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978-0-521-71968-1 - A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain: Second Edition

C. L. Innes

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**What do they know of England who only England know?*

(Rudyard Kipling, 'The English Flag', 1891)

*I do not deal in happiness, I deal in meaning.*(Richard Wright, *White Man Listen*, 1957)<sup>1</sup>*Mais, qu'est-ce que c'est donc un noir? Et d'abord, c'est de quelle couleur?*(Jean Genet, *Les Nègres*, 1958)

Kipling's line quoted above refers to men who travelled away from England in the service of empire. But it might equally refer to those British writers of African and Asian descent who travel from other islands and continents to engage with British society and culture. This is the turn that C.L.R. James gives the line when he alludes to it in the preface to his autobiographical work, *Beyond a Boundary*, asking 'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?', and asserting, 'If the ideas originated in the West Indies it was only in England and English life that I was able to track them down and test them. To establish his own identity, Caliban, after three centuries, must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew.'<sup>2</sup> In 1984, James commented thus on the importance of the perspective contributed by Britain's black community:

Those people who are in western civilization, who have grown up in it but yet are not completely part (made to feel and themselves feeling that they are outside) have a unique insight into their society. What such persons have to say, therefore, will give a new vision, a deeper and stronger insight into both western civilization and the black people in it.<sup>3</sup>

James was referring to the generation of young black people born in Britain after the wave of immigration from the Caribbean following World War II and recruited by British public services and private industries to help regenerate Britain. He would have extended this category to include the many immigrants recruited from the Indian subcontinent

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during those years. Recent years have seen a number of events and publications celebrating that first group of West Indian immigrants on the SS *Empire Windrush* in 1948, and the multiple achievements of black British and Asian British writers and artists during the past fifty years.<sup>4</sup> But relatively little has been said about the black and Asian writers who preceded them, who for over 150 years prior to World War II wrote of and to British communities, contributing distinctive insights as outsiders on the inside.

This book sets out to map and explore some of that preceding history of writing by black and Asian writers who since 1750 have made a home in Britain and made their voices heard, at least for a time. It begins with Ignatius Sancho, taken as a slave at the age of two years to England, and the author of a collection of letters, the first of which is dated 1766. The main body of this study concludes with 1948, a date which can be seen as both a new beginning with that fresh influx of settlers, and also a point at which many Asian, African, and Caribbean authors and activists who had been residing in Britain before and during the war years decided to return to countries newly independent, or on the verge of becoming so. What emerges from the century and a half preceding 1948 is not so much a tradition, as little is passed on from one writer to the next, as a series of recurring preoccupations and tropes. And what also emerges, in an age when European writers increasingly sought to authenticate an ordered and stable vision of the self and society, is the explicit or implicit acceptance among black and south Asian writers in Britain of a multiple identity. Such authors found little difficulty in presenting themselves or their characters as black *and* British, or African and English, or Indian and English, or Caribbean and Scottish, or various combinations of these identities. Their works assert a sense of core humanity and selfhood at the same time as they demonstrate their flexible performance of roles, emphasizing possibility and potentiality rather than fixed definitions. Thus Olaudah Equiano presents himself as an African while he is an Englishman named after a Swedish king, and affirms his identity as a free man while he is enslaved. He is an owner of slaves while declaring antagonism to slavery; he is a trader and skilled artisan, who takes pride in serving his master well; he asserts his love for his master as he asserts his anger at being betrayed; he participates in a scheme to repatriate Africans to Sierra Leone, while remaining an Englishman; he marries an English woman. A corollary of this sense of flexible identity and dual perspective is the inventiveness the writers display, both in terms of the content of their stories, and the forms and genres which they combine or devise.

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Similarly, the reading of these texts raises questions about many of the categories which have become current in contemporary critical discourse. Do labels such as ‘postcolonial’ or ‘New Literatures in English’ used to refer to the profuse creative activity which during the last fifty years has emanated from areas previously colonised by England, apply to writers such as Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, and Sake Dean Mahomed, whose writings were first published more than 200 years ago, who identified with the English and Anglo-Irish, and were at times themselves involved in imperial enterprises? The dictated narratives of Gronniosaw, Mary Prince, and John Brown, the use and recontextualization by Equiano, Dean Mahomed and others of passages from previous writers, the mingling of travel, anthropology, and autobiography, the intersection of private and public concerns in the writing and publication of their letters and autobiographies, all complicate and subvert assumptions about genre, authenticity, and the boundaries between oral and literary composition – assumptions which for many years have been taken for granted in our literary textbooks and classrooms.

While the categories ‘black’ and ‘south Asian’ are by no means unproblematic, they serve as convenient umbrellas to cover diverse groups of writers, many of whom would not have defined themselves in such terms. Both labels are applied retrospectively to include writers of African and south Asian (Indian subcontinental and Sri Lankan) descent, even though they themselves might have accepted or insisted upon other descriptions (such as ‘sable’, ‘Ethiopian’, ‘brown’, British, English, Scottish, ‘coloured’, ‘Negro’, Parsi, Punjabi, Trinidadian, Sinhalese, West Indian, and so on). Although I have generally adopted the overarching terms which are current today, at times I use the terms which the writers themselves seemed to prefer. It is not my assumption that the situation of writers of south Asian birth or descent in Britain is identical to that of writers of African descent, although the distinctions have sometimes been deliberately as well as inadvertently elided. For example, Indian children and women were often brought to England and sold as slaves in the eighteenth century, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth century Indians were frequently referred to as ‘negroes’ or ‘moors’. More recently, describing themselves as ‘black’ or ‘black British’ has been a means of affirming a political alliance on the part of writers of Asian descent with writers of African descent. A comparative study of African British and south Asian-British writers will make possible a clearer analysis of the differences as well as the similarities between them and the ways in which they have been and often continue to be read. This

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book will consider the changing labels and contexts with which members of the black and Asian British communities identified themselves, and will also pay attention to how they were identified by others.

Many of the writers discussed in this book as belonging to a history of British literature might be claimed also by Africa, India, the Caribbean. The criteria for inclusion is that the writer has spent a good proportion of his or her writing life in Britain, and appears to be at least in part addressing his or her work to a British audience. For most of these authors there is a double or multiple identity, which may sometimes overlap with the categories in which they are placed by reviewers and critics, and sometimes not. My contention will be that the lack of a single ethnic or national identity produces a creative tension and interaction resulting in new literary forms and new narrative and poetic techniques. Where relevant, some reference to writing in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean and the Americas will also be made, since such writing often provides a model or counterpoint for black and Asian writers in Britain.

The authors I have selected all resided in Britain for at least five years, many becoming permanent settlers, and the works discussed are those published in Britain and/or addressed mainly to a British audience. Thus I have not included Phyllis Wheatley or Harriet Jacobs, each of whom spent only a few months in England. I have excluded the works C.L.R. James published before he left Trinidad, as well as those written during his fifteen-year residence in the United States; nor have I made more than passing reference to Duse Mohamed Ali's autobiographical writings published in Nigeria after his departure from England in 1923. And as the main focus of this historical survey ends with 1948, I have paid relatively little attention to works published by authors such as G.V. Desani, C.L.R. James, and Mulk Raj Anand after that date. The influx of immigrants from the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, and East Africa in the twenty-five years following 1948, creates for black and Asian writers within Britain a significantly different kind of audience and literature, more often addressed to or incorporating a multiracial and multicultural community of readers. At the same time, the achievement of independence by India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, followed within the next fifteen years by the majority of most African and Caribbean states, resulted in the departure from Britain by many leading writers of the 1930s and 1940s, and a changed sense of a world and community in which the British empire ceased to exist – at least in name, and a majority of people lost their ambivalent identity as 'British subjects'.

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These exclusions allow this present study to focus on those works which speak to and of a British society whose differences were seen in terms of class rather than race, often making a direct appeal to the members of that society to live up to its proclaimed ideals of freedom and justice, and noting ironically the disparity between the ways which the British describe themselves and the ways they behave. Like Richard Wright, most of these authors eschew writing of romance or happiness; rather they are concerned with the pursuit of life and liberty, and the conditions which may make happiness and individual fulfilment possible. And like Wright they choose to 'deal with meaning': the meaning of freedom; the authority of experience; the definitions of humanity; the relationship between the body, categories of the body in terms of race and gender, and the self; the distinctions between the disempowered self and potential selves; the slipperiness of language; the relationship between language and power and powerlessness. Such preoccupations may not encourage fantasy or romance, but they do often display considerable irony and humour arising from their deep sense of the absurd and the disparity between rhetoric and reality. Some of the texts can be seen as 'writing back' to pro-slavery and imperialist texts and attitudes; some might also be seen as a 'writing in', an insistence on the significance of their individual stories and voices, an assertion of existence within a larger narrative and history. The remarkable popularity of many of these narratives, which frequently went into multiple editions, demonstrates not only the effectiveness with which the stories were told, but also the power of their appeal to the 'better selves' of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers in Britain, in enlarging rather than merely reiterating concepts of self and community. And what emerges again and again from the mid eighteenth-century involvement of Sterne, Garrick, and Sancho, to the mid twentieth-century involvement of Eliot, Orwell, Marson, and Desani, is the sense of a community of writers and artists who sought to discard racial and cultural barriers, and disseminate an inclusive and unprovincial culture.

This study cannot and does not seek to be exhaustive. Much archival work remains to be done to uncover forgotten texts and manuscripts, and many authors who might with further research be identified as either 'black' or 'south Asian' remain undiscovered. Nor have I tried to examine every text that can be identified in these terms. My aim has been to look in some detail at a few exemplary works and authors in order to explore the preoccupations and kinds of writing which seem most representative of the periods, times, and situations they confront.

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Because so many of the texts are not easily available and have long been out of print, I have quoted extensively in order to display the interest and character of the texts. In so doing, I hope to have demonstrated the need and potential for further exploration in this rich cultural history of writers and their readers.

Despite the important and invaluable histories of black and Asian peoples in Britain by scholars such as Peter Fryer and Rozina Visram,<sup>5</sup> relatively little is known about the individuals and communities of African and Asian descent who lived and worked in Britain, nor the conditions and cultural contexts with which they interacted. Hence, I have included in this study three contextual and historical chapters (Chapters One, Four, and Eight), to provide those who desire it with a sense of the social and cultural attitudes and the historical events which relate to a fuller understanding of the texts I discuss.

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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

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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.<sup>5</sup>

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 Hawkyns 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 Hawkyns 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 . . .<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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

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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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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, page-boys, soldiers, sailors, musicians, actresses, prostitutes, beggars, prisoners, pimps, highway robbers, street-sellers, and other similar roles'.<sup>13</sup> 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*<sup>14</sup>) and advertisements appear in the papers for a 'runaway Bengal Boy' (1743) and for a lost 'East-India Tawny Black' (1737).<sup>15</sup> 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,