



## Writing after *Windrush*

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### Introduction: Notting Hill, 1958

*On a Friday evening in late August 1958, a Swedish woman named Majbritt Morrison fell into an argument with her Jamaican husband Raymond as they left the Latimer Road underground station in London's Notting Dale neighbourhood. People congregated as the Morrisesons' dispute grew more heated. The conflict was suddenly transformed when a man in the crowd began shouting racial slurs at Raymond Morrison, apparently believing that it was his duty to protect a white woman from a threatening black man. Majbritt Morrison stopped arguing with her husband and began defending him from this attack, leading some members of the crowd to turn on her and call her a 'nigger lover'. A group of the Morrisesons' West Indian friends arrived as the shouting escalated and a fight broke out [...] The night after the Morrisesons' fight, crowds spilled out of local pubs in Notting Hill [...] spotting Majbritt Morrison on her way home down the high street, a crowd chased her to her house, volleying taunts of 'black man's trollop!' and throwing milk bottles. When Morrison stood her ground outside her house and refused police orders to go inside, she—rather than the members of the marauding crowd—was arrested (Sandhu 27-28)*

What followed were days of rioting and marauding bands of mostly young men spurred on not least by fascist Oswald Mosley, who shared a pamphlet declaring they should 'Take action now. Protect your jobs. Stop coloured immigration,' that requested '[h]ouses for white people – not coloured immigrants.' 'Hundreds of young men rampaged around the area breaking the windows of houses West Indians lived in and anything owned by them and attacking many on the streets' (Sherwood).

Fast-forward, just under one year later, to Notting Hill again, on 17 May 1959:

*It's just after midnight. Having had his finger, which he had broken at work, re-plastered at the local hospital, Kelso Cochrane was walking home. He was quite near the house in which he shared a room with his partner Olivia when a gang of white youths surrounded him. They called him many insulting names, punched, pushed, thumped, and then stabbed him. When he collapsed, they ran away. Two black men walking nearby rushed over. A taxi stopped. Cochrane was picked up and put in the cab but by the time they reached the nearby hospital, he had stopped breathing. Someone called a reporter at the Sunday Express and said 'three white youths have stabbed a darkie named Cochrane (Sherwood)*

The stories I want to tell you, the works I want to introduce you to tonight, or, in some cases, remind you of, emerge in the wake of those two events, two moments that didn't themselves transform the lives of Caribbean people and their descendants in Britain, but which, to borrow the words of Matthew Mead, marked an alteration in the British 'imaginary' and shifted the narrative in circulation in the era about England, about the territories then referred to as the 'West Indies', about safety in the 'mother country', about the true composition of the nation, about the legacies of the colonial era, about immigrants, residents, Blackness, Whiteness, in ways that have affected the targets of those attacks and their descendants for decades.

## After Windrush

I borrow my title, 'Writing after Windrush', from the scholars Hengameh Saroukhani and John McLeod, who invite us to think anew about those now dubbed 'the Windrush generation' in their recent special issue of *Wasafiri*, 'Writing the Scandal'. In their introduction to the issue, they note how 'Windrush' as a concept has been uniquely mobile, but has come, in this 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the arrival of the ship, to be tainted, transformed through the investigative work of journalist Amelia Gentleman into a shorthand for national shame.

Quoting an interview with the author Caryl Phillips in their special issue, shortly after considering the role the arrival of the *Windrush* played in the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony, Saroukhani and McLeod note that '[Windrush] once signified a frustratingly false and congratulatory mythology [...it] stood for a dehistoricised narrative of national uplift and perceived multicultural unanimity'. That story 'erased a much longer history of hostility toward migrants and newcomers' and Windrush, now, after the associated deportation scandal, can no longer serve as an emblem of a 'fantasy of multicultural bliss' (2). They invite us to use Windrush as a lens through which to view and review the history of migration to Britain, to allow this anniversary to be a time of 'critical reflection and interrogation' (3)—where we can think, simultaneously, of the multicultural dream *and* the night terrors that have long accompanied it.

For the rest of this talk, I want to follow their call, and allow the 'after' in my title to echo as loudly as 'Windrush'; to create space for us to think together about the 'after', the 'post', the what-happens-in-the-wake, and how that presses on and reshapes our understanding of the thing that precedes, and forces reconsideration of the initiating event.

Before that, though, it's necessary to drop in a significant piece of pre-history, to which the arrival of the *Windrush* itself is an 'after': The many centuries of Caribbean colonisation. It is always important to highlight that the Caribbean colonial enterprise was unique; Caribbean colonies were very different from their counterparts in other places in the world. The colonies were not, in the anthropologist Sidney Mintz's words:

*Erected upon massive indigenous bases in areas of declining great literate civilizations, as was true in India and Indonesia; they were not mere points of trade, like Macao or Shanghai, where ancestral cultural hinterlands could remain surprisingly unaffected in spite of the exercise of considerable European power; they were not 'tribal' mosaics, within which European colonizers carried on their exploitation accompanied by some curious vision of the 'civilizing' function, as in the Congo, or New Guinea; nor were they areas of intense European settlement, where new forms of European culture provided an accultural 'anchor' for other newcomers, as in the United States or Australia. They were, in fact, the oldest 'industrial' colonies of the West outside Europe [...] and fitted to European needs with peculiar intensity and pervasiveness (36).*

The Caribbean colonies were 'industrial' in the sense that their sole purpose for European powers was to maximise wealth by facilitating trade. The production of cash crops, including and especially sugar cane, took precedence over the welfare of the majority population, composed first of enslaved men, women, children, and infants with origins from across Africa, and later their descendants and the descendants of indentured servants with origins in Asia, brought in to cheaply replace African labour after emancipation.

Because of local exploitation and the effects of active overpopulation, Caribbean people, were, and have been, mobile, in circulation in and beyond the region—emigrants—throughout the region's recorded history. In the English-speaking territories, they took advantage of opportunities after WWII to journey to England. There is an earlier lecture in this Gresham series called 'The Windrush Writers and Artists' that covers the ground of what happened next for those who arrived after 1948. In short: hope, discovery of some opportunities, and disillusionment.

## After Notting Hill

Writing of his feelings about the Notting Hill riots in their immediate aftermath in his book *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), the Barbadian novelist George Lamming claimed that, in the wake of that event, '[w]e must accept that racial antagonism in Great Britain is [...] an atmosphere and a background against which my life and yours [that of his presumed English reader] are being lived' (76). He says that, only after the event, 'after the sirens of Notting Hill' did he begin to watch himself around White English people — in a way he imagines the English were hyperaware of the threat of being bombed during the Blitz (79).

In his native Barbados, and in Trinidad where he spent formative years as a young man, Lamming belonged to a fraction of a fraction of the local society—he was a scholarship boy, trained at one of the region’s better institutions, and a writer. In Britain, he was, through links forged across the Atlantic, and the London publication of a lauded first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), a frequent contributor to the BBC and the recipient of multiple fellowships. His visceral, outraged response to Notting Hill in *The Pleasures of Exile* signals the extent to which it was a leveller: Regardless of background, potential, accolades, social stature, intelligence, everything, Lamming and all his contemporaries—writers and workers alike—all visual outsiders—became a part of single putatively threatening, but actually threatened alien mass.

The destabilising effects of the riots and their aftermath are evident in his work from that period on. Where Lamming’s literary career began with the aforementioned and much-praised *In the Castle of My Skin*, a mournful reminiscence of Barbadian stasis and slow colonial decay, set against the hope of migration of its protagonist, G., his later works slip steadily into abject pessimism, where little hope is located in the Caribbean and even less hope is located in England, a place increasingly, in the words of Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile*, presented as a ‘dubious refuge’ (22).

We find much the same slide in the works of his contemporaries Samuel Selvon and Andrew Salkey. For the former, the rollicking, tragicomic novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) is followed by writing that is ambivalent about life in Selvon’s native Trinidad and disdainful of the posturing and discrimination that makes up life for Caribbean emigrants in England. Selvon’s final novel, *Moses Migrating* (1983), offers this disdain in an absurd, farcical narrative that presents its protagonist, an outsider in London and Trinidad, as a rootless hybrid who cannot be accepted anywhere, who is constantly stuck in between groups, who ends the novel outside of England and outside of Trinidad, trapped in an immigration queue at Heathrow with nothing meaningful to declare.

In Salkey’s work, the loss of hope in the ability of Caribbean emigrants to feel at home anywhere is similar but even more acute. His first novel set in England, *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960), is unapologetically focused on the middle-class emigrant set to which Salkey himself belonged and, uniquely in its era, explored queer desire and cast a critical eye on transnational Black culture. Its protagonist, Johnny, is mobile in all senses, flitting between lovers and locales. Later, in his second London-set novel, *The Adventures of Catullus Kelly* (1969), Salkey instead presents a Jamaican emigrant like Johnnie who performs the stereotypical role of sexually rampant Black stud. When at first it seems he is in control of his many couplings, and triplings, it becomes obvious that his lovers are exploiting him; what felt like power is revealed to be weakness, Catullus slowly driven insane by his symbolic, rather than literal, impotence. Written in 1960 as race-based tensions continued to escalate, *Escape* tries to think past the pressures of its time; by 1969, the year of *Catullus Kelly*’s release, thinking past, for Salkey, seems to have been impossible.

In the after-Windrush writings of these three figures we see a kind of melancholia—a longing for the fully welcoming England that could have been, perhaps should have been, post-war. Accompanying this, we have many emblems and motifs of stuckness, stasis, destabilisation, drift, and a range of arresting and distorted representative forms.

Among the most promising writers of their generation from anywhere in the world—as attested to in their early reviews, and in the opinions of readers discovering them today—all three slowly slipped out of favour in the British literary sphere, the hard truths their works explored less welcome, their disillusionment leading to departure. Having all arrived in Britain in the 1950s, they, each in their circumstances, departed for the Americas in the following decades.

## Conclusion: Melancholy Legacies

What interests me about these writers is the way they represented, in themselves and their works, individuals confronting the long ‘after’. Creatively and biographically, they tell a cyclical story of migrant welcome and repulsion in England.

The docking of *Empire Windrush*—the move to the centre from the colonies after World War II that the ship itself didn’t inaugurate but has come to emblemise—was about hope, the promise of acceptance in a fostering mother country that, if you were keen to contribute and worked hard, would make space for you. What followed in the immediate ‘after’ in Notting Hill, with the murder of Kelso Cochrane, and with the long unfolding of legislative and day-to-day discrimination, was a great dashing of hope, triggering feelings of betrayal, which has been repeated and repeated in its wake.

In England, we seem to see an eternal return to a default position of exclusion. We fall back in times of crisis to what Patrick Wright has dubbed a longing for a 'deep England', a pure green Albion that has never existed, one absent of any 'foreign' presence, in the hope that the invocation of this fiction can cure us of what currently ails. In that continuing flight to a past that never was, the country flees from its real promise, and its promises, turns its back on its cherished self-image as open, tolerant, and forward-looking, and gets itself, like the characters I described, stuck.

When I speak of 'after *Windrush*' I speak of this: The time after the promise, the time when the dream of the Windrush-era emigrants, of an England where they would be cherished, was shown to be no more than a dream. That time, of course, is now, has been now since at least 1958 and Notting Hill, the other anniversary we celebrate this year.

Many Black and Asian writers have inhabited this 'after', dwelled in it, turned over the promise and felt betrayal from multiple perspectives in their works. The list of them is as long as those writing since '58. They have, we have, continued to write in the wake, turned over the implications of what could have been, and looked everywhere for a new promise to replace it, but generation after generation, have been cast adrift.

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