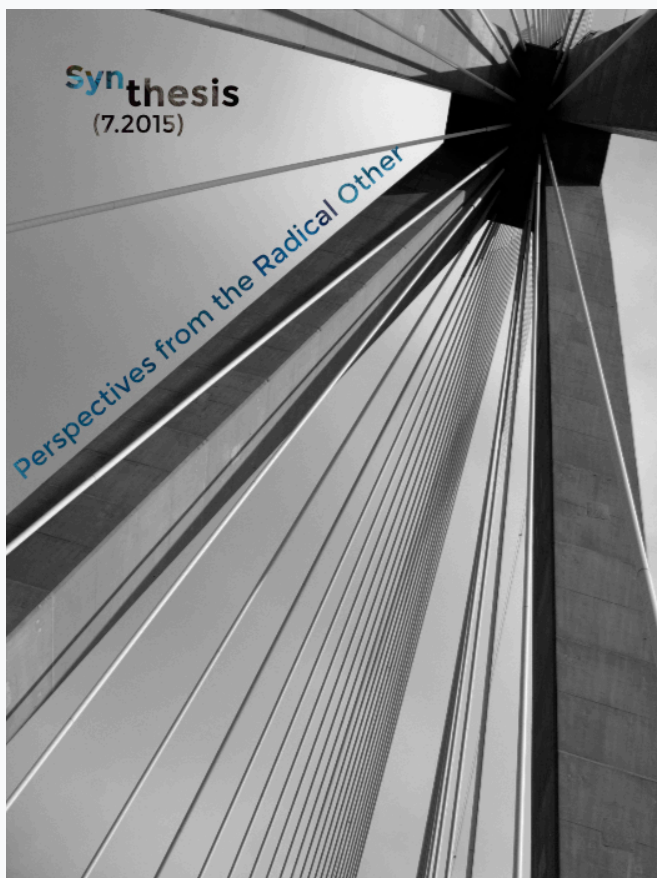


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## Woman in the Mirror: Reflections

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## Woman in the Mirror: Reflections

Laura Fish

### Abstract

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf asserts: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size". (34) The use of the mirror is key to Woolf's arguments about the position of women in general and in particular that of women writers. Complicating Woolf's view less than a century later, I examine how black women function as looking-glasses in a dual way: as blacks, we shared the past (and now share the current) fate of black people reflecting the "darker" side of white people, as many whites projected onto blacks the unacknowledgeable traits of their own nature. The mirror is also key then to the way in which racial oppression has been analysed in literature. My paper offers an account, by way of selected examples from the history of our literature, of indicating how the mirror has been essential to how black British women are viewed and reflected back. I suggest that the misshapen image in the looking-glass created by white people and also black men, allows them to see an inflated reflection of themselves, to assume false feelings of superiority, and to perpetuate oppression against us. I focus on Mary Prince, Mary Seacole, Una Marson, Joan Riley and Helen Oyeyemi—authors whose work either anticipates or relates to Woolf's notion of mirroring, by seeking ways to address or overcome the situation in which we are placed. The texts explored not only trace the development of the tradition of our writing - the shift from being represented to representing ourselves— but also present a range of cultural and political views and identify three recurring themes: firstly, the denigration in our portrayal; secondly, the assumed superiority white people and black men adopt over us; and thirdly our resistance in remonstrating against such treatment and exposure.

I can look into the mirror and learn to love the stormy Black girl who once longed to be white or anything other than who she was, since all she was ever allowed to be was the sum of the color of her skin, and the textures of her hair, the shade of her knees and elbows, and those things were clearly not acceptable as human. (174)

Audre Lorde

Literature, like a mirror, holds the power to create and reproduce images. Using the metaphor of the mirror, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf outlines the importance to men and to the act of literary creation, of feeling superior and making others feel inferior, and she demonstrates how men have employed mirrors to downplay women's ability and to make themselves feel powerful: "Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action." Woolf presents the mirror as a device to reflect back distorted realities, to prove that women's writing is as good as or equal to men's, to demonstrate aping or mimicking and as a tool to try to prove male superiority.

There is a coming together of ideas about the mirror implying an experience of translation – someone looking at you, you looking at yourself, and the effect on both sides - in Woolf's perceptions of literature and mirroring, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory of the "mirror stage" in relation to human development and the concepts explored in relation to the formative function of the 'I' to

racial difference and aggression towards the imaginary other in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1953). It "would be interesting" (161), Fanon writes:

on the basis of Lacan's theory of the mirror period, to investigate the extent to which the imago of his fellow built up in the young white at the usual age would undergo an imaginary aggression with the appearance of the Negro. When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self—that is, the unidentifiable, the inassimilable. (189)

Indeed, Woolf, Lacan and Fanon all examine how the mirror image can be construed as a destructive site; as a site of duplicity, presenting the opposite and "the other." However, although Fanon hopes his book "will be a mirror with a progressive infrastructure, in which it will be possible to discern the Negro on the road to disalienation," (184) he gives the issue of gender little thought and declares to "know nothing" of the black woman, an omission black feminist writers have contested. The use of Woolf's theories is also problematic for contemporary black feminist writers not least because of her assertion that, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction"(4). Woolf examines how these assumed prerequisites and conditions have affected women's ability to write well or to write at all. Alice Walker is notable among the women of colour taking issue with Woolf for her privileged and elitest attitudes, and her claim that an income of £500 a year is necessary in order to write (equivalent to £26,870.65 in 2013). In *Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (2004) challenges Woolf's theory by reflecting upon Phillis Wheatley's life. Walker asks, "What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself?":

This sickly, frail, Black girl who required a servant of her own at times—her health was so precarious—and who, had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day. (235)

Yet, while Woolf did write 75 years before Walker and in a context in which black women writers had not yet emerged, many of her ideas and her questions seem applicable to the position of black women writers even though opposition to black women's writing today is less overt than it was towards white women in Woolf's lifetime, when open claims about women's inferiority by "experts" were common. Woolf states: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" and further observes:

if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he going to go on giving judgment, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and dinner at least twice the size he really is? (34)

I would like to argue that in Britain black women serve a similar function for black men. However, black women function as looking-glasses in a dual way: we shared the past (and now share the current) fate of black people, reflecting the "darker" side of white people, as many whites projected and still project onto blacks the unacknowledgeable traits of their own nature. Ralph Ellison, in his essay "Twentieth Century Fiction" (1953), argues that false images of black people constructed within the imagination are critical to how white Americans view themselves. In other words, white persons can

only feel that their identity as Americans is safe if they deny their irrational and unacceptable side and project this onto black people. He elaborates thus:

the Negro stereotype is really an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life, forces through which, by projecting them in forms of images of an easily dominated minority, the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America. Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man. (41)

James Baldwin tackles Ellison's theory of the false image in his essay "Many Thousands Gone" (1949) to declare further: "One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our mind" (19-20). Baldwin uses "our" as an American, meaning that human beings, both black and white, are a complex mixture of good and bad impulses. However, white Americans have created an image of black people made out of the "darker" side that they find in their own nature, thus Baldwin declares: "our dehumanisation of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanisation of ourselves." The mirror is also, I suggest, key to the way in which racial oppression has been analysed in literature.<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, Ellison, Baldwin and Fanon all use the image of the mirror to unravel racial power and oppression.<sup>[2]</sup> In the opening to the *Invisible Man* (1953), Ralph Ellison explains why white people are unable to see the main protagonist:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed everything and anything except me. (7)

From this transatlantic starting point, I propose to reveal how mirrors have been essential to how black British women – I use the terms "black" and "women" as broad political identities – are viewed and reflected back in literature. I suggest that deceptive images in the looking-glass have allowed others to see an inflated reflection of themselves, and to assume false feelings of superiority and inferiority that have perpetuated oppression against us. I discuss ways in which mirroring has for many black people, especially black women and black writers, become a motif that has helped us to understand how racism works and how we here in Britain become seen as other. I bring together a mosaic of responses to such othering to create a prism—a spectrum of perspectives—through which can be seen tensions between how we as black women see ourselves, how we are seen by others and how literature has functioned as a looking-glass in which we have been reflected back, often distorted and disfigured. I consider the history of our writing and trace the development of a tradition, and the shift from being represented to representing ourselves. I focus on Mary Prince, Mary Seacole, Una Marson, Joan Riley and Helen Oyeyemi, and identify three main themes: firstly, the denigration in our portrayal; secondly, the assumed superiority white people and black men adopt over us; and thirdly our resistance against such treatment and exposure. The responsibility of engaging directly with these themes—and with the acknowledged multiple oppression black British women experience—has remained a major preoccupation within our writing, and the texts I explore either anticipate or relate to Woolf's notion of mirroring, by seeking ways to address or overcome the situation in which we are placed. Throughout the essay I use the mirror, not only as a physical object, but also as a metaphor. I present my personal experiences alongside passages of critical analysis to create a kind of three-way mirror comprising autobiography, fiction and critical readings. While history may be thought of as mirroring the future, I will now peer into the past to consider mirroring in the history of black

women's writing in Britain. Literary presentations from colonial history of people of African origin have, in the main, been misleading, exaggerated, stereotypical, or at best blurred. When I was researching *Strange Music* (2008), my second novel, the images I encountered of black women enslaved on plantations in the Caribbean in the 1700s and 1800s varied from animalistic portrayals to idealisation and the erotic, exotic "other." Edward Long, in *The History of Jamaica* (1774) drew parallels between black females and primates: "An orang-outang husband," he declared, "would not be any dishonour to a Hottentot female"(39). Long's account is typical of the history that associates black women with animality, claiming they gave birth as easily as an "orang-outang female." Negative and distorted images of black women were prevalent in the 1800s. As Barbara Bush states in *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (1990): "The black woman was viewed as physically strong, exuding a warm, animal sensuality, an inferior subspecies of the female sex" (15).

While there were a few privileged black women in English society before the sixteenth century, some of whom may have written poetry, the earliest published work by a black woman in Britain was *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), the autobiographical work of a slave born in Bermuda in 1788.[3] Tracing her struggle from slavery into freedom, illustrating how female slaves began to think of themselves not as chattel, or breeders, but as human beings—people, Mary Prince's text, like a mirror, reflects and defines her.[4] Prince's *History* also distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable actions against her—what Toni Morrison tags "unspeakable" acts—and the challenges she faced. Her book raises issues about the ambiguities of authorship. Through this text, readers enter a maze of mirrors—mirrors which blur the distinction between the imaginary, the real, the distorted. Thomas Pringle, with whom Mary Prince stayed after serving with the family of John Wood for thirteen years, wrote in a preface that appears to filter and attempt to legitimise the authenticity of the black woman's voice:

The narrative was taken down from Mary's own lips by a lady who happened to be at the time residing in my family as a visitor. It was written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible. (45)

This preface not only poses questions about the reshaping and "pruning" of Mary Prince's story, it problematizes authorship rhetoric and the politics and ownership of the narrative. The question of authorship is particularly interesting because there is a paradox to this edited truth: the very conditions that allow Prince to reveal what has happened are also those that restrict what she says. With regards to the authenticity of Prince's text, Moira Ferguson states: "How much or whether the narrative was reshaped after Mary Prince's dictation is hard to say, but many of its aspects do conform to fairly conventional propagandistic slave narratives" (23). The extent to which Prince was involved in the process of producing her book is doubtful because, as with many slave narratives, it was dictated to and transcribed by white British abolitionists with a vested interest in declaring opposition to slavery. How much then has been withheld, silenced, or erased? Ferguson comments on how black women were silenced by acts of sexual violence in Prince's narrative and refers to how, paradoxically, we only become aware of the extent of the violence to which female slaves were subjected when the slave women give voice to the indignities they had suffered. Ferguson underscores: "Mary Prince can offer us one of the few glimpses of her sexual reality, all but suppressed through the narrative..." (19).

We may assume that Prince's reality was suppressed because it was too shocking to be fully expressed, and that she herself also censored her own narrative.

Even in its mediated form, Prince's narrative was considered dangerous and controversial and two court cases followed its publication.[5] Thus public response to Prince's publication also mirrors back Prince's own outrage and the silence her book had broken, and more than that, it offers a display of the public rhetoric of truth and lies.

To understand the history of black women's writing in Britain we need to set it in the context of a history of oppression, by looking at the way in which white people have regarded black people and men have regarded women. How black women insert their voices into the meta narratives that privilege is key to this discussion. Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997) offers a useful theoretical and conceptual framework because of his insistence on "rational poetics" –a Caribbean identity and culture forged through the local history of slavery. Joan Anim-Addo in particular presents in-depth perspectives on Mary Prince in *Framing the Word: Gender and Genre in Caribbean Women's Writing* (1996) and focuses on redressing the silencing of Caribbean women's voices.

Following Prince, Mary Seacole (1805-1881) was the next black woman to be published in Britain. *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) gained wide recognition.[6] Passages of Seacole's text demonstrate the complexities of Seacole's own identity and how, as a black woman, she functions to reflect a distorted image of herself and yet confronts false mirror images of other black people. Seacole was born in Jamaica in 1805 as Mary Jane Grant, to a free black woman and a skilled doctress and to a Scottish army officer. Unlike Prince, Seacole, despite being generally identified as black, was of mixed African and European parentage and used the term "yellow" to describe herself.

With Seacole's confidently articulated narrative, as Woolf said of the work of Aphra Behn, "we turn a very important corner on the road," moving into autobiographical travel literature. Importantly, Seacole's book was written by her and not dictated; nonetheless, like Prince, she finds herself mirrored in the response others have to her and she has to others, and she uses autobiography as a mechanism to gain control of her own struggle against racism.

For instance, Seacole remarks on the racial discrimination she witnessed, describing how a slave woman was the recipient of cruelty from a white American woman. This is later mirrored in her account of being denied the opportunity of enlisting with Florence Nightingale, having "spent fruitless hours waiting for an interview." We can elicit from the passage below the importance to Seacole of writing about how she is perceived and reflected back, the phrase "read in her face" particularly suggests mirroring.

At last I gave that up, after a message from Mrs. H that the full complement of nurses had been secured, and that my offer could not be entertained. Once again I tried, and had an interview this time with one of Miss Nightingale's companions. She gave me the same reply, and I read in her face the fact, that had there been a vacancy, I should have not been chosen to fill it. (125)

The mirror image of Mary Seacole, once a site of distortion, is only now becoming visible again, posthumously. I refer here to Seacole being voted "Greatest Black Briton" (2004) and the many books about her, for example, *Caribbean-Scottish Relations: Colonial & Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language & Literature* (2007), Joan Anim-Addo's *Touching the Body: History, Language and African Caribbean Women's Writing* (2007), Jane Robinson, *Mary Seacole: the Charismatic Black Nurse Who Became a Heroine of the Crimea* (2005), Lynn McDonald's *Mary Seacole: the*

*Making of the Myth* (2014), and Elizabeth N. Anionwu's *A Short History of Mary Seacole: A Resource for Nurses and Students* (2005), which have been published in the last fifteen years.

Although close examination of Prince's and Seacole's works shows that their origins are rooted in oppression and servitude, and that these themes constitute the beginnings of a narrative inheritance for black British women writers today, their voices are also very different. Seacole takes pride in being Scottish, and tries to become assimilated and successful both professionally and economically. During her participation in the war, she endorses the hegemonic view of the English towards those enslaved by the Ottomans and instead of siding with the slaves (in this case Grecian people); she presents the Ottoman men as superior when compared to their deceitful slaves, as Sarah Salih exemplifies in "A Gallant Heart to the Empire: Autoethnography and Imperial Identity in Mary Seacole's Wonderful Adventures" (171-195).

In order to prove that women were as capable of literary creativity as men, Woolf claims that women's writing often "aped" men's—which suggests mimicking and mirroring (59). There is a parallel here with Prince's and Seacole's narratives, as it is clear from some of the extracts cited above that they are proving they are as good as, or equal to, white people and men. Their narratives are paradoxically both inhibited and stimulated by proving this and their own worthiness. The sense of the burden of proof and its effect upon the narrative voice is evident too, as is pointed out by Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee in the editor's "Introduction" to Seacole's book: "there are times when the author's voice assumes the tone of an English gentleman, that is, reflecting the prejudices and mores of the class to whom the book was directed" (39). The question is whether her tone is not also the effect of her economic and political development (throughout the narrative she is concerned to show how she progresses economically, how she is an achiever in a society that promotes economic individualism). In other words, it is possible—or even inevitable—that she endorses some of these prejudices and mores herself.

Leaping forward in time, while Marson was born and raised in Jamaica in the early twentieth century, black writing was beginning to gain a cultural presence. The Harlem Renaissance was rising in America and Negritude was beginning to emerge in France and the Francophone colonies. Marson emerged, therefore, in a new climate of international and cultural activity. Rhonda Cobham, one of the women behind the introduction of black women's writing to the British feminist publishers, The Women's Press, describes Marson as a "foremother" of black British women writers. Giovanna Covi in "African-Caribbean New Woman Speaking Truth to Power, Modernist Women, Race, Nation" (2005) and Delia Jarrett Macauley in her biography, *The Life of Una Marson, 1905-65* (1988), both explore how Marson's reception limited her opportunities, and how this is reflected in her writing. Not only is Marson one of the first black women writers to experiment with language in different ways (an issue discussed further below), Innes describes her as:

one of the earliest black women poets to address the issues of a white aesthetic which is absorbed by black men when it comes to standards of female beauty, an aesthetic which is at least implicitly questioned by the woman speaker.(211)

In "Kinky Haired Blues" from *In The Moth and the Star: Poems* (1937), Marson challenges the white aesthetic of beauty as well as reflecting upon and responding to the popular projected image of black women:

Now I's gwine press me hair

And bleach me skin.  
I's gwine press me hair  
And bleach me skin  
Wot won't a gal do  
Some kinda man to win? (91)

Marson challenges racist attitudes, brings out the differences rather than the similarities between blacks and whites, and protests against the mirror image presented of black people.

I am black  
And so must be  
More clever than white folks  
More wise than white folks  
More discreet than white folks  
More courageous than white folks  
I am black  
And I have got to travel  
Even further than white folks  
For time moves on. (40)

*Herself Beheld: the Literature of the Looking Glass* (1988) is Jenijoy La Belle's study on what happens in life and in literature when women confront their own reflections, La Belle claims that we tend to do this even more when experiencing trauma and the upheavals of change. Alison Townsend describes in her review how La Belle's book characterizes the mirror's power for women.

La Belle defines women's encounters with their mirrors as essentially semiotic acts which can enable them to transform the mirror, using it as 'a tool for self-exploration and self-discovery. (203)

Images, and mirror images in particular are always illusions. Images do not have depth; they are just a surface that can be cold, beguiling and duplicitous. The mirror's duplicity is scrutinised in Niamia Leslie Williams' *Black Poetic Feminism: The Imagination of Toi Derricote* (2007). In her book about the American poet, Williams considers both Lacan's psychoanalytical theory of the "mirror stage" and La Belle's argument that mirrors have greater potency for women in developing a sense of self than they have for men. Williams claims that the mirror is a site not only offering possibilities for seeing who we are and how we have changed, but also that our relationship with it can signify inner turmoil or disharmony:

The cultural self-deception girls learn in order to maintain relationships within Western society deepens when they look into a common domestic item: the mirror...Derricote documents the mirror's cold duplicity when gazed upon by a doubting or unsure female in her long series entitled "the mirror poems"...La Belle suggests that men look into mirrors and see unimportant physical representations; mirror gazing does not propel them into questions about the self, or into psychological processes. Men are not raised to look in mirrors, she postulates, but to discount them...For men, disunity between the image in the mirror and the self is normal, for women, "it is often a sign of revolt or the beginning of a psychological disorientation."

In *The Black Notebooks* (1999) Derricote uses mirrors in her "mirror poems" and also in autobiographical writing about her experiences as a biracial person, and how the crisis of identity inflects upon her as a black woman who identifies politically with black people yet is often mistaken as, or seen as, being white:

I'm sure most people don't go around all the time thinking about what race they are. When you look like what you are, the external world mirrors back to you an identity consistent with your idea of yourself. However, for someone like me, who doesn't look like what I am, those mirrors are broken, and my consciousness or lack of consciousness takes on serious implications. Am I mentally "passing"? (25)



The expression, “someone like me, who doesn’t look like what I am” stands out. Derricotte is illustrating how appearances can deceive, and that people can be expected to behave in certain ways because of their appearance and the colour of their skin.

Being black phenotypically is an issue with which I am familiar, because I was adopted by and grew up within a white English family, I can “think white,” by which I mean that my early development was dominated and shaped by white liberal perceptions and the “white gaze.” This is not generally acknowledged because when most people look at me, they see a black woman which is how I now also see myself.

Una Marson’s *Autobiography of a Brown Girl* (begun in 1931, unpublished), uses the tradition of articulating real life experience and of reflecting back reality for black women in England, and one benefit of this was that Marson could recreate herself. The autobiographical narrative therefore becomes a kind of three-way mirror that not only includes the author herself, but its conventions allow for a centring of the self in the mirror-image the author has arranged. The predominance of autobiographical works by black women writers in Britain may have given the impression that they were capable only of one genre, and may have limited the level of their literary accomplishment.

Whether or not writers are confined by writing autobiography, autobiographical writing has built upon a tradition from the slave narratives, which, as I have pointed out, were often enclosed within “white” writing. The process of writing about one’s own life can be liberating and free us from how we are perceived, individualise experiences and events and open a space for re-defining, re-negotiating and re-membering our identities.

In her lifetime Marson published four volumes of poetry. Lyn Innes reveals that “A number of her poems reflect and challenge the stereotyping she encountered as a Jamaican woman, as in the following lines from ‘Little Brown Girl’”: “Little Brown Girl,/How is it that you speak/English as though it belonged/To you?” (4).

Here we see the effects of the mirror yet again: Marson adopts a tone of assumed superiority for the (white) English voice, while at the same time remonstrating against the portrayal of the imagined black woman. The effect is to make more audible the condescension the poem is framing—this is an example of a kind of derisive mimicking or mockery and what is important is not her use of language but the relation of language to imperial power. A topic articulated more recently by the Jamaican poet, Olive Senior, in her poem “Colonial Girl’s School”(1985).

Una Marson was one of the first black women writers published in Britain to tackle what has become a highly complex and much debated issue concerning the use of language. Language presents a dilemma for many African and Caribbean writers.[7] One of the characteristics of Marson’s work is the inclusion of Jamaican folk rhythms and inflections and, similarly to the African American poet Langston Hughes, idioms and inflections common to colloquial speech. This tradition became popularized by Louise Bennett. Marson was therefore also at the forefront of the movement to write in vernacular speech. Innes argues that “the Harlem Renaissance models allow Marson to move away from her earlier rigid adherence to traditional English literary forms, and to adopt new forms and idioms. Thus she begins to use Jamaican Creole in poems such as ‘Quashie Comes to London’ and ‘Foreign’, both of which adopt the idiom of a man” (17-21; 99-102). This process of writing in Caribbean Creole involves turning the mirror back on itself, in other words, seeing ourselves as others see us, or hearing ourselves as we are heard. In Marson’s case, contemporary critics of her work decried her attempts to create a new voice from the West Indies. For example, the Jamaican poet,

critic and publisher Clare McFarlane announces in a review that “Beauty in the artistic sense is rarely possible in a broken language; this is because the words, the materials with which the artist is building, are blurred in outline and unshapely...There is in the language itself something ludicrous which, while it heightens humour, often lends a farcical appearance to tragedy and makes burlesque of pathos.”[8] McFarlane’s opinion nowadays has been widely contested.

In the late 1970s, to mid 1990s, tensions between Britain’s black communities and the police were mounting, a new vocabulary and political identity created a new awareness of what it was to be black and British.[9] During this period, black British women began to find their voices publicly. Their writing began to enter into the country’s public and academic sphere and as a result of the boom in the publication of black women’s fiction, the first bibliographies of black writing were developed. So too was criticism which, as well as analysing the work of black and Asian writers, explored the differences between black British and black American writing. In Britain, Joan Riley’s first novel heralded an increasing availability of books by black women writers. Similarly, Helen Oyeyemi’s first novel succeeded this period.

Riley’s *The Unbelonging* (1985) had marked another turning point and brought a new style to black women’s writing—a refusal of optimism. Dissenting from poetry, prose, rhythm writing and the happy black Caribbean woman image, the novel also throws cold water on the image of the resourceful black woman. Mirroring is an important motif in *The Unbelonging*, for not only is the novel semi-autobiographical and mirroring Riley’s own life, but Hyacinth, the protagonist, is unable to relate to her own physical appearance in the mirror. She finds a beauty salon that claims to transform, “ugly ducklings into swans (89). Hyacinth wonders: “Could she be beautiful? Would she dare? God, it would be so nice not to be ugly” (90). What she has had to suffer is mirrored back in her feelings towards her father; she expresses aggressiveness towards him and wants “to hit out at him, to kick and pound,” and, as a vulnerable and abused child lacking in the support to develop coping skills, it seems her future relationships and development will be permanently affected. Intense anger is expressed towards Hyacinth’s stepbrother, she “[didn’t] care if [her stepbrother] was going to starve” and also wishes they were dead: “‘God I hate them!’ She thought bitterly after he had bolted up the stairs. ‘I hate them all so much. Why can’t they die, why can’t they all die?’” (23-24). Hyacinth’s memories of Jamaica are splintered images and her experiences upon returning “home” to the Caribbean as sharp as shards of glass.

My own fascination with mirrors goes back to my childhood. Because of the way I was raised as a transracial adoptee, the first black person I was aware of was the girl who stared out at me from the mirror. I recall wondering, Who is she? Sometimes, half a century later, I find myself doing a double-take. My early perceptions of beauty were influenced by Western and Victorian ideas of femininity and “fairness”—ideals that have long been treated as the norm—while typical African features have been portrayed as aesthetically unappealing. Although today the beauty industry idealizes a new bronze-skinned hybrid, this idealized image combines a small nose and neat, perky breasts with prominent buttocks and long flowing hair, my own relationship with the black woman in the mirror has been ambivalent, and fragile, if not difficult.

Patricia Duncker reveals in *Sisters and Strangers* (1992) that “Riley’s recurring question throughout her first three novels, *The Unbelonging*, *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987) and *Romance*, (1988) is simply this: how are Blackwomen [sic] to live their lives in the awareness of truth when that truth is impossible to bear?”[10] As Lauretta Ngcobo notes, “black British women’s

writing is not easily accessible in the context of a white readership, for much of what is explored is a clear indictment of the white society from which that readership springs.” Ngcobo writes:

We as Black writers at times displease our white readership. Our writing is seldom genteel since it springs from our experiences which in real life have none of the trimmings of gentility. If the truth be told, it cannot titillate the aesthetic palates of many white people, for deep down it is a criticism of their values and their treatment of us throughout history. (12)

The unspeakable converts in the theme of mirroring to the invisible. Bernadine Evaristo said in an interview for *New Writing Worlds in Norwich* (2005) that she once felt a need for literature that reflected her own cultural background. Like many before her, Evaristo remonstrates against her invisibility as a black woman.

Where was I in British Fiction? Nowhere that I could see... People in the majority culture of a society often don't understand this need for validation. I've heard such people say, "I don't read fiction to see myself in it"... but don't we all look for writing that explains ourselves to ourselves when we're younger? When the gap between our own cultural backgrounds and those portrayed in literature is a chasm, we can fall into it, screaming, sometimes silently or sometimes noisily, as I did. I loved literature, but literature, it seemed, did not love me.

Through the British media black women now have a more visible presence and yet because of economic pressures, the subordinate social conditions in which we are often placed and lack of adequate representation, not only in literature but also in power structures and, whether intentional or not, discriminatory legislation and practice, our views are seldom heard. Perhaps these are the reasons why, Duncker observes, “Again and again, Black and Asian writing reflects the uncanny, exhausting experience of being both visible and invisible, at once present and absent, harassed and ignored, perpetually insecure in a white racist Britain” (211-212).

Writing back often involves the process of mirroring. In Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), for example, Antoniette's narrative necessitates an acceptance in the reader of the mad woman in the attic and, in my own moments of torment, I am often reminded of Antoniette's passionate and haunting story. Her psychological disintegration and descent towards madness is a journey which ultimately becomes the mirror opposite to that of the wholesome goodness of innocent Jane's depicted in *Jane Eyre*. Like Rhys, new black British writers raise interesting perspectives on contemporary mirroring and take their readers through the looking glass – through a process of re-narration – to explore what is on the other side, and to show how, in Rhys' words, that “there is always the other side, always” (99).

Mirroring, separation, loss, shattered and fragmented selves, are strong themes in Helen Oyeyemi's and Diana Evans' first novels. Both *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and *26a* (2005) are haunting tales of twins, of double identities, of sisters who die; they portray how destabilising the experience of “going back home” can be and the havoc that ensues as souls battle for oneness and a single identity. The looking-glass appears as a central image or mechanism reflecting different identities—black, white, mixed parentage, twin sisters—in *The Icarus Girl*. Oyeyemi explores an extraordinary number of ways in which TillyTilly can be read as a reflection of Jessamy and vice versa. There is even symmetry in the name, TillyTilly; one half reflects the other. Mirrors and reflections come into play throughout Jessamy's and TillyTilly's relationship—it is in a mirror that Jessamy reflects upon and confirms the way she sees herself and her shifting identity—sometimes she barely recognises her reflection. In the extract below, mirror images themselves are mirrored:

Still holding the mirrored blonde girl, she padded down the passage to the bathroom without switching on the light and peered into the mirror, watching herself intently, one hand pressed hard against the rim of the basin. She blinked several times, trying each time to catch her reflection out in the dim light. Then she pressed her finger against the cold glass, joining herself to her reflection, pointing, marking herself... After some time, she stared as if she had just woken up from a trance, feeling the sultry wetness of tears trickling down her face. The mirror had misted up; she couldn't remember whether she had been breathing on it. It was cold. She thought that she could make out that her reflection was smiling. A trick of sight or of sensation? Cautiously, Jess wiped at her face, then crumpled the blonde mirror twins between her fingers and went back to her bedroom. (185)

The themes within Oyeyemi's first novel correspond to those in works by other contemporary black British women, such as struggles over representation and role reversals, as in this extract where Oyeyemi's characters' mirror images fight for independence from each other:

Jess had now cleared a rough little patch of mirror, but was bewildered to find that she was only looking at herself... She leaned closer, squinting, then gasped aloud as her reflection spoke to her. "I want to swap places, Jessy."  
It was Tilly's voice, but Jess's mirrored mouth moving. "Sw-swap?" Jess stammered, touching her face even as she tried to discover how this could be. Her reflected eyes narrowed and passed over her coolly, and the cheeks were sucked in thoughtfully before Tilly said: Yes. I've decided it's about time." (242)

The passage above could be read as symbolising that we are entering another stage in the process of creolization, hybridity and homogenization and assimilation, or as the disintegration of black identities. What is key to the reasons behind the disintegration of groups set up to support black women's writing? Is it how writers perceive and position or locate themselves? Where their political affiliations lie? It appears that although there was an emergent black feminist criticism with books like *Charting the Journey* (1988), in the process of this reworking, the solidarity that there was at one time between black women writers has fragmented, and although a tradition is being developed, this has not resulted in a critical mass, although it almost did in the 1980's. Joan Anim-Addo tells us (Interview, 2006) there is a perception that there is not a need for a black feminist criticism—but it has come adrift; what has occurred, she says, is a kind of reifying—only one black female writer is let through at a time, and Britain's own black communities lack cohesion, "A sprinkling of successful writers," she declares, "hardly constitutes a genre."

While my discussion does not delve into the many debates related to black British writing, for example, about black British identity, the divisive phenomenon of Islamophobia, the postcolonial debate, genres of black British writing, the question persists: what does reflecting upon recent mirror images of ourselves tell us? In terms of how far the body of writing has come, we must consider an important development - the new MA at Goldsmiths in Black British writing.[11] Collectively black writer's voices have challenged racial prejudice and negative stereotyping and the prejudiced attitudes have, to some extent, changed. It is my view that the effect this change has had has resulted in a more equal society. It also amounts, in literary terms, to significant numbers of black women and men being published. Their works hold up mirrors for us in which we can see how distorted reflections of ourselves have shaped our identities and other's perceptions of us. Racial identity, the presence and role of race in the literary imagination, black existential philosophy, the notion of "double consciousness"[12] and "the white gaze" have been explored in the writings of Buchi Emecheta, the publisher Margaret Busby, Monica Ali, Zadie Smith, Bernadine Evaristo and many more, and much of their work has been central to retrieving the black British experience. Ironically, these writers have achieved great works of literature, despite or because of their desire to address injustice; in the creative

process of writing, their anger becomes part of their art and effectively shatters the old mirror image.[13]

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## Notes

[1] See also the following texts: Ralph Ellison's, "Twentieth Century Fiction"; Franz Fanon's, *Black Skin, White Masks; Shadow and Act*; James Baldwin's, 'Many Thousands Gone', *Collected Essays*.

[2] In the following texts the image of the mirror is employed in relation to racial difference: Ralph Ellison, *Twentieth Century Fiction; Shadow and Act*, (41); Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. (139; 161; 178; 186). James Baldwin, *Many Thousands Gone, Collected Essays*.

[3] Mary Prince, F. Westley and A. H. Davis Eds. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* London: Westley and A. H. Davis, Stationers' Hall Court; Edinburgh: Waugh & Innes, 1831; 'Towards a Post-Western Humanism Made to the Measure of Those Recently Recognized as Human.' Eds. Asimina Karavanta and Nina Morgan, *Edward Said and Jacques Derrida: Reconstellating Humanism and the Global Hybrid*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008 (250-274).

[4] See Joan Anim-Addo's article tracing the development of black women's writing in Britain: 'Inventing the Self: An Introduction to the Black Woman Subject/ Object in Britain from 1507 - 2007', *Touching the Body. I am Black/ White/ Yellow: An Introduction to the Black Body in Europe*, Mango Publishing, 2007.

[5] Alan Richardson, Olaudah Equiano, Debbie Lee, Mary Prince. *Early Black British Writing: Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince and Others*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. (234 – 235).

[6] Seacole was quoted as an example of "hidden" black history in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*: "See, here is Mary Seacole, who did as much in the Crimea as another magic-lamping lady, but, being dark, could scarce be seen for the flame of Florence's candle". Salman Rushdie. *The Satanic Verses*. London: Vintage, 1988 (292); Several buildings, organisations and entities, mainly connected with health care - including a web-based collection of research-based evidence and good practice information relating to the health needs of minority ethnic groups, and to multi-cultural health care - have named after her in England and the Caribbean; in the Caribbean, amongst numerous other awards, Seacole was posthumously awarded the Jamaican Order of Merit in 1991. A "green plaque" was unveiled in Westminster, on 11 October 2005; a blue plaque is situated in Soho Square, where she lived in 1857. Seacole was introduced into the National Curriculum, in 2007 and her life story is taught at many primary schools in the UK alongside that of Florence Nightingale.

[7] For further reading see Marlene Nourbese Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*. Toronto: Ragweed Press/University of Toronto Press, 1989.

[8] The Life of Una Marson, cited from Clare McFarlane, 'Review of the Moth and the Star', no date, Una Marson papers, Box 1949B, National Library of Jamaica.

[9] For further information see James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing*.

[10] Patricia Duncker, *Sisters and Strangers*, (245).

[11] 'Words of Colour' has five writers commenting on the importance of the proposed M.S.A in Black British Writing at Goldsmith's University, London. [wordsofcolour.co.uk/saving-black-british-literature/](http://wordsofcolour.co.uk/saving-black-british-literature/)

[12] W.E.B Du Bois theory of African American "double consciousness" originally from "Of Our Spiritual Strivings", *The Atlantic Monthly*; later edited and republished as "The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches". A. C. McClurg & Co., Chicago: 1903 (p. 9). "Double consciousness" is a term used to describe the psychological challenge of reconsidering an African heritage with a European upbringing in slavery and education.

[13] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (30).

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