

Working Paper Series

Written in Stone

Black British Writing and
Goldsmiths College

Les Back



Deptford Town Hall is a particularly appropriate place to reflect upon Black British writing! This might seem like a strange thing to suggest, given that the building was relatively recently integrated, or some might say appropriated, by Goldsmiths College to form part of the university campus. I want to think about writing in perhaps a slightly eccentric way and approach the history of Black British writing in this part of London through both literary and non-literary forms of inscription. Part of what I want to argue is that the history of empire, and, as a consequence, the heritage of colonial and postcolonial citizens is literally written in stone and on the buildings where students study today.

Italo Calvino wrote that the city is overwritten in ways that are both there and opaque. So traces are etched into the physical structures of this place. Yet, they do not always reveal themselves to us. “The city” writes Calvino “does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.”² It is in this kind of spirit that I want to think about how the lines drawn all around us contain a history of empire, postcolonial struggle and creative expression.

Walking into Deptford Town Hall it is easy to miss that there is a ship on top of it. The weather vane that is in the shape of a galleon beams light on bright mornings like a daytime lighthouse. In a sense it points us to the connections between the global maritime economy of riverside London and the history of Goldsmiths College. In fact, what we know today as the ‘Richard Hoggart Building’ was a boarding school for the sons of officers in the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines. The foundation stone was laid by Prince Albert on the 1st July 1843³ The traces of empire are woven into the physical and social fabric of Deptford. What kind of ship is it? A warship? A trader? A slave ship? Finding these imperial connections was not a matter of historical archeology in 1982 when I came here for the first time as a teenaged student. There was a

1. Talk given on 24th October, 2003 at the Writing Black Britain Conference, organised by Joan Anim-Addo as part of Black History month, Goldsmiths College, Deptford Town Hall, New Cross, London.

2. Italo Calvino *Invisible Cities* (Vintage, 1997) p. 11

3. A. E. Firth *Goldsmith's College: A Centenary Account* (Athlone Press, 1991) p. 19.

significant minority of my peers who attended the College on military scholarships even then. Palpable daily reminders could be seen in the muscular boys who ran down Creek Road in battle fatigues carrying combat supplies on their backs.

THE HEART OF DARKNESS

This building was formerly the seat of local government in Deptford, an elegant Edwardian structure built in the early part of the twentieth century. It is a monument to South London's maritime past. Modelled on the hull of a ship the building is adorned with four statues of British Admirals that look down on passers by. In 1994, when the building was being renovated, some heartless villain or anarchist guerrilla stole the original weather vane. During the year it took to replace the wrought iron miniature my walk to work was not quite the same. Somehow Deptford and the College itself did not make sense without its ship.

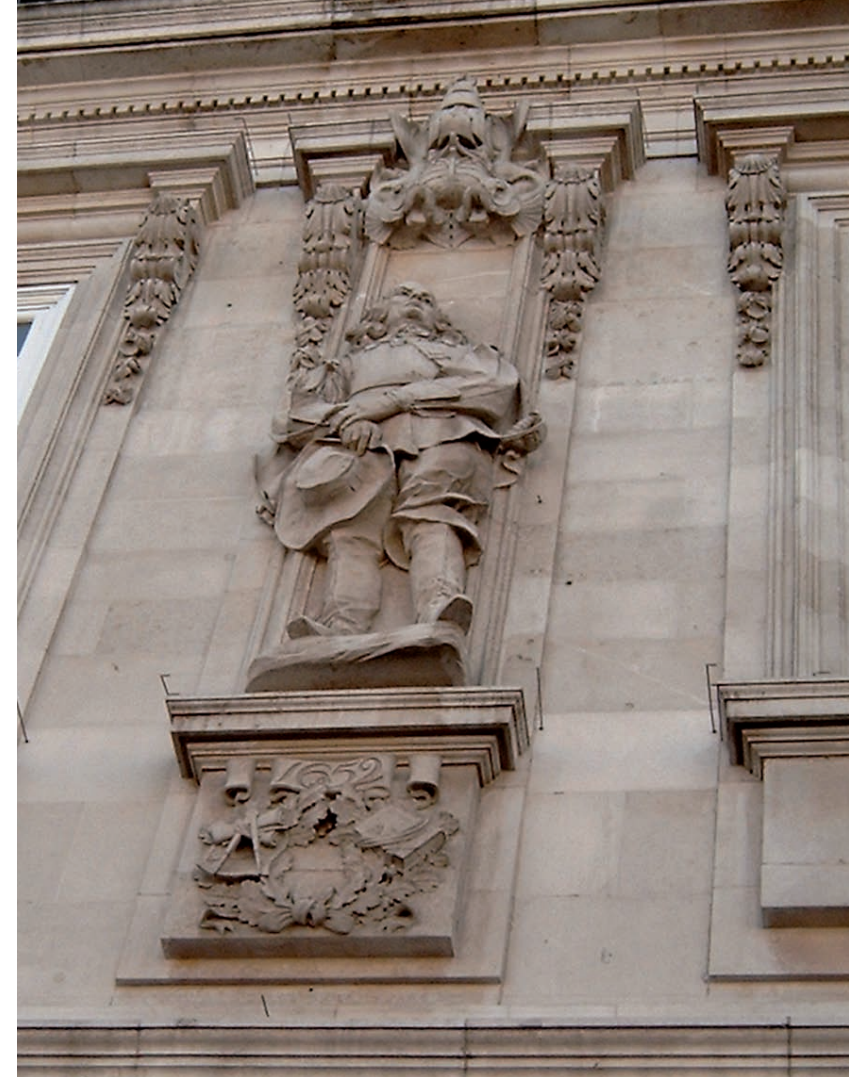
The galleon was the technology par excellence of the imperial age and it was here on the banks of the Thames that these vessels were constructed at the King's Yard established by Henry VIII in 1513. Deptford's local culture cannot be understood without an appreciation of its maritime history and the global connections that were established through ships and the local people both notable and destitute who sailed in them.

The official guide to the Borough published in 1915 describes the significance of the national heroes celebrated in stone at the Town Hall:

Sir Francis Drake with a globe in the background suggests the first circumnavigation of the world. The gallant [Robert] Blake, with 1652 underneath his effigy, recalls that Admiral's first engagement with [The Dutch Admiral] Von Trump in that year. On the opposite side of the oriel window the figure of Nelson, with the date of Trafalgar 1805, is a reminder of the appropriate opening of the Town Hall on the centenary of the famous action. The fourth Admiral is a conventional representation of a British admiral of the recent period.⁴

Blake was not only renowned for his battles against the Dutch but travelled extensively to the Caribbean to raid the Spanish colonies. The Town Hall was opened on the 19th July 1905 with the Fabian reformer Sidney Webb present. Every surface of the building is

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4. F. Bingham The Official Guide to the Metropolitan Borough of Deptford (Deptford Borough Council, 1915) p. 25
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adorned with maritime emblems including dolphins, shells, cables and anchors, tridents and windlasses. The souvenir brochure published to commemorate the occasion emphasised the figurative portrait of history in the design:

The note of symbolism is maintained down to the smallest trifle, as is illustrated by the wreaths under the admirals. Thus amid the foliage in the wreath under Admiral Drake is hung a cluster of beads and trinkets as well as a chalice and crucifix, which suggest the spoils of a Spanish galleon, or the plunder of some Spanish Church, while among the

*oak leaves under Admiral Blake is a clasped Bible in allusion to his puritanism*⁵

The Town Hall was once described as 'obscene', not because of its imperial imagery but "because its luxury contrasted so strongly with the poverty of the borough."⁶ It was the first time that this district had been granted its own local form of government. Local identity is symbolised in a very self-conscious way through allusions to exploration, passage, and international conflict. Global relationships are thus sedimented in 'the local' setting.

In 1553 The Primrose, built at Deptford, was part of a small fleet which established the first contact between the English and the African kingdom of Benin. Indeed, key figures in the emerging slave trade like John Hawkins, treasurer of the Queen's Navy, were closely connected with the Deptford yard. Joan Anim-Addo comments in her excellent history of black south East London:

John Hawkins, who lived in the Treasurer's House at Deptford Dockyard, could be considered the 'English Father of the Atlantic Slave Trade'. On his first slaving trip in 1562 Hawkins was able to combine trading activities for the two chief commodities of the period. He took gold from Lower Guinea and at least 300 slaves from Upper Guinea, 1,000 miles away?

Travelling on to the Caribbean, Hawkins traded his human cargo for pearls, ginger, sugar and hides. Thus was established the triangular trade that would be so devastating for the African chattel, yet lucrative for London's merchants. Hawkins flaunted his success in slaving. His coat of arms showed three black men shackled with slave collars and his crest showed a captive slave tied and bound. Indeed, on his third slaving trip in 1567 he was accompanied by none other than Francis Drake whose memory is celebrated in stone at Deptford Town Hall.

This part of London was to provide an important base for the city's expanding commerce. There was little distinction in this community of seafarers between the maritime adventurer and the ignominious slaver.

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5. Borough of Lewisham Souvenir of the Opening of the Town Hall (Gaylard, 1905) p. 23

6. J. Coulter Lewisham and Deptford on Old Photography (Alan Sutton, 1990) p. 114

7. J Anim Addo The longest Journey: A history of Black Lewisham (Deptford Forum, 1995) p. 8
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Joan Anim-Addo concludes:

*The ships themselves, the majority built or fitted out at Deptford for the maiden voyages, often returned to Africa after repair in the area's dockyards*⁸

These histories, often hidden within the public versions, provide an important reminder of how this particular locality both affected and was affected by the early forms of European expansion. All this makes me think of the traces of a different past every morning as I gaze upon the miniature galleon.

Joseph Conrad in his novella *The Heart of Darkness* captures these international connections between the imperial metropolis and the colonial hinterland. The book is about a voyage that starts in London and ends in the African interior, as Marlowe - the book's protagonist - searches out a brutal colonial administrator called Kurtz. Written between 1898 and 1899 the following passage describes the departure:

*The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth... And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, 'followed the sea' with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith - the adventurers and the settlers; kings' ships and the ships of men on 'Change; captains, admirals, the 'dark interlopers' of Eastern trade, the commissioned 'generals' of the East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of the unknown earth!... The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealth, the germs of empires*⁹

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8. Ibid. p. 12

9. J. Conrad *The Heart of Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 136-137
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What Conrad captures in this passage is the role that the river played in establishing the routeways of European expansion and the effect this has on the 'race that peopled its banks'. It also draws a clear connection between empire and exploration. Francis Drake - after his forays in slaving - circumnavigated the globe aboard the Golden Hind and looted the Spanish empire along the way. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth I on the deck of the Golden Hind at Deptford in 1581. Drake died in the Caribbean in 1595 along with his fellow traveller and slave trader John Hawkins.

Ignatius Sancho, one of the first black writers to emerge from this part of London, was born during the middle passage on a slave ship in 1729. Sancho was bought by a family in Greenwich as a servant for three young sisters. His thirst for learning and education brought him into conflict with his mistresses. Eventually, he ran away and made his case to the Duchess of Montague who employed him as a butler. In the Montague's library Sancho taught himself to read and write. The Montagues were involved in the plantation system in the Caribbean but they were also philanthropic and keen on 'racial experiments':

*The Duke of Montague had previously involved himself in the education of Francis Williams, a boy born of free blacks in Jamaica. Wishing to see if education would affect a black child in ways similar to a white, the duke had provided for the young Francis to be educated at a grammar school and then at Cambridge... It is likely that local black people would have seized any opportunity to exchange news and stories, particularly about sympathetic whites!*¹⁰

This 'local knowledge' enabled Sancho to become one of London's earliest black writers. *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho* - his first publication - became a best seller and captured a national audience. Olaudah Equiano was another black literary and political figure who was brought to Deptford and re-sold into slavery there. Later, after buying his freedom, he campaigned for the abolition of slavery and wrote *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustav Vassa*; this autobiography documented in detail the experience of slavery from the slave's point of view. The story of Sancho and Equiano marks the beginning of an intellectual movement that needs to be understood in both local and international terms. The unintended consequence of imperial expansion was that it allowed intellectuals like CLR James - who spent the last years of his life in the neighbouring district of Brixton - to use the metropolis to transform the cultural legacy of empire and to challenge the very forms of knowledge that were produced in its institutions.

Imperialism is not merely an economic and political phenomenon but the idea of empire was enshrined in art, ideas, science and architecture. The prime Meridian fixed at Greenwich in 1884 - just a few miles from Deptford - is the place from which time is measured (i.e. Greenwich

10. J Anim Addo *The longest Journey: A history of Black Lewisham* (Deptford Forum, 1995) p. 8

Mean Time). It is also the point from which everywhere else in the world is plotted: the cartography of empire was drawn from a hill in south London. In 1894 a small group of London anarchists attempted to blow up the first Meridian. This incident is dramatised in Joseph Conrad's brilliant novel *The Secret Agent* first published in 1907 just two years after Deptford Town Hall was opened. Maybe there is a connection between the Greenwich bomb, anti-imperial sentiment and the theft of the Town Hall ship.

From its high perch this symbol of Deptford's imperial past oversaw the break up of the dockyards, the dismantling of empire and the settlement of three generations of post-colonial subjects from the Caribbean, Ireland, Africa, South East Asia and Cyprus. Such diverse communities give this part of London an intensely multicultural and international resonance and the combination of these differences re-fashioned the social landscape yet took on a distinctly local form. Deposited within 'the local' are present global relationships, but we can also find there the historical imprint of past connections. In his prison notebooks the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci - who was incarcerated by Benito Mussolini for his leftist politics - argued that the starting point for any critical understanding of our place in the world involves a kind of archaeology of everyday life. He wrote that we are a "product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."¹¹ We have to create that inventory for ourselves and it seems to me that is why black history month is so crucial a period to reflect upon this challenge.

THE FIRE THIS TIME

The aftermath of the New Cross fire was reverberating through this part of London during the 1981-1982 academic year when I came here as a first year undergraduate. On the night of Sunday 18th January 1981 a fire was started, many believe by an incendiary device, during a joint birthday party for Yvonne Ruddock and Angela Hackson at 439 New Cross Road. That night the blaze took the lives of ten young black people. Three more died later in hospital of their injuries. Deptford and New Cross had a history of racist arson attacks!¹² Three years before, the Albany Empire in Creek Road and the Moonshot youth club had

11. Antonio Gramsci Selections from the Prison Notebooks (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) p. 324.

12. Jess Steele Turning the tide: the history of everyday Deptford (Deptford Forum Publishing Ltd, 1983) p. 218



been gutted by fire. In the late seventies the Albany had been a focus for 'Rock Against Racism' events. The day after it was burnt out, a note was passed through what remained of its letterbox. In cut out newspaper lettering a message read - "Got You."

The police made the, now characteristic, mess of the investigation into the New Cross Fire. The crime is still unsolved, although it is widely agreed that it was a racist attack. A massive and historic demonstration took place on Monday 2nd March 1981. The Black People's Day of Action started in Fordham Park and more than 5,000 people took part!¹³ From New Cross the protesters wound their way through riverside London via the Houses of Parliament, Fleet Street and ended in Hyde Park. At Blackfriars there was some confrontation. While the local press reported the march respectfully, the national papers unloaded the full weight of racial stereotyping. The Sun ran the headline 'Black Day and Blackfriars.' Two years later the fire took its fourteenth victim. A young man called Anthony Berkbeck killed himself by jumping out of a block of flats in Forest Hill. He had survived the fire by leaping out of the first floor window of 439 New Cross Road, but the memory of that night tormented him fatally.

During his recent public lecture in the Sociology Department series, Professor Paul Gilroy reproached the College for not acknowledging and honouring those lost during these solemn and tragic events. He was right to admonish the institution. In the early eighties there was a ferment of political activity taking place literally all around the College and political struggles against the Sus Laws and policing were being played out on our very doorstep. The sad truth was that in large part, and with some notable exceptions, the College went about its business with complete disregard for the great effort to make London a more just city.

Thinking about that time now, it is striking how much the College has changed. The student body in 1982 was almost exclusively white and middle-class. At Rachel Macmillan Hall only two out of the five hundred students who lived there came from black or Asian backgrounds. Racist graffiti was plastered all over the men's toilets in the Geography Department on the first floor. For many, Goldsmiths was the last chance saloon for finding a place at a university. Most came through clearing; none seemed to have chosen the College. I wasn't a Sociology student,

13. Joan Anim-Addo *Longest Journey: A History of Black Lewisham* (Deptford Forum Publishing Ltd, 1995) p. 137

and to a large extent the Sociologists were set apart from the rest of the student body. They were more diverse in background, often including a large proportion of mature students. Linton Kwesi Johnson studied Sociology here between 1973-76. Kobena Mercer is another Sociology student from that time who has gone on to great success. Speaking recently on Laurie Taylor's Radio 4 'Thinking Allowed' programme, Linton paid tribute to his Sociology tutor, Paul Filmer: "Paul was a great tutor and he supervised my dissertation which was on reggae."¹⁴ This programme also featured Brian Alleyne talking about his new book *Radicals Against Race*¹⁵ Elsewhere, Linton has spoken more critically of his experience of the wider atmosphere in the College as a black student: "When I turned up they'd say it was some mistake."¹⁶

MULTICULTURAL DRIFT

Some of the most articulate voices in writing the Black British experience have worked here and used the College, sometimes uneasily. There is something about that I want to at least try to acknowledge. The Caribbean Studies Centre that was well established by the mid eighties is, I think I am right in saying, the longest standing research centre in the College. In the early eighties a whole host of young black intellectuals came and gave presentations in a converted shop frontage on the New Cross Road. I dug out a seminar list this week. It was chaired by Winston James and included among the speakers, Kobena Mercer, Errol Francis, Hazel Carby, Pratibha Parma, Paul Gilroy, Cecil Gutzmore. I think - in a way - the miracle of the College is that it is a permeable space. Things go on inside these rooms with real consequences, often beyond the apprehension of those people in senior positions in the institution. It's always been like that. I've always loved this anarchic quality and it is something that is truly special about Goldsmiths College.

Today, the student community is so different from when I started here as student. According to the College's "fact file", 8% of our students are from ethnic minority backgrounds.¹⁷ Although this change has yet to be reflected in the academic staff, Goldsmiths is no longer a hermetic "white island" separated from the diversity within the capital's

14. His dissertation was later published and is amongst the first serious discussions of the politics of reggae. See Linton Kwesi Johnson (1976) 'Jamaican Rebel Music,' *Race and Class*, 17(4), 391-401

15. B. Alleyne *Radicals Against Race* (Berg, 2002)

16. 'Poet on the Front Line,' *The Guardian - Saturday Review*, May 4th, 2002 p. 6

17. Goldsmiths College Factfile 2002 (Goldsmiths College, 2002) p. 7

populace. I don't want to gloss over the real challenges, dilemmas and difficulties in achieving something close to a multicultural university. It is possible to imagine what it would be like now but twenty years ago it would have been unthinkable. The College has moved a long way - perhaps without much conscious direction - towards what Stuart Hall calls a "species of multicultural drift."¹⁸

What I like about Hall's notion of "drift" is the way it captures the small, accumulated acts that add up to profound social change. Those often unacknowledged and undramatic shifts can easily be passed over and we need to develop an inventory of them in order to assess the direction the drift is taking an institution like Goldsmiths. The notion of drift might also imply that movements occur by themselves. Of course, there are things that impede or accelerate such changes. No institution or group can assume that there will be a lineal and even drift towards a multicultural future. The ship may be drifting in a multicultural direction but there is also the necessity for it to be steered.

One thing that I recognize in today's students is the excitement of encountering the world of ideas for the first time. Part of the promise of education is that it can feel like it will change everything. Once exposed to the magic of books, it is hard to acknowledge that they have only a modest power. This, I think, is not necessarily a depressing realisation, although I can see how it might seem so. The sense of exhilaration and discovery - which is Higher Education at its best - can quickly turn to disillusion and frustration. Disappointment in the academy is sometimes devastating, like being let down by a friend. It can take the form of impatience with the lack of change, or an overwhelming sense of the pointlessness of academic work. Some of the most spectacularly gifted students and colleagues that I've worked with have been prone to episodes of this kind and I am not immune to them myself.

Very recently a black student caught in the shadow of fallen hope remarked in a seminar - "we can talk as much as we like but nothing really changes..." The mature student wasn't actually talking about Higher Education specifically. I responded by insisting that some things do change and that twenty years ago he and I wouldn't have been in that seminar room having a conversation at all. There is real hope to my mind in this simple, empirically verifiable, fact.

I want to return to the question, what kind of ship sits atop the old Town Hall? Has it remained a slave ship with imperial cargo or has it been transformed into a vessel of academic cosmopolitanism where alternative histories are written? Perhaps it is more complicated than a simply either or answer and like the complex nature of metropolitan life all of these things need to be part of our inventory. This in a sense is the paradox of postcolonial London.

18. Stuart Hall 'The Multicultural Question' in Barnor Hesse (ed) *Unsettled Multiculturalism* (London: Zed Books, 2001) p. 231

LES BACK

Les Back is Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. His main interests are the sociology of urban life, youth, racism, and right wing extremism, music and popular culture, and the sociology of sport. His books include: (1996) *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*, London: University College Press, (with John Solomos); (1995) *Race Politics and Social Change*, London & New York: Routledge (with John Solomos) (1996); *Racism and Society*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd (with Anoop Nayak) (eds) (1993); (eds) *Invisible Europeans?: Black people in the 'New Europe'*, Birmingham: AFFOR, *Theories of Race and Racism* (with John Solomos, Routledge), *Out of whiteness: Color, culture and politics* (with Vron Ware, University of Chicago Press) and *The Changing Face of Football: racism, identity and multiculture in the English game* (with Tim Crabbe and John Solomos, Berg). His new book is called *The Art of Listening* (Berg) and it will be published in 2007. He also writes for newspapers and magazines on topics ranging from football and music to politics and education including the Guardian and The Times Higher Educational Supplement.

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T 020 7919 7171
www.goldsmiths.ac.uk