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Freirian Liberation, Cultural Transaction and Writing from 'The Working Class and the Spades'[1]

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Abstract

It have a kind of communal feeling with the Working Class and the spades,
because when you poor things does level out, it don't have much up and down.
Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956)

The majority of West Indians settled in a country which offered them few opportunities to articulate their cultural dislocation. As a supposed silent majority with limited access to the black intellectuals and activists who were concerned for them, this paper will explore a little-known cultural exchange and trace the trajectory of Sam Selvon's fictive post-war fraternity between 'the Working Class and the spades'. It is true that by1968, any such alliance was under threat as London dockers and Smithfield meat-packers were vocal in their support for Enoch Powell's anti-immigration lobby. However, this paper will present research into an alliance which occurred a decade after Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech to suggest that indigenous working class writers' groups, formed out of class alienation in the 1970s, facilitated a unique cultural space for de-classed 'immigrants' and their children in post-war Britain. The paper will argue that the Federation of Working Class Writers and Community Publishers (formed in 1976) attracted funding and created opportunities for West Indian migrants, who would almost certainly not have been considered 'writers' under other circumstances, to express their part in what Donald Hinds had described collectively as a *Journey to an Illusion* (1966).

The writers' groups of the Federation were able, influenced by the radical pedagogy of Paolo Freire, to make a 'safe' space for racially excluded migrants to meet, talk and write about their liminal position in the often hostile climate of 1970s Britain. These are minority literatures from a silenced majority; although the work is of little value in conventional literary terms, it records the first-hand experience of first and second generation of West Indian people who found themselves unexpectedly in the 'ghetto'. The paper will present some rare examples of writing and poetry from the Federation archives, explore the reasons for its inception and debate its value to cultural and literary historians today.

* * *

'Old Father'

Old Father to England in Winter '59
Cold bite him hard,
Make him bawl in his small basement room
By the Grove.
Every day he cry out:
"Man, a tekkin' de nex' boat back home."
But come Spring,
Old Father still here.
Time Passed.
Old Father feet begin to shift.
His roots have no meaning now.

[…]

Boy,
Old father don't want to know we now,
In his white Rover,
With his slicked back hair.
And them white people saying
"He's an example to his people!"[2]

Hugh Boatswain's 'Old Father' is one of the poems in a little-known anthology by working-class authors entitled quite simply *Writing*. In 1978, a predominantly white organisation, collectively they were named 'The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers' (FWWCP), published their inaugural collection. In all probability, Boatswain's poem would not have been published without this collective which was founded on the notion of a left-wing grass-roots solidarity. By the mid-1970s, it is well documented that racial tensions were severe enough to provoke serious civil unrest in Britain. But looking back at the events of 1976, Caryl Phillips tells Maya Jaggi: 'although there were riots in Toxteth, Brixton, Handsworth and Moss Side, our lives were not determined by them.' [3] Phillips reminds us that we might look to alternative forms of resistance from West Indian migrants and their children. Boatswain's work speaks to the conditions of the 70s and engages, in sparse poetic form, in much of the cultural analysis that is pivotal to this paper. Boatswain's poems demonstrate the importance of creativity, cultural transaction and transition in the historicising of West Indian migration and settlement in Britain. 'Old Father' describes a movement towards a black British autonomy, fully formed by the late nineties. Stuart Hall describes the transformation from assimilation to autonomy as follows:

> There is no sense that Britishness is an ideal to which we might want to subscribe or assimilate. We are fully confident in our own difference, no longer caught in the trap of aspiration which was sprung on so many of us who are older, as part of a colonial legacy described in Fanon's famous phrase Black skin, White mask. Black identity today is autonomous and not tradable. [4]

I hope to demonstrate, in the brief space that this paper allows, that the so-called 'ordinary' and often silent majority of post-war West Indian migrants, and a generation of children born to them in Britain, chose to redefine and reaffirm themselves through the cultural transaction of creativewriting. A transaction made possible because of 'Federation writers' and literacy groups that formed in the British cities. 'Old Father' is dialogic in that it dramatises the world-view of two generations of West Indian people: a first wave settler and a British-born poet who berates his elder for 'selling out'. They are both agents in the important cultural, ideological and generational shift that Hall describes above.

Ron Ramdin's study, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain*, emphasises the division between black and white, between state and black youth in the consciousness raising years of the 70s.[5] Particular parts of Britain saw black youth running at the sight of a British 'bobby' until they, and their parents, refused to be harassed. Boatswain's poem 'Cut Up Dub' tells of the turning point:

> "Sorry son going to have to take you in,
> Lots of crimes in this area,
> Come on down to the station for questioning."
> Nex' morning, black boy come from the station,
> No bookings, no charges,
> Jus' a heapful a bruises.
> Man a' goin' bounce up Stokey tonight,
> But a' h'ain't goin' run in de dark. [6]

If the British police force's institutional racism validated such behaviour to young black people in the 70s (and still does according to the Lawrence enquiry) what hope was there for a future equable multiracial citizenship? The emerging 'structure of feeling' is also captured in the *Writing* anthology in a photograph depicting the 60,000 British citizens demonstrating their political support and solidarity for the victims of racial harassment at an Anti-Fascist rally in Victoria Park in 1978.

But where does someone caught in the continual 'fight or flight' scenario of the literal and imaginative 'ghetto', and who has never considered themselves as a writer, and who has never been part of an ethos of writing and publication, find the validity for such an activity? Few scholars of the British Caribbean diaspora know of a safe 'space' created for black youth and their parents by the Federation writers' groups. The writing was cathartic and, in turn, it stimulated reflection, transcendence and growth. The Federation enabled migrant writers, and their children, forging identities in a troubled metropolitan space, to record and reject their disempowerment.

The title of the paper quotes from Selvon's 50s masterpiece, *The Lonely Londoners*, alluding to an earlier West Indian empathy with the white working class. Arriving in a bombed out Britain in the 1950s, West Indians found that the separations and horrors of war had traumatised and bewildered the Motherland:

> It have a kind of communal feeling with the Working Class and the spades, because when you poor things does level out, it don't have much up and down. A lot of men get kill in war and leave widow behind, and it have bags of these old geezers who does be pottering about the Harrow Road like if they lost, a look in their eye as if the war happen unexpected and they still can't realise what happen to the old Brit'n.[7]

Or as Caryl Phillips puts it: British people 'had no idea what the fuck was going on with all these black faces arriving'. [8] Any sense of fraternity would soon prove fickle when, a decade after Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, London Dockers and Smithfield meat-packers openly demonstrated their support for Enoch Powell's anti-immigration lobby. A decade later, by 1976, black people were on the streets communicating very powerfully how little investment they had in a British way of life. However, a challenge to a white, male, middle-class hegemony was to manifest itself (amongst other things) in the origins the Federation. It responded to complex post-war social, cultural and political developments which had increasingly threatened any notion of a cultural consensus. A brief explanation of the ethos of the organisation is necessary in order to understand the conditions under which some of the writing came to be generated.

Nine groups of writers formed the initial membership of the FWWCP, orchestrated by Chris Searle and Ken Worpole in 1976; it was sparked by progressive educational, as well as cultural and political, concerns. Searle and Worpole demanded a curriculum for English teaching that would relate to the lives of working-class children and which would validate forms originating from that culture.[9] Inspired by the pedagogy of Paolo Freire which insisted that liberation of the oppressed must involve literacy acquisition, and a move toward reconceptualisation -which begins with the oppressed first speaking then writinghis own words. Diverse voices - regional, foreign and ungrammatical - became the subjects of development rather than eradication.

The state system had failed an alarming number of adults who were leaving school with poor reading skills. National research into literacy meant, importantly, that the funds became available for the first time

for projects specifically targeted at adults.[10] Federation groups funded as Adult Literacy projects - ironically, in order to standardise written English - were to provide West Indians with opportunities for expression, including some first attempts at writing in Creole.

The ‘writing from the working class and the spades’ in the title refers more specifically to an alliance of activists and creative writers. Formed in Liverpool, one of the founding member groups of the Federation was the highly politicised 'Scottie Road group' (which included such talent as the young Jimmy McGovern). In 1970, this group of white working-class writers, Liverpool's Irish immigrants of 100 years before, founded a workshop to include Caribbeans and an exiled South African writer. The workshop was situated in a staunchly white catholic area of Liverpool - Scotland Road. The group gave readings, taking black writers and performers into pubs where they would almost certainly not have felt comfortable.[11] After hotly debating its purpose - the Arts Council funded the Federation’s first full-time paid national coordinator (the Arts Council insisted on calling the post 'Literature Development Officer') and its first anthology, Writing, in 1978.[12] The member groups went on to publish short stories and poems in small-scale community anthologies and poetry journals. Founded originally on the premise of a unifying left-wing solidarity, this was to change when a supposed working-class alliance fragmented on political, gender and race issues. So that, by the 1980s there were separatist anthologies funded by Race Equality Units. The initial orthodoxy of early Federation membership demanded that members should be working-class and groups applying to join were 'vetted', but because West Indians from diverse cultural and social backgrounds were de-classed, homogenised as'immigrants', they were welcomed regardless of their societal position back home.

The groups operated democratically, with no regard for commercial considerations or for received notions of what constituted 'poetry' or 'fiction'. As Rebecca O’Rourke put it they ‘put two fingers up to the establishment’.[13] Consequently some of the written forms are difficult to categorise but they nevertheless constitute an important impetus toward written expression for first and second wave West Indian migrants, many of whom it is often asserted are exclusively wedded to oral expression.

There is little doubt that a desperate sense of homesickness is the key to the release of much of the writing produced by migrants in Federation groups. The practicalities of living in a foreign country stimulated the need to acquire standard English, but as part of a group, they would also find comfort in the sharing of their feelings with other Caribbeans in a similar position.[14] But for many West Indians in Britain, homesickness - the actual severance from loved ones, familiar objects and rituals - was a very real problem that might be eased by the company of the writers' group. The differences between British and Caribbean food and the difficulties of obtaining simple ingredients, such as long-grain rice, would often serve as a focus for their alienation.[15] Ironically, it was under the auspices of an 'English class', which nevertheless insisted on maintaining the authenticity of West Indian language and expression, that *Captain Blackbeard's Beef Creole and other Caribbean Recipes* came to be published. The introduction explains: 'As far as possible we have written Captain Blackbeard as we spoke it, each recipe in the voice of its author'.[16] And those authors, all thirty-four women and six men, are named.The book is ostensibly a recipe collection, but it also includes stories of events attached to certain meals, poems, songs and illustrations, and as such it represents a particular response to change brought about by migration and the reconstitution of rituals and identities under threat. The publication affirms the importance of knowledge and skills which would have previously been passed on as an everyday part of an oral culture and includes techniques which may well be traced back to survival strategies developed by an enslaved society taken from Africa. They may possibly have been written down for the first time in order to ensure their absolute survival on the 'third passage' from the Caribbean to England.

The recipes, and the instructions concerned with social occasions, carry with them the coded messages of a 'people without history', people who are left out of 'official' literature.[17] People who are seldom recorded in 'official' historical documents are honoured in the names of the recipes: 'George's Pumpkin and Chocho Soup with Dumplings'; 'Vilma's Roast Chicken' and 'Eualia's Okra, Shrimps and Saltfish'. A written record is unnecessary in a closely-knit community with a shared heritage and culture. In a sense, the Peckham group of Caribbean writers, separated from that community, represent the need to find new ways of recording material that would not normally be written down: that is the rituals, processes and cooking implements that feature in *Captain Blackbeard*. The anthropological nature of the information

given reveals aspects of life that may well have remained part of an important but 'silent legacy'. An example here is the recipe for 'Simon's Strong Rum Punch', which is set alongside the following information on how to obtain the main ingredient:

> 'The Rum Factory'
> I know these men
> who work at the sugar cane factory
> They make rum there
> The men usually take rum home
> by soaking their coat in the rum in the vat
> when they get there in the morning.
> When they are ready
> to come home in the evening,
> they take their coat out and put it in a plastic bag
> and take it home with them.
> When they get home
> they wring the coat out,
> and leave the rum to settle.
> Then they put it in a bottle
> and keep it for drink
> and give their friend some.
> This was the strong rum.
> You can't buy it in the bar.[18]

We may surmise that this (illegal and dangerous) practice dates in some form from the earliest sugar plantations and their refineries. Indeed, much of the writing, which is set out visually in the quasi-poetic format demonstrated above, is intent on giving detailed instructions to the novice on quite specialised skills - such as 'killing a Chicken', 'Salting, Smoking and Pickling' - all of which might be supposed to be redundant in urban Peckham but which reaffirm a quite distinct Caribbean identity.

To be fully understood, such material needs to be studied from *within* the community that continues to cascade it. Although the very existence of Federation 'community' publications (by definition) reflects their supposed significance and validity for their immediate constituents (in this case Peckham), as they become written down to ensure their survival, their wider availability poses a problem of interpretation which needs to be addressed.

Of course as you can tell from Boatswain's work, writing produced by Federation black writers was not all to do with recipes and reminiscence, neither did it existed solely to combat homesickness and to record traditional Caribbean rituals and practices. It is clear from the archives that Caribbean poets joined the Federation because they were highly politicised and their writing spoke to the conditions of the 70s that had also inspired Linton Kwesi Johnson, the Race Today Collective and Stuart Hall.This poem was published in a 1987 anthology, *Not All Roses*.[19] 'Watch It!', by a Federation woman poet Thandiwe Benjamin, relates the 'sus' law to a history of migration in the context of its various stages: of the failed assimilation of the 1960s and the disassociation and resistance of the '70s. In so doing, it anticipates the reactions that would provoke the riots of the '80s:

> 'YOU BETTER WATCH IT'.
> We build up de street
> And we clean up de street,
> A drive a bus in de street
> But you won't leave us in peace.
> Now we a go a rioting in de street.
> Me seh fe watch it
> Black people a go mash it.
> When blood a running
> Know that we're not funnin'.

No bother hide cos
We a go get you
You better watch it![20]

Benjamin's work is a barometer of the changed consciousness of a second-generation of Caribbeans who would have no experience of the gentle agrarian lifestyle recorded in Captain Blackbeard. However, both types of poetry - the reminiscence work and the politicised commentary - were made possible because of important shifts: by the late 1970s, events in Britain which had stimulated the formation of the Federation were to provide a unique set of conditions for poets whose work had never 'fitted' European models and whose opportunities for expression had been hitherto denied.

To conclude, then, the unique context provided for by the politicised workshops provided a safe cultural space for disaffected Caribbean adolescents who, by the 1970s, had been failed by a British education system. Ken Worpole recalled that Vivian Usherwood, Sandra Agard and Hugh Boatswain were part of a group of 'very talented young black writers around Centreprise' in the mid-1970s.[21] Additionally, it becomes clear that many of their parents, so called 'ordinary' migrants were developing their literacy, their political analysis and their creative writing. To be fair, some of the material reflects the fledgling status of its writing but, equally, much of it is rich, compelling and uniquely informative. However, it is pointless to attempt, as the Arts Council's funding committee did, to judge its merits by Eurocentric literary standards. The real achievement of the Federation was its ability to create the conditions to release denied expression: setting up projects to enable adults to acquire literacy, promoting oral history projects from groups marginalised by society (for example - immigrants and travellers); and by validating the idea of working-class creativity and agency. By facilitating the publication of the outcomes, the Federation circulated a lived experience of 'difference', and provided an environment for writers to explore that difference. The success of this movement led Stuart Hall to express his 'amazement' to Anne Walmsley in an interview:

> Europe has shunted culture off to one side. It's the higher arts. I think, [what] has certainly amazed me [is] the notion of black school kids writing about their experience in poetry and so on.[22]

As one of the most grounded and influential 'blacks in an ivory tower', Hall recognises the significance of a working-class writing movement, and its accomplice community publishing, as part of a new type of ownership of a different, non-European, notion of culture.

Lola Young recently observed (on a BBC Radio 4 debate on constructions of ‘Englishness’), that the people in the poorest parts of Britain are much less easily defined along race lines than in the American ghetto. But what is clear from the Federation publications, is that people in some of the most deprived areas of London, Liverpool and elsewhere engage in their own cultural analysis. It is not clear whether Hugh Boatswain read Frantz Fanon before he wrote his poem, but ‘Old Father' communicates the idea of 'Black Skins and White Masks' in a way that his immediate constituency can respond to, demonstrating that people written about by cultural theorists, sociologists and ethnographers will write about themselves, for themselves, and for each other.

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Notes

[1] The quotation in the title of the paper is from Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London, Longman, 1985; first published Allen Wingate, 1956) p. 75.
[2] Hugh Boatswain, 'Old Father', in *Writing*, Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (London: Centreprise, 1978), p. 45.

[3] Maya Jaggi, 'The Final Passage: An interview with Writer Caryl Phillips', in Kwesi Owusu, ed. *Black British Culture and Society*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.159.
[4] Stuart Hall, ' Frontlines and Backyards: The Terms of Change', in Owesu, p. 127.
[5] Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Wildwood, 1987).
[6] Hugh Boatswain, 'Cut Up Dub', in *Writing*, pp.46-47.
[7] Selvon, *ibid,* p. 75.
[8] Caryl Phillips, *op cit*, p. 161.
[9] In 1971, Chris Searle was dismissed from his teaching job as a result of a dispute concerning his publication of school-children’s writing. Searle had not gained official permission to publish *Stepney Words* (London: Centreprise, 1973; First published in two editions by Reality Press in 1971). The back cover blurb validates the project: '15,000 copies of these poems have been printed and sold, giving these young working-class children a readership far larger than many established poets.'
[10] 'A grant of £1 million for the financial year 1975-76, [became available] to help local authorities and others meet the expected initial increase in demand for adult literacy...'. A.H. Charnley and H.A. Jones, *The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy*, 3rd. edn (London: Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, 1986; first published, Huntinton, 1979), p. 2.
[11] Author’s interview with Barbara Blanche and Barbara Shane, founding members of ‘Scottie Road’ writers’ group. Liverpool 8, 28.6.2000.
[12] See Jim McGuigan, 'The State and Serious Writing: Arts Council Intervention in the English Literary Field', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 1984.
[13] Author’s interview with Rebecca O’Rourke, Middlesborough, 17.7.95
[14] See Louise Bennett's poem 'Homesickness' in Stewart Brown and Ian McDonald, eds., *The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1992), pp. 11-12.
[15] First-wave migrants from the Caribbean tell how they were forced to use a type of pudding rice in their recipes. This would transform one of their staple recipes, rice and peas, into a mush.
[16] Written and collected by a group of Caribbean writers attending a 'Peckham Bookplace' English class, *Captain Blackbeard's Beef Creole and other Caribbean Recipes* (London: Peckham Publishing Project, 1981), pp. 64-65.
[17] See Laura Esquivel, *Like Water For Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Instalments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies* (London: Black Swan, 1993).
[18] *Captain Blackbeard*, pp. 64-65.
[19] 'According to a report published in 1978, 44% of the "sus" arrests in London in 1977 were black youths; but black youths made up only 2.8% of the total population', in 'Racism and the Law', *Racism in the Workplace and Community* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1984), p.3.
[20] Thandiwe Benjamin, 'Watch it', in *Not All Roses: Poetry and Prose*, The Black Anthology Group (London: Centreprise, 1987), p. 49.
[21] Author's interview with Ken Worpole, London, 28.11.95, transcript p.2.
[22] From Anne Walmsley's transcript of her interview with Stuart Hall, London, 8.10.87. The interview was part of her research for *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: New Beacon Books, 1992).

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