

Inside the Frame: Women Writers and the Windrush Legacy: Interviews with Grace Nichols,
Karen McCarthy Woolf and Jay Bernard
by Hannah Lowe

It is seventy years since the MV *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury, a time long ago enough to really feel like ‘history’, but also a moment which is continually, through its commemorative practices, held up to the light – a ship in a bottle – to evaluate its significance. *Windrush* casts a long shadow, having achieved a metonymic function, symbolic of all the postwar Caribbean arrivals to follow. It continues to be a vital source of celebration, community-gathering and acknowledgement – of the experiences of those who came to Britain in the postwar years and endured and survived the indignities of populist and institutional racism *and* of the transformative diasporic cultures and new meanings that are a continuing legacy of the first, second, third and now fourth generations in the UK. But since 1998 (the year in which the ship’s name became household knowledge) critics have also challenged and interrogated the Windrush metonym, ‘that huge fiction of a ship’ as Jackie Kay writes in her short story ‘Out of Hand’, a narrative which (re)inscribes the presence of women aboard the ship, a historical truism often absented from Windrush commemorations.

The characterisation of Windrush as a male narrative began with the now iconic Pathé news footage of the ship’s arrival at Tilbury on 22 June 22 1948, showing only men alighting the ship and featuring only men in its short sequence of interviews. Similarly, it is the stories of men which feature in the subsequent newspaper reporting of the *Windrush* passengers’ settlement. But a close look at the ship’s passenger list (and at the lists of the numerous ships to follow) evidences the presence of women, placing them alongside men as early pioneers in the Windrush story, not a belated or secondary part as they are often assumed.

Windrush has also become a literary shorthand for Caribbean writers in Britain during this time, most of whom were men, but they had female contemporaries – women such as Una Marson and Beryl Gilroy, who also narrativised their experiences in a hostile Britain. Marson, perhaps best known as the producer of the BBC’s *Caribbean Voices*, had arrived in Britain in 1932 and depicted her experiences in poetry.ⁱ Beryl Gilroy’s memoir, *In Praise of Love and Children* (1996), which took forty years to find a publisher, portrays her life as a black teacher and foster mother in 1950s Britain. Like male writers of this time, Gilroy ‘record(s) ... a confrontation between ... protagonists and Britain, its institutions, its people, and some of the strategies that were employed in that situation’, with the added dimension of gender discrimination (Stein, 4).

The next ‘generation’ of ‘post-Windrush’ women writers might be distinguished by being born

Britain and/or starting to write in the 1970s/1980s/ 1990s, among them (and by no means exclusively) Grace Nichols, Joan Riley, Merle Collins, Andrea Levy and Malorie Blackman. A younger but similarly amorphous group might be defined as those publishing since 2000 – Zadie Smith, Malika Booker, Dorothea Smartt, Leone Ross and Karen McCarthy Woolf, and younger ‘millennial’ writers such as Deanna Roger, Natacha Brown and Jay Bernard. The thematic interests of these writers also intersect with writers of African heritage – Buchi Emecheta, Bernardine Evaristo, Helen Oyeyemi, Diana Evans, Patience Agbabi for example – instigating a question about who Windrush story ‘belongs’ to? Is it only those of Caribbean diaspora that can claim its symbol as their own? It is notable that no similar commemorations of arrival exist for African heritage people in Britain, or for those in the South-East Asian diaspora.

The Windrush umbrella is then perhaps characterised as much by who it might exclude as much as include, drawing our attention to its complex position as a nodal point in black British experience. And distinguishing groups of writers into generations or by nationality is of course unable to account for the multiple allegiances, overlaps, and/or disparities between writers and their projects. The work of the writers mentioned here offers a vast and multifarious picture of the experience of being black and British, and taken together, responds to the significant political, social and cultural changes that have taken place in Britain between 1948 and 2018. It was the changed attitudes towards multiculturalism in the late 1990s, for example, that encouraged and sanctioned the inaugural celebrations of Windrush, and fostered a climate in which literary depictions of multicultural Britain – Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* are key examples – were celebrated. Like Kay, Levy revisits the Windrush of 1948 to challenge aspects of that story through her inclusion of a female protagonist and emphasizing a pre-Windrush black British presence.

What else might Windrush mean to black women writing across the temporal spectrum since the actual ship docked? How does Windrush intersect with shifted and shifting matrices of class, gender and/or sexuality? Or speak to those who claim dual or multiple heritages? In the interviews below, I have asked three poets – Grace Nichols, Karen McCarthy Woolf and Jay Bernard – about their relationships to Windrush and its legacy.

Grace Nichols was born in Guyana in 1950 and has lived in Britain since 1977. Her first collection *I is a Long-Memored Woman* (1983) won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Subsequent collections include *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984), *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), *Sunris* (1996) and *Startling the Flying Fish* (2006). She also writes prose, including fiction for children. Her latest poetry collection is *The Insomnia Poems* (2017).

HL: Could you describe your 'narrative of arrival' – why you left Guyana and what you hoped to find?

GN: If I hadn't met my partner (now husband) John Agard, I doubt whether I would have ended up in England. We met when we were both working as young journalists for one of our national newspapers, *The Chronicle*. When we began living together, we each had a daughter from our previous respective marriages.

John's dad had migrated from Guyana (a British colony at the time) and had settled in England for a number of years before we came in 1977 so England seemed a natural choice. We both had hopes of becoming professional writers. John had a slim self-published volume of poems at the time, and I had written about a third of my one and only novel, *Whole of A Morning Sky*. What drove us to leave Guyana was the worsening political and economic climate in the country and the fact that Guyana had no publishing houses as such, apart from a government owned press.

I think that migration is very much part of our Caribbean psyche, the idea that you can go abroad to better yourself or to achieve your dreams. I was unprepared for how much I'd miss home though, as I come from a big family of five sisters and a brother. I was accustomed to seeing them nearly every day along with friends and relatives, Georgetown being a fairly small city. Dropping around spontaneously to someone's home was not advisable in England. Yes, I soon learnt to change my 'calypso ways' in this regard.

Perhaps it was this emotional separation from Guyana that made me turn more and more to poetry, which was a deep love of mine from childhood when I would dip into my headmaster-father's poetry books. We only lived in London for about four months before coming to live in the green rolling downs of Sussex. At that time you could count the number of black or migrant type faces. I never really experienced the nitty-gritty of coping with life in London, though I visit London regularly.

HL: Windrush is one of the first moments on the trajectory of black British history to be commemorated on mainstream platforms. Does the Windrush hold any particular significance to you? Do you see it as important to your own experience and your writing?

GN: There's no denying that the Windrush marks an important psychic milestone in postwar Caribbean migration to Britain, though the black presence in Britain goes back a long way to Roman times. During the fiftieth anniversary Windrush celebrations, I did attend a number of events and met some of the Windrush pioneers including Sam King, the first black mayor in Southwark. Our very close friend, poet James Berry, who sadly passed away this year, would often speak of the Windrush which he said he'd just missed, as he'd arrived in Britain the following year. I knew and appreciated the work of those early London-based pioneering writers such as Edgar Mittelholzer, Sam Selvon, Andrew Salkey, and James Berry himself, all part of my Caribbean literary heritage. In the late seventies and early eighties, however, the women's movement was making its presence felt and I was reading and being inspired much more by the poetry of women such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Audre Lorde, the African-American poet, as well as novelists like Buchi Emecheta. It was the heart of the women's movement era.

HL: There is an interesting tension perhaps, between your work, much of which articulates the subjectivities of black women, and Windrush, which has often been memorialised as a story of young black men. Is this something you have been aware of, or provoked by, in your writing?

GN: I would have been conscious of this and wanted at some level to articulate the experiences of the black immigrant woman's voice in Britain as depicted in poems such as, 'First Generation Monologue' and 'Wherever I Hang'. I think the main impetus of my work has always been more Caribbean however, filtered through that 'see-far' Caribbean-eye. The Caribbean is a microcosm of the world and our identities are many and varied, so I can become a 'Cariwoma', an embodiment of the Caribbean spirit as in 'Startling the Flying Fish', as well as enter the voice of 'Dora Maar' who was Picasso's muse and mistress, and whose face is behind his iconic 'Weeping Woman' painting (I was poet-in-residence at the Tate Gallery, London). I express what moves me. I don't want to feel restricted by what I should or shouldn't write about.

HL: Nostalgia and disillusionment re-occur in your expressions of the Caribbean migrant in Britain – I'm thinking of poems such as 'Island Man' and 'First Generation Monologue' – as do a sense of belonging, resilience, and sometimes irreverence, like that expressed in your famous line 'wherever I hang my knickers – that's my home.' Do you deliberately seek to express both the pleasures and the pains of exile, and what might these terms, pleasure and pain, mean to you in this context?

GN: I think it's crucial to consider that Caribbean people don't usually see themselves as exiles, in the same way that someone forced to flee a war-torn country and can't return, might see themselves, often English might not even be their first language. To me that's exile. I can still go home anytime I like, although it would mean big changes to my lifestyle. Guyana was a British colony and I grew up speaking English and what we call 'Creole'. We basically had the same educational system that someone growing up in England would have had, studying poets like Shakespeare and Keats, so in a way England was both familiar and unfamiliar.

Collections such as *I is a Long-Memoried Woman* and *Startling the Flying Fish* did grow out of a kind of psychic historical ache and sense of displacement which is part of our wider collective ache but I don't see my poems in terms of a neat polarity between 'pleasure' and 'pain'. You could say there's something of the irreverent in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. That's me expressing my playful side in the same way that I enjoyed giving a twist to those famous words 'wherever I hang my hat, that's my home' from the Sam Cooke song I'd known from way back.

HL: Your work is full of migratory arrivals and departures and a close engagement with history. What is the relationship between poetry and history for you?

GN: When I was about twelve or thirteen-years-old, our school curriculum switched to West Indian history and I had a wonderful history teacher called Mr. Owen (I've written a poem about him). He made history come alive in a vivid way. When he spoke, the historical characters were like those in a living theatre, not dead and static on a page, so I have him to thank for my ongoing relationship with the living entity of history. Naturally as a woman I write from a woman's perspective. History is there, like a vast forest to be explored, and it's like going through and lighting it from a different angle, reflecting on what interests or excites me. I had a very basic knowledge of English history. It was only after I came to Britain that I'd become more aware of English history, and of black figures such as Mary Seacole, Ignatius Sancho, Equiano, and more specifically, the arrival of the Windrush itself.

Karen McCarthy Woolf was born in London in 1966 to English and Jamaican parents. She has published two collections, *An Aviary of Small Birds* (2014) and *Seasonable Disturbances* (2017). She is an anthologist and editor and has held numerous residences, including at Spread the Word literary development agency and the National Maritime Museum.

HL: Can you tell us about your own father's journey and life in Britain?

KMW: Ricky McCarthy came to the UK from Kingston, Jamaica in 1957; as such he was very much part of the Windrush generation and his personal journey was both chronologically typical and yet in many ways quite singular. The first job that he took here was 'on the buses' as a conductor, an experience that stuck with him as a frontline encounter with the British public. People would drop the money for the fare into his hand to avoid physical contact, and one woman even refused to take her change from him. The first place he lived was in Clapham (London), as there was a strong West Indian community in the area. Then after a brief stint in Notting Hill he moved to a studio in Hampstead, and he stayed in the borough of Camden for the rest of his life, for the most part in West Hampstead. I mention these geographical details now because most people wouldn't expect to hear of a Caribbean community in Hampstead, but people rented bedsits all over the capital. This was before Thatcherism and the economic and cultural segregation that wide scale home ownership and property speculation has wrought on community diversity.

Throughout the 1970s he worked in the accounts department at Kodak's London headquarters. I think they were based near Kingsway. I remember him telling me he was always the only black man dressed in a suit going into the office on his tube carriage every morning. The 1970s was also the era of Black Power, a time when he became more active politically. He sat on school boards as a governor, was a lifelong member of the Labour Party, and knew many figures of the era, from Darcus Howe to Michael Foot. His fight against institutionalised racism was very alert to the power of the media and its misrepresentations of the Caribbean community. This came to a head in the Brixton Riots/Uprisings after which he set up and gained funding for the Afro-Caribbean Radio Project in the Bon Marché building in Brixton, where he ran a media training initiative for young people, so they could tell their own stories.

Speech radio was his passion and his vision was for a station where news and educational content were at the forefront: he was never interested in running a music-based station. This dream came to partial fruition under the guise of Spectrum Radio International, where he was a founding co-director of the Afro Caribbean component. One memorable event was when Margaret Thatcher came to visit the station on its opening. He is the only director not to be featured in the picture as he refused to be photographed with her. 'Why would I do that?' he said, 'She's a racist.' A more welcome encounter was when we went to the official press briefing with Nelson Mandela on his release from prison. This was a career highlight, along with meeting Muhammed Ali. In fact, he was engaged in community

projects right up until the end of his life, when he travelled to visit a dance project he supported in Ethiopia at the age of eighty-two!

HL: The commemorative practices of *Windrush* often focus on the contact between migrants and the host population, including interracial relationships, and the experiences of their children. In what ways does your mixed background find expression in your work, if at all?

KMW: In my twenties I was very conscious of the fact that I was mixed-race, and that I had a white mother and sisters. For a time I was quite focused on exploring my identity thematically in my work as a writer. I researched a book with a friend on the mixed-race experience in the mid-1990s, and we interviewed dozens of individuals about growing up mixed-race in the UK. Hearing stories that echoed my own was important; it helped me realise it was perfectly valid to be 'other'. I also wrote a radio drama 'Dido of Kenwood' for BBC Radio 4, which explored the life of Dido 'Belle' Lindsay, who lived at Kenwood house in Hampstead in the eighteenth century, and whose story was later related in the film *Belle*. My interest in Dido was very much connected with the mixed-race experience. Dido's white father was an aristocratic naval officer who 'encountered' her mother on a slave ship in Cuba; my mum's family were cockneys from the east end and Islington. Even though we were no doubt of different class backgrounds, I enjoyed the local coincidence. However, what really interested me about Dido's story was her relationship with her great-uncle, Lord Mansfield, who was the Lord Chief Justice of England and whose precedent ruling on the case of a runaway slave laid the legal ground towards abolition. I was fascinated by the idea that this familial relationship may have influenced a larger political paradigm.

My first book *An Aviary of Small Birds* was a book of elegies mourning a baby son who died in a full-term stillbirth. In my new book *Seasonal Disturbances* I wanted to shift from making a very intimate loss universal, and think about the universal losses society is facing, particularly with nature, climate change, human rights and the macro-political forces that are driving these precarious imperatives. As a poet, my hybrid identity surfaces through my engagement with form: I realise that I'm most interested at what happens in the liminal spaces, where one thing meets another, whether its lyric poetry and prose, found materials or unexpected encounters with nature in the urban environment.

HL: Poems like 'The Neighbourhood' in *Seasonable Disturbances* lament the gentrification of Brixton, your home, and a place of significance in Windrush history. I found the lines 'if I don't stop talking

politics / I'll have no old friends to sit down and eat cake with' very thought-provoking. Do they apply to poems as well?

KMW: Yes and no. It's a playful line, of course. Whether I 'represent' the stereotypical version of what a working-class person might look like, or act like, is debatable. Those broad-brush characterisations are so limiting and can be so easily turned against us. I was writer-in-residence at the National Maritime Museum throughout the summer of 2015, when the racist rhetoric of Brexit was at its nadir. The museum asked me to respond to their exhibit on migration. I wanted to think not just about celebrating migration and its fluidities and movements, but also about who gets to be 'a migrant' and who doesn't. In a way that spurred my interest in gentrification, although of course gentrification was happening anyway. It felt unstoppable. What I realise latterly is that gentrification was my own 'migration' experience: it's about finding yourself in a situation where your community changes or disappears but you haven't gone anywhere. It's complex: we have to challenge all of our reactions, to resist a knee-jerk othering as we become othered. Sometimes a new coffee shop can feel like a good thing, particularly if it's an independent local business. Now I have a rubric: if 'regeneration' or whatever it's being called at that minute increases rather than decreases diversity, then all's well and good. If not then we need to interrogate it, thoroughly!

HL: Can you tell us about your chapbook *Voyage*, which arose out of that residency? It reminds me that Windrush is one of many migrations ...

I also wanted to explore my dad's story and being at the museum I had access to their archives which was brilliant as I found my dad's name in the *Irpinia*'s ship's log. That was really exciting. He was listed as a 'clerk'. My first instinct was to find the ship and try and sail somewhere, ideally Jamaica. But it had long gone to the breaker's yard. Then I discovered that the *Irpinia* was hired out by the producers of a film called *Voyage of the Damned*, and that the ship was the set for another real migrant story of Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Germany in 1939. 'Voyage', the title poem, relates my father's migration story on board the ship together with that of the Jewish refugees, so the narrative encompasses the fact that migration is a multi-layered and historical event.

Jay Bernard is a poet, writer and film programmer, born in London in 1988. They often works across disciplines and have held recent residences at Transport for London and the London Metropolitan

Archives. They have published three chapbooks: *Your Sign is Cuckoo, Girl* (2008) *English Breakfast* (2013) and *The Red and Yellow Nothing* (2016).

HL: Does the Windrush have any personal or political significance for you?

JB: My family came to Britain about fifteen years after the Windrush. I thought it was very poetic, arriving by boat, but when I asked my maternal grandmother how she got here she said, very matter-of-factly, 'By plane'. I don't think there was much romance in any of my grandparents' arrivals in Britain, nor in the realities of being among the first wave of migrants to this country. But I see it as a return, really – a return to claim what was theirs, what they were owed after centuries of oppression. What really strikes me is the idea of Britain as a motherland, which is what initially prevented any laws being made against West Indians arriving. It was a shock to the British system that their colonial subjects might ever make it in substantial numbers, might then bring over their families, might then start to make demands, and ultimately change the country forever. I love that – that the privilege of being a British subject was upheld precisely because no-one ever expected colonised people to take it up. It's darkly amusing. But it's not my origin story, really. My family were in the vein of the Windrush, but I associate them with something a little different, a slightly different aesthetic, not so easily or willingly romanticised.

HL: Your poem 'Cadence' from your first pamphlet mentions Windrush, and begins 'I should consider this cold British soil / an island for a funeral ...'. It made me wonder what you think of this 'cold British soil', if your ideas or thoughts have changed since you wrote the poem?

JB: Yes ... they've changed a lot. I wrote that poem when I was seventeen and I'm nearly thirty now. So it's half my life ago. My understanding of racial politics is very different. In that poem, I think I am saying that I feel connected to Britain and others don't. But I didn't have the sophistication to explain that this connectedness wasn't uncomplicated. I think that poem is a lesson in saying what you mean more clearly. I was working things out.

HL: Your recent work *The Red and Yellow Nothing* moves way back in time, centuries before Windrush, to explore 'blackness in Europe'. I really enjoyed the book, a prequel a Middle Dutch folktale. In the introduction you tell us that the character Morien is 'not raced, but he is dark skinned'. Could you say more about that? Might Windrush obscure these earlier histories?

JB: With the *Red and Yellow Nothing* I wanted to write about a time before this kind of racism, which we have become accustomed to. Which is not to say there wasn't horrendous prejudice – of course there was. You only need to read *Staying Power* to learn about the laws against black people taking up apprenticeships, the racist hiring practices in the shipping industry, the violence that targeted people in their houses. But *The Red and Yellow Nothing* goes back beyond that, and I suppose into a time we'll never quite comprehend. The story the book is based on, *The Tale of Sir Morien*, shows a 'white' father embracing his 'black' Moorish son. The dynamics are so completely different to anything else I'd read, that I felt it was important to present this too: not that somehow people were lovely to each other back then and are terrible now, but that this stuff *changes*, that dynamics between different cultures and people *were different*. There is something powerful about being able to see glimpses of another reality, especially in Europe, because the racism of today and the racism that infuses the history of the Windrush feels so all-encompassing.

HL: Other projects of yours have responded to history. Could you tell us about some of these? What's the relationship between poetry and history for you?

JB: What's the relationship between poetry and history? Well, it used to be one and the same. After *The Red and Yellow Nothing*, I went forward in time and started writing about the New Cross Fire, which took place in 1981. I wanted to write about New Cross because it's actually one of the crucial moments in British history when the relationship between black people and the state really changed. Windrush to New Cross is a very important historical strait, one I am learning more about, and it feels incredibly important to keep writing about it, especially in the wake of Grenfell. Everyone remembers Windrush, but I get the sense that the New Cross Fire is less a site of understanding and memory, partly because it is so horrific, combative and challenging. It will occasionally come up in the news – every significant anniversary there'll be a nod, but not the kind of constant, active, almost axiomatic referencing whenever we talk about black British history. Which is the case with the Windrush.

HL: In a recent talk at Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow you refute the idea of the present as an inevitable outcome of the past, or history as one single trajectory. (It reminded me of the irony that the Windrush was first celebrated in the same year as the Stephen Lawrence enquiry). I found your ideas very engaging. Can you say more about them?

JB: I'm not a historian, so I don't deal with trying to piece together things as they were. I'm really listening to the present, listening to echoes of the big bang, so to speak, ripples that are still perceptible. I was in Berlin when I wrote that piece, and it came from hearing the station stop 'Onkel Toms Hutte' speaking to me: *Uncle Tom, Uncle Tom, Uncle Tom*. I visited that stop and found myself walking around this very strange, live, aural history that I wasn't sure the white Germans living there could hear. So I was interested in how language is history, how history makes language, and also how this might be misused. Poetry works because each word contains many ideas. To my mind anyway, the reason you write a poem is because each word speaks for itself, and the ideas therefore don't need to be spelled out. You feel them on a very deep, almost unconscious level. Except, of course, as poets we also spend our time unpacking what people have written. But that doesn't happen in the mainstream media, and increasingly people see no point in the exercise.

I think Brexit showed that very clearly: how some narratives can be heard and others can't, and how tied up that is with Britain and empire. It romanticised the figure of the salty working class striking back against the metropolitan elites. A great trope. David and Goliath. But as with the Windrush, the reality is so, so different. And isn't it interesting how the figure of the immigrant doesn't work in that narrative. People who have cheated death at sea are a scourge upon Europe, and we are happy to let them drown; white working-class people being betrayed is very poetic, acceptable and even desirable. That narrative groove has been so well worn that you simply have to allude to it, and you get the power of all that history in an instant. But a more complex narrative, say the history of black people in Britain *before* the Windrush doesn't have anything like that narrative power. So when we allude to Windrush when we talk about immigration, we are kind of playing into the Brexiteer's rhetorical hand. No-one can *hear* the complexity of that story in an instant. It comes across as noise.

ⁱ See Marson poems such as 'Nigger' and 'Little Black Girl' (2011)

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