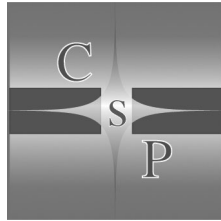


Diasporic Literature and Theory – Where Now?

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Edited by

Mark Shackleton



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INTRODUCTION

MARK SHACKLETON

The theoretical innovations of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, James Clifford and others have in recent years vitalized postcolonial and diaspora studies, challenging ways in which we understand ‘culture’ and developing new ways of thinking beyond the confines of the nation state. The notion of diaspora in particular has been productive in its attention to the real-life movement of peoples throughout the world, whether these migrations have been through choice or compulsion. But perhaps of even greater significance to postcolonial theory has been the consideration of the epistemological implications of the term – diaspora as theory. Such studies see migrancy in terms of adaptation and construction – adaptation to changes, dislocations and transformations, and the construction of new forms of knowledge and ways of seeing the world. These “mutual transformations”, as Leela Gandhi has called them,¹ affected colonizer and colonized, migrants as well as indigenous populations, victims and victimizers.

The articles in this volume look at recent developments in diaspora literature and theory, alluding to the work of seminal theoreticians like Fanon, Bhabha and Gilroy, but also interrogate such thinkers in the light of recent cultural production (including literature, film and visual art) as well as recent world events.

The first pair of articles considers the key issue of utopianism and its reverse, melancholia, in diaspora theory. Terms like ‘diaspora’, ‘hybridity’, ‘postnationalism’, particularly as they appear in the writings of Homi Bhabha, have been critiqued for their euphoric overtones which, critics argue, ignore the sufferings of the underprivileged and do not pay sufficient attention to historical, geographical and political contexts.² In his opening article, John McLeod takes as his point of departure a recent essay on Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* which sees it as a positive instance of freedom from the past, unlike the work of Caryl Phillips which, according to the critic, is imprisoned by the past and out of step with the multicultural flux of the present. Challenging this view, McLeod argues that not only is Smith concerned with the effect of the past on the present,

but that Phillips's work exhibits a "progressive utopianism" that although acknowledging the continued presence of the racist past, nevertheless posits a qualified optimism found in the tender interracial encounters of often marginalized people. McLeod's article also addresses Paul Gilroy's recent work *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004). Although Gilroy avoids the critique that Benita Parry levels at Bhabha – that he privileges bourgeois representations – nevertheless for McLeod Gilroy's vision of a convivial multicultural Britain is both too hopeful and too generalizing, and he sees in Phillips both a more accurate and a more sensitive reading of British multicultural realities.

Eleanor Byrne's article traces the themes of melancholia and impasse in postcolonial and diaspora theory. In part this sense of melancholia would appear to arise from the lack of legitimation many privileged postcolonial academics feel about their role as commentators on the Third World or as effectors of political change. On the other hand, a sense of impasse, of blocked movement, of the impossibility of logic, is understood by deconstructionists in the field as inherent in human thought, and in the human condition. Melancholia in postcolonial psychoanalytic thinking is linked to mourning, a shuttling to and fro between the past and the present. But the paradox of attempting to both remember and forget the traumatic past is not necessarily negative, as it proves to be the source of creative possibility in the key postcolonial work of Joseph Conrad, J.M. Coetzee, Jean Rhys and others. Paul Gilroy in *After Empire* contrasts melancholic Englishness, morbidly obsessed with loss of Empire, with the convivial joyfulness associated with cultural diversity of British youth culture. Gilroy adopts a Freudian stance in arguing that melancholic ghosts can be exorcised, which puts him out of step with most postcolonial theorizing on melancholia in which the ghosts of the past continue to make their presence felt.

The second pairing analyses and interrogates canon formation in the field of Anglophone postcolonial and diaspora studies in Europe and North America. Now that postcolonial writing would appear to have become institutionalized in the Western academe, what kind of world is represented by these newly-formed canons? As a result of its apparent absorption into institutional frameworks, has such writing ceased to provide political critique? What is represented and what is excluded by such canons; do they inevitably reflect a Western and male bias? Jopi Nyman's article provides a pilot survey analysing the content of twenty university-level introductory courses to postcolonial literature, primarily in the United States, and he also alludes to similar surveys investigating European universities in the late 80s and Canadian universities in the early

90s. Nyman's study revealingly shows evidence of 'hypercanonization' with the repeated appearance of certain writers (e.g. Achebe, Dangarembga) on course lists. African and Caribbean writers are most likely to be represented, though the influence of diaspora theory is shown in the increased representation of contemporary Transcultural writing. Overall, Nyman's survey suggests that the Western academy has established a conservative canon of post-colonial literature, one which foregrounds established postcolonial writers or those who rewrite (and hence reinforce) the Western canon. As such, the project of postcolonial writing to repudiate what is understood to be canonical by presenting non-Western alternative literatures is not exemplified in practice in Western universities.

Sandra Courtman's article explores the reasons for the invisibility and lack of critical attention received by West Indian women writers between the post-war years and the 1970s. In these years the early canon of black British writing is dominated by Caribbean male novelists, British publishers particularly favouring migration or "final passage" novels, exemplified in the work of Sam Selvon, George Lamming and Kamau Brathwaite. Courtman points out that the preferred genre for many West Indian women was autobiography rather than fiction, and the publication of the lives of unknown writers received little support from British publishers. Nor did West Indian woman's writing receive much support from more established male Caribbean writers. The case of white West Indian (Creole) women writers is also illustrative of the way powerful voices can go unheard. Works painfully exploring the "terrified consciousness" of white settler families, as in the writing of Jean Rhys, Lucille Iremonger and Rosalind Ashe, were often overlooked in the post-independent period when 'authentic' black experience was sought. Courtman's article demonstrates how publishers, readers' expectations, social climate, gender and class are all factors which influence the construction of postcolonial canons.

The next section, "Diasporas of Violence and Terror", concerns a theme of increasing relevance in the post 9/11 world, but as Neelam Srivastava's article shows, the ethical question of the use of violence is central to postcolonial liberation struggles in the twentieth century. Whereas both Mahatma Gandhi and Frantz Fanon saw the refashioning of the self as a vital part of their political decolonization programmes, they disagreed about the role that violence played in that refashioning: Gandhi famously advocates non-violence in India, whereas Fanon, based on his knowledge of the liberation struggle in Algeria, sees violence as a strategic necessity in conditions of oppression. After surveying writings on violence

by Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt, Srivastava discusses Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* (1938) and the anti-colonial films of Gillo Pontecorvo in the 60s, to illustrate how they are influenced by the ideas of Gandhi and Fanon respectively. Srivastava shows how violence acquires an ethical stance in situations of colonial and neo-colonial conflict in the twentieth century, though it remains an open question whether one can truly distinguish between revolutionary 'cleansing' violence and the perpetuation of colonial violence in postcolonial forms.

Stephen Morton's article particularizes the issues of state and individual violence through his analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Fury* (2001). In terms of state violence, *Fury* can be placed within the frame of twentieth-century Anti-Americanism and U.S. imperialism and the culminating counter-attack of 9/11. Violence and fury have moral, political and psychological histories, and anger can be seen, on both the state and the individual level, as an attempt to redress injustice. But as the novel explores, such fury is not without its ironies. Professor Malik Solanka, Rushdie's protagonist, illustrates the dilemma of the diasporic subject in a U.S.-dominated world, for Solanka's anger at U.S. foreign policy is in direct conflict with his desire to migrate to America. Morton points out in conclusion that a similar dilemma faces the Third World writer (and we can arguably include Rushdie here) who wishes to condemn political oppression in the Third World and at the same time be non-aligned with the First World in an age of American imperialism.

Part 4 analyses time, place and 'home', all notions that have been frequently invoked and discussed in diaspora studies. Sandra Ponzanesi reads Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* in the light of recent diaspora theory, in particular the seminal work of Avtar Brah and Paul Gilroy. Brah's notion that diasporic belonging is more a question of performance than a stable fixed entity is illustrated in the novel by four characters who perform themselves through narration, memory and forgetting. The setting of a ruined villa in the aftermath of war is a diaspora space, a no-man's land, where 'real histories', and national identifications are revealed to be unreliable or irrelevant. In Ponzanesi's reading the novel's world is one in which time is rhizomatic, difficult to grasp, contain or fix. The narrative functions to spacialize time and temporalize space, consequently foregrounding the notions of deterritorialization, uprooting and displacement. 'Home' is not an actual place, but a space one invents for oneself. To some extent *The English Patient* illustrates Gilroy's understanding of diaspora as subversive, a force which undermines the monolithic power of the nation state and

creates bonds between diverse identities, although overall Ondaatje's vision is less celebratory and more qualified than Gilroy's.

Pascal Zinck's article "Kazuo Ishiguro's Otherhood" similarly questions, subverts and ironizes fixed notions of home and identity. Like Ondaatje, the complex displacements and deterritorializations in Ishiguro's own personal history are reflected in the texture and themes of his writing. In Zinck's analysis Ishiguro's work are "retrofictions" in which the past is an imaginary homeland, and the present is a foreign country. The dominant motifs of his work are otherness, smokescreens, hoaxes, mimicry and camouflage. Zinck in particular traces the theme of orphanhood in Ishiguro's work, demonstrating the way his protagonists have borrowed selves, undefined identities and constructed, often highly fictionalized, versions of 'home' and 'nation'. Even more than Ondaatje, Ishiguro's work is a direct challenge to the celebratory hybridity of Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy.

The final section, "Border Crossings", looks primarily at the ideological and conceptual aspects of diaspora rather than focusing on geographical and physical migration. Asta Kuusinen's article investigates the notion of border in two Chicana photographic artists, Laura Aguilar and Kathy Vargas. Taking Gloria Anzaldúa's highly influential *Borderlands/La Frontera* as her starting point, Kuusinen points to the significance of personal and shared pain, the body as 'border', specific geographical and psychological contextualizations, and the contribution of Chicana artists to Anzaldúan and post-Anzaldúan border theory. Aguilar's images of the female form, black, white and Chicana, deconstruct racial hierarchies and question heteronormative practices, while Vargas's representations of the Alamo bring together the personal and the historical. More cerebral than corporeal, Vargas's Alamo works directly contest the dominant culture's investment in coherence and national unity by displaying a class-based affinity with a most unlikely idol – Ozzy Osbourne.

The concluding article by Mark Shackleton explores the trickster figure in Native North American, African-American, Caribbean, Maori and African writing. As a world-wide cultural symbol associated with marginality and border existence, the very ambiguity and indeterminacy of the trickster figure has been a fertile source of creative possibility. In the work of Gerald Vizenor (Anishinabe) the trickster challenges "terminal creeds", that is fixed and deadly notions, and by continuously avoiding stereotyping keeps notions of 'Nativity' complex and flexible. The article also explores the spider trickster Anansi in Caribbean writing. Anansi can be seen as a symbol of diaspora, sharing links with West

African cultural roots, but undergoing transformations in the cross-Atlantic passage. The transformations of the Nigerian trickster Eshu and his re-emergence in Caribbean and African-American culture and writing are similarly discussed. Both traditional and postmodern, culturally conservative and taboo breaking, a symbol of continuity and of resistance, the trickster figure forbids closure, and does what this volume intends to do – to keep the field of diaspora studies open.

Notes

¹ See Leela Ghandi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 129-35.

² See, for example, Benita Parry's critique of Homi Bhabha in *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

PART 1:

**CELEBRATION OR MELANCHOLY?
DIASPORA LITERATURE AND THEORY
TODAY**

CHAPTER ONE

DIASPORA AND UTOPIA: READING THE RECENT WORK OF PAUL GILROY AND CARYL PHILLIPS

JOHN MCLEOD

In a recent essay regarding the representation of multicultural identities in the novels of Zadie Smith, Jonathan P. A. Sell offers a particularly illuminating yet questionable vision of contemporary multicultural writing as suggesting new models of identity and history where the protocols of the past no longer impinge upon the present. He argues that Smith's novels depict a stubbornly contemporary milieu into which history happily can no longer reach:

[Smith's] metaphysic of flux means that we can only get a rapid fix on the fleeting here and now. In this respect she represents a break from the traditional retrospection of postcolonial writers: what's past is a prologue, an attachment to the present which, like a mooring post, can be slipped. By slipping the bonds of causality, by emancipating herself from historical determinism, and by fixing her eyes on the present, Smith is able to inscribe identities which are no longer hung-up on historical injustices or immersed in sombre, unproductive introspection. As such she forms part of a multicultural generation and offers a more positive model of identity.¹

There is much which is questionable in this statement, which, to my mind, certainly misrepresents the purview of Smith's work (*White Teeth* actually emphasizes the unpredictable unbreakability of past and present while acknowledging the inevitability of change). Sell's comments on retrospection and introspection are particularly alarming. Earlier in his essay, he suggests that Caryl Phillips's writing (specifically his 1997 novel *The Nature of Blood*) is exemplary of sombre retrospection, where readers allegedly discover a rigid, essentialized model of identity imprisoned by the past and out of step with the multicultural flux of the present: "Phillips's project seems to be to derive some universal human essence,

extracted from some common past experience (diaspora, writ small as domestic abandonment), which may serve as the basis for a better future".² It seems from these two quotations that 'postcolonial' and 'diaspora' are inevitably freighted with the gloom and turmoil of insoluble and enduring prejudices. Hence, Sell's argument seductively suggests that in reaching for the rhetoric of multiculturalism, the residual problems of the past cheerfully vanish and cultural history can be rewritten. Under this new rubric, selected writers once identified with both postcolonial and diaspora representations (and the historical consciousness linked to both) are now welcomed to the multicultural festivities having undergone something of a conceptual refit: "Rushdie's early novels are already ridding themselves of colonial bugbears and prophesy the future achievement of a seamless multiculturalism. It is novelists like Smith who deliver Rushdie's future in their realistic view of present-day multicultural identity".³ Those postcolonial and diaspora writers who are less willing to believe that the past is fully over in the present remain locked outside of the multicultural party, determined like Caryl Phillips to pursue "lachrymose marginalia to the tragedies of history's defunct".⁴ Forget diasporic consciousness, and embrace the multicultural metaphysics of flux – so goes one recent critical trend.

Sell's utopian endorsement of multiculturalism in opposition to the alleged problems of the postcolonial and diaspora, despite appearing salutary and committed to a democratic sense of self and society, offers us no chance to address the inconvenient ways in which the past remains absolutely enmeshed in the problems of the present. As we shall see also in the recent work of Paul Gilroy, there are problems in placing one's faith purely in cultural endeavours, often not fully understood, as an index of or blueprint for predictable social transformation. In this essay, and in contradistinction to Sell's views, I shall explore how an engagement with the sombre histories of race, colonialism and diaspora may help negotiate a different kind of utopian vision – one which I shall call 'progressive utopianism' – that is mindful of the presence of the past while offering a tentative, hopeful and non-idealized illustration of diaspora ethics which are linked to (following de Certeau) the practices of everyday life. I shall first critique Paul Gilroy's influential thinking, which also, to my mind, is centrally concerned with opening a transfigurative, utopian vision of a changed world based upon an enthusiastic misreading of contemporary multicultural opportunities and nationalist problems, before turning briefly to the fiction of Caryl Phillips, in whose work we might find a progressively utopian vision of contemporary realities. In so doing, I want ultimately to challenge the narrowness and bluster of Sell's hyperventilated

dismissal of postcolonial and diaspora thought created by his amorous engagement with the gleeful flux of the multicultural.

As James Procter writes, “‘diaspora’ can appear both as naming a *geographical* phenomenon – the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group – as well as a *theoretical* concept: a way of thinking, or of representing the world”.⁵ It is this latter epistemological sense of the term which demands that issues of diasporic imagination and representation are germane to everyone, rather than exclusively migrant-descended or ‘minority’ communities. As Avtar Brah has written, both the material and the imaginative spaces of diaspora demand the attention and participation of those who “are constructed and represented as indigenous”.⁶ Such imaginative possibilities can be fed back into the social and material environments of community and society as tentative utopian designs for progressive social transformation in which the border logic of race and illiberal nationalism is superseded by the common recognition of political and ethical equality.

Most prevailing critiques of diasporic thought tend to focus on its culturalist inflection, as well as its alleged privileging of exceptional cosmopolitan or bourgeois representations of migration and settlement which do not capture unequal material conditions. Benita Parry’s work represents some of the most eloquent and forceful thinking along these lines. As she claims:

those infatuated by the liberatory effects of dispersion do not address the material and existential conditions of the relocated communities which include economic migrants, undocumented immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and victims of ethnic cleansing, and whose mobility, far from being an elective ethical practice, is coerced.⁷

Hence, her critique of Homi K. Bhabha’s famous advocacy of migrant and diasporic thought concerns Bhabha’s alleged privileging of the experiences and vistas of “the cosmopolitan artist, writer, intellectual, professional, financier and entrepreneur in the metropolis, rather than the ‘grim prose’ of low-waged workers in western capitals” and other such subaltern figures.⁸ Conceived of in this way, the utopianism of diasporic representations can never progressively contribute to social transformation as it remains detached from and blissfully unaware of the material world. In pursuing this line of thought, Parry is in danger of devaluing or jettisoning new modes of innovative thought which may not be as remote from the “grim prose” of the subaltern lives with which she is concerned. But she is correct to demand a better engagement on the part of

intellectuals with what we might call the vernacular, rather than cosmopolitan, lives of the majority of diasporic peoples.

Perhaps heeding Parry's warning, Paul Gilroy's *After Empire* (2004) is very keen to attend to vernacular life in its attempt to relaunch a post-nationalist mode of thinking which is built upon the seemingly convivial encounters of (in this instance) England's major popular cultural environments (music, nightlife, television, etc.). Gilroy responds to the events of 11 September 2001 and its aftermath by reinforcing his well-known advocacy of a post-national, anti-racial cultural politics which – as demonstrated previously in his seminal works *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack'* (1987), *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and *Between Camps* (2000) – is built from a distinctly diasporic and transnational rescripting of received notions of identity and belonging. In the current gloomy and unstable climate of the twenty-first century, argues Gilroy, the illiberal discourses of race and nation appear even more attractive as ways of making sense of a changing and unstable cultural, social and political milieu. "State-sponsored patriotism and ethnic-absolutism are now dominant", warns Gilroy, "and nationalism has been reconstituted to fit new social and geo-political circumstances in which the larger West and our own local part of it are again under siege".⁹ In exploring how diaspora cultures in the West convivially broker new youthful modes of culture and identification which reach beyond race and nationalism, and in pitting them against the neonationalist and racializing technologies of the contemporary Western states bent on a war against terror, Gilroy rightly reminds us of one of diaspora's most significant resources: a sense of hope, which he describes (*apropos* a discussion of Fanon) as "that diminishing and invaluable commodity".¹⁰ Indeed, Gilroy's body of work may be understood as distinctly diasporic in temperament as well as intellectual in character in its determinedly hopeful investment in contemporary youth cultures. These cultures, inclusive of many different kinds of people, are seen as making possible casual and vernacular political possibilities which challenge the formal protocols of state authority.

That said, Gilroy's intellectually rich thought is ironically problematized by this laudably hopeful vista, which at times clouds his readings of conviviality and can lead to a rather presumptuous engagement with popular culture. Put simply, some of the activities about which he writes may be less hopeful than he claims. His theoretical commitment to post-national and post-racial *modus operandi* – where itinerancy, temporariness, and plurality are ethically unquestionable – limits his ability to understand the possibilities and problems of different kinds of

vernacular creativity. This leads, on the one hand, to some rather large claims being made for popular cultural endeavours, and, on the other, to an unsubtle dismissal of other vernacular cultural forms which are considered as conceptually dubious. For example, and firstly, Gilroy's enjoyable advocacy in *After Empire* of the white British rapper Mike Skinner of The Streets makes much of the alleged emergent England which his lyrics call to popular attention:

These wittily delivered vernacular pronouncements were aimed toward the establishment of more modest and more explicitly democratic specifications of a revised national identity [...]. Racial difference is not feared. Exposure to it is not ethnic jeopardy but rather an unremarkable principle of metropolitan life. Race is essentially insignificant, at least when compared either to the hazards involved in urban survival or to the desperate pleasures of the postcolonial city: "sex and drugs on the dole."¹¹

Gilroy is writing these sentences in 2004. But by 2006 Skinner's lyrical explorations have shifted from the everyday realities of scratching a living in the postcolonial city to the price and pleasures of his new-found pop fame: designer drugs, rehab chic, and the perils of dating celebrities while inspired by Neil Strauss's bible for picking up women, *The Game* (2005). Whereas Skinner appears huddled in a bus shelter on the cover of the 2004 The Streets album *A Grand Don't Come for Free*, the cover of 2006's *The Hardest Way to Make an Easy Living* depicts him standing by a vintage Rolls Royce and sporting designer trainers – hardly popular possessions, of course. The contrast between the different kinds of transport conjured here (the humdrum bus, the flash car) reveals much about Skinner's changing relationship with the vernacular life of the streets.

My point is not to mock Skinner's new-found pop fame or his honest attempts to write about the world of celebrity where he has subsequently found himself (all pop musicians live in constant danger of being seen to have 'sold out'). Rather, we might question the longevity and tangible impact of the "revised national identity" which his music allegedly heralds. Has any such new and unremarkable vision of urban ethnic heterogeneity effected transformative lasting change, however microcosmic? Or has its existence been as temporary as Skinner's attention to the lives of those who know only the city's humdrum streets? How do we quantify and protect the agency of such popular cultural endeavours? The transformative possibilities which Gilroy links to The Streets's music may exist more in hope than in expectation or reality. Just as Gilroy's brilliant exploration of the 1970s anti-racist initiative Rock Against Racism ultimately cannot account for the rise of Thatcherism and

the shift to the right in UK politics in the 1980s,¹² so too does his championing of many twenty-first century popular cultural endeavours too keenly discover, and make major claims for, a transfigurative political agency which has either failed to materialize or is too temporary to effect a significant impact.

Secondly, Gilroy's rather unsubtle dismissal of those cultural endeavours which appear conceptually bankrupt – and hence, to his mind, inevitably politically suspect – can be gauged by his curious encounter with English football. In a section of *After Empire* subtitled “Two World Wars and One World Cup”, Gilroy reads this once-common chant of the England football team's hooligan supporters – which dovetails and celebrates England's defeat of West Germany in the 1966 World Cup final with the twentieth century's World Wars – as evidence of, variously, Britain's (not just England's) postcolonial melancholia, unable to accept the decline of Empire and status; the insolubility of older class-based forms of politics and identity; the fraternal solidarities built through the equation of war and sport; and the persistence of popular nationalist and racist modes of thought. Given the global commodification and aggressive marketing of football, with teams featuring rootless millionaires playing for wages rather than local pride or identity, Gilroy wonders if it may take “the formation of a pan-European super league to consolidate a new set of regional ties and translocal loyalties that could make the option of absolute ethnicity less attractive than it appears to be at the present. [...] Meanwhile, the dead weight of a corrosive class culture and regional differences within the country prevent the decomposing game from reinventing itself”.¹³ If we require evidence of fraternal, illiberal nationalist sentiments, and wish to discover a residual England stuck in older class-based conflicts, it seems that all we need to do is go to a football match.

Gilroy's dovetailing of the national football team's hooligan following with English football *in general*, regardless of regional variation, translates the exceptional into the universal. Yet, if we briefly think about football culture in more detail, and consider the game's regional locations outside of the hooligan confines of England's infamous supporters, we may discover entirely different examples of vernacular invention which knowingly and ironically mobilize seemingly nationalist mantras for the express purposes of challenging precisely the kind of moronic nationalism which Gilroy rightly deplores. Arguably, and by no means universally, watching football today is one popular cultural environment where older racial, national and class protocols are deliberately dispensed with. ‘Regional’ football clubs like Liverpool and Manchester United attract a

heterogeneous body of support which has no problems accommodating transnational *and* localized affinities, and where any distinctly nationalist tendencies compete within a spectrum of non-competing loyalties. Indeed, at English football grounds it is not uncommon to find groups of supporters deliberately challenging with their chants the recidivist nationalist sentiments which have gathered around the England football team and its hooligan support.

For example, following his ignoble sending off when England played Argentina in 1998's World Cup finals in France, the iconic figure of David Beckham was held solely responsible by the mass media, by many England fans, and by lots of English folk who ordinarily cared little for the national game, for their country's defeat which ended England's participation in the competition. Effigies of Beckham were even burned outside of West Ham United's football ground in East London prior to the start of the 1998/99 English Premier League season. But during his first few games for his (then) club Manchester United, the United fans continuously chanted "Argentina" to the mystification and occasional distress of other clubs' supporters; primarily as a way of backing their beloved player, but also as a means of succinctly but surely mocking the absurd hysteria of the English who were happy to blame Beckham for what was considered almost a treasonable assault on the very soul of the nation itself. The United supporters mischievously borrowed an alternative national signifier, to which they had no particular affinities, in order ironically to challenge the popular nationalist advocacy of a proud and wounded England. The coincidence of England's 1998 footballing victors and the nation against which Britain fought a territorial war concerning the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in 1982, brought to the chant a further political edge and significance: in many ways, in happily chanting "Argentina" the United supporters mounted a radical vernacular challenge to a chilling genealogy of state-endorsed popular nationalism – in which a line of descent can be traced from Thatcher's pro-British neo-colonial Falklands War to the 'pride' of England's hooligan supporters, and which no doubt engendered Gilroy's frightening experience of himself and others "run[nin]g for our lives from vicious drunken crowds intent on a different, bloodier sport than the one they paid to see on the terraces".¹⁴ This determined terrace-taught resistance to English nationalism has lasted longer than the pluralizing effects of The Streets's album. The dissenting, daring recitation of "Argentina" has been kept alive by the United supporters' cheering of the club's Argentinian striker Carlos Tevez; while England's predictable exit from the 2006 World Cup Finals is often celebrated in the United fans' song concerning the young Portuguese

striker Cristiano Ronaldo who, like Beckham before him, was held responsible for England's demise in that year's competition for seeming to cause the dismissal of the latest English footballing hero (and Ronaldo's United team mate) Wayne Rooney. In their chant about "that boy Ronaldo", the supporters of England's largest, richest and possibly most famous club rhetorically soil the pristine white shirts of the England team with delightfully excremental vocabulary, and once again deliberately revel in the nation's sporting failures.¹⁵

My general point, then, is that Gilroy's tempting models of utopian diasporic transformation are perhaps more wishful and idealized than they might first appear. Pop music is more than The Streets; England's diverse football supporters do not necessarily support England or its hooligans' illiberal nationalism. In creating a scenario where an apparently nationalist vernacular group assembled on the football terraces is contrasted with the blasé multiculturalism discovered through popular music and in its concomitant nightclubs, Gilroy traffics too freely in clichés of cultural affiliation, and to my mind he risks imposing political agendas upon seemingly dissimilar cultural milieus which may not be supported by the practices of everyday life which one discovers there. In other words, the admirable utopian principles of his work – equality, democracy, and freedom beyond the illiberalism of race and nation – at times divert him from a consideration of the ways in which the realities of contemporary Britain simply do not fit his schema. Gilroy's vision of a convivial multicultural Britain, resourced by its diasporic condition, demands our assent; and as a utopian political goal it is worthy of support. But as an evaluative tool of contemporary British multiculturalism, it seems worryingly inaccurate and unplugged from the realities of vernacular cultural life.

A richer, better informed, and more sensitive vision of England's multicultural realities can be found in the recent writing of Caryl Phillips, whose fiction, despite its predominately still and sobering tone, provides a more considered illustration of a progressively utopian milieu. Surprisingly perhaps, Phillips's writing restlessly exposes and imagines many vital, important, and hopeful possibilities which constitute an ethical *demand* for change. Rather than mistake the sights and sounds of multiculturalism, convivial or otherwise, as evidence of achievement, Phillips looks to the business of everyday life for the principles of a truly progressive and transformative prospect. Organized into five sections, and moving unexpectedly across time and location, his recent novel *A Distant Shore* (2003) primarily juxtaposes the stories of Dorothy Jones, a retired music teacher who has just moved to a new housing development

somewhere in the north of England, and Solomon, a refugee from Africa who has been forced to flee his native country due to the political situation there and has endured a difficult crossing from Africa to Europe as an illegal immigrant. Originally called Gabriel, he too has ended up in Stoneleigh far from friends and family: while Dorothy has lost her sister to cancer and her husband to another woman, Gabriel/Solomon has witnessed the murder of his family by Government soldiers and has endured the death of several of his friends as he has journeyed to Stoneleigh, where he works as a caretaker-cum-security man. The lives of these two characters hardly touch: their friendship is brief and revolves mostly around the trips which Dorothy takes to town in Gabriel/Solomon's car, and any developing relationship between them is cut short when Gabriel/Solomon is murdered by local white youths and dumped in the local canal. Dorothy ends the novel silently in what appears to be a mental institution. "I had a feeling that Solomon understood me" (312), she remarks in the closing page of the novel, but such an understanding has not been able to blossom. Instead, in juxtaposing their narratives of how each figure ended up in Stoneleigh, Phillips leaves the reader with the task of considering the possible points of contact and connection between each troubled figure which open up across the seemingly impermeable borders of class, race, gender and nation.

The novel's engagement with issues of national identity and belonging in a multicultural frame is begun in the novel's opening lines, narrated by Dorothy, in which the familiar parameters of nation, place and belonging are both established and confounded: "England has changed. These days it's difficult to tell who's from around here and who's not. Who belongs and who's a stranger. It's disturbing. It doesn't feel right" (3). It is tempting, perhaps, to regard this statement as a more modest companion piece to the vision of Smith's *White Teeth*, which may also seem like a novel about a changed place and the process of change itself. Yet as Dorothy's narrative proceeds, it soon appears that actually not a lot has changed in England, and the contemporary confusion about nation, place and belonging is nothing new at all. Dorothy's deceased father, a war veteran and sinister patriarch, did not like travelling outside of England and had a problem with outsiders: Dorothy recalls him "bemoaning the fact that we were giving up our English birthright and getting lost in a United States of Europe" (27). He was also racist: Dorothy remembers that for her father "being English meant no coloureds" (42) and that "he regarded coloureds as a challenge to our English identity" (42). Dorothy has a brief sexual relationship with a local newsagent, Mahmood, who has moved north and changed professions partly to escape the misery of

working in Indian restaurants, where he has become sick of the sight of “fat-bellied Englishmen and their slatterns rolling into The Khyber Pass [restaurant] after the pubs had closed, calling him Ranjit or Baboo or Swamp Boy, and using poppadoms as Frisbees, and demanding lager, and vomiting in his sinks, and threatening him with his own knives and their beery breath [...]” (202). When Dorothy’s sister, Sheila, is assaulted in London, she refuses to press charges against her black attacker due to the violent treatment she presumes he will receive at the hands of the Metropolitan Police.

And there is the nature of Gabriel/Solomon’s murder itself – chased by racists and dumped in a canal by The Waterman’s Arms pub – which recalls another infamous death in the north of England. In May 1969, the bruised body of a Nigerian migrant, David Oluwale, was recovered from the River Aire in Leeds, in the north of England. Two members of the Leeds City Police, Ken Kitching and Geoff Ellerker, later stood trial for the manslaughter of Oluwale in 1971. These charges were dropped due to lack of evidence, but both men were convicted and imprisoned for assaulting Oluwale in the final months of his life.¹⁶ Although in *A Distant Shore* Gabriel/Solomon’s killers are not policemen and they are ultimately convicted, the death of Oluwale certainly echoes in the representation of Phillips’s character’s demise – Phillips would have been eleven years old and living in Leeds at the time of the death, and his latest book, *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007) contains a long essay on Oluwale. Finally, *A Distant Shore* also reminds us that, away from England, some of the same old myths of the ‘mother country’ are operating. Gabriel/Solomon flees across the English Channel clinging to the side of a ship with a Chinese man (who is drowned) and a fellow refugee called Bright. “I am an Englishman” (134), challenges Bright. “Only the white man respects us, for we do not respect ourselves. If you cut my heart open you will find it stamped with the word ‘England’. I speak the language, therefore I am going to England to claim my house and my stipend” (134). Although Bright disappears soon after landing, it seems unlikely that his sense of English ‘respect’ and assumption of tenure in England will go unchallenged.

Therefore, Phillips counters those enthusiasts of England’s multicultural present by reminding us that change may be more illusionary than achieved, and that there is something dangerous in cutting free the frenzied flux of contemporary life from the more responsible retrospection of the past which might reveal that the present is very much caught in the vice-like grip of old, enduring problems. In many ways the novel often articulates the “grim prose” of those lonely, dislocated and desperate lives

about which Parry reminded us. Were this the only task of *A Distant Shore*, then I would have some sympathy with Sell's critique of postcolonial and diaspora aesthetics, as well as his view of Phillips. But to stop here in our reading of the novel does a major disservice to its materially-grounded and determined vision of possibility and change in the midst of a prejudicial country, one which is progressively utopian in a number of important ways.

As Stephen Clingman expertly puts it, *A Distant Shore* encapsulates Phillips's general interest "in all those asymmetrically marginalised and excluded people of whatever origins whose paths cross in ways that shift from the complex and complementary to the jagged, tangential and disjunctive – in itself an underlying formal patterning of his work".¹⁷ In Phillips's writing, black and white characters, migrant and indigenous folks, endlessly encounter each other between the poles of conviviality and hostility. As in much of his fiction, *A Distant Shore* is concerned centrally with the temporary yet invaluable encounters between tangential peoples that evidence their myriad, unexpected, yet day-to-day participation in each others' lives. Consider the lift which Gabriel/Solomon's lawyer gives him from London to the motorway against her husband's wishes, or Gabriel/Solomon's relationship with the truck driver Mike – the significance of these relationships, and plenty of others besides, must not be underestimated. Their aggregation speaks to the persistent and perpetual everyday refusal of prejudicial barriers, and as such they are more enduring, meaningful and progressive than some of the more spectacular celebrations of multicultural flux and freedom beloved of advocates of multiculturalism.

Let me consider briefly one such example. When Gabriel/Solomon makes it to England, he takes refuge with his companion, Bright, in a derelict house, where he befriends a lonely young English girl, Denise. After bringing him food, she tells him of the violence of her father and her boyfriend, and begins to sob:

[Gabriel] hears a soft pop as her lips separate, and he prepares to listen to her. But whatever it was the girl was going to say, she decides to stifle it inside. Gabriel understands that this house that he and Bright have stumbled across is, for this girl, a place of safety. His anger at her manner, and her way of speaking to him, begins to subside as he realises just how vulnerable she is. He puts his arm around her and holds her. There is something comforting about her young weight on his body, and Gabriel decides to stay put in this position until she calms down. (188)

Having fallen asleep, Gabriel/Solomon and Denise are discovered by the girl's father, who attacks them both. Gabriel/Solomon is arrested for sexually assaulting Denise, as her father presumes, although the case is ultimately dropped as Denise refuses to testify against him. We might consider the entire episode as another example of English racism and prejudice, and in many ways it is. But also we must *not* forget the weight of that silent moment shared by Gabriel/Solomon and Denise. The silence of the characters here marks problems of communication and encounter, to be sure. But Gabriel/Solomon's willingness to listen sympathetically to Denise is both ethically vital and at the heart of something transformative: he loses his antipathy towards (in his eyes) Denise's inappropriate youthful attitude and begins to understand the shape, and the pain, of her life. She, too, requires refuge from a hostile world. His holding of her is caring, tender, supportive, and resourceful (and, of course, profoundly non-sexual).

To my mind, these characters' embrace is a distinctly utopian moment, where the social assignments of race, nation and gender are overwhelmed by an ethical and humane form of engagement and support. But it is not, by any stretch of the imagination, an idealized moment: like the derelict house within which this embrace occurs, the moment is temporary, embattled, and threadbare, while the dangerous prejudices of the present remain to menace its participants. The transformative agency engendered by the embrace is not necessarily revolutionary or instantly transformative. Rather, it seems closer to that which Michel de Certeau has defined as one of the tactics of everyday life – a moment of popular creativity in which one makes something new from a situation beyond one's choosing: "Although they remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances these transverse *tactics* do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it".¹⁸ Seeking refuge in a new place, Denise and Solomon/Gabriel support each other in such a way which enacts its own moment of refusal of those discourses which might suspect their encounter. Phillips remains conscious of the ways in which this moment is fragile and does not idealistically signal the end of the history of racial discrimination – the arrival of Denise's father with the police puts paid to that. Rather, the novel's tentative utopian vision is discovered in its demand that we attend to the *necessity* of these moments for surviving the present and building a better future. The challenge, it seems, is to transform the agency of the embrace between Solomon/Gabriel and Denise from fuelling survival to engendering a new practice of everyday life, where transracial and multicultural encounters can be ordinary and warm without endangering their participants.

It is precisely here that I believe the novel's progressive utopianism is discovered, in the demands it makes for transformation without prematurely celebrating the cheerful conviviality of the allegedly changed multicultural present, or spelling out rigidly and programmatically the ways in which change is magically achieved. There already exist major resources for change, it appears; but change must be embraced within the context of an inclusive diasporic space in which *all* participate, rather than pursued by a particular interest group as part of a 'minority' or special-interest agenda which would continue the cleavage between the multicultural enclave and the 'host' community. This is why *A Distant Shore* is as much the story of the *Daily Mail*-reading Dorothy Jones as it is of the refugee Gabriel/Solomon: if more people could understand better that the story of an African migrant in England is inseparable from that of an English-born schoolteacher, and that 'migrant' and 'native' narratives can *never* be kept apart, then England really will begin to change into a diaspora space.

For me, the progressive possibilities of this imagined moment, and many others like them in the novel, resides in Phillips's binocular focus upon the everyday refusals of racism and division within the grim context of a stubbornly prejudicial milieu. He offers no premature celebration of the end of history or prejudice, and there is no delighted celebration of multicultural chic. Instead, attention is directed to the endless, proliferating tactics of everyday life which are proffered not as political stratagems but as an ethical imperative. They are neither exemplary nor exceptional, but significantly ordinary, part of a wider range of tactics, each unique to its circumstances and moments, which Phillips holds out for our consideration in his fiction. As Gabriel/Solomon learned, in encountering compassionately the lives of others, we might acquire the precious commodity of understanding and hence be forced to change our impressions of others.

To be sure, we must remain aware of the fragility and temporariness of such moments, where conviviality has not necessarily triumphed over confrontation. Indeed, for me de Certeau is at his most dispiriting when he writes that the tactic, unlike the strategy, is ultimately improvisational and placeless: "Whatever it wins, [the tactic] does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities'".¹⁹ But I would rather put my faith in the progressively utopian possibilities of such delicate, precarious yet hopeful encounters and use their fictional imagining as a guide to creating ethical modes of behaviour and thought beyond their immediate theatres of action, rather than run headlong into the amnesia of Happy Multicultural Land (satirized so wonderfully by

Zadie Smith) where prejudices are presumed to have been liquidated as soon as the past is conveniently forgotten. The job of transferring the ethical imperatives of such tactics into a strategy – the latter de Certeau defines as “the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it”²⁰ – is distinctly a task for us all, one which the reading of *A Distant Shore* may serve to engender, and which should continue long after our reading of the novel has finished.

Notes

¹ Jonathan P. A. Sell, “Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: A Model for Multicultural Identity?,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.3 (2006): 33.

² Sell, 32.

³ Sell, 33.

⁴ Sell, 42.

⁵ James Procter, “Diaspora” in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. John McLeod (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 151.

⁶ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 209.

⁷ Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 100.

⁸ Parry, 70. See also Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

⁹ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 27.

¹⁰ Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, 58.

¹¹ Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, 105.

¹² See Paul Gilroy, *‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992 [1987], 115-135.

¹³ Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, 122.

¹⁴ Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, 121.

¹⁵ The chant, often accompanied by a co-ordinated waving of arms in the air, recalls perhaps The Beach Boys’ 1966 rendition of “Sloop John B” from their album *Pet Sounds*, a tune which is based on an old Caribbean folk song. The words are as follows: “He plays on the left / He plays on the right / That boy Ronaldo / Makes England look shite.” I am grateful to my colleague Professor John Whale for identifying the likely link to The Beach Boys’ song.

¹⁶ For a detailed account of Oluwale’s life and death, and the subsequent prosecution of the policemen, see Kester Aspden, *Nationality: Wog: The Hounding of David Oluwale* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

¹⁷ Stephen Clingman, “‘England has changed’: Questions of National Form in *A Distant Shore*,” *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* 7.1 (2007): 46.

¹⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29.

¹⁹ de Certeau, xix.

²⁰ de Certeau, xix.

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