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The Thematic Tradition in Black British Literature and its Poetic Representation

Carolina Fernández Rodríguez

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The Thematic Tradition in Black British Literature and its Poetic Representation

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a thematic study of Black British Literature. The analysis covers the way in which Black British writers have dealt with the issues of childhood, old age, history, return to the homeland, identity, language, and hybridity. Each of those questions is exemplified with a number of poems that show one or some of the perspectives from which they can be considered. The overall study thus constitutes a revision of an integral part of contemporary English Literature that works at destabilizing the idea that “pure” cultural identities exist and that homogeneous national literary traditions are possible.

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Given the historical and political shifts that the phase “Black British” has undergone in the last decades, I think it necessary to start by making clear the sense in which I am going to use it throughout my paper. Despite the more recent standpoints according to which Afro-Caribbeans and Asians can no longer be “subsumed and mobilized under a single political category” (Hall, 2000: 128), I agree with other voices that are in favour of using the adjective “Black” as a political denomination, not a descriptive one, that can accurately express “a positionality that strategically unites disparate groups against increasingly organized and vicious manifestations of Euro-racism” (Sharma et al., 1986: 7).

As a literary critic with an interest in comparative approaches, my own position as regards the literature produced by British writers of African, Afro-Caribbean, and South-Asian descent is that their texts share many important features, both formal and thematic. So that is another reason why I find it convenient to use the phrase “Black British” in its most inclusive sense. Besides, the increasing phenomenon of the multi-diasporic writer and the writer of complex descent who cannot be easily associated with nothing less than several countries and world-views makes it more and more appropriate to find

large categories where, as in this case, people of colour with similar aims and problems can find their strategic place.

In any case, the aim of this paper is not to add any further fuel to the controversy that already exists as regards the label “Black British,” but to offer a limited study on the themes that dominate Black British Literature, as well as to provide the audience with some analyses of how those themes are dealt with in the works of several Black British poets.

My thematic analysis departs from Cesar Meraz and Sharon Meraz’s article on “The Thematic Tradition in Black British Literature” (2000), in which both critics distinguish basically five different themes: childhood, old age, history, return to the West Indies, and negations of post-independence West Indies. They focus almost exclusively on the novel form to illustrate those thematic possibilities. My own contribution to the study of the thematic tradition in Black British Literature is twofold. First, it has to do with an extension of the basic subject matters, to which I add the issues of language and hybridity, while replacing the label “negations of post-independence West Indies” with the terms “identity/home/belonging”. Secondly, as I have already mentioned, I offer commentaries on specific poetic texts that clearly illustrate each of the themes proposed.

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1. The trauma of childhood

One important concern in Black British Literature is childhood and, in particular, the problems that the black young Britons have to face. Thus, many novelists, especially female ones, have written Bildungsroman novels that document the trauma experienced by the Black British child. Generally speaking, one can notice that the female children tend to endure even more hardships than their male counterparts, mainly because of the fact that they are doubly oppressed on account of both their race and gender. As Caryl Phillips himself put it in an interview in 1986: “In the case of West Indians in Britain, it seems to me that the women have taken more blows than the men” (Birbalsingh, 1986: 147). One of the most outstanding prose examples of this topic is undoubtedly Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging* (1985), a novel that recounts the experiences of eleven-year-old Hyacinth who, after arriving in Britain from Jamaica, is forced to confront a world presided over by racism and abuse.

In “The Way We Were” (2000), Maureen Roberts, a Grenadian and British poet, offers an interesting example of how the theme of childhood may be dealt with in poetry. Her poem, of a narrative kind, is a sad recounting of some of the injustices she had to endure as a child after she and her family settled

in Britain. She stresses the fact that British people seemed to ignore that their mother tongue was English too: “They thought we did not speak English,” runs the first line of the poem. She likewise remembers how Black Britons used to be mistrusted and the occasions when they were cheated. But most of the poem focuses on the issue of education. For her parents, giving her a good upbringing was vital. Yet, all their attempts to help her integrate into the British society failed in one way or another. At her dancing school she danced, but she did so “crippled by shyness”. Her body was chastised on several levels: first, because she was subjected to European beauty standards (“Listened to a whole conversation on how / Ugly we were”), and also due to the requirement that she dance according to Western rules that leave no room for her “freestyle pieces”. On winning a ballet prize and getting “the cheapest thing on the table,” she learned the meaning of racial prejudice once and for all. However, her childhood experiences allowed her to learn one more discouraging lesson. Her piano teacher, an elderly English teacher, seemed to disregard the fact that she was not white. Nevertheless, she could not fail to take into account the issue of social classes. Roberts’ poem thus shows us that the notion of racial prejudice is rarely not associated with others such as gender or class discrimination:

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Took piano lessons from an elderly
Smooth-cheeked, old, English lady
Who loved music, *ergo* life.
The piano teacher pushed silver, grey, angel's hair
From her face and talked to me
Prepared me for exams, which I took.
Knew that I understood English, better than most
Gave me warm Ribera before I entered cold exam rooms
...

But, I realized when she gave my sister and me
A lift home one day
She checked out our house
The size, the type, the street.

This saddened me
Because I knew then
That even if you beat race
That still leaves class.

2. The hopelessness of old age

Another theme given attention to in Black British Literature is old age. Many writers have dealt with the reality of aging for the immigrant in the UK. Basing their literary materials on the fact that after a period of years in Britain many immigrants have attempted to go back to their countries of origin and that at least a number of them have actually gone back, writers

with an interest in old age have often focused on the longing of the old immigrant to return to his/her homeland, a prospect that becomes harder and harder to carry out as time goes by and the economic hardships that are frequently coupled with old age further separate them from the land of their dreams. Besides, when their goals are achieved, the act of going back home does not always coincide with the old immigrant's memories or expectations. Yet, the theme of returning home is so important that it deserves a section of its own. Examples of how the issue of old age is handled in Black British novels can be found in Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987), and Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987).

Grace Nichols's "Two Old Black Men on a Leicester Square Park Bench" (1984b) constitutes an interesting poetic rendition of the same subject:

What do you dream of you
old black men sitting
on park benches staunchly
wrapped up in scarves
and coats of silence
eyes far away from the cold
grey and strutting
pigeon
ashy fingers trembling

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(though it's said that the old
hardly ever feel the cold)

do you dream revolutions
you could have forged
or mourn

some sunfull woman you
might have known a
hibiscus flower
ghost memories of desire

O it's easy
to rainbow the past
after all the letters from
home spoke of hardships
and the sun was traded long ago

In this poem we see two old black men sitting on a bench. Their situation is indeed a delicate one. On the one hand, because of the cold that is making their fingers tremble, and also because of their winter clothes, which seem to impose silence on them, as if they were too heavy or covered their bodies so much that speech was impossible (“scarves / and coats of silence”). On the other hand, because the persona wonders what their dreams are about, and all the possibilities she considers are negatively connoted. A couple of dreams might be related to things which never came true while they were

young or which were later lost (“do you dream revolutions / you could have forged / or mourn / some sunfull woman you / might have known..”). The third thing they might be dreaming about could be their homeland, which, in their memories, has been “rainbowed,” that is, idealized, despite the news that things back home are terribly deteriorated. In any case, we see how Nichols depicts the situation of old black immigrants as a hopeless one: they are alone (their silence indicates they do not share much intimacy), cold, mourning their lost youth and idealizing their lost country.

3. Return to the Homeland

As I have already pointed out, another recurrent theme in Black British Literature is that of the return to the homeland. This theme was first dealt with by the first-generation writers (like Sam Selvon), and later on taken up by contemporary Black British ones. Most of the novels that illustrate this issue record the difficulty, or even impossibility, of return both for the first-generation immigrants and for their Black British children. For the latter the problem is even more complicated, since most of them have never even been to their parents’ homelands.

As critics Cesar and Sharon Meraz (2000) have pointed out, there is another aspect of this theme that is also commonly

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dealt with in novels that explore the issue of returning to the homeland, mainly that of analysing the psychological factors that mistakenly make the Black British child associate their parents' homeland with their true home. What is particularly disturbing here is that this need to find an alternative home can only be understood in the context of a racist system which is responsible for marginalizing the Black British, denying them their place in the British society, and thus forcing them to make up an imagined homeland. Vernella Fuller's *Going Back Home* (1992) is clearly a superb prose example of that attempt to analyse some young Black Britons' need to find surrogate homes, but writers such as Caryl Phillips, Amyrl Johnson, Beryl Gilroy or Andrea Levy have also contributed a good number of texts that explore the theme of returning to the homeland.

Guayane/British poet Meiling Jin, a writer of Asian descent, offers, in "The Knock" (1990b), a poetic example of another aspect of the theme we are concerned with in this section. In particular, she writes about deportation; in other words, she is interested in the experience of those illegal immigrants who do not return home because they are willing to do so, but because the metropolis does not offer them another option. In her poem, the poetic persona is "[n]ot a traveller by choice,"

but one “who has been dispossessed”. For that reason, she lives in constant “fear of the knock,” the police’s knock that will finally call at her house:

And quietly comes the Dawn.
The knock.
Police.
A short trip
Via the airport.
A oneway ticket
To an unknown place
Called Homelands.

Ironically enough, for the poetic persona her supposed Homeland is “an unknown place”. The irony effectively relies on the fact that, in dealing with her, British institutions have failed to recognize that after years of estrangement from her country of origin she can no longer feel integrated into it. On the contrary, the place which she could call her own, refuses her the right of citizenship. Here, therefore, the theme of going back to the homeland is intricately connected with that of home and belonging, that will be analysed later on.

4. History revisited

Another theme is that of history. There are many Black British texts whose main narratives are set in the eighteenth and

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nineteenth centuries. Some of these explore plantation slavery times and are, to a certain extent, influenced by the slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, both ex-slaves who lived in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and who, despite the difficult circumstances that they had to endure, managed to have their works published in their times.

Contemporary Black British writers interested in the theme of history revisit it in order to address the issues associated with historical misrepresentation of the Black British population, and they go on to rewrite it in an attempt to reinscribe the character of the slave who has been misrepresented or radically blotted out by the most important representational discourses, i.e. history, anthropology, ethnology, travel narratives, etc. Ultimately, their goal is to provide a greater understanding of Black British history as well as of the racial tensions that characterize contemporary Britain. Several novels by Dabyd Dabydeen deal with history in this sense, as well as do others by Caryl Phillips, Fred D'Aguiar and Beryl Gilroy. Poet Linton Kwesi Johnson is particularly interested in studying the connection between slavery times and the present. He sees a continuum of racial violence from the era of slavery to contemporary Britain. Thus, his work *Dread, Beat and Blood* (1975) is written under the conviction that Black Britons have

endured many historical hurts, which explains their desire to seek violent revenge in contemporary times.

Apart from the history of slavery, another aspect that is likewise considered in some texts is the system of indentured labourers. The fact that during the nineteenth century many people were shipped from India to work in the Caribbean plantations is also remembered in the novels of both V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) and Laksmi Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind* (1990).

Besides, we should also take into account the female Black British writer's concern for the memorializing of slave history. Her work is in a sense more complex, as she needs to consider not only the representation of slavery in British history, but the way in which a number of gender issues have influenced it. Gilroy's work, for example, shows "her attempt to empower the black slave woman with an identity quite beside a mere sexual object" (Meraz, 2000).

In "Strangers in a Hostile Landscape" (1990), part of which is transcribed below, Meiling Jin deals with several issues such as the concept of home, the problem of belonging, and those of violence, racism, and the invisibility of minority ethnic groups. The poem is written as if it were an autobiography ("When people ask me where I come from / I tell them this

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story”), but it is also influenced by the fairy-tale genre (the ship the persona’s grandfather sailed on was called “Red-riding Hood,” and one of the characters of the story is a prince called “Brit Ain” who, as many fairy-tale princes, is only intent on making himself rich). But both the autobiographical and the fairy-tale elements are decorative features of the fundamental narrative line, which is of a historical nature. In particular, the persona gives us her version of the history of black Britons of African, Caribbean and Asian descent. Therefore, references to the beginnings of imperialism and to the slave trade and the system of indentured labourers are taken as the first issues to be considered. Later on in the poem, the persona connects the history of slavery with the racism and violence suffered by the Black British population in present times, much in the vein of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s continuum of racial violence from the era of slavery to present-day Britain. As Johnson, Meiling blames that historical continuum of racism for Black Britons’ occasional outbreaks of violence.

When people ask me where I come from
I tell them this story.

...

When my grandmother was a girl,
paddle-boats crossed the river
from the town.

They brought all sorts of people
looking for
God only knows what.
Unspeakable riches, I suppose.
Instead, they found sugar-cane;
sugar-cane and mosquitoes.
They worked hard on large plots of land
dem call plantation.
Slaves worked the plantations originally
and when slavery was abolished,
freed slaves worked the plantations.
And when they were decimated,
we worked the plantations.
We were called,
indentured labourers

...

And when one day
I was chased from school
I turned and punched their teeth out.
Too harsh, you say,
I don't's agree,
They would have smashed my head in.

5. Identity, Home, Belonging

Another theme which is very commonly treated in Black British Literature is that of identity, which is in its turn related to

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the issues of “Home” and “belonging”. Black British writers are writers in the diaspora. They have a past West Indian, African or Asian identity, as well as a British identity. For that reason, they very often use their fiction and their poetry to explore the ways in which they negotiate their identities, that is, the ways in which they work out their attachment to their places of origin (or their parents’ places of origin) and to Britain. Their works are then an exploration of their idea of “Home” as the place where they belong, where they are at ease, culturally speaking.

Many critics have devoted their time and efforts to establish different categories for writers with complex identities of the kinds we are dealing with. The choices that these writers have are plenty: some associate themselves with their countries of origin rather than with Britain, thus considering themselves as Asians/Africans/West Indians in exile; others, however, prefer to see themselves as Black British, putting emphasis on their Britishness. At any rate, what really matters is that all these writers inhabit a borderlands, a space where two or more cultures may be at work, and that each of them may choose to speak from a particular point of the “spectrum of creative in-betweenness” (Meraz, 2000) that is at their disposal.

The dialogism of their works is evidenced, among other things, in the settings of their works: in the works of one writer (take Joan Riley or Vernella Fuller, for example) characters are set in the West Indies, made to emigrate to Britain, go back to the West Indies as tourists or immigrants, or simply by means of their imaginations and their memories. Thematically speaking, we also see this space of creative in-betweenness in that, for instance, many writers explore social, economic, cultural and political issues relating to Britain and/or to their prior homeland.

In this extract from Fred D'Aguiar's "Letter from Mama Dot" (1985) we can see an example of how the theme of identity has been dealt with:

You are a traveller to them.
A West Indian working in England;
A Friday, Tonto, or Punkawallah;
Sponging off the state. Our languages
Remain pidgin, like our *dark, third,*
Underdeveloped, world...

"Here we see two basic elements in relation to identity. First, the persona refers to the ways in which blacks are derogatively labelled by white Britons. Labels *identify* you as this or that. In this case, blacks are associated with negative things such as "Friday" (see the intertextuality with Defoe's *Robin-*

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son Crusoe), and “Tonto”. Besides, blacks are identified as immigrants in all cases, despite the fact that nowadays most blacks in the UK have already been born there. Secondly, the persona refers to Black English (“our languages”) as another marker of their identity, since, as it is widely known, group membership can be easily decided by means of the variety of English that one speaks.

“This Landscape, These People” (1964), by Zulfikar Ghose, a writer of South Asian descent, adds other features to the representational problems posed by the question of identity and belonging. This poem has three sections. The first one is set in England. In it the persona explains her unbelonging, as we can see in one of the stanzas where she shows her detachment from England:

A child at a museum, England for me
is an exhibit behind a glass case.
The country, like an antique chair, has a rope
across it. I may not sit, only pace
its frontiers. I slip through ponds, jump ditches,
through galleries of ferns see England in pictures.

The second section of the poem is set in India. This space is more agreeable for her and her relationship to her homeland is therefore conveyed in much more positive terms. However,

this is not the place where she belonged either, it was not her Home:

Born to this continent, all was mine
To pluck and taste: pomegranates to purple
My tongue and chilles to burn my mouth. Stones were there to
kick. This landscape, these people –
Bound by a rope, consumed by their own fire.
Born here, among these people, I was a stranger.

The third section is also set in England, many more years after her arrival. The country is now characterized by its multiculturalism, as we can guess from the image that appears in the last stanza of the poem, where we are told that “the road from Putney Hill / runs across oceans into the harbour / of Bombay,” thus conveying the idea that both England and India are closer to each other than both dare to imagine. The persona is now able to feel at ease in this space of in-betweenness which she can rightly call her home, which nevertheless does not entail that her identity can be easily defined, as she herself notes when she does not know whether to call herself “Stranger” or “inhabitant” in relation to England:

I stir the water with a finger until
it tosses the waves, until countries appear
from its dark bed: the road from Putney Hill
runs across oceans into the harbour

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of Bombay. To this country I have come.
Stranger or an inhabitant, this is my home.

To conclude this section, I would like to refer to Grace Nichols' somewhat irreverent poem, "Wherever I Hang" (1998), where we find an example of how the poet deals with the divided self of an immigrant woman who has left the Caribbean for England. After some time in London, she goes on missing her home country; yet, she too realizes that, little by little, her customs have begun to change, which implies the transformation of her original identity. The geographical transportation from the West Indies to England has resulted in a problematization of her identity: "To tell you de truth / I don't know really where I belong". Like other writers, Nichols uses the image of the "divided" self to confront that unresolved problematization: "Yes, divided to de ocean / Divided to de bone". However, as regards the issue of where home is for the divided self, Nichols' poetic persona has no doubt: she first refers to the Caribbean as "home" ("And is so I sending home photos of myself"), but eventually, she categorically states: "Wherever I hang me knickers – that's my home".

6. New languages

I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
From the root of the old one
A new one has sprung
Grace Nichols, "Epilogue"

In 1986 Salman Rushdie affirmed that being a black writer in a predominantly white society entailed a kind of public responsibility; in particular, that of "giving voice" (37), which has a twofold implication for him. On the one hand, "giving voice" implies celebrating the writer's world and, on the other, shouting the chasm which exists between white and black perceptions of their mutual world. For Rushdie, "the project of 'giving voice' necessitates a new language and a new kind of form; fundamental alterations need be made in the syntax and the content of the language if it is to be allowed to say new things" (37).

As a matter of fact, the development of a new language has been a fundamental issue for most Black British writers, who have not only made use of it in their works, but have also made that new code a most important metaliterary topic in much of their production.

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The Trinidadian Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1963) is an interesting landmark in the history of Black British Literature. From the linguistic point of view it stands up as one of the earliest attempts to use a West Indian creolized English as a narrative voice. West Indian Creole (sometimes called "patois" or "nation language") evolved from the language of slaves, whose English retained some of the grammatical structures of their own African languages. Although underrated by many British as "broken English," or as worthy only of comic expression, creolized English or, more generally speaking "Black English" (where we can include varieties of English spoken by other ethnic minorities apart from West Indians), continues to be the literary language of choice amongst many Black British writers.

Selvon's use of such language was primarily aimed at giving a naturalistic flavour to his text. However, later Black British writers use West Indian Creole or Black British English self-consciously, in an attempt to resist and fight against white domination by means of an intentional insertion into the master language, that is, standard British English, of Black English terms, phrases, pronunciations, grammatical rules, etc. Thanks to this insertion into the master code, Black British writers are trying to represent their power to own but not be

owned by the dominant language. Black English thus allows them to synchronize two or more cultures but, at the same time, to show their ability to “remain within an ambivalence without succumbing to the pull of any single culture” (Wah, 1996: 62). **(note 1)**

To exemplify this general overview of Black British English, I would like to comment on two poems, one by Grace Nichols and the other by John Agard. Nichols’ poem, “We New World Blacks” (1984a), is quite an interesting text because it offers a good instance of the way in which many contemporary Black British writers deal with the issue of language in their works, and the extent to which they do so in a conscious way. In this mode, the issue of language is inextricably related to that of identity, which, as we saw in the previous section, is also a major theme in Black British Literature.

The timbre in our voices
betrays us
however far
we’ve been
whatever tongue
we speak
the old ghost
asserts itself
in dusky echoes

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like driftwood
traces
and in spite of
ourselves
we know the way
back to
the river stone
the little decayed
spirit
of the navel string
hiding in our back garden
(Nichols, 1984a)

Here Nichols is denouncing the discrimination that blacks are enduring in Britain, and their struggle to be accepted as Britons. On this occasion, difficulties for them are shown to arise not from the colour of their skin or their different ethnicity, but from the very “timbre” of their voices. In the poem this “timbre” is personified (it “betrays” blacks) and metaphorically associated with both Black Britons’ bodies (the term “timbre” refers to a physical quality) and their linguistic code. For many white Britons Black English is a mere variety of “broken English” that can be dangerous for standard English, since it may end up corrupting it. However, Nichols’ poem shows that Black British people’s use of their peculiar patois has been dangerous only for themselves: they are the ones that have been

“betrayed”; in other words, it is their problematic belonging to the British language, and therefore to the British nation, that has been given away by the “timbre” of their voices.

Despite her using a standard variety of English in that poem, Nichols has made Black English the main theme of the text. Her position in these lines, however, is maybe slightly pessimistic and not as self-assertive as in other texts, since in “We New World Blacks” she has chosen not to examine the subversive possibilities of using Black English, that is, the power implicit in Black Briton’s apparent position of powerlessness owing to their deviance from the standard code.

On the contrary, John Agard, who in the poem “Remember the Ship” (1998) declares himself “citizen / of the English tongue”, thus fully and unashamedly appropriating the English language, is more conscious of the subversive possibilities of “mugging de Queen’s English,” or, in other words, of using Black English as a means of achieving self-assertion. In his poem “Listen Mr Oxford don” (1985), from which the latter quotation has been taken, he uses a poetic persona who defiantly addresses a Mr Oxford don in Black English, that is, a person who is supposed to speak the Queen’s English perfectly well. Moreover, the poetic persona tries to intimidate the don with his “dangerous weapon,” which is no other than

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his “human breath”. With this metaphor, as it happened in Nichols’ poem, a physical feature is used as the tenor of a trope where the black body and the black linguistic code conflate, thus conveying the idea that one’s identity is inescapably bound to one’s body and language. Such “human breath” is dangerous inasmuch as it metaphorically assaults standard British English (“Dem accuse me of assault / on de Oxford dictionary?”) by means of certain unorthodox departures from the linguistic norm: “I slashing suffix in self-defence / I bashing future wit present tense”. Since standard British English has been seen as a symbol of a unified British identity, Black British is then an effective attack on such an identity—an attack which is calling for a recognition of the diverse peoples that make up present-day Britain.

7. Celebration of Hybridity

As Raman Selden and others have pointed out (Selden *et al.*, 1995), the experience of migrant or diasporic people is central to contemporary societies. Responding to this, studies of race and ethnicity have been at the forefront of recent discussion seeking to articulate the lived experience of postmodernity. In those studies, the concepts of race and ethnicity are distinguished, thus allowing us to deconstruct, among others, the assumption that there can be a unified national identity. Cer-

tain terms have been developed in the context of those studies, such as the concept of *hybridity*.

The notion of *hybridity*, as R. Young has explained (1995), was first used in a *biological* sense (hybrids were the result of the mixture of different species, whereas mongrels were the crosses between different races). Later on, Bakhtin employed the term “hybridity” in a *linguistic* sense. Finally, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and others began to talk about *cultural* hybridity. Selden has summarized the sense in which Stuart Hall uses that term:

Hybridity is an enabling metaphor which assists theorization of the “black experience” as a “diaspora experience” (both in Britain and the Caribbean) and brings to the fore the doubleness or double-voiced structures which he [Stuart Hall] sees as constitutive of this experience (Selden *et al.*, 1995: 231).

For Young (1995), hybridity can be understood in two ways: first, as a syncretic force that hegemonizes several distinct elements which are transformed into a new form that can then be set against the old form, of which it is partly made up; secondly, hybridity may be seen in a more radical guise as a way to disarticulate authority, as a form of subversion that produces no stable new form because it implies a permanent

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revolution of forms. In any case, however, the subversive potential of the hybrid form/subject/society is evident.

J.O. Ifekwunigwe (1999) has rejected the term “hybridity” (which he sees as somehow still related to its origins as a biological term) and argued for the use of the phrase “cultural *métissage*” to account for individuals who, according to popular concepts of “race” and by known birth parentage, embody two or more world views or, in genealogical terms, descent groups. He arrived at this label after considering two facts: first, that the concept of race has no biological foundation; and secondly, that in a globalizing world such as ours, one can increasingly claim that there are transnational/multiple migrants who, by virtue of their cumulative experiences of travel, education and labour, represent “cultural *métissage*” just as multiracial people do. Whatever the terminology used, however, what interests me from Ifekwunigwe’s ideas is that he states that an individual may be a cultural hybrid, without necessarily being a racial hybrid too.

Out of this brief view of the possibilities that the term *hybridity* has opened up for cultural critics, I would like to highlight two ideas once again, for they are essential for understanding contemporary Black British Literature: first, the idea that “hybridity” is celebrated by many critics as a destabilizing concept

that constantly forces us to question all preconceived notions, such as, for example, those of “cultural purity” and “unified national identities”; secondly, the idea that every human being may be a hybrid, at least culturally speaking.

To conclude this section, I would like to comment on how John Agard’s poem “Remember the Ship” (1998) celebrates the concept of *hybridity* and works with those two ideas I have highlighted above. Here is a section of the poem:

As citizen
of the English tongue
I say remember
the ship
in citizenship

...

for is not each member
of the human race –
a ship on two legs
charting life’s tidal
rise and fall
as the ship
of the sun
unloads its light
and the ship
of night

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its cargo of stars
again I say remember
the ship
in citizenship
and diversity
shall sound its trumpet
outside the bigot's wall
and citizenship shall be
a call
to kinship
that knows
no boundary
of skin
and the heart
offer its wide harbours
for Europe's new voyage
to begin

Agard's celebration of hybridity works by means of his conception of the notion that all human beings are "a ship on two legs," an image by means of which he conveys the idea that the history of humanity has always been linked to migratory moves (the "ship" of the metaphor is responsible for introducing the theme of voyages, explorations, diasporas – any kind of displacement, in short). The fact that ours is "a ship *on two legs*" reminds us of the fact that, as critic Stuart Hall has

noted, the “diaspora experience” is inevitably connected with doubleness; in other words, Agard is maintaining that all human beings have complex cultural identities that have been made up of at least two world views. The apparent diversity of all the world views we can think of is thus reduced to the common denominator of the “ship on two legs”.

Besides, by means of the pun on the word “*citizenship*,” Agard is pointing at the problem of all those diasporic persons that become illegal immigrants when they reach their place of destination, thus losing all rights and their human status. The system that unwillingly accepts them fails to understand that there is a link that binds all human beings, despite their apparent diversity or the colour of their skin.

For Agard, however, if Europe understood that global kinship, the mere fact of being a human being would entitle every person to citizenship regardless their race or ethnicity. This generous, multicultural and diverse Europe would be a glorious thing, worthwhile the resounding of trumpets. But, again, as critic R. Young has noted, this new Europe would have achieved no closure, no final and definite form, but would find herself at a new beginning, ready for other voyages, other changes, a permanent revolution of forms – just as it has always been:

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This survey of some of the thematic possibilities of Black British Literature and their poetic representation has shown us that Black Britons' experience is of a varied and interesting nature, though it very often adopts a disturbing one too, especially for those who resist a redefinition of concepts such as "British identity," or even "English Literature.

However, for those readers, critics, and literary historians who are ready to reconsider traditional dictums on what the historical truth was or what the authentic English identity must be like, the texts I have analysed in this paper may help us enlarge our vision and change our reaction to the problems posed by multiculturalism in contemporary societies.

In short, instead of reinforcing the idea that cultural hybridity is one of the maladies of our globalized world, those poems I have commented on may lead us to value cultural *metis-sage* as the tool that will allow us to cross-fertilize one another. They expose the damage caused by racism, as when they show the problems endured by Black young Britons or their grandparents; they examine the historical representations of eurocentric historical narratives and unveil their racist and sexist biases; they likewise study the subversive potential of linguistic codes, as well as their adaptability to new cultural contexts; to conclude, it is their analysis of concepts such as identity, home and belonging that invite us to celebrate hy-

bridity and to share with Gillian Beer the belief that “the island” (or the British Isles, one might say), “to be fruitful, can never be intact. It is traseried by water, overflown by birds carrying seeds” (1990: 271).

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1. Fred Wah's article does not focus specifically on Black British Literature, but more generally on the phenomenon of "code switching" that can be observed in what he calls "half-bred poetics," or, in other words, the literature produced by multi-racial and multi-cultural writers.