Natasha Brown

# Assembly

Presented by: Polina Mackay

**Assembly is Natasha's Brown debut novel, first published in 2021. Set in contemporary London, the book is a first-person narrative by an unnamed narrator who is a young, black British woman working in finance. The narrator is highly aware of the multiple challenges she faces. At work, she is the subject of various micro-aggressions by male colleagues who comment on her appearance, or enjoy telling her that she has been promoted because she ticks all the diversity boxes. In her private life, her seemingly caring and empathetic white boyfriend from an upper middle class family is largely unaware of his own privilege or the difference between the environments they have to navigate every day.**

This short book shows many different forces converging to exact ever greater pressure on the narrator as the narrative progresses. A forthcoming garden party at her boyfriend's parents' country home exposes her to insidious racism and the full force of the class system in British life. She is ever more aware of her place as a privileged servant of the capitalist system that underpinned colonialism and slavery. Most pressingly, she has just been diagnosed with breast cancer. In an existentialist decision, she chooses neither to share this news with anyone in her life, nor to receive what her doctor tells her is essential, indeed life-saving, treatment. The novel is, in part, an extended explanation of how the forces of class, race, and history might make this an empowering choice.

One of the most important features of Brown's novel is the narrator-protagonist's intersectional identity. She navigates multiple identities: as a British citizen, an individual of Black descent, a young black woman working in finance, a person grappling with cancer and someone who is keenly aware of their societal expectations. The book shows us the multiple and complex challenges the character faces in these roles. For example, the narrator is objectified at work by male colleagues who comment on her appearance, describing her hair as "wild" and her skin "exotic" or noting that "her blouse [can] barely contain those breasts" (1). Obviously, this environment makes the context of race, sex and "pretty privilege" in the book directly relevant to the story from the beginning. The narrator's feelings of constant scrutiny, which contribute to her thinking that every day is yet another opportunity to make mistakes, appear as a natural progression of an ongoing broader situation that goes beyond the individual circumstances of this character.

Brown's novel also unpicks the ways in which surveillance affects a person's sense of national identity. She has her narrator say that such an environment is "disorientating, prevents you from forming an identity. Living in a place you're forever told to leave, without knowing, without knowledge. Without history. […] Born here, parents born here, always lived here – still, never from here" (48, 50). These thoughts are indicative of another challenge Brown's narrator is facing: having to internalise and process the wider context of the historical oppression of colonised peoples, and also deal with the disparity between what the colonising power thinks happened and what actually happened. For instance, she notes with some sarcasm the day the HM Treasury account on Twitter tweeted the following message: "Here's today's surprising #FridayFact. Millions of you helped end

the slave trade through your taxes" (this was a real tweet on the 9th of February in 2018, since deleted; 92). However, the narrator feels the weight of the history of European imperialism and slavery very differently, writing that in their most basic sense they boil down to "the nameless, faceless, unidentified (black) bodies, displayed, packed, and chained, side-by-side head-to-toe" (79). This historical context amplifies the contemporary challenges the narrator has to confront, making everyday missteps feel like they are loaded with generations of weight.

Assembly also links the pressure to assimilate to mental health issues within the broader context of colonialism. Quoting bell hooks from the essay "Postmodern Blackness," the novel states, "Per bell hooks: We must engage decolonization as a critical practice if we are to have meaningful chances of survival" (Assembly 86). hooks' argument points to the struggles of decolonising the mind, especially when few black voices are included in the conversation. To this demand to engage decolonisation as a method of understanding knowledge, Brown's response is to question the process altogether. She has Assembly's narrator ask, "How do we examine the legacy of colonisation when the basic facts of its construction are disputed in the minds of its beneficiaries?", the beneficiaries being the white middle to upper class communities of the colonising power that have ripped most of the benefits of colonialism.

This book is also interesting stylistically. As a short novel of 100 pages, which disrupts the prose with gaps in the text, italicised sentences and a poem, it reads like a compressed, edited down narrative that gives the reader merely a snapshot of the hostile environment the novel's narrator has to face in contemporary Britain. Assembly is a political novel that demonstrates the many ways in which intersectional politics amplify the weight of individual societal stressors, such as sexism. The book also offers a political reading of disease when it writes cancer as a metaphor for other kinds of societal malignancies: racism, systemic inequality and the pressure to assimilate.

**LANGUAGE:** English

**PUBLISHER**S: Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, L'altra, Gyldendal, De Geus, Grasset, Suhrkamp, , Astoria, Cappelen Damm, Poznań Publishing House, Tordesillas, Livros do Brasil, Curtea Veche / Byblos, Anagrama, Wahlström & Widstrand, Dusbaz

**CENSORSHIP STATUS:**

Video

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By: Polina Mackay, Marina Protrka Štimec, Mirela Dakić, Magda Potok, Vedrana Veličković, Rahul Putty

Politics of literature • Political novel • Fiction • book club

## Resources for Reading Groups

A key focus of the CAPONEU project has been to produce materials on political novels for community reading groups and to organize book clubs across Europe. This collection brings together resources and reports on those activities which will be useful for anyone who runs or attends a reading group.

Audience: