A move towards the mainstream? New perspectives on the public reading of minority writing in the UK

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Introduction, context and terminology

The subject of this chapter is the *public* reading of minority writing, focusing in particular on the UK public library user, and on works of fiction written by Black British and Asian authors, in the English language.

Five decades since the main waves of immigration to the UK from countries in (for example) the West Indies and Indian subcontinent, is it indeed commonplace to regard the fiction written by members of these often long-settled communities as removed from the mainstream? In 2013, Hirsch asked, 'Why does it take a white face to keep us interested in African stories?' (p.35), observing that Hollywood films set in Africa will always feature white Americans in the leading roles. Similarly, in 2011 Johnson asked where Britain's black writers could be found, suggesting 'It seems our stories are truly acknowledged only when coming from the pen of white writers'. There is still perceived to be a white bias in mainstream popular culture, and a reluctance to raise the status of works of fiction by black authors to equal that of white authors. This perspective was similarly described by Berkers et al (2013) in a comparative study of the classification of Dutch, German and American minority ethnic authors in newspaper reviews: 'ethnic minority authors themselves have few options to facilitate their entry into the literary mainstream since writing about majority themes, having their publisher classify them as mainstream authors or publishing with a mainstream publisher seem to have little effect.' (p.13).

Despite these concerns, it is relatively common for the key stakeholders in the provision of 'minority writing' – publishers, booksellers, library suppliers and public libraries – to use certain grouped terms in promoting it to the reading public. As the context for the research is the public library, its design required the separation of Black British and Asian fiction from other works of fiction perhaps more traditionally associated with a public library collection, in order to compare their readers to those of other genres, using terms with which the research participants would hopefully be familiar. The author shares the view of Goebel and Schabio (2013) that fiction genres 'do not exist a priori, but in the texts themselves and in the interpreters' heads' (p.1). It could be argued that any of the books perceived by the research

participants – all users of public libraries and readers of fiction - could be classified in a number of different ways. Another notable point regarding the grouping is that all genres are strongly felt to have a limited life-span (Fowler, 2002; Goebel and Schabio, ibid.), corresponding to what Goebel and Schabio (ibid.) describe as 'long-term dispositions in societies, reflecting on social structures, communal vs. individualised concepts of interaction, ontological beliefs, forms of self-fashioning, and…on shortcomings and tensions within a given society.' (p.1). This societal influence is of particular relevance to a body of literature which originated from the direct descendants of colonial rule.

Whichever term one chooses to describe this significant body of literature in the English language, it should be acknowledged that although its general position is anti-empire, as Jussawalla (in Shaffer, 2007, p. 97) states it is nonetheless 'a literature born of empire and one influenced by English literature', emerging both directly and indirectly from a long tradition of British literature. It is this 'Britishness' which provides the focus for the literature explored in this chapter, namely that which is written by 'Black British' authors, and that which is written by 'Asian' (i.e. of Indian subcontinent heritage) authors, both writing in the English language.

Introducing an anthology of specifically 'black British writing' in the fifty years since the SS Empire Windrush brought 492 West Indian emigrants to British soil, Procter (2000, p.5) justifies his selection of that term: '*black*, within the context of this text, refers to an "imagined community" comprising Caribbean, African and South Asian experience in Britain'. Deliberately employing the lower case initial letter 'b', Procter - and others with similar beliefs – use the term 'black' in a political sense, moving beyond any biological or racial meanings. Mercer (1994, p.291) similarly explains: '…the naturalized connotations of the term *black* were disarticulated out of the dominant codes of racial discourse, and rearticulated as signs of alliance and solidarity among dispersed groups of people sharing a common historical experience of British racism.'

Introducing a collection of Black British writing, Sesay (2005, p.15) argues that the term 'Black British' has emerged as a more appropriate way to describe the generation of writers who may be happy to be described as 'post-colonial', but who are perhaps more likely to accept this alternative term, given that they were born and educated in Britain and may therefore have a different perspective from postcolonial writers of a previous generation. With a non-British heritage and parentage but an entirely British upbringing, they may feel

what Sesay describes as an 'alienness', an 'otherness' (p. 16) which differs from that experienced by previous post-colonial writers. Young (in Sesay, 2005, p.14) argues that incorporation should only go so far, as 'laying claim to a…literary tradition is particularly important for us [Black British people] in racially stratified societies where the acquisition of a certain kind of skill with the written word and an identifiable intellectual progression are seen as key markers of a civilised culture.' Donnell (2013) suggests that the term 'black' signifies 'collectivity and alliance under a political identity, and encompasses people of African, Caribbean and South Asian descent' (p.9).

For other critics, however, the label 'black British' or 'Black British' is too 'homogenizing', a convenient term which ignores the plurality of nationalities and cultures within the apparent group (Enwezor, 1997, p.87; Dabydeen & Wilson-Tagoe, 1997). Gunaratnam (2003, p.30), considering the use of specific racial categories, asks 'what effects does such homogenization have upon the economic, social, political, interpersonal and emotional lives of people identified as being in that group?' Indeed, Hall's (1988) essay entitled 'New Ethnicities' strongly questions this 'all-encompassing' nature of the term 'Black British', referring instead to the 'extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category "black" (p. 268).' Similar perspectives can be found regarding the homogenizing nature of the term 'British Asian', for example that 'there is, of course, no one "Asian community" in Britain. It is fissured along lines of origin, Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani, and, increasingly, along lines of social status and class.' (Manchester Evening News, 2007)

It should also be noted that certain authors - generally those who are living in Britain but have a South Asian or African heritage - choose to identify themselves as 'British', and deliberately not 'British Asian' or 'Black British' respectively, in part as a political statement. Williams (1999, para 11) cites Hanif Kureishi and Caryl Phillips as two such examples, explaining that for Phillips, the use of the term 'Black writer' or 'Caribbean writer 'lets people off the hook, because they don't want to then reconsider, to reconfigure, Britain in their minds'.

An important point regarding terminology is that the label used to describe the genre should not necessarily reflect its readership. In a study of Black fiction written by African American writers Thompson (2006) emphasized that although the genre is directly related to ethnicity and racial identity, it is not necessarily the case that every African American will read it, nor

that it is unavailable to members of other communities. Similarly, in a British study Peters (2000) found that members of the British African Caribbean community are likely to read books by white and other authors, and that non-African Caribbean readers are likely to read books by African Caribbean authors. As she states, 'the definition of *African Caribbean fiction* must be more to do with stocking books *by* African Caribbean authors, *about* African Caribbean people, regardless of who reads them' (p. 14). In a guide to West Indian and Black British literature, Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe (1997, p.10) claim that the term 'Black British' refers to material that has been 'created and published in Britain, largely for a British audience, by black writers either born in Britain or who have spent a major portion of their lives in Britain'. Williams (1999, p.4) suggests that 'rather than being a dangerously essentializing ethnic and nationalist term, *Black British* actually becomes more useful because of the shifting nature of what each word signifies'.

It is in recognition of these viewpoints that the terms 'Black British fiction', 'Asian fiction in English' and the combined term 'minority ethnic fiction' are used within this chapter, albeit acknowledging the problematic nature of labels used to describe such a complex and diverse range of books.

The readership of minority ethnic fiction

Influential in shaping the arguments presented in this chapter is Leavis' 1932 work 'Fiction and the Reading Public', in which the point is clearly made that the novel is often overlooked in literary criticism, despite the fact that 'this body of writing has exerted an enormous influence upon the minds and lives of the English people' (idem, xxxiii). And although fiction reading has been studied to a greater extent in more recent years (Mailloux, 1982; Rosenblatt, 1994), comparatively little is known about the readers of individual fiction genres, and less still about the readers of so-called minority ethnic fiction genres.

Indeed, the question of the readership of minority ethnic fiction arguably raises more issues than it resolves, and the identity of its reader and their reading choices remain subjects of much debate. One underlying issue is whether or not members of minority ethnic communities are themselves the main readers of titles by minority ethnic writers, and therefore the target audience for the marketing campaigns. Several writers have commented on the consideration of one's cultural background when devising book marketing strategies (Hundal, 2007; Simsova, in Zielinska and Kirkwood, 1992), which relates to ideas

underpinning reader response theory that readers are more likely to respond to a text they can relate to (Appleyard, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1983; Squire, 1994). There is also the concept of the 'double audience' (Young, 2006, p.20), whereby some of the readers of a minority ethnic fiction title would be from the same ethnic group as the author, and some would not. How, then, should this book be promoted, and how should it be shelved in our bookshops and libraries? Hicks and Hunt (2008) argue that any author could potentially be of interest to any member of the reading market.

Unsurprisingly, research has also shown that members of minority ethnic communities are not necessarily looking to read minority ethnic fiction (Hicks and Hunt, 2008; Thompson, 2006), and that readers beyond these communities may also want to read these books (Sanderson, 2001; Thompson, 2006). Related to this point is the perception that British readers from all cultural backgrounds generally have wider reading tastes (Olden et al, 1996; Ruppin, 2009), and are now more accepting of - and interested in – reading fiction reflecting ethnic cultures other than their own (Kendall, 1992; Hicks and Hunt, 2008; McDermid, 2010).

The public library service and its provision of culturally diverse materials

In describing the UK book market in the 1930s Leavis (1932) emphasises the important role of the public library service in supporting the public reading habit, describing it as 'the chief source for the poorer class of reading-matter in book form' (p.5).

Today we refer to the contribution of the public library in arguably broader terms, focusing not on a particular socio-economic group it may or not serve, but on a tolerance of all abilities and interests. Greenhalgh et al (1995), for example, posit that the public library represents 'the inherited culture of rational thought, self-education and individual enlightenment', having sustained 'an enviable tradition – unlike many other institutions – of non-sectarianism and secularism' (p.24). This tradition is supposed to apply equally to a library's selection of reading materials for public use, whereby such a collection should contribute to an environment which 'truly represents and achieves diversity and celebrates and encourages it in others' (CILIP [The Library and Information Association], 2017). These two objectives of the public library service map neatly onto the 1970s ideal of the former UK Library Advisory Council, for whom the provision of materials for 'diverse communities' could be divided into two categories, 'those which are aimed at meeting the needs of minority groups and those

consciously designed to reflect a multi-cultural society' (Library Advisory Council, 1977). In line with the theory of multiculturalism that society becomes richer as one's cultural horizons are expanded (Parekh, 2000; Sturges, 2004), it has also been suggested that there may be a benefit to all members of the community of being exposed to materials about other ethnic cultures, as part of the reflection of a culturally diverse society (Elkin, 2003; Guerena & Erazo, 2000). Birdi et al (2012, p.126) propose that such an exposure would help to establish the 'community networks' and the sense of 'community identity' described by social capital theorists such as Percy-Smith (2000).

During the past three decades the perception that a person's inaccurate or stereotypical views of other ethnic cultures can be challenged, and even changed, by the engagement with fiction reflecting these cultures, has repeatedly been linked to a call for public libraries to promote minority ethnic fiction to all their users (Kendall, 1992; Mansoor, 2006; Peters, 2000). There is evidence to suggest that many library services have made a sustained effort to develop substantial collections of books by (for example) Black British, Black American, Asian and South Asian authors (Denny, 2006; Van Fleet, 2003), promoting them more widely than the minority ethnic communities they will often depict (Elbeshausen and Skov, 2004; Jamal, 2001).

Referring in particular to the South Asian communities, Akhtar (1984, p.120) offers that those books which are 'aimed at acquainting the host population with the cultural, religious and historical backgrounds of ethnic minorities, have the potential to enable libraries to succeed where others have not made much headway.' Such material has the capacity not only to build 'a bridge of understanding between different communities' but have also 'given Asian readers a sense of pride and security'. Simsova (in Zielinska and Kirkwood, 1992, p.31) similarly refers to the capacity of material 'about the old country in the new language' as 'a kind of bridge', termed by Lambert (1969, p.52) as 'psychological continuity'.

In a UK study of library services in predominantly white areas, Mansoor (2006) found that concept of multiculturalism, or pluralism, whereby 'incoming' cultures sit alongside existing cultures, was welcomed by respondents as a notion of public library service and stock provision, in particular because of its perceived capacity to increase mutual tolerance and understanding of cultures. This idea had previously been expressed by Whitehead (1988, p.3), who stated the need for libraries to present fiction from other cultures 'to long established British residents', thereby 'challenging long-held prejudices and enlarging their sympathies

and understanding beyond the narrow range of merely personal experience', and Peters (2000, p.56) agreed that such material 'should be aimed at all users'. At a general level, Usherwood and Toyne (2002) reported in a study of the value and impact of reading imaginative literature that readers interviewed for their research felt that reading improved their ability to relate to other people, even that it had increased their understanding of people from other backgrounds and cultures.

Study 1: the reading habits and attitudes of public library users

The idea of fiction as a means of achieving attitudinal change has been empirically tested by the author (Birdi and Syed, 2011). A general survey was conducted of the reading habits and attitudes of public library users within nine local authorities in the UK East Midlands, with a particular focus on Black British and British Asian books. This was conducted as part of an evaluation of *black bytes,* a public library fiction promotion of titles written in the English language by Black British authors. As an intervention it aimed to increase the readership of Black British fiction by both minority and majority ethnic communities. Although the titles within the promotion itself were uniquely Black British, the focus of the study was expanded to include British Asian authors writing in English, in order to broaden the investigation of attitudes towards British minority ethnic fiction.

The survey was methodologically interesting in its focus on both positive and negative reading choices. A brief, quantitative reading habit survey was devised, and distributed by library staff at issue points in 16 libraries in the nine participating local authorities. This consisted of 5 simple questions, and using typical genre classifications used by public libraries[1], asked readers which genres they were borrowing from today and would usually borrow from, which genres they would not consider reading, and which factors would influence them in choosing their books. The survey was designed to be distributed at library issue points at two separate time-points, i.e. prior to, and towards the end of, the installation of the *black bytes* promotion.[2] (A key aspect of the longitudinal evaluation was the inclusion

[1]Asian fiction in English, Black British fiction, LGBT fiction, Sci-fi/fantasy fiction, Romance fiction, Lad lit fiction, Crime fiction, Chick Lit fiction, War/spy fiction, Literary fiction. The labels used were the result of a series of discussions between the author and the project advisory group (for this first study), and were agreed to represent a wide range of the fiction materials available in a typical public library in the East Midlands.

[2]552 questionnaires were collected prior to the promotion (428 experimental, 124 control), and 495 afterwards (377 experimental, 118 control).

of five 'control' libraries in addition to the 16, i.e. libraries in which the *black bytes* promotion would not be installed.) In combination, these two measures enabled an investigation as to whether *black bytes* had a noticeable impact on the fiction borrowing habits of the library user.

Statistical (chi-square) tests showed that there was a significant increase in respondents from experimental libraries (i.e. those with the promotion) reporting that they were 'usual' readers of Black British fiction after the intervention had taken place (chi-square = 7.37, $p<.01$), whereas the control group (those from libraries without the promotion) showed no significant change between the two time points (chi-square = 0.27, ns).

Tests also showed that there was a reduction (7.8%) between the two time-points in the number of respondents from experimental libraries who would not choose to read the genre, whereas the proportion of respondents from control libraries who would choose not to read Black British fiction had increased slightly (1.0%). This indicates that those respondents from experimental libraries were now less likely than before not to choose the genre, after the *black bytes* promotion had taken place.

In addition to the survey, interviews were conducted with 21 participants, and a number of these commented on the separateness of minority ethnic (specifically Black) collections or promotions in public libraries, generally supporting the views of researchers in the field that materials can be difficult to find, but could – and do - have a wider appeal than minority ethnic communities:

> 'I think the last time I went in there was a section on black writers…I think the idea would be for a more general appeal, because it probably just highlights, shows that there are talented Black writers, and this is what they've got to offer, so it wouldn't just be for Ethnics.'

> 'It [the black bytes promotion] has a general appeal, because I think that everybody needs to be made aware of how black culture is influenced by English culture in this country…I think that anybody, once they had picked up a book [from the promotion] and started to read it, they would probably find it really interesting.'

This first study revealed an openness on the part of many respondents to read from a wide range of genres, and to try new material. The longitudinal component to the survey indicated

that there had been a positive change in attitudes towards fiction reading as a result of the intervention of the *black bytes* fiction promotion.

Study 2: the readership of 'Black British fiction' and 'Asian fiction in English'

A second study was conducted, in order to explore in greater depth the concepts underlying different reader 'types', and thereby to form a more detailed profile – a *richer picture* – of the reader of minority ethnic English language fiction. The framework is personal construct theory, underpinning which is the idea that 'a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events (Kelly, 1955, as cited in Fransella, 2005, p.67). Kelly writes of a subjective reality in which we all exist, and which is 'based on the meanings we have attached to previous experiences' (Banister et al, 1994).

The principle underpinning this study is that our own interpretation, of these experiences is the influential aspect, and not the event itself. Personal construct theory helps us to explore the values of others by recognising the values present in our own constructs and how we interpret them, which is helpful in an exploration of the concepts underlying different reader 'types' (of which a key part is the exploration of the diversity of individual perspectives). The research had two objectives, namely to apply personal construct theory and the associated repertory grid technique in order to generate a series of perceived characteristics of genre fiction readers, and to expand upon these characteristics in relation to the readers of two minority fiction 'genres'. Whereas the first study obtained the views of members of the fiction reading public, this second collected data from a group of library staff, and library and information science postgraduate students, each of whom had experience of working with a cross-section of that reading public.

Findings regarding the perceived reader profile were similar to those reported in previous research, indicating for example that a relationship was perceived by one third of participants between fiction reading and class. Uncertainty again emerged regarding the readers of 'Asian fiction in English' and 'Black British fiction' and their perceived class membership, but t the link made in previous research between a higher social class/educational attainment/income and Literary fiction (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999) was also found in relation to these two minority fiction groupings.

New constructs emerged regarding the perceived characteristics of the reader, for example that neither Black British fiction nor Asian fiction in English clearly belonged to

'mainstream' fiction, whether the term was interpreted as 'non-serious' fiction such as the more established genres Romance fiction or Crime fiction, or as 'majority' fiction, enjoyed by the reading public as a whole.

Participants regarded neither Black British fiction nor Asian fiction in English as 'mainstream' fiction, yet what is 'mainstream', in this context? Two not entirely unrelated interpretations emerge from this study. Firstly, that it describes a novel more concerned with plot and entertainment than literary style – more in line, perhaps, with the traditional genres of Romance fiction, Crime fiction, War & Spy fiction, etc. Certainly, Nicholls (1995) would agree that mainstream fiction can be distinguished from other fiction of 'seriousness' (p.2), although Pearl (2002, p.ix) gives an alternative name for 'mainstream fiction' as 'literary fiction', which 'may have genre elements (e.g. historical, adventure)', but may equally be more complex in terms of plot and/or style. The second interpretation is that 'mainstream' refers to the reading material of the 'majority', whether in terms of an ethnic majority or its overall popularity with the reading public.

In exploring the readers' preferred plot it can be inferred that, given the similar ratings frequently made across the constructs to 'Black British fiction', 'Asian fiction in English' and 'Literary fiction', the two first are perceived as sharing similar characteristics to a more established, perhaps culturally broader genre which includes both classic (older) and contemporary novels. All three were felt to be likely to be looking for a more 'challenging', 'mind-exercising' reading experience, and to be generally more interested in literary style than the plot itself.

Although not inevitably the case, Black British fiction and Asian fiction were generally perceived as sharing similar characteristics. A quantitative analysis was conducted of the total number of shared (perceived) characteristics across the ten fiction 'genres' selected for this research, using constructs grouped under five main themes[3], and the readers of Black British fiction and Asian fiction were the most strongly-related pair within the ten. However, they are by no means perceived by their public readers (or by the public library staff who promote them) as an identical pair. For example, according to the quantitative and qualitative data each reader could be either male or female, or younger or older, but the Black British fiction

[3]Perceived demographic profile of the reader, Perceived approach to reading, Preferred Nature of Plot, Subject Interests, Preferred Genres. For a full description of these themes and how they were arrived at, see Birdi, 2011.

reader is regarded as slightly more likely to be female than male, and the Asian fiction reader as slightly more likely to be younger than older. In terms of the perceived nature of plot in the books chosen by the readers of Black British and/or Asian fiction, the Asian fiction reader is regarded as just as likely to look for a happy ending as not, whereas the Black British fiction reader is felt to be more likely *not* to look for a happy ending. Statistical intraclass correlations[4] revealed very little agreement among participants regarding the nature of the readers of Asian fiction in English and, to a slightly less extent, the readers of Black British fiction. There would appear to be two possible explanations for this lack of generalisability for each of the minority fiction genres, namely:

1. That it is very difficult to 'define' the reader of Black British fiction or Asian fiction, as he/she could have any of a wide range of characteristics

2. That participants are simply unfamiliar titles within such groupings, and therefore have no stereotypical view of the reader(s) in question.

Both arguments are entirely feasible, although given the significant levels of agreement across participants regarding the more 'established', traditional genres (Crime fiction, Romance fiction, Science fiction/fantasy, War/spy fiction) which would be given a clear section within any public library collection, there appears to be considerable evidence to support the second argument in particular. It is easier to stereotype the readers of more established genres, as they are well-known to us, frequently read by the general public and some participants could clearly imagine a 'typical' reader of those genres without difficulty:

> '… funnily enough that's what was going through my head, at [name] public library, my first library where I grew up, walking round the shelves, and I remember the War and Spy thriller sections, and seeing the old boys there, and I think it was near the Westerns, and the non-fiction war books, and I sort of associate it with that.'

> 'If there's a sole reader of that type of 'Literary fiction', he's not really interested in Science fiction, but they would on occasion take out Black British fiction… It's quite interesting, trying to going back through my mind about what people take out.'

[4] A descriptive statistic, the intraclass correlation (ICC) is a measure of the reliability of ratings, so can be used to take into account any variation in ratings, and instead gives a more precise measurement of agreement.

In the case of so-called minority fiction, however, public libraries would not inevitably have a separate section for 'Black British fiction' or 'Asian fiction', and their popularity with the reading public is arguably less. This was illustrated in the findings of the first study presented in this chapter, wherein a sample population of 1,047 library users contained just 29 (2.8%) readers of Asian fiction in English and 36 (3.4%) readers of Black British fiction.

Discussion: a theoretical explanation of the findings

The first study revealed a positive change in readers' attitudes towards Black British fiction and Asian fiction, as a result of the intervention of a small fiction promotion in public libraries across the East Midlands region. Reader response theory, and the related concept of reader development, can help us to explain this pattern of respondent behaviour; in reader response theory the reader plays a critical role, participating in a 'triangular relationship' between 'reader, text and the interaction between the two' (Appleyard, 1994, p.6), even acting in some sense as co-author (Iser, 1978). The term 'reader-centred practice' (Train, 2003, pp.35-6) has become frequently used in the application of reader response theory to library and information science, now commonly described as 'reader development'. In line with reader response theory, the concept of reader development aims to raise the status of reading as a creative act, to increase people's confidence in their reading, and to bring isolated readers together (Van Riel, 1992, p. 4).

The framework for the second study is a psychological theory, namely personal construct theory, as described above. Although the two theories are from very different disciplines, they are complementary in their shared focus on the individual and their subjective reality, and each can be used to understand the characteristics of the readers of 'minority ethnic fiction'. Key to our understanding of this approach is the concept that the individual's interpretation of experiences is of more value in understanding the individual than the experience itself. Similarly, reader response theory (and the related library and information science concept of reader development) can help us to understand the reading behaviour of an individual, and that he or she plays an active role in interpreting a text, creating in a sense a new narrative from the interaction between the individual reader and the 'unique' text (Walsh, 1993, p.16). With each placing the individual at the centre, contributing to the creation of a new 'subjective reality', personal construct theory is felt to complement reader response theory very well, in an attempt to further understand the characteristics of the readers of (for example) Black British and Asian fiction.

Conclusion: a new positioning of minority writing

In their 1987 work 'A thousand plateaus' Deleuze and Guattari propose that a description of literature as either 'major' or 'minor' is not simply a quantitative assessment: 'Majority implies a constant, of expression or content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate it', and '[Majority] assumes a state of power and domination, not the other way around' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p.122). Fiction described as 'Black British' or 'Asian' is often grouped (for example by a public library service) as belonging to a body of 'minority' fiction, which could be perceived as minor in terms of the ethnic communities they depict or from which their authors originate, or in terms of their perceived status within a larger body of work. The context for this chapter is the public library, and here the concept of 'minority fiction' could relate to its perceived minor status, both in terms of the reader's perception of such fiction within the overall public library collection, or to the way in which such materials are excluded – deliberately or otherwise – from the main fiction stock and its promotion to the general public.

The idea of 'mainstreaming' has been discussed in this chapter, and it emerges from both empirical studies that Black British fiction and Asian fiction are perceived by readers and staff as somewhat removed from the main library collection. There was a lack of certainty regarding where such books should be positioned within the fiction stock, as reflected in previous research. This is unsurprising given the complex historical and micropolitical development of minority writing within the book trade, whereby authors from so-called minor nations or minority cultures would be burdened with the role of representing their own cultural background in any work they produced: as Pisac (2012) argues, this burdening resulted in positioning this writer as 'a cultural broker who offered plenty of contextual background…fashioned so as not to disrupt the dominant narrative of literary and cultural representations' (p.204). Pisac also proposes that in order to understand minority writing 'one must consider the broader social and historical conditions that produce such a politics of representation of cultural difference and their consequences on the lives and works of foreign writers' (pp.204-5). Given these two issues, when considering whether 'Black British fiction' (for example) should be part of the mainstream public library collection or promoted as a separate body of work, should we not first ask whether the positioning we are proposing within a library's fiction collection fairly represents either this cultural representation, or the broader context from which they originate?

A pragmatic solution could be to adopt a dual approach to promotion, whereby titles identified as (for example) 'Black British fiction' are purchased in multiple copies and shelved both within the main fiction collection and in a separately labelled section (Peters, 2000; Clough & Quarmby, 1978). However, notwithstanding the increased cost of such an enterprise, to take this approach arguably continues to regard these titles as 'subjugated' in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari originally described, '[subjugated] to an image of its own identity', and 'representing, rather than forming, its own identity' (Colebrook, 2002, p.117).

Previous research has indicated that the public library is still regarded by many as a white institution whose services do not fully reflect the interests all members of its local community, and certainly the empirical research would not appear to contradict this in terms of its provision of Black British or Asian fiction. Such titles do not have a large readership in public libraries, their readers choosing books outside the 'mainstream' collection, library staff failing to have a clear profile of the readers of these genres.

Encouragingly, however, the research also indicated that a deliberate attempt to promote minority ethnic fiction titles can be successful in developing its readership, with both white and minority ethnic communities. It is therefore recommended that public library staff ensure that minority ethnic fiction books are regularly included in stock promotions, not only those specifically related to ethnicity (e.g. Black History Month), but also in the overall programme of promotions for the library service as a whole.

Having recommended to increase the visibility of Black British and Asian fiction to all readers and to broaden the range of stock collections provided within the book trade and public library service, it seems appropriate to conclude with an insight from one of the authors themselves:

> 'There's a beautiful image in Saul Bellow's latest novel, *The Dean's December*. The central character, the Dean, Corde, hears a dog barking wildly somewhere. He imagines that the barking is the dog's protest against the limit of dog experience. "For God's sake", the dog is saying, "open the universe a little more!" And because Bellow is, of course, not really talking about dogs, I have the feeling that the dog's rage, and its desire, is also mine, ours, everyone's. "For God's sake, open the universe a little more!"' (Rushdie, 1992, p.21)

Although the book to which Rushdie refers in the above comment was written neither by a 'Black British' nor an 'Asian' author, it is included here for two reasons. Firstly, because Rushdie regards a work of fiction by a white, Canadian-born American author as important

and highly relevant to his own position as an Indian-born British writer, and secondly because it could very easily represent the voices of other authors from minority ethnic communities whose work has been the subject of this chapter: a plea to publishers, booksellers, library suppliers, library staff and readers, to open their collective universes and to ensure that their interpretation of terms such as 'fiction' and 'literature' are as broad and all-encompassing as they could be.

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