
Migrancy, Culture, Identity by Iain Chambers

AN IMPOSSIBLE HOMECOMING

If we rethink culture ... in terms of travel. then the organic. naturalizing bias of the term culture - seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, dies. etc. - is questioned. Constructed and disputed historicities, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction, come more sharply into view.

James Clifford¹

Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world.

Martin Heidegger²

One day I recognised that what was more important for me than anything else was how I defined myself to the degree that I was a stranger ... I then realised that, in his vulnerability, the stranger could only count on the hospitality that others could offer him. Just as words benefit from the hospitality the white page offers them or the bird from the unconditional space of the sky.

Edmond Jabes³

On southern Californian highways, around Tijuana close to the Mexican border, are road signs usually associated with the encounter of nature and culture: symbols of leaping deer or prowling bears that warn us to look out for them crossing the road. This time the icon is diverse, it refers to cross-cultural traffic. The graphic indicates people on foot. Desperate to escape the destiny of poverty, they cut or crawl through the border wire and, dodging the speeding automobiles, scamper across the concrete in a dash to flee from the past and in-state themselves in the promise of the North.

This desperate scene of hope, migration and attempted relocation is a fragment, invariably caught in a press photo, on the news, in a television documentary, in immigration statistics, that nevertheless illuminates much of the landscape we inhabit. When the 'Third World' is no longer maintained at a distance 'out there' but begins to appear 'in here', when

¹ James Clifford, "Travelling Cultures" in Lawrence Grossberg, Gary Nelson and Paula Treichler, *Culture Studies*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p.101.

² Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, New York, Harper & Row, 1977, p.219.

³ Edmond Jabes, *Le Livre de L'Hospitalite*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991.

the encounter between diverse cultures, histories, religions and languages no longer occurs along the peripheries, in the 'contact zones' as Mary Louise Pratt calls them, but emerges at the centre of our daily lives, in the cities and cultures of the so-called 'advanced', or 'First', world, then we can perhaps begin to talk of a significant interruption in the preceding sense of our own lives, cultures, languages and futures.⁴

This is not to say that London and Lagos are nowadays simply geographically separate urban centres held in the common syntax of the global metropolitan media. They may share certain goods, habits, styles and languages, but for each thing in common there is also a corresponding local twist, inflection, idiolect. They are not merely physically distinct, but also remain sharply differentiated in economic, historical and cultural terms. Nevertheless, such differences are not always and inevitably instances of division and barriers. They can also act as hinges that serve both to close *and* to open doors in an increasing global traffic.

Migration, together with the enunciation of cultural borders and crossings, is also deeply inscribed in the itineraries of much contemporary reasoning. For migrancy and exile, as Edward Said points out, involves a 'discontinuous state of being', a form of picking a quarrel with where you come from. It has thereby been transformed 'into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture'.⁵ For:

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.⁶

Such a journey acquires the form of a restless interrogation, undoing its very terms of reference as the point of departure is lost along the way. If exile presumes an initial home and the eventual promise of a return, the questions met with *en route* consistently breach the boundaries of such an itinerary. The possibilities of continuing to identify with such premises weaken and fall away. This memory of primary loss, persistently inscribed in the uncertain becoming of the

⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London & New York, Routledge, 1992.

⁵ Edward Said, "Reflection on Exile", in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornal West, *Out There, Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1990, pp.357-63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.365.

outward journey, has made of exile a suggestive symbol of our times. Indeed, a significant tendency in present-day critical thought, confronted with the shrinkage of the European rationale that once claimed to speak for all and everything, is to adopt metaphors of movement, migration, maps, travel and sometimes a seemingly facile tourism. However, such metaphors are not restricted to the genealogy of a particular critical paradigm, or confined to the plane of a theoretical turn. Although we might cynically choose to read in recent intellectual peregrinations simply the latest twist in the continuing narrative of patriarchal, occidental intellectual power as it seeks to domesticate the rest and extend its hold over the once excluded and silent, there is clearly also something else occurring here. In the accelerating processes of globalisation we are also increasingly confronted with an extensive cultural and historical diversity that proves impermeable to the explanations we habitually employ. It is this complex and persistent challenge to the world we are accustomed to inhabit that forcibly suggests that we are not merely witness to the latest unwinding in the lax liberal spring of mental eclecticism.

For recent apertures in critical thought instigated by certain internal displacements in the hearth of the West (feminism, deconstructionism, psychoanalysis, post-metaphysical thought) have been increasingly augmented by the persistent question of a presence that no longer lies elsewhere: the return of the repressed, the subordinate and the forgotten in 'Third World' musics, literatures, poverties and populations as they come to occupy the economies, cities, institutions, media and leisure time of the First World.

Such a highly charged punctuation of the cosmopolitan script, destined finally to be recognised as a part of our history and be televised in future riots of the metropolitan dispossessed, compels us to recognise the need for a mode of thinking that is neither fixed nor stable, but is one that is open to the prospect of a continual return to events, to their re-elaboration and revision. This retelling, re-citing and re-siting of what passes for historical and cultural knowledge depend upon the recalling and re-remembering of earlier fragments and traces that flare up and flash in our present 'moment of danger' as they come to live on in new constellations. These are fragments that remain as fragments: splinters of light that illuminate our journey while simultaneously casting questioning shadows along the path. The belief in the transparency of truth and the power of origins to define the finality of our passage is dispersed by this perpetual movement of transmutation and transformation. History is harvested and collected,

to be assembled, made to speak, remembered, re-read and rewritten, and language comes alive in transit, in interpretation.

To talk of this inheritance, to refer to history, as to refer to translation or memory, is always to speak of the incomplete, the never fully decipherable. It is to betray any hope of transparency. For to translate is always to transform. It always involves a necessary travesty of any metaphysics of authenticity or origins. We find ourselves employing a language that is always shadowed by loss, an elsewhere, a ghost: the unconscious, an 'other' text, an 'other' voice, an 'other' world; a language that is 'powerfully affected by the foreign tongue'.⁷

For the nomadic experience of language, wandering without a fixed home, dwelling at the crossroads of the world, bearing our sense of being and difference, is no longer the expression of a unique tradition or history, even if it pretends to carry a single name. Thought wanders. It migrates, requires translation. Here reason runs the risk of opening out on to the world, of finding itself in a passage without a reassuring foundation or finality: a passage open to the changing skies of existence and terrestrial illumination. No longer protected by the gods or their secular resurrection in the vestments of an imperious rationalism or positivist projection, thought runs the danger of becoming responsible for itself and the safekeeping of being, its only protection lying, as Rilke and Heidegger remind us, in the very absence of protection.⁸

This inevitably implies another sense of 'home', of being in the world. It means to conceive of dwelling as a mobile habitat, as a mode of inhabiting time and space not as though they were fixed and closed structures, but as providing the critical provocation of an opening whose questioning presence reverberates in the movement of the languages that constitute our sense of identity, place and belonging. There is no one place, language or tradition that can claim this role. For although the journey from the centre into the periphery, seeking the unexpected, the bizarre and the wonder of it all, may still dominate this literature - this book, for example - such stories ultimately represent a weak echo in the volume of travel, migration and dislocation that so many people coming from elsewhere have faced and continue to experience. So, I finally come to experience the violence of alterity, of other worlds, languages and identities, and there finally discover my dwelling to be sustained across encounters, dialogues and

⁷ Rudolf Pannwitz quoted in Walter Benjamin, "The Task of Translator," in Walter Benjamin, *Illustrations*, London, Collins/Fontana, 1973, p.81.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, "The Turning", in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York, Harper & Row, 1977.

clashes with other histories, other places, other people. For the return of the 'native' not only signals the dramatic necessity 'to abrogate the boundaries between Western and non-Western history', but also returns to the centre the violence that initially marked the encounters out in the periphery that laid the foundations of my world.⁹

So this is not necessarily even an account of travel. For to travel implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival, the knowledge of an itinerary. It also intimates an eventual return, a potential homecoming. Migrancy on the contrary, involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming - completing the story, domesticating the detour - becomes an impossibility. History gives way to histories, as the West gives way to the world.

It means to live in another country in which:

It becomes more than ever urgent to develop a framework of thinking that makes the migrant central, not ancillary, to historical processes. We need to disarm the genealogical rhetoric of blood, property and frontiers and to substitute for it a lateral account of social relations, one that stresses the contingency of all definitions of self and the other, and the necessity always to tread lightly.¹⁰

Does all this mean I have nothing to say, that every gesture that begins in the West is inherently imperialist, merely the latest move in the extension of my power regarding the others? It is perhaps here that the political and ethical implications of the arguments advanced in this book can be most clearly grasped as an attempt to fracture the vicious circle between speakers and the spoken for. For, in breaking into my own body of speech, opening up the gaps and listening to the silences in my own inheritance, I perhaps learn to tread lightly along the limits of where I am speaking from. I begin to comprehend that where there are limits there also exist other voices, bodies, worlds, on the other side, beyond my particular boundaries. In the pursuit of my desires across such frontiers I am paradoxically forced to face my confines, together with that excess that seeks to sustain the dialogues across them. Transported some way into this border country, I look into a

⁹ The quote from Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 1982, p.x.

¹⁰ Paul Carter, *Living in A New Country, Travelling and Language*, Faber & Faber, 1992, pp.7-8.

potentially further space: the possibility of another place, another world, another future.

The accumulated diasporas of modernity, set in train by 'modernisation', the growing global economy, and the induced, often brutally enforced. migrations of individuals and whole populations from 'peripheries' towards Euro-American metropolises and 'Third World' cities, are of a magnitude and intensity that dramatically dwarf any direct comparison with the secondary and largely metaphorical journeys of intellectual thought. Analogy is risky. There is always the obvious allure of the romantic domestication and intellectual homecoming that the poetic figures of travel and exile promise. Still, it is a risk to be run. For the modern migrations of thought and people are phenomena that are deeply implicated in each other's trajectories and futures.

To be forced to cross the Atlantic as a slave in chains, to cross the Mediterranean or the Rio Grande illegally, heading hopefully North, or even to sweat in slow queues before officialdom, clutching passports and work permits, is to acquire the habit of living between worlds, caught on a frontier that runs through your tongue, religion. music, dress, appearance and life. To come from elsewhere, from 'there' and not 'here', and hence to be simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the situation at hand, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive, arrangements along emerging routes. It is simultaneously to encounter the languages of powerlessness and the potential intimations of heterotopic futures. This drama, rarely freely chosen, is also the drama of the stranger. Cut off from the homelands of tradition, experiencing a constantly challenged identity, the stranger is perpetually required to make herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present.

As such the stranger is an emblem - she or he is a figure that draws our attention to the urgencies of our time: a presence that questions our present. For the stranger threatens the 'binary classification deployed in the construction of order', and introduces us to the uncanny displacement of ambiguity.¹² That stranger, as the ghost that shadows every discourse, is the disturbing interrogation, the estrangement, that potentially exists within us all. It is a presence that persists, that cannot be effaced, that draws me out of myself towards another. It is the insistence of the other face that charges my obligation to that 'strangeness that cannot be suppressed, which means

that it is my obligation that cannot be effaced'." As 'the symptom that renders our "selves" problematic, perhaps impossible, the stranger commences with the emergence of the awareness of my difference and concludes when we all recognise ourselves as strangers'.¹¹ This decentring of the classical 'individual' leads also to the weakening and dispersal of the rationalist *episteme*, of the Western *cogito*, that once anchored and warranted the subject as the privileged fulcrum of knowledge, truth and being.¹²

In such a rendezvous critical thought is forced to abandon any pretence to a fixed site, as though it offered stable foundations upon which the sense of our lives could blithely be erected. It is not solid in its surroundings, immutable in its co-ordinates. It is not a permanent mansion but is rather a provocation: a platform, a raft, from which we scan the horizon for signs while afloat in the agitated currents of the world. Continually constructed from the flotsam and fragments blown in from the storms called 'progress', critical thought rewrites the tables of memory as we attempt to transform our histories, languages and recollections from a point of arrival into a point of departure.¹³

THE FICTION OF IDENTITY

'There are winners,' said the imprisoned rabbi, the imprisoned saint. 'Winners with their arrogance, their eloquence. And there are losers without words and without signs.' 'The race of the silent is tenacious.'

Edmond Jabes

Representation: that which simultaneously speaks for and stands in for something else.

These meanings are often run together because the notion of mediation underscores them both. As a consequence, the ethical and political motivation behind questions of representation in both its senses will similarly concern the possible conflict of interests between the mediator and the mediated. This expresses an obvious political asymmetry that is considerable because unavoidable.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Stranieri a se stessi*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1990, p.9. *Etrangers a nous-meme*, Paris, Fayard, 1988.

¹² The archaeology of this event--"Man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."--is brilliantly expounded in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*. London & New York, Routledge, 1991.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London & New York, Routledge, 1991, p.xvii.

Language is not primarily a means of communication; it is, above all, a means of cultural construction in which our very selves and sense are constituted. There is no clear or obvious 'message', no language that is not punctuated by its contexts, by our bodies, by our selves, just as there is no neutral means of representation. This understanding of language, as a material that is potentially shared and yet differentiated, is then further compounded when we shift our gaze from the local underworlds of the West, its hidden histories and subaltern cultures, to the further horizons and territories of contemporary metropolitan cultures elsewhere. For here the 'typical' may no longer be London or New York, but Mexico City and Calcutta - contexts and languages that can no longer be assumed to be regulated by a Euro-American norm.

The break-up of universals decisively marks the body. By accepting historical and cultural differentiation, it is no longer possible to think of the body as the passive ground or constant of subsequent social activity. It, too, is a historical and social site that can neither be considered fixed nor taken for granted. For, as Vicki Kirby argues, the assumed referent of the body becomes a flexible zone, interleaved, crossed and composed by multiple discourses, constructed in different languages, tempos and places, received and lived with disparate meanings that are diversely embodied. To treat the world, its possibilities and its individuals, in a contingent manner brings us to the threshold of enabling differences to be, and 'calls into question the project of perfecting mastery of the world on the grounds that, given resistances built into the order of things, the project would reduce everything to a straitjacket while pursuing an illusory goal'.

There is the emergence at the centre of the previously peripheral and marginal. For the modern metropolitan figure is the migrant: she and he are the active formulators of metropolitan aesthetics and life styles, reinventing the languages and appropriating the streets of the master. This presence disturbs a previous order. Such an interruption enlarges the potential as the urban script is rewritten and an earlier social order and cultural authority is now turned inside out and dispersed. All is revealed in the dexterity of moulding the languages of modernity and cultivating the city according to different rhythms, making it move to a diverse beat. It is to speak the languages - linguistic, literary, cultural, religious, musical - of the dominator, of the master, but always with a difference. Language is appropriated, taken apart, and then put back together with a new inflection, an unexpected accent, a further twist in the tale. As Gayatri Spivak puts it: 'In post-coloniality, every metropolitan definition is dislodged. The general mode for the post-colonial is citation, re-inscription, rerouting the historical.'

It is the dispersal attendant on migrancy that disrupts and interrogates the overarching themes of modernity: the nation and its literature, language and sense of identity; the metropolis; the sense of centre; the sense of psychic and cultural homogeneity. In the recognition of the other, of radical alterity, lies the acknowledgement that we are no longer at the centre of the world. Our sense of centre and being is displaced. As historical, cultural and psychic subjects we, too, are uprooted, forced to reply to our existence in terms of movement and metamorphosis.

The single, homogeneous point of view, that sense of perspective and critical distance, born in the Renaissance and triumphant in colonialism, imperialism and the rational version of modernity, is what we are now called upon to question and undo. A presumed mastery of the world - from the 'realistic' eye of the painter to the 'scientific' perspective of the cultural anthropologist and the critical distance of the historian: the sight/site of God - to which the rest of the world and its peoples are subjected (the 'Orient', the 'native', the 'other') is being challenged. To set language against itself, noting the diverse inhabitation of the very same medium, for example, 'English', is to wrest from language itself the truth that it is always partial and partisan: it speaks for someone and from a specific place, it constructs a particular space, a habitat, a sense of belonging and being at home.

None of us can simply choose another language, as though we could completely abandon our previous history and freely opt for another one. Our previous sense of knowledge, language and identity, our peculiar inheritance, cannot be simply rubbed out of the story, cancelled. What we have inherited - as culture, as history, as language, as tradition, as a sense of identity - is not destroyed but taken apart, opened up to questioning, rewriting and re-routing. The elements and relations of our language and identities can neither be put back together again in a new, more critically attuned whole, nor be abandoned and denied. The zone we now inhabit is open, full of gaps: an excess that is irreducible to a single centre, origin or point of view. In these intervals, and the punctuation of our lives, other stories, languages and identities can also be heard, encountered and experienced. Our sense of being, of identity and language, is experienced and extrapolated from movement: the 'I' does not pre-exist this movement and then go out into the world, the 'I' is constantly being formed and reformed in such movement in the world.

Despite our desperate, eternal attempts to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak. Of all the layers that form the open (never finite) totality of 'I', which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake,

corrupt, And which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic?

... that famous old 'I' is, to put it mildly, only an assumption, an assertion, above all not an 'immediate certainty'.

In this movement our sense of identity can never be resolved. I might self-consciously try to halt the journey and seek shelter in the comforting categories of being, let us say, white, British and male, and thereby cut off further conversation. But the movement in which we all are caught, the languages and histories into which we are thrown, and in which we appear, lies beyond such individual volition. The awareness of the complex and constructed nature of our identities offers a key that opens us up to other possibilities: to recognise in our story other stories, to discover in the apparent completeness of the modern individual the incoherence, the estrangement, the gap opened up by the stranger, that subverts it and forces us to acknowledge the question: the stranger in ourselves. So identity is formed on the move. 'Identity is formed at the unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture.' In that passage, and the sense of place and belonging that we construct there, our individual stories, our unconscious drives and desires, acquire a form that is always contingent, in transit, without a goal, without an end.

Such a journey is open and incomplete, it involves a continual fabulation, an invention, a construction, in which there is no fixed identity or final destination. There is no final referent that exists outside our languages. As Nietzsche insisted, there are no facts, only interpretations. Just as the narrative of the nation involves the construction of an 'imaginary community', a sense of belonging sustained as much by fantasy and the imagination as by any geographical or physical reality, so our sense of our selves is also a labour of the imagination, a fiction, a particular story that makes sense. We imagine ourselves to be whole, to be complete, to have a full identity and certainly not to be open or fragmented; we imagine ourselves to be the author, rather than the object, of the narratives that constitute our lives. It is this imaginary closure that permits us to act. Still, I would suggest, we are now beginning to learn to act in the subjunctive mode, 'as if we had' a full identity, while recognising that such a fullness is a fiction, an inevitable failure.⁴⁵ It is this recognition that permits us to acknowledge the limits of our selves, and with it the possibility of dialoguing across the subsequent differences - the boundary, or horizon, from which, as Heidegger points out, things unfold: both towards us and away from us. This fictive whole, this 'I', is,

as Nietzsche would have it, a life-preserving fiction, one that conserves us, and saves us from the discontinuities of the unconscious, from schizophrenia, self-destruction and the entropy of madness. It is this knot, the interminable tying together of the stories across the 'resistance to identity at the very heart of psychic life', that holds us together.

Such a construction, however imaginary and fictive the apparent resolution it offers - the whole, the full and complete 'I' - is also a his-story, a her-story, a cultural narrative, a fabricated reality like any other. And it is in this fictive coherence that it paradoxically becomes possible to think beyond the minimal pragmatics of the closure necessary to perpetuate any act. If, while setting down the full stop, thereby permitting the account to acquire shape, significance and force, we here recall Nietzsche's insistence on the fictive character of the world, we are invariably reminded of the mutability of our construction and, with it, of the precariousness of our narrative *and identity*. *It is to perceive in this interval not a rigid limit but the shadow line of a potential transit.*

In this intermingling between the usually separated worlds of fact and fiction, history and narrative, rational closure and unconscious opening, the metaphor slips through sequential linearity and rational explanation to interrupt it, subvert it, complicate it. The analytical and the poetic are contaminated, realism and the fantastic are confused. Linearity, the rational explanation and apparent closure of the 'I', is deviated, disrupted and displaced by the interruption and interval of another story. Here language does not necessarily involve a neat unfolding towards eventual resolution and finality, but rather a navigation through a potential vortex of voices, a dissemination of sense in which we sometimes choose to halt, and at other times choose to travel.

This suggests that movement and migration - from Africa to the Americas, from rural space to urban life, from ex-colonies to metropolitan centres - involves a complex transformation. For, beyond the generalities of 'modernity' or 'capitalism', there is no single frame or cognitive map that unites these experiences and histories. This implies that there is no privileged representation of reality, no single tongue or language in which 'truth' can be confidently asserted. Across language, myth and metaphor there lie the interconnections, but they do not automatically lead to a shared recognition or identity. Language, myth and metaphor may be common, but they are also inhabited in different ways. Indeed, it is paradoxically the increasing access to a collective syntax - television, rock music, 'English' - that has simultaneously also provided the means for registering the extension and complexity of a differentiated world.

In this mutable sharing there is no complete or closed explanation. Movement and multiplicity frustrate any logic that seeks to reduce everything to the same, to the apparently transparent discourse of 'history' or 'knowledge'. These partial forms, these incomplete encounters, like language itself, provide the thresholds for new encounters, new openings. unrehearsed possibilities, that alienate *the holism of history*'. *This involves entering a state of hybridity in* which no single narrative or authority - nation, race, the West - can claim to represent the truth or exhaust meaning.

Even when we describe the totally unknown, we can do so only in terms of the partially known or the known. Instead of admitting the failure of our categories, we love to clobber our empirical experiences until they fit these categories.

The problems of such translation are not unique to the West. There is an Indian folk tale about some people who saw a pig for the first time. At first they were bewildered, then one of them confidently claimed that it was a rat that had eaten too much. Another disagreed, and as confidently said that it was an elephant, shrunk due to starvation. Neither was willing to give up his or her categories and admit that this was a new experience.

The Guyanese writer and critic Wilson Harris has recently pointed out that the experiences of movement and marginality do not merely refer us to geographical locations -just as the word 'Europe' implies more than a physical place - but, rather, provide a critical angle or perspective on cultural formations and emerging cultural capacities.

This transformation in our understanding of movement, marginality and modern life is inextricably tied to the metropolisation of the globe, where the model of the city becomes, in Raymond Williams' words, the model of the contemporary world." The migrant's sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a non-integrated present, is perhaps the most fitting metaphor of this (post)modern condition. This underlines the theme of diaspora, not only black, also Jewish, Indian, Islamic, Palestinian, and draws us into the processes whereby the previous margins now fold in on the centre. As a further supplement, think of migration. movement and the historical harvest of hybridity that characterise such diverse postcolonial novels as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*, Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone To Heaven*, and the poetic sequence of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *XI Self*, and set them alongside the

altogether more modest peregrinations through the world that many of us in the West experience through the media, tourism and travel, and its effects on our sense of reality, time and space. In the evocation of audio, alimentary and visual pleasures through the naming of places - Trinidad. Kingston. London, Paris, New Delhi, New York - we come across cities that are both real and invisible, to echo Italo Calvino: places whose symbolic and *real* alterity provide another chance, a further question, another opening.

However, this seemingly common grid, offering simultaneous connection and distinction, cannot obliterate the real differences between the forced movement and exiles of individuals and peoples induced by war, economic deprivation, political repression. poverty, racist slavery, and that diffuse sense of mobility that characterises metropolitan life, charted in the privileged channels of movement represented by the media, information technology, advertising, *tourism and a generalised consumerism*.⁵² *In the gap between such connections and differences we can begin to unwind the self-reflexive national idiom and its xenophobic refusal of external referents in its formation, in its making. It permits us to contest the denial, inscribed in the authorised versions of English history, language, literature and identity. for example, that Africa and New York also form part of a black cosmopolitanism that lives in south London, or that certain Birmingham identities can draw upon an imaginary that was committed to celluloid in Bombay. This is to bring home that the birth of modernity does not lie unilaterally in the history of European expansion and the modalities of remaking the world in its own image - the Industrial Revolution, capitalism, representative democracy - but equally lies in the savage repression of ethnic, religious and cultural alterity, in the brutality of the black African diaspora, the Atlantic racist slave system, ethnic pogroms and the imperial sacking of the globe that made its history, my history, the history of modernity and 'progress', possible. As Paul Gilroy has so brilliantly argued, there is a prophetic sense in which a black woman, man or child living in Charleston, or Bristol, or Kingston, in the midnineteenth century was not simply the victim of modernity, progress and the modern nation state that was built on their enslavement and racist subjugation, but was also its producer, its maker, part of the constitutive cultural and historical fabric of modern Euro-American societies.*