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James Berry - Celebration Songs

Abstract
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.

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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 Man6 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?  

6
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 folkways 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’!

Vergie mi gal, yu know
wha overték 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

(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)

Its 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 -

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   everything, everything, happen
   like yu was here, here on spot
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(*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',

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

*(p. 31)*

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

*(p. 34)*

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
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 WestIndian-British poetry at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham.


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.