Abstracts

Panel 1: Beyond Narratives of Unbelonging? (Westlain, 217)

‘Ruin and Recovery: A Spatial Reading of Diana Evans’s Fiction
Suzanne Scafe (London South Bank University)

In Evans’s 26a, the character, Georgia, speaks of her ruin in spatial terms. It is both a place and a time of loss. Recovery too is a place ‘to find the ones we have lost, the unruined, the ones we dream of becoming again’ (103). In this paper I examine Evans’s depiction of ruin and recovery, represented both in figurative and psychological terms and as physical or material space. I focus on Evans’s use of space and argue that underlying the texts’ realistically presented localities, are the narrative’s use of the magical and fantastical, which create instabilities in the text and serve self-consciously to challenge routine distinctions between self and other, native and foreigner, home and homelessness. The identities it constructs are unselfconsciously plural, constituted of shifting, or colliding geographies and temporalities, whose significance nonetheless rests in the present of the novel, and not in an extra textual historicity. Although centring on stories of loss and dislocation, the narratives create affective spaces of commitment that, despite being also configured by loss and sadness, present the possibility of hope. The detailed attention to the specifics of place, are evidence of Evans’s interest in how characters belong to places and each other, rather than on the need to belong. The paper demonstrates the narratives’ privileging of unbelonging and movement, though within its carefully constructed spaces of commitment, constituted by the emotional ties of individuals to each other.

‘Beyond Narratives of Unbelonging in Black British Women’s Writing: Aminatta Forna’s The Memory of Love’
Irene Perez Fernandez (University of Oviedo)

I heard a song, a morning as I walked to college. It came to me across the radio playing on a stall I passed. A song from far away, about a lost love. At least so I imagined, I didn't understand the words, only the melody. But in the low notes I could hear the loss this man had suffered. And in the high notes I understood too that it was a song about something that could never be. I had not wept in years. But I did, there and then, on the side of a dusty street, surrounded by strangers. The melody stayed with me for years.

(Aminatta Forna, 2011: 1)
The above quote that I have chosen from Aminatta Forna’s latest novel, *The Memory of Love* highlights the issues I would like to focus on in my analysis of the novel. These words uttered by Elias Cole verbalised a memory; the sensory experience of hearing a song. The character does not understand the lyrics but the melody in itself conveys a universal emotion: that of loss. Forna’s novel is undeniable emotionally gripping and this is the result of characters that are “so quintessentially human and easily recognizable” (Norridge, 2012). Yet, how can it be so when the novel explores the emotional spaces of suffering and loss through the lenses of characters who are survivors or witnesses of the devastating civil war in Sierra Leone? How can a reader who has not experienced first-hand such distressing events recognize the emotional spaces of others? Drawing on Sarah Ahmed’s views of emotions as openness: “as spaces where bodies and world meet and leak into each other” (2004: 69), I shall analyse the reasons behind these apparently unlikely interpersonal emotional connections. Moreover, I shall examine how the main characters in the novel, Agnes, Kai and Adrian, unable to come to terms with the ordinary spaces that surround them after the memory of war, construct alternative emotional spaces. The narrative, thus, depicts emotions as fluid, non-static temporal positions, from where to start alternative journeys of discovery, of remembrance, of being, of surviving. The spaces of emotion form a continuum in the character’s lives: they are never fixed, never stable, never secured but always adapting, reinventing themselves and changing.

“Vicariously Thatcher: Questioning Critical Cosmopolitanism in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*”

Henghameh Saroukhani (University of Leeds)

Zadie Smith’s debut novel *White Teeth* (2000) continues to provoke critical debate, from the merits of Smith’s precocious writing style (Wood) to the dubious marketing strategies of Britain’s “cover girl of the ‘Multicultural Novel’” (Thomas). But as *White Teeth*’s contemporaneity diminishes, the terms of contention surrounding the text are beginning to shift from the national language of multiculturalism towards the more locally and globally inflected terminology of cosmopolitanism. As critics increasingly engage with the planetary rhetoric of *White Teeth* – often deeming the millennial poetics of the novel as emblematic of a “cosmopolitanism from below” – they necessarily obscure the reactionary 1980s politics of the text. This paper questions the extent to which *White Teeth* can be regarded as a progressively demotic cosmopolitan novel. Taking Walter Mignolo’s notion of critical cosmopolitanism as an enunciation of the ways critics have read *White Teeth*, I argue that the text challenges the interpretive capacity of a cosmopolitanism constructed through so-called vernacular or “subaltern positions” (Mignolo). With specific emphasis on Samad Iqbal, I trace how the novel unsettles salutary conceptions of cosmopolitanism through its ventriloquism of Margaret Thatcher’s rhetorically polite Powellism. The limits of critical cosmopolitanism reveal itself in the ways Samad vicariously stands in as Thatcher in the text; his anti-immigration, anti-European, and anti-riot sentiments, characteristic of Thatcher’s new right discourse, entangles a conservative poetics in the narrative that contaminates the so-called demotic cosmopolitanism of the novel.

Panel 2: Beyond the Black Atlantic (Westlain, 216)

‘Multi-axial Englishness in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara*’

Samantha Reive (University of Leeds)

In order to illustrate what I identify as a move towards a multi-locational constitution of Englishness by contemporary black writers, my paper will interrogate Bernardine Evaristo’s 2009 revision of her debut novel-in-verse, *Lara*. I will argue that the revision of Evaristo’s narrative gives dramatic voice to the changing face of black British writing, and in particular I will investigate the ways in which black British writers are contributing to contemporary articulations of Englishness. In moving beyond the Black Atlantic paradigm, I identify the
expanded European narrative of Lara, in which the eponymous protagonist’s Irish and German genealogical trajectories are set alongside the African and Brazilian narratives, which have previously been read as aligning Evaristo’s texts with Black Atlanticism. On the contrary, I argue that the parallel narratives of migrant histories mapped in the revised edition, as well as Evaristo’s triangulation of England with Africa and South (significantly, not North) America, is a rejection of the privileging influences of African-American experience envisioned by Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, and the failure of the black Atlantic to adequately account for the histories of multi-local subjects. John McLeod has recently posited that ‘a post-British England requires the relinquishing of Englishness as ethnically or racially exclusive’ (McLeod, 2013, p187). My reading will draw on contemporary conceptualizations of Englishness, and locate Lara as concerned with expressing both the multipositionality of Englishness, and the inadequacy of the parameters within which we approach black British writing.

References

‘Politics, Polarities and the Geographical Poles: Mojisola Adebayo’s Black Ant/arctic’
Nicola Abram (University of Reading)

This paper extends the triangulation of Africa, the Americas and Europe posited in Gilroy’s Black Atlantic to profile diasporic journeys to the Arctic and Antarctic. It considers two plays by black British performer Mojisola Adebayo: Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey (2007) and Matt Henson, North Star (2009). Moj was inspired by Ellen Craft, an African American slave who escaped to freedom in 1848 by disguising herself as a white man. Mojisola imaginatively extends Ellen’s journey, making her the first black woman to arrive in Antarctica. Matt Henson celebrates the achievements of African American explorer Matthew Henson, who was part of a pioneering expedition to the North Pole in 1909. Complementing the global horizons of the plays’ subject matter, Mojisola has conducted her own transnational expeditions. She researched the plays in Antarctica and Greenland, and took Moj on an international tour. This literal journeying is mirrored in her literary forms, as her work travels widely across aesthetic traditions; she comfortably references canonical English literature (Shakespeare, Homer, Coleridge) alongside African griots. This paper reads Mojisola’s invocation of the geographical poles as undermining the conceptual polarities that structure racist, ableist and (hetero)sexist thought. She rewinds tectonic history to insist on the symbiosis sustaining the poles and the rest of the planet:
Antarctica melts,
Africa sinks,
We all disappear.
(2011)

I argue that this revised cartography of the Black Ant/arctic not only demands responsibility for the global climate, but also inaugurates a model of mutuality that might productively inform contemporary social politics.

References
Adebayo, Mojisola, Mojisola Adebayo: Plays One (London: Oberon, 2011)
This paper will consider the shift in Helen Oyeyemi’s novels to date from a ‘standard’ Diaspora mode (focused on alienation and hybridity) to works which replicate many of the aesthetic characteristics associated with English Literature’s canonical texts. I will argue that to appreciate the impact of Oyeyemi’s work analysis needs to move ‘beyond the Black Atlantic’. The argument will acknowledge that the Black Atlantic paradigm is appropriate to understand the writing of Black British authors, including Oyeyemi: placing them within a black Diasporic network and allowing postcolonial readings which help to understand the notions of alienation and displacement, hybridity and resistance that certainly are present in the literature. However, I will argue that this perpetuates distinctions between canonical (‘proper’ English) literatures and its Others – for example, Black British writing. Additionally, it has no way of accounting for a sense of English belonging that can also be traced in Oyeyemi’s later novels. Reading through a lens of ‘belonging’ to the English literary tradition highlights aspects that locate the novels within the discipline of English Literature, and, I will suggest, that this insistence on belonging located within Black British texts, is potentially transformative of the discipline. I will suggest that Oyeyemi participates in this transformative agenda as an English writer using the literary traditions of English Literature. Also, she participates as a black writer bringing about a ‘transformation of British society and cultural institutions’ by ‘lay[ing] claim to post-colonial and to British cultures in Britain’ (Stein, 2004, p. xiii).

References

Keynote: Bernardine Evaristo (C218 The Checkland Building), ‘Black British Women Writers: Our Past, Our Present, Our Future’

Award-winning British writer Bernardine Evaristo is the author of seven books. She is also an editor, critic, dramatist and essayist. Her writing spans the genres of prose novels, verse-novels, a novel-with-verse, a novella, poetry, non-fiction, literary criticism and radio and theatre drama. Her latest novel, Mr Loverman, is about a 74 yr old Caribbean London man who is closet homosexual (Hamish Hamilton/Penguin, 2013 & Akashic Books, USA, 2014). Her writing is characterised by experimentation, daring and subverting the myths of various Afro-diasporic histories and identities. She has published widely in a variety of publications and anthologies. Her books are: MR LOVERMAN (Penguin 2013), HELLO MUM (Penguin 2010), LARA (Bloodaxe 2009), BLONDE ROOTS (Penguin 2008), SOUL TOURISTS (Penguin 2005), THE EMPEROR’S BABE (Penguin 2001), the first version of LARA (ARP 1997), ISLAND OF ABRAHAM (Peepal Tree, 1994).

Panel 3: Teaching Black British Women’s Writing (Westlain, room 219)

‘Why I Teach Black Women’s Literature’
Tracey Walters (Stony Brook University)

In the opening poem of Ntozake Shange’s For Colored Girls, Shange writes:

"somebody/anybody/sing a black girl’s song/bring her out/to know herself/to know you/but sing her rhythms/carin/struggle/hard times/sing her song of life/she’s been dead so long/closed in silence so long/she doesn’t know the sound/of her own voice/her infinite
For almost 100 years, Black British women have been singing the songs of the Black British female experience, songs that bear witness to their pain and songs that celebrate their triumphs against adversity. These songs told in the poetry and prose of countless writers from Berol Gilroy to Bernadine Evaristo give voice to my story, they sing my song and validate my presence in the world.

This paper will share my thoughts and experiences about 13 years of teaching Black British Women’s literature at an America University. I will discuss why I teach and who and what I teach. I will talk about the various challenges in teaching the literature and the rewards of bringing the work to undergraduate and graduate students.

Why:
Teaching Black British Women’s literature is personal and political. Growing up in Hertfordshire, England in the 1980s, I never read a single book about anyone who looked like me or shared my experience. Discovering the literature in the 1990s while in graduate school in the US helped me establish a cultural and national identity. As a Black and British woman living and working in the United States, I have an opportunity to share the Black British women’s literary tradition with others who look for themselves in the pages of the text. Although I encounter few Black British students in my courses (I’ve had some), I have many students from across the African diaspora who can relate to the literature and who find that the literature gives them a deeper understanding of their lives.

Who:
In the United States, Black British women’s literature is reduced to a handful of well-known international writers. In my courses, I acknowledge the politics of exclusion so that students are aware that the writers in this tradition are not limited to Zadie Smith or Andrea Levy, but also include Bernadine Evaristo, Valerie Mason John, and Dorothea Smartt. I also make sure to incorporate literary criticism by writers like Hazel Carby and Kadija Sesay. While students are always eager to read the literature, I am often faced with the challenge of accessing the material and relying on anthologies. Other difficulties include not being able to find older materials, which are often out of print, or ordering mass quantities of newer titles, which are published with smaller presses.

What:
By highlighting themes of identity, cultural hybridity, and beauty politics, I help students understand that the Black British woman’s experience is unique in its own right, and yet has a universality that connects it to the human experience. My courses encourage students to rethink their notion of the Diaspora, Britain and British history. I help students reconsider the history of Britain and celebrate the black contribution to British letters and arts. Teaching Black British women’s literature allows me to bring my perspective and personal experience into the classroom, and thus offers students a deeper understanding of a literature and experience unfamiliar to many in the United States.

‘Embodiment and Embedding: the MA in Black British Writing; Through a Pedagogy of Blackness’
Deirdre Osborne (Goldsmiths University)

As Nirmal Puwar (2004) argues, projection of neutrality of social and cultural spaces is highly questionable. They are as racialised and gendered by power relations as the human bodies who enter into them -- or who do not -- or, who cannot. In relation to agency and intervention, co-designing the MA Black British Writing, the first degree of its kind is to confront Puwar’s ‘space invader’ dynamic. Whether intentional or unconsciously activated, narratives of interference or disregard have coalesced around the teaching of this subject.
Given the shocking imbalance in numbers between non-black and black professors in the UK, this impinges upon expected capabilities and visibilities of black people’s cultural citizenship and academic presence. The (re)centralising of Black British women’s writing for performance (ascendant in the 1980s-90s where many women: Kay, Evaristo, SuAndi retain cultural longevity but not in the theatre) turns us to the inevitable question of how necessary artistic and academic shape-shifting (to be trans-generic, cross-disciplinary) remains as a survival strategy, from the position of “space invader”? The potential pedagogy of blackness can be found in debbie tucker green’s works which challenge the bodily and generic borders that frame perceptions of black women’s dramatized representations, and her own position in contemporary writing contexts. Reading her texts imposes or choreographs the reader’s eyeing of the page, demands a suspension of standardising the text, (through re-pronouncing it). In the silencing process of reading, her work thus teaches readers how to read afresh, to follow the lead of the language as rendered – a re-education in how English functions.

‘Queer No More: Reading Mr Loverman’

Maria Helena Lima (SUNY Geneseo)

My presentation explores the use of Bernardine Evaristo’s Mr Loverman in an introduction to literature course, “Reader & Text: Genre Matters.” Our reading of the novel will focus as much on Carmel’s liberation (all chapters focusing on her have “Song of” on the title) as on Barry’s and Morris’ love story (primarily the chapters beginning with “Art of”). Because Evaristo’s is the only novel we will read, special emphasis will be given to the Caribbean and Black British history Barry remembers as he walks the streets of London, the ‘world’ the novel creates. We will explore how theory permeates the text; Barry describes the ease with which he shifts linguistic registers as his “post-modern and post-colonial prerogatives.” We will explain the passages where gender norms and stereotypes are reproduced with the fact that the two Antiguan men are in their seventies. Realizing that the present of the narrative is only one year—from May 1st, 2010 to 2011—perhaps my students will forgive Barry for reproducing heterosexual norms in his expectations of what a committed relationship with Morris (perhaps even a civil union) would bring: no more ‘misdemeanors’ of gay men’s ‘wandering’ sexuality. By foregrounding ‘the trouble with normal’ while claiming that Barry’s mind is still in need of some decolonizing by the novel’s end, we will also try to understand the reasons Barry and Morris identify for “how many [Caribbean] men sow seed” but don’t stick around to see it grow. The history of slavery has been used to justify the seemingly prevalence of homophobia in the black community. Does the novel do anything to complicate that narrative?

Panel 4: Rewriting the Canon (Westlain, 217)

‘Virginia Woolf: Room for Discussion?’

Claire Hynes (writer)

For the critical section of my PhD in creative and critical writing, I abandoned conventional forms of academic writing and chose instead to revise in pastiche form, Virginia Woolf’s landmark feminist essay on women and writing, A Room of One’s Own. I would like, in a paper for the Black British Women’s Writing Network, to discuss the ways in which Woolf’s ideas influence me. In particular, I am inspired by Woolf’s urgings that women develop forms of writing suitable to their own needs, since I have often felt restricted by traditional literary forms and academic writing. However, I would also like to show how I feel excluded as a black woman from much of the debate expressed in A Room of One’s Own. Woolf’s considerations of white middle-class women who have been hindered and thwarted through history fails, frequently, to resonate with me. Yet little critical material exists which questions A Room’s relevance to black women, or even Woolf’s inclusion, in one passage, of a silent
“negress” other. My paper would, I hope, contribute to broader discussions about black women’s insider/outsider relationship with celebrated white feminist texts.

‘I am a Black Woman…. And I don’t bite: Contemporary (self) representations of Black British Women’
Desiree Reynolds (writer)

I am whispering troo yuh press hair. I catch yuh renk stinki n breath inna me han. I trowing it all back to you. Come den……right inna me cratches, watch me shit out you guilt an collec you misery. Come forward……beg yuh come.

These are the last words of my main character Seduce from my book of the same title. Seduce is more than biting. She’s kicking and scratching and dragging us with her, glorifying in it all. We live with the myth of the angry black woman. Every time I went into my sons school, I was treated with caution, like walking dynamite I had to be handled with care. The statement suggests concern for those outside of us, it is placating, we must make sure that those around us are comfortable with who and how we are. Yet you’re scared of a voice you haven’t heard. We are seen as more emotional, quick to anger and to madness, other closer to nature and promiscuous. These stereotypes haven’t changed. Seduce is about a woman who is angry, informed by racism, sexism, and colonielisation. She wants to call to account and has little regard for others. The pitfalls of being ‘strong’ is probably the same for every woman, the punishments the same. We need to create our own representations and more of them. Seduce says, I am a Black Woman and I bite and cry and laugh and you’ll be alright with that.

‘Black British women’s theatre in the 1980s'
Giovanna Buonanno (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia)

The 1980s were a significant decade in the making of a culturally diverse Britain and the formation of Black arts, thanks also to the financial support for minority art granted by the Greater London Council and other institutions. It was the time when second generation writers and artists came of age, who were determined to challenge the representational void of Black culture in Britain and investigate the construction of cultural identities as a performative process: “a “production”, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 1990). Theatre undoubtedly proved to be a powerful medium in conveying the changing modalities of Black British identities “constituted within, not outside representation”, and challenging the invisibility of ethnic minorities in 1980s Britain. This paper will explore the emergence of Black British women’s theatre in the context of both 1980s identity politics and the rise of British minority ethnic (BME) theatre. It will focus on the work of writers and practitioners such as Jackie Kay, Bernardine Evaristo and Yvonne Brewster, whose role was crucial in affirming the presence of black women on the British theatre scene and making them “visible in roles other than those which have been foisted upon [them]” (Review of Silhouette - Theatre of Black Women, in Spare Rib , 1984)
Panel 5: Rewriting the Nation (Westlайн, 216)

‘Manifestos of Intent and Disavowal: Anthologizing Black British Women’s Writing in the Twenty-first Century’
Sarah Lawson Welsh (York St John University)

This paper will reflect upon some key terms and key moments in the anthologizing of Black British Women’s Writing from 2000 to the present in terms of the state of the field and the usefulness (or otherwise) of the terms used to define, describe and demarcate Black British Women’s writing. In particular, I will consider a selection of editorial prefaces and introductions as manifestos of intent and disavowal, showing how they operate as moments of radical space-clearing and possibility but also, increasingly, as spaces of textual consolidation and sedimentation as a canon of black British women’s writing emerges. I will consider the significance of the shifts from generic anthologizing of Black British writing to more specific anthologies of Black British Women’s writing, the implications of the transition from small presses to more mainstream publishers, as well as the increasing number of anthologies edited by practising Black British women writers. Anthologies for consideration will include Newland & Sesay eds IC3: the Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain (2000), Arana & Ramey eds, Black British Writing (Serpents Tail: 2004), Kadija Sesay ed. Write Black Write British (Hansib: 2005), Neil Astley ed. Bloodaxe Introductions: Alexander, Alvi, Dharker and Kay (2006), Osborne ed. Hidden Gems One & Two: Contemporary Black British Plays (Oberon: 2008 & 2012), Moore ed. Hair Power (2009), Evaristo & Nagra eds, Ten New Poets Spread the Word (Bloodaxe: 2010), Goddard ed. The Methuen Drama Book of Plays by Black British Writers (2011), Kay, Procter & Robinson eds, Out of Bounds (Bloodaxe: 2012).

‘Configurations of the Nation in Andrea Levy’s Fiction’
Elif Öztabak-Avcı (Middle East Technical University, Turkey)

In her essay “Transformations within the Black British Novel” (2004) Kadija George Sesay revisits David Dabydeen’s definition of black British literature in A Reader’s Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature (1987). According to Sesay, current non-revised usages of Dabydeen’s 1987 formulation – the literature which has been “created and published in Britain, largely for a British audience by Black writers, those born in Britain or who have spent a major portion of their lives in Britain” (qtd. in Sesay 100) – may misleadingly suggest that “black British literature [has] remained static” since then (100). Sesay holds that there are significant differences between the early black British fiction and the ones produced from the late 1980s onward in terms of language, themes and imagery (100). While agreeing with Dabydeen regarding the centrality of Britain as the location associated with the majority of black British writers either as their birthplace or the place where they have been based during most of their lives, Sesay argues that their works do not “have to be identified as being ‘largely for a British audience’ – with that phrase’s suggestion of alterities – since the members of this group already see themselves as British” (100). What Sesay deems unnecessary today in the definition of black British literature – the identification of the audience as largely British – may however be emerging as a significant point of distinction between earlier and late 20th- and 21st-century black British fictional writing. In the light of Rebecca Walkowitz’s remark that “[n]ot every book that travels is produced by a writer who travels” (532), the aim of this paper is to explore the trajectory of Andrea Levy’s engagement in her novels with the nation and national identity. Apart from raising questions regarding the nationality of her novels’ addressee, the paper sets out to examine the ways in which the idea of national distinctiveness is treated in her novels and to what extent Levy’s novels participate in what Carine Mardorossian defines as “migrant literature,” which is structured around a “cosmopolitan, transnational, and hybrid vision of social life” (21) and the writers of which are not necessarily immigrant.
Works Cited


‘A Project of Ambivalent Inclusiveness: Mobile Nationalism in the Transatlantic British Novel’

Priya Purohit (Indiana University, Bloomington)

Treating the contemporary Black British novel as a site of cultural negotiation (Bhabha), this paper explores the ways in which “fragmented stories – of languages, experiences, generational conflicts” become transnational biographies that facilitate the “coexistence of pressures of homogenization and absorption and forms of local opposition and resistance at exactly the same moment” (Ramazani 14). Writing out of transgeographic personal histories, contemporary Black British authors produce protagonists who are less concerned with finding their roots than establishing their roots as implicated in British history, and as part of the great composite whole that is modern day “Britishness.” Bernardine Evaristo and Andrea Levy, among many others, write from transnational contexts, revealing how their individual ancestral histories converge with British history, convergences that preclude the hegemony of imperial history and privilege “intricate attachments to Britain” (Stein). This desire to incorporate their personal histories into mainstream British culture culminates in fictional products with a distinctly non-fictional objective: confirming that to be Black is to be British by expanding the narrative of British history to account for the diasporic experiences enabled by slavery, empire, war and globalization. I will examine Evaristo’s and Levy’s novels as examples of the desire to engage with explicitly biographical concerns; Lara (Evaristo), Small Island and Fruit of the Lemon (Levy) are specifically autobiographical, but even those texts less embroiled in the authors’ respective origins – like Blonde Roots and Emperor’s Babe (Evaristo) or The Long Song (Levy) – sharply interrogate the nexus between African, Caribbean and European histories. The results are anachronistic transatlantic biographies that collapse the center/margin binary in the past to enable a multicultural present. The contemporary Black British novel not only functions as a biography for its author, but more importantly, rewrites the biography of a nation.

Panel 6: Generations (Westlain, 216)

‘Re-imagining History and Shaping Cultural and Collective memory’

Chris Weedon (Cardiff University)

I am my father’s griot, this is a hymn to him. I am telling you this story so that I can turn my father’s blood and bones, and whatever magic his mother sewed under his skin, into history.
– Nadifa Mohamed, Black Mamba Boy p.1

The story that Nadifa Mohamed, daughter of British Somali seaman, Jama Mohamed, tells in Black Mamba Boy recovers experience common to many British Somalis before and during World War Two. It is a story of violence and deprivation but also solidarity and endurance, offering a very different perspective on colonialism and the Second World War in the horn of Africa. Like many other texts, it challenges the common sense idea of a singular shared
history and ancestry as the basis for the national story, emphasising the importance of linked but differentiated histories in which the slave trade, Empire and migration are central. Historical novels and novels based on family and community stories have formed an important strand within British Black and Asian writing since 1980. This development can be understood as part of a broader movement in cultural and social history that seeks to rescue forgotten and marginalised voices and give voice to the testimony of older generations. This paper looks at some of the ways in which Black British women writers have engaged in this process.

‘In Search of My Father’s Garden: Diana Evans’s The Wonder’

Pilar Cuder-Domínguez (University of Huelva)

In a previous paper, I identified a number of novels by Black British women writers (including Diana Evans) that tackled the construction of masculinity, singling out the issue of intergenerational strife between fathers and sons as they espoused altogether different views on identity and ancestry, embracing ties to either Africa, the West Indies, or Britain. I would like to look into this subject in more detail in Diana Evans’s second novel, The Wonder (2009), which I find decidedly intriguing and innovative in several ways. First, the West Indian father is a ghostly presence rather than a physical one, as he has been long dead by the time the action starts and his son Lucas never got to know him, or even of him. Born to estranged parents, and orphaned on his mother’s side when he was still a baby, Lucas and his older sister Denise were raised by their maternal grandmother, who never passed on any information about a father that allegedly drowned some time ago. As he approaches his twenty-fifth birthday, he decides to open the oversize wardrobe that contains photos and mementoes of the past, instantly becoming obsessed with his father and embarking on a quest that will help him make sense of his own life. Secondly, I’m also intrigued by how Evans has rendered the father-son link extremely problematic, fractured and elusive, in contrast to the smooth linearity and connectedness of the mother’s legacy. In this novel, it is literally the father who is “the madman in the attic,” an unacknowledged artist whose very memory has been repressed, while Lucas’s sister Denise finds it easy to lead a life shaped on her grandmother’s, channeling her own creativity and ambition into a small flower business. Therefore, I will be arguing that Evans has built a novel with strong intertextual connections that playfully undermines and rewrites some very powerful concepts in women’s fiction and feminist criticism to date, and that these resources are aimed at rethinking Black masculinity in the UK nowadays.

‘Exorcising violence against women in the poems of Malika Booker, and Warsan Shire’

Monica A Hand (University of Missouri -Columbia)

“It is in place that we locate ourselves, mark ourselves in relation with others; it is in place that we survive.” — Meena Alexander

The poet Malika Booker, in her new book of poems, “Pepper Seed”, and the poet Warsan Shire, in her chapbook “teaching my mother how to give birth,” both traverse places and memories of home that are fraught with sexual and emotional violence against women. Malika Booker is a British writer of Guyanese and Grenadian parentage. Warsan Shire is a Kenyan-born Somali poet who is based in London. Reading both poets is like reading an extended blues lyric about the internalized wounds created by colonialism and carried across borders, and from generation to generation in the woman’s body and in her spirit. In this paper I will look closely at a few poems by each writer as they relate the stories of their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. Stories that both foreshadow and mirror their own. I will discuss how these poets do not let us romanticize or exoticize their countries of origins or life in Britain. I will highlight what they tell us about the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of women that is culturally and historically borderless. It is as if both love and loss is
carried in the body, and is passed down in a dowry that may not be visible but scars from the inside as it is passed from mother to daughter. I will also discuss how both poets treatment of seemingly taboo subjects like physical and sexual abuse (sometimes domestic) actually releases them (and us) from this legacy and begins the healing process. It is in the body – that we carry the memory of our birthplace (its beauty and its violence) and it is in the body that we must find our place of survival.

Monica A Hand, is the author of “me and Nina,” Alice James Books (2012) which was short listed for the 2013 Hurston Wright Legacy Award and a finalist for the 2012 Foreward Book of the Year. She has a MFA in Poetry and Poetry in Translation from Drew University and has attended residencies at Poets House in NYC and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA. A Cave Canem alum, currently, she is a PhD candidate in Poetry at the University of Missouri- Columbia.

Panel 7: Questions of Identity and Place I (Westlain, 217)

‘Fostering and Adoption: A Case To Be Read’
Kadija Sesay (writer and founder of SABLE LitMag)

An increasing number of works are being published by second generation British born women of African parentage. One of the themes they focus on, that is explicit to their life backgrounds is that of adoption and private fostering. Private fostering is when a child under the age of 16 (under 18 if disabled) is cared for by someone who is not their parent or a ‘close relative’. This is a private arrangement made between a parent and a carer, for 28 days or more. Private fostering was common amongst parents of West African origin, who migrated to the UK in the ’50s and ’60s. They often placed their children with English families to care for them, for reasons often related to work and or study schedules and living in places unsuitable to raise their children. The experience of children placed with foster families varied greatly, from the foster families informally “adopting” children into loving families to ones of extreme abuse. Regulations in regards to private fostering, are more rigorous today but the effect that they had left indelible marks on those children and it is now more public, being revealed in creative form as fiction, memoir and some poetry. Writers have drawn on their personal experiences to offer the perspectives on transcultural adoptions and fostering. This will be looked at within the texts of Joanna Traynor, Jackie Kay, Precious Williams and Valerie Mason John.

“I am making a new dance and practising in the garden”: Bodies in motion and performance
in place in Diana Evans’ The Wonder
Patricia Noxolo (University of Birmingham)

This paper undertakes an analysis of the relationships amongst bodies, movement, performance and place in Diana Evans’ second novel ‘The Wonder’. The novel can be read as a story of family memory, in which a generation marked most consistently by music, flowers and water search for an understanding of a previous generation marked most clearly by dance and by travel. The search for the previous generation is constantly frustrated and complicated by a series of gaps caused by the selectivity of family stories, as well as the absences in public archives. However what links the two generations (a link realised in the narrative if not always in the characters’ experience) is a deep awareness of the forms of living beings (profiles, silhouettes, shapes) and of the power of movement (walking, running, journeying, leaping, rocking, growth, erosion, ageing). The paper draws this closely-observed liveliness into dialogue with current geographical theories of place and mobilities to explore how the novel produces a complex sense of place and memory as performed through a range of mobilities. The paper ultimately argues that this lively mixture of moving
bodies, plants and water has particular resonances for Black British experiences of place and for their relationships with geographical theories of place-making.

‘Deconstruction of Performative Black Sexuality in Bernardine Evaristo’s Mr Loverman’
Sebnem Toplu (Ege University, Turkey)

Along with writing “herstories”, writing (his)tories is not a new topic for Evaristo either, since her first gay character was Venus in her second fiction The Emperor’s Babe (2001). What makes Mr Loverman’s Barry Walker a contesting character is that he is a 74 year-old Caribbean Londoner, a husband, father and a grandfather and after 60 years still in love with his childhood friend Morris. Hence, “married” is the intriguing key concept here; as Butler maintains, “[t]he centrality of the marriage ceremony of performativity suggests that the heterosexualization of the social bond is the paradigmatic form for those speech acts which bring about what they name […] then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse” (1993, 224) (emphasis original). Butler also argues how “[g]ender is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as ‘internal’ and ‘hidden,’ nor is it reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play between psyche and appearance” (226). Therefore, one can argue that what is presented with Barry is “the sign of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures” (228) (emphasis original). Barry’s wife Carmel also provides an interesting counternarrative that shows the impact of his deceptions on her life. Carmel knows Barry has been cheating on her, believing it to be a woman. The novel is an ingenious tangle of relationships Barry has to handle with his wife, his two daughters, a teenager grandson and lover Morris; creating an Other disputing cultural myths and fallacies. The normative heterosexuality of the society is shattered in Barry’s bisexuality. This dual gendered sexuality functions as a Barthesian myth – culturally constructed meaning– deconstructing regulatory heterosexuality. As Barthes notes, the worn-out state of each myth “can be recognized by the arbitrariness of its signification” (1993, 127). In Evaristo’s work subversion becomes the means of her fiction as she undercuts myths and heterosexism, subverting the dominant ideology. Therefore, this paper will explore Barry’s identity– gender performativity and its perception by his family and lover Morris and society at large.

Works Cited

Screening of Valerie Mason-John’s talk ‘We are what we think’. Followed by a Q and A with the author via Skype (C218 The Checkland Building)

to write across the genre. She is currently looking for a publisher for her new novel, *I Am Memoried*, a family saga that takes us to war torn Sierra Leone, high society England, and the streets of Brixton.

Panel 8: The Black Woman in the Mirror: Reflections and Conversations (Westlain, 219)

‘The Black Woman in the Mirror: Reflections’
Laura Fish (University of Newcastle)

The paper combines a creative and critical approach and reveals how the mirror has been essential in how black British women are viewed and reflected back in literature. The use of the mirror is key to Virginia Woolf’s argument in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929); Woolf says: ‘Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size’. As women, black women serve the same function for black men. But I illustrate how black women function as a looking-glass in a dual way: as blacks, we shared in the past (and perhaps still today) the fate of all black people of reflecting the ‘darker’ side of white people, as many whites projected onto blacks all the unacknowledgeable traits of their own nature. The mirror is therefore also key to the way in which racial oppression has been analysed in literature. The popular image projected of black people is the mirror opposite to that of white people, and in this image we see a partial or distorted reflection of ourselves. The essay, in a sense, puts up a mirror to the history of women’s writing that Woolf presents in *A Room of One’s Own*, and the mirror image I draw reflects upon the history of black women’s writing in Britain.

‘The Im/Possibility Of Photographing an Absence’
Ingrid Pollard (artist and photographer)

Research Questions:
How do we render the invisible through photographic images and form?
How are ideas of haunting and ghosting articulated through photography and landscape?
This paper explores the im/possibility of recording a ‘presence’ and the ‘sense of an absence’ through photography. Through Examination of historic photographic images and my own visual practice address various statements; does there need to have been a human presence at a site from a particular historic moment for there correspondently to be a sense of an absence? Can the sense of a presence also be tied to a particular event, a landscape or can a memory be ascribed to a site rather than an individual.

Primary text
Laura Marks: *The Skin of Film*,
Olu Oguibe: *The Substance of the Image*
Ulrich Bear: *SpectralEvidence*

‘Conversations with Caribbean/African/African-American/European/other writing’
Yaba Badoe (writer and film-maker)

Cicero: “Who knows only his own generation remains always a child.”

As a British/Ghanaian writer and film maker, my work reflects an ongoing conversation between myself and my country of origin. Most recently, Fadoa Films, an NGO I make films
through, has embarked on a Feminist project to celebrate African women writers in a series of documentary films. The first in the series, The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo, explores the artistic contribution of one of Africa's foremost women writers, a trailblazer for an entire generation of exciting new talent, among them internationally acclaimed Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The documentary charts Aidoo's creative journey through pivotal moments of inspiration in a life that spans 7 decades from colonial Ghana, through the tumultuous era of independence, to a more sober present day Africa where nurturing women's creative talent remains as hard as ever.

In this particular conversation, which uses images to evoke the major themes in Ama Ata Aidoo's writing – the impact of slavery on Africa and its Diaspora and the experience of post-colonialism from the perspective of an African woman – my concern is twofold. First of all, to create films by and about African women; in this case an iconic writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, the first published African woman dramatist. And secondly, to begin to build an archive that documents the achievements of cultural innovators for the use of teachers and students of African women's writing throughout the world. On a personal note, my aim is to deepen my own writing through a better understanding of one of the cultural traditions I am part of.

Panel 9: Questions of Identity and Place II: Regional Identities (Westlain, 217)

‘Irksome 'Irki': Home and Belonging in Kadija Sesay's Irki
Harald Leusmann (Ball State University)

A Black British writer of Sierra Leonean descent, Kadija Sesay deals with the aspects of 'home' and 'belonging' in her debut poetry collection Irki. Throughout Irki, Sesay negotiates her second generation West African identity and her at times irksome attachment to her homelands: her parents' place of origin and contemporary Britain. I want to use 'irksome' here not in a negative connotative sense but to be reflective of the qualities that keep Sesay on edge and make her conscious of the in-betweenness of physically being in Britain and returning imaginatively to the place her parents originated from. Irki is thus an investigation into Sesay's idea of 'home', a borderland she belongs to where two cultures are at work that places her in a “spectrum of creative in-betweenness” (Meraz, 2000). The poet's divided self is thus able to make connections between the dislocation and migration of her parents, their different religions, the gradual loss of a national tongue, and her growing up Black under the Union Jack during the racial tensions in Britain of the 1960s to 1980s. As a result, the poet arrives at some form of cultural hybridity that is characteristic of the “diaspora experience” … [which] brings to the fore the doubleness or double-voiced structures which he [Stuart Hall] sees as constitutive” (Selden et al., 1997: 231) of this diasporic condition with its tense and irksome negotiations of home and belonging.

Works Cited:
'Let we sing the song again': the significance of form in Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze’s *The Fifth Figure* and *The Lamplighter* by Jackie Kay

**Irralie Doel** *(University of Brighton)*

In *The Fifth Figure* (2006), Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze explores the lives of five generations of Caribbean and Black British women of mixed ancestry, using a structure based on the Jamaican quadrille to form dramatic monologues which move between prose, poetry, history and memoir. In *The Lamplighter* (2007), Jackie Kay explores the individual and collective cost of slavery through the experiences of four women in a work which functions both as a radio and stage play and an epic poem. This paper will discuss Breeze and Kay’s experiments with form and dramatic use of storytelling, song, repetition, voice and performance in these texts and consider how they both speak to and extend traditions of Black Women’s writing.

‘The triple knot?: Black Scottish Women’s Writing’

**Jessica Homberg-Schramm** *(University of Cologne)*

Joy Hendry has famously described the contested identity of Scottish women writers as the “double knot in the peeny [pinafore]” because they are doubly marginalised as Scots and as women. In this paper, I will explore the work of Black Scottish writers in order to find out if their blackness causes yet another marginalisation and how identity construction intersects with the additional categories of nation and/or region. The negotiation of a Black Scottish identity will be exemplified on the work of two black Scottish Women poets, namely Jackie Kay and Maud Sulter. Maud Sulter's main poetic collections were published in the 1980s whereas Jackie Kay's writing originated mainly in the 1990s. The comparison of these two distinguished poets allows a diachronic perspective which can trace cultural and social changes in Scotland as well as changing attitude towards race and nation. One focus of this discussion will be Sulter’s and Kay’s use of language and the employment of the demotic.

Jessica Homberg-Schramm studied English Studies, German Studies and Politics at the University of Cologne, Germany and Durham University, UK. She worked as a lecturer for German at Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge, UK, and currently works as a research assistant at the University of Cologne. Her PhD project analyses forms and functions of the postcolonial

**Panel 10: The Politics of Form** *(Westlain, 216)*

‘Re-writing and Re-righting History: Neo-Slave Narratives and the Literary Imagination’

**Stephanie Iasiello** *(Emory University)*

Neo-slave narratives problematize the notion of legitimacy, implicitly and explicitly taking up the issue of objective truth by calling attention to the gap that exists between Truth and its written representation. While Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* (2010) straddles multiple genres, I argue that Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction” is perhaps the most accurate label to account for the complexity of the text. Hutcheon suggests that the purpose of historiographic metafiction is to intertwine the historical with the private experience of the individual. Levy’s novel binds together the historical and the private through July’s tale of her enslavement in Jamaica, and its metafictional qualities call attention to the act of creating a story. Through *The Long Song*, Levy effectively writes into existence voices that have long been neglected, even within the canon of slave narratives. Nicole Aljoe aptly argues that West Indian slave narratives are marginalized within the discourse of the slave narrative genre; North American slave narratives, in general, have received more critical attention than their West Indian counterparts. Likewise, much of the scholarship on neo-slave
narratives focuses solely on works by African-Americans. Ultimately I argue that through a seamless blending of fiction and history, The Long Song effectively calls attention to the mode of representation typically found in slave narratives and re-shapes it in such a way that problematizes the idea that Truth is implicit in representation. Furthermore, the aesthetic commentary embedded within the novel reminds the reader that constructing history is necessarily a subjective, ideologically-driven enterprise, one that involves the orchestration of many different sources.

“Like Having a Malt Whisky”: The Strong Taste of Anxiety in Jackie Kay’s Short Fiction’

Elisabeth Bekers and Veerle Piëtte (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

While many studies on Black British Women’s Writing deal with issues related to culture, ethnicity and race, this paper seeks to contribute to broadening this field of criticism by reading Jackie Kay’s rarely discussed debut story volume Why Don’t You Stop Talking (2002) – which barely touches upon the abovementioned issues – as an example of psychological short fiction. With their poignant, humorous explorations of anxiety disorders, which are best taken in small quantities “like [one would have] a malt whisky” (Kay qtd. in Rustin 2012: 1), Kay’s stories belong to what is a dominant subgenre in British and Irish short fiction (Malcolm 2012: 74), a subgenre marked by a preference for “moments of sudden revelation” and “sharply observed details” and “geared to analysing psychological changes behind factual events” (Stanzal & Zacharasiewicz, qtd. in Nagy 2009: 18).

This paper examines how Kay constructs the maddening realities of characters suffering from a wide range of anxieties by building up her narratives towards moments of revelation (a characteristic of psychological fiction) and making use of such highly appropriate narrative techniques as mirroring, interior monologue, the iceberg principle, and an array of unusual but apt metaphors and motifs. The paper will also show how such a literary-psychological approach allows for a more positive reading of the stories’ open-endedness than is offered in the few existing studies of Kay’s debut story volume.

‘Characters in quest of their identity in Bola Agbaje’s play Gone Too Far!’

Hildegard Klein (University of Malaga)

Bola Agbaje’s play constitutes a very fascinating contribution to the ongoing public debates about racism and multiculturalism defining the landscape in present day Britain. The author shows a multiplicity of ethnic groups in an urban multicultural environment, peopled by Africans, West-Indians, and Asian Britons. In my paper I analyse the author’s vivid dramaturgy, which, using a kind of picaresque structure, illustrates the knife culture of these youngsters, who are constantly under threat and in danger to end their lives tragically. By presenting two Nigerian brothers, Yemi, brought up in Britain, and Ikudayisi, raised in Nigeria, who get involved in a gang war, Agbaje theatricalizes the dangerous tribal divisions and racial tensions within the area’s black youth. I examine in which way Agbaje engages in the issue of identity, indicating the characters’ serious identity crisis. Alienated from British mainstream culture, they have formed an urban hybrid subculture, influenced by the Jamaican and Afro-American underclass, and by American fashion, such as baseball caps, and rap talk. The confusion of identity is apparent in most of the characters, but it is particularly manifest in the mixed-race Armani, not knowing whether to identify with White Britain or the Black Caribbean. I specially scrutinize the author’s final hopeful image that implies a hybrid form of culture, where individuals draw upon their own heritage, integrated into British culture which would bestow them with a real sense of identity.
Wine Reception and Evening Readings: Dorothea Smartt, Katy Massey, Kadija Sesay and Sheree Mack (C218 The Checkland Building)

Dorothea Smartt, literary activist, live artist, and established poet with an international reputation, is described as a "Brit-born Bajan international". She has two full collections, Connecting Medium and Ship Shape [Peepal Tree Press]. Her latest chapbook, Reader, I Married Him & Other Queer Goings-On, “…is subversive, radical, and surprisingly panoramic. Ultimately…about Black diasporic love at its most radical and life-affirming.” She is currently researching her third full collection, continuing to rework standard narratives, this time examining same-sex relationships and cross-gender experiences as push-pull factors behind ‘West Indian’ émigré workers on the Panama Canal.

Katy Massey is a former journalist who now writes, runs arts projects and conducts workshops, predominantly in the field of Life Writing. Her last publication was the Arts Council-funded collection of memoir 'Tangled Roots' which she edited and which uniquely features self-authored stories by members of mixed race and multi-racial families from the North of England. She obtained her PhD in Creative Writing from Newcastle University in 2010.

Kadija Sesay is the founder of SABLE LitMag, editor of several anthologies and co-director of Inscribe, a professional development project for Writers of African and Asian Descent. Her poetry, stories and essays have appeared in anthologies, journals and encyclopedias around the world. She has performed in literary festivals and events in the UK, USA and Middle East. She received several awards for her work in the creative arts. Her poetry collection Irki was published in Spring 2013 which she toured in the UK, USA, Caribbean and West Africa. She was recently awarded an Arts Council Grant to work on her second poetry collection, The Modern PanAfricanist’s Journey.

Sheree Mack is an established poet, who also writes prose, drama, and life writing. She has two full collections of poetry Family Album (Flambard Press, 2011) and Laventille (Smokestack Books). Her latest chapbooks, The Properties of Silk and Borrowed Light, draw upon memories and stories both from the women of Dunbar as well as her own family. She is the Jessie Kesson Fellowship Writer in Residence with Moniack Mhor, 2014. She has recently been awarded an Arts Council International Travel Grant (2014-2015) to work with the Jefferson Land Trust to further her relationship with writing about nature.

Award-winning British writer Bernardine Evaristo is the author of seven books. She is also an editor, critic, dramatist and essayist. Her writing spans the genres of prose novels, verse-novels, a novel-with-verse, a novella, poetry, non-fiction, literary criticism and radio and theatre drama. Her latest novel, Mr Loverman, is about a 74 yr old Caribbean London man who is closet homosexual (Hamish Hamilton/Penguin, 2013 & Akashic Books, USA, 2014). Her writing is characterised by experimentation, daring and subverting the myths of various Afro-diasporic histories and identities. She has published widely in a variety of publications and anthologies. Her books are: Mr Loverman (Penguin, 2013), Hello Mum (Penguin 2010), Lara (Bloodaxe 2009), Blonde Roots (Penguin 2008), Soul Tourists (Penguin 2005), The Emperor’s Babe (Penguin 2001), the first version of Lara (ARP 1997), Island of Abraham (Peepal Tree, 1994).

She is also Reader in Creative Writing at Brunel University and teaches the six-month 'How to Tell a Story' course for the University of East Anglia/ Guardian masterclasses in London. She originally trained as an actress and latterly earned a PhD in Creative Writing from Goldsmiths, University of London. She has been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the Royal Society of Arts and she was made an MBE in 2009. www.bevaristo.com. You can also find her on Facebook and Twitter.