

Achieving Blackness and social mobility in Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black*

Joseph McLaren¹

Introduction

Diran Adebayo, author of *Some Kind of Black* (1997), nominated for the Man Booker Prize, and *My Once Upon a Time* (2001), demonstrates an innovative literary style and the achievement of blackness as it relates to identity and larger racial contexts that impact the possibilities of social mobility. Also, Adebayo, as a critical writer, co-edited *New Writing 12* (2004), which helped to codify Black British writing in the new millennium. Brother of Dotun Adebayo, who established *X Press*, Diran was familiar with the challenges of publication and marketing of Black British writers.

The notoriety of *Some Kind of Black* in the last century, the fact that it earned numerous recognitions, including the Writers' Guild of Great Britain's New Writer of the Year Award, the Author's Club First Novel Award, the 1996 Saga Prize, the Betty Trask Award, and was serialized on British radio, is reason enough for it to be called a Virago Modern Classic. The novel exemplifies remarks in *Black British Writing* (2004), where the editors, R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey, suggested that "[t]here is a considerable amount of 'reconfiguring' and 're-inventing' going on in Britain at the moment" (Arana and Ramey 2004, 4). Adebayo's contemporary relevance is shown by his involvement in Speaking Volumes Live Literature Productions, organized by Sharmilla Beezmohun, Sarah Sanders, and Nicholas Chapman. Speaking Volumes defined its writers as "people whose backgrounds may be black British born and bred, Caribbean, African, African American, mixed race" (Beezmohun, Sanders, and Chapman 2015, 5).

Social mobility and identity: defining Blackness

Some Kind of Black can be viewed as a retrospective commentary on a certain era but also as an exploration of the complexity of racial demarcations and identity formation. Of Yoruba-Nigerian descent, Adebayo represents what is sometimes called Black British writing but more precisely an Afro-British perspective. His initial novel, which mines the autobiographical self, shows the origins of his language usage, the creation of narrative styles and dialogue that are not based on conventional vernacular, but on the author's own

¹ joseph.mclaren@hofstra.edu

imaginative word stylings. The main character, Dele, and his sister are in pursuit of social mobility. Although their actions could result in certain achievements, police authority hinders their mobility and the assumed benefits of an allegedly meritocratic system.

Because Black British perspectives of the mid-twentieth century have traditionally been linked to Caribbean cultural and historical realities, the work of Adebayo is informative because it shows the unique elements of African, especially Nigerian, ancestry in its association with British social conditions in the 1990s. These lines of demarcation within a larger area of Black British categorization have been addressed by Ulrike Pirker, who observes, “black history and culture in Britain were treated mainly as an extension of Caribbean and African cultural expressions” (Pirker 2011, 5). Added to these vectors is the African American element, the Atlantic crossings extending through the Black Arts Movement and sixties Black Power infusions.

Although these broader characterizations were societal frameworks, they complicated the marketing of novelists such as Adebayo, who recognized the pitfalls of publishing categorizations. In a 2007 comment in *Bookseller*, he remarked that BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) categories were “commercially damaging” to authors who could be of broader interest and “encourage[ed] a certain banal representation and a group identity that I don’t think readers want” (Rushton 2007). Adebayo also commented extensively on race in an *Observer* article (Adebayo 2001).

Some Kind of Black received scant mention in 1996, but the remarks by Emma Lindsey in the *Observer* point to the underlying attributes of the novel’s stylistics and main character dilemmas, “[b]eing Nigerian, with West Indian peers and a guilt-ridden liking for white women” (Lindsey 1996, 17). Other commentaries were presented by Adina Campu, who focused on the identity question (Campu 2010, 58), and Bruce King, who recognized certain urban black issues (King 2002, 165). Overall, the novel was considered in the *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* “as ‘a major step in black British literature’ (Sesay), especially in its use of language and characterisation” (Stein 2002, 3).

In *Some Kind of Black*, the main character’s relationship to his parents and especially the expectations of his father push him toward achieving status through the pursuit of higher education. In this regard, the assumptions of social ascendancy are also intra-racial, where distinctions between Caribbean and African descended groups are sometimes reinforced by characters within these cultural demarcations. For the main character, achieving within the context of Eurocentric expectations could require a decentering of racial identity and defining oneself within the parameters of blackness.

In a personal interview, Adebayo commented on the relationship between his biographical particularities and his first novel.

I was a minority within larger Britain. I was also a minority within Black Britain in the sense that most Black people then were of Caribbean descent in Britain whereas I was of direct African descent. So, I have this sense of being part of a

lot of different homes without being completely a straightforward fit in any of them. A lot of my first book looks at cultural identity [...] [and] subcultures, the black subculture scene in London in the 1990s, things like drum & bass, jungle, and hip-hop music-based scenes. My novel explores what happens when you feel you have to choose between your different homes. (in McLaren 2015)

In his novel, Dele's parental home mandates the pursuit of university education, assumed to be the mode that will merit entrance into British social hierarchies. However, this pursuit becomes secondary to addressing the immediate necessities engendered by violent police actions. The novel shows the added layers of complexity because of black racial or ethnic affiliation, but also represents certain ironies as in the possibility of maintaining interracial romantic relationships in an era marked by racial divisions. Most important, the reversal of expectations of violence against black youth, the assumption of white perpetrators inverted, creates ironies that subvert the binary white-black opposition.

The problem of identity expressed in the novel's title, implying varieties or approaches to blackness, can be related to certain of Paul Gilroy's perspectives.

Whether these people were of African, Caribbean, or Asian descent, their commonality was often defined by its reference to the central, irreducible sign of their common racial subordination—the colour black. (Gilroy 1993, 86)

In the novel, interracial relationships between the main character and white girlfriend Andria are in some way the source of critical identity issues, when during a moment in their relationship, the narrator says of Dele, “[h]e couldn't square the circle. He had always been some kind of black. But now was a new stage, and he was finding out what demands this latest leg would place on him, and which needs he had to satisfy” (Adebayo 1996, 190).

Conclusion

In a time when police authority was assumed to be racially white, the brutalization of black communities could be understood in an evolving critical manner, where class, race, and gender were not always elements of the paradigm. *Some Kind of Black* questions whether the ethnic notes of Caribbean and African cultural roots can resolve into a monolithic or uniform conception of blackness, whether individual and group identities are in continual reformation and reharmonization. The assumption of a meritocratic system and the mobility engendered by higher education in a Eurocentric environment are undermined by cultural and social forces.

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