Kunapipi is a bi-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

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Front Cover: ‘pyro-technics’, Hal Pratt


Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.
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The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously. Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green.


Virginia Woolf’s vision of life as flux, given literary expression in The Waves, has much in common with Hal Pratt’s photographic work, featured in this issue (and on the cover). I first came across Hal’s photography in the form of a wave — well, two waves. The first was a black and white photograph of a wave, framed in weather-beaten wood; and the second was an unframed plane of aqua wash — ‘a painting’ that looked as though the colour, texture and rhythm of a wave had been somehow transferred directly to paper — such was the illusion. On further inquiry I discovered that what I thought to be painting was photograph and what I thought to be ‘wave’ was something other. ‘These images,’ writes Hal, ‘are about change’:

When I began this project, photographing slipped boat hulls, I did not see abstract landscapes where a waterline might transform into a distant horizon. I saw subtle colours and contours and richly textured weathering. It was some time before the metamorphosis took place and it crept on me almost imperceptibly. (66)

Many of the contributions to this issue explore the illusory nature of ‘our world(s)’ — the deceptive nature of our perceptions and the creative and critical means by which those perceptions might be changed. As I write these words, a recent performance of Handel’s Messiah echoes in my head: the trumpet will sound and ‘we shall be changed’. Belief in the possibility of transformation, and the knowledge that we can and do change, is both the hope and sometimes also the fear by which we live. It is what Hal Pratt calls ‘terra fluxus’ and what Kenyan writer David Mavia, alias Jambazi Fulani, calls ‘shifting visions’ (124). ‘I’m reading about certainty,’ writes John Haynes, ‘the odd/mad sense the word “know” takes on if I say

‘I know you’re on the sofa, now’. It’s not how hard I’ve gazed at you, how carefully I’ve checked the room, but the insanity of doubting it. And then I thought of tales of Africk, eyes set in men’s pectorals. (88)

… shifting visions.

Anne Collett
A.N. Jeffares
11 August 1920 — 1 June 2005

We have all experienced it. Someone we hugely admire because of their inexhaustible energy or their creative talent dies, and it is as though night had fallen in the afternoon. It is simply not possible that this person has gone. Yes, they were nearly 85, but they seemed so young, so positive, and they still had so much to give.

Thus it was for his friends, former colleagues, former students, and countless associates in a wide spectrum of the literary world when they heard that Derry Jeffares had died. Died characteristically, of course, if one can have a characteristic death. He had been entertaining on a fine early summer afternoon in the garden of his home at Fife Ness, Scotland’s most easterly point where it reaches out towards the continent and the wider world. He retired to bed. The next morning his wife could not wake him. He had slipped out of the world as though it was the most natural thing to do at that moment. That was how he lived his life. Everything seemed right when Derry did it, even when he was asking you to do the impossible — to write a book in six weeks, change your academic specialism because he thought you were in too crowded a field, take a post in Ouagadougou, claim tax relief on the garden shed because you might use it as a study.

I met Alexander Norman Jeffares for the first time in 1967. I was a postgraduate student at the University of Ghana and Derry, as we all were invited to address him from the start (had I at that stage and in that era ever called a professor by his first name, let alone a diminutive?), arrived in June as our external examiner. Douglas Dunn, head of the Department of English, assigned me to look after the visiting dignitary. This meant accompanying him to the sea in order just to talk and to listen. Derry was a brilliant talker and, though a brisk listener verging on the impatient, he had a knack of ferreting out the nugget of information he needed. In my case he wanted to know what I intended to do after I finished my modest M.A. and my limited teaching. ‘You must do a Ph.D. and have a lectureship in the School of English!’ he announced, within what seemed minutes of spreading our towels on Labadi Beach.

And so I did. Few people gainsaid Derry Jeffares when he had a plan in his mind. Like many academics of my generation, we owed everything at the beginning to him. He would snap people up wherever he visited, commission a first book from them, get them a post somewhere, and by a combination of stick and carrot would groom them for what he hoped would be a splendid university career. It was a style which could not survive this era of equal opportunities and I am sure that those who disapproved of it did so with good reason. Notable among them was his colleague at Leeds, Arnold Kettle, who was not only an outstanding critic of Victorian fiction and a brilliant teacher, but also Vice-President of the British Communist Party. They had more in common than they
admitted, both being *bon viveurs*, but their mutual antipathy was because they represented different points on the politico-economic spectrum. Derry was an *entrepreneur*, a capitalist and a lover of private initiatives, Arnold a believer in conforming to social and moral principles derived from a passionate belief in the equality of human beings. But in some ways they mistook each other. Both of them utterly lacked in class prejudice. At Derry’s dinner table to the end of his life you might find Seamus Heaney and the local garage mechanic, a specialist in alternative medicines and a publishing baron, an eminent novelist and a farmer’s wife. It was the same in the Kettle household. And both loved wine.

By the time I met Derry he was already a legendary figure. He had done pioneering work on the life and poetry of W.B. Yeats, his compatriot. *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet* by A. Norman Jeffares was published in 1948 and was the key work on its subject for the next thirty years. As a schoolboy Derry had persuaded Yeats to contribute a poem to the school magazine. It was the start of a life-long passion for Anglo-Irish literature. If Yeats was the epicentre of this, so many others featured too. In 2000 he produced a definitive edition of the poetry and plays of Oliver St. John Gogarty. Congreve, Swift, Goldsmith, Maria Edgeworth, and many others passed before his editorial gaze.

Derry’s academic trajectory was unconventionally broad for a man of his time. After taking his first degrees at Trinity College, Dublin, he moved to Oxford and studied for a second doctorate there. His first lectureship was at the University of Groningen, 1946 to 1948. Whilst there, he married Jeanne Calembert, who was of Belgian origin, though they had met in Glasgow. With their daughter Bo, they moved from Holland to Edinburgh. After three years he was given his first chair, the Jury Professorship of English at the University of Adelaide. It was there that he discovered new Australian writing, as well as classic authors such as Henry Handel Richardson, whom he particularly admired. This was to be the basis of his pioneering concern for new literatures in English from all round the world, though his devotion to Irish writing remained pre-eminent.

The big chance came with his appointment in 1957 to the chair of English at the University of Leeds. At a stroke he was in a formidable position to influence English studies as profoundly as his Shakespearean predecessor, G. Wilson Knight, had done. Derry brought literature and language teaching together within a newly constituted School of English. Scholars and students came to the School from all round the world, especially from the emerging academies of Africa and India. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *Ariel* began life at Leeds. The first international conference on Commonwealth literature took place under his auspices in 1964 and led to the setting-up of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies.

I joined the School in 1969, registered by then for a Ph.D. under Derry’s supervision. I was awed by his beneficence. I had been offered a starting salary of £1,200 a year, with which I was rather pleased. A few days before I began, I
received a letter out of the blue increasing it to £1,400. As I was about to be married, I could not believe this unsolicited largesse, but it was typical of his view that if you started generously you would avoid grudges and win allies. Sometimes, however, he was deliberately provocative, if he thought it might shake complacency, which he disliked above all things. I recall a staff meeting in my first term at which all the senior teachers, among them the poet Geoffrey Hill, were asked to switch their courses round. ‘But I have always taught Victorian poetry!’ came the inevitable squeal (not from Hill, I hasten to say). ‘Precisely,’ said Professor Jeffares. ‘That’s the problem. I would like you to do seventeenth-century prose this term.’

Academic leadership of this kind was criticised, but Derry had little time for whingers. He felt that many university teachers were quite lazy, had often not thought about their discipline for many years, and were financial illiterates. He not only had them teaching in areas they barely knew existed, but he would commission text-books and critical studies from them by the dozen. Thus was born York Notes, the series originally planned for Middle Eastern undergraduates but later becoming global. Academics began to clamour to write one of these, realising that the sales very often paid for their summer holidays. My own on Lord of the Flies generated more income than anything else I have written, though it has to be admitted that sales depended not on the quality of the critique but on the frequency with which the text being discussed was taught. It became a stock remark that Derry would commission the office cat to write a study guide in the series if one was needed urgently.

This might imply that he had no standards. It is not true, but he could not be bothered with pomposity, and he felt he saw a lot of it in the university and publishing worlds. He was in fact the most meticulous editor, with an uncanny gift of reading rapidly, writing long marginal annotations, chatting vociferously, and sipping wine all at the same time. He answered correspondence by return and read every word one sent to him for comment.

In 1974 Derry Jeffares surprised everyone but his family by moving back to Scotland. He took a chair at the University of Stirling, where by now I was also teaching. Few could understand why he had given up so prominent a chair for a post in a university scarcely five years old. It was assumed that he had become bored with senior administration and that he wanted a more tranquil setting in which to pursue his scholarship. All this was true. Though his home in Leeds had been delightful, decorated as it was with wall paintings by Quentin Bell and more recently by his artist daughter, the various homes that followed in Fife had wonderful pastoral beauty and tranquillity. Here he could indulge his love of building walls, have his old cars safely installed in the out-houses, and give Jeanne space for her pottery and surroundings conducive to her flair for spirit healing.

But I suspect there was another reason to go to Stirling, which none of his obituarists have noted. He wanted to help the university re-position itself. Stirling
had recently undergone a public humiliation when a visit by The Queen provoked unprecedented demonstrations of the type that had been associated only with radicals in France. The survival of the university was at stake. Derry had been a friend of Tom Cottrell, the first Principal, who had died at the age of 49 under the strain of what had happened. Without drawing attention to this motive, Derry knew that a professor of his national standing arriving in Stirling when its fortunes were at their lowest ebb would help save it.

From time to time Derry Jeffares would take on an advisory role, for example by serving successfully as the chairman of the literature panel of the Scottish Arts Council. He continued to travel widely until well in to his seventies. His publications — books, editions, articles, and latterly many poems — flowed ceaselessly. He returned a set of proofs on the day of his death. His was an inexhaustible energy. It flowed from a heart that relished humanity. He could be droll, uncharitable and dismissive in his opinion of people, but he somehow got away with it, because his comments were always made so charmingly, and with such wit.

On the day of his funeral I was asked to hold one of the cords as the coffin was lowered in to the grave. I had never done that before and I held on like — well, like grim death. The undertaker had to give me a succinct lesson in the laws of gravity. As it was lowered I felt such a sense of love for the man and so great a sense of the honour in being asked to hold that little thread of connection. I feel the same in being asked to write about him now. I, and many of my generation, owe our professional beginnings to him. Even though he was a giant in the story of English Studies in the twentieth-century, his influence in Anglo-Irish literary research and his historic instigation of post-colonial discourse will eventually fade in importance. However, as long as there are people alive who recall him, his presence will remain, for we are unlikely ever to know a man combining so rich a spirit with so practical a manner of expressing it.
ANNIE WERNER

Savage Skins: The Freakish Subject of Tattooed Beachcombers*

When the first beachcombers started to return to Europe from the Pacific, their indigenously tattooed bodies were the subject of both fascination and horror. While some exhibited themselves in circuses, sideshows, museums and fairs, others published narratives of their experiences, and these narratives cumulatively came to constitute the genre of beachcomber narratives, which had been emerging steadily since the early 1800s. As William Cummings points out, the process of tattooing or being tattooed was often a ‘central trope’ (7) in the beachcomber narratives.

Tattoos represented for the white spectator an instant signifier of the savage otherness of the inhabitants of the South Seas, and the practice was increasingly deployed in colonial literature as an immediately visible example of the exotic primitivity of the Pacific ‘savages’. In light of this, tattooed white men symbolised a problematic straddling of racial identities. As Judith Butler points out, a disruption or renegotiation of the accepted norms and practices in regards to bodily boundary ‘disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all’ (Butler 169). A ‘white’ body, indelibly inscribed and transformed by a ‘savage’ text, created in the minds of the European public a sense of unease and confusion that ultimately led to the common perception of beachcombers — and especially tattooed beachcombers — as untrustworthy rogues. The Indigenous tattoo perfectly highlights the notion of the skin as boundary or border, and the tattoo itself as that which crosses that border, yet simultaneously resides within it. The beachcombers both crossed borders (in Greg Dening’s terminology, the beach) and lived within them. Likewise, their tattoos were symbols of the crossing, embodied on and in the corporeal self.

In this essay, I explore the representation of tattoos, tattooed bodies and the practice of tattooing in beachcomber narratives of the nineteenth century. The presence of tattooing in these narratives, I argue, responds to, engages with and reiterates the notions of otherness and savagery that surrounded tattooing since its reappearance1 in Europe in the late 1700s. Captain James Cook was responsible for re-introducing the practice of tattooing to Europe after visiting Polynesia and bringing back several ‘specimens’ of the Indigenous people he had encountered, many of whom wore tattoos. These tattooed bodies were exhibited as exotic and primitive curiosities, and this context significantly impacted the way that the corporeal markings were perceived. Cook’s reintroduction of the practice of indelibly marking the skin, and his naming of the phenomenon —
tattoo, taken from the Polynesian, *ta-tau* — meant that tattooing was intrinsically and invariably linked to themes of racialisation and othering that were fundamentally linked to the colonial agenda.

The beachcombers’ engagement with Cook’s terminology and definition is essentially responsible for the creation and entrenchment of ‘tattoo’ as a permanently othering practice, which is capable of both blurring and transforming racial identity. The symbol of the tattoo, I will argue, is used in these narratives as part of an already emerging yet still developing discourse of colonial power, which utilises the tattoo as a symbol of racialisation, cultural transformation and inexplicable degeneracy. In this essay, my discussion focuses on only those men who returned to Europe wearing Indigenous tattoos, prior to the popular adaptation and Europeanisation of tattooing by later sailors. It is important to make this distinction, since the tattoo at this point was still viewed as a symbol of exotic otherness, and had not yet been co-opted by criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso as a symptom of criminal degeneracy. I am interested in this earlier interpretation — tattoos as the mark of the exotic other — because I believe that all subsequent interpretations of the tattoo are embedded in and feed off the earlier, colonially determined definition. My intention in this essay is to establish a discourse surrounding tattoos that considers and interrogates their colonial history. Beachcomber narratives provide an excellent subject for such an interrogation since they are the first popular literary representations of Indigenous tattooing.

In *Islands and Beaches*, Greg Dening defines the beachcombers as

> those who crossed beaches alone. They crossed the beach without the supports that made their own world real into other worlds that were well-established and self-sufficient. They were strangers in their new societies and scandals in their old…. They confronted, as few other men confront, the relativity of everything that made them what they were: their values, their judgements, the testimony of their senses. (Dening 129)

It is in this theorisation of the nature of the beachcomber that the notions of liminality, or, in the words of A. Irving Hallowell, ‘transculturisation’, is first suggested. As Ian Campbell points out, tattooing often functioned as an ‘important channel of assimilation’ for the beachcomber. Problematically, however

> [c]ontemporary observers had both a fascination and a horror of the tattooed white man, regarding the native tattoo as a sign of extreme degradation and depravity. Nothing else seemed to symbolise so evocatively the extent to which a white man had ‘let himself go’ or ‘sunk’ than having his skin marked in the manner of ‘savages’. (Campbell 99)

For the returned beachcombers, this popular attitude presented a contradiction in their identity — the tattoos that they had received as a means of integrating into native Oceanic societies, meant that they were unable to fully re-integrate back into their own European culture. As Campbell points out, ‘Returning and
fitting back in turned out to be more difficult than might be expected and, in many cases, appears to have been more difficult than the adaption to Polynesian life had been’ (Campbell 99). The border crossings that these men experienced — physical, corporeal, geographic and cultural — each added to the reception they received from European and American society. Campbell indicates that ‘the term [beachcomber] generally had connotations of opprobrium because a man who chose to “live among natives” was not merely an emigrant; he was regarded in European society as a renegade’ (4). For tattooed beachcombers, this opprobrium was made immediately visually apparent. Cummings notes that few beachcombers, if any,

truly crossed cultural boundaries and came to live as did their Polynesian hosts, though many later capitalised on the presumption that they had accomplished precisely this. For beachcombers, tattoos became permanent reminders of their experiences and an ever-present prompt to tell stories about exotic peoples and customs in distant lands. (Cummings 7)

Such an indelible ‘prompt’ inscribed upon the corporeal border meant that reintegration was intrinsically linked to constant re-enactment of the border crossing. The return crossing is therefore suspended, never able to be completed on account of the constant reminder. For returned tattooed beachcombers, the transgression of their corporeal boundary by the Indigenous tattoo facilitated a suspension of identity. Marked and coloured by the Indigenous ‘text’ of the tattoo, these men were no longer fully ‘white’. They are othered, not only by their experiences, but also by the permanent and immediately visible symbol of them.

For many beachcombers, Indigenous tattooing was a necessary procedure in order to confirm and affirm their status within the tribe of which they became a part. Barnet Burns, an Englishman who settled in New Zealand in about 1831, claims to have allowed himself to be tattooed ‘as it would be of service to me’ (Bentley 4), and he received a Maori facial tattoo or *moko* that indicated his assimilation. Similarly, Edward Robarts, who voluntarily left his ship in the Marquesas Islands in 1797, reluctantly allowed himself to become tattooed as a matter of survival. The Marquesans amongst whom Robarts resided, tattooed extensively, and most Marquesans were heavily tattooed with symbols of initiation, status and familial affiliation. Despite his twenty-two-year residence in the Islands, Robarts received only one tattoo, which Dening describes as a ‘meal ticket’ (Dening 2004 308). The tattoo symbolised Robarts’ membership into an elite group that afforded him food in a time of famine. Like Burns’ *moko*, Robarts’ mark symbolised his acceptance into a group that ensured his survival, but it also signified a compromise of identity and autonomy. This compromise, and the unease it may have created for Robarts, is indicated within his narrative by his unusual treatment of the subject of tattooing.

Unlike other beachcombers who published their narratives in the nineteenth century, Robarts does not comment extensively on his own, or others’ tattoos. He
makes no mention of his own tattoo throughout his journal, and details of this mark come only from others’ descriptions of him. Adam Krusenstern, the Russian explorer who visited the Marquesas and published his account in 1805, provides a description of Robarts, the ‘light coloured person’ who met them on arrival: ‘We soon found out that he was an Englishman, who had already spent five years in the island; he was almost entirely naked, having only a narrow girdle tied round his middle, and was tattooed on the breast’ (6–7). Robarts’ lack of description of his tattoo(s) suggests that his relationship to these marks was tentative. He either did not want his European readers to know that he had been tattooed, or he was unwilling to admit his dependence on the tribe.

Also striking is Robarts’ lack of comment on the tattooed bodies of his Marquesan companions. While other voyagers to the Marquesas could not help but comment ad nauseum on the heavily tattooed indigenous inhabitants of the islands, Robarts remains strangely silent on the topic. Even in his otherwise extensive and comprehensive anthropological observations and descriptions, no comment is made. Indeed, Robarts’ most detailed accounts of tattooing are made in reference to his interactions and descriptions of another Marquesan beachcomber, Joseph Cabris. In these descriptions, he displays an attitude of fear and abhorrence towards the tattooed white man, who he considers to be somehow transformed.

The Frenchman, Joseph Cabris, was a contemporary of Robarts in the Marquesas, and although they were quite possibly the only white men permanently residing in the same island group during the same period of time, the two exhibited extraordinarily different attitudes to the tattoos they received. Both men were fully integrated into Marquesan society, becoming fluent in the language and customs of their adopted people and marrying into Indigenous families. Both were tattooed in the Indigenous Marquesan manner as a matter of necessity, however Robarts was marked reluctantly and less extensively than Cabris, who seems to have embraced the practice and was heavily tattooed. Robarts comments on his first meeting with Cabris since receiving his facial tattoo. ‘I lookt at him, but did not Know him. The face was tattooed all over [and this] disguised the features. When he spoke, I drew my hand from him. I Knew him to be the french boy’ (Robarts 97). In this interaction, Cabris is ‘masked’ by his facial tattoo, and therefore unrecognisable. The denial of visual recognition — in Robarts’ terms, visual ‘Knowledge’ — indicates the removal of Cabris from Robarts’ visual perception of what a fellow white man should be, and Robarts recoils in horror from this permanently masked — and therefore transformed — individual. Robarts’ recoiling from Cabris’ transformation illuminates his own reluctance to become tattooed, and suggests a disinclination towards this kind of ‘transformation’.

Many beachcombers express within their narratives a similar sentiment of reluctance when it comes to their being tattooed by the Indigenous people. As
Cummings has indicated, tattooing is a central trope of beachcomber narratives from the Pacific, and features prominently in many accounts, however few beachcombers admit to being tattooed voluntarily. Where Robarts hinted at his distaste for Indigenous Marquesan tattoos in his abhorrence for Cabris and his failure to mention his own tattoos, many beachcombers are more explicit in their rendering of Indigenous tattoos in a negative light. Frequently, the process of tattooing is elaborately conveyed as being a torturous, painful process that they were either forced into, or reluctantly submitted to as a matter of survival.

John Rutherford was resident in New Zealand from 1816, and his narrative was published as a substantial section of George Lillie Craik’s book, *The New Zealanders*. In his account, Rutherford suggests that he was the unwilling recipient of his tattoos, and maintains that he was a passive victim in the process.

The whole of the natives then seated themselves on the ground in a ring, we were brought into the middle, and, being stripped of our clothes, and laid on our backs, we were each of us held down by five or six men, while two others commenced the operation of tattooing us. (Craik 135)

Given the previous mentions of cannibalism within the text, where Rutherford and his companion wondered if the Maori ‘were examining us to see if we were fat enough for eating’ (Craik 134), it may be argued that Rutherford’s depiction of the scene is calculated for suspense. Surrounded by ‘all’ of the natives, ‘stripped’ of their clothes, and ‘held down by five or six men’ the process is obviously not something the men submitted themselves to willingly. In maintaining this unwillingness, Rutherford essentially denies responsibility for the othering marks that he has received. This, in turn, establishes two important meanings. Firstly, Rutherford denies responsibility and willingness, and therefore ‘maintains’ his whiteness and civilised racial and cultural identity. He has not willingly submitted to the ‘transforming’ process of tattooing, and is therefore, in essence, not entirely transformed. Secondly, the tattooing process is depicted as an inflicted, torturous event, where the white men are victimised, and therefore establishes the Maori as barbarous and savage. In turn, the tattoos are implicated as both the means and the result of the torture.

James O’Connell, a beachcomber on Ponape in the Caroline Islands, depicts his own tattooing in a similar manner. Like Rutherford, O’Connell sets a scene of suspense prior to his description of the process, describing an ominous journey to the place where they were to be tattooed, which ‘would have been pleasing, if we had not been so utterly in the dark as to the purpose of the journey’ (113). On arrival, O’Connell and his companion busy themselves in speculation as to their ‘end’. The woman who tattoos O’Connell’s hand is described as his ‘executioner’, and the process itself is described by O’Connell as a ‘battering’ and ‘punishment’. According to O’Connell, he heartily entreated against any further tattooing, but to no avail: the ‘savage printers’ continued their torture, and O’Connell ‘often thought [he] should die of these apparently petty, but really acutely painful
inflictions’ (116). Again, the tattooing process is established as a kind of torture, and the tattooing natives are rendered as ‘savage printers,’ indelibly inscribing their native text into and onto the passive white body.

O’Connell’s companion in captivity, George, was apparently unable to bear the pain of being tattooed, and begged not to have the operation completed. This wish was granted, but not without ‘unequivocal expressions of disgust at his cowardice and effeminacy’ (115). In O’Connell’s narrative, George is emasculated by not being able to endure the tattooing. This in turn establishes O’Connell as being brave, honourable and essentially more of a ‘man’. In addition to this, O’Connell claims that the Ponapeans exclaimed ‘Jim Chief brave!’ in admiration of his endurance. This exclamation does much for O’Connell’s standing: he is denoted as a ‘chief’, with all its implications of power, authority and status, and he is also established for the reader as being ‘brave’ even in the eyes of the savages. Further to this, George’s cowardice at the ‘tattoo hospital’ meant that when he was married, he received a wife of ‘no rank’, unlike O’Connell, who was married to a member of the ruling family — his father-in-law was chief of the island Net. Therefore the tattooing also translates, albeit subtly, into an indication of O’Connell’s sexual prowess. While O’Connell engages with the pattern of depiction where Indigenous tattoos are applied against the will of the white recipient, he simultaneously revels in the glory and status that the tattoos avail. O’Connell’s justification of the process therefore becomes double-barrelled: not only does he relinquish responsibility by indicating that he was tattooed against his will, he also clearly outlines the benefits that the tattoos availed.

According to O’Connell, the final tattoos he received were administered by his wife as a part of the marriage ceremony. Like his tattoos, O’Connell depicts his marriage as something he succumbed to unwillingly and unwittingly. Suggestions of voluntary submission to ‘savage’ ways were to be denied, especially in relation to indigenous tattooing and marrying into indigenous societies. For many beachcombers who aimed to sell their stories as a means of making a living upon returning to European or American society, it was important to re-establish their European identity so that they were not viewed by the public as degraded rogues.

As Daniel Thorp points out, beachcombers were considered by white populations to be ‘more degraded than the Natives,’ presumably on account of their ‘fall’ from civilisation: while the indigenous people had never been civilised, the white-man-gone-native had held civilisation in his grasp, and thrown it away in favour of the indigenous, ‘savage’ way of life (Thorp 2). For this reason, depictions of Indigenous tattooing, marriage, and other rites that may have been perceived as evidence of a white man’s ‘fall’ into native degeneracy, were suitably framed to absolve the narrator of responsibility. Saul Reisenberg, O’Connell’s biographer and a prominent anthropologist of the Caroline Islands, indicates O’Connell was a pathological liar, who actually deserted from his ship and
fabricated much of his narrative in order to cover up a convict past (Reisenberg 4–5). Indeed, O’Connell’s career upon his return to Europe hinged upon his tales of shipwreck, captivity and torture. In 1835, performing with the Lion Circus as the first tattooed man to be exhibited in the US, the ringmaster ‘had a rare story about this man, of the torture inflicted by savages doing the work of tattooing’ (Obrien qtd in Riesenber 12). Within his narrative, O’Connell also justifies his tattoos by evoking the ever-present threat of cannibalism. He claims that his tattoos prevented him from being ‘eaten’ by another tribe when he was travelling through the islands. ‘Notwithstanding the representations of Ahoundel that we were in danger of being eaten if we ventured out of his sight, nothing but the most courteous treatment was received by us. My tattooing, speaking of my relationship to Ahoundel-a-Nutt, was better than letters of introduction’ (182).

Since 1492, when Columbus ‘adapted’ the word cannibal from the Arawak *caniba*, the threat of encountering ‘cannibal savages’ was a constant fixture in explorers’ journals, travellers’ and beachcomber narratives, and most writers seem to be fixated upon the question of whether or not the people they encountered actually did or did not practice anthropophagy. As Frank Lestringant points out, by 1533 the word cannibal was ‘already firmly attached to manifestations of a barbarity which was as mythical as it was extreme’ (33). Therefore ‘cannibal’s’ etymological history is in mythological barbarism. Like the word ‘tattoo’, it is an entrenched cultural myth that is embedded in a process and discourse of othering and colonialism. For readers of the time, cannibalism and tattooing were tantamount horrors, and I would suggest that this is a result of the corporeal transgression that each represent — the physical crossing of the boundary between the savage and civilised body. By implying that he was shipwrecked and captured, and that his participation in the ‘savage’ act of tattooing was forced, and in fact justified by the equal or greater threat of being ingested by the savage body, O’Connell disavows responsibility for his participation in the Ponapeans’ primitive way of life.

John Rutherford, who marketed himself and displayed his tattooed body in the same way as O’Connell, engaged a similar tactic of disavowal in order to make himself more ‘marketable’. In England in 1828, Rutherford made his debut appearance as a man captured and tattooed by New Zealand Maori. Like O’Connell, he also claims to have been shipwrecked, however, as Thorp points out, ‘most modern scholars believe he was a deserter who jumped ship’ (8). Of course, such an unromantic truth would have done little for his performance, which instead relied heavily on the drama and suspense created by the already familiar trope of captivity and torture. What Rutherford also failed to mention in his performances was that most of the tattoos on his body were in fact in the Tahitian style (Fellowes 7), with only his facial tattoos being those of the Maori. That Rutherford was able to exhibit himself as a man ‘tattooed by Maori’ in spite of his Tahitian designs is indicative of the notion of ‘blanket primitivism’
that tattooing evoked. The tattooed body was merely marked by ‘savagery’, and the cultural and geographic origin of those marks was ultimately inconsequential. This idea was enforced as more tattooed performers started to emerge. Some, claiming to have been shipwrecked and/or captured in the South Seas and forcibly tattooed, exhibited tattoos depicting American flags and presidents. Yet their stories were still valid in the eyes of the viewing public because the idea of the savage tattoo had been so ingrained into popular consciousness. In the context of Rutherford’s captivity and involuntary, torturous tattooing, the tattoo emerges more potently than ever as a symbol of universal savagery and barbarity. In denying responsibility for the tattoos and implying that they were forcibly applied, Rutherford attempts to avoid being objectified because of his othered and racialised

‘John Rutherford — from an original drawing taken in 1828’. (Reproduced from George Lillii Craik, The New Zealanders, p. 87, Charles Knight, London, 1830.)
(coloured) skin. Rutherford set a trend for future performers, who inevitably found it easier to claim that their tattoos were forcibly applied by savages, rather than to admit that they had volunteered to be the subject (or object) of such a barbaric practice. This disavowal of responsibility for the marked skin was virtually the only avenue by which a tattooed individual could attempt to maintain their ‘civilised’ identity despite their ‘savage’ skin.

The return of beachcombers from the Pacific was frequently fraught with such contradictions of identity, especially for those who were tattooed during their sojourn. While their tattoos had allowed them to assimilate into Indigenous Pacific societies, they essentially disallowed their full re-integration into European society. For heavily tattooed white men and women in Europe and America in the nineteenth century, occupation as circus and sideshow freaks was usually the easiest, if not the only, option, and most tattooed beachcombers found themselves employed in this capacity. In becoming a tattooed body, the beachcombers took on not only the perceived primitivity of the natives, but they also subjected themselves to multitudes of other interpretations upon their return to Europe or America.

The ‘criminal’ nature of the tattoo was, by 1900, well established in both popular and clinical literature, mainly thanks to the work of Cesare Lombroso in Europe, who pathologised the tattoo and ‘scientifically’ established these external marks as signifiers of the subject’s overt or latent criminal nature. Though Lombroso considered only the tattoos of convicted criminals, and did not analyse any kind of Indigenous tattooing, his theories both complied with and challenged the perception of Indigenous tattooing at a time when various interpretations of the phenomenon were being born. On one hand, Europeans perceived tattooing as an exotic mark of the noble savage, such as in the case of the Tahitian Omai, who visited London with Cook and was embraced by society. On the other hand, and in a school of thought more in keeping with Lombroso’s theories, it was perceived as a savage and barbaric act which had no place on a white man’s body. Under modern theoretical and scientific scrutiny, Lomboso’s work is exposed as under-researched and over-generalised, as shown by interpretations by Jane Caplan and Nikki Sullivan. These interpretations however, in highlighting the flaws in Lombroso’s century-old theories, expose a new set of questions surrounding the way that tattoos are interpreted and read in terms of a social language. As Sullivan points out, the flaw in Lombroso’s work is that he fails to address the possibility suggested by Foucault that the discursive production of identity and difference involves the embodiment of social beliefs and values, and that our reading and writing of the textual bodies of others may constitute an unconscious reiterative performance of particular codes and practices, rather than an initiative process of the recognition of innate truths. (Sullivan 25)

In other words, our ‘reading and writing’ of tattoos is a part of a broader discursive pattern. As I have argued, the Indigenously tattooed bodies of white beachcombers were written and read within the discursive framework that was availed by Cook’s
re-introduction and framing of the term. What Sullivan suggests here is that tattoos only signify in a broader context of a language of tattooed bodies, where referents are available to generate meaning. Sullivan’s work is useful here as it draws the tattoo away from the popular thought that the tattooed body is somehow a symbol of some ‘hidden’ and essential interiority of the subject.

Like Cabris, Robarts, O’Connell, and Burns, George Vason, whose ‘Narrative of the Late George Vason’ was published in 1840, returned to New York with a full traditional tattoo and eked out an existence as an educational artefact of exoticism. Vanessa Smith offers a useful interpretation of this phenomenon:

As performer, the beachcomber could maintain an identity in translocation, supporting himself by representing the culture from which he had come, even as he had in the Pacific Islands. The practice of tattooing meant that the body of the repatriated white man often bore the inscription of an alien aesthetic, which could serve as the text of performance. Not simply an anthropological or aesthetic value, the tattoo was also the scandalous sign of degeneration. (Smith 47)

Smith’s interpretation is useful in that it raises the notion of translocative identity, which was a common feature of many beachcomber narratives. The indelible physical marks — the tattoo — signified the deeper marks upon the identity of the ‘captured’ individual.

The returning beachcomber was subject to substantial shifts in cultural placement, and therefore identity, as a result of the borders he had crossed. For the tattooed beachcomber, who as I have shown was forced to make a life as an exhibited freak, a border was also crossed between subject and object. Many travellers to the Pacific described the dehumanising and objectifying effect of tattoos. O’Connell likens his tattooed appearance to that of animals, claiming that after receiving his tattoos he resembled a ‘rhinoceros’ (116), and writing that ‘I came from the tattoo hospital a bird of much more diversified plumage than when I entered’ (116). Possibly the most famous beachcomber of all, Herman Melville, claims that the process of tattooing ‘obliterated every trace of humanity,’ and also likens the tattooed appearance to that of a rhinoceros (118). He exclaimed that by being tattooed, he would have been transformed into an ‘object’ (298), like the old chiefs whom he likens in appearance to ‘verde-antique’² (118). Horace Holden, a beachcomber on Palau, wrote that he was ‘filled with horror by the sight of being apparently human, and yet almost destitute of the ordinary marks of humanity… They were fantastically tattooed on different parts of their bodies’ (Holden 32). John Martin, in his Account of the Natives of the Tongan Islands, in the South Pacific Ocean, describes the tattooed skin as resembling ‘soft blue satin’ (37). Similarly, Frank Coffee, a traveller who published his journal as Forty Years in the Pacific: A Book of Reference for the Traveller and Pleasure for the Stay-at-Home in 1920 likens the tattooed faces of elderly Maori to ‘plaques of old wood’ (179). Given the frequency with which tattooed people were thus described on returning to Europe or America, the tattooed person found himself
to be even more of an ‘object’. By bearing the generic marks of the savage, the tattooed beachcomber became an exotic artefact, whose primary value, and indeed currency, was derived from the objectification of the tattooed body.

While it could be argued that most beachcombers actually objectified themselves by willingly being exhibited, my contention is that their exhibition was at times a dire response to the objectification and othering that the European and American public had already dealt them. For Joseph Cabris, the selling of his story was merely a way to make ‘a few rubles [sic],’ on his return to Europe, and his body of Marquesan tattooing had become his ‘major assett’ (Campbell 138). At the time of his death this ‘major asset’ was actually preyed upon by art dealers and collectors who intended to flay and tan Cabris’ tattooed skin. Like so many other tattooed bodies, traded as commodities across oceans and cultures, Cabris ended his life being most valued as a freakish object. I believe that the return of the beachcomber, the crossing of the border from ‘savagery’ to civilisation, and its inherent objectification was fundamental in promoting and maintaining the symbol of the tattoo as the mark of savagery, even on a white man.

As O’Connell points out, ‘Tattooing, spoken of in another connection as embalming the memory of the dead, is an art essential, in its symbolical language, to the preservation of the traditionary uses of the natives’ (151). In light of this, O’Connell, and other beachcombers who were inscribed in a similar manner, became physical embodiments of the ‘savage’ way of life and brought an element of this back to their own culture upon their return. For European and American readers and viewers, the tattooed white man was an example of exoticism who was physically and psychologically transformed by his experiences, wearing primitivity on, and in, his skin. Tattooed beachcombers became fixtures in the public imaginary and consciousness at a time when tattooing, as a phenomenon and as a discourse, was still emerging. For this reason, the beachcombers’ representation of their tattooed bodies played a fundamental part in the formation and cultivation of a discourse of tattooing that was linked to colonialism and projects of othering. The beachcombers’ impulse to offer justification for their Indigenous tattoos suggests that they were already subjected to the negative connotations and assumptions that tattoos held. Their texts however, in perpetuating the negativity and reiterating the need to distance the beachcombers from the process and/or deny agency in receiving the marks, enforce a discourse that represents tattoos as the visual signifier of a primitive other. When skin is considered as the physical boundary between self and other, these marks represented the vulnerability of ‘whiteness’ to be transgressed by the coloured other. As beachcombers became entrenched in the public consciousness as articles of exotic spectacle, the objectification they were subject to within Euro-American society was solidified. Having taken the ‘mark of the savage’ into their bodies, marking their border as that which has been crossed, the tattooed beachcombers who returned to their native cultures found themselves unable to reassimilate
and were therefore rendered as liminal figures for the rest of their lives. The writing and publication of their narratives served to justify and explain the tattoos the beachcombers received, however the visual titillation offered by the spectacle of performance rendered such explanations irrelevant. O’Connell relates for his reader an anecdote involving the Ponapeans’ discovery of some books he had in his possession. He writes,

the leaves were torn out and sewed into blankets, under which half a dozen women were strutting in all the pride of peacocks. In addition to the beauty which the article thus manufactured possessed as a ‘lagow [likou],’ (blanket), it had another charm in the tattooing. The wearers imagined themselves connected with the English chiefs while thus wearing the white man’s tattoo. (110)

When it began to rain, and the garments were washed from their bodies, ‘They were very much chagrined … and protested that the white man’s tattoo was good for nothing, it would not stand. That the islanders’ tattoo will stand, my body is witness’ (110). Just as the ‘white man’s tattoo’ proved unable to ‘stand’, so too did the beachcombers’ attempts to play down or deny the pertinence of their tattoos. The freak show of physically embodied savage skins would always subsume the written word. What this shows is that the peculiar transgression that the indigenous tattoo emblematises — the visual stigma of a breach of boundary — was an inescapable transformation — one which resulted in a loss of concrete identity, status and home.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the ‘Developing Diversity’ conference at The University of Wollongong, and I would like to thank conference participants for their suggestions and feedback. Particular thanks to Katherine Biber for their valuable contributions to this essay.

2. The practice of tattooing — that is, the injection of a pigment under the dermis of the skin — is in fact ancient and extensive. Tattoos have been found on the mummified skins of ancient Egyptians, depicted in paintings of ancient Britons and Picts, and on the frozen body of Ötzi the ‘Ice Man’ who was discovered in the Swiss Alps in 1991 and is estimated to have died around 3000bc. By the 1700s however, the practice had all but died out in Europe, so Cook’s voyages to the Pacific reintroduced the concept and practice to European consciousness.

2. Verde-antique is a type of marble, which is commonly engraved or carved.

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The representation of gay and lesbian sexualities in the Caribbean began receiving much attention in US popular culture when, on May 24, 1998, a *New York Times* article cited The Cayman Islands’ Minister of Tourism as having said he had denied docking rights to a Norwegian Cruise Line ship that was chartered as a gay cruise because ‘a ship chartered by gay tourists came to the Cayman Islands in 1987, and the visitors’ public displays of affection offended many residents’ (McDowell 3). The exclusion of these gay and lesbian tourists from the Cayman Islands illustrates a certain theoretical representation of the Caribbean as devoid of a space for alternative sexualities. This has been remarked by Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé who, in his reading of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, points out how Fanon ‘banish(es) all discussion of Martinican homosexuality to the footnotes of his text’ (139).

In response to Fanon’s brief footnote on ‘l’absence de l’Oedipe aux Antilles’ (146) and the general marginalisation of the topic of Caribbean same-sex desire, in ‘Not Just (Any)Body Can be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas’, M. Jacqui Alexander studies the interconnectedness between West Indian nationalism and homophobia by examining how, after the achievement of political independence in the Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago, West Indian ‘Black nationalist masculinity needed to demonstrate that it was now capable of ruling, which is to say, it needed to demonstrate moral rectitude’ (9) and, in so doing, naturalise heterosexuality through legislation. This naturalisation of heterosexuality has resulted in the coding of same-sex desire as a foreign element and as an invader from the first world — the turning away of gay cruises re-enacting Carib and Arawakan arrows against European battleships.

These exclusions necessitate an investigation of discourses of local Caribbean homosexualities and the ways in which they intersect with the moral Caribbean state and the globalisation of gay and lesbian identities. The coming-of-age
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narrative appears to be a pertinent place within which to examine these competing discourses as it contains aspects of sexual maturation in relation to larger social structures and allegiances. Unlike white Euro-North American coming-of-age/coming-out narratives such as those in Bennet Singer’s anthology Growing up Gay and Edmund White’s A Boy’s Own Story, coming-of-age narratives by queer people of colour from outside the industrialised first world are multiply modulated by discourses other than those of sexuality. As Gayatri Gopinath notes in her comparison of Edmund White’s A Boy’s Own Story — a gay coming-of-age story in the US in the fifties — and Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai’s novel Funny Boy:

Unlike White’s text, where sexuality is privileged as the singular site of radical difference and the narrator’s sole claim to alterity, sexuality in Funny Boy is not one but many discourses — such as those of ethnic identity and forced migration — all of which speak to multiple displacements and exiles (134).

To take Martin Manalansan’s theorised ethnographic study of Filipino gay men in New York City as example, it becomes important to take into account ‘the ways in which the globalisation of gay and lesbian oppression obfuscates hierarchical relations between metropolitan centres and sub-urban peripheries’ (428). Such a study needs to ask how those narratives might be utilising allegorical strategies that, following Fredric Jameson’s argument, could place them within larger narrative strategies in the so-called ‘third-world’. This matter becomes particularly important for the Caribbean, whose native and imported inhabitants were constituted as individual and political “others” at a time in which these very terms emerged in the Early Modern discourses of European colonial expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This article is therefore mindful of the ways in which the self becomes a synecdoche for the nation in the narratives of colonised peoples.

Unlike Euro-North American queer coming-of-age narratives, many Caribbean coming-of-age narratives present homosexuality as an alternative which is considered or experienced and then bypassed, seldom embraced as the ideal orientation over heterosexuality. Many of these narratives contain a strong overt homosocial aspect in which intense, romantic childhood friendships are definitive in the formation of the protagonist’s personality. In both homosexuality and homosociality, the pressure of societal opprobrium on a young person often results in the dissolution of the same-sex bond and promotes the progression of the individual towards a heterosexual orientation. This essay traces two distinct representations of homosexuality in three Caribbean novels: Jamaica Kincaid’s Annie John (1983) and Lucy (1990) and Shani Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night (1996). While these writers’ texts are complex and multi-faceted, I want to trace among the many issues addressed in their works the different developmental paths through which homosexuality is narrated.
Both Kincaid’s *Annie John* and Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* present homosociality and homosexuality as a prominent thematic current. However, a wide epistemological gulf separates Kincaid’s and Mootoo’s treatment of these same-sex relationships. In Kincaid’s work, while homosociality and homosexuality are described with unashamed openness, same-sex behaviour remains fixed to a developmental matrix in which it occupies a subordinate role to a goal or telos which is decidedly heterosexual. For Kincaid, same-sex desire remains a form of social and physical experimentation, which, when contained and restricted to the early years of a person’s life, functions as a rite-of-passage into a predictable heterosexual adulthood. Same-sex desire plays an important structuring role in Kincaid’s texts for the history of Annie John’s social life is punctuated by her various homosocial attachments. Throughout the course of her childhood and adolescence, Annie develops important friendships with Sonia, Albertine, the Red Girl, and Gwen. The life-story of *Annie John* is so profoundly marked by these same-sex emotional attachments that the characterisation of two of these females, the Red Girl and Gwen, is elaborated in extended individual chapters.

In contrast to Kincaid’s presentation of homosexuality as a rite-of-passage, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* moves away from linear and hierarchical categories which undermine the validity of homosexuality and alternative genders. Mootoo’s postcolonial identity — born in Ireland and raised in Trinidad — as well as her lesbian self-designation (Condé 63) provide rich autobiographical material for the framing of homosexuality and alternative genders within the enterprise of Empire. As such, in *Cereus* it is possible to see a dislocation of heterosexuality as centre and telos of the sexuality model, and a fragmentation and proliferation of genders that has as one of its consequences a challenging of the colonial project. Precisely, in her doctoral dissertation, *Queer Diasporas: Gender, Sexuality and Migration in Contemporary South Asian Literature and Cultural Production*, Gayatri Gopinath describes how the indentureship of South Asians in the British Caribbean colonies instituted practices of domesticity and constructions of ‘home’ that produced the violent gender normativity that Mootoo’s novel challenges. She writes:

> Indeed the novel suggests that if heteronormativity — and more specifically heterosexuality — is a means by which to discipline subjects under colonialism, then one of the means by which to escape the sexual and gendered logic of colonialism is by escaping heterosexuality. (143)

In the same way in which *Cereus* bears autobiographical traces of its author’s rearing in Trinidad, Kincaid’s *Annie John* is the story of a young girl whose coming-of-age narrative bears a strong biographical resemblance to the author’s own upbringing and identification with the Caribbean island of Antigua. Moira Ferguson points out in *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body*, that
Jamaica Kincaid writes Annie John fifteen years after she came to the United States and after Antigua becomes independent. In several interviews, Kincaid invites readers to equate Annie John with herself. Annie John is one of Jamaica Kincaid’s avatars.

(75)

Following Annie’s growth in her social, educational, and familial contexts, the narrative of Annie John presents the idyllic picture of a West Indian childhood. Ending in the protagonist’s departure from the island-colony to a life in the colonial metropole, Kincaid’s novel bears a striking similarity to other major Caribbean coming-of-age novels such as Lamming’s In the Castle of my Skin, Zobel’s La Rue Cases Nègres and Naipaul’s Miguel Street. Annie’s circle of friends is composed of a number of girls with whom she develops important homosocial friendships, her attachment to Gwen standing as particularly important. Her educational career is marked by a British colonial ideology of which Annie is not entirely uncritical, allowing the narration to have a strong anti-colonial impetus. Like many of the protagonists of Caribbean autobiographical allegories, Annie bears the stigma of bastardisation, any description of Annie’s father being entirely missing except for passages that make reference to his numerous extra-marital affairs and the violence of his mistresses against her mother. The mother is the most notable figure in the family and Annie’s relationship with her can be described, at its best, as turbulent. The characters of Annie and her mother are often revealed through heated dialogues concerning the adequate socialisation of ‘a proper young lady’. Lucy’s departure for nursing school in England marks the end of the narrative as well as the fulfilment of the goals prescribed by her colonial education and the gendered expectations of her mother.

Annie John’s ‘Gwen’ chapter is prefaced by a comment revealing the self-conscious nature of her attraction to other girls and of the rapidly sequential nature of these homosocial affairs for Annie John. On the first day of school, Annie John declares: ‘I liked a girl named Albertine, and I liked a girl named Gweneth. At the end of the day, Gwen and I were in love, and so we walked home arm in arm together’ (33). The allusion to the Proustian character of Albertine strongly foregrounds female same-sex desire. As Eve Sedgwick remarks in Epistemology of the Closet ‘there is no way to read the Albertine volumes without finding same-sex desire somewhere’ (231).

The open display of Annie’s affection for Gwen characterises most of her relationships with her other girlfriends. This openness translates into uncommon boldness with Sonia, whom she pursues voyeuristically: ‘I loved very much — and so used to torment until she cried — a girl named Sonia. I thought her beautiful. I would then stare and stare at her’ (7). The narration of Annie John’s attraction to these many girls attains certain refinement in the description of the Red Girl, whose tomboyish behaviour is admired and coveted by Annie John: ‘I had never seen a girl do this before. All the boys climbed trees for the fruit they
wanted, and all the girls threw stones to knock the fruit off the trees. But look the way she climbed that tree: better than any boy’ (56).

The chapter of ‘The Red Girl’ serves to articulate the falsity of the gender dichotomy used to discipline individuals in society, an observation that brings into question relations of power more generally in the colonial context. Aware of a certain societal dissonance between her feminine gender and her desire for other girls, the Red Girl offers the salvation of a via media at the male/female bifurcation of the gendering road. Annie John looks up to the Red Girl not only for her ability to compete with boys but also for her ability to surpass and conquer boys’ performances of masculinity. The Red Girl is ‘better than any boy’ also at the game of marbles: ‘She loved to play marbles, and was so good that only Skerrit boys now played against her’ (58). The Red Girl’s ability to outperform boys stands as proof of the falsity of the myth of male supremacy and concomitantly in the colonial context the myth of Euro-North American superiority. Under the influence of the Red Girl and against the approval of her mother, Annie John questions the validity and legitimacy of colonialism as she defies her prescribed gender role by playing marbles. The testicular appropriation of the boys’ marbles underscores the enabling uses of the trope of castration in the successful subversion of patriarchy and empire. The masturbatory jouissance of playing with marbles illustrates the joys of a reclaimed personal and political autonomy.

Annie John’s attraction for the Red Girl overshadows her earlier infatuation with Gwen and stands as further proof of the rapid succession of multiple same-sex love-affairs during her childhood and adolescence. Annie describes her fantasies of infidelity as she strolls around with Gwen:

We walked into our classroom in the usual way, arm in arm — her head on my shoulder…. The Little Lovebirds, our friends called us. Who could have guessed at that moment about the new claim on my heart? Certainly not Gwen. For, of course, in bringing her up to date I never mentioned the Red Girl. (60)

The description of Annie John walking hand-in-hand with her girlfriend stands as evidence of the straightforward presentation of same-sex attachments in the novel, for the description of homosocial desire is clear throughout and very much at the surface of this text. Physical and verbal expressions of same-sex affection are not concealed, but are expressed with openness. For instance, the favourite topic of conversation between Annie John and Gwen consists of repeated declarations of romantic desire: ‘we told of our love for each other’ (48). Annie John does not mince words to describe the homosocial bond between the schoolgirls as a deep romantic attachment rivalling and competing with the discourse of heterosexuality. When Gweneth gives Annie John a present — a rock found at the foot of a sleeping volcano — Annie says: ‘It may have been in that moment that we fell in love. Later, we could never agree on when it was’ (46). Moreover, Annie John’s plans for living in a house of her own with Gwen
If homosociality is presented frankly in Kincaid’s work, homosexuality is not. In fact, more sexual descriptions of desire between Annie John and her girlfriends are relegated to the subtextual level in coded form. Such forms of coded homosexual acts involve Gwen and Annie John’s practice of lying down in a pasture to expose their breasts in the moonlight (74). One of the most outstanding of these coded forms of homosexuality involves the curious ‘affectionate pinch’ (45) Annie John practices with her girl-lovers: ‘Then I would pull at the hair on her arms and legs — gently at first, and then awfully hard, holding it up taut with the tips of my fingers until she cried out’ (7). Clearly, this bodily play between Annie John and Sonia involving the excitement of the senses through touch articulates a certain sensuality that remains mute except for the wordless cries of Sonia. Annie John also practices this coded form of sexuality through pinching with other girls. With the Red Girl, for example, Annie John refines and perfects this activity through her articulation of intense emotions — especially the transformation of pain into pleasure:

Then, still without saying a word, the Red Girl began to pinch me. She pinched hard, picking up pieces of my almost nonexistent flesh and twisting it around. At first, I vowed not to cry, but it went on for so long that tears I could not control streamed down my face. I cried so much that my chest began to heave, and then, as if my heaving chest caused her to have some pity on me, she stopped pinching and began to kiss me on the same spots where shortly before I had felt the pain of her pinch. Oh, the sensation was delicious — the combination of pinches and kisses (63).

It has become customary for critics to pathologise Annie’s eroticism, when they do not ignore it. For instance, Diane Simmons interprets these expressions of same-sex desire of Annie John’s as one of ‘several attempts to replace her mother’s love’ (108), following a developmentalist model of psychological growth with heterosexuality as a proper telos. Whether it is easily recognisable at the surface level or requires a more intricate exegesis to bring it to light, homosexuality is problematically presented by Kincaid as a stage to be overcome in the process of maturation. One of the coded homosexual acts between the girls, the fondling of each other’s breasts, is explained as a necessity due to the absence of boys: ‘On hearing somewhere that if a boy rubbed your breast they would quickly swell up, I passed along this news…. [W]e had to make do with ourselves. What perfection we found in each other!’ (50). In other words, homosexuality is presented as childish exploratory behaviour. Lesbianism, in Kincaid, is permissible as experimentation and as a second-choice option to the goal of heterosexuality.

Menstruation signals the end of this period of homoerotic experimentation. After Annie John begins menstruating, a rift is created between herself and Gwen which signals the end of their emotional attachment: ‘Gwen and I vowed to love
each other always, but the words had a hollow ring, and when we looked at each other we couldn’t sustain the gaze’ (53). It is significant that this division between Gwen and Annie John occurs after Annie’s first menstrual period, for her maturation involves the shedding of the homosocial and homosexual associations which for Kincaid are only permissible as childhood sexual experimentation.

Annie John’s same-sex relationships exist within a wider societal circle which tolerates the attachment as part of female socialisation before puberty. As Annie John says, ‘[w]e separated ourselves from the other girls, and they, understanding everything, left us alone’ (46). Nevertheless, the strong societal compulsion towards heterosexuality exerts a strong, destructive pressure on Annie’s relationships. Annie John is aware of the non-normative quality of these attachments and is carefully furtive and secretive concerning her sexual attachments to other girls: ‘When I got home, my mother greeted me with the customary kiss and inquiries. I told her about my day … leaving out, of course, any mention at all of Gwen and my overpowering feelings for her’ (33). Eventually Annie John fails to conceal from her mother her attraction to girls, for Miss Edwards, the school teacher, catches the girls exposing their body parts in sexual games and denounces Annie to her mother: ‘Tears came to my mother’s eyes when she heard what I had done … my mother couldn’t bring herself to repeat the misdeed to my father in my presence’ (81).

Annie John’s affection is the love that dares not speak its name in her family circle. As such, it is tempting to consider Annie John’s a case of the ‘closetedness’ Sedgwick has studied in *Epistemology of the Closet*:

‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. The speech act that coming out, in turn, can comprise are strangely specific. (3)

Annie John never enunciates the speech act of ‘coming-out’ found in queer first world coming-of-age narratives, which suggests the inability of first world models of sexual alterity to travel to other parts of the world, such as the Caribbean. As Martin Manalasan writes, ‘the closet is not a monolithic space and coming out is not a uniform process’ (435). Annie John does not come out because for her same-sex desire is a pubescent experiment and does not constitute a fixed identity for life, as occurs in Euro-North America.

Nevertheless, the stigma of homosexuality, even as a non-identitarian behaviour, is too much for Annie John to bear and she capitulates to the progressive narrative of sexual development with heterosexuality as telos. The end of her sexual attraction to Gwen is described as a major re-orientation of her desire, and a radical transformation of her sexual sensibility. Annie John confesses: ‘Gwen … was no longer a thrill for me. It was as if I had grown a new skin over the old skin and the new skin had a completely different set of nerve endings’ (91). To a great extent, the end of Annie’s relationship with Gwen marks the
termination of her homoerotic desire as an acceptable form of relating to other girls. It is important for Annie John to declare her overcoming of this attachment in her maturational process: ‘Gwen, formerly the love of my life, [is] now reduced to an annoying acquaintance’ (129). More poignantly, Annie’s dismissal of Gwen is a self-conscious attempt at establishing her homosexuality as an anterior and immature form of desire which she has left behind and has no intention of returning to: ‘When I saw her [Gwen] now my heart nearly split in two with embarrassment at the feelings I used to have for her and the things I had shared with her (137). Annie John’s embarrassment marks her internalisation of society’s compulsion to heterosexuality and her capitulation to its normative power.

As Annie John matures, she feels socially compelled to consider the subject of marriage. Her rejection of marriage should not be understood as a rejection of heterosexuality in toto, but rather as her refusal of an institution that oppresses women. Annie has witnessed how women like her mother must tend to the needs of faithless men like her father. In fact, she resists marriage only in the sense that she does not wish to meet the same fate as her mother — a servant to an aging, irresponsible man.

Kincaid’s more recent novel, Lucy, functions as a sequel to Annie John as it follows the story of a young Caribbean woman in her late teens who migrates to the United States to work as an au pair for a wealthy, white couple. If Annie John resisted the Western notion of “the closet” as an adequate descriptor of Caribbean same-sex desire, the first world metropolitan narrative of Lucy moves closer to an acknowledgment of homosexuality as a condition of the self. However, this condition of the self is presented as temporary and puerile in nature. In Lucy, Kincaid further refines the homosexual experiences of Annie John’s childhood and clearly presents homosexuality as a rite-of-passage to be overcome in the process of personal maturation. Lucy declares how before having been initiated into heterosexual sex by Tanner, ‘there was a girl from school I used to kiss, but we were best friends and were only using each other for practice’ (83). Here, Kincaid leaves no doubt as to her conceptualisation of homosexuality as rehearsal and as antechamber for heterosexuality. Her ‘practice’ with girls helps her sort out her feelings with respect to a young man, Paul, with whom Lucy proves that she has ascended to a heterosexual identity. Therefore, while in Lucy there might be a representation of homosexuality as a state of being, this falls short of full assimilation of the Western idea of homosexuality as a permanent quality of the subject that is manifested as an adult orientation. As if articulating the counterpunctual postcolonial debate between acculturation and deculturation, Kincaid’s discourse reveals a deep ambivalence between a drive for complete rejection of Western modes of sexual alterity and a consideration of partial adoption of these imported values.

After an unsuccessful date with a boy whom they meet at a record store, Lucy and Peggy, her best friend, seek romantic solace in each other: ‘We were so
disappointed that we went back to my room and smoked marijuana and kissed each other until we were exhausted and fell asleep” (83). Lucy fantasises about Hugh during this homoerotic experience. In a manner similar to the ‘practice kisses’ mentioned earlier, Kincaid returns to her representation of homosexuality as a situational, furtive behaviour which must stand as a second-choice alternative to an all-aspiring heterosexuality. As such, Kincaid’s discourse presents homosexuality and homosociality as a stage to be overcome in the maturational process of personal development. The young female protagonist is a seducer of girls who, becoming aware of the societal stigma to her desire, disavows her same-sex orientation and adopts the norms of heterosexuality as telos because, as Antonia MacDonald Smythe notes:

> The sexual identity that the child Annie begins to form is interrupted by social conventions that return young women to heterosexual compliance. Her Antiguan society does not name women living and working together as friend and as lovers to be an option. Instead, female community is subordinated to masculine desire and the institution of heterosexuality. (58)

In contrast to Kincaid’s presentation of homosexuality as a rite-of-passage to be overcome in order to achieve a teleological heterosexuality, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* makes an important departure from the linear and hierarchical categories which stigmatise homosexuality and alternative genders. In fact, Mootoo’s presentation of homosexuality and alternative genders subscribes to the postmodernist aesthetic of decentredness, a model that replaces the modernist progressive models of modernity. In *Cereus*, it is possible to see the dislocation of heterosexuality as centre and telos of the sexuality model, and the fragmentation and proliferation of genders.

This dislocation of heterosexuality and the proliferation of genders becomes evident in an analysis of the four main couples of the *Cereus* narrative: Sarah and Chandin, Mala and Ambrose, Sarah and Lavinia, and Tyler and Otoh. Sarah and Chandin are the only people of East Indian descent at a seminary founded and run in Lantanacamara by missionaries who have come from the colonial metropole, the Shivering Northern Wetlands. Their marriage is esteemed by the seminary community as a natural event, due to their miscegenation fears. Chandin and Sarah marry more as a result of social pressure than from any romantic attraction between them. In fact, Chandin only proposes to Sarah after being rejected by Lavinia, the daughter of his Wetlandish adoptive parents. Utilising the rhetoric of incest to prohibit his union with their daughter, their racism is exposed when she is betrothed to a wealthy cousin in the Wetlands.

Mala, the main protagonist of *Cereus*, is Ambrose’s childhood playmate and adolescent lover. Ambrose repeatedly fails to defend Mala against the attacks of abusive children and her father. Guilty, he falls into a comatose-like state from which he arises once a month to make amends to Mala by sending food to her house. He marries Elsie Mohanty, who becomes a servant to her ill husband.
After years of lethargy, Ambrose leaves his bed-ridden state and renews his friendship with Mala, who is now at the nursing home. Their re-encounter at the end of the narrative, however happy, is tinged with regret: ‘No time to waste, not a moment to be wasted’ (248).

The failure in the marriages of Chandin and Sarah, Elsie and Ambrose points to Shani Mootoo’s attempt to decentre heterosexuality through her representation of it as an unsuccessful institution. Also in line with this motivation, it is significant to note that the males in the heterosexual relationships of *Cereus*, Chandin and Ambrose, do not marry their first-choice partner and are forced to settle for second-choice partners with whom they have unsuccessful relationships. As if responding to the Kincaidian discourse in which homosexuality is presented as an inferior alternative to the heterosexual goal, Mootoo presents heterosexuality, generally, as an unhappy consolation.

Chandin and Sarah’s loveless marriage finally dissolves when Sarah leaves her husband in order to live abroad with her female lover Lavinia, the missionaries’ daughter who had earlier rejected him. Sarah and Lavinia form a lesbian couple, challenging the patriarchal and heterosexual constraints of West Indian culture. Sarah, from the island of Lantanacamara, is of East Indian descent. Lavinia is Wetlandish. Their relationship triumphs over the abusive patriarchal rule of Chandin and over the deep racial prejudices of the island and the missionary school in particular.

The departure of Lavinia and Sarah from Lantanacamara contrasts sharply with the relative unproblematic existence of male homosexual relations in the island and speaks to the incredible affront that lesbianism poses to the Caribbean patriarchal nation Alexander describes. In terms of a queer exile, their flight is similar to the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas’ escape from Fidel Castro’s Cuba described in his fictionalised autobiography *Antes que Anochezca*, translated in English as *Before Night Falls*. Because of their expulsion from the national body, it becomes important to note that these protagonists do not appear to be othered as ordinary objects, but that they evacuate their respective islands as national abjects. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé has utilised Kristeva’s notion of abjection to understand the societal role of the Puerto Rican homosexual protagonist of Luis Rafael Sanchez’s novel *¡Jum!* (134) and this deployment of Kristeva’s notion appears relevant here as well. The extension of Kristeva’s notion of the corporeal human being to the national body appears to be an appropriate step, for in these texts queer subjects are expelled from the body politic in the much the same way as the biological body excretes faeces and vomits food. Kristeva writes:

> nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. ‘I’ want none of that element, sign of their desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it. But since food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me,’ who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which I claim to establish myself. (3)
For Kristeva the abject is not an other, it is the thing itself. Abjection is an act of self-evacuation. Reading allegory into Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, the abjected protagonist is an allegorical representation of the nation expelling her. The abject is in fact the subject: ‘It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled’ (4). As such, the queer exile presented in Mootoo’s and Arenas’ texts depict the Caribbean state’s mechanism of shedding and hiding away a sexuality that is inadmissible to itself because it contradicts the moralities of patriarchy it inherited from colonial rule and which it still seeks to emulate, as Alexander demonstrates. Mootoo’s representation of abjected lesbianism then addresses the idea of the anxious patriarchal state that cannot contain the idea of its own dispensability and must hide from its view a vacuous image of itself.

Ambrose and Elsie’s unhappy marriage remains undistinguished except for their child Otoh. Born as a girl and named ‘Ambrosia’ at birth, Ambrose and Elsie’s child, in an exemplary case of Caribbean magical realism, is successful at a gender re-assignment which is accepted by everyone in the community:

> By the time Ambrosia was five, her parents were embroiled in their marital problems to the exclusion of all else, including their child. They hardly noticed that their daughter was transforming herself into their son…. [T]he child walked and ran and dressed and talked and tumbled and all but relieved himself so much like an authentic boy that Elsie soon apparently forgot she had ever given birth to a girl…. [E]ven the nurse and the doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marvelled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl. (109–10)

Otoh’s gender-reassignment becomes more significant when he begins a love affair with Tyler, the effeminate male, cross-dressing nurse of the nursing home. The nature of their union makes the question of Otoh’s gender appear to be, in comparison, very simple: are Otoh and Tyler a homosexual couple? Are they a heterosexual couple, by nature of their gender at birth? Through the characters of Otoh and Tyler, Shani Mootoo presents gender as a proliferating and fragmented idea and undoes such binary distinctions as male/female and homosexual/heterosexual. In this manner, Shani Mootoo uses ‘utopianism to explore what it might mean to imagine a space for lesbians and gay men in the Caribbean’ (Smyth 156). In general, the success of the non-normative sexualities in the narrative of *Cereus*, as opposed to the failure of the heterosexual unions, points to Mootoo’s dislocation of heterosexuality as being an ultimate, desirable goal.

Unlike Kincaid’s narrative in *Annie John* and *Lucy*, there is no developmental narrative in Mootoo’s *Cereus* towards heterosexuality. In fact, considering structure, there is no progress at all, at least not one that can be considered linear. Fragmented narrative flashbacks are held together by the overarching story of Mala. Nevertheless, it becomes important to consider that Mala, because of her mental illness, is herself fragmented between Popoh, her childhood self, and her current state of being and therefore, the novel’s only point of coherence
is already fragmented and multiple. With respect to homosexuality, Kincaid’s Annie John stands as a presentation of the Caribbean in which modernity’s linear time is used to position homosexuality as a test to be surpassed on the road towards a subjectivity which is decidedly heterosexual. In contrast to this, Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night attempts a non-linear, postmodernist narrative in which heterosexuality is destabilised as normative centre and in which multiple, alternative genders freely proliferate.

The ‘sexually deviant’ protagonists of Annie John and Cereus Blooms at Night function as competing allegorical representations of the Caribbean as a libidinous zone. Annie John functions as an allegorical representation of the Caribbean insofar as she is an African-descent servant to a white, wealthy family. This allusion to the Caribbean experience of slavery is further re-enforced by Annie’s migration from Antigua to the US, a modern-day reference to the importation of large numbers of Africans to the cane-fields of New World. Annie John’s allegorical connection to the Caribbean nation is clear when she describes her own emotional condition as being ‘in a state of no state’ (121). Lucy continues Annie John’s allegory of the Caribbean. Lucy becomes aggravated when her employers’ circle of friends associate her with vague representations of the Caribbean that demonstrate their geographical ignorance:

‘So are you from the islands?’ I don’t know why, but the way she said it made a fury rise up within me. I was about to respond to her in this way: ‘Which islands do you mean? The Hawaiian Islands? The islands that make up Indonesia, or what?’ (56)

Lucy’s sense of self is intricately enmeshed with her place of origin to such a degree in this diasporic situation that she becomes the spokesperson for the region, voicing its complaints concerning colonial representations. Lucy is particularly incensed by the representation of the Caribbean as a holiday destination for travellers from wealthier countries: ‘Somehow it made me feel ashamed to come from a place where the only thing to be said about it was: “I had fun when I was there”’ (65). The degree to which Lucy feels the pain of misrepresentation of the Caribbean in the form of shame points to the ways in which the Caribbean and herself are fused in an allegorical construction. In contrast to the shame produced by these colonialist representations of the Caribbean, Lucy is excited about Hugh who possesses a more informed idea of the Caribbean, ‘[T]he first thing he said to me was “Where in the West Indies are you from?” and that is how I came to like him in an important way’ (65). Moira Ferguson makes the allegorical connection of Kincaid’s protagonist with her Caribbean island most clear:

Lucy is also Antigua of 1967, a territory freeing itself from the coloniser, already tentatively entering an early postcolonial phase. In the late nineteen sixties Antigua was struggling toward partial independence ... just as Lucy struggles successfully toward a form of independence. (131)
The presence of allegory in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* is clear in the developing, overarching character of Mala, who operates as a mad-woman-in-the-attic figure, a literary descendant of *Jane Eyre*’s and *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s insane Caribbean mistresses. The allegorical aspect is also evident in the choice of a fictional name for the island-setting in order to make it stand as Every-Island. Other choices in names such as ‘The Thoroughlys’ for the last name of the family of Wetlandish missionaries is a noteworthy use of allegory to promote a representation of British colonialism that resonates with Victorian values. However, it might be difficult, initially, to perceive the ways in which Tyler and Otoh, considered to a large degree peculiar and eccentric by the inhabitants of the island of Lantanacamara, operate as allegorical representations of their community. When one takes into account the ways in which eccentricity has been a trope utilised to define the Caribbean — one only needs to think of the carnivalesque representations of the region — the allegory becomes more evident. Moreover, Tyler and Otoh’s undefined gender-status speaks to the nebulous representations of the Caribbean Lucy confronted. When Tyler, in drag, says: ‘I felt flatfooted and clumsy. Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and non-existence’ (77) it becomes difficult not to read into his gender performance certain ideas of the Caribbean as the politically, socially and ethnically undefined place the friends of Lucy’s employers visited during their vacations. The same can be said of Ambrosia’s transformation into Otoh and of his subsequent impersonation of his father. In this way, Tyler and Otoh’s gender ambiguity is allegorically representative of the island community and of the Caribbean as a whole as spaces without fixed identities. Mary Condé notes the allegorical content of *Cereus* when she writes that:

> Mala is the character who comes closest to being a personification of Lantanacamara: she blends into the background of its vegetation, and can imitate perfectly the cries of its birds, crickets and frogs. She, like the island, is left again and again by those who leave home for the Shivering Northern Wetlands…. Just as the cereus only blooms one night in every year, so Mala, the embodiment of Lantanacamara, experiences only brief intervals of happiness with the mother, sister, and lover who all desert her. (69)

Kincaid’s character, Annie John-Lucy, and Mootoo’s characters, Otoh and Tyler, present different manifestations and uses of the Caribbean as a hypersexualised, libidinous zone. The work of both writers occupy different places within one tradition which sees the Caribbean as a place of unrestrained sexual freedom, as a Garden of Eden in which the traditionally accepted rules for sexual conduct are not applicable. For Kincaid, the historical representation of the Caribbean as a libidinous zone needs to be surpassed by one in which the Caribbean matures towards heteronormativity. For Mootoo, the representation of the Caribbean as a libidinous zone, essentialist as it has been, can be re-
deployed for purposes such as the validation of alternative sexualities. These competing views expose two divergent progressive narratives concerning Caribbean sexuality. Both acknowledge and accept the problematic view of the Caribbean as an area of unrestrained carnivalesque sexuality. Nevertheless, while Kincaid seeks to rid the Caribbean of these semantic associations by positing homosexuality as an infantile stage towards a decidedly heterosexual maturity, Mootoo reacts against this developmental narrative by highlighting an indigenous, regional tradition of accepting sexual difference.

As allegorical representations of the nation and region, Annie John-Lucy as well as Otoh and Tyler present different paths towards the inclusion of dissident sexualities in contemporary Caribbean societies. Annie John-Lucy stands as the route of sexual conservatism. The acceptance of Otoh and Tyler’s in the fabric of Lantanacamara’s social life at the end of Cereus Blooms at Night stands as an optimistic note on the part of Shani Mootoo concerning the de-stigmatisation of alternative sexualities and genders in the Caribbean and as the possibility of overcoming the anxious patriarchal West Indian state Alexander describes.

NOTES
2 For a more extended study of the relationship between nation and subjectivity in Caribbean literature, see Roberto Strongman, Allegorical I/Lands: Personal and National Development in Caribbean Autobiographical Writing.
3 See Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky’s Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire. This work analyses the developing of male-male bonds through triangular relations involving a woman. Sedgwick’s subsequent work, Epistemology of the Closet, suggests the possibility of female homosocial bonds as well (88).
4 For an extended treatment of this topic, see Lucy Wilson’s ‘The Novel of Relational Autonomy: West Indian Women Writers and the Evolution of a Genre’.

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‘The Witness’, ‘The Naming’, ‘Memories and Talismans’ and ‘This Silent Place’ trace the life story of my maternal Grandmother, Doris (formerly Dorris) Eloise Butcher nee Benjamin. Her story begins in Jamaica, where she was born in 1900, and lived until the age of thirty. After meeting and marrying my English Grandfather, Charles Horace Butcher, she migrated to London, and then in 1971, following my mother’s marriage, migrated once again, to Australia.

The poems explore notions of belonging, dislocation, migration, and familial and Colonial silences. From my perspective, in the sub-tropical, suburban Newcastle landscape where I grew up, and where she lived until she died in 1989, I re-imagine my Grandmother, re-trace her footsteps.

My Grandmother was born ‘illegitimate’ and ‘The Witness’ looks at the silences that exist surrounding her birth. However, there is difficulty witnessing a silent story, one that, like the Australian landscape, has many layers of erasure including the dual lack of the witness to the birth and my witnessing of the account, or lack of testimony. Whilst it is essential to remain sensitive to these personal silences, so many women’s stories remain untold. ‘The Naming’, as its title suggests, further investigates the issue of ‘naming’, focusing on the signing of the name Benjamin on my Grandmother’s marriage certificate. Whilst ‘Memories and Talismans’ and ‘This Silent Place’ seek connections, unearthing my Grandmother’s thoughts and desires for ‘home’.
Doris Eloise Butcher, Kingston, Jamaica. (Photographer and date unknown.)
THE WITNESS

in metastasis
the cells divide
as seeds between teeth split
it spreads
‘as the disease progresses
they
become increasingly abnormal
in behaviour and appearance’¹

next to your Christian names
was a line ________________
leading nowhere
a line bereft of ...

in the box marked Witness was the name

you can tell a lot about a person by their name

with his eyes glued upon you
from the start, your Father,
You who were cast
(like those before)
cast half
and half
between this and that
when Mother sent you away
with your grandmother
you stayed
the salty harbour breeze
calming the Jamaican heat

and underneath tight-lipped,
your tongue curled back
not a word was uttered
not a word spoken
As Seeds between Teeth Split

of the facts:
Augustus Miller Benjamin
watched you slip from your
watery sack

memory
stored
to fight off attack
from that line that leads nowhere
between this
    and that

from what you said and what we know

in case it all came leaching out
in a

Lou Smith

THE NAMING

Although the term metastasis may describe such disparate processes as the shifting of symptoms or local manifestations in mumps or the transportation of bacteria from one part of the body to another, it is used particularly to indicate the spread of malignant tumours to distant sites.¹

Silence salted the air thick
when with the cursive curl of wrist
you signed nee Benjamin
on the dotted line.

And there it sat
a seed lodged in tooth
a thought
caught at the back of the mind
never to be spoken of again

your name was Butcher now.

Mechanisms of transfer include direct extension or seeding of body cavities and surfaces...

Years later, sunk in your chair
your stockings rolled below the knee,
the view a canopy of trees
and ‘the bank’ of blackberry vines we played in

had the mid-morning sun bleached
the memory of your in-laws’ fears,
a whitened spot where thought once existed
of arriving in England, you from the Colonies,
your baby heavy in your belly

What would the neighbours think of the colour of her skin?
On the mantelpiece
in floral porcelain frames
sat the photos of your half-brothers
fading to shades.

MEMORIES AND TALISMANS

Did here remind you of the smell of heat
the sweat moist and pungent under arms
forming yellow patches on your blouse?
Like on the one from Panama you wore as a child
and I’ve worn (to comments of *isn’t that exotic!* after you.
Did it remind you of those days eating breakfast
of grapefruit sweet with sugar,
of frying saltfish or rice with peas?
Jasmine hedge suburban fences here,
their smell thickening the hot air sweet
in this place so far from your home, but all I know.
When you walked the quiet cul-de-sac breathing
in their intoxication
did you conjure the noisy streets of Kingston,
cart sellers’ calls, strange creaks and dockland horns?
When you felt the bush track beneath your feet,
the crunch of bark and smell of gum,
did the sky overgrow with rainforest vines
from the mountains you left behind?
What talisman did you hold to keep those memories close?
I hold your photo between forefingers,
I keep your wedding ring wrapped in velvet,
and I wear your blouse from Panama
embroidered thick with flowers.
As Seeds between Teeth Split

Doris Eloise Butcher, Karina Smith, Louise Smith, Westcourt Road, New Lambton, Newcastle, NSW, Australia. Mid-1970s.
THIS SILENT PLACE

So many paths you have walked,
shantytown streets hovering in mirage
London lanes wet with sleet.
And then here, this place
this silent place
where Awabakal stories are hidden
under California bungalows on suburban streets.

In the stillness of late summer days,
when Jacaranda petals carpeted the bitumen road mauve
you strolled,
the smell of soaked lawn seeping clay soil
wetting your parched tongue
with the thirst for home

and your petticoat was static on stocking.

As a detective I’ve traced your journey
my thoughts recording events,
qualitative data of
heres and theres,
but there is so much space,
so many blanks
filled with poetic licence.

If I run too fast,
ask too many questions
will my ankle buckle on
the slippery edge of
uneven bluestone?
The leg disjoint,
the periosteum peel away
from the bone like paperbark?

Fact: Dorris Eloise Benjamin
Born: Kingston, Jamaica 1900.

Stratified white,
Poor, uneducated.
She was able to embrace an internal milieu of Colonial rule.

1930 you married an Englishman, Charles Horace Butcher, my grandfather.

1931 headed for the ‘mother country’.

1971 arrived in Australia.

As a tree
I stand upright,
my bones holding me in place,
my neural sensory branches reaching.
As a detective, I trace the sole of your foot with my fingertip.

Doris Eloise Butcher. (Photographer and date unknown.)
JOYCE JOHNSON

‘Is Not Story, Is the Gospel Truth’: Fact and Fiction in Ian Strachan’s *God’s Angry Babies*

‘We all live within the stories we tell, for these tales fashion a coherent direction and identity out of the discontinuities of our past, present, and future.’

(Drew Gilpin Faust, 2)

Have faith to face, Caonoba
the tree-green seas rolled down
one doubt will smash the garden
shatter the convex lawn
drown the three nuns of fear.
(Edward Braithwaite ‘The Cracked Mother’ 180)

In *God’s Angry Babies*, Ian Strachan interweaves different types and styles of discourse as he examines the extent to which stories circulating at a popular level within a community colour people’s vision of reality and influence behaviour. Stories, as used in this discussion, include narratives describing events, and fictional stories as well as ‘ideologies, rationalizations and explanations’ (Faust 2). Type of discourse refers to the distinctions which are made, for example, between myth, legend, folktale, autobiographical writing, news report and letter. Differences in style are created by the mixture of language varieties, the use of figurative language, shifts between direct and indirect speech, and the patterns of rhythm and tonal qualities resulting from these. Much of Strachan’s material is derived from the performance culture of Bahamian oral tradition, but he also specifically relates his stories to the language of ‘classrooms and offices, lawyers and library books’ (Strachan 13) stemming from British scribal tradition. The interaction between the two traditions which resulted in the Bahamian Creole, the local vernacular language, reflects both the nature of the society which Strachan describes and processes taking places within it. The heterogeneous sources which he brings together in the novel reflect the geographical fragmentation and cultural diversity of the Bahamas, which is situated on an archipelago and is inhabited by people of mixed African and European heritage. Strachan’s integration of different formal and stylistic elements suggests the process of creolisation by which native born Bahamians attempt to unite their society and reconcile divergent elements. Events described in the novel highlight
stories which are used by politicians, social agencies like churches and schools, peer groups and family members to influence each other during this process of acculturation. Strachan depicts a central character who comes to disbelieve many of the stories which shaped his outlook. Like his prototype in Brathwaite’s poem cited above, he is ‘cracked’ by fear as his mind is inundated by doubt.

Strachan’s plotting of the novel directs attention to the problematics of storytelling. The use of multiple narrators, a drastic rearrangement of chronology, and different styles of narration reflect his concern with the relationship between fiction and fact, appearance and reality, and the effects of time and memory on recollections of the past. In depicting political corruption, social dysfunction and gender inequities, Strachan also brings out the significance of various stories circulating within the society and the ways in which they colour people’s vision of reality. The method is dialogic. Neither the narrator’s nor a particular character’s views constitute the ultimate authority with respect to the situations presented. Moreover, the central character who is highly critical of events is in many ways as compromised as those he berates. Stories, Strachan demonstrates, have submerged meanings which members of a community internalise and act upon. Storytelling, he also shows, however, can be used, as he uses the novel, to make people aware of the ‘meanings in which [they] live enmeshed, embedded, not even aware that they exist’ (Dance 1992 277).

The novel is set in the fictional islands of the Santa Marias in the context of political infighting following on the achievement of black majority rule. It shows the chief protagonist Mark Etienne Bodie, popularly known as Tree — a name given him by his friend Small Pint — in the process of defining his relationship to his society and liberating himself from the influence of his mother who has been the significant formative influence in his life. Tree, the ‘las’ chile’, and a boy growing up without a father, is especially attached to his mother and is particularly aware of the sacrifices she has made for her children. His experience in the post-Independence period both extend and contrast with those of his mother who grew up in the colonial period. Strachan explores their different historical outlooks, and counterpoints their responses to the architects of black majority rule.

Tree’s mother, Maureen Bodie, a woman ‘trapped in a world that has been created by men, and whose organisation is male’ (Dance 1992a 142) has acquired a degree of autonomy. She has left a husband who abused her, and used the opportunities provided under black majority rule to further her education. Resentment of her ex-husband has been a driving force, but her primary goal in life is to ensure the well-being of her three sons. Maureen has remained loyal to the party which facilitated her advancement and enabled her to establish an identity apart from her husband’s. She assumes that Tree thinks as she does. Strachan thus creates a parallel between Tree who tries to be loyal to the mother who has nurtured and protected him and the people of the Santa Marias who have remained loyal to the ruling party. Tree is as much constrained by his
mother’s personal history as the people are by stories of the party’s role in the achievement of black majority rule.

The novel is written in four parts, each contributing in a variety of ways to the theme of storytelling. Strachan’s insights on the role of storytelling in the community emerge not only from personal histories of characters like Maureen and myths circulating within the political environment but also from material selected from the repertoire of folklore, rumour, gossip, and news reports. Given the significance of juxtaposition, alternation (the interweaving and combination of narrative units) and embedding in the novel, further discussion of the uses of storytelling and the problematic relationship between fact and fiction that Strachan creates will follow the contours of the text.

The opening chapter of Part 1, entitled ‘Ten’, establishes a sense of place, describing the demoralising conditions of life in Pompey Village, a segment of the urban culture in Safe Haven in Grand Santa Maria, the capital of the Santa Marias. People in Pompey Village are victims not only of neglect by their elected representatives but also of their own heedlessness and ignorance, as the accident between a truck and a bus demonstrates. The potholes which hamper movement and contribute to accidents reflect the difficult social terrain negotiated by the community. The accident in which Tree is involved as a passenger, and its immediate aftermath, initiate a train of reflection and a ‘revisiting’ of the past with respect to the present when he is almost twenty years old. The reference to the general elections scheduled for the following year establishes a time frame for this process of retrospection. For Tree, recollecting past experience and telling his story has a cathartic effect, relieving certain tensions in his mind and in his relationship with others, in particular his mother.

The description of the environment in which the accident occurs introduces themes of political corruption and mythmaking — that is, the construction of stories to ensure public regard or to foster allegiance to a party. The news report by M.E. Bodie, staff writer for The Daily Report — Tree narrates, but not in his own voice — underscores the view of the community presented by the third person narrator and draws attention to another kind of story which also serves to define the cultural landscape and determine the political climate. ‘True or false’, as the third narrator later observes, ‘once something appeared in The Daily Report, it might just as well be fact, because people treated it as such’ (238).

Tree’s meeting with his mother, following the accident, provides another perspective on the political environment and the uses of stories. The mixture of understanding and tension existing between Tree and Maureen is apparent when she confronts him in the hospital emergency room. As she rescues him from this demoralising environment, she is determined that he must go to university abroad, as she had done. Tree has secretly been applying for admission to universities in the United States. When he tells Maureen that he has been accepted by one, she urges him to contact the new Minister of Education, Thaddeus McKinney, who,
she hopes, will assist Tree in obtaining a scholarship to finance his studies abroad. Maureen, loyal to the party that brought black majority rule, tells Tree that Thaddeus is ‘a good man’ (17). She still sees him as ‘a humble man from Crab Bay’ (17), a man ‘with hardly any formal education, who worked his way up from a bus driver’ (18). Thaddeus, whose example can be used to show that ‘A man could be anything in Santa Maria’ (18) has, in effect, the ideal profile for the politician soliciting popular support. Maureen believes that Thaddeus will help Tree, for she has internalised the idea which developed in the context of slavery and colonialism and which politicians of the post-Independence era use in their own interest: ‘Black people must stick together’ (17).

Although he has heard stories casting him in a different light, Tree agrees to meet McKinney to please his mother — his need for a scholarship is greater than burgeoning doubts about the ruling party and the use of a common history of oppression to engage loyalty. He realises that he cannot hope to further his education unless he accepts some form of patronage, a view which is confirmed in a subsequent conversation with two friends in which he discovers that Yellow Man has bought his driver’s license and Small Pint has joined the police force without meeting the requirements. Moreover, there is his mother’s story which seems to justify her outlook and her continuing loyalty to the political party which helped her.

Flashbacks to Maureen’s childhood, adolescence and marriage in the rural environment of Runaway Island evoke the context of traditional storytelling and oral history. Strachan thus reminds the reader of other types of stories which characterise the culture — stories other than those intended to accomplish political objectives. The tone of the narrator, which is noticeably different from that describing Pompey Village, suggests another ethos. The narrator combines the truncated sentences and repetitions of the storyteller searching for words with the succinct downright manner of the ‘knowledgeable’ informant. Underlying the narrative voice is that of the polydialectal Maureen. Her ‘language of choice’ (12) is the vernacular, but she has taught herself to use standard English effectively and has conveyed to Tree an idea of its importance and ‘power’ (13). The account of her early life, which distances it from the world of Pompey Village, underscores her achievement in educating herself and achieving independence in a male-dominated society.

Set in anterior time, Maureen’s struggles as a child growing up in a rural setting contrast with the experiences of her sons who live comfortably in the city. By blending personal history with various types of folklore, Strachan indicates how her story functions for her and those to whom she tells it. Maureen uses her story like a myth to inspire her sons and motivate them to succeed. In outline, her story is typical of those which parents of her generation, who have moved to the urban context, tell their children about life in the country, and the difficulty of making their way up and out. However, it may also be compared to the story
which the politicians rehearse about the difficult road to independence and black majority rule. Both stories tell of triumph over difficult circumstances, help to shape future development, and instil loyalty. Maureen, however, unlike the politicians, does not dispense favours to win support.

Maureen’s personal history is repeated in a dramatic monologue which is addressed to Tree. This version of her story voices her dissatisfaction with her situation as a woman, disappointment with her older sons, and the failure of her marriage to their father, Mercer Stone. The irreconcilability of Maureen’s and Mercer’s outlook reflects the situation in the wider community where, as Maureen tells Tree, ‘What a woman say don’t mean a shit…. What a man say is law’ (39). Although Maureen’s own example as a woman who has liberated herself from virtual servitude as a wife and managed to function independently subverts this idea, she still displays the ‘cart horse’ mentality (34) derived from her early upbringing. She is overprotective of her sons who, even in a crisis, wait for her to come home and cook their dinner, and in a variety of ways helps to perpetuate the male dominance that she rebelled against. She cannot, as it were, change the story and, like the community in relation to the ruling party, she is trapped in the history of past experience.

As the focus of narration shifts to Thaddeus McKinney, Maureen’s problematic situation regarding her sons and her entanglement with history are further illuminated. The narrator’s vituperative and ironic account of Thaddeus’ career highlights the limited options of the black man attempting to better himself in the immediate post-Independence period, the self-justificatory attitudes of politicians in a context of adversarial race relations and various forms of political manoeuvring. As was noted earlier, in the popular estimation Thaddeus, ‘the humble man who had come to Safe Haven as a picky-head boy from Crab Bay’ (47) has become a heroic figure despite the various stories in circulation about his marital and financial problems. People who ‘came up the hard way’ can empathise with him to the point where they suspend moral judgments. The interview with Tree, who is seeking his assistance, presented directly without tag clauses or intervening narrative, conveys a different ‘story’ from the commonly accepted one.

Finally, Part 1 introduces the story of Tree’s eldest brother Firs’born whose experience is essential to an understanding of the tension between Tree and his mother. Terse narrative frames a brief scene which shows how Firs’born has effectively cut off communication with his family, and surrounded himself with barriers of gibberish or silence. Firs’born’s attempt to obtain a university education abroad had ended in failure and his story is unsettling for Tree who fears that he could disappoint his mother as Firs’born has done. Firs’born’s inability to use a shared language increases Maureen’s distress, and alienates their brother Kevin. Strachan here directs attention to the role of language in sustaining relationships. While the narrative records Maureen’s anguish, it also invites an objective view of her treatment of Firs’born, as she comforts him: ‘Don’ mind Kevin. He
don’t know better. He never suffer, you see. He never suffer like you or me, so he
don’t know better’ (63). Maureen’s remarks convey more than she is aware of saying. Her experiences and the stories that she has heard have taught her to valorise suffering. Her utterances reflect an attitude to suffering and misfortune that is also prevalent in the society where politicians use the stories of past oppression to appeal for support. People who have suffered together, they tell the people, understand each other and, as a consequence, must support each other.

Part 2, ‘Voices’, elaborates on themes already introduced and adds to the range of narratives. A series of flashbacks recalls Tree’s early life in Crab Bay, one of the Santa Marias, and a subsequent period in the capital Safe Haven. Recollections of the period before his family moved from the rural environment of Crab Bay centre on experiences in elementary school and incorporate the folklore relating to children’s games. It seems a world away from the accident that M.E. Bodie’s news report, describes. The account of Tree’s elementary schooldays, however, point not only to the poverty of the educational system but also to the capacity of the school curriculum to accommodate political mythmaking.

Tree’s early years in Safe Haven are marked by his friendship with Small Pint, another boy growing up without a father, who initiates him into the ways of the city. Tree’s world expands after he meets Small Pint who knows most of the stories circulating in Pompey Village. Small Pint, who ‘pretended to be Christopher Columbus sailing from Spain’ (89), directs Tree’s journeys of exploration in this new world, making up stories of ‘adventure and gold and spices’ (89), while initiating him into the realities of urban life. Small Pint, however, dismisses the culture of classrooms and offices. His voice challenges Maureen’s, as he tells Tree: ‘School don’t count. They is only be trying to play wit’ ya head in school’ (87). Through Small Pint, Tree meets others beyond his mother’s circle of acquaintances, some of them social misfits whose stories have legendary status in Pompey Village. The stories of these people who are virtually outsiders in their own community not only illuminate other situations and events in the novel but also show how the lines between fact and fiction become blurred. They highlight other sources of oral tradition, rumour and gossip.

Mudda Mae’s story is based on speculation and gossip supported by other stories circulating in the community that relate to obeah and black magic, and are associated with the African past. In her case, circumstances in the present are explained by beliefs surviving from a distant past. The children of Pompey Village have imbibed these beliefs which, though not directly taught, inform the social environment and colour the words people ‘throw’ at each other. Mudda Mae’s ‘eccentricities’ and the ‘smooth expanse of brown dirt’ (101) in her yard where nothing except a sapodilla tree grows, fuel suspicions that she is an obeah woman: ‘She done frig up the soil an’ all’ (101). Children, who are anxious to add their names ‘to the annals of the Village, be numbered among the legends of the place’ (103), Tree and Small Pint among them, ‘endeavoured to challenge the old obeah woman’ (103). Their daring assaults on Mudda Mae’s property, in
turn, also became ‘the stuff of legend among the younger children’ (103). Stories thus create new stories. When Tree finally has a face-to-face encounter with Mudda Mae, he recognises that the fanciful stories which he once accepted as fact are fiction.

Crazy Mr. Burke’s story also centres on the illusion/reality shift. Mr. Burke, a charismatic and inspiring preacher who formerly avoided women, surprises his congregation by marrying Brenda, a seductive newcomer to the church, who is less than half his age. When she leaves him for a younger man, Burke abandons his church and lapses into irrational behaviour. Admiration quickly changes to pity, some church members blaming Brenda for ‘bewitching’ him and others wondering ‘if Burke head wuzzan bad from day one’ (109). Burke’s sudden downfall raises questions about his congregation’s perception of him. Who was the real Burke? Was the charismatic preacher a creation of his followers, like the children’s imaginings about Mudda Mae? Mr. Burke’s story clearly points a moral for characters like Thaddeus McKinney and the popular Prime Minister of the Santa Marias whose hold on power depends on how others perceive them.

Where the ‘legends’ of Mudda Me and Crazy Mr. Burke amplify the theme of political mythmaking, Jahown’s story has a more direct bearing on Tree’s situation. Jahown, who had gone abroad to study, had dropped out of university, a year away from qualifying as a doctor. People in Safe Haven conclude that too many books and too much study have driven him crazy. This is another tenet of folk belief that Tree, who plans to attend university abroad, is aware of. Jahown’s story, which is a variation of Firs’born’s and that of his girlfriend’s brother, Julian, raises doubts about Tree’s plans for the future. Such stories tend to make Tree question himself and Maureen’s counsel. Jahown’s voice, however, cannot successfully challenge Maureen’s. Tree is aware of the compromises which Jahown, with his disdain for middle class aspirations, makes to survive. Peddling souvenirs to tourists, Jahown dreams the artist’s dreams of showing ‘the whole wide worl’ what we is and where we come from’ (116).

The three satellite stories clearly add to the picture of social dysfunction, while illuminating the major themes. These ‘bizarre and embarrassing’ (99) stories, which people repeat sometimes covertly, open up another window on the society for Tree. Ultimately they typify those that M.E. Bodie, records for *The Daily Report*. These stories convey a different picture from the tourist brochures which are meant to obscure reality and versions of Bahamian history in which ‘a painful reality is often mythologized’ (Strachan 2002 3).

In the light of such stories, the novel refocuses on Maureen’s past, and in particular, her failed marriage and early struggle for independence. Her past suffering has prepared her to cope with the present and is regarded in a positive light: ‘Hers had been a long and bitter seasoning’ (117). Insistent repetition suggests the indelible impression of bitter experience on her mind and the extent to which her account of her past experiences resonates in Tree’s, countering the
effect of the stories which undermine her influence. M.E. Bodie’s article
describing the gutting of the Low Price Supermarket — an obvious case of arson
which is ignored by the police — juxtaposes the situation of Maureen the black
woman, who toiled her way up through education, and the businessman using a
shortcut to prosperity. This news item is clearly an ironic comment on Maureen’s
struggle, which lends authority to her view of experience at this point.

Reminiscences of Tree’s high school days further demonstrate the extent to
which he is constrained by Maureen’s history. Strachan here represents the
language of urban adolescents, a variant of the vernacular noticeably different
from that of Tree’s elementary school days or that of his mother’s monologues.
Differences exist not only in style and expression but also in sentiment and
emotional quality which evoke an environment that Tree must leave behind but
cannot completely abandon, despite a compelling loyalty to his mother. On the
one hand, he has accepted that he cannot disappoint her: ‘I don’t want let Mamma
down. I got to do well…’ (135). On the other hand, he is aware of his debt to
friends like Small Pint who opened up the world of Pompey Village for him. As
the Head Boy of the school, Tree, who is required to report infractions of the
rules, cannot, for example, report Small Pint: ‘Small Pint is my good-good fren.
We just changin’ me and him. Is like we goin’ two diff’ren’ ways. But I cyaa
never forget where me and him come from’ (136). Like his mother and the party
which compels her loyalty, Tree and Small Pint have shared a common history.
Tree can understand the dilemma which people like her face and even her
characterisation of the Minister of Education as ‘a good man’.

Tree’s journalistic enterprises also lead to conflicting loyalties. Although he
continues to write for The Daily Report which attacks the government, in his
effort to obtain a scholarship he has also become involved in Thaddeus
McKinney’s re-election campaign. Required to glorify the ruling party’s actions
and destroy the reputation of opposition candidates, he is further caught up in an
atmosphere of rumour and speculation. The third-person narrator’s style reflects
the blurring of the lines between fact and fiction in which Tree is engaged:
‘People said’, ‘The news spread’, ‘It was a popular saying’ (142). As McKinney’s
aide, Tree disseminates information for which no one claims direct responsibility.
He uses human interest stories to create endorsements of the government and
revises history on demand.

The story of Thaddeus McKinney’s opponent, Maxwell Brown, against whom
Tree is obliged to write scurrilous propaganda, highlights another aspect of
storytelling: the effect of time on the process of recollection. McKinney’s efforts
to discredit Brown fail, for while the passing of time has made certain actions,
like the Prime Minister’s exploits, seem more glamorous, it has also blurred
memory of Brown’s transgression. As the narrator observes:

He had been gone so long that an entire generation was learning his name, his original
name, for the first time. They did not know of his transgression years before and if
they were told about it, they might not have believed it…. Even for those who claimed they remembered, the story had grown cloudy, had ceased being fact and become rumour. Those among the older generation who were helped by Maxwell Brown … began to reshape him in their minds, they began to doubt or simply deny what twelve years ago everyone knew for certain to be true. Only the vindictive swore they knew the details and embellished in the retelling. (144–45)

The vindictive threaten with their silence, since memory can be activated by a chance event or by the political propagandist, like Tree, hoping to create yet another reversal of opinion. Here, the artist’s preoccupation with the relationship between the lived event and its subsequent reporting clearly underlies that of the social critic inveighing against disreputable politics.

Part 3, ‘Clash’, which provides a further retrospective view of Tree’s development, continues the exploration of stories which impinge on his consciousness and influence his thinking. Tree finds the stories originating in the religious context especially confusing. A flashback to the funerals of his grandfathers, John Bodie and Simon Stone, who died when he was eleven, introduces folk beliefs relating to death and the meanings of dreams. The traditional religious folklore associated with the African past and the material disseminated by churches including stories of the apocalypse and evocations of hellfire by television evangelists seem equally disquieting. As a small child he was conscious of unseen presences haunting his dreams and making him afraid to fall asleep.

As he matures, Tree is also troubled by the double standard in sexual behaviour in the community. At thirteen, he discovers the minister of his church having sex with a female member of the congregation in the vestry. They are both married people. He knows that this incident cannot be mentioned even to his mother. He is not sure that she would believe him. People who reported certain stories in public were ‘considered troublemakers’ (99). Strachan thus focuses on another kind of story, one that remains largely suppressed because of prevailing social sanctions but one which becomes a burden for the individual who knows it. Memory of the incident in the vestry haunts the adolescent Tree who is beginning to confront his own sexual fantasies. It reawakens his fears about dying and feelings of unworthiness encouraged by his religious exposure. He is not bold enough to tell other people about his doubts and fears, ‘least of all his mother’ (195). Questions might make Maureen, who is secure in her faith, think that he is an unbeliever.

Differences between Tree’s outlook and his mother’s become more apparent when he enters the local community college. At Santa Maria College, Tree meets Elsa who becomes his girlfriend, and whose views are largely incompatible with Maureen’s. Elsa, like Maureen, is confident and strong in her convictions. Her story, told in a dramatic monologue, also provides another perspective on Tree’s relationship with his mother. Elsa knows Maureen’s story: ‘Who in Santa Maria
don’t know Teacher Bodie who struggle and pull herself out of a ditch and buil’
a house for her chirren on her own?’ (188). She is aware of the effect that both
Maureen’s personal legend and ‘her good stories ‘bout how wonderful the P.M.
been to her and her family’ (188) have had on Tree. Although Maureen has
freed herself from a tyrannical husband, Elsa recognises that she is passing on to
her sons outmoded ideas about women’s roles, and by overprotecting them
sanctions the gender inequities that she objects to. Elsa observes that, while
stories of sacrifice and service may inspire others, they can also become
burdensome, as in Tree’s case: ‘But is possible to love a chile too much…. The
burden get to be too much; livin’ for you and not for themselves’ (189). Memories
of a difficult past, she recognises, have helped Maureen to create strategies for
survival in the present, but also keep her trapped in a variety of ways. Maureen
has attached so much value to her own history, that Tree, as Elsa sees it, though
belonging to a new generation, with a new set of experiences, has become caught
up in her story and has no clear sense of his own identity. Elsa’s observations
thus underscore the parallels between Tree who is constrained by Maureen’s
stories, Maureen who remains stubbornly loyal to her own historical experience,
and Santa Marians enslaved by their loyalty to the government which brought
black majority rule.

Elsa’s intervention comes at a point when Tree is becoming critical of his
mother’s political views. As he is aware, this is partly because of a generation
gap, but his involvement in Thaddeus McKinney’s election campaign also gives
him a different perspective on events. His mother knows the ‘good stories’ about
her party, but he is familiar with the bad ones which he couldn’t tell her anyway.
As he observes:

Can’t talk to Mamma because she won’t understand. She’s just like most of these
old folks. Don’t understand when we complain about the Government. Don’t
understand when we say that the PNF ain’t interested in educating people. … Can’t
talk to her. First time in my life I can’t trust my own mother. (168)

His involvement in an anti-government student demonstration, like Elsa’s views
on the way Maureen raises her sons, are also things that he cannot mention to
his mother.

Tree’s account of his half-hearted participation in the student demonstration
further illustrates the difficulty of countering the prevailing legends affecting
social behaviour. The demonstration seems futile from the outset, and the police
treat the occasion lightly: ‘They just act like escort’ (181). The atmosphere is
party-like, with tourists smiling and taking pictures. The demonstrators have no
coherent story to buttress their positions: ‘We just sit in the road and start up
different chants, calling for so and so to resign, saying this and that about the
education of the youth’ (181). They have no alternative view of history to contest
what they were taught in their civics classes, and their ‘rebellion’ merely serves
to reinvigorate stories of the Prime Minister’s exploits on the road to
Independence. The Prime Minister’s arrival on the scene effectively ends the protest. The student leader of the demonstration, Bain, is subsequently invited to speak at the Party’s Annual Convention where ‘He attacks corrupt politicians and governmental neglect’ (183). Strachan thus highlights another kind of ‘story’ circulating within the community — empty talk, the clichés of political infighting. Bain is duly enveloped by the aura surrounding the Prime Minister. Tree is, however, even more guilty of empty talk, as he continues to churn out speeches and fliers for Thaddeus McKinney, behind the scenes.

Tree, finally assured of a scholarship to study abroad, is forced to acknowledge his connection with McKinney’s election campaign publicly. In a letter to Dr. Runne, a former college lecturer who lost his job, following the student demonstration, he rationalises his involvement with McKinney. Self-interest and curiosity, as a budding journalist, had led to deeper involvement, and he is forced to appear on the election platform to endorse McKinney’s candidacy and bolster his popularity among the youth. His role as McKinney’s aide, fashioning tales to sway opinion and win votes is essentially that of a storyteller, and he is especially aware of this when he appears on the election platform to endorse McKinney.

‘Caught between complicity and challenge’, to use Diane Macdonell’s phrase, Tree is tempted to alter the legend of ‘the good man’, ‘the humble man who had come to Safe Haven as a picky-head boy from Crab Bay, the bus driver turned union man, the reliable fellow, the man like other men’ (47). He finds himself, however, repeating the same old story that his listeners are accustomed to hear. He again recognises the difficulty of countering existing myths — popular beliefs that have built up around McKinney — and of changing the story, even in the light of new evidence. Strachan thus takes the reader back to the central theme of the novel — how the stories we tell influence opinion and affect behaviour.

Tree gains even greater understanding of the power of the myths circulating in the society when his friend Stoolie, a policeman, tells him about an attempt by two colleagues to entrap and humiliate two prominent politicians who are believed to be gay. The attack on the men has been instigated by Thaddeus McKinney, but has been made more possible by the scurrilous article which Tree had written about one of them, at McKinney’s bidding. This tale of police brutality also thematises story-telling, as it raises questions about whose story will be believed — the victim’s or the policemen’s. Acceptance or rejection of either account will depend, to a large extent, on the existing rumours about the parties involved.

Tree realises that his views can never be fully compatible with his mother’s or his peer group’s. Their clashes of opinion are an inevitable part of the process of maturation, and he can accept and reconcile their accounts of individual experiences. This new orientation is reflected in the description of the Junkanoo celebration which begins Part 4 of the novel. Like the creole language, Junkanoo reflects the fusion of different African culture and the blending of African and British traditions in society. A form of expression created by native born Bahamians, it promotes togetherness and enables individuals to transcend their
personal experiences (231). The third person narrator clearly empathises with the ‘magic makers’ (231). For the participants, Junkanoo is an expression of freedom, an escape from imposed conventions awakening a core of memory, but ambivalence lurks behind exuberance and spontaneity. People ‘gel’, as the interjected exclamations of the dancers indicate, and social divisions and personal tragedies seem to be forgotten. The embedded conversation of the ‘youts’, however, interpolates behind-the-scenes bickering, suggesting a different story behind the festivity. The ‘cultural guerrilla’ (Wynter 36) has not resisted the Market economy, although it continues to serve its original purpose. Junkanoo, in effect, presents a mirror image of the community resonating from a clash of cultures and veering between the make-believe and the real.

The focus shifts to political events and recent Santa Marian history. Tree, who has been writing articles for The Daily Report ferociously attacking the government and scurrilous attacks on the opposition for Thaddeus McKinney, assesses the ruling party’s performance up to this point, the effects of their recent twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations, and their chances in the approaching general elections. His old habit of acceptance makes him want the party to remain in power, although he has begun to doubt its ability to do so. He questions the stories and beliefs that support the status quo. These include, for example, codes of behaviour stemming from historical experience: ‘Black people must stick together’, and concerning political leadership, ‘the blacker the better’ (236). They also include stories of the Prime Minister’s exploits in the struggle for black majority rule which Tree and his cohorts learnt in their social classes. Once he starts questioning the account of events that has been passed on to him, Tree remarks, for the first time, features in the Prime Minister’s physical appearance that had gone unnoticed before. Myths which had the power to bind also had the power to blind, but the break with the ‘storybook past’ (256) promulgated by politicians is also a consequence of social developments following on black majority rule. As the narrator observes:

Tree’s generation was born into black Majority Rule, born into Independence. They never knew what it meant to have nothing, to shit in the bush (except by choice)…. For them pig’s feet and sheep’s tongue had lost significance as the master’s leftovers and had become delicacies. (257)

Weaned on American television shows, and encouraged to study abroad, members of this generation no longer believe stories of the Prime Minister’s extraordinary powers, and have begun to reinterpret the events underlying the ‘storybook drama’ (258) of his exploits. The ruling party which had for twenty-five years controlled the electorate with the stories it disseminated, is in turn brought down by the power of speculation, rumour and ‘sip-sip’.

Tree’s new perspective on events does not completely invalidate that of Maureen who has remained loyal to her party. His satisfaction with the turn of events is reflected in M.E. Bodie’s final news report of the opposition party’s
landslide victory at the polls. As Tree prepares to leave for university abroad, he is reassured by Firs’born’s recovery which both confirms Maureen’s faith in her children and augurs well for him. Strachan uses this incident to highlight yet another context of storytelling. Firs’born’s return to using a shared language is not only a good omen for Tree but also enables them to renew their understanding as brothers and revisit their childhood. As Firs’born recounts one of the folktales that their mother used to tell them, Tree knows that all will be well, and he is comforted ‘out of joy, out of fear’ (271). He leaves the Santa Marias for university abroad, prepared for further changes in a narrative which will continue to unfold. He is not sure what sort of character he will become by the time he returns. Along the road to maturity, he has partially liberated himself from his mother’s way of thinking, he has parted company with many of his boyhood friends and he has broken up with the girlfriend who helped him to look critically at his mother’s story. Poised to begin a new stage in life, he is ready to assess and appraise stories that others will use to compel his obedience or arouse his fears. The stories which formed him are ones that he will use to create new narratives.

In God’s Angry Babies, Ian Strachan identifies stories which groups and individuals use to orient themselves within a community and relates individual patterns of experience to structures of experience in the society as a whole. Stories, a means of processing information, inculcating belief, and guiding behaviour, may be used to solicit support from groups or individuals or to discredit them. Over time, personal or communal histories develop legendary status or mythic significance and thus contribute to various forms of ideological subjection. The stories we listen to or tell not only help to create a sense of togetherness or otherness, but also colour our vision of reality.

WORKS CITED
HAL PRATT

Although born in Sydney, Australia, my childhood was spent in country New South Wales. We moved to Wagga Wagga during World War II and then to Parkes in the Central West where I went to school. The only cameras I experienced at that age were Box Brownies which most families owned. Otherwise I occasionally saw a large view camera used by the school photographer, or the street photographer who saw us as easy game when we were on holidays.

At the age of six (see photograph by street photographer) I decided I would be an architect. It was not my first choice but one my mother wisely steered me towards and which I followed until the age of 57. My first preference was to be an artist like my well-known uncle, Douglas Pratt, who made a good living as a landscape painter and etcher after losing his job as a surveyor in the Great Depression.

After finishing high school, I moved to Sydney to work with the State Government while studying architecture part time. Once I started earning a wage I was able to afford my first camera, a very trusty Pentax SLR (a quantum leap from the Box Brownie) which I took overland to Europe and back.

Having my own camera was the beginning of a real interest in photography. As the business of architecture became more restrictive photography grew in appeal. I became increasingly disillusioned with the creative side of architecture — limited by mounting regulations and paperwork — and I started anew in photography in my mid-fifties. I moved out of Sydney to Thirroul where I built a studio with a darkroom and attended courses on darkroom technique at the Australian Centre for Photography. Since 1997 I have worked towards a solo exhibition each year.

Current projects include photographing every wheat silo in New South Wales for the State Library, and granite country around Eugowra in the Central West.

THE IMAGES

The images reproduced here are drawn from an exhibition at Orange Regional Gallery entitled, ‘Terra Fluxus’. The exhibited prints were large colour
photographs more or less life size. In other words they matched the size of the original photographed surface. Yet despite the accuracy of the portrayal, the viewer has difficulty recognising the motif, or even mistakes the photograph for a painting.

A photographer has to make many choices on the way to creating the final print. In my case, that does not mean complete control. In the field I must work with the available natural light and to some extent allow the motif to direct what is to be seen. When I began this project, photographing slipped boat hulls, I did not see abstract landscapes where a waterline might transform into a distant horizon. I saw subtle colours and contours and richly textured weathering. It was some time before the metamorphosis took place and it crept up on me almost imperceptibly. Once realised (it was always there to be seen) it was a relatively simple matter when shooting to think forward to the final print and what it might portray when abstracted from the original object.

In time another aspect of this metamorphosis would manifest itself — an underlying universality. I could now say this image is to do with earth, this with water and so on. With a little selection I was able to label the images according to the basic elements — fire (pyro), earth (terra), air (aero) and water (aqua).

These images are about change. The initial catalyst was the simple surfaces of boat hulls weathered by the sun and salt air, which were undergoing repair or restoration. The rich surfaces are unique to the maritime environment where natural and unnatural forces are constantly changing the texture and colour of surfaces. Initially, I was happy to capture the sensuous forms of boat hulls and the varied patina created by sanding and weathering but progressively the images moved into a less tactile realm. The otherworldliness of the images influenced what I thought about in photographing the motif and the role of thinking in photography generally. How, for instance, is the photograph of something very physical transformed into something metaphysical? The print becomes an abstraction of the physical surface suggesting a depth or expansiveness not apparent in the original motif. The photographer is able to isolate a particular detail of the environment to a point where the final image has a life and energy of its own; not the ‘frozen moment’ often referred to in documentary photography, but an expression of something more elemental about the nature of surface itself. In the process of creating the print the tactility of the original surface is dissolved. The original motif is remembered only by the photographer — to the viewer it is barely recognisable. Where once there was a waterline on a stranded hull there is now a horizon in a desert landscape.

These photographs make no technical leap. The equipment, the film and the processing are traditional, resulting in straightforward unmanipulated photographic prints. With the emphasis on the print and what it might evoke in the way of feelings, memories or dreams there seems to be a strong similarity to painting. This is not to deny the original catalyst — simple surfaces beautifully coloured and textured by sun, salt air and sandpaper.
Hal Pratt

aqua-marina
Wollongong Harbour.
A boat in drydock at Wollongong Harbour.
Palimpsest and Seduction: The Glass Palace and White Teeth

There is much critical commentary on the use of palimpsest as a metaphor in postcolonial writing for the violent imposition of colonial culture and indeed, this emphasis is warranted. Less noted, however, is the element of seduction involved in the concept of hegemonic control in colonial or imperial situations and in postcolonial fiction. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the use of these concepts in the popular and critically acclaimed postcolonial novels, Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace (2000) and Zadie Smith’s White Teeth (2000). While palimpsest — as metaphor and technique — is evident in both, this essay argues that the idea of seduction plays an important part in the understanding and representation of complex colonial relationships in both novels.

The term palimpsest refers to the physical erasure or the covering over of one surface with another, and in postcolonial studies it refers to cultural overlay and control of a discourse in addition to military and/or political takeover. The colonial struggle includes the imposition of cultural definitions over the existing interpretations of events. History as palimpsest refers to the writing over of previous histories in order to displace them. In terms of geographic space, colonial discourse covers over prior texts, images, names and meanings of a place, constructing it as empty and ready to receive inscriptions (Carter 23). Thus the palimpsest metaphor highlights the ‘active layering of cultural meanings’ whereby the forms and meanings of the imposed culture are privileged and prominent, obscuring and contorting the meanings and forms of past cultures (Cowlishaw 294).

The nature of palimpsest has implications for techniques in postcolonial fiction; specifically, for the tactics of the authors as opposed to the tactics of their characters. In James Scott’s (non-palimpsestic) analysis, any articulation against colonial imposition can only take place in secret or ‘off stage’, outside the official discourse, and at least the private maintenance of one’s original language is obviously relevant to that possibility. De Certeau, however, details through the metaphor of palimpsest how the oppressed tactically bend and manipulate the strategic rules of the dominant order, forging a place for themselves in the dominant overlay (29–42). Nicholas Thomas discusses this as the degree to which a colonial history may have been shaped by ‘indigenous resistance and accommodation’ rather than simply the will of the colonisers (15, 56).

Palimpsest then, carries the suggestion of superimposition and residual layering because previous meanings are not totally erased. As Daniel Alarcon
argues, there are always traces of previous inscriptions, and the series of writings, over-writings, and partial erasures of histories and myths result in ‘a tangle of contentious and sometimes contradictory texts’ (7). Culture as palimpsest implies that there remain ineradicable traces of past cultures which form part of the constitution of the present (Ashcroft, et al. 174; Rabasa 145). This means that there can be no pure cultural past to return to, given that each historical layer has been tinged by the cultures that have gone before it. In India, for example, there can be no reaching back to a ‘pure’ Hindu past. More centrally here, it also means that because colonial erasure is only partially successful, the language or ‘counter hegemonic voices’ of the colonised, in Alarcon’s term (189), may seep or bubble through. Chantal Zabus (3) extends the notion of palimpsest to include linguistic hybridisation, or bubbling through, designed to make explicit the alterity of the colonial language, being so ‘other’ that it cannot convey the indigenous culture (173). She talks about the ‘indigenisation’ of the colonial language (3) and heralds ‘the palimpsest as the major icon of cross-cultural syncreticity and linguistic metissage in non-Western literature and criticism’ (10). As one example, the language used by the Algerian novelist, Assia Djebar, creates ‘a multilingual palimpsest’ with traces of oral Arabic inscribed within the French text (Donadey 1). Similarly, Salman Rushdie is famous for his use of words from many languages, of hybrid words, and of the syncopations of Indian English. In addition, of course, Rushdie uses palimpsest as explicit motif and metaphor in The Moor’s Last Sigh (1995; see Fletcher 2001).

Palimpsest is a form of hegemony, which Michele Barrett describes as ‘the organisation of consent without violence or coercion’ (238). Yet, palimpsest does involve a type of violence. In Jose Rabasa’s terms, discourse itself is part of the violence of conquest. Alarcon comes close to proclaiming palimpsest the key to all postcolonial study (4), but a theory of the colonial imposition of hegemony that credits so much to palimpsest does not take sufficient account of the role of seduction, or what Peter Pierce describes as ‘captivation by the dominant culture’ (144). As Jane Miller remarked of Edward Said’s theory of cultural hegemony, Orientalism, it is ‘an immensely seductive theory about seduction’ (114). If seduced, one does not oppose but actively attempts to conform and participate.

In the history of colonialism, Western modernity has been much more seductive than Western ‘westernism’, as it were. The ‘modern’ refers generally to variations on the themes of progress through reason, and while that has often meant science, technology and economic development, it may also include the administrative and the cultural. As Ashis Nandy argues in the preface to The Intimate Enemy, colonialism may also actually reorganise local hierarchies, albeit under the overarching one of white racial superiority (and while this may be attractive to some, it is not necessarily attractive to traditional dominants). The advantage of modernity, especially if the appearance of universality is achieved, is that it presents itself as the latest stage in historical development. It outbids or
supersedes its rivals by appearing to be the latest stage in an inevitable progression. It also may be sufficiently seductive to cause self-hatred among those who ‘fail’ to be ‘modern’.

The argument in this article is that *The Glass Palace* and *White Teeth* focus on palimpsestic and seductive effects of imperialism differently. In *The Glass Palace* palimpsestic effects are primary, but major characters also are seduced by ‘modern’ aspects of the West. In *White Teeth* the focus is more consistently on the attraction of ‘the modern’ for major characters. This fundamental difference between the novels is evident at the level of literary construction and device. *The Glass Palace* features the central metaphor of stain to denote palimpsestic effect, and indigenous languages bubble up through the overlay of English. The characters are multi-lingual, and language is used to include some while excluding others. The general effect is one of seriousness. In *White Teeth* the approach is much lighter — an ironic tone or consistent facetiousness is used to deflate the ‘modern’ pretensions of the characters, while the intermix of languages is used for humorous effect. Language may still bubble up, but it is more a case of people being caught between two languages (and thus the humour) than of indigenous languages pushing against English.

**The Glass Palace**

*The Glass Palace* is an epic exploring three generations of families and their activities across Burma, India and Malaya. The story begins with the colonisation of Burma, proceeds through WWII, and ends during Ne Win’s military dictatorship in Myanmar (ex-Burma). The major characters are: the Bengali Rajkumar, his eventual (Burmese) wife Dolly and their sons Dinu and Neel; Dolly’s friend and Indian independence activist, Uma Dey, and Uma’s twin nephew and niece Arjun and Manju; and Alison, the grand-daughter of Rajkumar’s mentor, Saya John. Rajkumar, a dispossessed orphan, grows up and makes his fortune in Burma while Dolly moves as a child to India with the exiled Burmese royal family. Uma, Arjun and Manju’s stories take place largely in India. Dinu and Arjun meet Alison on her family’s rubber plantation in Malaya.

Ghosh uses the concept of palimpsest to pull this broad story together. In a minor but direct way he invokes palimpsest in Dolly’s response to questions about her childhood in Burma. Although memories only come in small bits, she says, they cannot be blocked out — as when scribbling on a wall is only partly successfully painted over (113). More generally, Ghosh uses the analogy of a stain colouring Indian thinking, which is much more aggressive than Rushdie’s use of the analogy of intermixing cooking flavours in *Midnight’s Children*. Arjun ultimately recognises that the mentality of Empire affects Indians, and especially Indian troops, controlling their perceptions (518–19): ‘It is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us’ (518). This means that they also are ‘steeped in the racial mythologies’ of the British (520), which in turn contributes to the palimpsestic nature of the military structure in India, with the British at the top,
Indian professional soldiers in the middle, and Tamils at the bottom as racially unfit to be soldiers (in the British view and thus in the professional Indian military view). While this stain analogy fits under the earlier characterisation of hegemony as palimpsest employed in this essay, it also invokes the attraction of the modern. Rajkumar, for example, is impressed that the British bring commerce and efficiency with them (66); more specifically, he notes that only the Europeans thought to use elephants for profit (74). The thought of controlling nature for man’s benefit excites him (75). Dinu, on the other hand, is involved in modern photography but does not subscribe to colonialism, using new art forms from magazines as a refuge from the Myanmar dictatorship. Uma, also, after initial enthusiasm, realises that the smaller world created by transport technology does not assure greater international (or domestic) understanding.

Primarily, however, the attraction of the modern is explored in relation to the Indian army. Loyalty to the army is ultimately enforced by coercion, deserters to the new Indian National Army being tried for treason, but soldiers like Arjun are captivated—they want to be ‘sahibs’, and Arjun knows the Empire has effectively died when it is no longer alive within his own heart (441). He sees the Indian military itself as ‘modern’, as breaking traditional taboos, fraternising across racial and religious lines, and living with Westerners; he and his colleagues are the ‘first modern Indians’ (279) to overcome traditional racial and religious hierarchies as well as by participating in modern military technology. This does not work out quite as he envisages. When Indians begin to become officers there is a backlash among the British. Even other Indians are not happy to serve under Indian officers (281–82), and Arjun’s commanding officer sees this as ‘self-hate’ (282), the other side of adulation of the British.

The modern is perceived to be good, in part, because the traditional is perceived to be bad. In Burma the masses were excluded from the royal Palace on pain of death (34), and those admitted to serve could only enter through low doors (32) and always had to crawl in the royal presence (54–55). The queen had killed off potential rivals to her husband (38–39, 115). But Dolly suggests to Uma (then the British Collector’s wife and not yet converted to the cause of Indian independence) that Queen Victoria has been responsible for millions of deaths (114), and after the invasion of Burma there are ‘round-ups, executions, hangings’ (56). Similarly, when Dinu points out that women were badly treated in pre-Empire India, Uma agrees and recognises that tradition-based resistance to colonialism can entrench traditional inequalities, but she also argues that imperialism is not intentionally a reform movement and that women’s situation in Burma had clearly deteriorated (294). Old hierarchies are destabilised, and the foreign orphan Rajkumar is able to prosper, but he also becomes part of the exploitation of Burma by Indians under the Empire. The point here then, is that colonialism can be both ‘modern’ and imperialistic, while tradition-based resistance to imperialism may advantage some indigenies but disadvantage others.
Language is central to these conflicts, and languages are deployed in several ways in this novel. All of the major characters are bi- or multi-lingual with strong cultural ties to more than one country. Indians born in Burma have both Indian and Burmese names and use words from both languages, and even the Burmese princesses, in exile, learn Indian languages. Despite (or because of) the official dominance of English, retaining the old dialect is a way of maintaining old ties, especially for Rajkumar (66, 122). There also are terms peculiar to work situations, for example, from the teak camps (73) and rubber plantations (230), reflecting the high percentage of minorities working in such places (89). Language is overtly used as a weapon as well as to bind people together. The Burmese queen in exile, for example, speaks Hindustani fluently and uses that to embarrass and intimidate Indian officials who are Parsi or Bengali (109). Also politically, Dinu declares the need to communicate in ‘secret languages’ in Myanmar under military dictatorship (509).

The main characters, like the Indian army, are seduced by different aspects of the modern. Those discussed here are Rajkumar, Uma, Arjun and Dinu, who, respectively, play the roles of entrepreneur, political activist, soldier and aesthete. The novel is generally structured to provide over-layered perspectives.

Rajkumar is a Bengali orphan left to fend for himself in Burma just before the British colonial invasion. Even as a child he is bright and ambitious, marked by ‘curiosity, hunger’ (30; 58) and is able to take advantage of the opportunities opened up by imperialism. He becomes a labour contractor in order to raise business funds. This position also enables him to acquire inside knowledge with which he can underbid competitors in order to secure a large teak contract that makes him wealthy. Rajkumare turns to war profiteering in an attempt to save his fortune (315–16, 393), arguing that this is just the way things are done. His gamble fails when WWII bombing destroys his last financial ploy, and he ends up a refugee, returning to India penniless — perceived as a failure by his daughter-in-law (469) but taking solace from his grand-daughter. In agreeing with the British that the Indians are necessary to the Burmese economy (241), Rajkumar fails to realise that his economic interests have political implications. He learns early in his career to smile and wait during periods of government repression (46), and is happy to participate in British imperialism rather than opposing it. He states the case for the entrepreneur (248), but he overstates the case for Western initiative, as many characteristics of modernism are not unique to the West.

Uma enters this story as the wife of the Collector (an Indian rare in the upper levels of the Raj administration who is responsible for the protection of the Burmese royal family in exile). After the death of her husband, Uma becomes active in anti-colonial politics, specifically in the Indian Independence League. The brutal suppression of the Burmese rebellion convinces her that Gandhi is right that an armed uprising cannot defeat a modern Empire (254). Thus, her support for non-violent opposition is pragmatic rather than utopian, being based
on her recognition of the technical (military) strength of modern Empire, as is her stance that using English does not undermine her anti-colonial credentials (295). It does mean, however, that once again opposition is couched in the Empire’s language.

Arjun, Uma’s nephew, is accepted into the new, prestigious Indian Military Academy (257) and thence into the 1st Jat Light Infantry (259). Initially he sees this battalion’s role in the Empire positively (262), thinking that India’s military is its most modern organisation. His absorption into the Indian military is accompanied by his enthusiastic adoption of English slang (259). However, despite his conventional good looks and charm, Alison (grand-daughter of Rajkumar’s mentor) recognises that he is shallow — a view that echoes the ‘mercenary’ claim made against him and other Indian soldiers. Although captivated by the Empire, Arjun changes his view mid WWII, coming to articulate the view that the Indian army is tainted by the stain of British racism. He dies fighting in the anti-imperial Indian National Army (480), having changed sides, but not having abandoned the military.

Of Rajkumar and Dolly’s two sons, Neel takes after Rajkumar in burly appearance and in interests, but Dinu is more delicate like his mother. Childhood polio has left Dinu with a limp and an introverted personality. He is shy except when holding a camera (226). He begins to see everything through the view finder (351) and while in Malaya he relates to Alison, the first love of his life, through photo techniques (356–58). Dinu is on the far left of student politics (306), but he supports the Empire during WWII because he thinks the Nazis and fascists are worse (293). He sees his own personality as overly accommodating, while Alison always fights back (246), and, indeed, she dies shooting at Japanese soldiers. Later, back in Burma, Dinu marries and his wife is active in the democracy movement. They are both jailed, and she dies of TB upon release (501–502). Dinu avoids politics in Myanmar (535) but is seduced into activity by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi because he perceives her as understanding that politics is ultimately trivial compared to ‘religion, art, family’ (542). In the face of overt censorship, including artistic censorship, Dinu holds seminars on photography that provide opportunity not only for enjoyment but for the expression of personal opinion (even if the topics are not overtly political) in the face of pressure to obey (509).

Dinu is revealed to be the major character at novel’s end, and not simply because he is the last man standing. He is, throughout, the main counterpart to Rajkumar and he is contrasted to Arjun’s physicality and gung-ho military style in the competition for Alison. Therefore it is important to consider his role further, especially as he is not directly ‘political’. As a form of ‘the limping hero’, in contrast to the other males Dinu evokes what Ato Quayson calls the ‘tropes of disability in post-colonial writing’ that reflect the maiming effect of empire. Quayson cites Lacan’s discussion of the ‘culturally structured set of stereotypes
about wholeness’ (56) that is superimposed (‘palimpsestically, as it were’) over the infant mirror phase and its deluding reflection of wholeness (55). It is the apparently whole and vibrant Rajkumar and Arjun (and Neel) that do not survive. Dinu’s role also involves an artistic and very ‘modern’ orientation. Photography is perhaps quintessentially modern, to some extent conditioning our way of living and of perceiving reality. There are palimpsestic overtones in the question of whether photos only show the surface layer or tell the truth. Interestingly, Dinu’s philosophy of photography is taken from the famous American photographer Edward Weston. Thus, Dinu emphasises the careful setting up of photos (pre-visualisation) just as Weston focused on beautiful composition and technical meticulousness at the expense of social consciousness (Sontag 96, 102, 136, 142). This would appear to parallel Gosh’s depiction of Dinu in the novel. Despite some ambiguity in the text, Dinu is not directly involved in ‘political’ activity and supports Suu Kyi because she recognises the triviality of politics, seeing the space he provides for discussion about photography as significant in itself. He quotes Weston’s advice to Trotsky to the effect that exposure to new art forms can itself open people up to new ways of thinking (510). Dinu is attempting to create space outside the political arena based on an alternative, more open form of the modern — even meeting to talk about photography is an escape from the palimpsestic overlay of dictatorial censorship. Nonetheless, like Rajkumar and Arjun, he also is in some sense a ‘mimic man’ trying to catch up with the West.²

Pursuing the seduction theme, Ghosh emphasises the importance of Indian willingness to do the work of Empire for the British. Part of this is informal participation in economic activities within the Empire. Rajkumar, for example, serves as a contractor of Indian labour for Western petroleum companies in Asia (124) and later he owns the largest teak company in Burma as one of the Indians running the Burmese economy (240). Primarily, however, this work is official administration and military activity. The Indian Civil Service acts as an ‘imperial cadre’ (158) and the (Indian) Collector defends the Empire to the Burmese king (107). Burma generally is under the administration of British India (243). With the Japanese invasion of Malaya during WWII the Indian station master in Malaya accepts a whites only policy on the evacuation train as appropriate, and Indian guards enforce it (423–25).

The other side of formal administration is military. Two thirds of the British colonial force in Burma were Indian Sepoys (26), and they were used later to put down a Burmese rebellion (247). The situation is similar in Singapore (29) and Malaya (327). The Sepoys were often more loyal than lower class British troops, and the Empire was considered secure as long as the Indian troops remained loyal and would put down uprisings (223). Compared to Malaya, all India seems poor (348), by implication because India finances its own military support of the Empire and participation in English campaigns (221).
Gosh suggests that the key to the Indian relationship to Empire is seduction, and that WWII did create a crisis. Without the promise of independence, why should Indians go to war for Britain and very likely be sent overseas (313, 318, 406), while those already overseas were at risk of being overrun by the Japanese (393). This situation was exacerbated by racial tensions caused by discrimination against Asians in (imperial) Asian countries (345–46, 406, 423–25) and by British backlash against the new phenomenon of Indian officers (338–39, 353). Indian officers eventually rebelled (or deserted). Arjun accepts Buckland’s prediction that the Indian rebellion will begin in the military, as they are the best educated and are being asked to risk their lives, but Uma has been working for Indian independence since the 1920s (and for Gandhi before that). Arjun is actually among the last to stop being what his fellow Indian officer Hardy calls ‘the biggest stooges of all’ (427), just as he was initially among the most severely tainted with the stain of seductive imperialism.

**WHITE TEETH**

*White Teeth* is set in neo-imperial England and revolves around the friendship between Englishman Archie Jones and Bengali Muslim Samad Iqbal, who served together in the British army during WWII. The novel traces the lives of Archie and Samad, their wives, Clara (Jamaican) and Alsana (Bengali), and their children Irie Jones and the Iqbal twins Magid and Millat. Also featured are Marcus and Joyce Chalfen and their children, who become involved with Irie, Magid and Millat. Palimpsest appears in the form of the stories about Archie and Samad in Belgium during the war and about Samad’s great-grandfather Mangal Pande in the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Dorothy Smith argues that public discourse consists of a series of layers, and to understand previous events we must rely on participants retelling those stories as filtered through, and regulated by, higher layers. Thus, on the one hand, the claim that Archie and Samad make on their war experience is bogus, based as it is on Samad’s assumption that Archie killed a ‘war criminal’ scientist in Belgium when he did not (94). On the other hand, Samad repeatedly tells a positive version of Mangal Pande’s role in the 1857 Indian Mutiny which is otherwise erased by official history.

The importance of language to the success of ‘counter-hegemonic discourse’ was noted at the outset of this article, and to this effect, languages are deployed in a number of ways in *White Teeth*, but primarily an interplay of languages is employed for humorous effect, undermining the seriousness of the speaker or the topic. Alsana, for example, is consistently caught between languages (and cultures), using fractured expressions: ‘Getting anything out of my husband is like trying to squeeze water out when you’re stoned’ (67). In defense of arranged marriages, she argues that a relationship worked because ‘Eve did not know Adam from Adam’ (67). She consistently addresses her niece with the full phrase, ‘lesbian niece of shame’. Samad speaks with an ‘Anglo-Indian lilt’ (93) and
slips into Bengali: ‘so colourfully populated by liars, sister-fuckers, sons and daughters of pigs, people who give their own mother oral pleasure’ (455). In the opposite direction, an inflection betraying twenty years in England undermines his most vehement invective against the West (349).

Clara’s mother Hortense speaks with a Jamaican accent but also has a voice she reserves ‘for pastors and white women’ (34). Clara herself has a Jamaican accent (30), especially when ‘excited or pleased’ (57), but also has ‘a threatening patois’ (451). The unimpressive KEVIN leader, Shukrallah, speaks with Caribbean inflections and undermines his message by tautology and three-word repetitions (‘Don’t be misled, deluded, fooled’ [407]). Irie criticises Millat for putting on a Jamaican accent to mock the Iqbalns and Joneses (206), but there is a common street argot (188, 200–201), and all kids use a Jamaican accent to express scorn (145). Thus, when asked by Joyce where he is from originally, Millat responds in his ‘bud-bud-ding-ding accent’ (275). An exception then to the use of language merely for humorous effect, is the aggressive deployment of Jamaican accents and ‘Paki’ terminology — linguistic identifiers that surface in times of stress or emotion. This slipperiness and slippage of language also provides opportunities for irony. For example, in street language ‘chief’ means ‘fool, arse, wanker’ (141), so when the unsuspecting Samad refers positively to Magid as ‘a natural chief’ Millat smirks (187).

Irony is a highly contested term, but usually refers to saying one thing but meaning another. In that sense, it is inherently palimpsestic, consisting of the surface statement, the implied meaning, and the two combined in narrative context. Distinguished by what Nancy Walker calls ‘open ends and contradictions’ (23), irony supplies no answers and is both ambivalent and, according to Linda Hutcheon, subversive — a rhetorical strategy for contesting existing discourses from within. (1991, 1994) Irony may also have the purpose of indicating to one’s discursive community that these people and/or statements are not to be taken too seriously.

It is primarily in this latter sense — as a playfully teasing tone or as the trivialising humour of the facetious — that irony is encountered in *White Teeth*. For example, no one can take the school seriously when ‘detention’ has been replaced by ‘post class aberration consideration period’ (262). Samad worries that modern Western decadence has substituted irony for knowledge (179). The critic James Wood has a similar worry, disparaging *White Teeth* and other ‘postmodern’ fiction for replacing character development with ‘hysterical realism’. Then again, Wood has his own restricted view of the ‘good’ novel, and Smith’s characters are otherwise deployed. Importantly, they are seduced by different aspects of modernism and the solutions they find are undermined by ironic tone among other devices. This may make the text more comic than satirical, but it may also open up the text and help to avoid what Nicholas Thomas calls the grand narratives of postcolonial writing.
Melita Glasgow and Don Fletcher

Alsana worries that the Chalfens (‘Chaffinches’) are ‘Englishifying’ Millat (297), but generally it is the modern rather than the Western that seduces these characters (and it is Irie and Magid, not Millat, who are susceptible to the modern in the form of the Chalfens). It is particularly Irie, Magid, Millat and Samad who are seduced. Irie wants to look like the white girls because Millat sleeps with them and considers her only in the category of an old friend. Further, she sees herself as fat, busty and uncontained, and hates herself for it (230, 232, 235ff). The episode of Irie’s attempt to straighten her hair which ends with the purchase of a wig is too painful for facetiousness.

Irie is captivated by the Chalfens and wants to exchange the ‘randomness’ of her own family for the ‘science’ of theirs (294–95). This ‘science’ embodies a form of middle class rationalism that believes children should speak out and openly accepts psychological analysis of action and response (275, 277). But Irie is wrong about the Chalfens. Smith undercuts their middle-class claim to inheritance of The Enlightenment with the coda, but ‘where they got this idea, its hard to say’ (372). They are in fact a parody of themselves with their ‘Chalfenisms’, their ignorance about Islam (276, 301–302) and their lack of understanding of lesbianism or other people generally (301–302). In addition, the apparent excellence of their inter-generational communication is undermined by their son Josh’s joining the militant animal rights group FATE without his parents’ knowledge.

It is clear however that Magid is seduced by science. He was captivated by a chemistry set at the age of ten (145) and later by his school science experiments (181). Like Irie, he is attracted to eliminating the random (315) and so is attracted to Marcus as a Chalfen and to Marcus’ cloning project. But his seduction by science is also undermined by Smith’s facetiousness. He becomes a clone himself, in his mother’s view: because he brushes his teeth six times a day and irons his underwear — it is like having David Niven at the breakfast table (362–63). In only four months his correspondence with Marcus approached ‘the length and quantity of the true epistolophiles, St Paul, Clarissa, Disgruntled from Tunbridge Wells’ (314). Magid identifies Marcus immediately at the airport, but when Marcus takes that as a further sign of a mystical meeting of minds Magid points out that Marcus is the only white person at that gate (362). This desire by Magid and Irie to escape randomness is negatively linked to Marcus’ (and Nazi) eugenics against the positive value of hybridity.

Millat seems different from Irie and Magid and is not seduced by the Chalfens, but he too is attracted to the modernity of the West. Feeling he belongs nowhere and needs to belong (233), he does not know who he is (245) and suffers from self-hate (322). The reader is prevented from seeing Millat as behaviourally similar to Joyce through Smith’s use of ironic tone taken in relation to Joyce’s stereotypical sexual desire for Millat. Millat however is not treated without humour, joining the Islamic organisation KEVIN not only because of the feeling of belonging it affords him but for the outfit and bow tie (378). He can follow
instructions from KEVIN but he cannot give up ‘the West’ (that is, gangster films). The name KEVIN itself is an example of ironic tone. It stands for Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation, which gives them an acknowledged ‘acronym problem’ (255). KEVIN is further trivialised when a meeting degenerates from a discussion that centres on the form of violence revenge should take to a discussion of which translation of the Koran should be read (428–29). This is not the Islam of Millat’s father (or of his great-great-grandfather). Fundamental Islam is itself a response to modernisation and presumably a response to living in the West, just as Samad is more concerned with his religion because he is living in the West.

Samad, refusing to accept that the second generation need be different (250), is appalled at the children’s apparent assimilation (165) and accuses Alsana of having ‘swallowed it [England] whole’ (173). He simply wants two good Muslim sons (349), and of course sees KEVIN as a terrorist organisation rather than as an Islamic one. Although Alsana articulates the (palimpsestic) argument that there is no racial or religious purity to have lost (204), for Samad it has all gone wrong: ‘No doubt they will both marry white women called Sheila’ (349), he laments. It does not help that Samad has not been able to integrate economically, unlike Rajkumar in The Glass Palace, and is dependent on a distant cousin for a job waiting tables. Finally, however, Samad’s response is conditioned by guilt. He is captivated and seduced by Poppy, his sons’ music teacher. He is tempted not only by Poppy’s flattering perception of him as the embodiment of Eastern wisdom, as Joyce experiences Millat as stereotypically sexy, but also by Poppy as the liberated modern woman. He recognises in her the seductive decadence of the West (126) that is also part of its modernity. Dominic Head argues that in White Teeth the present generation is sufficiently assimilated to avoid being cripplingly rootless (108), but the seduction of assimilation remains perhaps the major tension in this novel.

In conclusion then, palimpsest has been used to refer to the manner in which colonial/imperial discourse covers over and represses alternative cultural expression and interpretations of events. This is an aggressive concept, including control over language, even when not including physical violence. In the novels discussed here, however, the idea of seduction complements that of palimpsest, especially the seductiveness of the modern in various forms. Whereas in The Glass Palace the palimpsestic stain metaphor is complemented by the seduction of main characters by various aspects of the modern, in White Teeth the focus is more consistently placed on the seduction of major characters and on the facetious undermining of those processes. By claiming the modern as Western, colonial/imperial discourse leaves no space for the non-Western modern and undermines appeals to experience as a source of wisdom as simply being out of date, so that alternatives seem restricted to appeals to tradition — with its often archaic inequalities — or the modern West.
NOTES

1 Aung San Suu Kyi is the General Secretary of the National League for Democracy in Burma and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1991). She is currently detained under house arrest in Burma.

2 The term is, of course from Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*. For a recent worthy exploration of this theme see de Kresten’s story of ‘Obey’ Obeysekere in her novel *The Hamilton Case*.

3 Squires describes much of the text as ‘satirical’, but also suggests that the treatment of racism, for example, is more comedic than overtly political, indicating that ‘racism is out of date’ (38).

WORKS CITED


JOHN HAYNES

from YOU
for Afinki Kyari

When we consider a case like Dante’s we are powerfully reminded of the reasons which have supported a view of love quite contrary to that advocated by evolutionary psychology. Love, it is suggested, is a cultural construct; and the way it is constructed depends upon various features of a given society. For example, in a society such as ours in which adults very often live alone until they fall in love, love is closely connected to overcoming loneliness. But this could hardly be a major feature of the experience of life in a society in which — until marriage — the individual would normally live in the closest proximity to an extended family.

John Armstrong, *Conditions of Love: The Philosophy of Intimacy*

XXV
I’m reading about certainty, the odd mad sense the word ‘know’ takes on if I say ‘I know you’re on the sofa, now’. It’s not how hard I’ve gazed at you, how carefully I’ve checked the room, but the insanity of doubting it. And then I thought of tales of Africk, eyes set in men’s pectorals.

And this to do with stern Miss Browne, and *West* chalked on the blackboard with a compass arrow pointing at the Shrewsbury Arms, and *East* towards the conker tree, to do with Andrew when she hustles him with, ‘Come on now, Andrew, a noun of place?’ — then with her anger when he stubbornly repeats: ‘That corner!’

Nothing more certain than my shoes down there, or that the bell would go, Mum be at home, the fields, the garden fence, sun on the car — although we left and all that proof is gone, as that of preschool has, now Number Ten. What’s certain’s certain just in retrospect? Which tick-boxes, when I’m dead, will you check?
But you’re not certain, are you? Things I’ve said, when hurt, when slightly drunk, words years ago, that lodged — no time, no past — inside your head. And no use now to show how then, how you, how I, swirlings of air you didn’t know out of a fear, and still have not quite heard. I say I love you but it’s only words.

They’re not the same as love, of course not, words, and still less English words, still less Bature tunes and pulses that you never learned at school, and don’t quite fit reality, not even now, not even here, where they, like yours, contain a different kind of earth. I say I love you but it’s only words.

As if the rocks and loam create a tongue, as though the meaning were geography, another kind of rain, another sun. But that’s only a metaphor, the way that love alas prompts us so readily to plant the desert full of magic herbs. I say I love you but it’s only words.

_Bature_: European (masc.), White Man.
Home as the setting, as the narrative, the starting point, the past? The soul, maybe, before the longing came? The tale you live as it comes back to you or as somebody tells it, re-tells it, as you tell me? A dawa fence? A swaying scarlet bird? I say I love you, but it’s only words.

The frog hangs downward by its eyes from surface tension on a pond, the sun, as red as a tomato, drawing lines of shade along the furrows — and so on, so I imagine, as I’ve always done, exploring as the White Man always would. I say I love you but it’s only words.

The Reith Lectures are on the theme of trust, without which, as I read, I realise, nothing coheres at all, and that’s not just Have I spoken with truth to you? Did I mean what I said? Or what I meant to try to say or what you thought I had inferred? I say I love you but it’s only words.

dawa: maize, i.e. the stalks used for fences.
I touch you. I imagine you. I change you into words, my cells, my chemicals, my sparks, my dancing spine. I make you strange. I conjure you from common syllables, from Kano market, Billingsgate, Arrivals. I wait holding your biro name on cardboard. I say I love you but it’s only words.

The orphan you still are must justify, must justify, must not (the phrase is just) be found wanting, can’t help it, nor can I, the daughter’s loss that drives out every trust, my trust in doubt as well, the way of love that you should understand, since you’re a nurse. I say I love you but it’s only words.

I’ll be your malam and bring magani. I’ll mix up something that’ll staunch your fear of needing me, some *mai bakin gashi*. I’ll squeeze the droplets gently in your ears until your eyes are bright, and onion tears will seem to stand in them, but nothing worse. I say I love you but it’s only words.

*Magani*: medicine in the sense of traditional remedy. *Mai gashin baki*: literally, the one with the moustache, name of patent medicine for all ailments. The label has a picture of a White Man with a moustache like Lugard’s.
Your glossy pages slosh over and come to it, the human heart, the ventricles, a section of the pericardium or outer wall, and then the visceral, the veins, the valves, the systole diastole of human metre with a sound like lub and dub inside the stethoscope. Like love.

Safe on the page with little arrows, captions, insets, it’s not like the Holby City shots of that thing jumping in the surgeon’s reddened plastic gloves, so carefully squared off with cloth, or electronically monitored, suspended still as death on by-pass where no pain or feeling’s left.

Look down then, nurse, and set your ECG, place the electrodes, switch on. All your hard homework will come in now. Examine me. Note what you see there, or what you’ve inferred from that pen with no hand filling my card with peaks and troughs of helpless lub and dub that I can’t hide, or alter, or make up.
This essay locates *London Letter and Other Poems*, a work by the Nigerian poet, Odia Ofeimun, in the context of the growing tradition of postcolonial travel writing, underscoring its inevitable reconciliation of personal memory with colonial history. In arguing that the poet problematises the burden of self-definition, the paper suggests that Ofeimun’s elaborate exposition of his preference for the metropolitan identity that the urban space creates in his theoretical reflection is a metaphor for appropriating the hybrid constitution of postcolonial identity. Lagos and London, which function superficially in the work as opposing spatial designations of the homeland and the colonial mother country respectively, consequently emerge as collaborators in shaping a unique identity that the poet-persona, as a postcolonial writer, shares with others in the in-between space.

Odia Ofeimun is a prominent member of the generation of Nigerian poets that emerged in the seventies to challenge the tradition of ‘apolitical poetry’ associated with an earlier generation of poets, the leading members of which are Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and J.P. Clark-Bekederemo. A Political Science graduate of the University of Ibadan, Ofeimun, who was born in 1950 in Iruekpen Ekuma, in Midwestern Nigeria, must be credited with stirring the emergence of socially responsive poetry in the Nigerian context. He has, over the years, been an active member of the Association of Nigerian Authors, the umbrella union of Nigerian writers, having served at various times as its General Secretary and President. He was, in addition, a member of the editorial boards of such Nigerian newspapers and news magazines as *The Guardian* and *The Tempo* for more than a decade.

Ofeimun’s reputation as a poet on the Nigerian literary scene for long rested on the success of his first collection of poems, *The Poet Lied*. The strong statement that the collection makes with regard to the primacy and urgency of the social responsibility of art inaugurated a generational shift in Nigerian poetry, making his work the signature tune for the kind of poetry that was to dominate the Nigerian literary scene from the 1980s to the late 1990s. While the committed art that *The Poet Lied* promotes was instantly recognised as his major contribution to the making of the Nigerian tradition of poetry and all assessments of his work acknowledged same, it has also turned out to be a major weakness of his poetry. As with all literary works with a clearly defined historical and political focus,
the possibilities of reading the work were limited. This is evident in the appraisals of Harry Garuba (1988) and Funsho Aiyejina (1986). An aspect of his work that has not been adequately assessed is craftsmanship. It is in this sense that Olu Obafemi’s ‘Odia, the Critical and Political Craftsman’ (2002) is a necessary, wide-ranging consideration of Ofeimun’s achievement, balancing the exploration of the ‘what’ with the ‘how’ of his poetry.

The publication in 2000 of three new books of poetry — *A Feast of Return*/ *Under African Skies, Dreams at Work* and *London Letter and Other Poems* — is a rare harvest of good poetry that is capable of transforming the critical reception of Ofeimun’s work. The most remarkable aspect of Ofeimun’s recent poetry is the eloquent manner in which it confirms his capacity for articulating concerns other than the apparently political. Ofeimun has not only broadened the basis for the assessment of his work, but has also demonstrated his ability to engage a variety of poetic conventions and modes. As with his earlier work, he still exhibits the remarkable ability to organise the poems in each collection around a central idea or thematic orientation. In each case, the poet demonstrates competence at exploring different facets of human experience in a poetic idiom that does not lend itself to easy signification. The closest to his earlier work of the new collections is *Dream at Work*. *A Feast of Return*/ *Under African Eyes* is a rare product of the experience of performed poetry, while *London Letter and Other Poems* operates within the tradition of travel writing, making it the most autobiographical of the three. The most obvious proof of the obsession of the poet with artistic perfection is the fact that the poems in the three collections benefited from many years of rigorous polishing. This, no doubt, inspired the friendly comments of Niyi Osundare, a fellow Nigerian poet, on his perception of Ofeimun’s work. In a tribute to Ofeimun on his fiftieth birthday, Osundare draws attention to some reservations he has about Ofeimun’s work, declaring:

> I have often teased you about the heavy-footedness of some of your verse; the overarching seriousness which tends to rob some of your well-wrought lines of a touch of humour; the over-conscious intellectualism of some of the poems…. There are also instances in which metaphoric competence tends to cheat the lyrical imperative. (81)

In the rest of this essay, I shall concentrate on Ofeimun’s *London Letter and Other Poems* as a work that operates within the tradition of postcolonial travel writing. This necessitates examining issues and concepts that connect the poet-persona to particular places, conscious of the fact that ‘[t]ravel literature is almost by definition highly autobiographical and by no means ideologically innocent’ (Rahbek 22). The essay also seeks to redress the marginalisation of poetry as a genre in the discourse of the postcolonial.

**IMAGINARY OR ADOPTED HOMELANDS?**

The critical reception of cultural production in the postcolonial world is increasingly becoming cognisant of the impact of the interrogation of conventional
markers of identity such as nationality and race. The erasure of the particularising value of distinctive identity — evidence of the growing impact of globalisation — is proof that emergent markers of identity have the prospect of illuminating our understanding of the context of contemporary cultural and literary production. The mass displacement of writers from the postcolonial world, and their westward migration, have increasingly necessitated the revaluation of traditional assumptions about writers and their attachment to their original socio-cultural locations, especially as this indicates the possibility of the survival of the creative imagination of writers in the event of spatial dislocation from the homeland. While Caribbean writers are traditionally associated with exilic/migrant writing in the Anglophone world, the works of many Asian and African writers who were at different times compelled by political, economic and other considerations to migrate to Europe and America, are now increasingly manifesting this trend. If the title essay of Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* (1992) is taken as the classic statement of faith in the expiration of traditional notions of identity based on fixed spatial location and affinity to a birthplace, experiences of writers from Africa, Asia and the West Indies in Europe in recent years have led to the recognition of works inspired by travel, migration and diasporic experiences as significant traditions. The West inevitably absorbs the creative output of the immigrant writers in the spirit of cultural globalisation. When the facilitator of emigration to the West is residual colonial affiliation, as is the case with many African and Caribbean immigrants in Britain and France (Zeleza 2002 10–11), there is always a tacit affirmation of association grounded on colonial bonding in which potential immigrants from the former colonies identify their prospective host country as the colonial mother country. Mojubaolu Okome stresses this pattern in global migration, underscoring the fact that, for this reason, ‘France, the United Kingdom, and other Western European countries [are] the most significant receiving countries’ (10). But the eagerness of the émigré writer to identify with the colonial ‘mother country’ is often negated by the reluctance of the latter to accept responsibility for citizens from the former colonies. Experiences of Caribbean people in Britain and citizens of Francophone African countries in France lend credence to this fact.

Postcolonial travel writing, very much like diasporic writing, raises questions relating to the identity of the writers concerned, as the motivation or basis for displacement from the original homeland normally reflects in the work of each writer. Two main attitudes to the writer’s spatial location are possible. One is a real or feigned emotional detachment from the homeland. This explains why some writers may feel no serious sense of attachment to their homeland even when all that sustains their creative engagement is the commodification of the peculiar literary practices of the same homeland. This becomes the outlandish artefact that they prepare to satisfy the literary taste of their European readership, especially when their ultimate desire is to earn a reputation in Europe. What they have in common with a writer of African origin like Ben Okri is a willingness
to identify with the relics of colonial association embodied in the myth of the British Commonwealth, which the common heritage of the English language practically sustains. Confirming the unique identity that this inclination generates, Eckhard Breitinger says:

[T]here is … a group of younger writers who have turned their backs — obviously permanently — to Africa. They reside in one of the metropolis of the North, participate in media racket that helps to promote their writing, but still adhere to Africa as the source of their inspiration and the location in which their writings are set. The prime example is the Booker Prize winner Ben Okri. (38–39)

Pietro Deandrea reports that a section of Nigerian writers and critics even attributes the award of the Booker Prize to Okri as a reward for the rather ‘scandalous picture of Africa’ (109) which his work is seen as projecting. But he is quick to add that Amos Tutuola had earlier been so accused.

The second and apparently more remarkable attitude to the homeland in postcolonial writing is that which celebrates the writer’s original homeland and not the adopted country. Many of the writers maintaining this outlook are notable critics of their home governments who were forced to leave their countries and seek refuge in other lands to escape political persecution. Dennis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Nurudin Farah are prominent African writers who have suffered the agony of exile because of their principled pursuit of sanity and justice in their homelands. This should not be difficult to appreciate in relation to African writers for, as Paul Tiyanbe Zeleza argues, ‘since independence African writers, far more than the professional academics, have exhibited a commitment to the political cause of the masses and cultural regeneration’ (1994 487).

Locating Ofeimun in either of these two main categories demands a close reading of London Letter and Other Poems which reveals certain ambivalence on the part of the poet-persona to self-location. The work provides an opportunity for him to reflect on the implications of the seemingly irreconcilable identities that the colonial and postcolonial legacies bestow on postcolonial writers. This becomes obvious most of the time when the creative activity is executed within the spatial location of the former colonial power. Ofeimun’s sojourn in the United Kingdom that inspired the poems in London Letter and Other Poems was intended to provide him an opportunity to do research that would lead to the publication of the biography of Obafemi Awolowo, the foremost Nigerian nationalist and politician he had worked with as private secretary, and the University of Oxford was his base. The clarification of the conflicting identities of the poet in the collection is executed in a subtle manner, involving the assertion of his affinities to two urban spaces — Lagos and London — designating the homeland and the adopted ‘mother country’. His work, in the true spirit of postcolonial travel writing, registers an impression of the ‘mother country’ without exhibiting the fascination with the exotic that defines the spirit of much of colonial/imperial travel writing. He privileges the resultant crisis of self-apprehension by appealing
to his memory of the homeland in his exploration. The simultaneous expression of ties to Lagos and London emerges as a metaphorical narrativising of this crisis. This validates Rahbek’s argument that ‘[t]ravel literature […] typically tells us much about the place the traveller is leaving as the one he or she is journeying towards, just as it often discloses more of the traveller’s personality than was perhaps intended by the author’ (22). The apparent projection of the self in the collection comes from the autobiographical dimension that the poetic expression of travel writing inevitably assumes. Travel writing in fictional expression normally provides an opportunity for the writer to substitute self with invented personages, even though perceptive assessments of such works can explore the essential connection between the writer and the world of the work. Ayo Abiteou Coly demonstrates this in ‘Neither Here nor There: Calixte Beyala’s Collapsing Homes’ in which the exiled Cameroonian writer’s dilemma in France is seen as dramatised in her fiction. The blurring of the boundary between the fictional and the autobiographical is implied in identifying the characters with her, leading to the conclusion that ‘[t]hrough Beyala’s representation of Africa, it appears that the continent is a collapsing home to her. This representation can only be read as a justification of her exile’ (44).

The foregoing indicates the constant temptation to read exiles and travel writers into their works which may either lead to an informed or a misinformed reading. We can only adequately appreciate Ofeimun’s London Letter and Other Poems in relation to the poet’s perception of the close interaction between the urban space and the creative imagination, a standpoint that foregrounds the significance of the city in the sustenance of his creative imagination.

IMAGINING THE CITY

Ofeimun’s implication of the city in clarifying his creative project, especially in his travel writing, may suggest that literary and cultural critics within the African context may not have sufficiently drawn attention to the capacity of the urban space to shape or facilitate literary representations. An obvious exception will be James Roger Kurtz’s Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel. The city particularly becomes significant in considering works generated by travel and exile, being the traditional abode of expatriates. Erik Cohen’s comment that expatriate communities ‘tend to be disproportionately concentrated in the large cities and particularly in national capitals of their host country’ (25–26) also applies to expatriate writers. This is becoming increasingly relevant in the consideration of recent African writing, much of which is being produced in the African cities and the seats of the former colonial powers. Paris and London have historically been choice sites for exiled and migrant writers. While Paris accommodated writers like Gertrude Stein, Leopold Sedar Senghor, James Baldwin, Ernest Hemingway and T.S. Eliot at various times, London has hosted such African and West Indian writers as Buchi Emecheta, Ben Okri, Samuel Selvon, Edgar Mittelholzer, V.S. Naipaul and George Lamming.
Within the African setting, Accra also attracted writers such as Richard Wright, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Manu Herbstein. The urban space provides the atmosphere and the facilities for the sustenance of the creative imagination and in the process nurtures a metropolitan spirit. It has consequently served in many cases as both the site for the production and the subject of literary reflection. The city occupies an important place in Odia Ofeimun’s creative project and he asserts his affection for Lagos, Nigeria’s former capital that also remains her commercial nerve centre. Elaborating on the significance of the city for him in ‘Imagination and the City’, Ofeimun suggests that the city creates a unique space for the cohabitation of people from diverse ethnic, national and backgrounds and consequently facilitates the forging of new identities across conventional categories of identification:

It is amazing how close ancient Rome is to modern New York and how much of a family resemblance exists between the city of London and Lagos in spite of superficial differences. The sprawl and anonymity that size engenders; the diminution of the city dweller to an ant size beside massive skyscrapers; the problem of filth and public conveniences. The perennial inadequacy of transportation and housing. The homelessness of individuals in the large crowds that pepper the landscapes and mindscapes of the city. (2001 14)

It is possible to appreciate the concept of the dislocated social space that emerges from the poet’s understanding of the character of the city in relation to Homi Bhabha’s notion of the Third Space, a site in which he locates an alternative mode of identification which is essentially transgressive, blending apparently contradictory categories and inclinations. This spatio-cultural site constitutes an alternative space for the postcolonial writer and becomes both a psychological reality and an analytical necessity. It is this same space that provides psychological refuge for Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*. Raisa Simola (2000 396) is profoundly conscious of this, affirming that ‘[t] he convention of locating writers within the confines of the national geographies of their country of birth has occasionally been discarded’. But the location of home actually acquires significance for metropolitan writers and intellectuals in an increasingly changing world, indicating the simultaneous inscription and erasure of identities. Sura Rath’s engagement with the problem assumes concrete autobiographical validation in ‘Homes Abroad: Diasporic Identities in Third Spaces’, testifying to the reality of the problematic and ambivalent task of identifying the postcolonial self:

Physically and spiritually Indian, but politically and perhaps intellectually an American, I stand at the crossroads where two nationalities/localities intersect. Both merge in me, yet each remains sovereign. In me the two engage in conflicts and tensions that are sometimes subsumed under my ‘internationalism’ or globalism. (3)

The poet-persona in *London Letter and Other Poems* constantly appreciates the fact that the colonial and the postcolonial investments in the constitution of
his self manifest when a spatial interaction between the homeland and the colonial motherland provokes assertions of these apparently conflicting components. This necessitates framing another space, very much like Ratt’s, in which his real self resides. In the world of *London Letter and Other Poems*, this reality plays itself out at various levels. Its most striking manifestation is probably in the linguistic wedding/appropriation of the colonial self and the nativist Other evident in the ambivalence that Nigerian Pidgin English articulates. Nigerian Pidgin English as a necessity of history is the making of the Nigerian colonial experience in which the values of Standard English and the dynamic inputs of the indigenous Nigerian languages are forced to collaborate in the invention of a medium which is neither indigenous nor European. The conflict also manifests in the love/hate relationship that defines the attitude of the persona to London and Lagos, indicating the acceptance and rejection of both at the same time. All these simply suggest that the postcolonial self is in every sense hybridised. Underscoring this reality in *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Jahan Ramazani argues that ‘[t]he postcolonial poem often mediates between Western and non-Western forms of perception, experience, and language to reveal not only their integration but ultimately the chasm that divides them’ (180).

It should not be difficult to appreciate Ofeimun’s special attachment to Lagos, especially as Lagos is not his birthplace. He is perhaps more consistent in his national outlook than Christopher Okigbo, whom Egudu (60) describes as a national poet within the Nigerian context on the strength of the sentiments expressed his later work. Okigbo, for all his national orientation, later participated in the struggle of the Igbo (his ethnic group) to secede from Nigeria. Identifying with Lagos — the city in which he has lived and worked for most of his adult life, which also appeals to him as the typical Nigerian city — is for Ofeimun, a convenient way to define his Nigerian identity; but as with his critical vision in *The Poet Lied*, his expression of attachment to Lagos is not necessarily uncritical. In his perception and representation of Nigeria, love for the land does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of a sincere, critical assessment of the national condition. It is then possible to understand why he resolves to love his land in spite of all her imperfections. This realistic vision of Nigeria is a unique feature of Ofeimun’s creative project:

The truth is that this city by the lagoon fascinates, if for nothing else, because it offers the closest Nigerian parallel to a melting pot. This, as I see it, is our prime city of crossed boundaries. It is the most open ground for the meeting of nationalities and the criss-cross of individual talent in this country. Hence it is like going to meet a good deal of all the colours of Nigeria when you come to Lagos…. Let me concede the point straight away: that Lagos is not a city where you may read a book in the comfort of a bus or train or recollect emotion in Wordsworthian tranquillity. Perish the thought! Lagos conjures images of traffic lock-jaws, progressively decrepit roads and rickety public transportation systems, crude commercialism, indifference to the
products of the human mind, lack of places of genuine public relaxation, an inhospitable culture of hospitality, tortured banking services and, in general, the tendency for brash materialism and uncouth and abrasive human relations to overcome good sense and aesthetics. (‘Imagination and the City’ 138)

REMEMBERING LAGOS IN LONDON:

The dilemma about expressing devotion to, and affection for, either Lagos or London, for the poet, is significant. Lagos, to Ofeimun, represents the homeland and all her imperfections, while London is the colonial motherland, to which he cannot deny a tie. To uncritically celebrate London — which does not enjoy an esteemed status in Anglophone African writing — is to unduly celebrate the colonial bond. Paris is, on the contrary, equated with a terrestrial paradise in much African writing of French expression. The fact that Jean Joseph Rabearavelo, who was a promising poet from Malagasy, committed suicide when denied a French visa which would have made it possible for him to realise his dream of going to Paris confirms this. David Diop’s case (Roscoe 1982 278; Makward 1993 201) is a remarkable exception.4 A mixture of love and rejection runs through many works that capture the experiences of citizens of the former British colonies in Britain. Expectedly, London is the setting of most works set in the country, as is the case with Ofeimun’s collection. This aligns with Maria Lopez Ropero’s stance that ‘travel writing has become a powerful instrument for cultural critique in the hands of special interest groups such as postcolonial authors’ (51).

London enjoys prominence in London Letter and Other Poems either as setting or as subject of some of many poems. This is sufficient basis for focusing on the relationship that the poet establishes between Lagos and London. This, however, is not a way of denying other concerns of the poet that include a description of his visits to some other European cities as well as an exploration of the amorous. The poems in the collection are organised into four sections: ‘My City By the Lagoon’, ‘London Letter,’ ‘Oxford Summer’ and ‘Travelogue’. There is a temptation to read the strategic placement of the poems that reflect on Lagos in the first section as a way of privileging concerns with the poet’s homeland in the sense of an effort made to foreground the ties to it. But the fact that ‘London Letter’ immediately follows this suggests that the relationship of the poet to the two may in fact project his special relationship to them on the basis of the values that they bear for him, betraying this preoccupation as a major concern of the collection. The last two sections are, therefore, only meaningful because they reinforce the significance of the first two by defining the identity of each city he visits in the context of her history.

‘Lagoon’, the first poem in the first section, defines the poet’s relationship to Lagos. The memory of Lagos, for him, is both soothing and shocking. The city, true to Ofeimun’s claims in ‘Imagination and the City’, does not emerge as an idealised space. This sounds credible largely because it is devoid of the distortion
and wild romanticising that often colour the imagination of the homeland in much travel or exilic writing, especially when venerating the homeland becomes a strategy for psychological survival in the face of the rejection that is often experienced away from home. The classic case is the way Negritude poetry redefined the African image as a conscious negation of its demonisation in European literature. The lagoon is, for Ofeimun, a metaphor and he invests it with suggestions that blend a sense of optimism with the romantic:

I let the lagoon speak for my memory
though offended by water hyacinth
waste and nightsoil…
I still let the lagoon reclain
The seduction of a land moving
with the desire of a sailing ship
pursuing a known star (3)

The desperate quest for sanity that energises ‘Lagoon’ also runs through such other poems as ‘Full Moon’, ‘Demolition Day’, ‘Self-portrait of a Lagosian’ and ‘Eko — my city by the Lagoon’. In ‘Full Moon’, this takes the form of a plea to a mother to allow her daughter to experience the purity of nature that moonlight can represent when there is a power outage. This, at the same time affirms the presence of the past, a clear proof of stasis. The event provides an opportunity to denounce the pervasive decadence in the city, and by extension, the entire Nigerian state, on account of subverted plans and unregulated social behaviour:

Let your daughter know purity of wish
before the pain of traffic lockjaws,
and streets overrun by garbage-mountains
and soldiers and policemen collecting toll
on the service lanes of life
teach her to hate and to swear (5).

In ‘Demolition Day’, the memory of the violated poor inhabitants of Maroko in Lagos provides an occasion to reflect on the plight of the helpless masses that constantly suffer deprivations and injustice. The situation in this case is particularly pathetic because the mass demolition of shanty houses in the neighbourhood, which led to the displacement of hundreds of poor people, was executed with military brutality. More disturbing is the fact that it paved the way for the affluent inhabitants of the neighbouring Victoria Island to acquire the whole land. The masterly deployment of visual imagery and the adoption of an effective idiom make the poem generally appealing. It dramatises the helplessness of the oppressed citizenry in the postcolonial state through the experience of an unnamed Maroko5 resident. The poet, manifesting a capacity for the prophetic, appears to suspect that the land will eventually be taken over by the rich. The plight of the average victim of the destruction of Maroko then becomes a parable
for the constant conflict between the powerful few and the powerless majority in contemporary Nigeria:

She knelt, cane-chaff on her tongue,
mocked by her mist-eyed anguish
wishing the lord would look her way
She knelt, dry leaf against iron hoofs
among the forgotten of Lagos,
the homeless of Maroko, wishing
the Lord would look at her withered hands
stretched pleadingly towards the law-mighty
epaulettes glinting with a merry stamp
towards her vale of sad wire…
She wept O Lord who would not look her way:
as bulldozers rumbled, rhino-happy across
her three-score days of rain,
where grass may grow forever
where cattle may be ranched
and limousines brace the lustre
of flashy skyscrapers
pointing a rude finger in God’s eye (6).

'Eko — my city by the lagoon', the longest poem in the first section, is a strange
love song in which images of chaos, disorder, insecurity, lawlessness, decadence,
 stagnation, all testifying to the fact that the city is a concrete symbol of
underdevelopment, paint a graphic picture of the typical Nigerian city. The
adoption of Eko, the traditional name of Lagos becomes an expression of intimacy,
which is consistent with Ofeimun’s personification of the city as a woman he
loves. But the irony that sustains the poem indicates that citizens of
underdeveloped societies — one of whom he is — have to make the best of their
condition. The beloved city of the persona is one which has shaped and has
equally been shaped by the inhabitants.

THIS IS LONDON!

The poems that come under ‘London letter’, apparently intended to present
Ofeimun’s perception of London, tell a traveller’s tale. ‘London’, the first of the
poems, registers the presence of Ben Okri in the London of Ofeimun’s
imagination. The poem also hints at other interests of the poet in the collection
that include a critical assessment of relationships across colour lines, the status
of London as a melting pot and the location of the Nigerian immigrant community
within the social fabric of the city. In the true spirit of travel writing, some
poems in the section are spiced with sentiments that border on the nostalgic.

The title poem, ‘London Letter’, offers a wide-ranging representation of the
poet’s impression of London, its peculiar character and the condition of its
Nigerian residents. The recurrence of such Nigerian pidgin expressions as ‘Na
London we dey’, ‘We dey for London,’ and ‘Na so, so enjoyment we dey', creates
the atmosphere for the sarcasm that sustains the satirical intent in the poem. As with most of Ofeimun’s poems, ‘London Letter’ presents a critique of London and the antics of her Nigerian residents. The London of ‘London Letter’ is viewed with the familiarity and privileged insight of a former British colonial subject. His perception of the city cannot be divorced from the high regard in which colonial subjects originally held the coloniser and the so-called ‘mother-country’. This, in a sense, makes the urge to compare Lagos and London irresistible. Ofeimun’s attitude to London tends to debunk the myth that once surrounded her. The London of London Letter and Other Poems is a postimperial city with a significant immigrant population. If the years immediately following independence saw citizens of former colonies of Britain coming to Britain for a defined period to enhance their education and acquire other skills needed for self-fulfilment in the newly independent states, immigrants of these same countries are now mainly compelled by economic and political crises in their homelands to emigrate to Britain. The significant presence of the immigrant population has, expectedly, generated questions and problems of identity, integration and economic survival, inevitably inspiring the urge to establish a link between the two:

Na London we dey. Pooling vast memories
across the Atlantic, we witness
the red bus careering towards Marble Arch
so free from the swarm and crush of Lagos
the sweating journey turned to a fiasco
fiercer than the wars of democracy.
We dey for London, spooling our best wishes
in strands of rueful remembrance — the god
of bolekajas packing bins upon human cattle
to redress crowded busstops;
ah! We pitch for undergrounds haunted to delirium
by highlife numbers only a Lagosian can hear
in the snakes and ladders of the mind
seducing Big Ben to dance ‘na soso enjoyment’ (14)

There is a close affinity between the image of London residents of Nigerian origin that emerges in this section of the collection and the collective image that Ovation International, has unconsciously constructed for them. The poem is, in this sense, a subtle assault on the social life of Nigerians in London which the Owambe tradition has come to represent. Owambe parties, as the social gatherings are known, create an atmosphere for the immigrants to exhibit hard-earned wealth as an index of success; but the tradition, due to its ability to draw people from the homeland to the colonial motherland on a regular basis indicates that the spatial and cultural gulf between the two is already being bridged. The survival of the owambe tradition in London is a pointer to the fact that the formerly colonised people are enacting a reversal of the cultural dimension of the colonial
experience by which their own cultural practices are now exported to the heartland of the coloniser as a symbolic expression of their presence, just as European cultural practices heralded the coming of the coloniser in the colonies. The poem indicates that London offers greater comfort to the immigrants than Lagos because it is more orderly, but does not fail to recognise the fact that it has its own slum and homeless inhabitants. Proof of the degradation of the persona’s compatriots in London is that they are forced to take up jobs that they would have despised back home in their desperate quest for survival. The poet-persona recalls seeing ‘my countrymen sing owambe to the garbage can’ knowing that pound yields no stink at dusk’ (19). The less successful Nigerians in London face the grim reality of marginalisation, degradation and the consequent frustration of their expectations, all of which render their sojourn and the high hopes that originally inspired their adventure unreasonable. Their condition is particularly pathetic, as history, nature and society seem to have conspired to authorise the verdict that is their lot. The transformation of the refrain from ‘Na so so enjoyment we dey for London’ (We are enjoying London to the full) to ‘we dey London like we no dey at all’ (We are living on the fringes in London) confirms this reality. The fact that many Nigerians experience the same hardship they wanted to escape at home all over again interests the poet who empathises with them:

Like them who sang ‘Lagos, na soso enjoyment’
we dey for London like we no dey at all
dreading the winter like the old woman the nights
without firewood to hold harmattans at bay
we dey for London like we no dey at all
chewing cud in the birth of freedom as tragedy
a used up hope mocking the human condition
on both sides of the Atlantic: Na so so enjoyment. (20)

What most passionately affirms the poet’s tie to the physical location he designates ‘homeland’ comes in the nostalgia-laden ‘Giagbone’, which celebrates his father and his emotional attachment to him. This, no doubt, betrays his recognition of home as not just a psychological phenomenon but also a spatial reality. Garuba’s comment on the poem is perceptive:

In this moving elegiac tribute to the life and times of his father, the poet creates a tale of colonial and postcolonial modernity, using the life of one man as its focus. Giagbone, traditional ironsmith who works the forge becomes a motor mechanic in the period of British colonialism and the introduction of motorcars into Nigeria. Taking advantage of the new economy, he excels in his profession of fixing cars.… Also inserting himself into the cash economy, he sets up a cocoa farm, buys lorries to haul the produce to Lagos … for onward shipping to the markets of Europe.

(2003/2004 6)

Even if an inclination towards obscure and incoherent imagery impedes easy understanding in most of London Letter and Other Poems, the work is, apart
from documenting the backward- and forward-looking reflections of the wanderer-poet, also a frank critique of the Nigerian condition and the mentality of the Nigerian at home and abroad. A basic interpretive key to the collection is the metonymic elevation of Lagos as a symbol for Nigeria. The work is a significant postcolonial reflection which is devoid of self-delusion and undue romanticising of the margins or the metropole.

The poet-persona problematises the acts of self-definition and self-location, invoking the complex and undeniable inputs of the metropole and the margins in the making of the postcolonial self. By interrogating the mode of identification that the conventional understanding of attachment to the homeland makes available, Ofeimun’s work indicates a broader range of the sphere of identity-formation for people in the postcolonial world. This involves eliminating the possibility of being labelled a stranger in the metropole, having opted for the norm of self-apprehension that the city provides — with the implied suggestion of the inconsequentiality of national and racial categories of identification. Ofeimun recognises the transnational space as site for the transcultural identity that he shares with others. Lagos and London, which the world of London Letter and Other Poems represents superficially as antithetical, actually collaborate in shaping him, and he does not see either as perfect or dispensable. The blurb of the collection acknowledges that the poet ‘presses personal biography and family history into a lyrical engagement with Africa’s collective memories’, adding that ‘his concerns are beyond the claims of race and nationality because he seeks ‘a common morality that cuts across different geographies and histories’.

By identifying himself as ‘a nomad unready for home’ the poet-persona hints at the possibility of extending the concept of home. He is particularly conscious of the shaping influence of Europe based on historical affinity and continuing association. The consciousness that he articulates invites comparison with that of Derek Walcott in his much-anthologised ‘A Far Cry from Africa’ in which he asserts the complexity of his identity. In all, London Letter and Other Poems acknowledges the ambivalent nature of postcolonial id/entities. This is a way of acknowledging the hyphenated character of identities in the modern world, validating Peter Childs’ claim that ‘it would be easy to describe the present as […] “post- national” in its mixtures of peoples and cultures, its spreading into the global and fragmenting into what is now being called the “glocal”’ (14). The work, arguably, affirms the increasing deterritorialising of identity and the prevalence of double consciousness in much of postcolonial travel writing.

NOTES
1 The collection is made up of poems and sequences that were originally written for performances by some dance groups in the UK.
2 The collections, in manuscript form, had circulated among the friends and associates of the poet long before they appeared in print.
This is a book-length exploration of how the city creates and is in turn recreated in postcolonial Kenyan novelistic practices.

His extended stay in France only deepened his anger towards, and rejection of, French and, by extension, European dealings with Africa.

Maroko, a Lagos slum, was very close to Victoria Island, an exclusive neighborhood. The shanty structures in the former were demolished and the land taken over by the rich inhabitants of Victoria Island during the military era under the guise of beautifying the city.

Eko is the traditional name for Lagos.

Established by Dele Momodu, a Nigerian journalist, this 100-page ‘celebrity magazine’ is published monthly in London. It professes a commitment to celebrating ‘Africa and friends of Africa’ and is apparently modeled on the African-American *Ebony*. Its main index of success is material wealth which it captures pictorially as exhibited in high profile parties held at home and abroad.

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HELON HABILA

My Uncle Ezekiel

My uncle Ezekiel’s body was discovered in a ditch early on Christmas morning, three years ago. Beside him was an empty bottle of cheap whisky; I still remember the red and green label on the bottle, with the inscription: Christian Brothers. Because of the empty bottle, and because of his drinking history, people assumed he had drunk himself to death — but actually, it was the cold that killed him.

The harmattan blows from November, sometimes earlier, reaching its peak in late December and early January, to peter out in March when the warm and humid winds begin to blow from the south, harbingers of the rainy season. The harmattan originates in the hot Sahara desert — it is called Hamsin in Arabic — and for some reason it turns chilly as it moves south of the Sahara. It moves in surges, peaking and subsiding, circling, as if reconnoitring, before swooping down on houses, trees, towns, countries, covering everything before it in fine white desert dust, sucking the moisture out of anything that is moist, and all the while screaming shrilly as it plays itself against power lines, roof awnings and tree branches — but its most punishing aspect is the cold.

Uncle Ezekiel stood no chance against it.

‘Ezekiel, Ezekiel, what have you done to yourself now?’ mama wailed when the news was brought to her by the old woman who had discovered the body on her way to Church. Uncle Ezekiel was the eternal child to his sisters — there were five of them. My mother was the only one living in the village, the other four lived in the state capital. The duty of taking the news to my four aunties fell on me. But first we took my uncle’s frozen body to the mortuary at the General Hospital, mama also made arrangements for a coffin with Jonah the carpenter; after all these flurries of activity and decisions. I left her in the living room, hunched forward in her seat, the tears trickling down her face, my three kid brothers seated beside her, solemn and sobbing, as if trying to out-mourn her. Soon the Christmas service would be over, and the mourners would start trickling in from the church, those who knew him and those who didn’t, the men would bravely force back their tears, the women would scream and roll in the dust and scream themselves hoarse — it was the tradition. There were no tears on my face. It was as if the light, stiff body I had touched and lifted out of the pick-up truck at the mortuary belonged to a total stranger, someone related to my mother, but not to me. Yet I had more right to mourn him, to out-scream and outfall them all. I knew him better than they did. I knew his secret pain, his anguish and frustrations. I knew him when he was young and good looking, when he had been so full of promise. I understood him more than his sisters. He was my friend, and for a while, my role model.
It was a two-hour trip by car to Jos, where my four aunties lived. I sat in the back of the old station wagon, jammed tight against other passengers, lost in thought. I watched the trees and shrubs through the window as they sped past — the harmattan had covered them in layers of dust. The grasses were sapless and pale yellow, the trees all spiky branches and coarse bark, unsightly; it was hard to imagine that a couple of months ago they were in leaf, some even in flower, the grass below them thick and luxuriant, insects and animals scurrying in and out of the bushes. Why did they suddenly give up their grip on their leaves with the first gust of harmattan, I wondered idly, as if this degradation, this death, was something they had secretly aspired to, something more compelling than life. For some reason it came to me suddenly that my uncle was exactly my age, twenty-five, the first time I saw him. Because my father was a schoolteacher, and his postings were mostly to small, out of the way villages, I discovered my mother’s sisters, and her only brother, one at a time.

*     *     *

We had just moved to Gombe, a sleepy roadside town in the savannah, slightly bigger than the last town where we had spent five years. Uncle Ezekiel was on his way back to the university after the mid-season vacation and he had stopped to see us and to show mama his new car, a Volkswagen Beetle. It was the 1970s, the golden decade of Nigeria’s history, before the rocketing inflations of the ’80s and ’90s, and cars were so cheap that even students like my uncle could afford to buy one from their bursary. The civil war was over, oil had just been discovered, and according to the Head of State, money was not the problem but ways to spend it: massive state bursaries to university students was one of the ways.

Uncle Ezekiel came one quiet afternoon, and was there a slight stagger to his steps as he entered our living room? When mama saw him in the doorway she jumped up and shouted, ‘Last born! Where are you from?’

‘From the village,’ he said, raising his hand over his head and motioning vaguely with it, as if pointing in the direction of the village. This was a gesture I came to associate with him, as if he had invented it.

‘I am on my way back to school. Everyone was fine at home, they send their greetings …’ his voice trailed off when he saw me. I was seated in a chair far from the door. A huge grin split his face. ‘Who is this? Is that Lamana?’ He came and stood before my chair, shaking my hand like a grown up.

‘Last time I saw you, you were like this, crying and shitting … how old are you now?’

‘Ten,’ I said. This close I could smell the whisky and cigarettes on him. I was shocked that mama’s brother smoked and drank; their father was a famous preacher. But she did not seem the least bit disturbed by it, or perhaps she was so happy to see him she did not notice. She gave him food and they chatted as he ate. He called her ‘Sister’ at the start of every sentence. I found that fascinating
— everything was fascinating about my uncle: the vague, absent minded way he
failed to finish his sentences, waving his hands as if to pluck out of the air the
elusive words; and the way his face would totally collapse when he laughed, so
that it stopped being a face anymore, just one huge lump of laughter. He had a
dimple on his right cheek. They talked about their parents — my grandparents.

‘Sister, I have one confession to make,’ he said to mama, his face dissolving.

‘What is it?’ mama said, imitating his smile.

‘Mama gave me a rooster to bring to you … I tied its legs and put it in the car
boot … but it must have somehow undone the knot with its beak … you know
how smart these village roosters are, very smart … then I stopped to buy something
… by now I had forgotten all about the rooster. When I opened the boot to get my
wallet from my bag it flew out. Prrr! and took to the bush,’ he flapped his hands
in demonstration. ‘Prrrr!’ he repeated over and over, laughing. Mama shook her
head but laughed with him nonetheless. Even I could see that Uncle was lying,
the chicken was most probably roasted and was right now digesting in his stomach
— but all she did was shake her head and wag a finger at him and say, ‘You, you
are impossible’.

And finally it was time to view the car. It was parked by the roadside, under
a sycamore tree: a metallic-grey Volkswagen. He opened the driver’s door proudly
and told me to enter, all the while explaining to mama how Hitler had had his
engineers specially design the car during the Second World War.

‘It can’t overturn, just like the beetle.’ He moved back and pointed at the car
top. ‘See the shape? Like the beetle. And it doesn’t use water ….‘ Mama bent
down and peered inside, running her hand over the leather of the seats. Half of
the backseat was covered by huge books, my uncle’s law books. After the viewing
he was finally ready to go, he sat behind the wheel and said to my mother, ‘In a
year’s time I will have my law degree … then no one can touch you. Lamana,’ he
said to me, ‘anybody tells you any nonsense just let me know when I come back.
Make a long list, I’ll sue them … you hear …’ he said bursting into laughter. He
started the car and drove off, waving with one hand through the window.

I felt sad to see him go, there was something bigger than life, almost magical,
about my uncle. Though he was short and slight of build, he filled a room the
moment he stepped into it, and no one I knew could tell stories like him.

That night at dinner mama told my father of Uncle Ezekiel’s visit. I detected
the pride in her voice when she mentioned the car. She said he was the first
person in her family to own a car, and to go to university. My father did not say
anything. He snorted when she related the joke about my uncle’s offer to sue
anyone we did not like. My father never thought much of Uncle Ezekiel even
then — perhaps he had already sensed the rot in the core, the way cats are said
to detect a dying man long before the event, and decided to keep my uncle at
arms length.

* * *

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Mama and her sisters were seated shoulder to shoulder on a straw mat, their backs rested against the wall: they had always been like that, right from childhood, incredibly loyal to each other, shoulder to shoulder, a solid phalanx against anything the world threw at them. They faced the rest of the mourners stoically; every once in a while some housewife would come and kneel before them, murmuring words of condolence, shaking their hands in turn, starting with my Aunty Ramatu, the eldest. I call her Posh Aunty. She had a flask of water beside her from which she occasionally sipped, daintily. Her husband had recently been promoted from a Secondary School principal to a State Commissioner, and to celebrate he had taken his family, my aunty and her four sons, to London for a week and, when they returned my aunty had suddenly transformed into Posh Aunty who wouldn’t drink from the same common pot in the kitchen anymore because she was scared of typhus. Her food, also for health reasons, had to be prepared separately. As soon as she arrived this morning, with my other aunties in her chauffeur driven Peugeot 504, she had started throwing money around: a goat was bought, a sack of rice, a gallon of cooking oil, soft drinks — all so that the mourners wouldn’t lose strength as they poured out their grief. The next hand to be shaken was mama’s. She was the practical one of the sisters; she had taken care of the grave diggers, and the coffin makers, and the mortuary bills, once in a while she went to the kitchen to have a word with the cooking gang. Next was Aunty Maria, or Timid Aunty, I call her that because her loud and domineering policeman husband had so intimidated her that she couldn’t look anyone in the eyes when speaking to them, not even her own children. Now she had an apologetic smile on her face as a mourner shook her hand, the tears rolled down her care worn cheeks; she kept nodding, almost genuflecting, at the woman shaking her hand. She seemed to be crouching more than sitting, as if poised to fly off if anyone shouted, ‘Boo!’ Her eldest son, Haruna, was in the same class as me at the university. And finally there was Aunty Jummai, or Pretty Aunty, the youngest of the sisters. She had actually won a beauty contest twenty years ago when she was at the Women Teachers’ College — she was still beautiful; but that was not the only reason why she was our favourite aunty: it was her kindness, how she was always willing to listen, to intercede when our parents wouldn’t understand.

The mourning was being held at my grandparents’ house, Uncle Ezekiel’s house actually, because as the only male child of his parents, he had inherited the house after their death. They had died four years ago, within months of each other, grandpa first, then grandma. It was a huge, desolate looking house, with tumble-down roofs and empty, cavernous halls and living rooms. Uncle Ezekiel had sold every stick of furniture in the house, including the bed he slept on. I found it hard to believe that this was the same house I had spent Christmas holidays in long ago with my cousins and other string of relatives who always seemed to be present in the big house.
The mourners were seated in the huge compound under trees and roof awnings, the men on one side, the women on the other side. The women were closer to the kitchen where huge pots of goat meat and rice were cooking. People kept pouring in, the women would come in chatting and laughing, then as soon as they saw the mourners they’d break into loud wails, throwing their scarves into the air, hitting their heads against trees until they were held and led to sit on the mats next to my aunts.

We, the young men, were seated far away from the rest of the mourners, under a nim tree, chatting desultorily; once in a while one of us would get up, yawn and then go outside to sneak a cigarette. From where I sat, my back against the tree, I could see another group of mourners, seated by themselves — in the centre was Black Ladi, my uncle’s ex-wife, flanked by her two daughters. My aunts call her, amongst themselves, Blacky, in reference to her character. Even from this far I could see the stubborn set of her mouth, the defensive frown on her face: her two teenage daughters, Anita and Hansatu, were mirror images of her, the dark skin, the pointy ears, the quick flickering eyes that kept swivelling round like radars detecting trouble. The two girls’ only saving grace was my uncle’s unmistakable weak chin. Close to these three, but slightly removed from them, was Sarah, my uncle’s other daughter. She had surfaced, suddenly, in the family circles six years ago from God-knows-where. She was a product of one of my uncle’s numerous peccadilloes when he was in the university.

I remember the first time I saw Sarah, I had just been admitted to read law at the university, on the way there I decided to stop at my uncle’s house in Bauchi. I thought he’d be happy to know that I was going to read law, after all he had inspired my decision to apply for law. I had not seen him for years, but through mama I knew that things were not going so well for Uncle Ezekiel. He had failed his law exams, and so was not called to the bar — but he was able get a job as a registrar in a magistrate court in Bauchi. He then got married to some schoolteacher whom, according to family lore, he had met in a bar room. It was all down hill from there. A year after marriage he totalled his car in a drunk-driving accident, barely escaping with his life, and was left with a long scar on his left jaw; then he was suspended from work the following year, ostensibly because he failed to turn up at the office for a whole month — but really because the people at the office were tired of his coming to the office drunk, and of having to wash his vomit off the table. Each calamity pushed him deeper into drinking, and the fact that he now had two daughters to care for did not ease matters.

He lived in a low-cost government housing project for civil servants, somewhere in the town centre. His house was number J2, and parked right in front of the door was the mangled remains of his metallic-grey Volkswagen Beetle. Voices raised in argument greeted me as I raised my hand to knock on the door, I put down my bag, wondering if I would not do better to turn and walk away, but I took a deep breath and knocked. There was a pause in the exchange; the door
was thrown open by my uncle. He looked like a caged bird looking for a way out—his face broke into a smile when he saw me.

‘Lamana! Come in, come in,’ he said, taking my hand, drawing me into the living room. His wife, Black Ladi, was standing in the centre of the room, her hands on her wide hips, a thunderous frown on her coal-black face. It was my second time of seeing her; the first time had been at their wedding years ago. Now she glared at my uncle and hissed, then without a word at me swept out of the room. I put down my bag and looked round the living room: the centre table had one leg broken, the seats were old and tattered armchairs, they looked as if some demented kid had gone at them with an axe. An old black-and-white Sony TV stood on a metal frame in an angle. For the first time I noticed that there was another person in the room: a plump, dazed-looking girl in a print dress, seated in one of the broken armchairs by the window. She couldn’t be more than thirteen years old. She looked as if she had just arrived from a journey, a battered looking bag with a red cloth peeping out of the top where the broken zipper wouldn’t close.

‘Your cousin, Sarah, she just came an hour ago,’ Uncle Ezekiel said in introduction, waving vaguely in the girl’s direction. He weaved back and forth on his feet as he spoke, he looked exhausted, as if on the verge of collapse, the hair on his head had turned white, and through his unbuttoned shirt I could see the ribs showing in his chest.

‘My cousin?’ I asked, turning to the girl. I had never seen her before, and I certainly had no idea he had a grown up daughter like this. ‘I don’t understand.’

His eyes turned fearfully to the curtained doorway into which Blacky had just disappeared, and then he turned to me, shaking his head in warning. He took my hand, ‘Come, we will go out. I will explain to you on the way …’ his words were cut short by Blacky’s reappearance. ‘No way,’ she shouted, ‘you are not stepping out of this house today. You must do all the explaining right here. Me too, I don’t understand, explain to me. Who is she?’ She grabbed him by the shirtfront as she spoke, jerking him back and forth.

‘Stop this embarrassment …’ he began weakly.

‘Embarrassment? So you think I am embarrassing you in front of your bastard daughter, is that so? Well, I have not started yet.’ She went to the girl. ‘And you, if you think you have come to your father’s house to enjoy, you are making a big mistake. Look at him carefully,’ she points at Uncle Ezekiel, ‘this useless man has been out of job for a whole year. He is a useless drunk. He is unemployable. I am the one who feeds him and his children. So better tell your mother, whoever she is, that if she thinks she has sent you here to live and send back money to her, she has made a mistake.’

I looked at Sarah. She was staring woodenly at the carpet before her, twisting and untwisting the edge of her skirt, each word thrown at her made her cringe deeper into her seat, as if she hoped the dirty redwood would turn to quicksand and swallow her. I felt sorry for her, and angry at my uncle’s wife, now I
understood why my mother and her sisters called her ‘Blacky’. But most of my
disgust was for my uncle. How could someone be so spineless? How could someone
with so much promise lose it all like this? All he could do as his wife ranted and
shook him by the shirtfront was to mutter, ‘Stop this embarrassment … stop this
nonsense immediately … you are making me angry.’ He slurred his words, shaking
his head helplessly at me. I turned away.

‘In fact, this has made up my mind. I have had enough. I am moving out with
my children. So, Madam Sarah, or whatever you call yourself, I hope you have
the strength to lift a drunken man to bed each night, and to wash the vomit off
him,’ Blacky said. And she was true to her word; as soon as her two kids came
back from school she bundled them into a taxi and left the house. We watched in
silence, my uncle’s feeble attempts to stop her were brushed aside angrily. Sarah
sat and stared into the carpet, not moving an inch. She lived with her newly
discovered father for a week, then my grandmother came and took her away to
the village.

That night, my uncle went and got roaring drunk. ‘To cool my temper,’ he
explained to me. It was that night that I asked him in exasperation, ‘Uncle, why
don’t you give this up? Must you drink? See how you’ve lost everything because of
drink.’

He looked at me, his bleary eyes amused, and shook his head. ‘You won’t
understand … it makes life bearable … my life is too complicated.…’

* * *

I was not to see Uncle Ezekiel again till three years later — by this time I was
not a kid anymore, I was twenty-two and had begun to discover what my uncle
meant when he said, ‘My life is too complicated.’ I had been in and out of love,
I had just lost my father, I had also tasted the sense of false hope alcohol can give
in dire moments. This was the late 1980s, the whole country was in turmoil, the
bright sheen that had covered the 1970s had gradually dulled to a dirty brown
patina, yet another military adventurer had seized power, and when the students
poured out into the streets to protest, the police had opened fire on them, killing
some, maiming some. Armoured tanks patrolled the campuses as if they were
war zones, when the tensions continued the schools were closed and we were
told to go home ‘until further notice’. Since I was not in a mood to go home, I
decided to visit my Uncle Ezekiel.

He met me at the door, he had one hand hitching up his trousers at the waist.
He had grown rake-thin since the last time I saw him. There was a hungry,
trapped look in his eyes whenever he was sober, his manner was distracted, his
speech incoherent; his hands shook; ironically, he was only himself after he had
had something to drink. The living room was even worse than I remembered
from my last visit: the black-and-white TV was gone; the dirty threadbare rug
that had made a brave show of covering the floor was also gone. Sheets of paper
on which half-realised attempts at a formal letter had been started and abandoned covered the three-legged centre table.

‘You came at the right time,’ he said to me, waving at the papers, ‘I am writing a letter to the Ministry of Justice … they are wicked bastards … you must see the letter they sent me last week, terminating my appointment.’ He pushed aside the top papers and fished out the letter, which he handed to me. ‘Here, read it. This is illegal … they can’t do this … I am a lawyer, I know my rights … but first I will give them a chance to take me back. Here, take the pen. I will dictate, you write, my hand is a bit shaky….’

I sighed. I wanted to tell him that I was tired and hungry, that what I wanted was a little rest, that if he could open his eyes he would see that he really had no chance with his petition, that people were losing their jobs in droves everyday — hundreds of sober graduates walked the streets unemployed, that the country had changed drastically since the last time he was sober. But I didn’t have the heart to say all this when I saw how excited he was, how his hands shook as he handed me the pen, how his words fell thickly over themselves and the saliva flew out of his mouth as he spoke.

He dictated, I wrote. The letter, which began peremptorily with lots of reference to legal facts and precedents, gradually simmered into a pathetic plea for a second chance. He was like a trickster who had depended all his life on his wits, who had now suddenly discovered that his bag of tricks was really and truly empty.

The following morning we took the letter to the Ministry of Justice. Uncle Ezekiel was dressed in his best suit, which was too big for him now; he had to borrow my belt to hold his trousers up. He was full of hope, but his face soon fell as we got out of the taxi and saw a long line of people with similar petitions as ours before the Director General’s office. We bravely joined the queue and moved an inch at a time, by midday I could sense Uncle Ezekiel growing restlessness — his hands kept going up to scratch his head, his eyes darted about, several times he broke the queue for a cigarette.

At 1 p.m. he said to me, ‘We have to eat now — I will go first, you stay in the queue, when I return I will take over.’

He ‘borrowed’ fifty naira from me and left. Of course I did not see him again till late in the night when he returned home drunk. I had waited in the line and when our turn came and he was not back I had headed back for home, only to discover that I did not have the key. I broke the lock and entered. I stayed up to give him a piece of my mind, but when he eventually came back he was too drunk, and I too sleepy, to have a talk. I left early the next day.

* * *

He did not go out without a fight — he did rage at the dying of the light, he actually managed to stop drinking for a whole year, but that was many years after the letter-writing day. In the interim, he left Bauchi and moved to the
village after he was evicted from his flat in the wake of the termination of his appointment. He lived with my grandparents, turning their final years into a veritable hell with his habit: he pilfered grandma’s jewellery, and foodstuff, and livestock, anything at all that he could turn into cash, to keep himself in booze. By now my family had also moved to the village after my father’s death, and I often ran into him in bar rooms.

‘Here comes your uncle,’ my friends would say and often there was no getting rid of him till I had bought him a drink. Thankfully he was never choosy, ‘Just anything to keep me going,’ he’d say, laughing, for even then he had not lost his laughter, and there were those, mostly women, who were impressed by his faded charms, his funny anecdotes about his university days, about his classmates who were now big-shots in government. On many occasions I had to carry him home when I found him slumped in some doorway, or asleep on some bar room floor.

He quit drinking when my grandparents died (they died within weeks of each other). After the burial mama and her sisters called a family meeting and, through a judicious mixture of threats and promises and tears and appeals to his ego, they got Uncle to promise to stop drinking. And he actually did. The sisters were ecstatic — in no time they were able to get him a job with the Local Government Library (the L.G. administrator turned out to be his former school mate), my mother began to hatch a plan to get him married. But, in a funny way, I think that one year of abstinence was Uncle Ezekiel’s most unhappy year. Perhaps, now that he was sober, he suddenly looked around and saw how much ground he had lost, and how impossible it was to recapture it. He did not laugh like he used to, he went about with a haunted, apprehensive look in his eyes, as if he was waiting for the day when everything would fall apart again. I guess he felt, in a way, that it was his fate to be destroyed by alcohol; it was his tragic flaw, the trigger to his doom. That might have been why he turned to the church, as a desperate attempt to seek divine intervention — but he was not there for long.

‘I find the sermons too tedious,’ he told me, ‘the preachers are too self-righteous. What do they know about life?’ I loved it when he talked like that; it showed that he still had some spark left inside him.

From comments and gossips overheard during the two days of mourning, I am now able to piece together the events of Uncle Ezekiel’s final day, the events that led to his relapse, and death. It seems that early on Christmas Eve he ran into an old classmate, Mr. Lamang, who had just returned from America after an absence of five years. Friends had gathered at Lamang’s house, and an impromptu party had taken off. While everyone around him drank beer and spirits, Uncle Ezekiel had stuck to soda, but as the evening turned into night, and the spirit level rose higher, and the young women began to arrive, and stories of old escapades were relived, Uncle had given in to temptation and had asked for a shot of gin.

‘Just one,’ he assured his friends who wondered if it was wise to go back after being dry for so long. And from there, of course, he ran out of control. He left his
friends around midnight, thoroughly drunk, his pocket full of money, a bottle of
gin under his arm.

Outside, in hotels and bar rooms, the parties were just starting; he went from
party to party, buying people drink, downing drinks. He could not be controlled;
it was as if some ravenous monster inside him was driving him on. Around three
in the morning he made for home, the bottle of Christian Brothers under his
arm, but of course he never made it, his legs gave out under him and by first
light he was dead.

‘Because it keeps me alive,’ he once told me when I asked him why he wouldn’t
quit drinking. I believe he meant that literally, because often when the police
and the soldiers were shooting people on the streets, he was cosy in some bar
room, drunk — or post-lucid as he liked to call it — out of harm’s way. But now
that which had kept him alive had turned round and killed him.

We buried him after the customary two days of mourning. What I will never
forget is the image of mama and her sisters, clad in black before the open grave,
their heads bowed in shame, the pastor had refused to come and say a graveside
sermon because Uncle Ezekiel ‘did not die in the Lord’. At least they had the
consolation of knowing that this would be the last humiliation they’d have to
endure because of him. I watched as the coffin was lowered into the gaping red
earth, I wouldn’t have been surprised if the lid had opened to reveal Uncle smiling
and saying it was all a joke — he was, after all, the trickster. I wanted to tell
mama and her sisters that they really had nothing to be ashamed of, he had lived
his life in the open, and his intemperance never really hurt anyone more than
himself. I pictured him being received in heaven by angels; well, not the Christian
heaven as we know it, but some milder, kinder suburb of it, where the reigning
deity, Bacchus, would welcome Uncle with a glass of stiff gin.
Imperial discourse and literary works from the colonial centre, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, nurtured the image of Africa as the ‘dark continent’ and espoused the idea that its inhabitants are ‘inarticulate dirty savages’ (Conrad 20). In concordance with the colonial idea of the muted and naïve native, Rudyard Kipling’s popular notion of the ‘white man’s burden’ became a synonym for the European imperial mission: the poor ‘blacks’ of Africa had to be lifted onto the stage of sophistication and civilisation and to be led into the light and blessings of Jesus Christ.

The first literary piece to reach out from the dark heart of Africa, the novel *Things Fall Apart* by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, finally brought enlightenment in 1958, albeit this time to the Western European world. The native of Africa could speak, and in a socially intelligible English! Ever after things have fallen apart for the Western construction of the ‘black’ African, and an increasing number of voices from the ‘dark’ continent have found their place in the literary world and confirmed that English has become one of their natural tools for expression.

In fact, Africa is a ‘living laboratory of languages’ (Schmied 205) and especially in the metropolitan centres, such as Nairobi, where the linguistic levels mingle and intertwine as speakers code-switch between at least three linguistic dimensions: their local languages, an African lingua franca, such as Kiswahili, and English as an international and pan-African language. In every day communication and creative writing, English is nativised and blended with various local and national African languages. ‘[T]here is an inevitable fusion of English and the rest of the languages each looking for accommodation in the phrases and sentences of the other’ (Mavia 2005) English is no longer just the coloniser’s language but in its indigenised varieties it clearly informs parts of African identity in every day life.
In this sense, David Mavia, alias Jambazi Fulani, represents a new generation of metropolitan Kenyan writers who, despite Ngugi wa Thiongo’s demand, did not abandon English but, with their amazing novels, short stories and poems, relate to their African cultural and social backgrounds with their multiple linguistic capital very confidently through a variety of transference and code-switching strategies. In Mavia’s short story ‘Nyof Nyof’, English blends in with Kiswahili and Sheng in a way that reflects the actual linguistic interaction in the vibrating centre of Nairobi and likewise provides evidence for the fact that the africanisation of English with its grammar and lexicology in Kenya is both a natural element of every day speech and a vital mechanism for creative writing. Mavia ‘experiments with the ever evolving of language forms in Nairobi and has frustrated the embarrassment of writing in some of the street language [that is, Sheng]’ (Mavia 2005). In the new millennium, Kenyan artists have thus started to re-inform their image, that is, to re-create their identity and to break away from colonial mental slavery. The shadow of Ngugianism is fading while a new generation of Jambazi Fulanis is arising and enriching the Kenyan literary landscape anew.

Mavia is a creative mind and a critical thinker. He sees himself as an upcoming writer, a photographer, a poet, a designer, and a lecturer. Most recently he indulged in scriptwriting and film shooting. Mavia ‘loves issues that build around culture especially when linked to language, artistic expression and history’ (Mavia 2005). Transmedia is his credo and the motivation of fellow Kenyan writers is one of his goals. Born in 1972, ‘into the Kenyan bridging generation; this is nine years after the Kenyan independence flag was hoisted’ (Mavia 2005), Mavia grew up in Nairobi before attending boarding school upcountry. Rural and urban divides inform his personality; ‘so he is a ruban’ (Mavia 2005). Between 1992 and 1996 he energised the philosophical discourse at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya, where he ‘pursued an undergraduate Degree in Education specialising in English and Literature’ (Mavia 2005). After Moi University, he permanently relocated to Nairobi.

David Mavia and I became acquainted in the winter months of 2003 while I was undertaking research on my Master Thesis Paper, which I devoted to the linguistic tapestry of Anglophone Kenyan Literature from 1964 to 2004. With his astute sense of languages and broad knowledge of Kenyan literary movements, he provided great insights and criticism. The mutual exchange of ideas has been a unique pleasure — asante sana.

NOTES
1 David Mavia offers a translation of the Jambazi Fulanis: ‘Sheng as a language is spoken most among the hoodlum folk. They are a gangsta/posse/thugish culture and identifying with them on a name level can tend to be imperative. Jambazi Fulani by direct translation stands for ‘Certain Thug’. It is being anonymous yet having a sense of belonging among the Sheng speakers.’
Nativisation is ‘the linguistic readjustment a language undergoes when it is used by members of another speech community in distinctive socio-cultural contexts and language contact situations’ (Kachru 1992 235).

Personal email from David Mavia about himself.

Engsh and Sheng are rapidly changing and still unstable Nairobian youth peer languages (cf. Abdulaziz and Osinde 46). As can be drawn from the terms themselves the languages are mixtures of English and Kiswahili: English is the dominating linguistic code in Engsh, whereas Kiswahili constitutes great parts in Sheng.

From the point of linguistics, the way David Mavia blends English with Kiswahili and Sheng can be described as congruent lexicalisation — a linguistic phenomenon which is typical for multilingual settings such as Kenya.

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Nyof Nyof

Ati the makanga of the fifty-eight mathree was mbolox so Koi fuatad nyayo and placed herself in the admirable eyes of Waf (short for Wafula). Waf was the dere of Western Bull, the mathree known for its bullish horn that attracted the choosiest of the bunch in Buru. She had dissed Maish because he was not focused; he happened to be bila chums and needed also to improve on perso. Lately it was rumoured he was courting some kahigh school projo which made Koi feel old and intimidated. Koi was a typical Boma girl trying to organise her perso and recently employed as a marketer for Safaricom. In as much as she had at some point endeared herself to Maish and had said yes to him, her discovery made her take a better option and as far as she was concerned Waf may not have been well connected but at least she was willing to enjoy their doze so long as he was available.

Unbeknownst to her Waf was not what she envisaged trust deres. There was this afti when she happened to be marketing near Mesora and for some reason after calling the office established it was not necessary to go back. So she went like to look for some lunch. She remembered the kajoint where the deres normally buy their nyam chom and headed there just in case she could capitalise or perchance Waf would be there.

The joint wasn’t really parked but the nyam chom was calling yaani the aroma was beckoning her to some lunch. Njoro happened to be the one running the joint on this day. He gave her that knowing look and asked her, ‘Kama kawaida?’

‘Lakini usijaze’, she replied. She juad that if she kulad so much it would take some time before she shed of the kathreatening pot.

‘Hizi ndiyo masaa za Waf mulikuwa nakadate nini?’ Njoro asked.

‘Zi ni kuchance tu’, she responded knowingly. The kiosk was another of those information agencies. Vibe must have gone round that something was cutting between her and Waf.

She thought she heard Western Bull mathree honk and brake. Then she heard the familiar voice Waf’s.

‘Soja si unipigie roundi utapat ka nishaa beng kidogo?’

‘Sawa Waf’, Soja seemed to oblige.

Then she thought she heard some kagiggle and Waf’s voice seemingly inducing some concern like he was vibing some kagirl. She just tuliad and in came Waf. He was with some kasupu holding her compromisingly and as he entered shouted, ‘Vipi Njoro nijazie kama kawaida na unitreatie haka ka KAP.’

Njoro tried to contain himself and pretended he was wiping the table then he whispered to Waf, ‘We ushaabambwa si uchecki one o’clock’. He turned in shock
in time to see Koi leaving. Tongue tied and slightly embarrassed he stayed on guilty as charged.

Meanwhile Koi realised that she had been taken for a ride and began to understand that he was a man of the industry and things had just gone Nyof Nyof — it was seemingly a pretty mbof storo.

Glossary
Afti — afternoon.
Ati — in the strictest terms it means ‘that’ but in use it carries exclamative tendencies so it would rightly be interpreted as ‘imagine’.
Better option — Safaricom’s slogan.
Bila chums — without money.
Boma — nickname of one Girls High School in Nairobi.
Buru — short form of an resident estate in Nairobi known as Buru Buru.
Dere — from the Swahili word ‘Dereva’ which is the English version of ‘Driver’.
Dissed — ‘to be left unceremoniously’, sometimes lightly used when someone is chiding another.
Fifty-Eight Mathree — the passenger cabs (Nissans) in Nairobi have routes and numbers and are referred to as Mathree which is an English version of Matatu. Tatu stands for number Three.
Fuata — to follow in Swahili.
Hizi ndizo masaa za Waf mulikuwa na kadate nini? — these are Wafula’s hours for lunch are you two having a date?
Juad — corrupted version of Swahili word ‘know’, though this indicates that it is in the past tense ‘knew’.
Kagiggle — a giggle but as previously explained ‘ka’ a small one.
Kagirl — a girl but as previously explained a small one.
Kahigh — ‘high’ but ‘ka’ indicates smallness or petite.
Kajoint — a place can be a café, its mostly associated with a communal gathering for various reasons. ‘Ka’ emphasises its smallness.
Kama kawaida — as usual in Swahili.
Kasupu — a beautiful girl.
Kathretening pot — a threatening potbelly.
Koi — short form of Wangoi a girls name from Kikuyu people.
Kulad — ate.
Lakini usijaze — ‘but do not fill to the brim’ or ‘don’t put too much’.
Maish — short for Maina, a boys name from the Kikuyu people.
Makanga — refers to the Nairobi colourful and noisy cab conductors (assistants) who ensure money is collected from the passengers and indicate every time a passenger gets to their station.
Mbof — from Swahili word ‘mbovu’ which means useless also.
Mbolox — the sheng version of Bollocks.
Mesora — a shopping centre in Nairobi.
Njoro — short for Njoroge a boys name in Kikuyu.
Nyam Chom — comes from ‘Nyama Choma’ in Swahili which means Roast Meat.
Nyayo — ‘foot print’, though popularised by our former President as his ruling philosophy.
Nyof Nyof — a more corrupted version of the word ‘useless’.
Perso — personality.
Projo — project.
Safaricom — a major cell phone service provider in Nairobi.
Sawa Waf — it is okay Waf.
Soja si unipigie raundi utapat kaa nishaa beng kidogo? — Soja please go round and pick up passengers for me when you come I will already have eaten.
Something cutting — something going on.
Vibe — talk.
Vipi Njoro nijazie kama kawaida na untreatie haka ka KAP — hi Njoro serve me my usual.
Waf — short form of Wafula, a boys name from the Luhya Bukusu people.
We ushaabambwa si uchecki one o’clock — you have been nabbed look at the one o’clock angle.
Zi kuchance tu — No I am just chancing.
THE ROLE OF THE KENYAN WRITER

The concept of a Kenyan writer has always been abstract but even so it seems there is a literary suit that categorises him or her. The mention of a writer in Kenya is almost swallowed by the shadow of the icon Ngugi. Recasting this image seems a monolithic feat, which might or might not be done; I don’t know whether that is good or bad.

The role of the Kenyan writer in the past is steeped in the baggage of colonial experience. Back then colonial education popularised the 3R’s: Read, (w)Rite and (a)Rithmetic. Those who caught the write R ended up as writers. They wrote for the villages or communities they came from and against the antagonistic forces of colonialism. The writer back then created works the sustenance for which was the East African experience especially revolving around the centres of ideological exchange, in this case Makerere, Nairobi, and Dar–es alaaam Universities. Figures of the pen included John Ruganda, Rubadiri, Ngugi, Okot p Bitek, Meja Mwangi, Tabaan Lo Liyong et al.

They might not have envisaged the turn of events in this generation. As a young and inexperienced writer it is easy to see that the Kenyan first generation writers did not anticipate the brooding of a television generation — a generation informed more by images than the word, a generation devoid of any abstraction and reflective thinking — (we have lost this, our capacities to think by engaging in the written word competes with the screen, a muse which steals every moment of the linear, logical and contemplative. There has been a killing of the book and the word, thus the literary artist is being choked if not being ignored).

THE ROLE BACK THEN

I should say first and foremost that the role of the Kenyan writer back then was to create and sustain the memory of our identity in its historical context. We have forgotten who we are largely because of a loosely written history, which sustains a poor picture of our past. The role of the literary artist was to colour our thoughts with cradle moments and things we might have easily forgotten. They had a role to honestly and accurately paint our identity before the colonial experience, the erosion of it and the possible salvage of our humanity and uniqueness.

The artist struggled against all forces, including the celebration of independence, to remind us of the true picture. The one thing most African governments forgot is
that independence should have covered politics, economics and culture. They took the first two, politics and economics, and ignored the last, culture. The literary artist at that time thus became the only cultural ambassador who stood in the gap to remind us that when we looked into the ‘new’ mirror of freedom from colonial rule what we were bound to see should not have been devoid of a cultural ingredient. So when we read their books we remember the villages, the rivers, the round huts, the names of places and people. When I read Achebe (a famous Africa Writer from West Africa) he has an indelible ability to capture village life taboos, sayings, customs, deities — there is a reliving of moments we never experienced as young twenty-first-century Africans. The distant historical other can be envisaged and thus we are able have a past that is not a vacuum. The only payment I can give these old writers is to read their books.

**THE NEW ROLE BACK THEN**

Their first antagonist was colonialism, and then came in the new governments of independence and a shift occurred — the postcolonial shift — and self-rule introduced new problems and daring writers began to critique those in power. Flags went up in speeches and inexperienced new leaders repeated promises that were to bring in a new nation. In our case, in the space of ten years, we were already experiencing assassinations. It seemed as though the only persons who could salvage the moment as the peoples’ voice were the literary artists. The compounding responsibility now endowed on them isolated many a writer because they were seen as a threat to those in power. On the global scale the African governments were placed in the position of choice — was it to be east or west, was it to be communism or capitalism? There was even a non-aligned movement — a cluster of countries — that avoided the west/east side-taking. The African countries were experiencing the critical near-death vestiges of the Pan Africanism Movement. This was a critical season for ideological turbulence. Most books written at this time performed a literary acrobatics — centred between the colonial experience and the reality of neocolonialism and self-rule.

**ENTER THE MARKET DRAGON**

Previously, writing and the writer had been based on the personality cult. It was about an individual and his/her works. Then suddenly the textbook syndrome arrived. It is something that is big in Kenya. Many people who would have wanted to make a living out of money jumped on this train. The textbook market is based on the demand made by the government for books suitable for teaching in primary and high school. It would seem at this stage that many began writing not because they liked it but because it was going to pay. Some books were custom made for the syllabi. These kinds of writers were research fellows, former teachers, and persons with connections to government tenders for the supply of textbooks (but this is a whole other story about the textbook publishing industry). The writer who dwelt with issues in society disappeared or was ignored, and in
any case, government had changed and those we thought could shed the light and father novelists and language developers were in exile. Once in a while a writer would come up and publish but would not stay long because apart from economic sustainability, the writer needs an audience — people to read his/her books and give feedback. In fact it is only very recently, perhaps even in the last five or so years, that we have experienced book reviews and book fairs in this country. The vacuum created by the text book rush resulted in the brooding of journalists who would wield their pens in local dailies, tackling issues, but very few ever writing or publishing their own novels. In fact, I only know two or three journalists who have published their own novels. Among them, the late Wahome Mutahi leads my list. For me, having met him before his death and having studied his novels back in college, he was the most accessible. He popularised the current trend of thinking in codified urban Kenyan language, employing the platform of satire in a column that had tremendous success. Generally then, if you asked the basic Kenyan about writers they would mention journalists rather than novelists.

As it is, textbook publishing still rules and lures many but does not have significant contribution to the reality on the ground, especially the development of language and the intrusion of idiosyncratic styles and choice of linguistic expressions. Additionally, the blossoming of the television industry and fm radio stations locally and transmission of programmes from outside is the number one attention stealer of possible readers of the written word. The common phrase in Nairobi goes ‘Kenyans are not readers’: it is debatable but truly the issue is that Kenyans place no value on their own local writers and artists. The prevalent logic goes — if it comes from outside then it is good for Kenyans. Inter-media competition has encouraged people to find the convenience of information entertainment and education outside of the novel — in television or movies, and newspapers. In fact I normally say that if one wants to cause a reality crisis in Nairobi all one needs to do is bring a halt to newspapers and the gutter press for a day or two and switch of television and radio. I think if that were to happen the country would riot.

THE NEW NEW WRITER AND A TRICKY ROLE

The current literary scenario has been set and mostly jump-started by prize writing. The past two Caine Prize Awards won by Kenyans have prompted many of the revived closet Kenyan writers to come out and show their mettle. In my observation the new Kenyan writer is a twenty to thirty something fellow with ideological constraints pulling him on all sides, especially as far as identity is concerned. It is as if we suffer from some Afro-centric post modernity. We differ from the first pre- and postcolonial writers in many ways, a few of which are:

Reality — we differ in context and reality. This affects our sense of mission. When you ask us why we write you will find various answers; but it seems the cool and reflective thing to do. Most of us will be found somewhere in between
the mystical reality of historical search for our roots and the undeniable material world that asks whether we can be economically sustained by the phrases we write.

Mission — from the first point (above) we might be seen to have a ‘non-ideological’ mandate to write — few do it for a living and a calling. Most want to have written a novel or two. Maybe it is the pomp that comes with awards or maybe it is the genuine search for an expression that drives us. We are less likely to study the trend and development of writing and linguistic expression. The peculiar styles that philosophically express our reality are rarely conscious.

Artistic Responsibility — because of a lack of mission the grasp of the role of the artist in the community might not be a gauntlet we want to pick up. It would deny us the opportunity to pioneer artistic literary expressions or have a sense of freedom to project into the future. Many a penman in my day and age, especially from my generation, thinks of the existential moment. The media has contributed to this greatly because it tends only to focus on the prize-winners and star writers.

Role Models — we have few role models, persons that are accessible and not embalmed in an icon bubble. I attended Ngugi’s Home Coming Writers’ Workshop. He said one of his missions in his short stay was to meet young upcoming writers. Well he is back in the States and no such meeting took place. In fact the writing workshop I attended was only for twenty writers and most of them were the Nairobi elitist literary-donor-funded ilk. We lack the human-faced chaperon who coaches and mentors one in the craft.

A Renaissance Indeed — I wrote an article last year whose basic thesis was whether Kenya was experiencing a cultural revolution. The observation I have made has been that something of that sort is going on. It is predominantly heightened by the music and visual world. Young folk are cutting music CDs, performing plays, meeting in café’s for readings, spotting dreadlocks. Writing has been thrown in and is beginning to sprout incisors from the literary gum show. Where this will end or head we will have to wait and see but I think it is good.

CONCLUSION

I doubt strongly if the new literary artist understands his/her role in present day Kenya. I can only say that at least it is good that someone is writing. We have a long way to go, I hope we approach our role with increased awareness.

2 THE USE OF LANGUAGE AND ITS ROLE IN THE FUTURE OF KENYAN LITERATURE

THE USE

How do we use language in Kenya? Relatively would be my answer. In a normal conversation there is a lot of mother tongue intrusion. In a typical Nairobi conversation it would be easy to pick out which part of the country the speaker comes from especially if they have heavy peculiar local language additives into English. Nairobi is basically a center of cultural integration. Language is one thing people spend without the basic rules of usage. The colonial generation is fading out and slowly giving way to arbitrary use of English. They were the ones
who were meticulous in the use of grammar, syntax, phonetics, prosody and the like. Then came MTV and sitcoms and less reading and people picked things up along the way. Language usage in Nairobi is a sign of status. We have basically mother tongue spoken in the villages, Kiswahili as the umbrella language, English spoken by the ‘refined’ or the intellectuals, then we have offshoot combination of Kiswahili and English, which breaks into two. On the one hand we have Sheng, which has more Swahili and local dialect intrusion, and on the other hand we have what we call Engsh with more derived English corruption than Kiswahili and local dialect.

Standard ‘proper’ English is a half-half chance found in most conversations unless it is a serious intellectual conversation without some sauce of intrusion of kenyanized phrases. Otherwise apart from Kiswahili, which is the umbrella tongue and various mother tongues, most people will fluctuate between Sheng and Engsh. Even then the divide is apparent and is dictated by status: the more affluent go with Engsh and the ghetto will thrive on Sheng. Mostly this will also cut across generations. The younger (38 and below if that is young) are immersed in the two shifts (sheng and engsh) so usage is both status-related and generational. This language use is essentially spoken and not written so its use in the future is based on a linguistic dynamism that will account for accommodation and growth of the languages especially when they tend to borrow from each other without the consideration of proper grammatical necessities.

LITERARY EXPRESSION AND ITS FUTURE

Most of the languages mentioned above are used primarily in verbal discourse. When it comes to writing then Kiswahili, local dialects and English are predominantly used. Kiswahili and English are official. Mother tongues/local dialects are used mainly in religious literature and have only of late been introduced in HIV/AIDS billboard campaigns.

When one tends to write in another language like Sheng it is seen as a violation of communication. Funnily enough it is more accepted in verbal than in written form. In fact the advertising agencies have of late been using it for various campaigns mainly because the constituent audience of young folk is becoming broad.

When it comes to prose, that is, literature (novels, poems etc), less has been seen in written format. Many, especially the older generation, may consider the use of Sheng prose as unpalatable, even suicidal. The use of Sheng is dreaded I think because it cannot be placed in a proper structure of linguistic rules and forms. It has the tendency of quickly mutating. Before you know it — in as little time as a couple of months or even a week, you will be chided for speaking old Sheng. Its acceptability in written format will take some time unless writers popularise it. Using such a language in literature will attract pockets of cult Sheng speakers. The threat seen in using Sheng as a language is in how it compares to English and the rest of the languages. Our linguistic gurus are silent on such issues or have one-sided arguments.
The Kenyan society largely suffers from a multiple personality as far as linguistic expression is concerned — one will be a different person in a context where Kiswahili is being spoken, different where English is being spoken and very different where Sheng or Engsh is being spoken. Trauma derives from the possibility that these personalities in one body never meet because even our choice of friends or posse can be dictated by which tongue we speak. Language multiplicity has encouraged us to perfect the art of acting — we play for the invisible cameras and hope that no one finds out who we really are.

I would not want to speculate what the role of language is going to be but there is an inevitable fusion of English and the rest of the languages, each looking for accommodation in the phrases and sentences of the other. It is a battle of language dominance and interpretation of realities or worldviews. The local dialect worldview is diminishing among the urbanites because they do not think in the vernacular. The language we predominantly think in will win the day. Knowing the Kenyan psychology I would say we are mimic men who have perfected our ability to become English. This is not necessarily in the strictest sense of well spoken and written language but in mannerisms and fadistic sense (if there is a word like that). It is laughable to think right now in Kenya that one is considered to have command of English if one has a twang (an American one for that matter). Our FM stations have promoted this attitude and our exposure to sitcoms and questions of image and identity have their part to play.

The future of usage of Language in Kenya will be largely based on literary artists, the vision they have and the best language in which to translate this vision. Whether the vision will represent the artists or the community at large is unknown.
MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

Confessions of a Liminal Writer: 
An Interview with Kee Thuan Chye

Kee Thuan Chye was born in Penang, Malaysia in 1954. He started writing poetry and drama in the early 1970s, while he was still an undergraduate student of Literature at Universiti Sains Malaysia, and had numerous radio plays broadcast on RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) during that period. He also wrote plays for the stage, including The Situation of the Man who Stabbed a Dummy or a Woman and was Disarmed by the Members of the Club for a Reason Yet Obscure, If There Was One (1974) and Eyeballs, Leper and a Very Dead Spider (1975).

However, Kee’s move to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital and premier city, in 1979, where he now lives, marked the beginning of a new phase in his writing that culminated in his agitprop play 1984 Here and Now, first performed in July 1985 at the Experimental Theatre in Kuala Lumpur. Since then, he has composed The Big Purge, performed at the Essex University Theatre, England, in May 1988, We Could **** You, Mr Birch, first performed at the Experimental Theatre in Kuala Lumpur in June 1994, and The Fall of Singapura, which has not been staged yet. Moreover, Kee is the author of two volumes of prose: Old Doctors Never Fade Away (1987) and Just In So Many Words (1993). His poems have been published in numerous anthologies and journals at home and abroad.

As former Literary Editor of the Malaysian English daily, New Straits Times, and current Associate Editor of the leading Malaysian newspaper The Star, Kee is one of the most prominent English-language journalists in the country. He was the recipient of a British Council Fellowship in 1987 and Australian Cultural Award in 1994. In 1998, he was invited as a guest writer to the Melbourne Writers Festival, the Brisbane Writers Festival, and Spring Writing in Sydney. In 2001, he was invited to the inaugural Standard Chartered International Literary Festival in Hong Kong. He has been a judge and regional chairperson of the prestigious Commonwealth Writers Prize.
Kee is also a deft actor and stage director. His acting credits over the last 25 years include roles in the films *Entrapment* and *Anna and the King*. He played a major role in the long-running TV series *City of the Rich*, and the role of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* on stage to unanimous acclaim in 1989. He has also directed about a dozen plays for the theatre.

This interview was conducted via e-mail in November 2004.

* * *

**MAQ:** Tell us something about your ancestors who first came to Malaya. How did they negotiate between the two cultures/worlds, following their migration?

**KTC:** I’m afraid I have no record of this.

**MAQ:** Has the cultural dislocation affected/enriched your imagination in any way?

**KTC:** Yes. It has certainly made me question my identity as a person and as a writer. Malaysia is still a young polity, having become independent only forty-seven years ago with a baggage of diverse races and cultures. The Malaysian identity is still amorphous. People like me from immigrant backgrounds although born here but not long after Independence have had to struggle to find a sense of belonging, and through the decades, with the formulation of ethnic-biased policies, the struggle has been made harder.

We’ve had to put up with being marginalised and being less privileged than the Bumiputras. We’ve even had to suffer the insult of being called ‘pendatang’ (immigrant). I personally experienced the adverse effects of such institutionalised racial discrimination when I was denied a tutorship position after completing my first degree although I was top of my class. That deprived me of the opportunity of pursuing my Masters because I could not afford to continue my studies without a job.

Today, the racial divide is still there. At its recent general assembly, UMNO, the dominant Malay-based ruling party, unveiled what it called its ‘Malay Agenda’. It defies good moral sense that in this day and age, in a multi-racial, plural society that is being urged by its leaders to work towards national unity, there is such an agenda. It makes mockery of what the leaders are exhorting. They seem to speak with forked tongues. Imagine the Whites in, say, Australia declaring a ‘White Agenda’. Even Malaysia’s leaders would have taken exception against such a notion, as it seemed to have done so against Apartheid in the 1980s, ignoring the fact that they were practising a form of Apartheid at home.

Given the yet unstable state of Malaysian identity, the challenge for Malaysians is contributing ideas towards its evolution. Writers can give flesh to some of the ideas. My imagination is stirred by issues like what it means to be Malaysian, how this nation can rise above racial considerations.
to embrace all its denizens and observe the time-honoured values of justice and fairness. My contention has always been that if we all helped to build this house which is Malaysia, why must some of us still be considered tenants?

The cultural make-up of my being is even more complicated. Despite being ethnically Chinese, I am culturally far from being one, having been educated in English which brings with it the assimilation of second-hand Western culture. I suffer from cultural anomic being unable to read and write Chinese and unschooled in the Chinese cultural traditions. I speak very basic Hokkien learnt from my parents. I think in English. My sensibilities are more Western than Asian. I might have steeped myself in learning the Malay language and assimilating Malay culture, but that was forestalled by the English education that instilled a false sense of superiority. In the ‘60s, non-Malays by and large didn’t take Malay seriously. We were still suffering from the colonial hangover. There wasn’t a strong sense of nationalism among non-Malay youths. We drifted with the postcolonial tide of uncertainty and apathy.

**MAQ:** *It was a terrible injustice that you were not accepted as a tutor in the department only because of your ethnicity. However, I believe, you did get an opportunity to pursue graduate studies later, but perhaps by then you had lost your interest in teaching.*

**KTC:** The initial intention of pursuing my Masters was not motivated by an interest to teach. Similarly, when I eventually did it at Essex University in the late ‘80s, becoming an academic was not on my mind. In fact, at the time, I had the option to study film-making in London instead, also to be funded by The British Council. But after much agonising, I chose to go to Essex because I had dependents and could therefore not be away for two years on the film-making course without income. Essex was only for nine months. Although the Essex experience has its good and memorable moments, I often look back with regret at the road not taken. A diploma in film-making could have taken me on a different, perhaps more fulfilling, career path. This is another life-decision that I made wrongly.

**MAQ:** *How did you come into writing — English writing? What motivated you to write?*

**KTC:** I think and read in English. I speak English ninety-nine percent of the time. Naturally, I took to writing in English. The motivation to write came at an early age for me. It was of course imitative. Around the age of nine, I was already scribbling stories. I was encouraged by an uncle whom I occasionally visited. He would glance at what I’d written and say general things to encourage me. In school, I showed my stuff to a few classmates. I was especially inspired after I saw the first James Bond movie, *Dr No*. It got me reading all the Bond novels by the age of ten or eleven. And I naturally wrote my own Bond novel! Around the same time, I was also
inspired after watching a school production of *As You Like It* at which I was besotted by the girl who played Rosalind. I embarked afterwards on the ambitious task of writing my own Shakespearean play!

In secondary school, I wrote virtually in competition with a classmate. We showed each other what we wrote. In retrospect, I think he wrote better. But I don’t think he pursued writing in his adult years. He became a pharmacist. He became a ‘drug pusher’ while I continued to be a pen pusher. The pains of growing up cried out for expression in poetry and my adolescence was engaged in that genre.

MAQ: *Is there any other memory from childhood that you would like to share with us? Any particular memory that you think might have shaped/influenced your personality/sensibility?*

KTC: There are too many! They all helped to shape me, so it’s hard to zero in on one particular memory.

MAQ: *Please explain to us your process of writing. Do you write with a particular audience in mind: Malaysian/ASEAN/Western? Or do you write primarily for yourself — to meet your personal sense of accomplishment, and for the joy of doing something creative/constructive?*

KTC: I started out writing for myself but my perspectives have now changed. I write for basically a Malaysian audience because this is the audience I want to reach out to. The issues I address are derived from my Malaysian experience and they are meant to be shared, first and foremost, with my fellow citizens.

MAQ: *In that case, I am afraid, your audience is likely to be rather small, given the Malaysian habit of reading, and reading English books in particular. Isn’t that disheartening for you as a writer?*

KTC: Not really. Of course it would be nice to be read internationally, but one should not gear one’s writing in that direction simply to fulfil that purpose. I’ve seen the results of Malaysian and Singaporean novels that pander to a Western readership. Often, they end up hawking exotica and the language gets stilted. Ultimately, what determines whether a piece of writing can cross borders is its intrinsic value, which would include factors like truthfulness and authenticity.

I have read the opening sequence of my novel-in-progress, *A Sense of Home*, in Malaysia and abroad, at Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Britain, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Hong Kong, Singapore — all to multi-national audiences — and it has gone down well every time, despite the fact that it is about characters living in Penang and the narrator speaks in the Malaysian brand of fractured and ungrammatical English. And I certainly did not aim it at an international readership when
I wrote it. When it was included in the anthology *New Writing 10*, published by Picador, I received a letter from the chief editor of Headline, an imprint of Hodder & Stoughton in the UK, asking if I could show her what else I had written.

**MAQ:** *How much of your writing is conscious and how much of it is spontaneous? Do you believe in the importance of editing/revising a piece of literary work or do you think it should be left entirely to the ‘truth of the moment’ as editing may affect the work’s ‘authenticity’?*

**KTC:** Every work needs to be revised and edited. And I say that not just because I’m an editor! Sure, there will be parts that encapsulate ‘the truth of the moment’ and these may not be touched, but it always serves the writer well to re-look at what he’s written in his first draft to improve on it, plug the holes, see things he did not see the first time round. Once you’ve written the piece, it’s good to stand back and see the larger picture before signing it off as a completed work. Authenticity is never compromised by revising and editing.

**MAQ:** *Who are the major influences on you, if any, as a writer/playwright? Have you been influenced by any of the local/regional writers or playwrights as such?*

**KTC:** When I started writing plays as an undergraduate, I was influenced by the Absurdist, primarily Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter. *Waiting for Godot* had a tremendous impact on me then. It made me look at the world, at life, in a way that was different from what I had perceived it to be. The Absurd plays came to me through a frequency I could tune into because they reflected my own inner turmoil at the time and my questioning about existential issues. I was not as familiar with local or regional writers. Those that I read were not so compelling in their vision as to have a strong effect on me. Later, in the 1980s, as I became more aware of the importance of reclaiming my Asian identity, I borrowed elements from Asian myths and traditional theatre for my plays and some of my poems. The play *1984 Here and Now* (1984) incorporated elements of the Wayang Kulit. And *The Big Purge* (1987) again had *Wayang Kulit* as a central motif. My writing has become increasingly eclectic, and this is best exemplified in the multi-faceted nature of *We Could **** You, Mr Birch*.

**MAQ:** *Please explain for our readers what Wayang Kulit is and how you incorporated elements of it in your plays?*

**KTC:** *Wayang Kulit* is shadow puppetry, part of the traditional cultural repository of Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia that have been influenced in the faraway past by Hindu culture. The stories of *Wayang*
Kulit are mainly derived from the great Hindu epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. They are performed by a *dalang* (puppeteer) who is so versatile that he plays all the characters. Imagine a Pixar animated film with only one person doing all the voices. A small group of musicians play the wind instrument *serunai* and percussion accompanies the *dalang* when he sings and also to punctuate the dramatic moments.

I incorporated these elements in *1984 Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* to depict the shadowy world of manipulative powers. In a sense, ruling politicians are like the *dalang* who is all-powerful because he dictates the story, the script, the performance. He manipulates. He theatricalises reality. What you see is what he conjures. The *Wayang Kulit* is for me, therefore, a powerful metaphor of power play.

MAQ: *Would you also tell us of your memories of the racial riots of May 13, 1969 — the incident that has come to shape Malaysia as a nation as it is now.*

KTC: I was fifteen and in Penang when the riots broke out. As the population was predominantly Chinese, Penangites did not feel the sting of the conflict as sharply as in the metropolitan centre of Kuala Lumpur. There were curfews. We felt the tension. News of Malays fighting Chinese and killing each other was shocking. We had lived together harmoniously, at least in Penang. There had been no sign of antagonism. Of course, the factor of ‘Otherness’ was there in our interactions but we were familiar with each other. We could throw racial slurs in jest at each other and be confident that neither party would take offence. We never felt, ‘Ugh, he’s Malay (or Chinese or Indian) so better not have anything to do with him’. We played together, we laughed together.

Families that had television sets probably felt the effects of the riots more. My family only had radio. We listened keenly to the news of developments. We heard lots of rumours, some probably unfounded, like Malay soldiers shooting innocent Chinese. Our home was away from the town centre so that kept us remote from outbursts of violence, but there was one harrowing experience for us. A few days after May 13, there was a constant banging on our back door, which was made of thin metal, for fifteen minutes or so. We were so terrified we didn’t know what to do except fear the worst. Fortunately, the banging stopped.

When Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman spoke to the nation on TV eventually, we were stunned because he was in tears. In those innocent years, we had respect for the nation’s leader. We realised the extent of the damage inflicted on the national psyche, but we had no inkling of the repercussions of the declaration of Emergency and the setting-up of the National Security Council headed by Tun Abdul Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister. We had no idea that the damage would radically change the
whole pattern of life in the country and negatively intensify the idea of ‘Otherness’ in all of us. To this day, relations between Malays and non-Malays have never been the same.

MAQ: Since you are both a creative writer and a journalist, would you consider these two interests conflicting or complementary?

KTC: Conflicting. My biggest mistake in life was going into journalism. The writing mode for a journalist is different — objective, factual, logical. I see that as being antithetical to creative writing. Besides, a journalist deals with words the whole day at work. After work, he may not have much energy left to deal with words as a creative writer. As a result, the creative writing is neglected. I have since been advising aspiring writers to banish all thought of becoming full-time journalists if they want to pursue creative writing.

MAQ: How would you consider the overall atmosphere in Malaysia vis-à-vis literature and writing?

KTC: It is not a conducive atmosphere. We do not have a big reading public. Our desire for intellectual engagement is low. V.S. Naipaul observed that when he was here and he’s right. Our schools condition our young minds into becoming submissive beings. They are not challenged to question. They are instead encouraged to be obedient and subservient to the powers that be. When they get to university, they are handicapped. They become lost when the academic spoon feeding stops. They have not been intellectually primed in their school years to deal with the approach and materials of higher education. Their main objective is reduced to merely passing examinations.

The Malaysian mentality is still feudal despite our avowed aspirations to be modern. There are too many contradictions in our edicts and the conduct of our public life, the codes we have to observe. These restrain us rather than propel us forward. In such a clime, literature struggles to find readership. Other factors work against it — the emphasis on Science and Technology, the rise of materialism that accompanies newly acquired wealth. Shopping is the number one pastime of Malaysians. Culture is not high on the priority list; the Budget allocations for culture are minuscule compared to those in other fields.

MAQ: What are some of the challenges you experienced personally, when you started out to write in the late ’70s, in the wake of the new language policy in the country?

KTC: I felt marginalised. I felt writing in English didn’t count for anything because there was a literature policy that recognised only literature written in Malay as National Literature. That written in other languages was considered Sectional or Communal Literature. This was demeaning. As demeaning as the National Culture Policy which stated that it would be
based on Nusantara culture (which embraces Indonesian culture, mind you!) and ‘suitable elements’ of immigrant culture. What did they mean by ‘suitable elements’? Who would decide what was ‘suitable’? Why go afield to Indonesia to incorporate its culture into ours when what is homegrown, albeit non-Malay, is subject to a test of suitability? I felt alienated as a member of the ‘immigrant’ race. I wasn’t made to feel that my writing counted for much. Such discouragement made me question what I was doing. I even felt guilty and inadequate writing especially in English, the colonial language, in a time of rising Malay neo-nationalism. I didn’t feel Malaysian writing in that language.

MAQ: One of the criticisms against Malaysian literature generally, and literature in English in particular, has been that it is too ethnocentric — often Malays writing about the Malays, Chinese about the Chinese, and so forth. Is that a fair criticism? However, having said that, I notice that you made an attempt to empathise with the Malay culture in We Could **** You Mr. Birch. How did you accomplish that? Did you engage in a concerted research on the indigenous Malay culture and history before you embarked on the play?

KTC: It is fair criticism, but as the Malay playwright Syed Alwi once said, a writer should write about his own race so that other races can understand it better. He does have a point. To me, it’s not important if a Malay writes only about the Malays or an Indian writes only about Indians. The work must arise naturally. It would be a mistake to resort to contrivance merely to include other races. We Could **** You, Mr Birch called for a multi-racial cast of characters. It was natural for that to be. I didn’t consciously set out to write a play that would have the various races featured in it. I can empathise with Malay culture because I have been in direct contact with it especially after I moved to K.L. in the late 1980s.

MAQ: Your plays are often political but you also address certain social issues in your writing. What in your opinion is the best way for Malaysia to forge a national identity that will be inclusive as well as horizontal, rather than exclusivist and vertical, in its formation?

KTC: National identity cannot be forged. It has to evolve organically. The best that can be done is for the authorities to not impose artificial constraints on its evolution. No National Culture Policy, no literature policy, no New Economic Policy. The Malays needed help to develop their economic status but this could have been done without resorting to exclusivist means that lower the national morale, demean meritocracy, and alienate races. There could have been a separate affirmative action programme that did not disrupt the flow of public life. We could have achieved much more as a nation today if not for exclusivist policies. Such achievements would have
made us prouder as a nation and enhanced our sense of national identity. This is a much better way than imposing labels and claiming superior privilege for one race over other races. The show of national unity in celebrations like those on Independence Day is contrived. The authorities have to strive to urge Malaysians to raise the Malaysian flag in their homes. But this is all display, trappings.

MAQ: Although I feel that a positive intervention from the government, emphasising equality of the races and universal social justice would help to heal the fractures caused by the British divide-and-rule policy during the colonial period. After all, the races were not allowed to intermingle freely by the British for many decades. Isn’t that the main source of misgivings between the races that we see now, and shouldn’t the government provide leadership in ejecting that seed of doubt from the minds of its people?

KTC: The main source of misgivings between the races was the policy formulated after 1969. That was when racial discrimination was institutionalised. It led to racial polarisation and distrust among the races. The British did adopt the policy of divide-and-rule but they did not prohibit free intermingling among the races. Which is why up until 1969, as I said above, the different races could interact harmoniously on a personal level without as much discrimination and suspicion as after 1969.

MAQ: What is your view of the future of Malaysian literature in English? How can it attain the potency and dynamism that we see, for example, in the literature of neighbouring Singapore?

KTC: Singapore respects literature in any language written by its citizens. By and large, Singapore upholds a meritocratic system. It nominates writers from across the language spectrum for its Cultural Medallion and for the SEA Write Award whereas here in Malaysia, you’d have to be writing in Malay to qualify to become a National Laureate or even be considered for the SEA Write Award, which is actually bestowed by an external body. In fact, year after year, the winning of the SEA Write Award by Malaysians has become a mockery. It’s a case of the writers in Malay waiting their turn to be called.

MAQ: But frankly, the younger writers have not accomplished much. There is plenty of talk about writing among these writers, but if you come to think of it, very little of actual writing has been realised by them. Why this disconcerting gap between their performance and promise?

KTC: I don’t think the younger writers in the English language have not been writing. They have. Some of them are quite prolific. And popular. In the area of drama, Huzir Sulaiman and Jit Murad have created an impression. In literature, I could think of Dina Zaman, Lisa Ho King Li, Jerome Kugan.
They may not be so well-known because Malaysian publishers are not keen to publish local writing unless it has the potential to sell. Someone like Amir Muhammad resorts to writing for media publications and making his own films.

MAQ: Would you like to say a few words about the theatre scene in Malaysia? How is the theatre in English faring vis-à-vis Malay theatre? What kind of support/incentive is there from the government for writers/actors/theatre in Malaysia?

KTC: Theatre is an activity that does not enjoy massive support in most parts of the world. It would seem that people involved in theatre are doomed to struggle, sometimes in vain. This is absolutely so in Malaysia. Theatre practitioners in English don’t dream of getting Government support. There have been instances of one or two Government officials (in the Culture Ministry) who showed empathy for Malaysian theatre in English and did what they could to ease its passage but these have been few and far between. By and large, if you want to put on a production, you have to go out and beg for money to finance your enterprise. This is not easy to come by. When economic times are hard, it gets harder. The Government did help when a few years ago, it moved to exempt theatre productions from having to pay the Entertainment Tax, which amounted to a hefty twenty percent on each ticket sold. This came about after years of struggle on the part of theatre activists to have the tax waived.

The Government makes it harder in the area of censorship. Scripts have to be vetted before they can be given a permit. Sometimes the vetting authorities require the excision of ‘sensitive’ or ‘unsuitable’ parts in the script. It is all part and parcel of the contradictions inherent in the Malaysian ethos I alluded to above. There are too many constraints. We are afraid of free expression. It may damage our thin skins.

MAQ: How has your writing evolved over the years? What are your future plans?

KTC: I wish I could write more. I honestly don’t think I have written enough. I blame that on my mistake of going into journalism and my own lack of self-discipline. Given my talent and output, I consider myself as nothing more than a minor writer in the larger canvas of Malaysian literature.

When you haven’t written enough, you can’t seriously talk about evolution in your writing. All I can say is that I am more considered now in my writing, less partisan. I’m no longer the angry young man of 1984 Here and Now. I lost the words for poetry not long after I became a full-time journalist and if that’s evolution, it gives evolution a bad name! I have a play brewing in my mind, a novel for which I have made copious notes but can’t find a direction for, some short stories that appear amateurish, and an increasing inclination to write TV scripts and screenplays. There are plans. If only I had the time and concentration!
Writing in his diary on 2 January 1949, Australian artist, Donald Friend (1915–1989), describes the events of the night before:

Last night there was an impromptu dance — I should say a drunken Breughel peasant romp — at the hall to celebrate the New Year. It was improvised suddenly on the spot by those who had not been invited, and were furious at being left out, to a dance in Sofala, to which the lucky ones went in a bus. Later they went round the village gate-stealing…. (Friend 633)

Friend writes from Hill End, an old gold-mining town about 300 kilometres west of Sydney and the dance took place in the 1890s Royal Hall. He first travelled there in August 1947 in the company of fellow artist, Russell Drysdale (1912–1981). The remnants of the gold rush — architectural grandeur, a scarred landscape, abandoned machinery — a small rural community, and cheap property prices provided the perfect location for Friend and his wartime friend and erstwhile lover, Donald Murray, to realise a dream of establishing themselves in the country.

A town character showed us round an old ruined village living in the memory of its former 50,000 inhabitants — and the fabulous tales of gold strikes. Now there are only a handful of rather sordid, jovial mad peasants who live by fossicking and rabbiting … six rooms for 5/- per week … the country, a garden, chickens and fruit trees and so on…. (538)

Friend found Hill End a captivating place to live and work for several years. Drysdale visited regularly and his Hill End works have come to occupy a central place in the canons of mid-twentieth century modernism in Australia, reinvigorating the nationalistic bush myth in the process (Haefliger 11; Hughes 67-68; Wilson 21–24). A flow of painters followed Friend and Drysdale through the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s: to visit Hill End was almost a rite of passage, and landscape the dominant theme.1 The artists who spent time there in the 1950s are often referred to as the Hill End Group, and the town an artists’ colony. The 1994 Art Gallery of New South Wales travelling exhibition, The Artists of Hill End, brought this artistic heritage to wide public attention, sealing its image within Australian modernism and refocusing artists’ attention on the site’s painting traditions.

In contrast to the focus on depicting a quintessential Australian experience which has dominated both the reception of modernist art from Hill End and the
Russell Drysdale, *The Cricketers*, 1948, oil on hardboard 76.2 x 101.5 cm.
work of the Hill End Group and its successors, it can be argued that contemporary
art has an important place in researching and interpreting the site of Hill End in
ways that are accessible, speculative and open-ended. This article explores how
the determinism of the twin mythologies — the artistic and the gold-rush heritages
— is questioned through the work of contemporary artists, revealing a multiplicity
of ways of engaging with Hill End’s historicity and its landscape. The introduction
of artists working in diverse media through a regional artists residency program
has added new perspectives to both the landscape painting traditions and the
‘glory day’ historic interpretations of the site. Characterised by an exploratory
approach which resists and reveals the fixity of cultural myths and master
narratives, the contemporary art movement questions the universalist assumptions
that dominated much modernist art.

Work by the Hill End Group has tended to be framed by critics and curators
as an expression of the essence of both Australian landscape and landscape
painting. Paintings by Drysdale such as *The Cricketers* (1948) are popularly
perceived as encapsulating ideals of national identity along similar lines to the
cultural concepts of bush realism that Henry Lawson’s writing established. The
stark, desolate backgrounds of Drysdale’s surrealist-influenced works are
contrasted with the endeavours of resilient individuals — the young cricketers
are testimony to the endurance of Australian sporting values against all odds.
The mythic value of *The Cricketers* is enhanced by its image of the abandoned
built environment: it simultaneously invokes Australian history in terms of the
gold boom and associates the urban with decadence and decay. If the concept
of national identity associated with the bush myth was notorious for its exclusion
of women, Indigenous people and urban/suburban life, the artistic traditions
that came to be identified with Hill End were equally exclusive: painting was the
medium that counted, landscape the subject of choice. A female artist such as
Jean Bellette (1909–1991), for example, although a member of the Hill End
Group, only achieved significant recognition through a retrospective exhibition
in 2004; her interest in classicism sits uneasily with the populist focus of
‘vernacular modernism’ (Wilson 21–24).

Friend, a diverse artist, drew and painted landscapes and portraits from life,
but was also attracted to representing Hill End through the mythologies about its
spectacular heyday. *St Patrick’s Night, Sally’s Flat* (1948) is an imaginary
depiction of a dance in a local hall during the area’s wild and prosperous gold
rush days. Friend frames both the past and the present as a ‘Breughel peasant
romp’ or ‘Bacchanal’, indebted in part, as Gavin Wilson has noted, to colonial
artist S.T. Gill’s (1818–1880) goldfield watercolours such as *Subscription Ball,
Ballarat* (1854) (Wilson 18–19) and also perhaps to descriptions such as those
by the popular novelist, Rolf Boldrewood, in *Robbery Under Arms* (1888).

It was a great sight to see at night, and people said like nothing else in the world just
then. Every one turned out for an hour or two at night, and then was the time to see
Donald Friend, *St Patrick’s Night, Sally’s Flat*, 1948, oil, pen and ink on hardboard, 45 x 66 cm.
the Turon in its glory. Big sunburnt men, with beards, and red silk sashes round their waists, with a sheath-knife and revolvers mostly stuck in them, and broad-leaved felt hats on. There were Californians, then foreigners of all sorts — Frenchmen, Italians, Germans, Spaniards, Greeks, Negroes, Indians, Chinamen. They were a droll, strange, fierce-looking crowd. There weren’t many women at first, but they came pretty thick after a bit. A couple of theatres were open, a circus, hotels with lots of plate-glass windows and splendid bars, alighted up, and the front of them anyhow, as handsome at first sight as Sydney or Melbourne…. It was like a fairy-story place, Jim said; he was pleased as a child with the glitter and show and strangeness of it all. (Boldrewood 225–26).

Nineteenth century representations such as Gill’s watercolours and Boldrewood’s description emphasise the ‘glory days’ of the gold rush, a celebratory image which has persisted in popular history and which Friend takes up with vigour in his diaries, drawings and paintings, including *Hillendiana* (1956), an exuberant series of illustrated gold rush tales.

Hill End’s population might have dwindled through the twentieth century, but its reputation has steadily grown, both for its colonial gold rush heritage values and its significant place in Australian art history. Arguably, the heritage fascination with the site stems from the spectacular nature of its rise and fall: from fairly quiet beginnings in the 1850s, the Tambaroora/Hill End goldfields boomed to a population of over 10,000 during 1871 and 1872 but by July 1873 many of the newly-founded speculative companies had collapsed and the thriving inland town began to empty out (Hodge 77–86). A commercial photographer, Merlin Beaufoy, and his assistant, Charles Bayliss, were commissioned by the successful mining entrepreneur Bernard Holtermann to undertake a precise photographic documentation of the town and its environs in 1872. In the 1950s, the discovery of the Holtermann Collection, together with the 1951 gold rush centenary celebrations and publication of *Hillendiana*, added greatly to the perception that the site’s past is readily accessible and to the focus on its ‘glory days’. As Alan Mayne notes, the ‘sense of a place frozen (or diminished) in time’ has pervaded both histories and artistic representations of Hill End (44).

As well, the documentary power of the Holtermann photographs, in addition to the romanticised narratives of the past, have fixed a narrative which not only excludes Wiradjuri ownership and presence at Hill End but also simplifies settlement history. To the three obsessions of popular history that Linda Young identifies — ‘ancestor veneration, pioneer fetishism, genteel fantasy’ (Young 178) — might be added a fourth for the art traditions that have become associated with Hill End: ‘trapped in landscape’. Representation of an authentic landscape is the paradigm that both artists and audiences seek and are caught by, yet the landscape is one that can never be authentic and is always shaped by the cultural and artistic heroics of past endeavours, whether painters or gold-seekers.

At Hill End, the complexities of sustaining a viable, remote community are intertwined with tourism demand for popular history and with the issues of
S.T. Gill, *Subscription Ball, Ballarat*, 1854, watercolour, 25.1 x 35.3 cm.
conservation, tenancy and provision of services that have accompanied the acquisition of much of the site by the NSW state government, through NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service. The site has been the subject of exhaustive documentation, both vernacular and official since the 1950s. Photographic and oral histories, memoirs, geological studies, conservation reports, management and master plans and a central place on school curricula have followed extensive acquisitions of land and buildings by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in 1967. The artists colony has left its legacy too: both Jean Bellette with her husband, art critic and painter Paul Haefliger (1914–1982) and Donald Murray bequeathed their Hill End cottages to NPWS. Bellette and Haefliger, who were part of Friend’s Sydney circle, bought their weekender in the early 1950s. They lived in Europe from 1957, keeping ‘Haefliger’s Cottage’, as it came to be known, and returning occasionally. Their bequest of the cottage to NPWS on condition it become an artists’ residency came to fruition in 1998 when Bathurst Regional Art Gallery launched the Hill End Artists in Residence program. In 2002 Friend’s former cottage, also owned by NPWS, was renovated, using drawings in his diary as the basis for the building work, and introduced into the residency program. The residency program has actively sought proposals from artists working in a broad range of media, providing opportunities for artists such as those whose work is discussed below — Margaret West, Fiona Hiscock, Cathie Laudenbach and Julie-Anne Long — to engage with the site. Each of these artists has produced a body of work which references diverse mythologies and histories of the site: West, the quest for gold; Hiscock, the daily life and environmental impact of colonial settlement; Laudenbach, the tensions between heritage conservation and interpretation and contemporary life; and Long, issues of identity as well as art history traditions. While painters have continued to work imaginatively and productively at Hill End, artists such as these working through the residency program have diversified not only the representations of Hill End that have emerged but also the ways in which the community has engaged with the artists. Not least, on a practical level there is a recognition that the ebb and flow of artists and their associates contributes to the economic viability of the village, while exhibitions, community workshops and events provide a distinctive creative program for the region. Artistically, these works can be characterised in relation to Paul Carter’s argument for the cultivation of ‘mythopoetic invention’ by artists which challenges and illuminates not only the fixity of history but also the repetitions of myth:

Their way of seeing and understanding is both pointed and playful. Because of this they are not constrained by the eyewitness historian’s unified perspective. Instead of shadowing his photographic series of unique events, they bring into focus the plural world of what happens. (173)

West was commissioned to make new work for Auriferous: The Gold Project, an exhibition devised at Bathurst in 2001 and funded by the Australia Council to
A Speculative Venture

Margaret West, notes: Hill End, 2001, gold, various dimensions
mark the sesquicentenary of the announcement of the discovery of gold at Ophir, near Hill End, in 1851 — the event that triggered the gold rushes in NSW and Victoria. The exhibition proposed to insert a place for contemporary art in the celebratory, re-enactment-driven civic commemorations of such anniversaries, allowing for critical commentary on gold rush history and the place of gold in the popular imagination. The concept of auriferous, a geological term that means bearing or yielding gold, was interpreted by West through an investigation of the flora that grows on the hard, rocky terrain of Hill End. In *notes: Hill End* (2001) four species of small yellow flowers, identified by the explorer and botanist Allan Cunningham well before the gold rush and found by West still growing on the site, are represented in finely worked gold against a digitised, magnified image of the Hill End soil. Illustrative of the persistence and regeneration of nature, these works also reference human endeavours — not only traditions of working gold for ornamental purposes but also the transformations that all gold-seekers chase: ‘they speak of discretion and innocence, of enterprise and ambition, and, above all, of endurance’. (West qtd in Judd and Lawson 20) Geological, ecological, social and economic concerns that resonate through the histories of gold-mining and the gold rushes are brought to the surface in a kind of visual shorthand through West’s *notes*.

Hiscock turned to domestic colonial life and the accompanying introduced flora in the body of ceramic works that she created following her residency at Haefliger’s Cottage in 2002. Using coiling technique, she hand-built a collection of vessels loosely based on early colonial domestic objects such as water pitchers, basins and mixing bowls. On site, Hiscock made watercolour studies of plant species which have been growing in gardens such as Haefliger’s since their introduction in the nineteenth century — figs, plums, quinces, briar roses, blackberries and pears: ‘when exploring the area I found many remnant gardens and orchards, and was told that early European settlers all tended to grow the same hardy and productive plant species’ (Hiscock). These images were drawn on the unfired surface with lead pencil; ceramic stains and coloured oxides were used to build up layers of soft colour wash; the work was then both bisque and glaze fired. The sense of careful crafting that emanates from the hand-building and decorating processes, and the use of botanical imagery, are a reminder of the work of settlement, especially women’s work. Oversized and extravagant, inexact in shape but robust, these works gesture towards both the practical and decorative functions of domestic ware. Hiscock’s body of work is informed by research into botanical drawing and colonial domestic objects, but it resists both ‘pioneer fetishism’ and ‘genteel fantasy’. The pots do not claim to be representative of a specific domestic life and in their relaxed formalism they draw on contemporary ceramic traditions as well as colonial. Hiscock’s works play on the heritage obsession with material culture providing a looser bridge to the past than the precise placement of objects in a reconstructed environment that house museums favour in presenting colonial domestic life.
Fiona Hiscock, *Hill End double handled fig pitcher*, 2003, high-fired earthenware, hand-painted and glazed, 47 x 36 x 26 cm.
Amanda Lawson

Catherine Laudenbach, Hall 1, 2001, Type C print, 1000 x 800 mm.
Like Friend’s fantastic imaginings, which discern and suggest the raucous presence of the past in the present, Laudenbach’s photographs centre on sites of human activity. In her Hill End body of work, completed during a 2001 residency and in subsequent visits to the town, Laudenbach has photographed various interiors. These include Bedroom (2001), Craigmoor (2001) — a bedroom in an intact house museum — and Hall 1 and 3 (2005). The power of Laudenbach’s photographs lies in their suggestiveness: there are no people in any of the images, yet the presence of bodies and personas, of the used lives of these interiors, is very strong. Laudenbach’s photographs appear direct and documentary in their presentation, however the selection of site and what is contained within the frame of the photograph is critical to reading these works. In Hall 1, the viewer is positioned at the entry to the Royal Hall. Contemporary use is evident alongside the visible heritage structures of the hall: framed historic photographs, lighting and a large LCD screen in front of a painted backdrop of a gold rush scene on the stage. Laudenbach’s work is often interpreted through the ghostly presences that its absences suggest or propose. Through the image’s gesture towards continuity of usage, as well as its sense of a stage set waiting for action, it is easy to populate the hall with imaginary crowds from the 1870s through to the 1940s and on to 2005. However, where Friend charts the fall from a ‘fabulous’ past to the ‘sordid, jovial mad peasants’ of the 1950s, Laudenbach declines to fix the human presence as well as refute the Holtermann claim to comprehensive documentary in a photograph which exposes the practices and mediations of representation: the ‘frozen’ time of historical photographs on the wall of a carefully conserved building; the gold-rush narrative and realist theatre implicit in the stage set; the unknown projection planned for the screen; and an emphasis on the viewer to make meaning of the image.

On 4 December 2004 the Royal Hall was full again. Locals and Sydneysiders were there for some fun; a ‘romp’ of a night by all accounts, watching and eventually participating in The Nun’s Picnic, a performance directed and choreographed by Julie-Anne Long (b. 1961). Long collaborated with film-maker Samuel James, photographer Heidrun Lohr and others on the performance and an installation conceived during Long’s 2003 residency and informed by Jeffrey Smart’s (b. 1921) iconic Hill End painting, The Picnic (Nun’s Picnic) (1957). Long disrupts the more usual curiosity about Smart’s painting (Did he actually see the nuns having a picnic? Would nuns in that kind of habit have been at Hill End? Is this a surrealist-influenced image?) with a performance approach:

I was attracted to the sense of displacement of the human figures in this painting. I asked myself what is the nun’s relationship to this landscape? What could be my relationship to this landscape? I was interested in my body as an abstract component of the composition of this performed landscape. (Long)

Long and Lohr worked together on a series of photographs of the nuns wandering through Hill End, inspired in part by the mid-nineteenth century Parisian
partnership of Virginia Oldoini, Countess de Castiglione, and photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson, that produced hundreds of images of the Countess in various costumes, often as characters from opera, theatre or history. At Hill End the Nun’s Project Team explored the new persona that costuming creates:

Wearing the nun’s habit around the village and into the bush became very important for the character that emerged. By displacing myself and my collaborators, I was hoping to inspire a different version of ourselves as we landed in this foreign landscape. (Long online)

The goldfields provided plenty of chances for disguise and reinvention, as the bushrangers in Robbery Under Arms recognise: ‘We let our hair grow long, and made friends with some Americans, so we began to talk a little like them, just for fun, and most people took us for Yankees. We didn’t mind that’ (Boldrewood 226). The Nun’s Picnic not only understands identity as performative, but by the humour and disjunction of using not only nuns, but nuns from a ‘great’ Australian painting, as its characters it also undoes some of the essentialist claims that have been made for the modernist paintings of the Hill End Group and their relationship to Australian identity. Although Friend may have ‘patronised, caricatured, and fundamentally misunderstood’ the locals (Mayne 124), he also established strong friendships in a community which appreciated his artistic achievements. The Nun’s Project Team’s performance at the Royal Hall created a local event which brought the artist/performers and their urban audience together with the local community. In doing so, The Nun’s Picnic dismantles some of the grand claims about art history and national identity that have emerged around Hill End and returns to the sense of fun that Friend found there. The performance suggests that the site is an active and flexible place, a landscape to walk through, a hall to party in, much more than a remnant of or monument to former times.

At Hill End histories of colonisation, the gold-rushes and Australian art collide to form powerful myths about national identity and heritage. Artists who work actively with the myths that surround the site not only engage with critical thinking about those myths but also suggest new dimensions for conceptualising the place and its histories. The works created by each of these artists – Long and the Nun’s Project Team, Laudenbach, Hiscock and West – through their explorations of Hill End expose some of the narratives of history and art history that have tended to fix the place in the cultural imaginary. They enable audiences to escape the trap of landscape and to wander a little more freely in the past and present.

NOTES

1 Artists working at Hill End have included Margaret Olley, David Strachan, Jeffrey Smart, John Olsen, John Firth Smith and Brett Whiteley; the National Art School had a tradition of student excursions to the Hill End and Sofala ‘painting grounds’.

3 Gavin Wilson, curator of *The Artists of Hill End* exhibition, initiated a one-off series of residencies, managed by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery with support from Evans Shire Council and NPWS, in the cottage in 1994 as part of the lead-up to the exhibition. This led to works by Wendy Sharpe, Peter Wright, Tom Spence and others being exhibited alongside the main body of older Hill End works.

4 The refurbishment of Murray’s Cottage and the residency program have both received support from the NSW Ministry for the Arts.

5 The Nun’s Project Team also included performers/collaborators Narelle Benjamin, Kathy Cogill, Martin del Amo, Rakini Devi, Bernadette Walong, Michael Whaites; music advisor Drew Crawford; painter Lucy Culliton.

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