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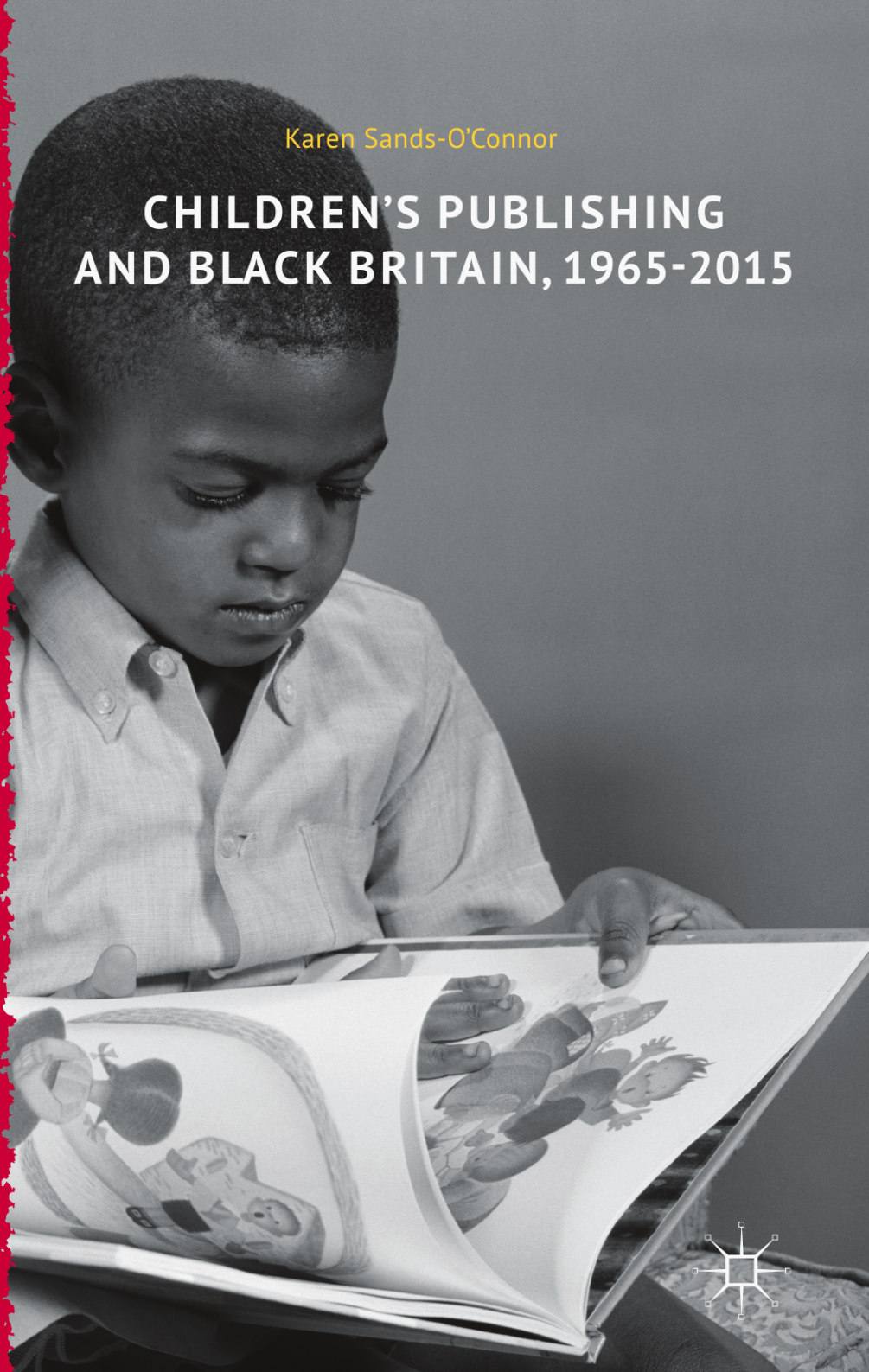

Karen Sands-O'Connor

CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING AND BLACK BRITAIN, 1965-2015

Critical Approaches to Children's Literature

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In memory of my mother-in-law, Gladys O'Connor who lived through these years of a changing Britain with grace and patience.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: We're Here Because You Were There—The Beginnings of Publishing for a Black British Audience

This book tells the story of many individuals and publishing houses that have tried or are still trying to ensure that Black voices are heard by British children. When I was working on my earlier monograph *Soon Come Home to this Island: West Indians in British Children's Literature* (Routledge 2008), I was concerned primarily with the authors who created Black characters, their motivations, and interests. For me, like so many other readers, the author has always been the salient figure in book production, and even in my critical work I often did not notice the publisher of a given text unless there was some reason to do so (such as, for example, when religious affiliation influenced the choice of authors/texts). But as I began to collect books by and about Caribbean people and Black Britons for children, noticing the publisher became increasingly inescapable. Some publishers were simply more likely to publish Black British children's literature than others. I began to pull books off the shelf based, not just on author's name, but on publisher imprint, and I could often predict the attitude a given book would have toward its Black British characters based on the publisher.

This led me to an awareness of publishers who focused exclusively on Black British characters. I discovered Bogle L'Ouverture Press, one of the first independent Black British publishers, because I happened to notice that two of the authors I had examined in *Soon Come Home*, Valerie Bloom and Andrew Salkey, had both been published by the press. In trying to find

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out what other books Bogle L'Ouverture had published, I discovered that the London Metropolitan Archives held the publisher's papers. I went to have a look and discovered, not just publishers' financial spreadsheets or editing notes, but a whole story of Black Britain in the personal letters, meeting notes, and unpublished manuscripts in the files of Jessica and Eric Huntley's publishing house. This prompted me to investigate other independent publishers, such as John La Rose's New Beacon and Verna Wilkins' Tamarind Press—and then to compare the motivations and considerations of these publishers with those of mainstream and popular editors and publishers. I realized that the history of Black British children's publishing was deeply intertwined with some of the biggest political and cultural changes in Britain after 1945. These changes, in housing, in education, in policing and immigration policies, affected all British children—Black and white, native and immigrant. How Britain saw itself and its citizens was and is reflected in the books published about Black people for children. And the choices that publishers make about which books to publish matter; they can, for example, indicate the gap between white and Black Britons' understanding of racial issues and needs. The relative success of these books (and their publishers) in the market can also suggest the level of awareness and concern that the buyers of children's books (who were and still are mostly adults) have about racism and racial inequality in the UK. The chapters that follow will examine some of the publishers who committed themselves to publishing books by, about, and for Black Britain in the period between 1965 and 2015.

I have chosen to look at books published after 1965 because, by and large, books written for British children and published in Britain before this time were—if they mentioned Black people at all—written *about* rather than by Black people, usually Black people somewhere outside Britain, and as portrayed for a white audience. Writing and publishing for a Black British child audience has always had a political angle, from abolition in the late 1700s to the curriculum wars that still continue today. And because the greater proportion of British readers were (and are) white, the motivations of and negotiations between author, publisher, and reader are complex. Often we assume that Black British children's literature comes from the same tradition as Black British adult literature, but their histories are not the same. The period from 1965 onward is generally seen as the beginning of British publishing for a specifically, deliberately Black child audience, because there was by this point in time a critical mass of West Indian and South Asian immigrant parents with children attending the

British schools. This meant that for the first time, children from visible minority groups *were visible* on an everyday basis, not just in a few neighborhoods or port cities, but across the country and—significantly—across London, where the majority of publishing houses had offices. Indeed, it is during the period between 1965 and 1980 that "Black British" was most likely to encompass any people racialized as not white, regardless of origin, because the concerns and problems of racism experienced by people from the Caribbean, Africa, India, Pakistan, and other former colonial nations of the British Empire tended to be similar—or at least were similarly portrayed in the media and in children's books. When used as a uniting force against oppression, Black British scholar Kehinde Andrews calls this definition of Black British "political blackness": "In Britain, political blackness grew out of the anti-racist movement and was a specific response to the problems of racism that people faced" ("The Problem of Political Blackness" 2064). However, as Stuart Hall has pointed out, this definition of Black British essentialized Blackness as a fixed commodity, and ignored "the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects" ("New Ethnicities" 225). In the case of children's publishers, most of the early organized efforts to produce books for a specifically Black child audience came from Afro-Caribbean communities, or from multi-racial community-based efforts; this is another reason that most of the Black British literature I examine in the book has a focus on Afro-Caribbean characters. Throughout this book, I generally use the term Black British when I am referring to British people of African descent, but there are times when (because of the terminology of the period), that term encompasses a broader group of people and I do my best to indicate that. Later in the book, again because of the terminology in currency at the time of various books' publication, I will use the term Black British when I am referring to people of African descent, and BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) when I am considering a wider group.

Another reason to choose 1965 as my starting point has to do with changes in the publishing industry which began just before but intensified and became standard in the decades following World War II. Children's books, which had (except for comics) been an almost exclusively hardcover market prior to the war, faced the same sort of paper rationing and restrictions during it. Children's publishers began paperback imprints as a temporary measure; but following World War II, changes requiring children to remain in school longer also meant that they were out of the employment market for longer. Children had more educational pressure

but also more leisure time to read than they had in previous decades. Following the end of rationing in 1954, they also had more pocket money, particularly the older child from the middle classes. They could purchase paperbacks more easily than hardcovers, and publishers exploited this possibility through imprints that catered specifically to young people. Penguin's Puffins, Heinemann's New Windmills, and Macmillan's Topliners series were just a few of the imprints that had their heyday beginning in the mid-1960s.

Educational publishers also moved toward less permanent binding during and after World War II, and this allowed them to respond to the multiple changes in educational policy following the introduction of the 1944 Education Act more quickly. Increased competition from other media, particularly in the form of the educational arm of the BBC (both radio and television), also forced educational publishers to make alterations in format and design of books, increasing the number of pictures and focusing more on the idea of narrative, even in nonfiction texts. More than traditional publishers, educational publishers had to aim their books squarely at the largest markets—urban areas such as London, Birmingham, and Manchester—and that meant acknowledging the changing population in those areas, often before publishers of trade books for children did so. In 1965, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were revised, and the Greater London Council (GLC) was replaced by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The ILEA not only became the most powerful authority in the country, it also would eventually become a publisher of educational materials itself, and due to its student audience, it was from the outset a publisher interested in issues of racial diversity and racism. This in turn also affected other publishers producing educational materials.

Thus, the postwar period was one of massive changes in Britain both within and outside the publishing industry. It was also a period of global change that directly affected Britain; many of the countries that had once been part of the vast British Empire were demanding their freedom. In Britain, unlike countries such as the USA or Canada, the immigration that occurred in the decades following World War II was connected predominantly to a colonial past. Labor shortages after the war caused Britain to reach out to its colonies and former colonies for workers; people from the Caribbean came in large enough numbers that the postwar immigrants were labelled the "Windrush Generation" after the 1948 boat that brought 500 (mostly male) migrants to the UK from Jamaica, Barbados,

and Trinidad, as well as some of the smaller Caribbean islands. These postwar migrants settled mainly in London initially, but some moved (mostly for economic reasons) to other British cities including Birmingham, Bristol, and Manchester. Many of these men had families who joined them, and soon a new generation of British people of Afro- and Indo-Caribbean origin began changing the face of British society for good.

The face of Britain might have changed after World War II, but not necessarily the hearts and minds of white British people. This is partly because the Blackness of Black Britons was made manifestly obvious and continually depicted as Other; but the whiteness of white British society has remained largely invisible. In recent years, Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out, "the 'whiteness' that had previously been largely invisible in the stories we told about who we were suddenly took center stage as the site where power and privilege converged and conspired to sabotage ideals of justice, equality, and democracy" ("Interrogating 'Whiteness'" 977), but Fishkin's "center stage" played to a very select audience (even in the USA, about which she was writing). Most people still accept whiteness as normal, and most white people daily benefit from societal structures that favor them. I focus on children's publishing because as an industry it demonstrates the tensions between Black and white British communities, even when both are willing and desirous of presenting a harmonious and multi-racial British society in their products.

Continuing inequality in the British publishing industry suggests a wider societal issue, something that Critical Race Theory (CRT) addresses. Patrice Lawrence writes, "Critical 'race' theorists argue that equality will not come without a fundamental review of the power dynamics between racialized communities, making the radical assertion that it is not in the interest of dominant white society for power to shift" ("'Race,' Education and Children's Policy" 163). Children's publishing in Britain at all levels and in all communities has made regular efforts to produce literature that responds to, reflects the experience of, and teaches all children in Britain about each other. But those efforts, however well-meaning, have rarely produced long-term success in terms of numbers or kinds of books published. To examine these efforts is one way of reviewing some of the power dynamics involved, power dynamics in which (as a white scholar) I myself am too often and unwittingly complicit. I have therefore made an effort in the book to identify the ways in which authors, publishers and critics are racialized by British

society, and through use of capitalization (Black instead of black) try to consciously shift some of those power dynamics, even if just a little bit, closer to equality. Before delving into specific cases of the post-1965 changes in the publishing industry, it is useful to have a sense of the colonial past that brought the Caribbean islanders to Britain, to better understand how that history influenced children's publishing in its own time, as well as the ways it continues to do so even now.

The Fight for the Abolition of Slavery and Children's Literature (1750–1838)

The history of British influence in the West Indies goes back at least as far as 1655, when the English took Jamaica from Spain. It is in fact the often-hostile relationship between the two European colonial powers that led British children's authors (both of fiction and nonfiction) to blame Spain for the introduction and perpetuation of slavery in the Caribbean region, from the 1700s right through the twentieth century. Although the British thoroughly embraced the plantation slavery system throughout their colonial Caribbean possessions, children's books concerning the West Indies portrayed slavery as distinctly un-British. While white British adults feared revolution and violent rebellion such as the French had experienced in Haiti, white British children were taught to either "pity the poor slave" or avoid the region altogether. Thus, while writers such as Anna Letitia Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth—not to mention countless missionary writers—depicted Black slaves as grateful for kindness shown them by whites, authors depicting white Caribbean subjects (known as creoles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) showed them to be spoiled and weak due to the hot climate and overindulgent parents. The cumulative message of all these books is that white children should avoid the Caribbean region and its subjects where possible, and if avoidance is not possible, extend kindness to all so that you might be saved a brutal death. This is, as should be evident, a message to white British readers, focused on the fate of the white character.

Some stories had (generally white) West Indians as prominent characters, but were set on British soil, and served as behavior-modification texts for children, with white creoles given negative behavior traits in comparison to their white British counterparts. For example, in Barbara Hofland's *The Barbadoes Girl* (1818), an English family welcomes in a West Indian child visitor; Matilda Hanson is a typical victim of the dangers of being

brought up in the climate and culture of the West Indies, and the father of the English family uses her as a negative example:

> You perceive, my dear children, that this child is in fact far more an object of compassion than blame, for she has been permitted to indulge every bad propensity of her nature, and their growth has destroyed that which was good; of course, her life [in Barbados] has been unhappy in itself, yet punishment has not produced amendment. (*Barbadoes Girl* 16)

Matilda in fact mimics the punishments she receives, using them on others when she is angry, particularly her personal slave, Zebby, who she physically and verbally abuses. Zebby is freed by the English family using the Somerset ruling, but *The Barbadoes Girl* is not her story; she does not go on to become educated and write her memoirs, but settles down happily as the English family's servant. The real story is about the white West Indian girl and the white British reader who are meant to understand and absorb the moral and behavioral lessons of the book.

There were authors who wrote during this time period from the point of view of the Black subject, enslaved or not, including most famously William Blake's "The Little Black Boy" (included in *Songs of Innocence* 1789) and Amelia Opie's poems *The Negro Boy's Tale: A Poem Addressed to Children* (1824) and *The Black Man's Lament, or, How to Make Sugar* (1826). However, again, these works were written for white British readers. Blake's poem is confrontational,[1] with the Black boy claiming a kind of spiritual equality with his white counterpart to make white readers consider white privilege, and not to start an eighteenth century Black Power movement. Opie's poems encouraged white child readers to participate in the abolitionist-led boycott of West Indian sugar. In her "Introduction" to *The Negro Boy's Tale*, Opie writes to "My Dear Young Friends" that "it is one of your Christian duties to abhor the cruelties practiced on poor Negro Slaves in the West India Islands, and to try, by every means possible, to put a stop to them" (iii–iv). Opie, like Blake, wants her readers to consider white privilege, although she does so through emotional rather than intellectual appeal.

Although most abolitionist and humanist writers of this time fell into the category of writing about Black people for the moral benefit of white children, there are a couple of authors whose intended readership is more complex. Joanna Baillie, in 1790, wrote several poems addressed to "Negro" children; Charles and Mary Lamb, in their 1809 *Poetry for*

Children, included poems about Black children in British schools. While the realities of British publishing of the time mean that the actual readership of these poems would have been almost exclusively white, the deliberate address to the Black child signals a change in thinking about the potential of a Black British reading audience.

Joanna Baillie intensely disliked the idea of poetry for a cause. When James Montgomery asked her, in 1824, for a poem for his collection on the evils of chimney-sweeping—another major "cause" of the period—Baillie sent him instead "a scientific discourse on reforming the chimney-sweeping trade" (Slagle, "Literary Activism" 67). Baillie told Montgomery that she believed poetry on behalf of a cause was "the very way to have the whole matter considered by the sober pot-boilers over the whole kingdom as a fanciful & visionary thing" (qtd in Slagle 68). Her poetry about what she called "Negro" children was not in any way abolitionist either; it did not appeal to emotions of sympathy and pity, as Opie's did, nor to the intellect as Blake's poetry had. Instead, the four poems that were probably written before 1790 but which also appeared in *Fugitive Verses* in 1840, are about the day-to-day life of the Black child, going to school, at prayer, working, and, most particularly, enjoying the natural world. "Rhymes for Chanting" demonstrates this clearly. Baillie's child speaker urges a butterfly to flee its predators so that it can enjoy the child's garden, "feed on the rose and the gillyflower,/And be my play-mate gay" (*Fugitive Verses* 204). Unlike many white poets writing in the voice of a Black subject, Baillie's poems do not compare the Black experience to that of whites; they do not put the Black child into savage nature in contrast with the civilized white world (the subject has a garden where the butterfly would be safe from the predators); they give the Black children agency to act within the world around them. However, the poems are set in a world separate from England; the natural world described of monkeys and ringbirds suggests a nonspecifically exotic setting, and no encounters between white and black children are described. Thus, Baillie's "School Rhymes for Negro Children" emphasize the humanity of the Black child, but it is doubtful as to whether any actual Black children saw these poems. Poems ostensibly written *for* Black children acted instead as a way to nudge white readers into believing in the humanity of the Black subject.

Charles and Mary Lamb's *Poetry for Children*, on the other hand, is clearly set in an early-nineteenth-century England (Yorkshire, in at least one of the poems) where white and Black children and adults met at school. The two poems, "Conquest of Prejudice" and "Choosing a Profession" concern

the Black child's experience of the white British world, one in which he (in both poems, the subject is a "he") struggles to understand where and how he belongs. In "Conquest of Prejudice," the African student, Juba, is at first "gazed on . . . as a rare sight" (Lamb, 2002: 669) but when the Head Boy, Henry Orme, decides he disapproves of the school's admitting Juba, the master fears "a mutiny" (Lamb, 2002: 669) and locks both boys in a single room for a month to sort out their differences. The focus in this poem is on the reform of the white boy; but the message to any Black British readers is that if you can ignore British prejudice, you will find a place in British society.

What kind of place you might find is suggested in the Lambs' other poem, "Choosing a Profession." In this poem, the adult guardian of a young West Indian Creole is in multiple minds over how best to help her protégée prepare for the world of work. She seems willing to train the boy for any profession; and indeed he has been sent, not to a village school, but to Westminster Prep School—in short, able to follow an academic life, should he so choose. Alas for all the guardian's well-meaning liberalism, the boy finds his own place to be much below her expectations; he wants to join "a troop of chimney-sweeping boys,/With wooden music and obstrep'rous noise" (Lamb, 2002: 669) because they are black like him. Both of the Lambs' poems make fun of the Age of Reason writers (such as Maria Edgeworth) who presumed that children could be taught to make sensible decisions by giving them total freedom of choice at an early age. But, given the time in which the Lambs were producing their poems, the foolish use to which the Black child in the second poem puts the agency given him does not augur much success for the Black child in Britain. Their poetry further showcases British attitudes about the links between class and race, suggesting that Black people choose to remain in low-status jobs because they are enticed by a carefree way of life, even when given the chance to "better themselves" in white British society. Although the Lambs' poetry is unlikely to have been read by many (if any) Black children in the nineteenth century, this idea of Black people as unwilling to try to succeed according to white British standards is something that continued to be a concern, even beyond 1965 when Black publishers began producing literature for Black Britons.

Empire (1850s–World War II)

During the abolitionist period, Black people in England—at least in London—were not an entirely uncommon sight. Freed Blacks frequently became servants, and married other (often white) servants; Black intellectuals, such as

Olaudah Equiano, were celebrated by both the Clapham Sect and Parliament.[2] But following the end of slavery throughout Britain's colonies (the last slaves were officially freed in 1838), the Black British population began to change; ironically, the success of abolition had the effect of turning Britain itself whiter. *Colonial* Blacks might be free, but they were also often poor, and had no need (and sometimes no means) to travel across the ocean to become servants when they could do so for whites in the Caribbean, or indeed, do something entirely different. The fashion for Black servants also faded during the Victorian period. The largest population of Black people in Britain during this time was of sailors, many without families, living in port cities such as Liverpool, Bristol, and Cardiff. Ron Ramdin points out in his history of Black Britain that, after abolition, "Although there were many 'high achievers' in Britain's black communities... the vast majority were working-class, to be found in the docklands of British seaports" (*Reimaging Britain* 95). Black British children were present, but rarely seen outside their own neighborhoods; most visible Black people were adults. The literature produced during this time reflected this; Black British people who appeared in books were generally adults, and Black child readers, when they were addressed at all, were addressed in the colonies.

The stereotype of literature produced for colonial children during the period of high empire is the missionary tract, and there were certainly plenty of those. But alternate literature was also being published for a Black child audience by the end of the century, primarily in the area of educational materials. Thanks in part to those missionaries more and more children in the West Indian colonies were attending school; although many of them learned to read by using cast-off versions of British reading textbooks. Indeed, there is evidence right up through the 1970s of what Ian Smith calls "a fixed feature of English colonial education, Wordsworth's work" ("Misusing Canonical Intertexts" 801). Many West Indians read about hosts of golden daffodils before they read about hummingbirds and hurricanes, but some attempts were made to address West Indian readers. Samuel Jarrett, for example, published *A Catechism of the Discoveries of the West Indies and of North America, compiled expressly for Schools in Jamaica* in 1897. In the preface to the book, he wrote, "This is the first Work of the kind ever published in Jamaica... every West Indian should have a full knowledge of the Discoveries of the West Indies in detail" (Jarrett, 1897: 3). By the end of the Victorian era, at least some authors were recognizing the need for texts that spoke to a specifically Caribbean (if not necessarily Black Caribbean) audience.

Another British scholar who felt that West Indians should have a record of their own history was Walter Jekyll, folklorist and brother to gardening expert Gertrude Jekyll. Walter Jekyll traveled to Jamaica in the late-nineteenth century, and while there he collected folk stories (many of them Anansi stories) from the people he met, attempting to write them down in dialect.[3] Although Jekyll's *Jamaican Song and Story* was published by the (British) Folklore Society in 1907, and contained a long academic preamble by Alice Werner, the idea that these stories were not just an academic exercise was advanced by Jekyll himself in his (much shorter) Preface:

> THE stories and tunes of this book are taken down from the mouths of men and boys in my employ. The method of procedure has in every case been to sit them down to their recital and make them dictate slowly; so the stories are in their *ipsissima verba*. Here and there, but very rarely indeed, I have made a slight change, and this only because I thought the volume might find its way into the nursery. (liii)

Indeed, we know it found its way into at least one Jamaican "nursery," because Walter Jekyll was the tutor of the future Harlem Renaissance poet and novelist, Claude McKay. McKay's early works (prior to his move to New York) reflect Jekyll's tutelage, being written in Jamaican patois about Jamaican subjects.[4]

The nursery is also the best place to find evidence of Black *British* people during this time. While British textbooks and magazines (especially for boys) tended to show Black people as only existing outside Britain, physically apart and intellectually inferior, the explosion of late-Victorian picture books indicated that Black Britons were indeed part of the fabric of British life. As I have written elsewhere (Sands-O'Connor, 2008: 38–39), Edward Lear, in 1846, included a Jamaican in his *Book of Nonsense* (Jamaica being handily rhymed with Quaker); his poem looks at the abolitionists (many of whom were Quakers) and suggests comically that perhaps they were not quite ready for the real-life consequences of their intellectual commitment to freedom and equality.

Later Victorians showed Black Britons more incidentally, but this is not to say accidentally. For example, Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872) included illustrations by the pre-Raphaelite painter and illustrator Arthur Hughes. One of the illustrations, for a poem about what makes the rose blush, shows a Black man in a frock coat, peering up