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Black British Literature in the Secondary English Classroom

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ABSTRACT
This essay explores the teaching and learning of Black British literature in UK secondary schools with reference to texts that now appear on GCSE English Literature specifications. It seeks to reveal some of the issues that may arise when teaching texts that deal with race and racism while emphasising the role of racial literacy in facilitating dialogue around these. By discussing initial considerations for teaching, I hope to support teachers new to teaching such literature feel better prepared to do so.

KEYWORDS
Black British; race; racism; racial literacy; dialogue

Introduction

The education system has generally been silent on the complex relationship between Black people and White Britain, with regards to how we came to be here, and the racial violence first generation migrants experienced (Akala 2018; Eddo-Lodge 2017; Olusoga 2016). Likewise, Black writers have been 'a footnote' in the taught curriculum' (Boakye 2022, 87) at KS4, usually pigeon-holed into poetry anthologies, like John Agard's *Checking Out Me History* which sat incongruously amongst other poems mostly written by White men of England's literary heritage. Students' experience of English at secondary school has been shaped by Gove's edict that 'the great tradition of our literature – Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy – should be at the heart of school life. Our literature is the best in the world' (Vaughan 2014). Such bigoted views produce flawed and exclusionary notions of Britishness while perpetuating anti-Blackness. Moreover, the literary canon which dominates the classroom either excludes the Black presence in Britain or is fixated on the suffering and dehumanisation of Black bodies, such as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and the titular character in Shakespeare's *Othello*. This extends to characters from American 'classics': Crooks in *Of Mice and Men*, Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Tituba in *The Crucible*; though these texts were removed from GCSE curricula, they have been retained for use at KS3. In his seminal book, Coard (2021 [1971], 31) writes, 'If every reference . . . in school shows "Black" as being horrible and ugly, and everything "white" as being pure, clean and beautiful, then people begin to think this way on racial matters'. Black British literature can play a central role in disrupting this inculcation because it provides us with authentic and diverse portrayals of Black communities and creates openings for students to ask

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critical questions about the relationship between our past and present society (Bishop, 2009).

Following the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the lack or absence of Black writers on exam boards' lists of set texts was widely acknowledged (Pearson 2020; Sundorph 2020). In response to these acknowledgements, exam boards announced on their respective websites plans to diversify their GCSE English Literature set text lists (AQA 2022; Nolan and Woodger 2021). I am under no illusion that this will change a system of social and political relations that protects the status quo, undermines Black students' potential, and adheres to deficit narratives regarding achievement and aspiration (Scafe 1989; Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury 2022). I see the inclusion of Black British texts at KS4 as an encouraging step forward. However, an understanding of the literature and issues surrounding its composition, as well as pedagogical approaches to teaching it are equally, if not more, important than its appearance on the curriculum. An increase in racial literacy in the teacher workforce is necessary for increased racial diversity in the curriculum (Joseph-Salisbury 2020). English curricula should feature a variety of Black British literature, texts 'that center racial politics and those that do not' (Price 2018, 7), but I will be focusing on those that do. It is apparent that teachers see the importance of talking about race and racism, but many feel there is a lack of guidance and training for in service teachers, as well as those within initial teacher education and training (ITE/T), on broaching these in the classroom (Elliott et al. 2021). While research into multicultural literature and cultural responsiveness in English classrooms exists (see Hardcastle 2016; Mohamud 2020; Shah 2014; Stone 1985; Yandell 2008), there are few studies which specifically explore the teaching of Black British literature in secondary schools. In this paper, I combine research and literature with my lived experience as a Black, female English teacher, to discuss initial considerations for teaching it, with specific reference to Chinonyerem Odimba's *Princess & The Hustler* and Winsome Pinnock's *Leave Taking*. Inspired by West and Williams' (1973) propositions about what awareness teachers in the US needed to teach African American Literature, I explore three areas for careful thought: (1) conceptions of Black Britishness; (2) the composition of the text and its location in the curriculum; (3) the positioning of teachers and students.

'It's a Sticky One, Styll'[1]: conceptualising Black Britishness

The term 'Black British' is problematic, prompting us to consider whether consensus exists on what it means to be British and what exactly is meant by Black: if it's a reference to skin colour, what relation does that bear to creative outputs, and if it's an ideology, what makes it Black (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 1988)? In 1980s Britain, political blackness was hegemonic, encompassing people of African, Caribbean, and South Asian origins and indicative of a solidarity between them, yet this eventually declined as these groups did not experience the same types of oppression (Modood 1994). Even organisations like the NEU (2021, 2022), who use Black in its broadest political sense, recognise that it is not accepted by all the groups it seeks to represent. Having been assigned this label by White Europeans with its associations of evil and savagery, Black people have endeavoured to reclaim it in a positive light, and it is now widely used to describe people of African and Caribbean heritage (Boakye 2019). Although it is recognised that race is 'a

socially constructed myth based on implausible pseudo-scientific meanderings and superstition' (Palmer 2010, 47), this paper acknowledges race as real in that it affects the way we live and experience the world (Warmington et al. 2018). What constitutes the social construct of Blackness is contentious, with views tending to be shaped by essentialist and anti-essentialist positions; the latter views Blackness as hybrid and fluid, with no truths, while the former is grounded in the belief of a shared and continuous Black experience and identity, leaning towards Afrocentricity and Pan-Africanism (Jordan 2016). This is a complex debate that will not be explored here, but being conscious of these positions may be useful in recognising different ideas about Blackness that students bring to their readings of and responses to the texts.

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois defined the concept of double consciousness, 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . . [so that] one ever feels his two-ness' (1994, 2). This illustrates the ever-present pressure of being Black in the presence of White people whose judgement and scrutiny we instinctively pre-empt. Likewise, Fanon (1952) wrote about third-person consciousness where, within the White gaze, we are made to feel responsible for our bodies, our race, and our ancestors. These sensations transcend geographical boundaries since Black people across the globe, termed the Black Atlantic, have a common history of oppression (Gilroy 1993). The torrent of racist abuse directed at footballers Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka for missing penalties at the Euro 2020 final is just one example of this burden of responsibility for Black people in the UK. Cross (1991) argues that this baggage accumulates from a young age as Black children perceive the advantages attached to Whiteness and desire to dissociate from their Blackness. This model was based on African American children, but it can be applied to many Black children in the UK who, through life experiences within and outside of the classroom, have been prepared 'for a life of self-contempt' and can express a longing to be White (Coard 2021 [1971], 34). Having worked in majority White contexts and witnessed Black children exhibit these attitudes and behaviours, it seems internalised oppression is not an issue of the past. It is in these children I have seen near reflections of my younger self, having learned quickly about the advantages attached to being White at primary-school age. Cross (1991) also maintained that Black people eventually pass this initial stage of dissociation and go through four other stages, some of which involve an acceptance of one's Blackness and developing a commitment to the concerns of the Black community. This idea is echoed by Sefa Dei and James (1998) who differentiate between *being* Black, which is one's given racial identity, and *becoming* Black, a politicised identity Black people deliberately assume to build community and resist oppression. Cross' stages of racial development is unlikely to apply to everyone racialised as Black, and there is no singular Black experience, but we cannot get away from the fact that being racialised as Black comes with consequences (Warmington et al. 2018).

Britishness is also difficult to define because it is tainted by English imperialism and nationalism (Kumar 2010). Though Black people have been present in the UK since the time of the Roman Empire, our presence in Britain in the seventies and eighties was framed as a national problem and we have been viewed as 'an "outside" force, an alien *malaise* afflicting British society' (Solomos et al. 1992, 26). The development of intense forms of control and repression has been the response, whether that be through immigration talks, far-right groups, police harassment, or schooling (Carby 1992; Solomos et

al. 1992). In 1985, the Swann report was one of the first government documents that acknowledged the discrimination faced by racially minoritized students, and the need for multicultural curricula to reflect Modern Britain. The Macpherson report (1999) also highlighted ways in which racially minoritized groups are disadvantaged with the term institutional racism being brought into the limelight after investigating the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence. Though some changes were implemented as a result of these reports, a lot has stayed the same. In my early years of teaching, I worked at a multiracial school in which White children were the minority, yet all the writers on the English curriculum were White. When I became KS3 coordinator, I asked in a department meeting about broadening the range of cultures that feature on the curriculum and the suggestion offered by the department head at the time was, 'What about Greek mythology?' Having looked at no novels or plays by Black or Brown writers throughout my time as a PGCE student, this only confirmed the idea that the English curriculum was White, an issue that still occurs (Elliott et al. 2021). More recently, the Sewell report, looking into disparities in outcomes for different ethnic groups, denied the existence of institutional racism and called for the construction of a 'unifying sense of Britishness' (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021, 89) to fix any sense of not belonging. One way the government has tried to achieve this is through the establishment of fundamental British values. However, this followed the Trojan Horse affair, where schools with large numbers of Muslim students and leadership members were investigated for religious extremism (Smith 2016). It would seem that 'values' translate to 'the British way of life' (303) meaning any individuals or groups perceived as not holding them are seen as not British and/or a threat. As noted by Maylor (2016, 317), 'there is a danger in advocating British values as it suggests that only British (and here we might replace British with White) values are acceptable'. Rapport (2020) asserts that 'distinguishing and eschewing what is Other, different, and very often inferior' is fundamental to Britishness and codes of classification (e.g. class, accent and education) are tacitly understood by all. Yet, this can also turn into 'issues of nationality: of being English, Scottish, Welsh – and certainly not being foreign' (101). There are nuances to the word 'foreign', but it has frequently been weaponised, particularly through the phrase 'Go back to where you came from' which is directed at Black and Brown people and reinforces the idea that an essential marker of Britishness is being White.

So, the complexities around defining Blackness and Britishness as individual components of identity are further intensified when amalgamating the two. There have been numerous attempts to capture, define and unpick what it means to be Black and British; a uniform response would be impossible, but most Black Brits have experienced racial violence, hostile environments, and a sense of dislocation (BBC and Open University 2022; Boakye 2019; Brinkhurst-Cuff 2018; Hirsch 2018; McQueen 2020; Okanlawon 2019; Olusoga 2016). Yet, our struggle is only one side of the story. Another side is one of joy, expressed through community, food, music, art, and more; these have existed as forms of resistance and resilience (Brinkhurst-Cuff and Sotire 2021). The definition of Black British is ever evolving, and it seems that generations of Black people born in the UK with different heritages stand together, their cultures intertwining to form a new Black British culture, with grime music being a 'soundtrack to this unification' (Boakye 2019, 22). Stormzy, whose debut album topped the UK charts, is intentional about representing this, saying 'in my pronunciation, in my diction, in my stance, in my

dressing, in my attitude. This is Black British. I wear it with pride and honour (Younge 2020). Numerous films and TV shows have centred and celebrated Black Britishness, from my late teens when Noel Clarke's *Kidulthood* series was popular, to more recent works that have diversified representations of the Black British experience, like Sarah Gavron's *Rocks*, Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You*, Channel 4's *High Life* and Raine Anne Miller's *Rye Lane*. I admit these examples produce a London or city-centric notion of Black Britishness, so there are opportunities to explore how this identity may otherwise be conceptualised in rural areas of the UK.

'Wot Do U Call It it?'[2]: understanding and locating Black British literature

Black British literature is now a widely used label, but I want to start by acknowledging some contention around it. In an essay *Against Black British Literature*, Fred D'Aguiar wrote 'attempts to pin the creative imagination of a writer to his/her black identity are really looking down the wrong end of the telescope' (1989, 106), which calls out the reductionism behind grouping Black writers into one category, since we are more than the colour of our skin and associated experiences of racism. Whereas, theatre director Dawn Walton (2008), contends that to see this label through the lens of race alone is to miss the point as Black writers 'are uniquely placed to deliver an incisive view of Britain today because we view it from two perspectives – black and white'. This suggests it is the multiple and varied 'vantage points' (Milner 2007, 391) of Black British writers that helps to distinguish the literature from that of their counterparts. Since the likes of Olaudah Equiano writing in the eighteenth century to Sam Selvon in the twentieth, Black writers have felt the need to illustrate the humanity of our communities; such attempts to refine and redefine concepts of self are a reaction against and counteraction of racist depictions in White imaginations (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 1988). Amidst racial tensions and the Black Power movement in the late sixties and seventies, Black British playwrights used their plays as tools of resistance (Pinnock 1999). The eighties saw a fresh wave of Black playwrights who, despite being British born, had inherited the West Indian cultural traditions of their parents, such as the use of Creole languages, and grappled with the dualities of their existence as Black Brits (Pinnock 1999). Winsome Pinnock's *Leave Taking* and Chinonyerem Odimba's *Princess & The Hustler* demonstrate that matters of duality are still relevant with both plays blending Standard English and Jamaican patois throughout. Scafe (1989, 47) notes that when students encounter Creole languages, they should be made aware of its use 'to form bonds of cultural identity and its historic functions of resistance and subversion'. The formation of Creoles, else dubbed nation language, was due to a submergence of the imported languages of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean who were deemed non-human (Brathwaite 1993). Likewise, past generations of Black children of Caribbean descent growing up in the UK were also discouraged by their teachers from using the languages of their parentages; they were not considered to be bilingual but rather less intelligent since Standard English was the supposed benchmark of civilisation (Carby 1992). Even today, this is an attitude – or enforced reality – that students are likely to have encountered in the classroom, with some schools prohibiting the use of alternative language varieties by students (Cushing 2020). Pinnock (1999, 31) notes that her decision to use patois in *Leave Taking* was 'liberating – and an act of defiance' as she was dissuaded from using it in her everyday talk. Despite Creole, in

particular Jamaican patois, being strongly associated with Black British cultural identity for second and subsequent generations of the Caribbean diaspora (Sebba and Tate 2002), this identification appears to surpass ethnicity. In a conversation about Black Britishness, (LB 2021, 378) says:

> there is a shared interchange now where . . . my Caribbean friends all say uniquely Nigerian phrases. then even we, as Africans, as a Nigerian, I will say uniquely Caribbean phrases . . . I feel the right to say it. I feel it's very much, my language.

This appears at the end of Jade LB's *Keisha The Sket*, a novel which combined 'Black working-class London colloquialisms, Jamaican patois and SMS shorthand [to create] a new dialect particular to 21st-century Black Britons' (Morris 2021). The appropriation of these phrases by non-Black students is an issue I will come to later. As mentioned earlier, much Black British literature has been concerned with redefining Blackness in response to racist depictions; there is also a desire to represent Blackness outside of the White gaze. Speaking on her first and second novels, Candice Carty-Williams said, '*Queenie* was so much about Blackness in response to whiteness . . . It's time to write something that is just about Black people' (Allardice 2022). So, by reclaiming definitions of Blackness and refusing to follow the rules of a colonial language, Black British literature is oppositional in content and form (Scafe 1989). Thus, it must be acknowledged that it 'cannot be taught alongside traditional literature in a way which leaves the cultural assumptions uncontested' (25). One example would be that a sense of belonging can be achieved through assimilation, by adopting British values and traditions while accepting glorified presentations of Britain's history (Tikly 2022). Yet, *Leave Taking* clearly exposes the destructive impacts of assimilation on the Black identity. When asked by her mother to define her sense of self, character Viv recites from Rupert Brooke's nationalist poem *The Soldier* to prove her Englishness. This is an ironic choice since Black and Brown soldiers were denied formal commemoration, but she is unlikely to have learned this at school (Lammy 2019). When asked by disillusioned – or, perhaps, enlightened – character Broderick what she knows about Nanny of the Maroons, she replies, 'Never heard of her' (Pinnock 2018, 29). Not only do these moments appear to be a criticism of cultural assimilation but, much like Agard's poem, of an education system that has helped 'blind [us] to [our] own identity'. Viv's eventual decision to read Black Studies at university demonstrates that she is 'checking out [her] history' (Agard 2004, 60). I can relate to Viv's character in some ways; English was my favourite subject at school, and I was taught to appreciate the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, totally unaware of the contributions of Black and Brown soldiers. Yet, the joy I found as an undergraduate discovering the treasures of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Sam Selvon and Andrea Levy was unmatched. Even then, the library is where most of these discoveries were made since Black writers were largely excluded from modules on the English Literature course. Instances like these could still be the case for many Black students in English classrooms who are erased from British history in school and may not be getting that education about their involvement at home or through supplementary school movements. Studying Viv's trajectory offers the chance for students to reflect on their own educational experiences and scrutinise this erasure.

Locating Black British literature in a largely White curriculum requires intentionality; ensuring it is thematically linked within and across the curriculum would help not only to

avoid tokenism but to confirm its importance as part of the whole school curriculum (Scafe 1989). Exploring literature at KS3 about migration from the Caribbean to the so-called mother country, like Floella Benjamin's *Coming to England* and Benjamin Zephaniah's *Windrush Child*, would provide essential context, subsequently enriching students' understanding of both *Princess & The Hustler* and *Leave Taking*. It has been recognised that literary illustrations of the migrant experience have mainly focused on the Caribbean diaspora (Goddard 2015). Gilroy (2013, xiii) states, African migrants 'whose colonial and post-colonial sufferings have been necessarily different' may struggle to connect with these texts. This might not be the case, though, for second and subsequent generations of Black students, where shared experiences along with the intermingling of African and Caribbean cultures have created new, common delineations of the Black British experience (Boakye 2019). Nevertheless, a window is presented for teachers to explore experiences of migration and being Black in Britain as told by writers of the African diaspora, like Buchi Emecheta, Bola Agbaje, and Derek Owusu. Beyond migration, students can learn about historical acts of Black resistance to White oppression, helping to build a curriculum which highlights the agency and resilience of Black communities. In the BBC documentary *Black Power: A British Story of Resistance* (2021), Linton Kwesi Johnson advises: 'the youngsters in the BLM movement need to appraise themselves of what has gone before so that they can draw some lessons from the battles that we fought and won'. This is applicable to *all* students, those who are 'in' the BLM movement, as well as those who have been impacted by it in some way. If KS4 students will be studying *Princess & The Hustler*, set amidst the 1963 Bristol Bus Boycott, they could study uprisings organised by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, such as Tacky's War, the story of which is told in Alex Wheatle's novel, *Cane Warriors*. In a UK context, there are countless potential topics for study: race riots across Bristol, London, Manchester, Liverpool, and Nottingham; the Mangrove Nine; and the Black Parents' Movement, some of which are illustrated in Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* short films. As pointed out by Muneera Pilgrim (2022), 'there are often Black communities who have been ignored for years' in the fight for racial justice, as opposed to White liberals who, since the toppling of Colston's statue, are centre stage. So, it is necessary for students to learn about the trailblazers from Black communities who paved the way for us today.

While studying acts of resistance contributes towards positive representations of Black communities in a curriculum which has traditionally portrayed us to be inferior, passive, and lacking agency, another effective way of doing this is looking at texts that illustrate Blackness through the prism of joy. Both plays illustrate racial politics while offering moments to centre Black joy. *Leave Taking* is just as much about self-discovery as it is about alienation, since character Viv is inspired to discover her Blackness, and character Del learns the practices of Obeah, a part of her cultural heritage which she initially snubbed. Similarly, *Princess & The Hustler*, which deals with issues of colourism and misogynoir, is a celebration of Black beauty and girlhood. In an interview, Chinonyerem Odimba said: 'I want people to know . . . that Black Girl Magic is alive . . . and . . . believe in the magic of what we could grow up to be' (Marks 2019). Here, she refers to the enchanting finale in which she envisions a space where Black beauty is cherished: 'a line of the most beautiful Black women of all sizes and nations appear' in front of Princess, before she joins them to 'take a bow' (Odimba 2019, 127). Bishop (1990) holds that reading literature,

which reflects reality, can be an act of self-affirmation; in a world which assigns cultural and symbolic value to Whiteness (Twine 2010), literary illustrations like these are of great significance. To complement the study of these plays, there is a wealth of contemporary media and literature which showcases Black joy. The song which comes to mind when I think about the final scene of *Princess & The Hustler* is Enny's *Peng Black Girls*, a tribute to Black femininity. When the song was released, she 'got so many messages from young black girls . . . just saying that . . . now they feel beautiful' (Frazer-Carroll 2021). Depending on school contexts – a point I touch on in the next section – students could discuss the song's relevance through an analysis of the lyrics. Likewise, Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff and Timi Sotire's collection, *Black Joy*, is a great resource for exploring literary non-fiction while drawing parallel themes with the plays. As I mentioned earlier, pedagogical approaches to teaching Black British literature are fundamental to the way it is received and responded to in the classroom. Research suggests that gaps in teacher knowledge may present an obstacle since there is an expectation, self-imposed and from students, for them to be experts (Elliott et al. 2021). In the final section, I make suggestions for how this might be overcome.

'Real Talk'[3]: the positioning of teachers and students

Suzanne Scafe, a Black female educator, was told by one of her Black students that 'We should read a lot of Black literature and we should do it with Black teachers . . . I don't want white teachers teaching me about Black people anyway' (1989, 11). Although she was teaching a previous generation of Black students, I think it is still important to be aware of potential wariness and scepticism about the introduction of Black British literature to the curriculum (Scafe 1989). Racism within society 'permeates our schools' (Joseph-Salisbury 2020, 3) and Black Caribbean students still experience 'persistent educational disadvantage' (Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury 2022, 1428). A YMCA report (2020) revealed that some of the barriers to achievement Black students face include teacher perceptions, racism at school, a lack of role models, and a lack of curriculum diversity, the first of which was the highest. Regardless of an increasingly racially diverse student demographic, 95.7% of the teacher workforce in England are White (UK Government 2023); the recruitment and retention of Black teachers remains a pertinent issue (Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020). Bree Picower states 'the sheer number of White people in the teaching field in a country marked by racial inequality has implications for the role White teachers play in creating patterns of racial achievement and opportunity' (2009, 197–8). An understanding of teacher positionality – the ways in which our race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental abilities and lived experiences shape our world view, as well as the ways we are perceived by our students (Johnson-Bailey 2012) – is crucial. Our conceptions of race, racism and Britain will have a direct impact on the way we approach and engage with these texts. Lander (2014, 93) noted that historically there has been 'almost no education or training to help student teachers to understand the constructs of race and ethnicity' and that White student teachers felt they needed further training to be better equipped for dealing with racial issues (Dunne et al. 2018). Many White teachers fear and avoid conversations about race, not wanting to say the *wrong* thing and cause offence (Flynn, Worden, and Rolón-Dow 2018; Maylor 2014; Skerrett 2011). Thus, racial literacy is an essential tool for

teaching Black British literature. For Twine (2010, 92), some of the components of racial literacy include:

> an understanding of the ways that experiences of racism and racialization are mediated by class, gender inequality and heterosexuality … a recognition of the cultural and symbolic value of whiteness … the possession of a racial grammar and vocabulary to discuss race, racism and antiracism …

The idea that a racially literate individual will recognise 'the cultural and symbolic value of whiteness' (2010, 92), necessitates self-reflexivity from White teachers by situating themselves 'within, rather than outside, an analysis of race' (Dunne et al. 2018, 71). Self-reflexivity must also extend to teachers from racially minoritized backgrounds, since a dichotomous understanding of the oppressor and the oppressed can obscure the fact that 'the oppressed may also be oppressing others' (Kishimoto 2018, 546) since we are 'capable of using tools of Whiteness' in our teaching practices (Picower 2009, 212). Joseph-Salisbury (2020) argues that designing and implementing curricula that can be defined as anti-racist is futile if teachers are racially illiterate. Whilst I agree, it could be argued that without the presence of curricular texts that require teachers to teach about race, they cannot develop their racial literacy practice, and the students' experiences are limited (Skerrett 2011). When studying these texts, it is important for teachers, particularly those racialised as White, to position themselves as active learners that do not – and could not – have all the answers on racial matters (Skerrett 2011). This could be achieved through a dialogic approach to teaching where students are given space to narrate their lived experiences and this is used to inform how curriculum content is navigated, allowing students to 'transcend their present societal barriers' (Flecha 1999, 164). However, willingness to engage in discussions around racial issues depends on the perceived safety of the space, the level of threat to their identity, their awareness of majority opinions, and the teachers' interpersonal behaviours (Wansink et al. 2023). There is room for debate about potential repercussions of having teachers with low levels of racial literacy teaching or facilitating discussions about race. Stuart Hall, cultural studies pioneer, believes:

> you have to create an atmosphere which allows people to say unpopular things. I don't think it is at all valuable to have an atmosphere in the classroom which is so clearly, unmistakeably anti-racist that the natural and 'commonsense' racism which is part of the ideological air that we all breathe is not allowed to come out and express itself. (Hall 1983, 260)

The ability to create this atmosphere is contingent on the skill and judgement of individual teachers. Even if a teacher is adept at doing this, the reactions – visible and invisible – of the students is beyond their control. Leonardo and Porter (2010) argue that a safe space for race talk can never truly be achieved for Black students because there tends to be an avoidance of ideas deemed controversial and emotions considered intense, primarily for the sake of protecting Whiteness. Sue (2013) found that discussions about race, for racially minoritized students, invited racial microaggressions, evoked powerful emotional responses and produced in them a conflict about whether to speak up, along with an uncertainty about what would happen if they did. Furthermore, staff from racially minoritized backgrounds felt an exhausting, overwhelming internal conflict about being objective and not being seen to take sides, which angered students from the same

backgrounds who looked to their teachers for support and validation. On the other hand, he found that many White students and staff members were unable to identify racial microaggressions; remained silent or refused to participate; dismissed the importance of the issue, and experienced high levels of anxiety and dread. Recognising this illusion of safe spaces, Arao and Clemens (2013) build on the idea of brave spaces which require courage by inviting teachers and students to lay ground rules to help them acknowledge the reality of discomfort and how to work through it. Yet, 'we must be careful how we claim the classroom as a brave space' (Verduzco-Baker 2018, 587) because Black students are already operating from a place of bravery in school and discussions around race and racism are 'more likely to be novel and to feel optional rather than a matter of survival' (588) for White students. To help shape the role of teachers in these discussions, Verduzco-Baker suggests (1) sourcing lived experiences told in the first-person so that the students aren't relied upon (2) 'calling in' rather than 'calling out' problematic beliefs (3) modelling bravery in our own responses to being 'called in'. With this in mind, teachers need to be aware of some of the complex feelings Black students have towards different aspects of race when facilitating discussions, some of which may be unresolved for them (Scafe 1989). In *Princess & The Hustler*, there are many: colourism; beauty ideals; interracial relationships, of the platonic and romantic kind; and Black mixed-race identity. It is important to be prepared for the variety of responses students may have if they are encouraged to take part in dialogue. Princess' experience of being ridiculed for her hair texture and skin tone will ring true for many Black girls. Despite traction gained by the natural hair movement, #black girl magic, and the work of organisations like The Halo Collective, Black females are routinely subjected to colourism and misogynoir, 'something young Black girls have learnt to internalise' (During 2020). As illustrated in the play, this bullying takes place within, as well as outside of, the school gates. Though Odimba counteracts these painful realities as the plot unravels, infusing the play with moments of Black joy, teachers need to recognise the hypervisibility that Black girls may experience when reading such scenes in the classroom, particularly in majority White schools. It may be difficult for them to 'take up positions of openness about aspects of their lives which they have never been able or even desired to express in school' (Scafe 1989, 9). Unresolved feelings that arise could be expressed and/or addressed by thoughtfully placing self and peer reflections within the scheme of work. Ultimately though, fostering positive relationships with students is the best foundation to work from so they feel able to engage in meaningful dialogue. In one of my GCSE lessons with a small group of students, we were looking at an extract from Akala's *Natives* in which he recounts his first experiences of racism. One of my White students, in a misguided attempt at solidarity, exclaimed that she loved mixed-race babies, and her mother wanted her to date a mixed-race boy. The one Black student in the room rolled her eyes and stayed quiet. That was the response I had at her age when faced with this sort of fetishisation which White girls perceived to be harmless or mere preference. Maybe the decision to keep quiet was to avoid the risk of being deemed unreasonable or combative, thereby keeping the safety of our White counterparts intact (Leonardo and Porter 2010). As the only other Black female in the room, and being racially literate, I decided to 'call in' the student by using the problematic comment as a learning opportunity to educate my White students who were unaware of the nuances behind it which perpetuate the idea that being mixed-race is trendy or desirable and keep in place a racial hierarchy with Whiteness at the top (Morris 2021;

Verduzco-Baker 2018). Admittedly, I was nervous about their reaction; I am very familiar with those comments, but they had not manifested in my classroom before. However, my White students were receptive, acknowledging that they had never thought about it in that way, and I noticed my Black student nodding in agreement with what I had said. This experience of 'calling in' went quite smoothly, but in a different setting – in which my entire class of around thirty was White, and I was the only Black teacher in the school – it didn't. Towards the end of a lesson where we had been exploring an article about the toppling of Colston's statue, a student said with flushed cheeks, 'Why are the Black Lives Matter protests happening in the UK and across the world? I just feel like this whole George Floyd thing got blown out of proportion!' I was instantly winded by that comment and I'm sure it would have shown on my face. I asked the student to explain what she meant by 'blown out of proportion', and she ranted about statues getting pulled down and everything changing. I grappled with words, mentioning the inhumanity and duration of his asphyxiation, the complicity of police officers, social media and the COVID-19 lockdown which meant everybody saw. By this point, the classroom had erupted into mini discussions and the bell had gone, so students were free to go, but this student stayed behind with a group of others to continue talking. I did plan a lesson to address the matter the next day but, throughout this episode, I experienced that Fanonian sense of third-person consciousness, feeling the need to defend my race which would not occur if a White teacher were in this situation. Mohamud (2020, 390), reflecting on a moment where her differing students' responses to a Maya Angelou poem became a point of conflict, realised that a Black student's 'racial identity was paramount to his perception of both the text' and his White peer's interpretation. Though I am not a student, this idea can be applied to both classroom instances I have described. Schools are institutions orientated 'around' Whiteness hence White bodies and spaces '"point" towards each other, as a "point" that is not seen as it is also "the point" from which we see' (Ahmed 2007, 158). White students are used to talking and reading about people who look like them and they don't necessarily identify with, relate to, or feel a sense of connectedness to those people for that reason. Whereas when Black students and teachers – who are used to being unseen in school curricula – talk and read about people who look like them, they tend to 'stand out' in the White gaze whether or not their perspectives and lived experiences are reflected by these people (159). This brings us back to the importance of where and how often Black British literature and histories feature within English curricula so this phenomenon might be reduced rather than exacerbated.

Language is something to be mindful of when doing class readings of *Princess & The Hustler* and *Leave Taking*; both plays feature the use of Jamaican patois throughout. For a long time, White and Brown youths have adopted certain phrases and ways of speaking from the Caribbean diaspora and this has been termed Multicultural London English (Cheshire et al. 2011). Some suggest the widespread use of MLE is a harmless reflection of language evolution, and just the way young people in inner cities speak (Drummond 2016). The other side of the coin is the idea of cultural appropriation, moreso when MLE is used by the White middle-class who do it for the clout while never having to engage with Black histories or deal with the struggles associated with being Black (Mensah and Lijadu 2020). Ilbury (2023) contends that the popularity of sketches on TikTok, in which users of different racial backgrounds adopt features of MLE to parody racialised stereotypes of a roadman persona, contribute to the spread of anti-Black and anti-poor narratives. When I worked

briefly at a rural school, groups of White students would call out 'blud' 'jheeze!', and 'innit fam' when I walked by, followed by snickering. It would appear their narrow version of Blackness – not from having spent time within Black communities – was conceived by this sort of content online and in the media. They likely have no idea about the roots of such words and phrases. Of course, students across school contexts will have different feelings about language and its users, and I have not set out to impose an answer; an awareness of this matter and related perspectives can inform how class readings are approached and the way student interactions are mediated. I was once asked if students should attempt to read patois in the accented way it would be spoken by its native users. To this, I ask: in general, would we expect students studying texts featuring languages and dialects different from their own to imitate native speakers? In classrooms where there are students who speak patois at home, letting them bring that to their class readings (if they want to) is one way to utilise and value their funds of knowledge and identity (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014). Finally, on the topic of the N word in a text, I have little to offer besides: don't say it! A democratic approach where students, chiefly those racialised as Black, and their teachers decide what might replace that word, be it a silence, or something else, is a possibility.

Conclusion

The appearance of texts like *Princess & The Hustler* and *Leave Taking* at KS4 presents many opportunities for students and teachers alike in the English classroom. Though there exists some apprehension around teaching texts that explicitly deal with issues of race and racism, particularly for those who have not read or taught much Black British literature (if any), I hope the considerations I have put forward assists teachers in their preparation for doing so. Engaging with such texts will be useful in occupying silences around race in English, but we must keep in mind the bigger picture. The potential impacts in the classroom can be minimised or magnified by whether schools are making use of the whole curriculum, their policies, student voice and CPD to create a climate in which Black students and staff are not only included, but respected, and empowered.

Notes

1. A phrase that refers to a difficult and/or awkward situation.
2. The title of a Wiley song from his 2004 album 'Treddin' on Thin Ice'.
3. A phrase used to signal/acknowledge the sharing of truths.

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