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## New northern voices: Black British writing and the devolving politics of prize culture

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### ABSTRACT

Representations of Black British life have long been concentrated in London. The capital occupies the centre of Britain's post-imperial imaginary and its literary economy, with Manchester at the fore of attempts to address cultural inequalities, from George Osborne's Northern Powerhouse agenda to regional outposts of the BBC and major publishers. Amidst increasing decentralizing momentum, this article proposes that literary awards are key in what James Procter and Corinne Fowler call the "devolution" of Black British writing. Focusing on Manchester's Portico Prize for the book that "best evokes the spirit of the North of England", I trace the award's approach to "racial diversity" and "the North" since 1985, identifying a creative economy framework in which a "placed" literary northernness exists in tension with the centralized Black British discourse. Overall, this article suggests that literary awards articulate in new ways the spatial imbalances within Britain's literary and political economies.

### KEYWORDS

Literary economy; prize culture; Northern England; Black British writing; decentralization; the Portico Prize

### Introduction: Decentralization and diversification

In July 2018, the Northern Fiction Alliance (NFA) composed an open letter to Britain's creative industries. Signed by 11 independent publishers including Comma Press, Peepal Tree, Dead Ink, and others, the letter asked the sector to become more equitable and better reflect its readers, condemning how "white, middle-class and London-centric our industry still is" (Northern Fiction Alliance 2018). In the letter, the NFA proposed an eight-point plan for decentralizing the literary economy and diversifying its workforce, including requests for publishers to sign up to the Spare Room Project in London, attend the NFA's round table on regional diversity, and develop a strategy to reach audiences beyond the capital and literary festivals. Recent policy research on regional imbalances in the creative sector also calls for greater investment in cultural infrastructure in northern cities, towns, rural areas, and coastal fringes (Northern Culture All Party Parliamentary Group, 2022). These demands to diversify Britain's creative sector concern long-standing intersecting, racial, socio-economic, and geographic inequalities dominating access to Britain's creative industries, but they also pose questions regarding the status of "the North" in the wider national imaginary. At the time the NFA's letter was published, two

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years had passed since Britain voted to leave the European Union (EU), and the “Leave” vote had become synonymous with a geographically vague and largely white xenophobic north (Hazeldine 2020). This tendency was rooted in a historical narrative of Northern England as a “region of discontent” during the Thatcher period and as the home of the “white working class” following several urban antagonisms in the 1980s and early 2000s. Both the 1989 burning of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford and the 2001 “Northern race riots” legitimized a governmental discourse of “parallel lives” (Cantle 2001) which racialized the white working class and pitted this group against predominantly Asian communities. The Brexit campaign and its aftermath saw this racialized narrative of the working-class north return with renewed significance under the neologism of “the left behind” (Goodhart 2017) or the “revolt of the rustbelt” (Hazeldine 2017). In Brexit-related media and political commentary, the north–south divide articulated itself forcefully in a set of dual narratives about Britain’s global identity after leaving the EU. Fixed to a localized English ethno-nationalism, the north was once again defined against its progressive counterpart – Theresa May’s “global Britishness” – which, it seemed, was located in London. While this opposition of a “local” north and a “global” London predates the Referendum, what Brexit revealed more acutely than before is the ongoing political currency of an iconography of the north as a post-industrial, white working-class monolith.

These spatial imbalances marking discussions of race in Britain are paralleled in the literary formation of Black British writing. Since the 1980s, it has, as Stuart Hall (1987) puts it, become increasingly “centred” to the extent that London takes on a national status as the default site for Britain’s post-imperial literary identity. Early post-war writing from the Caribbean diaspora, epitomized by Sam Selvon’s (1956) *The Lonely Londoners*, and post-millennial multicultural fictions of Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, and Hanif Kureishi consolidated London’s status as the apex of Britain’s post-imperial literary identity, providing a dominant idea of Britishness as “homogeneous, interchangeable, everywhere alike” (Baucom 1999, 10). Reverberating from these texts is a London-based yet simultaneously deterritorialized vision of Britain which, as Ian Baucom (1999) explains, “could incorporate local differences but would not define itself by local difference” (10).<sup>1</sup> Existing literary-critical attempts to “devolve” Black Britain echo Hall in seeking to conceive of a spatially differentiated approach to race in the nation. James Procter’s (2003) *Dwelling Places* pioneered the development of a devolved spatial optic for reading Black British cultural production that recognizes “the politics of location” (1), attributing the lack of regional difference to a “slippage” (164) between London and Britain. As he puts it: while the north of England is “synonymous with a (caricatured) white, provincial ethnicity”, London “does not seem to raise the same kind of contradictions” (161). London’s status as a metonym for post-imperial Britishness has distinct implications for the literary-political economy of England. Just as Joseph Jackson (2020) suggests that Black British literature has seen racial diversity “mobilised to evidence a new, unified, Britishness” (27), the subgenre has simultaneously relied on a distinctly localized image of Northern England that operates outside – and in opposition to – multicultural Britain. We might ask, then, is it possible to conceive of a postcolonial literary north? Or a Black northernness? And where would a devolved literary culture leave Black British literature as a field which has historically been wedded to a state-led, unified multicultural Britishness? These are all questions posed by

a multiracial and yet “placed” northern literary consciousness which is grappling with its relationship to the deterritorialized discourse of Black Britain.

While Black British writing has occupied a central place in literary approaches to devolution, existing critical discussion tends to favour literary representation over the material conditions of production and reception. We must also consider the literary life cycle after the commissioning and publication process: marketization, critical and commercial reception, and the methods of categorization all determine the terrain a text will occupy long term and how the work – and the places and communities it represents – will be read. Corinne Fowler’s (2008) analysis of the differing fortunes of Zadie Smith’s (2000) London extravaganza, *White Teeth*, and Joe Pemberton’s (2000) Manchester-based *Forever and Ever Amen* demonstrates the value of attending to the commercial logic of Black British writing. Indeed, this paper responds to Fowler’s call for “sustained” scholarly consideration of “the connections between political and literary economy” (2008, 75), offering an interrogation of literary awards as a vital and yet under-explored mechanism in the devolution of Britain’s cultural economy. As commercial enterprises, literary awards are implicated within the priorities of a neo-liberal market economy that upholds geographical and social axes of power. James English noted that “[t]here is no form of cultural capital so ubiquitous, so powerful, so widely talked about, and yet so little explored by scholars as the cultural prize” (2002, 109). Among others, English (2002), Claire Squires (2007), and Sarah Brouillette (2014) testify to the ways in which book prizes are caught up in the capitalistic ideologies of production, marketization, and reception; their workings – including eligibility criteria, selection of judges, and long- and shortlisted and winning titles – all reflect continuing asymmetries of power and capital. Economic concerns are exacerbated for regional literary awards, which are forced to reconcile the competing commitments to increasing revenue for publishers in a risk-averse market and promoting lesser-known writers from beyond the capital. In any case, the complex and contradictory mechanisms at play in prize culture mean that literary awards are uniquely placed to provide a measure of the national temperature.

The canonizing function of literary awards is now well established. This is especially true of mainstream awards like the Man Booker, whose role in constructing Britain’s post-imperial literary identity has been the subject of much scholarly criticism (Brouillette 2014; English 2002; Pearson 2019; Pearson, Sands-O’Connor, and Subramanian 2019). As Lucy Pearson, Karen Sands-O’Connor, and Aishwarya Subramanian (2019) point out, literary prizes “do not simply disseminate the ‘verdicts’ of the wider literary culture but are involved in a process of selection and definition that ensures at least some degree of preservation for the honoured texts” (2). Just as mainstream awards canonize a coterie of writers that curates a national literary heritage, regional literary prizes create images of a place as an “imagined political community” (Anderson 1983, 6). My view of literary prizes is thus as a form of place-based canonization, whose listings and inner workings reflect the social and geographic imbalances of power that underpin literary prestige. Adopting this view, this article examines the Manchester-based Portico Prize as a case study. Established by the Portico Library in 1985, the prize awards the book that best “evokes the spirit of the North of England”, aiming to “raise awareness of the region’s diverse literary heritage” (Portico Prize 2022). The analysis that follows traces the developmental history of the prize and its evolving approach to “diversity” and “the North” since 1985, identifying

a government-led creative economy framework in which a placed literary northernness exists in tension with the discourse of Black Britain. Overall, this article argues that literary awards articulate in new ways the interconnection between Britain's literary and political economies.

### Devolving the politics of prize culture

We can track the conceptual difficulty of reconciling racial diversity with a placed northernness through the Portico Prize's eligibility criteria. Upon its inception, the prize was dedicated to fiction and non-fiction set in Manchester. Gary Messinger's (1985) *Manchester in the Victorian Age* was the first winner of the prize, and this focus on the white, male industrial worker – largely in Manchester – during the 19th century is indicative of the narrow focus of the Portico Prize in its early years. Despite its initial emphasis on industrial Manchester, by 1987 the prize had widened its remit to include the north-west of England, which it designated as the cities of Liverpool and Manchester and the surrounding counties of Lancashire and Cheshire, and the High Peak area of Derbyshire (Portico Prize 1987). By 1989, the scope was extended for a second time to include Cumbria (Portico Prize 1989), before opening up to the entire north of England in 2007, dividing the area into the Arts Council Regions of the Northern Arts, NW Arts, and Yorkshire Arts (Portico Prize 2007). By 2015, the prize stipulated “a central theme or subject that engages with some aspect of the North, whether, for example, through place, character, or sensibility”, noting that “what constitutes the North of England and its geographical, linguistic, and imaginative locations are left to the discretion of those submitting and to the judges” (Portico Prize 2022). This contingent “imagined” definition of the north represents a decisive break from earlier spatially rooted approaches to the region.<sup>2</sup>

Coinciding with this weakening of “place” were changes in management and sponsorship that effectively saw the prize intertwined with Manchester's commercial status as a figurehead for cultural diversity in the north. After a four-year hiatus, the prize returned in 2019 under a partnership agreement between the Portico Library and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Connecting with the university guaranteed financial stability for the prize, but it also brought greater exposure as a consequence of MMU's involvement in Manchester's successful bid for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) City of Literature status in 2017.<sup>3</sup> This partnership thus marked a sea change in the prize's relationship with Manchester and the wider region, triggering a rebranding of the award as a celebration of cultural diversity in the north in alignment with UNESCO's agenda. Making the prize appear “innovative” and “diverse” (Portico Prize 2015) was key in the award's marketing strategy and internal organization, including a judging criterion which stipulated that texts “evoke the North but not be parochial” (Portico Prize 2017). Cultural diversity across Northern England was equally crucial to the prize's Arts Council England funding bid, which described both the prize and the Portico Library's broader artistic programme as “a beacon of culture in Manchester” (Portico Prize 2018). The reframing of the Portico Prize was, therefore, highly attuned to existing stereotypes about the north that had limited its commercial appeal in the past.

Until the prize's relaunch, the longlists and winning titles exclusively featured white authors with a strong focus on the region's industrial history. From 1995 until the prize's hiatus in 2015, there was a marked increase in debut authors and independent presses, but it was not until 2019 that Black and Asian British authors appeared on the Portico Prize longlist with Zaffar Kunail's (2018) *Us* and Nikesh Shukla's (2018) *The One Who Wrote Destiny*. By 2022, over a third of the prize longlist included either Black or Asian British writers, four out of five of whom were women.<sup>4</sup> Sairish Hussain's (2020) *The Family Tree*, Saima Mir's (2021) *The Khan*, Katy Massey's (2020) *Are We Home Yet?*, and Anita Sethi's (2021) *I Belong Here* were all considered for the prize in 2022, with Hussain's Bradford-based novel progressing to the shortlist. This growth in Black and Asian British literary representation signals an increasing commercial effort to place "race" in a way that destabilizes fixed iconographies of the north. At the same time, though, the Portico Prize's rebranding neatly articulates the ongoing interconnection of Britain's cultural and political economies. For instance, the attempt to present Manchester as a diverse cultural hub on an equal footing with London makes visible the ways the commercial logic of the prize has paralleled governmental attempts to harness the cultural industries as instruments of social change (Hewison 1987). Manchester has served as the primary location for cultural and governmental attempts at rebalancing England's economy. Both the "Northern Powerhouse" and "Levelling Up" agendas focused on big-ticket infrastructural projects to connect the city with London, a tendency which was matched in the cultural sphere by the establishment of "northern" outposts of the BBC in Salford's MediaCityUK and HarperNorth in Manchester. What these political and cultural approaches to regional inequality have in common is that they approach Greater Manchester as representative of the entire region; they evidence a kind of Manchester-exceptionalism that bolsters intra-regional inequalities between towns, coastal fringes, and rural areas. The direction of the Portico Prize after its hiatus is, then, a key example of how literary awards are implicated within a government-led creative-economy framework at a local and national level, which, as Brouillette points out, is founded on the "yoking together of cultural, social, and economic goals" (2014, 1).

The interconnected cultural and economic goals underpinning the prize's rebranding evokes the commodification of "otherness" that Graham Huggan (2001) terms the "postcolonial exotic". As Huggan explains, this "commodification of cultural difference" (76) emerges as a consequence of the merging of capitalism and a global literary economy, whose market-driven "regime of value" (33) serves privileged white audiences. Given their commercial logic, literary awards are central to the exoticization and consumption Huggan identifies. Squires suggests that this tendency extends to the diversification of the cultural industries workforce:

The high-profile awards are also a marketing strategy designed to help the book industries attract more BME [Black and minority ethnic] employees and secure more diverse audiences and greater revenues. These two motives are related: an increasingly diverse workforce is thought to be indispensable if publishers want to continue to access niche markets through street-level knowledge of the consumer preferences of specific communities. [ . . . ] We find the seemingly civic goal of cultural representation boldly coupled with corporate interest. (2007, 118)

The intertwining of diversity and corporate interest inevitably leads to “cultural representation” standing in for more radical outcomes that address structural barriers. In terms of the Portico Prize, this limitation bears out in the award’s listings, which remain dominated by London-based publishers. Of the 2022 longlist, all titles were published in the south east and 13 in London. A notable omission regarding Black writing nominated for the Portico Prize is Commonword, a literature development agency and community publisher that has been operating in Manchester since the 1970s. Today, Commonword is heavily associated with its subgroup, Cultureword, formed by Lemn Sissay in 1986 to focus on Black writers. As studies such as Lynne Pearce, Corinne Fowler, and Robert Crawshaw’s (2013) *Postcolonial Manchester*, anthologies such as Bloodaxe’s *Out of Bounds* (Kay, Procter, and Robinson 2012) and Dead Ink’s *Test Signal* (Connolly 2021) have proved, it is not that Black northern literary production does not exist, but that these outputs are seen to exist beyond the boundaries of the “literary” or the commercially viable. In this vein, it is hardly surprising that Black British writers who have emerged through writing development organizations like Cultureword rarely feature on the Portico Prize longlists. Moreover, considering the established symbiosis between a London-based canon of Black British writers and ideas of multiculturalism (Fowler 2008, 81), I do not think it would be a stretch to say that the intersection of ethnicity and geography would operate as compounding axes of marginalization.

Structural socio-economic and cultural barriers ring-fencing Britain’s cultural and san creative sector may partially explain the absence of Black British writers on the Portico Prize shortlist. Squires’s (2017) enquiry into publishing’s “diversity deficit” evidences the ongoing discrimination in the literary economy, despite the work of diversity initiatives. In this context, the prize’s selection criteria could be a potential limiting factor. As Pearson, Sands-O’Connor, and Subramaniam note,

the development of the Carnegie, Guardian and the Other Awards in the 20th century points strongly to the fact that unless criteria explicitly consider socio-political dimensions such as gender or ethnicity, “literary quality” will tend to privilege some voices over others. (2019, 102)

If “apparently neutral ideas of ‘literary merit’ in the UK have often been underpinned by a mono-cultural approach” (103), it is likely that these inequalities would be even greater if geographical location were considered. Indeed, the prize has struggled to assert its legitimacy in a literary economy in which regional writing is seen as “other” (Fowler 2008, 81), recognizing that “preconceived stereotypes of ‘the North’ may lead to a lack of national interest” (Portico Prize 2013). Given the Portico Prize’s changing eligibility criteria, it is worth noting that, despite increasingly diverse listings, every winner of the prize has so far been white. The absence of Black writers on the prize’s winning lists points not only to ‘the racialised literary significations of “northernness”’, but also to the ongoing structural social and geographical barriers preventing entry to the industry in the first place.

The focus of this article so far has been material culture. I have proposed that the development of the Portico Prize has augmented the centralized commercial logic of British literary culture in which a spatially rooted or placed “northernness” is incompatible with racial diversity. The remainder of this article identifies an ideological disjuncture between the prize’s approach to the north and that of literary production across the

region, turning to two case studies longlisted for the 2022 award. Contrary to the prize's methodological rejection of place, both Sethi's *I Belong Here* and Massey's *Are We Home Yet?* challenge the racialized and classed biases of their respective literary genres, and offer spatially rooted accounts of diasporic experience across Northern England. What is at stake here, then, is evidence of an already existing devolved, northern Black literary culture. Such visions of the region indicate the potential for diversifying dominant narratives of the north and decentering London in accounts of Black Britishness.

### Of prose and place: Black northern nature writing

In 2020, Sethi signed a high-profile deal with Bloomsbury Wildlife for a trilogy exploring themes of identity, place, and belonging. *I Belong Here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* forms the first book in this series, with Sethi hailed as a “powerful new voice in nature writing” (Cowdrey 2020). Sethi describes the work as an “act of resistance”, at least partly in response to her experience as the victim of hate crime. In the opening pages, Sethi recounts her journey from Liverpool to Newcastle on a TransPennine Express train, where she was told by another passenger to “get back on the banana boat” and “go back to where [she’s] from” (2021, 11). Sethi questions the nature of this request, having been “born and bred in Manchester” (11), which triggers her decision to undertake a long-distance walk across the Pennine Way. The first National Trail devised in England, the 268-mile route starts from the hills of the Derbyshire Peak District; crosses the Yorkshire Dales, Swaledale Valley, and the North Pennines; and passes over Hadrian’s Wall before ending on the Scottish border. Sethi’s point of departure makes visible national and regional zones of ongoing racial exclusion: England in general, and the north in particular. The narrative intersperses passages detailing Sethi’s walks with reflections on Britain’s colonial afterlives: from Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968 to the individual microaggressions she receives as a woman of colour moving through the English countryside. The visceral, embodied connection to the land established through walking facilitates a reclamation of the English countryside from its imperial connotations while also recognizing its history as a site of exclusion.

If access to the land is problematic and unequal, then so too is access to nature writing. There are historical reasons for this: the association of Britain’s “wild” places with displacement and exclusion; the reliance on literary modes and genres, especially the pastoral, that serve to naturalize social inequality; and the unequal access to the time and space required to produce nature writing. Sethi has written elsewhere about the intersectional class barriers pervading the English countryside and the ways in which her identification compounds these as a woman of colour. In her chapter for Kit de Waal’s anthology of working-class writing, *Common People*, Sethi (2019) recounts a time before she discovered the countryside. Her earliest memories of engaging with rural space were in a local park, and she explores how this engagement was heavily negotiated by the estate’s reputation as “Gunchester” (Sethi 2019, 212). In many respects, Sethi’s statement of belonging might thus be read as a response to the “pervasive whiteness of British nature writing” (Abberley et al. 2022, 6). In her remapping, the act of walking is a reclamation of both place and genre: as Sethi puts it, her journey is one of “prose as well as place, of both routes and roots, route-mapping and root-mapping” (2021, 102). *I Belong Here’s* paratextual material and subsequent media attention distinctly position



the book within a tradition of British nature writing. The cover art prioritizes Sethi's engagement with the landscape, featuring a painting of an unspecified area of the Pennine Way which is occupied by a small figure of Sethi at the bottom of the page. Likewise, the front page of *The Observer* on April 11, 2021 frames *I Belong Here* in terms of its rural-regional credentials, picturing Sethi standing against a similar rural backdrop alongside the headline "North Country Girl" (*Observer* 2021).<sup>5</sup> An endorsement from Robert Macfarlane, one of the most influential new British nature writers today, further concretizes the text's claim to the nature-writing genre in a way that avoids the kind of racialized pigeonholing identified by Anamik Saha (2016), whereby writers of colour are repeatedly likened to other writers of colour, even when the textual content of the works might suggest other literary parallels (8).

This is not to imply that cultural engagement with Britain's countryside has ever been exclusively white. Sethi's work operates within a longer history of devolved Black British cultural production in the rural north. As far back as 1987, the artist Ingrid Pollard's (1987) *Pastoral Interlude* documented Black British presence in the Lake District, while Caryl Phillips's (2003) *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child* (Phillips 2015), his rewriting of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, have depicted Black experience in the North Yorkshire moorlands. *I Belong Here*, therefore, is part of a larger coterie of Black British writers whose engagement with the English rural is both "placed" and definitively post-pastoral. As Fowler explains, this consciously critical engagement sees "rural spaces inspire almost utopian anti-racist visions of engagement with nature" but it is also "very much aware of rural England's relationship with the colonial" (2020, 113). In terms of anti-racist rural imaginaries, the statement of belonging which titles Sethi's work also echoes the continual refrain "we walk" in Testament's (2018) play, *Black Men Walking*. Centred on three Black men and one woman walking near Padley Gorge in the Peak District, the play makes visible the continuing racialization of English rural space and provides a corrective to England's white rural history. We might, therefore, read *I Belong Here* as evidence of a developing trajectory of devolved post-pastoral engagements with nature writing.

### Living on the tracks: Race, place, and post-industrial memoir

Like *I Belong Here*, Massey's *Are We Home Yet?* locates the north of England as a site of diasporic experience. Spanning the years 1930–2010, the book forms Massey's memoir as a mixed-race woman growing up in a working-class family in Leeds, an experience that she describes as living "right on the tracks" (2020, 213). Told through Katy's first-person recollections, *Are We Home Yet?* explores the relationship between a mixed-race woman and her mother against a regional backdrop of the socio-economic changes during the 1970s and 1980s. Massey's publishing story differs vastly from Sethi's, however, in that it represents an attempt on the part of an independent press to address racial inequalities in the creative industries. Indeed, I am wary of overplaying Sethi's status as a "lesser-known" writer, given that she was already an established journalist and broadcaster by the time *I Belong Here* was contracted. While Sethi is a working-class writer of colour from the north, her existing track record might have meant that she was perceived as less of a "risk" than an author without an existing publishing profile. Indeed, the fact that *I Belong Here* was signed to Bloomsbury – one of the "big five" London-based

publishers – may be partly attributed to her existing portfolio in several mainstream media outlets, including *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *The Sunday Times*, *BBC Wildlife*, *BBC Travel*, and the *New Statesman*. Conversely, Massey's book was published by Jacaranda, a small independent press, as part of their "Twenty in 2020" initiative to publish 20 titles by 20 Black British writers in one year. While Jacaranda is, like Bloomsbury, a London-based press, their scale and commissioning practices are vastly different, with the former actively working with lesser-known writers to address inequalities in the publishing industry.

We have already seen that Black British writing or the British "multicultural novel" has a predominantly London-centric, metropolitan register. But literary accounts of deindustrialization have been concurrently dominated by white, working-class, male voices, with the post-war cultural production often referred to as "Northern Grit", focusing particularly on the "Angry Young Man" (Wood 2020). To return to an earlier point, the relative marginalization of Black experience in accounts of deindustrialization may be a consequence of the positioning of "minority" writing in Britain's commercial landscape, which yokes such writers to a prescribed set of "multicultural issues" and sidelines the role they have played in shaping mainstream literary traditions. In this sense, *Are We Home Yet?* destabilizes the gendered and racial biases of post-industrial writing as a literary genre, providing a multiracial, working-class history of Leeds. Rather than desolate factories or the industrial landscapes that punctuate accounts of deindustrialization and its aftermath, the socio-economic shifts of the period are registered through domestic spaces and sex work as a gendered bodily economy that, in the absence of masculinized industrial labour, thrived under ideals of individual enterprise. Throughout the novel, the domestic spaces of Katy's childhood are interwoven with Thatcherism's reshaping of the north:

Home for the holidays, the impact of the ripples of the capitalist great leap forward of the 1980s had visibly impacted on my hometown. Inside Number 24 the browns and oranges of the 1970s were replaced with white walls, black furniture and a coffee table. The taste for clean stark lines reflected an air of optimism about what could be achieved with energy, vision and, of course, money. (Massey 2020, 145)

Parallel to this regional economic restructuring, Katy's mother, "in her early fifties with an apprenticeship of cottage industry prostitution behind her, was perfectly placed to exploit these trends" (148). While Massey's account registers the potential for female economic agency, the text foregrounds the complexities of reconciling sex work with motherhood and gendered notions of shame and respectability. These thematic concerns are precisely those driving pre-eminent expressions of the post-war and Thatcherite north. Most notably, Massey's account of the region in the 1970s and 1980s invokes the work of Pat Barker, whose focus on domestic labour articulates the relationship between social and economic production and how working-class women's bodies are shaped by an emerging Thatcherite individualism (Brophy 2005).

Massey also makes visible how globalized micro-economies have been a key part of Leeds's history and the city's wider commercial development. Exploring the now-gentrified city centre as an adult, Katy recalls her favourite childhood spots, including the bazaar:

We would wander past the grinning faces of hopeful Asian proprietors gesturing to racks of ragtrade knock-offs, and we'd marvel at the specialty stalls dedicated to selling endless variations on a single item: Cheese, pork, day-old bread, sweets already weighed out into four ounce bags, bakery "seconds", eggs, dried fruit, nuts, spices. We would see stalls for afro hair products, stalls for hair extensions, and stalls fashioned like ships where you can go inside and visit a hairdresser. You could get a Thai manicure, while I buy a cushion from the foam shop and overripe black-mottled plantain from the Jamaican grocers. We might notice that the tripe shops stands two units away from one selling Goods from Southern Africa. (Massey 2020, 22)

Katy's memories testify to the heterogenous "glocality" of Leeds's market, echoing the work of canonical Black British writers like Zadie Smith, who are often read as promoting a kind of "worlded localism" involving a mediation between global and local flows (James 2015, 47). Going one step further, *Are We Home Yet?* positions these globalized micro-economies within a longer regional history. During a passage in which Katy walks through the city centre, she recalls how Leeds and the wider region have been shaped by inward migration, referencing Michael Marks, who, upon fleeing Poland, opened a market stall in the city in 1884. Marks went on to partner with Thomas Spencer to co-found Marks and Spencer; yet "Leeds is not over proud of him – after all, he wasn't the first immigrant to end-up here, struggling to find a foothold in the city" (Massey 2020, 21–22).

This representation of the north of England during the 1980s and 1990s as a region which is marked by migration bears significance beyond the literary. As is mentioned in the introduction, this period solidified a view of the north, especially former mill towns like Leeds, as a space of racial antagonism (Miah, Sanderson, and Thomas 2020). Massey's memoir problematizes the racialization of the north, extending also to rural North Yorkshire. Frequent references to localized geographic markers demonstrate how Katy belongs just as much in Bramley Fell Woods and English Heritage sites like Kirkstall Abbey as she does in the residential streets of Leeds: as Katy tells us, "I have affection for the scruffy, urban glamour of Leeds and the rural ways I learnt in North Yorkshire and everything in between" (Massey 2020, 206). This is not to suggest that Massey offers a straightforwardly optimistic account of the north, but one that underlines how the region's economic shifts are complicated by racialized subjectivity. Katy's sense of both northernness and Britishness are "heavily negotiated" (209) by racism, demonstrating the difficulty of reconciling a mixed-race subject position with a regional affiliation to both North Yorkshire and Britain. Katy's childhood memories of Leeds in the 1980s thus place the north of England within a devolved literary landscape comprised of diasporic localities, but they also reflect the enduring imperial legacies marking such spaces. It is in this geographically rooted depiction of a mixed-race family during the mid-to-late 20th century that *Are We Home Yet?* retrospectively inserts itself into a regional history of working-class writing, pulling against the stereotype of white working-class identity that is so frequently attributed to discussions of the post-industrial north.

### Conclusion: Prizing Black northernness?

The purpose of this article has not been so much to advocate for the Portico Prize as an already existing site of devolved northern cultural production, but to explore

the broader ideological contexts shaping the relationship between northern writing and literary awards in Britain. It would be equally difficult to speculate why neither *I Belong Here* or *Are We Home Yet?* won the 2022 Portico Prize. Since its relaunch, the prize's judging panels have diversified significantly, alongside a sizeable increase in the writers of colour appearing on the longlists. But the prize's historical association with Manchester's industrial memoir (and the gendered and racialized biases of this format) may well endure as a legacy that precludes many authors and publishers from submitting work. There are, too, intersecting structural issues, including fixed iconographies of "regional parochialism" and the tendency for "multicultural" writing to be considered for diversity-led awards. So, while there is much potential in regional literary awards like the Portico Prize, a tension remains in the disconnect between regional literature organizations and independent publishers and the texts that appear on the prize's longlists and shortlists. *I Belong Here* and *Are We Home Yet?* provide valuable reassessments of northern literary genres, but are nonetheless published in London. The visibility of debut authors emerging from regional presses therefore remains an issue to reconcile with a commercial literary form dependent on spotlighting the writers most likely to add "prestige" and generate revenue through related event sales. At the same time, despite efforts to shake off its Manchester-centrism, the prize's sponsorship, marketing, awards ceremony, and associated events all take place in Manchester and are woven into the city's commercial status as a cultural hub for the north. As has been seen, this tendency aligns with centralized, government-led approaches to regional regeneration. So, while the Portico Prize longlist has, in recent years, sought to diversify Northern England's literary identity, such attempts cannot be separated from the centralized British state imaginary and its consolidation in Black British writing.

This article opened by suggesting that the utilization of racial diversity in the concept of Black Britishness has relied on an image of the north that operates outside – and in opposition to – Britain's multicultural identity. That a non-white author has yet to win the prize, as well as the fact that Black or Asian British writing has only recently featured on the Portico Prize's lists, demonstrates London's consolidation as the centre of Britain's publishing economy and its post-imperial literary imagination. At the same time, it is clear that pre-existing stereotypes of a provincial or insular "northernness" retain purchase in the prize economy, and this is not to mention the ethnic connotations that apply to Englishness rather than to Britishness. Taken together, a post-imperial yet *placed* literary north appears very far from a commercially viable prospect within Britain's mutually supportive literary and political economies. To adopt a more optimistic stance, this is not to say that devolved, Black literary cultures do not already exist across the north, but to underline the barriers preventing their commercial realization. This article has started to unpick the ideological threads between London and the formation of Black British writing, in order to draw out the implications for northern literary representation. While the seams are beginning to fray, there is much more to unravel.

## Notes

1. London's dominance in creative expressions of Black Britishness is matched in the academic subdiscipline. See John McLeod (2004) John Clement Ball (2004), and Michael Perfect (2014).
2. One of the judges for the 2010 award, for example, questioned the suitability of Sarah Hall's (2009) *How to Paint a Deadman*, due to a lack of "northern content" (Portico Prize 2010).
3. Until 2013, the prize's main source of funding was the Zochonis Charitable Foundation, meaning that the Portico Prize itself has benefitted from British colonialism. Zochonis's wealth was inherited from Paterson Zochonis (now PZ Cussons), who exploited British colonial rule in several West African countries to facilitate the exportation of goods including palm oil, coffee, groundnuts, and timber.
4. The only exception here is Okechukwu Nzelu's (2019) Manchester-based *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, though the narrative is focalized through the dual perspectives of a Nnenna – a teenage woman of both British and Igbo Nigerian heritage – and her mother.
5. An image of *The Observer's* front cover can be accessed on Sethi's website: <https://anitasethi.com/#jp-carousel-1248>. Accessed July 11, 2023.

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