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From Primary School Teacher to Ethno-Psychotherapist: Why Sound and Pedagogy Mattered for Beryl Gilroy (1924–2001)

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ABSTRACT

Beryl Gilroy (1924–2001) is often referred to as one of the first Black primary school headteachers in London, England. Her refusal to continue teaching in schools once she reached her fifties has not been explored in recent publications. Her interest in sound, pedagogy and therapeutic recovery can be revisited retrospectively. She strove to counter racism through the power of communication as a teacher, radio broadcaster, headteacher, therapist and published writer of memoir, novels and children’s reading books. The unifying thread in this article interweaves different perspectives on why Beryl Gilroy tried to create colloquial and phonetic speech in her published writings. It is argued that perhaps this was devised to help the reader share in her own reimagining of “poignant veridicality” – an appreciation of truth as something reached through sonic immersion in valuable and contrasting interpretations and feelings that do not always have to have rational explanations.

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Introduction

Throughout my formative years talk was paramount and free flowing. . . The story tellers in my family held us spell bound . . . in song, dance, gesture, and laughter. Their voices took on the light and shade of fantasy and the incongruities of the supernatural, of darkness and of mystery, to produce poignant veridicality. . . The audience was free to participate, to call, to respond . . . creating new meanings through metaphor, imagery, or perceptions of the familiar . . . to give surprise, joy . . . those of us who love “discoursing” knew. (Beryl Gilroy recalling the experience of learning in her own childhood, *Leaves in the Wind*, London: Mango Publishing, 1998, 14–15)

This article explores Beryl Gilroy’s professional journey from primary school teacher to ethno-psychotherapist and the role sound and pedagogy played as she reconfigured her working life between the 1940s and the 1990s. She strove to counter racism through the power of communication as a teacher, radio broadcaster, headteacher, therapist and published writer of memoir, novels and children’s reading books. Her interests in education, therapy and talk were multi-dimensional and need to be analysed in ways

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that recognise her breadth of interests that co-existed with her anti-racist stance. In the opening quote her understanding of “poignant veridicality” recognises her appreciation of truth as something reached through a sonic immersion in valuable and contrasting interpretations and feelings that did not always have to have rational explanations. She came to recognise that imagination was experienced distinctly and differently by people and that this variety mattered for creativity and self-expression.¹ As an adult she sought an audience on subjects relating to ethnic minority identities but would have liked to have been known for her thoughts on other subjects as well. However, she recognised a tendency for West Indian women to be seen in England as “derisive, semi-mimetic intruders.”² She did belong to the North Metropolitan Committee of the Race Relations Board.³ She was also, from 1979, a founder member of Camden Black Sisters, who worked to promote positive awareness of Black women’s lives and culture.⁴ On topics beyond the scope of race her opinion was not sought by influential figures in education. For most of the post-war decades she did not come into contact with high-profile networks who were receptive to what she had to say about education and she was not selected for education committees. As a West Indian Black woman: “the class to which you belong fitted you into the jaws of the system . . . those of us who dared to claim our colonial inheritance had to plead or even grovel for a hearing.”⁵ She is most often referred to in print and online as one of London’s first Black primary school headteachers but her refusal to continue working in schools has not been clarified in recent publications. Her interest in sound, pedagogy and therapeutic recovery can also be heard retrospectively and this is what this article tries to make space for. In this publication she will be referred to as Beryl as, unlike her surnames, it was a name that belonged to her from birth until death and beyond, as her legacy took shape.

Born Beryl Answick, in what was then the British colony of Guyana, South America, in 1924, she was raised from the age of two by her maternal grandmother and grew up in Guyana in a small village. Her grandmother, Sally Louisa James (1868–1967), who had a reputation in the community as a herbalist, took the young Beryl everywhere with her to teach her the importance of commitment and responsibility. Beryl’s mother and father are not directly discussed in her writings. Beryl did not attend school until she was 12. Reflecting on her childhood, once she was old enough to understand her “colonial inheritance,” she was surprised by her grandmother’s literacy.⁶ She was brought up as an Anglo-Catholic with no religious fanaticism. Neither her grandmother nor the local Barbadian priest saw schools as vitally important for Beryl given that her reading and understanding of language was advanced. As a teenager she did attend a church school locally.⁷ English and Creole were the languages she grew up with and her schooling was in English. Beryl completed teacher training at a centre in Georgetown, Guyana, where she graduated aged 21 with a first-class teacher’s certificate in 1945. She was involved in the UNICEF school-feeding programme from 1946 to 1951.⁸

As a qualified teacher and British citizen, she arrived in London in the early 1950s in the company of “1999” other students. Both the students’ passage by ship from Guyana and their university scholarships were financed by Crown Agents.⁹ In London, she studied for a diploma in child development psychology at London University. While looking for employment as a teacher she took on other jobs as an office worker and a maid in London. Fortunately, the Welsh principal of her training college in Georgetown made a recommendation to the Department of Education Services that she be given

a teaching post in London.¹⁰ In this respect her colonial connections did bring an opportunity. This was a period when emergency teacher training was in operation, so different forms of teaching certificates were recognised. In 1953 she was employed as a teacher in a Roman Catholic primary school in Bethnal Green, London. In 1954, she married a scientist of German descent, Patrick Gilroy, who shared her love of reading.¹¹ Beryl worked from home in north London for several years bringing up their two children, Paul Gilroy and Darla-Jane Gilroy. She ran an informal nursery school and mothers' group in her home as well as teaching adult literacy and contributing to BBC radio broadcasts, and completing her full degree in psychology.¹² In 1965, when Guyana's independence from Britain was imminent and with her own children having started formal schooling, Beryl returned to teaching in north London and was appointed as headteacher of a London primary school by 1969. She also poured her enthusiasm into diverse representations in the various reading book series to which she contributed. Some of these series were disseminated in the Caribbean and some in England.¹³ Beryl provided texts for *Little Nippers*, a series of reading books conceived by Leila Berg, for Macmillan Education from 1969, in a bid to include the idioms of working-class culture, colloquial language and realistic situations for ethnic minority communities in England. After the death of Beryl's husband in 1975, she moved on from her teaching career while in her late fifties after studying for a Master's in Education at Sussex University in 1980. She then focused on her writing and trained and worked as an ethno-psychotherapist. Her writings, both published and unpublished, suggest this expansion of her professional experience enabled her to develop her understanding of ethnicity, identity, language and healing from trauma. She died of a heart attack in April 2001.

The distinct historical context of Beryl's upbringing in Guyana needs to be clarified in terms of understanding how it may have shaped her views on social status and cross-cultural experience. Beryl remembered Guyana in her own writing as a multi-ethnic and multi-faith community where the celebration of Christmas, Diwali and Ramadan and Chinese New Year were shared and respected as significant to different members of the community. If there was jealousy, it was socio-economic, as she recalled – not about race.¹⁴ She credited a gifted Hindu teacher in Guyana as having taught her self-motivation and self-evaluation.¹⁵ The multi-ethnic population and its relative ease of interaction, which Beryl alludes to, is a story told and linked to a complicated Guyanese history that evolved after the abolition of slavery in the 1830s. Indentured labour continued until 1917 so descendants of those migrating peoples, as well as the descendants of the formerly enslaved African population, belonged to the Guyanese community that Beryl briefly summarises in her own memoirs. She made no mention of the indigenous community of Guyana whose land rights preceded the colonisation of these territories. Hadiyyah Kuma has observed how the displaced indigenous peoples of Guyana are discussed far less than those who experienced indenture or enslavement and that their contribution to the country is sometimes made invisible.¹⁶ From Beryl's perspective, perhaps she glossed over some of the complexities of cross-cultural interactions in Guyana, having left the country before she was 30 and then spending the rest of her life living in London. Ralph Premdas explains how in the 1950s Guyana's Progressive People's Party (PPP) split and came to mainly represent the Indo-Guyanese while the People's National Congress came to be associated with the Afro-Guyanese population, leading to sectional fears between communities.¹⁷ There were aspects of life in Guyana

that Beryl certainly did not idealise. Despite her respect for her Guyanese teacher training and her appreciation of that multi-ethnic educational culture which was organised “with high standards of neatness and endeavour,” she voiced some misgivings that school in Guyana was not a place where children initiated or asked questions without permission.¹⁸

Sarah Graham and Derek Gordon sought to explain some of the issues of social class and status that were prevalent in Guyana in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Education was allegedly a key factor associated with high occupational status in Guyana. Primary schools had their origins there as places where slaves or former slaves and their children might become “an industrious segment of the colonial population,” and evolved as places where the church oversaw that those attending were receptive to the notions of obedience to British culture and power. Furthermore, Graham and Gordon note contradictions and racist tensions around recognition of children of mixed-race heritage. There was some prejudice within Guyanese society concerning their social status beyond the confines of schoolings.¹⁹ By the 1940s members of the population acquiring diplomas and certificates and overseas training were becoming more widespread, and a gathering of expertise was socially respected. For those who stayed in Guyana the status of the primary school teacher may simultaneously have been declining as an occupational choice, particularly in the villages in the post-war years.²⁰ Beryl was part of that post-war generation who arrived in England. Arguably there was a far more simplistic understanding of migrating communities in England than Beryl had grown up participating in. There was also far less immediate discussion of England’s entanglement with slavery or indentured labour than she had been accustomed to.

In the opening quote at the beginning of this article Beryl took the word “discoursing” and used it not as a nod to Michel Foucault (1926–1984), of whom she was well aware, but to remember her grandmother’s social world and the need for “exchange and receptivity.” As this article will illustrate, Beryl avoided direct references to high-profile authors associated with education such as Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) and John Dewey (1859–1952), while subtly acknowledging their influence in scenes within her writing. In her writing on para-suicidal women and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), she recognised his nineteenth-century sociological arguments can only be partially applicable to Black women because Durkheim spoke from “the safe haven of the castle of his skin” where direct experience of low-paid jobs, menial work and feelings were not recognised.²¹ Discourse for Beryl could involve “long silences, speech sounds . . . [changing] its route . . . humorous, caring, curious. . . [Savouring] strange words.”²² She makes a specific distinction between discourse and tongue lashings, which were “cautionary and intentional.” Discourse was not predictable or chastising. Sound was nurturing to Beryl and indeed, when she was at home with her own babies, she “could not go past a school playground without stopping, listening and watching.”²³ Over and above any visual experience she was comforted by what she refers to as “a cataract of voices” or “cacophonous voice and syncopated pulse,” which was formed by the collective noise of children at school.²⁴ Beryl did not shy away from that which was discordant.

Beryl Gilroy: Literature and Representation

Before bringing more evidence of Beryl’s interest in sound and pedagogy to the fore and explaining the research methods that evolved, sometimes unexpectedly, during the

writing of this article, I need to acknowledge what has been published about Beryl so far. She had not been the main focus of either academic or popular book publications at the time of publishing this article. Most of the published discussions concerning her outlook have come in the form of interviews conducted in her lifetime or analysis of her fictional writings.²⁵ There are also recordings of contributions to panels, for example at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Some of these recordings are now held by the British Library Sound Archive or were published as a transcript within academic journals.²⁶ The British Library also acquired Beryl's archive in 2022, so no doubt further studies of her life and work will be forthcoming.²⁷ Her legacy has been revisited and represented as that of a pioneer of Black professional life in England, more often than her writings have been scrutinised or her educational and therapeutic thinking linked to its historical context. The Camden Primary School where she became a headteacher in 1969, formerly known as Beckford Primary School but now known as West Hampstead Primary School, now has a 15-foot mural outside dedicated to Beryl, which was created by the artist Fipsi Seilern and completed in 2022. It pays homage to Beryl's status as a headteacher but does not offer any illustrations of her pedagogy in action. The school was originally named after the English politician William Beckford (1709–1770), whose wealth was derived from sugar plantations and slaves. When the primary school was renamed in 2020 the possibility of it being named after Beryl Gilroy was voted for within the school but a majority did not opt for this change. The name West Hampstead Primary school was adopted instead.²⁸

In the most recently published Faber 2021 edition of *Black Teacher*, a new foreword was contributed by novelist Bernadine Evaristo, which credited Beryl as having deeply rooted moral values. Evaristo also makes some apology for the phonetic replication of the vernacular that Beryl uses in dialogue, suggesting it is: “not generally considered wise in fiction nowadays as it can make characters sound like caricatures.”²⁹ This reflection touches on an apparent ongoing conundrum facing critics of Beryl's work, concerning the appreciation of the power of sound for the reader. Beryl may deliberately have used phonetic replication because she wanted the reader to imagine the sound of the dialogue as she heard it. Yet a contemporary author of fiction, presumably not accustomed to teaching reading to children and perhaps unfamiliar with the use of sound in educational broadcasting, has here advised caution against the very approach to writing that offered us a vivid reflection of Beryl's own excitement over conversational pedagogy. If you spend a lot of time in primary schools, past or present, the subtleties and some agonies of sound are part of learning to read, they are part of song, they are part of helping children to unscramble misunderstandings and injustices between each other and staff and part of spontaneous oracy and rehearsed performance. Perhaps it can be inferred that Beryl, as a migrated Commonwealth citizen finding England awash with prejudice and ignorance in the 1950s, actively sought to use her role as an educator to focus on a pedagogy which helped heal mistrust through dialogue. Beryl argued that home languages, dialects and standard English all needed to be freely participated in and heard in schools. Children should be encouraged to swiftly transition between other languages, dialects and standard English. Translanguaging, as we might now say, without the acute self-consciousness Beryl had felt in the 1950s when despite having English as her first language she had been expected to conceal her variety of idiom and expression in her professional life once teaching in England.³⁰

Beryl does not write about Black supplementary schools in London, although she was no doubt aware of their existence. Jessica Gerrard's writing on Black supplementary schools in 1960s England offers explorations of this movement but Beryl herself was not actively involved in these networks beyond offering informal education in her own home to other families with a wide variety of ethnicities.³¹ Beryl's interest in conversational exchange over and above the predictable western structure of autobiographical and memoir writing was perhaps one of the reasons that some people appear to have been suspicious of her writing. She described *Black Teacher* as "resulting from a fit of pique" about the mocking of Black people in England. For the 1976 first edition, she had to work with an editor who was "an abrasive, metallic old man who did his best to axe the work, in spite of the contract."³² There are perhaps echoes in the responses to the book in the 1970s English context of contemporary fears generated in the English media regarding critical race theory. Roy Blatchford, a London comprehensive schoolteacher, reviewed *Black Teacher* in the *Times Educational Supplement* when it was first published in 1976, and questioned the "relevance" of the message:

Her trials in the fifties were deplorably the common lot for the immigrant. None the less, is it worth yet another voicing? Can the publishers seriously ask that the book should be taken to heart by educationalists and parents?³³

This review "trivialised" the book, as Sandra Courtman has indicated.³⁴ Perhaps it also helped re-direct the discussion of Beryl's work away from what inspired her professional life. Instead, it re-routed the focus to a parallel and arguably intrusive suspicion as to how acute or not her experience of racism was and suggested acknowledging the realities of her experience was something with which TES readers should avoid emotional engagement. Blatchford queried whether Beryl could really recall "all those interchanges," disregarding the power of dialogue-based storytelling in a memoir and with his subtext perhaps hinting that to have voices in your memory was a sign of madness or, worse still, perhaps magic.³⁵ Some primary school teachers with whom Beryl worked also "crossed themselves" in fear that she must "have something special."³⁶ Blatchford granted no recognition that much of the way in which primary school teachers can build up a sense of trust and a productive working environment in classrooms is through dialogue with the children they teach.

As previously acknowledged, there are a few 1980s recordings of Beryl's actual voice that can be heard if you sit in the British Library reading rooms in London and use licenced computers that are directly linked to the British Library Sound Archive. However, recordings of her voice are not widely accessible to listeners online. Most of our auditory engagement with Beryl's narrative and argument is likely to come about from reading her books and then listening in our own minds, if we can, to the re-created vernacular speech she offers on the page. I need to acknowledge here that some might also have access to the 2021 audiobook of *Black Teacher* narrated by the actress Debra Michaels, whose swift adjustments between accents Beryl would probably have admired, but this is another verbal interpretation not Beryl's actual voice as archived sound.³⁷ When we read on the page, auditory imagination compensates for an extensive access to archived sound. For Beryl, recalling what we experience as we reimagine and remember our own and others' educational interactions in the past or present was not madness. It

was the joy and sometimes pain of listening to what was being uttered and making peace with our own inner processes.

Black Teacher was not widely reviewed in educational journals when first published in 1976. The journal *History of Education* did not include it in its book reviews, and indeed it did not make space in that era for content which was concerned with what was then very recent historical reflection on the immediacy of classroom experience. *History of Education* in 1976 preoccupied itself with writings on education in Tudor and Stuart England, science and military education and an occasional article on the evolution of prep schools. There was a brief reference to Raphael Samuel talking at a conference about East London communities and education, but there was no direct discussion of recent history in terms of post-war teacher experience for Black women educators.³⁸ Marina Warner, writing in 2021, recalls how, when Beryl's writing was acknowledged in the 1970s, she was accused of "boasting" and of "exaggerating the prejudice" she faced. Warner also observed that while fellow Guyanese migrant and teacher E. R. Braithwaite, the author of *To Sir With Love*, went uncensored, a "black woman's claims were seen as vanity."³⁹ Edward Blishen, a former teacher and subsequently an author and broadcaster, reviewing *Black Teacher* in 1976 for the *Guardian*, had objected to Beryl's way of writing about education as "self-applause."⁴⁰

Sound has often been explored in the history of education with a recognition that it is an elusive source but one we can speculate on in a nourishing way, particularly as our interaction with digital and audio resources can now often be almost instant; that was far less possible for most of Beryl's lifetime. Joyce Goodman's writing on sound is informed by her own memories of teaching in schools in the 1970s, which involved experimenting with various sound sources including: wooden floors, nut casings, pebbles, sounds outside the room, and breath. Goodman argues that "constructions of subjective and collective meaning of sound-noise and hearing-listening can inform researchers' assumptions."⁴¹ Perhaps Beryl, who was also immersed in 1970s classrooms in an era before the national curriculum and where some degree of teacher agency in terms of pedagogical experiment was widely encouraged, was in her own way trying to offer the reader subjective and collective meanings to play with in their own minds when she wrote up her memories of teaching. She was concerned that, through the patterns of history, slavery had inhibited Black experience of play because notions of self-worth came through work, which the greed of the slave owner had demanded. To play had become associated with shirking, and beating children for not working had been normalised in West Indian society in her view. In this way, the trauma of slavery was perpetuated through parental discipline, generations after emancipation.⁴²

Nele Reyniers has highlighted the way certain professionals such as nineteenth-century doctors could use sound to entrench normative perceptions of otherness. Reyniers recognised the importance of the acoustic in the way young people were labelled.⁴³ Reading Reyniers's work I reflected how Beryl in her own era of the late twentieth century was perhaps actively trying to counter the homogenising of language and identity by emphasising the need to be able to move fluidly between different dialects of English that should all be uttered within school. Beryl listened to the radio often when at home with her own children and enjoyed the background sound of children communicating. Returning to teaching in schools in the late 1960s, she did not put the focus on educational broadcasts from outside the immediate school community. Indeed, by the

1970s she thought “television-centred values” had brought “turbulence” to children’s learning and voiced her relief that the children she had interacted with as a headteacher in school remembered her being actually present in the school conversing with them and playing the piano.⁴⁴

Audible and Visible Research Methods

This article started to take shape when the historian of education Peter Cunningham sent me a 1976 edition of *Black Teacher* in the post before it was reprinted by Faber in 2021. I read it before it was reprinted with the Evaristo foreword. What struck me first about the book was how much speech was re-created on the page and how central conversation was for Beryl as a form of storytelling and teaching. All the dialogues re-created in the book relate to people connected to Beryl’s working life – she does not share reconstructions of her immediate family conversations with her husband or children. As a reader I could deduce that an essential part of pedagogy for Beryl was respecting the dignity and word choices a child might use and extending them without curbing them. She described her evolved approach to school assemblies as an “infants forum” where as a headteacher she would read a story and a conversation would ensue between her and the children as a spontaneous discussion.⁴⁵ She did not directly reference any recommended twentieth-century educational handbooks or policies for guidance. Her teaching responded to circumstance: “I am not willing to create mental blocks for myself by even trying to absorb theories which, to me, have nothing to do with individual phenomenology.”⁴⁶

In my own published academic writing I have shown a tendency to lean on visual material and at times to intersperse writing with my own drawings, not so much to theorise but as therapeutic ornaments I carried with me to help illustrate experiences of research. In writing about Beryl I did not want to pull her into this trap, as she gives relatively little visual description of contexts or people in her writing: “I am only marginally concerned with detail which I leave to the creativity of the reader.”⁴⁷ It is communication Beryl wanted us to dwell on. She sometimes described schools in relation to the acoustics of a particular room.⁴⁸ As this article grew, it depended on reading more of Beryl’s writing and I began to explore the archival holdings at the British Library, the British Library Sound Archive and the BBC Written Archives. All these documentary sources were predominantly concerned with what Beryl wrote or spoke about for a public audience.

At the same time as writing this article, I was teaching students at both Middlesex University and the University of Cambridge. Some of these students, all studying education, grappled with concerns over whether they wanted to be teachers or to work in some kind of therapeutic role long term. They questioned whether schools made sense to them on their own professional journeys or whether they wanted to work with small groups or individuals who were wanting some kind of therapeutic intervention. Together with some recently graduated students from Middlesex University I made some five-minute sound recordings, editing together background sound of children talking and playing with recorded voices of the former students’ discussions about sound and pedagogy. Some students felt a strong sense of optimism regarding the community of the school and, like Beryl, they missed the sound of children talking together when they were separated from their space of work. Others had a very clear sense that their own

reflections and chance to be heard in a sound recording were making sources on the history of education for the future. When one five-minute sound recording was played at a conference, some academics found these recordings almost overwhelming as they had not had to listen to the noise of schools for a while when working in the relative quiet of universities. Some were unsettled by the simultaneous, overlapping and unpredictable nature of the flow of speech edited together to directly reference Beryl's interest in discourse as a space where people "come in with vigour and interrupt."⁴⁹ The discordant sound of children speaking simultaneously, which Beryl was open to hearing, some described as painful when audible in the space of a university conference. Others queried how such experiments with sound could be scientific evidence for historians. These experimental sound recordings are not audible in this journal article for ethical and copyright reasons and because Taylor & Francis journal articles are still usually conceived in the conventional sense as forms of communication that live inside a template. However, the collective experience of making the recordings helped me as a writer understand more about sound and pedagogy and what kind of sources might inform and shape the "poignant veridicality" that Beryl saw as a central presence in communication.

The most difficult part of researching this article was understanding the ethno-psychotherapy that Beryl had trained in and practised during the last two decades of her life. For ethical reasons the archiving of any kind of therapeutic practice is complex and minimal because of data protection and the professional loyalty of the therapist to the client. To make that kind of record can be a breach of confidentiality. The term ethno-psychotherapy is also not that widely used in published literature. Ethno-psychotherapy describes psychotherapeutic practice that takes cultural and ethnic identities as the starting point and does not let the process be constrained by mainstream European traditions of psychotherapy. Beryl did expand on ethno-psychotherapy in conversation with Roxann Bradshaw in the final months of her life, explaining that she had worked to counsel Black women to speak more openly about their sexuality and their identity and to move beyond the superficial to openly discuss emotional experiences within Black and White communities.⁵⁰ Ethno-psychotherapy could involve one-to-one therapy or group therapy. Culture influences how people experience and work with differentiated conceptions of mental illness and therefore therapeutic responses need to encompass ways of seeing that go beyond western notions of mental illness and work transculturally and ethno-psychotherapeutically.

Beryl's rejection of an ongoing career in schools in the 1980s could also be read as a powerful refusal of complicity with a particular national educational culture where she was not often heard beyond the immediacy of her own school community. Simpson has argued that if recognition of a contribution is not forthcoming, then refusal helps raise the question of what legitimacy those who think they have the power to recognise even have. What authority do they have to do the recognising? One authority can challenge the legitimacy of another.⁵¹ Once Beryl had become a head of a primary school it may have felt as if there was nowhere else to go professionally, as her outlook on education did not fit the educational debates of the time when mistrust of teachers' independence was growing.⁵² In mainstream schooling, which is so closely linked to the responsibilities of the state, asking direct questions that confront immediate contradictions in education and unpicking what is actually happening in schools is often hard to achieve, as it is

perceived as potentially disrupting children's education. Beryl did recognise that teaching, by its nature, was a "subversive activity," but she also saw that the situation was complicated by teachers favouring certain children over others in their own search for status.⁵³ Working therapeutically may have given Beryl more scope for directly meeting the needs of ethnic minority communities while also speaking out against misrepresentations. By the 1970s, schools had in her view become "failed socialising agents," forcing double standards on minorities as well as contributing to cultural denigration in society.⁵⁴

The Journey into and out of Teaching through Pedagogy and Sound

One of the reasons Beryl felt so strongly that sound mattered in education may have been because her own schooling in Guyana had involved songs and learning knowledge by heart without being given any explanations concerning the realities of what was said and learned. Her schooling in Guyana involved singing English songs, including the "Eton Boat Song," while no one even explained what Eton was.⁵⁵ In her first London teaching job in a 1950s Roman Catholic primary school she observed that children skipped to anti-foreign rhymes in the school playground and teachers left their prejudice unchallenged: "religion helped the emergence of ethnocentrism in children."⁵⁶ Throughout her working life she also argued that home languages and dialects and standard English all needed to be participated in and heard in schools freely and that this would facilitate creativity developing and prejudice diminishing. Children should be encouraged to swiftly transition between dialects and standard English when required. This perspective she maintained across the decades, but she never had opportunities to publish these arguments for an audience of educators in England. It was in her handbook on the teaching of reading, published by Longmans in 1962 for Caribbean audiences, some 14 years before her memoir *Black Teacher* was published in England, that Gilroy made one of her most self-confident assertions about dialogue and pedagogy:

Since English words form a real part of the dialect spoken by the children, teachers of reading should use the idioms of the dialect to help convey meaning to the West Indian child. These idioms, metaphors and similes differ from island to island, but they are as definite and expressive as their English equivalents. If dialect is completely suppressed, the children's speech tends to become stilted, inhibited and lacking in expressiveness.⁵⁷

When she had returned to teaching in London in the late 1960s, after time out of formal employment when she was bringing up her own pre-school children, she found pupils more suspicious of "foreigners" than they had been in the 1950s.⁵⁸ She also felt an increased sense of responsibility to shape pedagogy in a way that was inclusive of cultural background: "This idea of wiping out a complete background saddened me. . . . The West Indian children seemed so ashamed of a music or, indeed, anything that was black or African."⁵⁹ She focused on creative writing and the use of handicrafts to build sensory understandings and to invite a wider use of vocabulary. Reciting rhymes was also seen as a crucial illustration of the humour they may have picked up at home: "Nice English poems had no connection with their lives."⁶⁰

In many of the interactions recalled in *Black Teacher*, Beryl re-creates her own speech with direct feeling and frankness, whether she is addressing children or adults. She does

not flinch when random judgements are made and tells those who doubt her that they can report her to the Prime Minister if they so choose.⁶¹ She recognised there was no use ordering people around who were already marked by poor housing – a sense of trust had already been broken but some trust needed to be rebuilt. Therefore, in school, “The rules had to be few and definite and . . . the children had to accept them emotionally. If they did not, they isolated themselves from all that went on about them.”⁶² She also avoided being embroiled in selective listening, even if it would have been the easiest path. She was threatened by no child but at the same time a Christian conscience and related strictures of decent behaviour shaped her pedagogy in the sense that she could not overlook wrongdoings. When a pupil stole a handbag from Woolworths and tried to give it to Gilroy as a present, she instigated a school trip where the whole class went to the post office to post the bag back to Woolworths.⁶³ Again, discourse and action was used in her pedagogy, not chastising and tongue-lashing.

Reflecting back on her life as a teacher when she had left the profession she recalled: “Talk is my special ingredient . . . its creativity is ongoing, malleable, able to avoid the kiln of rigidity.”⁶⁴ To avoid this rigidity people needed to speak directly to each other without superficial agreement in Beryl’s view, and then through an acceptance of difference and disagreement “our souls might hear the same music of solace and hope.”⁶⁵ She resisted adopting what she called the “awful” and “gabbling know it all” voice of the headteacher.⁶⁶

Beryl was also arguably more interested in how people really communicated in classrooms than in the content of the curriculum. She suggested a curriculum that used Robin Hood and his Merry Men, and nymphs and fairies could probably be used to engage the children with themes that reached wider than the provincial English storytelling which some might associate with such traditional tales.⁶⁷ She did not use Enid Blyton in teaching as she recognised this author as too racist.⁶⁸ She felt that post-war primary schools needed to compensate for many of the things that were missing in family life, to create order and safety amongst the mayhem of home lives in England where “Empty bottles, packets of crisps . . . and opened-out hairpins littered the floor” and where “parents are like shadows in [the children’s] days and ghosts at night.”⁶⁹ In the vignettes and dialogues she created for the reader in the last two decades of her life she was free of the strictures that the BBC tried to impose upon her when she was a broadcaster in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, BBC staff tried to reshape her writing, asking that she offered: “a firmer ending, something to tie it up with the opening.”⁷⁰

In the writings Beryl shared with her reader in print, rather than in BBC broadcasts, new perspectives of experience relating to certain educational texts or figures of authority who belonged to the English-speaking world were sometimes introduced in a way that hints at realisations linked to therapeutic processes. The three examples discussed next concern reading a Matthew Arnold poem, Beryl’s experience as a maid in the 1950s working for Lady Winifred Gore (1891–1958) and a memory of reading John Dewey at Chessington Zoo. These three examples all concern the power of conversation and are used to illustrate some explanations as to why Beryl may ultimately have discarded the identity of a primary school headteacher and become an ethno-psychotherapist.

As a teenager, who by this point was attending a Church school in Guyana, Beryl came across the poem “The Forsaken Mermaid” by Matthew Arnold. She attributes this discovery, when writing about the memory in later life, to *Palgrave’s Golden Treasury*

Book 4, but that may have been a mis-remembering as most editions of this anthology included poems from an earlier generation of poets; however, Beryl argues her edition had additional poems.⁷¹ This poem was not introduced directly by Beryl's teachers or her grandmother. However, as Beryl complained about school often during the 1930s her grandmother bought her a book with the poem in it at the nearby Plantation sale, to encourage her to read out of school.⁷² The poem was about a mortal woman who married a merman and lived in the sea kingdom, but when hearing the church bells she left her children and husband and returned to life on land. Beryl, who lived near the sea and "heard all its voices," was traumatised by the poem when she first came across it, in particular the line of the merman to his children encouraging them to give up on attempts to call out to their mother: "She will not hear you though you call all day." She could not find anyone in the family to discuss her poignant sense of the merman's grief with until she found her grandmother in a "confabulation" of women and this group of women, including her grandmother, listened to Beryl. The choice of the word "confabulation" here is significant, because it is not used to question their mental health but to acknowledge the embellishments and "incongruities" of detail that meet in group conversation. They all listened to Beryl discussing her feelings about the poem and heard her read some parts of Arnold's poem. For her grandmother the poem released stories and myths from Guyana of the generation after slavery. They did not need to discuss what Matthew Arnold might have meant but instead how the impact of hearing this poem resonated with a history of slaves who died nursing their children as they worked, and returned as spirits to beat their masters into hell. The language of her grandmother was also described as being able to shift from Arnold's words to "a storehouse of colloquial proverbs."⁷³ It was not necessary for Beryl to remind the reader of Arnold's role as a school inspector and cultural critic. What spoke to her most memorably was how his use of language, via her own emotionally affected retelling, encouraged her grandmother to speak of the violence and loss within their own heritage.

One of the most unnerving chapters in *Black Teacher* is Beryl's account of her life in London before she could secure a teaching contract, working as a servant for "Lady Anne" in the early 1950s. Anne is a pseudonym used by Beryl in print. Her employer's real name was Lady Winifred Gore (1891–1958), the unmarried daughter of the 5th Earl of Arran.⁷⁴ Anne assumes that Beryl came from a line of "carriers" and that the country of Beryl's birth was a "literary void."⁷⁵ Despite or perhaps because of the relentless condescension she experienced, Beryl writes of her envy of Anne: "I suppose she was to a great extent what I would like to have been a civilised woman, so I didn't mind serving her."⁷⁶ Beryl was also shocked by the limited education that Anne herself had received in England, with no formal schooling. She was taught only by a governess.⁷⁷ She writes of Anne at times with a deference that is hard to confront if taken literally. Within the dialogue of the chapter there are hints of Beryl referring to what she learned from Anne, such as a "psychological acceptance of roles" and "civilised controversy." The chapter also weaves in wry jokes about individuals and clubs in a culture committed to Empire-building. According to Beryl, Anne taught her that education does not necessarily depend on going to school but that it does depend on a dialogue where people "come in with vigour and interrupt."⁷⁸ She helped her see a link between conversational pedagogy in families in both Guyana and England. Beryl's own children have repeatedly conveyed that

their mother saw education out of school as crucial.⁷⁹ This conviction also leaps out of the pages of the reading books Beryl produced for Longmans and *Little Nippers* in the 1960s and 1970s. Children are in dialogue with family, whether selling or buying produce, cooking, playing or just having a conversation.⁸⁰

Much of Beryl's conviction concerning education outside of school developed from her relationship with her own grandmother from her earliest years, but Anne in some way helped Beryl unwittingly recognise the lasting power of that connection. Beryl came to realise that Anne had taught her that education should develop many facets of the mind and not to place faith in possessions. She argues that she helped her find a sense of her own identity in London. The interlinking theme in all the praise Beryl attributes to Anne is that none of this happened through direct instruction from Anne. Beryl seems to realise that, through the one-to-one conversations and that unwitting sharing of different experiences, some kind of therapeutic dialogue was emerging. Anne was blatantly racist but she also wanted people to answer back, to heckle, to argue without quarrelling. If some transference was taking place between the two women, Beryl was the one with the professional future. She may have realised when reflecting on serving one ageing aristocrat that her own therapeutic work need not be invested in those hanging on to the last days of Empire but could be offered and shared with ethnic minority communities in London in the long term. Those communities were having to navigate the entrenched vestiges of Empire in the institutional landscape.

The third example of experiences of contempt and misrepresentation that could be linked to Beryl's long-term rejection of teaching in schools in favour of working as a therapist presumably makes an indirect reference to John Dewey. However, as with the memory of Matthew Arnold's merman poem, Dewey and his writings are not the central subject of Beryl's sharing of a memory. A dialogue between ideas and experiences echoes in the background. She relives a scene in *Black Teacher* where, during a school trip to Chessington Zoo, her pupils are playing and she is seated in the long grass reading John Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938).⁸¹ The author is not named so maybe she is not referring to Dewey's book but another with a similar title, but there is a chance the reader may make the association with Dewey. In *Experience and Education* Dewey addressed the interaction between internal and external conditions of learning and voiced concern for the consideration of individual student experiences. He acknowledged awareness of indirect experience as a vital part of education, because much of what we pick up might be incidental. In Beryl's writing a man in a cloth cap accosts Beryl and asserts that she must be "at home" seated in the grass. He speaks to her slowly, stressing each syllable as if she would have limited English. He takes her book and returns it to her upside down. In response Beryl sniffs, strokes and kisses the book noisily, interacting with the book as if she were an animal to make manifest his preconceived ideas about her. She then called out to her class in a mimicking Cockney accent suggesting they come and see a "nutter wot can read upside down writing." The man runs away afraid and the pupils rally to support her, laughing but also expressing their anger towards this man.⁸² In this small scene Beryl presents herself as a figure of safety, comedy and loyalty for her class outside the confines of the school. She could trust them to play outdoors on a school trip, but respect for Beryl is not reinforced by the reactions of strangers who corner her, mock her, presumably do not imagine her as a figure of authority and disrupt her concentration.

Beryl was critical of many of her experiences in English primary schools in the 1950s where “the children are verbally tethered to their seats . . . punished by smacks, jibes, and sneers.”⁸³ She observed that the teachers who wanted to stream five-year-old pupils were also so saturated in their own racist fears and could not even share crockery with Beryl in the staff room. There were eugenics overtones conveyed when teachers were racist and divisive in their views of intelligence.⁸⁴ At the same time, Beryl saw her work in English primary schools across the decades as largely liberated from the violence of straps and canes that were acceptable to a West Indian parent “who whether consciously or not may associate playing with shirking under slavery.”⁸⁵ This was a key tension, which she devoted her working life to undoing. Whether it was play in a classroom, a playground or a place where therapy was ongoing and whether the play involved objects or words, Beryl came to see that her work as a therapist could do more to help ethnic minority communities and trauma across generations than her work in education could. Fred D’Aguir wrote of Beryl’s impact on her son, Paul Gilroy, that a “child is destined to succeed in a space cleared by her energy and initiative.”⁸⁶ This did not necessarily just apply to her companionship with children as a mother, but also to those children she worked with as an educator.

Describing teaching in London for herself and her colleagues at the end of her teaching career, Beryl argued she felt constrained by a culture in London for the previous two decades that in her own words allowed the ethnic minority community to dominate only if they were clowns, entertainers and comedians.⁸⁷ Perhaps what Evarista was picking up on with her discomfort concerning caricature is part of this pressure on ethnic minority communities to bring in comedy to be noticed in London and whether Beryl had felt more pressure to entertain when she first published *Black Teacher*. To take another perspective, however, perhaps the way Beryl brought speech to paper was ultimately a way of sharing what she referred to as “poignant veridicality,” a kind of representation of shared discourse that could be enjoyed by many readers, listeners and those with auditory imagination. She also had a serious mission to promote different forms of and structures within published writing. To give the last word to Beryl: “In my own right I try to write pictures with the talk of my characters. I listen to people talking and open up their sayings like umbrellas.”⁸⁸ Perhaps she was interested in sheltering readers under an imaginary umbrella in a space where sound, pedagogical and therapeutic experience could all meet without being segregated.

Notes

1. Gilroy, “The Oral Culture,” 63.
2. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 214.
3. *Ibid.*, 247.
4. Donnell, *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture*, 62; see Tyson, *Claudia Jones* for further information on Camden Black Sisters.
5. Gilroy, *In Praise of Love*, 64.
6. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 138.
7. *Ibid.*, 137–40.
8. Fraser, “Gilroy [*née* Answick], Beryl.”
9. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 19. Since 1749 Crown Agents had conducted financial transactions for British colonies concerning grants from the British Treasury.
10. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 24, 241.
11. Bradshaw, “Beryl Gilroy’s ‘Fact-Fiction,’” 386.

12. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 118; BBC Written Archives RCONTI files on Beryl Gilroy from 1959 onwards.
13. See for example Gilroy, *Blue Water Readers*; Gilroy, *The Green and Gold*.
14. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 150.
15. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 150.
16. Kuma, in Lue et al., “Relinking Back to Community,” 171.
17. Premdas, “Race, Politics and Succession.”
18. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 94.
19. Graham and Gordon, *The Stratification System*, xiv.
20. Ibid.
21. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 177.
22. Ibid., 13.
23. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 121.
24. Ibid., 3 and 180.
25. See for example: Anim-Addo et al., “Anguish and the Absurd.”
26. See for example the British Library audio-recording of Beryl Gilroy as a panel member for “Childhood, Identity and Old Age” at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 26 July 1986, 1 hour, 2 minutes.
27. See for example Celebrating Beryl Gilroy, British Library free exhibition, 17 March–26 June 2022. The British Library commissioned the artist Amber Akaunu to engage creatively with the Gilroy archive. A zine was also produced that explores the idea of Black women and their archives as a blueprint to be built on.
28. “Beryl Gilroy: Public Artwork honours Camden’s first Black Headteacher,” 1 July 2022, BBC News online; “School Votes against Renaming Itself in Honour of Pioneering Black Headteacher,” *Camden New Journal*, 22 November 2020.
29. Gilroy and Evaristo, *Black Teacher*, xi–xv.
30. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 25.
31. Gerrard, “Self-Help and Protest.”
32. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 9, 18.
33. Blatchford, R. “To Miss. . . with Love,” *Times Educational Supplement*, August 27, 1976, 16.
34. Courtman, “Woman Version: Beryl Gilroy’s.”
35. Blatchford, “To Miss. . . with Love,” 16.
36. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 67.
37. The Black British actress Debra Michaels narrated the 2021 audiobook version of *Black Teacher*.
38. See for example: Leinster-Mackay (1976); Mansell (1976); and Tittler (1976). Raphael Samuel was one of the speakers at Avery Hill College of Education at the Annual History of 665 Education Society, December 17–19, 1976, speaking on “School and Community in East London 1820–1914.”
39. Warner, “I ain’t afeared.” Eustace Edward Ricardo Braithwaite (1912–2016) was a Guyanese contemporary of Gilroy who authored the autobiographical novel about his experience of teaching in London, *To Sir With Love* (1959). This novel was turned into a film in 1967.
40. Blishen, “A Hard School,” 16.
41. Goodman, “Experimenting with Sound and Silence.”
42. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 76; Bradshaw, “Beryl Gilroy’s ‘Fact-Fiction,’” 387.
43. Reyniers, “Sound as an Archival Source.”
44. British Library: MS 894 76/1/5, unbound.
45. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 181.
46. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 32.
47. Gilroy, “The Oral Culture,” 64.
48. British Library, MS 894 76/1/5, unbound.
49. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 34.
50. Bradshaw, “Beryl Gilroy’s ‘Fact-Fiction,’” 382.
51. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life*, 10–11.

52. See for example, Maclure, “Arguing for Yourself: Identity.”
53. British Library, MS 894 76/1/5, unbound.
54. British Library, MS 89476, Deposit 112863;4.
55. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 242.
56. *Ibid.*, 5.
57. Gilroy, *Blue Water Readers Teacher’s*, 65.
58. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 159–60.
59. *Ibid.*, 183.
60. *Ibid.*, 160, 167.
61. *Ibid.*, 7.
62. *Ibid.*, 161.
63. *Ibid.*, 146.
64. Gilroy, *Leaves in the Wind*, 16.
65. Gilroy as a panel member for “Childhood, Identity and Old Age.”
66. British Library, MS 894 76/1/5, unbound.
67. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 191.
68. Bradshaw, “Beryl Gilroy’s ‘Fact-Fiction,’” 386.
69. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 56, 154.
70. BBC WAC, RCONTI Beryl Gilroy Talks: Wyn Knowles to Beryl Gilroy, September 1959.
71. Fowler, *Palgrave’s Golden Treasury*.
72. *Ibid.*, 140.
73. *Ibid.*, 140–2.
74. Gilroy et al., “A Diagnosis of Contemporary Forms.”
75. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 31.
76. *Ibid.*, 35.
77. *Ibid.*, 33.
78. *Ibid.*, 34.
79. Gilroy, “VIRTUAL: Black Teacher.”
80. See for example Gilroy, *Green and Gold Readers ... Book 4*.
81. The text refers to a book called “Experience in Education,” so it is possible she is not referring to Dewey’s book at all but as no other well-known books on education carry this title perhaps she is reminding the reader of Dewey.
82. Gilroy, *Black Teacher*, 82.
83. *Ibid.*, 51.
84. *Ibid.*, 53.
85. *Ibid.*, 76.
86. D’Aiguar, “Letter to Beryl Gilroy,” 759.
87. British Library, MS 894 76/1/5, unbound.
88. Gilroy, “The Oral Culture,” 65.

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