

Poetry Beyond the Black Arts Movement  
By Ruth-Miriam Garnett

As the last century trailed towards close, American poets, including the late Lucille Clifton and Lucie Brock-Broido, impressively resurrected the persona poem. Brock-Broido's range is startling, in one collection covering Birdie Afrika of Philadelphia's tragic Move organization, and in another, writing wholly in the voice of Emily Dickinson. Clifton inhabited Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist in a wonderful Gospel-based tome. An earlier purveyor of this device, Sterling Brown, gave us Big Boy, a Southern black man defying subjugation by roaming. Langston Hughes' memorable out of body expression came via Mother To Son, a poem best known for its first line: "Son, life for me ain't been no crystal stair." In use of single character monologues, this form brings dramatic weight to reading and recitation.

Brooklyn-based Trinidadian Mervyn Taylor, a Howard and Columbia University alum, recently retired from teaching at the New School Of Social Research, retains the same taut passion in his work, but the central character is the poet's observation of compelling minutiae. His latest work is No Back Door (Shearsman Books 2010). In a twist on confessional poetry, Taylor looks outward, but with an enveloping empathy equally probative.

Taylor's drama is of a different sort. Like ethnography, it is scientific and journalistic, except that, despite a precision and economy of words and lines sparsely constructed, the weight of the poet's embrace of and involvement in the characters' lives and of life, decries detachment. He is son, brother, friend, coworker and neighbor to the steady parade of personae, his voice, described by Derek Walcott as "muted", nonetheless providing scalpel-like insight. Carnival participants loom large, as well as Brooklyn denizens and their adaptations to urbanity. The roster of characters and scenes occupy both the poet's past and present, and these pages, like the poet, live both places. More importantly, they live in him.

Migration, travel, displacement, are not so much themes in these poems. Rather, their central subject is the poet's witness, whether transcribing speech or depicting setting, one never loses sight of the mental acuity at work. A process akin to genius locating genius, Taylor's witness is as compelling as the act of staying alive and lasting through the twin partnership of heartbreak and joy.

-- Ruth-Miriam Garnett, author of A Move Further South, Laelia: A Novel, and Concerning Violence