Man Moses, you are still living in the Dark Ages!
You don’t even know that we have created a Black Literature, that it have
writers who write some powerful books what making the whole world
realize our existence and our struggle. Sam Selvon, Moses Ascending (1975)

Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of
double consciousness.

Despite all our desperate, eternal attempts to separate, contain and mend,
categories always leak.
Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality
and Feminism (1989)

The composition of this first substantial history of black and Asian British
writing, which stretches from the eighteenth century to the present, is both
a challenge and a provocation. It is a challenge in its aim to open new
dialogues, highlight correspondences, and establish productive frames
through which to read black and Asian British writing across a continuum
of quite distinct historical, social, and political moments of cultural produc-
tion. It is a provocation in its necessarily mediated reconfiguration of the
often eclipsed, discontinuous voices of Britain’s black and Asian past, present,
and future. The assemblage of any history is inevitably partial, a reading of
the past through the eyes of the present, which necessarily involves con-
struction, selection, as well as the unavoidable omission of materials which
might later come to light. Moreover, in relation to black and Asian British
writing, a body of work still in the process of definition and deriving from an
uneven and often occluded set of histories, the task is even more complex.
For whilst any literary history must record and track key moments of literary
and cultural expression, it should also be tasked with posing questions and
interrogating received frameworks of meaning, not only in order to chart
new critical cartographies but also to embed such readings within specific
cultural and material contexts. Aware of the pitfalls of producing an overly
neat narrative of reclamation, this history nevertheless seeks to decompress
the all-too-familiar narrative of post-World War II large-scale black and Asian
migration and settlement, uniquely opening up an extended vista which will
inevitably complicate understandings of the diverse and intrinsic contribu-
tions of black and Asian writing to Britain’s literary culture.

One can tell a lot about a nation by the stories it invents, by what books it
chooses to treasure, which paintings it displays at its galleries, and the nature
of the histories it constructs. Yet, as Anthony Appiah reminds us in his recent
study of contemporary identities, creeds, and colour, *The Lies that Bind* (2018),
one can learn even more about a nation by what it chooses to forget.1 Numerous cultural historians and literary scholars have drawn attention in
past decades to what the acclaimed cultural theorist Stuart Hall once called
the nation’s wilful ‘loss of historical memory’, an amnesia that not only
evacuated from plain sight the adjacent histories of Britain’s pre-World
War II black and Asian residents but also enabled the postwar myopic
construction of Britain as a white ‘island nation’.2 As Bill Schwarz puts it in
his introduction to *End of Empire* (2011), a study of the post-1945 novel,
‘England’ has always been a ‘fabrication’, its invention forcing out ‘from
the field of national vision awkward truths’. It has disconnected ‘metropole
from colony, white from non-white’ and has reinforced the enduring myth of
England as green and pleasant land.3

2 Until the 1990s, this amnesia was reflected in the lack of any reference to Britain’s black
In fact, Britain has had a black and Asian population for well over 400 years – at least as long, that is, as the history of its empire abroad. As W. E. B. Du Bois noted in 1911, not only was the ‘Empire’ a ‘coloured’ empire but the streets of London were increasingly revealing this fact. The long history of black and Asian settlement has repeatedly been borne out by the writings of pioneering historians such as Peter Fryer, Rozina Visram, and, more recently, David Olusoga, who look back to the period of transatlantic slavery from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, Britain’s engagement with the East India Company in the 1600s, to empire, and as far back as the black population of Roman Britain. Nevertheless, it is frequently forgotten that the definition, composition, articulation, and identity of the present-day nation stem from this much longer series of complexly interwoven and distinctive histories. Though not often evident in existing literary histories, it is clear that the long presence of Britain’s empire ‘within’ was not only a crucial element of the nation’s political and economic health but was also to become increasingly important in its cultural and literary life, responsible well before 1945 for a number of productive and transnational exchanges and connections which were to have major ramifications later in the century. Even the rationale for the building of a national literary canon, a concept originally designed to transport the Victorian Arnoldian notion of the nation as ‘home’ of purity, order, cohesion, and stability to the colonies, was first conceived of in relation to the context of colonial India before becoming institutionalised as a field of study at British universities in the nineteenth century. For not only was the formation of the nation built on the cultures of empire, but the subsequent construction, as Gauri Viswanathan presciently observes, of a narrow genealogy that attempts to ‘confine the discipline’ is ‘belied’ by

6 We are drawing here on Susheila Nasta’s argument in “‘Voyaging In’: Colonialism and Migration” in The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 563–84; 563–9.
7 See Gauri Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).
such ‘transcontinental movements’ and influences whose ‘multiple’ origins are as ‘diffuse as its current (and future) shape’.  

Drawing attention to how the confluence of such diverse and enmeshed cultural tributaries have impacted on the literary imagination of the nation is not always an easy process; not least, because of the ‘bundles of silence’ which have most commonly enshrouded these sources. The writing of any history is not a given but a process and a construction. Moreover, silences, as the historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has observed, can enter ‘historical production at four junctures: fact creation (the making of sources); assembly (the making of archives); fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).’ There are several examples of this, some more graphic than others. At a critical moment during World War II, to take one, Sir Winston Churchill delivered a famous speech to the House of Commons, seeking to rouse the patriotic spirit of the nation. Churchill was quoting liberally from a sonnet entitled ‘If We Must Die’ by the Jamaican émigré poet and novelist Claude McKay, as one of the authors of this introduction has argued elsewhere.

Whilst Churchill clearly intended to boost the morale of British troops to rise up and not surrender their ‘precious blood’ by dying ‘like hogs penned in an inglorious spot’, McKay’s 1919 poem was intended originally to resist the traumatic violations inflicted on the black descendants of the Atlantic slave trade in the United States. A key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, McKay had emigrated to the USA from Jamaica in 1912 and, unlike many other black writers and intellectuals who settled in Britain prior to the end of World War II in 1945, he only spent a brief and disillusioned spell in the country he had once imagined to be his spiritual and intellectual homeland. However, Churchill’s alleged translation of these lines into one of the sustaining narratives of the nation prior to the defeat of Germany and the winning of the Battle of Britain in 1945 is not only interesting for its obvious ironies (the source and original purpose of the poem have seldom been noted), but is also

10 Trouillot, Silencing the Past, 26.
12 McKay, ‘If We Must Die’ in Burnett, Caribbean Verse, 144.
indicative of some of the challenges faced in attempting to unearth, untangle, and retrospectively construct a history of black and Asian British literary and cultural production.\(^\text{13}\)

Such elisions continue even in more contemporary accounts. In September 2000, for instance, the *Times Literary Supplement* printed a review of the recently published modernist volume of the new *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (2000). Entitled ‘How the Critic Came to be King’, it appeared adjacent to a fascinating photograph, taken in 1942 on the occasion of a BBC broadcast by the Eastern Service monthly magazine programme *Voice*. In the original published version of this image, all the contributors to that programme were named, including several key black and Asian writers discussed in this history. They include: Una Marson (Caribbean poet and presenter), Venu Chitale (assistant producer and novelist), M. J. Tambimuttu (major poet and editor of *Poetry London*), Mulk Raj Anand (novelist and critic), Narayana Menon (writer and broadcaster) as well as T. S. Eliot, William Empson, Nancy Barratt, and George Orwell.\(^\text{14}\) In the image reproduced by the TLS, no reference is made to any of the black and Asian contributors, who were not only significant literary figures in interwar London but were also to play an important part in presenting a wider-angled view on Euro-American modernity. The caption simply reads: ‘among others – T. S. Eliot, George Orwell and William Empson’.\(^\text{15}\)

New archival findings are increasingly coming to light, but few substantive material traces exist in print which make available the voices and inscriptions of Britain’s early black and Asian writers. Yet, as several chapters here attest (Part I), some of the very first published works by Britain’s black and Asian writers appeared towards the end of the eighteenth century, often as political tracts, autobiographical forms of testimony, letters, and diaries: notably, they include publications such as Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1772), Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789), Ignatius Sancho’s posthumously published *Letters of the Late*

\(^{13}\) We note that there is at present no conclusive evidence of Churchill’s use of McKay’s lines.


\(^{15}\) See Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 25 where this oversight is discussed in detail; also Stephen Collini, ‘How the Critic Came to be King’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 September 2000, 11.
Ignatius Sancho, an African (1782), and Sake Dean Mahomet’s The Travels of Dean Mahomet (1794), arguably one of Britain’s first published works by an Indian in English. These books and compilations were in many cases self-consciously literary, engaging – as in Sancho’s epistolary exchanges with the novelist Laurence Sterne or in the wide-ranging appeal of Equiano’s strategically multigeneric and worldly text, which straddles autobiography, captivity narrative, and travelogue – directly with the literary culture of the day. Whilst such texts cannot be seen to inaugurate ‘a tradition’, the many issues these early black British writers had to negotiate, whether having to seek the means, like Equiano, to self-publish and market their works or having to shift between deliberately self-constructed and multidimensional political, cultural, and personal identities, still pertain today.

While this history of black and Asian British writing strives to be comprehensive, it cannot be all-encompassing. Not only does this heterogeneous body of writing emerge from the confluence of a set of multifaceted lineages and cultural-geographic reference points, comprising the Caribbean, Africa, the USA, South Asia, and Europe including the UK, but the diverse and often fraught engagements of its histories have generated layered and intricate topographies. Owing to the shifting nomenclatures that have been attributed to the writing over time, the not unproblematic categories of ‘black’ and ‘Asian’ are used here as a convenient starting-point, gesturing broadly to a field of reference rather than implying narrowly imposed racial or ethnic affiliations across what are diverse forms of expression and complexly formed cultural identities. In addition, whilst the overarching title black and Asian British writing is current in contemporary critical discourse, we are more than aware that the subject-matter and writers covered in this book (most of whom settled in, or spent significant periods of time in Britain) may well have

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Introduction

been described or have wished to describe themselves otherwise: whether as British, Scottish, Irish, Indian, Caribbean, African, Sinhalese, Trinidadian, Ethiopian, ‘Negro’, Asiatic, African Briton, woman, queer, with mixed and multiple identifications such as BAME – or simply as writer. That a number of these writers have chosen over time to highlight their complexly formed subjectivities, strategically subverting the straitjackets of racial or political categories of definition, is not only evident in a range of distinctive historical contexts; it has been crucial in disrupting exclusionary constructions of British literary culture which have persistently located them in a parenthetical relationship to the ‘nation’ and its literary culture. As Caryl Phillips notes in Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging (1997), British writing has long been forged in the crucible of cultural admixture and fusion, yet: ‘the once great colonial power that is Britain has always sought to define her people, and by extension the nation itself, by identifying those who don’t belong.’

Examples of this double narrative of insider/outside, focused on rights of citizenship and cultural ‘belonging’, abound in the rhetoric of politicians and their immigration policies. It is also more than evident in the articulations of writers past and present who have frequently been forced to negotiate the perhaps ‘irreconcilable’ gap between an enforced politics of cultural identity and ‘literary aesthetics’.

The contradictions inherent in the implications of such positionings are clear: most obviously, perhaps, in the 2018 ‘Windrush scandal’ in which the British government sought – in the same year as the seventieth anniversary celebrations and following the flagging of the 1948 arrival of Empire Windrush as an icon of Britannia’s multicultural face at the 2012 London Olympics – to wrongfully deport significant numbers of its elderly black citizens.

The title of this volume is not meant to suggest one single history because, significantly, we are not dealing with a singular, unified historical object. Neither do we propose a dual history, one black, one Asian. Instead, this History represents and constructs a heterogeneous history in a comparative, panethnic, and panoramic fashion: a ‘messy’ history that cuts across a broad range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, but without downplaying meaningful distinctions between them. Although proceeding from the beginnings in the eighteenth towards the contemporary in the twenty-first century, this book is characterised by historicist perspectives rather than a strictly linear order, eschewing reductive and neat linear evolutionary chronologies.

Individual chapters are of necessity not chronologically sequenced because of their engagement with phenomena that cut across time, be they of a formal, theoretical, political, or thematic nature.

This History traces the plural history of black and Asian British writing, an intertwined and polymorphous literary field characterised by both overlap and distinction. Moreover, as the use of ‘black’ and ‘Asian’ has only recently and retrospectively become part of common discourse to describe a key part of Britain’s diverse cultural heritage, this history revises as it documents. As a history which has evolved from the intersection of the multiple pathways which continue to criss-cross the various constituencies of the republic of letters – whether through conventional genres, the influence of orature, performance poetry, the influences of contemporary cultural theory, the wider networks of literary culture which determine reputation, visibility, and taste – it is inevitably also a work in progress. As such, however, this History navigates the location (or locations) of these literatures within the various contexts of UK cultural production and beyond, reflecting on their contribution both to Britain’s present-day postcolonial status and its contemporary international and transnational face.

Black and Asian British writing is not congruent with the contours of the UK; it extends beyond the borders of white British literary history. While constituting a key part of the UK’s national literary history, it is at once larger, more amorphous, and translocal. This literary field inhabits and at the same time also exceeds the literary space of the nation. In that sense this literature challenges and expands narrow and insular definitions of the nation, reminding the UK of the lingering effects of empire, confronting it with its colonial past and postcolonial present, and representing the irrevocable entanglement with the peoples and cultures it once colonised and who have now, for many generations, made up the face of the nation. This History engages with texts whose belonging to Britain is frequently expressed with ambivalence; texts whose reception, as British texts, cannot be taken for granted. More importantly, they are texts which can (and perhaps must) frequently be contextualised elsewhere too, in distinct literary and cultural traditions; texts which can point to and feed on a wide range of histories, geographies, languages, and cultures. Texts which may speak of and may be marked by diaspora and migration, displacement and exile, colonialism and postcolonialism, negotiations of exclusion and belonging. But even if none of these experiences are explicitly thematised, or formally encoded, in a given text, the sheer diversity, breadth, and pertinence of black and Asian writing from this country has
meant that it, too, constitutes British literature, co-determining what Britain and Britishness are today.\textsuperscript{21}

As has already been intimated, our usage in this volume of ‘black’ and ‘Asian’ references several highly diverse multilingual peoples and cultures with complex and fluctuating social, political, and cultural histories. In so far as black and Asian British are politically constructed categories, rather than specific references to a narrowly defined race or ethnicity, any critical language employed, any literary or cultural categorisations endorsed are necessarily interventions and acts in history. As has now been well documented, the use of the inclusive term ‘black’ (as comprising all British-based writers and artists of African, Caribbean, and South Asian ancestry, first popularised in the 1970s by CAM (the Caribbean Artists Movement), and later used as a political signifier against a constant barrage of racial injustices) soon shifted to the semantic distinction and political separation in the 1980s and 1990s of black and Asian British cultural production, a division that has more purchase today.

The solidity, then, of the terms ‘black British’ and ‘Asian British’ as literary categories is by no means complete, given the further complication that a wide variety of distinct nomenclatures are in circulation, with more than one label being applicable at times to the same text. CAM had deployed ‘black British’ in an overarching sense to refer to diasporic artists and writers in Britain with distinct backgrounds from Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, and so on. The concept was then extended, pointing beyond the Caribbean, in order to subsume ‘the common experience of racism and marginalisation’.\textsuperscript{22} Listing black and Asian Britons under one heading was a way of countering racism through a larger political alliance. This overarching concept had become increasingly problematic by the 1990s, as ethnicity could no longer be seen as grounds for cultural or political affinity.\textsuperscript{23}

Cultural and linguistic distinctions notwithstanding, the historical and structural correspondences and connections between the distinct groupings referenced by the terms ‘black Britons’ and ‘Asian Britons’, and their cultural production, require the panoramic and comparative approach which can only be provided in a single – and yet plural – history. While the strategically


\textsuperscript{23} Leon Wainwright, ‘Canon Questions: Art in “Black Britain”’, in Low and Wynne-Davies (eds.), \textit{Black British Canon}, 156.
inaccurate denomination ‘black British’ had its uses, the present moment requires a critical language which is not only ‘sensitive to specific intersections between national and transnational modalities’ but also ‘adroit in its handling of the complexities of aesthetic modes’. In this History, black and Asian British writing is used as a retrospective formulation when it comes to writing from preceding centuries. Instead of labelling, for example, Sake Dean Mahomet’s books as ‘Asiatic’ (‘Asian’) or Equiano’s as ‘African’, in accordance with eighteenth-century practice, our broad categories allow for diachronic development as well as synchronic overlap and distinction to emerge. These categories are marked not by closure but by porosity – they differentiate as much as they affiliate.

Useful to navigate across this double bind of alliance and difference, which both connects and distinguishes the diverse histories of Britain’s black and Asian communities, is Michael Rothberg’s concept of ‘multidirectional memory’. This helpfully accounts for the dynamics of generating and transmitting memory, the productive exchanges and entanglements which characterise remembrance across community boundaries. Rothberg emphasises that cultural memory evolves not in narrow isolation but through acts of dialogue, negotiation, and borrowing, so that, for example, the memory of slavery can productively draw on the language and grammar of indentureship – and vice versa. Multidirectional memory, then, is another conduit between the distinct bodies of writing this History represents. Bringing the work by black and Asian British writers into dialogue, emphasising points of connection as well as distinction, does not conflate these texts; rather, the mesh of knotted histories and distinct traditions and cultures which constitute the writing need to be contextualised and historicised in particular ways, chapter by chapter, not only with respect to community or lineage but also with respect to specific intersections of class, gender and sexuality, generation, regional locations, and idiom.

This project works on the assumption that black and Asian British literatures’ formal, generic, and cultural complexities can best be conceptualised as a refraction of the historical processes that have shaped the black and Asian presence in Britain. Historically, black and Asian literary culture has perhaps

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24 See Low and Wynne-Davies (eds.), Black British Canon, 5.
25 On porosity in Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist and Teju Cole’s Open City, see Mark U. Stein, ‘Mobile Writers, Porous Texts’ in Christiane Lütge and Mark Stein, Crossovers: Postcolonial Studies and Transcultural Learning (Zurich: LIT, 2017), 139–58; 149 and passim.