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PART OF A STORY THAT STARTED BEFORE ME

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PART OF A STORY THAT STARTED BEFORE ME

CHOSEN BY GEORGE THE POET

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Introduction

by George the Poet

Let me tell you why I'm so proud to present *Part of a Story That Started Before Me*, an anthology of poems on Black British history.

The history of Black people in Britain is long and varied – from the Ancient Romans to the present day. However, because of huge gaps in our education, many Black Britons never got the full picture. I'd like to think my generation will be the last to grow up with this hole in their history – hopefully in part because of books like this.

Historically, Black Britain has been a connection point where many cultures from across the world meet. The Black population is typically concentrated in Britain's big cities, often in particular areas of those cities, and **Britain has brought our cultures into closer contact than ever**. I was a child of African immigrants, and my generation was among the first to grow up alongside the children of Caribbean immigrants in Britain. Our early conditioning may have presented some challenges but we gradually became a family, **producing beautiful hybrid cultures of our own**. If I had grown up in my ancestral home of Uganda, I would have had a lot less exposure to the Jamaican, Nigerian, Trinidadian, Ghanaian, Bajan, Zimbabwean and Congolese cultures that have shaped my life.

As Black people, we often feel strongly about our heritage, but as Britons, we're also invested in the future of this country – how do we make sense of either one, without a complete understanding of our shared history?

I usually investigate what I don't know by googling 'books about . . .' followed by whatever is on my mind, and for years I've enjoyed studying different perspectives on the Black experience.

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The Black diaspora has produced generation after generation of powerful spokespeople, and many of the following have influenced me personally.

When **Linton Kwesi Johnson**, a Jamaican-born, British-based poet and recording artist, released *Voices of the Living and the Dead* in 1974, he didn't just speak for the brutalized British Jamaican working class, but also for oppressed people all over the world. He didn't need school to give him a qualification to be a credible voice – he just spoke.

And across the Atlantic Ocean, that same relentless Jamaican spirit led **DJ Kool Herc** to loop instrumental breakdowns of his favourite records, while talking rhythmically over them, during one of his famous parties in the Bronx. He wasn't just expressing himself; he was inventing another form of storytelling for billions of people: hip hop.

At that party in 1973, DJ Kool Herc unlocked something that would go on to liberate people who hadn't even been born yet. People like Black Britain's own **Ms Dynamite**. When I was eleven years old I discovered her song 'It Takes More' and I immediately knew Ms Dynamite wasn't just uplifting young girls in the hood; she was raising the consciousness of *everyone* who saw her on MTV Base that day. Her music was directly descended from what Linton Kwesi Johnson and DJ Kool Herc started in the seventies: **a tradition of creative storytelling – for us, by us.**

When I came to poetry in 2010, I had already spent five years making grime music. During that time, I had learned how to rhyme, but felt inspired to change genre when I discovered *Def Poetry Jam*. This ground-breaking TV show introduced me to **another kind of African American storytelling: spoken word**. I took this format, applied it to my work and reinvented myself, performing for African Caribbean societies in British universities across the country (since they were the only ones booking me back then).

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This period in my life also revealed to me the new generation of storytellers who were changing the face of Britain as we knew it. People like Sophia Thakur, Deanna Rodger, Casey Bailey, Vanessa Kisuule and more. I was honoured to be among these poets. Like the writers before us, **we found ourselves at the forefront of a cultural shift**, in which Black British voices were finally being recognized not just as agitators or entertainers or novelties, but as everyday citizens interwoven into the fabric of British society.

For a long time I was insecure about my role as a poet. In his 2019 book *Back to Black*, **Professor Kehinde Andrews** (founder of Europe's first Black Studies programme at Birmingham City University) commented that '**artists document the political moment; they do not create it**'. Here he pinpointed the source of my awkwardness about Black poetry and art in general: we risk confusing the talk with the walk – when there is still a lot of walking to be done.

Many of us begin our journey as writers by looking inwards to express emotion that will connect with others. But as we grow, so does our responsibility to look outwards. We are compelled to speak about more than just ourselves, given the conditions facing Black lives worldwide. We are called to stand up and shed light on stories that explain why things are the way they are. The poems in this book are the product of that process. **In order to develop Black consciousness, we have to capture our experiences in our own words.** This is a key part of pushing for a fairer world, and I'm proud to play a small role in bringing these voices together.

I firmly believe that **telling your own story is the secret to survival**, and if we raise our voices it will make a difference to issues that affect **everyone** in this country – but only if we all understand our part in it. Until very recently, Black British history had been left off the curriculum and out of mainstream conversations, but that has to change if we want to see change. Maybe with books like this we could start talking more about

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our history, one that's been an intrinsic part of Britain since Roman times.

It goes without saying that this anthology intends to add to conversations around racial inequality, as well as the legacies of colonialism and slavery. These conversations have been tragically but crucially reinvigorated by the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis in May 2020. His brutal treatment by police officers put the issues back into the mainstream. My hope is that Black Britain's unique position as a cultural intersection helps us amplify and connect the stories of Black people worldwide.

There's so much to be discovered, explored and celebrated, and I wanted to bring as much of it together in this collection as we can. *Part of a Story That Started Before Me* aims to link the past with the present through poetry, and while this book won't be able to cover absolutely everything, I believe it'll be a great conversation-starter.

And as much as I hope you enjoy this collection, I also hope you embrace any feelings of discomfort it may bring you. Poetry is not meant to be a pacifier. History is unfinished, and the messy work of dismantling our racial hierarchy falls on us. But that's OK, because **who better to continue writing this story than you and me?**

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A Note from the Editors

In compiling this anthology, we have worked with the poets' preference for capitalizing Black/black throughout. In addition, we have respected their preference whether to allow the poems to stand alone or to add notes on context.

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Mixed Messages

George the Poet

I'm the living future of my ancestors.
I'm the last chapter of the story that they wrote.
Wish I could hear the story from their perspective
Just curious you know?

I'm conflicted
Things have changed in ways no one predicted . . .

I want my message to be unrestricted, but I
Feel like it's becoming scripted.

We wanna celebrate. We wanna give credit. But that's
Symbolic. We need systemic. It's a
Mixed message.
Is it us that's bugging?
How can Black Lives Matter . . . if justice doesn't?

We discuss the contributions of great Black Britons
But not the colonised and enslaved Africans whose
Unpaid labour and stolen land helped
Turn Great Britain into a global brand.

Now our politics and our economic systems
Can't escape the West's controlling hand. We
Ask ourselves how we got in this position but the
Answer's simple: this road was planned.

How do we explain this to our young people
When it makes the country feel uncomfortable?

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Romans

27 BC–AD 476

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Romans: A Note on History

Dr Christienna Fryar

Africans have been in Britain since at least the time of the Roman conquest in AD 43. The Romans had conquered parts of North Africa, which means that some of the central figures in Roman history were African, like St Augustine, who was Berber. In Roman Britain, one significant Berber was Quintus Lollius Urbicus, who was the governor of Britain between AD 138/9 to AD 144. Perhaps the most notable African was Septimius Severus (mentioned in Abi Simms' poem on page 13), the Roman emperor from AD 193–211. Born in modern-day Libya, Severus spent time in Britain, which is also where he died. There were African troops stationed in Britain too, and we have the strongest evidence of their presence in the north of England, especially near Hadrian's Wall.

You may notice that I have been using the term 'African' rather than 'Black'. There is a reason for that. We know that there were people from the continent of Africa in Roman Britain, likely many people. But the available evidence makes it much harder to know how many of these people would be considered 'Black' as we think of the term today. Categorizing people by their skin colour and calling those categories 'race' is a relatively new invention in the sweep of human history. Throughout history there have been other ways to think about human difference. Our current usage of the terms 'Black' and 'white' would not have made any sense to people living in the Roman Empire. In addition, in most cases, when we use the term 'Black' today, we tend to mean someone whose heritage lies in sub-Saharan Africa and who may have some of the physical features that, since the late 1500s at least, have become associated with Blackness. (Racial categories have a history too.) But 'African' and 'Black' are not interchangeable, and we don't know how many of the Africans in Roman Britain might

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have been from sub-Saharan Africa rather than North Africa – or how many of those born in North Africa had parents or grandparents from parts of the continent further south. There is evidence that some of the African troops who were stationed near Hadrian's Wall had darker skin. Some were described as 'Ethiopian', which was the word used to describe Africans with dark skin during the period.

Historians work with fragments, and our ability to write stories about the past is determined by the pieces of evidence that survive. For this reason, we know more about Black people in Britain at some points in time than others and the available evidence does not always increase as we get closer to the present. Take medieval Britain, for example. We know more about Africans in Roman Britain than we do about Africans during the medieval period. What happened to the Africans who were here when the Roman Empire collapsed? We don't exactly know. Did they return to wherever they called home? Or did they call Britain home? Did they have children and grandchildren here? Unfortunately, we don't know that either, but we shouldn't rule out the possibility.

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Africans in Roman Britannia

Abi Simms

They were uncivilised brutes
Lived in mud huts with floors of dirt

Us?
Building pyramids,
The Tanzanian and Benin walls,
Creators of such sophisticated sculptures and designs

They, neither the ability nor the mental capacity
Too intricate

Designed and built by Aliens
Were the lies we were told

Why wasn't I told of the community in Eboracum?
Roman Britannia,
Upper-class Africans lived there

They speak of Claudius, Tiberius and Augustus
Caligula, Nero
You must have heard of Julius
The great Caesar?
Great Romans known throughout Britannia,
The world over
And their conquests

But

Can you imagine how I feel?
When to me it was revealed

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Roman Britannia was a mixed community
Just like mine

The diversity found in Londinium,
Why is it not taught
Or
Presented in class?

I questioned history
And
Its legitimacy

What about this?

How it's taught
The deeper knowledge I sought
Being dismissed

Lower class servants and slaves
Were the blacks
That's what we were told

Feeling insignificant,
Inferior and intimidated

Have a chip on your shoulder?

We are not to blame,
For the knowledge we have gained

But weren't there governors and ambassadors?
Gladiators
The highest status ever obtained

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There was
Quintus Lollius Urbicus,
A North African
Roman Governor of Britannia
Between AD 139 and 142
Known to Hadrian and the Scots,
You know,
The ones who oversaw the building of the walls
Including Antonine's

The Romans cared not of melanin
(Nor modern-day complex politics)
But the cultural wealth that lives within

Would it be so hard,
To put in your term study plan
That from Africa to the Mediterranean
Came the diverse community
To Roman York?

The famous ninth legion base,
Where two emperors
Septimius Severus and Constantius I,
Of North African birth,
Lived and died in Eboracum.

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A Note from the Poet

Since being introduced to history in primary school, I can remember the instant attraction, the wanting to know more, and the feeling that I couldn't wait for the next lesson. But that eagerness soon turned to disappointment when I realized there was nothing mentioned in the lessons about black people. I remember coming home quite angry and speaking to my dad. He saw that I was beginning to build up resentment towards the educational system and history in particular.

In Year Four, I remember being taught all the great and mighty things the Romans and Anglo-Saxons accomplished. We learned about the pyramids, who and what was in them, who discovered them and where they are, but never about the people who designed and built them. We were taught about Hadrian's Wall, the 'uncivilized' Africans and the 'civilized' missionaries, but never the fact that we had black people living here in Britain, one of whom worked as Henry VIII's chief musician. These people lived in mixed communities on their own terms, and not as royal possessions or slaves.

In Year Seven we learned about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. But the history that we were taught was very basic, the focus being on the Little Rock Nine and slavery.

As the school years progressed, we were promised that we would be going into black history in more detail, but we were given mere fragments of our history every now and then. One particular teacher said we'd have to wait until Year Nine to learn this heavy and painful plethora of stories.

By the time I got to Year Ten, the class was pretty much fed up. There was still no Black History Month lesson. The last topic we covered about blacks in history was policing methods, mainly in the UK, and our teacher also focused on the 7/7 London bombings, and the type of force the police use.

As a group, my friends and I started to discuss why we don't learn about black history, or the untold truths that school is not permitted to teach us.

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This piece was created as my way of saying that I'm tired of how the educational system has failed, and is failing, our young community year after year, and that no matter how much and how many times we complain, we are never heard.

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Ethnocentric Entropy

Highwater Ell

Before me?
We had many Caesars, Kings and Queens
But underneath them is plethora and mix of beings
Though in my readings through the picture books and libraries
Assyrian to Ottoman we rarely see black lives unsheathed

The Roman Empire had seized the globe
The Pantheon the beating pulse
From Babylon to England's coast
Engulfing demographic scopes
Italians to Aethiopes

A lesser-known leader was
Septimius Severus
Who served under Aurelius
And fought against the Parthians
The northernmost regions
Saw the African elites
At the forefront of the battle
To fortify the wall of Hadrian

For the Romans and the Greeks
Our skin tone was not the nexus
Or main reason for the severance
On the status you could reach
In fact Homer did denote
Africa was somewhat legend
Some call Septimius syncretic
With less pressure on aesthetics

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So this ethnocentric entropy
Means Severus then could have been
Of any sect or melanin
Who's born and bred a Libyan

So to think of Ancient Rome
As a place from way back then
Less ensnared by racial tropes
Is insane to comprehend
The story still is half on show
There's more black power to reveal
Maybe more have had the throne
Travelled borders, shared my home
Let no merits be erased
Or endeavours be concealed
How well do I know my place?
Am I impressed and do I kneel?

Before who?

A Note from the Poet

I was first inspired to write 'Ethnocentric Entropy' by the name of this collection, *Part of a Story That Started Before Me*, specifically, 'before me'. This made me think about all of the notable people who we're taught about from history and how there is a lack of any diversity in this group. I wondered who else held power and influence from other demographics throughout history. 'Kneel before me' is also a phrase used to demonstrate the power of one human over another, and in my belief that all humans are equal, this is where the poem begins.

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