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Contemporary Black British Women's Writing: Experiments in Literary Form

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This special issue on Contemporary Black British Women Writers showcases the range and variety of literary creativity of British women of African and African Caribbean descent since the 1990s through a mix of articles and interviews. If Black British literature was still invisible in 1990, over the past thirty years, women writers especially have pushed this field into the limelight, prompting critics rightly to observe that “contemporary black writing of Britain [is] characterised more and more by the work of women writers” and that these women’s literary endeavors are far “removed from the purview of ‘Black British writing’ as it has been predominantly understood.”<sup>1</sup> In this special issue, we understand that shift to be around the forms in which Black British women are writing. In a field that has been primarily appreciated for its exploration of lived Black experience, we want to pay attention to the innovations in writing that, from a literary perspective, are no less significant. In fact, we suggest that their experiments with language, style, and genre put Black British women at the vanguard of the British literary scene more broadly. This recognition raises critical questions about the extent to which precedence has been given to the politics over the aesthetics of their writing and the manner in which they have been siloed into a “minority” literature by way of their gender and race.

Historically, the designation of “Black British” as a literary category was instrumental in giving Black writers in Britain more visibility and opportunities for publishing their work. John McLeod notes that, because canon building assists in transformative processes in society, the “construct[ion of] a genealogy of black British writing” helped to recognize the work of Black writers as included within the “narrative of national culture.”<sup>2</sup> The rise of Black British literature as a distinct category was part of a greater political drive on the part of Britain’s Black communities to be recognized as belonging to Britain and being entitled to participate in public life and the shaping of national identity. Literary authors and intellectuals, most notably Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, strove to disprove the racist refrain resounding in the 1970s and 1980s that “there ain’t no black in the Union Jack,” and this growing awareness of Black British culture stimulated academic as well as public interest in the expanding body of Black British literature.<sup>3</sup>

However, in part, this categorization also has prevented Black British women’s writing from being recognized as part of the British literary mainstream, which explains some authors’ rejection or pragmatic embrace of the label.<sup>4</sup> As James English observes, the label Black British “was taken up in literary and other cultural spheres partly for reasons of commercial and curricular convenience, as a rough and ready way of situating a diverse and as yet uncataloged array of writers, artists, and works,” but this institutionalization rapidly established Black British writing as something separate from the normative literary tradition typified by white, male, middle-class authors.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Danuta Kean has explored how a distinct category for Black British writers affects the demands of the publishing industry. Her report, commissioned by Spread the Word (a writer development agency for London), identified pressures on what authors wrote about, narrow ideas of what was “authentic,” and marketing strategies focused on author ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> For instance, agents would advise authors to make their stories saleable by

conforming to stereotypical views of Black (and Asian) communities (for example encouragement in “upping the sari count, dealing with gang culture or some other image that conforms to White preconceptions”<sup>7</sup>). These attitudes tend to favor sociological realism in Black British women’s writing and encourage readers to approach the texts first and foremost as an authentic way to learn about an “other” experience.<sup>8</sup>

This paradoxical effect does not mean that we advocate rescinding the label “Black British.” An “outsider” status can be valuable in freeing authors from the dictates of tradition and allowing novelty to flourish, a phenomenon Kate Aughterson and Deborah Philips have noted in relation to women writers generally: “by being outsiders, women became innovators.”<sup>9</sup> The output of Black British women writers, who are “outside” on account of their race as well as their gender, indeed shows such experimentation, notwithstanding the earlier-noted pressures from the publishing industry to conform to their expectations. Hence, there is a balance to be struck between valuing the specific nature of Black British women’s literary innovations and giving their writing more recognition and status within the mainstream due to its ground-breaking forms. What is clear to us is that their writing should be recognized as a par with other British literature and acknowledged as a vital part of the literary scene more generally—the authors “corroborated . . . as being, incontrovertibly, constituents of Britain’s contemporary cultural landscape” rather than producers of but “a minor key in [Britain’s] contemporary literary production.”<sup>10</sup> For example, when Bernardine Evaristo won the Man Booker Prize jointly with Margaret Atwood in 2019, she did not have her fellow prize winner’s “global profile.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, by this point, Evaristo had an extensive output of writing in multiple genres, some success in garnering awards, and a high profile in supporting the (Black literary) arts in Britain, for which she received a Member of the British Empire (MBE) award a decade earlier in 2009.

These achievements were not enough for her acceptance into the literary mainstream, which was only concretized by winning the prestigious Man Booker Prize. When Lauren Laverne, who hosted Evaristo on the BBC Radio 4 program *Desert Island Discs*, asked, “How important to you is it that you are now part of the literary establishment?,” Evaristo appeared to concur with this appraisal of her new status despite her long-standing connections to that establishment.<sup>12</sup> In the discussion that followed, Evaristo made the point that few Black British women writers were being published, and few people knew the work of someone even as well-established as she already was.

Aughterson and Philips point out that, although Evaristo’s work is often deemed “difficult” (more by critics than her readers), it is her experimentation that allows her voice to be heard.<sup>13</sup> More realist texts, such as Buchi Emecheta’s London novels, may be more accessible to white readers (whom publishers assume to be their main target audience, according to Kean<sup>14</sup>), as these are sometimes assumed by white readers to provide “a window” into Black lived experience and can reinforce what the white majority already think they know about Black women’s lives. In Edward Said’s terms, these readings produce knowledge about the “other” and in turn, produce an expectation regarding the information the texts might impart.<sup>15</sup> Experimental forms disrupt this cycle by complicating or even rejecting the notion that the texts are a “window on the world.” We agree with Alison Donnell that the “literary value of these works in terms of innovation, whether in form or language, should also not be downplayed in favour of their social relevance.”<sup>16</sup> The innovations of much contemporary Black British women’s writing resist straightforward sociological readings and instead draw attention to how the texts are written. By asking their readers to engage specifically with the aesthetics of their writing, the authors make clear that they are not describing experiences within a limited set of expectations of Black lives

in Britain but rather exploring ways to document experiences that are not easily documented through the traditional, realist forms of British literature.

This special issue's premise is that Black women's writing is amongst the most thought-provoking British literature currently being published precisely because of its propensity to innovate on the level of aesthetics as well as politics. Slowly, Black British women writers' originality is being recognized in formal ways through the awarding of literary prizes and titles and more broadly in reviews and academic research that appreciate their manifold approaches literary renewal.<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Scafe, for instance, rightly proclaims that the fiction of Black British women "actively intervenes in contemporary novelistic traditions, extending and transforming the genre . . . . By doing so, these novels enliven and renew a form whose death is routinely foretold."<sup>18</sup> We would extend that sentiment to all literary genres. The range of innovations include anti-realism, genre revisions, hybrid cross-genre writing, intertextuality and metafiction, intermedial engagements with other forms, linguistic and structural play, and narrative modes of fragmentation. Many of these formal innovations are discussed in the articles included in this special issue and in the author interviews we conducted.<sup>19</sup>

To focus on the aesthetics of literary texts can be problematic, and specific issues arise when considering Black British literature. For some critics, the "appeal to aesthetic quality is reactionary and tainted with unwelcome ideological accretions."<sup>20</sup> For example, Peter Lamarque's comment that "literary appreciation is not a natural but a trained mode of discernment" already implies a bias within that appreciation towards canonical and mainstream literary genres.<sup>21</sup> Or it encourages the idea that a text must be appreciated either for its form or for its content, which potentially

encourages a bifurcation of interest that in one form or another runs through all literary criticism: interest, on the one hand, in structures, devices, narrative styles and modes, narrators and implied authors, and, on the other, interest in the human dramas depicted, the people, the conflicts, the politics, the emotions, the sociological and psychological implications.<sup>22</sup>

Yet it is possible to understand choices around form—and the aesthetic appreciation of these—as political in the depiction of human experiences. For Donnell, “it is often in their aesthetic experimentations that black British literary works are able to shift the terms and scope of political and historical literacies most powerfully.”<sup>23</sup> Such a viewpoint suggests that innovation and experimentation in Black British women’s writing is vital to their being able to address issues of race and gender on the one hand and challenge uniformed assumptions about Black women’s experiences on the other. As Jean Wyatt and Sheldon George note in the introduction to their collection of essays on contemporary Black women’s writing in the United States and the United Kingdom, the authors studied “lead readers not just to confront alterity but to also reexamine their own ethical views on alterity, particularly in relation to race.”<sup>24</sup> The writers encourage this re-examination through gaps and ambiguities at the textual level, the mixing of literary modes, and challenging plots focused on suffering. Wyatt and Sheldon also acknowledge the significance of reader positionality, noting that some (white) readers might consider a particular aspect of a text enigmatic, while other readers (from marginalized groups) might there find illumination.<sup>25</sup>

In this special issue, we would therefore concur with the idea that “experimentalism—in aesthetic or political form—is the very essence of political engagement.”<sup>26</sup> Black British women’s literature connects to “a tradition of women’s writing as one of necessary

experimentalism as a mode of questioning dominant stories, identities, and rhetorical modes,” a questioning that is rendered all the more necessary by the additional crossing of race and ethnicity with gender.<sup>27</sup> Editing this special issue also has made us acutely aware of the systemic racism within higher education, which means that Black academics remain virtually absent from the field of literary studies in the United Kingdom and across Europe.<sup>28</sup> We have therefore sought to balance the academic articles about Black British women writers with reflections by some authors themselves. Combined, the contributions showcase the innovative talent of a broad range of Black British women writers. The special issue presents several of the individual Black British women who in recent years have gained prominence in the literary scene within and outside the United Kingdom, but it also moves beyond those names to include contributions about and by authors with a developing reputation as literary innovators, not just in fiction but also in poetry as well as drama.

Sofía Muñoz-Valdivieso’s article addresses the work of two well-known authors: the earlier-mentioned Booker Prize-winner Bernadine Evaristo and Andrea Levy, whose 2004 novel *Small Island* won numerous British (Commonwealth) prizes, was in 2007 the subject of the biggest mass-reading initiative ever to take place in Britain, and since has been adapted both for television and the stage. In her article “Cross-Genre Explorations in Black British Narratives of Slavery and Freedom: Bernardine Evaristo and Andrea Levy,” Muñoz-Valdivieso explores the authors’ creative adaptations of the (originally African American) genre of the slave narrative in *Blonde Roots* (2008) and *The Long Song* (2010), respectively. She shows how Evaristo and Levy interweave different narrative forms, such as speculative fiction, intrusive narration, and comic self-reflection as used in eighteenth-century literature, into contemporary novelistic versions of the historical narratives by (formerly) enslaved men and women that were published in support

of the abolitionist movement. Muñoz-Valdivieso argues that the generic hybridity of their texts allows Levy and Evaristo to write against official records, emphasizing the lack of official historiography from the point of view of the enslaved themselves, women in particular. She argues that the authors maintain the political intent of the historical slave narratives while channeling their denunciation of slavery through a striking use of humor that both involves and distances readers. Genre-crossings and humor thus function as disrupting techniques in Levy's and Evaristo's contemporary fictional slave narratives.

Pilar Cuder-Domínguez likewise addresses genre-crossings, showing in her article "Black Disability and Diasporic Haunting in Diana Evans's *The Wonder*" how the gothic trope of haunting is used within the predominantly socially realist novel *The Wonder* (2009). Straddling these two generic modes is a character with a mental illness who haunts the text. As Cuder-Domínguez points out, mental illness features also quite prominently in Evans's two other novels to date, *26a* (2005) and *Ordinary People* (2018), the most recent of which has also received accolades beyond the British Isles. In *The Wonder*, the father's mental instability is not accountable for a literal haunting but is manifested in his son's sense of loss and absence around a parent whom he never knew and whose life he tries to reconstruct. Combining disability studies with postcolonial criticism, Cuder-Domínguez notes how psychologically violent colonial practices have led to trauma in the Black population, and she complicates the idea of mental illness as a metaphorical tool for subversion and resistance in her reading of *The Wonder*. Thus, for her, Evans's ailing character performs multiple narrative and aesthetic functions, as his son narratively resurrects him on a personal level, but also culturally, by remembering the forgotten artist as the celebrated Black British dancer that his father had briefly been. However, Cuder-



Domínguez notes that this act of remembrance remains fractured and incomplete, challenging mainstream traditions of narrative closure.

In her article “Intermedial Acts of Worldmaking: Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time*,” Eva Ulrike Pirker shows how the award-winning author raises interest in interwoven forms beyond genre to the level of media. Pirker discusses Smith’s most recent novel as a multi-layered, intermedial engagement with dance, first suggested by the borrowed title from the eponymous classic film with Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers. Ever since the young Smith entered the British literary scene with her critically acclaimed debut novel *White Teeth* (2000), in which she presented life in multicultural London around the turn of the millennium through the interlinked stories of three families with migratory backgrounds, the author has been noted for her skillful and knowledgeable portrayal of a wide range of contemporary characters, their lifeworlds, and predicaments. Although Smith’s works thus appear as paradigmatic acts of literary worldmaking, Pirker shows how *Swing Time* (2016), which follows its characters from London to New York and The Gambia, also points to the limitations of worldmaking. Problematic plot lines refuse to allow readers to fully immerse themselves in the narrative, while characters’ camp practices are not to be read as unnecessary hyperbolic acts but rather as powerful signs of agency that prevent narrative closure.

Jesse van Amelsvoort’s contribution testifies to the fact that Black British literature as a field is not to be too narrowly defined and stretches beyond the British Isles. Black British women writers have taken up residence (temporarily) on the continent of Europe (Helen Oyeyemi in the Czech Republic, Sharon Dodua Otoo in Germany) or in the United States (Aminatta Forna, Zadie Smith). In his contribution “A Change of Perspective: Sharon Dodua Otoo’s Playful Rule-Breaking,” van Amelsvoort explores Black British experimentation in short

fiction. Although the Berlin-based Otoo may be less-known in the United Kingdom than the other Black British women writers discussed in this special issue, she has succeeded in making a name for herself in Germany as the recipient of the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann prize for her German-language novella *Herr Gröttrup setzt sich hin* in 2016. Van Amelsvoort discusses how, in this work and in two earlier English-language novellas, *the things i am thinking while smiling politely* (2012) and *Synchronicity* (2015), Otoo uses humor and unusual narrative perspectives to mock homogenous notions of Germanness. Her playful breaches of literary and linguistic rules offer a welcome break from the rigidity of the identitarian politics that hold sway in the otherwise realistic lifeworlds that she describes. In van Amelsvoort's reading then, the formal experimentation in Otoo's short fiction serves the author as a means to expose her readers to alternative modes of viewing and understanding the world.

When it comes to the development of new literary trends in response to recent technological advances, Black British women writers do not lag behind. Jennifer Leetsch takes up one of the more recent forms of digital literature in her article "From Instagram Poetry to Autofictional Memoir and Back Again: Experimental Black Life Writing in Yrsa Daley-Ward's Work." Written to be shared on social media and often used in community building, Instapoetry's high accessibility and popularity has contributed to its being criticized by conservative segments of the literary establishment as being "terrible" poetry that lacks the complexity and nuance of "proper" poetry. Leetsch, however, argues that the digital form enables it to transcend the traditional confines of autobiographical writing, precisely thanks to its ability to bring more instant and intimate ideas into a broader public realm. In her case study of the work of Yrsa Daley-Ward, the youngest author to be analyzed in this special issue, Leetsch demonstrates how this new brand of social poetry encourages polyphonic and rhizomatic forms

of Black female self-expression and self-articulation that are better suited to fluid understandings of self and hybridized modes of belonging.

In “The Interrelatedness of Form and Content in Contemporary Black British Women’s Writing: Interviews with Victoria Adukwei Bulley, Laura Fish, Lou Prendergast, and Bernardine Evaristo,” we conclude the special issue with the reflections of these four authors. We combined their answers to our questions into one flowing conversation to highlight their thought processes and the connections they made between the questions. Our first two questions centered on form, content, and ethics, asking the authors about the relationship between form and content in their writing and how they experimented or innovated with form, then asking about their imperative to write and any obligations they feel towards their reading public. The third question related to the institutional pressures on writing that Black British authors might experience and how they themselves respond to these. Finally, they were asked about a Black literary tradition: did they agree that there was such a tradition, and if so, which writers or texts in that tradition had inspired or influenced them as a writer? Although highly personal, their answers resonate with one another and with our special issue’s aim, for they confirm that critical approaches that either overlook the formal experimentalism of their writing or oppose the aesthetic and political dimensions of their work do not acknowledge the full extent of their creative endeavors.

Victoria Adukwei Bulley discusses her use of form in poetry and how she plays with language experimentally. She talks compellingly about the influences and pressures she has encountered and about the inspiration she finds in Black literature, theorizing, and music. Like the other interviewees, she recognizes that the publishing industry can operate negatively against Black women authors. However, like Laura Fish in the next interview, she is adamant that she writes what she wants to write, guided by her own artistic compulsions rather than any outside

pressures. Her mode of writing, she tells us, is simultaneously organic and academic, a process of revisions in which form plays as much a role as content. Fish also speaks honestly about the personal and institutional battles she faces as a novelist. She sketches a history of publishing that shows how long Black women authors have been pushing back at institutional constraints, remaining determined that this fight is valuable as writing does matter in public life. Lou Prendergast brings writing for theater and performance into the mix, showing how form connects the performers to each other and to the audience in rich, multimodal works of art that fuse text, performance, staging, and music. Her reflections on her personal journey as an artist reveal how her creative writing is a bodily process as well as an aesthetic one and how she blends both through her yoga practice, which connects body and mind.

Bernardine Evaristo discusses the development of her art from drama to poetry to prose, notably her unique fusion fiction. For her, the aesthetic dimension of writing is key to the enjoyment of reading, but she also discusses the importance of characterization in bringing lived experiences to her readers. Like Bulley and Fish, Evaristo acknowledges the important influence of Black American women writers and Caribbean writers in the development of her own unique literary style. This explicit identification of African American women writers as a source of inspiration is symptomatic of the long-term absence of Black literary role models in Britain that we noted in our opening paragraph. It therefore comes as no surprise that a celebrated writer such as Evaristo expresses a strong commitment to supporting other Black British writers to develop their own artistic practice, a commitment that can clearly be discerned in the manifold ways in which she has been utilizing her own post-Booker Prize rise in fame to draw public and critical attention to fellow Black British authors (her genuine delight in appearing in this special issue alongside three lesser-known writers being a typical case in point). For Evaristo, a Black

British tradition is not to be understood as a particular way of writing but as a practice of nurturing all the individual, unique talent that Black British women writers represent.

With the scholarly articles and authors' reflections here collected, we seek to expand on the more customary socio-critical appraisals of the politics of Black British women's literature and celebrate especially the aesthetic qualities of their writing. Although women's literary experimentation, both past and present, has not received the same recognition as that of male authors, the remedial efforts advanced by the rise of feminist literary criticism since the 1970s have begun to give due credit to the formal innovativeness of women writers of color.<sup>29</sup> By spotlighting the engagements of female Black British authors with language, style, and genre, this special issue hopes to contribute to a more comprehensive appreciation of the literary endeavours of Black women in Britain.

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HELEN COUSINS is a Reader in Postcolonial Literature at Newman University, Birmingham in the United Kingdom. She has published in the journals *Research in African Literature* and *Postcolonial Text*, including coediting an issue of *African Literature Today* on “Diaspora and Return” (2016). She has also contributed chapters on African and Black British literature to various edited volumes. She has published widely on the Black British author Helen Oyeyemi, including contributions to *Telling it Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi* (2017) and *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives: Early Modern to Contemporary* (2021). Her current research focuses on metamorphosis in twenty-first century British women’s writing.

ELIZABETH-JANE BURNETT is an author and academic. Publications include poetry collections *Of Sea* (2021) and *Swims* (2017) from Penned in the Margins; a nature writing memoir *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* (2019); and the monograph *A Social Biography of Contemporary Innovative Poetry Communities: The Gift, the Wager and Poethics* (2017). She is a Leverhulme Research Fellow (2021-2022), conducting research for her “Creative Writing and Climate Change: Developing a New Wetlands Literature” project. She is also a nature diarist for *The Guardian* and Associate Professor in Creative Writing at Northumbria University. Her current book on moss is forthcoming from Penguin in 2023.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John McLeod, “Extra Dimensions, New Routines,” *Wasafiri*, 25, No. 4 (2010), 46. Tim Brennan began his introduction to the “Writing from Black Britain” special issue of *The Literary Review* with the question, “why are [Britain’s] black writers invisible?”; see Brennan, “Writing from Black Britain,” *The Literary Review*, 34, No. 1 (1990), 5. Two decades later,

Black British writing was hailed as a “relatively new field of study” in the paperback preface to a 2004 collection of essays on the subject; see Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey, preface to *Black British Writing*, ed Arana and Ramey (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), ix. It is important to note the earliest Black writing in Britain, produced by (formerly) enslaved Africans, was published as early as the eighteenth century; see C. L. Innes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> McLeod, “Some Problems with ‘British’ in ‘a Black British Canon,’” *Wasafiri*, 17, No. 36 (2002), 57.

<sup>3</sup> The racist football chant is evoked in the title of Paul Gilroy’s now classic investigation into racial discourses in Britain, *“There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987). The 1980s saw the publication of the first anthologies devoted to Black British literature, which included British Asian authors until the next decade in which the use of the term “Black British” narrowed to its current reference to people of African and African Caribbean descent only. Book-length critical investigations into the field did not emerge until the turn of the millennium. See Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, introduction to *A Black British Canon?* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1-12.

<sup>4</sup> See McLeod, “Some Problems with ‘British’ in ‘a Black British Canon,’” 56; and Deirdre Osborne, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)*, ed. Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>5</sup> James English, *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 4. Accordingly, the question mark in the title of *A Black British Canon?*, published in the same year, signals the volume’s intention is “to challenge the way in which black British writers and practitioners are being seamlessly incorporated into the academic canon, and to problematize

the consequent disciplinary institutionalization”; see Low and Wynne-Davies, introduction to *A Black British Canon?*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Danuta Kean, “Written Off,” in *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the U. K. Market Place*, ed. Kean (London: Spread the Word, 2015), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Kean, “Written Off,” 8.

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in criticism “black British women’s writing continues to be subject to sociological readings that side-step linguistic or stylistic aspect of the work”; see Suzanne Scafe, “‘Daring to Tilt Worlds’: The Fiction of Irenosen Okojie,” in *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives: Early Modern to Contemporary* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 246.

<sup>9</sup> Kate Aughterson and Deborah Philips, introduction to *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives: Early Modern to Contemporary*, ed. Aughterson and Philips (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Osborne, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)*, 16; and Scafe, “Unsettling the Centre: Black British Fiction,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1970-present*, ed. Mary Eagleton and Emma Parker (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 226.

<sup>11</sup> Aughterson and Philips, introduction to *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> “Bernadine Evaristo, Writer,” interview by Lauren Lavern, *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4, 25 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000mrb1>.

<sup>13</sup> Aughterson and Philips, introduction to *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives*, 2, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Kean, “Written Off,” [8].

<sup>15</sup> See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).



<sup>16</sup> Alison Donnell, “Looking Back, Looking Forward: Revisiting the Windrush Myth,” in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*, ed. Susheila Nasta and Mark Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 210-11.

<sup>17</sup> For the recognition that Black British women writers have received through awards and titles, see Elisabeth Bekers and Helen Cousins, “Helen Oyeyemi at the Vanguard of Innovation in Contemporary Black British Women’s Literature,” in *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives*, 206-07.

<sup>18</sup> Scafe, “Unsettling the Centre,” 226.

<sup>19</sup> Further examples can be found in Bekers and Cousins, “Helen Oyeyemi at the Vanguard of Innovation in Contemporary Black British Women’s Literature.”

<sup>20</sup> Peter Lamarque, “Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?,” *Philosophical Studies*, 135, No. 1 (2007), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Lamarque, “Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?,” 30.

<sup>22</sup> Lamarque, “Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?,” 37.

<sup>23</sup> Donnell, “Looking Back, Looking Forward: Revisiting the Windrush Myth,” 210-11.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Wyatt and Sheldon George, “Narrative Theory and Contemporary Black Women Writers,” introduction to *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women Writers: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form*, ed. Wyatt and George (London: Routledge, 2020), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Wyatt and George, “Narrative Theory and Contemporary Black Women Writers,” 5.

<sup>26</sup> Aughterson and Philips, introduction to *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Aughterson and Philips, introduction to *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> In 2017, the Runnymede Trust published a short report on the number of Black professors in universities in the United Kingdom. In this report “Black” included “women of African, Asian

and Caribbean origin and descent,” but still the number of academics at the highest level of seniority in the “Literature and Creative Writing” section amounted to only seven, the picture for lower-ranked members of staff being no less bleak. The fact that of these seven professors, three are professors in creative writing does seem to reflect the burgeoning of creative talent amongst Black women writers that our special issue is celebrating. See Iyiola Solanke, “Black Female Professors,” *The Runnymede Trust*, 8 March 2017, accessed 18 April 2022, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/black-female-professors-in-the-uk>.

<sup>29</sup> Even the most noteworthy discussions of experimental literature have scarcely paid attention to women writers of color, let alone to Black British women writers. No Black British women writer is included in Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, eds., *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Nancy Gray, *Language Unbound: On Experimental Writing by Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy, *Women’s Experimental Poetry in Britain, 1970-2010: Body, Time and Locale* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (London: Routledge, 2014); and Ellen E. Berry, *Women’s Experimental Writing: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). Although Gray and Berry do include African American poet Ntozake Shange and Berry includes Korean American author Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, the formal innovation of Black British women’s writing is only a central concern in the most recent publications on experimental literature; see Bekers and Cousins, “Helen Oyeyemi at the Vanguard of Innovation in Contemporary Black British Women’s Literature”; Scafe, ““Daring to Tilt Worlds””; and Bekers, “Experimenting in the Ditch: Buchi Emecheta’s Early Novels of Transformation,” in *British Experimental Women’s*

*Fiction*, ed. Andrew Radford and Hannah Van Hove (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 257-78.