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MIGRATION AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF IDENTITY.
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As you know I am a novelist and I also have an interest in criticism. This really isn't because I see myself as a critic. My interest is in trying to fit my own work into the broad sweep of thought about art and literature, to work out what it is I'm doing and how to create purpose and direction from this activity. One of the most meaningful things I remember reading about being an author comes from the German critic Walter Benjamin, from a speech in Paris during the 1930s. He talks about rescuing artists' work from fashion and he talks about how some photographers of the time had turned what he calls the struggle against misery into an object of consumption; and he goes on to say that for a writer's work to be a means of production rather than an article of consumption it should have an organising function. For this to happen it is also necessary for the writer to have a teacher's attitude – *a writer who does not teach other writers teaches nobody.*

Now the question is how to do this, and it's interesting to be thinking about it in a moment when we're discussing such issues as migration, nationality, citizenship and culture, not in an abstract mode, not as intellectual theory, but in terms of a living reality, which will decide how we can live together in a new Europe – both inside our traditional borders, and as a result of a growing movement of people between countries.

In this context, another idea which has influenced me is, of course, from Antonio Gramsci – every man is a philosopher – and he also pointed to the way that culture connects all the operations of our political, social and economic life.

Therefore, for me, literature and my work in it is part of this present attempt to reconcile new populations, new cultures and new struggles over cultural and social territory in Europe as a whole.

Roots, identity and 'retrospective hallucination'

So here I am, an interesting contradiction. Classically, an intellectual who has emerged from the working class, a black writer with various kinds of origins and interests in the regions inhabited by Fanon's *Damnés de la Terre* – the wretched of the earth – but I'm also a member of the post-industrial club of wealthy populations. To be here at all, within walking distance of Milan's golden enterprises, is to have both feet firmly planted in the condition of the West. The poorest and most oppressed among us enjoy a life which millions would envy for obvious reasons.

Now the temptation for someone in my position is to engage in what the theorist Gayatri Spivak calls 'retrospective hallucination'. She says that the ruling elites in the Third World, along with professionals and intellectuals who have their origins in the Third World, reconstruct their own history or, to put it another way, reinvent their roots which they claim spring from a historical world of uninterrupted ethnicity and nationhood, which existed before the takeover of imperialist and colonial culture. This re-invention becomes a rhetoric which they can use as sort of calling card for entry to the transnational academic and business world in Europe and the USA.

By extension I would say we also conflate this reconstructed nationhood with the historical roots of migrant identity. That is to say, the spokesmen and women of migration now tend to trace migrant identity to a pre-colonial and autonomous ethnicity, an autonomous nationhood, an ancient paradise, from which the migrants have been, somehow, exiled.

But we are also forced, I would say, into this position by a kind of popular racism which calls on us to trace our history through a kind of arena of separate development, as if migrant experience took place in a series of boxes, distinct from each other, and distinct from the world in which it takes place; and the result of the tradition of retrospection is that, for the migrants, their assertion of dignity, self respect or even humanity is supposed to be a constant recall of an imagined cultural tradition, an instant recollection of exclusive cultural roots, as if there was no other way of convincing society about their worth.

But as a black writer with a migrant background, now a citizen

of a European country, Britain, I have to be conscious that resurrecting an imagined utopia in order to describe my identity is a sterile approach, an intellectual cul-de-sac, whose likely consequence may be to shut me off from my environment rather than liberating me for constructive engagement with my fellow citizens.

The limitations of sociology

So I want to distinguish what I'm doing here from what I'd like to call traditional forms of migration studies, that is to say, the sort of study which springs out of certain major lines of sociological enquiry, and which places the phenomenon of migration – the act of people moving across borders to settle in different places – in the context of social conflict and political anxiety. Of course, these matters form an integral part of the background to any aspect of migration. After all it is essential to count numbers in order to understand where people are, what they are doing and how to help. But in Britain we've become very good at this. We know for instance, that migrants and the children of migrants have been excluded from certain occupations, that our system of public education has allowed a shameful proportion of migrants of migrant children to emerge without useful qualifications. We know that recruitment of migrants and their children into the police force, the Civil service and so on has been blocked by discrimination. We know also many of the mechanisms, which control this situation. The real problem, however, is to find solutions - and after two decades of revelation, discussion, and retraining, there is now a growing realisation that, if there is any answer to the problems we face, it lies in an understanding and a remodelling of the political and social culture we inhabit.

This is a difficult matter. Britain began to tackle the issue earlier than its continental neighbours, partly because our colonialist history created conditions in which migration became a central political issue during the mid 20th century, partly because our cities and a number of our institutions had already begun to be reshaped by the fact of migration. On the other hand, this also led to an early realisation that a purely sociological approach to these issues was not entirely useful. It became apparent, therefore, that culture was the only medium which could provide a framework for the solutions which had to be sought.

The uses of multi-culturalism

The product of this understanding was, in Britain, the concept of multi-culturalism, which was invented and described in particular circumstances to meet specific needs. Every country approaches its identity with a certain flexibility which allows it to attach new labels to whatever its citizens perceive to be the contemporary condition of life. For instance, in the 1960s when London was thought to be on the cutting edge of fashion, popular music and style, the city was referred to as swinging London. That's a trivial example but you'll see the point. So the term 'multi-culturalism' became a popular one to describe what was happening in British society when it became clear to any observer that the British population was beginning to feature new identities and that our cities were a mixture of cultures. The problem was that we then began to find out a number of things about multi-culturalism. For instance that it offered different meanings to different people.

On the one hand, we had a rhetoric about the co-existence of cultures from all over the world, and we demonstrated that by supporting Hindu religious festivals and the Notting Hill Carnival among other things. We had a high visibility of black and Asian people especially in popular entertainment and music. We had an obligatory respect paid by politicians and public figures to the idea that there were several different cultures in Britain which enjoyed equal status.

The reality of life in the multi-cultural state was, however, very different. While we celebrated the success of a relatively small number of artists and entertainers, along with some highly educated people from an ethnic minority background, we also had a developing tradition of discrimination and marginalisation towards those people who came from the cultures we were celebrating. At the same time the idea of cultural diversity started to become a useful tool for maintaining the barriers originally put in place by racial discrimination. To put it crudely the argument said – *you have a culture which we will support and praise, but that implies that we don't have to make room in our culture for you.*

Now you can see the potential in this for a kind of benign cultural apartheid, which is precisely why the organising principle of my own writing – and the writing of most of our migrant authors – is concerned with trying to understand how migration fits into a

framework of theoretical argument about the development of art and letters in the English language. This is because, while I have pointed to the exploitative potential of the multi-cultural concept, it is also true that migration and its effects have begun to set in motion decisive changes in the way that we understand cultures, their relationship and their interaction.

The meanings of migration

The first thing is to identify what we're talking about. Migration is not, of course, a 20th century phenomenon. People were moving across borders before there were borders. The populations of every continent owe their origins to various kinds of migration, and they haven't stopped moving ever since. So I'm not going to argue the virtues of migration, if only because the thing was self evident, (even before we ever heard of famous migrants like Arnold Schwarzenegger, arguably Austria's most successful migrant). Migration, on the other hand, has nearly always been associated with a species of dramatic intervention in the social, cultural and political forms of one location or the other. For example – the migration of the Mongols across Asia and Eastern Europe, the migration of the Mughals into the Indian sub continent – European migration into South America – Africa – Asia – and that's not to mention the traditions of internal migration in all of these places – especially in Europe.

We often speak of these things in terms of conquest – imperialism – imperialist ideology fostered the idea that when two cultures met the superior culture inevitably destroyed or drove out its inferior. So we also talked about civilisation as a matter of ownership in which the conquerors imposed their culture or took over the cultures they found. Imperialist Europe and its emigrants even believed that they introduced the idea of culture to territories in which such notions didn't exist. I think here about the great Polish/English writer Joseph Conrad, Josef Korzeniowski, and his book about the Belgian Congo – *Heart of Darkness*, a title which became part of the English language to describe Africa – and a line from the poem *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge occurs to me which describes this exactly – *'we were the first that ever burst into that silent sea'* – in a sense we see these notions persisting in the attitudes that Edward Said, the Palestinian academic, described as *Orientalism*.

There are obvious connections between these ideas about civilisation and our attitudes to nationality and citizenship which were born and nurtured here in Europe. The highlight of the nation state – where the way that people defined the nation and citizenship was concerned not only with who belonged to the nation and why, but also with where the boundaries lay between inclusion and exclusion.

But I want to make the point very strongly that while there is no doubt that the ideology of race and nation pervades the practice of European artists and writers in the modern period, there were also other interesting ways of talking about nationhood, rooted in other kinds of reality, and it can be argued that artists and writers have also persistently chosen other paths through which they have opened up an avenue of escape from the straitjacket of nation and nationality, and from the limitations of race and ethnicity. This brings me to the practice of black artists and writers in Britain.

As you can imagine from what I have been saying - I'm concerned with trying to understand how migration fits into a framework of theoretical argument about the development of art and letters over the last century, partly because I want to challenge the notion that, in the world of ideas, migration represents a sudden and alien incursion into the ecology of the arts in Europe. It also has to be true that the meaning of the phenomenon is formulated, not within an isolated crucible where only migrants live, but instead, the effects of migration are part of how modernity and modernisation have shaped our world, and, in particular, shaped the world of the arts and culture. So in this process I can't talk about migration as if it were merely an aspect of race and racism – not because those things don't deserve a focus, but because the issues of migration go well beyond anxieties about the colour of people's skins.

Enlightenment, culture and modernity

There is a moment in Europe, the start of the Enlightenment and the extraordinary movements of the 18th century where the nation state emerges to dominate the rhetoric of identity, and in this moment the way that people defined the nation and citizenship, was concerned not only with who belonged to the nation

and why, but also with where the boundaries lay between inclusion and exclusion.

One product of Enlightenment thought which went along with the development of the nation state was that Europeans began to question the religious rubric in which the soul and its relationship with the City of God was the index of the individual. The result of this questioning was a state of mind in which the self could be identified with idea of nation. You can collect a bundle of characteristics, assemble them into a single personality and offer this individual up as a synonym for the nation. The nation itself could be thought of, or described, as an individual – so the French Marianne, the American Uncle Sam, the English John Bull (Monsieur Rosbif), were all products of this junction between individuals and the symbolism of the nation.

But as we pass through the 19th century our ideas about what constituted the individual self changed radically. In Freud, we see the argument that we aren't born as ourselves – we acquire a self which is already stressed and divided by internal conflict, fractured into ego, superego and unconscious – and we hold these things together by entering into a symbolic order of language and culture.

So we arrive at the end point of the European Enlightenment – already in a condition of serious doubt about the status of the individual self – and this is a climax which brings on industrialism, control of information and centralisation of its distribution, capitalism, and military power.

Hand in hand with this is modernism – aesthetic self consciousness, interest in language, rejection of realism in favour of 'the real', abandonment of linearity in favour of montage and simultaneity, Romantic or emphasis on the value of aesthetic experience, depth and universal mytho-poetic meaning, privileging fragmentation, value of avant garde culture.

Once again modernist poets like T S Eliot provide us with illuminating descriptions of these states of mind – I think of the beginning of *The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock*, in which you can read this divided consciousness, this new awareness of a divided and fragmented identity – *let us go then you and I when evening is spread out against the sky like a patient etherised upon a table*

down certain half deserted streets the muttering retreats of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels and sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.

In true modernist style poets like Eliot reflected on the unreliability of words themselves – how they crack and break down into imprecision – a metaphor for the way that identity in modern times could never hold a single irreducible form. *'Things fall apart/the centre cannot hold'* which is the famous quotation from Yeats, his contemporary.

Joyce goes further in highlighting the nature of language as a reflection of fragmented identity – parodies of advertising, journalism, literature, science, colloquial speech and classical analogies all get tossed in to focus on the tools we use to construct meaning – and what emerges in *Finnegans Wake* is what he calls *'the waters of babalog'* in which meaning breaks down and flows into the shape of the narrative – the waters recreating and creating new meanings, contradictory statements and so on.

This brings us back to our particular tranche of modernism.

Migration and modernity

Migration has been going on while all this history has been in process. In the century before the last one the Enlightenment has already brought the concepts associated with non Christian, non representational, pre-industrial art into the Western canon. The Cubists and their cohorts, after all, imported ideas about 'the primitive' to justify their disdain for neoclassical and realist modes, and so on and so on – What's new?

What is important is the notion that the migrations which alter cultural perspectives in the 20th century emerge not from isolated moments of inspiration or compulsion. They are the resolution of processes which were set in motion during preceding centuries by the operations of the most powerful nation states.

After all what did the empires of the 19th century give their subjects? Well they gave them modernity in the shape of speed, industrialisation, the irresistible export of capital, instantaneous communication, centralised authority, universal surveillance, a

culture of quasi-liberal despotism.

One difficulty for the imperial misson was reconciling the political liberalism of the Enlightenment with its most important achievement, the nation state, within the framework of a rapidly expanding transnational capitalism. The logic of the nation was to impose cultural barriers between itself and the others who existed in the outer darkness. At the same time the corporate needs of trade and military dominance drove its members outwards to engage with those others, but rationality itself created social and cultural stresses which could only be resolved by a political rhetoric which justified despotism of one kind or the other.

Modernity provided an arena in which all these different elements operated. So now, as a result of the movements of the last three centuries or so, we have in the 20th century a globalised space in which the movements of migrants into regions like Europe are actually like an instruction manual about the effects of global culture on our ideas about identity and the nature of the self.

Migration in the 20th century, however, has been one of those extraordinary trends which created an impact that forced the realisation that we lived in the middle of a peculiar break with the past – and that we were moving towards a new aesthetic where the boundaries between art and culture were to be blurred, where culture and commerce couldn't easily be distinguished one from the other, where art and everyday life could be the same, where the constant flow of signs and images turned in a perpetual conversation about meaning. Which brings me to the practice of black British artists and writers.

Black Britain, the concept of the self and the flow of meanings

Artists are called upon to occupy a particular role in the business of arranging and fixing identity, because the pursuit of any kind of artistic endeavour is a public statement. Art and artists emerge from history, and at the same time recreate a history of their own activities. So in talking about the relationship between black British artists, black British identity, and some of the dilemmas I've been discussing, I need to discuss what it means to be black British, because, although we use the label continuously

nowadays, it is largely the practice of artists which has called this label, into being, and what they've done goes beyond a cosmetic multiculturalism and begins in the reconfiguration of identity. In fact, we needed this term. We needed it to describe a particular shift in awareness, which was not only to do with ourselves, but also to do with what was happening inside the United Kingdom.

Migration and the reconfiguration of identity

We know a great deal about the constitutional and legal framework within which British citizenship has evolved over the last fifty years. This was a political struggle, which went on over the space of fifty years and which opened up new categories of British identity, and made a new statement about citizenship in Britain. It is also clear that the process is not at an end. It has made possible a constitutional statement about our citizenship, which does not depend on ethnicity or racial origins. But, at the same time, this political formula does not account for the way individuals perceive themselves. My passport tells me where I can go, for instance, and even what I am able to do in certain cases. It does not tell me who I am. This 'who I am', however, goes to the heart of a fundamental issue: the problem of how our notions of self are constructed.

Our understanding of ourselves in postcolonial times was that an individual's identity was an autonomous entity – an *a priori* characteristic of skin colour or geographical location, something to do with the individual's relationship to a particular ethnic group or a particular place, a particular piece of territory. Many of our artists and commentators in the postcolonial world were, by and large, concerned with mapping the outlines of an authentic self which sprang out of a specific historical continuity, and whose health could be determined by the extent to which it resisted the invasion of alien elements and cultural dominance. All kinds of consequences flow from this view, such as the ongoing arguments about notions like a non-western aesthetic. It is this background, which makes the phrase 'black British' a necessary, and a challenging one, because it constitutes an argument about identity, which altered certain boundaries and created new possibilities.

For instance, the conventional way of talking about migration in Britain almost always focuses on the 'moment of arrival' be-

cause there is always a demand that the ethnic minorities should be framed within this 'moment of arrival' – a moment which appears to value and privilege the arrival but which also, much more powerfully, is an argument that defines cultures as separate and alien to each other and extends that notion into the past.

But this moment of arrival is an imaginary moment, because there were lots of black people in Britain before then, and we have begun to discover that the history of the black British community truly begins, not with the moment of arrival, but with a routine daily negotiation about crossing boundaries and barriers, about expanding limits – at the heart of this routine negotiation is a reshaping of the self, and in the process what emerges is a divided, fragmentary, contradictory consciousness, which we were obliged to take for granted.

Now I would argue that any individual consciousness is determined or over-determined by compulsory relationships and external processes. No one is a simple and autonomous unity. This is the point at which we all emerged from the long transformation of the post Enlightenment world. In the case of the black British we were obliged to be conscious of – aware – of the sense in which our selves were characterised by compulsory relationships with the people and the environment we found in the United Kingdom. This environment was composed of any number of different things, it was comprised of a bundle of economic and social features, forming a horizontal market place of cultures, coercive pressures, and a set of narratives about identity, about what people were.

So our reshaping of identity was determined by a continuing negotiation about the nature of language, about the meanings of behaviour, about things that were said, about how to learn, what we learned and what we taught. It was determined also by the internal play between a specific and singular history, that is the history of our own families, the history of the group to which that family belonged and the historical circumstances which dominate the lived experience of a person or persons in this arena. For instance, we associate with the coming into being of the whole concept of black Britishness a number of historical crises which are very important in the life of our community. For example, the Notting Hill riots, the struggle against 'sus', the New Cross fire, the death of Stephen Lawrence and so on. These historical circum-

stances frame the way we see ourselves and the way that vision of ourselves develops. All these elements and more go to make up the identity of any individual. What makes the narrative British is that these things took place within specific geographical and cultural limits and are determined by the conditions and processes operating within the limits of these particular boundaries.

So, the development of the concept black British is complex, it takes place over time, and it exists in a creative tension with a modernist conception of self-hood and a particular concept of individuality – and this understanding brings us to the role and function of the black British writer.

Black artists in Britain work within the framework of race thinking. Audiences and people in general look at our work with the question in mind, 'What is he saying about us? Does he like us? Is he attacking us? Is he condemning us?', rather than asking: 'What is he saying?' If I say that we live in a framework where racial divisions determine our view of almost everything I'm not making an accusation, merely stating a class of fact which accounts for many things. It accounts, for instance, for the fact that the inventiveness and creativity of black British artists have traditionally been submerged in a narrative about race, so that the productions of Caribbean, or African American, or Asian, or African artists are somehow perceived as offering the same view of the world as that of a black British artist.

This is a consequence of a framework of ideas dominated by race. Dominated also by generations of 'retrospective hallucination', as Spivak puts it.

Most black British artists, however, come from a peasant or semi-rural, working class background which on the ground never completely shared in the nationalist post-colonial reconstruction of Third World history. The reality in which their work is grounded happens to be this routine renegotiation of identity in their new homes, where the historic formation of diasporic blackness, as well as universalist notions about an 'uncorrupted' identity, or about unbroken connections with black roots, have no actual connection with their day-to-day experience.

On the contrary, the authentic identity of many migrant communities begins with the tension of operating several different selves at the same time. You'll see this most clearly if you live

through the process of operating a new language, new religious ideas, and new manners with some of the new East European migrants. The consequence of this tension is that as migrant artists the choices we make are often transgressive or at least unrecognisable within a context which demands from us an unambiguous black outline, 'black' that is, in terms of the stereotypes by which we're defined from the outside.

Typically, until very recently, the general context in which black British writers work has tended to regard us as another group of blacks who simply happened to be where we were, only notable for the colour of our skins; and the demand from us was to reproduce the 'drama of race.' In the present day it is possible to see an equivalent being created where the drama which is demanded from East Europeans is the drama of difference – a drama rooted in the distinction between rich and poor.

I'm suggesting here, that, typically, as artists, our major struggle is not so much with dramatic manifestations of racism, although we struggle with those too. You walk around London and in some parts of it, you can easily get the sense that you are in a vibrant, multiracial, multicultural community. You will see lots of black people on television, reading the news, for example. This will happen everywhere in Europe as minorities settle in – but it will become more and more apparent that the struggle we're engaged in is fundamentally concerned with the routine daily endeavour of representing who we think we are, within our specific circumstances, with unlocking and exploring the specific history from which we emerge and with finding outlets for that enterprise.

By contrast, in the past, black artists in the United Kingdom were, traditionally, more rigidly confined behind the barriers of ethnicity, where we were required to sketch out a picture of an alien identity. On the other hand, the necessity of breaking out of these limits, in order to talk about the changes which were occurring in our own lives, and about our relationship with our new environment is precisely what gives the work of black British artists it's radical tenor.

Our work, therefore, has generally described the process of becoming a different kind of individual self, a process which takes place in a sustained dialogue or conversation with all the elements

which go to make up this new self; and we see clearly the emergence here of a new consciousness, which springs from the time and place which contains it, and is linked to various other narratives about migration, about urban experience, about tensions between nationality and citizenship.

So what you are reading when you read our books is a part of the mechanism by which the concept of the black British came into being, a way of seeing, a reconfiguration of self-hood.

All this has had a specific and interesting effect on the culture and identity of the United Kingdom.

We, the British, recognised this fact in what I describe as the cosmetic rhetoric of British multiculturalism, but this rhetoric of inclusion conceals the fierceness and intensity of the struggle we are presently waging over cultural territory and over the identity of the state. At this moment in Britain we face a long constitutional argument associated with Celtic nationalism. The establishment of parliaments in Scotland and Wales are only the beginning of a debate about the retention or dissolution of the British union, and in the last few years another argument has emerged – what does it mean to be English? That is, someone who, whether or not they were born there, lives in and identifies with the country, England, as opposed to any other constituent country of the British Union.

If we use that definition a substantial part of the English population now has fairly recent origins in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Central and Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. This fact is rapidly rendering archaic the old view of Englishness as an ethnic club, and we now begin to recognise that we are in the middle of a cultural struggle to reinterpret exactly what Englishness and Britishness means, to re-interpret who has the right to say who we are, and towards what we should be sympathetic.

Black British and Asian writing is central to this recognition that a new debate has begun to organise categories of identity, opening up a new landscape. Within this landscape we begin to go beyond the pre-existing, the *a priori* definition of our nationhood which I heard my fellow citizens outline as I grew up. They used to say: *"We know what we are, because that is what we are. And if you have to talk about it, you are not one of us."*

British writing of every kind now has begun – with a certain tentativeness – to sketch out the changes in our identity, taking advantage of the opportunities opened up by this new debate where people are not saying, *"We know what we are."* Instead they're saying, *"We don't know what we are and we have to decide."*

I speak now about the writers of migration, rather than about migrant writers, because in this new atmosphere, it becomes the task of writers from any and every part of the population to understand and explore new meanings.

At the same time, this new landscape of debate and argument and discussion within England and Britain points to the potential throughout Europe for assembling an alternative to our traditional ideas of identity and its congruence with traditional ideas about the nation, because it is actually taking place in the context of discussions which are cranking up all over this continent: Germany, France, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and not least, here in Italy.

Look at the major features which the black British experience and its literature puts into this discussion: the phenomenon of migration, movement and mobility, the renegotiation of selfhood, the historicising of new identities and the reconstitution of a dominant culture to reflect again new identities which are often in conflict. All these things together can flow, separate, join up in the same space, co-exist. And not only co-exist, but actually offer the possibility of recreating a single culture with very different facets.

So the meanings associated with this experience, seem to open up a vista where it may become possible to accommodate all these elements in the same space without massacres, without daily murders, without orders. It is a vision on which artists who emerge from the black British experience have been nurtured, because they have had to be nurtured on that vision in order to maintain their humanity. And if it is a dream; that is the artist's job: to extend the reach of our imagination about the potential of real life and to dream our dreams about how things could be if we had the will. Migration brings home the necessity of this vision, and the writers of migration can offer us the map of this journey.