

“Remember the ship”: Narrating the *Empire Windrush*

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Despite the ubiquity of the SS *Empire Windrush* as a symbol of postwar Caribbean migration to Britain, there are few literary evocations of its journey and arrival, and of those, the majority are literary commissions from 1998, the year in which the ship was to become legendary. The synthetic nature of the literary engagement with the ship confirms its own construction as an historical event made retrospectively famous. This article describes and interrogates the 1998 rise to prominence of the *Windrush*, before examining the relationship of the actual ship to literary/cultural criticism and literary works. It contends that the small body of poetic and fictional narratives about the *Windrush* both problematize elements of a dominant *Windrush* narrative while simultaneously confirming the ship’s primacy.

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In her short story “Out of Hand” (1998), Jackie Kay describes the *Empire Windrush* as a “huge fiction”, in reference to the history and arrival of that particular ship and its role in postwar Caribbean migration. Her revision of the iconic 1948 Pathé newsreel of the ship’s arrival (which had featured only male migrants) depicts a female protagonist, Rose, stepping from the ship on to British ground. The focus on Rose interjects a woman’s perspective into a historical narrative with a strong male bias, and Kay’s sense of the ship as a “fiction” is intricately tied to the false promise of the “mother country”, which rather than welcoming the young and optimistic Rose, subjects her to a battery of racism endured over decades. In old age, Rose experiences a stasis of remembrance, replaying these traumatic events on loop: “the more she dwells, the better she feels. [...] She has got to remember” (Kay 1998, 103). Commissioned in 1998 as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the ship’s arrival, “Out of Hand”, with its thematic attention to memory, links neatly to the real-life commemorative context in which it was produced, when many of the original migrants of the

“Windrush Generation”, most of them in old age by 1998, were invited to testify to their experiences of journeying to and settlement in Britain.

The arrival of the *Windrush* was relatively widely (and predominantly positively) reported in British newspapers in 1948, although accounts at the time did not present it as a watershed moment in British history. This claim was made fifty years later, in 1998, when the ship’s arrival was claimed to be an epic and foundational moment -- the *beginnings* of the Caribbean diaspora to Britain. The fiftieth anniversary of *Windrush* became a “multimedia event”, inscribed through exhibitions, book publications, newspaper coverage and media productions, initiating an unprecedented public discussion about its significance (Korte and Pirker 2011, 9). A combination of factors account for the ship’s belated rise to fame, including a remarkable increase in the appetite for “history” that has burgeoned in Britain since the end of the 20th century (11). More specifically, *Windrush*’s ascent can be attributed to New Labour’s project of exalting a multi-ethnic Britain; the sanctioning of this project by state institutions such as the BBC; the growing interest in, and impact of, black British arts and culture; an awareness of the advancing age of the original group of migrants and the pressing need to record their experiences; and the efforts of black community groups such as the Windrush Foundation and individuals such as Mike and Trevor Phillips. The Phillips brothers’ documentary *Windrush: The Insatiable Rise of Multiracial Britain* (Phillips and Phillips 1998), which aired on BBC2 during the summer of 1998, made postwar Caribbean arrival household knowledge, the “success” of the film relying on a contemporary audiences’ necessary sense of distance between their own (presumed liberal) attitudes, and the misdemeanours of the past.¹

It was not only the experiences of the “492” that travelled to Britain on the actual *Windrush* that were commemorated, but those of all who made a similar journey in the period known as the “Windrush Years”.² While the particulars of the arrival of the *Windrush* are often rendered in fastidious detail – the “enterprising skipper” who saw an opportunity to make money offering passage to colonials wanting to travel to Britain (Winder 2004, 335); a government caught off guard, not having foreseen that the recent passing of the 1948 British Nationality Act would encourage colonials to assume their newly-conferred status; the subsequent temporary “dispersal” of the migrants to a

wartime deep shelter on Clapham Common – discussions of the *Windrush* legacy embrace *all* those who made the journey in the period afterwards, on hundreds of different ships taking varying routes (Paul 1997, 115–130). So while one strand of the *Windrush* narrative concerns the arrival of the actual ship, **another strand** constructs *Windrush* as a **metonym** which stands for all who arrived in this timeframe (from the late 1940s up until the passing of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act.) Caryl Phillips’s (1998) essay “The Pioneers”, for example, is notable for the way it moves between these two strands, evoking the specific journey of the *Windrush* as a originary moment, while also inscribing a more amorphous spectacle of arrival, not bounded by temporal specificity:

I have imagined the scene many times. We are in the late 1940s, or in the 1950s, or even in the early 1960s. Crowds of young West Indians are peering from the deck, eagerly securing their **first view** of the white cliffs of Dover. (264).

Black British history is a relatively new field of critical investigation, and the anniversary of *Windrush*, along with the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery in 2007, **were the first** black histories to move from the peripheries to the mainstream, with firmly established commemorative practices in a narrative tradition (Korte and Pirker 2011, 25–26). Visual evocations of the ship, such as that of Phillips, are typical of texts produced in and around 1998, and draw heavily on the symbolic power of the ship motif. Yet this treatment of the ship is curiously at odds with the deployment of the ship image in black transnational studies such as Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), where the ship motif evokes multiple mobilities, experienced both earlier and later. These include the Middle Passage, but also a global vortex of heterogeneous black journeying and cultural exchange, not curtailed by national borders.³ In contrast, *Windrush* has become a peculiarly British story, in which the ship seems to have only ever been seen to have travelled once, and in one direction.

In this *Windrush* narrative, the migrants are characterised in specific ways to support a view of their life stories as a communal “narrative of formation” (Korte and Pirker 2011, 8). Thus they are protagonists, often christened “pioneers” or “pilgrims” (an inflection which matches their gendering

as male), who must face the short- and long-term antagonisms resulting from their arrival in a hostile country: discrimination in housing and employment, populist racism, racist violence. Sam Selvon's ([1958] 1995) postwar depiction of these prejudices in *The Lonely Londoners* concludes with a strong sense of disillusionment: the migrant characters moving through the city "bewildered, hopeless", or "laughing because they afraid to cry" (142). In the 1998 *Windrush* narrative these obstacles have been overcome; important contributions have been made at many levels of British life; recognition is finally given.

Or so the story goes. Stuart Hall, who edited the *Soundings* special edition *Windrush Echoes* in 1998, was one among many to suggest that the celebratory spirit of *Windrush* was at odds with contemporary race relations, pointing out the particular irony of celebrating a struggle-to-success/racial assimilation narrative in the same year as the enquiry into the racist murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence (Hall 1998, 192). Caryl Phillips's "The Pioneers" similarly highlights how British racism "deferred" the original migrants' dreams of acceptance and equal participation, while also stressing the fundamental change to Britain made by their arrival, which introduced the nation "to the notion of postcoloniality" (1998, 282). Barnor Hesse (2000) also asked how the *Windrush* story could be seen as marking the *first* arrival of black people in any sense, when evidence of pre-existing regional black communities was startlingly clear (100).

Recent scholarship has added to these early critiques by examining the constructed nature of *Windrush*, challenging its centrality, and theorising how and why it achieved its standing in British history (Winder 2004; Mead 2009; Korte and Pirker 2011; Kushner 2012). Both Kushner and Winder highlight the inaccuracy of the claim that *Windrush* was a *first* in the history of postwar Caribbean migration, since two other ships, the *Ormonde* and *Almanzora*, had arrived without ceremony in 1947, carrying smaller though still significant numbers (Kushner 2012, 179–180; Winder 2004, 247).⁴ The appraisals of such critics suggest *Windrush* to be an amalgam of repeated, interlocking accounts which have raised it to an illusory and immutable status.

The cultural memory of *Windrush* is perplexing, since reports of the ship often vary, sometimes erroneously repeating elements, sometimes misreporting or omitting details, including the date of its arrival, route, passenger headcount, the presence of stowaways, the gender of the passengers, their motivations and/or countries of origin. Matthew Mead discusses these misrepresentations as a “cumulative sedimentation” (2009, 139), which began with early newspaper accounts declaring the *Windrush* passengers to be all Jamaican men: “Jamaicans Arrive to Seek Work” (*The Times*, June 23, 1948); “Cheers for the men from Jamaica” (*Daily Mail*, July 22, 1948); “Jamaican Emigrants Arrive” (*Manchester Guardian*, June 22, 1948); “The Men from Jamaica are Settling Down” (*Daily Worker*, July 14, 1948). This notion has been perpetuated by journalists, historians, literary and cultural critics, who have retold *Windrush* “detached from any particular instance of authorship” (Mead 2009, 139). Even now, the *Windrush* is commonly imagined to have sailed from Jamaica carrying only Jamaican passengers, despite obvious contradictions such as the Pathé interview with the famous *Trinidadian* calypsonian Lord Kitchener, conducted as he stood aboard the docked *Windrush* at Tilbury. An examination of the *Windrush* archive also contradicts these misrepresentations, since the passenger list evidences a headcount at Tilbury of over 1,000, including Europeans and Australians; Australia as port of origin; and a complex route sailed between Trinidad, Jamaica, Mexico, Cuba and Bermuda. Similarly, there is documented evidence of women, children, and indeed whole families, making the journey (Board of Trade 1948). As Mead has suggested, it is not that the passenger list is indisputable, but that it evidences incongruities in the narrativising of *Windrush*, which he attributes to a white, mono-cultural nation’s need to account for its burgeoning multicultural presence through the repetition of a mythic story (Mead 2009, 140). And this particular story is of male settlement in the mother country, a gendering which was crucial to constructing these migrants as a threat to white society.

Despite these misgivings about *Windrush*, its 1998 rise to prominence also marked an important stage in the process of overthrowing the white mono-cultural image of Britain. This process involved the notable vision, dedication and agency of black activists, historians and artists, as stressed by Mike Phillips in his reflections on the making of *Windrush* documentary.

Before we created it, nobody had a coherent story. I made the story up. History is about fact, but it is also about narration. I created a narrative that had coherence. I didn't do it completely on my own, but it was a part of how we did it. We said: This is the story, and this is its shape – it could have gone twenty different ways (quoted in Korte and Pirker 2011, 73).

For some in the black community, the acknowledgement given by *Windrush* to the black experience in Britain is critical, offering a vital source of identity- and community-building. Such responses remind us of Paul Gilroy's claim that the narration of the traumas of colonialism and slavery "invent, maintain and renew identity" (1993, 98). Others may feel excluded by the *Windrush*-centric bias of Caribbean-British migration history -- which, Tony Kushner reminds us, is a Jamaican-centric bias (2012, 181) -- wanting their own journeys and settlements to be acknowledged (183). These concerns are related to those of Roshi Naidoo (1998), who questioned the homogenising impulse of *Windrush* project and its parameters, asking what other postcolonial or postwar mobilities might be included in or excluded by it (172–179).

The literary *Windrush*

Given its fame, we might expect many literary evocations of the ship to exist, but rarely **does the actual *Windrush* feature in literature**. Most such representations of *Windrush* belong to state-sponsored literary commissions of 1998, a fact which highlights the synthetic nature of the *Windrush* moment. But the *Windrush* metonym has also been adopted by literary critics, who, since the late 1990s, have employed it as a straightforward contextualising strategy to describe the group of writers who migrated to Britain in the mid 20th century, looking for a more receptive literary culture (Wambu, 1998; McLeod, 2004; Stein, 2004; Ball, 2006; Dawson 2007). These writers include the Jamaicans Andrew Salkey, Stuart Hall, Una Marson, and James Berry; the Barbadians George Lamming and Edward Kamau Brathwaite; the Trinidadians Sam Selvon, C.L.R. James, V.S. Naipaul and John La Rose; and Guyanese writers Wilson Harris and Edgar Mittelholzer.⁵ Thus post-1998 critical discussions of postwar black migration narratives such as Lamming's ([1954] 1994) *The*

Emigrants and Selvon's ([1958] 1995) *The Lonely Londoners*, are often framed by the *Windrush* story. But *Windrush* is notably absent from pre-1998 critical writings about black Britain or postwar literature. For example, Stuart Hall's seminal essay "Reconstruction Work" ([1984] 2000), which examines the deployment of photographic images of postwar Caribbean arrival, does not use the *Windrush* metonym because it didn't exist at the time of writing, whereas in his later memoir, *Familiar Stranger* (Hall 2017), he titles one chapter "The Windrush Generation". Likewise, Houston Baker's (1996) anthology *Black British Cultural Studies* makes no reference to the *Windrush*. An exception is Donald Hinds's (1966) memoir *Journey to an Illusion*, which contains a passing reference to the *Windrush* in a form of personal testimony, when an interviewee reports that the *Windrush*'s name became "a household word in the West Indies as ex-servicemen and their close relatives trekked north" (53). But this brief mention does not come close to attributing to the ship the significance that it would later achieve.

The same disjunction is apparent between contemporary critical discussion of early black British writing and the literature itself. Selvon in fact describes the arrival of a different ship, the SS *Hildebrand*, on which the character Galahad arrives in the opening pages (1956, 23); Lamming's passengers travel on the *Golden Image*; in Caryl Philips's *The Final Passage* (1985), the protagonist Leila boards the SS *Winston Churchill*, while in Alex Wheatle's *Island Songs* (2006), Jenny and Hortense travel on the *Genovese Madonna*. The variety of names reminds us of the imaginative freight of the ship in postwar black British literature, as well as the historical fact that many ships besides *Windrush* travelled this route. Yet there is also a sense in which the imaginary depictions of ships have been recuperated as the *Windrush*, their own (fictional and factual) specificities obscured by the magnitude of the *Windrush* symbol.

The only writer in the early collective to have addressed the *Windrush* is the poet James Berry, who published *Windrush Songs* in 2007, although he in fact arrived in October 1948 on the following ship, the SS *Orbita*. Post-1998, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (by far the most celebrated of these texts, as the subject of the 2007 "Small Island Read" project, and serialised for BBC television in 2009) has become strongly associated with the *Windrush* experience, in part because of Levy's

biological link to the ship – her father, Winston Levy, was a passenger on its 1948 voyage. But the ship itself is only mentioned once in the novel, when the protagonist, Gilbert, buys a passage to England (Levy 2004, 99). Although Levy uses “1948” as a chapter heading and structural pivot point, the book illustrates that Britain’s black presence predates this moment, through a focus on Gilbert’s wartime experience in England and a depiction of the 1920s Empire Show. Levy also complicates the male bias of the dominant *Windrush* narrative through Hortense, whose arrival in 1948, like that of Rose in Kay’s “Out of Hand”, challenges the notion that women were a secondary part of this diaspora.

“A huge fiction”: *Windrush* commissions in 1998

In 1998, creative responses to the *Windrush* were instigated to promote the ship’s anniversary, presumably to bring into fruition a body of literature that would corroborate its recovered history. The texts produced include Kay’s “Out of Hand” (1998), four poems by John Agard (2000), and Benjamin Zephaniah’s (2002) poem, “The Men from the Jamaica Are Settling Down” (2002). These texts differ from factual accounts published in 1998 or after, yet the lines between fact and fiction in the narrativising of *Windrush* are blurred, since imaginative depictions often draw strongly on factual (journalistic or historical) sources, while story-telling, associated with fiction, is a dominant mode in factual accounts (Korte and Pirker 2011, 77).⁶ Unlike Levy, the writers considered here have no direct link to the *Windrush*, though Agard and Zephaniah are Caribbean by birth and background respectively, and Kay’s ancestry is Nigerian British, although she was raised by Scottish parents.

Kay’s story “Out of Hand” was one of five commissions made by Radio 4 in 1998, all to black British artists of African, Indian or Caribbean descent; they were invited to produce creative responses to the 50th anniversary. These commissions indicate that the voices of those with non-white migrant backgrounds were considered to be authentic, valid, or authoritative in the commemorative practices of the time. Such a conflation of immigrant identities might, on the one hand, reflect the significant similarities in British migration histories, or on the other, signal a homogenisation typical of the British state (Naidoo 1998, 172). Of those five commissions, only Kay’s features the *Windrush*

specifically, and her narrative disturbs certain elements of the accepted *Windrush* story, as do those of Agard and Zephaniah. However, these texts, in their very existence, also inevitably confirm the idea of the ship as a *first* – the beginnings of a significant black British presence – merging with the objectives and agendas that flavoured the 1998 moment and after.

The intertextual mode of “Out of Hand”, which references the Pathé newsreel and Peter Fryer’s article “Five Hundred Pairs of Willing Hands” (*The Daily Worker*, June 23, 1948), reminds us how the contemporary narrativising of *Windrush* often deploys its small archive of news articles, memos, photographs and the newsreel, all of which have been “remediated” in *Windrush* historiography. The archive is visually compelling, featuring the great spectacle of the tall white ship in dock, and its stylishly dressed passengers posed on deck or examining newspapers -- images which have been repeatedly displayed or evoked, as they are here by Kay: “Rose McGuire Roberts came down those Windrush steps” (1999, 99).

The existence of this archive is attributable to the moderate stir the ship’s arrival made in Westminster and its being greeted at Tilbury by government officials, photographers, and journalists, among them Peter Fryer, then a young reporter, who went on to become a leading historian of black Britain. Fryer’s book *Staying Power* (1984) is considered by many to be a key account of the black experience in Britain, and his authority as both historian and personal witness to a critical historical moment might account for Kay’s (and others’) engagement with his early writings about the ship (Mead 2009, 139). His article, one of the first interpretations of the *Windrush*, notably characterised the migrants in positive terms, drawing attention to the search for **work** as the motivation for migration. The metonymic phrase “willing hands” undermined the racial stereotyping of the migrants as lazy and unwilling to work that was to circulate soon after.⁷ Willingness, both in the article and in the story, are presented as the product of colonial allegiance to **Britain**; thus Rose arrives “hand over heart” and her “elegant, black, skilled, beautiful hands” are “ready and willing” (Kay, 1999, 97). But Rose’s recollections of her hands soon shift to recall their racist exploitation: “once they came to England they certainly had no life of their own. At all at all at all” (99).

Among Rose's **memories** is her first visit to the cinema, days after her arrival to Tilbury, where she witnesses her own mediated role as an historical agent, standing aboard the ship as it docked and captured in a (fictional version of the) Pathé newsreel. The real newsreel features interviews with three men (including the famous Lord Kitchener), but Kay's revisionist approach has Rose captured centre screen in a moment she "already felt [...] momentous" (Kay, 1998, 99). Watching the film, she becomes aware of the discrepancy between her personal experience of arrival and the monochrome version being screened. Rose's knowledge of the real colours of her clothes makes her want to call out: "That's me, that's me. That hat is red, that dress is navy. I know the colours she is wearing. She is me!" (102), and this makes her think she'll be asked for her autograph after the film. But when people stare at her as they leave the cinema, "not friendly like you would expect" (101), she is perplexed, not yet understanding the racial hostility of the new environment. This realisation unfolds slowly, when the only room she can find is "unfriendly like the landlady" and she is frequently given the more unpleasant tasks in her nursing job (101–102). Eventually, the outright hostility of the patients, whose racist slurs are typical of this postwar era, cannot be ignored: "You there! It's all your fault. You've bought your strange diseases with you [...] go back to the jungle" (101–102). The colonial duplicity that fosters Rose's loyalty to Britain then refuses her as an equal citizen is deeply traumatising. A crisis in witnessing compounds the trauma; hence the necessity she feels to remember: "never tell people to just forget it." (103)

John Agard's four poems – "Windrush Child", "Windrush Welcome", "Remember the Ship" and "Uncle Mo Mo steps out" (Agard 2000) – were produced as part of his BBC residency during the 1998 *Windrush* season. Taken together they form a flawlessly liberal petition for multiracialism, social equality and a broadening of national and European borders. The most personal of them is "Windrush Child", composed after Agard's meeting with Vince Reid, *Windrush's* youngest Caribbean passenger (Agard, n.d. "Windrush Child",). As with Kay's focus on a women's experience, this use of a child's outlook also intrudes on the sedimented narrative of *Windrush*, which generally figures the passengers as young adult male explorers. The language is simple and tender: "

Behind you

Windrush child
palm trees wave goodbye
above you
Windrush child
seabirds asking why.
(Agard 2002, 64).

The narrator comforts the anxious “Windrush Child”, who leaves for England with his “Windrush mum and dad”, and laments the loss of Caribbean landscape and connection to his grandmother. The child is unaware that he is “stepping into history”, and wonders only if things “will turn out right” (64). Agard is resoundingly positive, offering the child the image of a “kite of your dreams / in an English sky” to herald new kinds of belonging .

“Windrush Welcome” is similarly compassionate, retelling the arrival of the *Windrush* migrants, using the familiar epithets: “those pilgrims, pioneers [...] followers of a dream” (Agard 2000, 256). Like Kay and Zephaniah, Agard references the 1948 newspapers which “spoke of their dazzling ties / and said hope shone in their eyes”, and summarises this particular hope was centred on the migrants’ “dreams coloured red white and blue”. His critique of Empire calls for an end to its legacy of racism: “let the heart earn / to fly its banner / without regard to colour” and references Shakespeare in its closing predictions, echoing Louise Bennett’s ([1966] 2000) “colonizin / Englan in reverse” (16): “This England, that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a glorious conquest of itself” (Agard 2000, 257). These sentiments are extended in “Remember the Ship”, the most “civic” in nature of these poems, which repeats the refrain “I say remember the ship / in citizenship” (258) to rousing effect. The same anti-nationalist, anti-imperialist sentiments prevail: race is a “ghost” to move beyond; the “whip of the past” must be left behind. Agard’s rhetoric instead advocates new affiliations: “and citizenship shall be / a call / to kinship” (259), connecting a political identity of rights and residency to the emotive one of family.

The shortest poem, “Uncle Mo Mo Steps Out”, features a “black gent” in “a Windrush zoot” (Agard 2000, 257) whose perambulations around London signify ownership of a new environment

and the imposition of migrant aesthetics: “him two flying fish feet / a chip down Oxford Street” (257). Uncle Mo has a flaneur-like command of the environment, echoing that of Selvon’s dapper “lonely Londoners”, **who travail across the city in their best clothes and rate themselves** and each other on their knowledge of its terrain. Whereas West Indian dress-sense was often stereotyped and castigated in racist discourses of the time, Agard celebrates the visibility of such upfront style, stressing Mo’s impact on the London landscape: “Lawd, de man mek history / Him stop traffic” (257). The influence and new meanings produced by black culture in the diaspora are clearly signalled – Uncle Mo is “A walking catalyst”: a spearhead of inevitable change (257-258).

Benjamin Zephaniah’s (2002) *Windrush* poem is more vociferous than those of Agard, engaging head-on and disputatiously with the *Windrush* archive. Like Kay, Zephaniah draws on a Peter Fryer *Daily Worker* headline, “The Men from Jamaica Are Settling Down”, which he uses as both a title and refrain, and *Windrush* is presented as a site of contest between white “authors” of black history (both recent and historical) on one hand, and the black community, whom Zephaniah entreats to rewrite the ship’s story, on the other. The “truer” version of *Windrush* he proposes should include the experiences of women who “survived just as well as de men” (38); an amended headcount to account for the presence of stowaways; and, despite using a refrain which repeats the contention that the migrants were Jamaican men, makes clear they came from “other lands”, besides Jamaica (38). The poem represents white authority as the object of scepticism, and mocks the upper class “movietone voice” of the Pathe news camera (39), a gesture which echoes Mead’s criticism of the 1948 narration – where a “seemingly omniscient” voice emanates from “somewhere above the Thames Estuary” (2009, 138). White authoring of black history in the present moment is also decried - “we know that our history will be re-invented / If we do not write truthfully wid de Black pen” (Zephaniah, 2002, 40) -- a criticism that has obvious implications for the state-sponsored packaging and promotion of *Windrush* in 1998.

The poem appears in Zephaniah’s collection *Too Black, Too Strong* (2002) with a contextualising note, entitled “The Empire Comes Back”. This para-textual framing, aimed to influence the reader’s understanding of the poem, informs us that the black presence in Britain

predates the *Windrush* by hundreds of years – a knowledge absent from the poem itself. The note also seeks to sanction Zephaniah’s **representation** of the Windrush phenomenon, describing the commissioning, eventual rejection of the poem by the independent television company, Crucial Films, on behalf of the BBC in 1998, and Zephaniah’s response. In a personal email (August 27, 2016) Zephaniah confirms that he felt his introductory note to the poem was necessary because the community’s response to it had been so positive compared with that of the commissioners and broadcasters.⁸ The reasons given for its rejection -- that the poem was “too ‘political’ and too ‘confrontational’”, illustrate a disjunction between the messages of the poem and the triumphant tone glossed onto *Windrush* at that time, as well as a potential disparity between the institutional view of *Windrush* and that of the community (Zephaniah, 2002, 36). Zephaniah relates how, in response to its rejection, he sent the poem to Peter Fryer who ‘approved’ it, and to Arthur Torrington, the Secretary of The Windrush Foundation, who reportedly had “no problems” with the poem’s “political tone or the attitude” (36). These reported validations by important figures in black British historical studies are intended to legitimate the poem’s claims.

Windrush Songs

James Berry, the author of *Windrush Songs* (2007) holds a distinct position as the only one of the original literary Windrush generation to have engaged with the specific ship. There has been a general lack of critical engagement with this otherwise well-known and celebrated literary figure. Unlike other writers of the postwar period who arrived to Britain from the Caribbean in order to extend their literary careers, Berry arrived to Britain as an economic migrant, and developed his writing practice later alongside work as a telephone engineer. These working class origins are elaborated upon in the introduction to *Windrush Songs*:

When the Windrush came along it was simply a godsend, but I wasn’t able to get on that boat. I simply could not meet the expenses. [...] It was some time before I was able to get myself together and sell the few pigs and goats I had, to gather up the money. [...] I had to wait for the second ship to make the journey that year, the SS *Orbita*. (Berry 2007, 10)

Thus *Windrush* figures in Berry's personal reminiscences as a symbol of desire, remembered latterly as a "god-send" in enabling escape from the difficult circumstances of island life, *and* frustration: he could not afford the passage, a recollection that reminds us migration was only a solution to those who could pay for it.

By 2007 many would have been familiar with the tenets of the *Windrush* story and able to recognise the symbolic function of the collection's title. Berry's own understanding of the changing climate around black British history and the subsequent priming of a commercial audience is suggested in a letter written to Neil Astley of Bloodaxe Books, a prospective publisher:

It's particularly important for me to find a publisher for this new book as soon as possible because next year (2007) will be a landmark year for black people living in Britain, being the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. It's already obvious that there will be a lot of public interest and many events around this Bicentenary. (Berry 2006)

This awareness that the commemorative practices of the Bicentenary would have a bearing on the visibility of *Windrush* is well suited to *Windrush Songs*, since the collection positions postwar migration within the cultural and material legacy of slavery and colonialism.

The book, written in his mid-eighties, is the latest of Berry's five single poetry collections, and suggests the necessity of memorialising and testimony for the diasporic subject. The momentum behind the promotion of *Windrush* is partly attributable to the fading away of such witnesses to this historical chapter, as Onyekachi Wambu, an early promoter of *Windrush*, suggests of his attempts to commemorate the ship's journey in the late 1980s:

What started back then was a realisation that many of the people who came over in the first wave were beginning to die off or return home. There was a changing of the guard to a certain extent, and we had to make sense of what happened. (quoted in Dominic Cavendish, "Riding an Emotional Rollercoaster", *The Independent*, June 27th, 1998).⁹

Like many of the Caribbean migrants, in old age by 1998, Berry was invited to remember and memorialise on a range of platforms, including television programmes and published social histories, such as Tony Sewell's *Keep on Moving* (1998), in which he features.

But while the title of his collection gives *Windrush* and 1948 some primacy, the poems themselves do not engage much with the ship itself. Migration is treated as both specific and amorphous, neither wedded to the *Windrush*, nor separate from it. Berry refuses specificity by employing a general and oblique ship motif which appears in echoes, allusions and resonances – a “glorious world ship coming silently / on the old, old waterway” (2007, 80), a signal of the universal, transnational history of migration, more akin to Gilroy's use of the ship metaphor in *The Black Atlantic*. And despite the introduction's hint of an autobiographical approach, the poems are narrated by a multitude of speakers with different perspectives and desires, a polyphony which destabilises the notion of authorial truth or singular story. This is an important plurality, since often the *Windrush* in both its actual and metonymic forms is discussed as a homogenous public odyssey, in a way that overlooks the complex personal odysseys which it was comprised. Such multi-voicing calls to mind Stuart Hall's claim that the colonial experience is both communal in a shared history of transportation, colonisation and migration *and* about difference -- in, for example, the multiplicity of ethnic/cultural inheritances, life histories and individual subjectivities (Hall 1990, 227–228).

Difference is in fact inscribed in the very first poem, “Wind-rush”, which takes the familiar name “Windrush”, with its echoes of “gold-rush” and connotations of movement, and shifts its meaning. An unnamed speaker names what will not be missed when he migrates, in particular the “breezblow madness” of the hurricanes that commonly bring economic destruction to his land and the whole island (Berry 2007, 14). The hyphen transforms the term and makes “Wind-rush” two things at once: the terrible hurricanes *and* the boat that offers him salvation. But the unstable island economy of the 1940, where “Yu ketch up ina poverty trap” is only a factor in as far it is positioned as the residue of British involvement in the Caribbean (24). Jamaica is the site of forced exile and colonial exploitation, and the image of the ship evokes the earlier journeys of slave ships: “ancesthem did travel [...] in a ship hole, / chained-up, angry, filthy, half-starved” (54), as well as the

familiar island home the subject is rooted to . The physical scars left by imperial enterprises are seen in island slave burial sites: “Thatched slave shacks are gone / In their place – zinc house, garden / The great house, now derelict, turn to school grounds – or hotels” (22). Thus the beginnings of the *Windrush* story lie not at the point of arrival on British shores, but much earlier; Berry’s poetic trajectory stresses how the migrants were “pushed by history” (78). The sequence titles clearly evidence the route: “Hating a Place You Love” leads to “Let the Sea Be My Road” then finally to “New Days Arriving”.

The only poem to specifically reference the *Windrush* itself is “Whitehall Goin Turn We Back” from the collection’s final sequence, which reworks a well-known *Windrush* anecdote concerning a rumour that as the ship approached Tilbury, a British war vessel began to trail it, intending to prevent the migrants from landing.¹⁰ Berry’s speaker alternates tones of confusion and panic in relating this incident, but concludes with resignation: “Man oh man / White people dohn wan black people in Englan. / Now, them gon sink we dead. / White people dohn want we / to mix with the world” (68). This racist rejection aligns with what many Caribbean migrants did suffer in Britain – a particular kind of racist duplicity, invigorated by the discourses of imperialism. Despite the migrants’ loyalty to Britain and their newly-conferred status as British Nationals, to the British public they posed a threat to the old colonial order that structured itself on a strict hierarchy of racial geographies: disenfranchised blacks in their colonial outposts, with privileged whites at the imperial centre.

Each of the texts discussed above imposes new meanings on the dominant *Windrush* story, which is already many things at once: the result of a plethora of overlapping narratives, both past and contemporary; a historical package which feeds the contemporary appetite for historical consumption; and a beacon of cultural meaning to some in the black community for whom *Windrush* is an important validation of their own and their predecessors’ experiences. *Windrush* continues to be a source of literary inspiration, albeit a **limited** one. For example, Khadijah Ibrahiim’s (2014) poem, “Come What May We’re Here 2 Stay”, uses a brief symbolic epigraph, “*After Windrush*”, to contextualise her defiant survey of black contribution: “*In a strange land we made the grass grow green again*” (emphasis in original), and British hostility: “the milk and honey England never bring” (42).

Similarly, Lorna Goodison's (2006) poem of lamentation, "Windrush Sankey" evokes the material conditions of poverty and poor housing, now well-known aspects of the postwar Caribbean experience, in portraying a young migrant's fear of England and the cold room where he foresees he will live "without even a shilling for the gas meter" (28).

In 2017, the story of the *Windrush* occupies a central place in British historical culture, its arrival marked at intervals of a decade. It features on schools' history syllabi and continues to be inscribed in arts and media productions, such as the 2012 London Olympic Games opening ceremony, which "sailed" a visual evocation of the ship across the arena, escorted by actors dressed as its passengers. More recently, the BBC documentary series *Real Lives Reunited* ("*Windrush* and Clinton Visit" 2015) paired the reminiscences of four *Windrush* passengers with four witnesses to the 1995 visit of President Clinton to Northern Ireland, and the London Southbank Centre's 2015 "Changing Britain" festival held a public discussion about the legacy of the *Windrush*, featuring Mike Phillips and others. These, and a plethora of other recent manifestations, suggest that the *Windrush* has a place not as separate from, but as a part of, British history. The year 2018 will mark the 70 years since the *Windrush*'s arrival, and work is already underway to commemorate the anniversary widely.

Although the repetition of this particular story reinforces the false idea that 1948 marked the beginnings of British multiculturalism, we might observe the tentative shifts in mainstream channels towards the contextualising of *Windrush*. Two recent media productions – BBC 2's four-part television series *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (Olusoga 2016) and BBC Radio 4's ten-part series, *Black Britain's Past* (Burke 2016) were both marketed as excavatory in their attention the generally unknown terrain of Britain's multicultural past. Drawing on the long term and far reaching work of community historians, and echoing the claims of critics such as Hesse and Kushner, both give a more extensive narrative of the black British experience including black Romans, African slaves in Britain, the historic black seafarer communities and the role of black servicemen in the two World Wars (see also Costello 2015). The final episode of *Black and British* replays the well-familiar iconography of the *Windrush* story, but crucially, repositions its arrival to a later place on the historical trajectory. This broadening of parameters may represent a new establishment agenda to

explore a longer narrative of British encounters with black people, while simultaneously reminding us how the mainstream historicising of *Windrush* and of black British history in general, continues to be a process of selection, editing and omission.

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Please add a biographical note

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Notes

¹ For example, The *Windrush* documentary focuses extensively on interracial relationships, a key source of racial anxiety in the years following the *Windrush* arrival. But these are framed in hindsight, with couples discussing the discrimination they faced “back then”, as evidence of their endurance and survival – in the words of Stuart Hall ([1984] 2000), speaking of postwar imagery, “black and white people together, making love, finding their sexuality with each other and having children as the living proof that, against God and Nature, *It Worked*” (89).

² Although the dates of this period are undefined, I assume they encompass a period of time between 1947 (when the *Ormonde* and *Almanzora* arrived) to 1962 when the doors to Commonwealth immigration were brought to an end by the 1962 Immigration Act

³ See also “the black ship of state” used by Stephens (2005) as a metaphor for the ways of 20th-century black Americans intellectuals attempted to imagine African Americans as part of a transnational political community.

⁴ The lack of reaction to the *Almanzora*’s arrival to Southampton was bemoaned retrospectively by one of its passengers, Alan Wilmot, who stated his arrival “wasn’t like the *Windrush*: there was no publicity for us. It was a case of every man for himself” (*The Metro*, July 24, 2008).

⁵ Some writers came earlier -- such as CLR James, who arrived in 1932.

⁶ Factual accounts include Francis (1998), Sewell (1998), and Phillips and Phillips (1998).

⁷ The welcoming tone was echoed by the *Evening Standard*’s “Welcome Home: Evening Standard’s Plane Greet the 400 Sons of Empire” (June 21, 1948) and the *Daily Mail*’s “Cheers For The Men From Jamaica” (June 22, 1948)

⁸ See Gilroy (2004, 95–132) for a fuller discussion of the contested histories and the policing of remembrance.

⁹ 1988 saw the first official effort to memorialise the *Windrush*, when the pamphlet *Forty Winters On* was published by a combined initiative between Lambeth Council, *The Voice* newspaper and the South London Press.

¹⁰ Winder gives a version of this anecdote: “Out at sea, a couple of Jamaican wireless operators set up their game of dominoes right outside the radio shack, so they could monitor the news. They heard that the *Windrush* was being shadowed by a warship, HMS *Sheffield*, which was under instructions to turn them back if they made any trouble” (2004, 338).