Lisa Ahrens

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF BLACK BRITISH AND BRITISH MUSLIM LITERATURE

Heterotopic Spaces and the Politics of Destabilisation

From:

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**The Transformative Potential of Black British
and British Muslim Literature**
Heterotopic Spaces and the Politics of Destabilisation

This study investigates power, belonging and exclusion in British society by analysing representations of the mosque, the University of Oxford, and the plantation in novels by Leila Aboulela, Robin Yassin-Kassab, Diran Adebayo, David Dabydeen, Andrea Levy, and Bernardine Evaristo.
Lisa Ahrens combines Foucault's theory of heterotopia with elements of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory to work out Black British and British Muslim literature's potential for destabilising exclusionary boundaries. In this way, new perspectives open up on the intersections between space, power and literature, intertwining and enriching the discourses of Cultural and Literary Studies.

Lisa Ahrens (Dr. phil.) worked as a research assistant at the University of Paderborn where she taught English Cultural and Literary Studies.

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Introduction

During the years in which the present thesis was written, a number of significant, perhaps seismic events took place: In September 2015, former prime minister David Cameron addressed the Jamaican Parliament during his visit to the island, saying that "Britain is proud to have eventually led the way in its [slavery's] abolition" and that it was time to "move on from this painful legacy" (par. 13-14). His speech thus illustrates what Kehinde Andrews refers to as Britain's "progressive myth", expressing that "the act of abolition was 'British', but the atrocity of slavery was not" (par. 2-4). Moreover, in June 2016, Britain voted to leave the European Union after a controversial campaign which called on Britons to 'take back control' – a phrase which political journalist Steve Richards described as the "slogan of the year, and perhaps the century" (par. 1), and which seems to represent a sentiment of fear and conservatism. Indeed, recent studies have found clear indicators which suggest that the vote for Brexit was motivated by Islamophobia (Swami et al. 174) and public aversion to immigration (Goodwin and Milazzo 462), while FOI figures show that Brexit has in turn also generated a dramatic increase in racist and Islamophobic attacks (Bulman par. 1) And in 2018, the Windrush scandal revealed that, following then Home Secretary Theresa May's pledge in 2012 "to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment[1] for illegal immigrants" (Kirkup and Winnett par. 7), about 50,000 people from the Caribbean who had been invited by the British Government to Britain after World War II are now threatened with deportation ("It's inhumane" par. 1).

What those incidents illustrate is that Britain seems to be shaped by rather clear-cut and exclusionary boundaries both inside the country and in relation to the rest of Europe[2]. Indeed, the possibility of belonging to Britain appears to be available only to a limited number of individuals and societal groups. Examples from

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1 For an overview of potential poetic responses to "the discourse on deportation" (Herd 35) which was created by Theresa May's 'hostile environment' see David Herd's essay "Valediction Forbidden Mourning: Poetry in the Age of Deportation". Herd analyses how the 2016 Immigration Bill reinforces this hostile attitude towards migrants and refugees and calls for language and poetry to counter exclusion and create recognition for marginalised groups (ibid. 37).

2 This is also illustrated by a collection of essays by British writers edited by Nikesh Shukla (2016) and Afua Hirsch's 2018 "hybrid of memoir, reportage and social commentary" *Brit(ish): On Race,*

public discourse like those mentioned above suggest that it is particularly black Britons and British Muslims who are frequently excluded. What plays a considerable role in generating (but also, as will soon be pointed out, countering) exclusion is representation. In their study *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin point out that stereotypical representations of Muslims like for instance "[t]he bearded Muslim fanatic, the oppressed, veiled woman, the duplicitous terrorist who lives among 'us'" (2) serve to "confirm[...] non-Muslim viewers of these images in their sense of superiority and cementing the threatening strangeness of the Muslim Other" (ibid. 3). Their remarks illustrate that representation and exclusion are inherently linked with societal power structures. Similarly, in his reading of representations of black athletes, Stuart Hall explains that representation, through the creation of meaning, has the power to create and naturalise power imbalances and "preferred meaning[s]" ("Spectacle" 228). Thus, representation has the potential to generate and reinforce exclusion or facilitate belonging. However, what this also implies is that exclusionary boundaries can potentially be destabilised and transformed through alternative representations.

The dynamics described above serve as a point of departure for the present thesis. Against the background of British cultural studies and literary studies[3], it sets out to explore how contemporary black British and British Muslim writers use literary representations of space to engage with questions of belonging and exclusion. Gesa Stedman points out that cultural studies has "a political agenda – one that implies that the world can and needs to be changed" (5). The present study shares this view: It aims at analysing how black British and British Muslim novels challenge exclusionary boundaries set by dominant norms like secularism or whiteness, both on the level of representation and on the level of the potential interaction between reader and text. Space is here understood generally as "*a practiced place*" in Michel

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Identity and Belonging (Grant par. 2). Hirsch writes, among other topics, about heritage, class, and the body, and reflects on her time at the University of Oxford. The blurb of Shukla's collection announces that the essays answer the question of "[w]hat's it like to live in a country that doesn't trust you and doesn't want you unless you win an Olympic gold medal or a national baking competition?". It thus foregrounds that black people's belonging is not only contested by dominant society, but also highly conditional and narrowly defined. What is particularly significant is that the book was funded by (potential) readers who donated the money necessary to publish the collection. It includes 16 pages of their names, with each listing about 70 donators. This clearly indicates the continued relevance of and interest in questions of black British belonging to Britain.

3 Rainer Emig notes that "the relationship between Literary and Cultural studies in Germany, and particularly in the context of British Studies in Germany, is a special one" (28) and suggests that "a complete separation is [...] unthinkable" (ibid. 29). Quoting Nelson, Teichler, and Grossberg, he highlights that "Cultural studies involves *how* and *why* such work is done, not just its content" (ibid. 30). As will soon be pointed out in more detail, this work combines a close reading approach with cultural studies' attention to power structures and its concern with social change in order to analyse how literary texts might challenge exclusionary boundaries.

de Certeau's sense (117, original emphasis), thereby foregrounding the idea that space and its cultural implications and meanings can be (re)shaped by individual agency and practices. More specifically, this work makes use of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a highly productive category which draws attention to the ways in which space and spatial practices can perpetuate or challenge power structures ("Other Spaces" 352). Building on Foucault's theory, the upcoming chapters will therefore read three selected spaces – the mosque, the University of Oxford, and the plantation[4] – as heterotopic spaces in order to analyse their potential for change. Moreover, in its conceptualisation of an interactive heterotopic space, the present thesis will open up an additional analytical category which examines the transformative potential implied in the interaction between reader[5] and text.

This work therefore argues that the concept of heterotopic spaces generates new perspectives on the possibility of destabilising exclusionary boundaries and changing power relations, as well as on the ways in which marginalisation and belonging are constructed. Regardless of how successful the attempt to change those structures is on the plot level of the works, it is suggested that literary representations of heterotopic spaces have the potential to create an interactive heterotopic space in which integration and exclusion can be reassessed. In this sense, the use of Foucault's concept put forward by the present thesis illustrates how heterotopia can be applied programmatically to the study of literary texts: The approach employed here offers a close reading of literary representations of heterotopic spaces which embraces the social, cultural, and political context from which they emerge and pays particular attention to power structures[6]. At the same time, the analysis also puts emphasis on the texts themselves and investigates their agency in guiding the reader towards certain ideological positions and outlooks, thereby potentially reinforcing or changing perspectives.

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4 More information on the choice of exemplary spaces for the present thesis will be provided in Chapter Two.

5 More information on the present study's conception of the reader can be found in Chapters Two and Seven.

6 Close reading is a strategy usually associated with New Criticism's focus on the intrinsic value of a work which disregards the context from which it emerges. However, the present thesis suggests that a close reading approach which pays attention to detail benefits from a broader perspective which also includes a work's background. By applying such an approach, this work aims at preventing arbitrary readings of the novels at hand as well as foregrounding the functions performed by particular representations and textual strategies.

Foucault's concept of heterotopia[7] has been given a lot of attention by researchers. However, despite its enormous significance for British cultural and literary studies, the concept still lacks a thorough examination with regard to its potential as an analytical tool in such a context. The present study is certainly not the first one to focus on literary representations of heterotopias, but it intends to move beyond the frequently descriptive approaches which classify or label spaces as heterotopias but refrain from close readings that focus on the functions and subversive potential implied in Foucault's concept. Thus, there are for instance critics who classify Chicano borderlands (Ashcroft, *Utopianism* 134), the woods in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Moffatt 182), various spaces in Angela Carter's fiction, including catacombs, the castle, the prison, the city and the desert (Filimon 39), nature (Ismail et al. 153) and the mansion in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders* (ibid. 155-157) as heterotopias without paying much attention to their functions. Such readings appear to privilege the first five, rather descriptive principles of Foucault's theory and overlook its sixth feature, heterotopia's subversive potential. This is implied in the practices carried out there and in heterotopia's relation to the rest of societal space. Significantly, however, it is exactly its possible transformative function which constitutes heterotopia as an analytical tool.

At the same time, many critical perspectives also disregard heterotopia's literary origins, which Foucault outlined in *The Order of Things*[8]. Notable exceptions are Bill Ashcroft, Tiziana Morosetti, Marcel Thoene, and Sarah K. Cantrell. Bill Ashcroft and Tiziana Morosetti write from a postcolonial perspective. While Ashcroft considers silence in J.M. Coetzee's oeuvre as a metaphorical heterotopic space which functions in a heterotopic manner ("Silence" 145), Morosetti reads African counter-narratives by Femi Osofisan, Buchi Emecheta, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o as "literary het-

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7 Within the scope of the present work, it is quite impossible to provide an overview of all research to date on heterotopia – the amount of texts would certainly provide enough material for a book-length study. A highly recommendable source which includes an in-depth and continually updated bibliography of literature on heterotopia is Peter Johnson's blog *Heterotopian Studies*. Chapter Two provides more information on Johnson's blog and on the various disciplines and areas in which the concept has been employed. Another overview of heterotopia's reception can be found in Kelvin Knight's PhD thesis on heterotopia in fiction (*Real Places* 22-34). The present thesis concentrates on works which are relevant for contextualising its understanding and application of heterotopia.

8 More information on heterotopia's literary dimension will be provided in Chapter Two. At this point it is important to point out that the present thesis conceives of this literary dimension as going beyond merely focusing on the representation of heterotopic spaces in literature. Rather, it argues that textual strategies – like for instance the deliberate play with genre conventions, a text's narrative perspective or modes of mediation – can also have heterotopic and thus potentially subversive or transformative effects on the reader.

erotopias" which employ non-realistic genres[9] (49). Cantrell explores Hogwarts in the Harry Potter novels as a heterotopic space which has "both reflective and compensatory functions, taking protagonists and readers away from their respective worlds in order to renew their sense of the conflicts that permeate those worlds" (209). Thus, she too draws attention to a literary text's heterotopic potential for change. All three researchers thus provide case studies which illustrate that textual strategies can have heterotopic, and thus potentially subversive effects. In his study of four American novels, Marcel Thoene comes up with the term 'narrative heterotopia' which he applies to Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. Thoene suggests that a narrative heterotopia is

> the socially constructed, dynamic entity that assumes different significations to different people at different times under different circumstances. St. Jude [the space analysed] is outsourced from being a mere place, and it even goes further than solely representing an inscribed place. By the time that two or more realizations of it collide, it is discursivized, therefore generating the heterotopia. (Thoene 161)

Thoene's definition draws attention to the fact that he conceives of heterotopia as a form of discourse and links it to what he describes as "the very heart of spatial studies, i.e. the historicity of spaces, the dynamics of attributes that society inscribes into spaces, or simultaneous significations that spaces signal to different recipients, which are all paradigms providing material for a plenitude of (historical) narratives" (ibid. 52). Even though Thoene does not elaborate on his understanding of discourse but only mentions Foucault's "crucial contribution to" the concept (ibid. 52), the notion of heterotopia as a form of discourse appears to share with the present study a concern with how 'language' (in its broadest sense) and textual strategies can develop agency and create particular effects. However, his concept of narrative heterotopia ultimately remains rather vague and opens up many questions: Like Ashcroft's, Morosetti's and Cantrell's readings, Thoene's approach does not clarify how exactly those strategies work, and to what extent heterotopia can be used as an analytical framework or tool which is employed to bring about a text's transformative heterotopic potential. This can probably be traced back to the fact that Ashcroft's, Morosetti's, and Cantrell's interpretations appear in the form of essays and Thoene's analysis takes up only a minor part of his study (it is not even

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9   At this point it seems appropriate to draw attention to the fact that the term 'heterotopia' does not always refer back to Foucault's theory. In her study, published in German, Judith Leiß for instance reads heterotopia as a sub-genre of utopia and points out that her understanding of the concept differs from that of Foucault (40). She classifies those utopian texts as heterotopia which respond aesthetically to postmodernism (ibid. 20) and uses the term heterotopia because other critics in utopian studies previously employed it with reference to Foucault (ibid. 21; 39).

mentioned again in the conclusion). This indicates that they do not have the necessary scope to bring about more in-depth insights into the nature of heterotopia's literary dimension, or perhaps that they simply chose to focus on different, equally valid aspects of heterotopia than the ones investigated here.

There is, however, a longer study by Kelvin Knight entitled *Real Places and Impossible Spaces: Foucault's Heterotopia in the Fiction of James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, and W.G. Sebald*, which aims "to reclaim the heterotopia for literary analysis" (Knight *Real Places* 21). Additionally, many findings of his thesis can also be found in his later essay "Placeless Places: Resolving the Paradox of Foucault's Heterotopia" (2017). Disregarding Foucault's later definition of heterotopia in favour of the earlier French original transcript of Foucault's radio talk on the concept, Knight argues that heterotopia was never meant to be applied to real, tangible spaces (*Real Places* 21). Instead, he proposes to conceive of heterotopias exclusively as "literary motifs" (ibid. 21) and "fictional representations" of real spaces ("Placeless places" 142). However, focusing on heterotopic spaces only as 'literary motifs' still means that any analysis following his approach remains on the level of representation and disregards the potential textual agency those literary representations might have. Foucault's remarks on heterotopia's literary dimension on the other hand clearly reference the *effect* a text by Jorge Luis Borges, and particularly the way in which the narrative is arranged, had on him: It made him review the dominant mode of thinking at that time (Foucault, *Order of Things* xvi). Thus, Knight's understanding of heterotopia serves, like Ashcroft's, Morosetti's, Cantrell's, and Thoene's, to foreground that Foucault's concept does indeed not only refer to physically tangible places, but his approach finally does not seem to use heterotopia productively for literary analysis either. The present thesis on the other hand will show that focusing exclusively on the level of representation limits the enormous potential Foucault's concept implies for studying literary representations of space in the context of exclusionary boundaries and how they might be destabilised. In fact, it will become clear that the representational or plot level on which issues like power, ideology and social change are discussed can engage productively with an additional, interactive level. This level can be reconstructed by drawing attention to the narrative techniques and literary strategies that function in a heterotopic manner.

In order to develop, explore and assess heterotopia as an analytical tool from the perspective of literary studies, the present thesis is divided into three sections, each consisting of several chapters. The first section offers theoretical perspectives on power, exclusion, and space: Chapter One establishes the theoretical framework of this study and familiarises readers with Michel Foucault's concept of power, Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony and Stuart Hall's notion of representation. While all of these concepts will be used throughout the upcoming analyses, Sections Two and Three also draw on further theories from cultural studies (e.g. stereotyping or myth) and literary studies (e.g.

genre theory and narratology). Chapter Two moreover illustrates the understanding of space on which this thesis is built. In addition, it introduces the concept of heterotopia in greater depth and clarifies its use of the term 'heterotopic space'. In a next step, it sets out to develop the concept of interactive heterotopic spaces by combining Foucault's notion of heterotopia with Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory. Such spaces are opened up by textual strategies which encourage readers to reassess established norms and outlooks.

Sections Two and Three then focus on the analysis of such (interactive) heterotopic spaces. Section Two argues from a cultural studies perspective and analyses the representation of three different heterotopic spaces in six contemporary novels. Each of those spaces is characterised by a central conflict which illustrates the exclusionary boundaries that marginalise particular ethnic and religious groups in Britain. This study investigates the possibility of destabilising those boundaries, which is implied in the heterotopic spaces at the heart of the respective chapters. Against the background of the apparently exclusionary binaries of secularism and religion, particularly Islam, in Britain, Chapter Three studies Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008) and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). It offers close readings of the different mosque spaces and spatial practices represented in the novels and focuses on their relationship to and interaction with the rest of social space in order to explore the mosque's heterotopic potential for overcoming the binaries mentioned above. Chapter Four is concerned with the conflict arising from the so-called Oxford Myth: the promise of societal belonging which is implied in an Oxford education, but frequently turns out to remain unfulfilled for black students[10]. Focusing on Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black* (1996) and David Dabydeen's *The Intended* (1991), the chapter analyses representations of the University of Oxford and the extent to which it is shown to help the protagonists destabilise or even overcome exclusionary boundaries. Chapter Five offers a historical[11] perspective on a conflict that rests upon the brutal system of slavery which not only abused and excluded an unimaginable number of people, but also perpetuated notions of white superiority and British imperial power that last until today. In its reading of Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010) and Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008), Chapter

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10 A prominent figure who has recently spoken about her experiences in Oxford as a black British student is Afua Hirsch, both in her book *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* and in an essay for the *Guardian*. She writes in the essay that upon hearing that she was a student in Oxford people usually presumed that she went to Oxford Brookes, "assum[ing] that was where someone who looked like me belonged" (par. 3). She also concludes that "our universities are both a symptom and a cause of segregation" (ibid. par. 5). Oxford, as the proverbial British or even English university, appears to represent this particularly clearly.

11 By focusing on the plantation from a historical perspective, the present thesis foregrounds the "sense of historicity" which, according to Gesa Stedman, was introduced by cultural studies' "founding fathers" like Raymond Williams but has since then been lost (5).

Five therefore examines the heterotopic potential of the plantation in the context of Transatlantic slavery and analyses how the former slaves use the plantation in order to expose its compensatory, hegemonic function for the British colonisers.

Section Three then moves from a cultural studies analysis to a literary perspective on the three spaces selected for this thesis and puts the concept of interactive heterotopic spaces into practice. It explores two broader tendencies which can be seen to realise or support a text's heterotopic potential for change in the reader: creating unfamiliar familiarity and generating closeness and/or distance. The first tendency, investigated in Chapter Six, is generated by the transformation of genre conventions. The chapter thus offers an analysis of Yassin-Kassab's and Aboulela's modifications of the Bildungsroman genre, and Levy's and Evaristo's at times deliberate play with conventions of the slave narrative. The literary strategies examined in Chapter Seven are the textual interactions with an implied reader in *The Intended* and *Some Kind of Black*, as well as the use of unreliable and world-constructing narration in *The Long Song* and *Blonde Roots*, all of which can be taken to develop closeness to or distance from particular ideological positions in the plot. Indeed, those strategies open up an interactive heterotopic space between reader and text. Such a space creates a realm in which the conflicts analysed in Section Two can be analysed on a level which goes beyond textual representation and instead examines the novels' textual agency.

These introductory remarks and the brief preview of the present study have hopefully shown that it is primarily concerned with heterotopia's potential for change and social transformation. Exploring this potential by applying a close reading approach to literary representations of heterotopic spaces which pays attention to the works' social, cultural, and political contexts at the same time seems particularly fitting, given that literature has long been associated with a social function. Literature's ability to offer alternative representations and change attitudes has for instance been addressed through "'writing back'" against established and canonical dominant narratives (Thieme 1). This tendency is particularly prominent in black[12] British and British Muslim literature, the two groups of texts at the centre of this work.

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12 The use of the term 'black British literature' has been debated intensely (e.g. Procter 5; Reichl 33-40; Stein 7-18). Discussions range from concerns about grouping together heterogeneous texts in the first place to the denomination 'black' British itself. In this context, Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies explain that "the use of upper or lower case 'b' in the term denotes different groups, with the lower case signifying non-white communities that have suffered a history of racism, and the upper case 'B' referring to an assertion of a chosen Afro-centric cultural identity" (3). Since the present thesis is concerned with writers from diverse backgrounds such as Nigeria, Guyana, and Jamaica, and focuses on structures which generate belonging or exclusion, the use of lower case 'b' seems more fitting. However, it should be noted that the capitalised version is used when referring to theoretical concepts and categories which use an upper case 'B',

Black British Literature: Diran Adebayo, David Dabydeen, Bernardine Evaristo, and Andrea Levy

According to Mark Stein, black British literature is particularly characterised by its heterogeneity (18). It can best be described as a

> collective term that covers an imagined experiential field of overlapping territories. While at its narrowest it merely refers to writers with an African Caribbean background, at its widest it can include writing that takes recourse to domains such as Africa, Asia, or the Caribbean, and attendant cultural and aesthetic traditions. (Stein 17f.)

Still, what most texts which belong to the category of black British literature share is that they not only deal with Briton's black inhabitants, but also with British society more generally (Stein xii). Thus, Stein suggests that "[o]ne of the values of the term *black British literature* lies precisely in its reference to Britain and Britishness and its implied proposition that these concepts are subject to redress" (ibid. 17, original emphasis). This clearly illustrates that black British literature is concerned with questions of belonging, exclusion, and social change. Stein's observation that black British literature "is about redefining where one is staying, about claiming one's space, and about reshaping that space" (ibid.) is even more relevant for this thesis: His use of a spatial register points to the fact that many works of black British literature are actively involved in renegotiating the boundaries which generate marginalisation. Susanne Reichl also notes that black British literature can "be regarded as a counter-discourse to mainstream British fiction in that it inscribes new positions and thus exerts some transformative power"[13] (39f.).

The black British novels discussed in the present thesis, Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black*, Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*, David Dabydeen's *The Intended*, and Andera Levy's *The Long Song*, also engage with those concerns. Sara Upstone refers to Levy and Evaristo as "two of the most established recent black British writers" ("Some Kind of Black" 279). *The Long Song* was nominated for renowned prizes (it appeared on the longlist of the 2010 Orange Prize and was shortlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize) and won the 2011 Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction. This certainly indicates considerable public attention. *Blonde Roots* is equally acclaimed: It was shortlisted for the 2009 youth panel of the Orange Prize and longlisted for the original Orange Prize in the same year. In Ireland, it was longlisted for the

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   such as for instance the (female) Black British Bildungsroman (e.g. Tönnies, "Feminizing" 52 and Tönnies, "Black British Bildungsroman").

13 Similarly, John McLeod concludes that black British literature "is often endeavouring to redraft an understanding of the nation and its people that is prompted by, but ultimately supersedes, exclusively Black British concerns" (46).

2009 International Dublin Literary Award, it was a finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award in the U.S. and won The Big Red Read Award. *Some Kind of Black* won the 1995 Saga Prize even before it was published, the 1996 Writers' Guild Award and the 1997 Betty Trask Award, whereas *The Intended* was awarded the Guyana Prize for Literature in 1991. It is perhaps because their works have been published by smaller publishing houses (Abacus and Peepal Tree) than Levy's and Evaristo's novels (Headline and Penguin) that they seem to be less well-known to a non-academic audience.

Research on Levy's and Evaristo's novels is mostly homogeneous in foregrounding their focus on rewriting history[14] and their categorisation as slave narratives[15]. Indeed, similarly to this work, most researchers have read *The Long Song* and *Blonde Roots* as neo-slave narratives, with some of them investigating the novels' affiliation with the genre in greater detail (e.g. Lima 135 and Burkitt 408f.). Sofía Muñoz-Valdivieso has examined *The Long Song* "in the context of comic African American slavery fiction" ("This tale" 45) and has foregrounded both novels' status as British varieties of the slave narrative ("Neo-Slave Narratives" 43 and "Revisiting" 62). Her observations in this respect serve as a point of departure for the analysis in Chapter Six and will be explored there in greater depth with regard to the novels' appropriations of various features of different slave narrative varieties. Space does not feature prominently within research on the two novels. Indeed, neither Levy's nor Evaristo's novel has been read in the context of space, let alone heterotopia. The plantation is merely considered as a background against which the plot unfolds, but there is to date no study which has focused on it explicitly. It is perhaps because the plantation features so prominently in the novels that it has so far been taken

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14 Sara Upstone for instance considers *The Long Song* and *Blonde Roots* as "strategic rewritings of history intended to simultaneously speak to the silencing of black voices in conventional historiography, and the realities of race relations in contemporary Britain" ("Some Kind of Black" 280). Similar views are expressed by Tolan's (100), Baxter's (80), Fischer's (112), Muñoz-Valdivieso's ("This tale" 39), Laursen's (66), Lima's (137-144), and Flajšarová's (321) readings of *The Long Song*, and in Burkitt's (407) and von Rosenberg's (385f.) analysis of *Blonde Roots*. Jana Gohrisch on the other hand identifies factors which limit the subversive function of Levy's novel (430).

15 Researchers who offer different perspectives on the two novels are for instance Fiona Tolan, Judie Newman, Ole Laursen, Michelle Gadpaille, and Elif Öztabak-Avci. While Tolan employs a feminist and postcolonial perspective and compares *The Long Song* to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (103-106), Newman reads *Blonde Roots* as a utopian text (284) and links its reversal strategy to *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (285). Laursen examines *The Long Song* in the context of trauma studies and Hirsch's concept of postmemory (53), and Gadpaille draws attention to the practice of 'pica' – consuming non-food items – as "a structural motif" in the novel (3). Öztabak-Avci investigates the narratee in Levy's novel (118). Her approach is interesting because it includes the level of interaction between reader and text, even though by focusing on the narratee she employs a rather different approach than the present study.

for granted and thus neglected in previous research. Critics have certainly identified the novels' potential for generating new perspectives on Britain's legacy of slavery and questions of belonging. However, neither their categorisation as slave narratives with a rhetorical function, nor researchers' preoccupation with the texts' rewriting of history have led to an examination of how their use of literary strategies might interact productively with representations of space so as to encourage an active, and potentially subversive reading process. The present work intends to close this gap by providing a close reading of the plantation as a heterotopic space and a thorough study of the textual strategies which might destabilise boundaries and promote transformation.

Similarly, there are no critical perspectives on *The Intended* and *Some Kind of Black* which have read the University of Oxford as a heterotopic space. It is certainly true that Oxford does not feature too prominently as the actual setting of the plots. Most critical readings appear to have overlooked the enormous significance which Oxford and the Oxford Myth attached to it carry for the protagonists and their sense of belonging to Britain. Indeed, while critics have focused on the representation of London and its North-South divide in Adebayo's novel (Sommer, "Texts" 359f.; Stein 19) and the switches between London and Guyana in *The Intended* (West 226; Relich, "A Labyrinthine Odyssey" 129), Oxford in general has been disregarded in secondary literature on the two novels but for one notable exception: Reading *Some Kind of Black* and *The Intended* as "'postcolonial' university novels", Merle Tönnies offers highly insightful close readings of Oxford ("Postcolonial University Novel" 16). She concludes that in Adebayo's narrative, "[t]he self-seclusion of the institution is [...] brought to the reader's attention in the very set-up of the plot" (ibid. 28). Similarly, she points out that Dabydeen's depiction of the protagonist's experiences at an Oxford library indicate the fact that ultimately, "exclusion cannot be suppressed and manifests itself implicitly on a number of levels" (ibid. 25). Her position thus introduces a more critical perspective on Oxford[16] in the two novels than in most other research, where Oxford is at times mentioned but not really analysed: Many readings of Adebayo's narrative have for instance suggested that the protagonist Dele's Oxford education provides him with the cultural resources to construct an identity (Mathias 177) or that it "makes him part pf the elite, upper class" (Câmpu 60). In her reading of *Some Kind of Black* as a representative of "utopian realism", Sara Upstone indeed considers Dele's admission to Oxford the novel's utopian element[17] ("Postcolonial" 144).

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16 Chris Weedon shows similar tendencies when he briefly mentions the University's representation as "*supposedly* liberal" (87, emphasis added).

17 The realist element consists of the novel's depiction of violence, dialect, racism and its detailed geography of London (Upstone "Postcolonial" 143).

Most researchers celebrate Dele's hybrid identity (Kurtén 53f. and George Sesay 103f.) and the novel's depiction of the complexities of a multi-ethnic society (Dawes 22f.)[18]. Despite those dynamics, there are also critics who have noticed *Some Kind of Black*'s overall "tragic plot" (Stein 19). This observation is supported by Koye Oyedeji, who concludes that Adebayo's text "serves[s] to remind us of the tensions and obstacles of [sic] which we face as we negotiate the differing dominant ideology of the territory we call home" (370). The present study shares his opinion and intends to provide insights into how this perspective is generated by the novel's representation of Oxford as a heterotopic space. At the same time, it is argued here that *Some Kind of Black* still contains elements which might counter the pessimistic outlook on the plot level. These elements will be examined by applying the concept of interactive heterotopic spaces in Chapter Seven. Research on *The Intended* is most extensive[19] compared with the other three black British novels discussed here, but at the same time also particularly homogeneous, with the novel's use of intertextuality as its predominant concern. In contrast to the present study, most research considers *The Intended* a subversive, "decolonizing" (McIntyre 154) text. This evaluation is frequently based on the novel's use of intertextuality as a signifier of agency (Stein 169) and a hybrid identity (Fernández Vázquez 81 and 87; West 234f.)[20]. Even

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18 Mark Stein (19) and Kwame Dawes (22f.) express similar views, whereas Sabrina Brancato offers a curiously negative reading of Dele's identity when she suggests that he stands for an "essentialist and static notion of identity" (60) which illustrates the novel's overall "dichotomous stance" (ibid. 64).

19 There is for instance an edited volume edited by Kevin Grand on David Dabydeen's oeuvre which also includes three essays on *The Intended*. Similarly, a collection of essays on postcolonialism and autobiography in the works of Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, and Opal Palmer Adisa includes articles by William Boelhower, Wolfgang Binder, Tobias Döring, and Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn, who explore *The Intended* against the background of autobiography.

20 Further examples are for instance Russell West-Pavlov's analysis of the novel's depiction of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He argues that Conrad's text functions as "the principal pedagogic text through which reading skills, and thus access to hegemonic English culture, subsequently endorsed by examination results and university entrance, is transmitted to a young generation of immigrants" (52). In a surprisingly optimistic reading of the *The Intended*, which seems to confirm the Oxford Myth, Mario Relich observes that their discussion of *Heart of Darkness* "reveals so much about Shaz, Joseph and the narrator himself" ("Literary Subversion" 55). He pays particular attention to the fact that the narrator's reliance on the literary text itself helps him to create "his own individual identity", whereas Joseph's attempt to produce a film version of it leads to his ultimate failure "because film turns out to be too treacherous a medium" (ibid. 53). José Santiago Fernández Vázquez sees Joseph's interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* as a counter-discourse which challenges the narrator's trust in dominant hegemonic discourses (88). Karen McIntyre argues that Dabydeen's novel contains a "revisionary rewriting of canonical material – […] Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (159). Similarly, in his review of the novel, Charles Sarvan meticulously draws attention to aspects which he sees as (direct) references to *Heart of Darkness* (58-61), and Mark Stein suggests that *The Intended* "'writes back'" to Conrad's

though there are critics who have noted that the protagonist's degree of assimilation is highly problematic (West-Pavlov 50; West 221; Fee 69), they still tend to see the use of intertextuality in the novel as a highly positive element[21] which counterbalances the protagonist's ambiguous development. This work takes up a different stance and will show that other strategies in the novel are so dominant that they in fact limit the role of intertextual references. The present thesis attempts to offer a more nuanced reading of *The Intended* and *Some Kind of Black* than can be found in most other research. Such a perspective requires the analysis to not only acknowledge the functions of Oxford as a heterotopic space in the novel but also examine how textual strategies might contribute to or interfere with the novels' heterotopic potential for change in the reader.

British Muslim Literature: Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Aboulela

Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* belong to the category of British Muslim literature[22]. The term 'British Muslim literature' is used here to refer to contemporary texts by British Muslim writers which mirror a

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novel (164) and thus concludes that the novel foregrounds "textual agency" (ibid. 169). For a discussion of further intertextual references in the novel, including William Shakespeare and William Wordsworth, see Jutta Schamp (134-140). Other examples of critics who focus on intertextuality in the novel are Pietro Deandrea (168) and Mark McWatt (112).

21 Other topics in secondary literature which are considered to contribute to the overall optimistic reading of the novel are its use of Creole (Parry 91; Fernández Vázquez 98; West 230) as well as "[t]he text itself, in its form, its deliberate messiness [which] counters the iron cage of racial absolutism and hierarchy" (Fee 124).

22 The designation of texts by writers with a British Muslim background is still being debated: Critics have for instance used terms like "British Muslim Migrant Fictions" (Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity* 26), "literature by writers of Muslim heritage" (Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions* 5), "British Muslim Women's Writing" (Tancke 1), "Muslim Immigrant Fiction" (Hassan 298) or "black British Muslimah Literature" (Schmidt 25-35) to designate different aspects and emphases of texts by writers with a British Muslim background. There are also perspectives which refrain from employing any specific designation by making use of descriptions. Examples are Esra Mirze Santesso's monograph *Disorientation: Muslim Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature*, which includes a chapter called "Islam and British Literature" (28-56), or Rehana Ahmed's *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* (2015). The present study has selected the term 'British Muslim literature' for a number of reasons: It is supposed to foreground similarities to the other group of texts analysed here, black British literature. They share the concern with questions of marginalisation and belonging, but differ in a very crucial aspect: As pointed out previously, black British literature operates within a framework of racism and ethnicity, whereas Aboulela and Yassin-Kassab focus on religion and Islamophobia. The two signifiers 'British' and 'Muslim' thus serve to highlight the fact that this work is concerned with British literature and that it analyses texts in terms of religion rather than ethnicity.

shift from ethnic to explicitly religious issues, and which aim at "re-map[ping] the British landscape from a broadly Muslim perspective" (Chambers, "Recent Literary Representations" 179). In this sense, the novels discussed in the present work belong to a rather recent tendency within literary representations by British Muslims. It developed after 2001, when Britain saw "clashes between British South Asian and white youths in the northern English cities of Burnley, Oldham and Bradford" and the 9/11 attacks led to "the so-called 'war on terror'" (ibid. 176). This does not mean that literature in Britain did not focus on Islam before those events. Rather, Chambers argues that writers like Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith or Ian McEwan "have used Islam rather reductively, typically as a marker of fundamentalism, Islamism or the stereotypical figure of the terrorist" (ibid. 175)[23]. Islam occupies a central position in those texts, but it still "remain[s] subservient to other issues such as gender, class, sexuality and regional identities" (Chambers, "Recent Literary Representations" 175). In contrast to that, the texts analysed here belong to a group of narratives which portray Islam in a more complex way. Chambers sees them as a response to Islamophobia (ibid. 176) and suggests that they "are beginning to challenge the dominance that the concept of ethnicity has had over perceptions of migrant diasporic writing" (ibid. 187). Other critics have made similar observations: Esra Mirze Santesso for instance identifies "a shift in recent Anglophone fiction from a focus on ethno-racial tension to religious alienation" (4). Thus, rather than dismissing religion as a secondary marker of identity, writers like Aboulela[24] and Yassin-Kassab consciously engage with the possibility of belonging to Britain while at the same time being a practicing Muslim[25].

The complexity which characterises British Muslim literature's treatment of Islam is also mirrored in the secondary literature on Aboulela's and Yassin-Kassab's novels. While there is only a handful of contributions available on *The Road from Damascus*, which are mostly concerned with questions of identity and representations of Islam[26] (Chambers, "Sexy Identity-Assertion" 119; Rashid 93; Hilal 16; Ilott 31-42), Aboulela's *Minaret* has generated a broad spectrum of criticism. In his *Guardian* review of the novel, Mike Phillips describes it as "a challenging tale" (par.

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23 For a similar view see Catherine Rashid, who adds Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* to the list mentioned above (94), a writer whom Chambers also includes in the new tendency she identifies ("Recent Literary Representations" 179-182).

24 In fact, Lindsey Moore refers to Aboulela as "to date the most high-profile advocate of the Islamic revival in English-language literature" (75).

25 Critics argue that this development can also be observed in society in general: Stefano Allievi identifies a "'return of religions'" (19) in secularised public spaces, while Nasar Meer suggests that there is a new "'Muslim consciousness'" which explains British Muslims' increasingly dynamic negotiation of their religious identity (180). For more information see Chapter Three.

26 The only reading which adopts a different perspective can be found in Anna Rettberg's essay on the novel's approach to conviviality (188).

1) and notes that "Aboulela takes a huge risk in describing her heroine's religious conversion and spiritual dedication" (ibid. par. 11). His register already indicates that critical opinion on *Minaret* is extremely diverse and ranges from highly positive readings in the context of feminism (Hasan 100; Schmidt 123), empowerment and female choice (Cariello 340f.; Hunter 96; Dimitriu 124) to "right-wing Islamism" (Abbas 84), a "fundamentalism" that is "apolitical" (Hassan 317) as well as criticism of the novel's pedagogic and didactic undertones (Nash, *Anglo-Arab Encounter* 145; Hunter 88; Abbas 90). In this context, the *hijab*, the Muslim veil, features as a dominant motif in secondary literature (Santesso 91-97; Canpolat 226-232; Schmidt 115-120)[27]. It is perhaps because religion and particularly Islam and the signifiers attached to it (like for instance the veil) are ideologically charged to a considerable degree that most readings are either highly positive and celebratory or extremely negative[28]. A notable exception is Eva Hunter, whose perspective the present study shares. She remarks that "Aboulela is to be esteemed for the aesthetic quality of her work and for evoking the comforts of her faith as well as the rewards of its daily disciplines, but, given her work's appeal to young Muslim women, the quietist 'solution' that she advocates for Najwa is of concern" (94).[29]

Sarah Ilott reads both *The Road from Damascus* and *Minaret* as "British Muslim Bildungsromane" (27) and, similarly to this work, considers "shifting genre boundaries as a means of understanding shifting constructions of Britishness" (ibid. 5). However, in contrast to this study, she uses the Bildungsroman's concern with identity as a point of departure and focuses on the representations of identity in novels by British Muslim writers rather than engaging with the Bildungsroman form or structure explicitly. Since the present study thus differs considerably from Ilott's reading, both in terms of its overall approach and its interpretation of the two novels, it refers to *Minaret* and *The Road from Damascus* as British Muslim interactions

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27 More information on how the novel's depiction of the veil has been received by critics will be provided in Chapter Three.

28 Examples of positive readings are for instance Anna Ball, who considers *Minaret* "a neat act of textual resistance to the reductive notion of Islam" (120), Ileana Dimitriu's claim that the novel promotes "a state of mind based on a utopian vision of human solidarity beyond the orthodox dichotomies of home/exile or secular/spiritual" (125), Hasan's interpretation that "Aboulela offers an alternative definition of freedom, that is, the right to choose one's way of life based on the Islamic worldview" (98), and Ilott's suggestion that "Aboulela's novels are paradigm-shifting" (52). An openly critical but nonetheless convincingly argued interpretation is offered by Sadia Abbas (84-94).

29 A similar tendency can be observed in Claire Chamber's reading which admits that *Minaret*'s "belief in a transcendental *ummah* [community of Muslim believers] is somewhat naïve, and downplays the very real tensions between different Muslim groups within an in any case divided Britain", but still acknowledges that it is "an interesting novel of Muslim experience" ("Recent Literary Representations" 182). Hassan expresses a similar view (317).

with the Bildungsroman instead of using the term 'British Muslim Bildungsro-mane'. Catherine Rashid, Anna Rettberg and Lindsey Moore also consider the two novels as examples of the Bildungsroman. Just as the present thesis, Rashid refers to Mark Stein's 'novels of transformation' and argues that "Yassin-Kassab is cer-tainly aware of the socially transformative effects of a novel within an Islamophobic climate" (95). However, she focuses on the novel's use of Sufi discourse rather than established Bildungsroman patterns in order to ascertain its transformative ef-fects. Similarly, in her study of *The Road from Damascus*, Anna Rettberg concentrates on ethnicity rather than the genre itself. Distancing herself from Stein's concept, Lindsey Moore examines *Minaret* in the context of Felski's theory of feminist liter-ature: She argues that *Minaret* privileges the "'voyage in'" in the sense of "spiritual retreat" rather than the "'voyage out'" typical of Bildungsromane (68f.) and reads the novel as an example of the shift in British literature from ethnic (Arab) to reli-gious (Muslim) markers of identity. Thus, her interpretation, too, focuses more on the text's representation of identity and feminist perspectives than on the genre itself.

Space has not attracted much critical attention in the two novels. The only study which focuses explicitly on space in *Minaret* is an essay by Marta Cariello, who ex-amines the mosque, the city of London and the kitchen. She touches upon the mosque only very briefly and offers no close reading of it, but merely describes its minaret as a space "that will host her [Najwa's] survival" (340). Generally, the mosque is frequently mentioned by critics of *Minaret*[30], but it has not yet been read as a heterotopic space[31]. Literary criticism on *The Road from Damascus* has given equally little consideration to the mosque. The only notable reference appears in Anna Rettberg's study of the novel. She focuses on the text's description of Brick Lane mosque as a multicultural building and concludes that it "has obviously be-come an important topos for the multiethnic history of immigration to Britain and especially for the convivial Englishness in London" (185). Thus, apart from rather rudimentary references to and interpretations of the mosque in the two works, secondary literature seems to have overlooked its potential for destabilising power structures and challenging marginalisation. Reading the mosque as a heterotopic space will thus broaden the spectrum of critical perspectives on the novels sig-nificantly. Critics have associated Aboulela's and Yassin-Kassab's works with the Bildungsroman and identified didactic undertones in *Minaret* in particular. It can

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30 See for instance Hunter (91), Hasan (100), Hilal (129) and Schmidt (115), who read the mosque as a space of comfort and belonging. Lindsey Moore, however, has noted that "[h]er [Najwa's] mosque associations […] are not genuine attempts at friendship, but rather temporary alliances and attachments" (89).

31 In the last paragraph of her essay, Cariello remarks that spaces like the ones she focused on in her analysis "are possible heterotopias" (349), but she does not refer to Foucault or explicate how she defines heterotopia, nor does she apply the concept to her reading.

therefore be assumed that the texts' potential societal function has not gone unnoticed. However, this potential has so far been linked exclusively to *Minaret*'s and *The Road from Damascus*'s representations of British Muslims and Islam, and not to their appropriation of the established Bildungsroman genre. The present study on the other hand will go one step further and include the textual strategies employed by the works in order to ascertain how exactly they facilitate a reading process which might encourage readers to actively interact with the representations offered by the texts. The textual agency developed by *Minaret* and *The Road from Damascus* becomes especially obvious because the novels differ so considerably from other representatives of the genre.

As has been shown above, both Foucault's notion of heterotopia and the works discussed here have often been approached in ways which do not fully consider and explore their potential for change and transformation. The upcoming analyses will therefore employ the concept of heterotopia as an analytical tool in order to examine the texts at hand. Focusing on representations of heterotopic spaces and the use of literary strategies, they will investigate how the novels develop textual agency and negotiate exclusionary boundaries. Ultimately, the present thesis will explore the texts' transformative potential in the context of what might be called a politics of destabilisation.