# FRONTLINES BACKYARDS

## Between Map and Territory

In the confused lexicon of political conflict in the West, one term stands out as constituting a privileged topos, if not a defining trope, of the world we have all but lost (1).

The Frontline is where barricades are custom built, and wars of fixed positions waged, where revolutionary vanguards make their first and last stands and where the militarization of the body politic rules OK. Frontlines tell tales of impasse and breakthrough, attack and defence, progress and retreat. They are where generations of boys have gone, to become men and groups with 'attitude' and shake invisible fists 'in your face'(#).

They are where anti fascist struggles have demonstrated that the forces of reaction ' shall not pass'. Front line states have battled successfully with settler colonialism in Africa and popular movements in Latin America have fought against their countries becoming backyards of American Imperialism (#). Frontlines continue to be staked out in the heartlands of the western metropolis when and wherever racial confrontations take place.

We are familiar with the imagery and the reality of these struggles, and we are at home with the clear lines that can apparently be drawn here between oppressor and oppressed, baddies and goodies, bourgeoisie and proletariat, white and black, men and women, heterosexual and gay. At the same time we are becoming conversant, if not comfortable, with the notion that it was here finally that the onward march of the labour movement was halted, well short of its more generous goals. Drawing the front line under its own feet, labourism became encamped in the exclusionary territories of race, nation and ethnicity, creating its own version of the stakeholder society based on indigenous prides of place, or prior claims over local amenity and resource.

Since the 1950's, the hegemony of the front line over the strategic thinking and practical conduct of leftist politics in the West has withered away, along with triumphalist narratives of class struggle that inspired them. May 1968 marked the end of the front line as a comprehensive metaphor of struggle and the emergence of a quite different map of hope, pointing to whole new territories of contestation. As students in the cities of Old Europe tore up the ancient paving stones to create makeshift barricades and defend themselves against the entirely modern violence of the State, they discovered buried underneath their own actions and rhetorics, an altogether different geography and history - that of the backyard and the beach.

Backyards privilege everything that is marginalized by the rhetoric of front lines. Backyards are where grand narratives of race, nation and Empire come down to earth, are relayed or contested in small talk, in nationalisms of the neighbourhood or racist rumour mongering. Here gossip gathers strength and moral panics put down roots, cultural guerilla wars are waged, and all kinds of personal negotiation and resistance flourish. Across the backyard fence even public enemies can sometimes be private friends.

Backyards are also where women have sometimes been allowed to rule, while the men are away 'at the front'; meanwhile on the edges of the familiar matrilocal world, down back alleys, in secret as yet unmade gardens, children come out to play and youth cultures

conduct their strange encounters with the Other Kind. Elsewhere, on the beach, pleasures of sun, sea and sex are merged to create a brilliant polymorphous bodyscape, one that is increasingly extended into all the nightspots of the western world (not only discos, clubs and cinemas, but public parks, cruising grounds, and toilets), where ambiguous or transgressive models of sexuality are the new lords of the dance. Yet where desire is sovereign, the more intimate idioms of discrimination surreptitiously take hold of hearts and minds.

Today however, in the era of globalization, the customary antinomy of front lines, backyards, has become uncoupled from its historic relays. These are no longer easily correlated with divisions of labour, leisure or allocated into public and private realms. Under the impact of new information technologies, home pages link front line struggles against global concentrations of capital into no less global but dispersed networks of backyard support. The effective governance of the state goes transnational, while the electronic body politic runs subterranean power lines through the common culture of complaint that the loss of 'sovereignty' provokes amongst its fractious citizenry. Contra flows of population and ideas, from East to West, from South to North disrupt the old Eurocentric geographies; new frontiers of 'backlash' are set up against this 'alien' traffic, along beaches and waterfronts, in university faculties and housing estates, in fact wherever the empty fortress of the racist imagination feels threatened and demands a re-concentration of autochton around the policing of border camps.

For all these reasons, we find ourselves living in an uncertain era, where the boundaries between state and civil society, local and global, blur, and one community's front line increasingly runs through another's back yard. As the then Tory deputy prime minister, Mr. Heseltine, discovered recently when he looked out of the conservatory of his country seat and found a profane alliance of new age travelers and ex miners digging up his front lawn to expose the fact that underneath lay a rich seam of coal suitable for exploitation by open cast mining, a cause which is otherwise dear to Mr. Heseltine's heart (#).

When a front line invades a backyard, where what was once a back yard has become a front line, we have a political borderland that cuts across existing territories of identification. We can glimpse these borderlands taking shape in certain new coalitions of concern around issues of health, education and the environment. And we can see them emerging in the work of many contemporary cultural tricksters who have learn to live and work on both sides of the race, gender or class line .

The African American artist, David Hammons, is an exemplary figure in this respect. In his work he uses materials that are part of the detritus of coca colonial consumerism, but are also redeemed by their usage within the vernacular culture of Afro America - grease, chicken parts, hair, bottle tops, beer cans. Using these elements he builds art in public yet interstitial spaces in a way that relies on the 'now you see it now you don't' puns of the African trickster. For example his 'bottle trees' use empty beer bottles to make over the Ailanthus, (otherwise known as the 'poverty tree') into a statement about the double edged nature of intoxication in black culture). Dawoud Bey describes the context of this work in the following terms:

Walk through Harlem any given day and you will see his work, the work he does for people who cannot go to Soho and gallery hop. The people that he knows. The people that he comes from. Bottles stuck on top of bare branches protruding from the ground. From vacant lots and cracks and crevices in the sidewalk, Hammons transforms them to create visual music, something to smile about in an environment that doesn't offer a lot in the way of jokes. But

those cheap wine bottles have touched Black lips, lips looks for a cheap way out of a predicament whose ultimate cost is very high.(2)

Liminality can be creative of genuinely new idioms of cultural contestation; yet there is always a residual suspicion that the cultural trickster is simply trying to have it both ways; in the case of Black artists, it must be a great temptation to make a lot of money by selling work to rich White collectors through the gallery circuit, whilst at the same time doing just enough 'public art' to retain some street credibility with the Black community. Certainly there are just as many instances where the effects of marginality implode to generate aggressive or self destructive forms of escapism, and where technologies of chemical and ideological 'transcendence' combine forces to create a habitus of magical omnipotence fatally attractive to all those who are losing out in the struggle to 'get a life'.

What makes Hammon's work so different is his alertness to the other side of the story; it's centrality to his appropriation of the Dadaist gesture. You will not find the same thing happening in Britpop art. There is no sense here of what is going on in housing estates the length and breadth of de-industrialized Britain; and here, after all, you will find knots of little hard men, playing at king of the castle , many of them bald as new born babies, and still wearing dungarees to go with their hob nailed boots, as they flex their muscles to prove that the others are the real ‘mummies boys’; meanwhile, under bridges, along canals, on the walls of a hundred derelict factories, you can also read the signs of races, nations and classes that do not feature on the official maps of New Britain drawn by New Labour, but which offer another, sometimes more, sometimes less, hopeful set of directions as to where we might be heading(#).

The allegiances of these borderlands are as mobile as their location. They do not fit neatly within any tidy concordance of political and cultural aspiration. Those who argue for their incorporation in a 'stakeholder polity ' as part of a more general renewal of civil society, have first to deal with a paradox partly of their own making .The language of barricades, mass mobilizations, and 'they shall not pass' seems to belong to another era, another kind of urban space, where large crowds were more than a collective pose for the mass media, but were direct agents of the historical process. Nevertheless, in a so called post-modern world where political protest rooted in stable communities of local interest has supposedly been rendered obsolete by more dispersed, individualized and global networks of affiliation, the most obdurate struggles continually break out in and around the front doors/back yards of whatever is called ‘home’. As one Bangladeshi community leader in East London put it to me:

'I can surf the Internet, I can phone my relatives around the world, but I am afraid sometimes to go out of my front door in the morning to go round the corner to the paper shop in case I get attacked by a gang of racist thugs, who happen to live across the road'(3).

It is tempting to resolve this paradox by relocating its terms within an updated version of the binaries and boundaries of the past, but it really is wishful thinking to believe that the masses, as historically constituted, live on in the presence of the street missives. That new world, for all its echoes of proletarian combination, really does dance to different anthems.

The fact is that the historical compromise between local working class communities and the global city has been shaken up beyond any easy resettlement, as much by the feminization of immigrant labour from the so called Third World, as by the deconstruction of contemporary

forms of masculinity and manual labour in the West. And this in a way compromises national and class boundaries just as much as gendered and racialized ones (4).

There are, of course, a range of responses to this complication of political landscape in the 1990's. There are those who celebrate the new uncertainty principles, who exploit the luxuriant phenomenology of fragmentation and fluidity for their own narcissistic purposes, and fetishize the borderlands as sites of cultural or political transgression. En route, the migrant and asylum seeker, the unemployed and the down and out - all those who need the security and safety afforded by a settled existence and full rights of citizenship guaranteed by the State - are often transfigured into a kind of nomadic post modern hero by those who take all that for granted, and whose sense of possibility is confined only by the power of their own imaginations and of the institutions in whose pockets they live.

Then there are those who dig in around entrenched positions of militancy , draw an inflexible Maginot line of race, class or gender division, confidant on their side of shared roots and final victory; they have more in common than they perhaps would like to recognize with the cultural conservatives, who canvass a return to familial or communitarian values and who confuse the universal need to maintain firm boundaries between where selves begin and others end, with policies of self containment that draw the lines of discrimination under one's own feet.

The present debate between postmodernism and various kinds of essentialism has degenerated into a slanging match between the advocates of healthy happy hybridity on the one side and the defenders of pathological purity on the other. There are many, and I include myself amongst them, who feel that the terms of this debate are absurd, but who are also demoralized by the onward march of particularisms. This has happened at a time when the larger stories that once promised liberation are themselves indicted as part of the tyranny of Western Reason, rendered complicit with imperial humanisms and scientisms which turned out to owe more to the logic of fairy stories than any properly experimental procedure. To abandon these fairy tales would seem to leave us, with the insuperable problem, of how to sustain a struggle of long duration without the support of long term principles of hope with only the vacuous and febrile theoreticisms of the post modern turn to comfort us. Yet, is there a possibility, that in the very act of tracing through the whys and wherefores of unravelling these yarns, we might discover a conversation with a rather different, if submerged, narrative, a story line less freighted with the burden of representing hopes for an altogether better world, (and therefore less fraught with failed ambition), but one, nevertheless faithful to the resolve to be always beginning in the task of making over whatever is within reach, into some more habitable universe?

In this kind of language game, the aim must be to remain a beginner by continually returning to that moment. This is not one of a discursive foundation nor of an omniscient vantage point, where, as Rilke put it, words melt into what they cannot capture: principles of hope articulated by the act of utterance itself (4).

At a time dominated by the facile rhetorics of rejuvenation associated with New Labourism, such a poetics of political beginning, of 'making over', or even 'making good' is inevitably a risky venture; its costs and benefits are not likely to add up in any simple political, or at least electoral, calculus. The move we have to make, however, from a cultural politics of borderlands and liminality, to a mainstream political culture recentred around what that agenda has added to our sense of what is at stake, cannot be achieved by any other means.

**Who needs an island.....?**

One obvious point of reckoning for us in this conference is with the historical processes that have shaped the formation of an archipelagic identity for the 'British Isles', rendering it into multi-ethnic but Anglophone society within a unitary state. What has the appeal to 'islishness' added or subtracted from the construction of Britishness, considered as a device for assimilating a whole range of nationalities, some 'home grown' some not, within the hegemonic insularities of Englishness? How have the myths of origin and destiny associated with the Anglo Saxon island race story, come to grips with the co-existence of rival archipelagoes, whose narratives run counter to its imperial designs? Clearly, the Caribbean and Irish island stories are a central element in the local intelligence of where we live now.

Until we can answer these questions, we cannot begin to estimate what the project of political devolution might inaugurate. Nor could we say, with any confidence, whether from the ashes of this disunited unkingdom, some version of the British Isles might yet be born that was more than a site for the projection of rival insularities arising from its engagement with the trans-continental discourses of Europe, Asian and Africa. These are large questions that are only just starting to be studied and debated in any depth. In the space available here I can do no more than sketch in one possible line of enquiry which I believe to be fruitful (5).

The line of thought I'm going to ‘take for a walk’ was triggered by seeing a recent advertisement for a certain well known brand of coconut rum. This showed a Black middle class couple sitting contentedly in deckchairs in their own typically English suburban garden, above a caption reading:

Who needs an island
when you've got a back garden
who needs palm trees
when you've got rhododendrons
who needs the Caribbean
when you've got Malibu.

At first sight the advertisement represents a rather cruel double take on the aspirations and achievements of the new Black British middle class. They are portrayed as having traded in their insular roots radicalism for the comforts of an English middle class life style, whilst continuing to imbibe the essential spirit of Black Caribbean identity (courtesy of Malibu), but of course the ad contains another, more coded set of references addressed to its 'other audience' - the White English tourists who visit the Caribbean in search of sun sea and sexotic experience. They too can now stay at home and savour the taste of black culture in the comfort of their own backyards.

Through its play of substitutions the advertisement invites us to join in a rather curious game of trading places built around mutual disavowal and false equivalence. The Black couple are made to disown a travestied version of their own island cultures, in order to guarantee its authenticity as a source of disavowed desire on the part of a White audience whom they displace and represent by proxy. The story line is being ghosted in a double sense; and it enables Malibu to cross the racial divide in the name of a 'transcendental consumerism' which blurs all the distinctions that make its appeal possible. Of course the 'common culture' it proposes is nothing of the sort; for in one case it could only evoke a longing to return home

in order to escape from everyday life in a white racist society; as for the English, it is merely a matter of wanting to get away from the vagaries of the British winter. The disjuncture is made seductively easy to swallow. For Malibu is implicitly promoted as a kind of magic potion, that dispels racism just as easily as it blows away the rain clouds. It not only relieves Black consumers of diasporic angst, but also absolves Whites of post imperial guilt. No wonder it makes everyone feel so good.

Yet there is another, more hidden set of substitutions at work here, and one that takes us beyond any simple act of 'deconstruction' towards a deeper, more historically grounded appreciation of what is at stake. The reference to the tropical island paradise trades off and conceals its other less acceptable dimension - that of an island race who set off in small wooden boats to conquer the world and whose rapacious exploits brought the world's produce to its front parlours and back gardens, and 'made of them a continent entire'. As Derek Walcott said of the English colonial settlers in the West Indies, they ' helped themselves to these green islands, like olives from a saucer, munched on the pith, then spat their sucked stones on a plate, like a melons black seeds' (6).

The island story the Malibu advertisement does not tell, but depends on for its special effect, is a strange concatenation of hybridized ethnicity and racial purity. The burden of my argument is that these are two sides of the same story, not alternative versions of Britishness.

On one side, the island has been a highly efficient device for asserting Anglo Saxon racial superiority and establishing English sovereignty over the Welsh and Scots under the flag of Britannia, while simultaneously colonizing and pushing the Irish beyond the pale of mainland concerns. Yet if Little England needs Wales and Scotland, before it can , literally speaking, constitute an island at all, the exclusionary terms under which the English have constructed themselves as members of a pure bred island race have also made them into the backbone of an inclusive hybridized British nation . The circle was squared by claiming for the Anglo Saxon a uniquely 'islish' propensity, to absorb and manage cultural diversity, whilst at the same time making this a mark of superior civilization or breeding. 'En passant' the Celtic nations are confined to an ethnic periphery (shared with all those others who merely breed), a periphery that somehow does not have separate coastal and hence, according to this archipelagic doctrine, political, identity (7).

Whether the racial peculiarities of the English are traced back to Teutonic, Trojan or biblical roots, they have always been carefully amalgamated with the diverse heritage of an 'island home'. As a result, empire building - either of an internal 'British Empire in Europe' kind or of a world maritime power is seen as a natural expression or extension, of an innate and genial multiculturalism. Before we trace the unraveling of this particular grand narrative, it might be worth considering just what is entailed in its making.

It may seem self evident that islands and races are made for one another, easy accomplices in the projection of self sufficient sovereignties of every kind. Yet the island is a relative not an absolute category. The notion of land encompassed by sea is its necessary but not sufficient condition. It requires a further act of circumscription in the mind's eye, some process of narrative circumnavigation, in order to create an imaginary vantage point from which sea and landscape can be taken in and comprehended as a singular insular whole (8).

The island thus constitutes a peculiar kind of travelling story. Only when a point is reached that is recognized as marking the beginning, only when we arrive back at where we first

started, does the journey and the story end. So we have an apparently linear narrative, which turns imperceptibly in the course of its unfolding into circularity - a process entirely appropriate to its mythopoeic function, which is to create the island as a place of ideal beginnings and happy endings outside time. Yet this utopian paradise also poses problems for an account which has pretensions to travel in unidirectional historical time, in a word, to be a story of nation building. At this point, genealogy has to give way to teleology; a principle of external causation has to be introduced. The island has to be invaded, settled, and transformed some times by benign forces, sometimes by hostile ones. The invader in this context has an epistemological function, to narrativize causality and subsume it under rules of consequence. It is at the point where the island story turns into an invasion story, that its nation founding myths become actively racialized.

In terms of the Atlantic archipelago first named Albion and then the British Isles, the problem of how to unite local kingdoms of perception or survey within some overarching universe of discourse, was always the main task of state and nation building. For in literal, cartographic terms, the landmass of Great Britain was far too large to lend credence to its existence as a simple eye-land. Indeed, the colonial enterprise, owes much of its utopian drive to the quest for an ideal surrogate island state, an Illyria, whose small scale physical geography would furnish a natural symbol of sovereignty immediately given to the senses, yet still subject to investigation and control by an empire of the mind it helped to furnish with fabulous prospects. How else could castaways turn lords of humankind? Or Prospero tame Caliban? (9)

Back home, an enormous effort of land and seascaping was needed to construct the habitus of an island race from the ground up and render it politically and culturally legible. This patriotic labour of poets, painters, cartographers, farmers, mariners, gardeners, foresters, domestic travelers, and foreign tourists began with Gloriana and 'the Sceptred Isle', and reached its zenith in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the 'discovery' of a romantic coastal sublime to match the longer established Arcadian interior. This work in turn laid the foundations for an imperial vision which aimed to unite the islands that got to travel - those little England's established as tropic paradises in the colonies overseas - with the islands that stayed at home - the New Jerusalem's that were to be built by freeborn Englishmen amidst the 'dark satanic mills'(10).

Much has rightly been made of the cultural resistance that this imperial mission evoked, amongst both its internal and external colonial subjects. We should not overlook the fact that the physical geography of the British Isles also resisted easy translation into a unifying cultural or political geography. It took the intervention of particular kinds of discourse, specific loco-descriptive strategies, to conform map to territory and so naturalize the link. By the 1870's it was possible for little Englanders to say, without any sense of irony or anomaly that they inhabited a small island destined to rule the world.

The island race story was founded on a paradox. Here was an English nation continually being founded from outside itself, by the advent of strangers from continents overseas. The island story was never not an account of its invasion and settlement. How then was it possible to impose a pattern of insular meaning on this constant rupture, and give to the nation a singular over arching narrative identity?

This was achieved in a number of different but linked ways, all of them designed to establish lines of defense against admitting the 'invaders', who always and already inhabited the citadel

of Anglo-islishness, to full civil and narrative rights. The first strategy involved connecting temporal continuity to spatial contiguity; a coastal perimeter was described, threading through cliffs and bays, harbours and ports, estuaries and docklands, to form a bulwark of invented tradition against the anything that might erode the nation's political integrity. Here is how Michael O'Shea, the author of Maritime England (1987) makes the connections:

> That we have a unique history as a nation never conquered and a democratic Political system which is enviably independent is also largely the result of our invincibility, protected as we are by the seas, straits and channels that lie all around us. In social terms the peculiarities of the English way of life are again as much attributable to our isolation on our islands as to any innate and uneasily national characteristics. As a nation we and our ways owe much to the sea (11).

So here the founding myth of English democracy - the signing of Magna Carta on the 'island' of Runnymede is inscribed within a wider genealogy of resistance to outside influence. The idea that the 'islishness' of the British constituted a natural bulwark of popular democratic values against foreign tyranny has at least as long a historical provenance as the notion of the freeborn Englishman and the two are intimately linked (12).

This idea was taken up by the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, the architect of much post war thinking about child development and family values, in the following terms:

> For the development of a democracy, in the sense of a mature society, it seems that it is necessary that there should be some natural geographical boundary for that society. The fact that Great Britain is sea bound (except for its relation to Eire) has been very much responsible for the of our societal structure.' (13)

Winnicott's definition of political - and emotional – maturity, was the capacity to integrate or bring into some kind of workable relation many different elements or tendencies within both society and the self. For him the island functions as a symbolic container of conflicts in a way that facilitates their resolution through internal negotiation and settlement. The fact of seaboundedness furnishes a privileged ecology for attracting and nurturing a rich diversity of cultures, while holding them within a common frame. We are thus presented with, two linked visions of both democracy and the island; in the first case, they work together to repel outside influence in the name of an organic uniqueness; in the second, their interaction actively encourages biopolitical diversity. Racial Purity and Ethnic Hybridization once again make up two complimentary sides of the same island story.

So far we have been dealing with relatively undifferentiated cartographies of the 'island home' but over the last hundred and fifty year the anatomy of insularity has been fleshed out (14). Each potential point of entry has its own appointed guardians who police the ebb and flow of traffic between native and foreign shores. Let us note in passing the special role reserved for the docker, the lighterman, the seafarer, the coastguard, as the nation's watchdogs, a special kind of sturdy maritime yeomanry dedicated to preserving the purity of English hearts of oak. Let us also not forget that it is here that White labourism was born in campaigns by dockworker's and seamen's leaders against the 'alien' invasion of Jews, and against the use of 'coolie' labour on British ships. The multiracial communities of Lascars, East Africans, Chinese, Jews and Irish who settled, plied their trades and created their disparate 'tiger bays', not only in Cardiff, but in the East End of London, in Glasgow, Hull,

and Bristol, were always a principal target of exclusionary practice and sometimes, as in the riots of 1919, actual racial violence(15).

Nevertheless as the movement for colonial independence pressed its claims and the Empire prepared to strike back, the political rhetoric of multicultural containment grew more persuasive and even diehard imperialists began to use it.
Winston Churchill in his story of the Island Race (1964), for example, argued that the British Isles were:

> very accessible to the invader, whether he comes in peace or war, as pirate or merchant, conqueror or missionary. Those who dwell there are not insensitive to any shift of power, any change of faith, but they give to every practice, every doctrine that comes to it from abroad, its peculiar turn and imprint' (16).

So here the' invaders' are eventually absorbed within a common mentality and way of life. A deal is struck in which sensitivity to difference and change is not allowed to interfere with the rights of the already indigenous, to dictate the terms of settlement. It is this power of assimilation that constitutes the ultimate protection of the island race, rather than the sea defences which are all too easily breached. By separating the littoral from the metaphorical boundaries of the nation, a second line of defense is created, based on culture, mirroring nature's ways, but what would happen when this too became permeable?

The need to absorb so many different cultural influences within the story of the proud maritime nation standing alone amidst a sea of foreign troubles, was always going to be a source of anxiety for island story tellers. There are many who have clung to the natural symbolism of the sea bound island , even if, in doing so, they have had to extend its metaphoric scope beyond the realms of credibility. Sir Roy Strong, is his recent The Story of Britain (1996) could still assert:

> Britain is an island and that fact is more important than any other in understanding its history. The country was invaded piecemeal by those resilient enough to brave the rough waters of its encircling seas. Because of that difficulty small numbers came and once here they were absorbed into the existing population (16).

In his account, the rites of sea passage magically transform foreign invaders into potential kith and kin by initiating them into the mysteries of membership in a maritime island race. The fact that 'anyone who came, had to make a storm tossed journey in a boat' is for him the key factor. The sea here acts not so much as a barrier, but rather as a filter, a principle of natural selection, weeding out undesirables, and ensuring that only the fittest, those with the physical and moral fibre to survive the voyage, qualify for landing cards. Since only the resilient few – that is the most adaptable - make it, there is no problem about assimilating them.

The trope of the sea as a purifying agent, decontaminating the body politic again has a long historical provenance dating back at least to the Adventus Saxonum (17). It is reiterated in some of the romantic imagery associated with the coastal sublime (18). Roy Strong here gives the story a contemporary neo-Darwinian twist by implying that once the sea no longer serves as nature's own system of immigration control, other measures, of the same order, will be needed to sort out those who are to sink or swim on land. The State will have to intervene

to shore up a second bio-political line of defence, mirroring the cleansing action of Britannia's seas.

Here we can see quite clearly, how the island story turns into a fully fledged invasion story when and wherever the symbolic interaction of sea and landscape becomes radicalized and draws a line of discrimination between 'nurturant' immigrants and 'model minorities' who are to go on to become backbones of the nation , and the 'waves of invaders' who wash up like human refuse on the beach, to form a race apart, made up of pariahs and parasites on the body politic(19).

One of the difficulties of constructing island race-ism around a system of imagined coastal defences is that once this 'bulwark' is penetrated the invasion alarm bells tend to go off. One way of stopping the narrative from being continually inundated by 'alien floods' is to let the sea benignly 'invade' the hinterland, imposing its own armature of meaning on what would otherwise be a vacant space. Rivers, lakes, sea birds even wind provide 'reminders' of the coast. The process may be humanized by having settlers with 'salt in their blood' carry sea bred sensibilities with them, as they move inland and establish the architecture of a settled polity. The two ideas are often combined as in this evocation of racial memory by Francis Brett Young, in a long narrative poem celebrating the defiant stand alone islishness of Britain in 1940.

yet remember
how these were ever bred in cognizance
of the seas neighbourhood: there is no brook
of midmost Mercia but can taste the brine
of Trent or Severn, ....

no native blood
unstirred by those salt savours that beguiled
Celt, Saxon, Dane, and Norman to forsake
their homely garths and fields and to explore
the mysterious oceans. (20)

In reality of course, until the mid nineteenth century and the growth of the seaside as a popular resort, those who lived and worked around the coastal perimeter, had little intercourse with inhabitants of the interior. Many populations who worked along the shorelines or on the sea itself were officially regarded as a dangerous race apart- smugglers, wreckers, pirates, potential traitors to the patriotic cause (21). It is not surprising, I think, that their 'conversion' into backbone of nation heroes, coincides with a process of 'turning inwards' in the island race story, a symbolic turning away from the sea, to build a further line of defence against the stranger within.

The midsummer dream that has cast the most decisive spell over what it means to be 'for ever England', takes place in a wood, out of sight or sound of the seashore. The great romantic landscapes that have been painted of 'England's green and pleasant land' have tended to treat rivers, lakes and even shorelines, as pastoral devices. Wordsworth's 'valley of contentment' blinded holiness of earth and sky, made for itself, and happy in itself, perfect contentment, unity entire is a paradigm of this landlocked Arcadia. It celebrates the fact that in the process of settlement the world of the Tempest has been left well and truly behind (21).

Within this sheltered environment it then becomes possible to create little havens of insularity, localized little England's, that mimic the functions of coastal inhabitation, without its risks. Rivers, lakes, fountains, rock pools, even sandy beaches no longer function as reminders of the sea but are pastoralized and miniaturized for local implantation in the English garden. It is above all in the cultivation of gardens and the picturesque country scene that this vision of a harmonizing, all embracing aesthetic of Englishness is most precisely landscaped. Here in the careful arrangement of contrasting views and prospects, we find the same principles of controlled variation that are at work in the multicultural rendition of the island nation. James Thompson, the author of 'The Seasons' (as well as 'Rule Britannia'), like William Mason in his pioneering treatise on the English Garden (1782-81) endorsed Pope's preference for:

Not chaos like together crush'd and bruised
but as the world, harmoniously confused
where Order in Variety we see
and where, tho all things differ, all agree (22).

This principle of concordia discors, the harmonizing of discords, runs like a thread through all the arts and sciences of English assimilationism. Yet this thin green story line was made to be breached; its telling almost demanded a succession of invaders moving 'in waves' into the hinterland of Middle England threatening to 'swamp' its most precious redoubts, crushing and bruising native sensibilities . Much of the writing of Englishness in this century has been concerned with exploring the liminalities that ensue when the littoral defences of the nation give way to more complex and metaphorical strategies of insulation, and what happens when these symbolic front lines and back yards no longer furnish adequate controls on the process of cultural miscegenation so that wilder forms of hybridity ensue ( ).

In the late thirties, Edward Upward, a close friend of Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden, published a short story called 'The Railway Accident'. It describes a journey undertaken by some typical 'well bred' English upper middle class types to the country for a weekend house party. The journey that began in familiar enough territory then increasingly went off the rails as the underlying violence and madness of the situation came to the surface. The 'Mortmere Express' was full of soldiers, territorials belonging to Colonel Moxon's English Rifles, whose boisterous behaviour began to get out of hand, as they broke down the bulkhead separating the first and third class compartments. The narrator's companion was obsessed with making a detailed map of the country they were travelling through in order to convince himself that they were not heading for disaster.

As the story and the journey progressed, it became clear the map was not the territory and the territory was most definitely not the map. The 'Mortmere Express', a figment of the narrator's imagination, was following in the tracks of a similar train that ran into a collapsed tunnel, several years previously, killing everyone on board, and that no-one was in a position to avert a repetition of the disaster. However, at the last minute, the narrator and his companion managed to jump clear. They found their way to Mortmere Manor, where an elaborate game of hide and seek had been arranged as the centre piece of the weekend party. The game also started to go off the rails, bringing to the surface the sadism underlying its civilities. It too ended in violence, in a way that no-one was able to avert.

Here is Upward's description of the garden at Mortmere where the game was played out:

"The arum colocasia, lupines, lentils, the pomegranate sycamore, date palms, yew, beech and privet, fenugreek, meloukhia, the Acacia Farnesiana, carob tree, mimosa habbas, lemon verbena, nasturtium, rose and lily. Snakes hung from the elm branches; pigeons rose from black curtains of leaves, startled by the engine of the car. The river coiled through the woods, avoiding boles of pine and willow. Across the waters of the sun-white marshes alligator fishermen punted their raft. The sea-man's monument on Belstreet Down like the gnomon of a sundial casts its shadow over the roofs of the village. A quarter to five. Blue-tiled houses which had grown like bushes out of the ground... Odours of chimes of croquet hoops, tango of views of choirboys through the rustling privet.

The contained multicultural harmonies of the English garden with its carefully arranged interplay of exotically named plants, designed to set off by contrast, the superior varieties of native blooms, here takes on a more ominous tone. Real and imaginary flowers and landscapes jostle side by side, croquet lawns runs down to alligator swamps. Even the image of organic community takes on a threatening wildness 'blue-tiled houses which had grown like bushes out of the ground'. The signifiers of old Englishness, which should have provided a safe haven from the disruptions of modernity, figure an even more discomforting universe, a world which has tipped over into madness.

The madness is still with us, but it has been sanitized, or rather multiculturalized. It is, for example, present in a recent advertisement for Kew Gardens (#). This image is a post modern 'come on' in an even more cynical, and knowing fashion than the Malibu advertisement discussed earlier. Native Australians did not customarily have gardens in the English sense; they had symbolic landscapes or dreamings that were invisible to White settlers because they were fashioned as reticular or nomadic spaces rather than the kind of neatly ordered classifications of fauna and flora to be found in the botanical gardens at Kew. What the advertisement invited us to do was to finally misrecognize what escaped the grasp of the Victorian collectors of rare human and animal species - namely, that 'the authentic essence' of Aboriginal culture for Westerners is fixed precisely by its invisibility, by its inert resistance to scrutiny from any standpoint other than its own. This culture can safely be transplanted to Kew Gardens, precisely because it can be rooted in the concordia discors that underpins the quiet superiority of the English imagination at home with itself. The advertisement invited us to collude with the multiculturalist project as knowing insiders to its particular language game. That is how it proposed to let us off the hook of post colonial guilt.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, science and technology were making such manoeuvres redundant. Invisible waves, waves which transmitted populations and ideas from one side of the planet to another, but did not break on any shore, were melting everything that had seemed so solid about the white cliffs of Dover and the gardens of Middle England into insubstantial air.

Ironically it was the materialization of this threat, in a real not imagined war of the worlds which helped to temporarily re-stabilize the evanescent sense of English identity. Suddenly unified by a common threat from aerial bombardment in World War Two, the island home was reinvented as a nation under arms. Dover became a new front line, under bombardment from German guns. The battle of Britain was a sea battle, fought in the skies, while the population of the Home Counties watched from their snug ensconsements in the gardens and allotments of Southern England. Graham Swift brilliantly captured this moment, in

Waterland (1978), when a whole range of insularities, which at one level have been made redundant, were at another, being given a new lease of life.

In the late summer of 1940, while Hitler 'sets up shop' in Paris and makes invasion plans, while over southern skies history inscribes itself in white scrolls and provides ample material for the legends of the future, he (the narrator), rummages amongst the books his mother left behind and embarks on the two volumes of Hereward the Wake. While the inhabitants of London and other large cities are forced to take refuge within the solid fabric of air raid shelters and underground stations, he takes refuge in the fanciful fabric of Kingsley's yarn in which in misty fenland settings history merges with fiction, fact gets blurred with fable.

Who better than Hereward, that standard bearer of Anglo Saxon liberties, who single handedly, defied the Norman Conquest from his marshy fastness on the Isle of Ely, to represent the mongrel race in their darkest and finest hour as they stood alone against the threat of fascist invasion?

Dunkirk and the Battle of the Britain were the last moments in which the association of physical and political geography could be unproblematically sustained. By 1945 it was clear that Britain no longer ruled the waves, neither the air waves, nor the sea. All the more reason then, to fear that **the** Britons, whose ancient liberties had once been guaranteed by naval power, might in their turn become 'enslaved'.

It is against this background that we have to understand how Enoch Powell reconstructed the 'island race' story. The issue he addressed was no longer how such a small country got to make such a big empire, but, on the contrary, how little England could survive the onslaught of a succession of world historical forces, European fascism, Soviet communism, US coca colonialism and immigration from the ex -colonies by somehow remaining herself. Although Powellism is often read as the last gasp of imperial island race-ism, I think it is far more accurate to see it as an attempt to somehow erase that whole history and get back to some pristine pre-colonial founding moment of British 'Islishness'. As Powell put it:

> at the heart of our vanished empire, amidst the fragments of its demolished glory, the British are able to find, like one of her own oak trees, standing and growing, the sap still rising from her ancient roots to meet the spring, England herself, the continuity of her existence unbroken when looser connections which had linked her with distant continents and strange races fell away.

It is certainly true that when dockers from all over the East End of London marched in support of Enoch Powell, in 1968, following his 'rivers of blood' speech, they imagined themselves to be protesting against a tide of history which was not only bringing ex colonial subjects up river to land on their doorsteps in Canning Town or the Isle of Dogs, but was sweeping their own livelihoods away, in the opposite direction, down river, to the container port of Tilbury, where, of course the Empire Windrush had docked some twenty years before. In fact the front lines of immigration control had already shifted invisibly, under their feet, and into an altogether different realm, where a new racist discourse was awaiting them. The new immigrants that the dockers were worried about, were no longer waiting meekly at the dock gates for their permits to land but were threatening to drop, like predatory birds, or avenging angels from the skies.

Salman Rushdie captured what was at stake in the opening chapter of The Satanic Verses (1988) in which two of the passengers found themselves in free fall over Southern England, without a parachute, when the plane carrying them and other immigrants from the Indian

subcontinent exploded as it crossed the English Channel. Rushdie commented on the way the medium had itself changed the diasporic message:

> Up there is airspace. In that soft imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century, and which thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and war, the planet shrinker and power vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zone, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic – because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible, way up there at any rate changes took place in delirious actors which would have gladdened the heart of old Mr. Lamark - under extreme environment pressure new characteristics were acquired.

**Revisions**

Something happens to an island story when it turns its back on the sea, and walls itself up in a garden. When waves no longer break against shores, when the slow tug of tides and siltings re-shaping land are no longer available as metaphors of human trade and traffic, then the natal attraction of the 'island home' has to find other roots. Many people retreat into new technologies of insularity - the monadology of the motor car, the solipsism of the skin encapsulated ego, the narcissism of minor differences organized around physical appearance and style. In these new conditions, island 'race-ism' also flourishes, albeit of a more mobile and individualistic nature, but one which nevertheless still gets under the skin and hurts.

Post war Caribbean settlement in Britain with its complex and shifting articulation of different island stories, of Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, St Lucia and Grenada, was an unprecedented event that occurred at major geopolitical turning point. At the very moment at which Britain was being converted into an aircraft carrier for the new United States World Empire, a travelling island story landed on these shores that brought home everything that had been repressed in its construction as a White Atlantic archipelago.

The central role played by the Caribbean in the Anglo Saxon imagination, stems from the fact that, in very different ways these island topographies offered a model of coherence entirely lacking from the narrative landscaping of Britishness; the Antilles possessed an archipelagic integrity that had mysteriously got lost in the pursuit of England's own dream of imperial expansion, and which could only be recovered at second hand via 'Boys Own' adventure stories, featuring little Englanders who ran way to sea and got shipwrecked on some tropical island.

But when the adventure went the other way, it was quite another story. When the Empire Windrush landed at Tilbury, it recapitulated a history the English did not want to recognize or remember in themselves - the other 'darker' side of their island race story, the slavery that had founded these 'other' islands as colonial domains and in which rites of sea passage take on a quite a different meaning. Above all, what the English did not want to see, was the process of alienation from island roots that was required for the formation of an Afro-Caribbean or Black British identity capable of withstanding the rigours of White racism. Grace Nichols movingly evoked this process in her poem 'Island Man':

Morning
and island man wakes up

to the sound of blue surf
in his head
the steady breaking and wombing

wild seabirds
and fishermen pushing out to sea
the sun surfacing defiantly

from the east
of his small emerald island
he always comes back groggily groggily

Comes back to sands
of a grey metallic soar
to surge of wheels
in dull North circular roar

muffling muffling
his crumpled pillow waves
island man heaves himself
another London day.

One of the central paradoxes in the formation of this new identity, lay in the fact that it drew on forms of US Black urbanism (most notably of course its street cultures), in a way that accelerated the comprehensive destruction of the Caribbean island culture in the post colonial diaspora ( ). For example, the functions of the crossroads - as a liminal space where young men learnt the verbal arts of tricksterism from one another - were subsumed under a vernacular street code to create a new front line against racism, while the role of the yard (where women used to rule and regulate codes of behaviour) became increasingly privatized. Yardies may be 'home boys', but the territories they define are most definitely not domestic ones.

As an example of the mappings that resulted from this process, consider the image of front lines produced by a roots radical Black community organization in London during the 1980's (#). The bisection of the metropolis by the Thames is here used to suggest an absolute epistemological rupture in 'regimes of truth'. It is a tendentious frontispiece because the assumed racial binarisms, the evocation of a 'North/South divide' to articulate the image of 'two nations', just does not accord with the complex imbrications of space and race to be found in the post colonial city. Old Father Thames, ex multicultural waterfront, ex artery of Empire, ex White dockland, now bridges the discontinuities in Black experience through the very flux of images which it provokes.

This shifting geography has been brilliantly evoked by Fred D'Aguiar in his poem about the river in ' British Subjects':

I saw these waves
roping off into strand
that combine to make a fat rope
breaking on mud banks and turning pebbles
....

But the strands formed ropes of their own
and before I could name what they were
the ingenious head to which they were plaited
reared up from the tide, widening rings
that marked new heights on the South Bank
...
Right then Marley start to skank
his big steps threatened to make the water
break its banks, Barrier or no barrier
this was the dance of the warrior
the more he stamped the lower in the water he sank
until his dreadlocks returned to the waves I mistook
for plaits doing and undoing themselves

Through the special alchemy of 'dread', the iconic figure of Marley is transformed into a river god, the street sounds of reggae are transmuted into an elemental tidal force, and the Rastaman's locks merge with waves that Britannia no longer rules.

It has in fact been left to a few Caribbean poets - E.A Markham, Grace Nichols, Fred D'Aguiar and, most famously, Derek Walcott, to reinvent the Black island story and insist on its continued pertinence of the island and its seascape as a source and symbol of cultural resistance.

In Walcott's poetics, the island is transformed from a natural symbol of insularity and particularism into a concrete universal, a site where slaves and castaways learn to throw off the yoke of dereliction 'abandon dead metaphors' and write

Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight
Cold as the curled wave, ordinary
as a tumbler of island water

using a vernacular made up of:

the soft vowels of inlets
the pastures of ports
the litany of islands
the rosary of archipelagoes
Anguilla, Antigua
Virgin of Guadeloupe

As his island story has taken on ever wider 'archipelagic' scope so it becomes an image of the poets own 'Homeric' vocation:

At the end of the sentence, rain will begin.
At the rain's edge, a sail.

Slowly the sail will lose sight of islands;
into a mist will go the belief in harbours
of an entire race.

The ten years war is finished.
Helen's hair, a grey cloud.
Troy a white ash pit
by the drizzling sea.

The drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp.
A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain
and plucks the first line of the Odyssey.

This is a poetics of beginning that uses the island to make over what has been destroyed by colonialism through its attempt to create an artificial paradise in its own image.

The Irish also do not inhabit an island of their own making; as an offshore colony of the British Isles, and latterly divided by an artificial internal land border that set in motion sectarian insularities on both sides, Ireland could only be circumnavigated by equally impossible strategies of narrative closure. From the point of view of Anglo-ilishness, the scandal of the Catholic claim to 'home rule' was precisely that a united Ireland demanded the same fictive concord between political history and physical geography, national identity and coastal integrity that the English had already monopolized for the purposes of their own internal colonization of mainland Britain. Equally the embarrassment of Protestant unionism was that it exposed the fraudulent nature of the cartography of Englishness upon which the union was based.

Seamus Heaney has mapped out the intransigence of positionalities that has flowed from this, commenting sardonically:

Although they are an occupied nation
and their only border is an inland one
they yield to nobody in their belief
that the country is an island

Part of the problem is that there is no agreed correspondence between territory and map. As a result:

To find out where he stands the traveller
has to keep listening- since there is no map
which draws the line he knows he must have crossed.

Yet the quest for some fixed Archimedean vantage point from which to accomplish the subterranean reconstruction of the island remains fraught with contradiction and counterfeit hope:

Meanwhile the forked tongued natives keep repeating
prophecies they pretend not to believe
about a point where all names converge
underneath the mountain and where (some day)
they are going to start to mine the ore of truth.

for after all

you can't be sure that parable is not
at work already retrospectively

like the subversives and collaborators
always vying with a fierce possessiveness
for the right to set 'the island story' straight

Heaney's political evasiveness on 'the Irish question' is legendary. He seems to see the 'All Ireland Story', as part of the problem, rather than a solution and to hope the island will 'disappear by aggrandizement'. This is perhaps not so far from Walcott revisioning of the island as singularity that transcends local claims on human sovereignty.

**Making Over: Towards a Poetics of Political Beginning**

In literature and the arts, we are thus beginning to see the emergence of more hopeful ways of circumnavigating islands, reconnecting back yards to front lines, in ways which open up a more constructive conversation between private hope and public need, pointing towards an archipelagic vision that is more than a simple restatement of British Islishness ( ). But what lessons does this imaginative achievement have for the much more daunting task of reconstructing our present political culture?

Nimbyism is often characterized as the reactionary face of local insularities, the voice of the little people against the big guns of corporate capitalism and the global city state. Certainly it is often a way for disparate groups which have been marginalized in the process of urban regeneration to combine to put themselves back on the political map, but does it always have to take this abreactive form?

A story from the East End of London is instructive on this point. In 1936 Moseley's British Union of Fascists proposed to march through the heart of the Jewish community in Whitechapel at a time of rising anti-Semitism throughout East London. The Moseleyite action provoked a counter mobilization from left and anti-fascist organizations, which was also supported by sections of the local labour movement. The organizing slogan was 'They Shall Not Pass '. It was to be a trial of political strength with national as well as local implications, and things came to a head in the famous battle of Cable Street, where the BUF were finally stopped.

Now at that time there lived near Cable Street a working class family, who were well known for their anti-Semitism. Some members of the family had supported restrictive practices to prevent Jews being taken on in the East End manual trades. The younger members had been involved in street brawls with the local Jewish gang. It might have been anticipated that they would welcome Moseley's intervention, but not a bit of it. Like many East Enders, then and since, they were fiercely patriotic in both a local and national sense. They regarded fascism as a foreign ideology and Moseley's march as an invasion of their territory. On the day of the march, the entire family stationed themselves on top of one of the Jewish houses overlooking Cable Street. They spent their time ripping the slates off the roof and hurling them down onto the heads of the Blackshirts, yelling 'They may be Yids, but they're our bloody Yids'. In this way they managed to simultaneously attack Jewish property and protect Jewish lives, making their area an exclusion zone for fascism, whilst at the same time asserting their claims as an

imaginary ruling class, to exercise a form of quasi-colonial jurisdiction over its 'native' inhabitants.

The crossing of this famous front line by a poetics of the back yard opens up a space of representation that goes beyond both. It not only deconstructs a privileged political mythology of political mobilization, but also indicates the impure resources of meaning that may be set somewhat stealthily in motion behind the subjects own back in 'a good cause' by actions that otherwise proceed from 'a bad motivation'. Isn't this kind of political tricksterism perhaps what Marx had in mind when he said that History invariably proceeds by its bad side?

One final story may help to illustrate the kind of poetics of political beginning I am arguing for. Mrs. Ntolo came to London from the Cameroons in the 1960s, and now lives in a council house on the Becontree Estate, Dagenham. This is traditional area of White working class settlement, close to Fords. Mrs. Ntolo belongs to the Essene Community, a group of Black Jews who settled in Africa after the fall of the first Temple, and who have been practising a unique syncretic form of Judaism ever since. Part of the requirement of her religion is that certain observances such as ritual purification, and the burning of mourning bands, should be carried out in an oracle, built on specially consecrated ground outside the house, in a way which allows the observant to be in physical contact with the earth. In Africa there is no problem with building the oracle. The word is put around the village that it will be built on such and such a day and everyone puts aside some time to help. It is built of mud and straw and the structure is made to last for several generations. As Mrs. Ntolo found out putting up such a structure in your own back yard in England is not such a straightforward undertaking.

When she wrote to the Planning Department explaining at length, her reasons for wanting to put up this structure and why it had to be built of these materials. She at first, got an enthusiastic response. They even rang the local papers to tell them all about it. But when the 'Man from Housing' arrived on the scene, it was a very different story. They couldn't have their tenants putting up mud huts all over the place. What would people think? The neighbours had already complained. After all, this was Essex not Africa. Why couldn't she assimilate like other people? If she had been White, it might be different, but if they allowed her to go ahead it would set a bad example to other Black tenants. Anyway they had a look at it and it was definitely a dangerous structure, unfit for human habitation.

It did not stop at insults. The Council sent in workmen to knock the Oracle down. They had quite a job because they did not understand the principles of its construction. From the reports they thought it must be a flimsy temporary structure (what else is a hut?), that would fall down at the drop of a pick axe: whereas, of course, the oracle was built to last for generations. It took an earth digger, two bulldozers, and ten men working for a week, to complete the demolition.

The press ran the story, completely ignoring the religious and cultural politics of the issue, and presenting it as a bad case of homesickness. Mrs. Ntolo was putting up a mud hut to remind her of her happy childhood in the Cameroons. No doubt the intention of this 'human angle' was to win sympathy, but the effect was the opposite. Hate mail poured in suggesting that she be helped to go back to the jungle where she belonged.

Meanwhile the Council decided to take Mrs. Ntolo to Court, to get a possession order to evict her from the house, as well as an injunction preventing her from erecting a similar structure

again. The Judge was not amused. The Council had behaved outrageously. It was the right of every freeborn Englishman - and in this case, woman - to practice their religion in the privacy of their own home. The garden was still a private space and the Oracle was interfering with no-one. In no way could it be considered a dangerous structure. Still you had to take account of local feelings. Mrs. Ntolo could rebuild the Oracle, using the original materials, provided the structure was encased in concrete, so on the outside it would look like a modern European type of building, while on the inside it would still be an African mud hut. That way everyone would be happy. Mrs. Ntolo could carry out her religious observances, and the rest of the world would not be offended.

This masterpiece of legal equivocation around 'race relations'
was not however the end of the story. Some of the neighbours, White as well as Black, rallied round, furious at what they saw as an unwarranted intrusion by the Authorities and the Media, into an area they understood little about and cared even less. A petition was organized in support of her right to rebuild the Oracle. The local synagogue and Community Relations Council organized a series of activities to raise money for the new building. And the fight, as they say, still goes on.

The story brings together many of the points I have been trying to raise in this article, about the shifting geographies of racial conflict, the surrealism of the English sense of home, and the persistence of its attendant insularities within a still racially superior sense of the play of difference in the making of post colonial Britishness. The 'danger' of Mrs. Ntolo's Oracle, lay not only in its mixing together of the sacred and the profane, purification and syncretism, but its construction by someone whose own credentials belong to a 'wild' and unassimilable form of hybridity. The point of the story, it seems to me, is not just that it shows how it may still, under certain favourable circumstances, be possible to reconstitute progressive and popular politics of locality, operative across globalized racial divides, it also indicates, how a poetics of resistance is continually being created in cracks in the edifice of modernity's governance, over the shifting interface of front lines, backyards. How are we to understand this bizarre attempt to 'support' a 'traditional' structure that does not require it, if not as a futile attempt to prop up an obsolescent and insular model of modernity that might otherwise collapse? The attempt to wrap a vernacular architecture, composed from Black and Jewish religious influences, in the garb of a concrete prefab, to turn it into a kind of Christo installation in reverse, is doomed to failure. It is not just that this brittle carapace of Euro centrism will so obviously crumble away in the face of a hermeneutics of much longer duration. It is as if this oracle, by virtue of its very materiality, speaks a metaphysical truth that cannot be expressed in the legal/bureaucratic norms imposed on its construction. This truth is metaphysical because it embodies a principle of hope; born of stubbornness against all the odds, mind over matter 'materialism'. That is the building's scandal, and why it must be destroyed even as it is rebuilt, and it points to a poetics of perpetual political beginning against which all the bulldozers in the world are powerless.