

**STATEMENT OF  
AMENDMENT**

**TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

Name of Candidate: Sheree Mack

Title of Thesis: Family Album (a collection of poetry),  
and  
'A Drift of Many-Hued Poppies in the Pale Wheatfield of British Publishing'  
Black British Women Poets 1978 - 2008

Date of Original Thesis: February 2010

Date of PhD Award: 19<sup>th</sup> March 2010

This statement of amendment is provided to acknowledge an error made in the submission of my original Thesis.

I acknowledge that the texts of four of the poems in the creative part of this Thesis, although they represent my own poetic themes and personal perspectives, are significantly indebted in terms of wording, ideation, and lineation to published work by other poets, and that this should have been appropriately cited in the body of my thesis as 'Poems after' their respective inspirations.

The poems and poets are as follows:

- 'My Dad's Hat' is indebted to 'My Father's Hats', by Mark Irwin;
- 'Mahogany' draws on 'The Tree' by Daljit Nagra;
- 'Inventing Daddy in Bradford' borrows from 'Inventing Daddy in Las Vegas' by Lynn Emanuel; and
- 'Takes A Firm Hand' similarly draws upon 'Shrove Tuesday' by Pauline Plummer.

I declare that my omission of proper acknowledgement of the inspiration for my work was an error on my part for which I apologise to the original authors. I had no fraudulent intent in failing to acknowledge the inspiration of these poems in my presentation of creative work as original writing in my thesis. To the best of my knowledge, these are the only such instances of unattributed borrowings in the creative component of this thesis.'

Signed:  ..... Dr Sheree Mack

Date: 15/08/17 .....

*Family Album* (a collection of poetry),  
and

'A Drift of Many-Hued Poppies in the Pale Wheatfield of British  
Publishing':  
Black British Women Poets 1978 – 2008

**Sheree Mack**

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Newcastle University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

**February 2010**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis comprises a collection of poems, a dissertation and a series of linking pieces.

*Family Album* is a portfolio of poems concerning the themes of genealogy, history and family. It also explores the use of devices such as voice, the visual, the body and place as an exploration of identity. *Family Album* includes family elegies, narrative poems and commissioned work.

The dissertation represents the first study of length about black women's poetry in Britain. Dealing with a historical tradition dating back to the eighteenth century, this thesis focuses on a recent selection of black women poets since the late 1970s. These women are part of a recognisable aesthetic which is still being built upon by contemporary black women writers.

There are three parts to the thesis. The first part contains the original pieces of creative work which form a collection of poetry. This collection is accompanied by a section detailing my personal writing process. The second part comprises the critical analysis, research, commentary and the investigative process into black British women's writing. Questions of focus, order and arrangement have proved an exercise in creativity itself. The realisation that these two parts were not enough in terms of exploration of voice and writing provided the impetus for the third part of this thesis, 'she tries her tongue'. The function of this section is two fold: first to generate a relationship between the investigations into black women's poetry, Black Feminism and my own writing experience; second, as a way of challenging the objective, artificial and given method of writing a thesis. This is supported through a section where I locate myself within the black British women poets tradition. These linking pieces are an exploration into the personal-scholarly voice.

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I am in major debt to my family, Alan Matthews and Nathan Matthews, for being my support, my inspiration and my reality checks. Thank you for bearing with me.

***Family Album* (a collection of poetry)**

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Some of these poems have appeared in the anthologies *Brown Eyes Anthology* (Matador, 2006), *Hair Anthology* (Suitcase Press, 2006), *Modern Love* (Crocus Press, 2007), *Sexual Attraction Revealed Anthology* (Anchor House Press, 2007).

A selection of these poems also appeared in the pamphlet *Like the Wind Over a Secret* (ID on Tyne Press, 2009).

The author received a Decibel and Arts Council England Spotlight Award 2003-2004.

The author received residences at The Literary and Philosophical Society, The North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineering, Can Serrat, Barcelona Spain and MAS-SAMple, Caribbean Residences, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados in 2007-2009.



**tending to the past**  
*after Etheridge Knight*

there are people buried who are not content to rest in silence/  
 they haunt me/their words ripple upwards and outwards/  
 calling to me/ calling me back  
 to those photo albums stacked neglected/  
 creased worn torn soiled sepia and black and white/  
 images of generations/ gone with the wind

i did not make it/it was already there waiting for me  
 voices calling me into the past/wanting me to knit their faces  
 together into some kind of whole/ knitting isn't my strength/  
 once i drop a stitch a gap  
 is created/ a gap      i try to fill with false memories

my great granddad/ mother's mother's side/ why did you come to england  
 you left the heart of darkness for this land, where your fire was soon put  
 out/  
 i feel the texture of your suit/ i recognise your straight back/the poser  
 without/  
 your stance/ but the details are fabrications

i did not name it/it was already there waiting for me  
 voices calling me back to the land of the hummingbird/  
 where i smell the fragrant air of immortelle/  
 see the emerald velvet hills touch the sky

my father/ you left the crown colony  
 for this land/ where your blood was poisoned/  
 i know your style with your hand in your left pocket/  
 the poser/no hint of a smile/ a performer/ the truth/  
 never known

i did not mould it/it was already there waiting for me  
 voices calling me into the past/ wanting me to gather the  
 lost threads of experiences/  
 but my hands are shaky and awkward/ the road map of lines  
 lead down deadends/ roundabouts and detours/access denied

my great granddad/ mother's father's side/  
 you left little england's sugar cane behind for this  
 land where you spread your seed far and wide/  
 your wood cutters hands/ veins like ropes/ thumbs flat and discoloured/  
 i know the grain of your skin/ i sense the width of your nose/  
 the poser with a pigeon breast/ your longevity a fact/ the finer points a  
 mystery

i am not sure what it should be/but it was here waiting for me  
 i rememory/ i feel the intense heat/

i sleep with red ants/ rise anew/  
a different look in my eyes/ a different look from my eyes

i know your style is mine/ i know your blood is mine  
remembering faces/ names/ dates and histories  
is the task in hand to validate me/  
but the gaps continue to grow as time passes by  
but these photographs root me/ stay/

i know your fabric/i feel your fabric in my blood  
i am not sure what it should be/ i know this is not my voice/  
i know i did not make it/ name it/ mould it  
but it was there waiting for me/ i know you are mine

## Why Did You Come to England?

Name: Charles Mason  
English not the African name.

How can I know the real great granddad  
without knowing your real name?

Why did you come to England?

What was wrong with your life on the Gold Coast  
that you had to leave all you knew for another world?

What was the beauty of England  
except a word resting on the lips of a sailor?

Why did you come to England?

Looking at your face, with no hint of a smile,  
was it worth the sacrifice?

You found a red haired Geordie woman and  
two children who you never saw reach double figures.

Why did you come to England?

## **The Stoker, 1915**

I sit here with my back ram-rod straight,  
waiting for the man to fix his light box.

I sit here with my suit and white white collar,  
shoes shined, hair parted and ironed down straight.

I sit here now with my hat like a dome  
perched on the small table beside me.

I sit here with memories of travelling  
across the sea, away from my people.

I sit here with my back turned from my gods  
as I followed the gentlemen with fire.

I sit here knowing I can not return;  
I have forsaken my father's name.

I sit here looking the viewer in the eye,  
ever bold in my life choice, knowing ma's proud.

I sit here with my back ram-rod straight  
in the belly of a ship like a gentleman.

## Sestina I - Arrival, 1915

Spring and you march through the streets; on corners,  
 green buds. Your step, light. What will the day bring?  
 Your thick lips still coated with a salty  
 residue. Hair straightened material  
 like the compass needle pointing south. Specks  
 of white pin the sky. Sparks charge through your bones.

You stretch your limbs far and wide, creaking bones  
 after weeks of living in small corners,  
 cramped down low, noisy, tending flames, speckle  
 embers escape, singeing the skin, bringing  
 tears to your eyes. Here thoughts materialise;  
 wave to Ma til she was a speck of salt

in the distance. Pa, too proud to grind salt,  
 converse with the Gods or scatter the white bones  
 to learn the fate in the material  
 world for his son. Like a caged wolf cornered,  
 he stayed in the hut. A merchant ship brought  
 you in time to England, a place speckled

with a few brown faces. New words speckle  
 the air from tunnel mouths as white as salt  
 and as sharp. In the town centre, bringing  
 your village ways with you, back stiff as bone,  
 stride confident, you stop at the corner.  
 There's a shop full of hats, materials

you could only dream of. Material,  
 a hat, makes a gentleman. Light speckles  
 off the store glass, your reflection cornered.  
 Your gaze held by a fine pillar of salt,  
 scarlet wild hair trying on a box boned  
 bonnet, twirling in the mirror. This brings

smiles to your flawless face, a skipped beat brought  
 to your heart. Crushed rose skin. Material  
 of your bonnet should be silk, not stiff boned,  
 but smooth. Your eyes, amber and gold speckles  
 catch, like sunset over the plains. Once more, salt  
 peppers your lips. You roll to love's corner.

## White Women

Within my family there are white women.  
White women who married black men. I forget,  
neglect the fact, that their blood flows through mine.

Trace the past, a sea of faceless white is mine.  
The black men forefront, a mist of women  
behind. Their names I don't know or forget.

They are the enigma, shadows. Forget  
the cleaning and cooking, their duty and mine,  
they went against the grain, steadfast women.

In the corner of the frame, you white women  
are not forgotten. Your spirit is mine.

## **Mahogany**

The trees my great granddad grew  
on his own plot of land, he took an axe

and branch by branch,  
he stripped the trees

and set to work,  
with the grain, scraping,

creating smooth glossy limbs  
ready to pattern for the British market.

**Caressing Wood,  
Thomas Melgram, 1916**

Large, dry skinned, dusty hands.  
Yellow, shortened nails,  
flat fingers and rough palms.  
The backs, a network of thick veins, like rope.  
He runs his fingers across a chunk of wood.  
His touch slow and deliberate.  
Feeling the cool softness against his skin,  
his eyes close briefly and his lips fall open  
as he pulls in a slow, deep breath.  
He rubs his fingertips over and over  
the grain. A lethargic smile crosses his lips  
as he spreads his fingers apart again.  
The wood is talking and his hands are all ears.



## In Bed with Hats

We ask ...

what shall we do with  
this stilted photograph  
of our great granddad?

And why, when we see  
him later, he's in a hospital  
bed surrounded by family?

What about a wife?  
He must have had one  
or two judging by their numbers.

Maybe she's in the corner  
of the frame, the white  
slender hand lost on the pillow?

Of course, there were his hats,  
we can't forget them.  
Nor would he wish us to.

Taking all his grooming skills  
to place those growing larger hats,  
by the year, on his shrinking head.

We're told...

he was an immigrant, a dresser,  
opinionated. The war,  
the club, the movement .

They got together  
a year's engagement  
of family squabbles.

Five years together and each one  
saw a child until  
one took her last breath.

The memory of his first wife  
was maintained in the fullness  
of affection for the second.

Worn out, thin and pale,  
on the birth of the eighth child  
taken again. Him, still alive.

But again the hats, grander  
his face never breaking a smile,  
monkey-like, dignified.

We see...

him in bed, still  
his family vivid, feeding  
his ideas of grandeur.

Another hat, in a box,  
a recent present, he never  
got to wear in the open air.

Always deep sad eyes,  
no grin. The look of  
a man always alone,

looking for something that was there  
all along - if only he could  
see past his brim.

## Sestina II - *Easy Bones* Café, 1940

At the flicks, he's cornered  
 in the back row. He brings  
 fellow soldiers, fresh from shovelling salt  
 into bags, feeling the grains still under their uniforms' material.  
 The film starts to roll, speckles  
 come to life on the screen. Already he's numb to the bone.

The usual stiff English accent talks over black and white visuals of boney,  
 fresh faced soldiers marching in time, round the corner  
 into the streets lined with cheering people. People throwing speckles  
 of coloured paper, praying that time will bring  
 their loved ones back, unharmed. It's immaterial  
 if they win or lose as lives are lost like wind carrying beads of salt.

He pictures himself in the marching lines. The salt  
 of anticipation coats his mouth as his bones  
 scream out for action, resenting the present squeeze of the velvet material  
 of his seat. His eyes rest in the right hand corner  
 near the front. Her profile signals a beauty. Toasted freckles bring  
 pins and needles, starting at his toes, as desire speckles.

The film drones on, a distant speck  
 as his interest lies with her; cheeks salted  
 with rose, her ebony hair curled around her elegant neck, bringing  
 to Newcastle an Amazonian. Outside, waiting, he cups his boney  
 fingers around a Woodbine, inhaling deeply. She rounds the corner  
 on the arm of his brother, giggling, a sound like raindrops on taut material.

They talk briefly. She's aware of his smile, his khaki material  
 from head to toe. She holds on tighter to her beau's arm and speckles  
 their conversation with hushed words, all the time watching from the  
 corner  
 of her eye the brother, with the woodbine and that smile. A smile as sharp  
 as salt  
 unexpected on the tongue. Having coffee and toast at the *Easy Bones*  
 café, she stares into her cup thinking what a night with him would bring.

The slow easy smile from the corners of his mouth up to his caramel eyes  
 brings  
 a lightness to her head. Already having one man is immaterial;  
 this brother is different. His smile speaks to her young bones  
 and makes her reckless. She forgets her fine training as sin speckles  
 her cinnamon frame. To go with him would be adding salt  
 to the wounds. The next night, they meet at 6 on the corner.

**Waiting,  
Tommy Melgram Jr.**

There's a photograph of him  
standing on Newburn's High Street;  
trees in cherry blossom full,  
hands in the pockets of his best suit,  
as his eyes look beyond this scene.

He waits for her to come  
out from her mam's house behind;  
He's been to war, and sailed the seas,  
but she remembers the nights since  
that he's been out all night.

'I've been to me friends-  
A got too drunk.'  
She's like a pawn-shop,  
takes owt in.  
But she remembers everything.

## Sweetie

It is shaped like  
a rugby ball  
but lime green.

Taking off the sticky paper  
reminds me of  
hot spitting coals.

Once in my mouth,  
still tasting of cellophane.  
It's a soft shell around a hard core.

Bullets.  
That's what Nana used to call them,  
bullets.

She'd have a stash of them in her handbag.  
I'd be passing out with travel sickness  
before she'd part with one.

'Make it last', she'd say  
popping another in her mouth,  
and adjusting her wig in one swift movement.

## Not a Fighting Chance

Now that he cannot walk,  
now that he sits, unmoving,  
calliper on abscessed knee, supported  
in the recliner armchair, positioned below  
the sitting room window, I forget the one  
who at the age of 14  
boxed his way through West Yorkshire  
to feed and clothe his siblings.  
Once he enters the last hospital ward,  
I forget the man who  
tangoed around the women  
in order to dance into the boxing ring,  
all attention focused on his opponent.  
I've long forgotten his lethal left jab  
and his fierce upper cut.  
It's as if the fight has abandoned  
this ugly ogre nursing a swollen stomach,  
belching up black bile into a glass dish.  
He has left behind forever that young man,  
that high polished caramel man, my granddad,  
that keen storytelling man. And long before  
I knew him, that man who could only run  
for miles, or fight for title or country.  
A frog who stares with bulging eyes,  
the way he lies there, now, with his eyes open,  
for a moment with the dignity of an African President.  
I stay beside him, like his corner man at ring side  
ducking and diving in unison but not sharing his pain.  
His limbs, grained like marble, glisten  
in the spotlights.

## Port of Spain, Trinidad

The woman's skirt is the map of the town;  
along the hem runs the blue blue sea,  
a constant pull onto the port,  
where the silk cotton trees crowd.

Look close at the intricate detail,  
like the flipped off lid of an ink-well,  
splattered black lines run deep and wide,  
dividing up this vibrant masterpiece.

Just off centre is Laventille, where  
metal roof hovels crouch like crabs  
in the hills. Tempers brew, sparks  
fizz from the overhead electric cables.

Harsh showers send sewers and earth  
swimming along the old streets,  
tunnelling and burrowing  
looking for home.

**Mother/ Mother Country**

Years of it, years of it, burning, burning  
to feel your arms open and pull him in,  
to feel you smile up to your eyes with pride,  
to feel you, meet him, like the sea flowing.

Years of it, years of it, burning, burning,  
land he bought with money he put aside,  
built a house with veranda alongside,  
to feel you meet him like the sea flowing.

Years of it, years of it, burning, burning,  
to the other children your tongue was sweet,  
to him, outside child, the leather would smart,  
to feel you meet him like the sea flowing.

Years of it, years of it, burning, burning  
he took his suit and grip and stowed away  
on the big ship to the other Mother,  
to feel her meet him like the sea flowing.

Years of it, years of it, burning, burning  
now, you cry for the son you had and lost,  
waiting for him to come back home to touch,  
to feel him, meet you, like the sea flowing.



**His Possessions**

a suitcase  
gold tooth  
fur hat  
wives

a passport blue  
yellow palms  
shoe horn  
leukaemia

a quarter of pear drops  
gramophone  
mother back home  
rage

### Sestina III - When George Met Anita, Bradford 1968

To the Black Diamond nightclub on the corner  
of Manchester Road and Croft Street, you bring  
a silent predatory style to salt  
this razor-sharp scene. In your smooth blue suit, gabardine material,  
after a short evening shower, slightly speckled,  
charm your sinewy bones.

To the Black Diamond night club, with bones  
jangling, you come with a friend. Hugging the corner,  
you rearrange your full pink skirt, shot through with speckles  
of silver thread. You bring  
a certain kind of freshness to the material  
of this place; a quality that irritates other women like grains of salt.

The Black Diamond night club isn't worth salt;  
around for years, with its chipped tables and bony  
stools. Pulling in punters with thumping bass and seamless vibes, material  
heard nowhere else by the Coloured crowd. Entwining bodies in corners,  
accepting what small pleasures it brings,  
the spinning glass ball throws out lights in speckles.

Across the darkened room, you see each other speckles  
of light fizzing like stars in the cool night sky. Salty  
beads of anticipation coat your top lip, bringing  
goosebumps to your flesh and a weakness to the bone.  
You look again, out the corner  
of your eye, longer this time, experiencing the feel of material.

Just as buds are blossoming, this is movie material.  
It's love at first sight, not on the grey speckled  
screen, but playing out in real life, in a small corner  
of this city, which built its wealth on salt  
mines, deep white seams like bones.  
You move from your side of the room, not sure what this will bring.

To the Black Diamond night club, you bring  
no expectations as they are immaterial,  
but tonight as you two talk, the core of your bones  
sing. In a short time, you write letters, speckles  
of confetti as white as salt,  
as your heart, once a cage in search of a bird is cornered.

## Wedding Day, 14 September, 1968

The camera has caught them  
in front of the swinging doors  
of the registrar's office.

His stance is relaxed,  
in a smart dark suit, leaning,  
hand in pocket, casual.

His ebony skin smooth,  
smiling broad white  
concealing his vast years.

She clutches his cupped arm  
staring straight into the lens.  
No hint of a smile, serious.

Triangle glasses obscure  
her high cheek boned face -  
a blossoming beauty.

He's bedded many women.  
Children, he has a few.  
She leaves her village today.

In the humid space beneath  
her turquoise two piece,  
her virginal body buckles.

She must step out of youth  
be his woman,  
and keep her man happy.

Her nipple-less breasts  
and sagging stomach  
will have to yield to him.

Just the two of them,  
her witch's spectacles off,  
she pulls him into her side.

## Bonny Baby Contest

In the stuffy old village hall,  
in a corner, jam-packed  
under the stairs, are Geordie  
mothers smiling into the faces  
of their babies or the camera.  
My mum fixes the camera with  
a weary stare.

Twenty eight years old  
and newly married,  
my sister sits on her knee,  
with head turned around,  
making sure mum's still  
there. The touch of her knee  
and hands not being enough.

Mum does not smile.  
In Mum's face, I see my sister  
grown, and in my sister's face  
I see her son grown.  
Between their years  
and their stories,  
time is running by.

## Inventing Daddy in Bradford

If I could see nothing but the smoke  
from the tip of his cigar, I would know  
everything about his Windrush years.

If his spirit was contorted by the cold,  
with the grey evening light, I would know  
the rabbit warren streets of back to back  
terraces and broken down backyards  
were where he was allowed to live.

If I could see but his hands,  
I could recognise their dexterity  
as they would have played construction,  
with spiral shafts and threshing  
rotors, parts for a combined harvester.

I could reconstruct his strong jaw  
and his hooded eyes that scared me,  
but captivated the women back  
to his room, keeping his bones  
warm against the cold north wind.

With the damp cigar between his teeth,  
I could know why he chose to forget  
his home, put down roots here,  
senses accommodating to the greasy  
factory floors and screeching cogs.

If I could trace the two veins that bulged  
across his temple when he was vex,  
I would know of the passion that drove him  
to this godforsaken country. But, if I had my way,  
I would keep him far from Bradford  
– like the come hither tip of his cigar.

## Growing Tomatoes in the Back Room

They hang in bunches  
on vines, cheek to cheek,  
each an orb of luminosity,

barred with claret bands  
which scale the skins'  
radiant segments,

like glistening rubies  
in a jeweller's window.  
Shimmering, solid

globes: think baubles,  
a whizzing cricket ball,  
blushing plump ladies,

think sun on horizon.  
Glowing, and glowing,  
and not one in any way

distinct from the other  
-nothing about them  
of individuality. Each

a perfect fulfilment  
of precision. Your  
handy work,

you who tends them  
in the hot back room which  
breathes in the day's heat.

You are relaxed here  
tending a piece  
of your island at home.

## Pomegranate

There is a fullness about her,  
her bosoms, the fold of her dress,  
the contour of her shape downwards.  
She's a glossy, rounded wide fruit,  
with a tough leathery neat skin.  
She's a high yellow, heavily  
overlaid with deep pink. Inside  
is separated by membranous  
walls, white spongy, bitter tissue,  
divided into compartments,  
packed with sacs filled with sweet juicy,  
red, pink pulp. And in each sac is  
one angular, soft, not hard, seed.

Seasoned in September, this seed  
matures, but come January,  
it is ripe. There's cracks that appear  
on her thick rind. Watchful waiting.  
High temperatures usually  
essential for growth but this time  
hampers development. Before  
full –term, the precious garnet juice  
runs away, wasted. There's sickly  
skin, silver on the ward's stone floor.  
This one will be retained in stained  
memory. One that could have been.

## Daddy

You as a child,  
tall for your age, neat hair.  
All elbows and knees,  
rough rounded joints.

You in chattel,  
a circle of dirt as yard.  
Heavy rains that pound  
on the steel roof.

You crying,  
hollow echo like drum.  
Because you answered back,  
because you asked why.

The mark of the devil  
from repeated beatings.

Me as a child,  
afro like a halo.  
Big soft rolls of flesh,  
rough and scuffed knees.

Me in a flat  
a concrete veranda with  
pebble dashed walls  
for idle pickings.

Me crying,  
wails of pain pierce our home.  
Because I answered back,  
because I asked why.

Weals of swelling skin  
from repeated beatings.



## Naughty Amelia Jane

She was a big white doll  
with thick black curls  
and rosy red cheeks.  
She was looking sweet  
in a white and pink frilly dress,  
with white ankle socks  
and black shiny shoes.

She was hated by the other toys;  
the sailor, the golliwog  
and the wind-up mouse.  
They tried to keep out of her way  
as she liked to push them off the shelf  
on to the floor, to get them dirty.  
She always wanted to be the favourite.

He'd read all about her at bedtime.  
He'd sit on the edge of my bed,  
soften his eyes and his voice,  
and read chapters, just for me.  
This was the only time he was close.  
The only time I could ask questions.  
The only time I felt loved, by him.

### Three Legged Stool

Three screws used to nip my flesh like pincers.  
I focused on the wallpaper; cream tiles  
with bowls of oranges and apples, and jugs.

Jugs, I imagined held milk, warmed,  
creamy and sweet; no clinging skin on top  
but gushing freely like a geyser.

I couldn't eat the mash up lamb, dumpling and rice.  
She tried her best to eat hers and mine.  
He was in before I could hide. I was

damn farce. As a boy he never had such food.  
His rage ricocheted in our cramped  
kitchen. The stool chalked the floor

as he pulled me off.  
His large yellow-palmed hand  
sliced into my fleshy legs.

I focused on the polished wallpaper  
with the waxy fruit and heavy jugs, still feeling the nip  
of the three legged stool, knocked onto the hard cold floor.

## **Takes a Firm Hand**

He'll crack an egg firmly on the side of the bowl,  
letting the yolk fall through the jagged edges  
to land in the hollow made in the pile of flour and mix.  
Pouring in milk from the glass bottle,  
onto large handfuls of juicy sultanas.

All the time, he'll be speaking over his shoulder to his wife,  
who wonders how she'll cope once he's gone.  
He sees his children looking through the sitting room hatch-  
holds their gaze – 'Mind your Mother.'  
Making sure the message hits home with his yellowing eyes.

He'll take a generous knob of butter and rub around and around  
the flat tray, making sure that no corner is left untouched.  
And then he'll pour a stream of slow moving  
mixture into the tray, not one creamy drop  
escapes to stain his clean white kitchen bench.

## **I Have Learned To Be What I Am Not.**

It was 1977, silver jubilee, we were a family of four not five.  
They wouldn't have had to try again if I had been  
what they said I was, when I was born.

'It's a boy', Nana rang Dad to tell him.  
He cracked open the port and drew deeply on a cigar,  
savouring the moment of finally fathering a son,  
in England, after so many, many girls.

I have learned to be what I am not.

I watched Saturday, all day, *World of Sport*, jockeying  
my horse past the finishing post, pinning my opponent down  
on the canvas and challenging him when he told me to do  
as I was told and sit still.

I took his vexness, like any son, on the chin with attitude,  
so I didn't have to feel the breath that betrayed the sense of  
disappointment.

I have learned to be what I am not.

To keep the little six year old girl with bunnies and buck teeth,  
hidden away under the bedroom table with her ballerina  
*Sindy Doll*.

## Bunk Beds

There's movement above as she rolls and moans.  
The slates rattle. I lie on my back.  
A finger doodles on her mattress  
and my mind creates the colours.  
Through the double glazing, inside,  
are the muffled sounds of traffic  
and the distant rubble of his snores.

I breathe, shallow breaths,  
as the layers of itchy blankets weigh  
Bunnie and me down.  
My body, in high collar nightie, burns.  
I do not move. Shiny pine bars  
frame my dreams,  
frame my warm damp pool.

## Daddy Lion

It is dark when we reach the hospital,  
after the journey of  
diesel mixed with cramped bodies.  
The place looms large with  
only small windows of light.  
We go through the swing doors  
into floors, walls and benches all  
white upon harsh white.

Along a stretched corridor,  
I look for  
the Snow Queen and her sleigh.  
I only meet men  
in white coats.

Somewhere up high  
we enter a side room.  
The curtains are drawn.  
He is there  
bathed in spotlight.  
The beast of my life  
is tied to the bed by sheets.  
His head is shaved.

At mum's touch his eyes open.  
His heavy pupils swim in a yellow sea.  
She kisses his hollow cheek.  
His lips barely move.  
His roar is a moan.  
His claws are broken.  
His chest is cold.

## Coup D'Etat

I can picture him  
in the bathroom mirror  
clipping his close knit Afro,  
patting it down, trying to see  
his handy work from all angles.

Or him on an evening  
ready for the Bookies  
resting his trilby hat, just so,  
as if it would fall off  
but it doesn't.

If I listen carefully  
I can hear him on the stairs  
'Can it be that life was so simple then',  
Roberta Flack style;  
Or calling down to Eugene from the islands.

If I sniff the air  
I can catch a whiff of Old Spice  
after Sunday chicken and rice.  
Then the odour of iodine,  
disturbs our home.

The leukaemia is in remission,  
taking a rest before the coup d'etat.  
I can touch him, loose blue black flesh  
like thick treacle poured.  
I hold his hand.

## **Oil and Steel**

*After Henri Cole*

My Dad lived in a rundown maisonette  
watching a Rediffusion colour TV,  
reading the Bible and pornographic  
magazines, which he preferred to  
company and *The Watch Tower*.

One by one the men from the islands  
died of loneliness, except Eugene,  
who was there to lay him out and  
holding a shot of 100% white rum  
said- 'Now yuh home, at lang last.'

I took the feather from his hat  
and a silk shirt from his wardrobe  
as my inheritance.  
I once saw him bawling like a baby  
when he got a letter from back home.

After 25 years of silence, this man  
who never showed much affection,  
buried his head on his wife's bosom.



## Idol

Like the Egyptians worshipped the sun,  
you were my sun.  
I worked hard to make sure your rays fell on me.  
With my ABCs on our home made blackboard,  
I was better than she,  
yet she still held your sparks.  
I stepped into your beams.  
Solar maximum as I became the lioness,  
you, as the ring master, had to tame.

Like the orbit of an object  
around its focus, under its influence,  
my path was fixed. I absorbed your heat  
and threw it back hard.  
Increasing the friction developing an atmosphere.  
From the frequent  
drags of sickness, you were losing energy.  
Once your force was gone, I spiralled into  
the black hole you left behind.

## My Dad's Hat

Saturday mornings, while standing  
on the bottom step, I would reach  
up high to the hook in the passage,  
tiptoeing to reach higher,  
touching, and fumbling  
the soft crown. I would imagine  
it was a wild animal with soft warm fur,  
asleep and purring.

A dusty wind hummed through  
the fur and sent up a musky scent,  
his scent I loved, lingering on the  
band, the feather and the inner satin.  
Here I would smell the bay rum  
from his hair and I could almost think  
I was being held, or walking by the water,  
or touching the immortelle flame flowers,  
blooms whose scent was that of caramelised  
wood in the air, as now,  
as I think of his final sleep.  
I stand on this soft warm soil  
and watch light slowly close  
on the ripples of petals on the pond.

## The Grip

We proceeded backwards into the light  
carrying it with us, his grip.

A brown battered leather suitcase  
Oblong with cream creases along the joins.

Two round rusty push along locks  
spring open, tooth-like catches.

Inside a rich silky smooth sage lining  
with a small cream leaf detail.

He could have come over in 1952  
or 3 or 4. We don't know for sure.

He was a stowaway; him and his friend.  
His silences held longings and shames.

Leaving the pain of the past behind, caused a splitting  
in the self that broke out in acts of violence.

To move forward, certain words, conversations  
had to evaporate from his lips.

Or hide in a narrow part of his brain.  
I think he packed them away, away in his grip.

Then, he pushed the grip under the bed and forgot.  
Never to be opened again in his lifetime.

## Summer

Because it reminds me of safety,  
I love the smell of milk chocolate biscuits  
when we holidayed in caravans at Newbiggin by the sea.  
Because it reminds me of safety,  
my heart remembers  
my mum calling me in for a cup of hot sweet tea  
when the rain hammered on the tin roof like tiny fists.  
Because it reminds me of safety,  
I love the smell of milk chocolate biscuits  
in summer showers.

**Good Times***After Lucille Clifton*

Mama's paid the rent  
and the gasman  
and the electric man  
and the light is back on  
and the front room fire is glowing  
and there's singing in the front room  
and these be good times  
children  
good times  
good times

no more postponed groceries  
Mama's filled the pantry  
and the fridge be full  
with onions, tomatoes and ham  
and the table be full  
with apples, bananas and grapes  
and there's dancing in the kitchen  
and these be good times  
good times  
good times

oh children  
think about the good times

## Rollers

She took her time to tame her mass of hair.  
First, she'd make a strong mug of tea and sit  
at the high teak table with a plastic bag.  
Her cigarette smoke would claim the air.

A long wide comb in a cup of water,  
she'd pull it out, tapping off loose droplets,  
before running the comb through her thin hair.  
The comb would straighten out the grey black frizz.

Still holding the sections, comb back in the cup,  
she'd take a pink roller out of the bag  
and start at the tips of her hair, rolling  
upwards and under.

Only a pink and black sausage roll  
was left in her hand ready for a grip,  
like a white overcoat, encased the roll.  
She'd take a sip of tea and a quick drag.

Then she'd take the comb again, wet and pull  
on her tangled locks until it was straight.  
Rollers would be rolled up and under  
and covers in place, again and again,

until her whole head was a mass of rows.  
Pink and white rolls, like gums and teeth,  
gradually drying, gradually curling  
straight. After Sunday dinner and dishes done,

the rollers would be pulled out swiftly.  
These relaxed curls were then teased out like notes  
from a saxophone, until they danced around  
her head like a lion's mane but tamed.

## Ode to My Mum's Broth

Listen

no one makes broth like my mum  
with its chopped turnips  
diced potatoes  
and flakes of carrot;  
a melody of colours.

Listen

to the touch of her pinny rustling  
like the wind over a secret  
as she moves from the bench to the stove  
folding in the smooth butter beans  
the translucent onions and pearl soft barley.

Listen

to the broth thickening  
as the gas hisses  
and she seasons the  
soup, the heart of the soup,  
with her smile.

Listen

no one makes broth like my mum  
and I tell her and she  
takes her eyes off the pot to smile  
that smile, that is warmer  
than the broth could ever be.

Listen

I will need to taste this broth  
in years to come,  
scadding hot broth, to warm my heart  
when I'm away from home,  
when she's away for good.

## Ovaries

A snake has two; one in front of another.  
Yours nestled, just below your 'floppy' tubes,  
hanging, one each side of your womb;  
the home, at one time or other,  
for two children and a half.

Two walnut - shaped sacs,  
pearl-coloured, hiding treasures  
like a petulant teenager, but  
bouncy and squishy  
like putty stress balls.

Seeking medical advice about  
the erratic nature of your monthlies,  
at the age of 57, the consultant said  
you had the ovaries of a 17 year old.  
Remarkable.

Did you feel the need ever  
to reach in, clutch them? Lovingly  
roll them between your fingers  
slowly like hard boiled eggs  
without the shells?

It would just be your way  
of making them feel needed,  
making them feel wanted and alive.  
They were aching for that something  
they hadn't stumbled upon in a long time,

as you only had one love.  
He was all the man you ever wanted.



## Swan Song

It is a last minute, beg, borrow, or steal, flight deal.  
Her long dead husband's sister invites her for a month.  
She flies out the next week to Las Vegas,  
loses her luggage en route, arriving into the hot dry state  
with one pair of clean knickers  
and no blood pressure tablets.

A shopping spree is needed  
along with some late nights on the strip.  
She's punching dimes into the one-armed bandits  
and throwing chips across the green velvet tables,  
hearing ice clink against the glass  
as she savours another brandy and *Baby Cham*.

No one hears from her in a week.  
They call the house, the other house,  
the sister, the other sister.  
Thoughts cross their mind of a hospital,  
a car accident, off the dusty, windy track,  
after a late night drinking session in a saloon,  
bearing in mind, she has no licence.

After 7 days, she gets back in touch, calls  
to say that she just popped down to Mexico.  
They imagine her chauffeured across the border,  
sombbrero protecting her delicate pinky beige scalp,  
sporting a white t-shirt with "Amo México"  
splayed across her ample chest.

Her arms are waving above her head  
and her head is back, way back,  
eyes closed, feeling the sun on her face  
and her mouth is wide open as she laughs  
as she's never laughed before, abandoning  
herself to the moment.

## Pig's Trotters

When I get to the house I rush up the stairs,  
 doors swinging behind me,  
 I dive into the bedroom, zigzagging through bodies  
 to crash to the floor next to mum's side. My sister,  
 still in her pyjamas, tells me mum collapsed, then  
 ten minutes later, she's salivating and babbling about 'the kids'.

I dash to the window, pulling back the gardenia curtains  
 willing the ambulance to speed up,  
 I race back to her side, with the choking smell of urine,  
 straightening her cotton nightie,  
 smoothing her coarse hair. She's clutching her wedding rings.  
 I stroke her hands – cold hands.

I run back to the window, feel my airways tighten, I, who  
 have put on last night's clothes back to front, and I whisper,  
*Please hurry*, steaming the pane. I catch the sirens,  
 muffled as they lumber up the hill. I glimpse two green men  
 jump out of flapping doors with a metal stretcher banging  
 off their thighs, taking the steps like an escalator,

then I take a deep breath, and I think,  
 take my heart, I will gladly give it  
 to have mum off this floor and cuddling me again.  
 I've seen pictures of wailing women  
 over the bodies of their children, locked in that grief  
 like a vice. I long for such release.

Like men possessed, they feel her pulse,  
 press her chest, pump oxygen, release the bed  
 roll her on, tighten her in,  
 one two three, lift her up and out.  
 I walk down the path with me mum.  
 The air is heavy with dew; the clouds are

full and peaching. I breathe  
 as people breathe when they are trapped  
 underground, in gasps.  
 We lift up gently and do not stop until we reach the hospital  
 I walk into that room and watch her feet,  
 dry hard skinned, I cover them.

## Sunday Meat

I take the meat out of the oven;  
her pyrex dish with a chod of beef,  
forgotten for a week,  
all shrivelled and dry,  
lodged in a solid sea of fat.

I grieve for her now as I've never grieved before.  
She was spicy, full bodied port.

The only image that comes to mind  
when I tap into my memory chest  
is a shell on the hospital bed;  
an old woman with a slur, dazed,  
trapped in a sea of congealed fat.

## I'm Becoming My Mum

*After Lorna Goodison*

red/brown woman  
solid smile curtained  
a stirring brew

my mum weaved reds,  
yellows, purple strands of time, cuddles  
and words to create a home with

potato hot pot from left over Sunday roast to  
cups of Bovril after *Coronation Street* but  
before bedtime

my mum had a white cotton  
nightie dotted with petit rose buds  
it clung to her size

I have it now  
it bellows like a pelican's bill  
that would swallow the moon

I wear it now  
feel the fabric touch my skin  
like soothing calamine

red/brown woman  
solid smile curtained  
a stirring brew

## Eyes Down, Look In

We are sitting, me and Sharon, in a four man booth. The packed Bingo hall, waiting for the main session to begin. Eyes down look in – when Mum comes in, after 6 months dead. She takes an empty seat, clicks off her markers and gets ready for prize bingo, before and between the big money game.

We are sitting in the no smoking section. Mum lights up and takes a deep draw, she smiles. She's pleased with her full head of hair, rolled into place around her pink-beige plump face. '3 and 6, 36.' The caller starts. Chatting is a no-no in any game, but Mum's got a lifetime of things to say.

'Stop all the crying, Sharon. You'll make your self sick. Mick's shoulder can only take so much. You know you're the strength in that coupling.' Her chastisement a change. No one seems to notice our table. Eyes down, silently praying that their number will be out next. '9 and 0, top of the shop, blind 90.'

Mum's fingers dance across the numbers, clink, a comforting sound in the close, heavy air. 'Sheree, I'm working with you.' Her eyes never leave her board. 'Hold on, you're not alone. I'm working to bring happiness into your life. But you've got to let the hurt out.' Like coloured balls bubbling in the machine,

my grief bursts out in rounded orbs of pain. I want to scream, you left us alone to cope, to cope alone. My fantasies of the prodigal daughter's return with babe in arms were dashed as you slipped away during the night. '1 and 4, 14.' 'House.' Mum groans as if her life depended on

that win. She starts to line up her thick red and blue dabbers. Not green, as green's unlucky. Even in death, she's still holding out for that big win. Not wanting to see her hopes dashed. Not wanting to see her leaving us again, I look away through the sea of cigarette smoke, and half empty glasses.

## The Voice of the Draft

In creating this dissertation, I have mixed social histories and hybrid genealogies. While writing the poetry collection *Family Album*, I gathered scraps culled from the past – the past of family, community, and places – to stitch them together into a coherent narrative. I researched birth, marriage, and death certificates to gain biographical facts about long-lost members of my family. I also excavated memories of oral histories, stories passed down through the generations, along with a bundle of photographs. These scraps of evidence I stitched together to create a ‘whole’, although a ‘whole’ in terms of a poetry collection, not in terms of the ‘whole history’; I know I will never know the ‘whole truth’ of my family origins. *Family Album* is just the beginnings of writing that story.

I know *Family Album* is a construction, a fabrication knitted together from multiple sources and beginnings. I started out on the quest of searching for my ‘origins’ through my writing, as a means of getting to know my roots, but also as a means of claiming/reclaiming my identity, to find out ‘who is me?’ I am still in the process of cultivating the details and accidents that accompany every beginning of my family’s histories. As my research and writing shows, the beginnings of things cannot be found in one place, but in numerous and dispersed places, incidents and events.

I appreciate that there is a multiplicity of stories that I have chosen to ignore and/or not touch upon because of time, space and interest. I have made choices within this collection, because I have taken control of the writing process. This is my story and I have chosen the way I want to

write it/tell it. The lenses through which I see these histories, and the world, makes a difference to my work and to its reception by readers. However, as the 'knower', I didn't know fully what I knew until I wrote it down, that is, until I told the story with myself included in it. My thinking is not separated from my feelings.

'tending to the past', the first poem in the collection, is inspired by a poem by Etheridge Knight. There are other poems within the collection which are similarly influenced by other writers, such as Lorna Goodison, Henri Cole and Lucille Clifton. I think this tendency is evidence of my reading while creating this collection. It was Wendy Cope who said that '...if you are interested in writing well, in working at being a better poet, then the most important piece of advice that anyone can give you is that you have to read both recent poetry and the poetry of past centuries. That's how you learn.'<sup>1</sup> Learning through the writing process, reading other writers can influence the form, the techniques, the content or the tone of my poetry. Fleur Adcock, Douglas Dunn, Jacob Pollack, Clare Pollard, Leonita Flynn, Colette Bryce, Derek Walcott, Eric Roach, Lorna Goodison, Grace Nichols, Jean 'Binta' Breeze; these are only a selection of the writers I have read throughout this process, and who have helped me get to grips with the art of writing poetry.

Through this experience of reading and writing, I realised that I have to prove to my readers, to the establishment, that I am a real, serious poet. Prove that I can create poems using the traditional forms. But at the

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Cope, 'Poetic Licence', in *The Observer*, Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> September 2008. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/21/poetry.writing.wendycope>> accessed July 2009.

same time, I want my writing to be my own, to reflect my own individual voice. I want to demonstrate that I knew the rules but also had the confidence and creative licence to break those rules. If it means that I am not being true to myself and my intentions, and to my way seeing the world, then I have no qualms about 'taking liberties'.

For example, 'White Women' is a tritina, a form related to the sestina. The lines are grouped into three tercets with a concluding line; thus a tritina has ten lines. The three words that end each of the lines of the first stanza are repeated in a different order at the end of lines in each of the subsequent two stanzas. The words I chose to repeat were 'women', 'forget', 'mine'. Frequently, I berated myself for spending so much creative energy on the black migrant men within my family at the detriment of paying tribute to the white women who must have married these men to start the British side of my family. Either I kept forgetting their names or did not make the effort to find them out. Were these omissions a reflection of my shame at being connected to white blood? Was this a fact of my past that I wanted to keep hidden? I thought the tritina was a good form to use to explore this area of neglect because it suited my preoccupation, that reoccurring sense of guilt.

Using the tritina form gave me the space, in a controlled way, to explore this blind spot within my writing. However, on reading this poem, the reader will see eleven lines not ten. In the closing line, each of the three words must be used. When I completed the last line: 'In the corner of the frame, you white women are not forgotten. Your spirit is mine', I realised that this was far too long. It did not sit comfortably with the rest of



the poem and the pattern. The poem did not scan correctly with an extra long line at the end. But this line said everything I wanted to say to these women. So, I just adapted the form, to suit me, my meaning, and the poem better, by creating an extra line at the end. I was being true to my voice and the poem itself: I took ownership of the process. When this poem is performed, it provides a shock factor for the audience. Seeing a black woman standing before them, they do not expect to hear about this person being partly white.

A lot of the poems within *Family Album* have developed from photographs as these were one of the main sources of evidence still available regarding members of my family. Reading the visual clues is only a partial means of knitting together stories and characters, yet these have proved immensely useful for the collection. Poems such as 'Why Did You Come to England', 'The Stoker, 1915', 'White Women', 'In Bed with Hats', 'Waiting, Tommy Melgram Jr.' and others started from a still image taken many years before my birth. Through close reading, visual similarities could be discovered between generations. The similar poses, stances, hands, facial expressions, dress sense and suits provide the echoes that run through the whole collection. Therefore, through a natural process the collection is held together by this family resemblance and connections.

The final poem of the collection, 'Eyes Down, Look In', is not so much written within a particular poetic form rather than within a controlled breathing space. Decisions made about this poem in terms of form, rhythm, line length and structure were influenced by the poem's content. The poem was a catalyst for working through the grief of my mother's

untimely death. 'Eyes Down, Look In' is written in a kind of strict structure. Ten beats to a line, iambic pentameter, seven lines a stanza. This rigidity prevents the writing from verging into the sentimental. The groundedness also aids the believability of the situation; me imagining my mother coming back after six months dead. The reader is carried along within the experience through the regular rhythm and beat to the poem. This rhythm also mirrors the situation and sounds of being in a bingo hall in the North East of England; as the caller calls out the numbers and the participants click off their numbers. I don't like stuffiness and choose to write concretely in the everyday poetry of my speaking voice. My voice within the poem gives a sense of rhythm through the poem, creating a particular orality. This was a very therapeutic process and helped me come to terms with my mother's death. This is the value of writing, maybe writing poetry in particular. Something of value which other women of the generations past have no doubt realised and experienced. Our thinking is not separated from our feelings.

**'A Drift of Many-Hued Poppies in the Pale Wheatfield of British  
Publishing'  
Black British Women Poets 1978 – 2008**

## Introduction

The dissertation has one primary aim; to explore the development of black British women poets in Britain between 1978 and 2008. Has a tradition of black women writers developed in Britain? The primary interest is documenting the black women writers of the past who function as an influence on black women poets of the present. The imperative to remember and voice a marginalised history is shared by many second-generation writers. From the beginning of the tradition, we have used our writing as a way of challenging our limited position within society. Grounded in experience and exploring such questions as identity, history, and belonging, an evolving collective autobiography has been written. We write to become visible. Through using our voices, we want to be understood and gain our rightful respect as writers, women and human beings.

For clarity and cohesion, I have adopted a chronological approach to presenting the dissertation. This is a considered approach taking into account the recurring themes and focus of the creative work. Genealogy is the bridge between the two traditions of writing; creative and academic. The study of the descents of my family and ancestors, as well as tracing the generations of black British women poets beyond me, run parallel throughout.<sup>2</sup>

Establishing a black women's writing tradition in the UK calls for a consideration and awareness of a number of complex issues. One of

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<sup>2</sup> See Michel Foucault 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' (1971), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980) for Foucault's treatment of genealogy; also Heidi Safia Mirza, ed. *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1997), for her use of the term.

these is that black British women's writing has not attracted much literary analysis. This is in part because it belongs to a cultural politics that stresses social and political relevance over aesthetic considerations and innovations. It is within this introduction that I will attempt to situate myself in relation to these issues.

Throughout the generations, 'black' has encompassed different groups of people and different meanings. In the 1970s, 'black' was used as an empowering label within the Black Power movement. With such slogans as 'Black is Beautiful', pride was instilled within an Afro-Caribbean population living in Britain who were receiving negative messages about their race from society at large. In contrast, within the 1980s 'black' became a more political label with a much broader meaning. Different diasporas from the Africa, Asia and the Caribbean found themselves occupying similar positions within the institutionally racist country, Britain. Rather than 'black' being a term only referring to a physical trait, the colour of a person's skin, it became synonymous with a discriminated, disadvantaged position within British society. 'Black' became a collective label which different racial, ethnic and religious groups identified with in order to project a united front against discrimination. Within this dissertation, my definition of 'Black British' literature refers to that created and published in Britain, largely for a British audience, by black writers either born in Britain or who have spent a major portion of their lives in Britain.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Dabydeen and Nancy Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature*, (London: Hansib Publishing (Caribbean) Ltd, 1988) 10.

I will use the plural personal pronoun, 'we' when discussing black women's writing. I use 'we' because I am part of the tradition. The black women's poetry I will engage with is my community of writers. We share our work, readings and performances with each other. We are a supportive collective of writers, just like the many black women's writing collectives which have gone before us. It is important to state my positioning from the beginning as everyone perceives literature from a particular point of view, but some fail to acknowledge this in their writing.

My position is that I am writing from within, as a participant of the tradition of black women's writing. However, I recognise the problems of including the 'self' within this study. This is not primarily scholarly practice. Within Black Feminism, the use of the term 'we' is an accepted practice, however within western academic writing the standard is objectivity and distance. In recent years, there has been a movement to recognise the autobiographical voice as a legitimate way of speaking in academe. Writers such as Carol Gilligan, Mary Belenky, Gertrude Buck, Nicole Ward Jouve, Madeline Grumet, Jane Gallop, Wendy Bishop, have experienced and protested the separation of their lives from their work, their feelings from their thinking.<sup>4</sup> These and other writers view objectivism as being more about the consolidation of power and protection of the academic status quo rather than the validity of epistemology. Nevertheless, the deployment of the autobiographical voice is still viewed as alien within the academy; the academic is supposed to be 'above' the practice at the level of theory. Yet for black women, out of necessity, we have to be both the

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<sup>4</sup> See *Autobiographical writing across the disciplines: a reader / with a foreword by Ruth Behar*, edited by Diane P. Freedman and Olivia Frey (Durham : Duke University Press, 2003).

researcher as well as the practice. As Alice Walker indicates, the black woman writer, 'must be her own model as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself.'<sup>5</sup> Suppression of black women intellectuals means this process of feeling one's way is an unavoidable epistemological stance for black women intellectuals.<sup>6</sup>

Within an essay by Barbara Burford (1988), from which the title of this dissertation is taken, the fact that the first experience of a black woman reading herself in print is from an African-American perspective is striking.<sup>7</sup> There may be similarities within the Western world between black women as we share the triple oppression of race, gender and class; nonetheless, there is a matter of urgency that the differing life experiences of black women in Britain, 'all these voices, in their rainbow array, be heard.'<sup>8</sup> The literary environment has changed in many ways since 1988 when Burford's essay was written. Certainly, more black women writers have found themselves in print in the UK.<sup>9</sup> However, an increase of these

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<sup>5</sup> Alice Walker (1983) cited in Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 8.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Burford, '...and a star to steer her by', *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* ed. S. Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis, Pratibha Parmar (London: Sheba Press, 1988) 98-101. Burford admits that black American women and black British women share 'common ground' in terms of life experiences. Black women suffer the triple oppression of race, sex and class across the globe. From the 1970s onwards, it was African-American women who took up their pens to write about the specifics of this existence. For the majority of black women in Britain, their first experience of recognising an image that they can identify with is through the texts written by African-American women. There is a partial recognition as one woman's story cannot totally mirror another black woman's story, but there are parallels that can be drawn. There can also be sustenance drawn from experience in print. Within the twenty years since this paper, there has been an increase in the number of novels written from first and second generation of migrants to the UK. Yet still African-American female writers are the first names to be recalled and recommended when discussing black women's writing.

<sup>8</sup> Burford, in Grewal et al (eds), *Charting the Journey*, 98.

<sup>9</sup> For useful secondary literature on black British literature see R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey, (eds.), *Black British Writing* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004); James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003); Kadija Sesay (ed.), *Write Black Write British: From Postcolonial to Black British Literature* (Hertford:

writers does not necessarily equate to adequate and equitable access to publication, influence, and literary respect. As Joan Anim-Addo and Les Black (2008), both lecturers at Goldsmiths University in London, have suggested, there may have been wide public attention and reading in the past few years of such novels as *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith, and *Small Island* (2004) by Andrea Levy, but '[t]his public interest in Black British literature is not reflected in our universities and particularly in departments of English that cling to a literary canon that either ignores or challenges the inclusion of Black British writers within the curriculum.'<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, there are some academics, such as Sandra Courtman (2006), who believe that the market has changed for black literature, where '[i]t is the sheer presence and volume, now taken for granted, of contemporary black women's writing in Britain that enables John McLeod to pose the question of their labelling in his article 'Some Problems with "British" in a "Black British Canon"'.<sup>11</sup> Within this article McLeod explores the inadequate argument that Bernardine Evaristo's book *Lara* (1997) is an example of 'black British' literature, as the protagonist traces her ancestral links to Africa, Brazil and Ireland. Instead McLeod argues that it would be more correct and beneficial to acknowledge the transnational links within all black British writing. This is an argument that cannot be ignored, especially when the fact remains that the first black women

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Hansib, 2005); and Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformations* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> These points were initially raised within the conference titled "On Whose Terms? Critical Negotiations in Black British Literature and the Arts," (13-14 March 2008, Goldsmiths, University of London). The article followed: Joan Anim-Addo and Les Black, 'Black British Literature in British Universities: a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Reality?' *English Studies*, Newsletter 15, October 2008, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Courtman, 'Not Good Enough or Not Man Enough? Beryl Gilroy as the Anomaly in the Evolving Black British Canon', *A Black British Canon?* ed. by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies (Oxford: Macmillan Palgrave, 2006) 51.



writers in the UK came from the Caribbean, through Britain's involvement with the transatlantic slave trade.

Through being colonial subjects of Britain, raised with the British education system, justice and way of life, West Indians saw themselves as British in terms of cultural identification. When the Mother Country was in need they answered the call and travelled to England. It was a journey to an illusion, for the West Indian immigrant faced the reality of rejection by the Mother Country. During the period from 1948 to the 1960s, there was popular and official hostility against black immigrants, through the mainstream political parties as well as newfound political entities such as the National Front. In 1958, anti-black riots erupted in Nottingham, and in the Notting Hill area of London, where white gangs of teenagers engaged in 'nigger hunting'. Petrol bombs, stones, broken bottles and knives were used. Acts of Parliament were passed with the intention to restrict and then terminate the flow of black Commonwealth immigration.<sup>12</sup> A Nationality Act was passed which redefined the concept of 'nationality' so as to further limit the black presence in Britain.

The female story of postcolonial migration is typically written out of this history.<sup>13</sup> There are snippets of black women's stories, which came to light decades later as the women themselves emerged to challenge their negation and disrupt the neat telling of these events in history. For

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<sup>12</sup> The first one to come into effect in 1915 was the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914, <[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1914/cukpga\\_19140017\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1914/cukpga_19140017_en_1)>. But the Acts that were in response to the Windrush years of immigration started in 1948 with the British Nationality Act 1948,

<[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1948/cukpga\\_19480056\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1948/cukpga_19480056_en_1)>. This was followed by British Nationality Acts of 1958, and 1965, and then the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts 1962 and 1968 which sharpened the distinction between citizens of the UK and colonies <[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1981/cukpga\\_19810061\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1981/cukpga_19810061_en_1)>.

<sup>13</sup> Heidi Safia Mirza, ed. *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997) 6.

example, there are the narratives of black women soldiers in the Second World War (Bousquet and Douglas, 1991), the writings and campaigns of Una Marson for the League of Coloured People in the 1940s, and the political activism of Claudia Jones, who brought the *West Indian Gazette* and Notting Hill Carnival into existence in the 1950s.

During the migration from the Caribbean and Africa throughout the 1950s and 1960s, black intellectuals and writers were creating art in Britain. This was the time of such writers as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, C.L.R. James and Wole Soyinka, who identified themselves as Jamaican, Barbadian, Trinidadian and Nigerian. These men were influential in developing the agendas around black politics and cultural expression in Britain. Some have described present-day black writers in Britain as following in the footsteps of these earlier black male British writers.<sup>14</sup> These writers of the colonies felt a need and duty to represent colonial societies, to reveal the humanity of the people to a section of British society maliciously ignorant of that humanity.

Drawing upon their attachment to their home countries, these figures wrote about what it was like living in Britain. At the same time, they reproduced their own sense of cultural and political unity through establishing clubs and organisations across regional and ethnic boundaries in Britain; such organisations as the Caribbean Labour Congress (1957), the Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (1958), and the Caribbean Artist Movement (1966). These organisations and others gave West Indians and Africans an opportunity to

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<sup>14</sup> John McLeod, 'Some Problems with 'British' in a 'Black British Canon,' *Wasafiri: Caribbean, African, Asian and Associated Literatures in English*, Summer 36, 2002: 57-58.

meet fellow settlers and travellers from different islands and nations, providing the space within which to recognize their collective struggles and strengths. The urgent task was to address and convince a British readership of the human values that resided in black communities. The writer was thus a missionary in reverse, 'coming to Britain to educate and civilise the ignorant'.<sup>15</sup> The burden of exposure is characteristic too of earlier black writing in Britain.

Away from home, for them, Britain was their base from which to attack the injustices that were occurring in their birthplaces. These men accessed a valuable network between black communities in the diaspora under such movements as the Pan-African movement, the Bandung Conference (1955), The Organisation of African Unity (1963), and the West Indian Federation (from 1958 to 1962), in order to fight for independence back home. As Alison Donnell (2000) argues, these intellectuals and writers were not interested in fostering a nationalist identity in Britain. This time was one of international, transnational and cosmopolitan identities. They already had allegiances to their homelands. The first generation of immigrants may have been part of the British Empire, but were secure within their Jamaican, Trinidadian or Barbadian identities. Once they arrived in Britain and experienced racism and discrimination, it was not their cultural identities under threat but their rights as human beings.<sup>16</sup>

To counteract the idea of the black presence in British society being something 'new' and 'male', black women have written and excavated the

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<sup>15</sup> Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Alison Donnell, 'Nation and contestation: Black British Writing', *Wasafiri: Caribbean, African, Asian and Associated Literatures in English*, Summer, 36, 2002:12.

black female side of history. Through the process there is a gathering and reusing of found elements from a visual and literary environment shaped by histories of colonialism and patriarchy. There has to be the remaking of diaspora identities, the displacement of the negative attributes assigned to 'black' and 'woman' in order to change one discourse to the next.

Attitudes, trends and the publishing industry have constantly changed between 1978 and 2008, the timeframe of this thesis. There has been an increase in the number of black British writers published in the UK, so that a black British category of writing is now recognised. But there is also tokenism: a few 'acceptable' writers are let through the publishing gates. Subsequently, the criteria for publishing black writing is changed so that those who follow these lucky few are judged within the similar narrow vein in terms of their writing and subject matter. This can be argued is the case within novel writing.<sup>17</sup> For example, after Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, the publishing world judged and accepted 'black' literature from within the same happy multicultural vein.

Poetry is a more uncertain genre of literature within which to become established. It is frustrating to acknowledge that the problems highlighted by Burford in 1988 are still a prominent feature of British poetry publishing today; the lack of recognition or even representation within the literary and academic institutions of black women. Bernardine Evaristo clearly describes the world of poetry:

It is critical approval that is the engine behind the poetry world and this is closely protected: Poets review poets and poets sit on panels and present awards to poets. Validation totally from within [...] its

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<sup>17</sup> See Chris Weedon, 'Migration, Identity and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women's Writing', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 2:1, June 2008:17-35.

function is to keep out those who are not in the club or clubs.<sup>18</sup>

Those on the inside of these clubs, or as Ted Hughes had called it, 'tribe,' feel the honour and the benefits. We can only hope that with the appointment of Carol Ann Duffy as the new poet laureate membership to this honourable tribe of poets will expand, as her perception of this tribe includes black and Asian poets such as Moniza Alvi, Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharker and Jackie Kay.<sup>19</sup> Time will tell whether this breakthrough is sustainable.

Within *Free Verse* (2006), the reality of the poetry world within Britain for publishing opportunities for black and Asian poets is revealed. The report's results show that there is a thriving community of ethnic poets within the performing circuit, but that these same poets are failing to reach publication. Fewer than one percent of all poets published by mainstream presses in Britain are black or Asian.<sup>20</sup> The editors of the mainstream poetry presses in question are white and male and declare that their selection criteria are based on quality, irrespective of race or gender. However, one editorial director's response was:

There are some innate barriers to full cultural diversity in publishing as we rely heavily on good language and literary skills within our chosen fields. Not all ethnic and cultural groups can offer these skills.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Free Verse: Publishing Opportunities for Black and Asian Poets* (special report funded by Arts Council England and published by Spread the Word Literature Development Agency, June 2006) Available at < <http://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/freeverse/index.php?id=49>>

<sup>19</sup> Carol Ann Duffy talking in *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2009, 2-3, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/02/carol-ann-duffy-women-poetry>> (accessed 17/09/09).

<sup>20</sup> Bernardine Evaristo, 'We've had enough of Greek myths' in *The Independent*, Sunday, 13 August 2006 < <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/weve-had-enough-of-greek-myths-411707.html>> (accessed 15/08/2006).

<sup>21</sup> In *Full Colour*, *The Bookseller* in association with decibel (London: Arts Council England, 2004) 8. < [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/publications\\_for\\_subject.php?sid=8&page=2](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/publications_for_subject.php?sid=8&page=2)>

These comments are ethnocentric, maybe even narrow-minded, judging other cultural groups by the 'standard', but we have to wonder if this editor would perceive these comments as such. Black and Asian poets are receiving the message that they are just not good enough. Publishing still does not offer a level playing field. White writers can get away with being mediocre and be published while black writers cannot.<sup>22</sup> Both mediocre *and* good black writers remain unpublished.

There are other questions which should be asked while researching British publishing, such as how many black and Asian poets are submitting to mainstream publishers? What percentage of these submissions is published? Fiona Sampson (2006) stated at the launch of *Free Verse*, that after she became the editor of *Poetry Review* she had to actively pursue a policy of encouraging more poetry from ethnic minorities as the journal received little to no submissions from such writers.<sup>23</sup> This dilemma was epitomized by the initial list of the Next Generation Poets, compiled by a panel for the Poetry Book Society in 2004. There were no black or Asian writers on it, 'leading to judges to send out a frantic call for minority ethnic names to be submitted.'<sup>24</sup> The custom is that black and Asian poets do not submit to mainstream publishers, such as Picador, Cape, Faber and Faber, and Carcanet because these presses are perceived to be predominantly white.<sup>25</sup> The clear conclusion from the survey *In Full Colour*,

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<sup>22</sup> See Andrea Levy talking in *In Full Colour*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Fiona Sampson talking at the launch of *Free Verse*, 16 May, 2006, Royal Festival Hall, London.

<sup>24</sup> Danuta Kean, *Free Verse* 3.

<sup>25</sup> Major publishers of black British and Caribbean poetry are Bloodaxe and Peepal Tree Press. Both are northern companies; Newcastle and Leeds respectively.

(2004), was that 'the industry remains an overwhelmingly white profession.'<sup>26</sup>

When Black and Asian writers make contact with the publishing industry they are encountering an environment where they will be edited, marketed, sold and publicised almost exclusively by white publishing staff. There is a sense among authors that this mismatch affects the publishing process and their own careers.<sup>27</sup>

Black and Asian writers feel misunderstood within the publishing industry. We perceive the reception of our work as being unfavourable, wishing for minority ethnic communities to be better represented in poetry publishing. Three conditions were singled out as being crucial for more black and Asian poets to be published. Apart from the market to be developed and a higher profile needed for black and Asian poetry within the National Curriculum, more black and Asian people should be employed within publishing.<sup>28</sup>

There are no figures available to ascertain how many black and Asian poets actually submit manuscripts to the mainstream poetry presses. The only evidence is on the other side, after being published, such as Daljit Nagra's first collection *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (2007). Published by Faber and Faber in 2007, he is only the third poet of colour to grace their list in their seventy-five-year history.<sup>29</sup>

Burford, writing in 1988, claims that:

Black women writing in Britain at this moment share a commitment and a need to leave a legacy, an investment, for those young Black people whose only experience is life in Britain. To do this, we need a drift of many-hued poppies in the pale wheatfield of British

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<sup>26</sup> *In Full Colour* 4.

<sup>27</sup> *In Full Colour* 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Free Verse* 4.

<sup>29</sup> The two others are Derek Walcott *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* (1986), *Omeros* (1990) *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000) *The Prodigal* (2004), *Selected Poems* (2007); and Caryl Phillips, ed. *Extravagant Strangers* (1997), an anthology of prose and poetry featuring Linton Kwesi Johnson.

publishing.<sup>30</sup>

The legacy of writings by black women writers in Britain is often autobiographical, detailing and exploring their individual lives within their communities. Writing, like other forms of cultural production such as film and art, has become an important site for exploring the articulation of new forms of identity. Stuart Hall has argued that 'cultural identity' can be seen in at least two ways: 'one, shared culture, a sort of collective one true self' and the second being a self with critical points of deep and significant difference, which constitutes 'what we really are'. Cultural identity in this second sense 'is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as well as the past.'<sup>31</sup> These women's writings illustrate this in operation; the difficult process and progress of identity in which cultural differences and individual and collective histories all play a part.

In recent years, Patience Agbabi, Bernardine Evaristo and Jackie Kay have achieved mainstream publishing success. I would argue that this is because they have diversified their writing and appeal.<sup>32</sup> The majority of black women poets remain on the fringes, workshopping and performing. However, within this wheatfield of British publishing our unique and specific experiences can be excavated and read for their specificity and universality.

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<sup>30</sup> Burford, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) 222.

<sup>32</sup> Patience Agbabi has established an academic career through teaching at such universities as Cardiff, Kent and Cambridge. Bernardine Evaristo was recently awarded an MBE for services to literature in the Queen's Birthday Honours List, 2009. Evaristo has diversified from starting out as a poet with Black Women Talk collective to writing a selection of novels in verse. Her last book, *Blond Roots* (2008) was her first true novel. Jackie Kay, who has been on the literary scene for more than 20 years, writes poetry, short stories, novels, plays for radio and the stage. She is also an academic with relations with Newcastle University.



This dissertation aims to explore, describe and consider some ideas which are new in terms of theory, analysis and methods. To echo the development of this tradition, distant, academic writing did not fulfil the obligation of documenting the past of black women's writing. If the aim is to speak directly of and to our experiences, then the adopted voices have to vary; being objective and detached, sometimes personal, conversational and involved. This approach is neither purely academic nor entirely personal, but depends upon the best way to express the intent when exploring the uncharted relationship between the two.<sup>33</sup> As Bakhtin wrote;

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's own only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions ... Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language ... but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own.<sup>34</sup>

Language takes on a more powerful significance when used in connection with an Afro-Caribbean identity. The memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art is a struggle for meaning that black artists around the world have been engaged in. The stripping from the African of her language is denying the voice the power to create and express her own sense of self, her own image. The ability and power to use the voice was effectively stymied.<sup>35</sup> Writing in English is articulating the language of the oppressors, a language that was not only foreign, but

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<sup>33</sup> See R. J. Nash, *Liberating scholarly writing: The power of personal narrative* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 293-4.

<sup>35</sup> See Marlene Nourbese Phillips, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Gynergy Books/Ragweed Press: Canada, 1989).

also hostile and expressive of the non-being of the African; therefore, as writers it is our task to consciously restructure and reshape the language. The excitement and energy for me as a writer comes in the confrontation between the formal and the informal within the text itself.

### **The structure of the dissertation**

In this dissertation, I explore the development of a black women writers' tradition through analysis of the different generations of black women writers in Britain, as well as the organisations, collectives, anthologies and individual collections. Although my primary focus is on the period 1978 to the present, the dissertation goes back to 1773, with the selection of earlier black women writers in Britain included to situate a foundation for the tradition. For all their differences, we can trace a similar preoccupation within the writings of black women across the generations that include the body, voice, place and visibility, to name but a few.

Chapter One situates contemporary black women poets into the historical context of early black women writing in Britain. Such writers as Phillis Wheatley, Mary Prince, Mary Seacole and others are discussed to illustrate their entry into literature, the themes they explore within their writing, and how the very act of writing provided a necessary survival tactic for the 'selves'.

Chapter Two discusses the solidification of the category of black women writers in Britain from 1978 to 1999. Through organisations such as the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) and other collectives, a distinct type of Black British Feminism was formed.

Its characterisation was contested but its existence provided safe, supportive spaces for black women to share and publish their writing. Using a range of anthologies and collections of creative writing from this period, as well as the small selection of critical essays that are available about this period of writing, this chapter will explore that category called 'black British women's writing'. The aim is to demonstrate that this tradition of writing exists with a developing aesthetic which should be acknowledged, respected, and valued.

Chapter Three is devoted to four individual poets' collections: Dorothea Smartt, *Connecting Mediums* (2001); Rommi Smith, *Mornings and Midnights* (2005); Malika Booker, *Breadfruit* (2008); and Patience Agbabi, *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008). The chapter argues that within contemporary black women's poetry there are similar preoccupations that were highlighted within the early black women writing in Britain. Writing to change the way a black woman is perceived within British society, appropriating other voices, exploring the self-damaging actions of black women towards their bodies and questioning the issue of 'home' are present within these writings. A close critical analysis of these selected collections illustrates the continuation of a developing aesthetic, in turn, reinforcing the tradition. This chapter is accompanied by a short section where I insert the 'self' within the tradition of black British women poetry.

Chapter Four presents a summative conclusion of the dissertation. It rejects the marginal positioning for black women's writing in Britain, arguing that there is not just one way of writing a black woman's life, but there is a tradition that can be referred to. There is no attempt to represent

an essentialist black British female identity or way of writing. In between these chapters are linking pieces titled 'she tries her tongue', numbered one to four. These pieces survey the influences of black women's writing on my own writing in terms of subject matter, process and form. These pieces examine the development of my 'selves' as a black woman and writer through the reading and writing of this tradition. These interludes provide the bridging pieces connecting the key elements of my creative work, *Family Album*, within the context of the dissertation, but more importantly they attempt to place my work and myself within this tradition of black women's writings in Britain.

### 'she tries her tongue' 1<sup>36</sup>

I've always felt nervous when meeting new people. Not because I'm worried about what they'll think of me, but because at some point in the conversation I will no doubt be asked the question, "So, where do you come from?" When a white person asks me, this question comes with the implicit assumption that I am not 'from here'. They might think this is a simple question to ask but it is not a simple question for me to answer. Should I say Bradford, West Yorkshire, where I was born and brought up until the age of ten? Or Newcastle where I live now with my husband and son? Or even London, where I went to University and got in touch with my 'black' side? Or Trinidad, Ghana, Barbados and Sierra Leone where my ancestral roots lie?

When I was younger in the 1970s and living in Bradford, my dad didn't talk about Trinidad, but we knew it was the land of his birth. One of the reasons we knew this was because of the black crushed velvet scroll that hung in our front room depicting the islands of Trinidad and Tobago. We didn't even know he had siblings until, after 25 years of no contact, he received a letter from his sister, Tantie Gladys living in the United States, which started a new relationship with 'family'.

After my dad's death in 1981, all the silences changed. Our mum told us the stories our dad had told her but had decided not to tell us about

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<sup>36</sup> This phrase is taken from the title of Marlene Nourbese Philip's poetry collection, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1983). Philips describes this collection as a profound eruption of the body within the text. Presenting a significant development of her as a poet, she claims back the black female body from exploitation and profoundly anti-human demands. At the same time, Philip is experimenting with language to claim the power to control the word. She does this through the mixing of the formal and 'the demotic' on the page. This inspired me as something I would attempt within this dissertation through the linking pieces; 'she tries her tongue'. For more details about Philips' collection see the text itself.

his land, his family, his home. We moved to Newcastle then, to be closer to mum's family. It was being closer to my grandparents, listening to them talking and seeing photograph after photograph, that I began to understand my heritage. My maternal great granddad, my nana's dad, was from the Gold Coast, now Ghana. Charles Mason was billed as the first black man in Newburn, our small village. I knew that someday I would visit my ancestral lands, Trinidad, Ghana, Barbados, on my granddad's side, and Sierra Leone, a new piece of information which places my Trinidadian family as descendants of slaves.

"Where will you be buried?" asks a friend. For her the answer is simple; born in England, lives and works in England, dies in England, buried in England. But for me, it's a tricky question because frankly, I'm not sure where I'm from. I live in Newcastle, but I don't call it home; it's my base. I wouldn't call Bradford home, even though I still carry the Yorkshire accent around with me. 'Home' as a concept is problematic as it makes visible such notions as gender, diaspora, identity, culture. 'Home' as a term includes the sense of 'knowing home', what and where home is. It also encompasses that feeling of 'being at home' or away from home. But most importantly, 'home' includes that matter of 'becoming'. There are multiple and fluid meanings of home, from private to public, from physical to imagined. The idea of home is plural, a conflicting site of belonging and becoming. 'Confused' is one word that should be on my passport.

In 2007, I took the plunge. I approached a visual artist friend and said, "I'm going to Trinidad and Tobago. Want to come?" At the time, I wasn't sure what I was planning. I was excited, worried, nervous and

scared. When I tried to visualize myself there all I could see was the touristy, travel brochure images of the Caribbean; blue sky, blazing heat, turquoise sea, crystal white sands and swaying palm trees. All my knowledge of my heritage was based upon Westernized sources, framing the islands in a certain way.

Having completed a visit to the Caribbean, I can not really imagine what it is/was like to live there, to be born there and grow up there, as my ancestors did. I am second and third generation of immigrants, depending of which side of my family is in focus. I do not have that first hand knowledge of 'home', be it the Caribbean or Ghana, but I do of England. As Avtar Brah says, 'home', is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination.<sup>37</sup> Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement. My experience of my ancestral homelands is limited. In terms of nostalgia, I have a longing for places that are far removed from my everyday but are part of my identity. I may gain an impression of these places through my travels to them or through my family members, sadly all of which are now dead, except my sister. I have that sense of loss of place and of people. I use my writing to create those lost worlds.

There is a photograph of me, in holiday gear (green and white striped top and white cargos), grinning like an idiot, clinging tightly with two hands, onto the arm of a man I've just met ten minutes ago in Laventille, Port of Spain, Trinidad. My smile speaks of satisfaction, joy, relief and belonging. This man is a cousin I did not know I had. This embrace is one of ownership. He is family and he is mine. He is part of my past, my

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<sup>37</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 2000) 192.

present in that photograph, and my future. The past is in our futures, in our  
nows. I carry with me the baggage of the past into my present and future.  
My Laventille visit was like going to collect baggage from the left luggage  
department, finding and claiming baggage that I didn't know I had lost, but  
is now vital to me in my task of trying to know myself better. This feeling of  
belonging, this split identity/mixedness of being/feeling British, Caribbean,  
African without exclusive claim to any of them is something difficult to live  
with, to function with.



## Chapter One: Introducing Black Women Writers to Britain

The opening chapter of the dissertation provides an overview of the generations of black women writers who were first published and read in Britain. The discussion of the origins of a tradition and the individual's contribution to such a tradition is considered here. My intention, through drawing upon this history, is to underline the ideas and themes that were cultivated within their writing which are relevant to, and built upon, by contemporary black women writers. The chapter discusses the development of the 'selves', claiming their space in this country, at the same time as supporting their community through the act of writing; telling their individual and collective stories.

### 1. Phillis Wheatley

The abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 was the beginning of the universal recognition of the black body as human. Prior to this date, there had been global agreement, confirmed by philosophers such as Kant and Hume, that African- heritage people were chattel; that is, not human and unthinking. The myths of innate black inferiority, stupidity, savagery and bestiality, which were introduced to justify the slave trade and colonialism, still permeate all aspects of British life even today.<sup>38</sup> These prejudices established the conditions into which black women's writing entered. Therefore any black woman attempting to write during the eighteenth century would be judged not on the aesthetics of her writing, but on her ability to be human. As Lyn Innes (2002) details:

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<sup>38</sup> Zhana, *Sojourn, A memorable anthology of prose and poetry reflecting Black women in Britain today* (London: Methuen, 1988) 25.

...supporters of the slave-trade argued that Africans were subhuman, incapable of a 'civilized' life, of which writing and literary creation were the most important mark, and hence suited only to manual labour and in need of firm governance by plantation owners. Abolitionists set out to counter these arguments both by appeal to common humanity and by providing evidence of the capabilities of Africans... But during the eighteenth-century enlightenment period, the equation between writing, civilization and humanity became established, and the question as to whether black people were capable of writing and literary creation became crucial to the debates surrounding the abolition of slavery.<sup>39</sup>

Eighteenth century writers provided a unique insight into black experience through their autobiographical writing. There was a strong appeal to the European audience to recognise the humanity of the African. Inherent to autobiographical writing is the question of the 'truth', of questioning 'the division between knowledge and life, objectivity and intimacy.'<sup>40</sup> The 'truth' must be confirmed by someone other than the subject of the text. However, as Gayatri Spivak discusses within *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990), a history of post-Enlightenment theory, the major problem of autobiography has been how subjective structures have been used to give objective truth: 'The Native Informant was treated as the objective evidence for the founding of the so-called sciences such as ethnography and ethnolinguistics.'<sup>41</sup>

The extent to which autobiographical narratives by black people, and women, black and white, have been scrutinised and questioned has to

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<sup>39</sup> C. L Innes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002) 17.

<sup>40</sup> Linda Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997) 4.

<sup>41</sup> Gayatri Spivak quoted in Sara Suleri, 'Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition,' *Women, autobiography, theory: a reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison :University of Wisconsin Press, 1998) 123. Spivak goes on to say that the theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. 'The person who *knows* has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is *known*, somehow seems not to have a problematic self.' The Native Informant explains the inaugurating of 'the name of Man' in those key texts of German philosophy (Kant, Hegel, Marx) which were to found the ethical, political subject of European Enlightenment.

be acknowledged. When Phillis Wheatley, 'an uncultivated barbarian from Africa,' as she was called by some of her sponsors, published her poems in 1773, they were prefaced by a letter to the public that was signed by the governor and lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, seven clergymen, and nine gentleman of standing in the community, who confirmed the authenticity of her poems. Gaining the 'white man's' seal of approval, Wheatley's collection of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) was published in London; the first book to be published in London by a black woman. She stayed in London for a few months, eventually returning to Boston. Yet, the book had a life apart from Wheatley, as when she died in 1800 it had been reprinted and was used as an indication of intelligence in enslaved Africans for the Abolition movement.<sup>42</sup>

However, at the time, Wheatley's poems were judged as aesthetically inferior and mediocre when compared with 'good' European literature; a common trick used to denigrate black writing. Her work was deemed as 'below the dignity of criticism', but as comparisons with the poetry of her contemporaries such as Matthew Prior, Mary Collier and Stephen Duck have indicated, Wheatley's verse stands up to the challenge in terms of language, imagery and rhythm.<sup>43</sup> In the course of reading her poetry, for example the poem 'On Being Brought from Africa to

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<sup>42</sup> Reverend Robert Boucher Nikkols [Nichols] quoted in Vincent Carretta, *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996) 13.

<sup>43</sup> See David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (Hereford: Hansib Publishing (Caribbean) Ltd., 1988) for further details about the comparisons made between Wheatley's writing and her contemporaries. Also within this text there is reference to the Hart sisters, Anne Hart Gilbert and Elizabeth Hart Thwaites, who were two of the most prolific early black women writers. They are not included within this dissertation, partly because although their work was published in this country they lived only in the Caribbean and never visited Britain, and because of considerations of dissertation length.

America', it becomes evident that Wheatley wrote and travelled to touch human hearts. In just eight lines, Wheatley describes her attitude towards her condition of enslavement - both coming from Africa to America, and the culture that considers her colour so negatively.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die".<sup>44</sup>

Wheatley hints at the deceit of slavery by forcing the reader to adopt a more critical view, distancing them from those who look upon the enslaved with contempt. The self-description of 'sable' indicates Wheatley's high self-esteem as well as bestowing worth upon her race. She is an important voice to include in the tradition of black female writers in Britain as she challenges the stereotypical views held by British society towards black people as a whole, as well as to the black female. With the added weight of patriarchy, female slaves were defined also as the "dark continent." The notion of conquering, penetrating and pacifying female slaves mirrored the actions towards the Dark Continent, Africa.<sup>45</sup> Wheatley demonstrates the first steps in manipulating the English language to capture her voice in addition to questioning the morals and beliefs of slave-owning societies. She contributed to the anti-slavery sentiment in this country; as one historian puts it she was 'a supreme witness to the anti-slavery movement in Britain'.<sup>46</sup> Barbara Johnson (1990) explains that Wheatley, through the use of the passive voice, brought about change for the Negro without explicitly acknowledging or processing conflict and

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<sup>44</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 18.

<sup>45</sup> Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994) 78.

<sup>46</sup> Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe, 132.

dispossession.<sup>47</sup> Wheatley is a model of a black woman poet whose voice, against the odds, was heard. She changed the way that a black woman was seen and thought about within British society, ever so slightly, but still significantly, in terms of contributing to the development of a black women's writing tradition.

## 2. Mary Prince

The portrayal of black characters by white writers has largely been perceived as difficult; they are often portrayed in roles that are stereotypical and grotesque. During the eighteenth century, many Afro-Americans wrote narratives about the evils of slavery as a means of bringing about their freedom. The development of the self took place through the struggles to liberate themselves from the crippling social and psychological effects of the dominant ideology and culture. To a large degree the struggle manifested itself through the literature, particularly through the autobiographies published. Linda Brent (1861) testifies in her autobiography that 'slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.'<sup>48</sup> Considering female slave narratives of the period, these documented extensive circumstances of rape, breeding, childbirth and violence. Such texts as Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Rebecca Warren Brown, *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, a Native of Africa, Who was Enslaved in Childhood, and Died in Boston, January 3, 1815...Aged 65 Years. By a Lady of Boston* (1832), *The Narrative of*

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<sup>47</sup> Barbara Johnson, 'Euphemism, Understatement, and the Passive Voice: A Genealogy of Afro-American Poetry,' *Reading Black, Reading Feminist, A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (London: Penguin (Meridian), 1990) 206.

<sup>48</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Mineola, 2001) 6.

*Bethany Veney, Slave Woman* (1889) and the extensive study completed by Barbara Bush within *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (1990), to name a few, detailed the degrading conditions for enslaved women. Although these were from an African-American perspective, a female slave was forever aware of her sexual vulnerability. Like enslaved males, she had to cope with the floggings and mutilations but the female also had the added burden of rape and sexual abuse. 'She was to be had for the taking ...boys on and about the plantation inevitably learnt to use her'.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, in spite of the violence and degradation suffered by the enslaved women, their stories remained largely ignored and seldom talked about in public.<sup>50</sup> Black men when they figure are generally portrayed as a negative force.<sup>51</sup> Black women barely figure at all in imperial and contemporary literature, and when they do they mainly fill a maternal role and rarely speak. The responsibility of writing about and engaging directly with the experiences of black women has therefore, in the main, fallen on the shoulders of black women alone. In the last thirty years some historical work has drawn attention to these differences, and at the same time there has been increasing awareness that this is a subject area that has been overlooked in literature.<sup>52</sup> Black women's experience of slavery differed

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<sup>49</sup> Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: The Women's Press, 2001) 7.

<sup>50</sup> Selwyn R. Cudjoe, 'Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updates', *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (Connecticut: Meridian, 1990) 273-274.

<sup>51</sup> See Laura Fish, 'Strange Music: Engaging Imaginatively with the Family of Elizabeth Barrett Browning from a Creole and Black Woman's Perspective', *Victorian Poetry*, ed. Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor (West Virginia: West Virginia University Press: 2006) 510.

<sup>52</sup> See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010), David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), Maureen G. Elgersman *Unyielding Spirits: Black Women and Slavery in*

significantly from those of men. Yet, the female condition remained a closely guarded secret as few of the thousands of slave narratives, written during this period, were by women. Even fewer female slave narratives were published in Britain about the British involvement in the slave trade and slavery. The writings that remain can be seen as an attempt at grounding perception in the experiences of being a woman, demonstrating the earliest stages of Black Feminism.

One such slave narrative is *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (1831). An oral narrative told by Prince to Susanna Strickland, Prince finds her voice with her narrative. Writing out of a silence, she brings other silenced voices with her, both black women and men. She testifies about the crimes of slavery committed by the British government against African people in the Caribbean. In terms of the history of literary publication, as Joan Anim-Addo (2004) observes in her essay 'Sister Goose's Sister's', it was through early slave narratives and testimonies that 'black women were first allowed voice, specially to speak of their condition'. Anim-Addo argues that 'the nature of the testimonial discourse and its particular framing of the African –Caribbean voice relate to future publications silence.'<sup>53</sup> Prince took pioneering steps to tell her story, about her life and experiences of being a slave, in order to gain freedom, but to also set the story right regarding slavery. Prince declared:

I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they

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*Early Canada and Jamaica* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), and Venetria K. Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Joan Anim-Addo, 'Sister Goose's Sisters: African-Caribbean Women's Nineteenth-Century Testimony,' *Women: A Cultural Review* 15, 2004: 37.

may break our chains, and set us free.<sup>54</sup>

This narrative is also reconstructing histories; histories that had been erased – in the case of black women obscured by myth. Within the context of slave narratives rather than a single authorial voice there are multiple narrative voices. Before the reader encounters Prince's narrative there is Thomas Pringle, who mediates between the public and Prince through his editorial notes. Authenticating Prince's credentials as the writer of her *History*, Pringle insists that the narrative 'is essentially her own, without any material alteration rather than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible.'<sup>55</sup> Pringle acts as the 'civilizing missionary', taming Prince's crude sentences, even containing her voice, reinforcing the problem of a black woman still being 'seen' through the white man's, other(s), gaze.<sup>56</sup> This is still the normal practice in publishing as illustrated by editor's remarks about the lack of acceptable language skills by ethnic minorities.<sup>57</sup>

Whether Mary Prince's *History* was reshaped after she dictated her experiences to Strickland, and if so, how much, is difficult to establish. The association with voice and singularity becomes a more complex matter when applied to Afro-Caribbean narratives. These slave narratives, primarily about single historical individuals, were intended to be representative. When people are positioned on the margins of the institutional spaces of literary production, they are burdened with the

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<sup>54</sup> Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave*, ed. Moira Ferguson (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1993[1987]), 74.

<sup>55</sup> Ferguson, 57.

<sup>56</sup> Jordan Winthrop quoted in *Subject to Other: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834*, Moira Ferguson, (London: Routledge, 1992) 5.

<sup>57</sup> See point made on pages 54-55.



impossible task of speaking as 'representatives', in that when they speak they are widely expected to 'speak for' their marginalised community.<sup>58</sup>

This is a mediated text, therefore some could argue that by its very nature there is no subject or author behind these words. Doris Sommer (1996) claims that dictated narratives are written dialogues; that within these texts, both the voice of the narrator and the voice of the transcriber work together to create the whole.<sup>59</sup> The last word may be had by the editor, in terms of the ordering of the narrative, but the actual telling of the story by the individual, in this case Prince, is vital to the complete text. The need to describe self, the experienced truth from the point of view of a black woman to hostile outsiders, was and remains the driving force behind this creation.<sup>60</sup>

However, the whole 'truth' about the enslavement of Africans will never be known, as the process of excavating the black woman's experience means key elements that are 'unspeakable' are omitted. This is especially the case when the audience is taken into consideration.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: new positions in Black cultural studies* (London: Routledge, 1994) 236.

<sup>59</sup> Doris Sommer, 'No Secrets,' *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 130-157, and 'Sacred Secrets: A Strategy for Survival, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) 197-207.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen, *Black Writers in Britain, 1760-1890*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991) 15.

<sup>61</sup> The absence of such testimony within Prince's narrative can be explained by considering the purpose and audience of the text. Prince's *History* was sponsored by the Anti-Slavery Society, 'who won public support by detailing atrocities and portraying female slaves as pure Christ like victims and martyrs.' (Moira Ferguson, ed. *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave*, (University of Michigan: Michigan 1993[1987]) 4. Bearing in mind that the Society campaigned for the abolition of slavery worldwide, Christian moral truth and purity far outweighed the quest for the real truth of the female slave's experience. 'Mary Prince can offer us one of the few glimpses of her sexual reality, all but suppressed through the narrative...' (Ferguson, 19). It could be argued that this part of Prince's life was suppressed because it was too shocking or maybe Prince couldn't find the words to express this reality of her enslavement. But without a doubt religious pressure came to bear upon Prince, as after her first meeting with the Moravian church she admits, 'I felt sorry for my sins. I cried the whole night, but I was too much ashamed to speak.' (Prince in Ferguson, 73).

There are veiled references to 'indecentencies' that point to Prince's sexual exploitation by at least two of her owners. Yet her story is sanitised; no sex horrors and no sexual agency on Prince's part, outside of her official marriage, clearly indicates that this *History* serves as a centrepiece of abolitionist propaganda.<sup>62</sup>

Nonetheless, with her *History* Prince creates a space in which to claim voice and agency on behalf of black people and to debunk myths and definitions of slaves and ex-slaves. She lays the path for future contestations for power. From the beginning of her narrative when Prince states 'I was born at Brackish Pond, in Bermuda, on a farm ... my mother was a household slave,'<sup>63</sup> there is a desire for self-realisation in words and a revelation of the conditions shared with others. There is an invitation for the reader to consider that at times she is unable to describe her experiences to an English audience, but she also considers the English language itself limiting. Within the text there are places 'where she finds English language and sentiment inadequate... Often she is at a loss to "find words to tell you all I then suffered"'.<sup>64</sup> This masks the whole situation of the enslaved being coerced into using English as a common language once taken from Africa. Nevertheless, bearing in mind this complex social encounter, with this *History* there is an attempt to find the words to tell her story. Considering Linda Anderson's comments (2001), there is the opportunity for Prince to use her autobiography as a means of not just

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<sup>62</sup> Fred D'Aguiar, *Mary Prince by Fred D'Aguiar*, Penguin Classics (Canada: Penguin Group, 2008) < [http://www.penguinclassics.ca/nf/shared/SharedDisplay/0,,49152\\_0,00.html](http://www.penguinclassics.ca/nf/shared/SharedDisplay/0,,49152_0,00.html) > ( accessed 03/05/05).

<sup>63</sup> Ferguson, 57.

<sup>64</sup> Edwards and Dabydeen, 234.

asserting her own subjectivity but also that of her fellow black community.

This follows the idea that autobiography can become:

the text of the oppressed, articulating through one person's experience, experience which may be representative of a particular marginalized group as an important one: autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and expressing the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition.<sup>65</sup>

During her life and since, due to the scarcity of female slave narratives,

Prince's *History* has been held up as an example for such experience.

This does raise the problematic question of the notion or desirability of the

black artist being seen to be the representative of the race. As Fred

D'Aguiar remarks:

Her single story stands for that of countless others and this pressure on her narrative, the fact that in all likelihood this is not just about her experience but that of millions others spread well over two centuries speaks volumes to the present about the nature of that past.<sup>66</sup>

There was very little public debate about the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of the work, as critical attention was drawn more to issues concerning race and racism, which were posed in reductive ways that ignored the institutional and historical context in which the narrative took place. There has been a moment of 'corrective inclusion' to counteract such historical exclusion of black writers in Britain. *History* had to carry an impossible burden of representation as it stands for the totality of everything that could conceivably fall within the category of black women's lives, experiences and writings. Nevertheless, Prince, her person and her writing, contributed to that changing image and attitude towards a black

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<sup>65</sup> Linda Anderson, *The New Critical Idiom: Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001) 103.

<sup>66</sup> Fred D'Aguiar

<[http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/nf/shared/WebDisplay/0,,49152\\_1\\_10,00.html](http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/nf/shared/WebDisplay/0,,49152_1_10,00.html)> (accessed 03/05/05).

woman within British society. Prince may be an example of a woman who contributed to the stereotypical image of the strong black female slave, yet at the same time through her voice she provides a model of a thinking and feeling individual; a human being.

### 3. Mary Seacole

There is a long tradition of writers from Britain [...] who have found it necessary to travel. In many respects this tradition of departure, and sometimes return, was at its most furious during the period of empire and colonisation when countless numbers of British writers sought to define themselves, and their country, by travelling and encountering strange others who might, to some extent, affirm their sense of their own place in the global scheme of things.<sup>67</sup>

Part of the legacy of being a writer of the African diaspora in Britain is that 'home' is a complicated word. In terms of history and geography, 'home' could mean 'place' or 'country' as well as that emotional state of a sense of 'being at home'; a state that has been denied black people in Britain for centuries. Travel has been an important device for grappling with issues surrounding British colonial identity and belonging. Moving out of one society's boundaries and crossing into other countries gives the individual the time and space to construct and visualise his/her own independent identity. Operating within a society which is hierarchically structured from the monarchy down to the lower classes and marginal groups, position and identity is handed out at birth. Identity is worn. The individual becomes it. Within this class system, there are further divisions along gender, racial and ethnic lines. When clustered near the bottom of

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<sup>67</sup> Caryl Phillips, 'Necessary Journeys', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2004, 4-6.  
< <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/dec/11/society2> > (accessed 09/09/09).

the system, an individual's identity is reduced to clichés and stereotypes, subsequently influencing how they are treated thereafter. Difficulties arise when an individual attempts to change or liberate the 'selves' from this confined box, as the very survival of the system depends on the status quo. Therefore, any black woman who challenges this system through her being and the act of writing should be included within the foundation for black women's writing in Britain. One such woman is Mary Seacole.

Mary Seacole's travelogue, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* ([1857] 1984), is a fundamental contribution to the tradition of black women's writing in Britain. Seacole published her book in 1857 to instant success and was reprinted within the year. She died in 1881 leaving an estate valued at £2615, a relatively substantial sum equivalent to tens of thousands today.<sup>68</sup> A black nurse whose outstanding work in the Crimea is often overshadowed by that of her contemporary Florence Nightingale, Seacole's contribution to British society was lost in history. Seacole, a house-hold name in Victorian England, only became known to contemporary society through the republishing of her autobiography by Ziggy Alexander and Audrey Dewjee in 1984, and further by being voted greatest Black Briton in an online poll in February 2004.<sup>69</sup>

Seacole's writing represents a sense of identity formation, the sense of being an embodied, located individual through that insider/outsider position in relation to both 'here', meaning Britain, and

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<sup>68</sup> Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe, 136.

<sup>69</sup> See the website 100 Great Black Britons <<http://www.100greatblackbritons.com/>>. See also Jane Robinson, *Mary Seacole* (London: Constable, 2005) for more details about Mary Seacole's life and work.

'back there', meaning Jamaica. While writing about her activities during the Crimean War, she is fiercely patriotic. A devotion to the Queen and Country is a dominant feature of the narrative as she speaks proudly of the 'part she bore of the trials and hardship endured on that distant shore, where Britain's best and bravest wrung hardy Sebastapol from the grasp of Britain's foe'.<sup>70</sup> Her text becomes literally written both on and through her body, as she describes her experiences as a black female near the battlefield, and becomes an internalised sense of continual otherness. Her subjectivity could become forcibly split between blackness and Britishness given the rampant racism of the English towards blacks in their midst, the plundering and portioning of Africa, and the colonial repression of Jamaica. Yet Seacole does not allow this to happen. Seacole claims a type of non-fixed identity, which is always fluid and able to respond to change, that gives her 'the freedom . . . to become all she could be, despite the double obstacle of being coloured and a woman.'<sup>71</sup> The idea of a fluid, multifaceted identity is something that black women writers of the past have embraced and used to their advantage, and is still prevalent today.

*Wonderful Adventures* is one of the most important personal histories to be written by a Caribbean-born woman.<sup>72</sup> Within Seacole's travel writing, there are conflicting elements of pride in her African ancestry and unquestioning acceptance of British culture and attitudes. As a writer, travel enabled her to understand the importance of constant

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<sup>70</sup> Dabydeen and Wilson, 136.

<sup>71</sup> Aleric Josephs, 'Mary Seacole: Jamaican Nurse and Doctress, 1805/10-1881', *Jamaican Historical Review* 17, 1991: 48.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* ed. Alexander and Dewjee (Bristol:Falling Wail Press [1857] 1984) 38.

reinterpretation and, when necessary, reinventing herself. Through her upbringing, she was 'formed, brought up, reared, taught, educated, nursed and nurtured to be, a kind of black English [person].'<sup>73</sup> This means Seacole enjoyed an elevated social position within Jamaican society. She was not only taught how to read and write and to appreciate good writing, but perhaps also learnt 'how to ignore the labels white society liked so much to fix on to its various subjects.'<sup>74</sup> Mary Seacole occupied a unique position of 'not quite/not white.'<sup>75</sup> She described herself as 'only a little brown—a few shades duskier than the brunettes, whom you all admire so much.'<sup>76</sup> In her self-identification, Seacole moves from 'Creole,' through 'yellow doctress,' 'woman', and 'foreigner', to 'mother' to the British soldiers and 'English woman.'<sup>77</sup> This diverse identification demonstrates Seacole's ability and freedom to articulate her own position from a marginal space.<sup>78</sup> Seacole doesn't perceive herself as "other" and assigns this position of outsider to darker friends:

Strangely enough, some of the most vivid of my recollections are the efforts of the London street-boys to poke fun at my companion's complexion. I am only a little brown . . . but my companion was very dark.<sup>79</sup>

Here Seacole refuses to identify with the racial slurs, preferring to remain loyal with British attitudes of the time. This, as well as her medical knowledge and talent, gave her a level of respect that would most likely

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<sup>73</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Myths of Caribbean Identity,' *The Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture Series* (Coventry: Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick, 1991) 5.

<sup>74</sup> Robinson, 13.

<sup>75</sup> Homi Bhabha quoted in Emilian Kavalski, 'Notions of Voluntary Identity and Citizenship in the *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*', *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 7:2, 2003: <<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7i2/kavals.htm>> (accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2005).

<sup>76</sup> Alexander and Dewjee, 58.

<sup>77</sup> Alexander and Dewjee, 55, 85, 100, 110, 116, 223.

<sup>78</sup> Kavalski <<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7i2/kavals.htm>> (accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2005).

<sup>79</sup> Alexander and Dewjee, 58.

not be accorded to a person of her gender, racial background, and cultural/geographical location at this time.<sup>80</sup> When one young American confessed to wanting Seacole bleached so that she would be 'as acceptable in any company as she deserves to be....' Seacole responded to this insult with:

If it had been as dark as any nigger's, I should have been just as happy and as useful, and as much respected by those whose respect I value; and as to his offer of bleaching me, I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. As to the society which the process might gain me admission into, all I can say is, that, judging from the specimens I have met with here and elsewhere, I don't think that I shall lose much by being excluded from it.<sup>81</sup>

By admitting this position, Seacole implies that she has successfully navigated her way through her profession, which gives her this position of privilege. The American's speech places her as an object, but Seacole, through her response reasserts her agency.<sup>82</sup> Bearing all this in mind, Seacole could reject being identified as part of a black literary canon because of her negation of blackness. Evidence shows that Seacole preferred to identify herself with the white establishment rather than her Caribbean lineage. She had seen the benefits of such identification. She ingratiated herself with "white" society by disassociating herself from other black people. Seacole was a victim of Empire. A victim who internalized the hate of the colonialists and perpetuated the racial stereotypes of the mother country, which is still evident today in the self-hating and self-abuse by black women in Britain who internalise the belief that blond hair

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<sup>80</sup> LaJuan Simpson, 'Architecting Humanity Through Autobiography: Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*,' *Revista/Review Interamericana*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1-4, 2001 < <http://www.sg.inter.edu/revista-ciscla/volume31/simpson.html>. > (accessed 09/09/09).

<sup>81</sup> Alexander and Dewjee, 98.

<sup>82</sup> Simpson, < <http://www.sg.inter.edu/revista-ciscla/volume31/simpson.html>. > (accessed 09/09/09).



and blue eyes equals beauty. Conversely, for this very reason Mary Seacole needs to be included in any kind of black literary tradition because she is a prime example of a woman who defies the state-imposed identity and carved out her own identity, actively engaging with British culture on her own terms. It could be argued that she was amongst the earliest women writers who challenged the restrictive roles of "woman" and "black". Her many journeys and travels generated transnational influences upon her identity and writing. Seacole claims agency over her narrative, stating that 'unless I am allowed to tell the story of my life in my own way, I cannot tell it at all,'; carving out her own identity through her actions and writing, actively engaging with British culture, on her own terms.<sup>83</sup> Seacole's actions and voice subsequently changed, for the positive, the narrative surrounding the black woman within British society.

#### 4. Una Marson

There is a force that works against women writers who dare to write.<sup>84</sup> Within literature, the female is object and silent. She is assigned to the position of the passive image rather than energising creator. She is the object to be written about, rather than the subject who writes. The first black women's presence in the British Isles was recorded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where there is evidence of 'Moor Lasses' in the court of King

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<sup>83</sup> Alexander and Dewjee, 185.

<sup>84</sup> Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983) back cover comment.

James IV of Scotland.<sup>85</sup> A few years later these women were featured in a poem by William Dunbar. The poet says that:

the black lady had full lips and a snub nose,  
and the skin that shone like soap;  
in her rich costume she gleamed as  
bright as a barrel of tar.<sup>86</sup>

What followed was a poetic tradition of love poetry dedicated to black women, as they were viewed as exotic and mysterious objects. In Western culture, poetry is regarded in contradictory ways because of gender.

Poetry is seen as a prestigious, elite and esoteric form, and private, intimate, intensely subjective. Helene Cixous (1974) states that women have not written because, 'writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great – that is for 'great men.'<sup>87</sup> Poetry can be an empowering tool for women in search for the self but can be dismissed by the male literary establishment for being of little value. Adrienne Rich, in her influential essay 'When We Dead Awaken', talked about her sense of the forbidding weight of male poetic tradition, which she could only evade by constructing a counter-line of exemplary women. All language and traditional poetic language privileges the masculine position, and these women in their poetry are constrained by this whether they realise it or not.

During the twentieth century, in terms of the body of work published from the Anglophone Caribbean in Britain it was almost exclusively male.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Fryer, 3. Taken from James Kinsley, ed. *The Poems of William Dunbar*, (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1979) 196.

<sup>87</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 317.

<sup>88</sup> Among these early anthologies were John Figueroa's two volumes of *Caribbean Voices* (1966, 1970), and Andrew Salkey's *Breaklight* (1971), which mostly featured contributors living in the anglophone Caribbean. The artistic organization of Caribbean and black British poets began to develop more formally in the late 1960s, with the Caribbean Artists Movement emerging in London in 1966 under the supervision of John La Rose, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and Andrew

Throughout the centuries, black women seldom found their way into print. When they did, they wrote about their own experiences. Writing women clearly found a sense of freedom; a place where they felt they were allowed to speak within poetry. Black women were writing themselves into social and historical existence by writing their stories. Publishers labelled their work 'too psychological, strange, way-out, difficult to categorise.'<sup>89</sup> Women's work, experience and lives were considered irrelevant, almost trivial in comparison to their male equivalents, to the point that any achievements within the literary world by black women were claimed by their male colleagues.

For example, Una Marson self-published her collection of poetry *Tropic Reveries* (1930), and her second a year later *Heights and Depths* (1931). After a four year stay in England, *Moth and the Star* (1937) was published as a means of circumventing the male dominated publishing world and reaching her audience. Becoming a full-time programme assistant on the BBC Empire Service, she coordinated and introduced a series of programmes called 'Calling the West Indies.' It was during this phase of her career that Marson conceived the idea of *Caribbean Voices*, which 'was the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean

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Salkey (Markham *Hinter* 39). *Savacou Magazine* grew out of the movement of the 1960's which was mostly concerned with Caribbean artistic production and with consolidating a broad artistic alliance between all 'Third World' peoples. Multi-genre anthologies like E. A. Markham's journal contribution *Ambit 91* (1983) began to appear later (along with journals like *Wasafiri* and more recently *Sable LitMag*), later published with Bloodaxe as *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (1989) while James Berry assembled the first two major anthologies of poetry exclusively by 'Westindian poets living in Britain' (Berry *News* xii): *Bluefoot Traveller* (1976) and *News For Babylon* (1984).

<sup>89</sup> Beryl Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind: Collected Writings*, ed. Joan Anim-Addo (London: Mango Publishing, 1998) 21.

creative writing in English.<sup>90</sup> Marson became the BBC's first black woman producer, with *Caribbean Voices* broadcast on Sundays from London studios to listeners in the Anglophone Caribbean. Yet the fact that Marson created and nurtured this vital outlet for Caribbean writing is often overlooked in historical writings. Henry Swanzy, who was the programme's editor for eight of its total fifteen years of existence, is attributed the credit for the programme having taken over after Marson's return to Jamaica.<sup>91</sup>

Born in Jamaica in 1905, she came to Britain in 1932 after successfully editing the first Caribbean women's magazine, *The Cosmopolitan*. The magazine's internationalist perspective sets the foundation for Marson's later activism, writing and cultural work in Europe.<sup>92</sup> There are some black women such as Rhonda Cobham who claim Marson as the literary foremother of black women's writing in Britain. There were, as the dissertation has shown, other black women writing before Marson. Yet Marson can be credited with being the first black woman writer to use vernacular speech within her poetry in Britain. Marson catalogues the social acts of seeing in poems of varying styles and voices. Her experiences in England gave her a 'new awareness of herself as a black woman', which grew out of both a defensive reaction to British racial stereotyping and prejudice, but also from her growing cultural solidarity with other Caribbean and African people. Despite the

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<sup>90</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite quoted in Onyekachi Wambu 'The first wave', *Black British Literature since Windrush*, BBC History Webpage.

< [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/literature\\_02.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/literature_02.shtml) > (accessed 02/04/2008).

<sup>91</sup> 'Notably, Henry Swanzy's BBC Radio programme *Caribbean Voices* was to provide an important forum in the early postwar years, broadcasting work by many of the writers listed above.' James Procter, *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998, An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 13. Procter also mentions Marson's connection to the programme elsewhere within this text.

<sup>92</sup> Mary Lou Emery, *Modernism, the Visual, and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 112.

media's portrayal of black women as having inferior beauty when compared to white women, many of Marson's poems argued that black women should still be confident in their own physical beauty. 'Cinema Eyes', 'Little Brown Girl', 'Black is Fancy' and 'Kinky Hair Blues' all explore this theme. How the black body is gazed upon, the racialised gaze, dominates Marson's poetry of this time.<sup>93</sup> She used the inclusion of Jamaican folk rhythms and inflections, common to colloquial speech, to express her experiences of cultural schizophrenia, Jamaican-born living in Britain, in contrast to her earlier rigid adherence to traditional English literary forms.<sup>94</sup> Marson appropriated and subverted a culturally controlled range of discourses of poetry, 'writing back' to the dominant form. What this demonstrates is that not only does the tradition of black women's writing develop through manipulating the English language to represent their experiences more adequately, but also that this tradition continues to be transnational.<sup>95</sup> Marson demonstrates a relationship between her poetic writing and her need to re-examine what it meant for her to be a woman, a black woman. Through her struggle to revise and recast the dominant literary forms, her poetry, as process rather than product, suggest what was necessary for her survival as a black woman at the time.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1969) 109.

<sup>94</sup> Denise Decaires Narain, *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style* (London: Routledge, 2004) 13-14.

<sup>95</sup> Marson begins to use Jamaican patois in poems such as 'Quashie Comes to London' and 'Foreign', both of which adopt the speech of a man. This demonstrates Marson's growing confidence in her craft and wanting to find her way to write her existence.

<sup>96</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Marson in terms of the visual within her work see Decaires Narain (2004), Emery (2007), and Delia Jarrett-Macauley *The Life of Una Marson 1905-65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

## 5. Beryl Gilroy

The female story of postcolonial migration, during the 1950s and 1960s, is largely written out of history.<sup>97</sup> There are snippets of black women's stories, which came to light decades later as the women themselves emerged to challenge their negation and disrupt the neat telling of these events in history.<sup>98</sup> Gate-keeping, gender politics, racism and class conflicts of the twentieth century were the standards that rendered black women invisible and unheard within the wider society, not to mention the literary world. Added to this was snobbery in relation to what and how black women wrote.<sup>99</sup> Beryl Gilroy, through her mixture of autobiography and fiction in the publication *Black Teacher* (1976), highlighted the difficulties within the British education system in the 1960s, especially in terms of how it was failing the majority of students, including its multicultural students. *Black Teacher* is an example of women's literary expression, as Gilroy presents an imaginative experience of what it felt like being a black woman in Britain in the 1960s. At the time, *Black Teacher* was appropriated for its usefulness as a sociological and educational text, and as a result, her writing has merited very little literary critical attention. The subject matter may have been pioneering, especially from a black woman's perspective, but 'she joins the greater majority of writers who are not validated by the academy.'<sup>100</sup> This could be because she is black and female, what Gilroy would call 'subliminal racism.'<sup>101</sup> Gilroy's entry in the

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<sup>97</sup> Mirza, 6.

<sup>98</sup> See Introduction pp.50-58.

<sup>99</sup> See Russ (1983) and Gilroy (1998) for more details.

<sup>100</sup> Courtman, 55.

<sup>101</sup> Beryl Gilroy, quoted in Courtman, 54, said that:

*Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature* states that, 'There has been little criticism of her writing to date'.<sup>102</sup> This, with a few notable exceptions, is a situation which could be applied to the whole of black British women's writing; these writers have to critically analyse their own work, as it would otherwise be critically ignored. The mere fact that there was a critical silence surrounding Gilroy's work means that she had to be a major critic and messenger of her own work.

Within the text of *Black Teacher* there is a third-person as well as a first-person, autobiographical 'I' narrator. Simultaneously, Gilroy demonstrates the feeling and need to tell her story as a means of survival.

In the tradition of Black women who write to come to terms with their trauma, or alternatively to understand the nature of their elemental oppression, I wrote to redefine myself and put the record straight.<sup>103</sup>

But it is evident that in telling her story she leaves a legacy for those who come afterwards. This is a practice within the writings of black women that in the process of telling their own stories, they also have an eye on those that will follow behind. Black women writers want to leave a model for the next generation of writers so that they can learn from their

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The publishers, editors and other occupants of the inner publishing sanctum had been raised on the stereotype, preserved them and could not see beyond them. Talking with some about my writing brought the discussion to a dark and barren place. Their class-education had not prepared them for encounters with colonial minds.

Sexism was still at play, as well as race, as Gilroy's poetry was due to be included in the publication *Bluefoot Traveller - An Anthology of West Indian British Poetry* (1976) collected by James Berry, but it was withdrawn at the last minute because she was the only woman included. This was the tendency in Britain, during this time, for the collections of poetry published within this new 'West Indian' section of literature to be male dominated. Such anthologies include *News for Babylon: the Chatto Book of Westindian British Poetry* (1984) edited by James Berry; *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (1989) edited by E.A. Markham etc. See also footnote 86.

<sup>102</sup>Clare Buck (ed.), *Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992) 578.

<sup>103</sup>Gilroy, quoted in Courtman 66.

experiences. Models as guides to action and as indications of possibilities are important to all artists, but to aspiring black women artists they are doubly valuable. In the face of continual and massive discouragement, women need models not only to see in what ways the literary imagination has been at work on the fact of being black and female, but also as assurances that they can produce art without inevitably being second-rate or crazy.<sup>104</sup> The tradition of black women's writing is there; it just needs excavating. As Gilroy proclaims:

I always had to think of West Indians who were to come to be teachers of the future. I was a pioneer, an ambassador ... I was always being watched, assessed, measured and compared.<sup>105</sup>

Attending these feelings of being watched are the anxieties of not adequately measuring up to the standard. This is clearly seen in Gilroy's overwhelming desire to be accepted and to gain recognition first as a talented multi-racial teacher through the numerous examples given of her methods of teaching, and secondly as a British citizen. This narrative device can be seen as self-applause but also as a necessary tactic to reconstruct self-esteem under continual attack from racism.<sup>106</sup> These feelings of inadequacy and wanting to be just as good as, or equal to, white people can equally be discerned in Prince's and Seacole's narratives. Despite that, what this tendency indicates is that in the tradition of black women writers, writing is a survival strategy for the individual writers concerned. On a more collective level, when each black woman writes her life into existence, she affects the negative stereotypes that

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<sup>104</sup> Russ, 87.

<sup>105</sup> Gilroy, quoted in Courtman, 63.

<sup>106</sup> Courtman, 60.



have been in common circulation regarding the black woman. She challenges these stereotypes by illustrating alternative images and voices.

## Conclusion

Within this chapter, those historical elements within black women's writing in Britain have been explored. Wheatley's writing challenged the belief or perception of the black person as not human, and therefore not intelligent or able to write. Prince used her voice to tell her story and that of others, demonstrating both self-awareness and empathy. She aimed to set the story straight in relation to the British involvement with the transatlantic slave trade and the women's position within slavery. Prince gained her freedom through her *History*. Seacole takes ownership of her 'yellow' female body to tell her own story in her own way. Through her poetry, Marson demonstrates the desire for her writing to be accepted by the standard literary establishment. All the same, she remains true to herself, as a writer but also as a black female, as she utilises the language of the Caribbean people. Gilroy illustrates the difficulties that face a black woman who wants to write about her experiences. Facing rejection and meagre attention, Gilroy carves out a space for herself through her words, a place where she can feel at 'home' within the literary and academic worlds. Subsequently, her actions provide a unique model for the following generations of black women writers.

Through the centuries, the writings of these black women have been dismissed and overlooked in terms of critical attention and aesthetical value, meaning that the writers themselves have been the

critics talking about and discussing their own work: 'Woman must write her self; must write about women and being women into writing.'<sup>107</sup> Black women writers have been faced with the consistent need to prove themselves as artists, as capable of intellect and creative talent, to a community which does not support women's creativity. Any artist who seeks to put their work out into the public domain faces obstacles. Yet black women writers understand the necessity of writing for their selves and their community. As is the case now, black British women write to explore the self but also to reach an audience, to be heard. All the same, there has always been the tension between presenting that unique experience and appealing to the universal within their writings. All these women writers used writing as a means to an end. As this chapter has shown, the importance of writing underpins everything in their lives.

The chapter has illustrated that there are experiences and issues that recur amongst black women, yet the dissertation does not seek to produce the essential black woman. Stuart Hall (1988) calls for the 'end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject', and this point is reinforced by the multiple positions of difference revealed with black women's writing.<sup>108</sup> Writing itself is not only a method of empowerment, but also of survival. These women were writing back in a sense to be made visible, to be substantial. A white male author can write literature which may fail to gain recognition but this does not affect his position in society. For a black woman, already invisible in society, if her writings fail to make an impression on the literary world, she is further lost in society.

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<sup>107</sup> Cixous, in Walder, 316.

<sup>108</sup> Stuart Hall, quoted in Mercer, 251.

## 'she tries her tongue' 2

I was in the final year of my GCSE's at Walbottle High School, an all white school in West Newcastle, when for my final English assignment I had to choose two books from the school library and write about them. It was through this task that I found *The Bluest Eye* (1972) by Toni Morrison. This was the first book that spoke to me directly, as a young black female growing up in a racist society, and what that meant to my identity and my sense of self. This was the first book that I had read that had the main protagonist as a black girl. Before this, I was reading *Sweet Valley High* and *Sweet Dreams* romantic novels, within which the heroine was white, blond or brunette, with blue or green eyes. While reading I would lose myself in the world created within the texts, high school or college, and I would always imagine myself in the position of the heroine. I would imagine myself as white and beautiful. This is not to say that I was not proud of my blackness. I defended it against the insults to the point of drawing blood from the person who was stupid enough to call me any names. This was the public face. In private, I longed to fit in and be accepted. I longed to be white. This was my double consciousness, my split personality, of being one thing and wanting to be something else. And in my imagination I could be, I could speak with that other voice and be part of the majority of society for a change. But after reading *The Bluest Eye*, my consciousness shifted; my eyes were opened.

I remember one time I had cut my finger and mum told me to take the plaster off to let it breathe overnight. I took the plaster off and my finger was white. I jumped for joy and shouted, 'At last I'm white'. My mum, the

gentle protective one of the family, got really angry and told me never to think or say that again: I should be proud to be black. I thought then that I had done something wrong but this was forgotten in my childhood days. Until I read *The Bluest Eye*, I didn't realise I had a problem. I realised that I had been fooling myself. The predominant literature of my childhood had duped me into the belief that it was right to identify with the female lead in the book. That it was right as a young black girl that I should want to be white, popular and loved. These books allowed me to escape my reality at the same time as reinforcing the fact that I could never be white, that I could never be beautiful. However, the desire to be white was warranted by default due to the invisibility of black characters.

*The Bluest Eye* is about a young girl who longs to be white as then she will be seen and loved. Unconsciously, Pecola Breedlove wishes for blue eyes, '... here was a little girl asking for beauty'.<sup>109</sup> She lives with her poor black family who have all suffered at the hands of white society. Her father is humiliated so many times by white men; her mother escapes her existence of looking after white families though watching films. They are a family who have no love for the self, never mind each other. This book is an example of the harsh reality of being black in a predominantly white society. This book spoke to me. I was nearly 16 years old. 16 years too late in terms of wishing myself white, or wishing I was the same as the people I read about in the books, that is, white and loved. It didn't matter at the time that this story was coming out of an Afro-American perspective. I

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<sup>109</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, (Washington: Washington Square Press, 1972).

was so green, barren and starved that this book would do, would work some kind of magic to heal the wounds.

From *The Bluest Eye*, I advanced onto other Morrison novels, *Sula*, *Tar Baby*. Then onto Alice Walker, Grace Naylor and Maya Angelou.<sup>110</sup> I never thought that there would be or that there were similar texts like this coming out of the British context. It wasn't until I moved to London to complete my degree in English and Geography that my personal tutor introduced me to Joan Riley and Grace Nichols. Before this, these black women writing in Britain were invisible to me. I thought that something had to be done about this neglect and created a Black British Women's Writers group while at University where we, as black British women, shared what we read and educated each other about the stories, poetry and plays that were out there. Texts that were by us and spoke to us. We became a supportive and encouraging network of black women readers and writers. We even gained funding to invite these published writers into University; Jackie Kay and Jean 'Binta' Breeze to name a few were invited and were loved by the majority, illustrating how black women writers gain an audience through their performances, by being visible.

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<sup>110</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1980), *Tar Baby* (1994); Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1983); Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982); and Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1971).

## Chapter Two: Black Women Insist On Their Own Space

The last chapter focused on those individual women throughout history who used writing to present themselves to a wider public. For such individual efforts they gained varying degrees of recognition. This chapter considers the increased visibility of black women within British society, gained through collective action: that is, forming organizations, support networks and other groups. This tendency started with The Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent in 1978, at a time when Black Feminism went through a process of adaptation to sufficiently reflect the British situation. This included Afro-Asian unity, redefining the term 'black', and challenging Western Feminism. The chapter explores the ripple effects caused by women organising under the banner of Black Feminism. Further initiatives such as organising conferences, publishing collectives, and creative writing were the result.

Within this supportive environment, black women gained confidence and the space to produce anthologies and individual poetry collections. From the beginning these texts were content driven, rewriting the black woman's position in British history and the present. Later, an aesthetic developed. Certain tropes within this literature, elements which have been identified in the writings of black British women of the past, became prevalent during this growth. I have called these tropes or elements voice; the visual; the body; and place. These categories have the aim of making visible a distinct division of black British women's writing which developed during this time period, and which contemporary black women writers build upon as they create new support groups. These elements within their

writing should be recognized, acknowledged and valued as a clear literary aesthetic. At the same time there was a move away from the collective idea of the 'black woman'. Essential black female identity made room for value placed within the individual's experience, indicating diversity within the lives and writings of black women living in Britain. This resulted in the late twentieth century witnessing an increase in the number of individual collections of poetry by black women being published.

### **1. Black Feminism – 1978 to 1984**

Black women and their contribution to British culture and history through the decades remains concealed by history. When the black woman is traced in history what we see is how she is permitted to appear. We see glimpses of her as she is produced and created by others, for the sustenance of the patriarchal, colonial and now postcolonial discourse.<sup>111</sup> She appears and disappears as she is needed: the dutiful wife, daughter, the hard and happy, grateful worker, the sexually available exotic other, the controlling asexual mother, a homogenised third world woman.<sup>112</sup> In her representation she is without agency, without self-determination; a passive victim, waiting to be inscribed with meaning by those who wish to gaze upon her and name her. She is an object, not the subject of her story. The project of black feminism asserts and reclaims agency in the telling of who they are, their voice, their being, their very presence within

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<sup>111</sup> See Spivak (1988).

<sup>112</sup> See Mohanty (1993); Collins (1991).

the patriarchal, imperial project: 'As a people, we have rarely been accorded recognition for the part we have played in shaping this land.'<sup>113</sup>

According to Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe (1985), the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD):

was undoubtedly one of the most decisive influences on Black women's politics in the UK, as the first national network of its kind, it brought black women together from all parts of Britain. OWAAD's lifetime spanned only five years, from its foundation in 1978 to its demise in 1983. During this time it captured the imagination of many Black women and succeeded in bringing a new women's dimension to the Black struggles of the eighties.<sup>114</sup>

OWAAD represents the beginning of black women in Britain making a stand in an organised way. This is not to say that there were not happenings before this event. For centuries, black women have been organising, agitating, resisting and struggling to "make things right" in their communities, whether that was within black community and church organisations, or on a more spontaneous basis.<sup>115</sup> What was unprecedented with OWAAD was that:

Black women had begun to articulate demands *as an organised body*, with the assurance which could only come from a strong sense of self-knowledge and mutual solidarity.<sup>116</sup>

OWAAD was set up by women who believed that only an autonomous, self-reliant black women's organisation could really be

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<sup>113</sup> Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, ed. *The Heart of the Race*, (London: Virago, 1985) 2.

<sup>114</sup> Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 164.

<sup>115</sup> During 1980, the publication by Margaret Prescod-Roberts & Norma Steele, *Black Women: Bringing It All Back* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1980) documented the black women's point of view in terms of the international movement of people, a story never previously told. I mention this text not only because it 'enables Black, immigrant women to give their stories and perceptions in their own words' but it also challenged the gendered roles through the International Wages for Housework Campaign. Women performed both physical and emotional housework, making a significant contribution to society, both back home in the Caribbean and here in the UK, which went unrecognised. These black women in Britain came for the money because they helped to create that wealth. This text is a rallying cry for women to come together and fight for their rights, and is just one example of the multiple fronts that black women were fighting on during this period.

<sup>116</sup> Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 170.



effective in fighting all aspects of the triple oppressions which black women faced – i.e. race, sex and class discrimination. These three oppressions:

are intricately linked, and cannot be hierarchically ordered according to some arbitrary set of 'priorities'. We feel that this fact has been ignored for too long by anti-racist groups, the (mainly white) feminist movement, and by the traditional left, all of whom have tended to see their particular field of concern as the most important one, thus failing to cater for the needs and aspirations of Black women who are victims of all three.<sup>117</sup>

This was OWAAD's novel development, as the tendency within black communities was to present a united front, men and women, against racism. Black women swelled the ranks of the organisation and were accused of weakening the groups if they wanted to break away or place women's issues higher on the agenda. Therefore, created out of the blind spots of other organisations, OWAAD's first conference in 1979 enabled black women to move from a place of isolation into a space where they could share their experiences, knowledge, and struggles. Black women were no longer alone; they had each other. As one participant confessed:

When I went to the OWAAD conference in 1980 and read some of my poems, I had a really great sense of people wanting me, and wanting to hear me. I felt nervous at first, but in a way, I also felt safe, because I was around sisters and had nothing to worry about.<sup>118</sup>

The realisation that there were other women around the country going through similar experiences of oppression created a newfound confidence and understanding of their unique plight within this country. 'Knowledge is power', and with these newfound connections and organisation, black

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<sup>117</sup> 'Black Women Fighting Back – Second National Black Women Conference', *Spare Rib*, 95, 1980: 49.

<sup>118</sup> Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 207.

women in Britain were now in a stronger position to tackle their oppressions and injustices.

An immediate direct result of OWAAD's existence was the increase in the number of black women's groups developing around the country. Black women's groups emerged in Liverpool, Birmingham, Lancaster, Bristol and Wolverhampton, organised across Afro-Asian lines. These women came to realise that both ethnicities, Africans and Asians, shared a common historical experience of colonialism. This gave black women the strength to speak out together, but also to write together. The call to Afro-Asian unity by OWAAD demonstrates the emergence of an organic racialised consciousness from which evolved the conscious naming of themselves as 'black'.<sup>119</sup> It was an empowering act in an empowering time, but one that did not last, in terms of this organisation.<sup>120</sup>

It was tough being 'Black' in Britain during the 1970s and early 1980s. It was a dark time, an angry time, because whether you came to Britain as an immigrant or were black and British-born you were treated just the same; as an outsider, as if you did not belong.<sup>121</sup> There was poverty, appalling housing and services, but also police brutality and blatant racism within the wider society. For black people in Britain there were few positive images of themselves to cleave to. During 1981, black women's attentions were diverted as their support was needed after the race riots, in terms of defending their families in court. The streets of South London were burning, but the black population found its voice. Brixton in

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<sup>119</sup> Mirza, 8.

<sup>120</sup> Mirza, 8. See also Lewis and Parma, (1983a); and Brah (1992).

<sup>121</sup> See Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70's Britain* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 1982) and Paul Gilroy, *There ain't no black in the Union Jack: The cultural politics of race and nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

South London was an area of deep social and economic problems: high unemployment, high crime, poor housing, no amenities and a predominantly black community. The police were strongly disliked and seen as largely reactionary and distant. The heavy use of the 'SUS' laws, which allowed police to stop and search individuals on the basis of a mere 'suspicion' of wrong-doing, increased tensions between the black community and the police. On the streets of Brixton this reached breaking point as local residents complained about young, inexperienced police officers being sent on the streets, provoking confrontation. Around this social upheaval, black writing, poetry first, exploded. At the forefront were men such as James Berry and Linton Kwesi Johnson. During this period of history the embracing of blackness was seen in various intensive masculine guises. But women were not far behind, if not beside them, but their presence was overlooked.<sup>122</sup>

Accompanying this external pressure were the internal pressures to assert heterogeneous identities which proved too much for OWAAD to maintain. OWAAD folded under the pressure. There was the desire for visibility through celebrating cultural, religious and sexual difference. Identity politics seemed to offer that space for marginal groups to be empowered. Unfortunately, identity politics did not offer a way forward for challenging the wider structures that located people within a racialised and sexualised space in the first place. Although OWAAD disbanded by 1984, the ripples of its influence carried forward and onward. Those women who had been involved in the organisation published a special issue of

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<sup>122</sup> Valerie Bloom was active during this period.

*Feminist Review*; 'Many Voices, One Chant' (1984). Edited by Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar, the title is an indication that these women acknowledge their cultural and regional differences, but are still committed to unity as they seek to make their voices heard. Approached by members of the *Feminist Review* collective with a suggestion of a special issue, this was seized upon as an opportunity to get black women's writing published. The editors hoped that this edition would open the door for *Feminist Review* to include 'writings by and for Black women, so that this issue does not remain a token exercise.'<sup>123</sup>

Essays included within this issue attempt to carve out a niche for Black British Feminism by challenging Afro-American Feminism and charting its relevance to the British context: 'The realities of the day to day lives make it imperative for us to consider the simultaneous nature of our oppression and exploitation,' which were specific to the British context and should be addressed.<sup>124</sup> In telling their different stories, in exposing their personal pain and pleasures, Black British feminists reveal other ways of knowing that challenge the normative discourse.<sup>125</sup> This is made clear through articles addressing black women and the economy, black women organising autonomously such as the Brixton Black Women's Group, as well as black lesbianism. There is a challenge to white feminism and its reductionist tendency. There is a desire for equality, a struggle for social justice and the vision of universal sisterhood. They tell of the African

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<sup>123</sup> Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar, 'Many Voices One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives', *Feminist Review*, No. 17, Autumn, (London: Pluto Press, 1984) 1.

<sup>124</sup> Amos and Parmar, 4-5.

<sup>125</sup> Mirza, 5.

Caribbean experience of schooling, they reveal black women's struggle against domestic violence, they engage in black lesbian activism and speak of enriching, empowering, and complex alternative family forms and other ways of living and being.<sup>126</sup>

These challenges were made visible through the writing of poetry. The poetry included in 'Many Voices, One Chant' showcases poems from black and Asian women writers in Britain. There is Jackie Kay's 'So you Think I'm a Mule'. Also included is 'Political Union' and 'For Michael Smith' by Iyamide Hazeley, 'Hey white women' by Carmen Williams, 'I am a woman' by Perminder Dhillon, and 'Revolutionary Consumerism' by Pratibha Parmar; poetry reflecting the issues and concerns of the time, such as racism, and feminism neglecting to include black women and African and Asian heritage. However, the books which are reviewed within this issue are novels by women of colour from America and Africa.<sup>127</sup> No full length collection of poetry or novel by black British women is reviewed. Were there no reviews of poetry by black British women poets included because there were no collections published at this time? This cannot be the reason because both Grace Nichols and Valerie Bloom, migrants to Britain, had collections published in the UK in 1983. Also the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books (1982-95), organised jointly by John La Rose with Bogle L'Ouverture Books and Race Today Publications, took place in London showcasing black literary talent. This lack of inclusion was not only a missed opportunity for black British

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<sup>126</sup> See also Lewis and Parmar (1983b.); Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe (1985); Parmar and Mirza (1992); and James (1985).

<sup>127</sup> Buchi Emecheta, *Double Yoke* (London: Flamingo, 1984). Emecheta was living in Britain at the time of writing this novel but it details a woman's life in Africa.

women's writing, but is also an indication that these black feminists were still looking across the Atlantic for guidance and inspiration while being unaware of, or ignoring, equivalents closer to home.<sup>128</sup>

In spite of this, 'Many Voices, One Chant' did succeed in generating further expansion within the literary world. An advertisement within this issue calls for creative contributions for a new collective; Black Women Talk (BWT). BWT was set up in 1983 as the first black women's independent publishing co-operative in Britain and included Da Choong, Olivette Cole-Wilson, Bernardine Evaristo and Gabriela Pearse. Their aim was to publish books of poetry and prose written by women of African and Asian descent living in Britain. The collective's objective was explained as such:

Publishing is a powerful medium; and the written word has a great deal of influence on what people know and think, and conditions certain ways of thinking. By the absences of OUR VOICES, the publishing industry reflects and perpetuates the racism and sexism in this society. We are sick and tired of being the objects of Victorian/white/middle class peoples' travelogues. We believe it is important to encourage more Black women to write and record their life experiences and history and to provide a greater knowledge and understanding of our lives and herstories.<sup>129</sup>

The collective made a call for contributions for their first publication, due out in 1985, but *Black Women Talk Poetry* did not appear until 1987.

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<sup>128</sup> Throughout *Feminist Review's* publication history it has published articles on race and gender, such as in issue number 31 (1989: Spring). 'The past before us: 20 years of feminism', carried the piece from Prabitha Parmar, 'Other Kinds of Dreams', and an interview with Angela Davis. The whole of the next issue, number 32, (1989: Summer) was dedicated to Latin America. Later with issue number 59, (1998: Summer) there was a focus on the Caribbean with 'Rethinking Caribbean difference'. However, *Feminist Review* has never published another issue totally focused on Black British Feminism. This could be for two reasons. One could be that after 'Many Voices, One Chant', the *Feminist Review* collective might have thought that they had paid enough attention to the cause. Alternatively, the absence in this journal could be due to a loss of focus within Black British Feminism itself, reflected by the demise of OWAAD; with the disappearance of a visible organised branch of Black British Feminism, what was left were individual feminists fighting alone, not collectively.

<sup>129</sup> 'Black Women', *Spare Rib*, 140, 1984:28-29

The explanation given for the delay was that '[t]he route we have taken and the struggle we have had to arrive at this place bears witness to the odds stacked against us in making our voices heard.'<sup>130</sup> The women had to learn about the world of publishing, finance, printing costs and legal status before they could move forward with their publication. Also, the women in the collective were actively involved in other groups and projects, so there were competing pressures of time and money from the beginning: 'As the only visible Black women's publishing group it was hard to refuse the opportunities given to raise our profile and our issues'.<sup>131</sup> They had to honour requests to participate in various conferences and festivals. But more importantly, delays occurred because black women were not used to their writing being taken seriously.

There was a reluctance of these writers to submit their work. BWT had to stage several open reading events for Black women [who would eventually be persuaded] to part with their work and get it published.<sup>132</sup>

When finally published, *Black Women Talk Poetry* sounded out 'a chant to our ancestors, to ourselves, to our children', not claiming to be a representation of 'the essential black woman' but as something more, illuminating a creative endeavour that 'moved us, taught us, inspired us, bonded us, criticised and challenged us'.<sup>133</sup>

Black British women throughout the 1980s wanted to 'move away from their definition [of black] and use the term positively to assess our past'.<sup>134</sup> There was a desire to claim blackness, their own kind of

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<sup>130</sup> Da Choong, ed. *Black Women Talk Poetry* (London: Black Woman talk Press, 1987) 7.

<sup>131</sup> Choong, 7.

<sup>132</sup> Choong, 8.

<sup>133</sup> Choong, 9.

<sup>134</sup> 'Black Women', *Spare Rib*, 140, 1984:29

blackness, as women and British, at the same time as defining their own idea of black feminism. 'We Are Here' (1984), the first Blackfeminist conference for black women defining themselves as feminists, provided that much needed space to explore their common values.<sup>135</sup> Over the weekend, 150-200 women attended from around the UK. Discussions and workshops were offered. From this conference a number of initiatives were launched including the Blackwomen's Writers Network, the Black Lesbian Support Group and 'We Are Here', a Blackfeminist newsletter.<sup>136</sup> These were important moves forward, not only for black women feminists locating their struggle within their lived experience and context of Britain, but also for the emergence of black women's literature in Britain.

For a while black women in Britain recorded their experiences in newsletters, conference papers, and in the pages of predominantly white-orientated feminist publications, such as *Spare Rib* (1972).<sup>137</sup> These outlets had a direct relationship with the politics of Black Feminism. Writers like Suzanne Scafe, Stella Dadzie, Beverley Bryan, Jackie Kay, Maud Sulter, Jacqueline Rudet, and Barbara Burford gained access to publishers through collective action following Black Feminist politics.

Although OWAAD was only in existence for five years, the fact that a space was created and continued to have repercussions through further collectives, conferences and anthologies is an indication of Black Feminism being needed and subsequently utilised. The coming together of black women and their seeking of similar ground could not be disregarded

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<sup>135</sup> 'Black Women's Conference – We're Here', *Spare Rib*, 144, 1984: 21

<sup>136</sup> 'Black Women's Conference – We're Here', *Spare Rib*, 144, 1984: 21

<sup>137</sup> *Spare Rib*, a second-wave feminism magazine in the UK which sought to distance itself from traditional women's magazines, exploring alternatives to women's conventional, gendered role.



once it had begun, and the individual women gained strength from the collective. Black women were not only speaking amongst themselves but were also attempting to reach a wider audience with the written word. With writing, they were writing history, challenging the words that had been written about them in the past. They were becoming subjects, no longer passive objects at the hands of others, but claiming agency for themselves.

## **2. Anthologies – The end of the 1980s**

A series of collectives, collections and anthologies of creative writing became available towards the end of the 1980s, designating black women's writing as a discrete category of literature. The risks were small when taking the steps to publish these anthologies, as they were cheaper than individual collections from unknown black women writers. As black British poet Patience Agbabi said about her first attempts at getting published: 'I had sent a short manuscript to the Women's Press very naively. They wrote back saying usually people get published in anthologies first!'<sup>138</sup> Aside from introducing new authors to the publishing world and giving them the necessary credentials for further publication, poetry anthologies also bring emerging poets to the reading public in an easily accessible form. Since tours are occasionally arranged around major anthology releases, audiences increasingly have an opportunity to interact with the poets in a live setting. Anthologies also provide up-and-coming poets the added benefit of receiving recognition by association

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<sup>138</sup> Molly Thompson, 'Strangers in a strange land': an investigation into the representation of the black feminine body in writing by black women in Britain', unpublished PhD thesis, (Exeter: Exeter University, 2003) 149.

with established writers. Considering that the first in-roads into publishing for black British women were writings aimed at addressing past exclusions and removing silences and changing stereotypes, it was the political and social content of the poems, rather than the aesthetics, that influenced the substance of these anthologies. The identity as woman was primary, with the significance of culture and colour contributing to that sense of self.

Framing a comparison within three sets of two anthologies of black British women's writings, what follows is a discussion concerned more with how these anthologies are significant publications within the British context for framing a distinct field of writing, rather than detailed literary criticisms of the poems included within these anthologies.

(i) ***The Heart of the Race and A Dangerous Knowing***

*The Heart of the Race* (1985), edited by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, is a collection of autobiographical, creative and factual writings and interviews written within a black women's collective. The collection provides some much needed details of the everyday experiences of the generation of black women who came to Britain during the 1950s and 1960s. George Campbell portrayed Caribbean women within his poetry as 'history makers' as 'women stonebreakers', as 'hammers and rocks' and as builders whose strength had provided not just the sustenance for survival but also the power to create a way of life and a sensibility.<sup>139</sup> These black women had seen the appearance of material documenting the struggles of black people; they

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<sup>139</sup> Dabydeen, 43.

had witnessed the women's movement with 'herstory'. But, 'despite the efforts of Black men and white women to ensure that we were no longer 'hidden from history', there was still a gaping silence from black women.<sup>140</sup> Even though the majority came independently to the UK, and in almost equal number to men, black women arriving from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia appeared within official figures as either wives and/or dependents of the male migrant.<sup>141</sup> Therefore, these women could only claim rights through their relationships to men; as a result their experiences of inequalities within housing, education, law, immigration policy, and health went unrecorded and unheeded. The aim of *The Heart of the Race* was to move black women out from the shadows onto centre stage.

We are at the stage when we face the onerous task of creating strong self-images, for the need to confront and change the prevailing perception of us has never been greater. We want to materialise in the heart of this racist and sexist society where Blackwomen are invisible, to replace stereotypes in which the white world and Blackmen wish to constrict us.<sup>142</sup>

Writing became an empowering act that challenged the politics of domination that rendered these women nameless and voiceless:

We write in order to create new models, images for self and others. We mean to shed the old image of Blackwomen with dead-end destiny.<sup>143</sup>

Even though, as is evident throughout this anthology, these women experienced discrimination, racism and isolation, the women featured within this text take great pains to distance themselves from the stereotypical image of the 'long-suffering black women', or as Grace

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<sup>140</sup> Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1.

<sup>141</sup> Mirza, 7.

<sup>142</sup> Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1.

<sup>143</sup> Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1.

Nichols would say, 'a little black blood/undressed'.<sup>144</sup> At the same time as emphasising that they are not attempting to present a collective, universal position of the black woman in Britain, the editors and writers of *The Heart of the Race* succeed in presenting both the unique and collective experiences during these early years of migration to Britain for black women.<sup>145</sup> Where black women have been denied the privilege to speak, to have a valid identity of their own, a space to 'name' themselves, here within this text they enact agency to speak of their difference and their uniqueness. It is not the case, contrary to what Patricia Collins (1991) has stated, that these women claim to have special knowledge, a privileged or unique standpoint borne out of their marginalisation and the mere 'living life as a black woman'.<sup>146</sup> Such a claim would be to assume a naïve essentialist universal notion of a homogeneous black womanhood, and would render these Black Feminists no better in their conception of the self and the nature of power than that embodied in the authoritative discourses they seek to challenge.<sup>147</sup>

Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, the editors of *The Heart of the Race*, faced considerable difficulties when compiling this anthology. Not only was there a lack of source material to draw upon but furthermore there was a

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<sup>144</sup> Grace Nichols, 'Of course when they ask for poems about the 'Realities' of black women', *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets, Barbara Burford, Gabriela Pearse, Grace Nichols, Jackie Kay* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, (1984) Second Impression, 1985) 48-50.

<sup>145</sup> During the 1950s to 1960s 'black' as a racially identifying term was not in common usage and migrants were 'West Indians' responding to the call from the Mother Country. However, throughout *The Heart of the Race* 'black' is the signifier used, as this book is coming out of a Black Feminist stance, with its attempts to redress the absences of black women in history: 'Black women came to this country because we wanted to work. We have made a lasting contribution to the British economy and we have paid for it with our blood, our sweat and our tears.' Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 56-7.

<sup>146</sup> Collins (1991) in Mirza, 5.

<sup>147</sup> Gilroy (1993), and Suleri (1993).

question of which kind of language, register and style to use in order to write the text:

we were forced to reconsider that quasi-academic approach, as we gradually came to realise that this was contradictory. If this first statement was to speak directly of and to our experiences, how could we adopt the uneasy, uncomfortable tone of a small group of academics?

[... ]

The book had to be accessible, so that it would reach as many women as possible. We were not denying the value of research but we had to be clear that a book grounded in experience, that was evolving as collective autobiography, had to be written in a clear and unambiguous style.<sup>148</sup>

What is evident within this collection as a whole is the desire to remain true to their own voices, even if what they produce is not accepted by the academy. The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. However, as Audre Lorde says,

...the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.<sup>149</sup>

Therefore the choice is to write from personal and collective experience using simple everyday language, which runs the risk of being dismissed as subjective and unscholarly. However, the importance of doing so should not be underestimated, as '[t]hrough our language we express and define our collective consciousness as a people.'<sup>150</sup> The presentation of an anthology of various voices is fundamental, but to attempt to do so through

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<sup>148</sup> Laurretta Ngcobo, ed. *Let it Be Told: Black Women Writers in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1987) 125-6.

<sup>149</sup> Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools', *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (U.S.: Crossing Press, 1984) 112.

<sup>150</sup> Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 185.

a language which is far removed from the audience it claims to represent and reach defeats the objective. In order to fulfil this responsibility, the editors drew inspiration and sustenance from the collective and personal experiences of black women in Britain, as well as the long tradition of creativity and inventiveness laid down by their African foremothers. As Maya Angelou said, 'No man can know where he is going unless he knows exactly where he has been and exactly how he arrived at his present place.'<sup>151</sup> For that reason, drawing upon a tradition of song, dance and words, *The Heart of the Race* illustrates how black females can reject myths and stereotypes in order to reassert themselves within society on their own terms. The text reinforces that need for models, for knowledge of those black women who have gone before.

*The Heart of the Race* is a unique text visualized through the everyday experiences and produced through the everyday language of black women living in Britain. Only now, in 2009, are these voices which were coming out of neglect and silence being built upon by The Oral History Project on the Black Women's Movement.<sup>152</sup> This oral history project, set up by the Black Cultural Archives and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, is calling for black women volunteers to come forward and share their experiences of the Women's Movement.

Running parallel with this mainly non-fiction anthology is a collection of poetry, *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets* (1985), introduced by Pratibha Parmar and Sona Osman. This collection claims to '[mark] a unique and historic moment in feminist publishing. Here

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<sup>151</sup> Maya Angelou, quoted in Julia Cameron, *Finding Water: The Art of Perseverance*, (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006) 24.

<sup>152</sup> Launched on the 19th May, 2009. See <<http://heartoftherace.blogspot.com/>>

for the first time in Britain, poetry written by four British based Black women is brought together.'<sup>153</sup> This anthology, introduced by two Asian women, contains four women from African Caribbean or African British descent: Barbara Burford, Grace Nichols, Gabriele Pearse and Jackie Kay. This collaboration illustrates a continuing desire to foster African-Asian unity. Some of the poems had appeared elsewhere, such as Jackie Kay's 'So you think I'm a mule' in *Feminist Review* (1984), and some of Grace Nichols's poems are taken from her individual collection *i is a long memoried woman* (1983). Yet there are still enough new poems within this collection to be fresh and challenging.

*A Dangerous Knowing* is an important anthology in making the work of some black British women writers more widely available, and in signalling some of the issues regarding being black, female and writers at the time in British society. All the writers are concerned with their dual identities as black people and as women. The relationship between black and white women is also examined, as the title of some of the poems reveal: 'we are not all sisters under the same moon', 'We the Women', 'Between women'. Yet as a close reading of the title poem will demonstrate, the developing aesthetic of the black British women's writing movement was not limited to being black and/or female.

Firstly, Burford's poem, 'Untitled', celebrates the poet's identity as woman:

woman  
guard well your mystery.  
Your own creative fruitfulness.

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<sup>153</sup> Pratibha Parmar and Sona Osman, *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets, Barbara Burford, Gabriela Pearse, Grace Nichols, Jackie Kay*, (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, (1984) Second Impression, 1985) vii.

It is a bloody, an ancient,  
 and a dangerous knowing.  
 Beset with chimeras.  
 But it is the design  
 drawn on your bones;  
 the song hidden under your tongue;  
 the landscape painted  
 on the inside of your skin.<sup>154</sup>

Burford's use of imagery is essential to her poetic arsenal. She engages with the tropes of the body, voice, place and the visual, developing a black British women writers' aesthetic. Deploying visual descriptions and metaphor, with such references to 'skin', 'bones', 'tongue' and 'bloody', culture, race and colour are markers of difference. The woman's body is naked suffering. Nonetheless, Burford describes a woman's creative qualities as 'fruitfulness'. The speaker's creativity is part of her whole being, 'the design/drawn on your bones'. To deny such an 'ancient' tradition or to have this tradition denied by others is painful and dangerous to her being; it can turn inwards causing self-doubt, fear and hatred. This is reminiscent of a phrase implied in Audre Lorde's essay on the importance of poetry to women: 'The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.'<sup>155</sup> Burford reinforces such a tradition that when creativity reaches the public realm, women still suffer because it is 'beset with chimeras'. The use of the term 'chimera' could imply a suggestion that women are represented within a patriarchal society as monsters that need taming. Additionally there is the idea that for some people the association of black women with the art of writing still strains credulity and it is difficult for such

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<sup>154</sup> Barbara Burford, 'Untitled', Parmar and Osman, 4.

<sup>155</sup> 'the act of not writing at all would be asphyxiating, and would ultimately led to the death of the poet.' Audre Lorde, 'Poetry is not a Luxury', Lorde, 37.



people to recognise and accept them as writers. Burford could also be referring to the criticism levelled against feminism as a whole at that time, where it was said that it failed to acknowledge the position of black women within the movement as different but equal. But whichever reading is implied, this statement evokes the mystery that shrouds black women. Burford draws upon Greek legend rather than Caribbean or African traditions to highlight this, demonstrating her confidence and assurance as a black woman poet in Britain that she can claim the Western canon as being at her disposal.

Considering *The Heart of the Race* and *A Dangerous Knowing*, coming soon after the demise of OWAAD, it is evident that the issues raised through collective action were still relevant to the women, as was voicing the issues themselves. Through the written word they continue to bring attention to the position of black women in British society. There were commonalities as black women were viewed by society as a homogenous whole and not as individuals. Therefore the task of these anthologies was to map the multiple, individual experiences of black women living in Britain.

**(ii) *Let it Be Told and Sojourn***

The history of black British women's writing is not a question of quantity or quality, but of visibility. Once visibility is achieved the next step is to use their various voices to tell the stories of their realities. The next two anthologies that will be explored are *Let it Be Told: Black Women Writers in Britain* (1987), edited by Laretta Ngcobo, and *Sojourn: A*

*Memorable Anthology of Prose and Poetry Reflecting Black Women in Britain Today* (1988), edited by Zhana. Considering the titles of these anthologies, it is evident that verbalising black women's stories about their lives, journeys, migrations and sense of 'home' are paramount to these writings. What is important is not only their identities as woman and being black, but also their roles as writers in a hostile host society.<sup>156</sup> Conflicts materialise as the individual attempts to reconcile these tensions within the self, as well as without, with the idea of sharing experiences with society.

*Let it Be Told* is a collection of essays by ten Black women writers in Britain, and includes personal stories, and glimpses at the intentions and obligations of writing poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.<sup>157</sup> Writers such as Amryl Johnson, Maud Sulter, Valerie Bloom, Grace Nichols and the collective responsible for *The Heart of the Race* present a dialogue of 'some significant works' across cultures which points to a kinship which enabled and created a space for writers' voices and their work.<sup>158</sup> Again, this anthology reinforces the benefit of being part of a collective for the process and progress of writing as black women in Britain. A strategy used to consolidate the notion of a collective representing black British women's voice is to take as all-inclusive an editorial approach as possible:

Not all contributors can yet claim publications of their own; but as Blackwoman writers we share a feeling of oneness whether we are published or not, for the publication of anyone's work is fortuitous and we have felt disillusionment with the British publishing establishment.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Ngcobo, 225.

<sup>157</sup> Ngcobo, vii.

<sup>158</sup> Ngcobo, vii.

<sup>159</sup> Ngcobo, vii.

Achieving advances in publishing, this anthology is part of an archival process which builds upon the foundations established by Phillis Wheatley, Mary Prince and Mary Seacole. Here the tradition is progressing ever so slightly; not quite developing that much needed critical dimension to this category of writing, but succeeding in providing the space for writers to discuss their intentions through their creations. Black women in dialogue about theirs and others writing is a practice that has had to be integral to this tradition, as Gilroy demonstrated earlier.<sup>160</sup> Without this ongoing dialogue, the literature would pass by unacknowledged.

Within *Let it Be Told* are the first collected texts that critically engage and review the work of black women writers in Britain. For example, Dorothea Smartt comments on the collection of poetry *As A Blackwoman*, by Maud Sulter (1985). A Scottish poet and artist of African heritage, Sulter challenges through her poetry what it means to be a blackwoman, as well as reaffirming that she is also an artist. In 'Being a Private Person', she says:

Keeping to the room  
often to bed  
for fear  
of confronting  
the mirror image.<sup>161</sup>

What is reiterated is how black women have been systematically denied access to this realm of themselves or made to feel outside of its scope.<sup>162</sup> Here within this anthology, the women explore their 'selves' with each other.

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<sup>160</sup> Ngcobo, vii.

<sup>161</sup> Maud Sulter, *As A Blackwoman* (Hebden Bridge: Urban Fox Press, 1985) 37.

<sup>162</sup> Dorothea Smartt commenting on the work of Maud Sulter in Ngcobo, 69.

Within the introduction of *Let it Be told*, Ngcobo provides a context for black British women's writing, which at this time was widening its range. 'Publishers are the guard dogs of the tradition', as they determine which writers appear in print. They determine the standard. Black women receive the message that some books from certain people are more valid than others when their own books are not published.<sup>163</sup> Black women have historically got around these gatekeepers by establishing their own publishing presses and becoming publishers themselves; examples include Black Women Talk Poetry in 1983, followed by small black companies producing books such as Bogle L'Ouverture, founded in 1968 by Jessica and Eric Huntley, and Zora Press, established by Iyamidè Hazeley and Adeola Solenka in 1987.<sup>164</sup> This practice of self-publishing, or even what some pejoratively term "vanity publishing", is frowned upon by the literary world. For example, Zhana, the editor of the anthology *Sojourn*, includes a number of her own pieces within the text. This could be judged as 'blowing her own trumpet', or taking advantage of her position as editor to further her own work. On the other hand, this could also be argued to be evidence of the limited spaces or avenues that are available for black women to be published. There are precedents for this, with both Mary Seacole and Una Marson self-publishing their own work. If these black women do not make these opportunities for themselves then they will never materialise, and to be in print is to potentially reach a wider audience.<sup>165</sup> It is a difficult dilemma, deciding whether to remain

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<sup>163</sup> Ngcobo, 16.

<sup>164</sup> See page 83 for a discussion of Black Women Talk Poetry collective.

<sup>165</sup> Brown Skin Books, founded in 2002 by Vastiana Belfon, publishes intelligent high-quality erotica; Mango Publishing, the brainchild of Joan Anim-Addo, was established in 1995 in

unpublished or self-publishing in the hope that your work will withstand the criticism of being self-published; negative judgements which are made even before the actual work is critically considered. Whilst the tide is turning, slightly, towards looking favourably towards self-published literature, this seems only to apply to those books that are picked up afterwards by large publishers.<sup>166</sup>

*Sojourn: A memorable anthology of prose and poetry reflecting Black women in Britain today* is an anthology which progresses the idea of journeys experienced by the black women in Britain; journeys both physical and psychological. *Sojourn* includes prose, poetry, fiction, non-fiction and oral history, and presents the experiences of some black women in Britain at the time of publication. As co-founder of the Black Women's Writing Workshop, Zhana, the editor, believes that: 'all Black women are writers, each of us has a story to tell, and we just need the opportunity and the confidence to put words on paper.'<sup>167</sup> Again this anthology demonstrates an all encompassing editorial style. The editorial style will not affect the quality of the work, but it might have an effect on the overall quality of the anthology. The focus is not so much on the aesthetics of a piece, but more so on the content that speaks to

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response to the growing demand for a small black press committed to promoting and publishing the work of quality first-time and established writers; Tamarind was set up in 1989 by Verna Wilkins. The company publishes a wide range of Early Years Picture Books and also a range of Black Profiles aimed at ages 9 to 12.

<sup>166</sup> Best selling vicar-turned-author, G. P. Taylor, signed a multi-book deal, continuing his relationship with Penguin Young Readers Group in the United States and Faber & Faber in the United Kingdom after self-publishing the novel first.

<sup>167</sup> Zhana, 19. Zhana was a founding member of Black Women's Editorial Collective, an organisation which came together to compile an anthology but which fell apart. Zhana was left alone to edit the anthology. In the meantime she co-founded the Black Women's Writing Workshop, which worked with black women writers and would-be writers in London, creating a space for them to support each other through sharing their creativity. The workshops were a space where women opened up and began to understand and enjoy their creative processes and skills.

blackness, femaleness and other political issues of the time such as the existence and proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Within this context 'sojourn' also means stay; for generations of travellers to stay in Britain and make it their 'home':

Where is home? On the one hand, 'home', is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In the sense that it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality'.<sup>168</sup>

Due to the nature of migrations and journeys of black people to Britain from many different countries, it is difficult to pin down the 'origins' of any one person. There are multiple origins for the writers, such as India, Pakistan, New York, and black Britons born of Afro-Caribbean descent, but they are pulled together through personal and shared experiences. Consequently, this anthology concentrates on the relationships between women that are fundamental to their lives, on understanding themselves as a means of and an aid to surviving. Zhana interprets 'black' as meaning 'women of African heritage', but she also includes the experiences of women of Asian descent, who identify themselves as 'black'. Expanding the definition of the terms 'black' and 'woman' illustrates that there is no one essential black female identity. Zhana felt that 'it was important to represent some diversity of opinion and experience that contribute to the current, ongoing debate among Black women in Britain.'<sup>169</sup> This emphasises the shared experiences and identities of 'Blackwomen', but also has the reverse effect of calling into question the collective identity of

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<sup>168</sup> Brah, 192.

<sup>169</sup> Zhana, 20.

this category of writers. There is a tension that exists between the individual and the collective.

Towards the end of the introduction of *Let it Be Told*, Ngcobo states that there is now such a thing as 'the Blackwomen's' viewpoint:

From now on we exist where we had no collective considered viewpoint, now we have. In books such as this, we are carving for all Blackwomen a niche in British society.

Needless to say, the critical opinions expressed in this introduction are my own. They are not necessarily shared by the women writers who have contributed to this volume.<sup>170</sup>

This disclaimer is indicative of the tension between the individual and the collective which inflects many of these anthologies. Furthermore, it foregrounds some of the problems and anxieties generated by the category 'black women writers' itself, and some of the limitations of mobilising publications under such a heading. One problem is not wanting to claim to speak for all black women, not to be representative of others, because such women have been reduced to stereotypes for so many years; the editors of these publications would not want to reinforce them. This is the burden of representation as explored by Kobena Mercer (1994). After years of struggle, when an individual is given the right to speak, there is an overwhelming pressure to try and tell the whole story all at once. There is the fear that this will be her only opportunity to have her say, so she will try to say everything in that one moment.<sup>171</sup> These were often the conditions within which a black woman would tell her story:

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<sup>170</sup> Ngcobo, 34.

<sup>171</sup> Mercer, 235.

When artists are positioned on the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production, they are burdened with the impossible task of speaking as 'representatives', in that they are widely expected to 'speak for' the marginalised communities from which they come [...] such expectations would not arise in a situation where such events could be taken for granted, and normalised.<sup>172</sup>

A black woman's access to such spaces of articulation are limited by the effects of racism and sexism, therefore each writer has to carry the burden of being 'representative'. What is worse, as Mercer points out, is that because of a lack of continuity of context, black scholars, academics, and writers seem to be constantly reinventing the wheel when it comes to black cultural, literary and arts criticism.<sup>173</sup> With little development of a continuous context of mutual criticism, when there is criticism it is not organised or specific, but merely an outpouring. Within *Sojourn*, these women subvert this tendency by drawing from experiences which are varied and multiple. Whilst there are questions surrounding how adequate experience is for being a valuable authority, Sara Suleri argues that:

While lived experience can hardly be discounted as a critical resource for an apprehension of the gendering of race neither should such data serve as the evacuating principle for both historical and theoretical contexts alike.<sup>174</sup>

What these two anthologies have demonstrated is that the task of publishing black women's writings is not an easy, straightforward endeavour. For black women, moving from a place of silence to begin to tell stories about their individual experiences is a political act due to the existence of racism, sexism, and the class system within Britain. The authors have to tell their own stories first in order to change the popular

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<sup>172</sup> Mercer, 236.

<sup>173</sup> Mercer, 236.

<sup>174</sup> Suleri, 119-120.



skewed view about the black woman. This makes the black woman the object of study, but because she is in the act of enunciation this also gives her agency. This is the existence of the 'self' as one's own subject, not as someone else's object. Again, there are tensions evident between articulating the individual experience at the same time as developing a collective body, or even tradition, of black women's voices. The women who are part of this initiative see the carving out of a safe space for black women to express themselves as a necessity; to be seen on their own terms is a necessary and crucial move in the right direction.

**(iii) *Watchers and Seekers and Charting the Journey***

Both *Watchers and Seekers* (1987) edited by Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins, and *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (1988), edited by Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parmar, were anthologies edited by known and respected figures within Black British Feminism. This indicates how by the late 1980s there was beginning to be an overlap between and within the writers themselves; moving from writer to editor. This also indicates that the collective element within this tradition was still strong and utilised. There was an active desire to make this category of writing more diverse, more reflective of the true state, by calling upon varied experiences from black women living in Britain but also responding to migration across its borders; thereby, in the process stretching the definitions of 'black', 'female' and 'writer'.

*Watchers and Seekers* is an anthology of poems and short stories with one autobiographical piece included. It includes the work of twenty-six women writers whose origins are diverse; the majority are West Indian writers but there are also Indian, Nigerian, Chinese, European and North American women writers. Some contributors' personal details are missing; they may not have been supplied or this could illustrate the shared identification of 'black'. Yet this diversity does not stop Cobham, within the introduction, searching for literary foremothers of this writing tradition. Una Marson is named as significant to these varied writers, considering her race, gender and social position. Moreover, Marson is cited as 'a pioneer for her time in the search for an authentic literary style: a style that could reflect and utilise the heritage of those half-forgotten voices, skills and gestures.'<sup>175</sup> This illustrates the value of creating a tradition for those writers who follow. But this does not mean that the tradition is carved in stone; there are changes and additions. The establishing of a tradition is not as straightforward as Cobham would have the reader believe.

A symbolic foremother, irrespective of 'origin', reinforces that sense of sisterhood amongst black women writers, and within Britain and Black Feminism. This anthology is organised as a platform for black women writers in Britain to challenge the complacency of white middle class notions of the category of women writers. Here, this anthology attempts to broaden this category, but tensions exist between the individual and the collective experience. Cobham reduces 'home' to 'back home in the

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<sup>175</sup> Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins, eds. *Watchers and Seekers* (London: The Women's Press, 1987) 7.

Caribbean'.<sup>176</sup> Nostalgia is a common sentiment amongst members of a diasporic community, and appears as a distinct theme throughout the poetry of black women.<sup>177</sup> Svetlana Boym (2001) suggests that nostalgia (from the Greek, *nostos*- return home, and *algia*- longing) is a 'longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.'<sup>178</sup> This anthology starts off by claiming diversity, but brings the writers all 'back home' to the Caribbean. Maybe this is Cobham's attempt to shift the focus away from America for Black Feminism, and to have recognised a distinct 'brand' forming within Britain during this period and with these writers. But this action is contradicted when Cobham squeezes all this diversity into the one foremother box of Marson, and raises questions regarding the credibility of Cobham's intention. As the title indicates, this anthology encompasses black female identities which are positive and active. No longer are they prepared to be gazed upon. Here they are watchers; they are doing the gazing and are seeking that recognition of agency, and in the process are asserting themselves as human beings.

*Charting the Journey* takes up the black British women's writing baton from here, but does not attempt to create neat boxes for black women writers to slip into. *Charting the Journey* moves outside the box to

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<sup>176</sup> Cobham, 1.

<sup>177</sup> See Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (London: Virago, 1984); *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (London: Virago, 1989); *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (London: Virago, 1984); and *Sunris* (London: Virago, 1996); Merle Collins, *Rotten Pomerack* (London: Virago, 1992); Amryl Johnson, *Long Road to Nowhere* (London: Virago, 1985), *Sequins for a Ragged Hem* (London: Virago, 1988), *Tread Carefully in Paradise* (London: Cofa Press, 1992).

<sup>178</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 251-258.

embrace diversity and migration, past and present. As the title indicates, this anthology is attempting to include all journeys, no matter how diverse:

There is the tendency towards the collective adornment of moral and political superiority which is supposed to derive from the mere fact of black women [...] No longer do we succumb to spurious notions of unity - when that 'unity' is based on conservative and even reactionary ideas.<sup>179</sup>

This anthology started from the idea of blackness in contemporary Britain.<sup>180</sup> The aim was to redefine the taken for granted notions of 'black' and 'woman', and was organised around the broader category of 'Black and Third World.' The anthology is a contribution to this documentation of the struggle and its diverse historical roots.<sup>181</sup> The idea of 'journey' and migration is of central importance within this text as the contributors attempt to remap the boundaries of home and of self:

This journey symbolised a geographical, social, and political journey from the present to the past. From the past to the future, shifting in time, migration, movement across frontiers of life into new, uncharted territories of the self.<sup>182</sup>

With the diverse origins of the contributors, the anthology refuses to offer images of an imagined, collective homeland. Instead the editors embrace the idea of migration as making profound re-mappings of the boundaries of home and of self; '[a] migration into a better more comfortable place where we are made in our own ever-changing image.'<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parmar, eds. *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988) 3.

<sup>180</sup> Grewal, 1.

<sup>181</sup> Grewal, 2.

<sup>182</sup> Grewal, 2.

<sup>183</sup> Grewal, 5. See pp. 67-70 with reference to Mary Seacole to reiterate this point.

The black woman writer would not be in a position to do this, to create that ever-changing image of the self, if it was not for the tradition of the women writers who went before, whose shoulders these women are attempting to stand on. This is made evident through the number of pieces within this anthology which look back at the past, as an individual and as a collective. The anthology opens with the theme of 'home', followed by autobiography, the immigrant experience, childhood, issues concerning a black and British identity, and the struggle for equality. These reoccurring themes within black British writing speak of the multi-faceted, diverse and complex reality of black womanhood, which is marked by struggle.<sup>184</sup> The collective struggled to bring this collection to fruition. Conceived in 1983, once published in 1988 the collective had become five women working alone, each responsible for one section of the whole.

To conclude this section of the chapter, the idea of the black woman struggling to make changes and set the story straight about their diversity within the categories of 'black', 'female' and 'writer', as well as demonstrating the multiplicity within each individual woman, is a difficult task to undertake and execute effectively. A source of strength and guidance for this task would be the awareness of the collective action of other women working on similar initiatives at the time, as well as the realisation that there were women who had gone before who could be used as models and examples. Working together brought many benefits, such as 'visibility, credibility and access to institutions, publishers and other groups in the community.' It fostered the confidence to approach

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<sup>184</sup> Grewal, 6.

publishers, which individuals might not have done. It answered that vital question that at one time or another haunts us all: is my writing of interest or use to anyone else?<sup>185</sup> The 'realities of time', the searching within the past for sisters; these would have aided the endeavour to search for a language to capture that 'authentic subjective experience'.<sup>186</sup>

For this is the baggage the migrant carries with her – remnants of the past and visions of the future, while the present never quite seems to match up with either – yet it is from this that her life must be fashioned.<sup>187</sup>

### 3. Categorisation - The 1990s

The 1990s brought with them the eroding of feminist theoretical legitimacy. Diversity, proclaiming the right to be different in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity and sexuality, had already become an issue in the late 1980s. But that empowering act, rooted in the reaction to racism, no longer held sway as Black Feminism undermined its own position as a critical discourse by exclusionary practices which did not recognise the ethnic, religious, political, sexual and class difference among women.<sup>188</sup> However, through their actions in the 1980s (collectives, organisations and the publication of anthologies), there was an increase in the attention black British women were receiving through their writing, to the point that some literary criticism of their work began to appear. This was mostly black women writers looking at other black women writers. I will now look briefly at a selection of essays which have developed around the field of

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<sup>185</sup> Asian Women Writers' Workshop, *Right of Way*, (London: The Women's Press, 1988) 1-2.

<sup>186</sup> 'Realities of time' and 'authentic subjective experience', taken from Grewal, 257.

<sup>187</sup> Grewal, 6.

<sup>188</sup> See Mirza (1997), Anthias and Yuval-Dais (1983) (1992); Brah (1994), and Gilroy (1990).

black British women writers in order to explore the reception of this writing by the 'academic' audience.

### (i) Critical Essays

Valued criticism is important as it influences how to read a text, and gives an indication of how poetic experience can be used to generate theory. Once criticism of black women's literature has begun it means that others, besides black women themselves, are taking an interest in their writing. Following interest comes the bestowing of value upon the texts; whether positive or negative, it shows that black women's writing is being seen, read and recognised. When black women in Britain were being referred to in critical essays, the majority of the time they were being compared or related to writing by Asian, African, Caribbean and African-American women. They did not receive a lot of page space but maybe this is because there were fewer black women writing in Britain. Texts such as *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, (1990) by Patricia Hill Collins, the bible of black feminism, and *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, (1990) edited by Cheryl A. Wall, were heavily African-American focused. A UK equivalent at this time would be *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, (1991) edited by Susheila Nasta. As the title suggests, women writers and texts which reflect the multiple countries and cultures that combined within Britain to create 'black' women were included.

Within the introduction, Nasta states that she heard the sounds of a number of different, contesting and dynamic voices within Britain and

wanted to represent them within this text.<sup>189</sup> Here language is both the conduit and the bind. In terms of creativity 'the post-colonial woman writer' is not only involved in making herself heard in the male-centred world, but at the same time is discovering new languages to express her experience.<sup>190</sup> Within the text is presented a cross-cultural dialogue around the idea of motherlands, mothercultures and mothertongues. The essays consider novels and writings from such writers as Ama Ata Aidoo, Joan Riley and Anita Desai, exploring the variety of discourses and representations around the mother figure, independence, migration and exile. A multiplicity of voices are presented within the text, challenging the reductive stereotypical presentations of black women. Unfortunately, due to space and finances, no in-depth analysis of poetry is presented within *Motherlands. Let it be Told*, and poets such as Jackie Kay and Merle Collins, are mentioned only in passing.

It is not until Gina Wisker's *Black Women's Writing*, (1993) that there is a focus upon black British women's poetry. There is an international feel as there is a wide-ranging focus, not just on Britain but also America, Africa, and the Caribbean. The purpose of this book was to produce a context for the publishing and reception of black women's writing. Wisker claims that the aim was to represent the breadth and variety in the field of black women's writing. Wisker aims to introduce readers to a range of writers to illustrate a variety of tensions, differences, readings and receptions. Student responses to the texts in question are included within this publication. In terms of reading poetry within *Black*

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<sup>189</sup> Susheila Nasta, *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1991) xiii.

<sup>190</sup> Nasta, xv.



*Women's Writing*, Grace Nichols and her exploration of the black female body is considered in detail through her collection *i is a Long-Memorial Woman* (1983).

Nichols is an important figure within black British writing. A migrant from Guyana, she demonstrates the presence of Creole; standard English and a mixture of the two is achieved within her poetry. Nichols was probably the first black women writer living in Britain who received academic attention and criticism. Add to this Wisker's insight and thoughts within *Black Women's Writing* and this is an essential text for reading and understanding black British women's poetry.

Testimony and naming are singly important for everyone, but perhaps particularly for victimised or marginalised groups of individuals. Nichols's black woman speaks of a specific person with an 'I' identity, and every black woman who has been enslaved and shipped to a new land. Particularity and universality are also reflected in the easy move between past and present in time and tense. Female bonding operates on a diachronic and on a synchronic level; women from the past are invoked as well as the women amongst whom the black woman lives in the Caribbean. Nichols's use of the first person plural 'we' indicates a female community and a shared fate; a sense of collective strength is established through the repetition of beginning each stanza with such phrases as 'We the Women'.

Nichols's poems are aligned to an oral tradition which takes its rhythms and its inflections from the body. Breaks are created not by punctuation but by the need to draw breath, by how the body moves as it

recites the words.<sup>191</sup> The expression of the female body in women's writing is what the French theoreticians like Kristeva, Cixous and Annie LeClerc celebrate. The marrying of Nichols' poetry with theory legitimises the aesthetics of this poetry even more.

The expression of the female body and the attempts to find the language to express the 'true' self is further extended in the writings by Carole Boyce Davies. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), works in introducing UK talents to a new market. At the same time, Boyce Davies questions the language she has at her disposal to complete the task. Boyce Davies draws from a breadth of feminist thinkers around the globe, but her most innovative gesture is the blending of the critical and the theoretical with the autobiographical. This technique is useful in mirroring the diverse voices that have always existed within black women's writing.

Boyce Davies weaves what she calls "migration narratives" into the study's opening chapter. The first is the story of her mother, who migrated to the U.S. to work and make better opportunities for her children, and who now travels back and forth between her Caribbean birthplace and the various locations of her children's homes. Boyce Davies attempts to break through the threatening perspective of academic discourse. This is reflected in her pattern of writing, which is not linear but tends to a repetition created through a series of interruptions.<sup>192</sup> This reinforces the idea of black women's writing as a series of border crossings, not just geographical, national, but also of genres of writing. Davies correctly

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<sup>191</sup> Gina Wisker, *Black Women's Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993) 30.

<sup>192</sup> Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994) 4.

theorises, in her own unique way, how a black woman's subjectivity is a migratory subjectivity existing in multiple locations, refusing to be kept in one narrow place.<sup>193</sup>

In her subtitle "migrations of the subject," Boyce Davies announces the dismantling of the European empires, and the subsequent movements of colonized peoples. The maps that once defined nations and identity have had to be redrawn. The strength of this work is its deployment of the trope of migration:

Black women's writing ... should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing.<sup>194</sup>

The greatest failure of black feminist criticism so far, Davies argues, is its myopic focus on the United States. Black women's writing is better understood as a transnational, multicultural discourse that 'redefines its identity as it reconnects and re-members, brings together black women dis-located by time and space'.<sup>195</sup>

From a consideration of the few critical essays and texts that began to appear at the beginning of the 1990s, it is evident that the black feminist struggle had developed from the 'the right to be equal' to a celebration for the 'right to be different'.<sup>196</sup> The black woman has many selves - the writer, the reader, the autobiographer, to name but a few – which at this point are enjoying the opportunity to engage with each other, until the boundaries between each identity merge. To have multiple subjectivities challenges the usual view of the black woman and gives her back her identity as a

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<sup>193</sup> Boyce Davies, 4.

<sup>194</sup> Boyce Davies, 4.

<sup>195</sup> Boyce Davies, 4.

<sup>196</sup> Mirza, 12.

living process; though it is temporal, spatial and shifting, through risk, desire, writing and struggle, it can be transformative.

(ii) *bittersweet*

The end of the nineties saw contemporary black British poetry in anthologies including, among others, *The Fire People* (1998), *bittersweet* (1998), and *IC3* (2000).<sup>197</sup> These anthologies are different to those which went before because, apart from *bittersweet*, black British women writers are sharing the space with black male writers. One of the most interesting shifts has been generational, as a new wave of young black British poets gain increased recognition through anthologies like *The Fire People* - occasionally to the exclusion of more established poets. Lemn Sissay, editor of *The Fire People*, writes in his introduction:

The obvious names of Black poetry in Britain are not here. There is no Zephaniah, no Agard and no Nichols. [...] I want to bring you something else. I want to bring you the new generation of poets who are knocking on the doors of the publishing houses; the poets that are performing their words around the UK and Europe; the poets who are putting their words to music; the new poets, the raw, the fresh Black and British poets – The Fire People.<sup>198</sup>

To state that Zephaniah, Agard, and Nichols are so famous that by implication they no longer appear “raw” and “fresh” serves as a parallel with black British poetry in relation to the greater English literary canon. The literary value of these authors is generally accepted, and they most likely have a wider scholarly readership since they have been consistently

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<sup>197</sup> Re-emerging trends are to produce anthologies of black writing. Anthologies engage in the process of canon-formation by gathering together individual writers using the markers of nation and race. Recent anthologies of black British literature such as Courttia Newland and Kadija Sesay (eds.), *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* (London: Penguin Group Ltd. 2000) and James Procter, *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), seek to establish some kind of tradition.

<sup>198</sup> Lemn Sissay, ed. *The Fire People* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1998) 8.

considered worthy of study. Writers such as Grace Nichols and John Agard are included on examination syllabuses, reaching a wider audience under the title of "Poetry from other Cultures and traditions."<sup>199</sup> Questions arise about which examples of their work are being read. The use of "other cultures" in the syllabus title indicates the aim to distance this work from British literature and therefore avoid the subject of black Britishness and being part of the canon. 'Hurricane hits England', 'Island man' 'Half-Caste' are the poems that are used repeatedly; those poems that reflect the poet's presence in Britain, those poems that are based within the UK. This is a purposeful limitation, a continuation of the importance of the nation and the emotional attachments invested in it, at the expense of allowing the border crossings – both actual and imaginary - that are there in the black writing of Britain today and from the past.

I will conclude this chapter by looking at one anthology devoted to black women's writing, *bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry*, (1998) edited by Karen McCarthy. The title indicates the mixed blessings that black women writers have received over the years. 'bittersweet' seems like the perfect title for this anthology. The situation of black British women writers has not been made any easier by the towering presence of their African-American counterparts, which may have initially empowered them, but were not actually talking about or to their British experiences. This is not one cohesive genre. Frequently in *bittersweet*, the authors deal with similar themes such as family (especially the roles of mothers and fathers); cultural history and memory; hair and other issues of female

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<sup>199</sup> AQA, *NEAB English Language Specification A Syllabus*. 2000-2003.

beautification; male/female relationships and power dynamics; political events such as the Stephen Lawrence case (1993); music and song; alienation and otherness; and freedom. A number of these poets developed specific characters through whom they speak, demonstrating a concern for 'giving voice.'

*bittersweet* features poets from around the world writing in a series of eclectic styles. Karen McCarthy's ten years experience in publishing and extensive knowledge of the poetry world through her work with Apples and Snakes, coupled with her status as a South London promoter operating for some 15 years, provided her with the knowledge and contacts to undertake this task. The collection is divided into 11 sections with titles like 'Blood', 'Water', 'Salt', 'Fire' or 'Electricity', which form a comprehensive life cycle of experience that unfolds over some 84 pieces. Of particular interest within this volume of poetry are the experiments with genre, as poetry is blended with different media. There are musical metaphors from Akure Wall's 'Afromorph Text' to Stacy Makishi's audio-visual allegories, as well as Bernadine Evaristo's hybrid novel-in-verse *Lara* that combines poetry and prose.

This anthology is an important publication in that it shows not just the vitality of the black British poetic voice, but also its standing in the wider context of writing from around the world. It mixes new young writers like Malika Booker and Shamshad Khan, from London and Manchester respectively, alongside voices from previous generations such as Grace Nicholls, Merle Collins, and Jean Binta Breeze. The connection is that each has a story to tell, and each text is treated as part of a wider, epic

recital. 'I think the diversity of the work out there is the real strength of the book,' reflects McCarthy; 'In the structure I wanted to show all the aspects of women's lives to really try to give a sense of womanhood.' *bittersweet* is not overtly focused on issues of race: 'The themes are varied, complicated and far reaching,' notes Evaristo. 'That can only be a good thing. If you look at the anthologies from the 1980s, they were coming from a very specific black feminist perspective. Of course, the times have changed.'<sup>200</sup>

Times *have* changed since the 1970s when black women started to organise collectively. From then on black women engaged in the process of naming their subjectivity, telling their story. As more readings, performances, and writings reached an audience it became evident that there was not just one story, but there were *stories*; no one has a monopoly on what it is like to be a black woman living in Britain. There may be similarities, but there are just as many, if not more, differences.

## Conclusion

Black feminism as a project has a purpose: to excavate the silences and pathological appearances of a collectivity of women assigned as the 'other', and produced in a gendered, sexualised, wholly racialised discourse.<sup>201</sup> What Black feminism demonstrates is the existence of difference within a conscious construction of sameness. In the space opened up by the discourse of difference, black women continue the critical task of genealogical enquiry: to excavate and reveal the lives lived in resistance to the dominant images and spaces given. Black women

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<sup>200</sup> Bernadine Evaristo, quoted in Kevin Le Genre, 'I want a little sugar in my bowl', *The Independent*, Sunday, 13 December 1998. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books-i-want-a-little-sugar-in-my-bowl-1191159.html>> (accessed 23/07/09).

<sup>201</sup> Mirza, 20-21.

such as Grace Nichols, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Carole Boyce Davies, Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, have shown through the generations that they are concerned with mapping their experiences – not simply a mapping of experiences to uncover the 'truth', but rather an engagement with experiences; a placing of the self in theory to understand the constructions and manifestations of power in relation to the self.

What these anthologies of creative writing and critical attention by and for black women in Britain have achieved is the construction of an organised, supportive literary community of a mixture of first and second generation migrants to Britain. This community is diverse; there is no universal black woman subject. Differences can be seen within the generations in terms of a stronger lived experience of the Caribbean or Africa to draw upon within their writing. What they have in common is that exploration within their writing of their day to day struggles, that of not quite being at home in Britain. Even those women who were born here feel that they are not accepted here, be that because they are black, female, lesbian, Muslim, even Scottish. But what these experiences have produced is writing which is inventive in style and register. There is more room to subvert the English language and inflect it with Creole and African oral traditions. What these anthologies of the 1980s, running into the 1990s, illustrate is the power of collective action; when one black woman writes she claims that right so that other black women can follow and express her unheard songs.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Cixous, in Walder, 317.



### **'she tries her tongue' 3**

Every morning without fail my mum would spend time taming her mass of hair. She would sit at the high teak table with a plastic bag and her cigarette smoke would claim the air. A long wide comb was placed in a cup of water and she'd pull the comb out, tapping off loose droplets, before running the comb through her thin hair. The comb would straighten out the grey black frizz. Then holding the sections of hair she'd take a pink roller, starting at the tips of her hair, and roll it upwards and under. She'd repeat this task again and again until her whole head was taken over by pink rollers. This was a work of art. Her naturally frizzy hair would be gradually drying, gradually curling straight. After some time had lapsed, the rollers would be pulled out swiftly. These relaxed curls were then teased out like notes from a saxophone, until they danced around her head like a lion's mane, but tamed. She did this every day, maybe two or three times a day if she was going out again in the evening. This was performed because of the messages she received from society, from her family, from the media, that straight, manageable hair was good hair. This was the type of hair that everyone should have if they want to succeed, to be desirable to men and to be accepted.

"You've got good hair!" A constant chorus fed to me by my family as I was growing up. With this exclamation would come the customary feel of my hair, just to make sure. My hair was 'good' because it was thick but also straight; not so 'kinky'. I was told I had the best hair in the family and should feel lucky. I really didn't feel lucky. I always had to wear my hair in plaits or bunches, with ribbons and bobbles. I could never wear my hair

out and down. Why? Because, it could never withstand the elements. Rain or wind, my hair would become a tangled, knotty, shrunken mess.

I thought I could change this with a perm. My mum let me. I went to the hairdressers at the local shops in Newburn, meaning mine was the first black head the hairdresser got her hands on. She said she'd have to straighten my hair first and then perm it, because it was so strong. This was my first time in a real hairdresser's and I think the experience went to my head literally, because when she asked me if I wanted it cut, I just said yes, go for it. I wanted the glamour I wanted that long straight hair that I could only achieve when I had a large bath towel on my head with the folds cascading down my back.

The hairdresser straightened, permed, and layered my hair. That was over twenty years ago and my hair hasn't been the same since. Something must have gone wrong in the process because it looked 'good' when it was wet. This was my 'wet look' phase. My hair was constantly wet, dripping wet, and gelled up to the nines. I got a fringe from that trip the hairdressers, a fringe I treated like gold dust. I pulled and curled it with the curling tongs. I had to be more careful though, after I burnt my forehead. I've still got the scar.

I hated washing my hair, as afterwards I'd spend the whole week pulling and brushing my hair until it came out, stretched out of its tight curls into loose curls. By the time it was back to a decent length it would be time to wash it all again. There's something wrong when you feel that your hair is 'good' when it's dirty. Then when I became a mother, entering a new phase in my life, I had all my 'good' hair chopped off. I became

'peanut head', as my husband named me. It was basically a skinhead with my fringe. What this cut showed to me was that I had a small head and a beautiful profile. I enjoyed this phase of my life as I could just wash and go. I enjoyed the freedom even though while teaching I got called 'Sonique' by the school kids.

Then there was the time that I got locked extensions put in, but that's a whole other story. Now, my hair is locked naturally. I didn't go to a hairdresser's, not after my earlier experiences. Most days I wear my hair out and down. And it's glorious because it stays put against the rain and the wind. I run my fingers through it and it feels good. That's 'good' hair.

### **Chapter Three – Medusa Black, Red, White and Blue**

For the purposes of this dissertation, I have identified four tropes which appear within the work of black women's poetry. These tropes are the body, voice, place, and vision. In this chapter, I consider a specific trope in relation to the work of each writer. In terms of the body, a small selection of poems written by Dorothea Smartt are analysed. Smartt reinvents the Medusa figure as a black woman in order to explore the ingrained self-hatred and low self-esteem of black women. This is manifested through the mutilation of the body, the face, and hair to render the outward appearances of a black woman less black, therefore whiter and more 'beautiful'.

Black British women's writing is composed of many voices, different voices both within and between writers as they use 'the voice' to identify and excavate the 'self'. Assuming the 'voices' of others, Rommi Smith simultaneously presents the experience of one black singer as well as the shared community experience through her use of voice and musical language.

Place in terms of migration, journeys and home are recurring tropes within black literature simply because of the history of black immigration and diaspora throughout the centuries. How this trope has been explored and developed within the poetry of Malika Booker is documented within the chapter. Finally, the acts of vision, whether social acts of seeing, inner vision, or how one is 'seen' by others, are significant and emerge within black British women's poetry. How Patience Agbabi illuminates the significances of the gaze within her poetry collections is explored here.

Even though a black British woman writer's poetry will sometimes reflect all four of the chosen tropes, and more, only one is being applied to each individual as a means of isolating the aesthetic qualities of their work and making connections between the generations of black women writers in Britain.

The new millennium saw the development of poetry as a form removed from the page. The notion was that poetry should not be restricted to the page; rather, it is a public art which should be shared with the community at large. This became a guiding principle for capturing what it means to be black, human, and in Britain in the twenty-first century. All four of the women writers considered here were known first and foremost for their reading of their poetry; that is, they first attracted notice as performance poets. These women were presenting their poetry on the stage, in community venues such as theatres, bars and clubs. For black poetry, the orality and performance aspect of the work is nothing new; Louise Bennett, Valerie Bloom and Jean 'Binta' Breeze are confirmation of models to look back to for popularising the performance of poetry within Britain. Recently, a trend has emerged to identify performance poetry as being synonymous with black poetry. Rightly or wrongly, due to the 'ghettoisation' of black poetry, the poets make their livings from being billed as 'performance poets', whilst at the same time wanting to be recognised as 'page poets'.<sup>203</sup> With these issues in mind, this chapter offers a way of acknowledging these black women writers performances

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<sup>203</sup> *Free Verse*, 8.

“on the page”, illustrating a developing aesthetic which should be valued and respected.

**1. *'Make it go away, the nappiheaded nastiness.'*<sup>204</sup>  
Dorothea Smartt and The Body**

In 2002, in a remote valley in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, the remains of Saartjie Baartman, 'The Hottentot Venus', were finally laid to rest within her homeland. Baartman was taken from South Africa to Europe in 1810 to be displayed as a curiosity in various shows, until her death in 1815. Her remains were on display at the Musee de l'Homme in Paris as recently as 1992. She became a freak-show attraction, in life and death, investigated by supposed scientists and put under the voyeuristic eye of the general public. Baartman, being both African and a woman, can be said to fully embody 'darkness'.<sup>205</sup> Her black body was a thing of mystery to the white European gaze. She was caged and turned into an object of curiosity. Parts of her body were exhibited during her life as well as after death. Baartman was shown as evidence of the wild sexuality of the black woman because of the 'excessiveness' of her genitalia and buttocks. Baartman was physically present; she was the "spectacle". However, she was also perceived almost as an absence as she was barely accepted as a human being. She existed mostly as an image, something to be looked at, but at the same time she represented a non-image, the negation of her image, as the only parts of her body that were

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<sup>204</sup> Dorothea Smartt, 'medusa, medusa black?', *Connection Mediums* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2001) 57.

<sup>205</sup> See Maria Cristina Nisco, 'Dark Histories, Bright Revisions: Writing the Black Female Body', *Nebula*, 3:1, April 2006.

regarded as worthy of attention, her genitalia and buttocks, were also the reason why she was not accorded personhood. She was dehumanised.<sup>206</sup>

Black women were particularly singled out in the medical mythology of the nineteenth-century as hypersexual, and as a result, a likely carrier of syphilis. Because of her perceived lascivious and 'deviant' sexual appetite, it was believed that 'the qualities of blackness, or at least of the black female, are those of the prostitute'.<sup>207</sup> This belief is laid bare with the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman. The legacies of these damaging, mythical stereotypes have been pernicious and enduring, and the black woman's perceived hypersexuality continues to be used as a dominant image in various terms of representation.<sup>208</sup> Grace Nichols, with her collection *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, (1984) entered this debate, suggesting that there are problematic associations between black women and the notion of their bodies as hypersexed and deviant. Evoking three marginal social positions (being fat, being black, and being a woman), Nichols attempts to challenge conventional (white) male definitions of black women, as well as to redefine black female identities in new and unexpected ways. For example, in Nichols's poem, 'Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath', the black woman speaker is the creation of her own thoughts and words, soaking in the bath with an air of carefree defiance:

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<sup>206</sup> See examples of research and essays around Saartjie Baartman, such as Sander Gilman and recent books by Rachel Holmes.

<sup>207</sup> Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Towards an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature, *Critical Enquiry* 12 (Chicago: University of Chicago, Autumn, 1985) 229.

<sup>208</sup> See essay by Anneka Marshall. 'Sensuous Sapphires: A Study of the Social Construction of Black Female Sexuality', in *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective* ed. Mary Maynard and June Purvis (Basingstoke: Burgess Science Press, 1995) 106-124.

Steatopygous sky  
 Steatopygous sea  
 Steatopygous waves  
 Steatopygous me.<sup>209</sup>

Grace Nichols's fat black woman, steatopygous woman, with the protuberances of her body, compares herself with the sky, the sea, the waves, and in so doing she confronts and contradicts anthropology, history, and theology, all definers of standards and discipline.

That the black woman was seen as a monster, not just by society at large, but also by herself, is an idea that Dorothea Smartt explores with her 'Medusa Poems'. The 'Medusa Poems', which started out as a solo performance piece combining poetry and visuals, were later published within Smartt's debut collection *Connecting Mediums* (2001). Smartt was born in London and grew up in Battersea. Her parents came to London from Barbados in the 1950s. Many of the poems in her first collection explore both the Barbadian heritage and the experience of growing up in London, with both confidence and confusion. Smartt was very active during the 1980s within the Black Feminist Movement, frequently writing and interviewing other black women within *Spare Rib*. Regarding the use of Medusa, Smartt said,

Medusa was a name that was given to me by the kids next door when I started to lock-up my hair in the 1980s. That together with the general reactions of people, both Black and white, to the changing nature of my hair started me thinking about the possibilities.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Grace Nichols, 'Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath'. *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, (London: Virago Press, 1984) 15.

<sup>210</sup> Dorothea Smartt, quoted in Laura Griggs, 'Medusa? Medusa Black! Revisionist Mythology in the Poetry of Dorothea Smartt', *Write Black, Write British*, ed. Kadija Sesay (London: Hansib Publications 2005) 182.



Instead of allowing the label 'Medusa' to constrict her, Smartt re-appropriated it as an empowering force, researching Medusa's mythic ancient roots and rewriting her as a strong, beautiful, black woman. By the account from Perseus, Medusa's beauty contributed to her rape. Therefore part of her punishment is being denied access to her own beauty by being turned into a monster. Her beautiful hair is converted to serpentine locks, symbolising the dread she represents. When poets, women or otherwise, speak of finding a voice and expressing their own experience, they are talking perhaps about this transformation of a narrative, or fusion of narratives, which then works as their own; they make the sign or poetic language produce new meanings for them. So when Smartt writes:

Medusa  
 dread anger  
 welling up in her stare  
 natural roots Blackwoman  
 loving Blackwoman  
 serious.<sup>211</sup>

"Dread" here signifies locks of hair, but also carries the added meanings of fear and awe, signalling the reactions received by both Smartt and Medusa because of their appearance. Smartt came to the conclusion that:

Medusa was probably some Black woman with nappy hair, and some white man saw her and cried: a monster! And feared her, and so told stories about her dangerous potential.<sup>212</sup>

By making this identification, Smartt humanises Medusa, translating her from some supernatural creature into a real woman we can all recognise. Reminiscent of Amryl Johnson's poetry collection *Gorgons* (1992), where

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<sup>211</sup> Smartt, 59.

<sup>212</sup> Dorothea Smartt, 'How to liberate your inner Gorgon': Dorothea Smartt' Kevin Le Gendre, *The Independent on Sunday* < [http://www.peepaltreepress.com/review\\_display.asp?rev\\_id=258](http://www.peepaltreepress.com/review_display.asp?rev_id=258)> (accessed 13/06/05).

Medusa reawakens in the present day and sees what she had become, Smartt's central aim is to create a Medusa who was human, feminine and real.<sup>213</sup> This is further reinforced with the poem 'medusa? medusa black!' where Smartt uses the mythic figure again to reference the position occupied by contemporary black women, their responses to one another's bodies, and their own self image:

Scrub it, step smiling into baths of acid  
and bleach it red raw  
peel skin of life-sustaining melanin  
fuck it, wild-haired woman,

straighten it fry it, desperately  
burn scalps.<sup>214</sup>

Here there are echoes of the self-hate manifested in self-harm; the bleaching of the skin, the straightening of the hair. This refrain was also sounded in 'Kinky Hair Blues' (1937), by Una Marson, of how she hated the practice of that 'ironed hair/And dat bleaching skin ...', yet still changed her body and appearance in order to fit into society.<sup>215</sup> Similarly, Smartt's refrain 'Make it go away, the nappiheaded nastiness/too tuff too unruly too ugly too black', conveys the self-loathing of women hating their own bodies more than the practice of bleaching skin, and straightening hair to the point that they'd undergo such pain because it was outweighed by their hatred of themselves more.<sup>216</sup> Smartt is creating a space of re-invention, where young women can appropriate black female identity; rescue it from a fixed, essentialised construction of the way they 'should be'. Black women erect boundaries of what counts as blackness based on

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<sup>213</sup> Griggs, in Sesay, 182.

<sup>214</sup> Smartt, 57.

<sup>215</sup> Una Marson, 'Kinky Hair Blues', *The Moth and the Star* (Kingston: Gleaner, 1937) 91.

<sup>216</sup> Griggs, in Sesay, 182.

skin colour and hair texture which they then police – this is how identity is experienced.

This aspect of Smartt's work mirrors the writing of French feminist theorist H el ene Cixous, whose essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' laments these same women for whom the enemy lies within.<sup>217</sup> As Cixous argues:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be executants of their own needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism!<sup>218</sup>

Add to this class and race, and the black woman is even more disadvantaged in regards to fostering that enemy within: self-hatred. Audre Lorde writes in 'Eye to Eye':

We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other. Because we see in each other's face our own face, the face we never stopped wanting [...] at the same time as we try to obliterate it.<sup>219</sup>

What Lorde's essay suggests is that the experience that black women share is one of passively receiving and absorbing the messages of self-hate and then directing that rage and hate at one another. The ranting and raving in the poem, 'medusa, medusa black!', signified through the repetition of such phrases as 'black' and 'get back', is thus a method of both easing and articulating her inner pain; rage at herself and anyone else who looks like her. Criticism of this idea, with the continual use of the collective 'we', suggests that the black female experience is monolithic, that diverse identities are not constructed. As bell hooks has argued from her experience within black women's gatherings:

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<sup>217</sup> Cixous, in Sesay, 183.

<sup>218</sup> Cixous, in Walder, 318.

<sup>219</sup> Lorde, 'Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger', 155.

The black female voice that was deemed 'authentic' was the voice of pain; only the sound of hurting could be heard. No narrative of resistance was voiced and respected in this setting.<sup>220</sup>

The outward demonstrations of straightening the hair and whitening the skin are signs of black women attempting to fit into society's norms and standards. It's a kind of visual language, illustrating how the black woman has 'disappeared' throughout history, or has had no voice. These barriers are constructed by the wider society, but are also policed by black women themselves as to what counts as the right kind of 'blackness'; that is, the closest to white.<sup>221</sup>

In the last poem of the sequence, 'let her monsters write', Smartt gives a direct reference to Cixous's essay. First with the title, mirroring Cixous's own questioning reflections:

Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a...divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick?<sup>222</sup>

Smartt reinforces the idea of this self-restriction by using the image of Medusa squeezing herself into 'irregular-size compartments/ wooden and fortress-like'. Within the confined space, 'too small' and 'difficult', is 'an older I, her centre cave'.<sup>223</sup> This could be read as recognition of the tradition of women writers before her that are there if she only looks. But more importantly, it could also refer to the idea of the buried self, her true,

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<sup>220</sup> bell hooks, 'Revolutionary Black Women: making Ourselves Subject', in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Turnaround, 1992) 44.

<sup>221</sup> See Debbie Weekes, 'Shades of Blackness: young Black female constructions of beauty', Mirza, 113-126.

<sup>222</sup> Cixous, in Walder, 317.

<sup>223</sup> Smartt, 66.

real, even sexual self which she has denied herself, in order to be accepted within society, and the possibility that it is still there for her to embrace.

The body itself is a dwelling place. The Anglo-Saxons named it *banhus* (bonehouse) and *lichama* (bodyhome). Forced to live as man's Other and thus alienated from her self, in Cixous's words:

she has not been able to live her 'own' house, her very body ... Women haven't had eyes for themselves. They haven't gone exploring in their house. Their sex still frightens them. Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonized.<sup>224</sup>

In her last poem of the sequence, Smartt urges Medusa, other black women, to let the 'monsters', their primal female selves as they have been adjudged, explore their dwelling place; their bodies.

Under her hair  
let her monsters write  
from all sides- ceiling walls floor.  
Make a deep welcome  
for this singsong body.<sup>225</sup>

The selves which have been ignored, suppressed, displaced: let them out to take over their homes, 'ceiling, walls floor'.

Lytic poetry is a process which enables writers to position themselves as agents, to claim a value for their subjectivity, to make sense of themselves in the world physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Poetry is satisfying and empowering for the person who writes it. But this poetry, by a black British woman of Bajan descent, is

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<sup>224</sup> Helen Cixous quoted in Nancy Mair, 'The Way in', Smith and Watson, 471.

<sup>225</sup> Smartt, 66.

also gratifying and empowering for others. And this is where aesthetic value begins.<sup>226</sup>

## 2. *'I honoured the way your name rested on my lips.'*<sup>227</sup> Rommi Smith and Voice

In this part of the chapter, there will be a critical analysis of Rommi Smith's poetry collection *Mornings and Midnights* (2005), with particular emphasis in relation to her use of voice. Whilst the term 'voice' has various meanings within common usage, of most interest here are meanings and examples which refer to its metaphoric qualities. This would involve empowerment, such as when black women started to record their lives and experience through anthologies such as *The Heart of the Race*.<sup>228</sup> On a more personal level, 'finding one's voice' can refer to a personal fear of speaking that is overcome with time and practice.<sup>229</sup>

For thousands of years, a strong figure throughout the continent of Africa has been the cultural figure of the griot. He carries the cultural knowledge and identity of each people. The griot is a chronicler of history. He is also guardian of the knowledge of his people's ancestry, or genealogy. This history may never be written down, so the griot is an orator, lyricist and musician, keeping the records of the past alive. Within the writings and performances of Rommi Smith there is a black British griot. Smith, born in Yorkshire of Nigerian heritage, is a poet and playwright who fuses spoken word and music together. She has been

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<sup>226</sup>Helen Carr, 'Poetic Licence', *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) 96.

<sup>227</sup> Rommi Smith, 'Violets Presents For Violet', *Mornings and Midnights*, (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2005) 27.

<sup>228</sup> See pages 85-87.

<sup>229</sup> Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson, *Writing: Self and Reflexivity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 24.

performing her work since the age of 14, both nationally and internationally, at arts, music and literature festivals. Smith works in collaboration with dancers, music producers and musicians to create a synthesis of lyrical spoken and sung word. Smith opens *Mornings and Midnights* the same way a jazz musician would introduce major themes within his score; through repetition, a refrain in which the relationship between death and life echoes throughout the piece:

And there it is:  
my shroud in black and white.

I'm six feet under. Good feed for worms.<sup>230</sup>

Smith gives the audience the full weight of the problem facing Gloria Silver in the first poem of the collection, 'Any Old Death Will Do (or things to do when you're dead)'. There has been a major mistake; the world has been informed that Gloria Silver is dead. Smith introduces a narrative sequence of poems telling the story of Silver, a mythical diva who would have rubbed shoulders on the touring circuit with legends such as Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Josephine Baker. One morning, Silver reads her obituary in the newspaper. As the story progresses the initial theme is repeated, its context amplified, its meaning explored and resolved through jazz solos and blues repetitions. Moving through the sequence, Smith allows Silver to voice, to shout that she is so much alive, just like the music she has created in the past and continues to create right up to last line of the last poem in the sequence: 'We're alive, baby. We're alive. So, there.'<sup>231</sup>

<sup>230</sup> Smith, 'Any Old Death Will Do (or things to do when you're dead)', 9.

<sup>231</sup> Smith, 'Everything's Dandy', 30.

Themes of identity and recognition are archetypal in all blues dramas. Blues pull together and assert identity through clarification and playing back experiences and meanings.<sup>232</sup> While Gloria Silver is getting her music together she will be getting herself, her life, together. Silver is a ballsy kind of woman, feisty and strong. But Smith ensures the reader sees a vulnerable side too. In 'Little Boy Song', Silver suffers a stillbirth and reflects:

I wanted an excuse  
save me, love me,  
change me.<sup>233</sup>

These lines reveal Silver's sense of loss as well as a desire for her life to have turned out differently. She is a multi-dimensional character, complex; in short, a 'real' woman. This is a remarkable feat, as we have seen that in reality Silver is a fictional, chimerical construct created by a poet who admires several African American divas. In a recent recording of Rommi Smith performing 'Any Old Death Will Do' at Dove Cottage, Smith gives a candid explanation of what she is trying to do with this, her second collection.<sup>234</sup> Taking the strands of facts surrounding different women, such as Nina Simone, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Peggy Lee, the jazz and blues divas of 50s and 60s, Smith weaved elements of their stories together with fiction to create this collection. She endeavours to pay homage to these women, by inserting Silver into this world of heroines.

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<sup>232</sup> Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: oral tradition in African American literature*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991) 93.

<sup>233</sup> Smith, 'Little Boy Song', 23.

<sup>234</sup> Rommi Smith, 'Any Old Death Will Do', recorded live on 6 May 2008. 'Any Old Death Will Do' at Dove Cottage, Wordsworth Museum and Art Gallery, The Lake District, < <http://www.wordsworth.org.uk/events/index.asp?pageid=356&sectionid=1> > (accessed 03/07/2008).



The idea that a woman whose story had long ago been relegated to silence is suddenly awakened to the importance of keeping her story alive mirrors the unique and universal experience of black women living their lives unnoticed and unheard. Silver can only tell her story, just like a black British woman writer is in the best position to tell her own story. And yet in the voicing of her story she touches upon and /or covers other women's stories. Here with Silver, there is a familiarity within her tale that enables other women to take from it, as support for their own experiences. She is a composite of other women, therefore a part of all of us and a whole made of parts of us. Toni Morrison spoke about the use of autobiography for Afro-American or Black American literature in a way which still holds true for black British literature; it is the idea that a writer can be representative. She has said that:

My single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative.<sup>235</sup>

Such a notion recalls the example of the griot, and that of keeping track of the development of her people over time.

Smith's book becomes a collection of poems framed in a fictional narrative. In order to reflect the multiplicity of characters and voices, Smith experiments with forms: lyric, narrative, dramatic, epistolary, and telephonic. She uses a multiplicity of voices speaking through the one mouthpiece, Gloria Silver. Silver acts almost like a ventriloquist's dummy as Smith works to incorporate the women who were seen as 'just the frills and fluff at the front of bands where men are the lead, credited as masters

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<sup>235</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Rooted: The Ancestor as Foundation' in Walder, 327.

and technicians'.<sup>236</sup> These women were subversive when they used their voices to achieve recognition, expression, and even, in some cases, greatness: 'Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly.'<sup>237</sup> The formal standard language was subverted, turned upside down, inside out and even sometimes erased.

Within *Mornings and Midnights*, Silver 'testifies', giving witness to her life and the lives of other black women.<sup>238</sup> The griot's role has traditionally been to preserve the genealogies, historical narratives, and oral traditions of their people. Praise songs are also part of the griot's repertoire. Within the poem, 'When Bessie came face to face with the klan', Silver tells Bessie's story; her own story and other black women's stories about facing racial abuse:

She said that when song travelled  
people would be writing history books  
not about her love affairs, but about the moment  
when she cursed the air blue. All fists and hips.  
Sang her name at them like a weapon.  
Claimed the ground she stood on as her own.<sup>239</sup>

'Song', 'sang', 'cursed': using her voice, Rommi Smith is using the metaphor of voice to claim identity. The Klan abused Bessie as a black woman, verbally abused and threatened her, but she stood her ground, used her body 'fists and hips' to call, to sing her own name on her terms. She claimed agency, making herself subject rather than object; an actor, rather than acted upon.

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<sup>236</sup> Smith, Dove Cottage recording.

<sup>237</sup> Cixous, in Walder, 325.

<sup>238</sup> 'Testifying' is defined by Geneva Smitherman as 'a ritualized form of ... communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth and power of some experiences in which [the group has] shared.' Geneva Smitherman quote in Henderson, M. G. 1993, 'Speaking in tongues: dialogic and dialectics and the black women writer's literary tradition', *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* eds. Patrick Williams et al (London: Longman 1993) 261.

<sup>239</sup> Smith, 'When Bessie came face to face with the klan', 26.

There is a technique used in the blues called 'worrying the line'. This is repetition of a lyric or phrase but with slight changes in pitch, stress, or word order.<sup>240</sup> Rommi Smith is 'worrying the line' as Silver demonstrates repeatedly that she is alive. Even though, at times, Silver can see the funny side of her predicament and some advantages of 'being dead', she realises that she loves life too much to just give up. 'Damn, I'm pissed'; Silver will not lie down and die without a fight:

My first line to the world outside?  
Dear Sirs, correct your facts  
send in your hacks – I write to tell you,

I'm alive ....<sup>241</sup>

The final line, separated from the preceding stanza and followed by ellipses, signals the promise of a stormy story as the diva begins her struggle to re-establish her identity, her past and her future. The next few poems within the collection follow Silver as she tries to get herself heard, tries to tell the world that she is alive. 'The editor! Just put me through!', a repeated line in the poem 'The Phone Call Blues', gets more and more exasperated as Silver is left waiting on the phone line to speak to someone about the error.<sup>242</sup> 'Please hold on, you are in a queue./ Click...' Silver doesn't give up and gets a face-to-face interview with 'this dreamy young boy of a hack', but in 'RSVP', Silver is still 'pissed' as 'The little cute boy' thinks I'm 'course'/ rough as a jazzman's throat.'<sup>243</sup> The audience never hears the interviewer's voice in actual words, but knows him intimately through Silver's vocal mimicry. She might be angry that he has

<sup>240</sup> Sherley A. William, quoted in Jones, 94.

<sup>241</sup> Smith 'Any Old Death Will Do (or things to do when you're dead)', 9.

<sup>242</sup> Smith, 'The Phone Call Blues', 11.

<sup>243</sup> Smith, 'The Interview' 12. and 'RSVP', 14.

misrepresented her in the press but she still manages to control the situation, and has the last word:

You don't know spite until you're reading it;  
I'll answer back this cocky little shit.<sup>244</sup>

Smith uses the poetic device of simultaneously showing and telling. The audience is seduced by voice and voicing, becoming voyeurs in a musical flavoured revenge pact.

From here Smith develops the character's thoughts and analysis of the past, and her shrewd, blues-humour perspective on the events creates energy and interest. Within the poem, 'I was too young to be looking, but something saved me', there is a child who is silent within a world of voices:

I was a seven year old,  
with the weight of the world  
in my school bag.  
I kept my voice in an apple;  
I'd take small bites, whole words.  
swallow them raw.<sup>245</sup>

Silver 'kept her voice/ in the sideboard' or in 'the curve of her armpit', out of fear or because as a young black girl she didn't know how to use or what to do with her voice. Silver felt this way until 'this dark-skinned woman, .../opened her mouth/ again, it was a state affair'. In church with this woman singing, testifying to God, she earned her soul. Then when 'her voice was its most shimmering, radiant', this once silent little girl opened her mouth and sang. This is another example of a black woman setting an example for those women who follow behind her. The woman singing in church is a model that can be used as an inspiration and guide

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<sup>244</sup> Smith, 14.

<sup>245</sup> Smith, 'I was too young to be looking, but something saved me', 15.

for others, just like a tradition of black British women's writing can be used in poetry. In any speech-act, the speaker produces herself as an agent.

The final poem in this collection, 'Everything's Dandy', starts with the quote from Nina Simone, 'Jazz is not just music, it's a way of life.'<sup>246</sup> Jazz is not a metaphor for battles and dilemmas of the self but for the resolution in journeys of the spirit. This music has a unifying effect, which brings a sense of wholeness to the individual, not in solitude but in communion.<sup>247</sup> Smith infuses this poem with life, life flowing from the music. The choice of language is a musical aesthetic, providing musical accompaniment to one black woman's story: 'backbeat', 'bass strings', 'hittin' hide', 'lickin' ivory', 'struttin'', 'break it down', 'blowing'. There are suggestions of a drumbeat, a piano melody and the blue notes of the horns. And when the mood is just right, Silver is

...in the front seat, sittin' on the mood,  
feelin' for the green light  
I'm gonna change to blue.<sup>248</sup>

Like the rhythm of the drums, the sounds are repeated word for word, but with changes in texture, order, punctuation and motive. For example, 'As Dexter turns his hurt out to sail on', Rico 'fans the/Heartache by blowing regret out to sea.' The text itself becomes music, building up the rhythm and movement until, 'I'm a silk bird singing out the song'.

'Are you with me?' A simple question that Silver asks the band and the audience, but also a question asked by the author, Smith, to the reader. There is the blues connection between the singer, the band and the audience which is reinforced as,

<sup>246</sup> Nina Simone quoted in Smith, 'Everything's Dandy', 29.

<sup>247</sup> Gayl Jones, 53.

<sup>248</sup> Smith, 29.

... That sunlight  
called trumpet, I mirror with starlight,  
in one solid note holding out it's own  
prayer:

We're alive, baby. We're alive. So there.<sup>249</sup>

The light gives form and visibility through the illumination of experience.

This experience encompasses the reader as well. Here there is the idea that Silver is alive not dead; she feels alive while singing, using her voice as one with the music. Also there is the suggestion of self-definition as she is defining herself in recognised kinship with others through music.

Stepping out of the poem, Smith has successfully pulled the reader into the jazz world of Silver and has made the reader part of the music, hearing Silver's voice, loud and clear.<sup>250</sup>

### **3. '...older Shango priestesses/lit candles for future generations.'**<sup>251</sup>

**Malika Booker and Place**

An increasing awareness of living in a postcolonial world and a multicultural society has forced black women to revise and recast the dominant literary forms in recent years. Black women writers in contemporary Britain represent the 'self' through place, space and home. A black British woman's sense of identity spans over time and space, due

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<sup>249</sup> Smith, 30.

<sup>250</sup> For further discussions see Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin [1930s] *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981); Julia Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva* (European Perspectives) ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972); and Mae Henderson, 'Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition,' *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian Books, 1990) 116-142.

<sup>251</sup> Malika Booker, 'Identity', *Breadfruit*, (London: Flipped Eye Publishing, 2007) 31.

to the double displacement of the 'middle passage' and diasporic scattering. Within poetry there is a tradition of exploring the past to make sense of the present, which can be traced through the different generations of black women writers in Britain. The first generation of immigrants had a 'home' to look back to, be that the Caribbean or Africa. They have a strong sense of cultural identity and draw upon this within the hostile new country. First generation immigrants, black women writing in Britain such as Merle Collins, Grace Nichols, and Joan Anim-Addo, all share this firsthand knowledge of the Caribbean, having lived there and moved to England at different stages of their lives. There is a tendency amongst this generation to frame their memories of home in a romantic way. Dreaming of a nostalgic home back in the old country is beset with problems, for 'back home' becomes an idealised, romanticised place of origins which often turns out not so glossy when the 'migrant' returns. This feeling, longing, can be found and explored in the varied writings of Afro-Caribbeans in Britain.<sup>252</sup>

Contemporary black women writers born in Britain have only Britain as 'home'. No matter how hostile British society can be, it is still part of their identity. A particular kind of black culture is created in the British context, part conflict, struggle, and negotiation. Writing home becomes a critical link in the articulation of identity; an identity which is schizophrenic, of re/claiming and re/tracing an Afro-Caribbean culture within a British culture.<sup>253</sup> Their writing aims to reconcile both of them. Avtar Brah, mentioned earlier, presents the idea of 'home' being a mythic place within

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<sup>252</sup> V. S. Naipaul quoted in John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 209.

<sup>253</sup> Boyce Davies, 129.

the diasporic imagination.<sup>254</sup> This imagination of home is passed on to the subsequent generations within the diaspora as a means of keeping the images alive in opposition to the harshness of a hostile environment.

Malika Booker has been part of the literature scene for 18 years, but it was not until 2008 that *Breadfruit*, her first collection of poetry, was published. Before this, Booker was 'published' on the stage, in workshops and residencies, being a writer, performer and storyteller from the UK, Grenada, Guyana and Trinidad. She states on the website *Contemporary Writers* that:

Writing is the best way to engage the imagination, to create magic, change the world. I write because my mother tells me I am the first generation of women to be able to tell our stories and because I know there are women in the world who cannot speak. I write to make sense of life, to make the ordinary extraordinary.<sup>255</sup>

Here Booker sets out a mission through her writing which mirrors what has been argued throughout this dissertation; that black women write to tell their own stories, both for themselves and others like them. Black woman must write herself, must write about women and must bring women to writing: 'Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history – by her own movement.'<sup>256</sup>

Childhood memories of back 'home' are evoked by Booker through poetry about her father and mother. Within 'My Father's Letter',

I recall riding your shoulders  
your night stories, I spent years  
as a little tomboy  
modelled on you.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> See 'she tries her tongue 1', 60.

<sup>255</sup> Malika Booker *Contemporary Writers*

<<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth519CDC8B0eb2d19325VqP1883DB7>> (accessed 21/08/08).

<sup>256</sup> Cixous, in Walder, 316.

<sup>257</sup> Booker, 14.



These images are (re)imagined and excavated from memories. Her father is no longer alive but she longs for his presence as a means of securing her identity. She sees him within his homeland, Guyana. *Breadfruit* opens with the poem titled 'For Clara', Booker's mother. Within this poem Booker talks directly to her mother as she attempts to understand who her mother was and is, as a means of knowing herself more fully.

You are Victorian Myth;  
 stories circle your village of exploits,  
 how you beat three boys at once  
 throwing sand in their eyes.<sup>258</sup>

Booker traces her mother's past in Trinidad, to a time before Booker was born that she can only barely grasp:

in dramatic talk  
 to receive sprig of truth about the girl  
 you once were before me.<sup>259</sup>

From this longing to know her mother better, experienced almost as a nostalgia for another time, place and person, Booker comes to see her mother as the stuff of legend. Booker gains a better sense of self through exploring her relationship with her mother, to the point that she comes to understand her mother's journey:

as we sit today, not as mother  
 and daughter; our roles  
 have left us; we sit as two women.<sup>260</sup>

In a sense this ending illustrates the idea of 'mother' as a metaphor, that the best of a daughter can only be given to her by her mother, by another woman, for her to be truly able to love herself.<sup>261</sup> This reinforces the ideas

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<sup>258</sup> Booker, 9.

<sup>259</sup> Booker, 10.

<sup>260</sup> Booker, 11.

<sup>261</sup> Cixous, in Walder, 322.

already explored within the section relating to the body and Smartt's poetry.<sup>262</sup>

Michelle Cliff states that writing demands:

retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea ... it means finding the artforms of these our ancestors and speaking in patois forbidden to us ... it means mixing in the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting his style, and turning it to our purpose.<sup>263</sup>

Playing out within Booker's poetry is the pressure and necessity of living in 'one' national identity in modern culture. Writing poetry became a way to knit her British and Caribbean identities back together. Booker explores her relationship with her parents as a means of gaining a greater sense of self. After she explores her parent's histories and migrations, the final poem of the collection, 'Identity', presents an epiphany of these journeys, as boundaries and borders between the generation of women and their 'homes' become blurred and blended into the important realisation of self. The mixture of different pronouns (me, she, I, her) is an intentional device manipulated to create the sense that the black British women of today may not be that much different from the women of the past. The idea of 'home', land, and birthplace is evoked with the image of the umbilical cord 'buried back yard of Granny's shack' in Guyana while a new life is being sought on British soil.<sup>264</sup> Their blood flows through the land, producing a direct connection to the land and to the 'home'. Yet part of Booker's identity has been formed by the roots planted within the British landscape, something that she explored through her 'Garden Poems'. Completed during her

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<sup>262</sup> See pages 105-110.

<sup>263</sup> Michelle Cliff, quoted in Carr, 86-87.

<sup>264</sup> Booker, 30-31.

2004 residency at Hampton Court Palace Gardens, London, these poems address a 'border landscape', away from the multicultural inner city, exposing possibilities of such an *in-between* landscape of the suburbs.<sup>265</sup>

With the 'Garden Poems' section of this collection, it is easy to decipher the idea of borders and boundaries, where a person experiences the feeling of being lost or displaced. With the poem, 'The Maze: Absurd Charade', the maze is a metaphor for that diasporic identity:

Now you feel like  
 a wasp, hitting itself  
 over and over  
 against a glass pane,        knowing  
 there is no way out  
 of this maze,  
 desperate    to find  
 it.<sup>266</sup>

'The Maze: Absurd Charade' is a concrete poem with wider spaces between words, larger gaps than usual as a means of mirroring the design of a maze. The placing of words and line endings are purposefully floating, not fixed, playing with their meanings and keeping up the idea of the search; the search for the exit, the search for answers. Being lost in the maze, unable to escape, is reinforced with further poems within this section. Within 'The Maze: Maze etiquette', there are black fences, a manicured hedge, square blocks, all obstacles or barriers in the speaker's way, all keeping the person imprisoned in the maze. Borders are political constructs, usually arbitrary dividing lines that are social, political, cultural and psychic. These territories are patrolled against those that are constructed as outsiders, aliens, the "Other".<sup>267</sup> There may be a glimmer of

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<sup>265</sup> Procter, 126.

<sup>266</sup> Booker, 19.

<sup>267</sup> Brah, 196.

an exit, there may be clues in the multitude of foreign languages heard throughout the maze but 'the mind plays tricks ... Nothing here is simple.'<sup>268</sup> An individual is born into a maze of language through which contradictions and ambiguities are the means to make sense of the self. Language, like a maze, is a prison we are born into. The only way to maintain your self-respect is to bend and break the rules. Here Booker, through her multifaceted poetry, attempts to blur the boundaries to express her mixed heritage and histories, to feel at home wherever she chooses to roam; a conclusion which she has arrived at after charting the many journeys from the Caribbean to England, and the many adjustments of her selves in the process.

#### **4. '*... eyes bloodshot/ but they said they would heal*'.<sup>269</sup> Patience Agbabi and The Visual**

Within the first section of this chapter, the deconstruction of the myths surrounding the figure of the Medusa was explored in relation to Dorothea Smartt's poetry. This final section of the chapter will explore that abyss, where, with the poetry of Patience Agbabi, the black woman is seen on her own terms. With Saartjie Baartman, the black woman was seen and not seen.<sup>270</sup> She was an object, made a spectacle. Agbabi, through her performance of her poetry, on the page and on the stage, turns this spectacle on its head by inviting the gaze. Agbabi *demands* the

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<sup>268</sup> Booker, 20.

<sup>269</sup> Patience Agbabi, 'Sol', *Bloodshot Monochrome*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008)14.

<sup>270</sup> See Mary Lou Emery, *Modernism, The Visual and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) for more of a discussion of the use of the visual within literature.

gaze, setting the terms of how to be seen not only as a black British woman, but also as a writer.

Educated at Oxford and Sussex Universities, Patience Agbabi's work has been broadcast on television and radio throughout the world. She has lectured in Creative Writing at several UK universities including Greenwich, Cardiff and Kent. In 2004, she was nominated one of the UK's Next Generation Poets. She is the author of three poetry collections: *R.A.W* (1997), *Transformatrix* (2000), and *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008). The argument in this chapter is that Patience Agbabi's style forces the reader's gaze on to herself and makes her question what she is saying and how she is saying it. Her writing, both formalist and free verse, crosses linguistic, social and political borders. Following Avtar Brah, border writing is questioning the canon, through a reconfiguring and decentring of the English language. As Agbabi says in the poem, 'Rappin it up', from the first collection *R.A.W*:

Because I'm rapping it up in a real tight squeeze  
 I don't cross my l's I don't dot my t's  
 Shakespeare Milton Pope and Dryden  
 Wordsworth Eliot Great Tradition  
 all you poets I don't give a fuck  
 coz you're dead I am PA an I am RAPPIN IT UP <sup>271</sup>

Agbabi claims her space in the British literary scene. Born in London of Nigerian parents, raised by white middle class foster parents in Mid Wales, Agbabi has said that her unusual upbringing has provided advantages for her writing and has given her the ability to move between cultures: 'I've a strong interest in borders and boundaries. I've long been fascinated with the point at which one thing transforms or translates into another and this

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<sup>271</sup> Patience Agbabi, 'Rappin It Up', *RAW* (London: Gecko Press, 1997) 63.

has informed my writing in both form and content.<sup>272</sup> Through her writing, Agbabi is changing the face of contemporary British poetry; with her improvisation with language and form Agbabi changes how the line between the page and the stage is 'read'.

Like many other black British women poets, Agbabi came through the performance circuit.<sup>273</sup> Using the genre of performance poetry as a way of physically speaking out, by directly performing her work to an audience she circumvents or sidesteps the gatekeepers. She defiantly moves away from silence:

Give me a stage and I'll cut form on it  
give me a page and I'll perform on it.

Give me a word  
any word.<sup>274</sup>

There is a tension that arises between Agbabi's use of conventional forms and her interest in performance. The argument goes that performance poetry "has its place", but not in the same realm as page poetry. There is a lack of awareness surrounding the range and diversity within the Black and Asian category; that performance poetry is now synonymous with poetry from Black writers. It is an easy label to assign, and seeks to keep Black and Asian poets out of the mainstream. This has been to the detriment of poetry that has the complexity, nuance, and texture required to withstand scrutiny on the page.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Patience Agbabi, <<http://radiophonics.britishcouncil.org/writersonwriting/patienceagbabi/>> (accessed 15/05/09).

<sup>273</sup> See Kwame Dawes, 'Black British Poetry: Some Considerations', in Sesay, 282-299.

<sup>274</sup> Patience Agbabi, 'Prologue', *Transformatrix* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2000) 11.

<sup>275</sup> Bernadine Evaristo in *Free Verse: Publishing Opportunities for Black and Asian Poets* (special report funded by Arts Council England and published by Spread the Word Literature Development Agency, June 2006) 17.

Agbabi even argues that her 'print poetry' is underestimated, not acknowledged, 'seen' or judged for its form and relationship to the tradition; misconceptions which she realises are based on race. As we so plainly see in 'Ufo Woman,' from *Transformatrix*:

Hello! I just got offa the space ship.  
 I've learnt the language, read the VDU  
 and watched the video twice. Mother earth  
 do you read me? Why then stamp my passport  
 Alien at Heath Row? Did I come third  
 in the World Race? Does my iridescent  
 sky-blue-pink skin embarrass you, mother?<sup>276</sup>

Here, the speaker desires to fit in and has prepared by going through all the approved motions to be 'read'; a term used here in the sense of being understood, as a person, and having one's words read and understood as a poet. By definition, the alien does not fit in. The speaker 'reads' Mother Earth but is frustrated that Mother Earth does not 'read' her back, only seeing her 'iridescent colour'.

The visual within Agbabi's work is further developed within her latest collection, *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008). Agbabi reinvents the sonnet, through her exploration of race how British society sees race; 'black, 'white' and red' and all those 'grey areas' in between. *Bloodshot Monochrome* comes from a line in a film noir corona, 'Vicious Circle'. The scene is being 'filmed' through the muzzle of a gun so bloodshot implies an eye; an eye distorting the monochrome to red. The book plays with the wordplay on 'red' and 'read' – reading and writing is a major preoccupation of the book.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Agbabi, 'Ufo Woman' *Transformatrix*, 15.

In the opening poem, 'Seeing Red', Agbabi charts the progression of one person's identity. The persona moves from living with a black mother then a white mother, to freedom. As her own person she chooses to dye her hair red, but then to conceal it under a head tie. The main issue of the poem concerns how race is seen or not seen, as is the case with the white mother: 'the vision colour –blind'. This makes the speaker 'see red':

that I see the world through a red eye  
where blood and heart mean more than black and white.<sup>278</sup>

In bringing the theory down to the personal, Agbabi is attempting to rise above all the racism and petty in-fighting, prejudice, and discrimination, not only in society but also in literature. The persona within this poem sees that the individual is made of flesh and blood, not a colour or a race, but with a heart.

Agbabi offers the reader snapshots of life in the section titled 'shots', such as growing up, travelling, racial abuse and child birth, reinforced with the utilisation of photographic language. Terms such as 'shots', 'lens', 'eye', 'vision', 'dark glasses', alert the reader to how Agbabi sees the world, other people, and her own experiences. 'Shooting Ufo Woman', a return to the character introduced in a past collection, can be read as shooting a film as well as a shooting with a gun; perhaps suggesting that maybe her life is at risk within a racist, violent, sexist society like Britain. At least here Agbabi is in control of the outcome, as she controls the form, the sonnet.

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<sup>277</sup> Patience Agbabi, 'Interview with Patience Agbabi' *Books from Scotland.com* <<http://www.booksfromscotland.com/News/Roddy-Lumsdens-Blog/Patience-Agbabi-Interview>> (accessed 21/07/09).

<sup>278</sup> Agbabi, 'Seeing Red', *Bloodshot Monochrome*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008) 3.



Agbabi hopes to revitalise the British literary tradition by contributing to it in the present. She is contributing through her teaching, being visible within the academy which is a significant achievement in itself, impacting the next generation of multi-ethnic British poets.<sup>279</sup> Through her print collections, she is affecting the literary establishment, and through her live performances she is reaching a wider public. By refusing to see these worlds as separate or in tension, she is succeeding in generating dialogue by bringing these audiences together.

Agbabi rejects the page/stage split, refusing to accept borders and boundaries keeping her, as a black British poet, in the margins. To her there are no boundaries, just diverse cultural and literary pots to draw inspiration from. Lauri Ramey says Agbabi has challenged the bind of all forms of literary stereotyping and has brilliantly charted her own path: she is in a category of one.<sup>280</sup> In the past, a black woman on stage would have been an object, as seen with Wheatley and followed by Baartman, having to defend her ability to write and her right to exist as her own subject. These women did not have the right to speak but were 'seen' in a certain way, be that as a sexual animal or a spectacle of curious parts. Challenging their invisibility as human beings and their construction as 'the dark continent', Agbabi's poetry deconstructs previous constructs of black women writers as she wrestles back control over the power to see. She

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<sup>279</sup> See Joan Anim-Addo and Les Black, 11.

<sup>280</sup> See Lauri Ramey's work on Patience Agbabi such as 'Contemporary Black British Poetry', *Black British Writing*, (eds.) Lauri Ramey and R. Victoria Arana (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004 ) 109-136; and 'Situating a 'Black' British Poetic Avant-Guard', *Black British Aesthetics Today*, ed. R. Victoria Arana (Newcastle upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) 79-100.

articulates her demand of not only how to read her poetry, but also how to read Agbabi, as black, female, British, writer.

## **Conclusion**

Smartt's poetry writing around the myth of the Medusa aimed to see the self as a whole through the reclamation of the image. Through the clever use of language, mixing standard English and Creole, written across the black female body, Smartt shows beauty rather than 'the monster'. Smith, through her journey with a blues singer, gives voice to one woman which is also a polyphonic chorus of other women's voices. These women refuse to lie down and be assigned the marginal positions that society gives them. The black woman is no longer afraid to be seen and heard on her own terms, whether positive or negative.

Booker claims her past through her poetry; a rich Afro-Caribbean heritage coupled with her right to call Britain her home. She shows how black women in Britain bring a myriad of experiences, histories, cultures, and stories to the table called British society. They have just as many different ways and means of expressing these differences. All are valid. Finally Agbabi, now onto her third collection, not only champions the black woman but gives the reader the opportunity to look at the question of race within British society. Through quick snapshots of experiences, through glimpses of a black, white, and red society, the violence which exists is illustrated along with how each of us could make that change.

The body, voice, place and the visual are the means by which black women writers are 'talking' about that which has previously been unspoken. This chapter has attempted to show how black women poets are attempting to change how they are perceived by others through their writing. How others perceive black women causes a splitting of the self or self-dislocation. How they feel about and perceive themselves is affected by the society around them. There is an internalisation of these negative images that cause them discomfort and lack of ownership and control over their bodies, their homes, their lives. However, I believe the exploration of these limiting and false stereotypes is the first step on the road to subverting the images, and getting the reader to reassess these mythologies of the black woman. Being able to undertake this exploration within a supportive, collective environment is vital. Having examples and role models to draw upon during the process is another vital requirement for this journey. A tradition of black British women's writing exists for the claiming. This is a tradition of writers who are diverse and migratory, existing in cross-cultural contexts, negotiating and re-negotiating their identity across literary and cultural texts.

## The Voice of the Tradition

My voice is part of a mosaic of voices. The entire time I am writing personally, I am actually writing collectively, forming part of the ideas of my time and my generation. Through mapping a genealogy of black British women poets, I hope to insert myself into this activist literary tradition and in some small fashion become a doer in the word/world.

I want to experience that sense of belonging, of being rooted most immediately in a sense of place but also within a shared culture, writing aesthetic, and readings. I am frustrated and exasperated with classical forms of uncovering and relaying knowledge within the academy. I am made to feel alien within the academy because my voice is different. I've always been uneasy about my bearings. Just as the women writing in the past made the same realisation when creating their anthologies, I consider it a principle of my work that my writing will not be a tool for the alienation of others. I am an impostor who has slipped into the academy through the back door and can not do 'proper' academic work. But I know I am not alone in this pursuit and strive to connect with others who share my beliefs, and who are part of this tradition.

I met Dorothea Smartt when she came to Newcastle to run a workshop I had organised for writers of African, Asian, Caribbean, or Chinese descent. It was an inspiring day, from which we became friends and writing buddies. This developing relationship not only transformed my writing but also my person. The transformation of the Medusa into a black woman with dreadlocks was a phenomenon that Smartt embodied herself.

This was something I also wanted to emulate. Not only have I now locked up my hair but I have also embraced my body in a more positive and accepting way. This transformation is evident within a few poems which deal with the black female body within my collection, *Family Album*. Such poems as 'Rollers', 'Pomegranate', 'Ovaries', 'Sweetie' and others explore the love-hate relationship black women have with their bodies within Western society. This recognition of these feelings is empowering as we strive to accept and have pride in the selves that we are.

When I write I am the product of many oral and vocal influences. Being influenced is part of the learning process. There is a mixture of voices all rolled into one. I hear my father and mother in my voice, see traces of my handwriting and hear my voice in old notes to myself. In the North East, just as within the Caribbean, there is a certain way of telling a story, a sense of humour, a pacing that I hear in my voice, in my writing. Our voices are influenced by our situations, our responsibilities, and professional training. There is always the voice of the task - to entertain, persuade, analyse, attack, celebrate.

Following Rommi Smith's example, I have ghosted a voice. Just as she created Gloria Silver from a mixture of other women's voices, I have brought to life the voices I remember from childhood. I have tried to capture the voices behind the person, the family members. In 'tending to the past', I'm haunted by many voices. In 'Coup D'Etat', there is my father's voice when he would break into song while performing some other task. In 'Three Legged Stool', there is my father's angry voice, which is always more 'Trini' than his usual speaking voice. These may be only a

turn of phrase, a snippet of conversation, a specific word remembered, but they do colour the whole piece with other worlds and characters.

*Family Album* is a collection of poetry preoccupied with migration, journeys and places. My whole being came about through these movements. Through a growing sense of place there is the hope for a growing sense of belonging. This trope is evident within the tradition of black British women poets, as illustrated through the reading of Malika Booker's poetry within this dissertation, simply because of this island's history of slavery, colonialism, and immigration. Place is interrogated within our writing as a means of understanding where we come from but also as a device to find out how to cope with where we live now.

I would be denying part of myself if I did not acknowledge the Afro-Caribbean influences upon my writing. This affects not only the content, voice and sound but also the places that are evoked. Places such as West Africa, Barbados, and Trinidad are present within such poems as 'The Stoker, 1915', 'Mahogany' and 'Port of Spain, Trinidad'; places that I have experienced first hand and which have left a trace on my identity and understanding of my histories. But Britain also has an influence within these histories and my present life. I cannot live in the UK and not be part of the UK or influenced by the society. If my skin colour indicates a sense of unbelonging then my beliefs, values, traditions and standard of living reveal otherwise.

Throughout this dissertation I have been laying the foundations of a tradition to build upon. This tradition of black British women's poetry is not recognised, on the whole, as part of the British literary canon. Our writing

does not conform to the norms. I believe this situation arises because of racism, sexism, and classism within British society, leading to our writing being judged unfavourably. Even if we attempt to conform and mimic the rules, we are still judged, our writings and our persons, as not being good enough. While bearing this belief in mind, I see no reason why I should play the game, conform to the rules and attempt to be accepted, as I recognize that no matter what I do, I will never fit in.

With this in mind, the sestinas that are arranged within my collection were influenced by my readings of Patience Agbabi's sestinas titled 'Seven Sisters' in *Transformatrix*. For example, in 'Ms De Meanour', the persona is a cross-dresser or maybe a transsexual going out for a night on the town. Agbabi is crossing boundaries with gender roles, sexuality and content. Here, meanings run on, from one verse to another. Visually, the text is spaced on the right, away from the left hand margin. There are only one or two words for some lines. Even with the title, 'Ms De Meanour', being used as a name but also representing 'misdemeanour', meaning something is wrong, a transgression, some misbehaving is going on.

I read these creations and thought if Agbabi can play with form, so can I. I know the rules of the sestina, but that is not the point. In the poems, 'Arrival, 1915', 'Easy Bones Cafe, 1940' and 'When George Met Anita, March 1968', I kept the six end words of each line the same, 'corner', 'bring', 'salt', 'material', 'speck' and 'bone', only changing the word forms slightly at times, such as 'material' to 'immaterial' or 'salt' to 'salty'. By the time I'd finished the 36 lines of each poem, I had said all I wanted

to say, so why should I try and force the poem into the three lines at the end where all the six repeated words are used again? It would have been a waste of time and energy for me and would not have really added anything to the poem as a whole. So why do it? Because the rules say you have to? This is my writing, my creation and I take ownership of it. I have the confidence to do it my way; to take risks.

As mentioned earlier, the visual can be the use of the photograph within our writing. An image is stilled in time, but what happened before and after that moment is not seen. An image gives you the springboard to imagine the happenings, to project yourself back in time. Writing as a black woman in the North East of England is a lonely experience. In 2003, after completing my MA in creative writing at Northumbria University, I created a group to support writers of colour as up until this point I was the only visible black writer in the North East. I realised that I needed a strong network of support, encouragement and criticism from similar people in order to develop as a writer. identity on tyne was the first group of its kind within the North East and really put the literature from other cultures onto the Northern map. The irony was that the group was made up of writers from all over the world who were living in the North East, not born and bred here. They were from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, India, the Philippines, and other countries. However, through coming together, we reached out to other groups and individuals nationally. I eventually found some black female Northern writers such as Rommi Smith, Michelle Scally-Clarke and Khadija Ibrahim. They are few and far between. However, that does not bother me now because I accept who I am. That I am a Northern black



woman writer, that the Northern region influences my work. It does inflect my work with something different in comparison with a black poet from London. It has affected how I see the world in this collection. This is my contribution to the developing tradition of black British women's poetry. This is my imprint on the black British literary world and something that I am proud of and value.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

The dissertation primarily explores the development of a tradition in the poetry of black British women since 1978. Toni Morrison's analysis of the process of African-heritage writing, as rooted in 'a kind of literary archaeology' dependent upon exploration of 'what remains were left behind', complements the process of this dissertation, in that there is a fragmented history of black women's writing in Britain which I have attempted to explore. By constructing the foundations of this category of writing, it situates black British women's writing within the context of individual and community identity formation, providing the first study of length of Black Feminist collective action in relation to literary developments. Despite the prominence of this tension in the poetry of black British women, the dissertation demonstrates the tension that exists between the individual and collective identity. The diversity of voices within the black diaspora operating within the still-existing climate of racism, sexism, and classism means that any breakthrough in the British publishing scene is obtained through the individual. Following this breakthrough, the gateposts change for those who follow. The poetic speakers interact with the British society, displaying a diverse range of experiences that are specific as well as universal. This dissertation finds that through exploration of the body, voice, place, and the visual, black British women writers have been able to develop a narrative encased within their own terms of reference, not in relation to or in opposition to the mainstream, but in and for ourselves.

Chapter one of this dissertation linked the beginnings of black women writing in Britain with a developing aesthetic that is evident in contemporary black women's writing. Black women had to counter the dominant thoughts and attitudes of British society which saw black people as sub-human, and as therefore incapable of intelligent thought. It is evident in the examples of Wheatley, Prince, and Seacole, who had to partake in the process of having their credentials as writers being authenticated by white males, as have other black writers of more contemporary time periods. Yet these women had the double disadvantage of also being female in a patriarchal society. These women's writing, as with Marson and Gilroy, was semi-autobiographical in style and content as they wrote from personal experience, writing themselves as black women into existence. The writers' portrayal of the black woman situates a black woman's domestic, migratory and settlement experiences as poetic material. The speakers' reaching for agency may be seen as a reaction to the struggle to be seen and heard in the writing of black literature as a whole. However, the speakers' focus on being a 'survivor' is infused with anxiety, as within each woman's life they still experienced struggle as they questioned who they were as black females in Britain.

The close analysis of the Black Feminist movement in Britain in chapter two of the dissertation illustrated the advances in how a black woman was seen and heard by herself and others. Collective organisation, social and political action, and taking ownership of publishing highlights the singularity and collectivity of the speaker's voice. The main verbal event of this period was black women dialoguing amongst themselves as

they attempted to fill in the blind spots created through the neglect of black women's issues by the white feminist movement, and the black, male-dominated, community groups.

A reflective reading of the anthologies and critical essays which accompanied this consolidation of black British Feminism illustrates the working out of the tensions and struggles within the public realm of literature. The appearance of racism, sexism, domestic violence, the reclaiming of the past and literary foremothers, indicates to new and reflective readers alike that there is no essential black woman's identity. However, there are similarities of experiences which black women recognise in each other, and can draw strength from. The naïve reader realises that the black woman is a fiction, but the reflective reader realises that the fiction is simultaneously a poetic truth of diversity.

The evocation of poetry as a necessity for claiming agency and the self, as discussed throughout chapters one and two of the dissertation, further links the poetry of black women to a longstanding tradition of using writing as a means to an end. The difficulty with the English language and the lack of ownership of and inadequacy for expression is understood by the reader as both metaphorical and literal. The use of the trope of voice, 'tongue' and 'silence' makes clear the need for black women writers to manipulate the language to express ourselves more fully and truly. The self-conscious experimentation with vernacular, Creole linguistic forms or 'nation language', as Kamau Brathwaite would call it, on the page and the stage, manifests a black, female, and writer identity formation of the 1980s and 1990s. The presentation of the self through transnational influences

rejects the essentialising tendencies of identity politics, and acknowledges the importance of difference, highlighting the ways in which gender combines with race, class, sexuality, and economic power to determine a black woman's subjectivity.

In chapter three I have suggested ways of reading a selection of poetry from contemporary British women of African and Caribbean descent. The body, voice, place, and the visual emerge as central preoccupations in their writings. This tendency continues to build upon the foundations of black women's writing in Britain, where writing is used as a means of exploring the 'self'. The writing of the selves is a catalyst for the writers' evolution: the diminishing of a racist, patriarchal set of conditions by which they uncover and assert their agency. The poetry examines the shifting nature of time and the relationship of the speaker's past to the speaker's – and the reader's – present. The individual speaker is clearly seen as well as the shared collective narrative. These poets explore the characteristic themes of diaspora – home and exile, loss and longing, un/belonging, in/authenticity, hybridity – but do so from a woman-centred perspective that privileges female experience. They examine the social, political and cultural effects of migration. Insightful and imaginative gendered accounts exemplify how the experience of migration has shaped not just the first-generation of migrants, but also the lives and identities of their children. The use of the first-person narrative enables the articulation of emotional dimensions of oppression and the processes of resistance. At the same time, the question has been addressed of how women have reshaped prevailing conceptions of Britain, as well as how Britain has

shaped contemporary black British women's writing. Claiming Britain as their home is the first step towards engendering a positive sense of ownership and belonging.

Where originality lies within this tradition of black women's writing is through the devices and techniques that we chose to utilise in order to write our stories. *What* we choose to write about is just as important as *how* we write about them. The aesthetics of the pieces are there to see and be explored if the people doing the analysis can get past the colour of our skin, and/or our gender and/or our class status. This development would be further strengthened if more black women were seen in British academia, and if there were more appreciation of, or at the very least more engagement with, this literature within the academy. There is an identifiable trend of a 'black brain drain' away from British academic culture, with the result that it is easier to find courses on black British literature in the United States than in the United Kingdom.<sup>281</sup> Here in the UK, we are simply at the beginning of the process of changing the legacy of racism which affects and damages academic judgements and hierarchies of value. This dissertation is, hopefully, a contribution to that process.

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<sup>281</sup> See Joan Anim-Addo and Les Black, 'Black British Literature in British Universities: a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Reality?' *English Studies*, Newsletter 15, October 2008, for the latest figures regarding black people in UK universities.

### 'she tries her tongue' 4

This is not a conclusion.

I started to write – as a way of living my life. I was greedy for books. Dad started us off early with the usual fairy tales and Brothers Grimm stuff. When I got older I started to amass books because I felt that the possession of them alone instilled a special kind of knowledge in me, even if I didn't get around to reading them. It didn't occur to me that I could write just as many books myself until I felt my whole being was being questioned. I had written the childish stories about the adventures of a mouse, secretly, for years, but that was me just playing. It wasn't until after having my son, when I went back to teaching in an inner-city Newcastle school that I *needed* to write. I was a phenomenon within that school. This school was in a close-knit, narrow-minded, living-in-the-past kind of community. My black face was a novelty, a freak of nature even as a teacher, so had to be questioned, not just everyday but in every lesson. I know it was classed as a difficult school. I know other teachers had a difficult time controlling the pupils too. But I don't think that their whole being was in the limelight, under their ever-narrowed eyes. 'Darkie', 'Paki', even 'Chinky' just slipped off the tongue with no inclination of being offensive. I felt I had to educate these children in more ways than one. This battle took its toll. But writing provided a way out, a pressure valve, a release.

I write because I write. From time to time, I lose a sense of who I am, what I think myself to be. What I *know* myself to be, my own true self.

I write because I never found myself in literature. I write because I feel I have something to say but no one listens. I write and hopefully my words will reach an audience before they meet me. So that they won't judge me on my face, my colour or gender, or the way I speak, but on the quality of my words; on the freshness of my intellect.

I write in the hope of making things equal. When people write about women I can see some similarities, just as when someone writes about black men, I feel some recognition but not total recognition. The same feelings occur with Northern literature; there's recognition yet they don't really speak for me. They don't know me. I can only speak for me, speak of my experience. I can only speak from my experience and I hope that's all I do. It warms my heart to read a poem by a black woman that talks to me in some way, because I can see myself within that poem. But that isn't my experience. It's hers.

The influences upon my writing are multiple. I don't put limits on my writing, even if others do. I believe the world's literature is at my disposal because I enjoy a mixed heritage. I claim no particular birthplace, country, culture, religion as my own, so I feel that I am free to roam. There is a migratory, even transnational tendency within my writing. In this way I don't have a problem with using and abusing the English language. I know it is the standard that all writing is judged by, and of which I made sure I passed on the rules to my pupils when teaching so that they wouldn't be disadvantaged. But at the same time, I see the value and confidence within messing up English. Mixing and shaking it up by drawing upon other influences, cultures, histories. I claim my right to cross boundaries



between the creative and the academic, and use 'I' and 'we' within my research. This is being true to me. But it is also claiming power. Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. To create the selves is an act vital to the process of reacquiring power. It might be a struggle. I might have had to dig deep and long to excavate my literary and contemporary foremothers and sisters, but it reaffirms that which has been denied and eradicated.

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