# The Fertility of Liminality in *Locks* and my Other Published Works

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines mixed-race identity in post-colonial Britain through the lens of my critical and creative works. Focus is paid to my debut novel, *Locks*, which explores the racial identity of Aeon, a mixed-race teenager who is labelled as Black in Liverpool but White in a Jamaican prison. Aeon's identity crisis is shown to mirror the confusion of life in a post-colonial society, demonstrating how individual life history may mirror historical epoch. Mixed-race identity is, therefore, situated as analogous to the liminality inherent in the declining empires of the post-colonial West. To elucidate this idea, the thesis entwines my work with sociological, scientific and mythological frameworks. Drawing on postcolonial theory, critical race theory, colonial history and social science the study engages with quantum physics and ancient mythologies to illuminate the complex, non-binary realities of identity formation in the contemporary West. The works of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Frantz Fanon, Wilson Harris and Joseph Campbell inform this exploration. The thesis also draws on a range of critical and creative texts by Black British authors such as Afua Hirsch, Courttia Newland and Reni Eddo-Lodge, and explores mystical motifs in Black diasporic literature, including the works of Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward and Octavia E. Butler.

By bridging creative practice with interdisciplinary scholarship, this research demonstrates how creative writing can disrupt inherited racial taxonomies and open space for more nuanced understandings of identity. Aeon's quest for a theory of self that is both individuated and integrated, functions as an allegory for the possibilities of navigating between historical legacies and emergent modes of being.

This study contributes to critical and postcolonial theory by positing mixed-race identity development as an analogy for how all living in the post-colonial West, regardless of race, may start to navigate the muddy, and fertile, waters of the declining Western empires.

**Declaration**

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Table of Contents

**Introduction**

This study will show how my publications offer a unique lens through which to explore mixed-race identity in post-colonial Britain. Today's racial hierarchy was developed during the eras of Transatlantic Slavery and colonialism and used to justify both projects. Throughout that five-hundred-year period, global travel and scientific progress allowed us to explore and classify the world with unprecedented precision, and they have radically transformed our relationship to space and time. And yet, the ancient myths and religions of past millennia beguile us, still. We stand at the threshold of the old and the new. My work entangles the threads of colonial history, quantum physics and ancient mythology; and my debut novel, *Locks,* does this via the identity formation of a mixed-race boy from a Liverpool suburb.[1] And this last point matters. It is estimated that by the 1790s – the height of the Transatlantic Slave Trade – Liverpool's docks controlled '60 per cent of the British trade and 40 per cent of that of Europe as a whole' (Fryer, 2018, p. 27). Furthermore, Liverpool is home to Europe's oldest established Black/mixed-race community (Brookes, 2022, p. 7). These facts establish Liverpool as the ideal setting from which to explore the identities forged in an unprecedented era of mass migration, forced labour and cultural mixing. And yet, the story of Liverpool's Black/mixed-race community is largely forgotten by narrative literature. *Locks* aims to address this discrepancy. Moreover, this study posits Aeon, the protagonist of *Locks,* as an everyman for the times in which we live. In *Identity: Youth and Crisis,* Erik Erikson states: '. . . identity development has its time, or rather two kinds of time: a development stage in the life of the individual, and the period in history. There is . . . a complementarity of life history and history' (Erikson, 1983, p. 309). Aeon and his era are intrinsically entangled. Our history has led to the creation of a binary racial system, but times are changing rapidly in the post-colonial West. It is Aeon's birthright to traverse the liminal space between Black and White, just as we must traverse the liminal space between the old and the new. It is Aeon's quest to develop an identity that supersedes duality and simplistic taxonomies, one which connects him with a profounder, more universal, integrated essence – and his story acts as an allegory for these nuanced and liminal times.

[1] *Locks* is a novel based on my own experiences.

## Methodology

This thesis articulates the unique contribution made by my published works, in which mixed-race identity is posited as analogous to the liminality inherent in the post-colonial experience. The study adopts an intersectional approach, using an interpretative methodology grounded in literary and cultural analysis with which to deconstruct my work. It draws on history, social science, postcolonial theory and critical race theory. Furthermore, to broaden and deepen the emerging field of mixed-race studies, it enacts a dialogue between ancient mythologies, eastern philosophies and quantum physics, offering an original perspective on what it means to live in these times and to be a mixed-race subject in a declining former imperial centre.

**Essential Identity Crisis**

In my debut novel, *Locks,* the teenage protagonist, Aeon, is seen as Black in England but White in Jamaica. He is, therefore, destined to experience what Erikson has termed an identity crisis. Erikson welcomed the fact that '"crisis" no longer connotes catastrophe . . .' (Erikson, 1983, p. 16) but came to be viewed as 'a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another. . .' (p. 16) and he noted that 'This proves applicable to many situations: a crisis in individual development . . . or in the tensions of rapid historical change' (p. 16). Aeon's identity crisis is simultaneously an individual quest and an analogy for the identity crisis faced by the West in the post-colonial era.

In applying his theory to the experience of Black Americans, Erikson saw that identity 'seems to pervade much of the literature on the Negro [sic] revolution in this country and to have come to represent in other countries as well something in the psychological core of the revolution of the colored [sic] races and nations who seek emancipation from the remnants of colonial patterns of thought' (Erikson, 1983, p. 295). So, *Locks* is a continuation of a literary tradition in which Black writers address the struggle for identity in a society in which one's worth is questioned daily due to one's position in the racial hierarchy. When Aeon perceives the racist murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence as a direct threat, he looks to rap artists, and true 'prophets of identity confusion' N. W. A., for inspiration, playing their music as he drives around staring aggressively at 'gangs of White lads like I'd fuck them all up. On my Own' (Nugent, 2023, p. 4).[2] With no Black or mixed-race peers with whom to share his concerns, Aeon's upbringing in Searbank places him in a minority of one, and he aims to protect himself by expressing his fear as aggression.

Erikson goes on to call ethnic minority writers the 'artistic spokesmen and prophets of identity confusion' (298) and asks '. . . are these writers not proclaiming also an essential superiority of identity-in-torment over those identities which feel as safe and bland as a suburban home?' (298). Aeon is raised in the fictional leafy suburb of Searbank, just the place where one may establish an identity that feels 'safe and bland'. However, as a mixed-race boy, Aeon is not afforded the same security as his peers. In 'Normalers', a poem I wrote for a children's anthology, *Superheroes – Words are Our Power*, being normal and 'always fitting in' is shown to be a supposedly safe and bland identity which, however, can lead to monotony, envy, and anger (Nugent, 2021, p. 38). Conversely, in his marginalised identity, the poem's narrator finds an empowering sense of purpose. Whereas Aeon may be read as another

[2] Music as a sublimating force is a recurring theme in *Locks,* and one we will return to later in this study.

exemplar of Erikson's 'prophets of identity confusion', the narrator of 'Normalers' may be read as one who has triumphed over the confusion and attained a higher degree of self-actualisation.

For Aeon, assimilation into a safe, essentialist identity seems unattainable. Born between the Black and White binaries, Aeon's very existence is analogous to a society in flux. Race riots and the rise of far-right populism, Black Lives Matter and the transgender debate are all signs of post-colonial society's identity crisis. Aeon is the embodiment of this crisis, and his narrative elucidates the dark recesses of society's psyche, revealing a requirement for its own coming-of-age adventure – for a crisis overcome leads to a maturer identity.

One sign of a mature society would be the confidence to offer equal opportunities to all, regardless of race or any other difference. In the UK, however, Black literature remains marginalised. A recent survey in *The Bookseller* found that of the 1,000 top selling books of 2023, only 23 of them had Black authors (The Bookseller, 2024, n. pag). That is a meagre 2.3%, around half of the Black population percentage.[3] Furthermore, UK novels about race are largely London-centric – including the works of Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy, Hanif Kuerishi and Bernardine Evaristo – and few, such as Jackie Kay, Monica Ali and Caryl Phillips, hail from the north. Black men from the north writing literary fiction about mixed-race identity are incredibly rare. When I was asked what led me to write *Locks* in a 2023 interview in *The Guardian*, I replied:

> . . . I didn't see any models for what I was trying to do. . . what was written by mixed-race men? Black stories – thin on the ground anyway – were always about people with two black parents, and they were about London. Who was representing the nuance of being black while not being in a black community or not even being accepted as belonging to one, as happened to me in Jamaica? (Cummins, 2023, n. pag).

Liverpool, as stated in the introduction, is the ideal setting from which to begin an exploration of the liminal space between the binary notions of Black and White identity. The liminal lands between the racial binaries are an ideal place to explore new models of identity development. British writing on the mixed-race experience, such as Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* and Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*, present time and place as amorphous and un-chronological, suggesting

[3] Please see *The Science of Racism: Everything You Need to Know But Probably Don't – Yet,* the *2025 publication* where Keon West has compiled the most recent data on racism including: in 2017, 96% of all the children's books published in the UK depicted no non-White characters. 'Things improved somewhat between 2017 and 2021 and the proportion of non-White characters rose from 1% to 9%, but that's still only half of what it should be if the books were representative of the UK population' (West, 2015, p. 255).

an ability to overcome the limitations of time and space. Aeon's identity crisis also forces him to see beyond societal limitations and is an opportunity for him to mature and deepen his perspective. And what applies to Aeon, applies to these times. The West's identity crisis is an opportunity for us to mature as nations, as a people; to move beyond binary, essentialist notions of identity and move towards an identification with more intrinsic aspects of our nature as beings forged from the fluid energies of the universe.

**Aeon and the Wave-Particle Duality**

The famous double slit experiment in quantum physics demonstrates that the particles that form matter also behave as waves, and that these waves of potential collapse into particle form when they come under observation (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, p. 58). This paradox offers an apt analogy for Aeon's identity: his racial identity is like a wave of unformed potential, until it comes under observation.

Aeon has little to no concept of race at five years of age. His racial identity, at this stage, exists only as a wave of unformed potential. That is, until he is told by his school friends that he is 'coloured':

> I'd been told so many times that I was coloured. It was always some comment from a kid whose mum or dad had told them I was coloured because my dad was foreign.
>
> Coloured?
>
> I just could not get it. For one thing, I could not see how my dad looked any different to anyone else's dad in Searbank. This was in the early 80s when Dad was seven foot, two inches tall – one of those feet being pure afro (Nugent, 2024, p. 94).[4]

So, although the young Aeon can see differences between the way his dad looks and the way his friends' dads look, he has no reason to attribute meaning to these physical characteristics. To the five-year-old Aeon, his racial identity is a mere wave of possibility; a potentiality that is yet to be fully realised.

In his 2018 debut book, *Natives,* Akala speaks of the day he, as a five-year-old, reported an incident of racism suffered at school and how, at the moment of saying, 'Mum, the white boy . . .' (Akala, 2018, p. 37), he realised, 'But you're white, aren't you Mummy?' (p. 37). Akala explains: 'Even at five, I had somehow figured out there was a group known as "white people" to whom it was now clear that my mother belonged' (p. 38). He goes on: 'I somehow knew that whiteness, like all systems of power, preferred not to be interrogated' (p. 38). Akala, however, was raised in a London suburb and describes his primary school as 'very mixed ethnically' (p. 40). Aeon, on the other hand, has no non-white friends, and his recognition of

[4] Page numbers given for *Locks* refer to published paperback edition (Picador, 2023) throughout.

the power system of race and his place within it is much less sophisticated than that which Akala describes.

And yet, race is already impacting on Aeon's experience of growing up in Searbank, a predominantly White suburb of Liverpool. And once Aeon has been observed and categorised by his peers, the wave of racial potential starts to collapse into particle form: that is to say, into something measurable and individuated. Aeon has started to see himself as a racialised subject. Uncertain of what this nebulous club that he and his father have been clumped together into is, Aeon decides that he may as well, then, behave even more like his father, and he copies his father by using his cutthroat razor: 'The popping sounds of ten thousand tiny bubbles. The shock of cold steel on my cheek. The warmth of red blood, staining white suds and dripping off my chin' (p. 95). In Taoist and Buddhist philosophy, the number ten thousand represents the material diversity of the universe. So, when Aeon slices through the 'ten thousand tiny bubbles' (p. 95), he is, in philosophical terms, piercing the veil of the material world he knows and stepping into a new reality: a reality in which this connection between him and his father is fully materialised. He has stepped into a universe where race is only too real, and, whatever this perplexing taxonomy proffers, it is so insidious that it poses the dangers of 'cold steel' (p. 95) that may slice flesh and cause blood to flow. This scene foreshadows the violence that occurs later in the novel.

In *Mixed-Race Superman*, Will Harris, a British writer of mixed Chinese and Indonesian heritage, compares mixed-race identity to the teachings of eastern mystics. Harris invokes Keanu Reeves – who is of English, Hawaiian, Portuguese, Irish and Chinese descent – in the movie *Little Buddha*. Harris explains:

> . . . a class of young monks recite a sutra that could be the lesson of all mixed-race supermen: "Form is empty. Emptiness is form. No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind." To be mixed-race is to exist in a state of paradox. Race is an illusion that depends on purity and singleness. The Mixed-Race Superman is paradox made manifest, emptiness made form (Harris, 2018, p. 115).

Harris, here, compares a Buddhist philosophy of the paradoxical nature of the universe to the mixed-race experience. This ancient Buddhist sutra is strikingly similar to the tenets of the early 20th century physics that fed into quantum physics. For example, when, in 1905, Einstein published his famous equation, $E=mc^2$, he was demonstrating that energy is the same stuff as matter (when travelling at the square root of the speed of light: $c^2$) (Bodanis, 2016, p. 205). To say that energy is matter is to express the paradoxical nature of the universe expressed by the

sutra above: 'emptiness is form' (Harris, 2018, p. 115). Einstein's equation invites us to grapple with the paradox that this may simultaneously be that. The mixed-race experience – living simultaneously as this and that – interrogates dualistic, essentialist notions of identity, providing insights that may serve us all in these liminal times of the post-colonial era.

In *The Ventriloquist's Tale,* Pauline Melville, an English-Guyanese author of mixed European and Indigenous Guyanese heritage, employs the language of general relativity (Einstein's 1915 theory of gravity) and quantum physics in descriptions of Sonny, the novel's mixed-race trickster narrator, who is said to be 'a walking event horizon' and a 'singularity' (Melville, 1997, p. 283) and to 'be there and not be there at the same time' (Melville, 1997, p. 285).[5] So, Sonny is the embodiment of a novel way of exploring the physical world, a character whose attributes are aligned with the Buddhist sutra above and with Einstein's $E=mc^2$ equation – aligned with the old philosophies and the new science.

*Locks* initially employs quantum physics as a trope for the mixed-race experience when Aeon arrives in Jamaica. Aeon steps into the hot Jamaican breeze and his tracksuit puffs up, 'like a mushroom cloud' (Nugent, 2023, p. 6). In literal terms, a mushroom cloud is the result of an explosion of unfettered energy released when the nuclei of unstable atoms are split. Furthermore, this happens just after Aeon has flown from the 'Old World' to the 'New World' over the Kalunga Line. In Kongolese mythology, the Kalunga Line is the watery threshold between the physical and spiritual worlds (Bolster, 1997, p. 63). The text, here, is foreshadowing the nature of Aeon's transformation: his particleized identity (to coin a term) will be pulled apart when the unstable atoms of his racial identity are split, and he will be immersed in incandescent energies and introduced to his ancestral roots. However, for the time being, Aeon is still ensconced in the myth of racial identity.

[5] For further exploration of engagement with quantum physics in Melville's work see *Kinship Across the Black Atlantic: Writing Diasporic Relations* (Adair, 2019) and 'Quantum Landscapes, A Ventriloquism of Spirit' (DeLoughrey, 2008).

**From Myth to Mythology**

Myth, for our purposes, is what Roland Barthes describes as 'a semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system' (Barthes, 1993, p. 134). Race can be understood as such a myth, a symbolic system that functions as if it is real. Mythology, for our purposes, refers to the canon of narratives told throughout the ages to disseminate our understanding of our place within the universe, and my position on this is largely influenced by the works of leading mythologist Joseph Campbell. Myth is how we narrativize the particle – that which we see on the surface. Mythology is how we narrativize the wave – that from which the particles are formed.

In explaining the myth of Whiteness, Afua Hirsch describes it as 'an identity that was invented in order to provide the superior identity to blackness's inferior one' (Hirsch, 2018: p. 308). Whiteness and Blackness are indeed inventions. However, Hirsch goes on to say that Whiteness 'continues to operate on a political and economic level, only without anyone acknowledging it' (p. 308). The racial binary, though an illusory construct, is, simultaneously, persistent and painfully real. And by the time Aeon travels to Jamaica at sixteen, he has absolutely aligned himself with an essentialist and stereotypical Black identity.

In embarking on his coming-of age journey, Aeon takes guidance from the mythology taught to him by his teacher. He states: 'My favourite primary school teacher, Miss Elwyn, used to tell me that a hero's journey always starts with the hero having to leave home and go off on a mission, a quest, an adventure' (Nugent, 2023, p. 4). This is a reference to Campbell's theory of the hero's journey. Campbell's comprehensive exploration of world mythologies led him to conclude that there exists a universal pattern of narrative construction, a global monomyth in which:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from the mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell, 1990, P. xxiv).[6]

[6] I use the hero's journey in my work in prisons in which we guide prisoners through the steps of the hero's journey, teaching psychological models and techniques relevant to each step of the mythological narrative. Quantitative impact measurement data has repeatedly shown that people end the process with a greater sense self-awareness, self-control and confidence for the future. See www.riseupcic.co.uk

So, *Locks* quickly establishes that it may be read as an odyssey in the mythological tradition.[7] Therefore, what comes in the paragraph before this statement is the backdrop to the odyssey. Aeon states: 'I stared out the window of the Boeing 737 at the clouds billowing up into white empires over the Atlantic Ocean' (Nugent, 2023, p. 5). This image is simultaneously literal and figurative. Aeon does see the white clouds, but their 'billowing up into white empires' (p. 5) refers to the European empires who carried Aeon's ancestors in slave ships across this very ocean, thus establishing the historical framework for Aeon's identity crisis. Furthermore, the waves of the Atlantic may also be read as figurative waves: the only place Aeon's ancestors could escape to return to the embryonic wave of potential and avoid becoming racialised particles in Europe's new-world nightmare.[8]

Aeon's cousin, Increase, is then shown demeaning Black history and propagating the negative stereotypes of Black people that are vestiges of slavery and the colonial era: "Jamaicans perform worse than whites in just about every endeavour," said Increase, "apart from running and rapping and . . . pimping" (Nugent, 2023, pp. 4-5). He goes on to use his interpretation of modern history to undermine Aeon and Black people in general: "Who invented steam engines and aeroplanes, telephones and the atomic bomb, Aeon? . . . White men" (p. 5). Increase is playing the role of the so-called 'educated Negro' [sic] as discussed by Frantz Fanon:

> . . . slave of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro [sic] myth, [he] feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him.
>
> Or that he no longer understands it.
>
> Then he congratulates himself on this, and enlarging the difference, the incomprehension, the disharmony, he finds in them the meaning of his real humanity. Or more rarely he wants to belong to his people. And with this rage in his mouth and abandon in his heart he buries himself in the vast black abyss . . . renounces the present and the future in the name of a mystical past (Fanon, 1986, p. 13).

[7] While my writing is not mythological in the sense of engaging with a specific belief system, it draws on mythological tropes and symbolic frameworks to explore contemporary concerns. For further clarity on this, please see page 23, paragraph 1.

[8] In *The Sea is History*, Derek Walcot posits the Atlantic Ocean as both the place of torment and death for slaves thrown to the sharks, and also as a place of new birth: 'and in the salt chuckle of rocks / with their sea pools, there was a sound / like a rumour without any echo / of History, really beginning' (Walcott, p.256).

What Fanon describes above are two different ways of particleizing a Black identity. Firstly, Increase's method of particleization is to harvest a history written by White colonisers and position himself as the propagator of that prejudiced ideology to distance himself from his Black peers.[9] Aeon, on the other hand, desires to '[bury] himself in the vast black abyss' (p. 13) as an escape from the painful realities of his identity crisis.

Partly inspired by Fanon, Erik Erikson also discussed the kind of internalised oppression Increase displays above. In discussion of Erikson's work, Syed and Fish explain that 'Internalized oppression is the process by which oppressed groups come to internalize and adopt the negative views and stereotypes transmitted by the oppressive majority' (David & Derthick, 2014. cited Syed & Fish, 2018, p. 280). They go on:

> [Erikson] focused extensively on the legacy of colonialism and slavery and how they had constrained African American identity options. . . This collective identity work is critical for well-being but made all the more challenging by the dominant White majority's ongoing motivation to maintain power and superiority. This point is important because it situates colonialism and slavery not just as factors in the past that have residual influence, but rather as ongoing oppressive forces that shape opportunities for positive development (Syed & Fish, 2018, p. 276).

In my work, these problems of White supremacy and the identity struggles inflicted upon colonialised Black subjects, extends far beyond America and, in the case of *Locks*, includes England and Jamaica.

I have addressed the dichotomies faced by a Black British subject who immerses himself in essentialist White society in a short story I wrote for the Royal Society of Literature's centenary celebration of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in 2023. In 'The Inner Circle', Septimus Smith, a retired RAF veteran of the Windrush generation, visits Regent's Park. Septimus is desperate to reach the Inner Circle, which is both the literal place in Regent's Park and the figurative place of acceptance in White society. As Septimus reaches the literal Inner Circle, we learn that he fought for Britain in World War II. But we also learn that he was once beaten by Teddy Boys for walking there with a White girl, thus ending that relationship. Septimus collapses and dies on that very spot, having resolved all his old anger, fear and regret.

[9] The name Increase was chosen, in part, to accentuate the character's desire to transcend the achievements of his relatives and peers. The name is also a reference to Increase Mather, a leading voice in seventeenth century New England Puritanism, who was a moderating voice in the Salem witch trials. This latter association takes more precedence in *Snakes*, the second instalment of this story (currently being written).

Septimus, though satisfied that he reached the literal Inner Circle, is under no illusion that he was ever fully accepted by White society. Septimus overcomes negative emotions and attains peace, whilst simultaneously accepting that he was always othered in the country he risked his life for. This is a highly commendable accomplishment, and one Increase must strive for.

In 'Frederick', a poem commissioned by the Everyman & Playhouse Theatres, I posit Frederick Douglass as an historical mixed-race figure who, though born into slavery, managed to 'reject indoctrination / And stay true to an identity that only you create?' (Nugent, 2022, n. pag). The self-actualisation achieved by Douglass and Septimus Smith is the challenge faced by both Aeon and Increase in *Locks.* Aeon and Increase are forced to face their own indoctrinations and decide what identity they may now create. The indoctrinated paths Aeon and Increase are on at the start of *Locks* are both underrepresented in English literature. In 1993, the year *Locks* is set, there were even fewer Black protagonists in British mainstream media, and where young Black men were represented, they were often negatively stereotyped or shown as victims.

As Stuart Hall wrote in 'New Ethnicities' in 1988, we were only just coming to the end of 'the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (Hall, 1988, p. 248) in the late twentieth century, so there was (and still is) a limited range of ways in which Black subjects were represented. British society, at the time *Locks* is set, was only just waking up to the notion that there is no one way of being Black. Hall goes on:

> What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category "black"; that is, the recognition that "black" is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature (p. 249).

Hall hailed the start of the end for the notion of the essential Black subject and reflected on what was to come next:

> Now, that formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. Alternatively, it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to be a necessary fiction: namely, either that all black people are good or indeed that all black people are the same. After all, it is one of the predicates of racism that "you can't tell the difference because they all took the same" (p. 249).

To undermine the notion of an essential black subject, *Locks* employs the racist trope of "they all look the same" to comic effect when Aeon explains how he was likened to Trevor McDonald and other Black celebrities, including Gary Wilmot. Aeon is displeased with the Gary Wilmot comparison because, as an affable light-skinned comedian, Wilmot does not fit the essentialist Black identity he seeks to align himself with. Aeon, however, also does not fit the stereotype. He, too, is light-skinned, and he was raised in 'a semi-detached house facing a big field in a leafy suburb' (Nugent, 2023, p. 163). As Aeon takes his first solo stroll in Jamaica, he recalls how, in Searbank, there had long been a pressure to adhere to Black stereotypes:

> As a kid, I'd lost count of the amount of times an adult had commented on how "cool" I looked or how I was so "laid back". By the time I was old enough to see some benefit to being "cool", I'd already perfected the art of being frozen in ice just so I could fit in (Nugent, 2023, p. 43).

So, Aeon had, initially, resisted the call to embody Black stereotypes, and he strove to fit in, to stay 'frozen in ice' (p. 43), or particleized, into a stereotypically White identity. But that changed and now, as he walks through Montego Bay on a Saturday night, he is awed by the sights and sounds of what he deems to be authentic Blackness:

> The Jamaicans had something I craved: the defiance in the eye, the pain in the voice of the lion-man, the danger in the dance. And now I could feel it: the determination of bass-driven music with its whip-crack-at-the-wrong-time rhythm, always somewhere in the air.
>
> This was me (p. 43).

Indeed, what Aeon experiences here is more rooted in Black history, belief systems and cultural practices than anything he has known before. In the music, vocal tonality and signifying movements he notices here, there are elements retained from the African past of Black Jamaica's ancestors, and unique elements nurtured in the forge from which a new nation has developed over the past five hundred years. In the music there is that element which Paul Gilroy has called 'The irrepressible rhythms of the once forbidden drum [whose] syncopations still animate the basic desires – to be free and to be oneself . . .' (Gilroy, 2002, p. 76). In those movements, there is that which Gilroy describes as 'The distinctive kinesics of the post-slave populations [which] was the product of these brutal historical conditions' (p. 75). And Aeon knows there is something here for him. Here is the particleization of Blackness that Aeon now seeks.

However, for Aeon, there can be no simple assimilation into the prevailing myth of Black essentialism. For this is an odyssey in the mythological tradition, and is, by definition, a narrative in which the protagonist must overcome the strictures and structures of his times. That very night, Aeon will slip from the dimension of particles and back into the dimension of the wave when the violence foreshadowed by the 'cold steel' (p. 95) of his father's cutthroat razor is actualised in the butterfly knife of his attacker and he is stabbed in the thigh and collapses in the street.

Just before Aeon loses consciousness, he cries out to the essentialist, to the semiological myth, to the frozen aspects of both Black and White identities:

> "Come on, then!" . . . I screamed it all the way back to Searbank, to Mum and Dad. I screamed it to right here, right now, Jamaica. I screamed it to America and its Black movie gangsters and pimps. I screamed it at wide-eyed Black men screaming in abject terror as they're thrown over ravines by Tarzan – the White 'King of the Jungle'. I screamed it to all White people – a people I can never be a part of because it's already too fucking late (Nugent, 2023, pp. 80-81).

And finally, as White society has made it impossible for him to fit therein, he makes his choice with one last desperate scream: 'So I screamed it to all the Black people – 'Come on, then!'' (p. 81). But Aeon's pleas for the essentialist world of racial binaries to allow him a place will not be granted. Aeon is about to experience something much more truly essential than culturally constructed identities and historical connections. Moreover, he will also experience this deeper identification through music. He tells us:

> The chant takes me deeper. The Universe's pulsating rhythm, the first hymn; the supreme wordless psalm, the first word; the pre-eminent protest of primeval particles pulling apart, remaining as one; the great mother's endless lullaby; like the perfect repetition of a reggae bassline, backed by the simplest, most honest proclamation of the lion-man; two songs in one; one moment a birth, each moment a death (p. 82).

In *Locks*, this is how far Aeon must go to develop a truer identity: he must see himself in the context of the creation of the Universe. The 'Universe's pulsating rhythm, the first word' (p. 82) is analogous to the 'Word' that 'was God' as described in the Biblical book of John (King James Version, John 1:1), or the OM sound chanted by eastern yogis (Campbell, 1962, p. 189), or the Yo sound chanted by the Bambara of Mali (Ford, 2000, p. 197).

Music plays a similar role in *Palace of the Peacock*, the 1960 novel by mixed-race Guyanan British poet, novelist and essayist Wilson Harris. In a scene set in a mythical and transcendent vision of El Dorado, the narrator hears his crewmate making music and says, 'One was what I am in the music – buoyed and supported above dreams by the undivided soul and anima in the universe from whom the word dance and creation first came . . .' (Harris, 2021, p. 125). Music awakens the narrator to his true essence as one with the essence of creation. Furthermore, though Harris only read about quantum physics after writing *Palace*, he did come to recognise this passage as an example of the 'simultaneity, in which density is a transitive medium into music and the incandescent imagination [which] is consistent with quantum mechanics . . .' (Harris, 1999, p. 286).[10] Harris uses narrative to explicate the transitional relationship between energy (here experienced as music) and matter.

Aeon, much like *Palace's* unnamed narrator, experiences that which came before particleization; that which, in our era, is best described by quantum physics: 'the protest of primeval particles pulling apart, remaining as one' (Nugent, 2023, p. 82). This is a direct reference to big bang theory (Hawking, 2010, pp. 50-51) and the quantum theory of entanglement, which demonstrates that subatomic particles stay interconnected and affect one another via a process that supersedes our ordinary experience of time and space (Castelvecchi & Gibney, 2024, p. 241). Aeon is forced to see that the only end to the fraught quest for identity lies in an identification with that which exists before, after, and beyond all categories. This may well be another form of essentialism, but it is one that is universal and, therefore, unlimited.

[10] In other essays, Harris uses the term 'quantum imagination' to describe this technique in his writing: 'The quantum imagination, in my view, may be curiously visualized as a revisionary epic which seeks to reclaim extrahuman faculties in incandescent equations between being and nonbeing' (Harris, 1999, p. 246).

**Double Consciousness**

In *Shape Shifting: Toward a Theory of Racial Change*, Paul Spickard examines the lives of individuals whose racial identities are not 'permanent, unalterable features' but are 'more complicated than that' (Spickard. 2022, p. 1). And one of the shape shifters he examines is the mixed-race early twentieth century Pan-Africanist writer and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, of whom he states, 'there was no Blacker man in twentieth-century America' (p. 10). And yet, as Spickard points out, 'Du Bois grew up among White, small-town New Englanders in Great Barrington, Massachusetts . . .' (p. 9). Just as Aeon describes being 'frozen' (p. 43) into a White Searbank identity, Du Bois in his early years 'performed New England White culture perfectly' (p. 9) and, just like Aeon, 'all his known friends were . . . Whites' (p. 9). Also, as with Aeon, there came a time when Du Bois 'made a decisive choice to see himself as unambiguously Black' (p. 10). Maybe it was this fluidity of identity that led Du Bois to the insights of his influential theory of double consciousness in which he posits the experience of Black Americans as one of being simultaneously insiders (Americans) and outsiders (Black people subjugated by the racial hierarchy) (Du Bois, 2005, pp. 10-12).

Stuart Hall refers to Du Bois in his influential 1993 lecture, *Race, the Floating Signifier,* in which he develops the argument given in his aforementioned paper, 'New Ethnicities'. Hall states that race is 'more like a language than it is like the way in which we are biologically constituted' (Hall, 1993, no pag.). Race, as hall suggests here, is a signifier, not a biological fact. Hall describes the ways in which Du Bois struggled with the notion of race as either a construct or a biological fact, eventually settling on the notion that 'Africans and people of African descent have what [Du Bois] calls a common racial ancestry' and that 'color, though of little meaning in itself, is really important . . . as a badge for the social heritage of slavery, the dissemination and the insult of that experience' (Hall, 1993, no pag.). Du Bois's 'badge' is one Aeon desperately desires to wear. However, as Hall states, there is:

> always someone, a constitutive outside, whose very existence the identity of race depends on, and which is absolutely destined to return from its expelled and objective position outside the signifying field to trouble the dreams of those who are comfortable inside (Hall, 1993, no pag.).

Aeon is that 'constitutive outside' whose birthright it is to be a model for those living in these times where binary signifiers of all kinds – race, gender, class, politics etc – seem to be sliding and floating inexorably. And as Hall states, describing race as more like a language

than a biological fact will, to many in his audience, seem absurd. Aeon is one who is destined to be the very embodiment of that putative absurdity.

In my first published essay, ‘Rappin’ on Racial Dualism’ (Nugent, 2011, p. 26), I use Howard Winant’s essay, *Racial Dualism at Century’s End*, as a lens through which to explore how rap music promotes ‘fusion’ between racial groups and between different demographics in the Black community. I draw on the lyrics of Chuck D from Public Enemy, and a 2004 essay in which David Samuels argues that D’s connection with the Black struggle is merely putative, positioning D as an outsider to the urban Black cause because of his middle-class suburban background. So, Samuels attempts to position D an outsider due to his class. However, as I point out in ‘Rappin’’, ‘race is a more insidious category than class, for whatever blacks achieve socially and economically, they are still undermined’ (p. 28).

Aeon, like Chuck D, was also raised in a comfortable suburb, and when asked by a Jamaican boy if he ‘lived in a mansion, if we had maids and servants’ (Nugent, 2023, p. 120) he replies, “‘What? No!’” (p. 120). He then admits, ‘I didn’t mention the cleaner, obviously. Or the gardener’ (p. 120). Just as Samuels attempts to distance Chuck D from the urban Black conversation, so Aeon is alienated in Jamaican prison due to his class. However, as a rap artist and activist, D is able to assert an unambiguously Black identity. Du Bois, as stated above, came to be widely accepted as being as Black as any man in twentieth century America (Spickard. 2022. P.10). Aeon, however, unlike DuBois and D, does not have anywhere near enough Black cultural capital to ensure his stable immersion into Black essentialism.

**Superposition of Race**

The double slit experiment in quantum physics demonstrates that particles like electrons exist in a superposition, a simultaneous combination of possible states, until measured (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, pp. 68-69). Though particleized when he was a child, Aeon's identity still exists in a superposition of states.

'The first time I ever got arrested I was fourteen. I got nicked for having a go on Lollipop's bike' (Nugent, 2023, p. 104), Aeon tells us. He explains how his friends all hide their evidence of illegal drug use. The police, however, are only interested in the one boy who is not White and Aeon is tricked by the police and arrested. 'Then they made me take off my belt so my jeans sagged down over my arse, and take my shoelaces out so the tongue of my Reebok Pumps stuck up over the bottom of my jeans' (p. 105). So, Aeon, singled out from his group of friends, his liberty impeded, now resembles the stereotype of the 90s Black male youth with the sagging jeans and protruding tongue of the Reebok Pumps.

> They did, eventually, catch the kid who'd stolen the bike. He was a local lad, and a well-known thief from a family of total head-the-balls, all of whom had blond hair and blue eyes. I'd never robbed anything in my life.
>
> I started nicking money from mum's purse shortly after that (p. 105).

The police knew that Aeon was not guilty, as they had earlier stated that there were witnesses to the bike being stolen (Nugent, 2023, p. 105). Aeon, though far from perfect, was raised in a good home with professional parents and was not a thief. What the police force have achieved with this act, therefore, is not only to see Aeon misrepresented as the stereotypical Black criminal, but to cause him to feel so alienated that he steals from his own mother's purse. White society has created the myth, carving Aeon into a stereotype, a self-fulfilling prophecy of a problematic form of Black essentialism.

The issue of British institutions molding young men into criminals features in a poem I wrote for the *Crime and Consequence* anthology in 2019. 'Crime and Expectation' speaks with the voice of an incarcerated young man: 'Yes, I know that schools need rules / And yes, I know I disobeyed. / But if my needs were never met, I think back / What did they expect?' (Nugent, 2019, p. 180). 'Crime' illustrates how young men are recurringly failed by society's institutions for numerous reasons including race. The narrator asks, 'Does it feel right when a guy / who looks just like you holds the powers / And wears a badge and makes the rules?' (p.

180). As in *Locks*, it is only when the narrator of 'Crime' starts to recognize his own innate worth that the possibility of a more empowering identity opens to him. 'I've learnt what schools refuse to teach' (p. 181) he says, 'Rule breakers, too, are made of stars' (p. 181). As in *Locks*, the insights revealed by contemporary science – that the elements that form all physical life are forged in the furnaces of the firmament – offer the key to a profounder identity, one that is finite and flawed yet simultaneously infinite and incandescent.

The poem asserts that we will only have the right to punish people, rather than helping them to heal, when society has overcome its binaries: 'Until women don't blame men, until black people don't blame whites, / And until white men learn to read the very histories they write' (p. 181). It is also acknowledged, here, that White males have a specific responsibility to shoulder due to power they still hold as a vestige of the colonial era. It is the abuse of such power that creates the dangerous rifts we saw following Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968, Nigel Farage's appropriation of conspiracy theories before the race riots in 2024 (Cook, 2024),[11] and whatever may follow Kier Starmer's "island of strangers" comment in 2025 (Nevet, 2025).[12]

In *Locks,* society has molded a Black stereotype, and it is the narrative's job to unpick society's work. The scenes of Aeon's first arrests in England are interspersed with his arrest in Jamaica. It is explained that 'The Montego Bay pigs didn't search any women or tourists, even Black ones, just young Black Jamaican men. And me' (Nugent, 2023, p. 108). So, the Black police officers in Jamaica single out young Black men just as the White officers do in Searbank. Even as a tourist in Jamaica, Aeon is still racially profiled along with all the other young Black men. Aeon, in this scene, is treated the same way as any other young Black man. However, following his arrest, as Aeon enters Copse detention centre, a young boy looks at him and screams, "Dem have a White man!" (p. 142). On entering the underground dungeon at Copse called the strongroom, Aeon says, 'No one was looking at me. It was like they couldn't register me yet' (p. 146). Only one boy, a boy with just one eye, seems to be aware of Aeon's presence. 'He stared at me hard. It was like he was the only one who really saw me' (p. 146). And soon, the lad says to Aeon, 'what the fuck are you looking at?' (p. 147). Then Aeon notices:

[11] As I write (Oct. 2025) Britain has just seen a protest led by far-right activist Tommy Robinson which attracted over 100,000 people.

[12] The adoption of anti-immigrant rhetoric by a Labour prime minister puts me in mind of Darcus Howe's reply when asked about Enoch Powel's anti-immigrant rhetoric following Powel's active recruitment of workers from the Caribbean. Howe explains that Britain's predominant political parties are both capitalist parties, and both will seek to undermine any group of labourers once they become problematic for them. Thus: 'What the Conservatives say today, the Labour party says tomorrow' (Howe, 1978, p. 53).

> Now everyone was staring at me.
>
> One Eye had made me real (p. 147).

One Eye is analogous to Polyphemus, the Cyclops encountered by Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. As explained by Campbell, in *Goddesses: Mysteries of the Feminine Divine* (Campbell, 2013, p. 162), the Cyclops is a threshold guardian, the one eye representing 'the narrow gate through which one has to pass on the way to initiation' (p. 162). One Eye asks Aeon, "Where the fuck are you from?" (Nugent, 2023, p. 147) just as Polyphemus asks Odysseus, "Well, who are you?" (Campbell, p. 162). Odysseus replies, "I am no man" (p. 163). For Campbell, this phrase represents 'self-divestiture as one goes into the magic realm' (p. 163). Odysseus strips himself of his base identity to progress into the deeper realms of creation. Aeon, however, is, as stated in a review of *Locks* in *The Telegraph,* 'half naïve teenager, half questing knight' (Lough, 2023, no pag.), and it is the 'naïve teenager' that answers One Eye, saying, "England, mate" (Nugent, 2023, p. 147). So, Aeon does the opposite of heroic Odysseus and pulls up the cloak of his external identity. For that, he will be beaten unconscious, because the narrative must divest our protagonist of all such certainties by any means necessary.

Here, in the literal and figurative underworld of the strongroom, the friction between the binaries is intensified when Aeon is forced to play 'The light and dark game' (p. 150). Aeon, here, tells a story of when he once got into a fight in a pub in Searbank and people chanted, "Trigger, trigger, trigger. Shoot that nigger" (p. 152), and we are, at the same time told, that the boys in Copse are shouting "Fuck up de White man" (p. 152). So, Aeon, now, exists in what I am calling a racial superposition: regardless of his efforts to cling to the Black identity foisted on him by White society, he is unavoidably simultaneously White and Black.

Throughout *Locks*, binary oppositions are recurringly illuminated and subverted. In a different prison, Aeon says, 'The moon took the sun's throne' (p. 126) and later refers to the 'moon king' (p. 131), subverting the typical western representation of the moon as female and the sun as male. In one conversation, it is suggested to Aeon that even the tick of a clock may become a tock (Nugent, 2013, p. 30-32) and, as we shall see, the past, in *Locks*, may become the present and male may become female. In numerous reviews, including in the *Telegraph* (Lough, 2023, no pag.) and *The Guardian* (Lloyd-Rose, 2024, no pag.), *Locks* is referred to as being 'lyrical'. Indeed, the narration of *Locks* is designed to blend poetry and prose, literary and colloquial registers and contemporary and ancient references, so the very voice of the novel is an illustration of how one thing may simultaneously be its opposite.

It is Aeon's closest ally in Copse, Shepherd, who points out that the doctor bird, a symbol of Jamaica that adorns a two-dollar note stained with Aeon's blood, is a bird of many colors, representing the multiplicity of forms (Nugent, 2023, p. 188). Later, again by the river, the friends see and hear the bird, and Shepherd says the word 'Syzygy' (Nugent, 2023, p. 222), a word that relates to the conjunction or opposition of related things, usually heavenly bodies. Shepherd, here, is telling Aeon, and the reader, that Aeon's odyssey relates to a deeper mystery in which putative binaries are unified.

'The function of myth', wrote Campbell, 'is to put us in sync—with ourselves, with our social group, and with the environment in which we live' (Campbell, 2013, p. 19). The environment in which we live is one in which the largest empires in the history of civilization have fallen, the pseudo-science of race has been indubitably debunked (though its false claims still pervade western society), and the insights of modern science have shattered a world view based on simplistic binaries. Ever since Einstein wrote his $E=mc^2$ equation, we have had to wrestle with the notion that energy is the same stuff as matter; that this is that; that one is simultaneously the other. In Aeon's world, this marriage of the binaries is represented via his Black and White identities.

**Between Old and New Models**

Joseph Campbell wrote: 'I have read somewhere of an old Chinese curse: "May you be born in an interesting time!" This is a very interesting time. Everything is changing . . . It is a period of free fall into the future, and each has to make his or her own way. The old models are not working; the new have not yet appeared. . . we are the "ancestors" of an age to come, the unwitting generators of its supporting myths, the mythic models that will inspire its lives' (Campbell, 2013, p. xiv). It is my contention that the stories that convey the 'new mythic models' will not form an overarching belief system to which society conforms en masse, as did ancient mythological stories. Rather, our contemporary understandings of the universe, and our place and purpose within it, will be, in part, conveyed through stories accepted as fictions yet which still pertain to ancient mythological tropes: the great mother, death and rebirth, the heroic quest and so on.[13] My work combines contemporary scientific insights with ancient mythological tropes via the stories of underrepresented demographics.

In 'One Step Higher', a performance piece commissioned by the Everyman & Playhouse Theatres and performed as part of a slavery history walk, I state:

> If race exists, we all must run.
>
> If we desist, their days are done.
>
> We all will grow when hate is gone
>
> The universe is made of one (Nugent, 2021, no pag.).

Here, as in my other work, I position race as an unstable system of categorisation and posit a conscious connection to our original essence as aspects of an integrated universal system to overcome division and move on to a new stage in our development as a civilisation.

When, in April 2020, I self-published *Locks* (before it was signed to Picador) I could not have known how urgent the themes were about to become. A month after *Locks* was released a Black man called George Floyd was murdered in Minnesota when a White police officer choked him for over nine minutes. Black Lives Matter protests swept the world, sparking a right-wing reaction that deepened racial division. That same year, Covid 19 killed a disproportionate number of Black Britons, and, according to *Forbes,* saw the creation of forty

[13] Examples include films like *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) which draws on the many worlds interpretation of quantum physics and engages with the hero's journey structure, TV series like *Undone* (2019-2022) in which the protagonist's father is a scientist whose research blends quantum physics with mystical traditions, and books like *Dark Matter* (2017) by Blake Crouch which combines multiverse theory with a mythic quest confronting alternate selves.

new billionaires (Tognini, 2021, no pag.), further widening the division between the super wealthy and everyone else. And, in April 2025, the British Supreme Court ruling that the legal definition of a woman is based on biological sex threatens to exacerbate the contentious debate on trans rights. The message of Universal Oneness and the call for a more nuanced approach to identity could not be more urgent.

The killing of Gorge Floyd was filmed, becoming a global media phenomenon that mirrored the brutal beating of a Black man called Rodney King by a gang of LAPD officers in 1991. That event sparked the LA riots which inspired the album *The Chronic* by Dr Dre which featured the song 'Dre Day', which is mentioned on the first page of *Locks*. Aeon's perspective in *Locks* is a reaction to a world in which American police officers can beat a Black man over fifty times with batons and be found not guilty of excessive use of force. Just prior to pulling Rodney King's car over, Officer Powell referred to a Black family as 'Gorillas in the Mist' (Feldman, 1994, p. 409). In his court case testimony, Powell referred to Mr King as 'bear-like' (p. 409) and 'getting on his haunches' (p. 409). And when asked by the prosecution if he considered Mr King to be an animal, Powell replied that King 'was acting like one . . . because of his uncontrollable behaviour' (p. 412).

The world has deemed that Black people may be referred to as animals and treated worse. Aeon, through his resentment, inverts this characterisation, turning the police into animals. In the arrest scene in Montego Bay, Aeon refers to the police as pigs. On the one hand, this is a common invective. However, as the narrative progresses, the word 'pigs' becomes a literal appellation. As Aeon is driven to Copse, he says: 'The driver had the wide and stubbly neck of a wild boar. "Oink," he said to the other pig . . .' (p. 141). So, what began as a reaction to resentment has become something more intrinsic and shifted the narrative into a different sphere: the sphere of mythology.

In *Goddesses*, Campbell tells us that 'The swine is the high sacred animal of the deep mysteries of the underworld' (Campbell, 2013, p. 177). This drive to Copse, during which the police morph into mythological swine, opens with Aeon remembering how his primary school teacher Miss Elwyn had explained to him that 'halfway through the story the hero has to die' (Nugent, 2023, p. 140). The whole scene now becomes otherworldly, and all the animal references are symbolic. Aeon explains that he is sitting with a boy he calls Puppy on his left side. The dog is a recurring symbol in *Locks.* When Aeon and Increase walk downtown, they encounter the first dog, a 'skinny fawn patchwork of a mongrel dog that took a death stroll into the road' (p. 19). This dog represents Aeon, his alienation, his identity crisis, and the risks he

will take to integrate with something that gives his life meaning. Puppy, the second figurative dog, represents the naivety of the adolescent boy, playing the man but craving for his mother. The third dog, Pistle (who we will return to shortly), is 'black, but kind of iridescent like a pigeon's neck' (p. 314). The strange coloring is reminiscent of the magical creatures of Welsh mythology, like the magical dog, Petitcreiu, which Tristan gave to Isolde the White (Campbell, 1968, p. 274). In *Locks*, Pistle's coloring also suggests a multiplicity of forms and something impossible to define by color.

In 2021 I was commissioned to write a poem that demonstrates how a racialized outsider may also be an insider in a nod to Du Bois's Double Consciousness theory. 'I=You' was published in an anthology, for which Linton Kwesi Johnson wrote the foreword, called *Not Quite Right for Us*. The title 'I=You' is another reference to Einstein's $E=mc^2$, suggesting that one thing, in this case a Black man, is the same as his alleged opposite, his White peers. The poem starts, 'I understand that you won't understand / 'cause you could never live as me – / but I know what you think / 'cause I am you' (Nugent, 2021, p. 68). The poem explains how the narrator, as a mixed-race Briton, also feels the shame of empire and is indoctrinated into Eurocentric and White supremacist ideology, revering White heroes who are known racists. Reni Eddo-Lodge states, in *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, that Whiteness is 'an occupying force in the mind' which maintains power 'through domination and exclusion' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 170). In 'I=You' and my other works, mixed-race Britons living in White communities experience race's domination of the mind as a double-edged sword, feeling the slice of both extremes, living a life in the friction between the binaries of inclusion and exclusion. It is possible, however, to find purpose in pain. As Campbell states above, the 'old models are not working' (Campbell, 2013, p. xiv). And in my work, the nuances inherent in the mixed-race experience are posited as keys to a new model, a more profound, inclusive and universal way to construct identity in these liminal and very interesting times.

**Identity Entanglement**

In the quantum theory of entanglement, a change made to one particle impacts on another seemingly unconnected particle with immediate effect regardless of their distance, demonstrating that the particles are, somehow, still connected in a way that supersedes the limitations of space and time (Castelvecchi, 2022, pp. 241-242). In *Locks*, Aeon develops an identity that is at once modern-day and yet impacted by the events of five hundred years ago.

In *Locks* the past and the present are entangled, and water and music are portals connecting the two worlds. This places *Locks* in a tradition of Black narrative where, as Ekow Eshun states in *In the Black Fantastic,* the book accompanying his Hayward Gallery exhibition of that title, the 'secular and spiritual intersect' (Eshun, 2022, p. 138). As Eshun explains:

> The trauma and enslavement of the Middle Passage shifted the cosmologies of origin for Africans in bondage. Understanding and imagining the movement of earthly flesh across the *kalunga line*, or the liminal space of the *crossroads,* transitioned from a source of spiritual enlightenment and ontological awareness to a psycho-spiritual space of retreat (p. 138).

As mentioned earlier, the Kongolese Kalunga Line is the watery threshold that separates the material world from the spiritual world of the ancestors. To some in those societies, this was where enslaved Africans passed when taken by European traders (Ford, 1999, pp. 40-41) and for many of those enslaved in America, the Kalunga Line, and similar African myths relating to water, remained a source of psychic retreat (Bolster, 1997, 65).

Black literature recurringly looks to the waters as the portal between the present and the past. In Courttia Newland's *A River Called Time*, Markriss travels to the spiritual realm where he is shown 'River Time' (Newland, 2022, p. 143) and directed to use it to travel to different time periods.[14] In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe's dead baby returns to the material world: 'A fully dressed woman walked out of the water' (Morrison, 1997, p. 50). In Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Dana's time travel begins when she is transported from 1970s Los Angeles to nineteenth century Maryland where she saves Rufus, a White boy, and her ancestor, from drowning in a river (Butler, 1979, pp. 6-7).

[14] As in my work, Newland's novel also interweaves quantum physics, postcolonial angst and ancient mythology (Newland, pp. 353-359).

The recurring song in *Locks,* 'The Weak Don't Follow the Water', instructs Aeon to 'follow the water' hear her wisdom and 'follow the signs' and is a homage to Black spirituals that revere the waters as a space of return and renewal, including, 'Wade in the Water' by The Fisk Jubilee Singers, 'Deep River' by Paul Robeson and 'Down by the Riverside' by Sister Rosetta Tharpe.[15]

Aeon's friends figuratively travel back to the primordial waters of pre-deterministic potentiality when they are pulled under and drowned by a river (Nugent, 2023, pp. 229-231). Aeon had already been there when he was stabbed in the street and experienced 'the great mother's endless lullaby' (p. 82). And it is an aspect of Aeon's own consciousness that wants him to return to the wave, to the 'Great Mother', as he watches his friends disappear. Aeon says:

> Part of me wanted to run down there and jump in. The part that wanted to carry the Universe's weight in matchsticks; the part that wanted to slowly lean forward and drop from the top of the multi-storey car park at the Tontine Market in St Helens; the part that wanted to go to Jamaica and make something happen. The part of me that had to be resisted (Nugent, 2023, p. 229).

Here, Aeon recognizes that a desire to return to the wave, the primordial waters, is related to his recurring dream about carrying matchsticks. The first time he mentions this dream is just after he has crossed the threshold into downtown Montego Bay to see his 'real home, my people, the place where I belonged . . .' (Nugent, 2023, p. 18-19). He explains:

> The sun felt heavier once we'd crossed that threshold. It weighed down on my shoulders like a ship, but heavier. It was like the weight of a ship full of people, their shit and piss and blood and pain all weighing down on my shoulders.
>
> The feeling reminded me of a dream I used to have. I'd be carrying matchsticks in my arms – all the matchsticks in the Universe (p. 19).

The waters that carry the ship are the literal Atlantic Ocean that carried Aeon's ancestors through the middle passage and figuratively represent the pre-deterministic waves of potentiality from which the material world emerges. The matchsticks are a separate but related metaphor – evoking the binary of fire and water – that represent the particles that form the

[15] The songs mentioned here are of unknown provenance and are performed by many singers and groups; I have simply mentioned my favourite renditions.

material world. They also represent the flame of human ingenuity which, as Prometheus discovered, is a dangerous burden to bear. Part of Aeon's consciousness knows that he himself has emerged from that wave of infinite possibility. As in Buddhist philosophy, '"all beings are in possession of Buddha nature,"' or as the Navaho say, '"*This* is it, and *you're* it"' (Campbell, 2013, p. 19).

Part of Aeon desires to return to the wave, and as he and Increase ride a moped along Jamaica's northern coast, he says:

> Further in, the sea dropped suddenly from marshmallow blue to a deep, never-ending darkness. Something in me wanted to sink into it and disappear; let the waters take me, the same way they'd taken Raphael and Douglas.
>
> Then the fear kicked in.
>
> The fear of no fear (Nugent, 2023, p. 270).

So, another part of Aeon keeps him in the deterministic realm, knowing there is learning here for him. The nature of that learning becomes clear when, following many trials of his essentialist identity, Aeon is deeply touched by the live reggae music he hears at the Sunsplash reggae festival. Aeon says:

> It made feelings bubble up from somewhere so distant I couldn't even find a memory to connect them to. The matchsticks dream was the closest thing I knew: the heavy, heavy weight; the lightness of the weight; the unknown source of the weight; and the light (Nugent, 2023, p. 283).

The sounds and the rivers and seas, which are the pre-deterministic wave, the matchsticks, which are the particles of possibility, and the duality that human consciousness contrives to make sense of it all, represented here as heaviness and lightness, are all coming together, as we approach the end of Aeon's odyssey. Then, when the cousins arrive in the Blue Mountains, their fathers' birthplace, the entanglement of past and present is clarified when Aeon is guided to his ancestral past by an Obeah man called Negus and a magical dog called Pistle.

Negus tells the cousins that their surname was invented by an ancestor called Virgil, born of a slave master and a woman who was the first Maroon, or runaway slave, in their bloodline. Virgil decided to shun his slave-name and invent his own name from a combination of Mc meaning son of and Menahem referring to the son of the Biblical strong man, Samson: 'So he is de son of de son of a strong man. Twice removed from Africa. You overstand?' (Nugent, 2023, p. 311). In Jamaican dialect, to 'overstand' surpasses understanding: it means

to have a deeper insight into the context, derivation and meaning of a thing or event. Negus is awakening the cousins to the reality that their current identities are entangled with the past.

Aeon is then guided into a past-life regression in which he sees himself on a beach in 1493 as a young Taino girl who watches as Columbus' ship appears on the waters spelling a new beginning for her people, and an ending for her mentor who takes his own life in the waters (Nugent, 2023, p. 312-318). And it is this Taino girl, Aeon's past incarnation, who combines the waters and the music as Aeon hears her singing in his head: "Remember; follow the water," she sings. "Remember. Follow the signs" (327).

Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* is another rare example of a Black British novel that deals with the brutalization of the Taino people, the indigenous inhabitants of Jamaica.[16] When David, *Mermaid's* protagonist, first encounters the mermaid he calls out, 'Mami wata! Come' (Roffey, 2020, pp. 7-8). By linking the African water spirit Mami Wata with a thousand-year-old Taino mermaid in a story set in 1976, Roffey entangles the ancient with the modern, but also entangles the various lineages of people of Caribbean descent. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward, 'Mami Wata' is prayed to along with 'Mary, the Virgin Mother of God' (Ward, 2017, p. 40), entangling African and Middle Eastern / European belief systems. And *Skin of the Sea* by Natasha Bowen evokes Mami Wata, using the name as a collective noun for the mermaids who 'bless the souls of those who pass in the sea' (Bowen, 2021, p. 305) in a retelling of Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Little Mermaid', entangling the European fairytale with African mythology. Moreover, whilst entangling mythologies and histories, all three authors are also playing their part to ensure the resurgence of powerful female archetypes.

[16] *Taino* by Jose Barreiro (1993) is a rare novel about Taino people. Novels about characters from other indigenous Caribbean cultures include *Inkle & Yariko* by Beryl Gilroy (1996).

**Return to the Mother**

In *Locks*, the background vibrational sound of the Universe is referred to as the 'great mother's endless lullaby' (p. 82). That vibration is the wave (the formless, Energy), and we are made of the particles which collapse into being from that wave (the form, Matter). Our true identification, our deepest identity, therefore, is with the Great Mother. To realize this identification, Aeon must attain a greater understanding of both aspects of what he is, the particle and the wave; the form and the formless; energy and matter. To achieve this, Aeon must align his male identity with the energies of the feminine principle.

A recent movement in western literature has seen the rewriting of Greek mythologies from women's perspectives. The great works of this contemporary feminist canon include *Circe* by Madeline Miller, *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood, *The Children of Jocasta* by Natalie Hayes and *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker. In a 2023 *Guardian* article, journalist Sarah Shaffi paraphrases author Sue Lynn Tan, stating '. . . shining a spotlight on the women in the tale . . . might shine more light on the emotional heart of the tale' (Shaffi, 2023, no pag.).

Part of the distinctive contribution of *Locks* is that it posits the union of the masculine, Aeon, with the feminine, Aeon's past life incarnation as a Taino girl, as a key to destabilize what bell hooks termed the 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (hooks, 2010, no pag.). In *Understanding Patriarchy,* 2004, hooks explained:

> Patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples. Since it is a system that denies men full access to their freedom of will, it is difficult for any man of any class to rebel against patriarchy, to be disloyal to the patriarchal parent, be that parent female or male (hooks, 2010, no pag.).

*Locks* demonstrates just how damaging the patriarchal bind is to Aeon, but it also offers alternatives. One such alternative comes in the form of Shepherd, Aeon's friend in Copse. Aeon tells us that 'Shepherd was the top boy at Copse, and no one ever fucked with him. But he never hit anyone or threatened anyone' (Nugent, 2023, p. 188). It is stated that he 'only talked when necessary' (p. 186) and that he looked at Aeon like he was 'a child he loved' (p. 187). So, Shepherd is clearly tough and respected, even feared, by all the other boys in Copse. But he is also gentle, insightful, empathetic and nurturing. His character approaches the 'softened' masculinity, as described by Hooper which, as Connel states in *Masculinities* 'does not mean the obliteration of 'harder' masculinities' (Connel, 1995, p. 265). In keeping with the principal

subtext in *Locks*, Shepherd resides in the liminal space between simplistic binaries of soft and hard masculinity.

Another alternative to the issue of problematic masculinities is atonement of the masculine with the feminine principle. It is Miss Elwyn who tells Aeon about the hero's journey. She initiates the call to adventure (Nugent, 2023, p. 4) and is the mentor whose voice stays in Aeon's head, providing psychological support through the trials of his odyssey.

Aeon has a relationship with a girl called Kissy, and it is she who holds the dominant position both initiating and terminating the relationship. Kissy stays on the school field while her male friends run away from the dangerous Kenton brothers. When the Kentons call Aeon a 'fucking coon' (Nugent, 2023, p. 62), Kissy confronts them. Having scared the bullies off she says to Aeon: 'Damsels in distress also like hugs' (Nugent, 2023, p. 64), ironically evoking the needy feminine stereotype whilst simultaneously refusing to occupy that subjugated space. As bell hooks stated:

> Both men and women participate in this tortured value system. Psychological patriarchy is a "dance of contempt," a perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy with complex, covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation (hooks, 2010, no pag.).

Kissy and Aeon's relationship subverts the roles of the tortured values system, and they experience true intimacy with 'no barriers, no fear or embarrassment' (Nugent, 2023, p. 67).

Also, once Aeon has seen himself as the Taino girl on the beach she keeps on returning to his consciousness. We are told '. . . she must choose to die with them or to live and become us. She sees us now, and she doesn't want to be us. And she knows that she will choose to be us' (Nugent, 2023, p. 321). So, she is the progenitor of Aeon and his people.

As the odyssey ends, Aeon is still flawed, still confused and still imperfect. He has, however, felt the pull of the waters from which we emerge, he has heard the song of the Great Mother of the Universe, and he has seen himself as a multifaceted being in an interconnected creation and he will surely never be the same.[17]

[17] *Locks* is part one of a three-part tale, and Aeon has much further to travel to attain self-actualization – *Locks* deals primarily with his journey toward individuation.

## Conclusion

My published works offer distinctive and original ways in which to view the nuances of being mixed-race, and of living in these liminal times of change in the post-colonial era. My work looks beyond simplistic binary structures of essentialized identity and poses novel ways of examining what it means to be a person living in these changing times, suggesting that exciting new approaches to identity formation may be reaped from our turbulent colonial past and our contemporary understanding of the nature of the universe. My work fuses eastern philosophy and western mythology with contemporary traditions of sociological and scientific theory, to suggest a necessary evolution from simplistic binary categorization to more fluid forms of identity. This journey, though confusing and at times painful, is inevitable and may well be the key to more meaningful, universal and inclusive future identities. Furthermore, in my works, the mixed-race experience is posed as analogous to the uncertainty of our times, suggesting that within this liminal space we may discover the universal aspects of our being. We live in very interesting times where identities once taken for granted are being exposed as performative, non-essential and unstable. The clear waters of binary identity formation have been muddied. It is my contention, however, that, as the ancient civilizations discovered, muddy waters are the most fertile.

## APPENDIX

There are countless writers who have inspired my work. Of those who write about the themes covered in this study – race in northern England, nuanced racial identities and mythology in Black literature – there are many I would have liked to include given more space. Below is a sample of just some of the writers I have not had space to mention in the above thesis.

**Agard, John.** John Agard was born in Guyana and later moved to Ironbridge, Shropshire. He refers to the Yoruba God, Ogun and West African/Caribbean trickster Anansi in his poem 'Follow That Steel Pan' (Agard, 2004, p. 37). His classic poem 'Half-caste' denounces the term half-caste – a term commonly used to refer to mixed-race people such as he and I in past decades:

> Explain yuself
> wha yu mean
> when yu say half-caste
> yu mean when picasso
> mix red and green
> is a half-caste canvas (Agard, 2004, p. 11)

**Brown, Wally.** Wally Brown's memoir, *A Life: Born and Raised in Liverpool 8,* is a fascinating exposition of the life of a mixed-race man born in Liverpool 8, the current home of Liverpool's Black community, in 1943. Brown recalls how in 1978 the Chief Constable of Merseyside claimed that 'the Liverpool Black Community was made up of half-caste people who are the product of liaisons between Black seamen and white prostitutes' (Brown, 2023. P. 440). However, a detail that may shock some readers even more is that these sentiments were repeated by the warden of the Caribbean Centre, 'Frank Richards, a man from the Caribbean' who claimed in a tabloid newspaper that 'the mixed-race community was lawless and criminal' (p. 440).

**Al Nasir, Malik.** Al Nasir's 2021 memoir, *Letters to Gil,* is an insightful exposition of the life of a young man growing up in a mixed-race family in Liverpool. Al Nasir states: 'We were a mixed-race family marooned on a concrete island with more than 100,000 families, many of them either deliberately or unwittingly racist – as was the norm back then (Al Nasir, 2021, pp. 20-21). It is also worth noting that Al Nasir's 2025 book, *Searching for my Slave Roots: From*

*Guyana's Sugar Plantations to Cambridge,* charts his quest to uncover his lineage which combines both Black slave ancestors and prominent White slaveholders.

**Antrobus, Raymond.** Antrobus discusses his mixed-race heritage and identity in numerous poems; most explicitly in 'Heritage Test' and 'Jamaican British'. In 'Heritage Test', Antrobus highlights the pain and confusion of being told one does not belong by referring to Bob Marley, one of Black culture's greatest icons, and the singer's own struggles with his mixed ancestry.

> Ebony, who is herself mixed, tagging me
>
> on Facebook, *"LOL @RaymondAntrobus*
>
> *IS NOT BLACK!"* just as I was visiting
>
> Bob Marley's grave and he came back
>
> from the dead as a duppy and laughed
>
> at my hair as he sang Slave Driver
>
> and threw his shoe polished dreadlocks
>
> across the cemetery . . . (Antrobus, 2022, no pag.)

**Baldwin, James**. Evoking his own experiences as a child preacher in Harlem, Baldwin's debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* shows the power of religious fervour to sublimate painful experiences and bind communities wracked by poverty, discrimination and exploitation. The protagonist's apotheosis in the church inspired some of my passages regarding music, belonging and spiritual upliftment in *Locks*:

> He moved among the saints, he, John, who had come home, who was one of their company now; weeping, he yet could find no words to speak of his great gladness; and he scarcely knew how he moved, for his hands were new, and his feet were new, and he moved in a new heaven-bright air (Baldwin, 2001, p. 238).

**Johnson, Linton Kwesi.** Johnson was born in Jamaica in 1952 and moved to England in 1963. His dub poetry inspired my own writing, particularly as I attempted to produce rhythms that would capture, at once, the deep pain of oppression and the sublimation of pain into power. Johnson's 'Sonny's Lettah (Anti-Sus Poem)', a polemic against police harassment, particularly sings to me as I write:

> dem tump him in him belly
>
> and it turn to jelly

dem lick him pan him back
and him rib get pap
dem lick him pon him head
but it tough like lead
dem lick him in him seed
and it started to bleed

Mama,
I jus couldn stan-up deh
An dhu notn: (Johnson, 2022, p. 24)

**Miller, Kei**. Miller is a Jamaican born writer based in London. His third novel, *Augustown*, elucidates the power of stories and religious mysticism in the face of oppression. Set in a fictional Jamaican town in 1982 (based on the real August Town which, according to local legend, was initiated by liberated slaves), the subplot is based the real-life preacher Alexander Bedward who, in 1921, promised his followers they would ascend into heaven. In the novel's retelling, Bedward levitates, but his ascent is thwarted as the authorities literally hook him to prevent prophecy. The narrator asks us to ponder, 'not whether you believe in this story or not, but whether this story is about the kinds of people you have never taken time to believe in' (Miller, 2016, p. 115).

**Okri, Ben:** Ben Okri uses mythical and religious imagery in many works, including *The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. One book which particularly inspired my own work is the incandescent *Astonishing The Gods* in which Okri writes:

> Even the moon had gone. The absence of the archangel had left him in the loneliest place in the world. There was now nothing behind him and a bridge of dreams before him. He felt that he was living the meaning of his life for the first time (Okri, 1995, p. 22).

**Senna, Danzy.** *From Caucasia with Love* by Danzy Senna is my favourite novel about the mixed-race experience. In the following excerpt, the narrator Birdie's older, and darker skinned, sister Cole elaborates on the lives of the fictional people who speak a language the sisters invented:

> The Elemenos could turn green in the bushes, beige in the sand, or blank white in the snow, and their power lay precisely in their ability to disappear into any surrounding.
> As she spoke, a new question—a doubt—flashed through my mind. Something didn't

> make sense. What was the point of surviving if you had to disappear? (Senna, 2001, pp. 7-8).

**Sissay, Lemn.** Sissay's memoir, *My Name is Why,* tells the story of a Black adopted child growing up in a White adoptive family and in care homes in northwest England. *My Name* begins: 'When I was fourteen I tattooed my name into my hand. The tattoo is still there but it wasn't my name. It's a reminder that I was not who I thought I was.' Here, Sissay exposes the struggle to belong in a system where one's identity is persistently under threat. (Sissay, 2022, p. 1).

**Walker, Alice**: Alice Walker's writing often adopts religious, mythical and spiritual tropes, such as Celie's conversations with God in *The Colour Purple* and Kate's encounters with shamans in *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* and, in the profoundest inspiration to my own work, *The Temple of My Familiar* in which Miss Lissie 'remembers everything' (Walker, 1989, p. 52), recounts past lives spanning back to the origin of human history, and Nzingha argues that Greek mythology was, in part, usurped from Africa (Walker, 1989, pp. 295-301).

**Zephaniah, Benjamin.** Born in the Handsworth district of Birmingham, England, Zephania's work blends the rhythms of northern England with Jamaican patois. In 'Dis policeman keeps of kicking me to death', Zephaniah exposes police brutality and internalised racism: 'I pleaded RACIST ATTACK / and another policeman come to finish me off – dis one was BLACK . . .' (Zephaniah, 2025. P.30).

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