Post-World War II mass migration to Great Britain altered its demographic composition more markedly than in any other period in its history, resulting in a modern multicultural nation state shaped by the ethnic diversity of its citizenry. Populations from African, Caribbean and South Asian locations arriving in Britain post-war brought diasporic sensibilities and literary heritages that have profoundly transformed British national culture, leading to a more complex and inclusive sense of its past. The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945–2010) examines the creative impact of this rich infusion upon English literature against the backdrop of the seismic social and economic changes triggered by colonialism and migration, multiculturalism and contemporary globalisation.

Since 1945 Britain has gradually declined from governing a vast empire to being a middle-scale world power that must align itself to the European Union or the United States in order to exert influence in global affairs. Despite this, the English language and Anglophone literature maintain a formidable impact internationally. In a social context where Britain’s political, educational, commercial and arts institutions today continue to display little ethnic and racial diversity, this Companion is timely, as it reasserts the influential presences of contemporary British Black and Asian literature as intrinsic to conceptions of British cultural heritage, while recognising the distinctiveness of this literature within the corpus of British writing and its global appeal.

The volume’s starting-point of 1945 follows the familiar splitting of twentieth-century literary history into pre- and post-World War II, which generally equates with the transition from modernism to postmodernism and the heterogeneity of post-colonial theory. Intersecting with these literary frameworks are certain phenomenological structures of race, sex-gender, class and nation that were generated in previous eras, but that
continue to act consequentially as a spectre within current writers’ creativities – whether through cultural legacies and networks, critical traditions, or the institutions that filter cultural access and opportunity.

‘British Black and Asian’ literature testifies to the magnitude of post-war migration’s rejuvenation and renovation of British culture. Post-war immigrants had a major impact on British society – and British society had a major impact on them. Britain’s imperial rule had never been monolithic, but tailored to specific nations and spaces throughout its empire. Immigrants to the UK’s ‘shared freehold’ brought these complex and variegated inheritances to a (geopolitical rather than ideological) post-imperial Britain. The first-generation settlers’ energies were at the helm of rebuilding war-damaged Britain into an incontestably multicultural society. Although the émigré writers were concerned with cultural self-maintenance as a strategy against racist hostility, they also turned their gaze unsparingly on British society through their literature. The alliances they formed with the white canonical traditions from a colonial education were viewed through a bifocal creative lens. Their British-born children then strove to culturally situate their indigene perspectives as arising from a migratory legacy, and also from the experience of having been raised and educated in a British school system that failed to represent African and Asian heritages positively. The move towards devolution within the UK during the 1990s further added to identity fluidity by releasing the nationalisms and regional affiliations (as well as languages, ethnographies and cultural traditions) that had been historically subordinated to Britain’s empire-building.

Although The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945–2010) acknowledges the historical pedigrees of these heritages, it cannot offer an exhaustive history or detailed coverage of these separate, yet co-implicated, fields of literature. What it does do is focus upon neo-millennial literature to recognise the realities of the African, Asian and European cultural lineages that contemporary writers inherit contextually – whether or not they foreground them textually. For this generation, Britishness is interpretable. They produce literature that combines diaspora-inflected retrievals and validations while fashioning an authentic ‘British self’. The range of chapters in this book recognise how, for over sixty years, British black and Asian writers have claimed their cultural citizenship in the face of social and cultural disregard, and transformed the English language itself, to better equip it as a vehicle for rendering the multiple, multicultural viewpoints in contemporary British society.

However, multiculturalism is not simply a twentieth-century phenomenon in the British Isles. The circulation of people and materials to and from Britain’s shores – beginning with its dominion status as ‘Britannia’ within
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The Roman empire (43–409 CE) and up to its own 400-year global empire from the sixteenth century onwards – means it has never been a mono-racial enclave, but a conglomerate of various ethnic groups, just as it is defined by its geographical proximity as Europe’s ‘largest off-shore island’. Recognising this evidence intervenes in the familiar narrowing of black and Asian people’s actual long-standing demographic presences to the post-World War II mass-migration-derived flashpoints: the partition of India (1947), the Elder Dempster shipping line’s West Africa to Liverpool service (1947–68), the landing of the Windrush from the Caribbean (1948), and the expulsion of Indians from Kenya (1968) and Uganda (1972). Readers unfamiliar with the terrain of post-war British socio-political and literary history will benefit from consulting the Timeline, with its snapshots of the key events and correspondent cultural happenings.

While the chapters gathered in the Companion cover the cornerstone literary texts, and thus contribute to canonicity, in another capacity they also participate in canon reformation through coverage of the latest literary innovations in transgeneric writing, sonic and vocal performativity, monodrama, landmark poetics and the perspectives to be gained from LGBTQI, and mixedness narratives, as well as adoption and fostering – dimensions frequently missing in the critical attention offered to British Black and Asian literature. Despite black and Asian writers’ centrality in recent developments and debates surrounding textual stability, interculturality and longevity in a digital age, these contributions remain circumstantial in chapters, as do experiments with the short story, micro-fiction, hypertexts and recordings. Likewise the limitation of space constrains contributors’ concerns with prizes, commissioning, publishing, reviewing, revival and archiving.

Three heuristic phases underpin this volume’s discussions of prose, poetry and drama. (Writing for the theatre is a unique feature that is integrated into the book.) These pertain to: the migrant sensibilities as derived from colonial consequences – ‘we are here because you went there’; the representations of second-generation Britons who were both marginalised in their birth land and disconnected from their parents’ countries of origin – neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’; and the mesh of local, transnational and global possibilities for neo-millennial generations whose sensibilities can be drawn from a wide range of sources and media – potentially ‘here’, ‘there’ and ‘everywhere’. This in turn assimilates a chronological differentiation roughly divisible as the ‘migratory’ and ‘arriviste’ period (1940s–60s), the ‘settler’ period (1970s–80s) and the ‘indigene’ period (1990s–2000s). Although this experiential and chronological interframing elicits a through-line in literary heritages, it should not be viewed as teleological.
The collection navigates the cultural genealogies that came together in the crucible of Britain resulting from colonial interconnectedness. While remaining mindful of the fact that diasporic experience panoramically moulds a broad spectrum of literary and cultural allegiances, the Companion avoids the assumption that this commonality means that ‘British Black and Asian’ literature invariably represents the consequences of colonialism – at the expense of other considerations, such as the writers’ creative contributions to a number of literary heritages. In conceding that the colonial legacy is intrinsic to contemporary Britain’s national, economic and socio-cultural realities, if we regard the “colonial” as the “new Anno Domini from which events are to be everlastingly measured”, we will unfortunately . . . limit the range of our vision and only ever see one side of the picture.10 The anti-colonial, liberationist polemic by Franz Fanon, (Edward) Kamau Brathwaite and Sylvia Wynter influenced the politicised aesthetics of the arriviste-generation poets from the Caribbean. Subsequently, the theorisation generated from within Britain by the founder of British Cultural Studies, Jamaican-born Stuart Hall and distinguished intellectuals Sri Lankan-born Ambalavaner Sivanandan and British-born Paul Gilroy opened up the academy to include ex-colonial spaces and – as a consequence – catalysed a decolonising of Anglophone literature from within Britain. As less buttressed by the traditional conceptual pillars (modernism, postmodernism, structuralism, post-structuralism), literary criticism benefited from following the cross-disciplinary influences of cultural studies in its critical attention to black and Asian writers from the 1990s onwards. While the heterogeneity of post-colonial theory and its portmanteau of approaches – such as feminism, psychoanalysis and trauma theory – are to be found in this book, this does not discount the debates that are also aired about British Black and Asian literature in relation to the post-colonial framework.11

The tropes and cultural personae that existed prior to the colonising enterprise (and the racist ideology that rationalised the enslavement system and subjugated territories) preset the co-ordinates for this volume’s contemporary focus. Prior to post-war mass migration there is little extant creative writing that foregrounds black and Asian people’s realities in literature produced by black and Asian writers in Britain. One of the consequences of this is that the genesis of pernicious stereotypes equating dark skin with inferiority – Europe’s most enduring act of creativity – has not historically been counteracted by an equivalent body of material representing the perspectives of these people.12

Yet blackness has always been intrinsic to the very formation of the English language and its expression. Blackness is a device for articulating the first great ledger of English life, the Domesday Book (1086).13 The rise of
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English playwriting coincided with the imperial enterprise, and established a performance repertoire for deleteriously denoting and objectifying blackness that lasted until the late twentieth century.\(^{14}\) Portrayals of dark-complexioned people as devils in Christian visual iconography existed alongside the use of blackness as defiled and venal – by which the purity and beauty of whiteness was reinforced – in literature and in art. These racial stigmatisations endured. Where ‘Moor’ had served as a hold-all term in the Renaissance period,\(^{15}\) the label of ‘coloured’ was similarly applied indiscriminately to all non-white post-war immigrants. The context where ‘residents of the empire with white skin and European cultural descent were British stock; residents of the empire with skin of color and African or Asian heritage were British subjects only’\(^{16}\) generated the transience and unbelonging that permeates post-war literature as an important thematic concern. The immigrant generation experienced the racist reality of doors being closed on them in housing, employment and social exclusion. As (Indian) migrant Prafulla Mohanti’s 1960’s memoir *Through Brown Eyes* (1985) exemplifies, a recalibration was required of one’s individual sense of self.\(^{17}\) In Jackie Kay’s fiction the signification of skin is fundamental to ‘self-fashioning and the problematics of the *persona*’, where, as Victoria Arana observes, Kay ‘sounds a timely sub-theme: that people generally can neither fathom nor control the way others read them’.\(^{18}\)

In his landmark book, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), Gilroy foregrounds the political mobilisation of race as an agent for historical change, and shows the connection between post-war British racism and the mythology of a white, Christian, national culture. Right-wing MP Enoch Powell’s florid rhetoric catalysed the overtly collective racism of the National Front’s ‘Keep Britain White’ campaign in the 1970s. This shaped the sensibilities of writers growing up in Britain at the time. As novelist and playwright Hanif Kureishi recalls of Powell, ‘this stiff ex-colonial zealot – with his obscene, grand guignol talk of whips, blood, excreta, urination and wide-eyed piccaninnies – was a monstrous, scary bogeyman’.\(^{19}\) Cultural critic Sukhdev Sandhu confirms the unbelonging his generation felt in the land of their birth where ‘Those who grew up in the 1980s hoping to assert their Englishness knew that, as far as Margaret Thatcher was concerned, they were a threat to national cohesion.’\(^{20}\)

Although a negative legacy of terminology maintained racial and ethnic objectification, the post-war settlers and their descendants contested the pejorative lexicon. To counteract racism, and engender collective self-worth, resistance was mobilised under the ensign term ‘Black’ throughout the 1970s and 1980s, where it served as a unifying signifier for the multiple ethnicities racialised as ‘coloured’. Collective identity politics enabled
survival in a hostile surrounding society that was in denial – as Jamaican-born poet Linton Kwesi Johnson renders it: ‘Come wat may/ We are here to stay/ Inna Inglan.’ Important cross-cultural–ethnic alliances emerged from the signifier Black. The playwright Mustapha Matura, of Trinidian birth and Indian descent, pioneered a distinctive stage idiom for black characters drawn from Rasta-speak, pan-Africanist politics and Black Zionist and Black Power influences to represent West Indians living in England and Black British youth. Matura’s breakthrough 1970s/1980s British-origin work represents the cross-cultural aesthetics of interlinked migration histories in Britain – a motif revisited by neo-millennial novelists such as Zadie Smith, Gautam Malkani and Suhayl Saadi.

While Black functioned as a confident proclamation of identity, some writers found it restrictive. The playwright and novelist Valerie Mason-John explains the term’s exclusions for the British lesbian community – ‘a fundamental part of black lesbians defining ourselves has been around our racial identity...This has led to painful debates around who is or is not black.’ By 1994 Tariq Modood condemned Black as an unacceptable identifier for British Asian people. Modood’s comments emerged from the academic spheres of the 1990s dominated by Gilroy’s conceptual landmark, the ‘Black Atlantic’. This context inferred the ‘invisibility’ of British Asians who had also been part of the colonial displacement through indenture. Nonetheless, ‘Asian’ – as first used in 1960s Britain to contest the racism of ‘Paki’ – was also delimiting. For Kureishi, ‘The Asian community is so diverse, so broad in terms of class, age and outlook that it doesn’t make any sense to talk of the so called Asian community.’ Religious identities had also been subordinate to the signifiers ‘Black’ and ‘Asian’. As Ziauddin Sardar argues, ‘Calling Muslims “Asians” is ridiculous because Muslims consciously reject all racial and geographical categories – as a Universalist worldview...Asia is not a race or identity, it’s a continent.’

As certain chapters in the Companion demonstrate, the true degree of interracial mixing – as uninterrupted historical fact – informs a number of writers’ backgrounds (Kureishi, Smith, Monica Ali, Kay, Bernardine Evaristo, Diana Evans), as well as subject matter. In The Story of M (2002), her confessional-eulogy-monodrama about her white Liverpudlian mother raising her family in 1960s Britain, SuAndi explains that, ‘As a Black woman playing my white mother, I “colour” the audience’s view of M.’ SuAndi’s work exemplifies radical new narratives concerning racialisation and self-fashioning that moves beyond binaristic thinking – as post-devolution microconstituencies similarly gradate ‘British’ beyond black and Asian notations. Welsh-speaking agency against English-speaking in-migration situates Wales
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historically – despite its role in the British empire – as colonised, thus obscuring issues of racial discrimination. As Welsh-Ghanaian-descent memoirist Charlotte Williams describes, ‘the Italians, the Poles, the Irish, the Asians and the Africans and the likes of us, all fighting amongst ourselves for the right to call ourselves Welsh’. In other post-devolution examples, ‘Afro-Scot’ asserts a British-less-ness. In her poem ‘Birth Certificate’ (1992) Maya Chowdhry’s persona declares, ‘My birth certificate says born in Edinburgh, Scotland, 1964/ but I was born in the world/ and the year doesn’t matter’, to divest the persona of national and geopolitical affiliations altogether. British Asian is a superfluous category for Saadi, as he, Yorkshire-born of Afghan-Pakistani parents, describes: ‘Growing up in the west of Scotland, I also endured a certain amount of anti-English sentiment’, and he identifies as a ‘Scottish Muslim’. In England the ‘complex identifiers such as “black English” or regional “Brummie Punjabi British”’ have become even more discretely localised, as with designations such as ‘Brixton-Jamaican’.

One’s indigenousness is recognised through birth or naturalisation (and a British passport), yet the visual marker of appearance can undermine this, producing an outsider and marginalised status – where certain citizens need to keep proving they are British even if they were born in Britain. There is no more durable example of an ethnicity-defined zone of exclusion for black and Asian citizens than the rural and urban divide. The British countryside (England, Scotland and Wales) remains the province of whiteness, the rural idyll functions as a nostalgic ideal of Britain prior to post-war migration, and is a situation reflected in the paucity of black and Asian work that is set in the countryside, where there has been no wholesale elimination of the racism that minority ethnic people can encounter there.

As this Companion demonstrates, the two fields designated British Black and Asian literature offer plural counter-narratives for representing lives often rendered negatively and reductively in mainstream cultural and political circles. The usage of these terms – as they have evolved within a British-based location – has been protean and responsive to the socio-political factors that have frequently surrounded, but not determined, the developing aesthetics of Black and Asian literature.

Although scholars may regard black British and British Asian as descriptors bestriding (the perhaps irreconcilable) terms of identity politics and literary aesthetic categories, the genesis of both literary fields can be traced through this complicated cultural positioning. The lens of identity politics has meant that creative texts have become viewed, in some quarters, as a kind of social document – generally concerning experiences rendered
outside white mainstream socio-critical awareness. As playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah explains it:

The establishment are accepting on the whole that we are articulating stories from our cultural background. But often as we get into the establishment, we then start saying, ‘Well, I don’t need to do that any more, I can be global,’ somehow forgetting that we’re only there in the first place because we are black British.35

Kobena Mercer exposes this as causing ‘relative neglect of the aesthetic dimension . . . whereby black artists in Britain may be recognised, acknowledged, and tolerated . . . but the work itself often seems to be taken less seriously as an enriching site of aesthetic experience’.36 For her part, Laura Chrisman points out that, in late twentieth-century cultural studies, ‘Aesthetics and aestheticism were made to function both as an explanation of and solution to social and political processes.’37 Cultural Studies’ opening up of literary language to the multicultural possibilities conceptualised through ‘traces’, ‘roots’ and ‘representation’ could in some quarters fan a kind of forensic critique that produced a canopy of critical verities which, as Jean Fisher argues, ‘focus and judge work on the basis of ethnic or racial markers’. The problematics of such an approach are ‘on the one hand, to look for confirmation of expectation, even prejudice – the artist as anthropological “native informer” – and on the other, to ignore the unique artistic dimension and experience of the work’ which can actually ‘deterritorialise’ these assumptions.38

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s post-colonial catachresis can mediate in this identity-politics–aesthetics conundrum. If understood as a strategy of resistance to imperial rhetoric (through recycling terms, which are then creatively redeployed – turning the prevailing discourse upon itself in a counter-appropriation) catachresis enables an interstitial space for relating and representing origins and perspectives: as lifted from abstraction and inserted into identity politics and the material world, and, correspondingly, disengaged from politics and the material world through an assertion of aesthetics and expressive modes.39 Using the prevailing aesthetic against itself can not only open up a counter-aesthetic, but also develop a model of counter-discourse and perform an intervention into social conditioning.

Black British writing crystallised as a literary category at the end of the twentieth century. It is generally understood to encompass the writing of indigene black Britons (of African descent) whose work speaks from a sensibility and standpoint quite distinct from the migration or arriviste narratives of previous generations of people in the UK who termed themselves Black writers. In the first major guide to Black British literature (1987), David
Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe question the meanings generated by ‘black’ in relation to creativity: ‘Does black denote colour of skin or quality of mind? … what does skin colour have to do with the act of literary creation? … what are the literary forms peculiar to “black” expression, what are the aesthetic structures that differentiate that expression from “white” expression?’

From Fred D’Aguiar’s 1989 ‘Against Black British Literature’, to John McLeod’s 2002 questioning of the utility of ‘British’ in relation to Black (as diminishing black British writers’ actual transnational profiles), to Arana’s 2007 problematisation of ‘Black’ (through inverted commas) in relation to British, critical frameworks appear paradoxically, responsive and yet restrictive towards the creative range of the writing they examine. An author’s self-termining can often be pitted against external cultural categorisation. While black authors might assert a range of affiliations or subject matter, reviewers and literary critics can – and often do – collapse creative expression with how they perceive its creator’s biographical designation. When Liz Hoggard proposes to Helen Oyeyemi ‘All your books seem to be about migration and the need to belong’, Oyeyemi unequivocally resists this provenance: ‘No, no! This is a thing people always talk to me about, but with The Icarus Girl, I wanted to write a doppelganger story. White is for Witching was my haunted-house/vampire story.’ Oyeyemi asserts her literary lineage and genre choices from underneath Hoggard’s socially driven, superimposition of colonial–post-colonial subjection. Another novelist, Aminatta Forna, lodges similar objections to being overruled and overwritten: ‘I have never met a writer who wishes to be described as a female writer, gay writer, black writer, Asian writer or African writer. We hyphenated writers complain about the privilege accorded to the white male writer, he who dominates the western canon and is the only one called simply “writer”’. Although Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe’s 1987 parameters intentionally omit British Asian writers – ‘since consideration of writers of Asian origin would demand a greatly expanded book’ – accommodating African-descent and Asian-descent writers in the same anthology became a feature of the critical attention that developed apace in the late twentieth century. Without this joint enterprise, mainstream (white-dominated) publishing, educational and critical lenses were inclined to regard the fields as insubstantial. A step in disentangling the literary constituencies housed under Black occurred with the Saga Prize instituted by Marsha Hunt in 1995 for unpublished black writers of African descent – born in the UK or Republic of Ireland. It decisively separated the African-descent indigene generation from the politically unifying sense of Black by not including Asian-descent writers, while also distinguishing second-generation writers from the
migratory and arriviste generations. However, the two distinct fields continued to be synthesised in literary studies up to the early 2000s, at which point scholars began to disentangle these legacies in earnest.45

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the nomenclature regarding Black and Asian literature is a subject to which white literary scholars in particular have turned their attention in the intensification of literary critical interest from the late 1980s until the 2007 peak. When Heidi Safia Mirza observes the phenomenon of white academics scouring the subaltern realms of marginality in order to ‘know us better than we know ourselves’46 she identifies the white literary critic who appropriates a ‘new’ field first by scoping its terminology – thereby exerting critical distance – and then by asserting expertise. In contrast, African- or Asian-descent literary critics tend not to conduct identity examinations with the same forensic detail – implicated as they are in the ethnic-racialising matrixes that have evolved. Joan Anim-Addo and Les Back elucidate the predisposition of ‘White interpreters towards “speaking for” and about, and seldom in dialogue with Black people’47 in the formation of critical networks and scholarship. The arrangement restricts full representativeness in the literary habitus. This Companion’s contributors represent diversity across ethnicities, nationalities and generations, demonstrating the impact of and interest in the work across the world, where its reception (outside the UK), can frequently be more marked as constituent of the British cultural landscape than it is acknowledged on Britain’s shores.

While conceding that the descriptors ‘Black British Writing’ or ‘British Asian Writing’ are, in some settings, disputed as unnecessarily exclusive, vague, outmoded or even irrelevant,48 in this volume they indicate the scope – for ease of reference – of a body of work in a context of literary history, rather than to impose racial restrictions onto complex possible identities and self-termining. Their use in this Companion is derived from a cultural location – the writer was born in Britain, or else was resident for much of their writing career. ‘Black British’ and ‘British Asian’ in this regard embrace aspects of standpoint and perspective, as a type of shorthand that diminishes distances across post-war Anglophone literature’s wide generic, linguistic and generational landscape. In making identity politics circumstantially specific, chapters encourage critical engagements that identify and respond to the literatures’ aesthetic dimensions. The individual contributors in this volume variously employ ‘black’, ‘Black’ and ‘Asian’ as it is meaningful in the context of the specific chapter. This militates against imposing any ‘powerfully empty and possibly anachronistic master-signifier’.49

Part I’s ‘Traces and Routes’ segments the decades (1940s–70s) and (1980s–2010) into two contextualising chapters and functions as a
micro-chronology to map the changing politics of difference, identifications and creative innovations that grew from these periods. Susheila Nasta and Chris Weedon point the reader to significant literary and socio-cultural trends, in anticipation of the closer examination of individual writers’ works that in Part II concern the reworking of literary traditions (modernism, realism) as reconfigured through the gender-centring and decolonising representations of London’s metropolitan topography. The focus upon reinserting missing or marginalised histories, subjectivities, regionalities and sexualities in Part III profiles evolving forms and genres – as viewed through certain established theoretical and critical frameworks which are also recognised as problematic in relation to Black and Asian literature. These push-and-pull factors are tested further in Part IV via the alternative perspectives generated – from abroad as part of a globalised world – and from within Britain through the distinctive self-fashioning narratives representing adopted, fostered and multi-ethnic voices that challenge the traditional parameters designating national, familial and generic identities.

The (non-hermetic) monikers of Parts II–IV, ‘Translocations and Transformations’, ‘Restorations and Renovations’ and ‘National, International, Transglobal’, attune readers to the points of continuity and discontinuity, departure and return, that are discernible in the choices of subject matter, genres, narrative styles, and poetic and dramatic techniques. The inter-animating relationship this proposes is one of ‘imagining’ and ‘remembering’, and is best understood through Edward S. Casey’s observation, ‘Just as imagination takes us forward into the realm of the purely possible – into what might be – so memory brings us back into the domain of the actual and the already elapsed: to what has been.’

Nasta sets the volume’s co-ordinates of ‘what has been’ through acknowledging writers whose pre-1945 anti-colonial politics and antecedent literary influences reconceived the quasi-authority of the English exemplar in prose, poetry, drama and polemic. These expatriate perspectives form a precursor to the social contexts of immigration, displacement and exclusion that anchor immigrant colonial writers and English literature within the same demographic orbit of post-1948 Britain. By 1975, 40 per cent of the black population in Britain were British-born. Weedon’s socio-political historiisation scopes indigene black and Asian Britons’ new relationships towards home-grown British culture, localism, radicalisation and reception abroad.

In 1982 Sivanandan called for a radical poetics to free writers from a historical linguistic bondage, through changing ‘the use of words, word-order – sounds, rhythm, imagery – even grammar’. He argued that endowing black experiences with an authority over language was a project of altering ‘the experience of language itself’, so that the writer ‘frees it of its racial
oppressiveness’ and ‘invests it with the “universality inherent in the human condition”’.\(^{51}\) A number of the Companion’s chapters importantly locate drama and poetry in the vanguard of this visible, politicised poetics that reconfigures the sounds and rhythms of English, in making it ‘fit to purpose’ for expressing diasporic cultural presences in Britain. Authors seek out the pressure points in the very language itself through transformative uses of genre to voice marginality, and the interrelationships between textual enunciations – on and off the page – as read and performed, or as staged. As D. Keith Peacock examines, the dramatic syntax evolved by late twentieth-century playwrights offers a cornucopia of accents and idioms that de-standardise the stage lingua franca of English. This complements Birgit Neumann’s recasting of the sound of English by the post-Nationality Act, migrant-generation poets who, she proposes, responded to T. S. Eliot’s influence (in seeking to form a tradition) and used literary modernism’s ruptures and discontinuities to recover subaltern histories – through the experience of being black in Britain – via Caribbean speech patterns and in interactive public performance.

Similarly Corinne Fowler and Romana Huk chart contemporary poets’ revivalist tendencies in form, structure, content, perspective and ‘soundings’ that materialise the words off the page.\(^{52}\) As Fowler argues for a reach that is contemporaneously regional and transnational, both she and Huk disengage from the customary London metropolitan framework – Fowler through a devolved cosmopolitanism and rurality – Huk from a North American perspective which examines the reinvigoration of the ‘lyric’. Both chapters innovatively meet the demands for fresh forms of critical commentary that can engage with diasporic poetic performativity and its sonic properties, and negotiate the dimension of liveness and its effects.

As black and Asian writers had found themselves written out of the cosmopolitan modernist circles – in which they had been central figures in the 1930s and 1940s in retrospective English literary histories – ironically, their late twentieth-century literary descendants could not escape being defined by an urban literary straitjacket. The contrast between the cosmopolitan and the urban is one that indicates the difference between elite (culture imposed from the top down) and popular (culture grown from the grassroots). Yet an urban locale also exposes the differences between a migratory sensibility (migrating from the colony and often the countryside to the imperial metropolitan city) and what ‘migrated’ or British-born children (raised in an urban environment) sought to express, for which there was no literary precedent. To articulate his urban British experience Caryl Phillips turned not to Caribbean writers but ‘to what was happening in black American society’.\(^{53}\) For Phillips, the legacy of Caribbean writing ‘tended to be rooted in an exotic
geography I didn’t recognize’, whereas ‘Black Americans wrote about the urban experience I understood, and they were angry’.54 This anger Phillips names for his generation boiled over in uprisings in many urban centres in the 1980s – indicating the extent of racism and its consequences, namely, the second-class citizenship experienced by those of African and Asian descent and the widespread youth social alienation and deprivation.

Modhumita Roy’s coinage ‘Brutalist Realism’, as a conceptual framework for urban-located fiction (1990s–2000s), confirms a reinvigorating territorialisng of the city (in ways different from Sam Selvon’s landmark migratory perspective in *The Lonely Londoners*). However, Peacock points out social realism’s experimental constraints for drama, which, more often than not, replicate the grim media-driven stereotypes of black people’s lives in Britain (as commissioned by white-male-dominated mainstream theatre programmers).

In contrast to the male urbanists, Pallavi Rastogi considers the trope of ‘home’ in female writers’ domestic fictions – literature that has suffered from delayed recognition or disappearance in male-dominant migratory heritage. Through advocating a matrilineal literary lineage, Rastogi’s model of women’s ‘self-determination’, drawn from migrant/settler fiction, marks out a cultural path for contemporary novelists’ confident canonical and mainstream occupancies as beneficiaries of the pioneers’ experiential inroads. Similarly, in foregrounding the rarely acknowledged Black and Asian LGBTQ literary continuities to be found in a broad spectrum of poetry, drama and fiction, Kanika Batra identifies the representation and performativity of non-heteronormative desire as an oppositional strategy and yet also a conciliatory act, within a meta-context of ‘hetero-normativity and hegemonic whiteness’.

Recuperation connects literary technique to generic innovation across Part III. Graham MacPhee observes elsewhere that empire apologists represent the imperial–colonial encounter as ‘utterly disconnected from the present – as fundamentally past, and so as proof of how imperially innocent that present has become’.55 Black and Asian writers’ historical fiction and life-writing generates the opposite process and can be said to execute Toni Morrison’s concept of ‘re-memory’ – the active reconstitution of absence through the power of literature’s imaginative capaciousness. James Procter’s chapter on post-2000 historical fiction (ranging topically from enslavement novels to those set in the 1940s and 1950s) stresses this connectivity of recasting socio-cultural history from the perspectives of those groups omitted from or denigrated in dominant cultural memory.

As the Martinican intellectual Édouard Glissant’s concept of ‘relational poetics’ delineates that the transformative mode of history (self and
collective) enables the enunciation of ‘being’ as a reality with a self-defined past and a future, so Suzanne Scafe addresses such self-fashioning possibilities in black women’s autobiographical subjects. Recalibrating personal histories, Scafe reinvigorates and extends this genre’s critical framing beyond trauma-culture readings to highlight how life-writing’s recoveries and discoveries – that face up to the ongoing consequences of colonialism and racism – serves to dis/re/place the white male story.

There can be no more poignant recuperation than the literature representing post-war transracial adoption and its double inflection of racism and class prejudice where, as Wendy W. Walters has established, ‘the lens of fiction and poetry generates new narratives that challenge our previous understandings… to see the possibility of resistant identities and tactics, outside the state’s constructs’. In this vein John McLeod explores literary lineages that have formed through a number of writers’ adoption of *topoi* that creatively challenge the terms of familial and consanguineous norms and use aesthetics to release adoption narratives from a biogenetic clamp.

Another critical grip from which many black and Asian authors seek release is that of post-colonial pigeonholing. Malachi McIntosh’s chapter tests the fabric(ations) of post-coloniality, beginning with fiction writers Fred D’Aguiar’s and Salman Rushdie’s separate 1980s challenges to the harmful ethnic-cultural ghettoisation conveyed by educational and commercial umbrella terms such as World Literature, Commonwealth Literature and Black British Literature, in which writing of colonial provenance was bracketed off into special (post-colonial) categories, detached from the field of English literature proper. This connects to another major issue underpinning this volume – that of canonicity – where, as Bénédicte Ledent reveals, the criteria for attributing status and recognition towards the longevity of certain works and writers continue to be a context bounded by insider–outsider dynamics that rely upon perceptions of how closely a black or Asian writer can be aligned to the white-majority culture and its traditions.

The presence of some writers in more than one chapter of this *Companion* might not only indicate a multi-generic profile, but also suggest their canonical status – that a critical consensus exists in which some writers are unilaterally distinguished over others in producing noteworthy literary developments. Notwithstanding the impossibility of including the majority of authors across two distinctive literary fields (Black and Asian writing) in one volume, questions should still be raised about why and how these writers are prominent in literary studies. Given what is published, anthologised, taught and critically revisited, it is clear that some works are amenable to certain techniques of analysis, while critical lexicons have yet to be created to
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adequately address the textualities of others. Warmington probes the reception of Black and Asian writing in Britain today, where the issue of ethnicity-linked specialisation continues to be defined via tensions between agency and appropriation in a context of cultural legitimation where – to echo this Introduction’s starting-point – ‘Britain’s political, educational, commercial, and arts institutions continue to display little ethnic and racial diversity.’

Coda and Proviso

To investigate the literary terrain of a sixty-five-year period through centralising the work of British black and Asian writers is a radical undertaking. The perspectives provided by this work disturb the familiar lineages of English literature, and the sureties of its traditional provenances and its canon. This is not to conclude that the writers in this Companion automatically qualify as radical because they are black or Asian. The chapters recognise (what Fred D’Aguiar describes as) the ‘more rigorous indices’ by which the uniqueness and innovativeness of this writing might be identified and appreciated.

What this volume ultimately shows is that the causal links that have been made between African- and Asian-descent writing through colonial inheritances, racism and migration nowadays function as reductive critical frames for regarding such aesthetically diverse work. The synthesis of Black and Asian into a single category, which served both political and literary spheres at certain points in post-war British social history, is now unsustainable in the light of the plural and nuanced understandings of race, ethnicity, gender and faith, and their diversity in contemporary Britain. Thus neo-millennial scholarship that unbridles Black and Asian Anglophone literary categories from each other, rather than interweaving them (as publishing requirements can dictate), offers a critical autonomy more in tune with these contemporary socio-cultural antinomies.

However, the cultural institutions that were founded during the empire still limit or prevent access to people whose heritage bears the marks of British imperial dispossession. Keeping in mind Hall’s factors of ‘innovation and constraint’ that surround cultural genesis and production, it is important to reflect upon the breadth of inhibitive contexts that black and Asian writers still face. Across the interactive arts sector, in literature, film, television, theatre, museums and publishing, black and Asian artists in Britain can still find their lives and experiences – if represented at all – primarily filtered through the dominance of white directors, screenwriters, programmers, commissioning agents, reviewers and pundits. In 2015 the glaring...
lack of diversity in the arts sectors – and the personnel who comprise its complexes – is perturbing. If, as Dominic Sandbrook’s recent study The Great British Dream Factory (2015) argues, Britain’s worldview and cultural identity remain rooted in Victorian (imperial) values, then the reader of this Companion is likely to share reviewer Ekow Eshun’s dismay when he notes: ‘The most striking absence is the invisibility of black and Asian creative figures. In a book of 648 pages Sandbrook devotes just 10 to non-white names in a short chapter on the debut [my italics] novels of Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali. Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith are mentioned in passing.’

In contrast, through its vision, objectives and contents, The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945–2010) celebrates the consortium and continuum of literary inheritances that the fields of Black and Asian literature offer to readers. The book contributes to an ongoing critical project of amending the historical redaction and marginalisation of black and Asian writers in literary historiography, while at the same time corroborating these authors as being, incontrovertibly, constituents of Britain’s contemporary cultural landscape.

NOTES

2 This is evinced in: (publishing) Danuta Kean with Mel Larsen (eds.), Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place (London: Arts Council of England, 2015); (television) the Creative Skillset census reports a 30.9 per cent decline in the number of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people working in the UK television industries between 2006 and 2012: www.broadcastnow.co.uk/Journals/2013/07/12/q/n/a/Creative-Skillset-Census-2012-Full-Report.pdf; (sport) there are no black and minority ethnic (BME) coaches in Premiership football, while 25 per cent of players are BME – Richard Conway, www.bbc.co.uk/sport/o/football/29976832; (academia) of 15,905 professors in UK universities, eighty-five are black, and only seventeen are black women: Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Report, www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-in-higher-education-statistical-report2013/. There is only one black woman professor of English and comparative literature in the UK. (All the latter statistics are from 2013 data.)
3 Lord Parekh’s metaphor of Britishness is ‘that we are all involved in shaping in a direction in which we can see a reflection of ourselves and that we can collectively own’, 28 November (2005), Column GC38, www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldhansrd/v0051128/text/51128-34.htm
5 Isabel Mendizabal et al., ‘Reconstructing the Population History of European Romani from Genome-Wide Data’, Current Biology, 22 (2012): 2342–9; Turi E. King et al., ‘Africans in Yorkshire? The Deepest-Rooting Clade of the Y
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Notably: (presses) Allison and Busby, Bogle L’Ouverture, New Beacon Books, Peepal Tree Press; (journals) ArtRage, Wasafiri, Race Today, SABLE; (networks) Caribbean Artists Movement, Asian Women Writers’ Workshop, Black Arts Alliance, Centreprise, Malika’s Kitchen; (fairs) International Book Fair of Radical, Black and Third World Books; (prizes) Saga Prize, Caine Prize, Alfred Fagon Award, Polari Prize; (archives) Black Cultural Archives, Iniva, George Padmore Institute, Black Plays Archive.


Sukhdev Sandhu ponders these generational differences: ‘If migrants do contemplate the past, it’s the past of their parents and grandparents, of the colonial city or village from which they hail. This ancestral realm is alien to their children who don’t share the same geographies, memories or idioclects’, London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 284.


texts survive by Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, Robert Wedderburn, Mary Prince and Mary Seacole.

See: abbreviation of a black male pendant on a capital ‘I’, National Archive of the UK, E36/284f196r. (See p. xxii, this volume.)

The BBC commissioned and aired The Black and White Minstrel Show up until the 1980s: Sarita Malik, Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television (London: Sage, 2002).

Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, Black Face Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), x.


24. Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) advocates a transnational and intercultural perspective for black histories from the Atlantic trade route model to reject essentialist models of racial identity and nationalisms, to foreground the heterogeneous, metacultural links between the US, South America, Africa, the Caribbean and Europe.
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41 www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/02/helen-oyeyemi-women-disappoint-one-another
42 www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/13/aminatta-forna-dont-judge-book-by-cover=comments
50 Edward S. Casey, Getting Back into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1993), xvi–xvii.
54 Ibid., 48.
A snapshot from canon-makers’ omissions across prose, drama and poetry includes: A. S. Byatt’s assertion that black writers, in her opinion, do not possess ‘pure English national credentials’ in *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (Oxford University Press, 1999), xv; Dimple Godiwal’s revelation that Richard Eyre and Nicolas Wright ignore black British dramatists in *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (2000), in Dimple Godiwal (ed.), *Alternatives within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatre* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006), 6; and Ruth Padel’s *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem: A Poem for Every Week of the Year* (2004), which has three British-born black writers’ poems, one each by Fred D’Aguiar, Patience Agbabi and Jackie Kay.

