Jan Rupp

Genre and Cultural Memory in Black British Literature

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Memorial Turn, Generic Turn, and Black British Fiction at the Turn of the New Millennium

Black British literature is certainly less in need of introduction than two or three decades ago, especially following the "belated 'arrival' of black Britain as an academic discipline" (Nasta 2002: 3).[1] The emergence and consolidation of it as both a symbolic and a social system has made talk of "the black British genre" (Thompson 2005: 152) not uncommon. Yet the terms of classification are contested. Both 'black' and 'British' have been called into question, and it is consensus that for the common signifier to be maintained it needs to make room for internal differentiation. As Stuart Hall (1992: 309) has noted, "this 'black' identity […] continues to exist *alongside a wide range of other differences*". Next to ethnicity, consideration of these "different cultural traditions" (ibid.) has included gender, generation, religion, and more recently also location (Procter 2003; Cuevas 2008).

There is a much less nuanced picture where cultural memory is concerned. Where it is discussed, it is usually in the sense of "counter-memory" (Foucault 1977; Zemon Davies/Starn 1989a), by which literature is seen to record a "history of our otherness" (Bouchard 1977: 8). Literature, in this view, is an important surrogate medium for all those memories which are marginalized by dominant accounts and systems of power. In "cultural memory studies" (Erll/Nünning 2008), the notion of counter-memory corresponds with insights into the essential plurality of memory. This plurality is also acknowledged by referring to cultural memory in the plural, cultural memor*ies*, or in terms of "memory cultures"[2]. These insights are no doubt highly pertinent regarding the "amnesia that has overtaken British popular memory about its imperial past" (Hall 2007: 6). But while black British writers engage in "the *re-telling* of the past" (Hall 1994: 393), their histories of otherness are not only defined by difference to popular memory – they are also internally differentiated. Black British texts no longer put forward a blanket imperative to remember or a plea for "re-membering" (Bhabha 1994b: 63) only. More than before, they are informed by a debate over specifically what to remember, what past(s), and how. With the commemorative moment of the Windrush anniversary in 1998, the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the United Kingdom, and the currency of memory studies in the academy, few issues have so energized black British writing and its institutions over the past few years as the debates about Britain's colonial and postcolonial legacies.

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1 See Ball (2007: 621), who remarks that "anthologies and studies of 'Black British literature' are largely a twenty-first-century phenomenon".

2 This is the title and key concept of a collaborative research centre at the University of Gießen (1997 – 2008).

These debates have addressed (but rarely in a systematic fashion) the question of the "'memoryficational' power of literature" (Erll 2004: 306).[3] What is the potential of literature not only to reflect, but to actively shape, to 'make' memory? This, it could be argued, has always been a more pertinent issue in black British than in many other areas of literature. Here, writers are heirs to the far-flung history of colonialism and imperialism, even if they do not have to deal with it by default, and even if this history is an increasingly distant past. But the memorial turn in the humanities and the interest in issues of memory and commemoration in society more broadly have created a new, or at least qualitatively different, culture or frame of reception.[4] Texts which overtly deal with history and memory, such as the counter-narratives of slavery by writers like Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar, are celebrated for retrieving alternative accounts. Likewise, the absence of such memorial references is noted at a time when "myth has become a literary necessity" (Dawes 2005: 269). There is not only a return but also a "strained engagement with the question of myth and tradition" (ibid.) within the current emphasis on commemoration. Yet other writers "construct new myths for the Black British world" (ibid.: 271) and seem to regard themselves as heirs primarily to the more recent and more domestic history of post-WWII multicultural Britain. The result is not only the retrieval but an ongoing construction and reflection of a plurality of cultural memories.

This multi-faceted "memory work" (Kitzmann et al. 2005) finds itself in various forms of tension with a range of recent cultural and social criticism. For example, in his *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy (2005: 94) expresses a warning reminder that "the hidden shameful store of imperial horrors has been an unacknowledged presence in the British political and cultural life". As Gilroy (ibid.) expands, "[i]t is not too dramatic to say that the quality of the country's multicultural future depends on what is now done with it". Statements like these highlight a (twenty-first century) situation in which the connection between black British literature and the memory of imperial history thrown into relief. As a matter of both the production and the reception of literature, memory work appears as a central expectation confronting the black

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3 Sic; from the Latin *fication* or *ficare/facere*, to make.

4 Memorial turn is a frequent tag attached to the ongoing interest in memory across the humanities. In a much-quoted statement, Jan Assmann (1992: 11) has suggested: "Alles spricht dafür, daß sich um den Begriff der Erinnerung ein neues Paradigma der Kulturwissenschaft aufbaut." Doris Bachmann-Medick (2006: 16) notes that technically, a turn is different from a paradigm shift in that a paradigm shift tends to be located within the confines of an academic discipline, while a turn always reaches across disciplines and is therefore more attuned to an interdisciplinary field like cultural studies. Bachmann-Medick also describes the successive cultural turns in cultural studies as developing further and diversifying the field rather than aiming to replace earlier turns in the way a paradigm shift is usually understood to replace an earlier paradigm. Without going too far into this distinction here, I cite as much in support and elaboration of the memorial turn rather than Assmann's juxtaposition of paradigm and the German singular 'Kulturwissenschaft'.