

Institution: Brunel University London		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Diversifying Contemporary Writing and Culture		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Bernardine Evaristo	Professor – Creative Writing	09/2011 - present
Benjamin Zephaniah	Professor – Creative Writing	09/2011 - present
Hannah Lowe	Senior Lecturer - Creative Writing	06/2017 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Brunel Creative Writing research has transformed and diversified the UK literary landscape since 2014. The national engagement of 'The Complete Works Poetry' has increased the representation of ethnic-minority authors in the publishing industry by 10% (up from below 1% in 2005), and Professor Benjamin Zephaniah's work has influenced approximately 105,000 pupils at 105 UK schools to read and write. The international success of the Brunel African Poetry Prize has enabled winners to collaborate with Beyonce and be translated into 5 different languages spoken across the globe, expanding international readership of minority authors significantly. Professor Bernardine Evaristo was the first black woman to be named Author of the Year in 2020, following the success of her Booker-awarded novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, which subsequently led to the biggest shake-up in the UK publishing industry to-date. Brunel's Creative Writing researchers have redefined the contemporary UK literary field as a diverse, internationally recognised cultural brand and, in the process, have raised public awareness of marginalised literary voices and demonstrated that reading and writing is for everybody.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Prof. Evaristo's research into the life and work of Amiri Baraka (Ref. 2), one of the most famous and controversial African American artists of the 20th century, was to assess what underpinned his politics and to what extent his influence reached beyond the United States in influencing the Black Arts movement in the UK. Research was carried out in London, UK and in New York and New Jersey, USA, through multiple interviews with people who knew him. These included 2 of America's leading older African American women poets, Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni, who were part of his arts community in the 60s; as well as academics who wrote about him, such as Professor Gaffio Watts and Professor Komozi Woodard; and the director of the theatre where his work was most recently produced. Interviews were conducted with those who were involved in black arts in Britain, including theatre director, Hazel Carey, television director Charlie Hanson, who produced many trailblazing black programmes for the BBC, and Paulette Randall, Britain's leading black female theatre director and a founder member of Theatre of Black Women.

The interviews revealed a complex, uncompromising and sometimes contradictory individual who wrote poetry for the masses, believed in black nationalism and spoke out against racial injustice. Yet while he ostensibly argued for equality, his radical stance was commensurately misogynistic, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and intolerant of fellow black people who disagreed with him. The documentary also revealed that although publicly homophobic, Baraka had gay relationships when he was younger, and his attitudes towards women, at least, improved with

the times. Yet he was bigoted while decrying bigotry. The interviews and conversations also revealed the power of his writing and the Black Arts Movement to inspire young black people developing careers in the arts in the UK in the 80s. The documentary was ground-breaking as an investigation into the radical black arts scenes of 2 countries and 2 eras, and it was the first, and is, the only radio programme to focus on Baraka, and doubly so to view him through the multiple perspectives of those who knew him and those who were influenced by him. The final insights are in-depth yet also expansive in making transatlantic connections for black people who are making art happen in societies where they are marginalised and need to create platforms to be heard, to be included, to reflect their specific, demographic realities.

As one of the world's most celebrated performance poets as well as a novelist, playwright, reggae musician and self-style 'troublemaker', Prof. Zephaniah's research as practice grew out of the poetry school known as the 'dub poets'. His poetry combines campaigning politics with humour and is enjoyed by a broad demographic both racially, socially and in terms of age. Prof. Zephaniah's autobiography *The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah* (Ref. 5) highlighted his personal struggles as a black artist making his way in the publishing and wider creative industries in the racially discriminatory times of the 1970s and 1980s.

Dr Lowe's work combines historical research with memory studies and postcolonial studies. Her research as practice currently explores British multicultural society and its links to the Caribbean and China. Her most recent publication, *Women Writers and the Windrush Legacy* (Ref. 4), reclaims the story of Windrush for women writers who addressed the subject, and female Caribbean writers of the time generally, who faced a confrontation with British institutions including a sometimes-hostile publishing industry.

With *Girl, Woman, Other* (Ref. 1), Prof. Evaristo's aim was to see if she could address the almost complete absence of black British women in British fiction in a single novel. There are some 800,000 black British women and Prof. Evaristo wanted to explore a little of the variety of who they are. Extensive research followed, through reading literature, fields trips, internet research, personal conversations, historical research and fictional experimentation. The novel presents the findings of the research through the creation of 12 distinct protagonists in *Girl, Woman, Other* making it a polyphonic fiction. Prof. Evaristo discovered that multiplicity is a weapon against stereotyping and invisibility. The novel spans different cultural backgrounds, ages, classes, sexualities and occupations, and it provided insights into the construction of multiple character formations, including 1 non-binary womxn. Regarding form, Prof. Evaristo invented a new form for the novel. This employs a kind of poetic patterning and compression, which allows her to simultaneously get inside each character's thoughts as if they are speaking in the first person, but to also present them externally, while segueing their past with their present. The unorthodox punctuation is also an experimental and liberating free-flowing fusion of language.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Ref. 1 Evaristo, Bernardine, *Girl, Woman, Other*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019

Ref. 2 Evaristo, Bernardine, *Fiery Inspiration: Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement*, 2-part BBC Radio 4 documentary, 2015. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06j1kdp>

Ref. 3 Lowe, Hannah, 'Remember the Ship: Narrating the Empire Windrush'. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54 (4), 2018: 542 - 555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1411416>

Ref. 4 Lowe, Hannah, 'Inside the Frame: Women Writers and the Windrush Legacy.' *Wasafiri*, 33 (2), 2018: 3-9. [10.1080/02690055.2018.1431094](https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2018.1431094)

Ref. 5 Zephaniah, Benjamin, *The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah*. Scribner UK, 2018

Ref. 6 Zephaniah, Benjamin, *Windrush Child*. Scholastic UK, 2020

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

A survey conducted by the Publishers Association in 2019 found that the UK publishing workforce has failed to reflect Britain's racial and regional diversity. Only 11.6% of respondents identified as BAME, which is 2.4% lower than the UK population (14%) and 28.6% lower than London (40.2%), where most major publishers are based. These results echo those of a survey conducted in 2017, which found that 90% of the publishing workforce was white. This is in direct correlation to the underrepresentation of Black authors in publishing, who often do not make it through the submission process in the first place due to a lack of relatability on the publishers' side. This results "in fewer representations of marginalised communities and fewer visible authors from [poorer] regions, meaning kids [who grow up poor and working class] will still grow up thinking writing is something other people do" (E1).

Brunel research has gone actively against the 'whiteness' of the publishing industry, and has rallied for the commissioning of more black editors and convinced publishing houses to start implementing change. Over the course of the last 7 years, Brunel research has enabled over 40 minority authors to be published in prestigious outlets and win internationally renowned literary prizes. Likewise, it has significantly expanded readership and introduced approximately 105,000 pupils from all backgrounds to the world of reading and writing, encouraging them that it is something anyone can do regardless of where they come from.

I. Diversifying the UK publishing industry.

The research has had significant impact on the UK publishing industry and opened the doors to the biggest shake-up in publishing houses to-date. In June 2020, Prof. Evaristo's Booker-awarded novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (which sold over 500,000 copies) topped the paperback chart, making her the first woman of colour to claim that spot (E2). Prof. Evaristo was also named Author of the Year at the British Book Awards, making her the first black writer to win. UK publishing had previously been criticised for being a "hostile environment for black authors" and been urged to "look inside with [their] actions to improve the environment for black authors" (E3).

In the same month, the 'big 5' UK publishing houses (Penguin Random House; Macmillan; Hachette; HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster) acknowledged that "they must do a lot more to address racial inequalities in the books world" (E4). This response was a direct result of the historically unprecedented paperback charts in June 2020 and an open letter written by the newly formed Black Writers Guild (BWG), where Prof. Evaristo and Prof. Zephaniah are 2 out of over 100 members. The letter called on all major UK publishing houses to introduce much needed reforms to make the industry more inclusive. In October 2020, Prof. Evaristo has been awarded an OBE which further contributed to diverse literature being put on the list of national treasures.

In order to facilitate the much-needed change within the publishing industry, Brunel research had already begun addressing the issue 8 years prior. In 2012, Prof. Evaristo founded the Brunel International African Poetry Prize, an annual poetry prize worth GBP3,000 that develops, celebrates, and promotes poetry from Africa. The prize—which is the largest African poetry prize in the world—was set up to revitalise African poetry, increase its visibility in the literary scene and actively support poets in the opening of doors leading towards an international presence. Since 2014, there have been 43 shortlisted poets and 11 winners. During the assessment period, winners have gone on to collaborate with Beyonce who used their poetry in her 2016 album *Lemonade*, which was the highest-selling album globally that year with 2,500,000 copies sold (Warsan Shire); been awarded Guardian Best Book of 2017 (Nick Makoha); appeared in the New York Times (Nick Makoha, Gbenga Adesina); gained employment as Poetry Fellow at New York University (Gbenga Adesina, 2017) and won the Young Poet Laureate for London (Warsan Shire, October 2013) and Young People's Laureate for London (Momtaza Mehri, 2018). They have also been published as Penguin Modern Poet (Warsan Shire, 2017) and been translated into over 5 different languages (Safia Elhillo), including Arabic thereby expanding their readership significantly. Between them, they have published over 15 chapbooks (E5).

A related scheme, The Complete Works Poetry, was founded by Prof. Evaristo in 2007 and ran until 2017. It was deemed the most successful poetry-mentoring scheme in the UK. Funded by the Arts Council England (GBP260,000) it was designed to shake up the poetry-publishing industry and increase the number of black and Asian authors. From 2014 to 2017, 10 poets were individually mentored for 1 to 2 years by many of Britain's leading poets. The scheme was successful: while in 2005, less than 1% of black and Asian poets were published, in 2016 that number had risen to 10%.

Since 2014, former mentees have been shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre Poetry Prize worth GBP5,000 (Malika Booker, 2014); won the Manchester Poetry Prize (Mona Arshi, 2014) and the Forward Prize (Mona Arshi, 2015), both worth GBP10,000; won the T.S. Eliot Prize worth GBP25,000 (Sarah Howe, 2015) and joined famous previous winners such as Seamus Heaney and Sean O'Brien in the ranks; gained appointments at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and Royal Holloway University (Kayo Chingonyi, 2015); and published poetry collections (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017) with Penguin and other prestigious outlets, such as the Financial Times (Rishi Dastidar, Sarah Howe) and British Council Literature (Raymond Antrobus) (E6).

II. Increasing pupils' attainment and transforming the literary landscapes of UK schools.

Prof. Zephaniah's performance poetry with a political tone has encouraged pupils from all backgrounds to read and write more. His research goes directly against the notion that "writing is something other people do" (E1) and shows that you can be anything you want to be regardless of where you are from. Since 2014, it has been used by approximately 105 schools across the UK to inspire 105,000 pupils to read and write.

Prof. Zephaniah's autobiography describes his non-literary background and impoverished upbringing in Birmingham as a Windrush child and how he was ultimately able to turn his life around through literature. Pulling from his story, schools and local education authorities have used his poetry to create a role model for their pupils. In December 2018, Harrow College named a building after him. The new Zephaniah Learning Centre was funded through the Mayor's Skills for Londoners Capital Fund (GBP2,500,000). At the launch event, the Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills (Greater London Authority), said, "The Mayor and I are committed to ensuring all Londoners, whatever their background, can share in the capital's prosperity and fulfil their potential – this brilliant new learning centre will help equip many more local people with the skills they need" (E7).

The Principal of Harrow College was "delighted to officially open the new Zephaniah Building which promises to provide learning opportunities to all students who use it" (E7). In 2019, pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities shared their own writing with Prof. Zephaniah when he visited campus, "showing how they had been inspired by his vibrant, evocative poems" (E8). Prof. Zephaniah has enabled pupils to create new forms of artistic expressions which, particularly in 2020, have had therapeutic purposes when it enhanced the quality of their lives during the lockdown brought about by Covid-19.

Prof. Zephaniah's work has increased the representation of black literature in schools and demonstrated to pupils that anyone can be a reader and writer. Schools across the country have used his poetry to reduce the misrepresentation of black literature and simultaneously develop a literary framework to which ethnic-minority students can relate. Prof. Zephaniah was the first black British author with which many pupils could identify. This subsequently reduced the discriminatory notion of "you are not a poet in the eyes of the white man" and instead enabled them to learn that poetry is for them.

Prof. Zephaniah's poetry has also introduced pupils at predominantly white schools to ethnic-minority communities and broadened their understanding of our world where history is often ignored. These schools have benefitted from his work in the telling and visualisation of black history and increase their pupils' understanding of what is happening in the world (E9).

III. Raising public awareness of marginalized voices.

The works by Prof. Zephaniah and Dr Lowe (then, Lecturer) have also been used to raise awareness of the Windrush generation and bring into the public domain voices which are usually silenced. On Windrush Day 2020, the British Library (BL) released audio recordings of 3 public events held in 2018, where they had used Dr Lowe's work in an exhibition (*Windrush: Songs in a Strange Land*) to "shed new light on the significance of the arrival of the *Windrush* as part of a longer history of slavery and colonialism" (E10). The BL had commissioned Dr Lowe to create a poem-film for the exhibition in order to educate the public about improving the "relationship between Britain, the Caribbean and the descendants of the 'Windrush Generation' [which] continues to be fraught as anti-racist protests gather force..." (E10).

Prof. Zephaniah's *Windrush Child* directly relates to this undertaking, as it makes the present-day subjects of Windrush, racism, and terrorism accessible to young people. Both Dr Lowe's and Prof. Zephaniah's poetry contribute to widening the public access to unsung stories of the past and increase their understanding of "what's happening in the world, and change it for the better [which] we owe to ourselves, and future generations" (E9).

Brunel Creative Writing is a leading example of how excellent research can transform the literary landscape of a nation, by opening the doors of the publishing industry to ethnic-minority authors; addressing racial inequalities in the world of literature; and creating a new literary framework for an entire generation of pupils that shows that reading and writing is indeed for everybody.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

E1: *The Guardian*, 16 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/16/publishers-failing-to-improve-racial-and-regional-diversity-survey-finds>

E2: Booker Prizes Facts and Figures, <https://thebookerprizes.com/facts-figures>

E3: *The Guardian*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/10/black-british-authors-uk-book-charts-blm-bernardine-evaristo-reni-eddo-lodge-waterstones>

E4: *The Guardian*, 17 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/17/uk-publishers-lack-of-diversity-black-writers-guild>

E5: Brunel African Poetry Prize, <https://www.africanpoetryprize.org/2015-joint-winners>

E6: The Complete Works Poetry, <https://thecompleteworkspoetry.wordpress.com>

E7: New Zephaniah learning centre is officially opened at Harrow College, https://www.harrow.ac.uk/news/21573-zephaniah_opening_dec_2018.html

E8: Poet Benjamin Zephaniah visits campus building named in his honour, https://www.harrow.ac.uk/news/21603-zephaniah_visit_march2019.html

E9: *The Guardian*, 12 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/12/black-people-history-respected-teachers-police-benjamin-zephaniah>

E10: <https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2020/06/get-up-listen-up-for-windrush-day-2020.html>