Kwame Dawes, ed., *Red: Contemporary Black British Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press 2010), xx + 252 pp., ISBN 9781845231293, £9.99.

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The celebration, in 1998, of the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush triggered an "archive impulse" as Paola Splendore and John Thieme define it in their introduction to "Black British Writing: Sea-Changes", *Textus*, 23 (2010), 317. This impulse is testified by the impressive number of publications which commemorated the arrival of the first ship of Caribbean immigrants at the English port of Tilbury marking the birth of a new British society and of a generation of "hyphenated" authors. While collecting the literary achievements of Caribbean-British and Asian-British authors and acknowledging their contribution to critical negotiation of Britishness, the literary anthologies, edited volumes and critical studies published in the last ten years also offer a rethinking of the label "black British", defining, questioning and challenging this controversial coupling.

Needless to say, "black British" has always been a contested category. This encompassing term was first used in the mid-70s, when it gained currency as "a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalisation in Britain," as Stuart Hall famously argued in his "New Ethnicities" (in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Black Film/British Cinema*, ICA Documents 7, 1988, 442). However, Alison Donnell suggested that the term has never been easily confined to national boundaries, given its ambiguous reference to a collective identity both "international in its referents and counter-national in its intent" ("Nation and contestation: Black British Writing", *Wasafiri*, 17: 36. 2002, 11). As it provided a common political identification for the collective struggle, "black" thus became a sort of "unifying framework" according to Hall (442), weaving identities across different ethnic and cultural experience. By the late 1980s, fractures had started to emerge, and the umbrella term proved to be a limiting and hegemonic definition imposing homogeneity and dismissing complexity. In this light, the alliances and solidarity created across second-generation immigrants from different cultures started to creak at the seams. While the hegemony of the black experience in Britain shifted towards an engagement with difference and was replaced by a focus on more specific ethnic identities, the use of the term has remained a questionable practice to be constantly discussed and renegotiated.

An ongoing problematisation of the label "black British," without necessarily entailing its rejection, has in fact characterized the contested terrain of multiculturalism in the last two decades. Kept as a site of struggle over blackness, the term has often been used as a provisional and contested category, subject to interrogation and open to critique. However, this openness to debate and willingness to discuss is exactly what seems to be lacking in Kwame Dawes's most recent

anthology, *Red*: *Contemporary Black British Poetry*. The editor, a poet, novelist, playwright and critic, whose work also includes the collection *Wheel and Come Again: An Anthology of Reggae Poetry*, feels that at this stage there is no need for works that strive to define black Britishness "as an ethnicity" (17). Regardless of the debate that has flourished in the past few years on *Wasafiri* (17: 2002) and elsewhere, reviving the by now famous "Reinventing Britain Forum" (14: 1999), Dawes does not bother to offer his critical stance on the subject. Dismissing any attempt to engage critically with the term and its cultural and social history, the editor acknowledges in his Introduction that "black British" is a category constantly subject to change, but takes no pains to rediscuss it. On the contrary, he claims that, as the term "was enough of a defining factor," the poets were simply asked to confront the suggested theme. Therefore, in Dawes's words, "[i]f a poet felt comfortable with the label 'Black British', then he or she was welcome to submit work to the anthology." (19) However, Dawes's use of the umbrella term is unconvincing when it avoids tackling the question of definition.

Published by Peepal Tree Press, the leading publisher of Caribbean and black British Literature based in Leeds, *Red* is part of a tradition of poetry anthologies published in Great Britain seeking to define a black British canon. Yet, being the first anthology of contemporary black British poetry in ten years, since Lemn Sissay's groundbreaking *The Fire People* (1998) and Courttia Newland's and Kadija Sesay's *IC3* (*The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in England*, 2000), *Red* boasts the right of being "an anthology that is less about defining Black British identity or announcing its presence and credibility in the literary world, and [is] simply about reminding readers that as poets, Black British poets are ultimately interested in the word and in the joy and challenge of making images and finding music through language." (20) This assertive claim foregrounds nonetheless a sort of liberating attitude, a provocative gesture freeing poetry and literature at large from the constraints of limiting labels and definitions. In fact, the anthology has no defining criteria, let alone that of nationality or language – the opening poem by Abdullahi Botaan Hassan "Kurweyne" is a translation from Somali by Martin Orwin. In this light, the choice of opening up the category across national and linguistic boundaries undoubtedly complies with a transnational approach which explodes national boundaries and complicates issues of national belonging. The collection includes remarkable work by award-winning authors and young, lesser known poets from Dawes's Afro Poetry School; "page poets" and spoken word artists, and poets thriving on the border between the two, like Patience Agbabi. In fact, poets as diverse as Linton Kwesi Johnson, Grace Nichols, Jackie Kay and Moniza Alvi, from a Caribbean, African, South-Asian background who evidently "felt comfortable" with the Black British label, all submitted to Dawes their "meditations on red", to quote from a poem by Jamaican author Olive Senior. For all its unevenness (the collection includes well-known poems together with unpublished or recently published work), *Red* presents a wide range of explorations of the subject

theme, from conventional associations with blood, violence, passion, and sexuality, to more unpredictable interpretations.

The anthology is divided into six sections, each introduced by quotations on red ranging from Bob Marley to Oscar Wilde, from Ramayana to a somewhat unexpected Gwyneth Paltrow, while the poems are simply arranged by alphabetical order. Red is often the signifier of life experiences, associated with menstrual blood, giving birth or children's questions to their fathers (as in Mir Mahfuz Ali's "Dad, Why are Roses Red?"). Red evokes troubled parental connections, as in Jackie Kay's moving blues, "The Red Graveyard", and complicates blood ties through colour-blind visions, as in Patience Agbabi's "Seeing Red". However, red is also the colour of childhood memories in another country, or of an imagined past recreated through borrowed stories. The wound of displacement and the comfort of belonging are equally conveyed by images of hibiscuses and flamboyant trees, while for Imtiaz Dharker it is the pomegranate that "always reminded me / that somewhere I had another home" ("How to cut a pomegranate", 63).

The reflections on red alternate personal and collective memory. Politically engaged poems are represented in the anthology, which includes John Agard's reflections on blood leaving "its print on history's purest page" ("Sonnet #13"), and Linton Kwesi Johnson's 1974 "Five Nights of Bleeding", recording the madness of the racial violence of that tense social and historical period of British life. Red is also the colour of contemporary conflicts, as in Bernardine Evaristo's "Revenge" on the seeds of revenge sowed after 9/11 (76-84), a poem which is in a sort of dialogue with Patricia Foster's "Red Hibiscus," depicting another British soldier "scattered across an Iraqi field / like pollen from the head of a red hibiscus" (87).

The Standard English dominating the anthology is at times 'disturbed' by poems written entirely in Jamaican English, as in Jean Hall's "Grandma Clarice Red Doorstep", or in Khadijah Ibrahim's "When My Time Come". In both cases, language resonates with the memory of ancestral wisdom or a mother's funeral instructions to a daughter, asking that her ashes be spread across the Thames so as to "mek de wave tek / mi back to which part mi did come from" (100), while Trinidadian-born Roi Kwabena uses creole in "Sure, Reds" to convey his political reflections on the country. In Dorothea Smartt's "Red Mudder," creole weaves memories of the poet's father as "a young fella 'bout Bridgetown in 1933" (210) as the poet learns of the passing of the repository of that memory, her father's first wife. Moreover, poems are often inhabited by untranslated words and expressions from Caribbean and South-Asian cultures, and the notes at the end of the volume provide the reader with information about those French patois words, Punjabi terms, Hindu festivals, or West African poets that coexist in the anthology, testifying to the cultural diversity of its contributions.

The richness of the authors' approaches in this fertile and inventive production inflects red in all its hues, from scarlet to vermilion and crimson, from anger, loneliness, and pain to sensual love and belonging. While some of the poems overtly address the experience of migration, racial tensions or memories of a colonial past,

others comfortably confront the proposed theme of the anthology without feeling the burden of representation, the pressure of speaking for their community. In his choice to refuse engagement with the term "black British", provocatively dismissing the importance of defining or questioning it, Dawes seems to miss a chance to contribute to and expand the debate on its future directions in the twenty-first century. However, by leaving the borders of this category flexible and porous, the anthology leaves both the poets and their readers free to grapple on their own with the meaning of black Britishness, negotiating a "black British identity" which can still be identified with a cultural politics committed to resisting and challenging dominant systems of representation, as Stuart Hall had suggested for the eighties. Claiming their space of representation, the contributors seem to reshape and revise that space from a variety of perspectives and overlapping territories, eluding the constraints of internalized categories about race and identity, and implicitly calling for a more radical challenging of the "black British" label.