Abstract
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I like grey, I’m here to stay

John Agard

Dedication:
To the memory of
Paul Edwards &
Aubrey Williams
Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Articles in this journal are refereed. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Word for Windows, Wordperfect or Macwrite saved for PC on PC formatted disc) and should be accompanied by a hard copy, please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.

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John Agard, for 'Remember the Ship', with permission of the BBC, first performed at The Runnymede Conference on Citizenship and Identity: 'Finders Keepers' from Mangoes and Bullets (Pluto, 1985); James Berry, for 'A Schooled Fatherhood', 'Letter to My Father from London' and 'Bluefoot Traveller' from Hot Earth, Cold Earth (Bloodaxe, 1995); Fred D'Aguiar, for 'A Gift of a Rose' from British Subjects (Bloodaxe, 1993); Pauline Melville, for 'Mixed', and 'Hidous Love' from Rented Rooms (Dangaroo Press, 1987); Grace Nichols, for 'Wherever I Hang' from Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman (Virago, 1987); John Figueroa, for 'Christmas Breeze' from The Chase (Peepal Tree, 1992); Beryl Gilroy, for excerpt from Black Teacher (Cassell, 1976); Wilson Harris, for 'A Vision of Aubrey Williams' from Guyana Dreaming, ed. by Anne Walmsley (Dangaroo Press, 1990).

George Lamming and The South Bank, for 'The Coldest Spring in Fifty Years'; this talk was given at the Purcell Room as part of the South Bank Centre's Literature Programme; 'A Brighter Sun: A Celebration of Sam Selvon', 24 June 1995.

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Front cover: Aubrey Williams, 'Harpy Eagle', 1979. With kind permission of Eve and Maridowa Williams

Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal Myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
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INTRODUCTION

In June 1948 the S.S. Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury and 492 Jamaicans disembarked. Between that date and the 1970s, when primary immigration from the Caribbean was effectively terminated, several thousand West Indians came to live in Britain. The Empire was ‘coming home’, claiming rights of abode as British citizens holding British passports. Today there are half-a-million people of West Indian origin or descent living in Britain.

The Jamaican immigrants who came on the S.S. Empire Windrush were obeying traditions. West Indians, historically, have only travelled in order to work. Between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, they had been shipped from Africa and India to the West Indies to work in the plantations. In the period up to the Second World War, they were recruited to build the Panama Canal and to work in the factories of the United States of America. After the Second World War there was great demand for labour in Britain as the nation began to rebuild her broken cities. West Indians were actively recruited to work, through advertisements placed in West Indian journals by London Transport, the British Hotels and Restaurant Association, and similar organizations. They came to work in factories, buses, trains, hotels and hospitals, in jobs traditionally of low status and low pay. And they came with a sense of cultural identification with the Motherland. They saw themselves as British. Their education after all was based on the British system: the books they read (from the Royal Reader to Enid Blyton and William Wordsworth) were books being taught in schools in Britain. Their language was English or English-based; many of their religions (Church of England, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) were derived from Britain and passed on to them by British missionary movements. And the very towns, villages and counties they lived in were named after British places and personalities – for instance, Georgetown, Albion Estate or Brighton village (in British Guiana); Cornwall, Middlesex, Surrey (counties in Jamaica); Barbados, with its Nelson’s Column at the heart of its capital (predating the one in London’s Trafalgar Square) was commonly known as ‘Little England’. The journey to Britain however was a journey to an illusion, for the West Indian immigrants faced the reality of rejection by the Motherland. They may have believed passionately in their closeness and affinity to Britain and possessed a sense of belonging, but the British were equally convinced of their alienness, their otherness.

II

A handful of immigrants had literary ambitions, but they too had to undergo rites of passage on the English factory floor. Both Sam Selvon and George Lamming spent time as common labourers whilst their first novels were being considered for publication. Wilson Harris, between Faber’s acceptance of his Palace of the Peacock and the appearance of the novel, found employment as a factory hand. (V.S. Naipaul was one of the few writers fortunate enough to be exempted from cheap, casual labour. His Trinidad and Tobago Government scholarship took him by plane to England and Oxford).
Still, for all the humiliations endured (for in their countries, both Selvon and Lamming were respected journalists; Wilson Harris was a qualified and experienced land-surveyor), England was an exciting place for any prospective writer, with its several publishing houses, literary journals and significant reading public. One could achieve some degree of originality in England, for apart from Edgar Mittelholzer, no West Indian had established a strong presence (Una Marson’s poetry was practically unknown and grossly undervalued; C.L.R. James was read by a minority). The 18th century English slave narratives by Olaudah Equiano, James Albert Gronniowsaw, and Ottabah Cugoano were long out of print,1 as were Mary Prince’s and Mary Seacole’s nineteenth century autobiographies. The English had long forgotten the continuous black presence in their midst from Elizabethan times. As far as they were concerned, the Windrush brought black people into the country for the very first time. And, as Selvon says in Lonely Londoners, although the post-war West Indians came from different countries, from different ethnic groups and social classes, the English lumped them all together as lowly Jamaicans.

Anne Walmsley, in her comprehensive study of The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972 writes that:

would-be writers arriving in Britain from the Caribbean in the 1950s found a range of opportunities and encouragement open to them, especially if they lived in London. Book publishing was experiencing somewhat of a post-war boom; small, young publishing houses were eager to bring out fresh work by fresh, vigorous new voices from far corners of the Commonwealth, especially those who used English with the fluency, individuality and verve of West Indians. Publishers found a ready market for books about these writers’ tropical home environment and society, despite their containing much implicit, and, especially in the work of Lamming, explicit criticism of colonialism. Books which reflected the new Phenomenon of West Indians making their home in London also found an audience.

Sam Selvon himself spoke of the ‘wonderment and accolade that greeted the boom of Caribbean literature and art in Britain in the early fifties’. Undoubtedly there is much truth in such statements. Between 1952 and 1958 Sam Selvon, George Lamming, John Hearne, Edgar Mittelholzer, V.S. Naipaul and Andrew Salkey, published between them twenty novels, so we can assume that their publishers found sales to be satisfactory. Lamming won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1957, and Naipaul won it in 1959. Naipaul also received, in 1957, the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. Andrew Salkey received the Thomas Helmore prize in 1955 and Sam Selvon was given the travelling scholarship by the Society of Authors in 1958. Such honours were a measure of the favourable reception accorded to West Indian writers in the 1950s, though it has to be said that the experience of the mass of West Indians was very different: anti-black riots in 1958, and radical disturbances throughout the 50s and 1960s made the West Indians feel decidedly unwelcome in Britain.

This pattern of literary achievement and social rejection continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The Brixton and Toxteth riots coincided with some crucial publications and related activities. James Berry’s anthology, News for Babylon (Chatto, 1984), Grace Nichols’ I is a Long Memoried Woman (Kamak House, 1983) and Fred D’Aguiar’s Mama Dot (Chatto, 1985) were landmark publications, as was Berry’s poem ‘Fantasy of an African Boy’ (1984) which won the British National Poetry Prize. Caryl Phillips’ first novel, The Final Passage (Faber, 1985) was published to critical acclaim, winning the Malcolm X Prize for Literature (an
initiative by the radical Greater London Council). Other important works included poetry anthologies edited by Stewart Brown, and Paula Burnett’s monumental *Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* (1986). Writers of an older generation than Nichols, Linton Kwesi Johnson, D’Aguir et al. continued to publish: there was prose by Wilson Harris and V.S. Naipaul, poetry by E.A. Markham and John Figueroa. A spate of new presses arose, to complement the output of Faber, Heinemann and Longman. These presses, (Akira, Hansib, Karia, Karnack House, Peepal Tree) were by and large owned and managed by West Indians. They joined older small presses set up in the 1960s and 1970s to publish and distribute West Indian writing, presses such as Bogle, Dangaroo, L’Ouverture and New Beacon. Eric and Jessica Huntley, John La Rose and *Race Today* Publications did invaluable service to writing by the setting up of the Radical and Black Book Fair, a biennial event held in London between 1981 and 1995, which attracted thousands of potential readers. Finally, the value of British based journals like *Wasifiri, Race and Class, Race Today, The Voice* and *Caribbean Times* cannot be overestimated: they created space for serious critical consideration of the emerging literature, supplementing the work of international publications like *Kunapipi* and *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

In literary terms, the 1990s has been a period of consolidation and steady growth, in line with the more settled mood of the West Indian community. There have been incidents of social disorder (mostly relating to the death in police custody of black men, or to seeming police apathy in solving crimes against blacks, such as the killing of Stephen Lawrence), but on a less violent scale than the 1980s disturbances. Today, people of West Indian origin (by birth or culture) are represented in Parliament, Church, University, Union, Pavilion, Stadium and Media, to a greater extent than before. That Trevor Phillips, a Guyanese journalist and broadcaster (and the first ever black President of the National Union of Students) is being seriously considered for the position of Mayor of London, indicates something of the changed status of West Indians in Britain. That BiD Morris is the popularly elected leader of Britain’s largest and most powerful Trade Union (Transport) indicates something of our progress from the early days of bus-conducting and ticket-collecting. Unemployment, discrimination in housing, and over-representation in penal and psychiatric institutions, continue to erode such progress, but will not stop it. And works of the imagination continue to pour forth from the presses.

NOTES


David Dabydeen
Remember the Ship

John Agard

REMEMBER THE SHIP

As citizen of the English tongue
I say remember the ship in citizenship
for language is the baggage we bring –
a weight of words to ground and give us wing –
as millennial waters beckon wide
and love’s anchor waiting to be cast
will the ghost of race become the albatross we shoot at our cost?
I’m here to navigate – not flagellate with a whip of the past
but again I say remember the ship in citizenship
for is not each member of the human race – a ship on two legs
charting life’s tidal rise and fall
as the ship of the sun unloads its light
and the ship
of night
its cargo of stars
again I say remember
the ship
in citizenship
and diversity
shall sound its trumpet
outside the bigot's wall
and citizenship shall be
a call
to kinship
that knows
no boundary
of skin
and the heart
offer its wide harbours
for Europe's new voyage
to begin

FINDERS KEEPERS
This morning on the way to Charing Cross
I found a stiff upper lip
lying there on the train seat
Finders Keepers
I was tempted to scream
But something about that stiff upper lip
left me speechless
It looked so abandoned so unloved
like a frozen glove
nobody bothers to pick up
I could not bear to hand in
that stiff upper lip
to the Lost & Found
So I made a place for it
in the lining of my coat pocket
and I said
Come with me to the Third World
You go thaw off
Wherever I Hang

Grace Nichols

WHEREVER I HANG

I leave me people, me land, me home
For reasons, I not too sure
I forsake de sun
And de humming-bird splendour
Had big rats in de floorboard
So I pick up me new-world-self
And come, to this place call England
At first I feeling like I in dream –
De misty greyness
I touching de walls to see if they real
They solid to de seam
And de people pouring from de underground system
Like beans
And when I look up to de sky
I see Lord Nelson high – too high to lie

And is so I sending home photos of myself
Among de pigeons and de snow
And is so I warding off de cold
And is so, little by little
I begin to change my calypso ways
Never visiting nobody
Before giving them clear warning
And waiting me turn in queue
Now, after all this time
I get accustom to de English life
But I still miss back-home side
To tell you de truth
I don’t know really where I belaang

   Yes, divided to de ocean
   Divided to de bone

Wherever I hang me knickers – that’s my home.
What I want to do today on the occasion of this celebration of the work of the late Sam Selvon quite simply is to try and locate the context in which this arrival of writers from the Caribbean took place in London in the 1950s. Can you imagine waking up one morning and discovering a stranger asleep on the sofa of your living room? You wake this person up and ask them 'What are you doing here?' and the person replies 'I belong here'. This was exactly the extraordinary predicament quite ordinary English people found themselves in when they awoke one morning and saw these people metaphorically on the sofas of their living rooms and the people – meaning the authorities – who had brought these strangers into the ‘native’s living room’ had not asked permission or invited consultation about this invitation. On the one hand, the sleeper on the sofa was absolutely sure through imperial tutelage that he was at home; on the other, the native Englishman was completely mystified by the presence of this unknown interloper. On arrival we shared the same room in the same hostel and this hostel was the location of many of the scenes of The Lonely Londoners. We maintained a relationship of great comradeship and intimacy until Sam Selvon left some twenty odd years later in 1978 for Canada. But we were on the ship on arrival in Britain; there have been so many convulsions and transformations since this time that there is a whole generation now that finds us very difficult to understand. I know of no one who ever came to London by plane in the time I am speaking about. Also, it was I think absolutely impossible in 1950 within the spaces where we moved to find any Caribbean person who was a grandparent. I never ran into anyone who was a grandparent in 1950. I take it that grandparents are now quite numerous in 1995.

England lay before us not as a place or a people but as a promise and an expectation. Sam and I had left home for the same reasons. We had come to England to be writers and now as we were about to be anchored at Southampton, we realized we had no return tickets. We had no experience in crime; moreover our colonial status condemned us fortunately to the rights of full citizenship – in no circumstances could we qualify for
deportation. There was no going back. And all the gaiety of reprieve which we felt on our departure had now turned to complete apprehension. Like one of the many characters which he has since created, Sam said to me on the deck, ‘Who send me up in this place?’ For it was a punishing wind which drove us from looking at the landscape. An English voice said that it was the coldest spring he had known in fifty years. We believed him, but it seemed very cold comfort for people in our circumstances. I want to make two comments on this: first of all on the English consolation and then on the idea of it being the coldest spring we’ve had in fifty years. The English, who it seemed have had a very long experience of and tolerance of discomfort always try, or used at that time to try, to relieve the distress of strangers. This is what the comment ‘it’s the coldest spring we have had in fifty years’ meant because two years later Sam phoned me and said ‘look you know what a man just told me, “It’s the coldest spring we have had in fifty years!”’, and I would say that for the next two decades of my living in London I had been consoled by a voice that said the same thing. Then there’s that strange question ‘who send me up in this place?’; one finds this kind of question repeated in various ways in his work. It was as though we had no concrete choice to make – there was simply some force at work that sent you up in this place. It is the situation that the ‘boys’ run into all the time in The Lonely Londoners (1956).

The experience of migration here presents an interesting paradox and that is a paradox which is at the heart of the title of my book The Pleasures of Exile (1960) because West Indians were arriving in England with a very strong idea of England and that idea granted by imperial tutelage had a much more powerful influence on many of them – than their experience of the actual reality – which came out later in The Lonely Londoners amongst men who suffered all the hardships of being in Britain but still speak with this affection of not being able to leave the old Britain. It is an aspect of the colonial experience which goes much much deeper than its economic relation. There is a most extraordinary kind of bond that is forged by the history of that relationship and the Caribbean was the most extreme example of the colonial experiment. I remember coming in on what was called the boat-train into Waterloo. You see these buildings, these sort of factories and men are telling each other: ‘Look, that is where we get the Bovril from’, ‘Look, look that is where we get the Ovaltine from’, ‘Look, look, look’, and what was happening there was that they were coming into an immediate contact with all the things they ate or wore in the Caribbean. I think the word used today is ‘consumed’, and the one thing that came as a direct lesson from that was the extent of your total dependence on these places which you were seeing for the first time. ‘Look, look that’s where so and so comes from.’ The other was a very gradual learning of how two sets of people existed in each other’s consciousnesses.
After we split from the hostel, I think Sam was getting a little tired of seeing so much of me and the same was true of me by this time. The business of walking around the town every morning and sometimes with nowhere in particular to go and nothing much appearing to happen became repetitive. We therefore got separate addresses and I lived in a very well located address called 70, Parliament Hill, which was on the edge of Hampstead Heath. There was a man living in this place by the name of Pollard; he was some kind of engineer and he was anxious all week because he was expecting a letter. There was a job involved; Monday came, Tuesday, Wednesday. The letter should have come the week before; Thursday and I was now also expecting a letter. You lived in that kind of expectation. I am not sure where my letter was coming from or why I was expecting a letter and that was that. Every day was a state of emergency - you were expecting a letter. So we would meet on the stairs and he would ask me to look and then one morning, there were two letters. We spotted two letters and he said, 'I see two envelopes, you go'. I said, 'No it's Friday and Friday is not a day for me, you go', and he refused to go. So I went. There were two letters but they were addressed to the same name which was neither Lamming nor Pollard but Singleton whom we had never heard of. When we read the address it was our street alright - Parliament Hill - but instead of the number 70 the number was say X, which must have been Singletons. We were convinced that Singleton had our letters and we had Singletons. So we went to number X, Pollard rang the bell and an old woman came out. She seemed a little afraid of Pollard and that scared Pollard too. While we were trying to explain another old woman appeared. They didn't know anyone by the name of Singleton but they took our names and went to look again. We waited and when they came back an old man was with them. It was a house of old people, now very courteous and willing to help, but our letters were not there. 'So sorry' the old woman said, 'I have looked at all the envelopes that came in for the last few days but I didn't see any black stamps.' Pollard fell about with laughter and I thought that the old woman might have died from a heart attack. Black stamps. We must be clear about her meaning. She didn't simply mean negro, she meant stamps marked Africa or India, China or the West Indies. One kind, honest and courteous old woman had fixed almost two thirds of the World's population with one word. You might say that the old woman was a simple example of ignorance but I maintain that ignorant or not it has fundamentally to do with a particular way of seeing. These are different examples of how you exist in this consciousness.

I remember walking around Chelsea once and being stopped by an old-age pensioner and being asked, how long are you here and so on. He was telling me about these marvellous houses and we had a very fine time talking about the wickedness of the rich; he was poor and he told me about his childhood and so on and I told him about mine. Then he said, 'I
wish you good luck you should be all right' and I said goodbye. It was one of the most cordial and affectionate exchanges and then when I had got, I would say a few feet away, he said, 'Oh, by the way, there is something I wanted to ask you. Do you belong to us or the French?' Well this was 1950 and a Chelsea old-age pensioner but this is what I mean. This man had in the most natural, but you might think most extraordinary way, identified himself completely with the ruling and oppressive class. He had turned the person to whom he was speaking into an object, into one of his possessions. It was a way of seeing which cut right across all barriers of economic categories. But what is very easily forgotten is that this London which I am describing sounds very strange when you look at it today – that London was still a very powerful international political capital.

We are not often aware of the extraordinary speed of events that have taken place in our time. There was no independent black country south of the Sahara in 1950 with the exception of Ethiopia. Tremendous anti-colonial struggle was taking place but it would have almost been possible to find the most optimistic radical in 1950 who would genuinely have believed that South Africa’s apartheid would collapse before the end of the century. That it would collapse, yes, but it would really be crazy and erratic to imagine that within the century. The English press were reporting on a war that was made very horrendous in the 50s. It was a war of independence in Kenya but which was known to the English people as ‘Mau Mau’ and ‘Mau Mau’ was synonymous with cannibal and blood drinking and extraordinary ritual. If you go back and check with the popular press of the 1950s the newspapers reflect this kind of attitude. A dominant debate, if it can be so called in the House of Commons, was the suspension of the Guyana constitution in 1953. The Guyanese had had what was called a free and fair election which was very fair and very free, and the popular political party the PPP had won and ninety days later, the British Government suspended the constitution and imprisoned all the ministers except one. I want to suggest that not only in Moses’ basement room where they are usually discussing certain varieties of hustling but in barber shops and a variety of cells in drama, conversation was dominated by this kind of event which was taking place. This kind of event was feeding and fuelling the feelings of both the English and the West Indians. There was a man – a prolific speaker at Hyde Park and also a Guyanese – who once put the question to a large audience, ‘You know why the sun has never set on the British Empire?’ and the irate English would say ‘Why Why Why Why?’ and he said ‘Because not even God could trust an Englishman in the dark.’ This was a very sinister spectacle because this man had lost four fingers on one hand and that was the hand he always used to gesticulate to the audience, not his good hand. A very extraordinary kind of humour was developing out of these situations. It reminds me of Sam’s work for it was typical of Sam who always turned
things on their heads. He has a character for example – a very strange man who is called Galahad and for some reason which doctors may be able to explain, he is always hot in winter and cold in the summer. In the summer they have to give him vests and wrap him up and in winter all he wants is a night-shirt.

I think that the event that really started to twist feelings was what were known as the Notting Hill riots. 1958 was that critical moment when as it were, the wound opened very wide because attitudes in England on the question of race were very ambivalent. The English never liked this question to be raised explicitly and in any discussion of race relations would find some other term – a euphemism. For example, there was a Jamaican who applied to join the Metropolitan Police. In those days I had never seen a non-white person in most services, not any except maybe in hospitals. Anyhow, this man was asked to come to take the police exams and did very well. The inspector even asked him to tea – he did not just receive the letter giving him his results but was asked to tea. The man told the story of how the inspector congratulated him on his results but then he said, ‘You know, there is something I have to explain which has nothing whatsoever to do with this question of race but your case raises difficulties. We may not be able to have you because if you have noticed on the streets of London you will never see police with any distinguishing facial characteristics – like a scar for example.’ The Jamaican recounted the story marvellously; that he had never been so ‘elevated in Britain’ as by a phrase concerning his face which referred to distinguishing physical characteristics. I have you may think a certain sympathy at waking up on the sofa of decent liberal English people but such people got themselves into a lot of trouble when interviewing young black men for jobs.

It has always seemed to me that there’s a certain dialectic at work in relation to the colonial encounter as it took place in the Metropole. It is very curious that the Metropole was to a large extent responsible for the separation and fragmentation of men and women from these various territories. You could hardly get from Barbados to Jamaica. You could get a lot of trouble going from Barbados to Guyana and so on. The very Metropole had in a way organized and supervised this. It would be at the Metropole that you would see the creation of a regional movement. It is really at the Metropole that a certain type of new West Indian was born not in fact in one of the territories itself but by that extraordinary social movement which took place between Jamaica and Barbados between Trinidad, Guyana and so on in London. It was this encounter – this colonial encounter at the Metropole – which provided Sam Selvon with much of the human raw material of The Lonely Londoners.

Mention has been made of Caribbean writers. It was perhaps the most critical moment in the development of Caribbean literature, particularly aided by the work of Henry Swanzy of the BBC and Caribbean Voices programme (who by the way is still alive and was 80 on the 15th June). It
was a very strange thing that from Jamaica to Guyana, throughout the
islands every Sunday evening, people gathered round a radio to hear
whose work was going to be read from London. It's very interesting here
how culture almost followed the journey of economics. Many of these
stories were written in say Trinidad or Barbados, just like you would cut
the sugar in Trinidad or Barbados, but the stories were not read or heard
in Trinidad or Barbados. The stories were sent to the editor of Caribbean
Voices, as you would have sent the sugar to London to be processed and
returned in crystals. So the stories were processed, too, as it were and
returned to the audience for whom they originally belonged. It was a very
extraordinary but a very fruitful journey. Every what you call major writer
of the region came through these particular channels of writing in the
islands, almost paying to get published in local literary magazines, and
then being taken up by the BBC Caribbean Voices programme and
channelled back to the islands. I don't want to tell too many stories about
Selvon now but I might add that on the BBC programme you didn't only
get paid but you got paid by the minute. Men learnt how to read slowly
and remain convincing, you couldn't appear to be cheating. If you could
stretch a minute and a half to two, it would be the difference between one
and a half and two guineas. If you got a guinea for one minute, it was that
sort of income in a way that made possible the livelihood amongst the
writers. All of my first novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) was written
when I was doing this guinea a minute thing at Oxford Street. I do not
think it could have been written then without that arrangement with
Henry Swanzy.

Linked fairly closely to that period was another major Caribbean writer,
Andrew Salkey who sadly passed away recently. I don't think that
Andrew had any replacement when he was alive in those days, he was
irreplaceable always as a man who had cultivated a capacity for holding
people together, for bringing them into touch with each other. He was
able to bring into the same room men who in no circumstances would
want to share the same space with each other. For Salkey, they came. His
wife was the most gracious hostess. I do not know if you can imagine
Naipaul and Lamming and Mittelholzer in the same space. Well, that was
made possible by Mr and Mrs Salkey. It didn't only bring people together
and hold them together in that way but he made sure that if necessary
everyone would know where to find anyone. If you were trying to find La
Rose and you couldn't find La Rose, you would call Salkey and he would
say 'He is in Trinidad, here's the address and the phone number'. If you
couldn't find X you would phone Salkey and he would say 'He is in
Lagos; the address is ...' There was no corner of the globe that these men
might travel that was not monitored by Andrew. He did it entirely for
them and it was at that time an extraordinary fraternity of young writers
who were purposefully engaged in what they saw as the pioneering work
of the foundations of an important regional literature. Without London it
is very unlikely that any of us would have met and without London and what was called the exile – hence the pleasure – I think it is very unlikely that most, if any, of the books would have seen the light of day. There is a very strange reciprocity of taking and giving in this context between two landscapes and people of the Caribbean made very important discoveries, discoveries that they were not able to make from their base.

They discovered the existence of a white working class. You may find this very strange. I tried to put this down in *The Pleasures of Exile*. I remember returning to England after my first visit back to the Caribbean in 1956. Coming back on the boat, there was a man – a very senior civil servant – on the deck as we were coming into Southampton. He said ‘Look’, I wasn’t clear what he was talking about but he was pointing at a porter because he had never seen a white man carrying anybody’s luggage. ‘Do they let them do that?’ Now this was a very interesting comment because I am talking about a man who would have read Dickens in the Caribbean. He would have passed the Cambridge Senior Certificate reading Dickens but obviously something very important about Dickens had never got inscribed on his consciousness – something about Dickens made him always think that the hand that did labour could not possibly be a white hand. It was one of the most critical moments I had.

I actually am coming to the end of what I want to say today and I want to return to Sam Selvon. There was always something very elusive about Sam – Sam was there and elsewhere and beneath that surface of the prose, that surface that is so funny, beneath that surface of the ‘Kiff-Kiff’ laughter lies a very deep and very persistent melancholy. I regret very much to say that in later days a great distance both personal and spatial seemed to have come between us. We would meet in various places in the Caribbean or in the United States but I felt that he was always withdrawing from any exchange which threatened to be serious. I saw him in Martinique about four months before he died and I wanted to ask him about this withdrawal but I didn’t. It is possible I didn’t want to know and preferred to remember him as the Sam I had always known – very gentle and most generous.

NOTES

1. The day to commemorate the work of Sam Selvon held in the Purcell Room, London’s South Bank on 24 June 1995. The transcript of this talk was edited by Susheila Nasta, organizer of the event.
In November 1954, after a period of eight years as editor of the BBC radio programme *Caribbean Voices*, Henry Swanzy left London for Accra to take up a further appointment in broadcasting. Those eight years established for him a unique position in Caribbean literature. He had presided over a series of regular weekly programmes, at first lasting 20 minutes and then 29 minutes after 1947. These programmes became, perhaps, the most important focus for the development and promotion of the region’s literary output. Swanzy estimated that the programmes’ first six years introduced to its audience over 150 different contributors from the English-speaking Caribbean. In the life of the programme some 400 stories and poems were broadcast. Listeners were offered stories, poetry, plays and literary criticism beamed through the static of the short wave band and intermittently re-diffused by local commercial radio stations. The programme helped to launch the careers of many authors including a number who have achieved international fame as poets, playwrights, artists and musicians; notably, the Nobel Prize winning St. Lucian Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and George Lamming from Barbados, V.S. Naipaul and the late Sam Selvon from Trinidad, Gloria Escoffery, John Figueroa and the late Andrew Salkey from Jamaica, Wilson Harris and Ian McDonald from Guyana and the late E.M. ‘Shake’ Keane from St. Vincent. Two volumes of poetry which had been broadcast on the programme were compiled and edited by John Figueroa.¹

In the Caribbean, the years 1943-1958, the period in which the programme was broadcast, coincided with a peak of nationalist sentiment and activity. These aspirations were gradually given recognition and legitimacy by the British colonial authorities. In 1944, Jamaica obtained home rule, Trinidad was granted universal suffrage in 1945; the short lived West Indian Federation commenced in 1958. By the early 1960s, independent island
nations were becoming established in the region as first Jamaica then other islands were granted political independence. Swanzy could have been written off as a white colonial male, intervening in West Indian literary development, an outsider imposing an alien notion of ‘standards’ on a region with which, at the start of his appointment, he was unfamiliar.

However, his departure from the programme brought many messages of appreciation from writers across the Caribbean and in London. In 1955, just after Swanzy left the programme, the *Times Literary Supplement* noted ‘West Indian writers freely acknowledge their debt to the BBC for its encouragement, financial and aesthetic. Without that encouragement the birth of a Caribbean literature would have been slower and even more painful than it has been.’ Edward ‘Kamau’ Brathwaite has claimed that *Caribbean Voices* ‘was the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative and critical writing in English’. George Lamming has suggested that ‘no comprehensive account of writing in the British Caribbean during the last decade could be written without considering his whole achievement and his role in the emergence of the West Indian novel’. V.S. Naipaul has noted that Swanzy brought to the programme ‘standards and enthusiasm. He took local writing seriously and lifted it above the local’. Anne Walmsley the historian of the *Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972*, has praised Swanzy’s pioneering editorship.

How might these plaudits be assessed, especially since the nature of Swanzy’s contribution has, for the most part, remained obscure? To what extent did such an influential programme shape or reflect the pattern of Caribbean literature as it developed? Cobham has analysed the different styles of the editorship of *Caribbean Voices*, contrasting the programmes under the ‘English’ style of Swanzy and the ‘West Indian’ style of the programme under his successor, Naipaul. Figueroa (1989) has explored his perceptions of the influence of ‘Caribbean Voices’ both as a participant and as a chronicler of the poetry from many of the programmes. However, little has been recorded about the direction or form of Swanzy’s nurturing process for Caribbean literature.

The paper that follows provides an exploration of the scope of Swanzy’s achievement. It is argued that two important features, the circumstances surrounding the production of the programme and the strategy he pursued, provided an identifiable intermediary role which gave shape and direction well beyond what might be expected of a radio programme; that is, a mere reflection of developments in Caribbean literature. Additionally, it was a shaping with which authors, for the most part, were in sympathy.

In presenting the argument I draw on published secondary sources and on primary sources. The latter are in the form of previously undocumented communications between Swanzy and his formal agent in Jamaica, Mrs G.R. Lindo; other correspondents in the Caribbean, contributors to the programme in the United Kingdom and BBC archive interviews.
The Opportunity for Shaping
The opportunity for Swanzy to shape developments in Caribbean literature was provided by three important circumstances. One was an effective mechanism for the recruitment of original material. The second was the ability of the BBC to pay for contributions which were used. The third was the considerable level of interest among many writers across the region in writing and in being published. Altogether, these circumstances combined to stimulate a considerable range of contributions for the programme.

*Caribbean Voices* was first broadcast on the BBC West Indian Service in March 1943. The programme was broadcast for 15 years until 1958. The idea for a Caribbean literary programme originated with the Jamaican poet and playwright Una Marson, who was the programme’s first producer. During the Second World War, Marson was central to the production of a programme for West Indian servicemen and women, ‘Calling the West Indies’, which established links with families in their home islands. Jarrett-Macauley suggests that her idea for the programme, *Caribbean Voices*, derived from the wartime poetry programme *Voices*, edited by Eric Blair (George Orwell). Marson produced early editions of *Caribbean Voices* until 1945, when she returned to Jamaica. In the interim, before Swanzy was appointed to the editorship in August 1946, the programme was managed by John Grenfell Williams who established a regional BBC office in Jamaica. He appointed a literary agent, Mrs G.R. Lindo, to stimulate contributions from the region, to act as the contact point for local authors and to disburse local payments to contributors. Before this system was established, however, programmes took the form of readings from work published in papers such as the *Yearbook of the Poetry League of Jamaica*. When Swanzy took over the editorship in 1946, the practice of collating original and unpublished scripts regionally and sending them on to London was established. Twice a month manuscripts were sent to Swanzy in London via Jamaica. There selections were made and edited by Swanzy, and the rest returned via the official agent in Jamaica with comments about their quality, style or relevance for the programme. In 1951, Cedric Lindo, the husband of his official agent Mrs G.R. Lindo, estimated that there were 200 authors on file across the region. In a three year period Swanzy estimated that he had read some 750 manuscripts which had been submitted.

Secondly, the literary world of the region to which the early programmes of *Caribbean Voices* was broadcast was restricted and uneven. Few outlets for publishing existed, those which did exist comprised *Forum Quarterly* in Barbados, *The Beacon* in Trinidad and the *West Indian Review* and *Public Opinion* in Jamaica. Also, some national newspapers in Sunday editions, the *Jamaica Gleaner*, *Trinidad Guardian* and *British Guyana Chronicle*, occasionally provided publishing opportunities. The more regular literary magazines included *Bim* from Barbados, *Kyk-over-al* from Guyana and the intermittently produced *Focus* in Jamaica. There were, thus, few paid outlets or opportunities to be published or to obtain regular, informed
criticism. Two partial exceptions to the latter were the meetings of small groups of culturally minded individuals in self-appointed gatherings within each island and, occasionally, links by post between individuals who knew of each other's literary interest.

By 1948, Caribbean Voices had achieved a degree of popularity. As Swanzy himself noted, in one year: ‘the programme space was doubled: half an hour a week and £30 in fees! But far more than the cash ... the isolated writer could believe that that someone cared.’ Thus, in these ways, the opportunity for the exercise of influence was certainly there. For example, Selvon, an early protégé of Swanzy, noted: ‘The first payment I ever received for my writing was a cheque for two guineas from the BBC’s Caribbean Voices programme produced by Henry Swanzy, which I treasured for months as a marvel before cashing it.’

In 1951, at a PEN International literary luncheon in Jamaica in a talk on ‘Writing for the BBC’s Caribbean Voices’ Cedric Lindo, journalist and husband of the official literary agent, Mrs G.R. Lindo, illustrated the nature of Swanzy’s editorial role. On one hand he described Swanzy through the eyes of aspiring writers as an Olympian figure ‘a hard to please, unpredictable and implacable arbiter safe in the fortress of Broadcasting House thousands of miles away from his baffled and disappointed contributors’. On the other, Lindo however also described the status of the programme in the region as ‘probably the most profitable writing outlet for young writers of the Caribbean’ and ‘of real significance for the writers of this area’. He went on to observe that the programme meant more to writers than a profitable market; ‘those interested in West Indian literature’ he remarked, ‘will have noticed the exodus of many of our best young writers to England and the fact that one of their first ports of call is Mr Swanzy’s office at 200, Oxford Street is proof of this fact’. More significantly, he suggested, Jamaican members of the PEN club in his audience were especially interested in the answer to one question, ‘What does Mr Swanzy want in the way of contributions?’

The Practice of Shaping

Who then was this unpredictable and implacable arbiter, with the opportunity to influence the direction of Caribbean literature? And, indeed, what did he want? Swanzy had the experience and background, the sympathy and generosity to enhance what appeared to him as a variable, if potentially positive, literary environment for Caribbean literature both in the Caribbean and in London. Henry Valentine Leonard Swanzy was born in Ireland in 1915, the son of the Rev. S.I. Swanzy and Joan Frances Swanzy. In 1920, upon the death of his father he moved with his mother to England. He was a gifted student winning a number of scholarships throughout his educational career including a foundation scholarship at Wallington College and a Gibbs University Scholarship at New College, Oxford (where he obtained a first class honours degree in Modern History). His family had a
long association with West Africa. He joined the BBC in 1937 and became a Producer in the General Overseas Service in 1941, making a number of programmes in the 'Empire' field for the BBC. In 1946, he was appointed editor of Caribbean Voices. He brought to the programme editorial skills, considerable knowledge of Africa as well as effective promotional skills and a direct, deep and learned understanding of literature. He combined a self-effacing manner with a clear-sighted approach to his task.

During the time that he edited Caribbean Voices he also edited West African Voices for the Africa Service of the BBC and African Affairs, the journal of the Royal Society of Africa. This experience was combined with a generous spirit which many among the coterie of West Indian writers struggling to survive in London appreciated. Lamming has recalled how,

At one time or another, in one way or another, all the West Indian novelists have benefited from his work and his generosity of feeling ... If you looked a little thin in the face, he would assume that there might have been a minor famine on, and without in any way offending your pride, he would make some arrangement for you to earn ... by employing you to read.14

The knowledge and experience which his task entailed and the ideals which he held out for the programme were studiously played down in public by Swanzy. Although his role as editor of Caribbean Voices provided opportunities for self-promotion, he appeared to prefer to remain in the background, contributing when required but admitting merely to a technical and organizational role. In practice his skills of shaping were expressed more widely through his concern with identifiable standards, through his style of intervention and, directly, through his editing of manuscripts and his initiation of regular critical programmes.

The feature of his editorship which was dominant, however, was his overriding interest in the writers who contributed to the programme and his association with them. Swanzy was of the opinion that writers were important and needed to be nurtured because though they did not necessarily found a culture, they represented the expression of the best thought of the age.15 Among the writers with whom he associated, both in Britain and in the Caribbean, he adopted the role of educator, advocate and collaborator. He was as aware of the needs of those who ‘shine for a season as most people do who are not pretentious and write of what they know’16 as he was of the needs of the ‘stars’.

The term ‘educator’ is intended to reflect a number of approaches or methods of shaping that he brought to the job. These included the establishment of identifiable, metropolitan influenced standards, especially the development of a tradition through the provision of an informed critique both for the writers whose work was broadcast and those which were not; and thirdly, the shaping of a sense of community and ultimately the acceptance of the goal of an elevated literary achievement. These aims are captured in his observation: ‘the purpose of the programme, in so far as it
has a purpose is to attempt to build up some kind of contemporary tradition by the exchange of writings between the islands and at the same time to give the writers the benefit of some of the critical standards of Europe. Of course the relationship is temporary; the real work can only properly be done in the Caribbean itself.\(^7\)

His aims were implemented in a number of ways. Firstly, Swanzy made no secret of what he did want from contributors. His first requirement was that the programme be filled with authenticity and local colour. By local colour he implied not necessarily topographical features but because people write and speak best about the things they have made most their own, which in most cases are all the little details of personal living to which they bring almost automatically the writers discipline of speech and selection.\(^8\)

His first letter to Mrs Lindo, returning refused manuscripts, pointed out what was to him their most important limitation ‘I have been reading scripts which all have something in common, and that is a complete absence of local colour. This seems to me to be the greatest crime in the series unless of course the writer is a genius with a universal message’.\(^9\)

Secondly, he carried through the practice of shaping by establishing a tradition of criticism. Swanzy argued at an early stage in his editorship ‘If this programme is to be really effective in raising the literary standard of Caribbean circles I think it is important to have criticism. The most striking feature of the material I have seen so far, with few exceptions is its unevenness’.\(^10\) A Critics Circle was started in July 1947 which offered reviews of recently published books by West Indian writers. Swanzy himself presented a six monthly review of material broadcast. These broadcasts were often published in the *Sunday Gleaner* in Jamaica and in *Bim*.

Critics were employed from the growing coterie of Caribbean writers resident in London. In addition, Arthur Calдор-Marshall and Roy Fuller, were regular contributors to the programme. One theme of criticism, which Swanzy encouraged, was to point out why a story or poem was published. Early in his editorship he informed Mrs Lindo ‘We don’t want to give the impression that because a poem or short story is broadcast, it is necessarily altogether good. Frequently it is broadcast for one or two virtues which it might be useful to point out.’\(^11\) In time, the circle was occasionally widened, critics Spender and Laski made contributions, the former discussed a selection of poetry, the latter a novel by Edgar Mittelholzer. These critics were introduced to provide links with the wider literary world and, in effect, recognition for Caribbean writers as equals in the metropolis.

Thirdly, Swanzy provided shape to the *melange* of Caribbean writing through his efforts to create a sense of community beyond what already existed in the islands. At a practical level this appears to have evolved through the character of the man and his position rather than being a conscious process. In London, as the circle of Caribbean writers grew in number, it was apparent in his willingness to provide what employment was
available for periodic readings, for participation in critical discussion on the
air and in occasional social gatherings which he organized. Beyond the
programme, he offered practical support, when, for a time in the early
1950s, Sam Selvon and Gordon Woolford’s health declined.

The sense of community he fostered developed in a number of ways. In
London, as the coterie of West Indian writers increased in number during
the 1950s, Swanzy held informal evenings of literary discussion at his home.
West Indian writers from across the region could, for the first time, meet and
enter regular discussions with each other. In an interview for the BBC in
1966, Salkey described these gatherings in the following way.

Henry not only became our patron but our friend. He held tutorials at his house
in Hampstead. He helped us a great deal to meet the critics of the day. He
suggested books and so on ... And a very close compassionate look at our work.
I think this has been invaluable in getting the writers started in writing novels
and plays for the theatre ... Because of Henry’s influence we got to know one
another. I got to know the doyen of West Indian writing, Edgar Mittelholzer. I
got to know people like V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Sam Selvon. We looked
at each other’s work, we all threatened to write the West Indian novel. And of
course there was always Henry Swanzy there to make us realise that there was
more than just passing responsibility to him, the BBC and to our area.22

A geographically wider sense of community of editors grew out of a close
working relationship with Frank Collymore as editor of *Bim*. This link went
far beyond any other link with literary editors in the region. Relations with
the other editors ranged from cool with A.J. Seymour at *Kyk-over-al* to a
suspected hostility from Edna Manley, the editor of *Focus* in Jamaica.
Collymore and Swanzy corresponded regularly between 1948 and 1956.
During this period there developed a long lasting mutual respect,
interdependence and friendship between these two editors. In 1992, Swanzy
expressed the relationship with Collymore in the following way.

Looking back, I do not know which I admire the more, his tastes (which
coincided with mine!) or his magnanimity. Unlike so many literary people, he
was perfectly ready to pass on names of unknown writers, for their sake, and
not his ... So there was a two-way traffic between us: cash and publicity from the
BBC office in Kingston, where Cedric Lindo played a key role, and credit and
permanency from BIM. For good measure Colly’s letters were full of his rich life,
at school, in the theatre, in Barbados, in Dominica.23

Swanzy also initiated a tradition of supplying commentaries to *Bim* and
the *Gleaner* in Jamaica. This practice of publishing half yearly criticism
continued throughout the life of the programme.

For Swanzy radio was a means to the ‘dignity’ of print. In Collymore he
found a like spirit who published selected items which were broadcast and
introduced new writers from the Eastern Caribbean both through their work
and through letters of introduction from Collymore to Swanzy when they
were travelling to England. Lamming, ‘Shake’ Keane and Brathwaite were
all introduced in this way as they made their way to London.

The operation of that community network among these two editors can also be illustrated in connection with the excitement of discovering a new talent. Thus, it was to Swanzy, first, that Collymore wrote when he received from Harry Simmonds, the St. Lucian artist, copies of Walcott's '25 Poems'. The excitement was conveyed in the following way from Collymore to Swanzy.

Now I think I have made an important discovery. Last Monday Harold Simmonds of St. Lucia sent me a recently published volume of poems by young Derek Walcott. Have you heard of him? Walcott, who is nineteen years old tomorrow, writes with remarkable fervour. His literary forbears are obviously Hopkins, Auden and Dylan Thomas, especially the latter, but his work is obviously sincere and wonderfully mature ... I do not know when I have read anything so exciting. I have written Simmons to get more information about him, and to ask him to forward you a copy if he has not already done so.24

The Outcome of Shaping
The first important outcome of Swanzy's intervention was that he stirred a debate about relevance and standards in Caribbean literature which continues to reverberate long after he departed the programme.25 Caribbean Voices has been criticized for its colonial attitude to the region. Lamming identified in the programme a replication of metropolitan colonial relations analogous to the extraction of sugar cane. Thus, the BBC was accused of extracting the raw material of writers efforts in the Caribbean and, in return, the organization offered back to the region and its writers, over the radio, more refined versions of their work.26 However, in contrast, Figueroa suggests that Swanzy's efforts to achieve as wide a literary contribution as possible, from both writers across the region and critics on the programme, disturbed and undermined the more conservative and snobbish colonial literati in the Caribbean.27

Cobham draws on the transcript archives of the programme to argue that the application of metropolitan standards and use of metropolitan critics resulted in some insensitivity to the versatility of Caribbean English language forms.28 She contrasts this aspect of Swanzy's style of editorship with that of Naipaul. The latter, she argued, could advise on and reflect a greater sensitivity to the diverse language forms from the region. In addition, Swanzy has been criticised for giving insufficient recognition during his editorship to writing that emanated from the Caribbean which addressed universal themes.29

His defence of his interest in a local and specific focus was that an identifiable West Indian weltanschaung was in the making and it was inappropriate at that time to publish what would in effect be work indistinguishable from other writing from other parts of the world. Cobham hints that Swanzy's introduction of critics from the Caribbean could be construed as a way to avoid the unpleasantness of English critics rounding
on weak scripts emanating from the region.\textsuperscript{30} An alternative and more positive interpretation of Swanzy’s editorship, accepting the limited English ear for diverse Caribbean forms of English, stems from his feeling for struggling and committed writers and his willingness to support them in a practical way when possible. Lamming himself has recognized, for example, that without the financial support offered by the programme, \textit{In The Castle Of My Skin} would have been difficult to complete.\textsuperscript{31}

A second outcome was a clearing of space in which Caribbean writers could establish a legitimate claim for attention. Swanzy accepted that any intervention of the type that he directed from outside the Caribbean could only be temporary. But, as illustrated in his letter to Fuller, above, the real work of literary development, he recognised, remained to be carried out in the Caribbean itself. In the interim, Swanzy made a clearing by giving priority to the writers and by holding back the tide of commercialism of radio broadcasting so that some writers could break into the wider world of English metropolitan letters. This was an important outcome of his intervention which perhaps is reflected in the high level of appreciation and affection in which he continues to be held by writers of that era.

A third outcome was his influence on the nature of the audience for Caribbean literature. In some respects it is remarkable how little direct discussion there seems to have taken place around the nature of the audience for the programme. Few records appear to exist relating to discussion of the identity, size and interests of the audience. Occasionally, concern was expressed about the problem of rediffusing the programme, but the Caribbean audience appears not to have had a high profile. It is the wider audience which indirectly appears to have received more attention. The introduction of critics and critical metropolitan standards and the promotion of Caribbean writing in Swanzy’s occasional articles all suggest a concern for writers foremost and an unselfish eye on a widening metropolitan market.

By championing the local and specific ways of saying and writing Swanzy made a major contribution to the development and accessibility of regional writing from the English speaking Caribbean to a wider audience. It is this process of shaping in all its dimensions which deserves recognition.

\textbf{NOTES}

The preparation of this paper owes much to the encouragement and constructive criticism of Professor John Figueroa and Dr. Anne Walmsley. Any errors and omissions are those of the author.

\*NB. The Archive referenced in the notes is located in the University of Birmingham library. UB.

17. Henry Swanzy, Swanzy to R. Fuller 3:5:'48, UB Archive*
22. Andrew Salkey, Interview, 16 May 1966, Caversham House BBC Archives.
28. Cobham.
Descending the Stairwell: Dwelling Places and Doorways in Early Post-War Black British Writing

Dwelling places - houses, hostels, basements, bedsits - established themselves as key arenas of contestation in the narration of early post-war black British settlement. It was here that the panics and pleasures surrounding black immigration tended to accumulate and stage themselves. As Britain's doors were opened to its colonies and former colonies through the Nationality Act of 1948, those doors guarding the nation's residential hinterlands were being effectively closed. Housing was, perhaps more than any other threshold in the 1950s, subject to a 'colour bar'. Its fortification could be read in the proliferation of those now hackneyed signs of racial exclusion displayed in the windows of shops, guest houses and hotels: 'Rooms to Let. Sorry, No Dogs and No Coloureds'. Here it was the dwelling place, not the official point of entry, at which the regulation, policing and deferral of black settlement was to be most effectively mythologized. The British homestead took on the significance of a national frontier in this context. Those properties whose thresholds were 'transgressed' by the black settler quickly came to display the symptoms and anxieties being diagnosed more generally by the white national community. The articulation of fears surrounding black sexuality, hedonism and hygiene - in short the pathologising of black settlement in 1950s Britain - was ritualistically structured through the dwelling place.

Housing would persist as a highly charged symbolic venue in the following decades. In 1964, Conservative MP Peter Griffiths won a seat in the Labour stronghold of Smethwick with the unofficial slogan, 'If you want a Nigger Neighbour, vote Labour'. Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' (1968) speech - so often read as the high-tide mark in popular political racism - imagines the colonization of Britain's inner-cities through the invasion and desecration of a seven-roomed house in Wolverhampton, the last white house in the street. In the 1970s, housing remained a key, if diminished arena of contestation. The fiercely fought campaigns of the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG); the criminalization of shebeen culture, and the 'New Cross Massacre' of January 1981, which led directly to the Brixton riots of April, are testament to the continued racialization of
the dwelling place into the 1980s.

This paper is less concerned with that neglected cultural history of the dwelling place however, than it is with the absence of a vocabulary to 'write' it.¹ There is, I would argue, virtually 'no place' for expressions of 'dwelling' within the context of what Stuart Hall usefully calls the 'diasporization' of contemporary black experience.² I take 'diasporization' here to refer to current preoccupations with the black subject as a diasporic, or cosmopolitan migrant subject. In terms of black British discourse this might be said to include Homi Bhabha's interrogations into migrant identity and Paul Gilroy's recent research on the 'Black Atlantic', as well as the fiction of Salman Rushdie and Caryl Phillips. That complex, diffuse and highly influential body of writing has, I suggest, tended to embrace and celebrate a condition of 'homelessness' or 'home as everywhere', while viewing the dwelling place with a certain distaste.³ If, as Helen Tiffin argues, the house is a 'motif of indigenization' in literatures of Independence, the symbolic foundation of communal and national belonging, then the dislocated, uprooted migrant would appear essentially homeless.⁴ This logic needs complicating.

The celebration of homelessness in much black British and migrant discourse of recent years has entailed a forgetting of earlier, alternative strategies and versions of survival in the new homeland. The shifting relationships both to dwelling and dwelling places over the last fifty years have far too often been elided in contemporary criticism and theory, where the migrant subject has tended to be an ahistorical, universal subject. Here homelessness and itinerancy have become constants in the analysis of black literary and cultural production. Within this framework Sam Selvon and Hanif Kureishi, George Lamming and Salman Rushdie can be read collectively as dislocated citizens for whom home is equally elusive.

At stake here is more than a literary emblem, but the forgetting of a particular practice of settlement that was crucial to the formation of communal strategies of black resistance in the 1950s. In what is too often narrated as a 'pre-political' phase of black British history, it tends to be overlooked that it was in relation to the racialized dwelling place that some of the first instances of a black communal politics were to take shape.⁵ The South Asian 'mortgage clubs', Jamaican 'pardner' and Trinidadian 'sou sou' systems were unprecedented in this sense, working as collectives to facilitate property purchase, long before the more coherent mobilizing forces of Black Power got under way.⁶ The struggles by these communal organizations to become housed need accommodating alongside the itinerant agendas of diasporic discourse if this 'other side' of migrant culture is to be told. Dwelling, it is argued here, constitutes a troubling emblem within the context of prevailing diasporic theories: its very 'tenacity' unsettles currently fashionable notions of the rootless, wandering, essentially 'nomadic' migrant subject.
The significance I am attaching to the dwelling place as a symbolic venue sits uneasily in relation to the agendas structuring black British and migrant discourse in the 1980s and 1990s then. Here the sophisticated itinerancy of the 'unhoused' metropolitan migrant carries a degree of prestige that it never did in the 1950s. In comparison with the (no less complex) dwelling place of the pioneering settlers, current emphases on 'homelessness' have become a somewhat privileged mode of locating 'home'. The distaste for the dwelling place that emerges in recent writing can be partly explained by the new lifestyles they accommodate. For example, the all-male gatherings that form a substantial part of the basement culture in writings of the 1950s, have since given way to family lives, frequently divided along gender and generational lines. Here the dysfunctional domestic worlds experienced by Hyacinth in Joan Riley’s The Unbelonging (1985) or Karim in Kureishi’s The Buddha of Suburbia (1990) hint at a much more widespread condition: 'I pulled the curtains on the back garden. The room immediately seemed to contract. Tension rose. I couldn’t wait to get out of the house now, I don’t know why'. And yet Karim’s claustrophobia here is symptomatic of a more general desire in contemporary black British writing, to be ‘always somewhere else’, perpetually journeying in-between destinations.

This paper turns to the literary context of the 1950s and early 1960s in order to recover alternative narratives of dwelling within black British writing. That first wave of cultural production by West Indian artists living in post-war London is instructive here. It is within the rich body of prose fiction left over from this period that some of the most extended accounts of the dwelling place were to appear. Whether in the struggles to find and sustain accommodation in texts like Andrew Salkey’s Escape to an Autumn Pavement (1960), James Berry’s A Man at the Door (1962) and E.R. Brathwaite’s To Sir With Love (1959), or in the basement rooms of George Lamming’s The Emigrants (1954), the dwelling place constitutes a repetitious referent. Samuel Selvon, in particular, was to mark out the dwelling place as a key symbolic enclave in this period. From his reinvention of the basement room as ‘yard’ in The Lonely Londoners (1956), to the housing conflicts in Ways of Sunlight (1958) and The Housing Lark (1965), Selvon’s perspectives form part of a larger discursive response to the dwelling place in black literatures of the 1950s and 1960s:

The question of having a roof overhead becomes very important in a cold country ... From my observation of the immigrants in London, these are the things they strive for most desperately. It also becomes very difficult for them to even get a room to stay in because of social pressure and therefore, it acquires a greater desperation, a greater need and urgency to make sure that you have a room at least that you can return to, that you can at least retire to.

Here Selvon remembers the difficulty of finding a place to live in Britain in
the 1950s, a situation which he recorded in those works listed above. Of particular interest here is the way that he marks out the dwelling place as a locus of ‘return’ and ‘retirement’, as opposed to escape or flight. Like many of his West Indian contemporaries, Selvon viewed the dwelling place as an enclave or sanctuary within a wider, less tenable urban environment.

Consider, for example, the sustaining underground haven that is Moses Aloetta’s basement room in Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners:

Nearly every Sunday morning, like if they going to church, the boys liming in Moses room, coming together for a oldtalk, to find out the latest gem, what happening, when is the next fete ... Always every Sunday morning they coming to Moses, like if is confession, sitting down on the bed, on the floor, on the chairs, everybody asking what happening but nobody know what happening, laughing kiff-kiff at a joke ... How many Sunday morning get-togethers in the room: he must make a joke of it during the week and say: ‘You coming to church Sunday?!’

In contrast to the random, aimless trajectories of the boys as they wander through the streets of London, Moses’ basement exacts a magnetic pull, providing a pattern to their movements. This ‘coming together’ constitutes a kind of congregation: the basement is a ‘church’ with Moses (as his name suggests) presiding over affairs, offering consolation, direction, advice. As the veteran Londoner, or ‘Mister London’, Moses finds himself in the role of ‘welfare officer’. It is here that the gathering exchange memories – the ‘oldtalk’ of the Caribbean, as well as ‘the latest gen’ concerning their new lives in England. Moses’ house becomes the birthplace for a projection and proliferation of narratives that potentially marginalize the London beyond its walls, the repository of a ‘marooned’ Caribbean community.

It was George Lamming’s The Emigrants (1954) however, not Selvon’s London fictions, that provided the most persistently ‘housebound’ narrative of this phase of writing. Published some two years before The Lonely Londoners, Lamming’s was the first post-war black novel to be set in Britain, and yet, unlike Selvon’s work, it remains curiously neglected in available criticism. The Emigrants, I would argue, eludes the dominant vocabularies of black British discourse: it exposes the need to open up enquiries of the drifting migrant to include notions of dwelling. A dwelling is more than a house or habitus in this context – it also connotes the stasis of the verb ‘to dwell’, signifying a poetics of situatedness, positionality and locatedness.

George Lamming migrated from Barbados to Britain in 1950. The Emigrants, his second novel, was also the first to record the experience of post-war Caribbean settlement in England. It describes the journey of a wide cross-section of West Indians: the Governor and Tornado, Trinidadians who both served in the RAF; the Jamaican, Collis, a writer;
Philip, an aspiring law student; Dickson, a school teacher from Barbados. The novel has a tripartite structure, and is split into the following sections: 'A Voyage', 'Rooms and Residents' and 'Another Time'. Of particular interest here is the main body of the section, 'Rooms and Residents', in which London appears through a series of (mostly basement) interiors.

In terms of this substantial 'indoors', I want to concentrate on just two basement dwellings which, in themselves, seem to inform one another: Fred Hill's barber shop and Miss Dorking's flat and hair salon. The barber shop/hair salon are key urban centres in this and other black British fictions (see Larry's barber shop in Salkey's *Escape to An Autumn Pavement* (1960) for a strikingly similar contemporary account). In his essay on 'Black Hair/Style Politics', Kobena Mercer notes the preponderance of barber shops in black neighbourhoods and the possibilities they open for 'expressing the aspirations of black people historically excluded from access to official social institutions of representation and legitimation in urban, industrialised societies of the capitalist First World'. The barber shops considered here operate in this way, to accommodate a communal consciousness and open up territories of black expression. They represent independent, if fragile, urban economies outside the dominant centres of black employment in the 1950s.

The opening section of *The Emigrants* describes a series of horizontal journeys across space, firstly between the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica, Grenada, Martinique and Guadeloupe as the emigrants gather on the Golden Image, followed by their voyage to England and culminating in a train journey from Plymouth to Paddington. In contrast the second section: 'Rooms and Residents', opens with a detailed account of a downward journey into the basement room of Fred Hill's barber shop. This shift from horizontal to vertical trajectories, from 'bearing across' to movement down, indicates a shift in the novel, from surface to depth, translation to etymology, migration to settlement. The novel's subterranean locations are deeply ambivalent spaces, functioning as prisons (underworlds, graves, dungeons, jails); wombs (roots, foundations, sources, embryonic sites that are invested with an immanent potential for change, growth, or 'uprising') and as fortresses (enclaves or sites of resistance). As they gather in these submerged worlds, the emigrants come to occupy, possess and disturb the foundations of the metropolis.

In 'Rooms and Residents', the narrative shifts back and forth between basement, house and hostel. Fred Hill's barber shop, Miss Dorking's flat/hair salon and Tornado and Lilian's bedsit are exclusively West Indian underground territories that are interwoven, almost consecutively, with the homes of the novel's English and anglophile characters: the Pearson's, the Warden's, the Redhead's. Transaction between the black world below and the white metropolis above is an infrequent and always negative experience: at once more difficult and disorienting than that generally
performed in post-colonial migrant writings, as the opening description of ‘Rooms and Residents’ testifies:

The men couldn’t see each other in the dark, but they took it for granted that they were not in the wrong place. When the door closed, blocking the light, the street disappeared like a thief, and the steps led them feebly in a crooked angle along the walls down towards the basement. The change was too obvious for comment, and their silence suggested that the atmosphere had produced a similar sensation in each. The stairs descended uncertainly like raindrops trickling down the wounded face of a rock. The angle sharpened here, the next step was missing, and suddenly like a blow on the head, the foot made a final drop, and the body fought for its balance before preparing to move on. They drew closer now, waiting without a word for someone to explore the dark.¹⁴

Here Lamming dwells on the crooked, convoluted stairway which marks a significant threshold between the white metropolis (above/outside) that the emigrants have just left, and the black world (below/inside) they are about to enter. The winding descent takes the men through darkness, missing steps and unexpected twists and turns. The discontinuous staircase, with its gaps and angles are difficult to traverse and the group’s footsteps describe a hesitant, jerky pathway of stops and starts concluding in a jarring, destabilizing ‘final drop’. During this tentative descent, the men remain totally silent, not one word is exchanged between them. This communicative fracture reiterates the disjointed journey down the stairs. Together, the absence of steps and speech recompose this interstitial location as one of silence, fissures, faults and gaps. This tricky, tense (sub)terrain is more fraught with danger, more difficult to transgress than migrant discourse frequently suggests.

In the introduction to his collection of essays, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha enlists the African-American artist, Renee Green and her imaginative evocation of the stairwell to foreground his thesis on the migrant condition:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial identities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications, opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.¹⁵

Although the liminal staircases of Bhabha and Lamming offer a passage between worlds, the nature of this passage is constructed in very different ways. If for Bhabha the ‘symbolic interaction’ allowed by the staircase offers ‘cultural hybridity’, then for Lamming the staircase is an emblem of ‘imposed hierarchy’: emphasizing rather than deconstructing ‘the
difference between upper and lower, black and white'. The divergent trajectories of these two stairwells, I suggest, signpost the conflicting positions of their two authors. Lamming’s emphasis on borders, roots, etymologies and resistance point to nationalist concerns within the unlikely trope of migrancy. These concerns exceed the cosmopolitan migrant position of Bhabha, whose stairwell’s ‘hither and thither’ is a groping and stumbling in *The Emigrants*. The enlightenment and continuity that the stairway’s ‘connective tissue’ offers Bhabha is darkness and discontinuity for Lamming’s emigrants. The gloomy underworld in which they find themselves brings the ‘movement and passage’ of Bhabha’s staircase to an abrupt halt in ‘an underground that is both prison and hell’. In this novel the rigid demarcation of ‘indoors’ and ‘outdoors’ both recognizes and reverses (the emigrants rarely dwell beyond the *interiors* of this text) the racialized domestic threshold of the 1950s and the ‘colour bar’ that cordons it. As such, these thresholds work outside the terms of Bhabha’s ‘third space’. The cosmopolitan celebrity’s ‘art of translation’ in which, Timothy Brennan argues: ‘the distinction between inside and outside has been obliterated’ and ‘national boundaries are meaningless’ potentially erases the specific historical conditions of the 1950s threshold.

These thresholds become the site of a prolonged narrative focus in *The Emigrants*. So the ‘hard rigid nakedness’ of Fred Hill’s cell-like barber shop, with its door ‘shut tight’, solitary barred window, ‘imperviously cold’ stone floor and air of ‘dampness’ clearly demarcates a carceral space (p. 130). The visit from a policeman, following the arrest of Higgins as a suspected drug pedlar, further marks out the barber shop as jail, a criminalized underworld. As the Jamaican remarks, ‘they think there is some black underground connecting every one of us’ (p. 157). However, the basement room is more than a space of confinement. The doorway that takes the emigrants into the barber’s shop signals a new sense of belonging and inclusion: ‘Tornado had found a knob which began to turn slowly in his hand. He withdrew his hand and stepped aside, and the door slid back’ (p. 157). Here the basement’s threshold performs an act of self-regulation as the room itself admits the men. The ‘crease of light’ that appears from behind the door signifies a salvation that is qualified in the expressions of ‘surprise and rescue’ on the emigrant’s faces (p. 127). The friendly exchanges that follow, along with Fred Hill’s, interminable banter with the customers, ‘his immediate community’, create an atmosphere of exchange and dialogue that is reiterated through the symbolic layout of the room and the reflexive quality of the mirrors and photographs that run around it (p. 128):

They turned to admire the photographs that were stuck on the walls, photographs of an American jazz band whose members had given their autographs to the barber. These faces smiling and expansive betrayed a curious, reciprocal intimacy between them and the instruments that were held
so lovingly to their mouths. The barber felt their admiration, and turned to give information about the different players. (p. 131)

These pictures demarcate a new territory in London. The basement draws together the dispersed representatives of the African diaspora. Gathered within its walls the unlikely West Indian, African and Afro-American congregation comprise a depth of experience and histories in British soil. The 'reciprocal intimacy' that flows between the players and their instruments, exceeds the frames of these photographs, emerging in the 'new intimacy' of the customers, whose admiration for the pictures is returned by the barber's histories of them (p. 135). It is here, beneath the streets of London, that the emigrants reinforce and refine their sense of communal and colonial identity:

'The main historical point o' dis age is dis ... It is de age of colonial concern.'
'Dat's why we in all the colonies will fight,' ... His eagerness to make the point had turned almost to anger. 'Fight,' he added vehemently. 'Tis the time to fight.' (p. 130)

Here Fred Hill asserts the importance of an explicitly politicized group consciousness, while his community of customers listen in 'respectful and approving silence' (p. 130). The barber shop then is much more than a site of incarceration: it accommodates the possibilities of up-rising or revolution.

Indeed the boundaries of the basement, assigned and policed by the West Indian group, are equivalent to frontiers in the novel. Despite the wider sense of urban apartheid around them, this dwelling place appears to practice its own series of exclusions, border definitions and controls. This production of defensible space becomes clear when a policeman arrives:

'Come in,' the barber shouted. The men who were squatting by the door had got up to make room, but no one entered. The barber jerked his head round again and shouted his invitation.
'I doan' think you can hear from outside,' Tornado said ... The men who stood nearest the door agreed.
'Open up there,' the barber said, pointing the scissors from one man to the brass knob that turned the lock. (p. 157)

The doorway that earlier relinquished to Tornado's touch, now becomes a barrier: it is locked. The barber's 'shouted' invitations go unheard on the other side of the door which now establishes a communicative barrier between inside and outside, black and white worlds in the novel, underlining the difficulty of transaction between them. Even when open, the policeman 'remain[s] in the doorway', hesitating on the threshold between territories, his passage momentarily arrested (p. 157). The basement is more than a prison, it is also a fortress. In the subterranean world of Fred Hill’s basement it is, ironically, the policeman who finds
himself subject to the emigrants' collective surveillance in this new Caribbean enclave beneath the metropolis.

From the Pearson's house, the narrative returns to the basement location and another West Indian gathering (this time exclusively female), at Miss Dorking's home/hair salon:

This was a womb which the world (meaning those other than you) was not aware of. The world passed by on the outside, intent or callous, but ignorant of the intimacy and the warmth of this house, in this corner, where those women were seated around a table, a small table with three legs and a rectangular surface, old, polished and efficient. (p. 145)

Again here, there is a strong sense of division between outside and inside worlds. The view from Miss Dorking's window 'was abruptly blocked by houses which came up like a wall between two foreign territories' (p. 151). Just as the black congregation at Mr Hill's are keen to register their difference along with their 'brotherhood', the women speak '[o]ne voice in four or five keys. The incidents varied in four or five, but the results were, in essence the same' (p. 145). Congregating around a small table, there is an 'intimacy' to the women's conversations that is absent at the Pearson's for example (an English couple visited by Collis), where furniture marks individuation, distance, separateness. The sense of community, although not without its tensions, derives in part, from the hostile white environment around them and their shared anxieties of finding a 'decent' partner (p. 149). This is, in contrast to the men at Fred Hill's, who argue over the age of colonial concern and the problem of national identity. Lamming, in reserving the novel's 'major' themes as sites of male enquiry, contributes to what was an overwhelmingly masculinist period of literary production.

Nevertheless these West Indian women do establish effective bonds through a collective remembrance of the Caribbean. This is more than a nostalgic 'look back' to the homeland. As the Caribbean landscape - 'down town Port-o'-Spain', 'Marine Square', 'the Savannah' - begins to accrue, and gain depth within Miss Dorking's basement, the foundations of the white metropolis are symbolically disturbed, forced as they are to house an environment that normally exists out-of-bounds (pp. 145-6). This is reflected in Miss Dorking's use of her rented basement, illegally, as a hairdressers:

You know you ain't suppose to do it without a license, an' I ain't think she got any license. 'Tis different from back home where you could set up a little place an' it ain't nobody's business. Here every damn thing is something for papers, permission and signing here an' there, an' the income tax an' all that. You got to be so careful. (p. 146)

Like the basement rooms of the West Indian couple, Lilian and Tornado, Miss Dorking's flat is structured around an everyday life in the Caribbean.
For example, Lilian moves a bottle from in front of the mirror to a corner: "'Tis better there", she says, "I always hear the ol' people say, never let glass stare glass in the face". The domestic scene evoked from within this basement's walls exists outside the national community of 1950s London, with its pots of boiling rice and pervasive 'odour of onions and garlic' (pp.183-4). In contrast to the Pearson's home which is governed by laws, codes and conventions (a glass of sherry and a stroll in the garden before dinner are routine rituals), Miss Dorking's underworld exists beyond the boundaries of English jurisdiction. This 'little room' is run as it would be 'back home': the basement represents a 'pocket' or enclave that re-houses the Caribbean within the white metropolis.

This is reiterated in the arrival of the mysterious Frederick (a failed African missionary), who the women take to be a policeman and who threatens to violate the subterranean enclave:

He found the knob and turned it, but the door remained shut. It was bolted on the inside. He tried the knob again but no one opened ... Frederick rapped at the door again, while Miss Dorking extracted the rolled strip of brown paper from the partition and peeped through the crease of light. Frederick looked about him, trying to take in the geography of the place, and Miss Dorking saw him clearly. (p. 165)

Like the policeman earlier, Frederick finds his progression arrested at the doorway between symbolic territories: in both cases it is the West Indian community that regulate the borders of their domain, turning the prison into a fortress. It is Miss Dorking who is given the power to police her property and carry out a secret surveillance of its threatened threshold as Frederick struggles to locate himself.

Post-war black British writing then does not simply reverse the figure of the house as it appears in 'national' literatures, redefining it as a motif of dispossession or displacement. The sites of accommodation considered above operate, perhaps unexpectedly, as markers of location, possession, and of belonging. As such, the dwelling place offers a contradictory and challenging emblem within the context of prevailing ideas surrounding diasporic identities. The newly occupied metropolitan residences within black British literatures of the 1950s are not merely 'safe-houses' within a larger, more hostile, or unaccommodating urban environment. They are also private, exclusive and exclusionary territories, West Indian strongholds, 'colonized' sections of London, unfamiliar, unknown and unwelcoming to white Londoners. In this sense, migrant discourse does not and cannot signify solely in terms of the dislocations afforded by translation: the politics and poetics of location, place, position are crucial sites of enquiry in even the most 'mobile' of genres.
NOTES

I would like to thank Alison Donnell for her careful reading and comments on this paper.

1. There is still a good deal of work to be done on the cultural history of the dwelling place, and this paper represents part of a wider block of my research into ‘The Cultural Politics of Dwelling in Black British Discourse – 1948-1981’.
FERDINAND DENNIS

The Black and White Museum

It was originally called The Emporium and while it bore that name it remained a curious but much underused retail outlet on Kingsland High Street. During those early days its proprietor, Papa Legba, could often be seen standing at its glass door looking wistfully at the indifferent passers-by making their way to MacDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Ridley Road market or the shopping arcade. The Emporium’s crowded and untidy window display of books, plaster icons, bottled herbs and lucky charms were not on anybody’s shopping list. Papa Legba was new to the retailing business but he was no fool. Squat and stocky with a complexion similar to the colour of cinnamon bark, he always wore a white ankle length Kaftan; and his thick convex spectacles, slight stoop, huge forehead and an untidy head of grey hair, gave him an air of owlish wisdom. There was substance to this appearance: Papa Legba had travelled to many lands and possessed the gift of tongues. He spoke flawless English, all the major European languages; and so many African languages and dialects that he himself often forgot his knowledge of a tongue until somebody addressed him in it. So, after much thought over many nights, Papa Legba decided that The Emporium’s shortage of customers was due to its lack of a clear-cut identity; so he carried out a number of changes and renamed it the Black and White Museum.

Within twenty-four hours of effecting this name change Papa Legba’s establishment began to reap the rewards. A steady stream of customers wandered in. They browsed through the books, which were stacked in floor-to-ceiling wall shelves, and ranged from bestsellers like Alex Haley’s ‘Roots’ to antique tomes with titles like ‘Stolen History’ and ‘Narrative of a Survivor of the Middle Passage’; some were brand new, their stiff virginal spines waiting to be broken in by new readers; others were dog-eared with yellowing mildewed pages and reeked of abandonment.

Several notices on the bookshelves invited customers to borrow books for a token fee and proof of their name and address; and promised to secure, for a small deposit, within a month, any book published anywhere in Africa or the African diaspora over the past fifty years; three months for anything older.

But the Black and White Museum was far more than a bookshop. Its back room was a bazaar of African artifacts: ebony masks; statuettes made from ivory, ebony and makonde; lignum vitae walking sticks; malacite brooches,
earrings, necklaces and bracelets; bronze replicas of the Benin mask; fertility dolls from Ghana; clay figures from the Nok people of Nigeria; soapstone carvings from Kenya and Zimbabwe; metal horns from Hausaland; marimbas from Cameroon; cloths with elaborate patterns from the Congo; Lagos and Dakar designed clothes in colours of indigo and gold; and seashell necklaces from a small village on the Guinea coast where it was believed that the shells contained the souls of enslaved Africans who had drowned themselves rather than suffer the horrors of the middle passage. A notice above the doorway leading to the backroom read ‘Please feel free to browse’. Like the other notices, it was signed Mr P. Legba.

Papa Legba showed surprising generosity to these early customers. If a book, a carving or a piece of jewellery caught somebody’s fancy, he charged only what the purchaser could afford. Urging them to take the item, he would beam on these astonished customers a most beautiful smile of perfect white teeth – which were either dentures, expensive crowns or the result of orthodontic knowledge unknown to the rest of mankind – and he would say to these sceptical customers: ‘It’s your history, take it and pay me what you can’.

Soon word of Papa Legba’s kindness began to circulate. But it was satisfied customers who really brought the Black and White Museum fame. Hortense Smith was one of the early enthusiasts. Hortense was a long-suffering Jamaican mother of six children. She chanced up on the Black and White Museum when she was going through one of the periodically difficult phases that had been marking her life since she married Leroy Smith, a shiftless, drunken foulmouth, violent, womanizer. Not being much of a book reader, Hortense wandered to the back of the shop, and there she discovered a small recess crammed with glass jars containing a variety of herbs, barks and powders. According to the information on the jars, there were herbs for physical ailments such as arthritis, lumbago, eczema and psoriasis; dried barks from the baobab fruit for curing emotional problems such as bereavement and troubled hearts. There were toxic powders for eliminating tyrannical spouses or lovers, zombie powder for zombifying your enemy, dried leaves that would give you courage, and herbs that gave you freedom.

Hortense Smith expressed interest in some straightbackgrass, a herb which the label on the jar informed her was particularly effective for reforming wayward husbands. Papa Legba weighed out four ounces on a gold scale and instructed Hortense to grind it up into a powder then mix the powder with her husband’s shedded skin, and boil for three hours. The resultant brew should then be consumed by the subject within the next twenty-four hours. If, after a month, she wasn’t happy with the result – an industrious, faithful, home-loving husband – Papa Legba promised to give her a complete refund.

Hortense Smith returned five weeks later looking younger and happier and gushing with praise for the straightbackgrass she had purchased. It had
not only turned her errant husband into a temperate, affectionate companion, it had made him into something of a sexual athlete who was submissively responsive to the starting pistol of her physical desires. She was accompanied by two friends, Mildred Marshall and Esther Harris, who wanted some of what Hortense had bought, the exact same thing. These satisfied customers became walking, talking adverts for the Black and White Museum.

Soon customers started arriving from all over London. Some days a long queue stretched outside as far as Ridley Road market; people even stood for hours in the rain and the cold for the opportunity to purchase the Museum’s potent panaceas. Naturally, once they were inside the shop many of these customers became curious about its other goods, the books and the African artifacts. And when they had bought their herbs along with, say, an ivory earring or a goatskin drum, some noticed the red arrow pointing to the basement and the words: ‘The Middle Passage’.

Initially only the most intrepid customers ventured down – the slimy, rickety wooden stairs. At the bottom they found hundreds of yards of rough cast iron chain, padlocks, leg clamps, necklocks and neck-rings in various styles, iron masks, cat-o-nine tails, branding irons, wooden clamps and leather thongs, sweat boxes, treadmills and torture racks. Everything was encrusted with dried blood. A notice invited customers to take advantage of a special introductory rate for the ‘Middle Passage Week-End’.

The first fifty adventurous souls, an equal mixture of blacks and whites, had a hell of a time. For forty-eight hours they laid on their backs, head to toe, side by side in a dank, damp, fetid, sub-basement. By some hidden mechanical device, the sub-basement floor simulated the rolling and listing of a slave ship in the middle passage. It was mercilessly hot and every hour on the hour, sprinklers built into the ceilings sprayed the visitors with cold, salted water. And throughout all this the pain-filled voices of men, women and children issued from concealed loudspeakers. Those who needed to urinate or defecate had to do so where they lay. Once a day Papa Legba served a meal of foul-smelling, maggot infested gruel. A few traumatized adventurers emerged babbling in strange languages, some of which defied even Mr Legba’s encyclopaedic linguistic knowledge. To aid their recovery he sold them sachets of dried elephant’s testicles, which he assured them would restore their memory of who they were before the ‘Middle Passage Week-End’. But the majority of people walked away unhurt; they found it a uniquely invigorating, a cathartic experience.

Indeed, one Englishman was so moved that when he had stopped shaking his head and muttering ‘The horror, the horror, I didn’t know,’ he turned to a group of Caribbean men and asked them for forgiveness.

The Trinidadian in the group said: ‘Forgiveness? Sure man. Let we get some girls, a bottle of rum, and go jump up at carnival.’

The Guyanese said: ‘Sure, I’ll forgive you. But we have to negotiate forgiveness. Let’s talk about reparation.’
The Barbadian said, with great nobility and magnanimity: 'That’s history; the soil from which a better tomorrow may grow. There’s nothing to forgive.'

The Jamaican, when asked for forgiveness by the Englishman, said: ‘Forgive you? Me would never forgive you, not on the beaches, not in the fields, not in the hills.’ The Jamaican then threw a wild punch at the Englishman and had to be restrained by his friends.

The Jamaican’s name was Winston Hill and the Middle Passage Week-End was something of a life-changing experience. He gave up his job with British Telecom, bolted some steel doors onto his twentieth floor apartment overlooking Hackney Downs, started growing dreadlocks, and turned his flat into a pirate radio station called Maroons FM. It played nothing but plugs for the Black and White Museum, and Juju, dub and Nyabinghi music interspersed with the terrifying sound of Mau Mau warriors initiating new recruits. Unfortunately, Winston Hill’s Maroons FM went out on the same waveband as Radio Three, and after much protest from that station’s outraged and influential listeners, the authorities started a campaign to close it down, without offending its thousands of black listeners and risking a riot. First they tried to trick him. They wrote to Mr Hill informing him that he would have to move out because they were planning to demolish the high-rise block where he lived. Winston Hill wrote back saying that they should go ahead and demolish the other nineteen floors, and leave him where he was. Eventually, a Chief Inspector Blair Orwell, leading what became known as Operation Big Brother, succeeded in removing Winston Hill from his apartment and silencing Maroons FM. Winston Hill was given a choice between going into a mental asylum or being deported to another country. He chose to be deported to somewhere in Africa, but within a month he turned up at Heathrow airport claiming refuge from the madness he had witnessed in Lagos, Nigeria.

Cyril Baker heard about the Black and White Museum on Maroons FM. A fat timid filing clerk who had daily and stoically endured racial abuses from his colleagues and neighbours, Cyril Baker first visited Papa Legba’s establishment to buy an extract of lion’s liver to give him courage. After several doses had failed to rid him of his cowardice, Papa Legba persuaded him to try the Middle Passage Week-End. It worked. He emerged leaner, fitter and mean; very mean. On his first day back at work Cyril wore a T-shirt with the message: ‘I survived the middle passage, so don’t fuck with me.’ Some months later Cyril gave up his job, became Papa Legba’s unpaid assistant and dedicated his time to publicizing the Black and White Museum.

Cyril’s publicity efforts, combined with those of Maroons FM, brought, so many enthusiastic customers for the ‘Middle Passage Week-End’ that Papa Legba became greedy. He began to ignore the maximum capacity of the sub-basement, which was seventy-five. One weekend he packed three hundred people in there. This feat was achieved by building four new layers of shelves, thus heightening the authenticity of the Middle Passage
experience. Sadly, thirty people almost suffocated to death in one session, forcing the proprietor to once again observe the maximum number. Far from adversely affecting attendance that near fatal mishap blessed The Black and White Museum with notoriety which boosted the number of visitors. Whole families booked in for the weekends and people came back for second and third trips. Like the earliest visitors, they claimed it helped to soothe some troubled part of their psyche. Mr Legba took their money and smiled his beautiful smile.

The impact of the Black and White Museum was felt way beyond its modest High Street site. Children on nearby housing estates replaced familiar games, like doctors and nurses, with new ones, like slave and slavemaster. And it inspired a new style of clothes. Young men and women could be seen standing on street corners in ragged half-length trousers, shredded shirts, iron necklaces that hung down to the ground, leg clamps, and leg chains attached to iron balls or chunks of logs. The wealthier exhibitionists favoured tattered linen and silk, and gold and silver-plated chains. Couples showed their affection for each other by chaining themselves together. The nightclubs now sweated to new dance crazes like the 'Lashing', which involved one dancer holding a cat-o'-nine tails and pretending to whip the other dancer who twisted and writhed in rhythmic pretend agony. Another dance was called 'Escape' and entailed the dancer dashing about wildly with bulging eyes apparently streaming with tears of fear. The strangest of these dance hall trends though, was the Middle Passage Bogle, in which the dancer lay on the floor, hands pressed to his side, convulsed madly and frothed at the mouth and all in perfect timing to the furiously fast, bass-filled music known as jungle.

Now, of course, it's well known that black folk are major trendsetters in western popular culture. What 'Black youths' wear on the streets today are seen on the catwalks tomorrow; the music they listen to in obscure nightclubs are heard on mainstream popshows months later. So it won't surprise you to hear that white folk soon started copying these street trends inspired by the Black and White Museum. An ambitious starlet outraged television viewers when she appeared on an early evening chat show wearing crystal earrings in the shape of Ashanti fertility dolls and a dress of rusting chains which concealed little of her delightful body. That triggered a craze for similarly risqué dresses and skirts in what became known as the 'slave style'. Though more polite circles preferred the euphemism 'ethnic'.

When a disgruntled pop musician branded his forehead with the name of the record company which had tricked him into signing a ten-year contract, the entire music industry was swept with slave fever. Several successful new groups were launched. One consisted of four flaxen-hair young men from Manchester, known as 'Al White and the Oyinbo Posse'. They had an international hit with 'Mother Africa', a terrible ballad lamenting mankind's centuries old exile from the Edenic conditions of the rift valley. Another group, 'Mazungos with Attitude', had a phenomenally huge one-off rap hit
with a repetitive song called 'The Atlantic Crossing'. They subsequently disappeared, leaving rumours that they had drowned themselves in the Atlantic Ocean, though two members of the band were, some months later, spotted in a brothel in Mombassa, Kenya.

The manufacturers of a well-known brand of sports shoes got in on the act with trainers known as 'The Plantation', an especially rugged and heavy footwear which, by some curious device, made a rattling noise as the wearer walked. Not to be outdone, their closest market rivals launched 'The Runaway' with a multi-million pound advertising campaign using Lynford Christos dressed in shredded electric blue lycra tights and wearing the eponymous trainers which were distinguishable from that of their rivals by foot-long chains attached to the heels. On the more expensive version an iron ball was attached to one of the chains.

Meanwhile, back on the streets black folk, perhaps feeling that their culture had once again been stolen, were finding new styles and fashion. The Black and White Museum, the unacknowledged inspiration behind dance, music and clothes styles, suffered a reversal of fortune. Fickle fashion had moved on and Papa Legba was forced to close down. He sold his entire stock to a forward-looking Jamaican Jewish businessman called Carl Spencer Marks, who believed that the wheels of history always repeat themselves, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce and the third time as fashion.

The site where the Black and White Museum once stood is now a huge restaurant specializing in nouvelle soul food. Hortense Campbell is now the Conservative MP for Milton Keynes. Cyril Baker is now head of the Universal African Church of Revelation and Redemption, which has branches in Liverpool, Bristol, Greenwich, and the Shetland Islands. Winston Hill is now, reportedly, an illegal immigrant in Brooklyn, New York, where he belongs to a fast-growing sect which regards Cuba as Zion, Fidel Castro as God, and Bill Gates, the head of Microsoft, as the Antichrist. And Papa Legba was last sighted in the Bahamas where he is believed to be investigating the scientific and commercial potential of the humble banana for producing an intelligence boosting drug.
As I was saying ...

'Sorry?'

Yes man, name’s Holt, NJK. *Not* JK Holt, get it? Boy, as I say, you got to show them what we made of, bit of spunk, can’t ever let up; no Sir. Like I remember saying to that boy who favour you, you know, one of them Archibalds from Montserrat; young boy come over in the ‘50s; good family, mother and three sons. Yes man, as I said to young Archibald that day: you are young, you’re going to their schools; show them what you can do. You are the future in this place: leave the past to we. To us. We doing our bit. We cleaning up from behind. Your job is to press on, man. Bruk it up. Used to meet sometimes on a Sunday morning at the Baths. Paddington Public Baths. I call those meetings *strategic* man. Yes, Sir, the boys were serious. Well, there were two types of boys in those days. The Saturday-night Boys at the Palais handing over their money to the women, and the Sunday-morning Boys at the Baths. Some of them miss out. Fraid to show theirselves in public, going to the Baths. Like is their fault the English people and them don’t have bathrooms in the house they renting to black people. And you say to them: no need to shame. Is not you build house without bathroom. The house don’t even belong to you. And even then, you know, I make meself a promise, right there in the Paddington Baths in 1956. Or ‘58. No, it was ‘56 because Nasser had just close the canal and make we proud, man. You could have play cricket in the street in Trafalgar Square: the man stop the English traffic dead; turn off they petrol. Anyway, the promise I make to myself was this: whenever black people start to buy they houses, I going be the one to put in the bathroom. And I start to train meself in the art of bathroom-making. There was a little library at the bottom of Shirland Road; I used to go there at night and look up bathrooms, pore over them. Because I was what you would call a man without skills; except the skills of survival which even now they like to under-rate. I taught myself about dealing with your bath and your Ascot and your plumbing – always remember your waste; you is human, you have to be clean. And then the tiling to top it off. This was a task I set myself, ready to play my part converting the houses that used to be English.
Holt was about to go on, but they were in the launderette, and the young man who favoured Archibald seemed to be in a hurry. Hurry for what? Holt had been around in this country for thirty years and he couldn't see what there was to hurry for now. He was doing a real wash, not like the young fellow who came in only to use the dryer for his jeans and T-shirt and nonsense. Holt had a real wash, most of it belonged to the woman he lived with; he wasn't proud.

But he had wanted to explain to the boy that he wasn't boasting about the early days; he just wanted the young ones to get the picture. When he saw someone bright-looking like this, who could be the age of his son or grandson, he felt an obligation to pass on what he knew. No, the Baths weren't that big a deal; it was only a meeting-place after all, but there the boys somehow managed to lay down plans that put both their character and their future on the line. That's why he said it was strategic. Take for instance the business of First and Second Class. Well, you took it for granted you always ordered a First Class bath, because what you're saying to them is this: I am accustomed to baths. It's my situation in this country in one of your houses that denies me a bath where I live, that brings me here. First Class, please. And double soap and towel. Or two towels and soap. The saggar-boys in their two-tone shoes and Brylcream spending as much at the Palais; and on what?

But you know, the boys didn't stop at First Class, Soap and Towel. Soon, we were all buying two baths, man One for my baby; And one more for the road. But seriously, to demonstrate you were a clean man, you had to buy a First Class bath just to wash out the bath, to wash off the dirt of the last customer, and then you fill up First Class again and bathe. And I tell you one thing, the bath-attendant respect you for it. Because only the boys from home did that. This is a temporary measure, you telling him; this is a half-way house. Believe what you see, not what you read in the News of the World. And like young Archibald say: even the best Romans used to bathe in public.

Holt would have liked to explain how he got side-tracked from bathrooms into another sort of business, but the two people left in the launderette weren't the sort of people he thought he could confide in; so he started taking stuff out of the wash, proud that a woman customer was curious about his mainly women's clothing (and him dressed like a Bank Manager during a boom) something she obviously couldn't get her own man to do.

They used to call him Holt, just Holt – or JK – but that changed; that changed after he opened his shop. The original JK Holt was a West Indian cricketer from Jamaica who was on the edge of Test selection (in fact, he had had a few Tests at home against England and Australia. Then later,
they took him to India and Pakistan. And come to think of it, even he wasn’t that original – he was JK Holt, Jr). So when Holt opened up his shop in Ladbroke Grove in 1957, the boys decided to call him NJK Holt – Not JK Holt, to distinguish him from the cricketer.

He got into the business by accident. One Sunday morning at the Baths, he ran into the boy from Montserrat, one of the Archibalds from Harris’, who said that his family had just bought a house in Bevington Road from an Irishman, and there was a big room downstairs with all sorts of rubbish and an upright piano they didn’t know what to do with – the room, not the piano, for Archibald was a bit of joker – and why didn’t JK, who looked like a bit of businessman, open up a little shop down there? Only problem was it was bang opposite the public loo and they didn’t know whether it was a good thing to sell eatables just opposite where people were coming to relieve themselves.

Young Archibald had seemed reliable enough in other ways because not only had he bought his two First Class baths – catching on immediately – but he had brought his own soap and towel. Holt was more interested in having a go at putting a bathroom in the newly-acquired house, but Archibald said there already was a bathroom in the house; the reason he was at the Baths this Sunday was that they were having a wedding reception at the house later that day, for a cousin; and since so many people – including the helpers – would be wanting to use the bath, he decided to ease the pressure by coming over to Paddington. What with one thing and another, Holt ended up going to the reception at the Archibald house in Bevington Road.

The public loos didn’t look good just outside, and that seemed to rule out any sort of business, even if you weren’t thinking about food. And his business was bathrooms, not food.

But later, when the newly-married couple and most of the guests were gone, the boys who remained drifted downstairs to the big room where a young fellow from Trinidad entertained them on the piano. They were talking about this and that, how life was beginning to pass them by – one fellow had already been in this country eleven years – would you believe it? – and had been in and out of the army, though he had missed the War. Only the students – and maybe the nurses – seemed to know what they were about, no one was actually setting the place alight. The only thing you owned – except in special cases like this house – was the odd second-hand car which Moseley’s men were attacking saying you got it by putting their women on the streets. In the middle of all this – and some really heavy jazz on the piano – the boys insisted that JK open a shop in this very space, selling groceries. Before they said goodnight they helped him to compose the sign for the shop; the only doubt in anyone’s mind being whether the English, so funny in their ways, would come into the shop and buy from one of the boys.

NJK HOLT (Groceries) was a slight mistake as Holt didn’t go in for
groceries right away, but stocked up on Carnation milk and Omo and bags of salt-fish and brown rice and a few other things in tins and tubes that weren’t grocery. Holt was living with an ‘older’ woman at the time called Betty, and it is she who stayed in the shop while Holt went around organizing supplies and advertising by word of mouth. Betty couldn’t read too well and had her own way of pronouncing things, like looking at the label on the milk and saying ‘Coronation’. So NJK HOLT (Groceries) became known as the place where you could get real Coronation milk; and there were jokes, sometimes lewd, sometimes elevated, about ‘Queen Betty’.

It was at least eighteen months before Holt went out of the grocery business, and instead of organizing his bathrooms, had to do all sorts of drudgery to pay off his debts. And on top of everything Betty went and died. No one knew the operation was going to be serious, no one prepared you for it; but you know what these doctors are like, wrong and strong: they’ve got the knife and you’re unarmed.

And is a terrible thing, boy, to have a woman you don’t love die on you like that; it leave you with this thing they have in this country called guilt; boy it eat into you like that dry rot business into an old house. And you try to cut it out and replace this, replace, that, till you don’t know what else to replace. Even if you fit a whole new bathroom you got to have a house to put it in. Time come, boy, you feel like accepting defeat, and just handing over to the new generation, the offspring. Some people lucky to be able to do that. NJK HOLT iii: that would have been nice. But as I say, things take a long time, and before you know what happen, they already calling it the ‘70s; and calling you old.

And boy, it was like there was more deaths in the family; no one much about to share the new jokes, or recall the old ones. Take the new bathroom business, for instance, the Half-Way House: in the old days the boys would have shared the joke that old JK was if not throwing in the towel at least settling for a draw. Or to put it another way: NJK had accepted there was no point in trying to bowl out the opposition; and some of them would have give him hell that in the business of bathrooms he had set his sights lower than in the business with a woman, deciding beforehand not to go all the way (though if the truth be known his new partner, replacing Betty, had developed a way of punishing him just as he had punished Betty, one sister taking revenge for the other – that anyone in his place would have settled for a draw). Even the JK Holt joke seemed stale now, now that all cricket talk was about Viv Richards and Clive Lloyd and the four West Indies fast bowlers. People didn’t even know who JK Holt was. They were asking a man to forget his first family because he happened to be remarried.
Even young Archibald – that was becoming a bit of a joke, a man of his age with a white beard – had gone into decline. Holt sought him out, threw him a bit of a life-line, offered him a partnership in the Half-Way House for old times sake: remember, this was the man who got him started in business; this is the man who used to have ideas on putting the world to rights; on the moon-rockets in the ‘60s and whether the Moon wasn’t some mid-American desert and America and Russia in this thing together laughing at we. This was the man who told you about Vietnam and why African countries should or should not redraw their boundaries. Now, he was into another sort of struggle.

Archibald turned down Holt’s offer of a share in the Half-Way House because his energy was taken up with a woman. That was new. It seems that Archibald and his woman had come together at a level that was not only what you’d call graduate but post-graduate where he was into identifying her needs and fulfilling them and because this wasn’t just old-fashioned sex but something complicated, it turned into a full-time job which left the brother no time for other business and very little for his paying job of teaching in a school.

Holt tried several times to discover the nature of this woman’s needs – because she wasn’t a large lady and she didn’t seem extravagant, but you never know – but Archibald refused to come clean and merely said that his woman’s needs were no different from any other woman’s needs and that his woman was simply teaching him not to be selfish. It was Archibald not Holt who had gone to their schools and universities and maybe they resented you so much for it, they made you sign away the rest of your life like that servicing a woman full of needs, a woman who didn’t seem to have any more needs than anybody else. Holt was grateful that he didn’t have that kind of education and ambition and that the woman he lived with didn’t seem to have that kind of need. Archibald even dressed as if he was doing penance, as if he was still a student – a man with a grey beard – as if he was still going on demonstrations. No one who saw Holt on the one hand, and Archibald on the other, would ever guess which was the teacher fulfilling a woman’s need and which was the plumber in the family.

So Holt wore the tie for him (as long as one of them did it, the pressure eased); wore the tie to his bathrooms, and wore a rose in his button-hole. So they laughed at him. Nice. (If they weren’t laughing at you in this country they were doing something worse: never forget that.) Sometimes he was the funny man in the crowd, patrolling the boundary at cricket, the talking calypsonian; sometimes he was the African, the South American President, his uniform heavy with decoration. Sometimes the threat was more subtle. When it comes in the guise of a woman, a real woman with impeccable taste in bathrooms, what’s a man to do? So one day, this woman, no kidding, comes up and offers her life to Holt. And here’s Holt thinking: no one ever teach me to handle my own life so what
I going do with something really valuable like this? The thought of Archibald helped to clear his head: what sort of servicing did this one want, or need? But you can’t get your mind round that, can you? The enormity of the gift. So different from Holt’s present living-arrangement which was a marriage without foreign risks, where you exchanged gifts you knew the value of. This other thing was like having something you could never own delivered to your house. Made not in any one country. Countless unknown centuries of Kings and peasants putting it together: Here JK. Is yours. Take it. Is not right to tease a man like this. He had already lost one woman to the Health Service and the second one he was making do with also bore the mark of that butcher. He would say No as gently as he could to this new bit of temptation. The little voice that kept saying: ‘JK, Go for it. Go past the Half-Way House’ was drummed out in the jokes and laughter of those who knew him. He wondered how old Betty had managed to pretend not to mind jokes about her Coronation milk.

If he was on the edge of a joke, he would live up to it and dress the part. Hat, umbrella and waistcoat (and a flower in his button-hole) were the uniform of this Master Plumber determined again to maintain the spirit of the Baths; and he paid court to the woman whose gift he had to reject. Naturally, like other people, she had a man somewhere out of sight, so JK was speaking to him, too. JK was redoing her bathroom at the same time as the rest of the house was being renovated; and she was in residence trying to keep it clean. It was a smart, expensive house but a small one and the other workmen (who came dressed in overalls) were putting in new ceilings and making the house smaller.

So Holt, in the spirit of love and regret, observed that workmen should cut away old plaster, not cover it up, not hide it.

And she liked that.

He didn’t like to think of her in this lovely dining-room, the meal laid out, crisp new plaster above her head, but behind that, evidence of discolour, of accident, of rot: an old life.

This was more than she expected.

Apart from other things, if you continued to nail new ceilings to old ones, you would reduce the space for living; it was like what they were doing on the Underground reducing the diameter of the tunnels by up to two feet every time they redecorated. Surely, people must understand the politics of that.

Why are we talking about ceilings? Why are we talking about the Underground?

He apologized at having to take time to change his clothes on coming, on going; and began to wonder if he had been hasty in thinking he could not begin to fill this woman’s needs; and wondered if there was less to it than Archibald had pretended.
At last his washing was done. Everything out of the dryer and folded. It was starting to rain. He’d get a taxi, a mini-cab to take the washing home. Sometimes you were lucky. Last time he called the mini-cab he got his daughter. Her name was Cristobel. Or Mandy. She asked him his profession because now no one was interested in the NJK (even the woman who shared something of his life and was edging him out of it, called him something else). But Holt knew better than to complain of one woman to another.

His daughter said to him that she drove a cab to gain independence. And, in truth, she manoeuvred the car as if she possessed the road. She had a regular job working in Social Services but had been a mini-cab driver in her spare time for six years now.

Holt wondered if he should lie to his daughter, take credit for her, take her back home.

She wanted, she said, to liberate herself from the nonsense with men, and to pay her own way for her travelling, which was her passion. Last year she’d been to Americas for six weeks; the year before – with some women friends – she had gone to the Middle East. This year, it was Athens or Rome. Holt felt that something of the spirit of the Baths was being transmitted through the generations.

Not that it was her ambition in life to be a mini-cab driver.

So true. So true. And yet. As he was saying to that boy – one of our new MPs, you know, boy who used to come to the Baths in the old days: Boy, is not exactly what you want, is not exactly what we want; but you might as well go for it.

The mini-cab came, and this time the driver had a beard.
It is possible to represent or understand the experience forever evoked by that famous image of the S.S. Empire Windrush docking in 1948 in various ways, positive or negative, creative or destructive. One could read it as representing a voyage of discovery offering real opportunities for personal and material enrichment to those West Indians who opted, in Louise Bennett's words, to 'go a foreign/ seek yu fortune', or one could see it as just an extension of the 'Middle Passage' with the migrants still merely economic cogs in the Imperial machine. In truth, of course, the actual experience of just about everyone who came, literally or metaphorically, on that Windrush voyage from the Caribbean to Britain has been a mixture of the positive and the negative. There has certainly been much disappointment, reflected in the pervading sense of having been betrayed – in various ways – by the supposed colonial Mother country that so many of those migrants report. The racism, the exploitation, the appalling ignorance of the realities of Imperial history on the part of British people, the sense of loss and isolation and rootlessness ... all these are well chronicled and must be a part of any account of what it has meant to be a West Indian in Britain through the second half of the century. But the other side of that story; the excitement of 'leaving', of escaping the constraints of small island society into a space of possibilities, and the challenge of making a life – intellectual as well as material – in a new place despite those social and racial barriers ... that side of the story features much less prominently in the literature of exile and accommodation that is the migrant theme in West Indian writing. It is an important element in Sam Selvon's account of The Lonely Londoners 'making life' in the early 50s – the sense of light as well as darkness in his tall tales is in part what convinces contemporary readers of the 'truth' of those novels. But the chroniclers of that experience have, on the whole, concentrated on giving voice to the hassle, the injustice and the pain of the process of claiming that multi-cultural space in Britain.

One of the things that distinguishes James Berry's work from that of those other writers who began to write about the experience of 'settling in' – to use a pretty euphemism – and from most of those Caribbean heritage poets who have come to prominence in Britain through the last two decades, is its essential quality of celebration. It is a celebration tempered by a consciousness of all in West Indian history and the migrant...
experience that would defy celebration, but his urge to find value and sometimes joy in both the remembered life of his rural Jamaican childhood and in his sojourn as a ‘bluefoot traveller’ in Britain through the last fifty years, is the real motive force of his work. It is important to qualify what I mean by this ‘quality of celebration’. I do not mean to suggest that he goes in for simplistic praise songs, nor that he romanticizes either the rural struggle to survive in colonial Jamaica or the bleakness of those early encounters with an unwelcoming Britain, but rather that his instinct is to recognize the possibility in situations rather than to settle for the complaint or the self-righteous, self-pitying expression of anger or protest. Berry celebrates in the same way that Chinua Achebe has argued that he celebrates in his novels of Nigeria. Challenged to justify his use of the term celebration when his novels are full of individuals who are corrupt or weak or seen to fail, Achebe argued that it was in his very portrayal of them as people; flawed perhaps, never quite fulfilling their potential but nevertheless striving, ‘making life’ – to use that phrase again – that he celebrated their being. Similarly Berry celebrates the migrant experience through his sustained exploration of the many dimensions of what it has meant to be a West Indian in Britain, both the good times and the bad. So while he is often – and with justice – critical of the attitudes he finds in Britain (see for example ‘Everyday Traveller’ in Hot Earth Cold Earth, (1995)) he is also both self-critical (there are many poems of doubt and self-scrutiny throughout Berry’s work) and he has sometimes been willing to take unfashionable stances with regard to issues around race and identity in Britain (see for example his poem ‘3 London Blacks’). While he has been very conscious of what it has meant to black in Britain in the last half century he has never been willing to settle for isolation or the brand of black solidarity that amounts to a kind of willed segregation. In all his work – poetic, editorial and as a public spokesman/statesman for black people in Britain, Berry has been engaged in another process of creolization, of bridge-building, of changing the culture of Britain in such a way that he could write, in his introduction to his collection of poems When I Dance (1988):

> When one’s previously excluded cultural experience becomes naturally and properly included in mainstream learning material, one is bound to feel that something validly human has happened to both oneself and the old excluding culture.

Cause for celebration indeed. That rounded view of ‘the people who came’ and the society they came into and helped to change is the essence of his celebration of their experience, neither merely victims nor always innocent of blame themselves, but, to say it again, ‘making life’.

Some of those early poems – collected in his first book Fractured Circles (1979) – chronicling the ‘welcome’ those West Indian immigrants to the London of the 1950s received – seem bleak enough; the doors slammed in
black faces by affronted white landladies, the hustle for work and warmth, the petty and not so petty racism, a real sense of a betrayal by the colonial 'mother country', they are all there. But what his poems of that period also catch, uniquely, is the spirit of adventure and elation that the 'country bwoy' making out in the big city retained, despite all the aggravation. So the 'Migrant in London' declares:

I stan' in the roar, man,
in a dream of wheels
a-vibrate shadows.
I feel how wheels hurry in wheels.
I whisper, man you mek it.
You arrive.

That elation is quickly deflated by his realization of the harsher side of what it means to be a migrant in London:

Then sudden like, quite loud I say,
'Then whey you goin' sleep tenight?' 

The celebration of that man's experience is in the portrayal of both the elation and the despair, the sense of achievement and the sense of isolation. The one without the other would negate the truth of the whole.

In many of the other poems of that period – while they vividly catch the struggle of that time – they also understand that there were two sides to the story and even the outraged, hypocritical landlady responding to the rap on her door by the 'Field man of old empire' turned 'Roomseeker in London' has real fears, has her own illusions. As the poet says, 'His knocks hurt both ways' (Fractured Circles, p. 13). So while the poet's sympathies are clearly with the roomseeker his compassion can encompass, too, the flustered, hidebound landlady, imprisoned by the conventional prejudices of her class and time. When she bolts him out she also bolts herself in and it is the field man who retains his hope as well as his hurt, his dignity as well as the desperation of wondering 'how many more doors' he would have to endure closing in his face. In his highly acclaimed stage and radio play Song of a Bluefoot Man and in his poem 'Bluefoot Traveller' Berry explores the origin of the term 'bluefoot man' in the Jamaican context of village people's suspicion of – and hostility towards – strangers, even if they only came from over the hill as it were:

Man
who the hell is you?
What hole you drag from
...
to come and put body
and bundle down in we village
...
Why yu stop here?
So, without excusing the racism and hypocrisy, he has some understanding of the hostility to ‘strangers’ he encounters in Britain and by resisting the temptation simply to demonize the landlady the poet ensures our engagement – as readers – with the entire scenario and thus with the nuances of the roomseeker’s experience. The effect is to celebrate the migrant’s resilience rather than merely to complain of injustice.

Those are poems of personal encounter, vignettes of the migrant experience, essentially private occasions but celebrated in poetry. Other poems are more self-consciously public, sometimes angry, sometimes assertive but often also celebratory in the sense of validating struggle or ambition or achievement. In ‘Black Study Students’, for example, also in the *Fractured Circles* collection, the poet observes a group of evening class students – he doesn’t say it’s night-school or that the students are grown up men and women rather than children or adolescents, but that is the impression one takes from the poem somehow, perhaps because these students have almost as much to unlearn as to learn – and he marvels at their determination and perseverance. For them this is another voyage of discovery, another migration of the spirit, and much that is discovered is painful: but they are also discovering ‘strange familiar/footways’. The final stanzas of the poem culminate in this awed celebration of their determination to know themselves:

All know they arrive
from abysses to fill
shapelessness with dreams.

They go in pure and religious rage
renewed in a feeling of freedom
to grow.

*(Fractured Circles, p. 64)*

Another, ‘public poem’ is his bitterly ironic, spirit-wounded satire ‘I am Racism’, from the *Chain of Days* (1985) collection, which at first sight offers little to sustain my claims for Berry’s instinct to celebrate. In the poem ‘Racism’ becomes a character that speaks its own credo, congratulates itself on its insidious but ubiquitous presence, its privilege, its authority and perhaps most disturbingly – particularly for someone who grew up in colonial Jamaica and saw its effects on his own father – its naturalization as a kind of common sense even among those who are its victims,

After all
I carry the supreme essence.
I have a position to uphold.
And I well know I am extolled
in secret by nonspecials.
You see I do deserve special rights.
After all I am Racism
But even in that bleak poem, plainly fuelled by Berry’s rage and an immigrant’s sense of civic impotence, is an occasion for celebration; for the poem is of course a critique of racism and its effect is to draw the reader’s scorn on Racism’s blustering, grandiose arrogance. As a ‘nonspecial’ himself the poet’s capacity to mock, to ridicule, to make of that most culpable of materials – the English language – something which damns itself and its putative speaker, is a powerful riposte to the apparent argument of the poem. The significance of that achievement is the greater when we consider the poet’s sense of the colonial language as an agent of subjection, as we shall see when we look at his poems about his relationship with his father.

If he can demonstrate the ways that the English language can be made to damn itself, Berry has also been very much involved in the process by which the Jamaican creole that is one of his own ‘natural’ voices – and which, historically, enunciates its cultural resistance to that ‘standardising’ English – has been validated as a suitable vehicle for a Jamaican/West Indian-British poetry. Already in those early migrant poems the speaking persona’s language established a distinctive way of saying which is both true to the poet’s experience and invokes a whole culture’s cadence. His affection for the life of his Jamaican childhood is largely expressed through dialogues between characters rooted in or displaced from that world. For them there is no other language for the landscapes and experiences of that life than the ‘dialect’/ ‘patois’/ ‘creole’/ ‘nation language’ (whatever the currently acceptable terminology happens to have been!) through which they learned to know the world. One thing that Berry, the migrant, has wanted to do is to demonstrate that language’s capacity to adapt to and accommodate new experiences. So, in the poems of the wonderfully evocative ‘Lucy’s Letters’ sequence (in which Lucy, a long time exile from Jamaica, writes regular letters home to her friend Leela – who has never left the village – about her life in London and her nostalgia for ‘home’) the creolized voice of the more-or-less accommodated migrant in London becomes both the medium and the message:

City speaky-speaky is mixed up
here with bush talk-talk, darlin
an’ with Eastern mystery words

The Lucy poems – which made up a large part of his second collection Lucy’s Letters and Loving (1982) – often move towards conclusions that take the form of Jamaican proverbs, celebrating, again, the culture and its more than ‘folk’ wisdom. It is in the Lucy poems and others that catch the tone of affection, nostalgia and folky humour that Berry is most obviously a praise singer; his evocations of the lighter side of Jamaican rural life are more vivid, more truthful to that will-to-laughter that is – not just romancing it, but is – characteristic of those communities, than anything else in poetry. They are matched only, perhaps, by Olive
Senior's wonderful stories of country life. Of course both Berry and Senior are able to portray that bittersweet humour so well because they understand its sources, know well enough the struggle and the pain and the injustices that are facts of that life but also know that laughter has many functions.

Those qualities are perhaps best represented in the wonderful evocation of flattered outrage that is his 'Dialogue Between Two Large Village Women' in the *Lucy's Letters and Loving* collection. The details of the voice-picture of those two rural matriarchs meeting at a standpipe are picked out in the nuances of their language. Bet-Bet is seemingly outraged but seems very keen to tell her story, to let her friend know both of the cheek of the boy who has propositioned her, but also to let it be known that he found her attractive enough to 'try it on'!

\begin{verbatim}
Vergie mi gal, yu know
wha overtek mi?

Wha, Bet-Bet darlin?

Yu know de downgrow bwoy
dey call Runt?

Everbody know de lickle
forceripe wretch

Well mi dear, de bwoy put
question to mi
\end{verbatim}

(*Lucy's Letters and Loving*, p. 17)

Berry evokes that whole drama and its 'local' context by his precise and confident use of the creole. Vergie's bemused response, 'Wha? Wha yu say?' conveys disbelief, mock outrage and some amazement at the boy's force-ripe mannishness. But there is also - throughout the whole dialogue - some hint of a communal pride in the boy's boldface audacity and the virility of his ambition! The thrust of the poem reminds us that there is a strong strand of sensuality running through Berry's work.

'Dialogue ...' is a kind of honouring of those women and the life they represent in Berry's memory. There are many other such portraits of individual men and women throughout Berry's work: recognizing, acknowledging, honouring their lives. Some are heroes - Paul Bogle, Edna Manley, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela - but most are 'ordinary folk' like Lucy and Leela, like Nana Krishie the midwife and Ol' Tata Nago the healer, the people Berry calls his 'village cousins' and to whom he dedicated *Lucy's Letters And Loving*. He also writes of his family - there are several moving poems about his feelings for his mother - but the most intriguing are the several poems, spanning his whole writing career, that interrogate his difficult relationship with his father.
That hard won, long awaited first collection, *Fractured Circles* is dedicated to 'my father' and one has a sense that the poet is saying to his father, among other things, 'look, I did it, I achieved something, I made something special of myself'. The poem 'Thoughts on my Father' in that collection establishes that this was a complicated relationship. The poem ends with the assertion, spoken, it seems, son to father,

You scar me man  
but I must go over you again and again.  
...  
I must assemble material  
of my own  
for a new history  

(*Fractured Circles*, p. 26)

It's clear that his father and Jamaica are inextricably bound in the poet's memory and imagination; he is 'made' by both and remains in awe of both but equally both represent a destiny he is determined to escape, as he says in a later poem:

I refuse to be Estate 'chop-bush' man  
and a poverty path scarecrow  
('In our Year 1941 My Letter to you Mother Africa', *Hot Earth Cold Earth*, p. 31)

His father is portrayed as a strong, stern man who demands a certain traditional respect within his family,

And I wash my father's feet at sunset  
in a wooden bowl  
('Chain of Days', *Chain of Days*, p. 5)

but who still 'knows his place' in the colonial order and is passive in the face of insult and injustice:

My father stutters before authority  
His speeches have no important listener  
(*Chain of Days*, p. 5)

That suggestion of a kind of shame at his father's failure to make a mark on the world beyond the village begins in the child-who-will-be-the-poet's shock at seeing his father - 'my first lord/my inviolable king' going 'cap-in-hand' to the local white landowner and standing:

Helpless, without honour  
without respect, he stood indistinct,  
called 'boy' by the white child  
('A Schooled Fatherhood', *Hot Earth Cold Earth*, p. 62)

Suddenly 'a black history I didn't know' swamped the consciousness of the black child looking on and his determination to escape the island
because, 'I can't endure like my father', is established. That determination is restated in several poems, often alongside images of his father that recall his broken spirit but also begin to understand the force of the ideology responsible for his apparent passivity. Two generations on from slavery, his father's seeming to be ruled by 'old scars (that) warn you to yield and hide' becomes the spur that drives the younger man to dare to leave, to try and make more of his life than life in the village, in Jamaica, offered:

I refuse
to walk my father's deadness

('In our Year 1941 My Letter to you Mother Africa', Hot Earth Cold Earth, p. 31)

It is interesting that for the boy-who-will-be-the-poet it is his father's lack of words, of a language that will empower him to change the family's lot, that most enrages; that line about stuttering before authority is reinforced in 'New World Colonial Childhood' by the image of him reduced to:

our language master dumb
with forgetfulness, our
captain without compass

(Chain of Days, p. 44)

It is that dumbness, that lack of a voice, that humiliation by the language of the master that most terrifies and inspires the young Berry to break away: elsewhere he writes of the necessity but also the magnitude of that journey,

I must cross our moat of sea,
and I have no way. I must list
lost tracks, must write
my scanning of time, must plant
hot words in ministers like cool
communion bread. Yet I should drown
in language of our lanes.

('Faces Around My Father', Hot Earth Cold Earth, p. 27)

There is an implication that the son was not exactly encouraged in his determination to leave, that the father feels his son's attitudes as a kind of betrayal.

Significantly perhaps it is in a 'Letter to My Father from London' – in which the poet-son begins by describing the great difference between what life is like in the metropolitan centre and anything his father could imagine, constrained as he is by his colonial, village horizons – that we find the harshest judgement on his father's having wasted his life by his failure to challenge that status quo:

You still don't understand
how a victim is guilty as accomplice

(Chain of Days, p. 49)
Such a notion carries over into Berry’s general attitude to life as it is presented in his poetry, that refusal to be cowed into the role of the perpetual victim is the steel in his response to the frustrations of making a life as a black man in Britain.

Although these poems considering his father’s life and its legacy to his son are found right through Berry’s work, they become more explicit and profound as he gets older, culminating in the exploration of that theme as a major element in his most recent collection *Hot Earth Cold Earth*, published in 1995, and mostly written – we can infer – when the poet was himself in his sixties and seventies. The collection is dedicated ‘to the memory of my mother and father’ and both are certainly strong *presences* in the book, focusing the theme of a reconciliation – albeit painful – with the poet’s past. The final reference to his father in the book is in ‘Meeting Mr Cargill on my Village Road’. Mr Cargill, a contemporary of his father’s, meets the poet on the road and praises him for his appearance of good health and worldly success. He goes on to commiserate on the death of the poet’s father and recounts how – despite the son not being there for either the funeral or the Nine Night wake – all the formalities were observed to pay the father due honour –

> everything, everything, happen  
> like yu was here, here on spot  

(*Hot Earth Cold Earth*, p. 67)

So the poet is left both reassured and chastened; but while there is a sense that even in his death his father has reinforced the image of his son as a wayward child who failed to conform to the community’s expectations, there is also a sense in this poem of a kind of completion. The father finally laid to rest in the same patch of earth he had toiled over all his life – ‘we bury him ... under yu mango tree’ – has made his point. His grave is visited by his successful, much travelled, internationally honoured, son - OBE – a man of words who has been driven, in many ways, by his father’s struggle with words. This is a more complex celebration of both struggle and achievement, which recognizes the cost to both father and son of a history which eventually silenced the father but in a certain way gave the son his subject, his necessary anger, his voice. As Berry confesses in ‘Faces Around My Father’,

> I disowned you to come to know  
> thanks to connections that someone may feel.  

(*Hot Earth Cold Earth*, p. 70)

His sense of the force of that colonial ideology which had so distorted his relationship with his father led Berry to investigate its roots in a connection to Africa still ‘submerged’ in Caribbean consciousness. So, as we have seen, early poems like ‘Black Study Students’ responded to the
energy that the communal rediscovery of African history released, while others like the cathartic ‘Reclamation’ from Chain of Days charts a more personal rite of passage. It is a remarkable poem both in its ambition and its achievement. Berry has written elsewhere of his sense, from his early childhood, that something important was missing in his understanding of who he was, some part of the story was not being told. As he puts it in the poem:

Yet there was a knowing I was marooned from. And I didn’t know what or how or why.

(Chain of Days, p. 70)

Recognizing, perhaps after his encounter with those Black Studies students, that he needed to discover and face up to the African dimension in his cultural inheritance, he begins that psychologically daunting journey back through plantation slavery, Middle Passage and further, ‘through change of name/ through loss of tongue/ through loss of face’, until he reaches a place where:

unreachable time has turned familiar voices strange, but kept every face my own

(Chain of Days, p. 70)

Eventually emerging from that psychic encounter with origins back to this old/new world, the poet can assert ‘I’m new spirit out of skin’, can celebrate a capacity to ‘sing an old song like a first song’ (Chain of Days, pp. 72-3).

The exploration of what Africa ‘means’ in terms of understanding both his cultural inheritance and his personal identity has gone on side by side with his interrogation of his relationship with his father and Jamaica. In Hot Earth, Cold Earth, two long poems frame his exploration of that concern: ‘In our Year 1941 My Letter to you Mother Africa’ addresses the spirit of the continent and asks fundamental questions about what the relationship is and how it has evolved –

you sold my ancestors labelled, not got human rights

Will I have to store, or bag-up and walk with, inherited hurt and outrage of enslavement

At the other end of the collection is ‘Reply from Mother Africa’, a poem which Berry tells us in his Preface was a long time coming and ‘when (it) came, its contents were a surprise’ (Hot Earth Cold Earth, p. 10). The
The poem seems to distinguish between Africa as entity – as a place of origin and spiritual sanctuary – and the people of Africa who were corruptible and as mendacious as human beings everywhere. The Africans and Europeans involved in the slave trade, either as warriors or raiders, merchants or sailors, planters or the slaves themselves were involved in something evil designed by men for men which ‘Mother Africa’ was powerless to prevent, the poem seems to argue.

It was a poem expressing his concern with that history – and for Africa in a more political sense – that really brought James Berry to national prominence, when it won the National Poetry Competition in 1981. ‘Fantasy of an African Boy’ is not so much concerned with the African past as with considering the innocent African child’s musing on money as a metaphor for the contemporary relationship between the materially impoverished continent and the affluent West.

We can’t use money to bandage sores, can’t pound it to powder for sick eyes and sick bellies. Yet without it, flesh melts from our bones. (Chain of Days, p. 18)

The concern with Africa and that subtle edge of earned political awareness inform all Berry’s later work and underpin his pivotal role as cultural activist. As perhaps the first black-British poet (though the terminology and the concept is fraught) he has always felt a duty to be to some extent an educator – both in terms of raising consciousness within the black community and of mediating that community’s experience of the wider society. That commitment led to his involvement in producing materials for schools and colleges, his teaching and reading (he has a reputation as an inspirational leader of workshops and writing classes) and his efforts in promoting – and celebrating – the work of other black writers in Britain.

His anthologies of poetry by WestIndian-British (his term) writers, Bluefoot Traveller (1976) and News for Babylon (1984), provided crucial platforms for the work of writers who might otherwise have remained ‘invisible’ and unheard. His coinage WestIndian-British is interesting, carrying as it does a sense of both belonging and difference, and suggesting a genuine engagement between the migrants and the ‘host’ community which has led to the creation of a new – British – language, of new – British – forms of cultural expression. By their success, Berry’s anthologies fundamentally changed both the complexion and the voice of contemporary British poetry.

Given the evidence of a real psychological struggle with the facts of Caribbean history and the poison of colonial ideology that Berry’s poems about his father and Africa reveal, compounded by his personal
experience of prejudice and racism – in Jamaica, in the USA and in Britain – that other poems recall, it is the more remarkable that James Berry should have been able to cultivate this quality of celebration in just about everything he has written. Yet reading through the work as a whole again, that remains the dominant tone, that’s what the poems do – without romanticizing, without leaving out the hurt and the insult and the injustice that is still part of the everyday experience of black people in Britain – but they insist on celebrating the hard won authority to assert, confidently, as the black child’s voice does in his poem ‘One’:

I am just this one.
Nobody else makes the words
I shape with sound, when I talk

(When I Dance, p. 71)

NOTES

1. This essay developed out of an address given at the ‘Celebration Song’ Symposium – held in honour of James Berry’s 70th birthday and to celebrate the award of his OBE – held at the Horticultural Halls, London, in December 1994.

2. This formulation came out of discussion with Ian Diefenthaller, presently working on a PhD study on West Indian-British poetry at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham.

3. James Berry, When I Dance (London: Puffin Books, 1988), p. 12. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.

4. James Berry, Fractured Circles (London: New Beacon Books, 1979), p. 12. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.


6. James Berry, ‘Bluefoot Traveller’ in Hot Earth Cold Earth (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), p. 25. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.

7. James Berry, Chain of Days (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 12. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.

8. James Berry, ‘From Lucy: At School’ in Lucy’s Letters and Loving (London: New Beacon Books, 1982), p. 51. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.

A Schooled Fatherhood

James Berry

A SCHOOLED FATHERHOOD

There in my small-boy years that day couldn’t believe the shock, the blow that undid me, seeing him abused, reduced, suddenly. Helpless, without honour without respect, he stood indistinct, called ‘boy’ by the white child in the parents’ look-away, ‘don’t-care’ faces. Lost, in a peculiar smile – being an error, a denial of the man I copied, that big-big man I’m one day to be – he made a black history I didn’t know swamp me, hurt me, terror-hands of a dreaded ghost.

Two men apart, from now – with him not able to see, not able to keep pace with time or know my secret eye watchful – I began to see educated voices charging his guts like invisible pellets of a gun imbedding in him, daytime, nighttime. And soon, he clean forgot who he was. Then with his roots and person’s rights wiped away he knew he’d known nothing always, His deep man-structure dismantled, a tamed dog came in him and gave him face gave him readiness for his job – delivering shot birds between his teeth to get a patting beside high boots – my father

my first lord

my inviolable king.
LETTER TO MY FATHER FROM LONDON

Over the horizon here
you say I told you
animals are groomed like babies
and shops hang wares
like a world of flame trees in bloom

Lambs and calves and pigs hang empty
and ships crowd the port

You say no one arrives back
for the breath once mixed becomes
an eternal entanglement

You say unreason eats up the youth
and rage defeats him

Elders cannot be heroes
when the young wakes up centrally
ragged or inflated on the world
and the ideal of leisure does
not mean a bushman’s pocketless time

An enchanter has the face of cash
without sweat
and does not appear barefooted
bursting at elbows and bottom

He has the connections and craft
to claim the sun in gold
and the moon in diamond

You cannot measure the twig-man
image you launched before me
with bloated belly
with bulged eyes of famine
insistent from hoardings and walls
here on world highstreets
holding a bowl to every passerby

You still don’t understand
how a victim is guilty as accomplice
BLUEFOOT TRAVELLER

Man
  who the hell is you?
What hole you drag from
  and follah railway line
pass plenty settlement
sleep under trees
eat dry bread and water
sweat like a carthorse
to come and put body
and bundle down in we village?
How we to feel you not obeah-man
t’ief
  Judas with lice
  and a dirty mout?
Why you stop here? Get news
  Mericans open up dollar place
in we districk?
Here we got woman givin away
  to follah-line man –
  and water an donkey and lan?
Bluefoot
  I considerin you hard hard
I point out to you –
  move!
It in my bones deep deep –
  pick up possessions
walk again
An you don’t call out
  a battalion of fists
don’t pull down
hills of rockstone
don’t bring out
woods of lickle bumpy sticks
to drop on your head-top
an crack it up.

obeah-man: witchcraft man
Fred D’Aguiar

A GIFT OF A ROSE

Two policemen (I remember there were at least two) stopped me and gave me a bunch of red, red roses. I nursed them with ice and water mixed with soluble aspirin. The roses had an instant bloom attracting stares and children who pointed; toddlers cried and ran.

This is not the season for roses everyone said, you must have done something to procure them. I argued I was simply flashed down and the roses liberally spread over my face and body to epithets sworn by the police in praise of my black skin and mother.

Others told me to take care of the flowers, photo them, a rare species, an example for others, a statistic; that the policemen should be made a return gift crossed several minds – a rose for a rose.

With neglect, they shrivelled and disappeared, people stopped looking when I went saturday shopping. Though I was deflowered, a rose memory burned clear.

Now when I see the police ahead, I take the first exit; I even fancy I have a bouquet of my own for them; I pray they’ll keep their unseasonable gifts to themselves.
Aubrey Williams is a painter I have consistently admired over many years. Some of his most memorable canvases create, I find, a bridge from a world of light into a web of sensation akin to music. This capacity to transmute paint into feelings that relate to other areas of sensibility – whether sculpture or music – is for me the ground of marvel and a signal of remarkable talent and gifted power.

When I look at a Cezanne, for instance, I sense quite often the mood of sculpture. When I look at an Aubrey Williams something different may happen that I can only describe as an equation with fantastic rhythmic being in startling as well as subtle (indeed muted) tones and values in the life and movement in the canvas. It is in this sense that I speak of 'sensation akin to music'. All this enhances, I feel, his dialogue with pre-Columbian figures. Whatever omens or portents these possess – whatever caveats they sustain in regard to the dangers of runaway technology or obsessive ritual – there is a haunting measure of innate voice or celebration, a mysterious chorus within a shell of existences that the painting imparts. There is a resonance as well as an illumination, a moving and rich combination.

I find that his paintings convey a fine excitement, a sense of mystery, sprung from enigmatic combinations of legend and from varying characteristics of tone in the absorption of colour in light; sprung also from the filter of his imagination in the way it addresses specificities of landscape. This latter, in my judgement, is important. Aubrey Williams is not a painter of landscapes but his brush dips into landscapes to become a filter of associations into abstract reverie and mood.
Aubrey Williams with his painting 'El Dorado' before the hanging of his one-man show at the New Vision Gallery in 1958. Photo Anne Bolt ©
Aubrey Williams

The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean
(Reprinted from Guyana Dreaming, April 1990)

The first CAM Conference, in September 1967, held at the University of Kent at Canterbury, was opened by Elsa Goveia, historian, born in Guyana. Aubrey Williams spoke later the same day.

I was very disturbed, intellectually, by Professor Elsa Goveia's talk this morning. She made it clear that we have just done a very difficult thing in breaking out of one phase of our development and entering the new freedoms of the different islands and countries in the Caribbean. We will also at the same time have to move from colonialism into the 20th century in one jump, and we will have to do this in our creative arts first.

It always seems in the history of man that the arts give the direction for the technology, the philosophy, the politics and the very life of the people. Art is always in the foreground; it is the true avant-garde. The visual arts, being the simplest and the most direct, should be a little ahead of literature, because with emerging peoples you have the problem of illiteracy, and direct contact is the natural level of communication in this society. We have considered the strength of folklore in emerging societies. We know that this is direct contact. It is one man or one person sitting in front of a group of other persons. Painting is this kind of direct contact in that the artist must see the object before he can contemplate it, and before it can enter his state of being. Writing will be less effective until we achieve a higher level of literacy.

Now, I am worried about a prevalent conception that good art, working art, must speak, it must be narrative. I do not see the necessity for art to be narrative, in that in thinking about the past and man, art has never been 'narrative' to any great extent. I would not call primitive art in any sense directly representational or figurative. The arts of past civilisations were to a great extent non-figurative. One does not question the validity, or the strength of impact, of so-called primitive abstract designs on shields, on houses, in pottery, in the weave of fabrics; one just accepts them. But strangely in the West today, one makes demands upon the visual artist, demands that I think are not warranted in many cases. (It was a bit sad for me to see that it was our elder statesman in letters, C.L.R. James, who has turned, over the past two years, into being a champion for the more advanced and adventurous avant-garde in the visual arts. I would have thought that our young writers would have
Aubrey Williams

footed the bill far easier as they should be involved in the tensions that would produce an avant-garde art in the Caribbean.)

If our intellectuals have not got an automatically functioning visual chain reaction going yet, what must we hope for from our people at home? When I was last in Guyana at the celebration of Independence, I was stopped in the street by a man driving a dray cart that was loaded with people who had come all the way from a village named Buxton on the east coast of Demerara. They had come to Georgetown. And this man came up to me. I was taking photographs, and he made himself known. I did not know him and he told me how glad he was to meet me and he told me of a new function in his life, one that gave him great pleasure. He said to me, 'You see that dray cart there. One day every month I load it up with people from my village and I bring them down to look at your paintings.' I felt very crushed and humble, and I just didn’t know what to say. I said to him, 'They are abstract, people say they are abstract.' He used a very strong Guyanese cuss-word. He said 'Abstract, what is that? I don’t understand abstract. When I look at your paintings I can think about my days in the bush.' And I thanked him and I went up to the dray cart and I shook everybody’s hand and I spoke to the children for a while. And it was one of the most touching episodes of my visit back home. I am not trying to ask Caribbean intellectuals to consider abstraction as ‘high art’, or the ‘art of the future’ or anything like that. As a matter of fact I don’t even think of my paintings as being abstract. I can’t really see abstraction. Abstraction to me would be two colours on a surface, no form and no imprint of the hand of man. I do not think that painters paint abstraction, nor do I think that sculptors sculpt abstraction. I am not very sure that I understand the meaning of the word.

Another much abused term is ‘modern art.’ We should see to it that this awful virus does not get a foot-hold in the Caribbean - the attitude to the visual arts that automatically attaches labels to what we see when we look. Much of my work has come out of a long contemplation and a search into the pre-Columbian civilisation in the New World - primarily, the Aztec, the Maya, the Toltec and the Inca. Also, a long immersion in the work of our South American Indians in Guyana. I firmly feel that such art should be automatically appreciated by people from the Caribbean and from Guyana because they share the same environment. The South American and the Caribbean environment as compared with the ordered environments of much of the rest of the world, appears naturally ‘abstract’. It is yet, thank Heavens, not rearranged too much by the hand of man. We are losing it fast, but we are lucky to have our roots still in the earth of the Caribbean. We are still in a position to contemplate terrestrial reality. Ours is a beautiful landscape, unbelievably beautiful in some cases; but, as compared with the ordered landscapes in the countries that have been over-lived in, bizarre, unreal, incongruous. It is a very strong landscape and the primitive art that came out of this landscape remains
Aubrey Williams with his painting ‘Shostakovich Quartet No 7, Opus 108’, at the Commonwealth Institute, 1981

Aubrey Williams

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Photo Val Wilmer ©
unique. We should be proud of our non-figuration. We should be proud of the essences of human existence that the people from that neck of the woods have produced in the world. We should be very proud of people like Tamayo from Mexico. We should be proud of people like Matta from Chile. We must become more involved with the visual output of our artists in the Caribbean, because they are going to change the real seeing of the world. They are going to do it just as the politicians and the writers will do it.

And I would be far happier if I could see a greater interchange between all the arts in the Caribbean. Caribbean art seems to me up to now terribly isolated. Everybody is in his niche, using up endless energy working alone without the help of his colleagues. We should have more interchange, we should have dialogue between the novelist and the painter, the musician and the dancer, the potter, the weaver; even the artisans should be included in this. And the dialogue with the people would then be automatic.

We come from this environment, we came out of this environment, and we produce the things that belong back to the environment. If our painters must grope and search and forge ahead, we do not as yet know the language they should speak. We will have to grow into this language and it is a movement from a great state of frustration into one of a growing norm. I hope that we will eventually reach what can be called a norm visually, but we must not be too impatient, and I would hope that the interchange between all the arts would promote an atmosphere in which the Caribbean people will find a greater intimacy with the visual arts.
I don't think that I want to tell these events to the outside world more than once. In my head, of course, some of them recur in sudden flashes at the strangest times. But we had better not go into that! You must understand, though, for a long time I repressed their memory, especially the phone call. After all, these events happened some thirty years ago. The fragments have only recently come together so that I can now recount the experience.

You could call the whole thing an every day story of privileged colonialism. With privilege came duty and, even for a child, a sense of duty can exact a high price. The nub of the entire process for me, however, was a single phone call. I had to live with its consequences minute by minute, day by day, until the event, that call, became nothing of importance. A long forgotten summons to speak.

The years before that fateful call are surrounded by a nostalgia that refuses to be shifted. It brings to mind 'family', 'warmth' and what I assumed was 'permanence'. They were days of bright comic book pages turned by gods who were either amused or indifferent to my strivings.

My family lived in a town house at the south-western corner of a sloping field. The field had the grand name of Victoria Park. We were well off but from a poor tiny colony in the West Indies. At that time the island's population could fit into Wembley Stadium, with room to spare. Our neighbours were either relatives, whose house was for me an extension of ours, or friends, who seemed to have lived for ever next door to us.

From one upstairs window of our house I could watch football, cycle races and cricket matches as our two seasons, dry and wet, came and went. Home life was cozy conventional. My Dad went off each day to run his store in the town. My Mum stayed at home to run the house. The household was the centre of my life. Many items in the house were known by their brand names. We did not use Worcestershire sauce but 'Lea & Perrins'. Cod liver oil was 'Seven Seas'. My Dad's favourite whisky was 'White Horse' and its antithesis 'Alka-seltzer'. All these items at meal times had their particular place on the dining room table. In an alcove under the stairs was kept my Mum's sewing machine. It was, inevitably, 'the Singer'.

Domestic labour at that time was cheap and plentiful. Our cook's name was Prince, my nanny was called Thomas and the house-maid, Estelleta. Employees usually stayed loyal to our household for many years. School happened regularly but varied between two institutions. One was the
grandly named Kingstown Preparatory School, an overcrowded government school where we sang our times tables and recited unlikely poems like ‘The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna’ the many stanzas of which, for some reason, remain lodged in my memory. The other school I attended was a small ‘Dame School’. It was run by a large, black and quarrelsome spinster, Miss Peters. It was our duty each morning to convert a few rooms of her house into class rooms and in the afternoon to return the rooms to her home. This school was intended to instil in me the basics of the three R’s which, apparently, the larger school was incapable of doing to the satisfaction of my Dad and Mum. And so, Miss Peters kept a steady eye on some fifteen of us, as we parsed innumerable sentences, sweated through long-division and compound interest calculations, practised our cursive style in large copy-books and acquired a detailed knowledge of the King James version of the Bible. School and home were closely connected. I can remember, for example, to my great embarrassment, Estelleta, our maid, appearing at the little schoolhouse holding out my mid-morning snack which I had carelessly forgotten.

The years were divided by festivals and natural events. Two of the most important festivals for me were Christmas and Carnival. A special treat at Christmas was to be taken window shopping at night to see the range of new toys on display. This involved a visit to the three main streets in the town, Back, Middle and Bay. The cobbled stones of Middle Street twisted and buckled my feet in the surrounding gloom. Then a bright florescent light from a shop window made it bulge with clockwork toys, bales of doth and rows of household gadgets. The presence of these items was made more intense by the dim glow of the nearby street lights. This was an event we enjoyed as a family, like our annual beach holiday, with bright eyes and our mouths making a big wow.

Christmas had a smell all of its own. As a merchant, my Dad imported a few Christmas trees and one was always kept for us. So, that festival for me is firstly associated with the smell of dried pine. Mixed with this, was the strange scent which combined the plastic and metal of new toys torn from their wrapping before dawn on Christmas morning.

Before Lent, each year, I would thrill to the fear and excitement of ‘Jouve’ and the Shrove Tuesday parade. From that time I especially remember the dreaded ‘Monkey Man Band’. A known extrovert chained, tarred and masked himself for a day. His chains were held by a few followers from his band whose job was to restrain him. Occasionally, he would lunge at bystanders as he strutted and danced past our house to his small fife-and-drum band. Sometimes he would break ranks to chase a particular child before being restrained. Then he would rejoin the parade of brightly coloured carnival bands as they jigged and ping-ponged down the road to the steel-band music.

Between July and September hurricane warnings also broke up the year. One August I remember a severe storm was coming ominously close to our
island. The radio was constantly turned on in preparation for the next weather report. Windows were boarded up. Kerosene lamps and candles positioned. ‘Crix’ biscuits and tins of ‘Kraft’ processed cheese were stockpiled along with buckets of water.

As the storm drew even nearer, I remember seeing my Dad carry out a final act of preparation. As the light faded and lanterns were lit for the evening, in the eerie half-glow, he marched with a blanket to place it over what was probably the most innocuous item in the house, the telephone. Why the phone should merit this attention at such a time remains for me a mystery. Perhaps without the cover the lightening might have come dancing down the wires to escape into the house. Who knows. To a small boy it seemed significant at the time. The magic worked. The storm veered. We were saved.

But I digress. I don’t recollect very much about my first weeks in England and even less about the week before the fateful phone call came. I remember fighting back tears on the platform of London’s Victoria Station. That was the first time that I joined a small army of children dressed in regulation blue and grey. The clothes were heavy; for, a child from the tropics, I was not as yet accustomed to the weight of overcoats and those heavy Oxford shoes. There was probably only a lump in my throat as the train pulled out. Ignorance can protect for a while.

My first evening in the school I was offered a warm brown sludge to drink. I was told it was called ‘collation’.

There were long dormitories. The one I slept in had twenty-eight beds. There were insufficient blankets in winter and each night the sheets felt wet when I put my feet in between them. In a sort of mantra I used at first to count the thirteen beds on one side before coming to mine, the fourteenth, as I walked down the dormitory at night. Then, I would multiply by two.

The bathroom, with its line of washbasins and its slatted wooden floor, was a particular ordeal. It was not just being forced to stand around to wash in thin pyjamas in the unheated room. Sometimes there were towel fights in which the towels were rolled in a special way to make a type of tail. The ends were wetted and then they would be flicked at bare flesh. When they connected it made a sound like a cap-gun going off and stung quite fiercely.

One boy was assigned to show me the ropes. I’m told that I followed him around like a shadow for some time. I ate when he ate. Walked when he walked. Stood around when he stopped to talk to his friends. There was no romantic spirit of adventure. No fighting back. No ‘Tom Brown’s School Days’ with hitting the winning runs.

I have no recollection of weather changes or any other natural events of that time. There was mostly a cold, empty, aloneness.

I don’t recollect which lesson the phone call interrupted. I knew it was coming and it was only a matter of time. When it was over it seemed like a sharp blade had finally cut my world in two, causing change to spill over everything.
The boy who showed me the way to the school office left me at the door. It was ajar so I pushed it further but it only half-opened, allowing me to squeeze into the room, avoiding a protruding cupboard. Two mahogany desks filled the centre of the room. At one sat the school secretary. Her face was a very old crumpled white mask. She sat in front of a large upright typewriter. Near her elbow was the base of an ancient black telephone. The other desk was piled high with files, ink splattered Latin primers and dog-eared exercise books. From one wall a young Queen Elizabeth II looked over her dominions large and small.

The old woman held out the black telephone receiver and said: 'We don't usually allow calls to pupils. They cause too much disruption. But as you're new ...'

I put the receiver to my ear. The holes in the mouthpiece were encrusted with dried dust and spittle. The object smelled of cheap perfume. I felt sick; knowing, fearing and not wanting to know what would happen next.

One week ago, before I boarded the school train my Dad and Mum had said: 'Be brave. Just try it. We'll call to see how you like it. If you don't you can always return with us.'

'Hello' I said tentatively.

From far way a metallic voice said: 'So what do you want to do, son? We've still got your return ticket. The boat leaves day-after-tomorrow. You decide.'

My new woollen shorts itched uncomfortably. My bare knees were white with cold. My school tie felt like a stone lodged in my throat. The room turned watery. 'I ... I don't ... I want to ... I'll try it for a while' I stammered down the telephone to my father.

My confused and dependent state did not last long. A new order was already established. The wake-up call was at 7.10 each morning. Breakfast at 7.35, inspection of bed-making 8.05. Daily chapel 8.30. Then lessons till break time, more lessons, lunch, games, more lessons, tea, homework, a little free time, the dreaded bathroom and lights out. Military without the killing, until it was almost second nature. 'Almost', because with each fresh term's arrival, the platform at Victoria station would absorb my tears until the school train departed and the regimen, once again, imposed its mechanistic order.

Some of the other colonial children did not last the course. One boy, who, when told to write home to dear Mummy and Daddy, wrote instead to the family cat. He soon disappeared. Others simply called it a bad dream, shelved the uniforms and returned to the old order. Many more like me saw it through. Were we tougher or more docile? Who can tell? We certainly were changed.

I think that I can guess the unspoken question in your eyes. Why do I choose to recount all this now? What triggered these memories?

Some days ago my secretary took a telephone call from a Mr. Johnston asking me to ring back. He was calling from a number I failed to recognize. I
I'll Try it for a While

returned his call. A special reunion was soon to take place, he said. Boys from the 60s were being traced by all sorts of ingenious methods. Hope I didn’t mind such a call out of the blue. Would I like to attend? If I enjoyed the event then I might like to join other regular reunions.

I was flattered. But I was also put on the spot. I’d never been back to the school. What could I say? With all these memories flooding back and with increasing self-consciousness as the words came out, I heard myself say; ‘I’ll try it, for a while’.

LETTER TO PHILIP NANTON

My dear son,

Thank you for your long letter which arrived yesterday. Unfortunately it took fifteen whole days to get here. Don’t write KINGSTOWN on the address. If you write KINGSTOWN they send it to JAMAICA. The stupid Post Office people sometimes think KINGSTOWN is a mistake for KINGSTON and send it there first.

In your letter you ask about what is happening in the island. It sounds as if you miss it a little bit. Well, don’t worry about that. NOTHING is happening here. The place is DEAD. A few people struggle to earn a living but not many want to work. So many are leaving to go abroad the island will soon be empty.

We can’t even get the things we need in the shops. Things like ‘Sanatogen’. ‘Wait till the next shipment comes in,’ says the chemist, Mr. Jack. ‘But that could be weeks,’ I tell him. ‘What to do but wash your feet, pray to God and go to bed’ the damn fool tells me. Sometimes the boats just pass us by altogether. Your mother and I see them steaming by at night; all lit up not stopping even for a by-your-leave. So you see, you are really better off over there.

Another thing you should also know is that education here has gone to the dogs. Forty or more to a class. No science laboratory in any schools. Mr Richards tells me that he can’t get cover for his teachers if one of them is sick. Then that means eighty to a class sometimes. A hell of a way to carry on. The politicians, those scamps and thieves, don’t care. They say that they are fighting for independence. Independence for a rock a little stone sticking out of the sea-water. Imagine that.

Son, there is something that worries your mother and me very much. What is all this communistic business that you are putting into your letter? Your older brother had some of that in his head a little while ago. He was reading some of those funny UK papers, I suppose that is where you get it from. Those people can be damn dangerous. We have a few of these over-educated types who have come back to the island. I hear them sometimes with all their talk of ‘surplus-value’, ‘contradiction’ and the rest. What surplus-value do we have on this two-by-four-rock? We barely have value. And they want to look for surplus. I wouldn’t worry about that again.

I sometimes wonder now whether we should have left you there. You don’t know how much we discussed over and over if to leave you in the UK. In the end we thought that the UK was the best place. But be careful of those strange ideas.

Did I tell you that old man Joseph has sent his two sons to the UK, and the Jeffries children are soon to leave. You might see them in London. The Monks boy is back in the island. They said he couldn’t take the cold. He also started writing odd letters back home. He is now in the rum shop every day. You see, there is nothing to do here. If you get cold at night ask that nice man who runs the school for more. blankets. Soon holidays will be coming round, so keep cheerful,

Your affected father.
David Johnson talks to Yvonne Brewster about Louise Bennett

January 1997, London

What is your memory of Louise Bennett as a personality?

Well, Louise Bennett is like a large comfortable duvet (laughter). Yes, I believe a duvet because a duvet has a very practical use in that it keeps you warm, what a European image eh? ... for such a sunny West Indian lady, but I expect it’s because it’s snowing outside why that comes to mind. Her warmth is all enveloping, but her precision is like the stitching around the edge of the duvet. The feathers stay where they are and have their uses which are defined and channelled because of the intelligence of the designer. She is well designed.

She thinks clearly, she thinks ironically and she thinks musically. She is an incredible source of inspiration for anybody who has any concern about the value of West Indian literature ... the value of our Jamaican to be precise, because she wouldn’t refer to herself as a West Indian, she’d refer to herself always as a Jamaican, rather as I do, because I think there is a vast difference between the islands.

And it isn’t Louise go lightly, it’s Louise go very detailedly. She has all her reference points. She knows her historical data, so when she takes things like immigration to England and writes, in that particular poem ‘Colonisation In Reverse’, which is probably one of the most important sociological pieces of poetry ever written in the West Indies, then you see how precise she can be in such a short poem, and even if you don’t speak the dialect you are in no doubt about what that poem actually means.

She would take on stuff like cricket and the poaching of people’s culture by the British and do it in such a precise and stinging way whilst smiling all the while. I love it. And it’s so Jamaican, cos Jamaicans, naturally speaking, don’t get heavy. There’s always that little kind of laugh but you’ve got to see below it. I remember always, and Louise says this, ‘Ha, better laugh than cry’ or ‘If I don’t laugh I will cry’, and the threat in the ‘cry’ is important to recognize. So Louise Bennett, her whole personality, her whole effervescence, is one of laid back gentility and proactive cultural invasiveness.

It’s a fantastic combination and I have to say that her husband Eric, and I think tribute must be paid to him, had a great deal to do with keeping her in the manner in which she would be able to continue being like this.
How did he do that?

Well, because he understood (laughter). Husbands often don’t, and he was a fantastic support. I mean it’s as simple as that. Husbands often get jealous of a person of large, I keep saying large personality, of course the woman weighs, she weighs an impressive amount, *elle a de poids* shall we say, but that’s not the heaviness I mean ... I mean heavy in terms of her comment, although it always appeared so light to the audiences, and with children.

I remember she used to have a television show in the early days of television in Jamaica called, ‘Ring Ding’, and it was on on a Saturday afternoon I think. A programme for young people, always recorded. That was very sophisticated in those days you know. Louise would go home to this amazing house that she had up in Gordon Town, in the coolth of Kingston, not too far from the centre, but the coolth, you know Kingston rises very suddenly. It was an old kind of manorial type of house the doors of which were so thick they almost appeared to be like barriers to the uncouth if you like. There was a big fireplace if you please, fireplace in Jamaica; sometimes it was lit as well because up in the hills there it got cool in the evening.

She had this enormous bedroom in which there was this huge four-poster with Jamaican kind of turn of the century, or late nineteenth century, cut turned wood and stuff, and it was a high thing you almost had to step up to get onto the bed. It must have been at least eight feet square, you know almost canopied, and stuck up in one corner of the room was this television on top of the wardrobe which was also in Jamaican mahogany. Now, it was before the time of colour television right, so over this screen was spread a bit of theatrical gel, coloured gel, to give it that warm glow right. So you had this kind of pinky straw coloured gel, and she would lie in the bed, frothed up with all these wonderfully embroidered white cushions and pillow cases, and she would lie down, in state, in the bed and watch ‘Ring Ding’ on Saturday afternoon when it was being transmitted. Now, those of us younger people who regarded Louise Bennett as a saint, would sometimes go up there and watch her watching herself on television.

Could you just explain how you came into contact with Louise Bennett in the first place?

Oh, I don’t know. It seems I was born in her lap. I’ve never known a time when I didn’t know Louise, I don’t know David. I don’t remember meeting her d’you see, so I must have come into her presence before memory jogged. Funny no one’s ever asked me that.

So the child came.

A little girl called Maxine, she was one of my mother’s, my mother adopted many many many children, twenty-one I think in all, and she was one of my mother’s adoptions who I took as my daughter if you like. Anyway, I took Maxine with me, and Maxine at the time was about three and a half, so
David Johnson talks to Yvonne Brewster about Louise Bennett

we went up to watch Miss Lou watch herself.

We sat down on the bed, and she’s giving us cashew nuts and Christmas pudding and plantain; she was always eating, right. So we lay down in this bed, three women, one three and a half, me in my thirties or or late twenties, I can’t remember, and Louise Bennett, I don’t know how old, no one asks Louise’s age. So we’re watching this and Maxine starts to cry. We can’t understand and then Louise realizes what is wrong. Maxine is looking at the television and looking at the bed, and looking at the television and looking at the bed, and she’s not seeing the same thing coming out of the mouth of Louise, and you know Louise repeated what she was saying on television to put the child at rest. Isn’t that a fascinating thing?

That’s Louise Bennett. She appealed to everyone from small children to adults who would go and watch her and Maas Ranny in pantomime every year. These people felt they were watching their culture, their life distilled if you like.

What was the pantomime actually like?

Well pantomime in Jamaica started nearly sixty years ago. It started with the expatriates, the white expatriates wanting ‘something to do’ (accent). There was this amazing Frank Matcham theatre, the exact spitting image of The Theatre Royal Stratford East, but twice the size darling and twice as nice. It had all the plush, all the cupids and that’s where they did the first pantomime. I’m trying to remember the name of it. I think it was either ‘Sinbad The Sailor’ or ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ or one of these things. I’m not too sure of the exact details of the history of the pantomime.

So all of the white people were dressed up in lederhosen and slapping their thighs and had principal boys and stuff. This existed for quite a few years whilst they amused themselves you see ... and then the Jamaicans, typical Jamaican, decided (kissing her teeth) ‘Tekin’ ova yu noh!’ And this is when Louise and Ranny started to do it. I think that the first Jamaican pantomime with Jamaican overtones was a thing called ‘Busha Bluebeard’, where we had some black people on stage dealing with Anancy, the folkloric hero we celebrate. Anancy’s genesis is in Ghana ... which is where I think most Jamaicans came from and not Nigeria. Anyway, this new Jamaican pantomime started to take over. Now it has actually, dare I say this, fallen into disrepute. Well, I wouldn’t say disrepute because it’s not for me to say, but pantomime isn’t what it used to be. It has become a kind of annual excuse for putting on some kind of really rather cheap jokes. The ones I’ve seen recently, I don’t think they inspire like they used to because they used to be traditionally based. Now I think they’ve got a pantomime company and it’s always produced by the same people, so there’s a kind of déjà vu-edness about it.

In the Golden Age of the Jamaican pantomime it was produced by the Fowlers. They must not be forgotten, people sort of try and go on as if they didn’t do anything, they did. Greta and Henry Fowler were white
Jamaicans, but Jamaicans with a sense of history, who encouraged the Jamaicanization of the pantomime. They were the ones who put the money behind it to produce it so that Louise could do it. That’s what Louise is best known for, and wasn’t she marvellous!

I always remember as a youngster helping out with the direction of the pantomime called, ‘Morgan’s Dream Of Old Port Royal’. It was a kind of historical pantomime about the buckaneer, who became Governor of Jamaica, on the principle that if you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em. He was such a pirate, they made him Governor so that Jamaica stopped being pirated, it was a lovely thing and I was assisting Rex Nettleford I think, who was directing it. This was my foray into directing, yes. I learnt very quickly. I used to act at the time, I was terrible actually, but I learnt very quickly, and any time anybody was sick, who would do the part? Yvonne. So I was the kind of roving male as well you know, understudy. Louise was starring in the thing, but she was sick, for the first time in the history of the pantomime someone went on and did Louise’s part ... and it was me.

That’s something!

I know, I know, I know, and I knew the lines and everything, and I thought yeah, I wasn’t nervous or anything, cos when you’re young you’re so stupid, and I did four parts. I mean all different parts, but that is the one when I came on the stage darling.

And you say you can’t act?

I am a great respecter of actors. For instance when you are working with really great actors, I think Mona Hammond, up there on the wall behind you is a great actress. When you’re working with people like that, Jeffrey Kissoon, Norman Beaton, they’re all in this room the people I really regard, when you work with them and you see the depth of their talent you know that you’re a joker.

So what about that part then? What happened when you performed it? Stepping into Louise Bennett’s shoes.

Never thinking ... never thinking you know that all these twenty how many years of tradition everybody came to see Louise Bennett. Louise Bennett sick you know, and usually if Louise was sick they just cancelled the show. Now things were getting much more commercial in those days you know, and cancelling a show, ‘can’t cancel show’. Louise really was sick. ‘Well you will do it Yvonne’ ‘OK fine’. Right, look at the lines, remember them, yeah yeah, well this costume, they’re gonna have to wrap it round me twice, like the skirt forty-five inch waist ... boom boom ... (action of wrapping) they cut and try to puff me out a bit ... I went on. Without thinking that these people would be so shocked, when I went on and I heard the reaction, like, ‘A weh di!’ That’s when I was shocked, but darling I’m a trouper right. I won them over, because they didn’t want me, they didn’t know who the hell I was. I was a nobody you know,
nobody knew me. At that time, maybe I was on radio but they didn’t know my face. I used to have a dastardly kind of programme on radio called ‘Open House’, and I was producing some television, what was it? My time scale is getting all mixed up. There was no announcement made or anything, and I went on, and I thought oh my god, but I went through and by the end of the show I have to say, when I came down for my bow, and Louise was the last person and everything, I said to Lois Kelly Barrow, you do the last bow, you know, I’m not doing it. She said, ‘Don’t be so daft’. So she came down with me and Ranny and the audience really applauded ... through the generosity of the other actors ... I have to say. 

But it must have been good.

I’m not gonna say it wasn’t good, it was fantastic. It’s one of my lifelong memories actually. The cheek, and the sort of ... the arrogance. I don’t know I think it was arrogance, I think it was, well the show must go on.

What did Louise say?

Louise was great. She said, ‘Well A cyan get sick again now’, and of course she never was because she’s a trouper. She was great. Louise doesn’t have time for petty rubbish. I never felt any small mindedness or pettiness from her. She’s a giant.

After the pantomime I think what happened next was the Radio shows, in the sixties, ‘Miss Lou’s Views’.

Oh no, those were happening all the time, pantomime went straight through, until the middle seventies you know. ‘Miss Lou’s Views’ existed all the time, you see she wasn’t just doing one thing, commercials, Louise was jetting all over the world, giving lectures. Did you know Louise went to RADA?

Did she ever speak to you about her experience of being in England?

Not that I remember. I never thought to ask about it. I would be interested to find out what it was like. She wasn’t here for very long, I think she was here for a year at RADA or something like that, I’m not too sure.

So what about the radio shows?

Radio shows? ... look, dem tings changed cultural perception, political perception. Aunty Roachy? ... Look at all the things that Aunty Roachy would say ... you couldn’t say them things but, ‘As my Aunty Roachy said to me the other day, don’t you think is about time the Prime Minister get a haircut?’. She wouldn’t be as crass as that. The haircut could really mean, ‘cut arf ‘im ed’. She was very political, and that is why she is invirtual I think. You can ask her about this, but the fact that she doesn’t live in Jamaica is an enduring shame to that country.

Why is it that she is not in Jamaica?

Well I mean I think it’s politics, but she would be the best person to answer
that, if she will ... cos she doesn’t, but then this is a serious piece of work so she would probably answer you. I think she felt she had to leave.

*It’s also interesting that she chose Canada.*

Yes, but I think she had family up there and her husband is sick with his heart, and that was where he could get the best treatment you see. She has some things wrong with her as well, I think that’s where it’s best for her too. I read an article in a Toronto newspaper that a friend of mine at CBS sent to me, and she is really recognized as an important person in Toronto. I think that somebody like that, not living out their last years in Jamaica is a dying shame.

*It’s interesting listening to what you’re saying because it’s so positive, yet speaking to Jamaicans who came here in the 50s, they seemed to have little, if any interest in Louise Bennett and her work at the time.*

*Why was that?*

*Why? I think it was because it highlighted so much of what they were about ... what they actually came from.*

So it was embarrassing?

*I think so ... but this attitude has changed with succeeding generations. There’s more pride. What was the initial general response to Louise Bennett in Jamaica and how it has actually changed towards her. Now she’s regarded as a cultural figure?*

Louise Bennett is a very sophisticated lady. Louise Bennett’s education is first rate. She couldn’t be so politically accurate, and such a mover and shaker on the cultural scene, if she wasn’t in the possession of a very large brain so in our house she was quoted. I’m in a maze now you see, because I’m only one person, and I’m not a cultural historian, so my thing is coming from my particular perspective and I have never heard anybody say that they found Louise embarrassing. They found her hysterical, they found her annoying ...

*Embarrassing is my word, through actually trying to probe ... that age group of Jamaicans here.*

That’s possible here you see. Let me give you an example ... Barry Record had the first black television play in this country, called, ‘In The Beautiful Caribbean’. He’s a Rhodes scholar, he is so bright, and frustrated beyond words because he hasn’t had a play on since 1981, I think. He’s a brilliant man, a brilliant West Indian, he’s highly political, verging on Communist at that time. Right, Barry wrote about the truth in the West Indies and this was a ninety minute play on BBC One at peak time in the 1970s. They brought over Louise Bennett to be in it, they brought Calvin Lochardt from Hollywood, Joan-Anne Maynard, she played the ingénue, was Norman Beaton in it? I can’t remember. I was in some kind of funny production role
David Johnson talks to Yvonne Brewster about Louise Bennett

you know, I was always around behind the scenes trying to learn. It was showing the West Indies as it is, those people who have culturally closed minds and who can be politically inactive. I mean the people sometimes deserve the situation that they are in because they think guns answer.

**What was the response here?**

You know the switchboard was jammed with West Indians but principally Jamaicans phoning up to complain that one of the people in the thing had no shoes on, 'An to seh as if everybody in Jamaica walk wid barefoot!' I think that killed Barry Record. I don't think that he's been the same since. It was brilliantly done, Mona was in it, everybody was in it, they just swept the board, yes, and it was a damn good piece, Philip Saville, one of the most senior directors at the BBC directed it. They threw money at it, more than they would have done for a white production. There were the other things you know, all set up and sophisticated, but there were some scenes in down-town Kingston in the wretched of the earth sort of scenario, and the people complained. Now you see where is our sense of place not to be able to recognize ... mind you those people were having a hard time and people would laugh at them because the uninformed white trash didn't know any better anyway, and when you get white trash it's much worse than black trash will ever be. They went to work the next day, 'I saw your people and they didn't have any shoes on did they?' ... but the sum total of all the people phoning up to complain was that the BBC had shown some black people without shoes.

Now I ask you, where is our sense of place? Where is our pride? Where is our kind of sense of humour?

*It says a lot about many of the people that came over.*

I understand what you are saying to me, Louise would have been an embarrassment to them, because it's dialect that she's speaking. I have come across this attitude with this kind of people when doing pantomime. Remember, I've been working in this country since 1971 you know, right, and I mean I was here before then as well, working in theatre, and I did a Louise Bennett pantomime and the white people came but the black people didn't want to. They said, 'Oh they're just showing us as if we can't speak proper English'. They thought that for their children the only thing to be was British, and even now there is still some leaveover from that. There are some black youngsters who have been thrown out of their house because they were rude to a policeman, 'Yu should know 'ow to behave yuself because is a nice white man.' So there is a kind of self hatred and a kind of cultural disavowment that happens.

**So what about the response in Jamaica to Louise Bennett?**

I have never seen it ... never seen it ... I never felt that. Well at that level I have to say I don't know too many people. Well look, it's no good pretending, that's not the normal set of people that I deal with, right. I mean
if I dealt with people like that, it’s people who are working, because my grandfather was very wealthy and he had a big firm and a lot of people working for him ... but then they wouldn’t discuss that kind of thing with me anyway. I can’t say how people reacted to Louise in the privacy of their own homes, but my impression, from pantomime is that they adored her. These were the people that went up into the Gods. They saw themselves being shown on the stage, in their own true sense, and I don’t feel that there was an embarrassment. There’s embarrassment here because when you come to England, people make black people feel that they are insufficient, not quite human. In a way some people kind of try to make up for it by being more English than the English. So when you see the houses with the antimacassars and all the exaggerated suburban Englishness, it’s pathetic, but then you can’t laugh at the people because they had no guidance.

When you first came here ... when Enoch Powell brought black people over from the West Indies to come and work ... they came here by invitation you know. They never thought that they would ever breed, that they would ever need anywhere to live. They just thought that they were a kind of extension of the slave trade ... so they wouldn’t have any personal needs. So as a black person facing an attitude of no dogs, no Irish and certainly no blacks, you have to have some kind of reaction, and I can’t knock it. I’m becoming much more understanding of that attitude to Louise Bennett now as we discuss it, but I’d never really thought about it you see, because I’ve never really taken on board that sociological point.

The attitude is changing within that generation because their children and grandchildren have a need to hold onto their roots and are more positive about their history. They are being influenced by succeeding generations, and so if anything like Louise Bennett’s work is brought into the home, the response, in many cases, is more welcoming than it would have been twenty years ago.

Well I know, I know that myself from working with younger actors, and hearing my son’s views. He is twenty-two.

What about Louise Bennett’s direct influence on the work that you initially did in theatre? You played her part and then?

Well, in the pantomime the influence is there totally. In the other work I have to say that I don’t think that she influenced me ... directly. Overall, I think as a primary source that was very important. My bent was more for, not for writing you see, because I always knew I couldn’t write, not even a letter ... I always wanted to interpret. I was always into history. I want to see the forebearance rather than the present.

So Louise Bennett is not a direct influence?

No, not really. Not on my work but on the language, and how to approach the text, yes. Louise’s text is so muscular and so pared down. I have to cut a lot of the plays that I do because I find sometimes that West Indian
playwrights overwrite, kind of garrulous on the page ... and I think they say the same thing over and over again ... a bit like Shakespeare. Shakespeare did too you know, in case the people are talking and laughing and miss it the first time. I am a great respecter of Shakespeare but then everybody cuts Shakespeare, probably to cut out characters, but I cut it to cut out repeats. It's an art, I think I'm quite good at cutting Shakespeare actually, and I think I'm quite good at editing plays. In working with Louise on pantomimes I learnt how she would use an inflection, and cut out a whole half a speech. That's the kind of thing I learnt from her.

So it's about structure?

Yes. She will use one word to sum up, so it requires attention. If you can't give it the attention well tough titties, you've got to. Maas Ran, who was her cohort you know, they were always together, he died, and he was a lovely man actually, but completely different you know. He came from the minstrel background, and had a different approach. The two of them were chalk and cheese and so made a good team. He would go on and on. Ranny would add words, add and add, and she'd be cutting. If you look at the structure of her poems, I mean none of them are longer than a page, that's a bit of an exaggeration, one or two of them, but not many, and look at what they say.

What about putting her poems into performance?

Alright, here we go. The first thing I ever directed right, well directed in a way was when I was 14 and I was at school. I was terrible at school, they kept expelling me, because I was always busily arranging some kind of theatrical coup. Anyway, they wanted something for some Harvest festival or something. I got the whole of the fourth form, dressed them up, insisted on designing all these costumes and everything, and did a dramatized version of Linstead Market. 'Carry me ackee go a Linstead Market'. Now that is not a Louise Bennett poem, but I made the main character into a kind of Louise Bennett person, and then stole lines from various poems. I added them so that it elongated the thing and it lasted about twenty minutes. It's only one song you know. (Singing) 'Carry me ackee go a Linstead Market', you know, 'everybody come feel up feel up', and then you would go, 'everybody come feel up feel up, everybody come squeeze up, squeeze up', and we go, 'everybody come feel up feel up', and then a line out of Louise Bennett, 'Bwoy tek yu han outta mi ting yu noh', 'everybody come ... She wouldn't know about this, because it was a school thing. I never paid any royalties either. I was nicking lines from her poems to illustrate Linstead Market you see. It was a big success, and the school made a postcard of the cast with a wheelbarrow and ... it's all very pathetic but that was the first thing. So I was always doing little bits like that.

What about now and doing some of Louise Bennett's work through Talawa?

I have never thought about that ... I don't know but it's worthy of a thought ... um, a kind of evening with Louise 'Cool Breeze', got the title, right, um,
but, 'Every little breeze seems to whisper Louise' (singing). She is a major cultural figure in Jamaica, but I’m not sure how it would work here.

I used to run the Festival Commission for the Jamaican Government, Mr Michael Manley you know. I’d go all round the island judging, adjudicating voice and speech, and never, in all the years of doing that, did I attend a recital where there weren’t at least five Louise Bennett poems. The way in which these children used to come in and stand, han’ a kimbo. Everybody was a miniature Louise. That’s what you call having cultural influence. Today, if you go into the countryside especially, because Kingston is too into Dancehall and Ragga, I mean, they’ve made outsiders come and tell them what the culture is in a way. Even go to St. Catherine, go to Spanish Town, and Louise is in force. ‘Colonisation in Reverse, by Louise Bennett’. Han’ a kimbo and they are off. You think this is just monkeying, sort of just a parody, but ask them what it means ... they know. Some of the other poems, ‘I wondered lonely as a cloud that floats on high’.

‘What does it mean?’
‘Well ...
‘What is a daffodil?’
‘Well ... is a flower’
‘What colour? ... It says it in the poem’
‘Is yellow?’
They don’t know, ... but you ask them about a Louise Bennett poem and they know.

*Is that just because it’s close to home and the language?*

Well the teachers can teach them better. I used to encourage it. I used to give a Louise prize. Louise could be persuaded to come down and listen to the final thing. Louise is an integral part of Jamaican culture and so her work effects you whether you like it or not. In my work though, I don’t want to say yes yes yes yes, when I’m directing a play I’m thinking about Louise because I’m not.

Can you imagine for example, a repeat of, or something similar to ‘The Zebra Crossing Season’ , having a section where, some of Louise’s poems were performed?

Yes I could imagine it, but I would give it to somebody to do who wasn’t me. I would give it to a young black British person, and say right, what is cutting edge about this? It couldn’t be, oh let’s just go and have some recital of poems in dialect. For it to work it would have to go out on a limb of its own. You’ve set me thinking there ... just as we’ve run out of time.

It would be great to see Louise’s work performed by Talawa. Yvonne, thank you very much for sharing your fascinating experiences with me, and giving me so much of your time.

It has been a pleasure.
It was a hot day and the wooden house was stuffy. Probably no one had been in it for more than a few minutes since Othniel had been taken to the hospital. Someone must have come for the clothes he’d been buried in. Danielle opened the windows in the front room and sat down in one of the big morris chairs her grandfather had made himself.

The place hadn’t changed much. All her life Danielle had been in and out of this house. Her mother was only a few yards up the road, and grandparents were grandparents, but her father had had a lot to do with it as well. When Danielle was two, Martin Ostrehan had joined that great line of men in new felt hats and new wool suits which didn’t fit quite right and made them sweat as they laboured up the gang-plank, each with a big-able cardboard suitcase in his hand – a valise they always called it in those days – up the gang-plank and off the island and onto the ship. And a couple of weeks later they would all have gotten off the ship in Southampton and walked down another gang-plank to catch the train to London. Her father did write, though for a while now this meant no more than a couple of lines at Christmas, and from time to time he would send presents, usually expensive and hideous decorative objects which her mother always put on display in the living-room. ‘Oh, yes, my husband send that for me,’ she would tell visitors, ‘it must have cost him plenty money, but he doing real well up in England.’ No one was ever so bold as to ask why he had never come back, why she had never gone over there to see him. There was a photograph of the two of them on their wedding day on the top of the television, and as far as everybody was concerned her mother was most definitely Mrs Clarissa Ostrehan. Danielle imagined her father had another woman in England, perhaps another family, but if her mother knew, she wasn’t telling.

When her husband had left, Clarissa was only twenty-seven, well below the age at which it begins to be suggested to women that it is time for them to shut their legs and get a tambourine, but, in a society where for many people malicious gossip was as natural as squeezing lime on fried fish, nobody had ever managed to find anything scandalous to say about her. A teacher at the local primary school, she was its head at forty-two, and for as long as Danielle could remember, she had been one of the pillars of the church. Which meant most of the day on Sundays and two
or three nights during the week.

Danielle got up and went into the kitchen. Somebody had unplugged the fridge and emptied it, leaving the door propped open with a folded piece of newspaper. The water was still connected, but the day was so hot that Danielle had to run the tap for some time before the water was drinkable.

So whenever her mother was busy, Danielle had been left in the care of her grandfather and her grandmother Albertine, who was Miss Montgomery’s aunt. Miss Montgomery’s first name was Mavis, but she was such a sour old bitch that nobody ever called her anything but Miss Montgomery. Not to her face anyway. But Granny Albertine had been a sweet old dear. Danielle had early discovered that the children of the district didn’t want to play with a teacher’s daughter, particularly not with Mrs Ostrehan’s daughter, but this hardly mattered when Albertine was there to share with her the pleasures of an old-fashioned childhood.

Riddle-a-riddle-a-ree, Who can riddle this riddle to me? - A white lady in a green dress with black children. Which, as everybody used to know, is a soursop. But the children nowadays are only interested in video games. How often do you see girls skipping in the street?

Mr Jones teaches the scholars
The best he can
In reading and writing and spelling
And doing arithmetic.
He never forgets to use his whip!
And this is the way the months go round:
January, February, March ...

Mrs Ostrehan could be a real Mr Jones at home as well as at school, but Granny Albertine never ever got cross, never complained, even when Danielle, in spite of sincere efforts to please, proved incapable of acquiring her grandmother’s beloved skills with a needle.

Danielle rinsed the glass and left it on the draining board. No drying cloth in sight. She started to look through the rooms in earnest. Albertine had been much younger than Othniel, but she had died when Danielle was fifteen, leaving the old man to many years of widowerhood. The press and the chest of drawers were still full of Othniel’s clothes; nearly all of Albertine’s things must have gone long ago. The framed piece of cross-stitch was something she had done - the large eye and the inevitable THOU GOD SEEST ME. But where was Moses? Yes, in the dark.

How many hours she had spent in this front room, sitting at the table doing her homework, or just listening to the old man. He would talk to her for hours about his childhood, how he had nearly been killed in the mighty hurricane of 1898 which claimed a hundred lives and left so many thousands homeless, how his father had worn a coat of fine black cloth
and great black boots polished till they shone like glass and a tall black silk hat that shone like the sun on the feathers of a blackbird. His father McGregor Bispham had been the best coachman in all the island, Othniel had told her, so fine a coachman that when he died the white people had raised a monument of marble to his memory. And it was true. Or at least that part of it was true. Once while she was a student at the University Danielle had gone out to the country church in the district where none of the family had lived for many years. The monument was a small tablet on an inside wall of the church, but it was marble, and it said that McGregor Bispham was 'for more than forty years the coachman of the Hon. Augustus Perceval of this island, during which time he earned the attachment of the children of his master, by whom this tablet is erected in sorrowful remembrance'. Enough to make you puke — or some faint stirring of the brotherhood of man? Even now, Danielle could not make up her mind.

The strange foliage carved on the large mahogany-framed couch with its caned back and seat was dusty now. For years Danielle had thought it the most desirable object any member of her family possessed. Othniel had made it himself, what for most people would have been a lifetime ago. The arthritis in his hands had forced him to give up his cabinet-maker's work before Danielle was born.

Once he had spent the best part of an afternoon telling her about how she ought to be glad it was so easy to make a cup of tea, how she should reflect upon what a blessing it was to have a pipe bringing water right inside her house. Danielle had never had to carry a pail of water more than a few yards; Othniel told her to 'T'ink bout carrying a big-able conaree-jar a milenahalf to de pond, an' den you got to carry it all de way back wid de weight o' de water in it.' He told her how he used to fetch wood from the gully for cooking, and the seeds off the mahogany trees, and which woods were good for cooking, and which would burn well even when green and which ones would smoke too much. And she had forgotten. Perhaps she should have tried asking him questions in a methodical manner. Perhaps she should have made the effort to write everything down. Regrets were useless.

Danielle tried to bring to mind some image of her grandfather as a small boy. Rags? No, they must have been better off than most. Carefully patched hand-me-downs, perhaps. Long trousers, bare feet. A collarless shirt, maybe a man's worn jacket several sizes too large. A limeskin hat, the brim drooping, felt worn smooth and shapeless ... Clear enough, but it was some other boy she had seen in a turn-of-the-century photograph at the Museum.

Othniel stubbornly refused to be anything other than an old man. Othniel lying in his coffin, dressed in his Sunday clothes with as much
care as a shop-window dummy, except that his collar and tie were loose about the tortoise scrawniness of his neck. Othniel well past his hundredth birthday, slowly oh so slowly walking the length of the short street to the church on the corner where he had worshipped since before the memory of man. Sitting where he always sat, in the corner at the back of the church, in a pew he had made himself, like all the others in the church. Sitting in the kitchen at home, while Danielle trimmed his hair; thin, like peppercorns scattered over his yellow-brown scalp. She held up her hands, her fingers remembering the shape of his skull, the firm fleshy lump as big as a guava at the nape of his neck ... At the back, so you couldn’t see it when they’d laid him out ... Danielle clenched her fists to drive the thought away and then thrust them into the last of the cardboard boxes.

More church programmes, more tracts. Recipes clipped from magazines, all at least twenty years old – these must have been Granny Albertine’s – more newspapers, and – wrapped in plain paper, a photograph of a young black man wearing a white linen suit and a bow-tie. There he was, posed against some obviously painted vegetation, leaning one elbow on a classical column and holding a straw hat in the opposite hand. The words ‘Mother with Best regards Othniel’ trailed across the backdrop in much the same writing as the signature in the schoolbook and prevented any doubt. On the heavy card mount, in gilt lettering, it said ‘António Pessoa, photógrafo, Av. 7 de Setembro, Manaus’.

‘Manaus?’

What on earth had he been doing eight hundred miles up the Amazon? Danielle had never heard her grandfather, or anyone in the family, give the slightest hint that he had ever been out of the island.

Wait ...

De year after my fader dead was de year de hurricane come, chile. I was only twelve years old, but dere does be some tings yuh kyaan furget, no matter how long de Lord spare yuh life. Everybody from de village go up at de Great House to shelter when de wind start to blow. An’ it blow so hard Mister Perceval frighten fuh de roof an’ bring he fambly down in de cellar to pass de night wid de niggers an’ de yams.

De Great House roof ain’t lose summuch as one shingle, but de nex morning Kinnoul village gone, gone, gone. Sandymount ain’t too bad, cause de hill did shelter it some. Mister Perceval build back de people houses, but he put everybody at Sandymount, cause all two estates did belong to he. Kinnoul village gone. No person hear bout Kinnoul village from da day to dis one.

My mudda move into de servant quarters at de Great House an’ she send me an’ Albert to town to live wid she brother pon she mudda side. That was my uncle Theophilus an’ is he dat learn me all bout carpentry an’ cabinet-making. Muh mudda nuse to come to town now an’ again to
look fuh we, an’ muh uncle an’ he wife Phoebe treat we real nice. Dey had a son too, de same age as me, an’ de t’ree o’ we did have some real good times till Albert go way to Panama to wuk pon de canal an’ never come back.

Oh ... What was Theophilus son name? He name Oscar Weatherhead, a good-looking clear-skin fella. All de girls did like he too bad. He was a real good carpenter too. He fader did mean de shop fuh he, but he never come back from Sout’ America, which is how it come to me instead ...

Chile, yuh don’wanta hear no more bout my young days. King Solomon tell we dat Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him. I do some terr’ble wicked tings before de Good Lord send salvation to my soul. Yuh don’wanta hear bout dem tings. To besides, I too tired ...
PROLOGUE

I grew lonely for a song
to weave with flakes of iron-grey
and lift the tone to silver-white
watch them dazzle in the light

So came through centuries of lies
from dungeons, virgin lives,
guarding gold, precious stones
and breathing tongues of fire

to where a range of notes from steel
rose like pearls towards the sun
each hung more perfect than the last
reflecting prisms I had never seen

and through the rise and fall of sound
I heard the sigh of freedom’s song
breaking chains, shredding myths
losing fears and forging dreams

It told the story of our lives
Now scales have fallen from my eyes
I began to despair of ever getting a teaching post. There had been a time when I’d arrive back at my digs each night and expect my wise and sympathetic landlady to hand me a letter saying I’d been fixed up at last from the Divisional Office.

But as the months went by I didn’t really expect a letter any more. I cast around in my mind for some other way to get into teaching and it seemed to me that a job in a church school was the answer. I had always been a good Anglican – an ex-Sunday school teacher – and I regularly attended a church in South London. I knew they wanted an infants’ teacher in their local school and so I applied.

I wasn’t even called for an interview. The priest put a fatherly hand on my shoulder and told me, ‘You see it’s difficult, my dear. I know you’re a good person and Christian, and I’m sure you’re a gifted teacher, but don’t let’s forget that the children are at an emotional age. And then there’s the parents. I’m afraid they just wouldn’t accept you.’

He said this with the implication that I should understand. Well, I didn’t. There was no one in the school doing anything I couldn’t do. And the parents, who were they? Once a week Christians, to be sure.

I was becoming short of cash for Christmas, and one lunch-time I saw a card in a window littered with junk, advertising clerical work. Thinking that a change from Mr Coppett and Co. was about due, I pushed the door open. A bell muted with dust and age pinged gently. No one stirred. I peeped into the deep gloom. It was then I noticed a man sitting at a table eating a ham roll. Fiercely he bit off a large mouthful and, as he chewed, a slither of ham danced on his chin like a worm on a line. I stood waiting and after what seemed like hours, he turned his head ever so slightly.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘Came about the job.’

‘Can’t you read the card? It says no blacks wanted.’

I went to have another look at the card.

‘It doesn’t,’ I said.

‘Well, it bloody well ought to. I don’t expect blacks to come ‘ere pestering me when I’m ‘aving my grub. You clear off – you hear me? Clear off.’

That was my only effort to earn more money for Christmas.

The festival brought a flurry of activity to our office.

‘Cor,’ said Hilda, ‘I can’t ‘ave all this cutting done wiv two ‘ands.’ And
fussed some more.

On Christmas Eve Mave, who always preferred last-minute shopping, slipped away to the market and came panting up the stairs, carrying a large Christmas tree.

‘Hi, hi!’ said Hilda. ‘What we got ‘ere then? Ooh, ain’t it lovely? Lovely and spiky. Now why don’t we ‘ave a tree like this and do ourselves a party?’

Mave looked up at her and said, explosively for her, ‘Here, take this one. I’ll get another on the way home.’

At the news of the tree we all became children again. Excitement grew from a spark to a flame. Hilda worked like the proverbial black, decorating, prinking, handing, matching, chopping and changing the tree until it stood resplendent.

We went back to our desks and worked until four that afternoon. Then Hilda suddenly cried, ‘Shut shop, girls! Off to the workroom with you – drinks are on me.’

We followed her into the room. The large table on which she cut her dresses was beautifully set out with gleaming glasses and bottles of cider and sherry. She handed round the glasses brimful of drink – sherry for some and cider for others. Mave gulped her sherry and left soon after. That was more like Mave.

Mr Coppett still sat at his desk, pieces of paper crepitating at his touch, his back ageing and hunched. He sat there intent and involved – silently sabotaging, we thought, any enjoyment of the party. He seemed neglected, solitary and sad. Impulsively I took an undersized cone-shaped hat and placed it on his head.

‘We want to toast you, Mr Coppett,’ I said. He smiled briefly, as if I had made the most natural remark in the world, stood quite erect and waited.

‘To Mr Coppett,’ I said.

‘To Mr Coppett,’ reiterated all the others. He bowed, skimmed his sherry with his lips, removed the party hat as if it symbolised something rare and beautiful, and then with an expansive gesture settled down to his work again. He took no further interest in us and later disappeared like an apparition at dawn.

There was one further toast to come. As if inspired by my tribute to Mr Coppett, Sue stuck her face in Hilda’s and cried in her vibrant, generous way, ‘Three cheers for the old girl wot puts ‘erself out – for everyone!’

Hilda blushed a deep crimson, evidently touched by this quite unprecedented and unsolicited testimonial of regard. Or she might have been suffering a pang of guilt at the sheer, shaming untruth of it.

Anyway, she was momentarily overcome and left us briefly, murmuring, ‘I’m goin to ...’

We filled in the dread word for her.

Mickey elected himself Master of Ceremonies. He fished out a bottle of gin and drank it neat between swigs of sherry.
'I like Christmas,' I said, as I topped the glasses with the last of the sherry, and somehow, instead of leaving soon, we lingered.

'So do I,' replied Hilda. 'Everyone does. I don't know 'ow they come to mix a nice time like Christmas with all them animals and such - cows, sheep, donkeys and all that lot.'

She made a wry face. 'Fancy 'avin' that poor baby in all that cow dung. All them flies and smells.'

'There weren't any dung there,' chimed in Liz. 'Me Gran said God 'elped them cows to 'old it. 'ave you ever seen any of it in the pictures about Christmas?'

I found this extremely amusing.

Just to show they really accepted me they gave me first go in what they called 'the carsey' saying: 'Go on, Beryl, you can 'ave first go.'

When I came out, Sue eyed me with a look of prurient curiosity.

'Not bein' rude,' she said, 'just bein' inquisitive. What do natives do when they ... '

'Go to bed?' I asked.

'You know,' she said, self-consciously gesturing, 'your monthlies.'

'You mean when we menstruate?' I asked.

She nodded.

'Well, Sue,' I replied with mock seriousness, 'we swim! We jump into the nearest river and swim and swim for miles. Some of us swim for three days and some for four, but that's what we do.'

I put on my coat and slipped out. The cold gripped me fiercely as I hurried to the bus-stop, past windows that now seemed tawdry with their flimsy paper-chains and cotton-wool snow. The shadow thrown by a street lamp showed that I still wore my party hat, an untasselled fez. I flung it into the gutter.

It was then that I saw a man watching me from across the street.

'Hullo,' he said. 'How are you, my beautiful Caribbee?'

I didn't know what to make of him with his spivvy clothes and heavily greased hair parted in the middle. I didn't wait for more. I ran back to the office. Panting, I ran up the stairs and into instant comfort, directly they all knew what had happened. I'd been 'chased'. This had a weird significance for them. It seemed we were sisters under the skin, all right, when it came to the threat of rape.

There was much talk about dirty old men.

'Anyway,' Hilda said at last, 'it's an ill wind, ain't it? You see we forgot to give you your present. Fancy that, now. We got somethink special and we forgot to give it to you. Just the thing to cheer you up now you been chased.'

I opened the parcel. It contained a tiny bottle of perfume and a beautiful scarf of brilliant red.

'D'you like that scarf?' Liz asked, the deep concern in her voice ringing like a lump of sugar in an empty teacup. 'I got you that. Changed it three
times, I did – just like traffic lights. First I got green, then orange, then I
 got red.’
 I spluttered into my glass, and then I laughed. How could one cap that,
 especially when she was so obviously thrilled that the gift pleased me.
 I got out my own small gifts and handed them around. I hadn’t
 forgotten them. It was just that I was mortally afraid of being the first to
give ...
Auntie would say 'Ah! Christmas breeze',
as the Norther leapt from the continent
across Caribbean seas,
across our hills
to herald Christmas
ham boiling in the yard
plum pudding in the cloth
(Let three stones bear the pot
and feed the hat-fanned fire).

This breeze in August cools a Summer's day
here in England.
In December in Jamaica
we would have called it cold.
Cold Christmas Breeze,
fringing the hill tops with its tumble
of cloud, bringing in
imported apples, and dances
and rum (for older folk).
For us, some needed clothes, and a pair
of shoes squeezing every toe.
And Midnight Mass:
Adeste Fideles!

Some Faithful came –
and why not? – a little drunk,
some overdressed, but
ever faithful.
Like Christmas breeze
returning every year, bearing
not August's end, nor October's
wind and rain but, Christmas
and 'starlights'
and a certain sadness, except for Midnight Mass
and the Faithful
('The Night when Christ was born')

I miss celebrations, but I miss most
the people of faith
who greeted warmly every year
the Christmas breeze

August 1982
DAVID DABYDEEN

Adoration
(after Pieter Breugel’s Adoration of the Magi c. 1551, National Gallery, London)

These things he knew – a calabash scraped of skin and painted in the colours of dusk; an ancient brush of lama branches, inherited from his Master and his Master before him; and vials containing sidyam juice and the venom of water snakes, which only he could blend, to becalm poison with benevolent fruit, so that when a child was born, he could anoint its forehead with the potion and ordain for it a life of constancy: passion contained within wisdom, anger within forgiveness, sickness within hope, death within the intimation of stars. And only he, Manu, originator of life, could read the scroll of light that was the evening sky. It was his task to bear this knowledge, inherited from his Master, and his Master before him, and out of such knowledge to name the newly-born and to determine its future.

When a child was born, it was first brought to his hut, for without its naming, it could not be displayed to the tribe. These things he knew, the bawling of babies awaiting their names, the night air stinging their new skin, the night air like cinder in their lungs. And the sudden stillness as he brushed their foreheads clean, applied the potion from the calabash bowl and called them Saba or Juna or Ellar, signifying that this one would be the village beggar, that one a planter of eddoes, the other a maker of shrimp-nets.

Calabash, brush, potion, and an evening sky textured with stars: these were the measure and security of his life. His place in the village was constant because he had a particular function which only he could discharge. There was the Elder, schooled from childhood in the remembrance of their laws, who sat in judgement over adulterer and thief and gossiper. There was the Sorcerer, the keeper of the secrets of their masks, who knew what colours and patterns their faces must wear for particular ceremonies. And there was Manu, diviner of stars. The three of them maintained the order of the village, governing over planter and fisherman and weaver of cloth. And all life was contained within the boundaries of the village, the fields of jamoon and guinep trees, and the grasslands for their livestock. Beyond was the habitation of their ancestors, who never appeared to them, not even in dreams. Beyond was unthinkable, for it was the realm of the dead.

As unthinkable as the present was clear; the clearly defined tasks and duties and ceremonies of the village. Until one dread night, when an infant
was brought howling to him, and he scoured the sky for its name, but the stars were shaken from their frames and he was speechless before the chaos, the unexpected sadness of their lives which the brightest star foretold. The child howled and for the first time he felt pity for its pain, knowing that he was unable to determine its future, to moderate its pleasures and its sufferings, so life would become acceptable to it. He brushed its forehead, anointed it, and gave it a false name, for the stars could not be read. The infant continued to cry, and no amount of rocking and singing could comfort it. He knew then that the appearance of the new star presaged their destruction. The ways of their village would be changed forever, and with it his reason for being.

The Elder gave his judgement. 'Two cannot govern the village' he told Manu, 'there must be three. It has always been so.'

'But I must go' Manu insisted.

'There is nowhere to go. Beyond us there is nothing,' the Elder adjudicated. Manu pointed to the heavens and to the new star summoning him to an unthinkable fate, but the Elder could not distinguish one light from the next. It was not his role to divine the meaning of stars. The knowledge which once gave pride to Manu became burdensome. He felt trapped by a secret which could not be shared with others.

'Look' he addressed the Elder in a tone of desperation, pointing again to the new star but what was obvious to Manu was unthinkable to the Elder. He gave his judgement again: 'Two cannot govern the village. There must be three. It has always been so'. The repetition of verdict which once impressed Manu with its ring of authority now sounded like the stubbornness of the ancient.

'I must go. Someone is born afar and I must name it' Manu protested, for the first time in the history of the village questioning the Elder's ruling.

'You cannot go' the Elder commanded, denying him a third time.

So, when everyone was asleep, Manu slipped out of the village, his calabash and brush and vials wrapped in a bundle like a thief's haul. He slipped out of the village with the guilt of a thief. He had stolen their inheritance, their right to be named, and he was taking such inheritance to give to a foreign child in a foreign land.

The orchards and the grasslands gave way to swamp, then to softer earth, which suddenly collapsed into emptiness, absorbing and negating his terrified humanity. Only his possessions remained as tokens of identity, reminding him of his fixed position once within the village. But now he was the loosened nail in a collapsing universe. He clutched at his possessions frantically, to preserve an aspect of his former self, and he called out to the Elder, to the Sorcerer, but no-one answered. He called out his own name but no-one answered. Once more he panicked, but the distress in his throat was stillborn. In the emptiness his cries were rendered inaudible. He no longer mattered. He slipped out of consciousness with the guilt of a thief.
In dream they appeared, in profound guise, for their masks were corrupt, signifying no ceremony he recognized. The Elder and the Sorcerer wore battered faces, and their bodies were dressed in chains. They headed a procession of villagers, each chained to each in grief. Now and again someone screamed to the crack of a whip upon his back, like the call and response of storytelling, except that the fables were unfamiliar to Manu. A pale man dismounted from his horse and bowed reverentially to Manu. He offered Manu a staff. ‘Beat them’ the man tempted him, but Manu was perplexed by the gift. ‘Beat them, be their rightful Master’ the man urged, ‘their pain will give you strength. Here, let me show you’ and he raised his staff against the nearest slave, breaking his skull. The agony of the dying slave, and the terrified sobbing of the others, inspired the man. ‘Look how easy it is to kill’ he shouted, lashing out ecstatically. He battered them until he grew bored by their hurt. ‘It is true. After a while, people are not fun, don’t you think?’ And before Manu could recover his senses, the man clicked his fingers, conjuring forth a troupe of musicians. ‘People bore me. I give you instead the finest specimen of animal.’ He clicked his fingers again, and a woman appeared, dancing before Manu, offering magnificent breasts and thighs. ‘Here is something worth killing for’ the man whispered into Manu’s ear, pressing the staff again into his hand. He pointed to the slaves who had stopped their wailing, suddenly relieved by the dancing woman. ‘Kill them all before they rob you of her’ the man advised, drawing Manu’s attention to their fidgeting. ‘They will rise up, snap their chains, murder you and devour her,’ the man warned. Manu felt his hands gripping the staff with intent, but even as he stared longingly at the woman’s nakedness his sense of duty revived. He was still the wisdom of the village, determining its future according to the configuration of stars. He let the staff drop from his hands, denying the pale man a second time. ‘What will you kill for?’ The pale man asked in desperation, ‘tell me, and I will summon up anything you desire. Shall I bedeck you in gold? Shall I bum frankincense to beguile your senses? Shall I anoint your body with expensive myrrh?’

‘Go from me,’ Manu shouted in unexpected anger and the man retreated, startled by the threat of violence.

‘You’ve already sinned’ he accused Manu from a distance, ‘you have abandoned and broken your people and caused them to be sold into slavery. There is nothing you can do to redeem them.’ And he mounted his horse, raised his whip over the villagers and drove them to the waiting ships.

Still in dream Manu watched them go, knowing that their names would be cast aside. They would be renamed after mules and hoes and hovels. But the star still beckoned, reminding him of a superior purpose. The desire to save the villagers faded. The Elder and the Sorcerer cried out, challenging him to deliver them from evil, but he turned his face away from their distress towards the West, where the star presided.

It was a plainer journey than he imagined, for he encountered no marvels,
no bizarre landscapes. There were no epic struggles with his conscience, nor with giants and monsters. No riddles blocked his pathway. In no time he arrived and was disappointed not to be greeted. It was a village shabbier than his own, a stretch of dust littered with stones. There were twelve huts and a monkey straying among them. He had expected crowds, but the place was still. He followed the monkey to the nearest hut and called out in a stranger’s voice, but no-one appeared. He went from hut to hut, announcing himself, but all were deserted, except the last where a groan answered him. He pushed open the door to discover an ancient woman slumped on a bed of straw. With great effort she opened her eyes to meet his, but there was no flicker of interest. She lowered her head, closed her eyes and fell asleep. He looked around the hut, seeing nothing, for it was devoid of any sign of human presence. Not knowing what else to do he squatted beside the woman, waiting for her to stir. Eventually she awoke, but ignored him, gazing instead at the bag tied to his body.

‘Give me the food’ she said, stretching a shrivelled hand at the bag.

‘I have none’ Manu confessed.

‘Give me the food’ she insisted, the desperation of hunger giving life to her fingers. She ripped the bag from his waist and opened it greedily. She bit off a piece of the calabash and swallowed it without waiting to chew. He snatched the sacred vessel from her before she could eat more of it.

‘I need it for the child’ he said foolishly. She looked upon him with pity.

‘You are like the rest of them’ she said, not seeing his black skin, his woolly hair, his alien garments.

‘I am from –’ he went to explain.

‘I don’t care where you are from’ she interrupted, ‘thousands have passed through here recently from all corners of the earth, places you never thought existed. Yellow people, some white, some brown, then your lot, black, on horses and camels and asses and on foot, all different but all seeking the one fortune.’ She spat at his feet, watching the phlegm tremble and shimmer on the surface of dust. ‘They were following some star, they said, and it led them here. But there’s nothing here, see for yourself, there’s only me, but some of them were so desperate after their long journeys that they’d have me. “Get off you filthy pagan pigs” I cursed the lot of them, “shame on you to try to breed an old woman.”’ She thrust her face accusingly at Manu then relented. ‘Please, do you have any food in that bag your carrying?’

‘I have no food’ Manu confessed a second time.

‘I begged them too, but they wouldn’t give. They just wanted to take. But there was no treasure here, so they left. True, there was a star, but my eyes were too weak to see it. And what’s a star to me, I can’t eat it.’

‘Where are your people?’ Manu asked, thinking of his own loss.

‘My husband was a carpenter. Wolves ate him. I bore no child. I grew old. I walked out of the house, through all the phases of the moon, till I reached here, and I knew right away it was the place to die in. Look how loveless it is. But why can’t I die? I’ve been waiting for ever to die but nothing
happens. Please, do you have any poison in your bag?'
'I have none' Manu lied, denying her a third time.

That night, he sat outside the woman's hut, fingering his vials of poison obsessively. Her sleep was broken by cries of distress. Manu felt useless before the life suckling her breast, a creature of spite refusing to detach itself and allow her to die. The woman sobbed, challenging him to deliver her from evil, and he searched the night sky for wisdom, but the brightest star had eclipsed the light of other stars, like a life feeding off other, more vulnerable lives. There was nothing he could do but witness the rapacity in heaven and on earth. There was nothing he could do, and there was nothing to go back to. And yet he clung to his bag of instruments as frantically as life clung to the sobbing woman. They were useless, he knew, all their miraculous properties so much myth, but that was all there was. The brightest star was all there was, even though it witnessed nothing but a woman's agony.
Gendered Voyages into Coolitude: the Shaping of the Indo-Caribbean Woman’s Literary Consciousness

The arrival of some 551,000 Indians who, to use Mahadai Das’s phrase, ‘came in ships like cattle’, to the Caribbean, constitutes an indisputable event in the historical and cultural development of the Caribbean region where East Indians nowadays make up more than half of the population in Trinidad and Guyana. This voyage played a crucial role in the collision between worlds and the encounter between what were mostly migrating cultures, all of them leaving behind the original/‘authentic’ forms of the mother-country. From 1838 onwards, as the English needed more labour to keep their trade going and reassert their authority, Indian men and women were seduced, persuaded or bluntly stolen from their motherland to become slaves under another name: indentured labourers. As they were ‘driven by desperate poverty in India to sell their souls for five years and risk all for a chance of a better life’, they embarked upon ships that were forever to take them to a distant part of the Empire. The two systems, namely slavery and indentureship, were similar in many ways: the kidnapping act, the conditions of servitude, the laws of coercion, the homesickness and cultural disorientation establish obvious parallels between both colonial schemes. As Samaroo points out, ‘the major difference lay in the time of servitude: for the slave it was a lifetime experience, for the East Indian it was, in the first instance, for five years’. Yet, unlike the African slaves who were denied their very humanity and whose uprootedness was of an extreme kind as most of them were deprived of their name, language and selves, the Coolies had a signature, i.e., a name and an identity.

If the first generation of Indo-Caribbean writers, which includes major writers such as V.S. Naipaul or Sam Selvon, greatly contributed to the emergence and assertion of the Caribbean literary creativeness, they did not revisit what has been called the Second Middle Passage and the servitude that followed. Caught between assimilation and tradition, their writing displays interest in their Indian heritage and the Indo-Caribbean consciousness but it mostly deals with their journey to the metropolis, the immigration experience, the detachment and contradictory feelings about their culture as well as the mimic behaviour engendered by the colonial
system. In some of their works, an attempt is made to revisit indentureship but 'only the negative, external aspects of estate life are seen and the individual humanity of the estate worker preserved against all the odds, is lost sight of'.

Victor J. Ramraj’s claim that Sonny Ladoo’s *No Pain Like this Body* (1972) is ‘one of the few Indo-Caribbean works to focus on the indenture experience’ is currently challenged by a new generation of artists, who, like many contemporary post-colonial writers, feel the need to give a voice to the numerous facets of history as we near the end of the millennium, an era of globalisation and over-information which paradoxically does not leave any large space to memory. Sonny Ladoo but also Rooplall Monar, Clem Maharaj, David Dabydeen feel ‘it should be time to hymn [their] own wreck’. Emerging women authors such as Janice Shinebourne, Mahadai Das, Narmala Shewcharan, Lakshmi Persaud and Ramabai Espinet have also opted for a direct confrontation with the past and its catastrophic but also creative consequences as they are filling the gaps in both a gendered and ethnic-centred discourse. In Indo-Caribbean women writers’ poetry or fiction, the sailing into the past, the journey back to India, the torturing images of indentureship as well as the political and racial turmoil interweave with the dynamic of transformation and growth. The rewriting of history reveals a need to rechart a past that has been denied, forgotten and which is still hidden ‘in the blank spaces between the lines, in the dashes, the pauses between commas, semicolons, colons, in the microcosmic shadow world between full stops’, to use Mahadai Das’s phrase, an ‘Unpaged History’ lost through the selective reconstruction of historians.

The Coolie’s I-story has been silenced by both the world of publication and criticism trapped in an Afro-centric or western perspective. It is only a year ago that the Mauritian writer Khal Torabully has coined the word *Coolitude*, giving the experience of the Coolies a name. In his work that suggests a theoretical but also very poetical framework, the term *Coolitude* of course alludes to *Négritude* (though as my essay will show avoids the pitfalls of essentialism) and is defined by the author as the ‘alter ego of creolity’ or the ‘acclimatization of Indian culture on plural grounds’ (p. 71). Khal Torabully’s definition emerges as a deep assertion of a literary voice for all the Coolies around the world. As he points out, Coolies leave a lot of traces behind (places of cult, feasts, cooking) but in literature, ‘the silence of the coolies is unsettling’ (p. 65). These ‘latest arrivants in the complexity code of plural societies’ cannot remain voiceless: ‘his/her identity must be expressed, tuned into alterity, without denying any of his/her roots, making his/her the intercultural humus’ (p. 71).

In the Caribbean, the Coolie woman’s voice has been silent but also silenced because of numerous reasons that ‘must be sought not only in economic geography, the marginalization of Indo-Caribbean culture and general gender disadvantage, but in the past at least, in Indian attitudes to the education of girls’. The Indo-Guyanese pioneer writer Rajkumari
Singh, one of the first women to be politically engaged in Guyana, was also the first to assert her pride in being a Coolie woman, thereby claiming her contribution to the Caribbean and a past that is still denied. Her rethinking of the word Coolie emerges as a deep historical and cultural reification, an argument for 'the reinfection and political mobilization of 'Coolie' as a term of affirmation rather than denigration'.

Is it not time that we should think about this word ... re-think, rather ... It all started with our forefathers, remember ... this is the name of our hard-working, economy-building forefathers who were called COOLIE! ... The word brings to mind 'rows and rows of toilers' – coolie men and women – with soft mud squelching between their toes, up to their breasts, in water, planting rice ... All this they gave to us and more. In return for our HERITAGE what greater tribute can we pay to them than to keep alive the name by which they were called. COOLIE is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeats, achievements.

Her exclamation: 'Proclaim the word! Identify with the word! Proudly say to the world: "I AM A COOLIE"' echoes Khal's ideology and shows, how, like the Negro with Négritude, they both have turned an insulting word into a dignified name and heritage.

Like the Second Middle Passage, the East-Indian woman figure has been marginalized in most history books and has been made 'invisible' in Caribbean literature for a long time. The Indian women who arrived in the Caribbean were very often not the 'right kind of women,' for many social or economic circumstances had actually forced them to become independent or, in the words of men 'uncontrollable'. Indian women were involved in estates but were ascribed, because of the sexual division of labour, the lowest paid occupations, e.g., weeding and cane-cutting. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a change in policy towards the establishment of families emerged. As R.E. Reddock points out: 'By the 1870s therefore, owning a wife had become a social and economic necessity and controlling her an issue of life and death. But for large numbers of women this subjugation was not what they had come for' (Reddock, p. 42). In reaction to the efforts to reconstruct the patriarchal Indian family, many women of course attempted to maintain a certain degree of autonomy. And 'the Indian men resorted to the weapon used historically and internationally for this purpose: violence' (Reddock, p. 44). But women did not abandon the fight. At the beginning of the twentieth century, formerly indentured women became 'housewives' for most of their work was hidden within the household or domestic economy and not recognized as such. As a consequence, women, like other women all over the world, became separated from wage labour. When the Indian nationalist movement emerged, although the woman's question was present, it was relegated to a peripheral concern after, for example, the resentment on the part of Africans
or the legalization of non-Christian marriages. Yet, women took part in the Indian cultural resurgence and effervescence that emerged in British Guiana in the 1920s; nor did it prevent them from founding in June 1927, the first women’s organization in British Guiana, the East Indian Ladies’ Guild under the presidency of Alice Bhagwandai Singh. In the 1940s and 1950s, ‘the earlier desire among Indian men for an “uplifted womanhood” as a sign of their modernisation was no longer present. On the contrary, the trend appears to have been more towards consolidating the “otherness” of the Indian women in contradistinction to the Creolized African women’ (Reddock, p. 309). This attitude participated in the re-awakening of Indian cultural nationalism that stressed the existence of a separate Indian identity while reviving specific aspects of the Indian heritage, including the subordination and seclusion of women. It is only in the 1960s that the position of the Indian woman changed because of a rapid expansion of schooling and a considerable economic growth, the consequence of which was the ‘much greater acceptance of the contribution the Indian woman can make as a wage-earner to the family’s participation in the consumer economy’. But, although gender systems are still undergoing redefinition, her position has hardly changed. Her struggle for recognition and identity mirrors the Caribbean fight for independence in which gender has for long been very peripheral in comparison to race and cultural/political independence.

The Second Middle Passage or the crossing of the Kala Pani (dark waters) constitutes of course a bitter odyssey that becomes in both Mahadai Das and Ramabai Espinet’s poetry a mythical journey intrinsically linked with indentureship and the conditions of a servile bondage. Mahadai Das, who started her literary career in the 1970s, reviews this crucial displacement in her poem ‘They came in Ships’ which opens her first collection of poetry *I Want to Be a Poetess of My People* (1976), a collection which buoyantly traces the history of the Indo-Guyanese from indentureship to revolution. The poetess goes back in time but also in space as she travels back to India and British expansion which she openly attacks. The narrator weaves together a tapestry of visionary landscapes that give us the impression we are walking through an imaginary city of the East-Indian experience where we can hear ‘the cry of the coolies echo(ing) around the land’ (p. 4), a cry which echoes the scars left over by this forced migration. One can feel despair, solitude and suffering ‘under the yoke of their burden’ in an ‘endless reality in chains’; one can see people dying or starving at the streetcorners or notice the children and women at work in the fields. Indentureship and oppression have started. As she proceeds in her description of what is actually a peoplescape, the author points to the large variety of people who would cross dark waters because of very different reasons, dreams and aspirations which are then contrasted with what they were actually encountered: terrible working conditions, disease and death.
With repetitions and the use of the different connotative meanings of the word ‘cattle’, Mahadai Das uncommonly offers a multi-faceted image of the whole inner forced displacement as well as the vain attempts to improve the work conditions, so close to what is known as ‘slavery’, attempts that she describes with much irony but also with pride, dignity and hope. The poem is deeply concerned with resistance and strength, the slaves’ and Indians’ fight for respect and freedom embodied in Reverend John Smith, Lallabhagie, Cuffy, Crosby and Des Voeux, amongst others. Das’s words convey the problems and sufferings the Second Middle Passage engendered, pointing to how crucial this past was for the shaping of the future. The narrator stands alone, almost outside of the world, outside of history. She has survived and is looking ahead, wondering about the future.

The Trinidadian writer Ramabai Espinet re-uses the image of the ship in her poem ‘Lost Cargoes’ which closes her collection *Nudear Seasons*. The narrator equally penetrates the granite eyes and past of her grandfather, a past of cargoes of pain, cane-slashed legs, barracks, lost times. A past of ‘grieving through/Distances impossible/To measure’. A past of dignity and hope epitomized in the narrator’s grandfather leaving her a flourbag sack with an unwritten message. The opening of the bag and finding of ‘ragged sights/Bone and weed dipped in the sea’s/Long washing’20 embodies the narrator’s discovery and appropriation of her Indian heritage, an heritage from which she has to construe her own identity, ‘make a whole,/A life/Lighten the water, plant flowers/Gather the sea, lace the land’ (p. 87). Ramabai Espinet here echoes Mahadai Das’s image of the bone which is central in her last collection of the same name in which bones are resurrected to sing a heritage, to invent an identity that brings together all the different aspects of the Indo-Caribbean but also immigrant woman experience. They become flutes of expression, the tongue of the self that is resurrected and grows. Identity is reshaped by the discovery and exploration of the past. The recurrent reference to the bone flute, which finds its origins in an Amerindian South-American legend, establishes links with several Caribbean writers, essentially Wilson Harris, who has used the flute of bone to ‘re-trace one’s steps over lost ground, to visualise a womb of recovery’.21

While sailing back into time, writers equally rehearse the hardships of the indenture period and plantation life linked with the Second Middle Passage, whose suffering and pain is recalled in the numerous images in which the body is dismembered, wounded, beaten, scarred, appropriated, abused, disintegrated into inanimate parts. This ‘explosion’ of the body stands as an image of inner fragmentation and as part of a process of deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of identity or as a result of inner or physical migration. This disembodiment works as an echo of the hardships faced by the plantation workers but also the dismemberment of cultural values by a Western-centred colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Yet, the burden left over by the history of colonization did not prevent
East-Indians from contributing to the important achievements of their new country by e.g., instituting rice cultivation in the Caribbean, a contribution of which Mahadai Das often reminds the reader. In her poem ‘An Ageable Woman’, Ramabai Espinet goes further and reclaims the new country her forefathers have helped build with their sweat, hard work and suffering as she makes it clear that, unlike the colonizers and even neo-colonizers, she did not purchase it:

This Caribbean is mine
Not because I’ve bought it
Or bartered it
Or because I sell
Trade or use it
Or find it to be
‘A lovely piece of real estate’ (p. 81)

No, this Caribbean is hers because of her contribution to the building of the land with her work, sweat and suffering, as jiggers (small mites), bore holes through her bare ‘rice planting feet’. The authors’ claiming the land as theirs triggers off a reconsideration of what it means to be a member of a community or nation. This question is all the more crucial in the current globalization and migrational world of the late twentieth century.

* * *

The assertion and rewriting of the past goes hand in hand with an image of suffering but also of survival. With the emergence of Indian women’s writing, a new perspective and image of the Indo-Caribbean woman have emerged and subverted the stereotyped visions of Indian women as, for example, demure seductresses or passive and silent mothers. As in Rajkumarie Singh’s poem ‘Per-Ajie: a Tribute to the First Immigrant Woman’ which celebrates the great-coolie grandmother’s strength and contribution, women become dignified as they are portrayed as participating in the achievements of their own community. Indian women become part of Caribbean history in which writers try to rehabilitate their presence and crucial role. Their work is portrayed in very simple terms that convey admiration for their strength and dignity.

Nevertheless, many Indo-Caribbean Women writers realize that although there is progress, although women are extremely strong and have honourably contributed to the achievements of the Indian community in the Caribbean, gender remains an obstacle, a social, cultural construction of differences. In Das’s second and even more in her third collection of poems, the author becomes aware of and explores the very restrictions gender forces onto women. At the end of My Finer Steel will Grow (1982), her second collection, she ironically alludes to women’s domestic chores and how their men are well-served; an image she would herself reject but which is part of
the image she conjures up at the end of her collection ‘in seeking an image of love which is whole, uncomplicated and freely given ... an idyllic picture of East Indian peasant life’. Mahadai Das refuses and denounces the limitations of gender which are also encouraged by ethnic prejudices. In her last collection Bones, she portrays the immigrant woman as exploited, enclosed, possessed and used by a male money-centred world:

He grabs my tiara, my bangles
of silver. He gives me tokens
to send me to his factory,
send me to his store,
cage me in his offices,
keep me in his kitchens. (Das, Bones, p. 23)

Mahadai Das points out that the limitations of gender also have an impact on her work as a female poet. Society and the publishing world relegate her to the status of ‘monster’ as the narrator, who looks at her creation and perceives her work as a monstrous conception.

More importantly, patriarchal Indian values clash with the striving for new gender roles. Ethnic assertion and traditional Indian culture become conflictual. Janice Shynebourne’s The Last English Plantation (1988) which is set in the 1950s, the years that destabilized Guyana and witnessed an anti-India propaganda, points to this paradox. The episode which is to be remembered as ‘You want to be a coolie woman?’ perfectly illustrates the dilemma to which the Indian woman is confronted. After telling her daughter how hypocritical and vulgar Hindus are, how they arrange marriages, June’s mother proceeds to describe the gender roles ascribed to women by the Indian traditional culture:

they drink rum, they just eat and drink rum in their spare time, and beat their wives, and fight at the rumshops and the weddings ... Their wives cook from three o’clock in the morning to late at night. You want to be a coolie woman? Well be a coolie woman! I don’t care! Coolie women have to carry all the burdens for the men, the burden of the sick, the old, the children, burying the dead, and no thanks for it, only licks! (p. 128)

The main character in The Last English Plantation, June, slowly becomes aware that her reclaiming of Hinduness and search for a cultural identity is at odds with her mother’s aspirations for her future, which do not fit with the traditional image of the Indian woman. Her mother Lucille, having internalized colonial values, sees her daughter’s emancipation in a very British education and a need to distance herself from her Indianness. As June discovers colonial mimicry and silencing, she realizes that not only her roots but also her language are being erased by the colonial system. Janice Shynebourne records the stifling of June’s Indian inheritance and mother tongue which is erased by a system that forces her to speak a language with which she cannot express her own reality:
She spoke Hindi in those days, until Lucille and St. Peter's school erased it from her tongue ... Schoolwork had the same effect. It all erased the Hindi, the language of the coolies, the poor. The new language, English, did not only translate the books into her mind, it also translated New Dam. The more she absorbed the books, the more she became conscious that their words were not the words the people around her used about the same life, and she would listen to the differences. But then she began to understand that it was not just different words but different points of view she was really hearing. (p. 33)

On the other hand, Nani, who embodies the last stand of traditional India, 'a voice from the past which the present shoved aside' (p. 151), provides June with an alternative model. Like many young female Caribbean protagonists, June must come to terms with this fragmented identity and move beyond a cultural, psychic deadlock. But, as J. Poynting remarks, 'the issue of gender and Indianness is much more difficult to resolve'.24 The last chapter of Janice Shinebourne's novel, which pictures Nani retelling the Indian myths and thereby reviving the 'myth of exile' (p. 182), probably offers the promise of a better future in which the character negotiates and reinvents her split inheritance. Mahadai Das's phrase 'If I come to India ... will I find myself?'25 shows how allotted roots are constantly put into doubt. It sets out the condition of living between cultures and histories and points to the complexity and non-existence of a so-called 'solution' to this problem of cultural identity. The notions of identity and roots are questioned. The Indian world often becomes a 'lost world', 'the end of a world'26 which stresses the narrator's misplacement. In her poem 'Hosay Night', Ramabai Espinet makes it clear that the Indo-Caribbean identity is not rooted in India but in the Caribbean itself. The last stanza of her poem is both revealing and ironical:

This land is home to me
Now homeless, a true refugee
Of the soul's last corner
Daddhu days and babu days
And Mai in ohrni days
Lost to me - like elephants
And silks, the dhows of Naipaul's
Yearnings, not mine (p. 10)

The author ironically alludes to V.S. Naipaul's pessimistic view of the Caribbean and vain attempt to find his identity in India. The title of the poem is of course revealing when we know that Hosay night refers to a popular night street festival in Trinidad, now shared by that country's blending of races. The reference to the 'ohrni', the traditional veil worn over the heads of Hindu women, as a traditional element from the past, is also stressed by Narmala Shewcharan who notes that it belongs to the preceding generation (p. 132). This particular reference points to the important process of change women are going through, the movement away from the traditional values of their community.
Janice Shinebourne’s first novel *Timepiece* (1986) actually takes place after the last English plantation as Sandra, who closely resembles June, is now a trainee ‘female reporter’. She travels into the past as she goes back to her village, which, after the closing of the estate has died and has been devoured by the bush. It is actually when Sandra enters her dead grandmother’s room that she initiates a voyage into Guyanese history, a voyage into independence and womanhood, a voyage which is not without obstacles. Here again, Janice Shinebourne tackles the question of gender with great subtlety, pointing at the restrictions imposed by the traditional values like the confinement of women to house chores: ‘her job was to keep the children fed and house clean, clothes washed and food cooked’ (p. 37); ‘girl children must stay home and mind children and their home’ (p. 42). These go against any commitment of women in public life or education. Yet, if gender unites women in a ‘maternal council’ (p. 36), race and class separate them in many instances:

They said that at Wismar women had held down women to be raped – Afro-Guianese women held down Indo-Guianese women to be raped in revenge for their men preferring them, revenge against their men too. Violence was always a weapon used by one sex against the other sex, so it was inevitable it would be used by one race against the other. (p. 17)

Janice Shinebourne also shows that urban more ‘Western’ life equally excludes women by reducing them, looking down on them and ‘keeping them in their place’ (p. 74), confining them to specific female roles. In a world, which, according to Sandra, does not have ‘a sense of the past’ (p. 137), the protagonist tries to make her way in a town divided by political and racial riots. She feels homesick, an outsider from the ‘Coolie country’ (p. 68) and longs for a past of simplicity and community life.

The conflicts between past and present, gender and ethnicity, Western and traditional values point to the larger issue of choice between community life and the pursuit of an individual destiny, the search for an idiosyncratic identity. In Lakhsmi Persaud’s *Sastra* (1993), a novel that is also set against a background of racial tensions and negotiations, the author shows that distance from community and tradition can lead to suffering but also empowerment. Sastra makes her own choice when she breaks the path of tradition and marries the man she loves. Her parents are strongly opposed to this marriage which will sooner or later make Sastra a widow since Rabindranath suffers from leukaemia. A widow does not have any place in a conservative Hindu community. Sastra’s choosing of her own her destiny and going against her Karma will lead to her rejection by her community and family, which in the diaspora, according to E. Nelson, becomes ‘the chief vehicle for cultural transmission’. The peculiar situation she has to face illustrates that she is an outsider to both her community and the other communities, for she does not wish to distance herself from the Indian world. There is in Persaud’s novel, on the one hand, a distancing from the
Indian traditional male-centredness and dependence on community but, on the other a deep assertion of Indianness in the detailed description of the preparation of food rituals, as well as in the portrayal of women who bring up children, cook, guide the family and work in the shop. After years of pain because of her husband’s death, strength and wholeness eventually triumph. The protagonist changes her parents’ strict traditionalism to a certain extent, thereby ‘daughtering’ them, a notion that recurs in other works as narrators, by taking another destiny, change their parents’ views of things.

Narmala Shewcharan’s *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1994) is far from the romantic perspective and bourgeois setting adopted by Lakhsmi Persaud, but also portrays a woman faced with family, social, economic and political convulsions. Corruption, fear, chaos, disintegration, abuse of power, individualism, the dilemma of the idealistic constitute common points with Shinebourne’s *Timepiece*. Although it offers a darker vision, it is far from being deprived of strength and ideal. Among the numerous stories which the author subtly intertwines, Chandini’s struggle to keep her family emerges as central. While some join the opposite party and others flee to ‘the richman’s country’, her husband Lal sacrifices his family for a fight for a better tomorrow of his country. After he is killed in political riots, Chandini, like a mythical Indian widow, sacrifices herself for the sake of her children, ‘the only way to give them the better things in life ... a joke on the insurance company’ (p. 233). Women, gender and family become here peripheral and fall prey to political ideals. The violence that permeates Guyanese society invades the relationship between man and woman, particularly in the scene where Lal reappears and nearly rapes his own wife (p. 197). Subjectivity and collectivity, microcosm and macrocosm are here closely interwoven. The wounds of the past seem to haunt the female Indo-Caribbean imaginary which needs to reconnect with subjective and collective history by inviting a re-reading of history from the Second Middle Passage to the racial and political riots of the 1950s.

From Indo-Caribbean women’s creative voices emerge a reconstruction of a past that strives to be remembered and offers the possibility for Indo-Caribbean women to construct a new female consciousness that takes into account the history of indentureship, the Indian heritage and Caribbean multi-culturalism, so far denied and erased from history books. Yet, their writing very often stands off from historical location to embody metaphorical, melancholy, revolted or nostalgic meanings. But their work is far from being simply about nostalgia. Instead, it is about a cultural journey, about memory, history and the celebration of Indians’ contribution and resistance. There is a deep need on the part of the narrators and authors to page the past, to unburden themselves by telling their story, for it affords release/relief into authentic being: ‘those terrible times in Guyana are the times in which I grew up, and I am committed of necessity to write about them’ states Janice Shinebourne.
As they move between a language of diasporic loss of origin and use Indian words and references, Indo-Caribbean women writers offer a cultural representation of a new, personal syncretic perspective that examines the shortcomings and wealth of several worlds which they inscribe on a new literary palimpsest. They challenge not only the notion of homogenization but also of a monolithic feminism by showing the very different concerns that preoccupy 'Third World' women. Although they are proud of their heritage and past, Indo-Caribbean women writers fiercely criticize gender oppression within the Indian traditional system as they interrogate the contradictions that their diasporic experience forces on them. Yet, as they celebrate the woman's perspective, they point to the traditional values that are worth preserving thereby sharing the idea that the process of acculturation does not imply the complete relinquishing of Indian roots but adjustment and intermixing.

It is in fact metamorphosis or regeneration that lies at the heart of all those women's literary creativity. Their psychic fragmentation and dislocation engenders a crisis, a transformation and self-discovery. Resurrection or metamorphosis in its physical, visual and metaphorical forms permeate their writing and epitomize the shaping of an Indo-Caribbean female consciousness as narrators attempt to come to terms with the condition of living between various cultural homes, heritages and values, past and future. This image goes hand in hand with the concept of metamorphosis which embodies Carole Boyce Davies notion of 'migratory subjectivity', i.e., of a consciousness that is constantly in the process of being fashioned, a consciousness and cultural identity that is multiple and unsteady and transcends boundaries. Displacement is then associated with the fostering of new beginnings and the shaping of alternative identities. The narrators/authors have a sense of their consciousness being dominated and/or transformed by their pasts as well as the world they live in as they develop specific strategies for constructing associative identities that take into account the disparate and contradictory elements of their experience: traditional/modern, male/female, past/present/future, personal/collective. Their (re)construction of a new identity is associated with a negotiation of new cultural pathways. Regeneration and rebirth also establish links with the Indian cultural heritage and embody women's capacity to overcome their own limits.

Indo-Caribbean women's writing is certainly part of the Coolitude poetics and movement, i.e., a movement that strives for the rehabilitation of the history and dignified identity of the Coolies. Their writing, which traces back their origins and explores a new language, is imbued with what Khal defines as 'a desire to voice the missing part of the past and a projection in the plurality of the future ... to compensate for the loss of archives' (p. 71). Their creative memory gives their history a real voice thereby challenging the very notion of history and Western 'archivization' of the past. Yet, unlike other writers, Indo-Caribbean women writers do not resort to what Khal calls
'formal fleshing reminiscent of Modern poets' that would attempt to compensate for the lack of being and saying by the multiplication of language and literature devices. Instead, their writing is metaphorical, coloured, sensuous and even very Western as far as novels are concerned. Though fascinating, the parallel between Négritude and Coolitude is also misleading and incomplete in several ways. First, Coolitude is not a racial nor ethnic movement. This difference is visible in the terms that lie at the heart of the discussion here, namely 'Nigger' which refers to colour and 'Coolie' which refers more to a bondage and servitude. Khal even goes further and extends the definition of Coolie to 'the one who is without the text of his/her voyage' (p. 71). Négritude reflects some kind of essentialism that does not affect Coolitude in the same way. Another sharp distinction lies in the very concept of identity. While Négritude relied on a fixed and static identity, Coolitude, as it is defined by Khal and as it appears in the writings analysed above, seems to adhere to a contemporary vision of identity that is anchored in plurality and constant change. Coolitude is itself inscribed in diversity and takes different shapes and colours according to socio-historico-geographical contexts; it is the voice and the silence of an identity voyage echoing over countries and continents.

NOTES


2. Tejaswini Niranjana in her article ‘Gender, Identity and Cultural Politics: Studying the Culture of East Indian West Indians’ presented at ISER-NCIC Conference on ‘Challenge and Change: the Indian Diaspora in its Historical and Contemporary Context’ (The University of the West Indies, 1995), develops the idea that the diasporic cultural forms have been trapped by the binaries original/derivative, authentic/inauthentic and are perceived as ‘corrupt, imitative, degraded, a pale reflection of the "original" forms that are only to be found in the mother country’.

3. Narmala Shewcharan, *Tomorrow is Another Day* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1994), p. 50. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


5. The term coolie has undergone several shifts in meaning: it first referred to the inhabitants of Kula (India) but was later used to designate a hired labourer. The definition was then extended to emigrant workers from India and associated with indentured labourers with a negative connotation. In the Longman Dictionary of 1987, the term ‘coolie’ designates ‘(esp. in India and some parts of the Far East) an unskilled worker’, which illustrates both denigration and degradation.


10. In her introduction to her novel *Jesus is Indian*, the Indian South African writer Agnes Sam points to the urgent need to delve into the system of indentureship which she argues has been bluntly suppressed from history books.

11. Khal Torabully, 'Coolitude', *Notre Librairie* (Dec. 1996), p. 71. My translation. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text. Khal's comparison can be contested in the context of the Caribbean where creolity is very much linked with an Afro-centred approach and where ethnic riots constitute a main difference in comparison with the Pacific Ocean. Yet, if it is understood according to Edouard Glissant's definition, it acquires a larger and appropriate meaning.


18. Mahadai Das, *I want to Be a Poetess of my People* (Guyana National Service Publishing Centre, 1977), p. 3-4. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


24. Poynting, 'You want to Be a Coolie Woman?', p. 100.


29. Shewcharan, p. 75.

-Sylvia River, open your eyes and look at me. I need to check your blood pressure again. Are you still dreaming?-
- The doctor said we must get her out of the anaesthetic. She opens her eyes but she can’t speak. Speak to her again.-
- You’ve been semi-conscious since yesterday. You’re due for a painkiller in fifteen minutes. Would you like it now? It will hurt for a bit.-
No more drugs. I gave the frogs chloroform.
-What did she say?-  
-Something about chloroform. Careful, don’t touch her tubes.-
I can hear Miss K.
-What did she say?- 
-She’s delirious.-
Say thanks to Father Mason for putting a blessing on you.
-I can’t understand a word, can you? It sounds like pidgin English.-
Miss K, the voodoo priestess put something, the good voodoo, wrapped in a handkerchief in a corner of the bed. It is supposed to make me get better. She says, good herbs chile to make you get better. This is no voodoo.
-Can’t you hear how distressed she is? Somebody wake her.-
Miss K is saying, you need a good African burial to give your jumbie peace. A Christian burial is no use to our jumbies.
Miss K can say Hindu prayers too, do puja. Only she can bury me the Indian and African way, no Christian ways. Bring the hearse to put the corpse in ice. Let Sadhu come and tell me again that when I die the quicker I forget my body the better, that cremation is better than burial for shukshma sharira.-
-What is shukshma sharira Sadhu?- 
-That is the four functions of your mind Beti, and the winds of your body, and your five working organs and five knowledge organs.-
Mother is saying: -Sadhu is a heathen. Let him go and live in India if he wants to be an Indian. This is the West Indies, we are British. You will have an English funeral, so that you can go to heaven. Call Father Mason to preach a good sermon for you and bury you with holy water. You must die a Christian.-
In my dreams, I see Mother moving from one room to another. Each room is different. Each is a different continent. Her spirit is wandering because
Father Mason gave her communion wine and the body of Christ. She is not in Heaven because Sadhu and Miss K did not get to bury her and put Dutch pennies on her eyes. She should not have let Father Mason put communion wine on the lips of her corpse. I need Dutch pennies for the eyes of my corpse so I will not wander. Miss K will put Dutch pennies on my eyes. Sadhu will put red tikka on my third eye. Send for Miss K.

_She is dead._

When? Where?

_Ten years ago, alone in her cottage in South America. Pass four culverts. Go to her. They did not give her a Christian burial. They were afraid to bury her. The voodoo spirits came and took her away._

Miss K, I have come for you to bury me. Look, nothing has changed. Twenty years I was away, come back dead and nothing changed. Miss K, I come. You look so young.

_Oh my darling, you come to see me?_  
Yes, don’t tell Mother. Don’t tell Father Mason. They will want to bury me.

_Don’t worry about Mother. Mother is not here. She is dead. She died before you._

The anaesthetist said he is from Barbados so I tell him to go and call Miss K.

-All right darling, all right darling, I will go and get her, you just count to five and you will go to sleep and have real sweet dreams.-

No counting even, next thing I know, I am in the elevator, going back to the ward and smelling of chloroform and almost dead. We used chloroform to put frogs to sleep in the school laboratory before we cut them and they cut me.

-Who is Miss K? She keeps calling for Miss K.-

She is Miss Koko, Cromati. Father Mason tried to jail her.

_-Sylvia, wake up. I have to take your blood pressure._-

This is a nurse. Concentrate. Wake yourself up. Live. This is a nurse. Open your eyes and look. Don’t be afraid to open your eyes. No Dutch pennies for my eyes. I must not die without Dutch pennies for my eyes. This girl has no Dutch pennies for my eyes. But her eyes are blue like the Dutchman’s eyes. She is his daughter. Tell her to go and ask him for Dutch pennies for my eyes. Her eyes are too blue. _Look out, Dutchman haunt Guyana. Dutchman left all his gold Dutch pennies buried in jars all over Guyana. If you find the pennies, never spend it. You must only use it to bury the dead or the blue-eye Dutchman will kill you._

_-Sylvia, you must keep your arm still. I am trying to take your blood pressure._-

_-Your husband has gone home._-

Husbands are supposed to stay with their dead. You do not leave the dead on their own. You are supposed to sit up with the dead one night and one day. When Grandmother died, the whole family came from all over the
world and formed a circle round her bed for one night and one day. They never left her side.

-Why has he gone home?-
-She is speaking, at last. Call matron! Call the doctor!-
-Sorry to wake you up again.-

They do not leave the dead alone to die in peace. They harass the dead.

-My back hurts.-
-Her back hurts. She wants something for pain.-

No more drugs. I reek of chloroform. Why are you giving me chloroform?

-Sick, sick.-
-Get her a bowl.-
-Pain.-
-I’m sorry but you can only have an injection for the pain every four hours. You can have a pill every two hours.-

-Hot.-
-Someone get her a fan! Tell the nurse to get her a fan. Sweat is pouring from her.-

No fan. Don’t give me a fan. Uncle Darcus hung himself near his fan. He always sat in front of the fan. When he hung himself he kept the fan on. I don’t want the fan. Take the fan away.

-Where am I?-  
-She’s coming out of the anaesthetic.-  
-Hello dear, do you speak English?-  
You must tell them you speak English. Make them know you understand them.

-Yes.-
-She’s crying now. She’s fully conscious now.-
-Sylvia, you’re in intensive care. This afternoon the doctor will be down to see you.-
-Now it is afternoon.
-Are you awake? The doctor has something to tell you.-
-I am sorry, but we must operate again this afternoon. We must do a special test immediately.-

_Miss K says once they cut you you is no good no more. After all these white people never think about the soul. They only treat your body, cutting it up, cutting it up and they think it will live. Stupidy people. They don’t know to get better. You must dance till the spirit catch you and throw you down. How you can dance if they cut you up?_  
-No, not so soon, too soon.-  
-I assure you, there is no danger.-  
-Stand aside nurse!-  
-Breathe in deeply and hold your breath!-  
-Are you in pain?-  

_Blue-eye jumbie white girl, Dutchman daughter, go and bring the pennies for my eyes now._
-Yes.-
-Is it bad? Think of something nice.-
Too many voices.
-Take a deep breath. Nurse, stand aside.-
-I'll come back. Bear up now.-
The machine rumbles and clicks and too much pain.
-Thank you. Breathe normally.-
The blue-eyed nurse comes back. She puts her arm under my head.
-Think of something nice, the nicest thing that you've done. Go on, think about the thing that makes you happiest. What about swimming in the Caribbean sea? Imagine it.-

_Jumbies don't like water. They are mud. Water will melt them._
-I know someone from the Caribbean, he's a nurse here. He's lovely.

When were you last in the Caribbean? Are you still in pain?-n
-Stand aside Nurse! Another deep breath and hold!-
-It's all right.-

Her voice ebbs and flows like water. Jumbie voice.

-Don't close your eyes. Look at me. Take deep, gentle breaths. I'm here.

Try to relax. Is the pain bad?-n

_The jumbie grave is open._

The pain is too bad. I am dying. I can hear her voice, and Miss K's voice too.

-Doctor, she is in pain. It's the drain. You shut it off. Can I turn it on again?-n

-We'll hurry. We need to take several pictures. We have to find the leak. We'll be as quick as we can.-

-Deep breath! Hold! Breathe! Deep breath! Hold! Breathe deeply! Deep breath! Hold! Breathe! Deep breath! Hold! Breathe! Two more, then it'll be over!-

I am in the jumbie grave now, drowning in it like Miss K says happens when you die and like the time Uncle Darcus threw me into the trench to make me swim. When my body hit the water, I thought I would bounce off it and be safe but it parted for me like cloth then next thing I know I am weightless, the water is soaking through me and I can see underwater the bodies of the other children who are swimming. Where are my brothers? My mother has sent them to tea at Father Mason while I am drowning and dying. Underwater it is not brown but grey. My eyes will die first because the water is hurting them. If I shut my eyes I won't see myself dying. When I die again I will shut my eyes so I can't see myself doing it. I get to the bottom of the water and my feet and hands touch the mud. It is soft soft mud, like mud at the bottom of the graves where the jumbies live, the kind of mud I would have had to live in if I died and let the jumbies put me in the grave. Fight the water and live. Move, move, move, push, push the water, push back the pain in the chest, in the head, until they come to save you, human hands like the white girl hands saving you now. Don’t cry, not
now, not then. They were all laughing because they knew I nearly died. My eyes are open and I am living. Her face is there, not the water, not the ceiling.

Again she says look at me, keep my eyes open. I look and see her eyes blue blue blue blue blue blue like the midday sky at home and blue like Father Mason. Home is in her blue eyes. She tells me the sun is hot, I am at home. She tells me I am in the Caribbean. She tells me I am swimming in the sea, it is warm and comforting and relaxing in the water, she tells me I am at home, all my friends and family and the people I love are there. She wants me to live. She is afraid to see me die. She does not know how to let me die. How blue the sky in her eyes, how cool the breeze at home where I belong, how sad not to be at home if home is what she says it is. Her fingers brush my cheek. I am not fainting. I am going to sleep, like a baby. Like a mother, she is rocking and coaxing me to sleep. There is no pain. I am not dying. I lose the memory to fight. I let her hold my hand. I go to sleep. I take her hand with me to sleep, feeling safe to sleep.

I can hear the distant noises of other rooms and wards and offices in the hospital. I will leave this quiet room and return to my real life and remember everything. Turn. See? My head moves, it is alive. There is a nurse at a desk. Don’t die, call the nurse.

-Nurse!-
Call again, -Nurse!-
She is coming.
-Yes?-
-I don’t feel very well.-
She comes closer. -What is it my love?- 
-I feel really bad.-
-Well it’s not surprising, your insides have been handled twice now in two major operations in two days. We’ve been trying desperately to get you to come round.-

-What was this operation?- 
-To repair your ureter. It was a reimplantation of the right ureter, near your bladder, it was leaking. They had to take you straight from the x-ray because you fainted while they were taking the pictures. You have had a lot of anaesthetic you know. You have been very delirious, talking and arguing with everybody, in a world of your own. You have been worrying us. You’ll be all right now.-

The clock says three o’clock. I remember I had a mother who died. She died now, at three o’clock in the morning and the priest she believed in never once came to see her or give her the last rites. I am not dead yet. No mother, not time for you to come for me. That is what the people Father Mason called heathens used to say, that when it is time for me to die, my
mother will call me, I will see her and she will come for me. Not God, not Jesus, your mother. I mustn’t sleep or else I will die and she and Father Mason will come for me. Stay awake, doze a little, wake again, doze again. Don’t go to sleep and dream or you will die.

The feel of cold flannel on face. A blessing.

-Joanna?-  
-Who is Joanna my darling baby girl?-  
Another dream. Open my eyes. This is Miss K, leaning over me and smiling. Miss K why you take so long to come? They said you were dead.

-Miss K what you doing here?-  
-Lord child, you could really talk in your sleep. All the time you talking, I can’t understand you half the time and they send me because they say I will understand you. They say you talking West Indies. They say you talking voodoo. Careful chile or else they will lock you up. This is a Christian country. I will leave the bowl of water here and the flannel and come and wipe your face for you later. Where you from? I from Grenada.-  
-I can’t remember. Find out for me.-  
-Look, right here your notes say you are a Christian and we should send for the priest. You dreaming. You calling in your sleep. Whole night you calling. Poor baby girl. Go back to sleep now. Is the anaesthetic. You had it plenty times. It will wear off and you will remember everything. Rest.-  

* * *

-Hello. Wake up Sylvia. How’re you feeling? I am sorry. We have to operate on you a third time. I’m the anaesthetist. Just another anaesthetic. Does anaesthetic affect you?-  
-Your husband is here.-  
When she was dying, Mother used to call for me, and they used to tell her: Your daughter is coming. I can remember I had a mother but I don’t remember her face because she had no Dutch pennies for her eyes.

-What’s this they’re telling me about you having to go back to the theatre?-  
A man with a sneer.  
-My mind is getting straight.-  
-This has nothing to do with your mind. It’s about your body. Where is the doctor?-  
-Yes sir, of course, I’ll get the doctor.-  
-Sylvia, we’re going to give you your premed now.-  
-Nurse Carew, would you like to do it?-
-I don’t want more anaesthetic, again, so soon.-
-You’re going to feel very drowsy now. Don’t worry. I’m here. You can talk to me.-

Miss K you come thank god you come.
-She’s doing it again, talking in that voice.-
-You’re going to sleep now.-
-Listen to me. You’re not going to die. And I’ll be here when you get back from the theatre, and if I’m not on duty, I’ll come and see you. I promise.-
-I say, Sylvia River? Is that your name? Nod if you can hear me. Wake up a bit. Is your name Sylvia River? Just checking you’re who you’re supposed to be. I’m just going to give you an injection now. It’ll put you to sleep. Count to five.-

Pull me out of the dark hole where I am curled up like a foetus. No one hears me calling. The nurse who looks like Miss K is wearing her white uniform. She is walking in the hospital corridor. She is carrying a bowl of water for my face. I am calling her but my voice is choked in my throat like when Uncle Darcus threw me into the trench and I nearly drowned, like when Harold cut the priest’s throat to stop him breathing. But I could hear them laughing kyah kyah kyah. I was in the water but I could still hear them. I want to get out. I smell of chloroform. Your mother is in a coma, come at once. I must get out. Push. Swim. Push. Once more. Push. The head is almost there. I can’t push anymore. I’m dead. One more time. Your baby is ready. I want you to do the last stage breathing. Pant pant pant. Push hard when I say not before. I see the head. You are at home. The sky is blue in her eyes. The baby has black hair. Push. After you die you will be alive. Give her oxygen. Hold her tubes. Breathe. Pant. Push. Push. Come on. Yes yes yes yes yes. There we are, there.

-It’s me, Joanna. Open your eyes and look at me.-

Send Miss K. Send for her to pull me out from the grave. Send her to tie my baby’s navel string then bury it in the yard with all the family navel string. Her eyes are the colour of the sky at home, her hand is soft, too soft to cut the navel string. Miss K know how to cut the navel string.

-Pull me out.-

-Take my hand. I’m here. Let me wipe your face. You poor thing. You are having a difficult time. This was the last operation. Your ureter has been opened.-

My mother’s womb opened again. I was born again.
-Keep still, or else you’ll disconnect the tubes. You’ll fall off the bed. Sister, I need help, she’s rolling off the bed!-

Hold her Miss K, she falling. Jumbie got her. Don’t let me catch you going to the voodoo dances. People go into trances and fall down and you got to hold them down. Miss K is the obeah woman, she does hold them down and put cloth between they teeth to stop the fits. They always get better afterwards.

-There, there. I’m holding your hand. Open your eyes. That’s it. Keep
them open. Look at me and try and remember what is happening to you. Don’t close your eyes. Open them. You must wake up.-

They finished the x-ray?- 

This isn’t the x-ray. That was yesterday. You must try to wake up now. You’re delirious, hallucinating. Look I brought you a card, and a present. Do you like anemones?- 

Flowers.- 

Yes, they’re very English, like me. I’m from Henley, you know, where they have the regatta. I was born there, lived there all my life before coming to London two years ago.- 

I died again and was born too.- 

Hush. Try and talk sense.- 

My husband was born here. I had his baby. I remember having a baby.- 

He came but you were sleeping. He went away but he’ll be back.- 

When Mother was dying, her sister-in-law kept wanting to see her although they hated each other. Miss K says your enemies have to come and pay their respects to you when you are dying so you will not blow a bad breeze on them.

It’s the anaesthetic and painkillers. You’ve had a lot of both. You’re drugged. It’ll wear off in a day or two. I’ll wash your face. Here. Is that good?- 

Yes. Again. My neck too.- 

Turn over, I’ll do your back.- 

I was an infant. We are all bathing together, girls and women and babies. It’s the old logie village. Lily is holding me. She is stooping. I am naked, on her knee. She is drenched in her dress and she is pouring calabashfuls of water over me. This is the bathouse over the river. It’s a small weather-beaten hut on a platform made of large wooden planks. All the women come here to bathe together with the children. When they want to bathe naked they go into the hut and I can see them soaping themselves there. White soapsuds trail along their bodies. They pour water over each other. I am taken there to be soaped then brought out again to be rinsed clean. There are several buckets of water and everyone dips into them. Lily lifts me high into the air and I can see the huge trees of the forest around us as the women take turns to fill the buckets. The ritual of washing goes on for a very long time. It is the earliest memory I have of myself now, now that I am born again.- 

* * *

They’re all black this morning. I don’t want no black hands touching me.- 

Which one of you said that? Which one of you?- 

She is awake. Look she is awake. Someone tell her to mind her tubes.- 

Open your eyes or they will kill you. Open your eyes. Oh miracles. I am alive. Look, they have moved me back to the original ward. All the same
women I found in the first day. Why don’t they leave me in one place?
-Nurse, can I have the back rest raised please?-
-I don’t know if you can be moved. That is not my job. I have to ask the staff nurse and she is not here. They have left me, an auxiliary, in charge! Can you imagine it? What is this place coming to I ask you? Supposing one of you has a stroke or a heart attack? You see me here? I am extremely angry! I object entirely to this. So you all had better not aggravate me with your racism! You are not too sick to be racist! I don’t want black hands touching me indeed!

She storms away. The white patients grimace to each other. There is war.
-I don’t want black hands touching me.-
-Who’s saying that? Was that you?- 
-Was it me saying what?- 
-I don’t want black hands touching me – who is saying that?- 

They are all silent. The ward is waiting in suspense. She returns with three more black auxiliaries, and she is still complaining loudly about being left in charge of the ward. She is telling them that one of the patients said that they did not want black hands touching them and she would like to find out which person said that because whoever said it was not going to get so much as a drop of water from her or a bedpan, nothing, and that one over there that woman there wanted to get up because her back is hurting her and whoever wanted to take responsibility for lifting her could do so.

All the patients are saying nothing. The nurse is waiting for them to say something, for one of their number to take the racist to task, but no one is owning up.
-You want to be lifted?-
This nurse does not look capable of lifting anyone – she is so thin.
-Well I don’t want to be any trouble but I can’t bear the pain. One more day of lying on my back will kill me. But I don’t want to kill you either. I can’t move myself.-
-Is all right. Come. I will just adjus’ these tubes and come to your right. Now you do exactly as I tell you, you understand?- 
She has a West Coast accent. Guyanese voice, pure Guyanese voice. 
-Your accent, you have to be Guyanese.- 
-That’s right. How you know? You are Guyanese too?- 
-Yes.-
-I come from West Coast. You know West Coast. That is the other side of the Berbice River.-
-I know the West Coast. My auntie used to live in Belle Vue.-
-I am from Belle Vue. What was your auntie name?- 
-Johnson, Imelda.-
-I don’t know her, must have been before my time.-
-She only lived there a few years.-
-Come let me help you up. Slowly now, I holding you. Don’t move too fast. Come forward, come forward. Good. You glad to get up eh? You been
lying down a long time girl. -
-Lord, this is a blessing. Thank you. -
-Where it’s hurting? -
-Here, here. -
-Is the muscle you know from lying on it all the time. Gone stiff. Rub it, you must rub it. You have anything to rub it with? Any tiger balm? Sacrool? Limacol? You know the things we use at home? They are good for muscle pain. What about your tummy?- 
-Marjorie! Don’t bother to play doctor with that patient!-
-You hear her? She is in one bad mood today. All the white student nurses gone on strike today. -
-You not going on strike too? -
-We going this afternoon, take turns, but they didn’t organize the thing properly so all the student nurses and staff nurses went this morning.-
-You are an auxiliary?- 
-Yes, but I did my exams and passed. You o.k now? You want to lie down again? -
-I want to stay up. Please fix my pillows so I could stay up.-
-What about your tummy? How that feeling? -
-Bad.-
-Never mind. You will get better. Don’ go falling down now. I have to go now, there is a very sick old lady in the back bay.-
-What language is she speaking?- 
They are talking to me. Don’ let me catch you talking to white people. 
-You’re speaking to me? Are you speaking to me?- 
-Yes. My name is Francoise. What is yours?- 
-Sylvia.-
-I have hysterectomy but I have ovaries. I am glad. Have they given you replacement hormones? -
-I don’t know.- 
-You talk much in your sleep. You talk so much all the time. We all listen and feel so sorry for you. You call for your mother. But the young nurse Joanna looks after you good. She comes in often to see you. She sits by your bed and she holds your hand and talk to you. When she is here you wake up little talk to her. Your husband, children have been but you slept when they came. Can you understand my English? Many do not.-
-Yes I understand you.-
-These black nurses, they are so angry. The one you talk to first, she is worst, terrible. The one that lift you, she is nice. I hope the white nurses come back. The black ones don’t like we white ones. You are all right. You are from their country. You can talk to them. I don’t understand them.-
-You can understand them if you want to. Is it you who said that terrible thing? -
-No, no, no. Not me!-
Now the other women are complaining. The woman in the corner says
she is from Cornwall. She is clutching her belly and looking very glum.

-Just wait until the sisters and doctors come back. I am not putting up with this.-

-It's not right, is it?- This is the grey haired woman in the opposite corner.
-In all my twenty years of coming to this hospital, and I have had my children here, I have not had to put up with anything like this. She is like a one-woman-army that auxiliary.- Her eyes look keen and gentle and wise. Her bedside is decorated with flowers, baskets and pots and vases of fresh, glorious flowers. -Which of us would dare say such a thing?-  
-They are very aggressive.- Francoise is lying under her own duvet, beside her table full of perfumes, body creams, makeup, and matching gold hairbrush, comb and mirror. She is reading Shirley Maclaine's autobiography. Francoise is beginning to complain. She wants a piece of toast. She is going to get it. Sally is advising her not to do it.

Now, another patient is complaining about the noise. She is a tiny woman, with skin almost as white as milk, black hair and very blue eyes. She looks frightened and ill. How clever your children are, her neighbour was telling her, how articulate. She says that is because I am a teacher and I believe that children should not be repressed.

-I will ring the bell for Marjorie, the tall black one. She always comes. Not like the others.-  
-Francoise I would wait till she's seen to the old lady. She is very hard pressed.-
-The wind is so bad, I must have my toast. I have been calling all morning. I can't stand the wind anymore. I am going to cry. I feel awful. I will phone my husband. He must come. I want him to bring me some smoked salmon.-  

She rings the bell. No one comes. She rings again and the youngest nurse comes. She does not come to Francoise directly but stands in the aisle with her hands on her hips.

-Who rang?-

-I need some toast desperately.-

-Didn't they give you some this morning?-  
-I could not eat it this morning. You know how it is. I could only sip some tea now there is room for toast. Please make me some.-

-You are an unreasonable person you know. I have never met a patient like you. Every minute you want attention. What is the matter with you?-

-The matter is I am very sick. All of us. Look at us. You are very hard.-  
Beatrice is calling the auxiliary away. -Helen you leave them right there and come and help me here. If they strong enough to say they don't want black hands touching them then they strong enough to look after themselves.-  

Sally shakes her head. -That isn't right you know.-  

The door opens. Two white nurses enter. Beatrice begins to complain bitterly to them. She voices her grievances but they say nothing at all to her. When the sister enters the ward with the staff nurse Beatrice goes to them
and voices her grievances again. They take her to the office.

Now Francoise presses her buzzer twice before the Guyanese nurse, Marjorie, comes to her bed.

-Why did you take so long to come? Why are you people so cruel?-
-Why are you talking to me like that? What is the matter with you? Who you calling cruel? You people too damn bareface you know.-

-All morning I rang and no one came. You are all the same.-

-Look here, don’t talk to me like that. What do you want? I know what you are trying to do. You want to get me into trouble with Sister. Why you pick on me? Why you pick on me? Just because I was the one who used to run every time you call? Well I not running when you call no more because you can never be satisfied. The more I come the more you call. Don’t bother call me anymore.-

Francoise rings the bell again. One of the white nurses come, and she turns down the request for toast and walks away.

-Fucking English bastard, I wish I had gone to a private hospital. These fucking English bastards are such shits. And those black ones, I don’t want them touching me.- She whispers so low, it is not possible for anyone else to hear her.

It was she who said it. -You said it, you said you didn’t want black hands touching you. You are the one.-

-Yes, I said it. I don’t care.-

She gets to her feet, clutches her belly, and limps to Sally’s bed. Now They groan to each other about their lack of appetite, their wind, water and motion.

One of the white nurses calls Francoise for her wash. Not one nurse but all four white nurses go to Francoise’s bed to wash her. They draw the curtains, admire her hair, skin, perfumes, creams and silk pyjamas.

-I will tell you how to get skin like mine.- Francoise is saying. -Almond oil, use almond oil every time you bath. Try my perfume, go on, go on, there, isn’t it lovely?-\n
-Your hair is beautiful.- They are touching her, caressing her. -How lovely your skin is Francoise, I wish I could afford your perfume, not on my nurse’s pay.-

Discipline was gone, there was a nurses’ strike – unheard of in England in 1988, not enough nurses to go round, no more towels or dressing gowns, sheets and blankets threadbare, floors not clean, curtains faded and frayed. How cosy and quiet the ward becomes while Beatrice the black auxiliary left in charge fights in the office.

Lunch comes and when Francoise is given her tray, she complains in a loud voice. She sends hers back and goes to the fridge for her high fibre white bread, Polish smoked ham, wine and Swiss chocolates. While she is eating her lunch, the doctor and staff nurse come to her bed.

-Have you been using your own suppositories?- The doctor asks her.

Francoise admits she has been using her own medicine, a laxative,
something organic.
-You are not supposed to do that,- the Staff Nurse says.
-I can’t stand the suppositories.-
-You have to leave the hospital.-
-You can’t make me leave the hospital.-
-I will send for the doctor immediately.-

It is a woman doctor who comes. She is arguing with Francoise: you have broken all the rules, there is nothing we seem to be able to do for you, we have other patients waiting for beds, I think we can discharge you.
-No, I am not well enough to go home.-
-I am sorry, please phone your husband and ask him to collect you now.-
-Now? Now? -
-Yes.-
-But he just left!-
-I am sorry but you have to go.-

Francoise is sobbing, -Bloody English bastards, bloody English bastards. You are all racists. Nobody understands me when I speak, your food is awful, you are all so cold, why don’t you talk to the patients, why don’t you understand?-
Pauline Melville

HIDEOUS LOVE

I was never reasonable.
I am the woman in the Chalk Circle
Who would not let go,
Rage and chicken feathers
My north star.

Perhaps I should not
Have made my home in your dreams,
You, of all people,
The arch-wolf in a pewter sea.
But I did – like a soucriant.
And when you left
I ran, knife in hand
Through the skies of Paris –
That city of romance and Alsatian dogs.
Some people even reported a ball of fire
Over Notre Dame.
Later, I took to wandering
Through the markets of foreign cities
Calling your name.

My love dwindled into a hyena
Nosing with blood-stained snout
Over carcasses of memory.

They say time is a great healer,
So I wait for events
To clamp their sutures
Round the wound.

Meanwhile, the wind howls
Through empty sheets.
My house is a tomb
That I inhabit
On the level of poetry and cutlasses,
Dressed all in white,
Like a seagull.
MIXED

Sometimes, I think
My mother with her blue eyes
And flowered apron
Was exasperated
At having such a sallow child,
And my mulatto daddee
Silenced
By having such an English-looking one.

And so my mother
Rubbed a little rouge on my cheeks
For school,
Lest people should think
She was not doing her job properly.

And my father chose to stay at home
On sports days.
Since my mother has entered her eightieth year she has taken to more frequently reminding me of my dream to build a small place out in Guyana. As she mentally tidies up the business of her life, her anxiety grows: not for the moment when I will have to do the same type of reckoning, but more for my continued safety in this white land. ‘It might not be the same here always’ she says to me, as if her caretaking days soon to be over can no longer ensure the protection a white Welsh mother gave to her five black daughters. Somehow my mother’s sentiments don’t usher in any alarm but they do capture some of the uncertainties of my second generation status – the sense of an invitation made to the parent generation that could be miserably withdrawn, that fine line between the beckon and the wave. The ‘Why don’t you go back to your own country?’ question that was so oppressive and ugly in my childhood became for myself ‘Well, why don’t I?’.

In my thirties, seeking some resolution to this big ‘why?’, I decided to ‘go back’ to this country where I had never been and planned a cautious exile to my father’s land. I had some sense that my youth in Wales would now be complemented by a voyage of self-realization to a black country that only lived in the scrapbook of stories from my childhood. A passionate sense of a spiritual return home, nudged along by those thousand little sentences, ‘Where do you come from then?’, that overrode a certain knowledge that I had never truly known any other culture, any other land in any intimate way but Wales. Yet still there was a longing for some reconnection with something other, something that surely was my birthright.

I like the idea of ‘return’. I think this funny myth passes down like a beautiful poem in many black families. I find myself rehearsing it with my own daughters and yet at the same time in small, everyday ways, strengthening their possession of and their sense of belonging to Wales.

But belonging can’t just be plucked like a juicy fruit off that Caribbean tree; history and attachment don’t just flow into your body like the deep breaths of warm air blowing across black creek-water; that part of your identity can’t automatically fit you like the ‘I love Guyana’ tee-shirt you can buy anywhere on Main Street in Georgetown.

I had been in Guyana about a year when my dreams turned into black dreams. It suddenly struck me one day the extent to which my thoughts,
my way of thinking and even my dreams were peopled almost exclusively by white people. I was dreaming about my house in Wales. A beautiful woman was descending our staircase. The shock of the normality of this act coupled with the normality of her blackness and in my Wales house was immense. How could my brain have so wholly stolen from me any imagining of black people? How could my world be so white that I could only dream white dreams? Now the black people I experienced daily began to inhabit my dreams.

This startling little revelation brought to my consciousness the total normality of black life: the running for the bus, going on holiday, late for the hairdresser, dinner partying, playing golf-ing lifestyle that was just normal here. The high brow, the low brow, the middling normality of black life that had been so strangely distorted for me in Wales. When I went to see the bank manager she was black, the taxi driver, the librarian, the Minister, the lawyer and the hockey team, they were all black. Everyone was black and saying nothing about it. I would watch the minutiae of everyday actions performed by black people with relish, surprise and deep happiness: the idle low-voiced hum of the waitresses’ chatter enchanted me; the bank-teller reapplying her lipstick after lunch; the lovers meeting for lunch at Palm Court Cafe; business men at my workplace. My observation was obsessive and thorough and through this observation I discovered aspects of myself that as always the only black face I had never known. I learnt that deference to white people’s whiteness lurked in me like a cancer, that second class citizenship was my inheritance in a way these people didn’t recognize. Their post-colonial temperament reminded me of my mother ...

I worked in an aid agency on Carmichael Street. It was part of the country’s regeneration programme and our work was to translate big aid monies into small-scale welfare projects. The work suited me. I wanted to be part of putting back into Guyana what colonialism had taken out and as a newly reclaimed Guyanese national, I believed I was well placed. I recall one day at my workplace some American consultants arrived to ‘show us the way’. I was consumed with anger as these white interlopers with their ‘development’ language picked over our work like overseers and later dated the girls from the office. The New Colonials in their white Landrovers and four-by-four Toyota trucks brandishing all the symbols of their forefathers’ exploitations now reinvented in their Coca Cola mentality, their designer ‘jungle explorer’ garb and their voyeuristic fascination with the natives and ‘their culture’. Armed with Camel cigarettes, their talk of ‘Outside’ and their hard currency, they took their pick of Georgetown’s young women, whilst Georgetown’s young men got angrier. There were more and more of them appearing everyday as the recently democratized country opened its doors to the West. I took to distancing myself from anything white – from anything that reminded me of the place of my kind in this country’s slave history and now from its
New Colonials to whom I was intimately wedded.

'Heh Sista, wha' you do wi' Babylon?' a Rasta man asked me on the sea wall one evening. 'you slavin' on dis white fok?' he continued, not waiting for any reply. This incidental but charged confrontation turned my own eyes to relook at the small town Welsh boy I had married all those years ago in my hometown. 'Married? ... to he? ...!!' This was the desk officer exclamation at the immigration desk at Timehri Airport 'Don' ya know gal dat's all jus' colonial rubbish?' So how could this ever have been a true partnership? I asked myself. I think about my own mother growing up in Bontnewydd in the early 1900s and not speaking a word of English until she was 19 – how she found herself in the civil service in London and met my father – then an aspiring young black West Indian artist studying at the Slade school of Art on a colonial scholarship. Was theirs a relationship of equals? And then again of my older daughter’s marriage to a white native Welsh guy and my younger daughter’s politicized remonstrations that she is ‘definitely going to find herself a black husband’. These little twists and turns have been going on forever both in Welsh history and in the stories of the Caribbean and yet in the minutiae of our every day actions and the reaction of society to us they carry enormous personal costs and triumphs as we scale that interface between black and white, reminding both camps of their troubled relationships and yet the nonsense of the boundaries between them.

My distancing from ‘white’ ways of being continued with urgency. I immersed myself in the life of Guyana like my frequent submersion in Guyana’s creeks – brown skin concealed in the brown leaf-stained waters. My submersion was total: I rode the crammed-up minibuses daily and learnt that the ride held a language all of its own: ‘Room fo’ a squeeze?’ (room for one more but it’s not a full space) ‘wan’ me mek you a drop sista?’ (do you want a lift) ... I roamed the markets, engaged with the street sellers, walked streets I knew to be dangerous as if defying anyone to treat me as outsider ... and I danced and danced at every ‘jump-up’ or ‘road block’ where to big mega-watts I ‘backballed’ de hoi’ night to ragga, reggae, dob, soca ... I loved the pan yards, the heat, the rum shops, the heat, the sea wall at night, the heat ... that produced every plant, flower, leaf and fruit in XXL size. I felt refreshed; immersed; connected.

I had been in Kitty police station for two hours when the sergeant came to take my statement, and two before that standing on the road waiting for the PC to come and mark out the scene of the accident. But then, so had all the people on the minibus that ploughed into the offside of the Landrover. Nothing moves fast in Guyana. It was 3 o’clock hot hot by now. ‘So what was I doing driving a Union Jack stamped British High Commission landrover through Kitty? What was I anyway? Not a diplomat? Then who are you and where do you come from?’ The words were being spoken by the desk sergeant but the demand was silently made by the many eyes of the minibus occupants now seated expectantly
off-stage. I had offered to pay for the damage immediately but there was, of course, a process that I should not so soon have anticipated in getting to that same end. Perhaps I should have realized that I needed to be called publicly to account for the fact that I, alone, was the one who could not mentally conjure up the road markings and signs long faded or broken since the British colonial days. ‘How was I expected to know it wasn’t my right of way?’ is followed by a hum of disbelief from the crowd because EVERYBODY knows Shell Road has priority unless that is, of course, they are from ‘outside’.

‘So you a mix, rite?’ This official term to describe my origins was already being printed onto the proforma. That is not to say this classification was in any way on a par with ‘dogla’ or ‘putagee’, or any other variation of mixed race person, but clearly in this oldest of old pigmentocracies, a mix denoted that ‘superior’ union of black with white. This status meant that most definitely the minibus people would concede, that I would offer paternalistically to pay for all damage but that the black sergeant would find as many ways as he could to remind me that this was now a black people’s country and don’t I dare assume any of those colonial privileges. The Kitty story crashed hard into my identity pattern and added to a growing number of bruises that damaged my yet fragile sense of self. The women in the market affectionately called people like me ‘reds’ - ‘Com buy here daarlin, com Reds - look meh nice plantains ...’ - a description rather than anything pejorative, I was later told, but a clear marker of my ranking in this society. A dear black woman who I tried hard to befriend, ultimately treated me with the cautious mistrust that existed between ‘nigger woman’ and ‘coloured’. Yet I knew my great-great-grandmother had the experience of slavery, that my grandmother had been in colonial domestic service and I thought of the hundred ‘nigger’ women who were my ancestry.

I’m not comfortable with servants. That’s easy to say but there must be a certain ambivalence between black woman as mistress and black woman as servant. I felt it, even if Rati Naraine the housegirl didn’t. As children we had spent sometime in West Africa living on a university campus in Ibadan. We had servants in the house there, including a black man called Joseph who was essentially both servant and nanny. It was an easy relationship because Joseph was not in my command and anyway we were children. Joseph fed us, bathed us, played and storytold. He was black and he was an ordinary man. My father was black but he was not an ordinary man. He was very important. The relationship between my father and Joseph was always tense and sparky. Looking back I realize Joseph’s ordinary black self was a threat to my father – to who and what he had become – ‘a black British colonial in another British colony’. My discomfort with Rati Naraine was not of the same order however. Rather the opposite, because as much as Rati distanced herself from me respectfully, I tried to find every kind of social leveller I could to erase the
mistress/servant divide. After all she was a woman, a mother, and importantly an Indian in a country where Indians and blacks don’t mix. But my efforts were to no avail. Rati saw her service as a pleasure and a gift and my reluctance to accept it only wounded her.

I mention Rati because it was through her eyes that I began to unravel what was at issue for me. She was testing me out as she often did on her perceptions of ‘outside’: ‘Everyone in Inglaand sheer white white white rite Mistress?’ ... ‘dem say white people no wash every day like we people do’ ... ‘dem say Inglaand fulla ol’ people an’ dey sheer ogly rite?’ ...

Rati clearly didn’t think I was English. But then she would say ‘No Mistress, you can’t wear your hair out big big like dat on de road, we Guyanese goin laaf at you’. Rati wasn’t telling me I’m not black: she was telling me I didn’t know how to be Guyanese but that I could be if I wanted. I understood from her that my cultural baggage wasn’t right even though my face and my body fit were quite fine. I recognized that what joined me to this country was far deeper: that my history was the history of this country but this was only part of my journey and that if I dug deep enough I could find the Africa of my origin; that I could join as any black person to black person anywhere in the world, but the temporal divide was culture.

I was reminded of my university days when at the height of the Welsh student protest, Welsh speaking students refused to stand with the English speakers for our graduation photograph. As the only black person in the cohort I was not at all clear where I should stand – was this a cultural affiliation, a language grouping, a Welsh/English divide ... was I Welsh enough to join them?

I thought about Wales often during these Guyana days. I thought about a Wales in which my way of being fitted on an everyday level but where my black history was punctuated and my Welsh history hadn’t anticipated me. I thought about the big noise I was going to make on my return to make a place for the black Welsh in the Welsh consciousness.
Critical Myopia and Black British Literature: Reassessing the Literary Contribution of the Post-Windrush Generation(s)

In terms of my own work, I could have benefited from a critical tradition. We didn’t have one at that time and we’re only beginning to scratch at one in this country now.’

Linton Kwesi Johnson, 1996

In 1995 a new literary prize, the Saga Prize, was established for black authors born in Britain, prompted by its founder Marsha Hunt’s belief that ‘there is no black British fiction, period’. Hunt’s comment, aside from its problematically narrow definition of the already contested term ‘black British’ as ‘blacks born in Britain’, reflects a much wider selective amnesia concerning black British literature. That such critical myopia should co-exist with increased British media interest in West Indian and black British literature of late, is highly ironic; that it should so narrowly precede the fiftieth anniversary of the ‘Windrush generation’ points to the cultural and political urgency of re-assessing the contribution of West Indian and black British writers to post-war literature in Britain. Despite the possibility of tracing certain periodizations within this time span and the need to recognize shifts in the way such writers have been categorized, framed or read at different times, it is possible to regard such writing as a community of representations stretching over fifty years, one which has profoundly shaped contemporary British literary praxis but has often been critically neglected. Indeed, the last fifty years in Britain attest not to a ‘void of voices, a long silence’ but to a remarkable diversity of black literary voices which are only beginning to receive the critical attention they deserve. In the first part of this article I consider some of the shifts in the categorization of black writers in Britain as ‘West Indian’ or ‘black British’ and survey the more recent critical neglect of black British writing. In the second part of the piece, I concentrate on the important contribution of Linton Kwesi Johnson to the consolidation of a black artistic community in Britain, and address some neglected aspects of his work.

When, in 1976, James Berry complained that ‘Westindians here are a long way away from the dynamic cultural activities of American blacks or their fellow Westindians at home. They are grossly underexplored,
underexpressed, underproduced and undercontributing' his comments reflected a profound sense of this period as a transitional one in black British culture, caught between the explosion of West Indian writing in Britain of the Windrush generation and the first optimistic movements towards consolidating a black artistic community in Britain in the 1960s and early 1970s, and a climate of disappointment, indirection, even despair, felt by those who sought to encourage black British creativity in the 1970s, a decade marked by continued racism, exclusion and increased hostility towards Britain's black population. However, the 1970s were to be absolutely crucial in bringing to the fore a new generation of voices and laying the foundations for the creation of a new literary aesthetic which could be termed 'black British' rather than Westindian or Westindian-British.

Indeed, the 1980s and 90s in Britain were notable for the publication of a number of new West Indian and black British writers, and for an efflorescence of anthologies, wholly or partly dedicated to West Indian and black British writing. Early black British writing was anthologized in *Black British Writers in Britain: 1760-1890*, edited by Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen (1991) whilst contemporary black writing in Britain was first anthologized by James Berry in his ground-breaking collection *Bluefoot Traveller*, appearing in two editions in 1976 and 1981. This was followed in 1984 by the influential *News for Babylon – The Chatto Book of Westindian-British Poetry*, edited by Berry (1984) and later in the decade, by *Watchers and Seekers – Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain*, edited by Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins (1987) and *Hinterland – Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies & Britain*, edited by E.A. Markham (1989). The work of a number of black British poets was also included in *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse*, edited by Paula Burnett (1986). Having been excluded from *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (1982), West Indian and black British poets gradually found themselves admitted to the pages of a range of anthologies in the 1980s, from a single poem in *The Faber Book of Political Verse*, edited by Tom Paulin (1986) to the rather more generous selection in *Angels of Fire – An Anthology of Radical Poetry in the '80s*, edited by Sylvia Paskin et al. (1986) and the tellingly titled *So Very English*, edited by Marsha Rowe (1991). Most interesting of all was the placing of black British poets in a section of their own, alongside three other sections comprising the much touted but disappointing anthology *the new british poetry*, edited by Gillian Allnut and Fred D’Aguiar (1988).

Even such a selective bibliography as the above might seem, at first glance, to confirm Hunt’s point about there being ‘no black British fiction period’. However, a range of prose writing continued to be published throughout this period, as Prahbu Guptara’s *Black British Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1986) and David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe’s *A Reader’s Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature*
Admittedly, black British poetry was by far the most visible manifestation of this creativity but that did not mean that prose writing was non-existent. There were, in fact, a range of reasons for the relative critical neglect of black British prose fiction, not least the ongoing confusion as to how these writers should be categorised (Caribbean or black British or both?) and the powerful publishing presence of both African-American (especially women’s) writing and the extremely high-profile critical status accorded to a number of Asian-British writers in the wake of the Rushdie affair.6

In the 1990s in Britain an increasing number of new novels were published by black British writers, although they were frequently still co-opted to a Caribbean grouping.7 Black British poets were anthologized in *Poetry with an Edge*, edited by Neil Astley (1993) and *Sixty Women Poets*, edited by Linda France (1997) and most recently the same publishing house (Bloodaxe) has signed a number of black British poets including John Agard, James Berry, Fred D’Aguiar, Jean Binta Breeze, and Linton Kwesi Johnson. However, popular awareness of these writers and of their literary antecedents, the West Indian writers of the Windrush generation (such as Sam Selvon, George Lamming and Andrew Salkey, all of whom migrated to Britain in the 1950s), remained rare, this body of writing being generally critically neglected in all but the most specialized review journals and academic contexts.8

In 1998 with post-colonial studies apparently in the ascendant in the academy, writers such as Grace Nichols and John Agard appearing as recommended options at primary and secondary levels in the National Curriculum and an astonishing proliferation of theoretical writing on black British identities and black British cultural formations emerging from the likes of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, Dick Hebdige, Kobena Mercer and others in the last fifteen or so years, one might be forgiven for assuming that black British literature (and particularly the language of this literature) have been equally well surveyed and equally well served. However, the work of black British writers has been curiously neglected in this respect; where criticism exists it is to be found, with very few exceptions, scattered throughout specialized journals and edited collections rather than in full length studies.

The 1996 publication of *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, edited by Houston Baker et al. one of the most ambitious publications in the field, is a case in point. The essays in *Black British Cultural Studies* engage in debates surrounding cultural identity, diaspora, race, ethnicity, and the politics of representation in Britain, almost exclusively in relation to visual media; the important contribution of black British writers and writing to these same debates is thus elided; moreover, the text also fails to address black British language and language politics other than in the most fleeting and abstract way.9 At least four readers on Colonial and Post-colonial discourse have been published since 1995. However, there have been few
texts specifically addressing black British literary practice. Similarly, the last fifteen to twenty years has seen the publication of a number of important linguistic studies on black British Language, among them the work of David Sutcliffe and Ansel Wong, Roger Hewitt, Viv Edwards and Mark Sebba. However, very few have been concerned with the interface between language and literature or the literary use of creoles in a British context.

In an early review of one of the novels of emigrant life by West Indian writers of the Windrush Generation (such as Samuel Selvon, George Lamming and Andrew Salkey, all of whom emigrated to Britain in the 1950s), the reviewer commented on the ‘strangeness’ of the London portrayed in these novels: ‘Mr Salkey, concentrating on the impact of London on an educated Jamaican succeeds in making parts of that city as foreign to the English as Babylon or Buenos Aires – but then today they are.’ The continuing critical tendency to frame West Indian writers and writing in Britain as exotic, ‘other’, immature, overly specialist in subject matter and idiomatically problematic – even linguistically alienating – from the perspective of a white, establishment readership, was only one of the ways in which the immigrant population was marginalized, excluded from official ‘maps’ of literary and cultural production, during the initial contact period.

In the 1950s and 1960s, most of the writers of the Windrush Generation were regarded (and regarded themselves) as West Indian writers rather than British or British-Westindian. Their work was accordingly co-opted to an emergent West Indian canon and/or brought within the hegemonic sway of the category ‘Commonwealth Literature’. However, subsequent generations of black writers in Britain, many of them British-born, have been far less willing to accede to this category, preferring to signal dual or exclusively British affiliations and actively choosing a much more politicized positionality as writers. Despite the important linguistic experimentation of writers such as Sam Selvon, many of the ‘transplanted voices’ of the Windrush generation were writers content to appropriate predominantly European forms, primarily of course, the novel. Arguably, later generations have been much more concerned to forge new cultural and literary forms. Their experiences of Britain and their narratives of ‘Britishness’ (where they exist) have been determined by very different social, economic and political conditions; their experiences of racism and of a range of exclusions (economic, political, cultural) have been materially altered, not least by eighteen years of conservative government under Thatcher. As Dick Hebdige has recently argued:

for young blacks in Britain in the wake of the riots in Brixton and at Broadwater farm, liable to negative coverage in the press and on TV (where they figure predominantly as victims, culprits, unemployment figures, ‘immigration’ figures), subject to aggressive and intensive policing, such a blatant assertion of the right to be a black Londoner, to be both black and
British, has political bite – this is an identity traced out along a special jagged kind of ‘British edge’.16

The singular black British voice in this context is that of Linton Kwesi Johnson. Johnson was born in Jamaica four years after the S.S. Windrush sailed and he arrived in Britain some fifteen years after its arrival. By the 1970s, his poetic voice had burst onto a very different London scene to that of Selvon, Salkey and Lamming – politicized by the activities of the Black Panthers in Britain and the growth of black consciousness abroad, influenced by Jamaican reggae and grass-roots cultural activity across the Caribbean. Despite Johnson’s very different passage to, and arrival in, England, his ‘second-generation voice’ has arguably been the most important in this process of radical ‘mapping’ of black presence and black experience in Britain, especially as concerns the subject matter, form and language of black British literature. Almost fifty years on, novelists such as Salkey, Lamming and Selvon are still relatively ‘invisible’, not widely known or read outside specialized circles, although the work of succeeding generations of black writers and artists in Britain is at last receiving wider recognition. This greater visibility has been made possible, in significant part, by Johnson’s pioneering work and his wider role in the consolidation of a black British artistic community in Britain in the 1970s.17 In this article I consider a small selection of Johnson’s poems ranging from the mid-1970s to the present, not in terms of their treatment of key events in recent black Britain but in terms of their language and form, a more critically neglected aspect of Johnson’s poetry.

The poem ‘Reggae Sounds’ first appeared in printed form in Johnson’s second collection, Dread Beat an Blood, (1975) and later in recorded form on the album Bass Culture (1980). It locates itself within a West Indian/black British Sound System culture of reggae Deejaying, toasting, ‘versioning’ and ‘dubbing’ and explores reggae not only as musical form but also as the basis of a wider range of black cultural forms and cultural phenomena within which the interrelation of words and music, and the use of some form of Jamaican creole, is crucial. It was from such roots that dub poetry itself developed, although Johnson has repeatedly insisted on important distinctions between the oral art of the dub poet and that of the reggae deejay.18 Poems such as ‘Reggae Sounds’, ‘Bass Culture’ and ‘Klassical Dub’ all make use of chains of onomatopoeic ‘word-sounds’ (‘Shock-black bubble-doun-beat bouncing’ and ‘SCATTA-MATTASHATTA-SHACK’19) combined with a high incidence of dynamic verbs or verbs of motion, usually in participle form (‘bouncing’, ‘sounding’) or gerund form (‘searching’, ‘turning’ and ‘burning’). The frequent incidence of deeply symbolic nouns, such as ‘blood’, ‘storm’, ‘flame’, ‘root’ and ‘pain’ in ‘Reggae Sounds’ is reminiscent of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, which Johnson has acknowledged as a key influence on his work.20 They are often combined in alliterative groups, as in ‘bubblin
bass/a bad bad beat/pushin gainst the wall/whey bar black blood’ (from ‘Bass Culture’) and, as such, recognizably correlate to Albert B. Lord’s concept of sound clusters in alliterative or assonaic form and of the use of key words as ‘bridge[s] between idea and sound’\(^{21}\) which he observed to be characteristic techniques in oral literature.

More significantly Johnson uses such formulations to capture and recreate the power and kinetic energy which is intrinsic to many black cultural forms – not least music and the creative use of creole in a power-driven, performance context. The language and music of this poem, as in many of Johnson’s poems, is characterized by a particular spiritual restlessness; it reflects an historical experience of violation, pain and yearning, the ‘hurting black story’ to which he makes reference in ‘Reggae Sounds’; significantly (and it is from this factor that Johnson’s best poetry derives its strength), it is a language, ever aware of the violence it can barely contain, the kind of violence – actual or imagined – which could erupt at any moment within the urban context of continued frustrations, injustices and deprivations, in which many of the poems are set. In certain poems from the 1970s and early 1980s such as ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ and the tremendously atmospheric ‘Street 66’, this particular creative use of the inter-relationship of reggae rhythm and urban creole, takes on a further cultural specificity, that of Rastafarianism. The use of lexical items such as the \(\text{l-}\)-prefix is combined with a deliberately created aura of ‘Dreadness’ – a peculiar blend of menace, fascination and/or celebration of Rasta cultural identity which locates struggle in ‘Babylon’ firmly within the 1970s black Britain: the Blues Party, Sound System Culture, urban violence and police brutality.

In ‘Reggae Sounds’ the relationship between music and the word is, as I have suggested, foregrounded as the subject rather than merely the medium of his poem. In this way, it might be argued, Johnson draws attention to the form, and particularly the role of the voice and orality within his work, as being as significant as the more frequently privileged content. This is most clearly evidenced through Johnson’s highly controlled use of intonational patterning throughout the poem. In the recorded version of the poem, for example, he pitches the opening line of the first stanza (or aural unit) relatively high and delivers it with considerable intensity: ‘Shock - black bubble - doun - beat bouncing’; this is immediately contrasted with the drop in pitch, as well as intensity, of the second line: ‘rock-wise tumble-doun sound music’, before the return, in the third line, to the same pitch and intensity as the first. Finding adequate terms to describe this process is problematic because there is ‘no traditional terminology in phonetics for describing the many variations of pitch, loudness and tempo found in speech’.\(^{22}\) However, such a performance bears some analogy to the terms used to describe classical forms of music: forte/fortissimo (increased levels of loudness), allegro/allegriSSimo (increased tempo of music – here of speech), piano/pianissimo
(decreased levels of loudness) and lento/lentissimo (decreased tempo of music, or in this case, of speech). Indeed, the whole rhythmic and tonal structure of the first aural unit can be seen in terms of a musical analogy in which an instrumental opening precedes the breakthrough of the melody; similarly, the last line forms a chorus-like refrain, positioned between the sung and the spoken word in performance and redolent with significance. Johnson also adapts other musical techniques such as syncopation (from jazz) and the ‘bubble up’ or ‘reverb’ (from reggae) in this and other poems and this gestures toward the usefulness of a reading of his poetry within such frames.

In ‘Street 66’ Johnson creates a very different dramatic effect from his use of an adapted creole in conjunction with a reggae rhythm. As I have noted elsewhere, ‘Street 66’ describes the ganja-induced atmosphere of a blues party and the sudden appearance of the police on a drugs raid. In this poem, the overt violence of poems such as ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ has become more subtle and subliminal, adding an undercurrent of threatened or imminent violence which makes the poem powerfully evocative and atmospheric. As with all Johnson’s poetry, ‘Street 66’ is more effective when heard rather than read and rhythmic control and careful pacing are crucial – especially when, as at the end of this poem, dramatic effect is called for.23

The recorded version of the poem on the album Bass Culture, although accompanied by music, testifies to Johnson’s skill in using creole to create dramatic and atmospheric effects. For example, he uses gently alliterative lines which exploit the ‘open’ vowel sounds of creole and make use of internal rhymes (‘De room woz dark dusk howling softly six a’ clack/charcoal light, the fine sight woz moving black’) and lines whose alliterative ‘m’s’ create a mellifluous, hypnotic effect (‘the soun woz music mellow steady flow/an man on man just mystic red’), the ‘mellow steady flow’ of the Blues party atmosphere. Such lines are carefully juxtaposed with lines where the alliterative effect is altogether harsher and more abrasive and which feature a more abrupt rhythm: ‘Outta did rock shall come greener riddim/ eben more dread dan what de breeze of glory bred’, ‘the drought and dry root out’. These lines, with strong biblical cadences, presage the possibility of violence at the poem’s end, especially when Western warns: ‘any policeman come yah will get some righteous rassclaht licks’. This is echoed in his final, disturbingly measured words: ‘Yes, dis is street 66/Step right in a tek some licks’.

However, the creole which Johnson adapts as his basic medium, is also particularly suited to lyrical uses, as part of a directly personal and intense style. Unlike ‘Standard English’ it is an informal, emotive language strongly associated with intimacy and group solidarity rather than distance or divisiveness amongst speakers, able to offer a refreshing directness in place of the abstraction or formality of Standard English. Johnson’s ‘Reggae fi Dada’ is one of the best examples of his lyrical or elegiac use of
creole. It was anthologized in the 1980s in *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse*, edited by Paula Burnett (1986) and *Hinterland*, edited by E.A. Markham (1989); it also appears in printed form in his selected poems *tings an times* (1991), and in recorded form on the album of the same name (1991). I have argued elsewhere that this poem perhaps constitutes the 'finest creole elegy to date, combining as it does a deep sense of personal loss in its elegiac address to his father, a lament for the decay of a society and a razor-sharp indictment of the violence, corruption, and economic privations which the poet sees as afflicting contemporary Jamaica'.

On returning to Jamaica for his father's funeral, the poet reflects upon an oppressive society 'where people fraid fi waak/fraid fi think fraid fi taak' and where atrocious urban social conditions prevail 'people livin back-to-back/ mongst cackroach an rat/mongst dirt an dizeez, subjek to terrorist attack/political intrigue/konstant grief/an noh sign of relief'.

One salient technique in such sections is the use of extended runs of rhyming clauses to 'drive home' a point and to create, by their very momentum, a sense of the observer's impotence and inability to change such a progression of events. This is a technique very similar to that employed by the late Michael Smith in his seminal dub poem 'Mi Cyaan Believe It'. 'Reggae fi dada' is also characterized by 'striking ... biblical imagery and cadences [as well as] the use of repetition [and] an incrementally shifting refrain'. The discrepancies between the popular image of Jamaica as a 'sunny isle' and its actuality are neatly observed by Johnson, the only consistency he can offer is the fact that 'a deh soh mi bawn'. However, even this repetitive refrain is subject to change, as the poet is forced to chart the progressive news of first the sickness, then the death of his father. Johnson ensures his elegy for both parent and society are united by implicating the latter in the former's relatively early death. In the haunting passage of incredible tenderness with which the poet bids his father 'galang' to final peace, we find Johnson's handling of creole at its most lyrical, intimate and intense: 'galang dada/galang gwaan yaw sah/ yu nevah ad noh life fi live/just di wan life fi give/yu did yu time pan ert/yu nevah get yu jus dizert/galang goh smile inna di sun/galang goh satta inna di palace af peace'.

It is with the same devastating simplicity that the poem ends: 'soh we bury yu a Stranger's Burying Grounlnear to mum an cousin Daris/nat far fram di quarry /douna August Town'.

The more meditative nature and wide-ranging subject matter of many of the new poems in *tings an times* (1991) led many to suppose that the gently self-deprecatory humour of poems such as 'Lorraine' and the more sophisticated satire of 'Inglan is a Bitch' had been left behind for good. However, included amongst Johnson's latest poems on *LKJ A Cappella Live* (1996) is a remarkable self-reflexive, counter-discursive poem which re-enters such territory. The poem, ironically entitled 'If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet', was written in response to the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth
Century Poetry's use of a somewhat deprecatory definition of dub poetry as 'over-compensation for deprivation'. In this poem, released some twenty-one years after Johnson's first collection, Johnson again draws attention to the form and nature of dub poetry, but in very different ways to those employed in 'Reggae Sounds'. That such instances of misunderstanding and critical marginalization of black British literature should endure well into the 1990s is depressing, but that black British literature is more firmly rooted than ever, a vital component of the contemporary British literary scene, testifies not only to a tenacious history of black writing in this country but points also to a vigorous and exciting future.

NOTES

2. Increased media interest in black British literature has been signalled not only by the establishment of the Saga prize, but by many other developments. For example, X-Press, an independent black press which launched the tremendously popular, if controversial, Yardie in 1992 has continued to enjoy a high profile. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Abdulrazak Gurnah and other British-based black and Asian writers have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize whilst David Dabydeen, The Counting House (1996) is shortlisted for the Irish Impac Prize. Two black British writers, David Dabydeen and Moniza Alvi, were included in a recent much publicized 'New Generation Poets' promotion. Also there have been a number of recent BBC adaptations of black British writing: the serialization for radio of Saga prize-winner, Diran Adebayo's first novel Some Kind of Black and C.L.R. James, Beyond a Boundary and for television, Caryl Phillips, The Final Passage. A new black British newspaper, New Nation was launched in 1996 (with Diran Adebayo as one of its key contributors) and there has been increased coverage of black British writing and publishing on magazine programmes such as BBC 2's Birthrights and Black Britain and on Radio 3, which has recently featured programmes written and/or introduced by writers David Dabydeen, Merle Collins and Grace Nichols. Most recently, John Agard has been appointed as poet in residence at the BBC for the duration of 1998.
4. For example, CAM, the Caribbean Artist's Movement was established in London in 1966.
6. Rushdie was, of course the main 'beneficiary' of this dual-edged publicity but other writers such as Hanif Kureishi also arguably benefited from increased critical attention as a result.
set up the Saga Prize.

8. The most notable exception is, of course, that of V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul has not suffered critical neglect, indeed he is probably the highest profile West Indian writer in Britain. However, Naipaul, like Salman Rushdie is often framed not as a black British writer but, in Timothy Brennan’s terms, as a ‘Third World cosmopolitan’. Despite having produced work which is clearly located in Britain and relevant to debates on Britishness (e.g. The Enigma of Arrival, 1987) he continued to be categorized as a West Indian writer or as a ‘third world cosmopolitan’.


10. The Heart of the Race, ed. by Beverley Bryan et al; Storms of the Heart, ed. by Kwesi Owusu; Talking Black, ed. by Valerie Mason-John; and The Language of the Black Experience, ed. by David Sutcliffe and Ansel Wong are exceptions, but their remit is broader than a purely literary focus. Similarly, Motherlands, ed. by Susheila Nasta and the more recent, Other Britain, Other British: Essays in Contemporary Multi-Cultural Fiction, ed. by A. Robert Lee contain valuable essays but the former is not exclusively black British in focus and attends only to women writers, whilst the latter’s collected essay format only permits a selective rather than comprehensive coverage of the literature.


14. Some commentators such as Winston James have suggested that ‘Unlike their parents, who have less attachment to Britain, the second generation of “Caribbeans” are black Britons – whether they chose to be or not’ and points to language differences between this group and their Jamaican counterparts in the Caribbean as evidence of this cultural shift. Winston James, ‘Migration, Racism and Identity Formation: The Caribbean Experience in Britain’, in Inside Babylon, ed. by Winston James and Clive Harris (London: Verso, 1993), p. 252.

15. See, for example, the second part of David Dabydeen, ‘On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today’ in Tibisiri, ed. by Maggie Butcher (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp. 121-135; Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, Racialized Boundaries (London: Routledge, 1992); and most recently Avtar Brah, Cartographies of Diaspora (London: Routledge, 1996); as well as Linton Kwesi Johnson’s radical mapping of these years from a black British perspective in poems such as ‘Inglan Is a Bitch’, ‘It Dread Inna Inglan’, ‘Sonny’s Lettah (anti-Sus Poem)’, ‘Mekkin ’ histri’, and especially, ‘Di Great Insohreckshan’ which charts the Brixton riots of 1981 and begins with the historical pronouncement: ‘it woz in april nineteen-eighty-one/doun inna gheto of Brixtan’, all in Tings an Times - Selected Poems (Newcastle:

17. For example his activist stance, public performance style, links with popular culture (reggae music, youth culture), contribution to radio and journalism and involvement in the Race Today Collective.


24. ibid, p. 367.

25. ibid, p. 367.

Linton Kwesi Johnson

REGGAE FI MAY AYIM

it weard ow life wid det kyan canspyah
fi shattah di awts most fragile diziah
ow histri an byagrafi kyan plat gense yu
an dem 'angst' an dem 'anomie' gang-up pon yu

afro-german warrior woman
from hamburg via bremen
den finally
berlin

it woz in di dazzlin atmosfare
a di black radical bookfair
dat mi site yu
sweet sistah
brite-eyed like hope
like a young antelope
who couda cope

wid di daily deflowahin a di spirit
wid di evryday erowshan a di soul

two passin clouds you and I
inna di dezert a di sky
exchingin vaypah

but in di commerc a di awt
woz it fair trade in regret
in love an lauftah?

mi nevah know
mi coudn tell
mi shouda site seh
tru all di learnin
di teachin
rizistin
an assistin
di lovin
di givin
organizin
an difyin

dat di kaizah a darkness
did kyapcha yu awt
dat di lass time mi si yu
would be di lass time mi si yu

dat you woz free
fallin screamin
terteen stanzahs doun
yu final poem in blood pan di groun
dat soh sudden dat soh soon
you wouda fly out
pon a wan way tickit to ghana
gaan ketch up wid you paas
mongst yu ancestaz

wi give tanks
fi di life
yu share wid wi
wi give tanks
fi di lite
yu shine pon wi
wi give tanks
fi di love
yu showah pon wi
wi give tanks
fi yu memahri
DEO PERSAUD

The Notting Hill Carnival

'The camera is an instrument that teaches people to see without a camera'

Dorothea Lange
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN AGARD’S many collections of poems include *Mangoes and Bullets*. He is the recipient of the Casa de las Americas Prize for Literature, and is currently Writer-in-Residence at the BBC.

JAMES BERRY Jamaican black British poet awarded OBE in 1994. See Stewart Brown’s article for publications.

ANNE BOLT, who died in 1996 at the age of 84, was a travel photographer and writer and also a leading member of the National Union of Journalists and campaigner on copyright. The Anne Bolt Memorial Award, for photojournalists under 25, has been set up in her memory, with the first award to be made in July.

VÉRONIQUE BRAGARD, from Belgium, was a research student at Warwick and is presently doing a Ph.D dissertation on women’s writing at the University of Louvain.

YVONNE BREWSTER is the leading Caribbean theatre director in Britain. Her company, *Talawa*, has received critical praise throughout Europe.

STEWART BROWN is a poet and critic, and Senior Lecturer at the University of Birmingham. He has published many critical studies of Caribbean writers, including works on Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite.

DAVID DABYDEEN’S latest novel, *The Counting House*, has been shortlisted for the International Impac Dublin Prize, the world’s richest prize for fiction. He teaches at the University of Warwick. His first published work *Slave Song*, which won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1984, was the first collection written in creole to win this award.


FERDINAND DENNIS’S novels include *The Last Blues Dance* and *Duppy Conqueror*. He is co-editing with Naseem Khan a book on the Windrush generation, entitled *Voices of the Crossing*.

JOHN FIGUEROA The first native West Indian to be appointed to the post of Professor of the West Indies. His collections include *Blue Horizons, African and Caribbean Writing in English, Caribbean Voices* and most recently *The Chase: A Collection of Poems, 1941-1989* (Peepal Tree).

JOHN GILMORE, formerly editor of *Caribbean Week* is Lecturer in Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick. He is currently preparing for publication a scholarly edition of James Grainger’s poetry.

BERYL GILROY has published several novels to critical acclaim including *Frangipani House* and *Stedman and Joanna*. She was, until recently, a Research Fellow at the Institute of Education, London University.

WILSON HARRIS’ first published novel was *Palace of the Peacock* (1960). Since then he has published over twenty other novels and has established a reputation as one of the century’s great writers. A collection of his essays is being published by Routledge in 1999.

AMRYL JOHNSON a graduate of Kent University, has published three collections of poetry including *Gorgons* and *Long Road to Nowhere*. 
DAVID JOHNSON taught in many secondary schools in Britain before commencing Ph.D studies on Caribbean Drama at the University of Warwick.

LINTON KWESI JOHNSON has been publishing poetry since the 1970's. A selected edition of his work was published by Bloodaxe in 1993.

GEORGE LAMMING'S *In the Castle of my Skin* (1953) established him as a major Caribbean literary figure. This first novel was followed by five others as well as many published essays and interviews, most notably *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960).

SARAH LAWSON-WELSH did her Ph.D on language in Caribbean Literature at the University of Warwick. She presently teaches at Nene College in Northampton.

E.A. MARKHAM was born in Monserrat in 1939. He is a poet and short-story writer, and currently Professor of Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam University.


PHILIP NANTON from St. Vincents is an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick. He is presently writing a book-length study on Henry Swanzy and the BBC.

SUSHEILA NASTA literary representative for the late Sam Selvon, editor of *Wasafiri* and teaches at the University of Queen Mary and Westfield. Forthcoming publication is *Home Truths: Immigrant Fictions in Britain*.

GRACE NICHOLS won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for her collection *I is a Long-memoried Woman*, which was followed by *The Fat Black Woman's Poems and Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*. She writes for children and has edited popular anthologies; her most recent collection is *SUNRIS* (Virago) which won the 1996 Guyana Poetry Prize.

DEO PERSAUD from Guyana was recently exhibited at the Photofusion Gallery in London.

JAMES PROCTER is a PhD student at the University of Leeds. His research focuses on the relationship between migrant poetics and cultural politics in black Britain, 1948-1998. He is currently editing an interdisciplinary anthology for Manchester University Press, *Writing Black Britain, 1948-1998*.

JAN LO SHINEBOURNE'S two novels, both set in Guyana, are *Timepiece* and *The Last English Plantation*. She has held creative writing Fellowships in a range of British and American universities.

AUBREY WILLIAMS born in Guyana he was a founder member of the Caribbean Arts Movement (CAM). A monograph on Aubrey Williams is to be published by inIVA (1998) to coincide with the major exhibition of his work at the Whitechapel Gallery, 12 June to 16 August 1998.

CHARLOTTE WILLIAMS is Lecturer in the Centre for Applied and Community Studies at the University of Bangor. She has published memoirs of her Guyanese roots in the Welsh journal *Planet*.

VAL WILMER writer and photographer, living in London and specializing in the documenting of Black Music and history, she is author of *The Face of Black Music* (New York: Da Capo).