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The sweet part and the sad part: Black Power and the memory of Africa in African American and black British literature

Leila Kamali*

This paper examines the approach toward narratives of Black Power by African American and black British writers in the post-Civil Rights era. The relationship to Black Power politics is explored here in the particular context of how African American and black British writers are perceived to relate to a "memory of Africa"; how "Africanness" fits into these diverse configurations of contemporary black identity. African American writers often find that Black Power, with its heavy reliance upon iconography, has failed to acknowledge the fluid relationship which exists in African American communities and artforms with a traditional African American past, and with a "memory of Africa" within that tradition. The performance of Black Power is a practice which is shown to distance the present from the past, whereas traditional African American artforms are understood to figure performance as a site where the past may "possess" the present. Black British authors are not concerned with situating the memory of Africa as part of a continuous tradition in the way that African American writers are. Both American tropes of blackness, and the memory of Africa itself, are dramatized in black British fiction as inherited tropes which must be adapted in order to bear any relevance to contemporary experience. The very different kinds of emphasis that writers from these two cultural scenarios place upon notions of performance and tradition, in relation to blackness, lead us to discover that narratives in the vein of the "Black Atlantic" must be approached with some caution if they are understood to provide a global locus of identification while also respecting specific conditions of local cultures.

Keywords: African American literature; black British literature; civil rights movement; black Atlantic; cultural memory; black identity

African American and black British writers in the post-Civil Rights era both take an approach toward Black Power and its iconography that is provisional and strikingly ambivalent. The influence of a Black Power politics is explored here in the context of how African American and black British writers are perceived to relate to a "memory of Africa" – that is, an apprehension of the ways in which a notion of Africanness is dramatized in configurations of contemporary African American or black British identity. I suggest that the contrasting ways in which an iconography of Africa, often drawn from the usage made of the continent within Black Power imagery, is evoked by African American writers and black British writers in the late twentieth century, and is indicative of profoundly different approaches to the ways that *performance* recalls or revises tradition in these two cultural scenarios. African American writers find that Black Power, with its performance of Africanness, shows insufficient acknowledgement of the continuity which exists between what is

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characterized as African cultural practice, and African American tradition itself. Black British writers who have not themselves lived in Africa[1] invoke the performative nature of Black Power, and its particular dramatisation of Africanness, as a cultural site which surprises them in its striking *irrelevance* to black experience in Britain, but which at the same time inspires confidence in the possibility of adopting performances of blackness on terms suited to the individual, as part of a Black British enunciation of identity which is characterized by the performative.

Black Power here refers to the broad cultural movement, prevalent in the decade from 1965 to 1975, which mobilized itself into a number of discrete political organizations, central to which was an emphasis upon African American self-realisation in the face of racism and the history of slavery. Black Power encompassed a range of organizations from the separatist Nation of Islam, to the militant Black Panthers, who emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, catalysed by the recently assassinated Malcolm X and his call to attain liberation "by any means necessary."[2] The Nation of Islam (led by Elijah Muhammad), the Black Panther Party, and Ron Karenga's US Organization all tended to "emphasi[ze] the African cultural past as the true heritage of African Americans."[3] Elijah Muhammad, for instance, claimed "both Africa and the Middle East as black heritage,"[4] and Karenga founded Kawaida, a "syncretic doctrine based on traditional African religions."[5] Yet some African American authors writing in the wake of the movement have found its "Africanisms" reductive and damaging; they suggest that these characterisations of Africanness tended unhelpfully to place a notion of African tradition at odds with an authentic and well-known African American tradition (which was, they argue, *also* profoundly African). As Barbara Christian notes:

> Many blacks affirmed their African roots by changing their "slave names" to African names, and by wearing Afro hair styles and African clothing. Yet, ideologues of the period also lambasted older African Americans, *opposing* them to the lofty mythical models of the ancient past.[6]

Paul Gilroy finds this dramatic Africanism, adopted by some Black Power advocates, to be indicative of "a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intraracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the [slave] ships."[7] Gilroy is explicitly derogatory towards this "frozen" memory of Africa, and though he devotes a significant section of *The Black Atlantic* to the question of the "terror," or trauma, of slavery, he does not seriously consider the possibility – which this paper explores – that diverse expressions of the memory of Africa (from those concerned with the flamboyant and essentialized adornment of a stylized "Africanism," to echoes all but silenced in literature's most liminal registers) may *all* bear scars from slavery, and may all be equally expressive of a historical experience of trauma. The invocation of the memory of Africa is itself a response to this rupture.

African American authors writing after Black Power have emphasized the way in which text or performance can be "possessed" by voices from the past, and can therefore allow the past (including an African past) to be continuous with, and an integral part of, the present. John Edgar Wideman, whose stories are based largely in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, shows one way in which this may be effectively imagined, when he describes

> the Great Time of our African ancestors, a nonlinear, atemporal medium in which all things that ever *have been, are,* or *will be* mingle freely, the space that allows us to bump into relatives long dead or absent friends or children unborn as easily, as significantly, as we encounter the people in our daily lives.[8]

For African American writers who share this sense of a continuity with an African tradition that can be accessed at will, the Black Power movement's dramatisation of Africanness as a set of ethnically essentialized signifiers describes a kind of performance or theatricality which relies upon a dramatic break with the memory of the past. As Jean Genet noted, the most powerful weapon of the Black Power movement was often "spectacle."[9] The claiming of Africa as a focus for black identity allows for this spectacular function, but involves a separation from actual historical process. In the writing of later African Americans, however, we can see the deployment of a historical consciousness that develops through non-linear signification. They show that African American cultural memory negotiates the repeated traumas of American history precisely by allowing the past to *possess* the present, in nonlinear fashion, as is seen in vodoun, jazz, blues and other traditional forms. These writers present *possession* itself as a traditional African American practice which is also, by its nature, African.

The memory of Africa in African American fiction

While African American writers suggest that the repeated traumas of American history may have resulted in alienation from the past, they also show the way in which contemporary artforms register this historical trauma. In revisiting the performances of Africanisms, such as those epitomized by Black Power, these writers help us to see that the attempt to narrate history in linear fashion may be fractured, but the traumatized past nevertheless becomes known through that very fractured language.

Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) is written in a fragmentary style which epitomizes the "jazz impulse (grounded in blues and gospel) [which] engages basic (post)modernist concerns including the difficulty of defining, or even experiencing, the self [. . .] and the problematic meaning of tradition."[10] It moves around the historical event of a fire which burned on 13 May 1985 in the middle of a black neighbourhood in West Philadelphia, and was the horrific culmination of years of tension between the radical MOVE group and the City of Philadelphia. Wideman's approach toward a performance of Africanness in the novel plays upon the fact that MOVE's founder, originally named Vincent Leaphart, adopted the name "John Africa" and bestowed "Africa" as a surname upon each of his followers. It comments upon the practice of divorcing blackness as a signifier from a recognition of a black tradition – a situation in which "black cultural style became incorporated into a comfortable generational identity [. . .] once the signifiers of race began to be [. . .] removed from the body and to circulate like (and *as*) commodities."[11]

A nine-year-old boy was one of two members of MOVE who escaped the fire and a large part of Wideman's novel traces the quest of protagonist Cudjoe for the "Story of a fire and a lost boy."[12] The novel highlights the potential implications of evoking a memory of Africa through "the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity."[13] Cudjoe is shown to have approached his role as a father negligently, having fled Philadelphia a decade earlier and thus "failed his wife and failed [his]

kids."[14] He therefore "seek[s] the creative power of fathership,"[15] and feels that he "must find the child [from the fire] to be whole again."[16] To underscore the irony of the MOVE leader's use of the name "John Africa" in such a way that it fails to signify anything to do with Africa, Margaret Jones offers Cudjoe, in place of the story of the lost boy he is looking for, a "father-figure" from whose memory the name "John Africa" is completely excised:

> Because he was so sure of hisself, bossy, you know. The big boss knowing everything and in charge of everything and could preach like an angel, they called him Reverend King behind his back. Had to call him something to get his attention, you know. *James* didn't sound right. He wasn't a *Jimmy* or *Jim*. *Mr. Brown* wouldn't cut it. Mr. Anything no good. Reverend King slipped out a couple times and then it got to be just King.[17]

As the memory of the MOVE leader is evoked, his name is twice replaced; first with "James Brown," the "Godfather of Soul" himself, and then with "Reverend King." Nikhil Pal Singh notes that Martin Luther King has been integrated, as an "icon," into mainstream American culture, "allow[ing] Americans not only to celebrate their progress into a more inclusive and tolerant people, but also to tell themselves that this is who they always were."[18] The significance of MOVE's use of the name "Africa," and of their relationship to a history of black protest more generally, is not to be understood simply through the steady development of a linear narrative, but is more indicative of a tradition where the past appears in the present and where the memory of trauma can be registered in language. The signifier (whether "Africa" or "Reverend King") is divorced from linear historical process and instead operates in a performative present, embodying a relation to history that is predicated on the traumatic ruptures of American slavery and racism.

In Toni Morrison's work, this approach to language might constitute a meaningful counterpart in African American literature to what she has called

> the "unspeakable things unspoken"; [. . .] the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure – the meaning of so much American literature. [. . .] in other words, [. . .] the ghost in the machine.[19]

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) serves to demonstrate how narration of a memory of Africa may be disrupted by the trauma of African American experience in America. The trauma of the Middle Passage and of American slavery, for Morrison, is felt in speech, and prevents the memory of Africa from being "spoken" in any straightforward way. For instance, even as Morrison's novel opens by remembering the traditional folk tale of the "Flying African," the slave who, it was said, "[j]ust stood up in the fields one day, [and] went right on back to wherever it was he came from,"[20] it does not explicitly narrate a link to Africa as a destination. Morrison's opening tableau mentions only "the other side of Lake Superior"[21] as the insurance agent's destination, and even in her own separate critical commentary upon the novel, Morrison claims that Smith's "flight [. . .] toward asylum" may be toward "Canada, or freedom, or home, or the company of the welcoming dead."[22] If the novel is, as John N. Duvall would have it, "obsessed with names and naming,"[23] it is nevertheless characterized by a clear reluctance to name any memory of Africa.

Historical memory functions, instead, as "possessive," as can be seen in a scene where Macon Dead introduces a history to his son, explaining: "if you want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth."[24] Part of the "truth" revealed in this scene, in fact, appears not in the words spoken by Macon, but in the narration

accompanying his tale; this narration, which is entirely *non*linear, nevertheless reveals a memory of Africa. Some pages before this scene takes place, Macon tells Milkman: "If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans. A Pennsylvania African. Acted like one too. Close his face up like a door."[25] At one point during Macon's telling of the tale of his marriage, then, the omniscient narration comments that "his face looked like Pilate's. He closed the door."[26] Again, a few pages later: "Macon looked up at his son. The door of his face had opened; his skin looked iridescent."[27] While appearing to offer a simple narration of the past as recalled by the character's telling, Morrison also achieves her stated purpose of "urg[ing] the reader into active participation in the non-narrative, nonliterary experience of the text."[28] At this point, Morrison constructs her text in a way which offers the reader a sense of creating links in his or her own memory, because, as she says, "I want to subvert [the reader's] traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one: that of being in the company of his own solitary imagination."[29]

This approach toward naming a memory of Africa is indicative of a reluctance on Morrison's part to situate a memory of Africa squarely at the centre of her language. She has explained that, in her early writing, she "would do no research" in the area exploring links between African and African American literatures, "because [she] distrusted the sources," which to her contained a "scholarly vocabulary used [. . .] to describe *how* we say and how we are [which] is a code designed for destruction."[30] In light of the historical role played by Africa as a canvas upon which various imperial projects have been drawn, and the uncomfortable resonance between such projects and what has been, in effect, an American imperialism at home, Morrison identifies language as one of the sites in which such imperialism has occurred. For the African American writer, language becomes a troublesome currency with which to deal with the memory of Africa. Morrison's suspicion of a neo-colonial taint to any scholarship which might claim to identify the "African" in African American culture has led her to

> rely heavily and almost totally on my own recollections and, more important, on my own insight about those recollections, and in so doing [I] was able to imagine and to recreate cultural linkages that were identified for me by Africans who had a more familiar, an overt recognition (of them).[31]

If cultural memory in the African American context is characterized by a traumatic break with the past, this is nevertheless felt to be not a disadvantage, but a significant strength of African American culture. As a character in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) puts it,

> That's our genius here in America. We were dumped here on our own without the Book to tell us who the loas are, what we call spirits were. We made up our own. The theories of Julia Jackson. I think we've done all right. The Blues, Ragtime, The Work that we do is just as good.[32]

Black Herman's words are designed to encourage a sense of the validity of African American cultural forms which, even as they may engender a break from a memory of African tradition, can nevertheless be seen to function on the basis of that traumatic fracture, which still allows the memory of the past to possess the present.

The memory of Africa in Black British fiction

Black British writers may regard American-influenced performances of identity, and their attendant "Africanisms," as being far removed from their own lived experience but, nevertheless, are inclined to explore these positions as part of their own process of discovering the meaning and purpose of tradition in contemporary configurations of black identity. Where black British writers have inherited any notions of how to identify with "Africanness" from an African American perspective, this has formed an important stage in the realization that black identity in the British context – where any home-grown historical model of blackness is tenuous and subject to the considerable vagaries of the historical archive – can and must be improvised upon the basis of an infinite number of cultural inheritances.

Caryl Phillips, who was born in the Caribbean but grew up in Britain (and now works in the US), writes:

> Given the fact that in the seventies there was not, in this country, what we might term a black British literary tradition, I looked to the United States [. . .] I could connect with the frustrations of the African American writers, and I could certainly identify with the dark faces that stared out from their book jackets. [However,] the simple fact was, I was not an American. African American writers [. . .] were, at least to my eyes, from a different world.[33]

The relationship black British writers describe with American blackness typically reflects a tendency to receive African American influence as something initially to aspire to, subsequently to reject as inappropriate, and finally to adapt to particular ends. The black subject in Britain who seeks an identification with an African American position is left with a sense of the incongruity of his own experience in relation to what is presented as an assertive, powerful narrative of blackness. When black British writers (and readers) comment upon the influence of African American writers during and since the Black Power era upon them and their work, there is frequently the sense of a wished-for identification that is somewhat inhibited by the fundamental difference between the two experiences. The black peer Lord Taylor of Warwick has remarked:

> Many of my positive black role models came from *Ebony* – people like Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, Quincy Jones. [. . .] That encouraged me, because I could see that there were and are successful black people. That was the sweet part of it. The sad part of it was they were all American. They were untouchable in that sense.[34]

As American narratives of Africanness are shown to be strikingly out-of-place in a black British experience, they frequently come instead to be adopted alongside a multiplicity of other cultural influences, and adapted or performed anew, in order to enunciate highly individualized notions of identity. Such individualism is epitomized in Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* (1997) by "Cousin Beatrice," who appears with "an Angela Davis wig topp[ing] peach lips, lime green flares/draped over pink suede platforms."[35] As Liverpudlian Beatrice "burst[s] in [. . .] like a gust of wild laughter" with her "loud nasal mix of churning crackling globules," she berates the protagonist and her siblings for their "pig ignoran[ce]" about "African ways," and "flick[s] open a map of Africa/lighter," showing how African American iconography, and its assimilation of "Africanness," serves as material for black identities in Britain which appear self-consciously improvisational and iconoclastic.[36]

For black British writers, possession by the past is not linked exclusively to a notion of African tradition, but instead serves to redramatize a self-consciously mythical Africa as part of an imagined past, in a context where a known history of a black presence in Britain has been lost. Furthermore, while black British writers frequently begin from a position of awe and admiration for the perceived "legitimacy" of black identity in an American context, the privileging of spectacle typical to the Black Power movement may also be said to appeal to a sense among black British writers that, in the words of black British fashion designer Ozwald Boateng, "style is substance"[37] – when a lineage does not present itself as an obvious context for individual identity, the making of oneself becomes the central act. This theme is played out in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998):

> All the black guys his father loved to talk about were American, black Americans. Black Yanks, Colman would say. You spend your whole time worshipping black Yanks: Martin Luther King, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis. Black Yanks all of them. You are not American, are you? Colman grins to himself [. . .], remembering. I never said I was an American. What is the matter with you?[38]

The approach toward dominant African American cultural icons set out here by Kay is typical of a motif which occurs with regularity in fiction by black British writers who have never lived in Africa. The exuberance inspired by the gaze towards black America is initially accompanied by doubt over its significance for black identity in a British context. Yet that doubtful stance often quickly gives way to a realisation that what is most inspiring about an African American position is the freedom and confidence to *perform*. Encouraged by this show of confidence, black British writers seize the opportunity to perform identity anew, embracing the influence of American blackness and any dramatisation of Africanness that might seem appropriate to enable the individual to enunciate an identity often composed of a multiplicity of cultural inheritances. Kay's novel, which tells the story of a trumpeter who is born female but lives as a man, is exemplary:

> So when he takes off he is the whole century galloping to its close. The wide moors. The big mouth. Scotland. Africa. Slavery. Freedom. He is a girl. A man. Everything, nothing. [. . .] He just keeps blowing. He is blowing his story. His story is blowing in the wind. He lets it rip. He tears himself apart. He explodes. Then he brings himself back. Slowly, slowly, piecing himself together.[39]

The notion of "possession," in black British texts, is not often situated in terms which claim any affiliation to African tradition, but is felt instead as a function by which the past, including America, Africa, and indeed anything else of relevance, reveals its importance for the individual's self-realization – on the individual's own terms.

Writers from these two cultural scenarios attach very different kinds of importance to the notion of performance (and indeed of tradition) in relation to blackness. Narratives such as Paul Gilroy's genre-defining *Black Atlantic*, which emphasize common ground between diverse black cultures, must therefore be approached with some caution if they are understood to provide a global locus of identification while also respecting specific conditions of local cultures. Gilroy writes that:

> The style, rhetoric, and moral authority of the civil rights movement and of Black Power [. . .] were detached from their original ethnic markers and historical origins, exported and adapted, with evident respect but little sentimentality, to local needs and political climates. Appearing in Britain through a circulatory system that gave a central place to the musics which had both informed and recorded black struggles in other places, they were rearticulated in distinctively European conditions.[40]

Having remarked upon this tendency of black British artists to appropriate and rearticulate African American and other cultural products, he nevertheless goes on to collapse, rather than to explore, this dynamic relationship:

> How the appropriation of these forms, styles, and histories of struggle was possible at such great physical and social distance is in itself an interesting question for cultural historians. It was facilitated by a common fund of urban experiences, by the effect of similar but by no means identical forms of racial segregation, as well as by the memory of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms, and a stock of religious experiences defined by them both.[41]

If Gilroy begins by noting the *difference* between cultural forms developed in the African American context, and their subsequent appropriation by black Britons, his second statement then entirely collapses this tension into a notion of the *similarity* of the two experiences. By allowing this kind of slippage between notions of similarity and of adaptation, Gilroy's Black Atlantic may be accused of being insufficiently sensitive to the different ways in which memories of Africa are characteristically performed in African American and black British arts. In one sense, then, it is not only that, as Neil Lazarus notes, "vast regions of the 'non-West' are conspicuously absent from *The Black Atlantic*," or that "Africa and Asia are strictly marginal to [Gilroy's] exposition."[42] Rather, manifold "black experiences" even *within* "the West" are in danger of being misrepresented by, what Laura Chrisman calls, Gilroy's "transcendental category of blackness, which retains the 'ethnicism' for which he castigates Afrocentric nationalism."[43]

While African American writers have figured the practice of possession as an African American trope that finds its roots in African tradition, black writers in Britain frequently revel in performative evocations of "Africanness," and are rarely concerned about discovering any continuity with African tradition. Kay's *Trumpet* sets this out:

> We never actually got to go to Africa. Joss had built up such a strong imaginary landscape within himself that he said it would affect his music to go to the real Africa. Every black person has a fantasy Africa, he'd say. Black British people, Black Americans, Black Caribbeans, they all have a fantasy Africa. It is all in the head.[44]

Where an interrupted relationship with a memory of Africa is registered by African American writers as the effect of the experience of trauma, it is also recognized as such by black British writers but, crucially, this fractured memory is also *celebrated* as a response to alienation from a known historical past, which creates its own opportunities for discovering identity on a basis that allows some freedom for individuality. Black British writers present the capacity of historical memory to "possess" the present, but do not link this function to any particular site of African tradition, instead figuring it as an aspect of black Britons' specific relationship with a past whose basis in the textual and archival is tenuous. While black British history remains far less documented than its African American relation, the imaginative creation of historicity becomes paramount. The creation of

historical pasts is envisaged as part of a *black British* tradition of self-invention, rather than located as itself an element of Africanness surfacing despite the traumatic fracture from the continent.

Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993) opens with the memory of an African father who stands speechless, apparently frozen in time, but finally shows this figure speaking "through" a chorus of diasporan voices. The dramatisation awaited by the African father-figure is the equivalent of what Stuart Hall has perceived in the Caribbean imagination:

> The original "Africa" is no longer there. [. . .] History "normalizes" and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the "primitive, unchanging past". [. . .] it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered. [. . .] To *this "*Africa," which is a necessary part of the Caribbean imaginary, we can't literally go home again.[45]

For Phillips, the memory of Africa, like the inherited mythology of a "mono-cultural" Britishness which seems to exclude black people, awaits a form of narration able to dramatize the multiple temporalities of a diasporan existence. In the American novels considered above, a parental or ancestral inheritance (African American or African), has been felt as an agency which inhabits the past, but is established in a broader scheme where the past can run through the present. In *Crossing the River*, however, a memory of Africa as a parental or ancestral figure is partially left behind in the past, and becomes most significant as it is re-dramatized and even partially forgotten in diasporan expression in the present. The African father's words are heard in the Prologue, "For two hundred and fifty years I have longed to tell them: Children, I am your father. I love you. But understand. There are no paths in water. No signposts."[46] The cultural memory of Africa is shown to be of value as it is remembered and replayed through diverse present moments, to the extent that the image created by the African father's words is echoed by a white Englishwoman living through the Blitz: "It occurred to me that I was lost. That all the familiar landmarks had gone [. . .] I walked on knowing that there was no longer any such thing as a familiar route."[47] This "music" heard between the periodical "echoes" throughout the novel, evokes even more than the "mythological Africa" identified in the novel by Alan Rice as a "landscape of the mind [. . .] that links diasporan blacks across the Atlantic and is the reason that jazz music has such transatlantic resonance for Africans in Europe and America."[48] As the African father calls the white woman "My daughter. Joyce," and her own words speak directly to those of the heroes of civil rights and decolonization,[49] the novel is able to institute a memory of Africa that has travelled through the history of the diaspora, absorbed and adapted American and Caribbean memories of Africa, and is significant to the multicultural *centre* of British society, not just its "ethnic" peripheries.

Another version of this process of locating the memory of Africa within British histories can be found in S.I. Martin's *Incomparable World* (1996). The protagonists of the novel are African American soldiers, lured to the side of the British in the American War of Independence with the promise of freedom, only to "exchange [. . .] the life of a slave for that of a starving beggar on the London streets."[50] Here, as the buried history of eighteenth-century black London is rewritten into British history, a memory of Africa remains frozen in the past, fractured from the present by a British fiction of racial and cultural "purity" which relies upon a silencing of black British history. However, it is precisely by characterizing the history of Britain's attitude

towards its black citizens as a predictably perverse, cyclical game, in which it is impossible to claim unqualified victory that the author begins to dramatize a fracture with the myth of the past, in which new spaces can be found for the individual's self-creation:

> In his sleep he dreamed of Africa, an Africa he'd never known. The scene was a forest clearing – everywhere was hot and damp, with rotting vegetation just like Virginia in August. Smoke rose from chimneys, grass huts had windows and all the people dressed in the same cloth, the slave material: buckram. Roasting, fatty meats turned on spits. The whole village sang, call and response, with the rhythms knocking out in the background. [. . .]
>
> "But you cannot fly, you who have never known Africa," a dream voice informed him.
>
> [. . .] Suddenly [the] voice was gone, to be replaced by the African drumming and lamentations from Ivy Street. [. . .] The roosters of St Giles's High Street have curdled his sleep, and the nightmare slips away. He wakes once again, just another man without a woman, his dream already forgotten.[51]

Even though Buckram is African American, his predicament means that his "rootedness" in that cultural space is partially renounced. Equally, although the characters in Martin's novel are "only a generation away from another history in Africa,"[52] Buckram's identification with Africa functions like an inherited fantasy, an "intense, shallow circular talk,"[53] which belies a disconnection to lineage. The playing of an African identity appears in the novel as part of the material which enables the protagonists partially to control the terms upon which they are identified; something hinted at again in Georgie George's later admission that "for the price of a measure of ale, we'd play Princes of Araby for provincial fools."[54] Yet this performance of Africanness, as well as the characters' final elaborate ploy to make off with monies stolen from slave traders while "dressed as African nobles,"[55] also demonstrates the failure of the signs of "Africanness" to signify anything like a known tradition for these protagonists, a loss which is felt with some poignancy here. Just as in Buckram's "dream" cited above, Africa is "just like" Virginia, and also like London, the fact that identities are separated from any sense of lineage fills a historical gap in a way that is always provisional, and recognizes, as Stuart Hall puts it, that the performance of identity is "not totally universally true. It is not underpinned by any infinite guarantees. But just now, this is what I mean; this is who I am."[56] Martin's protagonists employ a vision of Africa as part of their repertoire for survival in Britain, but it is always used as an instrumental tool, rather than viewed as a site of essential origin. The identification with a performance of Africanness, like the gaze toward American signs of blackness, can be bittersweet, revealing as it is of the losses and gains of disrupted identities.

A similar provisional assembling of elements from which to construct unique black British identities can be found across recent black British writing. Buckram and his friends build a sense of belonging from as diverse a pool of cultural resources as Kay's Joss Moody; the assertion of a vision of Africa is just one of these elements. In Evaristo's *Lara* the engagement with African tradition is apparent at the levels of both form and content, but is equally contingent. The perceptibly aural quality of the novel-in-verse allows spirits of the past to "possess" the present, yet does not identify this practice solely with African American or African tradition. Evaristo instead positions the "speaking" function of her text as continuous with a diversity of traditions, from Yoruba praise song, to Greek tragedy, and traditional English verse,

so as to emphasize the facility with which her own multicultural British identity can be defined in terms of diverse traditions. This is not the same as situating the memory of Africa as part of a continuous tradition in the manner shown by African American writers. Evaristo adopts diverse traditions and inheritances and adapts them to a personal requirement, in order to access a language with which to represent herself and her claim to multiple cultural inheritances best.

If the instances in Evaristo's novel of speaking with spirits, or "speaking in tongues," implicitly recall the African American tradition, this does not mean that the author wholly identifies herself with an African American inheritance. The phase in Lara's story signposted as "Summer 81" is a light-hearted satire on the author's part of a corresponding phase in her own experience.[57] Here is an instance of the black British "inheritance" of an African American legacy of protest which, Evaristo's satirical tone might suggest, may not have been entirely relevant to her own experience after all:

> I denounced my patriarchal father [. . .] saw
> the rapist in every homme, the worms in every phallus,
> the bigot in all whites, the victim in every black
> woman, [. . .] I divorced my honky
> mother.[58]

Following this "phase" of Lara's (mockingly reminiscent of the black feminist position epitomized by Alice Walker, Barbara Christian and Audre Lorde, which protests against oppression on the grounds of race, gender and class), Evaristo, like Lara, might nevertheless be understood to have moved on to adopt a different attitude towards an African American influence:

> For many years I believed that my literary inheritance began with African-American women writers. [. . .] Then I realised that we were worlds apart. They were writing out of an African-American tradition, drawing on their history, their cultural specificities, their regional vernaculars. None of this was mine. [. . .] Then I began to discover my own literary voice, or multiple voices, and thankfully there was nothing American about it. [. . .] *What I had inherited from the American writers was the confidence to write out of my own experience.*[59]

Evaristo expresses here a crucial aspect of the uneven dialogue emerging between African American and black British positions throughout this essay. While she is inspired by the example of African American writers, she is not, in the end, at all concerned with the privilege they place upon certain forms of expression as being *especially* characteristic of African American tradition. If Evaristo adopts expressive forms seen by African Americans to be "typical" of African American writing, she treats this site of tradition with a lack of seriousness; actually situating it, as she experiences it, as *similar* to *other* diverse cultural inheritances and, moreover, as simply characteristic of her own experience.

Conclusion

African American and black British writers are sensitive to the particularly traumatic break in historical memory which is signposted by Black Power and its dramatizations of "Africanness." To all the writers considered in this paper, historical experiences of trauma make themselves felt in language just as they do

in music, art and fashion. The practice of divorcing signs from any attempt to represent experience authentically is commonplace in our mass-mediated world, but the two traditions discussed here present very different attitudes toward that gap which emerges between the historical memory of terror, and its easy inscription in text. To African American writers this gap betrays a reluctance to acknowledge the centrality of trauma to African American cultural practice itself. For Black Britons, a different experience of trauma, which has led to the sense that African tradition, and even its remembrance in American contexts, retains little relevance for them, presents another, unexpected opportunity, paving the way for their own versions of inherited and suitably adapted performances of Africanness.

Paul Gilroy's recognition of the productive notion of a Black Atlantic space, the "rhizomorphic, fractal structure [. . .] between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean," which refers to a historical "circulation of ideas and activists as well as [. . .] cultural and political artefacts," forms an important conceptual basis for understanding some of the ways in which cross-cultural exchanges have occurred since the advent of slavery and of mass migration.[60] Even as we recognize the Black Atlantic as a useful model, however, we should be wary of allowing it to accrue "some predetermined essence and value," as Joan Dayan puts it, in which "crosscultural circulation" is celebrated for its own sake.[61] Such a position risks ignoring the specificity of diverse localized experiences and, at the same time, may not be sufficiently attuned to the traumatic processes occurring at the heart of language itself. The dangers of treating a US-centred set of tropes, such as those associated with Black Power, as "representative" of African diasporic culture in general are commented on by Leon Wainwright, who finds that, in certain historiographical contexts, the recognized iconography of Black Power is used to evoke a unified diasporic consciousness. In doing so, we risk "los[ing] sight of the difference between African American issues and those of minorities and imagined communities elsewhere," by "look[ing] to rediscover black America as the forgotten cultural locus of Jamaica and Britain."[62] As Black Power is remembered by African American and black British writers, this essay has sought to show, it has served as both example and opportunity for creativity as part of traditions which nevertheless establish themselves as diverse and uniquely identifiable.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. The term "black British" functions most usefully for me as "a collective term that covers an imagined experiential field of overlapping territories. While at its narrowest it merely refers to writers with an African-Caribbean background, at its widest, it can include writing that takes recourse to domains such as Africa, Asia or the Caribbean and attendant cultural and aesthetic traditions. [. . .The] space denoted by the label in question is far from homogenous; on the contrary, its heterogeneity is one of its defining features" (Stein, "Cultures of Hybridity," 80). While recognizing the diversity of ethnic and cultural

identities which the term "black British" can indicate – including people born and raised in Africa – the argument advanced here applies to writers who have not resided on the African continent.

2. Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, 59.
3. Christian, "Introduction," 10.
4. McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 95.
5. Ibid., 105.
6. Christian, "Introduction," 10. Emphasis added.
7. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 189.
8. Wideman, "Preface," *The Homewood Books*, xi.
9. Cited in Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 202–3.
10. Werner, quoted in Jahn, "Will the Circle," 58.
11. McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 153–4.
12. Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire*, 7.
13. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 224.
14. Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire*, 9.
15. Carden, "If the City," 476.
16. Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire*, 7–8.
17. Ibid., 10.
18. Singh, *Black is a Country*, 4–5.
19. Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 11.
20. Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 323.
21. Ibid., 3.
22. Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 28.
23. Duvall, *Identifying Fictions*, 74.
24. Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 70.
25. Ibid., 54.
26. Ibid., 70.
27. Ibid., 74.
28. Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," 387.
29. Ibid., 387.
30. Davis, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," 225.
31. Ibid.
32. Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 130.
33. Phillips, "Following On," 34–5.
34. Gates, "A Reporter At Large," 179.
35. Evaristo, *Lara*, 73.
36. Ibid., 73, 75, 76, 73.
37. "Ozwald Boateng: Why Style Matters."
38. Kay, *Trumpet*, 192.
39. Ibid., 136.
40. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 82.
41. Ibid., 82–3.
42. Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice*, 62–3.
43. Chrisman, "Journeying to Death," 454.
44. Kay, *Trumpet*, 34.
45. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," 217.
46. Phillips, *Crossing the River*, 1–2.
47. Ibid., 179–80.
48. Rice, "Heroes across the Sea," 229.
49. "*Joyce. That was all he said. Just, Joyce. I could see the gap in the middle of his teeth. At the bottom. And then he reached out and pulled me towards him. I couldn't believe it. He'd come back to me. He really wanted me. That day, crying on the platform, safe in Travis's arms.* For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. To the haunting voices. Singing: Mercy, Mercy Me. (The Ecology.) Insisting: Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong. Declaring: Brothers and Friends. I am Toussaint L'Ouverture, my name is perhaps known to you. Listened to: Papa Doc. Baby Doc. Listened to voices hoping for: Freedom. Democracy.

Singing: Baby, baby. Where did our love go? Samba. Calypso. Jazz. Jazz'' (Phillips, *Crossing the River*, 236).
50. Fryer, *Staying Power*, 191.
51. Martin, *Incomparable World*, 28–9.
52. Coughlan, ''Soldiers of Misfortune,'' 8.
53. Martin, *Incomparable World*, 76.
54. Ibid., 121.
55. Ibid., 143.
56. Hall, ''Minimal Selves,'' 117.
57. Evaristo, *Lara*, 88.
58. Ibid., 92.
59. Evaristo, ''New Writing Worlds,'' 1–2. Emphasis added.
60. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.
61. Dayan, ''Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes,'' 9, 7.
62. Wainwright, ''Back to Black,'' 115. Wainwright is commenting upon the exhibition *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary*, curated by Richard Powell, David A Bailey and Petrine Archer-Straw. Whitechapel Gallery, London (7 June–4 September 2005), The New Art Gallery, Walsall (30 September–20 November 2005).

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