

Family Name

Heritage, association and representation are only some of the themes present in this new pamphlet of poetry which feature three poets all at the top of their game. Jenny Mitchell, Roy MacFarlane and Zoë Brigley have written poems inspired by the lineage bestowed by names, and how names have affected the lives and the perception of women and black people through a variety of perspectives which vary from the historical, enslavement, exploitation, the fight for liberty and expressions of violence through the theme of **Family Names**.

Explorations of the black experience are expressed by Mitchell and MacFarlane, based both on personal narrative and traced through history. It is a journey of bearing witness, creatively tracing through the body and an inner ancestral consciousness, and the power of the imagination, to make lucid the denigration of being black. It is a painful journey of how language and possession have labelled women as possessions and the black body as less than human.

What does a family name mean, what does it represent, and how does it impact on the lives of those who have to bear that name? There's no easy answer because we know that for a huge body of enslaved Africans, their right to their own name was lost to the ether, and the act of renaming by their enslavers was a further act of possession.

Whilst the lack of liberty applied to enslaved men and women, it also impacted on other non-black women's lives, (still present today where most women still take their husband's name) as considered by **Zoë Brigley**, who focuses on Mary Wollstonecraft, whose work for the rights of women was in direct opposition to the status of women at the time, and whose family name was derived from the Saxons' *wulfstan*, bearing with it many mythical wolf associations. Brigley's first poem references Horace Walpole's description of Mary Wollstonecraft as 'a hyena in petticoats', and traces Mary Wollstonecraft's name through she/wolf mythology defending the right to be wolfish because of the general derisory attitude to women. Mary Wollstonecraft's male ancestors are greedy, drunken and colonial exploiters of land in Australia.

The title of Brigley's poem 'Feminism is for everybody', is a quote from bell hooks who chose to lose the capitals on her name in order to take the focus away from herself and instead focus on the message (of feminism). In her poem Brigley reinforces that Wollstonecraft's practical strategy as an early feminist in a fight for liberty was to include everyone:

...

Not just the rights of women but the rights

of men, the rights of the human.

Brigley is not afraid, however, to look at the problems of Wollstonecraft's feminism, for example the limits of her understanding about the experiences of black women of the era.

There are echoes of Kamau Brathwaite in **Roy MacFarlane's** poem 'Call me by my name' in his invocation and re-imagining, where he acknowledges the existence of the first people of Jamaica/Xaymaca by reclaiming their visibility, names, and language. He calls the Taino people by their original names, (not *arawak* or *carib*) and voices their names for things: *cassava guava manatee*. He lays his first poem 'Past midnight', on one side, urging the reader to look at the placement of the poem from another perspective. (Brathwaite's body of work included the recognition of Caribbean oral language, which he called Nation Language, as well as rejecting some of the tools of empire e.g. the standard way of how text appears on the page.)

In MacFarlane's poem we can hear the famous echo of Brathwaite's proclamation 'the hurricane does not roar in pentameter' as

... the British anglicized the name of Huracan every time he returned, reborn,

re-named; Charlie, Gilbert, Ivan, Dean ...

... harnessed the God of Nature where they woke to see banana and orange trees laying prostrate to an island god

MacFarlane reaches beyond Christian religion to old gods and mythology to summon the demon-goddess Lilith in 'The House that Lilith made' where he imagines the suffering in the lives of women '*will stretch and not be destroyed by their own excellence and existence.*'

In his poem 'to my birth father with no name' he is voicing the voiceless search of the millions of enslaved children, victims not only of separatism, or being treated like animals for breeding, but completely incising from them the names of their ancestral families.

Jenny Mitchell's first poem 'Black Hair' takes us straight to one of the powerful symbols of black women – their hair, and what they have had to endure, both symbolically and in reality, through its negative perceptions. The British/Barbadian poet Dorothea Smartt and journalist and campaigner Emma Dabiri have both written about this subject and it remains highly significant in a range of contexts – how language is used in reference, historically,

stereotypically, and in its portrayal of 'othering'. From the names applied in a museum labelled *bush wool nest*, Mitchell reflects

*... Did a master pull it out,
punishment for burning crop? At night
a woman screamed, scalp alarmed,
forced to make their sacrifice.*

Black women have had to suffer the straightening and loss of their hair by burning the scalp or by application of harsh substances. There is 'good hair' and 'bad hair'. Good hair means it is pliable, and the result of having white ancestors, which down through the years has always been seen as a privilege. The violent treatment given to make hair 'easier to manage' or to fit in with society's expectations, even in the 21st century still bends to the model of Western beauty and is another aspect of the violence and denigration black women are treated with, by partners and society.

Mitchell's poem 'Motherland' is stark, portraying violence as written on the body of a dying mother

*the image of a ship floats along one thigh. Waves crash
in cellulite on either hip beside White Cliffs of Dover.
A hotel near the Harrow Road displays this sign:
No blacks allowed. She has to clean ten rooms,
cannot board with the white maids.*

This violence written on the body, historical and gender-based – is double edged; for being black *and* a woman.

All these poems are striking in their concentration and reportage, in their imaginative approach; in their differences the talent of each poet offers us a unique vision and leaves us to ponder further on our own family names and what tales they have to tell, or what they have left on our own bodies and inner selves.

Maggie Harris, Feb 2024