

# BREAKING THE MOULD: ESCAPING THE TERM “BLACK BRITISH” IN THE POETRY OF BERNARDINE EVARISTO AND JACKIE KAY

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## ABSTRACT

This article will discuss the work of Bernardine Evaristo and Jackie Kay in the context of “black British” poetry. I will argue that in both poets’ work the discussion of identities which are hybrid, complex and conflicted in terms of race and nation are further complicated as the exploration of gender and sexuality focuses on the personal and disrupts all classifications that are collective. Focussing on poems from Jackie Kay’s *Darling: New and Selected Poems* (2007) and Bernardine Evaristo’s verse-novels *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001) I will argue that as gender, sexuality, family relationships and motherhood, linguistic, cultural and poetic differences replace discussion of race and nation these writers present a post-racial and transnational understanding of the UK in the context of which easy labels, like “Black British” poetry are always up for debate. Furthermore, I will also suggest that Kay and Evaristo adapt poetic forms and push at their boundaries in order to accommodate their anomalous standpoints. Therefore just as “Black” and “British” become uncertain terms, so “Poetry” is also debated.

KEY WORDS: Black British poetry, race, nation, regional identity, transnationalism, poetic form.

## RESUMEN

El presente artículo analizará la obra de Bernardine Evaristo y de Jackie Kay en el contexto de la poesía negra británica. Argumentaré que en la obra de ambas poetisas el debate sobre identidades híbridas, complejas y en conflicto se complica a medida que la exploración del género y la sexualidad se centra en lo personal y altera todas las clasificaciones colectivas. Centrándome en poemas de *Darling: New and Selected Poems* (2007) de Jackie Kay y en las novelas en verso, *Lara* (1997) y *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001) de Bernardine Evaristo, sostendré que a medida que el género, la sexualidad, las relaciones familiares y la maternidad, y las diferencias lingüísticas, culturales y poéticas sustituyen el debate sobre raza y nación estas escritoras presentan una visión post-racial y transnacional del Reino Unido en cuyo contexto etiquetas fáciles como “poesía negra británica” siempre se prestan a debate. Además, sugeriré también que Kay y Evaristo adaptan formas poéticas y desplazan sus márgenes para adaptarlos a sus puntos de vista. Por lo tanto, de la misma manera que “negra” y “británica” se convierten en términos inciertos, también “poesía” queda en entredicho.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía negra británica, raza, nación, identidad regional, transnacionalismo, forma poética.



This article will explore the ways in which the poetry of Bernardine Evaristo and Jackie Kay repeatedly questions the label “black British” by revealing the inherent restrictions of the term and both writers seek alternative ways of envisaging nation and race as they explore experiences of diaspora and social difference. Both are contemporary female writers and Evaristo and Kay engage with similar themes including femininity, sexual identities, and the commodification identity in the contemporary world. They are both successful poets, writers and performers; although different from each other in terms of poetic vision and literary production. However, Kay and Evaristo have each vociferously objected to what they perceive as the restrictive label of “black British” poetry and their work also challenges this term which sets limits to their discussions of race and nationhood. As Jackie Kay suggests, this matter of personal experience makes her acutely aware of the limitations and expectations with which the black female poet is regarded. She demonstrates the problems that are involved in determining your own identity as she draws attention to the shifts of power that are involved in the definition of identity:

It's liberating to define yourself if you're the one that's doing the defining but when other people are constantly doing the defining and when all they ever do is define the Other in society, the black person, the gay person, the woman, then they assume the white heterosexual man is the norm and everybody else deviates from that. You don't get the likes of Ted Hughes and Andrew Motion being described as white, male, middle class and heterosexual. And if every time they were written about they had to face these terms it would be a pain in the arse for them, so why should I have to put up with it? (Kay, “Jackie” 238)

Here, Kay makes explicit the empowerment of “doing the defining,” and foregrounds the ways in which this is a process that is normally undertaken from an external position. She also demonstrates the way in which the entire process is built upon an understanding of “norms,” which she identifies as “male, middle class and heterosexual.” In this case, for Kay, and anyone who can not be easily located within this category, “doing the defining” is a process of identifying difference. Kay draws attention to racial categorisation here but does not mention regionality or nationality in this quotation. However, it is notable that both Ted Hughes and Andrew Motion are English poets, whilst she, herself is resolutely Scottish in her linguistic identification and poetic tone. In line with this, I will explore the ways in which Jackie Kay's poetry draws attention to the problematic of nationality and race in a way which mirrors her discussion above. Rather than abandoning these forms of categorisation completely, she insists on discussion of “the Other in society.” Therefore, whilst the Scottish voice of her poems complicates straightforward British identity, so the discussion of femininity, sexuality and racial heritage confounds easy notions of blackness. I will tie this reading to a discussion of the early poetry of Bernardine Evaristo and will focus on *Lara* (1997) and *Island of Abraham* (1994). In a way which mirrors Kay's interrogation of the term “black British” poetry, I will argue that Evaristo's work also disrupts easy notions of race and nationality. Likewise, in her work racial identities are often featured as part of a wider notion of social otherness and her construction of Britishness is inherently transnational. As



such, and in line with Kay, she questions the aptness of literary categorisation and refutes easy ways of “doing the defining”:

I think that what happens in this country is that people can't see beyond race. If you are a black writer you are deemed to be writing about black subjects and that is generally perceived to be for a black audience. (Evaristo, “Bernardine” 287)

Evaristo highlights the prejudices that she faces as a “black writer” in the mainstream, and again foregrounds the perception that this kind of writing is linked to a single experience of Britain and Britishness. Furthermore, when used in a populist way, the terms of its reference are limited to people of African descent, thus circumscribing its context even further. Although both Kay and Evaristo are of African descent—their fathers are Nigerian—they themselves have identities that are much more complex and hybrid than the term “black British” can adequately reflect. Evaristo’s first verse-novel, *Lara*, explores the reverberations of post-war racism on the mixed-race child of the nineteen-seventies. Lara, and her Nigerian father, Taiwo, are both racially abused and Evaristo does not shy away from describing the effects of this discrimination as they are both referred to in demotic racial terms, including “nigger-man” (32) and “nignog” (67). The inclusion of this vocabulary highlights the racism to which Lara is subjected and which contributes to her own sense of being socially and culturally different to the British context in which she grows up. In *Lara*, and her other work, these dynamics of race and racism are crucial to Evaristo’s portrayal of late twentieth-century London and impact directly on Lara’s sense of personal and national belonging. Nevertheless, there are moments in Evaristo’s work when the subject of race is marginalised by discussions of femininity, sexuality, gender and other more personally specific identities. Therefore, I will explore the ways in which the poetry of Jackie Kay and Bernardine Evaristo complicates notions of race and nation. In the work of both writers this is a critique of the term “black British” as a way of defining both their work and themselves. In their interrogation and rejection of the term, they both question the standpoint of those critics who use it unproblematically and demonstrate the manifold problems that being categorised in terms set by others brings.

## WHAT IS “BLACK” BRITISH POETRY?

In accordance with this, I will foreground the contrasts between Evaristo and Kay’s understanding of the term “black British” and the way in which it has been presented as an enabling and subversive form of writing in academic circles. This is in line with Kay’s discussion of the power dynamics of definition and self-definition that I foregrounded earlier, and also demonstrates the tacit differences between the academic and more general understandings of the term. I will highlight the ways in which although the term “black British” poetry is often used to describe a dynamic and disruptive form of writing, the fixity of the term potentially undercuts the subversive nature of the work. I suggest that this is overtly notable in



the work of Kay and Evaristo and so it is a term that they both seek to escape. Rather than settling for the externally imposed racial definition of “black” both writers articulate a more hybrid and productive form of racial identity.

However, it is notable that this approach is broadly in line with the way in which some critics, including Mark Stein, understand the term black British literature: “*black British literature* does not necessarily claim to represent a singular experience” (Stein 17). For Stein, black British literature is not the limited and limiting category that is so problematic for Evaristo and Kay. This is down to the explicit differences in the ways in which they conceive of the term: Stein foregrounds a broad understanding of the term that includes the myriad experiences of people living in the black diaspora in the UK, whereas for Kay and Evaristo it is inherently limited. Although the focus in their work mirrors Stein’s understanding of term, for them there is no straightforward or single appellation to include those experiences and their generalisation is inherently reductive. Kay’s poem, “Race, Racist, Racism” first published in *Off Colour* (1998), draws attention to this. It is a poem which explores the effect of race on personal identity and highlights the problem of self-definition in that context, as it demonstrates the marginalisation that racism produces and explores the definition of self at those margins:<sup>1</sup>

There is no such thing as black, said he.  
A pot is black, the earth, a shoe,  
But not I, said he, not I.  
I am not black, said he.

...

I will be oak or hazelnut or coffee.  
I will be toffee. I will be donkey.  
But I will not be black, said he.  
So you will be donkey, said I. (129)

Kay’s poem highlights the effect of racist comment on the definition of black British identity as the poetic voice is both guilt-ridden and resentful of the implication that racism is “down to me./ Entirely” (128). In this poem “black” becomes a term of racist abuse and is revealed to be wholly inaccurate in the categorisation of racial identity, as it is a suitable description of objects like, “a pot,” “the earth,” “a shoe,” but not of human skin colour. As the poem foregrounds the problems that occur when the terms of identification are set by others, it also demonstrates the inadequacy of language to articulate experience and identity. The concurrent denial and repetition of being “black” draws attention to the limits and unsuitability of the term. However, the subject’s repeated rejection of his own blackness is not a straightforward denunciation of terms, but also generates his search for

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Jackie Kay’s work come from *Darling: New and Selected Poems*. However, the original volume in which they were initially published is also detailed in the text.

new ones: “I will be oak or hazelnut or coffee.” This line demonstrates the way in which skin-colour becomes an identity. Kay’s use of nouns rather than adjectives highlights the absolute, but vaguely incongruous, nature of these terms, and reiterates it with the repeated, “or,” that suggests identity is singular and a matter of choice. Although, perhaps more descriptively accurate of the skin colours that are easily labelled black, these terms set by the subject himself are still revealed to be inherently problematic. This is most notable as the term “donkey” is introduced and reified in the line which is repeated by the poem’s narrator. The paradoxical identity, “donkey,” is explicitly chosen to concur with physical racial determinates, however, it also has other semantic associations which include animalism and the slang for foolishness. As such, even terms set by oneself, are revealed to be inherently problematic, and language is represented as both unreliable and limiting.

In this sense, the term “black British” is tense with its plethora of meanings and their potentially contradictory nature. Like Mark Stein, James Procter also has a similar understanding of the term “black British”: “One of the reasons I think black British is worth persisting with is precisely because it seems to disrupt rather than enshrine certain canonical orthodoxies associated with transnational postcolonialism” (Procter 44). For Procter, like Stein, the term indicates a category of British writers who complicate and undermine the traditional divisions of race, nation and question important notions like “postcolonial transnationalism” —and Kay and Evaristo’s work fits into this category. However, as Evaristo has repeatedly discussed, the term is much less enabling when it is being applied to your work. She highlights the ways in which, “racial labelling “ghettoizes you” (Evaristo “Bernardine” 287), and is, explicit in her discussion of the limitations and limiting effect of the imposition of literary labels. For her, to be racially determined as a writer also has implications for her subject matter and her readership. Furthermore, the contention that this “ghettoizes you,” suggests that this mode of identification is not only limiting, but actually marginalising as “black British” becomes a separate and singular identity, independent of the racial and national determinates that the term implies. Evaristo explores this in more detail in *Lara*, a text which investigates the construction of racial identity in the context of nineteen-seventies and eighties Britain, and in which her protagonist, the teenage Lara, is repeatedly faced with the difficulties of defining her identity:

‘I want a word! What’s so funny about being black?’  
 Lara smirked, ‘I’m not black, I’m half-caste, actually.’  
 ‘Oh but you’re very mistaken, lovey. Ask me how I know?’  
 Lara giggled, shrugged, went to leave but Beatrice’s voice  
 charged past her, abrasive, abrupt, ‘Stop right there!’  
 Lara exhaled a bored, amplified sigh, sneered, sat down.  
 ‘I dunno. How do you know, Miss Beatrice?’  
 ‘Experience, lovey, that’s how and don’t be so cheeky.  
 It’s time you woke up to the facts or the facts will wake  
 you up with a slap. The only half you are is half asleep.  
 Come up to Toxteth, then you’ll know what time of day  
 it is. We stick together up there, not like you Southerners



with your wishy-washy ways. They don't care whether  
your mother's white, green or orange with purple spots,  
you're a nigger to them, lovey, or a nigra as I like to say.' (74)

Like Kay's poem, this passage draws attention to the tensions at play within the term "black" and the problem of self-definition when your identity is fixed by others. It follows an incident in which Lara and her siblings identify mangoes as "black food" (73) and in so doing disassociate themselves from any form of black identity, mimicking the racism with which they themselves are faced. As Lara is questioned by her cousin Beatrice, it becomes clear that the label "black" whatever its political context, is insufficient to articulate Lara's "half-caste" identity. This highlights the tacit differences in their understandings of the term "black"; as Lara rejects the term as too limited to articulate her own sense of difference, for Beatrice the politics of black identity are subversive and revolutionary. It is ironic, however, that these politics are not necessarily racially determined, as they "don't care whether/ your mother's white, green or orange with purple spots." Although this sense of collectivity draws attention to the similar experiences of racial discrimination which face diasporic people in the UK, Beatrice's politicised standpoint is represented as being as naive as Lara's casual racism. In addition, her dismissal of Lara's Irish mother is represented as a form of racism in itself. As Beatrice concludes her tirade with "you're a nigger to them, lovey, or a nigra as I like to say" she unwittingly demonstrates the eradication of difference that is implicit within any form of collective labelling. This is further reiterated as Evaristo parodies her essentialist notion of blackness through the word "nigra" which recalls an Africanness which is inauthentic to Beatrice's twentieth-century Liverpool, and which tells only a part of Lara's story.

Therefore, even though, for critics like Stein and Procter, the term "black British" literature might refer to subversive and hybrid writing, in the work of these poets, the tag and any form of labelling is always reductive and restrictive. There is a clear difference in the ways in which the term is understood, and the tension between the problems of self-definition for the contemporary writers and the labels appended by critics remains uppermost —and not just limited to discussions of race. In a parallel move, the work of Evaristo and Kay also interrogates the fixed category of British identity. Kay's poetic voice is resolutely Scottish and Evaristo's sense of nation extends far beyond its boundaries, so both writers question the limits and inclusions that are involved in the construction of Britishness and thereby problematise the label "black British" even further.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF BRITISHNESS

In the work of Evaristo and Kay both race and nationality are brought into question, and those labels which are appended to them are revealed to be, in various ways, entirely insufficient. The subversion of these categories in the work of Kay and Evaristo is not just a conceptual concern, but also translates into their own sense of self, as Jackie Kay discusses:

I suppose I consider myself a Scottish writer, in the sense that I am, and I consider myself a black writer, in the sense that I am, and a woman writer, in the sense that I am. All these I am and I wouldn't deny being. I am wary of labels, though, because they tend to give people certain expectations and then people will assume that the themes in your work—or your interests—are actually of another spectrum than they are. (Kay "Interview")

Here Kay reiterates the tension between her own identity and the "labels" with which she is associated. In order to do this, she, perhaps paradoxically, explicitly identifies herself in terms of nationality, race and gender, however, this is undercut when she suggests that these categories "tend to give people certain expectations and then people will assume that the themes in your work—or your interests—are actually of another spectrum than they are." Like Evaristo's discussion of the way in which racial labelling "ghettoizes" writers, Kay demonstrates that for the writer, and their work, these terms are potentially restrictive in their singularity, allowing no debate as to the definition of race, nationhood or subject matter or poetry. Therefore, when Kay refers to herself as a "Scottish" writer she complicates the discussion of her Britishness by focussing on a regional identity that is also national, and is entirely incompatible with the more inclusive and less distinct label 'British'.

The tension between Britishness and Scottishness is prevalent in most of Kay's work through a clear regional narrative voice, which confuses the racial determinates of her work as race and national identity vacillate and compete. This is explicit in "My English Cousin comes to Scotland," in which Kay draws attention to the tensions within the notion of British as a national identity:

See when my English cousin comes  
It's so embarrassing, so it is, so it is,  
I have to explain everything  
I mean Every Thing, so I do, so I do.

[...]

I says, 'I'm going to have to learn you  
what's what.' And at that the wee git  
cheers up; the wee toffee knows says,  
'Not learn you, teach you' like she's scored. (203)

The narrative voice of this poem is humorous and naive, as it brings the tense relationship between the Scottish and English down to childish bickering. However, the language of the poem's narrator also demonstrates the clear linguistic split between English and regional Scottish English. In this context, the English cousin becomes an embarrassment on account of her lack of knowledge: "I have to explain everything," and the Scottish narrator is empowered. This childhood tension is a gentle mockery of the differences between the English and the Scots; however, the point goes further. In Kay's identification and characterisation of the two nations, she reveals the impossibility of their union and so questions the notion of Britishness. The linguistic tone of the poem roots it squarely within the Scottish





context and the text is littered with colloquialisms and departures from standardised English, suggesting that life in Scotland produces an alternative vocabulary to the English model. When the Scottish narrator announces, “I’m going to have to learn you/ what’s what,” it is a triumphant conquest of the alienated English cousin who is revealed to be out of place in the poem’s decidedly Scottish tone. Therefore, although when the narrator’s English is corrected by her cousin it is a reassertion of English dominance, it is notable that this linguistic correctness is also a sign of its own difference. The narrator’s defiant “like she’s scored” returns to her Scottish dialect and reinforces this colloquialism as the norm. “My English Cousin comes to Scotland” does not allow standard English to be prevalent, and as such, roots its consciousness firmly within the Scottish context. In so doing, the divisions that characterise inter-national relationships in the UK are uppermost and a single notion of British identity is always out of reach.

The focus on the Scottish voice is an important element in Kay’s poetry, and, in effect, not only destabilises and questions the notion of standardised English, but, always problematises the notion of coherent British identity in her work. Language is a signifier of the divided sense of nationalities on the island of Great Britain and the authenticity of this standardised English is repeatedly called into question. Furthermore, in poems like “Brendon Gallacher” from *Two’s Company* (1992) the production of a regionalised Scottish identity is uppermost, leaving Kay’s poetry notably devoid of a black presence. The child’s voice which narrates “Brendon Gallacher” is nostalgic and rooted in a specifically Scottish sense of home. However, it does not obscure social difference, but in this poem, otherness is not only figured in terms of race or regional identity, but through the narrator’s imaginary friend, Brendon Gallacher, whose “mother drank and his daddy was a cat burglar” (109). There is a dual understanding of social difference in this text, as Brendon’s parents represent both the realism of the alcoholic mother and the glamorous and lawless father, the “cat burglar.” Interestingly, both are characterised by their positions of social exclusion and marginality, thus imbuing Brendon with an otherness that is not constructed in terms of race, nationality or gender, but is still prevalent. It is this complicated sense of manifold differences within a liminal identity that characterises Kay’s work. This is figured in many ways and but demonstrates explicitly the limitations of the term “black British” poetry as a description of her work. Particularly as, even when her poems do deal with race and nation, they are characterised by a more general awareness of the various ways in which people are excluded and defined by their own difference.

In a satirical move, she explores this explicitly in her engagement with “The Broons,” a cartoon strip published in the weekly *The Sunday Post*. “The Broon’s Bairn’s Black (*a skipping rhyme*)” first published in *Off Colour* (1998) foregrounds this tension:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> More details of *The Sunday Post* and “The Broons” can be found at: <<http://www.dcthomson.co.uk/MAGS/POST/>>.

Scotland is having a heart attack  
Scotland is having a heart attack  
Scotland is having a heart attack  
The Broom's Bairn's Black. (159)

In a way which complicates poems, like “Brendon Gallacher,” that abandon a racial identity in favour of Scottishness, in this poem Kay explicitly highlights the problem of race in the Scottish context. The child’s “skipping rhyme,” the simplicity of the poem and particularly the repeated line “Scotland is having a heart attack” emphasises the tension between traditional Scottish identity and those of black diaspora communities in Scotland. This is disrupted in Kay’s poem by the presence of the “Broom’s Bairn” who is both alien and a composite part of recognisable of Scottish tradition. The bairn acts as an unstable signifier for a racially integrated Scotland, whilst also calling into question the security of Ma and Pa Broom as symbols of a reliable and fixed sense of Scottishness. As such the nuanced realities of contemporary Scottish life are critiqued within the banal securities of the weekly cartoon strip. This insistence on a Scottish identity that is both inclusive and regional again complicates notions of Britishness. Furthermore, as Kay engages with and overturns a cultural identity which is inherently Scottish she consciously excludes Englishness and other forms of British identity.

In a similar way, Bernardine Evaristo’s understanding of the term British is nuanced, complicated and operates to disrupt the boundaries of a purely national notion of British identity. John McLeod has discussed this in relation to *Lara*: “In following in the footsteps of black British writing, strictly national canons cannot bear adequate witness to the transnational pathways which, like Evaristo’s heroine Lara, ultimately cross water” (McLeod, “Fantasy” 99). He demonstrates the limitations of the term British for those writers whose histories extend beyond the boundaries of Britain, and in Evaristo’s work this is figured through the recurrent motif of the sea and water. What McLeod has called the “transnationality” of Evaristo’s vision elsewhere is notable even from her earliest collection of poems, *Island of Abraham* (McLeod, “Problems” 58). In this text, and her work more generally, she seeks to contextualise Britain within wider global networks of history, literature, myth and points towards those interconnections that span across worlds and genealogies. This is perhaps most notable in *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001) a text which refigures Britishness through the lens of Roman Londinium, which she represents London as a colonised town, “way out in the wild west” (26). This complication of national identity is further affected by the ethnic tensions within the British Isles and Evaristo also presents the city as a space which is characterised by social and racial diversity. Therefore, Evaristo’s Britain is conceivable only in a transnational context, and this has an impact on its representation of the past, and a reflection onto the present. *Island of Abraham* too presents a series of poetic voyages which locate late twentieth-century Britain and the poems narrators in terms of international experiences including histories and myths. In “Father, My Father,” this is figured through the narrator’s exploration of her father’s, and implicitly, her own, Yoruba heritage:



Your secrets loom like the discovery  
of rare old gems. My inheritance of  
principles, struggle and a story  
to be unravelled like gossamer.

Daddy, I cannot read your eyes  
those brown orbs of Yoruba history, but  
I can study your step, recoup years lost, and search  
into your past with belated enquiry. (15)

This poem, and the volume more generally, juxtaposes the ordinariness of British identity with the wealth of history that lies outside the nation, but has a bearing on it. Like the “rare old gems” of the narrator’s family history, this is represented as both an enrichment and a complication of contemporary British identity. In this poem, international history is figured in terms of the narrator’s personal response. There is a faint echo of Sylvia Plath’s seminal poem “Daddy” here, although the tone of Evaristo’s poem is rather different (Plath 222). However, “I cannot read your eyes” still articulates the divisions in family relationships that here become a more general signifier of the division between the narrator and the “Yoruba history” that is her heritage. As such, the “story” of her identity cannot be fully comprehended until it is “unravelled like gossamer” in a reworking of her own genealogy that is constructed upon a very specific sense on race and nation, both of which push the limits of the term “black British” in many ways.

The complication of this “black British” identity through the engagement with histories that occur outside the nation is an important facet of Evaristo’s work. She demonstrates the interlocutions between histories and reveals the pasts of British people, particularly those living in a diaspora community, to be constructed discursively with histories that are international in scope. In *Lara*, she makes it clear that this is a reciprocal relationship, not merely characterised by migrants settling in Britain, but also by the histories of voyaging out from Britain. These voyages signify the colonial encounter as the root of Lara’s diasporic identity, and are reinscribed by her, in a quest to find a viable history and identity. This, in some ways, paradoxical move reinforces the importance of Englishness for Lara, and ensures that whilst the text may extend beyond the national borders; those borders are of utmost importance. English identity is thus figured as a framework for Lara, one which is problematic and only usable through transformation, but which remains a contingent part of her sense of self-identification:

Expeditions in books borrowed from the library  
Liberated her from the environs of Arundel Road,  
for when fog vapourised her dark lamplit street,  
Lara became the beautiful Maisie in ‘The Orphan Girl’  
a story she made up, like Dickens. There she was:  
poor, pale, parentless, persecuted, pitiful, plebeian,  
puny, pongy, poxy, proud, pensive, polioed, placid,  
powerless, pathetic, piss-wet and shivering outside  
the mansions of ‘them rich ‘oose Christmas trees

dripped diamonds and 'oose turkeys glittered gold'.  
When snow transformed Lara's hilly vista, she escaped  
first light, donned duffel coat, balaclava, mittens,  
struggled out through the basement's frozen lock  
into the spellbinding Antarctic, to become Captain Scott,  
A brave lone figure conquering the vast desolate white.  
Ceremoniously, she stuck a stick in the snow —for England. (59)

This passage deals with the construction of Lara's identity in terms of a history of English literature and colonialism. It is notable that, in a way that is reminiscent of the Scottish tradition in Kay's work, that she makes associations with historical figures and literary traditions that are specified as English. Lara is figured as adjunct to any sense of collective nationality, as "a brave lone figure," a social outsider whose childhood is recalled in relation to her imagination, rather than her friends or siblings. As a mixed-race girl in London in the nineteen-seventies, she has no obvious role-model, and so her references are notably white, male and stalwarts of English identity. For instance, she proposes Dickens' hackneyed characterisations of Victorian womanhood in "the beautiful Maisie" —the stereotypical nature of which is highlighted by the alliterated "p"— and imagines herself as an ironic "Captain Scott" in the urban Woolwich in which this part of the text is set. In many ways, these are reductive and inappropriate modes of categorisation for the young Lara. However, in Evaristo's text, Lara's incongruous engagement with two stalwarts of white English masculinity not only draws attention to the fact that she has no other terms within which to imagine herself, but is also somewhat subversive in itself. As Lara invokes the Dickensian, "The Orphan Girl," she may plunge into nineteenth-century clichés of womanhood; however, she also detaches herself from her own contemporary, racial identity and conceives herself in very different terms to those in which she is externally characterised. There is a further irony in Evaristo's linguistic play: Lara as Captain Scott conquers "the vast desolate white" and sticks a stick in the snow "for England." Lara's explorations are not Antarctic, but very clearly fixed within the context of twentieth-century London, and her conquering of "the vast desolate white" is a sociological affair. Therefore she is using those reductive role models in a transformative way: they are the same old figures of Englishness but in Lara's subversive reading they take on a new significance. In her intertextual play with Dickens, Evaristo demonstrates that the structures he posits might be utilised for Lara's own purposes and suggests that although Lara's identity is narrated within already fixed terms of femininity and nationality, she always subverts the conventions set out by Dickens. In this sense, the text foregrounds the tension between Englishness and other identities to refute any sense of fixity or coherence. Furthermore, it is notable that here, Britishness is entirely absent, in favour of a national identity that is rooted within English convention, but is always orientated externally. As *Lara* demonstrates the ways in which Britishness, or more specifically, Englishness, is constructed outside the national boundaries, the crossing of borders is coupled with the return to a history of Englishness and a recuperation of that history that allows room for interpretation. In a



similar but somewhat different key, in Kay's work, the only authentic British identity is regional and is always located on the margins and she also demonstrates the inherent hybridity of the position whilst insisting upon recognition of diaspora communities in Scotland.

The work of Kay and Evaristo does not just question the stability of the term "black British" poetry, but goes further to demonstrate the ways in which the restricted nature of the label actually problematises itself. Likewise, Mike Philips suggests the emerging genre to explore, "the phenomenon of migration, movement and mobility, the renegotiation of selfhood, the historicising of new identities and the reconstitution of a dominant culture to reflect [...] new identities" (Philips 30). In the same way that Kay and Evaristo present versions of contemporary racial and national identities that are inherently complex and layered, Philips' understanding of the term draws attention to the way in which it subverts simplistic understandings of those categories. Thus the work of these writers draws attention to the limits and problems that arise in relation to any form of literary, or other, categorisation. Both Kay and Evaristo demonstrate the problems and dangers of identifying yourself in terms of racial difference and critique the ways in which it is always limiting, even when narrating a collective and empowered identity. Likewise, easy notions of the British nation are rejected for those which are both more specific and more transnational. The term British is all but completely abandoned, particularly in Kay's work as Scottishness provides a more authentic voice in her poetry, in a related way, Evaristo retains the framework of English identity, which remains far less distinct than Kay's Scottish standpoint. However, hers is a greatly transformed sense of Englishness that is retained, but transformed in Evaristo's work by a standpoint which is always orientated outwards from strictly national notions of England. As such, the work of both Jackie Kay and Bernardine Evaristo can never be strictly categorised by racial and national monikers such as 'black British'. These are revealed to be not just inappropriate, but insufficient to articulate their complex engagements with those histories, memories and narratives characterised by a multitude of voices that question the easy categories of "black" and "British" by foregrounding gender, sexuality, regionality, and the impact of transnational diaspora communities.

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