'I'll show you something to make you change your mind': Post-Colonial Translations of the Streets of London

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Abstract
The recent commemorations of the arrival of SS Windrush fifty years ago in 1948 have been a vivid reminder of the contradictions involved in colonial expectations of the imperial centre. In the aftermath of colonialism, the post-colonial eyes which viewed 'the streets of London' translated those streets into something which, when written, might make readers change their minds about what was really there. This response was both an expose of hidden or suppressed truths beneath the gloss of civilization and a revelation of a potential future which might transform those streets, translating them and their peoples into a different cultural language. It is this dialectic which I want to trace briefly through a number of Caribbean examples. Translated and transported under the encouragement of a British government desperate for labour, the Caribbean emigrants became transformed into immigrants, a paradoxical release and re-capture which revealed potential freedoms or possibilities, at the same time as closing them down. Nowhere was this more sharply felt than in London.

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The recent commemorations of the arrival of *SS Windrush* fifty years ago in 1948 have been a vivid reminder of the contradictions involved in colonial expectations of the imperial centre. In the aftermath of colonialism, the post-colonial eyes which viewed ‘the streets of London’ translated those streets into something which, when written, *might* make readers change their minds about what was really there. This response was both an exposé of hidden or suppressed truths beneath the gloss of civilization and a revelation of a potential future which might transform those streets, translating them and their peoples into a different cultural language. It is this dialectic which I want to trace briefly through a number of Caribbean examples. Translated and transported under the encouragement of a British government desperate for labour, the Caribbean emigrants became transformed into immigrants, a paradoxical release and re-capture which revealed potential freedoms or possibilities, at the same time as closing them down. Nowhere was this more sharply felt than in London.

The painful process of translation involved an experience of alienation, recorded by Barbadian novelist George Lamming in his two London novels, *The Emigrants* (1954) and *Water With Berries* (1971). *The Emigrants* catches the dislocating confusion of the moment of arrival. Part of that dislocation is a spatial displacement from living out in the open *in* the streets to living *beneath* the streets. One of the characters, Tornado, moves into a basement flat and feels how

> in another climate, at another time, they would ramble the streets yarning and singing, or sit at the street corners throwing dice as they talked aimlessly ... But this room was different. Its immediacy forced them to see that each was caught in it. There was no escape from it until the morning came with its uncertain offer of another day’s work.²

This imprisoning effect of the streets of London is a geographical
embodiment of the moment of alienation, and was recognized by many other Caribbean writers. In Orlando Patterson's novel *An Absence of Ruins* (1967), anonymity is positively welcomed by a protagonist eager to escape his guilt at his mother's death; in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967), Ralph Singh comes to London seeking 'The great city, centre of the world' only, ironically enough, to feel himself to be 'adrift' as if a castaway from a 'shipwreck'; while Sam Selvon's seminal *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) registers the dislocating 'panic' the newly-arrived Galahad feels at the possibility of not just getting lost in the metropolis but of losing his sense of self-identity entirely.

But as Jean Rhys's heroine, Antoinette, reminds her colonizer husband in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 'There is always the other side, always.' The 'other side' of this alienating displacement can again be glimpsed through Lamming. In his memoir *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Lamming recalls how after embarkation, the emigrants' journey from Southampton to Waterloo was 'an important lesson in colonial history' because aboard the train, the newcomers 'entered a wholly new role': as the white waiter asked them 'Will you be having lunch, sir?', they 'realised that white hands did nigger work in this country'. It was almost as if they had been translated into another world in which the terms of discourse had been reversed.

What Lamming calls 'this astonishing reversal of roles' was soon overturned by the experience of the capital: 'illusions of London as the Golden Chance' were quickly replaced by an experience of isolation, hostility and discrimination. Expectations of 'this new place as an alternative: open, free with an equal chance for any British citizen' were soon replaced by 'a cold stare, an enigmatic sneer', the English 'scandal' of racism. But this glimpse, in the reversal of roles, of an 'other side' to the dislocation of emigration lies at the heart of Lamming's view of the colonial process. His key metaphor for this condition is the widely-quoted one of the relationship between colonizer and colonized as embodied by Prospera and Caliban; and Lamming has investigated the double-edged process of cultural translation at work between colonizer and colonized in such a way as to remind us of its reciprocal effects: what is transformed is not just the colonized but also the colonizer. According to Lamming, Prospero, the colonizer, is afraid of Caliban, the colonized, 'because he knows that his encounter with Caliban is, largely, his encounter with himself'. The arrival of Caliban on the streets of London, therefore, was both a threat and a challenge to the imperial culture to adapt and transform, a process of 'translation' which for the optimistic Lamming was always an 'open' one.

The sense in which I am using this theoretical metaphor of 'translation' has been explored by Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha among others. Quoting Salman Rushdie's 1982 essay 'Imaginary Homelands', Hall suggests that writers like Rushdie are 'the products of the new diasporas created by the post-colonial migrations. They must learn to inhabit at least
two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them'. Such diasporic presences are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely. They bear with them the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages and histories by which they were shaped. In doing so, they remain unfinished business, seeding change in the culture they enter as well as being changed by it. In his essay 'How Newness Enters the World', Homi Bhabha stresses what Walter Benjamin describes as 'the irresolution ... of "translation", the element of resistance in the process of transformation, "that element in translation which does not lend itself to translation"'. We might recall that, as well as the linguistic sense of the word and Salman Rushdie's preferred sense of 'bearing across', the OED also gives another major meaning of 'translation' as: 'to change in form, substance, appearance, to transmute, transform, alter; to renovate; to make new; to retransmit a message'.

A 'translating' culture, then, is both passive and active, a condition and a process. Coming to the imperial centre in 1948, Caribbean culture was both translated and translating, changing the 'host' culture irredeemably. A vivid emblem of this comes in a story by Sam Selvon in the London section of his 1957 collection *Ways of Sunlight*. The title of the story, 'Working the Transport', itself offers a provocative insight. The aptly-named central character, Small Change, gets a job working for London Transport driving buses. With the bravado of a truly creative improviser, Change learns the rudiments of bus driving on the ship transporting him over from Trinidad, where he rigs up a mock vehicle and gets his fellow travellers to teach him how to drive, allowing him to convince the London authorities he knows enough to get the job; and in this sense he 'works' the 'transport' to his own ends. While Change is supposedly learning his new job he is also adapting to the new cultural conditions of London social life, part of which involves the proliferating London dance-hall scene of the 1950s. Keen to make an impression and gain status, Change finds himself asserting his culture's prowess by telling his girlfriend that in the Caribbean, rock and roll is outdated and has been replaced by a new dance, 'hip'n'hit', the existence and name of which Change improvises out of thin air:

she ask him: 'Can you rock 'n' roll?'

'Can I rock 'n' roll!' Change repeat. 'Child, that dance out of fashion where I come from, we used to do that two years ago. The latest thing now is hip 'n' hit. You mean to say is only now you all doing rock 'n' roll in London?'

'Hip 'n' hit?' the blonde say, puzzled. 'What's that?'

'I'll show you Saturday night, when we go dancing,' Change say.

So while the transport people trying to learn Change how to conduct, Change studying some kind of newfangle step, and when elevenses come he went to the other boys and tell them how he have to invent a new dance else the West Indies would be let down.
To help out, the other boys contribute to the invention process:

'You want to learn some new steps?' Catch say. 'Give me a beat.'

So Change sit down on the platform on a bus and start to beat the side, and Alipang finish drinking tea and hitting the empty cup with the spoon, while Jackfish keeping time on the bar it have what you does hold to when you going in the bus. And Catch dancing some fancy steps, a kind of Gene Kelly mixup with some mambo and samba and some real carnival 'break-away' . . .

'This bus have a good tone,' Change say, looking up to see what number bus it is, as if the number make a difference.15

London's transport is literally transported from vehicle to musical instrument, while Change later teaches all the teddy boys and girls to hip 'n' hit so that his new dance becomes 'a real craze south of the river'.16

This scene is a wonderful emblem of creative translation in action. Out of such 'small acts', to use Paul Gilroy's phrase,17 comes 'small change', but nevertheless the kind of irredeemable change which, in the wider process, filters into and transforms cultural life. As Kadiatu Kanneh argues in relation to The Lonely Londoners, 'migrants from Africa and different Caribbean islands, with distinct languages and dialects, form a new Black British identity in response to migration and racism, and radically change the identity of London itself, claiming London for their own'.18 So, in the only fiction I have come across by Stuart Hall, a short story from 1960 called 'Crossroads Nowhere', a recently-arrived and hungry Caribbean narrator is caught up in the apparent alienation of the city and 'the whirlpool of Marble Arch'.19 Among a permanency of signs and advertisements which were 'desperately English', a 'sprinkling of foreigners ... salted and seasoned the pavement-crowds ... as if thrust up from some vast, submerged international underworld that crouched behind the brassy frontage of the Odeon'.20 The narrator passes a figure who greets him with an 'unmistakable' West Indian 'lilt' and he asks the passer-by for a good place to eat: 'He began to wave his hand ... in an expansive arc that gestured me towards the farthest limits of Oxford Street, and seemed to embrace the whole of north London.'21 Despite the narrator and the passer-by sharing a sense of isolation and displacement, this proprietorial gesture of ownership also indicates the transformational potential even within the alienating moment of arrival and 'exile': the passer-by is 'without self-pity'; he is 'unresigned'.22 The brevity of the story and its epiphanic effect emphasize the irresolution, the unfinishedness, of this encounter between London and the Caribbean.

Even if the Caribbean flaneur doesn't go so far as to claim ownership, their very presence and gaze changes the city. In Omeros, Derek Walcott's transcultural and transhistorical protagonist arrives in London as if disembarking in the underworld from Charon's barge.23 Despite his universalizing persona, Walcott's protagonist is notably aware of the way London's past is written into its streets in the present. He sees 'under everything an underlying grime' in this flower of cities, 'as the tinkling
Thames drags by in its ankle-irons'. This image of slave history haunting the surface of the commercial river indicates the dialectical vision Walcott offers of 'a devalued empire'. But the imperial centre is not just tawdry with its past; it is redolent of a transformed future being effected by the translated beings the protagonist sees around him:

the shadows keep multiplying from the Outer Provinces, their dialects light as the ginkgo's leaf, their fingers plucking their saris

It is a glimpse of a potential future lost 'as a gliding fog hides the empires'. The protagonist's visit to London ends in a Blakean outburst of ironic questions and sardonic answers, revealing the hypocrisies of the post-imperial condition:

Where is the light of the world? In the National Gallery.
In Palladian Wren. In the City that can buy and sell us the packets of tea stirred with our crystals of sweat.

Tea is a reminder of the imperial legacy in apparently quintessentially everyday England. As Les Back points out,

London has a multicultural past to be recovered but the historical traces of this history have been bleached from public memory. English culture, whether embodied in the ‘afternoon cup of tea’, the Friday night ‘fish and chips supper’ or the ‘jovial London Bobbie’, is intertwined with the history of imperialism and intercultural contact.

After his glimpses of a translational process in action, Walcott's protagonist sees London's immediate fate is as a 'dark future down darker street'.

Walcott's view of London captures what Australian writer Paul Carter has described as a 'spatial history', in which 'the lacuna left by imperial history' can be glimpsed in traces left by presences which have gone in a temporal sense, but remain inscribed spatially and geographically if we can but read them. So, depending on who is doing it, walking the streets of London or even just looking at them changes them. James Donald's discussion of Michel de Certeau's essay 'Walking in the City' is a useful reference point here: 'When we walk the city streets,' Donald argues, 'we are engaged in “illegible” improvisations. It is like using language ... we operate within a constraining structure – the streets and buildings of the city on the one hand, grammar on the other – but we adapt it to our own creative purposes.' In a sense, then, we ‘translate’ the city itself.

Lest this suggests a transformational freedom which political and economic realities clearly preclude, let me close with two musical examples to answer Ralph McTell dialectically. As Paul Gilroy has suggested, 'foregrounding the role of music allows us to see England, or more accurately London, as an important junction point or crossroads on the
The webbed pathways of black Atlantic political culture. The first example is discussed by Gilroy in 'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack'. The 1980s reggae DJ, 'Culture Smiley' was himself 'translated' when his manager renamed him 'Smiley Culture'. In 1984 he had a hit with the song 'Cockney Translation' in which common Cockney phrases are translated into Caribbean creole as two working-class communities, white and black, both subjects of cultural stereotyping, attempt to negotiate a process of cultural transaction and comprehension which nevertheless leaves both social groups untranslated from their positions as economically oppressed:

Say Cockney fire shooter. We bus' gun
Cockney say tea leaf. We just say sticks man ...
Cockney say grass. We say outformer man ...
Cockney say Old Bill we say dutty babylon ...
Cockney say scarper we scatter
Cockney say rabbit we chatter

'Cockney say Old Bill we say dutty babylon ... cockney say scarper we scatter'. This is the different but shared language of lived oppression in the form of police confrontation. The different languages 'translate' into each other readily enough but also ironically act as what Gilroy calls 'equivalent “nation languages” facing each other across the desperate terrain of the inner city'.

The contradictions of that 'desperate terrain' are evident in the second example. Linton Kwesi Johnson's 'Street 66' from his 1975 collection Dread, Beat and Blood invokes a street context in which translation is blocked by the more familiar realities of racist confrontation and police brutality. The text emerged from a particular historical moment, invoking a period in the mid-1970s of violent clashes focused around Caribbean house parties, which, as Gilroy shows, was part of a process whereby London's Caribbean community was increasingly linked with criminality. At that time, Gilroy tells us, the black street party became 'an entrenched sign of disorder and criminality, of a hedonistic and vicious black culture which was not recognizably British'. Locating itself in such a context, the reggae music and the Rasta language in Johnson's text epitomize a resistant translation of western popular music, of English and of London itself. In puns and word-play drawing on Biblical and Rasta sources, the poem's speaker proclaims a transformative vision of a future whose lineaments are both revealed and clouded by the utopian effects of the green herb of apocalyptic Rasta redemption:

outta dis rock
shall come
a greena riddim
even more dread
dan what
de breeze of glory bread.
Christian Habekost mentions that Johnson’s involvement with the militant Black Panthers around 1969/70 gave way to an engagement with Rastafarianism in 1973; but the intriguing thing about Johnson’s poetry is the way he interrogates and problematizes both responses to the contradictions of cultural translation. This text paradoxically plays off the ‘peace and love’ message of Rasta against the militant invitation to violence enunciated by the character Western:

‘Street 66,’ de said man said,
‘any policeman come yah
will get some righteous raas klaat licks
yea man, whole heap a kicks.’

As if the invitation creates the effect, the last verse sees the arrival of the police, and Johnson leaves us poised between Western’s confident antagonism anticipating the confrontation and its almost inevitable but unwritten outcome:

hours beat de scene movin rite
when all of a sudden
bam bam bam a knockin pan de door
‘Who’s dat?’ asked Western feeling rite.
‘Open up! It’s the police! Open up!’
‘What address do you want?’
‘Number 66! Come on, open up!’
Western feeling high reply:
‘Yes, dis is Street 66;
step rite in an tek some licks.’

The house is no longer merely a number; it is a collective identity, a whole street in itself. In the recorded version of the poem recently re-released on CD, Dennis Bovell’s Dub Band create at one and the same time the spacey, hallucinogenic atmosphere of a ganja vision and a sinister sense of fatalistic menace, in which the eerie and haunting harmonica is part wail, part siren. The clock-like repetition of the bass line contributes to this, repeating the same pattern in its second part but dropping a tone, creating a powerful sense of going down from a high. Coupled with the ‘ting-ting’ of a triangle sounding like the bell of an apocalyptic clock gearing up to chime, and the bang on the snare drum to accompany the ‘bam bam bam a knockin pan de door’ of the police, the music and words work together organically to generate the uneasy translation between righteous confidence and a sinking anticipation of an inevitable outcome. Brilliantly, like the music, the text leaves us suspended between the two, refusing to conclude the coming confrontation. With his critiques of Rastafarian mysticism spelt out elsewhere as in ‘Reality Poem’, Johnson’s text has an intriguing ambiguity in its attitude to its subjects: neither the sensory transformations of marijuana nor the blunter transactions of physical violence seem capable of effecting any real movement toward a new
future. It is a text of translational stalemate at a particular historical moment, in which brutal state power effectively translated a whole community into a criminal register. In the context of the recently-concluded Stephen Lawrence enquiry, it is an apt reminder that in some ways, despite manifold translations such as the Notting Hill Carnival, the streets of London remain as 'charter'd' by power and ownership as they were for William Blake.

NOTES

1. A quotation from Ralph McTell's famous song, 'The Streets of London'. The full lyric can be found at: http://www.folkcorp.co.uk/mctell/faq.htm
22. Stuart Hall, 'Crossroads Nowhere', p. 188.
27. Derek Walcott, Omeros, p. 196.
30. Derek Walcott, Omeros, p. 197.


