

Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain

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Joseph H. Jackson's *Writing Black Scotland* (2020) is an exploration of the intersection between Blackness and Scottishness as represented in post-devolutionary Scottish literature and within a context of a Union in crisis. Perhaps best read in tandem with Scott Hames's *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution* (2020) and Ben Jackson's *The Case for Scottish Independence: A History of*

Nationalist Political Thought in Modern Scotland (2020), Jackson's effort to illuminate the nuances of a literary representation of a Scottish nationalism is part of a comprehensive investigation into the complexities of nationalist sentiment and how literature can act as a vehicle for such thought across these three volumes. *Writing Black Scotland* is, however, the only work of the three with an explicit

overall focus on the role of race and racial politics, making it a valuable and unique contribution to the study of Scottish literature and politics as a whole. Jackson's contention that Black Scottish literature is not merely a subclass of Black British literature, 'Just as contemporary Scottish literature has never translated cleanly into a shared 'British' literature' (Jackson 2020, p. 3), is deftly established through a measured analysis of a New Labour racial politics and the post-devolutionary Scottish nation. Jackson then shifts his analysis to three examples of contemporary Scottish novels by writers of colour - *Trumpet* (1998) by Jackie Kay, *Jelly Roll* (1998) by Luke Sutherland, and Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag* (2004).

Jackson's line of thought is established first through discussion of the dynamic between Englishness and Britishness, engaging with critical and theoretical conceptions of the nation and the importance of geography. Jackson achieves this by engaging critically with a field of Black British literature, established in the late 1990s to early 2000s, referring throughout to key figures such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, and to landmark novels of the period such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Arguing that New Labour policy at this time adopted

multiculturalism simply as a prudent political strategy resulting in part from the threat posed by 're-emergent sub-nationalisms, with Scotland to the fore' (Jackson 2020, p. 28), Jackson paints a clear picture of a Union in decline. His focus in this first chapter proper, however, is the idea that racial difference was used as a 'rhetoric deployed as a stock defense of the Union, where the ostensibly tolerant and multicultural character of Britain' is employed to refurbish Britishness (Jackson 2020, p. 38). This initial link between a Scottish nationalism and racial tensions which constitute threats to a Union based in the success of Empire, now crumbling under the weight of its decline, is utilised effectively throughout Jackson's analysis. His treatment of New Labour makes a point reminiscent of contemporary London hip-hop/punk duo Bob Vylan, who in their recent single *We Live Here* remind their listeners of the hypocrisy of a multicultural politics which does not constitute an anti-racism. Frontman Bobby Vylan shouts in a classic punk style quintessential to the Sex Pistols, 'Remember Stephen Lawrence/He too was free to roam/Eighteen years old at the bus stop/Murdered on his way home' (Bob Vylan 2021). Jackson directly references the 1992 murder of Stephen Lawrence and the Macpherson Inquiry

‘which found that the Metropolitan Police were institutionally racist’ (Jackson 2020, p. 79), a reality which a policy of multiculturalism does little to address. The murder of Stephen Lawrence provides an important example of a violent and structural racism which Bob Vylan takes to task. Jackson's argument utilises this same example to highlight the existence of this bigotry within a pro-devolutionary, pro-multicultural policy which he characterises as lip service to marginalised communities.

When turning to focus on Scotland, Jackson contends that approaching Blackness ‘from a nationally Scottish perspective (...) disrupts the smooth operation of this “black British” disciplinary’ (2020, p. 51). Contending that so-called novels of the nation, such as Grey’s *Lanark* (1981) and Welsh’s *Filth* (1998), deal inherently with Scottish racial politics, Jackson effectively links Black writing with a Scottish body of literature. He achieves this through reference to conventions such as challenging Thatcherism, state power, and institutional authority, the cultural supremacy of Standard English, and ‘the imperial yearning at the centre of British nationhood’ (Jackson 2020, p. 57). These opening chapters deftly illustrate the complexities of the political context and of

the capacity of both Black and Scottish literature to provide cultural resistance in an increasingly politically nationalist climate. This is not to say, however, that Jackson ignores the complexities of racial discourse within Scotland itself. His consideration of racial politics and discourse in Scotland lead Jackson to conclude that:

a critical approach to blackness and Scotland is part of a process of constant re-evaluation that maintains the primacy of the civic over the ethnic in the contemporary nation, with an emphasis on the new political conditions of devolved government (Jackson 2020, p. 2).

This understanding speaks to the common contention that Scotland, unlike England, is not a racist country. Jackson lends this discourse nuance, referring to ideas of a historical culture attached to Scotland amidst a rise in nationalist sentiment which hint that Scottish nationalism is not, in fact, wholly civic. Indeed, the very idea of a continual re-imagining of the civic suggests that there is still much work to be done on establishing and maintaining a truly civic understanding of national belonging and political representation. Jackson references oft-cited Glaswegian street names, such as Jamaica Street and Tobago Street, which maintain

reference to ‘the imperial sugar trade and plantation slavery [which] underpins so much of Scotland’s contemporary wealth’ (Jackson 2020, p. 63), undermining a narrative of Scottish state anti-racism. This provides a valuable critical and political framework for interpreting the authors whom Jackson moves to discuss in detail in later chapters.

Jackson’s analysis of *Trumpet* begins with an image of the novel’s largely absent protagonist, Joss Moody, play-acting as ‘Black Jacobians’ on the beach with his son Colman (Kay 1998, p. 99) in a reference to a Black radical tradition elaborated in C.L.R. James’ *The Black Jacobins* (1938) (Jackson 2020, p. 87). This meaningful change of James’ title locates the ‘fundamental embodiment of the principles of the French Revolution’ within a framework of a Scoto-British history encapsulating ‘James Charles Stuart, the Union of the Crowns, and the seventeenth-century infancy of what would become the United Kingdom’ (Jackson 2020, p. 87-88). Jackson effectively links this with jazz, which he argues is the radical ‘core of a black politics in the novel’ (Jackson 2020, p. 87). Jazz as a form of expression has been addressed by several critics (Baraka 1967, Carles and Comolli, 1971, Gabbard 1992), and

provides Joss with a method of expression which enables him to reconsider and defy categorisation and engage with an ‘intertextual conception of identity’ (Rodríguez Gonzalez 2007, p.88).

Jackson concludes his chapter on Kay with the contention that the most significant manifestation of this radical mode of expression, can be found in

the sense of grasping structural conditions at the root, in the novel’s identification of national differentiation within the Union itself, the disruptive potential of independence implied by that differentiation, and in the tartan-clad black Jacobians striding out of the past (Jackson 2020, p. 110).

Jackson addresses the texture of Kay’s geographical and national sensitivities throughout *Trumpet*, acknowledging both Joss’s ties to Scotland and Colman’s ambivalence towards any form of national belonging in an example of ‘racial and national disaffection and disorientation’ (2020, p. 88). Ultimately contending that the radical modes of expression represented in *Trumpet* do not chime with a New Labour pro-devolutionary stance, Jackson’s treatment of Kay’s only novel to date reinforces his overall project of illuminating the

connections between race, the nation, and the Union.

Jackson's consideration of Luke Sutherland's *Jelly Roll* elaborates on his more limited concern with jazz in *Trumpet*, making an explicit link between racial commodification and jazz music. In the line of Achille Mbembe, Jackson argues that Liam, the only Black member of a Glasgow-based jazz band that embarks on a tour of the Highlands, 'is replaced by the race-representative "black man"' (2020, p. 125) in an imposed and inherently ethno-cultural interpretation of Liam's identity. Through treating jazz within a white Scottish context, Jackson is able to call attention to an ethnic element in a Scottish nationalism which, as Sutherland represents in his work, consists of 'questions posed for Scotland in the devolutionary moment' (Jackson 2020, p. 140). At its core a novel which challenges any assertion that there is 'No Problem Here' (Davidson et al. 2018), *Jelly Roll* focuses in on the insidious potential for racial abuse in Scotland. Returning his attention to ideas of civic and ethnic nationalisms, Jackson here contends that 'In the mind of the Anglicised, landed Scot, the nation is defined in ethnic rather than civic terms' (2020, p. 133). He achieves this through reference to a nationalism

based in a Celtic historical identity. His reading of Sutherland's work directly references 'the symbolic expulsion of the racist "problem" from an otherwise healthy Scotland' (Jackson 2020, p. 137) and problematises political discourses which purport to be wholly civic.

Beginning with a discussion of the term 'political blackness', Jackson delves into *Psychoraag* with the contention that

blackness remains part of the twenty-first-century 'state of Asianness' in Scotland, as a critical cultural resource, as an imposed taxonomy... (Jackson 2020, p. 144-5).

Here Jackson points to the politicisation of Blackness as a racial category, a notion reinforced throughout *Psychoraag* through Saadi's references to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). Monochromatic images pervade the text as 'the political and social classifications of black and white (...) are displaced back to the visual' (Jackson 2020, p. 153). This binaristic tension is ultimately articulated through 'the figure of the "Scottish-Asian" hyphenated men caught between the Gothic dichotomy of whiteness and blackness' (Jackson 2020, p. 158). Jackson also returns to the idea of multiculturalism in his consideration of Saadi, contending that '*Psychoraag* is indisputably a cultural

product coded as multicultural, while containing various strategies of resistance’ (2020, p. 145), such as a specifically Scottish framework of response to an ‘era of multicultural governmentality’ (Jackson 2020, p. 146) under New Labour and Scottish Labour. Here Jackson returns to the thread of radical thought which he has previously explored through jazz; the idea that

Without a more radical attempt to grasp racism in Scotland, the political vacuum is filled actively by a form of recognisably British multicultural governmentality, against which *Psychoraag* reacts (Jackson 2020, p. 149).

This is achieved, in part, through a reference to *Psychoraag*’s own musical element, a thread pulled skilfully through all three of Jackson’s close readings. *Psychoraag* details Zaf, Saadi’s protagonist, running the final edition of his radio show over the course of one single evening, and the inclusion of a track list which ‘taps into a rich history of black musical forms as a kind of avant-garde “radical collage”’ (Jackson 2020, p. 160). This provides a musical element common to all three of the works considered in *Writing Black Scotland*, and highlights the potential not only for musical expression,

but for hybrid forms of expression. This hybridity is, itself, mirrored in the subjects of Kay, Sutherland, and Saadi’s portraits of Black Scotland as they navigate a culture which purports to accept all based on civic understandings of belonging, but which also becomes uncomfortable with radical, political, non-binary forms of expression.

Jackson’s work constitutes a much-needed addition to Scottish literary studies as an in-depth and considered analysis of post-devolutionary Black Scottish literature. His argument, strongly set up through political and national contexts towards the beginning of the volume, is deftly applied to *Trumpet*, *Jelly Roll*, and *Psychoraag*. This volume is helpful for students of Black British literature in establishing a distinctly Scottish field of study, and for students of Scottish literature in establishing a Black post-devolutionary literary context, thus simultaneously contributing uniquely to two fields of study and making clear the intersection between these.

Jackson’s work is timely, appearing at an extended moment of popular resistance to acts of outright violent racism in Scotland — such as the 2015 murder of Sheku Bayoh in police custody and the attempted deportation of two Sikh men which led to the 2021 Kenmure Street

protests — as well as in England. That there have, so far, been no other reviews of this work that this author can find, speaks to a hopeful surge in independent and original research which, in itself, constitutes responses and extensions to Jackson's work. *Writing Black Scotland* constitutes an all-important corrective to the dangerous notion that Scotland, unlike England, is free of racism, while highlighting the radical potential of Black Scottish literature to rail against a governmental body which, unelected by a Scottish populace, continues to sanction acts of racist violence. The delicacy with which Jackson unravels this dynamic is masterful.

Jackson's upcoming work can be read in the Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to Scottish Literature*, edited by Gerard Carruthers and due to be released in 2023.

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