

## Interculturalism and 'Alternative Fictions' in Britain Today

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I had no nation now but the Imagination.  
(Derek Walcott, "The Schooner Flight")

I think that if *all* English literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that Eng. Lit. has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction.  
(Salman Rushdie, "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist")

The proliferation of English literatures in the second half of the twentieth century has now reached such proportions that Salman Rushdie's wish to see them studied together is bound to be disappointed. Books of essays by different authors attempt to cover the whole field, though it is increasingly difficult to offer a general synthesis of the cultural interactions in English literatures, of their multifarious and complex developments, unless of a circumscribed region or on one of their specific aspects. At best, some comparative studies bring together germane areas, like Australian and Canadian literatures or African and Caribbean (though in this case more in drama and poetry than fiction). However useful when they were first published, early general studies like William Walsh's *Commonwealth Literature* (1973), Bruce King's *Literatures of the World in English* (1974) and William New's *Among Worlds* (1975)<sup>1</sup> belong to a now outgrown phase, and even when they appeared, they juxtaposed separate studies of local areas and already concentrated on their differing features rather than offered the overall view and language analysis Rushdie alludes to. The movement is centrifugal, though the proceedings of large conferences sometimes give

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1 William Walsh, *Commonwealth Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); Bruce King, ed., *Literatures of the World in English* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); William H. New, *Among Worlds: An Introduction to Commonwealth and South African Fiction* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcupine, 1975). Bruce King has twice updated his survey. Cf. Bruce King, ed., *The New English Literatures: Cultural Nationalism in a Changing World* (London: Macmillan, 1980), and Bruce King, ed., *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Conference proceedings also trace the development of literatures in English. Cf. among others Dieter Riemenschneider, ed., *The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1983). A majority of essays discuss the nationalist approach: Giovanna Capone, Claudio Gorlier, Bernard Hickey, eds., *Commonwealth Literary Cultures: New Voices, New Approaches* (Lecce: Editioni del Grifo, 1990); Geoffrey Davis and Hena Maes-Jelinek, eds., *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), and Anna Rutherford, ed., *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1992).

an idea of the diversity and richness of the field while also conveying some common underlying elements. Attempts at generalizations thus remain rare,<sup>2</sup> and sometimes defend themselves from any intentional globalizing or universalizing bias, which does not go without contradiction. In post-colonial studies generalizations gradually became the preserve of theory and cultural studies, and these often tend to overlook literary texts and to give precedence to abstract cultural and socio-political comments.

The first academic recognition of "Commonwealth" literature<sup>3</sup> came in 1964 when Professor A.N. Jeffares, wishing to draw attention to talented writers from the former colonies, organized a conference at the University of Leeds and founded *The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*. The proceedings were published in a volume entitled *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*.<sup>4</sup> Literature in the singular and the assumption of a shared culture (necessarily British) were already challenged at the Association's second conference, which took place in Brisbane in 1968, and whose theme was "National Identity,"<sup>5</sup> though the intercultural element came to the fore in discussions of literatures in other languages used in the Commonwealth, varieties of English, and translations in both directions between English and other Commonwealth languages. Twenty-five years later, the continuing tension and cross-fertilization between the national and the international and/or intercultural were obvious in the theme of a conference that took place in Graz in 1993, "Nationalism vs. Internationalism,"<sup>6</sup> which makes it clear that cultural self-definition remains a problematic subject of interrogation. There is no doubt that cultural nationalism is as hard to circumscribe as its political counterpart. "Nation, nationality, nationalism," writes Benedict Anderson, "all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse."<sup>7</sup> His own argument is that the roots of nationalism are cultural. Acknowledging Anderson's influence, Homi Bhabha

2 See the pioneer study which announces the shift towards theory: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989) and the literary history by Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Post-Colonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

3 Post-colonial criticism frequently discusses the unsatisfactory terminology used to designate literatures in English other than British and American. This is external to my present concern.

4 John Press, ed., *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1965).

5 Ken L. Goodwin, ed., *National Identity* (London and Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970).

6 Wolfgang Zach and Ken L. Goodwin, eds., *Nationalism vs. Internationalism: (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996). Studies on national literatures and cultures still abound. Cf. the emphasis on "nationalism" even in Bruce King's general surveys. The theme of a conference which took place in Klagenfurt in September 1997 was "Maintaining the National."

7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; revised edition, London: Verso, 1991), 3.

also presents "nation" as a constructed concept, albeit characterized by ambivalence and indeterminacy.<sup>8</sup> But his equating nation with narration implies that cultural self-definition is a persistent ideal even when subject to constant remodelling.

Understandably, the pre- and post-independence period in the former colonies saw an intense desire for cultural self-assertion and autonomy in reaction against Britain's imperial and, in various degrees, authoritarian policies.<sup>9</sup> It gave rise to literatures often described as resistant and oppositional, followed by some sub-groups, not necessarily nationalist in outlook but equally motivated by a longing for a clearly delineated and stable identity. Hence the rebirth of Aboriginal cultures in former colonies themselves considered as imperialistic (Australia, New Zealand, Canada) and the emphasis on categories like race, class and gender. These categorizations, often more important to critics than to writers, are what Wilson Harris, who has always argued for the obliteration of all boundaries, calls "self-righteous deprivation."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of aspirations to group particularities and of scholarly divisive definitions of identity, all cultures, as Edward Said argues, are impure and hybrid.<sup>11</sup> A well-known early example in African literature is Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which recreates the traditions and values of a homogeneous African community in Nigeria up to the arrival of the first Christian missionaries and the subsequent cultural clash. In Achebe's own words, it was written with the deliberate intention of restoring his countrymen's self-respect and pride in their past<sup>12</sup> and recreates Igbo life through specifically local cultural elements, including language forms transposed into English. Yet the novel as a whole is distinctly intercultural in its use of the novel genre and even in its title borrowed from W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming." One should keep in mind, however, that intertextuality, the blending of heterogeneous cultural elements in literary texts does not necessarily reflect a corresponding interculturalism in society nor a spectrum of different cognitive, psychological and philosophical approaches to experience. We see this in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* which evinces a rich intertextuality and intercultural allusions within a strictly delimited and hierarchical conception of culture:

The present age, a singularly stupid one, is the age of a mistaken nationalism and of an equally mistaken and artificial internationalism. I am all for empires, especially the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and I deplore the outburst of artificial nationalities. [ ] On the other hand, if anyone has a genuine nationality – and a genuine nationality depends upon the existence of a genuine literature, and you cannot have a nationality worth speaking of unless you have a national literature [...] let him assert it. [...] I agree also

8 Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 2, 4.

9 Cf., for example, Lord Macaulay's 1835 *Minute to Parliament* imposing 'European learning' in India.

10 Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, ed. Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liège: L3 – Liège Language and Literature, 1992), 37-8.

11 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), particularly 15, 68.

12 Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," in Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), 42-5. Cf. also "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," *Nigeria Magazine* 81 (June 1964): 157.

that there can only be one English literature; that there cannot be British literature, or American literature.<sup>13</sup>

If Eliot's statement on the exclusiveness of English literature is obsolete today, his conviction that "you cannot have a nationality worth speaking of unless you have a national literature" has obviously been shared by writers and more often critics in the former colonies since before independence, and it still motivates a sometimes obsessive search for identity.<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously, the expansion of English as a world language, the cultural interconnectedness resulting from easy communication, displacement, migrancy and exile have all contributed to a growing internationalism in literature and more generally culture. Commentators on cultural developments in the last few decades have concentrated on two major perspectives: one is still the nationalism/internationalism polarity interpreted as coexistent, mixed or oppositional, though, notwithstanding national aspirations, their complex entanglement sustains a continuous creative tension. This generated the other major aspect of literatures in English now competing for critical attention, i.e., hybridity, at once a consequence and an agent of internationalism but also the offspring of the increasing cultural heterogeneity within individual countries.<sup>15</sup> As Bruce King ironically puts it with reference to England and the United States, "[e]veryone wants to be a cultural métis or post-colonial."<sup>16</sup> I propose to examine a few recent novels by British writers of ex-colonial origin, which exemplify various degrees and conceptions of interculturalism.

As the former colonies were asserting their national character, an inverse process was taking place in Britain, provoking a much debated crisis of identity owing to the dissolution of the empire, the arrival of large numbers of migrants from the Commonwealth, and a revived national consciousness in Wales and Scotland.<sup>17</sup> Homi Bhabha writes that "[t]he Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous and native narrative *internal to its national identity*."<sup>18</sup> It must be pointed out, however, that the

13 T.S.Eliot, "Letter to Ford Maddox Ford," *The Transatlantic Review* 1 (1924): 95-6. Quoted by Wolfgang Zach in *Nationalism vs. Internationalism*, 9.

14 To cite just one example: "To become a people, a community must have a literature," Mavis Gallant and Ginette Gould, *Portraits d'écrivains: dictionnaire des écrivains acadiens* (Moncton: Editions d'Acadie and Editions Perce-Neige, 1982), no pagination.

15 It has been theorized, among others, by James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, and Homi K.Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). All three present hybridity as an ideal, unavoidable cultural model.

16 Bruce King, *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures*, 10.

17 In a recent issue the Magazine *Prospect* draws attention to the number of books recently published on the subject: "Jeremy Paxman's *The English*, Kevin Davey's *English Imaginaries*, Simon Heffer's *Nor Shall My Sword: The Re-Invention of England*, Peter Hitchens's *The Abolition of Britain* [...] Andrew Marr's *The Day Britain Died* and Tom Nairn's *After Britain*" (February 2000), 6.

18 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 6. Italics in the text.

advocates of a genuinely intercultural Britain generally come from the former colonies.<sup>19</sup> Yet the British fictional scene is probably one of the most intercultural in the English-speaking world. This is not to deny the persistence and development of a specifically English tradition.<sup>20</sup> But it is frequently overshadowed by fiction of a more international stamp usually informed by crucial contemporary issues, like displacement and exile, which intrude upon the Western world, a literature that both challenges and enlarges the British tradition. Publication in Britain together with the awarding of literary prizes to writers of mixed cultural affiliations have largely contributed to the recognition of writers of a non-British or non-English sensibility. The Booker Prize in particular has had a considerable influence. Many of its recipients are from the former colonies, and it has even been argued that, through them, British culture "is enriched by the disparate ethnicities of its former empire and sets about re-fashioning its own identity in post-imperial terms."<sup>21</sup> Other commentators, however, trace the crisis and re-definition of English identity much further back and postulate that "Englishness was itself a product of the colonial culture that it seemed to have created elsewhere. [...] [A]s a cultural and literary phenomenon [it was] produced in the ambivalent space that separated, but also conjoined, metropole and colony."<sup>22</sup> This assertion is, to some extent, substantiated in an anthology entitled *Extravagant Strangers* edited by Caryl Phillips. Taking as initial reference Daniel Defoe's satirical poem "The True-born Englishman" Phillips claims that Britain's vision of herself as "culturally and ethnically homogeneous" is a myth and that for at least two hundred years English literature has been shaped and influenced by outsiders.<sup>23</sup> This statement needs to be qualified in the light of the nineteenth-century novel, for if the outside world, the colonies in particular, impinge

19 Cf. in particular, Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," and Paul Gilroy, "Urban Social Movements, 'Race' and Community," in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), respectively 392-403 and 404-420.

20 Cf. Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Postmodernism and its Others: Cross-Cultural Counterpoints in British Fiction," *Anglistik*, 8.1 (1997), 61-73.

21 Luke Strongman, *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire*. Submitted for publication to Rodopi (Amsterdam/Atlanta). Forthcoming in its Cross/Cultures Series 3. Cf. also Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (1993; London: Penguin Books, 1994), 380-1.

22 Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), x, xii. Edward Said makes a similar point in *Culture and Imperialism*, 61-2. Both Gikandi and Said acknowledge their indebtedness to Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, but regret that he ignores the cultural contributions of the colonies to Englishness. Cf. also Bruce King: "Imperial powers import and are changed by the cultures they colonize," (*New National and Post-Colonial Literatures*, 10). In *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), Gauri Viswanathan demonstrates that English Studies were first imposed in India before being introduced in Britain itself.

23 Caryl Phillips, ed., *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), xiii, xiv. Most of the writers anthologized were born outside Britain or had a colonial experience.



at all on the writers' or narrators' consciousness, it is only as places that bring profit or punishment, as we see in *Mansfield Park*, *Adam Bede* and *Great Expectations*,<sup>24</sup> to name only a few.

Some real breakthrough in cultural diversification can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century in Henry James's treatment of the "international theme." In spite of its inclusion by F.R. Leavis in "the great tradition of the *English* novel,"<sup>25</sup> James's work introduced a new "structure of feeling," a new modernity in Raymond Williams's sense of the word,<sup>26</sup> through the encounter of cultures, none of which is presented as either inferior or subordinate. Apart from Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence,<sup>27</sup> the modernists followed suit both as exiles and in the nascent interculturalism within their work. Since then there has been a clear overlapping between the exilic experience, interculturalism, and the experimentalism which has most clearly modified the realistic tradition in British fiction. In his remarkable survey of the fictional developments in Britain over more than a hundred years, Malcolm Bradbury insists on the considerable widening of horizons due to the multi-culturalism that evolved on the British scene with the arrival of so many talented "migrant" and so-called post-colonial writers. Their work is part of the rich and varied production that gives the lie to the repeated announcement of the death of the English novel or allusions to its parochialism in spite of the emergence of several generations of young talented novelists of British or other origin.<sup>28</sup> While agreeing with this view, one cannot help noticing that multi-culturalism seems to be mostly on one side, and the uneasy feeling remains of a cultural division between English novelists on the one hand and writers of alien descent on the other, many of them British-born. Indeed few novels by English writers seem to take into account the changing social and racial configuration of society as a result of large-scale immigration from the former colonies or to show that it had any impact on English life.<sup>29</sup> Early examples were *City of Spades* (1957) and *Absolute Beginners* (1959) by Colin MacInnes.<sup>30</sup> A more recent

24 It takes the re-writing of an "international" writer like Peter Carey to evoke social and cultural elements totally ignored by Dickens: the Aborigines in *Oscar and Lucinda* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) and the convicts in *Jack Maggs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).

25 F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), 37. Italics mine.

26 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 297-8. James Clifford, Simon Gikandi and Edward Said borrow Williams's terminology. Said adapts it to "structures of attitude and reference," *Culture and Imperialism*, 61.

27 In spite of his experience and works located abroad, Lawrence remained profoundly English.

28 Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, xiv, 454. Among the most recent expressions of disenchantment with the state of the English novel, see Jason Cowley (literary editor of the *New Statesman*), "Searching for England," *The Waterstone's Magazine*, 19 (Summer 1999), 3-14. The element of renewal Cowley discerns is "a deep longing among English novelists [...] to reclaim an English cultural identity in fiction, to discover an English idiom [...] untainted by colonial complicity" (italics mine), 10.

29 English popular films seem to show a far greater awareness of multi-culturalism.

30 On this subject see Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 127-8.

one is Marina Warner's *Indigo*,<sup>31</sup> a fictionalization, cast in a "re-writing" of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, of her own family connection with the West Indies where her ancestors were planters for three hundred years. In an essay summing up with great honesty her family history in the Caribbean as planters and slave owners proud of their superior and "involute Englishness," Warner explains that their denial of any West Indian affiliation has deprived her of the right to claim that inheritance.<sup>32</sup> The conclusion of her essay throws light on her purpose:

Because our family was involved in an enterprise that so resembles Prospero's theft, that foundation act of Empire, I felt compelled to examine the case, and imagine, in fiction, the life and culture of Sycorax, and of Ariel and Caliban, whom I cast as her foundlings; I wanted to hear their voices in the noises of the Isle.<sup>33</sup>

The mythology and history of the "other" side, Sycorax, African Dulé (Caliban) and Arawak Ariel as well as the Middle Passage, are indeed recreated with imaginativeness and sympathy. However mythical, Sycorax and Ariel in particular illustrate the author's original exploration of another possible culture far more generous and humane than the colonizers' pretence to civilized values. The plot shifts from the first white man's landing on a Caribbean island to his descendants' life in post-war London. Serafine, the devoted Black nanny, transmitter of the island's past and a recurring figure in Caribbean fiction by white Creole writers, opens and closes the narrative, at the end of which twentieth-century Miranda falls in love and has a child with a Black actor who plays Caliban in *The Tempest*. This marriage, however, strikes as a symbolical reconciliation, a kind of atonement even, rather than a natural union in a multi-racial, intercultural society.

The subtitle of Warner's novel, *Mapping the Waters*, is pertinent to much fiction by Anglo-Caribbean writers, for whom the Atlantic ocean is a central metaphor, isolating the Caribbean islands and their inhabitants (see V.S. Naipaul's early work) but also, for many, a repository of a long neglected past. This phrase, an apposite sequence to Derek Walcott's famous "The Sea is history,"<sup>34</sup> evokes a two-way crossing and the surfacing of events and comportments which, through successive periods, diversified populations and cultures, first in the Caribbean and, by a boomerang effect centuries later, in Britain. It is equally an apt description of Lawrence Scott's work, a Creole Trinidadian, also a descendant of a planters' family, who emigrated to England as a young man. In his first masterly novel, *Witchbroom*, the I-narrator's alter-ego,

31 Marina Warner, *Indigo, or: Mapping the Waters* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).

32 Marina Warner, "Between the Colonist and the Creole: Family Bonds, Family Boundaries," in Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford, eds., *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1993), 199-204, 199.

33 Warner, "Between the Colonist and the Creole," 203.

34 Cf. also Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), which also "maps the waters" as it recreates the actual throwing overboard of sick slaves by the captain of the *Zong* in the early nineteenth century in order to claim compensation from insurance companies, a frequent practice also denounced in David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*.

androgynous Lavren, "travels through the nether world and the kingdoms below the sea,"<sup>35</sup> and comes up with his "carnival Tales" which encompass Caribbean history from the European invasion to the present day within one family saga. He thus traces through conquest, slavery, indentureship and creolization the social, cultural and religious evolution of a highly heterogeneous community, its racial interbreeding and its special brand of Spanish, provincial French and Irish Catholicism. The Black servants' voices break through the stories of the domineering White women with the narrative of other lives. The novel's rich metaphorical texture culminates in Carnival as both creative process and, perhaps too optimistically, as a means of doing away with all absolutes and transcending all historical and social differences:

There is no hierarchy in carnival [...]. all may cross over and inhabit the other. [...] And in that congregation were all kinds of people who had come through centuries to realise, at least carnival day, that they were people, that man could be woman, woman could be man, could be god, could be servant, could be master, could be indentured labourer, could be enslaved [...].<sup>36</sup>

Scott celebrates what he considers must be a multifariously human rather than a narrowly national, cultural or religious identity. In "Leaving by Plane, Swimming Back Underwater,"<sup>37</sup> he describes a return trip to Trinidad and his participation in a Hindu festival, and eulogizes the religious syncretism of the island. In his second novel, *Aelred's Sin*,<sup>38</sup> interculturalism between the Caribbean and Britain expands gradually through the changing individual consciousness of the two major characters, Robert de la Borde, a cocoa planter from Les Deux Isles (Trinidad and Tobago) who has come to England to understand the spiritual journey of his older brother Jean Marc (Aelred in religion). He had joined an English monastery, rebelled against its stifling rules and left it, and later died of AIDS, still a young man. The narrative oscillates in both time and place between England and the Caribbean. The monastery, in which Robert recreates much of his brother's life from his journals, letters and "book of dreams" is the former estate of an eighteenth-century absentee landlord, whose portrait with a small black boy kneeling admiringly at his feet reminds Aelred of the story of a young runaway slave, Mungo, told by his Black nanny. Gradually, the stories of Mungo, Jordan, the boy in the painting buried in the estate's old cemetery, and that of Ted, Aelred's mixed race friend and youthful love, killed when he was challenged to jack-knife from a high rock, intertwine in Aelred's writings, the three boys victims in different times and places of a similar racism and cruelty. The

major catalyst of Jean Marc/Aelred's growing awareness of discrimination is his homosexuality, now also recognized as an element of cultural difference. Contrary to the exuberant narrative of *Witchbroom*, *Aelred's Sin* unobtrusively discloses the major facts of West Indian history, whose significance both Jean Marc and Robert grasp from an English vantage point. The various literary genres, self-confession, journal, letters, book of dreams harmonize through the narrative's overall stylistic sobriety. Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Pied Beauty" is quoted as a hymn to diversity in both nature and mankind, and Jean Marc's awakening and response to the English countryside often links it to nature in the West Indies:

[Aelred] had watered father Justin's hyacinths, whose scent reminded him of the smell of pomme aracs. He inhaled them deeply. Home came on the breeze of the smell; from the big tree behind the house at Malgretoute.<sup>39</sup>

The presence of young African slaves as "pet Negroes" on eighteenth-century paintings by Hogarth, Reynolds or Van Dijk is also the germ of David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*,<sup>40</sup> a fiercely satirical novel, whose various degrees of irony are clearly meant to shock the reader into an awareness of the degrading enslavement not just of imported Africans but of a whole nation subjugated by its greed for money. In *Hogarth's Blacks*<sup>41</sup> Dabydeen had brought to light the previously unnoticed Blacks in much of eighteenth-century art. He praised Hogarth for expressing his indignation at a corrupt society through the attitudes of young innocent Blacks reduced to mere playthings or adult servants and slave women seen exclusively as a source of profit. As one reviewer put it, "Blacks – allegedly savage and subhuman [...] hold up the mirror to the barbarity of polite society."<sup>42</sup> This sums up exactly the main theme of the novel, which borrows its title from Hogarth's famous series of prints, of which a section of plate 2 illustrates each part of the narrative. The central character is the Black boy who, on the print, carries a kettle of hot water. Dabydeen imagines him as an old man on his deathbed, plagued by a Mr Pringle who wants to appropriate his life story and turn it into an epic, already framed in his mind, to serve the Abolitionist cause. But Mungo (nameless when he arrives in England and later called Noah, then Perseus) resists the attempt and tells his own tale of conversion and sodomization by Captain Thistlewood, his meeting with the washerwoman who prepares him to be sold, his acquisition by Lord Montague and his adventures in his household where he is made to wear the silver collar of Lady Montague's deceased monkey. Finally, he escapes to Mr Gideon's, a Jew who ministers to dying whores. This is where he meets

35 Lawrence Scott, *Witchbroom* (Oxford: Heinemann International Education, 1992), 3.

36 Scott, *Witchbroom*, 264-6. In his comments on the "magical realism" of the novel, Gordon Collier stresses its internationalism by comparing it to Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (Gordon Collier, "Literary Round Table," in Raimund Borgmeier, Herbert Grabes, Andreas H. Jucker, eds., *Anglistentag 1997. Giessen* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1998), 224).

37 Lawrence Scott, "Leaving by Plane, Swimming Back Underwater," in Stephen Hayward and Sarah-Lefanu, eds., *God* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), 134-158.

38 Lawrence Scott, *Aelred's Sin* (London: Allison & Busby, 1998).

39 Scott, *Aelred's Sin*, 48.

40 David Dabydeen, *A Harlot's Progress* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999). Page numbers are given in the text.

41 David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1985).

42 Roy Porter, "Savage Ironies, David Dabydeen's *Hogarth's Blacks*," *Times Literary Supplement*, September 13, 1985, 998.

Moll Hackabout, the whore in Hogarth's print, a paragon of beauty and purity, who cannot possibly survive in a perverse society.

Like Walcott, Dabydeen seems to think that "Progress is history's dirty joke," while the real harlot of the title is clearly mercantile England, in which human beings are only worth their material value, and everyone is enslaved to, or attempts to possess, someone else. One suspects that Dabydeen extends the analogy to humanity as a whole for no one resists the temptation of wielding power over someone else, not even Mungo who, through various strategies, "possesses" by turns his childhood friend Saba, Captain Thistlewood, Lady Montague and, of course, Mr Pringle, who never learns his true story. At a further remove he also subjugates the reader, who does not altogether escape his irony. Perhaps as a way of showing that he is no servant to any linguistic master, Mungo uses alternatively a highly sophisticated, sometimes pedantic language, pidgin or broken English and poetic reminiscences. This multivoicedness in a single narrator both asserts his mastery of different potential narratives and demystifies the alleged truth of Mr Pringle's "epic." While recalling his life, he says "I remember nothing" and "I can change memory" (2). And further, "I care not for this business of writing, the necessity of plot and verisimilitude" (248). His fragmented narrative offers several contradictory versions of each event or incident. African voices, ghosts of another life, another culture, members of his tribe whom he betrayed into slavery reappear in fantastic dreams or visions and impinge on his consciousness to the very end, belying his indifference or rejection of guilt. Though not idealized, Mungo's Africa seems to be more imaginary than real. Some of its history is told by the Amerindian-named Rima, and his spontaneous knowledge of philosophy and mathematics is supposedly inherited from Greek marauders who invaded his village centuries before. The horrors of the slave-ship, however, are anything but fictitious in spite of an occasional literal excessiveness obviously meant to convey the dismemberment of the tribes:

Once, after a particularly bad storm, out of curiosity I followed Captain Thistlewood, who went below to tally his losses. Apart from the stench which induced nausea and loss of concentration, it was difficult to count accurately, for there were hands sans arms wedged in the iron restraints, feet sans legs, stumps of necks. It was like a resurrection gone gruesomely wrong, for they were without the benefit of the sacramental. (48)

On the other hand, eighteenth-century London is depicted realistically with its motley population, scenes of desolation and misery, the suffocating and noisy atmosphere of coffee houses and the highly artificial atmosphere of aristocratic mansions. The constantly changing modes of expression, including parody and pastiche, the contradictions and uncertainties of the narrative are not, I think, an extreme example of postmodernist unreliability. When human beings are reduced to mere commodities, their inner selves utterly destroyed, as Mungo was "broken" (in two senses) by Captain Thistlewood, there is no substantial being left to inspire the story of one's life. Even art lies, as Mungo insists Hogarth did, insensitive as he was to the inner mystery of his models, a conclusion which tends to confute Dabydeen's own earlier comments on Hogarth.

From the fifties and sixties onwards, some Caribbean writers of African descent have felt it necessary to undertake a reverse triangular journey, travelling to England, then back to Africa. George Lamming described this experience in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960); Denis Williams fictionalized it in *Other Leopards* (1963), and Edward Brathwaite recreated the slave's odyssey to the New World, his descendants' return to Africa, then back again to the West Indies in his *New World Trilogy* (*Rights of Passage*, 1967; *Masks*, 1968; *Islands*, 1969). The reclamation of Africa, often ending with the realization that the West Indian can never fully identify with the land of his ancestors, is still a major concern for some younger "Black British"<sup>43</sup> writers as evidenced in a recent novel by an Anglo-Jamaican novelist, Ferdinand Dennis. *Duppy Conqueror*<sup>44</sup> is a dense, ambitious novel. It recreates the whole of twentieth-century Jamaican and African history through the life story of an ordinary Jamaican who grows up in the poor and falsely idyllic village of Paradise, Jamaica. He spends part of the war and the two following decades in England, then emigrates to a newly independent African state where, after eighteen years, he is refused citizenship and evicted by a dictatorial government. He returns to Jamaica to face at last the duty with which he had been burdened as a young man but evaded: to redeem both the Black and White branches of his large family, branded physically and psychologically by an ancestral curse. While building up wisdom and attempting to preserve his private self in an outwardly dissolute life in the Liverpool underworld, then as a nightclub owner in London, Marshall Seargent can't help becoming involved in liberation movements and Pan-African politics. His experience is that of the West Indian Black diaspora from emigration to Britain, through the decolonization movements of the sixties, the wild hopes in a newly independent Africa and the ensuing disappointment, first at the failure of Pan-Africanism, then at the gradual degeneration of the new democracies into cruel dictatorships. His extradition from Africa in spite of his marriage into a local family is proof that, for all his eagerness to belong, he remains an outsider.

The narrative unfolds chronologically and realistically, though often interspersed with poetic passages, especially in the first part when the mythological origins of Jamaica are repeatedly narrated by an old sailor. The local culture of Jamaican country life, with its surviving but modified African ceremonies, contrasts with the varied life styles of the Black diaspora in the Liverpool slums, London night clubs popular with Black GIs, then the familiar haunts of jazz lovers and, finally, the variegated Africa in a booming capital and the interior or sea-side locations. Marshall's voyages from one continent to another end on the highest rock of the Jamaican Blue Mountains where he sacrifices himself to redeem past and future generations from the family curse by submitting to an ordeal of fantastic visions which purify the brutal past by fire. The manner of his death is rather obscure, the only certainty being that he is "swallowed" by rock and sea, the features of Jamaica's

43 On this terminology see Fred D'Aguiar, "Against Black British Literature," in Maggie Butcher, ed., *Tibisiri: Caribbean Writers and Critics* (Mandelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1989), 106-114. D'Aguiar's argument, similar to Rushdie's in *Imaginary Homelands*, is that identity is a plural notion and that "the creative imagination knows no boundaries" (109).

44 Ferdinand Dennis, *Duppy Conqueror* (London: HarperCollins, 1998).



mythological creation. By conquering the "duppy" (ghost) of slavery, he has rescued Caribbean man from further wanderings in search of self-definition.

If some novels represent the peregrinations, forced or voluntary, of the deracinated and/or the multiracial communities that grew out of displacement and migrancy, others concentrate on the mutations that have taken place within the human personality itself. They uphold the potentialities of fulfilment concomitant with an unstable but dynamic individual identity. Much has been written on Salman Rushdie's fictionalization of hybridity but I cannot refrain from at least mentioning *The Moor's Last Sigh* as, possibly, his most exuberant celebration of heterogeneity. Contrary to the hero of Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, who refuses to grow in an attempt to stop history, Rushdie's "Moor" embodies the acceleration of history in modern times. He is also the syncretic inheritor of the three monotheistic religions, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, tolerantly thriving in Spain until Ferdinand and Isabella come to power. Moraes Zogoiby lives too fast and ages twice as quickly as anyone else. His mother paints him in successive versions of the Moor, the last Sultan exiled by Ferdinand and Isabella, and at one stage in the series she briefly achieves the ideal of unified diversity Rushdie himself aims at in his writing:

Around and about the figure of the Moor in his hybrid fortress she wove her vision, which in fact was a vision of *weaving*, or more accurately interweaving. . . . Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains crowded into her paint-Boabdil's fancy-dress balls, and the Sultan himself was represented less and less naturalistically, appearing more and more often as a masked, particoloured harlequin, a patchwork quilt of a man; or as his old skin dropped from him chrysalis-fashion, standing revealed as a glorious butterfly, whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours in the world.<sup>45</sup>

"Patchwork quilt," "harlequin," "chrysalis" clearly convey the birth of a new manifold human being who rejoices in his mixed identity, nevertheless fragile as the butterfly metaphor and the rest of the novel show.

A similar rejection of purity whether in race, culture, nation and, importantly, in the individual self informs all Wilson Harris's fictions from his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), to his latest, *Jonestown* (1996), as well as the considerable amount of criticism he wrote in the wake of his novels. Guyana, his country of origin, "the land of six peoples," may harbour the most multiracial society in the world, the descendants of various European conquerors and of imported labour from Africa, India and China. But its Amerindian population, eclipsed for centuries though "visible still in their nomadic living descendants"<sup>46</sup> in the Guyanese interior, was the catalyst of Harris's all-encompassing cross-culturalism. In *Palace of the Peacock* Harris already fictionalized what he was later to call "the cross-cultural psyche" of humanity by intimating that the multi-racial crew led by Donne, the conqueror, in search of El

<sup>45</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995; London: Vintage, 1996), 227.

<sup>46</sup> Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 7.

Dorado, were born "out of one complex womb,"<sup>47</sup> thereby implying that the very origins of man, his roots, are heterogeneous, just as he (Harris) conceives of God as plural.<sup>48</sup> His cross-culturalism, therefore, is also metaphysical and ontological. It begins to function at the level of the unconscious, the archetypal, the sacred. One of Harris's original contributions to that concept is the recurring insistence with which he has brought to light deep-seated similarities between certain forms of European and Pre-Columbian art or between old world and new world myths, for example between Quetzalcoatl and Faust.<sup>49</sup>

A dynamic plurality permeates all aspects of Harris's fiction: his conception of character as a cluster of personalities ("one is a multitude," says the narrator of *Jonestown*, 6), his protean images and paradoxical metaphors many of which strike a fusion between Christian and Pagan iconography (like the Arawak Virgin in *Palace of the Peacock*), his protagonists' exploration of plural otherness and of "compositional reality"<sup>50</sup> across ages, communities and cultures. Harris's rejection of all absolutes and his conviction that all images are partial, that no figure, whether god, mythical hero or ordinary man, can represent an unmitigated ideal, underlie his re-visionings of canonical epics and allegories, his re-conceptualizations of "divine comedy," of the Faustian myth and of Ulyssean behaviour in *The Carnival Trilogy*.

The whole import of creativity for Harris lies in an incessant bridging between individuals and cultures. *Jonestown* is an Old World-New World epic, in which the major character, Francisco Bone, the imagined sole survivor of a massacre that actually took place in Guyana in 1978, explores the motivations of its perpetrator, the cult-leader Jim Jones, and of his acolytes, himself included. The massacre is contextualized within a series of other twentieth-century holocausts and also recalls the extinction of Pre-Columbian peoples and of their culture. As Bone travels imaginatively through his past, he feels their presence in the Guyanese heartland and weaves into his "dream book" expressions of the Pre-Columbian world view. The precise calendrical time-scale of the story blends with a Maya conception of time with its fusion of past, present and future. Bone's perception of his environment is partly moulded by his awareness of Maya astronomy and mathematical knowledge. Above all, the Maya iconography mingling animals, men and gods pervades the narrative. Jim Jones, one version of the predator, is first associated with the sun, which has represented absolute power in Harris's fiction since *Palace of the Peacock*. The

<sup>47</sup> Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber, 1998, 1960), 39.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Wilson Harris, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 29: "I knew that the election of one sun as an absolute deity was an addiction to bias. God is multi-dimensional. Not uni-dimensional."

<sup>49</sup> On this subject cf. Hena Maes-Jelinek, "'Latent Cross-Culturalities': Wilson Harris and Wole Soyinka's Creative Alternative to Theory," *European Journal of English Studies*, 2.1 (1998), 37-48. The Parallel between Quetzalcoatl and Faust is fictionalized in Wilson Harris's *The Infinite Rehearsal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).

<sup>50</sup> Harris, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, 112.

predator also wears the mask of a tiger who kills Bone's mother on Carnival day and appears variously in the skin of a lion, eagle, vulture and serpent.<sup>51</sup>

As an imaginative writer Harris claims the cultural legacy and myths of the world which he revives in his fiction from a depository he calls "the universal unconscious" (he prefers the term "universal" to C.G.Jung's "collective"). He has clearly expanded the scope of the novel in English and enunciated a conception of fiction which dissolves all boundaries in time, place and consciousness:

Indisputably [the] novel form has exercised considerable dominance around the globe within the expansion of European empires. But such an expansion involves many cultures and began long before the eighteenth century [...] its contours and horizons may be traced much farther back [...] through the inception of the Middle Passage into ancient Rome, Macedonia, Persia, ancient Greece and India. [...] Such an expansion may need [...] to be considered and re-considered for different clues it offers us about alternative fictions and latent cross-culturalities between diverse ages, past and present, that bear on imaginative truth.<sup>52</sup>

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51 In Amerindian mythology the Sun-god was an absolute fed with the heart and blood of sacrificial victims. It stands in the middle of the Aztec and Maya calendars while cat (tiger) is one of the day signs. So are the vulture and eagle.

52 Wilson Harris, "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror: Reflections on Originality and Tradition," *Wasafiri* 20 (Autumn 1994), 38-43; 40.