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Story-Telling: The Empire's Neglected Responsibility

AMARYLLIS LOPEZ

Racism and xenophobia do not end just because a country's borders become more accepting. Instead they morph and adapt to the current societal norms. Especially in a country like the United Kingdom, where the legacy of the British Empire is still thriving, there is still a disconnect between the Empire's colonial effects and the country's present-day racist and xenophobic policies. This disconnect is reflected in their current literary canon which has helped British citizens convince themselves that racism exists in other people and other countries and not in their own lives and histories. A canon outlines and shapes the culture of a society through art and literature that reflects how life is like in that nation. The British literary canon currently upholds the notion that dead white men can still accurately represent their nation's diverse and ever-changing population. Historically speaking, the British canon has always memorialized the voices of white men and currently excludes the voices of women, people of color, immigrants, and other marginalized people that contribute to culture and history of the nation. Contrary to the original British canon belief, white men are not the only contributors to British culture. The Second World War took a financial toll on the British Empire and to resolve this issue it looked towards its Caribbean colonies to help rebuild Great Britain. In 1948, these Caribbean immigrants arrived in England on the *Empire Windrush* and since then have challenged and contributed to British culture and life. James Berry's *A Story I Am In: Selected Poems* (2011) belongs in the British literary canon as it reveals the reality of post-colonial xenophobic and racist British attitudes that still threaten the livelihoods of the Windrush Generation to this day.

Berry's work forces contemporary British literature and history to accept that British culture has been shaped by the

Windrush Generation. When the *Empire Windrush* returned to Great Britain with hundreds of Caribbean immigrants ready to work, the only thing their mother country could certainly offer was racism and poverty. As more migrants came to the United Kingdom, they brought with them their many cultures and languages that reshaped Britain into what is now their multicultural society today, but they "painfully discovered that their official status as British subjects often did not translate into their being welcomed as full-fledged members of British society" (Stallworthy and Ramazani 1832). White Londoners were unwelcoming and made life socially, economically, and politically difficult for the Windrush Generation. These Caribbean citizens' citizenship and "Britishness" were constantly being tested and questioned. The title of Berry's collection of poems, spanning over four decades of his lived and witnessed British experiences, is called *A Story I Am In: Selected Poems*, a nod to the exclusion he faced as a British citizen by way of the *Empire Windrush* and his unapologetic claim to his British citizenship. Berry memorializes the voices of those who have not been given the platform and space to reflect, celebrate, and share their British experiences with the general British public. *A Story I Am In: Selected Poems* demands those rejected British voices to come to life, to be seen, to be bold, and to be unashamed in-between pages and lines that validate their lives. However, despite the frustrations that many Caribbean immigrants found themselves facing, over time they acclimated to British culture. Assimilation brought on an uneasy sense of validity that left many feeling like lifelong outsiders who never quite fit in with British or Jamaican culture. Berry was able to put into words what the Windrush Generation was experiencing, and that the British literary canon was ignoring, in a way that did not feel like a forced or emphatic narrative.

Berry's poetry, which explores his feelings of not belonging to neither Jamaica or Great Britain, speaks to diasporic experiences of Caribbean immigrants who struggle to claim their intersectional identities which illustrates British colonial culture and on the pressure around assimilation. This sense of not truly

belonging goes back as far 1665 when British colonialism brought enslaved Africans to the shores of Jamaica and wiped out entire generations of its indigenous people. These British plantation owners were not invited or welcomed, and didn't even belong to the country of Jamaica and neither did the African slaves who they brought with them who, now, did not even belong to themselves. However, over time, "a sense of belonging gradually developed as generations born on the island evolved Creole cultures of their own. Yet Jamaica's cultural language bears the etymological traces of its rich and troubled origins: Africa and Europe; journeys into exile and death; plunder and ruination; slavery, rebellion, and an unfinished process of emancipation" (Brockington 134). This feeling of being a lifelong outsider is deeply embedded in Jamaican history as a result of British colonial rule. It is the product of generational divide and conquest and trying to survive and preserve whatever was left of the African slaves' identities. In his collection, Berry struggles with the disturbing truths of his homeland and motherlands interactions and aftermaths. The Windrush Generation was the first mass influx of those children of the Empire's first physical returning to the country that has caused so much pain, injustice, and hurt. In Great Britain, the Windrush Generation was pressured to let go of Jamaican culture and heritage and assimilate to British culture and aesthetics, once again having to conform to British standards and rule. The past and present of Jamaica and Great Britain seem to always be in communication, a troubling dialogue that leaves many concerned about the future of the two countries.

Berry's use of Jamaican Creole and standard English in his poetry forces the British literary canon to acknowledge and claim its Caribbean immigrants and narratives both as British experiences and established literature. Although Berry was not the first Windrush Generation poet to experiment with form and style, he is one of the first to unapologetically write "in 'standard' English and in Creole, choosing one or the other, or sometimes interweaving the two in a single text. This style of his, he said, 'simply emerged naturally.' But it was of great significance to Caribbean writers of

his generation and the next, as it further legitimated Creole as a form of poetic expression" (Holme). There is no clear praising of one language or culture over the other, as the work celebrates the two equally and encourages Caribbean writers to utilize both. White Londoners discriminated physically, verbally, and emotionally against their fellow Caribbean citizens for their looks, their foods, their cultures, and the languages they spoke. Understanding the experiences of one another helps us realize our differences and similarities that ultimately bring us together. Berry's poetry acts as a bridge to help further rebuild the relationship between Jamaica, his homeland, and his mother country, Great Britain. He puts into words the experiences and cultures of his fellow Caribbean immigrants that were not reflected in British literature at the time. Berry's poetry makes visible the invisible children of the Empire; it's Caribbean citizens. Berry's work represents the reality of a multi-cultural Britain. Not only did he diversify the capacity of the English language and what it looked and sounded like, and who it was for, but his work also did the same for British citizenship.

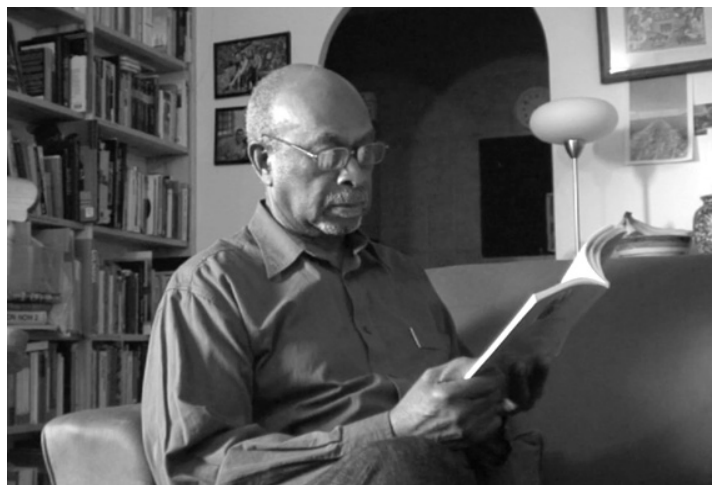


Figure 1. James Berry, still from *In Person: World Poets*, 2007.

Only a British audience would notice the references that Berry uses in his poetry which challenges and redefines who the British audience is. In Figure 1, we see James Berry reading from his collection of poetry *A Story I Am In: Selected Poems*. Before he reads his poem "To Travel This Ship," he talks about his anxieties

after graduating high school about not being able to continue his education in Jamaica. He saw the *Empire Windrush*, and the opportunities it promised, as a way to relieve these fears and anxieties. In this poem, he speaks of the lengths that many of the Windrush Generation would have gone through for a chance to be aboard the *Empire Windrush*, writing that:

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 hopin to buy her back.
Down in dat hole I was
I see this lickle luck, man, I see this lickle light. (*A Story I Am In* 151)

Berry humorously hints that this idea that work in Great Britain would amount to a large income assured the Windrush Generation that it would even be possible to sell their own family members and make enough money to buy them back. The promised opportunities of work and a better life in the United Kingdom were so enticing to the Windrush Generation that people would have put their own trust and reputation from their community on the line for a seat on that ship. Anyone who entered Britain before 1973, including anyone aboard the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, is legally entitled to live in Britain. Berry describes the migration stories of British citizens in his poems. Anyone who migrated on the *Empire Windrush* can relate to this poem, to the now-humorous but then drastic actions they would've or have done in exchange for a better life in the UK. Although this is written in Jamaican Creole, its message is not exclusive to Jamaicans. These themes of wanting to provide a better life for yourself and your family are values and ideals that speak to any British citizens regardless if they were born in Britain or moved from colony to motherland.

Berry's poetry tests and reveals British culture and expectations which need to be acknowledged for the Empire to truly be dismantled and evolve to the post-colonial. His poem

"Outsider" exemplifies the rejection of Caribbean immigrants as British citizens and the need to speak in "proper" English, appear less threatening, and assimilate to British societal norms to appease non-immigrant British citizens. The first stanza reads;

If you see me lost on busy streets,
my dazzle is sun-stain of skin,
I'm not naked with dark glasses on
saying barren ground has no oasis:
it's that cracked up by extremes
I must hold self
together with extreme pride. (*A Story I Am In* 28)

The speaker in this poem is aware that their skin color, which they are not ashamed of, already paints them to be non-British. They find themselves lost throughout England where it seems that no matter where they end up there is not a place where they can catch their breath and be relieved of all the stares and rejection. They face rejection, dehumanization, and internal and external isolation, all in the first stanza. They are aware of how other British citizens view them and try to define who they are on their own terms, separate from what those people might think. This constant struggle to define and conceive of yourself is a cycle that many Caribbean immigrants face daily. Stylistically, Jamaican Creole and "standard" English work together, yet "standard" English is what carries the narrative throughout. This speaks to the outstanding pressure to sound as "British" as possible and to discard your native tongues and cultures to truly be seen as British. If the reality of British society today is that it is multicultural and accepting, why is this sense of alienation and rejection still relevant to British citizens who come from a history of migration? For other Black British immigrants, Berry's poetry validates their experiences as well as helps them to conceive a truer image of themselves, free from a colonial perspective.

Anyone from Great Britain or anyone wanting to learn about British culture and experiences needs to be exposed to the work of James Berry in which he struggles with feelings

of belonging while being an outsider as a result of racist and xenophobic British culture. Studies have shown that British parents practice egalitarianism parenting to cope with globalization and this ever-evolving multicultural England. These parents teach the “the importance of individual qualities as opposed to membership in a racial or ethnic group... Parents using this strategy discuss their appreciation for diversity and the desire for their children to mix and learn from others. Parents may also stress the importance of hard work, equality, morality and self-worth to be more important than ethnicity” (Dimitrova 136). While this teaching is not exclusive to England, this kind of thinking is reflected in the current British literary canon. When ethnicity and race are pushed to the side as irrelevant characteristics of a person, that leaves a large portion of a person’s identity silenced and unacknowledged. Colour-blindness is not the anecdote to racism as it leads to further alienation and discrimination. By ignoring race and ethnicity you start to inadvertently equate that topics of discussion about equality should not include topics of discussion around race. This kind of parenting influences school curriculum, which leaves stories that are directly inspired by experiences of various races and ethnicities to be left on the back burner as the focus on race is too troubling for the general white British public. While a person’s race and/or ethnicity is not what defines them, it does shape the majority of their experiences and how they can interact with the world and what the world thinks of them. These are important aspects that we must keep in mind. When we ignore how race determines a person’s experience, we allow racist and xenophobic rhetoric to thrive in our policies, everyday language, institutions, works places, and literary canons.

James Berry’s *A Story I Am In: Selected Poems* stands as a literary work that will not let the experiences of the Windrush Generation be ignored at the hands of racist and xenophobic negligence. A canon recognizes the contributions of those who challenge, affirm, or experience a nation’s cultures and values so when a group of people who have created a home and culture in that nation is left invisible, it is a clear act of marginalization and

rejection from that nation towards those underrepresented citizens. These messages shape a nation’s policies which can have drastic and deadly effects on their citizen’s livelihoods and experiences. Today, the Windrush Generation’s citizenship and legal status are being questioned and many are facing deportation or have already been deported. Many have had to pay to prove their citizenship, which was granted to them aboard the *Empire Windrush*, and those who are not as financially privileged were left to be deported. In reaction to her controversial and institutionally racist requirements and leadership under the Home Office, British Prime Minister Theresa May has considered compensation to those migrants affected by these policies. It is this culture of neglecting the realities of their Caribbean citizens and immigrants that led to the country’s Prime Minister being able to pass and enforce these laws. Accessibility and visibility to stories and poems like the ones that Berry writes about can change perceptions of how people view each other, the social problems that affect people, and bring us to a better understanding of each other globally. Literary canons can help shape the conversations and pick up the slack where political debates ignore and neglect. It is our responsibility as active and engaged citizens to demand that our respective nations acknowledge their histories and wrongdoings and create a more inclusive culture that protects immigrants and their future children.

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About the Author

Amaryllis Lopez is a junior majoring in English and minoring in Latin American and Caribbean Studies and African American Studies. Her research, mentored by Dr. Allyson Salinger Ferrante (English), was a culmination of the importance of literary canonical claim and representation that she analyzed in Dr. Ferrante's Recent British Fiction course. She presented excerpts of this paper at the 43rd Annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association in Havana, Cuba in June 2018.