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.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Word for Windows, Wordperfect or Macwrite saved for PC on PC formatted disc) and should be accompanied by a hard copy, please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.


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Front cover: from ‘Casino’, by Althea McNish

*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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INTRODUCTION BY JOHN McLEOD

Laughing in the Storm: Representations of Post-Colonial London

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

Nonetheless, MacInnes’s advocacy of a London transformed, drawing its energy and hope from the postwar *demi-monde*, is never fully negated. *Absolute Beginners* ends inconclusively at London airport with the narrator attempting to leave the country, sick of the conflicts he has
witnessed. His final gesture is to embrace a group of newly-arrived Africans during a rain-storm. 'Welcome to London! Greetings from England', he cries. 'We're all going up to Napoli to have a ball!' The Africans 'all burst out laughing in the storm'. As this ending suggests, Absolute Beginners is a novel of stalled departure for the community it features. The final image of the 'laughter in the storm' acknowledges the storm of racial violence, but the value of the laughter is vital. It maintains Napoli's ebullient promise and keeps buoyant the Utopian possibilities of a very different London, the one seemingly annihilated by the riots. That laughter is one of the most important, if inexact, representations of post-colonial London in the 1950s.

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

This issue of Kunapipi celebrates and critiques some of the many different literary representations of London of the last forty years in post-colonial literature, without ever forgetting that this vigorous cultural activity has often occurred in a crucible of hostility, suspicion and hardship. The choice of the phrase 'post-colonial London', one with which several of the contributors to this issue are not always happy, is a stratagem intended to contextualize London both in terms of its enduring problems, and its social and semiotic transformation during the late
twentieth century. In Derek Walcott’s poem ‘The Bright Field’, the speaker refers to London as ‘heart of our history, original sin’. As Walcott suggests, Caribbean history cannot be understood without taking into account London’s formative influence in the Caribbean at both administrative and imaginative levels, and the same could be said for many parts of the Commonwealth: witness Peter Carey’s representation of the relations between London and Australia in his recent novel *Jack Maggs* (1997), or Amitav Ghosh’s mapping of London in *The Shadow Lines* (1988). So, the naming of a ‘post-colonial’ London is an attempt to bear witness to both continuity and change, to the continuing influence of London’s colonial history upon its contemporary, changing fortunes.

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

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

NOTES

This morning on Leyton High Street
I watched the too quick cortege
of glossy black sedans crowned with
plastic encased flowers. And
for the first time in my life,
I wondered at the incongruity
of carnations and death.

It is so with London for me:
death always seems absurdly comic;

Brit wit, I offer; but then
I am used to the calamity of sirens,
the open shore of mourners,
the wailing, the stench of duppies in the air,
the litany of blood and spirit
captured in the sun's rotting heat.

If I die in this sterile city,
no one, I fear, will know the language
of lamentation, and I will fade simply,
quietly like some nondescript
bookish cleric barely remembered
by stoic friends at the pub over a pint:
He was a nice chap, he was;
 wrote fine poems, he did,
so let's have another for him, shall we.
Even the leaves shedding themselves
will smell more thickly
of death and loss than these mourners.

It takes three days and an ocean between
to wash the savoury of Indian
from my finger tips. I finally rely on toothpaste,
a trick I learned so long ago
for killing the aroma of love and onions
in my fingers. Still instinctively
I sniff my hands like I return to poems
to remember the late lunch
sun and shadow, the palate
dizzy with the *mishti-knownta*
of your Bengali magic,
how we tenderly discarded the west
plucking vegetables, fruit,
tearing the bread and sweeping
the pulp and syrup of chutneys,
scooping all into the cup of our fingers
then prodding them with deft thumbs
into our mouths. While we ate
surrounded by the names of poets
and our scrawled and scarred sheets
of verse, I grew morose at the bile
percolating beneath the veiled friendships
between the coterie of poets
trans-cultural, who daub their exotic
scents on the walls of this old
city. I cannot read their eyes, nor can I
thaw the ice in their ritual welcome.
I give thanks in prayer that with you
I’ve found the space to eat
with fingers, to imagine poetry as music,
not the hustle, the jostle
for ground, for niches, for plots of barren
acres where we all wrestle to eke
a paltry living, our fingernails clotted
with dried blood and blackening flesh.

I’ve returned to South Carolina
where summer is barefaced and plain-
speaking, no dalliance here in Dixie.
I vow that if I must, I will return
without warning to Marlowe’s dark
Thames, this ancient stream
on whose southern banks new world
Kurtzes rave among the natives;
I will come incognito, travelling light,
seeking out the shelter
of your sun-washed loft, there
to make poems and scoop
mouthfuls of *basmati*
souped in your garlic-flecked sauces.
For three days, I am comforted
by the lingering spice of your daal
in my fingers, and somehow
while it lasts, it is enough.

DIONYSIUS' MIRACLE IN OXFORD CIRCUS

Oxford Circus, Central Line, five o'clock.
The train is yet to arrive.
He starts at one end of the platform
lightly touching the shoulders
of women, in his wake they are trembling
bodies loosened, arms reaching
for the walls, the vending machines
the bewildered bodies of men
with newspapers and briefcases, trying
to hold it in, this exploding
out of nowhere, these orgasms that break
them, their hips tightening
their faces uncertain whether to weep
or laugh, weep or laugh.
He looks back at the devastation,
the beautiful chaos of it all.
For some it is the first time in years
they had forgotten – for others
it is the music, the music in their heads
that turns and turns; while the men
look on in wonder, amazed, dazed
laughing stupidly at the scent
of the sea that fills this tunnel
as the train comes wailing in.

UMPIRE AT THE PORTRAIT GALLERY

At the Portrait Gallery near Trafalgar Square
I am searched by an ancient umpire
who mumbles his request with marbles or loose
dentures in his mouth. I see my first
portrait: the blotched bony fingers, the warts,
the clumsy overlarge gold ring loosely turning
like it will when he is entombed for good;
that look of boredom around the eyes
he masks with considered politeness
like a drunk man's careful compensations
and this self-important thinning of lips;
the nose, the greenish veins, the cliché
of a mole on his brow. It is too dark here
to study him well, besides he has found nothing
and the natives are restless at my back.

I am looking for the faces of this country
the rustic, the jaundiced, the worn,
sharp tight snaps so close the pores talk;
faces caught in unaware blankness,
the rituals of rocking to numb silence
on the trains; dirty light, the thin
mist of darkness in the underground
making the faces collectors' bits
keepables of a post-nuclear tribe.

I only find the posed stateliness
of another time – the courtly manners,
the clean colours staring from the palette
masking the stench and filth of older ways –
nothing to write about, really, nothing.

I am back in the lobby staring at the native,
his Adam's apple bobbing, his fingers
the thick blackened nails, the stale suit,
the cap, the poem he is – the simple grammar
of another time – the years of the bombs
falling; he must have seen broken bodies
too. Now he fingers my underthings
searching for things I may have taken.
He finds nothing, nods me along.
Still, the globular ring keeps me
from forgetting him altogether,
that and the absence of stories to tell.
It is brilliant outside. A black-faced
Bobby points me the way to the South
Bank where the river reeks of history
and word weavers converge in snotty halls
to flaunt their musings to the world.
Here we are in the carcass of empire
searching in vain for sweetest honey.
London in Hanif Kureishi's Films: Hanif Kureishi in interview with Bart Moore-Gilbert

Bart Moore-Gilbert is currently writing a monograph on Hanif Kureishi for the Manchester University Press 'Contemporary World Writers' series. As part of the research for this, he has been meeting with Kureishi on a regular basis. The following is an edited extract from an interview which took place at Kureishi’s flat in Baron’s Court, which focuses on the treatment of London in the author’s first three films.

BMG: The first thing that struck me about the films in terms of their representation of London is the way they allude to films which celebrate other capital cities. In ‘Some Time With Stephen’, you refer to Yasujiro Ozu’s Tokyo Story as an influence on Sammy and Rosie1 and in the script of London Kills Me, there’s an explicit reference to Fellini’s La Dolce Vita,2 which is playing at the Electric cinema in Notting Hill. That’s his homage to Rome, yes?

HK: Yes, it’s all set in Rome, or the outskirts of Rome.

BMG: And Sammy’s speech in Sammy and Rosie about the pleasures of London, that’s a reworking of Woody Allen?

HK: Yes, there’s a lot of Annie Hall and Manhattan in Sammy and Rosie. Annie Hall, especially.

BMG: In The Black Album, Shahid seems to feel that there aren’t any films about London, so before he gets there, his mental image of life in the city is formed by extrapolation from films about New York, like Taxi Driver and Mean Streets. Were your films in part a conscious attempt to make London a subject for contemporary British cinema - in a comparable way?

HK: I suppose so. Well there were some London films, a bit earlier, like The Long Good Friday. But the London I was interested in was the kind which never got on film, which was Asian London. Laundrette, then, was about the fact that London was a mixed city, a cosmopolitan city, a city of immigrants, as well.

BMG: If you take a film like Tokyo Story, in a sense Tokyo is the major character, insofar as it’s always there and it seems to determine the behaviour of so many of the characters, at least the younger ones. Aside from the focus on Asian London, was it part of your purpose to have
London as the central character in this sense?

HK: Yes. And I wanted to shoot films out in the city. So London Kills Me is very specifically located, in Notting Hill. There were thoughts of doing a lot of it in the studio, or here and there, but I wanted to photograph the place as it was, or as I thought it was. And all my writing, as you know, is concerned with London, in all sorts of ways.

BMG: What’s very noticeable about the films is that, aside from the excursion to the country in London Kills Me, none of them have settings outside London or its outer suburbs. In fact the rest of England, or Britain, hardly features in any of your work.

HK: In My Son the Fanatic it does, but aside from that, no.

BMG: One of the things that interests me is the way that London figures in terms of the transition between your plays, which I suppose represent the first phase of your career, and the films, which represent the second. In the last play, Birds of Passage (1983), the setting is very specifically the suburbs and the suburbs are somewhere that the young people want to leave in order to get to London. However, the older character David provides quite a long speech which acts as a kind of eulogy of the suburbs as representing the best of British life. What struck me is that David makes a connection between the suburbs and a notion of Englishness which is in the past, or under threat, or even on the point of disappearing. There are a number of factors behind this, but perhaps the most important, though it’s not spelled out as such, are the demographic and cultural changes bound up with ‘New Commonwealth’ immigration. I wondered whether the shift of location to London ‘proper’ in the first three films is connected to your sense that, whatever the virtues of suburban life — and David’s attitudes to them are by no means represented completely unsympathetically — they represent a sense of Englishness, which because it was, at any rate traditionally, defined more or less implicitly in ethnic as well as cultural terms, is no longer appropriate, or adequate, to the realities of modern Britain and the new conceptions of national identity and belonging which are now becoming necessary. And London, then, becomes a kind of laboratory for working out some of these new possibilities in terms of cultural identity.

HK: Well in my own case, there was a desire to get away from the stability of the suburbs, which is clearly what the suburbs were there for, the sense of permanence. Nothing changed very much and obviously for me as a young man, that was pretty dreary and I wanted the flux and cosmopolitanism and glamour of London.

BMG: But particularly in that speech of David’s in Birds Of Passage and also in some of the essays, especially ‘Some Time with Stephen’, which was written in 1987, there’s this idea that the suburbs are somehow quintessentially English and that therefore the move to London is tied up
with a desire to be something different, to imagine how one might become what Karim in The Buddha of Suburbia calls 'a new breed of Englishman'.

HK: Yes. Well, when I was there, the suburbs were mostly white. White lower-middle class and working-class. And me and my father and my sister were the only Asian people there, really. It wasn't cosmopolitan at all. It may be more so, now. So it was to get away from that kind of Englishness that I wanted to get to the city, because I couldn't bear being the only non-white where I came from. I need to live in a more cosmopolitan environment, as well as a more exciting environment.

BMG: At the same time, in some of your essays at least, there seems a note of nostalgia for the suburbs, so that although they are narrow and monocultural, they're also still associated with those Orwellian ideas of tolerance and gentleness and so forth - which perhaps you don't get in the city.

HK: Well, they do sort of work. It's not that one just hates the suburbs and wants to get away. They do serve their function, and they do preserve a certain kind of Orwellian gentility, I suppose. And privacy, which is so stultifying, because people don't engage with one another. You never really went into other peoples' houses. Certainly the parents didn't, though the children did to a certain extent. You wouldn't look at one another. In the opening of The Buddha of Suburbia, and in the TV film as well, Margaret pulls the curtains, she doesn't want people looking in. There's that sense of nothing being displayed, of living only in the most glancing and superficial ways, that's the idea of the suburbs. And that was terrifying to me, being a kind of sixties or seventies kid, with a romantic idea of what people could do with one another.

BMG: One of the ways I've been approaching your films is by looking at them in context of all those 1980s 'Raj Revival' and 'English Heritage' works and I've been thinking about your use of London in terms of the latter genre, especially, films like Hugh Hudson's Chariots of Fire (1981) and the Merchant-Ivory adaptation of Forster's A Room with A View (1984). You mention each of these films at various points in your non-fiction and I wondered whether the emphasis on London in your films is partly tied up with the fact that the social order that is mediated in 'Heritage' films is pre-modern; they evoke an old England which is centred on the country and the country house. And consequently London and other big British cities don't really feature at all in them, because that way England can more easily be presented as ethnically and culturally pure, even though at the time these films are being made all that has long gone. And, of course, the cities in the period that these films address were already culturally mixed, or 'contaminated', even, by foreign influences, though not of course as much as they are now. So 'Heritage' films want to exclude them, as part of that eighties project of defining national identity in very circumscribed terms.
HK: Yes, that’s right.

BMG: So there was a deliberate engagement with those ‘Heritage’ films in the way you used London in your own films, so that your London was aggressively different, more modern or progressive, more democratic, more cosmopolitan, than the kinds of England for which the ‘Heritage’ films were nostalgic?

HK: Yes, absolutely.

BMG: It’s interesting that insofar as rural England features in your films, it’s a backward, oppressive or threatening place. One of the characters in Laundrette, I think it’s Johnny, talks about the snakes you find there. It’s an alien and weird idea for him.

HK: Yes. Actually, my [new] play, Sleep With Me is set in the country. Somewhere in the country, it doesn’t say, but it’s set in a country house and all these people from London go for a weekend and while they’re there all kind of mad things happen. You couldn’t set Sleep With Me in London.

BMG: The country house has a very long history as a symbol of England.

HK: Yes. So these modern English kids running around in that kind of place indicates some sort of change, perhaps.

BMG: So in your films, the country, which is so English, traditionally, is actually a foreign land to these people who come to it from London?

HK: Yes, yes. I mean you imagine Johnny and Omar walking around the country, it would be a very strange sight. This skinhead with long hair [sic] and this Asian kid.

BMG: Which is actually what happens in London Kills Me, when the posse have their day trip out of London. Those country kids they meet are throwbacks, culturally, or deprived. They can’t cope with these apparitions from London. But they’re also dazzled by them, the freedom they represent.

HK: Yes, they’re amazed.

BMG: There’s a very interesting essay by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown in a recent issue of Marxism Today. She talks about the relation between Britain’s ethnic minorities and the rise of nationalism in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. One of the things she’s worried about is the resurgence of English nationalism in response to devolution, if Britain breaks up. In this context, she seems to see the city, especially London, as a place where minorities can claim a sense of belonging which goes beyond those narrow ideas of Englishness. [reads]: ‘If we blacks are going to be locked out emotionally from Wales, Scotland and England, I wish to claim London for us and those who think like us. Here we will preserve that historical fudge – a Britishness which is a civic device to bind people together without recourse to
London in Hanif Kureishi’s Films

It seems to me that in a way your films anticipate that kind of argument. So that London is a place of some kind of national or communal belonging still, but one to which anyone can belong, regardless of ethnicity or inherited cultural traditions. So, for example, in Sammy and Rosie, Sammy says, ‘We’re not Britishers, we’re Londoners.’ And you make similar kinds of comments about yourself in your essays.

HK: Yes, that’s very interesting. I suppose there aren’t really any ideas of Englishness as such in London. Even when you see churches. A church in London is more likely to be a tourist attraction than anything else. In the country it’s different. I went to a wedding recently in the country and you could see that that family had been going there for generations and they obviously all knew each other. Clearly churches don’t have those meanings in London.

BMG: And in London you can transcend that?

HK: Yes. I find going to the country terrifying because you always feel excluded. One gets very bad paranoia. I think it’s very interesting what she says about whether there’ll be a resurgence of English nationalism. I doubt it to be honest, I can’t see where it’s going to come from. I can’t see it coming from young people.

BMG: She doesn’t actually spell that out, but there’s clearly anxiety about reactions to developments like the resurgence of Scottish nationalism.

HK: Everybody wants their own nationalism, I suppose. You want to join in. But you can’t find a gap to go through. And then suddenly you see London and you think that can belong to us, it doesn’t belong to the English, it’s international. So suddenly you can see there’s a gap, you can force a way through there. I remember coming from the suburbs and not belonging and getting to London and thinking, where am I? who am I? And you suddenly see that you can claim London as your own.

BMG: But there’s also a quite different sense of London which comes across in the films, which are represented in Danny’s ideas in Sammy and Rosie about London as the site of ‘domestic colonialism’. This is striking in the context of the ‘Raj Revival’ films of the 1980s, even Gandhi, perhaps, where colonialism is something that happened a long time ago, a long way away. So that ‘London’ is actually quite an ambivalent space in the films overall. It’s the place of new identities, of opportunity and progress, but it’s also the place in which the old colonial order somehow continues, the injustice and oppression and discrimination.

HK: Certainly if you’re a young, black male, I think you’ll probably find that a lot of people have bad ideas about you and, you know, you may have certain ideas about yourself. About feeling excluded in certain ways.
BMG: The take that Sammy and Rosie has on those sort of issues, did you feel that in the emphasis on the riots, and the almost documentary aspects—like the references to the shooting of Cherry Groce and so on—did you feel that was a reflection of everyday reality, or was that exaggeration for dramatic effect? At one point you talk about the film’s mixture of realism and surrealism. Was all the conflict there to support the former emphasis or the latter? Or did you feel that’s the way it really was, and want to get that across?

HK: Well, that stuff had happened. Though obviously, you stick that in the middle of the film and it can seem surreal or an exaggeration. Clearly it wasn’t happening every day and clearly we weren’t living in South Africa. But also that film was made right in the middle of Thatcherism. And one really felt then that somehow the English, whoever they included, would, under Thatcher, really leave everybody else behind, the unemployed, certainly the ethnic minorities. And you felt that there were going to be two nations. You can see that Blair has somehow prevented that happening, but at that time that didn’t seem to be an entirely paranoid vision. Certainly those riots had taken place, there were riots going on everywhere in the country in the early eighties. And we watched all the television footage of that stuff when we actually shot the riots.

BMG: In Sammy and Rosie, I think there’s an interesting recapitulation in terms of the earlier connection between Englishness and the suburbs, because of Alice; she’s the old colonial and so colonialism becomes associated here with the suburbs. The violence which comes with ‘domestic colonialism’ somehow gets mixed up with the ideas of gentleness, as the other side of that Englishness represented by the suburbs as David in Birds of Passage conceives of them. She lives in leafy Cockfosters and it’s interesting that Danny says he doesn’t want to go there, he sees it as ‘dangerous’. She lives there in this great, decaying mansion-type building with a cellar which is full of quasi-Gothic secrets. It seemed there was a big shift in that sense from the way the suburbs come across in the plays, that they’re much more directly related to the darker side of the English past which is still having its effects on the present. It was actually shot in Kew wasn’t it?

HK: Yes, next to Kew Gardens. I suppose she wasn’t suburban in the way that we were. I thought of her as being more like Cheltenham, certainly from somewhere further out, an area that people don’t commute into the city from. For Alice, and people like her, the city would be considered dangerous, a strange and aberrant place. So I don’t see her as being suburban, I see her as being, I don’t know, provincial’s not the right word, I suppose quintessentially English in a way that’s probably now lost.

BMG: I saw a kind of link, or symmetry, in Sammy and Rosie that in the city itself you have this system of modern domestic colonialism and in places like
Cockfosters or Kew you have the vestiges of the old colonialist order. Which is oddly sympathetic as well, in its own way.

HK: Yes, I see that.

BMG: I’ve asked you about your relationship to Kipling before and I just wanted to go back to this for a moment in the context of the films. It seems to me that in some ways your vision of London is a kind of inversion of his vision of India in The Jungle Books, especially, so the former colonial centre has become a kind of jungle in which characters like Karim, who is so like Mowgli – and Kim – in many ways, and a lot of the characters like him, have to survive. It’s a kind of parodic reversal, so that the old imperial capital has become a place of threat and disorder, especially for the migrant.

HK: Yes, definitely. Someone like Karim comes to a place where very bad things are going to happen to him, unless he takes care. He has to be on his guard and negotiate and in a sense sell himself. When he plays Mowgli, he has to sell a part of himself, all he’s got really, the colour of his skin, in order to get by as an actor. And that’s not unlike what his father has to do, which is selling Indianness, or selling George-Harrisonness, in order to become an admired guru in the suburbs. So in a sense exoticism becomes a kind of commodity which one can exchange in order to get by in the jungle of the city. It seemed to me there were lots of ironies there.

BMG: Yes, it’s a motif throughout your work, the white liberal, even hip, domestic interior, which always has the lacquered box from Thailand or the rugs from Morocco. There seems a connection between that and the old colonial idea of prizing the authenticity or Otherness of the colonized peoples, making their difference a commodity.

HK: Yes, ethnicity is a commodity which is bought and sold, but you could also say in a way that it’s cultural interchange. Like Picasso taking African masks and making something else with them. You wouldn’t only say that he was exploiting Africa for images. This is how culture works. It takes originals and does other things with them.

BMG: It’s interesting you say that. Certain kinds of Marxists would probably disagree. Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, sees globalization as simply the latest phase in the West’s exploitation of the rest of the world and its appropriation of their culture. I’d argue that globalization is actually more of a two-way thing, that although there certainly is exploitation, it’s also the case that ‘they’ answer back, or ‘write back’, to use Rushdie’s phrase, and ‘we’ are changed as well by the relationship, we’re productively contaminated, if you like. And that’s especially what happens in places like London.

HK: Well the opposite of that would be purity. There would be no interchange at all. The whites would remain entirely white and the Third World
would remain entirely untouched by capitalism. That would be absurd. One of the greatest benefits that somewhere like India has at the moment is computers and e-mail and the internet, and this can give people access to education and knowledge and so on. It would be absurd, rather old-fashioned, just to see these developments as exploitation. I suppose I'm talking more about culture than economics. Culture is about mutation, you have to pick up bits and pieces from wherever you go, and that all has to change continuously, otherwise culture's not alive. And that's more apparent in a city like this. Economically I can see that things might be quite different under globalization, but I think you have to make that distinction. Otherwise, culture's dead.

BMG: Another of the things that interested me in terms of the films' representation of London was in the context of post-colonial ideas about 'imaginary homelands'. First of all, to go back to the 'English Heritage' films for a moment, it seemed to me that they're obviously examples of imaginary homelands, evocations of an England without any real social tensions, and so forth, an England which obviously never existed. But also many post-colonial writers seem to be trying to create imaginary homelands too. I felt there was quite a different emphasis in your films, partly because of the medium itself. As you've said, your London is a real London and the films are in some sense about a struggle over a real place. For example, in London Kills Me, the directions specify very particular streets and locations.

HK: Yes, I'm not a magic realist in any sense. There certainly isn't much magic in South London. Rushdie could find that, the others could find that, where they came from.

BMG: But is that tied up with the fact that they are using a literary medium? The world they create may be based on a real one, but by virtue of the medium it requires more imagining?

HK: Yes, but they're also using places, Bombay or Peru or Colombia, which are places where there really are mysteries, and superstitions, and the world is invested with a kind of magic which certainly Orpington, say, can't possibly have.

BMG: But is the same true of London? In a couple of your essays, you argue that there are aspects of London which you just don't get to know, life on the 'sink' housing estates for example. That London is a mystery in a way, that it's a place of constant surprises, that it constantly eludes you. The point about London is that it is full of these places and ways of living that you suddenly come upon, which bring you up short.

HK: Yes, and that is one of the pleasures of London, too, that in a sense you can never understand it and find it all, that it renews itself all the time and is always different in a way that the suburbs or the country are not. And that's the problem for people with London, too. It's always changing. And here's
that element of fantasy. I suppose that a lot of these places in London are playgrounds, really, for certain kinds of fantasies. Bloomsbury is a playground, there are thousands and thousands of articles and books continuously written about Bloomsbury, so it’s become a sort of soap opera, it’s a place that you can fantasize around. It’s real and you make it up. What I wanted to do with Laundrette, I suppose, was a sort of blast of the real. You know, if you want to know about London, it’s like that, it’s a laundrette in Peckham. It’s not England as it is in A Room with a View, with Judi Dench in her carriage.

BMG: So London is very much a real place, materially, in your films. It’s in your face. There are no shots of tourist London, of imperial London or the great shopping streets. I saw that as a really effective riposte to the impossible sweetness of the villages in the English countryside in films like A Room With a View.

HK: Yes, but you could have imperial London, too. But that’s not my area. It’s what you choose to put in, or leave out, that’s what’s interesting.

BMG: I suppose it’s a fairly obvious point, but there does seem a strong connection in your films between the idea of London as various and changing and the stress in your work on the malleability of identity. I suppose it’s an idea which connects with Kim again, the emphasis on disguise and the way a character like Karim is constantly changing his wardrobe as if he’s trying on new roles or identities.

HK: Yes, in London there’s a sense that you can make yourself up. At the beginning of the TV series, and in the novel, Karim sees his father doing that. His father’s usually a man who’s watching telly in the evenings, then one night he goes out and becomes a Buddha and everybody is amazed by him. Karim sees his father turned upside down, literally, and then he’s transformed into this other creature. Or in The Black Album, where Shahid could become a Muslim fundamentalist. Then he goes to a rave. And so on. That idea of mutability, it excited me very much, it was happening to me already. I was a Pakistani boy when I was with my Pakistani family, then I’d go to school, and I’d be a mod. And then you saw you could make more of it and enjoy it and it was rather liberating to think that you didn’t have to be stuck in one identity. I suppose one of the things I liked about Sammy and Rosie was all that stuff on the tube, the trains and the travelling, which is also a metaphor for other kinds of fluidity. You could easily have made that film without all that kind of stuff.

BMG: And that freedom is much less possible in the suburbs or in the country?

HK: Yes, but it’s partly because of class, too. You know, people don’t talk much about class. But when you went to the country, you knew you were part of a different class, you know, that you were disdained.
BMG: This is probably my final point and I guess it goes back to something we discussed earlier. In the essays, there’s a very interesting engagement with earlier writers like Orwell and Priestley in terms of their ideas about ‘Englishness’. In ‘Bradford’ you mention Priestley’s idea of there being three Englands, ‘Heritage’ England, the old industrial England, especially in the Midlands and the North, and the new suburban England which was emerging in the early part of the twentieth century. London doesn’t really get a mention in this scheme. And you argue that now there’s a fourth England, the England of the inner city.5

HK: Yes, particularly as those parts had been so bombed. So all sorts of people were able to move in, nobody wanted to live there any more. Certainly up to the seventies it was full of squats and derelict buildings. And there was a kind of cultural renewal, so that there were all those little theatres in basements and so on. There were places to hide and remake yourself and to make new kinds of communities. It was before the Canary Wharfization of London in the eighties under Thatcher. Before, those parts of England were still semi-derelict and therefore you had more spaces to play in. And to move in. And with all those new kinds of people, not just immigrants, though the immigrants were most visible, there was a new England coming into being, especially in London, even though it had always had those elements of difference to some extent, of the foreign, because of its history, because it had been the centre of the empire, of the world, even.

NOTES

SUJALA SINGH

Inventing London in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

When I first read *The Shadow Lines*, I was a graduate student in the US, battling through the maze of too-much-theory, multiple fraught subject positions and the various options for post-colonial mimicry. As a novel about border-crossings, hybrid subjects and post-colonial travels, *The Shadow Lines* fitted very well with my dissertation needs as well as the prevalent fashionable interpretive agendas of the day. Yet, my pleasure at reading the novel was because it was about home. As I sorted through my post-colonial traumas in small-town North America, the novel named the streets of Calcutta that I had grown up in. So much for missing home. A few years later, I came to London. This time, my partner and I used *The Shadow Lines* as a precious tour guide to 'ethnic' London. We meticulously charted out our forty-five minute tube journey from Wood Green to Brick Lane in quest not only of the Sylheti-accented Bengali that Ghosh's novel promised, but to assure ourselves of the existence of post-colonial London. A few weeks later, we discovered Turnpike Lane, a ten-minute walk from where we lived, with all the varieties of fish, Bollywood 'masala' and spinach that we could find in a Calcutta bazaar. In a sense, we were replicating the desires of the unnamed narrator in the novel who attempts to match the cartography of London with the stories that he has been told. While, for the narrator, this becomes a way of affirming the value of 'imagining with precision', of coming 'home' to what is supposed to be foreign, for us it was an attempt at warding off the loneliness of being in yet another foreign city, a desire to 'know' more than the routes which the A to Z delineated. Depending on where I was reading from, then, *The Shadow Lines* made me 'imagine' home through a nostalgic remembering as well as 'discover' the post-colonial London that I had read about.

This essay will examine the itineraries of story-telling in *The Shadow Lines* and ask questions about the responsibilities and consequences of worlds mapped and traversed through stories. Set up as a novel of family tales, the narrative line is filtered through the unnamed narrator's recollections of other people's stories, especially his uncle Tridib's. The narrator's early vision of the world is formed by the glimpses of far-off places that he gets from Tridib's anecdotes. This world-view feeds on the wonder of remote places, wonderful if only because of their remoteness, as
he drifts in and out of his surroundings in Gole Park or Southern Avenue (in Calcutta) to the imaginary London detailed for him through Tridib’s fragments. The little boy seeks an identification with the uncle he hero-worships through a world where borders are permeable, and their crossing easy yet adventurous. The bourgeois life the narrator leads in his upwardly mobile family with its strong sense of locale which remains static and safe, lends a foil to this quilted cartography. He hoards the tidbits of Tridib’s memory and narrativizes his voyeuristic consumption by detailing, in a map-maker’s meticulous manner, the spaces of wartime London, for example. As the novel proceeds, there is a gradual etching in of the ways in which the sweep of his vision gets marked up for divisions — divisions of mundaneness, of war, of religion and gender and a growing up to the responsibilities of stories that refuse to let his imaginings transcend them.

The narrative organizes itself through a self-conscious juxtaposition of various spaces, the most significant of which are Calcutta, London and Dhaka. For the narrator and his middle-class family, travel to London is far easier than the one beyond the ‘looking-glass border’ (p. 228), between Dhaka and Calcutta. As the text focuses on the painful consequences of these ‘shadow lines’ in the second section of the novel labelled ‘Coming Home’, I want to explore the implications of possible and impossible border-crossings in the novel. I want to contend that the question of belonging and identity gets curiously displaced. Rather than focus on the immigrant’s unbelonging in a first-world metropolis, the novel highlights the post-colonial trauma of the impossibility of going home to a place that has been defined as foreign, beyond the border, ‘Pakistan’. As the ‘Coming Home’ section of the novel seems to agonize over the consequences of a home that is no longer home, I want to contextualize this alienation in terms of the relatively easy crossing to London and ask questions of the unnamed narrator and his insistence on freeing London for ‘invention’. I will focus specifically on the role that London, first as remote, desired space and later as discovered metropolis plays in problematizing the relationship between told stories and untold histories.

The novel begins with a specific historical naming of time and place, of the London that the narrator must ‘invent’ many times over before he physically arrives there:

In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father’s aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib. (p. 3)

When he arrives in London in the late 70s, carrying the baggage of his imagined memories of the London of 1939, he meticulously traces the
routes of Tridib’s wartime memories. He zealously tracks down the locations associated with the Prices (family friends who the young Tridib had stayed with) and is proud that he knows their 44, Lymington Road, Hampstead address on ‘page 43, square 2’ of the A to Z ‘by heart’ (p. 57). So transfixed is he by the Tridib tour guide that he is ‘bored’ when his cousin Ila points to the used-clothes stalls and the vegetable market at Covent Garden until he accidentally discovers the old office of the Left Book Club where Alan Treswasen, Mrs Price’s brother, had worked before the war. What seems like a ‘musty old office’ to Ila means much more to him ‘for having seen it first through Tridib’s eyes’ (p. 31). The contrast between his and Ila’s ways of experiencing London appears again when she mocks his reaction to the Underground as he ‘gulped in the netherworld smell of electricity and dampness and stale deodorant’ with ‘For God’s sake stop carrying on like a third-world tapioca farmer – it’s just the bloody Underground’ (p. 21).

The narrator’s response is typical of the many ways in which he justifies and valorizes his version of London over Ila’s:

I could not persuade her that a place does not exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart. (p. 21)

The narrator’s faith in invented places derives, of course, from Tridib’s dictum that one ‘could not see without inventing what we saw’. For, if one didn’t do so actively, one ‘would never be free of other people’s inventions’. What can we infer, then, from Tridib’s ‘invention’ of the London that the narrator inherits and treasures?

I wanted to know England not as I saw her, but in her finest hour – every place chooses its own, and to me it did not seem an accident that England had chosen hers in a war. (p. 57)

This unquestioning endorsement of England’s ‘finest hour’ reads like a parody of England’s mythic exaltation of itself as a country that had saved the world but lost an Empire because of the war. The adult narrator exclaims the above while on a one-year academic research stint at the School of Oriental and African Studies, to study ‘the textile trade between India and England in the nineteenth century’ (pp. 13-14). How does one make sense of this earnest identification with the glories of wartime England by a student of colonial history?

The only other character in the novel who espouses an enthusiasm for war-time places is his grandmother, but she is declared a fascist by Ila and defended as a typical middle-class woman with average right-wing desires by Tridib. Ironically, it is she who elsewhere in the novel extends the narrator’s thesis by her emphatic corollary that those who live in England have earned the right to do so with blood:
They know they’re a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood... their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars. ... War is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. (p. 76)

In this variety of England and London, ‘Ila has no right to live there’. Citizenship or belonging hinges not on political participation – Ila ‘spends her spare time going on demonstrations in east London, and acting in radical plays for Indian immigrants’ (p. 78) – but on the invocation of rivers of blood, real or imagined. Using the grandmother as an example, Meenakshi Mukherjee writes:

_The Shadow Lines_ obviously questions the idea of nationhood that is consolidated through the baptism of wars or coercive apparatus.³

While critics have written about this questioning of nationalism in the novel in relation to sub-continental politics, they have tended to ignore the nationalist references to England because of the narrative’s lack of direct commentary on it. While allusions to England’s colonial past litter the text in the form of questions and asides, they are never taken up directly by the narrator. In contrast, the violence of border-crossings in the subcontinent as a result of competing nationalisms is deliberated upon at length as he painfully learns the cost of the intersection of private lives and public histories.

The narrator makes a case often enough for his imagined London not needing to be reined in by the obstacles of history. Here is another typical exchange with Ila:

But I _am_ free, she said laughing.
You’re lucky, I answered. I’m not: at least in London.
Why? she asked, draining her whisky. Because of the Raj?
I began to laugh. And then, because I knew she had forgotten, I tried to recall for her how, when we were eight-year-old-children, she herself had once invented London for me. (p. 31)

The above, yet again, seems to suggest both a dichotomy and a validation of story over history. In another context and location, when May Price visits Calcutta, the narrator enthusiastically displays the huge, expensive table that Tridib’s grandfather had bought from a Crystal Palace exhibition in the 1890s because he couldn’t ‘resist it’. On seeing the table, May exclaims her outrage at this sign of colonial collusion and class politics: ‘Why did he bring _this_ back, for God’s sake? she cried. Why this worthless bit of England; why something so utterly useless?’ (p. 48). Her politically-correct exclamation undermines the narrator’s magical, childhood association with it, ‘it seemed impossible to me to think of that table as an object like any other, with a price and a provenance’ (p. 48). For, it was under this table that Ila had invented London for him when they were ‘eight-year-old-children’. But even as early as that, he had
known that Ila had enacted the racism that she had encountered in a Hampstead school through the blonde, blue-eyed doll Magda (who is hurt and abused and called ‘Bloody wog, nig-nog’ as she is walking back from her imaginary school) while they were playing ‘Houses’ under the table. The disavowal of the Raj’s role and the redemption of the invention of that London becomes doubly ironic in the context of these contradictions being enacted under the shade of a massive, disused colonial relic.

In his essay ‘Inventions of the Other’, Jacques Derrida explores the meanings invoked by the word invention, the particularity of the event of invention, and its socially consensual legitimation as invention:

[An invention] will receive its status of invention ... to the extent that this system of socialization of the invented thing will be protected by a system of conventions that will ensure for it at the same time its recording in a common history, its belonging to a culture: to a heritage, a lineage, a pedagogical tradition, a discipline, a chain of generations. Invention begins by being susceptible to repetition, exploitation, reinscription. 4

Thus, it is the iterability of the invention that founds practice, and it is in the domain of repeated practices that a social habitat is formed. So, the fulfilment of the tempting desire to ‘be free of other people’s inventions’ is of course fraught with the possibility of its entrapment within the cycle of the utterance and iterability of invention itself. As the narrator echoes Tridib’s claim that:

everyone lives in a story, he says, my grandmother, my father, his father, Lenin, Einstein, and lots of other names I hadn’t heard of; they all lived in stories, because stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose (p. 179)

he seems to be making a statement about equal, egalitarian subjects who can envision, construct, imagine their respective geographies (a place has to be invented) or histories (depends on which story you choose). Such choices are more freely available, of course, to the privileged travellers from the narrator’s family who don’t have to stumble at the doorposts of British immigration offices. Even though he wishes to soar on the flights of invention, these flights become available to him through a particular cultural milieu, a context which makes it possible for him to hold on to his inventions as precious.

The status of invention, however, itself makes it apparent that there are irrevocable limitations to the free market of choices and inventions that the narrative can provide access to. Indeed, the narrative line complicates the possibilities of such freedoms. For even at the private sphere, despite his story-telling ploys of inventing and re-inventing, even though there are several voices he glides in and out of, the narrator bases his view of the wide world on the twin pillars of his uncle Tridib’s and his cousin Ila’s experiences, frequently setting them against each other, not just in
opposition, but as hierarchical. Despite his realization of multiple points of view and the possibility and necessity for different readings of experiential data, he idolizes and prefers Tridib’s methodology, fusing details with imagination, viewing it as superior to the immediacy of Ila’s more interactive ways of knowing. The narrator in his adulation of Tridib is imprisoned within the latter’s world-view, his ‘invention’. Ila, on the other hand, remains embedded, reinscribed into his infatuated invention, with only fleeting passages where he acknowledges the myriad ways in which he undermines her positions.

The safety-net of the ‘Going Away’ section of the novel, with all its sweep of vision and equal access to global spaces falls apart in the narrator’s ‘Coming Home’ as Tridib, the adored story-teller is brutally killed in Dhaka, cut down by the horrors of the religious lines drawn across maps and between people. In the novel, it is within the sub-continent that the proximities of space get negated, transformed by historical events in time, into insurmountable and painful distances. While the narrator laughs at the invocation of the Raj in a quote mentioned earlier, that history is obviously crucially implicated in the etching of the ‘shadow lines’ that divide the subcontinent.

Tridib’s death makes the narrator reflect on how in the four thousand years of recorded history, Calcutta and Dhaka had not been ‘more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines’ (p. 228). Left unstated is the history that engendered such a ‘state of war’. Just as the narrator invokes the war as a definitive self-image of England, he sets up the self-othered images across the ‘looking-glass border’ of the post-colonial sub-continent as crucial. The violence that overtakes his family in the latter part of the novel which seems far-removed from London is inextricably linked to its imperial past. Even as these parallel histories are spun out, why does the narrative hold its silence about their intersections? How does one read this silence in a novel that actually comments on its own silences? As he declares his inability to write about Tridib’s death, the narrator comments, ‘Every word that I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence’ (p. 213). I want to, now, cast these announced and unannounced silences against each other and think through the possible implications for Ghosh’s narrative.

II

After Tridib’s death, the narrator’s father made him promise that he would not mention the death to anybody, that he had died in an ‘accident’ in Dhaka. Years later, when he discovers that Tridib must have left for Dhaka the day before communal violence erupted in East Pakistan, he wonders why his father, a ‘practical’, ‘cautious’ man, did not prevent him from leaving. Looking through the newspapers immediately before the day of the riots, he finds no trace of the forthcoming tragedy in the
Calcutta papers, even though he remembers his father saying that he was glad they had gone away from Calcutta, for there was 'going to be trouble' there (p. 189). When he asked his father about the nature of the 'trouble':

My mother gave him a frown and a quick shake of the head, so he turned me around, pointed at the plane and said: Nothing. Nothing that you would understand. (p. 189)

Whether it be in the agonized puzzlement at the newspapers' silent treatment of the 'stirrings', or in his recollection of his father's insistence on his agreement in keeping the circumstances around Tridib's death cloaked under the normalcy of an 'accident', the narrator highlights the consensual complicities that force silences to emerge. According to Pierre Bourdieu:

the most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence.

In Ghosh's construction of the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*, what is emphasized is that the enforced silences in the text are important in inducing the sense of spatial-national cohesion of an 'imagined community'. According to Suvir Kaul, the silences that the narrator uncovers are 'not contingent or accidental, but are constitutive of the nature of Indian modernity'. The correlation between communal identities and nationalisms in the Indian sub-continent indicates the centrality in Ghosh's text of the silences that form the kernel of a conception of nation.

Set up against this, how do we read the silences that are not so painstakingly traced, collated and explicated in the novel? If the silences in Ghosh's text are the conduits through which the notions of community or nation get mobilized, what kinds of complicities is the narrator implicated in by his refusal to articulate the connections between stories and histories in relation to London? The articulations, as I have shown, are there, through other voices and asides. Ila's and May's questions, the grandmother's interjections about wars and nations are uttered, but then deliberately and wilfully set aside by the narrator. In a sense, these other voices serve to undermine the grand sweep of his vision, and expose the cost (quite literally, when May names the question of the price of the table bought at the Imperial Exhibition at Crystal Palace) of and responsibility for stories. But, in another sense, they also seem to state the obvious - the clichés about the role of the Raj etc. The narrator registers surprise whenever the colonial framework is juxtaposed against his invention of London, but not because he does not know it, but because he chooses not to speak of it.

One could also frame the narrator's choice in another way. Towards the end of the 'Going Away' section of the novel, Ila informs him that the landmark events of history take place in the West - wars, revolutions,
anti-fascist struggles - events that the rest of the (Third) world looks up at for inspiration and guidance, while 'nothing really important happens there' except 'of course famines and riots and disasters' (p. 102). Does the narrator as 'chronicle' then set out to articulate the status of Other(ed) histories, 'the silence of voiceless events in a backward world' (p. 102)? In that case, is the colonialist script in its fragmented enunciations available in the novel as an always-already discourse that does not need further coherence and elaboration?

So, what kind of a post-colonial novel has Amitav Ghosh written? By not focusing obviously on the colonial project, he turns away from the novel of Empire with its ambivalences towards colonialism in the tradition of Kipling and Forster. Neither does he write the immigrant's novel which explores the complexities of belonging and identity in the mother country. Ghosh's unnamed narrator does not discover a post-colonial subjectivity once he comes to London. He has, in fact, grown up in the shadow of London - in the stories he hears, in the journeys he undertakes, and the riots he sees, on the streets of Calcutta.

NOTES

2. The exact year should be 1978. Pages 12 and 13 of the novel encourage this sort of calculation.
5. Another striking example of the link between silence and nation appears when the narrator recounts his experience of 'trouble' between Hindus and Muslims as a young schoolboy in Calcutta. He writes of his relief that his best friend, Montu who was Muslim wasn't on the bus that day. His absence, however, unleashed the rituals of cleansing by the other boys - the emptying out of water bottles poisoned by the rumor of contamination - 'they had poured poison into Tala tank, ... the whole of Calcutta's water supply was poisoned' (p. 195). Unspecified, unnamed, yet the identity of who 'they' were was tacitly understood. In a moment pregnant with the portents of the claims of a sense of belonging that is shared by a busload of young schoolchildren, the quiet, unsaid movement of communal consensuality, of the divide between 'us' and 'them' which needs no words, emerges in the narrative.
The recent season of Windrush films and exhibitions in Britain celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the wave of Caribbean immigrants in the late 40s and 50s marks a public moment of stock-taking and an acknowledgement of the changing nature of British identity as a whole. Yet the series also suggests that migration – and the impact of migration – is intimately bound up with the geographical locations and destinies of cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leicester, Bradford or Leeds. As Mike and Trevor Phillips remark, 'the story of how ... migrants came to this country and became British is a story about cities.' 1 It will be of no surprise that the experience of cities and living in cities, particularly London, has become the subject of much contemporary post-colonial and black British fiction, from Sam Selvon's The Lonely Londoners to the Black Audio Film Collective's Handsworth Songs and Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses. The aim of this essay is to address the ongoing reassessment of race, migration, identity and urban spaces by exploring the representation of the city through women.

I want to begin by sketching how cities have been represented as essentially public spaces of work and leisure, particularly the way they have been discoursed upon as real or imaginary spatialized interfaces between the class, cultural, racial and sexual communities that bring about emancipatory change. The work of the cultural critic Paul Gilroy and the philosopher Iris Marion Young are two outstanding examples of this representation of the city and of urban social relations. Gilroy's work has been characterized by an interrogation of a conception of culture in terms of 'races', families or essences. Such concept-metaphors, Gilroy argues, run the risk of turning 'social processes into natural and instinctive ones', creating a nationalist language of 'ethnic absolutism'; the nation becomes 'a neat symmetrical accumulation of family units' culminating in the 'experience of unified, and continuous national identity'. 2 Read within the context of Britain, the black presence becomes a foreign presence which threatens the homogenous and unified white nation within its shores. In The Black Atlantic, Gilroy finds in the chronotope of the ship an
alternative vision of culture as cross-cultural fertilizations, hybridities and diasporas. But his earlier work, ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’, locates in the contested space of the city another vision and model of cultural identity. In contradistinction to the predominant racist association of black criminality and the inner-city, Gilroy reclaims the city as the site of black expressive cultures and a metaphor for their emancipatory potential, hybrid origins, self-determination and syncretism. In his concluding chapter, ‘Urban Social Movements, “Race” and Community’, Gilroy argues that new black counter- and subcultures might provide productive ways of reconfiguring community and urban relations in the politics of ‘race’. He emphasizes their urban dimensions and, drawing on Manuel Castell’s work, explains that these social movements ‘consider themselves to be urban, citizen or related to the city in their self-denomination; they are locally based, territorially defined and ... tend to mobilize around three central goals: 1 collective consumption; 2 cultural identity; 3 political self-management’.3 Gilroy suggests that such a new language of community based on ‘local factors ... political traditions ... local economy and residential structure’4 displaces an older and more essentialist conception of class and ‘race’, and may result in alliances across cultural groups. Despite their essentially ‘defensive’ and unstable nature, he finds in these alliances, agency and a ‘resistance to domination ... [rooted] in a radical sense of powerlessness’.5 (Gilroy offers the example of how ‘disruptive protest’ such as the battles over territory in the so-called ‘race’ riots in metropolitan cities can become an integral part of the symbolism of community in the city.)

Gilroy is not alone in privileging the city as a site for the emergence of more emancipatory forms of social relations. If his city is more the site than the model of such social relations, Iris Marion Young holds up the city as an exemplar of politics. While acknowledging that social injustices have been part of the history and formations of cities, Young argues for the city as a normative ideal, where ‘persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness’.6 Her ideal of city life is a vision of ‘social differentiation without exclusion’. Young’s privileging of the city is part of her critique not only of liberalism, universality and community, but also the exclusions that the liberal conception of the citizen-subject effects; the liberal conception of citizenship expresses a desire ‘for the fusion of subjects with one another’ into a unity of common values and experiences that denies and represses social difference. Young’s arguments echo Gilroy’s critique of filiative concept-metaphors such as ‘races’ and families in the language of national and cultural identity. Like Gilroy, the city allows Young to produce an alternative language of community that takes as its formative definition the experience of difference, hybridity and strangeness. In her attempt to harness difference to political activity and negotiation, Young’s city
privileges public spaces and public forums: ‘The group diversity of the city is most often apparent in public spaces. This helps to account for their vitality and excitement. Cites provide important public spaces – streets, parks, and plazas – where people stand and sit together, interact and mingle, or simply witness one another, without becoming unified in a community of “shared final ends”’.

In novels of 50s London, the impact of migration results in the new cultural interfaces that surface in urban spaces; such places are celebrated for their energy and fusion. Colin MacInnes’s novels, City of Spades (1957) and Absolute Beginners (1959), celebrate public urban spaces of leisure and youth culture that are influenced by the music of the sudden black influx. As Alan Sinfield puts it, MacInnes’s ‘enthusiasm’ in these novels was ‘partly a refreshing excitement at the new cultural opportunities offered by Blacks in a stodgy and boring English scene’. Here, London is a sum of its public scenes, with its ‘utopian fusion of subcultural [and youth] cultural forms’. Yet it is this dominant association of the city with its public face which prompts my disquiet and my question: does the city always have to be represented and discoursed upon in terms of its public faces? Can the city also be defined in terms its private and domestic spaces? Of course, both public and private are two sides of the same coin and both are explored in Sam Selvon’s powerful novel of Caribbean experience of 50s London, The Lonely Londoners (1956). On the one hand, the encounter with London is seen as a romance of its public place names; much of the novel also conveys the excitement of ‘coasting’ the big city’s parks, dance halls and public meeting spaces, particularly for young men. On the other hand, there is also the loneliness of people in the city ‘who don’t know what happening in the room next to them’. This London is one of alienation, where even Moses and the boys’ weekly meetings of ‘kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts’ barely keep the bewilderment and hopelessness of their lives at bay. But much of MacInnes’s and Selvon’s books are about men’s experiences of the city, men’s celebrations of the possibilities (and dilemmas) that urban lives bring about. What about the women’s stories in Selvon’s book; what of their experiences of the city? While Selvon does give a brief account of what happens to the character of Tanty, The Lonely Londoners only registers the presence of women obliquely, in terms of their relationships to men. In my preliminary exploration of three contemporary black British novels, I want to look at the part gender plays in the representation of urban experience and ask, firstly, if the concentration on public spaces is in some way itself gendered; and secondly, if the conventional split between the public and the private is more fluid than rigid in women’s experiences of the city. In particular, I want to address London – and this may be a contradiction – not only in terms of the utopic/dystopic ‘public’ spaces of work and leisure, but also as the ‘private’ spaces of home, family
and cultural community. The novels I have selected highlight this problem: Caryl Phillips's *The Final Passage* (1985), Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging* (1985) and Farhana Sheikh's *The Red Box* (1991). I will not dwell extensively on any individual novel, but say a little about the kinds of challenges each poses for the problem of the public/private dichotomy in the representation of the city.

*The Final Passage*, set in the initial waves of Caribbean migration, is in many ways an attempt to tell the woman's story of migration that is absent from Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Although Phillips's novel uses various focalizers and deliberately eschews chronology in its attempts to embody the fragmentation of individual life and the difficulty of historical understanding, *The Final Passage* is written primarily from Leila's viewpoint. The novel deals with migration to and experiences of London from the standpoint of a woman; it does not make gender absent from its portrayal of the city. Leila's gradual isolation, and the contraction of her London world to the sitting room of her derelict house, can be contrasted to her husband Michael's relative freedom in roaming the city for work and for leisure. One could of course argue that Michael's escape from the house is an escape from the imprisonment of his past (achieved through a wilful forgetting), and that Leila's relative stasis in character development is due to her reliving crucial moments of her personal history, and represent a wider inability to move on. But to offer such a comparative judgement of these two characters as the sole explanation of their response to migration and urban living is perhaps to be blind to the ways that gender moulds our experiences of the city.

Phillips's novel moves from Jamaica to London and, in so doing, we are reminded of the contrasts of colour, expansiveness and communal feeling that characterize the Caribbean, and the coldness of climate, greyness of surround, alienation and general hostility of the London environment. These juxtapositions are also made by Selvon; but in *The Final Passage*, the Caribbean is perhaps less nostalgically painted than in *The Lonely Londoners*. It is a place of fraught relationships, secrets and lies, cycles of poverty, macho attitudes, sexism and the legacy of slavery, a place in Leila's mind 'overburdened with vegetation and complacency'. London, in contrast, is imagined by both characters as a place of escape, a dream of new beginnings and achievements. But that such a positive image of London will turn out to be but a 'cold and chilly dream' is made real with Leila's travels through the London landscape. What Leila sees on her journey is decay, poverty, pollution, waste, litter and the debris of people's lives: the 'hurried, private English faces' and the open hostility of 'If you want a nigger neighbour, vote labour' and 'No vacancies for coloureds'. Leila notes in the grey winter landscape, the sky 'hung so low it covered the street like a dark coffin lid', cars were just 'blurry colours', and the people who rushed homewards were 'images of isolation, fighting umbrellas and winds that buffeted their bodies'.


loneliness of urban life will increasingly mirror Leila and Michael’s own lives, as husband and wife are estranged from each other. London becomes a metaphor for their deteriorating relationship; Leila imagines her husband as a ‘passenger on the same train, in the same carriage’ and their home a ‘cheap hotel room’.18 But while both characters experience alienation, Leila’s predicament is exacerbated by the fact that she is a young pregnant woman who has to take care of an infant.

As a migrant woman who is left at home with her child by her husband who works all day and then goes to the pub to drink, there are very little resources she can draw upon in a strange and hostile country. At first, she finds a friend in the working-class Mary and they go shopping together. But as she runs out of her own money, and when Michael refuses to offer up part of his wages, she begins to avoid Mary. Ashamed of her poverty, she simply stays at home more and more. The migrant woman’s experience of urban life is potentially more isolating than her male counterpart; she may be solely dependent on her husband and may have none of the communal support and network of friends and relations to help her. Leila’s house is not located in a Caribbean enclave in London, and therefore when she is abandoned by her husband she has no one to turn to. Leila’s day is literally reduced to feeding her son, waiting for ‘the postman to bring nothing’, thinking of her husband, attempting to read in the cold and sitting ‘in the gloom waiting for it to get dark before going to bed. This was her life’.19 Her isolation is both mental and physical, and results in her feelings of disassociation from her surroundings and the people around her (Leila imagines leaving England behind). Leila’s intense isolation is matched by a diminishing of passages of dialogue that characterize the earlier part of the novel; the silences alluded to in the earlier pages, which represent a lack of communication and understanding, are heightened with Leila’s increasingly disturbed focalization and solipsism. The physical landscape of London is registered less and less with the progress of the novel and Leila’s London becomes literally the four walls of her dilapidated sitting room. Phillips’s novel of a migrant woman’s vulnerability should not of course be read as representative of all women’s experiences of urban living. Oddly enough we are not given her husband’s story of London; his narrative is characterized by action – coming home drunk, going to work, going to the pub, meeting friends, perhaps even finding another woman. But his is another story. The Final Passage’s focus on women poses the problem of whether the experience of the city, and hence its representation, are gendered. It also raises the supplementary issue of whether one could classify these intense private and domestic experiences as also in some senses ‘representing’ the city.

Such a question arises with Joan Riley’s exploration of domestic violence in The Unbelonging.20 I have chosen Riley’s novel, set in Leicester not London, precisely because its portrayal of extreme vulnerability allows us
to think about the general question of whether the public/private split in discourses of the city is itself marked by gender. The novel’s exploration of the mental spaces of fear and vulnerability, to the exclusion of any wider sense of public context or surround, is perhaps an odd choice for this special issue on post-colonial London. Domestic interiors are vividly portrayed: Hyacinth Williams’s room, her sodden mattress, the sitting room of her father’s house, the various hostels she inhabits in Leicester and its suburbs, and her student accommodation in Birmingham. In the first half of the novel, public places other than Hyacinth’s school are only fleetingly described. In fact, it is not until after two thirds of the novel, when she returns to the place of her abuse, that the physical surround of her neighbourhood is described. Readers are informed of the novel’s setting in Leicester about three-quarters of the way through; such lack of geographical and spatial markers have lead some critics to assume that *The Unbelonging*, like other Riley novels, is set in London. Hyacinth Williams’s problem is similar to Leila’s — as women/child, both are made more vulnerable by the fact that they are newcomers to Britain. They suffer abuse in public and in the confines of their home. Hyacinth’s public encounters with others are described as severely traumatizing; she is often greeted with hostility from students and teachers at school, social workers and hostel wardens. Her reaction is to retreat into an increasingly imaginary Jamaica associated with comfort, family, friends, warmth and happiness. Riley’s narrative juxtapositions serve to reinforce the character’s isolation; the manner in which Hyacinth uses Jamaica to blot out present unhappiness has lead one critic to label this strategy as a form of ‘mental maroonage’. Yet there is no refuge in these interior or mental scapes, and her fear projects itself outwards. Hyacinth is betrayed by her body in her attempts to repress the past (bed-wetting even when she is 13), and in her desires to blend in with white folk. In her association of her ills and failings with her body (she is cruelly beaten, she hates the way she looks, her fear is expressed vividly as bodily reactions), her body becomes literally what is wrong with her. In addition to the internalization of racist discrimination, the shame of being ‘black’, she also internalizes the sexual and physical abuse by her father. She sees curiosity aroused by her scars and bruises as a shame that she does not want others to know about. It is no wonder that she uses physical and mental isolation as a strategy for survival. It is only with the gradual emergence of Hyacinth from her protective shell that we register more of her physical surrounds. The claustrophobic earlier sections of the novel focus primarily on her fear, the limited environs of her house and rooms, but she gradually relaxes into an awareness of public spaces with growing confidence. Hence in *The Unbelonging*, as in *The Final Passage*, the experiences of city life are very much written from the domain of the private and the domestic. These spaces are inextricably informed by gender.

I do not want to give the erroneous impression of an all too easy divide
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between the public as the masculine domain, and the private as the domain of women. I want to argue that the divide between public and private is perhaps more fluid than we perhaps give credit for, especially in the experiences of women. This has a corresponding effect on the way in which the city is discoursed upon. In relation to the public/private divide, domestic violence is of course the arena where such a boundary works to the disadvantage of victims of abuse. As Anannya Bhattacharjee argues, the privacy and isolation of domestic violence contributes to the silencing of the woman:

Isolation is one of the most severe forms of abuse in the home by a man against a woman, contributing to a battered woman’s perception that her condition is uncommon and shameful. It is one of the primary ways in which a man makes sure that the woman’s voice is never heard and that she remains [hidden, private] and dependent on him in every way. 22

In her focus on the South Asian immigrant community in the US, Bhattacharjee calls such a divide a mirage; the specific situation of the domestic worker and the use and abuse of loyalty to home and tradition in Asian communities render the dichotomy present in some feminist thinking distinctly unhelpful. Bhattacharjee’s interventions offer a useful way into Farhana Sheikh’s exploration of diasporic British Asian women’s identities, The Red Box. 23 Elsewhere, I have written of how the novel deconstructs Asian identity not as a primordial ethnicity but as a product of history, location and the politics of culture, contesting the right to live and work in Britain. In choosing to centre the novel on a female Asian sociologist (Raisa) and her two young respondents (Nasreen and Tahira), Sheikh also offers insights into the relationships between the feminist intellectual and her constituents. 24 But The Red Box is also instructive in the present context for its undoing of the public and the private.

The domestic or home worker’s place of residence is both private and public. The red box of the title alludes to the silence and mystery surrounding Raisa’s mother’s life and functions as the catalyst for her journey of discovering how cultural and sexed identities are formed. The largely silent and undocumented lives of women as homeworkers or in lowly-paid textile factory jobs, articulate the connections between the mothers of three otherwise different kinds of Asian women. Nasreen’s mother does piece work and sews for Mr Khan from her home, while Tahira’s mother works in a small factory which actively exploits women who work part-time and as ‘temps’. These women, like Raisa’s mother, do not have a national insurance number, are not registered as employed, and are hence invisible with regard to state and employment legislation. In Nasreen’s residence, the home is also the place of hard work as all the female children are roped into finishing the sewing tasks. Tahira is co-opted into the factory to help finish the unfinished tasks at the factory. For these women their private and public experiences of London at work and
home coincide. The public and private also coincide in other ways, notably in the fluid definitions of home as not only the private sphere of the domestic residence, but in the way the concept of home extends to the larger Asian community. This is particularly true as it impinges on a woman’s reputation – the honour or dishonour her behaviour has on her kinsfolk – and in the manner with which women’s behaviour is policed by models of propriety defined by the leaders of the community. In the novel, Tahira is aware of the double standards when it comes to judging her transgression as opposed to judging her male relations’ transgressive behaviour. Bhattacharjee argues that the concept of home means different things within the South Asian immigrant community: as the private ‘domestic sphere of the heterosexual and patriarchal family ... as an extended ethnic community separate and distinct from other ethnic communities’ and as their nations of origin.\(^{25}\) In all these spheres, the public and private divide is more fluid than conventionally ascribed. The novel never neglects how even such ‘public’ worlds are marked by the experiences of gender, and exist in tension with received public and private conceptions of home.

Yet it is also true that the character of Tahira’s movement across the urban spaces of leisure (bhangra discos, shopping arcades and cafes), and her participation in the anti-racial protest at her school, show a more assured approach to London and living in London. In this, Tahira comes much closer to Gilroy’s formulation of resistance through popular forms and urban social movements. While being sensitive to the kinds of structures that might restrict women’s choices, other contemporary novels such as Andrea Levy’s *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996) also register a new confidence by which young British black women negotiate different aspects of their identity and their rights as citizens of Britain. But even here, young women’s entry into the public spaces of leisure are not identical with their male counterparts. Exploring the representation of the city through women is instructive for it mitigates against the all too easy manner in which gender is rendered transparent.

NOTES

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7. Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, p. 240.
13. For an interesting discussion of history as fragment and pattern and its relation to an absence of communication, see C.L. Innes, ‘Wintering: Making a Home in Britain’, in Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction (London: Pluto, 1995), pp. 21-34. Innes’s discussion is also useful for its exploration of migration from the point of view of women.
I began to dip into my skin like a wet suit, toes first, warily, wriggled about, then legs all in, by summer 81 I’d zipped up and dived head first, that year I started art school, Landscape of the Souls I called my anarchic blood and black vortexes, I loved exploding the energy of colours, being bold. Summer heat choked my city’s horizon, sluggish clouds of fumes were mountains of dirt way up in the ether. Tourists homed in on Piccadilly like brain damaged fish, I barged, my large portfolio an aggressive advance guard, boarded the bus to Camden Town, my squat room, all purple walls, pampas-grass and Mexican mats. Nights steamed my pores in the 100 Club where pupil-swimming arousal came in the countenance of Josh. Under his pillar-propping gaze, I tried to dance cool, slyly studied the Dreads in corners with towels round necks, trainers, shiny track-suits – red, gold and green striped, confidently shuffling, moving just off the beat. ‘Go slower, syncopate, less movement, more weight,’ we exchanged numbers like French kisses, at 2am my creamed knickers rode the night bus home.
Josh, your limbs were waves. I swam.
Your myriad hands smooth licked me. The sea.
Juiced, me. You, carefully, entered, sensing your way in, alert to my every whimper, responding.
Kiss. Kissed my hips, like water, every secreted crevice, seduced, and only when I cried out first, did you go for the shoot, the spawn game, tadpoles into the pond. At last, on safe ground, at last, I was, on safe ground. 'Hey Princess, let's take the tube-train into darkness.'
Your public school tones joked, open Ibo vowels squeezed into nasal tubes, staccato consonants.
Years before I’d made my teenage foray into Brixton, awed by the vivacious tableaux of Atlantic faces. I was born into whiteness, this was the moon, I was elated. 'Sssss!' The Atlantic pub, Coldharbour Lane ‘Sssss! Yuh look nice, gyal.' Red eyes and Tennants extra.
I wore my grandmother’s stiff back, her deaf ear. 'Tcha! She favour pork!' I panicked to the station.
With you I merged into Tottenham, the Bush, the Grove, jostled in markets, pubs under arches, basement clubs. You squeezed my hand, I was six years old, Daddy? I poached your easy slope, excited, I was, exalted. Summer 81 I was touched by the sun.
I was jelly, you were my mould, yet
I could not set, would freeze or throw a wobbly,
criticised your arrogance, your African-at-Eton act.
‘You can talk!’ you retaliated, easing your motorway legs
onto my cul-de-sac. ‘You’re as rootsy as the driven snow.’
You rolled onto me, into me, my anger drifted
downriver like a log while I became an unplugged dam.
You loved your skin, polished with cocoa butter,
advised I do the same or I’d ‘flake to dust like a relief
in an Egyptian tomb.’ You’d coo over my complexion.
‘Do you like me or my lightskinned factor?’ I challenged.
‘Both, and at least I’m honest before you throw one.
You know, I suggest you pursue an academic career.
Paint as a hobby. You have a trunkful of O’s and A’s.
I only ever had three choices: law, medicine, finance.
Well, you know how we Nigerians are.’ ‘Yes,’ I lied,
then flared up. ‘So why are you trying to change me?’
Because I want to lick your chocolate button nippies.’
You twirled and stroked yourself, I laughed, coalesced,
but felt my summer of passion waning.
‘You’ll not marry a Nigerian if you can’t obey me’
I shook my head slowly. ‘You are such a wanker!’
‘Ditto, Lara, ditto!’ G & T in hand he rolled off
the mattress, loped his gorgeousness to the bookshelf,
leaned provocatively, crisp sinews, a little pot belly.
‘Marriage! Hah!’ I flung my head back. ‘Marriage?
I love the F-word too much, you know... freedom!’
‘Just as well, because you don’t even know what
Jollof rice is, let alone how to cook it. You’re strictly
a fish fingers and mash girl. You’ll make a sorry wife.’
He sniffed, smugly sipped his drink, crossed his legs.
‘Why don’t you put me down, Bertie Wooster, you know
for a change, and who says I only like Nigerian men?’
‘It’s obvious, you hope some of it will rub off on you.’
‘Oh fuck off you idiot! Shithead! Tampon dick!’
Then he melted, vulnerable in his contrived pose,
the sweet Josh, two years old and thumb sucking,
it was so easy to oust the monster, to get at his ego.
I softened, ‘Sorry, Josh. Cuddle?’ ‘Yes,’ he pouted,
‘A treatie for Wole the Wonder will do the trick.’
I crawled towards him, took his pitiful dejection
in my mouth, chomped, left a shiny oozing Bounty Bar.
Such a failsafe method of resuscitation.
Lautrec posters, blue lamps, Portobello pub, candlewax bubbles over baroque holders, hedgehog barmaids have stapled noses, safety-pinned flesh.
I hover in a dungeon alcove, nurse my port, insecure, wish I'd been born a Holland Park babe, was a funky half-caste dahling, a Cleo Laine jazztrress with a voice that sails, seducing the crowd. My kohl-eyed cohorts—Hampstead, Chelsea and Fulham have tunnelled salt up their nostrils. 'Is that not your Josh?' Emma exclaims, glimmering. Hickory, dickory, dock. Stop. Time clocks. Incongruous in blazer and loafers, he confidently guides a young Shirley Bassey in sassy zippy leather to the bar, all kissy-kissy, gooey-gooey. Yuk! I kamikaze my port, emerge bloodened, dazed, confront him outside. O to serrate beer bottles! Scarify his cologned cheeks! Kung Fu his dim sums!
'You like the F-word, remember. We're not wed, Lara.'
My alphabet tumbles, jumbles into a three year old's bawl.
'You... you...,' I barely whimper, a dissolving aspirin. Verbals! I need verbals! Please! I want my verbals!
'A hungry gerbil up your hairy arse!' I muster, he snaps, 'Oh do grow up, Lara! Welcome to the real world.'
Fury rode me. A wild buckjumper,  
I scalped myself, sacked Josh, speared my nose,  
my little Afro ears coiled a C of silver earrings,  
I barricaded myself into an army surplus trench coat  
and fronted a permanent Desperate Dan scowl,  
nuggets of disease erupted on my surface, squidgy  
pus-filled hillocks splattered my bathroom mirror,  
I denounced my patriarchal father, deconstructed  
my childhood, regurgitated appropriated ideas  
like closing-time vomit, I flirted with sensi, swooped  
on trendy markets for cowries, batiks and sculptures,  
I was a walking irradiated automated diatribe, saw  
the rapist in every homme, worms in every phallus,  
the bigot in all whites, the victim in every black  
woman, London was my war zone, I sautéed  
my speech with expletives, detonated explosives  
under the custard arses of those who dared detour  
from my arty political dictates, I divorced my honky  
mother, rubbished the globe for its self-destruct sins,  
and then flung open the Hammer House gates  
of my Rocky Horror Hades,  
and tossed the key.
The voice, drunk and defiant, is that of Lara, about half-way through Bernardine Evaristo’s novel of the same name. It is at this point that Lara begins to discover, or rather produce, her own version of post-colonial London; a new, hybrid identity that challenges the inevitability of a divided and racist national capital to suggest, instead, a positive diasporic space. Many other voices contribute to the telling of this history, their varying, often disembodied, tones adding to the multilayered nature of the writing which moves backwards and forwards in time in an attempt to piece together stories that have not always been passed on. Laid out as a series of prose poems, complete with an index of first lines, Evaristo utilizes oral and dramatic, as well as lyrical and poetic, storytelling modes. This concern with form, together with the sense of ‘performing’ identity which is enacted, reminded me of recent work by Pauline Melville and Meiling Jin, also writers who have been (and are) actors and performers, writing out of their complex post-colonial inheritance, and located in London. Of course, these writers must be read according to the various allegiances and connections that mark their writing, but their presence (and that of a growing number of exciting Black British writers) gives weight to Lara’s cross-Atlantic clarion call.

Evaristo’s novel is essentially structured around two key journeys undertaken by the central character of Lara da Costa; the journey into London (which is a journey into her own blackness), and then back to London via Nigeria and Brazil, a route which repeats the Middle Passage cartographies of her ancestors. These central journeys are criss-crossed, and preceded, by the memories of earlier journeys taken by her family, to which I will return later in my analysis.

I want to begin with the description of Lara’s entry into sassy, 70s,
teeny-bop girlpower:

Tank tops, Curly Wurlys, blue mascara, Top 20,
T.Rex, Jackson 5, Bowie, Slade, the Sweet, the 70s
spun Lara into the kaleidoscope of teeny bop,
at Eltham Hill Girls she torpedoed chewing gum
on entering, hitched her skirt on exiting, tissue-padded
her non-existent in the upstairs loo, and choked
over smoke at lunchtime behind the Jubilee Gardens (p. 61)

Her relative innocence is comically (for the reader) and dramatically (for
Lara) interrupted by her best friend’s revelation of sex (she’s 12) with her
boyfriend Daniel, and her justification – ‘He’s twenty-two, dishy and he
drives a white Jag!’ (p. 66). A mixed-race child, growing up in
overwhelmingly white South East London (Eltham, scene of the murder of
Stephen Lawrence), Lara is about to see herself through the racist gaze of
the twenty-two year old Daniel. This is the moment vividly described by
Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An
unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the
white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his
bodily schema ... My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted,
recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day ... All around me the
white man, above the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps under my feet, and
there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me ... 4

Daniel’s racist sneer and gestures sting and traumatize Lara in the same way
– ‘Discomfort burned Lara’s cheeks ... The room spun, blood sank to her
toes, faint, brimming, Susie’s eyes filled too, both were instantly sapped’
(p. 68). That evening she is catapulted into sudden and total alienation:

Home. I searched but could not find myself,
not on the screen, billboards, books, magazines,
... I longed for an image,
a story, to speak me, describe me, birth me whole.
Living in my skin, I was, but which one? (p. 69)

Lara’s lack of a story at this point is directly linked to her father’s
(Taiwo’s) deliberate burying of his own history and refusal to tell his
stories. Although Taiwo’s early letters to his mother provide us with an
insight into his immigrant experience in England, the letters are not sent
and these stories are never told. By the time of his marriage to Ellen,
Taiwo has decided it is too painful to tell of the past – ‘her mind should be
kept blank, he decided, she need not know’ (p. 28). This blankness is
passed on to his children, an absence which causes the young Lara to
imagine ‘Daddy People in the garden singing me’ (p. 48). Lara is born into
whiteness, unable to give shape to the Daddy People, or to herself as a
black child. Her profound disorientation on being called a ‘nigger’ (p. 68),
then, causes the pathological splitting of self-identification as outlined by Fanon:

As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it.5

Lara tries to be invisible at first by avoiding being seen with her father. But the nature of her split identity soon resurfaces:

In the showers at school I began to notice my difference.
My skin was drier, pubies curly, titties pointy, bum perched.
I wanted to be invisible. I wanted to be noticed. (p. 70)

Guidance arrives in the figure of Cousin Beatrice – ‘an Angela Davis wig topped peach lips, lime green flares draped over pink suede platforms’ (p. 73) – a highly visible, highly politicized, piece of Afrocentric Liverpool. Taiwo had landed in Liverpool and stayed with his cousin Sam who had settled there, before moving to London. But whereas he and Ellen had moved into the white outskirts of London to bring up their children, Sam and his Irish wife, Maureen, had raised their child in the heart of the old slave port. Beatrice had experienced racism much earlier – ‘South Africa? Liverpool is the apartheid state of Great Britain’ (p. 75). She is more knowledgable than Lara, more worldly and, crucially, has a story – gleaned from the old African community in Toxteth – which provides her with psychological support. The forgotten connections that Beatrice provides, and the family details Taiwo is persuaded to outline, begin to heal Lara’s fractured sense of identity, and she embarks on her own journey of discovery into London.

II

I began to dip into my skin like a wet suit (p. 87)

In the section of Lara extracted in this issue of Kunapipi, Lara joins art school, moves into a squat in Camden, meets her Nigerian boyfriend, Josh, at the 100 Club, and, in a summer of passion and elation, proceeds with him to explore Tottenham, Brixton, Shepherd’s Bush and Ladbroke Grove. The ‘vivacious tableaux of Atlantic faces’ (p. 88) that had once awed her, now begin to inhabit her canvas, enabling her to relax back into her body – ‘Go slower, syncopate, less movement, more weight’ (p. 87). Through the sexual pleasure and intimacy shared with Josh, Lara experiences that act of imaginary reunification – ‘At last, on safe ground, at last, I was, on safe ground’ (p. 88) – which, as Stuart Hall writes, ‘restore[s] an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past’6 and serves as a vital resource in the recovery of cultural identity.
But, as Hall also writes, cultural identity is not just about grasping points of similarity and connection; it also involves recognizing ‘critical points of deep and significant difference’:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.7

Lara and Josh are positioned very differently in their construction of blackness. She embraces him for his Africanness, but then begins to resent his ‘African-at-Eton act’ (p. 89) and his patriarchal assumption of gender relations. ‘You’ll not marry a Nigerian if you can’t obey me’ (p. 90) he declares. It soon becomes apparent that Josh is performing his own ‘Nigerianness’ and reinventing himself as more authentically Nigerian in relation to Lara. As she moves free of Josh, Lara begins to recognize how blackness is positioned and reinvented differently in different parts of London:

Lautrec posters, blue lamps, Portobello pub ...
I hover in a dungeon alcove, nurse my port, insecure,
wish I’d been born a Holland Park babe, was a funky half-caste dahlng, a Cleo Laine jazztress with a voice that sails, seducing the crowd. My kohl-eyed cohorts – Hampstead, Chelsea and Fulham have tunnelled salt up their nostrils. (p. 91)

The sight of Josh guiding ‘a young Shirley Bassey in sassy zippy leather to the bar’ (p. 91) is enough to persuade Lara that she must position herself anew in relation to the narratives of the past. The result is dramatic, and described in the comic, self-mocking tones of one who has since learnt the strongly performative element of any identity construction:

I scalped myself, sacked Josh, speared my nose,
my little Afro ears coiled a C of silver earrings,
I barricaded myself into an army surplus trenchcoat
and fronted a permanent Desperate Dan scowl ...
I denounced my patriarchal father, deconstructed my childhood, regurgitated appropriated ideas like closing-time vomit ...
I divorced my honky
mother, rubbished the globe for its self-destruct sins,
and then flung open the Hammer House gates of my Rocky Horror Hades,
and tossed the key. (p. 92)
After the consumption of much alcohol, and her already incongruous mental imagery scrambling into pieces of surreal role-play (some onto canvas, some down the loo), Lara leaves the cage she has created of London and wanders through Europe with a friend. Here they become 'more British ... darker with the Turkish sun, yet less aware of race for we are simply: Ingiltere' (p. 97). In this new context, Lara's wounds eventually heal and she sheds the old protective skin:

Under the Asian sun my armour roasts, rusts, falls off in bits, is swept out by the tide. I watch it bob off, new flotsam, study the twinkle twinkle in the firmament at night, go for a midnight dip, and emerge, the sum of all my parts. (p. 97)

III

When the Negro dives – in other words, goes under – something remarkable occurs.

Fanon's description of the way out of psychopathology and into a larger drama of identity and cultural inheritance, mirrors the journey that Lara takes through her own diasporic ancestry. Back in her Camden flat, she is called by a shadowy figure who appears in her room:

a woman, I thought, dark-skinned, tall, I was not sure for it quickly faded out into murkiness, then air, but the music, the wind, the tune, encircled me. 'Bring him home,' it sang, 'Bring him home.' (p. 101)

Lara's grandmother, Zenobia, is urging her to bring her father back to Lagos. Her voice, and the music she leaves behind, remind us of the opening of the text:

Sugar cane, damp musky earth, saccharine vanilla journeys in from eighteen forty-four, scenting Lara. Disembodied chords pluck the air. (p. 1)

Tolulope speaks immediately after these lines, in the most poetic and violently rendered scene of the novel, telling us of her rape and murder on a Brazilian plantation, then of her metamorphosis into bird and tree, until her son carries her seed back to Africa. But we have no context in which to read Tolulope's story, and her disembodied cries echo, strangely, throughout the narrative. Lara's physical journey back to Lagos, and then to Brazil, is also an imaginative gathering up of these lost voices and the stories they have been trying to tell.
Lara travels the first leg of this journey with both parents, Taiwo and Ellen. Lagos is seen through the eyes of all three characters, as well as through the third person narrator, who also comments on the ‘da Costa trio’ (p. 103) as they each negotiate their sense of isolation and belonging. References to the Brazilian and West Indian Quarters, to names such as Salvador, Cardoso, Damazio, Carrena, Roberto, da Souza, and da Silva, point to the Middle Passage narratives which have also hybridized Lagos. Taiwo’s memories, in particular, tell us of a busy port that continued to pull people to it:

Taiwo dreamt

of exploring the worlds these migrants left to memory:
Lebanon, Libya, China, Greece, India, Europe.
He took his sandalled youth to Apapa docks, watched
the emigres disembark from the huge cargo ships
which steamed into port, horns resounding for miles.
He taunted the ‘sailor’s children’ – pale raggedy products
of prostitute and European, who lived in the back streets. (p. 118)

These are the mixed-race children whom Taiwo was to see again on his arrival in Liverpool though now they are not taunted for their paleness. Taiwo’s own ‘pale raggedy product’ Lara – called a ‘nig nog’ (p. 67) in South East London – is now called ‘Oyinbo’ (p. 104) by the children of Lagos, meaning ‘whitey’.

This continuity with the past, which, as Hall argues, is ‘precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity’, is not shared directly between Taiwo and Lara. Although his presence in Lagos enables the reader to share his memories and reconstructions of the past, Taiwo still does not tell his stories. Instead, Lara is revisited by the ‘Daddy People’ of her childhood, only this time they take clear shape, and it is Zenobia who speaks:

My Omilara, now we take you into memory
sleep now, sleep ... (p. 109)

Lara ‘goes under’ with Zenobia, back to 1931; to the scenes of Taiwo’s childhood, to his twin sister, Kehinde, who is fated to die young, and to his stern father, Gregorio, who silenced him long before he arrived in England. These scenes contain their own stories of fractured identity, such as Zenobia’s submission to patriarchal custom, which Lara must learn to position herself within. The past is not a better place; it offers no easy coherence, but insight into the unstable signifiers that make us always, already hybrid.

This becomes increasingly clear when Zenobia’s voice is replaced by that of Baba, who takes Lara back to 1839. His is the fullest story, remembered in pain, and then deliberately orated to his grandson, Taiwo, for his benefit. Lara overhears Baba as he tells of slavery in Brazil; of the
plantation owner, Senhor Fernandés da Costa; of the murder of his mother, Tolulopé; and of his twin brother, Gilberto. As an 'emancipado' he eventually finds strength in the new syncretic cultures of Salvador and Bahia, especially in Candomblé, that intertwining of Catholic and African deities which provides him with a means of reconstructing his own past. He is finally able to return to Lagos, home of his ancestors, with his son, Gregorio; where Lara now sees him talking to his grandson, until he can speak no more:

Baba opened his mouth to speak; ghosts flew out. 
The muscled baobab leaves whispered behind him. 
Taiwo sighed, sat speechless in the bristling silence. 
He crept off into twilight, a cat courting the shadows. 
Baba would sit into the night by the light of a kerosene lamp. 
The world he now entered, Taiwo would never know. (p. 130)

The irony, of course, is that Baba entrusts all of this story to Taiwo, who then never speaks of it in England. Taiwo buried his feelings, in the same way Baba's anger 'went underground' (p. 122) as a slave, and it is Lara's journey which provides the imaginary reunification through which the story, and the anger, is released.

The circle is never entirely closed, however. Many areas of the past, like those Baba enters above, will remain untold. Where there are still stories to tell, they will be told in the forked tongues of the diaspora experience. This is the lesson of Lara's final journey before returning to London. She arrives in Brazil, where she hopes 'the past will close in on me' (p. 137), and is confronted instead by a 'rainbow metropolis' (p. 137) which has reinvented itself out of multiple origins:

Salvador grips its Yoruba mother like a shawl, threadbare, tattered at the ends, yet refusing to yield to wind, flap back over the Atlantico to home ... Yoruba words sign buildings, source Portuguese, its deities re-located in Candomblé ... (p. 138)

Moving through the Amazon, Lara becomes aware of the continuum of identity to which she is connected, and begins to recognize the subtle ways in which the post-colonial stages its own survival:

I become my parents, my ancestors, my gods. We dock, a remote settlement, I stretch my pins, earthed, follow my singing ears, Catholic hymns hybridized by drums, it is a hilltop church, Indian congregation, holding flowers and palm fronds. It is Palm Sunday! I hum from the door, witness to one culture being orchestrated by another, yet the past is gone, the future means transformation. (p. 139)

It is with this insight that Lara returns to London, her own future, which she resolves to paint 'with colour-rich strokes' (p. 140).
In Evaristo’s novel, then, the central character has to leave London in order to grasp the nature and promise of its post-coloniality. The hybridized environments of Lagos and Brazil offer Lara not only a lifeline into her own personal history, but also perspectives into the future developments of locations similarly traversed by cycles of colonialism. In this way, London emerges not as the privileged signifier of post-coloniality but as a key point in an endless chain of signification, and through which cultural identity is constantly postponed. As already indicated by Hall, Lara does not recover a ‘true’ identity that has been waiting to be found in some essentialized past. Her searching and poetic interrogation of Africanness is constantly interrupted by difference and hybridity, and by racial constructions that only partially give her voice.

Lara’s exploration of paternal ancestry also begs the question of her maternal inheritance. Ellen’s voice is one of the least explored in the novel. She rarely speaks in the first person, and although she expects to share her memories with Taiwo, her stories are never told. She is the ‘honky mother’ whom Lara ‘divorces’ at one point, the woman who ‘doesn’t know any better’ (p. 76) according to cousin Beatrice. There are occasional glimpses into Ellen’s own state of unfulfilment:

My love is a towel soaked in bleach, too long, it tears away into fragments of myself, then slowly disintegrates, I see myself in here, waiting, a ghost from this past, to haunt some future children with my sorry visage. (p. 78)

But the white, working-class woman has no voice in which to tell us of her experience as the mother of black children, or of the way in which she constructed social identity. Like Taiwo, she is herself the product of a post-colonial diaspora; caught, to use Roy Foster’s words, ‘in the interstices of the Irish-English relationship’. We are told, very briefly, that Emma of the O’Donoghue clan ‘fled the hardship of the garrison town of Birr in southern Ireland’ and with her small child, Mary Jane, ‘plonked herself on London’s doorstep in eighteen eighty-eight’ (p. 12). At the same time as Tolulope was experiencing the brutality of slavery, then, Emma’s family would have been suffering the devastation of the Irish famine; Baba’s return home with Gregorio coinciding with Emma’s journey into exile with her child.

But these parallels are not really investigated. Apart from the descriptions of working-class poverty – ‘Her ma, Mary Jane, a dressmaker, taking in, stitching food into mouths, clothes onto their bodies’ (p. 13) – these women are not vividly drawn. Like all descendants of the famine, ‘Edith invested in the future, the past was a pit to fall down’ (p. 12), but the novel satirizes the search for middle-class respectability that drives these women and, in the end, their Irishness is conflated into the dominant trope of whiteness. This mirrors the elision of Ireland and Irishness in discussions of the post-colonial in general and, as Luke Gibbons has commented:
Recent work in Irish criticism has begun to question this colonization of theory itself, demonstrating how Ireland’s anomalous position at once within and outside Europe gives issues of race, nation, class and gender a new complexity, derived from an intersection of both metropolis and subaltern histories. Discussions of race, for example, extend beyond Fanon’s ‘epidermal schema’ to engage with the chimera of ‘Celticism’... Considering Ireland in a postcolonial frame is not a matter of including one more culture within existing debates, but reworking the paradigms themselves.14

Lara’s hearing of ‘Catholic hymns hybridized by drums’ may indicate her own awareness of this ‘new complexity’ and may instigate her own journey into Irishness, an inheritance which remains still to be explored by Lara, and still to be inscribed into the post-coloniality of London.

NOTES

1. Bernardine Evaristo, *Lara* (Kent: Angela Royal Publishing, 1997), p. 95. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
5. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 197.
10. In their naming, Evaristo is signalling the ‘Ibeji’ or divine twins of Yoruba Orisha worship who are also called Taiwo and Kainde. Traditionally known as messengers of happiness and prosperity, these sacred deities also overcome the most awesome difficulties and it may be interesting to read the historically forked journeys of Taiwo and Kehinde da Costa as both shaped by, and as a migrant reshaping of, these ancient pathways.
12. Of course, this ‘voicelessness’ is part of a larger historical problem and not just specific to this novel, as the compelling narratives of these women are only now beginning to be written. See, for instance, France Winddance Twine, ‘The White Mother: Blackness, Whiteness and Interracial Families’, *Transition*, 7, no.1 (1997), pp. 144-154. Indeed, one of the strengths of *Lara* is the way in which it focuses our attention on the possible narratives this voice may have to offer.
He opened his eyes with enormous effort, as if all strength had left him, as if only the sheer habit of having to open the shutters onto the world made him look up. He struck the match. Strangely, the hiss that brightened the room also took him down its flickering flame, down the spiral of memories, until he heard, from years ago, the hiss of the cobra. Contrary to what one might think, it had nothing to do with the fanged demons of nightmares; it was really an old sod, the most gentle of creatures. He was lying beside his mother that time as the cobra emerged from the dense undergrowth that surrounded the hut under the canopy of wild fig and palm trees tangled up in climbing creepers. In his childhood in that hut he always felt surrounded by the primeval green of a giant forest. Suddenly thunder and lightning made him open his eyes and he heard the hiss of the cobra amidst the pattering of rain. It went, as always, slithering as if the last thing it wanted was to disturb anyone’s sleep, then past the mud hut with corrugated roof, across the plain of tall grasses, towards the great swamp. For reasons known only to himself, the old cobra never failed to keep a precise time between the waning of the moon and the cry of the jackal. He wasn’t scared of the cobra, and he fell asleep in the hiss and the pattering of the rain.

Only much later, when an intense desire to see the cobra made him grope under his pillow, through the folds of his mother’s sari, was he scared. Nobody ever saw the cobra; all one knew of it was the hiss of his passing in the rain. When there wasn’t any rain, and if the sky happened to be full of stars, one became aware of it by simply opening one’s ears to the inaudible murmurs beyond the clamours of the world.

That was last night; and today it just happened. How could he have timed something like this? Perhaps he could’ve waited until the dark had set in on the streets. Simply avoiding the shops with neon and, while passing the lampposts, taking a little care to keep his head down and slink away like a stray cat – without so much as a meow – he could’ve pretended that he was invisible. Naturally he had reason enough not to be at his ease. Whenever he let himself out of doors, those goddamn eyes, though never straight, always oblique with a sideways glance, would fix him right down at the bottom of a sewer. Now it wouldn’t surprise him in the least if knives were flicked at him with the murderous glint of their blades.
Caring not a thing in the world, like a mole surfacing before an owl perched on the barn, he risked the streets in broad daylight. He hadn’t planned it like this; but listening to the old sailor singing from the floor above, and suddenly looking out at the light that broke through the clouds, he moved to the toll of the bell of time. He didn’t take the lift to go down. He wasn’t so much anxious to avoid meeting anyone so close up as he was afraid that the bloody stench might cloud his moment of clarity. Not that the stairs were free of stench as they had their share of piss and puke to rival the lift. But by taking the stairs he could use the motion of his limbs to keep his clarity from slipping away. Not bothering to change what he had on and simply carrying a rucksack, he slid down the stairs and out into the courtyard. When he left the courtyard, set his feet on the dead-end alleyway and looked ahead between rows of tall, old, mangled apartments of a bygone modernist utopia, he felt unsure of his decision. Shouldn’t he have waited until it was dark? Seeing him in this broad daylight, surely they wouldn’t fail to take him for someone on the run as if he were full of a guilty conscience. Of course, they would be half right: yes, making a run for it, but no guilty conscience. Luckily the alleyway was empty and dead like its godforsaken end. He hurried along to reach the frantic traffic of man and machine on the main street. Once there he hoped to get lost, but his nerves were loosing him fast in the rumbles down in his guts. He thought it was funny because he walked this way so many times but never felt like this before. He had to admit, though, that he could never shake off the dread of falling victim to a racist ambush again, and there were moments – especially lately – when he was even a little scared of being mugged. Yet he never strayed from the right side of the law; not for cutting a self-righteous pose, but simply because of the way he was. Now he was a criminal, a fugitive. Why hold it back? Say it loud, say the shame of our time – an illegal immigrant.

When he looked up on the main road to plot his direction, he hesitated a moment and felt like turning back. Before he could give it a second thought, someone had already surprised him from behind. It was Poltu Khan, the smart guy who ran a travel agency. But that was only a front; his real business was fixing the illegals. He could do anything. If you needed shady passports, bogus marriages, dodgy admissions or crooked employment, he was the man for you. He was an informer too. People said the authorities had turned a blind eye on his little scam because he paid them off in kind. Which is to say, when the authorities weren’t getting anywhere with their fishing trips and they came breathing down his neck – which happened often enough – he gave them some illegal immigrants.

— Hey, Tapan Ali, what’s on your mind, man? said Poltu Khan as if he knew his troubles.

— Nothing really, I thought I should’ve brought the umbrella. It might rain.
You should know better, eh. In England it always rains. But you see there are two types of people in this world: one type carries umbrella, and the other doesn’t. You don’t look like an umbrella-carrying type to me – am I right?

Well, usually I don’t. But I’m going somewhere important, and don’t want to arrive with wet clothes.

Is that so? Sure, if it’s that important, you don’t want to arrive looking like a wet dog. But take it from me, it won’t rain for sometimes.

Right, if you say so. I’m off then.

Are you going far?

I’ll check out a friend in Wapping first, then on to my appointment.

I’m going that way myself. Let’s go.

Now that he was on the run as an illegal, the last thing Tapan wanted was to spend time with Poltu Khan. Noticing his knowing grin, Tapan felt that Poltu Khan had figured out what he was up to. He thought, Would the bastard grass on me? He felt a knot in his stomach but gave nothing away. He always thought he wasn’t a gambling man, staking his lot on a mere dice throw. But the unexpected meeting with Poltu Khan had made the decision for him. Now there was no turning back. It is strange how a chance happening opens an avenue on which one never dreamt of walking. From Bethnal Green Road they turned into Brick Lane. Poltu Khan offered to treat him to tea and sweets at Alauddin cafe, but Tapan declined. Between the milling crowds in the Lane they continued to walk together, Poltu Khan waving his hand to greet so many he knew, and he with his head bent to avoid any eye contact.

Bloody sods, Poltu Khan mumbled without betraying his usual impassive facade. Tapan pretended not to have heard him. Poltu Khan then brought out from the side pocket of his sleek, black jacket a packet of Dunhill. He offered one to Tapan, who took it with a nod of thanks, and put one between his thin, shifty lips. Lighting his with an expensive silver lighter and offering the flame to Tapan, he said:

What pathetic, this lot – aren’t they, Tapan Ali?

I don’t follow you, Mr Khan, said Tapan. Poltu Khan blew smoke pointing his nose to the sky, looked at Tapan with surprise, and said:

You’re an educated man, Tapan Ali, you should know how they’re like. I bet they talk bad behind my back. But every time they need fixing, they run to me. I can’t stand their sights, but I’m a kind man. I fix them, all right.

Tapan just shrugged his shoulders without making it known whether he agreed or disagreed with Poltu Khan but he couldn’t help thinking, I’d like to smash your head in, you motherfucking rat. Poltu Khan continued to greet people until, through the short passage of Osborn Street, they reached Whitechapel Road, where he was to turn left. Tapan, almost on an automatic trigger, wheeled to the right. Seeing him turn, Poltu Khan took a step in his direction, gave Tapan his business card and said:
– You’re an educated man, Tapan Ali. I’d like to help you. You know my office, don’t you? Or just give me a call, eh. See you soon, right?

– Yeah, Tapan mumbled under his breath and, still on edge, he moved briskly away from Poltu Khan as if he had just escaped the jaws of a born-again T-Rex. He hadn’t planned where to go; throwing the butt-end of the Dunhill, on impulse he turned left into Leman Street. The weather was still holding up and the clouds moved high in the pale, blue sky. He still had the feeling that Poltu Khan was shadowing him from behind because it was his business to know about the illegals. He looked behind but saw only a young couple walking, absorbed in each other as if merged into a single organism. He felt like a cigarette again. It had been quite a while since he gave up smoking but the tension of the moment made him accept Poltu Khan’s Dunhill. He cursed himself for that fatal slip. Now he felt hooked again. He rushed into a newsagent at the corner of Leman and Prescot Street and bought a packet of loose tobacco – his old brand, Golden Virginia – a pack of green Rizla and a box of matches. As soon as he came out of the shop, and while still walking, he rolled a cigarette. It surprised him that he hadn’t lost the knack; it rolled nice and thin with tobacco equally distributed at the right consistency along its length. When he lit the cigarette it dawned on him that since he hadn’t told anyone about going illegal, Poltu Khan, even if he’d suspected something, wouldn’t know anything for certain. Blowing out the smoke slow and easy, he convinced himself that Poltu Khan wouldn’t waste time on him; at least not yet. Feeling much calmer, he continued ahead, across Cable Street and through Dock Street, toward the river-front. At the end of Dock Street he turned right into East Smithfield, and then taking the steep stairs down, he entered St Katharine’s Docks.

On a regular drab late-autumn day, during the week, the Docks never became packed with tourists, and the locals, milling among them, didn’t fool themselves, as they usually do, that they were in a foreign land. He liked the Docks more then, the emptiness opening the place up to a strange kind of solitude. He tried to remember if all crowded places, when empty, made him feel lonely like that. Perhaps they did, though right now he couldn’t recall any because, in the anxiety of the present moment that brought him to the Docks, other places became dim in his memory. In those moments at the Docks, wandering aimlessly between water and land, and sometimes while stopping to look up at the mast of an old sailing ship, he would become aware that he wasn’t alone. He would feel that perhaps, unknown to him, he had become the focus of someone else’s attention, looking at him with curiosity if not repulsion. He would feel vulnerable and suddenly would rush out to find crowded places where, despite being so close to so many eyes, nobody would look at him with any particular attention.

Today the unexpected sun in the afternoon had brought out many people. It suited him fine because the last thing he wanted was to draw
attention to himself. He wandered around, mingling among the crowd, seeming to be amused like everybody else with the casual innocence of a tourist. At the approach of a small boat when the brightly painted drawbridges would go up, usually he would join the milling crowd with an air of excitement, to see it squeeze into the harbour. But today he wasn’t there for the scene.

After going around the Docks a few times he went into a cafe and ordered a Cappuccino with a spongy cake. He could have sat outside, by the water with colourful boats bobbing on it and the soft sun on his face, but the eyes drove him to a secluded spot inside. When the waitress, a young woman with bright, bubbly manners, came to serve his order, he thought that she looked at him twice as if she had seen something unusual. He said to himself, How does an illegal immigrant look like? Is he already showing tell-tell marks of a criminal type: arms elongating, forehead turning low and narrow, ears enlarging, and jaws jutting out alarmingly with large canine teeth? In other words, is he turning into an orang-utans? Well, you couldn’t entirely blame her. He knew that since he didn’t look all that together, he might’ve given her the wrong impression. He eased himself somewhat when it occurred to him that some nosey-parker like Sir Galton wasn’t measuring him up – perhaps from behind a broadsheet – with his telephoto eyes. No doubt he would’ve been much pleased with himself on his typical Oriental find: By jove, he’s the type. Fancy finding him right here in England! But then, hadn’t the old bugger started that goddamn cloning business in the first place? Right now how could he be certain that there weren’t a whole lot of his clones carrying on with his dirty work, with the same attention for the details? Whatever one might think, he had to give it to them, for they were the scientists of immaculate induction.

Halfway through his coffee the young waitress came to ask him if everything was to his satisfaction. He thought of it as odd: in an upmarket restaurant, yes, but this kind of customer service was unusual in a quick-service joint like this. When the waitress looked back at him a second time with the bounce of her permed blond hair, he felt he had had enough. Besides, the inside of the cafe was strictly non-smoking and he was dying for a fag. He left the payment for the bill on the table and hurried out.

It was late in the afternoon and the clouds, whose unexpected partings had earlier allowed the sun to slip through, were closing in fast. He moved briskly towards Tower Bridge. He rolled a fag and realized how quickly he was falling back into his old addiction. He walked along the steep wall by the river, glancing occasionally at the murky flow between the banks. While passing the sculptured Girl with a Dolphin leaping out from the fountain into the sky, he thought of Nilufar. He paused and leant on the wall and looked at the water slapping down below. Perhaps it was the wave harshly breaking on the wall after the passing of a large cruise-
boat that made him give into the impulse. He approached the hotel, determined to call Nilufar from the lobby. But seeing the stern looking man in uniform at the doorway, he lost his nerve. He didn’t need to look at him twice to realize that he was the gatekeeper from hell for sure. He backed off with his head down, but passing the Girl with a Dolphin, he looked up once more. Then he headed towards Tower Bridge. Instead of climbing onto the bridge he went through the low arch of the tunnel and arrived at the promenade by the southern facade of the Tower. The promenade, lined with autumnal trees, was nearly empty. He sat on a bench, his back to the grey crenellated towers and the ominous turrets, facing the river.

Nilufar must’ve called him, and realizing that the phone was off the hook, she must’ve been around to knock on his door. Last time, a few days ago, when she stayed the night at his place, things were tense between them. He was going on about Adela and his indecision and self-pity, and she was telling him to cut the crap and to pull his socks up. Perhaps it was one of those things that couples go through after their initial mesmeric fascination with each other, when the mere thought of the other blinds one to the difficulties of sharing intimate moments together, of each other’s idiosyncrasies, and one covers up the possibilities of getting annoyed in looks of reciprocal surrender. Perhaps they were already, without being aware of it, comparing each other with the memories of their past loves, and beginning to sense the other beneath the aura of fascination when they were strangers. That night they slept keeping their distance, careful of each other’s moans and groans so that they wouldn’t alert one to the proximity of the other, with his mind going over Adela and Tipu and the life he would soon live.

In the morning, while he was still asleep, Nilufar let herself quietly out of doors. When he got up he was relieved at not finding Nilufar next to him, not having to deal with the awkward moment of having to say something about last night. Yet, even before he made a cup of tea for himself, he became restless and phoned her up, but she wasn’t in or hadn’t bothered to answer. Later, when Sundar called around, he told him that Nilufar went to see a friend in Balham and would be away for few days. Between switching on/off the TV, listening to the radio, opening a book and, at night, between tossing and turning in the bed, he waited for Nilufar’s call. By the afternoon of the second day his nerves were in tatters. Perhaps it was this that made him snap; not the old man singing from the floor above and the sudden appearance of the sun. He would be the first to admit that he was a bit impulsive and at times prone to nerves, but he wasn’t that whimsical. Perhaps it was the lingering sensation from last night, the memories of the invisible cobra, and the murmur from the depths of the earth, of his suddenly becoming callous to the practical calculations of life, that made him take the plunge as if it had always been his destiny. Or perhaps it was something else, of which he hadn’t had the
slightest clue. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have made the run.

Now looking back on his decision, he knew Nilufar would be worried
for him; and when she found out that he had acted so stupidly, she’d be
mad. It wasn’t that she was in awe of the law. Far from it. She couldn’t
give a damn for that kind of nonsense. When his case wasn’t going well
and deportation was on the cards, they talked about the option of dodging
the law. But Nilufar wanted all the legal procedures and appeals to run
their course before deciding on that kind of action. Besides, if it was to be
done she wanted it done well. Nothing could be left to chance: weave a
maze so dense, the arseholes wouldn’t know what really hit them. If they
were still crazy enough to look for him, they’d be sure to end up begging
for an instant lobotomy. He knew that — as always — Nilufar would try to
think of something. He also knew that he needn’t have made the run yet
because he had a week before the deportation order was to take effect. But
at that moment he couldn’t think straight and, almost like a zombie, had
run.

Without so much as a warning, a yellow leaf unclasped its grip on the
bough, and fell on his face. It would have been natural to flinch but he
picked the leaf up calmly and felt its moisture in his hand. He thought of
it as strange because a yellow leaf had recently been turning up in his
dreams with the regularity of clockwork. He convinced himself that it
wasn’t an allegory of what had happened and was about to happen to
him. Perhaps something else, but what? He didn’t know; perhaps it
wasn’t even important to know. All he knew was that the dream would go
through him as if he were with an old friend in a familiar garden. Up until
now almost nothing had ruffled his dreams. Neither the roar of the wind
nor the silence of the depths, except a yellow leaf whispering to the conch
by the sea. Every time he hears the whispering leaf, he allows himself to
be carried away as if by a lullaby to an unknown land. Despite the
barrenness of the place, he expects his dreams to bloom as
if
upon his
arrival the dry sand is about to receive its long awaited rain. But then
when it rains the whole day, it leaves the conch full of water, right to its
brim. So the whisper of the leaf turns back upon itself like the cry of Echo
in the desolation of the forest. Walking in silence on the sandy shore, he
sees from the distance, across a thicket of mist, a horseman galloping
towards him. He has a sword, unsheathed in his armoured hand, held
steady as a statue. He doesn’t see the horseman’s face because the visor of
his jousting helmet has covered it like the dark veil of death. Unable to
whisper to the conch, somewhere between himself and the horseman, the
leaf floats in the air. Singular to his purpose, with his spurred feet firmly
in the stirrups and pulling the reins tightly, the horseman gallops in to
slice the leaf. The conch cannot mourn for the death of the leaf as it lies
buried in the sand full of water. Then a sudden gust of wind brings the
mutilated leaf and drops it on his naked face. The knight, his job done,
turns back with the pull of the reins and disappears.
Now split into halves, the leaf caresses his face, telling him the story it would have whispered to the conch if it hadn’t rained on that day. To begin with, it tells him what he had always known, that he is indeed an intruder on the land of the horseman. But so was the horseman, by a strange quirk of fate, to his land. Years ago, hadn’t the horseman set sail, with a murderous conquest in his heart, for the land from where he came? Yes, even in his dreams he was puzzled by this curious symmetry: he came because the horseman went. Unlike the laborious journey of the horseman on the trails of blood, he came simply as if on a homing flight of a migratory bird. Somehow, and always, he reaches a pathway that leads him at first smoothly as if he were shooting down a slide; then he comes invariably against the horseman. As expected, he has already metamorphosed himself into the gatekeeper. He doesn’t see the expression the gatekeeper bears on his face, nor does he hear him say a word. Rooted deep in his land, his bulk as stolid as a trunk, he is entirely given to his power of smell. When he attempts to sneak past, the gatekeeper smells him out, and bars his way with his bulk. Exhausted by his repeated attempts to pass, he sits down in the shadow cast by the gatekeeper, whose height matches the volume of his girth. He passes time by waiting, expecting the gatekeeper to put on a face, until he hears the rustle of feet gliding through the mist. With swaying lanterns they are carrying a coffin towards the passage that leads to the gate at the end of the mist. On a sudden spurt of impulse, he rushes towards them and asks: *What body are you carrying – is it of a migrant?* They do not answer him, they are faceless and tongueless, but they approach the archway with the rhythmic sway of their lanterns. As though he had known the approach of the body for some time, and without a word being exchanged, the gatekeeper lets it pass. Once more he hears the hooves, and when he looks back, he sees the horseman galloping towards him with an unsheathed sword in his hand. Now the hollow of the conch is not full of water, it is mourning for him, and the gatekeeper, sensing the cold of the corpse, lets him pass. Some morbid dream! But how can it be a dream? There is no enigma, no rebus, and certainly no allegory. Perhaps it is a story he likes to tell himself in quiet moments like this, and wished he’d really dreamt it.

It was getting dark and he felt the chill in his bones. He unclasped the yellow leaf and put it in his pocket, then he took a scarf from his rucksack and wrapped it around his neck. He turned the lapel up on his long coat and went back the way he came. Now he took the stairs to the bridge, heading south along the western catwalk. Strangely, he didn’t feel the excitement he always felt on this bridge of tall gothic towers marooned in the skyline. Nor had he felt the slightest urge to look at the river or the city of lights on its banks. When he paused to lick the paper on his roll, a man who was leaning against the railings asked him for a light. He flinched as the man pressed on him very close. Gaining his composure
somewhat, he lit a match, first to offer him and then to light his own.
- *Much obliged*, said the man.
- *If you want to keep the box, you're welcome to it. I can get one from the station*, said Tapan.
- *Kind of you, but no. I'm going to the station myself.*

Tapan didn't care for company, especially not him, but the man had already locked onto him and was matching his steps. He was a white man, middle-aged, careless in appearance but clean. Taking a drag on his cigarette, the man said abruptly:
- *If you don't mind me asking - where are you from?*

Tapan was taken aback by the question. He wondered why the man would be asking something like this - is he on his trail? He convinced himself that this wasn't very likely because he still had a week before he turned officially illegal. Surely the authorities wouldn't waste their scarce resources on him; at least not yet. But he still was at a loss as to what to say.
- *Well, around here - from that side of the river - I mean, East London.*
- *Uhm, is that so? But you don't sound Cockney to me.*
- *How does a Cockney sound then?* said Tapan with slight anger in his voice.
- *Of course, you're from East London. Malum. But don't get me wrong, I didn't want to pry into your affairs. All I wanted to know was your origin.*
- *You don't need me to tell you that, do you?*
- *You see - if I'm not mistaken - I'm also from your part of the world. Way back, during the Raj. My father was with the forces. I was born there.*
- *I don't get it. What part of the world you be talking about?*
- *Hindustan, of course.*

Tapan didn't come back on it; he let the man assume whatever he wanted to assume. Now the man wasn't asking any questions. It suited him fine; he didn't have to respond to his stupid gibber. He puffed on his roll and, turning right into Tooley Street, quickened a gear. The guy was still tagging along. After a while he started again, but this time as if he was talking to himself.
- *My father was a bandmaster. On Sundays he used to lead marches through towns, throwing his baton high in the air. Good show. Natives used to love it – pardon me, I didn't mean you. So did I. We lived in the regimental quarters in many districts. Mainly Mofussil. I was ten when - what do you call it - oh yes, Swaraj came. Rest you know, Achah, malum? Back to England. At first it was difficult. I hated Gandhi, wished him dead. That native took my country, I believed then. At least that's what my father told me. Very difficult, you know. England was a strange place. I missed the smell, the heat. But above all the rivers. Gradually, I'd forgotten about all that. Then when the Pakis started to come here - I*
don't understand why you bother. England, a godforsaken place, if you want to know. Why leave all that sunshine and such nice places? Anyway, when the Pakis started to come – no offence, I didn't mean you – I was pissed off like everybody else. I thought you lot had what you wanted – Swaraj, I mean. Why come here to muck up things for us? Anyway, when your people started to burn all those spices – and, of course, all those fruits and vegetables in Halal shops – my old sense of smell and things I loved started to come back. Yes, the rivers. I miss them very much. You see, that's why I go to Tower Bridge, to see the river. But it's not the same, is it? It makes me more sad. Mind you, also very angry. It's a pity that I never got to know you people. In the barracks all I saw were nappy-wallahs and methar-wallahs. Those fellows came and went. Never spoke. I thought all Indians were some sort of wallahs.

While they walked Tapan continued to smoke, occasionally gritting his teeth, but determined to keep his mouth shut. When they drew near London Bridge station the man said he lived around the corner.

– Pity. I never knew a real Indian. If you don't mind, I'd like to know you. Any assistance, just ask, said the man with utmost sincerity.

– Thanks. Tapan managed to say something at last.

– I really mean it. Any assistance. Bill Smith the name. They call me Bombay Bill around here. Look out for me on Tower Bridge. If not, the Black Beggar round the corner. So long, my friend.

– Yeah, Tapan mumbled under his breath as he turned his back on the man. He was glad to have shaken Bombay Bill off his back. He could fry in hell for all he cared. He had to admit though: the old sod was a dead nut case. Fancy churning up mother Ganges – of all places – from the bowels of the old girl Thames. What does he think he is: Serpent Vasuki, the churner of the ocean of creation? No time for all that now; he must phone Nilufar. Finding an empty phone booth, he went in and dialled the number. No answer. He tried again. Still no answer. Getting desperate, he rang Sundar. No luck there either. He thought, perhaps they were together looking for him. He didn't want to go back to his flat. That much was certain. Where could he go? Without knowing his precise destination, and almost at random, he took the northbound train. But Bombay Bill wouldn't leave him alone.
BRUCE WOODCOCK

‘I’ll show you something to make you change your mind’: 1
Post-Colonial Translations of the Streets of London

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even if the Caribbean flaneur doesn’t go so far as to claim ownership, their very presence and gaze changes the city. In Omeros, Derek Walcott’s transcultural and transhistorical protagonist arrives in London as if disembarking in the underworld from Charon’s barge. Despite his universalizing persona, Walcott’s protagonist is notably aware of the way London’s past is written into its streets in the present. He sees ‘under everything an underlying grime’ in this flower of cities, ‘as the tinkling
Post-Colonial Translations of the Streets of London

Thames drags by in its ankle-irons’.\textsuperscript{24} This image of slave history haunting the surface of the commercial river indicates the dialectical vision Walcott offers of ‘a devalued empire’.\textsuperscript{25} But the imperial centre is not just tawdry with its past; it is redolent of a transformed future being effected by the translated beings the protagonist sees around him:

the shadows keep multiplying from the Outer Provinces, their dialects light as the ginkgo’s leaf, their fingers plucking their saris\textsuperscript{26}

It is a glimpse of a potential future lost ‘as a gliding fog hides the empires’.\textsuperscript{27} The protagonist’s visit to London ends in a Blakean outburst of ironic questions and sardonic answers, revealing the hypocrisies of the post-imperial condition:

Where is the light of the world? In the National Gallery.
In Palladian Wren. In the City that can buy and sell us
the packets of tea stirred with our crystals of sweat.\textsuperscript{28}

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

London has a multicultural past to be recovered but the historical traces of this history have been bleached from public memory. English culture, whether embodied in the ‘afternoon cup of tea’, the Friday night ‘fish and chips supper’ or the ‘jovial London Bobbie’, is intertwined with the history of imperialism and intercultural contact.\textsuperscript{29}

After his glimpses of a translational process in action, Walcott’s protagonist sees London’s immediate fate is as a ‘dark future down darker street’.\textsuperscript{30}

Walcott’s view of London captures what Australian writer Paul Carter has described as a ‘spatial history’, in which ‘the lacuna left by imperial history’ can be glimpsed in traces left by presences which have gone in a temporal sense, but remain inscribed spatially and geographically if we can but read them.\textsuperscript{31} So, depending on who is doing it, walking the streets of London or even just looking at them changes them. James Donald’s discussion of Michel de Certeau’s essay ‘Walking in the City’ is a useful reference point here: ‘When we walk the city streets,’ Donald argues, ‘we are engaged in “illegible” improvisations. It is like using language ... we operate within a constraining structure – the streets and buildings of the city on the one hand, grammar on the other – but we adapt it to our own creative purposes.’\textsuperscript{32} In a sense, then, we ‘translate’ the city itself.

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

Say Cockney fire shooter. We bus' gun
Cockney say tea leaf. We just say sticks man ...
Cockney say grass. We say outformer man ...
Cockney say Old Bill we say dutty babylon ...
Cockney say scarper we scatter
Cockney say rabbit we chatter
‘Cockney say Old Bill we say dutty babylon ... cockney say scarper we scatter’. This is the different but shared language of lived oppression in the form of police confrontation. The different languages ‘translate’ into each other readily enough but also ironically act as what Gilroy calls ‘equivalent "nation languages" facing each other across the desperate terrain of the inner city’.

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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


CATHERINE BATT

Post-Colonial London, By Way of Medieval Romance: V.S. Naipaul's *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*

I am struck by how Naipaul draws on literary reference, not only to confirm, but even to valorize, place, and the experience of place, in his own writing. So the Langham Hotel, where the young Naipaul worked as a freelance for the BBC Caribbean Service, is significant because it features in 'at least one Sherlock Holmes story'.¹ In *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) there is an affinity between the textual experience of time and place as meaningful, and (from its position as canonical writing), Middle English Arthurian literature's power to confirm that experience. The writer turns, for validation of his own feelings, to a description of winter in the fourteenth-century poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, commenting explicitly on this as indication that he is 'in tune with the landscape'.² Amesbury is important because it is to a convent there that Guinevere retires after the Last Battle, in which Arthur is killed, and we are reminded that it is only some twenty miles from Camelot, 'at Winchester' (p. 50). (The identification of the place by its names across time is from Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur*.)³

By contrast, Naipaul's 1962 novella, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, presents us with a (fragmented) cityscape and makes use of romance motif, but avoids the later texts' synchrony of literary and physical spaces (although I appreciate the potential for ambivalence in the interpretation of such synchrony: is Naipaul there working in the interests of, or undermining the notion of, tradition?⁴). I want to look here at the novella's reticence about defining London space, its assumptions and evasions, and also at its oblique acknowledgement and uses of the literary space medieval romance maps out, and to suggest how they might in fact intersect within two frames: first, the diverse cultural constructions and displacements of Englishness (as vexed and relative a term as is that of the 'city'); and second, Naipaul's self-consciousness with regard to a literary tradition in English, keeping in mind the vexedness too of what constitutes a 'tradition': Simon Gikandi, in his recent study, *Maps of Englishness*, points out 'the mutual imbrication of both the colonizer and the colonized' in the
cultural spaces effected by the condition of post-coloniality. It is in this context of the negotiations of literary cartographies that I want to suggest the sideways presentation of London and the echoes of legend alike as projections of a post-colonial disillusion, but also of literary reinscription which, in the field of Arthurian legend, I want to argue, meet up with a late-medieval cultural reinscription, to suggest a more precise ideological position for Mr Stone as a form of cultural investigation.

Naipaul has explained in an interview that after A House for Mr Biswas, Mr Stone represented his return to writing: 'I had to write another book, to prove to myself that I could write, that it wasn’t all over, that one had a talent.' Complementarily, John Steinbeck explains of his reworking of Malory (1958/9) how the Morte Darthur was his entry into productive literacy, after he had experienced ‘the appalled agony of trying to learn to read’: ‘I stared at the black print with hatred, and then, gradually, the pages opened and let me in.’ Each writer draws something different from associating the Arthurian with literary articulacy. Steinbeck’s unfinished book (heavily dependent on Malory) suggests that his siting himself as reader makes him idiosyncratically reiterate rather than rewrite Malory: Steinbeck stands as a contrast to Naipaul, for whom the Arthurian implicitly provides a residual continuity which facilitates re-entry into writing. I want more closely to analyse the obliqueness of Naipaul’s engagement with an arguably illusory, but nonetheless (or perhaps consequentially) culturally weighty myth, to see how it dovetails with other ‘placings’, literary and social, in the novel.

Richard Stone, in his early sixties, and approaching the end of an undistinguished if comfortable career as an archivist in a large corporation, Excal – the word itself is ripe for Arthurian elaboration, as well as suggesting a world grown cold – marries a widow, Mrs Springer, after a brief courtship, apparently to stave off the depredations of a lonely old age: but soon afterwards, growing anxiety about the change in circumstances and routine that retirement will entail, which includes a fear of emasculation grounded in misogyny, a fear brought home to him by his experiences on a Cornish holiday, lead him to draft a plan for the mutual support of old men retired from the corporation. (Whether Excal has employed women for too short a time for them to feature as pensioners is not specified.) This scheme is enthusiastically taken up by the company, and developed by a dynamic young man in Public Relations, Bill Whymper, who gives the project its Arthurian trappings and gloss. According to the scheme, the former employees make up a Round Table of Knights Companion, their aim to offer succour to their fellows. Whymper finally ‘betrays’ Stone by making his niece pregnant and leaving for a job in another company.

There is about Stone an air of displacement in relation to the larger city he inhabits, and we view both London and its cultures through the lens of his own apparent diffidence towards both. It is as if Naipaul here mimics the English novel as he has elsewhere defined it, as not attending to the
importance and nature of the city. But *Mr Stone* itself presents a tension (precisely encoded as English reticence) between what remains unarticulated about the pressures of city and history, and a narrative acknowledgement of what Elizabeth Grosz terms the ‘interface’ between body and city, a ‘mutually defining’ relation, with the city a ‘fundamentally disunified series of systems and interconnections’ in relation to which the individual is positioned in so many ‘temporary alignments’. So London is primarily conceptualized as an agglomeration of peripheral districts, distinguished largely (though not uniquely) by name alone: Muswell Hill, Camden Town, Hampstead, Brixton, Streatham. Whymper’s home, characteristically, straddles two locations: ‘in Kilburn, on that side of the High Road which gave him a Hampstead telephone number’ (p. 87). Until the novel’s conclusion, which is the point at which we come nearest to locating Stone’s own home, a strangely indeterminate centre seems rather to hold these places apart than to draw them together. Richard Stone’s sister, Olive, has for years been moving ever further from the centre of the city, a displacement figured as a frightened retreat, a fear of violation of private spaces (p. 22), a movement that Naipaul’s Caribbean politician-refugee-narrator of *The Mimic Men* (1967) will re-enact; he will ultimately adopt a similarly anonymous existence, although the later novel openly states hopes of the city, and the trajectory from centre to margin is explicitly articulated as consequential upon a cultural and metropolitan disillusion.

David Dabydeen has suggested, of a later era and area of post-colonial London, that the different ethnic communities make for groupings of discrete cells that do not interconnect: Stone’s city is, largely, both discrete and anonymous. This propensity towards the discrete is of a piece with the presentation of ‘Englishness’ as so many forms of confining and confined households manifesting slightly different aspects of an enclosed and eccentric (rather than London-centred) conservatism. The respectable Tomlinsons are the arbiters of English middle-class good taste, awkward accommodators of continental ways (they serve Beaujolais rationed in liqueur glasses, and Mr Tomlinson dutifully bows to highbrow consensus in considering the French gangster movie as art film), and the Stones take their cultural cues from them, but their home has no specific London location: the effect is of a certain parochialism and, ultimately, a denial of cultural accountability in a domestic world detached from its immediate environment. Stone’s naive appropriations of popular culture in the face of situations outside his usual routine – as when he offers policemen cups of tea because he understands from films that this is what one does (p. 31) – similarly suggest awkward cultural accommodations rather than initiative.

Stone’s own house, with its bric-à-brac of empire (Mrs Springer’s tiger skin, a relic of her first marriage, is literally underfoot), and its semi-public areas selectively redecorated only when the upturn in Stone’s professional life would seem to require it, more explicitly signals domestic space as metaphor for post-imperial metropolis. The grotesquerie of Stone’s
frustrated attempt, at the beginning of the novel, to entice a troublesome black cat up the stairs and into the bathroom by means of cheese-cubes, where it was to have encountered Mr. Stone armed with a poker—'The poker was not for attack but self-defence' (p. 6)—carries sinister connotations in the context of the novel's undercurrent of a violence which is metaphorized or linguistic rather than physically realized. This displacement of social and conceptual issues onto material artefacts invites us to interpret figuratively the comically deliberate sequencing of red, white and blue cushions with which Stone's housekeeper improvises a bed for Margaret on her first night as Stone's wife, and to invoke it contrastively with the detail, towards the end of the novel, of estate agents' signs sprouting, joyously and almost organically, along Stone's road, as the area undergoes rapid social change: 'Bright “To Let” and “For Sale” notices in red, white and black appeared with growing frequency amid the green of hedges' (p. 111).

Whymper's quarters, by contrast with Stone's home, are rather more casual, and suggest a different accommodation of post-imperial spaces, with its (to the Stones) intrusive-sounding tenants, and Whymper's endorsement of European 'style'. His meals (p. 87) certainly owe more to an experimental Fanny Cradock-ish 'internationalism' than to personal familiarity with continental culture: no self-respecting mainland European would serve red peppers raw. These domestic spaces have their own decorum. In one episode, for example, to act Shylock with a pronounced Jewish accent as part of an evening's entertainment is silently castigated (p. 41), but typically the guest to whom it is intimated such a performance would give most offence is not himself dignified with a name: what concern or indifference an outraged sense of propriety may ultimately mask is left unclear.

If discrete architectural spaces offer different figurations of, and particular social rules for, a largely self-consciously unaccountable post-war white middle-class London society (there are few references to race in the book), London's topographical centre, where the characters apparently do little more spectacular than cross a street or wait for traffic to clear, is marked by anonymity of both person and space. The open streets countenance transgressions of normally observed proprieties. It is in the streets (on one memorable occasion at an Oxford Circus traffic island) that Bill Whymper most openly articulates his misogyny and his racism (in which Stone colludes), though no open confrontation with the targets of Whymper's racial hatred is recorded: 'There were days when the sight of black men on the London streets drove him to fury; he spent the whole of one lunchtime walk loudly counting those he saw, until both he and Mr. Stone burst out laughing' (p. 90). Earls Court, the most particularized area of London in the novel, is disquieting—'a disreputable, overcrowded area Mr. Stone had always thought it' (p. 26) — precisely because of the traffic between architectural and street space, because the boarding-houses and hotels that fill the area have to declare themselves, however discreetly—'A small
typewritten “Europeans Only” card below the bell proclaimed it a refuge of respectability and calm’ (p. 26) – in relation to the streets’ mix of classes and colours and their evidence of resistance and counter-resistance to social change, with British National Party members sharing pavement space with what are described as ‘foreigners of every colour’ (p. 26).

Just as Stone evades the particularities of his environment (except as they directly affect his domestic arrangements) so he ostensibly evades engagement with a sense of history and tradition, the possibility of which manifests itself in a liminal moment comparable with the point in medieval romance that signals the beginning of adventure. On holiday in Cornwall, attempted engagement with the domestic displaced in time and history on a visit to an abandoned Iron Age settlement prompts a feeling of depression and mild panic, compounded by an uncanny hallucination which gives Mr Stone intimations of mortality: disoriented, husband and wife encounter a strange wild-looking man who seems to be both threat and guide, a figure who has a more grotesque analogue in Chrétien de Troyes’s twelfth-century romance, Yvain, in the figure of the anomalous wildman cattleherd who directs hopeful knights to the site of chivalric adventure.16 Stone finds himself experiencing a ‘hallucinatory moment’, ‘an experience of nothingness’ (p. 50). After this, the narrator tells us briskly, ‘They decided to give the Cornwall of legend a miss’ (p. 50). But this experience is as formative of Mr Stone’s arrival at his benevolent scheme as is another, an anxious response to which places him precisely in his time; the vision of a recently retired man propped up by two women in the teashop to which they repair after a walk, a premonition to Stone of his own possible future condition, supported by ‘female keepers’ who collude in a social idea of his masculine importance. The uncomfortable dynamics of male-female relations throughout the novel, primarily involving a male rueful awareness of incapacity, but at the same time self-aggrandizement, coupled with a resentment of the female, who both colludes with and supports these structures, invite analysis as replications of power-structures between colonizer and colonized.

Stone’s idea for a selfless organization is not then altruistic at root, nor does it embody some ideologically pure stance that Whymper proceeds to pollute with his cynical manipulation of cheap theatrical ‘Arthurian’-inspired tricks: rather, the two are interdependent. The deployment of Arthurian allusions reveals something of the continuing evolution of ‘English’ culture, and how contemporary and recurrent concerns in fact constitute the mythical subject: here it pragmatically reflects male anxieties and aspirations, and serves as replication of masculine social, militarized, structures. The co-option of Arthurian legend to portray anxious masculinity, together with the narratorial invocations of springtime, aligns the novel in part with Malory’s Morte Darthur. Through formal literary and thematic echoes, the novella uses the Arthurian legend to replicate some of the anxieties other literature in English recognizes as fundamental to the myth itself.
Felicity Riddy has recently suggested that Thomas Malory's *Morte* is a 'post-imperial, or even post-colonial text', in that it speaks to the concerns of those English gentry dispossessed of French territories in 1453. This needs some qualification, in that the questions of the interrelation of writings in French and in English on Arthurian subjects in multilingual late-medieval British culture are different from those surrounding Naipaul's cultural situation. But each author, whose works belong to a continuity of English writing that uses the Arthurian to interrogate rather than to confirm, attempts to register a sense of cultural displacement through the very process of engaging with the Arthurian: so for both the Arthurian functions as a paradoxical space. This 'paradoxical space' has metatextual poignancy, for Naipaul's characters as for their author: Mr Stone's programme can be read as an attempt, like Arthurian adventure in general and Malory in particular, to defer the inevitable end, the death and the departition of the fellowship of Round Table knights, to which the title of Malory's Arthurian work draws attention, even as the narrative attempts a continuing series of chivalric adventures. Dynamism as well as closure is of course inherent in Arthurian narrative: just as the Round Table facilitates ever more medieval Arthurian tales, so for Mr and Mrs Stone, the association of Knights Companion generates ever more anecdotes: 'They had thought their life's store of stories completed; now they had the joy of acquiring new stories almost every week' (p. 77).

The society Stone envisages is one that in his mind reproduces familiar structures: he wants to preserve for men the 'comradeship of the office, which released them from the confinement of family relationships' (p. 66). (This is in fact close to the homosocial project of the Round Table as thirteenth-century romance imagines and describes it.) Office organization itself replicates other male social structures, recalled by, or noted in the behaviour of, other Excal employees, from the humiliations of National Service to the institutionalized bullying of public school life. The Knights Companion replicate a displaced militarism, part of the undercurrent of military imagery that haunts the book, largely in 'throwaway' details: dinner party guests position themselves 'like participants in some form of combat' (p. 39); the 'wild man of Cornwall wears 'a tattered, unbuttoned army tunic' (p. 49); Mr Stone's imagination sees Chelsea pensioners knocking at doors of Olde Englishe country cottages as he dreams up his scheme, and indulges a filmic fantasy of being a general co-ordinating troops, in his real-life office with its pseudo-military operations board and mapping flags (p. 64). (And puns, and the decorum of puns, are of continuing concern throughout the novel; there is a moral aspect to Whymper's delight in doing violence to and with words.)

The little badge Whymper has fashioned for the Knights Companion is of a knight charging at full tilt, but Whymper recognizes the vulnerability of the members of what he calls 'A society ... for the protection of the impotent male' (p. 66). This vulnerability has been read as anti-romance (the knight
should be doing the protecting\textsuperscript{20}, as in the episode in which the scheme rescues a poor soul from unfortunate domestic circumstances. But Naipaul here exposes the Round Table's potential as a legitimizing exercise for the expression of a beleaguered masculinity, whether that masculinity feels itself threatened by the feminine, or by other male violence. He has translated into modern terms the paradox at the heart of Malory's project, where violence, the foundation of Arthurian society, is both the expression of hatred and of 'fellowship', and the Round Table, supposedly based on equality, is sustainable only through a rigid hierarchization of knighthood (so chivalric identity in effect depends on the exercise of violence upon others' bodies). Comically, the Knights Companion also have to acknowledge hierarchy: they have to scrap the 'fixed gift allowance' in favour of a 'sliding scale' (p. 75) that awards more handsome presents to those who in their careers attained higher rank in the company, in order to avoid social embarrassment.\textsuperscript{21}

Naipaul's use of the topos of the change of seasons, but particularly of springtime, invites comparison with Malory, in that each writer uses it to problematize rather than synchronize a relation between the 'natural' and lived human systems. In a passage towards the end of the \textit{Morte}, one which has been read as uncharacteristic, Malory's narrator compares the coming of spring with renewal of the memory of love and chivalry, and makes the reader responsible for maintaining an ideology that the Arthurian narrative itself, upon examination, does not necessarily support.\textsuperscript{22} Naipaul's invocation of Spring is partly analogous to Malory's in its lack of fit between the ageing Mr Stone and the continuing renewal of the seasons and their cultural resonances, although Stone's experience ultimately finds more optimistic resolution than does that of Malory's readers.

In the novel, a spatial harmony, and a temporal harmony, in the sense that Stone is never drawn into replicating the tragic aspects of the Arthurian, mirror the coming to terms with writing and with an English tradition that constitute the composition of the book: the city's spaces are finally linked together at the novel's conclusion, when Stone, obliged to walk part of the way home because of a transport strike, goes along the Embankment and across the river to Brixton. It is at this point that London is described as having a 'warm heart', its life the continual flow of people into and out of its centre; that Brixton's 'crowds of black and white' are described without qualifying adjectives, and that Stone achieves a kind of peace (p. 125). I want to suggest then that a central focus in \textit{Mr Stone}, both as concerns the city and literature, is not, \textit{pace} John Thieme, 'a betrayal ... of the mythic imagination',\textsuperscript{23} nor yet, ultimately, a cultural betrayal. Rather, Naipaul's engagement is with disillusions and anxieties inherent in canonical English Arthurian literature. His work recognizes the ultimate lack of an 'originary' Arthurian myth, but \textit{Mr Stone} also gladly participates in that flawed mythologizing which it has in common with the literature on which it depends.
NOTES

4. Helen Hayward, for example, in 'Tradition, Innovation, and the Representation of England in V.S. Naipaul's The Enigma of Arrival', JCL, 32.2 (1997), pp. 51-65 quotes (p. 54) a Notebook containing an early draft of the Enigma, in the V.S. Naipaul Archive, II, 14:1, Special Collections, McFarlin Library, Tulsa: 'These literary influences constantly came to me in England; they came between me and what I saw.' This suggests that the literary echoes are unwished for, but Hayward concludes that the published work 'articulates a condition of ambivalence, and exemplifies ... cultural dislocation' (p. 63). On Naipaul as working to undo 'settled notions of Englishness' by means of a 'discourse of fracture and decay', see W. John Walker, 'Unsettling the Sign: V.S. Naipaul's The Enigma of Arrival', JCL, 32.2 (1997), pp. 67-84 (p. 70).
10. V.S. Naipaul, Mr Stone and the Knights Companion (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
11. 'From room to room I moved, from district to district, going ever farther out of the heart of the city.' The Mimic Men (London: André Deutsch, 1967), pp. 35-6.
13. See also p. 72, where Stone is disappointed, in spite of his own experience, that his newly recruited office staff do not resemble the charming creatures of 'films and cartoons'.
14. Contrast this with the kind of treatment of Piccadilly Circus we see in Sam Selvon's The Lonely Londoners (Harlow: Longman, 1956), where the heart of the city is the occasion and subject for long disquisition on the nature of the capital.
and the ambitions and enthusiastic engagement of its immigrant inhabitants with what it is to be in London. Selvon differs also in his invocation of the Arthurian: it is an adventurous and far-from-chaste post-colonial remaking his world, for whom the very streetnames of London are ‘big romance’ (p. 84), who earns the name ‘Galahad’.

15. Whymper’s ‘tolerance level’ of white Europeans is higher than that of his older colleague. While Whymper will defend a Polish office worker, for example, Stone is vehement in his ‘hatred’ of the Dutch walker he meets on holiday: ‘the blushing little mute in soft colours he hated most of all’ (p. 55).

16. See Yvain, in Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances, tr. D.D.R. Owen (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 281-373. This character, with ‘a head larger than that of a pack-horse ... great mossy ears like an elephant’s, heavy eyebrows, and a flat face with owl’s eyes and a nose like a cat’s’, dressed in skins, appears ingenuous but is more aware than are the knights who seek adventure: ‘I don’t know anything about adventure and never heard tell of it [he tells Calogrenant]. But if you wanted to go ‘o a spring not far from here, you wouldn’t get back again easily if you followed the proper custom there.’ (pp. 284-86).


18. For the technique of deferral in Malory, see, for example, Andrew Lynch, Malory’s Book of Arms (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), passim. French Arthurian prose romance tends more towards defining for Arthur a complete historical world, and the later medieval prose works especially are more interested in closure than is Malory: see Richard Trachsler, Clôtures du cycle arthurien (Geneva: Droz, 1996).

19. The account in the French Prose Merlin, part of the most popular (‘Vulgate’) cycle of Arthurian romance, tells of how, when knights arrive at the Round Table Merlin institutes, they are loath to leave: ‘And yet we wonder ... For many of us have no bonds with any among us; others have not seen one other before, and few of us were friends before. And now we all love one other as much as a son should love his father, or more, and it does not seem to us that we will ever be parted unless it is by death.’ Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, gen. ed. Norris J. Lacy, 5 vols (New York: Garland, 1992-6), I (1992), p. 197.


21. It is also perhaps relevant that the Round Table, in its manifestation at the first Annual Dinner Whymper organizes (p. 95), is in the shape of a horseshoe, and that Whymper translates the romance decorum of the ‘byrd [lady] in the bower’ into a sequestering of the spouses who turn up to the Dinner uninvited (p. 94).


KATE PULLINGER

Small Town: Pigeon Fancy

There was pigeon shit everywhere.

He’d had to lean hard on the door and push with his shoulder. It gave with a slow crunch and he slid through the gap. Like stepping into a ghost room, a room that was a plaster cast of itself – only not plaster, but bird shit. Oddly white at first, then grey, black and yellow. An ordinary, square, furnished room. The door he came in and a door out the opposite side, a settee, a thin-legged table, a broken chair. Net curtains on the window, a sink below, exposed pipes where the cooker once stood. Everything coated in a layer of shit one inch, two inches, some places as much as six inches thick. How many pigeons? How many years? How could such a room exist?

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He could see what she’d be like as an older woman. She’d have her own house full of odd books, the classics, anatomy, art, mostly second-hand, sheaves of music piled up around the boxed grand piano. She’d go to Greece on her holidays, drink retsina and look at the sea. She’d have serious relationships with men who’d think she was one thing, one way, until they learned that, in fact, she was not. She’d be metropolitan, wear gold-rimmed glasses on a gold chain.

And he would be old and conventional and he’d live in a small town and he wouldn’t have seen her for years, but he’d love her, he’d still love her, even then he’d love her more than he’d ever loved anybody.

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He arrived from Canada in the spring. It was part of the deal he had made with his dad – he finished his degree and worked for a year and was now having his summer of travel before heading home to start medical school. Peter was twenty-two. Twenty-two and still bargaining with his dad. He didn’t know how he’d got so old – that was how he thought of it – got so old. But now he had escaped and, for a while, he was free.

London suited him. The Falklands War was on in the South Atlantic and the city steamed with fiercesome debate. He found a card pinned to a
board in a radical bookshop – everything was strange in this city, even the notion of a radical bookshop was exotic to him – ‘Come and Help Us Make a New City’. He took the tube under the Thames to Vauxhall. Across the wasteland next to the overhead railway line he could see a tenement building and he knew that was his destination. Peter had checked out of the youth hostel, he was carrying his backpack with him; once he arrived, he would be staying.

The building had five floors, centred round a large internal courtyard. He walked through an archway and into the bright space, dropped his pack and sat on the ground next to it. All around the noise of hammers and saws – through open doors he glimpsed people working. After a few minutes, a young man wandered over. ‘There’s room,’ he said, ‘at the top.’ He indicated a flight of stairs in one corner. ‘With George.’

Peter picked up his bag and shouldered it. Everything was strange in London, this was only part of it. He went to look for George.

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They took over two adjacent flats on the fifth floor. There were forty flats in the building, but the entire north side was uninhabitable, even for the DIY die-hards among the group. The roof had caved in and the rain had worn through, collapsing the floors and ceilings of the flats, storey after storey, right down to the ground. It reminded him of an old avalanche site in the Rocky Mountains near where he was born. In the early part of the century a ramshackle, hard-hewn mining town called Frank had been obliterated when half a mountain slid down onto it in the night. One person – a baby – survived, a little girl Peter had always imagined was thereafter known as Frankie. No one had seen the slide take place, there was no one to see, they were all asleep. These days the highway ran right through it, across it, the road lined with enormous ragged boulders. A small plaque on one of the rocks told the story; Peter and his family would stop their car to read it from time to time. Now, in London, Peter wondered if anyone had witnessed the slow-motion avalanche at Vauxhall Palace Buildings. Probably not, he thought, the place had been empty for years.

On the fifth floor the flats were one-bedroom: landing and sitting room at the front, bedroom and kitchen following on in the middle, narrow bathroom and, facing into the courtyard, toilet outside on a small balcony. Everyone had their toilet outside on the balcony. In the morning the courtyard echoed with flushing. George decided right away that this wasn’t enough room for them both; Peter stood and watched as he fetched up a sledgehammer and proceeded to knock a hole through the sitting room wall. ‘On the other side,’ he explained between bashes, ‘will be another sitting room, same as ours. We’ll only have to do the kitchen and bathroom on this side, but we’ll have all this extra space.’ Peter went back
into the kitchen, to escape the dust. In the week he'd lived in Vauxhall Palace he'd been taught, after a fashion, how to weld pipes, how to run wiring. He lay back down on the floor and continued attempting to plumb the sink.

By the end of the day George had knocked a hole the shape of Frankenstein's monster through the wall. He called to Peter, who climbed through after him. The sitting room next door was identical to the one they already occupied, empty except for a large, pale, deco-style bureau that stood beneath the front windows. 'Cool,' said George, running his finger through the dust. Peter walked down the hallway towards the bedroom, which was furnished, the plain double bed neatly made as though expecting its tenant that night. At the window he pushed back the curtains, orange and blackened with age, and saw that the rear end of the flat was avalanche afflicted, collapsing into the ruin of the flats next door. It looked as though the kitchen was probably still intact, and he went to have a look. That was when he put his shoulder to the door and discovered the pigeon sanctuary. George, in his effete Australian way, was disgusted by the sight and the smell, although to Peter the room simply smelt old. When he was younger his father used to tell him he had an underdeveloped sense of smell, he was odour-blind, like some boys were colour-blind. But Peter knew his sense of smell was fine, he just happened to like tangs and aromas, a good whiff and you knew where you stood. A quick guide to intimacy. Now when his roommate shouted and rushed away from the room, Peter thought he heard a stirring — wings. From the corridor George called out, 'You can have this side, Peter, you're Canadian, you're used to wildlife.'

So Peter was happy in his London flat, his bijou squatted London property. In the evenings he and George cooked together, weird and economical combinations of rice and beans, they'd both become sudden vegetarians. Afterwards they'd venture down the street to the off-licence to buy beer, which they'd carry to the ground floor flat that had been converted into a meeting place, a speakeasy. A sound system had been rigged up and the walls painted black where they weren't knocked through to create more and larger spaces. Some nights people showed slides or films; everyone living in Vauxhall Palace seemed to be an artist, or at least, at art school, Goldsmith's, Camberwell, St Martin's, Chelsea. They all did things with their hands. There was a lot of talk about world politics, about the work on the flats, the best way of finding furniture, bathtubs, cookers and sinks, about the possibilities of a money-free economy. Peter didn't say a lot, but he listened. Amanda, Simon, Katherine and Will, and then the ones with nicknames, Squeak, Ziggy, Baby. And Fancy, the girl called Fancy, Peter wasn't sure whether that was her real name or not.
He slept between the sheets that someone had drawn up and corner-tucked years and years ago. The first night they smelt a bit musty and felt a little damp, but the double bed was luxurious compared to the youth hostel, compared to the floor of the sitting room on the other side of Frankenstein. Peter wasn’t used to hardship, even though he’d been a student for four years; he was soft in his North Americanness, central heating, dishwashers, microwaves, cars. He’d lain awake for a while, mulling over the plumbing he’d done, wondering if he’d got it right. They’d find out soon enough, when they turned on the mains tomorrow. He could hear music filtering up from the speakeasy. He’d left at three a.m., and people were still drifting around, talking, dancing, George in a corner with Amanda, both giggling wildly. The music died suddenly, and Peter was held close by the night.

He woke at first light with the sound of pigeons. It took a few moments to understand what he heard – at first he thought perhaps George had been successful with Amanda – were they having sex outside his door? It was a human sound, but then its humanity fell away – cooing. That breast-full bird sound, early morning. He got up and went out into the corridor. When he opened the door to the old kitchen he was met with sudden movement, the air filled with mad fluttering. He stepped forward, the crust under his bare feet like a rough beach of drying seaweed. The birds fled through a hole in the ceiling before he could see them. He went back to bed and dreamed of flying.

Once the kitchen and bathroom were plumbed in and functional, they got on with decorating. Peter had never been one to look at walls and consider colour schemes, but George went at this task with passion. ‘It’s got to look good,’ he said. ‘It’s got to be somewhere I would like to be.’ George was in a band, although Peter had never met the other members, never heard a strain of their music; he planned to turn his bedroom into a recording studio and spent his days arranging the wiring. Everything was legitimate in Vauxhall Palace, at least in their flat, the electricity and gas metered up, the appropriate boards notified, and they had every intention of paying their bills. They might have looked and talked like subversives, but Peter knew their souls – his soul – had a thick layer of small town underneath. Peter’s veneer of anarchy was very thin, thinner even than George’s, three weeks thin, the length of time he had been in the UK.

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Fancy’s flat was on the second floor of Vauxhall Palace, on the opposite side of the courtyard. Peter knew this because as he was coming out of the toilet on the balcony one day, he saw her going into hers. She was wearing a long T-shirt, and her legs were bare, as were her feet. He was relieved when she didn’t look up – he didn’t like the idea of her knowing he’d just been to the toilet. But he didn’t mind knowing what Fancy was
up to – it made her seem more normal, more real. He had spoken to her several times at the speakeasy. Once they had a conversation about Canada. She didn’t know anything about Canada, except that it was part of the Commonwealth which had something to do with the Queen. She’d certainly never heard of Alberta, and she told him that her best friend in infant school had had that name. Peter wondered what infant school was – a school for tiny babies? – but he didn’t ask. He thought that if he asked for explanations every time he didn’t understand something in England he would become known as the Question Mark King.

Fancy had been to art school as well, she’d only recently graduated – textiles. She was a weaver. She told Peter she also did silk-screening and print-making on fabric and he noticed her thin fingers were always stained with ink. ‘They don’t have art schools where I come from,’ he said.

She looked at him blankly. ‘I wonder what happened to my friend Alberta? We lost contact.’

Peter found English people difficult to comprehend, but he liked them, with their quiet, convoluted ways, so unlike the folks back home. He got on well with George, but George was Australian and also new and confused. Peter made friends with another of their neighbours, Joseph, who was a Catholic from Belfast – Peter knew this was politically significant but didn’t quite understand how or why. Joseph declared an immediate sympathy with people ‘from across the water’ and he told Peter they’d be mates because they both pronounced their ‘r’s’ properly. ‘Those English,’ he said, ‘they let their r’s evade them. Smokah,’ he waved his cigarette, a roll-up, in the air, ‘filtah – it won’t do. A sure sign of moral laxity,’ and he laughed and laughed until Peter laughed as well, uncertain of what was making them so happy.

Peter got a job, which he hadn’t intended. This was meant to be his summer of freedom and fun, but he found having to think of something to do every day rather taxing and thought a job would help him structure his time. And it would be easier on his savings. He worked in a take-away patisserie, a vaguely unpleasant shopfront across the Strand from Charing Cross Station. He spent his four-hour shifts down in the airless basement filling croissants from a giant vat of béchamel that a frightened Argentinian – ‘Colombia, I come from Colombia,’ he insisted – cooked up. Peter knew Roberto was Argentinian because when asked that ‘s what he said every time, before growing Austered and correcting himself too emphatically. Peter did not press the point and only mentioned the Falklands once when he asked Roberto what he thought of the war.

‘Nothing,’ said Roberto, ‘I think nothing. I come from Colombia.’

The basement was hot, made hotter by the ovens, and they worked shirtless, their backs sliding wet. When Peter cycled home across the river after work he felt the breeze dry his underwear.

At night he and George would go to the speakeasy. Eventually George and Amanda got together and the early morning sounds of the pigeons
became mingled with the sound of the lovers who seemed to feel free to make love all over the conjoined apartments, with the exceptions of Peter’s bedroom and the ghost kitchen next door. At these times Peter felt lonely, and he was rather glad of the company of the birds. In the morning he would stand at his bedroom window and watch them arrive and depart from the eaves. He would draw himself up and think of the girlfriends he had had at university and tell himself he could do it again, there was no reason to think the only women who liked him were those in Alberta – and thinking of Alberta made him think of Fancy and her infant friend and he lay back down on his hundred-year-old sheets. He liked to think of them as hundred-year-old but, in fact, they were made of nylon – pink – and he knew they probably came into being during the synthetic 1970s, the last time Vauxhall Palace was inhabited.

He determined to try harder with Fancy. That night at the speakeasy he spotted her friend Katherine. ‘Where’s Fancy?’ he asked politely.

‘Off somewhere with Tony, I should think.’

‘Tony?’

Katherine looked at Peter sideways, as though his interest in Fancy piqued her interest in him. ‘Oh Tony, don’t you know Tony? He’s been in love with Fancy since she was four.’

Peter felt himself pale.

‘That’s what they say. Tony was mates with Fancy’s older brother and when he dandled her on his knee she gurgled and that was it for him.’

‘Do they go out?’

‘They’re practically married. But if you ask me – ’ Katherine leaned forward, ‘Fancy’s bored with him. He’s so old! Nearly thirty.’ She clapped her hands and laughed.

Peter shared his beer with her. Joseph stopped by for a chat, cadged a cigarette off Katherine, then wandered away. Katherine told Peter about her current project – she was painting a replica of Michelangelo’s Sistine chapel on the ceiling of her bedroom. ‘Those fingers,’ she said, ‘they’re very difficult.’

Just when Peter was beginning to wonder if he should concentrate on being ‘nice to this girl instead of the other, Fancy came along and sat on Katherine’s knee. ‘Hello,’ she said, leaning to one side, her arms around her friend’s neck. ‘Hello there,’ and she winked at Peter. She hauled herself upright and nuzzled Katherine’s cheek.

‘Leave it out,’ Katherine said, neatly sliding out and away from Fancy’s grasp. ‘I’m going to find Simon.’

‘Hi ya,’ said Peter, nodding his head, feeling as though he was coming over all cowboy.

‘Hello,’ said Fancy, carefully placing an elbow on the table to steady herself. She was a little drunk. ‘I’d like to get to know you. Alberta.’ She giggled.

Peter pushed his last can of beer towards her. He got up and moved
around to her side of the table. Fancy shifted nearer and they put their heads together. ‘Britain has no rightful place in the South Seas,’ she declared. ‘Give back the Malvinas.’ Her breath smelt of apples.

‘I’ve got a friend who’s Argentinian.’ Peter thought of Roberto working in the heat of the kitchen.

‘You do?’ she said, moving a little closer. ‘I would like to meet him.’

‘I’ll try to arrange it.’

They talked about the speakeasy – who was there that night, who was not – Peter’s job, Fancy’s work. They talked about the present, immediate things. She wore a sleeveless vest that hung off her thin shoulders, he glimpsed a white cotton bra underneath. No one interrupted them and the hour got later and the black walls moved closer, the music grew softer although it still carried with it a harsh edge – the Test Department, the Velvet Underground, Crass, Lee Perry. Fancy kept her hand on Peter’s thigh.

After a while he was desperate to take a piss. When he was drunk he found he couldn’t bring himself to use the word ‘loo’, it seemed too silly, undignified. Back home they said ‘john’ or ‘can’ but those words were no good any more either. He got up and told her to wait right there and almost wished he could tie her to the seat so she wouldn’t move away.

The toilet was outside in the courtyard and to get there he had to pass through a series of small rooms. He entered one that had been painted red since the last time he was through – the night before? – walls, floor, ceiling. People sat on decrepit stuffed chairs and sofas, Amanda and George in one corner. Peter stood in front of them and started to talk, but they looked at him as though he was speaking from the bottom of the sea. ‘Peace man,’ George said. He held up his hand, fingers in a Star Trek V. Amanda said ‘Shh,’ then closed her eyes and fell asleep.

He got back to their table and Fancy was gone. Peter sat down in despair. The room was full of cigarette and druggy smoke, and for a moment he longed to take a bath. A voice behind him began to sing. A song about going out to Alberta, where the weather’s good in the fall.

It was Fancy and he stood up and danced a slow dance with her as she sang. He had hated that song as long as he could remember. But she knew all the words, and she led him out of the speakeasy, across the courtyard, upstairs to her flat.

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Nearly a week passed before Peter bothered to look inside the bureau in the sitting room on his side of Frankenstein. He and George used the other sitting room for lounging, drinking instant coffee, reading newspapers, this one relegated to thoroughfare. A footpath led from the hole in the wall through the dust down the corridor to his bedroom. In the middle of the floor, like a snow angel, was the imprint of a human body –
Peter guessed George and Amanda had made love there the night before. He strayed off the path, stepped onto the ghost bodies, and opened up the double front doors of the heavy yellowing piece of furniture. Inside sat a white china teapot with its own round and shiny chrome teacosy, and two white china cups and saucers. He took them out carefully. Both side cupboards and the drawers were empty. He carried the china through to the kitchen. After work he’d invite Fancy for tea.

George was lying in the bath. ‘Make me a cup of coffee, will you, mate?’ he called out.

‘I’m leaving for work.’

‘Oh,’ said George. ‘Dag,’ he added half-heartedly.

It was unusual for Peter to see George without Amanda now. Since they’d got involved George had become less animated, quieter, as though the two of them added together somehow made less than one person. Peter didn’t mind, although sometimes he felt as though his friend was disappearing. And he was a little envious. Fancy was proving elusive. There one minute, vanished the next, like something he had conjured.

George was not a tidy roommate. Peter didn’t mind, he washed the dishes and cleared the table but didn’t bother with much else. George had hung a black curtain in the bright bathroom and when he was on his own, he was often in the bath soaking. Peter had never been a big bather himself, at home he had always taken showers, but showers didn’t seem to be part of the landscape of the British bathroom. So when he came home after a morning at work, streaked with cream sauce and smelling of baked cheese, he learned to bathe, even though it felt to him like something one did last thing at night.

And this morning he had managed to find Fancy at home; he invited her to come round later for tea in the new teacups. He clattered up the stairs with his bicycle over his shoulder, trying not to bounce it against the wall on every landing. Inside the flat there was a peculiar smell. He leaned his bike against the wall and walked through the kitchen. George had boiled the kettle dry, there was water across the floor where he’d got out of the bath and flung the kettle from the cooker into the sink. The wall next to the cooker was blackened. Peter felt suddenly dismayed by the untidiness and, thinking he would mop the floor and clean the kitchen in preparation for Fancy, went into the bathroom to get the mop. They did possess a mop, George had found one in a skip.

The room was dark and fuggy and Peter drew back the curtain. When he turned, he almost lost his footing, there was so much water on the floor. George was still in the bath. His head rested on the rim and one arm dangled over the side and Peter thought he looked like David’s painting of Marat just after he was murdered by Charlotte Corday. Strapped around his arm was a piece of rubber tubing. An empty syringe lay on the puddled floor just out of his reach.

Peter stepped forward, unsure of his footing, unsure of how to view this
scene. It was beyond him, and he knew it, he felt his Albertan childhood all around and it did not include lying in the bath all morning, syringes, black curtains, speakeasies. He took another step. The water in the bath was cold. But George was warm, in fact when Peter moved closer he heard the faint sound of George snoring. Once Peter knew he was not dead, he realized his roommate looked happy, content, comfortable even. So Peter took the mop and went back into the kitchen. He concentrated on getting ready for Fancy.

They had slept together, just once, that night when Fancy sang ‘Four Strong Winds’ as they danced. They’d gone into the sitting room of her flat and she turned on the radio. ‘My stereo got nicked,’ she said. ‘I’ve got loads of cassettes –’ she pointed to the shelves – ‘but nothing to play them on.’

‘I’ve got a stereo at home,’ Peter said, and hated himself for mentioning ‘home’, for even thinking of Alberta when his new home was here, for bringing up his previous life. But Fancy didn’t notice. She sat on the cushions piled next to the wall. He sat down beside her.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ she asked, but he moved close to her, drawn in by her smell of apples.

In the morning Peter woke with sun on his face. He sat up and a piece of paper fell to the floor. ‘Good morning! Gone to market,’ it read. His arm had pins and needles. In front of him, taking up most of the room, was an enormous loom, a thick and complex piece of woven and patterned fabric emerging from it. It was as though the loom had materialized with the morning, he had not noticed it the night before. He got up and walked around it and was reminded of a piece of farm machinery, it was somehow pre- and post-industrial simultaneously.

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He finished cleaning up the kitchen in preparation for her visit and was wondering what to do about the burnt kettle when there was a knock at the door. On the way up the corridor he considered what he was wearing – he was filthy, his newest white T-shirt smudged and sticking. He suddenly realized it didn’t matter, this was what everyone in Vauxhall Palace dressed like. He felt happy; Fancy was coming to tea.

He opened the front door and there she was, and behind her a tall guy Peter didn’t recognize. He tried to stop himself from frowning.

‘This is Tony, Tony, this is Peter,’ Fancy said as she moved past. Peter stepped aside and let Tony pass as well. Tony who, according to Katherine, had been in love with Fancy since she was four.

‘Glad to meet you,’ Peter said, ‘come on in,’ but they were already in the kitchen, seated at the table. ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

Fancy nodded. ‘Tony wanted to see your flat, didn’t you Tony? It’s always interesting to see what other people are doing to their places.’
'You live here Tony?' Peter had thought he knew everyone in the flats. Tony nodded. 'No milk in my tea.'

Fancy was standing, moving around the kitchen, inspecting.

'Would you like a piece of cake?' On the way home from work Peter had bought a Jamaican bun loaf; they could eat it with butter. There were only two white china teacups—he tried not to worry.

Tony shook his head. He turned to Fancy and said, 'We will be late.'

'I know,' said Fancy.

Peter was boiling water in a saucepan. In Alberta, he thought, I would probably ask them to explain. Late for what? What are you doing? Who is this guy? Let's be frank. He remained silent, afraid to turn around in case he found them kissing.

'When can we meet your Argentinian?' Fancy asked.

'Roberto? I guess I could bring him to the speakeasy one night,' Peter said, uneasily. 'Yeah, he might like that.' Roberto would love the speakeasy but he would be unhappy to discover that Peter did not believe he was Colombian and had, in fact, been telling the world he was Argentinian. 'I'll ask him next week.'

He poured the tea and cut the cake. No one spoke.

After a while Fancy said, 'Where's George?' and Peter said, 'How's Katherine?' and the door to the bathroom swung open and George stood there in his towel, looking refreshed, smiling sleepily. 'Hello Tony,' he said, 'got anything on ya?'

Tony shook his head.

'I'll be off then,' said George, 'people to see.'

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After that, Peter felt a little low for several days. He didn't know what to say to George about the syringe, and he didn't know what to say to Fancy. He felt he had found her and lost her already. He went to work and, afterwards, hung around with Roberto. Roberto was obsessed with the British Museum; he was viewing the collection room by room. Peter accompanied him to Ming Dynasty Chinese Porcelain. They progressed from display case to display case very slowly. Roberto didn't speak, he looked from item to item, reading all the text carefully. 'What is "pigment"?' he asked Peter in the middle of the room. Peter explained as best he could, and when he felt he couldn't look at another vase, he began to examine the tourists. All the women had characteristics—an ear, a hand, a smile—that reminded him of Fancy.

He couldn't bring himself to mention the speakeasy to Roberto, and on Friday night he went along on his own. He drank a couple of beers and talked to people he suddenly felt he had grown to know rather well—Joseph, Simon, Katherine, Squeak. Around midnight Fancy emerged from the red room at the back. When she saw him, she came straight over. 'I
don’t know what those people see in that stuff,’ she said sharply.
‘What stuff?’
‘You know. Smack.’
Peter took a breath. ‘What people?’
known her for ages. It’s like a secret club.’
Peter nodded.
‘Let’s go,’ she said.
They emerged from the speakeasy into the night, wandering away from
the tenement onto the wasteland. The large empty space was ringed with
streetlamps, but it was thick black and unlit in the centre. They headed
into the dark. The night air was unusually warm, like summer nights back
in Alberta. ‘If you close your eyes,’ he said, ‘and block your ears, and
plug your nose, we could believe we were out on the prairie.’
‘It reminds me of Leamington Spa,’ she said.
Fancy turned and put her hands on his chest. He realized he was at least
a foot taller than her. She pushed against him and they fell backwards
slowly onto the hard ground. She lay on top of him and made small
movements adjusting their clothing. A freight train went by on the
overhead tracks. The breeze blew dust into Peter’s eyes, but as he raised
his hand to wipe it away, she began to kiss him. She kissed him hard,
with much more force than she had the night they spent together
underneath her loom. She bore down on him and soon he found himself
inside her. She rocked back and forth and he clutched her breasts and she
moaned and later he would see with great clarity that this was the
moment they conceived her pregnancy.
Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) is a novel about the creation of the self. In its 'writing back' to Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), it takes up the central themes of that novel: the exploitation of childhood and the child's struggle to find his own identity. At the same time, it constitutes a distinctly post-colonial account of the creation of Australia, as the child-figure becomes a representation of the new world. Inspired by Edward Said's reading of *Great Expectations* in *Culture and Imperialism*, 1 Carey adopts the generic conventions of the 1860s sensation novel (the genre, of course, of *Great Expectations*), and extends these, as well, to encompass the post-colonial concerns of Australia.

The sensation novel characteristically presents the patriarchal family and the law in a state of disorder, and interrogates the nature and status of these two institutions, and their sufficiency as a refuge for the people they are meant to protect. 2 The family, the law and the state itself are represented, in this genre, by the trope of the family home: in *Great Expectations* these include the blacksmith's cottage (home of Joe's inadequate fatherhood and Mrs Joe's tyrannical mothering); Satis House (where Miss Havisham reduces Estella to an instrument of her revenge); and the Pockets' household of neglected children. In the context of the colonial and post-colonial world, the metaphoric image of the political 'family' of the parent state and its subjects is expanded to include the family of the homeland and its colonies (settler colonies or colonized possessions). In Ania Loomba's words, the 'colonial state cast itself as the *parens patriae*, controlling but also supposedly providing for its children'. 3 The literature of post-colonialism takes up the same metaphor, laden with associations of identity and belonging: one of the 'common themes of the literatures of settler colonies' is described as the 'problem of finding and defining “home”'. 4 This metaphor is present from the beginning of the history of Britain and Australia. Watkin Tench invokes it at the very outset of his *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*: 'Some have been sanguine enough to foresee the most beneficial effects to the Parent State, from the Colony we are endeavouring to establish'. 5
shipped set sail from the 'Mother Bank' off the Isle of Wight, the convicts were already cast as children; bad children first, 'abandoned' (to use Carey's word) and sent from the family for their disobedience, and then the offspring of the parent state producing their own nation. Both these images of childhood resonate throughout Carey's fiction, with the emphasis on the dependent and vulnerable nature of the child. As far back as *Illywhacker* (1985), Badgery asks, 'Does it make you happy to be a child all your life? That's what an agent is, a child serving a parent. If you want to serve the interests of the English, you go and be an agent for their aircraft, and you'll stay a damn child all your life'.

*Jack Maggs* returns to the same theme, and the protagonist's return to London from Australia is explicitly presented as a casting-off of the role of the child. Asked about the possibility of going back to Australia, Jack Maggs says: 'I am a fucking *Englishman*, and I have English things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong.' Claiming England as his homeland, Jack Maggs refuses the association of himself with 'all that vermin' – the colonial outcasts, the convicts and settlers of Australia. In describing himself as 'a fucking Englishman', he is also rejecting literal childhood. Like Dickens's Abel Magwitch, he is metaphorically reversing the colonial family relationship. No longer the convict 'child', he insists on the role of adult, sexually active male: the father. Jack Maggs has returned to England to find his 'son', and seeks him in London, the location of home, the site of physical and colonial parenthood.

Peter Carey's London is a re-creation of Dickens's city, and, like its predecessor, functions also as a metonymical representation of English society and of the British colonial state. Its placenames (especially Great Queen Street in Westminster), and its pursuits of robbery and exploitation, connect it to the institutions and activities of Britain itself. London is a microcosm of the British empire, and Jack Maggs is its child, born from 'the mud flats 'neath London Bridge' (p. 75), and coming back from his first criminal expedition 'black as a nigger but carrying the King's silver' (p. 105). This London is also the home of Ma Britten, the 'Mother Britain' who anticipates Queen Victoria both metaphorically and in her description by Jack Maggs as 'the Queen of England' (p. 92). Her realm, however, is a lawless place. Her children are the petty criminals, Tom, Jack and Sophina, and the outlawed convicts shipped to Australia. In their misery and their uncontrollability, they constitute a symptom of the central failure of the novel, the failure of the patriarchal, colonial state.

This theme, the failure of patriarchy, is taken over by Carey from *Great Expectations* and the sensation novel genre. Much of the 'sensation' in this genre (fear, moral panic, and a sense of disorder in the world) is linked to the breakdown of order in society, manifested in the collapse or perversion of the patriarchal family. The sensation novel is peopled with weak or absent fathers; mother-figures 'unfeminine' in their strength; and
maltreated, victimized children. *Great Expectations* makes England, and London in particular, the location for the exploitation and corruption of children, a theme set out by Jaggers in his speech to Pip about their ‘being generated in great numbers for certain destruction’,9 and emphasized by Pip’s first, famous encounter with Smithfield, St Paul’s and Newgate Prison (pp. 163-4). Carey’s London retains the trope of the failure of patriarchy, but he intensifies every aspect of it, making it even more ‘sensational’ than Dickens’s original. Where Dickens’s fathers were ineffectual or, like Joe, ‘a larger species of child’ (p. 9), Carey’s are absent, criminal or murderous. Dickens’s mothers are neglectful or cold; Carey’s mother-figure is an abortionist. In these abnormal parents, Carey characterizes the parent, colonial state.

*Jack Maggs* is pervaded by the image of the absent father, the dying King. Elsewhere in Carey’s fiction, *Illywhacker* has already established the association between the two figures, when Emma accepts the loss of the portrait of the King of England, thrown away by her husband, even though ‘the monarch had been an important man in her father’s house’ (p. 452). By now, the image is more than metaphorical: the events of *Jack Maggs* happen in the early summer of 1837, as the old King, William IV, is slowly dying, within a few weeks to pass control of his country to Victoria – ‘Her Majesty as soon it will be’ (p. 270). On other levels of the story, the same theme is apparent. Jack Maggs has no father; Ma Britten has no husband; Tobias Oates is haunted by his own inadequate father – a man who will steal from his own son, a man Tobias believes a murderer. The absence of the father is accompanied, as in the sensation novel, by the rise of the monstrous or ‘un-natural’ mother. Ma Britten is Queen in a state without a King, mother in a family without a father. She is ‘a force of nature’ with ‘long arms’ and ‘wild hair’ – the opposite of the civilized good wife of patriarchy. Her skin smells of ‘snakeroot and tansy’ (p. 92), the raw materials of her trade as an abortionist. As in *Illywhacker*, the practice of abortion is associated with lawlessness, but also with a direct assault on patriarchy linked to the uncontrollable nature of women: the father is deprived of his son.10 Another such woman, in *Jack Maggs*, is Tobias Oates’s mother, ‘most loudly inconvenienced by his presence’ (p. 182), who leaves him to make his own way in London from the age of five.

The families controlled by such parents are exploitative, not protective, of children. These are used for their economic value as thieves and prostitutes, ‘raised’, as Jack Maggs says, ‘for a base purpose like a hog or a hen’. The ‘mother’, Ma Britten, is ‘more concerned with business than [their] morals’ (p. 239). The ‘father’ in the novel, the older male figure, is presented as a sexual predator – like the man who is the child prostitute Mercy’s first client, or Silas, taking Jack Maggs to rob houses when Jack thinks he is being brought to school. Tobias Oates plays this role to his wife’s young sister, ‘the beautiful child with whom he was besotted’ (p. 197). Around these figures, the novel is full of incidental details of the mistreatment of
The Location of Childhood: ‘Great Expectations’ in Post-Colonial London

children: the boy that Toby leaves ‘waiting half the day’ when he wants to buy his story (p. 42), the ‘page boy put out in the frost with nothing but a pair of old hessians on his feet’ (p. 57). The children who die in a gas explosion are the objects of Tobias Oates’s compassion, but also the raw materials for his journalism. They all form the background to the two central motifs of the death of childhood: Jack Maggs’s aborted son, and Lizzie’s death, brought on by a double dose of abortion pills. In this London, the child who does not die becomes corrupt: the ‘very kind boy’ Jack Maggs meets as a convict (p. 264) has, twenty-four years later, become the man who fires his pistol at him.

In the account of these families, Carey presents London — and by extension, the British state — as an inadequate or perverted ‘homeland’, the site of a patriarchal system which can no longer sustain itself or protect its literal or colonial children. However, the idea of patriarchy per se is not condemned. Indeed, a stable patriarchy is presented as the ideal system of organizing the world. Jack Maggs’s anger is directed at Ma Britten, the mother-figure, never at the father. The story he writes in invisible mirror­script is patterned on the narratives described by A.W. Baker as examples of ‘a received mode of writing’ about the convict experience, the convict memoir with a flogging at its centre. While his horrific recollection of this event is focused on the soldier who flogged him, he refuses to extend his fear or resentment to the system of which the soldier is merely an instrument. Mercy interprets the story in this light, arguing that the flogging was an act of the State. But when she says, ‘it were the King who lashed you’; he replies, ‘We were beyond the King’s sight. Not even God Himself could see into that pit’ (p. 318). Faced with the chance to reject the patriarchal state that punished him, he chooses instead to blame it for weakness, for its inability to supervise its subjects; and later, when he returns to Australia, he becomes a patriarch himself.

The last pages of the novel describe the re-establishment of the patriarchal family. It is only in Australia that sexuality and parenthood are ‘normalized’: Jack and Mercy can be husband and wife, father and mother, protectors and educators of their children. Mercy, who knows ‘what it is to lose a da’, prevails on Jack Maggs to ‘go home to [his] babies’, to his ‘real children’ (pp. 312-3), and their fitness as parents is underlined by Carey’s account of the five more children they have together. In a reversal of the original relationship between the London centre and the Australian periphery, Australia becomes the new ‘homeland’. There, children are raised in a stable, patriarchal household, headed by a father who is a ‘real’ father and a mother who is a good woman rather than an independent matriarch. Mercy ‘who had always been so impatient of the “rules” now [becomes] a disciplinarian’ to her children, and a housekeeper who ‘meticulously supervised’ her servants (p. 327). In Sydney, Jack Maggs has a street named after him: this naming reflects Australian masculinity just as London’s ‘Great Queen Street’ reflected
London’s abnormal femininity. The cast-off convict children become the new fathers and mothers, and from the state they created, Carey writes his post-colonial reassessment of London – an urban graveyard, the site of a dying empire and of the abuse and death of childhood.

The nature of such a reassessment, and of Carey’s post-colonial writing, has been a consistent theme in criticism of his work. His earlier fiction, especially *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), is often described in terms of its post-colonial imperative. Bill Ashcroft, for one, sees his narrative technique as a kind of ‘interpolation’ – writing back – parallel to that of Jean Rhys or J.M. Coetzee. Interpolation, he says, ‘not only characterizes the most effective post-colonial oppositionality, but becomes the predominant mode of post-colonial agency’. Rather than accepting ‘the basic premises of historical narrative’, interpolation ‘changes the master narrative itself’.12 But, if the master narrative of colonialism is that of the colonial father – the white man building his empire – Carey has not so much changed it as taken it over. The values of the colonial state are present in *Jack Maggs* at the end of the story; the only change is in their embodiment by the people and the land of Australia, rather than Britain.

In an account of Carey’s fiction pre-dating *Jack Maggs*, Graham Huggan comments on how Carey’s fictions interrogate the nation’s cultural origins, showing them to be the constructs of hegemonic paternal law. Carey’s fictions seem to illustrate here their postcolonial dimensions: in their refusal to pay respect to the nation’s British founding-fathers; in their contempt for the protection offered by the ‘parent’ culture (or cultures); in their systematic dismantling of patrilineally transmitted myths13

This is not a reading of Carey that can accommodate *Jack Maggs*. In this book, Carey shows no wish to condemn the ‘hegemonic paternal law’; *Jack Maggs* does not escape the colonial state of dependency by rejecting it, but by taking its structures, the same structures that failed in London, and re-making them. Having built ‘London in his mind’ to help him endure the torments of Australia (p. 321), he succeeds in re-making himself as an Englishman overseas. His career in Australia – saw-mill owner, proprietor of a hardware store, pub landlord, ‘twice president of the shire’ and president of the Cricket Club – is that of the English prosperous man transferred to a new world (p. 327). His Dickensian analogue is no longer Abel Magwitch, but Mr Micawber, making good as a Magistrate at the end of *David Copperfield*. Where *Illywhacker* offered motifs of rebellion against the father, *Jack Maggs* incorporates this same rebellion into the establishment of a new fatherhood, mirroring the old one.

This transformation occurs within the last two pages of the novel – a fantastic, wish-fulfilling ending that undermines the effect of driven realism sustained by the work preceding it, as surely as Dickens’s last-
page ‘shadow of no parting’ between Pip and Estella undermined the moral edifice of *Great Expectations*. It is an uneasy ending, and this uneasiness is communicated to many of its readers, especially those who read the novel in the context of Australian or post-colonial literature. (Some reviewers treated *Jack Maggs* as an ‘English’ text, concentrating on the echoes of Dickens and making no mention of the Australian context, Carey’s nationality or the novel’s ending.14) One reader called the finale ‘a happy ending of Dickensian perfunctoriness’,15 a phrase that again recalls Dickens’s struggles to reconcile himself to maturity in the fictional avatars of his child self. Other reviewers’ reactions point to further areas of disquiet. Nicholas Jose refers to Jack Maggs’s keepsake, ‘two dark locks of baby’s hair’, and interpolates the parenthetical question: ‘Was the mother Aboriginal?’16 There is no hint in the novel that she might have been – she makes no appearance – but the question is an attempt to fill what may appear to a contemporary reader a disturbing vacancy in this happy ending. Unlike *Oscar and Lucinda*, this novel records only the voices of the white settlers in Australia. There were, of course, other people there, living in the vast spaces surrounding the town of Wingham, outside the safe family home of Jack Maggs, his good wife Mercy and their children. The absence of any reference to these other dispossessed is a disruptive element in this ‘determinedly Australian and optimistic’ ending.17 The novel, which structures its indictment of Britain around the mistreatment of London children, looks forward to the comfortable life of Jack Maggs and Mercy; but lets its cast into the future fall short of modern Australian policies on the disruption of Aboriginal families and the re-settlement of their children.

In his analysis of Carey’s work cited above, Graham Huggan refers to the emergence of Australia as ‘a palimpsest of altered images, with no “essential” self to return to or call unequivocally its own’.18 The narrative of Jack Maggs’s Australian career might be seen as the creation of just such an ‘essential’ self. Its achievement, however, is costly. While Carey interrogates the myth of British colonial parenthood, he replaces it with another myth, the vision of an Australian homeland. According to a contemporary critic, ‘places called home’ are ‘built on select inclusions’, founded on a sharing of ‘blood, race, class, gender or religion’.19 Such inclusions necessarily imply corresponding exclusions. Jack Maggs starts the book as ‘other’ – the excluded child of the British state. By its end, he has become the ‘self’, the representative of the new nation of Australia. The turn to fantasy allows Carey to gloss over the oppositional process by which the post-colonial self is fashioned, and the question of what further, more marginalized ‘other’ is created in the process of achieving selfhood.
NOTES

I am grateful to Bruce Woodcock for his generosity in sharing research materials.


2. Notable examples include Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). In these and other such novels, the family (and the social order based on it) is threatened by individual lawlessness predicated on male or female adventurism; this is permitted to flourish by the weakness or complicity of the patriarchal figures meant to stand against it. For a brief introduction to this genre, see Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994).


6. Desmond Christy, ‘Inner Conviction’, *Guardian*, 11 June 1998, p. 8. Carey also refers to his own experience of this dilemma: ‘When I grew up the convicts were nothing to do with me and the people I must have identified with must have been the soldiers, the jailers, and England was home. My grandfather, who had never been here, called England home’.

7. Peter Carey, *Illywhacker* (London: Faber, 1985), p. 136. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

8. Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 128. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


10. In *Illywhacker*, Horace celebrates his success in procuring an abortion drug by saying: ‘To hell with the law ... the law is a monkey on a stick’ (p. 175). Phoebe’s reasons for wanting the abortion are expressed in terms of freedom and creativity (‘Can’t fly. Can’t do it. Can’t poetry.’), and she agrees in the end to have the child in exchange for a comprehensive legal document in which her husband guarantees her the right to fly (p. 180).


Where is the Post-Colonial London of London Magazine?

Recalling her 1950s primary school teacher, her ‘Queen Mary dresses tautly upheld by a Britannia bosom’ as she directed Empire Day celebrations every June, Angela Carter delighted in being able to observe by 1971 that her teacher’s ‘chickens’ had ‘come home to roost’. By then, she recorded, you could buy:

Greek cheese; yams; Indian mirror cloth, dried fish; black-eyed peas; West African printed cotton sold in twelve-yard lengths, sufficient to make a robe; olives in all sizes and colours; every kind of Pakistani sweetmeat; reggae records; hi-life records; canned bamboo shoots; goat; and once I went through the market and did not see a single banana which was neither green or black.

‘Can all this possibly be urban decay? It seems like a new lease of life’. Carter’s comments about Balham, South London were made in London Magazine in March 1971 as part of a series Alan Ross commissioned on the theme of ‘Living in London’. The series of articles ran from 1967 to 1974 and was made up of sixteen contributions. It is historically valuable not just because it includes little known pieces by writers as diverse as Angela Carter, Shiva Naipaul, Roy Fuller and Jonathan Raban, but because of its appearance at the end of a decade of profound national anxiety over immigration to Britain which resulted in three restrictive immigration measures, the Commonwealth Immigration Bill (1962), Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1968 (incorporating the White Paper of 1965), and the Immigration Act of 1971. ‘Changing London’, as one ‘Living in London’ contributor described it, was a preoccupation of the time. In this essay, representations of ‘changing London’ in the ‘Living in London’ series are explored as a part of a broader analysis of London Magazine’s relation to its site of production.

The magazine’s connection to London is clearly inscribed in its title and its location. When Alan Ross took over from John Lehmann as editor in 1961 the magazine was based in a street famed for its importance to the London book trade, Charing Cross Road, and today the offices can be found in a glorified and much mythologized garden shed at the rear of 30 Thurloe Place in South Kensington. The magazine has, as founding editor John Lehmann once stated, ‘a basic London character’, and its very name
references earlier incarnations of the magazine, the most famous being the early nineteenth-century journal published specifically as a London-based counterpart to the critical authority of the successful *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Lehmann's naming of the original 'Coming to London' series which was published between 1955 and 1957, as well as Ross's commissioning of articles under headings like 'Living in London' (1967-1974) or 'Living Out of London' (1976-1983), illustrate how in the late twentieth century London has continued to act in the magazine as a marker against which other regional identities are measured.  

However, as if to offset its southern English metropolitan bias, both editors also commissioned occasional 'Letters' from writers living outside of the United Kingdom. For example, S. Gopal's 'Letter from New Delhi' appeared in June 1954, Jack Cope's 'Letter from South Africa' in February 1969, and, (not all contributions being from Commonwealth countries) Fernanda Henriques's 'Letter from Brazil' in January 1969. Despite its name, *London Magazine*’s actual relation to place is more ambiguous than it first seems. When other recipients of the Arts Council of Great Britain were being devolved to regional bodies in 1990, for instance, Ross's journal remained a national client of the Arts Council because the Council's then Director of Literature, Alastair Niven, recognized the magazine as being national in terms of audience and international in scope. The magazine has been in receipt of an annual subsidy since 1966. It should be added that its audience is also international; the subscription list for February 1996 indicates a degree of worldwide readership chiefly at institutional level, although English, and moreover London addresses, predominate amid the addresses of individual subscribers. Chronologically speaking, the magazine’s international connections also have a long lineage. By association they can be dated back to the founding manifesto of John Lehmann's magazine *New Writing* (Spring, 1936), which, in its guise as *Penguin New Writing* formed the model for Alan Ross’s redesign of *London Magazine* when he became its editor in 1961. In *New Writing*'s 'Manifesto', Lehmann stated, 'NEW WRITING also hopes to represent the work of writers from colonial and foreign countries'. Ross’s manifesto pledges were less explicit in 1961 than Lehmann’s in 1936 but Ross nevertheless took up T.S. Eliot’s challenge to *London Magazine* to be ‘truly international’. Further, his comments in a letter to Alastair Niven at the Arts Council in December 1989 reaffirmed that Commonwealth interests ('post-colonial' is not a phrase common to *London Magazine*) continued to be an important part of the magazine’s remit.

Arguably, Alan Ross is one of several English publishers whose encouragement of emerging writers from the Commonwealth in the sixties contributed to the opening up of the post-colonial canon to the general reading public (Howard Sergeant of *Outposts* is another editor worth mentioning here, just as Alan Hill deserves note for his establishment in 1962 of the Heinemann African Writers Series). Certainly, Ross’s
influence on the individual careers of some post-colonial authors has been significant. For example, Christopher Hope, the South African poet and novelist, praised Ross for providing an international platform for his poetry in the seventies, as well as for helping to secure book deals for his fiction with more commercial London publishers. In the seventies the main focus of Hope’s writing in *London Magazine* was South Africa though he was then living in voluntary exile in London. Perhaps local and international identities in the magazine are not so easily separated. The case of another white South African poet, Douglas Livingstone, is also interesting. Livingstone never visited England, let alone London, but his personal and professional investment in *London Magazine* and its editor, with whom he corresponded from 1961 until his death in 1996, indicates that the magazine’s international reputation has been closely bound to its very ‘Londonness’. Livingstone contributed to South African literary magazines like *Staffrider* and *Contrast* but his letters to Ross suggest the poet positioned his London editor as the arbitrator of the quality of his work. An alienated, controversial and solitary figure in a country whose cultural life was long traumatized by apartheid restrictions, Livingstone’s letters to Alan Ross explain that *London Magazine*’s catholic and international scope alleviated some of his own profound sense of isolation. That it did so with complexity relates to his own position as a white, English-speaking South African poet, as well as to the ways in which a part of *London Magazine*’s authority stems from its representation, albeit ambiguously, of a capital which was also the former centre of the British Empire. Perhaps one of the reasons that *London Magazine* has rarely had to theorize its relation to place is precisely because it is ‘securely positioned within [an] absolutely central, powerful and known territory’.

The attitudes of the Londoners in ‘Living in London’ cannot simply be taken as those of either the magazine or the editor, but the sequence of articles does add another stratum to the complexities so far explicated of the magazine’s relation to place. It is an ambivalence that owes as much to the editor (who, born in India in 1922, is a colonial-born Englishman yet caught between ‘Anglo’ and ‘Indian’ identities) as to the changing times of the magazine’s production. Within the competing voices of the ‘Living in London’ exists a tension between an imagined city since past, and contemporary London. This might well be explained as the traversing of colonial and post-colonial London identities, which is arguably in line with the magazine’s own tendency to move between nostalgia and a celebration of the present. The experience of some ‘Living in London’ contributors, like Shiva Naipaul, the Trinidadian Indian writer, or Michael Feld, the London-born Jewish writer, fits into neither nostalgia nor celebration. That each fails to write or imagine themselves successfully in place in London either past or present, is a reminder that despite John Darwin’s labelling of the seventies as the ‘first post-imperial decade’, the place of the racialized other in the nation’s capital was then, and continues to be, severely
fraught.¹⁴

Several contributors, migrants to or in the city like Jonathan Raban, Shiva Naipaul, or Alasdair Clayre, make the point that the actual experience of London fails the London of the imagination, the ‘Big City’ Naipaul had ‘always dreamt of’.¹⁵ For others, ‘changing London’ is the root of its failure. Peter Vansittart, William Sansom and Patrice Chaplin, for example, wax nostalgic for a disappeared London which, in their choice of symbols (pubs and oak trees figure), might be read as a lament for a certain kind of fading Englishness. Sansom’s beautifully crafted description of his life in leafy St John’s Wood is one such example. His account is preoccupied with privacy and seclusion, describing his house and its location as an ‘enclave’,¹⁶ within a ‘high-walled garden’ (p. 53), in a ‘floral, arboreal Victorian retreat’ (p. 58). It ends at the ‘horrid border as far as Jermyn Street’ (p. 55) which is crossed only under duress. The fact that retreat is set against ‘changing London’ for this writer in his sixties born before the start of the First World War is openly expressed. ‘We live here’, Sansom says, ‘as a compromise between London proper, which we now mostly dislike, and the country, which we fear. London is changing too much for people of our uncertain age, it glares and stinks and roars’ (p. 52). St John’s Wood, then, offers sanctuary. Intrusion is met jauntily with mock battle-cries:

Turquoise-tinged starlings descend like a herd of miniature kiwis: one clap and they’re off – but that means dropping the literary pen which rolls off onto a rose-bed revealing a hitherto unseen sucker; out with the secateurs. Meanwhile the jasmin and clematis seem to grow at a rapacious inch a minute. Out with the secateurs. (p. 53)

When ‘the council’s echelon of Caribbean street-cleaners’ enter the scene the reader is reminded that at this point in London’s history, it was immigration that roused the greatest anxiety about change. Some of the tensions in this historical moment emerge in the account of London life by a younger writer, Patrice Chaplin who, having lived in both Spain and France, finds herself now living along a particularly run-down stretch of Finchley Road. Chaplin’s piece is, like Angela Carter’s, firmly located in the present, but for her the present largely repels. She too indicates London’s changing demography through a list of available commodities, notably Indian, West African and Malaysian food, but rather than Carter’s delight Chaplin is disappointed: ‘I look at the abundance of exotic and apathetic restaurants and long for one that serves English food, cooked well, with a log fire’.¹⁷ Chaplin slips here into myths of (implicitly white) Englishness and her yearning for retreat arguably echoes Sansom’s.

Amid such narratives of loss, regret and retreat, which, in the examples given above, reproduce a neo-colonial nostalgia for a past London, only Angela Carter offers a glimpse that something new might come of ‘changing London’, in the sense that Michael Gorra has used the phrase
‘post-colonial’ to acknowledge that it recognizes ‘a space has been cleared into which something new may come’. Too fat to be the Rose Queen (p. 51) in her school’s Empire Day celebrations, the passing of such ‘pantomimes’ of English imperialism in the fifties (the decade of the first major wave of West Indian and Asian migration to Britain) was a relief to Carter:

The entire pantomime, a perfect example of frozen ritual, never varied in a single detail from year to year, but the headmistress retired in the early ‘fifties, before it became camp, Firbankian, or actively offensive, and this fiesta of the ludicrous fortunately lapsed. (p. 51).

For all Carter’s optimism, the accounts of other contributors assert that the actual experience of migrating to London from the former colonies was not always cause for celebration. Even Peter Porter, an Australian who moved to London in the fifties and has since been content to be included among ‘British poets’, faced abuse from Radio Four listeners after his Antipodean-accented broadcasts on ‘British literature’. Shiva Naipaul relates his experience of the ‘the sub-world of “racial prejudice”’ in the boarding house culture of Earl’s Court in ‘Living in London - XII’ published in 1973. Unlike Porter, Naipaul’s experience denies him the possibility of a London identity:

In London, the vestigial Trinidadian ‘roots’ I had arrived with underwent a gradual petrification. But the city, while exacting its price, did not confer a new identity: I do not consider myself a Londoner. (p. 61)

The result was ‘a nomadism which has persisted into the present and which shows no signs of abating’ (p. 60). If the Trinidadian migrant’s experience of being ‘swallowed by the city’ (p. 62) resulted in a failure to belong, Michael Feld’s essay alerts the reader that identity-struggles articulated in ‘Living in London’ were not new conflicts but rather impacted with ongoing contests for place and identity in the city. London-born, Feld’s account of growing up Jewish in Stoke Newington is comparable to Naipaul’s in terms of how constructions of race can render ambivalent the writer’s relation to place. For instance, his piece hovers between insider and outsider identities: ‘It’s all right for my wife coming from Israel but you got a lot of Jews in Israel. I wonder what she’d have been like if she came from near Ridley Road where Ozzie Mosley, Bart, and all the other old nazis tried their comeback after the war’. Feld’s essay shares with another contributor, Paul Bailey, the experience of class migration, and with Naipaul the racialized other’s difficulty of grafting self to place, but it also raises questions over the limitations of the term ‘post-colonial London’ which might be said to exclude certain identities just as did descriptions of colonial London. To simply subsume Feld’s experience as a Jewish Londoner within the discourse of post-coloniality would be to
gloss over the differences in experience of London’s long established Jewish communities, when compared to Irish, West Indian, African and Asian communities, all of whom have experienced British colonialism in more direct historical ways.

‘Living in London’ offers no unified impression of London life in the late sixties and early seventies. In many ways the heterogeneity of the periodical form, typified in a magazine as eclectic as Ross’s, resists attempts to reduce its competing voices and meanings to single readings. In November 1970, for instance, William Sansom’s ‘Living in London’ piece is offset by Nirad Chaudhuri’s contribution about living in England, ‘Indian England’; and in the same issue appear American, Canadian and Greek writers, as well as a number of British contributors. The community of influence (meaning the editors, regular contributors and editorial advisers) have tended to be English, white and male, as reflected in ‘Living in London’ contributions by Sansom, Fuller or Ewart, but this has always been balanced by the presence of younger, more direct writers, as found in ‘Living in London’ contributions by Carter, Bailey, Feld or Naipaul.

Taken individually, out of context of either the magazine or the historical moment, the portraits might simply be appealing vignettes of the lives of a number of writers and artists located for some time in London: certainly they ought not simply to be read as a mirror of either London Magazine or London life in the late sixties and early seventies. Yet, whilst race and immigration are not their subject per se, the ways in which these issues recur across the accounts suggests that they are riven with national and local anxieties concurrent with the time of their production. The series’ profile represents a limited section of London’s community at the time, whose experience can be seen as posed between London past (Sansom and Chaplin) and present (Naipaul and Carter): the old and the new here reflecting the magazine’s wider profile. London Magazine has contributed to the emergence of post-colonial writing in English, publishing Derek Walcott and Christopher Hope in the sixties and seventies, and Upamanyu Chatterjee and Romesh Gunesekera in the eighties and nineties, but it also looks back and at times threatens to face the colonial past and not the post-colonial present. One result of this, ten years after the publication of ‘Living in London’, was a series of cuts in the magazine’s state funding as if it no longer represented the image of a ‘changing England’ favoured by the Arts Council.

One of the chief principles behind The Glory in the Garden, a policy paper published by the Arts Council of Great Britain on 30 March 1984, was to address the discrepancies of funding between London and the regions. Following The Glory in the Garden with action plans as regards ethnic-minority and disabled arts in 1985/6, it soon became clear that the Council was beginning to address the need to better fund a variety of communities previously marginalized in the arena of arts funding.
1985/86, the first year of implementation of *The Glory in the Garden*, *London Magazine*’s grant fell from £37,300 to £34,000. In the same year the magazine lost an influential friend in the form of Charles Osborne, formerly the Arts Council’s Literature Director, who left as a result of *The Glory in the Garden*. Osborne assisted John Lehmann on *London Magazine* in the late fifties and became Assistant Editor when Ross took over before joining the Arts Council in the mid-sixties. Although earlier correspondence between Alan Ross and the Arts Council suggests that relations between the magazine and the Council were not without their problems previously, it is tempting to associate the loss of its funding in 1985/86 at least in part with the staff and policy changes prompted by *The Glory in the Garden*. This being the case, was the metropolitan magazine penalized in the redress of bias towards London funding, despite the fact that a later Literature Director, Alastair Niven, would assure Ross that *London Magazine* was perceived as a national, not a London, client? Perhaps the magazine’s ‘Londonness’ was not the problem *per se*, but subsequent funding decisions seem to suggest the magazine was not seen to be representing its location in quite the ways the Council now expected of its funding recipients. The magazine enjoyed relative funding stability from 1985/86 until 1988/89, when its subsidy was cut from £34,000 to £30,000, then in 1989/90 to £25,030. That the cut in 1989/90 was closely bound with the Council’s recent interest in the representation and control of multi-cultural arts is a possibility. It was a year in which *Wasafiri*, a London-based magazine more explicitly committed to ‘Caribbean, African, Asian and Associated Literatures in English’, for example, received its first subsidy, just £2,000, under the list ‘Projects – Ethnic Minority Development’.24 Crucially, it was also a year in which members of the Advisory Panel on Literature allegedly took issue with an article by Michael Kelly selected for the magazine by Alan Ross. 25 Kelly’s article included photographs of a friend, the Directress of a Senegal dance group, in various states of undress. Nudity has long been a part of the magazine’s content, but, whatever the relationship between photographer and subject, Kelly’s article appears to have caused particular offence not least because the staging of the black woman as a sexual object under the white man’s gaze has familiar imperial overtones. Thus, in the 1980s when the Arts Council initiative was shifting towards shaping a national multicultural identity, the magazine’s relevance was seriously challenged. Despite this, today the magazine remains one of the Arts Council’s most valued literary magazines, receiving £23,691 in the year ending 31 March 1997, and Alan Ross continues to select post-colonial writing in English with the same exacting standards as he began when he first became editor in 1961.

In *London Magazine* the strong post-colonial element exists in tension with the kind of neo-colonial tropes suggested by the nostalgic elements in ‘Living in London’ or indeed by the imperial overtones of Michael Kelly’s
article. This slippage between post-colonial and neo-colonial disturbs any simple mapping of post-colonial London on the magazine’s pages, and is further complicated by the fact that London Magazine readers today are conscious that the magazine’s closure, when Ross chooses to halt his forty years of editorship, must be near. The shadow of this final closure might be said to further stress the magazine’s tendency to nostalgia, to look back in memoir pieces and other acts of remembrance that have become, to some degree, the magazine’s stock-in trade. To overly stress this aspect, though, is to risk losing sight of its long history of publishing new writers, local and international. The truth lies somewhere in-between. The eclectic London Magazine formula corresponds more closely to Angela Carter’s Balham marketplace, with its cross-cultural commodities, than Sansom’s elderly retreat into the seclusion of St John’s Wood. However, as I have tried to illustrate, in the course of its publication history the content of London Magazine has equivocated ambivalently between these two positions. At times this has signalled an ongoing struggle between the post-colonial and the neo-colonial, as glimpsed in the alternative Londons represented in ‘Living in London’. Which London is more real, the nostalgic or the celebratory, is ultimately a choice for the reader. What ‘Living in London’ points towards, and what London Magazine gives limited room to, is the number of different Londons that exist in the contrasting lives of its contributors.

NOTES

5. ‘Living Out of London’ contained nineteen contributions and was initially published under the title ‘Living in the Country’, but, after contributions by James Stern and Norman Nicholson in 1976, the general title was altered to ‘Living Out of London’ under which all other essays were published in the magazine.
8. [John Lehmann], ‘Manifesto’, New Writing, 1, Spring 1936 (London: John
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25. See Roger Garfitt to Alan Ross, letter, 5 February 1990 (Source: London Magazine Archive, Leeds) and Michael Kelly, ‘Red Monkeys and Green Marshes’, London Magazine, 29, 7, October/November 1989, pp. 86-96. Roger Garfitt, Margaret Busby, and David Dabydeen were amongst the members of the Literary Advisory Panel in 1989/90. P.D. James was the Chair.
In 1956, my father was thirty-nine years old. He didn’t even know how to boil an egg. But within two years he was creating the kookiest dinners in Washington and had the World Bank eating out of his hand. When he got back, everybody wanted to know how he had done it.

‘Easy,’ he would say, shrugging his big, round shoulders. ‘Stringhoppers. I fed them stringhoppers.’

His friends were mystified.

The stringhopper he invoked is now the centrepiece of Sri Lankan cuisine, but it is neither native nor foreign. Like the Indian buffalo’s mozzarella in Italy, or the shifting shape of the English tongue, the stringhopper was born out of wanderlust and a confluence of culture. A saucer-sized pancake of vermicelli squeezed out of a perforated mould, each stringhopper is like a nest of stories; a perfect emblem for Asia’s hub of trade routes in the past. But nobody knows for sure how it came to be.

‘How did you know how to make them?’ his friends would ask.

‘I looked in the Daily News Cookery Book,’ he would say, beaming. ‘I had this pang, a real hunger, for stringhoppers. So I made them myself. What else to do? A whole crowd came over.’

But he had not simply produced stringhoppers, he had turned them into an atlas of entwined colours: red, yellow, green and blue. The colouring was his invention. The austere world of the Colombo Daily News Cookery Book did not admit to this kind of improvisation. Its starchy prose was always absolutely deadpan.

The word quickly spread: ‘He got them to eat bright blue stringhoppers! You know, blue is like poison, psychologically inedible. He must have a real knack for handling those World Bank fellows.’ His career as an international negotiator took off. ‘From Jericho to Bretton Woods!’ he would joke. Even today in Sri Lanka, blue stringhoppers are exotic; in Washington in 1956, they were mind-blowing.

For my father, getting strangers to eat strange food was at the heart of the human story, the point at which the old world slips into myth and a new world stumbles free. The meal was where we could begin to understand each other, even as we recognized the briefness of our encounter.

Tolstoy Coomaraswamy who, after my father, probably has eaten more
Stringhoppers than anybody else I know, claimed they were inspired by Marco Polo’s visit to our island seven hundred years ago. Tolstoy was the biggest talker of my father’s generation; a big, beaky journalist who had not strayed out of Colombo for forty-five years but who recounted the fabulous journey of Marco Polo as though it were his own. He leaned against the kitchen cupboard and watched my father show me how to mix the dough. ‘When Marco Polo touched down in Ceylon –’ Tolstoy’s voice jibbed as he fixed his compass points, ‘actually Jaffna – he found that his host had laid out a real beach feast. Marco Polo was fêted, you know, even though later the bugger said we were all a bunch of lazy, drunk, mean-spirited layabouts. They put the works out: grilled seer fish, jackfruit, curried jungle fowl, heaps of pearly rice on plantain leaves like little temples in a velvet jungle and small hot spots of Malay pickle. Spoons carved out of coconut and tortoiseshell dishes, a really mouth-watering table.’ A rivulet of his own dribbled out with his words.

‘Over lunch Marco told our King Sendernam about his travels in China and the noodles he had discovered: the prototype for pasta. He couldn’t get over them. He described them with his hands, you know. He told the king about Kublai Khan’s favourite concubine who had been wrapped up in them: thin gossamer strings that were unravelled at a midsummer banquet in the dance of the seventeen noodles with everybody shouting ‘Gambay!’; knocking back the rice wine and ogling like mad. Imagine eating it! All that sweet sweat like butter melting on each noodle as it was stripped off a real, top-notch sex bomb.’

I squeezed the dough into the stringhopper mould and looked up at Tolstoy. His eyes were huge and round.

‘Only later when the fellow was lying down for an after-lunch nap, letting the ocean breezes cool his swollen feet, did Marco realize he had been a little tactless in talking so much about Chinese noodles to our people. He knew he had made a real blunder when Tikka, his local minder, started quizzing him on the noodle-making. Tikka was a clever kolla. A brilliant mongrel of our Middle Ages. He spoke Tamil, Sinhala, Sanskrit, Arabic, a smattering of Mandarin, Malay and a new harbour-front pidgin: Latin and Anglo-Saxon. All staccato. He told Marco about his family going all over the place; his great-grandfather had been an ambassador to Rome and somebody else had been the first Chinese travel writer Fa-Hsien’s guide eight hundred years earlier. But Tikka’s ancestors were not cooks, you know, or if they were, they had kept the noodle a secret.’

I imagined this Tikka talking: ‘Our chief wannabe big-big king-man. Wannabe know-how makum eff-dish kenoodle of uhu.’ A sharp, dark, bulging head whispering salaciously. ‘Nous wannabe makum the kenoodle big-big to impoke Marco Polo II much-such than Chinoise courtesan hokum-hooker, next time OK?’

‘Concubine,’ Marco would have corrected.
Romesh Gunesekera

'Concubine, courtesan, samesame treacle man. What the duck it matter?'

Marco Polo had spent only two weeks on the island, Tolstoy told us. Marco had coveted the king's massive ruby, but when he realized he could not get it, he dismissed the whole place as not worth another mention. 'Congealed ox blood,' he had snorted into the history books. On his last night on this then noodle-less island, after the sun had sizzled into the hot sea, Marco had dreamed again his most intense recurring dream: the dream of his mother's knedliky — a mitteleuropean dumpling she had discovered on her honeymoon at a snowbound inn in the Carpathian mountains. Marco Polo's father had apparently been so enthralled by the dumplings the innkeeper's daughter prepared every night of that blissful week that his mother had resolved to learn the art of this foreign cooking for the long-term health of her new marriage. Tolstoy said that Marco had grown up eating dumplings every day of his boyhood. And that night in a Lankan beach hut, thousands of miles from Venice, when Marco dreamed of them again, he realized that what the Chinese noodle left wanting, despite an orgy of eating, was the round, firm, springy shape of a crumpet rising like the moon. 'My little dumpling,' his mother had cooed so innocently all his childhood, an endearment he found himself echoing around the world as he sweetened bed after bed, searching for immortality among the pillow heads of love.

The next morning, he had said to Tikka, 'You know, never mind the noodles, what I really dream about are my mother's dumplings.' He described them: round, soft but firm, budding. A mixture of hope and home.

'Niha, niha,' Tikka had grinned, 'but how-do-you-do the eff-dish dumpling?'

At this point in the story, Tolstoy leaned forward as though he himself were about to invent a new dish for the world. 'When Marco described the business of pounding grain to make flour, mixing it with warm water to make your dough and then kneading it and kneading it and kneading it, Tikka noticed the similarity to making noodles in China that Marco had talked so much about at the lunch table the previous day. Tikka got so excited, fellow couldn't wait to get away and talk to the cook.' In a wonderful visionary moment he had seen how his imagination could straddle the whole known culinary world of 1294 and pull together Marco Polo's mother's dumplings and Kublai Khan's favourite noodles into a dish that would gobstop the entire island. A steamed rice-noodle dumpling disc hinting of youth and love and hope and home that would spread across the sea to Kerala, Tamil Nadu, all of south India, Malaysia, Africa and, in time, the UK, the USA, the whole world. 'The next morning, the stringhopper was born, and our Tikka was jubilant,' said Tolstoy, grinning and helping himself to a handful of my freshly steamed
ones.

‘Bravo,’ my father cheered. ‘For he on honeydew hath fed, and drunk the milk of Paradise.’ Honeydew? Perhaps Coleridge should have written stringhopper?

Ranil Jayawardene, an agronomist-turned-amateur-historian, now very big in pigs, and a former colleague of my father’s, dismissed these imaginings about noodles and stringhoppers. ‘Bunkum, sheer bunkum,’ he said when I told him Tolstoy’s Marco Polo story. ‘Marco Polo is fantasy. Fiction. One big lie. All this foreign food: hoppers, stringhoppers, kavum, kokis, things to do with flour and grease, all of this unhealthy stuff comes from western imperialism. Portuguese leftovers, that’s what they are. The Portuguese and the Dutch, they are the ones who left this mixed-up food, two hundred years after your Marco Polo. Then the Britishers brought their mad beverages: coffee, tea, gin and tonic. Stuff to spoil our tongues, our language, even our bloody bowels you know.’

To Ranil, cuisine reflected cartography and was determined by history. The New York waffle replicated a grid city, the folded crêpe mimicked those angular Parisian junctions, and the stringhopper was a map of the tangled route the Portuguese had been taken on to confuse their sense of direction when brought before the king. Ranil said that after the Portuguese had subdued the king with Lisbon cannon shot and Madeira cake, they made the cooks create the stringhopper as a reminder of how they arrived. ‘It belongs to a bad time,’ he said.

But surely the stringhopper, like everything else, must belong to those who make it?

Ranil slowly sucked in his thick blue lips. ‘I have to admit,’ he said, ‘your father’s stringhoppers were something else ...’

In the end, for my father, the stringhopper was what knitted reality together as he travelled the world: Beijing, Manila, Kabul and finally London. A mixture of hope and home, art and life, society and solitude. And although each of the vermicelli threads that sprouted out of his stringhopper press had an intrinsic beauty of its own, the real delight, he would say, was in getting the texture of the dough right. And when he did, he would beam like a poet who had perfected an unbreakable line connecting the past with the present. A real lifeline.
CARYL PHILLIPS

A Dream Deferred: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain

Text of the Arthur Ravenscroft Memorial Lecture, delivered at the University of Leeds, 11 May 1998

I

I have imagined the scene many times. We are in the late 1940s, or in the 1950s, or even in the early 1960s. Crowds of young West Indians are peering from the deck of a ship, eagerly securing their first view of the white cliffs of Dover. Before them lies a new land and a new future. At the moment of that first sighting I imagine that their dominant emotion would have been that of a profound sense of loss, for clearly they knew that it would be many years before they would return home to loved ones and familiar landscapes. A significant page in the narrative of their young lives was being turned; people and places were being confined to an earlier chapter. These emigrants were chained now to the future. A future in Britain. And, of course, they expected.

These young men and women had been raised and educated on the many scattered islands of the curved archipelago which constitutes the English-speaking Caribbean. The very language which sat on their tongues, the Bibles tucked away in their hand luggage, the belated hand-me-down colonial fashions which draped their shivering bodies, all bespoke a profound affiliation to the land which lay before them. They expected from Britain in the same uncomplicated manner in which a child expects from the mother. They expected to be accepted, but they hoped to be loved. They expected to be treated fairly, but secretly they yearned for preference. They were coming to the ‘mother country’ to impress and be impressed, and they had much to offer. From the deck of the ship their first glimpse of the white cliffs of Dover suggested a homecoming of sorts. The weather was a little chilly, but having reconciled themselves to the fact that the Caribbean was behind them, over the horizon and out of sight, they hoped now that everything would be just fine. Sadly, they were soon to discover that the chilliness did not just refer to the weather.
II

'Tis said there is a great number of Blacks come daily into this City, so that 'tis thought in a short time, if they not be suppress'd, the City will swarm with them.' The (London) Daily Journal, 5th April 1723.

Sixty-five years later, in 1788, the same drum was still being banged. Philip Thicknesse, a contemporary observer, noted that 'London abounds with an incredible number of these black men ... in every country town, nay in almost every village are to be seen a little race of mulattoes, mischievous as monkies and infinitely more dangerous.' Eighteenth-century Britain, at the height of the slave trade, and at a time when it was fashionable for the well-heeled to employ black servants, was a vibrantly, if not altogether successful, multiracial country. As countless critics have pointed out, one need look only to the work of Hogarth and his contemporaries, or glance at the literature of Fielding or Thackeray for confirmation of this fact. However, during the nineteenth, and particularly in the early part of the twentieth century the number of black people in Britain fell rapidly. The abolition of the slave trade in 1834 accounted for much of the numerical decline, and intermarriage and mortality only served to speed the process.

Of course, this does not mean that racism and prejudice also subsided. Far from it. Consider, for example, the recently researched case of Britain’s first black outfield soccer player. Walter Tull was born in 1888, the son of a joiner from Barbados who had come to Britain in 1876. By the time he was ten years old both parents had died and he was placed in a Methodist orphanage in London’s Bethnal Green. In 1908 he signed professional forms with Tottenham Hotspur as an inside-left, and he quickly established himself as a player who The Daily Chronicle described as 'very good indeed with a class superior to that shown by most of his colleagues'. However, in 1909 Tottenham Hotspur played a game at Bristol City and the racial abuse was such that the chief football magazine of the day called the language 'lower than Billingsgate'. Tull was subjected to racial chanting and monkey noises, precisely the same type of abuse that is still showered upon the modern black player. Racism was rooted into British society long before the era of the slave trade, but it was practised with a particular vigour during these years. However, after the abolition of the slave trade in 1834, racism survived, and it was there to not only greet poor Walter Tull, but it endured to welcome postwar Caribbean migrants to Britain.

III

In 1941 George Orwell sought to capture what was essential about the British character in an oft-quoted essay entitled, 'England Your England'. In it he stated quite categorically that British people had no desire to view
themselves as a nation of immigrants, and that a sense of continuity with the past was a crucial determinant of national identity. This would come as something of a surprise to Daniel Defoe who, two and a half centuries earlier in his poem ‘A True Born Englishman’, had pointed to what he termed ‘the mongrel condition’ of the proud nation which, much to its chagrin, had long been subject to continual waves of migration. However, in ‘England Your England’ Orwell was merely restating what most British people wanted to believe. That their traditions, hobbies and pastimes – their culture if you will – was not only deeply rooted in a continuous historical past, but was impervious to pollution from foreign sources. It was to be understood that the British neither needed to learn from, nor be subject to other people’s decidedly inferior cultures. Britain was mature and fully formed. British influence upon others was the norm; and after all, was there not an Empire to prove this?

The nineteenth-century imagined community of Empire did much to not only legitimize British racism, it entrenched the very ideas of Britishness that Orwell explored in his essay. After all, if Britain was a club whose members were scattered across the globe doing fine and necessary work, it made sense that one should at least clarify the rules of membership. In the nineteenth century, the very details and minutiae of being British took a firm grip on the national imagination, and writers and thinkers began to betray a powerful interest in British (which generally meant English) culture. Orwell’s ‘England Your England’ was merely an extension of this obsessive British desire to define the culture and thereby achieve some form of closure around the concept of identity. In his essay Orwell determines that England is:

The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn mornings

But Orwell does not stop here. ‘How,’ he wonders, ‘can one make a pattern out of this muddle?’ He tries again. This time English culture is

somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature.

Well, this second attempt to achieve closure does not entirely satisfy Orwell so he tries again. This time he appears to be clutching at straws. He declares:

We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts players, [and] crossword-puzzle fans.
In the end the only conclusion that Orwell can reach is the somewhat unconvincing one that because there has always been an England, there always will be an England. In the final sentence of his essay Orwell declares that England has ‘the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same’. In other words, having failed to achieve a proper definition of English culture, Orwell decides to have it both ways. Perhaps Orwell’s desire to define and fix ‘Englishness’ was prompted not only by the fervour of war, but by a knowledge that change was on the horizon; that the ‘so-called’ barbarians were at the gates. A mere seven years after the publication of ‘England Your England’, on 22 June 1948, the S.S. Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury and discharged 492 Jamaican migrants. The modern phase of postwar Caribbean migration was beginning. As Orwell’s essay suggests, a people who had no desire to witness the national character of Britain ‘polluted’ by foreigners, were about to come face to face with a people who fully expected to be welcomed as British subjects.

IV

One hundred and twenty-five thousand people came from the Caribbean to Britain between the years 1948 and 1958. Between 1959 and 1962, approximately another one hundred and twenty-five thousand arrived, making a grand total of about a quarter of a million. With the passing of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, this flow slowed to a trickle. Further legislation in 1968 made immigration from the Caribbean virtually impossible. A great number of the pre-1962 migrants were actively recruited by British companies such as London Transport, or Wall’s Ice Cream, who like countless other companies in the immediate postwar years, were in desperate need of labour. Some migrants arrived with the altruistic purpose of helping the ‘mother country’, but everybody wanted to better themselves, both financially and in terms of their experience of the world. There was, of course, also the hope that their children might have a first-class education, and if this could be achieved then whatever difficulties they might endure in Britain would be worthwhile. Sadly, it did not take long for these difficulties to make themselves known. White British attitudes towards Caribbean migrants were palpable from the start. Hundreds of testimonies by these pioneer migrants speak to the indignities that were heaped upon them.

Wallace Collins, who migrated to Britain from Jamaica as a 22-year-old in 1954, eventually left for Canada eight years later, where he wrote a book about his experiences in Britain. In Jamaican Migrant Collins remembers his first Saturday night in England. ‘A big fellow with sideburns’ spotted Collins and another Jamaican friend and shouted across to them: ‘You blacks, you niggers, why don’t you go back to the jungle?’ The big fellow then lunged at Collins with a knife, and Collins ran for his life. This type of
verbal and physical abuse was the norm for Caribbean migrants to Britain in the fifties, particularly if they were young and male. Blatant discrimination in housing and employment was also a given, although the Caribbean sense of humour often found ways of staunching the pain. A character in A.G. Bennett’s book, Because They Know Not sums up how many migrants dealt with the prevailing atmosphere. The character comments:

Since I come ‘ere I never met a single English person who ‘ad any colour prejudice. Once, I walked the whole length of a street look a room, and everyone told me that he or she ‘ad no prejudice against coloured people. It was the neighbour who was stupid. If we could only find the ‘neighbour’ we could solve the entire problem. But to find ‘im is the trouble! Neighbours are the worst people to live beside in this country.

The problem, of course, was that the Britain to which Caribbean people had migrated was not the Britain that they expected to find. In 1955 the Trinidadian, Learie Constantine, who had been in Britain since the early 1930s as a revered cricketer in the Lancashire leagues, wrote about his adopted home:

After practically twenty-five years’ residence in England, where I have made innumerable white friends, I still think it would be just to say that almost the entire population of Britain really expects the coloured man to live in an inferior area devoted to coloured people, and not to have free and open choice of a living place. Most British people would be quite unwilling for a black man to enter their home, nor would they wish to work with one as a colleague, nor to stand shoulder to shoulder with one at a factory bench. This intolerance is far more marked in lower grades of English society than in high, and perhaps it disfigures the lower middle classes most of all, possibly because respectability is so dear to them. Hardly any English women and not more than a small proportion of Englishmen would sit at a restaurant table with a coloured man or woman, and inter-racial marriage is considered almost universally to be out of the question.

In the postwar years British insecurity was everywhere in evidence. Deeply anxious about her rapidly changing role in the world, and disturbed by the rapidity with which the rapacious Empire was becoming the toothless Commonwealth, Britain was having to adjust to a new relationship with countries such as India, and the new country of Pakistan. The humiliation of the Suez Crisis in 1956, suggested to both Britons, and foreign observers, that Britain’s importance as a global power was also waning. The seemingly all-pervasive influence of American mass culture simply added to Britain’s increasingly desperate self-questioning. What did it mean to be British in this postwar world of decline and retreat? Clearly in such a climate, mass immigration from the colonies served only to exacerbate the anxiety that was
already gnawing away at British society.

Eventually, and predictably, there was civil disturbance as the number of unprovoked physical attacks against Caribbean migrants grew, and the arrivants began to defend themselves. White Britons were offered precious little explanation of the fact that these ‘foreigners’ were in fact British, that they had come to help, and that astonishingly enough for a migrant group only 13% were unskilled labour and that 87% had an often highly developed trade. Instead the British public were informed by the media that yet another boatload of ‘West Indians’ had arrived ‘whose calypso flamboyance could not be chilled even by the frosty air of an English winter’. The British government, who should have been making some concerted attempt to clarify what was happening in British society, were colluding in this media-driven campaign of disinformation and obfuscation. Violence was hardly surprising when one learns that (according to Harold Macmillan’s memoirs) in 1955 the Conservative Government actually considered using the phrase ‘Keep Britain White’ as an electoral slogan. This fact is made all the more disturbing when one realizes that this was the same political party that was actively responsible for recruiting Caribbean labour to Britain.

When one looks back at the comments made by white Britons of this period about this pioneer generation of Caribbean migrants, it is clear that white British hostility was rooted in a physical distaste for black people. In other words, it was a most primitive form of racism. Questions of undercutting white people in the job market, or the living arrangements of Caribbean migrants with many people sharing a single room, or Caribbean people’s ignorance of some customs such as lining up in an orderly manner at a bus stop, or their insistence on wearing loudly coloured shirts and ties, all of these complaints are commonly directed towards new groups of immigrants at any place at any time. By contrast, the particular focus of white British hostility was unashamedly racial. The comments of a personnel officer at a London-based factory are typical; when asked about coloured workers, he replied:

> We’ve found them slow and there’ve been complaints from the other men over their toilet habits. I’d rather have a strapping Irishman any day than a darkie, even if the Irish don’t stay long. After the last redundancy, it would cause a lot of trouble among the men if we took on any more coloured men or even swarthy British subjects from Egypt, so we’re not doing so.

A personnel officer at a south London garment factory was equally explicit:

> We require ability or a capacity for training, and also a smart appearance. From coloured applicants, after long experience, we also require intelligibility and an appearance attractive enough not to give offence to the rest of the staff. By this I mean that they should not be unkempt or too dark or negroid-looking.
Across the centuries British identity has been primarily a racially constructed concept. The situation has been complicated by the fact that in Britain it has been the habit to conflate race and ethnicity, so that one can still be white and excluded. Therefore, although race has been used to define who is British and who is an ‘alien’, it is also true to say that ‘ethnicity’ has also been a determinant. So that at certain times in British history, being Jewish, or Catholic, or speaking with an Eastern European accent automatically stamped one out as an alien. Race and ethnicity are the bricks and mortar with which the British have traditionally built a wall around the perimeter of their island nation and created fixity. On the inside reside patriotic Britons, who are British by virtue of their race (white) and their culturally determined ethnicity. On the outside of the wall are the foreigners with their swarthy complexions, or their Judaism, or their smelly food, or their mosques, or their impenetrable accents, or their unacceptable clothes, or their tongue-twisting names, or their allegiance to Rome.

The difficulty that postwar Britain had with Caribbean migrants, as opposed to immigrants from the Indian sub-continent or from Africa, is that as an ethnic body Caribbean migrants were far more in tune with what Orwell might have understood to be the British character. They were English-speaking Christians, who had studied their Shakespeare and Wordsworth at school, and while they might like saltfish and ackee, or curry goat and jerk chicken, they seemed able to synthesize these peculiar ethnic aberrations with a broad understanding of the ways of the British. In other words, to many white Britons these Caribbean migrants were uncomfortably and surprising British, and in order to properly exclude them and reinforce their alien status, white Britons needed to accentuate the one aspect of their identity which these people could do nothing about – their race – which, of course, accounts for the perversely physiological racism to which Caribbean migrants were subjected. For white Britons the equation would henceforth be simple and blunt. British people are white. Even the hitherto unacceptable Jew, Irishman, or Pole, whose ethnicity was certainly not British, would now be acceptable for the battle was to ‘Keep Britain White’. Despite the evidence of the British passport in the hand of the Caribbean migrant, the nation could certainly agree on one thing. A black man could never be a British man.

It was precisely this point that Enoch Powell, the paterfamilias of modern British racism, was trying to make in 1968 when he made his now infamous series of speeches in which he tried to give racial prejudice a veneer of intellectual respectability. Powell claimed that Westminster was ‘betraying the nation’ by permitting immigrants to settle in Britain for, by virtue of their race, they could never be admitted as full members into that closed, fixed, club called Britain. He was furiously attempting to convince the British people that a guilt-free nationalism that was racially constructed was
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synonymous with Britain’s best interests. I quote Powell. ‘The West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen, by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or Asian still.’ Why should this be the case when it would not be the case for a Spanish Jew or a French Canadian? The answer is simple. Because the West Indian or Asian is black, and people such as Powell were clinging on by their fingertips to the idea that Britain would always be white. As long as Britain could define membership of the British nation along racial lines, then she could continue to reside in the past and snuggle up against the cushion of her imperial history. The Powellite strategy was simple and transparent. Appealing to the lowest common denominator in British society, he wished to stigmatize Caribbean migrants as ‘alien’, as impossible to assimilate, as genetically ‘foreign’, then organize a campaign to send them back.

There is no doubt that Powell’s ugly proclamations were endorsed by a large section of the British population. Almost overnight he became an icon for millions of British people who were either too shrewd or too embarrassed to publicly approve of the crude racism of self-proclaimed fascists or ignorant skinheads. Although the leader of the opposition, Edward Heath, removed him from the shadow cabinet, the nation’s dockers and London’s Smithfield porters downed tools and marched to the House of Commons in his support. They were supporting a man who had said the following: ‘In this country in fifteen or twenty years time, the black man will have the whip hand.’ He went on to quote a letter he claimed to have received about an elderly widow living in Wolverhampton: ‘She finds excreta pushed through her letter box ... she is followed by children, charming, wide-grinning piccaninnies. They cannot speak English, but one word they know. “Racialist”, they chant.’ Powell’s various speeches during 1968 were vulgar, incendiary, and calculated to cause the maximum possible damage to the lives and interests of non-white British citizens. We know now that the social catastrophe that Powell predicted never came to pass: we know that he was not only wrong statistically, but he clearly misjudged Britain and the British character. History has taught us that this was a temporary alliance of patrician eloquence with gutter racism, but back in 1968 neither black nor white Britons could be sure of what might befall them in the years to come.

In 1968 I was ten years old, and the school I attended was on the Whinmoor estate in the northern part of Leeds. One morning, my friend, Terry Neat, came up to me in the school playground to tell me a joke. He claimed his dad had told him it. He said it goes like this, ‘Two Pakis walking down the street singing “We Shall Overcome”.’ That was the joke. I don’t know if I laughed. Terry definitely laughed, but I didn’t get
the joke. I don't think Terry did either, but clearly his father did. This was not only the year of Powell's terrible speeches, it was the year of the death of Martin Luther King Jnr and the end of a key period in the Civil Rights struggle in the United States. Clearly there was some conflation of these two events in this joke. Our friendship survived, but the ground beneath my feet became increasingly unstable. Like all non-white children in Britain during this time I tip-toed somewhat cautiously through life knowing full well that Britain's ambivalence towards me and my parents' generation could cause a stranger, a friend, or even a teacher to turn on me when I might least expect it.

The key issue for me and my generation - the second generation, if you will - growing up in the Britain of the late sixties and seventies was identity. We spoke with the same accent as the other kids, we watched the same television programmes, we went to the same schools, we did the same exams. Surely, we were British. Well, of course we were, and eventually we insisted that we were even in the face of a nation which continued to invest in a racially-constructed sense of itself. We endured discrimination in schools, in jobs, in housing, the same discrimination that was earlier visited upon our parents. However, our response was different from that of our parents who often held their tongues in order that they might protect their children. We were invested in British society in a way in which they were not, and it was clear to us that a British future involved not only kicking back when kicked, but continuing to kick until a few doors opened and things changed. We, the second generation, had to change British society with our intransigence, or what the police force called our 'attitude', because British society was certainly not going to change of its own volition.

The inner-city disturbances of the seventies and early eighties were largely born out of the frustration of this situation. That they occurred principally in the cities of London, Liverpool and Bristol, should come as no surprise to anybody who understands the complex relationship of the past on the present. These were the three chief slaving ports of Britain during the eighteenth century, and the injustices that were perpetrated in these three cities had occasioned discontent to simmer for decades. During the late seventies I was a student at University, and I remember each night being exposed to images on the television screen, and each morning reading stories in newspapers, all of which depicted black youths, who looked just like me, as a disciplinary problem in the heart of Britain. Very seldom did these reports mention the truly appalling police harassment, the continued discrimination in housing and in the workplace, and the institutionalized racism to which we were all subjected. For a moment my generation flirted with the idea of making being 'black' the basis of our identity, as African-Americans had done in the sixties and seventies, but mercifully this unsatisfactory notion never really took hold. In the end what the second generation were actually saying, brick, bottle, stone, or
book in hand was, we are British, we won’t allow you to harass and marginalize us, and we are not going away. In fact, we don’t have anywhere else to go. And then came Mrs Thatcher.

VIII

It did not begin well. In 1978, a year before Mrs Thatcher was elected Prime Minister, she claimed that ‘the British people who have given so much to the world’ were understandably fearful of being ‘swamped by alien cultures’. Once again a British politician was attempting to invoke a racially-constructed sense of Britain, for there was no doubt that the ‘swamping’ cultures she was referring to were colour-coded. In the wake of the Falklands War, her victory address at Cheltenham on 3 July 1982 further clarified her imperial mindset:

We have learned something about ourselves, a lesson which we desperately need to learn. When we started out, there were the waverers and the fainthearts ... the people who thought we could no longer do the great things which we once did ... that we could never again be what we were. There were those who would not admit it ... But - in their heart of hearts - they too had their secret fears that it was true: that Britain was no longer the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world. Well, they were wrong.

This was not a comfortable speech for many Britons to listen to. For Britons, such as I, whose heritage was blighted by the inequities and cruelties of Empire, this was a disgraceful speech, and one which served only to remind us of our tenuous position in British society.

Mrs Thatcher’s Britain was invested in images of Britain as a colonial power - ‘Put the “Great” back into Great Britain again’ was a popular Tory Party campaign slogan. However, alongside her desire to evoke an imperial past, Mrs Thatcher was also interested in hurrying the demise of the ‘well-born’ as a ruling force in British society. The self-made businessman, the upwardly mobile person who has no time for patrician codes of behaviour, or blue-veined privilege, or bumbling one-party Toryism, this would be the type of Conservative who would win favour under Mrs Thatcher. Her desire to modernize the nation by dismantling the Welfare State and selling off state-owned industry, meant that economic considerations began to play a large part in Mrs Thatcher’s perception of who and what was British and patriotic. And, ironically enough, despite her imperial sensibility, it was Mrs Thatcher who eventually took the first real step in moving Britain away from a primarily racially-constructed definition of British nationality and belonging.

In 1983 the Conservative Government produced an election poster which featured a full-page advertisement of a nattily dressed young black man in a suit, with his arms folded, and staring confidently into the lens of the
camera. The slogan beneath it read, 'Labour says he's black, Tories say he's British'. Suddenly there were to be acceptable 'aliens', such as profitable Asian businessmen and upwardly mobile black men in suits, which meant that there would also be unacceptable 'aliens', presumably those who still had the temerity to go to the mosque, or wear dreadlocks. However, Mrs Thatcher's new idea of British nationality, with its dependency on economic virility and on codes of behaviour, was clearly to be culturally and not racially constructed. Her new nation of hard-working, ordinary people, who were being encouraged to forget their 'place' and 'make it' in what she called her 'property-owning democracy', was to include non-white Britons for Mrs Thatcher was more invested in the realpolitik of the city than she was in the racism of her home counties electorate.

During the eighties, television stations and local councils began appointing executives whose special duty was to cater to this newly-recognized, and now to be tolerated, constituency of non-white British citizens. It was during this decade that the first black members of parliament were elected, and non-white faces began to play for and even captain national sports teams. In music and fashion, black became synonymous with style, and although the racism which had greeted the pioneer generation of Caribbean migrants still existed, it was impossible not to recognize that for the black British community things had changed for the better. Mrs Thatcher still continued to identify enemies within – the IRA, the 'Loony Left', Scroungers, Do-Gooders, and Trade Unions – but even as she rewarded the working classes with neo-Georgian doors, double-glazing, and carriage clocks with which they might adorn their newly purchased council flats and houses, Mrs Thatcher was also creating a space for the black community in Britain to begin to come of age.

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So fifty years after the S.S. Empire Windrush unloaded 492 Jamaicans at Tilbury docks, what kind of society do we have in Britain today? Most would probably claim that we have a multicultural society, but do so without stopping to think about what they really mean by multicultural. The word can, of course, refer to a society that is composed of many different cultures all living side by side. Or it can refer to a society whose common culture is composed of an amalgam of the interests and origins of its constituent members. The first alternative, while implying a healthy respect for the cultures of different people, can never really work. In such societies there will always be one dominant culture, and a hotchpotch of others which are, by definition, lesser; cultures which will be merely tolerated until some parent leads a boycott against the local school because it encourages its children to recognize divali; or until some police cadet finally sniggers out loud when being shown how the Sikh community tie their turbans.
A truly multicultural society is one which is composed of multicultural individuals; people who are able to synthesize different worlds in one body, and to live comfortably with these different worlds. In order for a society to tolerate such individuals, the society must by definition be open, fluid, and confident. In other words, the society must be everything that Britain was not when the first Caribbean migrants stepped off the ships in the forties and fifties. This pioneer generation met a Britain that was no longer sure of herself, a Britain which sought to define herself by strategies of exclusion, a Britain fearful of her shrinking role in the world. Should these same Caribbean migrants step from the trans-Atlantic ships today they would meet a different Britain in which a government who would discuss using ‘Keep Britain White’ as an electoral slogan could never hope to be elected, and would probably be violating the law of the land. While things are still far from perfect, and while Stephen Lawrence’s killers still walk free, and while we still endure huge under-representation in government, in the city, in the universities, in all spheres of power in this country, then the dream which those pioneer Caribbean migrants carried in their hearts will have to be deferred. However, there is no doubt that in the past fifty years Britain has changed, and it has changed radically.

Most Britons are no longer interested in the aimless navel-gazing of a George Orwell. And those who persist in defining British nationality in terms of race must become terribly confused when Paul Ince leads out the England soccer team, or Linford Christie does a lap of honour draped in the Union Jack. Young British people, both black and white, are these days increasingly invested in ethnicity as a signifier of their identity rather than crude notions of race. They are able to synthesize Wordsworth with Jamaican patties, or Romeo and Juliet with the music of Bob Marley, and happily many of the pioneer generation who stepped from the ships in the forties and fifties have lived long enough to see these changes. This pioneer generation should take heart in their achievement, for the reimagining of Britain is the logical extension of their arrival in the country. Because they refused to be beaten into submission by a country which patently had no desire to welcome them, and because they refused to conveniently disappear or slope off back to where they came from, British concern with a continuous past, with fixity, with a racially conscious rigidity, is these days playing an increasingly small part in how the nation thinks of itself.

So how should we ‘ethnically’ define ourselves as a nation? A synthesis of Indian takeaways, baked beans, soccer, Jamaican patties, St. Patrick’s Day, pub on Saturday, Notting Hill Carnival, church on Sunday, Mosque on Friday, and fish and chips? I say emphatically, yes. The inability to achieve proper closure around an ethnically defined concept of nation will inevitably

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cause more closed-minded citizens some problems. But better an open, fluid definition of nationality tied to ethnicity than a return to a situation where race and nation are perceived of as being synonymous. Should this happen then we will once again find ourselves surrounded by people such as Norman Tebbit, the former chairman of the Conservative party, who like some inept number eleven batsman will insist on occasionally slouching out of the pavilion. In November 1997 he stood up in the House of Lords and said that ‘different cultures will splinter our society’. And of course, being staunchly of the old school, by different cultures he meant different races. A day or so later the Daily Telegraph felt it necessary to admonish one of their own. ‘Norman Tebbit was not quite right about multiculturalism ... A child with a Welsh father and a mother from Ulster can eat Indian food, listen to reggae, and watch Italian football without experiencing cultural confusion and political alienation’. Precisely.

I would argue that whereas George Orwell claimed that, ‘It needs some very great disaster, such as prolonged subjugation by a foreign enemy, to destroy a national culture’, the truth is that it needs some very great fortune such as continual waves of immigration to create a national culture. And one of the most important waves of migration in the second half of the twentieth century has been the arrival of Caribbean migrants to Britain after the Second World War. Not only did they help to rebuild Britain with their labour, they made Britain think beyond Derby Day, Wensleydale Cheese, and the Boat Race as signifiers of national identity. As a nation we are now reluctantly post-colonial, but stubbornly pre-European. While it was the pioneer generation of Caribbean migrants who helped to introduce Britain to the notion of post-coloniality, it is their children’s and grandchildren’s generation who will help Britain cross the Rubicon of the English Channel and enter the European age of the twenty-first century. But this will be a different story. Fifty years ago the S.S. Empire Windrush dropped anchor at Tilbury docks and discharged 492 Jamaicans. It is these individuals, and the quarter of a million who succeeded them, who deserve our acknowledgement, respect and gratitude for as they stood on the deck of the ship and stared out at the white cliffs of Dover, they carried within their hearts a dream. And like all great pioneers, in the face of great adversity and innumerable obstacles, they remained true to their dream. Without them this country would be a poorer place. Without them I would not be on this platform. I stand here on their shoulders.
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