

Children's writing in 1970s and '80s London

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Abstract

In the 1970s and 1980s radical school teachers encouraged their pupils to write poetry and prose that they published for use in the classroom and distributed to the wider community. This qualitative and textual study concentrates on significant examples of student writing and utilises interviews with writers, teachers and organisers. The roots of this writing in relation to post-war progressive education are briefly assessed. This is followed by an analysis of writing by working class and immigrant children whose subjectivity became a site of considerable conflict. The status of vernacular language, political impulses and the nature of personal expression were questioned and debated.

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Matthew Arnold's notion of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said' retained considerable force for much of the twentieth century, and arguable continues to do so in the early 21st century. Explicitly and inexplicitly, culture was viewed in terms of finished products – 'the canon of English literature' being one example. For those who held to this belief yet remained eager to break down the elitism associated with these norms, the problem of cultural democracy became one in which 'good' culture was disseminated to wider audiences. The focus was on the consumption of existing texts as opposed to the production of new ones. For instance, Chris Smith, as culture secretary in the late 1990s, adopted this dissemination approach to culture in his book, *Creative Britain*.¹ The claim that marginal spaces could be a source of cultural creativity went unheeded; instead culture was to be funnelled into marginal spaces from the outside.

However, the decades of the late twentieth century witnessed a number of significant attacks on these assumptions. Culture came to be analysed from working class, feminist and postcolonial positions and advocates criticised the 'selective tradition'² of literature as exclusive and exclusionary, being based upon Eurocentric, middle class and masculine assumptions - Literature with a capital 'L'. As a result, within higher education, an increasing range of writing is now taught on some 'literature' courses, an indication that the term is in constant flux in responding to wider social

¹ Chris Smith, *Creative Britain*, Faber and Faber, London 1998

² Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verso, London, 1980. See also Peter Widdowson, *Literature*, Routledge, London, 1999.

changes. Others have questioned whether literature should be conceived as a body of work at all and, instead, have emphasised the practices of reading, writing and communication. From this perspective, creative processes have been substituted for established literary products and English literature disestablished in favour of a diversity of 'writing'. The proliferation of creative writing MAs testifies to this changing context. However, such courses tend to be quite separate from the study of literature itself – production and consumption of literature are kept on separate tracks with different destinations. Despite the recent growth of widening participation, such courses tend to attract the already well-educated.

In the 1970s the compulsory education system became a locus for the expression of these debates and conflicts. According to one perspective, the classroom was a place where pupils should be inducted into a culture, in part by developing an understanding of 'classic' literature. Literacy tended to be viewed as a foundation, a precursor to any serious engagement with literature; tools of the trade rather than finished product. Learning had to take place before one could engage with literature; in turn only a few who had mastered such skills might eventually come to write. Although this position had been challenged by 'progressive' educational traditions, in the 1970s a number of educationists, workshops and community publishers would also foster marginal voices and alternative forms of education in working class areas. Radical school teachers would nurture writing among their working class pupils as an experiment in cultural creativity. This writing would also prove to be an explosive force in a movement for working class writing and publishing which, from 1976-2007, came to be focused upon the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers

(FWWCP or 'Fed').³ The Fed would build upon a groundswell of creative cultural energies in many working class areas which encompassed both adults and children. In fact, an important stimulus in the development of the Fed had been the publication of *Stepney Words* (1971), a collection of poetry by children from Sir John Cass School in East London. Many of the poems complained directly about school, teachers and the local environment; others expressed the unhappiness of the children, a form of subjectivity which clashed with the expectations of the school authorities who proceeded to sack the teacher responsible, Chris Searle. In turn this stimulated a strike by the children who were supported by other local schools that came out 'in sympathy'; pupils were influenced by their parents' trade unionism as well as similar action by school children in France and the UK.

A number of other teachers were also developing children's writing, mainly in London. For instance, Ken Worpole and a photographer at Centerprise in Hackney produced a book for use by local school children, a *Hackney Half-term Adventure* (1972) which helped to stimulate a number of publications written by children themselves. Elsewhere teachers gained the confidence to publish children's writing and managed to carve out space within the curriculum for this work. Teachers developed this activity out of informal and overlapping friendship networks, many of them associated with the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE). Blair Peach was one teacher who encouraged his students to write and the Fed would publish an anthology of his pupils' writing in the wake of his death in the Southall

³ The following three paragraphs are based upon, Tom Woodin, *Building Culture from the Bottom Up: the Educational Origins of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP)*. "History of Education", Volume 34, Number 4, 2005, p. 345-363.

'Riots' of 1979. From 1976 The English Centre, part of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), published a series of books written by children, many of them immigrants. Commonplace in West London also produced a number of titles as did Black Ink, with its focus upon 'black' students. In addition, a individual schools, such as Tulse Hill, also published their pupils' writing. In doing so they brought into question the assumptions which positioned the student as a passive receptacle for knowledge and values.

This work had not developed entirely out of a vacuum but built upon post-war progressive educational practices which emphasised imaginative engagement and the creative capacity of 'disadvantaged' children. Pupils' writing was coming to be recognised as relevant and, on occasions, worth publishing, for both schools and communities. Moreover, the Plowden Committee helped to legitimate writing based upon personal experience rather than an over-emphasis on grammatical correctness. In doing so they followed in the footsteps of an international tradition of progressive educators, the most famous of which was Leo Tolstoy who had himself set up a peasant school on his Russian estate. He was deeply moved and impressed by the storytelling capacities of the children. His essay, 'Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us? Or, Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?'⁴ showed the value in pupil writing and its relevance for wider literary culture.

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *On Education*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1967. An account strongly influenced by this approach is Michael Armstrong, *Children Writing Stories*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2006. In Italy the work of Maria Maltoni also had a significant influence in this direction.

In the 1970s radical educational initiatives had elements in common with this earlier practice.⁵ They produced books which started from the knowledge and understanding of pupils themselves. Education was to be less didactic and based upon dialogue and a sharing of experience. By publishing work they connected learning in the classroom to a wider community. The ‘child centred’ approach revealed a faith and belief in the aesthetic capacity of young people - tangible evidence of their work and consciousness. Books and magazines were one means by which children could be inducted into a culture whilst simultaneously contributing to it. However, in the 1970s, there were also differences between these two approaches. An interest in pupil’s own vernacular languages was particularly strong. The validity of oppressed people expressing a subjective sense of self also drew on recent and contemporary social movements related to civil rights, feminism and colonial independence. Radical teachers in Britain emphasised inequality and connected personal experience to class solidarity rather than mobility. In addition, radical teachers broke new ground in consciously positioning these questions and approaches in terms of the urban working class child. In addition, children themselves adopted and adapted many forms from popular culture, a development which earlier critics had represented as the very antithesis of literature.⁶ Here I concentrate upon analysing some examples of this writing and what it tells us about education and learning. My account developed from a PhD study based upon interviews with activists and writers, analysis of publications and the study of archival material.

⁵ For instance, see Marjorie L. Hourd and Gertrude E. Cooper, *Coming into their Own*, Heineman Educational, London, 1971.

⁶ For instance, F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment. The Training of Critical Awareness*, Chatto and Windus, London 1933.

Migration as a source of writing

One significant group of students were recent immigrants who formed both writers and readers. Initially teachers were surprised that children from immigrant families produced so much writing but came to appreciate that it was a means of coming to terms with difficult and life transforming experiences. The sharp break in the lives of young migrants meant that they immediately had a history very distinct from their current situation. A heightened vision alongside new perspectives on both old and new selves could arise from such a disjunction of experience. These changed circumstances led to comparisons between past and present and heightened the interest in small details and the rhythms of daily life. Arriving and living in Britain, where they might face prejudice, also offered new angles on the society in which they had settled.⁷ Moreover, as they came to represent these experiences through writing they engaged with language in new ways in order to capture their rapidly changing circumstances. In some cases these very personal accounts of movement were linked to events of world significance such as war. Escaping from traumatic lives could appear to be almost arbitrary, partly a matter of luck:

My life has been sad, horrible and lonely... When we left the city [Phnom-Penh] it was ruined and people were dying and dead along the road. The corpses were starting to smell.⁸

⁷ See Various, *Our Lives*, English Centre, London, 1979, introduction; Ken Worpole, *The Politics of Writing*, "Radical Education", Spring, 1979; Michael Simmons interviewed by Tom Woodin, 2000.

⁸ Saroeun Ing, *Saroeun's Story*, "More Lives". English Centre, London 1987, pp. 45-6.

Simply recounting what their sense of sight and smell had told them was enough to position the young writer in a very different context than one usually associated with school children. In the aftermath of leaving, such an episode as this might intensify in the process of recounting and reliving it through writing. Similarly, the move to this country might not always be understood clearly, a leap into the dark for which there were no real reference points in the young person's life:

Mother told me one day that we were going to go to England soon, and I asked her where that was. She said it was a place where white people lived.⁹

Here, innocence serves as a distancing device in two respects – both nation and skin colour operate as reinforcing markers of boundaries. Rather than being able to locate 'England' on any known mental map, it 'was a place where white people lived', a statement which helps to delimit an estranged yet personalised space. In part this reflected the necessity of helping a child to comprehend wider social forces which they were ill-equipped to do.

The divide between past and present was not only an objective determining force, it also offered a basis for an active construction of meaning about the self. Paul George's *Memories* (Commonplace, 1975/6) recounted his past in Grenada in prose but chose poetry to describe life in England, underlining the discontinuity of experience in moving from the Caribbean to England. His childhood was close to nature, with friends, family and stories:

⁹ Mayank Patel, *Rare Bengal Tiger*, in "Our Lives...", p. 107.

On the way home we played games in the road. There was no pavements or sidewalks. We walked in the middle of the road and just stepped aside when the cars blared their horns.

When we reached home we did our work: fetch water, get firewood, go to the shop. We did not have pipes in our house or electricity. We cooked on an open fire. Every night we told Anansi stories before sleeping, like the hen, the cockroach and the rice and peas. Bengy used to tell us a lot of stories but Uncle Hayes always said he lied. He always used to frighten us, tell us about spirits and people who came to take children in the night to sell. We always said our prayers before going to sleep.

There was always fruit to eat. If one was not in season another was.¹⁰

George describes poverty in which much time was taken up with survival. But it is a bearable life with many consolations in which he and his family are part of nature itself. Storytelling is weaved into the pattern of this life which exemplifies a sense of regularity and timelessness. The landscape passes into the people who, in turn, blend back into the landscape, a literary strategy in which Thomas Hardy excelled.

In contrast George's poetry relates a sense of difficulty whilst beginning to nurture a pride in his own heritage. He charts the past-present relation in 'Once Upon a Time' with life in England as false and dangerous but also offering some opportunity:

I once walked the road bare feet.

Now I walk in high heeled shoes.

¹⁰ Paul George, *Memories*, Commonplace, London c.1975, p.5.

I cannot feel the ground under me.

I once climbed trees
That swayed with the slightest breeze
Now I climb steps
That reach to the sky.

I once ate fruit,
Fresh and pure.
But now I eat out of cans.

I once walked the night
Me and my brothers
Now I walk my room
For it is unsafe for I.

I once knew life
I now know
Life is what you make it.

Paul George¹¹

The short statements in this poem allow George to juxtapose past and present; then and now. Some of his most poetic lines, such as ‘walked the night’, provide continuity

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32

with the previous piece of work. Yet the safe and known life has disappeared in England. The sense of change is not only from the safe and familiar to the unknown in a new country; it also encompasses the transition to young adulthood as well as a shift from a rural to urban environment. In his new world everything is constructed and made, to some extent false. While it is unsafe for him he also recognises a potential to make his own future, a subtle shift of emphasis in 'making' things. The final line, 'Life is what you make it', brings confusion to the tensions he has outlined between the natural and unnatural world and points to a contradictory new life. In the new context, life cannot be known, only made, indicating an increased yet vulnerable sense of self. Given the difficulties that he has already outlined we are left to ponder whether this will be possible.

This body of writing has distinct similarities to some of the autobiographies by older people reflecting on the early twentieth century. The childhoods and community understanding that many of these young writers left behind bears a resemblance to older people's memories of pre-war Britain in which community and caring were perceived to be more widespread.¹² For instance, for Ranjit Sumal the privatised and individualised lifestyles in Britain were found wanting in comparison to the extended family and village life in India:

I remember when we first came to England everything was entirely different.

People passed by without a word...

Sometimes I would cry for we knew no-one. All we were was one small

family in the home my father bought when he first came on his own. A few

¹² See, Tom Woodin, *An Evaluation of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers*, PhD, University of Manchester, 2002.

relatives were lodging upstairs but still there wasn't enough of us. Not like it used to be, a big house where you could wander all on your own... Everything here was full of privacy.

...

Everyone in England works as an individual and so keeps everything private which wasn't at all the way our grandparents brought us up in. We were lucky that as children we didn't have to live that way. Here it is not at all a free world. Each one looks after himself and not his neighbour as it used to be in our village.¹³

Sumal connects personal freedom to supportive collective structures which gave physical and personal space. By contrast, privatised and individualised lives in Britain are found wanting. This tendency was also exacerbated by the exclusion of many migrants from collective structures that might have provided such validation and support.

In the context of this isolation, the family could take on significance as a haven against racism and prejudice, a place where better relations could be lived out. It was also a known place where a contribution could be made. For example, Sabir Bandali argued

Home was by far the best place. There, I didn't have to obey tedious regulations; I didn't have to get involved in stupid, unpleasant brawls.

Everything made sense at home. I knew my right place; I knew what would happen if I so much as swore. Home was always a small, almost ideal society.

¹³ Ranjit Sumal, *Back Home*. Commonplace, London 1981, pp.17-18.

It wasn't completely perfect because it was made of human beings and these have a tendency to contradict one another a lot.¹⁴

Regulations at home are clear and understood yet in public spaces such rules appear as complex and confused which also involved potentially dangerous interactions with other students. Here the home is presented as both an island of peace as well as a utopian space for thinking about the future. Black feminists in particular would develop such arguments against those who associated the private sphere simply with the oppression of women. Interestingly, the final sentence is characteristic of Bandali's detached and formal style of writing. In fact, many of these young people brought with them different expectations about the transition from youth to adulthood and developed an early maturity in the absence of a youth culture in which it was difficult to participate.

Maturity was also encouraged when young people had to take on family responsibilities at a young age and help to rebuild relationships after long absences. For example, Zohra El Kssmi arrived from Morocco unexpectedly and her relatives 'were surprised to see me because they knew nothing about it.'¹⁵ She was glad to leave, as it released her from difficult family relations. In reflecting upon her life, she took responsibility for her relationship with her mother, seeing both points of view despite the difficulties that she described:

¹⁴ Sabir Bandali, *Small Accidents. The Autobiography of a Ugandan Asian* in "Our Lives", p. 33 (1st published by Tulse Hill School 1977).

¹⁵ Zohra El Kssmi, *Families*, in "Our Lives...", p. 18

When I came to England to live with my mother, she was ever so nice to me... suddenly everything changed for the worse... She sometimes used to get extremely annoyed just about little things... Maybe this was because she did not bring me up herself and therefore when she realised I was different to what she had expected, and was growing up in a different way to hers, she then tried hard to assert her leadership by becoming authoritarian... She is extremely intelligent and her intelligence surprises me sometimes. But I think the trouble with mum is that she is a very proud, religious person... tries very hard to play the roles of both parents in order that my sisters and I don't give a bad name to our family...

The trouble is that she sometimes overplays these roles.

I am afraid I do regret some of the things that have happened to me in the past, which could have been solved very sensibly without the fuss that we had to go through. Before I became used to her behaviour, I used to blame her a lot for it and the thought of leaving her for ever was forming in my mind. I even had to see my social worker several times for advice in order to solve my situation. I can understand my mother's point of view now. She behaves so strictly towards me so that I can grow up to be a reliable person, able to face up to hardships on my own, and to be obedient, which might come in handy later on in my life when taking up a career.¹⁶

El Kssmi has turned the tables and is approaching writing from an adult's perspective, seeking advice from her social worker as an independent source of information and

¹⁶ El Kssmi, 'Families', pp. 19-20.

way of supporting her family rather than a power over her head. This is a formal discussion and analytical negotiation of feelings, emotions and familial relations that are at once public and private. The separation of families meant that relations had to be reconstructed in more conscious and formal ways that also bridged cultural divides. The formality of the account was also increased by virtue of the fact that it was a written rather than a spoken account. In addition, for some writers whose first language was not English, their main experience of learning to write may have been largely based on the classroom and personal study.

More writing

Although this output by migrant children had a certain distinctiveness, other children were also writing as part of a wider impulse and they also broke with convention but in different ways. For example, Chris Searle's pupils had not conformed to the 'chirpy East End cockney' stereotype but wrote about feelings of desolation and lack of self-worth, among other things. Out of this negative context, simply stating that you are a separate person and asserting a sense of self was a popular theme for many young writers:

Me, I'm myself

No one in this big
world is like me.

I'm different from you
and everyone else

I'm just plain old
me.

...

Pat Kirk¹⁷

The sense of self here is expressed directly and plainly but the poem is also constructed to make the writer appear small in a 'big world'. The final two lines, 'I'm just plain old / me', also tempers the more robust confidence of the opening line and infers a contingent and fragile self searching for expression. Many other young writers also mined this ambiguous and developing sense of self. In the poem below, Michelle Balgobin felt frustrated at her lack of power:

The year ticks by

The year ticks by

Slowly but surely

...

My every thought has to be examined

And cleansed.

As the year ticks by,

Slowly but surely

They will realise that I am

Old enough to think for myself.

Michelle Balgobin¹⁸

¹⁷ From *Stepney Words*, London 1971. Also quoted in Worpole, 'Politics of Writing...'

Here dual meanings of time are employed in the apparently obvious line that ‘the year ticks by’, which enables the writer to connect a long stretch into almost infinitesimally small units, each of which has to be endured. Time frames of adult and young person are placed in direct conflict with one another. Balgobin must wait to be able to ‘think for myself’ which is paradoxical given that she clearly already is able to express these feelings in poetry. The writer complains of being regulated and controlled while also aware of her growing self confidence. It is a call to be listened to while she waits for adults to catch up with her.

Young writers also extended out to explore the wider social setting in which they found themselves. In particular, Searle gave space and validation for writers to criticise their immediate surroundings such as the school and its teachers. Once again, the simple statement could have a wider impact:

The Old School

The school is old, and all tumbled down.

The bricks are as black as coal.

The paint is peeling off the walls

And the floors are rotting away.

...¹⁹

¹⁸ Michelle Balgobin, *The Year Ticks By*, in “As Good As We Make It”. Centerprise, London 1982, p. 38. See also Worpole, *Politics of Writing...*

¹⁹ ‘The Old School’ in *Stepney Words...*

It is hard to read this as simply a set of factual statements rather than a critique of the public importance given to this pupil's education. Although the poem draws attention to the physical presence of the school, it implicitly questions the meaning and significance of education in society. Negative uses of the past – the school is 'old' – help to establish that the school has not changed with the times. The claim that it 'is all tumbled down', if taken directly, would imply a heap of rubble, but instead is followed by closely observed actual details of the physical nature of the school.

Critiques of wider issues and causes were also developed. For instance, empathy and criticism could combine, incorporating analyses of wider issues as in this effective poem that blends feeling about the futility of war with an awareness of class relations:

Soldier

I was a soldier

A cockney soldier

A man that was born to die

Only cockney blokes get killed

Stuffy officers stay back safely.

I was a soldier

A cockney soldier

Before I died on the hill

With a bullet in my heart

I clawed my way to hell.

My brother was a soldier.

A bloody good soldier.

He was born to die.

But he died being shot

Climbing over the wire back to our trenches.

We both met in hell.

Colin Graves²⁰

Here the writer positions himself as reflecting back on his life; later we learn he is already dead, yet able to comment on his living self. The despondency of this poem is compounded by the thought that, 'I clawed my way to hell'. Here, by mixing up tenses, we are led to question why he would chose to claw his way to hell before he died. No other choices are offered. It then descends further when we discover that his brother, a 'bloody good soldier', has also died: 'We both met in hell'. This is an unexpected outcome for 'good' soldiers and no escape is available from the class system which predetermined their fate. The writer cascades destruction, defeat and tragedy until it becomes overbearing. Ultimately we may also be led to question the value of war itself if we heed this message from one of the damned.

In later books Chris Searle was to encourage his pupils to empathise with the experiences of oppressed people in other parts of the world as well as in the past, in

²⁰ Colin Graves in *ibid*

books like *Classrooms of Resistance* (1975) and *The People Go Marching On* (1976).

Poetry was also used to explore the self as a source of liberation and the basis for making wider social changes. A sixth form student published by Centerprise examined the relation between individual actor and wider societal structures:

The Cage

The racist

Sweats to build a cage

For the black

Eagerly and urgently hammering in

Every bolt for every bar

While the cancer of fear and hate

Eats away at his heart

At last he looks round at his work

And gives a start

For the mighty cage is complete

And he, too, is inside.

Savitri Hensman²¹

In practice though these books and approaches were lightened by an engagement with popular culture and the more immediate concerns of the children themselves. Indeed, many of these texts exude freshness in the use of language, especially by those coming to represent an experience in writing for the first time. The creativeness and

²¹ Savitri Hensman, *Flood at the Door. Poems*. London, Centerprise, 1979.

diversity of spoken language has provided a rich resource for Fed writers more generally. The following poem by a fifteen year old reveals a playfulness and enjoyment in describing a significant African-Caribbean cultural experience:

Domino

Mi enta de club, it waz quiet;

Mi start fe mek me way up de stears

Mi ear noize

Ellis, Brown, Porter an Findley play domino.

Ellis atel Findley fi rub it up

Findley atel im fe shut up;

Brown atel Findley fe play

Porter noh se noting.

...

Rose Porter²²

This use of language was debated in a context where education and culture overlapped directly. While many proponents of pupil writing directly encouraged the use of slang and non-standard language, teachers were also wary of losing contact with standard English. For instance, Black Ink debated this issue within the collective: the poet Linton Kwesi Johnson argued that vernacular language helped to develop a sense of identity whilst others also wanted tapes to be produced alongside written texts so that readers would be better able to understand how dialect was being

²² Rose Porter, *Domino...* in "Black Ink", Black Ink, London 1982 (orig 1978), p. 31.

constructed and relate it to standard English.²³ This fed into nascent debates about the role of language in education – academics, practitioners and parents would wrestle with the validity of vernacular speech and how these two uses of language might complement one another.²⁴

The playfulness with language was also matched by an anarchical element of humour in groups like the Basement Writers which resembled Unity Theatre style pantomimes rather than Marxist cultural theory. Alan Gilbey remembered one of the performances that didn't go down too well with more serious minded leftists:

The worst Basement Writers poetry reading ever was the second one, in which we decided to do a hilarious Top of the Pops parody sketch to start it off. The audience had come to see hard-hitting, East End poems. They got to watch Chris Searle dressed up as Lena Zavaroni, singing, 'Ma They're Throwing Eggs [Eyes?] At Me.' And then they mostly went home in the interval... That was the dafter end of it, when we did these awful sketches. Chris was very matey, very very matey...²⁵

The more politicised inspiration and discussion could go hand in hand with elements of youth culture that were adapted to the needs of developing writers. Gilbey himself was fascinated by comics, preferring to read the Beano than attend school. He would

²³ Based on information from Michael Simmons interviewed by Tom Woodin, 2000.

²⁴ For example, Roxy Harris, *Disappearing Language: Fragments and Fractures Between Speech and Writing* in Jane Mace, *Literacy, Language and Community Publishing: Essays in Adult Education*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon 1995. See also Woodin, 'A Beginner Reader...'

²⁵ Alan Gilbey, interviewed by Tom Woodin, 2000

produce his own cartoon strips in which he parodied local events and wider political issues such as the re-development of Wapping and East London. He would pursue his interest and go on to write for cartoons on TV.

Other young people adapted ideas and themes from popular culture in order to relate aspects of their lives. Joe Ackerman's *The Kids Are Alright* (1979) is a fictional account centring on a young boy and his relationships. He weaves in song lyrics and dialogue into a story which focuses on music and the daily interaction between young people. The ending varies from a 'typical' story in that the main protagonist does not 'get the girl' and he illustrates the scene with more lyrics which eventually become an irritant to the protagonist:

Joe frowned darkly.

If never I'd held you...

My feelings would never sho...

Each time I start talking, but...

'Belt up!' Joe shrilled. 'F'r--- sake, jus' belt up, ya noisy bastards!'²⁶

The story ends by turning in on itself in a burst of self-awareness and narrative control, tiring of the music lyrics which fill his everyday thoughts.

Some young writers also adapted the romance story in books like Chelsea Herbert's *In the Melting Pot* (1979) where she describes a relationship with a new boy on the block to help to 'put you in the picture of what goes on in and around our community'. This quote reveals a wider social purpose to writing about personal

²⁶ Joe Ackerman, *The Kids Are Alright*, English Centre, London 1979, p. 23.

relations, a creative way of describing a geographical area while also exploring personal relationships. Similarly, Stella Ibekwe's *Teenage Encounters* explored romantic relations but reveals her own learning process in both acting out expected roles but also understanding and criticising the way she reproduces them. Such stories were far from the more familiar and highly regulated formulaic romance novels but represented a more honest consideration of the personal experience of young people and their relationships.²⁷ Elements of fantasy in such accounts could be quite grounded in the spaces of these young peoples' lives and blend into more documentary styles. Of course, such bursts of critical self-consciousness with popular forms may have been encouraged by teachers at an editing stage or in deciding what to publish.

Longer works

Many of these accounts were published as booklets which helped to value the individual writer. This expanding culture of recognition built confidence and encouraged pupils to take risks with their writing. In this milieu young people began to experiment with longer pieces of sustained writing, both autobiography and fiction, which allowed them to expand and explore at greater length. I will discuss three of these accounts: *The Gates*; *Jackie's Story* and *A Comprehensive Education*. While not all of these arose out of classroom work they reveal interconnections between education and the wider culture.

²⁷ See also Worpole, 'The Politics of Writing...' Gemma Moss, *Un/popular Fictions*, Virago, London, 1989.

The Gates (1974) was written by two schoolboys, Leslie Mildner and Bill House, who did not fit with expectations of ‘good’ pupils. Through a narrative and partly fictional account they addressed issues of truanting and going into care. In writing such an extended piece of work the authors testified to a growing sense of entitlement which helped to explain the development of the novel. Longer writing also necessitated enhanced literary skills of composition and editing. As writers learned to read in more discriminating ways they started to edit their own and others’ work more effectively, continually re-drafting until a final version was arrived at. Co-writing and editing took place as a result of a friendly spirit of competition that pushed Mildner and House on to complete the book:

...I didn’t take him seriously... then one day he turned up with the first part of ‘The Gates’ and I’ll be truthful, I thought it was terrible, and that was how we started. Being bigheaded I thought I could do much better, and I wrote my idea of the first chapter, and for the next six months that’s how it went...

Sometimes a chapter would have to be written four or five times until we had it right.²⁸

The novel is self-consciously both a social document and work of fiction. It was written with a purpose, to raise discussion of school phobia:

When I was ill I remember thinking I was the only person in the world with a problem like mine. So we wrote this book to show phobics that they are not alone, and there is hope. And above all, to show parents that when their child

²⁸ Bill House and Leslie Mildner, *The Gates*, Basement and Centerprise, London 1974, p. 10.

will not go to school no matter the consequences, then he or she will not just be having ‘that Monday morning feeling’ or ‘lazyitis’.²⁹

The novel betrays a tension between showing and telling. The account is personal to the writers themselves but using the third person enabled them to gain a distance on difficult experiences. For instance, changing schools could create shockwaves for many children and this provided a key theme for the book:

Geoffrey Moller approached the gates of Elgan Comprehensive School. He hated everything to do with school. How he dreaded those mornings when he sat nervously on the corner of his bed and literally shook with fear... At one time he had been safe, safe inside the shell of Stanford Primary School. But now – that shell had opened, and Geoff was released from its womb and let out into the noisy, rough hell-world of Elgan Comprehensive – a world he was not ready for.³⁰

The importance of these educational transitions would not be fully recognised for many years. Sometimes the effects of facing this ‘noisy, rough hell-world’ were physical, ‘dizzy spells... attacks of being short of breath... agoraphobia... too terrified to step out of the house for fear he would stop breathing and die.’ These feelings were expressed literally and metaphorically through the large black gates surrounding the school. It was a fear that won over the logical side of David Cook, the second character:

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 9

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 11

... all David could think about as they got closer and closer were those big black iron gates, and the thought of being behind them like a prisoner... Then his mind went blank, except for one thought. And that was to get away, escape.

He could still remember his mother screaming, 'Come back,' and he could still feel his heart racing. It seemed as if he ran forever that terrible day.³¹

Fleeting moments of crisis are re-lived and repeated as significant elements in the novel, revealing layers of need, guilt and incomprehension. Fictionalising gives strength to the account and enables the writers to show supposedly illogical feelings and impulses waxing and waning:

... he looked back at the class and shuddered. Should he go in or should he run away?

'Hi' said a voice behind him. He looked round and saw a young man with a beard and long hair and spectacles, smiling at him.

'You must be David Cook', he said in a faint Canadian accent.

'Yes', answered the surprised David.

'I'm Lawrence Dane, the school psychotherapist. I've been standing here for quite a while. You were wandering whether to go in or not, weren't you?'

David looked back at the class.

'Yes I was,' he answered slowly.

'Why?'' asked Mr Dane.

'I don't know, I just can't seem to go in.'

'Why, what's so bad about it?'

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20

David shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t really know’, he answered.³²

The Gates was based on direct experience that could be outwardly described but not easily understood from the inside. The authors present their characters who truant without describing their inner dynamic in great detail. Again, a sense of self and subjectivity is both built up while being undermined. This helps to portray a sense of confusion in two boys who are self-aware to an extent yet unable to fully articulate their feelings.

However, the characters both relate to popular culture and engage in many things that ‘normal’ boys would do which gives them depth and humanity. For example, relations with girls are represented in an informal and direct way that would have been absent from more formal textbooks, even given an element of fantasy:

The two girls looked up. They were both about fourteen years old. The smaller one had big blue eyes, a small nose and long brown hair which hung down nearly reaching her waist. She gave a smile when Geoff said the wittiest thing he could think of.

‘Wanna lick of my lolly?’

She blushed slightly and looked at the other girl who was also very good-looking...

‘What time does your class start?’ asked Wendy.

‘How do you know that I’m in the tutorial?’ asked David. ‘I could be the plumber come to mend the drains.’

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 88-9

‘Well I don’t see your plunger,’ she said.

‘I don’t use a plunger, I use my hands.’ They all laughed.³³

As earlier, the formulaic notions of romance rapidly break down in such writing that addresses and describes fluid social relations and learning between actual young people.

The Gates also touches on class issues which, although not explored in detail, are introduced through a classroom discussion with a teacher:

Geoff changed the subject. ‘How many classes like this are there?’ he asked.

‘There are quite a few. Something like fifty in London. They’re mostly scattered around the poorer areas. Like Stepney and places like it.

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because most of the problem children come from the poorer areas of London.

Not all of them but quite a few’.³⁴

Here the classroom scene enables the authors to return to an element of documentary into the novel – directly telling the reader about issues which are being addressed more indirectly through the story. The book finishes positively with David and Geoff putting on a performance, starting to overcome their fears. They have pride in their school for ‘maladjusted’ children arguing against those claiming they were ‘mad’. The process of writing had itself been part of the process which helped to bring about such change.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 40-1

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 55

Jackie's Story (Centerprise 1984) details a young woman's life in a 'problem family', truanting from school and her subsequent life in care, written from a perspective after school. She becomes a 'substitute mother' when her own is ill, taking responsibility for her two brothers and is beaten by her father. After continually skipping school, she is eventually taken into care. In the absence of a family it is the social workers who take on the role of her parents. However, she comes to regret trusting public officials who utilize informal discussions in unexpected ways:

I wanted to talk to someone so I told her all of it, stupidly forgetting that last time she hadn't turned out to do quite what I'd expected.³⁵

Social workers and teachers are presented as blackmailers who prevent Jackie from seeing her family. On one occasion she is desolate after sneaking out to visit her mother who turns her away, fearful of the social workers.³⁶ When Jackie is allowed 'home' for a day she finds herself an outsider, no longer in the family nor out of it but caught in a limbo between the now alienated private world and the regulated public one.³⁷

Given the anonymous nature of the book, it was published very much as it arrived with minimal editing. Her account has a unique style, written as a spoken explanation about the immediate past, hardly pausing for breath, as if everything she described happened yesterday. Yet Jackie continues in this style in describing her whole life.

³⁵ Anon, *Jackie's Story*, Centerprise, London 1984, p. 47.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 61

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 65

Over 126 pages there is a blow-by-blow account in which she lays out the facts including minute details such as the time she went home on a particular day. For instance, when explaining that she started to truant:

I went to the shopping centre until dinner time then I went in to get my afternoon mark then I went home. My mum seemed surprised to see me but she didn't ask any questions and the next morning when I came down to breakfast in my normal clothes instead of my uniform she just said she had some shopping for me to do... My dad got home later... he walloped me and then he was going to wallop my mum too but there was a ring at the door... The teacher had wanted to know why I had been to school so irregularly and when I said I didn't like it she said I hadn't even tried it.³⁸

The style is factual and detailed, familiar to someone forced to account for her actions to school authorities and social workers. It resembles a defence in which she appears as witness in her own trial, presenting the reader with the information to judge the validity of her case. As a young person there is a naturalistic flow to the text in which Jackie seems unable to take control over her life.

Survival in this world has necessitated self-denial and control, partly in fear of getting caught out by what appears to be arbitrary and unjust rules – subjective expression carried dangers. In common with many autobiographies by older people, Jackie is unable to express emotion which occasionally forces its way into her text as in the following passage in which she is deciding whether to attend school:

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2

...my mum said she felt fine and I should go. I didn't want to but she reminded me of the consequences of not going. Nancy [social worker] picked me up and as we were driving along I found I was crying. She didn't say anything but passed me a tissue. I felt embarrassed to be crying in front of her but she didn't seem to mind.³⁹

The phrase, 'I found I was crying' appears regularly in the text.⁴⁰ Going into care, she is stripped of the little power she had and feels intense frustration, turning in on herself but also exerting some control by developing a 'protective layer' and often crying herself silently to sleep.⁴¹ She blocks an impulse to explore and understand her feelings which are too painful mentally and physically – a visceral and potentially explosive tension. Dreaming is a way of doing this, while stonewalling the outside world:

I lay on my bed and thought of as little as possible, if I thought of home and the past I wanted to cry and scream and wanted to get out of there so much it made me shake. If I thought of the future I was scared of what would happen, I felt just like a prisoner, alone and locked in, I wondered if my mum knew where I was. So I steered the safe course and thought only about that moment and none other... I lay as I was, dreaming, until nearly three.⁴²

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 15

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 26 & 82

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 55-6

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 55

Jackie fears stepping out of the present and engaging with the past and future and the wider reflections that such meanderings might engender. She becomes aware of the different assumptions of other young people immersed in popular culture and this gives her account a seriousness and reflectiveness also apparent, in different ways, in the writing by young migrants described earlier. She is not given the luxury of growing up through a process of graduated freedom as opposed to a plunge into cold and unknown waters. Her restricted childhood meant she was unable to relate easily to things like music, expressed in a more reflective passage:

It just seems funny that whereas I'm thinking about whether or not my brother has got beaten up again or even whether or not to go to the Social Studies lesson, they're continually moaning that they aren't allowed to stay out until twelve or that they haven't got the latest jeans. I do think about normal things too and care about clothes but not full-time.⁴³

Historically many have seen a restricted childhood as 'normal' but by the 1980s this was not the case; younger writers felt they were entitled to a childhood. When Jackie finally is allowed to leave the home she feels cheated and, with few stepping stones to adulthood, she is forced to make a sudden jump for which she feels ill-prepared:

...although it might sound funny I didn't want to leave school. Although I'd hated it and still didn't love it I didn't want to go out into the 'big wide world' yet.⁴⁴

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 100

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 110.

She does, however, move into a hostel and also enrolls on a nursery-nursing course providing evidence that Jackie is surviving her upbringing. It would be difficult to imagine this book could have been written from the perspective of a negative ending given that the starting point was so discouraging and inhospitable to personal expression. A certain level of distance and comfort is needed in order to reflect back on these circumstances.

By contrast Roger Mills' *A Comprehensive Education 1965-75* (1978) grew in part out of the supportive context at Centerprise which encouraged people to tell their stories. Mills wrote his autobiography of life at a boys comprehensive school in North London after he had left. In writing about his school days Mills was influenced by the idea of the collective autobiography, aware of the social factors influencing his sense of self: 'Any one of the thousand boys there could have written this story...'.⁴⁵ However, Mills' autobiography is also idiosyncratic in places and points in the direction of being a more literary work. He recounts his school days in imaginative ways:

I refer to it as a novel really, because although it's all true, I'd put it through the creative mangle... condensed some characters, left out some other characters, to make it more readable... compacted it, telescoped it and moved a few characters around.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Roger Mills, *A Comprehensive Education*, Centerprise, London 1978, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Roger Mills interviewed by Tom Woodin, 2000.

Moreover, borrowings from popular culture infuse the text such as the pupil who re-wrote *A Few Dollars More* for an English essay;⁴⁷ the appearance of skinheads;⁴⁸ or Oz and the ‘alternative society’;⁴⁹ all references which anchor the text in a particular time and place in a specific atmosphere of change. His style is informal and this is unsurprising for someone influenced by this 60s milieu:

I felt that school was something preventing me from joining the new
‘Swinging London’ outside. It was the era of the Beatles, the new Labour
government, Mary Quant and the mini skirt. The number one record was
‘Satisfaction’

I can’t get no satisfaction,

And I try, and I try,

And I try, and I try⁵⁰

The freedom and drama of these moments is juxtaposed with the school and teachers, and this gives rise to a class awareness, expressed ironically:

The public schools were so good, one teacher told us, that boys came from all over the world just to be a pupil at even the most obscure of them. Well, it seemed to me that our school must be on some sort of par with them, because we had boys from all over the world at our school too. We had boys from the West Indies, Pakistan, Malta, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Africa and Turkey, and that’s not forgetting the boys from the nearer places – Scotland, Ireland and

⁴⁷ Mills, *A Comprehensive Education*, p. 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 51-2; 56-7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 94.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 8.

Wales. Boys, hundreds of them from all over the globe, all sent to Britain and all converging in that one building at the top of Effingham Road in Hackney.⁵¹

However, the day-to-day life of the school contrasted sharply with the expectations facing public school boys. Instead, discipline and control were paramount concerns in order to produce well regulated children suitable for the restricted opportunities in the local labour market. While pupils were closely governed, black children were doubly scrutinised by the school for appropriate behaviour and expected to be ‘ambassadors for their race’.⁵² One way in which Mills handled such injustice was through fantasy as in this carnivalesque passage that undermines the authority of the headmaster in the face of his more responsible pupils:

...the headmaster had gone loco. With a double barrelled shotgun in his hands and his office door barricaded he would be yelling over the P.A. system ‘You’ll never take me alive, do you hear me? You’ll never take me alive.’ The whole school would be listening incredulously as with hideously contorted face he would rave on, teachers panicking not knowing what to do. ‘I know you’re all out to get me, but you won’t though, do you hear? HA HA HA.’⁵³

Autobiographies written by people who grew up after the war are indelibly marked by the possibility and potential for social mobility which had been a feature of much post-war working class writing. However, Mills experiences the tension between the growing entitlement and promise of the 1960s on the one hand and the reality of

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 61.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 27.

schooling in a working class area, expressed through a pep talk by Mr Harmen, on the other:

‘Maturity,’ he expounded, ‘is to know your limitations. Maturity is facing up to life as it really is and giving up daydreams. Limits!’

‘Lets face it lads,’ he said, peering benignly around the room, ‘none of you are ever going to be rich and famous and you’re not going to have a wife that looks like Brigitte Bardot. When you leave this school you’ll get an average job, settle down in an average mortgaged house with an average girl. It is from this position and with this knowledge that you must strive to make your life as worthwhile as possible and influence others to do so within these boundaries,’

‘Real maturity is knowing, knowing what you really want.’

What I really wanted was to be rich and famous and have a wife that looked like Brigitte Bardot.

I was incensed by Harmen’s Smug Sermon and that night I recounted to my mother what he had said, that he had virtually told us we were going to be nobodies. Failures at thirteen. My mother was puzzled by my attitude and was silent for a moment.

‘Well?’ she said.⁵⁴

Mills struggles to escape the restrictions of working class life, apparent in the miscomprehension of his parents, without rejecting a working class identity or blending into the middle class. These undefined and growing expectations undercut

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 49. Compare Keith Birch quoted in Tom Woodin, “‘More writing than welding’: learning in worker writer groups’, *History of Education*, 39(5), 551-567, 2005.

Mills' willingness to paint a finished picture, introducing a narrative voice to position himself ambiguously in terms of the context in which he grew up. He shows an awareness and self-reflexivity, leaving the ending open to a number of conflicting interpretations:

‘What do I want to do, what do I want to do?’ I was filled with a seething anger but I couldn’t figure out what I was angry about. It was about here I was going to give this little autobiography a neat, conclusive yet phoney end... I did feel at the time as if I had been promised something by the school. Exactly what the promise was is the only thing holding up the end of my tale.

I went out last night for inspiration, to the pub and friends of my age who went to similar or nearby schools. I asked them, ‘Do you feel you were promised something in school you didn’t get when you left?’ One said, ‘A job.’ Another talked about them making our expectations too high. Another said we were promised nothing definite except maybe an ability to apply their ragbag of knowledge to the outside world. The last said that we had been given a fair education in an unfair society and that comprehensives ought to be as revolutionary as the public schools are elitist.

I just nodded at all the suggestions and comments, said I still didn’t know what the promise was and that I would have another pint.⁵⁵

Mills himself would continue to work in community publishing and arts for many years and also kept writing, including a number of novels for children.

An ending?

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

The lives of these young people were indelibly marked by participating in such educational practices. Some of them would go on to use writing in their lives while others would remember their writing as an important educational experience in their lives – almost the whole of the early Basement Writers group would later enjoy considerable achievements in writing and culture.⁵⁶ As young people they gained both visibility and recognition which boosted their confidence and abilities in themselves. Through their written work pupils connected with the wider world beyond the school gates. Many of the publications received an audience among school children, teachers, parents and families as well as the wider community. The teachers and groups that published children’s writing went beyond the usual educational limitations: stories, autobiography, poetry and even a novel were all written, breaking out of the ‘Toytown measurements’ of the examined essay.⁵⁷ This represented a serious attempt to value and support children while also inducting them into a wider culture as part of an educational process. Teachers viewed their work as capable of wider adoption and as having a broader impact of the educational system generally.

These writings also bring out the fact that subjectivity has been, and is likely to remain, a site of conflict. This was most apparent in the views of wider authorities and officials who tended to misunderstand and object to such educational work. However, students’ subjectivity is more complex than this. Writing was never entirely free-flowing, waiting to burst out like flowers in spring. It was also channelled, constrained and directed by teachers, parents and the wider social and political

⁵⁶ Chris Searle, *None But Our Own Words*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1998. See also Woodin, ‘Building Culture...’

⁵⁷ Worpole, *Politics of Writing...*, p. 8.

context. Searle's experiments in empathy with socialist global struggles were one example of how the content of student writing could contrast with 'normal' educational expectations. He not only tolerated but actively encouraged oppositional expression. Moreover, more subtle forms of directional teaching were in evidence – young people produced writing in part to please their audience although this was less true in writing groups. In some cases a burden of representation is also apparent in which individual pupils were standing in for wider constituencies. For example, Sabir Bandali's book was sub titled, 'The Autobiography of a Ugandan Asian' implying that he should represent a social group.

However, this approach was not followed dogmatically by teachers who were influenced by various shades of socialism and educational debate. Their methods often attempted to span the socialist-popular culture divide. By fostering the expression of their pupils, teachers validated a range of experience which could not be classified politically in a straight forward way. In many ways such activist teachers were attempting to re-think existing political boundaries in a more inclusive way. Allowing young people the space to experiment and learn a range of models, was paramount to their concerns. Crucially, experience was a key starting point as well as a place to which writers returned. Writings were often initiated in the experience of students as well as their empathy with the lives of others. But in the process they also delved into deeper thoughts and ideas and strayed away from directly representational writing. In order to be true to a feeling or experience, writers might need to engage in elements of imagination and fancy. Conversely, forms such as romance could also serve as a means to explain and describe more factual matters. Indeed, these may be significant yet underexplored facets of autobiographical writing in general. Literary

forms and traditions were both utilised and transformed when adapted to the lives of young people. For instance, elements of popular literature – romance, comic book and fairy tale, for example – can all be seen to operate through these writings. The distinction between popular and ‘serious’ culture was questioned – an insight that was part of wider explorations of the meaning and value of popular commercial culture.

Many students also mined the boundary between speech and writing in coming into their voice. As in the Fed more broadly, successful writers remained faithful to their voices in developing a literature based in part on the experience of marginality.

However, while radical teachers were agreed on the need to recognise and respect working class culture, particularly language, many teachers were aware of the importance of learning the language of power in society, particularly for subordinate groups.⁵⁸

Since this body of work was produced, the wider social and political context has changed significantly and the children have now grown into middle age. The historical moment in which these practices took place has long passed and the spaces in which radical teachers operated have closed down. Teachers no longer exercise such self-control and autonomy over the curriculum. The openly socialist commitment of some teachers referred to here would not be tolerated by those in power. For instance, in the late 1990s, as a head teacher in Sheffield, Chris Searle was himself removed from his post by David Blunkett, a labour Secretary of State for Education. On the other hand, from a contemporary perspective these practices hardly seem to justify the term radical or experimental. In part this reflects the success of

⁵⁸ Chris Searle, interviewed by Tom Woodin, 2000.

such initiatives – it would seem to be unlikely that a teacher, however angry, would be sacked for producing a booklet of children’s poetry although the content of such writing might still raise eyebrows. Moreover, in recent years, a number of schemes have increasingly brought writers into schools to stimulate writing while independent groups continued to publish similar work for many years.⁵⁹ Aspects of this historical practice have had a marginal yet enduring impact upon mainstream practices.

⁵⁹ The Poetry Society ‘poets in schools’ schemes; Various, *Splash!*, Eastside, London, 1996. Pat Smart, ed., *It’s Our World As Well*. FWWCP, Liverpool 1990.