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## Laughing in the Storm: Representations of Post-Colonial London

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## Laughing in the Storm: Representations of Post-Colonial London

### Abstract

Forty years have passed since the publication of Colin Macinnes's account of the Netting Hill riots in his novel *Absolute Beginners* (1959). Macinnes was a peculiar kind of Londoner. Born in South Kensington in August 1914, he moved to Australia with his family in 1919 and he scarcely remembered the London of his childhood. He returned to England briefly in the 1930s before seeing action in the Second World War, and eventually settled in Central London in the 1950s, spending most of his time in Soho, or in Tottenham Court Road and Cable Street.<sup>1</sup> His enthusiasm for the changing faces of London in the 1950s, brought about by the birth of the 'teenager' and the vibrant new cultural 'scene' that arrived with postwar migrants from Africa and the Caribbean, was severely tested by the riots of August and September 1958, of which *Absolute Beginners* is perhaps the only novelistic representation. Through the eyes of an unnamed teenage narrator (Macinnes's finest fictional creation), we watch the new London - youthful, cosmopolitan, multicultural, tolerant of different sexualities- disintegrate under the pressure of older, less soluble divisions of 'race' and class. Set in the fictional enclave of 'Napoli' in West London, Macinnes's novel took a long hard look at the new demi-monde and was critical of what it saw. Macinnes seemed to lament that the Utopian possibilities promised by emerging, infant forms of cultural production (music, dance, poetry, film, radio) had failed to tackle, if not positively evaded, the enduring issues of 'race' and class bigotry which erupted with such violence in the late summer of 1958. The conflict seemed to defeat his belief that the London he knew could nurture new, tolerant forms of community, held together by their very racial and sexual diversity: the riots left this vista in ruins. Old problems still remained, and London's new youth culture either ignored them at their peril or thoughtlessly recapitulated familiar prejudices. Just as his narrator comes of age at the end of *Absolute Beginners*, Macinnes's optimistic vision ultimately had to confront a hostile world.

## INTRODUCTION BY JOHN McLEOD

# Laughing in the Storm: Representations of Post-Colonial London

Forty years have passed since the publication of Colin MacInnes's account of the Notting Hill riots in his novel *Absolute Beginners* (1959). MacInnes was a peculiar kind of Londoner. Born in South Kensington in August 1914, he moved to Australia with his family in 1919 and he scarcely remembered the London of his childhood. He returned to England briefly in the 1930s before seeing action in the Second World War, and eventually settled in Central London in the 1950s, spending most of his time in Soho, or in Tottenham Court Road and Cable Street.<sup>1</sup> His enthusiasm for the changing faces of London in the 1950s, brought about by the birth of the 'teenager' and the vibrant new cultural 'scene' that arrived with postwar migrants from Africa and the Caribbean, was severely tested by the riots of August and September 1958, of which *Absolute Beginners* is perhaps the only novelistic representation. Through the eyes of an unnamed teenage narrator (MacInnes's finest fictional creation), we watch the new London – youthful, cosmopolitan, multicultural, tolerant of different sexualities – disintegrate under the pressure of older, less soluble divisions of 'race' and class. Set in the fictional enclave of 'Napoli' in West London, MacInnes's novel took a long hard look at the new *demi-monde* and was critical of what it saw. MacInnes seemed to lament that the Utopian possibilities promised by emerging, infant forms of cultural production (music, dance, poetry, film, radio) had failed to tackle, if not positively evaded, the enduring issues of 'race' and class bigotry which erupted with such violence in the late summer of 1958. The conflict seemed to defeat his belief that the London he knew could nurture new, tolerant forms of community, held together by their very racial and sexual diversity: the riots left this vista in ruins. Old problems still remained, and London's new youth culture either ignored them at their peril or thoughtlessly recapitulated familiar prejudices. Just as his narrator comes of age at the end of *Absolute Beginners*, MacInnes's optimistic vision ultimately had to confront a hostile world.

Nonetheless, MacInnes's advocacy of a London transformed, drawing its energy and hope from the postwar *demi-monde*, is never fully negated. *Absolute Beginners* ends inconclusively at London airport with the narrator attempting to leave the country, sick of the conflicts he has

witnessed. His final gesture is to embrace a group of newly-arrived Africans during a rain-storm. 'Welcome to London! Greetings from England', he cries. 'We're all going up to Napoli to have a ball!' The Africans 'all burst out laughing in the storm'.<sup>2</sup> As this ending suggests, *Absolute Beginners* is a novel of stalled departure for the community it features. The final image of the 'laughter in the storm' acknowledges the storm of racial violence, but the value of the laughter is vital. It maintains Napoli's ebullient promise and keeps buoyant the Utopian possibilities of a very different London, the one seemingly annihilated by the riots. That laughter is one of the most important, if inexact, representations of post-colonial London in the 1950s.

In March 1960, MacInnes observed that the 'full shame and disgrace [of the riots] we have none of us yet adequately accepted, let alone redeemed – that is, if we ever can do'.<sup>3</sup> Almost forty years later, it is tempting to measure how little things have changed. In the decade of the shameful murder of Stephen Lawrence, and in the year when nail bombs devastated Brick Lane, Brixton, and Soho, intolerance and hatred are ever present. It is for this reason, perhaps, that a special issue of *Kunapipi* concerned with 'post-colonial London' is both timely and necessary. We need, perhaps as a matter of urgency, to bring into focus other views of London, ones in which some of the new possibilities figured in the laughter and embrace of MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* have been realized, despite the stormy urban encounters of the last forty years. These differing vistas reveal a vibrant, accommodating London where people have forged new communities and created a variety of novel, exciting representations of their city. They show that the exclusionary vision of London as a city besieged, its 'true' inhabitants displaced by 'foreigners' and 'outsiders', is limited and naive, the product of an imagination beset by identity-crises which has turned to violence and separatism in order to buttress a disintegrating sense of self. London was ever the place of the multitude, of difference and diversity. Its postwar fortunes have been influenced in part by new communities with ancestral connections to (amongst others) Africa, Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, China and South Asia. These Londoners have changed both the environs and the representation of London for good, and the city is today home to millions whose very sense of 'home' is evolving with the new, emergent redefinitions of community as simultaneously local and transnational.

This issue of *Kunapipi* celebrates and critiques some of the many different literary representations of London of the last forty years in post-colonial literature, without ever forgetting that this vigorous cultural activity has often occurred in a crucible of hostility, suspicion and hardship. The choice of the phrase 'post-colonial London', one with which several of the contributors to this issue are not always happy, is a stratagem intended to contextualize London both in terms of its enduring problems, and its social and semiotic transformation during the late

twentieth century. In Derek Walcott's poem 'The Bright Field', the speaker refers to London as 'heart of our history, original sin'.<sup>4</sup> As Walcott suggests, Caribbean history cannot be understood without taking into account London's formative influence in the Caribbean at both administrative and imaginative levels, and the same could be said for many parts of the Commonwealth: witness Peter Carey's representation of the relations between London and Australia in his recent novel *Jack Maggs* (1997), or Amitav Ghosh's mapping of London in *The Shadow Lines* (1988). So, the naming of a 'post-colonial' London is an attempt to bear witness to both continuity and change, to the continuing influence of London's colonial history upon its contemporary, changing fortunes.

Representations of 'post-colonial London' do many things, and the creative and critical works collected in this issue of *Kunapipi* can only gesture towards a much wider field, too various to generalize. Some representations often function as a cheerful rehearsal of tenure, and a means of resisting those who would deny millions of Londoners their right to citizenship. Other narratives, while engaging with issues of nation and identity, also explore more localized contexts or areas of the city, and examine how its myriad new communities create their own problems, possibilities and transformations – just as MacInnes's Napoli was his fictional celebration of the West London he knew, but also a crucible in which to explore a series of issues that reached far beyond its civic boundaries.

Several of the critical essays in this issue of *Kunapipi* were given at a conference on 'Post-colonial London', held at the School of English, University of Leeds, in November 1998. Thanks are due to all the delegates, who helped make the event both successful and stimulating, and all contributors to this issue for their generosity with materials and their patience. Particular thanks are due to Anna Rutherford, and *Kunapipi* for the space to work in; to Shirley Chew, who first suggested the idea for a special issue and without whom it would never have appeared; to Glenda Pattenden for her unfailing assistance and invaluable editorial advice; and to Liz Ekstein, whose laughter and embrace kept many a storm at bay.

## NOTES

1. For a full account of MacInnes's life, see Tony Gould, *Inside Outsider: The Life and Times of Colin MacInnes* (London: Allison & Busby, 1983).
2. Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners* (London: Allison & Busby, 1959), p. 203.
3. Colin MacInnes, 'The Express Families' in *England, Half English* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), pp. 34-47 (p. 42). This essay first appeared in *New Left Review*.
4. Derek Walcott, *Selected Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 76.