and cultural event organized by African Caribbeans living in the UK. As such, it formed a perfect platform for my introduction to the spectra of Black British reality.

I benefited from the impressive network of individuals and families that was the organizational backbone of the book fair. I was welcomed into the homes of people I had never met.

The book fair itself exposed me to a wide range of perspectives expressed in literature, art, poetry, music and through discussions with exhibitors and participants. This exposure not only broadened my understanding of historical, social and economic circumstances of this world but also significantly contributed to increasing my skills in spoken and written English.

Most importantly though, the book fair helped me in my search for a positive identity as a young African European, putting my own circumstances into an international framework, encouraging and balancing me as an individual.

I believe the book fair represented an important self-determined forum of expression by Black intellectuals, writers, artists etc. as well as a truly international platform for the advancement of intellectual, social, economic and political alternatives to prevailing structures. In this sense, the book fair was a professionally organized, genuine and kind-hearted attempt to help overcome the human hardships created by discrimination, social exclusion and economic marginalization. To many attendants it became an island of hope.

The speakers at the book fair festival that left a lasting impression on me were Abdul Alkalimat, John La Rose and Linton Kwesi Johnson.

I enjoyed and appreciated the kind attention and hospitality of John La Rose, Sarah White, Irma La Rose as well as that of supporters such as Gerlinde Rambausek, Sally Tucker, Cora Tucker and many others.

I cherish the good companionship and love for music shared with Keith La Rose in the years that have followed.

In various ways, the spirit of the Book Fair lives on.

CLARIBEL ALEGRIÁ

The Reflections of Icarus

My wings are of wax
but I fly
and I'll go on flying
even if the sun melts them
and I plummet.
I wouldn't like to be king
of desolate lands
without trees
without rivers
without hands opening doors.
My father studies me
through his tears.
Perhaps they'll call me crazy
reckless
a poet
but I'll go on flying
rising toward the sun
I am crying now
I don't want to see more crows
I don't want to hear their cawing
the sea is shrinking
the horizon vanishes.
I am near
I am coming
the clouds
are my tomb.

From Sorrow
Translated by Carolyn Forché
February 2002

ABDUL ALKALIMAT

The London Book Fairs, 1982-1995: Celebrations and Debates of Black and Third World Radicalism

Writing about the Radical Black and Third World Book Fair for me is part autobiography, part tribute, and part polemic. I lived the Book Fair as it provided fuel for my politics and life forces and choices. We are all indebted to the comrades in London, as well as Manchester, Bradford, Leeds, and many other places. And the Book Fair debates continue to bounce around in my consciousness, as lessons yet to be
learned and debates to be continued as the world changes and our choices continue to be dogma versus dialectics. So for these reasons and more, I consider it a challenge to write this statement about the Book Fair, and write it I must.

First a theoretical point about intellectual history. There has been much talk about the nature of a canon, its writing and its related curriculum at all levels of education. From my perspective, every attempt to fix a canon in time and text is a conservative move that presents history as if it were a bridge across a river, a fixed reference point seeming to help us get to where we want to go. I think this is the position of a ruling elite, a dominant group that wants to establish a hierarchy in which its ideas are fixed things to be revered and obeyed across the generations. For the majority of people in the world the future is one of struggle and the canon is not the bridge, but is the river itself, twisting and turning to negotiate terrain, seeking the ultimate fulfilment of the sea.

This is the contradiction of dogma versus debate. So, when I think of the canon of intellectual history, especially the history of black and third world radicalism, conferences and congresses come to mind. The paradigmatic conferences for the African American struggle are the National Negro Conventions that met in national, state and local meetings from 1830 through the Civil War. Every convention was focused on how to escape and/or end slavery. Since then every movement or organisation of political, intellectual and cultural significance has been born and maintained by conferences. Conferences place content above form, life above the artificial, and the messy ambiguity found in ideological struggle over the superficial clarity and stylistic sophistication of an approved text.

The Book Fair was the global manifestation of our public sphere, not the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas wrote about, but a public sphere of resistance. The Book Fair was a safe place to risk being open, and honest, and focused on freedom more than anything else. It was not about a job, awards, or tenure at a university. Some participants had these things, but most did not. In no way could this be considered a mainstream event. And yet, it was our mainstream. It was the kind of arena in which the battle for ideas would reward us the most. The Book Fair enabled us to define leadership and leading ideas, not in the ranks of our enemies or behind enemy lines, but in this environment that we ourselves, via our London comrades, would create.

The London Book Fair was the place to be each year from 1982 to 1995. We gathered and debated, we celebrated and we danced to the tunes of the world. It is not an exaggeration to say that the London Book Fair was a heartbeat of world revolution. Every impulse of intellectual, artistic and political significance was likely to be found there, and in being there was given a chance to speak and be challenged. In this short essay I would like to take you into the inner life of the Book Fair.

The Book Fair Life Cycle

Each year the Book Fair had a series of events we all came to expect. That expectation as fuel prepared us for an annual and then bi-annual festival of ideas and impressions. It had a life cycle. Here is how I remember the rhythm we all shared.

The Call: It came and then we knew it was on. By phone, letter and/or flyer the word went out and we knew that the London committee was on task. The committee, mainly based at New Beacon Books, but also involving Race Today and early on Bogle L'Ouverture, had a division of labour, but all joined in the politics of summing up events and setting forth political goals and objectives for the Book Fair. In that
context people were chosen for the programme, but always a growing network of scholars, activists, and artists would be invited and expected to come. Everybody was expected to join in the debate. No matter how famous or how young, if you were there, you were de facto part of the process.

The Brochure: Each year the Book Fair brochure was published and became a sort of A-Z of the people, publishers and events. It was our handbook for the year, and guided us from venue to venue, building our tension and expectation as we went. The pictures and the write-ups introduced us to each other and established a sort of fraternity of radicals. It helped bridge contradictions, filled in where there was ignorance, and gave ‘propers’ to all.

The Debates: The week of the Book Fair always began with various activities, especially the evening forums. These were the opening debates serving many different functions. In general, they were topical and helped us to teach and learn about historical and current events. But in particular they were also an opportunity for people from different movements to gather and discover they were different aspects of an even greater movement for human emancipation. These were the public debates, but there was more.

Every day, really from the time those of us from away got to London, it was on. Many of us stayed with comrades connected to the organisers so people debriefed us about our battlefronts and summed up their practice of the past year as well. The hub was at the home of John La Rose and Sarah White in Finsbury Park. Here the food and drink was shared by all. What a wonderful diversity of poetry and politics, metropolis and periphery, rooms and hallways filled with pointed commentary and spontaneous laughter. These debates were also rest and recuperation from the battlefronts. More on this later.

The Opening: The day each Book Fair officially opened was more tension filled than you can imagine. Setting up of booths for all the publishers, using equipment owned and borrowed, was the task of the committee. On that morning most of us turned to the books, posters, and other material we had brought to the market part of the Book Fair. People began to come in, sometimes before we wanted, but who could blame them? Most of us had been reared on disrespect for bourgeois law and order, and we felt where they were coming from. The high point of the opening was a speech, always delivered by someone who the organisers felt personified the art and politics of the Book Fair and who was part of the broad community.

The Book Fair: In the great tradition of the world’s cultures this was a market of high artistic, intellectual, and, most important for me, political significance. There were usually five or six aisles with booths on both sides, about the size of a hotel ballroom. Walking up and down many times over the course of the three day market, you could sense the ferment: movements, schools of art and political thought, organisations there to sell but more importantly to proselytise and debate, vendors there to find suppliers and customers, and authors there to witness the spectacle of book sales (actual or in expectation of their books yet unpublished). The questions were relentless: What have you published since last year? What’s in the works? Tell me about him/her, this or that organisation, etc. But in the end the baseline question was always the same – how can we win?

This was not just a visual treat, but each year there was a soundtrack that taught and cajoled, that set the rhythm and warmed the soul. Boy did I long for that tape, our tape, the tape of the revolutionary march with pointed commentary and spontaneous laughter. These debates were also rest and recuperation from the battlefronts.

The Party: At the end of the last day of the Book Fair we all knew we were going to move into high gear and let the good times roll at the annual party. There were many personal intrigues and loves lost and found, but most important of all, at least from my perspective as one from away, this was a time to hold and caress each other, to drink and release the inner tensions of the debates. In the end we were one, we were the fingers of our collective fist coming together to clap, to embrace, to boogie, and even to cry. We ate foods recreated in London from our many homelands and found what we shared – especially a little pepper, rice with some kind of beans and meat chopped up in it. Some Indian or West Indian takeout was always a treat, and someone always seemed to have that extra bottle needed to make the end of the party as hip as the beginning.

The Satellites: But there was more to this process than London. Usually there was an event before London in Manchester, and then afterwards in Bradford and sometimes Leeds. I always went to Manchester. It felt like home, an industrial city with estates, working class youth ravaged by drugs, fighting racism. I’m from Chicago. Plus I loved walking the streets of Frederick Engels, usually after reading a bit from his classic work about that city...
The London Debates

Through these various annual activities there were ongoing debates that were sometimes explicitly on the programme but always emerged as threads in the public and private discourse. The great debates of the Book Fair as I remember were about art, social change, education, women, ideological icons, and technology and the working day.

Art: The most universally appealing element of the Book Fair was the art it showcased and discussed. All forms were touched upon: literature, music, visual arts, dance, theatre, and film. The high point for performance was always the annual poetry night. Here the debate was encoded in the celebration of the voices and cultures placed on display in high fashion. More specific were the criticism debates that probed the meaning of art and its place in society. There was always the dual dynamic: art must never be delinked from society and the struggles of people for a better life. On the other hand, art must be protected from the policy dictates of petty bureaucrats or ideologues attempting to make art an instrument of a line decided by others than the artist and the broader community they serve. The affirmation of life, love and beauty is always a counter blow against fascism and imperialist greed.

At the Book Fair art was approached not as haute culture, but as the social production of the people, the cultural creativity of the popular masses, as popular culture. We often referred to the creation of the steel band, the origins of reggae and the blues. This was not only an open door to understanding the creative role of workers in seizing the unintended opportunities inherent in the leisure time of unemployment, but also an affirmation of the new cultural impulses found in each new generation of youth.

These debates took on a very explicit refutation of fascist policies against the artist and artistic freedom in the cases of Michael Smith and Salman Rushdie. Mikey Smith was a hip dub poet who spoke the nation language in Jamaica with rhythm, a people's sage singing in the streets and alleys of communities fighting to survive, to escape the terror of rats and roaches in poverty while hoping for moments to laugh and love. He was beaten to death in an urban ghetto of Kingston because he dared enter the neighbourhood of supporters of the political right — his poetry dared to live among the people! He read at the first Book Fair; the third Book Fair memorialised him after his assassination.

Then there was the Rushdie affair. He was a writer facing a death sentence from Islamic fundamentalists because he dared exercise his artistic freedom against religious orthodoxy. What was so wonderful about his defence was the way in which militant women in the London Indian community of Southall not only rose up to defend his right to write, but they also stood tall against domestic violence in traditional Indian homes and dared to provide shelter for battered women there. Here were artists-activists who earned the right to find their creativity without any halter, without any approval, without any censorship.

Social Change: The Book Fair was grounded on the premise that change was needed, not only in the structures of power and economic organisation of society, but in the very processes of social reproduction whereby we renew ourselves over the life cycle, and especially over the generations. We debated the relative role of social forces in conflict and how change was happening, and could happen even more than that. The debates started with their attacks: Racist and Fascist Attacks (1982), Resurgence or Barbarism (1983), (1984). Then we took up our offensive: Art and Social Change (1987), Education and Social Change (1988), Youth and Social Change (1988), Revolt of the Masses, Popular Power, and Processes of Change (1991), and Restructuring on a Global Scale: Crises, Consequences and the Way Forward (1993).

One of the main issues was to chart change as an objective process, but a process in which it was possible to intervene and help determine the future. The fundamental importance of historical materialism was always there, always pushing people to accept the objective necessities of history as a
framework instead of inverting things and assuming that freedom had no historical limitations. The debate seemed to centre on the issue of determination, the fallacy of considering history to be relatively simple mechanical processes of cause and effect. Airy post-modernist thinking was always lurking about, so every year we had to assert the universal importance of thinking dialectically: starting with the objective framework of history and then in that context studying and proposing the possibilities for human freedom. Our collectivity on this was powerful and grew from year to year.

The key to this debate was that we had artists and intellectuals joining with community and movement activists, all of whom were committed to the unity of theory and practice. People came from social struggles, not merely out of the classroom and the library. Critical to this was the role played by trade unionists from various countries, and community activists fighting on many fronts.

**Education:** The institutional focus of debate was on education, the one organised context in every society that is a contested terrain. Schools systems are where the youth are socialised, and youth always bring a desire for change, because they themselves are constantly changing. As a book-oriented activity, the Book Fair was interested in how progressive material was being included in the libraries and curriculum planning of each school system. Many community activists had experience with some kind of after school or weekend programme oriented to both academic excellence and social responsibility.

One aspect of the education debate tended to focus on the alternative strategies of ‘boring from within’ versus setting up an independent process. This is a classic problem that comes up in discussions of the trade unions, schools at all levels, governmental processes like voting, and the use of the media. This was basically viewed as a false dichotomy as people were doing both, and could not be dissuaded. Therefore the only dialectical approach was to explore the relationship between the two and continually discover the strengths and weaknesses of both. In fact, one of the leading members of the Book Fair organising committee became a local school official, while the main activity of the other organisers had been in a Saturday supplemental school.

**Women:** Women were at the heart of the planning process (practical and theoretical), the administration of the week of activities, as well as the formal programme. Again the tension was between centrifugal and centripetal forces – were we building a movement of united leadership involving all sectors of the community, or were we building separate movements, at times in conflict and at times united. We had both in the Book Fair, and it was exciting but tension filled to hear and feel the motion of all aspects of the women’s movement. Every ‘ism’ was there in the forums and in the market.

The voices of women in struggle sang many melodies, bringing forth a wonderful harmony of gender politics, with the necessary Bartok dissonance to remind us of the clash of forces even within ‘united’ motion. We heard and heard of the historical songs of the forest fighters in Kenya, the women of South Africa, the village women throughout South and Central America, the sisters fighting for social reforms in the USA. We heard women writers fighting for recognition and a fair reading, as well as about women oriented motions such as pay for housework, feminist oriented publishers, and many self-help projects.

**Ideological Icons:** The Book Fair also dared to take up icons of black and third world radicalism. There were three Nkrumah debates, and one major Book Fair focused on the discussion of Nkrumah. This was a necessary blow against dogmatism, unleashing new thinking about the fight for social transformation in Africa and the USA, as well as for the world revolution. Dogmatism is a retreat from the responsibility to think critically and never stop summing up experience and integrating it into the collective thinking necessary for progress. Dogmatists memorise, and confuse reciting a catechism with critical thinking.

The debate on Malcolm was necessary to rescue his orientation of constantly developing based on critical thinking and summation of world history. Many narrow black nationalists and Pan-Africanists hold Malcolm close to their definition of correctness and thereby negating his life from 1963 to 1965. And yet their participation in this debate was central, as many of these forces were also involved in the concrete struggles for social transformation. While some marginalised themselves and each year declared their differences before storming off, each year they managed to return, mainly because the Book Fair was the best case scenario for all of us. Indeed, there were always various interest groups and circles of ideological homogeneity who used the occasion of the Book Fair to meet and regroup while also taking advantage of the more inclusive diversity of the entire event. What remained as the central thread on
Malcolm X was this: no matter the criticisms that can be levelled at him, things he did and said at various times in his life need to come under critical scrutiny. He stands among those whose lives present us with a model of dedication and commitment, power and humility, anger and laughter, national democracy and internationalism.

Kwame Nkrumah was discussed in terms of Ghana, Africa, the third world, and world revolution. The post World War Two period can be properly understood only by including him along with the many other leaders associated with the 1945 Pan-African Congress in England, the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia. Nkrumah is the national icon of Ghana, and while everyone there appeals to his memory, the debate continues among Pan-Africanists and progressive political forces about his specific policies and his actual legacy. The 1945 Pan-African Congress was held in Manchester, and therefore it was fitting to have a commemorative event at all Book Fair locations. In fact, friends of the Book Fair had researched and published new material about the Congress. The most important aspect of all of the Book Fairs is that a full complement of revolutionary fighters from Ghana were always on hand. London is a great city that way, being the capital of the British Commonwealth and harbouring many revolutionary fighters living in exile, fighting their own ruling class as well as the British ruling class.

Technology: The most farsighted aspect of the programme each year was a focus on technology, especially the implications the technological revolution has for the working classes of the world in terms of rest, recreation, and cultural creativity. In England the fight in the coal pits formed the backdrop of these discussions. Organisers of the Book Fair reached deep into the British landscape and united with workers and trade unionists from the battlefronts as well as wives and supporters, cultural workers and journalists. There were many other cases of technologically-driven forced unemployment from Europe and the USA. The debates however were more far reaching than those of the ruling class economists, as they were searching to increase productivity for the private appropriation of surplus value.

The Book Fair analysed technological innovation as it might lead to the worst of times or the best of times. This aspect of the Book Fair called together the science and technology professionals who emerged in the 1960s in organisations like Science for the People, and took up the implications mainly of computers, robots, biotechnology, and the Internet. One of the most interesting aspects of this discussion was the teleological implications of those who seemed to love the new technologies and those who were focusing on the dystopia such changes seemed to create in the immediate future. Another issue was seeing technology only as Western tools of contemporary origin while devaluing centuries of technological innovation encoded in the world’s cultures. Finally, we discussed how such developments as Moore’s Law (every 18 months the power of the microchip doubles while cutting costs in half) was leading to such mass availability of powerful tools for all of us, including our movements for social transformation. We anticipated the cyberorganising of the WTO protests in Seattle and the global visibility of the Zapatistas from Chiapas, Mexico.

Socialism

The Book Fair debated the historical progress of socialism. This debate took place as many setbacks were weakening our ranks. In 1981 the Chinese Communist Party changed its colours and attacked Mao. By 1990 the USSR openly embraced a capitalist road. The best form of socialist revolution seemed to be the fight for incremental social reforms embraced by the various forms of social democracy rooted in the trade union movements around the world. Market socialism – whatever that means – was on the rise.

With state ideology no longer the main parameter for theoretical discourse, we could once again breathe life into the Marxist tradition by making a concrete analysis of the world. The limitation of the Moscow line had betrayed more than one struggle. The ideological discovery of Marxism in the line of Mao often substituted the dogma of Peking Review for the debate necessary for clarity and correctness. The Europeans were sober and weather-worn as the countries of Eastern Europe had been the failed experiment informing them. They were often more negative than I was because to me almost anything seemed better than the friendly fascism of Uncle Sam.

Most important of all is that fact that the Book Fair openly embraced the main dynamics of 20th century revolution. John La Rose put it this way in the 1987 Book Fair brochure: “The most significant event of the 20th century still remains the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the hope and promise and activity that it inspired.”
Generations
The perspective of world revolution was possible because the participants in the Book Fair covered many generations. We were anchored in the ideological discipline of the Third International, but embraced a debate that included all of the tendencies of world socialism. In this regard we acted more in the mode of the First International searching for a manifesto for the 21st century such as Marx and Engels had found in 1848 for the 19th and 20th centuries.

We had been baptized in the post World War Two national liberation struggles and brought of age in the resurgence of the 1960s. It was so very exciting to see a playful glance of recognition between old heads when a young person spoke well beyond her years and sang that revolutionary high note we all had hoped to make more often than we did. People came to the Book Fair with hope for the future and with the discipline that had carried us from ravaged areas of the world, often barely escaping the violence of our peers. That same hope now carried us to each Book Fair event that just might be the spark leading to the prairie fire of our youthful dreams.

Many of us had babies who were socialised within this cultural and political cauldron. They are now raising children, and it goes on.

Afro-Americans
One of the most interesting groups at the Book Fair were those peculiar African Americans. We were emulated by every black community and many others all over the world. But we were often overrated. Book Fair audiences expected to hear the resurrected voice of Malcolm X and our most revolutionary tradition. What they got was often very different from that. The movement in the USA that had challenged state power in the 1960s had been defeated by the 1970s. By the 1980s, the cutting edge was the black middle class and their intervention into electoral politics. I had a front seat in this regard: the standard bearers for this period were Harold Washington, Chicago’s first black mayor elected in 1983, and Jesse Jackson, who launched a presidential bid from Chicago in 1984.

The discourse in the black liberation movement in the USA had been forced into retreat. The revolutionary nationalism of Malcolm X had been replaced by a code of sectarianism in Black Studies and other mass settings (although some organisations like the New African Peoples Organisation stayed the course!). The left had been fractured and much like the British case had been marginalised as a ‘loony left’. The Afro-Americans were not prepared for debate on the world stage. not prepared to speak honestly and openly because we had been so reduced to shuckin’ and jivin’ to survive in such a winter of ideological oppression.

The Afro-Americans had been commodified. They demanded money for their services, were tricksters in the market, and had adopted the slick rhetoric associated with the polysyllabic ‘public intellectual’. The Book Fair was about use value, not exchange value. What was useful for the people? It was in the end a class question. In truth, the Book Fair’s respect for the African America was respect for the people. The artists and intellectuals who were often the most noted were often not quite up to the heights of their people’s culture. What saved the day was that key voices did continue to express our best, our humour and our anger, our strategic vision of freedom and our willingness in surviving the terror of the USA.

I was always nervous and concerned that we were not representing like we needed to, but this was a tension that I fed on, reading more, reviewing and editing, doubting and questioning everyone, everywhere, all of the time.

A Personal Note
Finally I want to make a purely personal statement. I learned, I taught, I loved, and I changed.

Recently an old radical professor, worn down by an academic life of privilege and bureaucratic detail asked me ‘How did you survive?’ One reason I survived is that I had the Book Fair. Once a year I could leave the terror of ideological meltdown in the USA and go to a festival where my kind of ideas were applauded and cherished rather than suppressed and demeaned. Don’t get me wrong. My primary source of political and ideological energy comes from the dynamics of the people on the battle fronts where I live. But we lose many more battles than we win. Through the Book Fair I lived through many struggles all over the world and absorbed the cultural energy of hope and resistance as ammunition to bring back home. I went to the Book Fair, but my friends and comrades at home shared as well.

I fell in love in London. I mean the whole range: philia, eros, and agape.

Philia: There was certainly a fellowship we shared, secrets and memories of actions planned and taken, a circle of trust only shared by warriors who drank the blood of victory together. We were a posse – the Afro-Germans, comrades from different collectives in Paris,
the Trinidad trade unionists and cultural workers, the Africans — from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Namibia, South Africa and many other places, and the many different collectives and networks throughout England. We were part of all of that and yet we were one big fellowship.

_Eros_: Then there was sex. I fell in love just about every Book Fair. Mostly I admired from a distance and felt warm inside. Those few times I actually loved (and lost), I only regret my likely male supremacy.

_Agape_: I loved the spirit of the Book Fair. People could smile and laugh like nothing you have ever seen, especially people who came from places experiencing unspeakable crimes against the people. This spirit of human decency and caring, spontaneous outbursts of affirmation and love, was captivating and forced you to feel good. Yes, that’s what I feel when thinking of the Book Fair — joy, laughter, and love.

January 2002

PEARL CONNOR

Concerning my memories of the Book Fair

The Book Fair opened up a whole new vista for black and third world people, establishing as it did an area in the lives of British Blacks never exploited before. My heart was warmed by the extensive displays by publishers, booksellers, artists, musicians, and filmmakers telling our story. Black and third world writing, never easily accessible before, was now at our fingertips.

I was absorbed in the atmosphere of progressive thought and in the great cross-section of visitors to the Fair. I felt ‘at home’ with my own.

The bringing together of black publishers like Bogle L’Ouverture, New Beacon Books and Race Today was an inspiration, and a real innovation, breaking as it did the hold of the metropolitan publishing centres.