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Review: *Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain* by Joseph H. Jackson, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020 207 pp, ISBN 97814744 61443, h/bk £90, p/bk £20.99, e-book£0.00 (open access)

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This is a review of Joseph H. Jackson's *Writing Black Scotland*.

Joseph H. Jackson's *Writing Black Scotland* (2020) looks at the ways in which questions involving race have evolved in Britain in the late twentieth century and twenty-first century, particularly in Scottish concerns of race and ethnic particularity as reflected in Scottish literature. Jackson advances Paul Gilroy's observation that 'Black' is a category that shifts from a 'biologically definite group' to a 'social fact' (9), and makes the claim that 'Blackness' is both 'biological fallacy' and 'immutable social fact' in Britain (10). Jackson further examines Kobena Mercer's statement that 'blackness of black Britain' is a 'symbolic unity' and brings together people from 'Asian, Caribbean and African' ethnic backgrounds (10). It is Mercer's insight that allows for a closer examination of Scotland's imperial history which determines the relation of 'non-white' populations of Scotland to the political region. The data provided by the Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity in 2011 shows that more people of Black and Asian minority claimed a 'Scottish-only national identity' than a 'British-only national identity' (15). Through a reading of literary works from the 1980s to the late 2010s, the book critically foregrounds this feeling of difference as it evolves and changes within the Black minority in Scotland.

Chapter One considers the British identity of Black Britain and argues that while Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy formulate a British nationhood on the basis of anti-racist policies, a post-British logic is already at work in determining the regional affinities of British literature. Exploring the tenets of the 1948 Nationality Act that designate Britishness as moving beyond an 'ethnically exclusive' formation to the Scottish devolution referendum of 1979 (30), and further on to the Parekh Report of 2000 which reaffirmed the multicultural nature of British society, the chapter underlines the ways in which the inclusivity of a Britishness extending beyond race has been developed in Black British writing. The chapter offers an astute study of how Scotland's move towards nationalistic concerns frames the reinvention of Britain as a multicultural state and influences the cultural expression of a multi-ethnic Black identity. Jackson engages with Gilroy's *Small Acts* (1993) to demonstrate how 'black culture' is often seen as a 'vernacular English culture' in order to compensate for the loss of an imperial past (47). For Jackson, Gilroy's return to the notion of a unitary and reconstituted Britain undervalues the political potential of Black culture within Britain. Scottish contestation of an England-centric Britishness problematises the manipulation of racial representations in order to make them fit into a narrative of British unity. Jackson concludes the chapter by revisiting John McLeod's argument that Black writing should be seen as a 'critique' of Britain rather than a 'rewriting' of Britain (50) and argues that it gives potency to the writings of Black Scotland, which interrupt the homogeneity of the category of Black British writing.

Chapter Two begins by examining the curious Scottish imagination as portrayed in the Guyanese author Wilson Harris's novel *Black Marsden* (1972). Harris builds a 'shared subjectivity' in the novel by incorporating epigraphs from the works of white Scottish writers (55), and the trope of separate Scottish nations, as experienced by the different races, is reproduced in the contrast between the characters of Clive Goodrich and Black Marsden. The postcolonial state of Namless is a transposition of Guyana on modern-day Scotland, and the inhabitants are required to continually evaluate inter-racial associations in order to live within such a territory. The plural identities of Black Marsden contest the rigid 'instrumentalization' of Black identity to serve certain political functions (56). The different characterisations of Edinburgh, and in turn, Scotland, present in Harris's novel offer the ground for contrasting the works of Black Scottish writers and that of white Scottish writers who chose to write from the viewpoint of Black characters. Alasdair Gray belongs to the latter category and Jackson engages with Gray's *Lanark* (1981) as thematising concerns of racism in post-imperial Scotland. The protagonist of the story in Book One, Duncan Thaw, paints a mural depicting Adam as Black in contrast to the white Eve, resulting in a host of controversies that question the sanctity of 'white Christianity' (59). Jackson argues that the national aspirations put forth in *Lanark* are not comparable to the anti-colonial nationalism theorised by Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Instead, Gray uses the character Lanark's encounter with the character Multan of Zimbabwe to reflect a lack of faith in Scottish politics and culture. Jackson reads Gray's later works like *Janine* (1982) as building a fantastical account of sexual slavery which is, in fact, a reimagining of Scotland's actual history of slavery and *Poor Things* (1992) as a brutal picture of class hierarchy in Scotland which problematises white-dominated accounts of Scotland's imperial history. Jackson writes that the white writer, in certain cases, assumes a 'colonial culpability' (63), if only to accentuate the very pathologies that provided the foundations of imperialism.

Jackson inquires into Maud Sulter's poetry collection *As a Black Woman* (1985), locating a critical account of the Black experience in Scotland which includes 'pan-Africanism', 'black feminism' and 'gentrification of black Brixton' (64), among others. The collection weighs the politics of Blackness in Britain and emphasises how it is transformed within the Scottish context into a marker of 'loneliness' (65). Concerns of transracial adoption in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (1991) further bring out the entrenched 'civic-ethnic' division in Scotland (69). In addition, James Kelman's essay collections and his fictional works such as *A Disaffection* (1989)and *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) bring together influences of African writers such as Alex La Guma, Okot p'Bitek and Ayi Kwei Armah to oppose 'cultural assimilation' into the dominant

culture of Scotland (70). Jackson concludes the chapter with a survey of Irvine Welsh's works and illustrates how Welsh's *Filth* (1998) reveals that racism in Scotland is in no way reduced through the historical event of devolutionary politics.

The third chapter begins by considering Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998) and its intergenerational analysis of the lives of Black men in Scotland which discloses a very specific Black experience that resists the novel's inclusion within Britain's national politics. Alan Rice's work is investigated as holding up the obverse position where Black Scottish writing of African roots is seen as ideologically against the racially governed Unionism of Scotland. Joss Moody, one of the characters in *Trumpet*, is presented as the 'transnational black Scot', while his son Colman is left to map out the relation between 'Scottish and "black British" constituencies' (100). The chapter highlights the politics of citizenship in Scotland and how Scottish citizenship is 'residency-based' (102), determined by a participation in civic life. The insufficiency of natal Scottishness in offering the right of citizenship becomes a fundamental ground for separating Scotland from the British state. The life of Colman Moody becomes a point of contention as his migration to London leads to a certain hyper-determination of his subjectivity as Black through the 'persecution of state and media agencies' (103). The mixed-race heritage of Colman is inspected to contextualise arguments of David Parker, Miri Song, and Kehinde Andrews which criticise the continued prevalence of biological characteristics as determiners of racial identity. For Jackson, the novel's 'Music' section ties together the novel's central engagement with jazz music with the unspeakable atrocities associated with Black history, making music into the instrument that articulates the linguistically inexpressible nature of Black trauma and suffering. Jackson reads the novel's exploration of music alongside Fred Moten's *In the Break* (2003) where jazz is presented as the centring force of 'black radicalism' (107).

The fourth chapter continues the inquiry into jazz music and Black radical expressivity with a reading of Luke Sutherland's novel *Jelly Roll* (1998). The entry of a Black Irish saxophonist Liam Bell into a Scottish jazz band provides the occasion for interrogating the push and pull of racist and anti-racist discourses within Scotland, and jazz becomes the focal point around which concerns of sexuality and national identification cohere. The relations between the enfranchised band members represent a democracy while Liam's Irishness, which is problematised further by his racial alterity, points towards the politics of migrant relations in Britain. For Jackson, the resituating of what is typically Black American music within the perplexingly 'whitewashed' Scottish context problematises the racialised power hierarchy (126). Jackson also explores the bandmate Roddy's sexual fascination with Liam's race as an 'ontological reduction' of the Black male body into an erotic object (123). Jackson's

focus on the reception of Black music in Scotland and the contradictions implicit in the racialised interactions with Black musicians allows the chapter to highlight the continuing anxiety surrounding Black cultural productions within Scotland. The chapter concludes with a critical exploration of how the word 'nigger' harms the Black subject (138), subjecting the body to forms of ideological and institutional control. Jackson analyses the knifing of Liam's body as an instance of the injury of hate speech indelibly appearing in the body, palpably felt and hence, kept separate from the remote abstractions of metaphor.

The fifth chapter looks into multiculturalism in Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag* (2004) which refutes the claims of a post-racial British nation. *Psychoraag* critiques Britain's rising multiculturalism as a reinvention of the reification of racial difference albeit within an 'aestheticizing' discourse (145). The novel, while aligning itself with works of writers like Hanif Kureishi and Salman Rushdie, who are contrastingly coded as 'black British' and 'British Asian' (145), raises questions about the markers of Asian ethnicity within a distinctively Scottish national background. Jackson analyses the novel's use of 'transgressive embodiment, heroin metaphors and taboo language' as a form of 'cultivated exhibitionism' which subverts its own nature as a multicultural artifact (150). The character Zaf, in his attempts to obliterate his colour and become white, returns his Black body to the category of a biocentric object. The racial hierarchy in the novel is studied against that depicted in movies such as Paul Laverty and Ken Loach's film *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004), but unlike the movie where the racial tensions are resolved, race relations remain in conflict in the novel as a reminder of the failed project of Scotland's multiculturalism. Zaf's Blackness—which is both black and brown—develops the argument for a political Blackness, the practical usefulness of which for the Asian community is contested by writers like Tariq Modood in 'Political Blackness and British Asians' (1994). For Jackson, the madness implicit in the desire for whiteness runs through the novel as an inversion of the madness that psychopathologises migration policies, such as that present in Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech of 1968. In fact, the psychoanalytic concept of the 'compartmentalization' of experiential states into 'formally reduced types' (159), as popularised by David Cooper, provides the conceptual paradigm for the multicultural state unable to realise its own irrationalities. The representation of madness in the novel serves to lay bare the failings of the British multicultural state. The chapter concludes with highlighting Zaf's navigation of the city of Glasgow as a development on the literary practice of psychogeography as practised by writers like Iain Sinclair in *London Orbital* (2002) and *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997). Zaf's movements across Glasgow are read as a form of 'political act' that maps out his own 'ethnic "cartogram"' of Glasgow (167).

The prospect of a post-British nationhood, following the referendums of 2014 and 2016, is explored in the concluding chapter. Hannah Lavery's spoken word poetry *The Drift* (2019), later published in the pamphlet *Finding Sea Glass*, begins to articulate an ambiguous experience of race in Scotland of the late 2010s. However, within the gradual loosening up of racial divide, Lavery's book shows that Scots of colour still do not have critical purchase over Scotland's history of imperialism and slave-ownership. The chapter locates this ambivalence in the very literary economy of Scotland where the popularity of the Black writer is transient, dependent on the evolving reifications attributed to racial difference. Maud Sulter and Jackie Kay address this very pattern of discrimination towards BAME writers in Scotland, and in Britain as a whole. Exploring co-ordinates of future research in the white writer's theorising of racial politics, Jackson argues that James Kelman's novels, such as *Dirt Road* (2016), 'denaturalize and rematerialize whiteness' by transposing the Scottish protagonist into zones of violent racial conflict in the United States (175). Jackson states that there is a certain displacement of concerns involving race when delving into the discriminations brought about by religious difference, particularly Islamophobia. The chapter emphasises the significance of Black artists for anti-racist policies within contemporary Britain and points out the overlaps between places that were always available for Black performers and places that had to be politically carved out. Of significance is the insight that the Scottish independence movement, which gains its first momentum between 2012 to the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, went against the tide of 'ethno-exclusive nationalism' (182). For Jackson, answers to continuing racisms within the British nation can be found in identifying the exclusionary practices of an English-specific nationalism.

Jackson's conclusion revisits the concerns of Chapter Two which focuses on white Scottish representations of Blackness. What becomes a white appropriation of Black claims to the narratives of victimhood in Irvine Welsh's work becomes gradually transformed into Black sympathies for the hybrid identities of the whites. The book's identification of the 'unmanageable and paradoxical' qualities of racial differences that challenge geographical boundaries echoes D. S. Marriott's claims in *Haunted Life* (185). Marriott assesses Black identity as the 'remnants of an unhistorical, unethical substance' (Marriott 240), and argues for splits in racial identifications that go beyond individual national histories. Apart from the works of the authors discussed earlier, other literary expressions of an equivocal racialised experience in Scotland are listed, from the works of Hannah Lavery, James Kelman, and Leila Aboulela. Reading against the canon of Scottish literature through an emphasis on the works of Black Scottish writers, the book, therefore, provides an alternate view of the devolutionary period

which has negotiated British literature along national lines. A valuable and timely contribution to Scottish literary studies and literary studies in general, Jackson offers an insightful critique of the future of Britain's multiculturalism beyond the artificial erasure of ethnic differences and Black Scottish writing as its own category of literary production rather than a sub-category of Black writing in Britain.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Marriott, David S. *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2007.