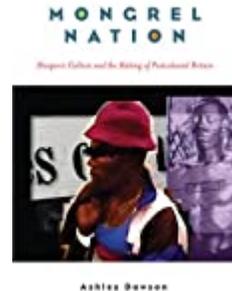




**Ashley Dawson.** *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. 226 S. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-09991-7; \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-06991-0.



**Reviewed by** Sandra Müller

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## A. Dawson: *Mongrel Nation*

In *Mongrel Nation*, Ashley Dawson, Associate Professor of English at the City University of New York, provides an overview of diasporic social, political and artistic movements in the UK, starting with the Windrush generation and ending with an observation of post 9/11 (and 7/7) cultural production. This history of non-white diasporas coming to Britain illustrates a move away from insular or excluding definitions of national identity to the notion of Britain being a truly mongrel nation (p. 188). However, as Dawson quotes Daniel Defoe's *The True-Born Englishman* in the preamble himself, the examples in the book as well as the conclusion rather show that in spite of the many attempts of various people to define a pure and authentic Englishness there never was such thing. This could have been made much clearer in the book as it remains rather a message between the lines as the book focuses on the specific contributions of black British artists and politically active members of diasporic communities to contemporary multifaceted Britain.

In all chapters, Dawson refers to artists and activists alike who attempt to overcome the traditions of linguis-

tic and mental colonization imposed by the educational apparatus in the British colonies of the Caribbean (p. 73) and other former colonies, and how insular and homogeneous definitions of Britishness were challenged.

At the very beginning, *Mongrel Nation* takes us to the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in London and introduces the calypso song *London Is the Place for Me* by Lord Kitchener. The optimism carried in this song turned to disappointment when the Caribbean migrants arrived at the mother country where they were not welcomed, but had to face an often hostile environment, where people saw them as outsiders, an invading force of dangerous aliens who threatened British identities that were conceived as pure and perpetual (p. 19). The chapter then gives an overview of the most important events such as political changes in the 20th century that have had an impact on migration and immigrants as well as their families. Dawson announces that the book is intended to show how diasporic communities have managed to challenge essentialist accounts of Britishness (p. 26), but also warns the reader that minorities still face obstacles in the UK and that race and racism are still present, not

least after 9/11, 7/7 and the war against Iraq.

The seven following chapters attempt to cover more than 50 years of entangled history and cultural production of Caribbean, African and Indian diasporas in Britain. Chapter one starts off with the Notting Hill riots and explains the tradition of calypso, how it was used to challenge existing hierarchies and how it was employed in carnival performances as well as Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*. The second chapter deals with the Caribbean Artist Movement (CAM), the Black Power movement in the USA and the UK, and introduces the works by Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Claudia Jones. Chapter three focuses on Linton Kwesi Johnson and dub poetry. In chapter four, Dawson takes a closer look at two novels by the Nigerian-born author Buchi Emecheta, i.e. *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*, and black feminism. Chapter five deals with Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. And chapter six revolves around Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* to argue that in the course of an increased interest in genetics and biotechnology, race and eugenics came back in through the back door. In his concluding chapter, Dawson compares British reaction to threats to the Blitz, IRA terror, 9/11, and 7/7 and finds similarities in the history of hostility towards Muslims with reactions to Asian and Afro-Caribbean immigration in the 1970s (cf. pp. 177-179). Dawson then refers to yet another form of popular cultural production, i.e. Asian Hip-Hop and in particular the Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) and Fun-Da-Mental, and how they challenge contemporary double standards, e.g. the currently fashionable narrative of bringing democracy to the Middle East by war and ignoring human rights.

Despite some shortcomings of the book, *Mongrel Nation* provides an overview of almost 60 years of Caribbean, African and Indian immigration to the UK as well as the contribution of these migrants and their descendants to cultural production as well as to social and political movements. The book addresses many important events such as the Notting Hill riots, the Rushdie Affair and the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, as well as their implications for the cohabitation between white and non-white people in Britain, artists in particular. Throughout the chapters there are various references to legislation (e.g. citizenship and immigration laws) and relevant (political) movements, such as neofascism, black power, feminism, and student movements that had an impact on diasporic communities as well as white British citizens. Furthermore I would like to praise the book for not only focusing on so-called 'high culture', but also investigating popular culture and non-written forms of cultural practice,

such as carnival, dub poetry performances and Hip-Hop.

However, the book sometimes lacks detail and remains superficial. This is not to say that the book is not interesting, but if e.g. the heading announces 'Migration, Gender, and Identity in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*' I expect more than lengthy descriptions of the origins of calypso and how its rhythms, language and topics found their way into Selvon's novel. The detailed analysis of Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch* in chapter four is a welcome exception compared to other more superficial analyses. The book concentrates more on the conditions of cultural production than the actual works itself, so those looking for a detailed analysis of cultural objects or practices might feel dissatisfied. In addition, the passages on carnival in chapters one to three are often repetitive. More detail on some of the texts and less repetition on carnival would have done the book good.

And despite the many passages on Caribbean carnival in the UK, the book is highly text-centered when it comes to cultural production. In particular in those parts dealing with music, e.g. the passages on dub, sound systems and hip-hop, there is almost no information about the actual music and the performative aspects of such productions.

In a number of instances, the book is not particularly reader-friendly. Many of the numerous endnotes seem simply superfluous. At times, terms are just mentioned in one chapter and only explained in a later chapter, such as e.g. in the case of 'amas' and 'canboulay', which appear in chapter one but are not explained before chapter three. And despite the book's overview character, it might still not be the first choice for undergraduate classes as for large parts the sentences are unnecessarily complicated and previous knowledge of e.g. Fanon, Bakhtin, Hall, Said, and Gilroy are necessary in order to understand the allusions in the text and the endnotes. Occasionally the references appear more like name dropping than actual arguments.

In particular in the concluding chapter about 'Post-9/11 Britain' I would have expected at least an outlook or a note on new forms of migration, e.g. from other areas such as Eastern Europe. It would have been interesting to investigate how those new immigrants, such as the often-cited 'Polish plumber', interact with the diasporas mentioned in the book.

If one is looking for an overview or selection of Caribbean, Nigerian and South-Asian takes on challeng-

ing outdated notions of Britishness, this book might be of interest, in particular because it spans from the 1940s until after the London bombings of 2005. Those looking for a detailed analysis of texts or performances might find other publications more useful.

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