



Changing the Narrative

New voices, new texts, new perspectives
in the literature classroom

Lesley Nelson-Addy, Victoria Elliott and Gary Snapper explore various ways of diversifying the literature curriculum so that it reflects the lives and experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups – from re-working KS3 English units and KS5 coursework, to introducing critical race theory and debates about representation.

A Journey of Discovery

Breaking Away from the Single Story

It is still a rare privilege for many Black, Asian and minority ethnic students to encounter aspects of their own experience in the literature classroom, **Lesley Nelson-Addy** argues. Here she explores some of the challenges we face in changing that situation, and suggests some practical ways forward.

The ‘new’ GCSE curriculum is Anglocentric and epistemically violent: it uses knowledge as a weapon. Not solely because of the removal of the Steinbeck classic, *Of Mice and Men* – a book most of us grew to enjoy and really learnt how to teach well. The GCSE curriculum is epistemically violent because it has removed any explicit, critical discussions about racism and race. The curriculum focuses on two parts of a ‘Golden Age’ – the Elizabethan and Victorian eras: ‘golden’ because of the backdrop of Empire – a supposed highlight of the nation’s identity. In fact, this is largely a celebration of theft, exploitation, rape, racism, psychological and physical violence, and an array of unlawful, immoral brutal deaths.

As a Black British teacher it’s uncomfortable for me to admit that the new curriculum is a violent political statement that does not invite critical engagement with or acknowledgement of the consistent erasure of the Black presence and experience in Britain. Students can succeed in English without ever engaging with ideas about postcolonialism, with literature written by a BAME writer, or with literature that features a BAME protagonist and highlights features of cultural difference. Early career teachers can also go through their training experience without engaging in these things. The cycle of the single story continues.

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It hasn’t always been like this. I remember studying the ‘Poetry from Other Cultures’ anthology at GCSE. Even though I had issues with the naming of this collection – it was eventually renamed ‘Poetry from Different Cultures’ – the poems provided an insight into modern experiences, with protagonists from a variety of backgrounds. Two of the poetry collections offered by AQA (‘Romantic Relationships’ and ‘Power and Conflict’) do still have some poems written by BAME authors. However, this slight and swift engagement with such literature will perhaps only awaken the hunger of students who desire a genuinely racially and culturally diverse curriculum.

Changing things at KS3

To move on, we need to refrain from recycling the same literature yet again, in the process freeing ourselves from the clutches of the English canon. We need to go on a journey of discovery and begin to draw up a curriculum that best reflects our society as it is. We cannot continue to look back as a way to move forward especially if we are not looking back with a critical eye.

Whilst it might be difficult to change things at GCSE (despite wanting to see changes in both the Language and Literature courses), we *can* work on our KS3 courses, and begin to plan for dedicating time to the study of well-written literature by BAME authors and/or with BAME protagonists. I understand that finding the time can be a real challenge. We need to ensure that students do well in their exams, and develop their ‘cultural capital’ – but we also need to give students a racially and culturally rich literary diet.

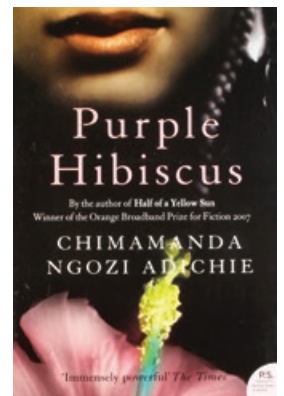
Below, I discuss some of the challenges we face and suggest some practical ways forward.

1. Powerful protagonists

Reading books with protagonists that mirror or relate to our own lived experience is empowering and liberating. We all know that our first encounter with a text that we connect with has the potential to leave a lasting impression. I remember when I read *Brit(ish)* by Afua Hirsch for the first time and encountered the narrative of her husband Sam: I was excited to find that his profile and perspective, despite being a black man, was similar to mine. However, the pleasure of finding, reading and studying a book that grants the young person the opportunity to see aspects of their experience written in fiction or non-fiction texts is still a rare privilege for many Black, Asian and minority ethnic students, especially students in Britain.

2. Moving beyond tokenism

When literature by British BAME writers is included in the curriculum, it often seems to be bolted on tokenistically – and it is often about ‘identity’. Such texts often force us to look at or understand ourselves – and questions of identity – through a white lens. Although that’s interesting, Black and Asian people do not spend our entire lives concerned about our identity. We also have everyday experiences that need to be explored – not in *comparison* to white people: just experiences in and of themselves. For example, *Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, gives us an insight into, and allows us to explore Adichie’s presentation, of family life. This should not mean that it is representative of *all* Black or Nigerian family life – but it does provide an opportunity for white students to ‘empathise with a character who looks nothing like them’ (Eddo-Lodge, 2018 p. 139).



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3. Planning a diverse curriculum

One of the ways that I have begun to engage with this move towards a more racially and ethnically diverse curriculum is by creating a ‘Voices and Perspectives’ unit for Year 8, focused on themes of pride, suffering and motherly love, and using poems exclusively by Black writers. This unit was part of a bigger project related to creating a mastery curriculum, to ensure that the students had a rigorous, coherent and challenging KS3 experience. Texts studied included: ‘Still I rise’ by Maya Angelou, ‘Praise Song for my Mother’ by Grace Nichols, ‘Flag’ by John Agard, ‘A Mother in a Refugee Camp’ by Chinua Achebe, and ‘Once Upon a Time’ by Gabriel Okara.

In order to trial the scheme of work and refine it, I taught it to a Year 7 top set group. The students contributed ideas related to improving the scheme of work, and we also had some interesting discussions about why the unit solely included Black writers. Even though these students were between the ages of 11 and 12, they were able to engage in discussion on this topic – and explored counter-questions posed by writers about their university curricula too, such as ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ Having that open discussion about the current curriculum and the need to explore diversity has brought the class closer together.

4. Collaborative planning and mutual support

As I have said, time is an issue – so we need to be mindful about sharing resources with each other, and we need to empower all teachers to feel comfortable teaching the content. We would be doing the country a disservice if we chose to solely appoint BAME teachers to lead on or teach BAME literature. Engaging with discussions related to race and racism may be uncomfortable, especially when there are BAME students in the class – but a more integrated approach is needed.

This should be a collaborative effort. We should be able to work with one another in our departments to ensure that all teachers feel confident in this process. During the creation of the ‘Voices and Perspectives’ scheme of work, each teacher who was creating a scheme of work had a critical friend, a fresh pair of eyes to look over the work, before it was taught in classrooms. As well as being an opportunity to add to the scheme of work, quality assurance from a critical friend can help to ensure that the content and pedagogy is appropriate.

5. Creating a safe space

Even with the best motives and intentions, and after diligent research and fervent discussions about race, it is possible that teachers or students may say something offensive during a class discussion. I like to believe, however, that the classroom should be the safest place to expose ignorance, to ask uncomfortable questions, to make apologies for mistakes, and to hear the voices of others who are able to share their truth in order to teach others. Furthermore, the more we teach about BAME writers, protagonists and experiences, the more comfortable we will become with doing so.

We need to take advantage of the classroom space and of English as a subject: both provide the freedom to explore a variety of issues safely, sensitively, but more importantly, candidly. We have to confront our reservations and have these conversations – and we have to do it now.

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Black and Brilliant

Changing the Narrative of NEA with Black British literature (and beyond)

‘There has never been a better time for books written by Black authors, particularly Black British authors’, writes **Victoria Elliott**. Here she recommends recent texts by Black British authors, and a few others, which would provide great starting points for the NEA (coursework) element of A Level English Literature, whilst broadening teachers’ and students’ literary horizons.

For large parts of the secondary English curriculum we are constrained in our text choices by exam specifications, and by what is contained in sets of 30 in the book cupboard. But there is a glimmer, a moment of wide open choice, in the form of NEA (non-examination assessment) – A Level coursework. This is a moment when we can prepare students for a world of literature outside the largely canonical, largely historical experience they have had up to Year 13, and really open up a world of contemporary literature. It is also a moment when we can step away from the ‘default white’ of most of our school curricula.

Reading any one of a number of autobiographical dissections of race that have come out in the last few years – Akala’s *Natives*, Reni Eddo-Lodge’s *Why I am no longer talking to white people about race*, Afua Hirsch’s *Brit-ish*, Chelsea Kwakye and Ore Ogunbiyi’s *Taking Up Space: The Black Girl’s Manifesto for Change*, or *A Fly Girl’s Guide to University* (Lola Olufemi, Odelia Younge, Waithera Sebatindira, and Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan) – drives home the point that for the demographic of the young Black British student, there is never a time at school when they study writers who look like them, or texts which feature themselves. They find themselves erased from literature and history. As Olufemi writes in *A Fly Girl’s Guide to University*:

‘It is useless to pretend that Dickens ‘spoke the language of humanity’ or that while male authors can articulate other experiences unaffected by their positionality. The effect of the white curriculum is such that we have imbued white male writers with the power and authority to speak for everyone; marginalised students often find themselves grasping at texts that were not written for them in an attempt to find a shared humanity that is based on their exclusion’ (Olufemi, 2019, pp. 57–8).

NEA is the opportunity for English teachers to broaden out that language of humanity and offer a wider range of texts, choices and suggestions to their students, of whatever colour, and show a different face to literature.

The good news is that there has never been a better time for books written by Black authors, particularly Black British authors, and for finding the perfect complement to your A Level students’ studies. In this article I will discuss a handful of texts which I have loved in the last eighteen months and make suggestions as to how they could form the basis of NEA, and what to pair them with.

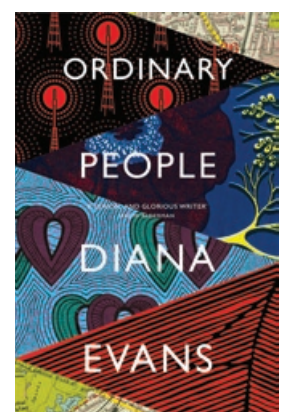
One of the challenges with NEA is finding critical material to support students, or indeed to enable ourselves to come to grips with less familiar texts. I have mostly suggested pairings with more traditional A Level texts, therefore, to reduce the burden of new texts, but the scope is really almost endless.

The Emperor’s Babe

Bernadine Evaristo shot to wide recognition as the first Black woman to win the Booker last year, with *Girl, Woman, Other* – but it is the earlier *The Emperor’s Babe* that I would strongly recommend for reading both for pleasure and study. A novel in verse, it tells the story of a Black girl in Roman London, who is married off to an older man, and eventually rises to become – as foreseen in the title – the Emperor’s mistress. The language is a riotous melding of anachronism, Latin and contemporary rhythms and has plenty to offer the close reader, quite apart from the form itself. The themes of sexual politics – and the sexualisation of (very) young Black girls has plenty to offer a contemporary reading. Alternatively, an assignment could focus on the treatment of history within the text.

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Given the relationship between the powerful older male (either the Emperor or her husband) and the protagonist, one potential pairing is with Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, where the protagonist’s fiancé is forced into the King’s harem, considering representations of sexuality and beauty presented from the very different viewpoints of the two books. Another good pairing would be that old favourite *The Handmaid’s Tale* for similar reasons.



My Sister, The Serial Killer

At the beginning of 2019 a short novel called *My Sister, The Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite made a big impression on the literary scene. I read it and was immediately struck by its parallels with *Sense and Sensibility* – an opinion in which I seem to have been alone. It's one which would make an interesting exploration for NEA, however. The protagonist Korede is a nurse whose life is interrupted by the need to cover up the murders committed by her younger sister Ayoola. The two sisters and their mother are alone in the world, after the death of their father before the book opens. Ayoola is headstrong, refuses to listen to reason, and Korede is always picking up after her. Korede's own love life is disrupted if not entirely destroyed by her sister's attractiveness and actions. The relationship between the sisters and their individual characterisation, in both books, would make an excellent assignment. Braithwaite's novel's brevity would complement the longer Austen well.

However, *My Sister, The Serial Killer* eventually reveals that Korede is not an entirely reliable narrator, and the structure of the narrative together with the topic, brings up parallels with a crime novel already on the syllabus for AQA B – *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

Tail of the Blue Bird

Another potential pairing (for either book) is with another novel from an African writer – *Tail of the Blue Bird* by Nii Ayikwei Parkes. This time in Ghana, rather than Nigeria, this is a magical realist novel (or would be classed as such in a Western context, which in itself is an interesting debate) about a British-trained forensic pathologist who is requisitioned (yes, I do mean that) by the police to discover the truth about an odd discovery made by the girlfriend of an important politician – is it a body? Is it a dead baby? Is it leftover meat? – in a village hut. Kayo Odamtten goes to uncover the truth and finds something more strange than a simple murder in this novel in which science and magic meet. I won't spoil the ending (this is no *Of Mice and Men*) because I do urge you to read this for yourself. But the comparisons between the village setting of *Tail of the Blue Bird* and *Roger Ackroyd*, and the inevitable differences between rural Ghana and middle England, would make for an interesting discussion. There is also an element of unreliability – though not on the part of Kayo – and the questions about the official versus the real narratives of crime would make it a good partner to either the Christie or Braithwaite's novel.

Meatspace

Sibling relationships are at the centre of Nikesh Shukla's *Meatspace*, which relates the adventures of a young author, stuck on his second book, obsessed with social media, who is suddenly confronted with his only internet namesake, Kitab Balasubramanyam. Kitab the Other has travelled from Bangalore to London to find our narrator, and seeks to insert himself into his life in ways which the original Kitab finds increasingly creepy. Meanwhile, the narrator's brother Aziz has travelled to New York to track down his doppelganger.

The novel weaves together social media, blogpost and unreliable and strange narrative to create a discussion on identity that is nothing to do with the immigrant experience, for once, but is about family, the

personae we present to the world via the internet and the paralysis of grief. The pair of brothers here would make for a good comparison again with Braithwaite's novel, but there is also scope for *A Comedy of Errors*, or *Blood Brothers*, considering the ways in which context shapes us, and how far apart or close together brothers can be. Pursuing the theme of the Uncanny in the shape of those who take our places, Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* could also offer a strong pairing, highlighting the black comedy underlying *Meatspace*.

Shukla's book is, I think, more likely to appeal to male than female A Level students, but it offers salutary and amusing lessons about life channelled through social media that will resonate with all. (A more 'literary' and appreciated novel by Shukla, *The One Who Wrote Destiny* is another good option, and for once set in Bradford, specifically Keighley, not London, which seems to be the epicentre of most British novels.)

(Note: Nikesh Shukla is the only author in this list who is of Asian rather than Black heritage. There are significant reasons why disaggregating 'BAME' is an important task, but our students of Asian heritage are as largely unreflected by the curriculum as our Black ones.)

Ordinary People, Telling Tales, Gingerbread

To approach this from the other direction:

If you like teaching Ian McEwan's novels (perhaps especially *Saturday*) as NEA texts ... then why not try out Diana Evans' *Ordinary People*, which explores the world of the Black British middle class rarely seen in fiction.

If you leap at the opportunity to do a bit of Chaucer when given the chance ... then pair it with Patience Agbabi's masterful (and bawdy) poetic retelling *Telling Tales*. (Her performance of 'The Wife of Bafa' as part of a workshop at the NATE Conference a few years ago was mesmerising.) This collection would also pair well with *The Emperor's Babe*, given the historical resonances of the texts and the linguistic playfulness deployed by both authors.)

If A.S. Byatt's beautiful and resonant explorations in her short stories are the ideal NEA text ... then consider Helen Oyeyemi's *Gingerbread*, which draws on fairytales and mother-daughter relationships, and would also pair well with Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*.

And finally ...

I had read none of these books before January 2019. I started last year with a resolution not to read books by white men, because I was aware that, despite myself, they dominated my reading. Even *A Brief History of Seven Killings* had been staring at me balefully from my bedside shelf since the day I bought it.

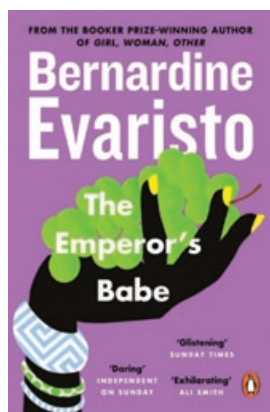
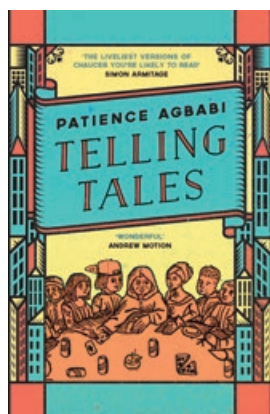
It was an experiment that brought me great joy and hugely broadened my horizons and my knowledge. I recommend it as an approach, just as I recommend these texts for interesting NEA experiences that will resonate with your students.

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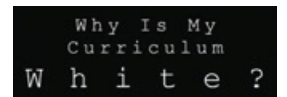
‘Why is My Curriculum White?’

Cultural Values in the Literature Classroom

‘Why is my curriculum white?’ is one of many questions about cultural value that go beyond set text study, that are ideal for debate and investigation in the literature classroom, and that help to develop students’ literary and cultural awareness, argues **Gary Snapper**.

‘A critical question for me is whether the Western tradition has the intellectual resources within to transform itself and come to terms with the historical effects and traces of racism that are invested in our institutions and in our knowledge traditions. I think it has – as a teacher I have to believe this – but we are only at the beginning of this process of transformation and the UCL collective has initiated a student-led movement that has the potential to provoke and demand curriculum change’.

Michael A. Peeters, University of Waikato, New Zealand (2015), ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 47, No. 7.



Michael Peeters, quoted above, refers to the campaign ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ which originated at University College London (UCL) in 2014, and has since become hugely influential in campaigns to decolonise the curriculum in universities around the UK. (See the UCL website ‘Dismantling the Master’s House’ for further information). The key element of this campaign is the demand to change the curriculum to incorporate greater representation of black and minority ethnic culture and history.

Such a demand is not new, of course: we have seen many attempts to make such changes in both schools and universities over the last 50 years or more. But what has developed over the last 5 years or so is a student-led movement which has forced universities to at least think about taking steps towards more radical change. Perhaps the most well-known example of this was the case of Lola Olufemi’s protest about the literature curriculum at Cambridge University in 2017.

Developing literary, cultural and political awareness

In relation to literature, much of the discussion – in schools and universities – has focused on the set texts chosen to be studied. I argue that we need to – and can – go beyond choosing different set texts. We should also think about how we can work within and around the constraints of the curriculum:

- to broaden students’ awareness of the ways in which literature interacts with social and cultural politics in ‘the real world’
- to bring a wider variety of texts, voices and perspectives into the literature classroom
- to make more space for discussion of, and investigation into, questions of culture and diversity – questions which are usually of great interest to our students.

Here, I briefly outline a range of approaches that I try to build into sixth form courses to make more space for questions of culture, diversity and politics. These suggestions are directed mainly at sixth form level, but some could well work, with adjustments, at KS3 and/or KS4 too. They are based on the following principles:

1. **Students should leave school understanding the key issues of our time** – including race, class, gender and sexuality – and the ways these issues might relate to their personal, social, cultural and professional lives, as well as their academic lives. For English, this is crucial – since these issues are now at the heart of what many English academics and university courses do. Just because a syllabus does not include specific treatment of these issues does not mean we should not or cannot address them.
2. **We should aim to develop broader literary, cultural and political awareness in students** – by enabling them to consider and discuss the nature and functions of literature and culture in society – and in literary studies. This helps them to understand and engage more effectively with English as a subject, and to contextualise their set text study. We have to plan carefully to enable this to happen, but such activity can be built into existing courses – both by embedding it within set text study and by making space for short stand-alone units or lessons between set texts.

All these approaches are applicable to a range of issues and topics, and are designed as much to develop literary and cultural awareness as political and social awareness. (Below, I mention race, class, and gender and sexuality, but topics such as the environment, social justice, and literary and aesthetic value can also be tackled in this way.)

Each of these strategies could help students to think about the question ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ and to begin to ‘come to terms with the historical effects and traces of racism that are invested in our institutions and in our knowledge traditions’.

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1. The Basics: Race, Gender, Sexuality, Class

It's hard for students to think effectively about issues such as race, colonialism, class, gender and sexuality if they have not had the opportunity to grasp the facts, rehearse the arguments and discuss the issues in a controlled environment. Sixth form English classes are perfect for this – and indeed I have found that students are very keen indeed to discuss these issues. It's crucial, in the first instance, to discuss these as *social*, not *literary*, issues. Use articles and extracts from media and non-fiction texts as stimulus. As well as talking about 'race', 'class', 'gender and sexuality', they should be introduced to and discuss the key concepts of critical race theory, postcolonialism, feminism and Marxism – as social, cultural and political movements rather than as literary theories. (They can move on to literary applications once they have grasped the key facts and arguments - *see below*).

2. Arguing about Literature

A great way to get students thinking more broadly about literature is to devote time to introducing them to debates about literature and culture in society. Media and journalism provide a wealth of resources. This is a great way to raise and discuss issues to do with the canon and the literature curriculum, the place of Shakespeare and the classics, and so on. For questions of race and culture, this is the ideal place to introduce and discuss the idea of 'Decolonising the Curriculum' and the 'Why is My Curriculum White?' debate: there are many online resources for this. Another great topic to focus on these issues is the question of race and casting in film and theatre productions (*see images above*).

3. Introducing Theory

Once students have engaged in these general debates, they can begin to look in detail at the representation of race, class, gender and sexuality in texts, and more broadly the representation of race, class, gender and sexuality in the worlds of literature, theatre and media, as well as literary studies. This is the time to introduce – at a very basic level – the idea of literary theory: the applications of critical race theory, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, Marxist theory, and perhaps others, to literary study. The underlying idea in all these is the examination of the operation of power in society and culture. It's crucial to remember that all students going on to read English at university – and many other subjects too – will study these theories, and often find them very difficult and unfamiliar. Introducing these ideas at school at an accessible level helps to prepare students not only for life and citizenship but also for their next academic steps.

4. Beyond Set Texts

Detailed study of whole texts – usually set texts – is the core of what we do – and will always be central. But there is considerable benefit in making wide reading (and viewing and listening) a more integral part of literary study in the sixth form. Beyond set texts, teachers can bring a range of additional texts into the classroom to broaden perspectives and increase contextual understanding – from short texts such as newspaper and web articles to stories, poems and extracts from longer texts (both fiction and non-fiction), to a range of media and performance texts (from classic theatre and poetry readings to topical tv). This broadens students' textual experience and knowledge, but also provides opportunities to introduce and build awareness of diverse voices from a range of cultures and perspectives – both in English and in translation – and of literature as a cultural force beyond the classroom, the curriculum and the printed page.

5. Creativity and Student Voice

The omission of creative or original writing (other than exam-style essays) from most sixth form literature courses is perplexing, especially since a great deal of evidence shows how successful this can be as a way of helping students to understand and engage with literature and literary analysis. It can be done through quick workshop activities embedded into study of set and unseen texts, or it can be done through more extended writing assignments – creative or 'recreative' writing in response to texts or topics studied, or non-fiction writing of various sorts. Another under-used option is the personal investigation into a literary issue – for instance into an issue such as 'Why is My Curriculum White?' – along the lines of the A level language investigation. Crucially, as well as developing literary awareness, such approaches help to develop students' research skills, and their sense of personal response, individual voice and cultural perspective, in ways that are often less constrained than the exam-style essay.

Further reading

See Teaching English Literature 16–19 by Carol Atherton, Andrew Green and Gary Snapper (NATE/Routledge 2013) for more detailed discussion of these principles and suggested approaches. The English and Media Centre's *Text Reader Critic* is a great resource, and the *AQA B A Level Literature* specification – and related text books – provide resources for introducing theoretical approaches.

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