FICTIONS OF A NEW IMPERIAL ORDER:
WWII NOSTALGIA IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LITERATURE

by

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I focus on a number of British novels written since 1995 that engage with the events of the Second World War. I analyze the extent to which these literary representations of WWII enable and/or subvert the consolidation and justification of current imperialist ideology and practice, through the reproduction and/or deconstruction of WWII nostalgia. I argue that nostalgia for the “just war” depends upon the repression of the colonial past and, thus, I also explore evidence in this literature of the return of the repressed: colonialism haunts these narratives. However, alongside the racialism of colonialism, my readings of these texts expose traditional gender norms and capitalist triumphalism as the other major ideological currents that sustain both WWII nostalgia and contemporary forms of imperialism.

The novels I deal with are from a range of literary categories, from those characterized as “low” or “middle-brow,” to those canonized within the pantheon of “high-brow” literature, as well as those characterized as “multicultural” or “postcolonial.” I examine the ways in which the literary “classes” or categories, within which these various texts are circumscribed, condition and frame their reception. Ultimately, I seek to reveal the ways in which various accounts of the past, and specifically the Second World War, enable different understandings of the present.
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Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................................. iii
Table of Contents................................................................................................................................... iv
Chapter 1 Introduction I: Imperialism and Nostalgia ............................................................................. 1
Chapter 2 Charlotte Gray: WWII Nostalgia in Popular Fiction............................................................. 15
Chapter 3 Atonement: WWII Nostalgia in Elite Fiction ......................................................................... 43
Chapter 4 Introduction II: Marketing Multiculturalism ......................................................................... 82
Chapter 5 Small Island and the Making of Multicultural Britain ......................................................... 99
Chapter 6 "Cool Britannia," White Teeth, and WWII ............................................................................ 133
Chapter 7 Conclusion: Resisting WWII Nostalgia in Amitav Ghosh's Glass Palace ... 169
Works Cited .......................................................................................................................................... 200
Chapter 1

Introduction I: Imperialism and Nostalgia

I. WWII Nostalgia and the “New Imperialism”

In an interview published in The Observer to mark the 60th anniversary of D-Day, Tristram Hunt prefaced his piece with the contention that his interviewee, Prime Minister Tony Blair, “appeared to relish our discussion on the meaning and legacy of D-Day and the Second World War.” Blair claimed that World War II represents the liberation of Europe from the evils of Nazism: “[F]ascism was defeated and peace in Europe began for the first time ever. It was a triumph over probably the most evil ideology that has ever been put forward in the world and it has ushered in an era of unprecedented stability and peace.” Reflecting on the spirit of national unity inspired by the fight against the Nazis, Blair stated: “Everyone then knew the nature of the threat, and the war was a tremendous coming together.”

This representation of the war as a moment of national cohesion, where both enemy and ally were unambiguously defined, is central to contemporary constructions of British national identity.

In Postcolonial Melancholia (2005) Paul Gilroy points to the contemporary obsession with recounting the Second World War. The anti-Nazi war, he argues, provides a foundation for Britain’s sense of identity, the rallying together of an entire population against the forces of totalitarianism. The “just war” has been constructed as a “mythic moment of national becoming” which retains a “special grip on Britain’s culture and self-understanding” (87). However, for Gilroy, in spite of the representation of Allied

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1 Tristram Hunt, “Tony Blair in Conversation with Tristram Hunt: ‘D-Day’s Outcome was the Beginning of a New Europe’,” The Observer [London], 6 June 2004: F19.
governments as the forces of liberalism and tolerance waging just war against the
“Ubermensch,” the glorification of the Second World War is, in fact, indicative of
nostalgia for a mythic racial homogeneity. This nostalgia is symptomatic of a longing for
“the recovery or preservation of endangered whiteness” (88), and for a clearly defined
national identity that can act as a panacea for the contemporary anxiety produced by an
insecure, postcolonial condition. WWII functions to “connect people to the fading core of
a culture and a history that is confronting a loss of certainty about its own distinctive
content and its noble world mission” (88). Images of the war against Hitler “provide a
touchstone for the desirable forms of togetherness that are used continually to evaluate
the chaotic, multicultural present and find it lacking” (88). The “memory of the country at
war against foes who are simply, tidily and uncomplicatedly evil,” Gilroy notes,
reinforces the idea that “we are still good while our uncivilized enemies are irredeemably
evil” (88). This consolidation of British identity around the primary dualism of good
versus evil – the allied victory “was a triumph over probably the most evil ideology that
has ever been put forward in the world” - is inseparable from the binary logic that
underpins racism and imperialism. As Gilroy points out, in her renaming of Nazism as
“race imperialism,” Hannah Arendt suggested that the “characteristic brutality of
European colonial rule was one of the most important ‘elements which crystallized into
totalitarianism’” (15). By associating Britain with unimpeachable good and effacing the
connections between colonialism and totalitarianism, British nostalgia for the “just war”
can be seen as part of a larger proliferation of revisionist accounts of imperial and
colonial history.
Undeniably, depictions of Britain’s righteous war against evil so prevalent within current popular and political discourse work to circumvent Britain’s responsibility for its own racial imperialism, itself not so far removed from that of its Nazi cousin if we are to believe anti-colonial thinkers like Albert Memmi, who argued in 1957 that colonialism is “one variety of fascism” (63); or, Aimé Césaire, who wrote, in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), that European peoples “have cultivated Nazism.” For, according to Césaire, “before it was inflicted on them,” European people “absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples” (174). Furthermore, numerous scholars have indicated that selective memories and mythic distortions of WWII have served to efface a series of other major atrocities for which the Allied governments were responsible: the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the bombings of Dresden and Hamburg, as well as the numerous bloody wars that have been waged since the defeat of the Nazis. As Noam Chomsky points out in *Hegemony or Survival* (2003), in “the war crimes trials after World War II… crimes qualified as crimes if they were carried out by the enemy, not the Allies” (20-21). Indeed, as American literary scholar Marianna Torgovnick points out in *The War Complex: World War II in our Time* (2005), “the first and major Nuremberg trial, the International Military Tribunal (IMT), carefully structured charges against defendants to avoid the possibility that using atomic bombs against civilians could be constructed as war crimes” (6).

The construction of the holocaust as an unprecedented and exceptional event spearheaded by a deranged and power-hungry lunatic disavows the extent to which WWII was a consequence of intra-European capitalist conflicts initiated during the First
World War, as well as of the complicity of the Allied governments in the rise of Fascism in Europe. In *Another World is Possible* (2002), Canadian scholar-activist David McNally points out that the Second World War was an extension of the First, whose “root cause” was “the conflict between imperialist colonizers and the ‘late-comer’ industrial powers who lacked colonial empires on the scale of their rivals” (150). As McNally asserts, for much of the western ruling class Hitler’s ascendency was originally welcomed and seen as a successful way to crush the development of working class and socialist movements. While individual citizens and movements fought hard against Fascism and its virulent racial imperialism, for the Allied governments this was not a war fought against the “poison of racism,” as British journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown contends in *Imagining the New Britain* (2001). Rather, in McNally’s words, “When they went to war, it was not fascism the Allies set out to defeat, but German expansionism” (151). In fact, racism was a central component of the ideology that fuelled the Allied cause. As prominent popular historian Howard Zinn points out in *Declarations of Independence* (1990), Churchill’s response to the news regarding the mistreatment of Allied POWs by Japanese forces clearly illustrates the sort of racism that subtended the “righteous cause”: “We shall wipe them out, every one of them, men, women, and children. There shall not be a Japanese left on the face of this earth” (qtd. 15).

However, while the national narrative of the war is entirely sanitized of such evidence, the “mythology of righteous anti-Nazi war – victimage, unimpeachable moral authority, and then eventual triumph” (Gilroy, 116) – is currently being deployed to justify an immediate imperialist agenda. As Gilroy points out, “The warm glow that results from the nation’s wholesome militarism has combined pleasurably with the
unchallenged moral architecture of a Manichean world in which a number of dualistic pairings – black and white, savage and civilized, nature and culture, bad and good – can be tidily superimposed on one another” (88). In this way, the invocation of WWII serves as an implicit justification for current US/British imperialist wars in the Middle East, eliding a range of resistance fighters with the spectre of Nazism. This is made explicit by such comments as those of Tony Blair who, in the above mentioned Observer interview, argued that “the threats to liberty and freedom in the contemporary world today… call for the same resolve and clarity of purpose [as the defeat of Nazism required] if they are to be overcome.”

Statements such as Blair’s also provide evidence that supports the contentions of Derek Gregory who, in his recent book The Colonial Present (2004), emphasizes that current narrative revisions and erasures of the past “are not only delusions; they are also dangerous… For what else is the war on terror other than the violent return of the colonial past, with its split geographies of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’, ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’?” (11). Significantly, then, in these contemporary invocations of WWII, we find not only a longing for an imaginary homogenous national identity and the erasure of the colonial past, but a nostalgia for “the aggrandizing swagger of colonialism itself, for its privileges and power” (10). Many contemporary reconstructions of WWII need to be understood as part of an imperialist nostalgia that serves to justify new forms of cultural, economic, and military imperialism currently being imposed by the United States and its allies.

This link between nostalgic evocations of WWII and neo-imperialism is made explicit in The Observer interview with Blair. According to his interviewer, Blair sees
himself as “the bridge between America and Europe” and D-Day as representative of the 
“triumph of civilised Atlanticism.” D-Day, Blair argues, should remind us that “the 
transatlantic alliance between Europe and America is of central importance to the future 
of the world.” Just beneath the surface of this triumphant rhetoric the contours of this 
new imperialism are visible. This “new imperialism” is articulated plainly by Blair’s 
former foreign policy advisor, Robert Cooper. In his article “The Postmodern State” 
Cooper differentiates between postmodern states (European Union, Canada, Japan, 
possibly the US) and the pre-modern or “failed states” who are bastions for “drug, crime, 
or terrorist syndicates” (16). In this world that has “grown honest,” where “powerful 
states no longer want to fight or conquer” (14), Cooper calls for a new kind of 
imperialism, one which “rests today on the voluntary principle” (18) and is “acceptable to 
a world of human rights and cosmopolitan values” (17). Paradoxically, however, he 
argues that when dealing with “more old-fashioned kinds of states… we need to revert to 
the rougher methods of an earlier era – force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is 
necessary… Among ourselves we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle, 
we must also use the laws of the jungle” (16). Here we see the normally disavowed 
connections between this new imperialism and older brutal forms of colonial rule drawn 
quite starkly. Indeed, such evidence confirms Gilroy’s suggestion that “the doctrine of 
pre-emptive might… [can] be traced to these early colonial adventures and the form of 
warfare they engendered” (15).

For Gilroy, in order to effectively combat the historical revisionism that is a key 
feature of the justifications for this new imperialism, “an increased familiarity with the 
bloodstained workings of racism – and the distinctive achievements of colonial
governments it inspired and legitimated” (4) is necessary. As Gilroy suggests, it is by investigating “how the brutal, dualistic opposition between black and white became entrenched and has retained its grip” (30) that we will begin to untangle the ways in which our present is determined by racial logic. By looking honestly at colonialism, we will come to see its legacy in the persistence of race thinking and the differential treatment of non-white immigrants and their descendants. However, and here is where I believe Gilroy’s analysis falls short, by emphasizing race as the primary and determining discourse through which the projects of imperialism have been elaborated, Gilroy goes some way toward undermining the historical account he argues is necessary for a full understanding of current geopolitical conditions. In order to fully grasp the ways in which race has become “a self-evident force of nature” (8), it is necessary to understand the contiguous histories of sexual and economic oppression which are its intimate allies. Indeed, the conspicuous absence of women from Gilroy’s discussions attests to an implicit reassertion of explicitly masculine binaries hinging on race, ethnicity, and nation. The centrality of gender and class must be recognized as key categories both within the histories of colonialism and in this new phase of imperialist violence in which the rapid feminization of both labour and poverty is central to the global capitalist economy which fuels current war (Amin; McNally; UN fact Sheet). It is only by sustaining a simultaneous critique of race, gender, and class that we will be able to fully address the

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2 Indeed, the historical construction of race and the elaborate categorizing of phenotypic and biological differences between peoples that accompanied and enabled processes of colonization took as its foundation the “common sense” of gender difference. As Anne McClintock convincingly argues in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* the colonial conquest of “virgin lands” was enacted through the “metaphysics of gender violence” (23). The violation of aboriginal peoples and their lands was naturalized through metaphors of gender hierarchies; relationships drawn between women, the working class, and colonized people became fundamental to the justifications of the subordination of all three groups of people.
links between an obsessive nostalgia for WWII, the “bloodstained workings” of the colonial past, and the imperialist present, or what Samir Amin has called the era of “permanent war”.

II. Literature and War Nostalgia

In *The War Complex*, Torgovnick addresses connections between the colonial past and the imperialist present. She points to the central role played by representations of WWII in the constitution of the present. She looks at the ways in which popular representations of WWII have helped condition the reception of current global conflicts by the American public. Pointing to the ways in which modern technologies of representation condition our experience of events, she writes that television, during the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath, was “the communal hearth around which we gathered… shaping the events of 9/11 even as we lived them” (xv). In fact, Torgovnick admits that in her own memories of the events of that day she has difficulty recalling the distinction between the reality of what she saw and experienced and the depiction of events on TV. This difficulty highlights “the extraordinary power of photographic and televised images to fix cultural memory… and to extend it beyond the original witness” (xvii). Through image-based media, Torgovnick suggests, the attacks of 9/11 quickly became inscribed as analogous to Pearl Harbour. This analogy further consolidated the construction of the US as the innocent victim of an organized and virulent enemy.

While Torgovnick characterizes television and other image-based forms of media as the instruments of ideological indoctrination, her vision of literature is considerably more optimistic. In literature, Torgovnick sees the possibility of locating memories and
histories that have been elided and erased from cultural memory, and finding places where distortions of WWII might be challenged. She sees the historical novel, in particular, as a vehicle for the exposure of disavowed connections between World War II and colonialism, both of which “espouse control over others and a will toward violence” (96). Grounding herself in the insights of formalist critics like Shklovsky, she argues that historical novels defamiliarize common-sense understandings of the world and allow us to see “things new through strange eyes” (18).

However, Torgovnick’s analysis too easily presumes the autonomy of literature from the social and material conditions of its production. Torgovnick fails to acknowledge the obvious fact that literature is not always the vehicle for enlightened or progressive visions of historical or cultural memory. Just as frequently literature, itself a powerful technology of representation, can be a potent force for the consolidation and acceleration of dominant and dangerous mythologies. As Terry Eagleton points out in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), it is necessary to recognize that “all art springs from an ideological conception of the world” (17); as critics, he warns, we must thus be aware of the “relations between [literary] works and the ideological worlds they inhabit – relations which emerge not just in ‘themes’ and ‘preoccupations’, but in style, rhythm, image, quality, and…*form*” (6).

In fact, according to Gilroy, reactionary constructions of British national identity are evident in current publishing trends. One of the features of the “cultural disorientation that [has] accompanie[d] the collapse of imperial certainties and postcolonial nihilism… has been a publishing industry bonanza dominated by books that either seek to diagnose or remedy the national pathology” (113-4). While Gilroy focuses specifically on popular
non-fiction such as Jeremy Paxman’s *The English*, Peter Ackroyd’s *Albion* and Roger Scurton’s *An Elegy For England*, the trend he identifies can also be found in historical fiction, which has experienced a corresponding boom. For in both kinds of literature we find the “sense of longing and belonging” that a prominent writer such as Ackroyd (in his 2002 *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*) identifies with the particularity of an Englishness characterized by its “reverence for the past” and its “affinity for natural landscape” (qtd. in Gilroy, 114).

As the literary critic Suzanne Keen has argued in “The Historical Turn in British Fiction,” the historical novel in Britain “has risen to prominence since the late 1980s” (171). This ascent to distinction corresponded with the Thatcher government’s agenda for the globalization of the marketplace and the privatization of social programs. The rise of the historical novel was also, Keen points out, contiguous with both a diminished focus on history in the public school curriculum and the explosion of the heritage industry in the UK. Indeed, the popularity of historical fiction “arguably stimulated a booming heritage industry’s focus on a positive, marketable past capable of inspiring patriotism and attracting tourists” (169).

Thus Torgovnick’s assertion that “a wave of historical novels about World War II may be just ahead of us, and is overdue” (96) entirely overlooks the fact that since the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII in 1995 and the eruption of memorial celebrations across Britain there has been a marked increase in literary representations of the war.³

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Interestingly, this increase also corresponds to transformations in the publishing industry, notably the expiration of the Net Book Agreement in September of 1995, which was the logical culmination of the free market legacy of Thatcherite thinking. In this new retail-driven economy, it is worth noting the sudden
The immense popularity of these historical fictions is corroborated further by the fact that a significant number have been made into popular mainstream films. Much of the fiction written about WWII in the last decade has partaken of precisely the sort of nostalgia circulating within other forms of popular culture pointed to by both Gilroy and Torgovnick. These texts elaborate narratives of the “just war” that ultimately serve to whitewash the colonial past and glorify the colonial present. Furthermore, these novels often claim to reveal an “authentic” past, while concealing the relationships between their “real” representations of the past and the ideological use of such representations in the present. As British critic David Lowenthal claims in Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History (1996), “In domesticating the past we enlist it for present causes. Legends of origin and endurance, of victory or calamity, project the present back, the past forward; they align us with forbears whose virtues we share and whose vices we shun (xi). As Lowenthal suggests, the past can easily become incorporated into the stories we tell ourselves in order to justify our attitudes and behaviour in the present. The stories from the past that we choose to tell are those that enable our understandings of ourselves. In other words, our interpretations of the present motivate us to tell certain stories about the past and to exclude others.

In this dissertation, I focus on a number of British novels, produced since the 1995 eruption of war celebrations in Britain, which recount and/or engage with the events of WWII. I analyze the extent to which these literary representations of WWII enable and/or subvert the consolidation and justification of current imperialist ideology and practice, through the reproduction and/or deconstruction of imperial nostalgia. Since this
nostalgia depends upon the repression of the colonial past, I also explore evidence in this literature of the return of the repressed: colonialism haunts these narratives. However, alongside the racialism of colonialism traditional gender norms and capitalist triumphalism emerge as the other major ideological currents that sustain both WWII nostalgia and contemporary forms of imperialism.

The novels I deal with are from a range of literary categories, from those characterized as “low” or “middle-brow,” to those canonized within the pantheon of “high-brow” literature, as well as those characterized as “multicultural” or “postcolonial.” I examine the ways in which the literary “classes” or categories within which these various texts are circumscribed condition and frame their reception. Somewhat unconventionally, I work extensively with popular review material as well as critical scholarly work on these texts. Given that I am considering the ubiquitous nature of WWII nostalgia, I wish to demonstrate the extent to which this nostalgia has become a dominant feature of diverse readings in (and of) the present. In other words, in keeping with my desire to challenge the notion that elite fiction is more likely to subvert dominant ideology than popular fiction, I wish also to challenge implicit assumptions that “elite” readings are less invested in “common sense” politics of the present than popular readings.

In Chapter Two I focus on the “low-brow” or “sub-literary” novel Charlotte Gray written by Sebastian Faulks. This novel is perhaps the clearest example of war nostalgia, illuminating some of the most obvious ideological work WWII novels are often engaged in. In the third chapter, I focus on the “elite” novel Atonement by author Ian McEwan. In this chapter I explore whether work characterized as “literary” might avoid the WWII
nostalgia (and its implicit justifications of colonialism and neo-imperialism) so fully exemplified by *Charlotte Gray*. I examine the ways in which the formal literary qualities of these novels, realism and postmodernism, respectively, work differently to support, consolidate, and/or subvert WWII nostalgia. I consider both the texts’ formal qualities and the social and historical conditions of their production with the aim of illuminating the relationship between texts and the ideological importance of the WWII narrative to current imperialist discourse. The exploration of the relationship between these texts’ commodification and the ideological work they perform will prepare the ground for the sustained critique of the literary category “multicultural” that I make in the fourth chapter.

In this fourth chapter I examine the social and political processes whereby certain texts are recognized and celebrated as “multicultural” texts, emblematic of a homogenized non-white or immigrant experience. This process of recognition and celebration ignores the vital literary heterogeneity of these works and the ways in which the heteroglossic text challenges the homogenizing influence of its frame. Ultimately, though, I argue that, notwithstanding the heteroglossic nature of these “multicultural texts,” they tend – as a result of the interplay between their content and the particular frames of reference which condition their reception – to work towards the consolidation of a mono-logic that operates in the service of the current imperialist world order.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, I look at novels that have been explicitly classified as “multicultural” and that might be thought to avoid some of the representational traps into which the seemingly more “mainstream” texts studied in the preceding chapters fall. I focus my analysis on Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*. Both
Smith and Levy’s portrayals of the treatment of black and Asian people in Britain during and after the Second World War do important work to undermine the fiction of a racially homogenous past, as well as the importance of “race” as a category of differentiation. However, the simple addition of black and Asian veterans to the story of Britain’s “wholesome militarism,” does little to disrupt the binary thinking upon which current racist imperialism depends. In fact, these depictions of WWII as a battle against evil fought by black and white alike work to circumvent British responsibility for its own racial imperialism. Thus, in these chapters, I explore the ways in which these “multicultural” novels, while seemingly working to disrupt the racist logic of imperialism, in fact can be seen to support the very discourse which sustains it.

In the concluding chapter, I move outside my study of specifically British literature to consider the novel *The Glass Palace* by the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh. This novel is an exploration of British colonialism in the subcontinent from the British invasion of Burma in 1885 to the end of the twentieth century. The exploration of WWII and the formation of the Indian National Army is an important focus in the novel. However, by situating the exploration of the war within a larger investigation of colonial history, Ghosh is able to avoid WWII nostalgia. In fact, Ghosh’s work can be read as a commentary on the ways in which the past is mobilized to justify the politics of the present. Ghosh’s work thus exemplifies the fact that, as Alan Sinfield asserts in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, “despite the powerful institutions through which dominant stories are maintained, there are other stories – subordinated perhaps, but not extinguished” (34). These subordinated stories are essential to the political transformation of our world. For as Sinfield points out, quoting Terry Eagleton’s
Social conflict manifests itself as competition between stories. Political change, as Terry Eagleton observes, will be coupled with ‘a fierce conflict over signs and meanings, as the newly emergent class strives to wrest the most cherished symbols from the grip of its rivals and redefine them in its own image’. (30)

Since stories are essential to how we understand ourselves and each other, the field of storytelling becomes one of contest. Thus, the different stories we tell must be read for their political dimensions and considered for the ways in which they work to consolidate or contest various political understandings of the world.
Chapter 2

*Charlotte Gray: WWII Nostalgia in Popular Fiction*

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag, discussing the production of photographs specifically of World War Two, points out that a significant number of these photographs, which provided “documentary evidence” of the war, were in fact staged. However, in spite of such revelations, “many staged photographs turn back into historical evidence, albeit of an impure kind – like most historical evidence” (57). Sontag’s assertions regarding the use of fictionalized representations as evidence of “historical truth” are important for a discussion of contemporary war fiction: To what extent does war fiction become part of the collective memory/narrative of war, part of the “evidence” deployed to explain or justify the present? To what extent is “collective memory” the product of contemporary narrative reproduction? For as Sontag asserts, “Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory… But there is collective instruction” (85).

As an initial site of investigation, I will turn to a recent British war novel, *Charlotte Gray* (1999), that provides an especially clear example of WWII nostalgia. *Charlotte Gray* is a story about “ordinary people in extraordinary times.” It is a romantic account of the moral heights human beings can command under the most trying circumstances. The novel depicts the “coming together” of regular people under the banner of the anti-Nazi struggle. This depiction of the (glorious) daring and bravery to which lead characters are summoned by the horror of the Holocaust is coupled with the intrigue of the romance between a young Scottish woman and a British RAF fighter. The
story follows Charlotte Gray who moves south to London to find work during the early stages of the war and falls in love with the airman, Peter Gregory. When Gregory goes missing after a supply drop over France, Charlotte becomes a spy and, with her near-perfect French, joins “the noble cause of resistance” (12) in order to find him. Her mission leads her to the small town of Lavaurette, where in spite of the successful completion of her official errand she decides to stay, both to work for the resistance and in the hopes of eventually locating her lover. Her friendship with a key member of the local resistance and his father forms a central part of the book. The story examines the occupation of “Free France,” and follows the deportations of Jews from the area to the death camps. Central is the tragic story of two little boys whom a number of families in the community unsuccessfully attempt to shelter and hide. The novel resolves with the reunion of Charlotte and her lover, both safely back in London.

*Charlotte Gray* was written by well-established fiction writer Sebastian Faulks who has been heralded as “one of Britain’s most popular novelists.” Faulks specializes in war fiction. As reviewer Jules Smith points out, he “has made war his special subject: he has edited the *Vintage Book of War Stories* as well as writing and presenting ‘Churchill’s Secret Army,’ a Channel 4 television series.” Faulks is the author of eight novels to date. His most popular novels form a loose trilogy that reaches from WWI with *The Girl at the Lion D’Or* (1989), best seller *Birdsong* (1993), which is set during the inter-war period, and *Charlotte Gray* (1999), which takes place during the Second World War.

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With the exception of this website, which is updated regularly and hence has changed since I first did this research, all other website references were last verified on July 20, 2009.

5 Ibid.
I. Realism, “History,” and Sentimentalism

Reviewers have praised Faulks’ strengths as an historical novelist. However, embedded in many celebrations of his skills, “his ability to bring his period settings to life,” is a nostalgia for the past, a belief that a good historical novel (like this one) would somehow give readers unmediated access to the past. In a review published in The Observer, Faulks himself is described in martial terms. Journalist Kate Kellaway observes,

Sebastian Faulks’ study is like a general’s war room. On the walls are meticulous, pencilled plans - as if his new novel were a campaign. The plans were put up to ensure that, over the 50-year trajectory of the novel, he wouldn’t step out of historical line. He’d know when Darwin did this, Einstein that, when cars were first seen on the streets of Vienna…

Faulks would have made a good soldier himself: attentive, upstanding, dutiful. He may not like being interviewed, but he is not about to go Awol.⁶

According to Kellaway’s description, Faulks has become his subject. His engagement with the past has fundamentally shaped his character, endowing him with the characteristics of the hero-soldiers (courageous, honourable, hyper-masculine) about whom we long to read and with whom we too hope to identify, or fall in love. Given the extent to which this immersion in the past has apparently formed the man Faulks is, it is implied that this martial past might also prove morally beneficial for the reader.

Furthermore, Faulks’ attention to historical detail – his maintenance of the “historical

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line” – is constructed simply as the laborious retrieval of a series of accessible facts (for instance, landmark dates of various significant technological inventions); it is figured as an act of discipline and honour (as a “good soldier” “he wouldn’t step out of historical line”). These precisely collected and “unmediated” facts are then, ostensibly, offered to the reader in their purest form.

Indeed, for many reviewers, both professional and amateur, the “realism” of Faulks’ texts seems to double as a guarantor of their quality. *Charlotte Gray*, identified as one of Faulks’ “realist sagas,” is called “refreshingly realistic” by one reader; another comments, “I like *Charlotte Gray* because of the realism”; in another reader review, titled “so realistic,” the reader contends that “the reality of war was shocking” and that “the book made you realise how real this really was.” Significantly, some readers construe the novel as historical evidence about this period: “I learned a lot about the French attitude to Nazism.” Indeed, in the numerous claims that Faulks’ novel “is good on historical facts,” it becomes clear that, as Sontag contends, “history is invoked as a truth beyond appeal” (52).

While it is undoubtedly true that Faulks’ fiction is immensely popular, even a favourable reviewer like Smith points to the “definite elements of sentimental

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7 Ibid
10 M. Burton, “So realistic,” *Amazon.co.uk*, 10 November 2006 <http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0099394316?pageNumber=2>
11 Ibid.
contrivance in Faulks’ writing.” Significantly, however, many reviews themselves engage similarly in sentimental evocations of war: “Faulks seems always to beautifully represent unjust and tragic contrasts of society during war”\(^\text{14}\), “It is a story of struggle and bravery”\(^\text{15}\); “you are caught up in the emotions of the characters as they struggle to save the ones they love, themselves, and their country.”\(^\text{16}\) Here beauty, tragedy, bravery, and patriotism combine to form a picture of maudlin banality: the story of good versus evil, a story in which, in spite of a few tragedies along the way, virtuousness and love are ultimately victorious. It is worth questioning whether these maudlin accounts of the novel might point to a more dangerous aspect of our interest in the “historical reality” offered by this novel. For, as Sontag argues, “sentimentality, notoriously, is entirely compatible with a taste for brutality and worse” (102). Indeed, to what extent is this excessive sentimentality, both in the novel and its reviews, intertwined with a penchant for both “realism” and gratuitous depictions of abjection.

Significantly, in many reader reviews of *Charlotte Gray* it is specifically in relation to the Holocaust that Faulks’ realism is apparently most effective: “This book provides a stark but accurate picture of the horrors of the Holocaust”\(^\text{17}\); “Some very gripping scenes within it focusing on the Jewish camps which are realistic and heart-

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\(^{15}\) A Customer, “Amazing,” *Amazon.co.uk*, 5 August 2005. [http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0099394316/ref=cm_cr_pr_hist_5?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&filterBy=addFiveStar](http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0099394316/ref=cm_cr_pr_hist_5?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&filterBy=addFiveStar)


wrenching descriptions of the terror.” 18 Indeed, the nostalgia for the “reality” of the WWII past seems to be inextricable from a voyeuristic desire to witness a “harrowing” and “unflinching depiction of the familiar story of the Holocaust.” 19 In these reviews the emotional thrill readers derive from their visceral experience of, what readers themselves have referred to as, the “harrowing” depictions of the “horrors of the holocaust” can be seen as “part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value” (Sontag, 23). The irony of this is not lost on all readers. Reader Olly J d contends, after a searing condemnation of the book’s plot and style, “Oh, but he did throw in something about the Holocaust, so it must be a harrowing and poignant read after all…” 20

As Sontag writes, “Pathos, in the form of narrative, does not wear out” (83). Indeed, the familiarity of a particular scene does not diminish its cathartic effect. It may, in fact, enable it: Charlotte Gray’s efficacy as a book that, as Faulks asserts, “is supposed to make you cry” 21 is largely due to the fact that the story it relates is entirely familiar. Discussing the reaction of Iranian audiences to repeated performances of the drama of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, Sontag suggests, “They weep, in part because they have seen it many times. People want to weep” (83). This sort of reaction is evident in a number of reader reviews of Charlotte Gray. For instance, in his review titled “Deeply Unsettled,” reader Fergus O’Brien contends, “The author’s unflinching depiction of the

18 Mrs. C. Cunningham, “The Film was Better,” Amazon.co.uk., 1 September 2006. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/productreviews/0099394316/ref=cm_cr_pr_hist_3?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&filterBy=addThreeStar>
familiar story of the Holocaust disturbed me – mentally, emotionally, even physically… Faulks has achieved the unique feat of making this reader nauseous, yet all the more grateful for it.”22 The (disavowed) pleasure this reader seems to derive from the experience of being “deeply unsettled” (he is grateful for the chance of being made nauseous) resolves itself in both the familiarity of the theme (the Holocaust as an iconic moment of European suffering) and the conventionality of the story itself (it is nausea invoked as a result of a familiar depiction of the Holocaust that solicits his gratitude).

The book, however, represents a version of the Holocaust that circumvents contemplation of Western complicity and relegates such atrocities to the figure of a far-off evil committed by amoral others. As a result, it refuses to confront its readers with the need to reflect on the persistence and ubiquity of racism and other forms of inequality and prejudice. The sentimental stories of Holocaust tragedies, which offer little reflection on the ongoing virulence of racism and imperialism, provide an easy opportunity for readers to experience the thrill of shock and dismay and simultaneously relieve themselves of any responsibility that might arise from the recognition of the historical continuities and ongoing realities of racial imperialism. Indeed, as Sontag points out, such stories placate our conscience, relieve us of responsibility, and allow us to continue to ignore the suffering of others: “So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence” (102). Ultimately, then, this narrative is more comforting than unsettling.

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Furthermore, readers are encouraged to understand the Holocaust as the mise-en-scène for the dramatic emotional development of the protagonist. This is made clear by the publisher’s synopsis of the novel featured on Amazon.co.uk:

[Charlotte] and the reader are drawn ever deeper into the lives of the assimilated French Jews – the children Andre and Jacob whose parents have already been sent to the death camps, and the Levades, father and son. Though ultimately powerless to help, Charlotte nevertheless learns a far deeper understanding of herself and her own family through them.

The Holocaust functions as a setpiece, evoking pathos and tragedy, and providing the space in which the emotional release necessary for Charlotte’s self-discovery is made possible. Genocide acts as a tragic but ultimately productive backdrop for the self-discovery of the protagonist. The cathartic release the book provides for the reader is mirrored and justified by the emotional journey of its heroine.

II. Simple Divisions

Numerous reviews of Charlotte Gray assert that the novel provides a complex look into the “vicissitudes of evil and compassion,”23 that it explores “the full range of collaboration as well as examples of courage and altruism.”24 Indeed, in the face of the pervasive mythology that resistance was a dominant feature of France during the war, when, in fact, the French resistance was constituted by a small minority of the population, the novel does endeavour to represent the complicity of Petain’s Vichy government and

many French citizens with the Nazi agenda.\textsuperscript{25} From the despicable schoolmaster Monsieur Benech, who “spoke as a man who feels the flow of history is at last vindicating his long-held beliefs” (120) and who ultimately tells the Milice the whereabouts of the two Duguay boys, to the gendarme Bernard, “an amiable enough man,” who turns a blind eye and allows the Duguay boys to “go missing,” but arrests the parents and defends himself by arguing that he was simply “obeying orders” (114), to the ironmonger, Madame Galliot, who loudly proclaims to her clientele that the deportation of Jews is “long overdue… they’ve been undermining us, keeping all the best jobs to themselves, swindling proper French people” (109), the novel explores the extent to which the French collaborated with their occupiers. Indeed, as one British character argues, “the anti-Semitism of the French would have found its way to the surface with or without a Nazi invasion. Pétain’s government is merely the expression of a long felt national wish” (25).

However, while the novel may function to alert readers to the disavowed stories of French complicity, it is also clear that French anti-Semitism is set against British righteousness. This is made explicit by one reader’s remarks: “I learned a lot about the French attitude to Nazism, I did not know that so many hated the British.”\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, Charlotte is shocked by “the passion of anti-British feeling” (167). The novel itself sets French complicity with the Nazi invaders in contrast to the healthy alliance between Britain and the United States. Julien Levade, a key member of the resistance and Charlotte’s close friend, reflects on the plight of his Jewish former boss: “They must be

\textsuperscript{25} The myth of a unified, heroic French resistance supported by the masses is explored by the French historian Henry Rousso in his seminal work \textit{The Vichy Syndrome} (1994).

\textsuperscript{26} F. Caldwell, “An ambition not quite realized,” \textit{Amazon.co.uk.}, 15 February 2005. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/productreviews/0099394316/ref=cm_cr_pr_hist_3?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&filterBy=addThreeStar>
patient; they must wait for the English and Americans and for people such as himself who would clear a path for the friendly invaders” (222). This juxtaposition is further evident in a scene that takes place in a Lavaurette café in which a selection of the community’s Vichy sympathizers and Julien converse:

“You’ve read about the allied landings haven’t you? They think the English might try and invade in the north. The Marshal says we’ve got to be ready to see them off. I tell you it won’t be a pretty sight, especially if the Americans join in.”

“The Americans,” said Roudil incredulously. “What’s this got to do with them?”

“They’ve sent a representative to the Free French,” said Julien.

“Well,” said Benech, “that shows just how much they know.” He laughed in rich amusement. “Poor old Americans! They really have the wrong end of the stick.” (121)

By winning the scorn of one of the story’s most manifestly detestable characters (Monsieur Claude Benech), the British/American alliance is clearly characterized as the force of goodness. Furthermore, the Normandy invasion (the invasion of British and American forces from the north) is implicitly alluded to. D-Day was one of the most decisive and dramatic victories for the Allied forces, and one that is consistently invoked to illustrate their glorious sacrifices as they fought against Nazi evil. For instance, in the summer of 2004 numerous events were held to commemorate D-Day. In response to the news that both the Queen and Prime Minister would be attending commemorations in France, Veterans Minister, Ivor Caplin, suggested that “their presence highlights the importance of the D-Day commemorations and sacrifices made by British and
Commonwealth military personnel 60 years ago.”

Significantly, “The visits were announced during a press conference following discussions on international terrorism, Iraq, the Middle East and European defence.”

What is, of course, erased in this depiction of Britain and the US as a benevolent force fighting against the evils of racism and intolerance is any trace of the complicity of the Allied governments in the rise of fascism. Anti-semitic and fascist sympathies were far from abnormal among the political elite in the Allied countries, whose governments, it must be remembered, were compelled to join the war to stop German expansionism but had actively colluded with the Nazis, whom they saw as a bulwark against communism. In fact, as Canadian historians Alvin Finkel and Clement Leibovitz point out in Chamberlain-Hitler Collusion (1997), British support for the German invasion and annexation of Czechoslovakia was intended to provide the vehemently anti-communist Nazis with an eastern front from which to fight Russia. The British collaboration with Nazi forces was largely motivated by a desire to protect capitalism against the encroachment of socialism:

The Bolsheviks were viewed in the circles of the powerful as a ‘virus’ that infected the working class in every country. Worker unrest, growing electoral support for Communist and Socialist parties, and the spread of socialist ideas throughout European nations’ non-European colonies were blamed on the new rulers of Russia… Indeed, vilification of the Soviets went hand in hand with strident defenses of the existing economic order… Fascism in this context was

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welcomed because it put the people in their place and defended, however thuggishly, the view that property rights and the right to colonial possessions, not democracy and equality, were the central values of Western civilization. (25)

Significantly, the novel cultivates anti-communist sentiment by sidelining the importance of the communist resistance as well as the popular support communists received. As one character, a top official coordinating the SOE (Special Operations Executive) argues, the Communists “have the whole weight of the Occupier and Vichy and the French populace against them” (147; my italics). The sympathetic resistance figures in the book are anti-communist, which is rationalized by a somewhat unlikely awareness of the Stalinist project (given that this was long before Khrushchev’s 1956 denunciation – which instigated, it should be noted, massive fissures in communist parties/organizations around the world).

Anti-communism was an integral part of the Western governments’ acquiescence and even collusion with the Nazis. While the “Hitler-Stalin” pact is consistently evoked as a sign of the twin evils (Nazism and Communism), Chamberlain’s pact with Hitler at Munich is regularly excused.²⁹ In other words, this sort of conflation of communists and fascists is central to an erasure of Western complicity with Nazi forces. This is precisely the sort of conflation in which the novel participates. Julien considers the fact that he has approached a “Communist from Limoges… for information”:

²⁹ For instance, according to A.J. Taylor in *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961) – a work which, according to Finkel and Leibovitz, has “framed much of the subsequent debate about both underlying and immediate causes for war” (291) – British leaders pursued standard diplomatic measures in their negotiations with Hitler. These measures “naturally” involved a certain amount of compromise. Taylor further argues that British leaders entered these negotiations with the genuine intention of finding an avenue to peace and were as yet entirely ignorant of the Nazis’ malevolence. As a result, he suggests, they should not be judged too harshly in retrospect.
He did not want to associate with Communists, but in times of war you sometimes have to be expedient. Even as he explained this to himself he realised that this was exactly the argument employed by Pétain and Laval. The difference was that his position was not merely expedient, it had moral backing; also, his judgement, unlike theirs was sound. So he hoped. (166)

To work with communists, it is implied, is virtually as morally reprehensible as colluding with the Nazis. What is elided in this sort of representation of the past is the extent to which Western anti-communism sustained the longevity of fascism in Europe. It was British ships, after all, that patrolled the coasts of Spain to enforce an embargo against the republican government in the midst of a civil war with fascists. And, it was Western complicity with the Nazi leaders that ultimately undermined the plots against Hitler and his government that were being developed by key members of his military staff.

Overtures to the British by these Generals (made as early as 1936 and as late as 1940) were systematically ignored. As popular American scholar and prolific political critic Michael Parenti points out in his radio broadcast “Real History: The Origins of World War Two,”

The Abwehr tried to feed London secret information on the Nazi buildup.

Chamberlain was not interested. He failed to respond to all overtures from the anti-Nazi Germans, even high-placed ones who commanded divisions of troops, even conservative ones. In other words, I believe Chamberlain was not an appeaser. He was an active collaborator of Adolf Hitler’s.
These anti-Nazi conspiracies were not insignificant. In fact, “about sixty or so senior officers… were eventually executed by the Nazis or arrested or died when these plans were eventually exposed.”

However, while the novel clearly presents the British as the forces of goodness and constructs the communist “threat” as a near equal to the fascist reality, it does offer a critique of the British government’s role in attempts to destabilize Gaullist resistance networks. Within the opening pages of the book we are made aware that the top official, Sir Oliver, is ready to do “something simple but destructive. In France” (12). In fact, for Sir Oliver, “discrediting the Gaullists must remain [the] first objective” (149). Sir Oliver is emblematic of a government effort to thwart Resistance movements in France by actively “misleading… factions” (149). British politicians were concerned about “the likely configuration of Europe after the war.” Thus, spiking the Gaullist networks would serve a number of purposes. It would be a set back to the Abwehr. It would clear a way for G section networks and stop de Gaulle getting too big for his boots. It would help keep the French resistance under British control. (148)

Charlotte is unwittingly used as a pawn. She is sent to pass along false information – “False times, wrong map references and so on. Gentle havoc ensues. The idea is that the confusion should be as public as possible, to do the maximum damage to the General’s reputation” (148). The information she passes along to Gaullist resistance members results in their ambush by French police forces.

However, this critique of the British government’s role in attempts to destabilize Gaullist resistance networks is easily dismissed as the work of the aristocratic Sir Oliver.
Even, for instance, the government functionary, Cannerley, who initially goes along with the scheme, ultimately recognizes this as the wrong sort of “compromise” and asserts that he has “entered this business to do some good” (13). The scapegoating of Sir Oliver fits comfortably with the familiar formula, established in nineteenth-century British literature, in which blaming the aristocracy is sanctioned by virtue of their symbolic exclusion from the “core” of the British nation, as part of the consolidation of middle-class hegemony.

Indeed, this insight into the government’s duplicity and immoral political jockeying for power is not reflected in the attitudes of the “regular” British characters in this text. In fact, a clear demarcation between the government and the people is drawn. In many ways this is refreshing, highlighting the commitment of numerous civilians who joined the war to fight against fascism, while indicating the extent to which the governments were motivated by strategic concerns regarding power distribution in post-war Europe. However, this consideration of government dishonesty serves to inscribe even more clearly the myth of the people’s war, a war waged by citizen-soldiers against the horrors of racism, and thus moves away from any consideration of the centrality of racism and racial imperialism to the consolidation of white British subjects.

In spite of the seeming complexities, Faulks’ sentimental story ultimately depicts an uncomplicated struggle between good and evil, resister and collaborator. This depiction is further solidified by the narrative voice itself. It is this voice that guides the reader’s sympathies and identifications. The third person narrative, though intermittently focalized through a variety of perspectives, is for the most part focalized through Charlotte. It is Charlotte with whom readers are asked to identify (or “fall a little in love,”
to cite a back-cover blurb from the *Daily Express*). Even the occasional forays into perspectives of the secondary characters consolidate a sense of the accuracy of Charlotte’s vision. Charlotte is offered to readers as a sensitive and attractive young woman. Only love and her innate sense of right and wrong guide her. Her naivety adds to the value of her perspective, by endowing her opinions and attitudes with a transparency that ostensibly comes with the honesty of innocence. Charlotte’s feelings about the war are articulated within a few pages of our introduction to her:

She had come to see the enemy as not one competing cause whose selfish aims were as defensible as any other’s, but as a plain manifestation of evil… [S]he had unwittingly developed an almost motherly identification with the men killed. She despised their killers. There was no doubt in her mind. (32)

As Torgovnick contends, the construction of the Germans as “evil Nazis” and the “Japs” as “fanatical, racially different, and even bestial,” depended on processes of othering that sanction the aggression of war: “The enemy becomes subhuman or even demonic, linked by some ineradicable trace, often conceived as racial or religious, to pure evil that must be destroyed” (9). Indeed, while the appeal to racial difference is not explicit, the maternal connection Charlotte invokes in order to understand her own feelings draws on a logic of filial relation that subtends racial coding and differentiation. For Torgovnick, “Othering forms a link…. [b]etween theories of imperialism… and theories of world war” (10). Both require that “sane people… dehumanize enemies to kill and maim them” (9). Indeed, it is under the aegis of “enemy of war” that the categories of what Gilroy calls “infrahumanity” have been produced at such sites as Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and various “black sites” across Europe. The links between these and earlier categories of
subhumanity produced under colonial rule must not be overlooked (Gilroy, 20). The constitution of an “us” and “them” within the logic of Charlotte’s statement is sustained by her close friend and resistance partner, Julien, who referring to the Nazis and their French collaborators says: “These people are not like us” (225).

In the opening pages of the book we find Gray’s naive, “working class” patriotism juxtaposed with the decadent cynicism of two aristocrats, whom she meets on the train ride to London and whose jobs entail strategizing the course of the war rather than the more honest work of fighting in it. When asked whether she is patriotic, the surprised Charlotte replies, “Of course… Isn’t everyone? Particularly at the moment” (14). And while it is easy for Charlotte to articulate the animus that motivates her desire to participate in the war effort – “I know what we’re fighting. The Nazis. I hate them with a sort of personal bitterness” (14) – it is somewhat more difficult for her to articulate the exact contours of what she is seeking to defend: “I don’t know. It’s not something you can easily put into words” (14). However, while agreeing with her interlocutors that “British tolerance, British science and British exploration” are at the core of what she wishes to preserve, ultimately she argues that her patriotism is motivated by her love for “the countryside where you grow up, the towns, the villages, the people. The people more than anything. The buildings that make up your home” (14). Charlotte’s patriotism blends an unquestioning hatred for the enemy with pride in British imperialism and the wholesomeness of the English people and countryside. The parallels here between Charlotte’s patriotism and the ideology of National Socialism itself should not be overlooked. Nazi ideology coupled nationalism and imperialist ambitions with a strong affection for the pastoral, idealized and mythic portraits of the peasant past and rural
labour, and the spirit of the volk invested in the countryside. Significantly, in the non-fiction discussed by Gilroy, which mourns the loss of the security of British imperial identity, we find a thematic parallel: “‘natural’ landscape…emerges as a dominant element” (115). Gilroy suggests that works like Paxman’s *The English*, Ackroyd’s *Albion* and Scruton’s *An Elegy for England*, by excluding “all urban and metropolitan spaces” from the imaginative formulation of a renewed Britain, quietly purge the country of the symbolic and material centres of cultural and ethnic mixing (115).

The rural French setting of *Charlotte Gray* performs a similar function. The countryside is idealized as the embodiment of a pastoral past uncontaminated by contemporary cultural mixing. For Charlotte the rural France she inhabits “had fused ideas of love and national honour to the ideas of a kind of earthly paradise” (33).

Discussing his obsession with France as the setting for many of his novels, Faulks asserts that France “inspired this strange romantic yearning in me… I couldn’t understand it for a long time but I know now that it was a yearning for the past.” For Faulks, “France offered… imaginative access to the past.” In a 2005 interview for *The Observer*, the interviewer suggests that Faulks turned to historical fiction and to France as a result of his feelings that “modern Britain [is] incomprehensible.” Faulks agrees with this assessment: contemporary Britain, he admits, “seems to me frivolous - apt and ripe for journalism - but it is difficult to see much grandeur in it.” “‘Grandeur,’” as the interviewer points out, “is the other word that comes up more than once: it is what Faulks aspires to.”

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31 Ibid.
32 Kate Kellaway, “All in the Mind,” *The Observer* [London], 21 August 2005: C.
III. Colonial Norms and Nostalgia

Explicit in Faulks’ distaste for Britain’s “incomprehensible” present is a profound nostalgia for a grandeur that ostensibly accompanies the country at war. Faulks’ aversion to the present, the absence of non-white Britons from his narratives, and his turn towards the pre-WWII past – the war often being marked as the moment after which immigration changed the “face” of England – should be cause for reflection. In fact, Faulks’ contentions combine what Gilroy has labelled the “Churchillian response which casts its eye outward in pursuit of the healing power of greatness” with a search for “national renewal in the treasure trove of Englishness” (115). Significantly, this post-imperial hungering for renewed greatness “feeds Britain’s vicarious investments in U.S. pre-eminence” and is also connected to “the magical rehomogenization of the country as the favoured solution to its postcolonial plight” (115). In Faulks’ statements about his own perspectives as well as his fiction, we can see the relationship, identified by Gilroy, between an “inability to recognize our country, since the arrival of postcolonial aliens” and the “retelling of colonial stories [which] project the imperial nation as the primary victim rather than the principal beneficiary of its vanished colonial dominance” (105).

British colonialism is not entirely absent from Charlotte Gray. Both India and Africa play a minor, yet important, role in the story. In examining these roles it is possible to see the extent to which the novel works to “minimize the extent of empire,” to invoke Paul Gilroy’s critique of Linda Colley’s 2002 Captives, which he characterizes as a work of revisionist history that seeks to represent the British as the “passive ‘captives’ of their imperial project” (94). India appears as a romantic spectre, an idealized childhood for which Peter Gregory longs, an edenic imperial past. An exotic, maternal land of
abundance and warmth, British India is depicted as a sort of earthly paradise. The novel’s representation of India can be understood as a contemporary version of representations of the colonies of the sort which Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, suggested “enabled, encouraged, and otherwise assured the West’s readiness to assume and enjoy the experience of empire” (80). Indeed, while India appears only in snapshots of nostalgic remembering, it is nevertheless central to our understanding of Gregory’s character. Thus, as Said’s analysis allows us to understand, while there is an explicit disavowal of the periphery and imperialist adventures, they nevertheless play a central role in the construction of the metropole; the colonial “other” is the backdrop against which the imperial subject self-defines. References to the colonies “stand for a significance ‘out there’ that frames the genuinely important action *here*, but not for a great significance” (93). However, as Said argues, “these signs of abroad include, even as they repress, a rich and complex history” (93) of the colonial/third world. Glimpses of the colonized can be uncovered in the syntax of Gregory’s rememberings:

> Gregory was thinking only of a suburban road in India. It was not like the metalled roads with paved edges that crawled through England’s deadening suburbia: it was flanked by palm trees, deep ditches, and was filled with running bare-backed children. There was a house at the end, which was his house, and in its cool rooms he would shortly be given tea with samosas, jellies, gulabjamuns and cucumber sandwiches. Then he would go onto the verandah at the back of the house and his mother would read to him. (28)

Here the passive voice (“he would shortly be given”) retains the evidence of their labour even as it effaces the presence of the serving people who make the luxury of Gregory’s
childhood possible. Importantly, the (white, colonial) mother is the culmination of the child Gregory’s journey from the exotic outside to the cultured civility of the house. Further, the emphasis on the maternal figure echoes Charlotte’s own “motherly identification with the men killed” and fixes attention on the tragedy of war for the white Britons. This focus on the victimage of white Britons is further effected by the fact that immediately following this paragraph we are brought back into the present tense of the narration in which Gregory returns from his reveries to where he sits in a “wooden-barrack room in Southern England” listening to a lecture on the new and frightening advancements in the technological capacities of the German airforce.

At another moment in the novel Africa and its colonized people are evoked through another entirely incidental anecdote. Gregory is woken in the darkness before dawn by the elderly French couple who are sheltering him as he recovers from his injuries: “Gregory hated being woken in the night. It reminded him of days in Africa when the boy would rouse him before dawn because there was work to be done before it grew hot” (194). It is from this negligible aside that we can infer the status of Gregory’s activities in the British Protectorate of Nyasaland.

Gregory “had been farming in Nyasaland when the war broke out” (50). Convinced of the justice of the cause by his “fierce South African neighbour,” Forster, who “was unhappy with the way some people in his own country seemed sympathetic to the Nazis and wanted to put every distance between them and himself” (50), Gregory returns from central Africa to fight the war. Here we see explicitly the disavowal of the brutality of British colonialism effected through both a gesture towards South Africa (where colonial brutality reached a zenith, but which remains an example of colonial
atrocity largely credited to the descendants of the Dutch invaders, against which the
“tolerant” western countries tend to self-define\(^{33}\) and an engagement with WWII (the
war in which the benevolent allies waged war against intolerance and evil). As a “good”
colonialist, one who wishes to distance himself from his quasi-Nazi countrymen, Forster
is constructed as a hero. Forster is killed in the war and is remembered by Gregory for his
“modest colonial smile” (79). In this way, the novel circumvents the connections between
colonialism itself and its Nazi relative. In the British Protectorate of Nyasaland, land
grants to plantation farmers were a major element of the dispossession of the native
peoples of their lands. Furthermore, given the reality of racial hatred directed by the
white landowners towards the black majority, the book’s liberal portrait of Gregory’s
“modest” colonial roots masks a darker reality. By constructing both Gregory and Forster
as sympathetic and just characters, good colonialists fighting against the wholly other
Nazis, the novel engages in a consoling rhetoric for contemporary readers who do not
want to be reminded of the economic realities that liberalism (then and now) overlooks
and represses.

According to Gilroy, in order to fully understand the imperial present it is
imperative that British people “appreciate the brutalities of colonial rule enacted in their
name and to their benefit, to understand the damage it did to their political culture at
home and abroad, and to consider the extent of their country’s complex investments in
the ethnic absolutism that has sustained it” (99). Such revelations are entirely absent from
_Charlotte Gray_. Invisible is the India of the Rowlatt Acts, or “Black Acts,” which
extended the War Measures (of WWI) and gave the British government “the powers to

\(^{33}\) Few talk of the affiliation between Canada, which is generally considered to have practiced a gentle form of colonialism, and Apartheid South Africa. Just one aspect of this affinity is the fact that South African Bantustans were explicitly modeled on the Canadian reservation system.
quell sedition by silencing the press, detaining political activists without trial, and arresting any suspected individuals without a warrant"; invisible is the India of the Amritsar Massacre of 1919 when colonial forces opened fire on unarmed protesters killing as many as 1000 people and wounding 2000, the India of the 1920 Salt March or the 1930 Chittagong Armoury Raid; absent is the Bengal Famine of 1943 in which an estimated three million people died as a result of early colonial investments in monoculture, the stockpiling of food reserved for British soldiers, as well as the scorched earth policy put into effect to thwart the Japanese invasion.

The erasure of this history allows for the justification of imperialist projects of the present. As journalist John Pilger points out, as a result of the conscious deletion of the brutal consequences of colonial history from national memory – such as the 21 million Indians who died in famines as a result of British colonial policy – contemporary British politicians are able to celebrate the colonial past in the service of current imperialism: “Treasurer Gordon Brown, the paymaster of the Iraq bloodbath, declared… to the *Daily Mail*: ‘The days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over. We should celebrate much of our past rather than apologise for it.’” This, according to Pilger, in spite of the fact that since the formal demise of the British empire, as declassified government records have made evident, the British government has been responsible for the “direct or indirect deaths of between 8.6 million and 13.5 million people throughout the world from military interventions and at the hands of regimes strongly supported by Britain.” The sort of sanitized, even romanticized colonial history evoked in *Charlotte*

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Gray coupled with the heroic depictions of the Allied victory in WWII work to legitimate claims such as Brown’s. Indeed, accounts of the Second World War, devoid of any critical reflection on British imperialism and its genealogical ties to the Nazi Holocaust, perform an immediate ideological service: Reconstructing a martial past that can enable both the celebration and rejuvenation of imperial designs.

IV. Gender Norms and Nostalgia

However, in examining Charlotte Gray’s reconstructions of World War Two, we find not only nostalgia for the imperial past as seen in Gregory’s memories of India and Nyasaland, but also a longing for traditional gender roles. In fact, the Manichean divisions that underpin these depictions of the just war serve not only to consolidate the logic of racism but also that of misogyny. Recognition of the contiguous logic of race and gender oppression in reconstructions of WWII is a necessary part of understanding the appeal of WWII nostalgia and its relationship to contemporary politics.

In her analysis of contemporary war films such as Saving Private Ryan (1998), The Thin Red Line (1998), and We Were Soldiers (2002), Torgovnick notes “the absence of women save as motivators or as ciphers” (33). “The undertow in war films,” she notes, “is towards conventional narrative – the home men left to which they hope to return, with emphasis on mothers and wives” (32). However, simultaneously, these films seem to celebrate “an all-male world, the realm of guy-talk, in which identity beyond the chain of command does not matter” (32). This double aspect of war films is revealing. Indeed, this nostalgia for the conventional family life involves the simultaneous elimination of women and a longing for the homosociality engendered by war.
Given the largely male-dominated world of war in both film and fiction, the fact that *Charlotte Gray* is a wartime novel with a female protagonist is exceptional. Indeed, on the surface the novel appears to disrupt conventional gender roles. For instance, it is Charlotte who goes to France to rescue her lover: “She closed her dry eyes and felt her lips come inwards in a narrow line. She saw his face. Don’t worry, my love, don’t worry, I’m coming to get you” (102). However, Charlotte has nothing to do with Gregory’s safe return to England. And, ultimately, gender roles are tidily preserved.

Faulks has received a fair amount of praise for his ability to write about women: “He writes about women disarmingly well. And about love.”^36^ This review from *The Observer* reveals an important connection in Faulks’ work: his writing about women is virtually inextricable from writing about heterosexual romantic love. It is precisely this relationship, between women and the myth of romantic love, that constitutes the basis of conventional gender roles in *Charlotte Gray*.

Indeed, Faulks’ *Charlotte Gray* romanticizes the subordination of women – their desires, their lives, their self-conceptions – to men. In joining the SOE, Charlotte finds “the chance she has long wanted – to escape through action… to reassemble her life into a harmonious whole” (72). However, Charlotte’s “escape” is one of gender conformity: her sense of wholeness “would be accomplished, she felt sure, by the light of the passion that she had for Gregory” (72). Her motivation is her man. Her love for him “had granted value to her life” (144). In spite of Gregory’s rather dismissive treatment of her, the truly brief initial love affair prior to his disappearance, and the long years of war that follow, Charlotte’s loyalty to her lover is surprisingly unrelenting. Furthermore, this subordination of her independent desires to the myth of romantic love is represented as

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ultimately rewarding for Charlotte. Indeed, in spite of her apparent commitment to the resistance, in one particularly telling moment Charlotte admits: “I don’t believe in a general ideal, I just believe in one particular man… I can’t organize my life until I know whether he’s alive” (161). Her decision to continue to work for the resistance is motivated by this imperative: “to return to London was to give up, and if she gave up on Gregory, then she was giving up faith in her own life” (178). Her destiny and her identity become absolutely intertwined with his. Indeed, her feelings for Gregory are so overwhelming that once they “had crystallised, she found it difficult to picture herself in a previous epoch, while the days of transition themselves seemed lacking in self-awareness, almost comically confused. She loved him. How could she once not have loved him?” (38)

However, the subordination of Charlotte’s identity to men does not end here. Charlotte’s entire life is motivated by her relationship to men: her discovery of her fall from innocence has to do with her father’s past and his relationship to war; her motivation for life and love is Gregory; her involvement in the war is on account of her desire to find Gregory; even at the apparent culmination of the novel, the motivation for her journey north to Paris is to enable the reconciliation of her male friend, Julien, and his father, Levade, to pass a message to the dying man from his son. Essentially, Charlotte remains a female enabler in a male story. Indeed, as one astute Amazon.com reader remarks, “This bestseller (why?!) reads like a male fantasy as the woman lives, and will happily die, for a man that she doesn’t really know. Of course, she’s also a virgin before Peter comes along…”

The traditional gender roles propagated in the novel are also worthy of consideration in relation to the novel’s classification as a historical novel. For, recalling Eagleton’s advice, it is important to be aware of the “relations between [literary] works and the ideological worlds they inhabit – relations which emerge not just in ‘themes’ and ‘preoccupations’, but in style, rhythm, image, quality, and… form” (6). Like the vast majority of historical novels, Charlotte Gray employs “traditional narrative strategies and do[es] not undermine [its] own truth claims” (Keen, 176). Thus, the narrative form of the novel ensures that its own ideological biases (regarding race, class, and gender) remain unchallenged. Indeed, in his introductory notes to Keen’s essay, James English suggests that traditional historical novels continue “to shape the past – including a durable nostalgia for Britain’s colonial past – … [and] are in turn shaping the politics of the present” (11). Given that the readership of historical fiction in general and historical romance fiction in particular is dominated by women, the novel’s unreflexive style can be seen as part of the ideological apparatuses that help to maintain the status quo by teaching people, and women in particular, their “appropriate” roles within the larger society.

However, the significance of Charlotte Gray’s classification as historical fiction relates to gender in another way as well. Categorized specifically as historical romance fiction, or traditional historical fiction, the bestseller is part of a subgenre which has been afforded little critical respect. According to Keen, this lack of critical attention is particularly noteworthy given the subgenre’s massive popular appeal. Indeed, “historical romances remain the dominant form because of their sheer mass in the marketplace” (173). This lack of critical attention, Keen notes, is at least partially the result of the genre’s association with a female readership. Thus, the explosion of historical fiction,
identified by Keen as the “historical turn” taken by British literature in the 1980s (discussed briefly in the introduction to this dissertation), has involved a re-gendering of the historical novel as a genre. Unlike “lowbrow” “traditional” historical romance literature, such as *Charlotte Gray*, the “new historical fiction” (170) has garnered a significant amount of critical commentary. This critical attention, according to Keen, has involved a disavowal of its female readership: “if a popular subgenre can rise from its subliterary zone into an arena of cultural respectability, it may do so by shedding its strong association with women readers, despite the fact that most actual readers are female” (170). This elite “new historical fiction” has received ample critical attention and, in contrast to historical romance fiction, has often been characterized as postmodern in its approach to representations of the past. Unlike traditional historical fiction, these texts ostensibly involve a “frontal assault on the nature of facts, evidence, and the very possibility of a knowable past” (179). This subversive potential would appear to lend itself to challenging WWII nostalgia and the racialist, sexist logic which so often accompanies it. Thus, it is to this “emergent form” that I will turn in the next chapter.
Chapter 3

_Atonement: WWII Nostalgia in Elite Fiction_

At this point, I would like to return to Torgovnick’s claims regarding the potential in literature for disrupting nostalgic evocations of WWII. As I hope I have illustrated through the analysis of _Charlotte Gray_, this subversive potential is far from universal in the historical novel. However, perhaps the potential for subversion that Torgovnick identifies in this fiction has to do with the fact that her claims are based on readings of “elite fiction.” It is to “important postwar novels” and “great historical novels” that Torgovnick turns in her attempts to find a place in which regressive wartime nostalgia might be overcome. Thus, the guiding question I will be asking in this chapter is whether work characterized as “literary” might transcend/avoid the WWII nostalgia (and its implicit justifications of colonialism and accompanying logic of racial purity, gender norms, and class ideology) so fully exemplified by _Charlotte Gray_. Thus, in this chapter, I turn from popular fiction to an examination of a “literary” novel, Ian McEwan’s _Atonement_.

Both _Charlotte Gray_ and _Atonement_ have achieved enormous popular success. Like _Charlotte Gray_, _Atonement_ has been turned into a film. However, unlike _Charlotte Gray_, _Atonement_ has also received widespread attention from literary scholars and critics, the guardians of “high culture.” It has been hailed as McEwan’s “finest most complex novel” by James Wood (_The New Republic_); Frank Kermode characterized _Atonement_ “as easily his finest,” arguing that “no contemporary of his has shown such passionate
dedication to the art of the novel” (*London Review of Books*); similarly, Robert MacFarlane, after remarking that “the dust jacket proclaims *Atonement* [McEwan's] finest achievement,” went on to comment that “although publishers are prone to this... view of their authors' talents, in this case they are triumphantly right” (*The Times Literary Supplement*). A number one international bestseller, the novel was shortlisted for the 2001 Booker Prize, received the WH Smith Literary Award (2002), the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award (2002), the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction (2003), and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel (2004).

Part One of *Atonement* takes place over the course of one summer day in 1935 at the estate of the upper-class Tallis family. Briony Tallis, an imaginative child of thirteen, has written a romantic play, *The Trials of Arabella*. With the help of her three cousins who have come to stay with the family as a result of the imminent collapse of their parents’ marriage, she hopes to perform her melodrama for the company that will gather that evening. Over the course of the day, Briony’s ambitions for her play are thwarted and she witnesses a scene, the interpretation of which will change the lives of everyone at the Tallis home forever. By the fountain, she sees Robbie Turner, “only son of a humble cleaning lady” (38), the Tallis’ charlady. Next to him is her older sister, Cecilia. The two struggle briefly over a flower vase. Through multiple reiterations of the same scene focalized through the different characters, readers discover that the two young adults are in the midst of the initial discovery of their mutual passion. But the young Briony, whose imagination is swimming with new and self-important understandings of her own role as an artist, sees Robbie as a threat to her sister.
Her fears are further confirmed when she opens a letter Robbie has entrusted her to deliver to her sister. In this uncensored version, which Robbie has unintentionally sent, he confesses to Cecilia: “In my dreams I kiss your cunt, your sweet wet cunt. In my thoughts I make love to you all day long” (86). The obscenity confirms Briony’s diagnosis: he must be a “maniac” (120). Over the next few hours a story begins to take shape in her mind: “this was the story about a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she was able to reveal that he was the incarnation of evil” (115). Thus, when Briony happens upon her sister and Robbie making love in the library, she imagines that her sister is being attacked. And when her cousin Lola is raped by dinner guest and chocolate magnate Paul Marshall, she believes it was Robbie. She says it was Robbie. In spite of her cousin’s hesitation. In spite of the darkness of the moonless night. For this lie Robbie is sent to prison and Briony spends the rest of her life trying to atone.

In the second part of the novel the focus switches from Briony to Robbie, who after five years has been granted an early release from prison in exchange for joining the infantry. In this section WWII nostalgia becomes most immediately apparent. Readers follow Robbie across the French countryside with two companions in the retreat to Dunkirk. Cecilia, we discover, has remained faithful to him since his imprisonment, cutting herself off from her family after his arrest. They communicate throughout his long incarceration entirely by letters, which they continue while he is at war. Every one of her letters ends the same way: “I’ll wait for you. Come back” (202-03). Like Charlotte Gray, Atonement romanticizes traditional gender roles. Like Charlotte, Cecilia’s faithfulness to her absent lover is presented as evidence of her virtue and status as a “good woman.”
In Part Three we are returned to England, where Briony has given up her chance to attend Cambridge to work as a wartime nurse, which, it is suggested, she has done to atone for her childhood crime. This section describes her experiences as a nurse-in-training and as a caretaker for the tide of critically wounded soldiers flooding in from Dunkirk. It is in this part that we learn of the marriage of Briony’s cousin Lola to her rapist Paul Marshall. We also learn that Briony has contacted her sister and Robbie, finally reunited after his return, and has agreed to publicly and legally retract her early false testimony about Robbie. During this time, Briony also receives an encouraging rejection letter from the Horizon editor, Cyril Connolly, for “Two Figures by a Fountain,” which we realize must be a draft of the first section of this book. The section ends with an author’s initials “BT, London, 1999” (349).

In the last section, a short coda to the rest of the novel, suspicions are confirmed. Briony Tallis, now an old woman and a well-established writer, has authored the whole preceding story, the writing of which has been her attempt at atonement. In these last pages the narration shifts from third to first person as we follow Briony on the day of her seventy-seventh birthday. She has just learned that she is suffering from vascular dementia and her memory and mind will rapidly deteriorate.

The novel ends with the startling revelation that Cecilia and Robbie’s happy ending was very likely a liberty taken by the author. It is intimated – albeit embedded in a paragraph in which Briony muses on the relative lack of importance of distinguishing between fact and fiction – that the “real” Robbie “died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940” and “Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station” (370).
I. Postmodern Sensibilities

One of the central issues addressed in *Atonement* is that, as John Berger has famously argued in *Ways of Seeing*, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (8). In other words, seeing is (always already) an act of interpretation. When Briony sees Robbie “attack” her sister in the library, we are told “what she saw must have been shaped in part by what she already knew, or believed she knew” (123). When Briony sees Robbie’s figure retreat in the darkness, it was “[l]ess like seeing, more like knowing” (170); indeed, “what she knew was not literally based on the visible… It was too dark for that…” (158). Briony’s (mis)identification of Robbie, and indeed the story as a whole according to McEwan, is a metaphor for the “problems of perception” more generally.38 In this way the novel suggests there is no fixed truth; truth is contingent on perception and all perception is subjective and therefore fallible. As Terry Eagleton writes, in a somewhat surprisingly favourable review of *Atonement* appearing in the medical journal *The Lancet*, “if all seeing is partial seeing… then any particular truth is a sort of fiction.”39

In Linda Hutcheon’s important work on the formal and ideological contradictions evident in much contemporary art, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1989), she identifies what she calls *historiographic metafiction* as the quintessentially postmodern genre. According to Suzanne Keen, this type of historical fiction “tells stories about the past that point to multiple truths or the overturning of an old received Truth, mixes genres, adopts

a parodic or irreverently playful attitude to history over an ostensibly normative mimesis” (171). For Keen, *Atonement* is one of the “striking examples of contemporary British works in this category” (171). However, while *Atonement* clearly engages in metafiction and focuses attention on the subjective nature of truth, ultimately, as I will argue, McEwan’s novel manages to reaffirm some of the most hackneyed “truths” associated with WWII.

For some readers *Atonement*’s metafictional quality disturbs an otherwise good story. With regards to the final coda in which we find out the authorial voice has in fact been Briony’s all along, not the omniscient narrator we had assumed, reviewer Olive Clancy writes, “finding out that the entire story was given from her perspective only made me suspect her motives. But then these 20 odd pages probably would not bother most in what is undoubtedly a great read.” Yet another reviewer, this time from an internet blog, suggests “the book probably would have been more satisfying to me if this section wasn’t included. I guess that’s because this ‘wrap-up’ section actually ‘unwrapped’ what could’ve been a tidy ending.” These readers indicate discomfort with the fact that this otherwise realist narrative is disrupted by the metafictional turn.

However, for most reviewers, it is precisely this “unwrapping” of convention and readerly expectations that constitutes the exceptional nature of this novel. It is the recognition that the story is in fact the testimony of a rather unreliable narrator, whose motives should indeed be treated as suspect, that retrospectively adds new and interesting dimensions to the novel as a whole. In fact, as one reviewer points out, the story makes an explicit commentary on “the tidying up of real-life loose ends made in the service of

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manufacturing a satisfying tale." It is Briony’s penchant for tidiness and symmetry in fiction that results in her disastrous misinterpretation of the relationship between Robbie and her sister: “The truth was in symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense” (169). Symmetry is a formal mode of “common sense” in which the young Briony locates “truth.” It is a dangerous narrative formula in which Robbie, simply by virtue of his position and class, must occupy the role of the villain. Atonement thus appears to point to the potential dangers of unexamined “common sense.”

Furthermore, in the last section we learn that the happy-ending itself has been manufactured to maintain the integrity of a satisfying story. The “real” story of the lover’s fate has very likely been modified to please and placate the audience. Briony attempts to justify the license she has taken by asking “How could [the real story in which Robbie and Cecilia die before their reunion] constitute an ending? What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?” (371). However, the novel invites us to reflect on the moral implications of such a gesture. For, in this tidy and romantic ending are echoes of Briony’s earlier narrative conclusions (and their disastrous consequences). Indeed, in an article on narrative judgements in Atonement James Phelan points out,

Briony’s question, ‘who would want to believe that [Cecilia and Robbie never reunited] except in the service of the bleakest realism?’ reminds McEwan’s audience that her romantic impulses fuelled her misidentification of Robbie. Had

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42 Michiko Kakutani, “And when she was bad she was…,” The New York Times. 7 March 2002: E1.
Thus, we might read in *Atonement* an invitation to ask what sort of fictions we create about the past to assuage our guilt and justify our behaviour in the present.

Of course, McEwan’s novel (as opposed to Briony’s) gives us both the fictional happy ending and the ostensibly “real” tragic ending. Thus, the apparent binary established between fiction and reality is itself problematized since the “real” story is also a product of fiction. Significantly, while this is duly noted by many critics, none asks what McEwan’s “real” story might serve to justify, what guilt this story might help to assuage. Indeed, in a novel that ostensibly problematizes truth-claims and that addresses the way in which such “truth” is framed and constructed, the absence of these vital critical questions remains particularly glaring.

The absence of this critical reflection is most significant in relation to the novel’s representations of wartime. By examining how *Atonement* is constructed through its paratexts and critical reception, it is clear that in spite of the self-reflexive nature of the narrative, nostalgia for the “just” war remains a dominant response to the novel.

In her 1972 article entitled “Ideological Dissent from Works of Fiction,” reception theorist Susan Suleiman argues that while the *roman à thèse* possesses a more “clearly discernible ideological (communicative) function… all ‘realistic novels’ possess this ideological function to some extent – they seek, either consciously or unconsciously, to provoke the reader’s assent to certain extra-aesthetic values” (164-165). However, texts, on the other hand, which “lay bare” the devices of their own construction parody “the conventions of … authoritative narration and forc[e] the reader to become aware of the
artificiality of their undertaking” (172). It would also follow then that works that reflect on their own construction expose the ideological investments operative within their surface narrative. Markedly, however, while *Atonement* clearly reflects upon its own literary devices, and thus ostensibly exposes its own “artificiality,” this does not appear to result in recognition of the text’s ideological investments on the part of many readers. Readers who are more resistant to the particular ideology expressed in a given text are more likely to become aware of the formal devices deployed in its manipulation. The inability of many readers to recognize the ideological function of *Atonement* confirms the centrality of WWII nostalgia as a dominant cultural narrative to which a large cross-section of readers are wedded. It should also perhaps alert us to the fact that, as literary critic Amardeep Singh argues, “unmasking… conventions doesn’t necessarily undo their hold over the imagination, nor is it clear that readers can do without them.”[^43] Thus while *Atonement* may provide readers with opportunities to interrogate the novel’s artificiality, such opportunities are not necessarily taken.

While this novel inspires reflection on the framing of events – how they are read and by whom – critics resist shedding any critical light on the sacred territory of WWII and European suffering represented in this novel. Indeed, missing from virtually all critical responses is evidence of an awareness of the fact that, as historian Robert Anchor has argued, “historical narratives, no less than fictional narratives, always serve in one way or another, to legitimize an actual or ideal social reality” (10). Or, further, as Michael Hanne writes, in *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change*, “all historical writing is in large part fictional, not only in that historians sometimes get their

facts wrong, but also because the facts they ‘get right’ are only given shape and meaning in the telling” (34).

As Eagleton points out, in his *Lancet* review, the novel’s meditation on the “perilous partiality of truth” may suggest that “the only truth we can be certain of is the one we create.” He also notes that this is “hardly an edifying reflection.” However, alongside this relativist lesson, the novel might point to the extent to which our visions of the world, the stories we tell ourselves and one another, are constituted by an amalgam of already established conventions. Furthermore, the novel also points to the relationships between certain kinds of knowing and power. For, while Briony’s initial story about Robbie is informed by her burgeoning understanding of literary conventions and generic constraint and her desire for symmetry, her story sticks because it is the story that everyone is ready to hear: “So many decent people could not be wrong, doubts like hers, she’s been told, are to be expected… They were impassive whenever she wavered, and firmly recalled her to her earlier statements… Then it was comforting to feel she was confirming what they already knew” (170). Robbie is son of the charlady. There is class bigotry at play in the construction of Robbie as Lola’s rapist. Thus, *Atonement* alerts us not only to the apparently subjective nature of any given truth, but the extent to which “truth” is a product of ideology; it highlights the relationship of “truth” to social, cultural, and material forces. But this is not a lesson that seems to influence critical readings of the novel. No one questions the extent to which McEwan’s “truth” about WWII might itself be a product of ideology.
II. Realism and the “Truth” about Dunkirk

Notably, there are some striking similarities between the claims made about the realism of *Atonement* and *Charlotte Gray*. In both cases, the apparent realness of the novels is considered a central attribute of their value. Indeed, despite the numerous claims regarding the importance of *Atonement*’s metafictional character, realism remains the category of value most commonly evoked in relation to the representation of the British Army’s retreat to Dunkirk and its aftermath. *San Francisco Chronicle* editor, Dave Weigand, argues, “The entire Dunkirk section has such a vivid sense of realism to it and the sense of being so nakedly exposed to attack.”44 BBC reporter Olive Clancy contends: “It is as realistic a portrayal of the horror of war as I have read.”45 One reviewer finds the description “so believable” that she professes,

You’ll be utterly convinced that you, the reader, not main character Briony Tallis, have labored for 14 hours straight tending to wounded soldiers in a London hospital; that you, the reader, not hero Robbie Turner, have trudged hundreds of miles cross France, stepping over disembodied limbs and surviving fever-induced hallucinations.46

In the context of numerous articles and reviews which simultaneously dwell on the ways the novel problematizes distinctions between fiction and reality, the assertion of the realness of McEwan’s depiction of Dunkirk is both significant and ironic.

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To further justify and support their claims regarding the realism, authenticity, and truth rendered in parts two and three of the novel, many critics point to the “scrupulous research” undertaken by McEwan. McEwan’s Dunkirk evacuation is “a deeply researched and imagined episode” writes Frank Kermode in the London Review of Books. Catherine Belling asserts that the novel “contains scrupulously researched and moving descriptions of the British evacuation from France in 1940 and of the training of wartime nurses.”47 Eagleton claims that the “scrupulously researched hospital scenes are etched with almost intolerable immediacy.” Archival research, these critics imply, is what allows proximity to the real; the process of careful archival retrieval provides access to the immediacy of the past. Furthermore, the very grammar of these statements seems to indicate that this immediacy (secured by archival research) is what guarantees a strong emotional response from the reader. Cultural critic Geoff Dyer makes this point explicit in his review for The Guardian: “McEwan’s command of visceral shock is here anchored in a historical setting thoroughly authenticated by his archival imagination.”48

Indeed, in spite of the fact that the story of the war is written by Briony – a narrator who admits, “If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book” (360) – critics do not question the version of events in relation to the representation of WWII. To avoid such questions, some critics point to the fact that both McEwan (the author of the novel) and Briony (the “author” of the novel) are

involved in extensive research in the Imperial War Museum. Frank Kermode writes, “[l]ike Ian McEwan, [Briony] has recently been working in the library of the Imperial War Museum.” Earl G. Ingersoll notes, in “Intertextuality in P.J. Hartley’s The Go-Between and Ian McEwan’s Atonement,” that “Briony, as a noncombatant wrote the gripping scenes of the retreat from Dunkirk, but then, as she indicates in the epilogue, she did her research into the accounts of participants, as McEwan admits he did his” (252). Yet another critic suggests that Briony’s “challenge in relation to the Dunkirk section of the text – to effectively render a combat experience that she has not herself undergone – parallels McEwan’s own with regard to the wartime content of the novel as a whole” (Crosthwaite, 62). All the discussion of the deconstruction of clear divisions between fact and fiction in which the novel engages is forgotten; both these writers (the fictional and the real) have done their homework and thus readers can be assured they have been provided with an accurate depiction of this important historical moment. Even if it is Briony’s story in the end, the critics seem to suggest, she too has engaged with the documentary evidence that guarantees her representation of WWII is authentic.

This idea is not simply the result of some critical failure on the part of critics and scholars. Rather, the novel and its paratexts invite readers to make this conclusion. In the last few pages of the novel we learn that Briony has compiled her Dunkirk story through copious research at the Imperial War Museum library. At the novel’s finale she visits this place where “scholars now gather to research the collective insanity of war” and busies herself “checking final details” (353). Her story, she reports, has been compiled using material from her long correspondence with Mr. Nettle (one of Robbie Turner’s companions in his trek to Dunkirk), as well as “letters the lovers wrote… [which are
kept in the archives of the War Museum” (371), and her own experience as a nurse during the war. In the acknowledgements which appear but a few pages later at the novel’s end McEwan points to his own research at the archive by offering his thanks to “the staff of the Department of Documents in the Imperial War Museum for allowing me to see unpublished letters, journals, and reminiscences of soldiers and nurses serving in 1940” (375). The elision between Briony and McEwan enables readers to ignore the extent to which the research done by Briony and the archive which she visits are the products of fiction. While the Imperial War Museum exists in reality, the archive Briony visits is a fictional projection of this archive. Fictional too are the correspondence between Briony and Mr. Nettle and the letters exchanged between Robbie and Cecilia.

In *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction*, Suzanne Keen looks at the contemporary literary phenomenon of stories which “designate a character or characters at least temporarily as archival researchers” (3). While McEwan’s *Atonement* does not meet all the criteria established by Keen to qualify as a “romance of the archives,” Briony’s archival research is central both to the story and its critical interpretation. Briony’s archival research ostensibly ensures the veracity of her account of the Dunkirk retreat. Indeed, like most of the “romances of the archives” that Keen explores, in *Atonement* the pleasure of both researcher-character and reader “depends upon the recovery of truth from a fictive archive” (27). Critics, however, have a tendency to resist asking Keen’s central question: what “kinds of truths [do] these enticing fictions beguile us to accept” (27)? In the case of *Atonement* the answer is clear. By reading Briony’s archival research as a guarantee of the authentic nature of the representation of
WWII, critics resist having to question the ideological investments implicit in McEwan’s representation.

There is another sense in which the archive is fictive. Here we can talk not only of the archive produced in fiction and visited by Briony, but the real archive explored by McEwan. As Jacques Derrida points out in *Archive Fever* (1995), “archivisation produces as much as it records the event” (17). The archive, Derrida insists, is not impartial. The archive is not simply a place where information is collected: the specific methods, practices, and technologies involved in the accommodation and selection of the archival material help to determine its content, by influencing how that material is read and interpreted. Thus, as Derrida points out, the institution in and for which an archive is created is central to the constitution of the archive itself. An archive reflects the principles that guide the institution of which it is a part. For it is the institutions themselves that frame the way in which the material is selected, accessed, and understood: “What is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way. Archival meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives” (Derrida, 18).

Both Briony and McEwan’s research is done at The Imperial War Museum. Whose stories are saved here? How are these stories collected and framed? What worldview do they justify? Drawing on the work of Thomas Richards in *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (1993), Keen points to the connections between knowledge, fantasy, and the consolidation of imperial power. It is partially through the acquisition or illusion of knowledge enabled by the archive that Empire is created. Furthermore, Keen points out, the importance of the archive to the consolidation
of imperial power has increased rather than decreased in the years following
decolonisation. Keen writes, “the contraction of the Empire in the contemporary period
has enhanced rather than detracted from the status of archive, since the libraries and
collections leave a relatively positive legacy compared to many real-life situations of the
postcolonial world” (18). In other words, the archives of Empire have becomes a vital
resource in the consolidation of a favourable depiction of the colonial past.

While the Imperial War Museum archives are full of the records of many people’s
real experiences of war, it is nonetheless necessary to understand the selective nature of
this truth. Since only some people’s experiences/memories are documented and only
certain people’s testimony used to create McEwan’s/Briony’s “scrupulously researched”
vision of WWII, it is essential to ask whose stories this vision of the war erases or
excludes. What positive legacy of Imperial Britain is being constructed?

III. “Dunkirk Spirit”

While Atonement may appear to inspire reflection on the relationship between fact
and fiction, the novel maintains a fundamentally reverential and nostalgic attitude
towards the history it represents. The novel’s depiction of the Dunkirk retreat is central to
its consolidation of WWII nostalgia. Described by Churchill as the “miracle of
deliverance,” depictions of the Dunkirk evacuation have become a central component of
WWII mythology. Like Charlotte Gray, Atonement features both sentimentalism and
violence. As with reviews of Charlotte Gray, critics point to McEwan’s graphic
depictions of violence as further evidence of the access to the real experiences of WWII
offered by Atonement. The hallmarks of Atonement’s verisimilitude are its “acrid, graphic
account" of “the horrors of war,” its “scenes of the wounded,” and its “description of what shrapnel and fire can do to the human body” (Hidalgo, 88). I would argue, however, that these depictions in fact serve to hide the real catastrophe of war behind the screen of sentimentality.

The Dunkirk evacuation involved a ten day effort to rescue hundreds of thousands of retreating Allied troops trapped by the German army in France. According to the myth, alongside Royal Navy vessels sailed scores of amateur sailboats and fishing vessels manned by brave civilians risking their own lives to participate in the rescue. This largely fictional rendition of the evacuation clearly involves the evocation of a unified British people pulling together in this time of crisis. However, according to Hermione Lee, writing in *The Observer, Atonement’s* representation of the horrors of Dunkirk serves to undermine one of the most significant national myths in relation to WWII, that of Dunkirk as a heroic rescue. She writes:

Two long sections describe, with unsparing, closely researched, gripping relentlessness, the retreat to Dunkirk, as experienced by Robbie and his two (splendidly done) comrades-at-arms and by Nurse Briony Tallis in St Thomas's Hospital. The bloody, chaotic shambles of the retreat sabotages one common national fantasy, of Dunkirk as a heroic rescue…

There is a major flaw with Lee’s diagnosis: the “rescue” itself is not represented. The Dunkirk section ends with the men waiting on the beach. We know what comes next. It is a piece of British history that is so overdetermined that the very mention of the word

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49 Ibid.
“Dunkirk” evokes the spirit of national cohesion and triumph against enormous odds. In addition, since the novel’s next section describes the influx of men into London hospitals, the implication is that the evacuation was successful. Furthermore, the depiction of the Dunkirk retreat as a “chaotic shambles” does nothing to undermine the national mythology attached to its name. In fact, the pathos this depiction creates helps to highlight the “miraculous” nature of the rescue. Indeed, Churchill himself described Dunkirk as a “colossal military disaster,” asserting that “wars are not won by evacuations” (qtd. in Calder, 110). Dunkirk as a military disaster is what turned it into a mythic moment of English heroism and national cohesion. Where the military failed, English civilians triumphed. The civilians who sailed the many small ships to save the thousands of men trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk are largely a fiction. In fact, the “Dunkirk miracle” was a crucial piece of propaganda, consciously constructed by the British government and deployed both during the Second World War and many times since. Discussing its use in contemporary political discourse, Sinfield points out that “the wartime myth [of Dunkirk] is invoked with the implication that we should forsake allegedly sectional concerns for the politician’s version of ‘national interest’… [N]otions like the Dunkirk spirit call the dead ‘into service once again to help legitimate the regimes for which they have died’” (26).

Only one critic questions the veracity of the Dunkirk description. In reference to the description of “disciplined Guards regiments going in the opposite direction, presumably to serve as a doomed rearguard,” Frank Kermode, in his otherwise entirely positive review, suggests that “Here as elsewhere we are left to wonder who picked up this point and put it into the story. Did it, in fact, happen? Who will vouch for its truth?
Has the author a patriotic weakness for the Guards? It’s a small point, but it raises the sort of question that comes up over and over again in this novel."52  Indeed, the representation of the British soldiers as a rear guard holding back the Germans belies many recorded accounts of the retreat. According to renowned British historian, Angus Calder, the retreat was made possible because “the German armour, with Hitler’s acquiescence, was halted south of Dunkirk on the 24th and did not roll again until the 27th. This was a crucial error by the Germans. The Luftwaffe alone, harassed by fighters operating from bases in England, could not prevent the evacuation” (The People’s War, 107). Furthermore, it was French troops who held the rear guard. Absent from Atonement’s account of the Dunkirk retreat is the betrayal and manipulation of the French forces. Indeed, as Calder (among many others) points out, when “the British began to pull troops away from the firing line… [they] left adjacent French troops exposed on their flanks… Neither [the French] nor the Belgians were informed when, on 26 May, the order went out to start wholesale British evacuation – ‘Operation Dynamo’” (The Myth of the Blitz, 93). When the Germans moved into areas the BEF had evacuated “seven French divisions, ‘half of the French First Army,’ were left cut off near Lille” (94). Thus, the Dunkirk “miracle” actually involved the “‘methodical deception’ of the French” (95).

My intention in offering this supplemental (albeit common) reading of the history of Dunkirk is not to engage in a battle over the truth. Rather, I wish to suggest that by choosing to represent only Robbie’s singular vision of the Dunkirk retreat, McEwan (via Briony) excuses himself of the responsibility of having to contextualize the perspective

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he chooses to represent. We are treated to a perspective of the British retreat that serves
to bolster dominant national reconstructions of the event.

As historians Morgan and Evan point out, in *The Battle for Britain: Citizenship
and Ideology in the Second World War*, “an enduring and dominant myth is that the
[Second World War] created unprecedented national cohesion that cut across political
differences, conflicts and strife” (135). Dunkirk in particular has become a virtual
synonym for this strong, unified and wholly English community. Even as it was
happening, Dunkirk was being constructed as an exemplary and mythic national moment.
This is nowhere more evident than in the words of J.B. Priestley speaking in a BBC radio
broadcast June 5, 1940, the very day after the evacuations were completed:

I wonder how many of you feel as I do about this great battle and evacuation of
Dunkirk. The news of it came as a series of surprises and shocks, followed by
equally astonishing new waves of hope. What strikes me about it is how typically
English it is. Nothing, I feel, could be more English both in its beginning and its
end, its folly and its grandeur.53

IV. “The People’s War”: The Role of Class and Gender in WWII Nostalgia

Central to mythic constructions of social cohesion during WWII are
representations of ‘the common people’. Significantly, this construction of “an idealized
image of their common people – ordinary, decent, productive citizens for whom and by
whom the war was being fought” (20) was not unique to Britain. In fact, it was a tool
used by both German and British governments to secure civilian support for the war. In

both Germany and Britain this image of the common people united to defend the values of their civilization was interconnected with a defence of imperialism and “racial superiority.”

However, the image of the “people’s war” and Churchill’s “invocation of a ‘common people’ united in a common cause” was an image that “appealed to all strata of society” (Morgan and Evans, 21). The rhetoric of a united and egalitarian society fighting the forces of evil was deployed as a means of garnering the support of working class people from whose ranks conscripts were largely drawn. As Morgan and Evans point out,

> From the start, the war against Nazi Germany was presented as a struggle against the ‘forces of darkness’ that threatened civilised society, and British interests around the globe… To a mostly conscript, working-class army, the war was legitimated by appealing to common beliefs in justice, equality and democracy. (Morgan and Evans, 5)

Of course, “the freedoms people were asked to defend in the name of democracy and liberty were often more rhetorical than real” (Morgan and Evans, 18). Such ideas were deployed strategically in order to consolidate the patriotism of the working classes during the war, but their unintentional consequence was that people’s expectations were raised about the possibility of a more equitable society in the post-war period. Many historians have pointed to the role of this war rhetoric in inspiring the working class demands that led to the post-war development of welfare capitalism in the West (Calder; Morgan & Evans; Sinfield).

In *Atonement* the lionization of “the common people” is specifically effected through the figure of Robbie. A number of reviewers identify Robbie Turner as the
“hero” of McEwan’s novel. These accounts of Robbie are imbued with an air of reverence. For instance, Hermione Lee begins her Observer review of Atonement with an account of “the first time we hear the hero speak.” An Amazon.co.uk reader insists that readers will become entirely identified with “hero Robbie Turner” during the Dunkirk episode. Yet another asserts that readers will find “their hero[s]” Dunkirk experience both “horrific” and “compelling.” “Only son of the humble cleaning lady,” Robbie is the embodiment of the wholesome, empathic “common man.” A decent, persecuted man. Robbie’s identity as a working class boy with a Cambridge education “transform[s him] from the son of servants to Cecilia’s intellectual equal, if not her ‘better’” (Ingersoll, 251). For a number of critics, this in conjunction with his relationship with Cecilia Tallis, who gives up her family and class status to be with him, speaks to a levelling of class distinctions. As Geoff Dyer argues, “the partial democratisation of Britain that results from the social upheaval of war is prefigured by Cecilia’s turning her back on her family and allying herself with Robbie, the working-class graduate.”

However, as a highly literate man and aspiring doctor, Robbie also represents the values and interests of an idealized middle class: Distanced from a corrupt aristocracy (embodied by the Tallis family), still one of the decent “common folk,” but educated and professionalized. Robbie’s relationship to an ideal middle class is further reinforced by the fact that representations of the other servant class people at the Tallis home tend

55 James-a rundel, “Touching and Tragic, an excellent read,” Amazon.co.uk., 29 August 2006. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A1QRBW1N79SFQ?ie=UTF8&sort_by=MostRecentReview>
towards caricatures: Betty, the tyrannical cook; Robbie’s mother, Mrs. Turner, the clairvoyant charlady; the loyal ‘Old’ Hardman, the groundskeeper and his vaguely lecherous and unmistakably slow son, Danny.

Significantly, Robbie’s dream of becoming a doctor is accompanied by the dream of becoming a member of the intelligentsia and acquiring symbolic supremacy over non-white people:

He thought of himself in 1962, at fifty, when he would be old, but not quite old enough to be useless, and of the weathered, knowing doctor he would be by then, with the secret stories, the tragedies and successes stacked behind him. Also stacked would be books by the thousands, for there would be a study vast and gloomy, richly crammed with the trophies of a lifetime’s travel and thought – rare rain-forest herbs, poisoned arrows, failed electrical inventions, soapstone figurines, shrunken skulls, aboriginal art. (92)

Here we see the interconnection between the acquisition of status, knowledge, and the objectification of colonial “others.” These “trophies” of imperialism – rare rain-forest herbs, poisoned arrows... soapstone figurines, shrunken skulls, aboriginal art – help secure his symbolic and literal authority. Thus while critics point to an equalizing of class distinctions engendered in the novel, this “equalization” is implicitly the capitalist fantasy of class mobility. The idealized upper-middle class status which Robbie hopes to attain depends on the objectification of racialized others. His coveted socio-economic status depends on a mastery of others evident in his imaginary possession of the art, implements, medicines and body parts of aboriginal people.
In fact, *Atonement*’s construction of the heroic “common man” is made possible through the simultaneous objectification of non-white “others” and the denigration of women. According to McEwan scholar, Julie Ellam, in an unpublished conference paper, Robbie’s “imprisonment is made possible by the English class distinctions that are the subtext to this piece” (3). However, these class distinctions are figured most clearly through the trope of a gendered leisure class, specifically embodied by Emily Tallis, the mother of the Tallis family. As Ellam claims, the novel “points the finger of blame at the structure of British society as embodied by Emily’s snobbery” (3). This allocation of “blame” and its embodiment are significant. Indeed, in spite of the portrayal of men in positions of political power, men in this novel are at worse represented as weak or absent. Women almost exclusively make up the cast of malevolent or manipulative characters, the characters to whom we are invited to assign blame.

It is Emily Tallis who throws herself into Robbie’s sentencing with an energy that is clearly motivated by her class ideology and rivalry with her husband: “She had pursued [Robbie’s] prosecution with a strange ferocity, while Jack turned away, vanished into his Ministry the moment he was needed” (227). From the start she felt that her husband’s patronage of Robbie was misguided. According to Emily, Robbie had become living proof of some levelling principle [Jack Tallis] had pursued over the years. When he spoke of Robbie… it was with a touch of self-righteous vindication. Something had been established which Emily took to be a criticism of herself. She had opposed Jack when he proposed paying for the boy’s education… ‘Nothing good will come of it’ was a phrase she often used, to which Jack would respond smugly that plenty good had come already. (151-2)
While Emily is depicted as a prudish and controlling, but ultimately ineffective, woman – having to repeatedly “retreat to her bedroom” (122) with debilitating migraines – her husband Jack, although frequently absent, epitomizes the benevolent patriarch. When he “was home, the household settled around a fixed point. He organized nothing, he didn’t go around the house worrying on other people’s behalf, he rarely told anyone what to do – in fact, he mostly sat in the library. But his presence imposed order and allowed freedom. Burdens were lifted” (122). The picture of the idealized patriarch is thus developed through an implicit invidious comparison to the overbearing and domineering woman. In an aristocratic, patriarchal home dependent on the hierarchy of social class, the upper-class, male domination is constructed as the foundation of equilibrium; Paradoxically, patriarchy is figured as the source of “freedom.”

The novel’s disparaging depiction of women is further evident in the representation of Lola, who is described as “precocious and scheming” (65); she is a girl who “longed to throw off the last restraints of childhood, who saved herself from humiliation by falling in love, or persuading herself she had, and who could not believe her luck when Briony insisted on doing all the talking and the blaming” (324). Indeed, as Kermode points out, readers are invited “to suspect that this flirtatious child knew perfectly well the attacker wasn’t Robbie.” Thus, Lola too shares the blame for Robbie’s long incarceration. Indeed, when Briony discovers Lola sitting in the darkness, we are told that Lola “may have been about to speak, she may have been about to embark upon a long confession in which she would find the feelings as she spoke them and lead herself out of her numbness towards something that resembled both terror and joy” (166). Furthermore, we are told that she marries her rapist because she knew on “which side her
bread was buttered” (358). Similarly, we are informed: “Nor did the bride appear to be a victim” (325). In fact, according to Brian Finney, Lola’s marriage to Marshall is evidence of her “worldly manipulation of the advantage the rape has given her over her rapist” (74). Indeed, the real victim in this story is not the child who is raped. The victim in this tale is Robbie, “an innocent man” whom, “with silence and falsehoods,” “Paul Marshall, Lola Quincey and she, Briony Tallis” had sent to jail (325). In fact, in the reaction “sexy, manipulative teenage Lola” (Lee) elicits from critics, there is an implication that she “asked for it.” The novel itself encourages this response, for Paul Marshall remains remarkably absent from the landscape of blame. In the scenes immediately following Lola’s rape, readers are encouraged to focus their anger on Briony and direct their compassion towards Robbie. And, while Marshall – from his name, to the “ammo” chocolate he makes for the troops, to his aggressive, jocular manner – is associated with military aggression, he quickly fades from the reader’s consciousness. Ultimately, he remains entirely peripheral, like evidence not taken into account rather than the perpetrator of this horrible crime.

Furthermore, while readers might infer why a young girl in this situation would behave as Lola does, they are left without any definitive understanding of Lola’s thoughts or motivations. Why, for instance, would Lola have felt it was better to blame Robbie than Marshall? The implication is, of course, that she was in some way complicit in her own violation, that she asked for it or enjoyed it. Is this not precisely the sort of culturally sanctioned misogyny that historically has kept women and children from coming forward about rape? Neither are readers given a sense of her complicity, her guilt, an understanding of why a young girl in her situation might use her nascent sexuality, why
she might thus feel complicit in her rape, why guilt might plague her. No evidence of the social pressures a young girl in her situation might be under is offered. We are left only with the perspectives of Emily and Briony Tallis: Lola as a projection of Emily’s conniving and promiscuous younger sister, Hermione; Lola as a flirty, manipulative adolescent; and, even in Briony’s older reflections, Lola as a “stage villain,” with her “gaunt figure, the black coat, and the lurid lips” (358). Given the extent to which McEwan delves into the psychological twists and turns that motivate both Briony and her mother, it is surprising that Lola’s perspective is entirely absent from the novel. While, of course, both Emily and Briony’s perspectives are Briony’s, given that she is the fictional author of this story, it is nevertheless unclear why she is able to represent the intricacies of her mother’s psychology but refrains from doing so for Lola. Furthermore, since this absence appears to have little consequence for the plot generally, indeed since it establishes a notable imbalance, it is worth noting that the real author here is McEwan. The prejudice apparent in the text, evident in the lack of compassion shown to Lola, is conveniently projected onto Briony.

The negative characterizations of Briony, Emily, and Lola are set in clear contrast to the favourable depiction of Cecilia. However, even Cecilia is initially represented as manipulative. When her brief struggle with Robbie over the vase results in a piece of it breaking off in Robbie’s hand, Cecilia – who is caught up in the roller coaster of her emotions – enjoys the pain this accident will cause Robbie: “It was irresistible, she knew, even delicious, for the graver it was, the worse it would be for Robbie… ‘You idiot! Look what you’ve done’” (29). When we are privy to the thoughts of Robbie, on the other hand, no such unkind or sadistic thoughts are evident. Rather he chides himself
for his weakness, his inability to express to her the extent of his feelings for her. Only once Cecilia has fully realized her love for Robbie, her ambition only to live for him, is she represented as wholly admirable, even ideal. In *Atonement* then, we find again the intersection of the nostalgia for WWII and nostalgia for the nuclear family, a mythic romantic love engendered by a woman’s absolute devotion to her man. She writes to Robbie: “I have you to live for… You are my dearest one, my reason for life” (109).

Furthermore, Cecilia’s future “naturally” and happily involves the fulfilment of her maternal function. She writes to Robbie of her experience working in the maternity ward of the hospital:

> When she described a happy outcome, that moment when the battle was over and an exhausted mother took the child in her arms for the first time, and gazed in rapture into the new face, it was the unspoken call to Cecilia’s own future, the one she would share with him… though in truth, his thoughts dwelled less on birth than conception. (207)

The fact that Robbie’s thoughts focus on conception is further evidence of his status as a “manly” heterosexual hero, Cecilia’s masculine complement. While the idealized Cecilia’s future involves the “unspoken call” of motherhood, figured as a “natural,” instinctual drive, it is significant that neither Lola nor Briony has children. These less noble, less desirable, less “natural” women are the embodiment of a corrupted modern femininity. Nostalgia for traditional gender norms is tightly woven into the fabric of these representations. For, good girl Cecilia’s early death ensures her conflation with the “traditional” past, whereas both Lola and Briony live into the present and thus implicitly represent the degeneration of non-traditional modern women.
Of course, it is Briony, “that busy, priggish, conceited little girl” (367), who misidentifies Robbie because she “couldn’t tell real life from the stories in her head” (324). Between parts one and three “the novel shifts us from… Briony the literary narcissist to Briony the self-oblivious nurse tending to the atrociously wounded in wartime London.” She takes on nursing “as a sort of penance” (McEwan, 212) and learns “her humble place in the ward” (319). In becoming a more obedient, stable young woman, Briony is represented as a more sympathetic character. As one San Francisco Chronicle reviewer argues, “the horrors she witnesses seem to catapult her at last out of her destructive self-interest.” The implication here is that a little bit of war horror will do a silly girl good. In finally coming into a highly feminized caretaking role, Briony begins her atonement.

The centrality of clear gender distinctions is further evinced by critical discussions of Atonement’s stylistic transitions. The first section is largely focalized through the perspective of Briony, the second is entirely focalized through Robbie (albeit still ostensibly written by Briony). The gendering of these different sections is evident in terms of the values critics attach to their different narrative modes. Briony’s part one is described as “elliptical,” “romantic,” even “melodramatic.” The representation of the style of this section is in keeping with the fact that, as Sinfield points out, “women writers are said to manifest sensibility, sensitivity, extravagance – ‘code words for feminine in our culture’ – at the expense of verisimilitude” (28). Part Two, as we have already seen, is consistently discussed in relation to verisimilitude. In this section, McEwan constructs “a more straightforward narration” where “the emphasis is on objects, bodies, and the

physical sensations of hunger, thirst, and fear” (Hidalgo, 7). As one reviewer notes, “The elliptical style of the opening part has no place in these pages,” and McEwan himself has confirmed that in this section he “write[s] in a choppier prose with shorter, simpler sentences,” for “on the battlefield the subordinate clause has no place” (qtd. in Finney, 74). The masculine world of war is thus signified through the more “straightforward” style, in which McEwan uses only the fundamental elements of a sentence, cleansed of all superfluous (feminine) embellishment. Significantly, however, the subordinate clause is what gives context to otherwise unquestioned statements or “facts.” In the sections dealing explicitly with the Second World War direct authoritative statement is preferred over contextualization.

V. WWII Nostalgia and Post-colonial Anxiety

In general, British imperialism and colonialism remain conspicuously absent from McEwan’s novel. Entirely absent are the millions of Asian, African and Caribbean soldiers who fought for Britain during the war. Indeed, in spite of the fact that, as McEwan himself has pointed out, “the whole of the British army was at Dunkirk,” not once in the countless anecdotes of the retreating BEF does a black or brown face appear.

In fact, the whiteness of Atonement’s prewar and wartime England is only made visible in contrast to the “colour” of the postcolonial present. In the final coda, dated 1999, the racial diversity of contemporary Britain implicitly operates as a sign of degeneration. It is within this final sequence in which we learn of the imminent loss of

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61 Qtd. in David Weigand, “Getting rid of the ghosts (Q & A: Ian McEwan)” San Francisco Chronicle, 10 March 2002: M2.
Briony’s memory (memory in which the past is preserved) that we meet Michael. Michael is the cab driver who drives her back to the much transformed Tallis mansion. He is described as “a cheerful West Indian lad” (362) who sulks when she insists he turn off “the thumping twangy bass noise” (362) and whose handshake she describes as surprisingly “feathery and unassertive” (364). Through the cab windows she reflects on the transformations of her childhood home, the future of her past. And while Briony herself protests “there was no need to be nostalgic – it was always an ugly place” (363), the sentimentality evident in the description encourages readers to conclude otherwise. While the house itself had been established from the outset as a monstrosity, it is in this place that an idealized love between Robbie and Cecilia was initially established, in a world before disaster, when the future was still a glorious prospect. The ivy – symbolic of age and thus the presence of the past – which once covered the house’s façade has been stripped away. In its bare state it is “unprotected.”

In this final section racial degeneration becomes a metaphor for Briony’s descent into dementia:

However, withered, I still feel myself to be exactly the same person I’ve always been. Hard to explain that to the young. We may look truly reptilian, but we’re not a separate tribe. In the next two years, however, I will be losing my claim to this familiar protestation. The seriously ill, the deranged, are another race, an inferior race. (356)

Significantly, her expulsion from sanity is figured in racialized terms; she will become a member of “a separate tribe,” “an inferior race.” Then, in Michael’s cab she experiences a minor stroke – a small step closer to the dementia through which she will become a
member of “another race, an inferior race.” It is useful here to recall Toni Morrison’s discussion in Playing in the Dark of the ways in which white writers have deployed figures of black Otherness as a mean through which to meditate on their own identities, as a means through which fears are addressed and allayed, fantasies projected and fulfilled. According to Morrison, “it is possible to explore and penetrate one’s own body in the guise of the sexuality, vulnerability, and anarchy of the other” (Morrison, 35). It is against the backdrop of what Morrison has called this “Africanist presence” (5) that Briony, for the first time, experiences “desperation” and “claustrophobia,” a feeling of “helpless confinement, within the process of decay, and a sensation of shrinking” (McEwan, 362) which she has already metaphorically established as a sort of racial degeneration.

Aside from the metaphorical role played by racial “difference,” Briony’s attitudes are informed by hackneyed racial stereotypes. Briony dwells briefly on Michael’s background, his absent father, his professional mother. He himself is a graduate from law school and is beginning a doctoral thesis in “law and poverty in the third world” (362). While on one hand Briony contends that it is “safest to treat everyone you meet as a distinguished intellectual” (362), it is clear that her judgements of the man belie this assertion. Firstly, the hyperbole of the statement points to the sarcasm at play (“everyone” must be treated as a “distinguished intellectual”). Indeed, we might detect an air of nostalgia here for the good old days when intellectuals could be clearly distinguished from the masses, where skin colour was a stable signifier of rank, education and class. Furthermore, her assessment of his music – “It sounded so childish, though I had the suspicion that some terrible sentiments were being expressed” (362) – evince her real
conclusions about him: childlike, but potentially menacing and dangerous. This is illustrated by her portrayal of his other characteristics. She describes his response to the fact that she “would not tolerate the thumping music at any volume” as sulking, a characteristically childlike response. Further, she points out that after carrying her bags into the front lobby of the hotel “[h]e wished me happy birthday and shook my hand – how feathery and unassertive his grip was – and left” (364). The fact that she pauses to remark on the nature of his handshake illustrates her surprise. Her surprise speaks to the physical hostility she expects from him.

VI. Liberal Tolerance

McEwan’s public statements regarding contemporary multicultural Britain evince an attitude not dissimilar from that exhibited by Briony. After the London tube bombings of 7 July 2005 McEwan asserted in an interview with Spiegel, “There is no refuge [from terror] and if you want to be in a city like London, with its relatively successful racial mix, it’s impossible to defend.”62 The explicit subtext here is that terror is something brought to the white English by racialized others. As long as these “others” cohabitate with “us,” “we” will always be in danger. Real Britons are the white and peaceful victims of this terror-izing “other.”

While I would argue that Briony and McEwan manifest a chauvinism indicative of a parochial imagination, numerous critics have pointed out that it is Briony’s inability to imagine alternate perspectives that brings about her crime.63 Indeed, it was her

63 See scholarly articles by Finney and Hidalgo as well as reviews by Kermode and Eagleton.
attachment to “the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains” that results in her “failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as [she is]” (McEwan, 40). In an interview with Romana Koval, McEwan argues that imaginative identification is an essential element of morality: “That sense that other people exist is the basis of our morality. You cannot be cruel to someone, I think, if you are fully aware of what it’s like to be them.” According to McEwan his novels are… “about showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else. It is the basis of all sympathy, empathy, and compassion. Other people are as alive as you are. Cruelty is a failure of the imagination.” But whose perspectives are represented in *Atonement*? It can be argued that readers are asked to identify alternately with Robbie, Cecilia, and even Briony at different points in the novel. However, given that collectively the narrative develops towards a singular ideological perspective, the question remains as to what extent this apparent diversity allows for any real capacity to expand the limits of the imagination.

Significantly, the limits of *Atonement*’s imaginative identifications are paralleled in McEwan’s discussions of contemporary reality. In interviews with McEwan about the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, McEwan argued that it was the terrorists’ inability to imagine others that enabled them to perpetrate their crimes: “You cannot be cruel to someone if you fully understand what it is to be them. You have to somehow screen that out. You have to say to yourself, ‘They’re not really humans’.” However, like the limitations of identification in *Atonement* itself, McEwan’s moral

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65 Qtd. in Kate Kellaway, “At Home with his Worries,” *The Observer*, [London], 16 September 2001: Features, 3.
imperative only impinges on “their” ability to identify with “us.” The historical examples McEwan sites in his discussion of human violence and immorality are telling. While he cites the Holocaust as “the greatest, lowest moment in modern history,” the only other examples he draws upon are “Gengis Khan and Tamerlane” along with the Rwandan genocide “where a sort of orgy of destructiveness, shocked the world.” Nazis, Mongolians, Turks, and Africans. In spite of centuries of genocide, brutal forms of colonialism, and the neo-colonialism that has actively fuelled countless violent civil wars and ethnic conflicts, such as the one that raged in Rwanda, Western capitalist powers are entirely absent from the territory of blame or responsibility.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that there may in fact be limits to imaginative identification as the central condition for morality. While being able to see the world from a multiplicity of perspectives may provide the evidence for a relativist reading of the world, it is unlikely to transform someone’s ideologically invested assessments of the world. For instance, given an account of her grief I may decide that it is sad that an Iraqi mother has lost her child in an American bombing. However, if I already have established ideas about the righteousness of American intervention in Iraq, I may decide that while unfortunate, such deaths are necessary. I may decide that the massive death toll (at least 650,000 Iraqis) is the unfortunate by-product of ridding the world of “insurgency.” If, however, I have access to the historical and political context (US-Iraqi relations since the 1950s, the value of oil, the importance of strategic access to the Middle East for capitalist expansion) in which the war in Iraq was perpetrated, I am likely to come to a significantly different conclusion. Thus imaginative identification may be only a piece of

what is necessary. Indeed, it may be rather more important to understand the historical and material reasons that motivate various human behaviours.

Justifications for current imperialist adventures embedded in *Atonement*’s depiction of the Second World War are explicit in McEwan’s own political commentary. McEwan makes explicit connections between fascism and Saddam Hussein’s regime, thus implicitly endorsing the American led invasion of Iraq. Ignoring the fact that Hussein’s government was put in control of Iraq by Western powers and in response to a question regarding his own support of the invasion of Iraq, McEwan suggested that war was a necessary preventative for “continued torture and genocide and abuse of human rights by a fascist state.”

The obvious limits of McEwan’s political analysis can be detected in the formal qualities of the novel as well. In his review of *Atonement* for *The Lancet*, Eagleton contends that with the “shifting from one viewpoint to another, the novel form teaches us a politics of liberal tolerance, engaging a plurality of perspectives; but this, too, takes place within the brutal monomania of the imagination, and it is, after all, the all-privileged novelist who decides to whom to hand the microphone next.” What Eagleton alludes to here, is the extent to which “liberal tolerance” is itself a form of “brutal monomania.” And, while Eagleton does not go on to make this point, it can certainly be argued that, in the case of *Atonement*, the novel’s “liberal tolerance” simply works to consolidate the supremacy of the white, liberal, male. The lack of any real diversity in the perspectives presented in the novel illuminates the limits of “liberal tolerance” and its

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logic of supremacy cloaked in a rhetoric of “diversity.” For, as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out in “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” liberal tolerance “bring[s] to light the inherent contradiction of the liberal-democratic ideological project.” Liberal tolerance is the watchword of “multiculturalism” and involves patronizing Eurocentrist distance and/or respect for local cultures without roots in one’s own particular culture. In other words, multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ‘racism with a distance’—it ‘respects’ the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. (42)

This is a point to which I will return in the following chapters as I explore WWII nostalgia in the context of “multicultural fiction” in Britain.

**VII. Author-ity and the Glitterati**

To conclude my discussion of *Atonement* I would like briefly to return to a consideration of its status as “elite fiction.” For, as I point out at the beginning of this chapter, it is elite fiction that Torgovnick suggests might have the capacity to subvert WWII nostalgia. However, this assumption does not take into account the extent to which literary categories are determined by a literary establishment whose choices are at least as much determined by ideological and economic investment as they are a measure of “objective” literary greatness. As Alan Sinfield points out, “Literature is writing that is acknowledged as such within a powerful publishing, reviewing and educational apparatus” (33). The fact that, according to McEwan, “*Atonement* is going to be absorbed
into the school curriculum” is another indication of the extent to which this novel has been incorporated into the cultural establishment.

Ian McEwan’s status as a celebrity author is an important feature of the success of this novel. Avid McEwan fan and fellow celebrity author Zadie Smith asserts that McEwan “has had one of the most consistently celebrated careers in English literature.”

The importance of McEwan’s status as a member of the glitterati is all the more significant in light of recent accusations that a large part of Atonement was taken directly from the autobiography, No Time For Romance, of romance novelist Lucilla Andrews. According to Julia Langdon of the Daily Mail, “the remarkable similarities between passages of her book, detailing the grim realities of nursing at St Thomas’ Hospital in London during the Second World War, and a section of McEwan's novel” were “brought to light as a result of a doctoral thesis by a student at St Hilda’s College, Oxford.”

Given McEwan’s many borrowings from Andrews’ text (an account of which can be found in Langdon’s article), it is significant to note, as Langdon does, that while “McEwan’s novel met with such reverent acclaim - it received rave reviews and was shortlisted for the 2001 Booker Prize – [Andrews’] own writing was regarded by the literary elite as ‘mere’ romantic fiction.” Lucilla Andrews had apparently intended to denounce McEwan at a public luncheon in her honour. However, the eighty year old was taken ill and never recovered. The similarities between her work and that of McEwan were remarked on in her obituary.

68 Qtd. in “An Interview with Ian McEwan.” Barnes & Noble: www.bn.com. (No interview date provided) <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Atonement/Ian-McEwan/e/9780385721790#ITV>


The extent to which *Atonement* has been embraced by the elite literary establishment is evident not only in the critical attention it has received but in the ways in which it is discussed. Reviewer Kellaway comments that she read *Atonement* “as one might drink a good wine, relishing every word, not wishing to swig too fast, not wanting it to be over.” But *Atonement*’s status with the literary establishment is also largely due to the novel’s (unacknowledged) ideological investments. In arguing *Atonement* should be “assured a place” in the literary canon, Ellam contends that “with *Atonement* McEwan can be seen to be offering salvation for those who worry about the future of the British novel. Its historical context, its awareness of its literary heritage, and its popularity with the public all serve to remind us that the act of transformation is both possible and interesting.” The contention that something specifically called “the British novel” must be saved is intriguing. Salvation? From what? From whom? Indeed, embedded in this contention is an inherent contradiction. While “transformation” of the “British novel” is ostensibly both “possible and interesting,” salvation of the contemporary “British novel” shall be found in “historical context” and “literary heritage.” In this assertion there lurks a disavowed racial/culture imperialism. The “historical context” of *Atonement*, as we have seen, is comprised of a nostalgic representation of the “just war” which serves to consolidate a heroic white English identity; the “literary heritage” ascribed to the novel by Ellam – “Woolf, Forster, Lawrence, Richardson and Austen” – is entirely comprised of white English authors.

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71 Kate Kellaway, “At Home with his Worries,” *The Observer* [London], 16 September 2001: Features, 3.
Chapter 4

Introduction II: Marketing Multiculturalism

Ellam’s suggestion that the potential for salvation of something called the “British novel” lies in *Atonement*’s “historical context, its awareness of its literary heritage, and its popularity with the public” overlooks the fact that British national identity is not static, but is continuously revised through the stories that are told, the novels that are written, the web of representations that make up the imagined community that is Britain. Ellam’s ideas exemplify the fact that dominant representations of British history and culture have largely excluded the reality of its diversity. As Stuart Hall points out in his 2001 Pavis Lecture, “The Multicultural Question,” “British society has always been much more diverse, much more internally divided and contradictorily related to itself than it was ever represented in the dominant historical myth” (8). Thus, in light of Ellam’s assertion regarding *Atonement*’s role in the “salvation” of the (implicitly white and English) “British novel,” it is worth considering whether fiction that explicitly seeks to represent an alternative vision of British national identity might offer a different sort of “salvation,” a salvation from WWII nostalgia. In these next chapters, I will consider the extent to which “multicultural fiction” can provide an alternative to the colonial nostalgia and homogenous “Britishness” embedded in the WWII fiction I have examined thus far.

A similar move is made by Torgovnick, who turns to “post-colonial literature” for an alternative to the mainstream narratives of the Second World War. Looking to uncover the “host of elisions concerning aspects of World War II outside Europe” (97), she

Torgovnick looks specifically at the differences between the novel and film version of *The English Patient*, noting the film’s omission of both Indian colonialism and atomic bombings of Japan. She asserts that this erasure is indicative of the construction of the Second World War in American cultural memory and, more generally, is a sign of the extent to which this erasure is central to contemporary WWII nostalgia. Torgovnick points specifically to “the novel’s references to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and everything that might lead one there” (99), suggesting that such references both point to and defy the omission of these events from the dominant cultural memory.

In Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*, she points to the novel’s exploration of the relationship between the history of imperialism and WWII as well as the complicity of the British in the rise of fascism in Europe. A large portion of the novel involves the main character Butler Stevens’ recollections of wartime, and clearly investigates the politics of appeasement and links between the aristocrats at Darlington Hall, where Stevens worked, and Mosley’s fascist party. Furthermore, by setting the novel in 1956, Torgovnick argues, Ishiguro’s novel gestures towards the marginalization of the Suez Crisis “as an important boundary to British imperial and political ambition” (109) within Western cultural memory.

Thus, both novels disrupt the normative conventions of World War Two nostalgia by alluding to atrocities committed by the allies during the war as well as the colonial practices that were their precedents. However, in Torgovnick’s allusion to the ethnicity of
these authors, in her reminder that these “men are, of course, Asian born…” (113; my italics), her argument collapses into a common conceptual fallacy: the notion that where we are born or our “racial” or “ethnic” identities are a sort of guarantor of a particular political attitude or point of view. Perhaps the most striking indication of Torgovnick’s essentialism can be detected in her bizarre claim that “based on evidence entirely outside the text and noticeably absent from it” Ishiguro’s novel can be read to “evoke by omission the neglect in the West of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (110). Admitting that the claim may seem “hyperbolic,” given that the bombings never appear within the text’s frame of reference, she goes on to contend that the parallels between Ishiguro’s first two novels and Remains of the Day are the basis for her contention. However, her evidence for these parallels hinges on the fact that like Stevens the characters from these other novels (in which the atomic bombings are explicitly evoked) are also “masters of repression” (110). The absurdity of this “evidence” makes all the more obvious the real rationale for her claims which are finally revealed in the final sentence of her discussion of the significance of the atomic bombings to Remains of the Day: “Kazuo Ishiguro [was] born in Nagasaki in 1954 in the aftermath of the nuclear destruction” (111). Of course, Torgovnick is far from alone in her suggestion that the politics of literature written by postcolonial “others” is based on the (racialized) identity of the author. In fact, it can be argued that this sort of racial or ethnic essentialism is rampant in readings of “postcolonial fiction.” Significantly, Ishiguro himself has explicitly rejected attempts to label his work as either “postcolonial” or “Asian” fiction, suggesting that his ethnicity and work should not be considered contiguous (Israel, 94-95).
Analyses, such as Torgovnick’s, which fetishize the “subversive” potential of texts written by non-white people, are not only essentialist, they are often inaccurate. In a number of recent and acclaimed novels by non-white, British authors WWII features prominently. However, neither the identities of the authors nor their novels’ “multicultural character” ensures narratives that disrupt the dominant nostalgia for the “just war,” for a world of racial homogeneity and for clear distinctions between good and evil. Furthermore, given the attention that tends to be focused on the identity of non-white authors, it is particularly important to be attentive to the novels’ paratexts: their marketing and framing, that is to say, the context in which “multicultural” fiction is both produced and consumed. Thus, before I begin my readings of particular novels, I will consider the context of official British multiculturalism in which these works are written. I will consider the ways in which diversity is managed through multiculturalism, the ways in which, as Cynthia Hamilton asserts, “multiculturalism has been used as an institutional strategy to obscure and thereby help to preserve existing relations of domination and power” (167).

I. Multiculturalism in Britain

Paul Gilroy begins Postcolonial Melancholia with a defence of multiculturalism. He points out that hostility towards multiculturalism has been promoted in mainstream British culture. A 2006 article in the Daily Telegraph makes this hostility explicit. Reporter Michael Burleigh opines: “the hegemonic creeds of anti-racism and multiculturalism - propagated by the BBC, Channel 4, the churches, local government, schools and universities - have downgraded the majority culture and rubbished Britain’s
traditions in favour of the ‘black armband’ view of history. Each perceived historic slight trumps every other value.” From Enoch Powell, to Margaret Thatcher, to the British National Party (BNP) attacks on non-white Britons and immigrants have had a long and dirty history. Indeed, racism and anti-immigrant propaganda have long been a staple of British political discourse; however, in the climate fomented in the wake of 9/11, overt racism has received a new lease on life. As Žižek contends in “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” there has been “a triumphant comeback…. of pure, undistilled racist hatred of the Other which renders the rational tolerant attitude utterly impotent” (36). Žižek’s hard-hitting critique of multiculturalism does not blind him to the fact that the brutal racism espoused by the likes of the BNP is on the rise. Žižek is aware, in other words, of the fact that in relation to this more flagrant racism, the discourse of multiculturalism would seem a refreshing and wholesome respite.

To its supporters, multiculturalism is commonly understood as the social and political framework in which the acceptance of “diverse cultures” is encouraged. However, as critical race theorist Kenan Malik argues in an article entitled “The Real Value of Diversity,” dominant ideas both for and against multiculturalism are premised on similar assumptions. While proponents of multiculturalism argue that ethnic diversity is a public good and its opponents blame social ills on this “cultural impurity,” both sides agree that multiculturalism has arisen as a consequence of demands made by immigrants: it is the historic result of struggles by non-white immigrant peoples to protect the “right

to maintain [their] own identity, culture, language, religion and customs.”73 However, as Malik argues, multiculturalism was not generated within local communities, but rather “was imposed from the top, the product of policies instituted by national governments and local authorities in order to defuse the anger created by racism” (par. 8).74

In Britain, multicultural policies were implemented in order to weaken the solidarity of non-white Britons working together for political equality. This solidarity is apparent even in the term “black Briton” which, not unproblematically, references all non-white British citizens. Compelled, then, by the strength of the political struggle of black Britons against racist immigration policies, racist attacks, and police brutality in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s, the British establishment was forced to recognize that, in Malik’s words, “unless black communities were given a political stake in the system, their frustration could threaten the stability of British cities” (par. 14). Thus, the incorporation of certain limited and transformed demands made by black Britons was central to the “success” of multiculturalism as a strategy of management and containment.

73 This statement is from a 12-point race relations plan developed by the City of Bradford in the wake of battles that took place between anti-racist forces and the National Front in April 1976.

74 It is important to distinguish between state-sanctioned multiculturalism and the lived reality of people in cosmopolitan urban centres throughout the world. Gilroy emphasizes the obvious benefits of “cosmopolitan conviviality,” which, he points out, “does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance” but the “processes of cohabitation and interaction” (xv). What Gilroy highlights is the importance of recognizing the ways in which lived experience, while constituted within various political discourses and policies, is never fully contained by them, but moves beyond and outside of them. Thus while what Stuart Hall has called the “multicultural drift,” a term to describe “the unplanned, increasing involvement of Britain’s black and brown populations visibly registering a play of difference right across the face of British society” (“The Multicultural Question [Sheffield]”, 1) should not be overlooked, this “drift” developed in conjunction with a political doctrine not unlike its Canadian and Australian forerunners. It cannot, therefore, be entirely separated from the government policies which have codified multiculturalism as the appropriate response to the fact of cultural diversity. Also, as Hall points out, this “creeping multiculturalism remains deeply uneven. Large areas of the country, most significant centres of power, substantial areas of racially differentiated disadvantage, are largely untouched by it. Outside its radius racialised exclusion compounded by household poverty, unemployment and educational underachievement persist, indeed, multiply” (1-2).
According to Žižek this sort of manoeuvre is a common tactic of the ruling class. Žižek writes:

To work, the ruling ideology has to incorporate a series of features in which the exploited majority will be able to recognize its authentic longings. In other words, each hegemonic universality has incorporated at least two particular contents, the authentic popular content as well as its distortion by the relations of domination and exploitation… How did Christianity become the ruling ideology? By incorporating a series of crucial motifs and aspirations of the oppressed… and rearticulating them in such a way that they became compatible with the existing relations of domination. (30)

The introduction of multiculturalism involved precisely this kind of rearticulation. Official multiculturalism redirected the focus from inequality to the importance of recognizing cultural differences. As Malik points out, “At the heart of the strategy was a redefinition of racism. Racism now meant not simply the denial of equal rights but the denial of the right to be different” (par.15). Significantly, by claiming that non-white people had the right to retain their identities, values, and explore their own histories (as if “their” histories could somehow be detached from “ours”), the meaning of equality was quietly, albeit profoundly, transformed. As Malik asserts, equality no longer meant “possessing the same rights as everybody else,” but rather “possessing different rights, appropriate to different communities” (par.15).

As numerous thinkers working in the field of race scholarship have argued, the focus on cultural differences encouraged by multicultural rhetoric and policies resulted in the “balkanization” of non-white people into diverse ethnic groups and has served to
undermine the formation of political solidarities. According to Malik, “political struggles that had dominated the fight against racism in the 1960 and 70s had become transformed into battles over cultural issues” (par. 17) by the mid-1980s. This aestheticization of politics undermined the collective political struggles of non-white Britons and “entrenched divisions and strengthened conservative elements within every community” (par. 18). However, while the fragmentation of solidarity has been one political consequence of multicultural policies, ironically, it has also resulted in the perceived homogenization of non-white peoples. Multiculturalism constructs a binary between dominant “British culture” (read: white Anglo) and “multicultures” (read: all racial, linguistic, and ethnic “others”), who are then represented as interchangeable, colourful cultural supplements. Indeed, as Malik claims, the ideology of multiculturalism is constructed on “the same assumption that has dogged the debate about race relations from the start: the idea that black people are in some way fundamentally different from ‘British’ people and that the problem of race relations is about how to accommodate these ‘differences’” (par. 16).

In fact, while the terminology of “race” has been replaced by that of “culture,” the same essentialist assumptions are at play. Culture like race is treated as a natural and static fact rather than a fluid social process. Furthermore, since the discourse of multiculturalism is sustained by a belief in absolute cultural differences, it diverts attention away from any analysis of the material conditions that sustain inequality. As a result, multiculturalism is incapable of challenging systemic inequalities. Thus, as Tahir Abbas, director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture at the University of
Birmingham, argues, multiculturalism has come to mean “the presence of ethnic minorities, but says nothing about their social status.”

II. Multiculturalism, New Imperialism, and WWII Nostalgia

As Gordon and Newfield assert in their introduction to Mapping Multiculturalism, “Multiculturalism arises in a context in which culture is a commodity to be bought and sold in a multinational marketplace altered by the globalization of production” (13). The “Cool Britannia” campaign perfectly exemplifies this point. “Cool Britannia” was a media term coined in the mid-1990s that is intertwined with the politics of Tony Blair and his government’s platform of “modernisation.” As Dohra Ahmad notes in her favourable review of White Teeth entitled “Brushing up on multiculturalism,” “multiculturalism is big business”:

Coming out of England in particular, the tourist industry as well as various gin manufacturers – for a time icons of the old colonial power – have adopted familiar sets of multicultural imagery that work to replace a stuffy, history-steeped, and exclusively Anglo national identity with one that is hip, young, and multicolored. The Tony Blair-endorsed “Cool Britannia” tourist campaign of the 1990’s turned the new hybrid nation into a product for global consumption.75

This capitalist fantasy of a multicultural wonderland has promoted both the fetishization of “cultural others” and the erasure of the reality facing the majority of non-white Britons.

According to Žižek, multiculturalism is “the ideal form of ideology of this global capitalism.” The American multicultural critic, E. San Juan Jr. makes an analogous point in *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference* (2002), arguing that multiculturalism is “a reformist tactic for carrying out those infamous neo-liberal goals of stabilization, deregulation, and privatization that have caused untold misery for millions” (34). The celebration of “cultural difference” at the heart of multicultural discourse masks socio-economic inequalities both within Western “democracies” and globally. For instance, the rhetorical insistence that the multicultural nation is a place of diversity and equal exchange hides the reality of a growing gap between the rich and poor, a gap which is increasingly gendered and racialized, with the vast majority of the world’s lowest paid, most insecure work performed by non-white, migrant, or “third world” women.

Furthermore, by projecting a fantasy-world of color-blindness and equality, the rhetoric of benevolent Western multiculturalism is deployed to naturalize social and economic inequalities on an international scale. This point is elaborated by Jodi Melamed, who argues, in “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” that multiculturalism portrays neoliberal policy as the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity. Neoliberal policy engenders new racial subjects, as it creates and distinguishes between newly privileged and stigmatized collectivities, yet multiculturalism codes the wealth, mobility, and political power of neoliberalism’s beneficiaries to be the just desserts of “multicultural world citizens,” while representing those neoliberalism dispossesses to be handicapped by their own “monoculturalism” or other historico-cultural deficiencies. A
language of multiculturalism consistently portrays acts of force required for neoliberal restructuring to be humanitarian: a benevolent multicultural invader (the United States, multinational troops, a multinational corporation) intervenes to save life, “give” basic goods or jobs, and promote limited political freedoms. (1)

What Melamed’s analysis of the relationship between multiculturalism and neoliberalism elucidates is the extent to which multiculturalism can be understood as a mitigating discourse for the current form of imperialism.

The relationship between multiculturalism and current imperialism is made manifest in Blair’s vision of the “new Britain.” As political biographer Anthony Seldon contends in a keynote address entitled “Tony Blair in History” given in Montreal in 2005, Blair’s “new Britain” entails “a changed relationship for Britain in the world, where he would be leading the country, alone or in association with America, in the war against terrorism, bringing peace to the Middle East, and combating third world poverty and climate change” (par. 1). So, just how different is this alternate vision of multicultural “Cool Britannia” from its predecessor and namesake, the Britain of “Rule Britannia”? Equipped with a retooled language of the “civilizing mission,” Blair’s “new Britain” and America join forces behind the linguistic veil of “democracy” to defend the interests of multinational capitalism: bringing “peace” in the form of devastating war and the massive expropriation of resources, and imperialism dressed in the rhetoric of “humanitarian aid” and “freedom” abroad, just as they veil racial inequality with the rhetoric of “multiculturalism” at home.

As San Juan Jr. points out in his critique of US multiculturalism, “the old belief in ‘our civilizing mission’ endures despite claims of charity, patriotic compassion, liberal
latitude, respect for cultural diversity and so on” (7). In fact, as Melamed suggests, it can be argued that this belief endures partially because of these claims. Similar claims have always been central to justifications of imperialism. For, such claims help disguise the brutal reality accompanying these “charitable missions.” This fact signals the centrality of language to the manufacturing of consent. As John Collins and Ross Glover argue in *Collateral Language: A User’s Guide to America’s New War* (2002), “A central project of any political rhetoric is to develop support from the people” (3). The authors use the example of Hitler’s Germany to point to the ways in which states strategically deploy certain types of language in order to “convince [their] people to commit the most atrocious acts,” developing a “sophisticated set of linguistic tools (some may say weapons) to manufacture broad-based consent” (3). The rhetoric of cultural diversity is an ideological-linguistic tool used to manufacture domestic consent for imperialism and the maintenance of the status quo within Britain by obscuring the racism of British policy both at home and abroad. Significantly, in a 2006 speech intended to illustrate his tough stand on “terror,” Blair asserted that multiculturalism is something “we should continue celebrating.”

Cultural pluralism, San Juan Jr. argues, “has been retooled for the imperatives and exigencies of the ‘New World Order’…. While the political armies of racial supremacy were defeated in World War II, the practices of capitalist nation states continue to reproduce the domination and subordination of racialized populations in covert and subtle ways” (7). San Juan Jr.’s analysis circumvents recognition of the ways in which the rhetorical insistence on the defeat of “the political armies of racial supremacy” works in

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conjunction with the rhetoric of cultural pluralism to simultaneously efface and reproduce the contemporary “subordination of racialized populations”; while San Juan Jr. offers valuable insights into the power relations that sustain multicultural discourse, the WWII triumphalism he implicitly endorses operates in harmony with representations of benevolent multicultural nationhood. Indeed, multiculturalism is an important ally of WWII nostalgia: nostalgia, that is, for mythic national unity, for Manichean division between “us” and “them,” “good” and “evil.” The evocation of Western Allied governments as the forces of liberalism, multiculturalism, and tolerance serves to justify the persecution of those deemed intolerant and monocultural. The irony, of course, is that these representations of Western tolerance and altruism simultaneously validate a lack of tolerance.

III. Repressive Tolerance and Multicultural Fiction

Many scholars have written about the ways in which the exclusion of racialized “others” has been central to Western national identities. However, in Strange Encounters Sara Ahmed discusses the fact that inclusion of the “other” is in fact necessary to the multicultural nation. As Ahmed points out, in the multicultural nation “cultural others” “fit into the nation precisely because they allow the nation to imagine itself as heterogeneous (to claim their difference as ‘our’ difference)” (96). According to Ahmed, multiculturalism is invested in a process of ‘stranger fetishism’ where “the act of welcoming ‘the stranger’ as the origin of difference produces the very figure of ‘the stranger’ as the one who can be taken in” (97). Othering, she points out, is thus effected through acts of inclusion.
This paradox was made glaringly evident by Tony Blair in his 2006 speech “The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values.” In this speech Blair specifically addresses Britain’s accommodation of racialized “others” in the wake of the London tube bombings. He begins his address with the claim that the “modern vision of Britain” is that of “a country at ease with different races, religions and cultures.” Significantly, the syntax of Blair’s statements illustrates the ideological assumptions it superficially appears to disavow. Here Britain (“a country”) is the subject, separate from the objects of difference with which it is so benevolently at ease. In other words, Britain is not a country of “different races, religions, and cultures,” but rather one that is comfortable with, but distinguished from, them. Furthermore, this Britain is little more than a “modern vision” suggesting that the “ease” Blair highlights may be little more than a projection, a self-representation disguising a more profound unease with the reality of its diversity.

However, in the same speech Blair claims, “We like our diversity. But how do we react when that ‘difference’ leads to separation and alienation from the values that define what we hold in common?” Blair’s assertion that we like our diversity might appear to contradict his earlier characterization of a Britain distinct from its cultural diversity. However, Blair’s suggestion that “difference” might be in conflict with the country’s core values and his assertion that “we expect all our citizens to conform to our common values,” expose the superficiality of his multicultural rhetoric. For, while Blair celebrates “the common culture of tolerance we have established in this country today,” his

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contention that “our tolerance is part of what makes Britain, Britain. So conform to it; or don’t come here” shatters the illusion of tolerance he attempts to construct.

As I noted in Chapter One, according to Gilroy, WWII nostalgia in Britain functions to “connect people to the fading core of a culture and a history that is confronting a loss of certainty about its own distinctive content and its noble world mission” (88), and is therefore ostensibly incompatible with multiculturalism. For Gilroy, contemporary representations of WWII “provide a touchstone for the desirable forms of togetherness that are used continually to evaluate the chaotic, multicultural present and find it lacking” (88). However, as Blair’s comments illustrate, official multiculturalism itself involves a “secret longing for the kind for community it pretends to replace” (Gordon and Newfield, 4).

Indeed, Blair’s comments make clear that multicultural “tolerance” does not extend to a diversity of views but only to diversity in terms of “lifestyle” or the superficial trappings of “culture.” Blair makes this fact very clear: “Integration in this context, is not about culture or lifestyle. It is about values. It is about integrating at the point of shared, common unifying British values.” In other words, “we” can tolerate “them” so long as their ideas are compatible with those espoused by “us”; but, if “they” actually challenge the dominant ideology, if they do not adopt “our” worldview and value system, “they” are characterized as dangerous (potential terrorists). This is precisely the point made by Žižek who contends,

Liberal ‘tolerance’ condones the folklorist Other deprived of its substance—like the multitude of ‘ethnic cuisines’ in a contemporary megalopolis; however, any ‘real’ Other is instantly denounced for its ‘fundamentalism’… the ‘real Other’ is
by definition ‘patriarchal’, ‘violent’, never the Other of ethereal wisdom and charming customs. One is tempted to reactualize here the old Marcusean notion of ‘repressive tolerance’, reconceiving it as the tolerance of the Other in its aseptic, benign form, which forecloses the dimension of the Real of the Other’s jouissance. (38)

Here Žižek points to the ways in which the discourse of multiculturalism, and “liberal ‘tolerance’” in particular, works to construct two types of “Others,” those whose identities can be readily commodified, deprived of their substance and assimilated, and those whose ideas and values are at odds with Western, capitalist, “democracy.” Only those who are seen to conform to the former category are accepted into the multicultural nation. The other “Others” are constructed as a perpetual, violent threat against which the nation must rally to guard itself. Thus, the “liberal” celebrations of “difference” in its “benign,” commercialized and apolitical forms can be seen to operate within a paradigm of repressive tolerance, since the boundaries of what is tolerated are circumscribed in such a way as to deny access to the expression of real differences.

The category of multicultural fiction has developed within the context of this “repressive tolerance.” In what follows I ask not only what makes certain works of “multicultural fiction” popular, but why certain works are heralded as representative of the multicultural. Specifically, I examine the relationship between multiculturalism and representations of WWII in Andrea Levy’s Small Island (2004) and Zadie Smith’s White Teeth (2000). I explore the relationship between the discourse of multiculturalism that frames these novels, their representations of World War Two, and reasons for the popularity of this fiction as multicultural fiction.
Both *Small Island* and *White Teeth* have received widespread acclaim for their portrayal of multicultural London. Judges of the Whitbread prize described *White Teeth* as a “landmark novel for multicultural Britain,”\(^78\) while Ruth Wishart claimed at the Edinburgh International Book Festival that *Small Island* was “an especially timely book for a nation that is struggling to cope with its multiple identities and to define what it means for us to be living in a multicultural society.”\(^79\) I argue that the success of *Small Island* and *White Teeth* must be understood within the context of multiculturalism as an official strategy of management and containment. Through an examination of content as well as marketing and reception, I illustrate the ways in which these “multicultural” novels, while working to disrupt the logic of white supremacy, simultaneously can be seen to work towards the consolidation of a regressive and ultimately racist multiculturalism that itself serves to consolidate and sanction the hegemony of normative, white British identity.

\(^78\) Qtd. in “Whitbred Prize 2000: Books: Special Report,” *Guardian.uk.co Books*, [http://books.guardian.co.uk/whitbread2000/0,384967,00.html](http://books.guardian.co.uk/whitbread2000/0,384967,00.html)

\(^79\) Ruth Wishart’s introduction of Andrea Levy at The Edinburgh International Film Festival. A transcript of the proceedings can be found at the following web address: [media.edbookfest.co.uk/bookfestival/.../05_08_15_andrea_levy.doc](http://media.edbookfest.co.uk/bookfestival/.../05_08_15_andrea_levy.doc)
Chapter 5

Small Island and the Making of Multicultural Britain

Andrea Levy’s Small Island (2004) specifically works to redress the erasure of non-white British soldiers from the memory of WWII and explores the arrival of the Windrush in 1948 as a pivotal moment in British history. Indeed, the novel embodies Mike and Trevor Phillips’ assertion in Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain that “on 22 June 1948 the Windrush sailed through a gateway of history, on the other side of which was the end of Empire and a wholesale reassessment of what it meant to be British” (6). While at points in the novel Levy challenges the construction of race as a biological fact and exposes the conditions of its social production, Small Island ultimately participates in a reconstruction of WWII that works to bolster the very racialism she fleetingly appears to escape.

Small Island pursues the interwoven stories of four characters: Gilbert, a Jamaican airman who serves in Britain during the war and returns there on the S.S. Windrush in 1948; Hortense, a light-skinned Jamaican woman who marries Gilbert in order to escape to the England she has dreamed of since she was a child; Queenie, an English butcher’s daughter who marries young to escape a life of drudgery as a butcher’s assistant and who becomes the landlady of the boarding house in which Gilbert and Hortense reside; and Bernard, Queenie’s English husband, who for most of the novel is missing after his demob in Burma. The novel skips between first person narratives from each of the four

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80 In fact, in the acknowledgements at the end of her book Levy explicitly cites the Phillips’ text as a major influence on the novel.
characters, switching back and forth between the present tense of 1948 and an amorphous “before,” between two small islands: England and Jamaica.

Ultimately the stories of these four characters are knit together by the absence of a fifth whose story is only told indirectly. Michael Roberts is Hortense’s cousin, the boy with whom she grows up and with whom, upon his return from boarding school, she falls in love. Michael, however, chooses the white, blonde-haired Mrs. Ryder, wife of the local American missionary and schoolteacher. Their affair produces a scandal that in turn causes Michael to leave Jamaica and travel to England. Hortense is heartbroken. A few years later Hortense meets Gilbert Joseph, who looks something like Michael. Hortense and Gilbert get married in order to facilitate their migration to the mother country. In the meantime, Michael has become a member of the RAF and while in England meets Queenie. She is smitten. He seduces her and she becomes pregnant. Later Queenie meets Gilbert who is brought to her by her stepfather who mistakenly believes Gilbert is Michael. Ultimately, Queenie, Gilbert, and Hortense live together under one roof having been brought together by Michael’s absent presence. The significance of this proliferation of coincidences is not apparent until the novel’s end.

When Bernard finally returns, he is appalled to discover that his wife has rented rooms in his family home to “coloureds.” Even more distressing, his wife is distinctly uninterested in pursuing conjugal relations with him and within days of his return gives birth to a mixed race child, born of her brief union with Michael Roberts. In spite of himself, Bernard grows fond of “the little mite” just in time for Queenie to convince Hortense and Gilbert to take her child (who the readers, but not the characters, know is also a blood relation of Hortense) in order that it might grow up amongst its “own kind.”
I. Realism and the Cult of Authenticity

*Small Island* has enjoyed great success and received enormous popular acclaim. It has won a series of prestigious awards: the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread Novel Award and the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize. In his brief blurb Linton Kwesi Johnson praises *Small Island* as “a work of great imaginative power which ranks alongside Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, George Lamming’s *The Emigrants*, and Caryl Phillips’ *The Final Passage* in dealing with the experience of migration.” Andrea Levy, whose first novel, *Every Light in the House is Burning*, was published in 1994, is often considered one of the pioneers of black British writing. According to Christie Hickman, journalist for *The Independent*, such a time is “hard to imagine now, when British-born black and Asian writers such as Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali have redefined concepts of Englishness and stormed their way into the bestseller charts.” However, Hickman’s difficulty imagining a past as recent as 1994 is at best disingenuous, given that it was a time when writers like Rushdie and Kureishi were already well-established. Also, what Hickman’s statement effaces is the fact that the presence of bestsellers written by black and Asian Britons is not necessarily indicative of a transformation in the core values that underpin concepts of Englishness, as the statement suggests. In fact, in spite of the prominence of a handful of celebrated black British writers, of whom Levy is one, the framing and reception of *Small Island* suggests both that black British writing continues to be perceived as an exotic appendage to

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British literature and that publishers continue to require that the work of black British authors be expressive of a particular vision of multiculturalism and the experiences of non-white Britons. Indeed, the very term “multicultural literature” so often used to describe literature written by non-white Britons involves, as Graham Huggan points out, “a theatricalized perception of cultural otherness” (154).

Levy herself is clearly aware of the pressures facing black British writers to represent their racialized experience. As she pointed out at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in August 2005: “A black Briton who is writing about that experience – that is the crucial thing – will find a publisher if their writing is half decent… If, however, you are a black Briton writing about your quest for the Holy Grail or something like that, I don’t know.”83 What Levy points to here is the extent to which the “multicultural fiction” that is published is chosen for its value as representative of “ethnic” experience. In The Post-Colonial Exotic Graham Huggan writes, Ethnic autobiography, like ethnicity itself, flourishes under the watchful eye of the dominant culture; both are caught in the dual process of commodification and surveillance. This might help explain why the work of writers who come from, or are perceived as coming from, ethnic minority backgrounds continues to be marketed so resolutely for a mainstream reading public as ‘autobiographical’.

(155)

Indeed, the work of non-white Britons is consistently marketed and reviewed as essentially autobiographical. In “The Politics of the Exotic: The Paradox of Cultural

83 Address given by Andrea Levy at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2005. A transcript of the proceedings can be found at the following web address: <media.edbookfest.co.uk/bookfestival/.../05_08_15_andrea_levy.doc>
Voyeurism” feminist theorist Susan Hawthorne points to the motivations for this demand for ‘ethnic autobiography,’ arguing that it is symptomatic of “the voyeurism on the part of dominant culture” (263). The performance of “difference” required of people from non-dominant groups has been a significant element of British imperial culture. For instance, the British Empire Exhibit, which, interestingly enough, is the setting for Small Island’s opening scene, was an important way in which British identity was consolidated against the displays of “exotic” colonial “others.”

Speaking with Guardian reporter Raekha Prasad in 1999, Levy insisted: “I want to switch the emphasis. Because being white is the norm, it has become like having no race. Martin Amis has black characters in his books, his writing is informed by race just as mine is. I want to put him on a platform at a literary festival to talk about race.”84 The fact that “normal” British writing is considered race-less and thus implicitly white is an example of the ways in which, as Hawthorne points out, “The particularities of the dominant culture are taken to be universal… [while] the particularities of the non-dominant culture are taken to be simply that: particularities” (263).

Levy has further challenged the notion that as a black woman writer she has less capacity to reflect the nature of human experience in general: “I call myself a black woman writer because ‘black’ and ‘woman’ are the two lenses through which I explore myself and the rest of my fellow human beings. But sometimes if you use the term, other, often younger, black writers consider it to be a kind of ghettoisation. For me, it is just the opposite – it gives me a pathway into the great stream of human history.”85 Thus Levy

insists that the particularities of her identity provide a position from which she can
explore the human condition more generally. However, despite Levy’s attempts to use
her identity and experience as a jumping off place, rather than a destination, the framing
of her work clearly constrains the realization of this desire. Indeed, the marketing and
framing of Levy’s work exemplifies Susan Hawthorne’s claim regarding women writers
whose attempts “to universalize their experience [have tended all too often to be] reduced
to the particularities of a lived life” (262).

Indeed, what Hickman refers to as Levy’s “colourful family background” is a
central component of almost every book description, review and accolade. Underneath a
large glossy photo of Levy, the inside cover of the 2004 Review paperback edition reads
“Andrea Levy was born in England to Jamaican parents.” In spite of Levy’s attentiveness
to the pressures she faces as a black woman writer to represent “the black experience,”
her own website seems to encourage precisely this sort of limited reading of her work.
According to her website biography: “In 1948 Andrea Levy's father sailed from Jamaica
to England on the Empire Windrush ship and her mother joined him soon after. Andrea
was born in London in 1956, growing up black in what was still a very white England.”

The elision between her own family’s history and her novel is further cemented by the
fact that Levy’s father’s name is Gilbert. Her mother’s is Hortense. The reader is
couraged to read this novel as the author’s intimate account of a personal history. This,
it is implied, guarantees the real-ness, the truthfulness, the facticity and thus the value of
her story.

   <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/andrea-levy-notes-from-a-small-island-732211.html>
The consistent references, made by critics, reviewers, publishers as well as the author, to Levy’s racial identity and family history that frame *Small Island* operate as authorizing devices. The implicit assumption here is that it is by virtue of her (black) identity and (black) experience that she has the authority and insight necessary to accurately represent her subject: race issues. By establishing her “ethnic otherness,” the “authenticity” of her story is legitimated. The message here is clear: as an “ethnic other” Levy provides readers with an “authentic” look into her “exotic” experience.

Significantly, Levy’s portrait of white society is similarly authenticated with reference to her personal experience. As a result of the “particularity” of her experience, any attempt to represent experiences other than her own must be justified: her website tellingly assures us that her story is one “to which she brings her understanding of white society,”88 an understanding she acquired because she “grew up liking… the company of her white friends.”89 Two assumptions are at play here: first, that it is her direct experience of white people that allows her to accurately represent them; second, that her account of white society is even-handed (implied here: not like those angry black people who don’t like white folks).90

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90 Indeed, Levy faces additional pressures as a result of the fact that she has been described by some critics as “angry,” a characterization that ostensibly developed because of Levy’s comments about the pressures and exclusions of the publishing industry. Considerable attention has been paid by other critics and her own publishing apparatus to placate any such fears. For instance, Kate Mosse, Founder of the Orange Prize, defended Levy by asserting, “People think it’s only possible to be a black writer and be angry about black/white relations. But colour is invisible in Andrea’s books. It’s not about being black or white. We all exist in every shade of grey” (qtd. in Marianne Brace, “Andrea Levy: Notes from a small island,” *The Independent*, 12 June 2004: People. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/andrea-levy-notes-from-a-small-island-732211.html>). In Mosse’s haste to deflect criticisms about Levy being angry about racism, she suggests that the remedy for angry black accounts of racial inequality is to produce accounts which erase race (and therefore racial inequality) altogether.
Having established that, based on her experience, she can also represent white people, her website informs us that *Small Island* “is more than just a story of the Jamaicans who came looking for a new life in the Mother country” (my italics) but also a story that examines “the adjustments and problems faced by the English people whom those Jamaicans came to live amongst.” One insinuation here is that a story “just” about the emigration of Jamaicans to Britain would be both partial (we need both “sides” of the story) and uninteresting (to the implied audience). Furthermore, by characterizing the arrival of Jamaican immigrants as a problem that was faced by white Britons, Levy’s website suggests that racism arose spontaneously as a natural consequence of contact between racially distinct groups rather than developing as a justification for historical inequality. In other words, Levy’s website suggests that the source of the “problems” the “English people” face is the introduction of Jamaicans; racism is then configured as the consequence of the introduction of this “difference,” symptomatic of an attitude-adjustment period that will ultimately be overcome.

II. The Origins of Multiculturalism

*Small Island* has received considerable praise for its representation of an era perceived as the origin of multicultural Britain.\(^{91}\) On the back cover of Levy’s novel we

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\(^{91}\) According to Elizabeth Keim, reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle, Small Island* “goes further” than “the immigrant experience… to excavate from the rubble of the Blitz the ‘Cool Britannia’ society in which multicultural fiction thrives today.” Keim’s suggestion that the novel “goes further” than “the immigrant experience” implies a linear progression from a homogenized “immigrant” to the much more desirable “multicultural” Britons of “Cool Britannia” who have been well-assimilated into western market-driven culture and, as a result, participate in the celebration of their own commodification. Importantly, WWII figures as the inaugural moment of “Cool Britannia.” However, given that “Cool Britannia” is a fiction, a marketing campaign rather than a accurate characterization of British society, Keim’s comments illuminate the extent to which a fictionalized past (WWII nostalgia) enables the production of a fictional present (Cool Britannia).
are told that “It is 1948, and England is recovering from a war… Small Island explores a point in England’s past when the country began to change.” Both WWII and the iconic trip of the S.S. Empire Windrush, the emigration of a few hundred Caribbean people to London in 1948, are marked as the beginning of Britain’s transformation into a multicultural society. So, how do these two mythic moments operate collectively in the construction of the present?

The arrival of the Windrush has often been characterized as “an important landmark in the history of modern Britain, symbolising the beginning of modern multicultural relations which were to change British society significantly over the following years.” However, by establishing the primacy of 1948 as a turning point in Britain’s history, the arrival of a few hundred Caribbean people is presented as the advent of British racial integration. This emphasis neglects the reality of black peoples’ presence in Britain since the twelfth century. It aids in erasing the history of slavery in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as the presence of African communities that had been established by the early eighteenth century in the seaports of Bristol, Cardiff, and Liverpool. Forgotten are the thousands of African Caribbean people who came to Britain during the First World War to work in war industries and in the merchant navy.

Elevating 1948 to the symbolic moment of British racial integration marks this moment of “contact” as the source of all ensuing “race problems.” In so doing, race is constructed “as an eternal cause of racism rather than… its complex, unstable product”

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93 For an overview of the presence of black folks in Britain, see The Oxford Companion to Black British History (2007).
(Gilroy, 14). In other words, race is understood as biological difference rather than as a social process. As Gilroy points out, Britain’s relentless “failure to be hospitable is about far more than just managing the internal effects of mass immigration. It cannot be said too often that this is not, at source, a matter of ‘race,’ even though, for many people, it is understood and lived as such. It is the workings of racism that produce the order of racial truths and not the other way around” (106).

However, while Gilroy’s contention that racism produces race is an invaluable tool for combating the construction of race as biological fact, the question that follows naturally from his assertion is: If race is a product of racism, where does racism come from? Essential here is the fact that during the post-WWII reconstruction of the British economy immigrants were actively recruited from the colonies. Cheap labour was absolutely necessary for the recovery of the British economy. Thus, the structural maintenance and promotion of class inequality was justified through the rhetoric of racism (i.e. these people are not as inherently valuable as “us” and therefore better suited to do exploitative work). Of course, this racist construction of black people was a central part of the institution of slavery.

Furthermore, a focus on Windrush as the inception of multiculturalism illustrates the disavowed racial logic lurking at the heart of official multiculturalism itself. While post-war reconstruction brought in waves of immigrants from all over Europe, the Windrush supposedly only brought “coloured” immigrants. As John Solomos points out in *Race and Racism in Britain*:

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Considerable publicity was given to the arrival of 417 Jamaicans on the Empire Windrush in May 1948 and the subsequent arrival of large groups of West Indian workers, and this focus on ‘coloured’ immigration helped to obscure the fact that the majority of immigrants came from the Irish Republic, white Commonwealth countries and other European countries. (49)

It is in this era of British history that the figure of “the immigrant” becomes indelibly inscribed as a person of colour. Also, the arrival of immigrants from the Caribbean initiated after the war, far from heralding an era in which cultural and racial diversity was accepted, immediately excited major political debate which eventually, in the wake of larger movements of migrants from the West Indies in the late 1950s, resulted in the institution of the Commonwealth Immigration Act restricting entry to immigrants from the non-Commonwealth colonies. In other words, if anything, the immigrations that began in 1948 resulted in more restrictive immigration policies for “coloured” immigrants rather than a transformation in social attitudes.

Moreover, 1947 was a watershed year for colonized people; the decolonization of India had reverberations for people around the world. In arguments of the sort one finds in Michael and Trevor Phillips’ *Windrush*, which represent 1948 as the inception of multiculturalism, the fact that this era was one of massive and historic movements for decolonization is conveniently de-emphasized. The end of empire is thus revisioned as a benevolent move on the part of an enlightened Britain that, like a parent who recognizes its children have come of age, grants them their independence. This formulation is fundamentally at odds with the reality of violent revolution and historic struggle on the part of colonized people. Representing 1948 as the inception of British multiculturalism
can be seen as a sort of saving face or compensation for the historical-psychological impact of losing empire. Thinking in these terms we can come to understand the seemingly arbitrary allocation of the inception of multiculturalism to this era as a retrospective coping strategy for the end of empire.

WWII nostalgia is entirely compatible with this cultural narrative of historical compensation. In the construction of 1948 as the inaugural moment of multi-racial Britain, WWII features as the event that created the conditions for this great change. For instance, Levy’s website claims, “The Second World War was a great catalyst that has led to the multi-cultural society Britain has become. For Andrea Levy acknowledging the role played by all sides in this change is an important part of understanding the process so we can go on to create a better future together.”95 While emphasizing the significance of WWII as a catalyst of multiculturalism, Levy’s website account downplays the extent to which colonized people had to fight for national independence as well as their basic rights and freedoms within Britain in the wake of WWII.

On the one hand, Levy’s account of black, and specifically Caribbean, soldiers during and after WWII serves as an implicit critique of the absence of these soldiers from traditional narratives of WWII. Her focus on the commonly disavowed experiences of black servicemen undermines representations of the war as a victory won by a racially homogenous Britain and also serves to expose race as a social construction. In one instance, for example, Gilbert Joseph, one of Small Island’s four narrators and a Jamaican member of the British Royal Air Force, remembers his brother’s attempt to enlist for duty at the onset of the Second World War:

With the fervour of a crusade my brother wanted to fight in this war. But when the British Royal Air Force asked him the question, ‘Are you of pure English descent?’ Lester replied, ‘Come take my blood and see.’ Nobody believed him when, rejected by the RAF, he returned home burdened with the knowledge that the Mother Country only required members of the white races for this fight…

Lester’s response highlights the absurdity of the quasi-biological qualities that we have come to accept as commonsense in relation to “racial” and by extension national identities, and emphasizes the way in which assumptions about white racial purity are coded into definitions of British identity. Furthermore, Lester’s treatment points to an important double standard at the heart of colonialism: for the purposes of assimilation or indoctrination the colonized were to consider themselves British subjects; however, the privileges of this status could be quickly repealed on the basis of racial difference. Of course, black men were, in fact, eventually enlisted to fight for the mother country, which quickly realized their value as expendable soldiers.

Levy’s decision to represent the experience of Caribbean servicemen such as Gilbert Joseph challenges their erasure from the annals of history. Levy, however, is not alone in making this sort of revisionist move; in Imagining the New Britain, for instance, black British journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown insists on the need to remember the more than 3.5 million black and Asian men who volunteered as soldiers for WWII. “Our endless war memorial services,” Alibhai-Brown notes, “have so neglected to reflect these sacrifices that in 1995 local authorities in London and Midlands began special events to

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96 This relatively predictable point is made by a number of critics. See, for instance, Barbara Korte’s “Black and Asians at War for Britain: Reconceptualizations in the Filmic and Literary Field?”; Maria Helena Lima’s “‘Pivoting the Centre’: The Fiction of Andrea Levy”; Cynthia James’ “You’ll Soon Get Use to Our Language.”
honour this record.” The lack of acknowledgement and even active disavowal, she argues, has left many black and Asian veterans “shocked and disenchanted with the way this country had allowed racism – the very poison they had fought against in the Second World War – to so infect its own shores” (54).97

However, while Levy’s portrayal of the treatment of black people in Britain during and after the Second World War may challenge the fiction of a racially homogenous allied force, and sometimes challenges the importance of “race” as a category of differentiation, the simple addition of black veterans to this story of “wholesome militarism” (Gilroy), of good fighting against evil, does little to disrupt the binary thinking upon which racist imperialism depends. Troublingly, Gilbert himself would appear to subscribe to this “wholesome” story, as in the following episode when he challenges his white landlord Bernard’s persistent racism:

Listen to me, man, we both just finished fighting a war – a bloody war – for the better world we wan’ see. And on the same side – you and me. We both look on other men to see enemy. You and me, fighting for empire, fighting for peace. But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan tell me I am worthless and you are not. Am I to be the servant and you are the master for all time? No. Stop this, man. Stop it now. We can work together, Mr. Bligh. (525)

In his attempt to show Bernard the absurdity of his attachment to the categories of race, Gilbert constructs racism as an act of volition, some sort of irrational aberration, rather than a structural feature of British nationalism and imperialism. By representing racism as an individual choice, prejudice is figured as the source of a lack of racial harmony

97 Of course, Alibhai-Brown’s account participates in WWII nostalgia, by constructing the war as a fight waged against racial imperialism by the forces of righteousness.
rather than a consequence of systemic inequality. In *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006), Walter Benn Michaels makes an analogous point. According to Michaels, representing racism as an attitude problem is an important obfuscating feature of multicultural ideology:

> The trick is to think of inequality as a consequence of our prejudices rather than as a consequence of our social system and thus to turn the project of creating an egalitarian society into the project of getting people (ourselves and, especially, others) to stop being racist, sexist, classist homophobes. (20)

The anti-racist project becomes solely one of having to change (bad) individuals and circumvents the importance of having to transform the social system that ensures race, gender and class divisions are maintained.

Set up as the logical anti-racist response to Bernard’s bigotry, Gilbert’s depiction of WWII as a battle against evil fought by black and white alike – multicultural forces fighting against the evil (and external) forces of racism – works to circumvent British responsibility for its own racial imperialism. Indeed, the story of “wholesome militarism” to which Gilbert seems troublingly committed needs to be further deconstructed by a thorough understanding of the disavowed colonial history it covers over. Significantly, the revisioning of WWII as a multi-racial endeavour can be easily assimilated into this story of an altruistic allied fight against racism. Thus, Levy’s novel participates in the mystification of the motivations of the Allied governments in the Second World War. It neglects any larger excavation of colonial history, which, as Gilroy argues, is crucial to an understanding of the structures that enable current racism and imperialism. In fact, *Small Island*’s representation of WWII contributes to the reproduction of “a sanitized
history of the imperial project,” of the sort that, as Gilroy points out, “is required by those who wish to bring it back to life” (47).

As a corrective to this tendency to sanitize Britain’s imperial past, Gilroy argues that it is necessary for British people “to appreciate the brutalities of colonial rule enacted in their name and to their benefit, to understand the damage it did to their political culture at home and abroad, and to consider the extent of their country’s complex investments in the ethnic absolutism that has sustained it” (99). But Levy’s novel falls short with regard to this contextualizing imperative. References to the Caribbean colonial past that make possible the present tense both of the narration (1948) and of the novel (2004) are vague and impressionistic. Slavery, rebellion, sexual exploitation, white supremacy, independence struggles resonate in a nebulous Jamaican “before” narrated by the Jamaican characters Hortense and Gilbert, but are seldom explicitly invoked. While this pastiche of conversation, image, impression, and memory may collectively serve to generate a vague sense of the legacy of white supremacy in Jamaica, it is curious that, in contrast, a rather more explicit exposition of Britain’s colonial project in the novel involves India and is focalized through the perspective of Bernard, the white, middle-class, male Briton, a man who describes himself as “proud to be part of the British Empire. Proud to represent decency” (379). It is through his eyes that readers witness the intra-Indian violence of the 1946 Calcutta Riots that accompanied the Partition of India:

Thousands were killed in Calcutta. Men, women, children, even suckling babies, it didn’t matter who. They called it a riot. Those of us who’d been there in the thick of the battle with these blood-thirsty little men knew that it was more than that. Muslims butchering Hindus. Hindus massacring Muslims. And who knows
what side the Sikhs were on? Rumours said the wounded were too many to be counted, the dead too many to be buried. They were fighting for who should have power when a new independent India comes. Made me smile to think of that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country. (375)

While only the most insensitive and bigoted reader could fail to register the extreme prejudice generating Bernard’s vision, it might well be argued that the lack of any other perspective serves to whitewash historical realities and allows the reader to shrug off any real understanding of the violence engendered by the Partition.98 Indeed, the absence of any explanation for this violence enables a reallocation of responsibility from the colonial aggressors onto the colonized themselves and validates the race thinking that has, as Gilroy contends, “rendered the bodies of natives, slaves and other infrahumans worthless or expendable” (45). Such misrepresentations of the colonial past epitomize what Gilroy argues is a “widespread desire – to allocate a large measure of blame for empire to its victims and then seek to usurp their honored place of suffering, winning many immediate political and psychological benefits in the process” (95).

While Levy’s text often highlights Bernard’s racism, his pathetic disposition undermines the full impact of his responsibility. From the outset Bernard is established as an insipid character. The reader’s initial impression of Bernard is focalized through his wife, Queenie, who finds him distinctly uninteresting during their courtship, but marries him to escape her imminent return to a life of drudgery as an assistant in her parents’ butcher business. Through Queenie’s eyes readers develop a vision of Bernard as a coward – at one point when bombs are falling on London “he just clung to [Queenie] for

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98 For a detailed account of the range of historiography covering the Partition as well as a thoughtful investigation into the ways in which the violence of the Partition has been accounted for, see Gyanendra Pandey’s *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (2002).
safe-keeping like a toddler” (273) – who hides behind ineffective evocations of moral
superiority, a man without passion whose intellectual naivety and physical delicacy – the
back of his neck, which becomes a recurring example of his lack of physical appeal, is
described by Queenie as “bony and scrawny, look[ing] more like the back of a heel with
his ears sticking out” (253) – gesture towards his general lack of life force and impotence.
Nothing about Bernard excites passion in Queenie. Sex with her husband is a distasteful
chore, and even her desire for a child remains unfulfilled – until, of course, one results
from her passionate, if brief, affair with the Jamaican airman, Michael Roberts. But, the
construction of Bernard as metaphorically impotent and quite possibly physically sterile,
his representation as an ineffectual and cuckolded man, participates in what Gilroy sees
as ongoing attempts “to minimize the extent of empire, then to deny or justify its brutal
direction, and finally, to present the British themselves as the ultimate tragic victims of
their extraordinary imperial successes” (94). For instance, even the full impact of the
horror that readers might experience in the face of Bernard’s decidedly brutal treatment
of a child prostitute whom he visits in Calcutta is mitigated by Levy’s careful
illumination of extenuating circumstances – the death of his dear friend Maxi, the ribbing
he receives from other servicemen for his lack of interest in sexual exploits – and by the
reader’s insight into the internal turmoil Bernard is himself undergoing. Thus, his
misguided fear that he has contracted syphilis from the child, the shame of which
prevents him from returning home for over two years after his arrival in England,
accentuates his pathos rather than the sadism that might otherwise be foregrounded.

Significantly, in an interview given for The Guardian Levy asserts, “For me, the
most poignant character in *Small Island* is Bernard.”99 While Levy characterizes Bernard as her “most poignant character,” his racism is clearly trumped by the hardships he faces himself. The interviewer, Bonnie Greer, notes that “Levy draws Bernard with amazing compassion, giving this shattered man a voice. We see England through his eyes… she turns Bernard into a tragic anti-hero in the classic mode.”100 Thus, Bernard is figured as the real victim of the story: Bernard, Levy asserts in that same interview, “is the one who went through a lot. When you think now how we ‘police’ trauma, men like Bernard had nothing at all. You come back and you’re not important any more, because whatever you were out there, you were certainly important. That coming back and feeling a kind of redundancy must have been hard.”101

Gilroy’s perspective is useful because it provides a way of critiquing Levy’s obfuscation of western responsibility in her construction of Brits as the “passive ‘captives’ of their imperial project” (94). However, there is also a problem with Gilroy’s perspective, one that we can begin to understand by paying attention to the ways in which Levy stresses the internal inequities that have served to bolster colonial systems of domination. For instance, as Levy’s account of the continued mobilization of Bernard’s unit of airplane mechanics after the end of the war emphasizes, those made to do the empire’s dirty work are rarely those plotting its trajectory. Indeed, as one “communist agitator” in the unit calls out, “We’re being used to prop up the British Empire” (378). Ultimately, Bernard’s close friend and a number of others are killed in a fire set under the

100 Ibid.
101 Ibid. This is not to suggest that the post-traumatic effects of war are not a legitimate object of concern. However, it should also be noted that in the context of this narrative the focus on Bernard’s trauma functions as an obnoxious diversion from the brutal realities of imperial history.
hut in which they are having a secret meeting. The fire is clearly intended to target men who are organizing to resist their continued use as “props” for empire.

In the depiction of these British soldiers unwilling to be redeployed we might find an interesting, albeit imperfect, parallel with the current imperial war being carried out in the Middle East in which a disproportionate number of US and British troops are taken from the ranks of the poor who have few choices and who join the army for the financial and educational incentives. Thus, by gesturing towards the imbrications of various forms of oppression and their combination in the service of colonial enterprise, Levy’s text offers a subtle corrective to Gilroy’s limited and ultimately damaging focus on race alone. However, the implicit critique of Gilroy we find in Levy’s novel is only partial and ultimately Small Island goes some way towards reproducing the sort of racial essentialism that Gilroy is eager to avoid.

III. Identity and Inequality

Gilroy argues that colonial constructions of race and racism are essential to current configurations of the infrahuman, a term Gilroy borrows from Giorgio Agamben to denote the “marginal figure of the person who can be killed with impunity and of their reduction to the infrahuman condition of ‘bare life’ that sanctions their death” (48). For Gilroy, race is the primary mode of allocating differential value to human lives. According to Gilroy, the colony’s “necessary reliance on divisions within humankind… demanded and institutionalized the abolition of all conceptions of citizenship as universal entitlement” (48). However, this argument is badly incomplete, for racial categories are but one of a number of historically and socially constructed divisions within humankind
that have sanctioned and continue to sanction the systematically unequal treatment of people. “The abolition of citizenship as universal entitlement” was demanded by a series of essential exclusions. Women, the poor, and colonized people were all pre-emptively excluded from the category of full citizen at its conceptual genesis. Indeed, the very notion of universal rights was paradoxically premised on exclusion from its inception.

Thus, Gilroy appears to miss a central feature of our contemporary social and political system – the system bell hooks has called “white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy”: namely, the ways “race” intersects with other configurations of difference which likewise (and often collectively) sanction the production of categories of infrahumanity. For Gilroy,

the ‘race’ idea is powerful precisely because it supplies a foundational understanding of natural hierarchy on which a host of other supplementary social and political conflicts have come to rely. Race remains a self-evident force of nature in society. Our being resigned to it supports enabling analogies and provides legitimation in a host of historical situations where natural difference and social division are politically, economically, and militarily mediated. (8)

On the one hand, Gilroy is right: racial difference is commonly considered natural and fundamental. Because of this, racial logic is certainly used to naturalize other forms of difference through analogy. However, racial difference is but one categorical form of difference that is used as the ground against which other forms of difference are then figured through correlation.

By subordinating various constructions of “difference” as “supplementary” to race, Gilroy undermines the very historicity he argues is essential to the deconstruction of
race thinking. For, in order to fully grasp the ways in which race has become “a self-evident force of nature” it is necessary to understand ways in which phobic constructions of racial or cultural “difference” have been produced in conjunction with configurations of “difference” in gender, sexuality, and class. While Gilroy catalogues a series of formative “dualistic pairings” which sustain racial logic in the present, his list is itself incomplete – alongside “black and white, savage and civilized, nature and culture, bad and good” also stand the binaries of woman versus man, sexual deviant versus the sexually normative, not as subordinate analogies, but as ideologically and materially contiguous. While Gilroy contends that “‘race’ refers primarily to an impersonal discursive arrangement, the brutal result of the raciological ordering of the world” (39), his analysis circumvents recognition of the ways in which “difference” is always discursively configured with reference to other forms of difference. For instance, racial difference is “naturalized” through an analogy to gender difference and vice-versa. Making this relationship apparent is essential to deconstructing the status of identity categories as natural or inherent and is what I hope to demonstrate in my reading of Levy’s text.

At points, Levy’s novel appears to offer a partial corrective to Gilroy’s oversights, illuminating the imbrications of sexual “deviance,” gender and race difference in the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy. For example, the violent response of American GIs to the intimacy evident between Gilbert and Queenie as they sit in a teashop together exemplifies the ways in which fears of miscegenation have sanctioned both the policing of white women’s bodies and the brutalization of black men, as well as the absolute erasure of the sexual violence repeatedly perpetrated against black women
by white men. Thus, by highlighting ways in which the overlapping of various “forms of difference” collectively enables the consolidation of a white masculine identity, Levy’s text can provide a valuable supplement to Gilroy’s argument.

*Small Island* also suggests that both class and race “difference” enable the consolidation of white, bourgeois Britain in the reaction of Queenie’s neighbours both to the presence of a cockney family bombed out of their home and relocated to a room on Nevern Street and the arrival of Jamaican post-war immigrants. Comments like “They’d be happier among their own kind” (269) accompany the arrival of the poverty stricken family and are echoed directly in their reactions to the Jamaican tenants Queenie takes in as boarders. In fact, what Levy’s novel highlights is the extent to which class has been conceived in terms of cultural or racial difference in Britain. For instance, in a pithy remark, Mr. Todd (Queenie’s exceedingly bigoted and nosey neighbour) makes apparent the construction of working class people as ethnic others: “We’ve got enough Poles living here to start their own country anew. Now these Cockneys” (270). Levy draws clear parallels between the prejudice levelled at both white working class people and Jamaican immigrants. “I am not happy to have those people living here. This is a respectable street. Those kind of people do not belong here” (286), calls out a woman when a working class family is moved into her neighbourhood. A similar protestation accompanies the appearance of Jamaican immigrants: “But these darkies bring down a neighbourhood” (117).

By comparing the discrimination levelled at Poles, Cockneys and Jamaicans alike Levy’s story offers a critique of prejudice. However, while illuminating the fact that class has been figured as cultural difference, the novel offers no further critique. Rather,
once again, the problem is represented as simply a matter of prejudice, one we can
overcome by respecting one another’s “differences.” The message seems to be that we
should have sympathy for these others, as Queenie does by retrieving for the same
Cockney boy the toy he has dropped in the mud. This formulation of class allows us to
conveniently sidestep dealing with the structural inequality that motivates the
construction of class categories to begin with. Significantly, in the era of neoliberal
multicultural “tolerance” this response to class difference has become ascendant. As
Michaels argues, “We have started to treat economic difference as if it were cultural
difference… then it’s our attitude towards the poor, not their poverty, that becomes the
problem” (19).

By treating class as an identity category, and classism as the unfortunate outcome
of “our prejudice rather than as a consequence of our social system” (Michaels, 20), the
historical construction of race as a class category is neglected. Both “race” and gender
categories developed as we know them today with the rise of capitalism and colonialism
and have been central to the development and maintenance of class categories. Race and
gender (among other “identity” categories) are deployed to solidify beliefs in
fundamental or natural differences between people. These “natural” differences are then
deployed to justify their economic exploitation. Gender and race are, in fact, class
categories as well, arising as categorical forms of human difference in order to justify the
exploitation of the labour of women and racialized “others.”

102 For instance, the rhetoric of white supremacy served to dissipate the threat of revolt by uniting the white

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102 In the case of gender, since the “discovery” of sexual dimorphism, the category of woman has been
consistently deployed to justify the maintenance of separate spheres and thus a class of people whose (often
invisible) unpaid and underpaid labour is the bedrock upon which the visible economy runs.
underclasses to their oppressors under the banner of racial superiority. In other words, race rhetoric (like the rhetoric of official multiculturalism) has been deployed to fragment class solidarity. As Michaels points out, we like visions of our societies “divided into races rather than economic classes” (3). Since racial and cultural difference are constructed as not only insurmountable but desirable, directing attention towards (racial or cultural) diversity at the expense of any analysis of (class) inequality effectively promotes the perpetuation of inequality along what have become (on a global scale) increasingly gendered and racialized class lines.

IV. Narrative Strategy and Controlling Images

At various moments Levy’s novel draws our attention to the interdependency of various constructions of “difference.” She does this not only at the level of content but at the level of form, specifically through her formal strategy of constructing her narrative through a series of distinct but interwoven perspectives. In Precarious Life, Judith Butler, addressing the solipsism of US accounts of the 9/11 attacks, asserts that “the ability to understand ourselves not from the first-person alone, but from, say, the position of the third, or to receive an account delivered in the second, can actually work to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken” (8). Similarly, Gilroy champions the importance of the empathy made possible by the ability to “imagine what it is like to be somebody else” (63). By developing the narrative of Small Island through four separate first-person accounts, Levy requires not only that her readers identify with several perspectives but also that they see each of these characters through the eyes of
others. Thus the empathy that Gilroy argues is foreclosed by race thinking is ostensibly encouraged through this strategy of multiple identification.

However, the empathy that is encouraged by the apparent equality afforded the characters and their various narratives is upon closer examination actively undermined. Indeed, the novel’s attempts to secure the readers’ sympathy for Bernard, even as his violent misogyny and racism are marginalized, are particularly significant when compared to the novel’s depiction of Hortense. Hortense is a light-skinned Jamaican woman who has fully internalized race and class hierarchies central to white supremacist colonial rule. With her skin “the colour of warm honey” and her private school education she is convinced that “No one would think to enchain someone such as I. All the world knows that rousing anthem declares: ‘Britons never, never, never shall be slaves’” (72). She is bewildered by the treatment she receives when she arrives in London. Her accent, which she recounts “had taken me to the top of the class in Miss Stuart’s English pronunciation competition” (16), is apparently incomprehensible to many white Britons; her high-tone skin is the object of intense discrimination. However, far from promoting sympathy for Hortense, the narrative encourages readers to judge her harshly. This is consistently demonstrated by reviews. Characterized by critics as “insufferable,” “prissy,” “snobbish,” “a village snob, insecure, narrow-minded, and more or less ignorant,” Hortense is ultimately represented as “the least sympathetic character” in the novel.

As Patricia Hill-Collins argues in Black Feminist Thought, controlling images

have been central to the justification of black women’s oppression. Hill-Collins points to the discrepancies between Victorian ideals of white womanhood – “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” – and representations of black femininity. Specifically, Hill-Collins identifies the figure of the mammy (“the faithful, obedient domestic servant”) and the matriarch (“the ‘bad’ Black mother”) as two of the most powerful images operating to control black women’s lives and justify their subordination. Significantly, while Hortense is the object of ridicule for her attempts to embody the qualities of a British “lady,” both of these controlling images identified by Hill-Collins play a role in the negative portrait of Hortense.

Hortense is portrayed as a prudish and frigid woman who marries the kind-hearted Gilbert to get to England in spite of the disdain she feels for him and her constant characterization of him as a “fool man” (321) with a “rough Jamaican way” (449). She is not a “good wife.” In spite of the cooking classes she has taken in school, she cannot cook. She looks down on Queenie for her less educated manners and is generally amazed by the low standards she discovers upon her arrival in Britain. In relation to her husband Gilbert, she is both domineering and insensitive. This depiction of Hortense as pushy, bitchy and emasculating participates in stereotypes of black women as overbearing matriarchs. Hortense’s proud demeanour and her attempts to attain the status of a high-class lady are the focus of derision in the novel. She is determined to adopt “all fine diction” and while using Gilbert to help her find her way to the education authority where she intends to find a job, she is eager to distance herself from this “uncouth” and “low-class” man. However, in spite of all her “fine diction” and high-class airs, she is frankly rejected when she goes to apply for a teaching job. Her years of training at an elite
teaching college in Jamaica are irrelevant: “You’re not qualified to teach here in England” (454), she is told.

Disturbingly, reviewers appear to enjoy the rude awakening Hortense experiences when she discovers that “her precious qualifications have no meaning in the British education system, and that her status is precisely the same as that of any other black immigrant.” Indeed, *Seattle Times* reviewer Michael Upchurch asserts that “the shock she gets on arrival is both hilarious and woeful. Levy nails it, making Hortense a character you love to hate.” Rather than evoking sympathy, like the intensely racist Bernard, Hortense is the object of scorn, even hatred. Levy “nails” a representation of black femininity that is both familiar and comfortable for dominant culture. Troublingly, Hortense’s recognition of her position of inferiority vis-à-vis both her husband and dominant white culture is celebrated by many critics. For instance, Mike Phillips, one of the co-authors of *Windrush*, asserts that the “revelation” of her status as a black immigrant “almost destroys her self-esteem, but it also sets her on a path to self-discovery,” while *New York Times* reporter Fatema Ahmed affirms that “one of the most moving aspects of the book” is “the slow development of Hortense’s respect for her husband.” Here we see the intersection of racism and sexism in the construction of the appropriate black femininity.

As Hill-Collins points out, “Maintaining images of Black women as Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression” (68). Hortense does not subscribe to her own subordination either as a wife to Gilbert or as a black

106 Ibid.
woman immigrant in London, and she is punished for it: she is ridiculed; she is the object of contempt. The positive transformation, emphasized by reviewers, that Hortense undergoes involves her acceptance of her fate as a member of both the sexual and racial underclass. As Hill-Collins points out, for dominant white culture “the matriarch is essentially a failed mammy” (73). Notably, Hortense’s redemption at the end of the novel comes in the form of her acceptance of her role as a surrogate maternal figure. Forced by circumstance to act as mid-wife to Queenie as she delivers her illegitimate son, Hortense remains resistant when Queenie shoves the infant into her arms in a bid to ensure that the child grow up among “its own kind.” Eventually, however, Hortense experiences the “appropriate” maternal instincts and accepts the role of substitute mother. The “naturalness” of this decision is further emphasized by the fact that (unbeknownst to all the characters) little Michael is in fact the son of Hortense’s cousin. The apparent equality established by the narrative structure is undermined by the construction of Hortense as a woman in need of a “re-education about colonial race and class” (James, par.18) and presented as a sympathetic character only in so far as she finally recognizes and accepts her own subordination.

V. Racial Purity and the Return of Empire

The decisive concluding gesture in which Queenie gives her mixed race child to Hortense and Gilbert because “I just want him to be with people who’ll understand. Can’t you see? His own kind” (522) reads as a reinscription of ostensibly clear racial distinctions and a reaffirmation of white racial purity as necessary to definitions of British identity. This abrupt and dramatic ending functions as a sort of moral rejoinder to
the novel. This ending, in the spirit of neo-conservative commonsense, can be seen to invoke the possibility of racial mixing as simply unrealistic idealism: *How could a black child grow up with white parents in a racist environment?* Of course, there is no acknowledgement of the fact that whether his parents are black or white, English society remains white supremacist not simply because white people have racist attitudes, but because racial logic is an important feature of the socio-economic system. Thus, Levy’s closing gesture constructs racism once again as an inherent and inescapable feature of cultural proximity, and “race,” in Gilroy’s words, as “an eternal cause of racism rather than… its complex unstable product” (14).

According to Levy, “I wanted an ending that would make people think, ‘Is that the country we want to live in? Is that how we want to live?’ rather than it feeling like the right thing to do.” But such a question would then need, at the very least, to be implied in the novel. Instead the concluding pages of the novel move briskly through Queenie’s attempts to convince Gilbert and Hortense to take her infant child – “We can’t look after him”; “I haven’t got the guts for it” (521) – and the young couple’s admission that “there is nothing else we can do” (528). Ultimately, the novel appears to reaffirm the conclusion the characters themselves have come to: Michael should be among “his own kind.” This conclusion is not drawn solely from the recognition of the racism the child would experience growing up in an exclusively white environment, but also from the reader’s awareness of the actual blood relationship between Hortense and the baby Michael. This familial relationship between Hortense and Queenie’s child is emphasized over and over

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110 Levy’s intention here may be of some significance to those who wish for a fuller understanding of her personal motivations; however, authorial intention is only one small factor in the interpretation of a novel. I do not wish to dismiss Levy’s intentions, but wish to illustrate the ways in which the narrative strategy as well as the framing of the text and the larger cultural environment is at least as important to the interpretation of the novel.
again – in Hortense and Queenie’s discussion of the baby’s name; in Hortense’s projections of the child’s future in which she rehearses an incident from her own childhood with the baby’s father – and ultimately serves to quiet any real outrage the reader might feel. In fact, there is otherwise no narrative need for Queenie’s child to also be the son of Hortense’s lost love and cousin. It adds nothing to the story, except an odd coincidence, until the end. But here it finally serves the purpose of ensuring that racial segregation is written over as the commonsense reaffirmation of family bonds: the little Michael is truly among “his own kind.”

The ideological subtext of this concluding gesture is further bolstered by the novel’s brief epigraph: “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed to so many by so few.” These famous lines are from Winston Churchill’s famous speech “The Few” which he gave on August 20, 1940 at the height of the Battle of Britain. In this address, Churchill praises the courage of the RAF airmen and points to their valour as the beacon of England’s eventual victory against the German aggressors. It is significant that the final word is given to a man whose aggressive promotion of British imperialism is paralleled by very few.

Gérard Genette identifies two functions of the epigraph relevant to understanding its role in Small Island. According to Genette the epigraph “consists of commenting on the text, whose meaning it indirectly specifies or emphasizes” (157). Ostensibly, Levy’s intent here is to re-signify Churchill’s rhetoric to include the important contribution of black and West Indian soldiers during WWII. However, we

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111 While epigraphs are usually found at the beginning of a text, Levy’s use of what Genette calls the “terminal epigraph” allocates even more authority to Churchill’s words: “The terminal epigraph, [which comes] after the text has been read, is obvious and more authoritatively conclusive: it is the last word” (149). In fact, according to Genette, the terminal epigraph operates as a conclusion or moral.
have already considered the fact that this revision, the addition of black soldiers to the story of “wholesome militarism,” does little to disturb the fundamentally racist logic upon which WWII triumphalism depends.

Perhaps she intends to point to the important burden borne by the immigrants of 1948 in redefining Britain as a multicultural nation. Indeed, Churchill himself in this very speech uses a rhetoric of tolerance and diversity not unlike the multicultural rhetoric of today. He characterizes Britain as “the most united of all the nations” having “nurtured in freedom and individual responsibility” an environment “not of totalitarian uniformity but of tolerance and variety.” But, Churchill’s oration is also a rallying cry for the preservation of Empire, its glory and immense privileges. Applauding the fact that “the British Empire stands invincible,” he looks to a future in which Britain and the United States “somewhat mixed up together in some of their affairs for mutual and general advantage” will together rule over the rest of the planet, having won for themselves the right to direct the course of history: “The right to guide the course of world history is the noblest prize of victory.”

Genette also identifies the use of epigraphs as stemming from the author’s desire “to integrate the novel, particularly the historical or ‘philosophical’ novel, into a cultural tradition”:

The epigraph in itself is a signal (intended as a sign) of culture, a password of intellectuality. While the author awaits hypothetical newspaper reviews, literary prizes, and other official recognitions, the epigraph is already, a bit, his consecration. With it he chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon. (160)
Thus, it is worth considering into what sort of cultural tradition Levy implicitly assimilates her work.

It was Winston Churchill who penned an editorial in 1896 to the Saturday Review during the Cuban revolt against the Spanish. Raising the spectre of Haiti as an example of this looming danger, he argued that while the rebels clearly had the support of the people, Spanish rule was imminently better than governance by black people. He wrote:

A grave danger represents itself. Two fifths of the insurgents in the field are Negroes. These men… would in the event of success, demand a predominant share in the government of the country… the result being, after years of fighting, another black republic. (qtd. in Zinn, 303)

During the 1919 British invasion of Afghanistan, Churchill promoted the use of poison gas on Afghan citizens whom he characterized as “uncivilized tribes.” Rejecting criticisms as evidence of “squeamishness,” he argued that chemical weapons were a natural development in expediency of weaponry that would “procure a speedy termination of the disorder which prevails on the frontier” (qtd. in Chomsky, 147).

In Pirates and Emperors, Old and New (2002), Noam Chomsky argues that the Churchillian doctrine continues to be a foundational feature of the ideological rule of the capitalist classes in which “the rich and powerful have every right to demand that they be left in peace to enjoy what they have gained, often by violence and terror; the rest can be ignored as long as they suffer in silence, but if they interfere with the lives of those who rule the world by right, the ‘terrors of the earth’ will be visited upon them with righteous wrath” (17). At the end of WWII Churchill asserted that
the government of the world must be entrusted to satisfied nations, who wished nothing more for themselves than what they had. If the world-government were in the hands of the hungry nations there would always be danger. But none of us had any reason to seek anything more. The peace would be kept by peoples who lived in their own way and were not ambitious. Our power placed us above the rest. We were like rich men dwelling at peace within their habitations. (qtd. in Chomsky, 15)

It is not difficult to understand the lionization of Churchill by both American and British administrations in more recent years.¹¹² This is the tradition into which Levy inserts her novel.

It is possible that Levy’s citation of Churchill is intended ironically. However, given that this type of authorial irony is present nowhere else in this novel, this possibility is fairly easy to discount. Furthermore, the question remains as to whether irony is an effective device for combating WWII nostalgia, its implicit lust for empire, its dependence on racial logic. It is this question that we will pursue in the next chapter on *White Teeth*.

¹¹² Significantly, Churchill’s image has become a symbol of the alliance between the Bush and Blair administrations. This was illustrated by Blair’s gift to Bush in 2004 of a set of Winston Churchill mementoes. A bust of the wartime leader already occupied a place in the oval office.
Zadie Smith’s debut novel, *White Teeth* (2000), has been characterized as “a sparkling comic epic of multicultural Britain.” The novel, for which Smith is rumoured to have received a £250,000 advance based on only two chapters and a plot-synopsis, was published when she was just 24 years old. The novel and its author have been the winners of numerous prizes and awards. These include the *Guardian* First Book Award, the Whitbread First Novel Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Overall Winner, Best First Book), and two EMMA (BT Ethnic and Multicultural Media Awards) for Best Novel and Best Female Media Newcomer. *White Teeth* was also shortlisted for the *Mail on Sunday*/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, the Orange Prize for Fiction, and the Author's Club First Novel Award. The novel quickly became a bestseller.

As with *Small Island*, the identity of *White Teeth*’s author has been central to the marketing of the novel. However, Smith’s identity has not only been used to sell her own fiction, but to sell the idea of “Cool Britannia” itself. In fact, Smith has become an icon of British multiculturalism. She has been repeatedly characterized as a symbol of the new multicultural Britain and of its flourishing industry in “multicultural fiction.” As Canadian Women’s Studies scholar Kathleen O’Grady reported, in her 2002 interview with Smith, numerous critics “have taken the opportunity to herald the coming of a new

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age of British novelists... with Smith as the prototype” (105). Smith’s entrance into the British literary scene was, as *Village Voice* journalist Joy Press has noted, contemporaneous with the “rebranding [of] the U.K. as the home of the hip” and she “fit the bill: young, gifted, trendy, and biracial.”

The marketing of Smith as a symbol of “Cool Britannia” is exemplary of the commodification of “multi-cultures” central to official multiculturalism. Numerous scholars have pointed to the fact that the reification and fetishization of non-white peoples within the capitalist marketplace is essential to the management and containment of political contestations of the status quo. As bell hooks points out in her seminal essay, “Eating the Other,” “difference is often fabricated in the interests of social controls as well as commodity innovation” (25). Others are reduced, as Žižek argues, to folkloric spectacles, objects, the ethnic ‘thing’. Whole cultures are characterized through commodities “like the multitude of ‘ethnic cuisines’ in a contemporary megalopolis” (37). By constructing “cultural difference” solely as the appearance of difference, colourful fetishes to be sold, bought, and consumed, “difference” is reduced to a matter of aesthetic rather than political choices or values.

In *Signs of Struggle: The Rhetorical Politics of Cultural Difference* (2002), Thomas West argues that it is necessary to “take a stand against the commodifying, fetishizing, and exoticizing of differences and to recognize just how representations of differences are connected to particular agendas” (2; my italics). In light of West’s injunction, it is interesting to note, as British author Hari Kunzru does, in “Art, Writing:

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White Teeth,\textsuperscript{116} that the celebration of multiculturalism and Smith’s \textit{White Teeth}, in particular, appear to be connected to the growth of profoundly racist immigration policies and anti-immigrant attitudes. Kunzru writes,

The time, it seems, is right for Smith’s version of Britishness, and the hype surrounding her is certainly a sign of a changing cultural climate. While this is infinitely preferable to the cricket test or the neurotic pre-Suez nostalgia of Majorism, it is hard to feel that the rush to garland this particular young writer is entirely value-neutral. The New Labourite rebranding of Britain has co-opted second-generation immigrant achievements (along with pop music, fashion and design) as a sign of the Blairite renaissance, a move which sits ever more uneasily with the bubbling anti-immigrant panic. One can’t help feeling that \textit{White Teeth} is being sold as a piece of Islingtonian (or Chalfenist\textsuperscript{117}) beach reading, giving the usual white liberal reading public a reassuring frisson of contemporaneity while they vote to send the parents of the next generation of Zadie Smiths off to asylum-seeker’s detention centres.

Given Kunzru’s own status as a successful “second generation” British author, his comment appears to reveal a lack of self-reflection and begs questions regarding the possibility of escaping this cooptation as a popular artist. However, Kunzru’s central point here should not be overlooked: not only does “Cool Britannia” exist alongside growing anti-immigrant sentiments, but the celebration and commodification of the art

\textsuperscript{116} A piece commissioned but never published by the \textit{London Review of Books}. (No commission date available) <http://www.harikunzru.com/whiter-teeth-2000>

\textsuperscript{117} The Chalfens in \textit{White Teeth} are a caricature of an upper-middle class English family who are eager to befriend “brown strangers” and embody the racist condescension of liberal “tolerance.”
produced by non-white Britons serves to disguise this rising tide of reactionary politics beneath the trendy commercial trappings of multiculturalism.

The popularity of Smith’s “flavour of Britishness” is partially due to the fact that, as hooks contends, “within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning to liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (21). Ultimately, then, what the commodification of this “new Britishness” makes evident is the extent to which British identity continues to be defined as racially white, something that is clearly illustrated by the popular reception of Smith herself. While *White Teeth* has been heralded by lay readers and critics alike as “a portrait of multicultural London over the years” and as an example of “how the concept of ‘being British’ has evolved in that time,”¹¹¹ characterizations of Smith as “the George Eliot of multiculturalism,” “the Lauryn Hill of London Literature,” and literature's “great black hope” (qtd. in Thomas, par. 5) tell a different story. Smith and her novel remain representative of a *certain kind* of Britishness. Her writing is consistently qualified – for instance, in web reviews on Amazon.co.uk – as representative of the “issues facing immigrants in England,”¹¹² and even as “applicable to immigrants coming to any Western country.”¹²⁰ In other words, Smith and her work remain representative of cultural “otherness,” juxtaposed against the mainstream of (white) British culture.

This simultaneous marginalization of, and fascination with, cultural “Otherness” is not a new phenomenon. In fact, hooks relates the commodification of “difference” as

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“resources for pleasure” (23) to imperialist nostalgia. This nostalgia involves desire for “contact with the Other even as one wishes boundaries to remain intact” (29). Imperialist nostalgia is not antithetical to a “celebration” of otherness. In fact, according to hooks, the commodification of difference central to this “celebration” promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization. (31)

Thus, a dual, seemingly contradictory, process of exclusion and erasure is at work wherein ethnic “difference” is both qualified as supplementary and thus excluded from the imaginary construction of the dominant cultural polis and simultaneously integrated and assimilated through consumption and thus, ultimately, erased.

Calling Smith a “multicultural pin-up for the culture sector,” Claire Squires has argued, in a paper entitled “‘Young, Gifted and Very Good Looking’: British Literature and Publishing in the 1990s and 2000s,” that there is “no writer in the field of recent literature and publishing whose career would seem to celebrate Cool Britannia more than Zadie Smith’s” (2). This characterization of Smith is telling. That is to say, it reveals nothing about Smith herself, and much about the way in which her image has been manipulated and deployed for both commercial and political purposes. In Squires’ pithy characterization of Smith as both “multicultural pin-up” and icon of “Cool Britannia” the imbrications of racism, misogyny, and commodification are clear. Smith is reduced to an objectified centre-fold, an exoticized, sexualized, “racial other” offered up for voyeuristic
consumption, marketed and sold to a niche group, “the culture sector” (read: those eager to consume other cultures).

Reviewer Catherine Keenan rightly points out, “it’s not Zadie Smith's fault that she's young, black and sexy, and that the British press salivated over her first novel as if she had single-handedly discovered multiculturalism.” However, Keenan’s suggestion that “to assess the book properly, you need to peel away endless layers of hype” misses the fact that perceptions of the novel itself are inextricable from the “hype” that has framed it. In fact, as Graham Huggan points out in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, marketing forms an essential part of the experience of reading, of the meaning the reader produces through her interaction with the text. What Gérard Genette has called the epitext is particularly relevant to reading Smith’s work which, as reviewer Andrew Laing points out, “owes a lot of its success to the power of marketing.”

The market machine was indeed particularly relevant to the success of *White Teeth*. As British literary critic Susie Thomas, argues in her critique of *White Teeth*, “Zadie Smith’s False Teeth: The Marketing of Multiculturalism,” “*White Teeth* became the most lavishly promoted debut novel of recent years, which in part explains why it has gone on to sell over a million copies: massive advance publicity is a law of increasing returns” (par. 5). However, as Thomas points out, the inflated praise and massive success of a novel that Smith herself criticised as “the literary equivalent of a hyperactive, ginger-
haired tap-dancing 10-year-old” (qtd. in Thomas, par. 3) was largely due to the fact that it “appeared at just the right time, when Smith’s brand of undemanding multiculturalism could serve as an anthem for the complacent self image of London as the harmonious melting pot” (par. 6). However, in spite of the centrality of marketing to the success of White Teeth, the content and form of Smith’s novel were central to the novel’s promotion and celebration. As Thomas asserts, “Smith’s vivacious lit-lite idiom” as well as her “brand of undemanding multiculturalism” have been central to her commodification and celebrity status (1). Thus, White Teeth’s status as exemplar of “Cool Britannia” is not a product of marketing alone, but is facilitated by the book’s content and narrative style as well.

White Teeth (2000) is set in a small borough of northern London and explores the lives and relationships of a large multi-ethnic cast. Its epic proportions and layered plot virtually defy summary. The narrative jumps between historical periods: from 1945 to the 1970s, from the 1980s and 90s and back to reflections on colonial histories dating to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The friendship between Archibald Jones – the dim-witted, but kind, white working-class Briton whom we meet at the novel’s opening in the midst of a botched suicide attempt – and Samad Iqbal – the one-armed Bengali waiter who is caught up in his inability to reconcile his Bengali, Muslim, and British

124 It should be noted, however, that criticism of the role of marketing in Smith’s success must be tempered by reflection on the extent to which all best-selling novels are promoted for purposes that often exceed the apparent literary merit of the work. Considerations about what the reading public might gravitate towards at any given moment are paramount in the minds of publishers and influence their strategic use of the often inflated claims that lead to a particular novel’s success. Criticisms of the marketing of White Teeth are not uncommon and, while often accurate, need to be considered in light of the fact that Zadie Smith’s authority as a British writer (young, black, female) is easily put into question. Thomas’ critique of White Teeth’s marketing does not take this into account. However, perhaps the most important element of her critique is her attention to the fact that “reviewers hailed White Teeth (2000) as an almost immaculate conception, as if it had burst onto the scene without precedent or precursors” (par. 1) and that this characterization served to “temporarily eclipse[] the more enduring work of [Black British] writers who came before her” (par. 1).
identities – frames the story. The two meet during the final days of World War Two as members of a tank unit composed of “the rejects of war” (77). It is here they strike up their unlikely, but lifelong, friendship which is renewed years later when Samad immigrates to London with his young wife, Alsana. The novel explores the interactions within and between the Jones, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens, an affluent liberal family who appear later in the novel. The narrative is alternately focalized through various members of its cast, as well as an intrusive and garrulous third-person omniscient narrator who frequently interrupts scenes to offer meta-commentary.

According to Smith in an interview for The Observer, the inter-racial relationships she explores in White Teeth are “something to be wished for, but I think they might exist now, and certainly in the future, with the amount of mixing that has gone on.”¹²⁵ Smith’s depiction of contemporary London where “prejudice exists, but tolerance appears in equal measure, and racist violence is only mentioned briefly and second hand”¹²⁶ is entirely compatible with the official portrait of multicultural Britain. What Susie Thomas has called “Smith’s undemanding brand of multiculturalism” leaves the status quo intact, illuminating cultural difference but without exploring the social and historical relationships that sustain “difference” and perpetuate inequality. For instance, early in the novel in a flashback to a wartime conversation, Samad and Archie discuss Samad’s arranged marriage:

¹²⁶ Ibid.
“A young lady has already been picked out for me. A Miss Begum...
Unfortunately the Begum family do not yet have a female child of my
generation.”

“You mean your wife’s not bloody born yet?”

“What of it?” asked Samad, pulling a cigarette from Archie’s top
pocket.

“Where I come from,” said Archie, “a bloke likes to get to know a
girl before he marries her.”

“Where you come from it is customary to boil vegetables until they
fall apart. This does not mean,” said Samad tersely, “that it is a good
idea.” (84-85)

Rather than exploring the power relationships that inform our understandings of
difference, White Teeth reduces cultural differences to nothing more than a matter
of taste. Of course, what makes this exchange amusing is that overcooked veggies
and arranged marriages are clearly not analogous. Samad’s apparent blindness to
the logical absurdity of the equation between these incommensurable cultural
practices ultimately highlights the highly ideologically charged nature of this
“foreign” marriage practice in relation to the value-neutral British eating habit.
Furthermore, the comparison distracts from any recognition of the extent to which
Western marriage practices are also steeped in patriarchal power inequities.
Notably, ultimately, both men marry women less than half their ages. And both
these young women are compelled to marry them either out of a sense of duty or
desperation. While we can assume that Alsana marries Samad to fulfill her filial
duty, a similar sense of duty and custom inform Clara’s decision to marry Archie:
“Clara still felt that deep down her mother would prefer her to marry an unsuitable man rather than live with him in sin” (40).

The unwillingness to contextualize cultural differences within the field of social and historical power relationships is an example of the substitution of an insistence on superficial cultural differences for an understanding of political or economic inequalities that inform “difference.” Padmaja Challakere, in her article “Aesthetics of Globalization in Contemporary Fiction,” explores the extent to which popular contemporary fiction (specifically Smith’s *White Teeth*, Royle’s *Counterparts*, and Hensher’s *Pleasured*) “mimics rather than resists the metaphorizing mode of neo-liberal capitalism” (2). Central to this process is the championing of “neo-liberal cosmopolitanism” whose “most salient feature… is that it completely brackets off economic inequality as a concern.” In fact, according to Challakere, “The most significant form taken by neo-liberal cosmopolitanism is its substitution of the language of economic inequality with the language of cultural antagonisms. Neoliberal cosmopolitanism disavows barriers by ‘not looking,’ by resurrecting market rhetoric of ‘walls coming down’” (4). Furthermore, as Challakere explains, *White Teeth*’s mode of doing social history through a *pastiche* of flat discrete images puts us in mind of Debord's discussion of “the spectacle.” While there are many truth-baring moments, the incisions made by conflict and violence are avoided, and it is here that this enormously successful novel stages its fidelity to the cheerful optimism of “neoliberal
cosmopolitanism.” In the place of conflict, there is juxtaposition of contrasting images; in the place of dissent, there is consensus achieved through postmodern paradox.

Challakere’s critique is important for understanding the ways in which White Teeth’s deployment of caricature and “postmodern paradox” constructs a consensual spectacle of “differences.” Challakere’s claim that the “novel stages its fidelity to the cheerful optimism of neoliberal cosmopolitanism” illuminates the fact that Smith’s vision of multicultural Britain effaces the extent to which the racism that informs the discourse of “tolerance” and “diversity” is deployed to justify and even naturalize real material inequality. The extent to which this discourse has functioned as a mask is evident in the fact that it has been quickly superseded by overt racist rhetoric in the wake of both 9/11 and the 7/7 London Tube bombings, events which ostensibly justified an unmasked racial hatred.

I. Caricatures of the Multicultural

As one reviewer has noted, Smith’s White Teeth was hailed almost universally “as representative of London’s new multicultural present which at last had happily moved beyond the problems of race and prejudice.”127 On one hand, we might wonder how this is possible. On the surface, Smith’s novel appears to be an epic exploration of the multiple challenges that people of colour continue to face in Britain: from Irie’s attempts to straighten her hair and lose weight in the face of mainstream white ideals of femininity, to Samad’s quest to write his ancestor (supposed initiator of the Sepoy

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Rebellion of 1857) into history, to the barrage of racist ideas that spill out of the well-meaning, liberal Chalfen family, the text seems to be saturated with evidence of the persistence of discrimination on both the individual and systemic level. How then is it possible that such an exposition of racial prejudice could be hailed as a portrait of “happy multicultural land” (Smith’s ironic phrase)? How, indeed, could White Teeth’s portrait of London “serve as an anthem for the complacent self image of London as the harmonious melting pot” (Thomas, par. 6)?

Certainly the framing and marketing of the novel have been central to harnessing this text in the service of New Labour’s refashioned model of empire. However, “Smith’s brand of undemanding multiculturalism,” in Susie Thomas’s words, offers itself as compliant ammunition. According to reviewer Dohra Ahmad in “Brushing up on multiculturalism,”

White Teeth presents a kind of literary Benetton… ad. Her characters include Brits of Bengali, Jamaican, Polish, German, Saudi Arabian, Barbadian, and plain old English descent; Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and secular Jews; closeted gay men and out lesbians; adolescents, mid-lifers, and octogenarians who may be fat or skinny, drop-dead gorgeous or genetically cheated.128

Significantly, while Ahmad goes on to argue that collectively Smith’s cast “forms a unified picture of a diversified nation,” it can be argued that her characterization of White Teeth’s cast highlights one of its central failings: Smith’s characters are defined by their

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superficial “otherness.” They are caricatures of “difference” rather than explorations into its complex real-life manifestations.

The opening sequence of the novel provides a number of salient examples. In the first few pages there is a parade of characters whose cameo appearances will soon be forgotten, but who nevertheless illustrate the nature of Smith’s characterizations. Mo Hussein-Ishmael, an abusive, “sweaty bulk of brown-skinned Elvis” (6), is the owner of a halal butcher shop who is obsessed with hacking pigeons to death with his cleaver and who flings abuse at his son, Arshad, and assistant Varion, “a massively overweight Hindu boy” also described as “a big dejected blob.” It is Mo who discovers Archie slumped over the steering wheel of his car and saves his life by insisting that he move from the delivery area in front of his shop.

Archie’s carbon-monoxide induced reveries include memories of his insane ex-wife Ophelia, “a violet-eyed Italian with a faint moustache” (7), one of whose grandmothers — “the more glamorous one with the big scarves and fewer moles” (9) — observes of Archie, when he comes to collect the material detritus of their marriage, “he take-a everything, capisce? He take-a her mind, he take-a the blender, he take-a the old stereo – he take-a everything except the floor boards. It make-a you sick” (9). While the comic quality of the depiction of the characters at Mo’s Butcher shop depends on their absurdity and superficial quality, the portrait of Ophelia and her family depends on the reiteration of familiar sexist stereotypes about the unattractiveness of the “darker” Southern European and stereotypic, almost schoolyard, mimicry of immigrant Italian accents, with the silly addition of “a” after every verb. Significantly, in John Mullan’s admiring review of *White Teeth* he suggests that the novel’s “passages of unalloyed
“satire” – which, he notes, often depend on “satirically imagined types, their absurdity representative rather than distinctive” – allow the novel to paint a picture of “multicultural England” while “esap[ing] obligations of political correctness.” While Mullan constructs this “escape” as a freeing of the imagination from the shackles of “political correctness,” it is worth noting that the term “politically correct” arose as a backlash term intended to ridicule and discipline those who felt that highlighting social inequality was imperative. It is significant that *White Teeth* apparently “escapes” this imperative precisely by buying into caricatures of “difference.”

As Challakere points out, notwithstanding Smith’s apparent attempts to destabilize racial determinism, “The aesthetic mode in which the novel deals with the serious opens it onto the flatness of TV, where characterization is co-extensive with superficial externalities such as style, looks, dress, and speech modes” (10). Indeed, as I have already indicated, the text often relies on the easy shorthand of stereotypes for its comic appeal. The two-dimensional quality of many members of Smith’s multicultural cast can be understood as symptomatic of the multiculturalists’ construction of ethnic “others” as the fetishized caricatures of “diversity.”

Even the central characters lack the depth, and individuality, that would challenge the reader’s easy amalgamation of them into types and force us to consider the particular intricacies of their lives as evidence of either a common humanity or expressions of human diversity. Significantly, numerous readers of *White Teeth* have recognized this aspect of the novel. As one reader review on Amazon.co.uk suggests, the novel’s “descent into lazy caricature would make an amusing sit-com but fails as a work of

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art.”

Yet another similarly contends that “the characters are all types of one sort or another. Smith sets them in motion in order to comment on her grab-bag of issues, but never quite gives them enough individuality or humanity.”

Significantly, however, recognizing the fact that these characters are caricatures does not guarantee the reader will not simultaneously see *White Teeth* as an accurate representation of multicultural London. For instance, members of The Covington Book Group, while acknowledging the fact that “they [the characters] were caricatures,” simultaneously affirm: “You could see all those people in London. You could go to any bit of London and see all those people or characterisations.” Troublingly, in this formulation, “people” and “characterizations” become interchangeable. What these comments illuminate is that Smith’s easy characterizations actually reinforce images of cultural differences which are already perceived precisely at the level of caricature.

**II. World War Two as Narrative Foundation**

In terms of the relative space it occupies in the text, WWII might appear to play a minor role in the novel. However, and it is here that the novelty of my analysis lies, the war is a frame for the novel’s many plots and sub-plots. It is introduced close to the beginning and provides the context for the inception of the novel’s central relationship – between Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal. This friendship, begun in the final stages of the war, is the foundation for the rest of the story. From their friendship proceed the

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130 A Customer, “Author is indebted to Salman Rushdie,” *Amazon.co.uk*, 16 September 2001. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R2XU1T9LMGWH7K>

subsequent relationships between their wives and children, community members, and neighbours.

Archie and Samad’s youthful, often comic struggles, as low-ranking soldiers in what Smith refers to as the “Buggered Battalion,” as well as the larger context of the fight against the Nazis (ultimate symbol of racial “purification”), act as a backdrop for Smith’s epic “multicultural” tale. Symbolically, Archie and Samad’s tank unit is a “bridge builder” unit: “creating routes where routes had been destroyed” (75), a perfect metaphor for the professed utopian goals of official multiculturalism. In fact, WWII is marked as an inaugural moment for multicultural Britain. Racial mixing, it is made clear, was absolutely novel for the British-born Archie: assigned to the same unit as the brown-skinned Samad, “all he could do was stare” (72). However, the novel calls attention to the fact that the war creates a context of equality for these radically different men:

They were standing side by side on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground, dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper sailing boats, wearing the same itchy uniform, their ice-pinched toes resting in the same black boots scattered with the same dust. (72; my italics)

The repetition of sameness highlights the extent to which their differences become muted in this context. It is on this supposedly level playing field that the two central characters come together in “a friendship that crosses class and colour” (83).

As in Small Island, White Teeth’s construction of WWII as the inception of multiculturalism erases the long history of black settlement (and enslavement) in England and circumvents British responsibility for the development of racial imperialism. It evades the fact that black and Asian men deployed as soldiers during the Second World
War had been denied both individual human rights and national independence in their home countries. Critics, such as Sander L. Gilman, have argued that in *White Teeth* “the history of the struggle against the Nazis becomes the background for the contemporary struggle against homogeneity” (139). However, Gilman’s construction of contemporary multiculturalism as an antidote to National Socialism’s project of racial supremacy is misleading. In fact, the multiculturalism proffered by *White Teeth* can be seen to sit quite comfortably with contemporary racial imperialism and anti-immigrant sentiments.

While the story points briefly to the racism levelled at Samad by members of his tank unit, it also focuses the reader’s attention on Samad’s prejudice and chauvinism. For instance, at one point he warns his new friend: “Never go to India, Sapper Jones, my dear friend, it is a place for fools and worse than fools. Fools, Hindus, Sikhs, and Punjabis” (76). At another point, in which he argues the British have made a great mistake by giving Sikhs important military positions in their Italian campaign, addressing an absent Sikh soldier, he rants: “your sweaty face and your silly fake English moustache and your pagri balanced like a large shit on top of your head” (76). Samad’s sectarian chauvinism serves to confirm dominant assumptions about the unruly, uncooperative nature of the people from the subcontinent who – it is then implicitly assumed – require Europeans to mediate their bloody in-fighting (the violence of the Partition often evoked as a form of proof). Rather than the outcome of a long and dirty history of inequality between white and non-white peoples, between rich and poor, racism is represented as a matter of prejudice on a level playing field in which white and non-white people alike participate in nasty representations of one another. What is significant here is not the representation of Samad’s sectarian chauvinism alone, but the fact that this “racism” becomes the focus of
the 1945 scenes, overshadowing the “naive” Archie’s fetishization of Samad and even the overt racism of the other members of the tank crew.

Notably, the most obvious inequality that is depicted in the novel is between Archie and Samad. Here a significant reversal is apparent. In an inversion of the white = mind and black = body binary, Samad is the brain and Archie is the grunt labour. When the rest of their tank unit is murdered for their meagre possessions, in a small town in Bulgaria, Samad and Archie set about to fix the radio: “Samad knew how, he knew the theory, but Archie had the hands and a certain knack when it came to wires and nails and glue. And it was a funny kind of struggle between knowledge and practicability which went on between them” (80). Now, on one hand, we could argue that inverting this age-old racist dichotomy is quite simply an act of textual resistance. The narrator does point to the fact that “it was awkward, an Indian telling an Englishman what to do” (80). However, the dynamic quickly becomes normalized to the extent that when Samad asserts “one strong man and one weak is a colony Sapper Jones,” it is clear that in this “colony” Archie occupies the position of the colonized. The innocent Archie lionizes the slightly older and more world-savvy Samad: “Archie had never had a hero… But Samad, as he stood up there with his shiny officer buttons glistening in the moonlight… had struck the seventeen-year-old Archie full square… here was a hero” (94). On the other hand, it is Samad who fraudulently assumes the role of “Captain,” overcome by his desire to become a war hero. In fact, ultimately, while Archie’s desire to fight in the war is motivated by his desire to fight “For England. You know… democracy and Sunday dinners, and… and… promenades and piers, and bangers and mash” (103), Samad’s
participation in the war is revealed as entirely ego-driven and opportunist, so much so that “on learning that the war against Hitler is over a great rage wells up in Samad”:

This war was to have been his opportunity. He was expected to come home covered in glory, and then to return to Delhi triumphant. When would he ever have another chance? There were going to be no more wars like this one, everybody knew that. (90)

Samad is convinced that they “need blood on their hands” (102) in order fully to occupy the position of war heroes. His fantasies of gore and glory lead him to coerce Archie into murdering the Nazi prisoner of war whom he wins from a Russian unit in a drunken poker game.

In spite of his adoration for Samad, Archie finds himself unable to kill the Nazi doctor. Archie’s resolve to kill crumbles when pushing the frail and sickly doctor into the moonlight because, although “he wanted to see evil, pure evil,” he sees instead “his victim struggling to pull out a battered cigarette packet and a box of matches from his top pocket like a human being” (456). It is precisely Archie’s inability to see “Dr. Sick” as anything other than a human being that ultimately distinguishes him from Samad, and, of course, from the Nazis themselves. At the same time, this episode makes clear the extent to which Samad lacks humanitarian sensibilities. It is significant that this friendship – which symbolizes the inauguration of British multiculturalism – ultimately features a reversal of the colonial relationship where an innocent white Briton is held in thrall to a cynical and morally suspect South Asian. Like the bumbling character of Bernard, in Small Island, this representation may be understood as participating in what Gilroy sees as ongoing attempts “to minimize the extent of empire, then to deny or justify its brutal
character, and finally, to present the British themselves as the ultimate tragic victims of their extraordinary imperial successes” (94).

III. The Ideological Everyman

While the novel establishes superficial differences between cultural “others,” the “homogenizing pluralism”132 central to the doctrine of multiculturalism is also reflected in White Teeth. The novel’s narration is alternately focalized through the perspective of a number of the leading members of its cast. However, at the heart of the novel, is the average, white, Briton Archie Jones. Characterized by one critic as “the most sympathetic, peace-loving and likeable protagonist in the novel” (Ramsey-Kurz, 80), “the hapless Archibald Jones,” according to the back cover of the novel’s paperback Hamish Hamilton edition, is positioned “at the epicentre” of the novel.

The book’s cover describes him as “an Everyman with no distinguishing features apart from consistency, a quality that turns out to be his greatest asset.” By characterizing Archie as both lacking in “distinguishing features” and an “Everyman,” whiteness is securely positioned as the un-raced, normal human type from which all others deviate. Significantly, it is through Archie that we are introduced to the novel’s “multicultural” cast: first to Samad as Archie, slumped over the steering wheel of his car, remembers “the oldest friend he had – a Bengali Muslim he had fought alongside back when the fighting had to be done” (10); then to Clara Bowden, “magnificent, tall, black and ebony and crushed

132 “Homogenizing pluralism” describes the process whereby various cultural differences are homogenized under the aegis of “diversity” or “multicultures” and collectively juxtaposed to the dominant Anglo-white cultural norm.
sable,” whom Archie meets at a New Year’s party immediately after his suicide attempt.

Archie’s perspective is characterized as culturally innocent. He is perceived with some suspicion by his co-workers who are distressed by the fact that he is “always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn’t even notice and now he’d gone and married one and hadn’t even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was” (60). Further, confirmation of Archie’s colour-blindness and innocence in the face of blatant prejudice is illustrated in a scene in which Archie’s boss attempts to ensure Archie and his black wife will not show up to the company’s next dinner. In this scene, in spite of the boss’ many obvious attempts to make his point, Archie remains unable to recognize the racial prejudice in which other members of his culture are thoroughly invested. Archie’s colour-blindness, while depicted as a symptom of naivety, is nevertheless marked as an admirable quality. However, when Archie first sets eyes on Clara, the description of his perception makes clear that his vision of Clara is informed by a sexist and racist cultural bias: “She came striding down the stairs… like some kind of vision or, as it seemed to Archie as he turned to observe her, like a reared-up thorough-bred” (20). The comparison of a black woman to a bred animal clearly indicates Archie’s submersion within the sexist and white supremacist cultural imaginary. The moral seems to be that racism is a product of intention rather than a structural element of our culture with which our ignorance only further secures our complicity.
According to the back cover of the Hamish Hamilton paperback edition of the novel, in spite of his “hapless” nature, it is Archie’s consistency that “cements his antagonistic wartime friendship with Samad,” that “keeps him married to Clara,” and keeps the Iqbal and Jones together “despite their manifold differences.” In other words, according to this description, Archie provides the glue that binds together the multicultural story. It is through Archie’s perspective that the book concludes with a revelation of his wartime secret, and his brave attempt to circumvent the murder of the former Nazi doctor, which also, significantly, involves the destruction of the eugenicist science experiment being conducted by the same doctor. Ultimately, in fact, Archie emerges as the novel’s hero (albeit a comic one), resisting Samad’s insistence that he murder a prisoner of war and finally saving the same doctor from being shot by his friend’s deranged, fundamentalist son while simultaneously destroying the eugenicist’s experiment. A benevolent white naivety is positioned as the foundation upon which contemporary cultural mixing is made possible.

IV. “Lite-lit” and the Limits of Irony

Given that white benevolence is positioned as the dominant lens through which the narrative is focalized, it is fitting to wonder for whom the text is written. A potential answer to this question is revealed in the narrative address. For instance, the narrator suggests that “we often imagine that immigrants are constantly on the move” (398). Then on the following page, in the midst of a description of the twin brothers’ apparently ineluctable ties to their cultural past, the narrator informs us “this is the other thing about
immigrants (‘fugees, émigrés, travellers): they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow” (399). The diction of these sentences positions the reader outside any immigrant community, setting up as an “ideal” reader a “you” who constructs herself against the “they” of non-white Britons. For, given that the paragraph in which this latter sentence occurs is dealing specifically with the lives of Millat and Magid, the younger and British-born generation of the Iqbal family, it is curious that they are constructed here as “immigrants” in spite of the many apparent attempts throughout the text to destabilize binary configurations of white Britons versus “coloured” others.

The two-dimensional quality of Smith’s multicultural cast and the narrative address which situates the “ideal” reader outside of the “immigrant” communities represented in her text suggest that Smith positions herself as a sort of “tour guide to the unfamiliar.”

However, Smith should not have to shoulder the entire responsibility for “touristic readings” of her text.\footnote{In the “Unbearable Weight of Authenticity” Rosemary Hathaway defines “touristic readings” as “the fallacious practice whereby a reader assumes, when presented with a text where the writer and the group represented in the text are ethnically different from herself, that the text is necessarily an accurate, authentic, and authorized representation of that ‘Other’ cultural group. But the touristic reading is a snapshot, a still photo (with the emphasis on ‘still’), a cultural portrait that selectively edits out signs of dynamism or contention, both within the text and within the culture ‘represented’ by the text, and features only what the reader wants to see” (1).} Such readings, as my initial contentions regarding the reception of this text within the literary mainstream imply, have a great deal to do with the way in which texts by non-white people are marketed to and received by a dominant white readership. Furthermore, it can be argued that there is self-conscious irony involved in Smith’s assumption of the neutral “we,” that she is using it for rhetorical effect. In this case, she encourages the reader to confront the ways in which the likes of Magid and Millat have been excluded from the domain of “real” Britain. However, it may be
precisely in Smith’s use of the ironic mode that her text reveals most clearly its affinity with the market-driven multiculturalism of “Cool Britannia.”

What Susie Thomas has called Smith’s “lite-lit” tone has led some readers to praise the novel for its comfortable approach to uncomfortable subject matter: “She [Smith] was able to address the topic of racism in an optimistic and uplifting way, sans the typical rage and bitterness.” Implicit in this lay reader’s comments is the assumption that anger in the face of racism is inappropriate and that any confrontation with one’s own racism should be avoided. *White Teeth* is celebrated for its comfort-value, its ability to make light of serious issues. The problems *White Teeth*’s characters face are ultimately the stuff of glib comedy and thus are easy to dismiss. As Greg Tate suggests, Smith’s narrative mode is one of ironic detachment. Smith adopts an authorial voice “so above the fray that her characters’ internal wranglings don’t seem fraught with much mortal consequence.” As Challakere points out,

*White Teeth* is upbeat, and this optimism is what accounts for its market success and seductiveness. The denser overtones of the tragic and the serious are avoided. This severing of depth produces a synthetic urban space where democracy is signified through a bright syncretization of different idioms and style. It is worth remembering that [Milton] Friedman's declarations about democracy are based on just such a conflation of democracy with consumer choice. (14)

Indeed, Thomas’ classification of *White Teeth* as “lite-lit” seems particularly appropriate, evoking similar categories like “easy-rock” – marketed for the fact they are easy to consume and do not disrupt the status quo.

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<http://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R3UVW1OCBHXOFP>
One of Smith’s biggest critics, James Wood, classifies *White Teeth*, in “The Smallness of the ‘Big’ Novel,” as an example of what he calls “hysterical realism”. According to Wood, this genre’s exhausting number of plots and subplots, their “glamorous congestion,” ultimately serves to disguise their essential emptiness. In novels of this kind, he argues, “An endless web is all they need for meaning. Each of these novels is excessively centripetal. The different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels” (2). Wood illuminates the fact that the formal qualities of *White Teeth*, its exaggerated multiplicity of coincidences, its “hysterical” qualities, in fact serve to distract from the lack of a deeper thematic core. While the novel is characterized as an exploration of the relationships between cultures, such an examination, as Neil Lazarus and Crystal Bartolovich have argued in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (2002), cannot be divorced from a critique of (or, in the case of a novel, perhaps the foregrounding of) imbalances in the global political economy. Far from exacting a coherent critique of the power dynamic embedded in social relationships, the narrative voice adopts an attitude of ambivalence. As Kunzru contends,

Smith spreads her satire evenly across all her subjects, maintaining a wry, slightly world-weary perspective that spares no one and retails no particular solution, settling instead for a kind of celebration of confusion, a relish in the sheer convolution of cause and effect that shapes her characters’ lives.
Such a vision conveniently reduces cause and effect to coincidence rather than situating social relations historically. A humorous cynicism is offered in the place of an engagement with the forces at work behind established power relations. Irony becomes, as Linda Hutcheon suggests it can, in Irony’s Edge: the Theory and Politics of Irony (1995), “a kind of surrogate for actual resistance and opposition” (28). White Teeth gestures towards “resistance,” which it fetishizes as commodity choices (like the t-shirts of Che Guevara sold in shopping malls around the world). This fetishization is a consequence of divorcing “difference” from its historical elaboration, constructing it simply at the level of the superficial, and thereby evading any need to address or understand the forces that underpin inequality.

While everyone in White Teeth is equally available for mockery, historical inequality has ensured that mockery of “others” is more potent. Putting down non-white or colonized people has power precisely because it is bolstered by a history of ideological and material oppression. Jokes have consistently been used to disparage “others” while avoiding responsibility for the system that keeps inequality intact. Ironic reiterations are nevertheless reiterations which still can work to solidify stereotypes whose force, after all, is generated through repetition. Perhaps part of the evasion of political responsibility at work in White Teeth can be attributed to the nature of irony itself. For, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out, “irony’s multivocal instability is usually at the expense of ‘necessarily univocal social commitments’” (“Nationalism, Irony and Commitment,” 29).
V. Nazis, Feminists, Marxists and Muslims

While, as I have already suggested, WWII operates as an important framing device for the rest of the novel, the sort of sentimental WWII nostalgia apparent in the other novels we have examined thus far is largely absent from *White Teeth*. In fact, maudlin nostalgia for the war is only evident in the eyes of the old veterans who sit around the English pubs (frequented by the likes of Archie and Samad), themselves the objects of pathos and irony. However, while the sentimentalism often associated with WWII nostalgia is largely absent from *White Teeth*’s comic narrative, Nazism plays an important role as a signifier of evil against which our “multicultural” present stands in opposition. Incredibly, Nazism is established as analogous to a series of “ideological positions” such as feminism, Islamism, and socialism. By alluding to the affinity of these diverse movements with Nazism, the novel explicitly affirms its own commitment to neo-liberal politics, where criticisms of inequality are ridiculed and undermined, even as racist and sexist tropes are revitalized.

Thinly veiled contempt for feminism is evident throughout *White Teeth*. For instance, in the depiction of a group of women at the school parent-teacher meeting this contempt is revealed. Samad’s inability to comprehend Ms. Miniver’s insistence on being referred to as “Ms” rather than “Miss” or “Misses” is the focus of this scene.

“I’m sorry? You are not married?”

“Divorced, actually, yes. I’m keeping my name.”

“I see. You have my condolences, Miss Miniver. Now, the matter I – ”

136 “Often you see old men in the corner of dark pubs, discussing and gesticulating, using beer mugs and salt-cellars to represent long-dead people and far-off places. At that moment they display a vitality missing in every other area of their lives. They light up. Unpacking a full story on to the table – here is the Churchill-fork, over there is Czechoslovakia-servietter, here we find the accumulation of German troops represented by a collection of cold pens” (218).
“I’m sorry,” said Katie, putting her fingers through her intractable hair.

“Umm, it’s not Miss, either. I’m sorry. I have been married you see, so – ”

Ellen Corcoran and Janine Lanzerano, two friends from the Women’s Action Group, gave Katie a supportive smile. Ellen shook her head to indicate Katie mustn’t cry (because you’re doing well, really well); Janine mouthed Go On and gave her a furtive thumbs-up. (111-112)

The ridicule of Katie’s desire to be recognized independently from men is achieved by emphasizing the affected reaction of both Katie and her friends to Samad’s inability to understand. With the reference to the “Women’s Action Group,” the novel makes a direct poke at feminist organizing in general, by suggesting that such organizations operate as therapy groups for hyper-sensitive and, very likely, hysterical women. The punch line of this exchange is uttered by Samad who, finally understanding Katie’s wish to be referred to as “Mzzz,” responds, “And is this some kind of linguistic conflation between the words Mrs and Miss?… Something to describe the woman who has either lost her husband or has no prospect of finding another?” (112). This joke relies on the reader’s familiarity with and appreciation of stereotypes of feminists as bitter women, angry as a result of their inability to attract a man.

The novel fully participates in the construction of “bad feminists: how ‘they’ hate men… how ‘they’ are all lesbians” (hooks, vii). As bell hooks points out in *Feminism is for Everybody*, a great many people still “think that feminism is anti-male” (1). This misrepresentation of feminism is persistently promoted within popular culture. It is exemplified by the representation of Alsana Iqbal’s niece, Neena, who plays the stereotypical part of the man-hating, lesbian feminist. Working hard to indoctrinate other
women, she lends such books as “Greer’s *Female Eunuch*, Jong’s *Fear of Flying*, and *The Second Sex*, in a clandestine attempt, on Neena’s part, to rid Clara of her ‘false consciousness’” (68). The grotesque caricature of Neena’s feminism becomes overt when Neena tells the pregnant Alsana and Clara: “I mean, I just think men have caused enough chaos this century. There’s enough fucking men in the world. If I knew I was going to have a boy – she pauses to prepare her two falsely-conscious friends for this new concept – I’d have to seriously consider abortion” (68). Clara’s anxious laughter produces a misunderstanding in which Alsana’s comment – “The murder of innocents – is this funny?” – is interpreted through the eyes of their acquaintance, the ex-park keeper who, as it turns out, is also a Holocaust survivor. “Not in my experience” he comments. “It strikes all three women – the way history will, embarrassingly, without warning, like a blush – what the ex-park keeper’s experience might have been. They fall silent” (69). The significance of his comment is thus highlighted for the reader and operates as an unequivocal moral rejoinder to Neena’s “feminism.”

It is notable that in both instances anti-feminism is also constructed as a quality of the Muslim characters. Alsana, for instance, calls her lesbian niece “Niece-of-shame”: “It used to come in longer sentences, i.e., *You have brought nothing but shame*… or *My niece, the shameful*… but now Alsana no longer had the time… it had become abridged to Niece-of-Shame, an all-purpose tag that summed up the general feeling” (55). This characterization of Alsana’s attitude towards her niece combines neatly with the representation of (white) feminists as self-involved, bleeding-heart, covertly racist liberals – as when we are told that “Janice and Ellen looked over to [Alsana] with the piteous, saddened smiles they reserved for subjugated Muslim women” (114). The
combination works to ensure readers overlook the extent to which Alsana herself espouses certain feminist values. Muslim men in the meantime are characterized as inherently sexist, unable to understand the most basic concepts of gender equity (“Mzzz?”), even after they have been clearly explained.

Significantly, then, reference to gender equality performs a double function. On one hand, it is ridiculed as the hobby horse of short-sighted, self-indulgent feminists and, on the other hand, it is used to illuminate the distance between “British” and “Muslim” values. For, as Arun Kundnani points out in *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st Century Britain*, Muslims are consistently characterized by their “supposed failure to share in the values around which Britishness is thought to coalesce: sexual equality, tolerance, freedom of speech and rule of law” (126). Samad’s stubborn inability to understand Ms. Miniver’s relatively ordinary request and Alsana’s intolerance of lesbianism function as a sign of Muslim distance from the liberalism of British culture.

According to Kathy-Ann Tan, in “‘Caught Between Worlds’: Monica Ali, Jhumpa Lahirir, Zadie Smith,” “[Smith’s] unflinching look at religious fundamentalism in postcolonial Britain is also frighteningly accurate, especially when read in the light of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre” (237). The spectre of Nazism is central to Smith’s depiction of Islamic fundamentalism. It is this depiction that allows critics such as Tan to elide (Islamic) “fundamentalism” and terrorism. Given the fact that within mainstream political discourse WWII has specifically been invoked to justify contemporary imperialist campaigns in the Middle East – often through analogies between Nazism and Islam – the interplay between the representation of Nazism and the Muslim characters in this novel is particularly worthy of consideration.
In the initial WWII episode in which we are first introduced to Samad, he expounds on the evil of the Nazi eugenicist P.O.W. in order to justify his murder. However, rather than illuminating the distance between the views of the Nazi doctor and his own, this scene confirms their affinity:

He’s a scientist like me – but what is his science? Choosing who shall be born and who shall not – breeding people as if they were so many chickens, destroying them if the specifications are not correct. He wants to control, to dictate the future. He wants a race of men, of indestructible men, that will survive the last day of earth. But it cannot be done in a laboratory. It must be done, it can only be done with faith! Only Allah saves! (102-103)

Smith cements the absurdity of Samad’s attempt to distinguish between “scientific” and religious justifications for racial purification by having him proclaim (twice, like a mantra): “I’m a Muslim and a Man and a Son and a Believer. I will survive the last days” (104). As the repetition of the same phrase emphasizes, Samad and the Nazi doctor are represented as ultimately invested in a similar project: the production of a “race of men” who “will survive the last days.”

Samad’s character provides the screen onto which elisions between Nazism, communism, and Islam are projected. Exploring “the metaphor of ‘separated twins’ and ‘the fall of the Berlin Wall’” (2) in contemporary literature, Challakere argues that “building the Berlin wall, as a host of historians have reminded us, was linked to containment and displacement of Germany’s Nazi past into East Berlin” (2). Overlooking the pressures put on the communists by the West, the wall appears as a symbol of “communist totalitarianism,” which has at last been overcome. According to Challakere,
the metaphor of the fall of the Berlin Wall is short-hand for a celebration of the triumph of an idealized and sanitized free-market capitalism: “Waving the banner of fall of the Berlin Wall provides a convenient metaphor for human agency while at the same time allowing us to situate the crisis of barriers safely in the past” (5). Celebratory depictions of the fall of the wall serve as a distraction from the increasingly violent divisions perpetrated by contemporary capitalism between the world’s rich and poor. As Challakere points out, “Representations of the coming down of the wall today conceal the violence of walls that are daily going up” (5).

Upon the occasion of the coming down of the Berlin Wall, the Iqbal and Jones families gather around the television for dinner. The fall of the Berlin Wall is clearly positioned in relation to the multicultural hub-bub of the Iqbal/Jones family dinner (itself a snapshot, we are implicitly led to think, of a world in which old walls have been dismantled). In the background the news reports: “The 28-mile long scar – the ugliest symbol of a divided world. East and West – has no meaning any more” (208). However, Samad is unable to recognize the “utopian” potential embodied in this historic event. Instead, we are told, he feels contempt: “Foolish. Massive immigration problem to follow… You just can’t let a million people into a rich country. Recipe for disaster” (208). According to Challakere, Samad is positioned as the ideological antithesis to the optimistic “deconstruction” of totalitarianism. She writes, “the fall of the Berlin Wall emerges here, as in Friedmanian marketspeak, as a tabula rasa floating strangely free from its troubled past while at the same time emerging as a symbolic divide erected by people like Samad Iqbal, the novel’s much-too-Muslim protagonist” (10). Eventually Samad emerges “fully morphed [into a] ‘Muslim fundamentalist’ who decides to erect a
kind of Berlin Wall between his two sons” (12). Utterly unable to come to terms with the hybrid reality of the British multicultural present, Samad is convinced that his sons will be afforded a better education as Muslims and Bengalis in their “original” homeland. However, circumstances are such that he is only able to send one of his twins. The message, according to Challakere, is clear: “In contrast with the Utopian dismantling of the Berlin Wall in the modern era, ‘Berlin Walls’ are being rebuilt by people like Samad Iqbal” (12). As Challakere points out, “Samad Iqbal’s Muslimness obtrudes upon the reader as a familiar cliché, as nothing other than churlish ‘anti-Westernism’.” Challakere’s argument allows us to see how White Teeth’s depiction of Samad’s brute authoritarianism metaphorically takes the place of both communism and the Nazism associated with it. Significantly, this is precisely the place that Islam has come to occupy in the transfer of the “axis of evil” rhetoric from WWII to the Cold War to the “war on terror,” from the Nazis to Communists to Muslim countries in the Middle East.

Notably, in the climactic finale of White Teeth, in which virtually every character in the book appears, various threads of the novel hitherto only dangled briefly before the reader are hastily knotted together. Here at the end of the novel, we learn (in a flashback) of Archie’s generous inability to kill the Nazi prisoner of war. According to critic Helga Ramsey-Kurz in “‘Humouring the Terrorists or the Terrorised? Militant Muslims in Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, and Hanif Kureishi,’” Archie allowed the Nazi doctor to escape in spite of his “fear of his friend Samad Iqbal, who insists on the murder as a pledge of Archie’s manliness” (81). In the present-tense of the novel’s conclusion Archie again circumvents the murder of the doctor, this time at the hands of Samad’s fundamentalist son, Millat, by throwing himself in the path of the bullet. Ramsey-Kurz
contrasts Archie’s moral rectitude to the corruption of the Muslim characters, asserting that “martyrdom for Archie is not a ‘privilege’… Archie’s decision to react once more… is ultimately a moral choice and so is the killing of others” (81). Ramsey-Kurz’s reading of the moral distinction between Archie and Samad is further corroborated by the fact that at the same time as Archie selflessly throws himself in the path of the bullet meant for the doctor, Samad recognizes the Nazi doctor and “realizes that he has been lied to by his only friend in the world of fifty years” and thus that “the cornerstone of their friendship was built on nothing more firm than marshmallow” (454). While on the last page of the novel there is a brief allusion to the continuation of the relationship between Archie and Samad, there is also the suggestion that this vision of the future is a fabrication, a “wicked lie,” which sustains “the myth… that the past is always tense and the future, perfect” (462). Thus, while far from conclusive, the implication is that this formative friendship sustaining the multicultural present of the novel has been damaged by Samad’s conviction that his friend should have obeyed his directive to murder. If multiculturalism does not work, this episode seems to suggest, we have only to look at the truculence (even brutality) of “cultural others” who refuse to come to terms with democratic (Western) values.

The hackneyed analogy between Nazism and communism evoked by images of the fall of the Berlin wall is reiterated throughout the novel. In fact, Nazism is thoroughly elided not only with communism but with all other forms of socialism. The Chalfens, for instance, are explicitly constructed as Marxist/anarchist/socialists. While the attitudes and biases evinced by the family are more akin to those of bourgeois liberals, Smith chooses to populate their shelves with an “enormous supply” of magazines such as “New
Marxism, Living Marxism… Third World Action, Anarchist’s Journal” (272). The novel works to conflate the two-dimensional caricature of a politically unengaged upper and upper-middle class elite with the radical politics of anti-capitalism. Smith’s smug depiction of the Chalfen family constructs a vision of socialist struggles as the intellectual diversion of a self-involved, pampered professoriate, rather than the theoretical and real life engagements of large numbers of working class and poor people and their allies (among whom intellectuals of various stripes figure prominently). More distressingly, Marcus’ attempts to reverse the spread of disease, to create a genetically “flawless” creature, are compared to his anti-capitalist politics. Socialism is thus constructed as a dangerous utopianism, akin to Nazi eugenics: “for illness was, to Marcus, nothing more than bad logic on the part of the genome, just as capitalism was nothing more than bad logic on the part of the social animal” (269).

In the final episode of the novel, the Nazi doctor returns as co-creator of Marcus Chalfen’s genetically engineered “FutureMouse.” Marcus credits the Nazi doctor with being his “mentor” and “the guiding spirit” of his research. Markedly, the “FutureMouse” experiment, while ostensibly intended to illustrate the ability to “slow the progress of disease, control the process of ageing and eliminate genetic defeat” (370), also has the curious effect of turning the brown mouse white, establishing an obvious metaphoric connection between these genetic experiments and white supremacy through the spectre of eugenics. “You eliminate the random, you rule the world” (294), asserts Marcus as a justification for the importance of his work. Socialism is established as the dangerous antithesis to multiculturalism, as a totalitarian design juxtaposed to the democratic heterogeneity of neoliberal cosmopolitanism. Significantly, while this construction of
socialism promotes the vilification of Marcus as a “socialist” genetic engineer, this
depiction of Marcus is marked by a fundamental inconsistency. This irregularity is
highlighted by Kunzru:

Given that biotechnology, and especially the area of transgenic animal research, is
the preserve of private corporations and university departments with complex ties
to industry, and given both the collaborative nature of these processes and their
uneasy relationship to some of the values Marcus and Joyce are portrayed as
espousing, the whole thing rings hollow. Marcus’s world always feels like that of
an arts professor or a social scientist, not a research geneticist.

White Teeth thus implicitly displaces responsibility for the sort of research carried out
both within and outside of universities through massive endowments from the corporate
sector, research that therefore routinely skirts if not actively violates the ethical, onto the
shoulders of disciplines within the humanities – hotbeds, we might infer, for the breeding
of dangerous political radicals.

The parallels White Teeth suggests between Nazism, feminism, socialism and
Islam operate in much the same way as more common forms of WWII nostalgia. As in
much contemporary political discourse on the Second World War, the spectre of Nazi
evil is evoked to silence and marginalize dissenting voices and to justify current forms of
imperialism. White Teeth’s superficial depiction of multicultural society is devoid of any
considerations of structural inequality. This vision of multiculturalism is set up as the
paragon of democracy in contrast to the totalitarianism evoked with reference to Nazism
and projected on feminists, socialists and Muslims alike.
Chapter 7

Conclusion: Resisting WWII Nostalgia in Amitav Ghosh’s Glass Palace

I have focused thus far on a series of diverse British novels, produced since the 1995 celebrations of WWII in Britain, that engage with the events of that war. My analysis has revealed the extent to which these literary representations of the war enable the consolidation and justification of current imperialist ideology and practice, through the reproduction of WWII nostalgia. These stories have tended to buttress myths of the “people’s war” as a war waged by the unified and egalitarian forces of good against the forces of evil. Explicit and sentimental manifestations of this myth are evident in both Charlotte Gray and Atonement. However, even Small Island’s important addition of black veterans to the story of WWII ultimately does little to disrupt this fallacious construction of “citizen soldiers fighting a necessary war against the forces of totalitarianism, us versus them” (Torgovnick, 2). Indeed, the juxtaposition of “multiculturalism” and “democracy” against the monocultural and imperialist aims of the National Socialists works to efface Britain’s responsibility for its own racial imperialism both past and present. Similarly, White Teeth’s humorous deployment of the war nevertheless anchors ideas about Allies versus Nazis to the familiar binary of good and evil, from which a series of reactionary analogies easily cascades.

These sorts of depictions of WWII are dangerous, as I have argued, because they hide the political and material motivations for the Allies’ involvement in the war behind the mask of altruism and they erase the complicity of the Allied governments with the rise of fascism. These stories clearly serve to distract from the affinities between fascism
and colonialism, by constructing a spurious dichotomy between Nazi totalitarianism and Western “democracy.” Moreover, by illuminating the “truth” of this dichotomy through the representation of an “authentic” past, these novels work to conceal the relationships between their “real” representations of the past and the ideological use of such representations in the present. As a result these stories are easily drawn into the service of contemporary imperialism in the Middle East by implicitly enabling analogies, made explicit in much dominant political discourse, equating Allied forces with “the coalition of the willing” and Islam with Nazism. Bluntly put, these texts elaborate narratives of the “just war” that ultimately serve to whitewash the colonial past and glorify the colonial present.

The question remains as to whether it is possible to avoid or subvert this nostalgia in fictional representations of the war. In this conclusion, I will turn to a piece of fiction that I argue represents the war in such a manner as to avoid WWII nostalgia and the justifications of current imperialism it engenders. This novel is *The Glass Palace* (2000) by Amitav Ghosh. This novel falls outside the purview of my study thus far: *The Glass Palace* is not a “British” novel.\(^\text{137}\) Ghosh is an Indian author and while he received his doctorate from Oxford University, he has lived most of his life in India and the United States. However, the novel is an exploration of British colonialism in the subcontinent and focuses on WWII as a period within that larger imperial history. The novel is set entirely in South Asia and, through the lives of its multi-generational cast, the narrative explores over one hundred years of Indian, Burmese, and Malayan history.

\(^\text{137}\) Notably, however, Ghosh’s work falls within the purview of what Britain’s largest literary prize, the Booker, can assimilate.
The novel opens with the invasion of Burma by the British in 1885 and follows the life of Rajkumar, an orphaned Indian boy living in Burma. At age eleven he falls in love with Dolly, one of the child maids of the Burmese Royal family. As an adult, now a prosperous businessman, Rajkumar travels to Ratnagiri, India, where the Royal family has been exiled and confined, to find Dolly. Although initially resistant, Dolly ultimately chooses to accept Rajkumar’s proposal and returns with him to Burma.

During her time in Ratnagiri, Dolly becomes close friends with the wife of the District Collector, Uma Dey. When her husband commits suicide Uma finds herself with the freedom and the financial means to travel abroad. She returns to India some years later, having become an important figure in the Independence movement.

The lives of Dolly and Rajkumar remain intertwined with Uma’s throughout the novel, as do those of their children and Uma’s niece and nephew. Perhaps most significant among this second generation is Uma’s nephew, Arjun. As a very young man, Arjun joins the British army and is among the first group of Indians to become commissioned officers. The novel details the slow process of Arjun’s disillusionment. Ultimately, during WWII, Arjun joins the Indian National Army and is one of the last “diehards” to hold out against the British in the jungles of Burma. At the end of the novel, Jaya, the granddaughter of Rajkumar and Dolly and the great-niece of Uma, travels to modern day Miramar to find a lost uncle and investigate the vestiges of her family’s past. Throughout the novel, the lives of the characters are inextricably linked to the social and political upheavals through which they live.

The novel plays with the distinctions between history and fiction, the narrator seamlessly moving between the roles of storyteller and historian. This interplay between
fact and fiction is essential to the novel’s overall meditation on the relationship between past and present, on the ways in which the stories we tell about the past influence our understandings of the present. This is a feature of the novel that I will address at some length in the final section of this conclusion. First, however, I will address the issue of marketing that has been a prominent feature of my analysis throughout this dissertation.

I. The Marketing and Reception of The Glass Palace


While Ghosh’s fictional work has escaped branding as “multicultural fiction,” it is consistently represented as “postcolonial” and could well be seen as falling within “the recent media-invented tradition of ‘Indo-chic’” (Huggan, 67). “Indo-chic,” as Graham Huggan explains, is comprised of the “products of the globalisation of Western-capitalist consumer culture, in which ‘India’ functions not just as a polyvalent cultural sign but as a highly mobile capital good” (67). In other words, “Indo-chic” is part of the fetishization and commodification of “India” into reified consumer products, pieces of “postcolonial
exotica” to be bought, sold, toured, tasted and consumed. In fact, if like Huggan we interrogate the impetus behind “the continuing hunt for ‘Indian masterpieces’, especially in Britain,” we find it is “tied in both with an exoticist perception of India filtered through the familiar topoi of Raj nostalgia and with a metropolitan desire, through this reified ‘India’, to rejuvenate a humdrum domestic culture” (74). As with “multicultural literature” the celebration and commodification of “postcolonial literature” can be understood as part of the cooptation of resistance within neo-liberal capitalism. It is part of the management and containment of political contestations of the status quo. As Elleke Boehmer points out in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature (1995), the promotion of postcolonial migrant writing may offer another instance of the appropriation by Europe and America of resources in the Third World. The Western powers which retain the economic and military upper hand in relations with the ex-colonial territories are also the countries in which migrant literature is given wide support. (238)

In this context Indian literature of the diaspora written in English can easily become “a culturally mediated view of India made accessible to the wide English-speaking world” (Huggan, 80).

*The Glass Palace* has received a significant amount of praise from the popular press. The novel won the Grand Prize for fiction at the Frankfurt International e-Book Awards in 2001. It was named a notable book of the year by the Los Angeles Times, the

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138 While Ghosh’s work in general has been the subject of significant critical attention, the scholarly work on *The Glass Palace* is surprisingly meagre. An MLA search turns up only seven published articles on the novel. These articles include R. K. Gupta’s “‘That Which a Man Takes for Himself No One Can Deny Him’: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* and the Colonial Experience” (2006); Neelam A. Maharaj’s “Amitav Ghosh and The Forgotten Army” (2006); Melita Glasgow and Don Fletcher’s “Palimpsest and Seduction: The Glass Palace and White Teeth” (2005).
New York Times, and the Chicago Tribune. Thus, while The Glass Palace can be read as a condemnation of colonialism, it can be also be argued that, as Huggan suggests with reference to Rushdie’s hugely successful Midnight’s Children, its incorporation into “the Euro-literary mainstream has had the effect of robbing it of much of its oppositional (anti-imperialist) power” (71).

Of course, the possibilities of protecting literary production from the contexts of imperialism which shape our global realities are limited for all writers, and even more so for authors who seek an international audience. The difficulties in negotiating the tensions involved in the pitfalls of marketing and commodification do not, however, prevent artists from simultaneously highlighting and protesting these processes. It is worthwhile recognizing the ways in which Ghosh, like many Indian authors writing in English, has “contributed to this contemporary mode of consumption while also critiquing it” (Huggan, 81). An example of Ghosh’s critique of the ideological biases inherent to mainstream institutions of literary production is readily available in his notorious rejection of the Commonwealth prize in 2001. In that year, The Glass Palace was awarded the Commonwealth Prize (Eurasia) for “Best Book” (Zadie Smith’s White Teeth was the Eurasia winner for “Best First Book”) and became a finalist for the overall contest. However, within days of the announcement Ghosh withdrew his book from the competition in an open letter to the contest administrators, thus forfeiting his £1,000 finalists’ prize (and the opportunity to compete for the £10,000 awarded to the overall winner). Ghosh’s central objection was to the term “Commonwealth Literature.” He argued that this “misnomer” “anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a
disputed aspect of the past.” Given his opposition to this categorization of fiction, Ghosh suggested his acceptance of the award would amount to hypocrisy. Ghosh is one of a number of Indian writers who have protested various attempts by the old empire to reassert dominance through the appropriation of culture. However, few have gone so far as to reject the dollars and prestige associated with such awards. For instance, Salman Rushdie, who wrote “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist,” an essay contesting the assumptions at work in this classification of literature, accepted the Commonwealth Prize (Eurasia) in 2000 for his novel, Shalimar the Clown. As journalist and fiction writer Amitava Kumar suggests, in a commentary first published in Tehelka, in Ghosh’s letter not only is there “no nostalgia for the Raj here, but more emphatically there is a turning away from all the duplicity about opposing the Raj and still accepting its crumbs.” In other words, as Kumar contends, in withdrawing his nomination for the prize Ghosh has “put his money where his mouth is.”

Ghosh’s letter to the Commonwealth prize committee pointed to the absurd exclusion of works in languages other than English from the Commonwealth prize, languages, he argued, “that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries.” His critique of English language hegemony is, of course, tempered by the acknowledgement of his own use of English, which he pointed out is “ultimately rooted in my country’s history” of colonialism. However, noting that his book was eligible for the prize

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140 The debate regarding the use of English to contest imperialism is briefly capitulated within the text of The Glass Palace itself during an argument between two main characters. Significantly, this debate is contextualized within a larger argument about whether or not to support the Allied involvement in the Second World War:

“Here you are so full of indignation about the British. And yet you use the English language more often than not…”
because it was written in English and belongs to “a region once conquered and ruled by Imperial Britain,” he asserted that of the potential reasons “why a book’s merit may be recognized these seem to me to be the least persuasive.” He argued that he would be betraying the spirit of his novel should he permit it to be subsumed within “that particular memorialisation of empire that passes under the rubric of the commonwealth.” Gesturing towards the fact that our interpretations of the past have real implications for the present, Ghosh asserted that “the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also open to choice, reflection and judgement.”

As I have already suggested, drawing the reader’s attention to the relationships between our interpretations of the past and present is central to The Glass Palace. In fact, the issue is explicitly addressed in a dialogue close to the end of the novel in which two characters discuss censorship and repression in modern-day Miramar:

“Look at the ways in which these thugs use the past to justify the present.
And they themselves are much worse than the colonialist; at least in the old days, you could read and write.”

Daw Thin Thin Aye smiled and shook her head in reproof. She said: “To use the past to justify the present is bad enough, but it’s just as bad to use the present to justify the past. And you can be sure that there are plenty of people to do that too.” (462)

“That’s neither here not there,” Uma shot back. “Many great Jewish writers write in German. Do you think that prevents them from recognizing the truth?” (256)

Here Ghosh stages the familiar, but still salient, question regarding the efficacy of the master’s tools in the deconstruction of his house. Ghosh appears to suggest that these tools may be transformed from their original purpose through their use in the service of justice.
It is precisely this sort of self-reflexive awareness of the ways in which history is deployed for specific political purposes in the present, as well as the ways in which our interpretations of the present motivate us to take refuge in nostalgic evocations of the past, that is missing from the WWII narratives we have analyzed thus far.

As Gilroy contends, “an increased familiarity with the bloodstained workings of racism – and the distinctive achievements of colonial governments it inspired and legitimated” (4) is necessary to effectively combat the historical revisionism that is a key feature of WWII nostalgia. *The Glass Palace* illuminates the connections between colonialism and the Second World War by situating its depiction of the war within a larger representation of colonial history.

II. British Imperialism in South Asia

*The Glass Palace* explores over one hundred years of South Asian history, connecting the stories of India, Burma, and Malaya through the intimate lives of its migrant cast. The novel explores the relationship between these countries and their people, bound together by their experiences of British colonialism. The novel opens with the British invasion of Burma in 1885. The military strength of the British is like nothing the Burmese had ever seen: “Guns of such power had never before been heard in this part of Burma, nor was it easy to conceive of an order of fire so rapid as to produce an indistinguishable merging of sound” (19). The royal palace in Mandalay is quickly overrun. The soldiers carry off “cartloads of booty” (27). In less than a decade the country is teeming with Europeans – white men “from France, England, and America” (106) anxious to get rich off the land.
The lust for resources was coupled with an equally intense need for labour. India was a significant source of labour for the British Empire. After the end of slavery, Britain’s dependence on India’s labour grew even stronger. Huge numbers of Indians were used in the Caribbean, Burma, and Africa as workers on plantations, railways, docks and in mills. In Burma and Malaya, there were large numbers of Indians working in the rubber, teak, and oil industries in conditions akin to slavery. However some Indians, such as Rajkumar, one of the novel’s central protagonists, were able to take advantage of the booming imperial economy. According to Ghosh in an interview for *AsiaSource* in 2004, “Rags to riches stories were very common among Indians in Burma. Many of the Indian business magnates of pre-war Rangoon had arrived in that city with little more than a tin suitcase and a few anna in their pockets” (2). Orphaned at eleven with nothing to his name but a gold bangle given to him by his mother on her deathbed, Rajkumar eventually works his way to become a wealthy teak business owner, a man who later supports the Allied forces during WWII because he “had come to be convinced that in the absence of the British Empire, Burma’s economy would collapse” (266). Significantly, Rajkumar’s initial “break” comes by selling indentured Indian labourers to European companies in Burma:

There was no quicker money to be made anywhere. Many foreign companies were busy digging for oil, and they were desperate for labor. They needed workers and were willing to pay handsomely. It was hard to find workers in Burma: few Burmese were so poor as to put up with conditions like those of Yenangyaung. But back home in India… there were uncountable thousands of people who were so desperate to leave that they would sign over many years’
earnings. A young man like Rajkumar could grow rich quickly in this trade. All one needed was a few hundred rupees to pay one-way passage for the recruits.

Here Ghosh highlights the extent to which India had been impoverished by two centuries of colonialism, leaving many Indians desperate for even the most exploitative work. But, Ghosh also points to the ways in which the victims of colonialism can become its accomplices and even beneficiaries, how class systems operate to “divide and conquer,” constructing a powerful elite with clear allegiances to the colonial system.

However, the story of Indian complicity with British colonialism is not told alone. Parallel to this story run multiple stories of resistance and rebellion. In particular, the novel underscores the extent to which The First Indian War of Independence, also known as the 1857 Indian Mutiny or Sepoy rebellion, had a lasting impact on the consciousness of the colonized and produced a distinct unease within the ranks of the imperial rulers. During the Second World War, Indian soldiers were required to participate in a war that many recognized was a contest between imperial powers: “this was a competition for supremacy among nations who believed it to be their shared destiny to enslave other peoples – England, France, Germany” (276). The expectation that soldiers die for an empire that professed the values of equality while denying colonized people their national sovereignty, as well as their basic human rights, produced an irreconcilable tension, ultimately culminating in the “mutiny” of large numbers of Indian soldiers from the British Army and the formation of the Indian National Army. This story of the Indian National Army is central to the novel.
III. WWII and India’s Forgotten War of Independence

Telling the story of the Indian National Army is motivated by Ghosh’s desire to retrieve untold stories – stories which have been obscured from history and whose resurrection serves to challenge the status quo. Ghosh asserts:

anyone who looks into Indian history must necessarily be amazed by how little is actually known about it. And I don’t just mean the history of ‘subaltern’ groups, but even of dissenting elites (for example the story of the founders of the Indian National Army is unknown to most Indians). (qtd. in Hawley, 12)

The story of the INA is particularly significant because, according to Ghosh in his 1997 article titled “India’s War of Independence,” the “British would not have left India had they not been faced with the prospect of large–scale mutiny soon after the war” (106).

This point is conveniently overlooked in Small Island’s depiction of WWII in the subcontinent, focalized through the perspective of the white Briton, Bernard. And, while White Teeth alludes to the Indian presence in the British Armed Forces during WWII, it elides the fact that, as Angus Calder points out in The People’s War, “India was bullied into participation against the wishes of its own leaders, [and] when Britain ‘stood alone’ in 1940, she stood on the shoulders of several hundred million Asians” (19). Over two million Indian combatants fought in the Second World War. Ghosh suggests that “even as these Indian soldiers wandered the world in the service of Empire, many, perhaps most, of them harboured treason in their hearts” (“India’s Untold War of Independence,” 106).

Indeed, when Britain declared war “on behalf of Britain and her Empire… public opinion was deeply divided” (The Glass Palace, 265). As The Glass Palace illustrates, in both
Burma and India, “many could be heard to voice bitter condemnation of Britain’s war on their behalf without any binding guarantees of eventual independence” (265).

*The Glass Palace* situates the story of the Indian National Army within a depiction of widespread resistance to European colonialism. This resistance punctuates the novel from its beginning. For instance, early in the novel, in 1905:

“Everyday there were reports of meetings, marches and petitions: people were being told to boycott British-made goods; women were making bonfires of Lancashire cloth. In the Far East there was the war between Russia and Japan, and for the first time it looked as though an Asian country might prevail against a European power. The Indian papers were of news of war and what it would mean for colonized countries. (90)

When Japan is ultimately victorious the result “is widespread rejoicing among nationalists in India and no doubt in Burma too” (91). Decades later, Japan capitalized on pan-Asian solidarity as part of its campaign in South Asia during WWII. The Japanese invasion of Malaya was well coordinated on every level and took the British army by surprise. Already Indian troops had begun to mutiny, disgusted by the prospect of “risking everything to defend a way of life that pushes [them] to the sidelines” (351). Into this already tense environment the Japanese planes drop pamphlets in Hindustani signed by Amreek Singh of the Indian Independence League: “Brothers, ask yourselves what you are fighting for and why you are here: do you really wish to sacrifice your lives for an Empire that has kept your country in slavery for two hundred years?” (33). Thus while many saw the danger of Japanese militarism, many also saw the Japanese as
strategic allies “until the British are out of India” (378). As the Burmese student leader says, “Colonialism’s difficulty… was Freedom’s opportunity” (265-266).

In elaborating the story of anti-colonial resistance, *The Glass Palace* points to the importance of members of the Indian diaspora to independence. After the death of her husband, Uma Dey travels to the United States where she becomes part of a large community of Indians associated with the movement for independence (specifically, the Ghadar Party and the Indian Independence League). As Ghosh points out in the *AsiaSource* interview, “the experience of journeying abroad frequently served to radicalize Indians” (2), the new vantage point providing them the perspective to recognize the inequalities inherent to Western “democracies” and their colonies. In these international contexts connections Indians made with other colonized people became not only more possible but important to the development of the nationalist struggle:

The Indians were, comparatively, novices in the arts of sedition. It was the Irish who were their mentors and allies schooling them in their methods of organization, teaching them the tricks of shopping for arms to send back home; giving them instruction in the techniques of fomenting mutiny among those of their countrymen who served the Empire as soldiers. (192)

Here, as elsewhere, the novel highlights the development of Indian militance in relation to the nationalist cause. Notably, in dominant accounts of Indian history, the story of militant Indian struggle against colonialism is one that is largely subsumed in the memory of the Sepoy Rebellion, which is constructed as an entirely exceptional moment in the history of the British Raj. Forgotten is the Chittagong Armory Raid and the
uprising against the British at Chittagong (former East Bengal) between 1930-34. Independence itself is most often configured as a transition characterized by cooperation.

In *The Forgotten Army: India’s Armed Struggle for Independence* (1993), Peter W. Fay argues that there has been a concerted effort in the West to write India’s independence as an entirely benevolent gesture on the part of the British. Far from involving violent insurrection, India’s independence is revisioned as a transfer of power. As Fay asserts, in the West “we have always held that Indian independence was the product of Gandhian moral force operating upon the English conscience” (6). According to Fay “what pleases us so much about this tale is its happy atmosphere, the good feeling that radiates from it, the absence of rancour… and the absence of bloodshed” (2). Of course, the bloodshed that the Western account of Indian independence does not forget is the intra-Indian violence of the Partition. Fay suggests that the focus on the “violence offered by Indians to Indians, not violence offered by Indians to Englishmen or Englishmen to Indians” enables a “comforting distinction.” It is this distinction that makes possible perspectives such as the one elaborated by Bernard in *Small Island*:

Muslims butchering Hindus. Hindus massacring Muslims. And who knows what side the Sikhs were on? Rumours said the wounded were too many to be counted, the dead too many to be buried. They were fighting for who should have power when a new independent India comes. Made me smile to think of that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country. (375)

Without the stories of the realities and brutalities of colonialism itself and the violent struggles for independence by Indians directed against the British Empire, depictions of

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141 Ghosh uses Fay’s text and “knowledge of the period” as resources in his own research, a debt he acknowledges in the author’s notes at the end of *The Glass Palace.*
intra-India violence “naturally” lead to assumptions very similar to those articulated by Bernard. In fact, the persistent myth that independence itself was granted peacefully – “A measured delivery to Indians of the instruments of governance, in the manner of the father handing the keys to his son” (Fay, 3) – allows for the guiltless preservation of Raj nostalgia and a persistent attitude of condescension regarding the many difficulties Indians have faced nation-building since official independence.

The popular mythology that constructs independence as, in Fay’s words, “something scheduled, something certain to be granted, something that did not have to be fought for” (9) is evinced by Arjun’s Commanding Officer at the point when it becomes clear that his troops are likely to desert to join the Japanese:

Independence for India is just a matter of time. Everyone knows that the days of Empire are over – we’re not fools, you know. The last thing an ambitious young Englishman wants to do today is to go out to a backwater… The truth is that there’s only one reason why England holds on anymore – and that is our sense of obligation… There’s a feeling that we can’t go under duress and we can’t leave a mess behind. And you know as well as I do that if we were to pack our bags now, then you chaps would be at each other’s throats in no time – even you and your friend Hardy, what with being a Sikh and you a Hindu, a Punjabi and a Bengali… (359-360)

Here we see the connections between spurious notions of the benevolent Empire and racist ideas regarding the “savagery” of the colonized. The Glass Palace challenges notions about the impossibility of solidarity between various religious and ethnic groups
within the subcontinent. In fact, when mutiny begins to spread through the ranks of the British Indian army,

the officer who was singled out for censor was a Muslim. When news of his punishment reached his battalion, a company of Muslim soldiers proceeded to lay down their weapons in a show of sympathy. The next day many of the battalion’s Hindu soldiers also laid down their arms.

At this point the incident assumed a new gravity… That Hindus and Muslim troops could act together to support an Indian officer came as a shock to High Command. No one needed to be reminded that nothing of this kind had happened since the Great Mutiny of 1857. (277)

Given that the British had actively promoted intra-India animosity, evidence of solidarity across ethnic and religious differences was confirmation of the extent of their overall loss of control. In spite of the active promotion of sectarian chauvinism by the British as a strategy for dividing and conquering the colonized, the Indian National Army, as Ghosh points out in “India’s Untold War of Independence,” was a coalition of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh forces and was “marked by very amicable interfaith relations.” In fact, according to Ghosh, the bonds between many of these resistance fighters “survived partition” and “persist to this day” (114).

As Fay suggests, the prevalent myth that Indian independence was peacefully granted combines neatly with the belief that “England fought not for political or material advantage… but to save Europe and the rest of the world from the barbarism of Nazi Germany” (7). Such historical “facts” produce a story that “forces us to agree that any Indian who raised his hand against the British in the Second World War… forfeited, by
this one act, the sympathy and respect of civilized mankind” (7). Having ascribed “truth”
to the dominant narrative of Indian independence, we might find ourselves agreeing with
Colonel Buckland who says to Arjun, who has secured the freedom of his former CO:
“You’re a traitor. You’re a disgrace to the regiment and to your country. You’re scum”
(388).

The erasure of India’s war of independence is not new. The Glass Palace exposes
the extent to which control of information was deployed as a tactic to secure British
control. An absence of information about the more militant arms of the independence
struggle served an obvious strategic purpose. This is suggested in a dialogue between
Uma and Dolly:

“Why have I never heard of the [Indian Independence] League? The papers
are always full of Mahatma Gandhi, but no one ever speaks of your group.”

“The reason for that … is that Mr. Gandhi heads the loyal opposition. Like
many other Indians he’s chosen to deal with the Empire’s velvet glove instead of
striking at its iron fist.” (193)

Uma’s contentions, while articulated as the views of only one character, appear to be
supported by further evidence in the novel (as well as outside it142). For instance, The
Glass Palace reveals the fact that “it was not till the latter months of…1943 that the first
rumours of the Indian National Ar
my began to reach India” (412). As Fay argues, the
British were fairly effective at keeping news of the anti-colonial struggle from the Indian
public. “Wartime security” allowed the British to police lines of communication and
construct the news such that the majority in India knew even at the end of the war “only

142 According to Ghosh’s historical account of this period in “India’s Untold War of Independence,” the
British clearly found Ghandi a more palatable opponent than anti-colonial militants. This is also the
argument made by Fay in The Forgotten Army.
that the British were victorious in Burma, and the army of the Raj was the instrument of that victory” (10). However, once the war was over a number of officers of the Indian National Army who had been captured by the British were brought up on charges at the Red Fort Trials held in the fall of 1945.

In a couple of pages of exposition, *The Glass Palace* recounts this history. To the British, members of the INA

were JIFS – Japanese Inspired Fifth Columnists. They were regarded as traitors – both to the Empire and to the Indian army, the bulk of which had continued to fight for the Allies… The Indian public, however, saw it differently. To them imperialism and Fascism were twin evils, one being a derivative of the other. It was the defeated prisoners of the Indian National Army that they received as heroes – not the returning victors. (413)

The Congress party ultimately championed the cause of the INA. This, in spite of the fact that Subhas Chandra Bose, the leader of the INA, himself a former leader of the Congress Party, had been at odds with both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru as a result of their clear differences of opinion regarding the “tactical use of violence.”

However, the massive public support for the accused and their case as well as the extent to which the Red Fort trials helped consolidate the national aspirations for “the complete and immediate independence these men and women had struggled to obtain” (Fay, 10) eventually helped secure the support of the Congress Party. In fact, the party ultimately put together the defendants’ legal team, which was headed by Bhulahai Desai, “a barrister from Gujarat who was widely believed to be the most brilliant trial lawyer in

143 In fact, ironically, as Ghosh points out in “India’s Untold War of Independence,” “Nehru had once said that he would take up arms himself if Bose were to march into India with Japanese help” (107).
India” (“India’s Untold War of Independence,” 107). What was on trial, Desai proclaimed to the court, was “the right to wage a war with immunity on the part of a subject race for their liberation” (The Glass Palace, 120). Desai’s defence illuminated the hypocrisy inherent in Britain’s self-representation as a purveyor of equality and democracy, and exposed the oppressive nature of imperialism.

Constructing members of the India National Army as “traitors” requires a disavowal of the similarities between fascism and imperialism, of the fact that “the Nazi genocide has colonial precedents” (Gilroy, 50). Obscuring the similarities between fascism and imperialism is central to WWII nostalgia and has been a component of all the novels we have previously explored. However, in The Glass Palace, the comparison between these “twin evils” is made on numerous occasions. For instance, in a debate with her young friend, Dinu, over the relative merits of entering the war, Uma asserts:

We are caught between two scourges: two sources of absolute evil. The question for us is, why should we pick one over the other? You say that Nazism will rule through violence and conquest, that it will institutionalize racialism, that it will commit unspeakable atrocities. All of this is true… But think of the evils you have listed: racialism, rule through aggression and conquest. Is the Empire not guilty of all this? How many tens of millions of people have perished in the process of this Empire’s conquest of the world – in its appropriation of entire continents?... Worse still, the Empire has become the ideal of national success – a model for all nations to aspire to... Isn’t that what Japan and Germany want today – empires of their own? (255-256)
Here Uma clearly articulates the parallels between fascism and colonialism. To be sure, given that this particular statement is made by one character, and is made in the context of a debate with another, these comments cannot be read as authoritative claims of the kind sometimes made by the novel’s narrator/historian. Nevertheless, Uma is not the only character who makes this point. In fact, this conversation takes place in the midst of a massive demonstration in Calcutta in which student groups and Congress party supporters, among others, pass out flyers with Gandhi’s famous lines: “Why should India, in the name of freedom, come to the defense of this Satanic Empire which is itself the greatest menace to liberty that the world has ever known?” (254). Other perspectives are by no means absent from Ghosh’s novel: it is necessary, Dinu argues, to enter the war along with the British, for “Hitler and Mussolini are among the most tyrannical and destructive leaders in all human history… They’re imperialists and racialists of the worst order” (255). *The Glass Palace* does not propose definitive answers about what is right or wrong, but provides a number of perspectives and arguments which readers are themselves encouraged to evaluate.

Indeed, while *The Glass Palace* points to the parallels between fascism and imperialism, the novel does not settle for easy answers or good/evil binaries. For instance, the novel illustrates the uneasy alliances produced between anti-fascists and colonialists. While Rajkumar and his son Dinu work together to support the Allied cause, Rajkumar’s support is informed by his reliance on British imperialism, whereas Dinu’s “antipathy to British rule was surpassed only by his loathing of European Fascism and Japanese militarism” (266). The novel also highlights the extent to which an alliance with
the Japanese against the British was perceived by many as a matter of simply
“exchanging the Britishers for the Japanese” (378).

Far from producing a simplistic vision of victims and oppressors, of good versus
evil, The Glass Palace draws attention to the complicity of the British Indian Army in the
maintenance of colonialism, in South Asia and beyond. In Calcutta, for instance, caught
in a demonstration organized by the Congress party, Arjun finds himself surrounded by
student activists who accuse him of being a part of “an army of occupation,” “an army of
slaves – marching off to catch more slaves” (250). In this context, the novel explores the
dilemmas faced by Indian soldiers presented with the opportunity to turn against the
Empire. Readers witness Arjun and his close friend Hardy undergo the difficult transition
from loyal imperial subjects to anti-colonial militants. The trauma of this transition is
exaggerated by the profundity of their original belief in the Empire. In The Glass Palace
this point is most succinctly articulated by Independence League leader and former
soldier, Amreek Singh:

We never thought that we were being used to conquer people. Not at all: we
thought the opposite. We were told that we were freeing people. That is what they
said – that we were going to set those people free from their bad kings or their
evil customs or some such thing. We believed it because they believed it too. It
took us a long time to understand that in their eyes freedom exists wherever they
rule. (193)

While Ghosh illustrates that Britain’s ability to maintain its rule over the vast
territory of India and its millions of people was “a feat that could not have been pulled off
without the active collaboration of a large number of Indians” (“India’s Untold War of
Independence,” 104), this exposition of complicity does not suggest a level playing field in which malevolent characters of all nations and “races” are equally free to exploit others. Instead, Ghosh focuses attention on the efficacy of the colonial system itself, which operated as much through persuasion as through coercion. As Ghosh points out in “The Anglophone Empire,” an article published in *The New Yorker* in 2003, imperialism “rest[s] on two pillars… Weaponry is only the first and most obvious of these; the other is persuasion. When the empire was in British hands, its rulers paid almost as much attention to this second pillar as to the first. Its armies were often accompanied by enormously energetic apparatuses of persuasion, including educational institutions, workshops, media outlets, printing houses and so on” (2). Thus the exploration of British imperialism in *The Glass Palace* does not focus exclusively on its military dimensions, but the extent to which persuasion and cooptation were essential to its power.

The extent to which Indian soldiers were affected by British hegemony – later described by Arjun as “a huge indelible stain which has tainted us all” (446) – is evident from Arjun’s early relationship to his military education. He tells his sister: “I just can’t believe my luck” (226). *The Glass Palace* details the inculcation of Arjun and his fellow Indian soldiers into ranks of the army and the ways in which their “education” involved a radical erasure of their Indian identities and a justification of the projects of Empire. On leave at his family’s home, Arjun boasts that his group of Indian officers would be “the first modern Indians; the first Indians to be truly free” (242). The novel illuminates the extent to which the indoctrination of these men involved the equation of “modernity” with all things European. In the mess halls the men are only permitted to eat English food. Their ability to stomach English fare becomes a test of their “fitness to enter the
class of officers” (242), each mouthful representing “an advance towards the evolution of a new, more complete kind of Indian” (242). The elevation of these soldiers to the rank of officers involves having “to prove, to themselves as well as their superiors, that they were eligible to be rulers, to qualify as members of an elite; that they had vision enough to rise above the ties to their soil, to overcome the responses instilled in them by their upbringing” (242). In other words, their ability to prove themselves as worthy members of a “superior” class is unambiguously connected to their disavowal of their own histories and identities. As Ghosh’s discussion, in “India’s Untold War of Independence,” of the real-life stories of the men who deserted the British army to join the Indian National Army reveals, often “these encounters with racism served to convince them – as they had an entire generation of Westernized Indians – that the British colonial regime was not Western enough” (108). However, as The Glass Palace shows, even while many Indian soldiers “really believe[d] in what they [were] doing; they believe[d] that the British [stood] for freedom and equality,” there was simultaneously considerable tension with the army. Discrepancies in “salaries, promotions, and service conditions” (108) did not go unnoticed. As one officer, quoted by Ghosh, remarked, “We may be ‘Sahibs’ to our soldiers, but we’re still ‘bloody niggers’ to the British” (108).

During the war a multitude of hypocrisies became apparent to many Indian soldiers and the fissures in British hegemony quickly began to widen. For instance, noting that the military academy had instilled in them the idea that “the safety, honor and welfare of your country come first, always and every time” (286), Arjun’s friend Hardy questions: “Why was it that when we took our oath it wasn’t to a country but to the King Emperor – to defend the Empire?... If my country really comes first, why am I being sent
abroad? There’s no threat to my country right now – and if there were, it would be my
duty to stay here and defend it” (287). Furthermore, during wartime when Indian soldiers
were called upon to risk their lives, the fact that soldiers trained in England “get paid a lot
more than we do” (247) provided stark proof that in the eyes of the British “their lives
were of lesser value” (108). Revelations such as these caused many to recognize “that
this equality they’ve been told about is a carrot on a stick – something that’s dangled in
front of their noses to keep them going but always kept just out of reach” (247).

Indian soldiers deployed in Malaya, where living standards were significantly
higher than in India, began to realize that

a grimy curtain of snobbery had prevented them from seeing what was plainly
before their eyes – that although they had never been hungry, they too were
impoverished by the circumstances of their country; that such impressions as
they’d had of their own well-being were delusions, compounded out of the
unimaginable extremity of their homeland’s poverty. (302)

This revelation was further amplified by a colour-bar. Indian soldiers began to see the
paradox in which they were caught. As Arjun’s colleague, Kumar, asserts: “We’re meant
to die for this colony – but we can’t use the pools” (299). These realizations act like
numerous fractures in a porcelain vase, the accumulation of which eventually causes the
vase to crumble: “they no longer knew who they were, no longer understood their place
in the order of things” (299).

Unlike nostalgic depictions of WWII, The Glass Palace makes no attempt to
construct an homogenous force of “evil.” (It is notable, for instance, that representations
of the Japanese, except as an anonymous, and highly effective, military force, are largely
absent from the novel.) In fact, the novel highlights the extent to which the distinctions between friend and enemy were fundamentally blurred. Men who joined the Indian National Army often found themselves fighting their former colleagues, their friends, even members of their own families. Far from lionizing the soldiers of the Indian National Army as unmitigated anti-colonial heroes,\textsuperscript{144} 

The Glass Palace examines the murky moral territory that their struggle forced them to negotiate. In fact, in one of the most poignant scenes in the novel, Arjun is obligated by his political allegiances to kill his batman, Kishan Singh. The effect of this scene is intensified by the fact that a love relationship between these two men has been subtly developed over the course of the novel. Ghosh clearly steers his readers’ sympathies to illuminate the extent to which basic morality can be eroded by dogmatic adherence to ideology.

After the defeat of the Japanese, Arjun and Kishan are members of a contingent composed of the “few last diehards from the Indian National Army [who] were still battling on in central Burma, harassing the advancing Allied army” (443). On the brink of starvation, covered with jungle sores, and without sufficient ammunition and resources, the remaining soldiers of the INA fought the advance against impossible odds. Desertion, however, was common. Kishan is caught attempting to desert and Arjun is forced to illustrate his commitment to the cause by executing his friend. Kishan begs for his life: “Sah’b – remember my mother, my home, my child….” Arjun replies “It’s because I remember that I must do this, Kishan Singh. So that you cannot forget all that you are – to protect you from betraying yourself” (453), and shoots him.

In his final days Arjun is painfully aware of the extent to which he has been shaped by the Empire against which he now fights: “We rebelled against an Empire that

\textsuperscript{144} An accusation that is made by Neelam Maharaj in “Amitav Ghosh and The Forgotten Army” (2006).
has shaped everything in our lives; colored everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (446). Arjun’s inability to escape an adherence to black and white logic is evidence of the extent to which the British Empire shaped him. It is suggested that this is the underlying cause for his own emotional and physical demise. In the end, Arjun is himself betrayed by “one of his own men” (453). According to the soldier who reports his death to his old friend, Dinu, given the option to surrender Arjun “shouted back calling them slaves and mercenaries” – epithets he himself had been called as an officer of the British army – and opens fire: “It was clear… that he did not want to live” (454).

IV. The Fictions of History

According to Brinda Bose, in her introduction to Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives (2003), Ghosh is keenly aware of “the responsibility that the novel bears to a culture and society” and takes seriously his own “commitment to meeting that responsibility himself” (14). While Ghosh consistently avoids characterization as a political spokesperson, he also is clear about his commitment as an outspoken advocate against injustice:

I never allow myself to forget that my most important public commitment is my work: if this was not so I would not be a writer; I would be a politician. But a writer is also a citizen not just of a country but of the world. When I feel strongly about some issue I think it’s my duty to express my views as cogently and forcefully as possible. (qtd. in Hawley, 11)
Notably, even as he denies a direct relationship between politics and art, Ghosh implies here that part of his commitment to politics is engendered through his work as a writer. An examination of Ghosh’s work suggests that central to this commitment is his foregrounding of the importance of history. Indeed, *The Glass Palace* draws heavily and directly from historical material to elaborate its fictional narrative of WWII. Ghosh was trained as an anthropologist, sociologist and historian and has worked for many years in journalism. Numerous critics have noted that Ghosh’s scholarly interests appear to have profoundly influenced his fiction. For instance, as John Hawley points out in *Amitav Ghosh: An Introduction* (2005), Ghosh “retains the anthropologist’s dedication to ‘remembering’ stories that otherwise slip from consciousness and from recorded history” (165). His writing thus moves between the fictional and non-fictional, his historical research often becoming subject-matter for his fictional narratives. Such is clearly the case with *The Glass Palace*. Passages from the novel have, in fact, been directly lifted from his previous historical account “India’s Untold War of Independence,” published in *The New Yorker* special commemoration edition of Indian independence in 1997. Elements of the lives and experiences of the men he interviewed as well as of famous historical figures clearly inform those of his own characters. Such evidence would indeed appear to attest to the fact that as Bose asserts, “Ghosh’s aesthetics is a fictional embracing of historical/political subtexts, and an intellectual exploration of both the major, as well as the marginalised, contexts of modern history” (18).

Significantly, in many of the examples of nostalgic WWII fiction examined thus far, historical “realism” and the value of historical accuracy have been consistently lauded by readers and critics. It is therefore particularly interesting that the exploration of
South Asia’s history and politics in “The Glass Palace brought criticism from some quarters for becoming ‘too’ involved in such issues” (Hawley, 173). Indeed, in a number of cases marketing agents and critics seem eager to distance Ghosh’s story from its historical specificity. This is all the more significant if we again recall Gilroy’s contentions regarding the need to contextualize WWII within larger depictions of colonial history in order to avoid a nostalgic relation to it that functions to justify current racial imperialism.

In the Yale Review of Books, reviewer Bikram Chatterji criticized Ghosh for setting the novel in “an unfamiliar past.” One wonders whether more “familiar” renditions of the British Raj, WWII, and Indian Independence would have afforded the same criticisms. The marketing synopsis of the novel on Amazon.co.uk asserts that “the gentle and intimate detail of the characters and their interwoven relationships removes any need for an understanding of this area of the world in geographical or historical terms” (my italics). This apparent compliment can be read as an attempt to cultivate a lack of curiosity in relation to the history and politics explored in the novel. Furthermore, the advice is quite simply absurd given that “the characters and their interwoven relationships” are themselves fundamentally intertwined with the geography and political history in which their stories unfold. In Chatterji’s review, Ghosh’s attention to history is figured as intrusive injection of political commentary into an otherwise compelling “family saga,” and readers are advised to pursue the novel with this in mind. Given that praise for historical “reality” has consistently been a feature of the celebration of WWII

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146 Ahdaf Soueif, “Product description: Amazon.co.uk Review,” Amazon.co.uk, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Glass-Palace-Amitav-Ghosh/dp/000651409X>
narratives (most notably in relation to Charlotte Gray and Atonement), these reviews of The Glass Palace would appear to indicate that the history explored by Ghosh is one which many would prefer to avoid. These reviews might in fact suggest that the reception of the novel has been modified by a desire for stories that efface the connection between imperialism and the Second World War, and that provide “comforting distinctions” between good and evil, imperialism and fascism.

In her review of The Glass Palace in The Los Angeles Times, Marina Budhos expresses concern that “the fiction can become schematic, as characters fulfill a particular facet of history and the balance shifts towards facts and overwhelms the imaginary terrain.” Budhos’ critique assumes clear divisions between history and fiction. Significantly, Ghosh has voiced a distrust for “the lines people draw between fiction and non-fiction,” claiming that “lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought” and as a result “must be disregarded” (qtd. in Hawley, 9). Budhos’ comments suggest that history itself is not an essential part of our imaginary terrain. This spurious distinction between “fiction” and “history” can serve to distract from the extent to which both historical and fictional accounts are informed by the politics of the present.

Given these contentions regarding the ideological nature of representations of the past, we might ask in what ways Ghosh’s novel speaks to the present. Without reducing it to a political treatise or suggesting that it relates a singular or simple political message, it is worth noting that unlike other examples of WWII fiction I have examined, The Glass Palace points towards the mutations of colonialism into neo-colonialism, tying understandings of imperialism, WWII, and anti-colonial struggle to the geopolitics of the

present. As Colonel Buckland informs Arjun, in a perverse bid to retain his officer’s loyalty to Empire:

   The Americans have been telling us for years that we’re going about this the wrong way. One doesn’t have to keep up an Empire with all the paraphernalia of an administration and an army. There are easier and more efficient ways to keep a grip on things – it can be done at less expense and much less bother (379).

*The Glass Palace* can certainly be read as a condemnation of colonialism. However, far from suggesting that imperialism has been happily laid to rest, Ghosh alludes to the connections between imperialism in the past and the present. These connections are made explicit in his 2003 article, “The Anglophone Empire,” where Ghosh writes: “If the Iraq war is to be seen as a kind of imperialist venture, then the project is neither new nor purely American.” Pointing to the affinities among America, Australia, and Britain, Ghosh argues that by virtue of “a shared culture and common institutions” as well as “a shared history of territorial expansion” it is most fitting to understand this grouping as simply “the newest phase in the evolution of the potent political force of the last two centuries: the Anglophone empire” (1).

Understanding this newest phase of empire requires a clear-sighted evaluation of the colonial past, free from the sort of mystification so clearly evident in WWII nostalgia. As Gilroy argues, “making this long forgotten history coextensive with [our] moral lives… is essential” to the creation of a more open-minded and just society (148). Indeed, as we examine the stories we tell about the past we must recognize that, as Sinfield points out,

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148 In his review of *The Glass Palace* in *The Hindu*, Meenaski Mukherjee called the novel “the most scathing critique of British colonialism I have ever come across in fiction.” Ghosh replied by asserting “If this is true, then it would have to be said, surely, that colonialism has had a pretty easy ride” (Caswell, 3).
they are not just outside ourselves, something we hear or read about. They make sense for us – of us – because we have been and are in them. They are already proceeding when we arrive in the world, and we come to consciousness in their terms. As the world shapes itself around and through us, certain interpretations of experience strike us as plausible because they fit with what we have experienced already. They become common sense, they ‘go without saying’. (27-28)

Telling stories that contest these dominant, “common sense” interpretations of the world is crucial to political change. We must recognize the extent to which the stories we tell about our past are essential to the consolidation of the politics of the present and, ultimately, the quality of our collective future.
Works Cited


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