No Matter How Long the Night, the Day is Sure to Come: Differences, Diversity and Identities in Caribbean-British Poetry since 1945

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Abstract

English poets of ethnic origin have traditionally responded to their social condition with greater immediacy than the politicians of their time. This article focuses on the process of exclusion and inclusion of English poets with an ethnic background into the canon of English literature. It demonstrates the ways poets search and fight for their ethnic and/or English identity. Special attention is paid to Claude McKay, Louise Bennett, James Berry, John Agard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, Levi Tafari, Grace Nichols, and Jean Binta Breeze, whose works are examined in order to explore the notion of "otherness." The concepts discussed also include social prejudice, conflicting identities, social hierarchy, multicultural diversity of Englishness, and mainstream attitudes and images in contrast with ethnic imagery. The poetry of these poets is analysed in relation to the Empire Windrush generation of Caribbean-British poets, the post-war immigration policy of the UK, and in the context of diasporic literature.

Keywords

ethnic poetry, Empire Windrush, British literature, British-Caribbean, postcolonial, multicultural, Claude McKay, Louise Bennett, James Berry, John Agard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, Levi Tafari, Grace Nichols, Jean Binta Breeze

In 2007 Jahan Ramazani argued that "if the empire once transplanted Wordsworth's lyric daffodils and anglocentric representations of London from England into the tropics, where no real daffodils grew, poets of the African diaspora in Britain have borne black bodies and creoles, calypso and reggae to London, along with idealistic, sceptical and humorous attitudes towards the imperial centre."[1] The ethnic presence in contemporary British poetry is determined by the larger historical and social context of the British colonial and postcolonial history—from the age of discovery in the late 15th century, through the slavery period, the abolition of slavery in 1834 to the liberalization and the growth of the national consciousness in the 1930s that resulted in social unrest after the Second World War.[2] Geographically speaking, contemporary British authors of ethnic origin have roots either in the West Indies, Africa, or Asia. Focusing on the postwar period, there are distinctive generations of ethnic poets who employ various poetics. The article demonstrates the relationship between post-1945 nationality and immigration policy of Great Britain and the formation of a Caribbean-British poetry tradition.

Jamaica, one of the largest islands in the Caribbean, has the motto of "Out of Many, One People" which reflects the ethnic diversity of the population. As N. Samuel

1 Jahan Ramazani, "Black British Poetry and the Translocal," Neil Corcoran, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 212.

2 As Samuel Murrell states "Oliver Cromwell's government attempted to balance the white to black population ratio by shipping criminals, prisoners of war, prostitutes, and other undesirable persons to Jamaica as a form of punishment and as indentured servants. However, when the slave trade was abolished in 1807, blacks outnumbered whites by as many as ten to one."
N. Samuel Murrell "Jamaican Americans", at http://www.everyculture.com [accessed 2012.02.08].

Murrell documents, in the 1990s up to 90 percent of the approximately 2,500,000 Jamaican inhabitants were of African ancestry, whereas the rest claimed roots in Asia or Europe.[3] Beginning with the discovery of the West Indies by Columbus in 1492, the original culture in the Caribbean islands was to a large extent based on the oral tradition, as most aboriginal people remained illiterate. Yet, there always existed the duality between the African languages of the first slaves and the English language of the British colonizers who conquered the island in 1655 and transformed it into vast sugar plantations. In the colonial era, hymns sung by heart in the aboriginal languages competed with forced religious instruction from the King James Bible. The tension between these influences is reflected in the early Caribbean stories, songs, and poems. In the subsequent centuries, the native African languages and dialects gradually lost their prominence and were replaced by Caribbean creole. The patois, a mixture of English and African dialects, was a means of showing a difference not only in class but also in identity. The slaves wanted to speak a different language from their British masters. On the other hand, the ethnic people of the Caribbean were linguistically richer than the British. Wycliff Bennett has argued that "with the European languages, the peoples of the region [the Caribbean] acquired national memories, ideas, legends and tradition that pass from generation to generation through these languages […]. Caribbean writers are able to make fresh and original use of already existing models, European literature is not merely an influence, but a legitimate artistic tradition."[4] Due to migration within the Caribbean as a result of the slave trade, it was difficult for the indigenous people to preserve the individual aboriginal languages, therefore today there is "little in [Caribbean] culture that is recognisably indigenous."[5] On the other hand, British English was not rich enough to provide a vocabulary for the new reality and consequently it was "the aboriginal tongues [that] have been furnishing European vocabularies with names and words to new world experience."[6] As a legacy of the historical and cultural development in the region, the contemporary Caribbean authors swing between using Standard English and patois.

In the colonial past, Caribbean poetry lagged behind fiction. The general consensus had it that fiction better expressed the stories of the slaves and the slave-owners and in that sense, Caribbean fiction of the 18th and 19th century was close to American slave narratives. Poetry achieved its prominence only in the second half of the 19th century. At its early stages, it developed along with British literature. The Caribbean poets wrote predominantly landscape poetry that cherished the beauty of the West Indies. In this their work resembles the landscape poetry of the English Lake poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Landscape poetry of the Caribbean authors was later invested with a spiritual dimension that came close to the pantheistic writings of the British Romantics who filled nature with philosophical meaning and perceived nature as a living organism. Bennet believes that

> Romanticism persisted in the West Indies well up to the nineteen-thirties, but in the rather thread-bare form of Victorianism and in the Georgian cult of respectability. It took the unrest of the thirties, the period which more than any other marked the development of

3 Murrell, http://www.everyculture.com.

4 W. Adolphe Roberts, and Wycliffe Bennett, eds., *Anthology of the Poetry of the West Indies* (place and publisher unknown, [c1950]) 3–4.

5 Roberts, *Anthology of the Poetry of the West Indies*, 5.

6 Roberts, *Anthology of the Poetry of the West Indies*, 5.

> national consciousness, to give birth to the authentic new voices that could proclaim West Indian nationhood, individuality and significance.[7]

In the Caribbean, the fashion of landscape poetry was supported by the Empire Poetry League[8] which is clear from the introduction to its 1929 anthology *Voices from Summerland*, in which David Mitchell argued for a very formal style in poetry and adherence to the British models: "Once more our restless sea-born race has explored the wine-dark ocean and founded new homes for the children over not one but many seas. And of its ever-loyal cherishing of our English poetic traditions this volume is a proof."[9] Even the first Poet Laureate of Jamaica, Tom Redcam (born T. H. MacDermont, 1870–1933),[10] would adopt the formal style of English Victorian poets, as in his poem "Spanish Town"

> There priest and lawyer, sailor, king's viceroy,
> About thine altar-stone have lain them prone,
> Pilgrims that slumber round a bivouac fire ,
> Till night be spent and God's good pleasure luzown.
> Death is life's bivouac round the fires of faith.
> Grey town and time-norm church, we come to thee,
> Shrine of our history; about thy tombs
> The patriot's spirit lingers reverently.[11]

Redcam advocated with great vigor that the Jamaicans must have a respect for the past of the country. Wycliffe Bennett believes that Redcam in his work "combined the strength of a patriot and the intellectual balance of a philosopher with the rapture and wonder of a child."[12] Redcam is also to be credited for a literary supplement in the *Jamaican Times*, where his first pieces of creative writing were published, the act of which paved the way for the poetry and prose of successive decades.

Whereas poets such as Tom Redcam represent traditional poetics, the 20th century also brought a change in the choice of themes. Victor Chang argues that:

> at the beginning of the twentieth century writers were beginning to recognize the difference in their landscape and slowly coming to terms with it, mostly through a passionate declaration

7 Roberts, *Anthology of the Poetry of the West Indies*, 22.

8 "The Empire Poetry League was a British-based organisation founded in 1917, with an effective existence of about 15 years. Initially having a patriotic impetus [...], it shortly became a vehicle for Sydney Fowler Wright (1874–1965), now remembered mainly for his genre fiction. The League, through Fowler's small press, the Merton Press, was active in the 1920s in producing anthologies of regional verse of the United Kingdom, usually tied to a single county. It also, true to its name, published early collections from elsewhere in the British Empire: a 1921 anthology *Voices From Summerland* compiled by J. E. Clare McFarlane in Jamaica, and a series of *Dominion and Colonial Verse* collections. The League's magazine, *Poetry and the Play* (initially *Poetry*) ran from 1917 to 1932, when the League foundered. The Jamaica Poetry Society, formally a branch, persisted into the 1950s. The work of the League in publishing new poets made few reputations, and Wright was outspoken against free verse." quoted from "Empire Poetry League", accessed May 20, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire_Poetry_League.

9 Victor Chang, "West Indian Poetry," Neil Roberts, ed., *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 237.

10 He was named the first Jamaican Poet Laureate posthumously in 1933.

11 Tom Redcam, "Spanish Town," W. Adolphe Roberts, and Wycliffe Bennett, eds., *Anthology of the Poetry of the West Indies* (place and publisher unknown, [c1950]) 37.

12 Roberts, *Anthology of the Poetry of the West Indies*, 15.

> of love for its beauty and splendour. The movement continues down into the middle of the century, but there is an increasing maturity of vision which causes poets not simply to celebrate and invoke the beauty of the landscape, but rather to be increasingly concerned with a sober and realistic appraisal of what the society and the land mean to them. They are no longer just declaring themselves ecstatic at the beauty that surrounds them; they are seeing the poverty and the harsh existence demanded by life in the islands and still accepting it as theirs.[13]

In the 20th century Caribbean there emerged poets who preferred poetry that reflected the spoken language. For example, in 1911 Claude McKay (1890–1948) published a pioneering collection *Songs of Jamaica* in which he experimented with the Jamaican creole. In 1912 McKay emigrated to the United States of America, where his novel *Home to Harlem* (1928) became a national bestseller. In 1919 McKay left America and spent close to two years in Britain. There he became acquainted with socialist and communist ideas. McKay desired to see "the old country", as is evident from his poem "Old England:"

> I've a longin' in me dept's of heart dat I can conquer not,
> 'This a wish dat I've been having from since I could form a t'o't,
> Just to view de homeland England,
> in de street of London walk,
> An' to watch de factory chimneys pouring' smoke up to de sky,
> An to see de matches-children, dat I hear 'about passin' by.[14]

As Ramazani has argued, McKay "seems to bow to London's symbolic force as synecdoche for the empire's glorious sights, monuments and history. The speaker professes a yearning to walk London's streets and averts his gaze from the fact that 'de homeland England' has ruled and exploited Jamaica and other Caribbean colonies for hundreds of years."[15] McKay at the close of the poem stands amazed and overwhelmed by the grandeur of St. Paul's Cathedral and the sound of its organ. Before McKay left Britain for America in late 1920, some of his poems were reprinted in *Workers Dreadnought*, which helped to establish him as a recognized writer in Britain.[16]

Louise Bennett (1919–2006) is another Jamaican poet who preferred the oral idiom.[17] She represents performance poetry which finds its inspiration in the local color and in contemporary social issues. She was not a member of the Caribbean Empire Poetry League, "nor was she ever invited to join because what she was doing—rendering in comic verse the events, scenes and characters from the folk culture of Jamaica, using the language of the folk—was not regarded as 'poetry.'"[18] Bennett's poetry often speaks of the sorrows of the former slaves and of racial prejudice. She stayed in England for several years in the 1940s and 1950s and wrote a seminal poem, "Colonization in Reverse", about this experience. When the poem was published in 1957, over 40,000 Caribbean immigrants

13 Victor Chang, "West Indian Poetry," 241.

14 Claude McKay, "Old England," William J. Maxwell, ed., *Complete Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 45–46.

15 Jahan Ramazani, "Black British Poetry and the Translocal," 202.

16 Paul P. Reuben, "Chapter 9: Claude McKay," *Perspectives in American Literature: A Research and Reference Guide*, at http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap9/mckay.html [Accessed 2012.02.18].

17 Louise Bennett was a great performer and her poetry was only published many years after it had been written.

18 Victor Chang, "West Indian Poetry," 237.

were living in Britain.[19] The poem became instrumental in voicing the cultural gap between the Jamaicans and the British:

> Wat a joyful news [. . .]
> Jamaica people colonizin
> Englan in Reverse.

The roles of the colonizer and colonized are reversed in the poem, as it is the Jamaicans who colonize the British, and not the other way round: "Jamaica is Englan boun", thus "colonizing it in reverse." Jamaicans arriving to Britain were of mixed class background, "from country and from town", yet all shared the same

> […] future plan
> […] fe get a big-time job
> An settle in de mother lan.

By settling in what they perceived as their motherland, they would

> tun history upside dung!
> […] populate
> De seat a de Empire.

Jamaicans leave their island in the hope of a better future, good jobs, education possibilities and hope that their "mother land" would embrace them. However, the bright future the immigrants had hoped for turns into a nightmare of racial discrimination and prejudice

> Dem face war an brave de worse,
> But me wonderin how dem gwine stan
> Colonizin in reverse.[20]

The speaker ridicules the stiffness of the British and by the colonization in reverse the Jamaicans morally win over the British.

In the postwar period, the difference between mainstream British poetry and ethnic poetry was obvious: whereas the British poetic scene of the 1950s was dominated by the Movement poets who wrote poems full of allusions to classic literature, obedient to strict poetic forms and mostly regular meter, the ethnic poetry tried to capture the natural rhythm of speech and aimed at depicting the harsh conditions of British ethnic minorities. On the other hand, the ethnic authors had a close affinity to the Liverpool poets because both groups shared avant-garde poetics and anti-establishment appeal. The theme of the Caribbean diaspora reoccurred among the first post-war generation of British ethnic poets—it materialized in themes including a return to family roots, slave history, the colonial past, a search for identity, racial prejudice and discrimination, longing for equality and independence, language issues, and a sense of place and belonging to a place. On the general level, the themes in ethnic poetry of the 1950s and 1960s also included the dream of a new settlement in the mother country, the search for housing and work, culture shock, and gradual radicalization of black power. As Chang has argued,

19 Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 132.

20 Louise Bennett, "Colonisation in Reverse," in *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 16-17.

"West Indian poets progressed from attempting to provide their readers with a sense of history and place to probing analyses about the nature of their society."[21] Most of the writers of this generation were born outside the British Isles. Due to the 1948 Nationality Act, British citizens from the Caribbean, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, and African countries could freely enter, settle, and work in the UK. This generation of Caribbean writers was formed by the people who arrived on the SS *Empire Windrush* that docked in Tilbury, England, in June 1948. From the very beginning, however, the Caribbean British citizens did not feel welcome. For example, already two months after the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* there were race riots in Liverpool when the National Union of Seaman tried to keep black sailors off of British ships. Although the Caribbean people were invited by the British government to help the British post-war economy, they were largely considered as primitive people who could only work in manual jobs. At first the British government had a policy of non-intervention, but when the race riots escalated in Birmingham and in Notting Hill in London, British politicians had to take a stand. There was no legislation that would restrict the free mobility between all countries of the British Empire. The politics of accepting new immigrants to the British Isles changed fundamentally in 1962 when Commonwealth Immigration Act was passed. It allowed the admission and settlement of only two categories of British citizens: first, to holders of British passports issued by the British Government – i.e. not issued by any of the colonial governments—who retained unrestricted access, and second, to the holders of employment vouchers. Three years later in 1965 a White Paper followed which ruled that only 8,500 vouchers be issued per annum. Yet, the white British public was still growing anxious about the probable massive immigration.

The true attitude to the former British subjects was fully revealed in public for the first time in Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood Speech." Alluding to Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Conservative politician on August 20, 1968 in Birmingham openly criticized not only the British Commonwealth immigration policy but also the proposed anti-discrimination regulations that were being hotly debated in the Houses of Westminster:

> We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre. So insane are we that we actually permit unmarried persons to immigrate for the purpose of founding a family with spouses and fiancées whom they have never seen.[22]

In his speech Powell further referred to a letter he received:

> Here is a decent, ordinary fellow-Englishman, who in broad daylight in my own town says to me, his Member of Parliament, that the country will not be worth living in for his children. [. . .] What he is saying, thousands and hundreds of thousands are saying and thinking—not throughout Great Britain, perhaps, but in the areas that are already undergoing the total transformation to which there is no parallel in a thousand years of English history.[23]

Powell described what he thought the position of the indigenous population would be and what the effects of West Indian diaspora are:

21 Victor Chang, "West Indian Poetry," 241.

22 Enoch Powell, *Freedom and Reality* (Kingswood: Elliot Right Way Books, 1969) 283.

23 Powell, *Freedom and Reality*, 282.

> For reasons which they could not comprehend, and in pursuance of a decision by default, on which they were never consulted, they found themselves made strangers in their own country. They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighborhoods changed beyond recognition, their plans and prospects for the future defeated; at work they found that employers hesitated to apply to the immigrant worker the standards of discipline and competence required of the native-born worker; they began to hear, as time went by, more and more voices which told them that they were now the unwanted.[24]

Similar views to Powell's were included in the public speeches of, for example, Duncan Sandyas (the Secretary of State for the Commonwealth and Colonies 1960 to 1964) and even Winston Churchill.[25] Therefore in 1968 the Commonwealth Immigration Law was quickly passed within three days. This law practically ended primary immigration—it abolished the voucher system and from now on only those who had a close relation in the UK could enter. This regulation limited the number of legal immigrants to a minimum.

In this period, people from the West Indies still lived in very poor housing estates and were socially underprivileged. For this community, poetry became a powerful source of expressing their political and cultural heritage. As Childs says "while resistance against discrimination has taken the form of demonstrations, protests and 'riots', blacks have more commonly turned to cultural forms to register their grievances, express solidarity, and contest the politics of representation."[26] For the Windrush generation of poets, the English language served as a medium for voicing their identity. For example, Windrush voyager Aldwyn Roberts, better known as Lord Kitchener in "London is the Place for Me", which he composed during his passage, explores through the refrain line "London is the place for me" the irony of discovering the everyday reality of living in the mother country:

> I am glad to know my 'Mother Country',
> I've been travelling to countries years ago,
> But this is the place I wanted to know.[27]

He tries to convince himself and the British that they can live in an amiable atmosphere of mutual understanding:

> Because the English people are very much sociable,
> They take you here and they take you there,
> And they make you feel like a millionaire.[28]

Although Lord Kitchener "laugh[s] and talk[s] and enjoy[s] the breeze"[29] and walks down the Shaftsbury Avenue and resides in Hampton Court, the social position of the speaker would always remain that of an underprivileged person. Jahan Ramazani has argued that

24 Powell, *Freedom and Reality*, 285.

25 For further details see Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 193.

26 Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry*, 194.

27 Lord Kitchener, "London Is the Place for Me," in *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 19–20.

28 Lord Kitchener, "London Is the Place for Me," 20.

29 Lord Kitchener, "London Is the Place for Me," 20.

> though often 'located' in London, their poems [i.e. of the poets of Jamaican diaspora] are 'translocal', in that they see the metropolis afresh through the lenses of non-metropolitan history, language and power, and shuttle across and unsettle imperial hierarchies of centre and periphery, motherland and colonial offspring.[30]

Kitchener later recorded the poem in a calypso style that reflected the original Trinidadian carnival music which gradually became an inspiration for the whole of the Caribbean area. The sound of calypso was very fit for the natural rhythms of creole speech and was in sharp contrast to Standard British pronunciation. However, all the glorious images of England as an embracing mother-country are deconstructed in "My Landlady is Too Rude", where the poor housing conditions, scarcity of jobs and racial prejudice are foregrounded:

> My Landlady's too rude,
> In my affairs she like to intrude.
> [. . .] A lot of restrictions to break your heart.[31]

In a similar tone, Egbert Moore, nicknamed Lord Beginner, in "Mix Up Matrimony" hopes for smooth assimilation: "Please cooperate/ And amalgamate."[32] Lord Beginner's enthusiasm for England is shared by a fellow ethnic poet of this generation George Browne (1920–2007), alias Young Tiger. In his poem "I Was There (At the Coronation)" he is consciously blind to social stratification when he equates the queen, the Duke of Edinburgh, and himself as being on the same social level:

> She was there.
> I was there.
> He was there.
> I was there.[33]

In *Fractured Circles* (1979), a seminal collection of poems, James Berry (1924–) deals with the burden of immigration. "Migrant in London" portrays the Caribbean immigrants as pilgrims to the holy land:

> Sea divided for we, you know
> how we turned stragglers to Mecca.

At first, the speaker is amazed by the tourist landmarks of London:

> I see Big Ben strike
> the mark of my king town.

He hopes his dreams of a better life in the old country will come true:

> I whisper, man you mek it.
> You arrive.

30 Jahan Ramazani, "Black British Poetry and the Translocal," 202.

31 Lord Kitchener, "My Landlady's Too Rude," in *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 21.

32 Lord Beginner, "Mix Up Matrimony," *London Is the Place for Me: Trinidadian Calypso in London, 1950–1956*, Astralwerks, 2002.

33 George Browne, "I Was There (At the Coronation)," *Calypso in Great Britain: The Anthology*, Nordic Entertainment, 2009.

Yet, he realizes that practical matters have to be solved first:

> Then sudden like, quite loud I say,
> 'Then whey you goin' sleep tenight?'[34]

In discussing this poem, Bruce King identifies the trauma of an individual who fulfils his dream by making the transition to London, only to find that to make a living in Britain is no easy task

> while representing problems encountered by the Windrush generation, *Fractured Circles* treats the immigrant experience as a spiritual wasteland of angers and memories that needs to be transcended through poetry. The poet is both part of a community and an individual seeking renewal.[35]

In another poem, "On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955", Berry portrays a situation in which traditional British politeness towards strangers may backfire. A white British lady initiates a conversation with her black fellow passenger:

> Hello, she said and startled me.
> Nice day. Nice day I agreed.
> [. . .]
> Where are you from? she said.
> Jamaica I said.
> What part of Africa is Jamaica? she said.
> Where Ireland is near Lapland I said.
> Hard to see why you leave
> such sunny country she said.
> Snow falls elsewhere I said.[36]

Although the lady is trying to be nice, in her decision to involve the other passenger in small talk, she assumes a superior social and cultural position of an established citizen whose politeness turns into embarrassment as her ignorance of geography and history of the other is revealed. A similar case of cultural misunderstanding occurs in Berry's "Travelling as we are". King believes that "the interiorized philosophizing [of the speaker is interrupted] when, on a London underground train feeling 'British among Britons'"[37] the poet is confronted with racist remarks of ignorant tourists as he hears two white children from the American South ask their mother:

> But this is Europe, Memmy. How come
> niggers live here too?[38]

The naive question of the children emphasizes the racist mindset of mainstream Americans towards ethnic minorities.

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34 James Berry, "Migrant in London," in *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 20–21.

35 Bruce King, *The Oxford English Literary History: The Internationalization of English Literature,* vol. 13, 1948–2000 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 105.

36 James Berry, "On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955," in James Berry, ed., *News for Babylon: The Chatto Book of Westindian-British Poetry* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), 190.

37 Bruce King, *The Oxford English Literary History*, 105.

38 James Berry, "Travelling as we are," in *Fractured Circles* (London: New Beacon Books, 1977), 15–16.

Since the 1950s, many Caribbean poets who settled in Britain have chosen to reject the Standard British English used by mainstream poets, preferring the creole that seemed to reflect their fractured identity. As Edward Brathwaite says in his *History of the Voice*: "The hurricane does not roar in pentameters."[39] The poets distorted proper spelling in order to be distinct from the British mainstream white poets. A good example of the hybrid language is "Listen Mr Oxford Don" by John Agard, in which the poet equates the importance of university education with the act of immigration:

I didn't graduate
I immigrate.

He rejects the stereotypical image of an immigrant who habitually wields a gun and commits crime:

I'm not a violent man Mr Oxford don
I only armed wit mif fuman breath
but human breath
is a dangerous weapon.[40]

In "Remember the Ship", Agard contemplates the ambivalent nature of his Caribbean heritage:

As citizen
of the English tongue

I say remember
the ship
in citizenship

for language
is the baggage
we bring.

Ultimately, he calls for a utopian Britain where multiculturalism would prevail:

diversity
shall sound its trumpet
outside the bigot's wall

and citizenship shall be
a call
to kinship

that knows
no boundary
of skin

and the heart
offer its wide harbours
for Europe's new voyage

to begin.[41]

39 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), 10.

40 John Agard, "Listen Mr Oxford Don", *Mangoes and Bullets*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991), 44.

41 John Agard, "Remember the Ship", in *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 258–259.

The 1970s saw an increase in the political engagement of immigrants. This was partly a political and cultural reaction to the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s. To address the rise of racial hostility among the British public at the time, the British government established the Race Relations Board in 1965, which evolved into the Commission for Racial Equality in 1976. Prominent poets of the 1970s such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, James Berry, Grace Nichols, and Fred D'Aguiar documented racial tensions in the society. These poets "were concerned with meeting [their] readers, viewers and listeners, and setting up a dialogue with them. This was one way, [they] felt, of breaking down the barriers of exile."[42] Their exile rather meant a marginalized position within British literary circles that was reflected in the refusal of the major publishing houses to market ethnic writers on the grounds that these writers would only address a small audience of their own ethnic group. As a result, exclusively ethnic small publishing houses were set up to publish only authors of color, for example, Race Today, New Beacon, Akira, Dangaroo, Sheba, and Virago. In order to support artists of Caribbean origin, Edward Kamau Brathwaite founded the Caribbean Artists Movement in 1966 because he felt that "West Indian artist were not participating significantly in the cultural life of the country that had become their home."[43] Another activity that promoted ethnic poetry at the time was the embrace of the Rastafarianism subculture in the 1970s. Bob Marley came to Britain in 1975, "making popular the subcultures of dancehall, reggae and bass culture."[44]

As Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy have shown, in the 1970s the burden of having to speak on behalf of immigrants that rested upon ethnic writers was lifted, and in the 1980s and 1990s there was a "diminishing need to speak for a singular, coherent, 'representative' community."[45] With the rise of scholarly studies of diaspora in ethnic literature in the 1980s, the marginalization of ethnic literature was no longer the case. Salman Rushdie, Meera Syal, and others rose to the status of major writers who enriched the canon of British literature. At the same time, on the political level, the discrimination of immigrants continued. In 1981 The British Nationality Act was passed. It introduced six categories of citizenship[46] thus segregating British nationals into "full" and "lower grade" British citizens who have been deprived of their civil rights by their own mother country.

The 1990s brought yet greater diversification of the British literary canon. Many established literary prizes such as Booker Prize or Whitbread Prize were awarded to ethnic writers—Zadie Smith, Arundhati Roy, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ben Okri. In addition, these traditional literary prizes came to be rivalled with the literary prizes for exclusively ethnic writers such as The Orange Prize (founded in 1992). Furthermore, in 1998 John Agard became the BBC Poet in Residence, a case of the literary establishment paying homage to the achievement of an ethnic writer to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the voyage of the *SS Empire Windrush*.

42 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The Caribbean Artists Movement", in in *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 169.

43 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The Caribbean Artists Movement", in *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 168.

44 Meraz Cesar, and Sharon Meraz, *Black British Literature,* accessed August 14, 2002, http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~bump/E388M2/students/meraz/mainpage.html.

45 James Procter, ed. *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology* (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 195.

46 These are: British Citizenship, British Dependent Territories Citizenship (in 2002 renamed into British Overseas Territories Citizenship), British Overseas Citizenship, British Subject Status, British Nationality (Overseas), and British Protected Person Status)

In 2002, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act was passed. It grants British Overseas Citizens, British Subjects, and British Protected Persons the right to register as British citizens. This act has also extended the right to British citizenship to all those born of a British mother after 1961. Along with the political recognition of the civil rights of ethnic minorities in Britain, their literary talent too achieved mainstream acceptance. As Peter Finch has noted, "in the space of little more than fifty years the insular, clear verse of mainland English Britain has changed from being a centralist and predominantly male, seemingly academic practice to become a multi-hued, postmodern, cultural entertainment, available to all."[47] Contemporary British and especially ethnic poetry approaches the audience via various media and thus poetry readings resemble happenings. The current themes dominating ethnic poetry include comparison of the "white" with the "black" by which the white serves as a matrix against which the black had to be judged as deviating, the slave trade triangle[48], the burden of the British Empire, the history of black presence in Britain, and the historical development of national and cultural identity that is preserved in the diaspora.

There has been a trend of angry, militant representation of the Caribbean diaspora in poetry. An early major representative of this attitude is Linton Kwesi Johnson (1952–). He introduced to Britain dub poetry, a performance poetry form which originated in the West Indies. In "Inglan is a Bitch" Johnson goes beyond the calypso legacy and incorporates elements of dub poetry and reggae. In this 1970s poem, Johnson criticizes racial prejudice that prevents an aging immigrant from obtaining work in England:

mi know dem have work, work in abundant
yet still, dem mek mi redundant
now, at fifty-five mi gettin' quite ol'
yet still, dem sen' mi fi goh draw dole

Inglan is a bitch
dere's no escapin it
Inglan is a bitch
is whey wi a goh dhu 'bout it?[49]

Ramazani claims that Johnson, unlike his calypso predecessors McKay and Kitchener, "situates his more defiant poetry primarily in African-Caribbean neighbourhoods in and around Brixton."[50] Johnson takes a radical stand also in "New Craas Massakah", in which black people at a birthday party are assaulted by whites. The poem was occasioned by a fire-attack that broke out in January 1981 in a private house in the New Cross Area of southeast London. Thirteen black people were killed. The police investigation was rather indifferent, which led to escalated racial protests, as no one has ever been punished in that case. Johnson describes the change from the joyful party atmosphere into a sudden flight of panic and grief:

47 Peter Finch, "British Poetry Since 1945," in *The Continuum Encyclopaedia of British Literature*, accessed March 7, 2007, http://www.peterfinch.co.uk/enc.htm.

48 The slave trade triangle refers to the slave traffic between Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean/America, from where the slaves and the goods produced on the plantations were transported back to Europe.

49 Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Inglan is a Bitch," accessed May 1, 2012, http://www.thenewblackmagazine.com/view.aspx?index=1190.

50 Jahan Ramazani, "Black British Poetry and the Translocal," 208.

first di comin
an di goin
in an out af di pawty

di dancing
an di scankin
an di pawty really swingin

den di crash
an di bang
an di flames staat fi trang.[51]

Johnson does not deny that there has always existed the threat of a racial attack in the back of the minds of the colored immigrants:

wi did know seh it couda happn
yu know – anytime, anywhe,[52]

but they have to live with it knowing that even the police would not be very helpful

instead a raisin di alaam
mek di public know wha gwaan
plenty paypah print pure lie
fi bline joe public eye
and di police dem plat an scheme
canfuse an canceal
mi hear she
even di poor payrence af di ded dem try fi use.[53]

The racial prejudice was obvious in the investigation of the police, which did not take any action to find the person who started the fire on purpose.

Benjamin Zephaniah (1958–) is a younger poet who too explores The New Cross Fire, but unlike Johnson he employs Standard English. In "13 Dead", which was later recorded as a song, Zephaniah commemorates the victims:

We will not forget
We must not forget
We cannot forget
13 dead and nothing said
We will not forget.[54]

The rhythmic, incantatory character of such poetry gave rise to live readings by Zephaniah, a pioneer of British performance poetry. In his case, the poems exist primarily through public presentation, whereas the printed form is secondary. Zephaniah is a political poet whose agenda includes concern for the poor, immigrant, and underprivileged, as he claims that

51 Linton Kwesi Johnson, "New Craas Massakah," accessed May 1, 2012, http://www.mountain7.co.uk/index.php?/archives/16-Linton-Kwesi-Johnson.html .

52 Linton Kwesi Johnson, "New Craas Massakah."

53 Linton Kwesi Johnson, "New Craas Massakah."

54 Benjamin Zephaniah, "13 Dead," *Rasta*, Upright Records: 1983.

> in theory Britain should be the last place on earth where you should find racism. But the reality is that many people are suffering from what I call the 'last off the boat syndrome'. They conveniently forget their journey here and now live in the fear that Britain will be flooded by penniless asylum seekers who would then drain out precious society of everything they hold dear. [. . .] I also feel concerned that in the country of my birth my rights are ignored. In this multicultural, multiracial country, its prisons, its courts, even its hospitals don't recognise my religion or cultural heritage.[55]

Zephaniah's poem "What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us" voices these concerns. In April 1993 Stephen Lawrence, a black British student of Jamaican descent, was chased and murdered by a group of white youths. Although the Metropolitan police investigated the case, the five suspects were not convicted until 2012 when a change in British law made it possible for two of them to receive to life imprisonment for a racially motivated crime. This murder case again called attention to the segregation of the white and "colored" people. Zephaniah states in the poem

> Black people do not have
> Chips on their shoulders,
> They just have injustice on their backs
> And now we know that the road to liberty
> Is as long as the road from slavery.[56]

Levi Tafari (1960–) shares with Zephanian the tone of political engagement. In his educational work and in his poetry, he stimulates the self-respect of the black community for which he serves as an ambassador. In "Working So Hard" he attacks the prevalent class system that separates the people in power from the masses

> Your sit in high places
> and decide what's right for me
> your justification
> is your university degree
> Your rules and regulations
> they fulfil your fantasy
> while down on earth
> we graduate in reality.[57]

The officials, with the help of a privileged education, are portrayed as detached from the real life problems of ordinary people.

While Zephaniah and Tafari are militant male poets of the Caribbean-British diaspora, Grace Nichols (1950–) prefers to use a humorous tone. She explores the deeply rooted images about black people through the poetic persona of a fat black woman. As Webhofer points out, "Nichols conceives of the female body as both a physical and a symbolic reality. [. . . She] gives her persona a body which is the visual representation not only of her sexual but also of her racial identity."[58] The persona enables her to maintain

55 Benjamin Zephaniah, *Too Black, Too Strong* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2001) 11–12.

56 Benjamin Zephaniah, "What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us," in *Writing black Britain 1948–1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Procter (Manchester: Maschester UP, 2000), 260.

57 Levi Tafari, "Working So Hard" in *Rhyme Don't Pay* (Wirral: Headland, 1993), 15–16.

58 Gudrun Webhofer, "Identity" in *The Poetry of Grace Nichols and Lorna Goodison (*Lewiston and Salzburg: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 11.

a strong point of view from which she comments on the stereotypes of racial prejudice in British society. In her poetry, history is a strong recurring element. The poet links England not only to the Caribbean but also to Africa, as is demonstrated in the poem "Out of Africa." The focus on the slave trade triangle between Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe highlights the dilemma of identity—she asks whether the true motherland of black people in Britain is to be found in the Caribbean or in Africa or in England. Nichols's poetry typifies diasporic writing, as it explores the themes of exile, uprootedness along with the search for ancestors and their values. Physical migration is often transformed into imagined journeys of unexpected pleasure, as they give the speaker a sense of belonging to a place. "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" exemplifies this feeling. According to Webhofer, "the poem deals with the colonisation of the body by the fashion industry."[59] The fat black woman searches in winter London for nice "accommodating clothes." However, all she finds are "frozen thin mannequins" that bring her to "curses in Swahili/ Yoruba."[60]. Unable to find clothes of her size, she turns to the language of her African ancestors. Finally, she overcomes the shopping despair and returns from her imaginary travel to the roots, only to conclude that her size prevents her from buying fashionable clothes, here equated with the stereotype of white, lean, mainstream model woman:

> when it come to fashion
> the choice is lean
> Nothing much beyond size 14.[61]

Another major black female poet is Jean Binta Breeze (1956–). She came to Britain in the 1980s upon an invitation by Linton Kwesi Johnson, who discovered her gift for dub poetry. James Procter recognizes Breeze as "the first woman to write and perform dub poetry [who] is a pioneering figure in what was traditionally regarded a very masculine genre."[62] Unlike her male colleagues, Breeze is not interested in the issues of racism and politics. Procter argues that "where earlier dub and performance poets in Britain tended to explicitly document particular incidents affecting the black community (the Brixton riots of 1981; the injustices of stop and search policing), Breeze's poetry is more oblique and indirect. Rather than focusing attention on physical violence and conflict, Breeze's work tends to concentrate on the psychological and subjective dimensions of the black women's experience."[63] She splits her time between England, where she makes a living by poetry and music, and Jamaica, where her whole family including her three children has stayed. This schizophrenic life[64] at two places is reflected in "The Arrival of the Brighteye:"

> My mommy gone over de ocean
> My mommy gone over de sea
> she gawn dere to
> work for some money

59 Gudrun Webhofer, "Identity," 20.

60 Grace Nichols, "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping," in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (London: Virago, 1984), 11.

61 Grace Nichols, "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping," 11.

62 James Procter, "Jean Binta Breeze," accessed February 2, 2012, http://literature.britishcouncil.org/jean-binta-breeze.

63 James Procter, "Jean Binta Breeze."

64 Jean Binta Breeze uses the word "schizophrenic" in her interview, accessed February 2,2012, http://www.57productions.com/article_reader.php?id=8.

an den she gawn sen back for me
one year
two year
tree year gawn
four year
five year
soon six year come.[65]

In the "The Mad Woman's Poem" dramatic monologue is used to mediate the feelings and ideas of the speaker lost in the western society:

wen me fus come a town
mi use to tell everybady 'mawnin'
but as de likkle rosiness gawn outa mi face
nobody nah ansa me
silence tun rags roun mi bady
in de mids a all de dead people dem
a bawl bout de caast of livin
an a ongle one ting tap mi fram go stark raving mad
[. . .]
an sometime mi a try board de bus
and de canductor bwoy a halla out seh 'dutty gal, kum affa de bus'
ah troo im no hear de riddym eena mi head
same as de tape weh de bus driva a play.[66]

Breeze addresses the diasporic situation of not belonging to the new country of settlement, a sense of being uprooted and not being able to assimilate with the new society.

From the vantage point of the present, the poetry of post-war ethnic writers in Britain is diverse—it demonstrates a deep awareness of ethnic cultural heritage, the risks of assimilation, and the benefits of multicultural society. Their writing reflects the possibilities and limitations established by the changing British legislation on nationality and immigration. The poets constantly juxtapose the black and white society and the stereotypes about each of these. By doing so, they uncover the aesthetic of the Afro-Caribbean culture as judged against Anglo-Saxon. Their poetry adds colour to the contemporary canon of English literature that has thus been enriched by many multicultural dimensions.

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65 Jean Binta Breeze, "The Arrival of the Brighteye" in *The Arrival of the Brighteye and Other Poems* (Newcastle upn Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2001), 7–8.

66 "The Mad Woman's Poem," in Steward Brown and Mark McWatt, eds., *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 309.

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