“Black” British Aesthetics Today

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Edited by

R. Victoria Arana

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PREFACE

"Black" British Aesthetics Today is a collection of critical essays exploring current thinking about the newest artistic and literary works being produced in Britain. The book is a scholarly outgrowth from observations initially shared at the eponymous international symposium that took place in April 2006 at Howard University. My motive for organizing that symposium came out of my realization as a scholar of contemporary "black" British literature that discussions of contemporary "black" British writing emphasised the social and demographic features of the writing and very infrequently touched on its quality *as* writing, its artistic features and objectives, or its aesthetics. I wondered if the output of artists in other genres was being treated in this more or less anthropological or sociological way, instead of being considered specifically as art and examined for aesthetic and artistic qualities and execution. The symposium was designed to fill the gap.

I have found it useful to define the term *aesthetics* as "the deliberate design of the appeal to an audience"—rather than attempt to provide an ontological definition. *Deliberate design* is one of the most important aspects of the work of an artist, surely, but it may not be obvious—and especially not if critics and reviewers (interested mostly in themes) are concerned principally with such matters as *who* is producing the work and *what* it may be about, and not in its implicit idiom or equivalent nonverbal communicative strategies.

In my own research, I soon discovered that artistic manifestos were not to be found in abundance to help reviewers and critics to see what might be "new" or "brilliant" or essentially "different" about the artistry of contemporary "black" British writers. Publications anthologizing works by new "black" British writers, for instance, promoted new voices and left it to readers to determine their relative artistic merits and accomplishments. Often these introductions mentioned the socio-political emergence of the voices, but drew little or no attention to what the voices were saying and no attention whatsoever to *how* they were crafting their messages.

The artists themselves, of course, do indeed manifest their aesthetics, if we can learn to discern these traces. But without attention to aesthetics and craft, we cannot *fully* appreciate the emergent artistic productions—mostly because they *are* new.

Looking around for help from scholars and critics writing about the new aesthetics, the post-post-colonial aesthetics, the new millennial aesthetics, I

found very few really helpful books and articles: those which I did find are included in the comprehensive bibliography found at the back of this book.

"Black" British Aesthetics Today offers readers a more comprehensive and more insightful treatment of the newest "black" British aesthetics than anything available to date. It shows how current thinking and practice confirm the existence of a vibrant and engaged population of witty and creative talents passionately engaged in the work of transforming the very idea of what it means to be a British artist and citizen today.

"Black" British Aesthetics Today contains twenty-three chapters set into four sections. The first section relates current "black" British aesthetic practices to traditional aesthetics from various quarters, including the ancestral African arts, the Black Arts Movement of the United States, and the more recently developed postcolonial expressive modalities. The second section amplifies the theoretical exploration of current trends and movements in a full spectrum of the arts: literature, the various graphic and media categories, architecture and design, drama, and the performance arts. The third section offers focused studies of individual works or sets of works exemplary of the new "black" British aesthetics. The fourth section recognises the careers of two exemplary "black" British literary activists, women whose considerable energies and exuberant intellectual efforts in behalf of "black" British literature and the arts have inspired many others to follow suit.

Many of the essays are written by the new and avant-garde writers and artists themselves and, as such, amount to the manifestos I had searched for but not found (in print) before their contributions were solicited for this particular publication. The volume includes as well a useful, comprehensive bibliography to help readers ground further work in this field.

In this volume, the terms *black*, *"black"* and *Black* all appear, and it has been my decision, as editor, to allow each contributor to treat the word in his or her own way. For the most part, though, I should clarify that, for many of us sensitive to the current state of cultural affairs in Britain, all of these terms have been challenged. For the title of the book, I use "black" to call attention to the historical reality of a group so called. The word *Black* as a category for human beings was recently been labeled "offensive" by some Britons of African parentage, and it is fast becoming politically incorrect to use it in the United Kingdom. According to British journalist Toyin Agbetu, progressive Britons and others should use the term *African British* to designate British citizens of African heritage or racial backgrounds. Agbetu explained: "*African British* is the name now used to describe the community previously mislabeled as Afro-Caribbean, Black British, U.K. Black, Negro, Nigger, Coloured and Black. It embraces all British nationals with antecedents originating directly from Africa or indirectly via African diasporic communities, such as those in the Caribbean

and South America" (see Agbetu's Ligali webpage at www.ligali.org). In his essay titled "Say It Loud: I'm African and Proud" (*New Nation*, 12 July 2004), Joseph Harker explained "why the time has come to ditch the word *Black*." Writers with cultural and racial roots in India, the Middle East, and other places have also been critical of the label for themselves. I have discussed the matter at length in my introduction to *Contemporary "Black" British Writers*, a volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and in my essay "The 1980s: Retheorising and Refashioning British Identity" in *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay (2005). When all is said and done, many of the writers and artists referred to in the present volume find the label "African British" neither appealing nor even accurate and use other terms to describe their identities and ethnicities. Andrea Levy, for example, calls herself simply English, Michael McMillan calls himself an Englishman of Vincentian parentage, Kobena Mercer calls himself a Londoner of Ghanaian-British descent, Kadija Sesay calls herself an Englishwoman of Sierra Leonean heritage, Roshini Kempadoo calls herself a British-born artist of Indian Caribbean descent based in London, and so on. While the culture is trending that way, no neutral term that could serve as an *omnium gatherum* yet exists that would help readers and librarians identify the focus of this book, which is why I use the expression "*black*" advisedly—surgically even—and within the forceps of quotation marks.

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INTRODUCTION

AESTHETICS AS DELIBERATE DESIGN: GIVING FORM TO *TIGRITUDE* AND *NOMMO*

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In a recent online conversation between African novelist Helon Habila and "Black" British writer Courttia Newland, these two young writers explored their thoughts about the vocation of writing. Segueing to the purposes of their artistic endeavours (as happens so frequently when writers from the African continent engage writers of African heritage living elsewhere), Habila and Newland began to try to define the major differences in their points of view concerning aesthetics. A point they pondered related to the place of identity-formation in their respective creative works—how their characters developed maturity, how that maturity related to a strong sense of selfhood, and what self might mean in different cultural contexts. Newland commented:

> I long ago realized that to the African community outside the United Kingdom, our ["black" British artists'] quest to define who and what we are must seem perplexing at the very least—as Wole Soyinka has said, "Why must we boast of our negritude? A tiger does not boast of its tigritude." While I agree that this is true of a tiger that finds itself in its normal environment, could the same be said for one that is caged and peered at by hundreds of spectators a day, miles away from home? Would it not notice how much it stood out, wonder at what makes it different from those outside the cage?
>
> I recognize that an English [white] author would not feel these things, for the very reasons you do not feel them when in Africa. The fact that you are who you say you are is a given.

If an artist's aesthetic can be construed as a vision or conscious scheme for the representation of an idea and if it is, for that reason, *the deliberate design of an appeal* to one or more audiences, real or imagined, no discussion of an artist's aesthetic can ignore the artist's local (read: *residential*) situation, nor can it ignore the artist's perception of himself within his or her cultural context.

Courttia Newland's comment has broadly ramifying implications for our subject matter in this volume.

Every original artist must at some point or another feel the need to boast of his or her tigritude, especially if *tigritude* is to be construed as the artist's indispensable identity, the distinguishing marks of that identity. The artist may not consciously ask, What is my tigritude, my truest self? But surely —Giorgio Agamben's melancholic musings aside[1]—the artist *does* wonder, How do *I* want to relate to and attract the attention of real and potential spectators ambling around? The essays in this volume—particularly those by Diran Adebayo, Anthony Joseph, Valerie Mason-John, Koye Oyedeji, Lauri Ramey, SuAndi, Andrene Taylor, and Samera Owusu Tutu—engage aspects of this crucial conversation. And SuAndi and Valerie Mason-John, especially, posit that certain aesthetic features and artistic strengths in the works of "black" British artists derive from their having to deal candidly with bizarre experiences of cultural dissonance or dislocation, whether or not they are armed from birth with knowledge of a rich African or other heritage.

For some artists, the metaphorical cage to which Courttia Newland alluded exists as the artist's persona, the way the artist feels (or fears) that he or she is perceived by others. The artist's persona is, of course, only a symbolic enclosure or constraint or condition surrounding the possibility of speech and expression. In other times and other places, silenced or alienated from their surround, some afflicted artists, we know, became the spectators and recorders of their defeated careers. Their artworks, designed in solitude—for some god, an imagined audience, or the self alone—remained confidential messages, and spectators coming upon them later have sympathized or appreciated those artists' messages designed in solitude, quiet joy, or self-torment.

In contrast, the "black" British artists coming into the lime lights *today* are concerned to reach out, and the artistic programmes emerging from their considerations of identity and of relation to community embody not merely *a politics of identity*, but *an aesthetics of identity* as well. Theirs is *the deliberate design of an appeal*, of an invitation to consider an idea—something like a call, a summons, a prayer, or even a growl. In the light of that challenge, Valerie

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[1] See Agamben's treatise on the status of art in the modern era, *The Man without Content,* tr. Georgia Albert (Stanford UP, 1999). In discussing the aesthetics of G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, and Charles Baudelaire, Agamben concludes that aesthetics "is unable to think of art according to its proper statute, and so long as man is prisoner of an aesthetic perspective, the essence of art remains closed to him" (102). It should be noted, however, that Agamben is mostly concerned with aesthetics as a philosophical enterprise, not with the artist's *aesthetic*, the self-conscious premise of his or her artistic principles and aims.

Mason-John, for instance, argues in her chapter that the *trans-raised* “black” British writer (at times against the grain of both “blacks” and “whites”) takes perhaps the greatest aesthetic risks in an effort to communicate biting truths about social realities in the U.K. today. Others whose writings are included in this volume pronounce their own artistic trajectories as moving toward larger aesthetic freedoms, acquired through greater knowledge of and pleasure in the world’s radiant traditions.

In this volume, we have collected a rich discussion on an array of thoughts, statements, and products of “black” artists at work in Britain today. These British citizens seek to have their say and to express their creative ideas in a wide variety of genres. Of course, today being what it is—an era of ever-present global mass media and of communications at the speed of light, a period also, some say, of colossal collisions between contending cultures—Britain stands at an interesting junction in regards to the world and its peoples. It has offered itself not merely as a *pied à terre* for travellers from its former dominions, but as a place of permanent residence for individuals from around the world seeking political asylum at its shores. Since the end of World War II, waves of migrants from Britain’s former colonies have joined the descendants of the historical Angles, Saxons, Normans, and other tribal influxes to the Albion Isles, and they are now all contributing willy-nilly to the creation of a new cosmopolitan nation.

The descendants of the most recent arrivants have been participating formally and enthusiastically since 1997 in the lively project of “Re-inventing Britain”—and doing so, it seems, with the Establishment’s blessing. But to re-invent Britain will require, all are agreed, more than a series of constitutional reforms: it will take (as it always has in the past) brilliant and accessible works of the creative imagination. Never more than in the present day have artists been challenged to produce works that appeal to more than their solitary selves—works that convey something more than an image of their inner *tigritude* pacing in circles within the confines of their isolation. Re-inventing Britain will take something like a fresh aesthetic disposition. W. H. Auden may have been colossally off-beam in asserting that “poetry makes nothing happen.” Nelson Mandela added a gloomy post-note to Auden’s observation: “Poetry cannot block a bullet or still a sjambok, but it can bear witness to brutality—thereby cultivating a flower in a graveyard.” With all due respect to Auden’s ghost and Mr. Mandela, the arts—the works of the creative imagination—can do a good deal more than merely participate in the mournful horticulture of burial-ground flowers, as the essays in this book emphatically demonstrate.

One major feature of the aesthetic of many current “black” British artists is a decided emphasis on a firm and purposeful (if not always cheerful) civility. As I have argued elsewhere, many of the writers publishing in the

United Kingdom today affirm *in no uncertain terms*[2] their fundamental commitment to advancing the cause of an egalitarian civil society in Britain, where most of them were born. Their basic dedication to this socio-political end underlies their aesthetics. It gives their creative work a certain amount of *gravitas*, even when their works are meant to be light-hearted, entertaining, or just plain funny. Indeed, theirs might be thought a difficult artistic tone to maintain while the West's zealous "war on terrorism" is going on and inter-ethnic paranoia (or fanatical mistrust of "others") is escalating in some quarters. Valerie Kaneko Lucas's chapter on "verbatim drama" shows what aesthetic strategies contemporary "black" playwrights are using to draw attention to *mainstream* lapses of civility and justice—Lucas's point being that the tenor of the plays is not so much *anger* over the unfairness of British systems of justice as insightful, compassionate *analysis* of how things go wrong.

In the light of these current realities, it is worthwhile to analyse how contemporary "black" British writers manage to reconcile their politics and their art, without compromising either. In general, the prevalent aesthetic—it seems to me—can be codified (roughly) this way: (1) Artworks must be socially engaged and sympathetically alert to contemporary ways of life. (2) They need to be psychologically rich and plainly representative of real social and moral dilemmas. (3) They should maintain and offer moral compasses that point to wise conduct, even when (fictional) characters may seem to be losing their way. (4) They should devise ways to demonstrate a healthy attitude toward change as well as respect for *valuable traditions*, whatever their provenance. (5) The brightest-lit moments in each work should bring into focus the artist's best thoughts and deepest feelings on these matters. (6) One of the best ways to accomplish these artistic ends is through a friendly sort of satire. The authors whose writing today glows most brightly with all six of these attributes are (according to critics and reviewers) Diran Adebayo, Monica Ali, Bernardine Evaristo, Anthony Joseph, Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith, and Benjamin Zephaniah. While they are not, by a long shot, clownish buffoons, they are the "comic hotshots" among today's "black" British writers. Patience Agbabi, Biyi Bandele, Diana Evans, Martin Glynn, Jackie Kay, S.I. Martin, Valerie Mason-John, Courttia Newland, Helen Oyeyemi, SuAndi, Meera Syal, and Alex Wheatle also create works attentive to contemporary states of mind and full of subtle wit and good humour. Their works may not be out-and-out riotous like those of the "hotshots," but, in adopting the essentially optimistic modalities of wit and social satire, they, too, manage their cultural critiques artfully and with a

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[2] See my "Black American Bodies in the Neo-Millennial Avant-Garde Black British Poetry" in *Literature and Psychology* 40, 4 (2002): 47-80, esp. 52-53, 77; and "'Black' British Writing: An Introduction" in *Contemporary 'Black' British Writers / Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Sumter, SC: Bruccoli, Clark, Layman, in press).

smile. Among photographers, Joy Gregory in her *Cinderella Tours Europe* (2001) and Roshini Kempadoo in her *ECU-European Currency Unfolds* (1992)—to cite just two examples—register equivalent aesthetic qualities.

Jude Okpala's chapter in this volume addresses the differences between texts written by authors who focus on Africa and those who focus on Britain. In centring his discussion on such writers as Ben Okri, Biyi Bandele, and Chris Abani, Okpala makes the important point that the lenses of postcolonial critique, especially as these have been fashioned to examine works by expatriate Asians living in Britain, do not help us materially to clarify the aesthetics nor the historical realities that concern this band of (Nigerian-born) British writers interested in current affairs outside of Britain proper. Okpala's caveat strikes me as vital to our volume's purposes. His further point that what may appear fantastic or preposterous to one living within the relatively safe enclave of Britain may indeed be realistic (a shameful reality) and should be checked against facts before it is hastily relegated to this or that aesthetic or generic category (gothic crime, sci-fi, or fantasmagoria). Okpala's argument suggests to me that one seriously misreads the works of these writers if one does not recognize how much their aesthetics are confluent with the paradigmatic one sketched above, especially the part about representing *real* social dilemmas.

On the other hand, in a recent dialogue with London poet Dorothea Smartt (whose heritage is Barbadian), Jackie Kay (the "black" Glaswegian poet, novelist, and dramatist) said, "In our society right now, we are obsessed with fact and memoir, biography and autobiography, and what gets lost in all of that is the imagination itself."[3] In short, it is the artist's imagination, as Jackie Kay so appositely reminds us, which deliberately designs the appeal of the artwork; so, it is the artists' imaginations, rather than the particulars of their lives or the connections between their lives and their themes, on which we readers and scholars of the *artistic* productivity of our age should (most gainfully) be focusing. Jackie Kay, in that same interview, noted, "…it isn't really my job, in a way, to analyse my own themes or try to work out what I am doing, because then [an artist] can end up thinking, 'Oh, I am the kind of person who does this and then does it again" (10). Point well taken. It is *our* job as readers, critics, and scholars to pay attention to the part that imagination plays in the works created by "black" British artists and writers today—and this, precisely, is the objective of *"Black" British Aesthetics Today*.[4]

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[3] "Jackie of All Trades, Mistress of Many" (interview of Jackie Kay by Dorothea Smartt) in *Sable: The LitMag for New Writing*, issue 9 (Autumn 2006), p. 9.

[4] Much has been written and debated, especially in the abstract, about the validity of aesthetics as a topic of inquiry today. For the best current scholarship on the topic, I strongly recommend the excellent collection of essays *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, edited by Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, & Jeffrey Rhyne (Oxford: Oxford UP,

It is not an easy territory to negotiate, however—especially not *today*, as I have said. In addition, we are often reminded that distinct differences exist between *imaginative works of art* and their close cousins: those well-crafted artefacts associated with versions of clan ritual or with the straightforward conservation of established hegemonic traditions. While we should be mindful of such distinctions, I certainly do not mean to suggest that *imaginative art works* cannot exist to express political ideas or religious sentiment; they can, of course, and often do, as Koye Oyedeji, Magdalena Maczynska, Lauri Ramey, and Andrene Taylor take pains to explain in their chapters in this volume. Genuine art works, more often than not, have served extra-aesthetic purposes, including the endorsement of a hegemonic ideology or the exaltation of some purported spiritual quintessence. When they convey, respectively, political or religious intentions, those messages can be so ingeniously incorporated into the *design* of the creative work that the political or religious *ennoncé* becomes equal if not subordinate to the aesthetic experience offered to readers, listeners, or spectators. In such cases, it becomes necessary for art critics and literary critics to distinguish the particularities of the aesthetic expression from the work's social and religious functions. This need complicates our study of "black" British aesthetics today, given the overt and undeniable socio-political and ethnic orientation (or scope) of so much that is being produced. We need to know something of Nigerian belief systems to understand fully Helen Oyeyemi's, Valerie Mason-John's, David Nwokedi's, or Biyi Bandele's fiction about British youth of African heritage—as Koye Oyedeji and Jude Okpala point out. Samera Owusu Tutu discusses the politics that are inseparable from what, in her chapter, she calls the "resounding underground" of performance poetry in the U.K. Anthony Joseph sees avant-garde poetic experimentalism as a profoundly political statement in itself, especially when the literary establishment seems to recognize and to reward only poetry that sounds the "black" identity themes in acceptable, if not predictable, ways.

Some comparisons seem in order here, to clarify the issues. Who would argue that the initial experience one has, for instance, of the basilica of St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican is *not* (even for a Roman Catholic) an aesthetic one, sparked by a response (whether positive or negative) to the lofty and gilded architecture, the lighting of statuary, the staging of the religious paraphernalia? The same can be said for the ruins of Sacsahuamán outside Cuzco or the colourful painted villages of the Ndebele in Zimbabwe. Just so. These places were designed aesthetically, to appeal to more than the artists involved, whatever purpose besides an aesthetic one they may serve or have served.

2002). Of special note are Emory Elliott's "Introduction" to the volume; Winfried Fluck's "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies" (79-104); & Louis Freitas Caton's "Afterword" (279-293).

Similarly, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are about the tugs of power and affiliation on a personal, a national, even an imperial level; yet, one would not call these novels primarily political tracts. The deliberate invention of character and situation and the attention to subtle traits of individual human conditions and aspirations lift the literary inventions out of the banal and self-serving category of mere clan ritual designed for the purpose of reanimating political solidarity. The works of novelists have, in short, very little in common with partisan political gatherings. The same may be said for the fiction of Diran Adebayo, Monica Ali, Biyi Bandele, Judith Bryan, David Dabydeen, Bernardine Evaristo, Victor Headley, Peter Kalu, Jackie Kay, Andrea Levy, Courttia Newland, Mike Phillips, Joan Riley, Ravinder Randhawa, Leone Ross, Zadie Smith, Meera Syal, Joanna Traynor, and Alex Wheatle—as well as for the plays being written and produced today by, for instance, debbie tucker green, Tanika Gupta, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Winsome Pinnock, Roy Williams or the raft of new "black" British playwrights: Rhashan Stone, Mark Norfolk, Pat Cumper, Maya Chowdhry, Valerie Mason-John, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, Dolly Dhingra, and Sol B. River. No matter what happens in a story, its audience often perceives in the "conflicts" of plot (whether in the theatre or on the page) various fundamentally social and political messages. The scholarship in our field has addressed the matter of social themes with verve and enthusiasm. Among the best recent work along these lines are John Clement Ball's *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (2004), Gabriele Griffin's *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* (2003), C. L. Innes's *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000,* Bruce King's survey *The Internationalization of English Literature* (2004), John MacLeod's *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), James Proctor's *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (2003), Sukhdev Sandhu's *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writrs Imagined a City* (2003), Kadija Sesay's edited volume *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature* (2005), Mark Stein's *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004), and Michelle Wright's *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004).

Published discussion of the aesthetic properties of the artworks of today's "black" British artists—and most especially of "black" British writers whatever the genre—is a much scarcer commodity. Samera Owusu Tutu's chapter in this volume breaks new ground by detailing the aesthetics of that most political of poetic genres, the black British performance poetry scene, and exploring the aesthetic connections between the U.K.'s poetry underground and the new "black" British mainstream. The essays of Tracey Walters, Magdalena Maczynska, and Roy Sommer provide useful mappings and the groundworks for future, serious study of today's "black" British fiction.

What were their creators thinking when they designed their artworks? What particular objectives had they in mind? Are today's "black" British architects, artists, composers, dramaturges, filmmakers, hip hop artists, multi-media artists, novelists, poets, photographers, playwrights, sculptors, and writers of works in new hybrid genres enunciating their tigritude or taking it for granted—and how do their diverse imaginative stances affect their deliberate designs? Such are the questions about British arts today that are raised and answered in the essays that follow. We have direct answers to many of these questions in the artistic manifestos included in this volume—the chapters by Diran Adebayo, Anthony Joseph, Roshini Kempadoo, Sheree Mack, Michael McMillan, and SuAndi. Yet, these writers and artists also raise wide-ranging questions about aesthetics today. We are most interested, in this book, in exploring the dimension of imagination as it is invested in "black" British artworks of our own day—and in discovering ways of appreciating what motivates the artists who are producing this particular body of aesthetic objects.

"*Black" British Aesthetics Today* answers two important questions: *What precisely is "artistic" about current black British art?* and *Why is this question so important?* To answer those questions, it is imperative—at the outset—to approach the subject from the standpoint of the artist. So far, there are no competing publications that I know of, although there are many to which this particular collection serves as a sequel (see this book's Bibliography).

This book contests and rebuts the idea that the whole subject of aesthetics is an effete one, best not engaged in literary study today, and counters Giorgio Agamben's thesis that humanity (he, in fact, used the term "*man*"/ "*uomo*") can no longer relate to tradition. In contrast to the affirmations of the scholars included in this introductory unit of our book, Agamben's thesis, though gaining recognition in academic circles, sounds an irrelevant chord, quite dissonant in our framework and completely at odds with the tenor of what Andrene Taylor, SuAndi, and Jude Okpala have to say in their chapters about the vitality of the links between today's "black" British artists and writers and their antecedents. Because the breach between Agamben's popular thesis and the aesthetics of contemporary "black" Britons is so marked, it would be unwise to pass over his claims without comment. In his provocative chapter "The Melancholy Angel," Agamben wrote:

> The interruption of tradition, which is for us now a *fait accompli*, opens an era in which no link is possible between old and new, if not the infinite accumulation of the old in a sort of monstrous archive or the alienation effected by the very means that is supposed to help with the transmission of the old.… Suspended in the void between old and new, past and future, man is projected into time as into something alien that incessantly eludes him and still drags him forward, but without allowing him to find his ground in it. (*The Man without Content,* 108)

In *Outside Literature* (1990), Tony Bennett, the British cultural critic, is far less phlegmatic about the position of the arts in contemporary life than his near age-mate, the Italian philosopher. In his anti-elitist, materialist critique of the whole trajectory of philosophical disquisitions on aesthetics, Bennett agrees with Bertolt Brecht, who suggested quite simply that "we should abolish aesthetics." While, like Brecht, Bennett considers the philosophical enterprise of aesthetics a "useless" attempt at describing a universalising system, he does not go so far as to deny "the political utility of discourses of value"—and, instead, warns against "class-specific aesthetic norms" and bourgeois hegemonic projects that are essentially attempts "which serve as a blockage to both political analysis and cultural policy formation" (*Outside Literature*, p. 166). While he does not call it an aesthetic, as such, Bennett nevertheless subscribes to the notion that an artist does *indeed* formulate his or her own local and specific *discourse of value* within an economy of competing political force fields. It is a useful postulate, which, I find, echoes in diverse ranges and registers through the chapters that follow. I think that what Bennett's calls "discourse of value" is the antecedent to the aesthetic afflatus, which then inspires the artist to imagine a design for the work of art. We cannot "abolish aesthetics" and think seriously about art as such.

This collection of essays on "black" British aesthetics today is divided into four sections. Unit I (*The Sankofa Tradition: Looking Back to Move Forward*) takes up the topic of earlier aesthetic positions and practices out of which the artists and writers living and working in Britain today have emerged and to which they are still connected in important ways. Without explicitly contending with Giorgio Agamben's seductive argument (that the crisis for the artist today is that humanity has been severed from tradition), Andrene Taylor, SuAndi, and Jude Okpala map out the roads that connect current "black" British artists and writers with (or disconnect them from) predecessors, both recent and ancient. Unit I, thus, is foundational. In her chapter "Black British Writing: In the Tradition of Revolutionary Poetics," Taylor relates the writing of new "black" British novelists to the tenets of the African American Black Arts Movement. SuAndi, in her panoramic investigation "Cultural Memory and Today's Black British Poets and Live Artists," surveys "the existence of cultural memory" from the personal perspective of a British-born individual and writes of her one-on-one exchanges on this topic with a broad array of fellow artists who live and work in Britain. Bristling with references to the web-pages of fellow artists and studded with *à propos* comments in the form of personal anecdotes and her own poems, SuAndi's essay amounts to an aesthetic manifesto announcing the incalculable and irreplaceable value of cultural memory to the contemporary "black" British poet. To round off the unit, Okpala points to the stubborn affinities between postcolonial and "black" British

aesthetics, even in the face of strenuous efforts by literary activists, including Kadija Sesay, to distinguish the two; and, at the same time, he warns against too glib an application of the postcolonial critical apparatus to the works of today's writers of African backgrounds. In sum, Unit I takes up American, diasporan British, and postcolonial "residuals" in the works of today's "black" British arts practitioners, to show the many ways that traditions of various sorts play crucial roles in contemporary "black" British aesthetics.

Unit II (*Critical Theories and Aesthetic Movements*) offers eight stimulating chapters that look at our topic from an array of differing points of view. In "'Diaspora Wasn't Made in a Day': Reflections on Aesthetics and Time," Kobena Mercer traces a genealogy for "black" British aesthetics and names some of the specific cultural challenges confronting artists working in a range of media today, from architecture to arts curatorship. In "Situating a 'Black' British Poetic Avant-Garde," Lauri Ramey analyses various ways that poets have availed of both diaspora and avant-gardism to generate innovations either in synchrony with or opposition to recent aesthetic developments in Britain. Tracey Walters explores trends in the new "black" British literary criticism as they emerge from the aesthetics implicit in the works of today's writers. Koye Oyedeji takes up the idea of a "post-black condition" and relates it to currently perceived problems of artistic representation—for the "new" artists as well as the "new" audiences. Magdalena Maczynska investigates the aesthetics of realism in the new "black" fiction and elucidates its attraction. Avant-garde poet Joseph Anthony explains the resistance to avant-gardism among "black" artists and audiences and his own attraction to it. Samera Owusu Tutu brings to the discussion insights from the "poetry underground" flourishing in the United Kingdom. In his manifesto "'Pretty is the New Black: New Directions in Black British Aesthetics," Diran Adebayo, a "new" novelist himself, challenges artists and audiences to pay much closer attention to the writer's deliberate choices of poetic imagery, literary forms, and artistic devices that produce pleasure while highlighting the truth of a work's spin on reality.

Unit III (*Embodied Aesthetics*) takes our investigations a few steps closer to the individual art works and the creative imaginations of individual artists. In his chapter, Roy Sommer surveys the field of contemporary "black" fiction to indicate the richness of the stylistic choices evident there—and to suggest ways that an "intercultural narratology" would help to explain the aesthetic effects of the many formal strategies deployed by new "black" cosmopolitan writers. His point is that critics must be alert because the writers are, more and more, availing themselves of intercultural signifying systems and exploiting an incredible array of narrative strategies culled by writers with multicultural and multi-ethnic interests from the communicative strategies of artists and writers from all epochs and from around the world. Courtney Martin

centres her discussion on the cultural challenges of new media and explores the way one multi-media artist (Yinka Shonibare) imaginatively exploits a new, non-standard, public venue for the display of thought-provoking aesthetic objects. Meenakshi Ponnuswami concentrates her analysis of new aesthetic orientations in "black" British theatre by discussing the treatment of alienation and transnationalism in the plays of Winsome Pinnock. Deirdre Osborne unpacks for us the aesthetically motivated provocations implicit in the theatrical works of debbie tucker green and Dona Daley. Amna Malik concentrates on a film by Martine Attille to demonstrate aspects of a creolised "black" British aesthetics with roots in all quarters of the former British Empire. Valerie Kaneko Lucas explains the aesthetics of verbatim drama, using a set of current theatrical works that draw directly from the public record to elicit civic sentiment as well as aesthetically conditioned responses from theatre audiences. Roshini Kempadoo discusses her own aesthetic ideas and practices, the concepts and methods that have inspired her highly hybrid photographic artworks. Michael McMillan unpacks the aesthetics of West Indian domesticity and, further, explains the aesthetic appeal of an installation he curated in the U.K., which (in distancing and reifying aspects of the West Indian "front room") linked British history to current "black" British artworks in a whole spectrum of genres. Sheree Mack's chapter—in surveying specific cases of "black" women's authorship and authority—draws the conversation around to an aspect of our subject that she fears always suffers suspicious neglect: the volatile critical discourses surrounding "black" British women's aesthetics today.

Unit IV (*Activists in the Vanguard of "Black" British Aesthetics*) sets in motion, I anticipate, an on-going effort to recognize and to celebrate the work of a new generation of arts activists who, plainly, have devoted their intellectual energies to enlarging awareness of "black" British arts and aesthetics and who have sterling records of success in bringing worldwide recognition to what is new and special about artworks emerging from the U.K today. In this section, for starters, we highlight the lives and careers of Susheila Nasta and Kadija Sesay, whose critical insights and entrepreneurial work are integral parts of the overall representation of "black" British aesthetics today.

* * * * *

In chapter after chapter of this volume, it will be noted, a common, underlying aesthetic informs the productions of "black" British artists and writers today. The similarities (and some of the differences) in the topics and themes of this developing canon have already been explained socially and historically. The contributors to this volume want the world to pay attention to

the aesthetic idioms, the new shapes, the brilliant creative imaginations implicit in the artworks.

It is not beside the point to note that, about a group of twentieth-century African American writers, Johnella Butler, a distinguished American academic, wrote:

> The[ir] quest for wholeness suggests more than a revision of the way we view racism, slavery, and their legacies in everyday lives. It involves a change of world-view, and a struggle ensues in either consciously attempting to realize that change or, for African Americans, in living in accord with and utilizing the sustaining aspects of African-American culture…. That struggle is fuelled by the binaries of materialism and spirituality, the masculine and the feminine, good and evil, black and white—binaries that perpetuate the inhumanity of racism, sexism, hetero-sexism, classism, neo-colonialism, and the dominance over and the destructtion of the environment. …their writing expresses the loss of something vital to the affirmation of humankind's frustrated need to understand and live through connections to one another and to the world. (180)

Butler contrasts the Western sense of reality ("*Logos*" and a binary approach to it) with the African sense of reality ("*Nommo*"). She summarizes the system of values resident in *Nommo*:

> connection to a usable but not a defining past; connection to other human beings; recognition of the connection and overlapping of discourse if not in content, purpose, or process, then in time or place, or even connected through opposition… all things negotiated as relative to the common good of humanity. (180)

There are salient and particular differences, of course, between the immediate concerns and aspirations of the American writers Johnella Butler discusses (Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, Julie Dash, Jean Toomer, and Ishmael Reed) and the concerns and aspirations of the writers and artists included and/or discussed in this book. But Butler's injunctions not to forget about *Nommo* are apposite. It is impossible not to recognize a family resemblance between (a) Butler's distillation of the aesthetics of some of today's African American writers and (b) the powerful, embedded discourse of inclusive and communitarian values which—whether we call it *Nommo* or something else—conditions the artistic manifestos and creative productions of this newest generation of "black" British artists.

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UNIT I

THE SANKOFA TRADITION: LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

The role of the African artists today is to begin the process of developing a language that enables us to communicate across ethnic, tribal, national and geographical boundaries; however, it should use the elements of the various ethnic, tribal, and national groups to achieve this end. But, before we can begin that process, it is necessary for us to acquire a greater understanding of our traditional art forms and culture, specifically its purpose within our ancestral societies. Within most traditional African societies, there was no such thing as "art for art's sake." Art was an integral part of the life of the community; it was not separate nor was it solely the artist's prerogative to express his personal desires and inclinations. Art was the means by which sacred history served the function of revealing those invisible dimensions that gave support to transcendent ideals. For without sacred history, self would have no relationship to family, family would have no relationship to community; community no relationship to world, and world no relationship to Creation. Those traditions are not dead, buried, and inert, unchanging things waiting to be rediscovered. They are living entities which must be constantly renewed, to enable us to make ourselves anew—new Africans in a contemporary, post-modernist world.

In today's African artist's work, we must see the eyes and hands of the contemporary artist, looking anew, not at, but through, the prism of an African aesthetic speaking in a new world with the voices of the ancestors; voices for so long silenced; in doing so, their art will offer new generations the opportunity to look again with fresh eyes, to see themselves in new ways.

—George Kelly Fowokan, SPS, Sculptor

CHAPTER ONE

BLACK BRITISH WRITING: "HITTING UP AGAINST" A TRADITION OF REVOLUTIONARY POETICS[1]

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> Tradition … cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.
> —T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919)

> The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before.
> —Alice Walker, "Fundamental Difference" (1970)

> Implicit in the writer's situation is the cumulative effect on that tradition upon the culture of his times. One could say that the writer is essentially a creation of the books he has read.
> —Larry Neal, "The Writer as Activist?" (1976)

As critic Michelle Joan Wilkinson suggests, "A concern for tradition represents not the failure to relinquish the past, but the responsibility to remember it. Tradition is itself a politic of cultural memory—to adopt the subtitle of Kary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery*. A tradition of revolution is one that reverses the rotation: such a tradition swings, pendulum-like, up against the past with each stride it makes into the future." Today, I situate my conversation about Black British writing as "hitting up against" the tradition of revolutionary poetics of the Black Diaspora. The tradition is marked by the

[1] Title inspired by Michelle Joan Wilkinson's "In the Tradition of Revolution: The Socio-Aesthetics of Black and Puerto Rican Arts Movements, 1962-1982."

presence of ancestors, real or imagined, and it is always implicitly or explicitly political.

Kadija Sesay, in her introduction to *Write Black, Write British: From Postcolonial to Black British Literature*, argues that the current generation of Black British writers is pushing beyond the category of postcolonial. In Sesay's view, this generation has a different "take" on Britain because they are writers born and educated in Britain (16). Nonetheless, the writings of these authors reflect an aesthetic of literary resistance that expands beyond the geographical plane of England. Authors such as Patience Agbabi, Courttia Newland, Chris Abani, Lorraine Griffiths, Bernardine Evaristo, Diran Adebayo, Jackie Kay, Dorothea Smartt, and others are a part of a tradition which extends to the shores of Africa, America, and the Caribbean.

While I am aware that young Black Britons are strongly connected to the English literary tradition, it is my argument that their new movement is an extension of a larger African diasporic tradition that includes but is not limited to the Negritude Movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and Black British writing's most immediate predecessor, the Black Arts Movement. My particular interest in this essay is to trace the African American connections in the writings of today's Black British writers. As Lauri Ramey points out in "Contemporary Black British Poetry," "African American poets are often cited as having served as role models and voices of permission for many contemporary Black British poets" (116). Instead of suggesting that these writers are performing a radical break from their literary predecessors, I argue that this generation is in the process of innovating many of the themes, re-shaping, re-vitalizing, and expanding many of the aesthetic features present in the work of their literary predecessors.

Black British writing is, thus, created within a framework of multiple relationships. The tensions among the relationships of race, identity, culture, and history converge and create a series of thematic and structural continuities and discontinuities that work within and against a tradition of revolutionary poetics. The tradition is defined by common themes while manifesting technical transformations. The tradition is also defined by the function of the poetry, which is to raise individual consciousness in order to create social and political change.

The tension among the various relationships in the literature can be best understood in the poets' use of the "ancestor." In "The Ancestor as Foundation," Toni Morrison argues that it is "interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of the ancestor" (201). Morrison describes the ancestors as a "timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (201). While Morrison references the ancestor in terms

of the novel, the ancestor is manifested in poetry as well. Farah Jasmine Griffin's use of the concept in *Who Set You Flowin': The African-American Migration Narrative* is in line with my assertion. In her text, Griffin extends Morrison's concept of the ancestor in terms of "ritual, religion, music, food, and performance," and she adds: "His or her legacy is evident in discursive formations like the oral tradition. The ancestor might be a literal ancestor; he or she also has earthly representatives we may call elders" (426). In terms of theme and structure, the ancestor is clearly present in Black British writing.

Take for example, Dorothea Smartt's Medusa poems from her collection *Connecting Medium*. In that series, Smartt constructs Medusa as everyday women—mothers, grandmothers, and godmothers—and revolutionary women. In the poem "Medusa: Cuts Both Ways," Smartt writes,

> Medusa is Nanny
> Medusa is Assata Shakur
> Medusa is Cherry Groce
> Is Eleanor Bumpers   is Audre Lorde
> Is Queen Nzinga   Sarraounia…. (60)

The poem appropriates the image of Medusa to include women, who in their own ways, serve as examples of resistance to a patriarchal order. According to critic Laura Griggs, Smartt uses the myth of Medusa to challenge patriarchal myths and effectively unlearn gender submission (191).

While Griggs's assertion is no doubt correct, Smartt is doing more than merely re-writing the Medusa myth: she is following a black storytelling tradition. In his study of Harlem Renaissance poetry, Sterling Brown states that one of the five areas of the new poetics was the use of the black heroes and events. According to Brown, the poetry of the Harlem period reflects an expression of historical and racial pride. The result of such a shift of attitude is articulated in the five major concerns:

> (1) a discovery of Africa as a source of race pride (2) a use of Negro heroes and heroic episodes from American history (3) propaganda of protest (4) a treatment of the Negro masses (frequently of the folk, and less often the workers) with more understanding and less apology and (5) franker and deeper self revelation. (61)

Brown notes that it was not until the Harlem Renaissance that black poets of the diaspora began to use heroic figures as symbols and as part of their developing a mythology from within black culture.

Black Arts critic Stephen Henderson, in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, reiterates Brown's assertion, doing so in the critical framework he provides to understand the poetry of the Black Arts Movement. According to