

**SHEREE MACK**

**Sheree graduated with an MA in Creative Writing from Northumbria University in 2003 and is now starting her PhD at Newcastle University researching Black British Women poets and her own poetry.**

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**BLACK BRITISH WOMEN WRITERS IN BRITAIN MAINTAIN  
TWO FACES IN MORE THAN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER**

**Sheree Mack**

**Newcastle University**

**Introduction**

My name is Sheree Mack. I am a writer and part of the English Department here at Newcastle University. This is my first year of a part-time PhD in Creative writing. Therefore, it is a hybrid work requiring both literary skill and critical judgement. This is the infancy period, not only in my own studies but also in the procedure of creative writing PhDs so I'm not sure how the final thesis will break down, percentage wise or what the final product will look like. Therefore I maintain that I am feeling my way within this study in more ways than one. Creative PhDs are charting new ground, such courses only being recognised for funding since 2001, but I am also treading new ground because I am a black British woman, writer, academic, critic, and theorist. The working title of my thesis is: 'A Black British woman's journey towards herself' and it has a subtitle: 'A kaleidoscopic story, with overlapping codes and images due to a distance from a unified linear history.'

Black British women intellectuals have been silenced creatively and critically for decades. As Heidi Safia Mirza wrote, 'to be Black and British is to be unnamed in official

discourse'<sup>1</sup>. As a body of work and theory, Black British women's writing is still developing. Therefore, I found that I initially "censored" myself.

As Alice Walker points out about a Black woman writer, 'she must be her own model as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Positioning**

I am part of the group titled Black British women writers/intellectuals.

It is important to state my positioning from the beginning, as everyone perceives literature from a particular point of view but some fail to acknowledge this in their writing.

My position is that I am writing from within. Identifying my position as a participant runs the risk of being discredited and hence unscholarly. Suppression of black women intellectuals means this process of feeling one's way is an unavoidable epistemological stance for black women intellectuals.<sup>3</sup> Andrea Levy, the first author to win both the Orange Prize and the Whitbread award within the same year, herself has stated that "black" and "woman", 'gives me a pathway into the great stream of human history. I have within my grasp Hamlet's "undiscover'd country", which is not death, but another way of writing about life.'<sup>4</sup>

### **Focus**

Let me stress now that this is work in progress. These are thoughts provoked by initial readings, findings and it is a case of using you as a sounding board and hoping for feedback. This is an exploration. I have thoughts floating around about why do I write? Why do other Black women write? How do we use our writing to make sense of ourselves- these multiple, shifting, and often contradictory identities made up of different and similar representations of gender, race, class, sexuality? But I think today in order to construct a place from which to speak there needs to be an 'arbitrary closure'. According to Stuart Hall, this is a point at which the infinite flux of differences is brought to a halt temporarily as a condition of speech. 'I need to say something, something ... just now.'<sup>5</sup>

Today I'd like to briefly explore this concept of identity/cultural identity in relation to Black women's writing. Using this exploration, I'd like to closely read the poetry of one

Black British woman writer, Dorothea Smartt. I hope to illustrate how she negotiates her identity, her sense of self, by writing against the racial and gender stereotypes, reclaiming a cultural identity that is both British and connected to family roots in the Caribbean and Africa.<sup>6</sup>

## **Identity**

Barbara Shaw Perry argued, at a past Society of Caribbean Studies conference that, ‘If literature is, among other things, the exploration of human identity in all its fullness – its historical, social, psychological, spiritual facets – reading migrant African-Caribbean British literary texts through the lens of history and material relations can render only a partial view of the dynamics of identity... what has to be taken into account also is the emotional and material complexity of living in the cultural borderlands in order to produce interpretations and theories that more accurately reflect migrant experience.’<sup>7</sup>

Identity refers generally to the discourse of self. According to Kath Woodward, in *Identity and Difference*, identity gives an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live.<sup>8</sup> To engage within the construction of identity necessarily means encountering essentialism. The idea that there is something essential – defining, necessary, representative, and totalitarian – about one’s identity, especially in relation to Blackness as a marker of racial identity, is an easy justification for nationalism and separatism.<sup>9</sup> The idea that it’s a simple process, a recognition, a coming home to rest in some place which was always there waiting for one. The ‘real me’ at last, as Stuart Hall would say. Hall goes on to explain, the idea of ‘coming home’ to an identity that has always been, is a myth.<sup>10</sup> Hall said, ‘I was aware of the fact that identity is an invention from the very beginning long before I understood any of this theoretically.’<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall goes on to propose the idea that identity is in constant flux, ‘identity is a production; which is never complete; always in process and always constructed within, not outside, production.’<sup>12</sup> ‘Black’ identity is no less of a construction than any other. What has to be recognised is the diversity of subject positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category ‘black’.<sup>13</sup> I know that ‘identity’ is complex, and in five minutes the issues cannot be discussed fully. I would have liked to have talked about Gilroy, Fanon, de Gay to name but a few. Move on.

## Introduction to Poetry

Before I look at examples of poetry more closely, let's give you some facts!

**Fact:** 'There is not a brick in that city which has not been cemented by the blood of slaves' taken from *Heart of the Race*, by Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, talking about Bristol but this description could well fit other cities in Britain such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester etc. This illustrates how the wealth of Britain was consolidated through the slave trade, imperialism and colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

**Fact:** In our culture white and black images are often used as opposites, symbolising "good" and "evil".

**Fact:** In Enid Blyton's fiction Noddy was being mugged by a gang of demonic black golliwogs whilst immigrants were arriving in Britain from the Caribbean, Asia and Africa.

**Fact:** Having been encouraged by the British government to come and work in this country, the Windrush generation were met with hostility and perceived as a threat<sup>15</sup>.

**Fact:** Concepts about race have merged with gender ideology to create an experience sometimes described as "double oppression", after W. E. B. Dubois and Paul Gilroy.

**Fact:** Black women writers are reclaiming the past as part of the process of negotiating a new, powerful identity.

Of course, I'm calling these statements facts but they could be contested depending on your positioning, as in all versions of the 'truth'.

Considering this new powerful identity in relation to Black British women writers, I'd like to concentrate on the following aspects of identity:

- i) naming/labelling,
- ii) physical identity,
- iii) language.

## i) NAMING/LABELLING

‘A mother-of-sufferer  
trampled, oppressed  
they want a little black blood  
undressed  
and validation  
for the abused stereotype  
already in their heads’<sup>16</sup>

Taken from Grace Nichol's poem, ‘Of course when they ask for poems about the ‘realities ‘of Black women’, the ‘they’ implied in the title, hold pre-conceived ideas about black women. If not victims, then other limiting stereotypes such as mummies, matriarchs and whores are used to define black women. A poem written in the 1980s, this still holds relevance to the present situation for Black women. I would argue that Dorothea Smartt constructs a response which attempts to break out of the expectations imposed on black and female and works against the odds to claim the ‘I’.

Smartt was born in London and grew up in Battersea. Her parents came to London from Barbados in the 1950s. Many of the poems in her first collection, *Connecting Medium*, explore both the Barbadian heritage and the experience of growing up in London, with both confidence – ‘Your coming made me... // a different kinda Essex girl, / the kinda Blackwoman / the world ain’t seen yet’ – and confusion at Clapham Junction: ‘Stood... / looking at the largest / railway junction in the world / with a train passing / every three minutes / Wondering where to go’.

Regarding Smartt’s *Medusa* poems, which started out as a solo performance piece combining poetry and visuals, Smartt said, ‘Medusa was a name that was given to me by the kids next door when I started to lock-up my hair in the 1980s. That together with the general reactions of people, both Black and white, to the changing nature of my hair started me thinking about the possibilities.’<sup>17</sup> Instead of allowing this label ‘Medusa’ to constrict her, Smartt re-appropriated it as an empowering force, researching Medusa’s ancient roots and rewriting her as a strong, beautiful, Black woman.

‘Medusa  
dread anger  
welling up in her stare  
natural roots Blackwoman

loving Blackwoman  
serious.’<sup>18</sup>

Dread signifying locks but also with the added meanings of fear and awe, signals the reactions received by both Smartt and Medusa because of their appearance. Smartt came to the conclusion herself, after delving into Medusa’s mythological past, that: ‘I thought to myself: Medusa was probably some Black woman with nappy hair, and some white man saw her and cried: a monster! And feared her, and so told stories about her dangerous potential.’ By making this identification, Smartt humanises Medusa, transcribing her from some supernatural creature into a real that we can all recognise. Smartt’s central aim was to create a Medusa, that was human, that is woman, that is real.<sup>19</sup>

## ii) PHYSICAL IDENTITY

‘Now, if you’re white you’re all right,  
If you’re brown, stick around,  
But if you’re black, Git back! Git back! Git back!’<sup>20</sup>

This Black children’s nursery rhyme demonstrates another stereotype concerning the standard idea of beauty. Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye* is a prime example of how black women from an early age internalise the idea that beauty is blond, blue-eyed and skinny.<sup>21</sup> It was deliberate colonial policy to have a class based racist hierarchy which dominates Caribbean society to this day. ‘The lighter the better’, meant that the mulatto, or the Creole population enjoyed better employment, housing, and positioning within society in comparison to brown and black people. Ziggy Alexander and Audrey Dewjee, editors of *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, wrote, ‘ One essential element of this struggle to retain European control was to create and maintain divisions between those black people who were free and those who were enslaved, and between those with European blood and those without.’<sup>22</sup>(see also James, 1993). The idea that the lighter the skin colour the closer to white therefore, superior, was not only perpetuated by the colonial authorities but was also believed and upheld by the black people themselves. Frantz Fanon’s work was the first attempt to record the psychological damage suffered by colonial people, as he writes about his own alienation in the chapter ‘Man of colour and the White Woman’, ‘Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my

mind, surges the desire to be suddenly white. I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white.’ Colonialists perpetuated the belief that ‘white’ was the ‘norm’ and ‘black’ was the ‘other’. This was internalised. This was/is ‘colonising of the mind’.<sup>23</sup> For a black woman it has also been argued that her subjectivity is ‘a subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and also a subject racialised in the experiencing of gender.’<sup>24</sup> According to Lola Young in *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, she notes that there is a marked reluctance to discuss these issues, particularly in the public forum. ‘In addition, there are those who declare that colourism in contemporary black British communities has diminished significantly (see for example, Weekes 1997; James 1993)’<sup>25</sup>

However, this self-hate runs deep, as illustrated in ‘Kinky Hair Blues’, by Una Marston:

‘Gwine find a beauty shop  
cause I ain't a lovely belle.  
The boys pass me by,  
They say I's not so swell ...  
I hate that ironed hair  
And dat bleaching skin ...  
But I'll be all alone  
If I don't fall in.’<sup>26</sup>

Writing in the 1960s, Marston was a pioneer in her time because of the issues she wrote about and the way she wrote it. She had an awareness of herself, living between societies and how she was represented within British society.

Second generation immigrant, Dorothea Smartt challenges this physical presentation of black women as the furthest away from the ideal of beauty, in a number of poems in her collection, *Connecting Medium*. First in the poem titled, ‘five strands of hair’, Smartt writes:

‘I began clenched teeth  
tight steel combs and  
mother’s fingers –  
slippery Dax heroines  
pulled out the need.’<sup>27</sup>

Here, Smartt describes the pain that she went through in order to have ‘good hair’, i.e. straight hair; the closer the look and the texture to white hair, the better. This conviction was passed on through generations as it was her mother, within this poem, pulling out the

kinks along with other women. This was pain, the effects hard and harsh from the actions of tight steel comb. Pulling out the hair with the straightening cream. Pulling out the need. Pulling out the kinks in the hair, pulling out the need to be more white than black.

Smartt presents profound socio-cultural observations like bullet points on a flipchart about the emotionally charged subject of hair in the black community.

‘Fact: Your hair is an integral part of your skin

Fact: Natural African hair must be processed to make it manageable

Fact: Straightening hair made the first U.S. Black millionairess.’<sup>28</sup>

Some of the facts are not strictly factual but as Kevin Le Gendre reviewed, ‘she convincingly conveys the complexities of what’s in the head through the vagaries of what’s on it’.<sup>29</sup>

This is further reinforced with the poem ‘Medusa? Medusa Black!’ where Smartt uses the Medusa, this mythic figure again to reference the position occupied by contemporary Black women, their responses to one another and their own selfimage.

‘Scrub it, step smiling into baths of acid  
and bleach it red raw  
peel skin of life-sustaining melanin  
fuck it, wild-haired woman,  
straighten it fry it, desperately burn scalps.’<sup>30</sup>

Following Laura Griggs argument in the collection of papers published under the title, *Write Black, Write British*,<sup>2</sup> edited by Kadija Sesay, Griggs explains that, ‘similarly, the poet’s refrain, ‘Make it go away, the nappiheaded nastiness/too tuff too unruly too ugly too black’, conveys with disturbing accuracy and honesty the self-loathing of women who have been coerced into becoming their own enemies, hating their own bodies and, therefore, themselves.’<sup>31</sup> This aspect of Smartt’s work mirrors the writing of French feminist theory Hélène Cixous who’s essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, laments these same women for whom the enemy is within.<sup>32</sup> More discussion is needed here but unfortunately we must move on.

### iii) LANGUAGE



This is a difficult section of for analysis as language is such an important part of identity and one aspect that is constantly changing and developing as an individual gains a deeper understanding of self and the world around her.

Marlene Nourbese Phillips write in *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks*:

‘Edict 1

Every owner of slaves shall wherever possible ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethno-linguistic groups as possible. If they cannot speak to each other they cannot then forment rebellion and revolution’<sup>33</sup>

I won’t insult you by going into the background and development of Caribbean and nation languages. I’ll make the assumption that we all know the circumstances that created a spectrum of languages within Caribbean society such as the mixing of conquering Europeans, African slaves and indigenous American Indian languages. What developed were Englishes, from the standard to Caribbean English, which looked similar but are different in terms of actual rhythms and the syllables. I’m making it simplistic here, but what also has to be added to the mix is how the languages have transformed again within the British context. Furthermore, Cixous put forward that masculine culture and language suffocates female creativity. The way forward, Cixous explains, is for women to write themselves into history using their own female language, *écriture féminine*.

Following on from this also is as

Barbara Christian observes of Audre Lorde, ‘as a black, lesbian, feminist, poet, mother, Lorde has, in her life, had to search long and hard for *her* people. In responding to each of these audiences, in which a part of her identity lies, she refuses to give up her differences. In fact she uses them, as woman to man, black to white, lesbian to heterosexual, as a means of conducting creative dialogue.’<sup>34</sup>

**An aside here would be an acknowledging of my own refusal to give up my differences when considering writing this paper for this conference. I chose to write this paper in a more creative, less academic voice, closer to the understanding of ‘self’ rather than trying to ‘be’ or mirror the voice of something or someone, that’s just not me.**

Carrying on ...

Smartt illustrates her creative uses of language as she mixes words and vivid images within her poetry. Examples include ‘journeyman, journeywoman, masterpattern’, mancountry’ from the poem ‘generation dreaming’.<sup>35</sup> These are all two separate nouns are joined to create one. The isolation of certain words, the repetition and combination of others, all serve to rework language and define meaning.

‘let her monsters write  
from all sides- ceiling walls floor.  
Make a deep welcome  
for this singsong body.’<sup>36</sup>

Here Smartt urges us to let our monsters, our primal female selves out. The selves which have been ignored, suppressed, displaced, let them out, be it screaming or singing, out through our bodies, through our voices. Smartt uses different voices, her “London voice” and her “Bajan voice” of her childhood saying, ‘We are the connecting medium between England and the Caribbean, between black British experience. I feel a responsibility to be a good conduit, to let what needs to come through from the past in a way that will help us deal with some of the madness out there’, illustrating how she must negotiate a rich and difficult passage through and between identities, histories and forms of expression.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to conclude this paper as there are many strands running through it and many strands that are not. The ideas discussed were many but there were also many gaps.

I can only go back to the aims cited at the beginning: why do I write? Why do other Black women write? How do we use our writing to make sense of ourselves- these multiple, shifting, and often contradictory identities made up of different and similar representations of gender, race, class, sexuality?

“I recognise the place, I feel at home here, but I don’t belong, I am of, and not of, this place.”<sup>38</sup> Taken from Caryl Phillips’ collection of essays, *A New World Order*, this observation illustrates the position of second and third generation children of immigrants



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- <sup>15</sup> ‘‘Crushing out with each dancing step.. .’ – Contemporary Black Women Poets- Negotiating Identity’ accessed 01/12/03  
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- <sup>16</sup> Grace Nichols, Dangerous Knowing- For black Women Poets, London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, p48
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- <sup>18</sup> Dorothea Smartt, Connecting Medium, Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2001, p.59
- <sup>19</sup> Laura Griggs, ‘Medusa? Medusa Black! Revisionist Mythology in the Poetry of Dorothea Smartt’, Kadija Sesay (ed.). Write Black, Write British, London: Hansib Publications, 2005, p.182
- <sup>20</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. New York: Routledge. p.79.
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- <sup>22</sup> Ziggy Alexander and Audrey Dewjee (eds) Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands, Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1984, p.11
- <sup>23</sup> Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, New York: Grove Press, 1952, p. 63
- <sup>24</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, ‘Speaking in tongues: dialogic and dialectics and the black women writer’s literary tradition’, in Williams, Patrick (ed.), Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader; London: Longman, 1993, p259-260
- <sup>25</sup> Lola Young, ‘How Do We Look? Unfixing the Singular Black (Female) Subject, in Gilroy, Paul, Lawrence Grossberg and Angela M. Robbie. Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall. London: Verso, 2000, p. 420.
- <sup>26</sup> Una Marston, ‘Kinky Hair Blues’, assessed 14/06/05  
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- <sup>28</sup> Dorothea Smartt, Connecting Medium, London: Peepal tree Press, p.22-23
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