

# The Novel Today: Recent British Fiction

## Lecture 9: Multicultural Britain: The Outside as Inside

1) Multicultural London:  
Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000),  
Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani* (2006)

2) The Black Atlantic:  
Patrick Neate, *Twelve Bar Blues* (2001),  
Bernarine Evaristo, *Blonde Roots* (2008)

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### 1) Multicultural London: Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000)

#### The Novels of Zadie Smith:

*White Teeth* (2000)

*The Autograph Man* (2002)

*On Beauty* (2005)

*NW* (2012)

*Swing Time* (2016)

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*Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009)

*Feel Free: Essays* (2018)

(+ short stories)

#### Epigraph to *White Teeth*:

What is past is prologue

- *Inscription in Washington museum*

#### Structure:

(4 parts)

- *Archie* 1974, 1945
- *Samad* 1984, 1857
- *Irie* 1990, 1907
- *Magid, Millat and Marcus* 1992, 1999



This has been a century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bounding a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best – less trouble). Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort [...] it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. There are still young white men who are *angry* about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight wrist. But it makes the immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, *disappearance*. (326f.)

#### 'White Teeth':

- chapter titles: 'Teething Trouble', 'The Root Canals of ...', 'Molars', 'Canines'
- the fiction of uniformly white teeth behind the smile vs. the reality of molars, canines, incisors, root canals, false teeth, dental work in all shades from pearly to black bearing witness to lives lived
- baring your teeth between appeasement and aggression
- human beings only get two chances...

► teeth as a symbol of history, memory, and a shared colonial past

(cf. Meyer 2017)

## Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani* (2006)

### Beginning

-- Serve him right he got his muthafuckin face fuck'd, shudn't b callin me a Paki, innit. After spittin his words out Hardjit stopped for a second, like he expected us to write em down or someshit. Then he sticks in an exclamation mark by kickin the white kid in the face again. -- Sudn't be callin us Pakis, innit, u dirrty gora.

Again, punctuation came with a kick, but with his left foot this time so it was more like a semicolon. -- Call me or any a ma bredrens a Paki again an l'ma mash us an yo family. In't dat da truth, Pakis?

-- Dat's right, Amit Ravi an I go, -- dat be da truth.

The three a us spoke in sync like we belonged to some tutty boy band, the kind who sing the chorus like it's some blonde American cheerleader routine. Hardjit, Hardjit, he's our man, if he can't bruck-up goras, no one can. Ravi then delivers his standard solo routine: -- Yeh, blud, safe, innit. (3)

### **Robert McCrum, “Has the Novel Lost Its Way?”**

(*The Observer* 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2006:

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/may/28/fiction.features>)

This obsession with literary fashion comes at a price. Consider the sad story of *Londonstani*, a first novel by a talented young Asian writer named Gautam Malkani. Hype aside, this spirited coming-of-age story, narrated by Jas, a Hounslow schoolboy, in a mish-mash of patois, rap, text messaging and west London street-talk, is a promising debut. If it had been published, as its author once intended, as a teen novel, it might have found a secure place as a contemporary classroom cult.

Alas, everything about its short life has been a disaster. Once Fourth Estate, hungry to cash in on the *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* market, had paid an advance in excess of £300,000, the die was cast. Thereafter, *Londonstani* had to be ‘the literary novel of the year’. Like a Fiat Uno entered for Formula 1, after a squeal of brakes and a loud bang, *Londonstani* was reduced to a stain of grease, and some scraps of rubber and tin, on the race track of the 2006 spring publishing season. In Borders or Waterstone’s, *Londonstani* is already being airbrushed from history. The celebrity culture of which contemporary fiction has become an uneasy part has no use for failure, or the garret.

### **James Graham, “‘This in’t Good Will Hunting’: *Londonstani* and the Market for London’s Multicultural Fictions.”**

<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2008/...>

*Londonstani* failed, McCrum argues, because it didn’t sell. (...) Yet the novel’s poor sales do not in any simple way stem from it being mis-marketed by its publishers. For all its youthful subject matter and stylistic irreverence, it is literary and explores multicultural themes. The problem, rather, is that it is literary and explores multicultural society in a style that, whilst being endorsed by reviewers, does not appear to have matched the prevailing taste of its audience. (...) The key here, then, is to explore how, exactly, it is not literary and multicultural in the same way as its more commercially successful putative competitors – McCrum’s ‘*White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* market’.

(T)he novel itself is arguably more challenging of the liberal consensus that frames the debate (on multiculturalism). (...) In spite of Mr Ashwood’s protestations (the characters) are aware of his well-intentioned designs for their collective destiny, but they also refuse to let their experience become an exemplary, feel-good story of the marginalised making good in the mainstream.

Rather than embody the progressive values of liberal humanism, the characters are unswervingly materialistic. (...) They are part of ‘the first subculture to celebrate rather than counter conspicuous consumerism’ (Malkani), deriving more from African-American cultural forms, such as hip-hop, than British pop culture. At their extreme these traits and values are antithetical to those of McCrum’s *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* audience. (...)

(T)he novel represents a kind of caricatured globalised blackness that simply is not to the taste of the majority of consumers of multicultural fiction. In this way *Londonstani* challenges the liberal proponents of multiculturalism – be they politicians, publishers or the implied audience of their ‘multicultural novel’ – rather than reinforcing their ideological preconceptions. It quite deliberately engages with what David Goodhart has called ‘the progressive dilemma’.

(cf. Eckstein et al. 2008)

## **2) The Black Atlantic: Patrick Neate, *Twelve Bar Blues* (2001)**

### **The Novels of Patrick Neate:**

*Musungu Jim and the Great Chief Tuloko* (2000)

*Twelve Bar Blues* (2001)

*The London Pigeon Wars* (2003)

*City of Tiny Lights* (2005)

*Jerusalem* (2009)

### **Twelve Bar Blues:**

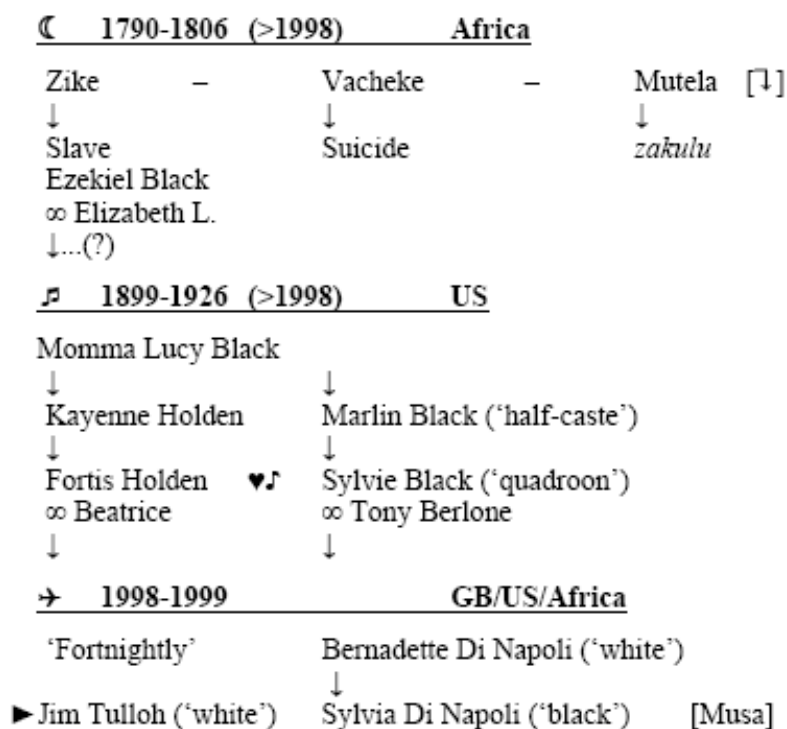
the most common harmonic progression in all jazz; it comprises twelve bars based on tonic (I), dominant (V) and subdominant (IV) harmonies, organized in the simple pattern:

I-I-I-IV-IV-I-I-V-V-I-I.

Patrick Neate, *Twelve Bar Blues*

Ⓒ Prelude		1790-1806	Africa (Maconda, Zambawi) ➤ New Orleans, Louisiana
Chorus 1 (Book One: Polyphony)			
♫ Ch. 1-4	(I)	1899-1911	US (Mount Marter, Louisiana)
Ⓒ Ch. 5-6	(IV)	1998	Africa (Zimindo, Zambawi)
♫ Ch. 7-8	(I)	1912-1915	US (Mount Marter/New Orleans)
➔ Ch. 9-10	(V)	1998	GB/US (London/New York)
♫ Ch. 11-12	(I)	1917-1920	US (Mount Marter, Louisiana)
Chorus 2 (Book Two: Dissonance)			
➔ Ch. 1-4	(I)	[1968-]1998	[GB (London)] US (NY/Chicago)
Ⓒ Ch. 5-6	(IV)	1998	Africa (Zimindo, Zambawi)
➔ Ch. 7-8	(I)	1998	US (New Orleans, Louisiana)
♫ Ch. 9-10	(V)	1920-1924	US (Mount Marter, Louisiana)
➔ Ch. 11-12	(I)	1998-1999	US/GB (New Orleans/London)
♫ Coda		1926	US (New York)

Chart of Characters (Strands 1 and 2):



So the story of Zike, Mutela and Vacheke was lost to history – only preserved in the imprecise metaphors of a folk song in the Land of the Moon – and the debt went unpaid for the best part of two centuries. But fate is a perverse trickster with no sense of timing. Catch his eye and you can bet he'll reel you in like a fish on a line. Even after 200 years. (12)

The boy with the voice sounding over the water  
sings meanings that no person hears.  
And the girl wearing seashells, the greatest chief's daughter,  
has drowned in a lake of her tears. (327)

So fate spins its patterns like a spider spins a web. And a hornet scoffs until he's stuck fast and then he's too busy saying prayers to his maker to be cursing his bad luck. Most likely, a careless duster will take down the web before too long and fate will begin to spin again, in a similar corner of a similar room, a similar pattern but no two webs are ever the same. So we shake our heads at the story of Toothless Naps and we can't help but comment on fate's taste for an ironic twist. But humanity's begging you, though you don't hear it: don't restrict the untold story of a flawed hero to one meagre adjective. Please. Because the tale of Toothless Naps is the coda to the most beautiful twelve bar blues that Lick Holden ever played and it fills our guts with an emptiness to swell souls. And the horn hits the final note and flattens it blue. And the song is ever incomplete and it leaves us wanting more. (401)

### **Narrative Technique:**

- omniscient authorial narrator, invisible/covert
- simulated oral interaction between narrator and audience, frequently addressing the dialectics of fate and retrospective narrative insight (call-and-response pattern)
- typical phrases: 'Truth be told, ...', 'Truth is, ...', 'Now the fact of the matter is, ...', 'Fact is, ...'
- the limits of knowledge are addressed by the frame:  
*Prelude: Because stories are forgotten / Coda: Because stories are untold*

- ▶ reflexive omniscience: narrative as a medium for producing knowledge/truth based on individual and collective experiences and horizons of meaning
- ▶ every narrative is contingent

As Jim spoke, Sylvia raised her head a little. She couldn't believe how much he remembered of what she'd told him. Had anybody – *anybody* – ever listened to another as generously as that? [...] It was strange to hear someone else recount her life story. It was as if the various twists and turns suddenly slotted into place like the jigsaw chapters of a book. And, for the first time, she felt a sense of inexorable progress towards a conclusion, a denouement that was already written, committed to the page, waiting for her to choose to read it. For a brief moment, Sylvia felt comfortable with who she was. Or comfortable with the question anyway, because she was sure it had a definite answer, however difficult. But then Jim had finished her story and the pastor spoke up and the moment was lost. The church was as silent as religion. (257)

### Jim Tulloh's Blues:

I came here to lose myself but I found someone else.  
Now she ran off with a witchdoctor and I'm left on the shelf.  
Woh yeah! I got the identity-crisis blues!  
When you can't forget yourself, it surely turns you to the booze!

For the first time in my life I figure that I'm in love,  
But my baby's a dirty whore. Lord Jesus! Heavens above!  
Woh yeah. She'll fuck anyone who'll pay!  
But when it comes to me? I just don't get no play!

Yeah she a low-down hooker! Not even much of a looker!  
Kind of elegant, I guess! But way past her best!  
False eyebrows, lashes and nails! Probably got false breasts as well!  
I can't help but love her! But she's old enough to be my mother!  
(cf. 320f.)

*The old man was certainly fond of digression, like a jazz trumpeter that gets wrapped up in the improvisational potential of a specific phrase; something that never happened to the original blues men, like Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong (before '38 anyways) and Lick Holden, of course. Y'all don't know me. Y'all don't know nothing about 'me cept I'm the one gonna finish this story and you 'spect it to sound as clear as the music from this ol' horn [Lick's cornet]. But let me tell you somethin', sugar pie. In fact, let me tell you three things about stories because there ain't nothin' so damn complicated as a story (except the jazz and I's not stupid enough to think you understand that any.)*

- ▶ *There ain't no story so important as the one you tells about yourself.*
- ▶ *No story[s] set in stone [...] If them pages restrict a story, then there ain't nothin' restrict it so bad as your own mind.*
- ▶ *Last thing I tell you is that stories don't have no beginning, middle an' end [...] Fact is that stories have a vibe jus' like love. (247f.)*



### Other 'Black Atlantic' Texts:

Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (1991); *Crossing the River* (1993)  
David Dabydeen, *A Harlot's Progress* (1999)  
Bernardine Evaristo, *Blonde Roots* (2008)

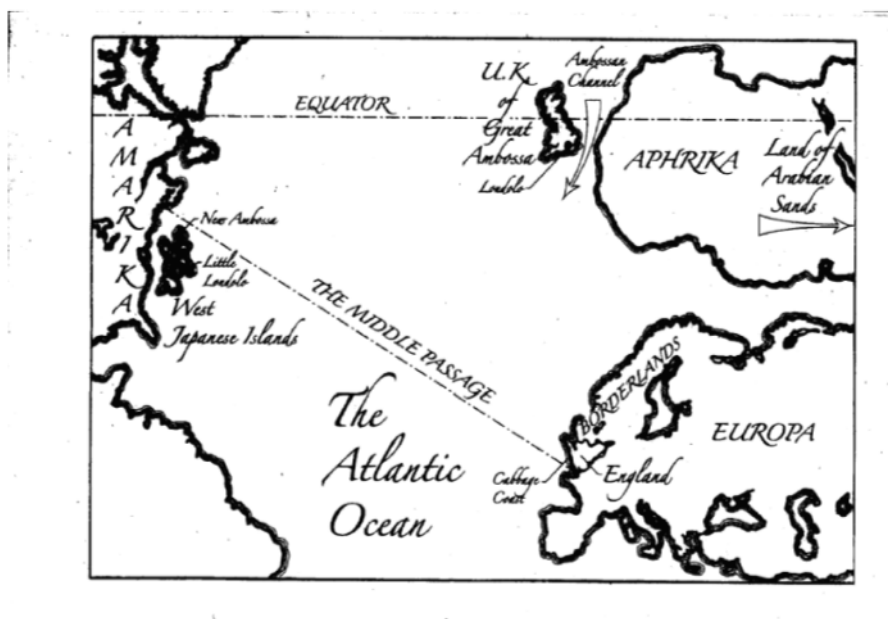
(see also Gilroy 1993, Eckstein 2006, Evans 2009, Munoz-Valdivieso 2012)

### Bernardine Evaristo, *Blonde Roots* (2008)

(on Evaristo in general cf. von Rosenberg 2010)

#### The Novels of Bernardine Evaristo:

*Lara* (1997, verse novel; new exp. ed. 2009)  
*The Emperor's Babe* (2001; verse novel)  
*Soul Tourists* (2005)  
*Blonde Roots* (2008)  
*Hello, Mum* (2010)  
*Mr Loverman* (2013)  
*Girl, Woman, Other* (2019)



### A Map of (Post-)Modern Fiction

Modes:	Documentary Fiction	Realist Fiction	Revisionist Fiction	Implicit Metafiction	Explicit Metafiction
<b>Scales:</b>	external/environmental reference  illusion  'real' comm./character comm.			internal/systemic ref.	auto-referentiality  anti-illusion  lit. comm./narr. comm.
<b>'Programs':</b>	(Avantgarde) ↑	Realism	Romanticism →	Modernism	← Aestheticism ↑
<b>Orientations of Meaning:</b>	obj. (subj.) [[lit.]]	obj. subj. (lit.)	(obj.) subj. lit.	(obj.) subj. lit. → lit.	[[obj.]] (subj.) lit.

(cf. Reinfandt 1997, 240)

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