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Performing Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name

A View From The Outside Looking In: Writing The Libretto

Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name

Joan Anim-Addo

ABSTRACT

Despite nearly four centuries of publication, Black British writing is only beginning to be recognised as an established body of work in the UK. In such a context characterised by sustained suppression of writing as explored in the recent report, *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place* (2015), how might a libretto be written and developed by a Black British woman writer who must also earn a living lecturing part-time? The libretto in question is *Imoinda, or She Who Will Lose Her Name*, which focuses squarely on Atlantic slavery through a radical rewriting of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688). I argue that *Imoinda* emerges from precarious beginnings shaped by racialised and gendered conditions, and I question how a Black British woman writer might undertake and sustain such a task? I briefly sketch how Black British Writing, as a body of "Outsiders" writing, suppressed since it first revealed itself in the eighteenth century, remains stifled today. Turning to key institutions – publishers, agents, and the university – that have consistently disregarded the significance of the body of writing, I address the precarity that so often leads to potential Black writers under-performing or abandoning their writing practice, as I trace the long writing journey, lasting over a decade, to bring *Imoinda* from page to performance.

Keywords:

Imoinda, Atlantic slavery, Outsiders, libretto, Oroonoko, Black British writing, Aphra Behn, UK Arts market, art of writing, hostile Britain, suppression of writing, transnational

Black, British, transnational^[1], and a published writer of several genres, I claim the title, “writer”, only sometimes. Like other Outsiders – and borrowing from poet-philosopher, Audre Lorde – I have a deep quarrel with the history that my writing reflects. Unsurprisingly, reflection on the writing can seem a luxury that writers like me can ill afford. In a way, the writing becomes the mirror, I guess, especially thinking of authors such as Joan Riley who, with the *Unbelonging* was finally privileged to break through, via Women’s Press, the publication barriers of the 1980s and bring her novel to light telling of the hostile Britain so painfully familiar to Black readers. I remember, too, Amryl Johnson, poet, who died alone and is now perhaps largely forgotten. So, although when occasionally contemplating questions of process, I fantasise about becoming a more disciplined writer – focusing on a single genre, perhaps – it is problematic, now, for such single-mindedness. That is, even if such change were in my gift. My writing of the libretto, *Imoinda, or She Who Will Lose Her Name* (hereafter, *IMOINDA*), serves well to illustrate my meanings.

On presenting the libretto at the university of Trento before it was first published in 2003, I began with the following extract from my poem, “Creation story”:

Now in a space she claims
that feels sometimes
like home
a woman poet of the new tongue
at evening time
sings alone

And whilst others not too distant
hearing notes of fluid pain
pause puzzling
she gives voice
that soars on high calling
won’t you, won’t you
trace the scars of my knowledge
with your fingers
to begin our knowing? (Anim-Addo,
Haunted by History, 13)

To consider the process of writing *IMOINDA*, I shall attend, here, to selected particularities and a questioning of the nature of the art of writing in Britain; especially what such “art” might mean when one is on the outside looking in. Self-evident though the realities are for writers who discover themselves to be “Outsiders” – or, effectively excluded – examination of the field indicates that progressing one’s individual art practice still relates in good measure to privilege or support, or alternatively, “scars” that are too often residual of the process. Relatedly, and referring specifically to *IMOINDA*, I shall first attempt to sketch how Black British Writing, as a body of Outsiders’ writing, suppressed since it first revealed itself to parts of the national consciousness in the eighteenth century, remains with few exceptions largely hidden. That is, mainly not taught in the university by scholars of Literature. I turn to key institutions, discussed below, claiming to be most supportive of literary art – or so we are led to believe – even as they act to stifle specific parts of that body of writing. Thirdly, I address the situation in which Black writers, familiar enough with precarity in everyday existence, are all too often led to under-perform or abandon the written art they wish to pursue. I pay attention throughout to the question of Black British women artists, for whom, despite Lorde’s familiar twentieth century admonition, having their poetry published in the twenty-first century, remains a luxury.

Lorde’s highlighting of black women’s Outsider-ness, invariably intersectional,

certainly applies to the context of Black British Women’s publication suppression. Elements of these, above, will shed light on *Imoinda* and the creative process that the libretto has so far entailed. By this route, I hope to consider both practice and process, while focusing particularly on the tension between one’s writerly beginnings, and the self that discovers writing as simultaneously pleasure and responsibility realised at a particular historical moment in time.

IMOINDA, which I continue to think of as poetry, and which the scholar, Kristina Huang^[2] identifies as “narrative poetry” was first performed as a *rehearsed reading* at The Oval House Theatre, London, in 1998. The work illustrates well the practice – or journey – reflective of many Black practitioners, specifically, Black women practitioners. Certainly, gender is highlighted as well as race, for while those on the inside can and will dismiss the history of Black British writing arts in Britain, it remains vital for *Outsiders*, or those whose experience tell of “unbelonging” in Joan Riley’s sense^[3], to remember. Also, in pointing to an outer and inner circle of the writing arts world – however much of an approximation that circle may be – I am indicating that which, though not often acknowledged, is widely known to be true. Namely, that race and gender still matter in arts production, especially given residual, colonial belief systems, embedded in thinking and practices within key institutions that continue to inhibit the development of Black British writing as a body of work. I am clear about the coloniality because the plural field of Black British writing is one in which my writing might be located, and carries many identifiable strands, including one that signifies the Caribbean. I also teach, research and lead in the field.

My research having led to the seventeenth century author, Aphra Behn, discussed further below, from her work I

borrowed the character, Imoinda, whose name entitles my libretto. In 1997, with centralised arts support, namely from the Arts Council, recognising gender and race as factors inhibiting cultural production in the UK, *IMOINDA* came to be developed through an Arts Council ‘women’s’ bursary. The bursary, awarded through Talawa Women Writers’ Project, and co-funded by Talawa Theatre Company, in effect, let me through the theatrical door. Talawa is a Black Theatre company co-founded by the legendary Yvonne Brewster, and it is very likely that, without such access – through one Black woman reading another – the project would not have gone much further than my desk. I had already had individual poems published, as a well as a short story in a Women’s Press collection.

The rehearsed reading of *IMOINDA* was billed as a “Spread the Word & Talawa Workshop” project. “Spread the Word” described, then, as London’s “literature project” and now known as “the writer development agency for London”, remains indispensable in the twenty-first century, for its inclusivity into London’s literary scene, and as such, it continues to be funded by the Arts Council of England. Bernardine Evaristo in the late nineties, was the engine driving Spread the Word, so that, in effect, I had broken into an outer arts circle led at that moment by Black practitioners. Even so, the project’s Summer 1998 programme featured among its feast of writers, only one other Black British woman writer, Malorie Blackman, described, then, in the programme, as having “over thirty books published for children”. It should be stressed that this is an exceptional accomplishment for a Black British woman writer in any period.

It is intriguing that highlighted again over two decades later, this time through Spread the Word’s, *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place* (2015), Malorie is referenced by Danuta Kean as an established author who recalls “always”

being “the sole face of colour at any publishing event” and that she “stopped feeling lonely” only “a decade ago”. Malorie’s additional concern that she seems “to have gone back to being the sole face of colour at literary or publishing events” sadly chimes with what the highly influential and distinguished Black, British, transnational poet Kamau Brathwaite noted decades ago, namely, that there are moments when black writers are “let through” in Britain. If Brathwaite’s suggestion hints at lack of support, then this has been borne out through research focused on differing institutions, discussed below. As in publishing, the institutions appear to have suppressed rather than supported, the body of writing currently referred to as Black British writing.

Furthermore, when the corpus of writing from the *letting through* years is listed, it becomes evident that between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the pattern of single publications does not cease until the mid-twentieth century. As a result, readers might well believe that Black British writers were somehow a fluke of the twentieth, perhaps even the twenty-first, century. This is emphatically not the case; Black British writing and its suppression is directly linked to the heyday of the British Empire and its historical realities, particularly enslavement and the long-term trafficking of Black people by white colonisers and their agents. Attempting to justify the lucrative trafficking of black humans, among the ideas widely propagated to preserve slavery was the so-called “science” of the 19th century which claimed to “prove” that Africans and their descendants were not as capable of reason as Aryans and thus not fully “human”. As the philosopher Sylvia Wynter – formerly, Outsider fiction writer and playwright here in the UK – reminds us, Black people constitute the only group of humans once placed outside the bounds of “reason”. The

impact of this widespread, colonial and racist belief has shaped white perception of Black people, globally, as limited in terms of intellectual thought, creativity and so on. A malignancy, the stark, seemingly implausible idea which structures the underbelly of European Enlightenment thought, lies dormant in British institutions. Tellingly, the influential Scottish philosopher of the period, David Hume wrote:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences.^[4]

Linking the widespread racist ideology / philosophy that was popular at the time, to creative production, Hume specifically advises:

In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but ’tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, *like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.* (Italics mine)^[5]

The concern that the Black British writer might be, “like a parrot”, merely imitative in their writing lingers in some circles. That is, as Joanna Russ reminds us, because the “prohibitions” that applied in the British Empire to Black people learning to read and write are not taken into account. Despite brutal punishment applied for daring to learn to be literate, many surprisingly did. Black writers Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano are ready examples in the eighteenth century, and afterwards used their hard-won literacy through publication to contest white British supremacist views. This literary tradition – and *Imoinda* is an example –

continues to be challenging through form, content, and language choices in today’s submissions for publication, by Black writers.

In addition to the prohibitions, many forms of discouragement – formal and informal – are historically familiar to Black writers, whether they are authors *in the making* or already published. This is important for the historical contextualising of my own writing of *Imoinda* at the end of the 1990s. That is, a decade following the eruption of race riots in major UK cities in 1981. Those taking to the streets to protest the relentless racism and naked hostility encountered by Black people here in the UK, would, in time, increasingly come to refer to themselves as Black British, though not yet in that fateful year. The period might be read, rather, as one of bitter realization of many things, including, in relation to writing and publication, the extreme “discouragement” on finding that publishing doors were effectively closed to Black writers. Certainly, there had been some opening up in the 50s and 60s, primarily to those authors whose work held the promise of relating to post-independence markets, particularly the African market, though also that of the Caribbean, notable remnants of Britain’s erstwhile Empire built on enslaved bodies.

For those who had recently migrated from the outer spaces of Empire and were living here in the UK, access to publication was proving particularly difficult. As a result, pioneers among those who would later be referred to as the “Windrush generation” took to developing small independent presses, theatres and other arts spaces, intent on opening doors for others who, being Black, found their writing lives invariably restricted. Such a theatre space was Talawa Theatre, which would make possible the initial development of *Imoinda*.

In those years, as a qualified teacher of English, I had become particularly drawn to “theatre in education” strategies in the classroom. I routinely set up improvisation exercises with my classes, and invariably improvised “in role” with the pupils. In effect, habituated to thinking in terms of drama, and to staging scenes in my head, I began to consider writing a play. But what does one do with a play in the UK when one is not working in the theatre and one’s submission is drawn from the substance of Black lives? My writing, generally, in the final decades of the twentieth century would suffer the fate of most UK Black writers; it would reach a particularly limited public audience.

Yet, for those of us interested in literary arts, despite the exclusions, every opening was important. Such was the Alfred Fagon Award, linked at that time to Felix Cross’s Black Theatre Co-operative. As I understand it, the award was supported, at least in part, to gauge whether Black writers had any potential in the field. In its first round, I submitted my play, *At Gulley’s Edge* which was short-listed for the award.

At Gulley’s Edge signals an important shift in my taking my own writing seriously. After all, I had written a full-length play, an exercise that takes time, and sustained crafting. It had been shortlisted which meant some recognition of its merit. Furthermore, I found that I had moved from practice that involved hastily scribbling ideas on pieces of paper, only to archive them – in a manner of speaking – in the bottom of my bag, and find them months later, indecipherable. I had established a routine that was allowing me to develop my writing. How I did this in a climate ranging from discouragement to hostility involved the following:

- Gaining writing time by giving up my full-time job for one that was part-time
- Developing a group of my own to encourage each other to write. Until we

had enough material to give readings, we met regularly around my kitchen table

- Giving readings in community settings, particularly libraries
- once we had enough material that audiences started requesting our publications, I turned my hand to publishing.

While my submission did not win the Alfred Fagon Prize the following year, communication swiftly followed from Yvonne Brewster, co-founder and Director of Talawa Theatre inviting me to an interview. Having read my submission, she was offering me one of precious few Women's Bursaries. Her question, once we settled into the meeting, required me to consider what sort of writing I would like to do, if I had complete freedom to do so. That the prospect of "complete freedom" to write whatever I wanted was liberating should be emphasised. Black writers, certainly at that time, soon learnt that they are not free to write whatever they want; at the very least, considerable writerly contortion would be required to make submissions fit publishers' views. Yet, however crafted, the writing must first be let through by gatekeepers of what is increasingly referred to as *the creative industry* making judgements about work that they suspected would not sell and would not be worth their time. Consequently, not for any sustained period had I considered the prospect of freedom to write whatever I choose. I therefore surprised myself when my response was "opera", followed by a swift "but". I was not allowed to complete the sentence, and the outcome was that I had been awarded an Arts Council Women's Bursary. At the same time, my world had been opened to the possibility that I could write whatever I wanted. Much later, I would see that a women's bursary was very much to the point given the weight of the caring roles that so many women carry, and that

indeed I was carrying. Indeed, the intersectional impact of race and gender on Black British writing is yet to be examined and fully understood. Where such investigation might have been happening is the university. That is, in the space within which the publishers and writing agents might have learnt more broadly about their own history, including that of Empire, its resulting Englishes and creolised cultures, as well as the transnational peoples who not only came to Britain, but did so by virtue of their British passports linked to bearing the literal burden of Empire. Peter Fryer meaningfully refers to that history as "British Black History." Equipped with such knowledge, arts and humanities students might also have learnt more humility in the face of human diversity by studying a range of expressions of humanness, including varieties aesthetic representation from different cultures. They might have learnt to be multi- or even pluri-literate; but instead, the university and its humanities departments, steadfastly ignoring meanings of globality, invariably confirmed those meanings, akin to Hume's, reasserting white, male, cultural expression.

The university, founded upon Enlightenment ideas – decidedly unenlightened in relation to Black humans – most strikingly reflects these within its Humanities subjects, and has in large measure promoted knowledge as if only European thought – particularly that of the male – is to be valued. Wynter, referred to above, has been tireless in her condemnation of such practice and its disastrous effects for humankind. What is least readily learnt in such institutional space is knowledge and appreciation of human diversity and how this relates to an understanding of difference and similarities in the poetics of a range of human groups. While developing *IMOINDA*, and in a university job in an English department where Black scholars remain a rarity, I co-founded

our MA programme in Creative and Life Writing. In the years that followed, just after *IMOINDA* was first published – not in the UK but in Italy, in an Italian/English edition translated by Giovanna Covi and Carla Pedrotti – I founded another MA programme. I switched from teaching Creative Writing to the new programme, "Caribbean Literature and Creole Poetics", an area about which there was, and still is too little knowledge. It is also an area from which publishers and other literary gatekeepers might benefit immensely. Leading, recently, a publisher's in-house course on Black British writing, I came to appreciate, even more fully, the value of such knowledge for publishers, most of whom had never had any sustained opportunity to learn about the complexities of writing linked to different cultures or to several cultures simultaneously. In other words, they were overwhelmingly uni- or monocultural, meaning, importantly, that they were poorly equipped to value much of the cultural production of a super-diverse population such as those that people cities like London.

To return to the publication of *Imoinda*, I had always known that for more than the usual reasons of indifference or lack of interest, or even hostility, publication was going to be deferred. *Imoinda's* genre is, after all, not only a neo-slave narrative, challengingly re-writing the story of colonial slavery from the enslaved's point of view [6]. It is also a libretto; that is, written for a particular kind of performance, a process that usually entails a production prior to publication. For these reasons, I was especially delighted to be invited to submit the manuscript for translation and publication, albeit for a university's small press. In the circumstances, and though I am reliably informed that the Italian university system is no less shaped by European Enlightenment ideas than the UK's – in fact, probably more so – I readily accepted the invitation.

The questions remain to be asked: how and why does an African-Caribbean/Black British, non-musician, part-time writer even contemplate – let alone write – a libretto? The answer lies only partly in a moment of abandon, believing that one can, though Black in Britain – maybe should – as an artist, be able to write whatever one wants. More to the point is that having researched Caribbean Literature, particularly Caribbean women's literature, I discovered that despite the centuries of Empire, Black characters and particularly women were rarely to be found in English literary writing. While there are no surprises there – since it suited European financial interest to consider Black people to be less than human – in the process of research, I discovered the character, Imoinda, in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1776), a novel, perhaps best known for being the first ever published in English. After Behn's writing, Black women characters are rarely to be found in European writing. To offer a nuanced explanation about my borrowing from Behn, I quote from an introduction that I presented at the colloquium in which Giovanna Covi inaugurated the libretto at her university in Trento:

My quarrel with her [Behn's] writing concerns the location of the prince's lover, Imoinda, and the silencing of the black woman at the heart of Oroonoko's narrative. Imoinda, significant by virtue of being a first fictionalised black woman character, is drawn in Behn's writing, so as to be a mere 'shadowy presence' of black womanhood. I would argue that she is quite insubstantial in comparison with the character upon whom she appears to be based, one who defies tribal laws and the wrath of an all-powerful King to be with her lover. A crucial difference in my location of Imoinda is that I perceive her within her traditional setting,

though not trapped by it. (*Voci femminili caraibiche e interculturalita*, 83)

Whatever one's writing situation, the process is invariably shot through with tensions. I'll highlight a current tension between the intense marketisation of writing that marks the early twenty-first century moment and what might momentarily be called the romance of writing, namely, thinking about the practice of writing as "art". There is a tension, too, between the urge to write and the need to develop that writing if it is to be shared. For Black writers, a key question is where to seek the necessary development, for while within writing circles complete beginners are readily accepted, what happens afterwards? To illustrate, I distinctly recall sharing within the first and only writing class that I attended that I'd had my first short story accepted for publication by Women's Press. The tutor's response, "well, you've done rather well for yourself", signalled more incredulity than I, in my naivety at the time, might have anticipated. There is a tension, too, between the time that writing demands and what might be called woman's time, given the demands of caring that falls so heavily on women, as measured against the need to earn a living.

For a Black woman embarked on writing a libretto in the UK in the late twentieth century, the tensions now appear to have been not only innumerable, but almost irreconcilable with productive habits of writing. As a result, reflecting on the writing of my libretto, currently, many tensions have only gradually revealed themselves concerning my writing as practice. I wrote, then:

As a black woman claiming a public voice in the twentieth century, I am forced to confront this voiceless past which bears directly upon the 'scars of my

knowledge'. While I have found, in London, the heart of the former British Empire, the process of publication extremely challenging for my fiction and poetry, the difficulty is trifling compared to having work produced in the English theatre. (*Voci femminili*, 85)

The question might be re-iterated: especially given the larger racial context, who writes a libretto? I remain uncertain, though I've come to understand that the writing of librettos is particularly niche. It appears to be writing by invitation, more or less; and usually the invitation comes from a composer. As I would come to appreciate, such a practice has become ingrained in composer / librettist relationships in which the final product becomes 'my opera' for the composer, while the librettist becomes a mere name on the page. Confoundingly for my own practice, I had written the libretto, and would have to find an interested composer. Despite all of this, in many ways, *Imoinda* represents the strangest recognition of my writerly self for very many reasons. First, it was the moment that I felt I could think of myself as a writer, partly because of the scale of the project. That is, bigger than a single poem or a short story. Also, I'd been free to choose the subject matter, form, language style and so on; *Imoinda* was, after all, neither the result of a writer's competition nor submission invitation. I had been mentored, albeit for a full weekend after which the mentor slipped out of my life and was not heard of again, but I was completely hooked on the project. Still, by the time the libretto was due to be published, a particular aspect of the precarity disproportionately affecting Black creative writers had become visible. I wrote:

Just recently, an article in the national press, *The Guardian*, discussed the demise of black British

theatre. It is a story of political recognition in the 1980s giving rise to the collapse of black theatre by the end of the twentieth century in Britain. Therein lies the tip of the monumental production iceberg for black writers, and gender has not even begun to be explored relative to this. So, the conditions of literary production are difficult, and it is an audacious African-Caribbean woman who makes independent claims to literary authority. It is, if we pursue this logic further, a distinctly foolhardy writer, who, being African Caribbean, and woman, takes on the operatic world with all its meanings of high and low culture, status, class and so on. (*Voci femminili*, 85)

Looking back on the process of writing *Imoinda*, I only sometimes recall that it was not utter madness that led me there, but a combination of reasons with theatre in education at its centre. Concerning the publication itself, the response is worth some examination. As indicated above, the university of Trento was especially interested and undertook both translation and first publication. One of the many things I learnt from my colleague and translator, Giovanna Covi, is that opera in Italy is by no means the fetishized middle-class domain that we understand it to be in the UK. In contrast, opera is a popular art form, open to audiences singing along with their favourite arias. In addition, familiar with my writing, my translator perceived the epic potential within *Imoinda's* narrative and appreciated that potential *as opera*. Without her genuine interest, the libretto would not have been published in 2003, and may well have remained one more bundle of papers in my collection.

The response that followed from the USA was immediate and was led on the other side of the Atlantic by Maria Helena Lima, an esteemed scholar of Caribbean and Black British Literature,

who was adamant not only that she wanted to see a production of *Imoinda*, but that she knew the composer most likely to be interested. That composer was Glenn McClure. Lima's particular interest led to publication of the libretto in a stand-alone, slim volume in 2008. As I explained in interview to the Italian literary scholar, Lisa Marchi, it was being contacted by Glenn McClure and listening to his ideas for working with young people to develop a world premiere that prompted the second edition:

It seemed clear that a portable text was urgently needed, one that young people could physically carry around with them. The first bi-lingual edition, published in Italy in 2003, was a scholarly edition including several essays. Although extremely important, it was not pocket sized. The second edition of *Imoinda*, in English only, was published in 2008, the year of the world premiere at the School of the Arts (SOTA), in New York. (Marchi, 'Transformative Potential', Interview)

The 2008 *Imoinda* publication enabled high school students from the School of the Arts (SOTA) Rochester City School District, Rochester, New York, working alongside scholars, educators, and professional artists to compose a musical score. Together they developed and produced a full cast and full orchestra production of *Imoinda* with the support of an \$85,000 grant. Glenn McClure, a recipient of the prestigious Continental Harmony Commission by the American Composers Forum led the 'multi-generational' team composing the music for the production. The outcome was the only full production of *Imoinda or She Who will Lose her Name* as a World Music Opera. The team developing the writing from libretto to opera included SUNY Geneseo Faculty Members: Glenn McClure (Composer / Project Director); Dr. Maria Helena Lima (Literature

specialist); and Dr. Gerard Floriano (Opera and Vocal Technique). Musical Direction was by Alan Tirre (SOTA); and Sarah Mattison; and Choreography was by Clyde Morgan. Supported by the New York State Music Fund, the World premiere of *Imoinda* enjoyed a much-appreciated run from 1st to 4th May, at SOTA's Main Stage Theatre, and attracted rave reviews.

Publication of the 2008 edition has also led to a trickle of publications from scholars based primarily in European universities and the USA. Greek scholar, Mina Karavanta, for example, in her paper, "The injunctions of the spectre of slavery: affective memory and the counter writing of community" (2013) places *Imoinda*: alongside the recent work, *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip, in order to examine how the two "Caribbean texts" counterwrite the history of the slave plantation. On the other hand, writing in Margarete Rubik's book, *Aphra Behn and her Female Successors* (2011), Aspasia Velissariou is certainly dismissive of my writing. Indeed, as Professor Sue Thomas states, in her review of Rubik's collection of essays, Velissariou's is "an invective against" *Imoinda* clearly revealing a lack of knowledge of Caribbean writing and key elements of its tradition that need acknowledgement as with any other tradition of writing. Most significantly, as Thomas emphasises, Velissariou misses the point by being unaware of "the cultural context and the intertexts" of the writing of *Imoinda*. Thomas highlights further, "the final sequence of *Imoinda*" and the "important concepts in African-Caribbean literature and culture" to which the writing alludes. Thomas both lists and references these. Thomas' point reinforces the concern raised above, about how limitations of literary knowledge can be influential in terms of gatekeeping. Uninformed reading by cultural gatekeepers

confidently unaware of their own cultural limitations produce distortion. In the case of such reading within publishing and reviewing, for example, outcomes of rejection and non-publication can be deeply damaging.

This is not the case with Kristina Huang's "Carnivalizing *Imoinda's* Silence" (2021), which showcases a thorough mining by the author of several genres of my writing, including poetry and essays. Huang's is a sustained and successful attempt – as I consider it – at understanding not only why someone like me might claim an interest in opera, but also what that might mean in terms such as "carnivalizing" to which, as she emphasises, I have returned over the years. Huang also documents a range of performances of *Imoinda*, mainly in the USA. Additionally, collaboration, first with Juwon Ogungbe and more recently with the composer, Odaline de la Martinez, has led to several musical performances of sections of the work here in London.

In the UK, there has been no critical response to the libretto, as far as I am aware. However, an AHRC postgraduate 'student-led initiative' research funding has supported some exploration of the libretto. Former students, Natasha Bonnelame, Mar' Ene Edwin and Tendai Marima organised activities including a hybrid virtual/ in-person conference in which key interested scholars participated. The project, "Words from Other Worlds", was concerned to address the absence of Caribbean voices such as *Imoinda's* by producing a virtual and print collection of student perspectives on what they referred to as a "minority text". In so doing, *Words from Other Worlds* sought to "make African-Caribbean presence known" beyond the standard reading list of the English university classroom via the virtual global space of the internet [7]. The student-led initiative sought to create a shared arena through the interactive and collaborative framework

of the workshop, journal and web space. Their concern was to explore what they referred to as "the malleability of the text when read through the eyes of drama, music, art, literature and museum studies." They hoped through such a dynamic approach to IMOINDA, to produce a range of contemporary, "new" ways of looking at and going beyond the text within the radical context of the "ever-changing digital world".

Did the 2009 digital focus by postgraduate students make a difference, and if so, to whom? What difference did the 2008 School of the Arts Project in New York make, either to the students involved or to the opening of possibilities for production or sharing the work? The answer must certainly be that it is too early to tell how each influenced, changed, or shaped subsequent audiences or range of audiences. That the intervention by the University of Trento and the initial act of publication turned the tide of the project is evident. Initial publication led to curiosity about how the text might work on stage, leading in turn to a second edition and the beginning of performances that might be considered experimental. As Huang reminds us, however, a consistent theme of my writing is carnivalizing, including that of opera set within a Caribbean context. From that vantage point, in many ways, the published text is only the beginning.

I stated at the outset that *Imoinda* was reflective of the familiar route for Black writers in Britain, especially women. Since the various institutions remain largely exclusive, it also continues to be the case that our work is often better placed to gain exposure if we are positioned to do it ourselves. This is undoubtedly an additional burden. However, having long discovered that I could either spend precious time writing or beseeching agents to have me on their books, I do not have an

agent. Notably, some surprise has been expressed about Black writers not having agents. Why? Surprising or not, life is simply too short. At best, agents might open doors. With no such organising force, *Imoinda*, for example, had no direct route to the theatre, publication and so on, except my own and that of my networks. Despite it all, this is how far *Imoinda* has travelled. That there is no critical response from the UK does not surprise me. I am not holding my breath. Perhaps it is worth reiterating: the mirror is in the writing.

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Endnotes

1) The term 'transnational' is privileged here, not to obliterate or hide specific belongings, such as Caribbean countries, important though they certainly are, but to emphasise the multiple spaces of belonging that cannot be reduced to size or geographical positioning of country of birth in which one has perhaps not lived longest. Also, I capitalise Black in line with my understanding of Kim Hall's "tropes of blackness" in relation to "relations of power". See Hall, Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 6-7.

2) See, Huang, Kristina, 'Carnivalizing Imoinda's Silence'.

3) I refer to the novel, *The Unbelonging* by Joan Riley.

4) Hume, quoted in Eze 2000, p.692. For a discussion of the ongoing debate concerning the significance of Hume's footnote reasserting his racist views, see Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, "Hume, Race and Nature".

5) Hume quoted in Eze, p.692.

6) What I did not realise while writing *Imoinda* was that it was part of a new wave of generic writing, namely the neo-slave narrative which would become important for Black writers across many nations. See, J. Anim-Addo and M.H. Lima, "Introduction" *Callaloo* 40, no. 4 (2017), "The Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre" (3-13), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2017.0132>.

7) The digital repository of videos and content from the November 2009 interdisciplinary workshop is "Critical Perspectives on *Imoinda*," <https://www.gold.ac.uk/wow/>.

8) *The Good Place: The Trolley Problem* clip on YouTube; part 2

9) A cluster of cases seemed to make this story resonate particularly with students who'd read about the murders of Sarah Everard, Julia James, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman; and the reports of inappropriate police behaviour at vigils. Themes related to rape culture were particularly evident in undergraduate creative writing coursework that academic year (my anecdotal data).

10) Earlier still, William Caxton produced a medieval *Metamorphoses*, translated not straight from the Latin but a French version, that isn't covered here. (Ovid, *The First Book of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, 1480)

11) 'His attempt on Daphne... was no sudden impulse. He had long been in love with her, and had brought about the death of his rival... who disguised himself as a girl and joined Daphne's mountain revels. Apollo, knowing if this by divination, advised the mountain nymphs to bathe naked, and thus make sure that everyone in their company was

a woman; Leucippus's imposture was at once discovered, and the nymphs tore him to pieces.' (Graves, 2017)

12) If the fact that such a widespread governmental operation on US soil doesn't cause more public scrutiny seems odd, Lovecraft does provide prohibition as a cover, stressing that only the 'Keener news-followers' and 'liberal organizations' may have followed up on the fate of the prisoners, and these were met with 'long confidential discussions'. Presumably the same can be said for the destruction of Hodge's prison. (103).

13) See Joshi (p. 901).

14) The sequence is contained in *That This* (2010).

15) Mary Ruefle, via private letter on receipt of my book, *Birds and Ghosts*, in 2023.

About the Author

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