(Re)Imagining Black Britishness: Identity Politics, Belonging, and Celebration in *A Portable Paradise* and *Assembly*

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Abstract

Multicultural identities are integral to defining notions of 'new Britishness,' yet are rarely acknowledged in the British cultural narrative. This article demonstrates how Roger Robinson's *A Portable Paradise* (2019) and Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021) represent Black Britishness by employing counter-hegemonic images. Rather than solely a festive act, celebration is connected to identity politics by highlighting the lived experiences of marginalised subjects. Whereas Robinson offers a poetic account of collective displacement, Brown provides a Woolfian exploration of belonging. In turn, this article underscores the cultural response towards recent socio-political discussions around race in Britain, deconstructing what is deemed celebratory in society.

I feel it against my skin, the thumping nationalism of this place. I am the stretched-taut membrane of a drum, against which their identity beats. I cannot escape its rhythm.
– Natasha Brown, *Assembly*

Introduction

Over the last decade, the hostile socio-political landscape of Britain has once again become painfully clear. The Grenfell Tower fire (2017), Windrush scandal (2018) and Black Lives Matter movement (2013-) are merely some of the most emblematic topics of debate alongside matters of identity politics. As literary scholar Sara Upstone indicates, "race is more amorphous than it has ever been, yet its social relevance persists in ways which defeat and dispute [its] fluidity" ("Black British Fiction"126). One can observe how multicultural identities are essential to defining Britishness, yet are rarely celebrated as such. The lived experiences of Black Britons are central to discussions around belonging but require further investigation. This has prompted a surge of cultural responses across contemporary Black British literature. As Tony Kushner states, there is "an increasing willingness of minorities to respond to the emotional and sensory onslaught of racism with resistance, wit and imagination" (535). Writers diversify traditional images of Britishness and argue for a sense of social change, adopting literature as a legitimising force. As Chris Weedon claims, texts "[provide] a space in which sensitive and marginalised issues can be explored from minority perspectives" (225). In particular, as Upstone shows, literature becomes "a mode of political intervention" whereby artists reimagine unique forms of 'new Britishness' ("Writing Beyond Race" 4). As such, traditional notions of Britishness are subverted by portraying a more racially diverse picture of British society.

This article traces the representation of Black British identities by analysing two contemporary works which creatively engage with matters of celebration and belonging: Roger Robinson's poetry collection *A Portable Paradise* (2019) and Natasha Brown's debut novel *Assembly* (2021). These texts have received extensive recognition in the literary realm

due to their incisive societal critiques. As such, this article explores how both authors represent Black Britishness and identity politics by employing counterhegemonic notions of celebration. Engaging with existing scholarship on identity and literature, I will argue that *A Portable Paradise* and *Assembly* examine how multicultural identities are excluded from the traditional British cultural narrative. Whereas Robinson offers a poetic account of displacement in Britain, Brown provides an intersectional rewriting of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). As a result, they deconstruct which images are deemed celebratory in society. This is done through an individual and collective lens which provides a detailed picture of new Britishness, indicating how identity politics is at the heart of contemporary Black British literature.

Identity Politics in Contemporary Black British Literature

In contemporary society, identity politics manifests itself in a strong distinction between 'us' and 'them,' oftentimes resulting in the marginalisation of selected subjects. Thus, I argue that the celebration of particular identities is typically derived from hegemonic thinking. As Lasse Thomassen indicates in *British Multiculturalism and the Politics of Representation*, identity politics is a "site of inclusion and exclusion," referring to the "struggle with and over representations" (12-36). This subsequently influences our perception of the world, and has an impact on which identities we choose to acknowledge. The connection to celebration, or crucially, the lack thereof, is central here. Rather than solely a festive act, I believe celebration to be highly connected to identity politics. It pertains to matters of belonging and displacement, underscoring both centre and margin. In relation to the British context, one can notably observe how celebrations around hegemonic, white Britishness prevail in the current socio-political landscape (Younge xi). In turn, there is a lack of recognition for non-white, multicultural identities. Nevertheless, as Tomiwa Owolade states in *This is Not America: Why Black Lives in Britain Matter*, Black Britons play an important role in the shaping of national identity (156). This article subsequently

engages with issues of representation by destabilising what is deemed celebratory in Britain.

Whereas multicultural identities are increasingly embedded into Britain's cultural identity, they are rarely included in the collective imaginary. Britishness is still perceived as a concept which excludes many different communities based on race and ethnicity. As Gary Younge writes in the foreword to *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, throughout history the role of Black Britons was "acknowledged if only to be contested" (xi-xii). Thus, the Black British community remains largely excluded, and uncelebrated, from the lauded British identity. Race has thus become a site of cultural and political struggles for representation (Weedon 214). The concept of belonging requires a sense of recognition – something which Black Britons are often denied. According to Thomassen, this ambiguity surrounding what constitutes Britishness is actually central to its definition: "the representational space of Britishness is not a fixed identity with fixed borders," but rather "marked by difference and tensions" (26-38). Social cohesion depends on the celebration of diversity. Furthermore, as Upstone explains, there now "exists a conterminous resurgence of positive investment in blackness" ("Black British Fiction" 126). Celebrations around hegemonic Britishness are challenged by foregrounding the role of underrepresented identities.

Literature has an important socio-political function here. According to memory scholar Ann Rigney, cultural texts "can be studied as a creative response to changes in the world" (330). This is due to the politics of representation. Literature holds a political element through which particular hegemonies and identities can be challenged (Upstone, "Writing Beyond Race" 4). In this way, it can be viewed as a mode of social change through its ability to offer a certain counter-discourse. This is especially pertinent across contemporary Black British literature, a genre which encapsulates the writing by British authors of African and Caribbean descent. This genre has been celebrated due to its social relevance regarding identity politics. Artists have additionally been praised for their experimentation with language and style (Bekers & Cousins 211). More specifically, since the 1980s, Black

British writers have increasingly engaged with matters of race and ethnicity. As Elisabeth Bekers and Helen Cousins indicate, the rise of Black British literature constitutes "a greater political drive on the part of Britain's Black communities to be recognized as belonging to Britain and being entitled to participate in public life and shaping of national identity" (211). This discussion has continued into the twenty-first century as debates around race have once again become increasingly widespread.

This article is specifically concerned with how contemporary works subvert dominant images of Britishness. According to Upstone, British authors often use their writing to reflect cultural moments in time, arguing for the emergence of a kind of 'new Britishness' ("Writing Beyond Race" 4). This is especially prominent following recent socio-political events in Britain, such as the Grenfell Tower fire and Windrush scandal. It has opened up a new space wherein artists can discuss topics traditionally occluded from the British cultural narrative and wider societal debates. In particular, writers stress the interplay between identity politics, nationhood and belonging ("Black British Fiction" 126). They respond to, and critically engage with, multicultural Britishness in a myriad of ways. As such, texts provide a certain agency in representing counterhegemonic notions of celebration. They, for instance, challenge hegemonic constructions of Britishness by repositioning Black Britons as integral to the greater narrative. As Kadish Morris states in *The Guardian*, "we need the words and radical ideas of black poets — to reimagine the kind of world we want to arise once the ash has settled" (Morris). In this way, writers deviate from the dominant celebratory rhetoric by underscoring issues of identity politics. The connection between literature and society is thereby highlighted, through an intersection of both the personal and the political.

"Nothing to Bury but Ash": Poetic Displacement in *A Portable Paradise*

Notions of identity politics and celebration are also present in contemporary poetry, as poets are heavily engaged with societal debates. As Morris states, "poetry is the language of urgency" (Morris).

Here, I will specifically focus on the work of Roger Robinson, a Trinidadian-British laureate known for his performance poetry and critical explorations of Black Britain. His lauded poetry collection, *A Portable Paradise*, notably won the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize in 2019 for its literary and socio-political significance. This success "should be both applauded and interrogated" as it showcases a lack of recognition for Black Britons in the past (Morris). Robinson counteracts celebrations of Britishness by illustrating the displaced position of multicultural identities. He does this by remembering an underrepresented community against the backdrop of the Grenfell Tower fire. *A Portable Paradise* subsequently places the collective experience of Black Britons at centre stage by writing an elegy for them.

On 14 June 2017, a hazardous fire broke out in the Grenfell Tower in North Kensington (Afewerki). The primary cause of the fire was attributed to institutionalised racism surrounding the treatment of council housing residents, whereby building management did not comply with safety regulations and the concerns of the residents were ignored. The fire, and its aftermath, sparked ongoing discussions regarding the contested position and treatment of Black Britons. In *A Portable Paradise*, Robinson responds to this event, presenting the fire as a spectacle involving both tragedy and celebration. In the opening poem, 'The Missing,' the poet recalls how "the Risen stream slowly, so slowly / out the gothic doors / and up to the sky" (Robinson 9). This indicates a certain closeness to the event, seeing how the victims have passed and found their way to Heaven, appearing as "black smoke from spreading flames" (9). The blackness of the smoke not only stresses the racial dimension of such a tragic event, it also shows how each victim is innately linked to the fire. They even begin to resemble a separate city: "they are the city of the missing. / We, now, the city of the stayed" (10). Altogether, this reflection exemplifies how literature can provide an important space for examining marginalised issues (Weedon 225). The poet reflects on violent matters of racial politics and displacement in modern Britain by holding up a mirror to society.

In the poem 'Dolls,' Robinson specifically plays into literature's ability to intervene in socio-political discussions. This is achieved by

contemplating the role of creative citizenship. In particular, Robinson imagines how he "could, like the gods of fate, somehow rearrange the events" (18). This implies a feeling of responsibility regarding the representation of the fire. He expresses a desire to save the victims by "[having] had the fire on the day of [the Notting Hill] Carnival and encouraged those on the top floors to be a part of the festivities" (18). Notably, this provides a revealing angle on the theme at hand as the Carnival, increasingly co-opted by white Britons today, is juxtaposed against the tragic event. In this way, the poet seems to remobilise the festivities as a celebration of Britain's black communities. Robinson turns tragedy into celebration: "let life and love continue in Grenfell" (18). The connection to identity politics is prevalent here as notions of Black Britishness are retrieved from the margins.

This can be related to the larger topic of national belonging in *A Portable Paradise*. Britain is often termed 'the promised land,' praised for its diverse character. In the past Britain has fashioned itself as welcoming to implied outsiders and migrant identities. However, this idyllic image does not align with reality, as multicultural identities are seldom celebrated in this context (Younge xi-xii). Robinson responds to such notions by bringing visibility to those who are deemed invisible in society. Robinson's 'Paradise' here becomes a 'portable' place of solidarity and belonging that Black Britons seek. This sentiment forms a recurring allegory throughout the collection. As Robinson notes, "Paradise began to morph into different links, [growing] in increments from personal to political to social" ("Roger Robinson talks about his work," 01:35-01:45). In the eponymous poem, Paradise becomes a physical place: "carry it always / on my person, concealed" (Robinson 81). Rather than a fixed site, it comes to encapsulate the feeling of home in a more tangible sense. The poet further explains how "if life puts you under pressure, / trace its ridges in your pocket, [...] hum its anthem under your breath" (81). This indicates how one can find celebration in the transcendental by singing the melodies themselves.

Robinson underscores the displacement of Black British communities through his representation of violent and vivid imagery. In particular, the poem 'Citizen I' stresses how after decades of struggle and legacy, "now you

want to send me home" (43). Here, Robinson illustrates the collective response to the Windrush scandal, referring to the unjust deportation of those who came to Britain on the *Empire Windrush* in the 1950s and after (Owolade 135-8). Robinson notably indicates the lack of recognition for this community:

> you were always planning my departure,
> from the moment I walked down the gangplank,
> freestyling "London is the Place for Me"
> [...]
> our relationship
> has never been more than strained at best.
> Every second street name is a shout out to my captors. (43)

The poet pinpoints how Black Britons were exploited to help build the Empire, and how their place in society remains uncelebrated. This showcases how race-related events have become testament to a lack of belonging experienced by multicultural subjects, further highlighted in the discussion of racial politics and postcolonial melancholia today.

The poem 'The Darkening Red of Your Blood' reflects on matters of police brutality. Robinson illustrates how Black Britons are degraded due to the lack of value afforded to the colour of their skin. As Sara Ahmed indicates, the social body, whether individual or collective, is shaped through particular power relations which influence our perception of the world (4-7). It becomes a site of objectification. The poet reflects this by indicating how the Black British body is *looked at*, rather than truly *seen* or *heard*. He subsequently offers the following advice:

> Do not fall for it.
> Don't be the ink of a new obituary.
> [...]
> They love the flow of blood;
> it makes them feel powerful, like a god.
> [...]
> Realise that keeping yourself alive
> is bigger than racism and disrespect. (Robinson 36)

One can observe how Robinson reveals the underlying issues of racism by showcasing how the lack of celebration regarding multicultural identities is rooted in hegemonic thinking and, in turn, everyday life (Kushner 514). The strategic construction of race is central to this. As Robinson's work demonstrates, images of Britishness are often shaped through the stereotyping and exclusion of implied others. *A Portable Paradise* thus constitutes a poetic account of displacement, questioning which identities are acknowledged within Britain's social fabric. Robinson offers visibility to the community of Grenfell by commemorating and celebrating the victims at once. Moreover, after gaining popularity in the literary scene, Robinson has created a new cultural archive of Black Britain, *Home is Not a Place* (2022), showcasing the poet's larger commitment to cultural diversity and representation in his work. As stated, "we need some black plaques / on these buildings" as a sign of recognition (Robinson 43).

"Parody on my Body": (Re)Writing New Britishness in *Assembly*

One can observe similar insights in the work of Natasha Brown, a British-Jamaican novelist who gained attention for her socio-political critiques. In contrast to Robinson's text, *Assembly* (2021) explores the intersectional lived experience of a single character. The metamodern novel, a piece of autofiction and metafiction written in stream-of-consciousness vignettes, follows an unnamed black narrator as she is preparing for a garden party at her wealthy family-in-laws' house. This is illustrated against the background of the hostile environment in a London-based company, as the woman reflects on her contested position in Britain. As literary scholar Harald Pittel indicates, the novel can be defined as a "state of the black nation debut" because it "question[s] one-sided constructions of national identity" (96). In her work, Brown interrogates how some identities are celebrated over others, and how notions of identity politics infiltrate everyday life.

In doing so, *Assembly* includes various references to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. This modernist novel follows a woman preparing for a dinner party as she contemplates her place in post-war Britain. Brown

seems to update this celebrated story to a more contemporary socio-political debate by engaging with notions of womanhood, race and class, whilst covering similar intersecting plotlines and strategies. In other words, intertextuality, as an aesthetic device or political strategy, is used by Brown to extend, transform and restructure the original (Rigney 99). It additionally helps to legitimise the social value of *Assembly* by alluding to a quintessential British text, and subsequently commenting on the position of underrepresented subjects. Moreover, in her discussion of class, I argue that parallels can be drawn between Brown's work and William Morris' novel *News From Nowhere* (1890).[1] This comparison is complemented by the aesthetic similarities between both book covers, stressing the wider use of intertextuality. As such, *Assembly* engages with Britain's cultural legacy by reconstructing hegemonic images of Britishness.

This is coupled with a larger discussion of identity politics. Brown uncovers which identities are celebrated across British society, and which ones remain marginalised. This is achieved by tracing the struggles of the unnamed black narrator. In her attempt to climb the social ladder, she contemplates her role within Britain by highlighting the personal as political. As such, she mirrors the character of Clarissa Dalloway by reflecting a contemporary mindscape in light of crisis. This is exemplified in how the narrator is constructed through the constant projections, judgements and accusations of other characters. She is the object against which the dominant subject can silhouette itself. In turn, this influences her subordinate position on the whole as she is only celebrated for diversity's sake: "any value my words have in this country is derived from my association with its institutions: universities, banks, government" (Brown 23). Thus, the narrator laments how the term 'British' can solely "be claimed hyphenated or else parenthesized" (15). One can even relate this to the rejection of implied outsiders on a collective level: "What is citizenship when you've watched screaming *Go*

[1] *News From Nowhere* is a utopian socialist novel which covers pertinent discussions around class and gender. In *Assembly*, Brown alludes to this British text by referring - both implicitly and explicitly - to structures of socialism and sexism alongside issues of race. This pertains to the prejudices which the narrator faces in both the garden party and workplace, as she herself questions, "Can I see that? My primary issue is poverty, not race. Their earnest faces tilt to assess my comprehension, my understanding of my role in this society. They conjure metaphors of boats and tides and rising waves of fairness. Not even reparations - no, even socialism doesn't stretch that far" (Brown 86).

Home vans crawl your street? [...] When *British* reduced to paper, is swept aside and trodden over?" (Brown 54). This reference to the Windrush scandal showcases how, in society, Black Britons are deemed black first and foremost, their sense of Britishness being merely an afterthought.

The narrator's multicultural identity is also exploited on a more intimate level. In particular, her white upper-class boyfriend uses her identity to uphold his own legacy, one of patriotic Britishness. After their time at Cambridge University, her social capital had transformed her — "my style, my mannerisms, my lightly affected City vernacular" (Brown 17). This pinpoints a moment wherein the narrator could reconstruct her identity on her own terms. However, her boyfriend instead sees this as an opportunity to redefine and celebrate himself. This becomes apparent on arrival at the family-in-laws' house and later the impending garden party, which mirror the festivities in *Mrs. Dalloway* with characters such as Sally Seton being referenced for further allusion. Here, the narrator reveals how the romantic relationship has a distinct political dimension. His acceptance of her offers him a "certain liberal credibility" and "[assures] his position left to centre" (Brown 67). In turn, she is granted a form of acceptance by the conservative partygoers. However, "in his imagined biography, this relationship will ultimately reduce to a sentence — maybe two. Thin evidence of his open-mindedness, his knack for cultural bridge-building" (Brown 67). The narrator is appreciated for her contribution to his legacy, rather than her own selfhood. Her multicultural identity is thus not included in, but remains complementary to, the quintessential image of Britishness.

Furthermore, the lavish garden party appears to mirror the socio-political landscape at hand. The black woman is expected to perform her designated role and, in doing so, adopts an assemblage of identities in order to gain recognition. As Brown writes:

> There's a promise of enfranchisement and belonging, yes. A narrative peak in the story of my social ascent. [...] My thoughts, my ideas – even my identity – [...] exist as a response to the partygoer's words and actions. Articulated

> along the perimeter of their form. Reinforcing both their selfhood, and its centrality to mine. How else can they be certain of who they are, and what they aren't? Delineation requires a sharp, black outline. (68-69)

This exemplifies how the narrator's identity is celebrated only in response to the wider collective. This 'narrative peak' of acceptance can thus never be entirely reached. Moreover, by embedding the narrative in celebration, without featuring the actual party itself, Brown creates room for structures of identity politics to unravel. This provides a space to highlight what remains hidden across contemporary society. As the narrator indicates, "I am lost both literally and in the larger, abstract sense of this narrative" (84). Brown subsequently turns the invisible visible in an attempt to illuminate matters of racial prejudice. This is further illustrated in Brown's play on the word 'assembly'; Whilst carrying positive connotations of celebration, the term also highlights elements of difference.

This is additionally addressed in the author's exploration of belonging. The boyfriend raised "his quill and drew [her] into their world" (24). Nevertheless, this does not cancel out her marginal position. As the narrator realises, "pulling back the curtain, he's invited me to the chambers beyond. It's not acceptance, not yet. It's just a step further, closer" (50). This showcases how she is essential to the British socio-political landscape, but rarely celebrated as such. In turn, Brown concludes that assimilation is the only possible answer. *Assembly* thus provides a counterhegemonic image of Britishness by exploring the experiences of a multicultural subject who retains marginal status despite the centrality of her position in society.

Conclusion

The precarious position of Black Britons has become undeniably clear in both society and literature. While multicultural identities are essential to the socio-political landscape, they are rarely recognised in this capacity. In particular, this article has examined how Robinson

and Brown represent Black Britishness and identity politics by challenging traditional notions of celebration. I have here focused on contemporary Black British literature as a unique genre which stands at the intersection between artistic expression and socio-political engagement. One can notably pinpoint how writers discuss issues of identity and celebration in relation to belonging. To this end, I have argued that celebration, rather than a festive act, can be connected to hegemonic thinking and representation.

This article has subsequently shown how Robinson and Brown diversify notions of new Britishness by reflecting on multicultural identities. *A Portable Paradise* focuses on recent socio-political events by deconstructing notions of belonging and celebration. As Robinson posits, "who buys this flower and in / what circumstance or event?" (25). In turn, *Assembly* covers matters of identity politics in a fictional account of everyday life in Britain. This is achieved through various intertextual references and discussions around race. As such, both authors represent the overlooked in society by engaging with diverse perspectives in both form and content. They, together with other writers, pave the way for a future where Britain is celebrated for its cultural diversity. In doing so, Black Britons are embedded into the cultural memory, claiming the right to recognition.

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Biography

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