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Atlases, viruses and frontiers

Memories and margins

The will to write, to world

Postcolonial inquiries

Identities and survival

Silence and translation

Postmodern anthropologies

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The radical reconfiguration over the last three decades of critical studies and what constitutes 'knowledge', whereby 'theory' and writing, literature and the 'social', poetics and politics have crossed each other's path, has led to an irreversible interrogation of previous autonomies. It would be simple to reduce this trajectory to a superficial social history that commences around 1968 and develops, above all, through the writings, both theoretical and literary, of new historical subjects distinguished by gender, ethnicity and minority status. However, these are also symptoms of an altogether deeper current that, to use the unfashionable concept of egemonia, *draws our attention to the limits and crisis, both intellectual and institutional, of a particular historical-cultural formation and its subsequent arrangement of disciplines in the western academy. The confident nineteenth-century positivism and/or idealism that cultivated and established the present day divisions and distinctions of the social sciences and humanities (and the critical and historical sense of such terms are themselves to be investigated) is exhausted. Confronted by nervous retrenchment into orthodox backwaters or else the continual adjustment of the inherited discipline in order to continue to converse with change, the initial* dispositif *is now clearly in crisis.*

Yet crisis is, of course, the very basis of criticism. This is to suggest a theoretical modality that is neither conservative nor merely accommodating. But if positivism and idealism are no longer able to mirror the world in their languages, if the confidence of a subjective objectivity orbiting around the universal I/eye (humanism) is justly afflicted by doubt, then critical work, whether in literature or anthropology, becomes an altogether more exposed, more vulnerable, undertaking. Whatever the response to such a situation, which, of course, requires recognition as a critical situation and not something to be brushed under the carpet, it becomes clear that a local response, for example restricted to the field of 'English literature', cannot be divorced from a wider comprehension of the crisis-criticism of the humanities and its particular tutelage of 'knowledge'. It is in this direction that the new series of Anglistica *proposes to travel, drawing critical strength, above all, from an interdisciplinary approach that has historically developed within the vicinity of English literary studies, that of cultural studies. But, precisely because it is interdisciplinary, existing between and beyond existing disciplines, neither cultural studies nor the critical perspective proposed for this journal can claim the authority of an intellectual orthodoxy nor the institutional recognition of a disciplinary regime. Being vulnerable is an uncomfortable, but necessary, position to occupy; the only comfort it provides is the perpetual aperture, the opening, through which an intellectual challenge can continue on its way.*

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EDITORIAL

The central theme of this number of *Anglistica* is the exploration of the relationship, frequently antagonistic, between the idea of community and that of modernity in the context of postcolonial literatures and criticism. A critical light is cast on both themes in the writing, work and thought of authors as diverse as Keri Hulme, David Malouf, Bruce Chatwin, Adrienne Rich, Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Gloria Anzaldúa, Homi Bhabha, Richard Wright, Ursula Le Guin, James Clifford, and across genres that include travel writing, science fiction, anthropology, contemporary poetry, Shakespearean theatre and the novel. The apparent antagonism between 'community' and 'modernity' gives way to a mutual interrogation in a landscape in which ideas concerning the subject, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and agency are rendered accountable to the partisan and incomplete historical configuration of their cultural locations.

Whilst nearly all the following essays continue to intonate the literary-critical apparatus of individual texts and authors, they combine to constitute a shared cultural horizon in which limits – of the voice, the body, a language, history and culture – are registered as instances of cultural and political empowerment. As a result, the inevitable disentangling of literary traditions and cultural canons from universal claims does not automatically lead to their abandonment or negation, but rather to their being reinvested and relocated in the light of an ethics and aesthetics of limits. Here traditions are translated, are forever in transit, as the identities and identifications that literature, locality and community sustain respond to a world in which the mirror of an earlier design has clouded over. The previous reflections of the historical 'subject', universally confirmed in a world of unilateral projection, now confront the interruption of others refusing to be the 'other': of Africa refusing to be 'Africa' or natives refusing to be 'native'; of women refusing to be 'women' and men to be 'men'.

Critical sense, understood as the direction of the unfolding of historical and cultural possibilities, invites us to analyse on the move. This is to evoke both the journey of return to a previous history (that of colonialism and the humanist premises of occidental modernity, for example) and the movement sideways, out of habitual definitions that invariably restrict our view to a confirmation of our selves. So, not only does the stable idea of 'tradition' begin to vacillate, but also that of the

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'native'; not only is there a potential undoing of the geopolitical relationship of blood and soil that has so murderously fuelled European nationalism both at home and abroad, but also of the assumed naturalness of the relationship between tongue and territory amongst indigenous groups in the present-day world. There are no simple answers to offer here; the historical evidence of the difficulties of living within these inheritances and their limits, as both modern 'European' confronting 'Third World' migration, or Aborigine communities exchanging their 'dreaming' canvases for Toyota Land Cruisers that permit them to maintain their custody of the land and the song tracks, are equally in question. No one has the patent on 'authenticity'.

At this point, the obvious dissymmetry between the coloniser and the colonised, between the victors and the victims, is transformed into a more complicated vision in which no body, culture or history is able to subtract itself from a diverse 'worlding of the world'. Each, in the language, locality and literature she and he inhabits, is rendered unremittingly susceptible to a worldly enframing that far exceeds the homogenous logic of capital or 'westernisation'. In the historical transfusion of cultures and language, both the terms of the former coloniser (land and property) and those of the colonised (tongue and territory) find themselves before a horizon of wider uncertainty in which logic, even the most powerful, is frequently confuted in historical translation and cultural transformation. Perhaps a potential communion is not so much to be found beneath the sign of capital as in the unruly diversities of histories, cultures and identities discovering themselves in the eventual thinning of one's blood, heritage and history, and a subsequent dissemination and dispersal in the ongoing narration of the world. Here, in a critical context invariably characterised by the multiplication of points of view the following essays seek to reach beyond the presumed uniqueness and authority of occidental universalism. For they simultaneously seek to suggest new ways of connecting the poetical to the political in the emerging modalities of a complex, always incomplete, terrestrial enframing of global becoming.

Iain Chambers

This volume is the product of two interdisciplinary seminars: 'Alterity and the anthropology of writing' (1996-7), 'Literature, locality and the limits of community' (1997-8). The seminars were organised by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti in the context of the PhD programme *Letterature di lingua inglese*, and involved graduates and teachers from the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples, and the University of Rome. The seminars were particularly inspired by the works of Frantz Fanon and James Clifford.

ARTICLES

Language

Silvana Carotenuto

A 'will-to-poetry' in the crossing of space and time: *An Atlas of the Difficult World* by Adrienne Rich

On a coutume d'appeler ce moment l'aporie;
la croisée indécidable des chemins
(Anne Dufourmantelle, "Invitation")

> I see the life of North American poetry at the end of the century as a pulsing, racing convergence of tributaries - regional, ethnic, racial, social, sexual - that, rising from lost or long-blocked springs, intersect and infuse each other while reaching back to the strengths of their origins. (A metaphor, perhaps, for a future society of which poetry, in its present suspect social condition, is the precursor).[1]

According to the Jewish American poet and critic Adrienne Rich, poetry is a 'theatre of decisions about space and time' directed 'by a woman'.[2] If the convergence, intersection and infusion of differences constitute the scene of our contemporary world, these need to be located in 'space' for poetry to testify to the human effort of survival on earth. They also need to be planted in 'time', to allow poetic expression to recover the connection between old and new cultures; the vital synthesis between difference and future. In particular, what is essential to

[1] Adrienne Rich, "History stops for no one", in *What Is Found There. Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1994), 130.

[2] Adrienne Rich, "Someone is writing a poem", in *What Is Found There*, 87. In a decostructionist approach, Elizabeth Grosz, *Time, Space, Time and Perversion. Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995), urges for a renovated feminist investigation into the *spatio-temporal location* of female 'embodiment'.

the crossing of space and time, to their intersected-infused community, is the theatre of decision and enactment realised by "the anger and tenacious love of the women".[3]

This is exactly the dynamics that Rich intends to investigate in *An Atlas of the Difficult World.*[4] She dedicates the first half of the poetic collection to 'place', focusing on the "specifically North American tunnel vision, the particular and concrete meaning of our location here and now, in the United States of America".[5] The second section is entirely devoted to 'time', testifying to what the poet calls "my sense of being engaged in a long, continuing process… a declaration that positioned poetry in a historical continuity, not above or outside history".[6] The intersecting of these two perspectives is realised by a woman who initially drives through the huge landscape of America looking for those 'binding' traits – exile, immigration, urban experiences, solitude, patriotism – that will eventually allow her to approach at the end of her journey a community of female readers. It is to them that, in her journey through time, the woman will offer the poetic re-writing of feminine strength and a female economy, a critique of 'tokenism', the historical memory of the Holocaust in the beautiful 'Easter War Time', the autobiographical and communal Jewish reflection on destruction and survival, death and rebirth. The experience of a located community of female readers crossed with the gift of the poetic re-flection, re-elaboration and re-writing of a specific historical experience substantiates the end of *An Atlas of the Difficult World* with the invocation of a new 'will' to poetry.

[3] The non-separation between 'space' and 'time' is stressed by Adrienne Rich, "What is an American life", in *What Is Found There,* 121. For the 'location' of women, see also her "Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet" (1984), in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry. Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1986), 166. In general, we can say that 'woman' represents a problematic of 'embodiment' related to the contemporary awareness that, as emphasized by Rosi Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference", *New Formation. Technoscience*, 29 (Autumn 1996), 11, "we are situated subjects, capable of performing sets of (inter) actions which are *discontinuous* in space and time" (my italics).

[4] Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World. Poems 1988-1991* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991). Page references will be given in the text.

[5] Adrienne Rich, "North America Tunnel Vision" (1983), in *Blood*, 126

[6] Rich, "Blood, Bread, and Poetry", 180.

In the encounter of 'desire', 'testimony' and 'future', this will is the only change we have to wish, witness and hope for: the advent of a community of care, love and ethics, to be realised here and now, in the difficult immediacy of our world.

Spaces of Proximity

> her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to love them to the point closest to their drives; and then further, impregnated through and through with these brief, identificatory embraces, she goes and passes into infinity.
>
> (Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa")

Adrienne Rich
14 Edgevale Road
Baltimore, Maryland
The United States of America
The Continent of North America
The Western Hemisphere
The Earth
The Solar System
The Universe[7]

Community - Blood - Birth

At the origin of *An Atlas,* there is a woman driving a car. In pursuit of the poet's 'true revolution', that of the crossing of

[7] This is the 'address' of a letter that Rich received when she was young. See Rich, "Notes towards a Politics of Location" (1984), in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry,* 212-212.

"subjectivity and objectivity, vision and technology, together inventing conditions for the spontaneous imaginative life of all of us",[8] the woman drives in 'THE SALAD BOWL OF THE WORLD': California, passing a community of workers who pick strawberries in close communion, their hands stained with blood. Blood is what constitutes the material of the world, what the community shares, what a delivery nurse sees in the human landscape in front of her: "prematures slipping from unsafe wombs" (3). The reference to deliverance is functional to the staging of the birth of poetry itself: in the communal territorial life of America, facing the blood, pain and suffering of its people, poetry is born as the *événementiel* – "what remains unforeseeable, speaking about itself as at the origin of another world, or at another origin of this world".[9] This is the initial problematic of *An Atlas*: the poetic birth of the original trait between alterity and identity, difference and community, the Other and 'I'. This theme is central to Adrienne Rich. In "Dearest Arturo", she writes: "*The great justification for the act of reading and writing fiction is that through it we can be disciplined and seduced into imagining other people's lives with understanding and compassion, even if we do not 'identify' with them.* In the act of writing, this is to feel our own 'questions' meeting the world's 'questions', is to recognise how we are in the world and the world is in us".[10] In 'Someone is writing a poem", she pursues this theme:

> Someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an 'I' can become a 'we' without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images. A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, and images of strangers.[11]

[8] Adrienne Rich, "The muralist", in *What is Found There*, 50.

[9] Jacques Derrida - Bernard Stiegler, *Ecografie della televisione* (Milano: Cortina, 1997), 13 (my translation).

[10] Adrienne Rich, "Dearest Arturo", in *What is Found There*, 26.

[11] Rich, "Someone is writing a poem", 85.

An Atlas practices such poetic 'theory', staging the driving woman's decision to let the 'other' speak by quoting the 'Declarations' of "1.000 tongues which know neither enclosure nor death",[12] the thousand different voices of Indians, Blacks, Chicanos, poor whites and Puerto Ricans: "one says... One says... One writes... One says..." (3). They evoke the hope of getting home free, the remembrance of recent moments in history, the experience of violence and the necessary search for remedy. In the poem, uncanny references to rape, expressed in 'wreckage, deck and waste', are counter-pointed by the movements of the moon and the "light and music still pouring over / our fissured, cracked terrain" (4). Animated by the heartbeats of such memories and images, situated in the difficult crossing of pain and hope, poetry is forced to take a stand: the 'same and ever-changing' language provides a 'spatial geometry' of life (Assia Djebar), an earthly 'geography of emotions' (Amitav Gosh), a 'geography of proximity' sustained in the continuity of a female identity:

> But the woman driving, walking, watching
> for life and death, is the same. (5)

In-difference

This female 'effect' is multifaceted: 'woman' represents "the unity and resonance of our physicality, our tie with the natural order and the bodily earth of our intelligence".[13] She interprets "the core of metaphor, that which lies close to the core of poetry itself, the only hope for a humane civil life. The eye for likeness in the midst of contrast, the appeal to recognition, the association of thing to thing, spiritual fact with embodied form,

[12] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 257.

[13] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977). For the notion of a female 'effect', see Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis. Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Cornell: Cornell U.P., 1985).

begins here. So begins the suggestion of multiple, many-layered, rather than singular, meanings...".[14] At the beginning of *An Atlas*, the driving woman traces an Hermes' entrance into the 'Sea of Indifference' of the American landscape – "deserts, countrysides, birthplaces and cemeteries, old and new battlefields, sea-towns, suburbs, capitals of money and dolor" (6). In the midst of a contrasting territory where "incinerators, landfills, sewage and toxic-waste plants are crammed next to the ghettos",[15] she turns her 'eye for likeness' into a 'cartographic eye of art'.[16] It is a metamorphosis announcing Rich's allegiance to the poetic project of mapping the difficulty of the world; it sustains her political certainty that "The myths and obsessions of gender, the myths and obsessions of race, the violent exercise of power in these relationships could be identified, their territories could be mapped".[17] The 'same, always changing' woman will drive into human experience, writing a poetic atlas of its multilayered contradictions and hopes. It could have been a mural, as an internal voice reminds us. Rich has elsewhere described the mural as "the opposite of possessive, exploitative power: the power to engender, to create, to bring forth fuller life".[18] Here, she chooses an atlas. Against the background of their differences, the two visions both suggest a plural scenario of lines and drawings – the "many false starts and strange go-rounds, many hard choices" of the creative processes[19] – in whose complexity the only mattering difference concerns responsibility in the choice of 'position', 'location' and 'perspective'. The poem ends by beginning: "where do we see it is the question"(6).[20]

[14] Adrienne Rich, "Woman and Bird", in *What is Found There*, 6.

[15] Rich, "What is an American life?", 119.

[16] See Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *L'oeil cartographique de l'art* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).

[17] Rich, "Blood...", 176.

[18] Rich, "The muralist", 49.

[19] Rich, "Foreword", in *Blood*, XI.

[20] In *What Is Found There*, the poet dedicates a chapter to "Not How to Write Poetry, but Wherefore", 190-196.

Insectitude

> It concerns the destiny of a woman, of love, of insectitude.
> (Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints*)

The landscape opens with the primary concern devoted to the 'choice' of perspective: *An Atlas* rejects the locations of 'innocence', 'ingenuity' and 'the fatal attraction of nostalgia'.[21] These elements can only keep agency immobilised, as in the experience of a woman who, in a house in Vermont, broods on her memories in an infinite lapse of 'self-deception', stuck in "that intricate losing game of innocence long overdue" (7, 10). Suddenly, the approaching autumn frost animates the picture of her golden past (the woman's attempts to figure out a life in the ignorance of existing forms of alterity) with the arrival of the 'death of innocence wind', and the announcement of a spider who, weaving its web, "comes swimming toward me" (10).[22] At first, the insect reminds the woman of her father's motto – "*Without labor, no sweetness*" – a motto already dismantled by her long experience of 'grief' and 'rebellion'. Then, the spider's intricate labour realises an unexpected 'sweetness' in the woman's sensibility, a new and respectful sense of communion with alterity as such:

> But how do I know what she needs? Maybe simply
> to spin herself a house within a house, on her own terms
> in cold, in silence. (10)

[21] Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference", 10. As a further motive of contemporary crossings, see the critique of the myth of 'innocence' in Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (London: F.A. Books, 1991).

[22] In relation to Rich's emphasis on the 'feminization of poverty', the 'materiality' of the weaving and spinning spider is linked to "the nineteen year old Philippine woman sewing the difficult side seam along the denim cloth of a Levi's blue jean pant leg in a new industrial zone outside Manila". Rich, "Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life" (1983), in *Blood*, 152. Naturally, the metaphor refers also to the practice of writing itself: "A new web is continually woven, an ever-renewed, always freshly synthesized web of meanings and values" (ibid.).

Nature and Culture's 'Waste'

> The best world is the body's world
> filled with creatures filled with dread
> misshapen so yet the best we have
> (Adrienne Rich, "Transcendental Etude")

> Forms, colors, sensuous relationships, rhythms, textures, tones, transmutations of energy, all belong to the natural world. Before humans arrived, their power was there; they were nameless yet not powerless. To touch their power, humans had to name them: whorl, branch, rift, stipple, crust, cone, striation, froth, sponge, flake, fringe, gully, rut, tuft, grain, bunch, slime, scale, spine, streak, globe. Over so many millennia, so many cultures, humans have reached into preexisting nature and made art: to celebrate, to drive off evil, to nourish memory, to conjure the desired visitation.
>
> The revolutionary artist, the relayer of possibility, draws on such powers... The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees inseparably from art, is not ashamed of any of these loves, and for them conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying and beloved. [23]

Fearless of the natural world, in the sweet silence linking the woman and the insect's inspiring web,[24] *An Atlas* makes its move, versatile and volatile, towards new guiding lines, the mapping that 'binds' its surveyed country. From the animal commune, poetry drives into the field of 'vegetation': from North to South, the journey traces the American landscape in the black eyes and gold petals of the 'girasol'. The flower is dear to Rich's Jewishness for its 'other' name: it is the 'Jerusalem artichoke'. The sunflower is also precious to humanity because whole populations of Indians and hobos have been saved from

[23] Rich, "What is an American life?", 250.

[24] As stressed by Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 170: "If we learn how to read (the) webs of power and social life, we might be able to learn new couplings, new coalitions".

starvation thanks to its natural and vital strength called *Spendthrift* or 'nature''s waste. In its resonance, 'waste' double-binds the poem's thought: in the segregated republic of America destruction and dissipation affect the condition of teachers, poets, astronomers, historians, architects and intellectuals, to the extent that their invaluable work of construction and repair has been seriously threatened by the total 'waste' of human resources.[25] Poetry is left with a hopeless question: "and where are they now?"(11).[26]

The 'Trans-location' of Poetry

> Poetry itself, in our national life, is under house arrest, is officially 'disappeared'. Like our past, our collective memory, it remains an unfathomed, a devalued, resource. The establishment of a national 'Poet Laureateship' notwithstanding, poetry has been set apart from the practical arts, from civic meaning.[27]

[25] See the emphasis given to such a 'position' by Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lecture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

[26] The specifically American relationship between 'wealth' and 'waste' is remarked by the poet who says that "in constructing an ideal of Americanization and equating this with virtue, progressiveness, decency, and worth, the assimilation imperative has also assured that those least able to assimilate - most often because of skin color or gender but also because of ethnicity or religion - could be cast as absolute Other, sentenced to live different laws, treated as victims of inferior biology". Rich, "Resisting Amnesia", 141-142.

[27] Adrienne Rich, "What would we create?", in *What Is Found There*, 19. In "The Soul of a Woman's College", in *Blood*, 190-191, the poet further articulates on the problem: "The loss can be accounted for also in these other terms: … there is no way of measuring the damage to a society when... the woman architect who might have reinvented our cities sits barely literate in a semilegal sweatshop on the Texas-Mexican border, when women who should be founding colleges must work their entire lives as domestics, when poets and community leaders and visionaries and ordinary people with heart and wit, with a tale to tell, a hand that can paint or carve, are dying from uranium-contaminated water and the dumping of carcinogenic wastes. I am talking about the loss, not just to certain communities, but to all of us - deliberate wasting of lives, not natural disaster".

Are they lost for ever? Is this a sign of nihilistic alienation of means and desire? In the search for binding needs, aware of universal dissipation, moved by the urge for remedy, the journey accepts the move to "this unbound land these states without a cause", reaching out for the "margins of life where poetry has been pushed".[28] Here, poetry is written in communion with the landscape itself: "poems in Cantonese inscribed on fog /... the transfer of African appliqué / to rural Alabama... / poems of a weary wall" (12). 'Marginal' communities overflow with written signs tracing the 'boundaries' of what the poem calls 'TransAmerica' (13). This is what Hélène Cixous describes as the very radical strength of the 'passage':

> if ... one remains open and susceptible to all the phenomena of overflowing, beginning with natural phenomena, one discovers the immense landscape of the *trans* - of the passage... it means that the factor of instability, the factor of uncertainty... the *indecidable*, is indissociable from human life. This ought to oblige us to have an attitude that is at once rigorous and tolerant and doubly so on each side: all the more rigorous than open, all the more demanding since it must lead to openness, leave passage: all the more mobile and rapid as the ground will always give way, always. A thought which leads to what is the element of writing: the necessity of only being the citizen of an extremely inappropriable, unmasterable country or ground .[29]

'TransAmerica' leaves a double choice open to poetry: the journey can go north-east to meet 'one layer of Western tradition' in the

[28] Rich, "History stops for no one", 141. In "Notes toward a Politics of Location", 212-223, Rich repeats her critique of 'centrality', 'the Western self-centeredness', 'the arrogance of believing ourselves at the center', 'the presumption that white people are at the center of the universe'. In this respect, her specific question becomes: "You could see your own house as a tiny fleck on an everwidening landscape, or as the center of it all from which the circles expanded into the infinite known. It is that question of feeling at the center that gnaws at me now. At the center of what?"

[29] Hélène Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", in Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Hélène Cixous. Rootprints, Memory and Life Writing* (London: Routledge, 1997), 52.

romantic American heartland; alternatively, it can direct itself south-west to encounter the fragmented lives of un-monumentalized, miscalled, erased peoples. Help echoes in the responsible certainty of "the most truly experimental and integratedly political poet in her time",[30] Muriel Rukeyser who, going South to the discovery of her neglected country, once wrote: "*There are roads to take… when you think of your country… there are roads to take*" (13). Can a road mean the 'unemotional objectivity' of a 'short-circuit rational' realism determined to document violence 'neutrally' (once again, the poem discretely refers to a rape)? If reality is the only 'material' we dispose of, coupled to human capacity to survive through action, the *event*ual road can only be constituted by the immanence of an open, demanding and swift language, an uncertain and inappropriable way of writing poetry, an undecidable community of 'difference' and *'differance'*. As Edward W. Said reminds us, it is a writing that encounters *other* ways of telling:

> Thus to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, our own not least. Cultures may then be represented as zones of control or abandonment, of recollection and of forgetting, of force or of dependence, of exclusiveness or of sharing, all taking place in the global history that is our element. Exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms or... with *other* ways of telling. [31]

Ex-île

An Atlas absorbs this 'quotation' almost literally by deciding to narrate the sufferings and expectations of 'exile' and 'immigration' in an*other* way. Avoiding all temptations of ontology, its first move locates specificity in space. From Limerick, Ireland, Annie Sullivan

[30] Rich, "Not How To Write Poetry, But Wherefore", 159.

[31] Edward W. Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors", *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989), 225.

emigrates to the United States. Just a child in 1847, the woman is already mapped by the experience of the exile from her island's borders at once isolating, protecting and exposing her. Within the borders of the new island of America, she reflects on the expectations of her new life, crossing it with the burden of the old hatred for English colonialism. In the historical link between exploitation and famine, she discovers that poetry is 'older / than hatred'; that its explosive force absorbs all dialectics:

> A potato explodes in the oven ...
> a potato splattering oven
> walls
> poetry of cursing and silence, bitter and deep, shallow and drunken
> poetry of priest-talk, of I.R.A.-talk, kitchen-talk, dream-talk, tongues despised
> in cities where in a mere fifty years language has rotted to jargon, *lingua franca* of inclusion
> from turns of speech ancient as the potato, muttered at the coals by women and men
> rack-rented, harshened, numbed by labor ending
> in root-harvest rotted in field (15)

Before they become symbols or icons, the 'things themselves' inscribe a community of earth and poetry: "*language only medium that gives the time at once stopped and mobile to inscribe the interstitial. The* in**terre**sticiel".[32] Absorbing the position of ex-ile, the 'interstitial' between the two is-lands will provide the small girl with the earthly space on/in which to insert its absolute style – "la langue populaire (par opposition à la langue savante des juges ou de la sophistique, de la rhetorique et de l'argutie juridique) dans la langue, les effets d''étrangèreté' dans la domesticité, l'étranger dans le meme".[33] Within the *lingua franca*

[32] Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 80. In note 26, the editor says: "*Zones in (terre)conscientes*: unconscious, interconscious zones, with a parenthetical earth, perhaps unearthed - if not buried - conscious zones"(115).

[33] Anne Dufourmantelle invite JACQUES DERRIDA à répondre *De L'hospitalité* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997), 23.

of colonialism, a language of concrete, unaggrandized simplicity, a solitary, non-heroic and humble language, will be opposed to the man of genius, the great, godlike creator, supreme source of truth, thanks to its communion amongst women in kitchen, home, domestic spaces... Such a language may not be able to 'document' expectations and disillusionment, the relief and succour of a people – the girl's "America. Meat three times a day, they said" (15). It will certainly 'map' the decision for a new poetic agency: "Slaves - You would / not be that" (ibid.).

The dream-site

This is the space where aspiration can turn into action; poetry can escape all paternal confinements and embrace "the world of dreams".[34] Following the desire-laden unconscious, the poem entitled "(The DREAM-SITE)" writes of a young woman – maybe the same, ever changing 'one'? Maybe she is an*other*? Is it still necessary to trace such biographical traits, ideological communities of intent, essences or similarities? The girl is looking at the "cobwebs, tendrils, anatomies of stars" in the starry vault above her, from the bus taking her to New York – "the tortured geometry / of township and lot" (J. Haines). There, her dream will simply identify with the geographical chance to feel part of an urban community, the meshing together of a multitude of bodies constituting themselves as the corporeal maps of the city's quarters (Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, The Bronx):

> we and all the others
> known and unknown
> living its life (16)[35]

[34] On this poetic land, see Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1993), especially the section entitled "The School of Dreams".

[35] Rich has often noticed that her practice of writing follows 'a known-unknown, continuous-discontinuous thread'. The non-linear movement is important in that it can try "to reveal what it is to be part of the city, part of this republic, as dark-skinned, female, half-assimilated Jew, Sicilian, erotically at risk, legally at risk, living in the face of gay bashing, racism, AIDS". Adrienne Rich, "The Space for Poetry", in *What is Found There,* 38.

Ex-it

"To be at the edge of the earth, facing stars. Aster and disaster…".[36] New York, a lost city whose dreadful light illuminates garbage and barricades, cannot be other than the dream traversing the nightmare in the coalescence of historical and spiritual ruptures. According to Rich, however, this is the condition that makes poetry "more necessary than ever: it keeps the underground aquifers flowing; it is the liquid voice that can wear through stone".[37] From the sky *via* the city, *An Atlas* now moves towards the archaic and eternal Ocean, the water/womb, towards the necessary, urgent, central 'exit, the waking moment of rebirth'. "The ocean (*mer*) is the arm of the mother (*mère*)".[38] The fluidity of poetry's extraordinary strength follows the wave against the rock, exploring the plurality of unexpected senses. The ocean's water flows into the open space and back to its origin, creating a movement which builds "wild calm constructs, momentary, ancient" (17). These are forms that immediately materialise in a sense of 'limit' as a means for 'mental survival' – the poem desires that which a disoriented, passive, desperate and fearful man did not find in himself, he could have learnt from the Pacific. At the same time, beyond its teaching mystery, the wave also materialises a rite of passage crossing conception of life with natural and historical death.[39] Through the sea's golden colours of ashes, blue lights and lunar stone shadows, the poem creates one of Rich's most fundamental images: in a 'world of darkness, crisis and painful contradictions' – which is the only place where 'we live' – the sea can also signify the 'suffocating panic of the birth trauma'. In the poem, we hear incomprehensible evocations of drowned children on the shore, dead messages from slave ships, huge nuclear suns, picnics ending with death...

[36] Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 25.

[37] Rich, "What is an American life?", 122.

[38] Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 102.

[39] See Marc Augé, *Non Luoghi. Introduzione a una antropologia della surmodernità* (Milano: Eléuthera, 1993), 84.

Kind-ness

> another reality; like desert-water kept from the surface and the seed, like the old desert-answer needing its channels, the blessings of much work before it arrives to act and make flower. This history is the history of possibility...
>
> (Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*)

> I work in solitude surrounded by community, solitude in dialogue with community, solitude that alternates with collective work. The poetry and the actions of friends and strangers pass through the membranes of that solitude.[40]

Death on 'slavery ships' – the journey moves onto the scene of primordial 'loneliness'. In the effort to meet its mystery loneliness evokes the white men's nihilism, isolation, displacement, chaos, flux, insignificance and folly. At the same time, the sand of the human desert also writes the figural 'counteragents' to madness: those lonely hermits, with their capacity to cross the desert happily listening to its secrets.[41] Maybe they are listening to the secret of 'gender'? Following the cry along the avenues of Medajool, the Salton Sea, the journey traces the progressive erosion of all patriarchal imprinting in space: the landscape reveals the inscription of the memory of those women who have lived, worked and died in the desert. Like an injunction from another

[40] Rich, "The muralist", 53.

[41] The poet has dedicated a wonderful essay to "The hermit's scream", in *What is Found There*, where she depicts "the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe. It is as if forces we can lay claim to in no other way, become present to us in sensuous form. The knowledge and use of this magic goes back very far: the rune, the chant, the incantation, the spell, the kenning, sacred words, forbidden words, the naming of the child, the plant, the insect, the ocean, the configuration of stars, the snow, the sensation in the body. The ritual telling of the dream. The physical reality of the human voice, of words gouged or incised in stone or wood, woven in silk or wool, painted on vellum, or traced in sand… Poetry… is a carrier of the sparks, because it too comes out of silence, seeking connection with unseen others" (57). The 'happiness' of the hermit could be related to the character of 'textuality' which, as emphasized by Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 102, "is happy when it is read".

story, Maria Eleanor Whallon appears at the edge of the Joshua Tree National Monument; dead at the age of eighteen. She is buried in Twenty-nine Palms. Far for being a 'cross in the desert', her grave signposts the discovery of a lineage of women's strength, pain and survival: "Her mother travelled on alone to cook in the mining camps"(19).

From an*other* story or... from a story of 'others': advancing further South, towards Mexico, the journey meets infinite and total *solitude, loneliness, homesickness, lonely retreat*. These elements are so absolute as to be grafted onto the landscape with the names of Soledad, La Nuestra Senora de la Soledad, the prison of Soledad: that 'college of force' populated by bitterness and self-hatred:

> to face the dragon of primordial loneliness. Getting lost in the abyss of infantile desolation, re-experiencing the agony of loss and separation from the mother, discovering the nameless chaos, the flux and loss of identity and meaning are all aspects of this terrifying space. There, in that only place, the poet seeks to erase the patriarchal imprinting of the symbolic and work on the re-visionary task of reconstructing meaning in female terms.[42]

In Soledad prison, a young man (possibly Jimmy Santiago Baca, once housed in a New Mexico prison where he wrote: "a pebble could come to mean a world") is learning to take care of his wounds, at the same time straining to communicate his struggle to others.[43] If it is true that "we need gentleness, compassion and humour to pull through the ruptures and raptures of our times",[44] man's kindness echoes among his mates, creating the desirable and urgent event of a human community, the revealing encounter with the 'same, ever-changing' other:

> *someone to understand, someone to accept the regard,*
> *the love, that desperation forces into hiding* (21).

[42] "Mother, Daughter, Sister, Lover", 151.
[43] Quoted by Rich in "What is an American life?", 121.
[44] Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference", 24.

'Universal' Patriotism

> We plant flags in blood.
> (Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints*)

Can a 'community of despair' signify a 'universal'? Does Rich universalise 'pain' and 'brotherhood'? Here the "trajectories of two (or more) elements that might not otherwise have known simultaneity. When this happens, a piece of the universe is revealed as if for the first time".[45] And the journey moves "*into the streets of the universe, now*!" (22). The poem confronts one of the major tasks of reflection for our times:

> Within the political context of contemporary postcoloniality more generally, it is perhaps especially urgent to underscore the very category of the 'universal', as a site of insistent contest and resignification. The term 'universality' would have to be left permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent, in order not to foreclose in advance claims for inclusion.[46]

A female voice is fathoming the meaning of love for her country – "The history of this earth and the bones with it?". Her effort is to map all natural and human elements ("Soils and cities"; "shame and hope"; "Minerals, traces, rumors"); singularity ("each of us"); present matter ("now a driven grain, a nucleus, a city in crisis"); the very sense of a community ("global anger and grief"). These traits intersect with the charting of all human

[45] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 8. This takes further account of the 'difficulty' of her poetry as explained in "What would we create", 21: "there are two kinds of poetry: the poetry of 'unverifiable fact' that which emerges from dreams, sexuality, subjectivity - and the poetry of 'documentary fact' - literally, accounts of strikes, wars, geographical and geological details, actions of actual personas in history, scientific inventions... I have tried to combine both kinds of poetry in a single poem, not separating dream from history - but I do not find it easy". Together with Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 59, we could say that part of the difficulty in *An Atlas* concerns the crossing of "the echo of the landscape, the echo in the landscape".

[46] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations", in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Women Theorize the Political* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7-8.

responses to patriotism: closure, escapism, religion, power and powerlessness, peace and justice...

Once again, the nurse returns to the scene. This time, instead of giving birth to the *événementiel*, she is facing death: with the same caring presence, she is cleaning a corpse, blowing on its spirit's embers.

This moment produces its 'difference': against the homogeneity of the imagined community of the nation, the woman – "like and unlike so many others" – identifies patriotism with her caring love for the country's soil. At the core of her belonging, however, poetry maps out the idea that "to love is not of this world, but of another planet. What could be confusing and misleading is that the other planet, which is ruled by the absolute and by faith, is nonetheless located in this world".[47] On this loved earth, the 'double regime' of *An Atlas* decides to mobilise the 'universal' link between humanity and land, belonging and history ("remember / that blessing and cursing are born as twins and separated at birth / to meet again in mourning", 23). In a double crossing the poem pushes patriotism deep into its 'interior' feeling – "the internal emigrant is the most homesick of all women and of all men", while the 'external' fabric of power explains death through 'militarism': "every flag that flies today is a cry of pain" (23).[48]

Manus

From internal to external, from 'political consciousness' to 'radical art': towards the end of the journey, the poem enters its own geographical poesis in the question: "What homage will be paid to a beauty built to last / from inside out?" (24).[49] The

[47] Rich, "Resisting Amnesia", 153.

[48] In "What would we create", 16, the poet explains that "Ribbons, ... like flags, ... keep at bay doubt, confusion, bitterness, fear, and mourning".

[49] See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies, Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), especially, in Part II, the chapter entitled "The Inside Out", 27-111.

sublime moment in which such beauty materialises is Rich's 'poet*h*ics of care', the love for those bodily signs that have entered "the universe – a universe to which writing will be added or on which it will work – *because* they have called attention to themselves by their intensity".[50] In a metanarrative impulse, the driver looks at the woman sitting next to her, her spiritual and bodily presence, her dark hair, her eyes, her *hands:*[51]

> your woman's hands turning the wheel or working with shears,
> torque wrench, knives, with salt pork, onions, ink
> and fire
> your providing sensate hands, hands of oak and silk, of
> blackberry juice and drums
> --- I speak of them now. (FOR M., 24)

Munus

> And all this has to travel from the nervous system of the poet, preverbal, to the nervous system of the one who listens, who reads, the active participant without whom the poem is never finished...[52]

The poem lauds the strength and continuity of the woman's living hands because they can write a new 'reading' space. Crossing the ending 'FOR' with the opening "Dedications" of *An Atlas*'s last poem, the reader enters the writing as the principal agent of Rich's 'intimate poetry', its most loved interlocutor: "you are reading this poem" (25). The atlas shifts all possible directions to meet the plurality of reading locations: an office, a bookstore across the plains' enormous spaces, an underground train, the waiting-room

[50] Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 72.

[51] A beautiful reference to 'women's hands' comes from Toni Morrison, in her lecture at the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. For a relevant interpretation of this corporeal emphasis, see Judith Butler, "Linguistic Vulnerability", *Excitable Speech* (London: Routledge, 1997), 6-13.

[52] Rich, "Someone is writing a poem", 84.

of eyes, beside the stove. The map takes note of all possible reading lights: 'yellow lamp-spot', 'the darkening window', 'on a grey day of early spring', 'by the light of the television screen', 'by fluorescent light', 'your failing sight'. All possible reading needs are accounted for: tiredness, solitude, arrest, liberation, *intifada*, identity with strangers, suicide, resistance, single motherhood. The poem's extreme intention is to give hospitality even to 'absolute alterity' or 'alienation' in language: "I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language / guessing at some words while others keep you reading / and I want to know which words they are" (26). At the very end of its journey to such a multi-layered community, poetry can finally offer the last *gift* on earth: the poem itself, the spell of its precious donation. In the hope that in the common practice of writing and reading 'creators' and 'receivers' together will never be abandoned on their path towards the extremity of life's sense, the essentiality of an ultimate experience:

> I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
> left to read
> there where you have landed, stripped as you are. (26)

Experiential Times

> What is most true is poetic. What is most true is naked life. I can only attain this mode of seeing with the aid of poetic writing. I apply myself to 'seeing' the world nude, that is, almost to e-nu-merating the world, with the naked, obstinate, defenseless eye of my nearsightedness. And while looking very closely, I copy. The world written nude is poetic.
>
> (Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints*)

> this umbombed landscape... is not simply a geographic place, but a time zone, an era in which I, by my very presence in it, am rooted. No one simply passes through. History keeps unfolding and demanding a response. A life

> obliterated around me, of those I barely noticed. Life unmarked unrecorded. A silent mass migration. Relocation. Common rubble in the streets.
>
> (Irena Klepfisz, "Bashert")

> I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist, I am created and trying to create.[53]

"We are left with our naked lives, the brevity of life itself, and words":[54] When humanity is naked, simplicity acquires the status of poetry. As an essential part of Rich's critique of "the indestructibility of poetry, the poem as a vehicle for personal immortality",[55] the second section of *An Atlas* places itself on the material earth, there weaving the historical threads of human life. Having focused on 'geographical dislocations' and 'secular discoveries', the intention, *here and now*, is to testify to 'the painstaking recovery of implicit or internalised histories'. History will be looked at through the privileged eyes of *her-stories*: [56]

> Our theory, scholarship, and teaching must continue to refer back to flesh, blood, violence, sensuality, anger, the bread put on the table by the single mother and how it gets there, the body of the woman aging, the pregnant body, the body running, the body limping, the hands of the lesbian touching another lesbian's face, the hands of the typist, of the midwife, of the sewing-machine operator, the eyes of the woman astronomer, of the woman going blind on the transistor assembly line, of the mother catching the briefest expression on the child's face: the particularity and communality of this vast turbulence of female becoming, which is continually being erased or generalized.[57]

[53] Rich, "Notes...", 212.

[54] Adrienne Rich, "How Does a Poet put Bread on the Table", in *What is Found There*, 41.

[55] Rich, "Blood...", 168.

[56] Said, "Representing the Colonized", 213.

[57] Rich, "Blood", 54-55.

Time – Taste – Touch –Thought

> What is marvelous: the ordinary metamorphosis: these people are subject to alteration, to time. Time is at work. And not just time. Everything that endlessly paints us from the inside. All the blows and messages that knock at the door of the heart, and paint from the inside the troubled nervous agitation we call soul. (The soul, our capacity to suffer…)
>
> (Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata*)

History commences with 'desire': the reconstruction of the *outline* of a female body through her vision, her insubordination, her discovery and error. The first poem depicts the image of a becoming "She" who combs her hair, while reflecting "*I have been the weir / where disintegration stopped*" (29). This instant coincides with her decision to experience "what must be gone through", a precious point of intelligibility syncopating the past and future of her small actions. Time is slow; slowly does the night absorb the encrustation of a century: having freed the nests and webs in her hair, 'She' disappears. It seems merely an 'optic' apparition meant to introduce the 'savor' of the next poem. "That Mouth" speaks of a girl who is trying to free herself from all parental ties. The adolescent picture of her father/mother/sister/brother reveals that "all the transactions have long been enacted /… strange trade-offs have long been made /… Strange trade-offs have long been made" (30).

At stake is the incapacity of the economy to convey "the swallow, the splash of krill and plankton, that mouth / described as a girl's"(30). This voice that comes from this mouth expresses a different wish: "to make *place* – invent place – for a writing that has every latitude to construct an economy as it goes".[58] Offering herself as the testing ground of the importance of an*other* economy for women, thus utilising the formula that "strict economies of means release a powerful concentrate of feeling",[59] 'Marghanita' counts up the debts of a dead artist who

[58] Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 68.

[59] Rich, "History stops for no one", 136.

was "her enemy… Her love. Her twin" (31). The complex relationship of love-hatred between the dead woman and the young woman is set off against the unexpected emergence of memories of childhood – "when one is other, and passes to the other" (Michel de Certeau). For example, Marghanita recalls a boy with whom she used to be in communion, alliance and poetry: "... she breathed their breath, he hers" (31). It is the rising of the 'male' possibility within her that makes the desolate scene of the woman's death even more striking: in the house, alone, she asks: "where are the others?" Around her, there is only the lingering presence of adolescent objects writing a female 'politics of dress and adornment': faked nails, a set of veils, a necklace of pearls. These objects encounter the small possessions of the dead woman: a small book wet with rain, some photos from an album, colors, paints, glycerin tubes, and salt balls.[60] The strict economy of these feminine 'luxuries' – the 'maternal matrix' – marks the *rélève* of an archaic memory: the visionary and familiar objects constitute matter to 'touch', feel and observe, the precious relics of a female history otherwise obliterated, what ignorance would dismiss as rubbish. Marghanita feels that "Without these... no purpose for the future / no honor to the past".[61] Touching them, she meets her own 'time' – "a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal; the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other".[62] In a sudden hunger, her decision is to take care of it all:

> And so
> hating and loving come down
> to a few columns of figures,
> an aching stomach, a care taken: something done. (32)

[60] This passage seems to refer to an overcoming of the "the patriarchal dualistic and hierarchical division into acting subject and acted-on object: each conceives the other, each is mother and daughter interchangeably, is both subject and object, is dark 'drenched' in light, reciprocally". "Mother, daughter, sister, lover", 129.

[61] Ibid., 147.

[62] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 221.

Is Marghanita experiencing 'hunger for reintegration', that is the "return to her mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her, to find the mutual confirmation from another woman that daughters and mothers alike hunger for, pull away from, make possible or impossible for each other"?[63] The poem only says that something has been 'done', adding that something can be realised also in 'witnessing' and 'criticism'. This is why the next poem pays its tribute to the bodily stance of 'Olivia', a fundamentalist Christian militant. Her identity is a trace left in those political meetings where she is remembered for her sense of timing, her head bent to take 'notes', as if to engender what Hélène Cixous calls 'love':

> I love (reading-writing). Notebooks. The earth before the book. The notebooks of Kafka, of Dostoevsky, of T. B., of C. L., the breaths, the cries, the pebbles. When I read, I look for the notebooks of the book... to take down what engenders, what causes, what will be a book.[64]

Rich's version is that "when the staves of history fall awry and the barrel of time bursts, some turn to prayer, some to poetry: words in the memory, a stained book carried close to the body, the notebook scribbled by hand – a center of gravity".[65] In the poem, gravity centres on a dramatic metaphor: at home, Olivia's notes turn into "the exhausted theater of your sleep". What is the subject of this scene? The love with which the woman is remembered moves into the understanding of her 'mental' stance: 'tokenism' used to place her "at some pure point of mastery", tokenism was her fatal mistake.[66] Olivia believed she knew life better than the ones who were exploiting her, convinced of her freedom and ability to move on both sides of the world, higher than anybody else. In time her presumptions

[63] Ibid. 218.

[64] Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 57.

[65] Adrienne Rich, "A Clearing in the Imagination", in *What is Found There*, 115-116.

[66] In "Split at the root. An Essay on Jewish Identity", in *Blood*, 114, Rich explains that tokenism is "the myth of the 'special' woman, the unmothered Athena sprung from her father's brow".

would result in 'death': "You were a woman walked on a leash. / And they dropped you in the end" (34).

The End

> the concentration camps... when we write in these circumstances, it's because we are another person, we are the other. Perhaps I am going to die but the other remains. In this situation it is the other who writes.
>
> (Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints*)

> a politics based on concrete, heartfelt understanding of what it means to be Other. We are women and men, *Mischlings* (of mixed parentage) and the sons and daughters of rabbis, Holocaust survivors, freedom fighters, teachers, middle - and working class Jews. We are gay and straight and bisexual, older and younger, differently able and temporally able-bodied; and we share an unquenched hope for the survival and sanity of the human community. Believing that no single people can survive being only for itself, we want a base from which to act on our hope.[67]

In the end… there was 'memory': in 'Eastern Wartime', a young Jewish girl sits in streetcar number 29, reading classical books, learning Latin, working on her assimilation. Memory records her sensations wired to the streetcar stove's smell of kerosene, her woollen gloves, her eyes on the falling snow. All of a sudden, sight moves onto the capital letters of unexpected telegrams announcing 'concentration' and 'extermination'; an unbearable void frames the news of Jewish births and deaths, deportation and hell. In the East of Western Europe, far from America, in the same century, the impossibility of believing in such a horror paradoxically crosses the possibility of ever being able to teach children the necessary love for life, together with the reality of racist hatred:[68]

[67] Adrienne Rich, "If Not With Others, How" (1984), in *Blood*, 203.

[68] See Tzvetan Todorov, *Gli abusi della memoria* (Napoli: Ipermedium, 1996).

how do you say *unfold, my flower, shine, my star*
And *we are hated, being what we are?* (38)

We are the young girl who starts her deadly journey; *we feel* compassion for her humiliation in the bleak land of abjection, denudation, stolen adolescence and de-humanisation; *we follow* her hopes in a youth and beauty that fail to save her from the hands of perverse doctors in horrid experiments. Confronted with historical destiny, interrupted by unbearable horror, epic memory narrates of two classmates who, feigning to be a romantic couple walking in the wood, reach the secret bases where resistance is being organised. The poem records their dream of "living in the forest as in a folksong", stating their resolute intentions: "you don't intend to die / too much you think is waiting in you for you" (40). Time leaps to meet up with expectations: in the lag, the young couple in search of an end to degradation reappears in an old woman's eyes. At the end of the century, the woman feels their experience – 'knowledge', she calls it – in the connective tissue of her body: the couple has been haunting her, accompanying and marking her loyalty to the millions of people who were annihilated and also to those who tried to rebel, write, leave a trace. As a historical legacy, memory knows that the Holocaust is impossible to communicate, but also that it is impossible to forget: "Remember me / Bear it not" – says Hamlet where 'time is out of joint'. In *An Atlas*, at the tragic crossroad of its tasks, memory utters its refusal to know the time of 'restoration' and 'framing'. Instead, its 'carnal, intrusive, inappropriate and bitter' essence flashes on the graves dispersed by contemporary evil, vandalism, and dubious secularism. It lights on survival, hospitality and pride, the human dreams of revolution, peace and generation.[69] It

[69] The articulation of 'pride' still provokes interrogations and questions in the poet: "in the plenitude of life, if I feel linked by a texture of values, history, words, passions to people long dead or whom I have never met, if I celebrate these linkages, is this what I mean by pride? Or am I really talking about love?" Rich, "If Not With Others, How (1984)", 204.

sees the Nazi violence taking place nowadays in Berlin or Mississippi; in the contemporary community of oppressed women in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; in the streets in Romallah, where the silence reminds us of the timeless fear in gasmask lines.[70] Gradually, never satisfied with institutionalised history, memory gains the 'present' of the poem from where to ask for 'recognition'. In a wired circularity, its initial appearance as the opening of an historical scene – "Memory lift its smoky mirror" – it metamorphoses into the final 'lifting' of a progressive knowing:[71]

I am standing here in your poem unsatisfied
lifting my smoky mirror. (44)

'Progressive' Life

La memoire ne cherche à sauver le passé que pour servir au présent et à l'avenir.

(Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*)

I long to see the widest range of progressive issues defined as Jewish issues everywhere in this country. I long to see the breaking of encrustations of fear and caution, habits of thought engrained by centuries of endangerment and by the spiritual

[70] This is Rich's idea of historical 'community of action': "Don't we have to start here, where we are, forty years after the Holocaust, in the churn of Middle Eastern violence, in the midst of decisive ferment in South Africa - not in some debate over origins and precedents, but in the recognition or simultaneous oppression?". Rich, "Notes", 226-227.

[71] In the poem, the life and death, the destruction and survival of a whole community is given through the initial link between personal sensations and historical messages, knowledge wired to posterity, the 'string quartets' of death woven by the needle of dreams to the reality of natural light, knots of collective memory, the 'woman wired in memories', the rolls of films emptying the emergency of the present.

> sterility of white mainstream America. I long to see Jewish energy, resources, passions, our capacity to celebrate life pouring into a gathering of thousands of American Jews toward 'turning the century'. I believe the potential is there. I long to see it stirred into glowing life.[72]

In *An Atlas* memory witnesses the progressive understanding of life, glowing on those moments in time that, in sudden illuminations, articulate the contemporary pain and suffering of the world: the experience of a caring community, love in relationships, friendship, the singularity of a Jewish woman's desire. If it is true that the ego operates within an imaginary order in which it strives to see itself reflected in its relations to others, then a "Tattered Kaddish" can bear witness to the material community of the mourners congregating around the crumbled and tightened lives of all the suicides we have loved and who have loved life – "*when* they could" (45).

> *the lover and the loved, home and wander, she who splits*
> *firewood and she who knocks, a stranger*
> *in the storm, two women, eye to eye.*
> (Adrienne Rich, "Transcendental Etude")

Love is crossed with 'outrage', as happens to the victim of an accident who died *when* least prepared, and her surviving lover – "uncertain who she is or will be without you"(47). The dynamic between the two women is dear to Rich. Stating that "Survivorhood isn't a stasis: the survivor isn't an artefact, despite efforts perhaps to reify or contain her", she has often stressed the need to mourn "the dead and the survivor alike, defying such ideas as that the fittest survive or that victims 'choose' their destiny".[73] 'Victim' and 'survivor' are names given by helpless pride and pretentious knowledge, both unable to "take the mirrors and turn them outward / and read your own

[72] Rich, "If Not With Others, How" (1984), 209.

[73] Rich, "History stops for no one", 141 and 139.

face in their outraged light"(48).[74] This 'light of outrage' reminds us that, in the midst of generalised historical and social unprotection, there is no claim to single safety or protection – the only radical chance is for us to shake prayers, gods and commonplaces, to pierce the steady surface of history, to break out towards the other edge of life, the 'aftermath of silence'.[75] In *An Atlas*, 'For a Friend in Travail' evokes a woman who has been paralysed during an operation. In the 'time to speak to you', Rich's poetry of intimacy describes the woman's nightmares on encountering the "Relief, appallment, of waking" (51). Her doubt as to the daily possibility of time itself – "How day breaks, when it breaks" – is counter-pointed by the poetic awareness of "Love for the world: we are part of it". On the *other* side, the bleak reality is that, if "we write from the marrow of our bones", her life will suffer from lack of vital expression forever: "How the poppies break from their sealed envelopes / she did not tell". The other is far away, in a place that the poem can only interrogate in despair:

> What are you going through, there on the other edge? (51).

"From... the perspective of the 'edge' rather than the end, it is no longer adequate to think or write culture from the point of view of the liberal 'ethic' of tolerance, or within the pluralistic time frame of multiculturalism".[76] Against all 'liberal' notions of life,

[74] As explained by Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 95: "This will become clear, if we listen to one possible definition of 'survivre': 'surviving'. Writing is a question of survival: living in spite of, living more, escaping. Multiplying existence".

[75] According to Rich, "What if", in *What Is Found There*, 242, this is what substantiates the 'power' of poetry: "the tension between subject and means, between the is and what can be. *Edges* between ruin and celebration. Naming and mourning damage, keeping pain vocal so it cannot become normalized and acceptable. Yet, through that burning gauze in a poem which flickers over words and images, through the energy of desire, summoning a different reality"(my italics).

[76] Homi K. Bhabha, "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt", in Lawrence Greenberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York, Routledge, 1992), 57.

the 'other edge' of *An Atlas* shows the desire to "get some sleep like an ordinary person", of a woman who is still haunted by childhood memories and whose description is loyal to Rich's own reserve:

> sometimes I feel inadequate to make any statement as a Jew; I feel the history of denial within me like an injury, a scar. For assimilation has affected my perceptions; those early lapses in meaning, those blanks, are with me still. My ignorance can be dangerous to me and to others. Yet we can't wait for the undamaged to make our connections for us; we can't wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous. There is no purity, in our lifetime, no end to this process .[77]

Initially, the poem re-stages a letter in which Rich's mother expressed her view of the 'assimilation principle': *"Some of them will be / the most brilliant, fascinating / you'll ever meet / but don't get taken up by any clique / trying to claim you / Marry out, like your father..."*[78] The letter's obsession adds to the historical horror of the death of six

[77] Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), in *Blood*, 122-123.

[78] This poem is actually devoted to the gentile maternal lineage that Rich, "Split at the Root", 102-103, describes as "the inveterate romantic heterosexual fantasy, the mother telling the daughter how to attract men (my mother often used the word 'fascinate'); the assumption that relations between the sexes could only be romantic, that it was in the woman's interest to cultivate 'mystery', conceal her actual feeling)". In the same essay, focusing on "survival tactics - heterosexuality as protection. My southern gentile white woman's culpability" (ibid.), the poet explains that "my mother once wrote to me, criticizing my larger Jewish choice of friends in college: ... I wonder if that isn't one message of assimilation - of America - that the unlucky or the unchaining want to pull you backward, that to identify with them is to court downward mobility, lose the precious chance of passing, of token existence. There was always within this sense of Jewish identity strong class discrimination. Jews might be 'fascinating' as individuals but come with huge families who 'poured chicken soup over everyone's head'" (111-112). The poetic image of 'going back home and sleep as everybody else' may come from the poet Irena Klepfisz who, interrogating her existence, felt that "had circumstances been different", she would have enjoyed "the possibility of having lived 'an ordinary life', the life of 'common things, gestures and events'". Rich, "History stops for no one", 136.

million Jews, producing the woman's desire for respite and peace as well as her own internal division – an unbearable 'exile of ashes'.[79] The pain is so strong as to provoke the urgent necessity for compensation; as the poet knows, "every group that lives under the naming and image making of power of a dominant culture is at risk from this mental fragmentation and needs an art which can resist it".[80]

> lightness or 'lighting' as naturalized in the production of the visual image as form of likeness, a mimetic light; and a 'lightness of being' that is apparent in contemporary art practice – a 'lightness' that is neither levity nor devoid of agonism or suffering, a lightness that come with ironic reversal, an alleviation and unburdening, a demonic defiance, a vernacular violence, a subversion of the sententious, a lightness, or a quality of visible light, that has its own specific gravity, and represents a struggle for survival.
>
> (Homi K. Bhabha, "Unpacking My Library... Again")

In 'Two Arts', resistance comes from the artistic practice of injecting alterity into the pulse of a 'star'. It is an image that, for the poet, hints at the "unknown potentialities – voices, visions, spiritual and ethical – of which we and the Jewish star on my neck serve me both for reminder and a goad to continuing and changing responsibility".[81] In the poem, the starry pulsation materialises into the pure electricity of a 'statue'. As if to indicate the refusal to monumentalise pain and sufferance, on one side, its light negates all economical appropriations of the 'other' who is "like cinders on the floor" (53), "a membrane of trilobites /... helm of sweat

[79] For the burden of the 'assimilation', see Hannah Arendt, *Il futuro alle spalle* (Bologna: 1981), in her interpretation of Kafka's life. According to the philosopher, by describing situations in which a man - from nowhere, without biography or home - looks for a normal existence in the respect of rights that others can naturally enjoy, the writer represented the typical condition of Jews, a whole humanity treated as Jewish.

[80] Rich, "Blood", 175.

[81] Rich, "Notes", 227.

and dew" (54).[82] On the other side, light as an artistic icon of love and beauty, cannot but provoke an appeal to the 'production', action and *agency* of one's own life: a voice reminds us that "you have to raise it up, you / have a brutal thing to do" (54). Can the 'brutal thing' refer to the impossibility of evasion from the instant of extreme temporality when the 'utter darkness' of death has to be faced with 'clear eyes'?

> An eye, coming in closer.
> Under the lens,
> lashes and veins grow huge
> and huge the tear that washes out the eye,
> the tear that clears the eye. (55)

If tears create 'A Clearing in the Imagination' for creation to take place,[83] the very treasure lies in the eventful 'time' of the 'in-between' all possible temporal dichotomies:[84]

> this is the ancient hour
> between light and dark, work and rest
> earthly tracks and star-trails
> the last willed act of the day
> and the night's first dream
>
> If you could have this hour
> for the rest of your life. (56)

[82] This includes an appeal to 'poetic appropriation': "Every practice, every activity that takes place outside of a couple can engender jealousy, concern. But maybe art more than all: in so far as, it must be said, there is an infinite *jouissance*, and it is produced between you and writing, you and painting. And what is more, it is non-communicable. Because it remains mysterious, so that the other has difficulty appropriating it; and that perhaps he or she does not want to appropriate it, moreover. There is an indefinable 'intimacy': by the fact that it develops, that it emerges, it's as if it were a great threat, first of all to the other's capacity for appropriation and even his or her desire for appropriation." Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 94.

[83] This is the title of an essay in *What Is Found There*.

[84] Rich, "Resisting Amnesia", 143. 'In-between' these strong moments lies the political effort of Rich's new 'mapping': "What must be mapped as a new international space of discontinuous historical realities is, in fact, the problem of signifying the interstitial passages and processes of cultural difference that are inscribed in the 'in-between', in the temporal break-up that weaves the 'global text'".

The spatial community gained in the initial journey meets here "the community of time, a belonging in terms of temporal existence, *coexistence*".[85] For Rich, the co-existence of the radical opposites of death and life marks "the moment where the critical instance, the conscious instance is weakest... the moment of proximity to myself".[86] In this 'in-between' of life and death the poem signals the end of its journey through time, the dramatic moment when desire, testimonial practice and hope for the future intersect, in the 'pulsing, racing convergence' of a new *will* to poetry. 'Final Notations' first offer a complete *résumé* of all the topographical difficulties of the experience of *An Atlas* ("it is like an occupation of a city or a bed"), its mental and corporeal efforts ("it absorbs the whole body"), the progress of its temporal advent ("you are coming", "you are taking", "you are going away"), the difficulty of its eventual realisation ("it might appear as imposition or unwanted confrontation").[87] Then, poetry writes its temporal gift of a 'will' that resonates with the renovated and open possibility of our humanity:

> It will be short, it will take all your breath
> It will not be simple, it will become your will. (57)

As Rich emphasises, the only change of life is in the fluidity of poetry, its infinite on-going process of radical transport and 'crossing':

> This kind of art... is not produced as a commodity, but as part of a long conversation with the elders and with the future (And, yes, I do live and work believing in future)... a tradition in which political struggle and spiritual continuity are meshed. Nothing needs to be lost, no beauty sacrificed. The heart does not turn into a stone.[88]

[85] See Roberto Esposito, *Communitas* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998).

[86] Cixous, "We Are Already in the Jaws of the Book Inter Views", 106.

[87] Rich emphasizes that our change is "sustaining the blows of the material and imaginative challenges of our time... write... of fields of stress that cannot be evaded, public crisis of neglect and violence... to bear witness to a reality from which the public - and maybe part of the poet - wants, or is persuaded it wants, to turn away". "History stops for no one", 115.

[88] Rich, "Blood", 187.

Demetrio Yocum

If only Caliban were a virus: a literary-clinical analysis of colonial alieNation

You 'dear reader!' are used to thinking of people as intact entities; The doctor sees that people are made up of component parts; the human body is a well-oiled machine. The cell biologist sees a collection of cells - colonies really - all living in harmony to produce a supercolony or 'nation' called a "man"... a pluralistic multiethnic society.
(Richard Noel Re, *Bioburst*)

Mastery of language affords remarkable power.
(Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*)

Colonial psychiatry, after World War II, represented one of the principal disciplinary fields in which the Western imperialistic design, by means of degenerated medical theories, overtly manifested its sociocentric and ethnocentric vision. As 'objects' of the European psychiatric gaze, entire populations and their cultures became pathologised; while scientific researches were dedicated to the pathological constitution of the non-Western brain. In this distorted and perverted 'logic' of disciplining and punishing, Frantz Fanon's revolutionary activity in Algeria as a psychiatrist clearly stands out as one of the most lucid attempts to reveal the political project inherent in the Western manner of analyzing colonial madness.[1]

[1] See Françoise Vergès, "Chains of Madness, Chains of Colonialism", in Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness* (London: ICA, 1996).

It is in relation to the importance of situating Fanon's political activity within psychiatry that Isaac Julien's film, based on the biography of the controversial Martinican political activist, emerges as particularly significant. One of its great merits is to demonstrate how Fanon's political engagement was closely intertwined with his reformist medical practice by innovatively assembling sequences of interviews with historical documentaries and fictional reconstructions. Julien's film makes it perfectly clear how colonial Algeria, and specifically the years spent in the psychiatric asylum of Blida-Joinville, offered the theoretical ground for Fanon's political assertions:

> If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization.[2]

Even more significant is the fact that Fanon's own introductory words indicate that his pioneering text *Black Skin, White Masks* is a clinical study entirely structured on the basis of a medical socio-diagnostics in relation to the linguistic *édifice complexuèle* of the Antillean:

> No, speaking pidgin-nigger closes off the black man; it perpetuates a state of conflict in which the white man *injects* the black with extremely dangerous foreign bodies.[3]

In order to reveal the pathologies inherent in colonial discourses and the psychological consequences of racism in the colony-asylum, Fanon employed an extremely specialized medical language. In the chapter "The Negro and Recognition", in *Black Skin, White Masks*, there is a powerfully problematic clinical observation in which all of Fanon's 'political' diagnosis concerning Martinique seem to merge; it is the identification of the island's disease as a neurosis:

[2] Isaac Julien, *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks* (Normal Films, 1995).

[3] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 36 (italics mine). Hereafter cited as *BSWM*.

> It is not just this or that Antillean who embodies the neurotic formation, but all Antilleans. Antillean society is a neurotic society, a society of "comparison". Hence we are driven from the individual back to the social structure. If there is a taint, it lies not in the "soul" of the individual but rather in that of the environment. The Martinican is and is not a neurotic. (BSWM, 213)

The same specific pathological nervous disorder, or better, the same colonial diagnosis adopted for the Martinican community as a whole, was reformulated thirty years later by Fanon's fellow countryman Edoard Glissant. In his *Caribbean Discourse*, Martinique is again compared to a patient consumed and corroded by a linguistic neurosis. Examining the psychological, sociological, and philosophical implications of cultural dependency, Glissant locates the symptoms of the Martinican linguistic neurosis not only in the way language is structured, but equally in the way all institutionalized discourses, whether economic, political, or religious, represent a crisis of a supposed national identity:

> we see in Martinique, even today, that one of the extreme consequences of social irresponsibility is this form of verbal delirium that I call habitual, in order to distinguish it from pathological delirium, and which reveals that here no "natural" transition has managed to *extend* the language into a historical dimension. Verbal delirium as the outer edge of speech is one of the most frequent products of the counterpoetics practiced by Creole. Improvisation, drumbeats, acceleration, dense repetitions, slurred syllables, meaning the opposite of what is said, allegory and hidden meanings - there are in the forms of this customary verbal delirium an intense concentration of all the phases of the history of this dramatic language. We can also state, based on our observation of the destructively non functional situation of Creole, that this language, in its day-to-day application, becomes increasingly a language of neurosis. Screamed speech becomes knotted into contorted speech, into the language of frustration. We can also ask ourselves whether the strategy of delirium has not contributed to maintaining Creole, in

spite of the conditions that do not favor its continued existence. We know that delirious speech can be a survival technique.[4]

These critical social analyses by the two Martinican authors stress the equation of a medical diagnosis of disorder with the process of a pathological, dis-figuring *alie*N*ation*, (a specifically linguistic one, that can be defined as a neurotic *mise en scène du dire*). It came to be re-examined in 1983 by the anthropologist Francis Affergan:

> An assimilating unity... what can be denominated an environment of malady.We are in the presence of non-pathological symptoms which tend to develop and represent sub-categories of norms as deviances to those same norms. There is no absence of norms so to speak, but the presence of several heterogeneous and simultaneous ones. Malady is symptomatic of health and anomaly at the same time. This non-pathological malady is experienced as continual adaptation to anomaly.[5]

The importance of this quotation lies in the ambiguity it expresses. As in the ambivalent linguistic *marronage* delineated by Glissant when the Martinican author refers back to delirious speech as a political and social site of resistance, it appears extremely difficult in Caribbean social and cultural contexts to draw a line between communal and individual, between health and anomaly, as so clearly stated by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

This paper is deliberately spatially schematic and structurally fragmentary, and takes its controversial cue from Fanon's clinical representation of Antillean society in order to introduce political questions inherent in linguistic acts of self-fashioning and cultural re-appropriations. To deal with such a complex subject, this paper will introduce the figure of Caliban, the Shakespearean character of *The Tempest*. This approach has

[4] Edoard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse. Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 128-29.

[5] Francis Affergan, *Anthropologie à la Martinique* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1983), 45 (my translation).

been employed to escape, or better, to explode a simple dualistic opposition. As will be discussed later, the Western trope suggested by the conquering magician Prospero and his enslaved and "deformed" island subject Caliban has been far too heavily exploited in psychoanalytic theories of colonialism to articulate the complementary attitudes in both the colonizer and colonized. Fanon himself strongly dismissed this problematic interdependency in his criticism of Octave Mannoni's colonial theories. Yet the reading of Shakespeare's play as a 'redundant', mythical narrative, in which the two heroes or anti-heroes Caliban and Prospero are this time distanced, might be useful in approaching Fanon's clinical analysis of Antillean society.[6] As clearly expressed in *The Tempest*, Caliban's mastery of Prospero's language articulates sounds of the "alien" self and cultural status recognizable at the linguistic root of the Fanonian neurotic community. Therefore, I will begin by tracing forward from Shakespeare's play to disrupt the very unities that have been found in that work.[7] Moreover, instead of drawing a linear trajectory, a challenging medical-scientific metaphor will be deployed. This could be defined as physiological, since this paper will try to anatomize Shakespeare's *corpus* in order to separate out its parts and examine one of its well-functioning organs, *The Tempest*, where the 'deformed' slave Caliban this time will be analyzed as a virus.[8]

Why not? Consider *The Tempest* as a whole, as a sort of biological organism that we could dissect with a knife or a scan. To do this we need to deconstruct the work in two stages. First, if one traces the itinerary of Caliban's journey, from Shakespeare's

[6] It was Claude Lévi Strauss who, in *Anthropologie Structurale*, elaborated the concept of redundance to examine native Brasilian mythical, discursive structures. He then applied it to the reading of the canonical, classical myths of Oedipus and Parsifal.

[7] This analysis, therefore, does not claim to propose an interpretation. But it will consider bases for interpretation and ask questions about the process leading to interpretation. Finally it will implicitly ask where interpretation actually leads us.

[8] The reason why this paper pursues a physiological model is to be found in the attempt to relate *The Tempest* to contemporary life. If that adaptation is not possible in some way, *The Tempest* ceases to be a significant part of one's own cultural heritage.

play to the mythopoeic dimension it has come to represent worldwide, the succession of different versions will take on a certain simultaneity.[9] As a result, the linearity of the story will be replaced by semi-independent events in a multidimensional space. This will reconfigure the affected 'organic' body – the text as a whole. Such an analysis will show how *The Tempest*'s organic structure, by virtue of its virus Caliban, can be spatially and chronologically disparate but still function as a text/organ.[10] At a second stage, the experimental analysis calls for an investigation of Caliban's infectious ability to break down the defense mechanism of the literary and poetical host.

Organic intoxication

> *You taught me language; and my profit on't is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language.*
>
> (William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*)

> *We have so many words tucked away in our throats and so little 'raw material' with which to execute our potential.*
>
> (Edoard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*)

If only Caliban were a virus! The title is of course a provocation. But it is also meant to jolt us into some realizations about the way we read and how *The Tempest* has been read. We read science in one way, literature in another. We seldom connect the two, yet perhaps we should. Unless we have been over-academized and too

[9] M. Serres clearly expresses the prerequisite assumption for this phase: 'the plurality of disjointed spaces, all different, is the condition of the series that assembles them'. See Michel Serres, *Hermes* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1996), 48 (my translation).

[10] Some literary critics today still consider the life of the author and the life of the text as equivalent. Others are more likely to suggest that the text is similar to an organism regardless of the author. In physiology we have the same situation but without the psychological associations. See Richard Noel Re, *Bioburst* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

compartmentalized, we should realize that our scientific and literary paradigms interlap or at least should generate a mutual critical fieldwork.

But what is at stake here is a simple question: is the metaphor of literary wholeness not a biological one? The humanities include the sciences and vice-versa, for as our mathematical and physical patterns of the world change, so does our understanding of social, literary and political models. The Copernican revolution certainly influenced our religious views and made a new literature possible. Descartes, Newton, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Einstein have greatly helped rewrite literary and political models as much as Dante, Goethe, Freud, or Shakespeare.

The Tempest, it appears more and more evident, is still a healthy work that can easily become infected by subsequent interpretations, where by interpretation we understand a process of normalized closure. Not only are its images subject to infection, but so is its language:

> Since everybody knows that language is a heterogeneous, variable reality, what is the meaning of the linguists' insistence on carving out a homogeneous system in order to make a scientific study possible?[11]

The same might be said for the literary critic who tries to impose a homogeneous system on a given linguistic text. In other words, it is no longer possible for linguists or literary critics to ignore the inherently fractal nature of language configurations.

Fractals, we remind ourselves, have indeterminate boundaries and are controlled by unexpected attractors. No two trajectories in this system interlap or repeat. Thus, the system no longer obeys an either/or imperative or the true/false, yes/no imperative of logic. No longer is it possible to say definitively whether a given element, in this case Caliban as a virus, is "in" the system or "outside" the system. From now on it will be

[11] Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota University Press, 1987), 100.

necessary to recognize that a language, a text, can expand and interfold in infinitely complex ways.[12]

Therefore, as far as I am concerned, we have only just begun to read *The Tempest*. Most of the works that refer to this text have, over the centuries, tried to restrict the information it contains within carefully controlled boundaries.[13] From Renan's political thesis in which the energetic slave passionately declares: "no mortal has the right to subjugate another, and, whatever happens, revolt is a most righteous duty",[14] to Retamar's illustration of Caliban as the symbol of the oppressed in South America, many writers have represented Shakespeare's character as a political symbol of the colonized subject. I would suggest that this type of analysis is a double edged sword. We cannot know consciously everything that is simultaneously present in a language text, even

[12] This is perhaps why Stephen Orgel reminds us that: "all interpretations are essentially arbitrary, and Shakespearean texts are by nature *open,* offering the director or critic only a range of possibilities. It is performances and interpretations that are closed, in the sense that they select from and limit the possibilities the text offers in the interests of producing a coherent reading. In what follows I have undertaken to be faithful to what I see as the characteristic *openness* of the text that has come down to us, and to the variety and complexity of its contexts and their implications. To do this is to indicate the range of the play's possibilities; but it is also to acknowledge that many of them (as is the nature of possibilities) are mutually contradictory. There is nothing anomalous in this. The text that has come down to us is poetry and drama of the highest order, but it is also, paradoxically, both *less* and *more* than literature. It is, in its inception, a play script written to be realized in performance, with broad areas of *ambiguity* allowing, and indeed necessitating, a large degree of interpretation". See Stephen Orgel, "Introduction", *The Tempest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 12 (italics mine).

[13] Several critical studies have focused their attention on Caliban's spatial-temporal ability to inspire various artists over the centuries. Among the many I have found extremely suggestive Rob Nixon's essay, "African and Caribbean appropriations of *The Tempest*", *Critical Inquiry,* XIII, 1987, in which the author offers an interesting thesis of how Caliban, with the end of the 1970s, has ceased to embody a strong political character; Margaret Paul Joseph's *Caliban in Exile*, (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1991), which provides an historical genesis of the character from Montaigne to K. Brathwaite; Alden T. T. Vaughan & Virginia Mason Vaughan's *Shakespeare's Caliban* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), an original and well-documented cultural survey of Caliban's figure, in which the authors track him through history, literary criticism, theatre and cinema.

[14] Passage quoted in M. P. Joseph, *Caliban in Exile*, 34.

if we had all the time required to explore exhaustively the possibilities of all its possible reading trajectories. But we do have the power to decide on parameters and perspectives that are compatible with our needs for regulation. Thus, the best we can do in terms of literary criticism is identify or suggest categories of conventions which for specific readings introduce a degree of predictability or recurrence into the text. These conventions function, if we go on exploiting our physiological metaphor, like sympathetic hormones in biological systems and are themselves partially controlled by the literary critic's disorderly running brain waves. If, therefore, we can learn to live without the finality of a single closed and faultless reading, this paper proposes that the provisional 'viruses' and 'hormones' we have currently selected will beneficially assist us in our incessant search for their equally temporary substitutes.

To elucidate this point let me start with the description of two scenes. Both of them are related to the question of language. The first articulates the beauty, accumulated in a rhythmic balance between sound and time, of Shakespeare's verse in one of its most moving incarnations, where Caliban's speech bears witness to the secrets of the island:

> Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
> Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
> Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
> Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
> That if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
> Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
> The clouds methought would open, and show riches
> Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd,
> I cried to dream again.[15]

Caliban's inability to express himself without babbling and stumbling paradoxically on poetry like "a thing most brutish",[16]

[15] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, III, ii, vv. 133-141 (Milano: Garzanti, 1993).

[16] Ibid., I, ii, vv. 358-359.

at the same time produces these notable verses. Here it is tempting to compare Prospero's linguistic teaching scheme to the aggressive violence done to Caliban in order to humanise him in one of the most original modern sequels of Shakespeare's play, written by the American Rachel Ingalls. This re-writing is set in a hypothetical, middle class, contemporary American community, where Caliban this time has acquired the shape of the fugitive acquatic monster called Aquarius:

> [he]... has been taught human speech at an Institute using an electronic gadget which gave him a shock every time he got something wrong. The teaching scheme was run by a Dr Forest, who was severe but emotionally detached. When he went away, Kelsoe and Wachter used the electronic prod and other devices - the chair with the straps and the fitted eye-glasses - to tease and torture. They had also, he later told her, taken advantage of their positions of power in order to force his participation in various forms of sexual abuse, some of which she hadn't known of before.[17]

Pursuing our physiological trajectory, it should be remembered that unexpected attractors in the discursive structure may send the next points in diverging directions. Similarly, Ingalls' literary description is powerfully evocative of colonial mental hospitals in Algeria before the arrival of Fanon, as illustrated in Julien's film where the director exploits precisely the image of Fanon as a legendary liberator. In one section, we become the spectators of a scene set in Blida-Joinville where Fanon does not hesitate to challenge colonial medical and social regulations. In this powerful scene we watch Fanon, dressed in the psychiatrist's white coat, authoritatively walking through the wards in which patients are chained. Commenting on a story told by Irene Gendzier, which is amazingly reminescent of Julien's scene, Françoise Vergès remarks: "This symbolic gesture of removing chains takes on an even greater meaning when one thinks that these chains evoke the chains of slavery which had been forced

[17] Rachel Ingalls, *Mrs. Caliban* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 22.

upon Fanon's ancestors by French men".[18] Likewise the imaginary chains of dependency and inferiority which bind colonized, 'gabbling' Caliban.

'Ban, 'Ban, Cacaliban!

LANGUAGE IS A VIRUS FROM OUTER SPACE
(William Burroughs, *Exterminators*)

And he was going: "Ugh... Ugh... Ugh..."
... "I think he's in some kind of pain. I think it's a pain cry."
And I said: "Pain cry? Then language is a virus."
(Laurie Anderson, "Language is a virus")

As the main Western trope for the portrayal of the colonial self and the colonized other, the West and the Rest, Prospero and Caliban came to represent one of the fundamental myths that have sustained (or failed to sustain) nationalist political movements in the Third World. At the same time, Shakespeare's figures have been employed in psychoanalytic accounts of colonialism as the substitute mythical narrative of the Oedipus complex.[19]

As Stuart Hall interestingly observes in Julien's documentary:

> One can understand... [Fanon's]... use of the metaphor of the master/slave dialectic as a kind of historical, Hegelian rereading of the Oedipus. Because I think Fanon himself is also deeply concerned with the struggle with the father. And this is what is at the centre of his text. The struggle between the black son and the

[18] Vergès, "Chains of Madness", 48.

[19] Fanon's clinical study stresses the fact that it is definitively impossible to locate in Martinican society psychic or social structures based on the Oedipus complex: "Like it or not, the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes.... But, putting aside the question whether the ethnologists are not so imbued with the complexes of their own civilization that they are compelled to try to find them duplicated in the peoples they study, it would be relatively easy for me to show that in the French Antilles 97 per cent of the families cannot produce one Oedipal neurosis". (*BSWM*, 152).

> colonizing father; it's that conflictual black/white, father/son relationship that is not outside the reach of the Oedipus complex.[20]

Black Skin, White Masks, in its most historically contextualized dimension, is precisely a harsh critical reply to Octave Mannoni's psychoanalytical reading of colonial society, as Fanon himself reminds us in his Introduction and in the fourth chapter:

> In the fourth chapter I examine a work that in my opinion is dangerous. The author, O. Mannoni, is, moreover, aware of the ambiguity of his position. That perhaps is one of the merits of his evidence. He has tried to account for a situation. It is our right to say that we are not satisfied. It is our duty to show how we differ from him. (*BSWM*, 15)

> M. Mannoni takes it upon himself to explain colonialism's reason for existence. In the process he adds a new complex to the standing catalogue: the "Prospero complex." (*BSWM*, 107)

According to Mannoni's *Psychologie de la Colonisation*, colonization induces dependency attitudes in both the colonizer and colonized: the former needs to be reassured in his superiority while the latter, by sustaining the former's ego, shows his need of a father figure and protector symbolically represented by the former. Mannoni locates this typical relation in the literary characters of *The Tempest*, where Caliban attempts to revolt not because he is exploited, but to change the master he serves. Refusing Mannoni's theorization of the dependency complex, Fanon seems fundamentally to suggest that Prospero and Caliban do not need each other. The interdependency theory, according to Fanon, generates only alienation:

> regardless of the area I have studied, one thing has struck me: The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation. Therefore I have been led to consider their

[20] See I. Julien, *Frantz Fanon*.

> alienation in terms of psychoanalytical classifications. The Negro's behavior makes him akin to an obsessive neurotic type, or, if one prefers, he puts himself into a complete situational neurosis.... The attitude of the black man toward the white, or toward his own race, often duplicates almost completely a constellation of delirium, frequently bordering on the region of the pathological. (*BSWM*, 160)

The pathological traits of alienation emerge clearly from Fanon's vision. In his own psychoanalytic language any analysis of colonialism would be partial without considering the essential role of alienation.[21] In privileging the psychic dimension, he locates in linguistic articulations the pathological mechanisms of colonial alienation. According to his analysis, language is the necessary passage to social (dis)alienation in a neurotic community enslaved by its own linguistic articulations: "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a colonization" (*BSWM*, 17-18).

If Fanon's text opens with a chapter, *The Negro and Language*, dedicated to the linguistic question, the reason is to be found in his fundamental observation on how linguistic behaviour is pathological for both colonizer and colonized. The practice of language in colonial social structures is neither transparent nor neutral. Historically, the colonial space was structured in a context in which the colonizer's language was established as the legitimate and dominant language and imposed itself as the norm to measure other local uses. According to Fanon, the statutory dependence of the colonized was marked by the usage of a linguistically limited code denominated by the colonizer as pidgin-nigger. Pidgin-nigger is

[21] Robert Smith, following Fanon's line of thought which leads to the colonized's psychic disintegration, can state: "The colonized personality is alienated not only from his color and, traditional community but, most importantly, through the dynamics of colonialism/racism, he is alienated from his very being as a Black person". See Robert Smith, "Fanon and the Concept of Colonial Violence", *Black World*, 22, 7 (May 1973), 26.

essentially the minimum of communication imposed by the imperatives of production and domination. Its typical characteristics are short, syntactically poor sentences, limited vocabulary and vagueness of statement. The black man's 'amputated' speech disclosed the subject's own psychic and social alienation, as its fundamental existence depended entirely on the other (the interiorized colonizer), against whom the black man measured and defined his own deformed social identity.

As a result of the colonizing act, the Martinican community is structured as a community only to the extent of the inferiorization undergone by Creole language, which, in the end, is subject to disappearance under the pressure of the valorising practice of French. 'Inferiorization' and 'valorization' are the two processes which dynamically characterize the Fanonian linguistic community, determining at the same time the action of forces between its extreme poles. The bottom of this social hierarchical system is occupied by the black man who does not know how to express himself outside Creole language. At the top, there is the white man who speaks only "the French of France, the Frenchman's French, French French" (standard French). In between the two poles there is an intermediate level characterized by pressure from the top and pressure from below, an area of the articulation of an atypical phonological and morpho-syntactical mixture which might be named, according to the variations, 'creole French' or 'French creole'. In this interplay, Creole and French represent the primal, fundamental idea of personality and social identity. It is impossible to conceive the Fanonian linguistic community without Creole and French. Social identity is conceived in the 'articulating lines' of its style, lexis and syntax.

If one reads this in the general frame of colonial interlocution, each pole represents a status which is not only social, but also ontological; in which the process of social alienation implies the "superiority of the white" and "the racial inferiority of the black".[22] Consequently, the double function of

[22] On this problematic relation between race and language, see Aimé Césaire, *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969).

the colonizer's language is displayed. First, it is a source of frustration and the cause of the compensation phenomenon as observed in the colonized race; second, it is the instrument supplied in order to be "europeanized", to become alienated from one's own culture:

> The black man who has lived in France for a length of time returns radically changed. To express it in genetic terms, his phenotype undergoes a definitive, an absolute mutation.... The habitually raucous voice hinted at a gentle inner stirring as of rustling breezes. For the Negro knows that over there in France there is a stereotype of him that will fasten on to him at the pier in Le Havre or Marseille: "Ah come fom Mahtinique, it's the fuhst time Ah've eveh come to Fance." He knows that what the poets call the *divine gurgling* (listen to Creole) is only a halfway house between pidgin-nigger and French. (*BSWM*, 19)

> The Negro arriving in France will react against the myth of the R-eating man from Martinique. He will become aware of it. He will practice not only rolling his R but embroidering it. Furtively observing the slightest reactions of others, listening to his own speech, suspicious of his own tongue - a wretchedly lazy organ - he will lock himself into his room and read aloud for hours - desperately determined to learn *diction*. (*BSWM*, 21)

The colonized's linguistic behaviour, as examined by Fanon, is inseparable from the condition of subjection. The colonized knows that to progress in the social hierarchical structure he must adopt ruptural attitudes which consist in abandoning all linguistic usage linked to his subaltern status. To practice the dominant language is the obliged token for identification with the ruling class: "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains mastery of the cultural tool that language is" (BSWM, 38). This 'instrument', says Fanon further on, is: "the key that can open doors which were still barred" (*BSWM*, 38). Alienation is displayed in the colonized world by linguistic articulations of rupture: syntactic repression and

the abandoning of local idioms. At this stage, the same 'desiring gaze' with which the colonized man looks at the colonizer's property is exposed: he attempts to appropriate the values and symbols of his master by exploiting a hypervalorised and hypercorrect language. For the colonised the dominant language is simultaneously a goal and a weapon. As Caliban in *The Tempest* reminds us: "First to possess his books".[23] The mastery of the dominant language is not simply the interiorisation of originally inaccessible values, it is the sine qua non condition for the conquest of symbolic power and the possession of the world articulated and delineated by that same language.

But the principal gap of the colonised counter-discourse lies in the fact that it does not escape the colonizer's forms of expression or their preconceived schemes of thought. As proposed by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the discourse articulated by the decolonised raises the problem of the reappropriation of the colonizer's language as a means of expression in the context of modernity.[24] But what subversive and transforming power could the colonized themselves have over this very language?

So far too many answers to this question have already been given. This paper wants to suspend any univocal conclusion. It will conclude, instead, with two directions suggested by the physiological approach. The first leads us to *Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs*. In this collection of poems, the Ugandese poet Taban lo Liyong, like Caliban, expresses himself as follows: "[I]... was taught language/ And what I do with it/ But to curse in my own way?'[25] The second directs us towards another book of experimental poetical writing, *Islands*, by the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite. In the poem "Caliban", the author reproduces the musical rythms of the limbo: "a dance that is said to have originated after the experience of the cramped conditions

[23] Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, III, ii, v. 90.

[24] See F. Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

[25] Passage quoted in Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban*, 265. The interplay between the poet and Caliban is evident at the same nominal level.

between slave-ship decks of the Middle Passage". In one sequence, Caliban himself affirms:

And
Ban
Ban
Cal-
iban
like to play
pan
at the Car-
nival;
pran-
cing to the lim-
bo silence.[26]

Apparently, no medical cure is yet available for the 'red plague' of Caliban's linguistic curse: he remains 'possessed' by language. Extremely contagious, it seems to germinate from a poetically metacalibanic virus.[27] And if, as in Brathwaite's *X/Self*, Caliban uses a computer to write, trying to be modern by learning Prospero's new technological languages, similarly, new 'viruses' will continue seriously questioning our scientific knowledge, and challenging our disciplining boundaries.[28]

[26] Ibid., 263-264.

[27] On the concept of Caliban's linguistic possession as a metacurse, see Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Caliban's Triple Play", in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *"Race", Writing, and Difference* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[28] Once again, Brathwaite's title 'nominates' Caliban by referring to Aimé Césaire's play *Une Tempête* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993), in which the black slave Caliban wants to be called *X*.

Antonella Sarti

Silence and the Edge of Translation: Keri Hulme's *the bone people*

It is not the literary past, the facts of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language...We must never cease renewing those images, because once we do, we fossilise.
(Brian Friel, *Translations*)

A national culture is not a folk-lore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover a people's true nature. A popular culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence.
(Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*)

Silence, translation and the desire for the 'other'

According to the Maori tradition, we step backwards into the future and forwards into the past. Identity, as an on-going process within the retelling of the past, present and future, is seen as the site of creative power in the fiction of New Zealand Maori writer Keri Hulme. Difference constitutes cultural identity in *the bone people.*[1] It is a difference that dwells in the

[1] Keri Hulme, *the bone people* (Wellington: New Zealand Women Spiral Collective, 1984; repr. London: Picador, 1985). With Patricia Grace, Keri Hulme was the first Maori woman writer to be published in New Zealand. Significantly, this occurred in the years leading to the labourist turn headed by PM David Lange (1986-1989), which inaugurated a consistent opening up of publishing and cinematographic

experience of becoming, and which interrupts coherence through dispersal and fragmentation. Instability, unsettlement and doubleness – Maori and/or *Pakeha*,[2] man and/or woman – are the ambiguous modalities that re-site cultural and social boundaries for Keri Hulme. Difference maintains the defence of the multiplicity of divergence at the base of intercultural translations;[3] the absence of difference is homologous to non-existence for Hulme.

This article suggests how in *the bone people* the author seeks to decenter the desire for the 'other' through the subversive power of silence that demolishes the ghettoes of Maori ethnic art and identity, and subsequent definitions of authenticity. This leads to a search for the identity of the Maori community embodied in the recreation of new patterns of language to oppose not only to English socio-linguistic and historical silencing, but also to that caused by a self-defeating Maori insistence on subalternity.[4] Thus silence (as speechlessness or displaced logocentrism) will be discussed as an articulate response to repression, and a reaction against the historical-political invisibility of the 'diverse' perpetrated by the colonial 'Word'.

Hulme's novel strikes a resonance with many works in the postcolonial debate that denounce the 'affiliation of knowledge with power' through the objectifying *worlding*

activities to the subaltern cultures in the country (Maori – the larger minority – and Pacific Islander, Chinese). *the bone people*, which was published by a private association of New Zealand feminist artists (the Spiral Collective) was also the first Maori novel to be awarded the prestigious Booker Prize in Great Britain (1985) and ever since it has been regarded as 'the New Zealand Maori novel'.

[2] A Maori word for non-Maori people, referred to the first European immigrants and to their descendants.

[3] See Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Donald F. Bouchard, ed., (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977); Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968) (repr. Columbia University Press, 1995).

[4] The self-destructive Maori acceptance of the condition of subalternity was discussed recently also by Maori writer Alan Duff, the author of *Once Were Warriors* (Auckland: Tandem Press, 1990); see Antonella Sarti, ed., *Spirit Carvers: 18 interviews with New Zealand writers: Cross-Cultures* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).

Logos.[5] We also find in Julia Kristeva's historical-materialistic semanalysis a similar ideological frame to Hulme's fiction.[6] Kristeva, too, aims to dismantle the order of language and to defend silence (the poetry of silence) as the anarchic cry against any socializing or totalizing assumption of language. Hulme also demonstrates – as Terry Eagleton once theorized – how it is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt.[7]

Among the many critics and feminist authors debating the politics of identity and exploring the art of silence in order to depose authority and the authoritarian power of language, King-Kok Cheung depicts another kind of comparative terrain to Hulme's ethnopoetics.[8] In *Articulate Silences* the Asian American critic evokes the silence formed between violating voices and the creation of new historical memories. In opposing the logocentric tendency to regard silence as an absence, she analyses the many tongues of silence struggling to come into being in minority women's writing. She challenges Eurocentric views of speech and silence as 'polarized, hierarchical and gendered', and shows how silences (voiceless gestures, textual ellipses and authorial hesitations) can be articulate.

What we see in *the bone people* are modes of inarticulateness that decenter, disseminate and interrogate authority – linguistic, moral, ideological and gender authority. Opposing the concept of the margin, Hulme deploys the theme of silence to address the

[5] See, of course, Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), and Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Penguin, 1991). For more, specifically related to the theme of the 'response-ability' of silence, see: Iain Chambers, "Signs of Silence. Lines of Listening", in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question. Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), 47-62.

[6] See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

[7] Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkley: California UP, 1976), passim.

[8] See King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993).

minority experience finding its voice to counter history. She contrasts the insistence on the idea of the ethnic self (or cultural 'authenticity') with the need to transcend ethnicity altogether. As such, *the bone people* is to be included in the debate on the hybrid condition of the native as either a silent object (Spivak)[9] or an articulate subject (Bhabha): a debate between those who uphold the possibility of aligning with the subaltern and those who say this only serves to reinforce the imperialist view of ethnic differences.[10]

Economic and political dominance has long been augmented by the knowledge of the other to increase the knowledge and power of one's position towards the other. Yet in the process of translation from domination to understanding the 'other', the issue is whether it is really the subaltern's voice speaking or rather the voice we have attributed to the 'other'. Rey Chow argues that the alter-native can really speak only after the recognition of the untranslatability of the subaltern discourse into an imperialist discourse. She introduces the idea of the native as the indifferent, defiled image that stares back at us, mocking our imprisonment within our false image.[11] She identifies the act of returning the gaze – a witnessing gaze – with the native's refusal to be an image or a reflective mask. This is what we encounter in Simon, *the bone people*'s mute child, who, though not a native, disruptively takes that role.

Returning the gaze is deceptive precisely because it refuses to deceive, thereby frustrating the assumption that there is always something else beneath the mask. Prior to Chow, Hulme describes how the perpetrator, caught under the subaltern's gaze

[9] "The subaltern subject, whose identity is its difference, cannot speak.... Being the margins or the silent/silenced center marked by epistemic violence", Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: MacMillan, 1988).

[10] See Paul Gilroy, "Cultural Study and Ethnic Absolutism" in Grossberg, ed., *Cultural Studies*, 187-198; and Benita Parry, "Resistance Theory/Theorizing Resistance, or Two Cheers for Nativism", in Francis Barker, ed., *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester UP, 1994), 172-196.

[11] Rey Chow, "Where Have All the Natives Gone", in Angelika Bammer, ed., *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (Indiana UP,1994), 125-151.

and consumed by the image of the 'other', lives in a violent identity with him/her. In *the bone people*, she denounces the representation of the Maori subject as equal to a fossilised and silent object. The inscription of the native under the sign of authenticity both by the dominant culture and by Maori clinging to their pre-colonial identity is for Hulme equivalent to an act of psychological, social and cultural violence. It is comparable to setting the native alongside the savage, and thus reducing the heterogeneity of a culture to a romanticised demand for a single mythic memory and collective identity:

> She told him what a noble fighter the old Maori was, and the school texts repeated it whenever they mentioned the Maori at all. God, what lies we get taught. Exemplify the honourable incidents, and conceal the children who got the chop, the women and the old men stampeded over cliffs, the bloody endless feuding... yet the gallantry according to the code was there, the wit in the face of inevitable death... besides, he (Joe) grins to himself, as a race, we *like* fighting. We're not too far from the old people, Kerewin and me.... Thinking about old horrors somehow lessens the impact of the new ones.[12]

Clearly, falsified images of a native culture accelerated assimilation policies in their intention to suppress the difference: "Maori were expected to become Europeans in those days. It was thought that the Maori could not survive, so the faster they became Europeans the better for everyone".[13] It is interesting to see how, as recently as 1994, the same concept was vehemently pointed out by the New Zealand Samoan writer Albert Wendt, while commenting on the value of community life:

> The quest for the self is eventually determined by the quest for the group. The self can only be whole and strong when linked to others – the whole environment, society, cosmos. In Samoa we talk of the self in terms of *itu*, sides – we perceive others in multi-

[12] Hulme, *the bone people*, 338.

[13] Ibid., 359.

> sidedness. You can only be whole/complete when those sides are in harmony. We also change our perceptions of one another; there are no universally true ways of perceiving the self. In the whole colonial process, colonizers control how the colonized are perceived and perceive themselves; nearly all that is indigenous is devalued or erased or changed in that process.... When I was at school in Samoa or New Zealand, our histories were labelled 'prehistory' or 'folk-history'.[14]

For Keri Hulme the idea of the 'other', together with the concept of authenticity, is considered a 'fetishized cultural commodity', a subtle example of control through reinforcing the position of the subaltern and thus reducing native arts to mere anthropology.[15] A point of view also held by contemporary New Zealand Maori writer Patricia Grace:

> As I have said in my first novel, *Mutuwhenua, The Moon Sleeps,* I think the two (Maori and Pakeha) cultures can live side by side and still not be assimilated or integrated as long as there is equality and respect. Yet, in all the things that Maori people try to do to retain and regain their language and culture there are always barriers. As long as we are thought of in terms of our myths and legends, arts and crafts, singing and dancing, that is acceptable and fine. As soon as we are seen to move outside those boundaries we come up against suspicions and barriers.[16]

This point is amplified in Trinh T. Minh-Ha's words: "Today, planned authenticity is rife; as a product of hegemony and a

[14] From an interview with Albert Wendt (Auckland, June '94), in Sarti, *Spirit Carvers.* Albert Wendt is the well-known author of *Pouliuli* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1977), *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1979), *Ola* (Auckland: Penguin, 1991), *Black Rainbow* (Auckland: Penguin, 1992).

[15] As later defined by Gareth Griffith in "The Myth of Authenticity", in Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, eds., *De-Scribing Empire* (London: Routledge 1994), repr. in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 237-241.

[16] From an interview with Patricia Grace (Wellington, August 1994), in Sarti, *Spirit Carvers.*

remarkable counterpart of universal standardisation, it constitutes an efficacious means of *silencing* the cry of racial oppression".[17]

By discarding the mythic cult of authenticity as a substitute for the colonial perpetuation and recuperation of power – cultural identity is offered in exchange for the political cul-de-sac of essentialism – Hulme argues that the true alter-native's voice is only to be found in a continuous interweaving of spiralling cultures, the product of fringe-dwelling. It is to be found in the 'liminal space of cultural hybridity and differences' where, as Homi Bhabha insists, signification occurs. In *Kai Purakau* Hulme comments:

> There is a melding of two cultures going on here. It's not happening fast enough and it's only a small group of people, but the arts are leading the way. Though there's been a huge amount of subjugation of one culture by another, there's still an *edge* where there's something bloody exciting happening.[18]

In opposing the idea of difference reduced to the authenticity of the 'other' – an 'other' which is only to be thought of as an imaginary projection consolidating the imperialist self and denying real alterity, as the 'other' is incorporated within the 'identical' or else expunged for being different – Hulme turns to the concept of critical difference that lets one see the other within oneself, the other of one's self. Here authenticity is considered to be a relative, shifting, contested and context-bound site; a never-ending, unwinding translation of cultural and personal differences that commence from individual marginality. Hulme's attempt to integrate Pakeha and Maori cultures involves transgressing and violating existing definitions. For actual Maoriness does not necessarily depend on unconscious, biological or genealogical reasons, but on a feeling of being Maori. In other words, it depends on an individual's desire for

[17] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 168.

[18] *Kai Purakau* is the famous New Zealand movie directed by Geoff Murphy. The quote is from Jonathan Dennis and Jan Bieringa, eds., *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington:Victoria University Press, 1992), 171.

making his/her way back/forward into Maori culture and language in order to syncretically re-imagine and re-edit it. And there to live it. Yet this prospect has encountered the resistance of the well regarded New Zealand critic C. K. Stead who upholds the idea of "unwilled otherness"[19] and has consequently accused Hulme of not being 'authentically' Maori,[20] and thus of writing in, through and out of a misappropriated 'other' identity.

In its fundamental projection of art as renaming through intercultural synthesis and sites of identity, *the bone people* is a subversive 'return of the gaze' not only to imperialist attitudes but also to imperialist narratives.[21] It contests *their* naming, and their objectifying knowledge of native realities. For Hulme, the reversal of the Manichean binarism of centre/margin which produces the indigenous-other equation is to be reached through a constantly shifting performance of intellectual and physical 'creolization'.[22] She depicts this creolization process through a shared and conflictual journey to the origins by the descendants of both torturers and victims, both the colonizers and the colonized. In order to overcome the 'horror' of the individual past (symbolising the horror of a colonial past of dispossession that still causes a feeling of either oppression or guilt) her characters travel through the amnesia-tunnel of violence, alienation, and near-death towards the recovery of memory, in a

[19] See Margery Fee, "Why C. K. Stead didn't Like Keri Hulme's *the bone people*: Who Can Write as Other?" *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 1 (1989), 12-30.

[20] Keri Hulme is of mixed ancestry including an eighth Maori.

[21] See Christine Hamelin, '"Fitted to his own web of music': Art as renaming in *the bone people*", *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 10 (Dec.1993), 107-120.

[22] Also similarly expressed by Edward K. Brathwaite: "to be creole did not completely mean or imply satisfaction, stabilization or completion of a process; quite the opposite, in fact. To be creole in the changing world of the early XIXth century was to be in a state of constant bias from/towards ancestral cultures", in "Caliban, Ariel and UnProspero in the Conflict of Creolization. A Study of the Slave Revolt in Jamaica 1831-32", in Vera Rubin and Arthur Tuden, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Slavery in New World Plantation Society* (New York: N. Y. Academy of Sciences, 1977), 44.

journey corresponding to a historical re-reading and re-routing. The past becomes as malleable as the present.

The journey ends with the re-shaping of the Maori inheritage and Maori community life at the heart of present-day New Zealand multicultural society with the literal and figurative building of a new *Marae* (the meeting-house in the Maori tradition).[23] The *Marae* is to be seen as the site for the embrace of spiralling cultures, that 'liminal space of cultural hybridity' and of syncretic translations of New Zealand's varied cultural experiences, including the revisitation of the Maori one as it survived and lived on throughout the colonial process. This re-edited Maori cultural heritage is to be seen as an integrative part of New Zealanders' search for identity.

It is relevant then that the journey for identity, leading to the rediscovery of this Maori heart, is facilitated through the go-between role of Simon, an orphaned Irish child and late immigrant, who does not directly belong either to the Pakeha or to the Maori side. Shipwrecked on the shores of the South Island, Simon is marginalised socially (he is the delinquent son of a drug dealer who has abandoned him) and psychologically (for he cannot speak); and he is emotionally disturbed by haunting memories of the violence inflicted on him by his real and surrogate fathers. It is his disturbing presence and strategies of resistance that paradoxically act as intercultural intermediacy in reconciling the opposite identity poles (Maori/Pakeha) of his last two, but no less violent, appointed guardians. Both are fringe-dwellers. Kerewin is a white *Prospero* of Celtic and Maori origins who is also an aggressive, eclectic intellectual and an artist lost for inspiration. Joe, a Maori *Caliban*, is an outcast, bone-carver and latent homosexual, spiritually broken and dislocated from his original language and culture.

[23] A point of view also recently expressed by New Zealand critic David Eggleton while commenting on a widespread tendency in contemporary New Zealand culture, in "A slight angle to the Universe", *New Zealand Books* (August 1997), 11: "Homi Bhabha and his ilk have persuaded us that a colony, or ex-colony, has no memory. It is lobotomised, amputated, surrogate, secondhand. Pacific-drifting and busy staving off bicultural schizophrenia, New Zealand has Maoritanga as the mystic centre of Aotearoa, as its ultimate reference point, helping legitimise a (healthily) bastard culture".

Alongside the growing identification of the victim with the victimizer in the triangular Joe-Kerewin-Simon relationship, Hulme illustrates that differences are not only between but within ethnic contexts.[24] In the shared experience of migration and diaspora by Maori, Pakeha and non-Maori/non-Pakeha peoples in New Zealand, we encounter the idea of identity as a syncretic intercultural translation, as a re-iteration of desire continuously subjected to the interplay of history, culture and power (as in James Clifford's words, "a politically contested and historically unfinished process").[25] This concept of identity as a syncretic translation challenges many of the stereotypical premises of ethnicity as embodying 'indigeneity' or 'otherness'. As Stuart Hall has observed, "we are all ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are".[26]

So, *the bone people* suggests that inscribing a people, a minority, under the ethnic attribute is akin to thinking of their culture as doomed to being 'other'. Hulme proposes that ethnicity is not something to be passed on from generation to generation, but a dynamic and constantly reinvented pattern of identity. And in insisting on her characters' split and blended identities, especially in the focal chapter describing Joe's meeting with the *Kaumatua* – the traditional repository of Maori ancestral oral lore – the author rejects the concept of ethnicity as a sign for marginalisation, dispossession and displacement. On the contrary, she proposes ethnicity as a site of personal identity and diversity as a site of individual (neither racial nor social) being. Regaining Maoriness becomes a willed process of becoming.

For Emmanuel Levinas, Western philosophy's devotion to the idea of totality has consistently excluded and silenced what it fails

[24] See Williams, "Keri Hulme and Negative Capability", 108.

[25] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.

[26] Stuart Hall, *Black Film, British Cinema*, ICA Documents 7 (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1989) repr. in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 223-227. See also Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart), 222-237.

to contain.[27] Cast into postcolonial terms, the myth of universality has long acted as a strategy for imperial control, absorbing the other within the category of the same. Levinas' thesis of ethics as the site of difference, or the place where alterity and the multiple can be maintained without being annihilated within universality, draws us close to both *the bone people* and to the critique of the occidental episteme and its obliteration of all in pursuit of the same. For Levinas, alterity lies in the immediacy of the other's face, a face that is present in its refusal to be contained, and for Hulme the 'other' is simultaneously the unconstrained other's face and the one that forces us to face our selves.

In the innumerable conflicts between self and other, torturer and victim, Pakeha and Maori, ethnicity and authenticity in *the bone people* silence becomes the means of escape – the break in the continuation of any unilateral history. Silence resets all meanings and escapes the binaries. It sets one in a relationship to infinite others, and in a new relationship to language.

Reclaiming lan(d)guage

> *Now we are on my home ground, foreign territory.*
>
> (Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing)*

> *Landscape is people. The people are the landscape,* tangata whenua, *people of the land. The spirit of one's landscape must go beyond borders and barriers. A whole people denied their landscape and their own way of talking about the landscape, denied space to develop their own mythology within the world of contemporary communications is a theft of a more terrible kind than depriving them of their own past.*
>
> (Barry Barclay, *Te Rua)*

Moving from the same towards the other is to loosen language from surrounding structures; and to move in language, Hulme

[27] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, trans. *Totality and Infinity* (London: Editions Duquesne, 1969).

suggests, is like moving across land, which is to propose a new understanding of the landscape of the mind:

> Language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's.[28]

In *the bone people*, as in New Zealand's present history, regaining Maori language is accompanied by the right to reclaim ancestral land. Indeed, displacement for the Maoris has occurred both in language and space throughout the colonial and post-colonial experience. For Hulme place is language; it provides an identity in constant flux and change, a discourse in process. Language and landscape thus cannot be thought of separately; they are an amalgam kneaded together through myth, where myth provides the revitalising energy of a counter-discourse to official history:

> [What is your idea of myth?]
> Once I wrote on my tax return I was a Myth Maker, they didn't appreciate it at all. (The Tax Department has no sense of humour). It is like accruing loadings and shadows to language. You're accruing myths for yourself to make sense of things. We attempt to make a pattern out of it or derive some meaning or find out the why. That is what myth is to me... The land reacts on people rather oddly in New Zealand. I think maybe it has to do with being born in an earthquake-prone area. We don't take anything for granted. We explore. That is why I think we weave myths and religions. We explore ourselves and ways of being because we want to make some kind of sense of why we are here and why we have thought and consciousness... The quintessence of telling stories is making stories up. But the deeper meaning is that there is often nothing else you can trust, because stories are what makes sense.[29]

[28] Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 171.

[29] From an interview with Keri Hulme (Okarito, March 1995) in Sarti, *Spirit Carvers*.

Along the fault-lines where *Terra Firma* stands for both *Terrain and Terror*,[30] on the cutting edge (New Zealand) where language becomes a marginal territory emerging out of conflict and struggle, Hulme's idea of creative life shares a profound alliance with the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldùa in *Borderlands*: "Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create... When I write it feels like I am carving bone. It feels like I am creating my own face, my own heart".[31]

By offering her feminine vision of creativity and spirituality through an extremely fragmented use of language that points to both a subversion and a making whole, Hulme aims to overcome cultural polarities by seeking to establish a syncretic cultural identity based on the idea of a common landscape – on the common language of the land Aotearoa/New Zealand represented by Maori re-told and re-enacted myth. This is the myth that New Zealanders of mixed genealogical descent are now communally re-enacting in the arts, the "exciting", culture-melding "edge" Hulme mentions in *Kai Purakau*.

It is the old Maori *Kaumatua* who at the very heart of *the bone people* restores 'the Broken Man', Joe – the failed Creole Maori – to psychic wholeness and reassurance, together with the spiritual wholeness of the land from which his people have been displaced. Parallel to Joe's inheriting the land of his ancestors (on the most northern part of New Zealand's North Island, where the Maori people first approached Aotearoa) is his re-discovery and acceptance of his own personal and Maori identity.

> [The Kaumatua]:
> I have watched the river and the sea for a lifetime. I have seen rivers rob soil from the roots of trees until the giants came foundering down. I have watched shores slip and perish, the channels silt and change; what was beach become a swamp and a headland tumble into the sea. An island has eroded in silent pain

[30] Bill Manhire, "Terra Firma", *Print Out* (Autumn 1994), 21.

[31] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands. La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 73.

since my boyhood, and reefs have become islands. Yet the old people used to say, 'People pass away, but not the land. It remains forever'....We ceased to nurture the land. We fought among ourselves. We were overcome by those white people in their hordes. We were broken and diminished. We forgot what we could have been, that Aotearoa was the shining land. Maybe it will be again... be that as it will, that thing which allied itself to us is still here. I take care of it, because it sleeps now. It retired into itself when the world changed, when the people changed. It can be taken and destroyed when it sleeps, I was told... and then this land would become empty of all the shiningness, all the peace, all the glory. Forever. The canoe has power, because of where it came from, and who built it... *it is the heart of this country. The heart of this land.*[32]

The canoe the *Kaumatua* has been watching over all his life is a simulacrum of the divinity of the landscape that led and can again lead the Maori journey towards identity and place to/in Aotearoa.

Linked to this, the recovery of Maori language and myth through regaining the meaning and sense of landscape occurs in the reclaiming of the island motif in one of the concluding chapters, "The Woman at the Wellspring of Death". And the re-discovery of psychic harmony is made possible through the figure of the 'lady of the southern land, Great Lady of the Night' who acts as healer to Kerewin who is dying of stomach cancer (a possible metaphor for colonial domination: being eaten by foreign food). The mysterious all-knowing, all-seeing personification of Hinenui Te-Po, the Maori Goddess of the Night and symbol for creation and life, is translated by Keri Hulme into the Shakespearean figure of Sycorax ("This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, which thou tak'st from me", *The Tempest*, I,ii) and is accompanied by *The Tempest*'s shipwreck imagery, representing Kerewin's spiritual and intellectual shipwreck ("storms... silent waves... pearl things").[33] The description of the black 'Lady of the Night' also seems to draw on the Shakespearean character:

[32] Hulme, *the bone people*, 336 and 364.

[33] Ibid., 423.

a thin wiry person of indeterminate age. Of indeterminate sex. Of indeterminate race. Browned and lined, and swathed in layers of old blanket weathered and sundyed. Silver hair. Silver eyebrows... watery eyes. It says, coming over and bending in by the bunk, 'You can understand, now?... Life is lonely. *Foe we all are, one apart from the other.*[34]

Acting as Sycorax, in order to restore Kerewin to her personal and cultural memory, the 'Lady of the Night' focuses her speech on reclaiming the island-reality as opposed to the condition of being ex-isled.

Reclaiming lan(d)guage: the female body

In *the bone people*, as well as in several of Hulme's short stories from *Te Kaihau: The Windeater* which she wrote while completing the novel, the body – and especially the female body – is a fundamental cultural signifier in the motif of reclaiming land and/as language.

As in much post-colonial literature the body is acknowledged as the literal site where resistance and oppression are struggling.[35] Concentrating on dance, gestures and movements, Hulme offers a means to express political resistance against the authority of the Word via the re-enactment of the Maori oral story-telling tradition. Here, the female body is attributed the power to continuously re-shape and listen to the Spirit of the land and to memory.

In the corporeality of language – the eye made hand, and language as a hand – Hulme explores the silent language of deformation. In "Hooks and Feelers", one of her earlier and most popular stories, for example, she depicts the nailed hand of a crucifix emerging from a black cover as the only language left for the woman-artist who feels responsible for the incident causing the deformation of her child's hand into a hook. Later in the same story, when the mother's breast is scarred by the child's

[34] Ibid., 424.

[35] See G. C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, and especially, included in the book, Mahasweta Devi's short story "Breast-Giver", 233-240.

hook, the action leads to the acknowledgement of the woman's breast-tumour, a metaphor for exploitation and torture, as well as a response and liberation.

As deformity has often been compared to 'otherness', Keri Hulme metaphorically describes it as a consequence of the lack of acceptance of alterity. The lack of acceptance of Kerewin's own female body and intellectual displacement in *the bone people* accompanies her lack of acceptance of the 'diverse' embodied in the mute stranger-child and reflected in her psychosomatic disease, evinced in the episode of 'The Lady of the Night'. And through exploring conditions of women coming to terms with psychic anomalies and abnormal growths – such as tumours and unwanted pregnancies – Hulme aims to diminish the distance between differences. In her fiction, deformity is seen as the product of violence, of domestic violence and self-inflicted violence: the summation of frustrated efforts to communicate. It is in order to recover from self-destruction, amnesia and the devastation of individual and social failure, that many of Hulme's women – who are often frustrated artists – confront evil in the shape of terminal diseases, as is the case of Kerewin in *the bone people*. The passage through deformity and alterity leads to the recovery of their artistic talent and a mental peace.

The inscription of pregnancy and deformity in the female body also suggests an obsession for bearing and nurturing a strange being, an alien: a cuckoo bird or a kind of tumour itself, as in the stories "A Drift in Dream" (a prelude to *the bone people*), and "One Whale, Singing". In the latter tale, the feeling of the alien sickness of pregnancy is transformed into one of warmth and music (reminiscent of the 'web of music' in *the bone people*) in the presence of a pregnant whale: a native inhabitant, and metaphor for both the 'other' existence the woman would like to lead as well as her longing to communicate:

> a humpback whale sported and fed. Occasionally, she yodelled to herself, a long undulating call of content. When she found a series of sounds that pleased, she repeated them, wove them into a band of harmonious pulses.... She feeds it love and music, and her body's bounty... absorbing, storing, correlating, winding her song meanwhile experimentally through interstices.[36]

The 'cannibalistic frenzy' of the man who in the whale's memories has tortured and killed one of her female companions migrating south ("tongue eaten from her mouth, flukes and genitals ripped out")[37] is reflected both sexually and intellectually in the pregnant woman ("Communication with other species, man is not alone, for God's sake!").[38] The encounter with the whale causes both the shipwreck and the woman's discovery of freedom in the ocean waters, when the canker deformation she had felt inside her body changes for the first time into a living human being. This kind of deformation is recurrent in *the bone people*'s imagery and finally summed up in the dissolution of Kerewin's stomach cancer at the end of the novel. Accepting the foetus/facing the tumour – Hulme suggests – is a process of both (ac)knowledging and resisting. In its boundarylessness, the woman's body is seen as one of the lands and languages through which the overcoming of the discrimination of 'otherness' is made possible. As with silence, it is the site for the translation of 'otherness' from marginality into a kind of maieutic and liberated identity.

Silence-listening

> *Silence resonates. It is not equated with absence, lacuna or emptiness; it is a different sound, a soundless space of resonance, and a language of its own.*
>
> (Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Undone Interval")

The language of silence – a speechless silence interspersed with music – is explored in *the bone people* as a kind of alternative language. As non-verbal communication, it contrasts with the

[36] Keri Hulme, "One Whale, Singing", in *Te Kaihau*, 61 and 64.
[37] Ibid., 65.
[38] Ibid., 67.

cultural assimilation strategies at work in the Logos. It is a means of interruption and resistance, that operates through disturbance and difference. In Simon's story, Hulme shows to what extent we can make violence against the silence we are faced with. A silence which, in assuming to make sense of, we too often break open and colonise. Silence is a metaphor for the 'other"s presence.

Simon's use of silence as a way of re-telling a censored story in a voice that is 'other' has been interpreted by Graham Huggan as a re-enactment of the Greek myth of the rape of Philomela.[39] Indeed, on account of the child's otherness embodied in his muteness, he is represented as a kind of 'invisible' presence. Through invisibility – a metaphorical condition for the subaltern – he plays the role of a go-between. As a go-between he first acts as a mischievous demi-god resembling the Maori Promethean figure of Maui, and as an orphic medium interacting between the concepts of universality and relativeness, homogeneity and heterogeneity, myth and history. For the same reason, the figure of Simon has also been compared to the Shakespearean figure of Ariel,[40] whose music in *The Tempest* is echoed in *the bone people*'s prologue ("It is all silence./ The silence is music./ He is the singer"). Like Ariel, Simon is skilled in dance and mimicry.

Mediating between past and present, between personal memory and cultural roots, Simon fundamentally acts in Maori and non-Maori intercultural translation processes envisaged in a daily rite of passage through striking violence – including sexual abuse. Violence and loss have deprived Simon completely of his own landscape and reduced him to the condition of being 'an inarticulate child, a tongue-locked mind'. His silence, underlined by his mutilated body, is symbolic also of a people deprived of their own language and *rangatira*/power. The representation of his psychological and physical dismemberment aims to depict

[39] See Graham Huggan, "Philomela's Retold Story: Silence, Music and the Post-Colonial Text", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 25.1 (1990), 13-23.

[40] See Graham Huggan, "Opting Out of the (Critical) Common Market: Creolization and the Post-Colonial Text", in Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin, eds., *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989), 27-40.

the need for the dis-memberment and fragmentation of New Zealand's historical and cultural identities. Such identities are called upon to undergo a process of confusion leading to re-memberment, that is to a journey back to the land, a route initially inwards to the *Is-Land*.[41]

The child's muteness originates from a need to be listened to; it is a strategy of resistance to his foster parents' attempt at socially domesticating him by imposing another, foreign, language upon him. In defining his identity, silence and music – including both "noise and riot", "peace and quiet", "harmony and discord" – simultaneously represent both the haunting of his nightmarish past and a shelter from the violence of the present:

> The horror was still at home in him. It was almost always there. The only defence he could raise against the dark and the horror and the laughing terrible voice were his golden singers, the sounds and patterns of words from the past that he had fitted to his own *web of music*.[42]

By partially depriving the child of his hearing during a last tremendous beating ("I've taken away his music... the dancer's grace is gone. Damn you"),[43] Joe, the Maori appointed male guardian, also imposes his own master-like authority on him: 'be silent, go mute!' It is a silence which he, too, cannot penetrate. The episode, that will cause the foster-father a period of alienation verging on suicide, is linked to that of the *Kaumatua* healing Joe by making him listen – as if to music – to the language and spirit of the Maori land: "All the land is filled with mysteries, and this place fairly sings with them".[44] It also resonates with Caliban's words, providing an alternative re-routing of the Shakespearean motif: "The isle is full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not" (*The Tempest*).

[41] The reference, here, is to Janet Frame's famous metaphor of the island (New Zealand) as the I-land, in her first volume of autobiography, *To the Is-Land* (Auckland: Random Century, 1982).

[42] Hulme, *the bone people*, 73. My emphasis.

[43] Ibid., 443

[44] Ibid., 368.

The character of Simon embodies both the Shakespearean figures of Ariel and Caliban through the kinds of violence that subjugate him. He can be compared to Ariel on account of the psychological violence inflicted on him by Kerewin – his white guardian (besides the menaces caused him by the haunting of his nightmarish past) – and to Caliban on account of the daily beatings and constrictions he is subjected to by his black master, Joe.

In addition to the reversal of that kind of mastery, with the figurative device of an autistic/mute child re-envisaging the whole process of telling, Hulme explores the textual strategy of shifting narrative, gaps and voids as a way of subverting the master-code of the occidental modernist tradition. Through textual fragmentation, anarchy and dispersal, she contests such concepts as hierarchy and genre boundaries, and insists on elusiveness and indeterminacy as a means to oppose the prescriptive rigidity of colonial – patriarchal – discourse in evaluating the 'other'.

The child's resistant and enabling silence is to be read as a way of re-routing present realities by upsetting any sense of self-presence and self-coherence. Parallel to that, Hulme's strategy of absences is a reflection of the truth-reenvisaging process she aims to recreate from the oral story-telling tradition. According to that tradition, voids cannot be filled in, for reality is continuously shifting; just as ideas of truth, peace and order must be subverted all the time in order to progress to new ones. For truth cannot exist as a mask, or as an unrefutable error hidden in the process of history.

By working with silence within the written text Hulme creates slippery configurations where rhythms, resonances, interstices and intervals become sites for interactive listening between different cultures, races and fragmented identities:

> Haere mai! The land is clothed in beauty and the people sing.... O, never silent by the sea/ always something talking/ water on rocks/ water on sand, wind and birds/ your heartbeat and/ others' words/ whatever knocks/ keep right on walking. *Listening is for free*.[45]

[45] Ibid., 428-9.

The place for listening is said to be the rejoined community of the Marae, where all have a voice ("In the Marae it would be mixed up, patterns of language weaving into one another").[46] The Marae or the place for 'gathering, to learn, to mourn, teach, welcome and rejoice', is the site of change ("New Marae from the old Marae, a beginning from the end")[47] and of the spiralling embrace of voices. Indeed, in *the bone people*'s commencement and conclusion, the collective dances of creation, destruction and change in the Marae invoke images of interwoven spirals. Spirals which are symbolic both of death-rebirth, of the inward-outward nature of things, and of the possibility for the integrity of collective cultures to be maintained, provided they are mutually re-worked together into new patterns.

In *On the Way to Language* Martin Heidegger considers listening to be the initial stage of being with others, which also means authentically being with oneself.[48] And in *La filosofia dell'ascolto* Gemma Corradi Fiumara explains that a discourse is meaningful only when the discourse is listened to – since listening is a maieutic process that interlaces the contingent and fragmentary into meaning.[49] What distinguishes a true dialogue, she suggests, is the will to listen openly, by maintaining the enigma of what cannot be understood within the language of the other, rather than seeking to explain or cancel it.

In *the bone people* violence destroys the noise of meanings and leaves room for a listening able to find comprehension of the self and acceptance of the other. This brings us to the threshold of the silence of our own voice that leaves room for the voice of the other's silence. On that edge differences and silences can be translated into new interlacing voices.

[46] Keri Hulme, talking about *the bone people* in Sarti, *Spirit Carvers*.

[47] Hulme, *the bone people*, 3.

[48] See Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959), trans. *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper, 1971).

[49] See Gemma Corradi Fiumara, "La filosofia dell'ascolto", in *Funzione simbolica e filosofia del linguaggio* (Torino: Boringhieri, 1980), 144-159.

Locality

Marina De Chiara

A Thin Edge Of Barbwire: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*

I wonder whether the famous sculpture of Coatlicue in the Mexican National Museum, an enormous block of stone covered with signs and symbols, might not be described as primitive despite the fact that it belongs to a very definite historical period. On second thought: it is a barbarous work, like many others left us by the Aztecs. It is barbarous because it does not possess the unity of the primitive artifact, which puts the contradictions of reality before us in the form of an instantaneous totality... and barbarous because it has no notion of the pause, of the empty space, of the transition between one state and another.

(Octavio Paz, "Primitives and Barbarians")

The words used by Octavio Paz to describe what he calls a "barbarous" work could well express, paradoxically, the idea of modernity as it appears in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (1987).[1] Anzaldúa evokes the disrupting, 'barbarous', image of Coatlicue, the pre-Aztec serpent goddess who contains within herself the principles of heaven and earth, life and death, light and darkness, male and female, both in the spiralling textual structure of her book and in the invitation to a new way of interpreting notions of cultural identity.

I would like to offer a reading of *Borderlands* mediated by the complex and ubiquitous metaphor of Coatlicue, which I take

[1] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). All the quotations are from this edition.

to signal the difficulty, if not impossibility, of any politics of containment implied in communitarian discourses, be they national or minority ones. Central to Anzaldúa's work is, indeed, the question of identity and its political and epistemological representation confronted with the notions of community, marginality, colonial exploitation, cultural plundering and exclusion, or, more generally, with the notion of belonging. "Land", defined by Frantz Fanon as "the most essential value, because the most concrete" for a colonized people, "the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity",[2] is turned into "borderland". Through her transformation, Anzaldúa highlights the idea of the border as a supplement which gives land (and belonging) the mark of an impossible possession, never simply 'there', but always somewhere else, further on, beyond something. In this image of the border/land, in this insistence on the 'supplement', emerge the issues of colonization and of cultural identification as debated by the Anglo-Indian critic Homi K. Bhabha who emphasizes the conflictual dimension of postcolonial modernity:

> How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?[3]

Anzaldúa describes this supplementary shifting in her preface, immediately addressing the complexity of cultural identity/identification:

> The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands

[2] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1967), 34.
[3] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2

> are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.
> I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. (Preface)

From the initial accentuation of her border identity, Anzaldúa proceeds to show how colonial history has traced everywhere in the U.S. Southwest a geography of continuous territorial displacements: violent invasions, plundering, dispossessions, violent overlapping and mixing of peoples of different races, languages, cultures. Forced migrations from place to place hide the attempt to return one day to the native land, to one's extirpated roots; borders proliferate to keep cultures ideally confined and separated from one another. Anzaldúa's evocation of past colonial oppressions serves the task of re-membering the collective history of the Chicano people, connecting the scattered pieces of what official culture marginalizes as an inferior people and an inferior language. The Chicano people are a mixed people speaking a mixed language, resounding with all the accents of the cultural encounters they have been involved in:

> The switching of "codes" in this book from English to Castillian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language – the language of the Borderlands. There, at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born. (Preface)

The defence of Chicano language reflects the defence of a whole 'minority' or marginalized culture, via the recollection of

an infamous past: from the first Indians, the pre-Columbian Aztecs, inhabiting the mythic Aztlán (U.S. Southwest), through the atrocities committed by Hernán Cortés and the Spaniards who exterminated millions of Indians and then mixed with the colonized giving birth, in 1521, to the Mexican race (a new 'mestiza' race of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), up to the brutality of the Anglos who occupied Mexico in 1846 and seized the present lands of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California. Such violent encounters were often followed by the creation of unnatural geographical boundaries, an attempt to contain the exposed 'difference' within the imposition of limiting frontiers, borders, devices of seclusion and exclusion.

For both Chicano and Mexican people the myth of the lost territorial treasure (the Aztlán 'homeland') is still alive. In drawing the map of this lost 'treasure' Anzaldúa is actually tracing an articulate route of historical anamnesis: the recollection of a collective past which has been obscured and blurred by centuries of colonial oppression and deprivation; the re-memberment of the painful memories silenced by the stifling power of the official historiographical accounts reported by the winners.

To rewrite history through the *clandestine* eye of the Chicano people means to reread history through the pieces which had been left out of the account. To rewrite history from a new perspective, that is from the 'margins', implies the subversive presence of a clandestine voice which disturbs the unisonant rhetoric of a monolithic historical knowledge, and which displaces traditional knowledge to offer alternative points of departure for the interpretation of 'facts' and 'events'.

The necessity of a new way of knowledge, a 'migrant' knowledge, is clearly claimed by Bhabha who suggests that history must be rewritten from the perspective of the margins, from the migrants' exile, from what the modern nation-state considers to be its margins, in order to show the impossibility of representing a people as a homogeneous, total, holistic entity:

> We may begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion – *the many as one* – shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class or race as social totalities that are expressive of unitary collective experiences.[4]

The clandestine voice of the Chicano shows the other side of the grand historiographical 'event', which is intimately composed and built on the blood and bones of the anonymous individual, whose body, whose private and domestic life, History feeds on. Territorial body, social body, textual body, biological body are all intertwined in continuous communication. In talking of the borderland, the U.S. Southwest, Anzaldúa exposes the extreme vulnerability of its frontiers, its territorial body, its geographical map, through a continuous trespassing of the textual shape where the borderline between theoretical and non-theoretical writing is questioned. Each shape turns metamorphically into the other, recalling, once again, the figure and movements of Coatlicue.

From prose to poetry, from biography to historical account, from mythology to literature, from economics to the private memory of domestic poverty and drought, from geography to the search for a utopian motherland to which one could belong, from textual theory to writing as it takes shape through a painful unconscious, from the emancipatory call towards a new free society to the hallucinated sexual body shivering with desire and sensuality, *Borderlands* escapes all genre rules which could confine it in a simple categorial definition; like a serpent the book moves through spiralling routes, ignoring the rectilineal law of consequentiality, the teleology of progressive narrative development. Its movements are always at the borders of something: in-between contact zones, proximity zones, passage zones, contagion zones. Teresa de Lauretis reads this particular style of writing as a specific strategy of intervention adopted by lesbian Chicanas:

> the style favored by contemporary Chicanas and other writers of color who self-identify politically and unapologetically as lesbians within U.S. Third World feminism; a style that, from the title of one major exemplar (Anzaldúa), may be called borderland

[4] Ibid., 142.

style, *estilo fronterizo* – a kind of writing that combines prose with poetry and fiction with biography and oral history, crisscrossing borders between languages, genres, and sociopolitical locations.[5]

The geographical border itself is envisaged as the most dangerous image of the 'wound', or better, of an 'open wound':

> The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. (3)

To talk of the border as a wound means also to remind us of the fragility of the *mother-land/mother-tongue*, raped and wounded, and left exposed to aggression, to stealing, to maiming, to mutilation, to expropriation, to silence.

> For some of us, language is a homeland closer than the Southwest – for many Chicanos today live in the Midwest and the East. And because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages. Some of the languages we speak are: Standard English; Working class and slang English; Standard Spanish; Standard Mexican Spanish; North Mexican Spanish dialect; Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California have regional variations); Tex-Mex; Pachuco (called caló). (55)

In discussing the relationship between social taboos and the structuring of the sexed body, analysed by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1969), Judith Butler points out that it is actually at the margins that collective imagery often posits the dangerousness of living 'in-between' things, in-between worlds; indeed every border evokes the extreme "vulnerability" of the border, its intrinsic possibility to give in during the encounter, which explains the reason why margins have always been the favourite trope of contagion. According to Mary Douglas the

[5] Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love. Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 205.

body is the perfect model for all those border zones which are under a threat or are precarious; all social systems present a special vulnerability especially in their marginal zones, hence all margins are considered dangerous. If the body is synecdochal for the social system, then all sorts of uncontrolled permeabilities represent a site of pollution and danger. Homosexuality, as a form of boundary-trespass, is consequently envisaged, Butler concludes, as a polluted status, both uncivilized and unnatural.[6]

Contrasting the fear of contagion and pollution, impurity and mixing, through the defence of Chicano language, Anzaldúa is also deeply committed to the defence of her own homosexuality, linking the raped land/language to the body raped by the heterosexual/male order. The defence of lesbianism as an act of resistance to colonial enslavement is strongly expressed in the words of Cheryl Clarke (one among the many contributors to an anthology edited in 1983 by Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, significantly entitled *This Bridge Called My Back*):

> It is profitable for our colonizers to confine our bodies and alienate us from our own life processes as it was profitable for the European to enslave the African and destroy all memory of a prior freedom and self-determination.... And just as the foundation of Western capitalism depended upon the North Atlantic slave trade, the system of patriarchal domination is buttressed by the subjugation of women through heterosexuality.[7]

Anzaldúa evokes the risk of living at the margins through the image of the forked tongue of the serpent, the forked tongue of the chicano, in-between English and Spanish, a mixed register for a kind of writing which wants to express itself freely and yet remain obscure, unexplained, because it does not yield to the

[6] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 132. For the notions of purity, impurity, abjection, abnormality, and normality, which I use here and in the following pages, my reference is especially to Julia Kristeva's works.

[7] Cheryl Clarke, "Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance", in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings By Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 128.

imposition of what Anzaldúa calls "linguistic terrorism": that is translation into 'good' English, the oppressor's language, with its demands that everything be explained smoothly, transparently, evenly, totally.

> Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.
>
> I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue – my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice: I will overcome the tradition of silence. (59)

Untranslatability marks the impossibility of a unifying history of a unified subject, resisting the call to univocity. Anzaldúa shifts easily from English to Spanish without warning or translation: the borderland is visible and exposed, the *wound* does not heal. Her language is composed of the various accents which came one after the other, overlapping, clashing and mixing, until they created a language which is still paying the price for its own hybrid nature, its own mestiza, hence marginal nature, but which nevertheless does not want to give up the borderland, the in-betweenness, it inhabits.

Buried in Anzaldúa own adolescent memories are the pain and humiliation inflicted through a sly form of colonial terrorism, a linguistic terrorism which perpetuates its violence by diminishing and debasing the Chicano language. The raped territory is then the raped culture of a people, because language is the very body of being, and in it identity dwells:

> So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. (59)

To lose one's language, to yield to translation, to give in to the winner's language, to abdicate before the oppression of the

linguistic terrorism imposed by the grammar rules of power, to reduce oneself to silence for the shame of one's bastard voice, means to annihilate oneself as a person, to come to terms with the humiliation of one's own inferiority, to bow to the law which separates what is pure from what is not. This is a law which sets strict limits between the inside and the outside, between what is normal and what is obscene:

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. (3)

The struggle to confine, to exclude, to dispatch and exile is invariably fought on linguistic territory. Anzaldúa's language, Chicano Spanish, is a border tongue, a Coatlicue tongue living in-between worlds, moving quickly through the different accents, only to remind its people of their bastard origin:

> But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, *evolución, enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción* have created variants of Chicano Spanish, *un nuevo lenguaje. Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir.* Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language.
>
> For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves – a language with terms that are *neither español ni inglés*, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages. (55)

In breaking down the boundaries between different literary genres, in destabilizing the laws of 'genre', Anzaldúa repeats the adventures of the Chicano language, where fragments of different languages compose a mixture, a hybrid, which nevertheless claims

its dignity by foregrounding the borders and disjunctures of which it is composed. Here the politics of fragmentation, which according to Sidonie Smith is "the means to counter the centrifugal power of the old unitary self of western rationalism" revealing "the cultural constructedness of any coherent, stable and universal subject",[8] turns into the exaltation of values such as 'impurity', 'incompleteness', 'hybridity', 'uprooting', 'polymorphousness'.

Through the valorization of Chicano language Anzaldúa is in fact tacitly inviting her people to return to their homeland, to regain their lost territory, to reclaim the lost treasure. But her invitation does not imply fantasies of racial purity, which are the basis of all nationalistic ideologies; for the territory she claims is actually the place of the encounter, the crossroads, the borderland, the geographical trope which runs through the book, continually signalling that the utopia of the social body as a unitary organic body must disappear, because the social body is open, porous, communicating, fluid. Sidonie Smith comments:

> Anzaldúa promotes borderlands, ones inscribed on her body and on her tongue as well as on the land. For borderlands are spaces in which history is intensified rather than escaped and where it can never be fixed. Her geography becomes fluid rather than fixed in its oppositional politics. Multiplying identities and histories creates a homelessness – a homelessness that undermines any secure anchorage in one history, even the history that becomes a national romance. The figure of the borderlands also foregrounds the constructed nature of boundaries, including the boundaries of the subject.[9]

The social body as a text refuses the call to univocity, to the totalizing vision. It offers itself as a kaleidoscopic richness of

[8] Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body. Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1993), 155.

[9] Ibid., 178.

perspectives, an unceasing flow of fragments, of photographs, which draw a picture where biography is also always a collective history, the memory and identity of a people. It then becomes impossible to establish a frame neatly marking where poetry begins and prose concludes: the poems feed off the richness of the prose which announces them. *Borderlands* is this hybridity of the textual body, which unmasks the nature of colonial oppression without resorting to the magniloquent official history. Rather, it is is allowed to appear through memories and accounts of everyday life, which redeem from oblivion and amnesia what history cancels with its collective, high-sounding name and oppressive tradition.

But the return to a mythical state of freedom, prior to Western colonization, does not imply a passive exaltation of the Aztec past, for pre-Columbian societies were yet another form of oppression, as patriarchal as their descendant Chicano culture, in which women are still subservient to an oppressive male tradition. Kate Adams addresses the double racial and patriarchal oppression which condemns the mestiza to cultural subjugation and silence:

> The mestiza is further silenced within the borders of sexist paradigms of identity, reinforced by external systems of oppression and internal cultural and religious traditions... restrictions represented by the homeplace and home culture.[10]

In this sense, the book does not offer an uncritical exaltation of Chicano cultural tradition, but a rethinking of the actual position and status of women within a patriarchal order and a system of gender oppression which must be challenged. Sidonie Smith quite rightly lists the book among other modern women "manifestos", which offer new strategies for an emancipatory women politics addressing a future of different possibilities for

[10] Kate Adams, "Northamerican Silences: History, Identity, and Witness in the Poetry of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Leslie Marmon Silko", in E. Hedges and S. Fisher Fishkin, eds., *Listening to Silences. New Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1994), 137.

women identifications.[11] Proclaiming her 'disloyalty' to the behavioural norms and beliefs of her patriarchal Chicano community, Anzaldúa insists on the necessary betrayal of the cultural models which oppress her:

> As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new system of values with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. (80-81)

In fact Smith considers Anzaldúa's strategy as one of "sexual disidentification"; that is, an attempt to free the idea of 'woman' from all kinds of previous cultural stereotypes she has always been confined to. It is also in this perspective that Anzaldúa proposes a reconceptualization of the common boundaries of modernity, anticipating Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), through questioning the 'subject of feminism', the meaning of 'woman' and of 'women representation' within a phallogocentric (patriarchal and heterosexual) regime, and at the same time inquiring into what Adrienne Rich called the oppressive cultural system of "compulsory heterosexuality".

[11] "Calling the subject into the future, the manifesto attempts to actively position the subject in a potentially liberated future distanced from the constraining and oppressive identifications inherent in the everyday practices of the 'ancien régime'" (Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, 163). In the section entitled "Serpentine Subjects and Pastoral manifesto" (Ibid., 169-179), Smith offers an interesting reading of *Borderlands* as an "antipastoral" text.

Anzaldúa's manifesto is a celebration of ambiguity and hybridity, rather than fixed 'identity'. Hybridity is a passage, a crossing, a *bridge*. Hybridity is the word for a new conscience, a "mestiza conscience", which challenges the holistic thrusts and ideological closures which consider the subject and its history as a unitary place, homogeneous, perfectly reducible to transparent formulas and conclusive labels. The idea of hybridity is also a challenge to the ideological closures hidden in totalizing feminist discourses which still address 'woman' as the Western white, middle-class, heterosexual subject, denying the complex interweaving of feminist discourses with postcolonial and gender issues.[12] After discussing the complicity of 'identity' with other orders of values, the Vietnamese-American writer, critic and film-maker Trinh T. Minh-ha borrows Anzaldúa's image of the bridge in envisaging identity as a form of "re-departure":

> Identity: the singular naming of a person, a nation, a race, has undergone a reversal of values. Effacing it used to be the only means of survival for the colonized and the exiled; naming it today often means declaring solidarity among the hyphenated people of the Diaspora. *But every place she went / they pushed her to the other side / and that other side pushed her to the other side / of the other side of the other side / kept in the shadows of other* (Gloria Anzaldúa). Identity is a way of re-departing, different pauses, different arrivals.[13]

If Octavio Paz comments on the sculpture of Coatlicue as a barbarous work because it does not possess "unity" and, furthermore, because "it has no notion of the pause, of the empty space, of the transition between one state and another", it is for exactly the same reasons that the comment can serve, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, to express the image of Coatlicue as the awareness, not of barbarity, but of the real complexity of

[12] On this complex issue, see Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other. Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1989).

[13] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red. Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 14.

culture. Anzaldúa's text represents the impossibility of a search for unity. The images it disseminates of ancient Aztec rituals and traditions come back to life in a personal biographic story, which is nevertheless the product of a collective experience, and for which the very image of the 'wound' is a symbolic sign for the perennial split we all have to learn to live with, however painful.

The poems in the second part of *Borderlands* abound in images of wounded bodies or killed animals and people, offering an iconography which recalls similar images from the work of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. In her paintings the impossible search for a body without wounds is also a reminder of a traumatized society where the inside and the outside can exchange places, where the 'normal' and the abject question each other about their respective 'foreignness'. And if Frida Kahlo portrays herself wearing male clothes and a moustache, then the sexual body reveals itself as split and open, porous and fluid, ready for the intense verses Anzaldúa dedicates to the women she has loved.

Her land is a borderland, the land of the eternal passage; it is the bridge between things, a 're-departure', it is a passage over to somewhere else, it is a battlefield ...

> This is my home
> this thin edge of
> barbwire (3)

Images of guerrilla and barbwire, martyred bodies bleeding from thorns devouring the flesh (images which also inhabit Kahlo's iconography) prevent the text from embodying the classical image of well composed order. So *chaos* swallows *cosmos*, opening wide onto the interdicted realm of darkness and the unconscious, the terrible demons exorcized by Western culture. But it is this very realm that for Anzaldúa gives birth to writing itself, this irruption of the 'otherness' which invades the boundaries of normality, the irruption of the undesirable which reappears and brings dismay – the unconscious, pain, anguish, despair, interdicted words, taboos, the obscene, removed memories, blood:

> I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. *Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre*. (71)

The appearance of the undesirable which trespasses from its own place onto somewhere else is also one of the images which open the book: the trespassing of the "mojado" ("wet back"; the mocking name for the clandestine Mexican immigrant) who attempts the illegal crossing of another 'wound', the Rio Grande, the river which splits the land in two parts, separating misery from welfare, the poverty of Mexico from the prosperity of the United States. Poor Mexicans in despair meet late at night along the river, a real frontline, ready to make the dangerous crossing, holding their clothes on their heads. From this 'wound' in the land, from this river of pain, Anzaldúa's story begins: images crowding pages unable to contain them, and registering the vulnerability of the boundaries within which some would like to set limits to life, or divide what is 'normal' from what is not:

> A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal". (3)

The new "mestiza conscience" then, is also a new knowledge, the "migrant" knowledge Bhabha talks of. It is a conscious rupture with the oppressive closure of traditional culture that exposes in the very borderland, in this place of vulnerability and contagion, of danger and metamorphosis, the subject in a perpetual process, never stabilized in a precise and final identity, but in perennial transformation and movement. The very act of writing becomes the performative space where the subject stages its movements of constant metamorphosis against a silencing tradition. In "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers", Anzaldúa explains:

I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you.... And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing.[14]

And the 'unmentionable' reappears in a section called "El Retorno" — maybe the 'return' to the mythical Coatlicue state Anzaldúa evokes: this time the serpent Coatlicue seems to spiral along the verses of a poem, re-staging the ambiguities of identity in *Borderlands*:

To live in the Borderlands means you

are neither *hispana india negra espanola*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing

that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
that *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*,
that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half – both woman and man, neither –
a new gender

[14] In Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back*, 169.

Francesco Minetti

Politics of survival in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

My paper deals with some narrative and ideological transformations in Chinua Achebe's approach to colonisation and postcolonialism, with particular reference to his most recent novel. His bitter sense of modernity seems to be thematised as an act of atonement which is readable if set against western violence and cultural assimilation. Generally speaking, his novels raise the question of black leadership in terms of tragic choices and responsabilities, and envisage a line of historiography along which power, while urging to be restored to the place originally held within African cultures of the past, is shown therefore to have been irreversibly appropriated by the white man. In this way, African politics comes to be a completely externalised space; that is, an internationally performed and locally empty power whose elusive rules allow the old white master to goverrn through the mediation of native puppets.

Yet, in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) as well as in his essays of the eighties, Achebe rethinks the experience of decolonisation and gives emphasis to what has outlived the encounter with the white man and thrived on it: Nigerian multicultural and interethnic society.[1] He promotes a retrospective vision of history and communities that is connected with contemporary theoretical discourses on postcolonial

[1] My article takes into account some essays that Achebe published in *Hopes and Impediments. Selected Essays 1965-1987* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1988) as well as his "African Literature as Restoration of Celebration", *Kunapipi*, XII, 2 (1990).

survival, such as Stuart Hall's genealogical inquiry into the terminology of postcolonialism and Homi Bhabha's notions of border identities and cultural hybridity. Although *Anthills* cannot be seen as an answer to or a direct dialogue with the main critical issues posed by these scholars, yet their epistemological frames help to focus and dramatise Achebe's ambivalent and deeply divided attitude towards black ethnocentrism.

The Nigerian writer's new mode of narration makes itself evident in the last chapter of *Anthills*, where a radical hope of social and sentimental regeneration emerges from the words and actions of the people at Beatrice's house. These women and men are "the story's survivors" but significantly they meet together not only to mourn two dead heroes, Ikem and Chris, but also to swear friendship to each other and learn to cultivate it. Their mutual link is much more than a closing device for Achebe's novel since it has been gradually and laboriously strengthened despite the characters' deep differences of gender, class, religion and ethnic origin. The survivors are occupied with maintaining and celebrating their special way to self-government which, while reacting against all the brutal military abuses described in the novel, implies that different ideas and behaviours will be engendered after the sharing and experience of a transverse and decentred cohabitation. For this reason, their socialisation is opposed to the divided destinies of the leading characters, Sam, Chris and Ikem, whose old friendship is estranged as they succumb to a common logic of power.

Achebe stages the friends' problematic link in order to question, provisionally at least, his belief in an autarchic leadership which, while aiming at social palingenesis and liberation, in fact transfigures political subjects into warriors: difference of opinion becomes a threatening yielding to enmity. He seems to signify that their warfare fatally inherits the skeletal structure of government left behind by the white coloniser. Colonialism, as Robin Ikegami has pointed out, is "a haunting but distant memory, the remnant of a past the novel's leading characters would like to transcend but which has in some overt as well as covert ways influenced the concept of government current

through most of the novel".[2] Ikegami makes it clear that, as already in *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe is not concerned only with the alienation and fragmentation of African traditional roots, but also with the ways all his characters interrogate the "other survival", the disguised return of colonisation.

This means also that in *Anthills* the current idea of politics as a locatable site of command is denounced. The Other is re-presented in its ambiguous function of both identifying and disrupting the Self, of fixing the communal sense of belonging and, at the same time, chiastically undermining the opposition of friends and enemies on which communities live. Both at Beatrice's house and within the political brotherhood of Sam, Ikem and Chris, the principle of alterity appears in its different ways as a ghostly signal, indicating how postcolonial subjects and geographical territories have been marked by their double inscription, their split status as fragments of lost worlds of the past and as signs of the colonial aftermath.

Though apparently emerging *after* the end of western administrative and military occupation, the postcolonial moment points also to a re-opening of history that contests the evolutionary idea of historical studies and tries to go *beyond* their tendency to conceive transition as a homogeneous and pre-determined rite of passage from the white master's old power relations to the establishment of decolonised national states. Hall urges criticism to investigate postcolonialism according to the epistemic perspective of its countermark "post". He looks for power in "the reconfiguration of a field, rather than as a movement of linear transcendence between two mutually exclusive states".[3] Likewise, Bhabha writes that postcolonial events escape the progressivist opposition between archaic origin and modern alienation, insofar as the hybrid compound, the double survival of native cultures and

[2] Robin Ikegami, "Knowledge and Power, the Story and the Storyteller: Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*", in Michael Parker and Roger Starkey, eds., *Postcolonial Literatures. Achebe, Ngugi, Desai, Walcott* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 66.

[3] Stuart Hall, "When was 'the post-colonial'? Thinking at the limit", in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-colonial Question. Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), 254.

western colonialism, is narrated *in medias res*. By suspending preconceptions and expectations, this critical state of intermediacy helps to rid history of the fixity of its past as well as of its presumed teleology, in order to release the third space of alterity and to interrogate present transformations as "an agency of initiation that enables one to possess again and anew... the signs of survival, the terrain of other stories, the hybridity of cultures".[4]

Thus, the hybrid temporality of the postcolonial present, while radically questioning the coloniser's way of narrating, tells that power cannot return to the origins that preceded colonisation because all native cultures and societies have been haunted, since their mythic beginnings, by the same violence against the Other that the coloniser has brought to its tragic, modern limit.

Hymn to the sun

Any critical or imaginative discourse on survival refers to an initial state of chaos and apocalypse whence some floating remains of destroyed past worlds emerge, resist and can be culturally transformed. In *Anthills* apocalypse is represented in a brief poetical prose passage, the Hymn to the Sun, written by Ikem Osodi. Ikem is the National Gazette's fiery editor and journalist, who, because of his political engagement, breaks up his bond of affection with two old friends: Sam, who has become His Excellency, the ridiculous dictator of Kangan, and Chris, the sceptical and rather resigned Honourable Commissioner for Information.

The hymn naturalises the sense of distressing powerlessness Ikem comes to feel while coping daily with the overwhelming national and international forces that support the military regime. But, together with his bitterness and disillusions, Ikem's visionary poem discloses his sudden, deep desire to cling to his ethnic belonging and assume the choral voice of his original Abazon community. This happens because, by denying their votes for the dictator's election, the Abazon people seem to give

[4] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 235.

new strength to Ikem's revolutionary battle. More generally, however, Ikem's hymn brings to light Achebe's own conflict between the land, which is represented in his previous novels as a site of authenticity and tribal identity, and the nation, Kangan, which is the white man's bequest and is characterised by black politicians' verbal "humming and hawing" as well as by their absurd brutalities.

Ikem identifies with Abazon as soon as he learns that it is struck by a terrible drought. But Achebe dramatises this identification through a dizzy movement of images enacting significant temporal and spatial fractures between the journalist's cosmopolitanism and his nostalgic return to and hopeless escape into Abazon mythologies and sensibility:

> Great Carrier of Sacrifice to the Almighty: Single Eye of God! Why have you brought this on us? What hideous abomination forbidden and forbidden and forbidden again seven times have we committed or else condoned, what error that no reparation can hope to erase?
>
> Look, our forlorn prayers, our offerings of conciliation lie scattered about your floor where you cast them disdainfully away; and every dawn you pile up your long basket of day with the tools and emblems of death.
>
> Wide-eyed, insomniac, you go out at cock-crow spitting malediction at a beaten, recumbent world. Your crimson torches fire the furnaces of heaven and the roaring holocaust of your vengeance fills the skies.[5]

Seemingly the drought, raised to the metaphysical level of a holocaust and of the human sacrifice paid to the Single Eye of God, is initially intended to be contained and reinscribed in the cycle of natural regeneration. Ikem's detailed description of the wasteland goes along with his hope to decipher the enlightening signs left behind by God's destructive transit. These signs are "the blunt residual features" that transfigure trees into "hydra-

[5] Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), 30. All following quotations from the novel are bracketed with their page numbers.

headed bronze statues" and make them look like "anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires" (31).

Achebe draws the title of his novel from an Igbo saying that visualizes the task of tradition by narrating that, when the rain comes, the new grasses of the land are likely to think that the world begins with them and is always green; they therefore need the signs of the past, embodied by the durable, uncompromising architecture of the termites. In this sense, the anthills celebrate what Achebe frequently defines as a myth of conciliation, the indissoluble bond linking a people's cultural identity with its cyclical spiritual displays. As he says in one of his interviews, the anthills "know, they remember, and they will be there again when there is another fire and all the present grass is burnt".[6]

In the irretrievable disaster that deprives Abazon of a future prospect, the silent presence of the natural monuments offers a sign of recognition that is tantamount to the stubborn resistance of human collective memory, a grandiose trace of sovereign autonomy and of social and creative experience, whose roots plunge into ancestral energy. It is not an accident, however, that, even though they are rhetorically presented, in order to reveal the transcendence and return of the past, Ikem's envisioned fragments, the "soaring motes of an incinerated world", do not depict more than burnt and lifeless trees. Within the Abazon landscape where the poet picks up their image, the trees are symbols of survival and yet they acquire their fleeting momentum only thanks to Ikem's propitious and idealistic metaphor, thanks to his displaced vision of the trees and their forced resemblance to the statues and, then, the anthills.

Despite Achebe's transparent translation of the anthills into their myth of regeneration, what is more interesting is that, while entreating the Sun to calm its apocalyptic rage, Ikem's choral "I-eye" in fact defers the time of his land's rebirth. His hymn gradually becomes a philosophical meditation upon the violence and madness released by the Abazon catastrophe,

[6] Achebe in Jane Wilkinson, *Talking With African Writers. Interviews* (London: Currey, 1990), 52.

since the poet dwells on his contemplation of other natural fragments that he does not want to poeticise. Unlike the image of the anthills, these fragments disclose a linear temporality, carrying out untameable messages of fall and death. Through his slow and dazzled cadences Ikem's writing reveals for instance that, together with roasted songbirds and butterflies, Morning no longer exists because she has withdrawn into "the seclusion of a widow's penance in soot and ashes" (31). Moreover, the narrating eye finds itself wandering about an empty village, where dogs are competing with vultures for the corpse of the madman who, until this last day of the world, had been at the centre of the market-place to taunt the absent villagers. In the end, it is evident that Ikem's prayer to the Sun shares much with the madman's cry: "Where is everybody? You have not forgotten your own marketday? Come!" (31). Both Ikem and the madman are eyewitnesses who have been obliged to interrogate silence and absence, after seeing that the effects of incineration, the ashes and the clouds of smoke that cover the world, have turned God blind and clogged up "the canals of birth in the season of renewal" (31).

Ikem's tragic spirit goes therefore beyond the reconcilements of the myth wished for by Achebe in his quoted extratextual comment. Chidi Okonkwo writes that by describing the passing of direct colonial domination Achebe revises his typical drama of world creation and dissolution to enable it to transmit the new novelistic problems of "how to create a national order out of the anarchy of nation-states created by colonial masters".[7] Ikem's chaos of nature is a political allegory about the white man's disguised presence and his long-term interests in Africa, insofar as the drought can be seen as a comment on one of those never-ending effects of colonisation that have deprived nature of its balance and gods of their power. But different reasons lead Ikem to identify with the *mad* voice of his people: madness implies a double refusal of the postcolonial state of affairs in Kangan and of Abazon's traditional values.

[7] Chidi Okonkwo, "Chinua Achebe: the Wrestler and the Challenge of Chaos", in Parker and Starkey, *Postcolonial literatures*, 83.

First of all, what Ikem's madness calls to account are the black national leaders' actions, since it is Sam and his lackeys who cause the Abazon disaster and who deliberately refuse to intervene. Nevertheless, Ikem does not aim at celebrating an archaic world that has been destroyed and replaced in the formation of colonial and postcolonial states. The present drought significantly gives way to Ikem's consideration that the Abazon people were themselves colonisers before being colonised. Within the void landscape, where the inhabitants' dead future comes up against their mythical past, the melancholy *griot* articulates the reticences underlying the legends about the foundation of Abazon. And there is a bitter irony, when he writes that human salvation relies on the hope that the Sun may have mercy on itself and stop its vengeance. The irony discloses how Ikem's people explain and imagine the present catastrophe of their land. According to them, God has given men madness and eternal night because of their primeval abomination, a fault that can neither be understood nor erased, but only exorcised and repeated through a new act of violence:

> No one could say why the Great Carrier of Sacrifice to the Almighty was doing this to the world, except that it had happened before, long, long ago in legend. The earth broke the hoes of the grave-diggers and bent the iron tip of their spears. Then the people knew the time had come to desert their land, abandoning their unburied dead and even the dying, and compounding thereby whatever abominations had first unleashed the catastrophe. They travelled by starlight and lay under the shade of their mats by day until the sands became too hot to lie upon. Even legend is reticent about their plight recounting only that every night when the journey began again many failed to rise from under their mats and that those who did stagger up cast furtive glances at the silent shelters and set their stony faces to the south. And by way of comment the voice of legend adds that a man who deserts his town and shrine-house, who turns his face resolutely away from a mat shelter in the wilderness where his mother lies and cannot rise again or his wife or child, must carry death in his eyes. Such was the man and such his remnant fellows who one night set upon the sleeping inhabitants of the tiny village of Ose and wiped them out and drank the brown water in their wells and took their land and renamed it Abazon. (32-33)

Ikem reopens his people's foundation myth in order to represent a history of falls and survivals, of men's continuous attempts to adapt to the death-sentence pronounced by the Sun; while Abazon is shown as having been geographically displaced, repossessed and renamed through violent solutions. Moreover, doomed to leave their home, the Abazon people were also inclined to make a new beginning elsewhere by robbing their neighbours of their land and lives. Against the background of this ancient voice, Ikem's revisionary tale makes it clearer that, by centring upon the figure and value of warriors, the migrant people did not take any account of the law of hospitality and committed a double fault, both inside and outside their community. Whether this primeval abomination was a cause or an effect of God's revenge, Ikem certainly denounces the fact that the exiles not only transgressed the taboo that prevented them from abandoning their women and children in the wilderness, but themselves ruthlessly attacked and plundered the foreign village of Ose.

However, Ikem's criticism of the ethnocentric tradition and tales is less concerned with the past than with its possible return. Indeed, tribal wars can happen once again because the present drought gives Abazon a dangerous opportunity to legitimate the survival of the strongest. According to native beliefs, all natural catastrophes produce hidden, symbiotic mirrorings between the Eye of God and the eyes of the warriors, who recognise and inherit the death legacy of the Sun in order to pass the buck of violence to others. But Achebe's distance from this solution is underlined when Ikem inscribes his people's struggle for survival within the limits of their postcolonial condition. In ancient times the land borders could be shifted by incorporating and sacrificing the Abazons' neighbours as scapegoats but this answer, whereby the original community was regenerated, cannot be reproposed. The white man's presence has traced a wider political map which destabilises ethnic identities on the

territory and blurs the clear-cut division between friends and enemies: "today no one can rise and march south by starlight abandoning crippled kindred in the wild savannah and arrive stealthily at a tiny village and fall upon its inhabitants and slay them and take their land and say: I did it because death stared through my eye" (33).

As everywhere in the world, white violence was accompanied by the "humanitarian" spirit of ethics or religion. But, far from implying that this spirit was previously absent in Africa, Ikem merely notices that meekness and respect for others arise in history only when war, more than diplomacy, has become the necessary support of western profits and the ruling principle of international law. Modernity imposes a barrier which seems to "civilise", to teach the utopian cohabitation of different ethnicities, at the very moment in which this law is the badge of the rout of Abazon. Thus, Ikem's ambiguous attitude towards his own criticism of black absolutism is dramatically revealed when he concludes his hymn: if the law of Kangan reflects the imperialist peace, then it must be accepted because the warriors of old times have been reduced to the slaves of today. What the present inhabitants of the wasteland can do is to send a delegation of elders to Bassa, the capital of Kangan, to ask for help and speak humbly to the Big Chief and his government, who "hold the yam today, and hold the knife" (33).

Out of Ikem's writing, the Hymn to the Sun is osmotically filtered into the novel, to show how the power of violence circulates after colonial military occupation, and how it is embodied in a dictatorship which rules the country through blackmail and sadism. The way Kangan comes to be imagined in *Anthills*, and outlined as the estrangement of the original community, is significantly staged by the old leader of the delegation to Bassa. From his words we learn the real cause of the drought, together with the tragic "good sense" that will guide the Abazon People to submit themselves to Sam and regret their previous refusal of votes:

> More shifting-eyes people came and said: "Because you said no to the Big Chief he is very angry and has ordered all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area to be closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun. You will suffer so much that in your next reincarnation you will need no one to tell you to say yes whether the matter is clear to you or not."
> "God will not agree" replied many voices.
> "So we came to Bassa to say our own yes and perhaps the work on our bore-holes will start again and we will not all perish from the anger of the sun. We did not know before but we know now that yes does not cause trouble. We do not fully understand the ways of today yet but we are learning."(127)

After pointing to the new power relations, the elder so emphasises the gift of storytelling as to undermine any primacy of war. Stories become more important than the heroic service accomplished by the Abazon warriors, who shield the boundary of their country and throw "the invading enemy" out, because the narrator's word "outlives the sound of war-drums" and prevents the community's progeny "from blundering like blind beggars" (123-124). Ikem is given the role of epic singer which amplifies Achebe's teleological reading of the anthills since telling, like tradition, seizes the very movement of history: it records its defeated characters' causes and names and, in recalling their acts, it "owns us and directs us" (124). Whereas the common men's vision appears mostly "like the middle of a mighty boa which a foolish forester mistakes for a tree trunk and settles upon to take his snuff" (125), it is only the prophetic boon of the devotee of Agwu, the god of healers, that can transfigure fragments into "his new-found utterance", stories of battles and survival into History (125).

But Ikem's distance from his assigned task obliquely emerges through all his cultural negotiations with his native place. He cannot share the elder's naively, though understandably, absolute ethnocentrism, even when his refusal both of Abazon traditions and of the modern law of Kangan gives way, as is already shown in his hymn, to a desperate, third space. He reads a sense of self-closure and of consoling redemption into the elder's allegorical tale about the tortoise and its lot. In the tale, while falling prey to the leopard, the slow little animal has nothing left but to scratch the sand with its hands and

feet and throw it in all directions, in such a way that after its death "*anyone passing by this spot*" will realise how grandiose the match was. For the elder, Ikem is one of these eyewitnesses who will report the dead fighters' proud resistance and make future generations say "*True, our fathers were defeated but they tried*" (128). Although the warriorlike values are seen to be crumbling, the elder's words show that the Abazon community clutches hold of its traditional hierarchy: violence is not opposed but deferred and fictionalised through the tortoise's performance, so that the traces left on the sand imply the noble dignity and boldness of all the people, together with the scalding memory of their defeat, their revengeful spirit brooding further hate against the other's violence.

The elder's voice is present in Ikem, though differently articulated in his ideology, whenever his remarks on the dictatorship stress that power, being taken away from Abazon, has to be converted into a true means of social reaction and liberation. And this mood can be felt, as well, in Achebe's essays when he writes for instance that his reminiscences of folk-tales are transvalued into a sort of unconscious or dark side of the coloniser's historical practices, into the writing process whereby what has been repressed and displaced can be kept alive in a tale's "voluminous folds" until times are ripe to serve a revolutionary purpose.[8] At the same time, however, by staging the elder's vision of storytelling, Achebe frames and dramatises the risk residual ethnic cultures run of plunging into teleology and essentialism. Moreover, he tackles the question of the inevitable dislocation and liminality of postcolonial subjects when he has Ikem interpret the story about the tortoise at the University of Bassa. While telling the tale, Ikem becomes aware that it is releasing the sense of alterity inscribed within itself, since it gives him "a way to accept something however small from the other" (154), so that his monologue

[8] See Achebe's comments on a similar Hausa story about the Snake and the Toad, in "African Literature", 1990, 9-10. The "voluminous folds" are actually those of the laughter the tale is capable of provoking; a laughter that contains the secret presence of a "hint and glint of iron", and hence a possibility of "severe stricture".

dissolves into a collective conversation with the students and achieves "the close hand-to-hand struggle he so relished" (154). In his mind, what survives the leopard's violence becomes the element of irresolution that the story carries with itself, since he realises that its secret force lies in the mobile precariousness whereby words percolate through the institutions of power and communicate their uncanny, threatening presence: they "frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit – in state, in church or mosque, in party congress, in the university or wherever" (153).

Histories and stories

In recent discussions about postcolonial alterity the complementary categories of apocalypse and survival have been reproposed outside of Achebe's discourse on native essence and estrangement. It is in fact more than a difference of terminological inflection if one considers that censuring white violence does not generally prevent critics from pointing out that new histories have been arising, at the crossroads between indigenous traditions, their cultural translation and their irreducible permanence within the map of globalisation.

Bhabha draws on the Benjaminian and Derridean ideas of *survivre* to rework the hybrid status of postcolonialism as "the afterlife" of meaning; that is, as the interstitial and shifting representation of any original text when it has been translated into another "language". Here the element of resistance by postcolonial subjects does not lie merely, as with Ikem's enunciatory act at the University, in the social and dialogic circularity whereby the colonised's tale avoids being culturally metabolised by the leopard. On the contrary, Bhabha recognises that native identities and myths are inscribed in the process of western assimilation and, in a way, they are doomed to be rewritten ever more in terms of these linguistic power relations. But he also shows how the displaced representations of origin pose the question of their absolute ethnocentrism as "the seed of the untranslatable – the foreign element in the midst of the performance of cultural

translation".[9] Native presences are suspended in the irresolution of their origin and can be compared with the philological cruxes a translator of literary texts runs up against. Indeed, by reading the postcolonial condition through Walter Benjamin's theory of language, Bhabha observes that "unlike the original where fruit and skin form a certain unity, in the act of translation the content or subject matter is made disjunct, overwhelmed and alienated by the form of signification, like a royal robe with ample folds".[10]

Far from mourning the loss of such an organic unity, Bhabha is concerned with inquiring into the multiple ways whereby essentialism can no longer be transmitted and is verbally paraphrased in the histories of modernity. The value of the "ample folds" emerges from an endless play of signifiers which is quite different from Achebe's quoted remarks on the voluminous folds of a tale's reception. What Bhabha signifies is that ethnic communities cannot return to their self-referential system of beliefs and practices that preceded western colonisation. Whereas this system is liable to Derrida's criticism of any teleological projects which preside over the formation of community identities, Achebe would add that the coloniser's arrival disrupted the system long ago, obliging people to rethink themselves and cope with the others' place within their world.

Put in Achebe's words, Bhabha's deconstructionist vision reflects all the disproportion existing, even today, between westernised figures of code-keepers and the colonised who are searching for their own code of translation. The Nigerian writer's emphasis on essentialism is never abandoned but strategically transformed when he claims that black cultural property cannot be dealt with unless it is set in the perspective of a social repossession of means of subsistence. While commenting upon the Hausa tale, the Nigerian writer grants for instance that the class struggle he sees, between Snake the aristocrat and Toad the commoner, may be found in the story against the *griot*'s original intentions. The singer may have concealed his social protest in his words to such an extent that his auditors missed it, but a gesture of utopian

[9] Bhabha, 227.
[10] Ibid.

atonement is always preserved within the dark conceits or folds of telling, and it is expected to be read, even when stories apparently accord with the ruling values. Hence what remains untranslatable for Bhabha becomes an act of ideological disambiguation in Achebe's vision.

In a similar vein, when he writes about his choice of the coloniser's language, Achebe observes that, since British colonial policy encouraged the babel of native languages, most African writers created a new language, both native and foreign, "to transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism".[11] He discloses the high potentialities of linguistic hybridity when he brings the colonial heritage to account, asking "what possibility, what encouragement, there was in this episode of our history for the celebration of our own world; for the singing of the song, in the din of an insistent world and song of others".[12] It is not merely a question of giving everybody his due as the elder says in *Anthills*. Achebe's African origins teach him to include "new, unaccustomed and thus potentially threatening encounters": the Igbo practices of *mbari*, traditionally performed to domesticate disquieting wild forces, continued to be used after the imperialist District Officer's arrival, in order to incorporate his threat and give him "a seat among the moulded figures of *mbari* complete with his peaked helmet and pipe", with his bicycle and his native police.[13]

But Achebe's attention to the resources of cultural translation seems to fail when the hybrid is not directly placed in the territories of art and literature, when it becomes an emblem of perverted social consequences and of the dead end African postcolonial nations lead to. Significantly, he thinks of linguistic dispossession in the following terms:

> Today things have changed a lot, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe. Three or four weeks ago my

[11] Achebe, "African Literature", 8
[12] Ibid., 3.
[13] Ibid.

wife, who teaches English in a boys' school, asked a pupil why he wrote about winter when he meant the harmattan. He said the other boys would call him a bushman if he did such a thing! Now, you wouldn't have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do. How can this great blasphemy be purged? I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry.[14]

In a way, both Bhabha and Achebe aim at inscribing sites of cultural syncretism into the processes and texture of globalisation. But, whereas Achebe stigmatizes the blasphemy of saying winter instead of harmattan, Bhabha seems to believe that no master code superimposes its *Weltanschauung* while presiding over cosmopolitan negotiations between different cultures. Indeed, by quoting Rudolf Pannwitz, Bhabha looks for the agency of native foreignness within a theoretically neutral code whose purpose would be not "to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German [but] instead to turn German into Hindi, Greek, English"; that is, in this case, to decentralise the translator's linguistic primacy and make the German translation reflect within itself an interstitial presence of the original languages.[15] Unfortunately, this utopian decanonisation of origins is performed only in a one-way direction, insofar as the violence of past colonisation and of the present cultural market historically decide to have English act as a mediator. Since English is the language of globalisation, its linguistic agency drives, for instance, African people to call winter their season windy or to displace the Abazon drought when "the weatherman on television reciting mechanically the words of his foreign mentors tells you it will be fine all over the country" (27).

Bhabha bases his map of new hybrid and transitional identities on Guillermo Gomez-Pena's image of "stubborn chunks", in order to point out that the subjects of postcolonial difference live and precariously "float" inside the international

[14] Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher", in *Hopes and Impediments*, 29-30.
[15] Bhabha, 228.

system. Uninfluenced by teleological plans of class consciousness or ethnic and gender claims, they merely avail themselves of the contingent, ever-shifting interstices left free by all power institutions. But the postcolonial irresolution shows its tragic effects in Achebe's parodies of experts and managers, who are unable to cope with problems of national survival. These subjects learn abroad to build bridges but "can't stop us from hiring an attendant who will take a bribe", or they set up the finest machinery but are not interested in creating "the technician who will stay at his post and watch the controls instead of going for a chat and some groundnuts under a mango tree outside".[16] Achebe wonders why corruption, indolence and violence appear to be endemically inscribed in the social texture of the new nation. And he thinks that the absence of teleological values has given way to a simplistic, literal mind which cannot pose ethical questions. While putting the country's soul at risk, the politicians' mind does not see what arts and history teach, that there are inappropriate and unworthy goals, "which place an intolerable strain on the pursuer".[17]

Thus, on the one hand, as he seems to acknowledge, Achebe's praise of a true modernity is a substantial refusal of it: "we saw the price of modernization and subconsciously decided we were not prepared to pay it".[18] But, on the other, looking for the cultural ingredient of modernisation as the very source of its vitality, the Nigerian writer shifts his essentialism towards the interethnic, national state within which technologies are thought to promise and fulfill concrete aspirations, like food, health and education for all. The journey into modernity should rather be "a metaphysical search for abiding values" aided by the unparellelled inventiveness of the arts.[19] By reactivating the archaic energy of creation myths, the arts restore what the violence of history has made incoherent and problematic: they

[16] Achebe, "What Has Literature Got To Do With It?", in *Hopes and Impediments*, 108.
[17] Ibid., 107.
[18] Ibid., 108.
[19] Ibid., 115.

rewrite the country's native roots, its "threatened past and selfhood", in the form of "a cosmopolitan, modern identity".[20]

Achebe's dialectics of native stories and white history betrays its discursive closure insofar as it is compared not only with Bhabha's notion of postcolonial irresolution but also with Hall's vision of colonialism as both a system of exploitation and "a way of staging or narrating a history".[21] Indeed, both Hall and Achebe acknowledge that the unstable existence of some postcolonial states has to be visualised on the basis of a punctiform configuration of facts telling and determining how colonisation, though historically dead, "lives on its after-effects".[22] The ghostly return of colonisation is reworked through "internal" crises and comes back under the different guises of unsubstantial democracies, of technological fetishism, of aid for development twisted into local corruption and nepotism, and of the growth of native capitals heteronomically governed by international banks and corporations.

But these signs of neocolonial hegemony cannot be read off against Achebe's discourse on the nation. Hall recognises that the way native origins were lived in the colonies "had to be decisively different from how these cultures would have developed, had they done so in isolation from one another".[23] Colonisation is revealed to have had tragic but ambiguous effects all over the world, since it disrupted identities both in colonies and empires while provoking opposed, mutually mirrored attempts to signify and react against the displacement of their societies. Whereas decolonisation tried strategically to restore uncontaminated origins, western historiographies staged and confined the white man's violence as a very local or marginal subplot within the larger story of capitalist progress. Thus, what Hall wonders is whether postcolonial histories really go through this binary structure which externalises the Other in a well fixed place and time. Most white, liberal or marxist,

[20] Ibid., 110.
[21] Ibid., 253.
[22] Ibid., 248.
[23] Hall, "When was 'the post-colonial'?", 251.

intellectuals still find it difficult to cope with the assumption that ethnic alterity remains an anterior and primitive moment which has to be assimilated in their grand narratives of civilisation. Likewise, on the other side of the binary structure, Achebe seems to believe that natives alone, while finding their ethical choice between inappropriate and appropriate goals, should exorcise the colonial ghost in order to recover a self-produced cultural identity and an absolutely national polity.

Achebe meets Hall's criticism of the binary structure half-way, when *Anthills* shows how postcolonial territories and subjects appear to internalise the opposition of coloniser and colonised. In this way, Ikem reflects on his own privileged belonging to the ruling class of Kangan:

> How does the poor man retain his calm in the face of such provocation? From what bottomless wells of patience does he draw? His great good humour must explain it. This sense of humour turned sometimes against himself, must be what saves him from total dejection. He had learnt to squeeze every drop of enjoyment he can out of his stony luck. And the fool who oppresses him will make a particular point of that enjoyment: *You see, they are not in the least like ourselves. They don't need and can't use the luxuries that you and I must have. They have the animal capacity to endure the pain of, shall we say, domestication*. The very words the white master had said in his time about the black race as a whole. Now we say them about the poor. (40)

Here, again, Bhabha's cultural translation or Hall's global reading of the encounter with the white man is felt as a hostile and chaotic moment of African decolonisation, that must be overcome. But what remains untranslatable in Ikem's view is at the same time a double opening towards modernity. First of all, after the withdrawal of British troops, the rising national economy should aim at reforming an organic social body and building a common interethnic home, against the previous "animal domestication" of the poor. The split between Ikem's original land and the new, postcolonial territory can be sutured

insofar as he seems to point ideologically less to the fratricidal wars of African tribalism than to the universalistic consciousness of Marxist historiography and to the class struggles that drove proletarian masses in Europe. It is certainly thanks to this foreign presence that Ikem can see a reversal of roles in decolonisation, as if in the relay race of history the baton at stake, being fixed in the place and time of native properties, could be passed from the white master to all his slaves without implying a mutual contamination of identities and cultures.

But Ikem recognises at the same time that cultural estrangement has in fact been worked out because of the black leaders' desire to occupy the master's place, to ape his social status and reproduce hia way of government. Thus, whenever Ikem evokes an authentically native presence, he soon discloses how his ideals of social justice can neither incorporate "inner" enemies nor leave out "outer" friends without the very idea of the nation collapsing.

In search of an enemy

According to Bhabha, postcolonial communities, especially those reconstructed by migrants in metropolitan areas, have been marked by "the making, or becoming minor, of the idea of Society", by the migrants' withdrawing from any western spaces of the *socius* and the logos of universal brotherhood.[24] Nevertheless, the right to signify through a new power of naming gives the colonised a sense of cultural belonging by questioning "the masculinist, authoritative subjectivity" inscribed in the process of colonisation.[25]

While all over the world the evidence of integralism and economic exploitation drives people to consider that politics is still in search of an enemy, Achebe's novel, like Bhabha's politics of survival, wonders whether postcolonial histories still need their worn-out scenery of resentful male heroes. It casts a gloomy (and ironical) shadow on the figure of the wrestler, on

[24] Bhabha, 231.
[25] Ibid., 233.

the guardian of the land who recognises the other as enemy and hurls himself against "foreigners", whether external or internal. *Anthills* reveals that, although Sam, Ikem and Chris become more and more foreign to each other and brood over their mutual suspicions, they constantly recall the name and memories of their old friendship. This implies that, within the binary relationship of self and double, any one of the warriors needs to estrange his friends and fatally push them towards the figure of the outer community enemy, a rhetorical figure that already exists and is necessary if male brotherhood is to arise.

It is not Ikem, however, who can raise the question of male violence. His revisionary tales re-articulate the warcry and carry the wrestler's auratic absolutism to the threshold of African post-independence history. Here it is suggested that Ikem's truth, his impassioned trust in the universalistic and humanistic ideals of class belonging, has been shattered too many times and translated into racial hatred and the vicious circles of coups and counter-coups. Rather, I believe that Achebe obliquely visualises the difficulties of postcolonial belonging through his characterisation of Chris. It is significant that the new kind of interethnic friendship is worked out at Beatrice's house, after the news of her man's death and ultimate message has reached destination. Disguised as a beggar and hunted down by Sam's lackeys, Chris had tried to get a girl out of a police sergeant's clutches, while all the people around were talking about the regime's sudden collapse:

> The other said nothing more. He unslung his gun, cocked it, narrowed his eyes while confused voices went up all around some asking Chris to run, others the policeman to put the gun away. Chris stood his ground looking straight into the man's face, daring him to shoot. And he did, point-blank into the chest presented to him. (215)

How will criticism interpret the gesture whereby Chris has deliberately looked for his death in the mouth of the gun and, for the first time, opposed the violence of the Kangan dictatorship? All Achebe says is that, in his flight into Abazon, Chris reads the

Hymn to the Sun and sees the anthills in the wilderness. But where has Chris's disenchanted accommodation gone? Indeed, Achebe's descriptions of his character show how a longing for dissolution underlies Chris's political thought, a nausea that drives him to silently accept and justify the degeneration of the Kangan society as well as the most cynical and ridiculous aspects of power. But the rendezvous with death is neither an aesthetic harakiri nor a stoical admission of his guilt. It is, instead, the crucial turning point when the symbolic pact of male brotherhood not only discloses its reversal of friends into enemies, but says who and where the enemy really is. The rape of the unknown girl disrupts Chris's position when, suddenly, in the image of the sergeant he sees how Sam has been the scapegoat: one on whom he has offloaded his responsabilities. In his deathplace Chris looks for a new self that lies beyond his own past and that he can perform only in the paradoxical way he both sacrifices his life and laughs at his unexpected heroic gesture.

The three leading characters' deaths do not empty the postcolonial scene of the novel. Achebe stresses that, in the temporary absence of military power, Elewa and Beatrice's elaboration of their mourning leads them not to retreat into their private widowhood but to recognise how the latest violent and bloody facts have disclosed "a defensive pact with a small band of near-strangers that was to prove stronger than kindred or mere friendship" (218). Beatrice's mourning, above all, is a self-consciously political act that traces the circle within which all the other survivors can pick up "something from the wreck of the recent past that may help them as they make their way into the future".[26] But Achebe stages this sorting of their past by laying all emphasis on two closely related events, the naming ceremony and Beatrice's answer to Chris's riddle, his last reported word "grin" or "green".

While traditionally a male name, Amaechina or *May-the-path-never-close* is given to Ikem and Elewa's newly-born female child in order to signify that, in her father's absence, the girl will grow by keeping the heterogeneous status of her family

[26] Achebe in Jane Wilkinson, 51.

alive. In the name, difference is embodied and articulated to the extent that it reinscribes an apparently masculinist dream of immortality with the real value of matrilinear transmission through daughters. At the same time, its suggestion of androgyny provides a sign of how Beatrice's new community wishes to carry the questions of property and power beyond any binary opposition of friends and enemies. This is eagerly celebrated after Beatrice has discarded another significant name, *The-remnant-shall-return*, which. while pointing to the fact that what is hidden in tradition can be spoken again, leads in fact all the onlookers to think about Ikem and Chris. But Beatrice gives voice to their silence without any commemorating attitude. The image of the dead men is shown to shrink, like the Cheshire cat, since she is restricted to remembering Ikem's small-boy smile "floating around us now" (222) and Chris's last grin.

In this sense, it becomes dramatically evident that Achebe is taking his last steps to revise his tragic vision of the warrior, when Chris's death is commented on through a reading which keeps the Abazon justification of violence at an unambiguous distance. If in Ikem's tale men carry death in their eyes because they inherit it from their gods, all the friends of Beatrice's community believe, on the contrary, that Chris "was able to look death in the eyes and smile and make a joke" (231). By performing his death, he has bequeathed the hope contained in the folds of his pun, whereby his own grin both deferred and ironically contested the very idea of himself, as Beatrice explains, in the representation of the last self-righteous "green bottle" of a popular counting song: "The bottles are up there on the wall hanging by a hair's breadth, yet looking down pompously on the world. Chris was sending us a message to beware. This world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented" (232).

A new beginning emerges therefore from the texture of the transverse and horizontal social relationships at Beatrice's house. It is a radical mood that defies even the reverential cult of dead heroes in the will to occlude, together with their corpses, any form of leadership and charismatic authority that would open a further cycle of violence and death.

Marie Hélène Laforest

Masculinity in the margins: women writing the Caribbean

Anglophone Caribbean women's fiction has been defined as a body of writing which is "committed to an ideology of change," struggles to undermine phallogocentric logic, and "makes a political point of incorporating the marginal and the peripheral".[1] This literature has dealt as much with issues relating to motherhood, female bonding, and female alienation as with colonialism, migration, national politics, and color and class hierarchies. However, it has focused on the quest for identity. Traditionally a concern for the male writers of the region as well, this quest has almost always eluded the question of sexual orientation.

Unexplored in male writing, this aspect of the self has occasionally surfaced in women's writing since the 1980's, but has not been subject to close scrutiny. In their 1994 survey of anglophone Caribbean women writers, critics Denise deCaires and Evelyn O'Callaghan asserted: "To date, there have been few explicit portrayals of lesbianism apart from the poetry of Dionne Brand and sections of Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone*".[2] Even if referring exclusively to female relationships, this statement is only partly accurate inasmuch as it overlooks the publication of *"If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire"* by

[1] Evelyn O'Callaghan, *Woman Version. Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women* (London and Basingstoke: MacMillan Caribbean, 1993), 13, 110.

[2] Denise deCaires and Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Anglophone Caribbean Women Writers", *Kunapipi* 16,1 (1994), 629. This approach obviously considers lesbian, feminist writer, Audre Lorde – who has theorized the erotic as power in her 1978 book of the same name – American rather than Caribbean.

Michelle Cliff in 1981, the lesbian overtones in her 1984 novel, *Abeng*, as well as the writer's fictive transvestism in *No Telephone to Heaven*.[3] After Cliff, Jamaica Kincaid as well has faced the issue of young girls' sexual orientation in both the short story "In the Night" and in the novels *Annie John* and *Lucy*, where there are explicit references to sexual choices. The young girls in Kincaid show a preference for same-sex relations which, albeit referring to a specific developmental stage, that of adolescence, does open up and question the general validity and automatic acceptance of heterosexuality.[4]

Since then, two other texts by Caribbean women writers have appeared which deal openly with sexual identity, one by Kincaid

[3] Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (1988) (London: Minerva, 1989), (hereafter cited as NTH). In *Abeng,* two homosexuals appear: Uncle Robert and Mad Hannah's son. Both die in the end. As to the young girls, Clare and Zoe, their encounters are charged with racial and class, but also sexual overtones. The scene in which Clare and Zoe lay naked on the rock by the river reveals how Clare is attracted to and flustered by her friend's naked body: "In the moments before the cane-cutter startled them, she had wanted to lean across Zoe's breasts and kiss her". (*Abeng*, 1987,124) This overt declaration of desire of the female body is the culmination of many other ambiguous references that run through the novel as in the case of the two girls reading in the paper about "a rare disease which only girls could contract, in which they were gradually turned into men…. Clare thought. "Well, if one of us got the disease, then the other one could marry her and promise never to tell a soul. "Don't make game, man, gal can't marry gal" (*Abeng*, 103).

[4] The anonymous young girl in "In the Night" proclaims: "Now I am a girl, but one day I will marry a woman – a red-skin woman with black bramblebush hair and brown eyes, who wears skirts that are so big I can easily bury my head in them. I would like to marry this woman and live with her in a mud hut near the sea." Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River* (New York: Vintage, 1983),11. (hereafter BR) Lucy, instead, remembers kissing "a girl from school, but we were best friends and were only using each other for practice". Then she kisses Peggy, a young adult like her, "because they had nothing better to do". *Lucy* (New York: Plume, 1991), 83. Whereas Annie says of Gwen: "I said that I could not wait for us to grow up so that we could live in a house of our own, I had already picked out the house". And again: "I looked at these girls surrounding me [her schoolmates], my heart filled with just sprung-up love, and I wished then and there to spend the rest of my life only with them". *Annie John* (London: Picador, 1985), 45, 51. Carole Boyce Davies has examined the critique of heterosexuality in Kincaid, especially through the episode of the 'tongue' in *Lucy*. Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women: Writing and Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994)

herself, the 1997 memoir *My Brother,* and *A Small Gathering of Bones* by Patricia Powell published in 1996.[5] Three women writers – Cliff, Powell and Kincaid – have therefore written against the heterosexual imperative. They do not stage women, however – female sexuality remains hidden – but homosexuals, confronting homophobia and confirming the subversive nature of their writings which, as has been argued, "evade dogmatic theoretical delineations as to who may speak about what in which voice or language".[6]

Afro-diasporic Perspective

Interest in homosexuality in Caribbean female literature cannot, however, be seen in isolation. Not unlike the upsurge of female writers in the 1980's, which was a direct consequence of the literary success of African American women, it can be said that engagement with homosexuality resonates with the struggle for gay rights in the United States. In recent years, Caribbean literature has experienced the influence of American trends and productions.[7] This is as much the result of the increased mediazation and globalization of black politics, as of migratory flows bringing an increasing number of West Indians to settle in the United States.

West Indian literature cannot, of course, be identified with the African American one, but there are contiguities. In the United States, recognition of homosexuality lies within female writing.[8] They are the ones who shattered the silence which had shrouded

[5] Patricia Powell, *A Small Gathering of Bones* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1994); Jamaica Kincaid, *My Brother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) (hereafter cited as SGB and MB)

[6] O'Callaghan, *Woman Version*, 81.

[7] Compared to the beginning of the century and to the Harlem Renaissance period which was strongly influenced by a Caribbean presence in Harlem (Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Arthur Schonburg) today the trend has shifted to the extent that there is a fear of African American hegemony over Afro diasporic cultures and the Caribbean in particular.

[8] The intention here is not to assert that gay and lesbian experiences are identical, but to point to the commonality of their repression within a regime of 'compulsory heterosexuality'.

the lives of lesbians and gays. The taboo was indeed broken by the books of Audre Lorde and Alice Walker who in 1982 and 1983 respectively came out with *Zami. A New Spelling of my Name* and *The Color Purple.* Both went way beyond the metaphoric sexuality of texts like Richard Wright's *Native Son.*

In the West Indies, silence about male homosexuality was initially broken by Edgar Mittleholzer who, according to Faizal Forrester, "introduces to our literature the landscapes of forbidden homosexual desire".[9] This isolated instance dates back to 1950. In contemporary literature, however, it was a woman, Michelle Cliff, who first came out. Cliff left Jamaica at a young age and still resides in the United States. In her 1981 autobiographical text "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire", she wrote: "In the family I am known as the "lady cousin". It has to do with how I look. And the fact that I am twenty-seven and unmarried – and for all they know, unattached. They do not know that I am really the lesbian cousin".[10]

The homophobia of black cultures is well-known.[11] It has been explained as a direct legacy of slavery which destroyed the

[9] Faizal Forrester, "'Revolting Bodies': Homosexual Dream and Masculine Anxiety in Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office* and Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground*", *Caribbean Studies*, 27, 3-4 (1994), 313. In Mittelholzer's novel homoerotic desire manifests itself only in dreams. However, recent analyses of homosexuality like Richard A. Isay's, take the following point of view: "I have found sexual fantasy to be a more clinically useful way of defining homosexuality than behavior". Richard A. Isay, *Being Homosexual. Gay Men and their Development*, (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 12.

[10] Michelle Cliff, "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire", in *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry* (1985), 360. Portrayals of homosexuality in the Caribbean are found in works by Caryl Philips and H. Nigel Thomas: *Higher Ground* and *Spirits in the Dark*. They were preceded by Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) and *Abeng* (1984).

[11] Obviously homophobia does not affect black cultures only. In speaking of a "hegemonic" masculinity, Michael S. Kimmel affirms that "the standards of masculinity" exclude men who are not "white, middle-class, heterosexual, and early middle-aged". He further adds that "Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood". Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia. Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity", in Mary M. Gergen and Sara N. Davis, *Toward a New Psychology of Gender. A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 230, 233.

black man's image of himself. An "enfeebled black masculinity" felt it necessary to transform the homosexual into an outcast in order to "shore up the image of black maleness".[12] As Barbara Smith has affirmed, even today, "public expressions of homophobia are acceptable" in black culture.[13] Encouraged by the writings of black lesbians, however, the history of black homosexuality in Afro-diasporic culture has begun to be written: that of the closeted men of the Harlem Renaissance and of the lesbian women of that period – even if the evidence in their writing is scant.[14] The question of the absence of homosexuality in black fiction was further addressed in the mid 1980's by writers Joseph Bean and Essex Hemphill. Hemphill affirmed that "… as a black gay man there was, except for Baldwin, little to nurture me", and that "the 'chosen' history has erased homosexuality from our recorded history".[15] More recently literary critics from the African American community have acknowledged the homophobia of the culture by citing it as the cause – together with racism – of James Baldwin's departure from the United States to Paris in 1948.[16]

The representations of black gay men by Black British film director Isaac Julien are well-known today; and, in particular, his portrayal of the closeted sexuality of the African American poet Langston Hughes. In a return to, and revision of, a particular configuration of black history, *Looking for Langston* (1989)

[12] Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother. New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Los Angeles and London: Alyson Publications, 1991), xxi, xxix.

Black masculinity has been constructed through the interiorization of Euro-American standards. "Although the gendered politics of slavery denied black men the freedom to act as "men" within the definition set by white norms, this notion of manhood did become a standard used to measure black male progress". bell hooks, *Black Look. Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 90.

[13] Barbara Smith, "Homophobia: Why Bring It up?", in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, David M. Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 101

[14] Gloria Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 21.

[15] Hemphill, *Brother to Brother*, xxi, xxix.

[16] Henry L. Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 1651.

visually depicts the complex world of sexuality which emerged during the Harlem Renaissance. Because of its graphic descriptions, the Hughes estate asked that some scenes be cut before its viewing in the United States. The film exhibits black gay sexuality while at the same time undoing the stereotypes of black men. Black men are shown as "vulnerable" and as "shed[ing] the protective shield of hardened masculinity they are in real life expected to wear like a mask".[17]

It has traditionally been difficult for black writers to openly criticize their own culture. To redress the balance against centuries of degradation, of dis-information and of pernicious myths which accompanied colonialist and imperialist ideologies has proved an arduous task. Not least, because whenever blacks have shown the negative sides of their culture, the 'view from within' they provided was used to confirm and politically exploit previously established stereotypes. Uneasiness in critiquing their own culture manifests itself in the popular view that homosexuality is imported, 'foreign.' This vision is disputed by Michelle Cliff, as Timothy S. Chin points out:

> Cliff clearly disrupts the discursive positioning of homosexuality as a 'foreign contamination' by de-allegorizing the rape of Harry/Harriet when he was a child by a British officer. . . Harry/Harriet insists on the concrete and literal brutality of the rape': 'Not symbol, not allegory... merely a person who felt the overgrown cock of a big whiteman pierce the asshole of a lickle Black bwai'. (NTH,129-30)[18]

In its stead, Cliff propounds a genetic explanation of homosexuality: "I was born this way, that I know", affirms her character Harry/Harriet. This position, which does away with

[17] bell hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 198. "Tongues Untied" by Marlon Kiggs is also defined as a poetic film on black homosexuality by Essex Hemphill. Hemphill, *Brother to Brother*, xxv.

[18] Timothy S. Chin, "'Butlers' and 'Battymen'. Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature", *Callaloo,* 20,1 (Winter 1997), 138.

environmental influences, has been strongly supported by the gay community in the United States. By eliminating the idea of choice, it seems to offer the advantage of allowing homosexuals to overcome the guilt associated with same-sex relations. But at the same time, it denies the plurality of the subject. By postulating an identity rooted in sexuality, Cliff naturalizes homosexuality, merely applying to it the vision society has produced of heterosexuality. Homosexuality, however, can be seen differently. As defined by Judith Butler, it implies both sexuality and performativity whereby "the speaking 'I' is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex".[19]

Caribbean Stories

In *No Telephone to Heaven*, Michelle Cliff traces the story of Clare Savage from her migration to the United States until her return to Jamaica where she dies in a revolutionary struggle. Despite its focus on the female members of Clare Savage's family, the novel attributes a crucial role to Harry/Harriet as Clare's link with her motherland. Appearing at the onset of the novel, he/she is present to the end as Clare finds him/her again upon her return. It is under his/her suggestion that she will undertake the trip back to her grandmother's land to find her roots, reconcile herself with her foremothers and discover the purpose of her life. Harry/Harriet on his/her part, born of a maid, is taken into the home of his middle-class father. He/she grows up in a strictly heterosexual context until he/she makes the decision of assuming a female identity.

[19] "Performativity must be undersood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names". Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 3. See Boyce Davies, *Black Women*, 8: "If following Judith Butler, the category of woman is one of performance of gender, then the category Black woman, or woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist".

Patricia Powell's novel, *A Small Gathering of Bones*, is also set in Jamaica. Ian is dying of AIDS, but his illness has no name as yet. This is 1978 in Jamaica and the disease is spreading among the middle-class men whose lives are depicted in the novel. Dale tells the story of Ian and his homosexual friends during a ten month period. Ian was both Dale's and Nevin's lover. His life is marked not just by the tragedy of his illness, but by his conflictual relationship with his mother who has rejected him because of his homosexuality. Longing for a reunification with her, guilt-ridden, Ian remains tormented until his death. Dale's story, instead, is that of his growth and increasing independence. As his relationship with Nevin deteriorates he acquires a better consciousness of himself, but not without going through demeaning and conflictual relationships.

Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* is autobiographical like all her works. This memoir recounts the story of Kincaid's younger brother who has contracted the HIV virus. His illness offers her the opportunity to return to Antigua after a twenty year absence. Out of the complacency of her middle-class life in the United States, she travels there on three different occasions, bringing with her doses of AZT in the hope of curing her brother. Her return throws her back into the harsh realities of her own working-class background. Her brother dies of AIDS in a run-down hospital. After his death, Kincaid will discover his homosexuality and the existence of a small homosexual world in Antigua.

Opening up

In Caribbean women's literature, which can be defined as prudish, the exploration of sexual orientation has produced a revolution in the writing, a disruption which goes well beyond the more or less explicit descriptions of sex.[20] It has given rise to

[20] Explicit descriptions are only found in Powell who depicts the homosexual world from the inside. "All of a sudden it became clear that Nevin's kisses didn't belong just to him anymore. His lips pressed against other fellows' mouths, alongside navels, between thighs with just as much fervency, just as much ferocity" (SGB, 56).

the depiction of orders of experience which had either been suppressed or treated in a rather stale and traditional style in Caribbean female literature: sexual desire and the mother-son relationship which has been encapsulated in the well-known expression coined in George Lamming *In the Castle of My Skin*, "my mother who fathered me".[21] Treading these new avenues leads to the incorporation of new themes and to the restructuring of the linguistic forms which had hitherto characterized this body of work.

The pattern of using literary English in descriptions and patwah in dialogue, which had become consolidated in female fiction, is altered in both Michelle Cliff and Patricia Powell. The disruptive power of the stories told, the struggle for an alternative sexual identity, unclenches once again the language which has come to symbolize Caribbean difference: the language it took writers centuries to accept, which had bore the symbolic weight of colonialist oppression and of Caribbean loss of identity.

In *No Telephone to Heaven*, the interruption Harry/Harriet represents in the rigid socio-sexual norms of Jamaican middle-class society, is expressed in Cliff's discontinuous language, in the fusion of registers which range from the lyrical of the European tradition, to the Dread Talk of Rastafarians and to the speech of dub poets. These linguistic shifts and re-mixing reflect the disruption in the homogeneous and unitary vision of the Caribbean world.

> Praying to Mother Africa to come save them in Jesus' name. Witnessing in a white tiehead for Jehovah, remembering Shango. But him fade. Dressed like poppy-show at a high Anglican mass for the sake of the Archbishop-him of Canterbury. Begging Jesus. Jah. Mosses. Shango. Yemanja. Oshun. God nuh mus be deaf. Some of them worshiped with their bodies. Rum. Ganja. Music. Water. Vision. Fire. Drum. Stone. Trying to make communion

[21] "My fathered who had only fathered the idea of me left me the sole liability of my mother who really fathered me". George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) (Essex: Longman, 1987), 3.

> with God Almighty. No matter what him name be. What her name be. (NTH,16)

Responding to the violence enacted upon homosexuals in Jamaican culture with equal violence, Cliff's language becomes virulent.[22]

> Him cyaan help himself, him mother nuh maid? Harry/Harriet puts on a bikini – bra stretched across his hairy, delicately mounded chest, panties cradling his cock and balls – and starts to dance to "Hey, Jude". People laugh, but nobody takes Harry/Harriet to heart. (NTH, 21)

Harry/Harriet's cross-dressing is scorned from a middle-class regulatory point of view. Cliff returns the gaze of the middle-class – responsible for normalizing Jamaican society – on themselves, on the horror of their own lives which will lead to their violent death. Paul's mother and father, the heterosexual, self-righteous couple are butchered. They are the ones who have claimed the colonists' legacy, forgotten that of their African ancestors, and adhere to the dominating/dominated model which had oppressed them in the past. They are the transmitters of the patriarchal Eurocentric system with all its phobias. Cliff expresses her anger through crude descriptions which are unprecedented in this body of literature:

> He [Paul] looked down at her, away from her neck, to where he had emerged twenty-five years before. The base of a rum bottle was caught between her legs. What fe do? Terror at approaching this part of her. Have mercy. He pulled the bottle out and saw that the neck was broken. Jagged. Blood poured from between her legs, catching in her fine curled hair. The flies swarmed anew as a new banquet lay before them. He felt a terrible shame. (NTH, 26)

[22] The oppression of homosexuals is linked to that of the lower classes of Jamaican society. Cliff takes a strong anti-colonialist and anti-class position throughout the text.

Jamaican Creole which appears on and off in Cliff, becomes the sole language of *A Small Gathering of Bones*. Immersed in this language, thus in this world, the text stands outside of colonialism and its oppressive discourses. Patricia Powell takes Dale as the center of consciousness to provide an inside view of the homosexual community in Kingston.

> And that Saturday morning, Dale feel a wave of tenderness wash over him so strong, him wanted to stroke the thin stately neck in front him, and run his fingers in between and around the sharp edges of his shoulders, massaging each blade with the lightest of caresses. But instead Dale walk back to the living room, fatigue slowing up his every step, and start to pick up the clothes him did take off and leave on the floor last night. (SGB, 2)

The middle-class Creole Dale speaks is a language which moves with great ease along the Caribbean continuum, sliding across codes, producing an incantatory prose.

> Bill brought him a pair of crutches with his name engraved in silver on them, and Ian would vigorously hop around the house unassisted, blind to Miss Dimple's furtive movements behind him, just in case... And by the time Dale see Ian the Friday evening, the merriment had danced back into his eyes and a trembling radiance striped his entire person. (SGB, 100)

As Marlene Nourbese Philip has affirmed:

> To say that the experience can only be expressed in standard English (if there is any such thing) or only in the Caribbean demotic (there is such a thing) is, in fact, to limit the experience for the African artist working in the Caribbean demotic. It is in the continuum of expression from standard to Caribbean English that the veracity of the experience lies.[23]

[23] Marlene Nourbese Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* (London: The Women's Press, 1993), 84.

Lifting the lid on homosexuality has also changed Jamaica Kincaid's language. She, who has written in standard English only, has recourse to the patwah of Antigua, the "mother-tongue" which had been theorized by female critics, but which had remained repressed in Kincaid's previous work despite the Caribbean setting of her stories, despite the intense physical mother-daughter relations she has described. Her brother's transgressive life and alternative sexuality triggers a different use of language. Albeit in brackets, patwah is present. It is her brother's voice: "I told him to protect himself from the HIV virus and he laughed at me and said that he would never get such a stupid thing ('Me no get dat chupidness, man')" (MB, 8). And "('Me bex, you know, me bex, me no want he get me tings')" (MB,172). It is also Kincaid's mother's voice. This mother, who has not been heard, finally speaks. Kincaid recounts: "My mother said that the body in the coffin did not look like her son at all ('E no look like 'e, 'e no look like Devon')" (MB, 181). Or "My mother, looking at my children, told me that they loved her ('Dem lub me. Dem lub me a lot, you know')..." (MB,63).

Patwah in Kincaid, however, looks foreign whereas standard English, limpid as always, becomes the language of authority. The transcription she adopts keeps it distant from the standard forms. It goes back to the colonizer's view of the slaves' language as a bastardized form of their language, not as a new creation. Despite being defined as an anti-imperialist writer, Kincaid, here, brackets the language of her mother and brother. Patwah is set aside, does not appear as sign of difference and resistance in the text. She does away with its subversive history, forgetting that it has been reworked, remodeled and made anew.[24]

Although Kincaid has been described as having "no anxiety over language", in this case the language of Antigua serves as trope for other values, it stands for her brother's and

[24] Patwah has been seen as resistance, as a marker of difference for postcolonial writers. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). In her short poem, epilogue to her 1983 award winning collection, Grace Nichols writes: 'I have crossed an ocean/ I have lost my tongue/ From the root of the old/ One/ A new one has sprung', in Grace Nichols, *i is a long memoried woman* (London: Karnak, 1990), 87.

mother's norms. It doubles for the world of Antigua towards which she was ambivalent and which she now refuses, changing her perspectival location.[25] *Her* standard English and *their* patwah are the two extremes of the West Indian continuum; Kincaid has opted for the hegemonic form while her family is anchored to the speech of the subaltern; they, "the self-destructive of the world". "So this is it, no hug no nothing? (and he [her brother] said it in that way, in conventional English, not in the English that instantly reveals the humiliation of history, the humiliations of the past not remade into art)" (MB, 108). Kincaid confirms language as a site of power, revealing the asymmetrical relations within it.

A Discourse of Subversion

The articulation of the alternative form of experience which homosexuality represents has led women writers to subvert their own writing.[26] Novel in itself, the centrality of male characters has led women writers to explore new terrains, to reflect publicly on their own sexual lives, to deal with the connection between church and sexuality, and to sexualize the male body.

[25] Carole Boyce Davies had provided a reading of Kincaid's *Lucy* in which she interpreted "Kincaid's linked critique of heterosexuality and of language" as being "a long way from the anxiety over language and decolonization of the African and Caribbean male writer.... My assertion is that, for Caribbean women writers like Jamaica Kincaid, the assumptions about language are already embedded textually. Thus, the theory comes, not from the externalized exploration of what is taking place with language, but from the very deconstruction of the meaning of "tongues" and taste and language and ultimately of self". Boyce Davies, *Black Women*, 158, 159.

Kincaid's position in *My Brother* may be a cause not so much to read her work in a different light, but rather to see an evolution towards rejection of Caribbean norms and acceptance of U.S. middle-class values as evidenced in several passages of this memoir. See note 50.

[26] Caribbean women have principally written novels of development in which the male figure is often absent. The texts are centered on female figures – mothers, grandmothers, aunts. The young girls of the novels are often torn between Euro-derived values and African-derived ones. Sex is not depicted although sometimes its effects are – in the form of unwanted pregnancies, for instance.

Men were characteristically kept in the background, used only functionally; when relevant, their presence reflected the violence of the male world, above all its oppression of women as with Hyacinth's father's in Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging*. The foregrounding of masculine protagonists has obviously shifted the focus of female narratives, displacing the young girls, adolescents, and young women and eliminating along with them the references to menarche, menses, and to body parts as substitution for genitalia.

The female body in the woman novel of development – typical of the 1980's – is not explicitly and actively sexual; the narratives have left out the areas inhabited by desire and sexuality.[27] This was not only a reaction to the stereotyping and fetishization of the black female body in Western narratives which led them to consciously redress their images, but also the result of the prudish Protestantism of the English-speaking Caribbean. The "association of sexuality with shame, defilement and the forced renunciation of childhood freedom" is common among women writers and this is the result of an education which has instilled the "Christian and Victorian strictures as to respectability and morality with their attendant taboo on the expression of female sexuality".[28] The female protagonists of Caribbean fiction indeed neither sing nor dance, and rarely do they appear as agents of their sexuality in heterosexual relations. However, in dealing with a transgressive male identity, Jamaica Kincaid speaks in the first person of her sexuality: "My own life from a sexual standpoint, can be described as a monument to boring conventionality". She adds some pages later:

> I grew up alienated from my own sexuality and, as far as I can tell, am still, to this day, not at all comfortable with the idea of myself and sex. And so too, it must be this sort of man that my brother was who accounts for the famous prudery that exists among a certain kind of Antiguan woman (the English-speaking West Indian woman, as far as I can tell; I do not know about the other women who speak the other languages). (MB, 69)[29]

[27] Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid – who describes Xuela's sexual life in *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) – could be regarded as exceptions along with Marlene Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand.

[28] de Caires and O'Callaghan, "Anglophone Caribbean", 628.

Michelle Cliff in *No Telephone to Heaven*, constitutes a sexuality in displacement by making the character Harry/Harriet central to the text's unfolding. Written before the gay revolution and before the AIDS explosion – which would make it easier to render male homosexuality public – the novel reflects the need to justify homosexuality to heterosexual readers. To Cliff it is important to assert Harry/Harriet's existence, to establish his/her presence and foresee a future for her in Jamaica. Sun and moon, he/she will become only Harriet, will choose to be a nurse and live away from the Jamaican middle-class with its false value systems and repressive sexuality.

> She was a fortunate woman, one who had found her true vocation… a male organ swung gently under her bleached and starched skirt, through the yards of downtown, in her uniform and carrying her bag, sometimes wearing a red cape, a dashing figure even in the heat, like Mary Seacole… (NTH, 171)

Apparently more comfortable with the description of a male homosexual, Cliff is both Clare Savage and Harry/Harriet. Both characters are in-between figures: Clare is rootless, neither white nor black, neither Jamaican nor American or English. Harry/Harriet is neither boy nor girl, neither sun nor moon. They are both linked to female ancestral figures: Mary Seacole and Maroon Nanny. Harriet takes up Mary Seacole's legacy. Seacole was a free woman of color who while defining herself an "unprotected female", traveled widely in the mid-nineteenth century, practicing the nursing profession. Clare identifies with Maroon Nanny, the celebrated woman fighter in eighteenth-century Jamaica who resisted slavery and was so feared by the planters that "they thankfully rewarded the

[29] Jamaica Kincaid, *My Brother*, 69, 41. Many Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean women have provided graphic accounts of heterosexual sex.

slave who murdered her".[30] Clare and Harry/Harriet are at home in each other's company.

> "Girlfriend, tell me something. Do you find me strange?" Clare looked into her friend's eyes. Mascara and eye shadow washed away by the salt water, the eyes stood out, deep brown. Her own eyes naked, green as the cane behind them. She thought, Of course I find you strange; how could I not? You are a new person to me. At the same time I feel drawn to you. At home with you.
> "No I don't find you strange. No stranger . . . no stranger than I find myself, For we are neither one thing nor the other." (NTH, 131)

The transgressiveness of Harry/Harriet despite the contempt and the risk to his/her life is an act of courage. As she has done in *Abeng,* Cliff denounces homophobia as life-threatening. "... but a few did not suffer freaks gladly... had they known about Harriet they would have indulged in elaborate name calling, possibly stoning, in the end harrying her to the harbor perhaps" (NTH, 171).[31] The appeal for sexual liberation in Jamaica could not be stronger, the expressed need for a new society which differentiates gender and sexual identities and which does not literalize gender. Jamaica must become a place where a male organ can swing "gently under a bleached and starched skirt".[32]

[30] Peter Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 88.

As will be discussed later, Powell and Kincaid also explore the female ascendancy of male protagonists.

[31] The enigmatic reference to the harbor is intertextually linked to *Abeng,* Cliff's first novel, in which Clare Savage appears for the first time. Clare's uncle, Robert, who was thought to be "funny," "a little off", "a battyman" swims out into Kingston Harbor and does not come back. In the same novel, Clinton, Mad Hannah's son, swims out in the river and drowns to the shouts of "battyman, battyman" from the bank. 'Battyman' is glossed by Cliff as 'faggot'.

[32] Transexual surgery has been described by Marjorie Garber as "the literalization of the constructedness of gender". Marjorie Garber, "Vested Interests. Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety", in Henry Abelove, *Lesbian and Gay Reader*, 117.

The sexual displacement found in Cliff recurs in Powell. The tale Mrs. Morgan tells Dale about two lesbians, without him soliciting her, is the trace that points to a suppressed story, that of lesbianism. The tone is of nostalgia in recounting the story of "the lovely lady" who ended up in the alms house for trying, without success, to buy her father's love in exchange for his acceptance of her lesbian identity.

> 'Back in my young gal days I used to know a woman.' She sounded far away again. 'Lovely lady. College teacher. Well respected and successful in her vocation. Church going. Choir singing. All in all decent. She never marry. Did share a flat with another lady. Decent just like herself.' (SGB, 50)

This reference to two lesbians is set in the midst of a homosexual world. While Harry/Harriet incarnated homosexuality, was isolated and tolerated solely because he was "only one after all, one that nature did not claim", the men in *A Small Gathering of Bones* reflect a variegated homosexual population. Dale, Ian, and Nevin, the protagonists, have all accepted their sexual identity and do not waver under familial or social pressures; Alexander, instead, Dale's lover, a religious education teacher, is a closet homosexual, married with two children; Ian's boyfriend's, the lawyer Bill, does not have sex with him.

Concerned with the creation of blood and flesh characters, fearful of idealizing homosexuality, Powell pays considerable attention to what are considered the shortcomings of gay men. In so doing she does not dismantle this representational paradigm, she divides the stereotypes equally among the men. Jealous of Nevin's new young boyfriend, Dale threatens him with an ice pick. Ian and Dale have unprotected sex with unknown men in parks. There are older men with "battyman trousers" who try to seduce young men outside the sports grounds. Nevin is promiscuous; the "amount of fellows coming and going from his room has multiplied". The men contract AIDS through their recklessness. At the same time, however, their dreams are routed along a conventional heterosexual narrative. Dale declares: "It wasn't that him still didn't dream

of growing old with Nevin, travelling with him to distant places, probably even buying several acres of land and raising a child or two together" (SGB, 26-7).

In Kincaid as well, her brother, Devon – whom she describes as homosexual, but who appears in the text as bisexual – dreams of raising a family: "He would say that again and again, he wanted his own family and as soon as he could, he would get to it. He told me of a plot of land that was bare, available, for sale; he was going to buy it and build a house there and raise a family there"(MB, 57). These needs and desires as expressed by the male characters are new in Caribbean literature. They could be seen as an imitation of heterosexuality and therefore as reinforcing the very discourse homosexuals oppose. But as Judith Butler has shown, imitation can also be subversive as it "unveils the constructed nature of heterosexual subjects" and "disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality".[33]

Although homosexuality cannot be captured, cannot be contained in one category, in the Caribbean only the 'battyman' or 'auntie-man' exists in the sexual system; that is, a biological male who is effeminate. To Powell goes the merit of introducing the gay man in West Indian literature. Nevin is a successful businessman who runs a fabric store in Kingston; he owns a house which he shares with his lover, he is self-confident and on good terms with his mother. Until then, the gay man who appears in European and American urban contexts where the male partners enjoy equal status, was absent.

> Gay fiction often tells us "tales of the city", … because it was in cities like New York and San Francisco that gay communities first developed in the post-Stonewall period. "The city gives you the chance to make yourself up", Richard Sennett has remarked, and gay culture is to a large extent a made-up thing, an existential invention constantly proposing new values and codes of conduct."[34]

[33] Butler, *Bodies*, 125

[34] George Stambolian, *Men on Men* (New York: Plume, 1986), 4

The absence of gay men is also confirmed in Kincaid. A friend of hers, Freeston, is isolated in Antigua. Even his mother, who is supportive after he has contracted the HIV virus, would not understand the word 'gay' if he defined himself as such.

> To say that he was gay or homosexual was something he said about himself; to say that he was an auntie-man was something people said about him. She [his mother] understood him better when he was the person people said something about, not when he was the person who said something about himself. (MB, 147)

In Antigua, therefore, male bodies are still mapped according to their sexual roles; whereas in Kingston, Jamaica, the gay community has made its appearance. Powell describes gays who have a social life, who meet in their homes, at their parents', and who go to Clovy's Bar where they dance. At Loxley's parents' in the country, a picture of his and his dead lover stands on top of the television set. The men also practice homosexual solidarity, evident in Dale's friendship with Ian and his presence throughout his illness. Bill too is attentive to Ian's needs, buys him "a handsome leather chair with padded arms and a headrest and wheel Ian home from the hospital" (SGB, 90). He also hires Miss Dimple to care for him. When Ian has a coughing fit at the bar, the men present offer help.

> Slowly Dale lead him off the dance floor, and the crowd created a passageway and him lead the cough-racked Ian past the bar, and the jukebox to a quiet spot near the door. A fellow and his boyfriend offer up stools, Another arrive with a roll of toilet paper, somebody else with a glass of water. And with the onslaught of cool and fresh air, the cough subsided to only a grunt escaping Ian's lips now and again. (SGB, 118)

By affirming a gay collective presence, Powell does more than insert homosexuals in the social fabric of Jamaica and more than disrupt the narrative of the Jamaican nation as homogeneous. The attention to male social relations in the text raises other issues like the elaboration of new groupings, new

kinship in Kingston – as in the West – and the interpretation of a masculine experience by women. Taking on a male voice, Powell questions from within, patrilinearity, family, and inheritance, pillars of the West.

The Gravest of Sins

In particular, Powell resignifies the family. This means addressing the ways in which it has perpetuated itself, especially through the church which has sanctioned patrilinearity and made homosexuality "the gravest of sins".[35]

Dale, the Sunday School teacher, is caught between two images of God, that of the forgiving God and of the one who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Even if in his youth he had been lucky to meet an English pastor of the Episcopal church who had spoken of his homosexuality as the "will of the Almighty", the "cross to bear", his relation with the church grows more complex as he relates his sexual desire to sin. Guilty and ashamed, he feels constrained to "choose between Salvation and the love between men" (SGB, 107). However, even if he had criticized Ian for having promiscuous sex, he too gives in to desire. "After work him [would] frequent the park, eagerly awaiting the moment when the hand would press against his shoulder; each bringing its own peculiar brand of perfume..." (SGB, 121). In the park Dale meets unknown men with whom he has casual sexual encounters. The graphic descriptions of homosexual sex are a first in West Indian fiction:

> Then the hand was suddenly gone from Dale's raw and blistered nipple and the clinking of a buckle and the tinkle of the zip rip the night with such violence... Him breathe in the air charged with flower smells, rotting wood, damp dirt. People pass quickly back and forth on the narrow dirt road close-by, low conversations and spiralling laughter ringing loud into the night....
> Hands grip his hips, forcing him forward. Dale stumble, the coins from his pocket and keys sing out, the effete voice released a curse, but the hands, vice-like, steadied him, and with much swiftness and dexterity, as if well familiar with the narrow route, the man rip open soft folds pushing his way into flesh, pummeling and churning and crushing until the sound easing from this throat was like that of a hog whimpering quietly in pain. Then him was gone. And Dale was alone, Flooded with guilt, With shame. With pleasure. (SGB, 114)

So is the fact that the central participant in these sexual encounters is a member of the Pentecostal church who counsels "the late teen-age members of the congregation". In many cases Powell ironically juxtaposes gays and children. Loxley pays for Dale's study room which overlooks a nursery; when Dale and Nevin meet in a restaurant there is a baby girl scampering around; Dale meets one of his boyfriends, Alexander, when the latter drops off his children at Sunday School. As Powell establishes the social reality of homosexuals, she dismantles the notion of the threat, the possible contagion they pose to the wider society. Miss Dimple becomes harmful, instead. As she assists Ian, she succeeds in bringing about his conversion to the church and in having him baptized. By accepting the law of God, thus of the father, and renouncing his sexuality, Ian condemns himself to unhappiness.

> Ian would turn out like Bill and this wasn't what religion should be used for, to hide behind like a veil, to plunge into like a dream. Him should be able to accept himself and his religion, embrace the two like a twin. Not suppress one, while the other reign triumphant. (SGB, 119)[36]

[35] Kincaid does not reflect on the roots of her prudery nor does she ask herself where the prejudices about homosexuals come from. Cliff, on her part, has given up on the Christian God which has abandoned black people as evidenced in the title of the novel. No Telephone to Heaven, the line of communication with God is interrupted.

[36] The reference is to Bill who loves men, but does not have sex with them. He frustrates Ian's desire for a physical relationship.

Relationships with the church which, in West Indian fiction, had mostly revolved around conflicts between local and 'imported' religions takes on a more intimate dimension. Dale accepts both his alternative sexuality and religion. His determination allows him to free himself from his dependence on his previous boyfriends, and to become himself, a plural self.

The Mother Connection

The bold step the three Caribbean women writers have taken in presenting a male experience from a female perspective clearly disrupts European and Euro-American feminist theories which, although refuting the binary logic of patriarchy, are centered on gender differences. Gender dualism is deconstructed through the crossing of frontiers by Harry/Harriet, Ian, Dale, and Devon. The ambiguity of identity, the refusal of a stable unitary subject that had characterized Caribbean women's fiction expand as a female structure is translated into the masculine.

Since Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, identity for women has been defined in terms of relationships. It is from the female relational vision of the world that Powell, Kincaid and Cliff draw on to describe gay men. Even if psychoanalysis has suggested that selfhood for males is conceived in terms of separation and individualization, the men in the texts look for and practice solidarity among themselves: as in the case of women who construct their identity in relationship, the men's affiliation with other homosexuals strengthen their identity. At the same time, however, they do not look for forefathers as African American writers Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam, for instance, have suggested. They do not contemplate a symbolic reconjunction with homosexual male figures of the past. As they distance themselves from their fathers – as men do in most homosexual narratives – they openly identify with the maternal. "But Ian love his mother to distraction: Not so much the father. Not when him was alive or even now since him pass on, going thirteen months"(SGB, 19).[37]

Until the publication of *The Reproduction of Mothering*, the mother-daughter relationship was based on the supposedly 'superior' mother-son relation as delineated by Freud. Once this Freudian paradigm was abandoned, female writers focused on mother-daughter relations, an attention which has often idealized motherhood in contemporary women's literature through the maternal identificatory bond expressed so tellingly in Lorna Goodison's poem "I'm becoming My Mother".

> My mother raises rare blooms
> And waters them with tea
> Her birth waters sang like rivers
> My mother is now me …
> I am becoming my mother
> Brown/yellow woman
> Fingers smelling always of onions.[38]

Caribbean women writers like Jean Rhys have, however, depicted negative mothering and its effects; while the ambivalent mother-daughter bond has been explored in Kincaid – the difficulties Annie John's mother has in dealing with her daughter when she reaches puberty, explored in *Annie John*, reflect many a Caribbean situation. Still, the positive mother-daughter bond has been generalized by some critics drawing from the image of the strong black woman and of the idealized mother view of Euro-feminism. [39]

[37] Richard Isay has pointed out that most gay men who went to him for treatment reported lack of attachment to their father. He finds this to be a 'retrospect depiction', in the sense that gay men distance themselves from their fathers in their memory in order to avoid recognition of the erotic attachment to their fathers and of their sexual arousal in early childhood. Isay, *Being Homosexual*, 33, 34.

[38] Lorna Goodison, *I Am Becoming My Mother* (1986) (London & Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1995), 38.

[39] The intention is not to sustain that Goodison presents an ideal view of motherhood, but rather that voices referring to negative mother-daughter experiences have acquired less resonance since the importance given to "the mother/daughter plot" by feminists like Marianne Hirsch, Jane Flax, Adrienne Rich, as well as the French theorists.

> Further, each writer [Kincaid, Rhys, Marshall, Cliff] demonstrates the complex connections, that exist, for a Caribbean woman, between mother, culture and place. Climate, topography, foods, customs and memories forged in 'the word-shop of the kitchen', as Paule Marshall puts it, combine in a melange that nurtures and sustains.[40]

Powell and Kincaid both write against these psychological and literary assumptions. Powell establishes on the one hand, a mother-son relational connection similar to that linking mothers and daughters; on the other, she stages new figures of Caribbean mothers: Dale's, who silences her son's homosexuality and Ian's, who disavows her son.[41] Dale's mother confines him to secrecy after he confesses his homosexuality.

> "You know what them say about Uncle Ralph, Mama?" Him approach her one afternoon, hands press against thighs, head held-up high, way over-confident.
> She continue to hum, eyes close, head swaying slow, beads of sweat on her forehead, face shine . . . 'You know him funny that way.' Him did pause, waiting for her eyes to flutter open, the rhythm stop in her humming... But nothing atall. Him continue to wait for her attention . . . "I'm that way too"....
> But she still collapse. Faint way. Fold over, limp. (SGB, 40)

When his mother is revived, "her face look fresh and vibrant again. The muscles in her neck jerk around, erratic. But not a word about it mention". Denial and silence on the

[40] Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn, "The Bloodstream of Our Inheritance", in Susheila Nasta, ed., *Motherlands* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), 221.

[41] She also kills her son. First, by denying him her love, then by literally pushing him off the stairs, precipitating his death. The mother-son relationship is beginning to be explored in West Indian women's writing by for instance Elizabeth Nunez in the short memoir, "My 'Do-Over American Son'", in Brooke Stephens, ed., *Men We Cherish* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997); also by Lorna Goodison in the two poems "Songs for My Son" and "My Will". "... a knife keen with garlic/ to sever you from me/ and we'll never smell its primal top-notes/ you or I/ without memories of our joining" (Goodison, *I Am Becoming*, 18).

part of Dale's mother; violent actions in Ian's situation. Miss Kaysen, his mother, has the lock on the house door changed in order to keep Ian out after he has come out to her, enclosing in her birthday gift a letter "explaining the state of his heart where men were concerned". When Ian confronts her, she repudiates him.

> 'I am not your mother.'...
> 'I don't know who you are. So please go.'
> 'But, Mama.'
> 'Don't come back. Go. Go now.'...
> 'Mama, you just can't disown me so. You just can't...'
> 'I never did like you from the beginning. Miss Iris couldn't get you out. Twist yourself inside me womb like you plan was to stay. Them did have to force cow-itch tea down me throat to get you to budge. Even then you were no damn good. Should've followed me heart and put a blasted end to you, then.' (SGB, 22)[42]

Ian's rejection by his mother will torment him until his death. Thus, despite the collective gay presence, despite the attention from Dale and Bill, despite Miss Dimple – which could have served as substitute mother as has been theorized by feminist critics for girls – Ian, denied the mother-bond, will continue to fantasize his relationship with his mother.

> Dale wonder if Bill know about the letters. Ian's letter to the mother, typed and in chronological order, underneath the bed inside an old blue plastic folder, Dale come up on accidentally. Letters expressing thanks for various gifts the mother send. Other ones making references to certain conversations and meeting they had on specific dates. None of them true. All imaginary events. (SGB, 93)

[42] Kincaid's brother too is the child his mother didn't want: "He had read in a novel written by me about a mother who had tried and tried and failed and failed to abort the third and last of her three male children. And when he was dying he asked me if that mother was his mother and if that child was himself ('Ah me de trow'way pickney')" (MB, 174).

Through the mother-son relations, Powell destabilizes current gender norms. Affiliating the sons with their mothers, she underscores the feminine features of the male protagonists. Dale crochets, weaves, and embroiders. Ian thinks he should go to school to develop his talent. Dale won't apply as he is already studying geography. The thwarting of an individual's full development by imposed gender norms is evident.

> Dale suddenly run upstairs and back down again, tired and out of breath, with the bedspreads, tablecloths and cabinet top doilies him used to embroider while his mother was alive. Ian did tell him right away about the design school on Flowers Hill, and how Dale must apply if him interested in sewing. (SGB, 6)

Homosexuality in West Indian culture continues to be seen as deviancy and is often considered a direct result of a son's intense relation to his mother. Psychiatrist Richard Isay has asserted that there "is no evidence to suggest that early aberrant mothering causes those identifications with the mother that are traditionally regarded as the major determinant of homosexuality in men".[43] Thus when Powell underscores the men's relations with their mothers, she does not do so in order to re-propose the link between a mother's over-protectiveness and a son's homosexuality. Instead, she – like Kincaid – establishes a matrilinearity which is detached from sexual identity and is at the same time the source of positive values and enrichment. Dale is a caring character and nurses Ian during his illness. "He did tidy-up and clean Ian's apartment the time, wash his clothes and bring him food, *for him take after his mother that way*; can't stand to see bad things happen to people" (SGB, 3). Dr. Barnaby, the female psychiatrist, tells Dale: "It's tough, isn't it? Finding yourself trapped in the *same position as your mother*. Cycle repeating itself" (SGB, 64). Ian too, even if rejected by his mother, takes after her. "I know she would like the big one [TV set]. My mother likes things big and ostentatious. *And I am just like her*".[44] Nevin also takes after his

[43] Isay, *Being Homosexual*, 44.

[44] Italics are mine.

mother. He learned how to become a successful businessman from his mother who holds a fabric stall in the market. Dale, Ian and Nevin all fit into the female history of their families, into their mother culture.

In *My Brother* the mother heritage is also asserted. Kincaid's brother has a way with plants which is a cause for wonder. "What would my brother say were he to be asked how he became interested in growing things? He saw our mother doing it. What else?" (MB, 19). It is a talent he inherits from her, but which he does not put to use, aspiring instead to become a singer.

> Behind the small house in which he lived in our mother's yard, he had planted a banana plant, a lemon tree, various vegetables, various non – flowering shrubs. When I first saw this little garden in the back of his little house, I was amazed at it and I asked him if he had done it all himself and he said, Of course ("How you mean, man!"). I know now that it is *from our mother* that we, he and I, get this love of plants. (MB, 11)

What Devon inherits from his mother is not seen as worth developing. He has taken on the masculine norms of behavior, accepted the model of manhood which detaches men from their mothers. Despite this, he does not conform to the patriarchal model. "He doesn't make anything, no one depends on him, he is not a father to anyone, non one finds him indispensable. He cannot make a table, his father could make a table and a chair, and a house; his father was the father of many children" (MB,70). If his life had taken a different turn, perhaps developed elsewhere, it would have followed its female ascendancy.

> And when I picked up that book again, *The Education of a Gardener*, I looked at my brother, for he was a gardener also, and I wondered, if his life had taken a certain turn, if he had caused his life to take a different turn, might he have written a book with such a title? (MB, 11)

The mother-son bond is intense. Devon's mother's care turn to devotion during his illness. And when, thanks to the AZT

Kincaid brings from the States, his health improves, he leaves the hospital and moves in with his mother.

> After he was dismissed from the hospital my brother went back to my mother's house and slept in her bed with her. He had no place to go, not even a bed of his own, and so he went to his mother's house and slept in her bed with her, There was nothing wrong with that. (MB, 54)

Kincaid underscores this naturally intimate mother-son relation, by reiterating that her "mother's male children, by now in their thirties, live with her" (p.53). All three writers, therefore, challenge the regulatory gender norms which do not foresee foremothers for biological males and thus deprive them of an important source of empowerment and fulfillment.

The feminist concept of motherhood, which had emerged from the limited mother-daughter experience is extended, taken beyond its exclusivistic conceptualization, as say in Adrienne Rich: "The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother".[45] Cliff, Powell and Kincaid have all three shown that we are all –biological males and females – "of woman born".

Gender Assumptions

> "Him was manly enough to pass."
> (Patricia Powell, *A Small Gathering of Bones*)

Dale's status and social relations with the non-gay community are conditioned by his body which would be read as marked if he didn't parody the "married man's walk", in public spaces. Looking for Ian in a hospital, the hostlity of the receptionist spurs him to pass.

> Didn't sport the same limp wrist cock off to the side as if about to express some great wonderment, or gentle sway of the pelvis thrust forward like Ian. The sleeves of his shirt weren't turned up in that way way peculiar to fellows at the bar, showing off bulging, stone-like skin, his trousers weren't tight, pocketless, molding his buns into round pieces of hard dough bread. Him was barrel-chested, stocky around the middle, and walked with a confidence common to most married men. (SGB, 80)

[45] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (London: Virago, 1979), 218.

The uncertain boundary between straight and gay is re-affirmed as Dale does not name himself 'gay' on this occasion, does not perform his homosexuality. Caught in the interstices of a binary system, in between fixed categories, he remains "unintelligible" in the society. Michelle Cliff has identified 'passing' with silencing. "Passing demands quiet. And from that quiet – silence".[46] But the question as to whether 'passing' is subversive of gender norms or consolidates them must be asked. As Judith Butler suggests in the case of drag, miming a heterosexual mode can be used "in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexuall gender norms".[47]

In Kincaid's text, Devon 'passes', never comes out to his family. Unlike what happens with Harry/Harriet, Dale, Ian, and Nevin, Devon's concealed bisexuality will be revealed to Kincaid only after his death. To his family he incarnates the West Indian macho who, despite his illness, would like to convince all the women he encounters to sleep with him; who, no sooner out of the hospital meets with a prostitute, and who cannot go more than two weeks without sex. His unruly life hides his secret: the encounters with Antiguan homosexuals at an American lesbian's house who "had opened up her home and made it known that every Sunday men who loved other

[46] Cliff, *Land*. The term 'passing' has not been discarded since both white and black worlds have condemned the practice of people with black blood joining the white world. It must be underlined, however, that 'passing' – like miscegenation – is part of a racist lexicon. Its transfer to the homosexual world confirms the West's insistence on the fact that 'deviancy' (Euro/Other offspring, same-sex relations) be marked and rendered recognizable. It also confirms the belief in the idea that an individual has a 'true' nature.

[47] Butler, *Bodies*, 125.

men could come to her house in the afternoon and enjoy each other's company" (MB, 161).

These particular circumstances, Kincaid's unawareness of her brother's sexuality, make for a relationship with her brother that is one between two heterosexuals. In her eyes he is a heterosexual man who embodies West Indian machismo. And it is in relation to this man, who has presumably caught the HIV virus from a prostitute, that she describes the development of his illness and of their relationship. Manhood in Kincaid becomes correlated to the penis, "the absolute insignia of maleness".[48] For the first time in Caribbean women's writing, a full blown male body is depicted. But it is a body in pain, where the effects of AIDS are already visible, exposed to the reader's voyeuristic gaze.

But paradoxically, in deconstructing phallogocentric power, Kincaid appropriates codified representations of the black body. Her brother's black skin – "he was descended from Africans mostly" – becomes blacker as the disease progresses. As in nineteen-century iconography, illness is associated with blackness and both with sexual deviancy. "His mouth so white, abloom with thrush; his lips so red, glowing, shiny from fever; his skin blackened as if his normal quotient of pigment had increased from some frightening source…" (MB,149). Kincaid conforms to the Western view which has sexualixed AIDS and embodied deviance. "In the United States gay men and intravenous drug users are the 'privileged' victims of an awful immune system disease that marks (inscribes on the body) confusion of boundaries and moral pollution".[49]

"Already-spoken for" the black male body as Other insidiously reappears in Kincaid as she relies on an inherited imagery. It could be postulated that by reiterating an oppressive discourse Kincaid is resignifying against it – subversion through appropriation is after all a consolidated practice in Afro-diasporic cultures. But it is more likely that Kincaid buys into a

[48] Garber, "Vested Interests", 97.

[49] Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 165.

racist metaphor and its racist overtones. In many instances in *My Brother,* she proves that she is no longer in tune with the Caribbean world and appears to have inscribed herself in the West and wants to belong there.[50]

Identifying her brother with West Indian maleness which has (mis)shaped the society and despairing of the state of things in Antigua, she launches an attack on patriarchy. The West Indian man is guilty of having produced this kind of society. Guilty of not allowing her or her brother to fulfill their potential. "The plantsman in my brother will never be, and all the other things that he might have been in his life have died…"(MB, 19). Already in the short story "In the Night" Kincaid had denounced the limits imposed on men by hegemonic gender norms: "He [her father] would like to wear pink shirts and pink pants but knows that this color isn't very becoming to a man, so instead he wears navy blue and brown, colors he does not like at all" (BR, 9).

Kincaid writes against the Devon who has interiorized patriarchal maleness, reduced in the course of time to a narrow range of possibilities. In the phallocentric model, it is a man's heterosexual activity that yields masculine status.[51] Devon's identity is defined through his penis. When he can no longer perform through his genitals, he can no longer be defined a man in his environment. "This compulsion to express himself through his penis, his imagination passing between his legs, not through his hands, is something I am not qualified to understand" (MB,70). It is the myth of the West Indian macho her brother impersonates that Kincaid willingly debunks as she devalues black maleness and exposes her brother's penis, now a piece of undesirable flesh.

[50] From another perspective it could be sustained that by displacing the black man's penis, Kincaid is making place for the West Indian man since in the Western racist system, according to Fanon, "the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis". Yet, many elements in the text indicate Kincaid's familiarity with the Vermont world and her alienation from the Caribbean. Things Caribbean seem to have become unfamiliar to her: "… his old house which was behind hers, was too drafty. I could not understand this, because what kind of draft exists in a place that is hot all the time?" (MB, 54) (Laforest, forthcoming).

[51] hooks, *Black Looks*, 94

> I stood looking at him for a long time before he realized I was there. And when he did, he suddenly threw the sheets away from himself, tore his pajama bottoms away from his waist, revealing his penis, and then grabbed his penis in his hand and held it up, and his penis looked like a bruised flower that had been cut short on the stem; it was covered with sores, and on the sores was a white substance, almost creamy, almost floury, a fungus. When he grabbed his penis in his hand, he suddenly pointed it at me, a sort of thrusting gesture, and he said in a voice that was full of deep panic and deep fear, "Jamaica, look at this, just look at this…". I did not want to see his penis, at that moment I did not want to see any penis at all. (MB, 91)

The disquieting inscription of a male-centered experience by female voices unhinges the assumptions of both Caribbean and feminist cultures. In the first case, in re-articulating the cultural boundaries of the Caribbean which had been set by men within heterosexual narratives.

> Not paradoxically, but ironically perhaps, given the centrality of the matrifocal base to Caribbean society and culture, the men have tended to hold the political power and until recently have been solely responsible for articulating the nature, the boundaries, the concerns and innovations of the Caribbean literary tradition.[52]

In the second case, in uncoupling biological sex from sexuality, describing a male experience, and affirming female genealogies for men, women writers have disrupted feminist theories based solely on gender differences. As West Indian males are inscribed in female representation, a new page comes to be written in West Indian and women-centered literatures.

[52] Nasta, *Motherlands*, 212.

Maria Maddalena Parlati

"Dreamlands": David Malouf and the Nostalgia of Homecoming

This essay has its ideal inception in the words of the Australian poet Les Murray, for whom "time broadens into space".[1] I have tried to base my own writing on the post-structuralist theorizations of textuality and intertextuality, also referring to *place* as *humanized* space (in the sense given by the practices of geographical textualization of the Earth). In mutually interrogating these concepts, I have tried to focus on the discursivity of history *and* geography, on their invented status as neutral and innocent scientific discourses. It thus seemed possible to construct a reading apparatus which could propose one way of tackling the fictional versions of Australia spread over fields as varied as travel guides, anthropological recordings and novels.

In the parodic nature of David Malouf's writing, in his attempt at undermining too easily accepted myths of identity and tradition such as those imported by European colonisers in the wide arena of Australian deserts, I perceive a game of re-writing the literary tradition of England and a radical interrogation of the Robinson-Friday encounter. Between the lines of the canon, Malouf attempts an archaeological operation of recovering other memories: his *Bildungsroman* is actually a *remembering game*, in which all participants prove they are utter strangers to themselves.

[1] Les A. Murray, "Wilderness", in *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969), quoted in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London-New York: Routledge, 1989), 34.

The main site of the mnemonic operation in the novel and in the other discursive fields considered is the land tentatively fixed by the name "Australia", which in its literal roots already offers the perception of a violent ideological *alteration* on the part of European history: Australia as a moving and decentering land, historically obliterated, rendered totally blind by many colonial interpretations.

It is on the issue of naming and un-naming the land (in the words of the Canadian poet R. Kroetsch) that I find the focus of Malouf's attention: the geography called into action in the novel might be associated with Lawrence Grossberg's definition of "becoming" as the "spatialization of transformation", in the sense that the very ideas of margins are tested and put under an irrevocable erasure by the hybridity of language, geography, and writing.[2]

*

This land is intact...
(Michèle Decoust, "Australie")

In his essay on the Hachette *Guide Bleu*, Roland Barthes opens up the issue of the *mythological* nature of travel guides. By forcing tourists to a prepared and *naturalized* recognition of the suggested focal points of a certain landscape/country, to him guides operate a disfiguring incision on the body (yet always already fragmented) of the lands surveyed.[3] Such a blindness, which unescapably erases some geographical and cultural assets and stresses others, has helped to construe a vision of Australia both distorted and violent in its purported naturality.

[2] Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the hidden: recent Canadian fiction", *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 3 (1974): 43, quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire*, 140-141.

[3] "The selection of monuments suppresses both the reality of the earth and that of men, since it takes into account nothing present, namely historical, and for that the monument becomes undecipherable.... The spectacle is thus always on the point of vanishing." Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), 123, my translation. See also Trevor J. Barnes and James S. Duncan, eds., *Writing Worlds. Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape* (London-New York: Routledge, 1990).

Engrained within the discourses of global tourism, Australia's maps have in fact been charted like those of an imaginary continent, virtually posited as the last earthly Paradise, metaphorically as well as geographically drawn as antipodically *other* if compared to the self-compliant constructions of the West.

> Because the world - in places like this - is never absolutely new; there is always something that has gone before. Shrine or sacred place before church, farm before farm...[4]

"This", in Naipaul's words, is England, Salisbury, its cathedral, and farther away Stonehenge, its mystery and charm, the smell of a distant breath invading what Naipaul depicts as a very stratified world of construction and abandonment, wreckage and rebirth, a world innocent and yet teeming with the sounds of history.

In the most common marketable formulations of the otherness of Australia, its desert (with its implicated notions of being *unwritten*, *virgin*) metonymically becomes the whole country, and both are made to seem just too ready to offer images of a supposedly borderless continent to the inquisitive and voracious eyes of traveller-consumers. Seen from such a vantage point, the world of industry and urbanization appears as a waste land, whereas Australia becomes the red, beating heart of the world, made to seem untouched by the predatory hands of time, of our post-human all-devouring time.

> You need to talk of the bush and of space. None without the other. Being able to stop at night anywhere... and being certain that silence will not be broken, that your space will not be violated.... This space is yours, and you don't need to appropriate it to enjoy it, it belongs to all, and all is such a little number here in the Red Heart that it belongs as a whole to everybody. Actually, in time, you get used to thinking it is the

[4] Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (London: Penguin, 1987), 51.

minimal space, the vital space necessary to each human being.... The elementary space.[5]

These words by the French journalist Michèle Decoust are only one instance of the un-critical stance I have tried to hint at, and the very ideas of space and time need rethinking once one is physically and psychically travelling along the routes of this 'elementary', 'elemental' land. Her feature articles, together with many others published in international magazines, support and keep alive what I shall call another Arcadian dream, another utopia, a space of pastoral virgin land, antipodal in the sense that sterility is subverted to subsume a fertility of possibilities, be they hopeful settlements of a democratic nature or a vast life-giving and thought-evoking emptiness.[6]

On the imaginary map I am charting one side would be occupied by the Australia of the modern global tourist network, the perfect setting for fictitious and fictional adventures; *another* side would belong to visual and fictional memoirs collected from the works of explorers like Leichhardt and the Gregory brothers, whose journals offer their personal, authoritative, lonely glances at a country and a countryside that are utterly displacing in their lack of *dramatic* discoveries (i.e. worth the *seeing* and the *telling*).[7] In both instances, as well as in the historically recorded cases of convicts and migrants and in the many fictional renderings of those histories - and Malouf's Babylon is a very interesting case - journeys and discovery trajectories are put under analysis. Journeys from, or *escapes* from, and journeys towards, movements across a country of continental magnitude, lines drawn and continually under erasure tentatively fixing unsteady borders: travel routes and migrants' roots are the

[5] Michèle Decoust, ed., "Ce pays vous secoue comme un arbre", in "Australie. Le Désert et l'Etat-Providence", *Autrement*, hors série n. 7, (Paris: 1984), (hereafter cited as "Australie"), 80, my translation.

[6] For the suggestive image of various Arcadian mythologies in history, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), esp. Chapter 12, "Pleasing Prospects".

[7] See Paul Carter, *Living in a New Country. History, Travelling and Language* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), (hereafter quoted as *Living*).

painful links which David Malouf's novel *Remembering Babylon* (1993) attempts to interrogate.

*

"Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not":[8] Blake's Jerusalem and Babylon are used as an epigraph to Malouf's novel and function as keys to enter his fictional world. Jerusalem is the sign of teleological displacement, an Edenic dream of arriving at and at the same time recovering a lost *Heim* after the pain of diaspora; Babylon becomes the epitome of corruption and decay, confusion and disruption, a moving towards which also means dispersal: both embody a land and a memory as scattered as broken bricks, languages dispersing into diversities, a crashed security, a disquieting newness made of all the left-overs of a dreamt-of original unity.

Between these two imaginary and uncanny homelands moves Malouf's polyphonic world.[9] His deeply felt presence within the novel forces readers to continuous shifts in point of view: his mastering voice and eye possess the fictional matter, moving through the intricacies of playful textualities to question the authority of writing and of owning memory and at the same time ventriloquially possessing all voices. The decentring of the authorial stance seems in its turn decentred by Malouf's somehow self-approving conviction of being able, through the various *rites de passage* construed in the novel, and through writing as the fundamental *rite* itself, to catch the sense of all the voices inscribed.

In the very first chapter the reader is confronted with an unidentified object, stammering out a sentence in a language whose mastery is not (is no longer) in its possession. It is a creature ironically isolated from its surroundings by the pronoun "it", an *iddity* which marks the beginning of the novel and a

[8] William Blake, *The Four Zoas*, in David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), epigraph (hereafter quoted as *Remembering*).

[9] This also bears witness to his personal blends of cultures and nationalities. Malouf was in fact born in Australia from a Lebanese and English family, with Jewish blood and a Catholic education.

definitive turning-point in the lives of the members of a small community of European settlers in a land (Queensland) clearly and unforgettably marked by a "Crown... which held them all, a whole continent, in its grip" (5).

> 'Do not shoot,' it shouted. 'I am a B-b-british object!' (3)

The meeting takes place (as the writer-*informant* tells his readers) in the glare of the desert heat; the other party involved is a small group of white children who, parodistically, are at the moment of the 'arrival' intent on "playing in the forest". Through their game they imaginatively construct a vague European homeland, which in the course of the novel will further be characterized as a Scotland burdened by the fragments their parents carried with them when crossing the world. But the fundamental features of that other land in terms of colour, flora and fauna remain just as unreachable and inconceivable to the children as the "object" coming towards them from the forbidden land they have before their eyes.

> In the intense heat that made everything you looked at warp and glare, a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like a watery, heat-struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct, was bowling, leaping, flying towards them. A black! (2)

The ironic British object, watery mirage, moving earth or indistinct thing, is perceived by the eyes of Janet and Meg McIvor and Lachlan Beattie as "black" (2), but their first tentative definition is almost immediately effaced following the shifts the *thing* makes in their visual field. Seemingly immersed in the all-effacing light of a desert sublime - and under the the writer/witness's all-seeing gaze - the creature undergoes a process of metamorphosis under the children's eyes. In the unfaithful and incorrect uttering of an apparently incongruous sentence in broken English lies the radical point of displacement;

the predicament of the creature's linguistic location troubles all myths of identity:

> the thing, as far as he could make it through the sweat in his eyes and its flamelike flickering, was not even, maybe, human. The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird, a brolga, or a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another, all spells and curses, had been *changed* into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to the Absolute Dark. (2-3)

Malouf prolongs the time of the encounter and enlarges it to allegorise a different sense of time lapses. In the hot stillness of a strip of land called *colony*, bordering on a land perceived as *elementary*, the creature stops on a rail and is itself stopped halfway between one side of the fence and the other - one language and the other, one form of life and the other.

> It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other...[10]

In writing about his first painful encounter with his imposed otherness, Frantz Fanon recalls the terrifying echo made by the supposedly *innocent* voice of a child calling him a "negro".[11] An instance of what Gayatri Spivak calls the process of Othering, countered by Fanon's wilful moving toward *his* other: a political step towards hybridity, a geography of becoming in which *moving* (travelling, emigrating) is the vanishing point of alterity

[10] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112.

[11] Ibid., 111.

[12] Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, "The Rani of Simur", in Francis Barker et al., eds., *Europe and Its Others*, vol. I, (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1985), quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire*, 97.

as abstraction.[12] Displacement, taken in its very literal sense of being un-rooted, is in this way exploited by Malouf as the modern chance of inhabiting a fractioned world.

His rootless 'thing' testifies to its being Gemmy Fairley (one Gemmy with a similar story has been described by F. T. Gregory in one of his travel journals), a white man washed ashore, a Ulysses-Robinson of a very poor sort, a child exploited both in Britain and on board the ship which takes him to the Pacific Ocean and whose destination and end are left mysterious. Castaway, shipwrecked, alone: unlike Defoe's bourgeois hero, Gemmy is not the *White Man as Master*, never the one who gives names to things and so *discovers* them. For the black tribe who collect him after he is washed ashore he is a lost spirit; to the white community he represents a very unsettling discovery in that he disturbingly makes them sense the possibility of being submerged by what they imagine to be deep mystery.

> The country he had broken out of was all unknown to them. Even in full sunlight it was impenetrable dark. (8)

More dispersing even ("déroutant" is the word Michèle Decoust uses to define her first experience in Australia) is the sense many whites get of their searching gaze being exchanged by Gemmy's own curiosity and mixture of languages.[13] By speaking unknown words, or by simply being there, the young man evokes the utter fragility of colonial space: the white community needs to define its own boundaries and properties, but by its own nature, that space belongs - in the legal terms of the West - to another sovereign authority. Inscribed on an unseen map in a far-away office and marked as the property of a very distant queen, this poor and young community needs and rejects Gemmy since, to them, he verges on the dangerous brim of non-intelligibility.

> And all around, before and behind, worse than weather and the deepest night, natives, tribes of wandering myalls who, in their traipsing this way and that all over the map, were forever

[13] Decoust, "Australia", 79, my translation.

> encroaching on boundaries that could be insisted on by daylight - a good shotgun saw to that - but in the dark hours, when you no longer stood there as a living marker with all the glow of the white man's authority about you, reverted to being a creek-bed or ridge of granite like any other, and gave no indication that six hundred miles away, in the Lands Office in Brisbane, this bit of country had a name set against it on a numbered document, and a line drawn that was empowered with all the authority of the Law.... just three years back, the very patch of earth you were standing on had itself been on the other side of things, part of the unknown, and might still, for all your coming and going... have the last of mystery upon it.... Good reason, that, for stripping it, as soon as you could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ringbarking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home. It was from this standpoint that the little crowd of settlers, drawn together in such an unusual manner at this time of day, faced the black white man the children had brought in. (9-10)

Gemmy is literally transfused, although in a guarded way, into the Aboriginal tribe - whose name is never glanced at, maybe in order to remind white-skinned readers how differences other than the ones in which *we* are involved generally pass without mention. On the contrary, the white settlers exorcise his presence by inverting his in-betweenness and directing it against him, transforming him into a queer oddity, a puzzling absence of sensible order. His speech and looks are translated by the community as signs of inversion; his disrupted language is rendered funny and deviant from the norms their society gives itself in order to exist at all.

> Guessing what he intended became a game, and at last, as they eased themselves into the unaccustomed jollity of it, a noisy carnival. (10)

To the frightened adult community the sign of danger they read on Gemmy's body is erased by carnivalising and thus rendering obviously grotesque both him and his languages, otherwise felt as potentially disruptive of their social and psychic order. Behind the funny interpreting games everybody gets involved in still lies

an abrupt disruption of their fiction of stability; behind their common need to bring Gemmy *back* to his white-British language and memories trembles the dismaying fear that he, or anybody living so close to the mystery of the bush, might always slip back/forward into *other* times and places again.

> He wasn't all there, that's what people said; they meant he was simple. But there were some among them for whom the phrase, light as it was, suggested something darker: that even when he *was* there, in full sunlight, refusing to meet your gaze but engaged, so far as he was capable of it, in conversation, he was halfway gone, across a line, like the horizon, that was not to be fixed in real space, and could begin anywhere. (38)

The encounter becomes a confrontation which calls everybody forth into the match of subject definition. Malouf plays the game of unveiling many of the Western man's obsessions about *uneasily scriptable a-normality,* deviancy from the imposed laws of enlightened Order and Reason. But boundaries always prove to be very fragile, and eventually no more than interpretations, defensive constructions whose ideological nature lies behind the violating power of the Western totalizing and othering gaze.

> Even those who felt sorry for the man found themselves dismayed by what they called his 'antics'.... He was a *parody* of a white man. If you gave him a word for a thing, he could... repeat it, but the next time round you had to teach it to him all over again. He was *imitation gone wrong*, and the mere sight of it put you wrong too, made the whole business somehow foolish and open to doubt. (39, my emphasis)

While speaking the Aboriginal language of his adoption Gemmy's tongue runs smoothly towards things and people, what purports to be his mother tongue is instead blocked and blocks him into a subject position.

> It was the stammer. It belonged to someone he had thought was gone, lost, and here it was on his lips again. It had come back at the moment, up there on the fence, when he first found words in his English tongue. (14)

The world on the *other side*, the England and Scotland everybody in that spot of castaways stubbornly dreams of, is a Dickensian or Lawrencean one: what Gemmy seemed to represent to the white settlers' sense of being official subjects of the kingdom is already, at its very inception, cut down by their being starving things themselves, by their belonging to an industrialist society which found no place for them at *home*. Grotesque against grotesque, the forgotten people of a crossed flag, clinging to any sense of the past, longing for the home which might give them *some* sense: to them, home is anxiously built against fences; but in the novel, no matter how unstable it is felt to be, the only real home is language itself.

> He had started out white.... But had he remained white? They looked at their children, even the smallest of them chattering away, entirely at home in their tongue, then heard the mere half-dozen words of English this fellow could cough up, and even those so mismanaged and distorted you could barely guess what he was on about, and you had to put to yourself the harder question. Could you lose it? Not just language, but *it*. It. (40)

Language and a dreamt essence of 'itness' (whiteness? culture? civilization?) are seriously put in crisis by the question mark Gemmy represents: his dispersed memory is a continuous interrogation launched towards and against every settler.

> Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the present.[14]

In *Remembering Babylon*, a recalcitrant memory is appropriated and fictionally construed by a minority that feels invested with the authority to do so: this very typical colonial situation is

[14] Homi Bhabha, Introduction to Fanon, *Black Skin*, xxiii.

inscribed within the novel at the point in which Mr Frazer and Mr Abbot, respectively the minister and schoolmaster of the community, take it upon themselves to write down an outline of Gemmy's life. It is worth mentioning Lévi-Strauss's pages dedicated to the interestedness and power of writing:

> The only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires, that is the integration of large numbers of individuals into a political system, and their grading into castes or classes... my hypothesis, if correct, would oblige us to recognize the fact that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery.[15]

Writing as power, as the source and means of strength, platonically death-giving, or, in the words of Jacques Derrida, no less than "angoisse", "angustia", bursting oral life conveyed into the stricture of a printed line and its unerasable margins.[16] For Malouf, writing is clearly linked to a post-colonial formulation of the Hegelian Master/Slave dichotomy: writing and literacy become a dangerous site of political struggle, a confrontation which repositions both parties in a mutual reconsideration of roles and positions.

> The details of his story were pieced together... from facts that were, as he told them, all out of their proper order, and with so many gaps of memory, and so much dislocation between what he meant to convey and the few words he could recover of his original tongue, that they could never be certain, later, how much of it was real and how much they had themselves supplied from tales they already knew... (16)

Dislocation invades not only the world of Babylonian confusion Gemmy lives in, but also the idea of communication itself: in all its forms, be they written or spoken, language hides multiple traps while opening up instances of deferral and

[15] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), 229, my translation.
[16] Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967); Italian translation, *La scrittura e la differenza*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1990), 11.

overdefinition for a meaning which is the receding and perpetually unfixed human horizon. In the attempt to edit Gemmy's life, both Mr Frazer - whose name obviously refers to Sir James Frazer - and Mr Abbot act as anthropologists, each of them miscarrying and contaminating sentences with their own reconstructions or unseen interruptions. The story, like History, only *pretends* to be a smooth and continuous text, moving from beginning to end, encoding within its bounds departures and arrivals. But this fiction is undermined by the irony with which it is laid under the reader's eyes: writing, history, anthropology, geography all prove discursive battlefields founded on power relations which must invent their own invisibility in order to prove neutral and scientific truths, fairy-tales of rationality and peaceful positionings of facts.

> Out of boredom, but also to set himself at a distance from the occasion and to register, if only in an obscure and indirect way, the contempt he felt at the minister's smugness, he [Mr Abbot] had introduced into what he had just set down a phrase or two of his own. Hidden away in Mr Frazer's orotund periods, they were an assertion of personality, of independence, of his refusal to be a mere tool.... In this way he appropriated a little of the occasion to himself, a sceptical shade, at this and that point of the minister's Colonial fairytale. (19)

Linked by a similar strategy of literary artifices, the acts of writing and of physically and culturally inscribing Gemmy (and *through* him the world and Australia as opposed to it) into an otherwise weak arena of community intercourse are interpretive gestures of no absolute nature. Malouf plays with his own words and underwrites his authorial stance by shifting to the lines of thought, language and memory of a different member of the village, thus cutting his way through myths and dreams and unstable languages...

> There is no neutral standpoint in the power-laden field of discursive positionings, in a shifting matrix of relationships, of *I's* and *you's*. [17]

[17] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.-London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 42 (hereafter quoted as *The Predicament*).

Faced by a longing for what Michel de Certeau - in defining the sense and function of historiography - defines as a "readable text", speaking and writing subjects perambulate in the rhetorical fields of Malouf's novel and shape its maps.

Gemmy and Mr Frazer literally reenact the relation between anthropologist and informant, one a theoretician armed with the weapons of pen, ink and paper, the other perceived as a piece of text-land himself, and for that entitled in the eyes of the 'scientist' to draw paths whose purported naturalness it will be his personally allotted task to convert into readable and useful knowledge.

> It was out of a kind of reverence, as well as concern for the danger he might put them in, that he concealed from Mr Frazer... a good deal of what he himself could see.... (67)

Moving through the living world of the desert, Gemmy mischievously becomes the master of Mr Frazer's writing, inverting the direction of the control to which he had previously been subjected. By choosing to obliterate some parts of the *things* he could see and name in his other native tongue, he casts himself in the role of yet another voyager and explorer, contributing to a writing bound to be as partial and equivocal as any other. Though aimed at reconsidering the whole meaning of the white man's presence in it and at recovering it as a different kind of Paradise, rich in *other* plants and edible fruits, Mr Frazer's attempt at botanics is an invasive view-point: to his not-too-thorough-searching intellect and pen, Gemmy counterposes his own alert eyesight and understanding of the *different* writings marked on every single item (plants, fruits, insects) of Frazer's book.

"Who is actually the author of field notes?", asks James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture*, reminding his readers of some instances of informant-ethnographer relationships in which the first selects and prepares for the other's eyes his *all but natural* material.[18] By being not exactly master of one of the

[18] Clifford, *The Predicament*, 45.

Australian native tongues, but thoroughly enmeshed in it, infused with the senses and rituals attached to things and animals by *his* native tribe, Gemmy reinterprets his role as 'studied object' and draws an erasure sign over the presumptuous project of a certain kind of Western knowledge: his willful silences make him the co-author of Frazer's book and yet, always marking his state of disturbing and painful in-betweenness, respectful of the living relationship holding together land and animals and human beings in what Bruce Chatwin has translated as the land of the "songlines":[19]

> ethnography is... enmeshed in writing... ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority. This strategy has classically involved an unquestioned claim to appear as the purveyor of truth in the text.[20]

Just like Clifford's ethnography, in Malouf's novel writing and language are always connected with mastery and authority and always surrounded by a liminal Benjamin-like "aura": language is to Gemmy a kind of magic potion, an atmospheric stratum endowed with the power of transfusion in which words come to the speaker's mind due to spell-like osmotic processes; both to Gemmy and to each of the settlers the essence of their being lies in setting written lines on paper, in one case a writing extorted and pieced together, and, in the other, a text heavy with an authority which gives borders, properties, names.

> He knew what writing was but had never himself learned the trick of it: as he handled the sheets and turned them this way and that, and caught the peculiar smell they gave off, his whole life was in his throat... and he was filled with an immense gratitude. He had shown them what he was. He was known. Left alone with the sheets, to brood and sniff, the whole of what he was, *Gemmy*, might come back to him... (20)

[19] See Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987).
[20] Clifford, *The Predicament*, 25.

Obsessed with the idea of recollecting his lost world and words, Gemmy plans to reconquer his life by gaining possession of the texture given to it by Frazer and Abbot. The novel proceeds by shifting viewpoint from one chapter to the other, each time entering the life and thoughts of a different character involved in Gemmy's life and in that of the community. To his hosts, the McIvor family, the newcomer represents a continuous confrontation, unsettling their sense of identity. Belonging to an incomprehensible code of being, neither black nor white, neither British nor Australian, and yet all these at the same time, Gemmy Fairley functions as an epiphanic discovery which denies the pretentious reality of fixed borders and forces all to reconsider what they are and think:

> It brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned... to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night. And now here it is... solid and breathing: a thing beside which all you have ever known of darkness, of *visible* darkness, seems but the merest shadow, and all you can summon up to the encounter, out of a lifetime lived on the other, the lighter side of things - shillings and pence, the Lord's Prayer... - weakens and falls away before the apparition, out of nowhere, of a figure taller perhaps than you are and of a sooty blackness beyond black, utterly still, very close, yet so far off... that you cannot conceive how it can be here in the same space, the same moment with you. (42-43)

Questioning the Western sense of time and space by his mere vision-like apparition out of an uncanny *nowhere*, Gemmy marks a painful interruption in the pattern of the settlers' dream of founding a home, "a town where in time all civilities would prevail", and, ironically, "a vision of plantations with black figures moving in rows down a field" (62).

Already inscribed within the grain of this fiction, however, are other Australias. Sent there against his will, the young Mr Abbot thinks of it as a "graveyard" (53), as opposed to the Dark Continent of his dreams, the Africa of explorers and missionaries he would have liked to imitate; to Janet McIvor, home is

> this other life her parents had lived; ... Scotland and a time before they came to Australia, before she was born, that was her time

> too... giving reality to a world she had need of; more alive and interesting, more crowded with *things*, with people too, than the one she was in. (54)

The basic thought of all the British outcasts is that the land they are facing is an enemy to be conquered, an empty waxen slab on which to leave their personal imprint, name, corpse, law:

> He [Jock McIvor] had wanted them to go to Canada.... But... Australia seemed the larger choice. There was land there and sunlight... and spaces... they could barely conceive of here. (74)

Lachlan Beattie, the young starving orphan sent from Scotland to Queensland to make a living, initially loses himself in a dream of great adventures in which he acts as the discoverer, the name-giver forever to be remembered on all *History* books.

Everybody seems to be a "parody of a white man", an "imitation gone wrong" (39): even a self-appointed power showing its most ridiculous side when, in Brisbane, Mr Frazer confronts the Governor on the topic of his botanical research and proposals. The official words of the Queen uttered by her representative sound unreal and totally blind to the specificity of a land appropriated and termed *her* colony:

> Sir George's commission... is to call into existence a new self-governing state; in a land, territory rather... wild... and largely, as yet, unpeopled.... To keep his name before the Lords in Westminster he writes to one or another almost daily, describing in grandiloquent terms, all classical allusion and analogy, the names he has bestowed on a nameless part of the empire, the towns he has founded, the laws laid down. He sees himself as a kind of imperial demiurge, out of mere rocks and air creating spaces where history may now occur - at once the Hesiod of the place, its Solon, and its antipodean Pericles. (168)

In this fictional reformulation of the Arcadian dream, Malouf ties his readers in a knot of interrogations. Moving back to the discursive field of Australia as modern utopia, the

imitative strategies of rewriting the country conjured up within Malouf's fictional world also seem to be valid and workable traces for reconsidering both the concept of the Antipodes itself as the duplication-inversion of a mother-land, an imperial centre facing the rest of the world as in a mirror-like relationship of recognition, and the practices of intervention over the concrete arena of landscape construction.

Writing the land is not merely a metaphor, but rather what most evidently signifies the attempt at "covering the space".[21] In a country which "worked its defeats in a low way.... on every side oppressive, in all its forms clammy and insidiously sweet..." (51), dreams of mimetical reconstruction of a distant *civilization* have nevertheless been modifying some parts of the continent, as the passion of many city-dwellers for English gardening still proves.

> Gardening, in Australia more than anywhere else, means mastering nature. In the country of neverending summers... of droughts and floods... of fires and tropical cyclons... of red earth and eucalyptuses, the city is a permanent defiance, a fist raised against the burning sun. And in the sterilized borders of the city, the English garden is at once a quotation, a nostalgic glance towards the damp mists of the Irish sea and an exorcism: before a man who masters half an hectar of azaleas and rhododendra with 45 C in the shade, a whole continent bows. [22]

Gardening is an all but innocent activity, enforcing as it does an authoritative bend on the natural twists and turns of the ground, drawing lines and opening up perspective panoramas onto a man-made paradise singing a triumphant anthem of nostalgic defiance and mastery.

In other words, namely, in the words of the minister-naturalist of *Remembering Babylon*, Mr Frazer, the relationship to Australia (in the novel as in the past - and future - histories of the continent) should be exactly inverted, as in the metaphoric

[21] Malouf, *Remebering Babylon*, 32.

[22] Pierre Grundman, "Australia Utopia", in Decoust, "Australie", 261, my translation.

version of the story of Adam-Gemmy who is allotted a new Heaven (a new Jerusalem, a new Babylon?) in which metamorphosis would be a means of enriching, and not flattening, an already fertile land.

> This is what is intended by our coming here: to make this place too part of the world's garden, but by changing ourselves rather than it and adding thus to the richness and variety of things. (132)

Gemmy could be seen as a forerunner of this different way of living in a new country. To the white community and to its sense of being one he functions as the antagonist, both utterly foreign and too closely resembling the settlers' images of themselves. Thus read, he becomes the embodiment of a trembling modernity of cross-encounters, of mutual discoveries, of exchanged gazes: opening himself to the dangers of misunderstandings, eager to touch his *autrui*, ready to make contact and enter the terrifying arena of dialogue, this "black white man" forces everybody to discourse with the horror of a genetic imprint always connecting men and women to

> a half-forgotten swamp-world going back deep in both of you, but for him... you and all you stand for have not yet appeared over the horizon of the world, so that after a moment all the wealth of it goes dim in you, then is cancelled altogether, and you meet at last in *a terrifying equality*.... It was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them, since at any moment he could show either one face or the other; as if he were always standing there at one of those meetings, but in his case willingly, and *the encounter was an embrace*. (43, my emphasis)

Like the very physical confrontations between new settlers and native tribes registered in history, or forgotten by it, the fictional encounters of Malouf's invention have very unhappy results. Being the epitome of whatever is most feared by the community, Gemmy is ritually exorcised through the stories construed about him and also fixed within the distancing web of

his purported betrayals in favour of the Myalls.[23] Leaving his *third homeland*, Gemmy very literally enacts a dissemination of writing: once in possession of what he supposes to be his lost life and words, he lets them melt under the rain until lines, ink and paper drip back into the veins of his nurturing mother-land. With yet another interesting and ironic authorial positioning, readers find out that those sheets are nothing more than school-boy exercises; but the sense Malouf injects into this episode seems to me quite unchanged. The sheets which had aimed at recuperating Gemmy's supposedly *lost* humanity, by becoming illegible and useless, help reinscribe him in the unending line of life in which his stories, those of his tribe, of his England, of his Australia all melt to create a text of infinite possibilities.

Marking yet another visible turning-point, the last chapter is set in the years of the Second World War, a dreadful modernity in which the politician in trouble, Lachlan Beattie, and the Catholic nun who was Janet redraw the lines of their lives and memories. This plunges the reader into a very unnerving world of spies, Nazis, racial laws and censured correspondence, an Australia totally engrained within the history of the world. And again, Gemmy's personal adventure is translated into the social history of the country and its very guilty conscience. Lachlan tells of his explorer-like pursuit of Gemmy's footsteps to find out the end of their story:

> It involved a 'dispersal' six years before by a group of cattlemen and two native troopers, too slight an affair to be called a massacre, and no newspaper had got hold of it.... Whether this one had happened, as the woman claimed, six years ago in her own lifetime, or in her mother's, or last year, it had been gathered now into the dreamtime of the land itself, a shadowy realm where the bones of facts had already drawn around them the skin of rocks, of beasts, of air. (196)

Bones of facts, skin of rocks, land as body, an organism allergic to fixity, a novel reproposing dreamt journeys and

[23] Generic Australian English form for natives.

arrivals; the stories of Gemmy seem to be whispered suggestions that *every* world and story is about diaspora and dispersals, trembling memories and continuous beginnings. Gemmy, the newcomer, the already-come, is a *dangerous* antagonist of the settlers' community in his being a passageway for a modernity of fluid encounters, of continually discussed individualities, of a dismantling different *order* made of literal and metaphorical nomadism.

Babylon *must* be remembered. "To the Hebrews [it] meant 'confusion'",[24] the chaos which helps discover what Chatwin and Paul Carter posit as the only essence of a life led by everybody in territories that are always new, always unreachable:

> the new country is never simply a geographical location and always a historical and poetic destiny. And part of its appeal is that its endless deferral of arrival, while it can induce a sense of placelessness and depression, is also a formula for life - a prolongation of the journey that cheats death.[25]

The Australian critics Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin offer an acute interpretation of this sense of inhabiting the uneasy space of plural exile and plural belonging. Their words, together with Paul Carter's, may recover Malouf's unsettled *places* and make them become the visible sign of an incurable global scar, the violent nature of interpretation and the historical, fictional, construction of any identity.

> The post-colonial writer, whose gaze is turned in two directions, stands already in that position which will come to be occupied by an interpretation, for he/she is not the object of an interpretation, but the first interpreter.[26]

[24] Chatwin, *The Songlines*, 211.
[25] Carter, *Living*, 8.
[26] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire*, 61.

Limits

Floriana Perna

Identity, Alterity, Writing: "Songlines" by Bruce Chatwin

The purpose of this paper is to offer an anthropological reading of Bruce Chatwin's successful novel *The Songlines*, focusing in particular on the concepts of identity, alterity and writing. Chatwin's book, published in 1987, consists of a fictional account of the author's travel throughout Australia in order to decode and interpret the meaning of the Aboriginal songlines. The footprints of the ancestors, re-named "songlines" by the Europeans, are musical tracks scattered over the whole of Australia, which are believed to have been left by the Aboriginal totemic ancestors at the time of the creation of the world. The songlines mark off territories belonging to different totemic species and the structure of their melody exactly reproduces the morphology of the area from which they originate:

> The Ancients sang their way all over the world. They sang the rivers and ranges, salt-pans and sand dunes. They hunted, ate, made love, danced, killed: wherever their tracks led they left a trail of music.
>
> They wrapped the whole world in a web of song; and at last, when the Earth was sung, they felt tired. Again in their limbs they felt the frozen immobility of Ages. Some sank into the ground where they stood. Some crawled into caves. Some crept away to their "Eternal Homes", to the ancestral waterholes that bore them. All of them went "back in".[1]

[1] Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Picador, 1987), 81-82.

Although Chatwin distances himself from anthropology in several interviews and partly in the book itself, he has to deal with many an anthropological concern. The search for the meaning of the sacred knowledge of another culture inescapably implies a confrontation with a number of methodological issues such as information gathering, race, ethnicity, identity and cultural translation, as well as credibility and authority.

The first part of the article seeks to acknowledge and point out the presence of these anthropological themes in *The Songlines* through the study of characters, sub-plots and Chatwin's entire fictional production. In the second section I will analyze the text more closely, with regard to the issues of identity, description of alterity and style of writing.

"The Songlines" and Anthropology

> *It is fiction - fiction, not falsehood - that lies at the very heart of successful anthropological field research; and, because it is never completely convincing for any of the participants, it renders such research, considered as a form of conduct, continuously ironic.*
>
> (Clifford Geertz, "Thinking as a Moral Act")

In *Bad Aboriginal Art* E. Michaels suggests that *The Songlines* has to be regarded as Bruce Chatwin's most explicit and distinct anthropological project.[2] Anthropology, anthropological terminology and anthropologist-like figures as interpreters/inscriptors of alterity are more manifestly and decisively present in this work than in Chatwin's other writings. The author's project of "making sense" of the songlines is an anthropological task *par excellence*, since it implies a process of understanding and therefore of cultural translation. Moreover, the songlines pertain to secret and sacred knowledge, posing the manifold issue of the accessibility of the other's culture.

[2] Eric Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art. Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 164-175.

Accessibility has constituted a crucial topic for anthropologists: the understanding of a foreign society requires an amount of information acquired through "experts" or the natives themselves. This, in its turn, creates a dependency of the anthropologist on his/her sources. In his narration Chatwin provides himself with an "informant" (Arkady Volchok) modeling him, as he was later to reveal, on Salman Rushdie, who had actually traveled with him to Australia.

Anthropology also enters the fiction through the character of Mrs. Lacey, a white activist operating as a mediator between Aboriginal painters and tourists, depicted as trying to keep up to date with the latest anthropological theories. Additional figures of anthropologists are present at the mission of Father Villaverde, a Spanish priest seeking to convert Aboriginals to Christianity.

Examining Chatwin's other works, it becomes evident that anthropology constitutes one of the thematic centers of his entire *oeuvre*. Anthropological echoes are discernible in *In Patagonia* (1977), *The Nomadic Alternative* (1970) and *On the Black Hill* (1982). The first version of *In Patagonia*, for instance, edited with Susannah Clapp, contained an authorial fictional *alter ego* under the guise of an anthropologist. The director of the Asia House Gallery in New York, for whom Chatwin had produced his first article entitled "The Nomadic Alternative",[3] described the author of *The Songlines* as an "anthropologist at heart". *On the Black Hill* can also be described, as N. Murray remarks, as a work of social anthropology.[4] To write it, Chatwin gathered information by interviewing people, recording their reactions to pictures contained in *Welsh Rural Life in Photographs* by E. Scausfield, studying *The Hereford Times* and interrogating his personal informants.

Yet, notwithstanding his attitudes, references and language,[5] Bruce Chatwin refuses any explicit engagement in anthropological

[3] "The Nomadic Alternative", in Emma Bunker, Bruce Chatwin, Anna Farkas, *The Animal Style* (Asia Society: New York, 1970).

[4] Nicholas Murray, *Bruce Chatwin*, (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1993), 63-64.

[5] In *Bad Aboriginal Art* E. Michaels remarks that Chatwin borrows an outstanding number of terms fron Meggit, Myers and Moyle.

studies, highlighting on several occasions his merely amateurish position. In the opening of *The Songlines*, for example, his general purpose is presented as merely interpretative:

> My reason for coming to Australia was to try to learn for myself, and not from other men's books, what a Songline was - and how it worked. Obviously, I was not going to get to the heart of the matter, nor would I want to.[6]

He explains in a subsequent interview what getting "to the heart of the matter" meant to him:

> to go and live on an Aboriginal settlement. Then I would have had to undergo some kind of ritual initiation. But my stance was to remain an observer, to get as close as I possibly could without going through all that. I just didn't want to.[7]

This lay stance is reiterated and insisted upon through Chatwin's affirmation of the fictionality of his accounts. Comparing non-fiction to fiction, he conceives the latter as a humbler, less ambitious form of writing, since it does not imply professionalism:

> To write it as a fiction gives you a greater flexibility; otherwise, if you were laying down the law on these subjcts, and indeed I had a go at laying down the law, I can't tell you how pretentious you sound.[8]

Anthropological accounts themselves, however, undoubtedly imply a certain amount of fiction. Anthropology itself has been forced to admit it. Its postcolonial *crise de conscience* has led to the questioning and displacement of the oppositional fact-fiction binomy. The validity of a scientific, objective description of a foreign culture has been called into question. The neutrality claimed by such accounts has been unmasked as a form of

[6] Chatwin, *The Songlines*, 14.
[7] "An Interview with Bruce Chatwin", *Granta* 21 (Spring 1987), 34.
[8] Ibid., 24.

subjective, partisan, Eurocentric knowledge, produced by the projection of Occidental desires and appropriation of difference. The "we" of anthropological narration has been revealed as white, male, European, whereas anthropology itself has been denounced as a "grand narrative" stemming from the unequal distribution of power under colonialism. Thus the new ethnography has been forced to become reflexive, self-aware and to present itself as a limited, interpretative narration, renouncing universal credibility. Culture, in its turn, has come to be understood as an assemblage of texts, while textualization has come to be seen as a necessary prerequisite to interpretation.[9] New issues have come to the foreground: the authority of the authorial voice and the role of informants have given way to the concepts of "plural authorship" and the exchange of information has been understood as an ongoing process of negotiation (C. Lacoste, V. Crapanzano, J. P. Dumont etc.).

In the light of these open-ended and hybrid concepts of fact and fiction, Chatwin's narrative can certainly be read in a different way. Besides being a fictional account of the Australian songlines, the book voices European culture meeting its other, identity confronting diversity and a white man carrying with him the heavy burden of his own roots and limits.

The Structure of the Narrative

> *Writing depends upon the support of the "I", the presumed prop of the authorial voice, for its authority. Yet in the provisional character of writing this structure oscillates, is put in doubt, disrupted and weakened.*
>
> (Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*)

As a first-person narration, *The Songlines* emphasizes the slippery subjects of identity and authority. The fictional Bruce, the

[9] See Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, and James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

narrative's main character, coincides with the observer and the reporter. His account of Aboriginal culture intermingles with notes from Chatwin's notebooks which comprise philosophical digressions, theories of evolution, previous studies about nomads and flashbacks on the author's past. Consequently, the positioning of the subject is to be perceived as crucial to the credibility and to the authority of the narrator and is reinforced through a multiple splitting of authorial identity into several *alter egos*, of whom Arkady Volchok is the most striking example. The novel, originally entitled "Arkady", was intended as a platonic dialogue between Chatwin himself and Volchok modeled on Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*. Nevertheless, whereas the latter novel is structured as a conversation between antagonistic identities, Arkady is a pure Chatwinian character. He leads a nomadic life, believes in the same values as his counterpart, backs and develops Chatwinian theories. He thus has a substantially corroborative function, similar to the one Murray ascribes to the anecdotes Chatwin inserts in *In Patagonia*:

> The pattern is that Chatwin will make an observation (in this case, that Buenos Aires is reminiscent of Tsarist Russia) and conjure up, let us say, a "friend" who is the recipient of the *aperçu* and who caps it with a corroborative observation that confirms the force of the original perception. In this case, the friend recalls the recent visit of a Russian White émigreé who excitedly explored the friend's country house culminating in a declaration on seeing the attics: "Ah! I knew it! The smell of my childhood!"[10]

Volchok also serves another important function in the economy of the novel, being presented as the expert on Aboriginal matters. He has worked as a school-teacher in an Aboriginal settlement and acts as a mediator between the Australian government and the natives, mapping the latters' sacred sites to avoid interferences with the new railway track. The information he offers is credible, since Arkady has won the Aborigines' confidence:

[10] Murray, *Bruce Chatwin*, 47-48.

> Arkady was so struck by the beauty of this concept [the songlines] that he began to take notes of everything he saw or heard, not for publication, but to satisfy his own curiosity. At first, the Walbiri Elders mistrusted him, and their answers to his questions were evasive. With time, once he had won their confidence, they invited him to witness their most secret ceremonies and encouraged him to learn their songs.[11]

The problem of authority and credibility is hence transferred, delegated to an identity (Arkady) that does not need to be validated. This proves ancillary to the reinforcement of the account's credibility yet, paradoxically, it weakens the narrator's position, rendering him "inadequate". Chatwin, in fact, depends on Arkady's reports and judgements to be enabled to interpret the Aboriginal world; moreover it is Arkady, acting as a "gateway" between the author and the object of his writing, who arranges Bruce's encounter with the Australian natives at Cullen Outstation. In the course of the story-telling, the fictional Chatwin manoeuvered by Arkady consequently emerges as an ex-centric character, in that he is depicted as only partially in control of the course of the action he is narrating.

This fictional and temporal marginality is doubled in the spatial, geographical ex-centricity of most Chatwinian characters. Representing himself as dwelling at the margins of the narration, Chatwin metaphorically equates himself with the displaced, de-centered identities he creates. Almost all his fictional *personae* are, significantly, dislocated on account of being uprooted exiles. Arkady's father has moved to Australia from Germany, originally coming from a Russian village; nearly all of the characters described in *In Patagonia* are immigrants; *On the Black Hill* deals with another margin - the Welsh border; Dom Francisco de Silva, the main character of *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, is a nostalgic exile.

In placing these de-centered subjects at the core of his narrative, Chatwin openly calls into question the idea of "roots", traditionally intended as a stable, immutable element linked to land and

[11] Chatwin, *The Songlines*, 3.

belonging. In questioning Arkady's nationality (Australian-Russian-German), Chatwin claims a new, in-between citizenship and a nomadic, cosmopolitan identity with which he identifies.

A corresponding concept of syncretic, composite, multifarious identity is to be found, transposed and inverted, in *The Songlines*' representation of alterity. The problematic issue of "roots" and ethnic identity is confronted through the vivid portrayal of the Aboriginal priest Father Flynn. A foundling Aborigine brought up in a mission and educated to become a Catholic priest, Flynn reacts to the Catholic church's contempt for his people by operating a syncretic fusion between Catholicism and Aboriginal religious fundamentals. On this account, he combines the footprints of the ancestors with Jesus' "I am the way", disrupting and displacing the binary opposition between the terms, contaminating and crossbreeding the two oppositional entities and establishing a contact zone. The language of the Bible, the imperialist book *par excellence*, is re-inscripted on an indigenous text and turned against the dominator. The colonial text is not refused but opened, re-appropriated, re-written and ultimately rendered self-destructive.

Here Chatwin seems to be celebrating syncretism as a feasible politics of resistance, in the face of racial purity and chromatic essentialism (white/black) and, like Homi Bhabha, he seems to produce "third spaces" bridging the gap between different cultures and invoking new strategies of selfhood to be invented in these interstices.[12] His subject becomes a migrant *in fieri*, exceptionally akin to the postcolonial reflections on rootlessness, to Guillermo Gomez-Pena's concept of *borderigena*, "a native of the great border region",[13] and to Gloria Anzaldúa's definition of *mestiza*:

> That third element is a new consciousness - a mestiza consciousness - and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm....

[12] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

[13] Guillermo Gomez-Pena, "The New World (B)order. A Work in Progress", *Third Text* 21 (Winter 1992-93).

> The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject/object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended.[14]

In his representation of alterity, Bruce Chatwin also appears preoccupied with the dismantling of the stereotypes traditionally ascribed to Aborigines. The most frequently recalled *topos* condemning Australian natives to a subaltern and marginal position is their presumed racial inferiority. In Eurocentric and traditional anthropological discourse, Aborigines are held to be an inferior race, biologically different from the whites, incapable of progress, trapped in a retrograde past and therefore in need of the white man's intelligence to be saved. This notion of racial diversity is powerfully evoked in Arkady's conversation with his former schoolmate subsequently become a policeman:

> "So why do you bother with them?" The policeman jerked his thumb at the Aboriginals.
> "Because I like them"
> "And *I* like them," he said. "I *like* them! I like to do what's right by them. But they're different."
> "In what way different?"....
> "Made differently," he said at last. "They've got different urinary tracts to the white man. Different waterworks! That's why they can't hold their booze!"
> "How do you know?"
> "It's been proved," said the policeman, "Scientifically"....
> "I like them," the policeman repeated, "I never said I didn't like them. But they're like children. They've got a childish mentality."
> "What makes you think so?"
> "They're incapable of progress," he said. "And that's what's wrong with you Land Rights people. You're standing in the way of progress. You're helping them destroy white Australia."[15]

[14] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands. La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (S. Francisco: Spinsters / Aunt Lute, 1987), 80.

[15] Chatwin, *The Songlines*, 136-137.

This ideological discourse is repeatedly discarded in the numerous pages from Chatwin's notebooks reported in *The Songlines*, containing travel notes together with quotations from philosophers, historians, scientists and writers. Strehlow, one of the first researchers to recognize that the "primitive" intellect was actually not inferior to the "modern" one, is frequently mentioned, and Darwin's misinterpretation of the Fuegian Indians of the Navarino Islands as the "missing link" between men and monkeys is elsewhere openly condemned. Chatwin points out that "a young Fuegian spoke as many words as Shakespeare ever wrote".[16] The belief in the limited value of racial stereotypes is also ironically vehicled through the "return of the gaze" on the natives' part. The writer is openly mistrusted by black Australians and synechdochically assimilated to the *conquistadores*. It is assumed that, as a white man, he aims at appropriating difference, at taking photographs, at watching secret ceremonies and exerting power. Chatwin's stance is thus ironically equated with a category he attempts to dissociate from and to which, in fact, he can only partly be compared.

Lastly, in response to the alleged superiority of Western societies, Chatwin re-states his belief in the superiority of nomadic societies. Chatwin began his research on nomads in 1968 travelling from Afghanistan to Mauritania; in 1969 he planned a complex book about them, *The Nomadic Alternative* (the title was then diverted onto his first published article), only to find himself incapable of "framing" a subject in continuous motion. *The Songlines* was the continuation and accomplishment of this unpublished book which had continued to haunt the writer all his life. For Chatwin, nomadism was inextricably related to human restlessness, a concept which was perceived by him as the philosophical "question of questions". Restlessness, be it expressed or constrained, is a constant presence in Chatwin's books: Dom Francisco de Silva becomes aggressive in reaction to confinement; Mary Latimer, in *On the Black Hill*, perceives farm life as a trap and her husband Amos sleeps rough as a consequence of a "seasonal malaise". Restlessness, along with the human need

[16] Chatwin, *What am I doing here?*, 343.

for the new, seemed to Chatwin extraordinarily akin to a migratory instinct and he firmly believed natural selection had designated the human species to be a migratory one. Men's ideal possessions were, accordingly, no more than what could be taken with one; further, he was convinced the world had an ascetic future and always treated nomads as if they were saints.[17]

In accordance with these beliefs, Chatwin always maintained that nomadic societies were less aggressive and more democratic than settlers, since they offered a more satisfying solution to human restlessness. In the wake of this theory, in *The Songlines* history is re-interpreted in terms of the stantiality/migrancy conflict and Cain's biblical murder becomes in this rereading the primordial token of the settler's envious projection of desire onto the nomad. Settlement is perceived as the "lean season capitalized" and the urge to migrate is found in pilgrimages, in the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri as well as in many quotes from Blaise Pascal, Anatole France, Buddha, Diogenes and many others. *The Songlines* never comes to a definite end from a narrative point of view and Chatwin's theories on nomads provide in lieu of a linear chronology the theoretical frame which opens and closes it.

In the last analysis nomadism will also be made use of to interpret Aboriginal society, walkabouts and the songlines themselves, opening up an ethical reflection upon the inevitability of an interpretative frame, of a decoding subject, of a positioned account.

An inevitable positioning

In an interview with Michael Davie,[18] Chatwin declared the key to *The Songlines* was the quote on page 313, namely Heidegger's

[17] This notwithstanding, Chatwin's personal attitude to these topics was never univocal: he was a collector all his life, he preached ascetism and simplicity behaving nevertheless as an aesthete, sought an authentic encounter with the other, yet appeared sometimes anxious to contain and dominate it. His contradictory, uneven stances are also reflected in his fictional production, where an authentic desire to confront otherness on an egalitarian, democratic terrain clashes with a dilated, synecdochic amplification of the self.

[18] "Heard between the Songlines", *The Observer*, 21 June 1987, 18.

"the song still names the hand over which it sings". In *The Songlines*, he had crossed out "hand" and substituted it with "land". In the final pages of the writing Chatwin also throws light on another key to the book, namely his process of universalizing the songlines by subduing the Aboriginal concept to his own pre-existing explanatory theoretical frame:

> Yet I felt the Songlines were not necessarily an Australian phenomenon, but universal: that they were the means by which man marked out his territory, and so organized his social life. All other successive systems were variants - or perversions - of this original model....
> I have a vision of the Songlines stretching across the continents and ages; that wherever men have trodden they have left a trail of song (of which we may, now and then, catch an echo); and that these trails must reach back, in time and space, to an isolated pocket in the African savannah, where the First Man opening his mouth in defiance of the terrors that surrounded him, shouted the opening stanza of the World Song, "I AM!"
> Let me go one step further. Let us imagine Father Adam (*homo sapiens*) strolling around the Garden. He puts a left foot forward and names a flower. He puts a right foot forward and names a stone. The verb carries him to the next stanza of the Song. All animals, insects, birds, mammals, dolphins, fish and humpback whales have a navigation system we call "triangulation". The mysteries of Chomskyan innate sentence structure become very simple if they are thought of as human triangulation. Subject - Object - Verb.[19]

In *What am I doing here?* the assimilation of Aborigines to a wider and more comprehensive category of "nomads" is even more patently outlined:

> Aboriginals believe that the totemic ancestor of each species creates himself from the mud of his primordial waterhole. He takes a step forward and sings his name, which is the opening line of a song. He takes a second step which is a gloss on the first line and completes the linked couplet. He then sets off on a journey across the land, footfall after footfall, singing the world into existence....
> *I hoped to use this astonishing concept as a springboard from which to explore the innate restlessness of man.* (my emphasis)[20]

[19] Chatwin, *The Songlines*, 314.

In the light of these statements, Eric Michaels suggests that *The Songlines* is nothing but a gigantic projection of Chatwin's own restlessness onto Australian Aborigines, a questionable reduction of the other to the same, irrespectful of the black Australians' difference:

> But more, it is impossible to ignore the metonymic connection - writing or not - between "le vrai moleskine" and "le vrai savage." The connection is imprecise and probably insulting. It opens Chatwin to the charge of attempting to increase the value of the nomads, and thereby his account of them, by underscoring their rarity. These sentimentalisms make us suspect that the book is only about Chatwin, about his own rootlessness, his personal fragmentation, some reconstructed bohemian quest - which I can personally identify with, even if I see no excuse for this projection onto desert Aborigines that inescapably results in their appropriation...
> His possible, but questionable, contribution may be that he finally succeeds in positioning himself - rather than the Aborigines - as "the other"....
> Chatwin is admittedly a European; and once we realize that he remains at the center of the story, the main objections (other than literary or aesthetic ones) that can be raised concern his appropriation of sources, and his motives.[21]

Chatwin's confrontation with Aboriginal difference is to be considered undoubtedly biased in several respects. His second-hand knowledge of the songlines obtained through a white

[20] Chatwin, *What am I doing here?*, 63.
[21] Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art*, 172-73.

projection of himself produces a "massification" of the object of observation and a severe subject / object partition. The splitting of authorial identity transforms the interpretation of the songlines into a conversation between "us" about "them", thus, as Trinh T. Min-ha puts it, "a gossip" in which "them" is silenced. Consequently, Aborigines rarely come into contact with the writer. They are mostly reported, recounted and spoken for through white voices and their culture is primarily an immobile object to observe and depict.

Although seemingly interrupting a horizontal, linear conception of time and progress, Chatwin approaches Aborigines as the "nomadic source" and considers their songlines as a primeval system modified by subsequent cultures. This renders his study similar to the search for the vanishing primitive denounced by Rey Chow[22] and described by James Clifford in "On Ethnographic Allegory":

> The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text.... It is assumed that the other society is weak and "needs" to be represented by an outsider (and that what matters in its life is past, not present or future). The recorder and interpreter of fragile custom is custodian of an essence, unimpeachable witness to an authenticity.[23]

Further, while Chatwin occasionally recognizes diversity within the "Aborigine" category, especially when it is related to totemic species, Australian natives are for the most part essentialized and treated as a homogeneous whole. Elements such as lineage and class are ignored; the issues of gender and sexuality are only hinted at through Marian. Aborigines are thus denied a personal history, never coming to the foreground as individuals.

The awareness of such positioned elements should not, however, lead to a simplistic condemnation of Chatwin's writing

[22] Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

[23] James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory", in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*, 112-113.

as a biased, colonial and acquisitive account of Aboriginal culture. Its weak subject positioning, the disrupting of the idea of "roots", the return of the gaze on Europeans, the generalized effort to dismantle stereotypes and to counter racial inferiority testify to an incontrovertible effort to undo and re-write the colonial past.

On the other hand it would be utopian to think and strive for a purely impersonal, objective account of alterity. Fact and fiction, as we have seen, always interweave. The presence of the writing "I/eye" in the text is felt even through the selection of the data to report, the categories according to which the foreign culture is decoded and the style of writing. Through Bruce Chatwin's text we are constantly reminded of his, and our, European roots and, notwithstanding his efforts, the legacy of his white, male, European identity is clearly visible in his production. Roots and identity, in Chatwin as well as in us as post-colonial citizens and critics, cannot thus be denied in order to re-establish an illusory critical distance and to claim credibility. We are inescapably caught in the flow of events and cannot speak from an Archimedean point outside the real.

Chatwin's standpoint also brings to the foreground the theoretical problem of the act of speaking for the other. If the act of speaking for someone else is always positioned, it also inescapably leads to an appropriation of difference from the speaker's vantage-point. Nonetheless, we cannot think of our being silent and listening to the other as a feasible politics in every situation. Nor can the mere awareness of our roots and critical location prevent us from confronting otherness.

The Songlines offers perhaps, paradoxically, a response to these methodological issues to the extent that it reminds us of our vulnerability and limits. As Europeans, we must be aware of our own weaknesses. Recognizing who we are, where we are speaking from and who we are speaking to is essential to an ethical, self-reflexive positioning towards alterity.

Regardless of *The Songlines*' limits, this is a lesson Chatwin can still teach us.

Salvatore Proietti

Postmodern Anthropology in Clifford and Le Guin

This essay rereads two science-fiction (hereafter SF) novels by Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *Always Coming Home* (1985), both as allies to James Clifford's critique of "ethnographic authority" in *The Predicament of Culture* and as critiques of some of Clifford's own predicaments.[1]

Products and Boundaries

Clifford's project, in his survey of traditional and contemporary ethnographic practices, is an attack on the classic attitudes of positivist epistemology. His targets are the views of anthropology as exploration, detection, discovery, involving a purely objective scientist scrutinizing the fully available landscape of a native culture. The subject/object split, though, is also a hierarchy, informed by colonialism and imperialism - cultural and otherwise - while objectivity is a constructed fiction, a form of narrative "writing". Thus, Clifford wishes both to promote and to salute a change of attitude: "'Cultural' difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence" (PC 14).[2]

To anticipate my point about Clifford, the strength and limits of his own narration - with its elisions and exclusions - are

[1] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), hereafter cited as PC.

[2] See also James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

predicated on a tension between a critique of positivist myths of transparency and an implicitly prescriptive reassertion of the ethnographer's primacy.

Let us, however, commence with James Fenimore Cooper, and a letter to the *Albany Argus* in April 1848:

> The boldest violations of the Constitution are daily proposed by politicians in this country, but they do not produce the fruits which might be expected, because the nation is so accustomed to work in the harness it has placed on itself, that nothing seems seriously to arrest the movement of the great national car.

The US state as machine in an automated ride, safely keeping its course, beyond bumps and social conflicts, thanks to its built-in checks and balances: an early instance, writes the historian Michael Kammen in his 1986 volume *A Machine that Would Go of Itself*, in a long-lasting tradition that goes from horse-driven carts to mechanical devices-arriving in 1998 with computers and genetic codes.[3]

Cooper's car returns, updated as automobile, in William Carlos Williams's poem quoted in Clifford's Introduction. Post-World War One America has "no one to drive the car"; still, "something / is given off" (PC 3). Williams is ironically ambivalent, between disillusionment and national self-confidence; but so was Cooper, the author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, who knew very well the attitudes of nostalgia for irretrievable lost authenticity.

In Clifford's use of Williams, a significant elision occurs. The poem's opening, "The pure products of America / go crazy" becomes, in the Introduction's title, "The Pure Products Go Crazy". A philosophy of history is at stake here: excised from its

[3] James F. Beard, ed., *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1968), 5:333-34; Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 18. On computer discourse as procedural figuration for the state machine, see my "The Informatic Jeremiad: Virtual Frontier and US Cyberculture", in John Moore and Karen Sayer, eds., *Utopian Alternatives, Dystopian Dimensions: Explorations in the Study of Science Fiction* (London: Macmillan, forthcoming).

historical and political location, the unnamed setting of ethnographic authority ("the West", "modernity"), which is "no longer" unchallenged, can be construed as a monolithic, seamless whole.

The paradigm of lost authenticity works insofar as we assume a mythic past when "we" could speak for and dominate "others without fear of contradiction" (PC 7), separating "we", the researchers, from the previously pure "others", whose previous talking back is *a priori* denied. In such a winner-take-all approach, in its elision of fearful and liberating contradictions from *within* "our" culture - even if this is done in order to promote intercultural polyphony - there emerges a strong risk of an uncritical celebration of the present. Clifford also announces, in two footnotes (PC 9, 16), that he will not discuss "the ethnographic construction" of "women" and "the poor" (limiting himself to "natives"), nor "para-ethnographic genres" such as oral history. This is not without consequences.

Williams's poem continues: "mountain folk from Kentucky / or the ribbed north end of / Jersey / with its isolate lakes". Literally reified into contiguity with the landscape, these alleged natives were also very much within modernity in Williams's times, and the protagonists of major experiences of labor activism. Williams may have been ironic but Clifford is not; for example, he overlooks the crucial role of Appalachia, from the 1930s onwards, as the setting of important oral history efforts, which involved many ethnographically trained and politically motivated researchers.

My hypothesis is therefore concerned with the limits of "writing" as the seemingly unique and overriding metaphor for the ethnographic endeavor. In dispelling positivist assumptions of scientific neutrality and transparency, we need not give up striving for different principles of narrativity. If dialogue is invoked as an alternative to unidirectional authoritativeness, then oral history is precisely a form of ethnography *literally* based on dialogue, and that goes in the direction indicated by Clifford. Built around "interlocution", such an ethnography cannot do away with the fact of "being in the presence of the speaker" (PC 39), of the so-called informant's own conflictual

talking and observing back. *By definition*, its "construction as text is dialogical - the author's talking face to face with particular [people] rather than reading culture 'over their shoulders'" (PC 41). In this sense, scholars of Native American cultures such as Krupat and Tedlock insist on pointing out how "poststructuralist" notions of intertextuality or rejection of fixed and originary textual authority are shared by the practice of oral narrative.[4] Oral genres, including oral history, are in fact necessarily partial, "narrative" forms which require "interviewing";[5] they foreground translation into written form as both problematic and necessary, without any entitlement to blot out the speaking agency of the interlocutor. The stake is of course political; as Alessandro Portelli - both a literary scholar and an oral historian - puts it:

> To be aware of ourselves is essential to a delineation of otherness, but to confine our conversation to our own self-reflexivity is a way to erase the other from our discourse and negate the very reason for the discourse itself. This is why by *practice* I refer to oral history both as *intellectual* and *social* endeavor.[6]

Having restricted his field Clifford, instead, only allows all of this to appear as the liberal pastoral of "a true rural culture in endangered places like Appalachia", and as no less than "the idiocy of rural life" (PC 4-5). With this denial of alternative agency and voices, authenticity seems to have become a fact, rather than an oppressive construction.

Similarly, Williams's character of the part-native servant Elsie, uprooted from "her" culture, "expressing with broken / brain the truth about us" presents the reader with many disturbing

[4] Arnold Krupat, "Post-Structuralism and Oral Literature", in Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat, eds., *Recovering the Word* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 113-28; Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

[5] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

[6] Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), xiv.

ambivalences. True, we can, with Clifford, appropriate this image as an experience of modern "rootlessness and mobility" (PC 3). But we should also be aware of the undercurrent of racism in the image of the mentally retarded offspring of interracial marriage ("perhaps / with a dash of Indian blood"): here a lost integrity seems to be the purity of whiteness.[7] Making of Elsie the representative of the modern condition (as both Williams and Clifford do in different ways) entails silencing her as native, as worker, and (as a domestic, hardly a gender-neutral job) as woman. And as Clifford adds in another footnote, fictional servants are nothing but "domesticated outsiders" (PC 4).

The Appalachians are too archaic, Elsie is too complicit with modernity: neither seems to qualify as acceptably "other". Clifford's drawing of boundaries does not come without casualties. Limiting himself to the debate among professional academics, and to the metaphors of writing, he imposes a fence around a territory that has instead been continually reinvigorated by lasting fusions with the bordering and intrusive "low" realms of orality and politics.

In the need for a mythical past entirely dominated by fantasies of authenticity, women as researchers are also silenced casualties. The need for such a legitimating myth begets the shaky opposition between the syncretism of contemporary Native American experience and the romantic purity embodied (in another revealing footnote) in the story of Ishi, the infamous "last wild Indian in California" (PC 16). Yet, to find an alternative ethnographic fiction, the reader only needs to look at the standard text by Theodora Kroeber (wife and collaborator of anthropologist Alfred), *Ishi in Two Worlds* (1961). Here there is at least one important variant to the journalistic story of the Stone Age man "discovered" in 1911 and transformed into an animated exhibit in the Anthropological Museum at Berkeley.

[7] Some versions of the image of the state as machine (here, the ship) rendered uncontrollable by "alien", non-WASP presences in Williams's times are discussed in William Boelhower, "*Hic Sunt Panterae*: Race, Ethnography, and Modern American Literature", in William Boelhower, ed., *The Future of American Modernism* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990), viii-xliv.

Theodora Kroeber tells a different tale: Ishi's "backwardness" occurred *because*, and not in the absence, of contact with modernity. The culture of Ishi's Yahi tribe had indeed been a highly syncretic one, for example, with the absorption of Spanish words into their language. The backward turn was the result, around 1870, of almost complete genocide, caused by white settlers. Forced into diaspora but unwilling to leave their territory, the tribe began a "Long Concealment", living in hiding in their own land, abandoning all contacts with others, reinventing, out of fear and necessity, a "traditional" primitiveness that Native Americans had in fact not experienced in centuries. Throughout Ishi's life, his syncretic inventiveness baffled researchers; above all, his Pidgin mix of English and Yahi appeared pointless to them. So, neither this native fiction of violently imposed "integrity", with its tragedy of hardly liberating fragmentation, nor the woman who wrote the story, fit easily into the smoothness of Clifford's narrative.[8]

A Machine That Ought to Go of Itself

Clifford's notion of dialogue is also problematic. On the one hand, one can only agree with his reading of Bakhtin. To put it in a phrase, in Clifford's Bakhtin there is only syncretism. Authenticity and monologue do not exist as such, only as forces within discourse. Dialogue always exists: as Clifford quotes him, in Bakhtin language is always "half someone else's" (PC 41); it always includes, within any speech act, a conflict between controlling and liberating tendencies. Consequently, dialogue (whether oral or metaphorical) is precisely the unavoidable meeting between "a garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes" and an "'other world' composed by an individual author", always "complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer" (PC 25). As Toni Morrison reminds us, when

[8] Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi in Two Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

someone speaks, the "other", the respondant, is always there, even through ideologically charged absence (elisions, footnotes).[9] The point is whether one wishes to acknowledge the other's existence, whether, as Clifford himself writes, the act of reading is dialogical or not: "one may also read against the grain of the text's dominant voice, seeking out other half-hidden authorities, reinterpreting the descriptions, texts, and quotations gathered together by the writer" (PC 53). Clifford, though, contradicts himself by limiting Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" to the contemporary "global condition of . . . expanded communication and intercultural influence" (PC 22).[10]

Yet monologue monopolizes Clifford's reading of ethnographic texts; against Bakhtin, the models he proposes for the analysis of "ethnographic authority" seem to have successfully preempted any ruptures in the controlling voice. Appeals to established authoritativeness, the mystique of observation skills, the tendentious use of native language, synecdochic/extrapolative strategies for the construction of an essential "structure", the erasure of history, the imposition of enlightened "interpretation" (PC 30 ff.), all seem to work in a void. However, they can be highlighted because of obvious blank spots that ethnographers are all too happy to bypass in moving, "in unspecified ways", to their conclusions. These "imponderabilia" (PC 35) become a disturbing presence. I am tempted to suggest that Clifford faults ethnographic authority precisely for not being authoritative *enough*. I am also tempted to react with a hypothesis: isn't the moment of appeal to unjustified experience or authority one space of dialogic tension and contradiction that lies beyond the control of the researchers?

The issue of control versus involvement is central. In the third chapter of his book, Clifford's use of Conrad presents a

[9] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

[10] For my reading of Bakhtin's dialogism, I am indebted to Michael Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique* (London: Routledge, 1992). For an overview of the spectrum of approaches that the concept of "dialogue" has generated in anthropology and philosophy, see Tullio Maranhao, ed., *The Interpretation of Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

utopian figure in the "first narrator" of *Heart of Darkness*, who may be *read* as dialogic, but who is yet another liberal, relativistic observer who manages to transmit all - through his "voice" - without being involved.

Involvement, and the strategies against it, are a crucial point. As purest exemplary product of "colonial" discourse in anthropology (PC 60), Clifford - interestingly abandoning the US tradition - chooses the French researcher Marcel Griaule. Griaule presents us with a crucial, dialogically self-defeating paradox. On the one hand, we find a stress on detached, panoptical mapping, and a decontextualizing rhetorical practice based on written law. Clifford focuses specifically on Griaule's use of the lexicon of the pre-trial, written, secret phase of Napoleonic procedure (*instruction*), that inevitably leads to inconclusiveness (since the *renvoi en jugement* and the oral trial or public debate can never occur given the premises). But is this not also a dialogic foregrounding of the impossibility of definitive authoritativeness, even in this most airtight of constructions? Indeed, nobody seems to be more lucidly aware than Griaule himself of the impossibility of "harmonizing" (Clifford's word, PC 67) the power relations that make his work possible.

Being self-conscious and self-reflexive about the predicaments of ethnographic writing is not enough.[11] Orality and politics are also central to the question. At this point it is possible to read Clifford's enterprise as a depoliticizing move. As Niranjana writes from a post-colonial standpoint, in much postmodern anthropology the ethical and political thrust of an "affirmative deconstruction" is missing, leaving

[11] As N. Katherine Hayles argues in her "Boundary Disputes: Homeostasis, Reflexivity, and the Foundations of Cybernetics", in Robert Markley, ed., *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11-37, the notion of "self-reflexivity" and the problematization of the observer's position have been the bases in cybernetics and computer science for new formulas and rhetorics of totalization - as "autopoietic", integrated "systems". A number of anthropologists (from Mead to Bateson) have participated in this debate. For a general, sobering argument on the politics of self-reflexivity and systems theories in contemporary Post-Fordism, see Pietro Barcellona, *Il capitale come puro spirito* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1990).

only the possibility of defusing "politics into poetics".[12] In his reading of recent dialogic anthropology, Clifford is particularly troubled by the permanence of "the ethnographer as a discrete character in the fieldwork narrative" (PC 44), and tries to draw suggestions about the construction of a truly dialogic text. Later in the book, he contrasts "anthropological humanism", aimed at taxonomizing and taming the encountered other, with an "ethnographic surrealist practice [which] attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness - the unexpected", as "elements within a complex process" (PC 145-46). Yet, if taken (as Clifford proposes) in its pure form, this practice would not be ethnography at all. Rather than the predicament of the unresolved tension between analytical cognition and poetic estrangement, in the surrealism of Michel Leiris and others we only seem to have the latter. In fact, "Leiris' fieldwork in a 'phantom Africa' throws him back on a relentless self-ethnography" (PC 14); without some non-reductionist form of cognition, otherness itself disappears from the picture, reduced to the status of a ghost by narcissistic self-reflexivity.[13]

In the quest for dialogue as textual syntactics, it is not hard to read an attempt to evade the political aspect of contact with the native other, an attempt to put Cooper's and Williams's machine back on its tracks.

[12] Tajaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). This book was brought to my attention by Daniela Daniele.

[13] In the US context, ghosts and phantasms play a central role in the liberal version of expansionist rhetoric, commencing at least in the mid-nineteenth century. The use of dematerialized otherness as vehicle for narcissistic (if at times tortured) self-gazing is not always a liberating displacement. See Mirella Martino, "La linea d'acqua: *Moby-Dick* e le retoriche del Narciso americano" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rome "La Sapienza", 1998). I am, of course, not making a case for Clifford as neo-imperialist; rather, he too has (to take a cue from Jane Wilkinson's comment to the first draft of this paper) a political unconscious - or at least a rhetorical one. Clifford's own predicament of being caught between expropriative objectivity and self-absorbed aestheticism has a long genealogy behind it.

The Other's Tales, or, The Oral History of Science Fiction

In the rest of this paper, I will sketch out and juxtapose a different project, revolving around the same "postmodern" concerns. Both of Le Guin's novels (and indeed most of her fiction) are presented in the form of future anthropology, and problematize notions of otherness and writing through the metaphor of the alien encounter. Ursula K. Le Guin is of course the daughter of Alfred L. and Theodora Kroeber (the author of *Ishi*). More crucially, Le Guin draws on SF's estranging devices, on the reviving of utopian writing within the SF field in correspondence with the post-1960 New Left and feminist movements, and on the genre's North American history as a highly self-aware "mass" discourse which has established rewriting, parody, and textual openness as the bases for its poetics and aesthetics.[14] Historically a contamination of imperialist and utopian discourses, SF's "cognitive estrangement" (Darko Suvin's fortunate phrase) hinges on the fictional presentation of otherness, on the ironic task that Damien Broderick has called "allography".[15]

Le Guin's patchwork alternation of standard "fiction" sections with the aliens' (in *The Left Hand of Darkness*) and the future humans' stories (in *Always Coming Home*), as told to various past and present outsiders, and above all to each other, stages a displacement of one-sided attempts to control conversations, fictions, and histories.

> "I should like to hear that tale, my Lord Envoy", said old Esvans, very calm. But the boy, Therem's son, said stammering, "Will you tell us how he died? - Will you tell us about the other worlds out among the stars - the other kinds of men, the other lives?"

[14] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979); Teresa De Lauretis, "Signs of Wa/onder, in Teresa De Lauretis, Andreas Huyssen, and Kathleen Woodward, eds., *The Technological Imagination* (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1980), 159-74; Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible* (New York: Methuen, 1986); Samuel R. Delany, *Silent Interviews* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

[15] Suvin, *Metamorphoses*; Damien Broderick, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995), 117.

In the ending of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the visiting "I/eye" (named Ai, himself a Black from a planet which is not our own) takes up the missing role in a fully dialogical exchange, one which Clifford does not even consider: that of the informant facing the active participation and observation of the alien other (LHD 301, see also 181-93).[16]

Moreover, involvement and participation are stressed in two ways. First, we have the foregrounding of gender and gender roles as inescapable thresholds for contact. The aliens are androgynes, with cycles of sexual activity which may occur in either sex. The first "human" visitor finds in this some disquieting and exhilarating implications:

> Consider: . . . There is no myth of Oedipus. . . . There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves. . . . I really don't see how anyone could put much stock in victory or glory after he had spent a winter on Winter, and seen the face of the Ice. (LHD 93, 97)

Without war, rape, or the sexual division of labor, the planet Gethen (or "Winter") is no essentialist utopia: indeed, Le Guin's whole fictional universe is based on the negation of originary biological naturalness, on the construction of intelligent life as "genetic manipulation", or "planting" (elsewhere called "seeding") operated by another alien species (LHD 89). Clearly, this utopia has ambiguities of its own.[17] Moralism and nationalist hatred exist, in different forms. The overriding issue, recontextualized outside of inherent human nature, is "the fear of the other" (LHD 19). The relationship between the ethnographer/ diplomatic envoy ("First Mobile") Genly Ai and the exiled prime minister of the kingdom of

[16] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969; New York: Ace, 1983), hereafter cited as LHD.

[17] The subtitle to her 1974 novel *The Dispossessed* is "An Ambiguous Utopia".

Karhide on Gethen brings about nothing less than an "apocalyptic" disruption ("nothing to hold on to", LHD132).[18] As Robert Scholes writes, the encounter with otherness in *The Left Hand of Darkness* manages to foreground "the system of sexual difference *as* a system because it has offered us a *différance* from *difference* - a place to stand from which we can finally see the earth and perhaps even move it".[19]

The disruptive interplay of desirable and disappointing elements in the encounter between the two worlds supersedes classic "static" utopianism thanks to the non-reassuring, open-ended version of the common ground.[20] The rejection of "essence" is also the rejection of absolute incommensurability, but not of conflict. Throughout the novel the emphasis is on conversation and communication, not on reconciliation. Le Guin would concur with the controversial statement of Derrida in response to Levinas: "the other as alter ego signifies the other as other, irreducible to *my* ego, precisely because it is an ego. . . . This is why . . . he is a face, can speak to me, understand me, and eventually command me".[21]

Second, the final chapters with the two protagonists "crossing the ice" may also be read as a retelling of Thoreau's *Walden*, a book often referred to in Le Guin's fiction and essays.[22] If Thoreau

[18] David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction and American Literature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 76ff.

[19] Robert Scholes, *Textual Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 119. A long strand of feminist criticism - summarized and culminating in Sarah Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1988) - has harshly criticized *The Left Hand of Darkness* for its use of the pronoun "he" with regard to the androgynes. I prefer, with Scholes (*Textual Power*, 124-25), to read this as another self-conscious estranging ploy: allegorically, the aliens are "pure difference", outside "our" language and gender system, and Le Guin does not allow this rupture to be linguistically "domesticated". For a recent feminist appreciation of the novel, see Mona Fayad, "Aliens, Androgynes, and Anthropology: Le Guin's Critique of Representation in *The Left Hand of Darkness*", *Mosaic* 30.3 (September 1997), 59-73.

[20] Darko Suvin, "Locus, Horizon, and Orientation", *Discours social/Social Discourse* 1.1 (Winter 1988), 87-108.

[21] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 125.

tries to strip culture to essentials, mapping the resulting society centered on one single individual(ist), Le Guin does the same in an allegorical work that instead stresses verbal and bodily involvement with the other.[23] If Thoreau may reduce individual necessity to "fuel", *The Left Hand of Darkness* stages an ice-crossing scene ("Nothing else: the veiled sun, the ice"; LHD 236) in which survival and communication are forms of interdependence, and the latter can only find full actualization if the fiction of participant observation (present in earlier novels by Le Guin) is replaced by that of bodily contiguity (which here does not exclude sexual attraction), with dialogue and communication across difference as the ultimate ethical yardstick ("I and Thou, . . . it does, after all, go even wider than sex"; (LHD 234).[24] The novel is a secular parable which, contrary to Clifford's Conrad, presents not only dialogue but also vulnerability as hopeful horizons.[25] None of this, though, offers edifying consolation: as,

[22] Darko Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988), 147; Ursula K. Le Guin, "A Response to the Le Guin Issue", *Science-Fiction Studies* 3.1 (March 1976), 43-46.

[23] Fredric Jameson, "World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative", *Science-Fiction Studies* 2.3 (November 1975), 221-30.

[24] Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions*, 136. In this sense, Le Guin's trajectory is similar to Melville's participant observers, who gradually move from detached observers in *Typee* to ambivalent yet full-bodied participants in *Moby-Dick*. See Carol Colatrella, "Bercovitch's Paradox: Critical Dissent, Marginality, and the Example of Melville", in Carol Colatrella and Joseph Alkana, eds., *Cohesion and Dissent in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 229-50; and some hints in Martino, "La linea d'acqua". Twentieth-century ethnographic works which also foreground both fictionality and involvement include Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. On Le Guin as critic of racism and imperialism, see Lisbeth Gant-Britton, "Exploring Color Coding at the Beginning and End of the Twentieth Century in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", in Elisabeth A. Leonard, ed., *Into Darkness Peering: Race and Color in the Fantastic*" (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 35-55.

[25] On vulnerability, see Iain Chambers, "Dwelling, Vulnerability... The Interruption", unpublished paper, 1996; and Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

among others, Portelli reminds us, the wishful revision of the colonization story, significantly set in the 1490s ("Ekumenical Year"), is still a form of storytelling:[26]

> I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling. . . . Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive.
> The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments it seems to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them are false, and it is all one story. (LHD 1-2)

The anthropological "thick description" of the other culture returns in *Always Coming Home*, which stretches to an extreme the conflict and polyphony of voices, and reduces to an experimentalist minimum the role of plot.[27] In its digressive structure, which almost completely does away with the overall narrative and presents the reader with a multitude of interrelated micro-stories, this "archeology of the future" (the title of one of the first sections) is a collection of poems, tales, plays, essays, and drawings (plus, in the hardcover Harper & Row edition, a musical tape) from a future, post-ecological-disaster, Native American community. A "novel" of syncretic survival whose only consistent strand is the angle of a woman story-teller, *Always Coming Home* problematizes the roles of power and control in cultural writing, and marks

[26] Alessandro Portelli, *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking, and Democracy in American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 53.

[27] Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (1985; New York: Bantam, 1986), hereafter cited as ACH. Le Guin explicitly refers to Geertzian "thickness" as model for her SF - and for the genre itself - in the introduction and in some stories of the collection *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (New York: Harper, 1994). Among SF theorists, "thick descriptions" are also invoked in Darko Suvin, "Novum Is As Novum Does", *Foundation*, 69 (Spring 1997), 26-43.

the beginning of a forceful postmodern turn in North American feminist SF.[28]

Arguably influenced by Theodora Kroeber's *Ishi*,[29] the novel is set in a California divided between the peaceful, egalitarian, and mostly oral Kesh community - neither a closed nor an anti-technological one - and the militaristic Condor, who limit the practice of writing either to war rituals or to the subaltern sphere of women and the lower classes. Thus, *Always Coming Home* pits against each other the oppressiveness of power-oriented, monumentalizing knowledge (the cause of the destruction of the old order, whose surviving ruins are in fact the sources of many oral tales) and the need for permanence (above all, among the various subalterns) that only writing can offer in any less than fully ideal (if clearly more utopian than our own) society. Hopes and anxieties about the issue of permanence seem to me the crucial concern of the book, articulated in a fractured form that enacts openness and readerly involvement.[30]

[28] The beginnings of this theorizing can be traced to Jean Pfaelzer, "The Changing of the Avant Garde: The Feminist Utopia", *Science-Fiction Studies* 15.3 (November 1988), 282-93; and Veronica Hollinger, "Feminist Science Fiction: Breaking Up the Subject", *Extrapolation* 31.3 (Fall 1990), 229-39. The turning point is Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism, which is a central influence in recent SF theory and criticism; an overview of this influence is included in my "Intorno al cyberpunk", *Ácoma* 12 (inverno 1998), 63-76.

[29] Robert Maslen, "Towards an Archaeology of the Present: Theodora Kroeber and Ursula K. Le Guin", *Foundation* 67 (Summer 1996), 62-74.

[30] This is the stress in both Anglophone and Italian criticism. See Elizabeth Cummins, "The Land-Lady's Homebirth: Revisiting Ursula K. Le Guin's Worlds", *Science-Fiction Studies* 17.2 (July 1990), 153-65; Peter Fitting, "The Turn from Utopia in Recent Feminist Fiction", in Libby F. Jones and Sarah W. Goodwin, eds., *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 141-48; Daniela Guardamagna, "Geometria e groviglio nelle citta' di Ursula K. Le Guin", in Oriana Palusci, ed., *La città delle donne* (Torino: Tirrenia, 1992), 141-47; Jim Jose, "Reflections on the Politics of Le Guin's Narrative Shifts", *Science-Fiction Studies* 18 (July 1991), 180-97; Lee C. Khanna, "Women's Utopias: New Worlds, New Texts", in Jones and Goodwin, eds., *Feminism*, 130-40; Patricia Linton, "The 'Person' in Postmodern Fiction: Gibson, Le Guin, and Vizenor", *SAIL* 5.3 (Fall 1993), 3-11; Carlo Pagetti, *I sogni della scienza* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993), 136-39; Robin Roberts, *A New Species. Gender and Science in Science Fiction* (Urbana: University

The text self-consciously presents the Kesh culture as a fiction, revolving around fictions ("They had no god; they had no gods; they had no faith. What they appear to have had is a working metaphor"; ACH 52), which are "of a most amazing complexity, and imperturbably self-contradictory" (ACH 93). If discourse and story are, for the Kesh, the "hinge" for cognition, not all discourse is equal; the point is ethical and political: "If fact and fiction are not clearly separated in Kesh literature, truth and falsehood, however, are. . . . The distinction is one of intent" (ACH 536).

Allegorically again, the name of the "protagonist" is Stone Telling. Stones, as the Kesh formulas say, embody at the same time the weight of metaphoricity (ACH 98) and the always present *différance* of "the untranslated word" (ACH 437-48). If this everyday, non-heroic character has an exemplary role, it is that of a link between discourse and intent or agency. If on the one hand the Kesh culture appears not only anarchic but also primitivist,[31] prizing oral story-telling and periodically disposing of written books, still the permanence of the written and even of the electronically stored word (ACH 156ff) is also prized. The relative powerlessness of the natives requires some stones, some *différance*, in order to survive: "Maybe we're afraid of death, afraid to let our words simply be spoken and die, leaving silence for new words to be born in. Maybe we seek community, the lost, the irreproducible" (ACH 540).

For Le Guin, orality and writing must be made into mutually supporting principles; their most direct analogue is the opposition between home and travel. *The Left Hand of Darkness* also presented a "First Mobile", endlessly traveling but endlessly finding concrete goals, finding "a place in the blizzard", a form of solidity within the void and the

of Illinois Press, 1993), 148-55. For a dissenting opinion, saluting with enthusiasm notions of "mastery" and totality, taken as crucial to the "postmodernity" of *Always*, see Tom Le Clair, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 204-36.

[31] John Moore, "An Archaeology of the Future: Ursula Le Guin and Anarcho-Primitivism", *Foundation* 63 (Spring 1995), 32-39.

immateriality of the metaphorical waste of ice and wind. In *Always Coming Home*, the same could be said for Stone Telling, described in her travelling but also with a no less than mystical connection to both her collective ("the Valley") and material home. Only the warlike Condor celebrate the cosmic, holistic sense of home at the absolute expense of the concrete dwellings of families, kinship groups, and micro-communities. Thus, they direct their anathema against those who, like the Kesh, "deny that the soul of man has no house on earth" (ACH 409). Only metaphysical - and gender-blind - oneness ("for us there is only one, one house, One Above All Persons") can satisfy their will to overcome human limitations: "Only in war is redemption; only the victorious warrior will know the truth, and knowing the truth will live forever". Only hatred can be their feeling towards those who believe in the materiality of "build[ing] up houses of desire and imagination" (ibid.). As Donna Haraway writes, Le Guin's stance is postmodern precisely because of "her insistence . . . on fragility and limitation" and her "avoiding narratives of completion", in the name of "the pleasure of being at home in the world, rather than needing transcendence from it".[32]

This stress on contingency bears directly on Le Guin's view of utopia. In *Always Coming Home* at least part of the data are collected ("edited") by an outside visitor, an ethnographer from an unspecified time, who comments on the text and provides a continual thrust of self- and textual effacement. Connecting present and future, the voice of "Pandora" personifies an approach to utopia predicated on process and praxis rather than mere representation, on deictic openness rather than textual closure.[33] The Kesh are a world of future possibility ("The people in this book might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern

[32] Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, "Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway", in Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, eds., *Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 17.

[33] Fredric Jameson, "Of Islands and Trenches", *Diacritics* 7.2 (June 1977), 2-21; Suvin, "Locus".

California"), whose foregrounded fictionality bears directly on the discourse of the present:

> The difficulty of translation from a language that doesn't yet exist is considerable, but there's no need to exaggerate it. . . . The fact that it hasn't yet been written, the mere absence of a text to translate, doesn't make all that much difference. What was and what may be lie, like children whose faces we cannot see, in the arms of silence. All we ever have is here, now. (ACH ix)

Their origins are unknown or impossible, but the texts exist; even in orality and with the books destroyed: "Nothing is lost, nothing is forgotten, and everything is in little bits" (ACH 154). The text, like the community, is fragile and open ("there was never a wall; what on earth did they need a wall for?"; ACH 3), hence a locus of desire, but a text nevertheless. In an analogous manner, the Kesh utopia, which ironically critiques, parodies, and rewrites earlier, enclosed narratives, is nevertheless a utopia, with an estranged, non-phantasmatic consistency of its own. And it is the responsibility of the ethnographer to provide, in a dramatized conversation with an encyclopedic "Archivist", the explicit, political suggestion of the undisposable horizon of openendedness, the utopian striving towards, in Haraway's words, a way of superseding "humanism" without ceasing to reimagine "humanity":[34]

> PAN: I never did like smartass utopians. Always so much healthier and saner and sounder and fitter and kinder and tougher and wiser and tougher and righter than me and my family and friends. People who have the answers are boring, niece. Boring, boring, boring.
> ARC: But I have no answers and this isn't utopia, aunt!
> PAN: The hell it ain't. (ACH 336)

[34] Donna Haraway, "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape", in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 87.

Simona Marino

Memories of identity: Conrad, Achebe and Naipaul

> *our present will inevitably have an impact on what and how we remember. The point is to understand that process, not to regret it in the mistaken belief in some ultimately pure, complete, and transcended memory. It follows that the strongly remembered past will always be inscribed in our present, from feeding our unconscious desires to guiding our most conscious actions. At the same time, the strongly remembered past may turn into a mythic memory. It is not immune to ossification, and may become a stumbling block to the needs of the present rather than an opening in the continuum of history.*
> (Andreas Huyssen, "Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age")

> *It is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experience of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.*
> (H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*)

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is probably one of the most passionately praised and criticized books of the last decades. Considered both as a forerunner of modern notions of hybridity or as the quintessence of the most commonplace stereotypes and prejudices concerning Africa, constantly eluding any final definition, Conrad's text shows us how changing cultural and historical contexts can shape and revise

literary canons.[1] As a result, critical readings of the text have been paralleled by attempts at re-writing it, and the Conradian imagery has become the rhetoric of a culture that could be imitated, distorted, displaced or even ridiculed.

In his seminal essay "Signs taken for wonders", Homi Bhabha chooses *Heart of Darkness* as one of the possible references for the analysis of the above-mentioned dynamic of appropriation and repetition of Western symbols of authority and identity:

> The discovery of the book is, at once, a moment of originality and authority. It is, as well, a process of displacement that, paradoxically, makes the presence of the book wondrous to the extent to which it is repeated, translated, misread, displaced.... As a signifier of authority, the English book acquires its meaning *after* the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior, archaic image of identity. Paradoxically, however, such an image can neither be 'original' - by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it - nor 'identical' - by virtue of the difference that defines it.
>
> Consequently, the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and its articulation as repetition and difference.[2]

Every presence is a re-presence (representation), which shows that we do not experience mere 'reality', but its verbal and ideological construction, and that narrative produces ideology through language: the authority Conrad's book embodies may thus ambiguously serve both to create antagonistic images of identity, and to deconstruct this notion through the mechanism of repetition.

Both Chinua Achebe (born in 1930) and V. S. Naipaul (born in 1932) have felt the need to appropriate the Conradian voice in order to draw their portraits of African identity. In two of their novels (respectively, *Things Fall Apart*, 1958, and *A Bend In the*

[1] Examples of such radically contrasting readings of the novella can be found in Homi K. Bhabha, "How newness enters the world", in Bhabha, *Location*, 212-235, and Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa", *Massachussets Review* 18 (1977), 782-794.

[2] Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs taken for wonder", in Bhabha, *Location*, 107.

River, 1979) this mimic attempt is mirrored and dramatized through what Bhabha calls the "discovery of the book". The latter is both a metaphor (the awareness of the unavoidable influence of Conrad's authority in the literary unconscious of post-colonial writers) and an actual event in the plot of these novels. In Achebe's and Naipaul's texts this metafictional device both questions and appropriates (with radically different aims) the authority of this token of the colonial system of representation. This ambiguous co-existence, the (sometimes rejected) legacy of Western literary and historical memory of Africa, is experienced by the authors and recalled in the characters of these novels. However, while Achebe is still 'writing back' and trying to recover an impossible authenticity to counteract Conrad's assumed 'orientalism' - and the closure of such Western books on Africa as the work produced by his fictional District Commissioner - Naipaul chooses Conrad's voice to mimic and ally the nostalgic modernity of his opening to polyphony in history.

These pages aim at showing how the action of re-writing serves to identify a site of authority where memory is transformed into history, and to establish (as in *Things Fall Apart)* or question (as in *A Bend In the River*) the notion of community which derives from such assessments of what is generally acknowledged as the past. As far as *Heart of Darkness* is concerned, my comparison between Achebe's and Naipaul's fictional interpretations of the text aims at connecting the critical dissent on the novella with changes in the notion of the post-colonial.

*

Heart of Darkness (1899) both draws and erases the map of the European conquest of the African territory by undermining the colonial system of representation through the new, mimic presence of hitherto silent identities. The awareness of a crisis in the Western illusion of a historical monologue marks the impossibility of an authority establishing and assessing difference and identity. In order to represent this metamorphosis and to portray the impending chaos of fin-de-siècle Europe, Conrad makes use of the very stereotypes his narration ostensibly undermines, and (like Hegel) seems to deny

the existence of Africa's past. For this reason, Achebe violently attacks Conrad's novel as an example of "the desire - one might indeed say the need - in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest". According to Achebe, "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality".[3] *Things Fall Apart* is thus an attempt at showing the intentional failure of the Conradian text and at shaping a community whose 'subaltern' voice cannot be articulated in the code of hegemony.

Achebe's conception of the artist's role in moulding the silenced national consciousness through the (inevitably) imperialistic institution of the literary canon is described as the ritual celebration of an unacknowledged identity:

> I offer *mbari* to you as one illustration of my pre-colonial inheritance - of art as celebration of my reality; of art in its social dimension; of the creative potential in all of us and of the need to exercise this latent energy again and again in artistic expression and communal, cooperative enterprises.
>
> And now I come to what I have chosen to call my Middle Passage, my colonial inheritance.... It is not my intention, however, to engage in a detailed evaluation of the colonial experience, but merely to ask what possibility, what encouragement, there was in this episode of our history for the celebration of our own world, for the singing of the song of ourselves, in the din of an insistent world and song of others.[4]

In order to perform this rite, Achebe makes use of the easily recognizable tropes of an American search for identity. The

[3] Achebe, "An Image".

[4] Chinua Achebe, "African Literature as a Restoration of Celebration", in Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, eds., *Chinua Achebe. A Celebration* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 3.

Atlantic diaspora (evoked by the reference to the "Middle Passage") and the Whitman-like celebration of a national culture (the "song of ourselves") are the ambiguous symbols of what might be considered the first post-colonial experience in Western history. These very symbols, however, show that Achebe feels inevitably part of both worlds, and that he cannot avoid tuning the "song of ourselves" through the language which has made it impossible, and admitting the loss of the homeland he is trying to recover. For these reasons Achebe defines *Things Fall Apart* as "the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son",[5] and describes his alienation in the colonial text[6] by acknowledging his initial identification with Western culture:

> I did not see myself as an African to begin with. I took sides with the white men against the savages. In other words I went through my first level of schooling thinking I was of the party of the white man in his hair-raising adventures and narrow escapes.... But a time came when I reached the appropriate age and realized that these writers had pulled a fast one on me! I was not on Marlow's boat steaming up the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*. I was one of those strange beings jumping up and down on the river bank, making horrid faces.[7]

In order to perform his didactic task, Achebe's narrator looks for a genealogy of the conquest from the colonial subject's point of view: as the writer points out in his 1988 "Preface" to the novel, Okonkwo's father's weakness is the weakness of a generation who "did open the door to the white man".[8] Okonkwo's fear of resembling his father is thus the rage of a disinherited generation caused by the Conradian

[5] Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe. Language and Ideology in Fiction* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991), 25.

[6] Ibid., 6.

[7] Achebe, "African Literature", 7.

[8] Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1988), 10. From now on, references to this edition of the novel will be given in brackets.

abomination of a crime against the "imaginary homeland" Achebe tries to recover:

> He had a bad *chi* or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess.... The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. (28)

The father/son relationship could also be seen as a metaphor of the text's relationship with the tradition of Western narrative, both fictional and historical: a metaphor of the (Oedipal) need to claim the value of a 'minor' literature oppressed by the dominance of the 'fathers' - one of which is quite paradoxically Joseph Conrad himself.[9] I am not implying that Unoka is to be considered as a symbol of authority but, rather, that the previous generations' political ineffectivenes and acquiescence in the imposition of an alien culture had fostered the substitution of a shadow-like ancestry with dangerously reliable 'father figures'. However, this need to expose the cultural roots of the African annihilation through the re-writing of Conrad's novella cannot take into account that its rhetoric (which is often parodied in the pages of the novel) is, in its turn, an allegory and not an ideology. As Chris Bongie observes, Conrad uses the empire symbolism to express an (imperialistic) nostalgia for the fictional - as well as historical - opportunities of the 'adventure'.[10] By the end of the century the conquest of new lands had been accomplished and gradually substituted by the conquest of new markets which exposed the inadequacy of the adventure pattern to the new, globalized perception of the world. Conrad's imperialistic rhetoric is therefore the memory of a past relationship with otherness which had been overcome in his own time, although in Achebe's text it is interpreted as the anachronistic representation of that very relationship.

[9] For the concept of 'minor literature', see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[10] See Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories. Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 103.

The Foucauldian problem of historicizing what history has needed to repress in order to exist is embodied in Okonkwo's mythical status as a self-engendering founding father of the community who thus rejects the inheritance of his ancestors' surrender to the white man. By claiming the value of an (apparently) alternative archeology, Achebe creates an antagonistic supplement to European modernity. As Gikandi points out, this is an effort to fill the cultural gap left by the Western historical effacement of a past (and an equally denied present) belonging to Africa:

> In [this] sense, writing functions as a form of compensation - what Jacques Derrida has called a 'supplement' - for a historical experience that has been written out of existence in colonialist discourse or for the gap in the temporal development of Africa as it has been represented in the colonial text; narrative commemorates the African past.[11]

By exploiting the very characteristics of the novel which had previously made it a tool for the creation of the imperial community, Achebe creates a utopian time-scheme which vindicates the African past and perceives it not only in terms of history but also of progress. As Moses writes, however, this means acknowledging the Western historical *emplotment* which had traditionally decreed Africa's 'inadequacy':

> There are, of course, great differences between the articulate, dignified, and heroic Igbo people of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or *Arrow of God* and the uncultured and barbarous Africans of Hegel's "land of childhood". Yet throughout his novels, short stories, and critical essays, Achebe remains in accord with a Hegelian conception of history insofar as he traces a historical development of the Igbo people that points towards some conception of modernity.[12]

[11] Gikandi, *Reading*, 11.

[12] Michael Valdez Moses, *The Novel and the Globalization Of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 108.

The archetypes of the white man's narrative construction of Africa (those he blames Conrad for in his essay on *Heart of Darkness*) are employed in order to create an antagonistic community in opposition to European 'modernity'. This is, for example, Achebe's portrait of the darkness and the forest, so often identified with Africa not only in Conrad's works, but in Western colonial fiction as a whole:

> The night was very quiet. It was always quiet except on moonlight nights. Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string. And so on this particular night as the crier's voice was gradually swallowed up in the distance, silence returned to the world, a vibrant silence made more intense by the universal trill of a million million forest insects. (22)

Achebe's characters are, in James Clifford's terminology, nostalgic "pure products" which the writer (almost mirroring the Western anthropologists) locates in a 'different time' where a quite unconvincing antithesis to the inevitable hybridity in modern culture is to be found. I would argue that the result is a writing within the boundaries of Western culture, within the same set of binary oppositions which offer no chance of a dialogue with the culture of the conqueror.

The text juxtaposes orality and writing as a way of showing a part of Africa which the Western world chooses not to give voice to. The "discursive cannibalism" generated by the "Igbo ethnotext",[13] however, paradoxically mirrors Conrad's own portrait of the mutually devouring languages of colonialism. In *Heart of Darkness,* the avidity of Kurtz's verbal possession over the alien world around him is counteracted by the emerging language of the Africans who start using and distorting the words

[13] Chantal Zabus, "The Logos Eaters: the Igbo Ethno-Text", in Petersen and Rutherford, eds., *Celebration*, 19-30.

which limit and define their own identity. Both the voices of the cannibals on the *steamer* and that of the young African announcing Kurtz's death show that European words have become a common property and that they can be transformed into the dialogic outcome of a new identity.

As I pointed out previously, there is an analogy between Achebe's search for an African 'originality' and his main character's refusal of the father figure, which leads to his attempt at assessing his (male) engendering power as the founder of the antagonistic community. Almost in opposition to the Western vision of Africa (also shared by Freud) as a 'female' continent, ready to surrender and yet dangerously obscure, Achebe celebrates manliness as the (sexist) antidote to African annihilation.[14] However, despite Okonkwo's self-invention and his refusal of the Lacanian 'language of the father' (which also symbolizes the inheritance of history), Achebe cannot avoid writing in that very language which, though parodied, establishes a dependence on the literary tropes of the Western canon. The self-legitimating myth of the Igbo community - and of African national literature - becomes the ultimate dispossession of a culture that cannot modify itself, blocked as it is (even in Achebe's novel) in the world of an antagonistic (but ineffective) memory.

Words are the force winning the 'wrestling game' that, from the very beginning, metaphorically takes place in the text. Signs are what enables Achebe himself to talk about Africa: Okonkwo can draw his self portrait and give an outline of his body only by using a lump of white chalk, and, though a winner in the game which symbolically opens the narration, he is sometimes unable to speak. This manichean construction of identity - which Soyinka criticizes as a consequence of Achebe's inability to escape the stereotype of *negritude* - is yet another mark of the writer's surrender to the historical pattern he is trying to revise.[15] Fanon's "white mask" is still the only way of showing one's identity and it is often recalled

[14] See Brook Thomas, "Preserving And Keeping Order By Killing Time in *Heart of Darkness*", in Ross C. Murphin, ed., *Heart of Darkness, a Case Study in Contemporary Criticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 243.

[15] See Gikandi, *Reading*, 26.

throughout the text: spirits and dancers during feasts and funerals are hidden by or covered with a white disguise.

Achebe's white sign has a double origin. It belongs to Igbo traditional culture, but it can also be compared to Conrad's "white thread" unravelling throughout Marlow's journey to symbolize the path of white men's narrative possession of Africa: a plot spinning the texture of history. The "white thread from beyond the sea" is recalled but also reversed in the endeavour to free it from its occidental overtones in Okonkwo's father's childhood memory of his song of welcome to the kite, asking it "if it had brought home any lengths of cloth".[16]

It is impossible to write without wearing the white mask of words full of echoes shaping the perception and representation of Africa, yet Achebe tries to reverse Conrad's perspective by looking at the setting from the point of view of what, though undoubtedly dialogically conceived, cannot help being the memory and the result of the colonial status of any history-writing. The darkness portrayed at the beginning of Chapter Two becomes the force erasing the sounds and bounds of language (still negatively perceived by Conrad as the unspeakable part of his story, that which cannot become words) in order to give access to the world of a counter-memory that has never been narrated. The world of white men thus becomes that unnatural and illogical part of reality which had traditionally been identified with Africa itself:

> 'That cannot be,' said Machi. 'You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children.'
> 'It is like the story of white men, who, they say, are white like a piece of chalk,' said Obierika. He held up a piece of chalk, which every man kept in his *obi*, and with which the guests drew lines on the floor before they ate cola nuts. 'And these white men, they say, have no toes.'
> 'And have you never seen them?' asked Machi.
> 'Have you?' asked Obierika.

[16] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 45.

> 'One of them passes here frequently,' said Machi. 'His name is Amadi.'
> Those who knew Amadi laughed. He was a leper, and the polite name for leper was 'the white skin'. (68)

Europeans are identified with the two forms of whiteness known by the inhabitants of the village: chalk (i.e. writing) and sickness (deviation). The metaphor of the leper as a symbol of white men's penetration of the African mind returns in *Arrow of God*, where Achebe mentions an Igbo proverb ('As soon as we shake hands with a leper he will want an embrace') whose original version associates again the "white disease" with the act of writing: the Igbo word "omà" (embrace) also means "print".[17] The traditional image of the sign as a black mark on a white field (a metaphor of the inscription of identity on the blank space preceding writing) is thus reversed in the awareness of the European construction of Africa as a 'blank darkness',[18] the Hegelian land without history, a map still to be drawn by white discourse, a kind of writing which creates, but also erases identities. Achebe's argument is also supported by the fact that, like Conrad, he chooses one of the symbols of his culture as a signifier of its end.

The native silence (which in Conrad's story acquires a Bakhtinian dialogic function and gives shape to a possibly dissenting voice within the Western historical discourse) becomes in Achebe's novel the antagonistic code in which the white sign is archaically conceived of as an agent of corruption and disfigurement. The white sign is the instrument of a constant erasure of those identities that might oppose, in the search for "pure products" performed by the African writer, the degeneration the white symbolizes. Even in this particular feature of his work, however, Achebe seems not to realize that his words do not reverse, but rather reinforce, the Conradian trope of the white degenerate embodied by Kurtz, and that they, once again, set his work within the boundaries of the West.

[17] Zabus, "Logos-Eaters", 21.

[18] See Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness. Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Revealingly, it is not the father but the son who is killed in the Oedipal struggle taking place in the text: Okonkwo has to kill the child Ikemefuna, and eventually kills Ezeudo's son. For this reason he is exiled from his village and has to stay away from it for seven years. During this absence many changes occur in the archaic community Okonkwo has left. The Western historical action of erasing differences begins with the story of Abame, the village "wiped out" (15) after the murder of a white messenger, who dies pronouncing a Kurtz-like unspeakable message.

The lack of knowledge of the white man's narration of Africa shown by the natives (who are eventually slaughtered) is gradually replaced by the increasing juxtaposition of the two 'words'. The mother kite parable - "never kill a man who says nothing" (117) - paradoxically reverses the Western and Conradian stereotype of dumb Africa, and marks the beginning of a dialogue with a history that is now acknowledged as existing. The Conradian dialogism and the first signals of a (still imperialistic) will to grant a voice to the silent listeners of the white man's tale of abuse, here becomes the natives' discovery of their unconscious role in this tale:

> What is good among one people is an abomination with others. We have albinos among us. Do you not think that they came to our clan by mistake, that they have strayed from their ways to a land where everybody is like them? (Ibid.)

This reversed version of the black diaspora, in which white men end up in a land where they are perceived as different, re-reads the history of slavery as well as the fin-de-siècle fears of the possible inversion of the master and servant role. Similarly, Achebe also plays with the science-fictional side of Conrad's novella (which, like many contemporary texts, makes use of this kind of imagery to symbolize the above-mentioned 'fears of invasion'), thus appropriating the Western stereotype of the alien race conquering the community: "Perhaps green men will come to our clan and shoot us" (118).

The conquest of the territory is symbolically paralleled by the choice of a different father, the white man's God, by

Okonkwo's son Nwoye, who becomes an agent of the Oedipal machinery moving the plot. However, as in *Heart of Darkness*, the conquest is also represented as a narrativization of the land. In Conrad's novella, the unravelling of the 'white plot' was preceded and prepared by Marlow's initial musings on maps, showing the metamorphosis of the territory into written symbols of possession. Similarly, the conquest of Okonkwo's community is made possible by the contribution of an interpreter, who starts transforming African reality into a Western narrative previously unknown to the community. The interpreter creates through words the common territory of a language that the Africans start inhabiting, leaving their oral tale to begin writing and 'being written' in the white man's "fairy tale" (as history is called by the natives) (128).

The end of Okonkwo's exile and his return to the clan marks the discovery of the inevitable loss of the very idea of community which Achebe had tried to build in order to recover an identity independent of the role imposed by the white man:

> The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the thing that held us together and we have fallen apart. (145)

As a result, the voices of the people Okonkwo heroically tries to embody in his quixotic struggle against the 'word' that is progressively erasing African difference, are transformed into silence: "they have not found the words with which to tell of their suffering" (145). Okonkwo, who is eventually imprisoned for his revolt, dressed up as a warrior (i.e. interpreting the role of the native as if he were to pose for an exotic postcard), finally realizes his loneliness when he duplicates the initial refusal of the white man's conquering word by killing another messenger. After his exile, Okonkwo has to face his own anachronism, which underlines the inadequacy of Achebe's own writing; "the traditional aesthetic", Gikandi argues, "is precisely what colonial

modernism and the postcolonial state have denigrated and renounced to create the contemporary condition".[19]

The initial authenticity, which Achebe had nostalgically tried to recover in the portrait of the African community, is now replaced by a farcical acting in which the white man's vision of the native ironically substitutes the African perspective: Achebe's words mimic the text of history, with a District Commissioner patronizingly ready to play the part of the ethnographer after Okonkwo's suicide: "The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs" (167). This figure is a clear hint at the fictional Kurtz or the historical Roger Casement, who was Conrad's model for the character of the brilliant colonist/reformer gone native in the wilderness. A new voice (the author's own "ethnographic self-fashioning") replaces the chorus of "pure products" supplied by the Igbo community; the initial "we" becomes a "they" which serves to present the scene from a wider and more distanced perspective:

> The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book he had planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Everyday brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (168)

The book thus closes with the announcement of another text, marking the Western assertion and the African dispossession of

[19] Gikandi, *Reading*, 9.

the territory made possible by the mediation of the interpreter through the imperialistic action of translation, and subsequent homogenization. Okonkwo is no longer an individual, but a sign in the conqueror's code, a possible paragraph in his book. Achebe does not choose to represent what Bhabha calls the 'sign taken for wonder' of the European book miraculously *found* in the wilderness in so many adventure novels (including Conrad's). He does not take for granted this token of the Western supremacy over peoples 'without history', the symbol of authority which was the site of Europe's narrative creation of the colonial subject. Rather, he is much more interested in analyzing the genesis of such a book. While Conrad's *Inquiry* was a shabby and forgotten manuscript still held together by the white thread metaphorically representing the Western historical narrative throughout the text, Achebe's anthropological treatise silences the voice the writer has been trying to embody in his novel. This is the reason why the writer chooses it as a symbolical ending for his orality-based alternative version of the past. Achebe, then, still needs to create and draw an image of otherness (the white outline often occurring in the text) which Conrad represents as fading in the increasing polyphony of his text. To close *his* work, Achebe needs the very book that Conrad progressively deconstructs in the fragmentation of any shared idea of a commonly recognized version of the past, and that Naipaul (though somewhat nostalgically) erases in the pages of his novel. As Griffiths points out:

> both the commissioner and Achebe seek to reduce the living, oral world of Umuofia to a series of words on the written pages; and they are English words, for Achebe as well as for the commissioner.... Achebe is aware that in gaining the voice to speak he reveals his involvement with the destruction which he records.[20]

*

In his essay on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, V. S. Naipaul comments on the paradoxically comforting relationship between

[20] Ibid., 49.

colonial subjects and the very system of representation defining them:

> To be a colonial was to know a kind of security; it was to inhabit a fixed world. And I suppose that in my fantasy I had seen myself coming to England as to some purely literary region, where untrammeled by the accidents of history or background, I could make a romantic career for myself as a writer. But in the new world I felt the ground move below me. The new politics, the curious reliance of men on institutions they were yet working to undermine, the simplicity of actions, the corruption of causes, half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made. They were the things that began to preoccupy me. They were not things from which I could detach myself. And I found that Conrad - sixty years before, in the time of a great peace - had been everywhere before me.[21]

Conrad's book, Naipaul seems to imply, is both a part of the old colonial world and a representation of its end: the chaos ruling a world without fixed places is, however, not only the desolation of a history without an ordered plot (still looked for by Achebe), but even, as Bhabha and Naipaul, together with Rushdie, suggest, a welcome to a diasporic modernity. Though fearsome and inevitable, the latter frees the writer from his anachronistic role as creator of a counter-community which, as in Achebe's case, is still a mirror image of the identity pattern it both reverses and acknowledges.

The beginning of Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* portrays the lack of the world Achebe had tried, almost ethnographically, to build in the pages of his novel. The African territory is not a culturally homogeneous entity, but the outcome of different dominations and invasions. The protagonist Salim drives into it as if he were himself a stranger:

> But I drove on. Each day's drive was like an achievement: each day's achievement made it harder for me to turn back, and I

[21] V. S. Naipaul, *The Return of Eva Peron* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1980), 216.

> couldn't help thinking that that was how it was in the old days with the slaves. They had made the same journey, but of course on foot and in the opposite direction, from the centre of the continent to the east coast. The further away they got from the centre and their tribal area, the less liable they were to cut loose from the caravans and run back home, the more nervous they became of the strange Africans they saw about them, until at the end, on the coast, they were no trouble at all, and were positively anxious to step into the boats and be taken to safe homes across the sea. Like the slave far from home, I became anxious only to arrive.[22]

Thinking of the black diaspora, Salim realizes that his path towards a new life in Nazruddin's shop is an illusionary movement, that he is repeating (albeit in the opposite direction) the old slave route: that any 'arrival' will be an impossible enigma. Naipaul uses this analogy to emphasize the continuity of the journey, the dialogue between old and present situations. While, then, both Conrad and Achebe try to isolate their image of Africa in a distant and untouchable past (though for different reasons), Naipaul portrays it as the image of a future which has already been eroded by time in the continuous interchange of new and old dominations, of histories replaced by new versions of the events.

Salim cannot consider himself as an African the way Okonkwo could. He inhabits a world which is not the outcome of modern migrations, but the result of an unceasing mixture of peoples sometimes unrecorded by the Western narrative construction of Africa as a unified land of otherness:

> Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries. But we came from the east coast, and that made the difference. The coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back.... We never asked why; we never recorded. We felt in our bones

[22] V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 10. From now on, references to this edition of the novel will be given in brackets.

> that we were a very old people; but we seemed to have no means of gauging the passing of time. Neither my father nor grandfather could put dates to their stories. Not because they had forgotten or were confused; the past was simply the past. (17)

As Naipaul implies in his essay on Conrad, the only way of identifying one's place in the colonial world is by referring to white men's books ("if I say these things it is because I got them from European books. They formed part of our knowledge or pride. Without Europeans, I feel, all our past would have been washed away", 18). Africa is therefore, in Naipaul's vision, not a land of the past, but a "land of impermanent building" (18), living in a constant present. Achebe's community, on the contrary, blocked in a perpetual anteriority, cannot exist in a world that is no longer the one which is nostalgically found in European books, but is the shifting post-colonial reality, where territories and boundaries can no longer be fixed. The burden of the past, which establishes such limits to the representation of the colonial subject, appears as a "white lie" (22), a celebration of identity: "The Europeans wanted gold and slaves, like everybody else; but at the same time they wanted statues to put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves" (23). It is a lie that is shown as frail and temporary.

Achebe's search for a pure, African version of the community, prior to the coming and writing of the white man, becomes the abandonment of the very idea of a community to come, against the background of globalized modernity. "To stay with my community, to pretend that I had simply to travel along with them, was to be taken with them to destruction" (25). Naipaul needs first to assess the erasing action of European history writing, before erasing the permanence and stability of that narrative in the pages of his novel. Therefore, the emblem of the book first shows the awareness of a paradoxical dependence on Western memory, a memory of the Other as such, a memory that the Other has up to the end of the colonial era been unconscious of: "One tide of history – forgotten by us, living only in books by Europeans that I was yet to read – had brought us here.... Now another tide of history was coming to wash us

away" (25-26). The fact that Naipaul's quote recalls Marlow's musings on the Conradian trope of history as tides, apparently emphasizing the ephemeral nature of history, also stresses his paradoxical need for this shared memory belonging to someone else.[23]

A Bend in the River is set among the ruins of the colonial world/word.[24] The statues built by the conquerors to symbolize the value of their history are now a monument to the self-erasing power of history itself:

> And there were the ruins. *Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi*. These Latin words, whose meaning I didn't know, were all that remained of a monument outside the dock gates. I knew the words by heart; I gave them my own pronunciation, and they ran like a nonsense jingle in my head. The words were carved at the top of a block of granite, and the rest was now bare.... I was told that the monument had been put up only a few years before, almost at the end of the colonial time, to mark sixty years of steamer service from the capital.
>
> So almost as soon as it had been put up - no doubt with speeches about a further sixty years of service - the steamer monument had been knocked down. With all the other colonial statues and monuments. (33)

The monument (a symbol of Europe's assessment of its own history) is thus defaced by the "African rage, the wish to destroy, regardless of the consequences" (32): the names of places and streets are now substituted by the new topography of the constantly changing African map. Naipaul's regret at the loss of colonial stability, and his nostalgia for the community of the European past shows the acknowledged dynamics of a 'colonial desire' for the comforting presence of an Other whose separate identity can no longer be rescued. The "meaningless name[s]"

[23] Lynda Prescott, "Past and Present Darkness: Sources for V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*", *Modern Fiction Studies* XXX:3 (Autumn 1984), 551.

[24] Ashish Roy, "Race and the Figures of History in Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*", *Critique* XXXII:4 (Summer 1991), 235-257.

(32) of history, the ruins still echoing Marlow's discovery of the carcass of a railway in the middle of the wilderness, mark Salim's journey towards a silence that is different from both Conrad's and Achebe's. Conrad's unspeakable zone signals a voice still to be heard; Achebe's final silence marks the end of African cultural and political independence. Naipaul's silence comes after both historical moments and is the repression of a past on which even African identity is doomed to depend, the paradoxical site of an archaic future, "a place where the future had come and gone" (33).

Africa's uprooted chronology is contrasted by the European monumental counter-memory kept alive by Father Huismans' collection of native relics, in which Africa is transformed into an object by the Western gaze. As a keeper of the European stereotyped memory of Africa, Huismans is killed by the African rage: his body is mutilated, defaced just like all the memories of the colonial past. The dismemberment of Huismans' body symbolizes Africa's self-destroying attempt at deterritorializing a language which imprisons identity in someone else's memory.[25] The ritual killing of the father (echoing Okonkwo's denial of Unoka and Achebe's refusal of Conrad as a literary father) aims at disseminating a past still belonging to the West. The collection is eventually left to waste till it is newly discovered by an Afro-American who transforms it into "the nucleus of the gallery of primitive art he often spoke of starting. The richest products of the forest" (89). Africa is thus transformed into a commodity with the aim of pleasing the new imperialistic gaze of the U.S., paradoxically represented by a descendant of the initial diaspora.

America is the new model for the independent community: Big Man's domain relies on a capital-based economy, on the alienating production system whose magic is symbolized by the mystery of money ("It was like dealing in words alone, ideas on paper: it was like a form of play...", 95). In the new domain, whose main resource is the discovery of uranium, Metty (whose

[25] D. Emily Hicks, "Deterritorialization and Border Writing", in R. Merrill, ed., *Ethics/Aesthetics: Post-Modern Positions* (Washington: Maisonneuve Press, 1988), 47-57.

name is an allegory of the hybridity of Africa) feels he has lost his "slave security" (111), and Big Man himself, in the progressive defacement of the cultural landscape around him, needs the help of history in order to create a new community. Indar's speeches and the historian Raymond's books aim at creating an "Africa of words" (130) in order to replace the blank space of the "past, the smashed life of [the] community" (131). In the new nomadic world of uncertainties, in the diasporic code Salim inhabits, where the tropes of history are constantly staged and revised, no unique version of the past is, however, possible, and the incessant metamorphosis of the present modifies the perception of the events, as Raymond himself knows.

This Foucauldian "presentism"[26] makes it impossible for Raymond to perform the imperialistic task of the history-writer, once again echoing Marlow's skepticism at any narrativization of the events:

> One of the men standing around said, 'New discoveries are constantly making us revise our ideas about the past. The truth is always there. It can be got at. The work is to be done, that's all.' Raymond said, 'Time, the discoverer of truth. I know. It's the classical idea, the religious idea. But there are times when you begin to wonder. Do we really know the history of the Roman Empire? Do we really know what went on during the conquest of Gaul? I was sitting in my room and thinking with sadness about all the things that have gone unrecorded. Do you think we will ever get to know the truth about what has happened in Africa in the last hundred or even fifty years? All the wars, all the rebellions, all the leaders, all the defeats? (137)

The power/knowledge relationship between Raymond and the President (who chooses a white man to construct Africa's history) is an ineffective tool of the new African nationalism: Raymond cannot write a history whose "value" has never been assessed (143). The order of memory, which Achebe could still

[26] The term is used by Mitchell Dean in his *Critical and Effective Histories. Foucault's Method and Historical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1994).

try to represent, cannot be looked for: like Conrad, Naipaul stages the fragmentation and dissemination of any shared version of the events.

Collective memory is evoked throughout *Heart of Darkness* by the scattered images of the imperial past: Elizabethan pirates, the pilgrims of the Eldorado expedition, the Roman conquerors, all serve to show how history repeats itself in the utopian time Marlow travels through. Similarly, Naipaul chooses the theatre as a metaphor of the continuous enactment of a constantly imitated plot, which again recalls Conrad's "troupe of mimes" staging scenes from the imperial past. Naipaul's staging, however, takes place in England, where the 'mimic man' Indar, after contemplating the staging of the Other as a colonial ornament, turns to the theatre as a possible escape from the risk of unconscious imitation. Achebe's authenticity is thus replaced by the incessant repetition and displacement of shifting disguises.

The very separation between Africa and Europe starts fading in the discovery of a hybridity which makes history impossible. As Bhabha points out in his essay on *Heart of Darkness*, at the end of Conrad's book Europe 'contains' Africa just as much as Africa 'contains' Europe.[27] The antagonistic territorialization still present in the Conradian notion of mutual invasion is here replaced by the awareness of the impossibile return to the imaginary homeland of that shared past Achebe still tried to rescue. No anachronistic dream of a homeland is possible for Naipaul's characters who sarcastically contemplate themselves in the European "foreign fantasy" (152) but are equally detached from the nationalistic icons of the New Domain.

Salim travels to Europe and comes back just to feel once again that he does not belong to any place. His return (which leads to his imprisonment and to Ferdinand's final rescue of his failed 'father') is a new departure from the self-slaughtering dictatorship Big Man's Domain has transformed itself into. Naipaul's final recognition of Salim's inevitable homelessness strikingly contrasts with Achebe's celebration of Africa as the site of a

[27] Bhabha, "How newness", 213.

retrievable cultural identity which is independent of the artist's role in shaping the imagined community of the nation: "It is tempting to say that this literature came to put people back into Africa. But that would be wrong because people never left Africa except in the guilty imagination of Africa's antagonists".[28]

Both Africa and Europe are now lost memories of identity, territories and words which can no longer be separated, thus giving up Achebe's fantasy of difference and finally contemplating the 'discovered' and 'erased' book of the self in the mocking mirror of mimicry. As Naipaul writes at the end of the equally Conradian *An Area of Darkness* (1964), the nostalgic abandonment of the unretrievable past, which belongs to the Western Other, equals a final surrender to the multiplicity of meanings which makes it impossible to unravel Conrad's obstructive (but paradoxically needed) thread of history:

> facing my own emptiness, my feeling of being physically lost, I had a dream.
> An oblong of stiff new cloth lay before me, and I had the knowledge that if only out of this I could cut a smaller oblong of specific measurements, a specific section of this cloth, then the cloth would begin to unravel of itself, and the unravelling would spread from the cloth to the table to the house to all matter, until the *whole trick* was undone. Those were the words that were with me as I flattened the cloth and studied it for the clues which I knew existed, which I desired above everything else to find, but which I knew I never would.[29]

[28] Achebe, "African Literature", 8-9.
[29] V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: A. Deutsch, 1964), 280.

Sara Antonelli

An Omnivorous Third Point of View: Richard Wright on the Gold Coast

> *I don't expect to find anything there [the Gold Coast], that's completely new.*
>
> (Richard Wright, *Black Power*)

> *When he [Richard Wright] faces an African, he is facing the unspeakably dark, guilty, erotic past which the Protestant fathers made him bury - for their peace of mind, and for their power - but which lives in his personality and haunts the universe yet.*
>
> (James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard")

> *In trying to effect his departure from America and its way of life, Dick had become more of an American than he had ever been.*
>
> (Chester Himes, *My Life of Absurdity: the Autobiography of Chester Himes*)

In 1954, Richard Wright (1908-1960) published *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in the Land of Pathos*, a long essay he derived from the notes jotted down while traveling in Africa the year before.[1] Conceived of as an account of the political events that were undermining British colonialism in the Gold Coast

[1] Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reaction in the Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1954). When quoting from *Black Power*, the page always appears between parenthesis at the end of each quote.

(now Ghana), *Black Power* has never enjoyed wide fame.[2] Less than ten years ago the book also fell under the resentful attack of Ghanaian cultural historian Kwame Anthony Appiah who condemned Wright's vision of Africa because of its deep longing for the land of the fathers matched by a distaste for African indigenous culture.[3] Nevertheless, a reading such as Appiah's, which vehemently opposes Wright's judgments from the native's point of view and denounces the writer's disturbing appeal for the militarization of the Gold Coast, fails to fully evaluate the anxiety that permeates Wright's condescending vision.

Africa and African heritage have always played a pivotal role in the development of the African-American literary imagination; therefore, when considering Richard Wright's career, his growing distancing from the land of his ancestors may appear problematic and, to many, hard to accept.[4] Wright's overt lack of enthusiasm on this matter has also led his readers to consider *Black Power* a minor work coming from a former great writer who, having abandoned the emotional source of his favorite subject matters, i. e., American racism and black life in urban ghettos, had lost both his literary mastery and political insight. It is worth noticing, in fact, that Wright's fame rests almost exclusively on a phase of his literary career which could be neatly circumscribed by racial and national boundaries

[2] Apart from French scholar Michel Fabre, only a comparatively small number of critics have devoted their attention to *Black Power*. Among them, Jack B. Moore published a famous article which records the interviews he made to a number of people the writer had met. See Jack Moore, "*Black Power* Revisited", *Mississippi Quarterly* 48 (Spring 1988). John M. Really also deserves to be mentioned for an essay on Wright's self-fashioning in Africa: John Really, "The Self-Creation of the Intellectual: *American Hunger* and *Black Power*", in Yoshinobu Hakutani, ed., *Critical Essays on Richard Wright* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982). In more recent times, Paul Gilroy's compelling reading of *Black Power* has made the book available to wider audiences. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[3] See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "A Long Way from Home: Wright in the Gold Coast", in Harold Bloom, ed., *Richard Wright* (New York: Chelsea, 1987), 173.

[4] For a detailed analysis of the myth of Africa in African-American literature see Marion Berghahn, *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

because of its focus on the USA and American racism. Unfortunately, this period, that runs from *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) to *Black Boy* (1944), has obscured a more complex body of literature, which includes *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, (1956), and *White Man Listen!* (1957), written while the author, already living as an expatriate in Paris, was struggling to develop a trans-national political perspective which could offer him a role in the debate against colonialism in Africa and Asia.

While researching on a possible origin that could account for Richard Wright's reaction to Africa, this essay highlights those aspects which would permit a reading of *Black Power* against the background of Richard Wright's entire intellectual development. By questioning the above mentioned dichotomy in Wright's production, the following pages aim at demonstrating that *Black Power* does not stand in contrast to the writer's previous focus on the USA and American racism. On the contrary, they prove that Wright goes to Africa to strengthen a long-standing political vision centered on the assumption that African-Americans are bound to achieve a leading role in the world's class struggle. In particular, he maintains that, as they have already abandoned the countryside and the original folk culture to enter the modern world, African-Americans can provide the people of Africa with a serviceable example of the march towards enlightenment. It should be kept in mind, however, that because of his long-standing refusal of any racial kinship between Africa and black America, Wright needs to theorize that the only possible similarity existing between the two stems exclusively from the wrongs caused by political and psychological oppression. Considering the black peoples of America and Africa, he concludes that the effects of Western racism equal those produced by colonialism. But this similarity also allows him to establish a hierarchy; because it is precisely by comparing racism with colonialism that African-Americans' marginality achieves a powerful status both in the East and in the West. In fact, as Wright openly states, the Prime Minister of the Gold Coast, Kwame Nkrumah, has to force his people into modernity, in order to melt his country into the liberating vision foreshadowed by the quintessential American poet Walt Whitman:

> With words as our weapons, there are some few of us who will stand on the ramparts to fend off the evildoers, the slanderers, the greedy, the self-righteous! You are not alone...
> Your fight has been fought before. I am an American and my country too was once a colony of England... It was old Walt Whitman who felt what you and your brother fighters are now feeling. (351)

*

In 1958, while responding to the French journalist Jean José Marchand, Richard Wright explains that:

> For me, a Westernized black American, the term "black culture" represents the external aspects of the emotional and psychological expression of American, English, Dutch, and French people of African ancestry reacting against their relation with the dominant white society that has governed and conditioned their lives for the last four hundred years or more. *Although such an expression of culture may be called "black", it is in fact the kind of expression any minority group makes when it is placed in a situation where racial domination exists.* In short, blacks express themselves as blacks because they are treated that way.[5] (my emphasis)

A leftist intellectual who believes in the universality of the rational development of world history endorsed by Marxism, Wright maintains that class does transcend race. In his opinion, "black culture" is more a product of exploitation and domination than the expression of a given race.[6] Such a position might appear

[5] Richard Wright, "Le Noir est une création du Blanc", *Preuves* 87 (May 1958), 40-41. The interview was translated into English by Kenneth Kinnamon.

[6] For a recent treatment of the prominence assigned to class in the debate on race and American history see the seminal essay by historian Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History", in J. Morgan Kousser, James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). On the limits of the universalizing historical narrative of Marxism see Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990).

problematic to those readers who consider Wright a representative "black writer," but it does not actually stand at all in contrast with the writer's previous treatment of American urban ghettos.

Let me take a brief passage from his previous *Black Boy*, in which Wright comments upon the political impact of the thesis envisioned by Jamaican Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey. On that occasion he openly mocks the Garveyites' desire to return to the pristine land of the ancestors and considers their solutions too naive and over-emotional:

> The Garveyites had embraced a totally racialistic outlook which endowed them with a dignity that I had never seen before in Negroes.... I gave no credence to the ideology of Garveyism; it was, rather, the emotional dynamics of its adherents that evoked my admiration.... I pitied them too much to tell them that they could never achieve their goal [to go back to Africa], that they were people of the West and would forever be so until they either merged with the West or perished.[7]

Here and elsewhere, Wright states that the difference between the African world and the American world is irreducible and encourages blacks in America to abandon any utopian escape which could impede them to merge with the West, and with the economical forces that shape it. He believes that the only way to achieve freedom is by going from a traditional society marked by oppression and ignorance to a liberating Western modernity. In *12 Million Black Voices*, a book of texts and photographs from the Farm Security Administration files which aims at celebrating African-Americans who are entering modernity, he states that: "We want what others have, the right to share in the upward march of the American life, the only life we remember or have ever known".[8]

At this point it is worth remembering that Wright's uneasiness with the African heritage mirrors his uneasiness with African-American folk heritage. To him, they both represent an illusory escape into the realm of irrational forgetfulness, and

[7] Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 336-337.

[8] Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1992), 146.

possess an obsolete quality that a conscious black writer has to translate into a literature suitable for the new urban black masses.[9] In reality, he also believes that this literature is suitable for all urban masses everywhere, because by transcending the suffering caused by American racism African-Americans have developed a sensibility which is universal and capable of giving voice to the anxieties of the modern world at large. As he theorizes in his 1940 "How 'Bigger' Was Born", the horrors of American modernity has always inhabited the psyche of African-Americans.[10] In a passage in which he brilliantly criticizes the American literary canon, for example, he fiercely asserts the absolute relevance of the black experience he has described in his best selling *Native Son* by transforming his male protagonist into a representative character of modern times:

> I feel that I'm lucky to write novels today, when the world is caught in the pangs of war and change. Early American writers, Henry James and Nathaniel Hawthorne, complained bitterly about the bleakness and the flatness of the American scene. But I think that if they were alive, they'd feel at home in modern America.... We do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy brooding of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent terror; horror would invent him.[11]

The aim of this passage is threefold: if on the one hand Wright signals the relevance of the black vision, on the other he denounces its literary invisibility in the canon, while simultaneously declaring that only his own literature, which

[9] Wright freely displayed his suspicion of African-American folk heritage throughout his entire life. His stern attacks on black religion and black cultural tradition made him an uneasy member of the African-American community.

[10] Wright wrote this essay to explain the genesis of Bigger Thomas, the black male protagonist of his *Native Son*. The essay stands as a revolutionary manifesto in American letters. See Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born", in *Native Son & How 'Bigger' Was Born* (New York: Harper, 1993), 504-40.

[11] Ibid., 540.

reflects a painful spiritual hunger coming from discrimination, can fill such a void. It is significant, however, that Wright sees modernity as a scary worldwide landscape in which even the victims of racial oppression are not immune to Fascism's destructive appeal, a danger whose breadth he was probably the first to fully realize.[12] And it is precisely for this reason that Wright transforms the black experience into a symbol of modernity. He explains that the entire history of Blacks in America, consisting of slavery, Jim Crow's laws, and the current journey from the South to Northern urban ghettos, reflects a problem that the proletariat in European countries had experienced twenty years before, and that colonized people are bound to experience in the next twenty years. Or, as he puts it, "a problem of which the Negro problem is a small but a highly symbolically important part".[13] He believes, in fact, that the fate of the West depends precisely upon the fate of the disinherited and the dispossessed. Dealing with America, for example, he tellingly writes: "What we [Blacks] want what we represent what we endure is what America is. If we black folk perish, America will perish".[14] Nevertheless, since American racial oppression has for so long time prevented Blacks from acknowledging their full existence in the American world, he has to conclude that, so far, they have never fully lived. Being totally alienated from their country, and having nothing in common with their African ancestors, they angrily wander in a no-man's-land which prevents them from fully inhabiting the world. Speaking about the male protagonist of his *Native Son*, and, significantly, also about himself, he writes that:

> He [his character, Bigger Thomas] was American because he was a native son; but he was also a Negro Nationalist in a vague sense

[12] Ibid., 520-522. This passage echoes Wright's conclusions in his "The Miracle of Nationalism in the African Gold Coast", in which he warns the West against the possible emergence of a racist Africa out of the post-colonial struggle. See *White Man Listen! Lectures in Europe, 1950-1956* (New York: Harper, 1995), 142.

[13] See Wright's introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harper, 1962), xxi. The book relates the research carried on in Chicago's black belt by sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton.

[14] Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 146.

> because he was not allowed to live as an American. *Such was his way of life and mine; neither Bigger nor I resided fully in either camp.*[15] (my emphasis)

Of course, it is noteworthy that Wright considers his own despair a telling example of the consequences of American racism. But in his case, transcending both political and psychological marginality means empowering his literary skill. In fact, as he writes in his autobiographical *Black Boy*, Wright hopes to redeem himself by fulfilling his yearning for self-expression:

> I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal. I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.[16]

When more than ten years later he returns to these matters, his hunger for words and visibility has achieved full maturity. In *White Man Listen!*, a collection of essays in which he carefully builds up his comparison between colonialism and American racism, he comments on the origin of his double vision and consciously transforms it into an authoritative Western perspective to examine the world:

> *First of all, my position is a split one. I'm black. I'm a man of the West. These hard facts are bound to condition, to some degree, my outlook.* I see and understand the West; but I also see and understand the non- or anti-Western point of view. How is this possible? This contradiction of being both Western and a man of color creates a psychological distance, so to speak, between me and my environment.... In spite of myself, my imagination is constantly leaping ahead and trying to reshape the world I see

[15] Wright, "How Bigger Was Born", 527.
[16] Wright, *Black Boy*, 327.

> toward a form in which all men could share my creative restlessness.... I see both worlds from another and third point of view.[17] (my emphasis)

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In 1945, in an unpublished page of his diary, Richard Wright, borrowing a few lines from T. S. Eliot, wrote:

> This being forever excited about some new way to look at the world - which is born of my rootlessness - will endure. I don't think I'll ever find it -
>
> Because I do not hope to turn
> Because I do not hope to turn again etc.
> But what I must do is find a new language for the way I see life.[18]

Stressing the need for a new language which could account for his need of a "new way to look at the world", a need coming from his social marginality, and not simply from his "race", Wright returns to the problem already fully envisioned in his "How 'Bigger' Was Born", and *Black Boy*. On those occasions he had stressed that the practice of language is a viable antidote to despair, suggesting that the construction of a "bridge of words" will eventually fill the void inside the self, and lead to the creation of a connection with the distant outside world.

At this point, however, Wright also asks himself the real meaning of the word "Negro". In *12 Million Black Voices*, in order to stress the absolute isolation of Blacks in the American world, he had stated that the word "Negro" describes a "psychological island" whose "rocky boundaries" are established by slavery and white racism.[19] It is only in the mid-

[17] Richard Wright, "Tradition and Industrialization", in *White Man Listen! Lectures in Europe, 1950-1956*, 48-49.
[18] Unpublished journal entry, January 2, 1945. Quoted by Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), 46.
[19] Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 30.

50s, though, that his approach will achieve full maturity. In a brilliant essay included in in *White Man Listen!*, he thoroughly analyzes both the emotional division and the historical isolation embedded in the word "Negro", providing a radical criticism of the term.[20]

In "The Literature of the Negro in the United States", Wright traces the origin of African-American Letters, and clarifies that what we term "Negro Literature" has nothing to do with race, but with history and society. After providing a number of examples from the black canon, Wright concludes that when a black writer is at one with her/his culture, the expression "Negro Literature" must disappear. He explains that, if on the one hand writers such as Phyllis Wheatley, Alexander Pushkin, and Alexander Dumas never experienced any split between the personal and the political, on the other, the writings of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Paul Lawrence Dunbar reveal the painful existence of a psychological distance between the writers' selves and their homeland which is not imposed by race, or by a sudden recognition of their color, but by the remnants of slavery. Referring to these writings Wright states that they "do not stem from racial feeling, but from a social situation".[21]

Having thus established that the peculiarity of the black experience has nothing to do with race, Wright can draw a powerful analogy between black American history and the struggles in colonial countries. He invites his reader to consider that "the Negro is the only group in our nation that consistently and passionately raises the question of freedom", and, for these reasons, he concludes that since America is one of the leading nations of the world "The American Negro is rapidly becoming the most representative voice of America and of oppressed people anywhere in the world today".[22] As we shall see, this statement leads to a consequence whose import is crucial to achieve a full understanding of Wright's approach to colonialism and to *Black Power*. For it is precisely because of the

[20] Wright, "The Literature of the Negro in the United States", in *White Man Listen! Lectures in Europe, 1950-1956.*

[21] Ibid., 81.

[22] Ibid.,105.

prominent role he has assigned to African-Americans in the struggle for freedom everywhere that Wright's Americanness emerges as a powerful standpoint.

*

Richard Wright often described himself as a rootless man, and lived in self-exile for more than ten years. Following invitations from Gertrude Stein and Claude Lévi-Strauss, he visited Paris in 1946 and settled there the following year to escape the unbearable racial repression that he and his family were experiencing in New York. In Paris he was welcomed by the existentialists and also became a leading figure among black expatriates. He helped to launch African-American authors in Europe, and organized a number of exhibitions which promoted African art. Even though Wright did not believe either in the mystique displayed by the followers of negritude or in cultural nationalism, he supported the influential magazine *Présence Africaine* since its first editorial meeting in 1946. His commitment to Africa, however problematic, lies exclusively in the recognition of a common destiny of repression which had relegated both Africans and African-Americans to the margin of the Western world. Along with Alioune Diop, Wright assumed that black experience in white America foreshadowed that of the millions of Africans and Asians who were currently fighting colonialism and struggling to enter the modern world. This, as suggested above, was not a discovery that Wright made in France.

A black man, coming from the South of the US, Wright believed that African-Americans' successful escape from the countryside to big northern cities stood as a paradigm of black men entering modernity not only in the West, but also in colonial countries. He openly maintains that the conscious abandonment of the South, and the struggle to survive in the ghettos could inspire people in other continents to free themselves from colonialism. On that basis, during his journey to the Gold Coast, Wright envisions the possibility of using his experience as a springboard to launch himself into a career in the colonial political arena.

Black Power opens with a brief note written by the Prime Minister of the Gold Coast, Kwame Nkrumah, who declares Wright fit to research into the social and historical aspects of the country. The letter does not state the reason why Wright is fit for the task, but when two pages later we find, among other quotes, including one from Whitman, and one that explains culture in terms of social environment, a few lines from the famous poem "Heritage" by the black American poet Countee Cullen, readers are briefly made to question racial heritage:

> One three centuries removed
> From the scenes his fathers loved,
> Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
> What is Africa to me? (ix)

Wright gives his answer a few pages later when, ignoring the appeal of racial kinship, he explains that he "openly use[s], to limited degree, Marxist analyses, [and] bourgeois sources", candidly assuming that he is observing Africa "in terms of concepts that one would use in observing life everywhere" (xiii -xv). It is also noteworthy that Wright plans to overcome his unfamiliarity with African history by reading a few books in a few days: "I'll go by ship, if I go", I said. "That would give me time enough to read up on the history of the country" (5).

Despite the political and social analogies he has carefully envisioned between black masses in Africa and America in the course of his entire career, it is immediately clear that Africa causes Wright to face a number of unexpected contradictions and disturbing similarities which undermine his vision, and force him into a defensive mood. And it is precisely because of the difficulties experienced in trying to accommodate a whole continent into a pre-defined frame that Wright's analysis is a failure. Believing that the Gold Coast is undergoing the same process of social and economical development that has shaped the new Negro at home, he expects to witness the way in which the Gold Coast underscores the transition from rural world to industrialization. Since in his opinion African countries are bound to follow the same path already trodden by African-

Americans, he explores an alien culture in terms of a familiar one and tries to accomodate within his frame of mind a continent that refuses to enter his own vision of modernity.

As soon as he arrives, the Gold Coast offers the writer a number of "fantastic scenes", all conjuring up a "kaleidoscope of sea, jungle, nudity, mud huts, and crowded market places" which soon reveals a tantalizing landscape that Wright observes from a safe distance, sitting on a bus, as a spectator in a movie theater (37). Scenes from villages and the countryside are also disturbing, and disappointing:

> Naked black children sat or squatted upon the bare earth playing. Black women, naked to the waist, were washing their multicolored cloths in shallow, muddy rivers. The soil was rich red like that of Georgia or Mississippi, and, for brief moments, I could almost delude myself in to thinking that I was back in the American South.... There was no order, no fences, no vast sweeps of plowed earth such as one sees in the American Midwest. (36-37)

The negative parallelism just established between Africa and America is extremely significant, and results in the effect of transforming the Gold Coast into a distorted and excessive duplicate of America. Wright himself warns his readers:

> Africa is a vast, dingy mirror and what modern man sees in that mirror he hates and wants to destroy. He thinks, when looking into that mirror, *that he is looking at black people who are inferior, but, really, he is looking at himself* and, unless he possesses a superb knowledge of himself, his first impulse to vindicate himself is to smash this horrible image of himself which his own soul projects out upon this Africa. (158, my emphasis)

Obviously, the most striking aspect of this statement lies in the fact that, in anticipating the problematic emergence of an active mimetic process on the part of the colonized subjects, *Black Power* apparently transforms Richard Wright into the forerunner of the current debate on the ambivalence embedded in post-colonial

subjectivity.[23] In fact, having recognized a disruptive duplicate of the self, he is forced to admit the sudden appearance of a different Africa which is active, irreducible, menacing, and deeply shattering.[24] Despite this recognition, however, Wright does not assign the colonized subject an active part in the decolonizing process. Refusing the challenge imposed by the sudden emergence of this new subject, he prefers to annihilate the menace embedded in the disruptive colonial encounter with the creation of a paradigmatic mysterious enigma. Since the Gold Coast refuses to melt into his pre-defined perspective, Wright progressively distances himself from what he sees, while simultaneously embracing a literary strategy which could serve him to protect his politics.

It is precisely for this reason, in fact, that the editing of *Black Power* required a great effort on his part. As recalled by Michel Fabre, when Wright submitted the first draft to his publishers, Harper suggested cutting the many repetitions in the text.[25] However, the writer explained that the repetitions were instrumental and stemmed from a conscious choice. To his agent he wrote that *Black Power* needed no cut because the obsessive repetition of the same episode over and over came from the same strategy that novelist Joseph Conrad had previously mastered: "Conrad wrote all his novels in that roundabout way. It involves going back to some extent over ground already covered, but each going back reveals more and more of the things described".[26]

The strategy of revealing through repetitions allows the writer to seemingly disappear from his narrative. Actually, he simply disseminates his authorial authority, obviously maintaining a

[23] See Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[24] After his treatment of the ambivalence of mimicry, "(almost the same, *but not quite*)", Bhabha also concludes: "It is as if the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on the proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace", *The Location of Culture*, 86.

[25] Quoted in Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 403.

[26] Ibid.

powerful grasp on his subject. In *Black Power* Wright employs this strategy frequently, especially when he wants to suggest his conclusions without committing himself. By continuously presenting the reader with the same episode, he may give the impression that he is willing to reveal as much as possible, and from a variety of points of view. On the contrary, he is covering up. When, for example, he faces African women dancing naked, a shameful experience in which he seems to recognize himself and his people in the southern United Sates, he cannot but confess: "What I now saw was an exact duplicate of what I'd seen for so many long years in the United States" (57). Time and again he returns to this same scene, but he aims at disrupting the similarity, not at investigating it. By representing the same scene, he in fact manages to utterly divest it of its meaning, while simultaneously signaling his uneasiness and amazement in front of black female bodies dancing wildly. On one particular occasion he cleverly dislocates his anxiety by asking: "Why are they dancing?" He gives no answer, of course, nor can anybody provide one for him, apart from: "A young girl has just died, you see?" - a prelude to the more imperious: "You'd better go now, sar" (126). Puzzled by the mysterious reactions of the Africans, whom Wright also reports as talking to one another in an incomprehensible language, he bluntly concludes: "I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me" (127). Obviously, the aim of this strategy is twofold: if on the one hand he demonstrates that blackness fails to provide him with a racial basis to develop understanding, on the other he also safely distances himself from any shameful similarity.

As Bhabha has illustrated in dealing with English colonial texts, the "unhomely" mysteriousness of colonial encounters demonstrates the fallacy of the framework within which cultural otherness tends to be articulated.[27] In the case of Richard

[27] Bhabha, "Articulating the Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense", in *The Location of Culture*. Starting from the consideration that "There is a conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth, whatever that might be," Bhabha writes that: "What emerges from the dispersal of work is the language of a colonial nonsense that displaces those dualities in which the colonial space is traditionally

Wright, the disruptive power of otherness emerges despite the conscious effort to annihilate it by accommodating the Gold Coast into a well-known political landscape. This destroys the political framework he has carefully shaped throughout his life. It is significant, however, that, after the first discomforting amazement Wright derived from looking at the African landscape of naked bodies, he actually does "smash this horrible image of himself" he sees in the colonized other by denying the latter's agency in the colonial struggle. As argued in the interview with Marchand, Wright assigns no power to the African masses and praises only the black élite because of their positive embrace of industrialization:

> With the exception of South Africa, blacks in the USA, and those who live in the British Commonwealth, today "black culture" has no direct relation to industrial life. The relation that exists in Africa is more indirect and negative than positive. Industrial civilization has already influenced the attitude of the elite of the black world. Blacks have made themselves aware and they understand that the future of their people depends upon the way in which they go about breaking with their past and evolving in the future rational society.[28]

Following Everett Stonequist's *The Marginal Man*, Wright considers the impact of the West as the only liberating vehicle of modernity:

> Detribalization breaks down traditional ideas and introduces some of the Western.... Missionary education provides leaders and unwittingly furnishes much of the ideology and patters of

divided: nature/culture, chaos/civility. Ouboum or the owl's deathcall - the horror of these words! - are not naturalized or primitivistic descriptions of colonial 'otherness', they are the inscriptions of an uncertain colonial silence that mocks the social performance of language with their nonsense; that baffle the communicable verities of culture with their refusal to translate.... It is from such an uncertain invitation to interpret, from such a question of desire, that the echo of another significant question can be dimly heard, Lacan's question of the alienation of the subject in the Other: 'He is saying this to me, but what does he want?'", 123-24.

[28] Wright, "Le Noir est une création du Blanc", 41.

> expression, for African revolts are frequently a mixture of religious fanaticism and anti-European sentiment.[29]

But such prominence also bears a more radical consequence: the complete denial of the colonized agency in the process of decolonization. As he denounces to Marchand:

> The great mistake of the Western world is that it has not taken pains to or even tried to create an ideology or a vocabulary designed for those who lived under its domination. Except for the infantile sermons of the missionaries, there is a void in this aspect of Western thought.[30]

According to Wright, what distinguishes the African-American experience from that of the assumed absent-minded African is the ability to develop self-awareness. While still living in Chicago, he had explored the transformation of black folk into citizens following the evolutionary nationalist theory of Robert Park, and, accordingly, concluded that when a minority group achieves self-awareness, it tends to assume the form of a nation. But while in *12 Million Black Voices* he praises the new African-American "Men in the Making", in *Black Power* he shows only childish masses and their inability to master the forces that shape the world.[31] Wright can only hope that the educated Africans, those who have stepped out of their native primitivism, would return to their countries to enlighten their people:

> The British neglected to take fully into account that some of the Gold Coast boys would be beyond the confines of British influence, that some of them would soak up Marxism and would return home feeling a sense of racial and class solidarity derived from the American Negro's proud and defensive nationalism. (65)

It is noteworthy that, while traveling in the Gold Coast, Wright suddenly envisions a role for himself in the shaping of the new

[29] Everett V. Stonequist, *The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict* (New York & Chicago: Scribner's, 1937). Quoted in Wright, *Black Power*, 31.

[30] Wright, "Le Noir est une création du Blanc", 41

[31] Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 141.

Africa, and starts fashioning himself as the connector between two liberation movements: "I am the lost son of Africa who has come back to look upon the land of his forefathers. In a superficial sense it may be said that I'm a stranger to most of you, but, in terms of a common heritage of suffering and hunger for freedom, your heart and mine beat as one" (77).

On a public occasion, he also chooses to address Africans as younger and inexperienced brothers, revealing a strongly condescending attitude that, of course, impedes any communality. Obviously, the Africans refuse his vision, and Wright puts the blame on their naiveté, failing to recognize that the real origin of the Africans' suspicion lies in his own endorsing of a Western model of development:

> The handclapping was weak and scattered. Perhaps they were not used to hearing speakers who did not raise their voices, or maybe they had not understood.... Did they understand such concepts [Nkrumah's]? Could such sophisticated language be grasped by men so new to party struggles. (78-79)

Wright's patronizing disposition governs all his African encounters. He accepts the master-servant relationship, laughs at pidgin English and at the strange mixture of traditional values and politics, and makes fun of the African quest for literacy. To put it simply, Wright considers Africans still in the process of entering adulthood, and treats them like irresponsible children: "There is not enough foundation in this jungle life to develop a hard and durable ego.... The tribal mind is sensuous: loving images, not concepts; personalities, not abstraction; movements, not form; dreams, not reality" (264).

At the end of his journey he also suggests that his failure to be recognized as a leader for the African masses results from the clash between a sophisticated mind and what is still a folk culture. He assumes that Africans cannot appreciate him because of their tribal frame of mind and their simple thoughts. The only African who can understand what he is articulating is the Western educated and father-like Nkrumah, to whom he addresses his final appeal:

> There is too much cloudiness in the African mentality, a kind of vagueness that makes for lack of confidence, an absence of focus that renders that mentality incapable of grasping the workaday world.... You must be hard!.... Be merciful by being stern! If I lived under your regime, I'd ask for this hardness, this coldness.... AFRICAN LIFE MUST BE MILITARIZED.... I am speaking of giving form, organization, direction, meaning, and a sense of justification to those lives. (243-247)

Wright's report on Africa concludes with an astonishing appeal to militarism that signifies his disappointment and resentment towards those he considers passive and absent-minded masses, totally unable to develop self-awareness by themselves. Considered in the light of Wright's previous essay, "How 'Bigger' was Born", Nkrumah seems to incarnate the obscure manipulator of the masses against whom Wright had constantly warned "his people" at home. But, obviously, in Wright's opinion, Africans are less experienced than African-Americans, and need to be "regimentalized for the long pull" (347).[32] It is not surprising, therefore, that the only colonized subject he truly sympathizes with is the one who belongs to the so called "tragic élite", a category with whom he shares many traits.[33]

But the letter to Kwame Nkrumah ends with an even more surprising claim. Having analyzed the Gold Coast with tools already employed to analyze the USA, Wright quotes Walt Whitman, transforming the American revolution into the only

[32] Trying to explain why Nkrumah's project failed, C. L. R. James writes that: "Nkrumah is one of the greatest men of our day. What then went wrong? He attempted to do too much, particularly in his drive to make Ghana a country of an advanced economy.... However, in Nkrumah's drive to build a modern economy and create a sense of nationhood, he found himself splitting the new nation into a far more intractable division than the ancient tribalism". C. L. R. James, "The Rise and Fall of Nkrumah", in Anna Grisham, ed., *The C. L. R. James Reader* (Oxford-New York: Blackwell, 1992), 357-58.

[33] For a complete treatment of Wright's opinion of the tragic elite of Africa, see "Tradition and Industrialization", in Wright, *White Man Listen!*, 45-69

possible model for every struggle for freedom everywhere: "Your fight [Nkrumah's] has been fought before. I am an American and my country too was once a colony of England.... It was old Walt Whitman who felt what you and your brother fighters are now feeling" (351).

By recurring to the healing poetics of Whitman, whose celebrating "Song of Myself" reconciles oppositions by maintaining that the self-proclaimed democratic American poet is large and contains multitudes, Richard Wright provides a consolatory escape which, by repressing otherness, also annihilates the disruptive colonial deformation of the Western self.[34] As he wrote in an unpublished piece probably written in the late 50s, the new horizon of multiculturalism does not shatter his politics, and surprisingly confirms the universality of his omnivorous Americanness:

> I am an American, but chosen migrations, a multiplicity of social adjustments in many lands and many climes have made me feel that I could, as an American, live here among you without feeling that I am among moral inferiors; indeed, I am that sort of American -an amalgam of many races and many continents and cultures, that I feel that the real end and aim of being American is to be able to live as a man anywhere.[35]

The opening up of a new territory made of many cultures and unrelenting migrations is not liberating but élitist. Despite the emergence of a third point of view, Wright's response is that of a man who is definitely ahead of his time, but still irreducibly Western:

> My point of view is a Western one, but a Western one that conflicts at several vital points with the present, dominant outlook of the West. Am I ahead or behind the West? My personal judgment is that I'm ahead. And I do not say that boastfully; such a judgment is implied by the very nature of those Western values that I hold dear.

[34] See Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1986), 123.

[35] See Michel Fabre, "Wright's exile", in *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 189

If, on the one hand, living in a no-man's-land is a painful consequence of the oppression of racism, on the other, the career of Richard Wright signals that unrelenting uprootedness that allows the possibility of occupying all territories simultaneously while embracing contradiction.

REVIEW ESSAYS

Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural*, trans. by Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp.180.
Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, eds., *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp.333.

Reviewed by Marialuisa Pasquariello

The long-awaited translation of Certeau's volume *La culture au pluriel* (1974) brings us back to a fundamental stage in the field of cultural studies, to a period in which countless debates dealing with the insertion of culture in social life began to force the issue of a reconciliation between the theoretical and practical spheres of activity. Set against the background of heated arguments expressing the need for a structural change in society, the formulations articulated in this book acquire a prophetic force: in Certeau's view, culture is not an abstract realm (a "sum of values") defined 'high above' by the institutions, but rather a concrete field of production in which a collective labor is to be "undertaken over the entire expanse of social life" (102). Employing the incisive political and philosophical vocabulary of his time, Certeau puts forward possible paths and procedures aimed at translating the official discourse of authorities (that seek to position common people as passive objects, and receptacles of a unified meaning) into a plurality of discourses and signifying practices. 'Popular' performances are thereby rediscovered as the cultural means through which a "creative swarm" of individuals manage to open up a space of *cultural production*, and to eventually re-emerge within it as subjects of their own meanings, of their own "frames of reference". On this assumption, "culture in the singular" turns into *culture in the plural*, hence the title of the book.

It is worth remembering that these telling arguments were inspired by a particular historical context: the revolts and political struggles of 1968, whereby students and workers attempted to capture speech and raise their dissonant voices within the established idiom of the dominant order. The book is in fact a collection of articles (with the exception of the final chapter) formerly published between 1968 and 1973, and whose original purpose was to suggest a way out of a social malady experienced in that period: a crisis of values, namely the loss of fundamental references in both collective and individual consciousness. On the one hand, in the effort to preserve the established order, existing authorities were stubbornly sticking to values belonging to the past. On the other, different social groups were expressing the refusal of values, institutions, and representations that no longer corresponded to the real geography of meanings. By challenging and demystifying old powers and ideologies, a revolution of the "believable", envisioned by Certeau, would bring forth a "habitable world": a new space of movement informed by a sociocultural exchange. "A society ultimately

results from the response that everyone brings to the question of their relation to a truth and of their relation with others" (14); that is, a *reciprocal* recognition, and a *truth* (reasons for living) reconstituted in a "common language" that constitutes the double task of every social action. The author, then, (and here we arrive at the heart of the matter) asks himself: *how* can people emerge from cultural passivity and succeed eventually in modifying the geography of existing formulations? The solution he suggests is both *cultural* and *political*, insofar as culture produces *meanings* while political struggles open up *possibilities*. Social practices need to have a meaning for those who effectuate them; but then, cultural discourse, which discerns and criticizes such *closures*, must be followed by "a necessary politicization"(120), in other words by an *action* which creates and specifies *openings*.

It is precisely this necessity of producing a break, a rupture, that is underscored in the first section of the book ("Exoticism and Ruptures of Language"). This involves the attempt to short-circuit the "language of the imaginary" whereby the system tries to fill the void, the vacuum of values, left behind by discredited ideologies. For this language, by translating the vocabulary of commerce and advertising into a visual spectacle, an "ocular exoticism", eventually develops mythologies and paralizes action, thus reducing its spectators to passivity. Behind the seduction of these figurations (a repertoire of images, pasted over city walls, which summons up immediate objects of happiness) Certeau recognizes a hidden and anonymous colonization, a "power without authority", which attempts to assimilate and erase alterity. Here again, in order to expose and shatter this "totalitarianism of identity", he recommends *speech*, which initially takes the form of "blasphemy" (34). Here the violence of expressivity opens onto the horizon of a political battle and the virulent signature of a social group which claims its *difference*, its desire to exist.

Certeau's invitation is obviously not limited to irreverent acts of defiance. In his perspective every action ought to be inscribed in a constructive work. In fact, the second part of the book (entitled "New Marginalisms") is concerned with identifying the procedures needed to build a new cultural language and a *popular* culture. Universities, Certeau suggests, should become laboratories able to meet sociocultural expectations of everyday life and work, by "proportioning methods to questions and needs" (42). Yet the difficulty to surmount in order to achieve this goal was (and still largely is) the predominant attitude, in both schools and universities, of a refusal to acknowledge *other* cultural activities, ranging from popular paperbacks to the information and images of mass culture. As long as the élite/mass culture dualism survives, Certeau argues, the university will be insulated from any form of popularization. Even today, the radical shift encouraged by Certeau can hardly be considered fully achieved: in the official imaginary there still prevails a 'humanist' conception of culture, which relegates creativity to a restricted number of Authors and which celebrates works of art as durable, rare, solid masterpieces. All the *other* creativity which swarms, throbs, and blossoms in the fissures of institutional spaces, in the marginal activities of the house, the street, the everyday, remains largely unrecognized.

The remarks contained in the last section of the book ("Cultural Politics") provide suggestive insights into a critical revision of the term *culture*. In its redefined

status culture comes to include the heterogeneity of practices, styles, fashions, modes of thinking and doing coming from 'below'. Certeau also refers to the proliferation of unofficial sites of cultural autonomy in which a plurality of non-centralized groups (new social formations of women, youth, consumers, ethnic groups) claim their right to exist as *subjects* of their own meanings, irreducible to a global formula. Their local actions, both cultural and political, represent a radical challenge to the abstract and universalist ideologies imposed by central authorities. These hidden cultural activities, which succeed in reintroducing alterity into language, are not limited to minority groups; they are rather, in Certeau's definition, "a polymorphous carnival [which] infiltrates everywhere" (140). A silent majority, although remaining subject to the languages imposed by the system (television, newspapers, marketplace, etc.) nevertheless insinuates a surplus, an excess, a space of play. By re-using and re-combining the already given materials and the prefabricated signs according to their own interests and desires, consumers establish countless trajectories and itineraries which slowly change the balance of social constellations. Re-appropriated and domesticated signs are laden with new *meanings*: therefore, these daily operations (ways of *using* products) constitute an active cultural production, rather than a passive reception. In conclusion, in Certeau's perspective, culture "consists not in receiving, but in positing the act by which each individual *marks* what others furnish for the needs of living and thinking" (68). As Certeau's readers may recall, the investigations on the procedures of everyday creativity later became the specific topic of his best known book *L'invention du quotidien* (English edition *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984).

It is quite clear that the questions raised by *Culture in the plural* more than twenty years ago have surprisingly withstood the test of time. Although the pluralization of cultural places advocated by Certeau is all the more visible, the élitist and exclusivist notions of "culture in the singular" are, still today, far from being lost. Thinking culture "in the plural" also means registering the shattering of a presumed totality (*our* culture, *our* language) into a multiplicity of on going practices affected by *other* signs and localities: those inhabited by strangers, immigrants, and outsiders, whose presence in our homeland is still perceived as a threat. By rediscovering local instances of sense that lie beneath more universal and abstract propositions, we expose ourselves to the challenge of movement, openness, and change, and we inevitably lose the reassuring stability of the immutable Same. Yet it is only by accepting this new and vulnerable position that we might foster a reciprocal recognition, or as Certeau puts it, "the future enters the present in the mode of alterities"(131).

From Certeau's desire for "opening possibilities" we move to some theorizations in contemporary cultural studies still concerned with undermining those conceptual closures, abstract and totalizing formulations, which inevitably betray patterns of dominance, and subjugation to a centralizing logic. *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture* is a collection of essays which, from a postcolonial perspective, engage in a critique of the myths and stereotypes conceived around the questionable category of 'national identity'. More specifically, it is the contemporary formulations of Italian national identity as addressed by a conference held at Syracuse University in October 1992 (entitled "Designing Italy: Italy in Europe, Africa, Asia,

and the Americas") from which this book draws much of its material. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach (whose fields include anthropology, critical theory, film studies, comparative literature, African American studies, etc.) all the papers, from varying perspectives, share the attempt to explode the category of 'Italy', intended as a signifier of sameness, from the inside (its regional, peninsular, European context) as well as from the outside (the way Italian identity has been designated all over the globe). Italy is here the chosen paradigm for all the other national identities which can no longer be defended in a context of increasing globalization, where assumed cultural and ethnic boundaries are continually criss-crossed by flows of people, goods and information. Recent global demographic patterns, particularly the new African, Eastern European and Philippine immigrations to Italy, impose an interrogation of those abstract entities which go under the name of 'nationhood', 'home', and 'ethnicity'. The myth of a 'piccola Italia' (a fetishized and exotic place usually associated with high culture, fashions, luxury exports and food) turns out to be a constructed image "serving as the Other country for northern cultural tourism" (3). *Italianicity* is here exposed as a cultural figuration, a fictitious rather than an inherited genetic set. As Étienne Balibar rightly observes (*Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, 1991, 96), "no nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but as social formations are nationalized, the populations included within them ... are ethnicized – that is, represented in the past or in the future *as if* they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions". Most of the papers in this volume seek to unveil the role of cultural production and representations (popular print media, photography, films, novels, graffiti, etc.) in constituting and in reiterating those "imagined communities". In this key, these essays owe much to Benedict Anderson's study of nationalism (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983).

The opening section of the book, "Culture and Place: Italy as a European Country", questions stereotypes and myths concerning Italy, *Italianicity*, and Italian identity. The essays seek to demonstrate how constructed images and representations are functional to political strategies and ideological operations. These are realised through binaries and conceptual grids whose abstract and oppositional terms facilitate the task of imposing unilateral claims (what Gayatri Spivak would call *epistemic violence*). John Agnew's essay analyses the myth of a "backward Italy", namely the predominant representation of Italy as an underdeveloped and immature country struggling with modernity. Agnew ascribes this to a particular strategy: the attempt to idealize, by contrast, modern Europe as liberal and democratic. Italian differences, relative to a European context, are thus rendered absolute and explained through the simplistic evolutionary binary 'backward/ modern'. In a similar manner, Antonio Negri's article challenges the stereotype of Italy as "a country without a state" whose premise is, once again, the exclusivist opposition between Italy and the rest of Europe. If the power of cultural determination is often instrumental to the constitution of a national identity, cultural practices also sometimes effect social operations: for example, they mediate class ideology. In her detailed analysis of "terrorist" novels, produced in Italy during the "years of lead" (1969-1983), Beverly Allen demonstrates

how, in a period of profound crisis, these literary texts attempted to preserve stability and to keep the body politic intact. Allen emphasizes how the accurate differentiation of the perpetrators of clandestine political violence from the dominant class (accomplished through a process of *othering* – a distinction between *us* and *them*) cast terrorists as internal strangers, alien residents who threatened the stability of the nation state. Figuring violence as an imported disease has prevented Italy from coming to terms with its own fascist past. It is in these terms that David Ward invokes a radical rethinking of the self-image *buonista* that has been forced on Italians in the post-war period, and which is today reiterated by cultural practices such as slogans, ads, and graffiti: an image of innocence which contrasts deeply with racist outbreaks following the arrival of the first immigrant workers in Italy.

Italian colonization in Africa and its subsequent impositions is the argument debated in the second part of the volume ("Impositions, Race, and Colonization"). Mohamed Aden and Ayele Bekerie, in their essays, recall the brutal aggression and the abuses suffered in Somalia and Ethiopia. Italian imperialist expansion is seen as part of the wider violent praxis of hegemonic Eurocentrism. The "meeting between friendly peoples" (106), which is the dominant image of Italian colonization today, is severely called into question. Aden in particular defies, in quite a controversial tone, the stereotype of a sociable and pacifist Italian colonizer. The last essays in this section deal with Italian representational practices which portray images of Africa (as non-European 'other') appealing to a Western eye: from the erotic figurations of black female bodies, as seen in Karen Pinkus' study of the iconography of blackness in fascist Italy, to the exotic musical gestures of Verdi's *Aida*, which Paul Robinson nevertheless considers as an *Italian* rather than an "orientalist" opera.

Migrations, whether geographical or metaphorical, accelerate cross-cultural exchanges in an increasingly metropolitan world. Subsequent hybridity and cultural complexity entail the untenability of clear-cut distinctions between the categories of the 'First' and 'Third' World. The third section of the book ("Immigrations"), by exploring some her/his-stories of immigration, provides a radical displacement of communal identities based on racial exclusiveness. Graziella Parati proposes the Italophone literature written by African immigrants since 1990 (authors such as Salah Methnani, Saidou Moussa Ba, Pap Khouma, Mohamed Bouchane, and Moshen Melliti) as a representative stage of transition from a mono- to a multicultural and multiracial sense of the Italian nation. The 'third space' of mutual translation between diverse cultures and traditions opened up by African-Italian writers is also the place in which these writers defend their difference in non-essentializing terms; by reappropriating and modifying the 'other' language from within, they manage to rewrite stereotypes about the *extra-comunitari* constructed by Italian newspapers. Yet Italian immigrants too have experienced the unconfortable and ambiguous position of 'in-betweenness'. Here Pasquale Verdicchio's essay refers to southern Italian immigrants to North America as subjects cast in a position of 'double' alterity: deemed "nonwhite" or "racially inferior" in the U.S., and "second-class citizens" in Italy. Such a marginal position paradoxically becomes the ideal location from where to expose the ambiguity and hypocrisy of abstract concepts like 'race' and 'nationality'. As unrecognized subjects of a colonization (Italian unification in the 1860s, Verdicchio

argues, "was nothing if not colonialist in nature", 199), southern Italians abroad have developed the postcolonial discourse hindered at home (as witnessed by the works of Italian American writers like Rosé Romano and Dodici Azpadu). From a similar perspective, Francesca Miller's essay engages in a reconstruction of another migration, that of Italian immigrants in Brazil, seen from the initial hardships to the final integration and identification in the new *home*: an 'imagined community' largely built by Italian-Brazilians and in which they now feel legitimately included.

"Postmodernity and Global Italy", the last section of the volume, provides a useful insight into the dynamics of cultural interchange between formely separated worlds, articulated against the background of postmodern global markets. In such a hybrid context, which trascends nationalist divisions, the issue of biological and historical determinations are once again at stake. If cultural identities are increasingly constituted in shared networks of representation and communication, any 'natural' instance is inevitably problematized. More and more frequently ethnicity is reaffirmed only to be cast into the process of commodification of a market-oriented culture industry. Detached from their 'original' roots, ethnic markings become free-floating and interchangeable signifiers in the mutable *pastiche* of popular cultures. On this assumption, Elaine K. Chang's contribution, referring to youth cultural phenomena like the Ninja Turtles and Karate Kid, demonstrates how ethnic identities (in this case Italian and Japanese) are blended in a process of recycling and rearrangement of national icons (pizza, martial arts movies, youth culture, rap...), whose fresh combinations actually respond to marketing strategies. Ethnicized images acquire a strong exchange value as they superimpose meaning on the circulation of commodities.

Today, however, stereotyping processes are set in a dimension of cultural reciprocity. Mary Russo's essay discusses how the transposition of bodies, images, cities along transnational and international coordinates, and across a complex geography of displacement and refiguration, are always part of intercultural exchange ("Migration was rarely imagined as one-way", 237). The effort to re-establish such dynamics of reciprocity is at the centre of Marguerite R. Waller's analysis of two films (*Ladri di biciclette* and *Ladri di saponette*) whose attempt to decolonize the Italian screens, flooded with American cinematic producs, subtracts Italy from a unilateral model of cultural influence. If stereotypes, intended as a distorted perception and representation of alterity, a kind of negative discourse on the Other, were once a powerful instrument for the 'westernalization' of the world, today a process of orientalization of the West is a real possibility too. The discourse of the 'other' on our-'selves' can afford an excellent opportunity for self-analysis through alien eyes: by observing Japan as the counterpart of Italy in a mirror-like play of stereotypes, Antonio Marazzi reveals how a voyeuristic attraction and exotic representations of the 'other' exists on both sides.

As contributors here suggest, representational practices (including those images and stereotypes we use to characterize 'ourselves' and 'others') are never innocent; they do not merely reflect, but rather *constitute* identities and differences, sameness and alterity, through binary mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion which seek to naturalize such distinctions. Although this consciousness informs much contemporary

thought, and new formulations arise seeking to respect the volatility of national and cultural identity, popular icons of Italianicity are among those stereotypes which have remained largely unchanged. By stimulating an awareness of the countless patterns of dominance hidden beneath seemingly innocent practices, and by insisting on the idea of alterity and differences intended not as pre-given ethnic and cultural traits separating communities, but rather as the outcome of an ongoing process of transnational negotiation, these essays invoke a radical rethinking of national identity. In this project we may well once again recognize Certeau's suggestion of "thinking in the plural". To look at ourselves through the other, and vice versa, means to recognize even in the most taken-for-granted totalities the trace of alterity, that opening towards infinity.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiii, 139. £. 19.99
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature & Society* (Oxford-Nairobi-Portsmouth (NH): James Currey, EAEP, Heinemann, 1997) (1981), xviii, 167. £. 11.95

Reviewed by Marco De Bernardo

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's two recent books of essays show a concern for ordering and updating the author's ideas about literature and politics, ideas initially developed in his earlier non-fictional works: from *Homecoming* (1972) to *Moving the Centre* (1993).

Writers in Politics is actually a re-writing of the collection that appeared under the same title in 1981 for Heinemann. Titles and contents have been changed, though the book still has a tripartite structure. The general movement seems to be from occasional speeches of cultural-political interest – some of which deal with important issues in Kenya's post-colonial history and were originally presented at conferences – to more general essays. Two essays in Part 1, now entitled "War of Images" (as against its previous title "Literature, Education: the Struggle for a Patriotic National Culture" in the former 1981 edition), together with a third essay in part III have been excluded on account of their occasional character. "The Robber and the Robbed: Two Antagonistic Images in Afro-American Literature and Thought" has been moved to this section, revised and given the new title: "Literature & Double Consciousness". As a result, this first part, formerly more specifically concerned with Kenyan cultural-political issues, now appears as a theoretical introduction to the "cultural battlefield" of anti-colonial struggle, focusing on literary syllabuses, cultural identity, racial consciousness, and Ngũgĩ's most controversial concern, the use of African languages as opposed to European languages. Three wholly new pieces have been added to part III: "Culture in a Crisis: Problems of Creativity & the New World Order", "Kamau Brathwaite: the Voice of Pan-African Presence", "Learning from our Ancestors: the Intellectual Legacy of Pan-Africanism". These essays were originally papers given at various conferences in 1994 and 1995, as was "Freedom of Expression" in part II.

Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams includes Ngũgĩ's four Clarendon lectures presented at Oxford in 1996. The subtitle announces that Ngũgĩ is looking to a new theoretical enhancement of the relations between literature and political power. The first lecture, 'Art War with the State: Writers and Guardians of a Post-colonial Society', sets up a 'phenomenology' of possible relations between the arts and the state. It begins by proposing that there eixts an archetypical struggle in societal regulation. It goes on to list the features of art that make it intrinsically opposed to the power of the state, and the means employed by the state to contain it (from co-opting to killing its artists). The second lecture, 'Enactments of Power: the Politics of Performance Space', proposes to look at the art/state conflict as at a struggle for the control of performance space, that is, of the physical and psychic space of human life. Here we are presented with an account of the events of the 1977 production of Ngũgĩ's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which had been denied performance space by the newly independent country's cultural establishment. The performance, more than the play itself, proved to be connected in an interesting way to Kenya's political past and present: dancing actors and audience stormed the site of an earlier blood-shed by the British occupants.

In the third lecture, 'The Allegory of the Cave: Language, Democracy and New World Order', Plato's parable is used to denounce the majority of African intellectuals who choose to work in the language of the former colonizers, instead of bringing much needed new knowledge to their people's culture. The Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah (who had also, notoriously, used Plato's Cave allegory in his own writing) is brought in as an example of a "betraying interpreter". The issue is a complicated one, and Ngũgĩ fails to discuss his opponents' positions in this debate, although the gap in African society between the masses and the intelligentsia, and the failure of democracy – at the economic, political, social and cultural level – are undoubtedly a pressing problem for the continent. If competition exists between European and African languages in Africa, it exists even more primarily between oral culture and written literature; this is the subject of the last lecture, "Oral Power and Europhone Glory: Orature, Literature, and Stolen Legacies". Just as African raw materials are being exploited by the world economy, the richness of African oral culture is being preyed on by literatures in all languages. Ngugi's final proposal – not a new one on his part – is that Orature should be placed at the centre of African aesthetics and education.

The general impression is that new titles, new historical analysis and data, and the higher systematization and thoroughness achieved in *Penpoints* update Ngũgĩ's work only at the level of current political events. More general and theoretical essays like the first two of the newer book might be recommended as a "handbook for the contemporary writer (and reader)", in his/her approach to political power. Other essays collected in *Writers in Politics* are interesting as critical testimonies on Kenya's recent history (the problems of which are all but past), even though significant passages have been left out from the 1997 edition: those, for example, on the national curriculum which inflicted children with the study of daffodils and the English fog and, more generally, of a literature conveying a European point of view instead of an African one. When Ngũgĩ's *pars **construens*** becomes more precise, it seems biased by his

normative attitude to literature and language, bordering on nationalism and the critical fossile of socialist realism: he continues to propose the criteria of "loyalty to the class struggle and the nation" for writing and reading literature.

Ngũgĩ's ideology is anti-imperialist marxism: Marx, Lenin, Mao, Cabral, Fanon are his constant references. His critical, creative and political work is informed by the same oppressed-against-oppressing-class-and-nations dialectics, applied both on the socio-political and on the cultural ground. On both grounds, Ngũgĩ's life and work are rich in the experience of this dialectic, catchingly recounted in the essays – his creative works, from *Petals of Blood* to *I Will Marry When I Want* or *Matigari*, have increasingly transcended the realm of fiction and are interconnected with Kenya's recent history. The importance of Ngugi's work is that he keeps reminding us of a "reality" outside literature, a reality perhaps more obvious in the South of the world (in terms of hunger, cultural and material exploitation, and subsequent impoverishment and repression). When he does not propose his schematic parallelism between the fields of politics and aesthetics we arrive at a literature more aware of its own specificity, while at the same time remaining highly conscious of the problematic and unsure boundaries between art and reality. Despite the necessary anti-imperialist dialectic that applies to African culture, languages and literature, Ngũgĩ's reduction of the problem to such simple terms as "African culture, languages and literature against European culture, languages and literature", leaves out much of African literary achievements, with their complex and various dealing with the cultural and linguistic legacies of the colonial experience.

The paradox is that the political engagement that is keeping Ngũgĩ far from, and substantially preventing him from communicating with, the most advanced formal and theoretical experiences in post-colonial and world literature, is also producing results that exceed in a quite original way traditional boundaries between fiction and reality. Though he sounds dismissive when he hints at what he calls the "postmodernist legacy" in the last pages of *Penpoints* – in fact he seldom considers, not even to criticize it, the thought of other contemporary critics or writers – the story told in *Writers in Politics* of Matigari, one of Ngũgĩ's characters, believed by Kenya's dictatorship to be a real person, and as such sought after as a dangerous political opponent, is, in all its threatening paranoia, a true postmodern *chef-d'oeuvre*.

SUMMARIES

Silvana Carotenuto

A 'will-to-poetry' in the crossing of space and time: *An Atlas of the Difficult World* by Adrienne Rich

This article focuses on *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991) by the American poet Adrienne Rich. Drawing on Rich's recent critical work and poetry, it follows her poetics of the 'map' in the light of Hélène Cixous's theory of writing, and it interrogates the elements of 'space' and 'time' that organise the two separate sections of the collection. Rich's work proposes a complex poetics of the Jewish experience – both autobiographical and communal – that, in the final instance of death encountering re-birth, concludes her poetic journey with the invocation of a new and renovated 'will' to poetry.

Demetrio Yocum

If only Caliban were a virus: a literary-clinical analysis of colonial alieNation

This article takes its cue from Fanon's psycholinguistic analysis of Antillean society in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which locates the symptoms of a pathological colonial delirium in the way Antillean language is structured. It is in this clinical context that Caliban's "deformed" sounds, formulated by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, emerge as a significant linguistic root/phonetic route for contemporary linguistic acts of self-fashioning and cultural re-appropriations articulated by contemporary diasporic writing.

Antonella Sarti

Silence and the Edge of Translation: Keri Hulme's *the bone people*

The article explores the notions of diversity and identity in the process of intercultural 'becoming' within New Zealand Maori reality and representation, as suggested by Keri Hulme's internationally acclaimed novel *the bone people*. The place-language dichotomy and the problem of recovering Maori language through reclaiming ancestral land are

embodied in the search for self and wholeness within the community carried out by three of the protagonists. Modulated by the language of the body and by musical interactions, their strategies of resistance offer a subversive reading-key to *The Tempest*.

Marina De Chiara

A Thin Edge of Barbwire: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*

The complex notion of cultural identity and cultural identification is evoked through the powerful image of the 'borderland' by Chicano writer Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa presents herself as a 'border woman' in her 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Starting from Anzaldúa's text, this article explores the ways in which the modern idea of identity emerges as a site of permanent conflict, disrupting the attempts made by communitarian discourses to formulate any politics of containment.

Francesco Minetti

Politics of survival in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

Chinua Achebe's most recent novel thematises the links between violence and power in order to focus on the split status of postcolonial subjects and territories as fragments of African roots and signs of colonial aftermath. The endeavour of this paper is to locate these links within Stuart Hall's enquiry into the epistemology of postcolonial survival as well as Homi K. Bhabha's vision of border identities and cultural hybridity.

Marie Hélène Laforest

Masculinity in the margins: women writing the Caribbean

Although Caribbean literature has traditionally focused on the quest for identity, it has eluded the issue of sexual orientation. In recent years, however, Michelle Cliff, Jamaica Kincaid and Patricia Powell have questioned the heterosexual norms of their society by placing

homosexuals at the center of their narratives. By inscribing male-centered experiences, they have unhinged the assumptions of both Caribbean and feminist cultures. They re-articulate the cultural boundaries of the Caribbean set by men within heterosexual narratives and, by uncoupling biological sex from sexuality and affirming female genealogies for men, they disrupt feminist theories based on gender differences.

Maria Maddalena Parlati

"Dreamlands": David Malouf and the Nostalgia of Homecoming

"Dreamlands" is a metaphor to access fiction and history, to open eyes and ears to noises and voices once voluntarily ignored and 'normally' forgotten. The Australia of Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, a multivocal plural land, provides the unstable setting in which identity and alienness, community and dispersal, borderless spaces and restricted territories, encounters and departures appear as projected inventions of the West. Malouf's philosophical, historical and geographical 'location' erases any nostalgic 'return to the origin'. Thus, in both the novel and the theoretical space it opens, homecoming appears as a mirage we all must turn our backs on.

Floriana Perna

Identity, Alterity, Writing: "Songlines" by Bruce Chatwin

This essay offers an analysis of Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* focusing on its anthropological issues from a postcolonial point of view. The reading of the text through the concepts of identity, alterity and writing leads to the recognition of the limits of this European account of otherness caught in the space 'in-between' fact and fiction, narration and ethnographic description.

Salvatore Proietti

Postmodern Anthropology in Clifford and Le Guin

This essay looks into the narrative strategies deployed in the anthropological writings – respectively theoretical and fictional – of

James Clifford and Ursula Le Guin. It reads two of Le Guin's science-fiction novels both as allies to Clifford's critique of "ethnographic authority" in *The Predicament of Culture* and as critiques to some of the latter's own predicaments. The strengths and limits of Clifford's project seem to be predicated on a tension between a questioning of positivist myths of transparency and an implicitly prescriptive reassertion of the ethnographer's primacy. Le Guin's 'future anthropology', on the other hand, problematizes notions of otherness and storytelling through the notion of the alien encounter, staging a displacement of one-sided attempts to control conversations, fictions and histories.

Simona Marino

Memories of Identity: Conrad, Achebe and Naipaul

This paper analyses two postcolonial rewritings of *Heart of Darkness* in order to explore some of the changes that have taken place in the concept of community. Achebe's restoration of an Igbo textual memory in *Things Fall Apart* and his portrayal of its erasure by white men (and writers) provide a one-sided reading of Conrad's novella. His search for an alternative concept of authenticity continues to imitate the tropes of community and identity he seeks to undermine. V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* acknowledges the legacy of Western memory and the absence of an independent past and an original community. Free from Achebe's political didacticism, Naipaul's book emphasizes the very features of *Heart of Darkness* that are closest to modern notions of hybridity and polyphony in historical narratives.

Sara Antonelli

An Omnivorous Third Point of View:
Richard Wright on the Gold Coast

Written after traveling in the Gold Coast, *Black Power* represents Richard Wright's ultimate effort to be recognized as a political thinker. Wright's firm belief that the only similarity between African-Americans and Africans is the fact that the latter are now entering modernity after a long period of subjugation is contradicted a few hours after his arrival in Accra. Beside the irreducible political diversity that emerges, he perceives a painful and disturbing similarity to the most backward aspects of black Southern life. This forces him to reconsider his long-standing refusal of any forms of African ancestry. Despite his self-celebrated marginality within the West, Wright reacts to Africa, and to the possible emergence of African heritage, by seeking refuge in the messianic spirit of omnivorous Americanness theorized by Whitman.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Sara Antonelli is a PhD candidate in Literatures in English (University of Rome "La Sapienza" and IUO, Naples). She also works as Cultural Program Assistant at the Center for American Studies in Rome. She has published "Mask and Power in Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" (*Acoma* 13, 1998), and is currently completing the Italian translation of Jacob's text. Her work on the impact of the American Civil War on African-American women will be published in 1999.

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Simona Marino has a PhD in Literatures in English (University of Rome "La Sapienza" and IUO, Naples). Her PhD thesis deals with the representation of history in Conrad's novels. She has written essays on British and American writers, including John Donne, T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Stephen Crane and Leslie Marmon Silko, and teaches English and Italian literature.

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Floriana Perna is currently finishing a PhD in Literatures in English (University of Rome "La Sapienza" and IUO, Naples). Her doctoral dissertation analyzes the questions of Australianness and alterity in the work of Peter Carey. She has written about T. S. Eliot and the Orient, Nicholas Abraham's *The Phantom of Hamlet* and the (de)colonized body in Mahasweta Devi and Gayatri Spivak.

Salvatore Proietti holds a PhD from McGill University with a dissertation on "Cyborgs, Cyberspace, and North American Science Fiction". He has published numerous articles, in both English and Italian, on US and Canadian literature. His essays on science fiction have appeared in journals such as *Science-Fiction Studies* and *Ácoma*. He is currently working on a PhD thesis on post-revolutionary US (University of Rome "La Sapienza" and IUO, Naples).

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Demetrio Yocum is an English language assistant at the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples. He has published on post-colonial literatures and is currently completing his PhD thesis on Shakespearean performance and interculturalism (University of Rome "La Sapienza" and IUO, Naples).

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Examples:

Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), 19.

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