

Challenging Historical and Contemporary Notions of Blackness in British Writing

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ALENA SAHOTA, DEC 31 2020

Chinua Achebe famously argued that 'Art is not intended to put people down. If so, then art would ultimately discredit itself'[1] and it is precisely this 'discredit' that Black British autobiographical accounts aim to identify through their various challenges to the notions of Blackness. Inherently imbued with an agency, autobiographical accounts clearly present the voices that would be silenced in other forms of literature due to their status as a minority. For the purpose of this essay Blackness will be defined as the 'property or quality of being black in colour'[2] and the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano will be used to understand its foundations. In addition, Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* will be analysed to explore more contemporary notions. As a novel published in towards the end of the twentieth century, Kay's work provides the chronological antithesis to Equiano's narrative which serves as one of the earliest accounts.

As one of the earliest autobiographical accounts charting the Black British experience, Equiano's narrative serves as a key starting point to the introduction and understanding of the preconceived foundations of Blackness. Whilst this fact has resulted in much scholarly analysis of the narrative, it can be argued that the most important aspect in understanding the concept of Blackness is found in the opening chapter. Beginning his narrative with a description of his early childhood in Eboe, Equiano presents a description of African life that is uniquely free of a Eurocentric lens. Through a methodical listing of traditional culture, ranging from marriage to tribal warfare, readers are presented with a concise but detailed description of life before his enslavement.

With Equiano's account, readers are presented with an unexploited form of identity and therefore, can be regarded as a reworking of his Blackness outside of the mandates of the colonial British society he is a part of in his adulthood. Transforming notions of British Blackness Equiano's specific presentation of culture adheres to the definitions of a civilised society, providing a direct challenge to social rhetoric such as that from Scottish philosopher David Hume who suggested 'there scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion'[3]. As a member of the upper echelons of British society, Hume's quote not only provides an insight into the fact that Blackness historically had been defined by the proponents of the empire, but the mention of 'complexion' introduces the racialisation of society.

Strengthening the inference that Equiano's writing itself builds a sense of Blackness, is his specific choice to discuss Africa at the beginning of his narrative. As it documents Equiano's life before slavery, its placement at the beginning of his narrative it is uniquely imbued with a freedom outside of the social white conscious of which traces can be found throughout the rest of the text. Whilst it could be argued that this is due to the narratives chronological form, when examined alongside the awareness and agency of his writing this seems rather reductive. Instead it could be inferred that the discussion of Eboe early in his work functions as a marker for his reader towards an intent to redefine his Blackness through his own memories.

Exposing the reality that Blackness, in the sense with which it is considered today, is a direct product of the heavy racialisation that gave rise to slavery and the attempted erasure of any African identity. A reality accepted by Equiano himself who states that whilst he 'did not consider himself European he believed himself to be a 'favourite of heaven'[4], in comparison to the suffering to his countrymen, and thus directly address the agency of society in which heaven is only afforded to those who are racially white. Through his direct acknowledgement of racial inequalities readers are encouraged to understand that Blackness originated as an abstract form of conscious identity that

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historically worked as a means of both the social separation on the basis of race but also a justification for global colonialism. Therefore, by looking at what is widely regarded as a key foundation of Black literature in Britain, it can be suggested that historical autobiographies documenting Blackness aim to challenge Blackness by reclaiming the original individuality of African identity. Further adding to this inference is the fact that writers such as Frantz Fanon emphasising three centuries later that his words would represent the Antillean experience and that it would not be able to cover the entirety of what ones Blackness would constitute[5].

Inferring from Fanon's comments that historically the term of Blackness has been utilised in the erasure and oppression of the peoples possessing it, Equiano's specific descriptions of Eboe undermine the concept and become a daring challenge to the powers of society. Recreating a detailed image of his Africa, from the '3400 miles from Senegal to Angola', to the 'Kingdom of Abyssinia near 1500 miles from its beginning'[6], Equiano describes the natural wealth of his country and thus reclaims the grandeur of Eboe in a way that frees it from Western commercialisation[7]. Whilst the economic capital of Africa had been well noted, becoming the primary reason behind Western colonialism, Equiano's description away from ideas of monetary profit further expands the image of the continent away from the definitions of a Eurocentric lens.

Furthermore, with the assertion of Eboe's natural wealth, as a means of addressing and inferring an opposition to the working relation between Europe and Africa, Equiano presents to his readers an independent narrative agency with the means to subvert social expectation. Showcasing an expanse of knowledge in conjunction to the awareness of social racialisation, Equiano from the beginning of his narrative responds to racist Western works and uses himself as evidence to contrast prevalent racial ideology. Lucid in his speech, Equiano's transnational knowledge presents in opposition to the historically contemporary accounts of the time which, under the guise of established social authorities such as science, philosophy, and religion propelled ideas of racial 'primitivity'. A contemporary and somewhat disciple of Hume[8], primitivity of the races found its foundations in works provided by the revered German writer and philosopher Immanuel Kant, who through a hierarchal ranking suggested a 'scientific' order to society. On the false claim of being a 'natural science', Kant placed the Black diaspora third, above the Indigenous peoples on the ground that they are unable to be educated and as a result in need of ownership[9]. Kant reduces those in possession of Blackness to just the physicality of the body by dismissing their intellectual potential and as such demonstrates the dehumanisation that Equiano directly challenges in his opening chapter. The works of both Kant and Hume present the 'social capital' of Blackness being just the physical body provides evidence of the historically held concept that Black identity only begun with slavery. The continued relationship between Black identity and the trauma of slavery further sheds light on the reality that the personability of Blackness that had begun to be reclaimed by Equiano and those like Fanon who followed after, have continued to battle the established Western authorities possess more of a more social influence.

Whilst the battle to redefine Blackness away from the definitions of western authority could be considered an inevitable reaction against the overt racism of historical society, the analysis of contemporary autobiographies presents a continuation of this process of transformation. Although not a strict autobiography, Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* draws much of its content from its authors life[10] and explores the boundaries of the Black British diasporic identity to such detail that its analysis proves worthwhile in investigating the notions of Blackness in a contemporary context.

In particular Kay's novel presents a continuation of the issue that the possession of Blackness dehumanises the individual into social property. Following the aftermath of the revelation that jazz musician Joss Moody had been assigned female gender at birth, the novel explores the public collapse and rewriting of his identity. The intrusive and disregarding nature of western authority is overtly presented in the novel through the characterisation of journalist Sophie Stones. Listing a seven-stage plan[11] through which she will systematically gain access to the private life and family of Joss Moody, Stones intentions are clearly expressed in the narrative to not only convey her intrusive but clinical nature in dealing with the memory of a deceased Black man.

Charting a quest to obtain items from his birth certificate to personal photos and interviews of those close to him, Stones presents a disregard for the life Moody had created for himself even when encouraged by his son to not 'bother with this him/her... Just say him'[12], her initial reluctance becomes an act of direct defiance and transforms

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her disregard into disrespect. This incident forms a key moment in the novel as it overtly displays the dehumanisation of Joss Moody, dissecting his life under the guise of discovering the 'truth', Moody's personal truth, which has already been ignored by the revelation of his gender, is now threatened by complete erasure. Believing she has the right to access all aspects of his life, Stones calculated research would have the power to replace the 'facts' of Moody's life and erase Joss Moody to install in its place Josephine Moore. However, whilst it could be argued that the insensitivity displayed by Stones is not unique but rather a requirement of her job, this judgement becomes reductive when considered alongside Stones remarks regarding Moody's professional career and that it is at this point that Kay decides to move the narrative to Scotland.

The change in location allocates an importance to the moment in the novel, Kay uses it to emphasise the oppressive quality Stone's presents to not only Joss but also Colman. Delving into the complexities and differences of Blackness within Britain and as explained by Kay herself 'Scotland more clearly subjects racial minorities to a process of double colonisation'[13], and it is precisely this that is mirrored within the narrative as through the combining of Stone's and Scotland. As a global marker of Black experience, the character of Joss Moody suggests the possibility that the reconciliation of Blackness alongside Scottish identity could be achieved but this idea is quickly broken by the infiltration of Stone's and her actions are clearly presented as an extreme of society not simply the product of her industry.

Furthermore, the use of Jazz as a medium of self-expression and performance further provides an interesting comparison to the concept that social views of gender are what are truly performative but Blackness as a concept is a personal truth. A transgender male, the revelation of Moody's secret is presented as a violation that devastates both his family and his reputation as a revered musician. With the characters within the novel drawing attention to the body of Moody as a posed to his legacy, Kay presents a modern adaption of the historically held notion that the physicality of Black bodies still overcome their contributions to social culture.

Describing the bandages as 'sticky and sweaty...as if she was removing skin'[14], the intrusive description the post-mortem not only presents as a clear violation of Moody reveals the morbid interest in the black body. Despite being centuries apart, Kay's novel and Equiano's narrative both show British Blackness to be intrinsically linked to the physicality of the body and with the examination the identity of Joss Moody is destroyed and his existence effectively erasure. A process perpetuated by the medias hounding interest the loss of Moody's identity also results in the loss of his work which, in the public eye no longer has the embodiment of an author and therefore is culturally devalued.

In addition to this it can be suggested that this intrinsic linking of the gendered body to the performative nature of Moody's work is used to expose the reality that a gendered identity is a performative aspect that much of society adheres to and contrasts the inherent Blackness embodied by Moody and his son Colman. Having lived life as a man, Moody's success in life evidences that the biological sex and social gender are not mutually exclusive with the latter being a performance of what is considered masculine or feminine. This is contrasted by Kay who presents Blackness as an immutable aspect of life through both the treatment of Joss' and Colman's reaction. As described by Matt Richardson, Joss is 'no longer the exception'[15] and thus open to the racial prejudice of British society, something later mirrored by Colman who attempts to reclaim his Blackness through the prejudice idea of fetishizing of the Black body. Through this the silencing of what constitutes Blackness is exposed and in addition to the setting of Scotland the novel 'Trumpet' somewhat settles on a reality that whilst British Blackness is subjected to a social oppression that suggests it to be a fragile concept, Blackness - mirroring the sentiments of Equiano- is in fact a personal form of consciousness that can only be claimed by those that possess it. Finally finding a resolution with Colman accepting his father as a route back to reclaiming of his own masculinity and Blackness.

From the examinations of historical and contemporary autobiographies the definitions pertaining to the idea of Blackness have been constantly challenged and revised by Black authors. Through the presentation of their own life narratives, writers in conjunction to Equiano and Kay - who have formed the basis of analysis in this essay - have exemplified themselves in order to progress the definition beyond the formations of the allotted by the colonial society. Whilst Kay's novel presents some of the progressions that have been made, its ability to draw comparisons to Equiano's historical narrative also suggests the lengths of revision that still need to take place.

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Notes

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[5] Frantz, Fanon, *Black Skin White Mask*, (New York: Grove Press INC, 1967) p.109-39

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