

**FREEDOM AND THE CITY: CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION
AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

Established approaches to contemporary British literature frequently focus on how novelists from the UK have engaged with the complex account of culture that was developed on the Left during the 1980s as a response to Thatcherism. *Freedom and the City* shifts the terms of this debate in a new direction by using the thought of Hannah Arendt to reappraise the relationship between culture, Left politics and the British novel in the contemporary period, and to reveal a previously unstudied political and narrative logic I term the “cultural politics of disenfranchisement”. This logic grew out of a model of freedom advanced by leftist cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy during the 1980s and early 1990s, which identified urban subcultures as a substitute for the formal freedom associated with established political structures. Through close readings of six contemporary authors—Jeanette Winterson, Hanif Kureishi, J.G. Ballard, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro and Maggie Gee—I uncover the process by which British writers working after Thatcher came to believe that one of the consequences of this experiment with freedom has been a disastrous abandonment of politics in its formal sense: as a clearly delimited and agonistic public space in which a plurality of subjects is recognised and their actions invested with political meaning. Because of this abandonment, I argue, in less than two decades the coexistence of flexible cultural identities and urban space has become a virtual narrative impossibility: today, the British novel is frequently marked by structures of failed utopianism, frustrated or incomplete experiments and even withdrawal and quietism.

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of love and thanks are simply not up to the task of articulating her importance to me; without her, nothing—including this work—would be worthwhile.

DECLARATION

Certain parts of this thesis have been presented on earlier occasions at conferences or in published form. A highly condensed version of the first chapter was presented as “The Passion in Exile: Jeanette Winterson’s Venice and the British Inner City” at the annual conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative at the University of Birmingham on 5 June 2009, and at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association in New Orleans on 2 March 2010. Parts of the fourth chapter was presented as “We Are All Potentially *Homo Sacer*: *Never Let Me Go* and the New Proletariat” at a conference entitled “What Happens Now: 21st Century Writing in English—the First Decade” at the University of Lincoln on 9 July 2010. Certain sections from the second chapter were drawn on when writing the essay “‘New Times’ Television? Channel Four and *My Beautiful Laundrette*”, which was included as part of the collection *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT WE NEED NOW:

Left Culturalism's Experiment with Freedom

In 1989 the cultural theorist Stuart Hall delivered a lecture entitled “Old and New Ethnicities, Old and New Identities” to the Third Annual Symposium on Current Debates in Art History and Theory at the State University of New York, Binghamton. The substance of this lecture is now well-known: Hall argues that Western society has been made vastly more complex by historical processes of diaspora and new technologies of capital and community, which altogether have conspired to produce what he calls “new globals and new locals” (“Old and New” 41). Such a transformation poses difficulties for those on the Left who consider socialisation to be a fundamental component of subject-formation, since this newly heterogeneous society requires them to develop an understanding of subjectivity that is correspondingly complex. And he suggests that it is in this way that “the question of identity has returned to us”, a question that is deeply troubling because the “master concept” of class—hitherto the Left’s principal means of explaining the process of subject-formation—looks less and less apt to answer it (42, 46). Conventional understandings of class tend to assume that identity is forged primarily by economic circumstances, and that there is a point at which the subject can be considered complete; when her position in the relations of production has been fixed and her role in the battle between proletariat and bourgeoisie scripted, blocked and rehearsed. But while in the simpler, more homogeneous society of the past this analysis might have been sufficient, in a society made complex by gender, race and sexuality—in which a subject might be gay, black and transgender, as well as proletarian—the doctrine of economic determinism on which it rests appears less and less convincing. It is

not so much that class has suddenly become irrelevant; rather, there are other axes of determination that challenge its ability to explain subjectivity *in toto*, and which militate against the assumption that, while determined socially, *a posteriori*, the subject is yet, in the last analysis, immutable.

In reality, Hall counters, “[i]dentity is *always* in the process of formation” (47, emphasis added). And this disarmingly straightforward contention leads him to identify a profoundly difficult lesson that he thinks the Left must learn if it is to remain relevant in political circumstances marked by pluralism and multiplicity: that any attempt to mobilise the dispossessed on the basis of a single, shared consciousness is bound to fail, since the “structure of identification is [now] always constructed through ambivalence” and the concept of a political singularity no longer tenable (47). In this way the Left has been placed in the unenviable situation of having to re-evaluate some of its most fundamental premises in order to remain germane. However, Hall is worried that instead of rising to this challenge, many leftists continue to insist on the pre-eminence of antiquated heuristics that are no longer capable of confronting reactionary ideologies—namely, Thatcherism—which appear to have a stranglehold on the present.¹ Reorienting the Left towards a flexible model of subjectivity might seem to anticipate a disaggregated array of progressive forces incapable of uniting around a common political purpose. But, Hall urges, if the Left intends to continue its project of defending the dispossessed against a newly invigorated oppressor, it must locate a new kind of oppositional praxis, and this requires formulating a “politics of living identity through difference” (57).

Hall’s lecture at Binghamton represents a kind of apotheosis of the intellectual moment whose legacy *Freedom and the City* seeks to trace. First, it captures with genuine urgency the internecine conflict that racked the British Left throughout the 1980s, when the unity of the New Right under Margaret

¹ Lamenting this tendency, he says: “One is hearing ‘Let us go back to the old constituencies. Line up behind us. The old parties will come again’. I do not believe it. I think Thatcherism is more deep-seated than that; it is actually shaking the ground from underneath the possibility of a return to that old form of politics. So if you ask me what the possibilities are, then the first stage of it is in our own ranks. It is quarrelling among ourselves about which direction to go [in] before one begins to open that out” (Hall “Old and New” 66).

Thatcher contrasted starkly with its own recriminatory factionalism. Second, it is an important expression of the intellectual milieu surrounding the so-called “New Times” group, a collective that emerged from Martin Jacques’s editorship of *Marxism Today* and advocated a new kind of leftist analysis that could better explain the historic shift between Fordist and post-Fordist, “middle” and “late” capitalism. And third, it is a notable intervention in the evolution of British cultural studies, a discipline with which Hall has long been associated due to his directorship of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham during the 1970s. In all these respects, it is a key contribution to a body of thought that I will be referring to as “Left culturalism”. This term is both expansive and particular: on the one hand, it refers to an entire intellectual sensibility that reaches back to the “New Left” of the 1960s; on the other, it departs from the latter in methodology and to the extent that it was engaged with a political moment—or “conjunction”, to use a term favoured by its interlocutors—that was markedly different from the one that preoccupied earlier leftist thinkers.² In short, the figures who contributed to the 1980s

² It is important to be clear about what I mean by the “second generation” of Left culturalism, for the latter’s conceptualisation of culture as a socially contingent site of identification, alignment and disjunction differs quite starkly from earlier movements, such as the New Left of the 1960s. One way of explaining this difference is to contrast the methodology of the 1980s thinkers with that of the New Left. As Andrew Milner has suggested, prior to the New Left, “[i]n Britain [...] the culturalist tradition had become institutionally organized into the academic discipline of ‘English’, rather than that of sociology” (Milner 45). Thus it is hardly surprising that the first generation of Left culturalists sought to challenge the Right on this terrain, especially since—unlike sociology—the study of letters had not already been host to very sophisticated leftist analyses. Indeed, the very absence of such analyses—due to orthodox Marxism’s tendency to dismiss culture as superstructural and hence unimportant—was a crucial source of inspiration. As Milner goes on to note, “British cultural studies has its origins in a very specific theoretical ‘conjuncture’, that of the 1950s, in which cultural debate had appeared deadlocked between the cruder economic determinisms of much Communist Marxism and the seemingly endemic political conservatism and cultural elitism of the Leavisites. The kind of cultural theory which emerged from that deadlock would eventually be represented in post-structuralist retrospect as ‘culturalism’, but is more accurately described as ‘left culturalism’” (45). The assimilation of culture into leftist analysis was one of the key developments of mid-twentieth century Marxism, as was the friction that subsequently emerged between the radically historicist positions of culturalist Marxists and the more abstracted analyses of structuralist Marxists such as Louis Althusser and Émile Durkheim. In some ways, Hall might be seen to have bridged this divide in begetting the second,

iteration of Left culturalism believed that they could not hope to confront Thatcherism without first undertaking the difficult project of placing diverse ontologies and a complex account of culture at the heart of their analysis.

It is this second generation of thinkers that *Freedom and the City* seeks to engage, in arguing that particular British fictions of the last twenty-five years can be read as political thought experiments which altogether represent a sustained interrogation of Left culturalism and its legacy. It suggests that these fictions identify a logic I call the cultural politics of disenfranchisement, which was implicit to the culturalist understanding of emancipation and considered urban culture an adequate substitute for formal freedom. And it argues that close reading of key contemporary British novelists reveals how this logic had the unexpected effect of elevating exclusion to the status of a political principle, which in turn had a disastrous impact on the category of the political itself. My aim is to demonstrate how British writers working after Thatcher came to believe that one of the consequences of the cultural politics of disenfranchisement has been a disastrous abandonment of politics in its formal or structural sense:³ as a clearly delimited and agonistic public space in which a

distinct iteration of Left culturalism that emerged over the course of the 1980s. For while Hall was a key member of the first cultural Left—the first editor of the *New Left Review* when it launched in 1960—his work at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies during the 1970s sought to build on the earlier generation’s disciplinary foundations in history and English through an engagement with the semiotic and sociological paradigms favoured by structuralist Marxism. The resulting, highly nuanced account of culture is recognisably different to the one developed by the New Left, and was articulated by a wholly new generation of thinkers who were quite comfortable bringing structuralist—or, by this point, post-structuralist—analyses to bear on texts that would previously have been described as “literary”. Hall has in the past attempted to maintain links between the Left culturalism of the 1980s and that of 1960s: for instance, he recently identified in both a “long-standing quarrel with the reductionism and economism of the base-superstructure metaphor”, and argued that they held in common a belief that “the discourse of culture seemed fundamentally necessary to any language in which socialism could be redescribed” (“Life and Times” 188). However, while both schools of Left culturalism do share common ground—as well as being internally diverse and sometimes incoherent—there was a discernable methodological shift that took place over the course of the 1970s which serves to differentiate them.

³ In a recent essay Michael Hardt focuses on the distinction Michel Foucault drew between “politics” and “the political”: “In one of his many brief asides about contemporary theory, Foucault in the midst of [an] analysis of the internal conflicts of Athenian democracy attacks the trend of theorists

plurality of subjects is recognised and their actions invested with political meaning. It is to this extent that my investigation differs from existing critiques of the cultural project written from a leftist perspective. For where the latter have tended overwhelmingly to identify the abandonment of class and economism as its most noxious legacy,⁴ *Freedom and the City* focuses to a far greater extent on its denigration of politics.

In keeping with the textual praxis of Left culturalism more broadly, I do this not through a direct discussion of “culture” itself—for this is a rather detached realm of experience that is not readily accessible to the present⁵—but

today to focus on the political (designated as masculine in French, *le politique*) rather than politics (*la politique*), a trend that has only increased in the decades since Foucault’s time [...] Usage of the terms in colloquial French is inexact but gives us a first approximation of how Foucault understands the distinction: politics generally refers to the struggles and negotiations of power relations, whereas the political denotes a more removed, philosophical view of structures and relations of power” (Hardt 28). This investigation might be said to continue the trend Foucault warns against, since one of its key contentions is that political struggles are effectively meaningless unless they take place within structures of power that are capable of recognising them as political. To some extent I will be suggesting that politics (*la politique*) requires the political (*le politique*) in order to have any effect by exploring a logic—the cultural politics of disenfranchisement—which emphasises the former to the detriment of the latter at significant cost.

⁴ The most scathing of these attacks is voiced by Ambalavaner Sivanandan, who, in an article subtitled “The Hokum of New Times” argues that the culturalist approach was little more than “Thatcherism in drag” (Sivanandan 1). “New Times”, Sivanandan writes, “was born in the throes of political pragmatism under the sign of cultural theory bereft of economic reasoning”; its substitution of cultural for economic determinism allowed it to argue that “the agent of change in the contemporary [world] was not the working class [...] but the new social forces such as women, blacks, gays [...] who were themselves informed and impelled by the politics of the person” (5, 3). However, he contends, “the battle itself is neither about culture nor about the subject, but—still—about the ownership and control of the means of production and the exploitation of the workers” (8). Sivanandan does acknowledge that the question of politics is significant—“[t]he battle”, he concedes, “needs to be taken on at the political/ideological level and not at the economic/politics level” (8)—however, it is unclear whether by “politics” he means not just ideology but the spaces and institutions through which ideology is expressed and which generate political subjectivities.

⁵ Raymond Williams writes that a “documentary” approach to cultural activity “can yield specific evidence about the whole organization within which it was expressed” (Williams *Revolution* 62). However, this approach is unlikely to provide us with anything resembling a full understanding for the simple fact that it remains at a temporal distance from its subject. And, for this reason, Williams argues, “[i]t is only in our own time and place that we can expect to know, in any

by engaging with cultural texts that were written during and after the period in which Left culturalism emerged. Initially I will be discussing texts that appear highly amenable to Left culturalist politics but on closer inspection yield far more ambivalent implications, before going on to explore the legacy of this ambivalence in more recent British literature. The reason for this approach can also be found in Hall's lecture, which evidences an unprecedented willingness to treat cultural texts as active interlocutors in the debate surrounding the Left's renewal; valuable voices that should be invited up to the table, rather than confined to the kitchen. When Hall seeks to outline the thinking behind his theory of "new identities" he reaches not for a treatise, tract or textbook, but for a film: *My Beautiful Laundrette*, written by Hanif Kureishi and first shown at the Edinburgh Film Festival of 1985. The passage in which he cites this film is well-known, and will be familiar to anybody with an interest in Kureishi's work, but it is nonetheless worth quoting at length:

This is a text that nobody likes. Everybody hates it. You go to it looking for what are called "positive images" and there are none. There aren't any positive images like that with whom one can, in a simple way, identify. Because as well as the politics—and there is certainly a politics in that and in Kureishi's other film [*Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987)], but it is not a politics which invites easy identification—it has a politics which is grounded on the complexity of identification—it has a politics which is grounded on the complexity of identifications which are at work [...] If there is to be a serious attempt to understand present-day Britain with its mix of races and colors, its hysteria and despair, then writing about it has to be complex. It can't apologize, or idealize. It can't sentimentalize. It can't attempt to represent any one group as having the total, exclusive, essential monopoly on virtue [...] What we need now, in this position, at this time, is imaginative writing that gives us a sense of the shifts and the difficulties within our society as a whole. (60-61)

substantial way, the general organization" of a given structure of feeling (63).

What we are offered here is, on one level, a cultural reading of a filmic text. Today most of us are familiar with this hermeneutic approach, which is usually less concerned with a given text's aesthetic qualities than with using it to make a broader point about the culture—what Raymond Williams terms the “structure of feeling” (Raymond Williams *Revolution* 64)⁶—of a particular time, place and political milieu. Like many critiques that adopt this approach, Hall's reading is politically didactic, but that is hardly a problem: literary and cultural critics have for some time been apt to situate themselves politically when embarking on a given project, and even, in some instances, to use texts primarily as a vehicle for their own political pronouncements. Moreover, it is worth acknowledging that such didacticism does not necessarily produce unsound readings: *My Beautiful Laundrette's* slippery approach to characterisation does indeed seem to hint at an understanding of identity as constantly evolving in response to manifold social pressures that reside both within and outside the subject. And many audiences—including a significant part of the British south-Asian community—did object to it, so in that sense at least the film can be argued to circumscribe any attempt to treat Kureishi as a mouthpiece for his cultural constituency.

However, Hall's reading is also one in which the text is granted an ability to contribute, in at least a partially autonomous way, to a conversation that is fundamentally political. It is not treated merely as evidence—as a rich but basically inert terrain of corroboration—but as a substantial contribution to the discussion that deserves to be treated on equal terms with other, more conventionally political texts. This limited autonomy allows Hall to move beyond the diagnostic approach, but it also provides the basis for his declaration of what culture should and should not be, paradoxically enabling him to subordinate the text to the demands of political praxis—of “[w]hat we need now”. Thus his

⁶ Williams coins this term in *The Long Revolution* (1961), and considers it to describe “a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life that an external analyst could describe are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour [...] it is as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization” (Raymond Williams *Revolution* 64).

reading is not just didactic in its attempt to analyse the present structure of feeling; it is an explicitly political exhortation for texts, their authors and readers, to do certain things in order to bring about a shift in culture and society, both in Britain and beyond. Williams might have found this approach problematic,⁷ but what is more important to note here is that it allows any given text to take on a reflexive and potentially disruptive role, contributing to the political conversation in which it participates while simultaneously reflecting back on the praxes that are imputed to it. Stated simply, the danger in identifying “[w]hat we need now”—and giving the thing needed a voice of its own—is that it ends up having as much to say about you as you about it.

This process of culture frustrating—even turning against—its ideological masters, and shedding uncomfortable light on the assumptions of those who presume to speak for it, forms the principal focus of this investigation, as well as a good part of its methodology. *Freedom and the City* thus represents a continuation of the culturalist approach, since in principle it attempts something that cultural materialism has for some time sought to achieve: to appropriate Alan Sinfield’s terms, it “seeks to discern the scope for dissident politics [...] both within texts and in their roles in cultures” (Sinfield *Faultlines* 9-10). However, it departs from previous analyses of this type in one highly significant way: while for the most part cultural materialism has historically targeted the Right, *Freedom and the City* focuses on the Left—on the political and cultural assumptions of Left culturalism itself.

⁷ Williams criticises the tendency of Marxist literary critics to instrumentalise culture, something “which has made Marxism notorious: ‘Is this work socialist or not in tendency? is it helping forward the most creative movement in society?’ where literature is defined solely in terms of its political affiliations. Marxists, more than anyone else, need to repudiate this kind of end-product, in practice as firmly as in theory” (Raymond Williams *Culture and Society* 276). While “the arts of a period [...] are of major importance” in expressing its structure of feeling, this expression functions “not consciously, but by the fact that here, in the only examples we have of recorded communication that outlives its bearers, the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon” (*Revolution* 64-65). Any attempt at instrumentalisation is thus not just politically suspect but also bound to fail, since culture is not subject to prescriptions in any straightforward way.

1. Freedom and the City as Faultlines

For at least forty years cultural analysis has formed a significant aspect of left-wing thought in Britain. But while it was first deployed in a systematic way by Williams in the late 1950s and early 60s, it was not until the 1980s that it reached its highest pitch of political exigency, when many on the Left began to recognise a fundamental shift in the organisation of capitalism—the so-called “New Times”—which required them to overhaul their critical apparatus. Hall’s demand for a new model of subjectivity that moved beyond class is emblematic of this recognition, and forms part of a larger, far-reaching call for the Left to assimilate culture into its analyses. As he points out elsewhere, “any simple correspondence between ‘the political’ and ‘the economic’ is exactly what has now disintegrated”, and this “has had the effect of throwing the language of politics more over to the cultural side of the equation” (Hall “Meaning” 120-121). This said, the imperative for the Left to regroup on cultural terrain was not merely academic: it was also political in the most naked sense of the term, and this goes some way towards explaining why subjectivity came to be identified as the new front line. In one crucial way Thatcherism had pre-empted the Left: its adoption of Chicago School ideology entailed an understanding of the subject as first and foremost a consumer, periodically given to reinventing herself—if only by changing her stock portfolio or choosing a different brand of chewing gum at the checkout.⁸ However, even as Thatcherism mobilised itself on this new

⁸ The thinking underpinning it was, therefore, not so much liberal as neoliberal: the former’s hypostatised, *a priori* account of subjectivity was replaced by one that emphasised the formative influence of economic systems residing outside the self, which had the effect of endowing the subject with a large degree of flexibility. This said, the political project of Thatcherism cannot be reduced to an evangelical enthusiasm for Chicago School economists such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek. It is vital to recognise that neoliberalism found its footing in the UK not among the Liberals, but among the Conservative Party, which was historically inclined towards protectionist policies quite inimical to neoliberal macroeconomics. Consequently, as David Marquand observes, Thatcherism is riven with paradoxes: it represents neoliberalism write large, but alloyed with “a strong element of traditional Toryism” that emphasised “patriotism, pride in being British” and “the need to reassert British traditions”. The “rhetoric of Victorian values”, which stressed “the virtues of authority, of hierarchy, of discipline, [and] of order” was also “clearly central” to this project, and, as Marquand is at pains to point out, “of those virtues,

terrain, its flexible model of subjectivity was destabilised by a rigid, essentialised understanding of “Britishness” which sought to deny the increasing cultural heterogeneity that was a legacy of Britain’s open immigration policies of the 1950s and 60s, as well as the various identity movements that followed. This contradiction was of foundational importance to Left culturalism, because it represented a new and important site of contestation where the Left could challenge the Right by exposing its ideological fissures and inconsistencies. Where Thatcherism loaded the term “British” with white, straight, heterosexual and middle-class connotations, Left culturalism countered it by embracing identity as a complex and ever-changing process which couldn’t be reduced to national mythologies in this straightforward and politically obnoxious way. Where the Right attempted to obscure its incongruities with lazy appeals to human nature,⁹ the cultural approach revelled in the possibilities of paradox, and conceptualised the process of subject-formation as always contingent upon the cultural particularities of our interactions with the various collectives—family, community, subculture—that together comprise society.

In short, subjectivity formed what Sinfield calls a “faultline”: a site at which a given hegemony’s ideological logic becomes inconsistent and the possibility of resistance presents itself. According to Sinfield, one of the key strategies of cultural materialism is to locate these faultlines and adopt them as sites of political contest: “It is the project of ideology”, he writes, “to represent [social] relations as harmonious and coherent, so effacing contradiction and conflict; and the project of cultural materialists to draw attention to this” (Sinfield *Faultlines* 9-10). But while, in contrast to Thatcherism, the cultural Left may have actively courted conflict and contradiction, it, like any ideological movement, possessed faultlines of its own. And it might be useful to consider the titular terms of this investigation—freedom and the city—in this way: as

liberalism, even economic liberalism, is inherently subversive” (Marquand 164).

⁹ The 1979 Tory manifesto is a perfect example of this strategy: “We in the Conservative Party [...] want to work *with the grain* of human nature, helping people to help themselves [...] This is the way to restore that self-reliance and self-confidence which are the basis of personal responsibility and national success” (*Manifesto* 7).

faultlines wherein a hidden logic of Left culturalism becomes visible and vulnerable to critique.

The city has for a long time been considered a natural zone of operation for the British Left. In the nineteenth century it was where the oppressive dynamics of industrial capitalism were visible in their barest form, and so it is hardly surprising that when Friedrich Engels sought to study them in detail he trained his eye not on the Derwent Valley, where Richard Arkwright pioneered the mill system, but on Manchester, the world's first industrial city. The city is fundamental to Engels's analysis, however, not just because it gives material form to capitalism on a grand scale, but also because the conditions it produces enable the collective self-consciousness and empowerment of those whom it oppresses. Only in the city, he writes, do the latter "begin to feel as a class, as a whole; they begin to perceive that, though feeble as individuals, they form a power united [...] the consciousness of oppression awakes, and the workers attain social and political importance" (Engels 122). Thus it was in the city that the Trades Union Congress was formed, at Sheffield in 1866, and it was out of the difficulties of urban living that various forms of municipal socialism arose towards the end of the nineteenth century. When, after 1922, the Labour Party started to develop into a considerable force in British politics, it was largely due to the concentration of support in and around Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield. And while in the post-war period Labour became a party of national government, the metropolises of the industrial North and Midlands, Scotland and South Wales, continued to represent its heartlands.

However, despite this close and longstanding relationship with the city, the Left struggled to advance a meaningful urban response to the New Right when the latter began to assert itself in the early 1980s—even though the ravages of Thatcherism were most visible in urban areas. As Geoff Mulgan, another figure connected to the New Times group, wrote in 1989:

It is no coincidence that it is in the cities that the laws of Thatcherism have been most apparent, as riots simmer and erupt and as transport systems collapse; nor is it any coincidence that despite the prime minister's repeated call for a dynamic new

approach to the inner city, no vision has been forthcoming beyond a vague and scarcely inspiring promise of new shopping and leisure centres and orbital ring roads.

The Right's historic unease [with the city] makes it all the more remarkable that the Left has so clearly failed to sustain a coherent city politics. Although the Left in Britain evolved out of the cities, first implemented its ideas in municipal politics and still controls nearly all the major cities of Britain, it too has no real vision of city life in the 21st century: of how cities can be good places to live, and of how a balance can be struck between collective consumption and diverse identities. In other countries the Left has often used cities as long-term showcases, models of planning, redistribution and civic responsibility. In Britain the Left of the 1980s has often seemed more interested in using control of cities as a quick stepping-stone to national power, a means rather than an end. (Mulgan 262)

On a practical level, Mulgan is quite right: the British Left did indeed fail to formulate a coherent city politics in the 1980s.¹⁰ However, on a theoretical level the city became quite important to the Left's response to Thatcherism, and the cultural agenda played a significant role in this. For, as Paul Gilroy—a student of Hall—argued in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), if the Left wished to engage fully with the faultline of subjectivity, and to use the resulting insights as a way of militating against Thatcherism, it was imperative that “the role of distinctively urban processes and experiences [were] recognized” (Gilroy, *Union Jack* 228). Crucially, a fundamental component of this project as he conceptualised it was a “disassociation from the corporate structures of formal politics”, a necessary step if the Left wanted to reorient its critical purview towards “expressive cultures which prize non-work time and space” (228, 235).

¹⁰ Although some metropolitan authorities attempted to advance something resembling this—Liverpool under the (de facto) leadership of Derek Hatton, for instance, or Sheffield under David Blunkett—they quickly became bogged down in standoffs with Westminster before their power was curtailed by the Local Government Act of 1985.

And the city presented itself as exactly the kind of location in which this could be achieved: a place where formal politics could be renounced in favour of cultural propinquity, subversive pleasures and complex identities that were—like the city itself—never fixed, but always in the process of becoming.

In this way Gilroy invested the city with radically emancipatory potential. However, we should note that what is offered here is not so much a coherent *city politics* but a compelling model of *urban culture*. The distinction is significant, as is the subtle implication that formal politics are not simply irrelevant to the task of reading these cultures—they deserve no place in the political praxis that undergirds Gilroy's analysis. This point plays a key role in the discussion that takes place in chapter one of *Freedom and the City*, which focuses on Jeanette Winterson's 1987 novel *The Passion*. Winterson locates much of her narrative in Venice, in the early nineteenth century, after it has been annexed by the First French Republic. However, I argue that the novel's representation of the former city-state bears an uncanny resemblance to the British inner cities that were so important to the model of urban culture celebrated by Hall, Gilroy and Left culturalism in general. On the one hand, both are considered to be carceral places under the boot of an invading power—respectively, Napoleonic imperialism and Thatcherite urbanism. On the other, they are ungovernable, uniquely able to resist outside control: zones of untrammelled freedom whose denizens are at liberty to indulge their most ardent passions and transgressive whims. What is most compelling about this contradiction is that the former lack of autonomy is represented as a *condition* of the latter freedom; that the novel endorses a model of freedom that is predicated on its opposite. Critics have tended to ignore this political paradox and focus instead on the emancipatory aspects of Winterson's ludic approach to sexuality. *The Passion's* Venice is often read as a purely liberatory space in which ontological binaries are challenged and indeterminacy valorised. But while certainly true, this approach fails to recognise that the city's emancipatory potential ultimately relies on its residents' indeterminate political status as *exiles* of the French Empire. I argue that this celebration of exile is also characteristic of Left culturalism, and in this way begin to flesh out what I mean by the cultural politics of disenfranchisement: a logic which dictates that, in urban contexts where

cultural diversity and propinquity might substitute for polity, an act of collective, voluntary self-exile might be politically fruitful when a hegemon's power appears too great to resist through the mechanisms of formal politics.

We might be tempted to extrapolate from this that in certain respects cultural politics represented nothing less than a renunciation of a longstanding commitment to enfranchisement by means of a political logic that located emancipatory promise in the very abandonment of freedom. The danger with this approach, however, is that it risks being overly reductive in its definition of freedom and insufficiently sensitive to the historical context to which Left culturalism was reacting. A better way of understanding the emancipatory project of the cultural Left might be through what Aiwā Ong has called “experiments with freedom”. Ong argues that throughout modern history, moments of rapid capitalist expansion have often been accompanied by “[e]xperimentations with freedoms [...] at the political, social and individual levels”. The last thirty years—which have seen neoliberalism rise to a position of global hegemony—are no exception, and this development has “greatly complicated the meaning of freedom and obscured our understanding of the various forms it can take” (Ong “Experiments with Freedom” 229). The relationship between political authorities that guarantee different kinds of freedom and the spaces or ontologies through which the latter operates is now highly unstable,¹¹ and one of the principal reasons for this confusion at both the global and the local level is the gradual erosion of spatially delimited political entities such as the nation-state—for many a historic guarantor of personal freedom—by a deterritorialising neoliberal agenda that is predicated on a universalised, economistic understanding of individual liberty. *The Passion* encourages us to think of Left culturalism's engagement with the city as a response to this situation: as an experiment with freedom that rejected *both* the neoliberal model of liberty *and* the national/statist alternative in favour of another which conceived of freedom not as something the subject *has*—that she is recognised by some local or universal power as possessing—but as something

¹¹As Ong puts it, “What is citizenship if not the institutionalisation of human rights as political membership in a nation-state? What are human rights if not the freedom from basic human want promised by a global community?” (Ong “Experiments with Freedom” 229).

she *does*, performs, in concert with other people. It implicitly rejected the idea of freedom as a personal possession guaranteed by a sovereign, whether expressed spatially (the nation/state) or ontologically (the human/individual/consumer) and conceptualised it instead as an emancipatory praxis that must be *enacted* through cultural processes like subject-formation in spaces marked by pluralism, such as the city. And it is by imagining how emancipation can emerge in these circumstances even—or especially—when the latter are characterised by a lack of freedom, defined possessively, that *The Passion* reveals a logic inherent to Left culturalism which considered urban culture to be an adequate substitute for formal politics.

2. Neoliberalism and the Depredation of Politics

Winterson's novel is in no way a critique of the culturalist project: it merely directs our attention to a logic inherent to Left culturalism that has not received the attention it deserves. Subsequent texts have demonstrated a great deal more ambivalence, however, and after analysing Winterson, *Freedom and the City* goes on to explore how this ambivalence emerged by discussing Hanif Kureishi's second novel, *The Black Album* (1995). In this text, it argues, an author who has often been treated as a kind of poster-boy for the cultural Left comes to an abrupt and disturbing realisation about the latter's limitations. It charts much the same journey as Kureishi's first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), with a second-generation south-Asian immigrant moving to the city to take advantage of the generous opportunities—sexual, political and intellectual—that exist there. While studying at a third-rate college in the late 1980s, Shahid is taught by a lecturer who embodies exactly the kind of politics espoused by Left culturalism: who takes him to all-night raves in disused warehouses, dresses him in women's clothes and make-up, and encourages him to write essays on the ethnic and sexual indeterminacy of the artist who at this point is still known as Prince. However, he also falls in with a group of disenfranchised Islamic nationalists who explicitly seek empowerment on the basis of an essentialised Muslim identity. And in this way, Kureishi organises his novel around two

competing liberatory strategies: one which is predicated on political recognition and enfranchisement, and another which eschews such commitments in favour of expressive urban culture.

That he sees fit to contrive such a narrative strategy hints at a perceived need to “test” culturalist praxis against other emancipatory agendas in order to vouchsafe its continued tenability. However, far from alleviating the anxiety that is implicit in this need, an incipient discomfiture with culturalist praxis becomes increasingly apparent as the reader observes Kureishi struggling to resolve the narrative and political conflict he establishes at the novel’s outset. While the acid house subculture might at first appear amenable to the culturalist project, Kureishi represents it as overwhelmingly white, middle-class and even suburban, its politics more an exercise in consumer sloganeering than genuinely provocative. Meanwhile, though plainly troubled by the ontological certainties of Islamic nationalism, he understands how the latter might be viewed as a viable model of resistance for a particularly disenfranchised community of Thatcher’s Britain. Consequently, he is forced to pathologise nationalism as a way of neutralising its genuine appeal because—while unwilling to vindicate it—he does not feel that the cultural model is capable of defusing it in political terms. And because of this the novel feels poorly-resolved; characterised not so much by the kind of strategic irresolution celebrated by Left culturalism as by political impasse. Crucially, however, it is Kureishi’s abandonment of the city in the novel’s closing pages that allows the reader to understand the true political import of this failure. When Shahid and Deedee decide to leave London—even though it is only for a weekend on the coast—the reader’s suspicion that what she is witnessing is an abandonment of the cultural politics espoused by Hall and Gilroy is confirmed: for what kind of multiple selves, multiple ways of being, are on offer at the seaside?

In this way, *The Black Album* represents a key moment when the liberatory potential of the inner city was brought into question—along with the viability of the culturalist project as a whole—by one of the latter’s most earnest interlocutors. I argue that the novel seems to recognise that one of the consequences of celebrating the inner city as a site of cultural indeterminacy was an unquestioning embrace of *spatial* indeterminacy, which key figures

connected to Marxism’s “spatial turn”—such as David Harvey and Edward Soja—had identified as an important aspect of the New Right’s urban strategy during the 1980s and early 90s. Far from resisting capital’s saturation of urban communities, the analyses of the spatial turn revealed that flexible space was in fact the means by which capital advanced itself, and I suggest that, to Kureishi, this revelation raises the possibility that the cultural Left—which implicitly attached resistant potential to flexible space—was at best unequipped to combat the disaggregating strategies of Thatcherite urbanism, and at worst in cahoots with them. More importantly, linked to this spatial critique is another, more devastating one, which goes some way towards explaining why Kureishi came to feel that Left culturalism had nothing to offer disenfranchised subjects who demanded explicitly political recognition along communitarian lines. This second critique is deeply concerned with what Left culturalism did with the concept of the political in the name of freedom; with what key culturalist thinkers risked when they identified the collapse of politics and culture as a cornerstone of their emancipatory project.¹² For as Hannah Arendt argues in “What is Freedom?”—one of the eight “exercises in political thought” collected in *Between Past and Future* (1961)—without politics, freedom itself is rendered meaningless:

¹² Culturalist orthodoxy would dictate that this process represented expansion rather than collapse, and that, as Hall puts it, any “expanded definition of the political also entail[s] a recognition of the proliferation of potential sites of social conflict and constituencies for change”. Hall argues that the process of expanding the political was, in fact, begun by the culturalists of the 1960s, and was merely continued by those of the 1980s: the former, he writes, “launched an assault on the narrow definition of ‘politics’ and tried to project in its place an ‘expanded concept of the political’. If it did not move so far as the feminist principle that ‘the personal is political’, it certainly opened itself up to the critical dialectic between ‘private troubles’ and ‘public issues’, which blew the conventional conception of politics apart. The logic implied by our position was that these ‘hidden dimensions’ had to be represented within the discourses of ‘the political’, and that ordinary people could and should organize where they were, around issues of immediate experience” (Hall “Life and Times” 188). Whether this entails that the New Left must answer a charge similar to one I level at the culturalism of the 1980s is beyond the scope of this investigation, but the possibility is implied again in the third chapter, which discusses a “rudimentary” form of the cultural politics of disenfranchisement which emerged out of the turmoil of the 1960s.

The field where freedom has always been known, not as a problem, to be sure, but as a fact of everyday life, is the political realm. And even today, whether we know it or not, the question of politics and the fact that man is a being endowed with the gift of action must always be present to our mind when we speak of the problem of freedom; for action and politics, among all the capabilities and potentialities of human life, are the only things of which we could not even conceive without at least assuming that freedom exists, and we can hardly touch a single political issue without, implicitly or explicitly, touching upon an issue of man's liberty. Freedom [...] is actually the reason that men live together in political organization at all. Without it, political life as such would be meaningless. The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action. (Arendt *Between* 146).

In all her writings, Arendt never articulates the profound connection she perceives between politics and freedom more eloquently than she does here. And perhaps this is why it is so tempting to read this passage—wrongly—as optimistic. Because, to the extent that her political philosophy can be understood as a single body of thought at all, it insists over and over, and often in the starkest terms, that freedom is not merely the *raison d'être* of politics: without the latter, it cannot exist at all. Thus while her insights predate the political narrative this investigation seeks to trace, Arendt represents a key voice that will be heard repeatedly throughout *Freedom and the City*.¹³ Because the

¹³ It is worth acknowledging early on that some readers may have doubts about situating an Arendtian model of freedom alongside the broadly post/Marxist framework already established. However, while Arendt herself was quite hostile towards the Hegelian dimensions of Marxist historiography, it is important to emphasise that much of her work is characterised by strategies and concepts that are by no means anathema to leftist critique, such as historical materialism. *The Human Condition* (1958) is, at least in the first analysis, a notable exception, and perhaps the fact that this text is often mistakenly identified as the foundational expression of Arendt's thought explains why so few critics are willing to recognise that one of her principal achievements was to synthesise phenomenological and materialist paradigms in her analysis of political action. This synthesis tends to produce rather clumsy descriptions of her methodology: for instance, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman have described her as “[o]ffering what might be termed an eclectic

way she conceptualises politics entails an understanding of freedom as *both* praxis *and* possession; as action—and so performative—but action that takes place within a delimited space in which acts are recognised as possessing political meaning. There is nothing essential about this model of freedom: it is always contingent because human action is always capricious, and it is always the act rather than the executor that is recognised; however, it does dictate that, since an act must be exercised within political space in order to be free, the limits of this space are also the limits of freedom. As Arendt puts it in *The Promise of Politics*, published posthumously in 2005: “The crucial thing about this kind of political freedom is that it is a *spatial construct*. Whoever leaves his polis or is banished from it loses [...] the only space in which he can be free” (*Promise* 119, emphasis added).¹⁴

Thus where inside the polis, freedom is necessarily enacted in public participation, association and conflict, outside, it cannot exist at all. And it is this spatially delimited model of politics-as-freedom that allows us to read the abandonment of London at the end of *The Black Album* as an acknowledgement that the inner city will not achieve what the cultural project wants it to achieve. Because the way it has been conceptualised—as an indeterminate space of exile in which the emancipatory potential of expressive culture in all its colourful plurality can be realised—places it outside the political realm in which freedom

and singular Heideggerian-informed left-leaning cultural materialism” (Williams and Chrisman 7). Unwieldy as descriptions like this might be, they are highly suggestive of the versatility of Arendt’s ideas. I also happen to think that this one is quite close to the truth.

¹⁴ We see just how crucial space is to Arendt’s understanding of freedom in *On Revolution* (1963), in which she argues that “wherever it existed as a tangible reality, [freedom] has *always* been spatially limited. This is especially clear for the greatest and most elementary of all negative liberties, the freedom of movement; the borders of national territory or the walls of the city-state comprehended and protected a space in which men could move freely [...] What is true for freedom of movement is, to a large extent, valid for freedom in general. Freedom in a positive sense is possible only among equals, and equality itself is by no means a universal valid principle but, again, applicable only with limitations and even within spatial limits. If we equate these spaces of freedom [...] with the political realm itself, we shall be inclined to think of them as islands in a sea of oases in a desert. This image, I believe, is suggested to us not merely by the consistency of a metaphor but by the record of history as well” (Arendt *Revolution* 275, emphasis added).

bears any meaning whatsoever.¹⁵ In short, Kureishi seems to fear that since urban culture has been adopted as a substitute for formal politics, the Left has effectively nullified its own emancipatory project by surrendering the realm that gives freedom meaning. And to make matters worse, undergirding the spatial-political aspect of Kureishi's chagrin is an incipient sense that expressive cultures are not, in fact, capable of delivering on the emancipatory potential they were believed to possess in the first place. To be sure, the "second summer of love" represents an almighty cultural ferment, but it is one largely devoid of political significance: acid house might be a fascinating expression of contemporary youth culture, but it hardly represents a vehicle for political resistance. Thus not only did Left culturalism permit the New Right to instrument its political project virtually unopposed, it overestimated the potential of its own cultural project, too.

It is with this cultural and political impasse that the first half of *Freedom and the City* concludes. Its legacy forms the basis for the second half, which begins with a discussion of the "terminal zones" of J.G. Ballard's late novels *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000). Chapter three initially steps back to suggest that large parts of Ballard's oeuvre from 1962 on deserve attention because his early work is oddly prescient of the cultural narrative this investigation seeks to trace, and because this equips his later work with an historical insight that younger generations of British novelists lack. In his early disaster fiction—which is often read in the light of the political upheavals of the 1960s—Ballard develops what might be called a "rudimentary" form of the cultural politics of disenfranchisement that rehearses the emancipatory strategy adopted by Left culturalism during the 1980s. Like Winterson, in these texts Ballard formulates a disruptive praxis that rejects formal politics as a bourgeois myth by embracing the transformational potential of morbidity and exile, specifically through his utopian representation of environmental cataclysm. The

¹⁵ The stinging irony here is that Arendt's recognition of the intimate relationship between politics and freedom is predicated on an understanding of political community as necessary due to the inescapably plural nature of human society. In Bonnie Honig's words, "[w]hen Arendt calls for the protection of political space, she does so largely out of the conviction that plurality and difference [...] are the first casualties of the displacement of politics and the closure of political space" (Honig *Displacement* 10).

later novels diverge from this morbid utopianism, however, in focusing relentlessly on a totalised but disaggregated neoliberal dystopia whose spatial and ontological logics are at once highly elastic and oppressively deterministic, and in which every conceivable act of resistance—particularly those based on aesthetic/cultural self-realisation—has been co-opted by late capitalism. What is so compelling about these dystopian texts is that, in pointed contrast to the earlier fictions, they *lament* the eclipse of the political. *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes* recognise first that, while the key battleground of postmodernity has usually been identified as either culture or economics (depending on which is deemed to determine social reality), politics undergirds and cuts across both, and second that the abandonment of this particular battleground has allowed a set of chillingly totalitarian circumstances to emerge. To this extent, I argue, Ballard's late fiction can be seen to dramatise the legacy of the Right's attack on politics, as well as the latter's abandonment by the Left, and implies that in combination these two phenomena have permitted the complete depredation of the political by late capital.

The late novels also pursue Kureishi's nascent anxiety in *The Black Album* that, rather than providing a politically fruitful expression of conflict and contradiction, culture now represents a site of capitulation. Indeed, Ballard takes this gloomy thesis farther by suggesting that today culture serves explicitly to maintain the neoliberal hegemony it was once supposed to resist. *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes* form part of a polyptych of novels that explores the idea that, in realising its end of history, neoliberalism has given birth to a form of capitalism so highly calibrated, so totalised, and so devoid of the progressivism that spurred its development over the last two centuries, that it is at risk of eclipsing its own productivist imperative. This situation is expressed not just in the lassitude and pococurantism of the communities the novels represent, but also in the urban spaces these communities inhabit. The coastal resorts of southern Europe are depicted as simultaneously streamlined and sclerotic, totalised and fragmented, and function as explicitly spatial manifestations of Ballard's thesis that, in destroying the political as part of its hegemonic project, neoliberalism has generated the conditions of its own demise; that, in order to function, capitalism *requires* the kind of disorder once

represented by politics, which gives the lie to economism by reintroducing the unavoidable fact of the contingency of all social relations. In short, the late novels suggest that capitalism's end of history might also have been its de facto end unless it had found a substitute for the disruptiveness of politics. And they imply that the complex, contradictory and performative account of culture celebrated by the Left has come to serve neoliberalism in exactly this way. Hence the residents of these terminal zones engage in subversive acts of sex and violence which seem spontaneous but are in fact highly-coordinated by community figureheads who are keen to vindicate them as personal liberation in the service of civic culture. And in this way, Ballard's late fiction can be seen to use freedom and the city as a way of concatenating the three threads of this investigation—the enervation of the political in postmodernity, the paradoxically totalising and disaggregating spatial logic of neoliberalism, and late capitalism's steady co-optation of culture.¹⁶

To differing degrees, then, both Kureishi and Ballard suggest that the continued viability of culture—especially urban culture—as a vehicle for resistance now appears to be increasingly in doubt. And this depressing truth seems to have had a significant impact on contemporary British literature, for where once upon a time writers such as Winterson and Kureishi considered urban culture to bear emancipatory potential, today a progressive alignment of the city with a politically-engaged understanding of culture seems more difficult to imagine. It is this challenge that forms the basis of *Freedom and the City's* final chapter, which focuses on two well-known novels from 2005: *Saturday* by Ian McEwan and *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. I argue that *Saturday* represents a genuine attempt to rehabilitate the urban experience as a valuable

¹⁶ The latter in particular represents a commonplace anxiety in recent Marxist criticism; however, while cultural critics have frequently noted the connection between the Left's adoption of culture as a site of political praxis and its capitulation to one or another of the logics listed above, not all have mapped out the relationship in a systematic way. (Two thinkers who do are David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, and they come closest to connecting all three rubrics—culture, politics and space—systematically in their signature texts on postmodernity: respectively, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) and *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).) Moreover, few have used this relationship to read Ballard's late work, and none has done so by deploying the heuristic of freedom and the city.

site of pluralism and contingency, but that the novel fails to achieve this because of the way it interpolates its representation of a vibrant and polymorphous—if anxious—London with an anachronistic account of culture predicated on liberal humanism. By contrast, the representation of culture in *Never Let Me Go* exposes the way in which humanist aesthetics often serve to mask various forms of bureaucratised violence. However, even as the novel embraces an anti-humanist understanding of culture, the latter's role is limited to exposing oppressive logics rather than combatting them, and so we are confronted with a situation in which cultural activity will no longer suffice as a vehicle for emancipation. Ishiguro seems to suggest that a more explicitly political engagement is necessary, and yet it is no coincidence that the latter's absence is concomitant with a conspicuous eschewal of urban environments. For while he is aware that the city is a prerequisite for any engagement of this kind, he struggles to imagine what such a politicised spatiality would look like. Thus *Saturday* and *Never Let Me Go* represent two sides of the same problematic: in the former we are offered an optimistic rehabilitation of the city as a site of contingency and political pluralism which is compromised by the way it imagines culture operating within that site; whereas in the latter we are offered a far more progressive account of culture that is nonetheless profoundly pessimistic due to its political limitations, which are articulated via the very absence of any kind of plural spatiality.

* * *

For those seeking a way forward for Hall's project of renewal it cannot be said that *Freedom and the City* is a particularly happy read. The investigation begins in the mid-1980s, with a moment in which the Left endowed urban culture with significant emancipatory possibility. It concludes nearly twenty years later, when all sense of this potential has been lost and a progressive account of urban culture appears virtually impossible. In between is an extended discussion of recent British literature that demonstrates how the way in which urban culture came to be privileged in leftist discourse has profoundly undermined contemporary attempts to insist on culture *or* politics as meaningful sites of emancipation. But the purpose of this critique is not simply to dismiss

culturalist praxes, whether textual or political; rather, it is to advance a new reading of post-Thatcher fiction which recognises the latter's unique insights into a difficult moment in the history of the British Left. The question of whether Left culturalism will be able to move forward with the two distinct components of its project—a demand for radical political change on the one hand and a sophisticated analysis of culture on the other—intact is still open to debate, and will not be answered in a definitive way here. But recent pronouncements by Lawrence Grossberg, one of the figures responsible for introducing Hall's work to the United States, imply that the task is going to be difficult. In an essay entitled "Does Cultural Studies Have Futures? Should It?" Grossberg recognises that "it is not so clear—and it certainly cannot be assumed—that culture continues to be dominant in the current conjuncture" when compared with other broad disciplinary rubrics, such as politics and economics (Grossberg 17). While it remains an important aspect of everyday life—and thus surely worthy of continued study—we might ask whether culture still deserves to be treated as the singular determinant of social experience in the way it was a few decades ago. At the same time, Grossberg argues passionately (and rightly) that we must "never agree with those who would argue that questions of culture and identity were—and continue to be—somehow unnecessary distractions from the real work of understanding and transforming the contemporary context" (23). What is clear, however, is that some of the most foundational terms of cultural studies will need re-evaluating as it "revisit[s] the question of how one theorizes the social totality"; indeed, this process may even demand that practitioners set about formulating "a post-cultural (or, at least, a post-culturalist) cultural studies" (24).

That may well be the case. But *Freedom and the City* is ultimately less concerned with the status of the cultural within cultural studies than with how the latter conceived of the political. As such—if for a moment I can be permitted to rigidify a notoriously permeable disciplinary boundary—it is worth paying attention to what political theorists have to say about culture as well as what cultural theorists have to say about the political. The result of this shift need not be dispiriting: for one, Chantal Mouffe seems to think that culture can still play a significant role in political discourse. As she suggested in a recent lecture at the

Kunst-Werk Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin:

I am convinced that cultural and artistic practices could play an important role in the agonistic [political] struggle because they are a privileged terrain for the mobilisation of affects and the construction of new subjectivities. To revitalise democracy in our post-political societies what is urgently needed, I think, is to foster the multiplication of agonistic public spaces where everything that the dominant consensus tends to obscure or obliterate can be brought to light and challenged [...] To be sure, artists cannot pretend any more to constitute an avant-gard, offering a radical critique, but this is not reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They still can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities. I would say in fact that this has always been their role and that it is only the modernist illusion of the privileged position of the artist that has made us believe otherwise. Once this illusion is abandoned, jointly with the revolutionary conception of politics accompanying it, we can see that artistic critical practices represent an important dimension of democratic politics. (Mouffe "New Patrons")

Freedom and the City echoes this optimism in principle, though it is similarly sceptical of the idea that culture is capable of functioning as an agent of radical change in its own right. "Cultural politics" serves adequately as a shorthand, a broad indicator of ideological and hermeneutic sensibility. But one of the keenest lessons British fiction of the last twenty-five years has to teach us is that, however close the relationship between the two terms might be, culture and politics still refer to different things, and to conflate the two in such a way that the boundary between them becomes not just obscure but virtually impossible to determine is quite hazardous.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PASSION IN EXILE:

Jeanette Winterson's Venice and the British Inner City

The 1980s was a period when considerable political and economic upheaval coincided with significant urban redevelopment in Britain. It was also a decade when civil disobedience, rioting and violence became more common than ever and took on a distinctly inner-city flavour. Of course, the London boroughs received the majority of media attention at the time; however, the best expression of the crumbling British city was to be found elsewhere, in Liverpool, in the darkest north. As Richard J. Williams points out in *The Anxious City* (2004), Liverpool was “a city whose entire existence seemed to be in doubt by the middle of the 1980s”; whose decline was made “all the more disturbing because of the grandeur of [its] context”. It is a city that at its apogee boasted more wealth than anywhere in the UK outside London, whose streets are lined with innumerable listed buildings, and which is designated in large part a UNESCO World Heritage Site—a status that “value[s] it equally with Stonehenge, the Great Pyramids of Giza and the Taj Mahal” (Richard J. Williams 107-108). Yet by the 1980s it was widely thought to be in terminal decline, with rampant unemployment and a growing and increasingly angry urban working class. Nothing demonstrated this precarious situation more than the events of 3 July 1981, when the Toxteth riots earned the city another, more dubious accolade: the site of the first use of CS gas by police on the British mainland. But, as Williams points out, despite this troubled history Liverpool's decline has

produced a special fascination for outsiders. The travel writings of expatriate Americans Paul Theroux and Bill Bryson have

popularised its ruinous qualities. A local councillor, Keith Hackett, complained that one of the city's problems was the entertainment value of its decline, as if its purpose had become the production of morbid thrills for tourists. And yet, the city has willingly collaborated in this process. The standard architectural reference book on the city, *Seaport* by Quentin Hughes [...] presented an image of an entropic city, all soot, decay, moss, rotten wood and steam trains, the whole lot crumbling into the Mersey [...] Above all, Derek Hatton, the de facto leader of the city council between 1983 and 1986, presents an apocalyptic scenario, in which Liverpool becomes the true fount of resistance to global capital. (108)

So if decline and blight were affecting every large British city during the 1980s, it crystallised into a particularly awe-inspiring kind of thanatos in Liverpool, whose “continued existence was both rhetorically and actually in doubt” (108)—and yet this zone of decline, of extinction and morbidity, was perceived as both titillating and ripe for political exploitation.

In this sense, at least, Liverpool could count itself among good company. Venice, as Judith Seaboyer notes, has long been “a theater for narratives of death, fragmentation, and decay”. Indeed, the appeal of Venice to the Anglo-American mind has been connected to its “crumbling reality” since at least the Romantic period, and is as much a part of the city's mythology as is its grandeur (Seaboyer 484). As Tristram Hunt has pointed out, John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (1851-53) is shot through with anxiety about its titular city crumbling into the murky waters of the *Laguna Veneta*, never to rise again. And to this extent—that is, the extent to which it has come to serve as “an allegory of ruin” (Hunt 119)—we might say that its place in the popular imagination is not dissimilar to that of the inner cities during the 1980s. Indeed, this is perhaps why Venice's morbid magnetism became more powerful than ever towards the end of the twentieth century, when the political challenge represented by the latter was most acute. In this period, Seaboyer writes, “The *idea* of Venice [came] to serve a wider purpose than it did for the Romantics”, as a space in which “concepts of reality,

truth, and meaning [were] thrown into question by the idea of difference” (Seaboyer 484, emphasis in original). It is no coincidence that areas such as Toxteth, Brixton, Moss Side and Handsworth functioned in precisely the same way.

Seaboyer’s characterisation of Venice as “an allegory for the world-in-crisis and for the subject-in-crisis, each on the verge of a catastrophic collapse” (507) is articulated as part of a discussion of Jeanette Winterson’s second novel, *The Passion* (1987),¹⁷ much of whose action takes place in the city. Set during the European wars of the early nineteenth century, *The Passion* tells the stories of Henri, a young, provincial Frenchman who works as Napoleon’s cook, and Villanelle, a web-footed Venetian croupier who is sold by her husband as a *vivandière* to the officers of the *Grande Armée*. The two characters meet during Napoleon’s disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812, when they desert the army and walk across Europe to Villanelle’s home city. This Winterson characterises as a decrepit but fabulous place: ruinous, impossible to map and brimming with excessive and subversive pleasures. It is where people come if they want to lose themselves in sex and gambling—and above all if they wish to escape the Napoleonic regime, for if the city is nominally subject to French control it seems to exist entirely on its own terms. Try as he might to settle in, however, Venice remains a maddening mystery to Henri, and when at the end of the novel he is committed to an asylum for murdering Villanelle’s husband in gruesome circumstances, he makes no attempt to escape because the madhouse is so much easier to understand than the city outside.

Given Winterson’s critical constituency of queer theorists, it is not surprising that much analysis of the novel has focused on its representation of gender and sexuality.¹⁸ Seaboyer’s appraisal takes a novel approach, however, in

¹⁷ In fact, *The Passion* is Winterson’s third published novel, but 1985’s *Boating for Beginners* does not always appear on official bibliographies.

¹⁸ Villanelle has been the focus of much of this criticism, which often notes how her supposed masculinity—her “phallic” webbed feet (a masculine attribute passed from boatmen to their sons, not to their daughters), as well as her proclivity for cross-dressing and ambiguous sexuality—provides a deliberate counterpoint to Henri’s effeminate parochialism. Lisa Moore goes even further and argues that, while she never treats sexuality unproblematically, Winterson nonetheless “represents lesbianism simply as central, rather than ‘opposed’ to anything”, in so

foregrounding the significance of *The Passion's* physical and historical setting during what she calls the "Romantic dreaming into existence of the modern nation-state":

The choice of this historiographic ground of empire and expansionist warfare over that of revolution is not arbitrary; rather, it is constitutive of a text whose political focus, while manifestly gender and sexuality rather than politics in the national sense, addresses contemporary as well as historical sources of war and violence [...] The narrative operates at the level of the individual, but its implications are broader. The novel is set within the zone of the Romantic dreaming into existence of the modern nation-state, and while a concept so fraught with historical complexity cannot be traced to any kind of simple root cause, it has become a modern excuse for the compulsively repetitive European "tradition of senseless nationalist warfare". (Seaboyer 486)

doing forging a poetics of "lesbian postmodernism" (Moore 108, 110). She argues that in *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) Winterson "collapses the distinction between modern and postmodern" (116), ultimately "resist[ing] the idea that postmodernity displaces modernity historically by insisting on the coterminousness of both experiences of subjectivity and the body" (122). A large minority of critics, however, have chosen to concentrate on Henri's character, and have drawn attention to the significance of psychoanalytic paradigms to the text's bildungsroman mode. A recent appraisal by Susana Onega, for example, argues that considering the novel's "baroque economy of repetition and excess" it is no surprise that "Henri's maturation process is simultaneously expressed by means of Jungian, Freudian, Lacanian, mythical and Tarot imagery" (Onega 60). She explores Venetian space as a projection of Henri's futile attempt to piece together "his fragmentation of the self" and reconcile the *je* of his own identity with the *je-idéal* he perceives in Napoleon (60-62). She also uses Jung's account of the individuation process, together with his emphasis in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963) on the importance of recollection as a therapeutic strategy, to explore both the fragmentary nature of Henri's identity and how he attempts to rationalise his experiences through writing (69-70, 74-75). In a similar fashion, Seaboyer provides a perspicacious psychoanalytic investigation of the novel's representation of the death drive (Seaboyer 491-499), doubling (503-505—both Napoleon and Villanelle's husband, she argues, function as doubles for Henri's proto-modern identity), and of the return of the repressed as a metaphor for posttraumatic stress disorder (505).

The apparent connection between subjectivity, the narrative's historical situation during the development of the modern nation-state, and the idea of the city as what Jamie Skye Bianco might term a "zone of morbidity"—a space whose exceptional status in relation to sovereignty means that the people who occupy it possess lives stripped of all political significance¹⁹—is something I intend to investigate in detail in this chapter. Specifically, given the harrowing circumstances that typically prevail in zones of morbidity, I am interested in establishing why *The Passion* represents Venice as politically fecund. As Helena Grice and Tim Woods note, "Winterson's Venice represents a promise of possibility lying untapped in the history of space"; however, while their reading suggests that this promise "has been displaced from the contemporary world", I want to argue that *The Passion* considers it to apply to the inner city of the 1980s as well (Grice and Woods 33). This chapter will argue that, through its representation of early nineteenth-century Venice, *The Passion* considers the inner city to be a spatiality that is capable of resisting both the deterritorialising power of capital and the enervating processes of social and cultural normativity that together constituted the Thatcherite project. It will argue that this specifically spatial potentiality is built upon on a privileged understanding of urban culture that embeds the novel in the political milieu of Left culturalism in a very particular way. And it will suggest that the way in which the novel connects the city to an emancipatory narrative that eschews formal political

¹⁹ Bianco coins this term when discussing areas of South American land over which sovereignty has been partially relinquished by the states in which they are situated so that more developed states may engage in military and industrial activities that are not permitted in their own territories. These activities often have catastrophic effects on indigenous peoples, who are, as a consequence of the uncertain operations of sovereignty in these areas, typically afforded no opportunity for redress. "Morbidity" refers not only to the "vast complex of irradiation sicknesses, cancer clusters, and death through uranium mining, nuclear weapons testing and radioactive waste disposal facilities found across and adjacent to the traditional territories and current reservation lands of most Western states tribes" but also to the "exceptional" political and juridical circumstances that permit these activities to continue (Bianco par. 8). The reason for deploying this term, as will become clear, is that, owing to the period of its composition in the mid-1980s, *The Passion* perceives in such uncertain political and juridical circumstances a certain potential for resisting the hegemon—specifically, Thatcherism.

freedom in favour of urban culture in turn reflects back on Left culturalism itself, exposing a logic inherent to the latter which I call the cultural politics of disenfranchisement. As we will see in subsequent chapters, this logic has had a significant impact on British literature of the post-Thatcher period; indeed, I think it can be thought of as an enduring preoccupation of British fiction over the last twenty years.

1. Thatcher, Napoleon and Urban Space

For all the *The Passion's* historical specificity, it is clearly not the case that Winterson's political concerns are limited to the period she represents. While Jago Morrison argues that "*The Passion* presents itself very much as a *historical* novel" (Morrison 101, emphasis in original), it might be better to identify it as a historiographic one instead, since, as Paulina Palmer points out, it "recounts a sequence of events set in the past—but does so with an eye on their relevance to the present" (Palmer 103). Time and again Winterson subverts the standard of factual verisimilitude traditionally demanded of the historical novel and foregrounds her text *as text* rather than as history. The repeated assurance "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (Winterson *Passion* 5, 13, 69, 160) self-consciously draws attention to the politics inherent in the creation and maintenance of historical narratives, thereby characterising these narratives as ongoing rather than complete and eliding the temporal distinction between the novel's setting and the present day.²⁰ Of course, there is no simplistic equivalence linking the

²⁰ This attitude towards history has been prevalent in British fiction at least since John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), but it was explored with increased frequency in the 1980s by the likes of Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children* (1981), among others), Graham Swift (*Waterland* (1983)), Julian Barnes (*Flaubert's Parrot* (1984)), and Peter Ackroyd (*Hawksmoor* (1985)). Linda Hutcheon was among the first to explore this tendency—which she calls historiographic metafiction—in her *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), and it can readily be argued that two of Winterson's novels—*The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)—qualify for the label. Significantly, it can also be argued that the development of this tendency was connected to theoretical developments in the British academy of the 1980s. While Onega may be broadly correct to recognise a similarity between the historico-political interests of *The Passion* and those of new historicism, which was prevalent in North America during the late 1980s, it might be more correct

novel and the events of the mid-1980s; however, I want to suggest that there are some intriguing parallels between the two that need to be acknowledged if we are to understand why the novel imagines Venetian space to be saturated with resistant potential.

In order to understand how Winterson does this, we must first explore what it is that she wants to resist. This is baldly communicated in a striking image that appears towards the beginning of *The Passion*, when Henri describes the storeroom he is shown upon being inducted into the French army:

The space from the ground to the dome of the canvas was racked with rough wooden cages about a foot square with tiny corridors running in between, hardly the width of a man. In each cage there were two or three birds, beaks and claws cut off, staring through the slats with dumb identical eyes. I am no coward and I've seen plenty of convenient mutilation on our farms but I was not prepared for the silence. Not even a rustle. They could have been dead, should have been dead, but for the eyes. (P 6)

This unsettling image works in two ways. First, it represents Napoleonic space in microcosm, implying the Emperor's desire to arrogate and reorganise space on the most minute, apparently arbitrary level, while also reflecting and anticipating his desire to do the same on a massive scale.²¹ Second, it anticipates the fortunes of the European peoples who will come under Napoleon's rule: like the birds, they await assimilation into the French imperial machine with mute

to identify the novel's interests with those of cultural materialism, which was more prevalent in Britain. The latter, as John Brannigan comments, "explore[s] literary texts within the context of contemporary power relations" where "new historicis[m] dealt with the power relations of past societies" (Brannigan 9—though it should be added that this is something of a simplification). Through this political strategy, "literary texts become an important focus for contemporary attempts to resist power", providing "an impetus for political struggle in the present" and making it clear that "literary studies is not removed from the sphere of politics" (6). The interstices of culture, text and power is, as we have seen, a key concern of cultural materialism, and of the present investigation.

²¹ And well beyond the national boundaries of France: most notably in "Poland, or the Duchy of Warsaw as Napoleon had designated it" (Winterson *Passion* 100)

fatalism, their beaks—their ability to object—and their claws—their capacity to resist—removed. Together these implications establish two critical concerns of the novel: the permeation of space with the power of sovereignty, and the latter’s investment in an imperialist agenda designed to replicate this process *ad infinitum* by realising the potential of what Hannah Arendt calls “expansion as a political device” (*Origins* 149). In short, from the chicken coops of the *nouveau régime* right up to its loftiest levels, Winterson perceives everywhere in this organisation of space and people the extension of sovereign power.

Napoleon is identified as the embodiment of this power right from the outset of the novel: the opening paragraph—in a chapter entitled “The Emperor”—establishes him thematically and structurally as not simply the motivation for the members of the *Grande Armée*, but as the animus of the entire narrative. As Winterson writes, “It was Napoleon who had such a passion for chicken that he kept his chefs working around the clock. What a kitchen that was, with birds in every state of undress; some still cold and slung over hooks, some turning slowly on the spit, but most in wasted piles because the Emperor was too busy” (Winterson *Passion* 3). No longer an intimate space in which meals are prepared by artisans, the kitchen has become, at Napoleon’s behest, a vast, brutish machine with raw materials in various stages of transformation into finished product.²² The Emperor himself is “repulsive and fascinating by turns”, completely “in love with himself”, and his vanity and voracity wreak “devastation, rape, slaughter, carnage, starvation” (13). And yet Henri is infatuated with him: while his fellow soldiers “went out whoring most nights”, he recalls, “I was waiting for Bonaparte”. Here as elsewhere in *The Passion*, Henri

²² And while the image of the kitchen represents the arrogation and rationalisation of space and the people who occupy it, it also functions to attribute patriarchal discourses to the Napoleonic regime. When Henri serves him his evening meal, he finds the Emperor “sitting alone [...] turning the globe round and round, holding it tenderly with both hands as if were a breast” (Winterson *Passion* 4). Leaving the chicken on the floor, Henri knows that as soon as he has left the tent Napoleon will “pick it up and push it into his mouth. He wishes his whole face were a mouth [in which] to cram a whole bird” (4). There is no doubting the triple signification of “bird” here: simultaneously chicken, woman and world, all of them subject to Napoleon’s total power. As Henri notes, Napoleon likes “no one except Joséphine and he liked her the way he liked chicken” (3); that is, “in every state of undress”, plucked and cooked and ready for him to consume.

is feminised in relation to Napoleon: now he is dreaming, impressionable, with an almost sexual adoration for his idealised hero; there he is the doting housewife who spends his time confined to the kitchen, “learning how to stuff a chicken and slow down the cooking process” so that he might better please his emperor (15). But he is not unique in adoring Napoleon: it is an infatuation that afflicts all of France, because “[g]reatness like his is hard to be sensible about” and because the country “wanted a ruler and [...] wanted him to rule the world” (8, 30). Thus when he amasses an army at Boulogne in preparation for an invasion of Britain which ultimately never takes place, every one of the soldiers is prepared unquestioningly to die for his emperor. When two thousand men are drowned because the barges Napoleon has ordered built for the invasion prove disastrously unsuitable for crossing the Channel, “[n]o one said, Let’s leave him, let’s hate him”, because the nationalist agenda he represents is so powerful. The day after the disaster on the Channel “2,000 new recruits marched into Boulogne”, and, as Henri writes, “[a]ll France will be recruited if necessary. Bonaparte will snatch up his country like a sponge and wring out every last drop” (25, 8).²³

This rigid account of fixed identities for fixed national purposes, and its implicit measurement of human value in instrumental terms relative to the sovereign, sheds some light on Henri’s depressingly pithy outline of subjectivity under the Napoleonic regime: “Soldiers and women. That’s how the world is. Any other role is temporary. Any other role is a gesture” (45). The confusion of the national her- and himself with the national interest implicit but everywhere apparent in the novel’s characterisation of Napoleonic France is of crucial

²³ This is a clear reference to *levée en masse*—often considered the first example of modern conscription—which was introduced by the National Convention on 23 August 1793 and ultimately allowed for the creation of Napoleon’s *Grande Armée*. The first article of the declaration reads: “From this moment until that in which the enemy shall have been driven from the soil of the Republic, all Frenchmen are in permanent requisition for the service of the armies. The young men shall go to battle; the married men shall forge arms and transport provisions; the women shall make tents and clothing and shall serve in the hospitals; the children shall turn old linen into lint; the aged shall betake themselves to the public places in order to arouse the courage of the warriors and preach the hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic” (qtd. in F.M. Anderson 184-185).

importance to the development of the nation-state and to the nationalism of Napoleon's regime as represented in *The Passion*. At one point Henri writes, "Napoleon said war was in our blood" (108), explicitly linking the nation, the citizen and expansionism; at another he provides an account of the process of becoming a soldier, wherein the new recruit must substitute for the bonds of human compassion represented in family and friends the bellicose agenda of the nation; must forget "what it is about home that holds their hearts; not sentiment or show but faces they love" and replace this with "lust and rage" (28). The achievement of this end is aided in no small part by what is represented as a wartime propaganda machine: Henri notes that the soldiers who are about to invade Britain are convinced that the English "ate their children" and "committed suicide with unseemly cheerfulness" (8). Indeed this nationalist propaganda has become so deeply embedded in the French consciousness that, even to Henri's gentle, unjaded mind, nobody who opposes Imperial France's right to rule over Europe can be counted as human. When, leaving home to join the *Grande Armée*, a little girl asks "Will you kill people, Henri?", he replies, "Not people, Louise, just the enemy" (8).

The Passion, then, hardly minces its words when it comes to totalising logic of the Napoleonic regime: it occupies, annexes and assimilates, rationalises and mechanises, and as it expands it flattens spaces and reduces their occupants to a status similar to the chickens in their wooden cages. And while there are considerable differences between Napoleon and Thatcher, significant similarities present themselves when we consider the spatial logic of the Napoleonic regime alongside strategies for urban renewal under the New Right. Following her third electoral victory in 1987, Thatcher delivered a celebratory speech to her colleagues at Conservative Central Office in which she announced, "You can have a party tonight, you will have a marvellous party tonight, and you can clear up tomorrow, but on Monday, you know, we've got a big job to do in some of those inner cities" (qtd. in Walsh 182). The speech is more than a little disingenuous coming eight years after her accession, not simply because the "big job" of the inner cities had been left to fester for so long, but also because ultimately, in the words of Michael Walsh, "the cities were to remain the unfinished business of Thatcherism":

[T]he “two nations” Toryism which abandoned the deindustrialized North in favor of the commercial and consumer South was reproduced within the capital, with Thatcher’s suburban/Westminster axis set against the bohemian, immigrant, and redevelopment enclaves of inner London. Further yet, the “job to do” which the naive auditor might take to be the solution of social problems turns out to be redevelopment; Thatcher’s voice sets the gentrification agenda. (Walsh 182-183)

Walsh’s point—that for much of the 1980s the complex political and social processes of urban renewal were abandoned in favour of market-driven gentrification and suburbanisation—is more than evidenced by newspaper cuttings of the time, many of which simply refused to characterise the problems of the inner cities in anything but economic terms. In 1981, in the wake of a summer of rioting in Liverpool, London and Manchester, the *Economist* repeatedly identified the origins of the unrest in ideologically-driven post-war planning and spendthrift, left-wing councils with large, publicly administered housing programmes. The solution, it claimed, was to abolish rent control and permit tenants to sub-let while massively reducing the quantity of council stock. This would create jobs and facilitate the construction of new dwellings by the private sector, arranged within a comprehensible urban fabric that placed a premium on defensible space and enabled the “true policemen of any close community”—“the publican, the shopkeeper, the teacher, parents, housewives chatting on the doorstep”—to return to their proper positions of authority. The free market would reign, and a “traditional” model of community would be reinstated; local government would be neutered and inner-city areas could be governed like their proper equivalents, “rural villages” (“Apocalypse Then?” 35).²⁴

²⁴ The *Economist* made similar calls throughout the second half of 1981, for example in “Brixton Burns”, “The Tops of the Volcanoes”, “Fire Over England” and “Walkabout in Darkest Liverpool”. It was this thinking which led to the Housing Act 1980, which enshrined the right of council tenants to buy their homes for less than 70% the market value, and the Local Government Act 1985, which

In this sense, Thatcherism's urban agenda appears not dissimilar to Winterson's representation of the Napoleonic regime, as both work by occupying space and eliding difference by mobilising total power—irrespective of whether the latter is ideologically closer to nationalism or neoliberalism.²⁵ However, there is a second, connected, and equally significant characteristic that the Napoleonic and Thatcherite regimes have in common: a fundamentally anti-urban provincialism. In 1988 Hanif Kureishi reported on the Conservative Party Conference for the *New Statesman*. In order to soften the disconnect between inner London, where he was living at the time, and the universe of the conference delegates, his friends recommended that “there should be a

scalped the most powerful tiers of local government, the Greater London Council and the mostly Labour-controlled Metropolitan County Councils, and can be seen as one of the grossest acts of political vandalism in recent times. But it should be noted that the Thatcher administrations' attempts to reorganise the cities were hardly restricted to limiting local government and looking for market-oriented solutions: when the free market juggernaut found its path blocked by citizens unwilling to have their communities pulled apart, the government was perfectly happy to deploy state power in the form of law-and-order to clear the way forward. This subject is engaged with in more detail below, so it will suffice here to quote a bitter observation by Stuart Hall after the Broadwater Farm Riot of 1985: “Here is a recipe for Norman Tebbit showing how to get the alien wedge moving. Cut off the lifeline of government spending to the inner cities and destroy the fragile community groups and activities which provided these areas with the faint possibility of self-activity. Punish the local authorities who could be pressured into doing something and starve the networks of material support by ratecapping. Then, widen the powers of the police, virtually setting them up as an alternative source of moral and social authority in these areas, and start to penetrate into the community, into people's homes, in relentless pursuit of ‘the criminals’” (Hall “Cold Comfort Farm” 78-79).

²⁵ As far as expansionism is concerned these two ostensibly conflicting ideologies need not be thought of as opposites. As Arendt writes, the principal rationale for imperial expansion, was not in the first instance nationalistic—which is to say, cultural—or even political; it was economic. “Imperialism”, Arendt argues, “was born when the ruling class in capitalist production came up against national limitations to its economic expansion. The bourgeoisie turned to politics out of economic necessity; for if it did not want to give up the capitalist system whose inherent law is constant economic growth, it had to impose this law upon its home governments and proclaim expansion to be an ultimate political goal of foreign policy” (Arendt *Origins* 126). This is an important point, because it reminds us that the deterritorialising strategies of neoliberalism only succeed because sovereign governments allow them to. As such, it could be argued that to assume that Thatcherism's insistence of the strong state and its advocacy of neoliberal policies represent a contradiction is mistaken: they are, in this crucial sense, mutually necessary.

decompression chamber”, as “the shock of arriving directly amongst them would jar”. Accordingly, he decamped to suburban Bromley, where he was brought up, and which he characterises as “quintessential Thatcher-land. Perched between London and Kent it was affluent, white, Jew-free, lower middle-class England. If Margaret Thatcher had supporters this was where they lived and shopped” (Kureishi *Dreaming* 87). After the decompression was complete he went on to the conference where, one night, he had dinner with a Tory MP who spent the evening declaring Enoch Powell a prophet and a hero and, Kureishi claims, proclaimed himself

proud to be racist. The woman sitting opposite the MP intervened. “By the way, I’m Jewish”, she said. “Ah”, he said. “Well, then, as a Jewess you should acknowledge that there are many races and your race is different to mine. The English are a provincial people uninterested in culture. And you Jews are a metropolitan people obsessed with it”. (97)

What is important here is not so much that the MP is racist but that he characterises the English people—“his” people—as provincial, that he opposes this provincialism to metropolitan life and that Kureishi connects the former both with the suburbs and with Thatcherism. And because Henri’s enthrallment with Napoleon approximates quite closely this sketch of provincialism, Kureishi’s account helps us to understand the former as to some extent a projection of Thatcher’s suburban constituency.

Hailing from a small village in the French hinterland, Henri’s upbringing is sheltered, his character chaste and his preoccupations mostly domestic. Arriving at Boulogne—hardly a metropolis, but a more populous settlement than he is used to—he is “homesick from the start” and misses “all the everyday things [he] had hated” (Winterson *Passion* 6). Throughout his brief sojourn in Paris during the preparations for Napoleon’s coronation he appears discomfited by metropolitan life: his court dress is “[i]mpossibly tight”; he is so nervous in the company of the imperial great and good that he refuses to draw attention to himself—even when serving the future Empress a snack—and he is thankful

whenever he is discharged and can retreat to the “little room of [his] own” (34, 35, 36). Vitaly, however, this provincialism doesn’t preclude bellicosity: in fact, Henri hints that the former might be a condition of the latter when he observes the French to be “a lukewarm people [...] Not much touches us, but we long to be touched” (7). This combination of tepid parochialism with a keen desire for national greatness finds a clear correlative in Thatcherism, which David Marquand aptly characterises as “a sort of British Gaullism”, born equally of “a desire to reverse “a growing sense of despair, reflecting the experience of a generation of apparent national decline” (Marquand 60), and what Shirley Robin Letwin in her *Anatomy of Thatcherism* calls Thatcher’s “Little Englandism” (Letwin 21-22). In this context, the parallels between the allure of Napoleon to the French and of Thatcher to the English become even more apparent: they and their respective constituencies share, in addition to provincialism, a certain jingoism, a similar desire to make their countries great once more.²⁶

Thus while Napoleon is not Thatcher, Winterson’s characterisation of his regime in *The Passion*—its provincialism and jingoism, its spatial imperialism—nonetheless reflects a particular anxiety concerning the effects—political, spatial, subjective—of Thatcherism. However, if the first half of the novel concerns itself with the dangers of this spatial imperialism, the second half commits itself to exploring a space which appears to resist annexation and defy the normalising project of the Napoleonic regime altogether. And it is in its representation of resistant space that the novel’s setting becomes much more than an imaginative flourish. In fact, in its setting during the “Romantic dreaming into existence of the modern nation-state”, *The Passion* concerns itself intimately with the processes by which political subjectivity is generated and political structures come to ascribe meaning to actions. It is important, however, that it approaches this subject by first asking what happens when the subject places herself outside of those structures—in short, when she becomes an

²⁶ The resurgence of British nationalism around the Falklands/Malvinas conflict of 1982 was exploited to its fullest potential by a struggling Thatcher administration and is widely perceived as having secured the Tory victory of 1983. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the first Conservative party political broadcast of the 1987 general election campaign featured the slogan “It’s Great to be Great Again”, the hymn “I Vow to Thee, My Country” and a Union flag puttering patriotically in the wind.

exile—and it is to this slippery political status that we turn now.

2. Freedom and Exile

There is a significant moment in *The Passion* when Henri finally falls out with the Emperor; when, during the fateful Russian campaign of 1812, he grows tired of watching his comrades freeze to death and teams up with a *vivandière* named Villanelle and a disgraced Irish priest named Patrick and chooses to desert. The reason this moment is notable is because it represents a rupture with the sovereign in a clear bid for freedom. For, in addition to pronouncing his disillusionment with Napoleon's imperial ambitions, Henri justifies his desertion with a commonly articulated—even clichéd—desire for self-determination: “I don't want to worship him any more”, he says; “I want to make my own mistakes. I want to die in my own time” (Winterson *Passion* 86). And this is exactly what he gets when he leaves the French camp: in negative libertarian terms—that is, as Isaiah Berlin puts it, “to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with [their] activity” (Berlin 122)—Henri, Villanelle and Patrick sever themselves from a repressive political community and locate a space characterised by far less of the “interference” than they were subject to under Napoleon's regime. Accordingly, they become free to develop those “natural faculties which alone makes it possible to pursue, and even to conceive, the various ends which men hold good or right or sacred” (124). Berlin notes that negative freedom “is principally concerned with the area of control, not with its source” (129), and the vast empty vistas of the European Plain appear to represent just such an “area”, just such a “free” space: as Henri tells us, the Russians “didn't even bother to fight the Grande Armée in any serious way, they kept on marching, burning villages behind them, leaving nothing to eat, nowhere to sleep” (*Passion* 80), surrendering the Plain to a tiny, peripatetic population.²⁷ And while it is true that this space is not a comfortable one—it is

²⁷ This may appear to be a perversion of Berlin's argument, as his “area of control” is not material but abstractly political; however, as noted by most critical appraisals, the boundaries of physical, psychic and political space in *The Passion* are not at all fixed and any one may serve as a projection

barren and frozen, the deserters are “afraid to stop in case [their] legs buckled under [them]” and Patrick ultimately dies (Winterson *Passion* 88, 106)—Berlin reminds us that freedom isn’t “equality, or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience” (Berlin 125). It is just what it is: freedom.

Thus it seems that in deserting the French army Henri makes an astonishingly successful bid for freedom where the latter is interpreted in negative libertarian terms. But we might still wonder whether, even in this empty space, it is really the case that the three deserters are free of external impediments. Winterson furnishes us with little doubt that simply because the deserters have left the *Grande Armée* does not mean that they are no longer connected to France: they cannot fall into the hands of the French, as French law remains applicable to them, and they face the firing squad if caught. Hence if they really are to be considered free in the negative sense of the term, it is freedom only of the most abject kind; a kind that allows them to do little, is of value to few and to which only the most misanthropic survivalist might aspire. Because even living outside the law they are not impervious to the effects of power: in absenting themselves they no longer belong to any particular place, to any particular polity, and yet somehow remain subject to the power of French sovereignty. In short, their freedom—that most celebrated of political concepts—looks uncannily close to what Arendt would describe as worldlessness.

In book two of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt provides a lengthy analysis of the development of human rights as a political concept during and after the French Revolution. At the heart of this concept, she claims, is a peculiarly charged paradox that owes its existence to an irreconcilable disarticulation between, on the one hand, an ahistorical commitment to universalist humanism and, on the other, a historically specific appeal for the

of an/its Other—hence the novel’s amenability to psychoanalytic readings. Additionally, it is worth noting here just how problematic the central location of a radically de-politicised space is to Berlin’s conception (and valorisation) of negative freedom. For if, as he implies, freedom is a “political ideal” (Berlin 129) then it is, to say the least, paradoxical to claim that it exists in its purest form in a space devoid of the operations of power and of the presence of all other human beings—that is, of politics.

legitimacy of the nation-state as a political institution. Human rights, according to Arendt, are at the core of a “secret conflict between state and nation [which] came to light at the very birth of the modern nation-state, when the French Revolution combined the declaration of the Rights of Man with the demand for national sovereignty” (Arendt *Origins* 230). It was due to this conflict that the citizen’s position in the realm of the human would eventually come to be secured and legitimised by the sovereign and, consequently, that the latter would eventually become a kind of administrator in humanity. In essence this was because the tension between the universal and local claims of the nation-state for legitimacy entailed that the difference between human rights and national rights was elided: rights that were deemed universal (“human”) on a constitutional level became effectively national on a practical level. And this meant that, rather than being a political and legal body charged with protecting the individual’s rights as citizen, the state was capable of being “interpreted [...] as the nebulous representative of a ‘national soul’ which through the very fact of its existence was supposed to be beyond or above the law” (230). Rights became a marker of humanity ordained by the state and bestowed on its citizens, those citizens were agglomerated into a “national soul” and the end result, Arendt charges, was nationalism: “essentially the expression of this perversion of the state into an instrument of the nation and the identification of the citizen with the member of the nation” (231).

Implicit in this analysis are the beginnings of what would eventually come to be challenged as Arendt’s fetishisation of the polis by the likes of Seyla Benhabib, and her stigmatisation of “the social” by Hanna Pitkin.²⁸ For Arendt it

²⁸ For instance in their contributions to Honig’s *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*; respectively, “The Pariah and Her Shadow” and “Conformism, Housekeeping and the Attack of the Blob”. Feminist critics have been particularly vocal on these two counts, owing in part to Arendt’s suspicion that the various feminisms of the post-war period were attempting to elevate onto political ground concerns which she saw as belonging properly to the social. See, most notoriously, Adrienne Rich’s dismissal of *The Human Condition* in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (Rich 211-12). In a similar vein, the rigid distinction Arendt draws between public and private realms was often perceived as intractably problematic by many earlier feminist scholars, and only in the 1990s were attempts made to rehabilitate her. Dietz and Honig deal with this difficulty to a greater or lesser extent in *Feminist Interpretations*.

becomes impossible to emphasise enough the significance of an expressly *political* spatiality, from which all claims to the existence of political ideals must be made—and the most crucial of these ideals is freedom. Answering the question “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future* she argues from the offing that “[t]he field where freedom has always been known [...] as a fact of everyday life, is the political realm”; that it is “actually the reason that men live together in political organization at all. Without it, political life as such would be meaningless” (Arendt *Between* 146). We might assume, then, that exile from “political organization” is equivalent to dispossession of any claim to freedom, something Arendt explores in *Origins*. She subjugates those foundational freedoms of movement, opinion and so on constitutionally enshrined in the likes of the *Déclaration des droits de l’Homme et du citoyen* to the necessity of belonging to a polity: “There is no question”, she argues, that someone “outside the pale of the law” can be seen as possessing more freedom of movement and opinion “than a lawfully imprisoned criminal”, but this does not alter such a person’s “fundamental situation of rightlessness”. In fact, the freedom of opinion possessed by a person without a polity “is a fool’s freedom, for nothing they think matters anyhow” because a “fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective” (*Origins* 296). Consequently, Arendt argues, it is “[n]ot the loss of specific rights” which has precipitated the most murderous acts of state violence in modernity “but the loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever”. Humankind “since Aristotle, has been defined as a being commanding the power of speech and thought”, has been identified as “the ‘political animal’, that is one who by definition lives in a community”; hence a citizen can be stripped of her rights and remain human, but when she has her citizenship revoked, freedom loses all valence because “the loss of a polity itself expels [her] from humanity”. (297)

The paradox, then, involves not just “reckon[ing] with an ‘abstract’ human being who seem[s] to exist nowhere” (291), the “human” in “human rights”; it also entails that the power to determine the situation of this human being—that is, the power to bestow humanity—resides entirely with the sovereign. Giorgio Agamben pursues this idea in *Homo Sacer* (1995), in which he

seeks to shed light on the relationship between sovereignty and “rightless” human beings. Taking forward Arendt’s thoughts on the muddled inauguration of the nation-state and the constitutional aporia which seems to provide it with the ability to define the limits of the human, Agamben argues that “sovereignty is not an exclusively political concept, an exclusively juridical category”; in fact, he claims, “it is the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it” (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 28). Drawing on Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (1922), he identifies what he terms the “paradox of sovereignty”, wherein

the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order. If the sovereign is truly the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming a state of exception and, therefore, of suspending the order’s own validity, “the sovereign stands outside the juridical order and, nevertheless, belongs to it, since it is up to him to decide if the constitution is to be suspended *in toto*” [...] This means that the paradox can also be formulated this way: “the law is outside itself”, or: “I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law”. (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 15)

From here he argues that when the sovereign proclaims a state of exception—a state in which the juridical order is suspended—it is not the case, as we might expect, that the state of rule simply vanishes; rather, “what is excluded [from the juridical order] in the exception maintains itself to the rule in the form of the rule’s suspension. *The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it*” (17-18, emphasis in original). Thus in this scenario the two realms—rule and exception—are connected to one another in ambiguity, and the threshold between them represents “a crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing between membership and inclusion, between what is outside and what is inside, between exception and rule” (25).

Agamben declares life in the state of exception—similar to Arendt’s “fundamental situation of rightlessness”—to be “bare life”, and the kind of life

possessed by the Roman legal figure *homo sacer*. The latter represents “one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide” (71). *Homo sacer* is no longer considered politically alive within the polity, and so the rights customarily accorded citizens, such as the right to life, are suspended. As such, the injunction against murder—defined juridically—no longer applies, since, for a person to be murdered, she must first be recognised as possessing a life that is capable of being taken away illegally, and *homo sacer* does not possess such a life. The same logic applies to execution: should the sovereign extinguish this person’s life it could not be described as an execution, since for a person to be executed she must first be recognised—again, juridically—as possessing a life that is capable of being taken away in accordance with the sovereign’s fiat.²⁹ These two concepts combined—*homo sacer* and the “paradox of sovereignty”—are brought to bear on the idea of banishment, or exile. “He who has been banned”, Agamben argues,

is not, in fact, simply outside the law and made indifferent to it but

²⁹ Agamben’s failure properly to historicise his theories relating to sovereignty, the state of exception and *homo sacer*, has become an established target for detractors. The line he traces from concepts of bare and political life in classical democracy to those under modern democracy is, undeniably, problematic. His rigidly dyadic interpretation of Aristotle’s use of the terms *zoē*—which Agamben understands as “the simple fact of living common to all living beings”—and *bios*—“the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 1), that is, political life—has come in for particular criticism. Moreover, irrespective of specifically how he interprets these millennia-old concepts, in applying them unproblematically to the twentieth century and never accounting for their apparently miraculous survival through the years, Agamben was certain to come in for criticism. This methodological departure from Foucault—to whom Agamben’s thought owes a great deal—is something that has been noted by Alison Ross as significant and potentially purposeful: “The extent of Agamben’s departure from Foucault’s ascending model of analysis—which builds its tentative general picture by systematic reference to the analysis of how particular institutional practices operate rather than the ontological question of what they are—is instructive” (Alison Ross 5). In fact, Ross writes, “[t]he status of Agamben’s thought qua political philosophy may be interrogated [specifically] from this perspective. In his focus on bare life, Agamben provides a set of normative terms from which it becomes possible to interrogate diverse sets of institutional practices from the perspective of the direction they take. It is precisely this normative dimension whose absence in Foucault’s work critics often had cause to lament and which Agamben’s work may be seen to provide” (6).

rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order. (This is why in Romance languages, to be “banned” originally means both to be “at the mercy of” and “at one’s own will, freely”, to be “excluded” and also “open to all, free”). (28-29, emphasis in original)

And this, I think, is the kind of political position that Henri, Villanelle and Patrick occupy on their trek across Eastern Europe. In absconding from the *Grande Armée* and entering into the wilderness of the European Plain they take on roles that are far more redolent of *homines sacri* existing in the state of exception than of individuals occupying a libertarian space of negative freedom. Indeed, the only freedom they possess is—as Arendt would no doubt argue—also the most abject kind of unfreedom. For their lives are now politically worthless, and, as Henri points out, they can expect nothing but a voiceless and summary death if they fall into French hands: “Mutineers, or traitors as they were more usually called, found no leniency and were given no opportunity to make their excuses” (Winterson *Passion* 89).

3. Venice and the Cultural Politics of Disenfranchisement

It is thus in relation to the related concepts of freedom and exile that many of the ideas outlined by Arendt and Agamben can be brought to bear most fruitfully on *The Passion*.³⁰ However, contrary to the negative characterisations

³⁰ Not least because Agamben situates the origins of the state of exception in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes. These origins, he writes in *State of Exception* (2005), were legally formalised in the French Constituent Assembly decree of 8 July 1791, which declared an *état de siege*; this decree was built upon by the Napoleonic decree of 24 December 1811, which “provided for the possibility of a state of siege that the emperor could declare whether or not a city was actually under attack or directly threatened by enemy forces” (Agamben *Exception* 4). “The subsequent history of the state of siege”, Agamben writes, “is the history of its gradual emancipation from the

of worldlessness that these two thinkers provide, Winterson seems to perceive considerable potential in exile when the latter becomes the condition of a diverse group of people living together in a particular kind of expressive space. And this is because the latter frustrates the static ontological categories which, in the state of rule, are legitimated by the sovereign. We witness the beginnings of this when the cold of the “Zero Winter” forces the exiles to seek shelter in the home of some Russian peasants. Wary of being associated with the French invaders, Villanelle recommends that they pretend to be Poles (Winterson *Passion* 101); similarly, when their travels take them through Poland and Austria, she urges them to play Italians (103, 105). We can see that already, in their “polity-less”—read apolitical—status, the exiles’ identities have become more mutable than they were under the Napoleonic regime, where there were merely “[s]oliders and women”.³¹ Indeed the implication seems to be that exile *necessitates* performativity and effectively forces the subject to assume multiple identities, an implication only becomes clearer when Henri and Villanelle reach their destination, since there it functions as the premise for emancipatory endeavour.

wartime situation to which it was originally bound in order to be used as an extraordinary police measure to cope with internal sedition and disorder, thus changing from a real, or military, state of siege to a fictitious, or political, one. In any case, it is important not to forget that the modern state of exception is a creation of the democratic-revolutionary tradition and not the absolutist one” (5). This extrication of absolutism from *la Terreur* and the Napoleonic regime, together with the bifurcation of absolutism and the “democratic-revolutionary” tradition, is somewhat problematic and to a certain extent the latter seems contrary to Agamben’s thesis that the two are indivisible. Nonetheless, we are able to accept his point that the state of exception occupies a privileged position in political modernity not simply under totalitarian regimes such as Nazism and Stalinism, but also under apparently democratic systems of government—both of which, he argues in *Homo Sacer*, are derived from the same political lineage.

³¹ Even though Henri works in the Grande Armée as the Emperor’s chef, Napoleon realises on the eve of his coronation—when his sovereign status will be constitutionally enshrined—that Henri “would serve him better when [he] could handle a musket as well as a carving knife” and promptly orders him back to Boulogne for “a real soldier’s training” (Winterson *Passion* 37). Patrick, the disgraced priest, is charged not with clergy work but with keeping watch over the Channel in order to “report on the whereabouts of Nelson’s blockading fleet and warn practising [French] troops of any English threat” (22). And while it is true that Villanelle, as a *vivandière*, is at the service of the military, her status as a prostitute clearly functions to mark her as a woman under the patriarchal logic of the Napoleonic regime.

Winterson explicitly and repeatedly characterises Venice as a mercurial space populated by capricious characters; indeed, in Jago Morrison's terms, it is "a Mecca of provocative indeterminacy" (Morrison 101). Villanelle is our guide to this city, which she describes as "surrounded by water with watery alleys that do for streets and roads and silted up back ways that only the rats can cross" (Winterson *Passion* 49). Water is, of course, often a signifier of flux and mutability, and its use in characterising Venice is no exception: in Villanelle's words, the latter is a "changeable city [...] Streets appear and disappear overnight, new waterways force themselves over dry land" (97):

You may set off from the same place to the same place every day and never go by the same route. If you do so, it will be by mistake. Your bloodhound nose will not serve you here. Your course in compass reading will fail you. Your confident instructions to passers-by will send them to squares they have never heard of, over canals not listed in the notes.

Although wherever you are going is always in front of you, there is no such thing as straight ahead. No as the crow flies short cut will help you reach the café just over the water. The short cuts are where the cats go, through the impossible gaps, round corners that seem to take you the opposite way. (49)

Villanelle's claim that "there is no such thing as straight ahead" is a little bemusing, since she later announces, "I come from the city of mazes [...] but if you ask me a direction I will tell you straight ahead" (109). "Straight ahead", then, is a term just as slippery as Venice and Villanelle, whose own indeterminacy is communicated relentlessly and emphatically. She has "taken [her] pleasure with both men and women" (59-60) and enjoys dressing as a boy; however, when she does this the result is not entirely artifice, since her physical attributes situate her at the threshold between male and female anyway. Cross-dressing comes naturally to her because, as she says, "my breasts are small, so there is no cleavage to give me away, and I am tall for a girl, especially a Venetian" (56). However, her indeterminacy does not extend merely to her

gender, sex and sexuality. For reasons that are never elaborated upon beyond the supernatural, Villanelle was born with webbed feet—despite the fact that “[t]here never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen” (51). Clearly these are intended to function as a phallic signifier; a great deal has been made of this from any number of theoretical perspectives, and Villanelle’s sexual indeterminacy is plainly relevant to the current discussion. However, it is worth emphasising the other, more obvious—though less commented on—threshold that they straddle: that between the human and animal. After her mother gave birth, the midwife attempted to “cut off the offending parts straight away”, but “her knife sprang back from the skin leaving no mark. She tried again and again in between all the toes on each foot. She bent the point of the knife, but that was all” (52). This scene can readily be read as satirising sex reassignment surgery in newborn intersexed infants, among the most intrusive procedures aimed at producing a body that conforms to culturally determined norms. But the fact that Villanelle’s feet are not amenable to this kind of intervention is important—especially in light of her fondness for cross-dressing—as it has the effect of a paradox, positioning her in a situation simultaneously of absolute immanence and radical indeterminacy, and coding her as essentially inessential, always and inevitably located at the threshold where male becomes female, masculinity femininity—and human animal. Indeed, her status as “precisely *neither man nor beast*”, in Agamben’s words might be read as placing her in a similar situation to the werewolf, a figure he claims to symbolise the exiled or, in his terms, “banished” individual in many European societies (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 104-105).³²

Thus we might read Villanelle as a highly-determined embodiment of the

³² For example, the *wargus* of Germanic lands and *vargr* of Scandinavia, the Latin *garulphus* and French *loup garou*, all of which, Agamben claims, are permeated with the notion of the ban. He cites as further evidence Edward the Confessor’s characterisation of the banned person as *wulfeshead*, a figure who “bears a wolf’s head from the day of his expulsion” (qtd. in *Homo Sacer* 105). However, he urges that expulsion in this lupine figuration does not nullify all bonds with the polity: “Werewolf” status, he writes, represents “a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*” (that is, between natural life and life under the sovereign), and, in relation to the sovereign exception, is located at the threshold between “exclusion and inclusion”. (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 104-105, emphases in original).

ban, and radically different to Henri, who—though now in exile—remains a product of the rigid ontological boundaries of the Napoleonic regime. This is something Winterson gestures at when, sitting by a fire on their walk from Moscow to Venice, Henri and Patrick take off their boots to warm their feet on the fire and Villanelle, “seeing [Henri’s] surprise at forgoing this unexpected luxury said, ‘My father was a boatman. Boatmen do not take off their boots’” (Winterson *Passion* 89). The moment is plainly intended to establish Villanelle’s fundamental difference from Henri and Patrick, and the “soldiers and women” logic of the Napoleonic regime. And this otherness rests on the fact that, as Manfred Pfister writes, “her self and her gender identity enact and define themselves in her performances: they are not stable essences but essentially and passionately performative” (Pfister 25). The contradiction here—“*not* stable essences but *essentially* [...] performative”—is instructive, because it renders performativity immanent in a way that the concept ostensibly challenges. But what is more important is that Pfister does not limit this characteristic of essentialised indeterminacy to Villanelle; indeed, she claims that it is characteristic of Venice’s spaces and population *in toto*. In contrast to the hypostatizing rubrics of the Napoleonic regime, Pfister argues that Venetian space enables “a perform[ance of] subjectivity beyond binary divisions” and functions as a “stage” on which to “act out and explore the indeterminacies of in-betweenness”. She goes on to provide a list of binaries which she perceives as being elided by Venetian space:

water and land > *amphibiousness*
 East and West > *inner-European orientalism*
 past, present and future > *metamorphosis*
 freedom and destiny > *gambling*
 structure and chaos > *labyrinth*
 contradictory opposites > *paradox*
 reality and dream > *fantasy*
 male and female > *androgyny*
 religion and sexuality > *passion* (Pfister 25, emphases in original)

All of these elisions are relevant to the current discussion, but the breakdown of the freedom/destiny binary is of particular interest, for two reasons: first, because—as we have seen—even before we reach Venice freedom is a peculiarly charged concept in *The Passion*; and second, because Villanelle explicitly locates Venice’s indeterminacy in the city’s politically compromised status relative to the Napoleonic regime. “Since Bonaparte captured our city of mazes in 1797”, she writes, “we’ve more or less abandoned ourselves to pleasure”. Indeed, under occupation Venice quickly “became an enchanted island for the mad, the rich, the bored, the perverted”, for “[w]hat else is there to do when you’ve lived a proud and free life and suddenly you’re not proud and free any more?” (Winterson *Passion* 52). We are thus in no doubt that Venice has been stripped of a quondam and abiding autonomy, a history of political self-determination which ended abruptly when it was occupied by the French.³³ And yet there is a clear implication here that it is the *loss* of its political structures that has facilitated the city’s abandonment to pleasure.

Apropos of this, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the Venetians’ commitment to pleasure is described as an “abandonment”, since this can also be seen to describe the city’s political situation, which is not, to quote Agamben, “simply outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it”. The city might thus be considered to rest at that ambivalent threshold “in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable”. More importantly, while the Napoleonic regime is deeply implicated in this abandonment, it has not been successful in taming the mercurial spaces of Venice. As Villanelle notes, the Emperor has made his rationalising presence felt in the city by “demolish[ing] our churches on a whim and loot[ing] our treasures” (52), as well as constructing the *Giardinetti Reali* and *Giardini Pubblici*. But despite remaining theoretically subject to French imperial power, the city remains untamed and is left largely to its own devices. Thus we might say that, unlike Agamben, Winterson ascribes a kind of resistant potential to the

³³ In 1797 the Republic of Venice—which had been in existence since 697—was conquered by Napoleon. Sovereignty over the former city-state passed between France and Austria until a brief spell of independence between 1848 and 1866, when it was finally assimilated into the Kingdom of Italy.

state of exception. And it is perhaps for this reason that Venice attracts to its Rabelaisian situation of excess “the mad, the rich, the bored, the perverted” and—most importantly—the banned and the exiled. For as Winterson writes, “[t]here are exiles too. Men and women driven out of their gleaming palaces that open so elegantly on to shining canals. Men and women who are officially dead according to the registers of Paris” (53). We can detect more than a hint of *homo sacer* in this description of the characters who make Venice their home: to “Paris”—metonymically, the Napoleonic regime—they are “officially dead”, yet they live happily, pleasurably in a Venice that has become the state of exception writ large.

In this way Venice can be described not just as “a city of disguises” (92)—polymorphous, multifaceted and essentially indeterminate—but as a city which, as a consequence of its uncertain political situation, attracts yet more exiled and excluded figures to join those who already live there. And it is in relation to the idea of exclusion that the connection between *The Passion’s* Venice and political scenario in which it was written becomes apparent once more. Late in the novel Villanelle takes Henri around the tawdry Venetian back streets—the “cities of the interior” as she calls them—where they pass “ransacked palaces, their curtains swinging from shutterless windows”. Pointing to “a lean figure on a broken balcony” she says, “These are the exiles, the people the French drove out. These people are dead but they do not disappear” (114). In its decrepitude and political powerlessness, Venetian space recalls the fragile and fractious spaces of the inner cities, which in the 1980s often appeared just as impervious to control—much to the chagrin of the Thatcherite press. A week after the Handsworth riots of September 1985, *The Economist* published a pithy account of the unrest, during which parts of the inner-city area’s south Asian community were attacked by members of its Afro-Caribbean population, leading to violent skirmishes between the communities and police which left two dead and thirty-five injured. It lamented: “Thus Durban comes to Britain. The have-nothings set upon the have-a-littles who sell to them across the counter. The have-enoughs live and work elsewhere”. Fearing that this pattern was likely to be imitated in other cities “where quite small concentrations of aimless blacks are serviced and supplied by entrepreneurial browns”, it concluded with a weary resignation—

also a startling capitulation—that contravened its usually libertarian line on political and economic matters, calling for limited positive discrimination as a means to ameliorate the pitiful state of Britain’s black urban impoverished (“Now Handsworth Burns” 14).

Elsewhere, however, it stuck to its Thatcherite guns, calling for the system-built housing of the 1960s to be razed and maintaining its belief in saturating urban space with market forces. Most importantly, though, by this point in the 1980s a not-so-subtle shift of emphasis had appeared on its pages as it argued that since the problem of the inner cities could no longer be understood in solely economic terms, it begged to be appraised in criminal ones, too.³⁴ In this respect the newspaper was echoing the police and many on the political right, whose first instinct was to situate the debate firmly on law and order terrain. Although many in Labour’s ranks emphasised the economic factors instrumental in bringing about the unrest—little and poorly-directed investment combined with soaring unemployment—the Association of Chief Police Officers and many conservative pundits and Tory MPs characterised the riots as orgies of wanton vandalism.³⁵ In the four years after the last major bout

³⁴ “London’s high-density housing blocks”, it opined, “now house, among respectable folk, semi-criminal communities almost as vicious as those of Dickens’s private rookeries”; faced with riots like those in Brixton, Handsworth and Tottenham, “[a]ll members of Britain’s political community—not just conferencing Tories ready to bellow—need to start relearning how to call a crime a crime” (“Blacks’ Future” 13). It is worth noting that earlier in 1985 *The Economist* had cited Handsworth as a model for the inner cities. Despite the area’s economic lassitude, the news magazine drew particular attention to political measures, such as its well-integrated ethnic groups and successful community policing, which had made life more bearable (“Mixing in the Midlands” 40). All pretence to political egalitarianism was cast aside after the violence, however, when it carried the headline, “Poor Handsworth’s Asians Pay the Price of Prosperity”.

³⁵ Some claimed they demonstrated a tendency towards criminality arising from the waning of traditional models of authority in the post-war period: responding to MPs’ questions on 9 July 1981 Margaret Thatcher argued that “[a] large part of the problem that we are having now has come from a weakening of authority in many respects of life over many, many years” (qtd. in Kettle and Hodges 183). Others—not least the inner-city communities themselves—considered the police to be at fault, and the “sus” and “sas” laws deployed in places with large minority populations antagonistic and often implemented after a racist fashion. The “sus” law refers to the Vagrancy Act of 1824 which empowered police officers to arrest anyone occupying public space who was suspected of planning a criminal act. Although this law was abolished after the Scarman

of rioting, any attempt by the liberal establishment to understand and remedy the problems of the inner cities in social and political terms had dissolved into a mixture of bewilderment and jingoism. Now the need for the police to intervene in areas where community relations were often so strained as to be practically non-existent was articulated with more vitriol than ever before. After the 1981 riots the *Times* had adopted a surprising—though not unproblematic—communitarian perspective, characterising Britain as “a patchwork of different races and cultures” and emphasising pluralism over integration: “Tolerance”, it argued, “does not require that every Englishman should have a black man for his neighbour or that every Asian should forget his cultural identity” (“The Soiled Coin” 13). By September 1985, however, this optimism had given way to the law-and-order line, and what was a patchwork of cultures had become a series of “ghetto[es, which] must be policed, sensitively but with strength and firmness, to ensure that public order is upheld” (“Brixton Again” 17). In the wake of the Broadwater Farm riot a month later, the tone became somewhat balder: “This must stop; this must be stopped [...] Without support, direct, unequivocal for the maintenance of order on Britain’s streets, on all Britain’s streets, democratic politics itself is threatened” (“To Stop a Riot” 15). Thus a sense of the inner cities as dangerous, ungovernable and intractably destitute was established in the minds of Thatcher’s core constituency—the white, suburban, middle class. Everywhere the word “crumbling” was placed in relation to the inner cities; everywhere was their decrepitude further evidence of their moral collapse, their resistance to rationalisation, their fundamental otherness. To the political orthodoxy of the day, these areas became zones of criminal indulgence in drink,

Inquiry into the 1981 riots, the “sas”—stop and search—powers of the police codified in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act of 1984 were widely deemed to be similarly insensitive in their implementation. In response to this persecution, the desire of inner-city communities to police themselves became increasingly evident. The police came to be spoken of as an army of occupation—an analogy Thatcher condemned—and chief police officers had to work hard to reassure the *Times*-reading public that there were no “no-go” areas in the inner-cities. When, one day prior to the 1981 Brixton riot, two police officers attempted to help a wounded black youth named Michael Bailey, the already suspicious community surrounded and confronted them, pulled Bailey out of the police car “and spirited [him] away to shouts of ‘We will look after our own’” (Kettle and Hodges 99-100).

drugs and sex; red-light districts where illicit shebeens were commonplace and the streets were populated at all times of the day and night by the aimless and excluded.

Yet while this emphasis on the “crumbling” inner city is redolent of Winterson’s description of Venice in *The Passion*, there is a crucial difference between the two in that where a kind of horror accompanies the former—articulated by pro-Thatcher pundits in conservative newspapers—the latter is saturated with what the novel characterises as specifically political potential. Indeed, to the extent that Venice functions as a projection of the inner city, Winterson might be said to perceive in *both* a “promise of possibility”, in that they appear peculiarly resistant to domination by their respective oppressors. Now, this might seem like a novel and invigorating take on a type of space that, during the 1980s, was subject to much opprobrium. However, difficult questions begin to arise when we remember that a fundamental condition of Venice’s political promise is its status as a spatial expression of exile. As such, in the terms already established, it represents an *apolitical* space—something both Arendt and Agamben value negatively. In a state of exile, formal politics are suspended—or, at least, apply only in no longer applying. So how is it that Venice can be considered *politically* fecund? Conspicuously avoided until now, Agamben’s paradigmatic example of the state of exception—the concentration camp—cannot be ignored any longer. For how can a city that exists in a permanent state of exception, which is populated by the banned and the exiled—the wretched, the politically powerless—become a model for political resistance?

The answer, I think, is that Winterson’s interpretation of “politics” extends well beyond the rarefied Arendtian understanding of the term and segues in an intriguing way into the body of thought I have described as Left culturalism. As we have seen, at the time of the novel’s composition the latter was providing a sustained interrogation of the idea that politics represent a discrete category which only occasionally impinges upon the realms of culture and society. And the idea of resistance was key to this project: as Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg observe, the discipline already had “a long history of commitment to disempowered populations” and was thus

“forged in the face of a sense of the margins versus the center” (Nelson et. al. 11). Indeed, Stuart Hall echoes this commitment when he claims that one of the central aims of cultural studies was “to enable people to understand what is going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance” (qtd. in Nelson et. al. 2). This entailed a challenge to the isolated, *a priori* individual of liberalism, and an attempt to define agency collectively and identity performatively: Alan Sinfield’s conceptualisation of resistance, for example, distances itself from a liberal approach by arguing that “[f]or agency to operate [...] a ‘doer’ does not have to be in place first; rather, she or he is constructed through the deed. Identity develops, precisely, in the process of signification”. A clear corollary of this, he argues, is that the individual becomes an “unlikely [source] of dissident identity and action” because “[p]olitical awareness does not arise out of an essential, individual, self-consciousness of class, race, nation, gender or sexual orientation; but from involvement in a *milieu*, a *subculture*” (Sinfield “Cultural Materialism” 811, emphases in original).

There are shades of Judith Butler here—particularly in the idea of identity developing in the process of signification—and plainly this point is significant, as it segues into the emphasis on performativity in Winterson’s representation of Venice. However, equally important is Sinfield’s identification of the subculture as a space in which collective agency finds its most effective expression. Though Sinfield was a key figure in attributing to subcultures a specifically political content, the broadly oppositional mode of these collectives was identified somewhat earlier. In his 1979 work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, for instance, Dick Hebdige provides a groundbreaking response to earlier explorations of the subcultural phenomenon, which he argues tended to emphasise the desire of the post-war young to repair an imagined broken connection between themselves and the working class culture of their parents’ generation. By contrast, Hebdige contends that “emphasiz[ing] integration and coherence at the expense of dissonance and discontinuity” risks “denying the very manner in which the subcultural form is made to crystallize, objectify and

communicate group experience” (Hebdige 79).³⁶ Providing a poststructuralist gloss on this subcultural commitment to dissent, Hebdige argues that

violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced have considerable power to provoke and disturb [...S]pectacular subcultures express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioural codes, law breaking, etc.). They are profane articulations, and they are often and significantly defined as “unnatural”. (91-92)

So if dissent is the ultimate end of the subculture, the performance is the means of achieving this end. And where the instinct of a hegemonic power structure is so often to essentialise—to further entrench its own discourse, thereby rendering “unnatural” any oppositional activity—the response of the subculture is to emphasise difference and to render identity indeterminate; an ongoing process rather than a static ontological marker. This, Hebdige implies, is why performance is fundamental to the oppositionality of the subculture: it is, in a way, its *modus operandi*, and so when we speak of subculture, we must recognise that we are inevitably referring to a performative or “spectacular” phenomenon.

Even more significant than the emphasis on performativity is the importance Hebdige attaches to outsidersness—or exile—as a condition of subcultural style. He points out that in order to investigate the latter we are required to focus our attention on “the most mundane objects—a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motor cycle—which, none the less [...] take on a symbolic

³⁶ He cites the examples of the skinheads and the mods: “[T]he skinheads undoubtedly reasserted those values associated with the traditional working-class community, but they did so in the face of the widespread renunciation of those values in the parent culture—at a time when such an affirmation of the classic concerns of working-class life was considered inappropriate. Similarly, the mods were negotiating changes and contradictions which were simultaneously affecting the parent culture but they were doing so in the terms of their own relatively autonomous problematic—by inventing an ‘elsewhere’ (the week-end, the West End) which was defined against the familiar locales of the home, the pub, the working-man’s club, the neighbourhood” (Hebdige 79, emphases in original).

dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile” (Hebdige 2). Now at first this sounds quite unlike our analysis of the term: most obviously, the element of choice implied in “self-imposed” is not a luxury afforded the exiles of *The Passion*—though it must be said that, in deserting the *Grande Armée*, Henri, Villanelle and Patrick do place themselves in this situation. Irrespective of whether it is self-imposed or not, however, it is not difficult to see how the emphasis on exile as a tactic of oppositionality—a means by which a subculture may pronounce the “dissonance and discontinuity” of its relationship with a hegemonic culture—is helpful in understanding why *The Passion* perceives a “promise of possibility” in Venice, an urban space that represents exile writ large.

Like Hall and Sinfield, Paul Gilroy recognises that the possibility of resistance arises in collective action, rather than in the discrete individual of liberalism. But if anything he is more radical in examining how withdrawal—or outsidersness, or exile—interacts with collectivised cultural space, and how the two militate against nationalist discourse. Early in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) he questions an orthodox position within British sociology that perceives the possibility of resistance exclusively in relation to the political institutions of the state. In this understanding of resistance, he writes, “[t]he state’s institutions map out the strategic configuration of political conflicts [...and] provide a material context for the development of movements and organizations as well as an important basis for any relationship” (Gilroy *Union Jack* 33). He goes on to quote Frances Fox Piven’s and Richard A. Cloward’s *Poor People’s Movements* (1977), which argues that “[i]nstitutional life aggregates people or disperses them, moulds group identities and draws people into settings in which collective action can erupt” and suggests that, as a consequence, “institutional roles determine the strategic opportunities for defiance” (qtd. in *Union Jack* 33). Superficially at least, this spatial, collective agency appears to approximate the performative subculture described by Hebdige. However, what Gilroy is keen to contest is not Piven and Cloward’s understanding of agency but their rarefied definition of politics, arguing that, by itself, an understanding of politics as the state and its institutions is capable of neither recognising nor remedying a particular kind of cultural racism that had

become increasingly widespread in Thatcher's Britain.

This form of racism—which he labels “ethnic absolutism”—relies on a perception of “black history and culture [...] as an illegitimate intrusion into a vision of authentic British national life which, prior to their arrival, was as stable and as peaceful as it was ethnically homogenous” (“Ethnic Absolutism” 188). Associating politics only with the state, he argues, fails utterly to recognise the significant cultural dimension of politics relative to the nation, because

[t]he politics of “race” in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between “race” and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect. Phrases like “the Island Race” and “the Bulldog Breed” vividly convey the manner in which this nation is represented in terms which are simultaneously biological and cultural. (*Union Jack* 45)

In principle, Gilroy's point is not all that dissimilar to Arendt's argument concerning imperialism. Like Arendt, Gilroy understands that the state and the nation are not one and the same thing, and that their forced marriage represents a unique opportunity for the idea of the “national soul” to become harnessed for politically deleterious ends. Indeed, the similarity between Gilroy, Arendt and Agamben becomes even clearer when he suggests that the “new racism” is “primarily concerned with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. It specifies who may legitimately belong to the national community and simultaneously advances reasons for the segregation or banishment of those whose ‘origin, sentiment or citizenship’ assigns them elsewhere” (45).³⁷ This said, it is in

³⁷ In fact, it could be argued that, in many ways, Gilroy—together with Left culturalism more generally—is focusing his attention on a problem very similar to that which vexed Arendt before him and would come to be theorised by Agamben afterwards. This makes clear how erroneous it would be to dismiss the political thought of Arendt and her intellectual successors—including Agamben—as somehow anachronistic, beside the point, or limited in valence to a particular point in modern history. Similar questions to those posed by Arendt in *Origins* in 1951 were asked again in the 1980s and continue to be debated today through Agamben's exploration of the political and juridical nature of inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, when applied specifically to the United

Gilroy's solution to the problem of ethnic absolutism that we ultimately locate the reason behind Winterson's attachment of political potential to the Venetian "zone of morbidity", despite the dubious political logics that Arendt would no doubt consider to operate there. At the end of *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* Gilroy criticises the attempts by Labour in the early 1980s to persuade black people that the institutions of the white working class were the best vehicle for mobilising their frustrations with racism in the UK. Going much further than Hall, he charges that this approach completely misunderstood the depth of the problem, since the cultural politics of nation had already become aligned with the structures of the state in a way that foreclosed the possibility of the latter serving as a vehicle for resistance against the former. Consequently, he argues, "being political now requires complete disassociation from the corporate structures of formal politics"; indeed, "[a]uthentic politics is [today] thought to recommence with this act of withdrawal". Like wandering out into the frozen wastes, however, this process of withdrawal does not in itself constitute a "new" politics, since the latter is more likely to be found at "the intersection of territoriality and identity in urban black cultures" (*Ain't No Black* 228). In this way the city—not the rarefied polis, but "urban processes and experiences" (228)—becomes a space that promises a new kind of "[c]ommunity which is as much about difference as it is about similarity", and which thus militates against

Kingdom, these questions remain just as pressing as ever today, when regionalism and devolution are higher on the constitutional agenda than at any time since Irish independence, the doctrine of multiculturalism is valorised or lambasted with more vigour than ever before and barely a month passes by without one or another functionary of the state attempting to paper over the increasingly chasm-like cracks of the nation-state by deploying the concept of "British values". One example of this came in March 2008 when the former attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, announced a range of proposals aimed at celebrating "Britishness", including the establishment of a national holiday, community service and a ceremony for school leavers which would involve pledging allegiance to the Crown. Quite what an Irish nationalist living in Belfast might think about this was one of a number of witheringly incredulous questions that were begged of the proposals. The increasing fractiousness and fragility of the British nation-state is evidenced in many contradictory ways, not least in the growth of the more extreme nationalist parties (BNP, DUP, Sinn Féin) at the expense of their more moderate alternatives (the Westminster parties, Ulster Unionists, SDLP) at a time when moderate secessionist parties such as the SNP and Plaid Cymru have also seen an unprecedented growth in support.

the idea of a homogeneous national culture (235).

To this extent both the Arendtian and culturalist solutions resist the liberal notion that freedom can only be located in spaces where the individual is able to exercise her natural faculties in order to produce private wealth. But where Arendt narrows the definition of politics and elevates it above culture and society, Gilroy broadens it to include culture. And where Arendt responds to the problematics of nation by engaging with politics in the yet more discrete and rarefied realm of the polis, the culturalist approach repudiates formal politics altogether, exiles itself and emphasises the resistant potential of the performative subculture operating in urban “non-work time and space”. To Winterson, I think, Venice (and, by extension, the inner-city) represents just such a milieu: a spatial projection of alterity, fostering a subcultural—rather than a political—expression of subjectivity, in which identity is not conceived of *a priori* but is generated through performance. The very characteristics that would render the city a “zone of morbidity” for Bianco represent a “promise of possibility” to Winterson: being placed in an indeterminate relationship with the sovereign does not seem to her dangerous but liberatory, since it unleashes the power of difference to frustrate the homogenising rubrics of nationalism. Thus despite being abjectly unfree, Venice remains an emancipatory space because freedom exists most provocatively, most excessively, where there has been a complete withdrawal from formal politics; where the distinction between inside and outside is most unclear and the prevailing political scenario is exile. This is the key paradox that characterises the cultural politics of disenfranchisement: a paradox which suggests that we are most free when we relinquish any claim on political structures that might recognise us as such. The unique political ontology that arises from this abjuration is inert and thus of no use in itself; consequently, in order to deliver on its emancipatory potential it must be mobilised through expressive cultures, since only these are capable of providing a meaningful substitute for the political mechanisms that have been repudiated. And it is for this reason that the urban experience is fundamental to this model of freedom, because the latter can only be realised in spaces that are saturated with such cultures, like the city—and specifically the inner city, whose ambivalent political situation and diverse identities Venice mirrors. Only in

spaces like this will the cultural politics of disenfranchisement work, because only here can the full emancipatory potential of exile be enacted.

* * *

It is because of the way it connects this unique model of freedom with the city that *The Passion* is able to help us identify the cultural politics of disenfranchisement. Consequently, I think it deserves to have its status in the canon of contemporary British literature reappraised; to be recognised alongside Winterson's more frequently-discussed novels *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1981), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and *Written on the Body* (1992) as a text that says something important about the relationship between literature and critical theory in the British intellectual context. Having said this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the cultural politics of disenfranchisement should emerge through the "lesser" efforts of key contemporary writers, since it confronts us with a slightly different trajectory to the one British cultural studies is typically deemed to have taken. Our task going forward will be a gloomy one, since we will trace how this logic led eventually to crisis and impasse. But for the moment it is worth returning to *The Passion* in order to observe how, at the end of the novel, Winterson chooses to marginalise the Napoleonic/Thatcherite subject rather than the subaltern one, thereby affirming the oppositional potential of Venice and the inner city in the face of a seemingly insurmountable hegemon.

This is hardly a happy conclusion, for the subject in question happens to be Henri—a sympathetic character, if a rather colourless one. Then again, it is not surprising that ultimately Venice remains bewilderingly unknowable to him. On their trek through Eastern Europe Villanelle assures him that "When we get through this snow, I'll take you to the city of disguises and you'll find one that suits you" (Winterson *Passion* 100); however, when they arrive in Venice Henri is completely incapable of functioning there. The unmappable spaces require him to surrender his need for stability and embrace indeterminacy, but this is something he is unable to do: shortly after arriving in the city he goes for a walk, becomes lost and remains missing for five days; he only finds Villanelle again by

chance and, when he does, is told that she thought he had gone back to France (113). When he tries to articulate his disorientation it is not exactly surprising that he can think only in terms of Napoleon: “Where Bonaparte goes”, he says, “straight roads follow, buildings are rationalised, street signs change to celebrate a battle but they are always clearly marked. Here, if they bother with street signs at all, they are happy to use the same ones over again” (112). Similarly, he is quite incapable of adapting to live in a situation in which ontological categories enter a state of flux: when Villanelle introduces him to her parents he finds it incomprehensible that “the fact that I was a Frenchman didn’t bother them at all”, despite her stepfather assuring him that “[n]ot every Frenchman is Napoleon Bonaparte” (110). To Henri the *citoyen*—the national whose experience under Napoleon has encouraged him to consider his identity as fixed first and foremost in relation to the sovereign, who in turn embodies the nation—this talk is anathema. Indeed, Henri remains imaginatively a *citoyen* all the time he is in Venice, and this dooms his love affair with Villanelle, since each character is fundamentally at odds with the other: as Villanelle notes, “[H]e couldn’t live in Venice and I wouldn’t live in France” (148).

At the novel’s denouement Villanelle’s husband—the one who sold her to the army as a *vivendière*—finds her returned to Venice and, by a rather staggering coincidence, recognises Henri as the boy who stole his job as Napoleon’s cook. He threatens to betray their whereabouts to the French and so Henri murders him with Villanelle’s knife before carving out his heart and handing it to her. After being apprehended for the crime, Henri is deemed insane and imprisoned in the asylum on San Servolo.³⁸ And when Villanelle comes to break him out he refuses to go with her, choosing instead to consign himself to the madhouse, where he can tend the rose garden and write his memoir. This voluntary imprisonment is really quite ironic considering that—as Michel Foucault suggests in *Madness and Civilization* (1961)—the purpose of the asylum in modernity has been to contain, regiment and render invisible behaviour that frustrates the normative behaviour of Western society, and that its inmates were often considered to sit at the threshold between the human and the animal. Indeed, in some ways the asylum is no less a state of exception than

³⁸ An apparent mistake on Winterson’s part, since the island is actually named San Servolo.

Venice, but it appears to provide Henri with an illusion of stability which appeals to his Napoleonic mindset. Whether the madness of the asylum's inmates is real rather than simply another kind of performance—one that fools even the inmates themselves—is debatable; either way, Henri is much more content with this illusion than he is with the “living city” of Venice, because in tending his garden he exercises a kind of control which enables him to assert with absolute certainty that he “will have red roses next year. A forest of red roses” (113, 160). And perhaps this is Winterson's last comment on Henri the provincial: for, however illusory it might be, he has finally found his suburb.

CHAPTER TWO

RAVE TO THE GRAVE:

Hanif Kureishi and the Failure of Left Culturalism

In the last chapter we saw that careful reading of Winterson's 1987 novel *The Passion* sheds light on a moment in the late 1980s when certain figures on the British cultural Left came to substitute urban culture for city politics. I argued that this substitution forms part of a broader political narrative that was inherent to Left culturalism in its second iteration, which I have labelled the cultural politics of disenfranchisement. And I suggested that the level of emancipatory potential that was considered to reside in urban culture was remarkable, given that the process that led to its lionisation eschewed any political structure capable of recognising an action as bearing political meaning. This chapter will pursue the consequences of this process into the post-Thatcher period, when this experiment with freedom came under increased scrutiny and was considered by some to have led the cultural Left into a cul-de-sac from which it might never emerge intact.

On 26 August 1991, the most ostentatious contribution to the London skyline in thirty years was officially opened by the Duke of Edinburgh. Looming more than 240 metres above the capital, One Canada Square was the culmination of a decade of planning and construction, starting with the closure of the West India Dock in 1980. Designed by César Pelli—an architect well-known for advocating the aesthetic virtues of postmodernism—the tower's pastiche of Big Ben was quite fitting for a building that symbolised the incumbent Right's most grandiose attempt to rationalise urban space. A pity, then, that Margaret Thatcher was no longer around to witness its opening in an

official capacity: ten months earlier, she had been turfed out of office by a cabinet which, in the light of the Poll Tax debacle, increasingly saw her as a liability. But while the fall of the modern Napoleon might have inspired the Left to rejoice, this sentiment paled beside all there was to mourn in the Docklands' redevelopment. In the late 1970s the latter had not been all that far from the kind of entropic extreme represented by Jeanette Winterson's Venice: a once-glorious emblem of mercantilism in danger of slipping into the very waters it had previously sought to master and exploit. Its environs were home to some of the UK's poorest and most dispossessed citizens, as well as artists, vagrants and squatters attracted by the prospect of zero or near-zero rents. And when the London Docklands Development Corporation threatened to pull apart this community, the docks served as a theatre of conflict between a motley bunch of disenfranchised collectives and the combined power of state and capital. Unlike Winterson's Napoleon, however, this invading force succeeded in "BLEEDING DOCKLANDS DRY", as one piece of graffiti put it, and at the beginning of the 1990s that success was made incarnate in One Canada Square. The redeveloped docklands are thus a good place to begin this chapter. For while, in the form of the Militant Tendency, the radical Left had been instrumental in Thatcher's downfall—helping to organise the anti-Poll Tax demonstration of March 31 1990 that would become known ironically as the "Battle of Trafalgar"—in broader historical terms, it was not until Thatcher left office that the crisis of the Left really set in. And the challenge posed by postmodern space—specifically the kind produced by the LDDC—is one of the issues that concerns us now. For while the sheer scale of the Docklands project—the monumentalism of its architecture and the arrogant way in which it was developed with little concern for the communities that already lived there—recalls a kind of Corbusian approach to urban space, the planning regime under which it was delivered was axiomatically opposed to that which produced the shopping malls and high-rise estates of the 1960s and 70s. Where late modernist urbanism was typified by a rigid spatial logic, postmodern planning was distinguished above all by the significance it attached to flexibility. And this implied a relationship between the kind of flexible spaces celebrated in *The Passion* and those

produced by Thatcherism which, for some key figures on the cultural Left, was a little too close for comfort.

More importantly—and far more devastatingly—the similarity between the spatial regimes of the New Right and the cultural Left yielded implications about how the latter had conceptualised the relationship between culture and politics that caused it to question some of the most fundamental components of its emancipatory project. However, it is important to understand that, just as—indeed *because*—urban space was central to how Left culturalism articulated its experiment with freedom, the crisis that penetrated to the heart of this experiment also manifested itself in an attitude towards the city. It is thus hardly a surprise to find that, by the mid-1990s, enthusiasm for the emancipatory potential of the inner city appeared to be waning: notable leftists seemed to have quietly abandoned it as a site of political possibility, and by the turn of the millennium more pessimistic accounts of the urban experience were increasingly common.³⁹ Charting the anagnorisis that accompanied this change is vital in understanding how the cultural Left struggled to confront the challenge of postmodernity, and it is once again the fiction of the period that best enables us to do this—specifically, the fiction of Hanif Kureishi, a writer who has consistently functioned in critical discourse since the 1980s as the literary mouthpiece for cultural hybridity. We have already explored how, in his earliest work, Kureishi insists on identity as comprising a complex and contradictory flux of multiple differences, and established that in this way his writing evidences many theoretical concerns that were also central to Left

³⁹ There is a notable exception to this which needs to be acknowledged: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). For while this novel is shot through with intergenerational pathos, it remains stubbornly optimistic and could easily be argued to maintain the role of the urban experience as a guarantor of cultural pluralism and hybridity. However, if it therefore continues the emancipatory project of which Kureishi's early fiction formed such a crucial part—and that is far from certain—it does it, by and large, alone. After *The Black Album* Kureishi himself became entirely disenchanted with the urban experience, which the work of his middle period seems to suggest guarantees little more than an illusory and impermanent kind of individual self-realisation. It is telling, therefore, that while in her 2003 novel *Brick Lane* Monica Ali appears to echo Smith's enthusiasm for London's verve and vitality, she is less invested in the collective possibilities it represents and articulates her narrative of female emancipation in a depressingly individualised way.

culturalism. The slippery characters of *My Beautiful Laundrette*—from Tory-voting south Asians to gay national front thugs, Pakistani feminists to working-class dilettantes—seemed to Stuart Hall to embody an understanding of identity as constantly evolving in response to social pressures that cannot be properly accounted for without a correspondingly complex understanding of culture. Moreover, in his protagonists' peregrinations from the sexual and ethnic outskirts of society to its core, Kureishi reflects the belief that it is through studying the margins that light is cast most brightly on the centre. That these journeys are nearly always manifested in a migration from London's homogeneous suburbs to its vibrant inner regions corresponds with Gilroy's celebration of the political potential of expressive urban cultures in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*. Indeed, in his early work Kureishi frequently appears to consider the formative influence of the city upon the subject to be greater—and more progressive—than that of the nation: as he writes in his account of the creative process that produced *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), "I was brought up in London. It's my city. I'm no Britisher, but a Londoner" (Kureishi *Dreaming* 142). And this attitude is born out in his first novel, which explicitly deploys a literary mode—the bildungsroman—that is deeply concerned with the emergence of the subject in order to chart its protagonist's rejection of the nation in favour of the city. Beginning, "My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost", *The Buddha of Suburbia* invents and explores a plethora of fractious identities—all, to varying extents, subaltern—that, while contesting themselves and one another, are exhilaratingly accommodated by a captivating and polymorphous London (*Buddha* 3). It ends on a touching flourish of optimism, with Karim, his family and friends committed to an uncertain life in the inner city: "And so I sat in the centre of this old city that I loved, which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn't always be that way" (284).

Initially at least, Kureishi's second novel, *The Black Album* (1995), seems to mirror this approach. Set between 1988 and 89—a period that encompasses

the so-called “second summer of love” as well as the *Satanic Verses* controversy—its account of the city and the subject is as fraught as in any of his previous fictions. Its protagonist, Shahid, moves away from the Kent countryside to study the greats of English literature at a run-down inner-London college, but ends up in bed with a lecturer—Deedee Osgood—whose classes revolve around contemporary and popular culture.⁴⁰ Their affair involves plenty of passionate and subversive sex, and makes much use of the city’s dance and drug subcultures; however, at the same time, Shahid also falls in with a group of Muslim students headed by Riaz, a pious and enigmatic Pakistani who defines himself against the sex- and drug-fuelled debauchery of contemporary urban Britain by insisting on strict adherence to a narrow understanding of Islam that frowns on music and literature and seeks to emphasise the pleasures of the spirit over those of the body. In this way—that is, by forcing Shahid to choose between Riaz’s communitarian agenda and the hedonistic possibilities represented by Deedee—*The Black Album* establishes its principal narrative and political tension, constructing its protagonist as the contested territory between the libidinous possibilities of urban culture on the one hand and an essentialising Islamic nationalism on the other. Its similarity to Kureishi’s earlier work is thus readily identifiable: the novel is deeply invested in exploring the place of nationalist and culturalist politics in the contemporary urban milieu, and is keen to engage with the tension between *a priori* and *a posteriori* accounts of subjectivity at a historical moment when political, economic and cultural circumstances seem to be changing by the minute. Whether subjective fixity is represented by nationalism—English or Islamic—or Marxism, Kureishi’s response remains basically the same: while he understands the appeal of the

⁴⁰ It is necessary to acknowledge that Kureishi has consistently suggested that the debate he stages in *The Black Album* pits Islamic fundamentalism not against Left culturalism but what he calls “liberalism”. In the introduction to his stage adaptation of the novel—first performed at the National Theatre in July 2009—he recalls that, despite worrying that his observations would seem passé fifteen years after they were first written, “it wasn’t as though the subject of liberalism and its relation to extreme religion had gone away” (Kureishi “Newness” vi). For reasons that will become clear, I consider Deedee to be emblematic of Left culturalism to a far greater extent than she is of liberalism. The fact that she teaches popular and contemporary culture is one of these.

comfortable and unchanging truths upon which these world-views are founded, he cannot accept the hypostatised ontologies they inevitably entail. And it is for this reason that he ends *The Black Album* with a familiar endorsement of hybridity, declaring that “[t]here was no fixed self”.

However, this time Kureishi seems far less sure of himself, and immediately qualifies this statement with a question—“surely our several selves melted and mutated daily?”—that strikes the reader as not entirely rhetorical (Kureishi *Black Album* 274). This uncertainty is only compounded by the sense that, between his first and second novels, his enthusiasm for the city has been significantly dampened. Because while he never shies away from representing London’s shabbier side in the *The Buddha*—if anything, it is this aspect that excites him the most—in *The Black Album* there is less and less about urban life that Kureishi finds inspiriting. Early on he quietly signals that there will be far less of the comedy and concupiscence that typified his previous fictions by describing how the films Shahid watches in order to prepare himself for “how rough and mixed London would be” fail to “stead[y] him for such mundane poverty” as actually exists there (3). Moreover, in pointed contrast to Karim’s flirtation with fame in the intoxicating capital of *The Buddha*, once Shahid arrives in the city he feels “invisible; somehow this wasn’t the ‘real’ London” (4). Over the course of the novel we gradually become acquainted with this “real” London but, as Kureishi himself has suggested, the tone of *The Black Album* is consistently cooler and more detached than that of *The Buddha*.⁴¹ And when, finally, Shahid does embrace Deedee’s politics of play and pleasure over Riaz’s nationalist agenda, the resolution comes at the price of a *disengagement* with the city. For where in the earlier works his protagonists remain in London at the narrative’s close, in *The Black Album* Kureishi’s solution to the political tensions that have variously torn Shahid and Deedee apart and kept them together is a rather bewildering escape to the seaside.⁴²

⁴¹ In interview with Kenneth Kaleta, Kureishi argues that “*The Black Album* is a more objective novel” than *The Buddha*, “a cooler book emotionally” (Kaleta 144).

⁴² In the closing sentences, as the unlikely lovers sit on a coast-bound train, Kureishi writes that “the air outside seemed to be clearer. It wouldn’t be long before they were walking down to the sea [...] They looked across at one another as if to say, what new adventure is this?” (Kureishi *Black Album*

Given Kureishi's outspoken enthusiasm for the urban experience, the reader is entitled to ask how this volte-face occurred; to wonder what took place in his political imagination between composing *The Buddha* and the *The Black Album* that encouraged him to doubt the city's unique ability to reconcile politics and identity. The aim of this chapter is to answer this question, and in order to do this it will first explore a particular impasse that ensnared the Left in the late 1980s. This impasse has everything to do with the Arendtian conception of politics as presence and participation within an explicitly political space that formed such an important part of the previous chapter. Because, to a greater extent than in any of his previous fictions, *The Black Album* seems acutely aware of the oppositional possibilities of a communitarian politics organised around recognition, and doubts whether an emphasis on spatial and political indeterminacy—which is so central to *The Passion's* celebration of exile—is in fact capable of combatting the reactionary discourses of the Right in an urban context. Like *The Passion*, *The Black Album* represents a very particular intervention in the debate surrounding Left culturalism, and careful reading of this intervention yields compelling insights into the latter which would not be available to us otherwise. Apropos of this it is worth noting that around the same time that Kureishi published *The Black Album*, Paul Gilroy appeared to effect a similar abandonment of the city as a site of emancipatory possibility. For while black urban culture is valorised in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*—published, like *The Passion*, in 1987—come 1993's *The Black Atlantic* and the explicitly urban styles and processes that formed such an important part of the earlier book no longer seem capable of sustaining the author's attention. Certainly, his analysis of the "black Atlantic"—a heuristic that unearths a "counterculture of modernity" which, Gilroy argues, "reconstructs its own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy in a partially hidden sphere of its own"—reaps fabulous rewards (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 38-39).⁴³ However, in so

276). Despite—or perhaps because of—their uncharacteristic and unsteady commitment to one another, the reader is not inclined to find this adventure particularly adventurous.

⁴³ In this text Gilroy attempts to resist what he claims is a foundational Anglocentric prejudice of first-generation Left culturalism by suggesting that "historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an

far as our own discussion is concerned, the fact that both he and Kureishi distanced themselves from the city at the same historical moment is surely worthy of note.

In response to this seeming abandonment of the city as a site of meaningful political action by two prominent Left culturalists, a central subject of this chapter will be the now-familiar claim that the development of the so-called “postmodern metropolis” has been concomitant with a near-wholesale abrogation of the city as a political entity. For the *The Black Album* implies that Left culturalism shares some of the responsibility for this phenomenon, and for a diminution of the political in postmodernity generally. I want to suggest in the first instance that this was precipitated by the exposure of Left culturalism’s account of the close relationship between urban space and resistant praxis as ineffective in combatting Thatcherism’s spatial logic by theoretical developments elsewhere on the Left, within a body of thought known as the “spatial turn”. The fundamental challenge of the spatial turn—which emerged within Marxist discourse at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the

explicitly transnational and international perspective” (Gilroy *Black Atlantic* 15). Using black music from around the Atlantic he argues for the existence of what he calls a “politics of transfiguration” within which “the bounds of politics are extended precisely because this tradition of expression refuses to accept that the political is a readily separable domain”. And he proposes that critics should “reread and rethink this expressive counterculture not simply as a succession of literary tropes and genres but as a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics” (38-39). Of course, the collapse of politics and culture that Gilroy urges here also forms a significant aspect of his earlier text, which in its closing passages identified the city as the most appropriate site for realising the progressive potential of this collapse. However, in terms of Gilroy’s own intellectual development it appears that ultimately the direction of travel is *away* from the city, both as an object of study and as a site of emancipation. In *The Passion*, the unpredictable interplay between water and the city—and the political indeterminacy that this implies—suggests, in Grice’s and Woods’s terms, “a promise of possibility lying untapped in the history of space”. However, where *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* might be seen to endorse this statement with its emphasis on urban cultures in inner-city areas, in *The Black Atlantic* that urban context has disappeared completely, to be replaced—metaphorically, at least—with *only* flux, accident, indeterminacy. And this leads to a situation, as Laura Chrisman puts it, in which Gilroy accords specifically political action “no transfigurative potential, labelling it as expressive exclusively of a politics of bourgeois civic ‘fulfilment’” (Chrisman 460).

1990s⁴⁴—consisted in its convincing demonstration that the principal agency behind the massive expansion of indeterminate space in the postmodern metropolis was not the Left, but the Right. This contention posed a number of cutting questions regarding the political value Left culturalism attached to inner city space: it challenged the extent to which cultural, spatial and political indeterminacy could remain central to oppositional praxis and, most worryingly of all, raised the possibility that, rather than enabling resistant activity, the cultural politics of disenfranchisement inherent to Left culturalism’s celebration of mercurial urban identities in fact served to abet the Right in its strategy to totalise and to dominate.

I want to suggest that the shift of tone in Kureishi’s representation of the city between his first and second novels—from the sanguine and celebratory *Buddha* to the anxious and far less optimistic *Black Album*—represents a moment in which this problematic was acknowledged by Left culturalism’s most famous literary celebrant. I want to argue that, in reaction to this realisation, Kureishi came to believe that Left culturalism no longer promised a more effective opposition to Thatcherism than other resistant modes—specifically, nationalism—that contradicted its emphasis on cultural indeterminacy. And I want to suggest that this belief led Kureishi to question some of the more deeply held aspects of the Left culturalist project, such as its collapse of politics into culture and its connection of the latter with resistant praxis. Ultimately, I want to suggest that the abandonment of the city at the end of *The Black Album* not only

⁴⁴ Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*—a foundational text of the movement—was first published in France in 1974, but not translated into English until 1991. It was something rather more significant than prescience that enabled Lefebvre to write, more than a decade before space was engaged with in a meaningful way in Britain and America, that “[t]heoretical and practical questions relating to space are becoming more and more important. Questions, though they do not suppress them, tend to resituate concepts and problems having to do with biological reproduction, and with the production both of the means of production themselves and of consumer goods” (Lefebvre 62). Like many of the theorists connected to the spatial turn, Lefebvre suggests that “neocapitalism” (his term for the then-emerging orthodoxy that would become known as neoliberalism) creates “spatial chaos”; however, unlike later critics—and very much like the Left culturalists—he seems to believe that in this chaos may also consist the most fruitful means of developing an oppositional praxis (63).

expresses a sense that the city will no longer serve as a venue for Left culturalism's emancipatory project; despite the novel's apparent endorsement of Deedee's cultural politics of play and pleasure, its conclusion represents a moment of profound disillusionment with the project itself.

1. The Spatial Turn

Whether in delight or protest, the academic Left is generally unified in acknowledging that, since the mid-1970s, there has been a steady erosion of the nation-state in political and economic terms, as well as a corresponding increase in the relevance of the city as a unit of social analysis.⁴⁵ Thatcherism is generally deemed to have played a central role in this process and, in most accounts, to have compensated for the political and economic action it took to render the borders of the UK more porous—such as dismantling nationalised industries and opening British markets to international competition—by indulging in the kind of cultural nationalism that characterised the aftermath of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict. As we have already seen, Left culturalist figures followed Thatcherism onto this cultural terrain and valorised, in Gilroy's words, “the role of distinctively urban processes” as a means of combatting its jingoistic

⁴⁵ This is certainly true of Left culturalism too: in his exploration of the decline of the nation state, the New Times theorist David Held attributes particular responsibility to “the internationalisation of production finance and other economic resources” for “eroding the capacity of the state to control its own economic future” (Held 194). However, the claim that the nation-state should no longer be the principal focus of political, social and economic analysis has not just been heard on the Left. In her 1986 book *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, Jane Jacobs criticises Keynesian macro-economic theory for insisting that “national economies are useful and salient entities for understanding how economic life works and what its structure may be” (Jacobs *Wealth* 29). She contends that this perspective fails to account for the fact that within states there are often multiple economies that usually centre on cities. The latter, she claims, “are unique in their abilities to shape and reshape the economies of other settlements, including those far removed from them geographically” and should therefore take pride of place in any economic analysis (32). As we will see shortly, Jacobs's contention is very similar to the quarrels of Doreen Massey and Edward Soja with orthodox Marxism, whose exclusively historical materialism they consider limited in its ability to account for the obviously spatial dimension of capitalist development.

and hypostatised account of national identity. This strategy, as I argued in my reading of *The Passion*, entailed a celebration of the inner city as a site of social emancipation that embraced the political possibilities of disenfranchisement, and was expressed in Winterson's novel very much in spatial terms. The plurality of marginalised inner-city communities was considered to possess the potential to resist the nationalism of the New Right because it appeared to provide real-world ballast to the culturalists' theoretical account of identity-formation as an endless, discursive process in which groups and individuals are perpetually reconstituted by a free play of cultural signifiers that contradict as often as they complement one another. The plural approach to identity was thus *mapped onto* the space of the inner city, which became as mercurial as the populations that called it home, and in this way the flexibility of urban space was perceived to *both express and* reflect the highest progressive value of cultural complexity.

Like the Left culturalists, many figures connected to Marxism's spatial turn were centrally concerned with the role of flexibility in post-Fordism.⁴⁶ And,

⁴⁶ The transition from Fordism to post-Fordism consisted in the shift away from the mode of capital accumulation represented by the practises of Henry Ford and characterised overwhelmingly by rigidity—an emphasis on economies of scale, highly organised labour, and mass production and consumption—to a new mode organised around flexibility and specialisation, and consisting in economies of scope, non-unionised labour, and the specific targeting of consumer demographics. Hall and Jacques urge that the shift from the “rigid” world of Fordism towards the “flexible” one of post-Fordism “must not be understood as exclusively an economic development, in the narrow sense. Just as Fordism represented, not simply a form of economic organisation but a whole culture [...] so post-Fordism is also shorthand for a much wider and deeper social and cultural development” (Hall and Jacques *New Times* 12). As part of their attempt to locate new sites of left-wing inquiry and action in postmodernity, Hall and Jacques sought to resist a tendency across the British Left to dehistoricise Thatcherism and treat it as somehow coterminous with post-Fordism, rather than as a specific response to historical circumstances that were value-free. They provide a rebuttal to the claim that the new economic, political and cultural circumstances rendered the Left irrelevant by urging that post-Fordism never possessed a particular political trajectory, and that it was a major mistake for leftists to have assumed that it did: “It was not just that much of the Left had failed to understand the novelty and specificity of Thatcherism. What is more important is that it failed to distinguish adequately between [...] Thatcherism and the world which Thatcherism claimed to represent and aspired to lead [...] As a result, the Left failed to recognise the new ground or understand the new world that was being made. That new world and

like the Left culturalists, they sought to respond to both the challenge presented by the Right's apparent appropriation of flexible space for its own ends, as well as some of the most antiquated—and deeply-held—assumptions of the Left itself. However, the way in which they formulated this response differed significantly from the methodology of figures such as Hall and Gilroy, who started by analysing flexibility in relation to cultural identity, and then expanded their analysis to exploit the possibilities they perceived in inner-city space. While still maintaining an interest in the cultural dimensions of post-Fordism, thinkers such as David Harvey—whose *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) is a key text of the spatial turn—focused instead on elaborating a theory of space that might be reconciled more readily with an orthodox emphasis on historical materialism.⁴⁷ In other words, for Harvey the starting point was not identity, but space, time and the relationship between the two. He begins his investigation by characterising the experience of postmodernity as deeply bound up with “new dominant ways in which we experience space and time” that owe much to the emergence of “more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of ‘time-space compression’ in the organization of capitalism” (Harvey vii). In this way, he identifies this changing experience of time and space as the place to begin in any attempt to describe postmodernity in cultural terms.⁴⁸ This said,

Thatcherism were seen as one and the same thing. The latter, as a consequence, looked omnipotent, as if it was in command of history” (Hall and Jacques *New Times* 15).

⁴⁷ While many of the Left culturalists challenge the orthodoxy of economic determinism, Harvey abides by it and argues that “when set against the basic rules of capitalistic accumulation”, the new economic, political and cultural circumstances that emerged from 1972 onwards—that is, post-Fordism—“appear more as shifts in surface appearance rather than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new postcapitalist or even postindustrial society” (Harvey vii). Postmodernism serves only as a cultural *expression* of new, post-Fordist economic practices, rather than a gesture beyond the economic base-superstructure model itself; his aim is merely to “give an account of space and time in social life so as to highlight material links between political-economic and cultural processes” (Harvey 201).

⁴⁸ Harvey identifies the cultural corollary of Fordism in the emphasis on rational organisation as a utopian project in, for example, the architectural modernism of Le Corbusier, which—as typified in his slogan “By order bring about freedom” (qtd. in Harvey 31)—appealed to rationality as a means of bringing about social emancipation. Harvey claims that it was just this totalising rationality that came to be opposed by the countercultural movements of the 1960s, which

Harvey is by no means the only thinker to come upon this revelation, nor to draw on it in shedding light on postmodernity's cultural dimensions: crucial to Fredric Jameson's 1984 essay "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" is an elucidation of the representation of time and space in postmodernity, and particularly of the flattening and disorientating effects of postmodern architecture, photography and film. In fact, the "reassertion of space in critical social theory", as Edward Soja subtitles his *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), was by the end of the decade a well-established theoretical trend within Marxism. In addition to responding, as Harvey suggests, to the new political, economic and cultural circumstances of post-Fordism, this reassertion of space was also informed by a growing awareness of globalisation and its effects: firstly, as trade and migration barriers lifted and revealed the geographical inequities of wealth and development across cities, countries, continents and the planet; and, consequently, as progressive agendas sought to identify a praxis that was capable of spanning the seemingly unbridgeable distance between the global and the local. Some fundamental questions were asked of the Left by texts such as Doreen Massey's *Spatial Divisions of Labour*, in which she argues that "[e]ach country is different, and these differences have geographical implications"; that, even within individual nation-states, "things are more complex than a simple confrontation between capital and labour" (Massey 16-17). In the face of these various geographical differences, Marxism's rigidly diachronic perspective seemed suddenly myopic: surely uneven development needed to be accounted for synchronically as well? As Soja writes, an exclusively historical materialism "tended to occlude a comparable critical ability to the spatiality of social life, a practical theoretical consciousness that sees the lifeworld of being creatively

disdained the "oppressive qualities of scientifically grounded technical-bureaucratic rationality as purveyed through monolithic corporate, state, and other forms of institutionalized power". Laying down the cultural foundations of postmodernism, these movements emphasised instead "individualized self-realization through a distinctive 'new Left' politics, through the embrace of anti-authoritarian gestures, iconoclastic habits (in music, dress, language and lifestyle), and the critique of everyday life" (38). In other words, just those gestures and habits explored by early Left culturalist texts such as Hebdige's *Subculture*.

located not only in the making of history but also in the construction of human geographies, the social production of space and the restless formation and reformation of geographical landscapes” (11).

However, as far as the present investigation is concerned, what is crucial about the spatial turn is that it explicitly identified the Right as the agency behind the massive expansion of flexible space in postmodernity, as well as the worrying consequences this entailed. Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz* (1990) provides the most emotive example of this kind of analysis,⁴⁹ but more interesting for us is without doubt Beatrix Campbell’s 1989 foray into Britain’s “New Times Towns”, due to the peculiar nature of its connection with Left culturalism.⁵⁰ In her essay, Campbell visits a number of locations she claims are expressive of post-Fordist urbanism, and after a discussion of Livingston, Sheffield and Swindon, we end up in Basingstoke, forty-eight miles west of

⁴⁹ At its most dystopian, Davis’s account reads like a *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of postmodernity. In his “Fortress LA”, “municipal policy has taken its lead from the security offensive and the middle-class demand for increased spatial and social insulation” (Davis *Quartz* 227). The LAPD’s “quixotic quest” to bring safety to sidewalks conceals a brutal spatial dichotomy whose true logic leads inevitably to a massive assault on the public realm: “good citizens, off the streets, enclaved in their high-security private consumption spheres; bad citizens, on the streets (and therefore not engaged in legitimate business)” (253). What is more, there is very little we can do about it. There are no spaces of resistance in Davis’s account, no heterotopias, no enclaves of anti-hegemonic activity. As implied in my reading of *The Passion*, totalisation is indeed the end of neoliberalism’s spatial project, but this is achieved via an emphasis on precisely the kind of flexibility and indeterminacy that the novel locates at the heart of any attempt to combat such totalisation. The inner cities, which are represented as politically fecund in *The Passion*, are, in *City of Quartz*, solely “carceral”; their best expressions located in “pop apocalypses and pulp science fiction” like *Escape from New York*, *Running Man* and *Blade Runner*(223).

⁵⁰ Campbell herself could not be properly labelled a Left culturalist: she is a left-wing investigative journalist whose reports cover a range of subjects from sexual politics to child abuse and the plight of British urban youth. Nonetheless, it is significant that “New Times Towns” was initially published in *Marxism Today* when the journal was edited by Martin Jacques and heavily influenced by Hall and his culturalist agenda, and subsequently reprinted as part of the collection *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, which was edited by Hall and Jacques and anthologised a number of other leading Left culturalists, including Dick Hebdige. Campbell thus operates with sufficient proximity to Left culturalism to be familiar with its agenda while also maintaining a critical distance that enables her to discuss it with an outsider’s trenchancy.

London. This town, Campbell concludes, is a perfect example of “Thatchergrad”. The historic market centre has been demolished and rebuilt as a fortress of high-tech companies, and so thoroughly privatised is social space that leisure time has been completely domesticated: a wine box and a video at night; car-cleaning and DIY at the weekend. There is a general focus on policing and surveillance, territorial imperatives and forbidden spaces. For example, she writes: “The place dies at night—one evening I counted precisely fourteen people in the town centre—six were at cash points, the rest were on their way to somewhere else [...] Legend has it that the Pru[dential financial company]’s security people have rid the place of undesirables” (295). However, for all this obsession with menacing security forces and desolate urban vistas, we should be careful to differentiate Campbell’s vision from the bureaucratised and absurdly violent regimes of a thousand mid-century dystopias.⁵¹ For the logic of this dark and dismal urban space has more to do with *laissez-faire* than with red tape and regulation. Campbell is emphatic in attributing responsibility for this state of affairs to the ruling Conservative council, and draws explicit attention to the retraction of political impediments to investment and development which, she says with some irony, has produced “a flourishing economy unimpeded by planning, by civic pride, or by community politics”.

In this respect Basingstoke is typical of Thatcherite urban design, which, as we have seen, emphasised the need to sweep away local planning ordinances and the political power that protected them. What is interesting is that the

⁵¹ Without a doubt, the best-known novels to explore the spatial logic of the *post*-Fordist city are *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1984, 1986, 1988)—William Gibson’s so-called “Sprawl” trilogy—which is widely perceived to be a crowning achievement of the cyberpunk genre. Decrepit cities, youth subcultures and criminal personalities are staples of cyberpunk literature, which often features near-future dystopias in which multinational corporations wield more power than elected governments. These companies have to be resisted by fugitive outcasts, who are frequently computer hackers that must to negotiate competing—often amoral—interests with the currency of controlled information. All these generic features are present in British author Jeff Noon’s “Vurt” trilogy (*Vurt*, *Pollen* and *Nymphomation* (1993, 1995, 1997)). That rave-era Manchester is such as influence on Noon’s cyberpunk fiction is worth taking note of, as the political (and apolitical) aspects of late 1980s dance subculture will be discussed shortly.

rhetoric of this agenda relied heavily on the concept of flexibility: for instance, in his 1984 speech to the House of Commons, Environment Secretary Patrick Jenkin urged that “[p]lanning authorities must adopt a flexible and pragmatic approach to meet the ends of versatile enterprises” (qtd. in Brinley et. al. 16). Concluding their study of urban planning during the 1980s—published in the same year as “New Times Towns”—Tim Brindley, Yvonne Rydin and Gerry Stoker argue that going into the 1990s “[f]lexibility’ will be the keyword of the new style of trend planning. Development plans will be flexible planning frameworks” (Brinley et. al. 177). And this is the crux of the issue: rather than providing a basis for oppositionality, flexibility becomes the means by which Thatcherism realises its totalising spatial logic. Indeterminate spaces no longer provide the best conditions for realising the concept—much-vaunted by Left culturalism—of cultural complexity. As Campbell writes, “Citizenship has none of the multiple identities implied by the broader vision of the new times theory. Here the citizen is only a consumer” (295). Once, flexibility had been the foundation upon which the cultural Left built its model of resistance, by focusing on the endless flexibility of the subject herself. And, as our discussion of *The Passion* suggested, it was out of this flexible account of subjectivity that the celebration of flexible space arose. But in light of the observations provided by the spatial turn, this account appeared dangerously close to the right-wing logics it was intended to resist, and the celebration of indeterminacy—whether spatial or identitarian—no longer seemed to possess emancipatory promise. Indeed, now flexibility appeared to have become aligned quite explicitly with isolation, atomism—even totalitarianism.

2. Culturalism and Nationalism in *The Black Album*

Any reading of *The Black Album* cannot but observe that the intersection of urban space, culture and politics occupies a far more anxious position in this novel than in any of Kureishi’s previous fictions. And, as we have seen, it is its account of nationalism that seems to be at the heart of this anxiety—indeed, the

novel takes place in a London that is being quite literally blown apart by nationalist politics. It is reasonable to assume that in representing a bomb exploding on the main concourse of Victoria station a third of the way through the book (Kureishi *Black Album* 101-104), Kureishi has in mind the similar IRA attack of February 1991. But there are two important aspects of this episode that should be noted, the first and less important of which is its anachronism.⁵² More significant is the fact that any agency behind the bombing remains pointedly ambiguous: as Shahid travels along the Underground shortly after the attack he wonders of the jumpy commuters sharing his carriage, “What did they feel? Confusion and anger, because somewhere outside lurked armies of resentment. But which faction was it? Which underground group? Which war, cause or grievance was being demonstrated?” (103). In this way the oblique reference to the IRA attack has the effect of connecting the destruction of London’s urban space with nationalist conflict while never defining specifically the conflict—or the cause—concerned. As such, we might argue that a significant underlying anxiety of the novel is the *general* tension it perceives as arising from the presence of nationalist politics within an urban setting.

Of course, these politics are most clearly manifested in the agenda of Riaz’s group. Kureishi’s representation of the latter proved highly controversial, and has since been the subject of sustained attacks. The most acute of these is voiced by Ruvani Ranasinha, who argues that “despite Kureishi’s sympathy for his characters’ cultural disorientation, the attempt to demonstrate the draw of Islam for young people fails” because “the ‘debate’ is so weighted against the Islamists that Shahid’s liberal individualism and decision to leave the ‘paranoid’ Islamic group is unequivocally presented as enlightened self-interest” (Ranasinha 88, 85). However, the representation of Riaz and his group also has some eloquent supporters. In marked contrast to Ranasinha, Bart Moore-Gilbert argues that “*The Black Album* programmatically counters many stereotypes about ‘fundamentalism’”:

⁵² Being set over the winter of 1988-89, the events in the novel actually take place two years prior to the Victoria bombing.

Shahid—at least in the beginning—respects Islam as a faith and understands its appeal both in the context of his own existential uncertainties and of the hostile attitudes of the host society. Riaz is initially a relatively complex character, and is by no means unsympathetic, as his avuncular interest in Shahid indicates [...] Moreover, Kureishi is at pains to avoid suggesting that Riaz is simply an aged obscurantist. (Moore-Gilbert 135)

This contention that Riaz and his agenda are represented in a complex and sympathetic way is important, because it implies that Ranasinha's perspective fails to appreciate fully how the novel is keenly aware of the political possibilities inherent to nationalism. Indeed, I think it is crucial to acknowledge that in *The Black Album* the latter is represented as possessing *genuine potential* for resisting the “hostile attitudes of the host society”, and that it is thus central to the book's concern with the Left. For, despite the fact that Shahid decides to align himself with Deedee at the novel's end—at least, until it “stops being fun” (Kureishi *Black Album* 276)—in many ways she actually functions as a symbol for the failure of Left culturalism. Indeed, I think that the novel as a whole can be read as a painful meditation of the failure of Left culturalism as an emancipatory project. For whereas in his earlier fictions Kureishi appeared relatively certain of the potential for a flexible understanding of space and culture to combat the new and entirely pernicious kind of cultural nationalism exhibited by Thatcherism, in this novel he seems far less certain that flux and mutability are in themselves capable of resisting the assimilationist strategies of the Right. Indeed, I think that in *The Black Album* we witness a sophisticated critique of the strategies for political resistance that were lionised by Left culturalism—and which, once upon a time, Kureishi had enthusiastically embraced.

Crucially, this attitude is not expressed straightforwardly in terms of the novel's representation of cultural complexity, but via its account of how the latter intersects with urban space. As in much of Kureishi's earlier work, urban youth culture occupies a central position in *The Black Album*, and the subculture it is particularly interested in is the acid house scene that emerged in Britain

towards the end of the 1980s. From early on the febrility and ostensible subversiveness of this scene speak to Shahid's thirst for the "real" London,⁵³ for it seems a world away from the "mundane poverty" that characterises his initial experience of the capital. And it is significant in this respect that Deedee is the one who introduces him to it. During an after-class meeting, she and Shahid discuss their shared enthusiasm for Prince, and Deedee suggests that he might write an essay about the musician's indeterminacy: he's "half black and half white", she says, "half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho too" (25). She invites Shahid to her house so they can discuss the essay further, but when he arrives it soon becomes apparent that she has other plans, and as he is summoned upstairs to help her dress, Shahid finds himself wondering "what she and the night promised" (54). In this way, Deedee is immediately established as the apogee of libidinal satisfaction. More importantly, however, Kureishi is explicit in concatenating her sexual appeal with the possibilities of the city and the unpredictable milieu of rave culture, while marking all with a promise of dissident possibility. Later, as they travel to a rave, Deedee offers Shahid an ecstasy pill and before accepting he looks out of the taxi's window and thinks, "You could drive for two or three hours through this limitless city which had no shape, and not come out the other side" (57). London here recalls the labyrinthine spaces of Winterson's *Venice*, just as Deedee, to the extent that she serves as a guide for the disorientated provincial, recalls Villanelle, and together

⁵³ Dance culture had not by this point found a single institutional form, and was not yet dominated by the superclubs that would come to typify it a decade later. Instead, event organisers would occupy farmland and disused warehouses for the purposes of staging all-night raves that were sometimes free and often illegal. Partly because of this spatial transgressiveness—the leafy Home Counties, it was felt, were no place for young people to be enjoying themselves—and partly because of the prevalence of MDMA at these events, the rave scene soon faced moral panic, police hostility and parliamentary action. Most notoriously, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) attempted to target electronic dance music by defining it as "sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats" (Home Office *Criminal Justice* 63 1 b). Given this definition, and the definition of a rave as "a gathering of 20 or more persons" taking place "on land in the open air" (63 1A a, 63 1), the legislation appeared to criminalise military parades similar to the one that marks the Queen's birthday—a curious decision for a Conservative government to take, since Tories are usually keen to celebrate such occasions.

she and the city come to be associated with the excessive and subversive pleasure of expressive culture. This consonance between London and Venice, Deedee and Villanelle, becomes yet more striking when we arrive at the rave; when Deedee leads Shahid along the corridors of a dilapidated industrial building and they emerge into a fantastical space full of performative and provocative indeterminacy. “Many of the men”, Kureishi writes, “were bare-chested and wore only thongs”, and “[o]ne woman was naked except for high heels and a large plastic penis strapped to her thighs with which she duetted. Others were garbed in rubber, or masks, or were dressed as babies” (59).

However, while Shahid’s intoxication with this milieu is clear—it is implied allegorically through his desire for Deedee—it cannot be said that Kureishi is convinced that its emancipatory promise is genuine, and it is important that our suspicion of this is aroused primarily through his representation of space. As the night wears on, Deedee says she wants to take Shahid to “a much better place” farther out of the city. They climb back into a taxi and it carries them to “a lush, open area without shops” where “[t]he unlit mansions, behind tree-lined high walls and iron gates, sat far back from the road”. When they finally draw to a stop, it is at “the sort of place an English Gatsby would have chosen” (60-61). However, in these opulent surroundings a riotous party is in full swing: inside there are marble floor tiles, a grand staircase and a Jacuzzi, but also drug dealers shouting “Up the working class!” and doling out pills called “Leg-openers” (61-62). The mansion is “overrun by hordes of boys and girls from south London”, and this initially encourages the reader to understand the party as a kind of expropriation of suburban space by the dispossessed denizens of the inner city. Kureishi writes of the ravers that “most had probably never been inside such a house before, unless they were delivering the groceries. Now they were having the time of their lives. By the end of the weekend the house would be ashes” (62). And this reading only becomes more persuasive when combined with the repeated, apparently ironic emphasis on whiteness—from the carpets, to the stuffed polar bear, to the pills that Shahid buys. Yet there persists throughout this a sense that, actually, this irony is an illusion; that, in fact, the party represents nothing like the kind of pluralism

that Kureishi finds so compelling in his earlier fiction. In the taxi home Deedee apologises for taking Shahid places where there are “only white people” (66), and the author seems to imply that this homogeneity somehow alters the way his protagonist reads urban space. Arriving back at his inner-city digs, Shahid “recognize[s] the street” but finds that “all the doors [look] the same” (64). The “inner-European Orientalism” that Manfred Pfister used to describe Venice’s complex psychogeographical situation in *The Passion*—and which I think also applies to the way the inner cities were imagined by Left culturalism—appears to have been eradicated and replaced by sameness. Thus not only is the rave scene itself devoid of the promise of pluralism that Kureishi had previously considered inherent to youth subcultures; it somehow serves to occlude or elide the very spatiality that had previously served to express this promise.

What is more, in the context of the acid house subculture, identity itself is homogenised, individualised and emptied of the political possibility it possessed in the inner city. This is evidenced in Shahid’s experience on ecstasy while lying on a floor in an upstairs room with hundreds of other addled party-goers. Right at the outset of this episode Kureishi creates a clear link between anonymity, pleasure and death: “[K]ids were lying on the floor not moving—except to kiss or stroke one another—as if they’d been massacred” (63). And he is clearly horrified as his protagonist lies beside them; as Shahid succumbs to an annihilation of ego, self, subject, and abandons himself to the mercuriality of the ecstasy high:

He was [...] liquid, as if the furnace in his stomach was simmering his bone and muscle into lava [...] Somewhere in his mind there lurked desolation: the things he normally liked had been drained off and not only could he not locate them, he couldn’t remember what they were. He needed to find a pen and list the reasons for living. But what on the list could be comparable to the feeling of this drug? He had been let into a dangerous secret; once it had been revealed, much of life, regarded from this high vantage point, could seem quite small. (63)

There is throughout this episode an implication that liquidifying the self in the putatively collective context of the rave serves to annihilate social distancing in an apolitical rather than a fruitful way; that in rendering all boundaries permeable, the high serves to *remove* the subject from the realm of socialisation altogether. Earlier, as he watched the dancing in the warehouse—which is not quite ironically named the “White Room” (59)—Shahid “noticed, through the golden mist, that no one appeared to have any great interest in anyone else, though people would fall into staring at one another” (60). And in this way, Kureishi seems to suggest that the ultimate effect of the ecstasy high—and of the rave subculture in general—is a kind of social dislocation; that, in many ways, it is the nadir of atomistic individualism. The rave might *resemble* a community of difference—it is, to say the least, highly performative—but it has been robbed of the profound complexity that was the condition of the cultural model’s subversive potential, and so grown soporific and meaningless. In a way, Kureishi seems to imply that the rave is what remains of Left culturalism when it has been evacuated of its political content: superficial diversity masking sameness. And while the party might initially strike us as a hedonistic expropriation of suburban space, its provocativeness is undermined by his representation of it as a *disengagement* with the political challenges of the inner city—a kind of Rabelaisian white flight—and a way of evacuating identity of its political content.

At the same time, he is quite clear in implying that the difficulties faced by oppressed communities are more considerable than ever.⁵⁴ Unlike *Laundrette*, *The Buddha* and (arguably) *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, *The Black*

⁵⁴ Riaz’s “rescue” of Shahid at the end of the rave only serves to lend this implication an existential urgency. When the latter arrives home at the end of the night and tries, in an hallucinatory stupor, to make an omelette, he nearly gasses himself and has to be tended to by Riaz, who turns off the cooker, clears up the vomit and puts Shahid to bed. Without this act, Shahid—having disappeared as a subject during his high—would have *literally* disappeared, too. Thus when he announces to Chad the following morning that Riaz “saved my life” (Kureishi *Black Album* 70-71), the implication is clear that, in many ways, dance culture is a culture of death—social, political, even literal.

Album is also much more preoccupied with representing the vulnerability of disenfranchised inner-city communities over the progressive promise the latter possess as a whole. And in the absence of any alternative mode of resistance, these communities increasingly feel the need to protect themselves by possessing a stake in the *physicality* of the city. One particular episode in the novel demonstrates this neatly, and concerns a Muslim family whose home is being besieged by violent teenagers: “The husband had been smashed over the head with a bottle and taken to hospital. The wife had been punched. Lighted matches had been pushed through the letter-box. At all hours the bell had been rung and the culprits said they would return to slaughter the children” (90). In response to these threats, Riaz arranges for the family to be moved to a Bengali estate, but as this will not happen immediately he charges his followers with guarding the family’s flat. Shahid is asked to assist and, armed with machetes, bats and meat cleavers, the group drives to an estate that could not be more different from the kind of inner-city spaces celebrated in the earlier novels and screenplays:

A sombre sky, misty pathways and dead grass bound the blocks together. Small trees, in wire wrapping, had been snapped in two, as if they gave offence. There was graffiti, but only tags, nothing more to say, apart from the strange legend in foot-high gold and silver letters, “Eat the Pig”.

The streetlamps shed little light. The shadows of the posse rode beside them, like figures on horseback. The silence was broken by car alarms. There was the sound of a man running, followed by another, and shouts. The group stood and waited as one, anticipating attack. They were ready; indeed, they wanted, required, confrontation. But the moment passed. Menacing silence resumed. (89)

It is surely worthy of note that, where once the inner city was busy and boisterous—characterised by an excess of signs, actions, identities—here it is

ominously barren. More importantly, in a departure from *The Buddha*—in which racism in its baldest manifestation takes place in the dreary suburbs⁵⁵—here Kureishi emphatically situates racist violence in the inner city. And as far as Riaz’s group is concerned, the best means of resisting such violence consists in establishing defensible spaces with vigorously—even violently—maintained boundaries: as Shahid walks through the estate Kureishi tells us that “[t]his area was notorious for racists”; when protecting the flat the group sits “on the floor like guerrillas”, and when there is a knock at the door they stand to attention while Chad “unbar[s]” the entrance (100, 92-93). This focus on spatial fortification is quite opposed to the porous and mercurial spaces that are emphasised Kureishi’s other fictions, as well as in *The Passion*. The clamour of competing and complementary voices has been extinguished to be replaced by simple tags, simultaneously proprietorial markers defining and fixing space as well as plaintive appeals for recognition. Where previously inner-city space underwent a perpetual process of reinvention, and was celebrated as formative and expressive of its inhabitants’ contingent and capricious identities, now a desperate imperative resides in claiming and protecting it. And it is through the lens of this spatial imperative, I think, that *The Black Album*’s anxiety over the presence of nationalist politics within an urban context is most fruitfully assessed. Because Kureishi fundamentally doubts whether the city is able to reconcile all these competing politics: it is being literally torn apart, but the agencies behind this process remain unclear, as there are so many of them. In short, the question Kureishi seems to be asking is this: with every conceivable identity potentially queuing up to stake a claim on urban space, how is it supposed to contain them all?

⁵⁵ In one of *The Buddha*’s most memorable episodes Karim cycles to see his girlfriend Helen, who lives in the south London suburbs, only to be confronted by her objectionable father: “You can’t see my daughter again [...] She doesn’t go out with [...] wogs [...] We don’t want you blackies coming to the house [...] you little coon” (Kureishi *Buddha* 40). This lazy and pernicious form of racism is explicitly identified with the suburbs over the inner cities when Karim recalls taking a train ride with his suburbanite uncle through Brixton. Seeing Karim gazing out of the window at the “gardens [...] full of rusting junk and sodden overcoats”, Ted says, “That’s where the niggers live. Them blacks” (43).

At the same time, the novel implies an *understanding* of why oppressed communities are resorting to this strategy. During an early exchange in which Shahid asks Riaz where he is from the law student replies, “Lahore. Originally”. Shahid says, “That ‘originally’ is quite a big thing”, and Riaz responds, “The biggest thing of all” (6). The desire to maintain this “original” identity—and to encourage British-born Shahid to “return” to it—is manifested throughout the novel in Riaz’s repeated valorisation of cultural authenticity. Of course, the fact that all the members of his group seem to originate from south Asia should not be ignored; however, what is more important is that they perceive themselves to share a common cultural identity in Islam, and it is this that enables Riaz to opine, “We’re not blasted Christians [...] We don’t turn the other cheek. We will fight for our people who are being tortured in Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir!” (82). The elision between race and culture that lies at the heart of this statement might be read as an expression of Gilroy’s concept of ethnic absolutism, in which a racially and culturally homogenised Other is condemned as impinging upon a similarly constructed but more “authentic” culture that is perceived to require and deserve protection. Of course, Gilroy argues that ethnic absolutism as a racist discourse developed rapidly in Britain in the context of black immigration during the late 1940s and early 1950s—the arrival of the so-called “Windrush generation”. But in Riaz’s articulation the terms are flipped: Christianity is constructed as both racially and culturally other, while a stable and essentialised Muslim identity is used to string together a group of nationalities (Palestinian, Afghan, Kashmiri) that are in fact ethnically and culturally heterogeneous.

Significantly, rather than simply dismissing this model of culture as an unappetising perversion of an already obnoxious discourse, Kureishi seems sympathetic to the appeal of an essentialised Islamic identity to the subaltern subject confused by a form of cultural racism which dictates that someone may be British by citizenship yet irredeemably inauthentic by dint of her cultural otherness.⁵⁶ The “authentic” Islamic identity Riaz offers up to him as an

⁵⁶ Indeed, this sympathy is structurally central to the novel, in that the search for a more secure sense of political identity is what motivates Shahid to engage with Islamic nationalism in the first place: early on we learn that before coming to London he suffered from a profound identity crisis.

alternative is identical to that at the heart of the “white” racism he has previously endured, except that—and because—it inverts the latter’s logic to hinge on Shahid’s supposed “origins” in Islamic culture. And in light of this, the reader is entitled to wonder why, given that Kureishi’s representation of cultural essentialism is so derisively satirical when it is dressed up in Thatcherite garb, he is prepared to treat it as an even remotely viable political opportunity when it appears in the guise of Islamic nationalism. We have already explored the specifically spatial explanation for this: with the apparent exposure of Left culturalism’s celebration of indeterminate space as little more than a sop to New Right urbanism, oppressed communities might reasonably seek to fortify their claim on the city in order to protect themselves from racist violence that is only getting worse. But in order to answer this question in specifically cultural terms, we might compare the latter with Shahid’s “killing-nigger” fantasies, in which he tries to arrogate to himself the politics of the racists at whose hands he suffers,⁵⁷ and which thus represent another, similar attempt to appropriate an hegemonic discourse. Although he attempts to mimic this racism, Shahid cannot replicate it exactly because, despite his apparent desire to deflect it by “fitting in”, he is inescapably its object. In the words of Homi Bhabha, he is “almost the same” as the whites he mimics, “but not quite”—or rather, “*not white*” (Bhabha 89, 90, emphasis in original). To Bhabha’s mind this almost-but-not logic should be capable of providing a provocative disruption of any essentialising discourse, since mimicry is, “like camouflage [...] a form of resemblance, that differs from [...] presence by displaying it in part, metonymically”; the “threat” of mimicry

⁵⁷ He confesses to Riaz that he thought of “going around abusing Pakis, niggers, Chinks, Irish, any foreign scum. I slagged them under my breath whenever I saw them. I wanted to kick them up the arse. The thought of sleeping with Asian girls made me sick [...] When they came on to me, I couldn’t bear it. I thought, you know, wink at an Asian girl and she’ll want to marry you up. I wouldn’t touch brown flesh, except with a branding iron. I hated all foreign bastards [...] I argued... why can’t I be a racist like everyone else? Why do I have to miss out on that privilege? [...] I have wanted to join the British National Party” (Kureishi *Black Album* 11). Chad, Riaz’s most ferocious disciple, tells Shahid that “There’s a bit of Hitler in all white people—they’ve given that to you”, and Riaz confirms, “Only those who purify themselves can escape it” (12). The implication is that this purification process will aid Shahid in resisting—or rather, escaping from—the confusion he feels at being nominally British while remaining essentially (culturally) Other.

“comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself’” (90). Now, once upon a time Kureishi may have understood this almost-but-not logic as possessing great political promise: after all, *The Buddha* begins by emphasising “almostness” and it is out of the ambivalence of this term, and the possibility of subterfuge that it implies, that the novel constructs its optimistic account of cultural hybridity. However, while it is true that confusion is a common feature of the beginnings of both novels, whereas in *The Buddha* Karim’s cultural indeterminacy places him in a painful but politically advantageous interstice, in *The Black Album* this situation is represented as far more anxious: confusion has begotten madness, and the notion of partial or “metonymic” presence is characterised rather more unfavourably as absence. As Shahid confesses: “I began to get terrible feelings in my head [...] I thought I was going mad [...] I had been kicked around and chased a lot, you know [...] *I kept thinking there was something I lacked*” (9, 10, emphasis added). In this way Kureishi leaves us in little doubt that Shahid’s mimicry of white racism is not politically fruitful; it may expose the workings of hegemonic discourse, but any disruption it entails is epiphenomenal, and no longer capable of resisting racism in and of itself.

In marked contrast to this, the appropriation of cultural essentialism by Riaz’s group, and its conversion into a foundational Islamist politics, possesses significantly more promise because it represents an oppositional strategy predicated on the centrality of presence. This strategic value is not Spivakian: the reader doubts that Riaz would appreciate the contingency inherent to the concept of strategic essentialism, and his beliefs do not exactly strike the reader as dialogical, or as interventions in a war of position. Nonetheless, Kureishi seems to perceive a certain potential in the dislocation of cultural essentialism from the hegemonic rubric with which it had previously been associated—namely, Britishness—and its recasting as a political strategy aimed at resisting that hegemony. In this guise, cultural essentialism can no longer be dismissed as an objectionable discourse exercised by those who are already systematically empowered by the political, social and economic configuration of the UK and the

West more widely; it is, rather, a political tool for resistance that must be evaluated alongside, rather than in opposition to, other forms of resistant praxis. Certainly, it is entirely different from the cultural politics of disenfranchisement that we witness in *The Buddha* and *The Passion*; nonetheless, it remains an oppositional politics—and, more importantly, a *politics of recognition*, organised around a stable, “authentic” identity and evidencing Charles Taylor’s suggestion that “misrecognition”—read disenfranchisement—“can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred” (Taylor 26). Such self-hatred is precisely what Shahid confesses to when he speaks of his “killing-nigger” fantasies, and it is precisely what afflicts Riaz’s most ardent disciple, Chad—a south-Asian adopted by a racist family who hated his cultural otherness, and taught him to hate it too. Islamic nationalism offers an opportunity to reverse this bad education; its appeal to both Shahid and Chad revolves around its ability to reconnect them in an affirmative way with the “original” identities they have been encouraged to despise. And this identity in turn provides them with stable foundations on which to demand political recognition, and to resist the cultural racism that is endemic in Britain—as well as, lest we forget, a fundamental component of Thatcher’s political project. Thus when Chad says, “No more Paki. Me a Muslim” (128) he is committing to a strategy of opposition that, Kureishi thinks, requires genuine critical inquiry alongside all other resistant praxes. This apposition is alluded to explicitly when Shahid places Islamism within the context of the explosion of foundational identity politics that emerged in the wake of the 1970s: “These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew—brandishing whichever features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn’t be human. Shahid, too wanted to belong to his people” (92). What is implied here is the contiguity of these discourses, not their contrariety. Ultimately, Kureishi understands that an essentialised, Islamic conception of “origins” can be considered to be as legitimate and fruitful a bedrock for political recognition as gay, women’s—even human—rights.

While none of this entails that the stand-off between the agendas of Riaz and Deedee is enacted on a level playing field, it does suggest that Kureishi’s

engagement with the former—in particular his understanding of its appeal to Shahid—is done in good faith, and cannot be dismissed as straw-man thinking. As Kureishi insists in an interview conducted shortly after *The Black Album* was published, “I tried to be fair [...] I felt sympathetic [...] I didn’t want to write a book that took sides [...] I’m interested in all sides of the argument” (qtd. in Jaggi par. 7, 17).⁵⁸ The intellectual integrity that characterises this engagement is crucial to acknowledge, because only once we have done this are we able to appreciate fully its implications: that with the continued tenability of Left culturalism in question, oppressed communities are bound—and entitled—to explore other modes of opposition. And given that the focus on indeterminacy seemed to have achieved little more than to permit the agents of oppression to complete their project of domination, recourse to spatial and ontological certainties is understandable.

3. Bad Endings

Of course, understanding is not the same as endorsement, and it is because of this distinction that Kureishi is forced to contrive a way of dismissing Riaz’s nationalist agenda without condemning it. Significantly, he does this not by targeting Riaz himself, since the latter is too dignified to be discredited with ease; rather, he opts for the simpler strategy of exposing Chad—Riaz’s loyal dogsbody—as unthinking, misogynistic and ultimately self-destructive. Throughout the novel Chad embodies an uneasy mixture of comedy and pathos, but towards the end he becomes increasingly vicious as the “wound” of misrecognition inflicted upon him by his parents begins to fester. While Riaz lectures a crowd about “the crimes committed by whites against blacks and Asians in the name of freedom” (Kureishi *Black Album* 224) Chad sets fire to a copy of *The Satanic Verses* and Kureishi uses this emotive image to finally turn

⁵⁸ Of course, there is no guarantee that the novel reflects this desire to be fair—Ranasinha is quite right when she argues that “textual complexities cannot be contained within authorial intentions” (92)—but while Kureishi’s portrayal of Islamic nationalism may still be flawed, this does not mean that it is done in bad faith.

Shahid against the Islamist group: “Looking across the crowd at Chad’s expression he was glad” that he never subscribed wholly to Riaz’s agenda, because, Kureishi exclaims, “he never wanted his [own] face to show such ecstatic rigidity! The stupidity of the demonstration appalled him. How narrow they were, how unintelligent, how... embarrassing it all was!” (225). When Deedee calls the police to break up the meeting Chad is furious and condemns her as a “pornographic priestess” who “encourages brothers of colour to take drugs” (228). The chauvinism that until this point lurked beneath the surface of his invective becomes explicit: a few pages earlier he joked that he would like to “dynamite her” (218); now he launches into a misogynistic tirade, spitting that “[w]hen she is screwed she is heard half-way across London, like a car-alarm. And in the end, she is regularly aborted” (228). When one of the group extends a fist and says “I feel like giving her one of these” Chad responds, “Who could blame you?” (230). And when Deedee addresses him as Trevor—the name given to him by his racist parents—he is incited to deliver on this threat, screaming “Don’t use that name on me! That ain’t my true identity!” (266).

However, while we are told that Deedee “would be easy to hit”—indeed, while Chad “raise[s] his hand to strike her”—he quickly backs down, because, as Kureishi puts it, he knows “it would be an irrevocable step” (266). While easy to skip over, this moment is worth highlighting because it represents the baldest expression of Kureishi’s narrative and political dilemma at the end of *The Black Album*. To Chad, “Trevor” carries all the force of the most obnoxious epithet, since it perpetuates a similar, wilfully grievous kind of misrecognition. The novel is sensitive to this, but Kureishi seems aware that if Chad hits Deedee, he too will have taken an irrevocable step, since having one of Riaz’s entourage perpetrate male-on-female violence is likely to invite the reader’s opprobrium in a way that would place their agenda completely beyond the pale. The misogyny that is popularly imputed to Islamic politics would be violently evoked and this would simultaneously condemn the latter and render them politically untenable. It might be a stretch to suggest that Deedee is the paradigm of empowered femininity, since her supposed liberation from the yoke of patriarchy by her stuttering, Marxist husband Brownlow simply substitutes one set of social

expectations with another, without ever really challenging the subjugated position she occupies as a woman. Nonetheless, the novel's readers would almost certainly recognise the implication that (Islamic) religious dogma is anathema to (Western) feminism and, after consulting the hierarchy of liberties that is today so frequently invoked and so rarely problematised, conclude that a woman's right to bodily integrity exceeds the right of a man to exercise his God-ordained role as patriarch by some degree. This kind of emotive but bastardised feminist discourse is frequently invoked by liberalism to highlight the barbaric nature of the Other in a way that perpetuates absolutist attitudes towards non-liberal cultures and only occasionally serves the interests of feminism more widely. It appears that Kureishi knows this, knows that it would be a cynical and heavy-handed way of resolving his novel, and so avoids it.

Instead, he has Chad flee the scene and—probably, since Shahid only learns this second-hand—kill himself in a bookshop bombing (273). On one level this is a more adroit strategy, since it suggests that Islamic nationalism is based on little more than self-destructive *ressentiment* and enables Kureishi to sidestep the task of discrediting it in political terms by diagnosing it as a pathology, thus tipping the odds in Deedee's favour by default rather than by design. However, while in some ways more palatable than the scenario outlined above, this conclusion remains problematic. Because while Kureishi's affirmation of Left culturalism might be just about plausible in narrative terms, the authorial machinations that are required to turn the debate in this direction—though they comprise sleights of hand rather than *dei ex machina*—make little sense in terms of the open-ended politics he wants to endorse. Even if it opts to represent Riaz's group as paranoid and self-defeating rather than murderously misogynistic, *The Black Album* still reduces itself to a kind of *roman à thèse*—an “authoritarian” form which, as Susan Suleiman writes, is usually “written in the realistic mode” but “signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine” (Suleiman 10, 7). Certainly, Kureishi's novel is artful about signalling itself in this way: it is not a treatise but a text “based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation” (7), and so does at least make

an attempt to conceal the authorial interventions that enable its “doctrine” to emerge. Moreover, it is not “authoritarian” all the way through: Ranasinha’s argument that the debate is rigged from the start is, as I have suggested, mistaken. However, it remains the case that if the novel begins discursively it becomes monological in the process of anointing its preferred agenda, which seems strange when we consider that this agenda is supposed to be predicated on flux and fluidity. What common ground can the latter conceivably share with a form that Michel Beaujour describes as “appeal[ing] to the need for certainty, stability and unity” (Beaujour qtd. in Suleiman 10)? In forsaking “the modern ‘textual’ revolt”, which “attempted to [...] render impossible the emergence of an unambiguous meaning by the production of ‘plural’ texts” (22), doesn’t this form contradict some of the most fundamental tenets of Left culturalism, which similarly seeks to resist closure? When, on the last page, Kureishi writes, “[Shahid] looked out of the window; the air outside seemed to be clearer”, the reader almost hears his sigh of relief (276). He has, apparently, exorcised his doubts: the political agenda to which he allied himself—and did much to pioneer—in his early career has been vindicated; at the end of the debate his protagonist is able to conclude that “[t]here had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity” (274). And yet precisely because of its certitude this conclusion fails to convince, for it contradicts the very body of thought Kureishi is trying to recuperate. At the end of the day, Left culturalism does not deal in conviction; it revels in doubt and paradox.

We might say that, if the latter had once functioned as articles of faith for Kureishi—and for Left culturalism more broadly—in *The Black Album* he loses faith in them. In an exchange early on in the novel Chad upbraids Shahid for pursuing a life of pleasure, declaring that “[w]e are slaves to Allah [...] He is the only one we must submit to. He put our noses on our face [...] not] in our stomach” (80). And this exchange is recalled at the very end when Kureishi anticipates Shahid’s arrival on the coast, where, he writes, “[t]here was somewhere [Deedee] fancied for lunch” (276). Clearly appetite has prevailed over spirit, but the reader remains unconvinced by this victory—and, what is

more, suspects that Kureishi is unconvinced, too. For while Riaz's agenda might ultimately be debunked as "stupid [...] narrow [...] unintelligent" (225), Deedee's is no better: now, Kureishi writes, Shahid "didn't have to think about anything" (276). In short, the novel's conclusion feels not just formally authoritarian but also politically platitudinous—even wilfully self-deceiving—because while Kureishi manages to dismiss one side of the argument, the reader doubts his faith in the other. *The Black Album* thus represents a peculiar variation on the object of Suleiman's critique: a *roman à thèse* that does not quite believe its own *thèse*. It is a deeply anxious book, a book that is discomfited by the political implications of the debate it stages, and so contrives to endorse Left culturalism by emulating a form that shuts out the alternatives. It is thus also, paradoxically, quite a conservative novel, because in the last analysis its exaltation of doubt, contingency and pluralism rests upon a "need for certainty, stability and unity". And perhaps this is why finishing the novel is such an unsatisfying experience. Susie Thomas argues that "Shahid and Deedee speed towards Brighton for a breath of fresh air" (Thomas 101), but the reader wonders what exactly this air is going to taste like. The happy couple might have a whale of a time on the coast, getting high and dressing up in one another's clothes, but there remains a sense that this happy ending is unearned, because Kureishi no longer believes in the progressive agenda he is advocating.

We can extrapolate two specific reasons for this, the first of which revolves around the failure of culture to serve as a vehicle for political resistance in the novel, and the second around what is left of cultural politics when the "cultural" part fails to start. Kureishi is not the only literary figure to be troubled by dance culture,⁵⁹ but it is hardly a surprise that the kind of distaste for the

⁵⁹ In 2008 Will Self argued on Radio 4 that the second summer of love was little more than a popular expression of Thatcherism, furnished with a few pseudo-revolutionary phrases stolen from the counterculture of the 1960s (*Saturday Live*). And Matthew Collin considers the question of politics to be so charged that in his (rather nostalgic) history of the late 80s dance scene he attempts to deal with charges of apoliticism in the prologue: "The idea that Ecstasy culture had no politics because it had no manifesto or slogans," he writes, that "it wasn't *saying something* or actively opposing the social order, misunderstands its nature. The very lack of dogma was a comment on contemporary society itself, yet at the same time its constantly changing manifestations [...] served to dramatise the times. Ecstasy culture offered a forum to which people could bring

scene that he demonstrates should be articulated by a writer who had, until *The Black Album*, made a point of drawing attention to the resistive content of popular youth movements. Because, as Sarah Thornton writes in *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, the rave milieu appeared to sever the link between culture and resistance that Left culturalism had, to some degree, always insisted upon. In her account, Thornton criticises the tendency of cultural studies in its New Left incarnation to replicate the taxonomies of taste it sought to question by continuing to treat high culture as “vertically ordered”, while conceiving of popular culture as “horizontally organized”. Because of this, she alleges, popular culture was constructed in accounts by thinkers such as Raymond Williams as a “curiously flat” phenomenon. She also alleges that, in explicitly linking the organisation of working-class subcultures to strategies of class resistance, the early protagonists of Left culturalism’s second iteration, such as Dick Hebdige, simply repeated this tendency, treating subcultures synchronically as discrete and unevolving entities and failing properly to historicise the resistant potential they perceived in them. “For all their concern for rebellion and resistance,” she argues, “this tradition gave little consideration

narratives about class, race, sex, economics or morality. Again, its definition was subject to individual interpretation: it could be about the simple bliss of dancing; it could be about environmental awareness; it could be about race relations and class conflict; it could be about the social repercussions of the drug economy; it could be about changing gender relations; it could be about reasserting lost notions of community—all stories that say something about life in the nineties” (Collin 5-6, emphasis in original). The defence here seems to be organised around a conception of the culture as a kind of endlessly malleable backdrop against which the salient political issues of the period could be dramatised; indeed, Collin goes so far as to attempt to politicise the very *absence* of a political agenda. But he cannot escape the charge that the milieu merely animated the core values of Thatcherism, with only the most superficial façade of countercultural magniloquence. Collins does acknowledge that the acid house subculture—at least in the south-east of England—was overwhelmingly white and middle-class, and shot through by middle-class values. And it is only to this very limited extent can rave culture be said to have truly mirrored the Sixties’ counterculture. For as Hall writes with John Clarke, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts in the seminal cultural studies text *Resistance Through Rituals*: “Middle-class youth tend to construct the enclaves within the interstices of the dominant culture”; because of this, “[e]ven when the middle-class counter-cultures are explicitly anti-political, their objective tendency is treated as, potentially, political” (Clarke et. al. 60, 61).

to social change” (9). Her book, by contrast, is “not about dominant ideologies and subversive subcultures, but about subcultural ideologies”. She describes the latter as the “means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass” (9-10). And she coins the term “subcultural capital”—which she argues to operate in a similar fashion to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital”—in order to facilitate her analysis: “Just as cultural capital is personified in ‘good’ manners and urbane conversation,” she writes, “so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being ‘in the know’, using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles” (11-12). Thus rather than eliding the distinctions between different subcultures by focusing on their general resistant potential, Thornton attempts to account for the role of taste within and between them.

Of course, we might consider this analysis to reflect rather than explain rave culture’s apoliticism. However, there is a more important point to note here, one that concerns the continuing tenability of the subcultural model of political resistance celebrated in so many Left culturalist texts, from Hebdige through Hall to Gilroy. In the afterword to her account, Thornton suggests that the experience of the 1980s, in which the Right was far more politically radical than the Left, gave rave culture a political inflection quite different from the youth subcultures that preceded it: “Unlike [Jack] Young’s hippies and Hebdige’s punks, then, the youth of my research were, to cite the cliché, ‘Thatcher’s children’. Well versed in the virtues of competition, their cultural heroes came in the form of radical young entrepreneurs, starting up clubs and record labels, rather than the politicians and poets of yesteryear” (165-166). In other words, Thatcherism fundamentally altered the political logic of youth subcultures, which is why the rave milieu frustrates any attempt to locate a left-wing resistant praxis within it. This does not necessarily entail that all subcultures—including dance subcultures—are now apolitical, or even “Thatcherite”; it simply means that they can no longer be *presumed* to be sites of resistance. What is more, in some ways this fact enables analyses that were previously

occluded or foreclosed, as Thornton argues:

Rather than de-politicising popular cultures, a shift away from the search for “resistance” actually gives fuller representation to the complex and rarely straightforward politics of contemporary culture. The distinctions examined through multiple methods in this book demonstrate the rich creativities and originalities of youth culture as well as their entanglement in micro-politics of domination and subordination. (168)

The argument here is that subcultural politics are—and perhaps always have been—too complex to be unconditionally celebrated for their resistant potential. There must now be a reconsideration of the relationship between politics and culture, for any left-wing praxis that has constructed itself around the latter is liable to find that in the wake of Thatcherism it is significantly less capable of effecting meaningful social change than it had been previously. And this, I want to suggest, is what lies at the heart of Kureishi’s ambivalent representation of dance culture in *The Black Album*: it is not simply that he is uncomfortable with its apoliticism; more importantly, he doubts that it—or any other subculture—can serve as an effective vehicle for left-wing praxis after Thatcher’s revolution.

With culture out of the equation, it presumably falls to politics to shoulder the burden of emancipatory endeavour. But this, too, is closed off as a possibility, because of the collapse of culture and politics that was effected as part of Left culturalism’s experiment with freedom. Partly due to its intellectual origins in the Gramscian theory of hegemony, Left culturalism has always been predisposed towards an agonistic model of the political which rejects any sense of politics-as-procedure in favour of politics-as-confrontation. From the agonistic perspective, politics is conceived not as a dialogue but as a contest of competing wills, each seeking to advance its own hegemonic project. As Chantal Mouffe has suggested, this is why the agonistic approach “can properly be called ‘radical’. To be sure, it is not the revolutionary politics of the jacobin type, but neither is it the liberal one of competing interests within a neutral terrain or the

discursive formation of a democratic consensus” (Mouffe *Political* 52). Over the last thirty years the Right has succeeded in instituting a hegemony that has had the obfuscatory effects of naturalising social relations and turning history into a (neo)liberal teleology. However, this period has also witnessed the steady enervation of politics, defined confrontationally, as a consequence of what Bonnie Honig describes as its “displacement” into other, less agonistic discourses, such as law and administration.⁶⁰ For Honig this process represents a serious threat, as it has the potential to “disempower and perhaps even undermine democratic institutions and citizens” (Honig *Displacement* 14). But the discourses into which politics has been displaced have not been solely bureaucratic, and such displacements have not been performed exclusively by the Right. In a crucial way, Left culturalism can be accused of unwittingly encouraging this process, and thus of having a similarly enervating impact on the political, conceived as a clash of competing wills. In endorsing a radically emancipatory strategy that rejected any formal claim on freedom, it overlooked the central importance of recognition within a delimited space of contestation to the agonistic understanding of politics. Fundamental to the model of the

⁶⁰ The clearest example of a neoliberal teleology is Francis Fukuyama’s 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, which argues that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Hegelian “end of history” has been realised—happily—in the global domination of liberal democracy. Neoconservatives such as Fukuyama have certainly had something to do with the process of displacement Honig describes, and to this extent the Right has continued to do what leftists consistently accuse it of: it has obfuscated the contingent historical and social processes that mark its actualisation by providing the illusion of immanence. However, as Honig also points out, the process has been aided in no small part by political theorists of numerous political persuasions, from communitarians like Michael Sandel to liberals like Jürgen Habermas. Indeed, she writes, “[m]ost political theorists are hostile to the disruption of politics. Those writing from diverse positions—republican, liberal, and communitarian—converge in their assumption that success lies in the elimination from a regime of dissonance, resistance, conflict, or struggle. They confine politics (conceptually and territorially) to the juridical, administrative, or regulative tasks of stabilizing moral and political subjects, building consensus, maintaining agreements, or consolidating communities and identities. They assume that the task of political theory is to resolve institutional questions, to get politics right, over and done with, to free modern subjects and their sets of arrangements of political conflict and instability” (Honig *Displacement* 2).

political mobilised by Mouffe, Honig and Arendt⁶¹ is an acknowledgement that, in order for a contest to be a contest and not a war, competing hegemonic projects must approach one another as adversaries rather than enemies. The difference between the two is crucial, for where it behoves adversaries to recognise one another as competitors who bear a legitimate claim on the field of contest, enemies function in an essentially apolitical way, since they need not recognise one another's claim at all. As Mouffe puts it, in the agonistic model "[a]dversaries do fight—even fiercely—but according to a shared set of rules, and their positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives" (*Political* 52). And this is why, despite Hall's celebration of democratic politics as "an absolutely, bloody-unending row" ("New and Old" 65),⁶² Left culturalism foreclosed the possibility of this agonism ever coming to fruition. In embracing disenfranchisement, it guaranteed its own illegitimacy by figuratively placing itself beyond recognition, outside the space of political contestation. And in performing another kind of displacement—of politics into culture—it did little to oppose the process of redefining politics as a site of procedure that was a key hegemonic strategy of the New Right.⁶³

⁶¹ It should be acknowledged that Mouffe and Honig disagree to the extent to which Arendt's concept of political space can be described as agonistic: Mouffe argues that Arendt's thought "envisage[s] the political as a space of freedom and public deliberation" rather than one of "power, conflict and antagonism" (Mouffe *Political* 9); however, Honig suggests that attempts to place Arendt's thought in the deliberative camp "overlook the importance of [her] debt to elements of the Nietzschean project, in particular, her treatment of action as an intrinsic rather than instrumental good, her identification of action with a virtuosity that is individuating but not subject-centered, her antifoundationalism, and, most important, her commitment to the agonistic dimension of political action" (Honig *Displacement* 233).

⁶² Intriguingly, this characterisation is articulated during a discussion of the Greater London Council, an institution that epitomises the kind of formal politics Left culturalism eschewed. Hall suggests that we think of democracy "[w]e think of a nice, polite, consensual discussion; everybody agreeing". The GLC was, by contrast, "what democracy is really like [...] People hammering the table, insisting, 'Do not ask me to line up behind your banner, because that just means forgetting who I am'. That row, that sound of people actually negotiating their differences in the open, behind the collective program, is the sound I am waiting for." (Hall, "Old and New" 65)

⁶³ As will have become clear during the footnoted discussion throughout this chapter, it is not as if the assault on politics went unnoticed by key Left culturalists. Hall and Jacques, for instance, identify it as one of the more important consequences of the "transition from 'Fordism', which defined the

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Perhaps this is why virtually every one of Kureishi's fictions after *The Black Album* is characterised by political anaemia. Certainly, the vast majority of these are still set in the city, and this is in keeping with British fiction of the period more broadly: for, despite the apparent evacuation of political potential from urban space, London continues to be an important focus for many contemporary writers.⁶⁴ At the same time, the capital—especially its central districts—has served increasingly as the location for narratives of disenchantment which

experience of modernity in the first two-thirds of the 20th century, to 'post-Fordism'" (Hall and Jacques *New Times* 12). The problem was that the Right—at least in the British context—appeared to respond to the circumstances of post-Fordism with far more radicalism than the Left: in the introduction to *The Hard Road to Renewal* Hall concedes that he has "spent more time [...] trying to set out the essential starting points for my analysis of Thatcherism than I have to the crisis of the left: but this is because, analytically, the two cannot be separated [...] Thatcherism [is] not simply a worthy opponent of the left, but in some deeper way its nemesis, the force that is capable in this historical moment of unhinging it from below" (Hall *Hard Road* 11). And a central component of this response was a vigorous assault, sometimes incidental, sometimes strategic, on democratic politics: as Hall acknowledges elsewhere, "At root, the New Right is concerned with how to advance the cause of 'liberalism' against 'democracy'" (Hall and Held "Citizens and Citizenship" 179).

⁶⁴ This may have something to do with the fact that London still represents the postcolonial city *par excellence*, the place British writers must go if they wish to observe multiculturalism at work and thematise its successes, tensions, and failures. The examples hardly need enumerating; suffice it to suggest that the celebrated account of cultural hybridity in *White Teeth* probably would not have attracted so much attention if Smith had located her narrative in Tewkesbury rather than north London. The point here is not wholly facetious: we see from it that London continues to function in the vexed way it did in Kureishi's early work, on the one hand as a "world city" possessed of its own dynamic culture, distinct from the dreary nation-state it serves as capital, and yet on the other as a synecdoche for that very same nation, to whose reductive and hypostatised ontologies it is supposed to offer an alternative. And perhaps this is why Zahid Hussain's 2006 debut *Curry Mile*, set on a stretch of Wilmslow Road in Manchester known for its high concentration of south-Asian shops and restaurants, attracted so little attention compared to, say, *Brick Lane*. The implication seems to be that Nanzeen, the latter's Bangladeshi protagonist, would far less likely have discovered the delights of multiculturalism had she immigrated to Ali's home of Bolton, rather than the eponymous London street.

before the 1990s were more likely to have been situated in the faceless suburbs or, during the mid-century, in the exhausted industrial cities of the North. Kureishi is probably the best example of this tendency, and I think this has much to do with the way *The Black Album* changed his attitude towards the urban experience. Because, after 1995, he conspicuously shifts his focus towards disaffected city-dwellers whose political enthusiasm during the 1970s and 80s has led them at the turn of the century to an ideological impasse. Although it has attracted far less critical attention than his earlier material, the work of this period is at least as interesting in that it implicitly links the kind of contempt for crass materialism and vacuous spirituality many critics have celebrated in the work of French writer Michel Houellebecq to the contemporary urban experience in a way that the latter seems, sometimes bafflingly, to neglect. This approach is present in many of the short stories collected in *Love in a Blue Time* (1997) and *Midnight All Day* (1999), as well as in the novellas *Intimacy* (1998) and *The Body* (2003). The urbane characters who populate these narratives are often deeply unhappy, embarking on loveless affairs in order to escape their stultifying domestic lives and declining careers. More importantly, London is no longer the dynamic place of Kureishi's early fiction.⁶⁵ Despite its repopulation and physical renewal, it is nearly always represented as profoundly alienating. The music no longer rouses, the drugs anaesthetise rather than energise, and life in the Big Smoke appears to have settled down to a peculiarly tawdry, individualistic conformism. Indeed, we might say that in these fictions the petty suburban frustrations of *The Buddha of Suburbia* are no longer restricted to the outskirts of the city: they have insinuated themselves into the heart of London and poisoned the urban experience which had previously seemed so promising. *The Black Album*, as we have seen, represents the beginning of this process—it is the pin that bursts the bubble. But if that makes Kureishi's novel pessimistic, it is nothing beside the fiction we turn to now.

⁶⁵ 2001's *Gabriel's Gift* can be read as a warm-hearted attempt to reclaim the vivacity of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, but while in the former London remains a site of significant artistic possibility, it lacks the political dynamism of latter.

CHAPTER THREE

POLITICS IS OVER:

Culture and Co-optation in J.G. Ballard's Terminal Zones

If the first two chapters of this investigation sought to demonstrate how the cultural politics of disenfranchisement were thematised by one of the UK's most celebrated contemporary novelists, and to expose their role in leading another towards ideological impasse, the following two will demonstrate that this political logic has continued to be engaged with in recent British fiction in relation to two distinct but connected issues. One of these is the tenability of urban culture as a site of progressive activity, a subject that will occupy our attention in the next chapter. Through a reading of two of the most critically discussed British novels of recent years, we will be investigating whether a progressive alignment of culture and the city is today conceivable in the way that it was for Hall and Gilroy, and Winterson and Kureishi. Before that, however, we are going to pursue the implications of the Left's displacement of politics into culture at a time—the mid-to-late 1990s—when a general waning of the oppositional sensibility in Britain coincided with the gradual disappearance of agonistic public spaces and their replacement with the affectless surfaces of business parks and residential exclaves. And in order to do this we will be focusing on the work of Britain's most famous investigator of alienating urban landscapes: J.G. Ballard.

The so-called “sage of Shepperton” is conspicuous among the authors appraised here in that he is the only one who is no longer alive. Already in his mid-fifties when the first of Granta's lists of the best young British novelists appeared in 1983, Ballard had been a published writer for at least three

decades, and his bibliography already included nine novels and fifteen collections of short stories. Two works in particular had bought him the kind of cult following only notoriety can afford. The first of these was *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969), a series of “condensed novels” that explored the sixties’ mediascape; its televised violence and fixation with celebrity. The second was *Crash* (1973), a pornographic meditation on the centrality of the death drive to late-twentieth-century psycho-social experience, as expressed in the erotic possibilities of the car crash. But despite a cult status that begat huge international readership, he remained throughout his life something of an outsider to the literary establishment, and has been the subject of surprisingly few substantive appraisals. Nonetheless, Ballard is highly pertinent to this investigation, because while his early writing antedates the cultural politics of disenfranchisement by at least two decades, it identifies—and celebrates—something very close to them. And perhaps this is why his later work reflects on them with the wit of a man who is not sufficiently cynical to delight in the failures of the young, but old enough to understand why they failed.

1. Aesthetics and Politics in the New Wave

When Ballard started publishing in the late 1950s, his work was generally treated as genre fiction and deemed unworthy of critique by the literary establishment. This ensured that he was not fully engaged with until at least 1979, when his preoccupation with the nascent media culture of postmodernity was becoming *de rigeur*. However, from his first forays into the novel form it is clear that Ballard self-consciously sought to formulate a style that frustrated expectations from both sides of the divide between cultural legitimacy and inadmissibility. Indeed, an important legacy of his role in the New Wave of British SF, which centred on Michael Moorcock’s editorship of *New Worlds* between 1964 and 1971, was an eagerness to reject many of the conventions of both literary realism and popular generic style, and to synthesise others. His

first considered offering is a case in point. *The Drowned World* (1962)⁶⁶ is set on an Earth that is undergoing a massive ecological shift which has rendered everywhere but the planet's poles uninhabitable. Global temperatures are rising along with sea levels, mammalian fertility is declining and the novel is heavy with the implication that humanity is in the process of becoming extinct: "[M]ankind was systematically pruning itself, apparently moving backwards in time, and a point might ultimately be reached where a second Adam and Eve found themselves alone in a new Eden" (Ballard *Drowned* 23). This excerpt aptly summarises the novel's thesis that, contrary to bourgeois assumptions regarding humanity's (or at least Western humanity's) inevitable progress, given the appropriate circumstances we could become complicit in our own degeneration and death. Its protagonist, Kerans, is a government scientist and one of a platoon led by Colonel Riggs conducting an ecological survey around an abandoned city that turns out to be London. As the heat and humidity rise, the team is forced to retreat to its base in Greenland but Kerans insists on staying behind along with Bodkin, a military doctor, and his onetime lover Beatrice Dahl. The three are left alone at opposite ends of a tropical lagoon, unwilling to engage even with each other, and wait for their impending psychic devolution to open up a new mode of consciousness. Before long a treasure hunter named Strangman turns up with an entourage of subordinates who set about looting the city. Kerans is bemused by Strangman's search for material goods that no longer bear any value, and the latter struggles to comprehend the scientist's search for a new identity in his primordial past. Their relationship becomes increasingly suspicious, and when Strangman drains the lagoon in a bid to expose the city's streets and "rediscover" civilization they are brought into open conflict. Bodkin is shot dead and Beatrice is kidnapped; Kerans rescues her before being cornered by the treasure hunters, who are finally fought off by the returning platoon. Beatrice leaves with Riggs but Kerans rejects the offer of passage northwards, and the novel ends with him striking out south, alone, to an

⁶⁶ Since this investigation concentrates on novels I will not be commenting on Ballard's short stories, which are popularly perceived to represent some of his best work. By contrast, the first novel he published—1961's *The Wind From Nowhere*—was written in two weeks and aimed solely at establishing a readership. It was later disowned by its creator.

inevitable death, “a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun” (175).

Most of Ballard’s appraisers view his career in terms of polyptychs of three or four novels that obsessively revisit similar landscapes in which near-identical social and psychic avatars respond to similar circumstances in only slightly differing ways. This strategy is present from *The Drowned World*—whose theme of ecological disaster and devolution is continued in *The Drought* (1965) and *The Crystal World* (1966)⁶⁷—and it demands that any reader of Ballard’s fiction must treat the novels less as discrete narratives and more as one stage in a process of hermeneutic distillation. All of these novels offer a challenge to hierarchical orders of cultural legitimacy in that their characters possess none of the complexity we customarily expect of realist novels.⁶⁸ For instance, in *The Drowned World*, Strangman’s function as an avatar for imperialism is implied simply by emphasising his whiteness: the “man with the white smile” dressed in a “crisp white suit” (*Drowned* 90); similarly his second-in-command is represented as “a bare-chested Negro in white slacks and a white peaked cap” (89). This representational strategy can strike the reader as lazy, even objectionable, as it relies on an instrumentalised approach to character which appears more mythic than novelistic—indeed, which the novel as a form is usually expected to challenge. Ballard’s readers are never asked to identify with complex characters who are subject to comprehensible motivations and react in predictable ways to commonplace occurrences that take place in recognisable settings. Instead they are offered a detached, almost forensic analysis of perversely reductive types, or symbols, or—most appropriately of all—*specimens*, who respond in barely fathomable ways to extraordinary events. At the same time, even as he relies on certain SF topoi—such as the embattled

⁶⁷ After which Ballard’s obsession shifts towards the psycho-sexual barbarism of modern architectural and social technologies, which provides the subject matter for *Crash*, *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-Rise* (1975).

⁶⁸ This is not to say that they do not address issues of subjectivity and consciousness; rather, they approach these issues in terms that are, as W. Warren Wagar suggests, “fundamentally topographic”, via “explorations of landscape, both external and internal” rather than character in the sense usually encountered in the realist novel (Wagar 53).

community subsisting in a post-apocalyptic *mise-en-scène*—Ballard deploys expository devices that had not been typical in SF genre writing up until that time, such as a self-consciously dense prose style and a heavy use of allusion, both literary and scientific. Upon publication the novel was compared to *Heart of Darkness* (1902), an analogy that has stuck: as Patrick McCarthy writes, “[T]he resemblances between Conrad’s story of atavistic regression in the Congo and Ballard’s vision of a world reverting to a prehistoric ecology are so striking as to suggest at least an indirect connection between these narratives” (McCarthy 302). Indeed the connection goes beyond their superficially similar settings. The prevalence of symbols, the reliance on environment as a means of manipulating mood and meaning, the emphasis on topographies of mind and landscape (as well as an erosion of the boundary between the two)—all of these Conradian strategies are present in *The Drowned World*, and imply a bid to escape conventional realist modes of representation as well as an attempt to reach beyond the confines of generic SF.⁶⁹

There is a substantial body of criticism dealing with SF’s cultural legitimacy, and much of this hinges on its relationship with postmodernism. Roger Luckhurst’s contributions to this debate are particularly useful, as he is keen to single out Ballard as a figure who frustrates “literary/institutional determinations of [...] acceptable taste” (Luckhurst “Border Policing” 358). For instance, Luckhurst dismisses in quite cutting terms the suggestion by Brian McHale that SF should be seen as postmodernism’s “noncanonised or ‘low art’ double” (qtd. 361), an essentially pulp genre that mirrored but in no way facilitated the shift in “legitimate” culture away from a modernist preoccupation with epistemology towards postmodernism’s ontological concerns.⁷⁰ But while

⁶⁹ In a 1975 interview Ballard claims not to have read *Heart of Darkness* before writing *The Drowned World* (McCarthy 302), but while the Conradian influence must be kept in perspective, McCarthy identifies other references to Dante, Shakespeare, Defoe, Keats, Eliot, Joyce and even Kierkegaard. Far from being putative influences, he claims that many of these figures are baldly invoked and evidence Ballard’s highfalutin aspirations.

⁷⁰ Luckhurst parries: “This reaffirmation of the low status of SF is nevertheless disturbed by one name: J.G. Ballard. Ballard is seen [by McHale himself] to lead SF out of the ‘subliterary’ and into the mainstream. *The Atrocity Exhibition*, with its ‘ontological’ concerns, is a ‘postmodernist text based on science fiction topoi’. This is something of a quantum leap, for McHale characterizes

he resists the argument that SF and postmodernism developed similar interests in complete isolation from one another, he does not appear to disagree that they share an interest in the ontological. And in light of Ballard's reductive approach to characterisation this raises some challenging questions regarding the latter's politics—specifically his identity politics.⁷¹ Put bluntly, we might ask whether the representation of Strangman and his entourage satirises the West's (then ongoing) colonial enterprises with sufficient trenchancy; whether Beatrice Dahl's portrayal early on as the object of Kerans's libido and latterly as a damsel-in-distress is not just a little problematic. These questions are answered in part

Ballard's early work as definitively SF, although with some mainstream pretensions; *The Atrocity Exhibition* has become a mainstream text with SF residua. Given that McHale absolutely insists on SF and postmodernism's 'parallel development, not mutual influence', Ballard's sudden leap is nothing short of extraordinary" (Luckhurst "Border Policing" 362). What is most relevant here is not the critique of McHale's antiquated attitudes where canon-formation are concerned, or his insistence that SF developed alongside postmodernism but never directly affected it. Rather it is the suggestion that Ballard's presence in the post-war literary landscape cannot be fully appreciated if we force his work to cohere with vertically ordered conceptions of generic legitimacy. This applies to all of his work, including the two novels in which Ballard most conspicuously adopts a realistic mode: *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and *The Kindness of Women* (1991).

⁷¹ The question of politics in postmodern SF has been visited many times, and one of the genres that has received a great deal of attention is cyberpunk. Despite the genre's ostensible focus on outcasts and resistance, Nicola Nixon still feels the need to ask the question, "[I]s cyberpunk realizing a coherent political agenda? Is it indeed, 'preparing the ground for a revolution?'" (Nicola Nixon 221). Her answer is less than enthusiastic: "In Gibson's fiction [and the "Sprawl" trilogy in particular] there is [...] absolutely no critique of corporate power, no possibility that it will be shaken or assaulted by heroes who are entirely part of the system and who profit by their mastery within it, regardless of their ostensible marginalization and their posturings about constituting some kind of counterculture [...T]he idea that computer cowboys could ever represent a form of counterculture is almost laughable; for computers are so intrinsically a part of the corporate system that no one working within them, especially not the hired guns of Gibson's novels, who are bought and sold by corporations and act as the very tools of corporate competition, could successfully pose as part of a counterculture, even if they were sporting mohawks and mirrorshades" (230-231). This appraisal could be accused of missing the point somewhat, as one of the most challenging political questions to emerge out of the 1980s was whether resistance is still possible in increasingly totalised social systems. In situating their heroes in compromised positions relative to the corporate power they wish to resist, Gibson's novels could be argued to articulate this question in a productive way.

by Ballard's repeated suggestion that seeing the assumptions of his parents' expatriate community in Shanghai shattered with the onset of World War II—during which he was imprisoned in the Lunghua Civil Assembly Centre—equipped him with an unshakable belief that reality was entirely mutable. To an extent, this short-circuits any critique that focuses on his reductive approach to characterisation, because any such accusation is forced to admit of the existence of essentialism even if it seeks to condemn it, where Ballard's fiction rejects the possibility of a stable reality altogether. This places him at odds with the likes of Winterson and Kureishi, whose fiction—even as it explores the interstices of reductive binaries and unconditionally celebrates cultural indeterminacy—can still be argued to rely on a binary politics that opposes contingency to essentialism and subjugates the latter to the former. By contrast, in Ballard's work there is nothing beyond the contingent; it is simply presumed, without having any moral or political value attached to it.

However, even if this explanation softens the charges above it still renders his fiction profoundly ambivalent, and goes some way in explaining why he is sometimes perceived to resist progressive appraisal. As W. Warren Wagar writes:

Critics on the left are not happy with messiahs such as Ballard. While applauding his satirical jabs at modern bourgeois existence, they cannot take satisfaction in his evident lack of sympathy for, or interest in, working people. His failure to develop a political line, to speculate about social and economic structures, to see the possibility of anything but inward, psychic transformations, leaves them understandably cold. (Wagar 65)

If nothing else, Ballard's admiration for Thatcher—frequently articulated in the most unpalatable of terms—is enough to make anybody approaching his work from a leftist perspective shudder.⁷² And one such appraiser, Peter Fitting, barely

⁷² In interview Ballard once announced, "I'm in love with Margaret Thatcher—I want her to be my mistress!" (qtd. in Wagar 63). Elsewhere he states, "In England I support Margaret Thatcher

stops short of condemnation. Situating developments in SF within the socio-political history of the mid-century, Fitting suggests that the various emancipatory movements of the 1960s provided the New Wave with a powerful impetus that manifested itself in two distinct ways. The first revolved around “the belief that the present sorry state of affairs [was] due exclusively to the bankruptcy of the established *moral and ethical* values of our society, a bankruptcy which [could] only be resolved on the individual and spiritual level”. The second “took the form of [...] a new *aesthetics*—the search for new literary forms and techniques adequate to dealing with what was perceived as the changed reality of the 1960s” (Fitting 66). Fitting chooses J.G. Ballard as representative of this second inclination and argues that the strategies deployed in his fiction, such as those outlined above, evidence a dangerous tendency to aestheticise the challenges of the 1960s in a way that was politically fruitless. He focuses on *The Crystal World* (1966), which is set in a former French-African colony where the jungle is undergoing a process of crystallisation that effectively freezes time. The novel’s narrative arc is nearly identical to that of *The Drowned World*: a scientist visits a site of ecological catastrophe only to become fascinated by and ultimately complicit in his own psychic devolution and death. And, witnessing once again what he perceives to be Ballard’s implication that “human problems will be solved not through resistance, but through an acceptance of the aesthetic and reconciliatory dimensions of the cataclysm”, Fitting objects that “both the hero’s emotional problems and the larger racial tensions of the African continent are understood finally as aesthetic problems—as ‘problems of lighting’” rather than problems of human society, polity and so forth. As such, he argues, “the ‘speculative’ nature of much of [Ballard’s] writing lies not in the exploration of new social and human possibilities, but in the discovery and uses of various modernistic literary techniques” (67).

immensely... for *sexual reasons*. I admire her for mythological and sexual reasons. When I say this, people are totally fazed—they can’t understand what I’m talking about”. With scant regard for the facts, he goes on: “[H]er economic liberalism *has* led to the regeneration of British industry—there’s no doubt about that [...] The economic ‘Thatcher miracle’ has brought terrific economic prosperity, simply because all the bureaucratic restraints have been lifted” (Ballard to Vale and Reuther 308, emphases in original).

Such a reading lends resonance to the parallels that have been drawn between Ballard and Conrad; however, while the tendency of some modernist figures to aestheticise political problems has been the source of critical anxiety, the rigid distinction Fitting locates between aesthetics and politics within the New Wave has not gone unchallenged. For instance, Wagar considers Fitting's use of Fredric Jameson in order to explore the utopian impulse in post-war SF to be particularly problematic. Jameson argues that attitudes towards utopianism have "undergone a dialectical reversal": where Engels once denounced the utopian impulse as "a diversion of revolutionary energy into ideal wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions", in a time characterised by capitalist hegemony "the Utopian concept [...] embodies the newest version of a hermeneutics of freedom"; "practical thinking", by contrast, now "represents a capitulation to the system itself" (Jameson qtd. in Fitting 59).⁷³ To the extent

⁷³ It should be acknowledged that Jameson's comments on the relationship between SF and utopia are a little more complex than this. To Jameson it is no coincidence that the growth of SF coincided with the precise moment when the historical novel "ceased to be functional" as a form that provided cultural ballast for the concept of progress, which was a *sine qua non* of the development of capitalism during the nineteenth century (Jameson "Utopia" 150). Prior to the rise of capitalism, cultural forms had tended to consider the past to be "essentially the same as the present"; the historical novel thus served an important role in meeting capitalism's demand for "a memory of qualitative social change, a concrete vision of the past which we may expect to find completed by that far more abstract and empty conception of some future terminus which we sometimes call 'progress'" (149). When the historical novel lapsed into nostalgia this commitment to progress fell into doubt, and SF stepped into the space it left behind, providing "mock futures" that serve to transform "our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" (152). However, rather than simply replicating the obfuscatory strategies of the historical novel, SF contained within it a certain amount of subversive potential, since it served "to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*" in a way that actually drew attention to the politically necessary relationship between capitalism and the concept of progress (151, emphasis in original). It thus functions counterintuitively not "to keep the future alive, even in the imagination"; rather "its deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future" (153). Likewise, Jameson argues, the "deepest vocation" of utopia "is to bring home, in local and determinate ways, and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself" (153); to this extent, the content of utopian fictions—unlike the historical novel—is often a "perpetual interrogation of its own conditions of possibility", and these fictions thus "find their deepest 'subjects' in the possibility of their own production, in the interrogation of the dilemmas involved in their own emergence as utopian

that it anticipates this shift, Wagar suggests that Ballard's work is more amenable to a radically left-wing reading than Fitting realises. Ballard always resisted the suggestion that his fiction is dystopian, claiming instead that it "is optimistic because it's a fiction of psychic fulfillment" (qtd. in Wagar 56), and as far as his earlier work is concerned this would seem to be an accurate description: his protagonists' desire to be subsumed within whichever captivating ecological upheaval happens to be taking place is always finally indulged, and this invariably leads them away from a psychic and social order that is represented as increasingly antiquated and calcified. Wagar reads this as a "perceptive analys[is] of the collapsing moral world of late capital"; however, far from being nihilistic, he urges that Ballard's fictions "*are* utopias, and utopias of a post-capitalist landscape in which technocrats and tycoons alike would be out of work" (Wagar 67). To this extent his work is radical—even revolutionary—as it completely rejects the prevailing order of bourgeois capitalism in favour of one that appears to present at least the *possibility* of transcendence. Wagar identifies aesthetics as the vehicle for this radical transcendence and places Ballard's fiction within a framework that allows of a dialogical relationship between aesthetics and politics, with utopianism mediating between the two. Ballard might have argued that "[r]evolutions in aesthetic sensibility may be the only way in which radical change can be brought about in the future" (qtd. in Wagar 66); however, contrary to Fitting's boolean approach to the New Wave, in which fictions fall into either the political or the aesthetic category, Wagar suggests that the kind of "psychic transformations" that Ballard's aesthetic project explores "may be legitimately viewed as a *means* to a social *end*". This end is "concrete, real, *world-historical*", but it has been made possible in the first instance "by 'seismic shifts' in consciousness"—which is to say, by the kind of utopian impulse whose new political promise, Jameson suggests, resides in its relative immunity to capitalist co-optation (Wagar 68, *emphases in original*).⁷⁴

texts" (156).

⁷⁴ Wagar is not alone among Ballard's appraisers in arguing that, far from the kind of "managed decline" that Fitting perceives in the early novels, the latter are marked by a real sense of a coming

While at first sight Ballard's fiction appears quite distinct from that of the two writers who have previously occupied us, the discussion between Fitting and Wagar opens up an interesting parallel. The disagreement that separates the two critics appears, at root, to concern the question of praxis. Fitting argues that the aesthetic aspirations of the New Wave represented an attempt to respond to the challenges of a political milieu—the emancipatory movements of the 1960s—which sought to critique existing social reality from a radical perspective. Ballard's response was "mistaken and unrewarding" (Fitting 66) by comparison with that of other writers because it tended to aestheticise the political challenges of the time instead of "us[ing] SF to criticize [...] society by means of a more thorough and explicit identification of the social and political nature of capitalism" (68).⁷⁵ In the last analysis this aesthetic strategy seems to lead inevitably to dissolution and decay, even if it does reject a slowly atrophying bourgeois social order. Wagar responds by challenging Fitting's too-easy separation of aesthetics and politics, and insists that in Ballard's fiction the protagonists' rejection of the prevailing social order functions as a prelude to a kind of political transcendence that will allow for the construction of new "landscapes of justice" (Wagar 68). But while the first aspect of this rejoinder might be valid, the kernel of Fitting's argument still obtains. Even if the search for transcendence is successful, and manages to deliver radical material change, it remains the case that the aesthetic project undertaken in Ballard's early work hardly represents a politics of resistance; indeed, it is more appropriate to speak

social and psychic revolution. Andrzej Gasiorek, for instance, suggests that "Ballard's early novels and short stories portray the period of waiting" that seems to characterise Kerans's situation "not as dead Beckettian time in which nothing happens but rather as the necessarily prelude to far-reaching change" (Gasiorek 11).

⁷⁵ Fitting is by no means unique among Ballard's critics in being uncomfortable with his tendency to ignore material reality and to find political salvation in abstraction: discussing his embrace of new media technology during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Michel Delville argues that the fiction Ballard produced around this time evidences "a line of theoretical speculation whose radical and progressive premises are liable to culminate in sheer idealism, mainly because they fail to truly account for the social and cultural specifics of our time. What is conspicuously absent from Ballard's argument is a concern with the material conditions of production and consumption of mass-media artefacts" (Delville 89).

of a politics of rejection, or recalcitrance. When Kerans declines the offer of passage to Greenland and heads south the reader does not perceive this as an attempt to locate a new politically fruitful and sustainable mode of being in the drowned world. The old order may be irrelevant (Riggs) and even barbaric (Strangman) but Kerans's eschewal of it—and of human polity altogether—is an act of negation rather than affirmation; a retreat from politics rather than a concerted attempt to fashion reality after a new political model. And whether or not the novel's resolution bequeaths its protagonist the kind of "psychic fulfillment" that Ballard spoke of when defending himself against charges of pessimism, it remains shot through with the certainty of death. The best Kerans can hope for is the kind of death-in-life implied by his late encounter with the blind, necrotic but still living character of Hardman, who earlier in the novel left the base in a foreshadowing of Kerans's own journey into the jungle, and is now "a dying beggar [...] no more than a resurrected corpse" (171). What is more, this is a conclusion to which Ballard returns elsewhere in his apocalyptic triptych: a similar act of negation is used to resolve *The Crystal World*, when its protagonist finally rejects the fading colonial town of Mont Royal and heads into the jungle, towards an endless, solitary future of crystallised stasis.

It is in this way that Ballard's early work has more in common with the narrative this investigation seeks to trace than might be suspected. In both *The Drowned World* and *The Passion* potential is located in an act of voluntary exile that leads the subject away from the realm of political action. The vehicle for this act of negation is not the kind of agency that is recognised by and operates within a polity that lends meaning to actions; rather, in response to the pressing political questions of their circumstances, both Winterson and Ballard validate a cultural or aesthetic strategy that hinges on a rejection of any such milieu. As Wagar argues of *The Drowned World*, it is in the utopianism of this response that the novels' radicalism consists: they seek to transcend the world as it is currently configured in order to change it, and hope by these means to locate new "landscapes of justice" in which alternatives to the status quo may be realised. But for all the promise of this strategy, Fitting's argument forces us to remember that in both novels the landscape that is revealed by the act of

negation is a deeply ambivalent zone of morbidity in which the boundary between life and death can no longer be determined, as even this ontological certainty has been rendered indistinct.

Ballard's early fiction is thus quite relevant to the present discussion, as it can be seen to provide a rudimentary thematisation of the cultural politics of disenfranchisement. This is perhaps not so much the case where the issue of space is concerned, since it could be argued that while Wagar suggests that Ballard's first few novels are "fundamentally topographic" this is not quite the same as saying that they are centrally concerned with space—and certainly not urban space—as are *The Passion* and *The Black Album*. Indeed, given that the earlier novels are characterised by an obsession with devolution it might be more appropriate to approach them in terms of time. However, the way in which Ballard's consideration of exile, outsidership and resistance develops as his concerns shift away from the temporal and towards the spatial provides some insight into the strategy of resistance we witnessed in *The Passion*. In the latter novel, Winterson imputes to the Napoleonic regime a totalising tendency which, I have argued, evidences a real anxiety over the spatial project of the New Right. In opposition to this she constructs a Venice whose spatial mercuriality reflects the cultural and political indeterminacy of its denizens, and it is out of this cornucopia of contingency that resistance emerges. But if in *The Black Album* Kureishi begins to doubt the ability of flexible spaces and identities to resist the arrogant and hypostatising spatial logic of late capitalism, in Ballard's late novels the latter has become so flexible, so capable of co-opting dissident behaviour, that the possibility of resistance—whether of an aesthetic or political kind, or both—has vanished completely. It is therefore this milieu, as represented in Ballard's late novels *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2001) that will occupy us for the rest of this chapter. Because, to the extent that these texts build on Ballard's growing interest in architectural determinism, they allow us to observe the role of space in changing his attitude towards the cultural politics of disenfranchisement. In combination with the early novels, they provide an insight into the latter from two perspectives: one of twenty-five years before its appearance—which in many ways anticipates its emergence—

and one of soon afterwards, reflecting on its devastating impact.

2. Spatial Totalisation and the Social

The shift in Ballard's preoccupation from time towards space from *Crash* onwards comes to a kind of apotheosis in his late work, which is obsessed with the affectless and atemporal spaces of a hegemonic but increasingly complacent capitalism. The latter's totalisation has produced a social system in which every conceivable human faculty has been subordinated to the imperative of economic efficiency. Difference is elided as the class system is compressed into a social singularity, the progressive aspirations of identity politics are first co-opted, then perverted and finally rendered void, and resistance proves largely impossible. Into this situation Ballard inserts his provocative thesis: that social systems actually *require* disorder if they are to function efficiently. And so he sketches out a series of worlds in which disorder, dissent and difference are represented as vital—but, far from being the fount from which resistance springs, they are systematically appropriated to serve the interests of consumer-corporate capital. *Cocaine Nights* offers us the Spanish retirement resort of Estrella de Mar, whose citizens are so enervated that they are encouraged to play the rapist, the prostitute, the porn star, in order to salvage anything resembling bourgeois civil society. In *Super-Cannes* the French Riviera plays host to Eden-Olympia, a high-tech business park where CEOs work so tirelessly to advance the interests of corporate capital their health begins to decline and they are prescribed a programme of regulated psychopathy which involves alternately patronising and terrorising drug dealers, child prostitutes and the local immigrant community. In *Millennium People* a wealthy London suburb is in the middle of a revolution whose ostensible objection—that the middle class has become the new proletariat—masks a deeper and more violent logic. And *Kingdom Come*, Ballard's last novel, offers us the motorway town of Brooklands, where football tribalism provides the façade for a new form of consumer fascism that will ensure the the suburbs keep spending. These are worlds in which, as

Andrzej Gasiorek argues, “the struggle for freedom [takes] the form of celebrating criminality and psychopathology, in blithe ignorance of the extent to which these supposedly oppositional practices are the alienated products of the social realm they supposed to subvert” (Gasiorek 175); where “[d]eviance [is] a commodity under jealous guard”, “[c]rime [...] ha[s] become one of the performance arts” and “transgressive behaviour is for the public good” (Ballard *Cocaine* 135, 146, 181).

In their Ballardian manifestation the cultural politics of disenfranchisement cannot be said to be properly spatial, as they are in Winterson’s novel, and are certainly not committed to the urban milieu. However, as Ballard’s interests shift towards the urban spaces of postmodernity some interesting connections begin to present themselves, and one notable example can be found at the outset of *Cocaine Nights*. Charles Prentice is driving through Gibraltar en route to Marbella, where he is due to visit his brother Frank, who has been jailed on suspicion of starting a fire that killed five people. “Crossing frontiers is my profession”, he says, before singing a paean to “[t]hose strips of no-man’s land between the checkpoints” which “always seem such zones of promise, rich with the possibilities of new lives, new scents and affections” (9). As an overseas territory that is nominally self-governing, but whose sovereignty is under constant question, Gibraltar enjoys a kind of political indeterminacy that Charles finds compelling. However, this promise has “nothing to do with peace, order and the regulation of Her Majesty’s waves”. Quite the opposite: he is titillated by the petty criminality of the place, the “raunchy bars”, the “money-laundering and the smuggling of untaxed perfumes and pharmaceuticals”. And if he is pleased by the Rock’s rejection of the British imperial project, he takes similar pleasure in its refusal to bow to Spanish claims of sovereignty; in the fact that it “stick[s] up like a thumb, the local sign of the cuckold, in the face of Spain” (10).

This representation of Gibraltar might be seen as redolent of Winterson’s Venice, whose own political situation is equally ambiguous, and which is represented as similarly ungovernable, and hence peculiarly resistant to the totalising spatial project of Napoleonic imperialism. Indeed, a similar opposition

exists in *Cocaine Nights*, for Charles finds quite a different kind of spatiality when he reaches Estrella de Mar, the “residential retreat for the professional classes of northern Europe” where most of the novel is set (35). Empty and silent, the resort appears—at least at first glance—to be entirely devoid of any of the imbroglia and recalcitrance of Gibraltar; rather, it is an “eventless world” full of “memory-erasing architecture” (34) where there is “no past, no future and a diminishing present” (35). Tellingly, Gibraltar is barely mentioned again once we are introduced to Estrella de Mar: the unseemly outcrop of rock which “the Brussels bureaucrats are trying to close [...] down” (180) appears to represent the losing side in a battle with a homogeneous and deterministic spatiality that is the focus of Ballard’s inquiry in all of his later novels. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come* feature no comparable outposts of disorder to the one that opens *Cocaine Nights*.⁷⁶ Thus as the reader works her way through Ballard’s subsequent explorations of postmodern hypercapitalism she comes to remember Charles’s fondness for Gibraltar as mere nostalgia rather than a determined expression of faith in its resistant potential: it belongs to the past, and Charles is mourning it.

For *Super-Cannes* only sees the determinism of Estrella de Mar intensified. Arriving at Eden-Olympia, a high-tech business park for the world’s largest corporations, Paul Sinclair finds a similarly highly-regulated space of “glass and gun-metal office blocks [...] set well apart from each other” (*Cannes* 7); a place where “[i]ntimacy and neighbourliness were not features of everyday life”, where

[a]n invisible infrastructure took the place of traditional civic

⁷⁶ The only space that is vaguely redolent of it is Guy’s Hospital in *Super-Cannes*, where Paul convalesces after a flying accident: “Guy’s was a city under siege, filled with the sick, the lost and the confused, a shuffling host perpetually on the move in a vast internal migration” (39). Though Paul demonstrates a kind of nostalgia for Guy’s, and the hospital can be associated with sexual possibility to the extent that it is where Paul meets his wife, it hardly represents the kind of bawdy liminality of Gibraltar. La Bocca, the former industrial town that features prominently in *Super-Cannes*, might be compared to Gibraltar, but—as we shall see shortly—it speaks more readily of capitulation and control than resistance.

virtues. At Eden-Olympia there were no parking problems, no fears of burglars or purse snatchers, no rapes or muggings. The top-drawer professionals no longer needed to devote a moment's thought to each other, and had dispensed with the checks and balances of community life. There were no town councils or magistrates' courts, no citizens' advice bureaux. Civility and polity were designed into Eden-Olympia, in the same way that mathematics, aesthetics and an entire geopolitical world-view were designed into the Parthenon and the Boeing 747. Representative democracy had been replaced by the surveillance camera and the private police force. (38)

It is not hard to locate echoes of Campbell's foray into the "New Times Towns" in this passage. Just as in Basingstoke, in Estrella de Mar and Eden-Olympia privacy and defensibility are valued over all else: "Razor-glass topped almost every wall, and security cameras maintained their endless vigil over garages and front doors" (*Cocaine* 135). This is exactly the kind of postmodern space we are by now accustomed to hearing decried by the likes of Harvey, Soja, Jameson and Davis. Indeed, the latter claims to be excavating the future with his investigation of postmodern Los Angeles, and Ballard—who was a keen reader of Davis⁷⁷—appears to echo this when he claims that in Estrella de Mar "[t]he future had come ashore" (33) and that Eden-Olympia is "a huge experiment in how to hothouse the future" (*Cannes* 15). Using language that could have been lifted from Jameson's *Postmodernism*, Ballard writes that the Costa del Sol is "as depthless as a property developer's brochure" (*Cocaine* 16). The vernacular European style that all four theorists consider to be prevalent in the postmodern architecture of California has returned home and is simultaneously mingling with and destroying the originals it mimics: as Charles passes a new apartment block he considers its "mock-Roman columns and white porticos apparently

⁷⁷ In interview with Graeme Revell in 2003 Ballard says, "I've been reading Mike Davis's latest book. You know—the *City of Quartz* man? [...] Brilliant writer in his way. His latest book is *Dead Cities* [...] He's absolute steeped in the social history of California, but he hates big corporations—he feels they've destroyed LA and large areas of California" (Ballard to Revell 71).

imported from Las Vegas after a hotel clearance sale, reversing the export to Florida and California in the 1920s of dismantled Spanish monasteries and Sardinian abbeys” (16). And as Harvey would no doubt insist, the logic of these spaces is not predicated on rigidity. Quite the opposite: while their denizens might find it “irritating to be reminded of the contingent world” (*Cannes* 19), flexibility is an absolute *condition* of their existence. This is something that previous appraisers of Ballard’s late novels have noted: as Gasiorek writes, while in these novels

[t]ime has contracted down to a depleted present stretching out towards a blank future [...] change is ceaselessly and ever more rapid [...] and] takes place within a globalised, technology-driven system that seems uncannily adaptable and fearfully resolute. This is postmodernity as end-game and terminal zone, the site of a late capitalist colonisation so complete that temporality has been evacuated from it and can only be conceived in terms of spatial extension: more buildings, roads, airports, shopping malls, car parks [...] This is the future as more of the same, the future as post-history. Flexible, decentralised, and geared to the reinvention of its institutions and bureaucratic structures, thus ensuring that it survives by way of mutation, late capitalism is in these texts shown to be both reflexive *and* static. (Gasiorek 20, emphasis added)

In other words, the totalising tendency that Winterson imputes to the Napoleonic regime, which is indicative of the spatial logic of late capitalism, can now have its cake and eat it. As Harvey and Jameson argue, far from combatting totalisation and homogenisation, flexibility begets these qualities, and—as we shall see—performative disorder only serves to strengthen them.

However, it is worth exploring the relationship between the homogeneity of these spaces and the societies that exist in them a little more, because this will allow us to determine how Ballard’s representation of postmodernity

differs from the analyses of Marxist critics who, initially at least, seem most suited to its appraisal. The novels we are discussing here do evidence Ballard's late and characteristically idiosyncratic engagement with Marx, but it is interesting that this engagement appears to lead him, by and large, to *reject* the fundamental tools of Marxist criticism. While for most of his career Ballard was clearly interested in social hierarchies, in keeping with the narrative strategies developed in his early writing these were usually perceived in terms of typologies based on psychic disposition and/or professional activity rather than in terms of a shared social experience dictated by class status.⁷⁸ Indeed, the idea of class only begins to make itself explicitly apparent in his late fiction—and most notably by its absence, or at least its eclipse. While *Millennium People* advances the thesis that the middle-class is “the new proletariat” (Ballard *Millennium* 64) and *Super-Cannes* explores the oligarchy that presumably rules over them, it must be noted that, despite the ostensible emphasis on class, in each novel Ballard represents one social stratum to the exclusion of all others. The dynamics between these strata are never demarcated and their operational logics are virtually identical, since all function as part of a homogeneous late capitalist society that is struggling with economic lassitude, and so must co-opt disorder and sublimate it as a performance in order to inspire its citizenry and ensure it remains productive. As such, Ballard seems to engage with the issue of class only to the extent that he no longer believes it to exist in the Marxist sense: the social strata of the past have been compressed into a singularity, a kind of undifferentiated mass. This reading is bolstered by the novels' treatment of the relationship between labour and leisure under consumerism. Recognising

⁷⁸ This is to say that he was more interested in *caste* than class, something that is most obviously manifest in *High-Rise*, which tells the story of a massive social breakdown in an affluent apartment building. This is no Langian metropolis in which the proletariat subsists underground and is systematically exploited by a bourgeoisie that resides up in the skies. The floor on which each character lives is, as we might expect, determined by the relationship between property prices and personal wealth; however, none of these characters is, properly speaking, proletarian. The architect of the block may own the penthouse while a psychiatrist lives about half way up and a lowly film technician on the first floor, but this hierarchy exists in order to explore the social vagaries produced by a particular architectural environment, rather than as part of a Marxist critique of post/industrial class society.

Ballard's tendency to embark on broad imaginative investigations across a number of works, reviewers of *Super-Cannes* identified it as a kind of "companion piece" (Royle par. 3) to *Cocaine Nights*. This is an approach Gasiorek challenges when he argues that "[w]hereas the built environment of Estrella de Mar is soporific, a lotus-eaters' paradise, Eden-Olympia is a streamlined microcosm that arrogates to itself the functions previously allocated to society" (Gasiorek 175). However, while superficially true, this perspective does not fully appreciate that in the social, political and economic milieus of these novels production and consumption, labour and leisure, work and play can no longer be comfortably separated. The leisure society of Estrella de Mar, enjoying a renaissance under the programme of psychopathy and criminality that marks all of Ballard's late fiction, is now a hive of service industries. We are told that the resort is "as serious in its pleasures as a seventeenth-century New England settlement" (Ballard *Cocaine* 116), something confirmed in the fact that nearly every one of its residents has a job which shores up the leisure economy. At the funeral of Bibi Janssen, one of the fire's victims, we meet Blanche and Marion Keswick, who run the "Restaurant du Cap, an elegant brasserie by the harbour" (60), Elizabeth Shand, who owns the Club Nautico and is the community's "most successful businesswoman" (62), and "a retired Bournemouth accountant and his sharp-eyed wife who [run] a video-rental store" (67). For a retirement enclave Estrella de Mar thus seems bizarrely hard-working, and this is because the boundary between labour and leisure has been almost totally obscured. *Super-Cannes* achieves a similar effect using an inverted logic: Eden-Olympia is the most inhuman of workhouses; here "the concept of leisure [is] dying" as it is perceived as "the mark of the shiftless and untalented" (*Cannes* 46). Yet this over-emphasis on labour is, like the emphasis on leisure in Estrella de Mar, less than straightforward. As Wilder Penrose explains, "Work is the new leisure. Talented and ambitious people work harder than they have ever done, and for longer hours. They find their only fulfilment through work" (254, emphasis added). Although, to the extent that it is in work and not relaxation that the malaise originates, the situation of *Super-Cannes* is diametrically opposed to that in *Cocaine Nights*, the logic of the two texts is identical. In the latter it is an

excess of leisure that leads to lassitude where in the former it is an excess of labour, and the solution in both cases is to make the one activity consist in the other, thereby eliding the distinction between the two. Wilder Penrose might argue that “[a]t Eden-Olympia work is the ultimate play, and play the ultimate work” (94), but he could just as easily be speaking of *Estrella de Mar*. Considered in the light of Ballard’s habit of obsessively revisiting the same imaginative terrain over a number of different works, it seems clear that *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes* arrive at precisely the same conclusion: that under late capitalism human agency has become so instrumentalised the divisions we customarily draw between different types of social activity—and the different classes that perform them—have been largely erased.

A reader of Aldous Huxley might be a little baffled by this conclusion, for how can the instrumentalisation of social functions—witnessed also in *Brave New World* (1932)—lead to the *eclipse* of caste and class, which are so central to the social system imagined in that novel? The answer to this question, I think, lies in the fact that where Huxley’s system expresses the kind of rigidity characteristic of Fordism, Ballard’s late dystopias confront a post-Fordist world in which flexibility is the watchword of an international capitalism that has ascended to global hegemony. It is in this respect that Harvey, Soja, Davis and Jameson provide the most appropriate framework for approaching these novels in the first instance, as they demonstrate very effectively that at the heart of late capitalism’s celebration of flexibility is a logic that seeks ineluctably to expand and totalise. And their critique goes some way towards revealing the wholesale embrace of indeterminacy and contingency by the likes of Hall, Jacques and Gilroy as a capitulation to this logic rather than as the foundation of a new model of resistance. It is perhaps for this reason that, where Ballard’s early novels locate a glimmer of promise in an aesthetic project of self-exile that seeks to transcend political challenges—a project familiar from *The Passion* and other celebrations of the cultural politics of disenfranchisement—in his late fiction even this possibility is denied. Confronting the totalised hypercapitalism of *Estrella de Mar* and *Eden-Olympia* renders a fuller engagement with the ambivalent utopia of *The Drowned World* politically untenable, and so Ballard

eschews it and the rudimentary politics of disenfranchisement that it endorses.

This said, I think it would be a mistake to believe that the longstanding fundamentals of Marxist critique are sufficiently capable in themselves of illuminating Ballard's late worlds to the fullest extent. They may challenge the Left culturalist strategy of endorsing play and pleasure as the loci of oppositional activity, but they do this not by demonstrating that the productivism of late capitalism is too powerful an opponent to be effectively resisted in this way. Nor do they suggest, as more rearguard Marxist elements might, that it is the waning of faith in orthodox tools of analysis and the decline of class consciousness that have led to capitalist hegemony. These novels provide visions of a world so uniform and overdetermined that it is completely impossible to differentiate between the basic faculties of society using a critique that admits of human pluralism in any form whatsoever—whether it consists in the culturally determined realm of identity or in the economically determined realm of class. Whereas the reactionary might argue that through collectives of social circumstance popular will may win out, in his construction of an entirely atomised social milieu Ballard denies the possibility of any such collective emerging. Whereas the Left culturalist directs the focus of resistant activity away from work and towards play, Ballard's hypercapitalism appropriates both and is all the more productive—as well as violent, oppressive and exploitative—for it. It is certainly the case that the prognosis for human society in *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes* is gloomier than in the early apocalyptic fiction, because the political resolution—no matter how ambivalent—that marked the latter is no longer tenable. But in order to understand Ballard's late dystopias fully we require a theoretical model that is not merely capable of explaining neoliberalism in terms of the flexible post-Fordist economy; it must also address the specifically *political* dimensions of his vision and shed light on the new form of totalitarianism which he sees emerging. And such a model will not be found within Marxist approaches that subjugate the realm of culture to the diktats of economics, or vice versa. It will only be located in an analysis that recognises the primacy of politics.

In this respect I think that Arendt's thought—and specifically her

formulation of “the social”—are very helpful. Arendt claims that the phenomenon of the social emerged in the West during the eighteenth century and came to elide entirely the distinction between the private realm of the household and the public realm of the polis, resulting in a tendency to “see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping” (Arendt *Human* 28). In the ancient world the latter activity belonged properly to the private realm, where “men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs” (30); housekeeping was thus the process by which the necessities of life in its barest sense—food, shelter and so on—were guaranteed in the private realm. Because it was always run as a kind of despotism, governed by force by a single figurehead (usually the patriarch), this realm was inevitably apolitical. By contrast in the public realm of the polis citizens met one another as equals, but only because of the assurance that their “wants and needs” were being met elsewhere: as Arendt writes, “[I]f there was a relationship between these two spheres it was a matter of course that the mastering of life in the household was the condition for freedom [in] the polis” (30-31). It is in this way that Arendt can argue against libertarian models that politics is equivalent to freedom, for it is in the fact that citizens are free of the need to labour perpetually after their own survival that their freedom consists, and the exercise of this freedom *is* politics. To both the private and the public realms Arendt opposes “society”, whose exemplar she identifies in the eighteenth-century salon. “Society”, she writes, “expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action of outstanding achievement” (40). She submits that the development of economics—perceived by the ancients as “relat[ing] to the life of the individual and the survival of the species” and therefore “a non-political, household affair by definition” (28)—into a complete way of understanding the world during the eighteenth century prepared the way for the elision of the distinction between the private and the public realms, and the supersession of both by society. This was because “economics [...] could only achieve a scientific

character when men had become social beings [who] unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior, so that those who did not keep the rules could be considered to be asocial or abnormal” (42). Such a means of measuring human activity provided society—which was similarly conformist—with “an irresistible tendency to grow, to devour the older realms of the political and private” (45), and generated the totalising and expansionist phenomenon she labels “the social”. Class was a central feature in this development, since society was always connected to class status;⁷⁹ however, as far as the social was concerned “it [was] immaterial whether the framework happen[ed] to be actual rank in the half-feudal society of the eighteenth century, title in the class society of the nineteenth, or mere function in the mass society of today” (41). What was important was that the expansionist logic of the social ensured that whichever rank, class or function was in the ascendant, it would always seek to assimilate or abolish competing models of behaviour. Mass society can be seen as a culmination of this logic in that it demonstrates how the various social groups that preceded it “have suffered the same absorption into one society that the family units had suffered earlier; with the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength” (41).

Authority under the social has taken on a particularly insidious form, Arendt claims, because it has been diminished to a kind of vacuum, entirely removed from the populace it supposedly governs. In economics, as in society, the “one-man, monarchical rule” of the private sphere was transformed into “a kind of no-man rule”, as membership was determined by commitment to a shared principle rather than a person (as in the household) or a body of persons (as in the polis). However, “this nobody, the assumed one interest of society as a whole in economics as well as the assumed one opinion of polite society in the salon, does not cease to rule for having lost its personality”. This is because “rule

⁷⁹ As Arendt writes in *Origins*, from the late eighteenth century on “[t]he relationship between the state and society was determined by class struggle, which [...] supplanted the former feudal order. Society was pervaded by liberal individualism which wrongly believed that the state ruled over mere individuals when in reality it ruled over classes” (Arendt *Origins* 231).

by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions”(40). Such a rule of nobody Arendt identifies as an important component of totalitarian government in *Origins* when she argues that “the principle of authority is in all important respects diametrically opposed to that of totalitarian domination”. Instead of authority, totalitarianism introduces a “Leader principle” not all that dissimilar from the “principles” around which society and economics revolve. While the Leader principle resides in a single person, it represents a void in the sense that it is entirely removed from the polity it nominally governs; that it “does not establish a hierarchy in the totalitarian state any more than it does in the totalitarian movement”. As such, “authority is not filtered down from the top through all intervening layers to the bottom of the body politics as is the case in authoritarian regimes” like monarchy, as well as the authoritarian private realm which resembles a monarchy (*Origins* 404).

In this way the emergence of the social contributed towards the evolution of totalitarianism, which for Arendt was at root a political phenomenon rather than an economic one. Marx occupies a position of implicit guilt in her history, as his belief “[t]hat politics is nothing but a function of society, that action, speech and thought are primarily superstructures upon social interest” is not a discovery of his own, but “on the contrary is among the axiomatic assumptions [he] accepted uncritically from the political economists of the modern age” (*Human* 33). His vision of a post-political society following the necessarily febrile revolutionary period was ultimately little more than a vision of society itself, expanded and totalised. Indeed,

[a] complete victory of society will always produce some sort of “communistic fiction”, whose outstanding political characteristic is that it is indeed ruled by an “invisible hand”, namely, by nobody. What we traditionally call state and government gives place here to pure administration—a state of affairs which Marx rightly predicted as the “withering away of the state”, though he was

wrong in assuming that only a revolution could bring it about, and even more wrong when he believed that this complete victory of society would mean the eventual emergence of the “realm of freedom”. (44-45)

Arendt’s implication that Marx’s legacy will inevitably reflect his initial appropriation of economism and is thus not ideally calibrated to providing a critique of politics *qua politics* is worth underscoring here. Because for all that it is expressive of an indomitable technocapitalism, Eden-Olympia is more than a little redolent of Marx’s “realm of freedom” as critiqued by Arendt. Paul Sinclair worries about the complete lack of civil society there, and of institutions of government, but Penrose has a response for every misgiving: “There are no clubs or evening classes” / “We don’t need them. They serve no role”; “No charities or church fêtes” / “Everyone is rich”; “No police or legal system” / “There’s no crime, and no social problems”; “No democratic accountability. No one votes. So who runs things?” / “We do. We run things” (Ballard *Super-Cannes* 94). The result, Penrose insists over and over, is “[f]reedom [...] We’ve achieved real freedom [...] At long last, people are free to enjoy themselves [...] You’re free here, Paul. Perhaps for the first time in your life” (95-97). Using Arendt to shed light on these exchanges suggests that, while delivered under the auspices of global capitalism, rather than communism taken to its ultimate, post-political end, it is at root the economism undergirding both social systems which has yielded the dystopian circumstances that are the subject of Ballard’s late novels. Eden-Olympia is exactly the kind of “communistic fiction” ruled by exactly the kind of “invisible hand” Arendt speaks of when she defines “rule by no-one”—which is to say that rule is exercised by a principle that binds the business park’s denizens together in lieu of a hierarchically embodied authority. This principle is consumer-corporate capital; however, the logic by virtue of which it rules is in fact the social, produced by the fusion of society and economism, which Arendt argues laid the foundations of both capitalism and Marxism.⁸⁰ In this way we can

⁸⁰ This reading might appear to be complicated by Penrose’s assertion that it is “[t]he company [that] defines the rules that govern how you treat your spouse, where you educate your children, the

say that, despite his focus on global capitalism, the true object of Ballard's critique is the way power functions under the social. And since Arendt argues that the latter is also inherent to Marxism, some doubt must be cast over the ability of traditional Marxist critical apparatus to answer the specifically political questions Ballard asks of a time dominated by a hegemonic form of capitalism.

None of this necessarily blunts the insights gained by applying the models of Harvey, Soja, Jameson and Davis to the spaces of Ballard's late novels: they remain paradoxical places whose existence is predicated on flexibility, but

sensible limits to stock-market investment" and "[t]he bank [that] decides how big a mortgage you can handle, the right amount of health insurance to buy" (95, emphases added). Some might read this passage as a comment on the growing power wielded by institutions of global capitalism, but this does not quite reach the heart of Ballard's critique. The fact that we associate these institutions with global capitalism is only half the point; the key issue is that today power is so far removed from the individual that while it is becoming increasingly absolute it remains invisible, and thus impossible to hold to account. We might, slightly simplistically, describe the company and the bank as components of a paradigmatic axis: they may, after all, be substituted for one another without fundamentally changing the way power in Eden-Olympia actually works—that is, its syntax. To this extent, they mirror not just institutions of global capitalism, plugged into an international economy that wields massive but virtually incomprehensible power and floats free of any recognisable embodiment of the sovereign, but also the Council of People's Commissars in the Soviet Union, or the State Council of China, both of which were or are ultimately subordinate to inscrutable party machines. In some ways China's adoption of capitalism is a perfect example of how close, politically speaking, global capitalism is to state communism. As Slavoj Žižek writes, "What we have in China isn't simply a combination of a private capitalist economy and Communist political power. In one way or another, state and Party own the majority of China's companies, especially the large ones: it is the Party itself which demands that they perform well in the market". Posed in the West, the question, "Who demands that companies perform well?" would no doubt be answered: "the shareholders". However, this is a very long way from explaining how the system actually works, and though the people and/or organisations and/or logics that actually make it work are evident everywhere within this system, they remain curiously invisible. In this respect they are not dissimilar to the Communist Party in China. For as Žižek goes on, quoting Richard McGregor (whose book, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* he is reviewing): "It would seem difficult [...] to hide an organisation as large as the Chinese Communist Party, but it cultivates its backstage role with care. The big party departments controlling personnel and the media keep a purposely low public profile. The Party committees [...] which guide and dictate policy to ministries, which in turn have the job of executing it, work out of sight" (Žižek "Son" 8).

which are intractably carceral and highly deterministic. However, I think we stand to achieve a fuller understanding of these milieus if we use a theoretical model that refuses to collapse politics into either economics or culture, or both; indeed, which recognises the dire consequences of such a collapse for human freedom. As Bobby Crawford announces in *Cocaine Nights*: “Politics is over, Charles, it doesn’t touch the public imagination any longer” (*Cocaine* 245). In its place, Ballard seems to suggest, the social has become the true political logic of postmodernity, and in such a milieu freedom simply cannot prosper, as the possibility of anything resembling what Arendt calls “spontaneous action”—a necessity if politics-as-freedom is to exist at all—has been foreclosed. The social has virtually eradicated human pluralism, while the distinction between the public and the private realms has been completely eroded and institutions of housekeeping have been substituted for those of politics. The latter development is particularly evident in *Super-Cannes*: although hired as a paediatrician Jane soon finds that “[t]here aren’t many children” living in Eden-Olympia, so she begins work on a new project that exploits the expansive telecommunications systems linking the clinic to the workers’ residences in order to develop a highly intrusive system of health management. She explains: “Every morning when they get up people will dial the clinic and log in their health data: pulse, blood-pressure, weight and so on. One prick on the finger on a small scanner and the computers here will analyse everything: liver enzymes, cholesterol, prostate markers, the lot” (*Cannes* 67).⁸¹ The similarity of this passage to Arendt’s concept of an “administration of housekeeping”—the culmination of the social—is so close it hardly needs to be extrapolated further. And the correspondence is only deepened by the fact that, despite Jane’s belief to the contrary, Eden-Olympia is full of children: the figure of the paediatrician is clearly intended to suggest that every occupant of the business park has been infantilised; that, in a sense, the CEOs whom Jane cares for are actually *her* children. Add to this the figure of Wilder Penrose—the business park’s “amiable

⁸¹ While she has her misgivings about the project—it is, she says, “so totalitarian only Eden-Olympia could even think about it and not realize what it means”—the prospect that “it might work” ensures that she continues to assist in its development (Ballard *Cannes* 67).

Prospero” who acts as Jane’s patriarchal counterpart, helping keep the workers sane while “turning them into children” (3, 293)—and we see that Arendt’s use of the family as an image for the triumph of the social also finds a correlative in *Super-Cannes*. What is more, quite to the contrary of Penrose’s assurances, this triumph has led the residents of Eden-Olympia to *surrender* their freedom for the principle of consumer-corporate capital.

However nightmarish this image of a totalised society might be, Ballard appears to suggest that its real victims are not likely to be the masters of the universe whose private lives are systematically invaded by the new technologies of the social. Rather, they are those people who fall on the wrong side of the only meaningful ontological distinction that remains: that between insiders and outsiders—or rather, those whose relation to the ‘inside’ is indeterminate. In *Super-Cannes* the latter feature prominently as the quarry of Penrose’s “*ratissages*”, or manhunts—the bullyboy games he prescribes to keep executive minds sharp and spirits high. And they are nearly always oppressed minorities determined by race, gender or sexuality: the victim of the first *ratissage* Paul encounters, for instance, is a “Senagalese trinket salesman” (71). Later on in the novel the industrial suburb of La Bocca serves increasingly as a ghetto for these outsiders: after dinner there one evening Paul follows two north African prostitutes around the backstreets and finds a hinterland of “[o]ff duty chauffeurs, Arab pushers and out-of work waiters fill[ing] the narrow bars” (157):

In the nexus of narrow streets beyond the Boulevard d’Alsace congregated another constituency of the night: Maltese whores and their pimps, transvestites from Racife and Niteroi, runners for the dealers, waiting in their cars off the Avenue St-Nicolas, smartly dressed matrons who seemed never to find a client but returned evening after evening [...] A blond transvestite with the body of a rugby forward stepped into a streetlight, huge feet in a pair of stiletto boots, thighs exposed by miniscule satin shorts. His eyes swept the street, and followed a cruising car driven by a middle-

aged man with the face of a depressed bank manager. The car paused and a door opened, and the transvestite dived into the passenger seat, filling the car like a gaudy circus horse. (158)

This is a vision of subversiveness, performativity and febrile indeterminacy that would not be out of place in Winterson's Venice.⁸² We are told that La Bocca is "a long way from Cannes, but separated by a universe from Eden-Olympia" (152) and it is certainly easy to see that while the business park is, as Paul describes it, "the outpost of an advanced kind of puritanism, and a virtually sex-free zone" (155), La Bocca seems by contrast tantalising in its sexual subversiveness. However, we soon learn that it isn't as far removed as we have been led to believe. As Paul barbers over a child prostitute he intends to deliver into the hands of a nearby children's refuge (but whom we suspect also appeals to his latent hebephilia) a group of men from Eden-Olympia arrive and "set upon the fleeing crowd" (162). Of course, La Bocca is prime hunting ground for the *ratissages*, and, as such, serves Eden-Olympia in the most important way imaginable: as an outpost of crime and disorder, it provides a location in which the "patients" of Penrose's programme of psychopathy can indulge their need for violence, as the liminality of its inhabitants ensures that the police and political authorities care less about what happens to them than they would if, say, a prominent figure at the business park had been attacked. As this episode implies, the relationship between Eden-Olympia and La Bocca is more complex than it appears at first, and Paul quickly discovers that the suburb relates in an indeterminate way to the business park, which alternately patronises, terrorises and exploits it.

Like the population of Winterson's Venice, then, these people might be said to exist in a kind of limbo in relation to the social system that bears power over them.⁸³ Indeed, I think it could be argued that, again like Venice, La Bocca

⁸² Especially when considered alongside the emphasis on gambling: Paul describes how the two sex-workers "played at the fruit machines, their thighs rocking the pintables until the tilt-signs flashed" (Ballard *Cannes* 157).

⁸³ This is most unsettlingly communicated during an episode in which Paul visits a former children's refuge in La Bocca where "a teaching order of African nuns" used to care for the "orphaned or

resembles something of a zone of morbidity, in which disease is rampant and only treated by representatives of Eden-Olympia because the *homines sacri* that populate the suburb are of use to the business park. The unmistakable difference between Ballard's representation of *homo sacer* and that of Winterson, however, is that where the latter perceives this status as to some extent politically fecund, in Ballard's late novels it is a position of profound exploitation. Any resistant potential that this figure may have possessed has been either co-opted or otherwise assimilated by Ballard's hypercapitalism, and resistance is now largely impossible. In keeping with the novel's vision of a world dominated by a logic that compresses human pluralism into a single social totality, difference does not yield emancipation. One exists either inside that totality—in which case, as we have seen, the logic of the social has entirely eroded any possibility of “spontaneous action” and therefore freedom-as-politics—or outside it, in which case worldlessness forecloses the possibility of the latter ever emerging. In other words, irrespective of whether you are inside or outside, you are never free.

3. The Uses of Disorder and the Impossibility of Resistance

We have seen that in the novels Ballard wrote towards the end of his life the rise

abandoned daughters of migrant workers” (Ballard *Cannes* 150). Before his shooting spree David Greenwood—the paediatrician Jane was hired to replace—provided medical care for the girls, who have since been sent to foster homes. But Paul quickly learns that Greenwood did not work alone at the refuge, or purely out of a charitable heart. He was aided by another of the business park's physicians, Dominique Serrou, as well as two helpers and a cook; in fact, “[o]nly the generous funds donated by Eden-Olympia allowed the impoverished teaching order to educate the girls and provide them with books and a computer” (150). Eventually Paul learns that while at first Greenwood cared for the orphans and taught them English, he soon began to sleep with them and before long found himself as the head of a paedophile ring, arranging for the girls to be shuttled between the homes of Eden-Olympia executives and ensuring any sexually transmitted infections they contracted were treated properly. Serrou, meanwhile, acted as a “recruitment officer” for the institution, “tour[ing] the foster homes around Cannes and Nice, looking for likely talent. Girls with abusive ‘uncles’ or histories of VD” (348).

of late capitalism to a position of global hegemony is accompanied by a spatial logic whose totalising tendency, while manifestly facilitated by neoliberalism's valorisation of flexibility, relies on more troubling workings which owe more to the eclipse of politics by what Arendt calls the social. The result of this eclipse is the same deeply homogenised and atomistic society that we witness in the critiques of postmodernity by the Marxist figures connected to the spatial turn; however, Arendt's thought provides a means of better understanding the specifically *political* aspects of this situation. In addition, I think it may also serve as a way of concatenating the insights of the spatial turn with the general preoccupation with difference and otherness that has marked so many progressive responses to postmodernity. These two concepts find a kind of companion in what Arendt calls the unavoidable fact of *plurality*, which she argues is "the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (Arendt *Human* 8). Plurality provides the imperative to act because it demands that we negotiate the sharply defined distance between ourselves and our fellow human beings; this, in turn, forms the basis of any politics, as, to the ancient Greeks, "[o]f all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political [...] namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*)" (24-25). These two faculties—and thus politics in general—would be pointless if the need to recognise the fact of plurality did not exist; that is, "if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model" (8). But this has never been the case, and the implication is that any failure to recognise the distance that marks out one person as distinct from any other—or, more insidiously, any attempt to abolish it—can have worryingly dehumanising consequences.

Ballard's late fiction provides a vision of exactly these circumstances, as the social systems he represents seek endlessly to deny the fact of difference and diversity—in other words, to abolish plurality. To this extent, Gasiorek is quite right to suggest that Zygmunt Bauman's description of "the struggle to eliminate *noise* and *randomness* (in other words, autonomy and contingency) in [the] technological imaginary could have been written with Ballard's Eden-Olympia in

mind". Clearly the business park is engaged in a kind of "war on noise", and this is more than evidenced by the "fully controlled life-world and complete heteronomy of the individual" that it seeks to bring about (Gasiorek 186). But it is also crucial to note that if Ballard's late fiction has a single "thesis" it is that any social order that seeks entirely to eradicate noise and randomness also inevitably sows the seeds of its own destruction, for, without disorder of some kind, lassitude soon sets in and the system becomes imperilled. Thus if that system is to become truly totalised, disorder must first be co-opted and reconfigured before being deployed after a fashion that serves the system's interests. Richard Sennett's 1970 volume *The Uses of Disorder* may prove helpful in understanding this process. Certainly on a superficial level its interests coincide with our own, for Sennett seeks to establish a connection between the increase in "random" acts of violence in the post-war period and the particularly modern form of boredom he sees emerging as western society becomes more and more affluent and people are better able to "hide from one another", thereby escaping "the full range of social experience" (Sennett 186). He claims that affluence has enabled us to indulge a desire for what he calls "purified identity" (7), a process that involves "build[ing] an image or identity that coheres, is unified, and filters out threats in social experience" (9).⁸⁴ The result, he suggests, is a delusional and "adolescent" society that is dangerously incapable of accommodating disorder, as individuals come to believe in an emotional coherence with their community that simply "is not evidenced by their social experience" (32-33). In the service of this "myth of a purified community" (28) sameness comes to be mistaken for equality—something that Arendt also identifies as a dangerous strategy ranged against plurality—and this elision yields three dangerous consequences: first, a "loss of actual participation in community life", since if everybody is equal we can take each other on trust alone and the need to relate to one another disappears (41); second, a tendency for communities to invest to ever greater degrees in the "repression of

⁸⁴ Sennett writes that by means of this process the community ensures that "threatening or painful dissonances are warded off" and what is "preserve[d] intact [is] a clear and articulated image of oneself and one's place in the world" (Sennett 11).

deviants”—those who challenge the sameness of society and need to be silenced (43); and third, a widespread belief in “[t]he myth of community solidarity” which “disposes men [...] to escalate discord with other communities or with outsiders too powerful to be excluded to the level of violent confrontation” (44). It is because of this, Sennett believes, that we have witnessed, in our bored and “adolescent” society, a surge of violence: “the potential for ‘irrational crime’”, he writes, “for violence without object or provocation, is very great now. The reason it exists is that society has come to expect too much order, too much coherence in its communal life, thus bottling up the hostile aggressiveness men cannot help but feel” (181).

A little like Arendt—though with the accent on the affective rather than political dimensions of community and cohabitation—the aim of Sennett’s work is to remind us of the agonism that necessarily accompanies any attempt to live in propinquity with other human beings, something that requires us to recognise and engage with the fact of otherness, rather than to distance ourselves from it. Also like Arendt, Sennett sees the failure to recognise pluralism as having potentially violent consequences, and insists that societies must locate a way of accommodating disorder if they are to avoid them. Both of these perspectives find correlatives in Ballard’s fiction, which continues the author’s long-standing preoccupation with the outbreak of random violence in homosocial milieus. The societies depicted in Ballard’s late fiction are quite similar to the infantilised and “purified” communities that are Sennett’s subject: there is an analogous emphasis on “sameness”, on the infantilisation of human society, and—albeit to a greater extent in *Super-Cannes* than in *Cocaine Nights*—on the loss of participation in community life. Moreover, these circumstances appear to arise out of a comparable desire to eliminate disorder. However, where Sennett suggests that disorder can be used constructively to introduce us to an “adult identity” that accepts the existence of “dissonances” as a corollary of the unavoidable fact of human plurality (118), in the societies of Ballard’s late novels it is being used *bolster* the repressive mechanics of the “purified community”.

This occurs in two distinct but connected ways, which together comprise

the programmes of “elective psychopathy”—the attempts to unleash the “*energizing* potential” of psychopathic behaviour (Ballard to Vale 100, emphasis in original)—that are the focus of all Ballard’s novels from *Cocaine Nights* on. The first concerns his visionaries’ observation that a limited indulgence of the random violence and criminality produced by overly-ordered societies actually serves to shore up the social system and further entrench the status quo by providing the *illusion* of emancipation. When Penrose opines that “[i]n a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom” (Ballard *Cannes* 264) “madness” does not, as Delville suggests, signify a liberatory bid to regain the “instinctual freedom” we have abandoned in favour of “delayed satisfaction, safer planning and greater efficiency in all fields of modern life” (Delville 86). Indeed, it means quite the opposite, which makes Ballard’s use of “freedom” here deeply ironic. For what Penrose represents as freedom is in reality nothing less than a complete capitulation to a social order in which that concept is entirely absent.⁸⁵ His programme of elective psychopathy cannot be perceived in any way as emancipatory, as it is aimed at vouchsafing the endurance of Eden-Olympia and the proliferation of its logic throughout the Côte d’Azur, Europe and the world. And while his means of achieving this are certainly violent, they hardly represent revolutionary violence—what Slavoj Žižek describes as “a radical upheaval of [...] basic social relations” (Žižek *Violence* 183).⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Indeed, in an explicit contradiction of any notion of “instinctual freedom” Penrose urges that he sanctions “[n]othing too criminal or deranged”; that, in fact, he is in the business of distributing “carefully metered measure[s] of psychopathy” like “vitamin shot[s]”, aimed at optimising the business park’s performance (Ballard *Cannes* 259).

⁸⁶ Žižek claims that “the ultimate difference between radical-emancipatory politics and [...] outbursts of impotent violence is that an authentic political gesture is *active*, it imposes, enforces a vision, while outbursts of impotent violence are fundamentally *reactive*, a reaction to some disturbing intruder” (Žižek *Violence* 179, emphases in original). If this is true, then the violence of Eden-Olympia belongs firmly to the “impotent” category, as it is at root reactive and opportunistic. Disturbed by the imminent collapse of consumer capitalism under its own efficiency, Crawford and Penrose accelerate its logic in order to expose the systemic violence that resides underneath its apparently self-possessed facade, and dress up the indulgence of this violence as freedom. Žižek defines “systemic violence” as “not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence” (8), and is keen to impute it to so-called “tolerant” liberalism. “According to a well-

The second way in which Ballard's visionaries guarantee that the social laboratories they oversee can become fully totalised is to ensure the co-optation of any kind of disorder that might lead towards what Sennett terms an "adult" society, Delville is on surer ground on this point, deploying George Bataille's theory of "unproductive expenditure" in order to demonstrate the nature of this co-optation. "In Bataille's theories", he writes "social waste [...] transgresses the basic processes of production and consumption necessary for the survival of any given society" and extends "not only to art, games and leisure but also wars, religious cults, ritual sacrifice and perverse (i.e. non-genital) sexuality". The totalised social systems of Ballard's late fiction, however, investigate the possibility of a new "economy of the social whole" in which the "unproductive activities" Bataille identifies "can no longer be considered as an alternative to the homogenizing and commodifying processes of productive activity" (Delville 85). To a limited degree, Delville's characterisation of Bataille's thought is redolent of Gilroy's embrace of similarly unproductive activities involving pleasure and play, which form an important part of the strategy of resistance he seeks to mobilise against Thatcherism's productivist imperative. To Gilroy—and Left culturalism more broadly—the point at which "unproductive activities" are enacted represents a moment of possibility, since it is at this moment that oppositional subjectivity is formed, thereby disrupting essentialising discourses that seek to fix identities which are, in reality, highly fluid. As such, the culturalist account of social action—and, by connection, of resistance—can readily be described as relying on a performative understanding of subjectivity;⁸⁷ indeed, we saw in our analysis of *The Passion* how important the

known anecdote", he writes, "a German officer visited Picasso in his Paris studio during the Second World War. There he saw *Guernica* and, shocked at the modernist 'chaos' of the painting, asked Picasso: 'Did you do this?' Picasso calmly replied: 'No, *you* did this!' Today, many a liberal, when faced with violent outbursts such as the recent looting in the suburbs of Paris [between October and November 2005], asks the few remaining leftists who still count on a radical social transformation: 'Isn't it *you* who did this?' And we should reply, like Picasso: 'No, *you* did this! This is the result of *your* politics!'" (9-10).

⁸⁷ Arguing against liberal conceptions of political agency Alan Sinfield suggests that "[f]or agency to operate [...] a 'doer' does not have to be in place first; rather, she or he is constructed through the deed. Identity develops, precisely, in the process of signification [...] Identity is not that which

performative subculture was to its model of resistance. However, in Ballard's late novels performance takes on quite another role, arising from his longstanding belief that "reality is just a stage set that can be pushed aside" so that "a very different set of rules can then apply" (*Grave New World*). His early work, as we have seen, is not particularly interested in providing us with characters that complicate reductive stereotypes, since it does not consider a stable world against which such "reduced" characters might be mapped to exist in the first place. This representational strategy means that the performative subject can quite easily be robbed of the resistant potential ascribed to it by Left culturalism (among many other schools of progressive thought), for the simple reason that, as far as Ballard is concerned, there is no stable, essentialised/hypostatized/reified "reality" for performativity to militate against in the first place. Consequently, the performative moment can end up representing merely another point of capitulation—even the point, above all others, at which a given social system's determining influence over individuals becomes most overt.

This is especially true of the late novels, in which performance in the form of play-acting becomes the very means by which the system short-circuits any attempt to locate "unproductive expenditure"—art, games, pleasure, play—as the locus of oppositional activity. It is most readily apparent in *Cocaine Nights*, in which Bobby Crawford seeks to revitalise civil society in Estrella de Mar by encouraging its residents to replicate the kind of licentiousness and petty criminality of Gibraltar while evacuating it of any dissident possibility. Expressing scepticism that Crawford's programme of psychopathy will work, Charles argues that "[i]f you burgled my house I'd just call the police. I wouldn't join a chess club or take up carol-singing". Crawford counters: "Absolutely. You'd call the police. But suppose the police do nothing and I break in again, this time stealing something you really value. You'd start thinking about stronger locks and a security camera". Charles argues that this gets Crawford's project

produces culture, nor even that which is produced as a static entity by culture: rather, the two are the same process" (Sinfield "Cultural Materialism" 811). In this way, he suggests a collective, subcultural agency is constituted in the moment of dissent.

nowhere, since “[w]e’ve returned to square one. I go back to my satellite television and my long sleep of the dead” (Ballard *Cocaine* 243). However, Crawford responds:

“You’re not asleep. By now you’re wide awake, more alert than you’ve ever been before. The break-ins are like the devout Catholic’s wristlet that chafes the skin and sharpens the moral sensibility. The next burglary fills you with anger, even self-righteous rage. The police are useless, fobbing you off with vague promises, and that generates a sense of injustice, a feeling that you’re surrounded by a world without shame [...] The crime wave continues—someone shits in your pool, ransacks your bedroom and plays around with your wife’s underwear. Now rage and anger are not enough. You’re forced to rethink yourself on every level, like primitive man confronting a hostile universe behind every tree and rock. You’re aware of time, chance, the resources of your own imagination. Then someone mugs the woman next door, so you team up with the outraged husband. Crime and vandalism are everywhere. You have to rise above these mindless thugs and the oafish world they inhabit.” (243-244)

Of course, this new-found solidarity with one’s neighbours is organised around a grand delusion, since the “crime wave” doesn’t exist—and, what is more, the residents of Estrella de Mar know it. That Crawford places himself in the role of the burglar throughout his explanation suggests not just that he is speaking in hypothetical terms; the more important point is the implication that Charles would know who the burglar is, and understand that he had not, properly speaking, been the victim of a burglary. Nonetheless, he would continue to play the part of the victim, just as Crawford plays the part of the burglar. In this way, we see that the disorder that Crawford understands as necessary in order for Estrella de Mar to remain stable and productive is nothing more than play-acting. However, this play-acting represents a moment, first, in which his

programme of psychopathy co-opts disorder and renders it “safe”, and second, in which the very idea of performativity is evacuated of its dissident potential—in which, we might say, it becomes a simulacrum of itself. In this way we are able to observe that performativity in *Cocaine Nights*—as well as Ballard’s other late novels—does not subvert or agitate; it serves only to provide a *semblance* of disorder without challenging the social order in any meaningful way.

In certain instances, the disorder itself is relatively mundane: mischievous—while never exactly ludic—and not explicitly dangerous.⁸⁸ However, much more hints at the oppression and systemic violence that undergirds it. Exploring the gutted mansion his brother is supposedly responsible for torching, Charles finds a pornographic film made by several of Estrella de Mar’s residents. It features as its amateur starlet Anne Hollinger, one of the fire’s victims, who plays the role of a bride seduced by her bridesmaid. This is exactly the kind of activity Crawford is keen for his followers to carry out—Paula, it turns out, is the camera operator—and it begins in a relatively benign way. The figures on film, Ballard writes, “played their roles like members of an amateur theatrical group taking part in a bawdy farce”. After a “parodic lesbian scene” a man arrives and the narrative runs its predictable course; however, not long after its conclusion two more men break in and the bridesmaids restrain Anne Hollinger while they take turns raping her. As Ballard writes: “The bride was no longer acting or colluding with the camera. The lesbian porno-film had been a set-up, designed to lure her to this anonymous apartment, the *mise-en-scène* for a real rape for which the bridesmaids, but not the heroine, had been prepared” (126). Troubling enough in itself, the reader is yet more unsettled when Ballard describes the victim left behind: with “a face full of spirit” Anne Hollinger “wiped her eyes with a pillow, and rubbed the torn

⁸⁸ In one case Crawford steals a speedboat from Marbella harbour during the evening peak and motors out to sea, pursued by another craft. He sets the boat alight and swims ashore, where he is picked up by Paula Hamilton, Estrella de Mar’s resident doctor and Charles’s lover. Throughout the episode the emphasis on performance is unmistakable: “The harbour road,” Ballard writes, “was packed with cheering spectators who had stepped from the nightclubs and restaurants to enjoy the display” (Ballard *Cocaine* 144). Indeed, he concludes by describing how Paula waits for Crawford to reach the shore “like a chauffeur outside a stage-door after a performance” (145).

skin of her arms and knees. Mascara ran in black tears on to her cheeks, and the smudged lipstick slewed her mouth to one side. Yet she managed to smile at the camera [...] a brave child swallowing an unpleasant medicine for her own good” (127). The reason this episode is so disturbing is because it blurs any distinction between what is real and what is performed in Crawford’s programme of elective psychopathy. Does Anne’s smile mitigate the assault in some way, and thus render the rape as much of a simulacrum as the rest of the film? Or is the latter, in Žižek’s words, one example of “the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation” (Žižek *Violence* 8), and thus demonstrative of the “systemic violence” that prevails at Estrella de Mar? In keeping with the emphasis on flexibility that pervades the spaces of Ballard’s late novels, the answer can only be that it is both, and it is for this reason that the social systems he explores can be said to be truly totalised—even totalitarian. The co-optation of disorder in the service of the abolition of pluralism means that opportunities for meaningful political action—and thus resistance—are effectively nil, and the complete inability to identify where this co-optation actually takes place means that systemic violence becomes the rule in every instance.

This is not to say that Ballard refuses to represent resistance; as Gasiorek points out, in all of the late novels the protagonists “eventual[ly] turn away from the psychopathic visions that have been vouchsafed them” and stand in some sort of opposition to the social system with which they had previously been captivated. But Ballard’s appropriation of the neo-noir detective narrative makes itself apparent here in the most pessimistic way. In all of Ballard’s late novels the narrative strategies we discussed in relation to *The Drowned World* are present. Each is best considered less as a discrete narrative and more as part of a whole—“Variations on a Theme of Late Capitalism”, so to speak—but this thematic project is also held together by a wider stylistic strategy. The latter evidences a similar amalgamation of high and low to that of Ballard’s first novels, but he goes farther than at any other point in his career in distancing himself from SF and instead appropriates the topoi of detective fiction in order

to explore the vacuity of late capitalism.⁸⁹ In many such narratives the sleuth moves from a position of ambivalence in relation to “the job” to a position of implication and only at last—far too late—to a position of resistance.⁹⁰ Ballard’s late novels reflect this structure: each protagonist treats the social order he is investigating with a certain degree of suspicion at the outset but becomes increasingly in thrall to it until at last being convinced of the need to bring it

⁸⁹ This approach identifies Ballard’s late fiction as a comment on postmodernity even more clearly, as it mobilises a form that witnessed an astonishing revival over the course of the 1980s in texts such as Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, which sought to engage the affectless spaces and identities of the late twentieth century in a fashion similar to Raymond Chandler’s exploration of the faceless modernity of Los Angeles forty years earlier. Given his appropriation of this form, it is hardly surprising that the later novels comprise Ballard’s most sustained commitment to first person narration, with the attendant figure of the complex, unreliable narrator. This might appear to represent a move away from the dispassionate “forensic” strategy of his earliest writing, but in fact the neo-noir style is entirely amenable to the reductive approach to characterisation that he developed early in his career. None of the characters in the late novels is especially complex and, as in his earlier work, Ballard’s focus is on obsessively exploring the only ever slightly variegated responses of his specimens to the late capitalist topography they inhabit. But where his earlier protagonists often strike the reader as vaguely messianic figures who are determined *a priori* to be “right for their time”, and whose actions are often left unjustified in terms of the plot, in *Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes* and *Kingdom Come* the narrators relate to the originating act of violence through a family member’s involvement. This renders the connection between the protagonist and the violent event that kicks off the narrative both more urgent and more incidental, since the narrators are implicated only through an accident of consanguinity, but have an immediate and personal stake in the events preceding their involvement, and thus lends the plots a degree of exigency that is largely absent from Ballard’s earlier fiction. The emphasis on plot is in keeping with generic features of detective fiction; however, in Ballard’s later novels—as in much neo-noir—this is put to ironic use, as the plot functions as a manifest reality which will eventually unfold to reveal a deeper, latent truth: the deeply nihilistic logic of late capitalism.

⁹⁰ Obvious examples include Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. In the latter, cynical police assassin Deckard is brought out of retirement to hunt down five bio-engineered humanoids known as replicants that have landed illegally on Earth. As Deckard hunts down each in turn, his relationship with a female replicant named Rachel becomes romantic and the job weighs more and more heavily on his conscience. The conclusion is uncertain—not least because of the famously tortuous debates over which cut best represents Scott’s “authentic” vision—but in each it is implied that Deckard, having completed the job, has become both a *persona non grata* (and possibly a replicant himself), and has been manoeuvred into a position of oppositionality in respect to his former employers.

down. In every case, however, we doubt that resistance will truly prevent that order from regrouping and asserting itself once more. As Gasiorek argues, all of Ballard's late novels

end on a note of uncertainty because there is a strong sense that the narrators' culminating protest [...] will be ineffectual, and that the social forces ranged against them will prevail. Inasmuch as deterministic systems have always figured prominently in Ballard's texts, in these late works the power of such systems appears to be all-embracing. The belatedly awakened subject becomes aware of the system's criminality but is powerless to do anything about it; this personal knowledge, in short, makes no difference, precisely because the subject is figured as a puny entity whose interventions have no capacity to disturb the flows and exchanges of globalised multinational networks of power. The most chilling ending is to be found in *Super-Cannes* where it is clear that Sinclair's rebellion will fail because he is a figure from a superseded past whose values will be no match for the streamlined supercharged networks of the future: his one-man uprising, a parody of male heroism, will be no match for the corporate world, and the text's last image is of obdurate corporate power. (Gasiorek 174)

The catalyst for Paul's final act of resistance in *Super-Cannes* is two-fold: firstly, the plight and murder of the *femme fatale* figure Frances Baring, with whom he has been having an affair; secondly, the degradation of his wife. Jane's gradual abasement and exploitation is a particularly troubling expression of Eden-Olympia's ability to anticipate and co-opt dissent before using performative disorder to deploy it after its own interests. Early in the novel Jane is characterised as doughtily ambitious, and in every respect the more assertive and successful party in her marriage. Twenty-seven when Paul—more than a decade older—met her at Guy's Hospital following his flying accident, he

suspected at first that she was “some renegade sixth-form schoolgirl who had borrowed a white coat and decided to try her hand at a little doctoring” (Ballard *Cannes* 42-43). And it was this indomitable streak—as well as his fondness for adolescent-looking women—that attracted him to her. Indeed, early in the novel he conceives of her as Joan of Arc, an archetype of empowered femininity, and remembers how he was thrilled that she “smoked pot at the reception held at the Royal College of Surgeons in Regent’s Park, sniffed a line of cocaine in front of her mother [...] and gave an impassioned speech describing how we made love in the rear seat of the Harvard, a complete fiction that even her father cheered” (44). The confiscation of Paul’s flying license following the accident is clearly intended to suggest that his masculinity has been compromised, but he appears at ease with this situation, and happy to defer to the demands of his wife’s career. However, her sojourn at Eden-Olympia signals an imminent assimilation: upon their arrival, Ballard notes ominously that “[t]he heroine of ‘La Marseillaise’ was about to sheathe her sword” (45). While Penrose encourages Paul to engage with the violent masculinity of the *ratissages* Jane becomes increasingly passive as the less palatable aspects of her femininity are remoulded into a more acceptable form. She moves in with neighbours Alain and Simone Delage and embarks on a lesbian affair with the latter that is in no way provocative or political; instead it functions as a kind of homosocial domestic quietism, a period of incubation before Jane re-emerges into the world in a “safer” guise. And the scene in which this emergence takes place evidences the same confusion of performative disorder and systemic violence that we witness in the pornographic film episode of *Cocaine Nights*. Watching Jane climb out of the Delages’ Mercedes into the seedy backstreets of Cannes, Paul initially mistakes her for “a young prostitute in high-heels and a sequined shift dress”. Recognising his wife he turns to Halder—Eden-Olympia’s chief of security, who has driven him into town—and asks “What’s she playing at? It looks like a stage act”; Halder replies, “I don’t think it is...” (381-382). Neither Paul nor Halder can determine whether or not this is a performance—and nor, indeed, can Jane: for when Paul intervenes and takes her away, she says, “Something went wrong. It didn’t feel like a game any more” (384). She recognises her own assimilation, but

her inability to determine when and how this took place—indeed whether it was a game or not—renders her incapable of resisting it.

* * *

Of course, the most important thing to note about this episode is that it takes place in La Bocca, in the suburb we characterised as a zone of morbidity. Why is Jane Sinclair—a senior member of Eden-Olympia’s staff—being encouraged to identify herself with the *homines sacri* of La Bocca? Could it be the case that the ontological divide we identified as the only meaningful social division in this milieu is not as meaningful as we first suspected? In performing the role of *homo sacer*, does Jane *become* that role? Such a suggestion would chime with Žižek’s recent proclamation that “[t]oday, we are all potentially *homo sacer*, and the only way to avoid actually becoming so is to act preventively” (Žižek “Beginning” 55). But we may want to question what “authentic” act is available to us in a social situation as pessimistic as that of Ballard’s late novels, in which any conceivable act of dissent only serves to bolster the system against which the dissenter seeks to militate. What is the meaning of acting “preventively” in a world in which the logics that would designate us *homines sacri* are virtually impossible to resist? This, from *Violence*, would appear to be Žižek’s answer:

Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts the ultimate function of which is to make the system run more smoothly (acts such as providing space for the multitude of new subjectivities). The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to “be active”, to “participate”, to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, “do something”; academics participate in meaningless debates, and so on. The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw [...] If one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations, then [...]ometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do. (*Violence* 183)

And so we return to the politics of rejection with which Ballard concluded *The Drowned World*. For, faced with a social situation as pessimistic as that of his late novels, is Kerans's journey into the wilderness—his act of negation, of stepping back and withdrawing—the only strategy that remains? If it is, it hardly gets us very far, as we seem bound still to take up the mantle of *homo sacer*—the very category Žižek's "preventive" act is supposed to prevent. Thus, if we are right to detect in Ballard's first novel a rudimentary form of the cultural politics of disenfranchisement, it would appear he was a great deal more prescient than we gave him credit for at the beginning of our discussion. For Žižek's imperative seems to convict these politics even as it lays the foundations for their redemption: in abandoning any stake in the political world it appears they have become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and we are now required to commit to them in earnest. Are we, like Kerans, to wander off into a realm of morbidity and death in the hope that through our demise we can transcend totality and locate new "landscapes of justice", new polities, new politics? It may not be an appealing notion, but perhaps cataclysm alone contains the promise of the new.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT WE CAN'T HAVE NOW:

Locating Urban Culture in 21st Century British Fiction

The relationship between cataclysm and beginning anew will occupy our attention shortly, as we bring this investigation to a close. Before we do this, however, it behoves us to see what remains of urban culture—the primary vehicle for Left culturalism's emancipatory project—after the profoundly gloomy conclusions of the previous chapter. We have seen how J.G. Ballard's late novels explain the hegemonic position of neoliberalism within the postmodern city in terms of the depredation of politics by Left and Right alike. I have argued that the terminal zones of *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes* offer us a vision of complete capitulation to the forces of late capital, and suggested that, via a characteristic focus on deterministic social systems, Ballard's work indicates that we must engage with the death of politics as a discrete kind of human activity if we want to arrive at a fuller understanding of postmodernity. The cultural politics of disenfranchisement may have begun as an idea; an experiment with freedom aimed at uncovering new kinds of left-wing praxis. However, in exploring Ballard's utopian engagement with a similar (though more rudimentary) politics of withdrawal and rejection early on in his career, and discussing how he reappraised this project later on in his life, we have seen that the celebration of exile that undergirded the cultural politics of disenfranchisement dramatically foreclosed the possibility of resistance at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In light of this I think it worthwhile now to revisit the animating component of Left culturalism's experiment with freedom, in order to evaluate its place in recent British literature. Because only by discussing the relationship between culture and the city in our own historical moment will we fully understand how their

separation—first witnessed in *The Black Album*—remains a barrier to progressive aspirations. And only in this way will we be able to confront the intractable impasse Left culturalism faces today. In order to do this I intend to discuss two novels, both published in 2005, which have attracted a huge amount of popular and critical attention: *Saturday* by Ian McEwan and *Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro. These novels, I want to suggest, demonstrate the way in which an alignment of the urban experience with a progressive understanding of culture is now largely impossible to represent. The utopian imagination that made such an alignment possible in *The Passion* now finds itself hamstrung to such an extent that the narrative choice today is between anachronism and quietism; a conservative recuperation of antiquated cultural politics or a despairing refusal to represent the city altogether.

1. Rehabilitating the City: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

We will begin with a more sanguine account of the city which is only the more compelling for being deeply problematic. Ian McEwan's *Saturday* is notable, I want to suggest, because it represents an attempt to rehabilitate the city as an embodiment of the common good. The novel uses the city not merely to reflect on the way in which we currently live, or more vigorously to critique that way of life, but in its own way to celebrate the contingency and propinquity of urban existence as a fundamentally precious component of the status quo. And while this attitude clearly gestures towards conservatism, the significance of its articulation in a British context which remains prevailingly anti-urban should not be underestimated.⁹¹

⁹¹ To claim that Britain remains, culturally speaking—and even in terms of urban policy—stubbornly anti-urban might seem counterfactual when the current situation is compared to thirty years ago. However, while it is true that successive recent governments have tried to incentivise the development of medium- or high-density, mixed-use communities on brownfield sites close to urban cores calibrated to attract enterprises that might previously have operated out of business parks, much residential development continues to take place towards the outskirts of large conurbations or around commuter exclaves with ready access to the motorway network. The

Saturday takes place over the course of a single day—15 February 2003—when a million-strong march took place in London in protest over the imminent invasion of Iraq. The novel’s protagonist is Henry Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon, who lives with his wife Rosalind and son Theo in Fitzrovia. His daughter Daisy, a graduate student and poet, lives in Paris and is due home for a family dinner at which her maternal grandfather, Grammaticus, will also be present. In the morning, Perowne wakes early and looks out of the window to see a cargo plane descending into Heathrow on fire. He learns on the rolling news that the fire was caused by a technical malfunction rather than a terrorist attack, but the event explicitly locates the narrative in a post-September 11 setting and serves as an ominous portent of violence and disaster which overshadows the rest of the novel. On his way to play squash Perowne’s car collides with another, a “series five BMW” which he “associates for no good reason with criminality” (McEwan *Saturday* 83). Three men climb out of the car and in the ensuing disagreement over who is responsible for the collision Perowne is punched to the ground. Diagnosing the gang leader’s tics and tremors as Huntington’s Disease, Perowne buys himself some time by persuading Baxter that there is a way of alleviating the disease before escaping largely unhurt. Later, when the family is assembled for dinner, Baxter and his gang force their way into the house and there follows a tense stand-off, during which Grammaticus is punched in the face and a knife is held to Rosalind’s throat. Perowne again tries to emolliate Baxter, promising him that he has a paper on an experimental trial to cure Huntington’s in his office upstairs, but Baxter refuses to be duped. He forces Daisy to undress, and, in the process of complying, she reveals that she is pregnant. Spotting her collection of poetry, *My*

recent enthusiasm for so-called “eco-towns” must be appraised in this light: the draft Planning Policy Statement for eco-towns is strikingly similar to Ebenezer Howard’s garden city concept, deemed fundamentally anti-urban by Jane Jacobs (Jacobs *Death and Life* 18). In short, despite the markedly metropolitan disposition of recent Labour administrations when compared to their Tory forebears, the urban agenda remains shot through with an imperative to put distance between oneself and city. And we don’t have to go very far to witness this attitude in contemporary British culture: daytime property programmes of the last decade have invariably sung the praises of swapping urban living for commuterville, an attitude epitomised by BBC Two’s *Escape to the Country* (2002-present).

Saucy Bark, on the table, one of the gang orders her to read out her “dirtiest one. Something really filthy” (220). Instead, Daisy recites Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” from heart and the poem so impresses Baxter that he relents, announces he will take the Huntington’s trial and asks Perowne to show him the research paper in his office. Knowing that his lie is about to be revealed, Perowne slowly leads Baxter upstairs. While they are gone the family overpowers the other two assailants and Theo runs to help his father; together they toss Baxter down the stairs, where he is knocked unconscious on a skirting board. Later, Perowne receives a call from the hospital asking him to operate on “an extradural, male, mid twenties, [who] fell down the stairs” (232). Knowing that he will be saving the life of a man who attacked his family, Perowne operates successfully before returning home early in the morning and falling asleep next to his wife. The novel ends with a reproduction of “Dover Beach” in full.

Since John Banville’s scathing 2005 review of *Saturday* in the *New York Review of Books*, the novel has generated a significant body of negative criticism, much of which hinges on its failure to come to terms with the diversity of contemporary British society and the problematic role it carves out for culture within that society.⁹² The sheer volume of criticism suggests that the novel was received in exactly the way McEwan seems to have hoped: as an expression of the fractious post-9/11 zeitgeist. However, the tone of much of this material is

⁹² The first sentiment is most succinctly expressed by Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, who suggests that “McEwan’s novel continually glances at a multicultural and cosmopolitan society with which it resists engagement” (Wallace 467). And Frances Ferguson provides an eloquent summary of the second, which objects to “the emphasis on domesticity and art as the provinces of true love and cultivated understanding” (Ferguson 45). Of course, these two sentiments are hardly unconnected, and the link between them is nicely captured in Michael L. Ross’s implication that at root *Saturday* is a signal product of (neo)liberalism: “The ‘confused alarms of trouble and flight’ heard by Arnold in ‘Dover Beach’ permeate the London of *Saturday*. What they portend is a narrowing and hardening of the liberal vision that had once energized the Condition of England novel” (Michael L. Ross 93). McEwan’s intimate relationship with liberalism would seem fairly clear, considering his explanation of the shift that took place in his political sensibility while writing *The Child in Time* (1987): “From then on, I’ve never really been interested in anything other than trying to find connections between the public and private, and exploring how the two are in conflict, how they sometimes reflect each other, how the political invades the private world” (qtd. in Ross 76).

closer to frustration than dismissal, and I think this implies that *Saturday* might most appropriately be approached as a kind of ideological failure rather than a dreadful book from beginning to end.⁹³ This is not to deny that there are objections to voice—and plenty of them. There is no denying that for the most part *Saturday* salivates over the Perowne family’s lifestyle—the professions and hobbies, house, car and bolt-hole abroad—while refusing to meditate on the material circumstances of its most disenfranchised characters.⁹⁴ And plenty of problems arise if the novel is read as an allegory of the Third Gulf War, since it transparently represents a moral case for interventionism even as the high ground it seeks to secure is eroded by McEwan’s wonderment at the technology and terminology behind Perowne’s own (medical) interventions.⁹⁵ Moreover, its

⁹³ Take, for example, Wallace’s lament that “[m]ore powerfully than any previous novel by McEwan, *Saturday* evokes an all-encompassing cosmopolitanism that it then paradoxically marginalizes”. I wonder whether Wallace draws attention to this paradox not simply because it supports her (compelling) thesis that *Saturday* is symptomatic of the UK’s “postcolonial melancholia”, but also in dismay of the fact that it falls short of fulfilling a progressive potential which, early on, it seems to promise: “*Saturday* is unique in its failure to carry through on the very conversation it introduces: what does England become in the wake of its imperial greatness? How does it turn from a nineteenth-century understanding of nation and race with its vast inequities of social privilege and wealth, to a socially just, multicultural society in the twenty-first century?” (Wallace 467).

⁹⁴ It needs to be acknowledged, however, that Perowne’s class status is often communicated by means of gentle satire, for instance when McEwan describes Perowne struggling to overcome his guilt at owning a Mercedes. When a trip to Scotland gives him an excuse to put his vehicle through its paces, Perowne is quickly convinced of its magnificence and his guilt replaced by an understanding of himself as “the owner, the master” of something possessing “Lutheran genius” (McEwan *Saturday* 75). Despite some critics’ objections to what they consider to be McEwan’s fawning representation of Perowne, it would be a little ridiculous to argue that this characterisation is entirely without irony. As Magali Cornier Michael argues, “McEwan’s strategic use of a third person limited perspective allows the text to represent Perowne’s actions and thoughts while simultaneously presenting and subtly criticizing Perowne as symptomatic of and complicit with the problems Western cultures and human beings face in the contemporary moment” (Michael 28). This is quite right, but the question remains, however, as to whether McEwan is ironic *enough*.

⁹⁵ Something I think we can interpret in terms of the somewhat less-than-moral technofetishism, the “shock and awe”, which ultimately accompanied the invasion of Iraq. Again, there is a dash of satire when McEwan focalises the narrative through his protagonist and writes using a falsely

gender politics are rather dubious: while it is true that Rosalind is at least as successful in her career as her husband, Daisy's pregnancy can easily be read as the revenge of immanence on a female body which has hitherto been concerned rather too much with its own pleasure. And while the replacement of her "saucy bark" with Arnold's sonorous Victorianism only compounds the offence,⁹⁶ this moment also sees McEwan at his most atavistic on another matter. Because ultimately *Saturday* seems to keen for a Victorian moment in which culture provided moral ballast—a dose of Arnoldian "sweetness and light"—for a society whose futurity was predicated on scientific progress in the service of private profit. And this does indeed result in a tendency to "rationalize class privilege", as Frances Ferguson puts it (Ferguson 45).

modest, passive voice that "[i]t is said that no one opens up faster than Henry Perowne" (McEwan *Saturday* 251). However, the reader never really doubts his admiration for Perowne, and one of the ways this admiration manifests itself is in the latter's ability to manipulate sophisticated equipment and command a rarefied vocabulary which, it is safe to assume, most of McEwan's readers cannot. In places—especially towards the end—the novel begins to read a little like the teleplay for a daytime medical drama as the prose seems designed not just to ensure verisimilitude but to impress the reader through bafflement rather than edification. For instance, McEwan writes that Baxter was "drowsy in casualty, with a Glasgow Coma Score of thirteen dropping to eleven. Skull lacerations, no other injury recorded. Normal C-Spine X-ray. They did a scan, ordered a crash induction and sent him straight up" (249). And later: "Emily passes him the hypodermic she has prepared. Quickly she injects in several places under skin, along the line of the laceration and beyond. It's not strictly necessary, but the adrenaline in the lignocaine helps reduce the bleeding" (251). Any reader who is getting a little fed-up with the barrage of jargon might at this point wish to draw an analogy between the lignocaine and McEwan's use of technical vocabulary: it isn't strictly necessary, and its heavy-handed deployment seems contrived to elicit awe for anybody who can decipher it—most of all Perowne.

⁹⁶ We will return to this issue shortly. In her dense but fruitful investigation into *Saturday's* "neo-Victorianism", Molly Clark Hillard argues that the novel's account of gender is problematic not just because of its representation of Daisy, but also because of how it invokes and then obscures its premier formal intertext, *Mrs Dalloway*. Hillard writes of the "Dover Beach" episode: "Matthew Arnold is recited, and then reprised, as if to say, 'Do you hear? This is not Woolf'. Again, upon first reading, indeed, upon my own first reading, the 'Dover Beach' episode appears to elaborately establish male authority in order to disavow feminine influence [...] If this interpretation were correct, then McEwan with one stroke created a scene of richly layered chauvinism, in which the nation—rendered concomitantly as the female body shielded by male literary heritage—deflects an attack by forces rendered simultaneously philistine, anarchist, and terrorist" (Hillard 188).

In the context of McEwan criticism (and the best tradition of “the Tradition”) the response would no doubt be that culture is ultimately vindicated as an important corrective to the hard-headedness of science and commerce.⁹⁷ And it is true that, at first glance, *Saturday* seems to qualify for such a defence. McEwan repeatedly identifies Perowne’s lack of any artistic faculty as a kind of failure, for instance in the novel’s penultimate paragraph:

Daisy recited a poem that cast a spell on one man. Perhaps any poem would have done the trick, and thrown the switch on a sudden mood change. Still, Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live. No one can forgive him the use of the knife. But Baxter heard what Henry never has, and probably never will, despite all Daisy’s attempts to educate him. (McEwan *Saturday* 278)

However, even if we are able to overlook the essentially disparaging representation of poetry in this passage (it could have been “any poem” that Baxter “fell for”; he is, after all, only “one man”), the very notion of a corrective implies a relationship that is not dialogical but hierarchical. The corrective term in any given binary may complement the other, but it nonetheless remains necessarily subordinate to it, as well as, in turn, and in a more total way, corrected by it. The original corrective term is thus hardly corrective at all; it serves simply to legitimise the dominant term by providing the illusion of correction. According to this logic, Baxter (who is affected by Daisy’s recital)

⁹⁷ An argument that is atavistic in the extreme: as any reader of Raymond Williams will know, this is really the grand problematic from which the complex term “culture” emerged, as a way of answering the threat of a complete mechanisation and commercialisation of the human faculties under industrial capitalism. “I wish to show”, Williams writes at the beginning of *Culture and Society*, “the emergence of *culture* as an abstraction and an absolute: an emergence which, in a very complex way, merges two general responses—first, the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society; second, the emphasis of these activities, as a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgement and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative” (Raymond Williams *Culture and Society* xvii, emphasis in original).

might be read in the first instance as a kind of corrective to Perowne (who is not). On a social level, Baxter serves to remind Perowne that along with wealth comes a duty of care for those less fortunate, but this social reading is entangled with a more important epistemological inference: that for every rational, scientific world-view we require another—apparently, best provided by liberal humanism—which forces us to confront the unavoidable contingency of everyday life.⁹⁸ And perhaps this is why Perowne ultimately saves Baxter: that the latter is affected by Daisy’s recital suggests he possesses a mode of thinking which Perowne does not, but which the neurosurgeon recognises as a necessary corrective to his own perspective on the world.

This, at least, would be the generous reading of *Saturday*’s conclusion. Less generous would be to point out that, in addition to—or even rather than—correcting Perowne’s epistemological position, Baxter also serves to legitimise it, which is why he must be kept alive. In this way Perowne’s selflessness comes to seem more calculated than at first, and Baxter’s moral debt can be read as an obscene legitimisation of, on the one hand, a grossly iniquitous neoliberal logic which indentures and criminalises the poor while protecting the interests of the rich, and, on the other, the domineering binarism of Enlightenment epistemology which ensures the complete subordination of one binary term (culture) to another (science). After all, the novel’s conclusion hardly represents social and epistemological parity: while Perowne (who was not affected by Daisy’s recital) luxuriates in his bourgeois palace, the street-dwelling, drug-peddling Baxter (who was) lies in a hospital bed, vegetative but—vitaly—alive.

⁹⁸ The epistemological dimension of the relationship between culture and science is given an optimistic reading by Susan Green, who enthuses that “[w]ith *Saturday*, McEwan has achieved a new form of science fiction, deploying the language and interests of science as narrative technique, and promoting a cultural shift in ideas about consciousness. McEwan is successfully using the popular, accessible genre of the novel as a vehicle by which to communicate serious, contemporary concerns, thereby constructing *Saturday* as a meta-text to shift attention to exactly how it is that we know what we know—as well as to explore what we do not yet understand” (70-71). The implication is that McEwan goes some way towards bridging the divide between the “two cultures” of science and the humanities identified in 1959 by C.P. Snow, which Green cites at the beginning of her essay along with the debate that took place in 1882 between Matthew Arnold and T.H. Huxley, which revealed a similar schism.

And unless he is being devilishly ironic, McEwan seems content for this ending to be received happily, as providing political as well as narrative closure.

It should be clear from this reading that, like many other critics, I do not consider *Saturday* to represent a laudable step forward. This said, I think the significance of the city to its broadly optimistic conclusion—optimistic, at least, when taken on its own terms—gives us reason to pause, and to some degree this is because of the repeated, explicit situation of the narrative in the inner-London neighbourhood of Fitzrovia. The area is well-known for accommodating numerous political and artistic personalities and institutions over the centuries, including Thomas Paine, George Bernard Shaw, George Orwell and various clubs connected to the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and punk in the 70s. At the very least we can read this as a recognition of the urban neighbourhood as an important site for the exchange of radical ideas, and if we were feeling more generous we might suggest that McEwan's painstaking and largely positive evocation of a place closely associated with the oppositional sensibility might serve to mitigate the novel's less than palatable cultural politics. Of course, if we were in a gloomier mood the location might serve simply as grist to the mill, a further sign of McEwan's unwelcome erasure of any recent cultural endeavour he finds discomfiting or irrelevant to the demands of the contemporary period—indeed, that *Saturday* self-consciously arrogates to itself the literary style of Fitzrovia's most famous resident, Virginia Woolf, might serve only to make this strategy more outrageous. But if we resist the temptation of this gloominess for a moment, I think we might recognise in McEwan's endorsement of the city something worthwhile. For, despite the critique outlined above, the novel does seem in its early pages to perceive the unavoidable contingency and pluralism of urban existence as something remarkable and worth preserving. Describing Perowne gazing out on Fitzroy Square in the early hours of the morning, McEwan writes that while his protagonist "likes the symmetry of black cast-iron posts" and "the lattice of cobbled gutters", while he considers his "own corner" to be "a triumph of congruent proportion", the essential *disarrangement* of the square contains a value that equals or even exceeds those of order and symmetry. "The overfull litter baskets", he writes,

suggest abundance rather than squalor; the vacant benches set around the circular gardens look benignly expectant of their daily traffic—cheerful lunchtime office crowds, the solemn, studious boys from the Indian hostel, lovers in quiet raptures or crisis, the crepuscular drug dealers, the ruined old lady with her wild, haunting calls. Go away! she'll shout for hours at a time, and squawk harshly, sounding like some marsh bird or zoo creature.
(5)

Although Fitzrovia may have its origins in Georgian architectonics and the attendant preference for orderly planning and a muted approach to ornamentation, it pleases Perowne that over the course of three hundred years Charlotte Street, the neighbourhood's main thoroughfare, has been transformed into "a foreshortened jumble of façades, scaffolding and pitched roofs". What began as an insentient, rationalised space of the type fetishised by architects from Wren to Woods Elder and Junior, Haussman to le Corbusier, has evolved into the kind of place that exists solely by dint of daily rituals of inhabitation. The passage above implies an intimate relationship between the urban environment and the people who use it: the disorderliness of the former also serves to characterise the latter; the pluralism of the latter also inheres in the former. And McEwan is explicit in identifying this *living* urbanism as the root of Perowne's belief that "the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work" (5).

This sanguine characterisation of the urban experience readily recalls the "structured chaos" that is so crucial to Sennett's model of urban civilization, as well as Jane Jacobs's celebration of the diverse New York neighbourhood in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.⁹⁹ It calls to mind a communitarian

⁹⁹ Indeed, some of the most famous passages from *Death and Life* can be read as perfect expressions

understanding of the city which is capable of accommodating pluralism and contingency without inevitably neutralising them. In other words, it is a model of urban living which, once upon a time, was perceived as quite amenable to progressive appropriation, in which the city is conceived of as a series of contiguous places that are defined particularly, cumulatively and collectively, and which stands at odds with the atomising and dispossessory logics of both edge-city expansionism and inner-city gentrification. This marks out *Saturday's* representation of contingency from the rest of McEwan's oeuvre in quite an important way. For while we might be inclined to agree with Michael Wood that the novel accords with McEwan's career-length obsession with evaluating the impact of violent contingency on the modern (white, male) subject, we must also acknowledge that, unlike much of the rest of his fiction, *Saturday* begins from a point at which contingency is already accepted as an inevitable—and, to a limited but nonetheless significant extent, welcome—component of everyday urban experience. Wood writes that “[i]n different ways, most of Ian McEwan's novels and stories are about trauma and contingency, and he is now best known as the great contemporary stager of traumatic contingency as it strikes ordinary lives”. He goes on to list some of the agents of contingency to appear in McEwan's fiction and concludes, logically enough, with Baxter, whom he

of this model—perfect in both their consonance and eloquence—and invite comparison with the excerpts from *Saturday* quoted above. One example is the so-called “Ballet of Hudson Street”, in which Jacobs describes a day in the life of her Greenwich Village neighbourhood, and which begins: “Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy or pavement use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance – not to a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city pavement never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations” (Jacobs *Death and Life* 50). There is a flip side to using this passage as an intertext when approaching *Saturday*, as the New Urbanism on which Jacobs's writing had such a formative influence has sometimes been identified as a key agent of gentrification in the postmodern city.

describes as “contingency personified” (Wood par. 1). Considered in light of the critical reading advanced above, which dismisses *Saturday*’s narrative as a strategy of containment, this characterisation of Baxter seems quite right. However, to reduce the novel’s account of contingency to Baxter alone is to overlook the concept’s centrality to McEwan’s fundamentally optimistic representation of the city. Because, unlike his early material—in particular *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981)—whose oppressive foreboding begins at the outset and never relents, and unlike *Enduring Love* (1997), whose opening passages are so pastoral, so halcyon, that the ensuing disruption seems inevitable—dialectical, rather than random—*Saturday* begins with an enthusiastic account of how contingency is a necessary and important part of the contemporary urban experience.

Thus we might actually say that there are two kinds of contingency represented in *Saturday*: the first by the city, the second by Baxter. The concatenation of the two is vital, since it is largely because of McEwan’s insistence on containing the latter that his endorsement of the former fails. However, critics have tended not to distinguish between them at all, treating Baxter too straightforwardly as a metonym for the threatening urban landscape beyond the Perownes’ front door. This is perhaps because—due to the formal properties of the literary novel, and the continued belief that subjectivity is the most profitable site of political contest—they have preferred to subordinate the novel’s account of space to its representation of character. But while this hermeneutic strategy has enabled valid criticisms of the novel, it has also led to appraisals that are insensitive to its complex account of the city. For instance, Wallace points out that the Perownes’ house is emblematic of a paranoid, embattled urban bourgeoisie which fears the diverse and dangerous metropolis beyond its door: “[T]he family home in London”, she writes, “is heavily fortified against anything that might disturb its peace”, and while “Henry himself marvels at the house’s security system [...] McEwan does nothing to suggest that this hardware is meant to be ironic” (Wallace 473). The point is well-taken; however, *Saturday* is a novel that delights in recording details, and we are entitled to ask for what purpose each detail is recorded. In this instance I think that McEwan’s

laborious description of the security system functions not just to signify the family's fear of invasion, but also to anticipate the invasion that actually takes place at the end—particularly the ease with which Baxter's gang circumvents the family's attempts at spatial fortification. As such, the passage Wallace describes is absolutely ironic: Perowne thinks that the security hardware makes him safe but McEwan knows that he is fooling himself and quietly communicates this to the reader, in the process gently satirising his protagonist.

To be clear: I am not suggesting that critics are mistaken in claiming that Baxter is represented as a threat. Rather, I am trying to suggest that the city is not reducible to this one character; that it exceeds him and thus cannot be read in a straightforwardly allegorical way. Indeed, at one point in her critique, Wallace seems to acknowledge this when she writes that Baxter is “[n]ot a fully-fleshed villain [...] too one-dimensional to engage the reader's attention or to matter much to Henry”. Yet this does not inspire her to revise her reading of the novel. As she observes:

If indeed [Baxter] stands in for a larger and more persistent menace—the militant poor, the citizens of the developing world, or even an Arab extremist—then McEwan's fantasy becomes especially facile. Could his point really be to suggest that, when confronted by those who hate us, the West need only resort to its wits, its encyclopedic knowledge of science, and to hold out hope of a “cure” in order to distract those who would otherwise seek to harm us? That, in the end, we will easily overpower those who invade the sanctity of our homes, and that it will then be our obligation and duty to “fix” whatever injuries they've received in the process? (476)

The answer to this question is, I think, yes. And, read in this way, *Saturday's* conclusion is every bit as problematic as this reading suggests. But if we shift away from character and towards space—specifically urban space—as a way of explaining its undeniably problematic ending, we see that it is a good deal more

complex than Wallace allows. Because I think that it is important to acknowledge that in certain ways the novel does *attempt* to retain its early endorsement of the city right up to its conclusion. Explaining to Rosalind why he is going to the hospital to operate on Baxter, Perowne says, “I had a scrape in the car with him this morning [...] And a stupid showdown on the pavement [...] I have to see this through. I’m responsible [...] If I’d handled things better this morning, perhaps none of this would’ve happened [...] I feel I ought to go. And I want to go” (McEwan *Saturday* 238-240). Taking the novel on its own terms here, this is the only point at which Perowne occupies an explicit position of guilt; when McEwan actively encourages his audience to judge his protagonist—and, moreover, find him accountable. Of course, anybody committed to social justice must object that Perowne’s crime exceeds the charge levelled at him by quite a degree, and that his admission of guilt hardly engenders Dostoevskian levels of self-recrimination; indeed, viewed in this way, expiation does not cost him very much at all. But rather than focusing solely on the magnitude of Perowne’s punishment and seeking justice for the crimes he supposedly gets away with, it is worth drawing attention to the way in which this judgement is constructed, because the city plays an important role in it. As Wood argues, what brings Perowne and Baxter together in the first place is “that most random of urban events, the car crash” (Wood par. 1). And as the contingency and propinquity of urban living precipitated the “scrape”, Perowne does not shrink from acknowledging that, if this model of living is to be tenable at all, he must attend to his obligation to those with whom he shares urban space. Read in this way, Perowne’s treatment of Baxter seems less an act of selfishness, or of charity, than a duty demanded of him by the city.¹⁰⁰ And acknowledging this

¹⁰⁰ Ferguson even goes so far as to suggest that the operation on Baxter represents a kind of love: “Nothing in the novel or the news offers us a cure for dementia or Huntington’s Disease or the possibility of escaping ageing and death. But as Henry describes the moment in neurosurgery when ‘the patient’s identity is restored, when a small area of violently revealed brain is returned to the possession of the entire person’ and speaks of it as marking ‘a return to life’, he also ‘feels he could almost mistake it for tenderness’. Baxter, the man whom Henry had once described—in the wake of their traffic accident—as ‘the only person in the world he [hated]’—has become the beneficiary not of love but of something that ‘could almost’ be mistaken for it. Professionalism may have its privileges, but in *Saturday* it appears as a way of converting an impersonal

might encourage us to concede that McEwan's celebration of urban living at the novel's outset forms part of a much grander narrative whose purpose is to rehabilitate the city as an embodiment of virtues that have an important place within the progressive imagination, such as pluralism and contingency.

I do not think he succeeds in this enterprise. The critical reading offered above still stands and *Saturday's* conclusion remains, from a progressive perspective, reprehensible. However, as suggested earlier, its capacity to infuriate resides first and foremost in the implication that culture must be subservient to science and, above all, humanist in character. For it is ultimately from this issue that I think the novel's other problematic characteristics spring, including its—connected, and undoubtedly questionable—social commentary. We might say that *Saturday's* response to the challenges of the new millennium is to offer us an understanding of the good—inevitably a politically-charged concept, as Arendt reminds us¹⁰¹—that is incoherent. On the one hand, McEwan's notion of the good can be read through his representation of the city, which, as we have seen, is in some ways fairly laudable. But it can also be read through his representation of culture, and it is here that the novel becomes most problematic, because the model of culture it attempts to recuperate is entirely at odds with its commitment to the plural and contingent nature of the urban experience.

Matthew Arnold is without doubt one of the most freighted names in cultural discourse, his notorious definition of culture as “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold *Culture* 190) consistently associated with patriarchal, heteronormative, Eurocentric and other exclusionary world-views. As such, McEwan's decision to use him as an

relationship into something with the feel of love” (Ferguson 51).

¹⁰¹ Discussing Plato's understanding of ideas in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, Arendt writes that in both the philosopher is “defined as a lover of beauty, not of goodness”. However, in moving between the former to the latter, a “transformation was necessary to apply the doctrine of ideas to politics, and it is essentially for a political purpose [...] that Plato found it necessary to declare the good, and not the beautiful, to be the highest idea”. This purpose is to enable the philosopher to become the “philosopher-king, who wishes to be the ruler of human affairs because he must spend his life among men and cannot dwell forever under the sky of ideas” (Arendt *Human* 226).

ambassador of “culture” who successfully contains the “anarchy” that threatens to erupt onto *Saturday*’s pages right from the novel’s outset is dubious to say the least. Indeed, there is virtually no way McEwan can escape the charge of anachronism, given the way he mobilises “Dover Beach” during the standoff between Baxter and the Perowne family. This charge relates not just to the effect Arnold’s poem has on Baxter, who is so astonished by it that he backs down; it also relates to Daisy and the status she occupies as a woman poet. Daisy’s own collection of poems, *My Saucy Bark*, confronts her readers with such a fervid and libidinous voice that it embarrasses Henry and renders her mentor, Grammaticus, somewhat envious. But in parroting Arnold she is robbed of this powerfully disruptive capacity to speak for herself. And this not simply because Arnold’s voice replaces her own, but also because the idea of using a “classic” to defuse the situation actually belongs to her patrician grandfather, who covertly suggests that she recite a poem he taught her rather than one from her own collection (McEwan *Saturday* 220). Problematic enough in itself, the recital becomes yet more objectionable when we remember that it immediately follows the point at which Daisy is forced to undress and reveals that she is pregnant. This transforms her from an “independent young woman, gazing back [...] with head cocked” (182) into a far safer image of femininity: mute and naked; “[h]ead bowed [...] unable to look at anyone”; the “weighted curve and compact swell of her belly” speaking potently of her status as man’s concubine and vessel (218). Thus it can be argued that, by capitulating to Grammaticus’s suggestion and serving as a conduit for the grand poetic truths of liberal humanism, Daisy does not just echo an understanding of culture as “the best that has been thought and said”; she actually enacts the very worst aspects of its world-view, since in this moment she disappears as a subject of history and becomes once again the latter’s object.¹⁰²

Given that McEwan is probably aware of Arnold’s infelicitous position in

¹⁰² Indeed we might (with only a little flippancy) suggest that Daisy’s presence in *Saturday* mirrors women’s place in history more broadly: absent for much of the novel, she finally arrives with confidence, looking her father in the eye and telling him quite straightforwardly that he is wrong—at least where the invasion of Iraq is concerned. But no sooner has the reader met her than McEwan consigns her once more to silence, and Arnold has much to do with this process.

cultural discourse—he is, after all, a writer who has spent much of his career assessing the role of culture in contemporary society—the reader is entitled to wonder why (and whether) he thinks concluding his novel in such an anachronistic way might represent a step forward. This is especially the case when we recall that *Saturday* ends with a reproduction of “Dover Beach” in full. In a sense this could be argued to validate Perowne’s scepticism over the anti-war demonstrations by celebrating Arnold’s characterisation of England as a fortress of “[g]limmering and vast” cliffs, protecting the speaker’s tranquillity while, ominously, “on the French coast the light / Gleams and is gone” (Arnold “Dover Beach” lines 4, 3-4). But even if we do not subscribe to this particular reading, it is still the case that, confronted with the gloomy prospect that the world “Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (lines 33-34) the novel falls back on traditional platitudes about the vulnerability of (female and unborn) life and the (male) obligation to protect it as a way of justifying its attempt to contain the more violent possibilities of contingency. It is thus precisely to the extent that it mobilises the writing of a figure inextricably associated with liberal humanism that it can be read as profoundly conservative. And the sum of this is to argue that, for all *Saturday*’s self-conscious attempts to rehabilitate the city and many of the more progressive virtues that latter symbolises, it fails because the way it understands culture to operate in that rehabilitated city is so obnoxious. In short, while the “urban” part of its model of urban culture is not straightforwardly contemptible, the “cultural” part remains completely beyond countenance.

2. Damn it All! Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*

In contrast to *Saturday*, the representation of culture in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*—or, more specifically, the novel’s challenge to culture—deserves engagement, but its conspicuous refusal to link this challenge to the city forecloses the possibility of delivering on any potential it may possess. This

failure lends the novel its great strength as well as its principal weakness: it contains a warning about our imminent and total disenfranchisement that is stark and compelling, but it struggles to turn this warning into anything positive; it identifies a means by which we might escape our present impasse, but cannot locate the ground on which this means might be mobilised. As a consequence, it concludes on the same note of despair and quietism that has characterised much of Ishiguro's work.

In order to explore this ambivalent accomplishment a little further it might be useful to return to Slavoj Žižek's enigmatic warning, quoted at the end of the previous chapter, that "[t]oday, we are all potentially *homo sacer*, and the only way to actually avoid becoming so is to act preventively" (Žižek "Beginning" 55). This statement comes at the end of a 2009 essay published in the *New Left Review* entitled "How to Begin at the Beginning", in which Žižek identifies four sites of antagonism that demand attention from anybody seeking to expose and remedy the emerging injustices of a globalised twenty-first century. These are "the looming threat of ecological catastrophe; the inappropriateness of private property for so-called intellectual property; the socio-ethical implications of new techno-scientific developments, especially in biogenetics; and last, but not least, new forms of social apartheid—new walls and slums" (53). Žižek urges his readers to recognise in the last of these categories the harsh distinction between included and excluded—since without this realisation "all the others lose their subversive edge" (54)—and suggests that the dangers we now face threaten to exclude all of us in one form or another. Indeed, he argues, this complex nexus of threats might be considered to produce a new kind of proletariat to which we all might conceivably belong, and which "in contrast to the classic image of proletarians who have 'nothing to lose but their chains'" is "in danger of losing everything" (55). Žižek's analysis is relevant to the present study in a number of ways. The latter clearly echoes his interest in the distinction between inside and outside, and the first site of antagonism Žižek identifies—ecological catastrophe—will shortly occupy our attention. We are also clearly engaged with the idea of acting preventively, and this is one of many reasons why Žižek's comments are useful in approaching *Never Let Me Go*. The novel plainly reflects

his identification of emerging biogenetic technologies as a potential site for ethical consternation and political exclusion. However, I also think it echoes his warning that very soon the political ontology that best approximates our own may be that of *homo sacer*, and it does this by explicitly situating its readers within the same regime that oppresses its protagonist, Kathy H, while bestowing upon them a kind of class consciousness. To this extent, the novel might be read as an incitement for the new proletariat—to wit, us—to learn once more how to act in a collective and specifically political manner. In so doing, it asks some important questions about whether existing praxes—namely, those organised around culture—continue to bear potential, and urges us to begin from the beginning: with a working praxis that is apt for confronting the political challenges of the present day.

Superficially, at least, Ishiguro's novel belongs to the "alternative history" subgenre of speculative fiction exemplified by Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962).¹⁰³ It takes place in a late-1990s England which has spent forty years developing a socio-scientific regime in which human clones provide a source of spare parts that are used to cure "many previously incurable conditions" in the rest of the population (Ishiguro *Never* 257). Lacking parents, the clones are reared collectively in institutions as far away from public sight as possible, before beginning work as "carers" and providing palliative care for other clones as the latter are steadily dispossessed of their vital organs. After an apparently arbitrary period of time, each carer receives notice that she is to become a donor herself, and is steadily cannibalised until, some time in her early thirties, she "completes", or dies. The morbidities that historically affected the whole of human civilization are thus borne exclusively by members of an abject and dehumanised social stratum whose domination consists not just in the commodification of their life processes, but also in their assignment to a supporting role within the system of domination itself.

¹⁰³ That the divergence between our the history of our own world and *Never Let Me Go's* took place "after the war" (Ishiguro *Never* 256) might even be read as tacit acknowledgement of Dick's influence: the central conceit of *The Man in the High Castle* is that the Axis powers won World War II, and that America is subservient to the German and Japanese empires. The phrase "after the war"—repeated a page later—also lends the narrative a certain post-apocalyptic flavour.

Our guide to this chilling social system is Kathy H., who recounts her happy upbringing at a privileged, boarding-school style institution called Hailsham. Here she was looked after by a group of teachers, or “guardians”, who sought to resist the cloning system by using their students’ artwork to prove that clones had souls and therefore qualified as human. The novel revolves around a love triangle that develops at Hailsham between Kathy, Tommy and their domineering friend Ruth. Tommy is a social misfit who is artless on two counts: first, the artwork he produces in class—fantastical pictures of imaginary animals—is widely dismissed as childish; second, where the other students learn to dampen their emotions and enforce a status quo through subtle and often vindictive manipulation, he is prone to tantrums that upset this status quo and render him subject to ridicule. Ruth’s relationship with Tommy belittles him while causing friction with Kathy, who secretly loves him, and this leads to the group’s eventual estrangement from each another. When Kathy becomes Ruth’s carer and engineers a reunion with Tommy, Ruth regrets that she stopped them from pursuing a relationship and provides the address of a guardian, Madame, who was responsible for administering the art programme at Hailsham. There is a rumour that this guardian can suspend the donation process if two clones prove that they love one another and their artwork shows that they “match”. Ruth insists that, after she has completed, Kathy and Tommy must apply for a “deferral” (173), and so, after she dies, they visit the house Madame shares with Hailsham’s former headmistress, Miss Emily, on the Sussex coast. This climactic scene turns out hollow, however, as the guardians reveal, first, that deferrals don’t exist and, second, that all their philanthropic efforts have met with failure. Now the political landscape has changed and nobody wants to prove that clones have souls anymore; Hailsham has been closed down and the artwork is gathering dust in their home. After this devastating meeting, Kathy and Tommy go their separate ways and the novel ends shortly after Tommy’s fourth donation—during which he completes—with Kathy deciding to become a donor.

Ishiguro himself has suggested in interview that *Never Let Me Go* represented a departure for him in that it is less interested in self-consciously undermining its protagonist—in providing the reader with reasons not to trust

her—than his previous works had been. *Never Let Me Go*, he has said, isn't concerned with the kind of "self-deception" that was the theme of his earlier novels, and so "[a]n unreliable narrator here would just have got in the way" (Interview).¹⁰⁴ And with all the necessary caveats regarding authorial intention in place, it is worth pointing out that this self-professed eschewal of a narrative device for which Ishiguro's earlier fiction is so well known lends a unique social and political charge to the novel. Most significantly for our purposes, it inflects the relationship between reader and narrator in an intriguing way. For when, reminiscing about her childhood at Hailsham, Kathy says, "I don't know how it was where you were" (*Never* 13), we are placed in a unusually intimate proximity with her—not just in the sense that we, like Kathy, suddenly become clones (though without necessarily realising it), but also due to the arresting familiarity of the latter's language. As Shemeen Black has suggested, by using the second person address Kathy "assumes a readership who understands what it means to be a 'carer'"; in this way we are "cast as characters with whom [she] shares a frame of reference, and this reassuring gesture invites us to return the favor" (Black 790). It is important, as Black implies, that the reader is not addressed with a narrative voice saturated with self-consciousness, but as a subject belonging to—and, presumably, with *a common stake in*—Kathy's world. She is not a witness putting forward evidence, and we are not jurors attempting to determine her credibility; the emphasis is not so much on testimonial integrity but on the affective, social and ontological affinity shared between addresser and addressee.¹⁰⁵ This is something that permeates the language of

¹⁰⁴ This is not to say that the novel represents a complete departure from the issues that have featured in Ishiguro's work over the course of his career: the representation of memory continues to be important in *Never Let Me Go*, just as it is in all of Ishiguro's work between *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *The Unconsoled* (1995). However, the way the 2005 novel explores the role of memory within its economy of gratification promised and unfulfilled has an interesting impact on narrative time: Mark Currie, for instance, points to Ishiguro's use of the "proleptic past perfect" in representing Kathy's recollection of anticipation (Currie 91).

¹⁰⁵ The concept of testimonial integrity features prominently in Georgina Heydon's *Language of Police Interviewing* (2004), in which she studies the police procedures surrounding the murder of Stephen Lawrence in southeast London in April 1993. During the ensuing investigation the testimonies of particular witnesses were granted a degree of credibility that was not advanced

the novel: Kathy's narration is replete with phatic expressions that serve little purpose except to maintain rapport with the reader and her diction is expertly chosen by Ishiguro to reflect the familiarity and functionality of everyday conversation ("I was, as I say, watching the situation closely"; "I'm pretty sure I got it right"; "But I've gone off a bit" (Ishiguro *Never Let Me Go* 21, 38, 86)). And this, I think, has the effect—discomfiting for any postmodern—of reducing social distance, of eliding difference, even of drawing us into a social commonality.

The point here isn't that in *Never Let Me Go* irony never comes into play: dramatic irony—who knows what and when—is enormously important. I am not suggesting that the distance between Kathy and narrative voice has collapsed, or that the novel's artifice is somehow transparent. And I am certainly not arguing that it dupes us into suspending our faculty of judgment in its moral and political, as well as epistemological, sense. But I do think that the relationship between reader and narrator in *Never Let Me Go* has rather more to do with association than it does with confrontation, and that this associationalism constitutes a narrative strategy which is aimed at drawing the reader into the very same nexus of domination that oppresses Kathy. As Black puts it: "Our own comfortable sense of empathetic solidarity with Kathy ultimately constitutes the horror of the novel's *rhetorical technique*" (792, emphasis added). There would undoubtedly be some disagreement about this issue, especially as the cultural and narratological implications of sincerity have recently attracted a lot of critical attention.¹⁰⁶ For one, Bruce Robbins is more ambivalent about our relationship with Kathy, arguing that her

ability to understand the emotions of those around her and to make things right between them, leaving her own needs and desires out of play, has been one of her genuine attractions both as

others on the basis of cultural and racial markers, and Heydon argues that this constituted a kind of epistemological affront to the latter.

¹⁰⁶ For instance, the "New Sincerity", a term that has been used to describe a tendency in contemporary culture to militate against postmodern irony. David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" (1993) is sometimes seen as a key expression of the New Sincerity in American literature.

a character and as a narrator. It certainly makes her as convincing as she is. But in this sense it is her very *reliability* as a narrator that Ishiguro seems to be asking us to question. Could she be so reliable, locally, if she were not so shockingly indifferent to the larger, more distant context that looms beyond the children, their emotional entanglements, and their school—a context that makes anger and self-contradiction inevitable, that sheds different light on their emotions? Could she be so self-effacingly calm and believable if she did not accept the fundamental rightness of the system? (Robbins 300-301)

The point is well-made, but it does not necessarily preclude the possibility of an associational relationship between Kathy and the reader. The very fact of our affective connection with Kathy—which Robbins himself acknowledges—prevents our judgment of her from becoming a principle of distancing, since Ishiguro’s rhetorical technique ensures that any judgment on her is also a judgment on ourselves. What is really at stake in Robbins’s critique is not so much Kathy’s “reliability as a *narrator*”—that is, her testimonial integrity—but our political judgment of her, and part of *Never Let Me Go*’s genius is the way in which it places its readers in a position from which we cannot judge Kathy without simultaneously judging ourselves. In short, the moment we consider her to be unreliable in Robbins’s sense is the moment at which the circumstances of our own collective disenfranchisement, as well as our inability or refusal to resist, are marked out most sharply.

The associational aspect of *Never Let Me Go* has been noted by other critics: for instance Lisa Fluet, who argues of Ishiguro’s work in general that

while seldom using the term, [his] characters choose to speak for, and even defend, something like class consciousness, particularly as their very different forms of “we” resonate with certain contemporary theoretical models for comprehending the collective consciousness of those whose labor is largely, as Michael

Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued, based in knowledge-work and hence “immaterial”. (Fluet 267)

If it is correct to speak of class consciousness in the context of Ishiguro’s work,¹⁰⁷ then the associational relationship between reader and narrator in *Never Let Me Go* could very well be argued to gesture towards an extension of this consciousness towards us, the novel’s readers. And given the horrifying position the clones occupy, it could be considered to reflect both our agglomeration at Žižek’s hands into a new proletariat, and his warning that as part of this proletariat we may—all of us—someday soon find ourselves in the position of *homo sacer*.¹⁰⁸ It is interesting, considering this, that Fluet should mention Hardt and Negri while suggesting that many of Ishiguro’s characters evidence something akin to class consciousness, since Žižek too cites them in the process of highlighting the dispossessory logics he considers to be a key component of the rampant development of the life sciences. These logics, he writes, threaten to rob us of “the commons of internal nature, the biogenetic inheritance of our humanity”. And this is not the only commons to be suffering a steady erosion: others include “external nature, threatened by pollution and exploitation” and “culture, the immediately socialized forms of cognitive capital: primarily language, our means of communication and education, but also shared infrastructure” (Žižek “Beginning” 53). Clearly the last of these three commons

¹⁰⁷ And Fluet is not the only critic to identify class as a key concept in approaching *Never Let Me Go*. Robbins, for instance, argues that “[t]he organ-donation gulag, tucked away from public view and yet not kept secret, has its obvious real-world counterpart in what we call class. Doesn’t class divide just as effectively, allowing some of us to expect a reasonable return on our career investments while deviously ensuring that little will come of any expectations the rest may have?” (Robbins 292).

¹⁰⁸ Black writes: “Like *homo sacer*, Ishiguro’s students can be killed but not sacrificed; their deaths by organ removal create no source of transcendent meaning for them or for their community [...] *Never Let Me Go* can be read as a meditation on a world shaped by the eugenic fantasies of Nazi-era incarceration. Hailsham, the English boarding school-like institution where Ishiguro’s characters grow up, provides precisely such a shadowy territory beyond the admissible political life of the realm it inhabits and enables. Such a space strips its inhabitants of their claims to any forms of political identity; denuded of citizenship and culture, they represent a form of life that challenges traditional definitions of what it means to be human” (Black 789)

has, like the first, relevance to *Never Let Me Go* (and the second will also occupy our attention before long), whose representation of culture has caused a certain amount of head-scratching among critics. One of the responses to the novel's representation of artistic activity has been to treat it as a sort of faultline, in the sense coined by Alan Sinfield and explicated in the introduction to this investigation. According to this reading, the fact that for much of *Never Let Me Go* the clones do not fully understand their non-human status—and, moreover, are never really allowed to—is one of the conditions of their oppression. And despite being a philanthropic project aimed at ameliorating the conditions of its students' existence by encouraging them to express themselves artistically,¹⁰⁹ Hailsham functions as an instrument of this oppression since it mobilises the category of the human in a deeply dubious way. Not even Madame can truly believe it to apply to her students, considering the revulsion she demonstrates in their company, and even if we assume the guardians' good faith, their attempt to prove that the students have souls ultimately does nothing to change the system of domination; indeed, it vouchsafes its perpetuation by masking the true circumstances of the clones' oppression, thereby preventing them from organising themselves into a political community.¹¹⁰ The institution is thus an effective metaphor for the kind of humanist ideology celebrated in *Saturday*, whose end in that novel is the social and epistemological containment of Baxter.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ We might consider what Engels would think of such a project: "Philanthropic institutions forsooth! As though you rendered the proletarians a service in first sucking out their very life-blood and then practising your self-complacent, Pharisaic philanthropy upon them, placing yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!" (Engels 278).

¹¹⁰ Such an absence of self-realisation militates against the concept of class-consciousness introduced by Fluet, since the latter is produced at precisely the moment that ideology is demystified and the relations of production are revealed for what they truly are: logics of class oppression. In other words, without self-realisation, there can be no class-consciousness. As such, the clones might very well form a socio-economic class, even a proletariat; however, in failing to recognise the fact, the possibility of resistance vanishes. The role of space—more particularly, the absence of urban space—in preventing self-realisation is quite important, as will become clear.

¹¹¹ Ishiguro seems to gesture explicitly towards Hailsham's ideological function when he writes: "Tommy thought it possible that the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, timed

This project is the reason why Miss Lucy is forced to leave Hailsham, after explaining the students' political situation to them too frankly and insisting that "[i]f you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you" (Ishiguro *Never* 80). But it is also why, to Black, the moment at which Kathy and Tommy's non-human identity is confirmed by Miss Emily signifies a point of rupture, when the humanistic ethos undergirding Hailsham is revealed to be bogus and the ontological straightjacket which, as she puts it "mask[ed] their own mechanical condition and serve[d] to prepare them for lives of exploitation" is removed (Black 790). This analysis ultimately allows her to argue that because "the world of Hailsham is a world of cultural sameness, a normative ideal of white, middle class culture [...] *Never Let Me Go* affiliates postethnicity not with promise but with peril" (797). However, I think that here Black runs the risk of offering the most comfortable reading available where another, more challenging one is present. First, she substitutes a platitudinous warning against cultural homogeneity for an interpretation which recognises that, in fact, the novel attaches a certain value to sameness—specifically, to class, an understanding of sameness that has in the past served leftist ends rather well. More deleteriously, however, she treats the moment of cultural disruption—the confrontation with Madame and Miss Emily—as in itself sufficient to facing down the dire threat faced by the clones, without acknowledging that this moment singularly fails to alter their existential and political situation. True, Tommy's art—intricate pictures of animals that don't look like animals at all, which Kathy likens to "what you'd get if you took the back off a radio set" (Ishiguro *Never* 184)—is validated as bearing more truth about this situation than anybody had previously realised. And this could be

very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course, we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly. It's a bit too much like a conspiracy theory for me—I don't think our guardians were that crafty—but there's probably something in it. Certainly, it feels like I *always* knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven. And it's curious, when we were older and the guardians were giving us those talks, nothing came as a complete surprise. It *was* like we'd heard everything somewhere before" (Ishiguro *Never* 81, emphasis in original).

read as a small act of reappropriation, a quiet seizure of what Žižek might identify as their “means of communication and education”—which is to say, the commons of culture. But we should be cautious of attaching too much significance to this act, since to do so would be to overlook the fact that in *Never Let Me Go* culture conspicuously fails to do what Left culturalism expects it to do: facilitate resistance. At the end of the novel, with Ruth dead, Tommy dead, and Kathy alone and exhausted, still a carer, still colluding, still driving off to wherever she is “supposed to be” (282), Tommy’s art—and the truth it exposes—provides only the most anaemic succour. As much as culture might represent a vitally important commons, realising this is not enough; artistic action is not political action.

This apparent rejection of the connection between culture and resistance is notable considering the novel’s ambivalent relationship with a popular cultural form—SF—that has recently been identified as an important vehicle for voicing dissent in the British cultural context. *Never Let Me Go*’s focus on systemic domination and exploitation clearly positions it as an inheritor of twentieth-century SF from *Brave New World* through *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), right up to Ballard’s late novels. At the same time, while the narrative borrows some of its generic semantics from SF, it is important to recognise that in other ways it wholly eschews the genre, and remains self-consciously a literary novel. Highlighting this careful balancing act, I think, allows us to place the novel in a reflexive relationship with the so-called “British SF Boom” of the late 1990s. Roger Luckhurst identifies the origins of this boom in the general election of 1997, which resulted in the victory of New Labour under Tony Blair. As Luckhurst argues, New Labour treated “global capitalism as an accomplished fact” and sought to represent itself as a “post-hegemonic, even post-political” party, making quite a show of casting off its origins in state socialism. Since “Thatcherism had proved that markets alone did not foster social trust or cohesion”, it was necessary to continue the latter’s cultural project while adapting it for a (purportedly) progressive age (Luckhurst “Cultural Governance” 422). Thus where previously the heritage factories of Blenheim Palace and Leeds Castle had provided the basis for Britishness, now

the Britpop of Blur and Oasis, the readily containable iconoclasm of Young British Artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin, would form the foundations of a new, urbane Britishness which militated against the Tories' drab heritage fixation while achieving precisely the same end.¹¹² However, despite Labour's insistence that hierarchical conceptions of cultural legitimacy should no longer obtain, it continued to articulate cultural value using "*precisely* the classic measure of properly 'high' culture: transcendence" (423).¹¹³ And, as critics since Raymond Williams have consistently pointed out, quite opposed to the democratisation it is sometimes deemed to promote, transcendence tends to obscure the disruptive particularism of cultural production in favour of a universalist approach which dehistoricises culture, neutralises it as a site of political contest and effectively claims it for the status quo. (Hence why McEwan's "transcendent" invocation of Arnold so ostentatiously undermines his early commitment to the contingency of the urban experience.) The SF boom, Luckhurst contends, should be read as a strategic response to this muddled understanding of cultural legitimacy. The literary genres which underwent

¹¹² As Luckhurst argues, while this superficially inclusive cultural strategy might have enabled "a rhetoric of devolution and the dispersal of power", in fact New Labour's "model of governance enforce[d] conformity to the market" as "[c]ultural-political questions about form and content or resistance and incorporation are annulled by economism" (Luckhurst "Cultural Governance" 422-423, emphasis in original). Indeed, in some ways the urbane, New Labour conception of culture was capable of going much farther than its Thatcherite progenitor in reducing culture to economism, especially in the city: where the most high-profile contribution of Thatcherism to the urban landscape is probably the finance-oriented Docklands development, New Labour incorporated culture as a fundamental component of regenerative frameworks in deprived areas of London (the Millennium Dome), Manchester (the Lowry and Imperial War Museum North) and Tyneside (the Sage and Baltic).

¹¹³ Luckhurst quotes then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Chris Smith to support this point: "Let us not be sidetracked, either, by arguments about whether it is 'high culture' or 'low culture' that is important here, [he] soothed. Anxious to avoid the accusation that Blair had been a cynical populist, Smith continued: 'The Prime Minister did indeed invite Oasis to No. 10, but a few days later was at the Cottesloe Theatre being deeply moved by Richard Eyre's production of *King Lear*'. Smith declared that high/low distinctions were irrelevant to an inclusive vision of the arts. 'What matters is not the imposition of an inappropriate category, but the quality of the work and its ability to transcend geography and class and time'" (Luckhurst "Cultural Governance" 423).

“inventive hybridization and regenerative ‘implosion’—Gothic, sf, and fantasy—experienced such a revitalization in the 1990s because they could still find spaces outside the general de-differentiation or ‘mainstreaming’ effect sought by the strategy of cultural governance” (423). In their plurality and their vexatious position at the threshold of cultural legitimacy—occasionally demonstrating their influence on more mainstream products, but mostly frustrating attempts at co-optation—the texts Luckhurst identifies in his exploration of the SF boom therefore represent a kind of cultural oppositionality. Though—or rather, because—its constituent texts may not “provide a consistent political line” the boom “is vibrant and absorbing [...] precisely because it avoids such obvious didacticism. ‘Political’ readings, instead, come from attending to the ways in which generic tropes are reconfigured by context” (425).

It is astonishing how closely the conceptual apparatus of this 2003 essay matches that of Left culturalists such as Hebdige, Hall and Gilroy.¹¹⁴ Luckhurst’s analysis of the British SF Boom treats popular culture as “a product of resistance” to a co-optive cultural hegemony, and suggests that its constituent genres combine to form “an energetic cultural-political scene” which deploys “the generic apparatus of sf to explore [a] contemporary ferment” which is dominated by an institutional tendency towards cultural governance (432). But were we to revise this last sentence, substituting “subcultures” for “genres” and “style” for “SF”, we really could be talking about the political sensibility of twenty-five years ago, one of whose gifts—the cultural politics of disenfranchisement—has occupied us for much of the present investigation. As an analysis of a particular cultural moment Luckhurst’s argument is persuasive; however, it is worth noting that we are not required to extrapolate far before we are confronted with the persistent and problematically ineluctable equation of culture and resistance. It is as if Thornton never identified rave culture as the moment at which the all-pervading assumption of the Birmingham School for Contemporary Cultural Studies—that a highly variegated but always

¹¹⁴ Though not too surprising: the essay begins with a lengthy discussion of Hall’s “analysis of the increasing centrality of culture to any understanding of contemporary social formations” (Luckhurst “Cultural Governance” 418).

horizontally ordered popular culture inevitably serves as the vehicle for resistance across numerous politics, numerous rubrics of identification—was exploded; as if a decade of lassitude and pessimism never happened. And while it is surely preposterous to suggest that Ishiguro wittingly invokes Luckhurst, I think it is nonetheless instructive to consider the novel alongside the latter’s insights into the SF boom. *Never Let Me Go* can fairly easily be seen to hybridise two of the cultural forms Luckhurst identifies as bearing resistant potential—SF and Gothic—but it does so precisely while disinvesting this potential from expressive culture. Tommy’s artwork is clearly located below the threshold of cultural legitimacy, a threshold that also serves to locate the clones outside the realm of the human, thus guaranteeing their continued exploitation. Contained within this artwork are important truths that must be observed if the latter are to realise what is being done to them. But by pointedly refusing to connect this realisation—which, according to Black, is communicated precisely through the clones’ awareness of their cultural illegitimacy—with any kind of meaningful emancipation, *Never Let Me Go* challenges attempts to use such a boundary as in itself the measure of subversive possibility. In short, the novel recognises that if culture and resistance once dovetailed into a discrete kind of oppositional praxis, the connection between them has been severed, and this praxis is no longer capable of delivering on what it once promised.

Significantly, this abandonment of culture as a site of resistant activity coincides with a total absence of any kind of public space that might constitute a commons—such as the city.¹¹⁵ But this is not to suggest that the spaces of the

¹¹⁵ The only significant urban area to be named is Dover, a port town on the Kent coast with a population of about 30,000, and it is notable that the novel’s climax—during which Kathy and Tommy confront Madame and Miss Emily—takes place in the tiny coastal resort of Littlehampton, rather than in the nearby city of Brighton. In fact, virtually all of the spaces Ishiguro represents are windswept, evacuated and shot through with lonely melancholia. The most memorable of these is the marshland in which Kathy, Ruth and Tommy search for the stranded boat. After Ruth’s second donation, Kathy and Tommy take her to see an empty boat that is stranded in “open marshland” at the edge of a wood: “The pale sky looked vast and you could see it reflected every so often in the patches of water breaking up the land. Not so long ago, the woods must have extended further, because you could see here and there ghostly dead trunks poking out of the soil, most of them broken off only a few feet up. And beyond the dead trunks, maybe sixty yards away, was the boat,

novel are all private; rather, they are located in the penumbra *between* public and private, while being evacuated of the characteristics of both. Apropos of this it is important to remember that private spaces do not, as liberalism holds, increase the integrity, autonomy and privacy of the individuals who occupy them. They merely extend circuits of power which in the commons can be directed and controlled in a collective fashion into the private sphere, where the individual is largely powerless to resist them. A result of the disintegration of the commons is thus often a perversion of the private realm, and—as we have seen in our discussion of Ballard’s late novels—when these two previously separate spaces become impossible to differentiate the resulting social totality can appear chillingly totalitarian.

Hailsham might be seen to reflect this confusion of public and private. Describing a pond area in the grounds of the school, Kathy says:

[O]nce you came out to the pond, you’d find a tranquil atmosphere waiting, with ducks and bulrushes and pond-weed. It wasn’t, though, a good place for a discreet conversation—not nearly as good as the lunch queue. For a start you could be clearly seen from the house. And the way the sound travelled across the water was hard to predict; if people wanted to eavesdrop, it was the easiest thing to walk down the outer path and crouch in the bushes on the other side of the pond. (Ishiguro *Never* 25)

Hailsham functions here as a sort of panopticon, and so the temptation might be

sitting beached in the marshes under the weak sun” (Ishiguro *Never* 219-220). There are many other spaces like this; indeed, the novel ends with a dead, vacant landscape littered with rubbish and barbed wire. After Ruth and Tommy have died, Kathy drives up to Norfolk on a whim and, climbing out of her car, lost and alone, “imagine[s] this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up”: “There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire, and I could see how this fence and the cluster of three or four trees above me were the only things breaking the wind for miles. All along the fence, especially along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. It was like the debris you get on a seashore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before finally coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire” (281-282).

to appeal to Foucault in order to read it. However, given the extent to which *Never Let Me Go* so hauntingly represents a world in which the life process has been incorporated into the workings of politics, it might be more useful to appraise it using Arendt's concept of the social: the totalising logic which subordinates politics to the life process and collapses the public and the private, producing a flat, unvariegated space in which action is rendered meaningless. In fact, the social could quite easily be regarded as key to *Never Let Me Go's* central conceit. Since the clones possess neither their vital organs, nor the life process that is required to nurture them, the latter becomes subject to rigorous institutional regulation; it also explains why, as Kathy puts it, the clones "had to have some form of medical almost every week". That the room in which these medical examinations take place is located "at the very top of the house" not only lends them a Gothic aspect; it also conveys a sense of the massive distance between the clones and those who rule over them (13). Indeed, this sense of political dislocation pervades *Never Let Me Go*: the authority figures of its first half—the guardians—remain aloof and inaccessible, and towards its conclusion are revealed, like the Wizard of Oz, to possess no real power anyway. Moreover, even in the process of this revelation, Ishiguro refuses to sketch out the true workings of power in his imagined England, and what was a sense of dislocation between the subjects and executors of power becomes a void, an unimaginable (and unbridgeable) chasm. This is important, I think, because the virtual invisibility of true political authority in the novel echoes the way in which the latter functions in the social, which Arendt argues to be characterised by a sense of "rule by nobody". This is not, she urges, "no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of [the] cruelest and most tyrannical" kinds of domination; what is "decisive", however, is that on "all its levels" the social "*excludes the possibility of action*" (Arendt *Human* 40, emphasis added). And this goes some way towards explaining many critics' discomfiture at the clones' quietism; their apparently ready acceptance of their own abjection. For, as one critic wrote for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "[I]f you were scheduled to have your organs plucked out any day now, but in the meantime were permitted to wander around the British countryside pretty much as you chose, wouldn't

you decide at some point, “This is a really bad deal, and I’m moving to France?” (qtd. in Black 791).

The function of power in the social allows us to answer this perfectly reasonable question, as does the novel’s conspicuous eschewal of urban landscapes. For, despite the apparent eclipse of the city as a site of resistance, it would yet be impossible to imagine Ishiguro’s narrative taking place in an urban locale without stretching the novel’s ending—in which Ruth and Tommy head stoically to their deaths and Kathy looks forward to following them—beyond credibility. This is because, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have become far too accustomed to witnessing oppressed subjects rising up against their masters in urban contexts—whether the Fordist citadel of *Metropolis* (1927) or the cyberpunk sprawl of *Akira* (1988)—for the kind of quietism that characterises *Never Let Me Go*’s conclusion to be located there. Urban resistance movements need not always be represented as successful; nevertheless, given the historical role of the city in cultivating resistance and revolution, it would have been difficult for Ishiguro to situate the kind of systemic violence endured by the clones in an urban setting without also representing at least some kind of attempt to resist it. In this way, the spatial disparateness of *Never Let Me Go* takes on an important narrative function: plausibility. However, its keenest implication is political, and profoundly gloomy. There are, presumably, huge numbers of people just like Kathy, Ruth and Tommy—how else could the government guarantee replacement parts for the general public?—but Ishiguro refuses to name a single one who didn’t attend either Hailsham or the Cottages. Upon becoming donors, they are distributed to recovery centres in different parts of the country which always seem to be rural. And in this way, any sense of community they may have shared quickly evaporates, contributing to a sense of dissipation which is only reinforced by Kathy’s endless car journeys. Thus we might say that the clones occupy a similar situation to that of the agricultural class Marx describes in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852):

In so far as millions of [agricultural] families live under economic conditions that separate their mode of life, their interests and

their culture from those of the other classes, and that place them in an attitude hostile toward the latter, they constitute a class; in so far as there exists only a local connection among these farmers, a connection which the individuality and exclusiveness of their interests prevent from generating among them any unity of interest, national connections, and political organization, they do not constitute a class. Consequently, they are unable to assert their class interests in their own name, be it by a parliament or by convention. They can not represent one another, they must themselves be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power, that protects them from above, bestows rain and sunshine upon them. Accordingly, the political influence of the allotment farmer finds its ultimate expression in an Executive power that subjugates the commonweal to its own autocratic will. (Marx 145-146)

The guardians at Hailsham seem to embody just such an autocratic will (though, as we have seen, their power is entirely illusory); however, what is more significant is the emphasis Marx places on the role of *distance* in preventing the agricultural class from organising into a political collective capable of representing itself. The spatial distribution of the farmers is central to this failure, and, just as Engels implies in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, the lesson is that without propinquity—which is to say, *without the city*—class-consciousness cannot emerge.

To this extent, *Never Let Me Go* might be argued to foreclose the debate it opens up by gesturing beyond culture. And it is this that makes the novel's representation of an emerging class consciousness so unsettling, coming as it does at a moment when commons so fundamental to the way in which we live our lives are coming under such concerted attack. After all, we might ask, what conceivable use might class consciousness have without a public space through and in which it can take on a politically meaningful and, one would hope,

transformative role? The novel issues a political warning about new modes of oppression while urging that existing (cultural) modes of resistance are no longer useful; however, in rejecting the spatiality that enables political collectives to be formed, it cannot conclude with anything but quietism. It justly challenges the immanent connection between culture and resistance, but then—even as it meditates on the political significance of class-consciousness to its characters (and its readers)—forecloses any possibility of the city-as-commons that could substitute for this. Certainly, this strategy may be read as provocative, but the note of despair on which the novel ends implies that, where its representation of culture is welcome, its abandonment of the city is not.

* * *

So what does all of this mean for urban culture in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century? We have seen that, contrary to much existing critical opinion, McEwan's London represents a great deal more than a threat that must be tamed by reducing it to a site of procedure and contractarianism: it is fraught, even febrile, but in a way that the author appears to consider valuable. However, something in the model of urban culture presented to us in *The Passion*, as well as in Kureishi's early work, plainly strikes McEwan as inadequate. And so, in observing how this politicised spatiality interacts with culture, he attempts to revive what might be described as a "liberal imagination", and this profoundly anachronistic move ultimately serves to render the novel a political failure. John Frow has observed how the liberal imagination was unsuited to mass society for precisely the same reason Williams identifies in his early writing: since it functioned perfectly, in opposition to the crassly material processes of industrial capitalism, it was "ill-prepared to give an account of a fully commodified culture". The neoliberal imagination, by contrast, "locat[ed] its vision of freedom in an expanded realm of economic transactions rather than a separate realm of culture", and thus "has less of a problem [...] in coming to terms with a form of citizenship grounded in consumption rather than in the sphere of political judgment" (Frow 425-426). These comments are helpful in

giving the lie to any attempt to dismiss *Saturday* as a neoliberal polemic, since they reveal the novel to be far more anachronistic than this description allows. At the same time, Frow's analysis also explains why, in attempting to recuperate the liberal imagination, the novel fails so utterly, and this is because the likelihood of reviving the Tradition as a guarantor of the good in an age of mass society is so meagre. Such an understanding of culture is simply unable to "make sense of a public sphere which is mass mediated, other than by a reaffirmation of those values of rationality and citizenship which, rather than being undermined, are *simulated* by [the] new form of publicness" operating today (426, emphasis in original). Thus while *Saturday's* representation of the city might gesture towards a re-engagement with urban space as a locus in which pluralism and contingency are enacted, its insistence on reviving a liberal understanding of culture provides nothing but a fig-leaf for the economic logic of our neoliberal present.

Unlike McEwan, Ishiguro seems quite aware that such a revival is likely to result in an obfuscation of the true dynamics of oppression rather than an honest and vigorous engagement with them. For while the guardians at Hailsham mobilise the liberal imagination as part of their philanthropic project to prove their students' humanity, these endeavours serve simply to mask the latter's true, abjectly disenfranchised status, and to prevent an authentically collective response from emerging. *Never Let Me Go* is thus quite frank in acknowledging the futility of attempting to rehabilitate this liberal imagination at a time when its political foundations are being rendered increasingly irrelevant by emerging post-human ontologies and the total economisation of the subject. However, the implications of Ishiguro's novel are more far-reaching than this, because it suggests that, today, *no* model of culture is capable of providing a basis for political community or collective action. Cultural expression might play an important role in articulating political truths—Tommy's mechanical animals say more about the clones' status than all of the artwork in Madame's gallery combined—but these truths do not necessarily bind together the subjects they describe, and are in no way adequate to facing down political circumstances in which state, capital and biopower are combined

in a chillingly totalitarian regime. In this way, *Never Let Me Go* presents us with a double bind: it denies the possibility of a metaphysical good that might compensate for the subject's alienation from her own biological existence, while simultaneously rejecting the idea that material cultural processes might serve as a real—if historically contingent—foundation for self and community. In the context of the broader narrative we have been tracing, the novel represents a moment when Kureishi's incipient sense that cultural or subcultural activity will no longer do the work of the Left is articulated in the most despondent terms. In Ishiguro's novel, the connection between culture and resistance that was tentatively established by the New Left in the 1960s and reinforced over the course of the 70s and 80s by second-generation Left culturalists such as Hebdige, Hall and Gilroy is finally severed. But also in contrast to *Saturday*, it avoids representing the urban experience as politically fecund—by refusing to represent it at all. By reorienting the axes of social determination away from culture and complexity and back towards the cruel but similarly indistinct line between inclusion and exclusion, it appears to rehabilitate class as a meaningful political concept. But even as it achieves this—and in the process extends its warning about new forms of systemic violence to the reader—it forecloses the possibility of this concept serving as the basis for resistance by forsaking the spatiality that has historically served to crystallise collective self-consciousness and spur it into action.

Thus while we began this investigation with an intellectual moment that was full of enthusiasm for the potential that existed at the intersection of politics, culture and space, we appear to be concluding it at a time when the existence of a progressive relationship between the three is all but unimaginable. The fact that both *Saturday* and *Never Let Me Go* were published in 2005 is surely enough to justify placing them in critical proximity to one another, and to this extent it does not seem inappropriate to conclude that in the first decade of the new millennium, the internal coherence of “urban culture” as a political concept is very much in doubt. Indeed, in these two novels the constituent terms of this concept appear to be mutually incompatible. Either we engage with the city as a spatiality that bears political promise and accept an

anachronistic model of culture that neutralises this promise almost as soon as it is instantiated, or we attempt to move beyond culture altogether and attempt to confront the (neo)liberal imagination by other means, but without a public space that renders our actions meaningful. In the final analysis, neither option seems particularly palatable.

CONCLUSION

BEGINNING WITH THE END: Maggie Gee's Apocalyptic Natality

It is difficult, given the conclusions of the previous two chapters, to end this discussion on an optimistic note. The reading of McEwan and Ishiguro advanced in the previous chapter suggests that urban culture simply will not serve progressive ends any longer, and Ballard's late work leaves us in a deeply depressing situation, with practically no agency whatsoever and only a tiny space in which to exercise it anyway. Indeed, some pessimistic readers might wonder whether Ballard's work befits a last chapter rather more than a third, since the late dystopias seem to represent more a conclusion than a provocation, a full stop than an ellipsis. But to have situated his work in such a way would have been to foreclose even the possibility of beginning anew, and to arrive at the gloomiest of evaluations rather too prematurely. Because while today there undoubtedly remains a great deal of anxiety over our capacity to initiate change, the opening decade of the twenty-first century has not witnessed a simple continuation of the narratives that came to prevail during the 1990s—domination and totalisation, political entropy and ideological impasse. On a world-historical level, the “end of history” has been superseded by the so-called “clash of civilizations”,¹¹⁶ and international capitalism has only recently emerged

¹¹⁶ Indeed, this discourse began very shortly after Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man*, when Samuel P. Huntington published his thesis regarding emerging international tensions in a post-Cold War world, first in the 1993 article “The Clash of Civilizations?” and subsequently in the 1996 volume *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. While controversial, it would be churlish, given the geopolitical fallout from the attacks of September 11, 2001 to dismiss Huntington's analysis out of hand. This said, the global situation is

from a near-catastrophic convulsion which gave left-wing economists around the world license to sing the praises of J.M. Keynes without being ridiculed.¹¹⁷ The point to emphasise here is not so much that the demise of neoliberalism as a political and economic project—or, rather, as an economic project aimed at extinguishing politics—is yet conceivable. It is simply that, despite the defeatism and quietism that have taken hold of the Left over the last four decades, history still exists. Moreover, it is still the case that, under the right circumstances, each of us possesses the ability to exercise political action to some degree.

The optimism of this assertion might seem laughable in light of the discussion we have been staging. With the notable exception of *The Passion*, the

clearly more complex than Huntington imagined: while he predicted one of the most serious conflicts would take place between the West and China, Perry Anderson contended in 2010 that while “Sinophobia has by no means disappeared [...] another round of Sinomania is in the making” (Perry Anderson par. 2).

¹¹⁷ A notable Keynesian voice in the UK has been David Blanchflower, until March 2009 a member of the Bank of England’s Monetary Policy Committee and a staunch opponent of a neoliberal response to the global debt crisis. Despite Blanchflower’s misgivings, however, the result of the crisis in the UK has been a project of fiscal retrenchment unprecedented in postwar history, whose purported necessity has been well-exploited by the coalition government to mask its essentially ideological foundations. As Susan Watkins points out, at least in Europe, fiscal conservatives appear to have been the net beneficiaries of the crisis: “[E]ach European government”, she writes, “can use the crisis to push through capital’s wish list of structural reforms: in Germany, softening up the labour force by cutting unemployment benefits; in Spain and France, stripping out the gains—‘rigidities’—of older employees; in Italy, slashing the Mezzogiorno public sector. The widely proclaimed end of neo-liberalism looks more and more like the continuation of its agenda by other means” (Watkins “Blue Labour” 14). Žižek is depressingly accurate in summarising the popular response to this agenda, especially in Greece: “[T]he protesters’ story bears witness yet again to the misery of today’s left: there is no positive programmatic content to its demands, just a generalized refusal to compromise the existing welfare state. The utopia here is not a radical change of the system, but the idea that one can maintain a welfare state *within* the system” (Žižek “Economic Emergency” 86). In a short but highly pertinent aside, Watkins seems to acknowledge that the eclipse of politics that enabled the emergence of a neoliberal hegemony has much to do with this lack of vision: “As unemployment mounts and public-spending cuts are enforced”, she writes, “more determined protests will hopefully emerge; but to date, factory occupations or bossnappings have mostly been limited to demands for due redundancy pay. That neo-liberalism’s crisis should be so eerily non-agonistic, in contrast to the bitter battles over its installation, is a sobering measure of its triumph” (Watkins “Shifting Sands” 20).

texts we have examined imply that in the space of less than twenty years the British novel has come to be marked indelibly by structures of failed utopianism and frustrated emancipatory experiments (*The Black Album*), capitulation and fruitless oppositionality (*Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes*), and even withdrawal and quietism (*Never Let Me Go*). Moreover, the only novel characterised by anything even vaguely resembling hopefulness—*Saturday*—is so hobbled by anachronism that it serves more than any other text as a cause for despair. Nonetheless, even in this scenario the question “how do we begin anew?” does not have to be heard solely as an expression of despondency. It can also be engaged with in a more sanguine way; as part of a project aimed at uncovering the ground on which the Left might base new praxes aimed at delivering the emancipatory ideals that have so eluded it in recent history. It is with this mood that we will conclude our investigation; however, in bringing this discussion to a close we are forced to ask not just “how do we begin anew?” but also, “how do we begin *at all*?” Because at a time when the concept of “worldlessness” is attracting more and more critical interest—whether in the thought of Arendt or Agamben, Jamie Skye Bianco or Jacques Rancière—it seems appropriate that the existential aspect of beginning should be engaged with as much as its political dimension; indeed, that the two should be regarded as deeply implicated with one another. In keeping with this attempt to locate new beginnings, it also seems appropriate that our investigation will conclude with a brief discussion of a writer—Maggie Gee—who, despite a strong reputation among reviewers and other British novelists, sits outside the canon of contemporary British writers and has received just a handful of noteworthy appraisals.¹¹⁸

Throughout her career, Gee has persistently revisited two themes: the existential imperative to bear and raise children and the possibility of world-destruction through various forms of apocalypse. Of course, the former only serves to throw the latter into relief, and in combination they seem inevitably to push her work into a relationship with science fiction. However, just like Ballard—a frequent reviewer of her books—Gee has a complex relationship

¹¹⁸ That none of these appraisals is a book-length study demonstrates the magnitude of this critical neglect.

with SF, and often uses generic tropes to challenge the boundary between legitimate and popular styles. Some titles, like *The Ice People* (1998)—in which a couple confronted by social entropy brought on by rapid fluctuations in global temperatures become increasingly estranged as they fight over how best to bring up their son—mobilise SF paradigms in a knowing and even satirical fashion. Whereas others, such as *Where Are the Snows?* (1991)—in which a passionate but deeply selfish couple abandon their teenage children in order to travel around a world which, at the end of the novel, faces a similar cataclysm—broadly conform to the structural or syntactic expectations of mainstream fiction, but undermine realist aesthetics by introducing generic tropes that can strike the reader as incongruous. Common to virtually all of Gee’s writing, however, is a preoccupation with the potential embodied by children and young people, the world they may (or may not) inherit, and the politically onerous position of their parents, who have a responsibility to both.

In this respect she might be said to engage with one of the most compelling ideas in all of Arendt’s writing: natality. Simply put, this term describes “the birth of new men” and “the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born” (Arendt *Human* 247). It might therefore be argued to form the basis for all Arendt’s thought, since it is a prerequisite for the life of free action—the *vita activa*—which can, under the right conditions, be realised inside the polis. As she writes in *The Human Condition*, “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, acting” (9). Natality is thus simultaneously an existential fact and a political potentiality; however, it is also a promise of the perpetuation of the two in combination, since it represents, in Patricia Bowen-Moore’s words, both “the source of the power to begin” and “the factual presence of the power to continue to begin” (Bowen-Moore 28). Only in combination can these two things—the power to begin and the power to continue to begin—be called natality, because only then do they promise the possibility of free human action in the future.

Because of this promise Arendt can argue that, to the extent that “action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the

central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought” (Arendt *Human* 9). This said, it is not as if mortality possesses no political significance whatsoever. For while death might well be argued to form the “central category” of metaphysical enquiry, it also occupies an implicit but notable place in Arendt’s political philosophy—though it relates not so much to the individual as to what she calls the “world”, and not so much to the certainty but the threat of the latter’s demise. The world is a recurring term in Arendt’s writing, one that refers not to the kind of expressly political space that has occupied our attention until now, but to the entire fabric of our shared physical and sensory experience.¹¹⁹ And while she focuses on the necessarily positive nature of our engagement with it, there is everywhere in her thought a sense of its fragility; a feeling that it might easily be destroyed. It thus requires us to care for it, and we do this in two different ways: we are concerned for it because it provides the phenomenal and material prerequisites for the *vita activa*, and we express our hope for it in introducing new human beings into it.¹²⁰ But even

¹¹⁹ From her analysis of different kinds of human activity in *The Human Condition* it is clear that Arendt considers the world to be the product of work, of *homo faber*. “[W]here God creates *ex nihilo*”, she writes, “man creates out of given substance”, and the result of this act of fabrication is the world (Arendt *Human* 139). Presumably, if God’s creation were destroyed it would mark the return of the very nothingness out of which it was made in the first place; likewise, “if we do not use the things of the world”—that is, the things we have fabricated for ourselves—they will “eventually decay, [and] return into the over-all natural process from which they were drawn” (136-37). In this way, Arendt makes it clear that *animal laborans*—man as perpetuator and protector of the life process—plays no direct role in creating the world, since the latter is a fabricated rather than a natural phenomenon. But she also implies elsewhere that the world is distinct from the *vita activa*—the life of free action—since the deprivation of the latter is the loss of “a *place* in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective” rather than the loss of the world itself. It is, in other words, the expulsion from a realm in which one’s actions are recognised as bearing political meaning (*Origins* 296, emphasis added).

¹²⁰ On the one hand, Arendt argues that “at the heart of politics lies concern for the world”, since without the latter the *vita activa* could not exist (Arendt *Promise* 106); hence one of the responsibilities of the latter is to ensure that the world which forms its material prerequisite remains intact. As Hauke Brunkhorst suggests, the “relation of dependence between the world of action and of artificial things may be illustrated by a simple example: we cannot have so-called ‘roundtables’ on public issues if we have no actual tables, which are created through fabrication” (Brunkhorst 182-83). On the other hand, the world will one day be inherited by subsequent

while the latter sentiment is a key aspect of natality, and thus expresses our belief in the possibility of human action in the future, it is nonetheless highly fraught. Certainly, natality represents a good—even a miraculous—thing: Arendt argues that “whenever something new occurs, it bursts into the context of predicable processes as something unexpected, unpredictable, and ultimately causally inexplicable—just like a miracle” (*Promise* 111-112). But this irruption is also dangerous, precisely because of its unpredictability, and so it behoves parents to contain and control it. Hence the latter are charged with a double task: “[T]he child requires protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the world. But the world, too, needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each generation” (*Between* 185-86).

To this extent, we might say that the very concept of natality is shot through with fear over the potential destruction of the world.¹²¹ But while it might be described as disruptive it is also existentially and politically necessary, and a threat to natality is a threat, first, to the simple fact of human life, and second, to everything it makes possible—including the world itself and above all

generations of human beings, and what “saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted”. As we have seen, natality relates to the *vita activa* as a potentiality, but it can only fulfil this potentiality by being born and introduced to the world in the first place. Thus it is out of hope for the world that we introduce new generations into it, a hope which, according to Arendt, finds “perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their ‘glad tidings’: ‘A child has been born unto us’” (Arendt *Human* 247).

¹²¹ This places Arendt’s political thoughts in opposition to the private sentiments of Walter Benjamin, whose works she edited and published in German in 1955 before they were translated into English and published as *Illuminations* in 1968. In her introduction to the latter volume, Arendt draws attention to a letter Benjamin wrote in Paris in 1935, in which he confesses: “Actually, I hardly feel constrained to try to make head or tail of this condition of the world. On this planet a great number of civilizations have perished in blood and horror. Naturally, one must wish for the planet that one day it will experience a civilization that has abandoned blood and horror; in fact, I am [...] inclined to assume that our planet is waiting for this. But it is terribly doubtful that we can bring such a present to its hundred—or four-hundred-millionth birthday party. And if we don’t, the planet will finally punish us, its unthoughtful well-wishers, by presenting us with the Last Judgement” (Benjamin qtd. in Arendt *Illuminations* 42, emphasis in original).

the *vita activa*, its ultimate and greatest promise. One such threat—that of nuclear annihilation—seems never to have been far from Arendt’s thoughts from the late 1950s right through to the years preceding her death in 1975.¹²² Indeed, Bowen-Moore goes so far as to argue that

[n]othing stands in such contrast to Arendt’s philosophy of natality as [...] nuclearism. Under the cloud of the possibility of nuclear extinction, the worldly attitude of *amor mundi* [love for the world] and its concomitant imperative *volo ut sis* [I will that you be] seems a weak, if not superfluous recommendation to a world seemingly bent on its own destruction. In light of the fact that human beings themselves, *we*, have made this ominous possibility our present reality says something about our failure to appropriate the meaning of natality and its bond with the common world. (Bowen-Moore 130)

What is more, Bowen-Moore argues, to Arendt the political crisis represented by “nuclearism” represents only the concluding passages of a narrative that stretches back past Soviet gulags, Nazi extermination camps and the colonial outposts of European empires to the revolutionary tribunals of the Great Terror. It is merely the last ravings of a historical consciousness that has persistently refused to grasp the lessons of natality; the logical end to an entire “tradition of philosophical and political thought” that has “failed to grasp, and thus to sustain, the true nature of political action and freedom” (131).

¹²² Her most famous comments on the subject occurred in *On Violence* (1970), in which she suggests that, were a person to ask two simple questions of the post-war generation—“How do you want the world to be in fifty years?” and “What do you want your life to be like five years from now?”—the answers would likely be preceded by “Provided there is still a world” and “Provided I am still alive” (Arendt *On Violence* 17-18). But her anxiety over the possibility of nuclear apocalypse is evidenced more than a decade earlier in her comments on the Hungarian Revolution: at one point she argues that the “threat of destruction to the existence of mankind, even to the existence of organic life on earth” renders “all past political thought about war, its possible justification for the sake of freedom, its role as an *ultima ratio* in foreign affairs, perfectly obsolete” (“Totalitarian Imperialism” 20-21).

Gee's novels reflect a similar sense of the fragility of the world, and a feeling that we are failing in our responsibility to ensure its perpetuation. And nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Burning Book* (1983), which focuses on two generations of a working-class family from Wolverhampton and uses postmodernist strategies alongside more conventionally realist (even kitchen sink) techniques to explore how their lives are shaped by alcoholism and domestic violence, immigration and racism, the legacy of World War II and—overbearingly—the perpetual threat of nuclear conflict between Russia and America. The character who most urgently expresses the paranoia and existential terror that accompany the latter is Angela: bookish, left-wing—a CND campaigner from an early age—and, as she becomes an adult, increasingly fearful of what she sees as the inevitability of the world's destruction. Lying beside her boyfriend as a young woman, she points to the bleakly rational basis for her fear, given the sheer amount of destructive potential ranged against the world: "You talk about being reasonable", she says, "Well being terrified *is*. What do you think he was really saying, that old man on the bus last night? *Cheer up, it may never happen*. What do they mean by *it*? I feel it *is* going to happen. I feel we're all going to die" (Gee *Burning* 228, emphases in original). This fear is thrown into relief a few pages later when she recalls an argument with her mother, Lorna, after the latter walked in on her reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a teenager and shouted, "You're *obsessed* with war [...] I can't understand it, what's the matter with you? Why can't you be like other girls your age?" (237, emphases in original). That Anne Frank provides a link between nuclear apocalypse and the European holocaust is significant, given that she has functioned for many decades as the most potent embodiment of a potentiality that never had the opportunity to be fulfilled; a haunting symbol for the twentieth century's destruction of natality. And Gee seems to place Angela in a similar position when she writes that the latter "couldn't stay young (though she wouldn't ever grow very old)" (244).

Of course, images of youth have frequently been deployed in anti-nuclear propaganda to symbolise the death of futurity—we might say natality—that would be a consequence of the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, should

the latter's preventative qualities prove to be catastrophically overestimated.¹²³ Even so, Gee's novel is chillingly effective in demonstrating the sheer totality of nuclear apocalypse. In the last chapter, "The Chapter of Burning", her narrative begins to fragment as a multitude of other voices and texts intrude and interrupt: newspaper headlines describing a tense standoff between the US and USSR; the signs that Lorna and Henry, her husband, read during a visit to Kew Gardens; and above all the voices of the Hibakusha—those who survived the firestorms of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but bore the irradiated legacy within their bodies—which haunt *The Burning Book* from its earliest pages. Finally the bombs fall and Gee's whole cast of characters—her entire narrative world, including every insignificant creature and every record of it ever having existed—is destroyed:

Some died instantly, some took time. Bags of skinned organs, spilling, crawling. A thing called *lethality*, a thing called time. Time was a measure of terror and pain [...] The last light shone with no one to see it. The final photograph made its print. Everything was on it, nothing escaped. The pattern had an unearthly clarity. Melted eyeballs, shattering bone. Miracles of form became crackling bacon, miracles of feeling flashed to hot fat. Bleeding and terrified things pushed blindly against the pain which pushed out the light. *Some died instantly, most took time*. Nothing was too little for poison to reach it. Mice and sparrows found nowhere to hide. Black burst crusts that were rainbow fishes. Balls of burnt feathers on the black burnt ground. Flakes of ash were once soft moths quivering. Books in their charred skins feel less pain [...] All was as if it had never been. Blackened paper, the last leaves burning.

¹²³ Most notorious among these is Lyndon B. Johnson's "Daisy Girl" campaign advertisement during the 1964 US campaign presidential election, in which a girl plucks the petals off a daisy while counting to ten. On reaching it, a voice counts down back to zero as we zoom in on the girl's eye and a mushroom cloud ignites the screen. "These are the stakes", a voice intones. "To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die" ("Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Campaign").

(297-98, emphases in original)

As if the totality of this end were not clear enough, Gee then forces her readers to confront the ensuing nothingness by including three blacked-out pages. This arresting technique—which is only one among many textual experiments that would strike the reader as playful were the novel’s subject matter not so sobering—reflects an important characteristic of fictions of nuclear disaster written in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As David Dowling writes: “The memory of the Japanese holocaust acts both as a brake and a stimulus to the apocalyptic imagination” because “the attempt to write about *that* experience commands us to be faithful to the dead and the living survivors, and also exposes the limits of our language and our imaginations” (Dowling 47, emphasis in original). The memory of past destruction raises the prospect of a more total apocalypse in the future, which confronts us with the unimaginable nature of our own extinction; in turn, this failure to imagine demands that we remember earlier moments in which the possibility of world-destruction was rehearsed. In this way the need simultaneously to remember and to imagine (or rather, fail to imagine) becomes a moral and epistemological tautology that contains within it an urgent lesson about the preciousness of the world and the need to protect it. And perhaps this is why Gee ends *The Burning Book* with an epilogue entitled “Against Ending”, which serves as an impassioned plea for us to recognise our human potential to begin and to guarantee that it will last into the future. She laments that her “characters died in formations, nearsighted, their eyes on the ground. I loved them all but they died. I had thought that such things could not happen” (Gee *Burning* 303). However, in stepping out of her narrative world and addressing the reader directly she also reminds us that we have not died, and presents us with a final image, at once haunting and redeeming: a pictorial representation of seven birds ascending the page, wings spread from edge to crease, bearing the message “Words beat on against death... Always beginning again, beginning against ending” (304).

Although Gee clearly retained an interest in world-destruction over the course of the 1980s and 90s, none of the novels she produced in this period—

including *Where Are the Snows?* and *The Ice People*—reaches the apocalyptic intensity of *The Burning Book*. As the author herself has implied, it was not until the attacks of September 11, 2001 that she was reminded of the fragility of the world in such a haunting way that she was prompted to revisit the terrain with similar urgency.¹²⁴ However, when she did the result was, as one reviewer put it, “her most apocalyptic vision to date” (Hidding par. 2). *The Flood* is set in an unnamed city-state that forms “part of the satellite lands of the Hesperican empire, in its final decades”, and which is ruled by an ingratiating but superficial president named Mr Bliss who is only too happy to collude with Hesperica’s endless wars against other cities (Gee *Flood* 54). It quite plainly reflects anxiety over Britain’s post-9/11 relationship with the US—as well as its involvement with the “War on Terror”—and, as such, might be said to engage with similar concerns to *Saturday*, which also ruminates over the so-called “special relationship”. However, it is far more inclusive than McEwan’s novel and much more innovative; indeed, of all the texts we have discussed it is, formally speaking, the most unusual. There is a narrator (who remains unnamed) but no one protagonist; instead, the novel is dizzyingly polyvocal and multifaceted, featuring a huge cast of characters who range from male to female, black to white, gay to straight, old to young and even human to non-human.¹²⁵ And while it possesses palpable narrative impetus there is nothing in it that could be described as a discrete and singular plot: in the simplest terms, Gee achieves little else over the course of three hundred pages except to provide her readers with an insight into the diverse lives of her ensemble while building a sense of impending disaster, and then to wipe out her entire narrative world in one final deluge. Indeed, if *The Burning Book* augments its broadly realist aesthetic with a handful of experiments designed to draw attention to its textual status, *The Flood* discards virtually every formal constraint of the realist novel except

¹²⁴ In interview with Gee has said: “*The Flood* was the first book I’d written since September 11, and there was this feeling of fragility, that London would be destroyed. I suppose some unconscious part of me thought it could be my last book” (qtd. in Judith Palmer par. 11).

¹²⁵ Sarah Dillon writes that since the is “infested by animals, by microbes, snails, worms, birds, foxes, rats, mice, pigeons [...] there is no reason why the narrator of *The Flood* need even be human” (Dillon 390).

psychological verisimilitude, offering its readers a vision of contemporary Britain which, though easily recognisable, is allegorised to the point of parody.

On the one hand, this means that Gee is able to engage with the cotemporary milieu in a robustly satirical fashion: “Bliss”, for instance, transparently functions as a kind of portmanteau of “Blair” and “Bush”, and satirises the cosy relationship between the two leaders by turning them into a gestalt. At the same time, though Gee’s characters never appear to doubt the integrity of the narrative world in which they are situated, the psychological realism with which they are drawn enables her to complicate and even undermine her own satirical technique, thereby rendering the novel’s use of irony far less stable. One instance of this is when she describes a group of characters going to see *Madame Butterfly*. After the performance one of these characters praises the opera’s allegorical power: “So good on imperialism [...] The way they used the American flag [...] It was just like the way Mr Bliss and Mr Bare make use of the flag of the Hesperican empire. The director was very strong on satire”. But not all the others agree: while sat in the theatre, one leans across to another and says, “America is really Hesperica, of course”, and the latter—a respectable publisher dismayed by the parlous state of the cultural industries—hisses back, “That’s obvious” (Gee 140-141). By mapping Puccini’s opera onto *The Flood*’s narrative world, and then having one of her characters—an academic, no less—acknowledge the capabilities of allegory, Gee foregrounds and affirms her own rhetorical technique; however, she simultaneously uses another character to satirise it, self-consciously drawing attention to where her own narrative discourse “devolves” into caricature. The result is a text that hybridises culturally legitimate mimetic forms (allegory, opera, narrative realism) with their “baser” and more overt counterparts (caricature, burlesque, the fantastical) in such a way that their collective relationship with the world they represent—our world—is simultaneously earnest without being po-faced and parodic without being reductive. Sarah Dillon describes the novel’s aesthetics as “cartoonesque” and argues that Gee “savag[e]s the world she is representing *in and by the method of that representation*—a method more subtle and powerful, and definitely more unsettling, than that of direct narrative

realism” (Dillon 385, 386 emphasis added). This strategy has the added benefit of allowing the novel to remain formally playful without ever becoming arch or self-indulgent. Dowling dismisses many of the textual experiments that Gee conducts early on in *The Burning Book* as “obvious and tedious [...] postmodernist exercises in exposing the fictionality of the text in order to create a genuine sense of crisis” (Dowling 186). *The Flood*, by contrast, could never be accused of this because its rhetorical technique allows it to be formally innovative while maintaining a ruthless focus on the world it is satirising. Consequently, despite the fact that the narrative world of *The Flood* is (superficially) further removed from our own world when compared to that of *The Burning Book*, it feels politically engaged throughout.

One way in which this engagement manifests itself is in Gee’s representation of the contemporary urban experience. A little like *The Black Album*, *The Flood* is deeply concerned with how urban development reifies exclusionary logics operating at social, cultural and economic levels. Its disaggregated setting represents the division that is observable everywhere in modern British cities. Its wealthiest residents live in “cavernous house[s]” in leafy suburbs on higher ground where they have access to “better services: trichologists, reflexologists, manicurists, chiropodists, naturopaths, osteopaths, homeopaths, and chic small shops” (Gee *Flood* 51, 14). By contrast, its poorer, non-white population are confined to the Towers—decrepit blocks in low-lying areas, separated from the city and each other by the rising floodwater—and must commute to their menial jobs on waterbuses full of “[g]rey-faced people, packed together, slumped by pathetic small hills of possessions” (174). In the Towers it is a battle to obtain even the most basic goods: “We couldn’t get milk, or papers, or nothing”, one resident complains, “We, you know, bartered, some days, for food [...] The government did fuck all for us” (170). And while the city’s more privileged residents furnish their homes with paintings by fashionable artists, the walls here are scrawled with the eschatological ravings of a religious cult known as the Last Days. When the flood comes, the reader doesn’t doubt that the poorest will be first to drown.

We have, of course, encountered this landscape before. The Towers are

more than a little redolent of Winterson's Venice, and symbolise everything the Thatcherite press lamented in the British inner cities during the 1980s: failed experiments in modernist urban planning that house the multitudinous excluded and seem ready to ignite in violence at any moment. Among Gee's huge cast of characters, they are home to a self-hating homosexual ex-convict, a dysfunctional black family and an interracial lesbian couple, and frequently play host to violent demonstrations while suffering the contempt and weary anxiety of the city's (white) suburbanites. Waking up one morning, one of the latter turns on the news to find "more of the same [...] another distant city was resisting liberation; nearer home, more riots had erupted in the Towers, in a block which had had no power for seven days" (85). Gee's mention here of Hesperian attempts to impose freedom through occupation is plainly intended to satirise the US-led incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq, but they are also redolent of Imperial France's frustrated attempts to dominate Venice in *The Passion*, and to some extent echo Thatcherite urban policies of the 1980s, when the idea of freedom was used to justify the invasive process of gentrification. There is also an implicit connection in this passage between the kind of violence engaged in abroad and that delivered upon the excluded at home; however, where the former is represented as a highly mediatised series of spectacular events, the latter has more in common with what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence". This kind of violence, Nixon writes, is "deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie seats and flat screen TVs with the pyrotechnics of Shock and Awe" and instead takes place over great lengths of time, obscuring accountability by being "driven inward, [and] somatised into cellular dramas of mutation" (Rob Nixon 445).¹²⁶ It finds a correlative in the morbidities suffered

¹²⁶ Nixon outlines this concept in an essay on Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People*, in which he argues that the latter "gives focus to three of the defining characteristics of the contemporary neoliberal order: first, the widening chasm—within and between nations—that separates the mega-rich from the destitute; second, the attendant burden of unsustainable ecological degradation that impacts the health and livelihood of the poor most directly; and third, the way, under cover of a free market ideology, powerful transnational corporations exploit the lopsided universe of deregulation, whereby laws and loopholes are selectively applied in a marketplace a lot freer for some societies and classes than for others" (Rob Nixon 444). Though Sinha's novel concerns itself far more explicitly with these subjects than *The Flood*, Gee's novel might be said to

by those who fall into contact with the floodwater: as Gee writes, the latter is considered “dangerous [...] there’s talk about some virus”; soon after falling into a murky pool of the stuff one child begins to show “the strange red buboes [...] the sharp stigmata of flood sickness” on his body (Gee *Flood* 224, 281). Given their physical proximity to the floodwater and systematic neglect by the health authorities, the residents of the Towers are likely to suffer the kind of somatic violence Nixon describes—indeed, this is perhaps why Gee characterises the waterbuses as “floating hospitals” (174). And to this extent we might read the Towers, like Winterson’s Venice, as a watery zone of morbidity existing in a politically and spatially ambiguous relation to the rest of the city; home to a ragtag bunch of *homines sacri*.

However, rather than trying to give narrative expression to the slow violence that is likely to be suffered by these figures as a consequence of their excluded status, Gee opts once more to depict an apocalypse. This approach might be deemed unsuitable, since it refuses to confront on a social or representational level the kind of violence that accompanies environmental change; Gee could be accused of forsaking a potentially original take on the intersection of morbidity with political and spatial exclusion in the UK in favour of a narrative strategy that reasserts the primacy of the spectacular event.¹²⁷

achieve much the same thing.

¹²⁷ The violence that arises out of environmental degradation differs from nuclear apocalypse in that where the latter is usually imagined as immediate, total and blind to social distinctions, the former often takes place over long periods of time and overwhelmingly affects the already excluded. Nixon argues that “[f]rom a narrative perspective” the “invisible, mutagenic theatre” of slow violence “is slow-paced but open-ended, eluding the tidy closure, the narrative containment, imposed by [...] orthodoxies of victory and defeat” (Rob Nixon 445). And Mike Davis points out that “global warming is not H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*, where invading Martians democratically annihilate humanity without class or ethnic distinction. Climate change, instead, will produce dramatically unequal impacts across regions and social classes, inflicting the greatest damage upon poor countries with the fewest resources for meaningful adaptation” (Davis “Ark” 37). Narratives that are sensitive to these processes are increasingly common in literature written in or about the global south—*Animal’s People* being a particularly good example. However, they are less common in contemporary British fiction, despite the established tendency to use morbidity and life expectancy as measures of social exclusion, and the relatively large disparities that these measures have demonstrated between the wealthier parts of southeast England and

Nonetheless, it does have the effect of locating *The Flood* on the same thematic continuum as her earlier work, and allows us to read it as one episode in an ongoing engagement with the concepts of newness and renewal, beginning and beginning again. As Dillon writes of Gee's decision to indulge her apocalyptic imagination once more:

Given that, in contemporary Western discourse apocalypse and its imagery are frequently applied to political and natural events in order to suggest their cataclysmic, disastrous, or catastrophic nature [...] it may seem strange to suggest that apocalyptic narratives are a strategy for confronting and defeating the threat of remainderless destruction. But it does not seem so strange if one recalls that in the biblical tradition apocalyptic narratives predict both the end of the world and the coming of a new age [...] Biblical apocalyptic narratives thus both confront and diffuse the threat of total destruction, since they describe, reveal or predict cataclysmic events but only and always with the guarantee of a postcataclysmic continuance, be it in this world or the next. (Dillon 375-76)

To the extent that Dillon's remarks on *The Flood* also apply to *The Burning Book*, we might read both novels as points in a singular narrative that uses the concept of "postcataclysmic continuance" inherent to apocalyptic discourse as a means of encouraging us to face our capacity to begin, and to continue to begin. Indeed, this reading only becomes more persuasive when we consider the number of characters from Gee's earlier texts who reappear in the 2005 novel. Some of these, having already experienced one apocalypse, are resurrected solely in order to suffer another: for instance, Angela, Lorna and Henry are all alive and well despite the nuclear fire that supposedly killed them—along with everything else—at the end of *The Burning Book*. And they are not the only characters to have miraculously survived violent deaths: as Dillon points out, "[T]he writer

those living in Scotland and the north.

Moira Penny is very much alive and kicking despite presumably falling to her death in Gee's first novel *Dying, in Other Words* [1981]" and "Isaac, the homosexual art dealer who definitely died of AIDS in *Where Are the Snows?* is here resurrected" only to endure death by drowning (380).

This is certainly an unusual strategy, but it is one that Dillon, drawing on the analyses of M.H. Abrams, argues to be wholly of a piece with the apocalyptic tradition, since its "recursive procedure [...] replicates that of Revelation, which 'represents the present and future by replicating or alluding to passages in earlier biblical texts'" (381). Moreover, in the context of our own discussion, I think it serves to make Gee's novel more urgent, since to some extent it divorces her preoccupation with apocalypse from atomic weapons and draws attention to the broader ways in which the world is being placed under threat. As Bowen-Moore's comments on "nuclearism" imply, while our capacity for world-destruction might nowadays be measured in terms of emissions per capita rather than stockpiles and lethality, the menace to natality consists no more or less in the current ecological crisis than it did in the crisis that emerged when particularly invidious relations between two ideological belligerents coincided with the evolution of especially destructive weapons technologies. In fact, such moments are merely individual episodes in a much grander historical narrative with far graver political significance. And we might argue that Gee says something similar by resurrecting characters from her own work already associated with death and world-destruction and destroying them all over again using different means. For it enables her to import the concerns of *The Burning Book* into a new and more contemporary setting while suggesting that, though the specifics of the threat may have changed, the reasons behind it remain the same: contempt for the world, and a failure to recognise the importance of ensuring the possibility of the new both now and in the future.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Apropos of this, it is worth noting that *The Flood* continues Gee's concern with childrearing: Angela is now struggling with the demands of motherhood, inflicting the wounds that she received from Lorna upon her own daughter, Gerda. In an echo of *The Burning Book* that is so transparent it is must surely have been self-conscious, she shouts during an argument with her daughter, "Why can't you just be normal?", despite the fact that she was hardly a normal child herself, and was rebuked in similar terms by her own mother as a teenager (Gee *Flood* 210).

As in *The Burning Book*, the last chapter of *The Flood* describes an apocalypse: “the white line of water mov[es] in” and crashes over Gee’s characters, who “suddenly see how puny they are” as the maelstrom pulls them in and under (Gee *Flood* 308, 318). However, once more, the end seems to contain within it the possibility of a new beginning: as the water subsides, Gee writes, “three thousand generations of humans stiff and damp from their spell underground / push [...] up alive from the flood-washed catacombs / pulling themselves to their feet like apes” (320). In another epilogue that uses the representation of “post-cataclysmic continuance” to remind us of the preciousness of the world while warning that the threat of its destruction remains, Gee describes her characters emerging into a new city, a heavenly city—and one that she describes conspicuously without deploying the “cartoonish” technique that marks her novel up to this point. After they have “burst up” out of the water the victims of the apocalypse find themselves “in a round house full of water-lilies” before running into the sunlight through “cast-iron doors with their Victorian name-plate, ‘Kew Gardens, London’” (321, 322). And in the closing passages the narrator describes how, “stunned by the arc of the sun through the sky”,

they come now, arm in arm, flowing like water into their future. They pass without seeing us, homing, home, here in the city whose name is time, glimpsed long ago, across the river, the ideal city which was always waiting [...] Above the waters that have covered the earth, stained waters, bloody waters, water heaving with wreck and horror, pulling down papers, pictures, people [...] See, here they come, where all are welcome [...] Here we come, to lie down at last. (324-325)

I think this is where we should end this study: with Gee’s profoundly ambivalent conclusion and the complex questions it begs of us. Do the heavenly implications of this scenario merely confirm the deaths described in the novel’s last chapter? Or does the prelapsarian bliss Gee’s characters now enjoy suggest that the

experience of death cannot be all bad? What is the significance of her Edenic representation of Kew Gardens? This is where Gee placed her readers before the apocalypse of *The Burning Book*: does *The Flood's* conclusion mark a return to the narrative world of that novel? Or does it represent the return of the “real”? We are, after all, in an actual place, in an actual city: is Gee trying to locate utopia in the real world? Or does the final sentence, which describes us lying down, link “reality” with quietism? What exactly is the nature of this post-apocalyptic world? It is textual, obviously, but is it political? We see people living together, happily: “No one is mad here”, Gee writes, “no one is angry” (323). Does this speak of the demise of agonism, the demise of politics? Or does it speak of a revival of *amor mundi* and the imperative *volō ut sis*? Is this world something we have now? Something we might eventually possess? Or is it something that will never be ours, but which inspires us to reach for it nonetheless?

These are the questions that *The Flood's* conclusion asks us, and for the time being I think it best to leave them unanswered. Because to the extent that they leave us not with failure, not with capitulation, but with a vision of beginning anew—and a challenge—they also represent a modicum of hope. Insubstantial as it might be, this scrap of optimism may be the best we can expect.

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