

A HISTORY OF
BLACK AND ASIAN
WRITING IN BRITAIN,
1700–2000

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Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	page vii
<i>Chronological table of historical and literary events 1560–1960</i>	ix
<i>List of illustrations</i>	xxi
Introduction	i
1 First encounters: the historical context	7
2 Eighteenth-century letters and narratives: Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, and Dean Mahomed	17
3 Speaking truth for freedom and justice: Robert Wedderburn and Mary Prince	56
4 The imperial century	72
5 Querying race, gender, and genre: nineteenth-century narratives of escape	84
6 Travellers and reformers: Mary Seacole and B.M. Malabari	126
7 Connecting cultures: Cornelia and Alice Sorabji	142
8 Ending empire	167
9 Duse Mohamed Ali, anti-imperial journals, and black and Asian publishing	182
10 Subaltern voices and the construction of a global vision	200
11 Epilogue	233
<i>Notes</i>	245
<i>Notes on writers</i>	276
<i>Bibliography</i>	287
<i>Index</i>	301

Illustrations

- 1 Frontispiece to Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789).
Reproduced by permission of The British Library *page* 18
- 2 Frontispiece to 1803 edition of *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*.
Reproduced by permission of The British Library 29
- 3 Frontispiece to Dean Mahomet's *Travels* (1794). Reproduced
by permission of The British Library 47
- 4 Ellen Craft disguised as a Gentleman, from *Running a Thousand
Miles for Freedom* (1860). Reproduced by permission of The
British Library 104
- 5 Frontispiece and illustration from Mary Seacole's *Wonderful
Adventures* (1857). Reproduced by permission of The British
Library 127

CHAPTER I

First encounters: the historical context

Although there is evidence that African soldiers came to Britain with the Roman armies in order to keep the restless natives under control, it is not until the beginnings of European imperial expansion and slave trading that they begin to make a significant appearance in literature by and about them. Peter Fryer notes the presence of a group of Africans, seized from a Portuguese slave ship, in the court of James IV of Scotland at the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹ One of these may have been the lady ‘that landet furth of the last schippis’ mockingly celebrated by William Dunbar in ‘Of Ane Blak-Moir’, of which the third stanza reads:

Quhen schou is claid in reche apparrall,
Schou blinkis als brycht as ane tar barrell;
Quhen schou was born, the son tholit clippis,
The nicht be fain faucht in hi querrell:
My ladye with the mekle lippis.²

The poem perhaps refers to the ‘black lady’ who is featured in ‘the tournament of the black lady and the black knight’, an event which took place in 1507 with King James playing the role of the black knight, and which was repeated in 1508.³

During the same period, there are records of a black trumpeter in the court of Henry VII, who was paid 8 pence a day for his services. Some fifty years later, in 1555, a group of five Africans were brought from Ghana to England to learn English so that they could act as interpreters for English traders who had become aware of the wealth to be gained from dealing in gold, ivory and spices on the West Coast of Africa.⁴ English traders and travellers brought reports which added to the mingling of factual anecdotes and fabulous legends which dated as far back as Pliny’s accounts, written in the first century AD and translated as *A Summarie of the Antiquities. And Wonders of the Worlde* in 1566. Such a pot-pourri of first

person narrative and myth is represented in Othello's account of the tales which won Desdemona's heart:

Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth scapes i' th'imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence,
And portance in my traveller's history,
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,
It was my hint to speak. Such was my process,
And of the cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders.⁵

As the editor of *Othello* in the *Norton Shakespeare* notes, this speech and other works by Shakespeare draw on Pliny (who uses the term 'Anthropophagi'), Mandeville and Hakluyt. Presumably also the mention by Othello of his boyhood enslavement reflects current awareness of the Portuguese, Spanish, and English slave trade.

English involvement in the slave trade as a means of making a large profit began with the purchase and seizure by John Hawkyms in 1562 of some 300 Africans, whom he then sold to Spanish plantation owners in the Caribbean. Queen Elizabeth lent him a ship, *The Jesus of Lubeck*, to make a further voyage in 1564, and Hawkyms was given an official crest which showed 'a demi-Moor proper bound captive, with amulets on his arms and ears' together with a coat of arms displaying three black men shackled with slave-collars.⁶ During the sixteenth century Africans, and then Asians, were brought in smaller numbers to England and Scotland as slaves, domestic servants, and prostitutes. There are records of several musicians and entertainers at the court of Elizabeth, and also of entertainments involving her courtiers wearing blackface, a custom which Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* (1605) shows continuing after her death.⁷ Despite her enjoyment of such entertainments, however, Elizabeth did not approve of the growing numbers of black people resident in the country. A letter sent in 1596 to the mayor of London and the mayors and sheriffs of other towns commanded that such people should be deported: 'Her Majestie understanding that there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are already here to manie... Her Majesty's pleasure therefore ys that those kinde of people should be

sent forth of the lande . . .⁸ Elizabeth commissioned a Dutch merchant to arrest any black people in the land and take them to Spain or Portugal. Five years later the same merchant was again encouraged to rid the country of black people. In terms which are echoed in some of the more virulent rhetoric of the present era regarding refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers, Elizabeth issued a second proclamation in which she declared herself

highly discontented to understand the great number of negars and Black-amoores which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm . . . who are fostered and relieved here to the great annoyance of her own liege people, that want the relief, which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel.⁹

Elizabeth's proclamations are issued during the same period that English merchants were setting up systematic trading contacts with India. On New Year's Eve 1600, she granted a charter to the East India Company as the sole traders in the East and India. Twelve years later the Moghul emperor Jehangir granted the East India Company a mandate for trade in India, and during the seventeenth century trading stations or 'factories' were established in Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. During these early years when very few white women went out to India, there was considerable interchange and some marriages between the British and the native population, despite the usual practice of separating white expatriate enclaves from the 'Black Town' where native employees lived.¹⁰

The next 200 years saw a rapid increase in British involvement in colonization and plantation in Ireland, North America, and the Caribbean, together with flourishing trade with India and Africa, including the slave trade. The historian Dale H. Porter reports that by 1775 merchants from London, Liverpool, and Bristol were carrying an average of 60,000 African slaves across the Atlantic each year. Not only did the slave trade itself bring large profits (a slave bought in Africa for goods worth £15 would be sold in North America or the Caribbean to English or Spanish plantation owners for between £35 and £50), but it was intertwined with other lucrative trading and manufacture. Subsidiary industries which flourished in England included shipbuilding and the manufacture of iron manacles and chains, as well as goods such as East Indian cotton and British manufactured weapons which were traded for slaves in West Africa. Ships returning from the West Indies and America were loaded with tobacco and sugar, the latter being in great demand to

sweeten the coffee and tea which came from the new colonies and trading areas. Many bankers and merchants in London, Liverpool, Bristol, and other cities owned whole or part shares in the slave ships, and a substantial portion of the British economy depended on the slave trade, the West Indian plantations, and the industries which accompanied them.¹¹ Such dependency was openly acknowledged and encouraged by many merchants and members of parliament, for example the MP Charles Davenant in his *Discourses on the Publick Revenues*:

So great a part of our Foreign Business arising from these Colonies, they ought undoubtedly to have all due Encouragement, and to be plentifully supply'd, and at reasonable rates, with Negroes to cultivate and meliorate the Land. The labour of these Slaves, is the principal Foundation of our Riches there; upon which account we should take all probable Measures to bring them to us at easie Terms . . .

Slaves are the first and most necessary Material for Planting; from whence follows, That all Measures should be taken that may produce such a Plenty of them, as may be an Encouragement to the industrious Planter.¹²

Slaves were brought to England to serve the ships' captains, or given to their friends, or accompanied American and West Indian owners and their families when they visited England. The increasing presence of black people in England and Scotland is recorded in bill posters and newspapers advertising sales of slaves or offering rewards for runaway slaves. They appear also in paintings, prints, and cartoons, including many by Hogarth. David Dabydeen remarks on the variety of occupations and roles assigned to black people in the hundreds of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings and prints: 'footmen, coachmen, pageboys, soldiers, sailors, musicians, actresses, prostitutes, beggars, prisoners, pimps, highway robbers, street-sellers, and other similar roles'.¹³ These visual images show Indian as well as African children posed in very similar positions as pageboys and servants (see for example the paintings by Lely of *Elizabeth Countess of Dysart* and *Charlotte Fitzroy*¹⁴) and advertisements appear in the papers for a 'runaway Bengal Boy' (1743) and for a lost 'East-India Tawny Black' (1737).¹⁵ As Dabydeen points out, many of these portraits and prints illustrate the degree to which black and Indian servants had become commodities, signifiers of status in a culture which displayed ostentatiously its wealth and power through the 'exotica' shipped home from the colonies and trading empires. The print, *Taste in High Life* (after Hogarth) shows a small African boy dressed in turban and plumes, as much an exotic pet as the little poodle in coat and bonnet,

in a room bedecked with images and objects from China, India, France, and other worlds.

During the eighteenth century, what had been primarily a trading relationship with India, which left that country's own institutions and customs relatively unchanged, became a colonial one, with a stronger military presence. Robert Clive first contested the French participation in trade with India, and then went on to defeat the ruler of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daula, in 1757, establishing the East India Company as the main power in Bengal. Enormous wealth was acquired by British 'nabobs' who went to India to make their fortunes, often returning with Indian servants to adorn their establishments in England. In 1773, Warren Hastings was appointed governor general of all the East India Company provinces in India, and in 1784 the British government appointed a Board of Control in London with a British administrative arm, served, except in the lowest ranks, by British and Anglo-Irish men. Many of these men took their wives with them, and these families in turn brought back maids, ayahs, and other servants they had hired in India. Warren Hastings and his wife brought back two Indian boys, aged about thirteen, as well as four maids who were later sent back to India because 'they refused to work any harder than in India and wanted to lead exactly the same life'.¹⁶ The population of Britain also began to include many 'lascars', the sailors who were hired, or in many cases kidnapped, to serve as crew for the East India trading ships, and then abandoned, sometimes without being paid, when the ship docked in England. In 1786, a committee of relief was set up to help such destitute sailors, later widening its brief to include other destitute black people, as 'The Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor'. The committee reported that it had located 320 black people in need of relief, including 35 from the East Indies. Among those selected to settle in Sierra Leone as a place of repatriation was a twenty-nine-year-old sailor from Bengal.¹⁷

Estimates as to the number of black people living in Britain in the late eighteenth century vary between ten and twenty thousand. In a population of approximately three million, they were a visible minority, and their visibility was remarked upon by visitors as well as Englishmen. Philipp Thickness comments in 1788 that 'London abounds with an incredible number of these black men... in every country town, nay in almost every village are to be seen a little race of mulattoes, mischievous as monkees and infinitely more dangerous.'¹⁸ In *The Prelude* Wordsworth looked back upon the pleasing variety of

peoples he encountered when he travelled to London from Cambridge in 1791:

Among the crowd all specimens of man,
Through all the colours which the sun bestows,
And every character of form and face:
The Swede, the Russian; from the genial south,
The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote
America, The Hunter-Indian; Moors,
Malays, Lascars, the Tartar, the Chinese,
And Negro Ladies in white muslin Gowns.¹⁹

As James Walvin points out, the increasing visibility in Britain of black people, many of whom were slaves or former slaves, brought to the fore the contradictions and tensions between Britain's self-identity as the home of liberty and human rights and its role as a participant in the slave trade and the institution of slavery: 'The society which established the primacy of parliamentary power, and confirmed individual liberties before the law, was equally responsible for the development of black chattel slavery.'²⁰ As long as slavery seemed to exist mainly in the colonies it could more easily be ignored. But the presence in Britain and Ireland of black men and women who had experienced slavery made possible the powerful testimony to the humanity of Africans and the brutalities of slavery, both of which were denied or ignored by the supporters of slavery and its economic benefits. The issue was also highlighted in a series of legal cases which tested the extent of the commitment of England and Scotland to human rights and then in the fierce debate around the abolition of the slave trade which took place between 1787 and 1807. The abolitionist movement was the biggest political mass movement which England had ever witnessed, involving over 100 petitions and 400,000 signatories to them. It is in the context of this debate that much of the writing by black people was first produced and read; the legal, economic, social, cultural and literary discourses relating to slavery provide a series of arguments and representations about the status of black people in relation to English men and women which called for an explicit or implicit response by the first black writers and their readers.

THE ABOLITION DEBATE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK PEOPLE

Eighteenth-century black British writers wrote and were read in a variety of cultural and social contexts. The one that loomed most threateningly

and oppressively was the slave trade and slavery, and with it the debates for and against abolition. For many black people in Britain, slavery was not merely a past experience, but also a continuing threat. In 1749, the attorney general, Sir Philip Yorke, reaffirmed the status as mere property of people who had been purchased as slaves, even though they were now on British soil or baptized Christians, and confirmed as paramount the property rights of slave traders and plantation owners who wished to retain and return them to the West Indies or other colonies.²¹ In the case of James Somerset, whose Boston master had brought him to England and when he ran away recaptured him to be shipped back to Massachusetts, Judge Mansfield in 1772 reversed the Yorke–Talbot ruling, declaring that the laws of another country could not apply in England. However, this ruling did not, and was not intended to end slavery in Britain; indeed, Mansfield expressed considerable concern about the effects of freeing ‘no less than 15,000 slaves now in England’ whose worth he computed at approximately £700,000.²² For years afterwards, notices of sales and wanted notices for runaway slaves continued to appear in newspapers, coffee shops, and other public gathering places. Only in Scotland, which functioned under a different legal system, was slavery judged to be illegal in the *Knight v Wedderburn* case in 1778, when Joseph Knight contested his enslavement by John Wedderburn, who had purchased him in Jamaica as a boy and brought him to Scotland. It was ruled that no man or woman in the territory of Scotland could be enslaved, and that the laws of Jamaica could not apply to Scotland.

In 1788 the lucrative triangular trade between Britain, Africa, and the Americas involved more than 150 ships sailing from English ports (mainly Bristol, London, and Liverpool), with approximately one million pounds worth of goods manufactured in Britain for trade in Africa. These goods were partly sold and partly exchanged in that year for over 60,000 slaves imported from Africa, and then sold for between £30 and £40 each in the Americas. The ships then returned to Britain with cargoes of rum, tobacco, and sugar. In 1783 the view that African slaves were mere merchandise was emphasized in the case of an insurance claim brought by the owners of the ship *Zong*. A total of 130 sick slaves had been thrown overboard so that the ship’s owner could claim insurance for property abandoned by necessity (the claim was that water was scarce, although the ship arrived in port with 400 gallons of water to spare). Had the slaves simply died through natural causes, the insurance could not have been claimed. The case was brought to the attention of Granville Sharp by Olaudah Equiano, and Sharp attempted to bring a charge of

mass murder against the captain and crew. The prosecution was blocked by the solicitor general, John Lee, who asserted that the blacks were property: 'This is a case of chattels or goods. It is really so; it is the case of throwing over goods; for to this purpose and the purpose of insurance, they are goods and property: whether right or wrong we have nothing to do with.'²³ Only in 1796 did an English court rule that slaves could not be treated simply as merchandise in a case where a Liverpool trader sought to recover insurance for 128 Africans who had starved to death on a long voyage.²⁴ The slave-trade was not abolished in England until 1807.

Even after slavery was declared illegal in England, the identity of black people remained blurred with the correlation in most people's minds between slavery and black skins, ironically a correlation often reinforced by the anti-slavery crusades. Hence, the condition and background of slavery and the discourses surrounding it were almost inevitably an important part of the context in which black writers sought to define their own identities, to create their own voices, and to enter into dialogue with the community they now chose to belong to on their terms where once they were forced to belong on others' terms.

The identification of black people with slavery was both strengthened and contested by the growth of the empire, which entailed England's increasingly dominant role as a ruling nation and metropolitan centre, and her encounter with other cultures and their artefacts. Within the growing empire, and in the context of increasing commerce and trade from India and Africa, and the culture of consumption and commodity goods, black and south Asian people became yet another exotic import, a commodity which bestowed status on their owners. Thus, as noted above, black servants, grooms, and pages were frequently portrayed in many eighteenth-century portraits and group pictures, accompanying their wealthy mistresses, and masters, and their animals. Such pages were often dressed in exotic livery, featuring turbans and robes which might have little to do with their ancestral cultures, and much more to do with an orientalist perception of those regions. In such outfits, they were an adornment like the ostrich and peacock feathers, the paisley shawls, the silks, which adorned their mistresses.²⁵

In literature, a series of characters were developed and reiterated or replayed to denote the various paradigms into which black and Indian people were inserted in order to represent varied contexts and attitudes. Such paradigms can be seen in the construction of Othello and Oroonoko, on the one hand, and in the figure of the black servant or fool and Man Friday, on the other. It is interesting to note

that *Othello* was particularly popular in the eighteenth century and was performed much more frequently than Shakespeare's other plays, apart from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. C.B. Hogan gives a total of 265 performances of *Othello* in London between 1700 and 1750, compared with 186 for *Lear*, 163 for *Julius Caesar*, 96 for *Romeo and Juliet* (358 for *Hamlet*, 287 for *Macbeth*).²⁶ Also particularly popular was Thomas Southerne's dramatization of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, in which – perhaps in the context of *Othello* – Oroonoko's wife becomes a white woman rather than an African. Numerous versions were presented on stage in the eighteenth century. In 1759, for example, there were three different adaptations playing in London, in one of which (by Frances Gentleman) the anti-slavery theme becomes much more prominent. Both *Othello* and *Oroonoko* present the type of the noble, highly articulate and seductive African, whose passionate nature brings him to a tragic end. It is in this paradigm that one of the first supposedly factual biographies of an African may have been read when it was first published in 1734, Thomas Bluett's *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job*, which reports some events in the life of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo. Diallo was a Muslim merchant in West Africa, who was kidnapped and enslaved in Maryland. He was rescued and ultimately freed by Bluett, brought to England, made the acquaintance of a number of English gentlemen, was ransomed by his father, and returned to Africa laden with presents from his English friends. Bluett records these details about Diallo and his country at the request of Diallo, seeking to give 'such particulars of the life and character of this African Gentleman, as I think will be most useful and entertaining', endeavouring 'to make the whole as agreeable as the nature of the subject and the limits of this pamphlet will allow'.²⁷

Black people like Ignatius Sancho were perceived and perceived themselves as 'Othello-like'. His friend Stevenson tells the story of an encounter in the streets of London with a young white dandy who shouted out to him, 'Smoke Othello!' Sancho 'immediately placing himself across the path, before him, exclaimed with a thundering voice and a countenance which awed the delinquent, "Aye, Sir, such Othellos you meet with but once in a century," clapping his hand upon his goodly round paunch. "Such Iagos as you we meet with in every dirty passage. Proceed, Sir!"'²⁸ One of his letters refers to his shared foolishness with a number of black people, including Othello. Equiano, in a note to a letter preceding his *Narrative* and refuting the claim that his account was false, quotes Othello's final speech, 'Speak of me as I am, / Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught / In malice.'²⁹

Other eighteenth-century plays and operas sometimes featured black characters. In particular Isaac Bickerstaffe's comic operas portrayed black captives and servants. The protagonist of his *Love in the City* (1767), Priscilla Tomboy, is a West Indian (white) orphan whose imperious and cruel treatment of her black servant Quasheba is contrasted with the compassionate behaviour of her English friend, Penelope. *The Padlock* (1768) features a black servant, Mungo, who is lazy and gullible, but also quick witted. Bickerstaffe gives him what purports to be African dialect. And *The Sultan* (1773), like *The Padlock*, represents themes of captivity and liberation through the figure of Roxana, a rebellious and ungovernable English slave who persuades her master to set the captive women in his harem free. The late eighteenth century also saw a strenuous output of anti-slavery poems and pamphlets, many of which were circulated in thousands as part of the campaign to abolish the slave-trade. These include William Cowper's 'The Negro's Complaint' (1788), Jamieson's 'The Sorrow's of Slavery: A Poem' (1789), and Hannah More's *Slavery: A Poem* (1788).

But attitudes towards black people, and opinions about their capacities and their humanity, differed widely within Britain and the colonies. Although Hogarth could write about the aesthetic appeal of darker skins, for all too many, a black skin was a disfigurement of the worst kind. Thus a reviewer of Hannah More's poem commented:

Black is a colour which nature abhors. The eye startles and shrinks from it when it is first presented; nothing inanimate wears this horrid gloom; and in the living world, a black skin is peculiar to animals of the most peculiar and loathsome kind.³⁰

And despite the ambivalent depictions of Othello and Oroonoko as noble and learned men, many were convinced that Africans and all black people, by definition, were inferior. David Hume's footnote in his 1758 *Philosophical Essay* expresses attitudes possessed by many of his countrymen:

There was never a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in either action or speculation. . . . Not to mention our colonies, there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people without education will start up among us and distinguish themselves in every profession. In Jamaica indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks few words plainly.³¹