

## Claiming Space in a Hostile Environment: Journeys of Migration

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### **Departures and Arrivals: A Migrant Family Record**

My late mother Jenny always told me that she was, for the most part, made to feel welcome in Britain as a Black Caribbean woman. She was born in the French-speaking island of Martinique. She left the island as a one-year-old and after living in France and then Senegal, she travelled to Bognor Regis, Sussex in 1966 to learn English, aged twenty. There she met my father, fell in love, and made Britain her permanent home until she died in 2019.

After my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2018 and warned that she only had a few months to live, I began to record her life story. Every week we spent an hour talking about each decade of her life, which I recorded on an iPhone, and I am now left with seven hours of oral narrative that document her life story – her journeys of migration and the places she called home. I find it challenging to listen to her voice; she feels so close still and her disappearance from this world becomes ever more acute as her words fill the room. The recordings also inadvertently document her failing health; her voice becomes weaker as the recordings continue, week by week, and she has to take breaks to regain her energy and continue telling her story.

As I listen carefully to her narrative unfold, I am astounded by the richness and variety of her life experiences; her migration from Martinique as a baby to France, her departure from France in 1957 to live in Senegal and finally, her life in Britain. 'My life has been a life of departures and arrivals', she explained. Her Aunty Marilou used to tell her, '*Les Martiniquais sont des gens du voyage*' ('Martinicans are travelling people'). She reflected: 'The number ten punctuates the many times I have left a country. At ten months old, I left Martinique for France. At ten, I left France for Senegal. Ten years later, I left Senegal for the UK.' My mother articulated her feelings of connection toward Britain in this way: 'After so much leaving in my life, I found a sense of belonging in this country: I've worked hard, I have many friends and connections, I've become a mother and a grandmother. I've put down roots.'

This sense of belonging felt by migrants from the Caribbean in Britain is a narrative that contradicts the one I highlight when teaching my Postcolonial Literature courses at Leeds Beckett University, which focus on Britain as a 'hostile environment', a post-2012 term now used to describe the myriad ways that life has been made difficult for migrants in the UK. I am also deeply aware that the feeling of being welcomed to this country as a migrant is closely connected to questions of education and class; my mother was very quickly able to secure a position as a Producer in the French Department of the African section of the BBC World Service when she came to live in London. My mother's side of the family, the Zobels, were well connected; they had international links and were a respected, educated, middle-class Black family. As one of the first Black women to work for the BBC, my mother also had the privilege of working alongside open-minded people who wanted to nurture her career and get to know her. She did experience some racism, particularly when she was flat

hunting in London in the late 1960s. She was on the receiving end of the well-worn refusal from landlords and landladies; being told that a flat was available only to be informed on viewing, when they were faced with a Black woman, that the flat had been taken. She also felt strongly that the Brexit vote in 2016 emboldened racists, and for the first time in many decades she was the target of openly racist aggression. A few weeks after the vote, at her local gym, she was told in the sauna by a middle-aged man that this country ‘wasn’t for people like you’. She told me she had also, during the same week, been deliberately shoulder-barged in the street by a young white lady. Yet despite these experiences, my mother insisted that Britain was her home and had been a place of welcome for the majority of her life.

[Insert near here as quarter-page black and white image: FIGURE 1. Caption: ‘Figure 1 Jenny Zobel working at the BBC World Service, 1967’]

Her father, Joseph Zobel, also found a sense of belonging as a Caribbean migrant in Europe.<sup>i</sup> In 1946 he left Martinique to move to Paris and try to seek success as a writer. Joseph set sail from Martinique to Paris on the passenger ship the *Colombie* on the 29 November, leaving behind his wife Enny who was pregnant with their third child, my mother, and two young sons. He was thirty one years old and an aspiring novelist and poet, author of a short story, ‘Laghia de la Mort’, and of several articles for the Fort de France newspaper *Le Sportif*. For Joseph, as for many Martinicans who had been fed a steady diet of French schooling, France represented the land of opportunity – it was the cradle of French language and culture and Joseph was convinced that France would establish him as a respected and celebrated writer. What he did not suspect was how final this departure would be; he would never go back to live in Martinique.

In France, Joseph began to be recognised as a unique literary voice. His novels detail his childhood in Martinique and critique the French colonial system. The book which brought him international recognition was *Black Shack Alley (La Rue Cases-Nègres)* written in 1950 and later turned into a film by Martinican director Euzhan Palcy. *Black Shack Alley* describes the hardships of growing up in colonial Martinique and Joseph's grandmother's efforts to keep him out of the cane fields and in education. The book was published as a Penguin Classic in 2020. This honour – and further proof of being embraced by the literary establishment – would have made Joseph exceedingly proud if he had been alive to witness it.

When my grandmother Enny finally came to join her husband in Paris in 1947, she recounted to me that she was so shocked by seeing her breath in the cold air that she thought she was smoking. The French winters were a blow she never fully recovered from. In later life, she would make us grandchildren wear a cardigan to open the fridge door, in case we caught a chill, and she had a perpetual obsession with keeping out cold draughts which could, in her view, prove to be fatal. This account of her bemusement at the sight of her breath on the deck of the passenger ship as she arrived in France stayed with me; as a child who grew up in the perpetually damp climate of North Wales, I was struck by the idea of my dear grandmother as a young woman who had never really felt the cold, a woman full of hope and longing, being propelled into an unforgiving winter in a new and unknown country. I try to capture her astonishment, and my grandfather's disapproval at her naivety – which was ongoing – in my poem 'Arrival'.

## **Arrival**

*For Mami Enny*



When Enny died my mother found a secret drawer in her dresser, and inside it a bundle of papers encased in a velvet bag. They were letters written from Joseph in Paris to Enny in Martinique in 1946 and 1947. My mother and I read them carefully and they offered us a rare insight into my grandfather's life as a Black Caribbean man trying to find success in a Parisian society struggling with the challenges of the postwar period.

[Insert near here as quarter page black and white: FIGURE 3. Caption: 'Figure 3 Joseph Zobel in Paris (in a black suit), 1940s (photograph part of the Zobel Literary estate).']

Joseph's letters are in many ways far from representative of the experiences of an ordinary Martinican migrant in Paris during this period. They describe a string of successes, being greeted with great enthusiasm by the Parisian intelligentsia, so keen to align themselves with the new young Black 'voice' of Martinique, and his steady rise to fame. Even before his first novel *Diab'la* was published in 1947, there is a palpable sense of excitement and anticipation in his letters surrounding his work. While Joseph will have inevitably painted a preferred picture of himself in his letters home – they do evidence a tendency to boast and exaggerate – it is nevertheless clear that he was both highly visible and in demand in his new metropolitan milieu, unlike the hundreds of Martinican migrants in Paris working in badly paid employment and struggling to survive. In March 1947 he writes to his wife Enny, putting his gifts of cultural capital on display: 'since last Wednesday, I started a course in diction. It's difficult, the art of telling, of performing a text; but my teacher, a woman, an old artist, is amazed by my aptitude and everybody is astonished that it's the first time that I have come to Paris' ('Letter to Enny Zobel').

Joseph's dark skin colour and African features, which he complained in later writings had made him feel rejected in Martinique where light skin was coveted, would have made him

highly visible in Paris; yet, he highlights his assimilation into French society rather than focusing on any perceived differences. For example, he writes in *Black Shack Alley* of how in Martinique it is impossible to escape the politics of pigmentation: ‘one could never manage everyday to avoid a word or a deed bringing into question the dark nuances of the skin, which, in all milieus, determined sentiments and reflexes in the West Indies’ (205). In a culture where the lighter your skin, the more you are favoured, Zobel always stood out. He writes the following about race and his life in Martinique, in particular, in his unpublished essay, ‘Petit-Bourg’ (2002):

I avoided having dealings with grown-ups and that was quite easy, because every time I met one, it was to be told: ‘How ugly you are! You’ve got drooping lips, eyes that stay open without blinking. And you’re black. Black like an African!’ (np).

In an interview for a French TV magazine in 1984, Zobel explained that while he was a young man in Paris, he felt for the first time content living in his Black skin (*Télé 7 Jours*). This runs directly counter to the experience of fellow Martinican and seminal postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon, who writes about the trauma of the white gaze a few years later in Paris in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon is made acutely aware of his otherness, his ‘crushing objecthood’ by a frightened white child on the street: “‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’” Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible’ (Fanon 84). While Fanon describes his sense of being ‘imprisoned’, ‘dislocated’, and psychologically fragmented by the racist gaze and white power in Paris, Zobel seems to feel liberated in the same space from the internalised racism of Martinique (Fanon 84).

As we read through Joseph’s letters, which often detail the swapping of household goods between Martinique and France, my mother and I were struck by the fact that my

grandmother's replies were not kept by him, so we have no written record of her experiences of his migration to France and her own journey to join him with their three children in 1947; her narrative goes undocumented. Joseph was a successful writer and an intellectual, while Enny was a trained pastry chef, and I had observed, since I was a child, that he harboured a certain resentment towards her perceived lack of intellectual acumen. In the poem 'Undocumented', I attempt to 'dream/into the gap' and piece together my grandmother's story.

## **Undocumented**

*for Mami Enny*

The tiny drawer inside your dresser is secret  
but it pops open to the lightest touch  
inside, we are shocked to find  
the bundle of his letters, snug in their velveteen pouch  
we hurriedly unfold and read  
wary of the burden  
of confidences

Each scrawl speaks of his longing  
for you – his wife, and for the island left behind  
carried over oceans by a tide of hope  
to the cold  
white metropole



And so we read;

*You, you are more beautiful than brash Parisian women  
they are wealthy, but lack your humble grace  
and if the grand boulevards take my breath away  
when I lie, alone, in my narrow bed  
it's the softness of your hand, the light of fireflies,  
the steady flight of the mansfenil  
that fill my mind*

*One month later: let's get a little trade going,  
send me cinnamon, a packet of vanilla pods  
in Paris they'll fetch triple  
in return, parcels of kitchen things, a radio  
you'll be the envy of our neighbours  
for the radio – invite Monsieur Armand to wire and tune  
and Madame Christophe to covet  
place it (carefully!) on the second dresser shelf  
and when she's gone (only when she's gone)  
find a station with Biguine and dance with both our boys  
and I, in my icy room, will imagine  
the sway and tilt of your hips in the warmth  
of our kitchen*

Instructions on thinning pages

kept for decades but in his things nothing of your life  
of two wild boys and baby Jenny heavy in your stomach  
the unremitting heat; long sweaty, lonely nights  
the eldest rubbing your swollen feet  
and money worry  
(always money worry)

He will call for you and you will pack  
off to the world's centre  
stand beside the writer on his grand journey  
you'll bake cakes, raise children and host  
sing Creole lullabies, tell island stories  
(simple tales, he says, but you are not quite so sure)  
No long letters reveal your secrets, Mami  
did he not treasure your replies?  
and so the life I long to read still hides  
undocumented; I have no maps  
a granddaughter can only dream  
into the gaps

**Writing Windrush: 'What it is we want that the white people find it so hard to give?'**

'What it is we want that the white people and them find it so hard to give? A little work, a little food, a little place to sleep. We not asking for the sun, or the moon. We only want to get by, we don't even want to get on', exclaims Galahad to Moses in Sam Selvon's iconic novel *The Lonely Londoners* (69). What the English find so hard to give the migrants is their

welcome. Not many Caribbean migrant stories are as positive as my mother's and grandfather's, who became successful professionally and were able to integrate into French and British society. Part of the sense of welcome my grandfather felt in France was clearly a result of the escape from the ingrained pigmentocracy he experienced in Martinique as well as, eventually, his celebrated status as an intellectual and a writer. While he transcended all expectations as a very dark-skinned boy who grew up in an impoverished cane-cutting village, due to my grandfather's literary achievements my mother happily occupied a firmly middle-class status. With a degree of financial independence and in 1960s and 1970s Britain she moved in alternative, intellectual circles. Her relationship with my father, the English academic, writer and philosopher Peter Marshall, would have also given her firm inroads into English life and society. Through these distinct social circles my migrant family were able to 'claim space' in the often hostile environments of Britain and France, unlike Selvon's migrant characters.

As a Reader and Lecturer in Postcolonial Literature, I have taught so-called 'Windrush' literature to my undergraduate and postgraduate students for over two decades. On my 'Postcolonial Writing', 'Writing the African Diaspora', and 'Generation Windush' modules, we read Sam Selvon, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, Louise Bennett, Andrew Salkey, and V S Naipaul, among others, and focus on the portrayal of Caribbean migration to Britain and, more specifically, on moments of arrival. As Caryl Phillips explains, these writers are able to provide unique insights into the internal dynamics of our British society:

There are a number of people who have to basically take Britain's head by the ears and turn the head around to face the mirror, so that we can look squarely at who we are and what we are. Writers can do some of that. ('The City by the Water' 888)

My students and I closely analyse how the moment when the shores of England, the mythical destination, come into view is depicted in poetry and prose. We explore how Windrush writers focus on the weather, as my grandmother did, as foreshadowing the lack of welcome they will receive once they have disembarked. ‘It was a punishing wind that drove us from looking at the landscape’, wrote the Barbadian novelist George Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile*, describing his first glimpse of the grey shores of Southampton in 1950 from the deck of the ship which brought him from Barbados to England (212). His fellow passenger, Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon, turned to him and asked: ‘Is who send we up in this place?’ (212). It is in this moment, after a long journey by boat, as the port of destination comes into view, that Lamming and Selvon see the physical embodiment of a momentous decision. The journey by sea, which gives the voyagers time to reflect on their transitional, liminal state, their origins, history and destination, intensifies the experience of migration, and it is the thrill of anticipation and the trauma of disillusionment that gives the body of early Caribbean writing in Britain such potency.

I want to suggest how, initially, as the English controlled the conditions of hospitality, the migrants depicted in these early Windrush texts are unable to traverse the cultural and social threshold and embrace their citizenship, which leads to a profound sense of dislocation.<sup>ii</sup> Incapable of properly arriving or returning home, they are stranded in a city and society that drifts just beyond their reach (Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* 237). In Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which follows the journey of a group of first generation Caribbean migrants in London, we see a movement away from this state of paralysis at the threshold towards limited but creative, playful, and subversive movement through the physical and

linguistic spaces of London. In many ways, Selvon's migrants, referred to as the 'boys', appropriate the conditions of hospitality and belonging.

Kamau Brathwaite, who travelled from Barbados in 1953 to Britain to study for a degree at Cambridge University, captures the sense of both hope and hopelessness fueling the wave of 1950s Caribbean migration in his poem 'The Emigrants' (1967). He describes the emigrants' sense of uncertainty and tentative excitement as they journey from the Caribbean to different parts of the globe. They naïvely believe, Brathwaite tells us, that they are in possession of the enchanted keys they need to unlock the doors to a better, golden future in their host country:

So you have seen them  
with their cardboard grips,  
felt hats, rain-cloaks, the women  
with their plain  
or purple-tinted  
coats hiding their fatten-  
ed hips.

[...] What Cathay shores  
for them are gleaming golden  
what magic keys they carry to unlock  
what gold endragoned doors? (51)

The vision of Britain as a place of welcome and possibility was based on familiar colonial myths. After a diet of colonial schooling the dream of Britain, and especially London, and all

it promised loomed large in the minds of its colonial subjects. Lamming recalls in an interview in 2002 that when he sailed to England in 1950, he felt he was going to a place which had ‘painted [in his] childhood consciousness as a heritage and place of welcome’ (Schwarz, ‘Sea of Stories’ 53).

According to Lamming, the ‘seed’ of a West Indian’s colonisation had been ‘subtly and richly infused with myth’ and was ‘extremely difficult to dislodge’, which in turn had a profound effect on the psyche of the colonised (‘The Occasion for Speaking’ 26). Lamming emphasises that the English novel was central to the myth that convinced him and his peers to leave the Caribbean. He and his school friends had faith in ‘England’s supremacy in taste and judgment’ because of their reading; their ‘whole introduction to something called culture, all of it, in the form of words, came from the outside: Dickens, Jane Austen, Kipling and that sacred gang’ (27). Budding writers, Lamming explains, felt they had to leave if they wanted to establish themselves, as books were not written by ‘natives’ (27).

The reoccurring theme in these colonial first-generation migrant narratives is post-war London as a profound disappointment. Shabby, grim and unwelcoming, this was a very different city to the one imagined in the island classroom. As John McLeod argues in his book *Postcolonial London*, the war-ravaged capital in the 1950s was inhabited by a diverse, transient population of Irish and Commonwealth migrants, European refugees, soldiers and army personnel, which added to the sense of a fragmented, divided city—a London which ‘seemed disconcertingly lacking in substance in colonial eyes’ (61).

Selvon’s Moses, nicknamed ‘mister London’ (39) by the new arrival Galahad, is weary of London life, a fragmented city divided up into separate ‘little worlds’ (74). The landmarks of

London fail to excite him: 'You say to yourself, "Lord them places must be sharp." Then you get a chance and you see them for yourself, and is like nothing' (85). In Selvon's text Waterloo becomes a threshold space. The lonely migrants cannot break the habit of going to Waterloo to greet the boat train arriving with passengers from the Caribbean to be amongst the faces and voices of their countrymen and women. This is where Moses finds himself pondering return: 'Perhaps he was thinking is time to go back to the tropics, that's why he feeling sort of lonely and miserable' (26). 'Why is it', the narrator asks, 'that in the end, everyone cagey about saying outright that if the chance come they will go back to them green islands in the sun?' (138).

There is an ever-present mist which obscures clarity and makes London seem 'unreal' in *The Lonely Londoners*, as if it is 'not London at all but some strange place on another planet' (23). Selvon takes up the trope of weather to underline the experience of estrangement and haunting isolation. Echoing my grandmother's experiences, the newly arrived migrant Galahad is amazed at the sight of his own breath and tells the old-timer Moses 'I find when I talk smoke coming out of my mouth' (23). 'It so it is in this country,' Moses replies, 'Sometimes the words freeze and you have to melt it to hear the talk' (35). Here the theme of immobility is revisited in the image of words frozen as they leave the mouth of the speaker. When a brave and defiant Galahad insists on leaving Moses to find the Labour Exchange alone, a decision he quickly regrets, his sense of dislocation and confusion is again epitomised by the weather:

The sun shining, but Galahad never see the sun how it looking now. No heat from it, it just there in the sky like a force-ripe orange. When he look up, the colour of the sky so desolate it make him more frighten (42).

The weather, the frozen words and cold, alien sun become symbolic of English social and cultural landscapes and synonymous with the coldness of the English people. The English are effectively 'othered' in these narratives. In Lamming's novel, *The Emigrants* (1956), for example, the officials his protagonists encounter on their arrival are described as monstrous:

Caged within their white collars like healthy watchdogs, they studied the emigrants as though they were to be written off as lunatics [...] their noses stuck out like solid sticks of coal lost in its flames [...] the redness was almost transparent with the sudden spurts of vapour issuing from within (108–109).

Selvon's Galahad also experiences the depths of English hypocrisy and covert racism. Whilst in a public toilet, Galahad tells us 'two white fellas come in and say how these black bastards have the lavatory dirty, and they didn't know that he was there, and when he come out they say hello mate have a cigarette' (88).

Galahad's subsequent struggle to come to terms with his Blackness in the novel directly echo Fanon's trauma at being made aware of the 'fact' of his Blackness by a frightened white child in Paris. Like Fanon, Galahad is confronted on the street by a mother and child: 'Mummy, look at that black man!' the child exclaims. The mother becomes 'uneasy', pulls the child away and gives Galahad a 'sickly sort of smile' (69). The words of the child and the mother's reaction change Galahad's perception of himself and he experiences, similarly to Fanon, psychological disturbances and a sense of fragmentation, disassociating himself from his selfhood and his colour. Galahad starts to theorise that it is his colour which is causing all this 'botheration'; he wonders why he can't change colour and even starts talking to the 'colour



Black, as is a person' telling it that it is 'causing misery all over the world!' (69). Moses suggests, which appears to be a direct reference to and recognition of Fanon's work by Selvon: 'Take it easy, that is a sharp theory why don't you write about it' (70).

Lamming and Selvon's migrants are clearly not in possession of the enchanted keys needed to unlock England's golden doors that Brathwaite imagines in his poem. While they should enjoy 'at-home' status as citizens of the British Empire who were encouraged to seek employment in Britain, they are initially trapped 'on the threshold' in a state of non-arrival as they have been rejected by a host who has the key to, and therefore controls, the conditions of hospitality. Moses complains to Galahad that even the Polish owner of the 'Rendezvous' restaurant won't serve them, even though they have more rights to live and work in the country: 'We is British subjects and he is only a foreigner' (40).

Lamming's and Selvon's narratives of arrival focus on the estrangement of migration, and the desire to return to their place of origin is firmly juxtaposed with the impossibility of ever being able to leave Britain. Their characters are haunted by the possibility of return to the Caribbean, but fear that migration has changed them beyond recognition. They become, as Stuart Hall describes in an essay about diasporic being, 'familiar strangers', existing simultaneously inside and outside of life and society (?). In this sense the journey changes both the travellers, their perceptions of origins and their ability to return — were the migrants to return, home would seem changed, unfamiliar, unreal. For the migrants who never return, home becomes mythologised and takes residence in the realms of fantasy and imagination, just as England once did.

As the Indian-born writer Salman Rushdie suggests in his collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), home becomes a fictive destination. Looking back gives rise to ‘profound uncertainties’ for the ‘physical alienation’ of exile, which means that the migrant is incapable ‘of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost’ (10). The migrant writer will therefore ‘create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands’ (10). While Moses is all too aware that the ‘kiff kiff’ laughter and the empty stories, the ‘ballad and the episode’, exchanged between his struggling friends, inadequately mask tears of sorrow and homesickness. He lets the seasons roll by and does not return, getting ‘so accustomed to the pattern he can’t do anything about it’ (141). The sense of loss in the migrants’ experiences of London is comparable to what Hall theorised in much of his own writing as an inherent characteristic of the larger diasporic experience. The migrants’ relationship with their homelands, Hall explains, is as ‘far away enough to experience the sense of exile and loss, close enough to understand the enigma of an always-postponed “arrival”’ (492).

This idea of the perpetually postponed arrival is echoed in V S Naipaul’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1988), a narrative that cuts short any hope of transcending the limbo of exile. In the book, Naipaul describes a painting entitled the ‘Enigma of Arrival and the Afternoon’ (1911–12) by the Greek-born Italian surrealist Giorgio de Chirico, from which the novel takes its name. The artwork shows two figures at a deserted quayside and in the distance is the mast and sail of a ship (figure 4). Naipaul describes the painting in the novel as ‘a scene full of desolation and mystery. It speaks to him of the ‘mystery of arrival’ and he explicates how it epitomises his experiences of exile in Britain (91). Naipaul imagines that he will write a story inspired by the painting: the protagonist would arrive on a ship and leave the silence and desolation of the wharf through a gateway into a busy, bustling world, but then ‘he would lose his sense of mission; he would

begin to know only that he was lost' (91). Panicking, he would open a door and, to his relief, find himself back at the quayside, only to realise that there was no mast, no ship: 'The traveller had lived out his life'—he had never properly arrived, nor could he depart (91–92).

[Insert near here as half page colour: FIGURE 4. Caption: 'Figure 4 'Enigma of Arrival and the Afternoon' (1911–12), Giorgio de Chirico']

Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* push against Naipaul's searingly static and melancholic conceptualisation of migration. While Selvon's migrants are never welcomed by the British, he does allow a subtle undertone of optimism to creep into his text, although the tone is still speculative. In the closing pages of the novel, during his poetic epiphany on the banks of the Thames, Moses realises that he has forsaken his homeland for 'experience', perhaps one full of 'misery and pathos', but an experience which has perhaps made him a better man, and potentially, gives him something to write about (142). While movement forward is still restricted, for the 'restless, swaying movement' is still 'leaving you standing in the same spot' (141), Moses feels a 'greatness and vastness' for the first time, that there was 'something solid' after 'feeling everything give way' (142). The suggestion here is that, like Selvon himself, Moses will transcend his state of limbo through storytelling (a state which Naipaul's text never surpasses), which gives the novel a tentative sense of hopeful momentum.

### **Fighting Back: 'Di Whole a Black Britn Did Rack Wid Rage'**

In second generation British Caribbean writing there is movement away from a sense of stasis and acceptance towards a much more active call for resistance and, at times, outright rebellion against the institutional racisms ingrained in British society. The struggles faced by the second generation of Caribbean migrants in Britain are well documented in the blistering

verses of Linton Kwesi Johnson's (also known as LKJ) dub poetry. Johnson's poetry captures the mood in London's Black communities and tense relationships with heavy-handed and often abusive policing. Johnson joined the London Black Panthers in 1970 to train himself in how to deal with racial harassment, and his radical poetry bears witness to the 'explosive encounter between police harassment and black resistance' (McLeod 131). His dub poem 'New Cross Massahkah' documents the devastating effects of the New Cross house fire on 18 January 1981, in which 13 young Black British children lost their lives. The subsequent lack of proper investigation, blaming of the Black community, and the deliberate silence on the part of the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and politicians in response to the tragedy led to the 'Black People's Day of Action' on 2 March 1981. The march was organized by the New Cross Massacre Action Committee chaired by Trinidadian activist and writer John La Rose, and an organising committee led by the Race Today Collective and the Black Parents and Students Movements (which included La Rose, Johnson, Leila Hassan and Darcus Howe, among other prominent intellectuals and activists). The march saw 20,000 people protest together through the streets of South London with a rallying cry of 'Thirteen Dead, Nothing Said'. In April and July of the same year there were 'riots' across several British cities, including London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Leeds, during which young Black Britons clashed with police in a struggle against discriminatory policing, unemployment, and heavy-handed police tactics.

Johnson came to Brixton, London, from Jamaica aged thirteen in 1963. Like Selvon and Galahad's protagonists, he too thought he would find 'the streets of London paved with gold'. In an interview to commemorate fifty years since the death of the Nigerian migrant David Oluwale, I interviewed Johnson at The West Indian Centre in Chapeltown, a Leeds suburb which has historically formed the heart of the Black community, and we discussed his

arrival to Britain and the places he calls home. He explained that he considers both Jamaica and London his 'home':

I consider London my home. I'm always glad to get away from England, but I'm always glad to come back.

It was a rude awakening when I arrived, on a cold November day, and it was overcast and I thought, my god, is this England? You had ideas in your head about the mother country, this wonderful place with horse drawn carriages and literally, the streets of London being paved with gold, and then you see these ugly grey buildings, it was a rude awakening and it was a little bit traumatic in terms of schooling. That was when I first experienced racial abuse [...].

The thing that struck me was the racial abuse, from kids, being called a n....., and the racist attitude of some of the teachers. ('Linton Kwesi Johnson in conversation' np)

Johnson explained how his school was structured along racial and class divisions, with immigrants and working-class children populating the lower attainment classes, and children from middle-class, home-owning backgrounds in the top stream. This system in no way reflected the children's abilities; as Johnson pointed out he was intelligent and the curriculum he had been studying in Jamaica was far more advanced than that of his new English school. He was, however, automatically placed in the bottom set, as the child of Caribbean migrant parents.

Johnson's dub poetry, both on and off the page, forms a bridge between the first wave of 1950s Caribbean migrants and their children who reached adulthood in the seventies and eighties. Unlike Galahad's accounts of London in *The Lonely Londoners*, there are no loving descriptions of famous landmarks and place names, but a bleak and violent 'Landan toun'. Johnson's work references the hangouts of Brixton's youth and the loss of faith in a mythical London found in first generation Caribbean migrant writing, as well as the need to resist the oppressions of an institutionally racist society and to fight back. There is little of the long-suffering attitude and determination to 'get by' found in first generation writing. The British-born children of the first generation insist that they are here to carve themselves a space in a hostile environment and challenge authorities that viewed them as second-class citizens head-on.

Johnson was instrumental in bringing dub poetry to a global audience. This is poetry to be read orally; it is seeped in Jamaican oral traditions and music; it is the 'voice of the sufferers'. With numerous references to Rastafarianism, Reggae, and dub music are positioned in his work as a resource for cultural change. Johnson calls for Black Britons to stand up for their rights, to resist the oppression of the authorities and start a 'righteous' rebellion, as he extolls in 'New Cross Massahkah':

yu noh remembah

how di whole a black Britn did rack wid rage

how di whole a black Britn tun a fiery red

nat di callous red af di killah's eyes

but red wid rage like di flames af di fyah (*Selected Poems* 55-56)

From the restless state of Selvon's 'boys' to the fiery rage of Johnson's poetry, these writers are part of the literary legacy of 'Windrush generation' arrival narratives. However, with the shift from England to France, Joseph Zobel's Francophone migration story manages to disrupt this distinctively Anglophone narrative. Zobel focused on the feeling of a sense of freedom in his 'Black man's skin' in Paris, which runs counter to the struggles highlighted by these authors. Thus, via such a comparative lens, we can see why it is important to keep challenging any metanarrative of Caribbean arrival by drawing from a larger pool of Black European literatures (such as the work of Zobel), and exploring more diverse genres (for instance, through personal narratives rather than exclusively literary ones). In Zobel's life and writing we see an evolution of and a contradiction to the type of 'hostile environment' depicted in Selvon's and Johnson's London. The juxtaposition of Zobel's Parisian contentedness with the grim world of Selvon's 'boys' and defiant resistance of Johnson's poetics adds an important complexity to our understanding of the Caribbean migration experience to Europe and calls for more comparative research, especially in light of the lack of writing and research in the field of post-war Francophone Caribbean migration narratives.

### **A Raided Dawn: Hostile Environments in the Twenty First Century**

The concept of 'otherness' as a threat and the obsession with expanding and protecting borders and wealth has been seeded and nurtured in the British psyche by centuries of enslavement, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. The same fear is inspired by images of 'hoards' of migrants entering into post-millennium Britain in the pages of right wing newspapers. When in 2017 it surfaced in the media that hundreds of 'Windrush generation' Commonwealth citizens, specifically the elderly children born from that generation, had been wrongly deported and denied legal rights, Prime Minister Theresa May refused to admit that

the British immigration system was discriminatory. May herself had introduced the set of policies in 2012 aimed at making life hellish for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees without the correct paperwork. As May introduced her Hostile Environment immigration Policy, she stated: ‘The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants’ (quoted in Hill np). The hostile environment was orchestrated by blocking migrants from services such as the NHS, constant immigration checks carried out by those in positions of authority, and allowing the Home Office access to personal data collected by public sector organisations.

May’s hostile environment policy and the subsequent ‘Windrush scandal’ clearly demonstrated the ongoing discrimination against migrants in Britain into the twenty first century. My poem ‘Dawn Raid’ responds to the raid carried out by immigration officers in Glasgow in the early hours of Thursday 13 May 2021. Two men detained by UK Immigration Enforcement were released back into their community after the day of protest by local residents (Brooks). Campaigners told the Home Office ‘you messed with the wrong city’. I was deeply moved by this display of solidarity, particularly by the white Glaswegian community, towards the two men, and the empathy towards their plight to find sanctuary in Scotland.

### **Dawn Raid**

It’s Wednesday and  
as stubborn Springtime drizzle  
falls on Holyrood  
historic changes are afoot;  
Scotland’s ‘most diverse parliament’



take their oaths in:

British Sign Language

Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi

Doric, Scots, Gaelic

Welsh

and Orcadian

after an election in which refugees

are offered voting rights

for the *very first time*

It's Thursday and

as cold fingers of night

retreat to reveal a pallid

Glasgow dawn

Immigration Officers stalk flats to

rip two Indian men

from the womb of their beds

cuffed, sleepy-eyed

bellies still soft with the

contentment of Eid feasting

they drag them to the waiting van

On this dawn raid on Eid al-Fitr

in a corner of the country

where cultures cross-hatch like

webs of lace

these Immigration Officers

know not that they

*messed with the wrong city*

And so the people

gather

Shopkeepers, Office Workers, Teachers

white boy with the dreads who won't let go of his

beloved megaphone

youth in the yellow puffa jacket

screaming solidarity

to students and fellow sufferers

For long hours they demand freedom

for their neighbours

shatter the The Hostile Environment

with their welcome

ask for Wednesday's Holyrood's promises

with the force of their street-blocking mas

until van doors open and

two men spill into jubilant crowds

The men's prayers are quiet in the uproar;

while stunned by this display of love

they long only to sleep  
deep in their beds  
under the rise of Friday's crescent moon  
without waking  
to the  
darkness  
of a raided dawn

### **Remembering Oluwale: Legacies of Rejection**

Leeds has its own tragically brutal story of hostility and racism towards migrants, including the killing of the Nigerian migrant David Oluwale by two West Yorkshire police officers. The killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020, which sparked global Black Lives Matter protests, carries echoes of this tragedy. David Oluwale arrived in Hull in East Yorkshire in 1969 as a stowaway in a cargo ship from Lagos. Like all migrants, David travelled in hope of a brighter future. But from 1953 to 1969 he suffered from mental ill-health, homelessness, racism, destitution, and police persecution. David was hounded to death by two police officers; after a sustained and brutal pattern of abuse at their hands that spanned several years, he was drowned in the River Aire in 1969 near Leeds Bridge. Recent events have shown us that Leeds, like many other cities in the UK, has become less openly hostile towards migrants, but that racist and discriminatory attitudes persist.<sup>iii</sup>

British Caribbean author Caryl Phillips, who grew up on a working-class estate in Leeds, revisits the story of David Oluwale in his hybrid historical narrative 'Northern Lights', which constitutes a chapter from his book *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2008). Whilst in conversation with Professor John McLeod in Leeds in 2015, Phillips explains that

Leeds rejected Oluwale. Friends and social work agencies tried to help, but there is no getting around the fact that the city looked the other way while this man was cast – literally – onto the waters. But back in the late 1960s the city was busy, and the city stood on the threshold of a transformation that has finally come to pass.

[...] How would David Oluwale, or any newcomer, fare in today's regeneration Leeds? [...]. The temperature of the water remains the same. The river remains the same. The water tells the story. Without the river there would be no Leeds. The same river down which David Oluwale made his fateful final journey to his resting place in a clump of weeds near the Knostrop Sewage Works. ('The City by the Water' 883)

Phillips continually reminds us in his writing that the past inhabits the present. He states in the same interview: 'I think we're all of us guilty of walking right past the evidence of our history and the specific evidence of our colonial history, every day' (888). In my poem 'He Returned', I wanted to respond to the echoes of David Oluwale's story in Leeds today and detail the moment I took my children down to the 'dark arches', where the River Aire runs underneath Leeds station through a series of tunnels. It is an ominous place; cold, dark, noisy and oppressive. I was immediately reminded of Oluwale; his journey to Leeds across the ocean, his death in the water and, as Phillips so well describes, Leeds itself as a 'city of water', a place whose success is built on the waterways that crisscross it, the migrants

arriving across water to work in its mills and factories and the canals and rivers that allowed it to trade, via Liverpool and Hull, with the rest of the world.

## **He Returned**

### *Remembering David Oluwale*

Where does the river run to?

my children ask

out of winter sunshine

we stand under dark arches

in echoing shadow

in chills of stone and subterranean waters

in rumbles of overhead trains

above heaving river rush

Where does the river run to?

hanging question

peering over railings

faces pale, small

absorbed by the thundering Aire

that consumed Oluwale

Oluwale, to this city water-borne

Oluwale, who refused to submit

until they pitched him in

to dark waters

watched them entomb him

Where does the river run to?

always to the sea

Oluwale knows, he journeyed

down tunneled inky Northern canals

out into the sunlit spread

of Atlantic waters

borne                    by                    teasing                    currents

taken                    up                    by                    waves

which                    pulse                    restlessly,                    ceaselessly

under                    the                    cavernous                    sky

in water, he returned

Phillip's warning, in 2015, that today the 'temperature of the water remains the same in Leeds', foreshadow the shocking events of April 2022. I am the Co-chair of the David Oluwale Memorial Association (DOMA), who after a long campaign erected a blue plaque to commemorate Oluwale's life and death in conjunction with Leeds Civic Trust. Phillips travelled from the US to unveil the plaque and his words formed a part of the inscription, which read (see figure 5): *The river tried to carry you away, but you remain with us in Leeds*'.

[Insert near here as full-page-width colour image: FIGURE 5. Caption: ‘Figure 5 The Blue Plaque placed on Leeds Bridge in on 28 April 28 2022 to commemorate David Oluwale before it was stolen’]

The unveiling ceremony saw over two hundred people from across Leeds come together in solidarity and in support of social change. Hours after the plaque was unveiled by Phillips on Leeds Bridge, positioned at the point where Oluwale is believed to have entered the water, it was stolen. This followed a racist incident on the bridge during the ceremony itself and a spate of graffiti on the foundations of the new Oluwale Bridge, further upstream, and outside the Civic Trust offices, where the plaque was manufactured. The words read ‘N.....’s Out’, and ‘N.....’s out of the UK’. It was made clear that Leeds was still as hostile environment for those perceived as ‘outsiders’.

The night following the theft of the plaque, I had organised an in-conversation event entitled ‘Oluwale Matters’ with DOMA and Leeds Beckett University at The Leeds Library with Caryl Phillips. I asked him about his response to the events the night before and the theft of the plaque. This was his response:

We just saw something last night that Leeds doesn’t want us to see, but that doesn’t mean that Leeds is worse than any other city. There are always going to be uncomfortable narratives that exist within the framework of our city. It’s not about what happened last night that is the issue, quite honestly, it’s what we are going to do now, and we are going to do something. It’s not what was done to us, it’s what we are going to do in return.

Talking to you, Emily, and talking to Max [Farrar], it's clear we are not going to just roll over and do nothing. We already know about the uncomfortable truth that this highlights. We will regroup – and we will get on with it. ('Caryl Phillips in Conversation' np)

Since the theft of the plaque – which as I write in May of 2022 was only a week ago – the city has indeed 'got on with it'. There has been an overwhelming show of support from communities across Leeds for the work of the DOMA charity and an even louder call to 'Remember Oluwale'. A temporary, laminated plaque was put in the place of the stolen plaque the following day by Councilors, and when this too was ripped in half, another was placed in the same spot and also ripped. At the time of writing, a broken half is still in place.<sup>iv</sup>

Leeds City Council immediately offered to pay for three replacement plaques and the billboard company JCDecaux contacted the Leeds Civic Trust and arranged to project the image of the plaque across the city on their electronic billboards. The Hyde Park Cinema will project an image of the plaque before every film and Leeds' Kirkgate Market has a large projection of David Oluwale's face and the plaque in their recreation hall. The plaque appeared on the big screen at the centre of the Millennium Square, in the city centre. There has also been increased fundraising for the DOMA charity, support from MPs, and an outpouring of support from the general public, particularly through social media channels. The message has been clear; you can remove the plaque, but you cannot silence the message.

David Oluwale was a migrant who entered into an environment so hostile that he was denied the right to exist. His presence was so abhorrent to Inspector Geoffrey Ellerker and Sergeant Kenneth Kitchen that they sought to destroy him piecemeal and they finally succeeded in



their desire to make him disappear from the city. This message of hostility clearly still permeates our city and British society today, expressed clearly in the graffiti daubed on the walls in Leeds. Yet the message of welcome to newcomers, to those perceived, by some, as foreigners or outsiders, is gaining strength. This hybrid essay has attempted to bring together the academic, the personal, the political, the poetic and the literary in an examination of the ways migrants have struggled to 'claim space' in Britain and France and the different types of welcome and hostilities they have experienced. This hybrid form has allowed me to incorporate a plethora of voices into my narrative arc, in ways that resist a dominant metanarrative and analysis of migrant 'arrival'. Alongside a literary exploration, I have myself attempted to 'claim space' through a form which challenges traditional academic writing.

Phillips suggests that persecuted communities need to come together and 'get on' with the work of resisting oppressive forces, a form of resistance echoed in the poetry of LKJ and at the heart of the Glasgow protests, as well as in the responses of the citizens of Leeds to the theft of the Oluwale plaque. The competing narratives of migration explored here demonstrate how certain inroads can be made into so-called hostile environments, past and present, by communities standing together, as well as demonstrating how experiences of arrival and migration are varied and multifaced when framed within a wider, more transnational field.

I want to end with my poem 'Song for Leeds', written before the theft of the blue plaque, which wrestles with my ambiguous and complex relationship with Leeds, a city that feels like a place of both welcome and rejection for people like me, forced to perpetually negotiate

their perceived otherness through life in Britian. I also end with a photograph of my late mother and I at the Leeds West Indian carnival, dressed in our hibiscus costumes for our Mama Dread 2017 'All Ah We Are Migrants' masquarade. We created this troupe to remember the life of David Oluwale and stand in solidarity with the thousands of migrants who continue to loose their lives in the water in an a desperate bid to make a safe home on British soil.

## **Song for Leeds**

Leeds, meaning  
*people of the fast-flowing river*  
how you struggle to define yourself  
pushing up skyscrapers from rubbish-speckled streets  
hoping to distract us  
to dream bigger than the soot  
smudged across your building's faces.

Down by the canal  
two men share a morning spliff,  
a break from magnet-fishing metal  
from khaki waters slick with slime.  
On Leeds Bridge,  
three brisk council women  
plot the spot for a plaque  
to Remember Oluwale.

Oluwale, whose whispers echo still  
through heaving river-rush  
a migrant's protest  
at his pushing by police  
at his sinking in the Aire

Leeds, city of water  
cross-hatched by migrants  
beck-laced, fanning through Aire and Wharfe  
where metallic blue kingfishers  
pause from darting  
on discarded shopping trolleys

Leeds, city of back-to-backs and bridges  
still healing scars of industry  
no rest in your race for  
textiles, flax, chemicals, munitions

Dodging student sick  
a woman in the Debenham's doorway  
beds down on cardboard  
ears cotton-stuffed to drown out  
the whoops of clubbers

She wakes to a Pennine breeze  
of grass, lanolin and rain  
packs nothing and drifts to the Aire  
watches signets hide in the sweeping hair  
of a golden weeping willow  
and for the first time  
she hears the song for Leeds  
of lamentation and of praise  
rippling in the flow  
of its waters

[Insert at end of text before works cited: FIGURE 6. Caption: 'Figure 6 Emily and her mother  
Jenny; 'All Ah We Are Migrants' Mas at the Leeds West Indian Carnival, 2017 © Max  
Farrar']

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## Acknowledgements

‘Song for Leeds’ previously published in *Independent Life* (2022). Republished with permission.

‘He Returned’ previously published in *Magma: The Loss Issue*. 75 (2019). Republished with permission.

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<sup>i</sup> For an extended discussion on Joseph Zobel’s migrant experience and writing in France see: Zobel Marshall, Emily and Jenny Zobel. ‘Dans Cette Immensité Tumultueuse (In This Vast Tumult): Joseph Zobel’s Letters of Migration’. *Wasafari*. 28.1 (2013): 27-35 and Zobel Marshall, Emily and Jenny Zobel. ‘Lorsque je Vais dans mon Village (When I return to my Village): Zobel’s Visions of Home and Exile’. *Wasafari*. 26.3 (2011): 1-8.

<sup>ii</sup> An extended version of this discussion can be found in Zobel Marshall, Emily. “‘Is Who Send We Up In This Place?’” Threshold Paralysis and Postponed Arrivals in Sam Selvon’s *Lonely Londoners* and George Lamming’s *The Emigrants*. *The Literary London Journal*. 13.1 (2016): 20-36. Sections from this article have been republished with permission from *The Literary London Journal*.

<sup>iii</sup> For more information on David Oluwale please visit the David Oluwale Memorial Association website: <https://rememberoluwale.org>.

<sup>iv</sup> Another blue plaque was installed on Leeds Bridge by DOMA on 23 October 23 2022.