

A Brief History of Black and Brown People in the British Literary Sector

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Abstract. The UK is often seen as one of the most advanced countries in Europe in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion. Yet, in the literary field, many challenges still remain to ensure that black and brown British authors have a place in the publishing world. This article will trace some of the developments in UK publishing over the last thirty years and look at how independent organisations can lead the way in transforming the sector for all.

Keywords: UK Publishing; British Literary Field; Global Majority (or Black/Brown) Writers; Independent Arts Organisations; Speaking Volumes; Breaking Ground Project.

[esp] Breve historia de de ascendencia africana, afrocaribeña y asiática en el campo literario británico

Resumen. El Reino Unido suele considerarse uno de los países más avanzados de Europa en materia de igualdad, diversidad e inclusión. Sin embargo, en el campo literario aún quedan muchos retos por superar para garantizar que autores afrobritánicos y no blancos tengan un lugar en el ámbito editorial. Este artículo repasa la evolución de la edición en el Reino Unido en los últimos treinta años y analiza cómo las organizaciones independientes pueden liderar la transformación del sector para todos.

Palabras clave: el campo literario británico; el sector editorial; escritores de la Mayoría Global (o de ascendencia africana, afrocaribeña y asiática); organizaciones independientes del mundo del arte; Speaking Volumes.

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1. Introduction

Next year, I will reach the milestone of having spent thirty years working in the UK publishing and literature sector. That is a long time, long enough to see changes great and small in the industry. From the early 1990s when there were few computers on desks and paper manuscripts were stacked high all around the office, to now, when editing on-screen and using digital printing to be able to produce small print runs of books are the norm, technology has hugely transformed how publishing works. Many of these advances have been pioneered by the large corporations, created in the last decade or so as publishing companies have merged into huge edifices, combining their money and market share². Yet, I would argue that when it comes to valuing the people who work in the sector and, specifically, championing a diverse workforce, it is the small, independent organisations who are leading the way. This article will broadly set out some of the changes over the last three decades in UK publishing vis-à-vis black and brown people in the sector and will highlight what still needs to be done, both in Britain and further afield.

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² For example, when Penguin and Random House merged in 2013. See Page, Stephen. 'Penguin Random House merger brings a new chapter for publishing', *The Guardian* 7 January 2013

2. An Overview from 1994 to the Present Day

I started working in publishing in the UK in 1994, courtesy of an Arts Council of Great Britain (as it was then known, now Arts Council England) year-long publishing traineeship for black and Asian people. At the time, the industry was dominated by white, middle-class people, many of whom had been privately educated and then studied at Oxford or Cambridge, Britain's two most elite universities. As a public body charged with supporting the arts, the Arts Council saw an opportunity to try and level the playing field a little, and so between 1993 and 1995 ran the traineeship, supporting six black and brown people into the industry before the scheme was discontinued (it was started again a decade later when it helped another six into the sector). Yet, few if any of the original Arts Council trainees made it into the big publishing houses as long-term fixtures; of those I've kept in touch with, two currently work for small, independent literature organisations which are not publishers, whilst another is a successful radio show producer and host in Ghana.

This lack of success with the Arts Council traineeships might well imply key structural problems in the mainstream publishing industry in terms of retaining black and brown staff. Indeed, just a decade after my traineeship, a joint ACE and *Bookseller* magazine survey found that there was not enough support for people from the global majority working in the industry. The findings prompted those who were still there to start their own initiatives; in 2004 editors Alison Morrison and Elise Dillsworth formed the Diversity in Publishing Network (DIPNet) to enable black and brown people in publishing to come together to connect and offer each other mutual support³. DIPNet was subsequently run by literature organisation BookTrust from 2006–2014, then by City University under the name Equality in Publishing (EQUIP). In 2014 The Publishers Association and the Independent Publishers Guild (IPG) took responsibility for EQUIP, 'with the aim of continuing to promote initiatives relating to equality and diversity of employment and skills, and actively engage with the EQUIP network'⁴. The IPG, which is the UK's largest trade association for publishers with over 600 members, also has a Diversity and Inclusion group 'that champions progress and identifies practical things we might all do to encourage further change'⁵.

Despite these industry moves to host spaces around issues of equality and inclusion, in 2017 the *Guardian* newspaper ran a long piece entitled 'Diversity in publishing – still hideously middle-class and white?', in which journalist Arifa Akbar delved deep into the sector, looking at the full range of organisations, from publishers to book festivals, as well as to who is being published. One of the main conclusions of her article was that publishers' initiatives alone cannot create change. She stated:

There is overwhelming agreement among excluded communities that systemic change can only happen when inclusivity is filtered upwards. There is not yet gender parity on boards, even though women outnumber men in the industry; a lack of social diversity is one of its most stubborn problems and there are only a handful of BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] publishing executives who hold the power to buy books⁶.

Yet, it could be argued that, at some level, these initiatives may have made an impact. In the UK as of 2021, 'within the publishing industry, ethnic minority group representation has increased to 15% (excluding white minorities)' – although there is still an overrepresentation of people who were privately educated and who went to university⁷. But if you consider that the UK's white population in 2021 was 81.7%⁸, this means that ethnic minority representation in publishing is nearly up to where it should be now. However, as Akbar pointed out in 2017 and what these headline figures don't make clear is who is at the top and who is at the bottom of the ladder. In order to really interrogate how UK publishing is doing, those sorts of figures need to be drilled into at a much deeper level, including looking at how race and class intersect; for example, are the black and brown people in publishing also part of the group who went to private school? But that meaningful, in-depth work remains to be done.

3. Publishing and Politics

What of the small, independent UK publishers in all this – particularly those run by people from the global majority who publish authors who look like them? There is a long history of these organisations in the country, from New Beacon Books, the UK's first black bookshop and publisher formed in 1966 by John La Rose

³ About DIPNet, Diversity in Publishing Network website.

⁴ «History of the Publishing Equalities Charter». *EQUIP Publishing Equalities Charter*.

⁵ *Diversity and Inclusivity*, Independent Publishers Guild website.

⁶ Arifa Akbar (2017). «Diversity in publishing – still hideously middle-class and white?», *The Guardian* 9 December 2017.

⁷ *Diversity in Book Publishing*, Wordsrated website 17 January 2023.

⁸ *Population of England and Wales*, [Gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) website 22 December 2022.

and Sarah White⁹, and Bogle L'Ouverture launched soon after by Eric and Jessica Huntley¹⁰, to those which flourished later in the 1980s and 1990s, such as The X Press, started by black journalists Steve Pope and Dotun Adebayo in 1992¹¹ and BlackAmber Books, the brainchild of Rosemarie Hudson which she began in 1996 'to not only shake up the publishing industry and provide African, Caribbean and Asian writers with a wider platform, but prove they could be commercially successful'¹². Practically all these companies were tiny operations, employing few people to run their operations, so there was little that they could do to change the institutional structures of the whole publishing industry in terms of diversifying the workforce. But what they could and did change was *who* was published and what connections they themselves forged in order to have a greater impact on society as a whole.

Just like many other black and brown people in the UK of my generation, I have often commented that when I was growing up there were no books which included us. I loved reading but, to be honest, never really thought about it much until I was studying at the University of Leeds in the 1980s, and one day my mother asked me if I could find some books for her in the university bookshop. The list she gave me included two books by Guyanese-British author David Dabydeen: *Coolie Odyssey*¹³, a book of poems, and *India in the Caribbean*¹⁴, an edited anthology featuring essays, poems and prose by Indo-Caribbean authors on East Indian history and culture in the Caribbean. I was shocked – that such books even existed, that I hadn't thought about there being writers from my own heritage, and that my mother had even discovered them (I never found out how). Of course, publishers such as New Beacon and Bogle-L'Ouverture had been putting out books like these since the 1960s and they both also ran small bookshops selling their own material and other books by and about black and brown people, but they were not able to spend much on publicity and marketing, so could not reach much of the general population. And the other causes of the gap in my knowledge, beyond my own lack of thought, were multiple: school and university courses featuring only 'traditional' English literature written by white people, usually hundreds of years before; the books that were available in public libraries; the publications covered in the media both in terms of reviews and author features; what we found in the bookshops that were near us.

Political agitation by black people in the early 1980s, however, meant that things had to change. First, in January 1981 there was the New Cross fire in Deptford, south-east London, when thirteen young black people were killed in what was widely seen as a racist arson attack. The botched investigation that followed, despite many leads being given to the police, created a sense of shock at the injustice black people were receiving. As a result, in March 1981 The Black People's Day of Action was organised to support the bereaved families and protest the lack of police action. The country was stunned to see 20,000 black people marching from south-east London to the heart of the capital – often receiving racist abuse along the way¹⁵. Then in April of the same year, a police operation to flood Brixton in south London with police officers and implement a Victorian era law targeted black youth and caused a huge backlash. Called the 'sus' law, short for 'suspicion', it stated that just a police officer's suspicion that someone was about to carry out a crime would be enough to arrest them – and many non-white youths were deemed 'suspicious'. The local young black population mounted an insurrection against the operation and the years of police brutality they had endured¹⁶. The uprisings spread all over the country to other black urban communities, such as Leeds and Liverpool, led by young people who were equally affected by police harassment and economic and social deprivation, sending another shock wave through the nation.

The events of 1981 forced the Conservative government of the day to start to take notice of its ethnic minority populations and the inequality they had been protesting about for years – from how black children were schooled to lack of equality in the workplace. Whilst the political response to the events were government inquiries (e.g. the Scarman Report of 1981 into the Brixton riots)¹⁷, which began to interrogate the huge iceberg of structural inequality, the cultural one was multi-faceted. Local councils, particularly in urban areas, started to fund public libraries to buy material that was more representative of the UK's multi-ethnic populations, a practice which continued well into the 1990s (New Beacon Books were a major supplier of books to libraries in London and beyond). Some schools also slowly began to add books by black and brown people to their libraries. And one cultural movement that helped to make books by the global majority much more accessible to all were the International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books, which held twelve fairs in London and then also across the UK in Bradford, Manchester and Glasgow from 1982-1995¹⁸.

⁹ See *Personal Papers of John La Rose*, George Padmore Institute website.

¹⁰ See *Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications*, Friends of the Huntley Archives at LMA website.

¹¹ Anna Richardson (2008). *The X Press regroups*, in *The Bookseller* 19 March 2008.

¹² Vic Motune (2012). «The Publisher Who's Aiming to Change the World of Books», *The Voice* 6 October 2012.

¹³ David Dabydeen (1988). *Coolie Odyssey*. London: Hansib Publications.

¹⁴ David Dabydeen (1987) (ed.). *India in the Caribbean*. London: Hansib Publications.

¹⁵ For information on the fire and subsequent campaign, See *New Cross Massacre Action Campaign*, George Padmore Institute website.

¹⁶ For more information on the Brixton riots, see Felix Brenton (2010). *Brixton Riots (April 10-12, 1981)*, BlackPast website.

¹⁷ For more information, see «Scarman Inquiry into the Brixton Riots, April 1981: Lord Scarman's Report», The National Archives website.

¹⁸ See *The International Book Fairs*, the George Padmore Institute website.

New Beacon Books, Bogle L'Ouverture and Race Today (a south London based activist collective which published *Race Today* magazine and ran political campaigns for racial equality and social justice), conceived the idea of the International Book Fairs as a cultural response by black and brown people to what their communities had been protesting about on the streets. The intention was to bring together people from across the world as a 'meeting of the continents for writers, publishers, distributors, booksellers, artists, musicians, film makers, and the people who inspire and consume their creative productions'¹⁹ to participate in discussions about what was happening across the globe. This was a deliberate part of the methodology of New Beacon's John La Rose, to fight against inequality and social and racial oppression through the acquisition of, passing on and exchange of information. The Book Fairs attracted exhibitors and participants from all around the world and, in addition to the buying of books, various forums were held each time, ranging from cultural topics (such as Black British theatre and black and third world independent publishing) to the political (such as discussions on the racist and fascist attacks on black, left-wing and community booksellers in the UK or on the impact of new technologies on the working day). By the time the Book Fair ended in 1995, the UK's political and cultural landscape had changed, including that of literature.

4. A New Dawn?

What were these changes that had happened? After the 1995 Book Fair, the Organising Committee carried out an analysis of how the Book Fair had been organised since its inception and what it had achieved. In 1982 black people in Britain were clearly being marginalised in all fields, from politics to culture, but by 1995 progress had been made. Although there had been three people of South Asian heritage in Parliament between 1841 and 1919, in 1987 the first group of black and Asian MPs were elected to Parliament: Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng, Bernie Grant and Keith Vaz²⁰. Culturally, on television there were black newsreaders presenting flagship news programmes and black comedians such as Lenry Henry were fronting their own shows on the BBC²¹. And even the England football team, which had seen only three black players being included from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, had by 1995 variously capped twenty-four black players²².

In terms of literature, black writers were now being published by mainstream publishers and winning major awards, such as Ben Okri's 1991 Booker Prize for *The Famished Road*²³. In *Granta* magazine, which had started publishing a list of forty 'Best Young British Novelists' in 1983 and repeated the process every decade, the 1993 list included not only Okri but also Caryl Phillips, who would go on to be internationally acclaimed. The pattern of greater inclusion has continued, as journalist Lisa Allardice recently commented on the 2023 *Granta* list:

With 15 women, four men and one trans-masculine author, the new list confirms the big story of recent British writing – the decline of the Great White Male and the rise of Millennial Woman. On the 1983 list, there were six women and four writers of colour, including Buchi Emecheta. By 2013, women and writers from ethnically diverse backgrounds were in the majority. The class of 2023 also has an unusually non-metropolitan reach: the writers hail from destinations stretching from the Outer Hebrides to south Wales and the southern Irish coast²⁴.

This is where my story in publishing and literature starts, with the 1994-1995 Arts Council traineeship. I started at Virago, the then-independent women's publisher, where I began to discover the wealth of black and brown women connected to the UK who Virago published, including Guyanese-born Grace Nichols, Trinidad's Amryl Johnson, the Asian Women Writers' Collective and Rukhsana Ahmad²⁵. The second part of the traineeship took me to Heinemann to work for their International division, which published the African and Caribbean Writers' Series. I was not only able to get to know those pioneering African authors such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Bessie Head, but also developed a great working relationship with UK-based writers including, among others, Buchi Emecheta and Biyi Bandele(-Thomas)²⁶, as well as Caribbean authors

¹⁹ Sarah White, Roxy Harris and Sharmilla Beezmohun (2005) (eds.). *A Meeting of the Continents: The International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books – Revisited*. London: New Beacon Books and the George Padmore Institute.

²⁰ *The First Asian and Black Parliamentarians*, UK Parliament Heritage Collections website.

²¹ *The Lenny Henry Show*, BBC Television (1984-1988, 1995, 2004-2005).

²² *England's 105 BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] Players*, England Football Online website.

²³ Ben Okri (1991). *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape.

²⁴ Lisa Allardice (2023). «Granta's Best of Young British Novelists – meet the class of 23», *The Guardian* 15 April 2023.

²⁵ Grace Nichols (1984). *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. London: Virago.

Amryl Johnson (1989). *Sequins for a Ragged Hem*. London: Virago.

Rukhsana Ahmad and Rahila Gupta (1994). *Flaming Spirit: Stories from the Asian Women Writers' Collective*. London: Virago.

Rukhsana Ahmad (1996). *The Hope Chest*. London: Virago.

²⁶ Biyi Bandele-Thomas published *The Man Who Came In From the Back Beyond* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992) and *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993) in the African Writers Series, but later shortened his name to just Biyi Bandele when he published *Burma Boy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

who came to the UK to do events, such as Jamaican Patricia Powell (who lived in the USA) and Earl Lovelace from Trinidad. I'm proud to say that, using my publicity training from Virago, I was able to get one of Buchi Emecheta's novels reviewed in *Vogue*, a first for the African Writers Series. After my training I had several jobs and freelance work at publishers big and small, as well as being Deputy Editor at *Wasafiri*, the magazine of international contemporary writing, which championed black and brown authors from the UK and around the world. And in 2011 I co-founded Speaking Volumes Live Literature Productions with my colleague Sarah Sanders. As my trajectory shows, clearly there have been opportunities for people of the global majority to work in publishing, and to publish authors who look like them.

5. The Sector in the Twenty-First Century

So, what was/is missing from the UK publishing and literature world that compelled us to set up a new independent literature organisation?

In 2015 London literature organisation Spread the Word commissioned a report about people of the global majority and their representation in the UK. *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Authors and Publisher in the UK Market Place*²⁷ found that, in their survey of publishers and literary agents, 'over 74 per cent of those employed by large publishing houses, and an alarming 97 per cent of agents, believe that the industry is only "a little diverse" or "not diverse at all"'. Moreover:

Out of 203 UK-based published novelists polled, 30 per cent came from a BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] background. Only 47 per cent said their debut was agented compared to 64 per cent of the white novelists. Once into their publishing career, 53 per cent of BAME authors remained without an agent against 37 per cent of white authors²⁸.

In the actual report, there are many more examples of the discrepancies between black and brown authors compared to white writers, including the stereotypes that writers from the global majority were subject to; for example, if you were a black author, you were all-too often expected to write an urban novel about gangs, whilst brown authors with a South Asian heritage might be expected to have arranged marriages as a theme.

Five years later, the 2020 *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing*²⁹ was the first academic study on diversity in the UK publishing industry, with a particular focus on literary fiction, crime/thrillers and young adult novels. Again, the findings of the report made for sober reading, as report co-author Dr Anamik Saha stated:

Our study finds that publishers and booksellers do not have the resources, know-how, or sadly, the inclination to reach wider audiences. They do not see the economic or cultural benefit. Big publishers and booksellers need to radically reimagine their audience. The entire industry is essentially set up to cater for white, middle-class readers, in terms of the books it produces, the media it engages, even the look and feel of bookstores and the demographics they serve. This has to change³⁰.

Children's literature fares no better. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) is a charity working with all those involved in teaching literacy in the UK's primary schools. In 2018, the organisation started assessing children's fiction, non-fiction and picture books for children aged between three and eleven years (looking at the previous year's publications, in order to see the full year of books) through a project called *Reflecting Realities*. They found that, in 2017, of the 9,115 children's books published in the UK, only 4 per cent featured a BAME character at all. Even though by 2021 this figure had risen to 20 per cent, still only 9 per cent of books featured a *main* BAME character, with representation in fiction books lagging significantly³¹. The reason that CLPE called the research 'Reflecting Realities' is because the UK Department of Education's own figures stated that, in 2017, 32.1 per cent of children of compulsory school age were of minority ethnic origins³². Clearly, there is a huge disparity in what children's books are showing vis-à-vis characters compared to who is actually reading them.

BookTrust, the UK's largest reading charity, which reaches millions of children every year with books, resources and support, has since 2019 also been undertaking research, looking specifically at black and brown writers and illustrators for children published within the UK. Their latest report about the sector in 2021 found that, 'While we are seeing a year-on-year increase in books by creators of colour, we are

²⁷ Danuta Kean and Mel Larsen (2015). *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Authors and Publisher in the UK Market Place*. London: Spread the Word.

²⁸ *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Authors and Publishers in the Marketplace*, Spread the Word website, 14 April 2015.

²⁹ Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra van Lente (2020). *Rethinking «Diversity» in Publishing*. London: Goldsmith's Press.

³⁰ Quote by Dr Anamik Saha on *Rethinking «Diversity» in Publishing*, Spread the Word website, 23 June 2020.

³¹ *CLPE Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature 2017-2022*. CLPE website, 10 November 2022.

³² *Reflecting Realities: Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature 2017*. London: CLPE, 2018, p.5.

still far from an equitable culture of reading, creating and publishing children's books³³. Moreover, they discovered that only 4.5 per cent of children's book creators were British people of colour, creating only 3.6 per cent of unique titles. As the total percentage of people of colour creating children's books was 11.7 per cent, it shows that UK writers and illustrators made up less than half of the output in the sector. Indeed, publishers have a tendency to look to the USA to find books written by people of the global majority, rather than nurturing home-grown talent. However, this may well start to change as Pop Up Projects, a charity which champions equality in children's books, since 2019 has been running their Pathways Into Children's Publishing two-year training course for emerging children's book illustrators from backgrounds that are underrepresented in the industry³⁴.

As all these examples above show, the UK publishing industry still seems to have a long way to go. But this is where literature organisations, who work directly with new and established voices, can make a change.

6. Speaking Volumes, Breaking Ground

Formed in 2011, Speaking Volumes was forged out of a desire to make an intervention in the world of literature. As we have seen, mainstream UK publishers have been slow to act in terms of reflecting our increasingly diverse population, whilst most of the nation's literature festivals have tended to follow the pattern of simply programming authors with new books out. But if you are a black or brown author who is having trouble even making it to the point of being published, how can you become more visible and develop your writing career?

As an independent organisation with no central funding, Speaking Volumes can take on or conceive projects that we believe in, as well as being flexible enough to move quickly with the ever-changing world. Our mission since we started has been to highlight British and international authors of the global majority and writers from socio-economic groups who cannot usually get a place at the table. In this, we have been ahead of the curve; whilst the research cited above shows the issues with diversity still within the mainstream literature sector we, like many of the independent publishers before us and small organisations that currently exist, have been trying to make change happen from the ground up. Essentially, this means following the old adage of 'show, don't tell'. So our work consists of: mentoring aspiring authors, often for several years; helping writers to develop and/or have confidence in their voice and their stories; creating live events which platform authors not usually seen on stage; and working with partners in the UK and beyond who have the same vision or who are willing to try something new. We also want to tour writers as a clear way of showing publishers that when you put writers of the global majority in front of audiences, it works; people buy books, start to follow authors' online profiles, interview them, book them for other events and more. In other words, it's a sound economic investment to bet on these writers who many in the literature sector have been ignoring thus far.

As mentioned above, partnership has been crucial to our work, particularly around showcasing UK black and brown authors at home and abroad. Back in 2013, the *AfroEuropeans (Black Cultures and Identities in Europe)* international academic and cultural network held its biennial conference in London, co-produced by Speaking Volumes and the University of London's Institute of English in the School of Advanced Study. At the conference we showcased a range of Black British artists, including authors, musicians and comedians, and it soon became clear that many of the American conference participants didn't have much knowledge about the depth and breadth of black artists in the UK. But two academics were keen to help change that and were instrumental in helping Speaking Volumes create a US tour of Black British writers. Professor Maggi Morehouse, Burroughs Distinguished Professor of History and Culture at Coastal Carolina University, and Dr Elisa Joy White, Associate Professor of African American and African Studies at the *University of California at Davis*, not only gave me huge moral support in my vision of the tour but, crucially, provided foundational financial support to make it happen.

That faith, reinforced by Arts Council England funding, gave us the impetus to develop *Breaking Ground*, our multi-faceted project to showcase black and brown writers³⁵. Two years after I first talked about it, Speaking Volumes were in America with ten Black British writers for *Breaking Ground USA*, undertaking two tours of the east and west coasts from 2015 to 2016. During that time our authors participated in over twenty events at universities, schools, bookshops, theatres and conferences – and even gave writing workshops at Sacramento Maximum Security Prison. We also created our first *Breaking Ground* brochure featuring fifty Black British authors, designed by Black British graphic artist Jon Daniel. Over the course of those two tours, we distributed all 1,000 booklets far and wide across the North American continent. Some of the results of the tour were invitations to return to the USA and writing commissions among others. As for the writers themselves, they

³³ Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold (2022). *Representation of people of colour among children's book creators in the UK (2020-2021)*. London: Book-Trust, p.6.

³⁴ For information on the current course and past ones, see *Pathways into Children's Publishing*, Pop Up Projects website.

³⁵ See *Breaking Ground USA*, Speaking Volumes website.

bonded as a group and have continued to offer each other support and work together even to this day; for example, Roger Robinson undertook a joint tour with Nick Makoha entitled *Mixtape* in 2018, and published a book with Johnny Pitts entitled *Home Is Not A Place* in 2022³⁶.

The clear success of the American visits gave Arts Council England greater faith in our idea and they backed us again to take *Breaking Ground* abroad, this time to Europe. Our second, expanded *Breaking Ground* booklet, produced in 2017, now highlighted 200 British black, Asian and minority ethnic writers, from the just starting out to the established, from literary to fantasy fiction novelists, from spoken word performers to non-fiction writers³⁷. We published 5,000 copies of the brochure, which we sent to every UK literature festival and to British Council offices around the world. Those booklets were also distributed in Belgium, Finland, Germany Portugal and Spain where, alongside nineteen events with thirty-five different authors, we programmed six networking sessions with translators, publishers and festival organisers. Major outcomes of this iteration of *Breaking Ground* included the following: students at the Universidad de Alcalá who had attended an event with authors Yvette Edwards, Irenosen Okojie and Leone Ross went on to form a group to continue to translate their work; and major Spanish publishing house Entre Ambos picked up author Anthony Joseph's novel *Kitch*, with the translation being published in 2020.

In 2018, Speaking Volumes formed a partnership with Pop Up Projects, BookTrust and the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education to make an intervention in the children's literature sector. We featured 100+ British writers and artists of colour for children and young adults in our *Breaking New Ground* publication³⁸, designed by the late Jon Daniels' wife Jane. Our partner BookTrust delivered 25,000 copies to every school in the country and also subsidised authors' school visits, to allow students to meet black and brown authors, reflecting many children's heritages. Pop Up Projects arranged talks about the project in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, where authors and the *Breaking New Ground* partners spoke to those working with and in children's literature, from authors and publishers to teachers and librarians. We also attended the professional librarians' conferences, to make the sector aware of the wealth of diverse authors in the UK. Our project directly contributed to the research being undertaken by CLPE and BookTrust and informed how Pop Up Projects put together their Pathways into Publishing course. All these concerted strategies led to greater awareness of the changes that need to happen; for example, there are now more reviews of children's books by black and brown authors available in publications such as the *Guardian*. In autumn 2020 we were all thrilled to see that Faridah Ābiké-Īyimídé, a twenty-one-year-old Londoner studying at Aberdeen University who featured in *Breaking New Ground*, had landed a million-dollar US book deal for her first young-adult novel, a high-school thriller which highlights institutional racism. The two-book deal was brokered through her UK publisher, Usborne. While this is big news for any British author – very few writers ever get offered such sums – it hit the headlines because, apart from Ābiké-Īyimídé's age, she also happens to be a Black, Muslim, working-class woman³⁹. For us at Speaking Volumes, it was also gratifying to see that British young adult fiction by black authors can successfully travel across the pond.

7. Breaking Ground in Ireland

And what about outside the UK? Can *Breaking Ground* translate in terms of what is happening in other countries? In 2021 we were approached by Sasha de Buyl, director of the Cúirt International Festival of Literature, and Lindsay Reid at the University of Galway who wanted to create a *Breaking Ground Ireland* brochure to showcase writers and illustrators from ethnic minority backgrounds on the island of Ireland, including those from Irish Traveller backgrounds. This was an intriguing proposition. At its narrowest point, Ireland and Britain are only twelve miles apart. And yet, not only is there a 'complex past' between the two islands⁴⁰, but there are also many complex differences between them, ranging from the most obvious, such as religion, to the less talked about, such as who makes up their populations. It must also be acknowledged that there seems to be little interest in Britain at a general level about the complexities of their nearest neighbour. Whilst Speaking Volumes had worked with numerous writers based here in the UK who have Irish roots – including acclaimed poet and playwright Gabriel Gbadamosi, up-and-coming writer Fergal Harte, children's author and illustrator Yasmeen Ismail, children's author Emma Shevah and Manchester-based poet John Siddique⁴¹ among others – this partnership would give us the chance to make an intervention and, in doing

³⁶ See <https://speaking-volumes.org.uk/2018/01/07/mixtape/> for info on the *Mixtape* tour; Robinson, Roger and Pitts, Johnny. *Home Is Not a Place* (London: William Collins, 2022).

³⁷ See *Breaking Ground: Celebrating writers of colour*, Speaking Volumes website.

³⁸ See *Breaking New Ground*, Speaking Volumes website.

³⁹ Alison Flood (2020). «Faridah Ābiké-Īyimídé: the 21-year-old British student with a million-dollar book deal». *The Guardian*, 8 September 2020.

⁴⁰ Maureen O'Hare (2023). *The UK wants to build one of the world's most ambitious bridges*, CNN Travel 3 July 2021.

⁴¹ Gabriel Gbadamosi was part of the original *Breaking Ground USA* tours; Fergal Harte was published in *Not Quite Right for Us: Forty Writers Speak Volumes* (London: flipped eye, 2021); Yasmeen Ismail and Emma Shevah featured in the *Breaking New Ground* brochure; John Siddique featured in *Breaking Ground*.

so, to learn about the dynamic and increasingly diverse Irish literature scene which is changing the cultural landscape. But we did initially worry about our lack of knowledge in this field.

Before we agreed to the project, I decided to revise what I personally knew about Ireland's multi-ethnic communities. My awareness seemed scant at best. I have clear memories of the late 1970s and my sister and I watching the band Thin Lizzy on one of our favourite television programmes, *Top of the Pops*⁴². Even though I was only nine years old, it had lodged in my subconscious that the lead singer was black because at that time my family, like many black and brown people all over the nation, sat up and took notice whenever one of us appeared on screen. Only much later did I find out that his name was Phil Lynott and that the band were Irish. Then I thought of the early 1980s, when my sister and I had first developed our enduring love for Tottenham Hotspur⁴³, a football club in north London with a glamorous edge to it, ever since the late 1970s when two Argentinians had come to the club in an era before there were many foreign players. At that time, our part of the capital had a link to Tottenham because captain Steve Perryman lived down the road, and one of its rising stars, Glenn Hoddle, had started out in a local team. But the whole team were memorable, not just because we were winning competitions (FA Cup 1981, 1982; UEFA Cup, 1984), but also because there were at least two outstanding black players in the team, including the hard-working defender Chris Hughton – who, it turned out, I found out later, also became the Republic of Ireland's first black player in 1979⁴⁴. These two reminiscences had little to do with the world of Irish literature, though, but then a memory came back to me. Back in the early 2000s I had worked at the George Padmore Institute⁴⁵, an archive which was co-founded by, among others, New Beacon Books' John La Rose and Sarah White; in fact, the Institute was located above the bookshop. Each time I entered the shop to talk to Sarah, I couldn't help but notice a novel on the spinning book stand, mainly because the cover featured a pint of Guinness and a chilli side by side – but also because my sister had married an Irishman. *Paddy Indian* by Cauvery Madhavan⁴⁶ was published by independent publisher BlackAmber Books in 2001, and is the story of a young Indian doctor who relocates to a hospital in Dublin, encountering many issues of culture shock and not belonging in the process. Here, finally, was a tiny sliver of information lodged in my memory which we could use to help build *Breaking Ground Ireland* on.

Speaking Volumes said yes to the project, excited to learn about more black and brown authors on the island of Ireland. The call went out for writers and illustrators to send in their details. All of us, even our Irish partners, thought we would be lucky to get fifty responses. We had nearly double that and ended up featuring ninety people in the completed *Breaking Ground Ireland* brochure, which was published in April 2022⁴⁷. In their introduction to their brochure, Sasha de Buyl and Lindsay Reid talk of the numerous initiatives in the country which have laid the foundations to foster greater diversity in the arts including: the Irish Arts Council's 2019 Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy and Strategy; The Working-Class Writing Archive, a website featuring work by Dublin's working-class writers developed by Dr Emma Penney, Sophie Meehan and Áine O'Hara; the 2021 Play It Forward Fellowships Programme (Skein Press/*The Stinging Fly*), designed by Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe to nurture authors from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in literature and publishing; and the 2021 Diversifying Irish Poetry: Poetry Critics of Colour in Ireland, a mentorship programme for critics from minority ethnic groups launched by Dr Catherine Gander (Maynooth University in partnership with Poetry Ireland, funded by the Irish Research Council).

Sasha de Buyl and Lindsay Reid also mention some of the diverse authors in Ireland who are making waves:

Ireland's literary culture has long been beloved and its significance recognised around the world. However, to ensure an equally bright future, we must continue to innovate, challenge and redefine what Irish literature means today. Consider how Emma Dabiri's *What White People Can Do Next* (2021) and *Don't Touch My Hair* (2019) have proven that landmark writing on race can be produced from our shores, and that the intersection of Irishness and blackness creates a space for new conversations. Or how Anna Della Subin's *Accidental Gods* (2021) examines legacies of empire and patriarchy, the consequences of which we witness to this day. Or how Melatu Uche Okorie's *This Hostel Life* (2018) uses the deplorable backdrop of Ireland's Direct Provision system to create new stories. Or how the innovative fiction Yan Ge has written since living in Mayo unexpectedly weaves together the histories of contemporary Ireland and ancient China⁴⁸.

Indeed, one thing that struck me with the *Breaking Ground Ireland* cohort is just *how* diverse they are. Irish history is not British history; thus, you will find few writers of Caribbean heritage in the brochure. Instead of

⁴² Thin Lizzy, *Dancing in the moonlight* on *Top of the Pops*, BBC Television, 25 August 1977.

⁴³ *The Club and Honours* webpages on Tottenham Hotspur official website.

⁴⁴ Jacob Steinberg (2020). «Chris Hughton: Anti-racism protests can bring change in football», *The Irish Times* 9 June 2020.

⁴⁵ The George Padmore Institute is an archive based in Finsbury Park in north London which houses collections relating to numerous political campaigns and cultural movements of Britain's black and Asian populations from the 1950s on. See the website at <https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/> for more information.

⁴⁶ Cauvery Madhavan (2001). *Paddy Indian*. London: BlackAmber Books.

⁴⁷ *Breaking Ground Ireland*, Speaking Volumes website.

⁴⁸ Sasha de Buyl and Lindsay Ann Reid (2022). *Introduction: Starting a Conversation* in *Breaking Ground Ireland*, p.6

vestiges of Empire, here are people seeking a new world, from Brazilians living in Dublin to learn English to those of mixed heritage from the continent of North America, from authors from war-torn countries such as Yemen and Syria to those who have moved from places such as India to pursue academia. And, perhaps most surprisingly, are the number of writers and illustrators of all ages who were born in Ireland, both mixed-race and those of ethnic minorities. It is a fascinating mix that tells us there is so much more to discover, just a stone's throw away from our own back yards.

8. Making a New World

I started this article by looking at where UK publishing and literature were in terms of diversity when I started in the industry and then doing a whistle-stop journey through nearly thirty years, moving from the general picture to my own engagement and striving for change. Of course, it needs to be stated that I – and Speaking Volumes – are not alone in our endeavour to change the literature world; there's a healthy ecology of organisations around the UK, such as Commonword in Manchester, Spread the Word and Apples & Snakes in London, the Bradford Lit Fest in Yorkshire and Writing on the Wall in Liverpool, which also do much to support and mentor writers of the global majority and from working-class backgrounds. Each part contributes to the whole job of refocusing the industry. And, as I have also shown, there are people and organisations abroad who are also committed to ensuring more access for all in terms of the arts, from Lettrétage in Berlin to the AfroEurope@s network of academics and cultural practitioners across Europe and North America.

As every survey and piece of research has shown, though, there is still much work to do to foster racial equality and social justice in publishing and literature. And, whilst the big companies and festivals drag their feet to make that happen, it is the small, independent publishers and literature organisations who will continue to be fearless and to knock down walls and barriers. In doing so, we hope to create a domino effect that will lead to more books being published by a wider range of authors, not just to meet the readership needs of the global majority, but also to cater to the market demand of the global minority, whose thirst for diverse stories is just as strong. That's what we are all are striving for, a new world of books that truly reflects the world around us.

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