1   Introduction

Since the 1980s there has been a steady increase in the number of Black and Asian women playwrights working in Britain.[1] In the main these are either women whose parents migrated to the UK, or women who arrived in the UK as young children, or women who were born and educated in Britain.[2] Frequently college- or university-educated,[3] they tend to work across a range of media including radio, television, film, the newspapers, and literary forms such as poetry and fiction since it is impossible for most playwrights to make a living from their theatre work. Black and Asian women playwrights often create their plays in response to calls for submissions or commissions to write for a particular company or on a specific topic. Maria Oshodi, for instance, was asked to write a play on sickle-cell anaemia by a member of staff from the Sickle Cell Centre in Lambeth (Brewster 1989: 94). Tanika Gupta responded to a call from Talawa inviting 'new, black women to send in stage scripts' (Stephenson and Langridge 1997: 116). Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Besharam (Shameless)*[4] was written as part of Birmingham Rep's Attachment Scheme, designed to promote new playwriting and nurture young writers for theatre. The emergence and publication of work by Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain (e.g. Wandor, ed. 1985; Remnant, ed. 1986; Brewster, ed. 1987, 1989, 1995; Davis, ed. 1987; Harwood, ed. 1989; Remnant, ed. 1990; George, ed. 1993; Gupta 1997; Mason-John 1999; Rapi and Chowdhry 1998) has coincided, in Theatre Studies, with the establishment of postcolonial theatre/theory, intercultural theatre, world theatre, and performance studies. These developments reflect the hold of the globalization process on the cultural imaginary. They also bespeak the histories from which these theatres have emerged, histories of colonization, of

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cultural appropriation and commodification, of cultural exchange, curiosity, transformation, and international engagement, mostly on a highly politicized, uneven playing field on which the drama of the politics of the day found – and continues to find – cultural expression in contemporary theatre, performance, and theory.

Postcolonial, intercultural, and world theatres

Neither postcolonial nor intercultural nor world theatre has paid any sustained attention to the Black and Asian women playwrights now active on the British stage. As Sandra Ponzanesi in relation to writing more generally has put it: 'migration literature and post-colonial literature in general hardly focus on the internal differences present within Europe' (2002: 211). There are many reasons for this. In the case of postcolonial theatre/theory, the focus – as the term itself suggests – has been on the relation between the colonial and what came/comes after, often very much with the head turned back towards the colonial and with an emphasis on the current cultural productions in the former colonies.[5] 'Postcolonial theatre' indexes a political paradigm and reality shift (from colonial to postcolonial), a historico-temporal period (signifying what comes after the end of the colonial empires), and a reaction to all that coloniality entailed. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins' *Post-Colonial Drama* (1996), for instance, centres on the drama produced in former colonies, predominantly in Africa. Gilbert's later edited volume *(Post)Colonial Stages* (1999) includes discussions of theatre from across the world, still very much roaming the former colonial territories. In its focus on the theatre of the former colonies, this work offers important insights into the transformations which the impact of colonial forces and changes in political regime have wrought upon that theatre, even if and as it critiques past colonial conditions and their impacts. It gives voice and reception to the work of those formerly colonized. But it does not engage with the work of those who migrated to Britain or who are the children of such migrants, now living in Britain. Indeed, Ponzanesi claims that 'The post-colonial debate tends to be dominated by the English language as it rotates around the axis Britain/India, re-proposing the old dichotomy of empire

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while claiming to voice subaltern histories and marginal positions'
(2002: 211).[6]

'World theatre' references theatre from around the world in an
apparently politically and historically neutral manner that is, in fact,
belied by the specificities of the 'theatres' discussed under that head-
ing. J. Ellen Gainor's *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World The-
atre, Drama and Performance* (1995) in every contribution challenges
the assumption of a politically and ideologically unimplicated theatre.
But it also frequently leaves intact the notion that theatre is sited in
unitary, homogeneous geopolitical sites, referencing nations and eth-
nicities in ways that suggest that they have been unaffected by the
flux of people, pressures of differences, and diasporic movements that
go hand in hand with current forms of globalization.

'Intercultural theatre' comes in many guises but its chief char-
acteristic is the conjunction of theatrical elements from different cul-
tures, hence the 'inter' (see Pavis 1996). That theatre has been the
object of much recent critique (see Bharucha 2000). Julie Holledge
and Joanne Tompkins begin their *Women's Intercultural Performance*
(2000) with the following telling words: 'Intercultural projects that
originate in the west tend to focus on aesthetics first and politics
second . . . Interculturalism all too frequently is perceived to become
"political" only when a critic complains about (mis)representations of
otherness or appropriations of culture' (1). Much of the focus of inter-
cultural theatre has been on the conflagration of east and west, the
use of Japanese, Chinese, Indian performance elements or narratives
in theatre by western directors. Again, this work leaves intact a geo-
political imaginary that distinguishes, in a seemingly unproblema-
tized way, between 'them' and 'us', between an 'other' and a 'self'.

Insofar as Black women's production for performance has been
analysed, this has occurred at the intersection of postmodern, post-
colonial, and subaltern theories, with drama or theatre work un-
derstood – with reference to the anthropologically based work of
Victor Turner (1982) and Richard Schechner (1985; 1994) – as an ex-
tension or enactment of ritual and/or as what is now termed 'live art'
or performance art (e.g. Ugwu 1995; Gilbert and Tompkins 1996).[7]

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Turner's work especially, but also Schechner's, is invested in understanding performance as an evolutionary process, with continuities across time, cultures, and histories, ranging from everyday practice through ritual to 'high art'. This evolutionary model, referencing a certain cultural and historical past, is rather well encapsulated in Schechner's diagram of 'the evolution of cultural genres of performance from "liminal" to "liminoid"' that forms part of his foreword to Turner's *The Anthropology of Performance* (1987). Turner's work, more heavily anthropologically inflected than Schechner's, harks back unabashedly to 'primitive societies', 'tribal cultures', and other such vocabularies which inform what he describes in *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) as his 'personal voyage of discovery from traditional anthropological studies of ritual performance to a lively interest in modern theatre, particularly experimental theatre' (7). Indeed, Turner's last writings before his death in 1983 were moving towards a sociobiology of performance,[8] now of course a hotly contested terrain. Some Black and Asian British female performers' work has thus found itself the object of a certain (albeit limited) amount of attention because placing that performance work into lines of continuity which connect it with 'tribal cultures' and 'primitive societies' continues to embed that work in a postcolonial tradition which maintains those visibly different in a by now imaginary space of colonial otherness, part of the empire we'd still love to have. Avtar Brah (1996) has rightly talked of the problematic of the 'indigene' subject position and its precarious relationship to 'nativist' discourses. In some of the theoretico-critical work on performance we find ourselves back on that terrain. Indeed, Robert Young (1995) has shown how certain vocabularies, encapsulated in his work in and as the term 'hybridity', and commonly used in postcolonial theory, unselfconsciously and uncritically repeat ideas that informed the very coloniality which the new theories seek to critique.

In a thought-provoking essay Julie Stone Peters (1995) discusses critiques of postcolonial and intercultural theatre; she points to 'studies of the superimposition of European high culture on local cultures (and hence the suppression of the local); studies of the "orientalist" (inevitably falsifying) representation of the "non-Western"; studies of

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the ethnographic voyeurist spectatorship that serves such representation' (200) as evidence for the west's cultural imperialism. Her argument is that many of these studies reproduce 'the history of theatre in the empires [a]s the history of two sides' (201) which 'often unconsciously perpetuate . . . the unnuanced bifurcation of West and East, First and Third Worlds, developed and undeveloped, primitive and civilized' (202). Stone Peters' attempt to rescue postcolonial and intercultural theatre from such accusations translates into an assertion of 'theatre's position as an explorer in cultural forms' (208) and a celebration of the notion of translation, of the mutability of all cultural forms, and of identity as a way forward in the debate, a plea for viewing postcolonial and intercultural theatre as expressive of (ex)change where 'what is lost in translation may be gained in communication' (206). Stone Peters' argument is in many ways persuasive although she has to lose sight of her early point that cultural exchange does not happen on a level playing field in order to make it stick. In looking for a theatre which might exhibit the transformative potential she seeks to celebrate, Stone Peters references Una Chaudhuri who discusses '"the drama of immigrants" (196), in which an oversimplification or essentializing of cultural identity becomes untenable – in which it becomes impossible radically to subdivide the world into the "foreign" and the "familiar," the "exotic" and the "standard," "them" and "us"' (209).

The notion of the 'drama of immigrants' is contested by Mary Karen Dahl contributing to the same collection of essays as Stone Peters. Dahl refers to a discussion between her and a colleague in which she wanted to describe 'black theatre' as 'postcolonial' whilst the colleague thought it was 'immigrant drama' (1995: 40). Dahl ultimately refuses the term 'immigrant drama' after outlining the ways in which Britain's immigration policy is racist (see also Solomos 1993). Her argument is that the term 'postcolonial' gestures towards a history, that of colonization, which is conveniently obliterated by 'immigrant', a word that does not reference the prior histories that motivated that migration.

Three issues arise from these debates: one is the clear politicization of all the terms that are used; the second one is the question

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of who does the naming; and the third one is the question of what realities and/or histories we wish to address through such naming. Given Britain's colonial pasts and histories of migration that involved both shipping out and shipping in, the politicized specificity of terms referring to theatre by Black and Asian playwrights is inevitable. Indeed, it is noticeable – bearing in mind how little writing on this work there is, notwithstanding the size of the actual corpus – that most of the texts dealing with Black and Asian (women) playwrights' work are explicitly political in their scope, with titles such as 'Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Center'; 'Bodies Outside the State: Black British Women Playwrights and the Limits of Citizenship'; or 'Small Island People: Black British Women Playwrights'. All these titles also reference space, articulate explicitly or implicitly a tension between margin and centre, between inside and outside, which points to the imbrication of the *polis* as space and as political entity in the fashioning of Black and Asian identities. They tend to do so from a position permeated by a sense of colonial history, the present as expressive of the past.

The socio-cultural geographies they address are dealt with rather differently in Avtar Brah's discussion of 'the politics of location'. Understanding the importance of articulating the relationship between space, history, and present, Brah focuses on 'diaspora' as encapsulating that relationship. Arguing that 'if the circumstances of leaving are important, so, too, are those of arrival and settlement' (1996: 182), Brah explores 'how different groups come to be relationally positioned in a given context' (182–3), and proposes the concept of '*diaspora space*' (208) to designate the terrain in which, as she puts it, 'multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition' (208). Brah's concept of diaspora space importantly entails the recognition that that space is inhabited 'not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous' (209). Brah argues that both migrants and those who remain in one place are

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affected and effected by migration, that diaspora is the contemporary condition of being in multi-cultural spaces and that people from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds are equally shaped by diaspora, equally but not necessarily in the same way. Brah's conceptualization privileges the here and now, and it is this which makes her theoretical framework relevant here.

Empire and migration

The imaginary which nostalgically retains coloniality at its core is unsettled by the work of contemporary Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain because, as will become clear, these 'black [and Asian] voices at the center', to borrow the subtitle of an essay by Mary Karen Dahl, are not merely 'at the center' but, indeed, *of* the centre. Contrary to Paul Gilroy's assertion that *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, this work reveals that 'black' is a constitutive part of the 'Union Jack' as a metaphor for Britain, and it is the need to engage with this constitutivity that has prompted this volume. That need arises in part as a function of the increasing, and increasingly public, debates about race relations in the UK,[9] necessitated by continued racist attacks against Black and Asian people, racial harassment, and racialized violence in institutional and extra-institutional settings.[10] These debates and the race-related tensions and violence of the period since the 1980s are themselves expressive of the socio-political changes that Britain has undergone since the Second World War. Key to those changes has been the decline of the British Empire, a much more recent occurrence than its commodification through phenomena such as the Merchant-Ivory films about India would have us believe. Hong Kong, it is worth remembering, was only relinquished in 1997. And Britain continues to exercise sovereignty over bits of land and over people geographically significantly removed from the British Isles, such as the Falklands and, closer to home, Gibraltar.

The decline of empire has been matched by successive waves of migration into Britain of people from the former colonies, of Black people from the Caribbean and various African countries and of Asian people from India, from Pakistan, and from East Africa in the wake of political turmoil there (see Wilson 1978; Owen 1992, 1993; Solomos

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1993; Luthra 1997; Visram 2002). These migrants were initially encouraged to come to Britain as part of the post-war reconstruction and economic expansion.[11] Their arrival into Britain shattered the presumed dichotomy between Britain and its colonial 'others', creating the beginning of a transformation of what 'being British' means, a shift encoded, *inter alia*, in the various successive immigration and race relations acts designed to regulate the collapse between 'margins' and 'centre' as a consequence of migration (see chapter three in Solomos).

The migrations of Black and Asian people to Britain have their socio-economic, political, and historical, as well as geographical specificities (Wilson 1978; Solomos 1992; www.movinghere.org.uk). Whereas migrants in the mid-twentieth century, both from the Caribbean and from India and Pakistan, often but not invariably came from very impoverished rural areas, the Asians who arrived from the East African countries as political refugees during the 1970s, for instance, were frequently middle class with histories of considerable economic success. 'Black' and 'Asian' migrants to Britain thus did not constitute a homogeneous group of people, even if they were treated as such. Their diversity of backgrounds, languages, customs, religions, and everyday practices remained unrecognized as Britain, itself not a unitary entity, sought to come to terms with – as Avtar Brah has described it – its 'diaspora space'.

Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996) is conceptually significant for this volume because Brah seeks to shift the discourse from coloniality and postcoloniality, from migration and immigration, to *diaspora* which for her signals '*multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries*' (194). For Brah 'the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins' (180), a critique all the more necessary as British identities increasingly include people of mixed-race origin (Alibhai-Brown and Montague 1992; Alibhai-Brown 2001); migrants who have settled in the UK, sometimes after successive migrations that render any notion of a fixed origin untenable; and children of migrants who were born and brought up in Britain. Moreover, and equally important, Brah argues strongly that migration impacts not only on those who migrate but

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also on the communities into which they migrate. In this diaspora space multiple subject positions occur (208); fixity of origin becomes indeterminate and identity equivocal. This 'liquid condition of modernity', as Zygmunt Bauman has termed it, is the condition in which plays by contemporary Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain have been forged, and they bear the marks of that condition.

As the preceding pages indicate, *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* seeks to engage with a body of theatre work that has, on the whole, escaped critical attention. It has escaped this attention in my view because it does not readily fall into the remit of postcolonial, intercultural, or world theatre. The latter frequently perpetuate historical divisions by exploring 'the other' as *other*. Instead, I want to argue that although the plays under consideration bear the mark of those divisions, the work itself is produced by writers who do not necessarily view themselves as 'other' within Britain and who are now claiming their place at the table of British high culture. Their points of reference – in theatrical terms – are thus not the rituals, performances, or theatre works that are prevalent in the West Indies, parts of Africa, India, or Pakistan, but those of contemporary British theatre. These playwrights' work does not, in other words, readily fit the categories of postcolonial, intercultural, or world theatre as these are currently understood, but should be viewed as part of British theatre now. As subsequent chapters illustrate, as such this work comments on the lived conditions of diasporic peoples in contemporary Britain, giving voice to their preoccupations and experiences. My concern, expressed through the thematic approach taken in this volume, is thus with the issues raised in this work and their relation to contemporary Britain.

Naming identities

To talk of the work of Black and Asian women playwrights instantly begs the question of what 'Black' and 'Asian' mean. Both terms have political and cultural histories in the UK that are very different from their histories elsewhere. These histories have been variously charted (e.g. Wilson 1978; Mama 1984; Gilroy 1992, 1993; Mason-John 1995, 1999). As Mary Karen Dahl, looking in from the outside, observes

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of Britain: 'Hegemonic political and popular discourses combine diverse groups representing diverse cultures into a single category, the "not white"' (1995: 52). Playwright and performer Valerie Mason-John, commenting from within, graphically endorses this view: 'We were all wogs, all niggers, all coons. As a young child . . . I was called coloured along with children of Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, and Japanese descent, and anyone else who didn't resemble white' (1999: 11). During the late 1970s and early 1980s in the UK this homogenization in part led to a politics of coalition-building and strategic political alliances among people of West Indian, African, Indian, Pakistani, and other diverse origins, fuelled by a desire to achieve greater visibility and political impact through such coalitions. The history of the Organization of Women of Africa and African Descent (OWAAD), renamed the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent, is instructive here and illustrative of that phase of identity politics and coalition-building that, *inter alia*, shaped the race politics of the UK in the 1980s (see Mason-John 1999: 12–14; see also *Feminist Review* special issue on *Black Feminist Perspectives*, 17, Autumn 1984). The 'blackification' of women from diverse communities in Britain facilitated the adoption of the term 'black' as the signifier of a political allegiance of people who suffer/ed racialized oppression in Britain.[12] It also related to the (re-)appropriation and revaluation of the term 'black' as one associated with pride and power. Mason-John argues that 'during the 1970s it seemed quite clear that women of African, Caribbean and Asian descent were black' (1999: 12). However, it also became clear that the strategic utility of the term had its limits in the very different needs and issues diverse communities faced as is expressed in the plays written by women from these very different communities. In the same way that the question of arranged marriages, for instance, does not affect Caribbean communities, so the issue of single motherhood tends not to be foregrounded within Asian communities.[13] The recognition of these differences led to the demise of OWAAD and, more generally, to the foregrounding of diversity as key to contemporary Britain.

The homogenizing term 'Black' can no longer easily be used in 2003. There is a recognition now, for instance, that contemporary

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British culture has been differentially shaped by Black and Asian influences. Whilst the popular music and dance scene of the 1980s and early 1990s, for instance, was strongly influenced by Black cultures of various kinds, meaning cultures that bear the signature of African, Caribbean, and Black American backgrounds, the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century have seen the rise and increasing visibility of Asian cultures in Britain. West Indian carnivals have been matched by Asian melas in towns such as Leeds, Bradford, Manchester, Leicester, and London. In 2002 in Britain much publicity was given to the arrival of *Bombay Dreams*, a Bollywood musical brought to the British stage with a script by Meera Syal, by now a household name in the UK through the television series which she co-scripts and in which she stars such as *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars from No. 42*, as much as her acclaimed novels *Anita and Me* and *Life Isn't All Ha-Ha, Hee-Hee*. Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*, an epic about multi-cultural twentieth-century Britain, has been televised. Bollywood is widely discussed and can be viewed in all major British cities as well as on late-night British television. There are numerous theatre companies such as Kali Theatre Company, Clean Break, Red Ladder, Pilot Theatre Company, and others, which promote new work by British Asian – as well as Black – women playwrights. Bands such as Asian Dub Foundation have generated new fusion sounds that collapse cultural boundaries. The cultural identity that diverse Asian communities have carved out for themselves in Britain during the 1990s is both prominent and distinct from Black British cultural identities and operates across somewhat different cultural terrains. In the Britain of the twenty-first century both 'Black' and 'Asian' presences thus mould British culture in different but highly articulated ways.

Recognizing diversity

To understand the work of Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain, one needs to understand something of the patterns of migration underlying the emergence of that work. The patterns of migration which have informed the arrival of Black people in Britain are distinct from those of Asian people though much of the migration by Black and Asian people into Britain took place after the Second

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World War and in many ways mirrors Britain's colonial history. The arrival of the SS *Empire Windrush* in 1948 saw the entry of some 400 British subjects from the Caribbean into Britain (see Solomos 1993; Wambu 1998). Mass migration from the West Indies thus in some respects preceded migration from African countries, and also that from the Indian subcontinent. These migrations, a function of both labour market opportunities in the UK and changing economic and political climates in the countries from which people migrated, are the histories which inform the plays by Black and Asian women in Britain, frequently providing the central dynamic of the plays as their characters seek to live the diasporic lives which those migrations have meant for them.

As this volume demonstrates, diversity among Black and Asian populations, as much as between Black, Asian, and white populations, is central to the diasporic identities they – we – inhabit. Many plays by Black women playwrights, for instance, *inter alia* thematize the issue of the differences between Black people coming from African countries and Black people coming from the Caribbean. In Maria Oshodi's *The 'S' Bend* (n.d.), for example, her mother forbids Fola, one of the protagonists, to go to a party with the words: 'You mix with all these West Indian people who never pick up a book and read; do you want to end up like them? Go to your room and study, don't talk to me about West Indian parties!' (1, 3: 6). When Fola tells her West Indian friend Claudette that she is not allowed to attend the party, Claudette responds: 'You're under that African woman's power a bit too much' (1, 4: 19). And when a white girl, Mya, asks Fola about the differences between West Indians and Africans, Fola asserts that they have 'a different sort of general outlook, values, I suppose' (1, 6: 28), which she characterizes as 'A high educational value in the African, and I guess a high material value in the other, coupled with a lack of cultural identity' (1, 6: 29). Fola's view is that whilst Africans and West Indians can mix – her best friend, after all, is West Indian – 'one of the two has to make a sacrifice – SELL OUT, and too often, in most cases, it's the African half' (1, 6: 29). In her attempt to resist the materiality and loss of cultural identity she ascribes to West Indians, Fola in the end decides to return to Nigeria, inspired by a talk with her uncle:

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he showed me the possibility of avoiding a sell out. He seemed
to understand my feelings precisely. He had been brought up
in England himself and found that the only way to escape the
pressure of conflicting cultures was to completely avoid them
and live in a less conflicting environment. This can only be
done in your own native land, so he suggested I try life in
Nigeria for a while.

  I thought about this for weeks. To accept a total change to a
new life-style; would it work in my case? I tried to visualize
my future in England and just saw a life torn by my
submission to superficial cultural groups. This would mean a
continuation of the confusion . . . I may stay in Nigeria just
long enough to gain some sort of identity, strong enough to
keep me afloat for when and if I return to England. But,
whatever the outcome, Mya, the feeling of NOT completely
selling out is a feeling that has totally re-shaped my views and
my life. I've managed to carry out my own small rebellion.

                                                          (1, 7: 45)

Fola's response is of course only one version of how one might deal
with diversity; her repatriation at the end of the play, both into the
'custody' of her uncle and into the country her parents came from,
as well as her insistence on the possibility of the preservation of a
singular specific identity under diasporic conditions, raise as many
questions about female identity as they seemingly resolve for Fola.
The point here, however, is the articulation of differences among Black
people, the assertion of (a not invariably celebrated) diversity in a con-
text – Britain – where homogenization is the norm. Indeed, as the dis-
cussion of Ahmad's 'Song for a Sanctuary' in chapter five shows, such
differences, emblematized in Ahmad's play in the clash between two
Asian women with radically different diasporic histories and trajecto-
ries, are themselves often a source of conflict and are presented as such
in many of the plays, providing both dramatic tension and narrative
movement.

    Brah's argument concerning diaspora space constitutes a sig-
nificant rupture with those postcolonial positions that continue to

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operate in homogenizing and binarist terms. It also opens an avenue for considering new identities as they emerge and are articulated in the twenty-first century (see, for example, Ang 2001). The monolithic 'Black' or 'Asian' – which often figures as an ascription – is thus invited to contemplate identities that refuse such homogenization (see Ang-Lygate 1997). Geraldine Connor's self-description in her afterword to the programme for *Carnival Messiah* (2002), for instance, states:

> In this third millennium, I see myself as a living exponent of the meeting of Europe, Africa and Asia four centuries ago, the living product of African enslavement, of European colonisation and domination and of the ensuing crosscurrent of latter-day mass migration from the Caribbean to Britain. I carry all that cultural baggage with, I am what is defined as a 'New European'.
>
> (n.p.)

When I contacted writer Rani Drew[14] about her work she emailed me with the following comment:

> I do not seem to fit the bill of either Black or Asian Women. I resist the category and the concept. I wouldn't have come to England, if I wasn't married to an Englishman. So, I didn't come as an immigrant and can't be defined as the first or second or third Asian (not so young) immigrant generation. Again, I resist the definition.
>
> (personal communication, 29 June 2002)

Interestingly, Drew's play *Myself Alone/Asia Calling* (1996) focuses on a man, the child of a Hungarian father and an English mother, seeking to establish a sense of identity by travelling the world in pursuit of the occult and a spirit world that eludes him. Forever confined to an imaginary and a real liminal space, the man recounts his father's theory of the origins of the Magyar people: 'When you see a peasant in the countryside leaning on his spade and gazing eastwards, be sure he is listening to the call from Asia' (2–3). Here Asia figures as a non-specific eastern source of origin quite different from the ways in which Asia

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is presented in other plays by 'Asian' women playwrights. The play offers testimony to the potency of the imaginary in shaping people's lives.

Signatures of diaspora

Black and Asian women playwrights' work bears the signatures of the multi-locationality that informs their lives. Many of these scripts are written specifically for Black and Asian actresses and actors, something which rarely if ever occurs in plays by white (women) playwrights who are entirely unused to contemplating either themselves as in any way 'coloured' or the fact that they inhabit diasporic communities.[15] Plays by Black and Asian women playwrights thus provide performing/acting opportunities for women from diverse ethnic groups who are still rarely seen on the British stage. As Maria Oshodi in her preface to 'Blood Sweat and Fears', for instance, put it: 'I felt the need to provide good, strong main characters for young black actors' (94). Black and Asian women playwrights thus also place such actresses at the centre of the action, asking the audience to focus on people from social groups that are not often present in high-cultural forms.

Secondly, playscripts by Black and Asian women playwrights tend to thematize issues of race, colour, and ethnicity. They may do so in the form of an afterword that disavows these issues (see, for example, Rudet, as discussed in chapter seven of this volume) but whereas white playwrights do not usually feel compelled to comment on issues of race, colour, and ethnicity at all, thus reinforcing the frequently discussed fact that dominant cultures register no awareness of their specificities,[16] Black and Asian women playwrights virtually invariably do. Indeed, many of their plays, as this volume shows, focus on issues of race, colour, and ethnicity as key determinants of their characters' experiences. This is almost inevitable given the political climate in Britain in which questions of difference, migration, ethnicity, and regulation are perennially high on the agenda. Despite this, it has to be recognized that not all women playwrights of diverse ethnic origin centre their work on these issues. Ayshe Raif, for instance, the daughter of Turkish-Cypriot immigrants, is much more preoccupied

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with relations between women than with thematizing issues of race and ethnicity. Her play *I'm No Angel* (1993) centres on Mae West and her relations with various people as she asserts – and this is one of the central concerns of the play – that 'There ain't nothing closer in life than a mother and daughter. A mother and her child' (2, 2: 52). Another play, *Café Society* (n.d.), features three elderly women who meet regularly in a caf' (the title functions ironically here, providing an antidote to the actual corner caf' that is the women's regular meeting-place) in Hackney in London. Their interdependence and regular meetings are temporarily threatened when one of them starts to think about moving to another part of London and another one is courted by a man who wants her to move in with him. They all have Cockney accents; their colour, race, or ethnic background are never mentioned so that they could be played by white or black actresses, for example, but this is not specified. In fact, one might argue that the play constitutes a version of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*[17] since it features three women who are peers and have a close long-term relationship dreaming of a change that ultimately never takes place. Raif's plays 'Caving In' (1990) and 'Fail/Safe' (1991) similarly do not foreground race or ethnicity issues – their focus is much more on other key concerns and relationships that affect women's lives. So, although the thematization of race, colour, and ethnicity may function as one of the signatures of Black and Asian women playwrights' work, this is not inevitably the case.

Apart from writing for Black and Asian actresses, and thematizing race, ethnicity, and colour, Black and Asian women playwrights prominently engage with historical and contemporary social and political issues that impact on their communities in particular ways, not only in Britain but also in the places from which they migrated to Britain. Migration thus features both as a historic and as a contemporary phenomenon. In the plays it takes several distinct forms:

- the contemplation of migration within a certain home setting;
- migration within the country one was born in – usually from country to city;
- migration to another country, usually the UK, and its impacts;
- the contemplation of migrating back home for those who came to the UK in the middle decades of the twentieth century;

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- travel to countries from which parent generations migrated, a kind of impermanent reverse migration;
- making a life in a Britain in which Black and Asian people are categorized as migrant figures by virtue of their appearance, no matter what their individual histories are;
- breaking with one's community as an effect of changing values and attitudes across generations and between women and men, a migration effect;
- living in peer groups outside specific ethnically and/or racially defined communities as a function of one's particular history, development, and identity, another migration effect.

Pinnock's 'A Hero's Welcome' (1989), for instance, addresses the issue of the return of a Jamaican man who has fought for the British in the Second World War to his village in 1947. His presence stirs the imagination of other island inhabitants, who consider whether or not to leave to make their fortune elsewhere. Lisselle Kayla's 'When Last I Did See You', too, centres on the question of whether or not to migrate from Jamaica to the UK, Cuba, or America. In Prabjot Dolly Dhingra's *One Night* (1996) and Maya Chowdhry's *Kaahini* (1997) the issue of migration from India to Britain becomes fatefully entangled with sexual and emotional choices. Both Tanika Gupta's *Skeleton* (1997) and Rukhsana Ahmad's *Black Shalwar* (1998) explore migration within India from rural communities to the city and the impact this has on the protagonists' lives. They map geographies of unbelonging and liminal states as their characters seek to come to terms with the alienation that migration, even within one country, entails, signalled by the impossibility of a return to the place left behind. The nostalgia that the desire for return – to the place from where one has migrated, to the state one was previously in – engenders is manifested in plate 1, in which the characters from *Black Shalwar* are posed gazing longingly and wistfully down and off-centre to the left, a backward-looking gesture rather than a forward-looking one. Their conventionally romantically encoded body positioning, the male 'protectively' embracing the female from a position of relatively greater height (she leans into him), references the posters of romantic Bollywood movies, the stuff

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Plate 1   Adele Selim as Sultana and Ashvin Kumar as Khuda Buksh in Kali The-
atre Company's 1999 production of *Black Shalwar*.

that dreams are made of with all its lack of groundedness, a key feature
of that play.

Migrating 'back home' is a key issue in plays such as Jacque-
line Rudet's 'Money to Live'. In this play, the father of the central
character wants to return home to live a life free from racism, eco-
nomic exploitation, and insecurity. Moving down a generation, travel
to countries from which parent generations migrated, a kind of tempo-
rary reverse migration, is at the heart of Maya Chowdhry's 'Monsoon',
Ahmad's *River on Fire* (2000), Pinnock's 'Talking in Tongues', and her
play *Mules*. The impact of these reverse migrations is discussed in

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chapter three of this volume. Making a life in a Britain in which Black and Asian people are categorized as migrant figures – with all that that entails in terms of social exclusion – by virtue of their appearance, no matter what their individual histories, is perhaps the most common form that the theatricalization of what one might term a 'migration effect' takes. Jacqueline Rudet's *God's Second in Command* (1985), Mary Cooper's 'Heartgame' (1988), Meera Syal's 'My Sister-Wife' (1993), Paulette Randall's *24%* (n.d.), Yazmine Yudd's *Identity* (2000), Zindika's 'Leonora's Dance' (1993), and Winsome Pinnock's *Water* (2000) all speak to that experience.

Breaking with one's community as an effect of changing values and attitudes across generations and between women and men, itself a migration effect, underlies the dynamics of plays such as Grace Dayley's 'Rose's Story' (1985), Rukhsana Ahmad's 'Song for a Sanctuary' (1993), and Kaur Bhatti's *Besharam* (2001). These breaks are almost always involuntary on the part of the female characters who decide to move out of their communities, involving violence both psychical and physical to effect ruptures that mark the characters' exodus in a frequently tragic manner. Living in peer groups outside specific ethnically and/or racially defined communities as a function of one's particular history, development, and identity, another migration effect, occurs in Zindika's 'Leonora's Dance', in Kaur Bhatti's *Besharam*, in Jackie Kay's 'Chiaroscuro', and in Valerie Mason-John's 'Sin Dykes' (1999). Here the characters form part of peer communities, determined in the latter two cases by issues around sexual identities rather than racial/ethnic ones. In consequence, the plays have protagonists from a number of – rather than just two as is more commonly the case – different cultures and ethnic/racial backgrounds, offering a more consistently multi-cultural, as opposed to bi-cultural, view of contemporary Britain.

If migration in its various effects constitutes one major topic in Black and Asian women playwrights' work, so does spirituality. A common feature of plays by Black writers is the construction of the religiously over-invested mother or parents who drive their children away through a failure to understand that religion has a different place

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Plate 2   Shiv Grewal as Bobby Siddiqui, Parminder Sekhon as Zara Metha, and
Shelley King as Seema Siddiqui in Kali Theatre Company's 2001 production of
River on Fire.

in contemporary Britain than it has in the parents' lives. Typical exam-
ples include Zindika's 'Paper and Stone' (1989) and 'Leonora's Dance',
Oshodi's *The 'S' Bend*, Dayley's 'Rose's Story', and Kara Miller's
Hyacinth Blue (1999). Part of this differential investment in spiritu-
ality manifests itself in scripts by Asian women in the construction
of ghostly presences. For example, in Ahmad's *River on Fire* one of
the central characters, Seema Siddiqui, comes back to life after her
death and watches the impact of her death on her three children (see
plate 2). Similarly, in 'Song for a Sanctuary' Pradeep, the abusive hus-
band of Rajinder, hovers as a ghostly and threatening presence over
his family (see plate 10 on p. 155). In Gupta's 'Skeleton', the skele-
ton in question comes alive at night as a beautiful woman. In her
play *Sanctuary*, the shadow of a woman appears as one of the charac-
ters tells her story (1, 3: 45–6). Yudd's *Unfinished Business* (1999), a
play that defies the naturalistic boundaries with which it opens, raises
questions as to the materiality of one of its characters as its narrative

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unfolds. Pinnock's 'Talking in Tongues', Gupta's *The Waiting Room* (2000), and her *Inside Out* (2002), too, invoke presences that defy material definition. The presence and invocation of ghosts is of course not unfamiliar within western theatre traditions. Ghosts appear or are invoked in many of Shakespeare's plays, but their haunting contemporary presence is much less familiar to us. In the plays discussed above, spirituality and manifestations of the spirit world, of ghostly presences, are treated much more matter-of-factly than the secularity of western culture normally allows.

There are a number of other thematic concerns that one might discuss as typical of Black and Asian women playwrights' work such as the specific but differential treatments of family and community, the representation of young single mothers, of forced and arranged marriages, of inter-generational conflicts that involve multi-cultural dimensions. Since these are dealt with in subsequent chapters, I want briefly to turn to the issue of embodiment and visual notation to discuss some of the gestural and visual specificities of plays by Black and Asian women playwrights. One of the striking aspects of theatre in general, including contemporary theatre, is that although it relies on embodiment and staging for its final articulation, relatively little notation in the form of stage directions is given over to specifying the gestural and bodily frames within which plays are (to be) enacted. This is left to the practitioners – actors, producers, directors – rather than being (pre)specified by the playwright. Playwright Ketaki Kushari Dyson, for instance, told me in an interview: 'In the Bengali production [of *Night's Sunlight*] . . . they were very keen to do a lot of English things, just as here in the English production they were very keen to do very Indian things. So always the cross-cultural thing' (2001). Black and Asian women playwrights occasionally identify bodily gestures in their scripts that are culturally specific. These are in particular teeth sucking or teeth kissing, simultaneously a bodily gesture and an utterance, which tend to occur in scripts by writers with a Caribbean or African background. That embodied utterance has a variety of meanings dependent on context but it frequently serves to express annoyance, fed-upness, or disgust. In *Shoot 2 Win* (2002) by Tracey Daley, Jo Martin, and Josephine Melville, for instance, teeth kissing appears

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fairly frequently in the stage directions, marking attitudes and offering commentary on the action. In Gupta's *Sanctuary* (2002) the stage directions indicate palm-slapping as a form of greeting (e.g. 1, 1: 17). But such gestural referencing of culturally specific embodied practices is comparatively rare in the plays in question, bespeaking both the absence of that kind of bodily encoding in play texts more generally, and, possibly, the erosion and/or transformation of such embodied practices as part of the diaspora effect.

Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins have articulated the attraction of difference in performance and the ways in which cross-cultural differences are sometimes accentuated in productions along stereotypical lines in order to preserve notions of authenticity and purity (1996, esp. chapter two). This is evident in the production of plays with an Asian dimension on the British stage where 'Asianness' is frequently illustrated through the use of fretwork screens, characters wearing traditional dress such as the shalwar kamiz and dhupatta, or, less frequently, saris, and through, in particular, hand gestures that are associated with greetings or worship (see plate 3). These cultural signatures assert cultural particularity and simultaneously respond to certain images of Asianness common in British and other cultures.

Playwrights themselves articulate cultural specificity in several different ways including the introduction of languages other than English (as Cooper does in 'Heartgame') or through the use of particular accents or dialects such as patois. Many Black playwrights detailing West Indian experiences use forms of patois to locate their characters culturally. This can be experienced as personally liberating for the playwright. Pinnock, for instance, has said: '[*A Hero's Welcome*] was . . . the first time I'd used patois and I found that so liberating. It was another voice and it freed me in some way to be myself as a writer. It was a breakthrough for me personally . . . It was like discovering my voice' (1997: 50). Kushari Dyson has commented in an interview on how liberating she finds writing in Bengali, in which language she is not 'under Western eyes' (2001). And in her notes on the language of 'When Last I Did See You', Kayla states: 'In England today parents, young adults and children whose history is Caribbean, see very little of their oral tradition in written form. For too long the Afro-European

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Plate 3 Parminder K. Nagra as Kiran Siddiqui in Kali Theatre Company's 2001 production of *River on Fire*.

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based languages of the Caribbean have been regarded as almost without value. Because of this, there still isn't a standardized dictionary widely accepted, but these languages definately [*sic*] do have a rich and colourful tradition, uniting and sustaining the self confidence of the peoples of these islands' (1987: 97). Languages are clearly a way of uniting communities and fostering social cohesion. The articulation of languages such as creole, patois, Hindi, or Gujerat on British stages simultaneously speaks to those audiences familiar with these languages, ascribing value to these languages through their presence in a high-cultural space conventionally reserved for standardized forms of English, and installs those languages within British culture as part of that culture, not as a cultural space apart.

In this context the 'Dramatis Personae' or 'List of Characters' serve to indicate the racial politics of any given play. In some scripts, such as Mason-John's 'Sin Dykes' as discussed in chapter six of this volume, Gupta's *Sanctuary*, or Kaur Bhatti's *Besharam* the characters' racial or ethnic identity is stated in the list of characters, indicating that that identity is at issue in the play. This usually occurs in terms of either inter-racial or inter-ethnic differences, as in Dolly Dhingra's *Unsuitable Girls* (1999) in which differences in attitude towards arranged marriages between Asians and whites are explored. Alternatively, the articulation of the characters' racial/ethnic background in the list of characters signals the thematization of intra-racial or intra-ethnic cross-generational differences. Such is the case both in Patricia Hilaire's *Just Another Day* (n.d.), which deals with the issue of teenage pregnancy, and in Yemi Ajibabe's *A Long Way from Home* (1990), in which different moments and generations of migration and their associated socio-ideological implications are explored. What all these plays have in common is that they re-articulate, for a variety of reasons and in diverse ways, the boundaries between different racial and ethnic groups that have been central to the colonial enterprise. They thus affirm that 'there ain't no black in the union jack' – to quote Paul Gilroy – through the maintenance of those boundaries.

That position is in some respects exploded in those plays where the characters' racial and ethnic identity is not detailed in the list of characters. The absence of such articulation, as is the case in *Shoot 2*

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Win and in Trish Cooke's 'Back Street Mammy' (1990), does not mean that the plays contain no markers of racial or ethnic identity. Frequently names such as 'Dynette' or 'Shenequa' serve as one such marker of difference, as do the use of particular accents, dialects, or languages, the articulation of culturally specific bodily gestures and costumes in the stage directions, and the reference to culturally specific phenomena such as certain food-stuffs etc. However, by not foregrounding difference through naming a racial or ethnic identity, the playwright can unmoor that identity from its racial/ethnic boundaries, so that the subject, rather than being set into a racialized frame that denies her subject status within a Britain that has 'no black in the union jack', is re-figured as a subject who is constitutive of the Britain depicted in the play. In this sense, Black women writers, and not only they, 'living now within the administrative center of what was/is left of the British Empire . . . are now able to launch an internal/external critique that challenges simultaneously the history and meanings of imperialism, the projects of postcoloniality, the implications of various nationalistic identifications of home, and the ways in which masculinity interacts with these various systems of domination', as Carole Boyce Davies puts it (1997: 100).

This highlights the historicity of the work done by Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain. As a consequence of all the plays written, produced, and published since the early 1980s, it has become possible to create a map of sorts of the concerns that have informed that writing and production, concerns which mirror the changing situation of Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain. Whereas during the 1980s plays were dominated by inter-generational conflicts as expressive of the difference between the adult subject who migrated and the child who, so to speak, *was migrated*, and their different accommodations to that situation, by the 1990s plays tended to focus much more on how to live in Britain now, beyond the experience of the moment of migration, as part of a generation that had grown up in the UK. As Jatinder Verma puts it: 'The rise of a second-generation [*sic*] of "foreigners" – children born of immigrant parents – . . . provided a powerful motive to *achieve presence*' (1994: 55). How difficult this is to do is clear when one considers the difficulties Black and Asian

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women playwrights have had, and continue to have, in achieving cultural visibility in this country, even as they inhabit key stages on the new playwriting scene.[18]

Since the 1980s in particular, certain theatre venues have become critical for the production of new work by Black and Asian women playwrights as well as their male counterparts. These include, in London, the former Soho Poly Theatre, now the Soho Theatre; the Royal Court Theatre which has significantly supported the work of Winsome Pinnock, for example; the National Theatre where Tanika Gupta was writer-in-residence in 2001–2; the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn; the Theatre Royal, Stratford East;[19] the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith; the Oval House Theatre; and the Ritzy in Brixton where I saw Ntozake Shange perform. Increasingly, venues outside London – usually in cities and towns with large Black and Asian populations – promote work by Black and Asian playwrights. Among them are the Birmingham Rep, the Leicester Haymarket and the Phoenix Arts Centre in Leicester, the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds, the Liverpool Playhouse, and the Priestley Centre and the Mill Theatre in Bradford. These sites offer one opportunity for Black and Asian women playwrights to achieve presence.

Another such site is the critical reception of their work. Black British Studies, which has emerged as a lively arena of debate during the same period that the work of these playwrights has become more prominent on British stages, has not taken up that writing. Black British Cultural Studies has been mainly sociological in focus,[20] and the cultural sites that have been its most sustained objects of interrogation have tended to be those designated as popular culture such as film, music, and dance, with the consequence that Black and Asian women's presence in British theatre has been marginalized in its critical and theoretical debates. Some feminist theatre scholars, however, have begun to engage with these playwrights' work. Mary Brewer's *Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Women's Theatre* (1999), the only volume of this kind to emerge in Britain to date, still centres predominantly on plays by Black American playwrights. In *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (1995) Elaine Aston devotes a chapter to 'Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theatre' which focuses on Black

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women on the British stage. Liz Goodman (1993) includes a chapter on Black British theatre companies; Mary Karen Dahl writes on 'Post-colonial British Theatre' (1995), and May Joseph on 'Bodies Outside the State: Black British Women Playwrights and the Limits of Citizenship' (1998). Jatinder Verma, a male founding member of Tara Arts, a British Asian theatre company, has contributed to volumes such as Richard Boon and Jane Plastow's (1998) *Theatre Matters* and Theodore Shank's (1994) *Contemporary British Theatre.* Meenakshi Ponnuswami like-wise has contributed chapters to Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt's (2000) *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Play-wrights* and to *Women and Performance* (1995). The dates of these texts, and there are some but not many others, indicate a very grad-ual increase in critical interest in the work of Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain during the 1990s. William W. Demastes' *British Playwrights, 1956–1995* – covering a period when Black and Asian women playwrights were coming to the fore in the UK – for instance, asserts in his preface that 'Women have found a voice in the theatre; ethnic minorities have likewise increasingly found a place' (ix). How-ever, this is not the case in his work: of thirty-six entries, only seven are devoted to female playwrights, and none to Black or Asian women playwrights at all. Susan Croft has done much sterling work to remedy this situation; following on from her chapter on 'Black Women Play-wrights in Britain' (1993), she has compiled bibliographies of works by Black and Asian (women) playwrights (2000; 2001[21]) which indi-cate quite how much material by such playwrights has been produced. But overall the extensive research and scholarship on Black American women playwrights, for instance, even taking into account the very different migration and socio-cultural patterns which inform the US history of Black women playwrights' work, has not been matched by similar developments in the UK.[22]

Ponzanesi (2002) has pointed out the difficulties of achieving presence in a location dominated by an absence of focus on the first, second, and third generation of 'migrants' as constitutive subjects of contemporary Britain. Indeed, one might argue that appellations such as 'migrant', 'immigrant', and 'foreigner' – as well as all the more abusive terms commonly employed in racist contexts – are misnomers

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since many of the people to whom they are applied were born and grew up in the UK and identify culturally with that space, even if in a problematizing way (see, for instance, Carole Boyce Davies (1997) on this issue).[23] This is exemplified in an excerpt from an interview conducted by Anjona Roy[24] which mirrors the experience of Kamla, one of the characters in Ahmad's play 'Song for a Sanctuary':

> INTERVIEWEE: In fact, I'm seen as an outsider more or less. Not as . . . not as an Asian at all. Asian in colour, but not as an Asian because for one I don't speak an Asian language, and for two, I have come from the West Indies. So by Asians I'm not seen as an Asian and by statutory organisations I'm not seen as an Asian . . .
> AR: So what do you think that they see you as?
> INTERVIEWEE: I think they see me as a Brown British or a Westernized British . . . Well, I dress western. I would say, my body language is western and that in itself is a barrier.
> AR: Right, it's a barrier, but it is something you choose to do. Is that because it's important to you?
> INTERVIEWEE: I didn't choose to do it. I didn't have a second language. I've never had a second language.
> AR: OK, but you are saying that you dress western . . .
> INTERVIEWEE: I come from a western country.
> AR: OK. Right.
> INTERVIEWEE: I think it would be a bit of a hypocrisy if I were to dress Asian, because what messages will I be giving then . . . and then somebody comes up to me dressed in Asian dress and starts to speak to me in an Asian language and I'm saying, 'I don't understand what you're saying.' Can you see the complications of that?
> AR: Is it important to you that you present yourself in the way you do?
> INTERVIEWEE: Well, there is no other way to present myself, to be honest.

Underlying this exchange is the notion of a coherent identity, be it 'Asian' or otherwise, which the interviewee cannot produce because

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her physical appearance – according to prevailing stereotypes – is at odds with her demeanour or bodily practices and her self-encoding through dress. Exactly that contradiction is at the centre of the clashes between two Asian women in all the plays discussed in chapter five of this volume. The difficulties of adequately or appropriately labelling the multi-locationality of many contemporary subjectivities accounts for the dilemma faced by the interviewee and, indeed, faced by the characters in Syal's 'My Sister-Wife', Cooper's 'Heartgame', and Ahmad's 'Song for a Sanctuary'.

Some of the characters in these plays struggle with what might be termed bi-culturality, that is the question of how to negotiate effectively between two cultures with frequently very different norms, values, and demands. However, for many within the plays and outside the question is not just one of that negotiation but also one of what identity/ties to inhabit as values, and norms shift. Where ascriptions of identity tend to assume a congruity between appearance and a set of values, norms, and behaviours – itself of course a fossilizing move – such ascriptions come unstuck when appearance, values, and norms do not cohere in the expected way. Indeed, it is that expectation of coherence that needs interrogation, for it is not coherence *per se* that is at issue but what is presumed to cohere. That recognition involves the re-writing of a script that has held both self and other in place to explode the boundaries of our identities. It means assuming the diasporic as axiomatic and also assuming change. What this means – in the context of this volume – is that we need to recognize that the plays discussed within it bespeak a particular historical period. Nowhere does this become more obvious than when we consider one of the effects of 11 September 2001 when the World Trade Center in New York was bombed. As that terrorist attack was associated with Muslims, so in the aftermath of that attack did people of Asian appearance find themselves vilified if suspected of being Muslim, and a new differentiation among Asians – between Hindus and Muslims – arose in western cultures. The impact of that process is already visible in Rani Drew's *Bradford's Burning* (2001).

A word on the research process: in an article entitled 'White Out' (2000), Michael Billington asked, 'Is there a crisis in black theatre

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in Britain?' and answered it with, 'You bet. And it seems to be getting worse.' He cited Nicolas Kent of the Tricycle Theatre in north London who said:

> In the past two years alone a number of companies and events have disappeared: Carib, Temba, Couble Edge, the Black Theatre Season, the Roundhouse Project. Along with the companies, the regular African–Caribbean audience is also dissolving. But I could go on and on listing the problems. The fact that there is no black children's company and that theatre staff and boards are overwhelmingly white. If you read the Arts Council-commissioned Boyden Report into English Producing Theatres, you discover that only 16 out of 463 board members nationwide are black. Given that we at the Tricycle Theatre have eight of them, Stratford East five and Hampstead two, that must leave one black board member for the rest of the country.
>
> (1)

Billington goes on to point to the fact that 'Once there were 18 revenue-funded black and Asian theatre companies, now there are two. All but 80 of the 2,009 staff permanently employed in English theatres are white. And with odd exceptions . . . contemporary black and Asian experience goes largely unrecorded' (2). In fact, Black and Asian women playwrights have increasingly contributed to the recording of that experience. However, they – especially the Asian women playwrights – can feel that it is difficult to get their work produced. Tanika Gupta, for instance, argues that 'Asian theatre companies like Tara Arts and Tamasha really only develop new writers on a small scale, although Tamasha's production of Ayub Khan-Din's *East is East* was a huge success; but it was a bit of an exception. Their work is usually based around reinterpreting the classics. And although black theatre companies like Talawa develop new writers: Biyi Bandele Thomas and Zindika, for example, they don't seem to produce any Asian plays. So there isn't really anywhere for a new writer to go'[25] (1997: 117). It can thus be or become difficult to access these playwrights' work. Most theatres and theatre companies are insufficiently

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funded to archive their materials – and that includes playscripts and production photos – properly, or indeed at all. For touring companies on a shoestring budget and theatre companies operating on project funding such archiving understandably cannot be a priority. Although copies of performed plays are meant to be deposited in the British Library this is, as I found, both insufficiently well known and inconsistently followed. Where material is donated to special collections, it often lacks basic information which can become hard to track. Thus a collection may hold production photos but not details of the photographers who took them, making it difficult to reproduce these photos as part of the documentation process of the work. Much more needs to be done publicly to preserve all of this material, including financial support and education of companies and playwrights regarding the process of publicly preserving their work and accessing funding to do so.

This is continuous with the consistent marginalization of Black and Asian women's work for theatre (Ponnuswami 1995; 2000). To admit the existence of that work is to recognize that we inhabit a diasporic space, that high-cultural forms partake of and enable the formation of such space, and that we need to re-think our relations, and ourselves in relation, to those still viewed as colonized and colonial 'others'. It also means attending to the voices of those others, to try to understand their experience of diasporic space and to re-frame our own experiences in that light. The problematic of multi-locationality is graphically illustrated in all the plays discussed in this volume which, one might argue, have multi-locationality at the heart of their concerns.

Diaspora as theatre

Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain is organized thematically. Each chapter offers extended readings of two or three plays (as well as referencing a number of additional plays) within a specific thematic and theoretical frame. Following on from the introduction, chapter two, on 'Diasporic subjects', utilizes Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space to examine the representation of migration as a movement which places the individual into an estranged

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relation both to her country of origin and to the place to which she migrates, resulting in a longing for the homeland on the one hand and a recognition of the impossibility of return on the other. Caught in this 'entre-deux' (Cixous 1997), the characters in Trish Cooke's 'Running Dream' (1993), for example, negotiate complex and ambivalent longings across generations as they interrogate their own and their children's life choices. Winsome Pinnock's 'Leave Taking' (1989) frames this problematic in terms of itineracy and a social isolation which places the memory of childhood into the same space as the memory of the homeland, an irretrievable space which is both the point of departure and the place of the impossible return. The chapter analyses the theatricalization of the spatialized problematic of inhabiting diasporic spaces, suggesting, in alignment with Brah's argument, that the diaspora effect impacts not only on those who migrate but also on those who stay in one location.

Chapter three on 'Geographies of un/belonging' investigates the articulation of re/turns to countries of origin by second-generation migrants. For these children of the diaspora their parents' country of origin does not necessarily figure as the 'homeland' but may generate a new sense of unbelonging where difference is articulated not through skin colour but through the attitudes and behaviours which second-generation migrants have acquired as a consequence of living in a racialized and racist western context. This issue is treated very differently in Winsome Pinnock's 'Talking in Tongues' (1991) and in Maya Chowdhry's 'Monsoon' (1993). Where Pinnock, within a naturalistic frame, portrays the problematic of an alienated second generation, whose relation to Jamaica is that of exploitative tourism, augmented by the replication of the sexual exploitation of black people which structured the experience of slavery as much as the practice of sex tourism in the late twentieth century, Chowdhry, working more experimentally, projects the possibility of a turn to the homeland acting as a liberator for the displaced individual. The result is not a reintegration of those who have migrated or are the children of migrants but a recognition that the space and culture with which the central character is associated can speak to the identity of the individual in enabling ways.

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Introduction

The impact of inhabiting diasporic spaces on individual identities is explored in chapter four. Following Ang-Lygate's (1997) discussion of the inadequacy of the homogenizing and monolithic 'black' to encompass the diversity of identities representing 'ethnic minorities' in Britain, the chapter focuses on inter- and intra-racial differences as they are articulated in Winsome Pinnock's 'A Rock in Water' (1989), Zindika's 'Leonora's Dance' (1993), and Maya Chowdhry's *Kaahini* (1997). At the centre of this articulation is the isolation of the individual whose sociality has been undermined by the impossibility of mapping categories of identity onto individual realities and, indeed, collective experience. The chapter argues that the destabilizing effects of the diasporic experience, reinforced through the racist attitudes prevalent in British culture and the epistemic violence achieved through labelling, are constructed in these plays as resulting in degrees of alienation within individuals living in Britain that lead to social isolation and breakdown, and fracture both individual and community identities.

Chapter five, entitled 'Culture clashes', centres on the representation of a particular issue, arranged marriages and polygamous households within a western context, in three plays: Mary Cooper's 'Heartgame' (1988), Rukhsana Ahmad's 'Song for a Sanctuary' (1991), and Meera Syal's 'My Sister-Wife' (1993). Each of the plays articulates the culture clash between 'Asian' and western attitudes towards marriage in radically different ways, indicating that conventional western attitudes towards arranged marriages, 'Asian' families, and intra-familial relations are incapable of accessing the cultural and social codes which regulate these arrangements and relations. The characters' difficulties in reconciling divergent socio-cultural positions on marriage, domestic violence, and cross-cultural differences in gender role expectations are constructed as the key to the dilemmas which the plays present. Significantly, these dilemmas, although portrayed in realist mode, are not resolved within the plays in terms of conventional happy endings. Instead, the plays, inspired by 'real-life' events such as the killing of Balwant Kaur in the Brent Asian Women's Refuge in 1985 (Southall Black Sisters 1992), raise questions about the violence done to women in their negotiation of culture clashes.

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The debates about hierarchies of oppression and the relative positions occupied by sexuality and race, the impact of racism and homophobia, and their shared imbrication within structures of inequality, have generated plays by Black women which seek to interrogate the complex intersections of racialized marginalization and homophobic rejection which Black lesbians experience in this culture. These are discussed in chapter six which investigates the racing of sexualities in Jackie Kay's 'Chiaroscuro' (1984) and Valerie Mason-John's 'Sin Dykes' (1998). Importantly, the plays emerged at two very different moments of lesbian and of Black politics. Kay's play, rooted in pre-Clause 28 and pre-queer/performance theory days, projects the difficulty of lesbian closetedness and invisibility in an interrogation of racialized visibilities and the politics of female friendship. Mason-John's play, on the other hand, is fully invested in the politics of sexuality as performative within racialized power structures that extend across race boundaries and re-enact the dominance-submission dynamics which echo historical forms of slavery and enslavement. The chapter argues that shifts in lesbian and in identity politics replay racial oppression as sexual oppression while querying the meaning of identity.

Jacqueline Rudet's 'Money to Live' (1984), Grace Dayley's 'Rose's Story' (1984), and Winsome Pinnock's *Mules* (1996) are all issue-based plays focusing on the Black female body as a site through which Black women interrogate their sense of identity and socioeconomic positioning. These plays are analysed in chapter seven in order to establish the impact of racialized positionings on attitudes to issues which are not in themselves in any way race-specific. 'Money to Live' centres on a Black woman who decides to become a go-go dancer in order to make a living both for herself and for her family. In contrast to plays by white women playwrights on the topic of sex work in the 1980s which portrayed 'objections to sex and violence' (to quote Caryl Churchill), this play emphasizes the economic possibilities offered to women through their sexploitation and constructs them as making considered choices in which economic independence and security emerge as more important than the sexual politics of sexploitation. 'Rose's Story' focuses on a Black teenager's pregnancy (in some respects rather like Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, 1958)

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and the single teenage mum syndrome that has, in fact, a long history of post-war theatrical representation as well as a history of racialization, stigmatizing Black women as sexually promiscuous and likely to engage in unprotected, teenage sex. *Mules* presents the issue of the use of Black women as carriers of drugs across borders which made the news in the early and mid-1990s. This play's structure, as much as the others', reflects the notion of entrapment which Black women suffer through sexploitation. All three plays also engage with the problematic of gender relations in Black communities.

In the final chapter, 'Living diaspora now', the emergence of a new figure in recent plays by Black and Asian women playwrights such as Amrit Wilson's *Survivors* (1999) and Tanika Gupta's *Sanctuary* (2002) is discussed, that of the refugee and asylum seeker. This final chapter asserts that plays by Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain continue to reflect the socio-cultural, political, and economic realities which women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds encounter in the UK. Many of the plays which have been published to date present the issue-based, socialist-realist frame that informed much of women's theatre work in Britain from the late 1970s onwards. The necessity of articulating Black women's experiences of diasporic existence, fractured identities, racist and homophobic attitudes as well as the difficulties of negotiating inter- and intra-cultural differences, as portrayed in Pinnock's *Water*, also discussed in this chapter, has generated a body of work by Black and Asian women playwrights which interrogates the colour regimes, social codes, and cultural imperatives that govern British culture. The invisibilization of that body of work in (feminist) theatre history replicates and reinforces the marginalization of Black and Asian women's work in British culture. This volume attempts to intervene in that process, arguing implicitly for the need to establish a critical and theoretical apparatus to accompany the publication of works by Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain.