

# Introduction

*The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers...It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.*

— Toni Morrison

*The interior space of our imagination is a theatre that can never be closed down.*

— Salman Rushdie

LITERATURE IS A STOREHOUSE, a repository of words and stories which can travel across borders and across time. In March 2016, I was visiting Margate, a town on the Kent coast, when by chance I wandered into Turner Contemporary, an expansive gallery hugging the seafront. The Brexit referendum was still a few months off, but puffed-up promises of a new Britain, standing fearlessly alone and breaking free from its closest neighbours in Europe, were swirling. As I stepped into the quiet of the museum, I found myself in a huge room, brightly lined from ceiling to floor with batik-covered books, an installation by the leading British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare that was named ‘The British Library’.<sup>1</sup> As famous names jumped out from gold-embossed spines—Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Joseph Conrad, Oscar Wilde, Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith—I began to realise that almost all were linked to migration and to Britain. Through the collection of stories lining the shelves, this long history was being placed centre-stage.

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At first I was enthralled by the invented library due to my recognition of a history and community of migration narratives to which I felt I could belong. Not only was I familiar with some of the names of authors on the shelves but in some cases I knew the writers personally as well as their histories. Yet looking closely made me aware that the 'library' represented more than one artist's intimate vision, or any single pathway into history; it was also a performative public space, confronting viewers with multiple and sometimes competing narratives. Indeed, while the weight of over 6,000 names seemingly cemented a vision of a more hospitable Britain, it was clear that the exhibit was not simply offering a smooth, neatly conjured story by flagging the rich jewels of a history of migration or positing what has come to be commonly known as the celebratory narrative of the 'good immigrant'. Unlike the vision—highlighted at the opening of the London 2012 Olympics ceremony—of a buoyant, rainbow Britain, seemingly at ease with its diversity, but nevertheless masking the latent hostilities already experienced by Britain's black citizens and soon to become the 'Windrush' scandal, I noticed that many names also present—Oswald Mosley, GK Chesterton, Enoch Powell and, more recently, Nigel Farage—were notorious for their xenophobic and loudly expressed anti-immigration stance. Other spines had no names at all, perhaps leaving, as the artist has intimated, the future open.

This experience took me back to a journey I had myself made many years before, at school in the early 1970s and later, when I was inspired to launch *Wasafiri*, the magazine of international contemporary writing which this special anthology of essays partly celebrates. As a child of mixed Indian-English background, spending my teenage years

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in a provincial Suffolk town, the closest I got to India was through a chance encounter with EM Forster, whose famous 1924 novel *A Passage to India* suddenly appeared without context on my school's sixth-form reading list. And while I recall that my mother's bookshelves were populated by a sprinkling of books, wedged between English classics, by Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, RK Narayan, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabvala—a grouping I now realise reflected my family's moves between India, England and Europe—I was not interested then in how they had got there. It was some time before I was able to see the many mixed cultural forces which had always impacted on traditional canonical English figures such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Brontës, Henry James and TS Eliot. And it was only later, during my undergraduate degree at the University of Kent—on a course almost unique in British universities at the time—that I began, through an immersion in the works of now internationally distinguished writers such as Derek Walcott, Jean Rhys, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, VS Naipaul, Sam Selvon and Kamala Markandaya, to gain access to a literary world that reflected anything approaching the mixed experience of my own.

Such writers were soon to set in motion an important sea change, shifting ways of seeing and transporting scores of readers across the vistas of new worlds. Coming from a range of historical and political contexts, often—though by no means only—linked to histories of colonialism and empire, of enforced political exile or movement, these voices were significant not only in swivelling the lens but in changing the perspectives of the stories that had previously contained them. Though Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) is most often cited as the book heralding this

particular moment in Britain—a point touched on by Blake Morrison in his contribution to this anthology—there were many others. In my case, it was Jean Rhys, the Caribbean and European modernist, who was first to lift my blinkers. Her fictions drew me deep into the worlds of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Dominica, Jamaica, Paris and London, and I recognised her sense of displacement, as a female writer of mixed background, perennially situated on the outskirts of the metropolitan literary world. Most importantly, I was blown away by the artistry of her prose, her characters and her nuanced construction of the conflicts—racial, economic, cultural—of a divided colonial world that forced me to read and think differently. As she so powerfully reminds us in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1965), perhaps her best-known novel and one which provides a prequel to the back story of the mad Creole heiress in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: 'there's always the other side...always'.

It was writing such as this that led me to travel, through the literatures of the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia and black Britain, back into my own history and which motivated my work as teacher, editor and activist. It is perhaps no surprise that stories have always migrated. The dynamics of cultural growth or the birth of new artistic movements have most often been built—whether in ancient or modern times—on such cross-fertilisations, creating points of contact and connection, where admixtures are the norm and any notion of cultural 'purity' the aberration. So too, are the borrowings that often result from such crossings as stories, myths, and legends are recycled, translated, countered and reinvented. Yet such mixings have also resulted in negative articulations of cultural difference, such as the construction of the figure of the 'other', whether situated *within* the particular geographies

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of individual nations, or as those 'aliens' or 'strangers' who are perceived to threaten from outside.

In line with this, as some who lived through the cultural politics of the 1980s might remember, writers who were not immediately identifiable to reviewers through the comforting lens of a Euro-American aesthetic were often perceived to be off-centre by the arbiters of literary taste. This gatekeeping reverberated across all aspects of the industry from publishers to the writers themselves. Caryl Phillips summed up the experience of many in his early travelogue *The European Tribe* (1987). Reflecting on his early schooling in Leeds, he comments: 'I was never offered a text that had been penned by a black person... If the teaching of English literature can feed a sense of identity, then I, like many of my...contemporaries...was starving'. Phillips's sense of deprivation, fuelled by his lack of access to an imaginative world that existed outside the Anglo-Saxon tradition, paralleled my own and was replicated in many educational institutions across the country.

It was in this context that *Wasafiri* was born. While versions of how the magazine came into being vary, I have no doubt about what drove me to start the magazine with a community of colleagues and friends in 1984, a year now particularly resonant for its evocation of George Orwell's prophetically bleak vision of Big Brother and double-speak.<sup>2</sup> The cover of the first slim-bound red issue, which features a line-drawing of a group of independent pilgrims traversing the desert, still flags for us now what was already the magazine's prescient vision: to focus on writing as a form of 'cultural travelling', a passport to enter imaginative landscapes unseen and a conduit to the diverse histories of many worlds. Deriving from the Kiswahili word for

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'travellers' (a version of the Arabic *safari*), its non-English name both heralded relations that could never be neatly contained and the hybrid signatures of the writers who were soon to fill its pages. Expressing sensibilities that straddled multiple identities, competing histories, languages and traditions, their words would come to interrogate existing orthodoxies and break through the borders of established literary canons as the magazine, then only available in hard copy, connected their respective worlds.

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This anthology celebrates 35 years of *Wasafiri* and continues its founding aims. Yet the world is a very different place from the year the magazine first appeared. In the first decades after its launch, the fall of the Berlin Wall opened up the borders of Europe, apartheid was seen to 'officially' end in South Africa, the Good Friday agreement paved the path to peace in Northern Ireland. A major digital revolution had begun to open up the possibilities of the world wide web which, not yet the ominous agent it can be today, still offered the promise of an encyclopaedic and ever-expanding library as well as an open democratic space of unhindered global connection. Things were certainly not *all* positive—Thatcherism had resulted in an eruption of violence and economic unrest in the UK, Indira Gandhi was assassinated in India and WPC Fletcher shot outside the Libyan embassy. However, it felt at times as though there might be a shift, perhaps towards a growing awareness of cultural diversity and global connection.

Looking back, some of that optimism was clearly misjudged. The past three-and-a-half decades have witnessed tumultuous changes. With Brexit promised in Britain along-

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side harsher immigration laws, a government-condoned culture of hostility towards asylum seekers and immigrants, and a policy of building increasing resistance to those so-called ‘strangers’ knocking on the nation’s doors, the nation feels as divided as it was when *Wasafiri* was founded. Meanwhile narrow nationalist initiatives, often sparked by these unstable states of being, have given rise in the UK and elsewhere to the legitimisation of new populist movements and the far Right. As is increasingly apparent—amidst the disturbing rise of nationalist and religious fundamentalist movements worldwide—borders are being closed; and new walls, whether digital or real, are being constructed to restrict freedom of movement and communication. This climate has created a culture of fear, polarisation, division, prejudice and the re-creation in Britain of an increasingly insular and ever-smaller island, once more at risk of listening to the barrage of exclusionary and often outright racist discourses that first prompted *Wasafiri’s* invention.

In this context, it is perhaps no surprise that dystopian classics such as *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have once again gained prominence.<sup>3</sup> Both novels eerily signal how the truths of fiction can come worryingly close to reality: whether in imagining how the onset of an information revolution might change thinking or in creating a version of what we now call fake news—as encapsulated in the name of the Controller’s meeting room in *Brave New World* (‘Only Good News’), or in Orwell’s totalitarian universe of three superstates, where you must ‘reject the evidence of your eyes and ears’.

Today, the role of writers and of literature in asking questions and creating dialogues across often impassable barriers of prejudice and thought is not only vital but also

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perhaps more urgent than ever. As wordsmiths, whose craft uses the very same instruments through which political power is most commonly exercised, writers and politicians may well, as Salman Rushdie once put it, be 'natural rivals'. They both 'create fictions' but also make 'the world' as they want to see it. Yet as the words of writers frequently complicate, challenge or deny 'official versions of truth', giving the 'lie' to 'official facts', they are often, as Rushdie himself knew well, on dangerous ground.<sup>4</sup> Yet as intolerance of otherness continues to escalate, it is often also writers who continue to courageously speak their minds, despite censorship, detention and sometimes death. Above all, the worlds they open (and also contest) invite us to experience the world through the eyes of others. Perhaps the greatest writing does not just take us into other worlds but challenges us to shift our perceptions and recognise the stranger in ourselves.

As both an ancient and a modern art, one of the major functions of writing has not only been to inscribe but also to name and give voice. Writing enables us to question, complicate, doubt, act with abandon. Literature has always been a form of travel and writing, a place of experiment where words take on new meaning, ideas can be aired, criticisms levelled, creating a space of inquiry, ventriloquism, promiscuity and risk-taking.

Exploring the challenges and politics of writing now, the essays in this collection reflect distinctive literary voices which stem from a range of different cultural geographies. All point to the vital role of critical thinking in current times. As already intimated, the title of the anthology plays on and refashions the futuristic possibilities suggested by Aldous Huxley in his 1930s novel *Brave New World* in a contemporary



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context. With many antecedents—among them Plato’s Republic, ‘Revelations’ in The Bible, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, all of which imagine and create future worlds that step outside the anxieties of their own times—the controlling universe of Huxley’s book can either promise, as history has often shown, a ‘perfect-world utopia’ or ‘its nasty opposite’.<sup>5</sup> Drawn from Miranda’s youthful misjudgement in *The Tempest*—‘O brave new world, that has such people in it’—Huxley’s title is deeply ironic. In Huxley’s world of endless pleasure, bottle-bred babies and all-consuming conformity, it is John the Savage—a foil to the rest of the book’s deterministic universe and exiled to a reservation for feeling, thinking and reading too much—who is the voice of Shakespeare’s transported words.

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Exploring the startling contemporary prescience of Huxley’s vision, Romesh Guneskera’s creative essay engages directly with the theme of the collection by entering into an intriguing conversation with the dead author. In his ‘modern séance’ with Aldous Huxley, rendered as an appropriately disembodied digital conversation, Gunesekera interrogates Huxley on contemporary technology’s potentially destructive implications for imagination, language and human freedom. In her essay, ‘All the Feels’, Olumide Popoola similarly attends to the potentially damaging effects of social media and digital communications on the human psyche. She suggests that it is only through exposing our vulnerability and removing the masks of endless digital equivocation that we will ever be able to assume full responsibility and engage in effective political action.

The need to protect privacy and maintain the freedom of

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writing in an increasingly public-facing world is a subject of concern to many. Tabish Khair's 'The Bravado of Books' reflects on the power of both the spoken and written word. Reminding us of the importance of the materiality of 'books' as objects that have travelled across time and continents and which continue to 'make words both new and brave', Khair insists that readers and writers must still be able to make these links if we are to avoid a precarious future and the potential loss of a library of memory in a digitising age. The significance of libraries, personal and public resonates across the anthology, along with the books that have been key to transforming writers' lives. As Mukoma Wa Ngugi (son of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o) demonstrates, while he was inevitably subject to early encounters with the politics of decolonisation and the writing of a now-well-established African literary canon, his own path to writing popular crime fiction stemmed from a completely different series of influences. In all cases, however, as Shivane Ramlochan, Bernardine Evaristo and Blake Morrison individually reveal, our 'book shelves', however they have come into being, often transform our 'book-selves' (Morrison).

It is perhaps not surprising that latent and explicit worries about the disappearance of the book are embedded in several of the essays. Yet, for others, this is tempered by an awareness of the benefits of new technologies. As Bernardine Evaristo notes, the internet has not only changed the world of publishing forever, but has also 'reconfigured how we present ourselves to the world at large'. In particular, it has grown huge audiences for a new generation of millennial 'black womxn' writers who would not previously have had the freedom to move so swiftly past the barriers of literary gatekeepers in Britain and elsewhere and bring their work

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to the fore. Similarly, as Marina Warner proclaims in 'Out Loud', what is now the web—or 'loom' as she renames it—is fast becoming a powerful public platform for new enunciations. Though not without obvious negatives, it can, she suggests, offer hospitality to those without permanent homes, provide the world's largest library, act as a theatre connecting writers and, with its polyphonic multiplicity, generate new 'hybridities and grafts' between sonic and more traditional forms. For Warner, metamorphosis is a key tenet of all literature. Stories and myths will always move and shift their shapes; yet such translations, whether of the old or the new, will no longer be 'bound' by the 'written text'.

Several writers take up the story, perhaps one of the biggest challenges of the modern era, of movement and migration. Whereas Blake Morrison takes us into the intimate complexities of his personal voyage out from his small village in Yorkshire, Eva Hoffman tells a broader-scale but no less powerful personal story of migration that also explores what makes us who we are. As she takes us through her Jewish background and her exile from Poland during the Cold War, she asks how memories of enforced and often violent displacement—images of Aleppo in ruins get superimposed on to her recollections from childhood—resonate in a contemporary Europe of supposedly elective free movement. Robbed of one language, she has to learn to inhabit another, a process of rupture and loss that continues to generate new work.

Questions of politics made more complex by the ethics of writing the 'other' remain pressing issues. James Kelman, Bernardine Evaristo and Hsiao-Hung Pai all remind us how activism continues to be an ever-important collective

force in enabling writers to continue to work, be published, seen and heard. Yet, as Kei Miller subtly illustrates in 'The Minds of Writers', a dialogue stretching from Virginia Woolf to the Caribbean and the writings of a contemporary Jamaican journalist, such issues are never straightforward. So while writers may, whatever their cultural or social contexts, attempt to break new ground and engage with representations of 'otherness' again and again, they must avoid being carelessly unethical, shutting down rather than opening up possibilities. Like Miller, Shivane Ramlochan shows us how her journey into writing and move away from being 'The Good Brown Girl' has involved a robust critique of inherited traditions and a necessary subversion of entrapping cultural stereotypes.

Writing and politics are strange bedfellows. However, as we see in the essays that overtly address the overlap, literature can guide us to new vantage points, leading us to places where activism alone cannot go and where words are able to cross the often delicate boundary lines between creative interpretation and critical judgement. Raja Shehadeh's description of 'The Dinner That Changed My Life' speaks directly to this as he recognises that the linear legalistic discourse with which he attempted to improve the 1992 negotiations between Palestine's PLO and Israel could never take him to a position from which he might actually be able to 'help rehabilitate the tarnished image of the Palestinians'. Githa Hariharan also points to how literature can perhaps achieve what politics cannot, recounting how the vitality of the ancient myth of Draupadi lives on in contemporary culture—despite censorship—in the power of the female body and the real-life resistance of the Indian women of Manipuri to oppression in 2004.<sup>6</sup>

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Threats to writers and activists willing to speak out against restrictions on democratic freedoms across the globe continue to be a most urgent concern. As Bina Shah makes plain in her personal account of the ‘Life and Death of Pakistan’s Sabeen Mahmud’—an activist murdered in Karachi in 2015 for opening up a cultural café that ‘proffered’ an open space for ‘dialogue’ and ‘critical thinking’—writers living and working in such contexts are unable to ‘keep silent’, even when they know ‘that speaking out might endanger our lives’.

Though writers may not be able to directly effect changes in their worlds, their words certainly contain the passion and the courage to do so. For, as Caryl Phillips once put it in a comment which in part inspired the commissioning of this anthology: ‘As long as we have literature as a bulwark against intolerance and as a force for change, then we have a chance... For literature is plurality in action; it embraces...a place of no truths; it relishes ambiguity, and it deeply respects the place where everybody has the right to be understood.’<sup>7</sup>