

I

SUSHEILA NASTA

1940S–1970S

In 1945, the English fiction-writer V. S. Pritchett made a telling comment on the ‘disappearance’ of his friend, Mulk Raj Anand. Anand, well known as founding father of the Indian novel in English, had been living in London for over twenty years. A public intellectual and vociferous anti-imperialist, he was active in many different areas of cultural life. Yet, as Pritchett says, reflecting on Anand’s sudden departure for India at the end of the war, ‘He vanished . . . there seems to have been a long silence.’¹ That silence was partly the silence of war. Before 1939, Britain was an imperial nation, still confident, despite building colonial resistance, of its global role. After 1945, its horizons swiftly began to shift inwards to an island nation, keen to ‘screen out’ the awkward consequences of its declining empire from its field of vision.² Pritchett would certainly have been aware of the changing landscape of a blitz-torn nation, struggling, despite victory, to cope with the changed economic, political and social realities of the post-war world. The ‘silence’ intimated here, however, was primarily a cultural one: what Stuart Hall was later to call a ‘profound historical forgetfulness’ or wilful ‘amnesia’, that has continued for decades in accounts of British history.³ Although this gap in the cultural historiography of the nation has now begun to be addressed by a post-1990s generation of scholars keen to thicken the ‘lines’ of the ‘black in the Union Jack’, there remains a general failure to recognise the extent to which the map of English literature has always been forged from its mixed colonial past.⁴

Britain has had a heterogeneous migrant population for well over 400 years, correspondent to its empire abroad, making the imperial centre as much the ‘home’ of the colonial encounter as were the colonies themselves, situated on the so-called peripheries.⁵ 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’.⁶ The more visible presence of several generations of African, Caribbean and Asian ‘immigrants’ in the decades after World War II was not simply an effect of the residue of empire

(‘you are here because we were there’) but the culmination of a long and more intimate relationship.⁷ The presence of Britain’s empire within its imperial heartland shaped the nation’s cultural and literary life for many generations, forming the background to the publication of a substantial body of literary work. Well before 1945, a number of productive cross-cultural connections are identifiable that were to have significant ramifications later in the century.

This chapter seeks to highlight the key historical, political and cultural contexts that form the backcloth to Black and Asian writing’s emergence in Britain (1945–1970). Attempting, however, to isolate a small slice of history and provide a *stable starting-point* from which to trace the uneven growth of this diverse body of work is inevitably fraught with difficulties. In the first place, no single story or linear trajectory can begin to frame the many horizontal historical, political and cultural alliances that criss-cross these decades. Secondly, while the terms ‘black’ and ‘Asian’ may now be used retrospectively to define the works of British writers with African, Caribbean or South Asian diasporic heritages, this has not always been the case, not least because these writers had diverse affiliations and were simultaneously ‘routed’ and ‘rooted’ (to use James Clifford’s formulation) in local and transnational geographies.⁸ Thus, preoccupations almost always exceed the national, reminding us that familiar present-day notions of cultural cosmopolitanism and hybridised identity are certainly not new.

Just after the war, writers were most commonly identified by their race or national backgrounds – the ‘routes’ in journeying to Britain – whether from the Caribbean (almost all of the English-speaking West Indian islands, and Guyana), the Asian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) or parts of Africa (Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, South Africa). In the inter-war period, and well into the 1960s, writers comfortably inhabited multiple identities, whether through colonial and national links, as members of the Commonwealth, or as Britain’s new colonial and post-colonial citizens. At times they deliberately marked the signs of their difference by metaphorically wearing what Kwame Dawes calls diasporic ‘ships’ on their heads, highlighting their dual vision and intimate knowledge of worlds elsewhere.⁹ These multiple affiliations were also apparent through their links with transnational political and cultural movements and events – whether in the fight against fascism in the 1930s, pan-Africanism in the 1940s and 1950s, the Bandung Conference in 1955, the US Civil Rights movement, or the Organisation of African Unity in the 1960s – loyalties which added ballast to their simultaneous need to challenge an increasingly polarised and racist landscape in Britain. Before the 1970s, when ‘black’ became a collective identity sparking connections across diverse groups to jointly

contest the onslaught of British racism, these writers 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’, demonstrating ‘flexibility’ and ‘potentiality’ which arose from pluralised rather than fixed national affiliations or identities.¹⁰

A neat way to map the growth of Black and Asian writing in twentieth-century literary history would be to point to the ‘arrival’ of the *Empire Windrush* (June 1948) and align it to the now well-known metanarrative of post-war immigration. For 1948 not only coincided with the Nationality Act, initiating the ‘honeymoon’ decade of the open-door policy, but it was also only a year after Indian Independence and Partition, which was to mark the beginnings of the large-scale economic migrations from South Asia and East Africa during the next three decades. There is no doubt that the docking of this boatload of 492 West Indian islanders – whose passengers were bound on a journey not to a welcoming ‘motherland’ but an ‘illusion’ – represents an iconic moment in post-war immigrant history, a moment, as Jamaican poet Louise Bennett famously observes, when Britain began to be ‘colonised in reverse’.¹¹ *Windrush* has become part of the belated mythology of Britain’s public face as a multicultural nation, a conveniently distant and palatable signifier of a culturally diverse past.¹²

It is worth recalling that the sight of these ‘dark strangers’ crossing the nation’s threshold, captured in the oft-recycled black-and-white Pathé newsreels, opened an already embedded narrative of racial exclusion.¹³ As E. R. Braithwaite, Royal Air Force fighter pilot and author of *To Sir With Love* (1959), reflected:

In 1949, armed with degrees in Physics . . . I sought employment in many . . . well-advertised areas for which I believed myself eminently qualified . . . when time after time, I was denied employment . . . I was forced to confront the simple fact that, relieved of the threat of German invasion, the British had abandoned all pretence of hand-in-hand brotherliness and . . . reverted to type, demonstrating the same racism they had so roundly condemned in the Germans.¹⁴

The ‘colour bar’ was nothing new. As a key topic in a polemical newspaper feature (in 1934 by D. F. Karaka, novelist, journalist and first Indian president of the Oxford Union), it was also a key agenda item on the first day of the major pan-African conference held in Manchester in 1945.¹⁵ As media hype circulated about the growing numbers of immigrant arrivants, racial tensions correspondingly rose. As immediate post-war labour shortages were alleviated, successive governments launched a series of increasingly discriminatory Immigration Acts (1962, 1965, 1968, 1971, 1981),

which were shamelessly targeted at limiting the entry of Britain's 'coloured' Commonwealth citizens. As the nation's borders were effectively closed, issues of settlement became entrenched within a divisive discourse of 'home' and 'belonging'. This divisive history began to form a disturbing but persistent soundtrack to many artists' creative ambitions, artists who had hoped to benefit from an enlightened metropolitan literary culture and seek wider audiences for their work.

The remainder of this chapter will signal points of departure that stretch horizontally across and connect these decades. Necessarily selective and offering a loose chronology, it charts three areas. It offers a necessary *pre-history* to the better-known demographic shifts that occurred after World War II, to link individuals and groupings of writers already present at the heart of empire with those who followed in the period of 1950s and 1960s post-war migration. Secondly, in the era of the Suez Crisis and decolonisation, moves towards independence framed multiple representations of both 'home' and 'abroad', and saw a growing community of black and Asian writers challenge the straitjacket of what was becoming an increasingly hostile British literary culture. Finally, it will point to the shifting cultural and political geography of the 1970s, where, following the repercussions of right-wing politicians' damaging rhetoric, many chose to adopt the expediency of a collective cultural and political identity.¹⁶ However, this strategically unifying notion of 'blackness' delimited the scope of a British-born generation's imaginative vision, as powerful new voices from different ethnic, class and gender standpoints began to challenge the two-dimensional restrictions of such labels.

Precursors: Shifting the Furniture

Prior to 1948, London was both 'heart' of empire and 'home' to a number of students, writers and intellectuals who would help to shape the nation's literary history. The impressive roll-call of writers active in Britain by the mid 1930s and 1940s included: Jamaican poet, playwright, journalist and broadcaster Una Marson; those with Indian subcontinental backgrounds, Anand, Raja Rao, G. V. Desani and Aubrey Menen (London-born of Irish and Indian descent); and Trinidadian C. L. R. James. Also present were several activist writers of political treatises and autobiographies, such as radical pan-Africanists George Padmore and Marcus Garvey, and future political leaders Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Kwame Nkrumah (Tanzania) and Jawaharlal Nehru (India). Although many were lured to the colonial 'idea' of England, their perspectives were global. Moreover, their various publications – whether novels, poetry, short stories, plays, journalistic essays or

political treatises – pointed to alternatively constituted and mulatto modernities, offering a bifocal vision of the modern that existed both within and outside the European body.¹⁷

James, one of the most distinguished writers to settle in Britain during both the pre- and post-war periods, was fully cognisant of the extent to which Western European thought had determined his thinking. In his ground-breaking autobiography, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), he writes, ‘To establish his own identity, Caliban . . . must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew.’¹⁸ The encounter with English culture was a necessary prerequisite to the evolution of an anti-colonial aesthetic. Coming from a polymath, James’s voice permeated several platforms, as political essayist, philosopher, sports commentator, literary critic, historian and novelist. His anti-imperialism went hand-in-hand with his passion for literature, as evidenced by the 1936 production of his play *Toussaint L’Ouverture* (1934), in London’s Westminster Theatre, starring Paul Robeson.¹⁹ James’s ability to foster a dialogue both within and outside British literary culture created a unique vantage-point which continued to resonate in the writings of others in later decades.²⁰

Issues of race, politics and literature were often intertwined. Many were initially attracted to Marxism as a form of ‘tri-continental’ resistance, a means to combat the inequities of their colonial position and move beyond the limitations of a narrow monolithic vision.²¹ Whereas Anand’s first novel, *Untouchable* (1935), has most frequently been seen, like his many other fictions, as a socially realist novel with concerns outside Britain, it is clear that his global perspective sought to challenge the West’s narrow view of its own civility. In *Across the Black Waters* (1940), his little-known World War I novel, Anand depicts how the ‘barbarism’, generated as much from within as without, is the product of Western modernity, leading to repetitive atrocities worldwide. The mixed cultural trajectories evident in the work of writers such as Anand or Rao (also writing in France and Britain at this time) is comparable to a later generation of writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul, who, by the end of the century, were key figures in defining a new genre of diasporic South Asian fiction in Britain.

As with the formation of cultural associations later in the century, many were engaged with facilitating the activities of political and cultural networks dedicated to supporting African, Caribbean and Asian people’s interests. These included *The League of Coloured Peoples* (founded by Harold Moody, 1931), *The Progressive Writers Association* (inaugurated by a group of Indian activists, 1935) and various African and Colonial People’s Associations which began to hold meetings in London, Cardiff, Edinburgh and

Glasgow. Given the difficulties of finding publishing outlets, other avenues for cultural production were initiated, some closely linked to established groups, such as *The Keys*, edited by Marson on the *League's* behalf. Similarly *Indian Writing*, a review run by some of the Progressive Writers' founding members, provided a space for a globally networked community of South Asian writers, many of whom were then students.²²

Cultural platforms like the BBC were also significant conduits for exchange, providing metropolitan networks for the reception of these writers. Influential women such as Marson, Venu Chitale (producer and novelist) and Attia Hosain were regular voices in contributing to and, at times, shaping the content of the BBC's Eastern and West Indies programmes. Hosain arrived in 1947 and, like Marson, had multiple talents as novelist, actor and translator. Her collection of stories, *Phoenix Fled* (1953), and her novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), ground-breaking in their challenge to stereotypical readings of tradition and modernity, centralise Muslim women's lives in the narrative of Partition. Marson contributed to George Orwell's 1942 monthly poetry programme 'Voice'. Part of the Eastern Service, it acted as a cross-cultural contact zone, with Indian intellectuals in dialogue on air with such establishment figures as T. S. Eliot and William Empson. It also attracted the novelist and playwright Desani, whose mould-breaking novel, *All About H Hatterr* (1948), has long been acknowledged as a major inspiration to Rushdie.²³ While Desani, Anand and Marson (now sometimes called the 'foremother' of black women's writing in Britain) have largely 'disappeared' from literary histories, the inroads they made in interrogating what Timothy Weiss has termed the 'axis' of the 'metropolitan standard' were crucial in anticipating the shapes of things to come.²⁴

Pioneers: Making Waves

Although writers from the white-settler dominions also emigrated after the war,²⁵ by far the largest group came from the West Indies, along with several individuals from South Asia and Africa. Among those from the sub-continent was the young poet Dom Moraes, novelists Markandaya and Farrukh Dhondy, the Bengali philosopher and historian Nirad Chaudhuri, and poet and dramatist Ketaki Kumari Dyson. Several African writers, such as Wole Soyinka (Nigeria) and Ngugi wa'Thiongo (Kenya), were students in Britain during the 1960s and identified early on with the anti-colonialist stance of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968). Whereas Ngugi and Soyinka were both to return to their countries, other Sixties arrivistes, like Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Abdulrazak Gurnah (Zanzibar) and Lauretta Ngcobo (South Africa), made homes in Britain. Some, like Menen

with Indian and Irish parentage, were British-born. However, it was the West Indian ‘group’ who were to have the most influence initially. Their arrival not only marked an important moment in Caribbean literary history, but also laid the ground for a younger generation of largely British-born writers whose works were to become increasingly visible by the 1980s.

Often neatly packaged as the ‘*Windrush*’ generation, this remarkable gathering of writers, intellectuals and artists, from a variety of island locations, with different literary agendas, and racial and class backgrounds, provides the origins (like their Asian and African counterparts) of a ‘canon’ of Black and Asian writing in Britain.²⁶ The scale, influence and scope of their output marks a vital but often hidden element of what might be read as a collective multicultural autobiography of the post-war nation. It also bears fruitful comparison with the modernist movement, a network similarly energised by the convergence at the beginning of the century of an unusual grouping of migrants, exiles and émigrés.

With the exception of Derek Walcott, nearly every Caribbean writer crossed the Atlantic to Britain between the late 1940s and 1970. Notable among them were: among novelists, Sam Selvon (Trinidad) and George Lamming (Barbados), who travelled, by coincidence, on the same boat in 1950, Beryl Gilroy (Guyana), Andrew Salkey (Jamaica); and among poets, James Berry (Jamaica), E. A. Markham (Montserrat), Kamau (then Edward) Brathwaite (Barbados), and the Trinidadians V. S. Naipaul, his younger brother, Shiva, and Merle Hodge, who, like Stuart Hall (Jamaica), came over on prestigious island scholarships.²⁷

Not only was London a dynamic literary crossroads, but it was also a key publishing capital where, between 1952 and 1967 alone, over 137 novels by West Indians appeared in print, including several anthologies, short stories and plays.²⁸ Significantly, the subject matter of these publications, as well as the hyphenated identities of their authors, reflected a versatility which shifted seamlessly between representations of ‘home’ and/or ‘abroad’. Key texts included Selvon’s early novels: set among Trinidad’s East Indian community, *A Brighter Sun* (1952) and *Turn again Tiger* (1957); and his pioneering London works, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and *The Housing Lark* (1965). Lamming too employed this dual-directionality. His first book, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), a *bildungsroman* of a young artist coming to consciousness in colonial Barbados, was followed swiftly by his bittersweet experimental evocation of migration in *The Emigrants* (1954). V. S. Naipaul’s early and satirical Trinidad comedies, beginning with *Miguel St* (1957) and culminating with *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), appeared during this formative time. The explosion of West Indian talent was not just limited to fiction.²⁹ Jamaican poet Bennett (a 1950s RADA

graduate) began performing her ironic, poetic ballads, humorously depicting the consequences of reverse colonisation of Britain, establishing a vocal model for later spoken-word poets. Trinidadian dramatist and actor Errol John won the 1957 London Observer Prize for *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, set in Trinidad's yard culture.

The year 1958 is frequently highlighted as a watershed moment, when racial disturbances in Nottingham and London's Notting Hill marked the beginning of a long phase of deteriorating racial politics across two decades, culminating in the 1981 Brixton uprisings. These years coincided, however, with several important interventions by women. *The West Indian Gazette* (Britain's first black newspaper) was founded by Claudia Jones, who was key to facilitating the launch of the London Carnival in 1959 – now an annual event in Notting Hill. The lawyer Pearl Connor instigated a professional representation agency for black and Asian actors (1956–76), and Yvonne Brewster established Carib Theatre with Anton Phillips (1980).

As Caribbean writers' success and the general post-war publishing boom further encouraged editors to extend their reach, writing from Africa and South Asia gained more prominence. African modernist Amos Tutuola, then an unknown poet, had his unusual, magically realist Yoruba novel, *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1959), taken up by Faber & Faber, while the Royal Court produced Soyinka's and Jamaican Barry Reckord's plays. As African and Caribbean countries gained their independence, the attraction of new educational markets saw the Heinemann African Writers Series launched in 1962, followed by the later Caribbean Series. When Macmillan, Oxford University Press and Longman began to follow suit, this flurry of publishing interest in overseas markets, and international writing, also created a favourable milieu for British-based black and Asian writers. Mainstream editors, such as Cecil Day-Lewis (Chatto & Windus) or Diana Athill (André Deutsch), began to encourage the work of now well-known figures such as Hosain and Naipaul. Such shifts were confirmed by the inauguration of Commonwealth Literature as a disciplinary field at the University of Leeds in 1964, a move that was to have significant reverberations in the later emergence of a canon of post-colonial writing.

Although there was much initial excitement, the reception of Black and Asian writing in Britain became increasingly vexed. Comments by many reviewers remained barbed, in the seeming perpetuation of a patronising and paternalistic discourse. The majority focused predominantly on predictable questions of the 'exotic', authenticity, representations of national identity or the extent to which the sociological portraits of Britain's new immigrant communities were realistic.³⁰ Few explored the extent to which these works were inherently experimental, employing new forms and

reshaping the dominant epistemologies of the English canon. The need for a new architecture for the imagination, a language *for* rather than against identity, was to become a prominent area of political, historical and literary negotiation, as these writers attempted to create new correlatives to house the complexity of their mixed cultural backgrounds.

Realist works published prior to the 1958 deterioration of racial politics articulate a sense of entrapment, bewilderment and dislocation – such as Lamming’s bleak modernist evocation of disappointed love through the lives of his lost migrant characters in *The Emigrants*, or Selvon’s more buoyant exploration of a pluralist calypsonian-Trinidadian aesthetic, *The Lonely Londoners*, which reinvents London as a black city of words. Moreover, as Lamming was to note in his 1994 memorial tribute to Selvon, it was accommodation – whether literal in terms of housing or metaphorical in terms of aesthetics – that became a key area of ‘contestation’. ‘Can you imagine’, he says, ‘waking up one morning and discovering a stranger asleep on the sofa of your living room?’ On ‘the one hand the sleeper on the sofa was absolutely sure through imperial tutelage that he was at home, on the other the native Englishman was completely mystified by this unknown interloper’. This cultural ‘phenomenon’, he prophesies, might change ‘the habits of English reading’.³¹ The situation Lamming describes, which forced writers to perpetually negotiate the contradictions of what McLeod has perceptively called an imposed ‘inside-outsider’ status, became evermore difficult.³² Following the inflammatory consequences of Powell’s 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, Britain’s non-white immigrant population were perceived increasingly as the dark side of the nation’s consciousness, ‘aliens’ or second-class citizens, who had come to pollute the realm.³³

Writers during this period were by no means solely engaged with writing Britain; nor were their perspectives uniform on the vexed issues of race and representation. Nevertheless, the shared injustices of their predicament were regularly signalled in the content, themes and titles of early ‘immigrant’ novels – whether Andrew Salkey’s *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960), Markandaya’s *The Nowhere Man* (1972) or Emecheta’s gruelling account of her experiences as an African immigrant and mother in 1960s Britain, *In the Ditch* (1972). No longer shored up by the promise of an expectation, this often subterranean, immiserated world is frequently reduced to nothing more than colourless rooms in sordid boarding-houses.³⁴ Ralph Singh, Naipaul’s middle-class, self-exiled politician in *The Mimic Men* (1967), is cast adrift: ‘So quickly had London gone sour on me. The great city, centre of the world... I waited for the flowering to come to me... Excitement! Its heart must have lain somewhere... In the great city, so solid in its light... life was two-dimensional.’³⁵ Accommodation also

figures significantly in *The Nowhere Man*, Markandaya's bleak and gritty portrait of immigrant dislocation. Although Srivinas, her central character, has lived in London since the 1930s, and sheltered desperate Londoners in his basement during the war, he is targeted as an easy victim of 1960s racism when his house, now symbolising immigrant contamination, is literally burned down.

As urban centres became materially and metaphorically shut off by such signs as 'Rooms to Let. No Irish, No Coloureds' many devised modes to contest, subvert and open up the pathological nature of the ghettoised spaces into which British culture had forced them.³⁶ This was evident at the level of popular and literary culture alike. The naïve utopianism of Lord Kitchener's early recorded, widely circulated calypsos of London town brought the conviviality of calypsonian culture into homes, clubs, cafés and community centres in Britain.³⁷ However, his 'My Landlady's Too Rude' (1956) represents a much bleaker, dystopian domestic vision.³⁸ Soyinka's 1963 poem 'Telephone Conversation' uses a dialogic form to challenge stereotypes, as the reader becomes listener or eavesdropper. Dextrous in its linguistic play and dark humour, the speaker's recitation of a ridiculous kaleidoscope to describe his 'blackness' to a quizzing landlady who cannot see him – "HOW DARK?" . . . I had not misheard . . . "ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?" – breaks down the 'binaries' of her blinkered questions by 'pushing the logic of racialist attention so hard that he unmakes it'.³⁹

Like Desani before him, Selvon deconstructs the two-dimensionality of imposed identities through his literary translation of a vernacular's rhythms, which hybridises the novel form in the process. *The Housing Lark* (1965) or *Moses Ascending* (1975) both reframe the grand narratives of European modernity as they transform calypso, carnival and trickster folklore into a British urban context. Most significantly, such new modes of articulation offered the possibility of a pluralising and ultimately enabling mode of cultural survival. Britain began to be imagined otherwise, a vision that increasingly spoke to a growing black and Asian audience within its borders.

Despite growing tensions, these years generated a wide range of new imaginative vistas and cultural connections. Wilson Harris, whose Guyana Quartet *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), *Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), *The Whole Armour* (1962) and *The Secret Ladder* (1963) had already been published by Faber, was formulating his unique vision of the Caribbean as a paradigm for a multilayered and syncretic modernity. His ideas began to create connections with Hispanic and Francophone Caribbean writers such as Édouard Glissant, as well as an upcoming 1980s generation, including Fred D'Aguiar and Pauline Melville in Britain. Similarly, Brathwaite's trilogy *Rights of Passage* (1967) and its experimentation with oral performative

techniques – from African drums to the syncopations of New World jazz, expressed through a carefully crafted, vernacular idiom – were to become an important model for the next generation of British-based poets, as the Middle Passage and Black Atlantic became key preoccupations.

In another vein, and writing from a completely different angle, Naipaul began to embark on a series of journeys to explore his own particular ‘exile’. In the early travelogues *The Middle Passage* (1962), *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) and *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972) he dialogues with what he calls the ‘bastard histories’ of his indentured East Indian background. Visiting India and Africa, he further contemplates the ‘enigma’ of his relation to and ‘arrival’ in Britain, a question which has continued to engage him throughout his long and distinguished career. Despite winning the 1971 Booker Prize, Naipaul’s often negative visions of the corruption of newly independent post-colonial nations were unpopular among many of his peers who were actively supporting ‘Third World’ independence struggles and resisting the increasingly violent consequences of Britain’s worsening political situation. Britain’s black and Asian communities sought solidarity with the American Civil Rights, Black Power and wider student movements. The internationalist models led by US radicals LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Black Panthers Eldridge Cleaver and Angela Y. Davis, and UK Asian activist Tariq Ali motivated further resistance. It was this global political context that inspired Brathwaite, Salkey and John LaRose to pioneer the formation of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in 1966.

Similar to fusions between art and politics much earlier in the century, CAM had both an international and a local agenda, seeking to enable a more unified sense of a Caribbean culture, while fostering engagement with ‘a new . . . strand in Black British culture’ and the establishment of an alternative aesthetic.⁴⁰ Some of Harris’s pioneering essays, published in *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (1967), and their early formulations of hybridity and syncretism (long predating the ideas of such theorists as Homi Bhabha in the 1980s) were first delivered at CAM conferences.⁴¹ Similarly, Hall, who was to become increasingly vocal in Britain on issues of black representation in the 1980s, opened up debates on the difficulties that were to confront a new generation of black Britons – ‘in’ but not ‘of’ the nation – in his keynote address to the second conference.⁴²

As publishing opportunities waned during the 1970s with the increasing ‘ghettoisation’ of Britain’s black and Asian writers, La Rose and Sarah White launched New Beacon Books, an initiative that has provided a crucial publishing outlet and forum for cross-cultural debate for over forty years. Pivotal in spearheading the influential International Book Fair of Radical and

Third World Books, an annual event that was to launch the careers of many throughout the 1980s, New Beacon worked alongside Bogle L'Ouverture, a grassroots imprint set up by Jessica and Eric Huntley in 1969. Only two years earlier Margaret Busby, one of Britain's first black editors, had launched Allison and Busby with her partner, Clive Allison. Hosting a wide list across the spectrum of class, race, culture and genre, it was to showcase many Caribbean, Asian, African and Middle Eastern works, offering reprints by now important figureheads (such as James) that had long disappeared. These smaller enterprises, driven by the commitment and passion of editors well versed in Black and Asian writing worldwide, took the lead in promoting the up-and-coming voices of new poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, whose first collection, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974), appeared with *Race Today*, and his second, *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975), with Bogle L'Ouverture.

Shifting the Geography and Changing the Terms

To be sure, the period 1968–79 – in the last year of which Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister and which preceded the 1981 Brixton uprisings – has been described as one of ‘crisis’, an era when the cumulative impact of the xenophobic policies of successive governments fomented a negative cocktail of aggressive policing, muggings and violence on Britain's streets.⁴³ It was also an important time of transition, as a new generation of British-born, black and Asian Britons asserted their undeniable rights to British citizenship. As the decade progressed, flashpoints like the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival pinpoint further episodes of disaffection and confrontation. The content and tenor of artistic expression – whether in poetry, drama or fiction – increasingly reflected upon the complexities of this untenable situation. Britain's black and Asian citizens made it clear that they were ‘here to stay’ and united to resist the persistent onslaught of state-sanctioned racism. Many began to use race as a crucial, if ultimately limiting, platform for artistic self-representation, and, in this context, ‘black’ began to function as an ‘identificatory political signifier’, a cultural category deliberately constructed at a particular moment in time. Alison Donnell quotes Kobena Mercer: ‘When various peoples – of Asian, African and Caribbean descent – interpellated themselves and each other as /black/ they invoked a collective identity predicated on political not biological similarities.’⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, the vexed nature of this climate and the urgent need to validate and articulate the voices of what had begun to be seen as Black Britain inspired the content of a number of new works and generated new

cultural organisations, including: the Black Theatre Co-operative (1979–99, now Nitro), Temba Theatre Company (1972–92), the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (1978–82), and Tara Arts (1976–), founded by Jatinder Verma after Gurdip Singh Chaggar’s murder in Southall – a killing exacerbated a week later by National Front leader John Kingsley Read’s taunt, ‘One down, one million to go.’⁴⁵ Such groups were to provide instructive models in the future when, following Naseem Khan’s 1976 Arts Council report *The Arts Britain Ignores* and the sea-change, promised but not delivered, by Lord Scarman’s controversial inquiry following the Brixton riots, funding opportunities briefly became available. However, by the mid 1980s Conservative government arts cuts would decimate the sector.

Perhaps inevitably, many 1970s publications focused on the harsh social realities of race and representation. However, these years were also crucial in marking the emergence of forms signalling a new syntax and vocabulary for rebellion. Concurrent with Emecheta’s socially realist novels such as *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), Dhondy’s children’s short stories *East End at Your Feet* (1976) and Gilroy’s belatedly published autobiography, *Black Teacher* (1976), the politics of Johnson’s hard-hitting poems attracted large audiences at community centres like the Keskidee, North London. Drawing on DJ youth culture in Jamaica and London, and the US Black Arts movement, and working with musicians like Dennis Bovell, Johnson’s provocative lyrics transfixed eager audiences of young black Britons, keen to find vehicles to challenge their widespread negative image. Famous works like his epistolary ‘Sonny’s Lettah’ (1979) or ‘Inglan is a Bitch’ (1980) marked a significant shift away from Lord Kitchener’s lighter calypsonian satire. Johnson draws on the heavier rhythms of reggae, deliberately subverting standard English to remap his local neighbourhood with his gritty, creolised articulations. Johnson’s outspoken voice in powerful poems like ‘Di Great Insohreckshan’ – written after the 1981 riots – continued to posit what he saw as a ‘shared condition of subservience’ across the black and Asian communities. This vision was to significantly influence later performance poets: Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, Benjamin Zephaniah, Levi Tafari and Patience Agbabi.⁴⁶ His fusions of vocal and instrumental sound as interchangeable elements are a point of departure for Zena Edwards’s later multidisciplinary solo performance techniques.

Political battles over belonging and citizenship necessarily took precedence in the 1970s. However, it is important to remember that the signifier ‘Black’ remained ‘international in its referents and counter-national in its intent’.⁴⁷ Selvon’s iconoclastic, parodic novel *Moses Ascending* renders humorously the ambivalent nature of the situation as Britain edged slowly

towards the beginnings of the so-called era of cultural diversity. Flagging up a dilemma for black and Asian writers of what came to be called the ‘burden of representation’, we find Moses, once 1950s immigrant tenant, now a landlord, attempting to distance himself from his community as he tries to write his memoirs. As Moses is mocked by Galahad – a now ardent Black Power supporter who, with Brenda, a no-nonsense activist, undermines his literary endeavours – Selvon unfolds a subtle commentary on what was fast becoming a significant narrowing of the literary landscape, a situation which partially resulted in his 1978 departure for Canada.

With the increasing fragility of ‘Black’ as an instrumental, political umbrella becoming plain, the pressing need to posit diversification – in terms of ethnic identity, sexuality, gender and class – preoccupied many.⁴⁸ As Hanif Kureishi’s mixed-race, autobiographical protagonist observes in *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) – a book charting Karim Amir’s 1970s adolescence in suburban Bromley – the monolithic label of being ‘Black’ in Britain also created confusion: ‘Two of us were officially “Black” (though truly I was more beige than anything).’⁴⁹ The shift from the 1970s to the 1980s was to signal a sea-change in recognising British writing’s diversity, a moment most famously marked perhaps by the publication of Rushdie’s Booker Prize-winning *Midnight’s Children* (1981). The attention given to figures such as Grace Nichols, the 1983 Commonwealth Poetry Prize winner, for *I is a long memoried woman*, or Emecheta, nominated as one of Britain’s best young writers by the Booksellers campaign, confirms the practice of using ‘Black’ and ‘Asian’ as convenient subcategories. As with earlier generations, writers both welcomed and resisted such nomenclatures. The spectre of cultural inclusion still continues to haunt contemporary debates on how to locate the black and Asian canon, and why this now substantive body of British writing is still largely absent from its many post-war literary histories.⁵⁰

NOTES

- 1 Letter to Saros Cowasjee (4 October 1968); cited in Saros Cowasjee, ‘The Early Struggles of a Novelist’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 7:1 (1972): 49–56, 49.
- 2 Bill Schwarz, ‘Introduction: End of Empire and the English Novel’ in Rachel Gilmore and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945* (Manchester University Press, 2011), 1–37, 15.
- 3 Stuart Hall, ‘Racism and Reaction’, *Five Views of Multiracial Britain* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), 25.
- 4 C. L. Innes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain 1700–2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Pallavi Rastogi and Jocelyn Fenton Stitt (eds.),

- Before Windrush: Recovering a Black and Asian Literary Heritage within Britain* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).
- 5 This chapter draws upon and updates ‘Voyaging In: Colonialism and Migration 1945–1970’ in Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (eds.), *The Cambridge History of British Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 563–85.
 - 6 W. E. B. Du Bois, ‘Editorial’, *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, 2:4 (1911): 157–9, 159.
 - 7 Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1984); Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: Four Hundred Years of History* (London: Pluto, 2002).
 - 8 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 254.
 - 9 Kwame Dawes, ‘Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction’, *Wasafiri*, 29 (1999): 18–25.
 - 10 Innes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing*, 2.
 - 11 Louise Bennett, ‘Colonization in Reverse’ in Mervyn Morris (ed.), *Selected Poems* (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores Ltd, 1983): 106–7.
 - 12 See Oneyekachi Wambu (ed.), *Empire Windrush* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998); David Dabydeen (ed.), *The Windrush Commemorative Issue in Kunapipi*, 20:1 (1998).
 - 13 Paul Gilroy, *Black Britain: A Photographic History* (London: Saqi Books, 2009); Susheila Nasta with Florian Stadler, *Asian Britain: A Photographic History* (London: Westbourne Press, 2013).
 - 14 E. R. Braithwaite, ‘Preface’ in Wambu (ed.), *Empire Windrush*, 15–16.
 - 15 Delegates included Kenyatta, Nkrumah, Du Bois and British-based activists. Innes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing*, 177.
 - 16 Conservative Party candidate Peter Griffiths unseated Labour in Smethwick (1964 election) condoning the slogan ‘If you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Labour’. Paul Foot reproduces Griffiths’s reaction to the slogan as published in *The Times* in *Immigration and Race in British Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 44.
 - 17 Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1–13.
 - 18 C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Serpents Tail, [1963] 1983), xxi.
 - 19 Rediscovered in 2005; see Christian Høgsbjerg (ed.), *Toussaint L’Ouverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2013).
 - 20 On the 1950s generation see Bill Schwarz (ed.), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester University Press, 2003).
 - 21 Robert Young uses ‘tricontinental’ vision in *Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), found in earlier work by the critic Cedric Dover, author of the novel *Half-Caste* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1937).
 - 22 For the journal’s networks see: Rehana Ahmed, ‘South Asians Writing Resistance in Wartime London – Indian Writing’, *Wasafiri*, 27:2 (2012): 17–25; Susheila Nasta’s database, *Making Britain: South Asian Visions of Home and Abroad 1870–1950*, www.open.ac.uk/arts/south-asians-making-britain

- 23 Susheila Nasta (ed.), *India in Britain: South Asian Networks and Connections 1858–1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- 24 Timothy Weiss, 'The Windrush Generation' in Robert L. Caserio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century Novel* (Cambridge University Press: 2012), 163–75, 166.
- 25 Doris Lessing (Zimbabwe), Peter Porter (Australia), Fleur Aldcock (New Zealand).
- 26 These debates are aired in Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies (eds.), *A Black British Canon?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 27 Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 3–6; Rhonda Cobham, 'The Background' in Bruce King (ed.), *West Indian Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 9–30.
- 28 Gail Low, *Publishing the Postcolonial: Anglophone West African and Caribbean in the UK 1948–1968* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 93–121.
- 29 George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), 29–32.
- 30 David Dabydeen, 'West Indian Writers in Britain' in Ferdinand Dennis and Naseem Khan (eds.), *Voices of the Crossing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000), 59–77.
- 31 George Lamming, 'The Coldest Spring in Fifty Years', *Kunapipi*, 20:1 (1998): 4–10.
- 32 John McLeod, 'Postcolonial Writing in Britain' in Ato Quayson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge University Press), 571–603, 572.
- 33 The title of Emecheta's novel is *Second-Class Citizen* (1974).
- 34 Susheila Nasta, 'Setting up Home in a City of Words' in A. Robert Lee (ed.), *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction* (London: Pluto, 1995), 35–48.
- 35 V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (London: André Deutsch, 1967), 18–19.
- 36 Michael Eldridge, 'The Rise and Fall of Black Britain', *Transition*, 74 (1997): 32–43.
- 37 Cited in Jahan Ramazani, 'Black British Poetry and the Translocal' in Neil Corcoran (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 200–14, 204.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 40 Louis James, 'The Caribbean Artists Movement' in Schwarz (ed.), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, 209–27, 213.
- 41 Anne Walmsley's *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966–1972* (London: New Beacon, 1992) remains the definitive work.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 213.
- 43 Stuart Hall, Charles Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978); Lord Scarman, *The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders, 10–12 April 1981* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1982); Ambalavaner Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (London: Pluto, 1982).
- 44 Alison Donnell, 'Nation and Contestation: Black British Writing', *Wasafiri*, 36 (2002): 11–17, 11.

- 45 The taunt appears in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), 450.
- 46 McLeod, 'Postcolonial Writing in Britain', 587-90.
- 47 Donnell, 'Nation and Contestation', 11.
- 48 Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities' in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 441-9.
- 49 Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 167.
- 50 Orthodox cultural histories have tended to silence Black and Asian writing from mainstream British writing's metanarratives. See Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993).