

WRITERS MOSAIC

Michael Ohajuru

In conversation with Michael McMillan

Michael McMillan (**MM**): How did you come to this, to the project?

Michael Ohajuru (**MO**): Well, it all goes back to my [indeterminable] Open University essay, which I did on the Black Magus, the Black King in the adoration scene in the Bible. And the Black King, there's a, there was an image in Devon, one Black King in Devon, 1520-ish, and I wrote about that. And I just became captivated by the Black King because there's thousands of images of him. You know, all the great artists, Titian, Rubens, they've all done adoration scenes.

MM: This is the Black King from like the nativity scene?

MO: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

MM: Okay. Definitely.

MO: You know, it was complete fiction. Never existed. No Black King ever visited Britain and I... Britain or, or Europe, you know?

MM: Yeah.

MO: It's a made up, fabricated image to fit a narrative about power and status. And I ranted about this in my essay and continued to write for a number of years and, until I got involved with Miranda Kaufmann and we did a thing called *Image and Reality: Black Africans were Renaissance Europe*. This was 2013 or so. 2013. And she, she, in her PhD research, she found 300 plus Black Africans, fleeting, you know, Margarita, Blackamoor buried, people christened and so on. Just, just small references. And she put it together. She backfilled to create their lives. But she just had two images or one image, two images of one man, John Blanke.

There was a series of murals done for the underpass at Tower Hill of the life of Henry VIII. And one of them included a scene from the Westminster Tunnel Hall, which includes John Blanke. And it was done by an artist called Stephen B. Whatley. And he'd done a work for Miranda, a beautiful work, a pencil work.

And I thought, well, maybe I could get a picture of John Blanke, ask him to do one. And he created that first image. It got me thinking, because oh, I thought, well maybe I could get other artists. I liked the idea of the A4, the A4 format and

the black and white. I wanted the black and white images because that's what I could afford.

But also you get the aesthetic. I asked artists, 'Could you do me a... your version of John Blanke?' And I had the idea, could you imagine John Blanke? Because we, this is what we think he looked like because the image is essentially a caricature. It's not really John Blanke, it's an image and impression: a black man blowing a trumpet. Many of the artists took on the challenge.

It started to grow, becoming a bit of an obsession with the artist. And then someone said, 'Can I do some poetry?' And then it just grew. And that's how it started. So, I got the collection. How it became a project was then I thought, well, we got all these artists, well, maybe historians can say a few words.

So, let's get historians to kind of backfill. Like, where did that name come from? Who did he marry? You know, where did he go when he left the court? Because we know, we know from 1507 to what, 1512. But before that and after that, it's literally a mystery.

MM: Yeah. What did he look like?

MO: I'm glad you asked. Check the book out. No, we don't know. We can't... there's a, there's an impression of him.

MM: Right.

MO: But there's no... we have no... there's no sense of, there's no physical... there's no, there's no... no sympathetic...

MM: Representation.

MO: Yeah. No, no. So, you can tell this was the artist representing a Black person the, rather than reproducing.

MM: In that, the great Westminster role, the tournament role, he, the portrait of John Blanke, he has a turban. So, does that tell us maybe he came from somewhere in Europe, Spain, maybe, possibly?

MO: Yeah. Keep going, keep going.

MM: He was a Mormon.

MO: Keep going. Those are all possibilities.

MM: These are all speculation.

MO: Yeah. No, exactly. And that's a key part of the project. And for me, it's that speculation that exists and you can do intelligent, critical thinking.

MM: Yeah.

MO: Reflection, using your imagination. Then well, could he possibly be...?
Because many people cannot imagine a Black Tudor.

MM: And we know about John Blanke because he's in the archive.

MO: Exactly.

MM: So, all we have to do is look, and he's there.

MO: As my mom said, 'What can't speak, can't lie.'

MM: Right.

MO: He's there. The image in the record. Get over it, you know?

MM: Yeah.

MO: We're there. Not in great numbers.

MM: Yeah.

MO: You know, we're not ruling the planet, but we're there.

MM: Yeah. So, I mean, you have, as you say, artists, poets, academics, historians, graphic designers, painters, musicians, are all kind of re-imagining, you know, John Blanke. But do you think it's important for you, as a Black man,

and we can hear your scouser, you know, accent there, do you think it's important for you as a Black man to come to him, to write about him?

MO: Oh, a hundred percent. A hundred percent. Because as my mom used to say, 'It's good to see your face.' You know what I'm talking about, Mike? When you're going somewhere, you don't want to see hundreds and thousands, but just one or two. You nod.

MM: Yeah, yeah.

MO: You, you're the nod. You just, it's good. I mean, I just, it almost became what it is: an obsession. In terms of history, he's, he's, he's not a, he's not a Louis Armstrong.

MM: Yeah.

MO: A Hugh Masekela. You know, he's not changing the planet or the way people perceive, but the fact that he was there, that black trumpet presence in the Royal Court, you can span over those 500 years and the images of Black people in the 18th century, 19th century, right up to the 21st century. And I'm fortunate to have Lawrence Narkhom. He's a, he's a Grenadier Guards trumpeter. He's, he's, he would, he played at Charles III's birthday party. In the same way John Blanke would've played 500 years earlier. He would've played Henry VII's birthday party and other celebrations.

MM: Yeah.

MO: And that continuity, that black presence... now, I'm not a great royalist. I'm not, to be honest with you, but on the other hand...

MM: I won't tell anybody.

MO: No, no. On the other hand, that sense of continuity...

MM: Yeah.

MO: [continuation]... we were here.

MM: Yeah.

MO: Again, not great, but there's a presence.

MM: Quite a few of the artists reference John Blanke in relation to Louis Armstrong. Wynton Marsalis.

MO: Yeah.

MM: Miles Davis. Dizzy Gillespie. Courtney Pine, Shabaka.

MO: Bring it on.

MM: You know?

MO: Yeah, exactly.

MM: So, all about contemporary or modern Black male trumpeters. So again, they are kind of bringing John Blanke from the past into the present.

MO: Exactly.

MM: Coming back to yourself though, coming from Liverpool, how does he, what does he speak to you? What does he say to you?

MO: My father's Nigerian.

MM: Yeah.

MO: My mother was born in England, but her father was from Barbados.

MM: Right.

MO: And her mother was from Ireland.

MM: Yeah.

MO: So, I'm a real child of the colonies.

MM: Yeah.

MO: You know? So when I go to Nigeria, they call me 'Oyibo', the white man. And you may have experienced this yourself when you went to the Caribbean.

MM: I have. I have.

MO: You're, you're the Englishman.

MM: We look alike, don't we?

MO: You're the European, you're the, you know...

MM: That's right.

MO: You're the Englishman. And that sense of, you know, and it took me a long time and now I'm in my seventies. Come to terms, I'm here. I'm British, I'm... This is my home; I live here.

MM: Yeah.

MO: I am me. I'm Black and British.

MM: Yeah.

MO: And I'm not claimed to be anything else. This is who I am. So, it's helped me really galvanize myself.

MM: Yeah.

MO: Put my feet on the ground, say, 'I own this land', not own the land, I'm part of this land. I'm part of Britain. Get over it.

MM: Yeah.

MO: You know?

MM: Yeah. I mean, do, because the reason I ask that, Michael, is that for us as artists, as creatives to have an obsession, we've got to have some personal investment in it, haven't we?

MO: Amen.

MM: And that's why I'm asking you that question. There's something in a sense that we are looking almost for ourselves within the work, aren't we?

MO: Exactly. You know, come on. It's good to see your face. Good to see yourself. Let me turn it around, Michael. If, if there's nothing of the artist in the art, then it's, it's, it's of nothing.

MM: You are obviously dealing with the... the institutions: institutions and academics who, before you came along with this project, might have erased or hidden a figure like, like, John Blanke. I mean, what was the, what were the

challenges dealing with the institutions now who now... were beginning to acknowledge that there was a presence?

MO: You know, I was talking to some friends the other day about this, how we've come such a long way.

MM: Mm-hmm.

MO: Black British history, it's become... almost, it's become normalized. It's become standard and John Blanke is almost a household name. You know, he's a poster boy. He's on the, he's on the front of magazines.

He's been on the BBC news. It's accepted. And many institutions, we go to the National Archive now, there's a page on John Blanke. And I'm very, what I'm very proud of in the National Portrait Gallery, John Blanke is now part of the Tudor Galleries. And that's part that's only thanks to the work of artists like yourself, historians of... who contributed to the Black persons making it real, making it relevant.

You know, I'm part, I'm particularly thinking of Marika Sherwood, stalwart, she's passed away recently. She's a real, real, back in the day person writing about Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism... look, putting Black history or Black British history, empire on the map. And not shouting into the void, but not as well accepted, but we've come a long way now. We've almost normalized our history. So as far as

the institutions, now it's almost become, you know, mainstream. One of my relatives said they, her children were done... did John Blanke in primary school. They did a little session. So it, it's, it's, it's like the [indeterminable], you know?

It's, it's good in parts, you know, but we have come a long way and there's no, literally there's no going back now. There's a cohort of young historians.

MM: Yeah.

MO: Mainly female historians are going to have to, you know.

MM: Yeah, yeah.

MO: Black historians and they're doing some powerful work. We are bringing some extraordinary stories to life. So no, there's momentum there, but it's not as, more is better of course.

MM: Yeah.

MO: We are making, I wouldn't say we're making progress; we've progressed with moving on.

MM: Amongst the kind of many interpretations and reimaginings that you have, one of them that's potentially controversial is the A.I generated image of John Blanke. Now what was the approach there, rather than using a living artist,

for instance? Because that speaks to, you know, A.I generated imagery at this moment.

MO: Well, this is about 18 months ago when we... and A.I just starting. Let me be up... Let me put my cards on the table. I'm committed to A.I as the future. It is, it is here and it's growing and it's changing quickly.

And it seemed, if I was starting the project then, I would've just gone straight to A.I, and I don't think there would've been all these other images. Really.

MM: Really?

MO: I think because it's quite late in the day, the A.I came on the scene.

MM: Yeah.

MO: And so I saw that as, in some ways, you may not agree with this, Michael, but I see that as a natural part of the book. And in fact, that A.I image was hard to generate because we couldn't get it, we couldn't get it a prompt to do what it said it could do. Anyway, so we had to use, not just, we had to use Chat GPT for the words and for the image we used Midjourney.

MM: But what, what, what can A.I give that we as humans can't? I mean, because in a way, what if you are suggesting, if you did the book now, you'd use A.I. Well, where is our human agency in that?

MO: We, we do profiles of an 18th century county sheriff. What did it look like? We build a profile, you know, two, 3000-word profile, and then we put that into... as a prompt to create. And then they do, they create this white guy, then they say, make him black. So they make this black guy from this, from this white guy image. It's an imagine image. And this is where the thought comes from.

You look at that image and say, 'Yeah, that's how I imagine them.' No, it's not. Because images are the key part of the way we work and think.

MM: Mm-hmm.

MO: So the A.I, these recovered images, these created images, these fabricated images, are a way of helping us understand the past and critique the past in terms of, no, that's not it.

MM: But images aren't neutral.

MO: Exactly. No. But then we bring, it's us who brings the confusion and the concern and the worry or the positivity about the image. It's in our head. And it's

in your head. And that's what I think A.I can really help us literally get inside your head. But equally so your imagination and your...

MM: [interrupts] So, do you see A.I as neutral? In the sense that a lot of people have talked about A.I, A.I, artificial intelligence, right, has been, it's embedded... humans create it; but the people who create it are largely white men. So, their own unconscious biases are embedded within the algorithms within A.I. And there is a problem.

MO: No, I get where you're coming from, but I would argue this way. Back in the day, we used to talk about the internet. If it's out there, it's in here. Yeah?

MM: Yes.

MO: And these large language models consume data. They're cons... and they want data. That's where... that's their raison d'être to consume.

MM: Yeah.

MO: So as they consume more, then the more, more, the more Black people [are] involved. So...

MM: [Interrupts] Are you, is that an assumption?

MO: No, it's a fact. It's a fact.

MM: Have more and more Black people.

MO: The one, it could suit it. It'll integrate. How it uses that, it's indifferent. It just puts things together. A then B, it goes on a journey in its own mind to create this image. It has no, there's no malice of forethought. It goes on the journey. In some ways it's indifferent. We bring... this is a negative image; it's what, it's in our head. At the end it's in our imagination. And that's why it's so... it's good in the sense that it can help us to understand ourselves; because they, that's a good black image, it's a negative black image. It's in our... it's, it's a matter of interpretation.

And as, as AI get, as the database gets to get to know more, then I would argue that the, the, this, this idea, they're prejudiced, I think you know, maybe in the early days, but as they got closer, they're better at interpreting.

MM: So what you are saying, it depends on how informed you are in the questions you ask A.I. Because there are many, many instances, Michael, where people have used A.I and the representations that come up are, if not racist, are exclusive. They don't include us. We must actually be critically aware as we move into the future with AI and not kind of be naive and not just say, well actually the machine here is indifferent. No, it's not necessarily indifferent and we have to be critically aware. One of the, for instance, software... software recognition, we know the problem with software recognition, right? Is that statistics have shown

that people of colour have been misidentified. What's that about? This is where I'm going with A.I.

MO: I agree.

MM: Do you see where I'm coming?

MO: I get where you're coming from.

MM: We need to be critically aware.

MO: Okay. Let me answer it in two ways: one, that critical word. Critical thinking is a key part of...

MM: Yeah.

MO: By projecting, your imagination, your, your critical thinking faculties working together.

MM: Mm-hmm.

MO: Is this real? And for me, that's really important. That cha... that makes you not susceptible to conspiracy theories. You question; you challenge them. And that, at the same time, the technology is progressing so fast, the quality of the work it produces is getting better and better. So that, that inability to, to get

black, black faces is getting better. Now then you could argue, I reckon, well, it's the other way. We're going the other way now. They've programmed it that way; someone has done something. Now I believe that that is certainly possible.

MM: Right.

MO: But the technology we have today is sophisticated enough to just to see people as they are because they have the skills with the right lights, even very low lights, and seeing them from different angles. We have the ability to discriminate. And when they don't, then there's, maybe there's something going on. Because as I say, I think these machines are indifferent.

MM: So would you say, Michael, that you're a disciple of modernity in terms of the social progress of machines and technology?

MO: It's the future, get over it. And they say, 'We've got to handle how we work with it.' If you use an artist, you've got a tool there, which is at your disposal to do anything you want. It's a, it's a brilliant tool. Then you have to think, well, where's my value add? What do I bring to it? And this is what I think, this is what, this is me personally.

MM: Well, it goes back to this question, sorry to cut you, it goes back to this question: where is the humanness, the human presence in A.I? Because otherwise, Michael, you know, we can talk about the value and progressive

machines, but what does that then say about us as human beings in terms of our creativity? You know, I work a lot now with students who produce A.I generated essays. They're very clinical, they're very sterile and unhuman. There's no human presence.

MO: You can tell...

MM: There's... that's right. There's no mistakes. So the question is, what do they learn?

MO: I'll give you two points on that one. The first, how students should confront A.I. A.I is there. You've got to get over it; you've got to use it. You've got to find your voice, your way. You've got to find your humanity, whatever that is. And it may be hard in your chosen media, but you've got to find... find into there. The second thing is, and this is what is, this is a bit of my, a bit of emotion on my side, I don't think... There's a thing called genius. You know, when you look at some solutions to great mathematical problems, and we ask them, how did you do that? Well, I just did it. Or Michelangelo when he does the Pieta, how did you do that? Well, I just did it. That sense of... they create something literally out of nothing that we can see. Whereas these, these large language models, the AI models, they, they, they've, they're producing stuff, stuff that's been produced before and what you, you bring to, you put it together in a different way, but it's, it's something that existed before.

So it's creating that something special, that's something different, something genius. And that's the challenge that students have. It's easy for me to tell them. I've, I've talked to lots of them about it, but they've got to find their voice. It's a tool. It's a very powerful tool. But you've got to find how you can use it. You can't deny it.

MM: Mm-hmm. We're going to have to maybe agree to disagree on it, but I'm really, I think it's an important issue to raise, it's an important subject to talk about.

MO: Very.

MM: And it's an ongoing conversation I think we have to have.

MO: Very much.

MM: I mean, one of the easy answers at the moment is immigration and it, the toxic kind of xenophobic kind of response to immigration. And it's like, for our age, it's like, oh, here we go again. It's like, here we go again. A deja vu. And do you think in a sense that John Blanke, the presence of John Blanke 500 years ago talks to the black presence in Britain, which kind of says, actually, we've been here a long time. People would say since...

MO: Amen. Amen.

MM: [Continuation]... since the Romans.

MO: Yeah.

MM: But your contribution said actually definitively, here was a black man, he was part of the Royal Court. He was, he was a musician, a talented musician. He made his own. Yeah, he had a life. He was an individual. Yeah. He was probably free. He probably was a free man.

MO: He was free; he was paid wages.

MM: He was paid wages.

MO: And he left. The king gave him a wedding present.

MM: That's right. So he had his own agency.

MO: Yeah.

MM: And you know, you talked about Afrofuturism in the past, so that kind of sense of the past in the present is really crucial, isn't it?

MO: No, and it's so important, that sense of continuity. We were here and we are here and we will be here.

An invaluable to the Portrait by Yan Marsh, historian, curator. Portraits of non-noble cities in Tudor Britain are very rare because this new form of visual art in the 16th century was aimed at sustaining the fame and power of high-status individuals. Lesser folk might have pictorial images, images in woodcuts or manuscript illustrations, but these are often crude and typically generic representations.

But recognizable figures, the black trumpet in the 1511 tournament room is therefore amazing on many levels. Now, with this, this is John Agard's poem. And respect to John Agard, I can't read it with your intensity or your emotion, but I'll try. *John Blanke* by John Agard. In Norman French, the name has a ring that's nice. Not John the Blanc, Jean Blanc, to be precise. Shall we say a Tudor gentleman of colour or one who brought colour to the Tudor court? What's in the name leaves ample room to ponder. Am I not John White, the Black? The Black John White rolled into one turban. In days when the Henrys ruled the royal roost and the king himself took to the manly joust; I hailed the thrust of lance with trumpet blast. I, the equestrian exotic of the retinue blowing for every pence of my shillings due. Thus, the North African winds had followed me to an England known both as old and merry. Yes, I, whose Moorish skin echoed midnight's key, surveyed from a turban's rainbow, my adopted [indeterminable]. And to those white cliffs, my lips put forth their clarion.

Not quite a fanfare for diversity. Simply doing my bit for pomp and pageantry.
Yet when history's footnotes begin to grow more bold and the heart's tapestry
unrolls its spectrum, here again, my trumpet's dark riffs rising out of vellum. I
love that when he says, 'Not quite a fanfare for diversity. Simply doing my bit for
pomp and pageantry.'

MM: Thank you, Michael

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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