



HAL
open science

Letters and Chronicles from the Windrush Generation - Epistolary Sorrow, Epistolary Joy

Judith Misrahi-Barak

► **To cite this version:**

Judith Misrahi-Barak. Letters and Chronicles from the Windrush Generation - Epistolary Sorrow, Epistolary Joy. Windrush (1948) and Rivers of Blood (1968: Legacy and Assessment, 2019. hal-03257233

HAL Id: hal-03257233

<https://hal.science/hal-03257233v1>

Submitted on 8 Jul 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

9 Letters and chronicles from the Windrush generation

Epistolary sorrow, epistolary joy

Judith Misrahi-Barak

Introduction

In her article “Epistolary Traditions in Caribbean Diasporic Writings: Subversions of the Oral/Scribal Paradox in Alecia McKenzie’s ‘Full Stop,’” Isabel Carrera Suarez claims that “Caribbean literature offers relatively few examples of the epistolary genre in prose, despite abundant writing from and on exile” (Carrera Suarez 2007, 179). The three remarkable exceptions she notes are Olive Senior’s short stories “Ascot” and “Bright Thursdays,” Jamaica Kincaid’s “Letter from Home” and McKenzie’s “Full Stop,” which she goes on to analyse. I have showed elsewhere that there is in fact a much wider use of the epistolary genre in Caribbean fiction in all kinds of subtle and indirect ways.¹ But for the purposes of this chapter, I want to use as a starting point what Carrera Suarez says in passing in her article, saying on the one hand that the use of the epistolary form is to be expected in the Caribbean poetic writing because it is “firmly grounded in the oral” (2007, 183)² and, on the other hand, that the “overdetermined European genre of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, whose context differed so radically from that of Caribbean diasporas, has acted as a deterrent” (2007, 179).

As a response or complement to Carrera Suarez’s essay, I would like to throw further light on the epistolary genre as it is used by Caribbean poets such as Fred D’Aguiar, David Dabydeen, Linton Kwezi Johnson, but with a special focus on James Berry. It seems important to understand why poets who address the Windrush generation have resorted to what I would call the “epistolary poem” in such a deliberate and constructed way in their response to, and translation of, the Windrush. What are the modalities and consequences of such uses of the epistolary genre in the context of the writing of the Windrush, considering the fact the genre has been at the heart of European and Western culture? Could it be that the genre is requalified while it is revisited in this particular context? How? Is the genre requalified only because it can be used as a medium of criticism or is there another purpose?

In order to sketch possible responses, we will first have to wonder how the “epistolary poems” compare with the non-epistolary poems and what they express about the Windrush that could only be expressed in the form of a letter exchange. We will have to run through some of the main specificities of the epistolary genre as it is traditionally defined: has it really acted as “a deterrent” or rather, as I will

suggest, as an incentive? Finally, how can we read, today, those poems that are going back to the 1948 Windrush generation, but were written for the most part twenty or forty years after Enoch Powell's 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech, and why has Berry been considered as so different from the other Windrush poets? What is Berry adding to the conversation D'Aguiar, Dabydeen or Johnson had invited us into?

"Windrush did jus' come an' save me"

As a preliminary, and with the focus on Berry that is mine here, one should not have the impression that his Windrush poems are all shaped in the form of letters. Only a few are: *Lucy's Letters* (1982), while his *Windrush Songs* (2007) are not. If one wants to understand the specificity of the "epistolary poems" and their political and literary significance, a preliminary comparison has to be made with the non-epistolary poems.

Berry's *Windrush Songs* are structured to follow and present the different stages of the migration. Written over a generation but only published in 2007, twenty-five years after *Lucy's Letters*, they also reflect on the migration from a distance. Part I is entitled "Hating a Place you Love," while Part II is entitled "Let the Sea Be My Road" and is composed of "Reasons for Leaving," "Reminiscence Voice" and "When I get to England"; Part III concludes the volume with "New Days Arriving," on the cusp of life in the United Kingdom. In his short introduction, Berry situates post-World War II emigration in the colonial context and in the continuity of slavery: "And here we were, hating the place we loved, because it was on the verge of choking us to death. [. . .] In fact we had not emerged from slavery; the bonds were still around us" (Berry 2007, 9).

Berry's going to England (actually on the SS *Orbita*, the ship that followed the *Empire Windrush* in 1948) had "huge significance for [him] and [his] fellow West Indians" (Berry 2007, 11) because "[d]espite the aftermath of slavery there was still a respect for England and a sense of belonging" (Berry 2007, 10). The sense of challenge, hope and opportunity for all, expressed through the potent poet's persona, dominates the pre-departure *Windrush Songs*, caught up between the hatred and the love for Jamaica, and in the hopes the possibility of the migration has raised: "*Windrush* did jus' come an' save me" (31). Such hope also pervades "To Travel this Ship":

To travel this ship, man
 I woulda hurt, I woulda cheat or lie,
 I strip mi yard, mi friend and cousin-them
 To get this yah ship ride.
 [. . .]
 Man – I woulda sell mi modda
 Jus hoping to buy her back.
 Down in dat hole I was
 I see this lickle luck, man,
 I see this lickle light. (Berry 2007, 33)

Slavery is never far behind. As Berry says in his Introduction:

The bigger meaning of the voyage of the *Windrush* was that it brought change to two peoples: those who had come from a background of slavery in the Caribbean, and those whose society had benefited from that slave labour. Movements of people bring change and opportunities for development and enlightenment.

(Berry 2007, 12)

The image of the African man in chains hovers above that of the Caribbean man in migration, even if some form of humour tempers it, along with the use of exclamation marks and alliterations:

One day I would be Englan bound!
A travel would have me on sea
Not chained down below, every tick of clock,
But free, man! Free like tourist! (Berry 2007, 34)

Even if the poet “was always in a dream of leavin’” (Berry 2007, 34), the reversal of emotions attached to departing is quite clear in poems like “The Rock,” which begins in loathing and ends in the raw desperation of the anticipated longing, echoing through the Jamaican English. Here are the opening lines of each stanza, and the closing stanza:

Me not going back to dat hell Jamaica. [. . .]
Me dohn go back to no damn Jamaica
wha all-a-we call – “The Rock.” [. . .]
Me not gohn back Jamaica. [. . .]
I leavin the Rock. [. . .]
Me not gohn back Jamaica.
Only poverty there mould a man.
Only touris-dem see it paradise.
No sar! That sea sound not gohn reach me.
Ground dove cooing not gohn fill-up mi ears. (Berry 2007, 44)

It is in fact quite significant if somewhat surprising that *Windrush Songs* mostly foregrounds the pre-departure period, with all its powerful emotional charge attached to the fraught loving and loathing, and the anticipating. It is then followed by the departure itself. Five poems of the sea punctuate the volume, accompanying the poet in his crossing over:

Earth’s twin sister – old sea –
carry me on your mother back
above the unsteady bones, whitening whiter
Like wishes and dreams, complete cities
are transient skylines, sometimes looking

lit up with hanging stars
 Life moves on your surface
 like meteor that crashed
 into a moment and shattered it
 I want to feel safe like a sitting gull
 on your back, dreaming of fishing places
 Facing sky, let me lie
 on you, swaying,
 reading each star's biography
 Let me ride with you to your shores'
 four corners, finding balance of blends
 in looks, thoughts, voices. (Berry 2007, 40)

The poet is addressing the sea, as he is doing in the other four “Sea-Songs” that are all poems of the crossing, almost functioning as a synecdoche for the whole volume. Berry mentions in the Introduction that he is “juxtaposing” (Berry 2007, 11) Caribbean life to the immigrant’s experience in the United Kingdom. Yet, this is hardly what happens. *Windrush Songs* are poems of the mental and emotional projection towards England or back towards Jamaica, favouring the desire to preserve the yearning for departure and the memory of Caribbean life through imagery and language, rather than foregrounding the hardships of immigrant life in the United Kingdom over almost sixty years (1948 to 2007 when the poems were published). This is one of the reasons why Stewart Brown speaks of Berry’s work as “celebration,” in a way that is so different from other Windrush poets:

One of the things that distinguishes James Berry’s work from that of other migrant writers who began to write about the experience of “settling in” – to use a pretty euphemism – in Britain in the decades after the Second World War, is its essential quality of celebration. It is a celebration tempered by a consciousness of all in West Indian history and the migrant experience that would defy celebration, but his urge to find value and sometimes joy in both the remembered life of his rural Jamaican childhood and in his sojourn as a “bluefoot traveller” in Britain through the last sixty years, is the real motive force of his work.³

The ensuing labour of retrieving and reminiscing then takes over with poems of Jamaican life, the village drama and its people, as in “Villagers Talk Frustrations” (Berry 2007, 20), the sunlight, as in “Wash of Sunlight” (Berry 2007, 16), or the poverty, as in “Poverty Life,” which is written in standard English, probably to reinforce the connection between the poverty and the British colonisation:

Hungry children keep hungry mothers
 hungry mothers rear hungry children
 and children go to school on nothing.
 With land, two mules and a bicycle

a man can dance and get drunk
in the mouldy, sweet musky smell of dirty lives –
held captive by poverty.
Like captive by slavery
captive by poverty is
a continuous memory. (Berry 2007, 23)

Or as in “Poverty Ketch Yu and Hol Yu” in Jamaican English:

A trap ketch yu, naked
and hol yu dere, naked!
Yu ketch up ina poverty trap
Great House get yu fi servant
Great House dog keep yu it servant
Cokanut oil will shine up yu hair
you trousers press sharp sharp –
but pocket them empty, empty like husk. (Berry 2007, 24)

This coming and going between the two languages brings with it some indication that what Berry was interested in was the challenge of the contact, what he calls the “coming together” (Berry 2007, 12) more than the hardships of the living apart and the discrimination.

“Coming Together”

To find poems of immigrant life in Berry’s poetry, one has to go to the earlier collection, *Lucy’s Letters*, and one cannot but wonder at some of the reasons why Berry has borrowed the form of the epistolary to address the difficult relationship between the United Kingdom and its Caribbean immigrants. Documenting the departure and the arrival of Caribbean immigrants over two generations and choosing to publish the poems sixty years after the *Windrush* and the *Orbita* docked at Tilbury, forty years after Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech, is definitely a form of response, but which one? Through the inter-textual reading of the two volumes we can understand how the *Windrush Songs* further what Berry had been saying in the earlier *Lucy’s Letters*: the reading of the later volume has to be phased through that of the earlier one and its emphasis on the conversation and the interaction, on the dialogue and the cross-cultural contact, on the opportunity to create “new days.”

If we now approach the ways the epistolary genre is being used by Caribbean poets of the *Windrush* generation in general, and in James Berry’s *Lucy’s Letters* in particular, some of the specificities of the genre have to be taken into account, and something has to be said first about what is referred to as “epistolary” writing and the different contexts it has evolved in. It has become the object of a whole field of academic studies, particularly among French scholars as regards the epistolary novel of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether the letters were real or fictionalised. The names of Ovid, Petrarch, Seneca, but also Heloise

and Abelard, Madame de la Fayette, La Marquise de Sévigné, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, are not names one would have expected in a chapter devoted to the Windrush generation and Windrush poem-writing. Nor would it be expected to see mention of Richardson, Goethe, Virginia Woolf or Jane Austen. These names immediately suggest associations with Antiquity, the European Enlightenment and its unavoidable connections with the privileged life of social, philosophical and intellectual exchanges. They do not bring associations with colonial, postcolonial, diasporic writing. Beyond their many differences, all these writers and thinkers have in common the practice of the epistolary genre and through the letters they wrote, received and responded to, be they real or fictionalised, they elaborated their own thought and the way they wanted to construct their relations to society, to themselves and to their literary and philosophical work. Letters have empowered a genesis of the invention of the self and of the inter-personal relationship in a global world, be it through the exchange of real letters or the use of the letter as a literary device and an aesthetic mode (most scholars would focus on either one or the other, from different disciplinary perspectives). Letter-writing became a laboratory, and the best possible translation of the self onto the global stage, at least for the powerful, and for the men and women of *letters*, in all meanings of the term. How has this laboratory for the (re-)invention of the self been (*re-*)translated in the context of the Windrush generation poets? Why is it interesting to examine such a (*re-*)translation? What parameters can still be used, and what has to be revisited and modified in this new context, if anything?

Over the past thirty years, scholars have been using letters exchanged between emigrants and their families, interpreting them from a historical and sociological point of view and gaining insights into the conditions of the migration, of integration, or lack thereof, of work and pay, of discrimination, of social relations, of political engagement or disengagement, of the preservation of the bond with the mother country, or the destruction of that bond. These letters are also fascinating to read from the point of view of the aspirations and emotions that are expressed, always from the angle of a very specific context.

In any period of time, real letters are generally exchanged in an asynchronous yet generally reciprocal relationship; they function as a presence beyond the absence, aiming to abolish the distance in space and the separation in time. Yet, the context of colonial domination and migration is radically different. Addressees and addressers may well have been in a situation in which they would not know when they would see each other again, if ever. In the context of the Windrush generation, the emigrants did plan to come back but it did not always happen. In many ways, whether the letter was sent, and received, and read, and responded to, which was not always the case, the epistolary paradigm allows us to understand something of the complexities of colonial migration.⁴ Letters are always that quintessential diasporic artefact, sent across land and water when bodies cannot meet in the same time and space.

Migration has always meant physical severance, and combined sorrow and joy. Only rarely does it mean complete disengagement with the mother country, the reasons being diverse and never straightforward whenever such disengagement

happens. Be it the exchange of letters, or the lack thereof, it is the complexity of the relationship that is underlined, individual/collective, emotional/political. Private epistolary collections have been archived and made public, sometimes digitised.⁵ Epistolary collections in public access are extremely difficult to constitute: letters have been lost, families do not want to part with them, only one side of the correspondence has been preserved, and so on. Depositing them within archives is anything but self-evident.⁶

In the case of Caribbean writers, not many real letters have been archived and they tend to be the “letters from home,” not the letters that have been sent home. In a very interesting way, the other side of the conversation is often recreated by the writers through poetry that borrows the epistolary genre in the form of a letter that is sent to a relative or a friend. It is then up to the addresser to articulate their desires, express their nostalgia, to describe or reimagine their lives, old or new, for the sake of the addressee.

“I Long for we labrish bad”

In David Dabydeen’s “Coolie Son (The Toilet Attendant Writes Home)” (Dabydeen 1988, 65) the addresser is writing home to get the news of everybody in the village, paying attention to the specific situation of each and everyone, brought onto the stage of the poem by their name, Taana, Shanti, Juncha, Mala:

Taana boy, how you do?
How Shanti stay? And Sukhoo?
Mosquito still a-bite all-you?
Juncha dead true-true?
Mala bruk-foot set?
Food deh foh eat yet?

The first stanza is only a list of questions, underlining the hope for a response and the fact that love and attention are still in the heart of the emigrant. It is followed by affirmations and the second stanza in turn shares the news from England, making the expected comment about the weather:

England nice, snow and dem ting,
A land dey say fit for a king,
Iceapple plenty on de tree and bird a-sing –
Is de beginning of what dey call ‘The Spring’.

If the first stanza was dominated by the second person singular used to address the poet’s next of kin, the whole poem is a stage where “you,” “I,” “we” and “they/dey” interact, “I” being the representative of “we” in “their” land:

And I eating enough for all a-we
And reading book bad-bad.

But is what make Matam wife fall sick
 And Sonnel cow suck dry wid tick?

Food and education are the most important elements to be ascertained. Once they have been mentioned, the pull back to the questioning mode is too alluring to be resisted. At the very end of the poem the poet's persona tries to disguise and transform the situation he finds himself in, requalifying the job he has landed, hoping his mother will be impressed by the uniform and the bunch of keys:

Soon, I go turn lawya or docta,
 But, jut now, passage money run out
 So I tek lil wuk –
 I is a Deputy Sanitary Inspecta,
 Big-big office, boy! Tie around me neck!
 Brand new uniform, one big bunch keys!
 If Ma can see me now how she go please . . .

Fred D'Aguiar's "Letter from Mama Dot" or Linton Kwesi Johnson's "Sonny's Lettah" showed direct communication with the mother. Here it is not clear whether the mother is still alive or not. If she is, she may be illiterate and this is the reason why the letter is sent to the poet persona's sibling, even if the ultimate addressee is, indeed, the mother.

David Dabydeen's first book of poems, *Slave Song* (1984), was written entirely in Guyanese Creole. *Coolie Odyssey* is written alternatively in Guyanese Creole and Standard English, thus giving the impression that the poet's persona is moving between the two worlds, even if it does not mean belonging to the two worlds. In "Coolie Son (The Toilet Attendant Writes Home)" the tone is conversational, humorous even, and the poem plays on the different levels of understanding and discrepancy. The criticism comes up to the surface indirectly and through irony, made sharper by the alternation between the questions and the affirmations. What comes across most vividly is the dialogic dimension between people, recreated personas, remembered and reimagined characters, countries, worlds. The one-sided conversation paradoxically reinforces the desire for conversation and dialogue.

The most scathing criticism that is made of Windrush Britain is the well-known dub poem "Sonny's Lettah" by Linton Kwesi Johnson (1980),⁷ mentioned previously. As David Bousquet explains in his chapter in this volume, reggae music and its sub-genres were the soundtrack to all major events in the history of Caribbean migrant communities in the United Kingdom, from early ska during the 1958 Notting Hill riots, through roots reggae during the uprisings of the late 1970s and early 1980s, to ragga and jungle at the time of Stephen Lawrence's death in 1993. Reggae musicians and dub poets have always been involved in the fight against racism. In "Sonny's Lettah," a son in London writes to his mother back home to try and explain the reasons behind his conviction for murder and the imprisonment of his younger brother:

Brixton Prison
Jebb Avenue
Landon south-west two
Inglan

Dear Mama,
Good Day.
I hope dat wen
deze few lines reach yu,
they may find yu in di bes af helt.
Mama,
I really don't know how to tell yu dis,
cause I did mek a salim pramis
to tek care a likkle Jim
an try mi bes fi look out fi him.
Mama,
I really did try mi bes,
but nondiless
mi sarry fi tell you seh
poor likkle Jim get arres.

All the expected epistolary elements are there: the precise location where the letter is written (Brixton Prison in London), the address and opening (“Dear Mama,” “Good Day”). What is unexpected is the Jamaican English and dub poetry that Linton Kwesi Johnson uses, thus subverting the classical epistolary genre and undermining the Queen’s English:

Out jump tree policemen,
di hole a dem carryin batan.
Dem waak straight up to mi an Jim.

While the arrival of the policemen on the scene of the demonstration is described as well as the ensuing violent repression, Johnson always makes sure the reader never forgets the poem is a letter addressed to the mother. “Mama” punctuates the lines and gives the poem its structure, pitting the conventional, written, epistolary format against the oral rhythm of dub poetry:

Mama,
mek I tell yu whe dem dhu to Jim
[. . .]
dem tump him in him belly
an it turn to jelly
dem lick him pan him back
and him rib get pap

dem lick him pan him hed
but it tuff like led
dem kick him in him seed
an it started to bleed.

Mama,
I jus coudn stan-up deh
and noh dhu notn:
soh me jook one in him eye
an him started to cry
mi tump one in him mout
an him started to shout
mi kick one pan him shin
an him started to spin
mi tump him pan him chin
an him drap pan a bin
an crash
an ded.

When the charge for murder is explained, the addresser takes the time to conclude his letter with the usual forms of address. The love and tenderness between son and mother preside over the end of the letter, shoving aside the violence of the crushed demonstration:

Mama,
don fret,
dont get depres
an doun-hearted.
Be af good courage
till I hear fram you.
I remain
your son,
Sonny.⁸

Fred D'Aguiar's "Letter from Mama Dot" (D'Aguiar [1985] 2013, 20) does not include such an introduction and conclusion but it is very clear from the start that the poem is shaped as a letter. It may be one of the only ones that give the point of view from the Caribbean. Mama Dot is the one who is writing:

Your letters and parcels take longer
And longer to reach us. The authorities
Tamper with them (whoever reads this
And shouldn't, I hope jumby spit
In dem eye). We are more and more

Like another South American dictatorship,
And less and less a part of the Caribbean.

This is Guyana in the 1970s and the criticism is levelled at Guyana and Guyanese politics, through a poem written in England in the form of a letter written and sent from Guyana. All the usual requests are included:

Send a box soon. Pack the basics:
Flour for some roti; powdered milk;
And any news of what's going on here.
No luxuries please, people only talk, shoes
Can wait till things improve (dey bound
Fe improve cause dem cawn get no worse!)

There's need for flour, milk and any kind of news and it's always made very clear what the context is. What is most needed though is the letters, more than any other ingredient:

But it's worse somehow without you here.
Write! We feast on your letters.

The desire for the letters and the resulting frustration appear all the stronger as the reader only has one side of it, contrary to the poet's persona who is purportedly receiving the letter and writing back.

Recreating a one-sided, asymmetrical conversation is what David Dabydeen, Linton Kwesi Johnson or Fred D'Aguiar do in their epistolary poems. James Berry also recreates a seemingly anecdotal and simple one-sided conversation, arousing the desire for the whole conversation to happen, or to be (re-)imagined. Yet, the tone is softer and the epistolary device may have different purposes. So, why is Berry's poetry so different? In the very short Introduction to the slim volume of *Lucy's Letters*, Berry explains how the character of Lucy emerged and started to live her own life, almost "as a developing person":

As a poetic form, Lucy's Letters arrived out of a lighthearted conversation I had with a Westindian woman work colleague. She had come from a Caribbean village and lived in London nearly as long as I had. After that chat I walked away discovering the idea for a poem. It carried on imposing itself with an urgency.

Worked on, the idea revealed that Lucy kept in contact with her friend Leela in the village "back home". Leela had never left the village. Lucy's new way of life in London excited Leela. It sharpened Leela's curiosity. She could never hear enough about Lucy's life in the great city.

(Berry 1982, 9)

It is that "lighthearted conversation" that is so interesting in the Windrush context, discrepant as it is with the overt and covert racism, and the overt and covert

discrimination that were rife in the United Kingdom, and different as it may be from the more acid and heavily politicised criticism we saw earlier:

Things harness me here. I Long
 for we labrish bad. Doors
 not fixed open here.
 No Leela either. No cousin
 Lil, Miss Lottie or Bro'-Uncle.
 Dayclean doesn' have cockcrowin'.
 Midmornin' doesn't bring
 Cousin-Maa with her naseberry tray.
 Afternoon doesn' give a ragged
 Manwell, strung with fish
 Like bright leaves. Seven days
 play same note in London, chile. (Berry 1982, 39)

From the beginning of this first letter, it is a conversation that is initiated right away, stemming from the longing for Jamaica, for home, for relatives and friends (Cousin Lil, Miss Lottie, Bro'-Uncle), and it is a conversation *about* a conversation that lends the poem its flexible backbone, that conversation, that "labrish" (blabber) that is sorely missed but is recollected in sorrow and in joy, that flashes upon the poet's memory:

Me dear, I don' laugh now,
 not'n' like we thunder claps
 in darkness on verandah.
 I turned a battery hen
 in 'lectric light, day an' night.
 [. . .]
 At least though I did start
 evening school once.
 An' doctors free, chile. (Berry 1982, 39)

The different moments of the day or night are remembered in conjunction with the activities associated to them (the cleaning, the talking), in different places (the verandah, the village). The differences between London and the village back home are often expressed negatively, and the poem is replete with direct and indirect observations about Windrush migration. One finds mostly comments in the negative form when it comes to London life (the lack of light, the doors that have to be kept locked, the traffic, etc.) but also a few positive ones (the welfare state and the NHS, evening classes, paid leave, birth-control, etc.):

London isn' like we
 village dirt road, you know
 Leela: it a parish

of a pasture-lan' what
grown crisscross streets,
an they lie down to my door.
But I lock myself in.
I carry keys everywhere.
Life here's no open summer,
girl. But Sat' mornin' don'
find me han' dry, don' find me face
a heavy cloud over the man.
An' though he still have
a weekend mind for bat'n'ball
he wash a dirty dish now, me dear.
It sweet him I on the Pill.
We get money for holidays
[. . .]. (Berry 1982, 39–40)

Remembering shared moments at different times of the day or night is balanced with anticipating more shared moments (booking the tickets for the next trip):

Leela, I really a sponge
you know, for traffic noise,
for work noise, for halfway
intentions, for halfway smiles,
for clockwatchin' an' col' weather.
I hope you don' think I gone
too fat when we meet.
I booked up to come an' soak
the children in daylight. (Berry 1982, 40)

Throughout the poem several recurrent elements can be pointed out: the direct address to Leela, the verse that is as much a prose sentence as it is verse, the run-on lines that give a conversational tone to the whole piece, the dialogue between two friends who miss each other. Leela is just as present as Lucy. What is missed by Lucy would have been missed by any Caribbean immigrant in London: the sun, the food, the talk, the culture, one's home, one's own place. The fear of being changed by the migration is there too, even if it seems pedestrian ("I hope you don' think I gone/too fat when we meet").

Each "Lucy" poem has a specific inflection: "Englan Lady" focuses humorously on the Queen that Leela is so curious about:

You ask me 'bout the lady, Me Dear,
old centre here still shine
with Queen. She affec' the place
like the sun: not comin' out oft'n
an' when it happ'n everybody's out

smilin', as she wave a han'
like a seagull flyin' slow slow. (Berry 1982, 41)

“Holiday Reflections” shows the difficulty of readjusting to England once one has gone back home for a holiday:

I'm here an' not here. Me head's
too full of mornin' sun
an' sea soun' an' voices
echoin' words this long long
time I never have. (Berry 1982, 42)

Everything is seen through the Caribbean perspective. “Carnival” describes the Notting Hill Festival as if it was Mas at home:

We eat rotis an' patties.
We drink rum punch, me dear. (Berry 1982, 45)

“A Favour” is the only poem that actually anticipates the return, Lucy asking Leela to go and have a look at the plot of land that has been bought for her to have a house built on it:

Leela, darlin', as we did talk,
Go an' see the piece of lan'
Cousin Man-Man buy for me. I glad
it near the sea an' not mount'n
lan'. It planted well I hear.
Coconuts, bananas, sugar cane
an' some food growin'. A good house spot is there, what I will
get raised up little by little. (Berry 1982, 44)

In all the poems, Leela is always addressed as if she was close by, as if she was going to respond immediately, as if the closeness in language and emotion was doing away with the geographical distance and the physical separation: “Leela, darlin’,” “Leela chile,” “Me dear,” “Leela sweetheart,” etc. The side of the conversation that is missing only amplifies the desire for that conversation to take shape and the absent echo of it breathes in the luminous and sonorous lines of the poems. The verbal communication of the epistolary poem makes Leela very close indeed. She is right there, her whispers can almost be heard, she can almost be hugged. The epistolary genre that belonged to the written world of European letters and used to be rather formal has suddenly been subverted into an oral exchange, fluid and soft, tender and intense. It is indeed very different from the more political epistolary poems by Dabydeen, D’Aguiar and Linton Kwesi Johnson, but still, it is political in the wider sense.

Conclusion

What I have tried to show is that by borrowing and revisiting the epistolary genre that typically belonged to the written form, and was not used by ordinary people, Fred D'Aguiar, James Berry, David Dabydeen, and Linton Kwezi Johnson reformulate and rearticulate a genre that has been at the very heart of European culture. They set up a new laboratory of the self and of the other. They contributed to having the genre evolve from being the prerogative of the men and women of letters to becoming the favoured mode of communication of separated and dispersed/diasporic people. Using the genre in their poetry and in their own language, they repositioned their generation at a time when Caribbean people were still not "settled" in Britain as British citizens but only as Her Majesty's subjects. Yet, they changed the topic and the mode of the inter-personal conversation to hold it on their own terms.

Additionally, through the apparently cream-puff light poetics of epistolary poems, Berry stages the Windrush generation he belongs to in a particular way. If in *Windrush Songs* the poems used either standard English or Jamaican English, it is one of the specificities of *Lucy's Letters* to be written in Jamaican English, imposing the lilt of the Jamaican voice on the English language and creating a whole new aesthetic (but also social and political) experience out of a language that is rewritten and *re-spoken*, taking its inspiration from both cultures: a traditional written genre revisited through oralised Jamaican English: a conversation indeed, that evolves on its own, even if, precisely, one side is missing, always to be desired.

All the pieces fall into place if we remember the etymology of the word "conversation" that we have so often used in the context of the epistolary poems: it migrated to Middle English via Old French from Latin (*conversatio*, from the verb *conversari*), meaning "living among," "familiarity," "intimacy." Not only does Berry offer a complete reshuffle of the traditional epistolary genre and a reformatting of the diasporic bond across the seas and continents, he, more than the other Windrush poets, aimed to create "familiarity," "intimacy," aiming to "live among" English people as equal citizens, reaching out towards a certain idea of togetherness. Revisiting the epistolary literary genre is also part of that *conversation* and of the attempt to renew the *conversation* on different terms.

In 2007, almost forty years after Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, Berry may have wanted to emphasise the "coming together" more than the living apart and the discrimination. The disillusion with the migration is requalified in *Lucy's Letters* through the projected desire for exchange, interaction and a conversation that would imply all the players on stage. In 2018, watching in dismay as the Windrush crisis unfolded, we could of course wonder if we wanted to remember Dabydeen's, D'Aguiar's and Linton Kwezi Johnson's critical, politicised angles, rather than Berry's softer and more inclusive perspective. Or both: the sorrow and the joy, the bitterness and the softness. The conversation has to be pursued in any case since many people of the Windrush generation are still being denied the status of fully fledged citizens in Britain. James Berry shows hope in

the interaction, in the cohesive force of a *conversation*, sometimes sad, sometimes joyful, always trying to bring people together.

Notes

- 1 See Misrahi-Barak (2012) for analysis of works by Jamaica Kincaid, Myriam Chancy, Gisèle Pineau, Patricia Powell, Ramabai Espinet, Alicia McKenzie for instance; as well as Misrahi-Barak in Corinne Duboin (2013, 127–139).
- 2 Carrera Suarez focuses on Louise Bennett’s “Miss Lou” letters, Una Marson’s “Quashie Comes to London,” James Berry’s *Lucy’s Letters and Loving*, Linton Kwesi Johnson’s “Sonny’s Letter, Anti-Sus Poem,” Fred D’Aguiar’s *Mama Dot*, and David Dabydeen’s “Coolie Son (The Toilet Attendant Writes Home.)”
- 3 British Library Press Office release, 16 October 2012, on the acquisition of the Berry archive www.bl.uk/press-releases/2012/october/british-library-acquires-the-archive-of-caribbean-british-poet-and-writer-james-berry. Accessed 27 April 2018.
- 4 It is even more complex in the context of transnational or *transcolonial* migration, for instance between India and the Caribbean at the time of indentureship between the 1830s and 1917. See Judith Misrahi-Barak in Satpathy (2017, 18–36).
- 5 See the Digitising Immigrant Letters Project led by Sonia Cancian and Donna R. Gabaccia in 2009 within the frame of the Immigration History Research Center of the University of Minnesota: www.lib.umn.edu/ihrca/dil. Accessed 20 June 2018.
- 6 It will be interesting for the reader of this volume to compare this chapter with Neal Allen’s contribution, “Citizen Backlash Correspondence: Letters to Enoch Powell after ‘Rivers of Blood.’” While Allen’s chapter mobilizes a corpus and a disciplinary approach radically different from mine, both chapters highlight the unexpected and underestimated importance of letters in the context of Caribbean migration.
- 7 Recited by the poet www.youtube.com/watch?v=ls9pSdVFJaU. Accessed 20 May 2018.
- 8 See Note 7.

Bibliography

- Berry, James. 1982. *Lucy’s Letters and Loving*. London: New Beacon Books.
- . 1985. *Chain of Days*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- , ed. 1981. *Bluefoot Traveller: Poetry by Westindians in Britain*. London: Harrap.
- . 2007. *Windrush Songs*. London: Bloodaxe Books.
- Carrera Suarez, Isabel. 2007. “Epistolary Traditions in Caribbean Diasporic Writings: Subversions of the Oral/Scribal Paradox in Alecia McKenzie’s ‘Full Stop’.” In Marta Dvorák and W.H. New, eds. *Tropes and Territories: Short Fiction, Postcolonial Readings, Canadian Writings in Context*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 179–192.
- D’Aguiar, Fred. [1985] 2013. *Mama Dot*. London: Vintage.
- Dabydeen, David. 1988. *Coolie Odyssey*. London and Coventry: Hansib & Dangaroo.
- Misrahi-Barak, Judith. 2012. “Diasporic Agency and the Power of Literary Form in Caribbean Literature.” *Atlantic Studies* 9.4: 431–446.
- . 2013. “Ruptures and Junctures: Reinventing and Repossessing the Diasporic Self in Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge*.” In Corinne Duboin, ed. *Repenser la diversité: le sujet diasporique*. St Denis de la Réunion: Océans Editions, 127–139.
- . 2017. “Indentureship, Caste and the Crossing of the Kala pani.” In Sumanyu Satpathy, ed. *Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 24.2. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study. Special issue Winter 2017, 18–36. Text also <http://ias.ac.in/ojs/index.php/shss/article/view/1092>
- Phillips, Mike and Trevor Phillips. 1998. *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.