Cultures of Hybridity: Reading Black British Literature

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Abstract

'In the 1990s, it has become protocol to distinguish "black" (that is, African Caribbean) and "Asian" groupings in Britain' Ashwani Sharma and others have recently noted. I take this quotation as emblematic of a moment in British cultures where alliances between distinct black British groups have become more difficult and where diversity is emphasized. It stems from a study which responds to a growing presence and commodification of 'Asian' musical production in Britain such as bhangra, Southall beat, northern rock bhangra and house bhangra. This increased visibility of an Asian cultural presence is true for the arts generally; think of the soaring success of the sculptor Anish Kapoor's work; think of writers such as Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal, and, obviously, Rushdie, or younger ones like Bidishas or Atima Srivastava. There are the fields of fashion to be considered, or food, or TV with programmes like Goodness Gradous. While limiting my inquiry to the field of writing, I'm pursuing the larger question of the politics of 'Asian' cultural production vis-a-vis the older and overarching denomination 'Black British'. This paper
MARK STEIN

Cultures of Hybridity: Reading Black British Literature

So why complain? Ethnicity is in. Cultural difference is in. Marginality is in. Consumption of the Other is all the rage for late capitalism. Finally, it appears that the 'coolie' has become cool. Yet in congruence, racial violence continues to soar as Fortress Europe further secures its borders. Sanjay Sharma et al. I suggest that the emerging cultures of hybridity, forged among the overlapping African, Asian and Caribbean diasporas, that constitute our common home, must be seen as crucial and vital efforts to answer the 'possibility and necessity of creating a new culture': so that you can live. Kobena Mercer

'In the 1990s, it has become protocol to distinguish "black" (that is, African Caribbean) and "Asian" groupings in Britain' Ashwani Sharma and others have recently noted. I take this quotation as emblematic of a moment in British cultures where alliances between distinct black British groups have become more difficult and where diversity is emphasized. It stems from a study which responds to a growing presence and commodification of 'Asian' musical production in Britain such as bhangra, Southall beat, northern rock bhangra and house bhangra. This increased visibility of an Asian cultural presence is true for the arts generally; think of the soaring success of the sculptor Anish Kapoor's work; think of writers such as Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal, and, obviously, Rushdie, or younger ones like Bidisha or Atima Srivastava. There are the fields of fashion to be considered, or food, or TV with programmes like Goodness Gracious. While limiting my inquiry to the field of writing, I'm pursuing the larger question of the politics of 'Asian' cultural production vis-à-vis the older and overarching denomination 'Black British'.

This paper was sparked off by a conference in Trier where Hanif Kureishi's work was being discussed in a panel on Indian literature. The texts of the writer Kureishi, son of a British mother and a Pakistani father, can obviously be discussed in several contexts; my point is not that his texts should not be discussed alongside Indian writing in English. However, I do wish to ask which context or contexts would seem most productive and most adequate in the reception of Kureishi and fellow writers. English literature? Immigrant literature? Anglo-Indian writing? Pakistani literature?
British-Asian literature? Kureishi is not an immigrant in Britain and the suggested national labels are either too imprecise (English literature) or, conversely, not ambiguous enough, as in the case of Anglo-Indian and Pakistani literature.

It is noteworthy in this context that Sharma et al. insist on the distinction of black and Asian writers. On the surface this appears sensible in that the term ‘Asian’ may seem to provide a more accurate cultural context which in turn might serve as a basis for well-grounded readings; this division would also counteract the ‘Manichean bifurcation of black and white which inevitably renders Asians invisible and marginal to the practices of (sub)urban culture’ as one of the contributors contends. However, the term Asian is structurally similar to the term Black British which it seeks to supplant; it has its own internal silences in that it in turn renders invisible and marginal cultural production which is not South Asian. It is obvious that ‘Asian’ is used to mean of Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Indian origins. ‘South Asian’ is sometimes used for the sake of preciseness but more often than not the authors revert to the overarching ‘master signifier “Asian”’. Secondly, the political category ‘black’ which was more in vogue in the 70s and 80s than it appears to be today, did not only purport to include ‘the Asian experience’, to use the parlance of those days; its lack of cultural specificity – black referring to Asia, Africa and the Caribbean – was deemed to be of strategic value. The value of the concept of political colour was to emphasize a related predicament in Britain of those migrant groups and their descendants who had come there from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.

In finding a sufficiently and productively ambiguous name for the context in which to consider Kureishi and fellow writers we should keep in mind the productive context from which the literature emerges. World Literature, Post-colonial Literature or, indeed, New Literatures in English come to mind, all of which, however, fail to provide any specific cultural context; they at least indicate the hybrid quality of the cultural-social-political backgrounds and – to varying degrees – point to the insufficiency of national literary labels.

Another contender in this attempt at naming a context is the term ‘black British literature’. Whilst all three parts, black, British and literature, deserve interrogation, I will merely focus on the first two, ‘black British’, that produce so fruitful a tension. This tension is a reciprocal one in that ‘blackness’ redefines ‘Britishness’ and vice versa. In his ‘Rivers of blood’ speech of April 1968, Enoch Powell voiced his opinion that while black immigrants might receive or have British citizenship they would never ‘truly’ become British, let alone English. It is the edge then – contesting this exclusivist view – of the phrase ‘black British’ that is useful for our purposes.

But is Kureishi a ‘black’ writer, and if so, what does this mean? In the British context, the adjective still frequently refers to a rather wider group than in the American debate; according to the concept of political colour, ‘black’ refers to ‘people of colour’. In his bibliography of black British
literature, Prahbu Guptara offered a most straightforward definition in 1986:

Being ‘black’ is a matter of visibility, with social and political consequences. Being a writer is a matter of culture. Being ‘British’ is a matter, not of culture, but of what passport you carry. In my view, therefore, ‘black Britons’ are those people of non-European origin who are now, or were in the past, entitled to hold a British passport and displayed a substantial commitment to Britain.¹⁰

A somewhat more discriminating definition was proposed a year later by David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe (1987): “Black British” literature refers to that created and published in Britain, largely for a British audience, by black writers either born in Britain or who have spent a major portion of their lives in Britain.’ The authors go on to ask: ‘But what of the term “black”? Does black denote colour of skin or quality of mind? If the former, what does skin colour have to do with the act of literary creation? If the latter, what is “black” about black? And what are the literary forms peculiar to “black” expression, what are the aesthetic structures that differentiate that expression from “white” expression?’¹¹ The question of the nature of the relationship between ‘blackness’ and cultural production is raised here and unease with an essentialist definition of ‘blackness’ and ‘black literature’ is palpable. The term black British literature is accountable then in two ways. What holds the writing together, what are the shared features on the one hand, and what is it surrounded by, what is non-identical with it, where does this body of writing stand in relation to other bodies of writing? Maybe we can keep Guptara’s and Dabydeen & Wilson-Tagoe’s definitions pending now, the one being somewhat bureaucratic, the other more subtle and inquisitive.

In 1988, Alastair Niven presented a paper entitled ‘Black British Writing: The Struggle for Recognition’ making his case that writing ‘produced in Britain by writers of non-European immigrant origin or descent, is being under-recognised both internationally and at home’.¹² Like the preceding commentators, Niven uses black British in its overarching sense. It is ironic that ten years later – with black British writing eminently successful and central to the British cultural production – the terms of its reception remain undefined. A paper presented by David Dabydeen at the same conference lead the novelist and poet and Fred D’Aguiar to write a rejoinder. While granting that there are a black experience, black language, and black creativity, D’Aguiar argues that there ‘is no Black British literature’.¹³ The term is criticized for falsely suggesting homogeneity. He concludes ‘[I]t is within the arena of Britishness that battles of class and race and sex are being waged, not from those outside on some privileged inner circle’.¹⁴ In this important debate, Dabydeen, on the other hand, had asserted: ‘I feel that I am different, not wholly, but sufficient for me to want to contemplate that which is other in me, that which owes its life to particular rituals of ancestry’.¹⁵ He accuses D’Aguiar’s position of aspiring to Universalism and is unwilling to drop the epithet ‘black’ in order to be considered a writer.¹⁶
The term ‘black British’ is older than the above would suggest; it was deployed by the Caribbean Artists Movement in the late 1960s, a movement which, in the words of its chronicler, Anne Walmsley, ‘bridged the transformation of Britain’s West Indian Community from one of exiles and immigrants to black British’. This concept is deemed wider by Stuart Hall according to whom ‘the term “black” was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalisation in Britain’; this concept implies, politically speaking, that “the Black experience”, as a singular and unifying framework ... became “hegemonic” over other ethnic/racial identities’. It is this assumed hegemony of ‘the Black experience’ (in the narrower sense) which poses a significant threat to the feasibility of an overarching concept of a ‘black British identity’.

Hall has argued further that this first phase of black British cultural politics has seen an ongoing shift towards ‘engag[ing] rather than suppress[ing] difference’. What Hall is describing as two phases is the attempted contestation and dissolution of the hegemonic ethnicity of ‘Englishness’ by its confrontation with an ideally unified black British counter-ethnicity giving way to the construction of new ethnic identities. ‘What is involved is the splitting of the notion of ethnicity between, on the one hand, the dominant notion which connects it to nation and “race” and on the other hand what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery’. Hall here suggests an understanding of ethnicity that is not tied to nation, “race”, or culturalism, one might add, but to a positive understanding of the margin as a space of productive negotiation, productive of centredness, of cultural, social and political change. These pluralist spaces feed on their diversity – instead of a self-inflicted homogeneity to counter Englishness – and it is from this that they derive their energy. What Hall calls the ‘politics of ethnicity predic[ated on] difference and diversity’ is a move towards strengthening the possibility of a political concept of black British identities, in the plural, precisely by weakening its boundaries according to a ‘fuzzy logic’ as Robin Cohen recently put it.

What is at issue here too is the question which of the new British groups come into representation and gain according recognition. As long as the term black British implies only the experience of people with a Caribbean or, more narrowly still, an African-Caribbean background, it will rightly be considered hegemonic by those groups with a dissimilar background. If, however difference and diversity become recognized features of black British identities, more of the different groups’ experiences can be considered part of a diverse ‘black British experience’.

This essay opened with a quotation from Dis-Orienting Rhythms whose stress of the need in the 1990s to distinguish between black British groups is expressed not without scruples; the editors ultimately concede the ‘valency
of “Black” as a political positionality that strategically unites disparate groups against increasingly organized and vicious manifestations of Euro-racism. What they refer to as the ‘autochthonous naming of an Asian identity that takes account of the cultural specificities’ indeed constitutes a prerequisite for a re-making of political alliances; however, it may unfortunately also constitute an entryway to essentialist ethnic identity politics.

To make a leap back to aesthetic questions and to texts proper, we have to remember that the term ‘black British literature’ does not necessarily claim to represent a singular experience. Rather I use it as a collective term that covers an imagined experiential field of overlapping territories. While at its narrowest it merely refers to writers with an African-Caribbean background, at its widest, it can include writing that takes recourse to domains such as Africa, Asia or the Caribbean and attendant cultural and aesthetic traditions. Britain, then, is being constructed as a part of, say, the Caribbean, if and when a writer chooses to fashion such an alliance and to draw on these distinct cultural traditions, thereby forging a new, a third space. This new space denoted by the label in question is far from homogenous; on the contrary, its heterogeneity is one of its defining features.

The collective category of black British literature is, for example, undermined by the recently launched Saga prize ‘for the best unpublished novel by a writer born in Great Britain or The Republic of Ireland having a black African ancestor’. The prize was founded by the American actress and writer Marsha Hunt. Echoing D’Aguiar’s dictum, she claimed ‘[t]here is no black British fiction’ and conceived of the prize as a remedy. However, the prize was under fire before being set up. Hunt explains: ‘The Commission for Racial Equality didn’t want it to happen. They told me I might be subject to prosecution if I went ahead; the Society of Authors withdrew support’. The fact that a Folkestone-based travel and insurance firm catering for the aged sees a literary prize as a fit means of drawing attention to its business gives testimony to the wide interest now directed towards black British literature. However, the exclusive conditions of the prize – barring, for example, people with an Asian or Indo-Caribbean background – confirm once more the unsettled nature of the debate surrounding black British literature.

Another example contra the concept of black British literature is the Asian Women Writers Collective, whose founders drew up very precise boundaries as to who could become a member of the group. The group is not only constructed around gender and cultural background. Despite the seemingly wide catchment area insinuated by its name, the group is not open to all Asian Women, not even to all Asian Women in Britain, but merely to those who are resident in and around London. Their aim is ‘to explore our common identities as Asian women and as black women, but without making invisible the differences in our experiences and cultures’. Here, subtly, the fear of being culturally erased were culturally distinct groups to be included is manifest; unfortunately this fear entails a very
exclusive politics. The collective has its pendant in the younger Caribbean Women Writers Alliance which seems to cater largely for women of an African-Caribbean background.

There is certainly room for these more specialized collectives of creative work and debate. Yet, following the politics of their logic of demarcation, one could aim for even more specific groups, e.g. collectives of British-based Guyanese or Jamaican or Pakistani writers, which in turn could be subdivided further into Indo-Guyanese, Sino-Guyanese and African-Guyanese. While there may be reasons for that, too, for one practicability would certainly go against such fundamental ethnic particularism as far as the reception of literature is concerned. Moreover, the danger of over-specialization and exotic pigeon-holing looms largely. One could add that a divide and rule policy cannot be countered in this way either. The present day conflict in Guyana over the elections earlier this year, too, illustrates the implications of such demands.

Most importantly, we cannot assume that writers from a particular place by default situate their writing in an aesthetic tradition and a cultural context that derives from their own or their parents’ or their grand-parents’ birthplaces. Ultimately we have to be wary of attempts at categorizing writing neatly according to one or two ready parameters. It may once have seemed less problematical to see Selvon merely as a Caribbean, Emecheta as a West-African, and Rushdie as an Indian writer – although seeing them as Trinidadian, Nigerian, and, in view of Rushdie’s parents’ derivation, as Pakistani writers, respectively, would then have been equally possible. However, I would argue that today it is no longer appropriate to ignore the various allegiances and connections that mark contemporary writing.

There is a tendency towards viewing cultural production in international or transnational terms. While, for now, this may be more appropriate for film and music than for writing it cannot be ignored that literature does increasingly transcend national boundaries, be it in subject matters, production, reception or the blending of aesthetic traditions. One such attempt is Paul Gilroy’s notion of the Black Atlantic, about which he says:

> The reflexive cultures and consciousness [sic] of the European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the ‘Indians’ they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not ... sealed off hermetically from each other.

There is not enough space to deal with Gilroy’s study in depth here. What is striking about it is that the transnational space he delimits in formulations such as the above, at first includes Asians but throughout the book Gilroy mostly regresses to the formulation ‘African diaspora’, thereby dissolving his own concept. Moreover, in opposition to his stated intention, he also largely neglects West African cultures so that in the end the Black Atlantic is largely determined by the US, Britain and the West Indies.
Despite the fact that efforts are made to give this 'black' identity a single or unified content, it continues to exist as an identity alongside a range of differences. Afro-Caribbean and Indian people continue to maintain different cultural traditions. 'Black' is thus an example, not only of the political character of new identities – i.e. their positional and conjunctural character (their formation in and for specific times and places) – but also of the way identity and difference are inextricably articulated or knitted together in different identities, the one never wholly obliterating the other.

The heterogeneity of black British identity which allows, in fact presupposes, that distinct cultural traditions persist has been emphasized above. This rests on an understanding of identity which is not totalizing but instead names a facet, a plane, and possibly a phase, that overlaps with other facets, planes and phases. In his book *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, the cultural critic Kobena Mercer has taken this position further when he proposes not only a concept of black British identity as a hybrid, diverse and pluralistic identity, but also focuses particularly on the impact of the transformation of British culture by the second generation. 'Britain too has been massively reconfigured' Mercer argues. With reference to writers like Ben Okri, Kureishi, Caryl Phillips and Jackie Kay he concludes: 'Their presence has critically transformed the culture'.

The reference to distinct generations is crucial. While writers who migrated to Britain from the colonies and former colonies, like Sam Selvon or Kamala Markandaya do indeed have an ancestorship that ties them specifically to another territory, another cultural background within their own lifetime, young writers, of the so-called second or third generation, e.g. David Dabydeen, Caryl Phillips, or Kureishi, Patience Agbabi, Bidisha and Ravinder Randhawa came at an early age or were born in Britain. A return to 'cultural origins' for these writers is not easily conceivable; their cultural bonds are much more mediated than those of their parents and grandparents. Much has been written about the difficulties of 'returns' and it is an ongoing concern and theme in much postcolonial writing. In view of this I would argue that the term black British literature can be useful particularly when applied to today's younger writers.

One of the values of the term black British literature lies precisely in its reference to Britain and Britishness and its implied proposition that these concepts are subject to redress. While the insistence on 'black British-ness' was initially provocative in that it meant 'we're here to stay', the term is now provocative in a different way: it is about redefining where one is staying, about claiming one's space and about re-shaping that space. The younger writers speak and write from a much more empowered position than the Windrush veterans. As novelist Andrea Levy put it: 'if Englishness doesn't define me, then redefine Englishness'. There is not only a strong and clear element of rejection in Levy's statement – the rejection of a traditional, an exclusive, unattainable Englishness – but concurrently one of attachment, however tenuous and circumspect. Writers like Kureishi, Diran
Adebayo or Patience Agbabi have been brought up in Britain, are British, but are so in a specific way. It is this intricate attachment to Britain that is written out if we insist on categorizing writers only according to their parents’ cultural origins.

At this point a short digression to another ‘post’-word seems in order. A. Robert Lee uses the term ‘post-immigrant’ writing in his edited collection entitled *Other Britain, Other British.* Juxtaposing writing ‘from an angle no longer one of immigrant periphery’ with that of the ‘post-immigrant frontline and beyond’, Lee deploys a terminology which apparently cuts between those who themselves migrated and those who were born in the country of their parents’ destination. However, the term ‘post-immigrant’ writing could instead be read as denoting all texts written in the wake of migration, i.e. the first postcard home phrased on the SS Empire Windrush to the most recent writing of the descendants of the Windrush-generation. I will try to follow both possible readings below. This procedure seems warranted since Lee, while deploying a host of other terms in his essays, does not unfortunately impart a definition of ‘post-immigrant’ writing or the remaining terminology. He attempts to ‘seek recognition of changed working terms for “England” or “Britain”’ and argues that the novel of the younger writers he discusses ‘also, are British novels, however differently arrived at ... the Britain they inscribe.’ What happens with writers who ‘were’ migrated at an early age (like Caryl Phillips, brought from St. Kitts aged 12 weeks)? The term ‘generation’, too, does not help us here; between the arrival of the Windrush in 1948 and the Immigration Act of 1971 more than one generation arrived; and the arrivants, while mostly in their twenties, did indeed vary in age. More importantly, the term generation has its drawbacks in that it suggests an organic connection between the literature of different writers who may or may not stand in a relationship of entailment. Without entirely denying the usefulness of differentiation according to distinct generations, I’m not convinced that it is helpful to cut off entirely the younger writers from their predecessors which seems a consequence of Lee’s scheme. This is not to ignore the specificity of the contexts in which the Windrush generation wrote. However, there are shared experiences – as well as crucial differences – that are elided by a singular focus on immigration.

Lee’s text allows an alternative reading. If the term ‘post-immigrant’ writing is taken up in its wider signification, we arrive at a notion of diasporic writing (characterized by the requisite processes of mediation or translation in the way the term has been inflected by Bhabha and Rushdie); this concept would include not only ‘black British literature’, Jewish fiction in Britain, and writing by descendants of other exiles, migrants, expatriates, refugees, and displaced persons in Britain. With a terminology of that scope, however, it is clearly ignored that within its catchment area there may exist only little propinquity, with some traditions being far more
Since my interest in black British literature has started to grow, I have noticed the following process on my bookshelves: the African section, as well as the Indian one and especially the one containing Caribbean writing have been shrinking alarmingly while 'black British lit' is constantly growing. Now, that is only in part due to the acquisition of new books and the rapid growth of the field. It is also a sort of internal cannibalizing process whereby I move more and more books from their old place to the newer one. I'm only mentioning my personal filing problem here since I wish to register - against my own position - the danger of a new hegemony of writing from Britain fed by a containment that includes with what it cannot compete, a process at the expense of some of the other 'new literatures in English'.

Not every writer who may have passed through London once thereby qualifies as black British.

Seen from a different angle, however, one could object that the label 'black British literature' is too divisive - rather than too inclusive - in differentiating between different writers of Britain. While having argued that there is sufficient reason for speaking of a body of black British literature one could interpret the growing influence of this writing in a different way as well. In view of the current predominance of black British literature, maybe in the future we will be able to address a new 'new literature': namely that of Britain as a whole. Structurally similar debates concerning the 'postcoloniality' of US-American culture are currently ongoing.

For the time being, however, the argument put forth here is for a body of writing that is wide enough to accommodate a variety of black British literary forms, a body of writing that allows one to cut across the bounds of cultural identity, ethnicity, class, generation, and gender. The category 'black British literature' does not tend to reify nationalist categorizations since the second adjective is kept in check by the first one, and its references to cross-cultural and transnational cultural contexts. The writing, moreover, is not necessarily confined to one category for I would argue for a 'plural-alliance model' whereby, for example, Selvon can be and ought to be read in West Indian, Canadian, as well as black British contexts.

The purpose of this essay is not to look at creative texts in any detail, but to address some of the methodological problems involved in dealing with black British writing. In order to illustrate the particular difficulties raised and the points made, and to base some of the above claims more solidly, I would like to touch on the recent novel *Some Kind of Black*. Diran Adebayo, born in 1968, has landed quite a success with his début: in 1995 he was the first winner of the Saga prize for his unpublished manuscript. A year later he was the first living man to be published by the major feminist publisher Virago, to much acclaim. His novel of formation, a 'counterblast' against nationalism, is about Dele, who graduates in law from Oxford and to
maturity in the course of the text. He has to come to terms with the incidents surrounding a racist police attack on his sister Dapo which leaves her in a coma for the most part of the text.

Dele describes himself as ‘a Londoner yet to set foot in his home country’ and feels ‘nostalgia without memory’ for the Nigeria he misses without ever having visited. At the same time, ‘Nigeria’ is revealed to be an unstable signifier, as even in London we need to differentiate between ‘Nigerians resident off the Jubilee Line’ and ‘Nigerians coming like Yardmen in Hackney’. What is significant is that the novel is solidly based in the South of England but this setting is described as constantly in flux; and it is this context which frames the novel. Not unlike the dance music Sharma et al. discuss, Adebayo’s London is marked by an irreverence for ethnic or cultural purity and a delight in play and re-fusing.

The novel’s protagonist moves between Oxford and London where he has grown up. In the different areas of his life he self-consciously performs several different roles, thereby illustrating the concept of the performative character of identity. In growing up he has not only to negotiate the conservative expectations of his parents who came to London in the 60s, and who constantly remind him of what life in Nigeria would have been like but he is also pressurized by streetwise friends in London into ‘acting Jamaican’ and wearing ‘rudebwoy gear’. It is in keeping with the novel’s interest in divisions and concurrent dislike of absolutist identity politics that Dele’s London is fragmented according to a North-South divide on the one hand, as well as along the lines of distinct diasporic communities: ‘Nowhere in London gave him that feeling of crossing a border the way Brixton did’. These divisions are borne out by the linguistic varieties and vernaculars Dele employs and by his self-conscious dress sense. He faces a ‘a mini clothes-crisis’ when inclined to don a patterned agbada while feeling a strong desire to disassociate himself from the ‘cult-nats in similar attire’. Nubism is not for Dele. This multiplicity of divisions disallows any clear identification with one locality, identity or positionality; if anything, movement itself between localities, identities and positionalities is characteristic of Dele. As he tells his sister: “roots this” and “roots that”. I’m more worried about my branches, you know. It’s the branches that bear fruit and tilt for the sky’.

The novel plays with the idea of spaces such as the dance hall where social divisions can apparently be temporarily suspended – yet its tragic plot throws this very tenet into relief. As ‘the fusion of elements of south Asian culture and the rituals of the reggae dance hall’ characterize much of modern Asian Dance music, Dele inhabits spaces where ‘social collectivities [are] producing cultures of interbeing and mutual identification’. These spaces can simply not be accounted for in terms like ‘African British literature’, ‘West Indian literature’ or ‘British Asian literature’; these spaces feed on the blending and, crucially, heterogeneity suggested by the category black British literature and culture.

What is most pertinent for my purpose is the fact that the protagonist Dele
navigates not only from one social rôle to the next; he at once bridges gaps between different communities whether he is with 'African-African's' – who not without irony are tagged as 'hyphenated' – whether he acts Jamaican or whether he contemplates pleading to a policeman 'of colour' when being attacked by the law. It is this navigation across a continuum of black British identities which calls for the novel's appropriate contextualization.

Perceiving of the literature written by Britain's black writers predominantly in terms of the cultural spaces their authors derive from is problematical in that these interpretative contexts point to spaces and attendant cultural practices that were left behind by the writers in question – if not already by their parents or grandparents. The connection, then, to these 'origins' is not unbroken and has to be considered as mediated. This mediation, its processes and achievements, has been under scrutiny in a number of disciplines. Older (anthropological) models analysing the contact of cultures, assuming unilateral processes of integration, acculturation or assimilation, have been surpassed with the realization of the complexity of the processes involved. The settlement of new social, political and creative spaces that are distinct from both, the points of departure and of destination, the settlement of a third space, is reflected in the theorizations of creolization, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity. Paul Gilroy has stressed that processes of hybridization are misunderstood if conceived of as 'little more than a collision between fully formed and mutually exclusive cultural communities'. Gilroy denies both, a 'vision of authentic British national life' which 'was as stable and as peaceful as it was ethnically undifferentiated', and the perception of black settlers 'as an illegitimate intrusion' in this scenario.

Since there has been an increased awareness of Britain's ethnic diversity in this century, and since there has been a steady influx of black settlers into Britain from the 20s onwards, but particularly in the 50s and 60s, the existence of a body of literature (and film, music, fine art) reflecting these changed perceptions deserves particular attention. This body of literature not only tells the story of the proliferation and change of British cultures; beyond the thematic level, these changes are reflected – and indeed brought about – by the very existence of these cultural artefacts, along with artefacts and practices not under consideration here. The texts which I have been speaking about, then, are part of a newly invigorated British culture.

These texts are not British in a straightforward sense; which texts, if any, are so, is another matter. But they are no more Caribbean, Asian, African in a straightforward sense. The texts – and the processes of hybridization that lie behind them – do not only modify what 'British' means, they concurrently necessitate the interrogation and investigation of this pluralist, heterogeneous, sense of Britishness. The term 'black British literature' contains and expresses a tension between the two adjectives which invariably modify each other. It blends together heterogeneous texts which can and must be considered in distinct reading contexts. At the same time,
its value lies in the very acknowledgement of the provocative blending, not only of Black and British, but also of that which is signified by ‘black’ here: Asian, African and Caribbean. It thus refrains from referencing ethnic or racial collectivities; instead it indexes a political category which does not purport to represent a homogenous cultural context.

NOTES

1. For their support and criticism I’m grateful to the following people: Yomi Bennett, Markus Heide, Dieter Riemenschneider, Anna Rutherford and Frank Schulze-Engler. A version of this paper was presented at the 19th annual conference of the German Association for the New Literatures in English (1996) in Konstanz.


4. Sharma et al., p. 11.

5. The full name is Bidisha Bandyopadhyay, but the writer is known by her first name only.

6. The 18th annual conference of the German Association for the New Literatures in English (1995) focused on Interdisciplinarity in the light of which the decision to structure the conference programme according to regional/national parameters could appear questionable. But this is not the issue here.

7. Tobias Döring has made the astute observation that the critic’s desire to bring light to texts – as well as bringing them to light – resembles the enlightenment project of the explorer and colonial educator; with postcolonial texts, then, it may not be politic to produce readings which seek to explain every textual detail in the interest of clairvoyance. In this respect, the desire for consummate historical contextualization and cultural explanation needs to be somewhat curbed. See T. Döring, ‘Reading for Transparency? Rereading the Obscure’, in Can the Subaltern Be Read? The Role of the Critic in Post-Colonial Studies, ed. by Döring, Schäfer, Stein, Acolit Sonderheft, 2 (1996), pp. 90-97.

8. Sharma et al., p. 4.


19. Hall, p. 29.

20. Hall, p. 29.


23. The formulation ‘new British’ seeks to stress the ongoing process of negotiation as to who is and what is ‘British’, a process which of course dates back farther than migration from the former colonies to Britain. The semantic ambiguity of the term ‘representation’ is crucial in that ‘the tension between representation as a cultural or artistic practice of depiction, and representation as a political or legal process of delegation [links] together two strategic axes of contestation: struggles for access to material resources (that is, funding), and debates over aesthetic paradigms and priorities (that is, film language)’ (Mercer, p. 18).


25. Sharma et al., p. 7.

26. This quotation is taken from the entry form which contains the ‘Saga Prize 1996 Rules.’


29. The Asian Women Writers Workshop was founded by the novelist Ravinder Randhawa in 1984; it sees itself as a writer support group which organizes workshops and provides space for creative work and criticism. It has since published two remarkable anthologies of short stories.


35. Mercer, p. 3.


37. One example of many would be Kureishi’s essay *The Rainbow Sign* where he poignantly reports: ‘I couldn’t allow myself to feel too Pakistani. ... As someone said to me ... we are Pakistanis, but you, you will always be a Paki.’ Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and The Rainbow Sign* (London: Faber, 1986), pp. 7-38 (p. 17).

38. Maya Jaggi, ‘Redefining Englishness’, *Waterstone’s Magazine* 6 (Summer 1996), pp. 63-9 (p. 64). This is reminiscent of a comment made by Kureishi a few years previously: ‘It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being
British isn’t what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time.’ (Kureishi, *Rainbow* p. 38).


41. Immigration is indeed a crucial factor in ‘black British literature’; as Tim Brennan remarked, ‘the black British arts scene was born in immigration, and shocked to life by anti-immigration laws and the rise of the National Front’. Tim Brennan, ‘Writing from Black Britain’, *The Literary Review*, 34, 1 (Fall 1990), pp. 5-11 (p. 8).

42. Within a few pages, Lee speaks of ‘[I]mmigrant Britain’ (Lee, *Other Britain*, p.70); ‘indigenous lives of colour’ (p. 71); ‘Asian-British or Caribbean-British cultural formations’ (p. 71); ‘cross- and multiracial England/Britain’ (p. 71); ‘multiculturalism’ (p. 72); ‘Black-British diaspora’ (p. 73); ‘Anglo-Pakistani novella’ (p. 75); ‘immigrant periphery vs. post-immigrant frontline’ (p. 76). The issues surrounding black British literature are quite sensitive, however, and they require sensitivity at the terminological level as well.

43. Lee, *Other Britain*, p. 76.


45. In making this cautioning remark there is the following observation at the back of my mind: within English language literatures, British (and American) publishing houses benefit from the ongoing processes of centralization; the metropolis is thus being re-instated while other locations are relegated to the periphery of publishing. See also Margaret Ann Harris’ recent article on the new Faber Caribbean Series: ‘Writers’ Moment’, *Sunday Advocate* [Bridgetown], 19 April 1998, p.23.

46. This seems corroborated also by what might be a growing tendency of black British authors, namely to write texts which are ‘unmarked’ and thus not easily placed within the confines of black British literature. I’m thinking of some of the stories in Kureishi’s *Love in a Blue Time* (1997), his recent novel *Intimacy* (1998) and also of Bidisha’s first novel, *Seahorses* (1997).


48. Selvon’s Canadian or West Indian contexts could obviously be further subdivided, e.g. into Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian writing.


53. *Some Kind of Black*, p. 47 and p. 27.


55. *Some Kind of Black*, p. 216.


