Black and South Asian British Literatures

edited and introduced by

Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs

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Introduction

Those of us who grew up in the Britain of the post-war years will recall what a very different and less diverse society Britain was then and should thus be aware of the role immigrants from all over the erstwhile British Empire have played in creating the multicultural society we see around us today. As they began to make their mark in fields such as sport, music, literature, and film, they gradually expanded and transformed what we understood by British culture and in that process they have contributed to our rethinking what we mean by "Britishness". The first part of this *Introduction* will attempt to provide some historical context for that process.

Although the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the *SS Empire Windrush* which brought almost five hundred West Indians to Britain in 1948 may have led one to suppose that that was the year when immigration to Britain began, the origins of the presence of black and Asian people in the country lie very much further back in history. In the case of both communities it is a history which, as the title of David Olusoga's recent book *Black and British. A Forgotten History* (2016) implies, has long been neglected, in spite of the fact that, as he convincingly argues, it should be regarded as "an integral and essential aspect of mainstream British history". The first scholar to attempt to rectify this situation was Peter Fryer who in 1984 published his pioneering and exhaustively detailed study *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, which remains an authoritative source today. Of similar importance was the first comprehensive history of Asians in Britain, Rozina Visram's *Asians in Britain. 400 Years of History* (2002). A more recent and quite indispensable work which sought to achieve a degree of recognition for black British history while at the same time providing a compendium of hitherto scarcely documented knowledge on the subject is *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* excellently edited by David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones in 2007. Olusoga's book and the BBC television series it accompanied represent further steps forward in the discovery of black British history and will hopefully generate much interest. Nevertheless, many gaps remain in the history of Black and South Asian Britain.

The study of Black and South Asian British history ideally necessitates an understanding of British history as a whole. It requires that we look somewhat further afield than Britain itself to the history of the Empire, particularly to that of the Indian subcontinent during and after the Raj as well as to that of the colonies in the West Indies and Africa, the societies where immigration to Britain originated. The later history of immigration from Commonwealth countries and the large body of legislation which has been constantly revised in an ongoing effort to place limitations on it will be of particular importance. An understanding of British involvement in the slave trade from the Tudor period to the 19th century and of the racist ideology and practice in Britain which have had such a lasting impact

on the black and South Asian communities is essential. In the case of the black community, the wider transatlantic context should also be borne in mind since historical developments in North America, particularly with regard to slavery and subsequent race relations have influenced what went on in Britain, as has the influential work of African American thinkers and writers. And both communities now find themselves located within a global transcultural diaspora which has emerged from similar historical experiences.

Let us look first at the history of the black British community. Fryer began his book with the no doubt startling assertion that "There were Africans in Britain before the English came" (1). Those whose presence he was drawing attention to were soldiers and slaves belonging to an African unit in the Roman army who, at some time in the 3rd century, were stationed at Hadrian's Wall near Carlisle, and who came from the North African provinces of the Roman Empire. Recent archaeological research has also identified human remains of the same period at York, then Eboracum, as being of African origin. Thereafter there is very little evidence of any Africans in Britain until the beginning of the 16th century, but from then on during the Tudor period their presence is well documented. Catherine of Aragon, who later married Henry VIII, brought her African attendants with her to England. Africans (who had presumably been captured) were present at the court of James IV of Scotland in Edinburgh, one of the women among them memorably figuring in a poem by the Scottish poet William Dunbar. In England a black trumpeter, John Blanke, the first black person whose name is actually known, is depicted on the Westminster Tournament Scroll of 1511 and is also recorded as having played for both Henry VII and Henry VIII. In 1555 a group of five West Africans were brought to England, the intention being that they should learn English and on their return act as interpreters to facilitate English entry into the slave trade which was then dominated by the Portuguese. Such domination was effectively challenged for the first time in 1562 when John Hawkins raided Portuguese slaving ships, stole some 300 slaves, and transported them to Hispaniola (later Haiti) in the Caribbean. The great financial success of this first of Hawkins' slaving ventures led Queen Elizabeth I to invest in his second and third slaving voyages – to her great profit. Although most slaves were sent to America and the Caribbean some were purchased by wealthy people in Britain who regarded black domestic servants and footmen as a sign of status. Not all Africans who found themselves in England prospered though. Many fell into poverty and were blamed as scapegoats for all manner of social ills. In view of their growing numbers – by the end of the 16th century there were fifteen to twenty thousand in London alone – Elizabeth I, hypocritically disregarding the profit she had herself made from the slave trade, issued orders in 1596 and 1601 to expel all Africans from England. In vain. It is from that period that we may date the continuous presence of black people in England.

It was, however, not until Charles II founded the Royal African Company in 1672 and granted it a charter to trade in slaves that the English embarked on slavery on any great scale. Their aim was to supply a workforce to the tobacco plantations of Virginia and to the particularly labour-intensive sugar plantations on such Caribbean islands as Barbados, St Kitts and Jamaica where since 1623 Britain had been establishing colonies. In the course of the five hundred voyages the Com-

pany's ships undertook some one hundred and fifty thousand Africans were transported to the Americas. This intense activity established England as the major player in the transatlantic slave trade. When in 1752 the Company was finally dissolved and its monopoly of the trade thus ceased to apply, private slave traders took over and greatly expanded the trade. From the late 17th to the end of the 18th century the triangular trade between Britain, West Africa and the Americas based on the practice of slavery and the monopoly on the sugar and cotton trades provided the foundation for the wealth of port cities like London, Bristol and Liverpool and led to West Indian planters, cotton growers in America and English merchants alike making huge fortunes.

From the end of the 17th century the black population began to grow, and it also began to spread beyond London and across the country. Just how many of them there were is not known; current estimates vary between ten and fifteen thousand. Black slaves, most of them very young, were brought to Britain by West Indian planters and by captains of slave ships whose owners allowed them to sell the slaves off for their private profit. Many were auctioned in public houses. As contemporary newspaper advertisements offering rewards for runaways reveal, some slaves tried to escape. How many of those brought to Britain as slaves were eventually freed is not known. Not all Africans who came to Britain were slaves, however; some were seamen, who stayed on and remained free. For some time it was unclear – certainly to Africans – as to whether former slaves in England were legally free or not.

As in the 16th century, it became a fashion of the time for wealthy merchants and members of the aristocracy to acquire young blacks as domestic servants as a sign of status. In contemporary paintings and portraits, such as those by Joshua Reynolds, they were often depicted as minor figures decked out as pageboys in fine livery, while the lives of some of the less fortunate are documented in many walks of life in the bitterly satirical engravings of William Hogarth and others.

It was in the late 18th century that we see the beginnings of black writing in Britain. Among those accounts which have been preserved were Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1772), Ignatius Sancho's *Letters* (1782), Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787), and the best known of them, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself* (1789). All these authors had been enslaved before coming to Britain and their testimony was to play an important role in the campaign for the abolition of slavery. That campaign was spurred in the late 18th century by a number of significant events which heightened public awareness about the nature of the trade: a court case in 1772 in which the Chief Justice of England, Lord Mansfield, ruled that slaves brought to England by their owners could not subsequently be sent back into servitude against their will; the furore surrounding a trial in 1783 in which ship owners had claimed insurance reimbursement for one hundred and thirty-two slaves being transported on the slave ship *Zong* who had been thrown overboard on the orders of the captain; and the slave rebellions which took place first in the French colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791 (leading to the independence of Haiti) and subsequently in Barbados, De-

merara (later Guyana), and Jamaica. The campaign was further intensified by the founding of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and the increasing number of anti-slavery texts published. One of the most significant of these, published in 1831, was an outspoken slave narrative entitled *The History of Mary Prince,* the first to recount the brutal experiences of an enslaved woman. In 1807 trading in slaves was abolished throughout the British Empire and this was followed in 1833 by the Emancipation Act, which finally abolished slavery itself in the British colonies. It goes without saying that the legacy of slavery has been of enormous significance in the history of black Britain, and in consequence it still figures frequently in black writing.

The later 19th century was remarkable in black history for the prominent careers of some notable personalities, among them the African American actor Ira Aldridge, who became the first black person to perform serious Shakespearean roles on the British stage; Mary Seacole, who in her book *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) recorded her experiences as a nurse in the Crimean War and whose role is only now receiving the recognition it deserves; and the composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who sought to integrate black traditional music into the classical music of his time, most notably in his popular choral work, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast.* The period was also notable for incipient black political organisation in the shape of Pan-Africanism, which had its roots in England and which first made its mark with the Pan-African Conference held in London in 1900.

One of the activities in which black British men have always excelled is of course sport, especially football, and it was as early as 1886 that Arthur Wharton became the first black to play in the Football League. He was followed in 1908 by the better-known Walter Tull, who played for Clapton and Tottenham Hotspur before being killed in action towards the end of the First World War.

For black British people and for the colonies the First World War revealed much about the nature of British racism which did not augur well for post-war race relations. The British War Office believed that the war in Europe should be a "white man's war", and that recruiting blacks to fight in it from Britain itself, Africa or the West Indies would undermine white superiority, and ultimately endanger white rule in the colonies. Accordingly, when the British West Indies Regiment was eventually formed it was deployed to the Middle East, where it would not be fighting against whites, and when it was subsequently sent to France, it was used as a labour force and not allowed to fight. Tull was one of the few black British men who had managed to sign up for active service in spite of official hostility. Shamefully no black soldiers were permitted to participate in the victory parades at the end of the war.

The demobilisation of millions of service men led to social upheaval in Britain. Throughout most of 1919 violent race riots, motivated by such issues as competition for jobs, housing shortages, and racial discrimination took place in nine British cities including the ports of Glasgow, Liverpool and Cardiff in which black sailors were attacked and black-owned businesses gutted by large crowds of white working-class men. The government's response was to implement a much-resented policy of repatriation in the course of which some two thousand black

Britons were sent back to their countries of origin. The post-war riots were the first of many which would follow in the course of the 20th century.

In the interwar years the black British population suffered greatly from the effects of the so-called 'colour bar' which was imposed in many areas of society. Black people were denied jobs in industry, they experienced great difficulty in accessing housing, and were refused admission to cafés and hotels. A notorious case of the latter was a London hotel's refusal of accommodation to the famous Trinidadian cricketer Learie Constantine on the grounds of colour. White racism was prompted in part by fear of white women entering relationships with black men.

By the outbreak of the Second World War the black population of Britain, it has been estimated, was around ten thousand. It would rise very steeply to about one hundred and fifty thousand in 1944, when vast numbers of African American servicemen were stationed in Britain, and fall back to about twenty thousand in the immediate post-war period. (The temporary deployment to Britain of such large numbers of black Americans, who proved very popular in the country, caused considerable social problems due largely to the US army's segregationist practices and the racism of white GIs). In the Second World War African and Caribbean people were again recruited for military service but once again were deployed mainly outside Europe, so as to avoid their having to confront whites in combat. After the end of the war Liverpool saw renewed race riots, when black seamen were again debarred from jobs in the merchant navy and fell victim to brutal racist assaults by white males. These events also demonstrated the kind of police partiality in favour of whites which would characterise relations between the police force and the black population for decades to come.

It was with the arrival of the *SS Empire Windrush* at Tilbury docks in 1948 bringing 492 Jamaicans to Britain that the era of mass migration to Britain began. This process was memorably captured in Louise Bennett's witty poem in Jamaican patois, "Colonisation in Reverse" (1966), which captured the spirit of enthusiasm and scepticism with which West Indians moved to Britain after the Second World War, while at the same time prophetically posing the essential question as to how the British would come to terms with the legacy of Empire on their own soil, and with the kind of society 'colonisation in reverse' was creating. What the poem did not address, however, was the widespread disappointment that ensued when West Indians, especially the many who had served Britain during the War, discovered that what they had been brought up to view as the 'mother country' was not at all as hospitable as they had been led to expect.

In spite of official government hostility to the idea of black people moving to Britain in any great numbers major British employers like London Transport, British Railways and the National Health Service actively recruited in the West Indies. What initially facilitated West Indians' coming was the 1948 Nationality Act which granted British citizenship to citizens of the colonies and with it the right of abode in the UK. It was not anticipated that many non-whites would avail themselves of this opportunity, but when they did government introduced the first Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 and imposed entry restrictions specifically on citizens of what had become known as the "new Commonwealth", i.e. Africa, the West Indies and India, rather than those from the old dominions like Australia

and Canada. This piece of discriminatory legislation was a response to the serious anti-black riots which broke out first in Nottingham and then in London in 1958. Typically, it penalised the victims rather than the perpetrators.

The late 1950s and mid-1960s saw some notable cultural developments: in 1956 Samuel Selvon published his novel *The Lonely Londoners,* which dealt with the experiences of Trinidadian immigrants in London and remains one of the most significant works of black British writing; in 1958 Errol John's play *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* was put on at the Royal Court Theatre in London, the first black play to be produced in Britain; and in 1960 George Lamming published his seminal collection of essays *The Pleasures of Exile.* The year 1966 saw the first Notting Hill Carnival, which became an annual event, and the foundation of the first black British bookshop, New Beacon Books, which still exists today.

Politically the 1960s proved a turbulent time for race relations in Britain. This was due in part to the inflammatory activities of the neo-fascist National Front set up in 1967 which exploited widespread public opposition to immigration, advocated the repatriation of immigrants and campaigned for Britain to leave the European Economic Community. It was also exemplified in the most notorious intervention in the debate on race relations which was the speech given in 1968 at Walsall by the right-wing Conservative MP and member of the shadow cabinet Enoch Powell. Powell, who vehemently opposed immigration, predicted in overtly racist language that 'rivers of blood' would flow in the streets of England if the black presence in the country was allowed to continue. Although he was immediately sacked from the shadow cabinet, Powell's views continued to enjoy considerable popular support. In an attempt to counteract racial discrimination successive Labour Governments introduced three Race Relations Acts (1965, 1968 and 1976), the first two of which were criticised as too ineffective and were therefore replaced by a third Act, which also established the Commission for Racial Equality.

In 1971 when the black population of Britain amounted to only 4% of the whole the Conservative government of Edward Heath passed a further Immigration Act, which reflected the widespread racist and anti-immigration attitudes of the British population, and was designed to put a stop to almost all black immigration. When in 1979 the divisive Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came to power she voiced her own anxieties about Asian immigration. Immigration was running at a number twice the size of the population of Grantham, her own home town, she warned polemically, and people feared being "swamped", as she put it, by immigrants.

In the 1970s and 80s black people suffered greatly from factors such as high unemployment, job discrimination, poor housing conditions, substandard schooling, and police harassment. In 1980 police harassment of black youth contributed largely to rioting which broke out in Bristol. This was followed in 1981 by serious riots in protest against a spate of thirty-one (!) racist murders of black people which had occurred since 1976 and against insensitive policing measures. The riots spread to black areas in many British cities, among them Brixton in London, Toxteth in Liverpool, and Handsworth in Birmingham. As commentators like Fryer and Olusoga have pointed out, rioting was worst in those cities which in earlier times had profited most from the slave trade.

In subsequent years the black population, especially the West Indians many of whom intermarried, have largely integrated into British society, changing it for the better in the process. Many signal achievements have been recorded: in 1981 the first black cricketer played for England; in 1974 the first black person became chairman of the Greater London Council (an organisation Thatcher later abolished); in 1987 the first black members were elected to parliament; in 2002 the first black politician became a cabinet minister; in 2004 the first black sportsman captained the England rugby team; and in 2005 the first black churchman became Archbishop of York.

The black population now stands at about two million with one million of them living in London. Although the social situation of many of them has greatly improved, this does not apply to all. In 2017 being black still constitutes a major obstacle to employment; black youth unemployment remains at a critical level; many black workers earn considerably less than whites; black exposure to crime far exceeds that of other sectors of the population. As any reader of the London *Evening Standard* can confirm, the deaths of young urban blacks due to knife crime and gang warfare are all too frequent and constitute a grave social problem, which is yet to be dealt with effectively.

Although most will agree that racism in Britain has greatly declined, racist murders have continued to occur, most notoriously in the case of Stephen Lawrence who in 1993 was stabbed to death by white youths on the street in London at the age of 18. The serious mishandling of this case by the Metropolitan Police and their failure to bring the culprits to justice at the time, led to his parents initiating a national campaign, which resulted in the Home Secretary setting up an inquiry under Sir William Macpherson. The Macpherson Report subsequently concluded that the police investigation had been 'marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership'. Its recommendations led to major changes to the criminal justice system, particularly with regard to police dealings with ethnic communities, and its conclusions on institutional racism led to numerous organisations in Britain including, for example, the theatre examining their own practices. In 2012, nineteen years after the death of Stephen Lawrence, his killers were finally convicted.

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The term 'South Asian British literature' is today used to signify literature in the English language produced by immigrants to Britain from India and, after Partition, from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. From the 17th century onwards, Indians settled in Britain for a variety of reasons and different lengths of time, from short stays to further their education to periods of a lifetime. Sometimes this was from choice but also from financial necessity and today, of course, they are the British inheritors of their 20th-century migrant forebears. Who are these writers and artists and why do they find themselves over a period of four hundred years travelling to, or being born in Britain? Without doubt the answer lies within the space of geography and the past of history.

The southern Asian sub-continent they come from has today borders constituted by the Indian Ocean, Iran, Afghanistan, China (Tibet), Nepal and Myanmar. Historically, the first-known civilisation, that of the Indus valley in north western

India, had been influenced by Aryans from southern-central Asia as early as the 15th or 16th century BCE. However, the first real immigration of the Vedic, Sanskrit-speaking Aryans into the Indus valley and their subsequent invasion of the Ganges valley in the east can be dated back from the Veda texts to between the fourteenth and the 11th centuries BCE. The *Rigveda* collection of spiritual and literary texts reveals the early establishment of what became the Hindu caste system. From the beginning there was a distinction labelled "varna", meaning "colour", to divide the Aryan invaders from the darker-skinned indigenous people. This Indo-Aryan society was eventually divided into a four-tiered caste system or estates, headed by the Brahmin priests and the warrior nobility followed by the free peasants and traders and the lowest castes of the slaves, labourers and artisans who originally belonged to the indigenous peoples. Kings and Brahmin priests ruled over a settled population of Indo-Aryans, forming in time great empires which were conquered by, or in turn, assimilated other foreign invaders. Alexander the Great, in the 4th century BCE, brought Greek culture to the north but was succeeded by the Indo-Aryan Mauryan emperors who went on to conquer nearly the whole of the sub-continent. The 3rd century BCE was a period of transformation of the Hindu religion, with the secession of different sects, including those of Jainism and Buddhism. The latter spread, first, throughout India from Nepal with the support of the Mauryan emperor Asoka.

Paradoxically, although India had exported it to large parts of Eastern Asia, during the first millennium CE Buddhism declined in the sub-continent itself, becoming more or less integrated into the prevailing Hinduism. This occurred at the same time as successive waves of Arabic Muslim invasions, notably that which led to the conquest of Sindh and the Punjab in 712 CE. These are the two areas which were to be included in West Pakistan in 1947. However, the early Middle Ages in India was also a period of fairly settled Hindu kingdoms and empires including what has been alluded to as the Golden Age in Hindu culture, the Gupta empire, from about CE 320-550, covering most of India except for the southwest. It was an era of great scientific and cultural creativity with notable religious sculpture, poetry and, in mathematics, the invention of the decimal system. After its decline and that of successive regional empires, in 1206 Muslim invaders from the present-day Afghanistan region installed the Sultanate of Delhi. Often called the 'slave empire' as it had been inherited from the northern conqueror by a Turkish slave, the sultanate proceeded to organise the collection of taxes and military contingents from most of the Indian territory. This was a prelude to the rival Mughal Empire established by the Persian conqueror Babar in 1526.

In 1510 the Portuguese, the first Europeans, established themselves at Goa, midway along the western coast. They brought with them Christianity but soon intermarried with other faiths and adopted 'Indian' ways of life. When the British arrived, similarly to the practice of other nations it was as traders. The British East India Company received their charter from Elizabeth I in 1600 and was followed by the rival Dutch East India Company and in 1664 by the French. Established first at Surat on the West coast, the British were soon trading throughout India in spite of the fact that the 17th century was also the height of the Mughal Empire. This attracted many British traders to intermingle with the Muslim nobility and to intermarry and adopt an Indian way of life as so brilliantly described by William