

The Windrush issue

Postscript

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The 'Windrush' file collected here by Gail Lewis and Lola Young, with its varied styles, voices and *genres*, seems to me to do at least three things which distinguish it from much of the otherwise extremely interesting writing which accompanied the celebrations this year to mark the anniversary of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury in 1948, with its human cargo of Britain's first post-war Caribbean migrants. First, they try to give a sense of the 'irresistible rise of multi-racial Britain' - as Trevor and Mike Phillips put it in their excellent companion volume to the BBC2 series - which the *Windrush* has come to signify from the inside. Several pieces bring vividly back to us what it has actually meant *both* to a generation of Afro-Caribbean people, *and* to the British, Asian and African communities who were, in different ways, central actors in the drama which has unfolded but who, in the event, tended to be somewhat decentred. Secondly, they connect the event irrevocably to the present, to our current situation: writing it as a 'history of the present' not a nostalgic revisiting of the past. Thirdly, they use it as a benchmark against which to make a provisional assessment of how far we have travelled since 1948 along that road which, as the BBC series forcefully reminded us, took a serious dip downwards before it began its slow upward curve.

What they offer on this count seems to add up to neither a simple celebration of change (and a source of complacent British self-congratulation), which the *Windrush* event tended to become, nor a simple confirmation that racism is forever and nothing ever changes - which is a tempting scenario. The collection has, instead, been an occasion to engage in the much more difficult and troubling

task of offering an account which steers clear of self-confirming simplifications on either side, and sticks firmly with the complexities, the difficulties, of returning any simple answer to this historic *Windrush* question.

Jackie Kay's short story, recreating the migration experience through the eyes of her heroine, Rose McGuire, Femi Franklin's commentary to his personal photographic archive from the 1940s and 1950s, bringing the Nigeria-London connection into the frame, Roshi Naidoo's piece, reminding us that the *Windrush* 'belongs' to diverse migrant audiences, African and Asian as well as Caribbean, and Val Wilmer's poignant essay on her involvement in the early Black British jazz scene, all brought the *Windrush* experience vividly back to us as a lived experience.

Actually, there are some hidden connections here. Personal photo-albums like Femi's, and the more professional photographs of both the music scene and the early West Indian community by Val Wilmer, alongside the more 'public', heart-stopping images from *Picture Post* and the Imperial War Museum which were on exhibition at the Pitshanger Gallery in Ealing during the *Windrush* season, constitute (as I've remarked elsewhere, in my 'Reconstruction Work', photo-essay) some of the few and most precious remaining parts of the *visual* archive of those early post-*Windrush* days. These had a special poignancy for those of us who migrated to Britain in the early 1950s. The scenes and haunts Val Wilmer recalls were among the very few public (semi-public?) spaces where one did and could go, in the London of the 1950s, to hear the sound and feel the pulse of an authentic Caribbean atmosphere - Joe Harriot and Shake Keane playing, not 'reggae' (which hadn't yet been invented) but modern jazz, at the Marquee in Oxford Street (the luridly fluorescent, half-lit basement where, as it happens the Universities And Left Review Club first held their meetings in the early 1960s) is amongst my earliest musical memories of London.

What moved me especially about Val Wilmer's piece was the sensitivity and courage with which she records how one white English woman, whose voice today remains in some indefinable way distinctly 'English', was deeply re-shaped, not superficially but profoundly and irrevocably, by her encounter with 'the *Windrush* generation': and the hope her story signifies to us all of the possibility of witnessing, even at this late stage in our lifetimes, the astonishing sight of the birth of an authentically post-colonial 'Englishness'.

'The living Caribbean presence', she writes, gave that other world 'a credence it hadn't previously possessed'. Val, who came to know and inhabit this black world better than most black people, will not be surprised to know - but others may be - that it was equally transformatory for young black Caribbean people who had themselves migrated! I had met very few West Indian people other than Jamaicans before I came to London in 1951, when the black migrant presence was still extremely small. I was in open revolt against the middle-class 'colonial' culture and attitudes of my family, from whom, above all, I had 'emigrated'. Still, nothing could assuage that deep ache in the heart for the place one left behind which assails every migrant in the least expected moment. Meeting ordinary folks from the Caribbean in London was, for me, in experience exactly the same as it was for Val Wilmer, but from the opposite spectrum. It was to find 'a presence', as if the 'real' Caribbean I had never found there had come to meet me here.

This is the paradigm diasporic experience. The plain fact is that I became 'black' in London, not in Kingston. Roshi Naidoo, in her essay, about the *Windrush's* diverse audiences, not only refers to another key document of this diasporic transition-zone - Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*, which spoke for us all - but quotes a line from George Lamming's *Pleasures Of Exile* which says it all: 'no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in foreign territory In this sense, most West Indians of my generation were born in England'.

David Sibley on the racialisation of spaces and 'things', and Philip Cole's thought-provoking essay on citizenship and difference, put the *Windrush* experience in broader contemporary context. Sibley's essay reminds us how powerfully urban space has been racialised in the imaginary geographies of race, and how much these fixings of spatial identity are silently carried, like a virus in the bloodstream, in the coded conversations about race which are part and parcel of our everyday discourse. Cole, on the other hand, by setting migration in the context of globalisation, raises profound questions for political theory about the explicit universalism and the covert particularism which have accompanied the liberal, post-Enlightenment, 'Western' discourse on citizenship. He brought to the surface the way the internal bonding of political communities, which is recognised in the struggle to extend citizenship rights to 'everyone', tacitly, assuming that questions of cultural difference have already been resolved,

rests upon what is excluded - those who are refused access, who are beyond the frontier - citizenship's constitutive outside. This remind us not only of Paul Gilroy's deconstructions of the hidden interlocking of 'nation' and 'race', but also of the far-too-casual way in which Benedict Anderson - whose notion of nations as 'imagined communities' has been so productive - dismissed the idea that the archaic notion of 'race' and the modern notion of 'nation' could cohabit in the same discursive space.

The other pieces in their different ways plunge us into the complicated and ambiguous waters of the present. Julia Sudbury's essay is one of the most thoughtful attempts to steer a path through the treacherous waters of the intersections between race, gender and sexuality, in the form of the debate between black feminism and (often male-led) black anti-racism, or as she puts it, between gender activism and black masculinity, She wryly notes the way black women, seeking greater independence, have been made 'responsible' for emasculating black men, and how this has been used to police black feminism into line, black feminist struggles becoming the object of reactionary revisionism. There is much to be learned from the way she courageously refuses to be driven to either of the opposing poles of this false binary, and from the care with which she identifies the points at which progressive coalitions can be built across the gender divide, whilst not making concessions either to the collusive silence of the black community ('don't wash your dirty linen in public') or to forms of black homophobia.

How far, then, have we come along the road to a multi-cultural society which the arrival of the *Windrush* put so irrevocably on the agenda? Bilkis Malek on English football and the World Cup poses the significant question - not whether, but how much, difference has the 'coming of the margins into representation' made? I liked the way this piece marked *both* the shift towards inclusivity *and* the stubborn persistence of racism - the way the terraces can simultaneously embrace Ruud Gullit and Ian Wright *and* scream racist abuse in a single, ambiguous movement. She seems right to stick with the notion of the continuing deep ambivalence of the British towards an expanded definition of the nation, at least as these movements are reflected in the overwhelming mirror of football. Anne Phoenix's persuasive analysis of how indelibly the present situation is

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doubly inscribed by the simultaneous vibrancy of hybridisation and the pervasiveness of racism is compelling and important. Everyone will recall that in the very moment when *Windrush* celebration were in full swing, the Official Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence was being convened at the Elephant and Castle. The fact is that neither the one nor the other represent the 'true face' of multicultural Britain. The 'truth' lies with recognising the power and presence of *both* contradictory impulses, together, at the same time – and, Ann Phoenix adds, on the basis of the psychological evidence from her youth interviews, in the same classroom, and sometimes *in the same person*. Far from being mutually exclusive, locked in some permanent binary, Black and White are moveable feasts, which, in a society deeply in transition, not only consistently appear in the same space, but – as she says – are 'readily reconcilable as contradictory subjectivities'.

Just in case anyone is still left with the illusion after reading these essays that the 'irresistible rise of multi-racial Britain' is a simple affair, they should try reading again Gail Lewis's interview with the eloquent twelve-year old, Simon. We speak, glibly, of identity as 'becoming', as a negotiation between past and future; as a way of situating oneself in relation to a complicated 'past' in order to find some point of identification and enunciation in the present. But these abstract terms take life as we watch a mixed-race young 'Black British' boy negotiate his way around the reefs and currents of identity in a post-colonial but still-racist Britain, trading 'home' against 'home', colour against culture, roots against routes. Here is the young diasporic subject as 'narrator', partly but never completely held by a number of shifting and inter-locking 'stories' and competing loyalties, skilfully warding off the either/ors, holding steadily to the 'both/ands'. It is a remarkable 'performance' of the self, in Judith Butler's phrase, and its grounded knowledge and cosmopolitan openness remains with us as the most eloquently hopeful note in the collection.