

How do the narrators in “Checking Out Me History” by John Agard and in “The Emigree” by Carol Rumens portray the power and their experiences of identity?

- In “Checking Out Me History”, Agard writes how “Dem tell me... wha dem want to tell me”. The repetition of this phrase suggests the separateness of the education system from the narrator, and his anger about this. The phonetic spelling of “them” and “what” suggests the narrator’s Caribbean roots and forces the reader into saying the poem in Agard’s own accent. This use of language not only further separates the narrator from the reader and his society, but hints at his identity and how he has been selectively taught parts of British history (rather than, for example, “Toussaint” - a prominent figure in black history).
- In “The Emigree” we also get a sense that the narrator is separated from the world she was once a part of. Much like in “COMH”, we see how the narrator has heard news which she has been “told”, giving the reader a sense that the place she comes from is remote or isolated. However, unlike the narrator in “COMH”, this narrator seems happy, as the unhappy news of conflict “cannot break my original view”. She describes a world of a “bright, filled paperweight”, which connotes images of a snowglobe, and the childish fascination and joy this can bring. The word “bright” also introduces the motif of light in the poem, which can often symbolise realisation. “Filled” also suggests that the narrator is full of nostalgic memories surrounding this mystical place. This may make her seem slightly naive to the reader, however it also gives the impression that this place is a large part of the narrator’s identity, and that nothing can change this.
- In comparison, the narrator in “COMH” is mocking of the things that he has been taught about in Britain. These include “1066 and all dat... Dick Whittington and he cat”. This rhyme yokes together this date in history and a nursery rhyme, which could suggest that they are equally unimportant to Agard. Additionally, the phrase “all dat” is dismissive, and suggests that he is sick and tired of hearing about stories that do not relate to his own identity and heritage. This makes British history seem trivial compared to the struggles faced by the heroes of black history.
- However the stories that the narrator in “The Emigree” has been told appear to stick, as she is “branded by an impression of sunlight”. The word “branded” suggests a permanency to this action, almost like she is tattooed with the identity and memories of this place. Additionally, this appears to suggest that her view cannot change, despite the “accusations” she faces by “their free city”. The word “branded” also juxtaposes the positive image of “sunlight”. By returning to this theme of light, Rumens gives a sense that, despite the apparent threats to her freedom, the narrator feels hopeful. This may also imply that the narrator wants to return to the simpler and happier times of her childhood.