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Abstract

The voice, drunk and defiant, is that of Lara, about half-way through Bernardine Evaristo's novel of the same name. It is at this point that Lara begins to discover, or rather produce, her own version of post-colonial London; a new, hybrid identity that challenges the inevitability of a divided and racist national capital to suggest, instead, a positive diasporic space. Many other voices contribute to the telling of this history, their varying, often disembodied, tones adding to the multilayered nature of the writing which moves backwards and forwards in time in an attempt to piece together stories that have not always been passed on. Laid out as a series of prose poems, complete with an index of first lines, Evaristo utilizes oral and dramatic, as well as lyrical and poetic, storytelling modes. This concern with form, together with the sense of 'performing' identity which is enacted, reminded me of recent work by Pauline Melville and Mciling Jin,² also writers who have been (and are) actors and performers, writing out of their complex post-colonial inheritance, and located in London. Of course, these writers must be read according to the various allegiances and connections that mark their writing,³ but their presence (and that of a growing number of exciting Black British writers) gives weight to Lara's cross-Atlantic clarion call.

PATRICIA MURRAY

Stories Told and Untold: Post-Colonial London in Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*

Eat yer art out Jean Michel-Basket! This is London-stylee!
My influences are Hackney, afro-beat and Blue Peter!¹

The voice, drunk and defiant, is that of Lara, about half-way through Bernardine Evaristo's novel of the same name. It is at this point that Lara begins to discover, or rather produce, her own version of post-colonial London; a new, hybrid identity that challenges the inevitability of a divided and racist national capital to suggest, instead, a positive diasporic space. Many other voices contribute to the telling of this history, their varying, often disembodied, tones adding to the multilayered nature of the writing which moves backwards and forwards in time in an attempt to piece together stories that have not always been passed on. Laid out as a series of prose poems, complete with an index of first lines, Evaristo utilizes oral and dramatic, as well as lyrical and poetic, storytelling modes. This concern with form, together with the sense of 'performing' identity which is enacted, reminded me of recent work by Pauline Melville and Meiling Jin,² also writers who have been (and are) actors and performers, writing out of their complex post-colonial inheritance, and located in London. Of course, these writers must be read according to the *various* allegiances and connections that mark their writing,³ but their presence (and that of a growing number of exciting Black British writers) gives weight to Lara's cross-Atlantic clarion call.

I

Evaristo's novel is essentially structured around two key journeys undertaken by the central character of Lara da Costa; the journey into London (which is a journey into her own blackness), and then back to London via Nigeria and Brazil, a route which repeats the Middle Passage cartographies of her ancestors. These central journeys are criss-crossed, and preceded, by the memories of earlier journeys taken by her family, to which I will return later in my analysis.

I want to begin with the description of Lara's entry into sassy, 70s,

teeny-bop girlpower:

Tank tops, Curly Wurllys, blue mascara, Top 20,
T.Rex, Jackson 5, Bowie, Slade, the Sweet, the 70s
spun Lara into the kaleidoscope of teeny bop,
at Eltham Hill Girls she torpedoed chewing gum
on entering, hitched her skirt on exiting, tissue-padded
her non-existents in the upstairs loo, and choked
over smoke at lunchtime behind the Jubilee Gardens (p. 61)

Her relative innocence is comically (for the reader) and dramatically (for Lara) interrupted by her best friend's revelation of sex (she's 12) with her boyfriend Daniel, and her justification – 'He's twenty-two, dishy and he drives a white Jag!' (p. 66). A mixed-race child, growing up in overwhelmingly white South East London (Eltham, scene of the murder of Stephen Lawrence), Lara is about to see herself through the racist gaze of the twenty-two year old Daniel. This is the moment vividly described by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema ... My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day ... All around me the white man, above the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps under my feet, and there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me ...⁴

Daniel's racist sneer and gestures sting and traumatize Lara in the same way – 'Discomfort burned Lara's cheeks ... The room spun, blood sank to her toes, faint, brimming, Susie's eyes filled too, both were instantly sapped' (p. 68). That evening she is catapulted into sudden and total alienation:

Home. I searched but could not find myself,
not on the screen, billboards, books, magazines,
... I longed for an image,
a story, to speak me, describe me, birth me whole.
Living in my skin, I was, but which one? (p. 69)

Lara's lack of a story at this point is directly linked to her father's (Taiwo's) deliberate burying of his own history and refusal to tell his stories. Although Taiwo's early letters to his mother provide us with an insight into his immigrant experience in England, the letters are not sent and these stories are never told. By the time of his marriage to Ellen, Taiwo has decided it is too painful to tell of the past – 'her mind should be kept blank, he decided, she need not know' (p. 28). This blankness is passed on to his children, an absence which causes the young Lara to imagine 'Daddy People in the garden singing me' (p. 48). Lara is born into whiteness, unable to give shape to the Daddy People, or to herself as a black child. Her profound disorientation on being called a 'nigger' (p. 68),

then, causes the pathological splitting of self-identification as outlined by Fanon:

As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it.⁵

Lara tries to be invisible at first by avoiding being seen with her father. But the nature of her split identity soon resurfaces:

In the showers at school I began to notice my difference.
My skin was drier, pubies curly, titties pointy, bum perched.
I wanted to be invisible. I wanted to be noticed. (p. 70)

Guidance arrives in the figure of Cousin Beatrice – ‘an Angela Davis wig topped peach lips, lime green flares draped over pink suede platforms’ (p. 73) – a highly visible, highly politicized, piece of Afrocentric Liverpool. Taiwo had landed in Liverpool and stayed with his cousin Sam who had settled there, before moving to London. But whereas he and Ellen had moved into the white outskirts of London to bring up their children, Sam and his Irish wife, Maureen, had raised their child in the heart of the old slave port. Beatrice had experienced racism much earlier – ‘South Africa? Liverpool is the apartheid state of Great Britain’ (p. 75). She is more knowledgeable than Lara, more worldly and, crucially, has a story – gleaned from the old African community in Toxteth – which provides her with psychological support. The forgotten connections that Beatrice provides, and the family details Taiwo is persuaded to outline, begin to heal Lara’s fractured sense of identity, and she embarks on her own journey of discovery into London.

II

I began to dip into my skin like a wet suit (p. 87)

In the section of *Lara* extracted in this issue of *Kunapipi*, Lara joins art school, moves into a squat in Camden, meets her Nigerian boyfriend, Josh, at the 100 Club, and, in a summer of passion and elation, proceeds with him to explore Tottenham, Brixton, Shepherd’s Bush and Ladbroke Grove. The ‘vivacious tableaux of Atlantic faces’ (p. 88) that had once awed her, now begin to inhabit her canvas, enabling her to relax back into her body – ‘Go slower, syncopate, less movement, more weight’ (p. 87). Through the sexual pleasure and intimacy shared with Josh, Lara experiences that act of imaginary reunification – ‘At last, on safe ground, at last, I was, on safe ground’ (p. 88) – which, as Stuart Hall writes, ‘restore[s] an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past’⁶ and serves as a vital resource in the recovery of cultural identity.

But, as Hall also writes, cultural identity is not just about grasping points of similarity and connection; it also involves recognizing 'critical points of deep and significant *difference*':

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.⁷

Lara and Josh are positioned very differently in their construction of blackness. She embraces him for his Africanness, but then begins to resent his 'African-at-Eton act' (p. 89) and his patriarchal assumption of gender relations. 'You'll not marry a Nigerian if you can't obey me' (p. 90) he declares. It soon becomes apparent that Josh is performing his own 'Nigerianness' and reinventing himself as more authentically Nigerian in relation to Lara. As she moves free of Josh, Lara begins to recognize how blackness is positioned and reinvented differently in different parts of London:

Lautrec posters, blue lamps, Portobello pub ...
I hover in a dungeon alcove, nurse my port, insecure,
wish I'd been born a Holland Park babe, was a funky
half-caste dahlia, a Cleo Laine jazztress with a voice
that sails, seducing the crowd. My kohl-eyed cohorts –
Hampstead, Chelsea and Fulham have tunnelled
salt up their nostrils. (p. 91)

The sight of Josh guiding 'a young Shirley Bassey in sassy zippy leather to the bar' (p. 91) is enough to persuade Lara that she must position herself anew in relation to the narratives of the past. The result is dramatic, and described in the comic, self-mocking tones of one who has since learnt the strongly performative element of any identity construction:

I scalped myself, sacked Josh, speared my nose,
my little Afro ears coiled a C of silver earrings,
I barricaded myself into an army surplus trenchcoat
and fronted a permanent Desperate Dan scowl ...
I denounced my patriarchal father, deconstructed
my childhood, regurgitated appropriated ideas
like closing-time vomit ...
I divorced my honky
mother, rubbished the globe for its self-destruct sins,
and then flung open the Hammer House gates
of my Rocky Horror Hades,
and tossed the key. (p. 92)

Lara travels the first leg of this journey with both parents, Taiwo and Ellen. Lagos is seen through the eyes of all three characters, as well as through the third person narrator, who also comments on the 'da Costa trio' (p. 103) as they each negotiate their sense of isolation and belonging. References to the Brazilian and West Indian Quarters, to names such as Salvador, Cardoso, Damazio, Carrena, Roberto, da Souza, and da Silva, point to the Middle Passage narratives which have also hybridized Lagos. Taiwo's memories, in particular, tell us of a busy port that continued to pull people to it:

Taiwo dreamt

of exploring the worlds these migrants left to memory:
Lebanon, Libya, China, Greece, India, Europe.
He took his sandalled youth to Apapa docks, watched
the emigres disembark from the huge cargo ships
which steamed into port, horns resounding for miles.
He taunted the 'sailor's children' – pale raggedy products
of prostitute and European, who lived in the back streets. (p. 118)

These are the mixed-race children whom Taiwo was to see again on his arrival in Liverpool though now they are not taunted for their paleness. Taiwo's own 'pale raggedy product' Lara – called a 'nig nog' (p. 67) in South East London – is now called 'Oyinbo' (p. 104) by the children of Lagos, meaning 'whitey'.

This continuity with the past, which, as Hall argues, is 'precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity',⁹ is not shared directly between Taiwo and Lara. Although his presence in Lagos enables the reader to share his memories and reconstructions of the past, Taiwo still does not tell his stories. Instead, Lara is revisited by the 'Daddy People' of her childhood, only this time they take clear shape, and it is Zenobia who speaks:

My Omilara, now we take you into memory
sleep now, sleep ... (p. 109)

Lara 'goes under' with Zenobia, back to 1931; to the scenes of Taiwo's childhood, to his twin sister, Kehinde,¹⁰ who is fated to die young, and to his stern father, Gregorio, who silenced him long before he arrived in England. These scenes contain their own stories of fractured identity, such as Zenobia's submission to patriarchal custom, which Lara must learn to position herself within. The past is not a better place; it offers no easy coherence, but insight into the unstable signifiers that make us always, already hybrid.

This becomes increasingly clear when Zenobia's voice is replaced by that of Baba, who takes Lara back to 1839. His is the fullest story, remembered in pain, and then deliberately orated to his grandson, Taiwo, for his benefit. Lara overhears Baba as he tells of slavery in Brazil; of the

plantation owner, Senhor Fernandés da Costa; of the murder of his mother, Tolulopé; and of his twin brother, Gilberto. As an 'emancipado' he eventually finds strength in the new syncretic cultures of Salvador and Bahia, especially in Candomblé, that intertwining of Catholic and African deities which provides him with a means of reconstructing his own past. He is finally able to return to Lagos, home of his ancestors, with his son, Gregorio; where Lara now sees him talking to his grandson, until he can speak no more:

Baba opened his mouth to speak; ghosts flew out.
The muscled baobab leaves whispered behind him.
Taiwo sighed, sat speechless in the bristling silence.
He crept off into twilight, a cat courting the shadows.
Baba would sit into the night by the light of a kerosene lamp.
The world he now entered, Taiwo would never know. (p. 130)

The irony, of course, is that Baba entrusts all of this story to Taiwo, who then never speaks of it in England. Taiwo buried his feelings, in the same way Baba's anger 'went underground' (p. 122) as a slave, and it is Lara's journey which provides the imaginary reunification through which the story, and the anger, is released.

The circle is never entirely closed, however. Many areas of the past, like those Baba enters above, will remain untold. Where there are still stories to tell, they will be told in the forked tongues of the diaspora experience. This is the lesson of Lara's final journey before returning to London. She arrives in Brazil, where she hopes 'the past will close in on me' (p. 137), and is confronted instead by a 'rainbow metropolis' (p. 137) which has reinvented itself out of multiple origins:

Salvador grips its Yoruba mother like a shawl,
threadbare, tattered at the ends, yet refusing to yield
to wind, flap back over the Atlantico to home ...
Yoruba words sign buildings, source Portuguese,
its deities re-located in Candomblé ... (p. 138)

Moving through the Amazon, Lara becomes aware of the continuum of identity to which she is connected, and begins to recognize the subtle ways in which the post-colonial stages its own survival:

I become my parents, my ancestors, my gods. We dock,
a remote settlement, I stretch my pins, earthed, follow
my singing ears, Catholic hymns hybridized by drums,
it is a hilltop church, Indian congregation, holding flowers
and palm fronds. It is Palm Sunday! I hum from the door,
witness to one culture being orchestrated by another,
yet the past is gone, the future means transformation. (p. 139)

It is with this insight that Lara returns to London, her own future, which she resolves to paint 'with colour-rich strokes' (p. 140).

IV

In Evaristo's novel, then, the central character has to leave London in order to grasp the nature and promise of its post-coloniality. The hybridized environments of Lagos and Brazil offer Lara not only a lifeline into her own personal history, but also perspectives into the future developments of locations similarly traversed by cycles of colonialism. In this way, London emerges not as the privileged signifier of post-coloniality but as a key point in an endless chain of signification, and through which cultural identity is constantly postponed.¹¹ As already indicated by Hall, Lara does not recover a 'true' identity that has been waiting to be found in some essentialized past. Her searching and poetic interrogation of Africanness is constantly interrupted by difference and hybridity, and by racial constructions that only partially give her voice.

Lara's exploration of paternal ancestry also begs the question of her maternal inheritance. Ellen's voice is one of the least explored in the novel. She rarely speaks in the first person, and although she expects to share her memories with Taiwo, her stories are never told. She is the 'honky mother' whom Lara 'divorces' at one point, the woman who 'doesn't know any better' (p. 76) according to cousin Beatrice. There are occasional glimpses into Ellen's own state of unfulfilment:

My love is a towel soaked in bleach, too long, it tears
away into fragments of myself, then slowly disintegrates,
I see myself in here, waiting, a ghost from this past,
to haunt some future children with my sorry visage. (p. 78)

But the white, working-class woman has no voice in which to tell us of her experience as the mother of black children, or of the way in which she constructed social identity.¹² Like Taiwo, she is herself the product of a post-colonial diaspora; caught, to use Roy Foster's words, 'in the interstices of the Irish-English relationship'.¹³ We are told, very briefly, that Emma of the O'Donoghue clan 'fled the hardship of the garrison town of Birr in southern Ireland' and with her small child, Mary Jane, 'plonked herself on London's doorstep in eighteen eighty-eight' (p. 12). At the same time as Tolulopé was experiencing the brutality of slavery, then, Emma's family would have been suffering the devastation of the Irish famine; Baba's return home with Gregorio coinciding with Emma's journey into exile with her child.

But these parallels are not really investigated. Apart from the descriptions of working-class poverty – 'Her ma, Mary Jane, a dressmaker, taking in, stitching food into mouths, clothes onto their bodies' (p. 13) – these women are not vividly drawn. Like all descendants of the famine, 'Edith invested in the future, the past was a pit to fall down' (p. 12), but the novel satirizes the search for middle-class respectability that drives these women and, in the end, their Irishness is conflated into the dominant trope of whiteness. This mirrors the elision of Ireland and Irishness in discussions of the post-colonial in general and, as Luke Gibbons has commented:

Recent work in Irish criticism has begun to question this colonization of theory itself, demonstrating how Ireland's anomalous position at once within and outside Europe gives issues of race, nation, class and gender a new complexity, derived from an intersection of both metropolis and subaltern histories. Discussions of race, for example, extend beyond Fanon's 'epidermal schema' to engage with the chimera of 'Celticism' ... Considering Ireland in a postcolonial frame is not a matter of including one more culture within existing debates, but reworking the paradigms themselves.¹⁴

Lara's hearing of 'Catholic hymns hybridized by drums' may indicate her own awareness of this 'new complexity' and may instigate her own journey into Irishness, an inheritance which remains still to be explored by Lara, and still to be inscribed into the post-coloniality of London.

NOTES

1. Bernardine Evaristo, *Lara* (Kent: Angela Royal Publishing, 1997), p. 95. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. See Pauline Melville, *Shapeshifter* (London: Picador, 1991); *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997); Meiling Jin, *Song of the Boatwoman* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1996).
3. See the point made by Mark Stein in 'Cultures of Hybridity: Reading Black British Literature', *Kunapipi*, 20, 2 (1998), pp. 76-89 (p. 81).
4. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986 [orig. 1952]), pp. 110-114.
5. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 197.
6. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-237 (p. 225).
7. Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 225.
8. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 197.
9. Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 227.
10. In their naming, Evaristo is signalling the 'Ibeji' or divine twins of Yoruba Orisha worship who are also called Taiwo and Kainde. Traditionally known as messengers of happiness and prosperity, these sacred deities also overcome the most awesome difficulties and it may be interesting to read the historically forked journeys of Taiwo and Kehinde da Costa as both shaped by, and as a migrant reshaping of, these ancient pathways.
11. See Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', pp. 229-230. In these terms, London, Lagos, Salvador and Bahia are the necessary and temporary 'breaks', the 'cuts' of identity, in the infinite semiosis of language.
12. Of course, this 'voicelessness' is part of a larger historical problem and not just specific to this novel, as the compelling narratives of these women are only now beginning to be written. See, for instance, France Winddance Twine, 'The White Mother: Blackness, Whiteness and Interracial Families', *Transition*, 7, no.1 (1997), pp. 144-154. Indeed, one of the strengths of *Lara* is the way in which it focuses our attention on the possible narratives this voice may have to offer.
13. R.F. Foster, 'Marginal Men and Micks on the Make: The Uses of Irish Exile, c.1840-1922', in *Paddy and Mr. Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 301.
14. Luke Gibbons, 'Ireland and the Colonization of Theory', *Interventions*, 1, 1 (1998), p. 27.