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Publishing, the Curriculum and black British writing today

Introduction

This essay begins with two linked questions. First, to what extent is contemporary black and Asian British writing understood as *British* by British readers? And, second, which forces, especially in publishing and education, shape those opinions? Why would, say, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* be more readily prescribed on an A-level syllabus than Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, even today, in 2019? At a divisive time in British history marked by post-EU referendum xenophobia and hostility towards immigrants, these are important questions to ask. They remind us again that fiction and poetry are read and represented in ways designed to appeal to certain kinds of readerships and so reinforce certain kinds of identification and certain systems of value, as we explore.

The *Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds* (PWMW) research project on which we both worked from 2016 to 2018, examined how British readers approach so-called diverse or non-mainstream fiction and poetry.¹ We considered in what ways writing by black and Asian British writers encouraged perceptions of sameness and difference, and investigated what kinds of audiences were attracted by this writing. The institutional context of the project was significant, the University of Oxford, and the Oxford English Faculty in particular. The

University was of course in the past the pre-eminent training ground for Britain's colonial officers, while the Faculty, one of the largest and oldest English departments in the world, remains in many ways the formative stable of what we understand to be the English literature canon.² Both structures were and are built on deeply embedded funds of traditional cultural capital. The reading groups and workshop we organised, based both in English and at the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH), thus posed their questions of reading, identity, and the syllabus against a weighty background of entrenched national and cultural value. In this context, we were enormously encouraged that similar questions were being asked in contiguous circles by student-activists involved in the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford Movement (2015–2016), as well as by other students, chiefly in English and History at Oxford and elsewhere, who were concerned that their experience was nowhere reflected in the 'male, pale and stale' literature and history they were studying.³

Overall, we found that the syllabus changes introduced by then Education Secretary Michael Gove (2010–2014), had in recent years refreshed old ideas of the singular and pre-eminent island story—the notion that these islands, or *this* island, alone mattered when it came to ranking literary and historical importance (Higgins np). Though modified later, this new politics of exclusion had reinforced already existing structural inequalities that marginalised and silenced certain sectors of society. At the same time, wider global developments, including the still ongoing war in Syria, the 2015–2016 immigration crisis in Europe, and the new age of Trump, were (and still are) sharply polarising communities in many countries around the world. Yet, even so, we were to find, reading often worked as a way of bridging such divides, despite choices in publishing frequently militating against this.

On reading, a starting premise for the PWMW project was that reading as a cognitive process is involved, engaged, and active, and the reader, far from being a passive recipient of a book, is always centrally involved in animating its imagined worlds. He or she works in

conjunction with the suggestive and inferential qualities of writing constantly to defy and exceed constraints that external systems of value might impose. Building on these principles, PWMW worked with local reading groups and through weekly discussions with visiting writers to explore what it means to read contemporary fiction particularly (though not exclusively) as British readers.⁴ To our relative surprise, we found that though black and Asian British writing is often marketed as exotic or different, as we will show, nonetheless on entering even the relatively unfamiliar worlds that some of the books created readers of all ages were able energetically to put those imposed meanings to one side.

This essay expands on these ideas of reading that the project applied, and explores the key question as to why and how certain novels rather than others appealed to our selected readers. We examine the impact on reading experiences of the publishing process, including the selection, marketing and presentation of certain books over others. And we ask whether or not and how these understandings get filtered into syllabus making, and how students as well as readers from the general public see their own experiences reflected (or not) in these choices. But we also consider how readers may defy and exceed these determinations. In doing so, we cite examples from reading group discussions of three contemporary novels: Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* (2010), Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) and Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2014). These were three of the core texts from which the project's reading groups could select two books each.⁵

On reading and identification

As will already have become clear, *The Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds* project took as read the importance of imaginative writing in shaping our sense of the world, and hence emphasised throughout the agency of reading. Reading, we contended, allows us better to understand and direct our interrelations with and within the world. Through reading, we identify ourselves within our various communities, and navigate our relationships.⁶

Relatedly, in her 2003 study of book clubs in the United States, Elizabeth Long describes how her reading group subjects tended to use literature as ‘equipment for living’ (a phrase borrowed from Kenneth Burke) (131). Long’s readers looked to books for edification, seeking either pleasure or illumination. Literature functions in this view ‘less as a platonic ideal than as something that is pressed into service for a task beyond itself, a tool employed in the construction of human lives’ (Long 131).

With this focus on agency and relationship, the project attended to the reported reading experiences of actual readers, attuned to their historical, cultural, economic and otherwise located subject positions. We also made certain to keep a focus on the text itself, asking how its form and content might ‘call’ or speak to the reader in particular ways. Drawing these threads together, our project was primarily interested in two main approaches to reading: an affective or identificatory approach, as well as a more educational or objective one.

We found the first mode of reading reflected in many conversations within our reading groups, particularly those made up of non-professional readers. In discussing their reading, these readers dwelt on their experiences of identification (or a frustrated desire for identification), emphasising their affective experiences with a text, their being drawn into or pushed out of it. ‘I lived that with him’, a participant tellingly noted of a moment in *Black Mamba Boy* (East Oxford reading group). ‘I feel like I’ve been in Sierra Leone for a while now’, said another after reading *The Memory of Love* (Oxford City reading group).

For many, finding points of familiarity along gender, age, geographical or other lines was important for their ability to enjoy stories from communities different from their own. Often readers were also struck by locating experiences related to their own in very different contexts. In some cases, what we might call universal human stories, like falling in love or starting a family, acted as a bridge, especially when reading about other cultures, such as in Sierra Leone or Eritrea.

In a second set of reading groups drawn from the university and teachers of English, many participants were predictably well-versed in the discourse and modes of reading that are common in academic literary criticism. By contrast with the first grouping, such readers tended to avoid speaking in terms of identification in their conversations. In fact, their discussions were often characterised by a sense of distance, even suspicion, in relation to the text at hand. For example, readers in the University of Oxford group described *The Memory of Love* as having an ‘optimistic relationship with language’ without ‘the irony of modernism’, and with ‘a certain excess of private detail’. For these professional readers, Forna’s text was employed to provide particular critical narratives and allowed the individuals concerned to take up positions within their disciplinary field. The reading group was not a neutral space for them; among their peers, these participants had much at stake.

Even so, pleasurable responses were not lacking; far from it. Several of the professional readers reported moments of affective identification in their reading experiences. One of the graduate student participants in the University group noted, for example, that the batik clothing, foodstuffs, and even the texture of the grass described in *The Memory of Love* set off trains of memorable associations with growing up in ‘West and Central Africa ... [though] not in Sierra Leone’: ‘[T]he spikiness of the grass ... when I read that I was like, *That’s so familiar. I know that feeling of playing soccer and having your feet stabbed by the grass.* But in Britain you don’t have this.’ Another experience of recognition was tempered, however, by a critical sense of the novel as descriptively overwrought: ‘I grew up in Dubai and a lot of ... the instances where she talks about the dust are really kind of vivid to me because dust comes everywhere when you live in countries like that ... but then again she repeats it so many times ... even something like dust gets really heavy and kind of permeates everything and loses its evocativeness, I think’ (University of Oxford reading group).

Weighing these responses as part of the project, we did not want to suggest that the identificatory or subjective way of reading was somehow purer or less mediated than that of the literary critics. James Procter tellingly observes this in a discussion of postcolonial reading: ‘Lay reading is as contrived and compromised as professional reading’ (181). Rather we were concerned to observe how both modes of reading or relating to a text were consciously *and* unconsciously shaped and circumscribed by particular conventions, routines, and horizons of expectations (to use Hans Robert Jauss’s term). Indeed, both approaches might be regarded as instrumentalising the text in certain ways.

Nevertheless, what is evident in these two kinds of responses is a tension between distance and proximity in the readers’ approaches, or how they positioned themselves in relation to the work of literature. Both were moulded and informed by wider institutional decisions concerned with the representation, channelling and labelling of books in the market and in schools and universities; not least as minority writing was involved, as we further explore. Both also involved forms of close association with or affiliation to the activity of reading.

As implied, our remarks on reading also necessarily required considering the involvement of the writer. The ‘writer’ (or writing consciousness) and reader, we took it, were two closely involved participants or even interlocutors in any reading activity. The question we were especially keen to ask was how the writer might invite identification and involvement, whether in school or out of it. In effect, could the writer be seen as standing with the reader at the heart of the equation—the writer whom post-structuralist theory around thirty years ago had conclusively pronounced dead? How did writers calibrate their work in relation to readers, if at all?

To follow this through, we invited several writers, including Kamila Shamsie, Bernardine Evaristo, Daljit Nagra, Nadifa Mohamed, Aminatta Forna, Courttia Newland and Selma Dabbagh, to Oxford for a series of workshops. We asked them to consider two core

questions: how did they as writers conceive of the reader? And: did they shape or craft their writing in certain ways to appeal to an imagined reader? These questions, we believed, would help us shed light on how and why readers might prefer certain writings, selecting and remembering these over those, and how and why those writings caused readers so to choose.

Discussing these questions with the writers, we were struck that the first response several made was to say that they had tried to write the books that they themselves wanted to read or see themselves featured in. In other words, they had positioned themselves as readers. In this light, it was also significant that readers from across the groups commented for example on especially enjoying ‘a normal book set in Africa, about African people having normal life’. Their reading of this or other books had reshaped how they saw themselves in the world, precisely because the books’ central focus on the everyday lives and perspectives of ordinary people (rather than more challenging narratives of spectacular violence, poverty, etc), had drawn them in (Oxford city reading group on *The Memory of Love*).

Some of the writers reported that they had sought to facilitate diverse audience-entry through setting up what the reading groups called ‘western’ and westernised characters with whom British audiences could potentially identify. Paradoxically, however the reading groups sometimes felt they could leapfrog such gateway characters as other characters were more engaging: though ‘Adrian [a white, British narrator in *The Memory of Love*] ... was my way into understanding Sierra Leone ... I think increasingly as the book went on, I felt pushed away by him as a character, because he became increasingly unlikeable’ (‘Forna Workshop’).

Some readers commented that sharing the viewpoints of ‘others’ through reading (and, as we were now aware, through the writers’ facilitation) caused them to reflect on their own position in the world outside the book. They also felt that the experience gave them new perspectives and attitudes. For one A-level student reader of *A God in Every Stone*, the shift

from British archaeologist Vivian Rose Spencer's viewpoint to that of Zarina, a woman in Peshawar, yielded challenging new insights:

[Zarina] just sees [Vivian] as some sort of jumped-up Englishwoman who's got stupidly involved in something that's she's probably in danger of being rather sensitive about. And so suddenly you get that sense ... that we've been complicit in a way with [Vivian's] perspective all the way through and suddenly we're seeing it from their perspective. I found that very powerful although slightly frustrating at the same time. (Oxford school reading group)

A sense of discomfort was also evident in the responses of readers who struggled to connect with certain characters *until* they were placed in a more familiar context. Many readers in our East Oxford adult group for instance reported finding *Black Mamba Boy* a difficult read, attributing this to its almost mythic picaresque narrative and a disturbing scene of torture and murder. More immediate in their discussions, however, were their perceptions of the story and characters as geographically and culturally distant—at first providing little with which to identify. However, as one such reader described, feelings of recognition steadily began to emerge as Jama's journey brought him closer to home:

I suddenly had a vision of all those ... tall skinny black men standing around on the Cowley Road [in Oxford]. ... They've got their own journey and yet it's not part of my world. ... I became very much aware when he became ... a migrant in *my* world as opposed to when he's going through Africa ... when he started to get into the Mediterranean. I suppose I could almost see him out the corner of my eye. ... He's coming into my world, and would I see him, or would I have just walked past? ... I'd be thinking, *Ooh there's somebody sitting in the bus stop looking exhausted and skinny and hungry*, and I'd have walked past because in fact that's what I do quite a lot of the time with people He suddenly became real at that moment, whereas before it was ... a rather extraordinary fairy story almost, this magical boy who had been blessed with good luck. (East Oxford reading group)

As much as pleasurable experiences of identification, then, readers also experienced unsettling feelings called up by the recognition of unexpected connections—connections that also, however, in some contexts, raised provocative and productive insights.

On publishing and other exclusions

The interactive spaces created by reading could however be constrained by institutional and systemic pressures. Despite the many possible links and lines of identification that we found emerging between readers and writers, the publishing industry, for one, tended to create or entrench barriers between them, often on cultural and related grounds. And educational structures, including the content of textbooks and composition of course-outlines, acted to reinforce these. By and large, what is sold as mainstream contemporary British fiction, and taught as such in schools, is white and English.⁷ As for black and Asian British writing, there is not only underrepresentation of this literature in bookshops and on syllabuses, but also misrepresentation by the publishing industry. The two factors work together, with the result that in the classroom and elsewhere the potential for identification and involvement that the project's reading groups demonstrated, is blocked or at least reduced. For much of the past three decades, what might be termed black occlusion has been the status quo.

A year before our project, *Spread the Word's* 2015 *Writing the Future* report drew on hundreds of interviews with publishing industry insiders and authors to reveal that literature by writers of colour had been consistently underrepresented by the largely white British book industry. Statistics in *The Bookseller* showed that out of thousands of books published in 2016 in the UK, fewer than 100 were by British authors of a non-white background (Shaffi np). And out of 400 authors identified by the British public in a 2017 Royal Society of Literature survey, only seven per cent were black, Asian or of mixed race, compared to these groups constituting thirteen per cent of the population (7).

A similar marginalisation has been true for readers and book-buyers of colour. Mainstream (and predominantly white) British publishers have tended to concentrate on a market comprising ‘People Like Us’—by which is meant ‘White, aged 35 to 55 and female’ (*Spread the Word* 3). As one of our participant authors Aminatta Forna argued: ‘There is an orthodoxy whereby the presumed reader is totally mono-cultural, White middle England’, even though ‘[w]e know from looking at census data that this is a very out-dated view. I think sometimes a paradigm gets created and everyone starts to subscribe to it’ (qtd. in *Spread the Word* 14).

What we might call the monocultural feedback loop that currently exists, has had significant consequences for the content, preparation and packaging of the work of black and Asian British writers that has made it into the mainstream British publishing system. New black British writers have experienced pressure from publishers, whether implicit or explicit, not only to write a certain kind of book that plays into existing cultural or racial stereotypes but also to allow these aspects of their identities to be the most prominent feature associated with them and their writing.

Indeed, *Writing the Future* suggests that ‘the best chance of publication for a BAME novelist is to write literary fiction that conforms to a stereotypical view of black or Asian communities’ (*Spread the Word* 8). Resorting to cultural stereotypes thus becomes a hallmark of the marketing and presentation of this fiction. Indeed, writers have described being ‘advised by agents and editors to make their manuscripts marketable in [the UK] by upping the sari count, dealing with gang culture or some other image that conforms to White preconceptions’ (8). As Danuta Kean reports in *Writing the Future*, a ‘majority of [these] novelists reported that their ethnicity was the main focus of their publisher’s publicity campaign rather than any more universal aspect of their book’ (8).

To take an illustration from the project's group of writers, the cover of Aminatta Forna's first book, *The Devil That Danced on the Water* (2002) is strongly symptomatic of this tendency. Dominated by oranges and yellows, the memoir's cover features a sky overlaid with the half-transparent face of a black girl. Below the book's title in black is a cluster of trees and walking figures in near-silhouette. Seeing the book on a shelf, a prospective book-buyer is unlikely to imagine that, in addition to documenting Forna's search for the truth of her father's assassination in Sierra Leone, the narrative would include her experiences living in a caravan in Scotland with her white Scottish mother, or surviving boarding school in England. Rather, the packaging of the novel emphasises Forna's Africanness. As is the case for a staggering number of books with an African connection published by international anglophone publishers, the cover exhibits the 'acacia tree sunset treatment' identified by Simon Stevens in a 2014 tweet. His observation was then publicised in a viral *Africa is a Country* article on the predominance of such imagery on the covers of Africa-themed books (Ross np).

As these examples suggest, the presentation and packaging of books is undoubtedly governed by recognisable genre conventions, which allow publishers and booksellers to segment and target their markets. Though, on the one hand, genre categories and their marketing enable readers to identify the books they enjoy and locate them easily in bookstores; on the other, genres also shape, or even condition and confine, their expectations of books and narratives. At worst, these considerations can act as barriers to certain books, not least so-called BAME books, being picked up by readers. As the project's reading groups all demonstrated, readers are guided to certain books over others, according to how they identify, or are identified.

To take another mini case-study, the HarperCollins cover of *Black Mamba Boy* features a young boy walking across what appears to be parched ground, above which we see a short horizon of two acacia-like trees and a wall of a small settlement in silhouette, with the

author's name and the title set between the two scenes. Here, once again, are the expected 'African' sunset colours of red, orange and yellow, with silhouetted accents. The narrative itself, however, based on Mohamed's father's own life-story, follows the Somali boy Jama through a number of countries in the Horn of Africa, East Africa and the Middle East before he eventually reaches Britain. The novel leaves Jama in Wales—a grown man and British citizen. On one level, therefore, *Black Mamba Boy* can be read as a story of the complexity of Britishness or of the colonial periphery come to the metropole (see Boehmer 165–8). The PWMW reading groups certainly took it in these ways. Yet, at the same time, the book is presented and marketed according to conventions that belie this complexity. For those interested in questions of British identity, the book would *not* at first glance seem a likely choice. Neither would it appeal to those without a specific interest in reading 'African fiction'.

In effect, the clear message communicated by mainstream British publishing has been that black and Asian literature is generally perceived as other than or outside ordinary British writing. Such a message effectively 'boxes' readers into certain fixed demographic categories, and it casts writers not as crafters of words and worlds first and foremost, but as spokespeople for their communities or cultures. At worst, their writing becomes the object of anthropological curiosity rather than work allowing pleasurable reading experiences and inviting serious literary attention, as it certainly was when presented in our reading groups.

Gathering together these two threads – that reading can foster forms of identification and yet that this identification is often constrained by publishing and educational institutions – it then follows that how we see ourselves in relation to our current and potential communities, how we conceive of those communities, and perhaps even our sense of ourselves in relation to others, can become narrowed and even compromised by these marketing decisions and the educational structures that build on them. Curricula in schools and universities certainly

mirror and magnify the exclusions in wider society. In most English literature courses of whatever period, the writers taught are white, largely English and largely male. A fundamental inequality arises in which, though British culture at large is diverse, syllabuses are not. Indeed, many British readers and students find little to recognise or to identify with when they study mainstream British literature.

The situation has led prominent British authors such as Bernardine Evaristo, Hanif Kureishi and others to urge for a broader, more inclusive approach (Evaristo np; 'How Do We' np). They certainly recognise that what and how we read shapes our sense of ourselves and our communities. As the editors of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's *Our Compelling Interests* series argue, diversity and inclusion in fact 'benefit the common good' (Lewis and Cantor np). A more diverse group is a stronger, more creative and productive group. Or, as we showed, PWMW readers often felt compelled by the human stories that the selected writers were conveying, overriding through their identification with and interest in these tales the categories of reading experience that publishers had put in place.

Conclusion: reframing the narrative

All literature written in English in the British Isles is densely entangled with other histories, cultures, and pathways of experience—both within the country and far beyond. Syllabuses, publishing practices and our conversations about books ought to reflect this. Overall, our project found that people discover more with which to identify in stories from other cultures or involving different and unfamiliar characters than we might initially have expected. The power of storytelling and the border-crossing energies of reading seem by and large to override feelings of bafflement or alienation. Reading in effect means reaching out.

As this suggests, our project also determined that contemporary black and Asian writing from the UK absolutely can be taken as British writing: it presents as such and can be taken by

readers as such. The work of writers such as Bernardine Evaristo, Nadifa Mohamed and Daljit Nagra easily takes its place on the same library shelf, reading list and section of the bookshop as work by Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes and Ali Smith. It need not be hived off as having, variously, exotic, anthropological or ‘world interest’ value. Yet the perception of this writing *is* often affected by the ways in which it is marketed and labelled. Therefore, how we present this literature to readers can be as significant as what is represented in its pages.

When writing is framed as ‘other’ this can be an obstacle to our reaching out and identifying with characters or stories.

One way forward for mainstream publishers is to reconsider the practice of treating ethnicity or difference as the most important feature of a book, or indeed as though it were a discrete and homogeneous literary genre itself. While genre distinctions and conventions are marketing necessities, many books by black and Asian writers can be presented in terms of far broader genres. The bright metallic and neon cover of the most recent edition of Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*, and the enigmatic, haunting images featured on Helen Oyeyemi’s novel covers suggest that one promising new alternative may be to come across as, respectively, chick-lit or fantasy.

There are positive signs for the future. An EdExcel/Pearson A-level teaching resource on Contemporary Black British Literature has been developed. The ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ campaign has made inroads in university syllabuses: the success of Goldsmith’s ground-breaking MA in Black British Writing in particular should be noted. In the publishing field, the *Jhalak Prize* is raising the profile of minority writing in Britain, and in partnership with Words of Colour Productions, Jacaranda Books has pledged to publish twenty black British writers in the year 2020 (Cowdrey np).⁸ There is also the 2019 success of Diana Evans’s *Ordinary People*, which has been presented and received principally as a British novel of contemporary middle-class London life. Short-listed for the 2019 Women’s Prize for

Fiction, *Ordinary People* stands as a welcome example of how publishers may play an active role in challenging stereotypes, and broadening the scope of what is considered ‘ordinary’ British literature.

It is our hope that the attention, acclaim and meaningful gains of these initiatives will stimulate ongoing transformations in the publication, selection and presentation of literature of, about or from Britain *both* within the mainstream book industry *and* in educational institutions. Indeed, such shifts may become a matter of necessity rather than tokenism if they are to satisfy the needs and desires of an increasingly diverse book-buying and book-reading public.

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² In the event, as is perhaps predictable when it comes to so English and established a university, the institutional context intrigued and animated both the writers and the readers more than it put them off, not least as many of them, revealingly, had Oxford stories to tell. They or close relatives had studied at Oxford, or had relatives who had been students, or had taught people who ended up studying there. One participant had even been born in the building in which we held our workshops, the converted Radcliffe Infirmary.

³ See Bhambhra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu.

⁴ Here, given Oxford demographics, 'British' mostly meant white and middle-class, though not necessarily university-educated.

⁵ The other texts were Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*, Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, Daljit Nagra's *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* and Zadie Smith's *NW*.

⁶ For further development of these ideas, see Cave; Cave and Wilson; Boehmer.

⁷ To gloss, 'English' here is a national rather than a linguistic designation. By way of stark illustration, throughout 2017 and 2018 a prominent bookshop in Oxford hived off and in effect ghettoised all fiction by writers with a known African provenance, or even bearing an African name. These were placed in a separate set of bookshelves from mainstream white English or British fiction.

⁸ Other significant developments include: the staging of the late Andrea Levy's *Small Island* at the National Theatre in 2019; the BBC One programme on her work in December 2018 following on from the adaptation of *The Long Song* (repeated in February 2019 at the time of her death); and the March 2019 publication of the new *Daughters of Africa* collection by Myriad Editions, edited by the original editor Margaret Busby, and others.

Against this background, the *Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds* website (www.writersmakeworlds.com) offers a multimedia hub of resources on black and Asian British writing, providing points of departure for more inclusive, wide-ranging courses.