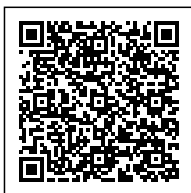


CONTEMPORARY BLACK HISTORY AND WRITING IN BRITAIN: DAVID OLUSOGA, AFUA HIRSH, AND RENI-EDDO-LODGE

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Biographical note

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Nota biografica

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Abstract

Le questioni riguardanti la multi-etnicità e la storia nera in Gran Bretagna sono restate nel complesso interesse di studi accademici come letteratura, studi post-coloniali e sociologia e non sono state prese in grande considerazione dai media principali. Questo è tuttavia cambiato recentemente: sullo sfondo di eventi come l'omicidio di Stephen Lawrence, il carattere multi-etnico delle Olimpiadi di Londra e la polemica sul trattamento riservato alla "Generazione Windrush" i media hanno iniziato ad interessarsi a questi temi. Tre libri recenti di David Olusoga, Afua Hirsh e Reni Eddo-Lodge, rappresentano questa nuova attenzione e contribuito al dibattito. Alcuni temi, tuttavia, rimangono nell'attenzione dei media solo in modo marginale: episodi di violenza nei confronti della popolazione nera, discriminazione sociale ed economica e questioni di heritage e memoria particolarmente collegati al coinvolgimento della Gran Bretagna nella tratta degli schiavi e nell'economia schiavista.

Abstract (English)

Questions regarding multiethnicity and black history in Great Britain have remained, on the whole, of interest in particular to areas of academic study such as literature, postcolonial studies and sociology and have not been taken up by the mainstream media. However, this has changed recently: against the backdrop of events such as the murder of Stephen Lawrence, the multi-ethnic

character of the London Olympics, and the controversy over the treatment of the so-called "Windrush Generation", mainstream media has begun to focus on these issues. Three recent books, by David Olusoga, Afua Hirsh, and Reni Eddo-Lodge, both represent this new attention and contribute to the debate. Some topics, however, still remain marginal to this media attention: episodes of violence towards the black population, economic and social discrimination, and issues of heritage and memory particularly linked to Britain's involvement in the slave trade and the slave economy.

Questions of multiethnicity and interculturality have generally had a marginal status in Britain. Public discourse on ethnic groups or minority cultures has in general taken place on the periphery of discussions on education and politics. While in some university departments, such as literature, cultural studies and sociology, Black and Asian studies have been prominent for some time (see, for example, Osborne 2016), this prominence is not, on the whole, to be found in other disciplines. The curricula in higher education, for example, are still canonical enough to have provoked, amongst some of the Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) student population the hashtag *#why is my curriculum white?* (Hussain 2015). Despite this, critical investigations of issues of race, ethnicity, discrimination, and representation, if not becoming mainstream, are now moving towards the centre of media attention. When, in 2018, BBC television decided to produce a follow up to the iconic survey of European art and culture of the 1970s, Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* (1969), one of the three presenters chosen was David Olusoga, a British historian of Nigerian descent well known for his work on black history. The book that resulted from his part in that series, *Black and British. A Forgotten History* (2016) has rapidly become a best-seller. Also on the best-seller list has arrived a mainly autobiographical account of issues of race, discrimination and black identity in Britain published by the *Guardian* journalist Afua Hirsh, entitled *Brit(ish)* (2018). Reni Eddo-Lodge, another independent black journalist, has written a similar book, polemically entitled *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017). These interventions are testimony to the fact that writing on black history, black identity, discrimination, and racism have become, over the last few years, more visible, vocal and (although this depends on the overall perspective) central in British cultural debates. However, if black issues have appeared to be more prominent in public discussion, we still need to ask ourselves a series of questions regarding, for example, areas that have not received full attention or recognition. What follows will flesh out these three recent interventions, focusing on the wider context of their work, and address some of the issues that these books raise.

Olusoga, Hirsh, Eddo-Lodge

First, let us look in a little more detail at the three works mentioned above. David Olusoga's *Black British*, as we have said, was based on his work on the new *Civilization* series of the BBC, broadcast in 2018. The book is oriented towards a general readership and is not a research monograph, but it is solidly referenced and a good example of popular history firmly rooted in the historical profession

(Olusoga is currently Professor of Public History at the University of Manchester). Olusoga was chosen as one of the presenters of the series alongside the Cambridge historian Mary Beard, an authority on Roman history and the role of women in particular, and well-known for her popular television documentaries on the subject, and the even better known historian Simon Schama. The choice of this trio signified a commitment on the part of the BBC, we may say, to make their own curriculum less white and male, and an attempt to give prominence to colonial and imperial history, narrated moreover by a black historian. The cultural outlook of the new series was flagged by the BBC as innovatory and critical, particularly with regard to issues relating to empire, asking the question, according to the BBC itself, “how far is British civilisation built on looting and plunder, or admiration and openness” (Furness 2018).

Afua Hirsh’s *Brit(ish)* may also be considered as a book originating in the cultural mainstream: Hirsch has for some years been a *Guardian* correspondent, was born and educated in the middle-class suburb of Wimbledon, and is a graduate of the prestigious “Philosophy, politics and economics” (PPE) course at Oxford. Her own account intelligently problematizes this provenance, both in relation to her black companion from the poorer suburbs of north London, but also, importantly, in terms of her own experiences as identifiably part of the black minority in Britain.

Perhaps Rene Eddo-Lodge, of the three authors, is the least connected with the educational or journalistic establishment. Her provocatively titled volume, with its threat to interrupt dialogue with white British readers, has given rise to considerable publicity and discussion and may be said to be in the limelight of current debates. As she herself points out, the polemical title in fact goes against the overall thrust of the book, which in many ways envisages white readers. The blog in which she originally argued that she intended to stop talking to white people about race opened up a debate to the extent that “...I now spend most of my time talking to white people about race” (2018, 15).

If these publishing and media events testify to an increasing centrality of race in public discourse, this is reinforced also by the authors’ own perceptions as expressed in their works. Eddo Lodge admits that since her original post, in 2014, things had changed: “by the time the book was published, the stars had aligned in such a way that people were ready for it” (2018, 231). She points out that the Tate Modern hosted an important exhibition on art in the age of black power; that in the 2016 election, black issues were highlighted in both the Labour and Conservative campaigns, and that the Liberal Democrat leader, Jo Swinson, in an “Aftermath” to a later edition, called her book “a brilliant read” (2018, 237). For her, since the publication, “there has been a renaissance of black critical thought and culture... it feels like the critical anti-racist perspective is on top of a wave” (2018, 235). Hirsh too points out that, despite the urgency of some of the issues presented in her book, with Olusoga’s TV presence and films such as *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) by the black director Steve McQueen, in recent years there has been a certain centring of discourse on race (2018, 65). This increased centrality, as Afua Hirsh remarks, is particularly evident if we compare attention to issues of race and discrimination today with the late twentieth-century Britain in which

they were brought up. For Hirsh, in the 1960s and 1970s, “‘black history’ simply didn’t exist” (2018, 50).

For Eddo Lodge in particular, however, this centring of issues of race has come up against a particular form of denial in white society. This involves putting forward a counter argument which denies that race or skin colour is of any major significance and contends that to foreground issues of race and ethnicity is simply to replay and reuse categories which are problematic in the first place. The principal attitude, for those who think along these lines, is to promote “race blindness”, that is, to reinforce and repeat the fact that the world must think in race-neutral categories. The problem with this position, and Eddo Lodge took this as her starting point in her original blog, is that it ignores the fact that in today’s society (not to speak also of racial attitudes in a historical dimension), race and ethnicity do constitute a crucial divide, and must be recognized as such. This inability on the part of many whites to perceive this divide provoked Eddo Lodge’s original angry blog in which she announced that she would speak only with those who did have this awareness: “I can no longer engage with the gulf of emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour articulates their experience” (2018, ix).

This awareness of the negation of race as an issue is shared by Hirsh, who points out that “...as long as racism does exist ... ‘not seeing race’ shuts down analysis of the issue” (2018, 26). Her book documents the ways that race and ethnicity still play fundamental parts, for example, in the crucial issues of access to educational and career opportunities, and argues that until these areas of discrimination are recognized and addressed with particular administrative and political actions, race and ethnicity must be posed as a question. Hirsh’s own admission to the higher echelons of the British education system, as she admits, was exceptional: the percentage of black admissions relative to black candidates to Oxford is only 13%, half the ratio for white candidates (2018, 182). Racism, as Eddo Lodge adroitly points out, is not just prejudice, it is prejudice plus power (2018, 59).

Issues central to public debate on race

This greater centrality of issues of race, exemplified in these three works, has not taken place in a vacuum. There are several areas of recent history regarding black experience in Britain, featured in their accounts, which have had prominence in public debate. These include relations between the black community and the police, debates within the educational establishment, the London Olympics of 2012, and the controversy over the “Windrush Generation.”

First, the issue of discrimination by the police was called to the attention of the general public with the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a brutal and racially-inspired attack on a 15-year old black schoolboy in London in 1993, but also with the subsequent failings of the police investigation. It was the insufficiency of the police response that led to a government-commissioned inquiry led by Sir William Macpherson in 1997. The case remained in the public eye right up until the second trial and

conviction of some of the perpetrators in 2012. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, otherwise known as the Macpherson report, with its severe criticism of the police response to the crime and its concluding indictment of the Metropolitan Police Service as “institutionally racist”, did much to raise the issue of police discrimination (and later, police brutality) in public debate.”¹ All three authors make reference to the Stephen Lawrence case and highlight it as part of a general turning point in awareness. For Olusoga, the 1990s are to be remembered as “the era in which the name of Stephen Lawrence was added to the long list of black Britons who have been murdered by racists” but it was a period in which as a whole, saw improvements in race relation (2016: 517). Hirsch points out that the British Home Secretary in 2014 “stunned” police officers by stating that they had acted with “contempt for the public” when handling sensitive cases (2018: 238). For Eddo Lodge, the Stephen Lawrence affair was “perhaps the closest Britain has ever come to a national conversation on the insidious nature of structural racism” (2018, 96), a term she prefers to “institutional racism” as indicating a broader indictment of discrimination (2018, 64).

Second, Hirsh and Eddo-Lodge also mention the recent increase in awareness in higher education regarding issues relating to ethnicity, representation, and inclusion. One notable example has been the growth and support for the movement contesting the prominent status of a bust of the British and South African imperialist Cecil Rhodes, the *#Rhodes must fall* movement in Oxford. In 2015, in the University of Cape Town in South Africa, the statue to the “father of apartheid” was pulled down; in the same year the controversy moved to Oxford, where there was a similar request to remove a statue to him. This controversy took place not only within the university but also in the mainstream media, raising questions of heritage and public memory (Chaudry 2016; Gebrail 2018). Far more than just a controversy about the bust, it was, as one former Rhodes Scholar said, “a metaphorical call for the transformation of the university’s curriculum, culture and faculty, which many blacks feel are alienating and still reflect a Eurocentric heritage” (Hirsh 2018, 78; see also Eddo-Lodge 2018, 130-132). The issue thus touched upon a perception that has been current for some time in literature departments where postcolonial studies as a discipline has risen to prominence, but which in this case saw its extension to the broader student population with the hashtag *#why is my curriculum white?* launched by the National Union of Students, also commented on by Hirsh (2018, 80).²

The third issue that has contributed to a centring of race in the framework of public debate was the general multi-ethnic tone of the London Olympics of 2012. This was highlighted from the start, as Olusoga points out, with the prominent place of the theatrical representation of the *Empire Windrush* ship in the opening ceremony of the London Olympic Games of 2012, complete with actors dressed as 1940s Jamaican migrant workers (Olusoga 2018, 521-522). Well-known to those with a knowledge of the recent history of immigration from the Anglophone Caribbean, the West Indies, the *Empire Windrush* was a ship that arrived at Tilbury in Essex with a cargo of fruit and around 400 Jamaican labourers in 1948. The arrival of the *Empire Windrush* is often seen symbolically as the beginning of post-war migration to Britain from the Commonwealth countries although, as Olusoga

points out, others have seen the prominence given to this event as potentially obscuring the longer and more complex and multifarious history of black migration to Britain and the role that race and empire have played in general in British history (2018, 523-524). This inclusion of the *Windrush* in a pantheon of other iconic scenes of British history in the ceremony was tantamount to a recognition of the importance of the history of the black and coloured communities, and an attempt to bring this finally within the British canon. The recognition dovetailed with the number of medals in the Olympics won by black British sports men and women such as Mo Farrah and Jessica Ennis-Hill. Another *Guardian* journalist, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, whose parents migrated to Britain after the expulsion of the Asian community from Uganda in the 1970s, justly reflected at the time that she and other coloured Britons were able, with the London Olympics of 2012, finally to bathe in a “warm pool of belonging” (Alibhai-Brown 2012).

Finally, also giving resonance to the name “Windrush”, Britain has recently seen a political scandal over the treatment of the first generation of West Indian and other coloured migrants called in the media the “Windrush Generation”. They had fallen foul of a recent migration policy initiated by the Home Secretary and later Prime Minister Theresa May aimed at creating a “hostile environment” for migrants. This policy resulted in a series of discriminatory treatments mostly of West Indians who had arrived in Britain before changes in the legislation on nationality and the bureaucratisation of migration in the 1970s, and who had found themselves as a consequence without the necessary documentation to be able to claim citizenship. This discrimination, which led in some cases to attempts at the repatriation of people who had lived and worked in Britain since they were small children, became high profile in the media and led to the resignation of the Home Secretary, Amber Rudd in 2018.

What remains marginal in black history

These four elements, then, have guaranteed a certain prominence to issues relating to race, ethnicity, and inclusion in public discourse, and constitute both the background to the success of these books and important elements of the discussions in the books themselves. However, with the exception of the London Olympics, this prominence has above all regarded discrimination or prejudice exercised to the detriment of the black communities. These three works are witness to this in their claims for greater recognition of discrimination and the need to acknowledge particular black interpretations of the present and the past. There are a number of other areas, in any case, which remain under-acknowledged, even within this overall framework. These relate in particular to the continuing issue of violence and intimidation, to the economic and social disadvantage of the Black population, and to the vexed question of the status of slavery and the slave trade in British history and British historiography.

The first issue regards the violence and/or intimidation that continues to be inflicted on people from minority ethnic backgrounds, episodes which feature in all three accounts. Olusoga prefaces his

work with a moving account of growing up in a white and often racist area of North East Britain in which his family was the target of racism and discrimination to the extent that they finally had to move out of the area (2016, xvi-xviii). Hirsh presents a number of accounts of ill-treatment, intimidation, and violence meted out to the black people she interviewed (2018, 230-232). Beyond anecdotal accounts in all three books, they also provide a more general view of the continuity of violence and intimidation towards the black community in the twentieth century. All of the accounts mention the particular climate of fear in the 1970s, with the rise of the racist National Front. Two prominent examples, however, provide a larger chronological frame. The first, recounted by both Eddo-Lodge and Olusoga, is the lynching of a black migrant, Charles Wootton, in the Liverpool docklands in 1919, which took place in an overall climate of intimidation such that the local authorities intervened to protect the black community from further attacks by a racist mob (Eddo-Lodge 2018, 14-15; Olusoga 2016, 450-451). The second, almost a century later, narrated in detail by Hirsh, was the death of the partially autistic Mzee Mohammed Daley in Liverpool, in 2016, subject to what many saw as “disproportionate” police action (2018, 239-244). This episode pinpoints once again the issue of violence that characterises relations between the police and the black community, and collocates it within a framework of increasing vigilance with regard to these relations, the Black Lives Matter movements in the U.S. While these episodes of violence are inevitably central to the experience and writing of these writers, as they are to the experience of most black citizens in Britain, these fractures in the political nation are still not generally addressed or are features of current debate. In other words, the entire issue of violence and intimidation, both on the part of racist groups and as characterising in a significant manner the relations of the black population and the police, has still not become the object of mainstream discussion (despite the findings of the Macpherson Inquiry).

The continued economic and social disadvantage of the black population has also, on the whole, remained a marginal story. This element is highlighted by Eddo Lodge in a chapter entitled “Race and Class” (2018, 189-212) and is the object of a separate chapter in Hirsh’s volume (2018, 215-242). Eddo Lodge also relates episodes in which this disadvantage was actively challenged, such as the Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963 in opposition to discriminatory employment practices (2018, 28-32). Events such as this have not received the sort of attention given to the better-known American experiences of the Civil Rights movement. The issue of the link between economic and social status, on the one hand, and racial origin on the other, remains structural, as Eddo Lodge and Hirsh stress, and despite the mainstreaming of some other issues relating to race, this has never taken centre stage in public debate.

The third element which has remained marginal is the place of slavery and the slave trade in the overall analysis and perception of the rise of the British economy. All three books devote much attention to slavery and the slave trade and as economic, political, and cultural facts of enormous importance in British history. Although this has long been the subject of discussion amongst professional historians (see, for example, Blackburn 1998; Curtin 1969; Thomas 1997; Walvin 1993),

this awareness would appear to be relatively new to more popular and journalistic accounts of British history. For Olusoga, of course, slavery is a central and unavoidable part of his “Black British” history, to which he dedicates a number of chapters. One particularly worth mentioning treats the somewhat neglected subject of the conflict between the institution of slavery, on the one hand, and the notion that slavery was not acceptable on British soil, an issue which emerged early in the abolition movement (2016, 113-142). The more present-oriented works of Eddo-Lodge and Hirsh, however, also devote considerable attention to the question. Eddo-Lodge begins her account with her own realisation of the importance of slavery to the growth of the British economy during a visit to the docklands of Liverpool (2018: 2-6). Hirsh argues forcefully that slavery and the slave trade must be further centred in accounts of British history. Quoting Salman Rushdie’s memorable comment in *The Satanic Verses* that “the trouble with the British is that they don’t know their history because so much of it happened overseas” (2018, 85), she emphasises that slavery must be seen not only as a stain on the history of Britain as supposedly the land of the free but also as a crucial part of the colonial economy (2018, 52-59). The history of slavery, for Hirsh, is central to black studies and black identity but it is also central to British history in ways which go far beyond the history of political and civil rights and the accounts of its abolition. It concerns, above all, the economic interrelations of Britain’s growth as an industrial and commercial nation. “Reassessing British history,” she concludes, “is not about race, it’s about integrity” (2018, 86).

Once again, although slavery and the slave trade have been unavoidably part of university and school curricula for some time, these issues have not had great attention in the mainstream media, and these three books redress the balance somewhat. They are also the result of the slow permeation of work in the academia on race and slavery, which Hirsch in particular recognizes, taking her readers over the some of the major historiography on the subject, acknowledging some of the works which have represented the recognized heights of the historiography of this area, from C.L.R. James’ study of the revolt of Toussaint L’Ouverture in the San Domingo revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, (2001 [1938]), to Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery* (1945), and Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power* (1984).

Black history moves towards the centre

Black history figures as an important frame for the accounts of both the journalists but is the central focus of David Olusoga’s book, whose intention is precisely to provide a broad overall narrative of black history and the role and importance of the black population in Britain from the Roman Empire until the present. In this, of course, the story of slavery and the slave trade occupy an important part. The triumphant narrative of abolition, the part of the story which made its way into canonical accounts with the figures of Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce and others, gives way to a sober account of the economic and ideological tensions that accompanied it. The account of the Mansfield judgement, for example, which established once and for all that a slave could not be such in the

“purified air of Britain”, a judgement which both limited the possibilities of slave owners to land their slaves even temporarily on British soil, perceptively balances this judgement within an overall context of the influential lobby of slave traders and speculators (2018, 130-139). Olusoga also narrates other areas of black history which are relatively well known, although still not perceived as part of the central national story such as the contributions of black and coloured soldiers and workers to the British war efforts the First World War (2018, 427-450). Another is the extent of support that wide sections of the industrial lobbies, and in particular the cotton industry, gave to the Confederacy side in the American Civil war, an element which again serves to centre the whole issue of slavery within the history of the development of British industrial structures of the nineteenth century (2018, 339-365).

These works also address issues of heritage and public memory relating to slavery. The interest in public memory regarding the slave trade may be said to have begun with a gallery in the Merseyside Maritime Museum on transatlantic slavery which opened in Liverpool in the 1990s and which subsequently became, in 2007, the International Slavery Museum. This was a useful initial discussion with regard to material heritage and sites complicit in the accumulation of capital through slavery: to witness the inclusion of slavery and the slave trade as fundamental themes in the development of the Liverpool docks as a cultural attraction constituted an important recognition of their importance in the history and development of the city (Tibbles 1994). A departure, in both Olusoga’s and Hirsh’s accounts, however, is the shift of attention from memory and heritage in places associated with the slave trade in Britain to other sites located in West Africa or the West Indies. Hirsh recounts in detail her own visit to a sugar plantation in St Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean and to the slave fort Elmina Castle in Ghana (2018, 52-54; pp. 202-206). Olusoga begins his volume with a long section on the Bunce island fortress and slave prison in Sierra Leone. These places have now become sites of memory concretely relating the iniquities of the slave trade and the slave economies in places in the West Indies and West Africa directly implicated in them. This welcome geographical widening of scope may be partly the result of individual and family points of reference: Hirsh relates how, as part of the search for her own identity, she “returned” to Ghana, where her mother came from, in an attempt to reinforce or construct her own African roots. We may also interpret this, however, in the case of Olusoga, as part of the identification of large geographical spaces such as the Atlantic as worthy historical and sociological units of study (Gilroy 1993; Baily 2005). This centring of the discourse of black history has implications for the further construction of public memory or heritage regarding black experience. The statue to Cecil Rhodes in Oxford is emblematic of the ubiquity of references to empire and to imperial administrators and soldiers in England, particularly evident in the street names and the statuary of the imperial capital. As Hirsh points out elsewhere (2019), moreover, although there are monuments to the abolition of slavery there is still no memorial to the victims of the slave trade and the slave plantations.

These works, then, both relate and represent attempts to bring black history to the centre of public discourse and popular historical discourse in particular. In terms of media coverage, there is

certainly a sense in which these arguments have begun to claim the limelight. In terms of literature emerging from non-white British authors (see Osborne 2016) for example, there has been some inclusion in school curricula. Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), which relates the story of a young girl of Pakistani background growing up in the West Midlands in the 1960 and 1970s, for example, was recently adopted as a set text on a number of GCSE examination boards for English literature. Although this would appear on the surface to be limited to the English literature curriculum, the issues it treated and the historical context which was highlighted constituted an important window onto contemporary coloured experience. Meera Syal herself commented:

To see whole sections in the study guide on the history of Indian immigrants in Britain, the 'Rivers of Blood' speech, the rise in the National Front in the 1970s, what it was like to live through that; to know that kids are studying that as part of British history, and that we are not a footnote in British history any more is just incredibly humbling, I so happy that happened.³

This centring must be welcome to any discussion of British history in a global perspective, too long skewed by the sort of forgetting which has long been recognized as constitutive of national identity (Anderson 1983, 15). The report on the prospects for multiethnicity in Britain produced by the foremost institution dealing with issues of race and discrimination, the Runnymede Trust, indicated clearly that the national "story" would have to be radically rethought if it were to be truly inclusive, and should be one which could "enable individuals to position their personal life-stories within the larger, more significant, national story" (Runnymede Trust 2000, 16). The work of Olusoga, Hirsh and Eddo-Lodge contribute in their different ways to the ongoing attempts, incomplete and partial, to include black and coloured perceptions of Britain's present and past within the mainstream of the "national story".

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1 The report is available on line at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf.

The discussion of “institutional racism” appears in chapter 6.”

2 Although Olusoga does not mention the *#Rhodes must fall movement*, he does devote some pages to the historical figure of Rhodes, in particular with reference to the movement to discredit him in the 1890s (2018, 414-418).

3 Meera Syal, interview on *Woman’s Hour* (BBC Radio 4), 27 May 2016, available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b07bt4wd>, accessed 22 February 2020). The reference to the “Rivers of Blood” speech was to that of the Conservative politician Enoch Powell, on 20 April 1968, predicting interracial violence if black and coloured migration to Britain was not curtailed. It became known as the “Rivers of Blood” speech because of his quotation from Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “Like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood”. The speech is commented on by all three writers (Olusoga 2016, 513-154; Hirsh 2018, 260; Eddo-Lodge 2016: 117-118).

