

DECOLONIZING THE IMPERIAL CENTRE: IMAGES OF LONDON IN BLACK BRITISH POETRY

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Abstract: *This article examines the imaginative decolonization of London by black British colonial and postcolonial poets since the early twentieth century. After explaining the place and role of London as occupying a significant place in the relations between poetry and decolonization, the article engages with the work of selected black British poets who arrived from (post)colonial countries in London prior to and during the period of formal decolonization following the Second World War, and their descendants writing in the late century. The aim of the article is to explore, in the light of cultural theorist Stuart Hall's theorizing and understanding of cultural identity, how these poets have imaginatively represented and re-constructed the British metropolis as a location of resistance and change, and articulated their sense of migrant, diasporic and transcultural identities.*

Key words: *Black British poetry, decolonization, postcolonial London, diaspora, cultural identity*

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“Stirred by restlessness, pushed by history, / I found myself in the centre of Empire”, writes James Berry, at the beginning of his poem, “Beginning in a City, 1948”, as he retrospectively describes in his collection of poems, “Windrush Songs” (2007), his arrival in London from Jamaica as an immigrant and part of what has come to be known as the ‘Windrush generation’. Berry’s poem conveys a sense of achievement, of being at the start of a new kind of experience, of new possibilities, and ends with his declaration “So, I had begun – begun in London” (2007: 270). Yet, it is not only an important personal event that Berry is remembering and recreating in his poem. The title of his collection refers to a particular foundational moment in the history of the West Indian and African migrants and diaspora, and also in the history of British literature, as the beginning of the migration of a large number of artists and writers from an empire in the process of rapid decolonization after World War II, when the British Nationality Act of 1948 allowed citizens from Britain’s colonies to enter the country as British citizens. As Alison Donnell writes in “Looking Back, Looking Forward: Revisiting the Windrush Myth” (2020), “the arrival of *SS Empire Windrush* at Tilbury Docks in 1948 and the disembarkation of ‘492’ West Indians from that ship has remained a significant and tenacious signifier within black British history. Indeed, just the single word ‘Windrush’ is now accepted shorthand for calling into view post-World War II mass migration from the Caribbean to Britain and an attendant narrative of the cultural shift towards a multicultural nation (195). In terms of a literary history, Windrush is “similarly invoked as a defining moment when the presence and influence of West Indian (and sometimes also South Asian) writers working and publishing within an English domestic literary landscape gained visibility and recognition” (Donnell 2020: 195). These immigrant writers were ‘pushed’ by historical conditions such as, in the words of Susheila Nasta (2004), “the need to ‘get out’, to escape the ‘philistinism’ of the West Indian middle classes and to discover a metropolitan reading public for their work” (2004: 573); they were “lured to the once-imperial metropolis” (Nasta 2004:563).

In fact, there had been immigrants and visitors to Britain and particularly London from the colonies prior to 1948, during the colonial period. Drawing attention

to the impact of colonialism within the imperial metropolis, John McLeod (2004) asserts that “although London’s built environment and public spectacles cheerfully celebrated the grandeur and fortunes of British imperialism, the city was also affected by the endeavours of those who had arrived via the international routes opened by imperial traffic” (2004: 5), and as such, it “occupies a particularly significant place in the evolution of postcolonial oppositional thought and action, and has long been an important site of creativity and conflict for those from countries with a history of colonialism” (2004: 6). Thus, by the early twentieth century, London was both the metropolitan and administrative centre of the empire and also the centre of opposition to it. McLeod explains this “conflicted position” (2004: 18) in the following comment: “On the one hand, London is the location where the British Government and so many state agencies have their national headquarters, circumstances which assist in the city’s imaginative fashioning almost as a synecdoche for the nation. On the other hand, as a specifically urban location which has welcomed for centuries peoples from overseas, London’s transcultural facticity has made possible new communities and forms of culture” (2004: 18). I argue in this article that the ‘conflicted position’ of London as both a specific place and, at the same time, a space of mobility and transcultural activity, has offered possibilities for imagining and expressing new forms of black identity and belonging, and made it possible for black British poets to participate in the task of advancing the process of cultural decolonization. As Jahan Ramazani (2009) observes, poetry “helps to remind us that decolonization is not only a political and military process but also an imaginative one – an enunciation of new possibilities and collectivities, new names and identities, new structures of thought and feeling” (2009: 162). Moreover, as Ramazani remarks, “just as the imposition of British poems and novels on subaltern peoples played a role in colonization, both at home and abroad, so too the imaginative labour of articulating an experience and a world after independence – in its sameness to and difference from what came before – continues to play a part in decolonization” (2009: 162). The poets I have chosen for my discussion are Claude McKay (1890-1948) and Una Marson (1905-1965) from the early decades of the twentieth century, James Berry (1924-2017) from the 1950s Windrush generation, Linton Kwesi Johnson (1952-) and Grace Nichols (1950-) from the second generation, and Fred D’Aguiar (1960-) from the late century.

Since poetry is a mode of cultural representation and production, the renowned and influential Jamaican British cultural theorist Professor Stuart Hall’s work that addresses concepts and issues involved in the cultural representations of black diaspora identities and experiences provides illuminating insights into the role of black British poetry in the imaginative decolonization of London. In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990), Stuart Hall, “himself one of the initial group of Windrush migrants” (Nasta 2004: 582), states that the cultural practices and forms of representation of the “Afro-Caribbean (and Asian) ‘blacks’ of the diasporas of the West – the new post-colonial subjects” have “the black subject at their centre, putting the issue of cultural identity in question” (1990:222). He goes on to argue that, “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, *positioned* (1990:222). According to Hall, there are at least two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’. “The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a

shared history and ancestry hold in common” (1990: 222). In this definition, “our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our cultural history” (1990: 222). While acknowledging the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of identity entails in “the emergence of many of the most important social movements of our time” (1990: 224), Hall offers an alternative approach to the concept of black identity: “There is, however, a second related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference*, which constitute ‘what we really are’, or rather — since history has intervened — ‘what we have become’” (1990: 225). Within this perspective, “cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*” (1990: 226). The diaspora identity and experience is defined, in Hall’s words, “by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*” (1990: 235). Thus, as Hall remarks in his lecture “Nations and Diasporas” he gave at Harvard University in 1994, to be the subject of diaspora is “to have no one particular home to which one belongs exclusively” (2017: 172). This is why, “diaspora subjects speak, sing, and write so eloquently in the metaphorical languages of love and loss, of memory and desire, of voyaging, travel, and return” (Hall 2017: 172).

One black West Indian poet who wrote ‘eloquently’ of a voyage to, and return from, London was Claude McKay, who was a visitor to London, rather than an immigrant. He had emigrated to the USA from Jamaica in 1912, and, “unlike many other artists and intellectuals who settled in the UK prior to the end of World War II, McKay was only to spend a brief and disillusioned spell in the country he had once imagined to be his spiritual and intellectual homeland” (Nasta 2004: 566). McKay’s poem “Old England”, first published in 1912, is about an imaginary voyage to London. The first-person speaker declares that he longs to sail to England: “I’ve a longin’ in me dept’s of heart dat I can conquer not, / ‘Tis a wish dat I’ve been havin’ from since I could form a t’o’t, / ‘Tis to sail athwart the ocean an’ to hear the billows roar, / When dem ride around de steamer, when dem beat on England’s / shore” (2012: 2722). It is actually London, acting as a metonym for England, that he wants to see: “Just to view de homeland England, in the streets of London walk, / An’ to see the famous sights dem ‘bouten which dere’s so much talk” (2012: 2722). He seems to be admiring the famous sights with which his colonial education has made him familiar, but in the next two lines, instead of mentioning one such sight, he goes on to describe “de fact’ry chimneys pourin’ smoke up to de sky” and “de matches-children” (2012: 2722) referring to what Ramazani calls “casualties of industrial modernity, such as the girl who freezes to death on New Year’s Eve, in both Hans Christian Andersen’s short story ‘The Little Match-Seller’ and William McGonagall’s poem ‘The Little Match Girl’” (2009: 166). In the third verse the speaker imagines himself visiting Saint Paul’s Cathedral and hearing the bishops “preachin’ relics of old fait” (2012:2722). Although he opens his “mout wid wonder at de massive organ soun” (2012: 2722) at the cathedral, he is not awed by all that he wishes to see, and can be slightly mocking when he goes to “de City Temple, where de old fait’ is a wreck”, and the parson is “a-preachin’ views dat most folks will not tek”

(2012: 2722). His tribute to “immortal Milton, an’ the wul’-famous Shakespeare” and “Past’ral Wordswort’, gentle Gray” (2012: 2722) buried at Westminster Abbey reveal his familiarity with English literature.

McKay’s lyric acknowledges the history of colonization in a new context, that of the imperial centre of the ‘homeland England’. The word ‘conquer’ that could also be used to refer to the conquest of the speaker’s land by the colonizing British, and the speaker’s wish to visit the tomb of “our Missis Queen, Victoria de Good” (2012: 2722) who was Queen when slaves became free in the West Indies are references to a specific history of colonization and colonial rule. The possessive pronoun ‘our’ affirms ownership; Queen Victoria was not only the queen of the English. The speaker expresses a sense of belonging, and subverts, in the use of non-standard ‘de’, the terms of this ownership, turning it into a possession of the black colonial subjects as well as the English people, creating a communal identity of all colonial subjects, in London and back home. The last two lines of the poem, “So I’ll rest glad and contented in me min for evermore, / When I sail across de ocean back to my own native shore” (2012: 2722), imply that when the longing he was unable to ‘conquer’ has been satisfied, he is ready to go back. His imaginary tour of London has been a means of ‘conquering’ his longing to see the mother country. By imagining himself visiting and experiencing freely the sights with which his colonial education had made him familiar, admiring and also commenting on what he sees from his informed and self-confident perspective, McKay’s speaker has articulated a new kind of relationship, a transformative encounter, between the black colonial subject and the heart of the empire. When he is ready to leave glad and contented, it is through his ‘conquest’, as it were, of the imperial capital that his desire has finally been ‘conquered’. He is transformed, so is the space of the metropolis into which his presence has been inserted.

A significant aspect of the speaker’s account of his experiences in London is his use of Jamaican creole, a non-standard form of English. As Sarah Lawson Welsh observes in “Vernacular Voices: Fashioning Idiom and Poetic Form” (2020), the use of non-standard language forms by black British poets has been “one of the most important revolutions in contemporary British poetry [...] Not only in performance poetry and through the spoken word, but also on the page, black British poetry constitutes and preserves a sound archive of distinct linguistic varieties.” (333). The use of Jamaican and Guyanese creole, defined by Kamau Brathwaite as “nation language” (2012: 2729-2733), by the poets under examination is a significant part of their endeavours to decolonize London in their poems, signifying their linguistic challenge to the language of the colonizer.

Una Marson’s poem “Quashie Comes to London” (1937) also makes use of Jamaican creole to present another transformative encounter between a West-Indian subject and London. It is a long, narrative poem, that enacts, in its forty-two four-line verses, Quashie’s various everyday experiences as he describes his encounters with various places and people of London. As Anna Snaith notes, Una Marson lived in London between 1932 and 1936, and then between 1938 and 1946 (2008: 94). She was involved with leading black intellectuals in London, and was the first Jamaican woman editor and publisher of a magazine, and founder of the BBC’s Caribbean Voices, “a crucial vehicle for the facilitation and dissemination of Caribbean literature in Britain and abroad” (Snaith 2008: 95). Like McKay’s speaker, Marson’s Quashie presents himself as a Caribbean voice and, in a similar manner, has free access to the places he

visits in London. Unlike McKay's speaker, however, he prefers to visit parks, restaurants and music halls instead of the famous sites that epitomize imperial power and cultural privilege. He portrays himself as enjoying his freedom to choose the places he visits. For instance, talking about the shows in London he says: "An' 'cording to de mood I hab / I choose de one fe go" (1937: 18). Quashie is evidently a long-term visitor to London, and the poem, in the form of a letter to a friend back in Jamaica, gives a humorous account of his everyday experiences as he discovers, by living in London and through his encounters with Londoners, ways of asserting his presence and identity, as part of a decolonizing response. He is also discovering or, becoming aware of, his attachment to the ways of his homeland Jamaica. As Susheila Nasta remarks, for the early visitors and migrants to London, ironically, "it was through the encounter with London that it became possible to inscribe a more fully realised picture of the world back home" and "to define a Caribbean consciousness within a British context" (2004: 574). Quashie's aim is, as he puts it in the first verse, to present to his friend a truthful picture of the English: "I GWINE tell you 'bout de English / And I aint gwine tell no lie, / 'Cause I come quite here to Englan' / Fe see wid me own eye." (1937: 17). Therefore, like McKay's speaker, he focuses on London, as the quintessence of England: "I tell you fuss 'bout London town, / Hi man, it big fe true" (1937: 17). While telling his friend about London, however, he reveals his nostalgia for his Jamaican home and Jamaican people. An instance of this occurs when he is visiting a music hall: "An' sometimes jes when I feel gran' / Dere sitting all alone, / Dem play some tune dat takes me home / In sweet and soulful tune" (1937: 18). His remarks about English girls also imply that his heart belongs to Jamaica: "I know you wan' fe hear jus'now / What I tink of dese white girls, / Well I tell you straight, dem smile 'pon me, / But I prefer black pearls!" (1937: 17). His racial pride is evident in his description of Jamaican girls as 'black pearls'.

Quashie creates a sense of communal identity in the imperial centre by mentioning the black singers working in music halls: "I see some ob me own folks dem / In dese here music hall" (1937: 18), and notes how these people have helped create a cultural activity involving music and dance, that brings the black people together, and how English people love "[...] all the coloured stars, / Dem love de darkies tunes me frien'" (1937: 18). Quashie describes in these lines a social space that offers the possibility of other similar social interactions. This image of London draws attention to the city as a welcoming space of transcultural exchange. Yet, the British context he depicts through his Caribbean consciousness bears reminders of a long colonial history as well. In his remarks about the movie shows, for instance, he makes a reference to this history: "I don't go much to de Movie show / For I see so much back home, / Dem all is nice but jes' de same / Dem is but de ocean's foam" (1937: 19). While the phrase 'de ocean's foam' signifies the imperial traffic of slavery and migration across the Atlantic Ocean, the similarity between the movies in London and back home clearly refers to the cultural colonization of the colonial people by the colonizer.

Quashie's disillusionment with London is expressed after an encounter in a restaurant. When the waitress, a "little gal in black and white" who speaks to him "wid charm", asks him, "What can I get you sir" (1937: 20), he says he wants some ripe breadfruit, saltfish and hot dumplings, whereupon the girl looks upon him "like say she lass" (1937: 20), and replies that they have none. The "dainty ting she bring" instead looks like "pigeon feed" (1937: 21). His nostalgia for home becomes intense: "It's den I miss me home sweet home / Me good ole rice an' peas / An' I say I is a fool fe come /

To dis lan' of starve an' sneeze" (1937: 21). In the concluding verse of the poem he declares his decision to go back: "It not gwine be anoder year / Before you see me face, / Dere's plenty dat is really nice / But I sick fe see white face" (1937: 21).

James Berry's migrant in London in his "Migrant in London" expresses no such desire or decision to go back. In a similar manner to his retrospective "Beginning in a City, 1948", it conveys a sense of experiencing a momentous event in personal and public history, and addresses issues of accommodation, both literally and metaphorically. James Berry, who came to London in 1948, was one of the influential Caribbean migrant poets in the formation of a black British canon. His early poem, "Migrant in London" was published first in his *Fractured Circles* in 1979. As Sarah Lawson Welsh notes, Berry, in his poetry, with its "crafted use of nation language and standard English, its experimentation with poetic forms" such as creole monologue, makes lyrical use of creole, and challenges "stereotypical notions that black British poetry is overwhelmingly public rather than personal, a voice only of protest and rage rather than of reflective lyricism" (2020: 339). According to Lawson Welsh, Berry's work shows that "nation language is particularly suited to lyrical uses as part of an open and intimate style. Unlike standard English it is an informal and emotive language, strongly associated with intimacy and group solidarity amongst speakers" (2020: 339). His representation, in his Jamaican creole voice, of the migrant's initial experiences upon his arrival in postcolonial London creolises the city by making his poem a space where a new communal and personal identity is asserted.

The poem begins with images of the speaker's homeland, Jamaica, before he starts to talk about his first impressions of London, his new home: "Sand under we feet long time. / Sea divided for we, you know, / how we turned stragglers to the Mecca." (2012: 273). Communal identity, being one of a group of West Indian immigrants, 'stragglers to the Mecca' like himself, is registered by images of Jamaica, and the departures from standard English, such as 'we' instead of 'our' and 'us', and the omission of a preposition and article before 'long time'. The second verse describes how he began to wander as a 'straggler' in the streets of London: "An' in mi hangin' drape style / I cross worl' centre street, man. / An' busy traffic hoot horns" (2012: 273).

The contrast between the images of Jamaica and London marks his perception of the change he is experiencing, and a sense of a new self being created. He is a newcomer, a wanderer; yet, like McKay's speaker and Marson's Quashie, he is also culturally familiar with this city and its symbolic sites. He names important, symbolic places: "I see Big Ben strike / the mark of my king town. / Pigeons come perch on mi shoulder, / roun' great Nelson feet" (2012: 273). The statue of the British Admiral Nelson who spent time in the Caribbean, as a representative figure of British imperial and colonial power, evokes the history of colonization. The variations of language from standard English to creole, such as 'my' and 'me', imply a sense of being divided between two cultures, but also indicate the migrant's new identity which lives, in Stuart Hall's words above, 'with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*'.

Mixed feelings of achievement, excitement and apprehension at arriving in 'the Mecca', the 'worl' centre' conclude the migrant-speaker's lyrical account: "I whisper, man you mek it. / You arrive. / Then sudden, like, quite loud I say, / 'Then whey you goin' sleep tonight?'" (2012: 274). The city lies before the migrant, but he suddenly realizes that there are serious challenges facing him as well, such as finding a place to

sleep. Berry's postcolonial migrant, unlike McKay's visitor-speaker and Marson's Quashie has arrived to make a home in London.

The image of London in Linton Kwesi Johnson's poem "Di Great Insohreckshan" which he wrote as a response to the uprising in Brixton which occurred in 1981 is no longer one of McKay's 'homeland', Marson's 'England', or Berry's 'Mecca'. By the 1970s and 1980s, after British politicians had, in the words of Ramazani, "fomented white racism" (2009: 172), and after black Britons had been inspired by decolonisation and the civil rights movement, black British poets started to reimagine the colonial metropolis more assertively (Ramazani 2009: 172). As John McLeod states, "in the 1970s and 1980s, London witnessed violent clashes often between the police and young black Londoners in a number of neighbourhoods with histories of migration and settlement" (2004: 127-128). Brixton became one of the "contested spaces in the cognitive mapping of London as, from one perspective, centres of black criminality and lawlessness; or, from the other, political resistance and insurrection" (McLeod 2004: 128). Linton Kwesi Johnson's poem participates in this controversy.

Johnson arrived in London in 1963, at the age of eleven. According to John McLeod, his arrival as a child makes him distinctive as a bridge between the first post-war generation of migrants to London, and their children's generation, the second generation of British-born black Britons who reached young adulthood in the 1970s and 1980s (2004: 130). His work, often located in the African Caribbean community of Brixton, focuses on the particulars of black people's lives and struggles in the capital. "Di Great Insohreckshan", first published in 1983, is a detailed imaginative recreation of the Brixton riots. In Johnson's work, the poetic images of London as a hostile and dangerous place, become a means of documenting, celebrating and intervening in the struggles of black British inhabitants of the city, thus decolonizing it imaginatively. "In what he makes of the history of 1981, Johnson attempts to create a robust and coordinated image of communal action which resources its identity and celebrates its agency" (McLeod 2004: 134). He gives voice to an angry new generation of black youth who were frustrated with their life in London and were determined not to put up with prejudice, discrimination and racist attacks.

The first verse of the poem: "it woz in april nineteen eighty wan / doun inna di ghetto af Brixtan / dat di babylan dem cauz such a frickshan / dat it bring about a great insohreckshan / an it spread all ovah di naeshan / it woz trully an historical occayshan" (2012: 309), explains when and how the riots started and celebrates the 'occayshan' as an act of making history. It also recreates an alternative image of London where certain locations are inhabited by black communities. The second verse continues to emphasize the significance of the event, and portrays a new communal identity, constructed through the unified response to racial oppression:

it woz event af di year
an I wish I ad been dere
wen wi run riot all ovah Brixtan
wen wi mash-up plenty police van
wen wi mash-up di wicked wan plan
wen wi mash-up di Swamp Eighty-wan
fi wha?
fi mek di rulah dem andahstan
dat wi naw tek noh more a dem oppreshan. (2012: 309)

As McLeod remarks, the pronoun ‘wi’, formed from the singular ‘I’ and the communal ‘we’ is one aspect of Johnson’s attempt to strengthen solidarity (2004: 133). In fact, as the lines above show, Johnson’s extensive use of Jamaican Creole is a powerful element of the provocative quality of his poem. Ramazani’s comment that by “drawing on reggae, mento, ska and other African Caribbean oral music”, Johnson “transcribes the orality of his Jamaican Creole, or patois, to de-standardize even standard words” (Ramazani 2009: 172), sheds light on the nature of the linguistic challenge presented in “Di Great Insohreckshan”. It is through speaking in the language of the black people that Johnson attributes them the power of agency, and bears witness to the validity of their ‘insohreckshan’.

The last verse describes a violent counter-attack by the police: “well now dem run gaan goh plan countah-ackshan / but di plastic bullet an di waatah kannan / will bring a blam-blam / will bring a blam-blam / nevvah mine Scarman / will bring a blam-blam” (2012: 311). The line, ‘nevvah mine Scarman’ is a reference to Lord Scarman and his report of 1981 on the riots in Brixton, commissioned by the government. By dismissing the report as ineffectual in providing a solution to the problems of black communities, Johnson is predicting further racist violence and oppression. His defence of the ‘great insohreckshan’ in the postcolonial capital acquires greater urgency and importance in such a context.

Even in the 1970s and 1980s, however, there were black British poets who preferred humour as a means of decolonizing the capital. Grace Nichols, who was born in Guyana and who moved to Britain as a young woman, adopts a playful tone in her depictions of London. Nichols’s lyric poem “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” from her second collection *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984) does not portray a communal act of resistance, but engages with a personal and more complicated sense of identity that includes issues of gender and sexuality. Nichols’s black Briton is a woman, and a fat woman. The “fat black woman” makes use of the literary space of poetry to assert her presence in London. London becomes a changed location, with the fat black woman as one of its inhabitants, who walks and shops in London as both a newcomer and a Londoner, defining a hybrid identity who can move in-between her black and British identities, constructing and acknowledging her new postcolonial identity as a fat black British woman.

The first verse depicts the woman as she moves from store to store to find clothes suitable for her size: “Shopping in London winter / is a real drag for the fat black woman / going from store to store / in search of accommodating clothes / and de weather so cold” (2012: 2751-2752). Nichols’s switch from standard English to Creole in the last line manifests the presence of a tension, experienced by the fat black woman, between the black British and Caribbean, in other words, between her new-world and old-world selves. She is very much aware of a physical environment which is greatly different to her native country. For the immigrant who comes from a warm climate, England is too cold, in both a literal and a figurative sense. The second verse reveals that the absence of a warm welcome is another, equally troubling cause of complaint: “Look at the frozen thin mannequins / fixing her with grin / and de pretty face salesgals / exchanging slimming glances / thinking she don’t notice” (2012: 2752). Yet, she does notice, and expresses her exasperation, in a single line positioned on the page as separated from the verses coming before and after it by double spaces: “Lord is aggravating” (2012: 2752). The spaces enact pauses in the fat black woman’s reflections, and lead to her feelings of

nostalgia for her former home: “Nothing soft and bright and billowing / to flow like breezy sunlight / when she walking” (2012: 2752). Remembering her comfortable self, the fat black woman “curses in Swahili/Yoruba/and nation language under her breathing / all this journeying and journeying” (2012: 2752). The mixture of black languages and creolized English, ‘Swahili/Yoruba and nation language’, is a powerful expression of personal and communal West Indian diasporic identity.

The last two lines of the poem form a rhyming couplet: “the choice is lean / Nothing much beyond size 14” (2012: 2752). By choosing to conclude with a critical remark on the inadequacy of London’s shops, and by employing the adjective ‘lean’ to describe the scarcity of choice, the fat black woman wittily mocks the ‘slimming glances’ of the salesgirls who are unable and unwilling to clothe her fat black female body with ‘accommodating’ clothes, in a literal and metaphorical sense. The positioning of the concluding line ‘nothing much beyond size 14’ to stand separated, by means of indentation and double space, from the lines before it, draws attention to itself as a stylistic device that dismisses the discriminatory attitudes while at the same time asserting the creative skills of the black British female poet/speaker. Although she is unable to find accommodating clothes, she is resolved to contribute to the imaginative recreation of London as an accommodating city for the fat black woman.

In Fred D’Aguiar’s poem “Home”, first published in his collection *British Subjects* (1993), issues of race, identity and freedom continue to be the major themes. The poem portrays London as the poet’s home, there is no mention of going back. D’Aguiar was born in London in 1960, but spent his childhood in Guyana, his parents’ country, before he returned to London in 1972. The poem depicts the poet/speaker’s arrival at Heathrow Airport in London and his journey, in a cab, to his house. It is clear that he is a person who has been journeying between nations and cultures: “These days whenever I stay away too long, / anything I happen to clap eyes on, / (that red telephone box) somehow makes me / miss here more than anything I can name” (2012: 246). While the first verse only hints at the name of the ‘here’ by mentioning a ‘red telephone box’ in parentheses, the next verse reveals it to be London: “My heart performs a jazzy drum solo / when the crow’s feet on the 747 / scrape down at Heathrow. H.M. Customs...” (2012: 246). His reference to black music, ‘a jazzy drum solo’ indicates his identity as a black Briton, juxtaposing it with ‘H.M. Customs’, the abbreviation for ‘Her Majesty’s Customs’, a signifier of British national identity. Although he has a passport, which he describes as “legal tender” (2012: 246), he is subjected to the racist behaviours of the Customs officers: “I resign to the usual inquisition, / telling me with Surrey loam caked / on the tongue, home is always elsewhere” (2012: 246). He responds to this hostility ‘like an English middleweight / with a questionable chin, knowing / my passport photo’s too open-faced, / haircut wrong (an afro) for the decade; / the stamp, British Citizen not bold enough / for my liking and too much for theirs” (2012: 246). He is not being perceived as truly British, but he is resourceful enough to resist the authority and racist attitudes of the officers. As McLeod remarks, “As well as appearing difficult to knock down, he makes a mockery of the officer’s racialized sense of British identity by calling subtle attention to English middleweight boxers, of whom most in recent years have been black” (2004: 173). When the speaker reaches his home in the city, he has difficulty unlocking his door: “At my front door, why doesn’t the lock / recognise me and budge? I give an extra / twist and fall over the threshold / piled with the felicitations of junk mail, / into a cool reception in the hall” (2012: 246). His stoic acceptance of the hardships

of making a home ‘here’, in London, and his determination to overcome these hardships is imaged in the ‘extra twist’ to the lock, which results in his ‘fall over the threshold’. In spite of this ‘cool reception’, the pile of ‘junk mail’ affirms his status as an inhabitant with an established address. Once safely at home, he declares his attachment to the city: “Grey light and close skies I love you. / chokey streets, roundabouts and streetlamps / with tyres chucked round them, I love you” (2012: 246). In the last lines of the poem, he addresses an imaginary policeman, another figure of state authority, in a humorous tone, and ends with a request from a bird: “Police officer, your boots need re-heeling, / Robin Redbreast, special request - a burst / of song so the worm can wind to the surface. / We must all sing for our suppers or else” (2012: 246). D’Aguiar’s own ‘song’ for his home, London, is itself a ‘special’ and moving tribute. Indeed, in all the poems examined above, it is by rendering their sense of migrant and diaspora identities so movingly and ‘eloquently’ that black British poets have made a contribution to the imaginative decolonization of the imperial centre.

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