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KUNAPIPI

Udstilling af den australske maler
Sidney Nolan
KUNAPIPI

VOLUME XVII NUMBER 3
1995
Kunapipi is a tri-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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*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal Myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
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KEN SARO-WIWA: A PERSONAL OBITUARY

Dear Anna ... You must of course have heard of the death of Ken. It was too terrible. While praying for him and for Nigeria I became physically sick, nauseous with a fever until release came. It was comforting to know that his last words were, 'Lord take my soul'. Apparently they tried to hang him three times before succeeding. In some countries this is taken as a sign from God a higher authority, to discontinue. Enough said. But it is hard to deal with – someone you’ve known, laughed with, who has visited your house. May his soul and all the others who died with him rest in perfect peace.

Karen King-Aribisala

I too knew Ken Saro-Wiwa as a personal friend and we had arranged to co-publish books so that more of what was written about Africans should reach the Africans it was meant to meet. So my sentiments are the same as Karen’s: ‘May his soul and all the others who died with him rest in perfect peace’.

Anna Rutherford
Mythmg Out?

I would like to comment on the confident assertion by the professor from New Delhi at this conference yesterday that Australian literary culture was moribund because we lacked myths.

That news will come as a surprise to most Australian writers. In our heads – and maybe some other anatomical parts as well – there are always two Australian myths fighting for precedence: the Myth of Landscape and the Myth of Character. For me the Myth of Landscape also divides into two opposing myths: the Bush and the Beach (or, as I think of it, the Shark versus the Dingo). The Myth of Character also separates into Fact and Gossip, but then as Stanislaw Lee says, myth is only gossip grown old anyway.

For some reason Australians seem to need the past, preferably the 19th century, to confirm for us who we are, and why. It’s ironic that the professor from New Delhi should stress our myth deprivation at a time when many of us are getting a little wary of the good old past being trotted out for one more waltz.

That line of thought aside, and keeping to the post-colonial context of this conference, may I point out to the professor from New Delhi the short existence and long cultural influence of a notorious social rebel named Ned Kelly, perhaps the one person who straddles the Australian myths of Landscape and Character.

This is a man whose name, even 115 years after his death, is still used to sell everything from bread to car mufflers to men’s fashionwear; a former highwayman (and I love the irony of this) whose name proudly flogs used cars along Sydney’s Parramatta Road.

May I mention my own interest in the Kelly myth? Several years ago, after reading some Jung, I began wondering about the collective unconscious of my country.

As Jungian psychology tells us, the collective unconscious is that part of the unconscious mind incorporating patterns of common memories, instincts and experiences. These patterns are inherited, may be arranged into archetypes, and are observable through their effects on our dreams and behaviour.

I wondered who, if anyone, symbolised Australia’s collective unconscious, and immediately thought of Kelly, our national hero and devil incarnate. Not only did Kelly spring instantly to mind, I could think of no other possibility. And, interestingly, like all proper myths and alone of all Australians, he had an obverse – Aaron Sherritt, his
former friend who would become his nemesis and Judas figure, his Other, the moon to his sun.

I then wondered whether I could take the country's most mythologised character and create an imaginary life for him. The Kelly story had intrigued me as a boy. I'd seen his helmet, or one of the several helmets alleged to be his, among the fascinating, grisly relics - the severed arm from the Shark Arm Case, the Pyjama Girl's silk pyjamas, old murder weapons - in the police tent at the Royal Show.

The Ned Kelly as presented by the police, and accepted by the public, was three grim icons: an iron helmet, a bushy beard, a death mask. The only photograph of him unmasked or alive showed a glowering middle-aged man. It surprised me to learn later that he was only 23 and 24 when he was at large as an outlaw, and that he was dead by 25. His brother Dan and Steve Hart were teenagers; Joe Byrne was barely 21. That was not the impression put out by the authorities.

But write about him? Wasn't the myth overworked already? Hadn't Kelly, in more ways than one, been done to death.

Back in 1986 I had written a novel of ideas and politics called *Fortune* about a modern explorer who finds a sunken treasure ship off the West Australian coast and becomes, briefly, the darling of the media and a folk hero, but who then falls from grace and, after official persecution and harassment, eventually becomes a victim and is hanged.

I think that what I wrote then, just as I had created variations of other Australian myths in several other books and stories, was really glancing off our central myth, the Kelly story. So, early in 1991, I decided to have a look at it.

The Kelly file in the Mitchell Library is thick, of course. Probably the biggest file of any Australian. What surprised me was not the quantity of material but the lack of the quality. The myth had attracted film makers since 1907, and Sidney Nolan, and Arthur Boyd in his sculptor mode. There had been writers by the score, but very few good ones. The only works by serious writers to hint at an inner man were a play, *Ned Kelly*, by Douglas Stewart, and a lively biography, *Australian Son*, by the journalist Max Brown, both written in the 1940s.

The field had been left almost entirely to historians and gung-ho, hobby biographers. None of the accounts of his life had managed to extricate him from the melodramatic 19th century illustrations of Stringybark Creek and Glenrowan. Perhaps it was a measure of the myth's strength that it had survived with so few imaginative interpreters. Even so, I wasn't convinced.

While I was waiting for the librarians to bring up yet more Kellyana from the bowels of the NSW Library, I idly plucked from the tens of thousands of books in the general shelves one particular book entitled *J.W. Lindt, Master Photographer*. It was an absolutely random choice, I'd never heard of Lindt and had no reason, other than boredom, to select it. I opened it, and it actually did that thing which books do in bad novels - it fell open at a particular page. Suddenly in front of me
was this powerful and moving photograph entitled *Joe Byrne’s Body on Display at Benalla*.

The caption read: ‘John William Lindt, the outstanding photographer of the late 19th century, in 1880 travelled on the police train to Glenrowan with a group of reporters, artists and photographers to witness the anticipated capture of Ned Kelly and his gang. By the time the train arrived the outlaw had already escaped from Jones’s Hotel, which had been set on fire to force him and his accomplices out. Joe Byrne had been killed in the seige and Steve Hart and Dan Kelly were burned beyond recognition in the fire.’

‘The photograph is one of Lindt’s most important images and one of the first real Press photographs. He was able to stand back from the macabre spectacle and watch the other photographers’ laborious preparations. At the critical moment Lindt recorded the entire scene.’

What the other Press photographers had done was to persuade the police to hoist Joe Byrne’s body up and down on a pulley in a crude imitation of life.

In the left foreground of Lindt’s photograph is a portly, city-looking gent with a sketch pad under his arm. He is turning away from Bryne’s body, grinning and chatting to another onlooker. The portly gent was the artist Julian Ashton, and Lindt’s print is reproduced from his autobiography *Now Came Still Evening On*.

The strong impression I got is that Ashton, the middle-class painter, was saying: *There is no art in this place, among dead criminals simulating life, and country coppers and vulgar pressmen mocking up a picture. I am of course above such things.* And that the photo-grapher, Lindt, had captured these bourgeois artistic pretensions too.

It seemed to me there were more layers to this subject than first apparent. I left the remaining Kelly files unread, and went home and began to write the novel.

The form it took owed something to a new interest, writing drama. I came to the novel literally the day after completing a play, and I saw the book in terms of a rounded drama. I decided to set the novel in the last 36 hours of the gang’s freedom. The Glenrowan Inn would be the setting, and the anticipated arrival of the special police train after the killing of Aaron Sherritt would provide the suspense. Everything hinged on the outcome of this confrontation.

Meanwhile, Freud, as well as Jung, would have been happy with the *dramatis personae*. A brave, pragmatic male figure at the core, and one with something of an Oedipal fixation and a thwarted love of his father. A friend who neatly becomes the hero’s Shadow, and turns Judas to boot. All overlaid with a racial and political grudge going back centuries, which is brought to a head by the removal, by Centralised Power, of the hero’s mother. Ritualised murder follows. This was the stuff of Greek tragedy. Mythology, you could say ...

If a major influence was the Lindt photograph, I had a different sort of reaction to the Nolan images. Robert Melville, in his book on Nolan’s
Kelly paintings, mentions a quotation from Maxim Gorky which he says helps us to see the significance of Kelly to Nolan.

'Side by side with the unhappy figure of Faust,' Gorky wrote, 'stands another character also known to every nation. In Italy he is Pulcinello, in England Punch, in Russia Petrushka. He is the invincible hero of the puppet show. He defeats everyone – the police, clergy, even death and the devil – while he himself remains immortal. In this crude and naive image the working people incarnated their own selves and their firm belief that in the long run it will be they who defeat and overcome everything and everybody.'

This is a fair interpretation of Nolan’s interpretation, at least in his first Kelly series, painted in 1946-47, where Kelly is the clown, the knockabout hero of the puppet show – Australia’s Petrushka.

Vital to this interpretation was the icon of the helmet, both funny and sinister, which Nolan so successfully embedded in our consciousness that artists shied away from any other Kelly image, and from the myth itself, thereafter.

For some reason it was important for me to remove the helmet and bring Kelly out into the sunlight. To do this I had to try and reinvent the myth. At no stage, however, was I in any doubt that the myth existed, or that it was the strongest one we possessed.
ANNE COLLETT

Body-Landguage: Linguistic inhabitation of land in the poetry of Judith Wright and Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal

This paper was performed at a European Australian Studies Conference in Copenhagen (October 1995) and included the reading of a number of poems (in entirety) that cannot be given word-space here, and quite obviously cannot in print, carry the qualities of that performance, but the ‘word of warning’ issued at the conference stands as a political statement as much now as then. That warning went/goes like this:

I have always considered poetry to be a performing art – that so much more is realized when printed word is voiced with living intent and significance. So, whenever given the opportunity to speak to a ‘real’ audience, I always take that opportunity to perform the poems I discuss.

It might be added that the reception given the performance was warm, and that the performance of work discussed invariably brings the audience on-side – tuning their collective ‘ear of mind’ not only to what you have to say about the work, but also to the voice and the sentiment of the author you would speak about/with/to. Authors are people. This may seem a rather obtuse thing to say, but it is something all too often forgotten by critics and audience alike. Relative to this comment and additional to my warning was/is a prefacial note that is particular to the written tradition of academic criticism, and it is this:

I have chosen to use the poets’ first names as opposed to surnames as a double name, after the first instance of naming, is cumbersome and seems to stilt the flow of prose, and it has always struck me as very ‘English public school’ and therefore both anti-woman and anti-democratic to use a surname only, as is the usual practice in academic writing. Names do matter, they sign a relationship and a stance towards that which is named (a point with which I am sure Oodgeroo – formerly Kath Walker – would be in agreement). After specific identity has been established in the initial use of a full name, why not refer to that person thereon/in by first name – personal name? It is all too easy to forget when reading printed word that people made this Word, in some cases people even died for this Word – Word is people power.

So to the paper:
Judith Wright was the poet of my childhood, whom I read for the affirmative joy of a poetry that spoke my land - the 'lean, clean hungry country' that was my 'blood's country' too.¹ What I found striking on returning to her writing after some twenty-five years, was the degree to which land was word-sculpted into body; and it is this particular aspect of her word-art that I would like to examine in this paper, in contrast to the almost total absence of what I have termed 'body-landguage' in the poetry of her 'other' half, her 'shadow-sister', Oodgeroo Noonuccal. In the poem 'Two Dreamtimes' (Alive, 1971)² Judith writes to Oodgeroo:

My shadow-sister, I sing to you
from my place with my righteous kin,
to where you stand with the Koori dead,
'Trust none - not even poets'.

The knife's between us. I turn it round,
the handle to your side,
the weapon made from your country's bones.
I have no right to take it.

But both of us dies as our dreamtime dies.

Looking back over her work in interview with Jim Davidson in 1982, Judith Wright remarked upon a growing consciousness that even in her first book, she had been writing, and was still writing on 'the theme of white occupation'.³ 'Nigger's Leap, New England' (Moving Image, 1946) is exemplar of this recurrent theme in her oeuvre that now spans some 50 years: 'The eastward spurs tip backward from the sun/.../Night floods us suddenly as history/that has sunk many islands in its good time.'(pp. 15-16)(The poem was here read in full).

In light of relatively recent post-colonial theory and the articulation of the colonizer's discourse of 'other', one line from 'Nigger's Leap' leaps from the page, in a way it would never have done twenty years ago, 'And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.' They that were 'ourselves writ strange' are the 'other' Australians, our (I speak here as a white Australian of settler stock) 'other' selves that Judith would give form to. These are the 'shadow' people of her poetry. Shadow is the black of white, the negative of positive, the distortion of proportion, the ephemeral of substance. In terms of Judith's view of Australian history, this shadow of existence, this 'dreamtime' is all that we have left of an indigenous culture that a few generations of men, her generations of men, have all but obliterated. In Platonic terms, the shadow on the cave wall is the only evidence we have of our reality - our belonging.

In 'Nigger's Leap, New England', the cliff over which the aboriginal peoples were hunted to their death is a 'spine of range' whose end point is a 'lipped' 'granite head'. It is as though the land itself screamed with their screams, and moulded itself to their body anguish.

Now cooled by time, the warm living flesh is become sculpted granite, whose silent lip recalls the horror of those silenced voices. The shadow
people are given substance, flesh become earth, bone become rock, in the word sculpture of Judith's poetry.

With some hesitation because I am still a little lost in a complexity that is difficult to de-code, I would suggest that Judith's poetry attempts to give substance to shadow, to quicken bone with the blood of word, not only that the submerged voices and stopped mouths of the indigenous peoples might tell the 'other' side of the story of terra nullius, but also that she herself might acquire an indigeneity - a word/land bondage - that would enable her to speak her belonging without guilt, without a sense of alienation.

On returning to New England in the late 1930s after an absence of some years, Judith observed, 'I knew then how closely connected I was to that landscape. I began to write again and the poems came closer to what I'd hoped for.' These were the poems for which she is still best known, poems like 'South of My Days', 'Bullocky' and 'Nigger's Leap, New England'; but they were poems that did not write meaning or sing belonging to the extent that she had hoped, and in the 1960s Judith was to remark:

It will take four or five hundred years for us to become indigenes, and to write poetry, unless you are an indigene, is very difficult. I don't know how anybody does it.

The landscape lost its character. The aborigines lived with the landscape and every bit of it had meaning for them. We couldn't accept any of their meanings. This is what the Jindyworobaks were trying to get at but they were doing it the wrong way. They were trying to deny their own meaning and to get back to the aborigines' meaning, but you can't do this. You've got to live your own meaning into it. You have to be yourself and at the same time come to terms with something that you have robbed of its original meaning. This is an extremely difficult thing to do."

Language, indigene, land and meaning are here linked in what amounts to a definition of poetry as linguistic inhabitation.

When Elleke Boehmer writes of Judith's work as a representation of the land as 'humanly viable, its geography made complex by historical and spiritual associations', of 'the work of convicts, the dancing of Aborigines, the solitary dreams of bullock drivers,' as 'enriching Wright's Australian earth', her reading of Judith's poetic landscape is too skating. In a poem like 'Nigger's Leap, New England', Judith does much more than 'read into dust and rocks the silenced history of Aborigines pursued to death by whites'. She writes the anguish of colonizer narrative into the land - she wordsculpts body into land. She is not merely highlighting a writing that has been erased by the colonists' narrative, but is creating a new medium - a new mode of expression - a new art of telling, not necessarily to make reparation for the past, but to create a belonging built on the acknowledgement of aboriginal inheritance and a land/body indivisibility that might also be ours - given time, maybe even given a poetry that creates links between land/body and word. It is an art that is painful in its making.
In the poem 'At Cooloola' (*The Two Fires*, 1955) she writes:

The blue crane fishing in Cooloola’s twilight
has fished there longer than our centuries.
He is certain heir of lake and evening,
and he will wear their colour till he dies,

but I’m a stranger, come of a conquering people.
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,
and made uneasy, for an old murder’s sake. (p. 140)

Most commentary on Judith’s poetry misses much of the poignancy, the hurt, the anguish of her historicizing, humanizing, the land – she is so acutely aware that although she was born of this land, she is not of this land because she has no claim to indigeneity. Although Les Murray writes, ‘If...you sing the country, celebrate the country, then it’s your country. These are the titles of ownership.’ (1992), and Judith herself declared that ‘Poetry ought not to be thought of as a discipline, but as a kind of praise’7, this singing, this celebration, is not enough. Her poetry sculpts the land into human form – word shapes land, shapes our perceptions of land, ascribes human meaning to rock and hill and tree and river. This is a poetry not of landscape but of land sculpt.

These hills my father’s father stripped,
and beggars to the winter wind
they crouch like shoulders naked and whipped -
humble, abandoned, out of mind.

Of their scant creeks I drank once
and ate sour cherries from old trees
found in their gullies fruiting by chance.
Neither fruit nor water gave my mind ease.

I dream of hills bandaged in snow,
their eyelids clenched to keep out fear.
When the last leaf and bird go
let my thoughts stand like trees here.
‘Eroded Hills’(*The Gateway*, 1953), (p. 83)

Although I remarked in a previous paper on Judith Wright that ‘The land/word scape that informs her work is woman,’8 I would now ask what woman? I do not think it is the pioneer white woman, as perhaps represented by her grandmother, May, but it would seem more and more that it is black woman – that shadow woman of herself – that other half, the indigene with whom she desires union. The land that is owned, bartered, stripped, whipped and blinded, is woman – her bony slopes wincing under the winter (‘South of My Days’, p. 20), her eyes clenched to keep out fear, her delicate dry breasts now drooping over ribs of bone (‘Eroded Hills’, p. 83). She is the ancient earth that roots the tree, that bears and buries the fruit, that bears and buries the fruit –
the overarching night sky that has known a million years: ‘On her dark breasts we spring like points of light/and set her language on the map of night.’ (‘Naming the Stars’ (Five Senses, 1963), p. 206)

When asked for an explanation of her spoken desire to ‘speak some quite new dialect’ (in the poem ‘For MR’) Judith said,

I feel very deeply this gulf between us and the Aborigines: the Aborigines are the land, we merely think we own it. The kind of dialect that I was trying to indicate there, would be one which at least came closer to Aboriginal ways of thinking and feeling and looking, because that does seem to me to be a very important thing we’ve got to do, somehow. That’s what I mean when I say they are closer to their reality than we can imagine, because we’ve actually got no reality.9

Remember my opening remarks about Plato and the shadows on the wall? It would appear that colonizer-belonging can only be built on the word union of us and other – ourselves ‘writ strange’ in body-language. As I said before, what is often missing from many readings of Judith Wright’s work is a sense of the intensity, the anguish of the poetry that arises from the colonist’s sense of unbelonging, and unrightful habitation. This is not only a question of tone or voice, but something apparent in the very structure of the poetry in which imagistic word-sculpture attempts to create bridges – body-bridges. However, the language link that Judith builds between us and them is not in fact dialogic but imagistic, and therefore static.

Although Oodgeroo’s work bridges indigenous and colonist claims to habitation, there is no sense in which land/body/word ‘possession’, or belonging, is in any doubt, because, as Judith says, the land is hers (that is, Oodgeroo’s). Therefore what is particularly striking in a comparison of the two poetic oeuvres is the almost total absence of land/body imagistic merging in Oodgeroo’s word form. She declares in ‘We Are Going’:

We are the wonder tales of Dream Time,
   the tribal legends told.
We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games,
   the wandering camp fires.
We are the lightning-bolt over Gaphembah Hill
   Quick and terrible.
And the Thunder after him, that loud fellow.
We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.
We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.
We are nature and the past, all the old ways
   Gone now and scattered.
The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone.
And we are going. (p. 74, emphasis mine)

‘We are going’ is a happening – a form of present continuous verb, that
Anne Collett

does not only indicate the state of imminent danger of extinction of the aboriginal peoples, but also carries a challenge (when we go, you go to, for we are the land that you would possess and without the land you are nothing) and a sense of forward momentum – we are going somewhere ... One of the things that came to my attention when reading the work of the two poets is the degree to which Judith’s grammar resolved itself in a past tense and Oodgeroo’s in a present tense. After six generations of aboriginal ‘sit-down’ that amounts to a heavy loss of productivity and creativity\(^1\), Oodgeroo, as word-bearer/bringer for her people cannot afford a loss of momentum. It is publish or perish – sing or die. Judith’s poetry, on the other hand, is ‘silted’, still frozen in a complexity of imagery that also bears a heavy load – but it is a burden of the past, not of the future. In the poem ‘At Cooloola’ (p. 141) she writes of:

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloola
knew that no land is lost or won by wars,
for earth is spirit: the invader’s feet will tangle
in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.
...

And walking on clean sand among the prints
of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear
thrust from the water; and, like my grandfather,
must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.

The word/image ‘silted’ occurs often throughout her work\(^2\), and for me it signifies a combination of richness and yet of backing-up, a loss of forward momentum, an involution, perhaps even a collapsing into self. In ‘Old House’ (The Gateway, 1953) Judith images her great-great-great grandfather moving through ‘that mindless country’ – a country in which he is lost without signs of belonging – ‘the nameless trees’; but the aboriginal people sing him into the country:

In the camp by the river they made up songs about him,
songs about the waggons, songs about the cattle,
songs about the horses and the children and the woman.
These were a dream, something strayed out of a dream. (p. 83)

They sing him into their dreamtime – their belonging, but for Judith and for her great-great-great grandfather, the doing and the singing is an unreality – a dream that is incomprehensible and impossible to possess: for Judith it represents ‘the past’ whose distance she would bridge with her poetry but the fragments will not make song, they remain silted:

But the sad river, the silted river,
under its dark banks the river flows on,
the wind still blows and the river still flows.
And the great broken tree, the dying pepperina,
clutches in its hands the fragments of song.
The poem ends without a stop\(^{13}\) – there is hope – but is it enough? The clutching hands of the dying tree image a degree of desperation.

Oodgeroo cannot afford this collapse into self, this silting of past. She is a poet on display, poet of her vanquished people who refuse to go silently. This role of poet in the public arena is something Judith experiments with but does not stay with, perhaps because this oratorical form cannot carry the complexity of her inheritance. Where Oodgeroo can be forthright and outward looking, Judith is always forced back into herself – questioning her responsibility, her liability, her complicity in a night that ‘floods us suddenly as history’.

Their differing poetic structures are not then just a matter of given word traditions, that of the written and the oral, or Western European and Australian aboriginal, in fact, both Judith Wright and Oodgeroo draw to some degree on an oral inheritance of ballad derived from the Scots. In a sense they both sing the land into history, but where Judith must create, must wordsculpt that belonging, Oodgeroo can rely on a word talisman that represents the narrative memories of people in place and time – the ‘songlines’ of a mythical, ancestral, hereditary land/body unity of thousands of years that she ably contemporizes, as in ‘Ballad of the Totems’, (p. 24). (This ballad was read in entirety) A ballad of totem does not sing of past totemic relationships, but of on-going relationships, undiminished by a Western European sense of time:

My father was Noonuccal man and kept old tribal way,
His totem was the Carpet Snake, whom none must ever slay;
But mother was of Peewee clan, and loudly she expressed
The daring view that carpet snakes were nothing but a pest.

‘Mother’ does not express this daring view of carpet snakes because she is a modern woman who rejects ‘old tribal way’ but because she is of the Peewee clan and holds the timeless position held by those of the Peewee clan that carpet snakes are nothing but a pest. The story is timelessly regenerative; and thus, the ‘old tribal way’ is not actually the ‘old’ way, but rather, it is ‘the way’.

Oodgeroo’s people are not bone, are not rock, are not history in a past tense – they are living present green-growing, lightning-making, thunder-breaking, shadow-creeping, daybreak-paling, tribal legends not just ‘told’ but telling ... for Oodgeroo is telling – she is paperbark – she is the song. In interview in 1988 Oodgeroo relates how Paster Don Brady “renamed” her:

And he said, Kathy, if we had our own way of life, if we could decide our own destiny, the tribal elders would have called you Oodgeroo, because you couldn’t do it without your sister, the paperbark tree. You need the paperbark. Which was quite logical. And so when I went home I wrote the story of Oodgeroo who had lost her tribes and was trying to get back to them, and it’s only lately that the people who’ve read the story have realized that I was writing about myself.\(^{4}\)
In her own retelling of the story/legend/myth of the paperbark-tree Oodgeroo re-situates herself within the continuum of dreamtime – singing/writing herself into story that does not remain fixed in the past but moves with that past into present and future. She begins her retelling of the paperbark story with reference to new and old dreamtimes:

In the new Dreamtime there lived a woman, an Aborigine, who longed for her lost tribe, and for the stories that had belonged to her people; for she could remember only the happenings of her own Dreamtime. But the old Dreamtime had stolen the stories and hidden them. The woman knew that she must search for the old stories – and through them she might find her tribe again.15

Working from a Western European perspective of ‘new and old’, Oodgeroo sings/writes herself into dreamtime continuum: ‘Time had lost his power over her because Biambi has made it so.’ (p. 32) Time is no longer perceived as though through the wrong end of a telescope. Temporality cannot be diminished or distanced. Kath Walker’s renaming of herself, Oodgeroo, through story, signifies a possession of self and community in land:

And when next the paperbark-trees filled the air with the scent of the sweet, honey-smelling flowers, they took her into their tribe as one of their own, so that she would never again be without the paperbark she needed for her work. They called her Oodgeroo. (p. 32)

When Oodgeroo says, ‘Let no one say the past is dead./The past is all about us and within’ (‘The Past’, p. 94), she is not trapped within or by tribal memories but sings them into living continuous day; for ‘a thousand thousand camp fires in the forest’ and a thousand thousand stories are in the blood and will be ‘writ strange’, not on bone but in the song – in living word – on paperbark. When, in the last line of ‘Eroded Hills’ Judith expresses the wish that her thoughts might ‘stand like trees’, there is a staticity – a desire for replacement rather than a desire for word that might generate new tree, new leaf and bird. Bird, leaf and tree, like the aboriginal people in Judith’s poetry have turned to stone, but the aboriginal people in Oodgeroo’s word are not stone, are not past. This is the difference between regenerative word as opposed to the word of signification – word of headstone (gravestone) and epitaph. For Oodgeroo word and body are blossoming tree – the living breath – for which there is no need to interpose the mediation of metaphor – the bridge of body-landguage.

In conclusion I would like to address the questions raised in my initial proposal for this paper – it is always interesting to read what one’s intentions were after having written the paper. Although I intimated in the proposal that Judith Wright and Oodgeroo draw on two very different poetic traditions – one oral and the other written, I am not sure that this is quite what I want to say, or what I have said.

Aboriginal ‘writing’ has no inimical or inherent written tradition (by
'written' tradition I mean a 'word-writing' tradition rather than a scribal tradition of sign and symbol that does not include word); and I do not believe a mere transcription of orature is sufficient to describe the word-writing process. Quite what that involves would take another paper. However, I would say that the writing of the indigenous Australian peoples cannot and should not be anthropologized or colonized by a terminology that would see it as a mere re-writing of orality or a contemporary translation of a mythical dreamtime. Dreamtime is not a past time but a 'present continuous', as Oodgeroo makes plain. What is apparent is that poetic structure – the make-up and mode of the word-vehicle – is largely determined by the writers' position within 'history' and the audience to whom he/she would speak. For Judith, 'blood's red thread still binds her fast in history'. For Oodgeroo, 'history' must be future – weaving stories into current corroboree. The 'two dreamtimes' as Judith calls them are different from each other but dependent upon each other for their survival. Publishers might shake their heads at poets ('Two Dreamtimes'), but song is our only means of pulling the fragments together into a continuum of human/land belonging.

NOTES

1. From 'South of My Days' (The Moving Image, 1946), p.20. This and all subsequent quotation from Judith Wright's poems will be from Collected Poems: 1942-1970 (North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1971/75) unless noted otherwise. Although I have indicated the original volume of publication, the page numbering refers to the Collected Poems.


3. Interview with Jim Davidson, 'Judith Wright' in Meanjin, 41, 2 (1982), p. 325: ‘The further I went into it, even in my first book, the more I became aware I was writing poetry on the theme of the white occupation, and it has become a rather strong one in my life. I don't know anybody else who was doing this when I began, and now I think I can possibly claim to be rather original.’


10. Quotations of Oodgeroo's poetry will be taken from My People: A Kath Walker Collection (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1970), unless otherwise noted.

11. An approximation of Irumula's words from a paper delivered at the conference.

12. 'The Cycads' (Woman to Man, 1949), pp. 41-2; and 'Old House' (The Gateway,
13. The lack of punctuational stop at the end of a poem is extremely unusual in Judith’s poetry which inclines me to feel a little hesitant. The poem appears without stop in *Collected Poems* but I do not have access to the poem as printed in *The Gateway* to check original punctuation.


16. See ‘Corroboree’ (p. 20) and ‘Bora’ that begins ‘Stone Age youth...’ (p. 34).
Citizens in Our Own Country

1967 – the year of change, the year of official freedom for Aborigines and the year we were finally classed as citizens in our own country. Yes, the 1967 Referendum changed the status of Aborigines forever. I didn’t know all the ins and outs of the lead-up to the citizens of Australia voting for the release of Aborigines from bondage. All I know was, it was a wonderful and decent thing all those people did for us, that is, those who voted for us to join the human race. I daresay there were the diehards who would have been happy to see the Aborigines still under supervision and surveillance in some settlement, mission or other apartheid-like structure. But the majority voted in our favour and we have them to thank for it. And yes, I’d heard and read about the South African apartheid policies and their inhuman treatment of the black people over there. While I can feel sadness for them, I can also feel my own sense of loss and isolation for what I’ve been through all my life.

It was very hard being taken away from my mother when I was a little boy of six. It was shameful the way it happened and my not seeing her again made me not only an outcast with my own people, but a homeless, incomplete person. Throughout my life, I’ve always felt a sense of the loss of my people. Although I had Rose, our children and her family nearby, it wasn’t the same as having my people, my mother and other relations close. I tell you, I felt that sense of loss so deeply. It was as if I were in limbo with no real identity. I knew I was a husband, a father and an in-law to Rose’s people, but I never had the chance to be a son, a brother, a cousin or any other relation to my people that was my right of birth, my right as my mother’s oldest son. I missed all that through no fault of mine, my mother’s or any of my people. I blame the rotten government policies of the time and those white people who made those policies. May they all rot in hell for my loss of family and identity and for my being treated as less than human. I will probably go to my grave feeling like this, but I believe I have that right. My loss is profound and I cannot forget.

Nevertheless, to get back to Pinjarra and the 1967 Referendum, that releaser of Aborigines from bondage. At first, it felt strange being a citizen. How was a citizen supposed to act? Did all of us Aborigines suddenly go out and join a church group, did we put our names down as councillors for the Shire, did we swagger around town saying, ‘look at us, we’re citizens now’, and did we join the Masonic Lodge? We did
none of those things. We headed straight down to the nearest pub and celebrated being citizens. Boy that was good, watching the faces of the owner and other whites drinking at the bar as we walked in and ordered a beer, in a glass, from the inside of this place we’d only seen from the outside. It was a priceless moment. To have Aborigines breasting the bar and requesting a beer from the barmaid was good for the soul. I tell you, we laughed at that barmaid and the expression on her face as three or four of us blackfellas lined up, placed our money on the bar and waited to be served. Like white men did, you know? It was an experience I’ll never forget.

Mind you, those Aborigines with ‘the dog tag’ (Citizenship Rights) were used to going into the pub and drinking, but I wasn’t. This was something new to me and I revelled in my new-found sense of equality, my new status as a citizen. But it wasn’t just being allowed to go into the pub and having a drink that made me feel good. It was the sense of being able to do that which added spice to the idea of being a citizen. If I was drunk, disorderly and untidy, then they could deny me a beer, but while I took notice of the rules attached to going to the hotel, dressed right and behaved myself, I was okay. It was my right to drink there.

Another thing, I didn’t forget to enrol to vote either, which was next on the list of things I had to do now that I was a citizen of this country; after all those years I had been reading the newspaper and taking an interest in politics, I now had the right to have a say in how they ran the country. I got Rose to go to the post office to get the necessary forms for me, filled them in and sent them away. Rose didn’t want to vote and I didn’t force her to; that was her choice. But for myself, I wanted to have my say and to do that I had to vote. However, being a citizen made me realise that there were no special rules just for Aborigines to live by. The rules the white people had to stick to were the same ones we Aborigines had to look out for.

No longer did we have to be off the streets by six o’clock at night. No longer did we have the police breathing down our necks making sure we stuck to the policies of the Native Welfare Department. No longer were some Aboriginal people made to give up their kids to be placed in missions or homes where they wouldn’t be able to see them for donkey’s years, and finally, no longer were Aborigines forced to work for miserable, lower wages than white people. Probably, these restrictions didn’t seem much to the whites, but to us Aborigines, it meant a whole lot. We were finally being treated as individual people and not having injustices chucked in our faces because of our race. I’m not saying that these things happened overnight. No way. We still had our battles with racist white people who had to realise that we were no longer under their thumbs. We all had our rights now, our human rights and they had to remember it. It was a start and things could only get better for us all.

In 1968 I had my second long-service leave. Many months before this
happened, Rose and I had made our plans to go north to see if I could find my people. When my brother Kitchener visited me that time, he spoke of our mother and told me how she had died of thirst with no-one near to help her. He also told me that if I ever got the chance, I should go back to the Pilbara and look up our lot who would be very glad to see me, especially those who had known me as a young child. Kitchener would be there and would tell our people that I was coming. Unfortunately, he died before this plan was put into action and I had to make the journey without him being there.

Some weeks before I started my long-service leave, Rose and I put our plan into action to go to Port Hedland and start my search from there. With money from my leave, we would buy a reasonably good second-hand car and drive up there. Our youngest son Clive, who was out of the army by now, his girlfriend and a nephew of ours would come with us to help me drive. I felt like a kid again going on a long trip into the unknown as we made our plans. I couldn't wait for the time to come when we would be off on our journey, my journey of discovery and recovery, I suppose you could say. To be on the safe side, we would go along the North West Highway and although this road wasn’t bitumenised yet, to my mind, it wasn’t as isolated as going through Meekatharra and the centre. The Brand Highway wasn’t built yet either, so we had to go through Moora and those towns along that line. One good thing about it was that we didn’t have to rush up there to Port Hedland. We could take our time with travelling. On the day before we left, I was as excited as a kid although I tried to hide my feelings by doing all the common-sense things like checking and rechecking the car. I also made sure we had jerrycans for extra petrol, extra tyres and plenty of food and water, our clothes, blankets and cooking gear, for we’d be camping by the side of the road most of the time. We were going on a long trip and I wanted to make sure we’d get there in one piece.

Early the next morning we made our start. Our Holden car seemed sturdy enough and I really believed what they said about it being Australia’s own car. I believed it would get us there and back with no big problems. We called in at Moora to see my cousin, Rosie Pryor, and her family. Her husband Peter was a good friend of mine from Settlement days and it was good to see them again. I hadn’t seen them for years ever since we left Wannamal, where I had been working on a farm. Then we were on our way again. Except to fill the car up, we didn’t stop again until we reached the outskirts of Geraldton where we camped for the night. After an early breakfast around our campfire we went into Geraldton, filled the car up with petrol and headed north for Northampton, where we filled the jerrycans up, checked the oil and water and made sure we got more water for us to drink, and started out once again. From here on in, we would have to watch how much water we drank. It was a long haul to Carnarvon, along a gravel road, so we had to be extra careful of how we drove. It would be woe for us
if the car broke down.

This didn’t happen until we got to the other side of Barradale. I don’t know what happened. One minute we were travelling along as good as gold, the next we were at a standstill. Something happened to the gearbox. Although us men – Clive, Michael Walley and myself – tried to get the car going, we had buckleys chance of fixing the gearbox. We couldn’t get into any of the gears except reverse. The only thing we could do was to go back to Barradale. We were about twenty miles out and the only gear we could get the car in was reverse. So Clive reversed the car all the way back to Barradale. It took us a while, but we got there. We were lucky a mechanic was able to fix the gearbox the next day and so once again, we were on our way.

Passing through the western side of the Pilbara was like coming home to me. When I first saw those ranges way off in the distance and then up close as we passed them, my spirit was uplifted. This was my country, my place, and I marvelled at the scenery as we passed by. The dry red earth, the spinifex, the ghost gums, the rocky outcrops and the dry riverbeds and creeks were such a sight to me. It brought back vague memories of a time long passed and lost to me, forever, I thought. Although I’d never been to this part of the country before (my country was around Hillside, Marble Bar and Nullagine), I knew, without doubt, that I was coming home. All the greenness, all the thickly wooded hills and the bush, the farmlands and the river which ran all the year round, the estuary and the beaches out of Mandurah, could not look so good to me as did the Pilbara. I knew that this country I passed through was very much like my own further east. I couldn’t wait to reach Port Hedland, find my cousin, Tom Stream, and take the trip to Marble Bar, my homeland. I was going home and I couldn’t wait to get there.

When we came to Roebourne we stopped for a while and made the necessary checks with the car. There were a lot of Aborigines in this town and while I was talking to some, I learned that Tom was still in Port Hedland and was waiting for me to arrive there. Don’t ask me how he knew I was coming up this way. As I remember, I didn’t tell anyone I was coming for the simple reason that I didn’t know where they lived. I couldn’t get in touch with anyone to let them know I would be there, but as I said before, the Aboriginal grapevine is a powerful thing and I wasn’t questioning anybody’s information as to my arrival. It took us about a week to travel, from the time we started out to the time we got to Roebourne. After leaving Roebourne, before I knew it, we were coming into Port Hedland and I was asking directions to where Tom stayed. It was a happy man who saw his cousin for the first time.

A lot of people remarked on how alike Tom and I were and there was a similarity between us. Among other jobs, Tom had worked as a dingo trapper for many years and knew the countryside like the back of his hand. He was a true man of the Pilbara and it showed in his quiet
manner and slow talk. Much like me, I’d say. Anyway, for the next couple of weeks, Tom took me to Marble Bar and Nullagine and all over the place. It was such a spiritual renewal for me and it brought back vague memories of a time long past when I was a little boy with my mother and her people. I knew, without asking Tom, that this part of the Pilbara was where I belonged.

In 1944 Aborigines were allowed to become “Australian Citizens.” Aboriginal people called their citizenship papers “Dog Tags.” We had to be licensed to be called Australian.
Gary Catalano

PARK

True. But some things about it remind me of a travel poster. That green, for a start, is too bright, too flat, and much too chemical. And what is one to make of the fact that those shadows look as though they’ve been stencilled to the grass?

CREEK

You can say what you like out here, but the trees and the rocks will always ignore you. And as for the creek, it likes to burble to itself and simulate voice after voice – a bit like a widow who has got into the habit of pretending that she still leads a rich social life.

TRANSLATION

There’s absolutely no one to be seen. Yet you’re certain there’s someone directly behind that line of trees, for when you hear the sound that comes from that direction – the sound, to be precise, of a thirsty dog drinking from a bowl of water – you know that you can safely translate: horse on blue metal road, walking slowly.

BUSH LULLABY

If it is understandable that I should have mistaken that small white nest snagged at the top of a wild rose for a baby’s bootie, it is equally understandable that whenever I think of it I have the strong impression that it is swaying, ever so gently, in the wind.

STRANGER

There are some things you remember with particular clarity: that green bedspread made of dyed hessian, for example, or the block of sandsoap that used to sit on the window sill just above the washing tub in the laundry. You also remember, though with slightly less clarity, that small wicker chair which stood at the head of the bed, and a yellow T-shirt with black markings at the shoulder. That T-shirt seemed to work like a charm, for whenever you put it on and looked into the mirror you’d instantly find yourself face-to-face with someone who seemed pleased to see you. But you, of course, were by no other.
Syd Harrex

AT THIS TIME
(for Clare)

Out of magpie throats, white water music
somersaults over Adam’s dark apples,
bosom slopes affording salmon shadows
as banks do bream, as blackened skies hide trout.
All the lusting and listing on the land,
as its winds rip bible tissue pages,
are incomprehensible without hands –
on seeding and reaping, fringeing vineyards.
Retirement here is spiritual recess,
comings and goings of eggs, cheese and beer;
you always collect anxiety mail
from the post-mistress, never telegrams
from T.S. Eliot on behalf of God.
And that’s the fluke truth: beautifully odd.

TO EMILY KATE ON HER BIRTH
11 August 1994
(for the original Emily, Marina, Greg, Rebecca)

I bet you are robust, and shout a bit
even now. Mar your mother’s sleep at times
by all means, but don’t neglect the aftermath
of smiles, finger clinging, the tenacious
suction of each nipple – unspiteful of
of course, finding there all imperatives of love.
But there’s a father in your envelope
as well. Feed him enough umbilical rope
and in years to come all you need to do
is wind him back like a big clumsy fish.
Watch the weathers inside the house and learn
the outer seasonal arrays. Silence
without meekness; trust with honour; belief
in yourself: these surpass the must-be grief.
RONNITH MORRIS

The Table of Memory

It is a long trek to the house built on the bones of silence. Only the very small are allowed to enter this place. Only when you have finished everything on your plate will you be allowed to leave. The entrance opens to a long corridor. The carpet is rich and dark, its centre is covered in a thick plastic sheet to preserve it. You walk down the hall to the kitchen; a rich orange cordial is drunk out of glasses that once held candles. For food think thick doughy noodles in broth, think fish and baked potatoes. Think chicken. *(The chicken a little dry, you took a long time arriving. You know six o’clock should mean six o’clock. But for you it means seven.)* Think platters of sliced radish and turnip. For dessert there’s stewed apples, and sips of sweet prune wine. There’s coffee and almond biscuits, there’s cake and the special liqueur chocolates for the grown-ups. Go on. *Nem ztvei, take two. Naa. Take.*

Anyone else would say hello; her greeting is *ess, ess, eat, eat.* The neighbour is a good man, a fine man, he has a good nature. He helps her from market to doorstep. It’s a *schlep* in which he staggers down the hallway under the weight of her purchases towards the kitchen table. He’s not so young any more. *So cheap, she says. So good, so fresh, so cheap.* She holds the broccoli up for both of you to inspect its multi-foliate head. You think they harvest broccoli from the sea, it’s disappointing to discover it grows, like any other vegetable, out of the ground. She smiles the new teeth smile. The neighbour asks, *do they still hurt? No it’s not the new ones that hurt. Sometimes, the old ones hurt. Still? Still.* He drinks his tea in noisy slurps and thanks her. *He is a gentleman. A mentch.* She tells you this in front of him. He smiles awkwardly – she places a hand on your shoulder and reminds him you are Hannahleh’s eldest. *A shayneh maydele,* he says, *a beautiful, good girl.* He forks another slice of apple cake and eats. When he rises to leave, you all rise; she wipes her hands on her apron and together you walk him to the verandah.

Back inside you pass the formal sitting area with its white crushed-velvet lounge suite. The stiff arm covers protect the couch from wear. In this room the plate-faces of heroes gaze across the distance from mantelpiece to buffet. The one that perturbs you most is a gilt-edged portrait of a one-eyed army colonel. When you look at the colonel’s face you can see how tightly his skin stretches to cover the skull beneath. This is the room where sepia photographs are coffined in boxes of acid-free paper. You walk to the kitchen table past her gold and pink plastic...
Eiffel towers; they sit on the glass of the sideboard that lines the corridor. You pass the monsteras and the kentia palms that clutch at you from the soil of their plastic pots, and enter the warm, safe place.

Fridge, oven and stove testify to grand days without want. A glass of tea, with lemon? A hot chocolate, some nush? More nush? Nush is the confectionary frogs she buys for your brother, and the peppermints she keeps for you. The old man, her husband, has his diabetic jubes. After all this time you can picture him most vividly in front of the ABC television news. The words In Canberra Today bring him fist-clenching joy. He advises Gough Whitlam in Yiddish. And what’s more, Gough follows his fervent counsel. Who knows where the old man is now? Probably with his pigeons. Don’t laugh, this is serious business; he breeds them. When you ask her if he loves you as much as the birds she tells you the same. And her also? The same. Don’t smile, she says, it’s a compliment.

You, you’re her favourite nusher. So good, the best girl in the world. To be big is to be good and you are a groessir maydele, a shayneh maydele, a big, beautiful girl. A good esser. You want potato cakes, latkas? It doesn’t have to be December for latkas. They’re good to warm you in the cold. Her hands peel and grate two potatoes and an onion into a shallow navy-rimmed enamel dish. An egg is mixed in, and then another one. Salt is added, not much but enough and some flour. She uses a large heavy silver-plated fork to stir the mix together. The lot is fried into a crisp interwoven whole. When you bite into it the inside is just cooked, the steam moistens the skin of your forehead and nose. You can’t finish it; it’s so big.

After dinner you bathe in a lilac bath tub, the bar heater is turned on especially; it radiates warmth from the hook on the wall. This type of clean differs from morning showers in which you wash, rinse and dry yourself quickly to make room for another sister. Here the floor tiles wink white, wink grey, wink purple in the steam and you can take your time. The face-cloth is a piece of kelp, a soap tug, an upper body warmer. And then as the water loses its heat you step into a towel, your back is patted dry, then it’s into pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers and bed. Your covers are packed with goose down. You lie on pillows bigger than you, the flannel sheets are rough and comfortable, here in this house where you sleep to wake and wake to feast. When you return home they’ll say first we saw your stomach and then we saw you.

You hear her walk to her reading in the kitchen. You turn on the light and rise. You place a chair on the bedside table and open the top section of the cupboard. The box of books, the children’s schoolbooks, is there. It’s heavy but you manage to draw it to your chest and step down. Your last step is a thud. She is standing at the door. Come here, she says as she hands you your dressing-gown. And you follow her with a novel in hand to the kitchen. The kettle is on, the candle flickers, the fluorescent light is steady. You ask her What are you reading? A
story, she answers. She asks you the same question and receives the same reply. Neither of you smile; both of you nod. This is as it should be. This is the best time. Reading here is a solemn matter. As her eyes follow her finger down the page she adjusts her glasses, moves her lips and reads on. When the words begin to blur you walk yourself back to bed.

Sometimes when its late you return from the bathroom and open the kitchen door – you expect her to be there. The room seems strangely unpeopled without her. A candle burns on the tabletop. The flicker of the flame is almost covered by molten-wax; it remains small but true. You get up to stare across black distance out of the kitchen window; all the light there is in the room provided by that weak flame. The moon’s rays are hidden by cloud. The thin halo of light tints the aluminium and laminex surfaces the yellowed tones of an old photograph.

It is morning. She is squeezing oranges dry as you enter the kitchen. Where are your slippers? You sneeze and it’s a cold. A cough and it’s tuberculosis. A serious illness. You laugh? It’s not nice to laugh. It’s not polite. Where are your slippers? The toast is thickly spread with cream cheese and topped with plum jam. Only a person who doesn’t know to think doesn’t know to put on slippers. The kettle is steaming, and there’s jam and vegemite. The vegemite has been bought especially for you. Every time you open the jar she wrinkles her nose as if she can detect its sharp yeasty smell from across the width of the table. And there’s cake. This early in the morning? Why not? Here there is always cake. An apple? A Golden Delicious? You shrug o.k. and there it is, its skin in one piece in the tub for the garden and four seedless pieces on the plate in front of your glass. You cough again and are handed a cup of lemon tea sweetened with honey and fortified with brandy.

When you dress it is in a denim pinafore she has made and she is pleased you chose to wear it. Her own clothes are mostly hidden by a floral cloth apron. She favours 1950’s house dresses. Your tights and skivvy are navy blue and your hair, pulled tightly away from your face, is fastened through a dark-blue clip into a high pony tail.

It is early afternoon. Together you walk to the butcher where she orders her own and mameh’s meat. The butcher hands you a stickel of something to chew on, a piece of kabana, which you put in your pocket. It’s easier than saying you’re a vegetarian. You are growing into a fine girl and your grandmother, your buba, she’s a balabuster’s balabuster, a homemaker to respect he tells you. As she orders from his wife he asks after mum. Mameh is studying to be a kindergarten teacher, you tell him. Buba stops ordering, she grasps hold of the word
kindergarten – with four daughters and a son you’d think she’d have enough of kinder. She pulls a face, fooyah. For that you need an education? That’s not a good work. Then she asks what you want to become, you tell her a lawyer. A liar, she laughs. The butcher laughs also. A liar. Better the medicine. Better a teacher.

On your way home you stop in at the factory. The place is noisy, fabric scraps litter the concrete underfoot: a textile detritus of threads and cloth remnants. The building is shaped like an aeroplane hangar – inside, the engines struggle to take off. The smells of sweat, grease and new cloth mingle. The Singers hum. These are factory-issue machines, larger and louder than their domestic counterparts. Women gun bolts of material down the eye of the mechanical needle; most wear glasses, all wear tape-measure necklaces. Suspended above them are racks of clothes hangers heavy with the weight of finished product. An internal three-quarter wall separates the pressing area from the sewing machines. The movements of the women ironing are at once balletic and economical. No woman here is under forty. When they look up and notice the two of you they shout Hello Lisel. This is Hannah’s eldest, she says, Hannahleh’s eldest. She introduces you to Mrs Churney, and Mrs Shanetop, Mrs Kirsch and Mrs Levin. You have met them before. A pleasure, they say. A shayneh maydele, a beautiful girl they tell her.

Mr Shapiro, the boss, steps from machine to machine replacing the empty cardboard holders with new spools of thread. His dark suit cuffs trail pieces of cotton. Despite this he looks a tidy figure of a man. When he sees the two of you he walks up and shakes her hand; then he takes your hand between his two. Mrs Raizen, he says, a pleasure. Hannah’s eldest? he asks her nodding at you. Yes, she replies, the big girl. A shayneh maydele, he says. He invites her into a partitioned space with a phone and a desk hardly visible for paper – his office. When he fetches her a glass of tea, with lemon, she is pleased and embarrassed. This is how it should be. He unfolds plans for a new cutting room. Together you walk to the old cutting room where two women navigate an invisible grid on their hands and knees; their instruments consist of blue pencils, white pencils, their charted landscape cloth and tissue paper. Another woman, a younger woman works the cutting table – really a very large table. A machine can’t do this, Mr Shapiro says. The woman at the table laughs. A machine doesn’t have mine eyes, she says.

When you leave, it is with a sack of material. At the kitchen table these pieces will become clothing. She is already planning an outfit for the baby, a dress for Mameh, overalls for you. No, you don’t need overalls. You don’t tell her the last pair she made were never worn. At the Tuckerbag you buy six cartons of skim milk. You carry them home in a cardboard box. Who can drink so much? It’s good to have in the house. But so much? It’s not so much.

Mameh buys her a sewing machine with computer memory. She
examines it but doesn’t use it. She tells Mameh a new sewing machine is madness, *michgas, she’s too old to learn this michgas*. For dinner she makes you barley soup with huge chunks of potato and pumpkin. Spinach is added last and floats on top. She broils trout and pours over the fish a mix of diced carrots, parsnips and onions; she adds a touch of dill. From under the sink she pulls out a glass of her own yoghurt; it’s all she eats nowadays. You sup and talk and then you read, she pulls out her magnifying glass and the Yiddish newspaper. You offer to teach her to read English. *For what? So I can read Gorky and Tolstoy and Shalom and Alechim?* She keeps government correspondence and Heart Foundation newsletters just so you can explain. Together you fill in the Medicare forms.

The neighbour tells you, *you should help her she’s not keeping things so nice as before. You should dust for her maybe?* You wash the dishes to make sure they’re clean. She gets you to thread a dozen needles at a time. She knows how to put them in the old machine by touch and she’s worked out a system to keep the colours distinct and nothing tangles. She says she can sew in a straight line with her eyes closed. *A person doesn’t have to see everything.*

In her dark she becomes more and more silent. When she talks its to ask after you. *The study? The car? The work? The boyfriend? A boyfriend – it’s not good to be alone.* Mameh is the one who becomes her memory, Mameh is the one who recounts her selling her wedding ring for a loaf of bread, or their boarding the last train out of Poland in exchange for a *stickel* salami. Buba never names the three nephews she buried in the snow of a D.P. camp after the war. Nor does she speak of her sister-in-law left behind in Poland. These things will be mentioned in the funeral elergy

*We sit at the table. When I sift through her photographs and ask her about the dead she can’t see to distinguish them from the living.*
Anna Morgan, the central character of Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*, has previously been read as a victim of her own inability to fashion some form of life for herself. It is possible, however, to suggest an alternative to such character-based readings and instead examine the systems of oppression which work to ensure that Anna remains an excluded, marginalized subject. Rather than personal failings, it is Anna’s gender and colonial status which prevent her from participating fully in the dominant social and economic order of *Voyage in the Dark*. Anna is textually constrained on three levels, which may be defined as economic, colonialist, and narrative. Imbricated within these is the question of gender, which functions to place Anna in a position of double-exclusion within the text. These forms of exclusion function at the levels of discourse and narrative; I would argue that Anna’s position is not, therefore, a product of realist character ‘flaws’ but rather that her discursive placement within the novel offers insight into the ways in which colonialism and sexism function in terms of textuality.

Anna is shown to be economically dependent upon men for financial support due to her position as an impoverished woman. In the early scenes of the novel, Anna is a showgirl in a touring troupe, and as a performer in *The Blue Waltz* she and the other women in the production appear on stage for the viewing pleasure of men as objects of the male gaze. Similarly, when Anna first meets Walter, the emphasis is upon her appearance and its effect upon the male gaze: “That’s one thing about you,” Maudie said. “You always look ladylike”. After Anna has ‘paired off’ with Walter, his first action is to look ‘at [her] sideways once or twice – very quickly up and down, in that way they have’ (p. 10). Walter thus occupies the subject position, possessing Anna through his gaze ‘in that way they have’. Later, when Anna eats with Walter in the private room, he ‘looked at [her] as if he was trying to size [her] up’ (p. 18). All the while Anna speaks in this scene, Walter ‘kept looking at [her] in a funny sort of way, as if he didn’t believe what [she] was saying’ (p. 19). Walter emphasizes the effect of the gaze by recalling Anna’s appearance when they first met:
‘You looked so awfully pathetic when you were choosing those horrible stockings so anxiously’ (p. 20); stockings Walter had paid for.

Walter had, in retrospect, purchased Anna with the stockings. In the scene in the restaurant, Walter comments upon Anna’s teeth (p. 19), as he ‘sizes her up’. This recalls the practice of purchasing slaves, where prospective buyers would examine the teeth of the slaves and attempt to discern how fit they were to work. Anna, as a woman in this English masculinist economy, must be fit for sexual activity rather than manual labour, but she is still, in effect, Walter’s slave. Walter thus first possessed Anna through his gaze and then through the metonymic purchase of the stockings. His regular payments to Anna complete the full transaction. In this economic order, Anna becomes a commodity, to be purchased through associated purchases of other commodities. Anna’s only available asset is her body, either as spectacle, as a member of the dance troupe, or object of sexual pleasure; her role in this exchange is thus defined and constrained by her gender. Women are expressly connected with the cost of objects, as in the description of the discrepancy between the cost of clothing and of women: “It’s funny, he said, have you ever thought that a girl’s clothes cost more than the girl inside them? ... You can get a very nice girl for five pounds, a very nice girl indeed, ... But you can’t get a very nice costume for her for five pounds” (p. 40).

Women are thus commodified objects to be bought and discarded in an English patriarchal system which sees them in terms of their sexual value, a system in which women are shown to collude. Maudie agrees that women cost more than their clothes: ‘after all, it’s true, isn’t it? People are much cheaper than things’ (p. 40). Later in the novel Ethel allows Anna to move into her flat and take part in the manicure business (a front for prostitution) on the basis that if Anna is able to ‘introduce some clients of your own it’ll be all the better for both of us’ (p. 115). Ethel then sees her opportunity when Anna is making money from Carl, and becomes complicitous in the patriarchal economy by allowing Anna ‘the run of the whole flat’ while simultaneously increasing the rent: ‘under the circumstances two and a half guineas isn’t too much to ask for this room’ (p. 135). Women thus exploit women, just as the men in the novel do. English society is therefore characterized as one of rapacious economic individualism, where there is no solidarity between the members of oppressed groups.

Anna stands at a remove from the English society of Voyage in the Dark. On one level she is marginalized as an impoverished woman in a system of patriarchal exchange. On another, her position as a colonial subject further excludes her from the English hegemony. Anna is persistently signalled as being Other to the middle-class English order of the novel, through the repetition of a series of signifiers and their related cultural associations. These include references to the cold and Anna’s aversion to it (corresponding to reports of Anna being born elsewhere, other than England), and the repeated descriptions of
Anna's character which stem from her unspecified 'alien' status.

For instance, when Anna first meets Walter, Maudie stresses the fact that Anna is 'always cold because she was born in a hot place. She was born in the West Indies or somewhere, weren't you kid?' (p. 12). Also in this scene, Anna's offer to show Mr. Jones her birth certificate is described (by him) as 'excessive' (p. 12). In this brief exchange Anna is therefore characterized as childlike ('kid') and 'excessive', common descriptive tropes applied to indigenous people of colonized societies and/or enslaved groups. This pattern of associations continues through the text, incessantly positing Anna as a non-English, colonized Other. When, for example, Anna tells Walter more of her background, he describes her speech as 'fine and large' (p. 44); she is, to him, a 'rum little devil' (p. 45). Walter adds that the Caribbean would be 'too lush' for his taste, a judgement Anna (unsuccessfully) attempts to dispute (p.46). These descriptors bring out the supposed excess of both the 'fine and large' Anna and the 'lush' colonies/tropics. Walter's language serves to infantilize Anna: she becomes a 'rum child, you rum little devil' and is, like the Caribbean, 'too much' (p. 48). In a repetition of this scene Walter again calls Anna a child when they are in the forest (p. 67) after she once more tries to describe the Caribbean. In the face of the English landscape, however, the Caribbean takes on an air of unreality; Anna begins to feel that she is 'making up the names' of the Caribbean flowers (p. 67). When confronted with the disparity between England and the Caribbean, the latter becomes for Anna the fiction it is for the English characters. The values and judgements of the English characters are imbued with such cultural power that the Caribbean becomes displaced into Anna's memories and dreams as 'unreal'. Walter's belief in the superiority of the English landscape (and indeed, his own judgement) effectively silences any opposition.

The excess attributed to Anna is also evident in her conversation with Joe. When she reacts to his lies about knowing the Caribbean, he asks if she is 'tight' (p. 106), and then describes her as 'quaint' (p. 109). Other characters pass similar judgement on Anna: Ethel calls her 'potty' (p.124) and a 'bastard' (p. 124); Carl asks if Anna is on drugs: 'you look as if you took something' (p. 131). Vincent refers to Anna as 'my infantile Anna' (p. 69) and as '[m]y dear Infant' (p. 80). To Germaine Anna is 'this kid' (p. 73) as she is to Laurie (p. 106) and Ethel (p. 125). All these descriptions of Anna recall the stereotypes of the tropics and their inhabitants as excessive, alien and exotic, and/or child-like. Anna metaphorically becomes the tropics, her body the locus of a convergence of attributes associated with the un-English colonies. In addition, there is the suggestion that Anna is an incipient hysteric. When she tells Walter not to forget her, he is described 'as if he were afraid [Anna] was getting hysterical' (p. 76). These perceived attributes of the Caribbean and the hysteric will function later in the novel as a veiled form of resistance to England and the English.

Ethel acts as something of a surrogate mother for Anna in that she
takes Anna into her house and offers to teach her manicure. Ethel, however, then seeks to exploit Anna economically, which fits the pattern already established in the novel. Anna’s other surrogate mother Hester also exploits her. It seems that Hester has robbed Anna of her inheritance by not giving Anna her share in her father’s estate (p. 52). Hester, like Ethel, is xenophobic. She has

an English lady’s voice with a sharp cutting edge to it. Now that I’ve spoken you can hear that I’m a lady. I have spoken and I suppose you realize I am an English gentlewoman. I have my doubts about you ... Speak up for I fear the worst. (p. 50)

Hester also stresses her ‘ladylike’ attitude through her disparagement of Anna. Hester has ‘tried to teach [Anna] to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn’t do it’ (p. 56). Anna is thus marked as a black West Indian, a characterization reinforced by Hester’s reference to Anna’s ‘awful sing-song voice ... Exactly like a nigger you talked – and still do’ (p. 56 [emphasis mine]). In the eyes of the English characters, Anna, to all intents and purposes, is a black West Indian. She is called ‘Hottentot’ by the other women in the dancing troupe (p. 12) and is told her voice is like that of a ‘nigger’. Hester makes the veiled allegation that Anna’s ‘mother was coloured’ (p. 56), and when she first has sex with Walter, the text links Anna with the slave Mailotte Boyd, whose name Anna had seen on ‘an old slave list’ in Dominica (pp. 45, 48). Anna is therefore continually linked with the oppressed/marginalized population of the Caribbean, despite the fact that she is white. In terms of the textual black/white binary, Anna presents an anomaly. She must, in accordance with this binaristic structure, be grouped with either one part of the equation or the other. That the text (through the English characters) links her with black rather than white would suggest, therefore, that the novel is uneasy with her status as a third term in the colour structure. As a Creole fifth generation West Indian (p. 45) she is white but belongs to the Caribbean. Thus, she must ‘become’ black so that the English order is not disrupted.

Anna also links herself with the black population: she says that ‘I always wanted to be black’ (p. 45). As well as keeping the binaries uncomplicated, this constitutes a desire to join a recognisable community. The novel continually contrasts the community of the black West Indians with the individualism of the English. In the Caribbean there is a form of female bonding available not evident in England. When, for instance, Anna begins menstruation, it is the black servant Francine ‘who explained it to [her], so that it seemed quite all right and I thought it was all in the day’s work like eating or drinking’ (p. 59). This sense of things being ‘all right’ is disrupted by Hester, whose talk with Anna makes her feel ‘awfully miserable, as if everything were shutting up around me and I couldn’t breathe’ (p. 59). The voice of the English woman works to oppress and silence that of the communal
Caribbean so that Anna is removed from the comfort of black Caribbean society. Significantly, it is at this point that Anna becomes estranged from Francine.

A second contrast between the Caribbean and English scenes is evident in the depiction of Francine as a surrogate mother for Anna. Anna can achieve a bonding with Francine not evident with any of the English surrogate mothers. Their relationship, however, is barred by colour: Anna realizes that Francine dislikes her ‘because [Anna] was white’ (p. 62). Making an important distinction between the white and black communities, Anna notes that to be white is ‘getting like Hester, and all the things you get – old and sad and everything’ (p. 62). One further contrast between blacks and whites is evident in the masquerade/carnival Anna recalls when she is bleeding after her abortion. The masquerade celebrates youth and gaiety in opposition to the old and sad English. It is marked by colour, vibrance and a spirited resistance towards the English colonizers. In England, there is no real outlet for this form of social protest: the closest Anna can come to allying herself with an English form of resistance is in her dream of the boy bishop, a feature of the English and European carnival (pp. 140-41). This, however, is no longer available to the oppressed classes of England, so Anna is forced to return, in dream, to the Caribbean to find a more viable form of resistance.

In the Caribbean masquerade the black population bands together, wearing masks which parody English faces:

the masks men wore were a crude pink with the eyes squinting near together but the masks the women wore ... over the slits for the eyes mild blue eyes were painted then there was the small straight nose and a little red heart-shaped mouth and under the mouth another slit so that they could put their tongues out at you. (p. 157)

The dancers also cover their necks and arms with white powder (p.157). Their dress and masks thus make them parodic English people, with pink skins, blue eyes and heart-shaped mouths. The women in the masquerade stick out their tongues as an act of defiance, a resistant mocking parody of the dominant English colonizers. Moreover, the masquerade is a communal activity, with all the black population joining in (‘they all have a go they don’t mind’ [p. 157]). The carnival is thus an activity ‘in which the whole collective participates’. As Emery notes, Anna’s recollection of the masquerade undergoes a significant shift. At first, Anna refers to the dancers as ‘them’ but the pronoun changes to ‘we went on dancing’ (p. 157 [emphasis mine]). In a drifting, dreamlike state, Anna takes part in the carnival, becoming one of the black Caribbean collective.

Anna’s bleeding after the abortion functions to link her with the carnival. In Bakhtin’s conception of carnival, emphasis is placed upon the faecal body, the points of the body
open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.  

The body, in the carnival, transgresses its limits so that it is no longer a self-contained unit but one which disrupts its boundaries to take part in the collective world. What is usually hidden or secret becomes part of the 'outside' world, as opposed to the 'inside' of the body, inverting and disrupting the conventional order; hence the emphasis on orifices, where the body both marks boundaries and transgresses them. This is why the Caribbean women put out their tongues: they enact the transgressive ideas of the carnival, revealing what is usually hidden in an un-English, 'rude' gesture. So too for Anna. Her representation of the grotesque body, with its abundant flow of blood, disrupts the closed unit of the English body. Wills has argued that the hysteric enacts a similar form of resistance, in that the hysteric falls into patriarchy's zone of exclusion. Described throughout the text as excessive or hysterical, Anna has thus been placed within this excluded zone and is 'representing the past in the present' as a form of resistance to the patriarchal/official order, thus disrupting linear, masculinist time. The past represented is, significantly, a remembered act of resistance, suggesting a connection between the carnival and the hysterical body, both of which refuse to obey or conform to the expectations of the dominant (English) order.

The disruption of linear time and narrative focuses attention on the enunciative site Anna occupies as the first-person narrator of Voyage in the Dark. She is initially presented as caught between two texts, one of the Caribbean and the other of England. When recalling Dominica, she quotes from 'that book' which describes the island as 'lying between 15° 10' and 15° 40' N and 61° 14' and 61° 30' W. A goodly island and something highland, but all overgrown with woods' (p. 15). In comparison to this is the England Anna 'had read about ... ever since [she] could read' (p. 15). The England of Anna's experience, 'smaller meaner everything is' (p. 15), operates in contrast to Dominica. Both places are the sites of reading, whether from 'that book' or the England Anna has always read about. The distinction between the two sites is represented by the image of the curtain which opens the novel: 'A curtain fell and I was here' (p. 15), thus marking the division between the Caribbean and England. This image draws attention to the split in the consciousness of the narrator and, in conjunction with the perceived unreality of the Caribbean landscape, exiles the colony behind the curtain, only able to surface in dreams and memory.

Anna may therefore be read as colonized/exiled on a third level, that of narrative and textuality itself. Anna is contained within a narrative which is already written in the codes of the Derridean general text, 'the field of historic, economic, political inscription'; a narrative which is impossible for her to break out of. Anna is rendered silent and pre-
written, unable to speak for herself. As Lyotard suggests,

[as narrator, s/he is narrated as well. And, in a way, s/he is already told, and what s/he himself/herself is telling will not undo the fact that somewhere else s/he is told\textsuperscript{13}]

Anna’s story is therefore effectively ‘already told’, so that she is discursively placed within a narrative that is simultaneously hers (told in the first person) and yet not hers, in that she is represented as an undifferentiated member of a generic class already defined and contained within the field of the Derridean general text. There is a specific reference to this situation in the early pages of the novel where Anna is reading Zola’s *Nana*, ‘a dirty book ... about a tart’ (p. 9). Maudie says that ‘a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another. Besides books are all like that - just somebody stuffing you up’ (p. 9). This places the reader in the position of reading Anna reading; Anna’s status as a textual subject is constrained within the pages of a book which is about to ‘stuff her up’. The text both acknowledges its status as fiction as well as the previous narratives which exert an effect upon the narrative of this book. Anna’s story is, in a sense, already written, in the texts which have preceded *Voyage in the Dark*. Anna is unable to disrupt this ur-narrative, a narrative which is masculinist and colonialist in its origins and ideology.

An early instance of this occurs when Maudie and Anna first meet Jones and Jeffries, and Jones predicts the ages of the women: ‘[He] knew you’d either be eighteen or twenty-two. You’re eighteen and so of course your friend is twenty-two. Of course’ (p. 12). This domineering speech signifies the status of the characters; the repetition of ‘of course’ indicates there is an expected pattern to the women’s answers and that Jones will not allow any deviation from it. This is despite the fact that the text contradicts Jones, in giving Maudie’s age as twenty-eight (p. 97), which is passed over in the exchange.\textsuperscript{14} Jones calls Anna and Maudie ‘you girls’, suggesting that they are seen simply as a type who are not permitted space in the text to diverge from this masculinist narrative. Jones’s name signifies that this is a narrative which has been written by a series of anonymous, patriarchal figures who have a collective identity. Women are thus expected to conform to the expectations of the Mr. Joneses.

When Anna has dinner with Walter, her actions are again dictated by an adherence to anonymous male codes. She wears black in the belief that ‘[m]en delighted in that sable colour, or lack of colour.’ A man called ‘Coronet’ wrote that or was it a man called ‘A Peer’? (p. 19). Again the actions of women (in this case Anna’s dress) are expected to conform to the dictates and desires of a nameless upper class man or men. The dinner is entirely based upon these masculinist desires, as Anna realizes when she discovers the bedroom. On doing so, she laughs with Walter ‘because [she] felt that that was what [she] ought to
do’ (p. 20). Walter’s laugh is that of a man who expects certain events
to occur which tally with his perception of Anna and himself. Anna,
however, desires a change in this script, in her hope that

[s]oon he’ll come in again and kiss me, but differently. He’ll be different and so
I’ll be different. It’ll be different. I thought ‘It’ll be different, different. It must
be different. (p. 21)

The repetition of ‘different’ throughout the passage clearly conveys
Anna’s desire to change the sequence of events as they have been
mapped out by the patriarchal forces as symbolized by Walter. But
Anna’s desire is wholly based upon the actions of the male. For things
to change, Walter must kiss Anna differently; he must be different so
that she can be as well. This, of course, does not happen and Anna is
left with the knowledge that she is the only one who has been naive to
the workings of the system: ‘The girls would shriek with laughter if I
were to tell them about this. Simply shriek’ (p. 21).

When reflecting upon her situation after dinner, Anna still hopes for
difference and change:

‘But it isn’t always going to be like this, is it?’ I thought. ‘It would be too awful
if it were always going to be like this. It isn’t possible. Something must happen
to make it different’. (pp. 22-23)

Immediately after this, however, the possibility that ‘perhaps it will
always be like this’ strikes Anna for ‘the first time in [her] life’ (p. 23);
she is to become ‘one of the ones with the beastly lives’ (p. 23). Anna
comes to realize that she is trapped within a narrative from which she
cannot escape. Her position is the product of the English environment,
where there is an emphasis upon both the exploitation of individuals
and the predetermined positions within culture and narrative which
women are forced to occupy. Anna frequently invokes the hope that all
will soon change, but this is a hope which cannot be fulfilled. For
example, when she buys clothes she thinks that ‘[t]his is the beginning’
(p. 25). But as with the dinner scene her hopes are based upon the
actions of men: it is, after all, Walter’s money Anna uses to purchase
the clothes.

Anna’s dream of a new beginning is the lie that the exploitative
patriarchal system feeds to the oppressed/marginalized groups. As
Walter’s accomplice Vincent tells Anna ‘[y]ou’ve only got to make up
your mind that things are going to be different, and they will be
different’ (p. 149). Ironically, Vincent says this as he provides the
money for Anna’s abortion, where Anna’s situation changes
substantially for the worse. The prospect of difference and change (as it
has been shown in the novel), however, is based upon men and their
putative magnanimity towards women, yet for women like Anna there
is no real source of hope or power to affect change.

Anna attempts to escape England to her past in the Caribbean. This is
'The One with the Beastly Lives'

done, as suggested, through memory and dream. In one instance, Ethel merges with the figure of Francine: ‘I’ll say Francine I’ve had such an awful dream – it was only a dream she’ll say ... I’d know for certain it had started again, my lovely life’ (p. 115). This dream, however, occurs at another point where Anna is vulnerable to exploitation: Ethel has just asked Anna to join the manicure business, which is supposed to work to Ethel’s advantage. It is notable that Anna’s desire to start again is repeated, at points in the narrative where her situation becomes increasingly desperate. The first desire for a new beginning occurs when Anna (with Walter’s money) buys the clothes, the second when she begins living with Ethel and the third when Anna obtains the money for the abortion which nearly kills her. It seems that each time Anna’s situation worsens, the voice of exploitative patriarchy breaks into the text to pronounce a belief in this spurious hope of putative new starts. The reality of Anna’s situation thus offers a stark contrast with the lies promulgated by a patriarchal system.

Anna’s attempts to break out of the prescribed narrative patterns are doomed to failure. Her efforts and her failure to do so are linked back to her status as a colonial subject. Anna tries to tell Walter about the Caribbean and her life there, to which he responds with the Anglo-Saxon middle-class judgement that the tropics are ‘too lush’ (p. 46). Similarly, Anna’s Caribbean history becomes a source of mockery to Joe. He tells Anna he knows the West Indies and her father: ‘Why I knew your father – a great pal of mine. Old Taffy Morgan. He was a fine old boy, and didn’t he lift the elbow too’ (p. 107). Anna’s Caribbean narrative is thus colonized by Joe and Walter, who attempt to take it over and either make it their own stereotypical story or simply deny it completely. She therefore cannot narrate because of her narrative’s alterity to the English order of the novel. Anna is in the paradoxical position of being unable to tell parts of her own story; the only codes available are the stereotypically familiar, pre-scripted ones of ‘I knew your father’, which is again an exclusion of women replaced by a form of male bonding (drinking together), or the concept of the tropics as strange, threatening and ‘too lush’.

A third major example of Anna’s inability to form her own, alternative story occurs when she is with Carl. Here Anna is again linked with an oppressed people, in that she, that evening, ‘did everything to the tune of Campdown Racecourse’ (p. 132), a song which is, of course, associated with African-American slaves. Carl is an American (p. 97), so the song in this instance links Anna with black Americans, victims of slavery in the United States, another instance of the text aligning Anna with oppressed/colonized peoples. Anna tries to change the words of the song, to ‘somebody won on the bay’ despite Carl correcting her (p. 132). Anna says she will ‘sing it how I like it’ (p.132), yet the potential rebellion or change to the script this implies is negated by Carl’s statement that ‘[n]obody wins. Don’t worry. Nobody wins’ (p. 132). The ‘nobody’ Carl refers to is, of course, Anna (and not
herself); she is the biggest loser in the novel, despite *Voyage in the Dark* supposedly being her narrative.

Unlike other men in the novel, Carl does not attempt to inspire Anna with any spurious form of hope. Carl’s is an alternative voice, that of the cynical and worldly-wise man which is echoed by the doctor at the end of the novel (another male character with no name). The doctor refers to Anna and Maudie as ‘you girls’ (the same term and tone Jones used at the beginning of the novel) and tells them they are ‘too naive to live’ (p. 159). It is his voice which concludes the text, contrasting with Anna’s previously expressed desires for a new start. Anna is, as the novel demonstrated, ‘too naive’, too unaware of the ways in which the system functions; her hopes for difference and change are juxtaposed with the doctor’s belief that Anna will be able to start ‘all over again in no time’ (p. 159). Starting again in this context, however, means more of what has gone on before. Anna is condemned to remain trapped within the masculinist, colonialist confines and narrative of English society. She is destined to repeat ‘all over again, all over again ... ’ (p.159 [ellipsis in original]) the exploitation and marginalisation already written into her story. The text realizes there is no new beginning for Anna; her place in the English social order has been shown to be prescribed and immutable. To argue that all Anna needs is more energy and drive is, in this reading, inapplicable, as her narrative position has been defined not by her supposed weakness as an individual but instead by the power of English masculinist imperialism.

NOTES

1. Peter Wolfe, *Jean Rhys* (Boston: Twayne, 1980) is a notable example of this form of criticism: he argues that Anna lacks ‘fiber’ and that she fails to support herself ‘honorable’ (p. 117). See also Nancy Casey, ‘Study in the Alienation of a Creole Woman: Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 19, 3 (1973), and her assertion that Anna’s life in Dominica has ‘taught her to do nothing’ (p. 99) which is the ‘root of [her] maladjustment to England’ (p. 96).

2. It should not be overlooked, of course, that Anna’s narrative functions to reveal the systems by which colonial women are constrained within discourse. *Voyage in the Dark* is in one sense a double-voiced narrative, in that it reveals these systems of oppression while at the same demonstrating the cultural power of these same systems.

3. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 10. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


5. Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p. 7, points out that the boy bishop dates from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a part of the English carnival, associated with the Lords of Misrule. See also Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p. 98, who links the boy bishop with the ‘topsy-turvy saturnalia’ festivals of the Middle Ages. The boy bishop was thus one aspect of a parody of the dominant English order.
7. Emery, op. cit., p. 66.
10. Ibid., pp. 130-31.
11. On an allegorical level, Anna’s abortion may be read as representing the ‘illegitimacy’ of post-colonial culture. See Stephen Slemon, ‘“Carnival” and the Canon’, *Ariel*, 19, 3 (1988), p. 61. Anna had previously been called a ‘bastard’ by Ethel; as the embodiment of a hybrid society, Anna is deemed illegitimate by the voice of the xenophobic English middle-class.
14. It is significant though that Maudie’s age is relayed through Anna’s consciousness. Anna, as becomes clear, does not know the codes by which this narrative operates.
The madman hit her one morning when she was on her way to school. The terminus was crowded, and many people saw the man stop rooting around in a garbage bin to race over and hit her on the shoulder.

'But, Jesuschrist, look how that blasted madman lick the pickney and dirty up her nice white blouse, eh?' a fat higgler said.

Jeri had turned seventeen that day and for the occasion she had taken special care with her uniform. It had been spotless before the blow. Now the man stood staring at her with his broad grin. She felt like giving him a good box, but his grime restrained her. It was hard to tell his real complexion because he was covered in what seemed like black grease. His hair was matted and filthy, his feet bare. He had on no shirt, and his black pants had frayed into a loincloth. He stank.

She had seen him, and others like him, before at the terminus, always searching the garbage bins for food, but she had never looked directly at them. Mad people could be dangerous. She wondered why this one had chosen to attack her that morning. But as his bloodshot eyes stared into hers, she didn't dare ask. She moved quickly away and joined the crowd shoving to get into the bus that had just arrived. When she reached school, she told her friend Anne-Marie about the man, and Anne-Marie said: 'Is a whole heap of dem out dere now, you know. My mother say is hard times causing it, but mi father swear is ganja cause it. All dem people you see smoking it dese days, some of dem goin' stark raving mad.'

She looked at Jeri. 'You ever smoke it?' Jeri shook her head.

'My brother say it make you feel nice-nice,' Anne-Marie said.

The next day, the madman was at the terminus again. She tried to avoid looking at him but she was aware of everything he did. He searched through the rubbish with one hand, immediately eating any food he found. When he'd had enough he came towards Jeri. People watched him and moved out of his way, some fanning their noses. Jeri moved with the others, trying to lose the madman; but he stalked her, wearing his foolish grin the whole time. The game continued for about five minutes, then Jeri's fright turned to anger. She stopped trying to evade him and went to stand at the door of Mother's Patty Shop, at the corner of the terminus. She stiffened as he came up to her, but he stopped three feet away and stretched out his hand.

'You want it?' he asked. She slowly looked away from his face and
Terminus

looked at his hand. A dirty piece of bread lay on his palm.
She raised her eyes again and shook her head.
'I ate breakfast already,' she said.
His grin went. His lower lip trembled. He turned and walked away.
She was afraid to go to the terminus the next day. She told her
mother and father about him and her father drove her to school. But
her father had to be at work by seven, which meant that when he
dropped her off she had to wait an hour for her first class. She didn’t
mind being early for the rest of the week but the next Monday she
began taking the bus again.
The madman grinned happily when he saw her. But she managed to
push her way onto a bus before he could come near. He tried to enter
the bus too but the conductor, a thick young man whose neck was
concealed by gold chains, kicked him in the chest.
'Don’t come on dis-ya bus wid you stinking-rass self,' he shouted.
The passengers laughed, and the conductor slapped the side of the bus
to tell the driver it was time to go. When Jeri looked through the rear
window, she saw the madman running after the bus. The people round
her, packed batty-tight, twisted to get a look and bellowed with
laughter. Those in the front of the bus thought the usual morning
quarrel had broken out.
The madman stopped as the bus drew away from him, and Jeri spent
the rest of the journey hating the conductor. She promised herself
she’d be nice to the madman if he was there the next morning. He
wasn’t.
The King George Bus Terminus was a rectangle, which everyone said
was too narrow for its purpose but which would stay that way forever.
On one long side of the rectangle were Mother’s Patty Shop, a Bata
shoe store, The National Bakery and a big pharmacy that sold
postcards, jewelry, toys, wigs, drinks ... everything but medicine.
On the opposite side of the terminus was a high red-brick wall
shielding the police compound. Sometimes swirls of smoke rose up
above the wall as the policemen burned sacks of ganja they had seized.
The terminus would then be filled with the herb’s unmistakable aroma.
It was a smell that reminded different people of different things. For
Jeri, it brought to mind Sunday mass, a different kind of incense to a
different God.
The buses always raced into the terminus at breakneck speed,
spinning round the corner to screech to a stop alongside the police
wall. They came out one at a time, invariably late, and people from
every part of the rectangle converged in a frantic rush. The more
athletic climbed through the windows while others elbowed their way
in. The trick was to position yourself in front of a robust-looking person
and have him push you in along with himself. Jeri had developed this
into an art after much practice; she hardly had to exert any energy now.
But the madman brought her a better system.
He reappeared at the terminus three days after the conductor had
kicked him. Grimy as ever, he now carried a machete. People hurried away when he approached them. Once, when his eyes met Jeri's before she could look away, he waved lazily and grinned. She sweated as he looked through the garbage bags in front of the bakery before sauntering toward her. The strength to run left her and she stood shaking, watching him approach. He stopped about two feet away.

'You missed me?'

'Yes,' she said softly, as if talking with a friend. 'What happened to you?'

'I was sick, bad-bad.'

'So, you alright now?' His stench was killing her.

'Yes ...' The rest of what he said was lost as a bus screamed round the corner. Before it stopped, the madman ran off, holding his machete in the air. Would-be passengers saw him and held back their own rush. When he reached the door, he stopped and beckoned to Jeri. Confused and surprised, she didn't budge for a few seconds, then she walked slowly into the bus, her shoulders hunched in embarrassment. When he moved off, letting the others resume their fight to enter the bus, she took a book from her bag and spent the whole journey with her eyes on one page. But she couldn't help hearing the laughter and talk about the madman.

'Must be her boyfriend, no?' someone said, and the whole bus roared.

For the next few weeks, Jeri was always the first one on the bus, and the scene at the terminus became a familiar one, everyone accepting her special status with immense merriment.

Jeri was no longer afraid of the madman but she couldn't get used to the way people looked at her and grinned as soon as she came into the terminus. When they saw her, they immediately looked round for him. Once or twice he wasn't there and she wondered if his germs had finally got to him. If he never bathed and ate only from the garbage, how could he continue living? Her father said he had probably developed immunity to every germ. Jeri's father was worried about her but she told him the madman would never hurt her, he would just turn her into a nervous wreck.

'I don't know what to do, you know,' she said to Anne-Marie at school. 'I feel sorry for him but the whole t'ing getting on mi nerves. I can't even study any more. Dis man goin' to make me fail mi exams.'

But Anne-Marie, ever calm, told Jeri not to worry. 'Cho, mad people all over the place now. You see the two woman-dem who set up shack outside the school gate? Yesterday, Sister Theresa go out to tell them to move and she have to pick up her fat foot and make tracks when they start fling all kinda things after her. One old Dutch-pot just miss her head. Heh-heh. I laugh till I nearly dead.'

Jeri's madman was just one of dozens roaming the city. All the call-in programmes on the radio nowadays were about the high number of madpeople in the country. The discussions mostly centered on the causes of the problem and on just what to call the mad people. 'They
are mentally ill, mentally ill, not mad,' some priest kept on saying on every talk show.

But callers to the programme didn’t care about such distinctions because many of the madpeople were dangerous. They threw rocks at cars, they sometimes walked around stark naked, they pissed and shat wherever they pleased, and quite a few of them had machetes and knives. One day, one of them threw a rock at the prime minister’s car, and that provided a week of very good radio shows.

‘Don’t trouble them and they won’t trouble you,’ the priest insisted, and the government tried to ban him from the air but that caused such an uproar among callers that he was finally left alone. The priest brought in a famous psychiatrist to appeal to people to stop using ganja. A lot of sensible doctors thought ganja was the cause of the growing madness.

It was true that more and more people were smoking the herb or brewing it to make tea. Mothers and fathers who had warned their children never even to look at ganja were now growing it in their backyards. When the price of saltfish jumped fivefold, the family all sat down and had a smoke. When the national currency plummeted from five-for-one-U.S. to 32-for-one, people mixed a little ganja into their dumpling batter and found they didn’t give a damn. Lots of families discovered that a big cup of good strong ganja tea in the morning made the day bearable: you could listen to the politicians on the radio without going off your rocker.

But things were now getting out of hand. Madpeople hung out in front of supermarkets, with their hands outstretched, calling sane shoppers ‘John-crow’ and ‘dutty dawg’ if the shoppers gave them nothing. Sometimes they walked into a church, pushed aside the pastor and took over the service until a few bold souls physically threw them out. One Tuesday, about five of them got into Gordon House, the parliament building, and threw rotten oranges and soursops at the leader of the opposition, who for the first time ever agreed with the prime minister: something had to be done.

The politicians summoned the radio-priest and had a long talk with him. The next day the priest launched a help-the-mentally-ill campaign, and all the Church-goers in the country joined in with gusto, including the students and teachers at Jeri’s school. They rounded up tens of madpeople, coaxed them into vans, washed them, cut their hair, gave them new clothes, and put them into Bella Vista Hospital for the Mentally Insane. Nearly all of them escaped within a month.

Jeri’s madman was among those the Catholics tried to help. They scrubbed him with Carbolic soap, shaved his head, dressed him in a donated blue polyester suit and got him admitted to Bella Vista.

Jeri told her mother and father about the clean-up operation and her father said, ‘Mmm, I bet you he goin’ get sick from all that cleanliness.’ But he didn’t get ill. He walked out of Bella Vista in all his finery and came to find Jeri at the terminus. Nobody else recognized him as the
garbage-scrounger of before. He looked like Tony Parnell, the Indian TV announcer whom all the women were in love with.

‘You like mi jacket?’ he asked Jeri.

‘Yes,’ she said shyly. ‘It’s nice.’

‘So, mi dear, what you doing Sat-day night,’ he asked next, watching her stiffen. ‘Come go out with me, no?’

‘Sorry, I have to study,’ Jeri said quickly and ran off to push into a bus that had just arrived. He stared after her.

‘You know, is too bad him mad,’ Jeri told Anne-Marie. ‘He look so damn good now.’

She didn’t see him for three weeks. Then, there he was one morning, searching through the garbage. Jeri was shocked at how soiled the clothes the priests had given him were. He was like her dog Tarzan: bathe him and he ran to roll in the dirt.

She kept her eyes on the police wall when he came up to her that morning. He stopped a few feet away but she could still smell him.

‘You don’t like me no more,’ he said. She slowly turned her head and they stared at each other.

‘You want some bread?’ he asked, coming closer and stretching out his arm. She pushed his hand away, touching him for the first time.

‘No, I had breakfast already.’ He walked off and she was left to fight her way unaided into the bus.

Two days later he was back with his machete but he ignored her, concentrating on the garbage bins.

‘I shoulda gone out with him. Just one time,’ she told Anne-Marie.

‘You must be damn mad,’ Anne-Marie said.

She and Anne-Marie graduated at the end of that semester and after the summer holidays both started university. Jeri hardly travelled by bus now because she lived on campus and when she came home for the weekend, her father drove her back to the university. So she never saw the madman any more.

One day, about a year after she’d started university, she read in The Star that the police had shot and killed an ‘apparently mentally ill man’, after he had attacked a bus conductor with a machete at the King George Bus Terminus. He had ‘severed’ the conductor’s arm and the man was still in hospital, ‘suffering from shock’. It was the fifth ‘mentally ill’ person killed by police that week.

Although there was no picture, Jeri knew it was her madman who had chopped the bus conductor. And as she lay on her bed in the dormitory, with The Star beside her, the smells of the terminus flooded into the little room. The rich head-filling smell of pastry and meat from Mother’s Patty Shop, the acrid taste of the black fumes from the buses, the sweet aroma of burning ganja – incense for a different God.

‘I shoulda asked him his name,’ Jeri whispered to herself. She curled up on her bed and sucked in the smoke that was slowly filling her dorm room.
Scholarship during the last decade has successfully highlighted the wealth of creative talent and literary innovation from contemporary Caribbean women writers, yet there remains a dearth of research and criticism on early women’s writing in the region. Even Out of the Kumbla, the recent study on Caribbean women and literature, introduces its volume of scholarship with the bold declaration that ‘Out of this voicelessness and absence, contemporary Caribbean women writers are beginning some bold steps to creative expression.’\(^1\) In general terms it might well be significant to note that Caribbean women’s writing, like many other literary traditions outside of Western metropolitan male interest, has been subjected to a whole range of material obstacles and critical biases which have affected the quality of literary production and reception. However, such an observation should not suggest that being silenced is synonymous with being voiceless, or that neglect is somehow the same as absence. By focusing all attention on the exciting and acclaimed writings of the last two decades, scholars interested in Caribbean women’s writing have only further marginalized the early literature (with perhaps the exception of Louise Bennett). Indeed, I would contend that there is a neglected archive of early Caribbean women’s poetry which merits critical attention, and that readers interested in this region’s literature might be surprised and rewarded by a closer look at its almost forgotten heritage.

One of these early writers, Una Marson, is now well recognized as an important literary role model for Caribbean women and there is no shortage of tributes to her. In the introduction to Watchers and Seekers (1987), Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins remind us that

In the search for foremothers to the writers presented in this anthology, the figure and work of the poet and playwright, Una Marson, cannot be overlooked.\(^2\)

While such gestures are significant in sentiment, the brief biography and scattered quotations from her poems which this piece offer will not effect any unearthing of her as a poet. Similarly, E.A. Markham’s introductory comments to the anthology Hinterland (1989), only revive
interest in Marson in line with the prevalent politics of reading, rather than through a desire to give voice to a poet of the region who has been wrongly neglected.

We note with some satisfaction, the general revival of interest in pioneering figures like Cladde McKay (Jamaica/USA, 1889-1948) and Una Marson. McKay's somewhat visionary quality and his early use of nation-language and Marson's near feminist perspectives and wide social sympathies appeal to the present time.3

None of her work is included in the collection.

Despite several such vague, appreciative gestures (which generally signal to Marson's pioneering awareness of gender as a significant determinant of cultural identity and endorse her historical significance), there has been no detailed or substantive reading of her work. Even those critics who have pioneered a literary recognition of Una Marson's work have adhered to criteria which make an uncompromised acknowledgement problematic. The elements of mimicry and pastiche within her poetry, along with her use of orthodox poetic forms and archaic language continue to elicit embarrassed critical silences or excuses.

My project here is to map out how Marson's poems have been read by previous critics and moreover to try to theorize the variously gendered narratives within which her work has been written and the particular exclusions from her range of work upon which these positionings are founded. I then wish to engage in a close reading of two of Marson's early poems, 'In Vain' (a love sonnet) and 'If' (a Kipling parody), in order to place what have previously been seen as oppositional poetic and ideological positions side by side and thus put forward a different, consciously speculative, reading of Marson's troubling texts.

My reading is motivated by the belief that revised analytical practices and notions of poetic excellence do not only allow us to acknowledge the biases and silences which have suppressed serious evaluations of the work of black women writers, but should also be seen as a means through which to focus on the creative potentialities engendered by multiple modes of self-identification. I hope that it will become evident through my readings that I am eager to turn the focus away from the persistent meditation on the problems and adverse effects of being a colonial woman writer, in order to reveal the textual possibilities which such an identity can provide.

For the majority of critics, the writing of Una Marson, and moreover the whole of the early period of Caribbean Literature, does not advance beyond blatant aesthetic mimicry or crude political posturing. In West Indian Poetry 1900-1970 A Study in Cultural Decolonisation, Edward Baugh voiced a common belief when he stated of Jamaican poets of this period, the 1930's and 1940's, that 'such interest as their work can hold now is almost exclusively historical'.4
Certainly the commonest criticism of Jamaican poetry during the first half of the twentieth century was its reliance upon British models and its lack of experimentation and 'authenticity'. Aesthetic critics challenged the worth of the poetry on the basis that it relied too heavily upon poetic models to offer any exciting or innovative insights into the possibilities of language, imagery or form. Cultural critics disputed the poetry's worth on the basis that it was too dependent upon the experiences and ideas of the colonial centre to merit the label 'Jamaican'. Both charges reveal that imitation was seen as the principal stumbling block to real literary achievement.

Although there might be some value in understanding that imitative forms were often an attempt to seize all that went with a centrality of discourse - recognition, publication and even money, many critics have argued that imitation should not be viewed in a purely pejorative light, as the single most shameful failing on the part of the individual writer, but rather as an inevitable consequence of a historically and culturally specific situation. An appreciation of the Caribbean's oral tradition along with an understanding of the various vehicles of imaginative indoctrination employed during colonial rule enables the critic to realize that an early Jamaican writer would probably have received a notion of literature in which originality figured less significantly than their European contemporaries.

Yet, some critics have moved beyond excusing the practice by offering historical and cultural reasoning for it, in order to re-evaluate the process itself and assess the potential it holds for subverting from within and mobilising the very conventions which it appears to submit to. The line between a mere imitation of a European literary model and a re-writing of it is difficult to draw and in many cases is as reliant upon a politics of reading as of writing. The use of stylized English language and the conscious adoption of British literary models should be viewed suspiciously by the critic searching for an imitative lineage in order to substantiate claims of unbroken colonial domination in the work of both white and black writers.

Even given the power of the dominant or authoritative literary discourse in Jamaica during this period, the poetry of Una Marson testifies to the possibility of appropriating and inverting the 'mother-tongue' in order to resist and expose its cultural politics and release the language and life of a culture repressed by it. Indeed, I hope to show that by reading Marson's poems with an alertness to gender and cultural issues, it is clear that her treatment of conventional Anglo-centric poetic models is multi-valent and draws the reader's attention to the shifts from emulation to parody, and from mimicry to travesty.

It might be useful to contextualize my own reading of Marson's poetry in the line of critical positions previously articulated, before offering close readings. Although the number of critics who have written on Marson remains small, there are significant traits to be observed. The only indications of the critical response to Una Marson's
poetry contemporary to its publication in the 1930's and 1940's are those opinions expressed by male academics in the introductions to three of her four volumes. Introducing Marson's third volume of poetry, *The Moth and The Star*, in 1937, Philip Sherlock identifies the nationalistic feeling with which her poems are imbued and interprets her sentiments of cultural belonging as an extension of her emotional generosity: 'how strong is Miss Marson's love of her homeland and its people'. Although, he condones the expression of her 'love' in this respect, Sherlock seems to believe that her emotional utterance tends towards the excessive in certain other poems, displaying 'more of sentimentality than of sentiment'. It is interesting that sentimentality is employed here as a disparaging term, denoting Marson's inability to restrain emotional expression, as this signals an implicitly gendered evaluation in which the 'feminine' quality of her verse is seen to jeopardize its literary merit. Indeed, together with Sir William Morrison's introduction to *Heights and Depths* in 1931 and L.A. Strong's introduction to *Towards The Stars* in 1945, Sherlock's critical commentary alerts us to the progressiveness of Marson's poetic voice in terms of cultural politics, yet fails to appreciate her equally powerful and innovative exploration of gender identity.

In their move to contextualize her solely amongst her contemporaries and thus prioritize those aspects of her poetry which linked it to the dominant trends in Jamaican poetry at this time, these critics simply overlooked the added complexity and interest of her poetry engendered by her exploration of gender related issues. Nevertheless, their inscription of her verse as 'strongly indicative of the poetic temperament of its Author' seems to establish a transparently gendered and curiously tenacious version of Marson's poetics as somehow releasing or compensating for personal truths, even 'women's problems'. As with many other female poets, the blurring of poet and poetic persona in analysis of Marson's poetry leads to spurious and simplistic readings and seems to licence scant attention to the specific formal and linguistic dynamics of the poetry itself.

In the 1970s, as Caribbean Literature began to be acknowledged by the 'centre' and accepted as worthy of serious publishing attention, two definitive studies which drew attention to the major figures and tropes of the emergent tradition appeared. Una Marson makes a brief appearance in two chapters of *West Indian Literature* (1979), edited by Bruce King. In the first, her poetry is alluded to under a group identity along with that of many of her contemporaries as 'sentimental, imitative of Romantic and Victorian nature poetry, and strives too hard to seem elevated'. Although such terms of appraisal predominate even today, they are clearly rooted in an inability to assess the value-laden assumptions within accepted literary criteria, and consequently create unfounded generalizations about Marson's work, and that of other early poets.

However, in *West Indian Poetry* (1978), Lloyd Brown devotes more
attention to Marson, providing a fuller analysis of her verse. Indeed, he makes a significant claim for her as ‘the earliest female poet of significance to emerge in West Indian literature’ and foregrounds the importance of gender within her work.9 Nevertheless, Brown remains unable to offer any sustained evaluation of Marson’s early poetry and simply dismisses *Tropic Reveries* as ‘extremely immature ... adolescent love lyrics’ suggesting that her poetry is, in these romantic and devotional poems, unsuccessfully a woman’s verse.10 It is interesting that even though Brown is the first critic to identify the significance of gender within Marson’s work, he perceives the poetry of *Tropic Reveries* as obscuring this argument rather than elucidating it. In his desire to discuss gender only in terms of an awareness of oppression, a position clearly motivated by the political claims being made for women’s literature and black peoples’ writing during the 1970s, he dismisses a vital aspect of Marson’s poetic archive and consequently fails to negotiate the complex representation of gendered consciousness which her poetry as a whole offers.

Indeed, it was not until the 1980s, almost half a century after the publication of Marson’s four volumes, that any critical essays devoted solely to her poetry appeared. Erika Smilowitz’s biographical article ‘Una Marson - A Woman Before Her Time’,11 in 1983, and her critical reading, “’Weary of Life and All My Heart’s Dull Pain’: The Poetry of Una Marson’,12 in 1984, redressed this absence. The biographical essay has been of central importance to the act of unearthing Marson as a significant figure, and reassessing her creative achievements alongside those of her male contemporaries. Smilowitz catalogues Marson’s diverse interests and achievements in journalism, social work and broadcasting, as well as her steadfast and vehement commitment to cultural expression as a crucial source of national pride and development. While Smilowitz’s research was evidently rigorous, and certainly much needed and appreciated, her involvement with the textual seems to have been complicated by a temptation towards romanticizing Marson’s life.

Smilowitz does not deny the significance of gender within Marson’s poetry, but rather declares that she ‘wrote as a woman. Her poems tell of passion, of desire, of frustrated love and above all, of loneliness’.13 This construction of ‘woman’ is not only limited, but more importantly selective. Smilowitz moves swiftly from Marson’s personal crises to her poems in order to fix an arresting and powerful image. The lack of close analysis, which would reveal the ironies within many of these ostensibly tragically romantic poems and also draw attention to the contrasting vision of the parodies, facilitates the consolidation of one gendered line of analysis. In a sense Smilowitz’s literary-biographical line of enquiry does not position itself too distantly from Sir William Morrison’s first critical pronouncement in 1931; her focus on the relationship between ‘feeling’ and authentic ‘femininity’ is also reminiscent of earlier comments.
While Smilowitz’s endeavour seems to be simply to describe or explain Marson’s poetry with the aid of biography, the icon of the sad woman which she presents becomes evaluative in the male criticism. Brown’s ‘immature’ and Boxill’s and Sherlock’s ‘sentimental’ are brought into sharper focus by a comment which John Figueroa makes in his review of the Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English. Objecting to the amount of space dedicated to Marson’s poetry, he terms her work ‘blethering’.14 The received ‘wisdom’ of Marson as ‘a lonely person, and ... a hard worker in many a good cause’ seems to suggest that her creative work should be treated with pity rather than intellectual rigour.15 This is a view which I have encountered throughout my efforts to research Marson’s poetry and one which I believe is inextricably bound to the notion that women’s poetry is somehow merely a vehicle for unreconstructed repressed emotions. Although Smilowitz may have been struggling for a reading which did not deny the significance of lived experience to the work of a black woman poet, in this biographical piece her analysis slips into a gendered discourse which I find uncomfortable and uncritical.

In the slightly later critical essay, Smilowitz does pay close attention to the poetry and identifies many of the subtleties and ironies which her earlier piece left unexplored. She continues her examination of gender within the poetry, viewing this as Marson’s area of originality ‘beyond the racial themes of her male contemporaries’. Nevertheless, to Smilowitz, Marson’s first volume, Tropic Reveries, strikes a note of honesty: ‘The emotions are straightforward, distressingly sincere and depressing’.16 These early images and voices of the ‘lonely woman’ continue to arrest Smilowitz’s attention too powerfully. She advocates that there is ‘no escape for women in Marson’s poetry’ and that ‘Marson leaves no doubt in her reader’s mind as to her perception of the plight of women, and it is a convincingly despondent picture’.17 In contrast, I wish to argue that Marson constantly leads us to doubt the finite nature of despair in her poetry, both by presenting alternative paths for fulfilment and by her radically unstable aesthetic which mocks easy assumptions of gender identity.

Even when Smilowitz does discuss the balance between resignation and rage which Marson sets up in Tropic Reveries, through her inclusion of poems which both celebrate and ridicule self-sacrificial love, she cannot reconcile the two images as coexisting, and insists on a model of linear progression in terms of feminist consciousness.

On the one hand, she writes that she wishes to be a ‘slave’ to her lover ... on the other hand ... she implies that husbands make their wives seem foolish ... Marson’s own philosophy, unformed at this point, may have been emerging.18 It is my intention to stage a reading of these two positions as non-conflicting later on in the article.

It is crucial to be aware of Smilowitz’s critical orientation in order to
position her way of reading, Smilowitz draws our attention to (her unreconstructed reading of) aesthetic failure within Marson’s poetry.

Her poetry, it must be noted and emphasized, is of uneven quality; many of her poems barely rise above the level of greeting card doggerel and hardly belong to any serious discussion of serious poetry.

This appeal to seriousness and consistency as essential for poetic achievement signals Smilowitz’s alignment with conventional criteria of literary criticism. Certainly this is an important factor, considering the impact of colonialism upon the conventions and expectations of the ‘poetic’ within the Caribbean and the ways in which this discourse of aesthetic norms has served to marginalize women writers within Caribbean societies. As many prominent critics of Caribbean literature have argued, such criteria have been developed by and for those outside of the colonial experience and this argument seems even more pertinent to women poets who are also marginalized by many literary criteria which dismiss any considerations of gender whilst being covertly informed by patriarchal thought. Indeed, in many ways the criteria on which we base literary criticism are as dominated by an Anglo-centric, white, masculinist bias as the canon which they sanctify, and therefore, are as useful in revealing the true substance of Jamaican women poets as a fishing net is to reveal the substance of the sea.

Gordon Rohlehr has proposed the notion of ‘an aesthetic continuum’, a model of literary evaluation which acknowledges the heterogeneity of standards and styles in the attribution of literary value. The proposal of a continuum blurs the entrenched boundaries constructed to contain and defend the realm of literary excellence. Certainly it is crucial to take account of the variables of history, culture and gender when determining any equation of poetic excellence. It is also important to be open to the possibility of aesthetic failure as a particular kind of success, which displays not simply an inability to match up to a model tradition, but a crucial, even if unconscious, rejection of that tradition as the standard to be matched. It is the lack of sensitivity which Smilowitz shows to this revision of evaluative methodology and its attendant imperative to re-read aesthetic values, which drives her prescriptive and limited view of gendered consciousness and serious poetry.

The same insistence upon a single focus for a discussion of gender appears in Honor Ford Smith’s article ‘Una Marson: Black Nationalist and Feminist Writer’; the only other article of length to investigate Marson’s poetry. Ford Smith’s paper is undoubtedly important for its contextualising of Marson’s work within women’s organizations and ‘race associations’ of her time, and is also of great significance in its exploration of Marson’s work as a playwright, an aspect of her work which has been almost completely neglected (mainly due to the fact that the plays have survived only in manuscript form). Although Honor Ford Smith explores Marson’s involvement in countering racial
oppression, she also draws our attention to the specifically female presence within her poetry. However, whereas Smilowitz had pursued the 'feminine' identification established by the early male critics, highlighting the icon of the 'lonely, frustrated woman', Honor Ford Smith extends Brown’s line of enquiry and inverts this axis to focus on 'the feminist', both within Marson herself and her literary work. Again, the construction of boundaries around and singular concentration on one icon of womanhood, here that of the feminist, precipitates another prescriptive critical framework with certain blind spots.

Unlike Smilowitz, Honor Ford Smith acknowledges the class affinity in Marson’s work and is also sensitive to Marson’s insistence upon the act of social re-vision through artistic and cultural means: ‘She pioneered an approach which expresses and articulates women’s issues through aesthetic forms’. However, she shares with Smilowitz a desire to prove Marson’s baptism into feminism as a linear, consequential raising of consciousness, misreading the date of Marson’s address to the first Women’s Congress as 1938, rather than 1935, in order to resolve the conflicting views of women’s psychological and social lives presented in *The Moth and The Star* in 1937.

Ford Smith’s article does not discuss the early material which Smilowitz concentrates on, and this absence could be interpreted as an unwillingness to engage with those poems which may appear to militate against a clear feminist reading. Her analysis of Marson’s poetry is suggestive of the desire to foreground elements of ideological resistance and play down elements which are associated with essentialist notions of women’s difference. Indeed, it may be that Honor Ford Smith’s analysis can be traced to a particular point in feminist literary criticism when a sensitivity to charges that women’s poetry was characteristically emotional produced a distancing from material which might be used to substantiate such a claim.

Certainly the sentimental, self-sacrificial love sonnets disrupt the securing boundaries which late twentieth century feminism has constructed around our notion of the post-colonial female subject, and consequently we might trace Ford Smith’s discussion of the politics of Marson’s poetry as being informed by a desire to reassert identity-based politics through an identification of the points at which resistance seemed most startling. While I am sympathetic to such a reading, it is important not to confuse the project of recuperating and analysing a neglected writer’s work with an over zealous desire to find feminist foremothers. There is a danger that the poetic work of a figure like Marson, who was clearly involved in the struggle against female oppression, can become misrepresented as uniformly harmonious with an agenda of contemporary feminism and consequently denied a substantive reading which is sensitive to the particular complexities and culturally specificity of her version of gendered identity.

Clearly, the two women critics who have analysed the writings of Una Marson have given new prominence to the issue of gender politics.
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Nevertheless, in seeking to produce readings which are of contemporary interest and critically coherent, they have also suppressed the crucial element of ambivalence in her writing and ultimately facilitated readings which promote ideas of resolution and closure. To a certain extent both have reinscribed an insistence on an integrated self (a liberal humanist myth which feminism has, in other contexts, sought to displace), they both appeal to the reality behind the representations and look to biography to substantiate their readings – the spinster or the active women’s campaigner. In these respects, I would suggest that both readings are reductive in their approach.

Indeed, this brief history of Marson’s critical reception seems to suggest a fundamental conflict between a series of poems which aim not to present a unified, fixed female subject and a series of critics who struggle to establish this very object. I would argue that in their desire to give Marson a poetic voice, critics have failed to realize that it is the multiplicity of her voices which so consummately reveals her aesthetic exploration of the conflicts and paradoxes which informed the cultural and gendered consciousness of her time. It is this problem which appears to be the crucial ‘impasse’ yet to be negotiated in approach to Marson’s poetry. The readings rehearsed above together work towards the suggestion that Marson’s poetry is coded by oppositional experiences: it is the literature of a fragmented, decentred subject of (having been subject to) the constructs of patriarchy and colonialism in the slave sonnets, and yet somehow a centred, whole, self-determining subject in the explicitly feminist poems. There has been no reading to date which has attempted to reconcile, or even to stage a meeting of, the perceived ideological failings of a black woman poet and her perceived triumphs, even though Marson herself published poems articulating these two positions within a single volume – thus refusing any absolute disassociation.

In the close readings to follow, I wish to contest the mutually exclusive categorising of these two poetic modes (the sentimental and the polemical) and thereby release Marson’s poetry from the tyranny of cognitive binarism (that well-known accessory to imperialism). I hope to show that to perceive the collision of two language systems, two ideological positions as oppositional is to read the constitution of female subjectivity too simplistically (the feminine or the feminist), as well as to read the poems transparently. Should we not now be able to celebrate the difference of Marson’s poetry in its fullness, not simply drawing attention to the ways in which her poetry is different from that of white women or black men writing in Jamaica during this period, but also highlighting the difference within. We must be careful not to let the search for the legitimate post-colonial female subject (whether constructed in the form of the oppressed [Smilowitz] or the resistant [Honor Ford-Smith]) obscure or deny the complexity of the poetry.

Within Marson’s first volume, Tropic Reveries, the startling and somewhat disturbing sonnet sequence in which the Elizabethan
The language and imagery of imperialism, which surfaces in a number of Marson’s ‘love poems’ with such disturbing and shocking effect, could be traced to the Elizabethan sonneteers. Both offer the same classical framework, in which the lover is apotheosized with the characteristic blurring of religious and amatory imagery. The frustration of fulfilment (all is ‘in vain’) could also be seen as mere convention, the portrayal of necessary cruelty and indifference on the part of the lover. Marson does present an inverted imitation of the paradigm of courtly love; the man is unattainable, placed on a throne rather than a pedestal, and the woman is actively, and inevitably unsuccessfully, wooing.

Yet, by inverting the gender roles, Marson brings new meaning to the genre. The adoration of woman and her fictive ability to wield power through indifference and abstinence within male courtly love poetry is revealed as playful and even derisory, since the real power structures of
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society frustrate any such notion of female power, an issue especially pertinent in the Caribbean. The politics of such poetry exist then in the space between art and life. Whereas, in Marson’s poem it is the relation between the art and life of a black woman which makes the ‘slave image’ such a disturbing, difficult and fascinating one. However, while this poem obviously provokes consideration of the power politics of eroticism and relationships within heterosexual, patriarchal, colonial societies, I would suggest that it takes us beyond a commentary on what has elsewhere been termed ‘the pornography of Empire’.

As I have already stated, criticism to date has attempted to either suppress or dismiss sonnets such as this one, which is part of an eight poem sonnet sequence. These approaches are strongly suggestive of the fact that such poetry is considered to be a saccharine sub-genre of gendered verse and embarrassingly colonial. Within the Jamaican context ‘A Lover’s Discourse’ is not only ‘unwarranted’ (to quote Barthes). The sentimental and sacrificial proves a particularly treacherous territory for the post-colonial feminist critic for whom such poems occasion a fighting back both of charges of emotional excess and of literary dependency.

However, the poem ‘In Vain’ seems to offer us a point from which to resist these readings. The proposition of the first stanza that submission and servitude represent an opportunity ‘to come into my own’ undermines any static notion of conditioned feminine self-sacrifice or cultural masochism. At the point of submission the slave should be owned; it is a moment which traditionally signifies the denial of subjectivity, not the acquisition of it. By calling the issue of ownership into question, Marson’s poem reveals how taking control of submission can be an act of transgression. Indeed, we might wish to extend this principle to a consideration of Marson’s poetics here and suggest that by consciously crafting a poem in which subordination is undermined any relationship of ‘In Vain’ to the European sonnet tradition is similarly subverted. Thus by rehearsing a position of servitude – to poetic convention as well as to the lover/master figure – this poem is able to articulate a space in which the subject can position itself even within the structure of slavery, which might be seen as a place of no resistance. By operating within convention, the poem explores but does not endorse the surrender of self, which might be seen as the traditional destiny of the female and colonial subject. It is this ambivalent representation of woman as slave within the poem which disturbs any easy reading of Marson’s gender politics; the ultimate undecidability as to the parodic or sincere nature of this genre of her poetry demands that we engage with the complexity of sexual and cultural identity.

If we pursue the possibility of subversion as textual allegory further, the title of this volume, Tropic Reveries, might be construed rather differently from the obvious romantic and climatic interpretation. Indeed, we might wish to consider this volume as a dreaming up of
alternative tropes for the Caribbean woman writer, as a series of poems which engage in irreverent reveries concerning dominant tropes. Certainly, the figure desiring mastery is not the only trope of woman to undergo revision in this volume. Indeed, it is in Tropic Reveries, the volume most densely populated by these seemingly self-sacrificial love poems, that we also find the most acerbic attacks on 'matrimony' – the expected epitome of heterosexual romance. In this volume Marson re-models two of the 'sacred' speeches of English Literature (Kipling's 'If' and Hamlet's soliloquy 'To be or not to be ...') playfully shifting the poetic axis from a discussion of 'man's condition' to an exploration of woman's.

Although much of the text in terms of language and form is directly taken from Kipling, the effect of the poem as a whole is far from mimetic. Reconstruction on the levels of diction and form serves to facilitate deconstruction on the level of ideas. It is clear that the Jamaican woman poet is not bidding to be a pale imitation of a brilliant predecessor, but is rather choosing models and forms best suited to elucidate her own ideas and express a state of consciousness and a social role which has been left uninterrogated by patriarchy and colonialism.

The parody of Kipling's grand recipe for manhood has an interesting subtext with reference to him as colonial writer, but I want to concentrate here on gender politics. While Kipling's poem inscribes the ethos of imperial masculinity par excellence, Marson's parody appropriates this framework with daring and decorum in order to communicate the consciously anti-heroic role of a 'wife worth-while'.

*IF.*

If you can keep him true when all about you  
The girls are making eyes and being kind,  
If you can make him spend the evenings with you  
When fifty Jims and Jacks are on his mind;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or when he comes at one, be calm and sleep,  
And do not oversleep, but early waking  
Smile o'er the tea cups, and ne'er think to weep.

If you can love and not make love your master,  
If you can serve yet do not be his slave,  
If you can hear bright tales and quit them faster,  
And, for your peace of mind, think him no knave;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you tell him  
Twisted around to make you seem a fool,  
Or see the Capstan on your bureau burning  
And move the noxious weed, and still keep cool.

If you can make one heap of all he gives you  
And try to budget so that it's enough,  
And add, subtract and multiply the issue,
So that the Grocer will not cut up rough;
If you can force your dress, and hat, and stocking
To serve their turn long after they are worn,
And pass the ‘sales’, and do not think it shocking
To wear a garment that has once been torn:

If you can walk when he takes out the Ford
And teaches girls to drive before you learn,
And list to tales of tyres without a wry word,
And let him feel you’re glad for his return:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds work and prayer and smile,
Yours is the world and everything that’s in it,
And what is more you’ll be a wife worth while.

(With apologies to Kipling.) 24

The trials which mark a boy’s rite of passage into manhood are travestied by the domestic obstacle course which faces a prospective bride. In the poem, the initiation into matrimony is revealed to be an exercise requiring practical skills, dissimulation and self-delusion. Indeed, although Kipling writes of maturity and Marson of matrimony the ultimate subject of both poems is significantly the same, in terms of a discussion of masculine fulfilment, and yet crucially different. Marson’s poem effectively re-defines and re-aligns the status of this achievement, again raising a question mark over established notions of value. The references within the third stanza of the poem point to the very real problems of budgeting, but also suggest that to be contented and worthwhile a wife must learn to play with the concept of value. The manipulation of figures which the wife must learn standing figuratively for the creative accounting with her own happiness which she must perform in order for her marriage to balance emotionally.

In this poem, Marson acknowledges and ‘plays off’ the primary text with critical awareness, thus making the ideological inflections of the poem far more explicit. To undervalue parody as either a sign of the writer’s inability to escape received models (a potential post-colonial reading) or of a penchant for apolitical play (a potential postmodern reading) would be to miss the radical relationship which these poems establish between different models of experience and different participants within an established discourse. As Helen Tiffin has pointed out:

Pastiche and parody ... offer a key to the destabilisation and deconstruction of a repressive European archive. Far from endlessly deferring or denying meaning, these same tropes function as potential decolonizing strategies which invest (or reinvest) devalued ‘peripheries’ with meaning.25

It is woman and domestic politics as periphery which Marson addresses in her parodies. As Linda Hutcheon points out, parody ‘establishes difference at the heart of similarity. No integration into a new context
can avoid altering meaning, and perhaps even value’. Indeed, it is crucial that the transcontextual act becomes transvaluative as the issue of sexual difference is written into Marson’s versions.

Rhonda Cobham-Sander has described Marson’s parodies as ‘of slight literary merit ... probably written while Marson was still at school for the entertainment of school friends’. Although this suggestion of commonplace schoolgirl activity is purely speculative it might be interesting to pursue this line of enquiry a little further. Rather than indicating the lesser value of these poems (Cobham Sander’s comment implies that they are somehow inconsequential and aesthetically immature), this idea that the poems were produced as a direct response to and in the context of the colonial educational system serves to highlight their inherently subversive quality. The pedagogic imperative for repetition which was instilled by this system is here radically revised through parodies of high literary discourses. By choosing to travesty such well-established texts, Marson is able to demonstrate her knowledge of tradition, whilst asserting a counter-discourse via the substitution of woman’s experience.

The apology to Kipling at the end of the parody does not signal the filial relationship with indifference. Marson deliberately foregrounds the ‘original creator’ and text and thus ironically references the consciously disobedient nature of this poem through a gesture of mock-humility. Although such explicit intertextuality may suggest that the meanings in operation here can only come into ‘play’ because of their textual (and colonial) antecedents, the counter-textuality of this poem illustrates that Marson’s relationship to tradition is not passive or derivative in nature.

While Cobham-Sander seeks to give agency to the education system, with Marson simply in the role of reactor, my reading seeks to highlight how this poem actually reclaims agency from an institution founded on a belief in the hierarchy of discourses in order to communicate a consciously non- (if not anti) elitist perspective. Far from being any incidental act of verbal play, this parody presents ideological rivalry, offering Marson an opportunity to radically dislocate tradition from authority and to question the gender politics of such an authoritative text.

Indeed, far from reading this parody as insignificant experiment with poetry or as a ‘miscellaneous’ work unrelated to the volume as a whole, I wish to propose that Marson’s parody be read as a paradigmatic text for an analysis of the tensions between imitation and creation within much of her work where intertextuality operates more subtly. Parody with its possibility for split signification works both within and against the colonial imperative to mimic, making a double demand on meaning which I would suggest is also operating in some of Marson’s ‘love poems’ on a less explicit level.

With these links in mind, it is interesting to consider the element of self-parody to be found within Tropic Reveries. In ‘To Wed Or Not To
Wed’ Marson ironizes women who ‘pine and sigh under a single life’, an agenda which a less generous critic may accuse her love poems earlier in the volume of fulfilling and in ‘If’ she seems to satirize ‘In Vain’ with the counsel to ‘serve yet do not be his slave’. Perhaps then, having arrived at the parodies, which are the penultimate poems of the volume, we can laugh at these earlier poems as unenlightened, if that is the parodies give us anything legitimate to laugh at? Perhaps we should laugh at the wonderful sense of contradiction which is embraced by Marson within one volume? Would this be an embarrassed laughter at the fact that Marson failed to spot her own discrepancies, or at the fact that no single version is more ‘true’ even though they may appear to be mutually exclusive?

If we laugh at these parodies, I think that it should be because they dare to confront paradox, embrace their constructed ‘other’ (the slave sonnets), and thereby tell the ‘whole truth’ which is necessarily partial. By communicating both versions of female destiny, Marson is able to disclose the multiplicity of identities, breaking free of the fiction of a ‘unified self’, to reveal the complex and contradictory constitution of a black woman’s subjectivity within a colonial and patriarchal society.

Read in this manner Una Marson’s poetry, testifies to the way in which a black woman poet was able to employ a language created by and imbued with a paternalistic and patriarchal ideology in order to write poetry which explored and exploded the mythologies constructed to support racism and sexism. However, it is her awareness of herself as a woman within a Jamaican society, where oppressive ideologies still operated, which provides the reader with a poetry which probes the dimensions of self beyond the nationalization of consciousness which has come to mark the literary achievement of this period.

NOTES

6. Ibid., p. xii.
10. Ibid., p. 32.
15. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 24.
18. Ibid., p. 25.
19. Ibid., p. 22.
Dragons in E.8

I’m waiting to see my social worker in her office. It makes me angry when she’s late, because she’s supposed to be working not doing me a favour. Here she is. Sandra. She’s just been up Ridley Road market to do her shopping and she got stuck on the one-way system up there. She apologises to me as a matter of course. Manners are important to Sandra. When I was little I remember a story I read about a girl who never said ‘please’ and ‘thank-you’. Her aunt who came to visit cut big ‘P’ and ‘Q’ letters from card and pinned them on her pinafore everytime the girl forgot. In the end the dress was so covered up with ‘P’s’ and ‘Q’s’ that the girl finally realised how to be well brought up.

Not dragged up like me.

‘Why do you always put yourself down?’ asks Sandra, really concerned. She really wants to know. She wants the key to understanding people like me. But she doesn’t understand. When I say things like that it’s a private joke with myself, because I’m saying what she’s thinking way back in her head. But when that’s true, and there’s a hundred Sandra’s thinking it, then it touches me and I sort of think it’s true as well.

You’ve got to have killer instinct in Hackney if you’re driving. The one-way paranoia we used to call it. Round there no-one cares what side of the road they’re on. You just have to drive like everyone else, like you’ve only got your destination in mind. I’ve said that to her before. That you can learn it, you don’t have to be born and bred in Hackney for it. I’m sure she thinks black people were born knowing how to sing, dance and cause traffic jams. Mind you, there’s no rush in NW3 so I suppose she’s not used to it.

Ridley Road is very good for fruit and veg though. And vegetables you never saw before. Plus when I got my hair permed, I used to buy the Curl Activator from there, that all the black girls used. There’s so many shops down that road that just sell black hair products and nasty bleaches for lightening the skin. Beats me why some black want to be white. My pink stain never did me much good.

Why am I thinking about Hackney when I’m supposed to be talking about something else? I’m always doing that these days. Just going off onto a different subject. It’s like my head is so full of things, I have to keep pushing them out to make room.

I’d been living on the Down’s Estate for a few months when Fliss and Rob moved in downstairs. It wasn’t really my flat, Barry’s name was on
the tenancy. He'd asked me to move in after we'd been going out together for about six months. I was working at an old people's home and he was despatch riding. He was good to me and we had some laughs together. We were high up and there was no lift but you got used to the stairs after a while. Anyway, there were stairs where my mum and dad lived. They had a lift, but it was always broken. Like the weather, it was another thing everyone liked to moan about. It was time for me to move out from there anyway. All those people with no future got on my nerves.

Fliss was short for Felicity. I was hanging out of the balcony watching them move into the flats on a Saturday afternoon. Barry had just pulled up on the Kawasaki and he was chatting to them in the empty courtyard and car park, that was also the kid's playground.

We helped them with their boxes and carrier bags. The Council hadn't bothered to let a lot of the flats there, so it was no wonder that squatters were moving in. Fliss and Rob had pink hair and wore leather jackets with writing sprayed on, but they seemed o.k.

We'd been redecorating our place and I'd made some big cushions for the floor. Rob and Barry got stuck into bike conversation so I started to tell Fliss about what I'd been doing on the flat. She didn't seem very impressed, but we were drinking coffee and rolling joints and making friends. By opening time we were all a bit stoned, so we took them to our local. They had been at college together, but they said it was a load of crap. Rob was looking for work and Barry's firm needed a rider so that was that. Fliss was a painter and wasn't bothered if she had a day job or not. She felt it would interfere with the creative process.

I worked for three days a week, so some afternoons I'd go downstairs to chat with Fliss. I was surprised that even after a month their flat was still full of carrier bags and boxes of stuff just sitting around. There was a big double mattress on the floor with a duvet. The walls still had peeling wallpaper. She'd bought a rug for the floor that even my Mum's dog would not have slept on. All round there were oil paints and brushes, cigarette packets and cooking foil, tins of half finished baked beans and dead matches. There were lots of Fliss's paintings around the place, with paint buttered on with knives, that didn't look like anything.

She was alright Fliss, but her pose bored me at times. You could tell by her look that she had money, yet she pretended to be poor. I wondered what the people who had lived there for years thought about them. Most of them just put up with it I suppose.

You could tell Fliss had never lived around West Indian people before, because she went out of her way to make friends with as many as she could. Especially the rastas who sold grass. The old black people would sometimes kiss their teeth as we passed them on the stairs. I felt embarassed because Fliss was wearing a t-shirt with a tit hanging out of a rip. I think she thought I was a bit square for keeping the flat clean and wearing clothes that didn't make a statement. But I think she knew
we were ordinary and that's why she talked to us.

It was strange how gradually but somehow the estate became divided up into those people who had lived there for years, and the new people. Most of them were white political activists or art students looking for life. They had come running from detached housing and fitted kitchens that their neighbours wanted to run to. I suppose I thought I was smart because I had them all sussed, the losers and the winners.

There used to be some good parties in those flats. Word of mouth in the corridors and so many people you could hardly breathe. Dope, and marble cake and fried chicken in the kitchen. People bringing their kids, dancing with them. Even the parties changed. The music was different and not so thick with smoke. Grass would still go round, but now there were five pound notes rolled up to snort white lines, pieces of silver foil to chase dragons with ...

I knew where they were coming from. How they were slumming it with the working classes. I might not have had their education but at least I knew how to pay my rent legally. Once I was telling Fliss about the old dears I worked with. About having to take them to the toilet, waiting on them to remember their train of thought ... She said it sounded 'gross'. She said that word a lot. She also said 'wicked' if she liked something, like she'd heard the black kids say. There was no talking to Barry about it. He was so keen, so impressed by their rebellion.

'What's so good about working class people?' He challenged me one day. 'They're ignorant and prejudiced. My dad he'll work and die driving that train for London Transport for what? He's never been on a plane or had a dream beyond four walls.' I knew what he meant but it upset me and I felt like he was betraying me, my mum and dad, our lot ...

Still, it was better than talking to next door who was always moaning. Fliss had some good books in her flat all still in boxes. She was out of it most of the time but I didn't mind just looking through the art books, while she spent two hours spiking her hair up with Palmolive soap. I got all interested in surrealism, and even went to the library to find out more. Maybe to the others it was a joke, but it felt fine to look up things for myself. On my day off I went to a Surrealist exhibition in the West End and used my old UB40 to get in free. I tagged along with a tour, eavesdropping as the guide explained the significance of ants in Dali's work. It wasn't important or necessary just interesting. I bought some postcards for the old dears which they put up on the notice board. The one I bought for Fliss was still in its paperbag on the floor. She was sitting in front of her canvas chewing her brush. She said she took smack to help de-structure her work.

She wasn't really interested in the exhibition. I remember she was shocked I didn't drink or smoke cigarettes. I didn't quite fit her image about working class people wasting their lives. Well I suppose I did in the end.
I did get to know Sonia next door after a while. It wasn’t surprising she was so miserable. She was on her own with a kid and her boyfriend ‘the governmen’ man’ as she called him, came round when he felt like it. According to Sonia everything belonged to the ‘governmen’’. She says, ‘I’m off to my governmen’ bed now’ or ‘sit down on the governmen’ chair love’, mimicking her old mum who always used that expression in Trinidad. Sometimes I didn’t know whether she meant the social security snooper or her boyfriend. Her daughter Tamla and me would always hoot with laughter sitting side by side in front of the telly. One night the governmen’ man cancelled by phone at the last minute. I was going to babysit and me and Tamla had spent the whole afternoon plaiting Sonia’s hair for the occasion. Tamla was six and she taught me how to make thin plaits and wax them carefully at the ends. Two hundred plaits! We were more upset than Sonia. ‘Well you know how governmen’ is’ she said to cheer us up ‘they screw you when they feel like it’. She winked across at me to see if I had got the double meaning. Tamla knew too, but she always let her mum think that she didn’t, she always looked after her like that. I used to think when I had a kid, I wanted it to be just like Tamla.

I hadn’t seen much of Fliss and Rob for a few months but Barry saw them all the time. They always seemed to be sharing a private joke.

I still went to the library once a week and one day I met Stafford who lived upstairs, in there. He was a graphic designer and unlike his younger brother Harold who was a rastafarian, he dressed in smart tailored jackets. Sometimes I’d lie in bed waiting for Barry to get in from downstairs and I’d hear Stafford come in at four or sometimes five in the morning. They shared a room and he’d always wake Harold with his noise. They’d argue and bang about, wake up the other flats. They were the best of friends really but their lifestyles were quite different. I thought Stafford was quite tasty but when he took out blonde women to nightclubs, they weren’t women like me. ’Rich white tarts who like being seen with forbidden fruit’ said Sonia with contempt. I would lie and imagine them because we never saw any of them. Stafford never brought anyone home.

Harold was different. He’d taken to visiting me and usually he would just sit quietly watching T.V. while I did chores or read a book. Sometimes we’d talk. Although he didn’t say much, I knew he liked being there and that was fine with me too. I hardly saw Barry these days anyway and when I did he was always talking about Fliss and Rob. If Fliss ever came upstairs, Harold would make some excuse and leave. Unlike me, he was too proud to even smoke her dope. Meanwhile, I was beginning to suspect that Barry was doing smack. We never really got round to talking about it and my attitude was that if someone didn’t want to tell you something, then I didn’t want to know.

Sometimes Fliss and Rob would come back from Marks and Spencers loaded down with carrier bags full of food. We all ate like kings for a
week on Chicken Kiev and Beef Bourguignon. Fliss said I should try it, it was easy. But I said I wouldn’t shoplift, because my mum had got nicked for stealing half a pound of butter from Waitrose. It never mattered if those things were true, they loved it. It made them feel guilty for not having to steal necessities. They wanted so much to appear poor and yet the reality made them swallow uncomfortably, it was true though. I used to think screw them for everything, their conscience and their money. My fridge was full of prawns, ham, pate and strawberries. Barry said I was wicked, and I should be grateful to them because they had been good to us. He also said that I should just admit that I was jealous. I felt sad and wondered if he was right, and also if he’d stopped loving me.

Around the time I started taking smack, Hackney was on the crest of a change. I remember watching black women putting out the washing, gaping at the distant houses in the streets. Prices were going through the roof. ‘For Sale’ signs were sprouting up in the grottiest road. In the streets all the new shops were rubbing shoulders with the rough trade. Next to the Greek shop was a vegetarian Indian restaurant that looked like a wine bar. Next to the useful Hoover parts shop was a useless kite shop and a designer jewellery shop that also sold one-off furniture. Our local was under new management. They knocked the pool room down and turned it into what looked like a greenhouse. It was called the conservatory, and there were books on the shelves. There were no fruit machines and the beer tasted like water Barry said. The Socialist Workers’ Party had their meetings there on Tuesday nights. Once a month they would purchase marijuana from the old black guys who still drank in there. The Yuppies didn’t socialise in Hackney, they just got their cars broken into. The ones who mingled were the do-gooders, the revolutionaries, the ‘artistes’ ...

Harold and Stafford lived with their old dad. Their mum had died two years ago just before we moved in. I took some Beef Bourguignon up for them and told their dad I’d cooked it, because he wouldn’t have approved of stolen goods. I could hardly get inside the door because five suitcases were piled up in the hall. I thought they were going somewhere. But Harold explained they just hadn’t touched anything since their mum died. Squeezing past into the front room I saw 3D Christ hanging over the mantelpiece, looking down on the countless glass fishes that you get in Ridley Road for 50p. All neatly arranged on different coloured crocheted mats. Everything shrouded in dust. It made me think of all the important, sentimental clutter that people collect in their life, that just becomes stuff when you die. I suppose she was always packed, always ready for the day she would leave for that place she had abandoned for England, but of course she never went. Fliss was laughing about it. She said their flat was ‘tacky’. Funny how the only thing about black people she liked were the drugs and the music. I nearly told her that her paintings were the nastiest things I’d ever seen.
But suddenly everything seemed empty to me that day. Peoples' dreams and hopes, their aimless existence, the government man screwing you when he felt like it, half a pound of butter becoming a criminal record. And I thought I heard laughter and champagne glasses clinking in the luxury conversions. And just out of earshot, up in the tower blocks, someone was cleaning toilets ...

The four of us were sitting in, listening to music and it was raining outside. That was the day I first had smack. Just smoked it. That's what the silver foil was about. I watched Rob burn the precious white powder and pass me a tube to inhale it with. I hadn't realised the three of them had been doing it for the last few months. Well I thought, why not, I'll try it.

It was the best feeling I'd ever had. I didn't feel anxious, or angry or scared. It was better than smoking dope because you didn't feel paranoid. I hugged Barry as though I hadn't seen him for ages. We all had a laugh. In fact we were all laughing so much I can't even remember what the joke was or who it was on. I thought it was alright to smoke it anyway, but jacking up was disgusting. I'd never do that. I was far too sensible.

It was coming up for two years we'd lived on the Downs. Smack was cheaper than speed those days and it was a small price to pay for the way you felt. Pistachio nuts were really cheap in the Indian shop and the bloke told me it was because there was a war on between Iran and Iraq. So it had become a cheap import. Smack came from there, so I reckoned it was probably also a good earner for some government who was shipping it out by the car load. I was feeling fine as I strolled past Hackney front line, digesting two of London's cheapest imports.

All the tower blocks looked like a fairy tale with pink clouds behind them. The air hung heavy with diesel and the sound of distant walkers, but it felt like another planet. I was on top of the world.

There was a phone box. About a dozen mean looking rastas were congregating around it. It was their business hot line. It was dusk and I was smiling as I walked past. I had nothing anyone could steal, just well being. There was a row of shops there that all hated each other. The kebab place hated the Chinese takeaway hated the Indian shop hated the West Indians. And they all hated the Jews because they got there first and done well and moved to Golders Green. Well not hate, professional rivalry you could call it. After all they were all in the same boat.

One night the four of us went to a kebab place on Green Lanes. Three in the morning and the place was packed. Some old men were playing cards in the back room with the video on, drinking turkish coffee. In the restaurant proper Stavros was talking to us. We always called him that even though his name was Mustapha because we couldn't pronounce it. He was saying how he watched the Cypriots move up the Piccadilly line. They started at Finsbury Park with rented accommodation then moved to Arnos Grove where they had a semi
and a thriving business. By the time they’d arrived, two houses and respect, they’d made it to Cockfosters. There was an Irish man playing guitar and singing country and western, really badly but no-one cared. I just laughed and laughed because I felt like a citizen of the world.

I was in my own private carriage, reserved first class. Everyone was out there engaged in the battle of life. Trapped by the very rituals that promised to set them free. Working like dogs so they could relax, being unhappy so that they could be happy. All waiting for a receipt for their good behaviour.

I was lying about it but I was jacking up then. Well it was getting expensive and you need much less if you shoot it straight into your blood. You learn it really easy. Finding a vein, slapping it to attention before feeding it. So easy to feel good.

The four of us spent nearly all of our time together. I lost my job around then because I could never get up in time. And I would lose patience with them when it wasn’t fair to. The old folk needed someone reliable, so I was a bad bet for them. Well that was alright. I managed to get some cleaning jobs in Stoke Newington. That was a turn up. I’d always promised myself I’d never clean other people’s houses, like my mum had done because she wanted a better life for me. And I could feel Fliss looking down her nose at me for it. But, I needed the money didn’t I?

Days just passed by. Sometimes I’d go into a panic if I thought we couldn’t afford to get some more stuff but Fliss and Rob always had some. So I suppose I had been wicked about her after all. Occasionally I’d suspect Barry had brought some for himself without sharing it with me, and we’d row about it.

You don’t get addicted just like that, whatever the adverts tell you. It sort of creeps up behind you like a stranger and before you know it, it’s like your bloody guardian angel looking over your shoulder, checking every move, every thought you have. Anyway I get pissed off when people say you’re not with it when you’re smacked out. I know what’s going on around me. And what I close my mind to isn’t worth knowing because it’s bullshit. The trouble with people like Sandra is that they’re into the bullshit, making sense of it from the books they’ve read. I know more about it than she does, I could do her job. But who am I kidding? No I couldn’t, because I’m sick, and she’s all I’ve got to help me get better.

Sonia said she didn’t want me babysitting the kid anymore. She probably thought I was a bit of a health hazzard, I must have had a government health warning across my face. I could hardly get out of bed in the mornings so I didn’t care. At the time I thought she had front to get annoyed with me talking about smack all the time, but it was alright for her to go on about trying to give up cigarettes.

The people on the estate didn’t rate us much. They thought we were dirty. They probably had as much scorn for me as I had for Fliss and Rob. And yet, in life you make strange bedfellows don’t you?
A lot of things happened around that time. What kept me and Barry together was something ugly, when it should have been something beautiful. It had nothing to do with the smack. I forgot my pills and lost so much weight that my insides were all messed up. First I didn’t have a period for a few months and then all this blood came out, staining the sheets accusingly. The cramps were so bad I thought I was going to die. I didn’t dare go to the clinic in case they did a blood test. All this blood came out. And somewhere inside that mess there was a shredded, feeble little life.

Harold still came round sometimes but I hardly noticed him I was so out of my head. My stomach hurt. The old men looked sideways at me as I staggered downstairs in the middle of the afternoon. I felt bad. I wanted to just feel alright but I felt bad, and dirty like a rubbish bag. There was nothing to talk about. I just took some more stuff so I didn’t have to think about it, so I would feel alright. There was nothing to do was there? It was all over.

One night the phone rang. It was Harold. We all started to talk on the phone, telling him to come over because we were having a party, yeah! The four of us were sprawled out around our flat, having eaten the last of the food. The sink was full of dirty dishes and cigarette ends. The record had finished but no one cared to move the hesitating needle back. I suddenly missed the quietness of Harold and I really wanted him to come over.

Then I realised he wasn’t talking in his usual Jamaican accent. He was talking like me, fast and scared. He said he was at Stoke Newington Police Station. He’d been picked up, and he wanted me to come and get him. He must have been really desperate to call me. So I went, even though the others said ‘wow what a downer’.

By the time I got there the police looked like wild animals to me. I’d had a hit before I left the flat to see me through the ordeal. As if it was me that had been beaten up. I strung some words together to the man behind the desk, gave him my address and all the rest of it. Finally they let Harold go, as we left the station, a police man sniggered ‘nigger’s tart’.

On the street Harold said nothing, we walked and I had no idea of what happened. As the free night air hit my face, I realised I had just been in a police station with heroin running around my blood stream. I started to laugh because I felt very brave and clever. Harold looked at me as though I was the most pathetic person he’d ever seen. I was so wrapped up in myself and thinking how ungrateful he was for my rescue that I never even noticed he was walking with a limp. That night I felt I’d let Harold down in a way, but I couldn’t think straight. I felt ashamed but I didn’t know of what.

The next night we got nicked. They burst into the flat like a movie, four policemen. They’d been watching Rob for ages. They found everything. I remember the plastic bags they put the pieces of foil, the tubes, the works, into. The evidence. The four of us got bundled into a
car. Lights came on but no one really noticed or cared. A few flats
double locked their doors. We were screeching down the one-way
paranoia and it was just another night in Hackney...

I wanted to talk about class to Sandra, but it’s not on her agenda
today. There was one policeman at the nick who loved his job. He was
ordinary, like me. Done well for himself. But it was like his slip was
showing. The little man who tugged his forelock at gentry was still
inside his head directing the class traffic. So he pushed me into a cell
saying ‘Get in there you slag’. All that gold dripping was from Fliss’s
neck as she started to blubber in front of him like a kid. And he said
‘What’s a nice girl like you doing with this scum?’ They let her go a
couple of hours later after her dad came down to the police station
sounding his aitches.

We weren’t so lucky of course. Fifty grams is a lot and with the
scales, Barry and Rob got done for dealing. They let me off with a
caution. I sold them a fast story about being led on by my boyfriend
and having to stay with him after I’d had a miscarriage because I was
too scared to leave. The solicitor from Legal Aid was great.

It was all rotten though. All the ducking and diving just to save
myself. I felt like my life wasn’t mine, it was just a defence. Like all the
shit that had happened to me was just a strategy to get myself off the
hook. I did visit Barry a few times but it was hard to get visiting orders
if you weren’t married, and his mum refused to talk to me. He started
writing me letters addressed to Mrs. Barry Watkins and that made me
laugh. There he was inside, getting his methadone script, being forced
to come off, and dreaming. He thought he could lean on me, when I
was falling apart. It was no good, it had all gone bad between us. We
never saw Fliss again. I had to give up the flat and move back in with
my parents and see Sandra once a week.

She says I’m hostile against people. That I use my hostility against
rich people as a crutch. She says I feel displaced and that I need to
integrate myself back into society in a meaningful way. She says I need
to talk about my feelings around the miscarriage.

What she means is I’m fucked up by life, by smack. I think she’s
probably right, but everyone’s fucked up. It just depends what side of
the table you’re sitting. All I have to do is follow the rules and then I’ll
get better. She’s pinning letters cut of card on my pinafore. I’ve got to
leave aside all my thoughts and sadness and just concentrate on getting
better. I miss the Downs and Tamla and Harold. But I don’t suppose I
was anything to them. Just another face that passed through. They
don’t need me to survive. And I look around my mum’s flat and I
wonder if I might have been happy if I’d settled for what was expected
of me. I miss Fliss too in a way because there was a lot of similarity
between us now I think about it. We were both trying to be different,
trying to be someone. Only my mum’s still cleaning and my dad’s still
unemployed. Fliss did send me a Christmas card saying she was
working at her dad’s firm. She never mentioned smack or her address.
Today I’m thinking about getting better. I’m thinking about all the things I could do. I can’t blame Fliss or Sandra because I’m a mess. I could be one of those people out there who makes choices about what they want to do in life.

Sometimes I do start to cry, because it’s no good planning tomorrows because I won’t do any of these things. At the worst I’ll end up being addicted to methadone and at best I’ll end up dead. When I’m feeling positive I do think I’ll stop, but then I get my script and I don’t know. I just feel different.

After a while I couldn’t be bothered to go to the toilet everytime I wanted to jack up so I just did it in the living room. Mum and dad were watching Eastenders in their slippers and I just stuck the needle into my arm.

My dad goes mad, but he won’t throw me out. My mum starts crying but I don’t know what to do. It feels bigger than me, this thing. And I feel so bad, so low if I haven’t got any.

In the morning I get up, have breakfast and I really hate smack. I hate getting under my dad’s feet as he sits sadly watching the afternoon T.V. smoking himself to death. I hate being here and making them ashamed. I give myself lots of good reasons for stopping. I’d like to hear Stafford coming in late at night waking up the other flats. But I wasn’t happy then either. I was always wondering where Barry was. How funny, then I was angry because he was doing smack and now I’m angry because he’s managing to come off it.

But I want to start thinking about the future instead of thinking about smack all the time. I watch T.V. and by the afternoon I want some and I forget about my resolve because I’m another person now and I want some. Sometimes I sell my script of methadone for smack. It’s so hard because it’s so easy. The physical urge overrides everything and even the idea of being so weak, so addicted, doesn’t stop me wanting.

There’s nothing left to say now. I just wanted to write down something about myself because I’m sure I’m going to die soon. It’s for my dad so that he knows I did nearly turn out alright and that none of it is his fault. It’s for someone who very nearly existed inside me. And it’s for Harold and Tamla because I liked them even though I never really fitted in. It’s also for Sandra because I never seemed to be able to answer her questions. I can’t tell her exactly which day I took smack or why. You’ll have to go somewhere else to find those answers. Maybe your books or television documentaries will tell you why people become heroin addicts.
Atima Srivastava Interviewed by Mary Conde

4 October 1995, London

Atima is a very pretty name. Is it common in India?

Thank you! No, it’s very unusual. It means ‘Light after light after light after light’ (perhaps ‘transcendence’ is the nearest equivalent in English) and it’s the name of a famous book of poems in India. Actually my friends call me Tim, and my family calls me Timmy.

You come from a family of poets, don’t you?

Yes, my parents and uncle are well-known Hindi poets, and my grandmother is a quite famous Hindi poet. She’s just died, and I’ve been thinking of translating some of her poems.

But you never thought of writing poetry yourself?

Oh God, I can’t stand poetry! I never learned to appreciate it.

How did your writing career start?

I wrote a short story, ‘Dragons in E.8’, which has been like a lucky charm or a talisman for me. I’d never written a short story before, and I entered it on the off-chance for the Bridport Arts Centre competition in 1988, and it came first out of three thousand. I won a thousand pounds, and the judge, Martin Booth (to whom I am utterly, eternally grateful), put me in touch with his agent. Then I wrote my first novel, Transmission, which Serpent’s Tail published in 1992. The strange thing is that my father won an All-India competition with his first short story when he was seventeen.

How old were you?

Twenty-six. I was born in 1961, so I’m thirty-three now.

I read Martin Booth’s report on the competition, and I was interested to see that he said of ‘Dragons in E.8’ that ‘It should be a novel’ – meaning that as a compliment, of course! He also said that he had tears welling in his eyes as he read the ending, although he recommended cutting the last sentence. (‘Maybe your books or television documentaries will tell you why people become heroin addicts.’) Would you cut the last sentence, in retrospect? What kind of audience did you imagine the narrator addressing?

How could I fault what he said! Of course I’d cut it! I suppose the implication of that last sentence is that I, like everybody else, used to
think of heroin addicts just as statistics. Not that I set out to write an 'issue' story. I was very flattered when a girl I knew who was a heroin addict said to me, 'I didn't know you took heroin.'

Anyway, he did say that cutting the last sentence is all he'd do to the story, bar correcting the typing errors ...

Oh, that was mortifying! I gave it to the secretary at work to type, and - I'm not being racist, but - English secretaries! I didn't even read it through, and I felt terrible when they sent it back, with millions of misspellings. I mean, I'm a brilliant speller.
There are a lot of comments about English people in Transmission: the speculation that they are obsessed with chocolate and puddings because English food is so boring, for instance. Do you think of yourself as English or Indian?

I think of myself as an Indian living in London, although I think there’s a lot of Englishness in me. That observation about the puddings is my dad’s. My mum loves English puddings, but my dad’s been here twenty-five years, and never eaten an English meal.

What’s an example of your ‘Englishness’?

I value my physical privacy. In India, if you want to go and listen to some music in your room, people will ask ‘What’s wrong?’ And through living here I’ve learnt certain formulas of politeness. But I might meet someone at a bus stop and tell them my life story – an Indian person wouldn’t do that.

I think part of my ‘Indianness’ is my deep connection with my family, knowing who I am through my family. The Indian child has a deep sense of self-esteem through being loved, and I’m an only child, so I was mega-loved! I think there’s a certain level of acceptance of behaviour in India you don’t get in England, too. An example is something my dad told me quite recently: his mum died when he was quite young, and his dad married again, and there was only one existing photograph of his real mum. His dad said he’d get it framed, but then he said he’d lost it, and later it occurred to my dad that he’d destroyed it deliberately. Now, in England this person would be in therapy! But my dad said he thought he was right: he didn’t want the children to grow up worshipping the photograph.

Language is very important, obviously. I’m bilingual in English and Hindi, and because I can speak my own language it’s relatively easier for me to get by in India. While I was writing the new novel I thought of the Hindi phrase to describe the light changing to evening. I used the word ‘dimmering’ in the end, which I don’t think really exists in English.

I’m going on my annual trip to India in December. But at present I can’t imagine living permanently in India. I think if I’d stayed in India, I’d only have mixed with middle-class Indians, instead of mixing with lots of different classes: I’m obsessed with the English class system! I did get a British passport about four years ago, because I was fed up with queuing for a visa to go to France for the day.

So it wasn’t from a great love of England?

I do love England ... but I don’t know why you say ‘England’! I only know London!

When did you come to England?

When I was eight. I was born in Bombay.
Like Kipling.

Yeah! I was listening to a programme about Kipling on Radio 4 just a few days ago, and I thought, if it was all right for Kipling to write about India, why shouldn’t I write about England?

_Do you feel you can write anything you like?_

Yes! I feel very privileged. I’ve got my own flat, I can earn enough money to write by working in television, I got an Arts Council grant for my second novel, and I love writing. And I don’t feel I’ve got to sell positive images. I’m sorry, but if you’re in the business of selling positive images you should be in advertising!

_Do you write very quickly?_

I wrote _Transmission_ like the clappers. And it’s practically a first draft. This second one was a bit slower.

_How do you write?_

Partly in longhand in an exercise book and partly straight on to the computer.

_Were the characters in Transmission based on real people?_

I put my friend Philippa, and that’s her real name, in _Transmission_, and she was like, ‘How dare you kill me?’ But I needed the narrator to get a sudden shock of mortality. Besides, I didn’t have any use for that character any more. Of course, the narrator isn’t _me_ exactly, and I’m a television editor, not a researcher.

_How did you get into television?_

Well, I did a degree in philosophy and literature at Essex University, but I dropped the philosophy after one year, and I should have done American Studies so that I could get a year in the States — I _loved_ American literature —

_Have you been to the States?_

Only to Florida and New York when I was seventeen, with my parents, with a view to settling there. But I’m very glad we didn’t move permanently away from London.

_Where were we with your career?_

Oh yeah, after university I worked as a waitress (I used that in _Transmission_) and then I worked for two months as a gopher in television and then I got put into the editing room. I wanted to do something with my hands because I’d done literature before and was fed up with researching. Then I got made assistant editor. I’ve been an editor for about ten years now. I learnt the craft of editing from technicians who were quite often racist classist sexist homophobic males, but who were nevertheless very professional and taught me how
to do my job professionally, when all I wanted was to sit with my feet on the table.

Have you suffered from racism?
Well, no, but I'm from a middle-class family, and very self-confident. And I was all right. When I started school in England I was at an advantage because I'd had such a good Indian education. I was the best at grammar and spelling. I dislike all this scrabbling for power, and blaming people: 'I've got a headache, whose fault is it?' I want to live in an integrated way.

Do you think working in television has influenced your work?
I do sometimes see things in sequences. And I've done a couple of screenplays. I thought that would be good because I'm good at dialogue, and it's fun to see it come to life, but I must admit I didn't like the collaboration, and writing scripts takes so long! I'm not really interested in writing anything but prose.

Why haven't you had your short stories published?
Because I'm waiting to write a few more.

Can you say a bit about your second novel? What's it called?
There's no title as yet. It's written from the point of view of a lower middle-class English girl about her childhood friendship with an Indian girl who she discovers, years later, is a heroin addict.

So in a sense you've returned to the subject matter of 'Dragons in E.8'?
Well, yes, but there's a lot more to it than that! Susan Jones, the narrator, is English, but her identity is composed of the Indianness of her friend Meena with whom she grew up, and in many ways Meena is quite English, especially what with having emigrated to Spain! (Eldorado and all that.)

I liked the crossover in the new novel where Meena says of her 'little Empire' of her Spanish garden and swimming-pool that it's "Just like the British Empire. Planned by geniuses. Executed by morons. Thwarted by Cunning Natives."

Yes, the Cunning Natives being the Spanish workmen who've managed to build a house for themselves out of the wages from Meena and her husband Simon, who are paying them by the day.

I think it works very well ... And are you going straight on to a third novel?
Yes!
Sister’s Room

Mama is making chapaties and tea for breakfast. I’ll only get the chapaties – the small ones. Not the tea. Sister gets the tea and Mama doesn’t spare the sugar. Not for Sister. Mama doesn’t spare anything for Sister. That’s why she has everything, especially her own own.

When Sister isn’t looking I steal a sip of her tea. I drink it too fast and it burns my tongue and lips. Sister sees me and knocks the cup out of my hands, and the tea spills all over my sarong. Some sugar still remains at the bottom of the cup, so I grab it and run.

And Sister chases me.

I run into Sister’s room and Sister calls for Mama, and Mama shouts, ‘Child, stay out of that room! That’s Sister’s room!’ Mama’s tone is full of possession as though there are treasures hidden inside the room.

While Sister tugs on the cup I look all over. The room is small, without windows. A blanket and sheet covers most of the floor. And two pillows. I don’t have a pillow. I share Mama’s. Huddled in the corner are Sister’s papier-mâché box, mosquito coils, candle and match box. Four pretty colours: gold, green, red and blue. That’s not a treasure unless Sister hides something inside the papier-mâché box. Before I can reach it, Mama drags me out of the room and separates me from the cup.

The papier-mâché box comes from Kashmir. It was a gift from the sundry shop clerk. He comes once a week to visit Sister. Uncle introduced them. The sundry shop clerk isn’t handsome, but he’s polite. He likes to shake everyone’s hand, including mine. I ask Mama if she likes the sundry shop clerk and she nods her head. She says he’s taller than Papa, though. She says Papa doesn’t like to look up to people, especially someone younger.

Papa asks to see the papier-mâché box, and Sister fetches it. Papa says it’s cardboard, not papier-mâché. He says it comes from a shop in town, not from Kashmir. Sister says it’s papier-mâché from Kashmir. Papa says it’s not. Sister says it is and runs crying into her room.

When Sister tells Uncle that the sundry shop clerk wants to marry Sister, Uncle’s right eye twitches and his nostrils flare. He argues with Mama over Sister, and Papa sides with Uncle. Now the sundry shop clerk isn’t allowed to visit Sister anymore.

Uncle is introducing Sister to a skinny man whose eyes are focused on the floor space between them. Mama is in the kitchen, where she likes
to busy herself whenever one of Sister's friends come to visit. I ask Mama why Sister has so many friends. She says Sister likes to talk. Sister is a good talker, I know that. Mama says Sister can out-talk politicians. I tell Mama I want to have my own room, like Sister, so my friends can visit me. She says my friends make too much noise. I say I don't have that many. Only a few. She says when I attend the new school I will have plenty. I tell her I don't want to go to school unless Sister goes, too. I tell her I want to have my own room. I tell her — Mama covers her ears with her hands and shouts, 'Child! Go outside and play!'

I prefer to play on the balcony.
Mama doesn't allow me to play there alone. She says the wooden railing is old. She's afraid I'll fall. Sister can sit on the balcony by herself whenever she wants. When we first moved in we used to run its length back and forth and wave at all the other girls on the other balconies along the road. Now we can only sit.

A cockroach is crawling down the wall where the plaster peeks through the blue paint. It hesitates beside Papa's dirty fingermarks, and I grab for it. It eludes my grasp, and drops to the floor. It hesitates in front of Sister's room, its antennas fluttering high in the air, looking confused. It darts one way, then the other, before seeking refuge beneath the closed door inches away from my fingers.

The door suddenly opens and out steps Sister's friend. He turns one way, then another, unsure which way to go. Sister guides him to the top of the stairs and he scampers down them as fast as he can. I sneak onto the balcony and watch him run into a food stall and nearly trip over two children playing in front of the tailor's shop, before he disappears around the corner.

Cars and motorcycles honk and drivers shout out their windows as I try to cross the busy street. An old man pushes me out of his way into the path of two boys riding bicycles. Their tires screech as I dash into the fruit market. While I'm there I gaze at all the different shapes and colours of the various fruits. After inspecting the mangoes, I smell one of the papaya's to see if it is ripe. The fruitseller accuses me of trying to steal his fruit and he chases after me, but I'm too fast and I run away. I slow down in front of the spice shop to admire the spices stacked high in baskets. Before I can smell each one, a fat man tosses a garlic bulb and tells me to go away. Next door, at the butcher's shop, there's a row of goat heads on a railing, so I stop and have a better look. The butcher says if I come any closer the heads will bite me. I don't believe him and I make a face. He starts to come after me, so again I run ...

Where we used to live, there was plenty of open space for Sister and I to play without being bothered by anyone. I liked to stand knee-deep in the river and feel the water rush between my legs. The house we had was fine. Papa built it himself using discarded plywood and sheets of corrugated zinc. He was going to add another room, so Sister and I
could share one and the two babies another. But the babies got sick — Mama says cholera — and died. Then a man from the city planned to build tall buildings right where we lived, so we had to move.

Uncle now lets us stay above his coffee shop. Soon after we moved in, Papa and Mama began to treat Sister special. Only Sister has her own room. I sleep with Papa and Mama on the floor in the main room, with Mama in the middle. I prefer to sleep next to Papa because Mama fidgets too much, but Mama doesn’t allow me anymore. She says I’m getting too old ...

When I return, Papa and Uncle are in the main room chewing betel nuts and spitting into a spittoon. Uncle passes money to Papa in a closed fist, and Papa tucks it into the folds of his dhoti. I pretend not to notice their betting as I sit down.

I tell Papa I want to have my own room. I tell Papa I want him to treat me like Sister. Like someone special. Papa grunts as he concentrates on his spitting. Ever since he hurt his back Papa grunts more than he talks. I tell Papa Sister is only three years older than me. I tell him I’m going to be twelve on my next birthday.

Uncle looks at me and a tiny smile appears on his face. I have never seen him with a big smile, only a tiny one. Or a sneer. Uncle continues to look at me long after Papa spits his red-stained saliva into the spittoon.

When Papa uses the bathroom, Uncle sits down beside me and strokes my hair. His hands are clammy and his breath smells of alcohol. His black beady eyes remind me of those belonging to a crow I once found dead on the balcony.

‘Twelve years old, is that right?’

Uncle pinches my cheeks and squeezes my shoulder and looks me over like he would a melon at the fruit market to see if it’s ripe.

I scoot away.

Uncle slides over, smiling that tiny smile of his. Uncle is not my real uncle. He’s an old friend of Papa’s.

Mama is standing in front of us holding a tray of tea. Her face is as twisted as a tomato that someone just stepped on.

‘Get away from her! Get away this minute!’

‘Now calm down. I was only —’

‘I know exactly what you were doing. It’s bad enough you got Sister. You’re not going to get Child, ever!’

‘Look, you don’t talk to me that way. You got a roof over your head, don’t you? Not some squatter’s shack, either. You got food to eat, don’t you? If it wasn’t for me —’

Papa appears. ‘You two fighting again? Now hand me that tea before it gets cold.’ Papa grabs for the tray, but Mama pulls it away and some tea spills. Papa yanks it out of her hands, spilling more.

Mama looks down at the tea and her eyes turn glassy. She goes back to the kitchen, and I start to follow until Papa calls after to me.
Later I join her and Sister on the balcony. Across the street a woman in a pink and red sari is buying fruit at the fruit market. Mama’s saris are old and faded. I point the woman out to Mama, and Mama says when I get older she’ll buy me a sari in any colour I like. I tell her yellow, the colour of the sun, because it’s bright and full of life.

Sister says she doesn’t like saris. She says they are old-fashioned. She likes to wear the pretty green dress that Uncle gave her. I once saw a white woman wear a dress like that. Sister looks just as good in it because she is fair. I ask her why she is so fair and she says the reason I’m dark is because I ate too many chocolates as a baby. I don’t remember eating any chocolates. Not real chocolates. I ask Mama if I ate any chocolates when I was a baby, and she laughs. Mama likes to laugh. She once told me laughing makes her forget. When I asked her what she wanted to forget she just looked at me with those big sunken eyes and didn’t say a word.

Sister says her hair is longer than that of the woman in the sari. It is. Mama wants to cut it short, but Uncle likes it long. He says the longer the hair, the younger she looks. Papa agrees. Papa agrees with everything Uncle says. I want to have my hair long like Sister’s. Mama, however, cuts it short.

Sister is wearing her green bangles. She has three on each arm. She used to wear red bangles, until Uncle gave her the pretty green dress. Now she wears only the green. I ask Sister if I can wear her red bangles. She says no. I tell Mama I want to have my own bangles. I tell Mama I’m going to ask Uncle to buy me a pretty green dress like Sister’s. Mama just sits there and stares at the woman in the sari.

The girls on the other balconies are waving to the people down below. Some of the passers-by are complete strangers, and others are too busy carrying things, or in too much of a hurry to take notice. Still, they keep on waving ... Across the street three boys are talking and grinning among themselves. When one of them looks up, I wave. Mama slaps my hand and scolds me, and Sister giggles. Music from the new jukebox Uncle bought for his coffee shop is now playing. Mama says the music is too loud. She says it gives her a headache. Smells of mutton and spices come on strong. Mama wishes it would rain. Dust rises all around us in little swirls. If I stick out my tongue I can taste it. I show Mama, and someone laughs.

‘Put this on your tongue,’ he says, and tosses up a small chunk of ice.

It lands at my feet and Sister and I scramble for it. I reach it first and slip it into my mouth. The ice cools me all over. Sister tries to take it away. She twists my arm, and I cry for Mama, and Mama tells Sister to let go of me. But she doesn’t. Mama gives up and goes inside where it’s quiet. When Sister hears the new ice-man calling for her, she finally lets go. She pushes back her hair and smiles down at him. The new ice-man tosses up another chunk of ice, and in the evening Uncle introduces him to Sister.
Papa tells Mama he doesn’t like the new ice-man. Papa was the old ice-man before he fell down the steps and hurt his back. He was drinking a lot with Uncle, celebrating Uncle’s birthday. Now Papa can’t work.

Mama doesn’t allow Papa to drink any more, but he still does. Sister says so. He drinks in Uncle’s coffee shop late at night, when Uncle brings in dancing girls. I tell Mama I want to watch the dancing girls dance. Mama says only men go there. I show Mama I can dance. I dance the dance Sister taught me. I tell Mama I want to be a dancer. I tell Mama I want to dance like the other girls in Uncle’s coffee shop.

‘No!’ Mama shouts, and she slaps me hard against my shoulder and I lose my balance and stumble against the kerosene burner, and I scorch my legs.

Sister says I can’t be a dancer now, because of the scars. She says dancers need to have nice legs like hers. She says Uncle says she can be a dancer whenever she wants.

I tell Mama.

Mama and Uncle fight over the dancing, and now Sister is mad at me. But I don’t care. Sister already has everything, especially her own room.

When Mama isn’t looking, I continue practising with my dancing.

A policeman stops by Uncle’s coffee shop, and later comes upstairs to talk to Papa and Mama about Sister. Mama is crying and Papa has to shush her so he can hear what the policeman is saying. Sister is crouched in the corner. Her eyes are red and swollen and she’s as still and as watchful as a mouse. When the policeman takes her with him her green bangles jingle all the way down the steps.

Uncle comes that evening and he and Papa argue about Sister and about money. Papa says he’s not getting enough and now he needs more, so he can bring back Sister. Uncle says he has a friend in the police station, and later that evening he returns with Sister, and Mama finally stops crying.

A month later Uncle’s coffee shop is closed down by the same policeman. Uncle says it’s because of the jukebox. Mama says it’s because of the dancing girls. Now it’s Uncle who complains about money. He complains every day for weeks, until one day he brings a white man to talk to Sister.

Mama tries to steer me away from him, but I break free and get a good look at him. The white man is tall and has hair as yellow as the sun and eyes greener than Sister’s pretty green dress.

The white man comes three days in a row and Papa and Uncle celebrate. Mama cooks tandoori chicken for everyone – including Uncle – and even I get sugar in my tea.

The following week the white man comes alone. Without Uncle. He wants to talk to Sister and he hands Papa money. Lots of money. Papa is so excited he can’t count it, he just shuffles the money back and forth
between his hands. When Uncle finds out the white man was there his nostrils flare. He tells Papa to give him the white man’s money. Papa refuses, and he tells Uncle to leave.

That evening Uncle returns and heads straight for Sister’s room. Only Sister is inside – not the white man. Uncle searches the kitchen and the main room, where Papa is sleeping, and also the balcony. He doesn’t seem to notice me at the top of the stairs counting the moths hovering around the lone light bulb, when he leaves.

I stop counting when I see the white man hustling up the steps, taking them two at a time. He pats me on the head, and I follow him to Sister’s room and Sister locks the door after him.

Since Papa is sleeping and Mama is busy in the kitchen, I press my ear to the door, but I don’t hear any talking. Later, I do hear loud footfalls coming up the stairs, so I hurry away from the door. Eyes twitching, nostrils flaring, Uncle tries the handle, then buries his shoulder into the door, forcing it open. Sister and the white man are lying side by side on the blanket. Their clothes are piled in the corner.

‘Give me my money,’ Uncle shouts. ‘You give me money, not them!’

Mama calls for Papa and Papa comes running, with sleep still in his eyes. He tells Uncle to leave, and they argue over the white man’s money. Sister is crying, and she flees around them, holding onto her pretty green dress. The white man tries to follow her, but Uncle drives his shoulder into him and knocks him down and he lands on top of Sister’s papier-mâché box, smashing it. Only red bangles come out. No treasure.

Papa tries to stop Uncle from hurting the white man further, but Uncle is too angry to reason with, and he hits Papa in the face – and Mama screams. Papa shoves Uncle against the wall, and the white man scoots around Papa and heads for the stairs. Papa turns around and looks at Mama, and Uncle jumps onto Papa’s bad back. They stumble out of Sister’s room and crash onto the balcony where Sister is hiding.

Mama is swatting Uncle with a broom, and I manage to kick him once before Mama pushes me out of the way. Papa and Uncle roll back and forth, and Papa finally breaks free and clammers to his feet. Sister is crouched in the corner directly behind Papa, and when Uncle rises to his feet, she tries to get out of their way. She has to cut in front of Papa, but Papa’s head is already lowered like a bull. He rushes at Uncle and runs smack into Sister and she’s flung against the wooden railing, and the railing breaks away, and Sister falls from the balcony.

Mama catches a hold of my shoulders and wails. All the girls on the other balconies are all looking down at Sister. She is lying still, holding onto her pretty green dress. Her green bangles have all broken free.

Papa and Uncle’s eyes are filled with shame as they exchange tentative looks at one another. Their gaze gradually settles, and for a long time they stare at each other. Then they turn and look at me. They are looking real hard. Mama digs her fingers into my shoulders as she tightens her grip and adds to her wailing a piercing, ‘Nooooo...!’
STORM LARKS

Sky is black as a ciné film reeling its last centimetres; imageless, burned by the light, its white-gashed celluloid flickers overhead.

The horizons tremble, then stand still, accepting the warm rain; our breathing falters, uncertain as purple in the sun’s fading bruise.

This frequency is all wow and flutter and rumble on the earth’s slow platter, its grindstone flinting out split-second streaks of light.

The gleam across your face fixes it here: white, ecstatic with shushed exclamations — then bass notes beginning below hearing’s octaves.

It’s ironic we don’t think of God now, only of the ions colliding, those fronts of heated air and copper dousing-rods drinking an electric blue.

But it’s death-sky music, you said so; your hand on mine glimpsed as a claw of bones, so old it could be winged or scaled, half-human.

Lightning fuses air’s nitrogen, cattle stumble, awash in curdled milk; ponies’ eyes panic, their mouths foaming at rain’s polished bit.

The voltage goes to ground, missing the uncoiled helix of acids that wash away, futile for a billion years until the chance of it lights like a struck match.

We’re sheltering by this gable-end, watching the town blitzed to monochrome, seeing skylarks stall then fly on singing into the air’s stunned height.
TIME, LOVE AND TENDERNESS

In this suburb of the city we stop
at the Wheatsheaf for a drink,
just where the B-road drops us,
after the motorway and poppy fields
where lapwings skim the cars’ hot roofs.

Cooler in here and dim at first:
we order cold beers, lean on bar towels,
hear pool balls click in their triangle
of noon’s lubricious light.

The jukebox is hushed, repeating
the same song like a wish:
Time, love and tenderness
over and over in this tap-room
tiled like a piss-house and kippered
with last night’s smoke.

We’re not complaining, it’s the right
place to be right now, right here where
there’s nowhere else: the optics wink,
brimfull of whiskey and gin, of vodka
and five-star forgetfulness.

Dust sequins the air; a rod of light
comes in like something you could touch.
A girl in stacked heels coils a snake-bite
into her belly. She shoots pool with that
limping man, laughing, tilting her cue
into the table’s alluvial green.

Her child bawls from its pushchair,
arms waving to some comfort beyond reach,
her tongue searching for speech until
silenced with a crisp.

From a side-table a youth looks on,
conjuring the future from one slow beer.
Cyclists pass the open door, wind
hustles litter on the street, blowing
the day away into the sun’s high curve.
The song whispers, wistful, conniving as they range the balls again onto the felt; she picks the child’s milk from the floor like a bottled cloud, or bottled love or time or tenderness, wiping its teat on her red dress.

The crippled man cues the phalanx. It slicks wide open: he grins as balls fall from cushions into pockets – like money or virtue or luck never did into his.

The landlord takes our glasses, leans into another haze of noontime drinking, hearing the juke-box’s psalm annoint us, seeing the angles of light fall more narrow, the hot road glitter as we turn to leave.

FOX

The fox in the headlights knows it shouldn’t be here, caught on the road through the larch wood, just stepping out to the chicken coop.

The fox is skittish; it’s made a faux pas, executes a sorry jump from pointed toes – a ginger novice in the dancing class.

This is a thin fox caught in sharp light, nervously swishing the white tip of its tail, painting itself out into the dark.

A few strokes and it’s gone into a chiaroscuro dusk; it shouldn’t have been there on the road, in this poem – dancing, up to no good.
Legend had it that during a dorm feast Sarah Granger-Field refused an awfully good bottle of wine because it was served in a teacup. She had said she couldn’t possibly drink the stuff in that receptacle. Only a wine glass would do. The taste of the cup would simply destroy one’s taste buds ... wine taste buds. She had had an ordinary drink of Ribena instead.

Quite particular about etiquette was Sarah. She pronounced the last syllable of her name with a long gaspish sort of ‘Ah …’ You know, in a posh la-di-da accent.

Actually it was in the dining-room that her manners really shone. If you sat by her you would certainly be passed the sugar or the salt, without even asking for them. If you sat by, say, Paula, you could go through the whole meal without eating. Then she’d say ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know you wanted such and such.’

You see it was considered rude to ask for anything, let alone stretch over the table for it. Your best bet would be to sit by Sarah. She would definitely see to all your needs without so much as a murmur from you.

When she ate it was a joy to watch. She’d eat as if the food was slightly boring. The fork would neatly spear the pea. Then there was the slight chewing movement before the mouth was parted, just a little, for the next morsel. At the end of the meal, tidy divisions of each food group – carby, proteins and fats – would be pushed to the side of the plate, again with a gesture of utter high-class disdain. The cutlery would not make any unrefined sound as is the way with cutlery in certain pairs of hands. Take Hilary for instance, or Mildred. Real plebs at the dining-table. The moment fork and knife made contact with plate, you felt sorry for the plate. And for the fork and knife too. Hilary and Mildred with their mouths full, drank liquids even while they were chewing, snacked their lips and ate with such obvious enjoyment, it was really quite fascinating in a boorish sort of way.

Then if you were sitting at the high-table with the house-mistress and Sarah was there, you were fine. Because she was good at making polite conversation. None of those awful silences when you wouldn’t know in God’s name what to say. And time was galloping towards the end of the meal and you hadn’t made your conversational input and no one else had either and it was so embarrassing.

Like the time that wretched junior Alice thought she’d be the saviour
of the lunch-time hour and asked the house-mistress Miss Gramley, 
'Please Madam, do you think it will rain tomorrow?' Apparently the 
silence got a little bit worse until Gramley thundered, 'Silly child! I'm 
not the weatherman you know.' Thus Alice held a place – if somewhat 
shaky – in dining-room history.

Not as much history as Sarah made one Sunday though. After church 
the lunch bell rang. As usual we formed a queue and went to our 
appropriate places in the room. The silence bell went and softly the 
head prefect passed the 'Grace board', holy words covered in glass, to 
the mistress on duty. We thanked God for what we were about to 
receive. Then came the serving bell, and the servers for the day went to 
the kitchen, soon coming back with trays laden with Sunday lunch, or 
'dinner' if you were a pleb.

Being Sunday, lunch wasn't so bad. Not liver and onions and mashed 
potatoes or leeks followed by a stodgy pudding and lumpy custard like 
during the week. But on Sunday we could look forward to a bit of lamb 
and new potatoes and mint sauce. And then trifle without sherry, but 
with cream on top.

Not too bad really.

But Sarah found fault with everything. The meat was like leather, the 
potatoes were mushy and the mint sauce was actually not mint sauce.

She was determined to complain to the mistress in charge, who just 
happened to be the cookery mistress. Quite perfect timing really. I 
mean if you're going to complain about the cooking, you might as well 
complain to an expert.

Actually the mistress really looked the part. She was the cooking sort. 
She wore flat, grey, soft shoes which she'd use to sneakingly tip-toe up 
to the oven and fling the door open. Many pies were caught by 
surprise. Some never recovered. When she read recipes, she'd lick her 
lips for punctuation. Her voice was like butter and so was her hair. At 
least at present. It was black hair dyed yellow and she had it all sort of 
swept to the top of her forehead in a crimped roll. And it looked like 
butter too. The crimped curl of butter you get served as part of a 
Continental breakfast.

But how Sarah complained. She really did go on. The cookery 
mistress ignored her. Sarah fumed all through grace and all through 
lunch time announcements. And if she hadn't already established a 
reputation – which was really quite solid, with the not drinking wine 
from a teacup and all – I myself might have wondered at this outburst 
of hers. Still if she was behaving like a pleb it was justified ... after all 
she was speaking up for all of us against that class of food.

The mistress, studiously looking past Sarah, continued with her 
lunch-time announcements. She said that some girls had been reported 
for peeping through the curtains at the village boys last Friday. Such 
behaviour would have to stop.

'Village boys are not your sort. Remember this girls,' she said in her 
voice of butter with the butter-crimped roll on her head.
Sarah had not been paying much attention. In fact she had been working herself up into a superior rage which was quite majestic. She used this rage to stalk into the kitchen and soon we heard her modulated tones – even when she was angry, it was kind of, well, modulated – giving the maids a ticking-off about the Sunday lunch. We could hear her giving them just that.

Next thing you know, Mrs. P., one of the maids, rushed into the dining room with Sarah in tow. ‘Ma’am ... I’m handin’ in me notice. These girls are too uppity. This one ‘ere, an’ me old enough to be her mother, she has a nerve comin’ in ‘ere tellin’ me what to do ... tellin’ me me job. If she don’t like the food, she can bloody well do the cookin’ herself.’

‘Come come Mrs. Perkins, pull yourself together,’ said butter voice. ‘Sarah you should be ashamed of yourself. Go into the kitchen and ask the maid’s pardon.’

Sarah refused to budge. The long and short of it was that not only Sarah but all the girls in her form had to apologise for her – Sarah’s rudeness. Butter voice said that those at Sarah’s table had to apologise too. We all, she said, had to learn respect for others the hard way. No wonder her pies never turned out properly. Someone who couldn’t follow a recipe can hardly be expected to understand the rules of conduct.

It was pretty annoying having to apologise to the maids for Sarah’s rudeness.

Thing is, it wouldn’t have been so bad if she was really upper-class, or at least upper-middle-class, or middle-middle-class. It’s all very well to have servants, have one’s parents go on cruises, have their name in the social register and only drink wine from a wine glass and tea from a teacup: then one has every right to say what one wants to the lower classes. But her grandfather, I understand, was in the textile trade.
‘Your pen, your ink’: Coetzee’s *Foe, Robinson Crusoe, and the Politics of Parody*

Your pen, your ink, I know, but somehow the pen becomes mine while I write with it, as though growing out of my hand.¹

J. M. Coetzee’s 1986 novel, *Foe*, presents itself as a ‘source’ or earlier version of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Its fictional premise, which places Susan Barton on the same island Crusoe and Friday inhabited, uses names and other recognizable details from Defoe to signal the complex literary relationship between the two novels.² *Foe* is a parody of *Robinson Crusoe* in the sense in which Linda Hutcheon defines parody as ‘imitation characterized by ironic inversion’, or ‘repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity’.³ By including ‘critical distance’ in the very definition of parody, Hutcheon shows that she views all parodies as in some sense critical of their source texts, although in practice there is a great range to the amounts and types of criticism suggested by different parodic texts. Whether a given parody is socially or politically subversive, however, depends not only on the particular features of the parody but also on the parodied text’s relationship to the dominant norms, practices, and hierarchies of its social context. What interests me about *Foe* is how it functions as a critique not only of *Robinson Crusoe* but also of broader ideological formations of which *Robinson Crusoe* is only one famous manifestation. Coetzee’s novel is similar to some of the more recent critical studies of Defoe, which point out the forms of exploitation and bias in Defoe’s writings.⁴ Coetzee seems to see *Robinson Crusoe* as a powerful myth of colonialism: myth because it omits or alters many of the brute realities and immoralities of colonial practice, powerful because the strategies it uses to encourage belief in the justice and profitability of colonialism have in fact held sway for a large portion of European history.⁵ The techniques Coetzee uses to challenge this myth, I will argue, provide readers with the materials to critique both the colonial discourse that makes possible an individual utterance such as *Robinson Crusoe* and the dominating strategies that may be surreptitiously appropriated by the critics of colonial domination.⁶

In this view, the most important feature of Coetzee’s parody is its claim of temporal priority. Although more recent, Coetzee’s novel creates the
illusion of being first, of being a set of source materials out of which Defoe’s work later emerged. *Foe* claims, in other words, that *Robinson Crusoe* is the parody. This framing device has the effect of throwing the whole of *Robinson Crusoe*, with its much-praised ‘realism’, into doubt. Within the frame, the things Coetzee deletes from the story appear as things Defoe has added, and the things Coetzee adds appear as Defoe’s deletions. To the extent that we take Susan Barton’s claim of priority at face value, we begin to see Defoe’s artistry as a manipulation of ‘the truth’ rather than as a monument to realism. By inserting his novel into the space between the supposed events of the island and the writing of *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee focuses our attention on the ideological purposes served by Defoe’s authorial choices, or on what Jameson would call the ‘political unconscious’ of Defoe’s novel. For Jameson, interpretations that seek to describe a text’s relationship to its historical context must be able to reveal ‘terms or nodal points implicit in the ideological system [of a given historical situation] which have, however, remained unrealized in the surface of the text, which have failed to become manifest in the logic of the narrative, and which we can therefore read as what the text represses’. Since, in Jameson’s Marxist approach, social classes are essential categories in every historical situation, and since class discourse is ‘essentially dialogical in its structure’, we may imagine these ‘terms or nodal points’ as voices in a dialogue.

The illusion or appearance of isolation or autonomy which a printed text projects must now be systematically undermined. Indeed, since by definition the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, the voice of a hegemonic class, they cannot properly be assigned their relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterances scattered to the winds, or reappropriated in their turn by the hegemonic culture. (p. 85)

As Foe says to Susan Barton,

> In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story. (p. 141)

Foe is referring here to the silences in Barton’s own story, most notably that of Friday, but his words apply also to silences in Defoe’s text that are the traces of its political unconscious. What Coetzee does in *Foe* is artificially to reconstruct an oppositional voice and, by means of parody, place it in dialogue with *Robinson Crusoe* so that Defoe’s polemic strategies can be seen more clearly. To recover all of Coetzee’s parodic messages would require a complete and systematic comparison of the two novels, but if we limit ourselves to those details that relate to the issues of power, obedience, and resistance we can at least clarify what these two ‘voices’ are ‘saying’ about colonialism and its justifications.
Before we begin our comparison, there is one more feature of Coetzee's parody we must take into account. While we can gain certain insights from taking Barton's claim of priority at face value, we retain simultaneously an awareness of the claim's emptiness. Like all parodies, Foe 'needs' its source or original to work as a parody. Every reader must know that Foe did not actually precede Robinson Crusoe, if only because its date of publication is printed on the back of the title page. This knowledge does not nullify Coetzee's ideological critique but places it in a playful context that extends the critique to include its own methods and metaphors. Here playfulness is not a mere adornment to our literary pleasure but a central part of the political message. Readers are given a text that they cannot simply imbibe passively without glaring error. Coetzee invites us to be critical, first of Robinson Crusoe and then of Coetzee's own position as parodist, in effect handing the pen and ink over to us just as Barton and Foe hand the pen to Friday at the end of the novel.

Coetzee's project involves dismantling the illusion of fullness and accuracy Robinson Crusoe fosters by introducing plausible alternatives. According to Susan Barton, for example, the fauna of the island were not as Defoe 'later' described them. Barton tells of the troublesome insects she saw on the island, and many types of birds, but she mentions no goats, yet the goat is one of the most important elements in Defoe's island economy. Crusoe finds them wild, tames them, and breeds them so that he is able to meet a great many of his needs with the milk, meat, and skins they produce. The closest equivalents to the goats on Coetzee's island are the apes. Crusoe makes his fur clothes from apeskins, we are told, but he does not try to tame or eat the apes. He treats them merely as pests and kills them every chance he gets. Why would Coetzee make these changes in Defoe's story? In order to answer, we must look more closely at the ideological purposes the goats serve in Defoe's novel.

Crusoe's dealings with the goats, who are in a sense the real 'natives' of the island, establish a pattern that holds for the human natives he encounters as well. In his journal he tells how he lamed one goat with his gun and then nursed it back to health. 'But by my nursing it so long it grew tame, and fed upon the little green at my door, and would not go away. This was the first time that I entertained a thought of breeding up some tame creatures, that I might have food when my powder and shot was all spent' (p. 92). Later, Crusoe saves a kid from the clutches of his dog, then leaves it penned in his bower for several days. When he returns, the kid 'was so tame with being hungry, that I had no need to have ty'd it; for it followed me like a dog' (p. 124). In these and other instances of taming, Crusoe follows what we might call a script or paradigm of enslavement. He first places the subject in some kind of danger, such as from injury or hunger, and then delivers it from the danger he has himself created. Since the danger arouses fear, the effect of
the deliverance is to make the creature grateful to and dependent upon Crusoe. Significantly, and perhaps miraculously, the creature’s loyalty to Crusoe remains even after the danger is gone. Crusoe’s script of enslavement, then, has four phases: danger, deliverance, gratitude, and obedience.

Crusoe seems at first to use this script unconsciously but later becomes aware of its great power. Regarding a stubborn old goat that he had to set free, he says: ‘I had forgot then what I learned afterwards, that hunger will tame a lyon. If I had let him stay there three or four days without food, and then have carry’d him some water to drink, and then a little corn, he would have been as tame as one of the kids, for they are mighty sagacious, tractable creatures where they are well used’ (p. 155). As Crusoe becomes conscious of how danger and deliverance create gratitude, his pattern of action becomes a science. Notice that in this enslaving script the ‘savior’ is actually a foe because he causes the very danger he later relieves. Salvation from danger is thus an illusion fostered by the master in order to secure himself a loyal servant.

It is no accident that this same script guides the scene of Crusoe’s conversion to Christianity, but with Crusoe in a different role. During a long bout of illness, Crusoe dreams that a man descends from a cloud with an ominous message: ‘“Seeing all these things have not brought thee to repentance,” says the man, “now thou shalt die”; at which words, I thought he lifted up the spear that was in his hand, to kill me’ (p. 103). Crusoe clearly believes that this dream comes from God and that his life is in danger, either from the illness or from the dream or both. In a state of great agitation he opens his Bible at random and reads the words of Psalm 50: ‘Call on me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver, and thou shalt glorify me’ (p. 108). God brings Crusoe to repentance by subjecting him to danger and then delivering him from that danger, but the deliverance has a price: God expects to be glorified and obeyed in return. Crusoe appears to learn a double lesson from this dream. He learns to be a proper servant to his divine master, but he also learns that threats and violence can be used to gain mastery over others. This is the lesson he applies to the goats and later to Friday and his other human subjects. The conversion scene thus conveniently gives Crusoe a religious justification for his colonizing activities. From now on he can claim that he is merely imitating God.

Why would Coetzee change the goats to apes and make his Cruso completely uninterested in taming them? In Robinson Crusoe the process of taming brings the others – first goats and then humans – into a willing submission, and their willingness is a key factor in the justification of enslavement as a colonial activity. When obedience is given willingly and remains even after the danger is removed, the colonizer appears as a benevolent master who obtains his power by persuasion rather than by coercion. If the persuasion and the willing obedience are removed, as in Coetzee’s version, the colonizer appears as a mere tyrant or overseer with no claim to benevolence. Coetzee’s Cruso wants only to (in Conrad’s
words) ‘exterminate the brutes,’ that is, the apes. He attempts to instill fear rather than loyalty.

When he first arrived, [Cruso] said, [the apes] had roamed all over the island, bold and mischievous. He had killed many, after which the remainder had retreated to the cliffs of what he called the North Bluff. (p. 21)

Although the meat and milk of apes is less useful than those of goats, Cruso still makes use of their skins and continues to kill apes whenever possible, so his actions cannot be explained by a complete absence of economic motive. Rather, this Cruso is not willing to pay the price of living with apes, which is what taming them would involve, to gain easier access to their skins. To be a tamer is, after all, to live in a kind of society with animals, however selfishly that society is structured. This Cruso wants animal by-products without any corresponding responsibility for the animals’ welfare and is willing to go to more trouble to avoid proximity to the ‘pests’. When we see this sort of attitude applied to animals that seem closer to humans in intelligence and sociability (apes rather than goats), its callousness becomes even more apparent. According to Coetzee’s framing device, it was Defoe who changed the apes to goats, making them less humanoid, and added Crusoe’s interest in taming and loyalty. In the presence of Coetzee’s text, then, Defoe’s authorial choices seem like a systematic attempt to turn a ruthless colonizer into a Christian hero without losing the powers and benefits of colonization. To put it in Jameson’s terms, Coetzee’s text reveals an ideological possibility of the colonial situation that Defoe’s text has repressed, namely the possibility of a violent and selfish colonizer who will not accept any limits on his power or make the least concession to gain a practical benefit. Such a colonizer ‘needs’ a writer like Defoe, just as Barton thinks she needs Foe, to make his activities palatable to a European audience convinced of its own benevolence and civility. Coetzee suggests that Defoe’s novel has more to do with marketing colonialism than with describing it.

Another point of difference between the two novels concerns the cannibals. Susan Barton says of the island, ‘As for cannibals, I am not persuaded, despite Cruso’s fears, that there are cannibals in those oceans ... All I say is: What I saw, I wrote. I saw no cannibals; and if they came after nightfall and fled before the dawn, they left no footprint behind’ (p. 54). Barton, who was on the island, tells her story to the author, Mr. Foe, who was not, and we are now encouraged to believe that in writing *Robinson Crusoe* Defoe directly contradicted this testimony and inserted the cannibals anyway. Barton suggests at one point that cannibals might be needed simply to make a dull story more acceptable (p. 67), but this begs the question of why a white, European audience would find cannibals acceptable. In *Robinson Crusoe*, the fear of cannibals not only unsettles the master but also helps to solidify his power. When Defoe’s Crusoe turns his script of enslavement on humans, the cannibals in the
text play a crucial ideological role. Crusoe has a dream that reveals to him how he will capture Friday. In the dream, eleven natives come to his island with a prisoner ‘who they were going to kill, in order to eat him’ (p. 202). The prisoner escapes and runs to Crusoe’s castle. ‘[I] showed myself to him, and smiling upon him, encourag’d him; ... he kneel’d down to me, seeming to pray me to assist him; upon which I shew’d my Ladder, made him go up, and carry’d him into my Cave, and he became my servant’ (p. 202). Both the dream and the actual capture of Friday follow the danger-deliverance-gratitude-obedience pattern established earlier, with one important difference. In the goat-taming scenes, the apparent benevolence of the master depended on our forgetting that he caused the danger in the first place, on our forgetting, in other words, that the saviour is a foe. Goats, of course, would not notice such a problem, but presumably a human subject would, and so a more elaborate scheme of mystification is necessary. In the new paradigm of enslavement the cannibals provide the danger and the colonizer provides the deliverance and receives all the glory. The native kneels and prays to be saved from the savagery of his own culture; Crusoe saves him and thereby gains a willing slave. The cannibals serve the ideological functions of removing blame from the colonizer, thus fostering his disguise of benevolence, and threatening a grisly death, compared to which slavery seems like the lesser of two evils. They serve the same functions in the later massacre scene, in which Crusoe gains two more human servants, the Spaniard and Friday’s father, by rescuing them just before they are about to be eaten. 11

As if to reveal how this pattern of enslavement works, Coetzee makes his Cruso argue explicitly to Barton that Friday’s current status is preferable to the alternatives: ‘perhaps it is the doing of Providence that Friday finds himself on an island under a lenient master, rather than in Brazil, under the planter’s lash, or in Africa, where the forests teem with cannibals’ (pp. 23-24). Cruso claims to have saved Friday both from savagery and from the worst excesses of civility, but because in this version we do not know how Cruso acquired Friday or who cut out his tongue, the claim remains doubtful. Friday’s silence feeds into Coetzee’s parody in interesting ways here. Instead of reconstructing a more realistic voice for the colonized native, Coetzee removes the voice entirely. 12 Although, as Barton later observes, this makes Friday vulnerable to ‘being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others’ (p. 121), it also removes precisely the possibility of confirming whether or not Friday’s obedience to Cruso, and later to Barton, is willing. In Defoe, Friday’s words repeatedly confirm Crusoe’s position of mastery, as when we hear him saying things like: ‘you teach wild mans be good sober tame mans’ (p. 227) and ‘Me die, when you bid die, master’ (p. 231). Such ventriloquized fawning is merely another way of silencing the colonized. In Coetzee’s text we see Friday acting obediently, but with no words and no smiles or other gestures of contentment we dare not conclude that he is a happy or willing slave. 13 Here again, Coetzee exposes the way
Defoe’s version works as a myth of the ‘good master’ or the ‘benevolent colonist.’

The logic of the ‘lesser evil’ is also at work when Cruso uses the apes as a threat to keep Barton in a submissive role. ‘Before setting out to perform his island duties, Cruso gave me his knife and warned me not to venture from his castle; for the apes, he said, would not be as wary of a woman as they were of him and Friday. I wondered at this: was a woman, to an ape, a different species from a man? Nevertheless, I prudently obeyed, and stayed at home, and rested’ (p. 15). Here the apes are a danger from which Barton can be saved only by remaining Cruso’s obedient subject. This Cruso attempts to ‘tame’ the woman by the same means Defoe’s Crusoe uses on Friday, but Coetzee does not allow the script to go unquestioned. Barton soon rebels and decides to roam the island on her own, regardless of the supposed danger of the apes. She later concludes: ‘In size they were between a cat and a fox, grey, with black faces and black paws. I saw no harm in them; but Cruso held them a pest, and he and Friday killed them whenever they could’ (p. 21).

When Cruso becomes angry at her breach of his authority, Barton’s response hinges on the issue of her willingness: “‘I am on your island, Mr Cruso, not by choice but by ill luck,’ I replied, standing up (and I was nearly as tall as he). ‘I am a castaway, not a prisoner’” (p. 20). Although she has been saved from death, fed, and cared for, Barton does not feel obliged to submit to Cruso, much less to swear undying obedience. She ‘stands up’ to him, both literally and politically, rejecting the theory that a lesser evil should be accepted without complaint. It is worth taking a moment to elaborate the elements of Barton’s critical thinking here. She questions first the logic of Cruso’s rhetoric (do apes really treat female humans differently?) and then its factuality (they do not look dangerous to me). She senses that her acceptance of Cruso’s food and shelter is being interpreted as a kind of contract entailing her submission (‘While you live under my roof you will do as I instruct’, says Cruso), so she argues that there was in fact no moment of free choice in which she entered into this contract. If Barton is a kind of colonial subject, then an important part of her rebellion involves seeing through the script of enslavement that has been used against her.14 Placed in a situation similar to Defoe’s Friday, she retains an ability to doubt that reduces Cruso’s power over her mind and her body. It is precisely this ability of the subjected human to doubt and question that is repressed in Robinson Crusoe, where there is no hint of rebellion or discontent among Crusoe’s subjects.15

Coetzee has taken two groups of natives from Defoe’s novel, goats and cannibals, and posited a single original, the apes, from which these groups sprang. The force generating this bifurcation is the need of the ideological system for certain functions to be performed so that colonizers can simultaneously dehumanize, vilify, and profit from colonized subjects. What in Defoe appear as different species, later joined in the figure of Friday, are in Coetzee’s reading merely literary symbols for the
different roles natives are forced to play in the colonial economy and ideology: they are a source of material comforts, but also a savage threat that supposedly justifies the use of force and hierarchy. Furthermore, in Defoe these two functions are mutually determining. Crusoe’s ability to turn Friday into a goat-like domesticated servant depends on the existence of ‘savages’ who have already placed Friday in danger. If no savages existed, the colonial system would have to invent them in order to reach and justify its goals, and this is precisely what Coetzee accuses Defoe of doing. There are no cannibals, tame goats, or willing servants in Coetzee’s version because such beings appear only in colonial propaganda. Coetzee has undermined those elements of Robinson Crusoe that, from an anti-colonial perspective, appear most hollow and manipulative: the idea that the colonizer is interested in anything besides power and profit; the idea that humans can be ‘tamed’ like animals into loyal and grateful subjects.

Viewed from within Coetzee’s framing device, the differences between Foe and Robinson Crusoe appear as a mixture of additions and subtractions made by Defoe to the ‘original’ Susan Barton story. As I have argued, however, the guiding principle behind these changes is one of strategic repression. The one thing Defoe does not want to admit is the threat of rebellion from colonial subjects. This ideological need leads also to repression of related ideas: that rebellion is possible because colonizers’ physical and material powers are limited, and that rebellion is likely because the conditions of colonial subjection (even without the extreme brutalities of whipping, exhausting labour, etc.) are harsh and demeaning. The things Defoe has added – the goats and cannibals, Crusoe’s interest in taming, Friday’s voice and what it says – are devices to cover over what has been repressed by substituting a mechanism that cuts off the very thought of rebellion at its source in the will of the subject. This mechanism (what I called the taming script) thus entails a psychological theory for both the colonizer and the colonized, a theory of what each would realistically do in certain situations. The colonizer, Defoe suggests, would offer assistance where possible and treat his subjects with kindness and restraint; the colonized would immediately perceive the benefits of living with the colonizer and accept the terms of his subjection willingly. Coetzee’s parody involves challenging the psychological theory by creating similar situations in which colonizer and colonized act differently: Cruso is not interested in improving anyone’s standard of living (including his own) or in fostering a benevolent public image; of his two subjects, Barton continually questions and challenges him, and Friday is inscrutable. If we find these possibilities psychologically plausible, then Coetzee has succeeded in calling Defoe’s psychological theory, and thus his myth of colonialism, into doubt.

II

So far, I have presented Barton as a voice of resistance, as she is for much of the island section of the novel, but this is not the whole story. One of
the most interesting features of *Foe* is that Barton’s questioning of power is not consistent and she is often aware of the inconsistency yet does not know exactly what to do about it. Her susceptibility to colonialist ideology is seen most clearly in her relationship with Friday, where she slips easily into the role of slave-master vacated by Cruso but finds that she cannot easily slip out again. Coetzee uses this double aspect of Barton’s relationship to power to show further nuances in his parodic project, including the need to consider the larger discursive formations that underlie canonical texts.

Barton’s first encounter with Friday sets the tone for what follows. When she sees that the figure who approaches her on the beach is ‘a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool’ and a spear, she immediately thinks to herself, ‘I have come to an island of cannibals’ (pp. 5-6). The stereotype that connects Friday’s racial features with cannibalism is thus part of the ideological baggage she brings with her to the island. On the next page we see one likely source for this stereotype:

> For readers reared on travellers’ tales, the words *desert isle* may conjure up a place of soft sands and shady trees where brooks run to quench the castaway’s thirst and ripe fruit falls into his hand ... But the island on which I was cast away was quite another place: a great rocky hill with a flat top, ... dotted with drab bushes that never flowered and never shed their leaves. (p. 7)

Barton reveals that she is herself a reader of the ‘travellers’ tales’ that are repositories of some of the West’s most persistent colonial myths: desert islands, spear-carrying cannibals, mutineers, and castaways. Although she declares that her experience on this island will be different from the literary model, it will not free her of her prejudices regarding Friday. Her view of him as mentally inferior leads her to interpret him in a very condescending way throughout the novel. During Cruso’s second illness, for example, when a ship arrives to rescue the castaways, Friday does not stay by his master but flees to the north shore of the island where the apes reside. Barton sends a search party to bring him back, on the theory that he does not really want what he has just chosen: ‘Inasmuch a Friday is a slave and a child, it is our duty to care for him in all things, and not abandon him to a solitude worse than death’ (p. 39). On the ship, she again translates his silence for the Captain: ‘He would rather sleep on the floor at his master’s feet than on the softest bed in Christendom’ (p. 41). Despite the fact that she herself has chafed at the bonds of servitude, she is, like Defoe’s Crusoe, convinced that Friday’s subjection has been complete and willing. The double standard signals an ideological conflict in her mind between her personal experience of oppression and the justifications she has imbibed from reading travellers’ tales. Barton thus functions as both an alternative voice to *Robinson Crusoe* and a sympathizer, both critic of the typical travel narrative and its heir. She becomes a walking manifestation of the what Hutcheon calls the ‘paradoxical essence’ of the parodic project (p. 77) as Coetzee shows that the dialogue of opposed classes or positions takes place within individual
minds as well as between people, groups, and texts.

To her credit, Barton cannot completely repress the side of her that is critical of power, but neither can that side completely repress her will to mastery. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, she does not retain her initial confidence in her interpretations of Friday. Coetzee undercuts the colonial arrogance later by making her doubt her own intentions: ‘I tell myself I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will’ (p. 60). Similarly, she also comes to doubt the language of gestures by which she thought she had been communicating with him:

How did he understand my gesture of putting out my tongue at him? What if, among the cannibals of Africa, putting out the tongue has the same meaning as offering the lips has amongst us? Might you not then flush with shame when a woman puts out her tongue and you have no tongue with which to respond? (p.69)

Barton even comes to doubt the supposed fact that Friday’s silence is unwilling. ‘Bitterly I began to recognize that it might not be mere dullness that kept him shut up within himself, nor the accident of the loss of his tongue, nor even an incapacity to distinguish speech from babbling, but a disdain for intercourse with me’ (p. 98).

In place of Robinson Crusoe’s conversion to Christianity, the spiritual drama we watch unfold is how Susan Barton begins, haltingly, reluctantly, to question certain aspects of the colonialist thinking she has inherited without being able fully to loosen its hold on her mind. Her growing discontent with the role of master leads to her plan to send Friday by ship back to Africa. Although this plan is ultimately a ‘castle I had built in the air’ (p. 111), her discovery of this fact proves to be both a genuine insight and a new opportunity for mastery. Coetzee symbolizes the role of text-based ideology in her journey by making her sell off the travel narratives she has taken from Foe’s library. In Ealing, greatly in need of shoes, she stops in a cobbler’s shop. ‘I offered him the Pilgrimages of Purchas, the first volume, and for that he gave me a pair of shoes, stoutly made and well-fitting. You will protest that he gained by the exchange. But a time comes when there are more important things than books’ (p. 100). Later, she sells Pakenham’s Travels in Abyssinia to a stationer for half a guinea, presumably to be spent on food. Here the travel books are literally baggage that weighs her and Friday down, just as their contents are a form of ideological baggage that chains master and slave together. The shoes and money enable her to make an ostensibly liberating journey in exchange for the vicarious, textual, and politically slanted journey offered by the books. Her selling of the books constitutes, in a sense, a rereading of them, or a new way of understanding their value. Now, after her frustrating experience as Friday’s master, she sees the books as valuable not in themselves but only for the other things they can bring her; they are valuable only when surrendered. We may be
tempted to conclude that, as in the island section, personal experience is functioning here as a kind of antidote to the distortions of inherited ideology, but this is true only up to a point.

Barton’s surrender of the travel books coincides with her questioning of one of their legacies, the assumption of Friday’s cannibalism, but the questioning produces no change in actual practice. When they find a dead baby girl in a ditch, Barton’s prejudice rushes unbidden to the fore:

My thoughts ran to Friday, I could not stop them, it was an effect of the hunger. Had I not been there to restrain him, would he in his hunger have eaten the babe? I told myself I did him wrong to think of him as a cannibal or worse, a devourer of the dead. But Cruso had planted the seed in my mind, and now I could not look on Friday’s lips without calling to mind what meat must once have passed them. (p. 106)

Along with the obvious projection of her own hunger onto Friday is a striking admission of the injustice of this projection. There is also, however, a scapegoating of Cruso that seems designed to absolve Barton herself of any blame for the problem. As we have seen, Cruso cannot be the only source of her cannibal stereotype since Barton thought of Friday as a cannibal before she ever met Cruso. It sprang more likely from her reading of the travel books she is now selling off, but is blaming the travel books really any different from blaming Cruso? What Barton confronts here is the persistence of colonialist ideology despite her awareness of its inaccuracy. There is a part of her own mind she cannot control, she claims, and it ‘insisted on [Friday’s] bloodlust’ (p. 106). The planting metaphor Barton uses to describe this persistence recalls the agricultural image embedded in the word ‘colony’ (from the Latin verb colere, to cultivate), suggesting that colonialist texts and rhetoric perform a kind of mental colonization of their audiences. If true, this would be an indication of the need for parodies like Coetzee’s but it is also a potentially unfair appropriation of victimhood by the master. Is Barton really unable to eradicate her prejudice or is she merely claiming that she is? As long as Barton remains impotent in the face of hegemony she also remains in the role of master. This may explain why the solution she does propose here is formulated as a paradox. Barton now sees, she says, that ‘in such [prejudicial] thinking lie the seeds of madness’ (p. 106), that the fruit colonialist rhetoric produces is not beneficial.

We cannot shrink in disgust from our neighbour’s touch because his hands, that are clean now, were once dirty. We must cultivate, all of us, a certain ignorance, a certain blindness, or society will not be tolerable. (p. 106)

Regardless of whether Friday was once a cannibal, Barton implies, she must pretend that the thought has never crossed her mind in order to live peacefully with him now; the same conscious forgetting of past crimes would be required of former slaves and colonial subjects as they look at the ‘dirty hands’ of their former oppressors. At first, this looks like a reasonable solution. To make new life possible, one must cultivate
ignorance of what one thought one ‘knew’ about the other. Barton’s re-use of the planting metaphor, however, signals that she is still relying on elements of the colonialist ideology she purports to despise. The phrase ‘cultivate ... ignorance’ (how can you plant an absence?) may suggest the mental process Barton has been attempting on this journey, that of clearing away the concepts and assumptions of colonialist ideology as represented in the travel books, yet her desire for such a solution is at odds with her stated inability to cultivate ignorance of Friday’s supposed cannibalism in this particular scene. In other words, Barton describes a solution she cannot or will not use in actual practice. It seems that Coetzee is staging a particular form of white liberal stasis in which the problem of pervasive ideology is acknowledged but at the same time declared to be unsolvable.

Barton’s journey to Bristol culminates in her critical reading of the ship master’s rhetoric and her abandonment of the fantasy of easy liberation that had inspired the journey in the first place. As soon as the captain promises to set Friday free in Africa, Barton reconsiders. ‘Whether it was the captain’s manner or whether the glance I caught passing between him and the mate I cannot say, but suddenly I knew that all was not as it seemed to be’ (p. 110). She rejects his promise because she becomes aware of a hidden agenda or repressed truth behind his words. She sees that an illusion of benevolence and helpfulness is covering the captain’s actual self-interest. We must acknowledge, first of all, that Barton’s critique of the captain’s duplicity is a genuine advance in her thinking. Having decided that she must liberate Friday, she is beginning to see that her attempts mean little without the cooperation of others in society. Furthermore, even if some honest captain were to take Friday to Africa, there would be other problems with Barton’s plan, for it rests on two questionable assumptions: that it is possible to erase the effects of colonial mastery by returning to a pre-colonial condition; and that racial separation is the natural and proper state of humankind. Repudiating this plan, then, looks like a positive step. When we look at the climactic rhetorical gesture of part II, however, we see that a clever recuperating manoeuver has been performed.

Was I too suspicious? All I know is, I would not sleep easy tonight if Friday were on the high seas destined a second time, all unwittingly, for the plantations. A woman may bear a child she does not want, and rear it without loving it, yet be ready to defend it with her life. Thus it has become, in a manner of speaking, between Friday and myself. I do not love him, but he is mine. That is why he remains in England. That is why he is here. (p. 111)

Barton is making her own claim of ‘benevolence’ here by asserting that she was too kind-hearted to leave Friday in the hands of someone who only claimed benevolence but really desired mastery. Barton’s critique of the captain’s benevolence thus becomes the basis of her own claim to benevolence as she jockeys to be seen by her readers as an enlightened and reluctant master who has no choice but to keep Friday as ‘hers’. In a
variation of the taming script from *Robinson Crusoe*, the evil captain and his ilk become the new 'savage' threat from which Friday must be rescued by the well-intentioned white woman. As above, whatever insights Barton has had about the workings of colonialist rhetoric have not affected her actual practice because she has exempted herself from the critical gaze. The liberal sentiments result in a renewed defense of the status quo. 19

Barton’s recuperating gesture allows us to reread the journey to Bristol as a new entry in the travel narrative tradition. While on her journey, Barton sells off Foe’s old travel books but continues to produce the letters to Foe that constitute part II of the novel, so that Barton’s own narrative grows in size as her library of travel books diminishes. Instead of relinquishing the ideology of the travel books and producing a genuinely liberatory narrative, however, Barton’s story is merely the record of a failed liberation whose rhetorical purpose, we can now see, is to explain or rationalize the fact of Friday’s continued enslavement. The travel books do not lose their value but are merely exchanged for another form of travel narrative with the same ideological thrust. The books quite literally finance Barton’s journey, which masquerades as a journey of liberation, but whose real goal is to arrive at the moment in which Barton can deploy a new form of the old justifications for slavery (i.e. the myth of the ‘good master’ and the accompanying theory of the lesser evil), in exact repetition of both Cruso and Crusoe. What makes her story different is that it adapts the old paradigm to a new environment that expects ‘politically correct’ repudiations of prejudice and dominance. In this environment, the colonizer’s duty to stage his/her attempts to critique and surrender power becomes the new ‘white man’s burden’, the new mask of selflessness.

The questions Coetzee raises about white liberal writing in part II must ultimately extend to Coetzee’s novel itself and to much of the post-colonial criticism and theory that has arisen in recent decades (including this article). 20 By making *Robinson Crusoe* the primary target of his parody, Coetzee introduces a danger that readers will locate the problem of colonialist ideology only in *Robinson Crusoe* and not in other texts, in broader social practices, or in themselves. He addresses this danger first by extending his critique beyond *Robinson Crusoe* to include the broader travel literature tradition of which it is a part, and then by showing that even this critique may be insufficient to change social practice. Identifying an intangible and culturally embedded ideology as the real target, however, brings us up against a major problematic of post-colonial writing generally. How can we understand the strength and pervasiveness of a dominant ideology without letting that understanding paralyze political action? 21 More specifically, because the pose of benevolence is a key part of the colonial ideology under attack, any declaration of an intent to liberate the oppressed, including the post-colonial critic’s, becomes rhetorically suspect as just another benevolent pose. If the need for rigorous suspicion dissolves into cynicism, however,
there is no hope for positive social change. That Coetzee is aware of these issues is reflected in the discussion between Barton and Foe in part III. ‘You must ask yourself, Susan,’ says Foe, ‘as it was a slaver’s stratagem to rob Friday of his tongue, may it not be a slaver’s stratagem to hold him in subjection while we cavil over words in a dispute we know to be endless?’ (p. 150). As long as the voices in this ‘dispute’ are only white ones, it will not be surprising if it remains ‘endless.’ At some point, whites must stop talking about surrendering power and simply surrender power. Barton and Foe agree, therefore, that they must teach Friday how to write so that he can become part of the discussion about liberation. As part III ends, Friday’s writing lessons have only begun, and Barton still prefers the role of tyrannical teacher (p. 151), but she and Foe have at least started learning how to listen to the voice that they have until now marginalized and repressed.

In the final analysis, is Coetzee doing anything more than demonstrating his benevolent concern for colonial victims in a narrative whose ultimate effect is to make Coetzee himself wealthy and famous, just as Susan Barton hoped to become from her story? If Foe prompts us to ask this question, then perhaps it succeeds after all in the task of fostering a critical consciousness in its readers, one that extends not only to Defoe and Barton but also to the seemingly liberal text they hold in their hands. Coetzee invites an active, participatory reading like that of the unnamed narrator of part IV, who finds Susan Barton’s manuscript on a table and reads its opening words: “‘Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further’” (p. 155). Coetzee’s text then continues without quotation marks: ‘With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard’ (p. 155). Reading is a form of diving here, and to dive is to merge with the narrator of the story, taking over the pen and the observing ‘I’/eye. Although this reader repeats Barton’s experience, however, he or she also alters it by exploring the wrecked ship Barton herself does not explore in Foe but only speculates about. The novel’s final image is of a physical effort to recover Friday’s voice and perspective. While strikingly original, this section is also a parody of some of the most memorable passages in Robinson Crusoe, in which Crusoe explores two wrecked ships off his island and salvages tools and materials that enable his colonial project. The work of salvage pictures what every parodist does with her/his literary precursors. Coetzee’s version, however, suggests that the most valuable sunken treasure lies not in the literary canon but in the mouth of Friday.22

NOTES

1. J. M. Coetzee, Foe (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 66. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Most critics mention some points of comparison between the two novels, though not all use them as their primary focus. Among the more extended comparisons, see: Peter E. Morgan, ‘Foe’s Defoe and La Jeune Nee: Establishing a Metaphorical


6. I am in agreement with David Attwell when he argues that Coetzee’s metafictional reflections do not disarm ethical commitment or political resistance but are in fact carefully crafted strategies of resistance; see J. M. Coetzee: *South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press; Cape Town: David Philip, 1993), pp. 2-22.

7. On Defoe’s realism, see for example Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1974). For a discussion of Coetzee’s personal views against realism, see Gallagher (pp. 18-19) and Attwell (pp. 11-14). Maher argues that Coetzee uses his revision of *Robinson Crusoe* to question the assumptions of the ‘ideology of realism’ and that he ends the novel with a virtuosic display of anti-realism.


9. Hutcheon notes this feature of parody in arguing that the ‘ambivalence set up between conservative repetition and revolutionary difference is part of the very paradoxical essence of parody’ (p. 77).


12. Gallagher discusses Coetzee’s struggle with the question of how a white author can speak for blacks without oppression (p. 43); so also does Aleid Fokkema in ‘Character as a Subject in Language: Some Reflections on J. M. Coetzee’s Foe’, New Comparison, 9 (Spring 1990), pp. 170-79.

13. The fact that Friday flees to join the apes when Cruso falls ill and strangers arrive suggests that he never accepted Cruso’s categorization of the apes as pests or dangers. At some level, he seems to view them as allies or companions.

14. Morgan makes a similar point (p. 86).

15. Barton’s resistance to colonial authority is complicated by evidence of her complicity with it (something I discuss further below). Notice, for example, that Barton escapes Cruso’s restrictions on her mobility by using ape skins to make herself some sandals (pp. 24-5). This particular increase in her freedom thus depends on materials gained through exploitation of the apes and is therefore an extension of that exploitation. Notice also that after ‘standing up’ to Cruso, she apologizes for her ‘tart words’ (p. 20).


17. For a similar interpretation of Friday by Defoe’s Crusoe, see Robinson Crusoe, p. 211.

18. Compare Derek Wright’s analysis of planting as a ‘positive alternative to history as War’ (p. 117) in Life and Times of Michael K; ‘Fiction as Foe: The Novels of J. M. Coetzee’, International Fiction Review, 16, 2 (Summer 1989), pp. 113-18. Atwell, also discussing the planting imagery in Michael K, connects it with ‘the Nietzschean “will to ignorance,” standing as the alternative to the devouring “will to truth”’ and to Derridean disemination (pp. 98-99). My point is that even if such a ‘will to ignorance’ represents a positive solution it is one that Barton seems able to describe but not enact.


20. In her discussion of Foe, Tiffin notes (p. 32) that in his own literary criticism Coetzee has warned of the tendency of critiques of the dominant replicate the problems they purport to solve: ‘Our craft is all in reading the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities ... It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn’, White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 81.


22. Similarly, Attwell, without noting the connections with diving and salvage in Defoe, sees in this ending a ‘deferral of authority to the body of history, to the political world in which the voice of the body politic of the future resides’ (p.116).
Always at new moon and full moon extremes of tide scarred this southern shore, back beach and front beach alike, and this year the last king tide of the winter was close on the equinox. A storm and days of heavy swell had sent high waves to lick away at the dunes, undermining them and making sand-slides, flattening, withering, scouring the ropey roots of the marram grass. In the calm that followed, a low tide at midday left the rock shelf of the headland wide open to the sun. Its thickly knit brown hide of bladderwrack glistened, with a summer steam coming up, early as it was, only mid-September, its gloss drying in the late winter sun. More bladderwrack lay rotting in mounds along the dunes, and bull kelp with clawed black holdfasts on tough legs, some shod with stone.

As on every other day, the woman was walking along the water’s edge under the lighthouse, where the rock shelf ran under the sand except for limestone formations here and there that stood out high, grey fretworks of rock hoary with salt in the early afternoon between tides. It was a Sunday, and fine at last, and among the regulars walking their dogs, some on a lead and some loose, there were little groups of city people just down for the weekend. Up ahead on the waterline where a spur of rock split into pools of deep water she saw black figures gathering against the light, some stooping to clip a dog’s lead on, and voices yelping. Eel, she made out, See the eel! And a couple hurrying past said loudly, A seal’s been washed up. Alive? Seems so.

A seal. Alive? Oil-dark, water-dark and glossy as the bull kelp, there it was, a blot on the wet sand, rearing and blinking in the sun and taking no notice of the gathering onlookers. They kept pace alongside it while it went back in, floundering in and out of the low pools and channels, the water breaking over it so that it looked like any smooth rock. The woman’s heart beat hard. In all her years she had never seen a live seal on the beach and she strained her eyes now to see the last of its rolling back as it made its way out to sea.

But it changed its mind. It turned and was heaving up the beach again on its bent wrists, tucking its back flippers in like a dog its tail, to sit with closed eyes, its narrow nose lifted and the long whiskers coppery in the sun. It shook itself suddenly and sent spray over the onlookers, who fell back exchanging shamefaced grins and remarks at their own jumpiness. A beading of water shone on the cape of fur over the shoulders and the tips of the ears that poked down like dark little teats. Could it hear the voices? Her own ears were too full of harsh breath. The crowd edged
closer, they could not get enough of the wonderful apparition. What does it want? a child asked, and was answered in hisses and mutters. Is it hurt? Not as far as I can see. Is it a him or a her? Male, by the size. Yeah, it’s a bull. Huge! See the mane? An old fella too by the look. Is he sick, Ma? Ma, is the seal sick? Well, if he’s on his own I suppose.

The seal’s rump and belly had a pale coat of sand. Absently he scratched his back with a hind flipper while his pin head rolled. For a moment his eyes opened, dark eyes, globular, and again he shook a spray of sand and water off, a halo of light. Then he was off and humping down the sand laboriously. His track was a double warping like that of a turtle, a caterpillar tyre, perhaps, which the dogs on leads came stiff-legged to sniff at, hackles rising. But they backed away fast when he turned around. He was tough-haired like a cattle dog but they all knew it was no dog that was oozing and moiling up the beach again.

Fluid, wire-whiskered, blind, monumental, the seal sat and shook his water off. He bent himself to scratch and sent more spray flying out with his flipper, which was a long-boned hand of bronze, she saw, a mailed hand. This time two girls dared to step up close, giggling, and then a young man. Some of the onlookers exchanged grins. Tame for his size, eh, someone said, poor thing. There was a shift of mood as plain as a tide and everyone felt it, how the awe was seeping away and threatening to turn to contempt, impatience, hostility. The woman’s heart sank. Any minute now, she thought, Someone is going to make the first move, throw a stone or sand in its face, slip a dog’s lead for the hell of it. It only takes one. She moved forward. You know seals are protected, she got ready to say.

The girl who was in front of the seal was moving her body now in time with his swaying, insistently, as if they were at a dance, looking up into his face because he was so tall, taller than any of the men there, even the surfer they were with, and her hair swung from shoulder to shoulder catching in the light, like a pendulum. The seal was taking no notice, the eyes in his roving head fixed somewhere beyond, out of reach, so that the other girl was emboldened to lean in and whisper in her friend’s ear, a dare perhaps, or a warning, a splutter of laughter.

The seal reared up. Suddenly he saw where he was. He saw the crowd of faces that were close enough to kiss. Suddenly eye to eye he took them in and his head split open, a throat stretched wide, a ring of yellow bone, a silent roar as he swayed there like a cobra. Transfixed, they were all bathed in a sour hot breath of fish. Then before anyone could move he convulsed. With a cobra’s speed he whipped away and in seconds the dark bulk of him was gone from the sand, leaving them gaping, and gone from the shallows, surging strongly from pool to pool out into the high breakers of the Rip.

It had happened faster than the shocked girls could leap back into the circle of onlookers, who in their turn gaped in fright, and then laughed, shaking their heads in amazement. There was an outbreak of relieved chatter, the hilarity that comes after a close escape – Shit look at him go!
He won't be back in a hurry! Nothing much wrong with him – as they scattered with their dogs along the beach.

All but the woman, who was left standing rigid, open-mouthed with shock. Before her eyes was the salmon-rose throat of the seal open in a mute, a mutual scream of appalled recognition.

More and more now she lived for the warm weather, slow as it was to arrive on this coast, and intermittent at the best of times, not to be trusted. For half the year a heavy wind from the south flayed the branches off trees and jolted roof iron, filling every space with the salt and seethe, the noise of rough water. A still day was a rare blessing: the sense of hiatus, the silent air, the sea barely moving. It would come to seem a memory at the back of the mind, an urgent, impossible longing, the way a silence could fall like that, out of nowhere, as if time itself had stopped. Even in midsummer the heat could be swept away for ten days or a fortnight at a time by a gale out of the south that tugged at roofs and branches, whipping the waves high over the seawall, tearing the bluestone blocks out to sea, felling fences. She battened down through the cold months and waited for the sun to bring her to life much as the skinks did that she came across from time to time on the path down the dunes on the first warm calm days in spring, crouched with their hands spread out on the top of a fence post, as still as the wood, grey whorls and stripes and a red eye. They would wait until the last minute and then spring off, whip into the scrub. There were larger lizards hidden in their thick hides, invisible snakes that flowed like hot glass over the sand. All the wildlife of the dunes lay low through the long dream of the winter. Numb of flesh, inert, congealed they lay in wait for the sun.

The back beach at the foot of the dunes was full of traps, sharp rocks and undertows, tangles of weed. As a child she had hated swimming here. Try as she might to keep to where it was safe, she would always be carried stumbling on to hidden rocks sooner or later, or knocked down by a wave and carried out of her depth. There were so many dark masses, either rocks or seaweed, and a threat either way. Her own children had been the same, but by then she had the remedy. The mask changed all that. Once you saw the underwater as it really was, your fear was gone. You found your way easily among the rocks that in the water light were more richly coloured than dry rock on land, and through the weeds in their lushness, intricate, ambered, layer on layer, weightless, in constant motion as the water moved. Since the day she first put on a mask and lost her fear, although she was still wary, she never saw any point in going in for the sake of it, swimming blind.

When there was surf it was impenetrable. Even on calm days the water seen from outside, from above, was a mass of glazed blue opacities. Not when she saw into them and beyond as they were underneath, masses riven into canyons and arches furred with auburn plumes and straps of succulent weed that rolled and swayed or slowly unravelled, depending on the tide, and some were in skeins of old rose, shrill green. Fastened in
the dapple of the rock faces were blond fans, grapes and feathers and
tight scrolls, flukes, foxtails, banks of moss, hairy pods, mussel-black and
green, and soft ones the colour of pussy willow. Now and then a shower
of silver needles went by. A blunt fish there in a hollow was a parrot fish
lurking, wary at the size of her; here a small one in a yellow and grey
striped vest waited almost until her hand closed over it before jerking
away as if on a string. Glass shrimps hung like hairs in a bunch of
bubbles. Sometimes other divers waved their blue limbs in the distance,
slow giants magnified in the water. You yourself were magnified. As you
approached the turbulent outer edge of the rock pools the water turned
icy and was crossed with cloudy shafts of sun that dissolved all around
you into sand, bubbles and specks of weed glittering like mica. Even in
hot weather you could only stay in a short time before you froze. A cold
fall of water was pouring through the Rip from the swell out in the strait,
deep water overwhelming the pools, filling the bay with a rain of sand.

It was a summer town built on the last spit of scrubland dividing the bay
from the open sea, and popular for holidays because of the chain of front
beaches scooped out of the cliff between headlands and held in by a
bluestone seawall. The town came to a high point at the last headland
with its lighthouse, beyond which the dunes began and the surf beach.
The headland was the border where two seas met, and two climates,
since often enough the bay was a brown bowl of wind on a day that was
all glassy stillness just around the corner at the backbeach, and yet
calm, barely rippling, when the surf ran wild and high.

All manner of curiosities washed up on this border, charred logs,
crates, spars, oiled seabirds and ships' garbage that she picked up and
put in a bin or passed by angrily, according to her mood. She poked at
the mounds of seaweed, idly fossicking. Once she stumbled on a whole
shark under the seawall. Night was falling and at first in the half light she
thought it was alive. A long leathery grey body, as long as her own, with
not a scratch, and heavy—she tugged at the dorsal fin, but it dragged her
arms down. Slit white eyes and a puffy maw caked with sand, toothless,
a gummy shark — why should it be dead?

It was unscathed as far as she could tell. She washed her hands in the
sea and then over and over with soap, but the stench of shark fin clung.
Around sunset on one of the early hot days in November as she groped
after a green chunk of bottle glass in a crevice in the rocks at the foot of
the cliff, a cave under the high water line— the beach a long expanse at
low tide, with net on yellow net of water being quietly cast up and pulled
tight on the sand — something else glinted at the corner of her eye. She
reached out and there it suddenly was, wet on her finger and not, as she
thought at first, the ringpull from a can but a real ring. Gold, uninscribed
but for a scratch or two, it was most likely a wedding ring, a man's, by
the size of it, she thought, since she had thick fingers for a woman and it
was loose on her. A lot of husbands wore a ring these days. Not her
husband, who would have scoffed at the idea, who had been dead and
buried for so long that she barely remembered his face. Loose though it was, it rasped at the loose skin over her knuckle and, tugging uselessly, she felt the welling up of an old anger, even panic. The ridges of skin and the knuckle bone made a bar and the ring had drawn blood, or the sand on it had, by the time she thought of soap. Then it slid off easily enough.

She drove around to the police station, where the officer on duty said that if the ring went unclaimed for three months she could keep it if she desired. It said so on the form: I *desire / *do NOT desire to claim the above property. In the space for the description he wrote One gold coloured ring. Now he crossed out *do NOT, she signed on the line and a pink slip was handed over. She took the trouble to have a notice stuck in the milk bar window, where it stayed put, fading to parchment week by week in the summer heat and the bold ink gone grey.

It was never a constant heat down here, it came and went in waves, but this summer was shaping up as one of the rare good ones, still and barely stirred by wind, becalmed, a heat wave without movement like the eye of a storm. More and more as she walked at low tide on the sand bed among the rocks she felt the presence of a swimming self who had hovered open-armed like a bird over this sand, these rocks, and would again soon, a shadow in green shreds moving underneath. Well into the night now and into the morning and on, the house held the day's heat. After dark she mostly did without the electric lights, for the sake of the small difference it might make, that one degree cooler. In the gloom the gas under her saucepan shone like a ring of blue teeth. If there was a moon, she left the blinds up at bedtime rather than swelter in the dark, almost as if moonlight had the power to cool the rooms. Her sleep was never deep then and she woke with a shiver at daybreak, as always, only to see that the clock was on 2:28, and then 3:44, 5:00, and the bed a raft in a sea of milk. A heat wave at full moon was the best of all. Like water the moon found every chink of the simmering house. In the cool of the morning she went in for a swim and again in the late afternoon, although only at the front beach. The surf beach was too far to walk in the exhausting heat, and driving was worse, the car baking, gritty with sand. But at night she would often walk there and stay until midnight or longer. The stars for light, and the red tip of the lighthouse as it burned on and off, on and off, like a cigarette someone was drawing on. Afterwards she slept light. She swam through a milky trail of bubbles and from time to time the seal rose up from the sea, rose and sank, and she heard his harsh breathing, or her own, or the sea. I stitch the sea with a white thread, in and out, she dreamed, and my hot head fills with water.

At the foot of the lighthouse she came across some cast-up plastic one day, a white shampoo flask with a green lid, perfectly smooth, silken, the wording on it almost erased, and anyway the salt north wind whipping at her eyelids and lashes was making her eyes run. The underside had a thick pelt of something, seaweed, she thought, turning it over, but it was
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barnacles, dozens, of a sort that she had only ever seen in books, goose-barnacles, big and small, clamped on a bed of grit. They were grey with streaks, marbled, rimmed and striped once across in black, little mitres all shut tight. A shank held each one so fast she could not have prised even the smallest one off without crushing it. A shank of tough jelly, it was colourless except where it emerged thick and black from the shell. Dead or alive, they were worth a closer look. She took the flask home where, her attention distracted, she put it down on the draining board and forgot about it. Nevertheless it tugged at her thought, the way a drop of water as it trickles from wrist to elbow will pull the line of skin after itself. The flask pulled tenaciously at her attention, until she went back and saw to her horror that the sun had been on it, and the afterglow still was, and ants were massing. The pelt on the flask was alive, it was all one ripple, a wave of movement, each mitre shifting, restless, and opening to let a small black tongue with whiskers come poking into the air, and wave, straining, a blind probe. They shrank in at a touch. From this mass there came a ceaseless whispering and clacking, a susurrus, a cry of air. On the beach there had been no sign of life, no sound and in the salt wind no smell: now they emitted a strong salt smell, musty, rich, incipiently rotten, that filled the room, and their urgency so inhabited her that she ran with the bottle back along the sandy path and down the steps to the beach in the half-light – it was after eight now and the sun had set – where she flung it and watched it float, jostling in the wash, a life raft, she thought, out to a rock pool until a wave wedged it under an overhang dripping with brown seagrapes. The raft of the Medusa, and she turned away. She knew goose-barnacles could only live in the deep sea.

The school holidays brought the campers and the daytrippers. As usual these days her own children and grandchildren had better things to do than come down here. Which suited her well enough. Living alone might have its drawbacks, but at least now she had no one to please but herself. Her seven years of widowhood had slipped by so easily and fast that she was surprised, looking back. If what she had read was true and the body renewed itself cell by cell every seven years, each one as it died being replaced by a new cell in a slow invisible wave of change, then nothing was left of her as she was then, a husband’s wife. Not one cell of this body had ever known a man. It was as if she was restored to a virginity of sorts, a second virginity of age, and endurance, solitude. A freedom – since to have worked her way so loose must amount to freedom, she supposed, though it was a dour freedom, if so. And, if so, it only matched what she had become. She was her own being, for better or for worse, flesh and blood. Lust was long gone, outgrown with the old life. The moon had no more influence now, waxing and waning, and there were no more tides of blood.

Pleasing herself then, she swam. For most of the summer the morning sea was still too cold from the night, and in the heat of the day the beaches were a furnace. But by four in the afternoon she was ready. The
water was golden by then like a pane of lamplit glass, thick and dimpled like a pub window. She gave herself up to the lovely lapse of the flesh as it dissolved and floated, barely visible, almost asleep. When she came dripping into the house an orange afterlight lay sprinkled all over the floor. Sometimes the sky was dim and the sun scarlet, and she thought a storm was brewing. The wind would change, but then the sky cleared a little – the sun still not fully clear for the rest of the evening, but creamy, opaque. And in the morning it would be hot and still again with no sign of a change, as if the heat wave were a spell it was under, a blessed interval.

She was never a beach-lover as such. She never sunbaked before or after. It was only the undersea, and even so she took care not to stay in long. There was an old wetsuit in the house, if she could be bothered wrestling it on: she preferred bathers with a T-shirt, less for the slight warmth than for the sake of her fair skin in the sun. Even between swims she would change straight out of these wet clothes that clung too coldly and get dry. She feared the sea cold, the way it penetrated to her very bones and lasted long after she came out and was sweaty and red, gasping. It was a different cold from that of weather, and she knew it to the quick of her, knew it in her bones, as the saying went. She could feel the stiffness of cold in them as she walked. In her mind’s eye the bones were green, knobbly and barbed, stirring inside a filmy flange like egg white, like a jellyfish mantle, which was her own flesh. It went back to her childhood, of course, the memory of the X-ray machine that used to be in shoeshops. You stood against it with your feet in the slot and there was a porthole on top like a diving mask that let you watch them moving. Bony, dismembered, cold and green, underwater feet.

This summer was another matter. This summer she could spend hours of every afternoon in the deep gold of the water, clear pale gold and dark gold, the colour of beer, in a tight webbing. It was murky underwater with the tide well past the turn. Little fat fish fled to crouch in the weeds as they swung sharply back and forward in a shower of sand. Murky underwater, although seen from above the water had gone that transparent deep gold. But then it was deceptive, notoriously not to be trusted. Always there was turbulence on the shores of the Rip, currents so suddenly icy from out in the strait that a swimmer would stiffen, transfixed, fighting for breath. Every once in a while a diver was swept out and fished up, long since drowned, by helicopter, and sightseers lined the cliffs and the jetty. Storms struck and overturned boats. But you always knew where you were on the front beach. Two arms of rock sheltered it and the sand accumulated there, so that the shallows went out a long way and they were bath-warm. In spite of the many rocks – blanketed in flat seaweed and green out of the water, but once underwater, deep dark blue – this was where everyone came. She picked her slow way out through the paddlers and the rocks into the deep water and back. Day after day the world she came up into would be stiff to her eyes, dry and sparse, glaring with a yellow heat that was wearisomely
heavy to move in. People sat gasping, shining red under a film of sweat. No one could remember a summer like it, the March flies like wasps and the gardens simmering with mosquitoes. The afternoon sea breezes failed and what shade there was as it lengthened, even the dense shade of the pines along the seawall, was no match for the heat. Night brought little diminishment. If anything it was harder to breathe after dark in the blinded houses. In cupboards and wardrobes the heat brewed. Even after a cool change had sent the wind hissing all through the house you only had to open a cupboard door for the stored heat to come spilling out all over you.

Summer meant a stuffy nose day and night, a rustling of fullness in your ears when you moved your head, loud and furtive like paper being uncrumpled, the sea water shifting its weight. Whatever you heard through water was magnified, as well as whatever you looked at. It ran out warm on the pillow at last, one side and then the other, a molten discharge. In the morning the pillow had snail-crusts of salt and this was the way of the childhood summers she remembered, heat-struck, the amplified thunderous sea in her ears, the sea smell, a scrape of rough sand in the sheets. In her sleep she was any age and all the ages she had been. A heat wave gave you into another life, floating swollen with lightness, diaphanous, a water being.

Once at the end of a sultry day when she came down for a swim, bait fish were strewn about as bright and sharp as knife blades. Nets, rods, and buckets were everywhere and men scrabbling for worms. There was a heavy pulse, and a hissing, rustling noise. It came from many big barrel-bodied grey fish that were flapping on the wet sand in a heap behind each man kneedeep in the water with a rod, pulling them in. No time to waste in killing what would die of its own accord sooner or later. Among the gear were plastic bags, slimed and bloodied and crammed with more fish, mullet, yellow-eye mullet, still arching, flailing, eyes and mouths wild. A gleeful little boy ran from heap to heap poking a finger at them. Sick, she turned back. Along its full length the beach was alive with the flutter and glint of their dying.

A knock at the front door one February morning: a policeman, taking her aback. He handed over the ring in an envelope, and the book for signing. One gold coloured ring. She slit the envelope: yes, it was the right ring. She had no doubt that it was real gold – not that she cared, when she had a wedding ring of her own that she hadn’t worn for years, finding it a burden, and no reason to desire another one whoever it was. What had made her say she would? Well, she could always sell it. With this ring, she thought, until death us do part and so it had and the marriage was over and done with. This ring that lay cold in the hollow of her hand, her property now: she had forgotten all about it. She stared, puzzled why anyone would take their ring off at the beach. It was surely asking for trouble. Unless you were having a quarrel, then you might.
Whoever it was had never bothered to make enquiries. Although it might have come off in the water, if it came to that, or been thrown in from somewhere else, anywhere, the clifftop, or a ship, even, and washed up here. Maybe someone’s ashes had been scattered at sea and the ring with them. What was it worth? She put it in her purse with a vague idea of having it valued when she was in town, but as the days passed so did any thought of selling it.

Since it might slip through her fingers among the loose change in her purse, she put it on a shelf of the dresser with other things from the sea on a nap of sand: shells and crab casts, a rose cuttlebone with a hood of white, a sea urchin with its red stubble, a bird skull like a shell on a white chain, a crab nipper inkwashed blue and the chunk of bottle glass, jade-green.

The gold caught the light. Wherever she moved it to among the sandy relics sooner or later it caught the light, the living gold. When it began to weigh on her she shut it with her old ring and the necklaces, amber, Venetian glass and bloodstone, in the camphorwood box. Still it felt wrong to have it there, it was not at home among the jewellery of her younger days or anywhere else in the house either. Whose property was it really? At a loss she held it in the palm of her hand, a circle of light and shadow on the crumpled skin. Where would it be at home, if it came to that?

Meanwhile she dropped it among the clothes in a drawer. She was never going to wear it and yet selling it had over time become unthinkable, she would as soon have sold her real, her own wedding ring. *desire*. In her dreams she saw it dilate as she bent closer, auburn frills of seaweed and then a glint, a pale hoop half in half out of the sand, the water. Nevertheless, one day close on sunset, which came a lot earlier now, she thrust it in her pocket and walked to the lookout on the cliff halfway between the front and back beach. The crevice where she had found the ring was directly underneath, but it was high tide and there was no beach there. Sand and rock, it was hidden under a swill of waves and froth, swinging and crashing head-on along the invisible rifts of the rock shelf. Again it was deep in shadow.

Only a flock of gulls drifting, balancing on the wind long-legged, were still alight with sun. She threw the ring out as far as she could, so high that it shone like a star in among them before diving down and taking a shred of the flock down with it out of sight.

Still the hot weather held and the house, like the sea, had its continuous tides of heat and cold that lagged behind those of the night and day. The moon waxed and waned, and rose and set. Of all this she was aware, fully attentive to the rhythms without knowing that she was, and having no need of a clock any more, or the calendar, tide tables, knowing anyway, as she had never done since her childhood. It was the immortal first summer of memory and dream and the essence of summer.

Well into March the spell of heat endured, barely broken by a week of
wind and rough seas that swamped the beaches. White waves broke against the dunes and the box-shaped grey standing rocks and swilled up over the flat rock that was like an old man’s sleeping head at the foot of the lighthouse and splashed the bottom stairs. Even the planks of the pier were awash. When the weather cleared and the sun came out it was warm and yet unmistakably now, for the first time that year, the hazy salt still warmth of autumn.

All along the front beach the mounds of seaweed lay rotting, infested with fleas. More weed swilled in the shallows. The pitted rock face of the cliffs around the headland were suddenly thick with little midges that you triggered off if you walked past, mass after mass, black outbursts that pattered and clung, a blind whirring. The sun was low and the sand more than half in shadow. For once she had it all to herself, as she wavered at the thick edge of the water. The forecast was rain and a strong wind warning and she knew this was the last hot spell, if she wanted another swim, the tail end of the summer, on the hinge between seasons. But not here, not in this stagnation. This once, for the sake of its vast bare wash of sky and sand, she would go on under the lighthouse in the distilled heat of the day and around to the surf beach.

Here too, if you looked, there were the traces of the battering of the past week, loops and shreds and grass skirts of bladderwrack strung up drying at the high tide line and along the torn fence of the dune, strings of beads, amber, oiled wood, white shells in the marram grass that shone at the rim of the dunes. But it faced west and was still flooded with light, washed clean, as she had known it would be: the sand and sea one white glaze and, apart from the usual encampment of surfers and dogs a long way off, black dots against the sun, she had it to herself. As always she stripped and went straight in, by instinct finding a channel of sand in the rock shelf at the place, she remembered as the cold clutched at her, where the seal had bolted and dived away all those months ago. It was low water now as it had been then. Green, gold and bronze the weedbeds of the pools lay still and warm with long pulsing hairy arms swaying, and her slow flippers, and the yellow webs of the light that pulled in tighter as they were disturbed, and then laid open all their weave again. This was the place of the apparition of the seal, where he reared on the sand and gaped and fled convulsing in all his length, a seal taller than anyone thrusting his furious way out to sea. His eyes were bronze-black and so were his long-boned hands. The rocks all around her bristled and shone with strings of drops and bubbles. His head had split like a wound, like a husk, a pod to lay open a great flower, two petals dyed crimson, hot with breath, silenced, a raw mouth. And the disparition of the wonderful seal.

The turbulence took her by surprise, a tall wave heaving itself sheer over the edge of the rock shelf, flooding the pool. She rose and was flung hard against rock, a jagged overhang, bladderwrack, and her shoulder stung, and her nose, her scalp, a sharp gash, a burning, as the wave swept back through and over a channel and she was through, she was
over the edge in the open water and choking on mouthfuls, the snorkel swinging as she filled to her depths with cold water, her head, her belly, her cunt. She groped for the mask and fingers jabbed her in the eye as she smashed on the rock wall again in the violence of the water. Her other hand was jammed - she wrenched, groping for a foothold - in a clamp of rock and she let go of the mask, cracked across with a wire of light, to toss and twist free. But she was wedged fast, her mouth wide in a scream of water, swatches of hair and seaweed streaming red.

A moaning in her ears woke her. She was flat on her back on the beach, the hard sand, with a numbness in her and an ache, her head on fire, and a great shuddering that was making her teeth knock. She was sour to the belly, salt or vomit searing her throat, and her eyes stung when they opened on to the sky, on to a ring of heads all staring down, shadowy, not anyone she knew. Dazzled, she squinted up, fighting to lift her head, but it was heavy and flopped weakly back. She shut her eyes. Something sharp and hot rasped at her mouth. Her scalp was shrunk tight on the bone. She raised a hand to feel for the mask but no, and her bathers and shirt were torn. In spite of the cold all her skin burned as if stung. There was no response in the other hand - she craned - bundled up in strips of cloth. Now the heads above were bandying words and she snatched at them, though they were too fast, her sick head shaking them away. Just about scalped. Ambulance. Alive. Yeah, I reckon. Just as well. Swallowed a heap. Like a skun rabbit. Hands a mess. Yeah, mangled. Shit yeah, well what do you. Top of the steps and this wave come up all black. What I said, pitch black. Full of kelp and it come right up over the reef. Could have been a shark or anything. Fuck. And in we charge and the next thing whoosh, up she. Jesus. One lucky lady. Steps? she thought. Wave? - but her mind kept closing over, squeezing shut, like an eye in the fire of the sun. She was cold on a towel clumpy with sand and a dry one was spread over the half-naked masses of her. A harsh breath somewhere near was a dog, panting - jingling, and a cold spray tickled her skin as he shook himself. Go on, she heard loudly, out the way now, good dog. Then a crackling like thunder in her ears dimmed out the voices overhead. Just outside and beyond all this and so near was the edge of the deep sea, the stillness. Why did they have to come along and interfere? What did they think was the point of going in after her and hauling her back high and dry on the beach and wringing her out like a trough of washing? It meant a loss that nothing on earth could make good, so vast no one would ever know the full extent. She had had her chance and missed it. Anyone know where she lives? - a voice cut loudly in - on the phone, love? No good, she heard, no. Lives on her own. She flung her arms open, fighting for more air in the crush of legs and shadows. Someone knelt quickly down at her side, a rough head blocking her field of vision and at that she got her head up at last and her mouth open to scream, only all that would come was silence, was breath in a noiseless thread of dribble, half blood, half sea water.
Cautious Optimism and a Danish Third World Literature Prize: Abdulrazak Gurnah and the ALOA Prize

Today literary prizes are the arbiters of excellence. This is both good and bad; often, in fact more bad than good, but in the case of the Danish literary prize for Third World literature, the ALOA prize it would seem to be good. It is, of course always possible to question the separation of 'Third World', 'Commonwealth' or 'post-colonial literature' from other varieties of literature, ghettorizing it in this way, but in this connection it must be important to look at the reasons for doing this. The purpose of the ALOA prize is to attract attention to literature from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania, which has been translated into Danish. The committee finds that there is a number of excellent books in this category, but they do not get the attention they deserve, due to the large number of books that are translated into Danish every year. As a second principle, the committee also wishes to introduce new and lesser known writers to the reading public, deliberately excluding best selling authors and Nobel Prize Winners. By explicitly stating this, they discretely point to the fact that those are also to be found within their chosen category. To British readers, however, the names are familiar. Previous winners and runners up of the ALOA prize include Amitav Ghosh, Ben Okri, Anita Desai and Mario Vargas Llosa. The stress is on 'excellence', or more simply put, 'good books'. This of course immediately raises the charge of Eurocentricism, parading as universalism, but I think this charge can be answered with a measure of confidence: It must surely be permissible for a Danish literary prize to reflect Danish literary preferences; furthermore, the approach of 'excellency' has the added advantage of avoiding pandering to exoticism, thus risking the charge of being condescending. This year's winner is Abdulrazak Gurnah with the novel *Paradise* which incidentally was also shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize.

'Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 in Zanzibar, and he now teaches literature at the University of Kent'. This short bio in the Penguin edition of *Paradise* predicts the movement of his up to now
four novels. *Memories of Departure*, 1987, describes the childhood, early adolescence and both personal and political reasons for leaving Zanzibar; *Pilgrims Way*, 1988, is a love story which deals with the problems of racism and personal adjustment of a hospital orderly and failed student of literature from Zanzibar, trying to adjust to life in Canterbury. With *Dottie*, 1990, Gurnah departs from what appears to be the autobiographical tradition of first novels of departure and arrival, which he shares with other immigrant writers like Buchi Emecheta and David Dabydeen. With this novel, like Dabydeen, he branches out into a completely fictional work, in this case with a female protagonist, creating an impelling main character on the background of a wide screen of immigrant social conditions. With *Paradise*, 1994, he returns, fictionally, to East Africa, and setting his story at the beginning of the 20th century he creates a mosaic of cultures, incidents and characters, bringing to life East Africa's rich inheritance of African, Arab, Indian and European traditions. On this background one could discuss whether he is an African or an immigrant British writer, but this seems to me futile. The contents of the novels is derived from both his African and his immigrant experiences, and the style is very much that of the Victorian novel, with traces of Dickens in the wide scope of characters and abundance of incidents, but held together by the personal development of a central consciousness in the manner of a bildungsroman.

There is a curious distinction between the novels set in East Africa and England: Whilst the East African novels are concerned with social injustice and personal failures, a concern Gurnah shares with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the immigrant novels, whilst also depicting gross social injustices, portray small, but carefully outlined personal victories. There is an overall movement of initial destruction of the individual in his African environment and a gradual regaining of a personal foothold and a new sense of integrity, even if this had to wait for several generations. Gurnah's Africa, both past and present, is a harsh place, full of cruelty and betrayals. Like the writer Yambo Ouologuem he seems to claim Africa's right to a violent past.

The paradise of the novel of the same name is a violent place. *Paradise* is originally a Farsi word which simply means a walled garden', says Gurnah. Via Greek it came to mean what we associate with it today: a cool and pleasant place where both righteous Christians and Muslim men go after death. 'But', continues Gurnah, 'somebody has to look after the place. And then there are the women: their place is inside the house, rather like prisoners. Paradise isn't just paradise, in fact, at times, it is more like hell' (Weekendavisen, 1 - 7 December, 1995). The garden in question is situated in a small town on the Tanzanian coast during the time of the Arab sultany of Zanzibar and the expansion of Arab trade into the interior. It is owned by Aziz, a rich Arab merchant, looked after by a gardener who is a slave and inhabited by Aziz' wife who is confined to the house according to the Muslim rules of purdah and slowly going mad from a mixture of mental and
physical violence. The garden, however, is exceptionally beautiful and peaceful, secluded and lush in contrast to the world outside it. This somewhat tainted paradise is set in the wider context of East Africa at the point in history when the European powers were occupying the territory. The novel paints a wide screen of Arab-Muslim, traditional African, Sikh-Indian and German white life and interaction. The picture is not just one of violence and betrayal, it seems to write directly into existing stereotypes of the population groups in question: The Arabs are exploiters, slave owners and sodomists; the inland Africans are primitive, cruel and treacherous; the Germans are violent and cruel; only the Sikh seems to get off lightly. In view of the fact that one of the main concerns of African (admittedly mainly West African) writers since the 1950s has been to endeavour to dispel negative images of Africa this is surprising. Gurnah says that he has never believed the history books' version that the European imperialists brought order to a chaotic situation; therefore he wanted to look at it from the other side. This sounds like the first part of Achebe's agenda to show the value, dignity etc., of his African past, but it ends up as the diametrically opposite view. If his book was just a description of a pre-European paradise it would 'just be a new lie to substitute for the old one.' (Politiken, 24-12, 1995). Achebe's African past was not perfect, either, but the point was to show that it was more perfect, or less imperfect that generally believed. Gurnah has moved beyond this necessity and is ready to shoulder an ambiguous cultural heritage. One reason for this could be that he is less concerned with 'roots' than earlier African writers have been. 'I believe that the importance of having roots has been overemphasized', he says, and with an ironic twist which owes something to Said he observes: 'It is as if having roots is considered to be more important for people who come from outside Europe. If a Dane went to Argentina nobody would suspect that she lost her "Danishness". But if you come from East Africa and live for 15 years in London everybody immediately thinks that you have lost something essential. You haven't.' (Weekendavisen). Cultural nationalism is not the agenda for this writer. What then is?

Among other things Gurnah wishes to demonstrate the complexity of East African society, dispelling any (British or European) ideas of a uniform or monolithic or authentic 'Africa'. There is also a strong sense of a writer tapping a virtually untapped source of fiction, creating scenarios and characters who have not found themselves seriously discussed in fiction. Walcott's sense of the 'adamic'! Finally there is a search for the reason why people make the choices they do. The main character, a young boy called Yusuf, is handed over as a slave to the rich Arab trader Aziz as compensation for his father's debt. He travels with the trader and ends up working in his shop on the coast, and here he encounters the walled garden. He is immediately attracted to it and obtains permission to work in it after shop hours. Here he is spied upon by the virtually imprisoned wife of the trader, and as he is a
beautiful youth she falls in love with him. The ensuing story follows the Old testament story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. Unlike his biblical namesake, Yusuf is not jailed, nor is he made an overseer of the jail, but metaphorically, he follows the same pattern.

Falling in love with the trader’s younger wife (a slave, like himself) his choice of action is so severely circumscribed that he might as well have been in prison. He dreams of escape, seems to accept his lowly lot, but finds that he has no reason to stay where he is. At this point a German column marches into the town, and he joins it on the spur of a desperate moment, thus echoing Joseph’s defection to the Egyptian jail authorities. Yusuf’s locked situation would seem to be a good reason to escape through the Germans, but his confused state of mind does not add up to a deliberate choice. ‘If anyone asked Yusuf in the book why he ran after the army he would probably say that it was just something that happened. It was not a deliberate choice’. This is how Gurnah explains the action of his main character (Weekendavisen). This intuitive and inexplicable aspect of choice is partly to explain why the Africans did not resist colonisation more strongly than they did, and partly to explain, or cast light on present day immigration, including his own. ‘It is an idea which interests me very much, because it also concerns people who choose to leave one place and move to another. Not until afterwards do you realise that you can’t step back and say, “I’d rather stay”. That moment has passed.’ (Weekendavisen).

Yusuf’s situation, both his lack of options and his confused state of mind is paralleled by the main character in Gurnah’s first, seemingly autobiographical novel Memory of Departure.

Set in Zanzibar in the period just before and after independence and union with Tanganyika as from 1964 Tanzania this novel describes yet another violent period in African history. The erstwhile Arab ruling class not only lost its privileged position, but found itself the subject of discrimination and violence. The first person narrator of the novel, Hassan, finds himself the victim of new quota systems which effectively bar him from entrance to higher education, and after an unsuccessful trip to visit a rich uncle in Nairobi he leaves Africa. This violent environment is again paralleled by an incredibly violent and loveless home situation of the main character. With an alcoholic father who has been to jail for sexually assaulting a young boy, a suffering and ineffectual mother, a sister who becomes a prostitute and a vicious living grandmother there is no space for affection, and the boy is sensitive, introspective and guilt-ridden about the death by fire of an older brother, for which he is blamed. He blames himself for what he calls ‘a failure of generosity’ and finds that he spends his time ‘in a state of shocked amazement at the way I have spent my brief life, all that endless malice, that incapacity to be warm’. (Memories of Departure, p.159). The novel amply justifies this feeling, but again the decision to leave is not a clear cut, logical reaction, but rather an intuitive and emotional one, and it is his intention to return after a period of working
on a ship, but if the novel is autobiographical, this is not what happens, and the autobiographical story is continued in *Pilgrim's Way*.

Gurnah arrived in England in 1968 at the age of 18. He then worked for three years which at that time earned him the right to a student’s grant in England. His main character Daud is a belated pilgrim to the shrine of Canterbury where he works as a hospital orderly. Chaucer would not have recognized him, and what was worse, British society in the late 60s would not either. It was the time of Enoch Powell and the National Front, and the racism and violence which the main character experiences are both excessive and relentless. It permeates all human relations, except possibly one, that of love. The novel is a love story, and although it is open ended it is positive about the capacity of love to both transform the main character’s own destructive self-pity and help his English girlfriend to withstand incipient racism. Towards the end of the novel they are beaten up badly by a gang of white boys, but the love survives, literally blooded. The novel is far from a rags-to-riches story, but it does record small, personal victories on the background of violent racism.

This view is given flesh and blood in the next novel *Dottie.* The main character of this novel, the young girl Dottie, is born in Britain of immigrant parents. Her grandfather was a Parthan who made it to England after having served in the army during the First World War; her grandmother was the daughter of a Lebanese shopkeeper. Her mother continued her parent’s physical journey to England by making the cultural leap, refusing an arranged marriage, running away and changing her name from Bilkisu to Sharon. She lived as a prostitute and died of some horrible unnamed disease in a tenement room, leaving three children, our main character and her younger sister and brother, all of unknown fathers. At the starting point of the novel the three children thus find themselves in the emptiness of cast moorings and no landing. They have no cultural roots to fall back upon, and there is no place for them in British society. They are second generation black British, left to prosper or perish without any of the props which are normally taken for granted, such as home, family, tradition, religion, moral guidance or love. Predictably, two of them perish; the brother becomes a violent drug addict, a ‘16 year old wreck’ and drowns in the Hudson river, searching for his black G.I. father.

In this connection Gurnah takes a controversial part in the discussion of the adoption of black children by white, middle class parents. The boy is initially adopted by such a family and is happy, but Dottie, acting on a strong feeling that the most important thing in her world is to keep the three of them (the family) persuades the social worker to effect his return; this violent shift from being accepted in a middle class environment to becoming an outcast at the bottom of society with virtually nowhere to go is held mainly responsible for his violent anti-white racism and eventual self-destruction. The sister is retarded and succumbs to prostitution, and she becomes one of the obstacles in
Dottie's slow, painful climb into both self-respect and a decent living.

Other obstacles, apart from the racist and class-ridden environment are the men she meets. Gurnah gives them short shrift; in particular, his portrayal of a white, middle class, self-pitying, pseudo rebel who takes his obligatory period of slumming out on Dottie and of course exploits her is pitiless. More destructive, however, is the black drug dealer who initially helps, but later brutalizes Dottie and her sister. Dottie's means of self preservation and advancement are traditional. Borrowing books from the library to read, evening classes and female friendships, a move from the assembly line to the typing pool. She is eventually rewarded by love, or the possibility of love, in the shape of a man who both respects her and thinks along the lines she is battling to carve out for herself. Her changing moods of traditional self sacrifice, through bitterness and self doubt and occasional outbursts of violence towards a realization of her own potentials and a desire to fulfil them are chartered very carefully and movingly, and Dottie seems to me a magnificent tribute to the survivors of the transition into black Englishmen and women. There is no unrealistic gloss on the story, but it does bear out Gurnah's own contention that he is a 'cautious optimist.' (Weekendavisen). It will be interesting to see how this 'cautious optimism' fares in his next novel which describes a person who returns from England to Zanzibar.
Janice Shinebourne, *Time-Piece* and *The Last English Plantation*

A major phenomenon in the recent development of Caribbean literature has been the emergence of a fairly large number of women writers who are taking over from a predominantly male tradition and filling the gap caused by the failure of new significant male fiction writers to appear after the first wave from the fifties to the seventies. Janice Shinebourne's remarkable first novel partakes of this flowering of new talents. It is, to use an expression of her countryman Wilson Harris, an 'act of memory', initiated by the protagonist-narrator's visit to her native village in Guyana. Pheasant, a village in the canefields of the Berbice area has been wiped out by the mechanization of estate work in both canefields and factory. When Sandra Yansen returns, the one family still living there do not remember the past, and there is only her own family's 'dying house', a ruin symbolical of the vanished close-knit community, to signal the 'unperturbed presence' of familiar ghosts.

The two major parts of the novel emphasize the contrast between rural Guyana, where the solidarity of genuine community still prevailed in Sandra's youth, and materialistic, competitive Georgetown which in the mid-sixties, when Sandra took a job there as a reporter, forced many talented young people to leave, not just to study abroad but to stay away from a racially and politically divided society and from an impending dictatorship. The rural world near the Canje river and on the outskirts of the forest is evoked with great sensitiveness and a touch of nostalgia but never with sentimentality. There was no racial discord among the villagers who struggled to survive, unaware that their precarious, exploited condition foreboded their disappearance when no longer needed. It was also a world dominated by strong women, whatever their racial origin, where Sandra's father, a humanist and spiritual man by inclination had taken refuge from the money struggle in the capital and the temptations of ambition in himself.

In contrast with this matriarchal community close to the land (the canefields, the forest, the river) Sandra discovers in Georgetown the difficulties of asserting herself as a woman both in her profession and in personal relationships, though hers is not a militant feminism. As in her recreation of Pheasant, it is the very nature of Guyanese society, its colonial past and threatening future that she explores in her portrayal of individual lives. Her characters are the makers of Guyanese history.
in a crucial and troubled period when the country was moving from colonial status to independence against a background of race riots and personal ambition, and failing to achieve true freedom and equal opportunity. But again, this is indirectly suggested through the characters’ experience.

At the end of this beautifully written novel the narrator asks: ‘Was there no dirge that could mourn his [her father’s] death, no song celebrate the life he had invested in this stranded and exploited village?’ The answer to that question is her own narrative. Janice Shinebourne received for it a deserved prize from the Guyanese government, one of the literary awards attributed for the first time in Guyana. Though she was the only woman in a group of male writers (Wilson Harris, Fred d’Aguiar, Marc Matthews), one is tempted to say with Gordon Rohlehr that ‘the woman will be carrying the major burden of writing [in the Caribbean] in the near future’. (Kijk-Over-Al, 38, June 1988)

This is confirmed by her next novel, The Last English Plantation (Peepal Tree Press, 1988), which also concentrates on local history in a brief and difficult period of transition in the early 50s, when the villagers in New Dam on the Canje River attempt to assume responsibility for their own lives under a still paternalistic plantation system and British troops are called in to prevent sedition. In this context of crisis, the heroine June, slightly older than Lamming’s ‘G’, more passionately rebellious and highly conscious, prepares to go to high school in New Amsterdam, while all her former schoolfriends have already started working on farms, in the canefields or factory. Here again the strength of the narrative lies in the felt immediacy of the social and historical circumstances the villagers are experiencing and the heroine’s intense sharing of their condition and troubles, her understanding of impending political changes that may take little account of the ordinary people’s aspirations to political and economic emancipation. The third-person narrative is told from her point of view, and she may seem at times unusually perceptive for a twelve-year old. But she is a sensitive recreation of mixed adolescence and childhood, particularly in her contradictory impulses: her recognition of the need for education (which she knows to be possible only because of her parents’ sacrifice) and her loyalty to the village and its people, her longing also for the sense of security they offer. This is shattered in her first days at school when she is confronted with the racial and social prejudices of other children (and some teachers’), more ferocious than any adult’s. As the Martin Carter epigraph confirms, this is a novel about the difficulties of becoming and finding one’s self for both a young girl and the disintegrating plantation society in which she was born. Her future remains a question mark as does the direction her creator’s writing will now take.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ROSEMARY VAN DEN BERG tells in her own words.
"I am an Abongmal woman who has recently completed and passed my Masters degree in Australian Studies/Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University. My thesis was the second part of my father's biography titled *The Changing Years: The Pinjarra Experience*. It tells of how the Aboriginal people of a small town in the south-west of Western Australia had to adjust to and change with the government's policy of assimilation and integration into the white Australian community.

Although the book covers the period from 1944-1975, the chapters I am sending you deal with the years from 1965-1970, when the 1967 Referendum voted overwhelmingly for Aborigines to become citizens of Australia.

These chapters tell of how the Aborigines re-acted to the Referendum and are an interesting study of the south-west Aborigines, the Nyoongar people, with whom I identify and am considered an elder.

Besides being a post-graduate student, I am a published author. My first book *No Options No Choice!: The Moore River Experience* (1994) tells of my father's story from 1910-1944.'

GARY CATALANO is an Australian poet and art critic. He has published numerous books of poetry, an art criticism book *Years of Hope* and one of the finest books written on Australian cultural criticism, *An Intimate Australia*.

ANNE COLLETT has her B.A. & M.A. from the University of Queensland. She has lectured on post-colonial studies at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London and is now teaching post-colonial, American and British literature at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. She is now poetry editor of Kunapipi and currently writing on the work of Mohawk poet, Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson.

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COVER
Portrait of Ned Kelly by Sidney Nolan. Poster used for Australian Festival at the Aarhus Festival week, 1988

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