Charting the "Black Atlantic"

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ABSTRACT

Cradling this water scene, Mary to a Pieta in which three bathers replace the incarnation of the Trinity, this anonymous woman forces us to consider the figures broadcast on her unclad body as something more than pieces of fieldwork or aesthetic artifacts, to view them also as the spectral inhabitants of a guardedly intimate, intra-uterine space. For if the gallery, the family-album, and the anthropological treatise all too frequently "make their objects" through acts of temporal displacement, through technologies of display which worship the pastness of the past, then the recollection of these three figures in the womb of the fourth discloses our bathers as subjects not only of a then and a now but of a yet-to-be.1 And it is as we attend to the serial temporality of these subjects that the two fragments of text I earlier promised begin to bear on this photograph's charting of a distinct and uncanny region within the dispersed territories of the post-colonial. 4.\n It is this networked space, where the human is manifest alternately as subject or environment, and, simultaneously, as both, that defines the territory of a postidentitarian humanism. 7.

FULL TEXT

The Sea is History

Verandahs, where the pages of the sea

are a book left open by an absent master

in the middle of another life--

I begin here again,

begin until this ocean's

a shut book....

--Derek Walcott

1.

Whatever else it is, this is an age of cartography. An age, perhaps, as Fredric Jameson has it, of cognitive mapping; cognitive because the territories we map (whether they are the territories of the nation, of capital, of hyperspace, or of transnational migration, to name only a few) insist on reshaping themselves, on continuously expanding or contracting, splitting and doubling, defying the abilities of their cartographers to keep pace, to commit to paper something that is not instantly belated. But "cognitive" also because, as the above list implies, the category of the mappable is itself increasingly unstable, because as our epistemologies of the local encounter the shifting ways in

which local cultures, local knowledges and local narratives confront the globalizing imperatives of the nation, capital, hyperspace, and migrancy, our sense of what constitutes a cultural locale, of what can be spoken of as a discernible, perhaps even a distinct, space, is also continuously expanding and contracting. I do not presume, in this essay, to unlock the riddle of the local and the global; instead, in the spirit of the times, I want to examine one of our moment's apparently global cultural locales. I want, that is, to ask whether it is possible to locate the postcolonial, to inquire whether it occupies or implies a discernible order of space, and to ask--if the postcolonial can indeed be located--how that space is inhabited and experienced. My suggestion is that it is both not possible to speak of the space of the postcolonial (for the fairly simple reason that India is not Nigeria which in its turn is not Jamaica which in its turn is not England) and that it is possible to do so (largely because these places are at once structurally distinct and structurally coupled); and that if we are to understand how this can be so we must turn our attention from these national spaces of belonging to the waters that separate and join them.

2.

"Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory?" an anonymous body of inquisitors demands the narrator of one of Derek Walcott's poems. To which interrogation the poem responds: "Sirs, / in that grey vault. The sea. The sea / has locked them up. The sea is history.... / ... / Sir it is locked in them sea-sands / out there past the reef's moiling shelf, / where the men-o'-war floated down; / strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself. / Its all subtle and submarine" ("The Sea is History" 1-4; 35-7). It is to that reply and that invitation that this essay responds.

Suffering a Sea-change

--all the deep

Is restless change; the waves so swell'd and steep,

Breaking and sinking, and the sunken swells,

Nor one, one moment, in its station dwells.

--George Crabbe

3.

Let me start with a photograph and two fragments of text. In the black and white print, a central image in Sutapa Biswas' 1992 exhibition "Synapse," an Indian woman and two children are standing in water, immersed to their hips, gazing directly at us.

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Illustration
CAPTION: Figure 1.

Their bodies are neither perfectly relaxed nor rigidly tense. Rather, they hold themselves as if photographed by surprise, uncertain whether to dip their dangling hands into the water, to delight in the cool shallows, or to formalize themselves, to adopt a pose, to substitute decorum for the forgettable postures of play. Photographed

an instant too late and an instant too soon, caught in a moment between abandon and self-collection, the three figures also wade between genres. The image implies a camera operator who is at once anthropologist, artist, and loved one. Either a snapshot for a family album, a study for gallery display, or a document for an ethnographic treatise, the photograph encloses the bathers in a multitude of literal and epistemological frames. If the undeveloped sandy beach and the wooded coastline invoke the anthropological at its primitivizing worst, and the precise cropping of the image alludes to the primness of the gallery, then these innermost and outermost containing devices confront a third way of holding these figures, an intermediate, memorializing frame. For, as we scan the shadowy space between the landscape enclosing these untimely *baigneurs* and the mounted photograph's edge, we note the enveloping presence of another female body. This fourth, barely visible figure, hands crossed at her waist, acts as a screen onto which the central image has been projected. Cradling this water scene, Mary to a *Pieta* in which three bathers replace the incarnation of the Trinity, this anonymous woman forces us to consider the figures broadcast on her unclad body as something more than pieces of fieldwork or aesthetic artifacts, to view them also as the spectral inhabitants of a guardedly intimate, intra-uterine space. Positioned in a multitude of framing spaces, the bathers, like the cultural locations they occupy, also inhabit a shifting series of moments. For if the gallery, the family-album, and the anthropological treatise all too frequently "make their objects" through acts of temporal displacement, through technologies of display which worship the pastness of the past, then the recollection of these three figures in the womb of the fourth discloses our bathers as subjects not only of a **then** and a **now** but of a **yet-to-be**.[1] And it is as we attend to the serial temporality of these subjects that the two fragments of text I earlier promised begin to bear on this photograph's charting of a distinct and uncanny region within the dispersed territories of the post-colonial.

4.

The first passage, from Joseph Conrad's novel The Nigger of the Narcissus, parades the dispirited musings of the text's narrator as he contemplates the unnerving presence of James Wait, a dying but not-yet-dead West Indian who has joined the crew of an English merchant ship returning to London from Bombay. "In the confused current of impotent thoughts that set unceasingly this way and that through bodies of men, Jimmy bobbed up upon the surface, compelling attention, like a black buoy chained to the bottom of a muddy stream" (102). Days before James Wait will, at last, have the good grace to die, days before his shipmates will tip his corpse into the Atlantic, Conrad's narrator finds himself dwelling in a zone of temporal confusion. Mistaking anticipation for recollection, the postponed for the remembered, Conrad's text here tropes the imperial uncanny not as the return of the repressed, but as the mocking and untimely resurfacing of that black subject which England has yet to submerge. If Conrad's text, like Biswas' photograph, casts the submarine as a space in which our senses of a "now," a "then," and a "not-yet" deliriously trade places with one another, then the second of those textual passages with which I wish to begin this reading of the postcolonial submarine returns to the dis-synchronicities of imperial water with a mixture of sorrow and delight.

5.

Responding to the suggestion that the Caribbean possesses a "submarine" unity, Edouard Glissant has offered the following observations:

To my mind this expression can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence.* And so transversality, and not the universal transcendance of the sublime, has come to light. It took us a long time to learn this. We are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship.

Submarine roots, that is floating free, not fixed in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches.

We thereby live, we have the good fortune of living, this shared process of cultural mutation, this convergence that frees us from uniformity. (66-67)

6.

As he negotiates a passage from the rhetoric of outrage to the dialect of celebration, Glissant models his shifting idiom on the metamorphic waters he navigates. Like Conrad, he confronts a cultural "current" setting "unceasingly this way and that," but rather than discovering an unrepressable object of dread at the heart of this tidal wandering, he encounters a liberating principle of briny metamorphosis. Reaping the harvest of the Middle Passage's violent seedings, he returns the time of drowning to our present time not as that which terrifies or outrages but as that which continuously transforms the contemporary. Memory here does not haunt, it translates, it fuses the time of remembrance with the time of the remembered, it joins a "now" to a "then" through the mutating wash of a sea-change which is also, always, a "yet-to-be." Reclaiming the slave from the waters of this Black Atlantic, Glissant's comment demands that we free ourselves from those acts of forgetting upon which the constitution of fixed identities so regularly depend, but asks that in joining ourselves to the no-longer forgotten we refuse to fetishize an alternate past and instead cultivate a vulnerability to the mutating ebb-tides of submarine memory.

7.

While this reading of the submarine again invokes a temporally dispersed subject, it equally implies a model of spatially-disseminated identity, a rhizomatic dislocation of the subject, a self which manifests itself not as an essence but as a meandering. But where the Deleuzian metaphors of the rhizome imply some rooting of the subject, Glissant's comments can be seen to further "radicalize" our conception of the rooting of the self. For if the subject of this post-colonial submarine again manifests itself as a rootwork, and as a route-work, this subject finds itself wanderingly-grounded not "in some primordial spot" but in the uncertainties of imperial water. Where Deleuze enables us to think the self as a reticulated system, Glissant couples that heterotopic self to an equally fluid environment which, as Biswas' photograph and Conrad's text reveal, not only encompasses the subject but "passes through" it. Having begun with an image of three women wading between genres, temporalities, and framing spaces, we now discover these bathers standing at the edge of a submarine world in which serial locations merge with disseminated identities, sea-changing subjects occupy multiple moments, and our categories of cultural belonging, like the uncanny waters lapping over the edge of the Narcissus, shift "unceasingly, this way and that" (Conrad 102).

Only Connect: Notes on an Imperial Nervous System

Synapse is a metaphor.Synapse is a place where

two people meet. Synapse is a place where two ideas

meet. Synapse is a gap across which two people's

ideas meet. Synapse is a place.

--Sutapa Biswas

8.

A photograph by a British photographer who was born in India. A snatch of text from a novel published by an author who once described himself as "a Polish gentleman soaked in British tar."[2] A second textual snippet drawn from the American translation of a Martiniquan intellectual's book of essays. What, we might ask, do these fragments have to do with each other? On what authority can they be read through and against one another? How can they be said to plot a coincident region within the dispersed territories of the "postcolonial?" What, for that matter, is the postcolonial? Is Sutapa Biswas "postcolonial" by virtue of her birth? Are her photographs, regardless of their content, postcolonial artifacts because of their maker's passport? Is Joseph Conrad, writing in 1897, equally or identically postcolonial, and when does his novel become such? At the moment of its writing? At the moment at which its narrator anticipates James Wait's drowning? At the moment of our reading? Surely, as Anne McClintock has so cogently argued, we must at the very least speak not of the postcolonial but of postcolonialisms.[3] Whatever the critical currency of the term, whatever the value of collecting discrete texts within an integrating theoretical framework, we must either begin to seriously address such questions or watch "postcolonialism" become a brand of critical sloganeering in which the constant injunctions to "celebrate diversity" amount to the dual fetishization and erasure of difference.

9.

If there is an apparently easy answer to such questions, if it seems obvious that we should simply abandon the collectivizing impulse and devote ourselves to the arduous business of reading for the particular, then, as with many obvious solutions, this is an answer which is deceptively simple. For one of the most valuable and most particular lessons that "postcolonialism's" texts have communicated to us is, in Glissant's terms, precisely the lesson of the "transversal." The coral-become bodies of those slaves drowned in the Middle Passage do link the waters washing the coast of Martinique with an eighteenth and nineteenth century history of the Caribbean, with the past and present legacies of the triangular trade, with the Victorian and Edwardian underdevelopment of Africa, Rastafarian and Pan-Africanist narratives of return, the poetry of Aime Cesaire, Afrocentric curricula, and the commodification of Kente cloth. In Derek Walcott's exploration of the waters of the Caribbean, the submarine further discloses itself as an expanse that is not only littered with "the bones of all [those] drowned in the crossing" (128), **and** with the "white memory" (129) of English sailors, but as a liquid territory parted by the keels of fishing pirogues, tourist liners, merchant vessels and slavers which, in cross-hatching the Caribbean, connect these watery deeps to the primitivizing economies of the American leisure industry, the Victorian houses of British capital, the English country mansions built off the slave trade, the imperial merchant marines chasing the Union Jack across the surface of the globe, and a Polish writer who began his career aboard one of those English merchant ships. To refuse to read these linkages is not to eschew indiscriminate acts of totalization, it is to refuse to read.

10.

If, following the lead of Fredric Jameson, we choose to conceive of our critical responsibilities not only in terms of reading but in terms of mapping, then it might be worth wondering what a cartography of such linkages might resemble, and upon what theories of knowledge and observation it might model itself. Sutapa Biswas' photograph, the 1992 "Synapse" exhibition in which it appeared, and the surrounding body of her work with which this exhibit interacts, suggest some answers to these questions. The synaptic metaphor which gave the 1992 show its name is embodied in another of Biswas' exhibitions from that year, "White Noise," a multimedia installation in which the black and white image from "Synapse" reappears in a series of back-lit transparencies mounted in light-boxes

whose ganglia of connecting cables the artist made no effort to hide.

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Illustration
CAPTION: Figure 2

If we wish to come to terms with Biswas' work, while at the same time mapping the cross-currents of that cultural ecology which her exhibits explore, then we would be well served not only by lingering over this resurfacing image, but by considering its interplay with the synaptic metaphor, a metaphor that in the case of "White Noise" was embodied not in the show's title but in that tangled circuit of video cables so visibly channeling the flow of visual information from one light box to another.

11.

Dictionaries inform us that a synapse is a "junction...between two neurons or nerve cells." But the definition does scant justice to the marvels of the synapse, a neural complex more fully dissected in the writings of an increasingly influential cellular biologist. In a series of works which have rapidly entered the select canon of systems theory, the Brazilian biologist Humberto Maturana has outlined an "autopoetic" theory of cognition which depends, at crucial moments, on an exploration of the wandering geographies of the synapse.[4] Maturana's epistemological idiom is unabashedly structuralist and consequently, though somewhat less obviously, humanist. And though this is not the thrust of his work, nor the way in which it is generally read, Maturana's writings can assist us in the task of sketching a map of those exchanges which collectively wire the branching networks of the postcolonial.

12.

Maturana's darling is the cell; it is the engine of his system. In anatomizing this "second-order unity," Maturana insists on two things. First, that the cell, or any other compound entity, exhibits a "structural determinism"--by which he means that all unities, including the human, are essentially solipsistic, assuming form not at the whim of their environment but by regulated, auto-referential, and sovereign acts of self-description. To this dictum, however, Maturana adds another which qualifies and almost contradicts the first. While the ontology of all unities depends on an internal structural determinism, each unity is simultaneously "structurally coupled" to its environment. To complicate matters still further, Maturana allows that unities and environments can exchange places as the vantage of their observers shift, i.e. that the human body can be seen as a unity autonomously within, but coupled to, a surrounding environment, or it may be understood as the environment enclosing a multitude of discrete organic unities. This "either/or, and both" epistemology recapitulates the paradox of complementarity that resides at the heart of quantum dynamics and, as Arkady Plotnitsky has recently suggested, much poststructural thinking.[5] Without dwelling on the infinite delights of the uncertainty principle, it is this second founding hypothesis of Maturana's work that I wish to examine. For in turning to those systems which regulate the coupling of unity and environment, the biologist sketches a map of our organic geographies which can help us begin our speculative charting of the synaptic wirings of the postcolonial.

13.

While at first glance Maturana's map of the world is disconcertingly binary, the logic of the couple demands that to his cartography of the within and the without he must add a chart of the between. In most complex organisms this

"between," this interstice that at once separates and joins unity and environment, is the territory of the nervous system, with its sprawling network of neurons and synapses. If the neurons are the various headquarters of the nervous system, then the synapses are its telephone lines. Or, to adapt the metaphor to the primary concerns of this essay, if the neurons are the scattered islands in the archipelago of the nervous system, then the synapses are its shipping routes: a conceit which, if extended, allows us to identify the Atlantic as the nervous system of empire, and to describe the submarine currents tumbling Glissant's drowned slaves as the synapses coupling the neural densities of metropole and colony. In this description the submarine emerges as neither European nor Caribbean, neither metropolitan nor colonial, neither within the "West" nor without it. Instead, the submarine locates the system of exchanges which at once acknowledges the distinct character of such "unities" and makes such distinctions meaningless. The submarine, then, is a place once again of the "either/or and both," but a place, crucially, where such uncertainty principles manifest themselves in certain ways, where we confront not a generalized system of exchanges but a particular network of relays. Of course, as Maturana is at pains to point out, such synaptic networks are not fixed. While some patterns of connection exhibit enduring stability, others change. But they do not change at random. If the nervous system is relentlessly "performative" then its performances always occur with reference to the peculiar ontogenetic histories of the unities and environments it couples.[6] Which is no more than another way of saying that ocean currents do not move at random, and that if the "Black Atlantic" houses the empire's nervous system, then its submarine flows exhibit a synaptic intentionality.[7]

14.

It will be immediately apparent that there are some similarities between what, with Maturana's help, I am calling the synaptic and what Deleuze labels the rhizomatic. Indeed, the sketches of synaptic configurations which Maturana provides in his text seem at first glance to be ideal maps of the rhizome's geography. The illustrations of synaptic networks in his text The Tree of Knowledge depict a sprawling, branching system of lines, a reticulum that like the rhizome "stabilizes around a...parish...a capital...a bulb" (in this case, the neuron) (Deleuze 7). But while the nervous system and its synapses exhibit the topography of the rhizome, they are not rhizomatic in the Deleuzian sense. In Maturana's description, the nervous system labors in the service of a discernible unity of which, as a border, it is a part--though, to be sure, that trafficked part which simultaneously regulates and disrupts the integrity of the unity.[8] The rhizome, by contrast, occupies a purely areferential universe, "it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality...there is no unity to serve as a pivot" (Deleuze 8). While this is no negligible distinction, it is not one whose full implications I can explore here. Rather, I wish to address two additional features of the synaptic which are wholly alien to the Deleuzian coding of multiplicity. The rhizome has neither a history nor an environment. The synapse has both.

15.

On the question of time both Deleuze and Maturana are unequivocal. "The rhizome," the French philosopher confidently asserts, "is an anti-genealogy" (Deleuze and Guattari 11). Synapses, alternately, configure themselves under the shadow of both a hereditary phylogenetic past and a continuous ontogenetic past; that is, they bear the traces of both a collective and an individual history. The consequences of this difference are immense. If we conceive of culture as a rhizomatic assemblage, then we must construct a philosophy of culture which has no use for memory. We must accomodate ourselves to inhabiting a pure present, to dwelling under the sole sovereignty of the synchronic. If, instead, our cartographies of culture are synaptic, then we must read our coupling routes not only as lines of connection but as the tracework of continuing and inherited histories. There has been much talk recently of spatializing time. The logic of the nervous system demands that we also learn to historicize space, even the performative spaces of the itinerary. But also--because the nervous system has an environment, because the synapse, unlike the rhizome, implies an encompassing territory--a synaptic map of culture depends on our

willingness to read not only the sprawling topographies of the link but the coupled territories of the linked. Deleuze invites us to hypostasize the multiple, to adore the schizomorphic lines which wire nothing together, which exist nowhere, which are their own splendidly narcissistic excuse. Maturana's writings raise the rather greater challenge of reading both a routework and the grounds which it roots, of examining both the circuity of culture and the assemblages which the circuit wires. To revert to Sutapa Biswas' exhibition "White Noise," where a Deleuzian analytic might devote itself solely to the electrical cables adorning the gallery's walls, Maturana's writings suggest that to comprehend this synaptic display we may also wish to glance at the light boxes. And if we do in fact study those boxes, we will find repeated there images of that imperial water whose currents link Biswas' Indian bathers not only to the London Gallery in which their images were displayed but to Edouard Glissant's charting of the transversal and to Conrad's eternally resurfacing "black buoy."

16.

In tracing the articulations of this nervous system which wires the colonial to the postcolonial, the Caribbean to Britain, the drowned slave to the modernist prose stylist, we must, however, do more than surrender ourselves to a metonymic order of reasoning or to an unearthing of the rich wisdoms contained in a pun on roots and routes. We must take care to prevent our critical cartographies from producing always the same map of cultural coupling. While the six-degrees-of-separation argument makes it impossible to say that not all points connect, we should nevertheless recall that those points that do join one another connect in specific and differing ways. Frantz Fanon, in a passing comment in Black Skin, White Masks, argues that "the body is surrounded by an atmosphere of *certain uncertainty*" (110-111). I can think of no better way of responding to those methodological questions I raised earlier than by suggesting that we incline to the insight of this aphoristic comment. Surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainties, we can devote ourselves to the particular without abandoning the transversal if we will diligently map the synaptic currents which network the postcolonial submarine.

17.

Throughout this essay, I have privileged metaphors of liquidity, primarily because, with Edouard Glissant, I want to suggest that we can map the postcolonial by charting its submarine flows, and because, while the metaphors of the nervous system are certainly suggestive, the synapses I wish to trace are constituted less as a sequence of relays within the body than as a series of transatlantic lines. But I have also done so because the works I wish to discuss represent the postcolonial as a marine geography, as a geography of trans-oceanic and submarine passages. In doing so, these works serve not only to locate a postcolonial territoriality, but to generate a vocabulary particular to that global locale, a liquid vocabulary that identifies diaspora cultures and identities as flow dynamics, as processes whose formative and reformative logics can perhaps be understood by borrowing from the lexical sea-chests of oceanographic discourse a submarine metaphorics of "surges," "meanders," "slicks," "spills," "sprays," "ripples," and "currents." To gaze on the waters of empire, to study the trans-oceanic routes of postcolonial migrancy, or, as Walcott has it, to "strop on" our sea-goggles, is thus not only to extend the reach of our critical cartographies but to expand our pool of key-words, to invigorate a critical discourse, which so frequently wearies its disciples by trotting out the same aging family of metaphors, through a fresh infusion of tropes.

18.

I say this with some whimsy, and much seriousness. For when reading becomes no more than an excuse for carting out the same reigning body of explanatory metaphors, we need not bother to read at all. In a world in which we inevitably discover that everything is "hybrid" we might as well close up shop, or reconcile ourselves to the fact

that we really are Bouvard and Pecuchet. I am not, of course, saying that everything isn't hybrid--I believe that everything is. But we must be able to describe how things are hybrid; imperial, postcolonial, and diaspora hybridities may perhaps best be understood--as Conrad's, Walcott's, Glissant's, and Biswas' work suggests--as a series of marine procedures. Which returns us to oceanographic discourse, and the more important point I want to make. Simply scanning a standard oceanographic treatise's table of contents--in the text I consulted there were no fewer than seven sections, containing twenty-six sub-entries, and one hundred and fifty-two sub-subheadings--reminds us that even an object as apparently self-identical and unmappable as an ocean has its own counties, regions, and routes; that this is also a space of certain uncertainties; and that while it might require astonishingly hard work to map the waters, that this is work that can be done.[9] So, without further ado, let me close by offering a map of one current within that cultural expanse I have been calling the postcolonial submarine.

Modified in the Guts of the Living

The whole picture dedicated to the most sublime of

subjects and impressions (completing thus the perfect

system of all truth we have shown to be formed in

Turner's works)--the power, majesty, and deathfulness

of the open, deep, illimitable sea.

--John Ruskin (3: 573)

19.

In the opening chapter of The Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy draws our attention to J.M.W. Turner's 1840 painting Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying. Actually, Gilroy is less interested in the canvas than in John Ruskin's failure, in his deeply sympathetic reading of the painting in the first volume of Modern Painters, to discuss this depiction of black bodies thrown like so much surplus cargo into the sea. Gilroy sees this refusal as symptomatic of Victorian and post-Victorian failures to acknowledge that Englishness has "any external referents whatsoever" (14). Ruskin's unwillingness to direct his reader's attention to the drowned and drowning slaves is not matched by a disinterest in the watery medium enveloping their bodies. His discussion of the slave ship caps a long and painstaking disquisition on water and water painting which reveals that he has evidently studied rivers, lakes, torrents, waterfalls, and oceans with extraordinary care. Ruskin notices the differing movements of slow river currents, which magisterially overwhelm any source of interruption, and rushing torrents, which, in their haste, bend their shape to the impediments they encounter. He plots the disturbances caused by approaching and rebounding waves as they encounter buoys, rocks, shorelines, and recoiling currents of water. His greatest energies, however, are devoted to a discussion of liquid surfaces and reflections--a discussion which, though it precedes the reading of the slave ship by some thirty pages, helps to explain why Ruskin fails to see what is so evident on the surface of that canvas.

20.

Water surfaces, Ruskin discovers, deceive the eye. In gazing upon them we either see the surface itself, but not what it reflects, or we study the reflection, in which case the actual surface disappears. By no means, he insists,

can we see both surface and reflection at once: each exists to annul the other. The task of the water painter is, then, to keep the eye of the observer constantly in play between these two mutually exclusive ways of seeing, to exploit the paradoxes of what Ruskin calls a "philosophy of reflection" (3: 545). In analyzing these two modes of seeing, Ruskin carefully excludes a third. Enjoined to devote ourselves alternately to the surface and the reflected "above," our eyes are forbidden permission to peer beneath the water, or told that there is no beneath, that what is visible below the surface is merely an inverse image of that which floats above. Turner's peculiar genius, Ruskin argues, derives from his brilliant exploitation of this optical ballet of surface and reflection, and from his refusal to allow us to delve beneath the water. "We are not," Ruskin insists, "allowed to tumble into it, and gasp for breath as we go down, we are kept upon the surface" (3: 539). "We," apparently, are not the jettisoned slaves, who have no choice but to tumble into the water, to gasp for breath as they go down beneath a surface on which a Victorian viewing public, freed from the obligation to wonder what lies beneath these waters, can see itself reflected.

21.

As the narrator of Conrad's Nigger of the Narcissus discovers, however, the black bodies spilled into the empire's waters refuse to remain submerged. Like James Wait they continue to bob up, disturbing a narcissistic inspection of those oceans which not only surround the island kingdom but define England as a liquid geography. In the opening pages of Heart of Darkness, Conrad again stages a scene in which his narrator peers into the waters which rim and define the boundaries of Englishness. Here, once more, an inspection of those waters which envelop and tongue the nation amounts to a complex act of remembrance.

The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the utter ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs forevever, but in the august light of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, "followed the sea" with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin.... (28-9)

In a text so relentlessly and famously obsessed with the cartographic, Conrad here suggests that to map England is not to map its grounds but its waters, that Englishness, apprehended only as an object ever fully present in the past, assumes the form of a "tidal current" which leads "to the utter ends of the earth." As England here becomes a waterway, or, to borrow Glissant's term, a "transversality," it also becomes a mortuary. The waters not only plot England's liquid shape, they contain the beloved dead who collectively define the nation's identity. Entombed within imperial waters, these great men specify what England must remember, and thus again be. In the catalogue of names which follows the passage I have cited, James Wait's names does not, of course, appear. But if in reading England as a waterway this text opens the spaces of Englishness to cultural currents streaming from the uttermost ends of the world, in identifying England's waters as a liquid cemetery it also reminds us that that mortuary is occupied not only by Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin, but by the eternally resurfacing body of James Wait, and by the slaves drowning beneath the surface of Turner's canvas and John Ruskin's prose.

22.

In closing The Nigger of the Narcissus, Conrad completes the labor of forgetting James Wait by suggesting that England not remember the bodies pitched into the colonizing nation's waters but recollect the ships which have plied the seas in the service of the flag. By the final pages of the text, England itself emerges as a vast floating

vessel, "the great flagship of the race; stronger than the storms! and anchored in the open sea" (121). While England here finds itself mirrored in the image of the Narcissus, it also finds itself dying. For the Narcissus has completed her final voyage; docked, she awaits her demolition and the resale of her broken timbers. And the task of preserving English identity becomes, at last, the business of dredging the lost hull of this national allegory from the waters of the historical deep.

23.

In recent years this imaginary redemption of a submerged English ship of state has been literally reenacted. Patrick Wright has discussed the neo-nationalist celebrations which attended the rescue of Henry VIII's ship the *Mary Rose*.[10] And on July 8, 1995, the National Gallery in London opened an exhibition which once again imagined Englishness as a dredgework. The gallery supplemented its special exhibition of Turner's 1838 painting The Fighting Temeraire, Tugged to Her Last Berth to be Broken Up with an array of materials designed to ensure that this canvas be viewed, in Thackeray's words, as "a magnificent national ode."[11] The Temeraire had fought with Nelson at Trafalgar, but in 1838 it was demolished by a London ship-breaker, and its parts resold. And it is the Gallery's interest in the fate of the vessel's disseminated timbers, quite apart from its nostalgic reinvention of the painting as a fetish of national identity, that deserves some attention.

24.

The curators of the show reserved a room of the exhibition for a display entitled "The Temeraire Survives," and filled that room with the collection of souvenirs the ship has become. In an age that identifies its postmodernity in those late capital economies which ensure that fragments of the downed Berlin wall are rapidly available for purchase at Macy's, we may be tempted to view this dissemination of the ship as a thoroughly contemporary phenomenon. But such dispersals and recollections of a nation's monuments are not exclusively recent occurences. John Ruskin concluded his lengthiest discussion of Turner's canvas by predicting precisely such a fate for the Temeraire: imagining a "tired traveller" absently leaning against the "low gate" of "some country cottage," Ruskin laments the wanderer's ignorance that the gate has been cut from a beam of the glorious ship. As if in response to Ruskin's fear that the shards of the scattered vessel might fail to invoke that absent England which the ship has come to symbolize, the National Gallery's curators diligently gathered and displayed a vast array of the Temeraire's enduring and identifiable fragments in the "survival" room. An altar table, an altar rail, two sanctuary chairs, and a stand for a bone ship model, all fashioned from the departed vessel's oak timbers, accompany diverse medallions, and a portrait of a dog framed in Temeraire wood. The most prized relic, however, is a gong stand owned by King George V in which two brooding figures, carved from Temeraire beams, guard a Temeraire gong which hangs above a plaque extolling this "Souvenir of the wooden walls of Old England." The compensatory message of this collection of knickknacks could not be more clear: acting to affirm Ernest Renan's famous insistence that a nation is, above all else, a privileged body of collective memories and to dispel John Ruskin's worries that England might not only forget but utterly fail to recognize that version of itself which the Temeraire had been, this assortment of splendid fragments assures the observer that the National Gallery will neither allow the Temeraire to be forgotten nor permit the wooden walls of this old England to sink, once more, beneath the tide of remembrance.

25.

If this exhibition publicly restages Conrad's strategy for redeeming England by resurfacing the nation's marine architectures, then a recent Birmingham exhibition has duplicated this tactic, but has done so in a way which disturbs the National Gallery's placidly triumphalist narrative of national identity. On January 17, 1991, Keith Piper

mounted a show at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery which he entitled "A Ship Called Jesus." The title of the exhibition alludes to the "Jesus of Lubeck," a vessel which Queen Elizabeth gave John Hawkins in 1564 to enable him to embark on England's first official slave-trading voyage. The irony of the slaver's name provides the occasion for Piper's mixed media exploration of four centuries of Black British culture. The exhibition comprises three parts: "The Ghosts of Christendom," which examines the enslavement of West Africans and their transportation to the Caribbean; "The Rites of Passage," which plots the post World War II migration of West Indians to Britain; and "The Fire Next Time," which explores contemporary black urban culture. Piper addresses his Black British, and Black Atlantic, themes through a variety of media: video monitors display alternating images of cross-burnings, American civil rights activists, and immobile West-African statuary; a stained glass installation depicts Queen Elizabeth I flanked by female slaves; framed ethnographic portraits parade the bodies of naked but armed Africans; a photo montage, in the shape of a cross, reveals the outline of two black feet that have been pierced by nails; and a tombstone to the Jesus of Lubeck bears the following inscription: "In 1564 Queen Elizabeth I donated a ship to John Hawkins for the first official English slave trading voyage...the name of the ship was the Jesus of Lubeck...we've been sailing in her eversince [sic]."[12]

©1997 Keith Piper, used by permission.

Illustration
CAPTION: Figure 3

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Illustration
CAPTION: Figure 4

Collectively, these objects and images re-create the interior of the gallery as a resonant miniature of the Black Atlantic diaspora.

26.

As it maps the configurations of this diasporic network, the exhibit also plots the transformation of those cultural entities coupled together by the perturbing currents of the slave trade. In particular, the show asks its audience to consider the ways in which black experiences of Christianity have transformed both African and Anglican identities. In his catalogue essay, Piper directs our attention to the African creolizations of Christian worship, mutations of Church experience which point "to the extent to which during this particular leg of its voyage, the slave ship called Jesus has experienced a mutiny of radical proportions. The same Africans for which the ship had been a mechanism of imprisonment had seized control of the helm and were steering the ship in a totally different direction."[13] The exhibition's examination of this "hi-jacking" of this sacred vessel reminds us that the ship of Englishness has been similarly redirected. The National Gallery's assured recollection of the nation amid the fragments of the Temeraire, should not, I believe, be read apart from those reconstitutions of British identity manifest in this show. Where John Ruskin instructs the viewing public not to see the black bodies tumbling into the waters of the Atlantic, and Joseph Conrad and the National Gallery substitute an image of the "great flagship of the race" for a sight of those Africans, West-Indians, and Black Britons who have been transported within, thrown from, and who have steered that repeating vessel, Piper's work will not allow us to forget these black sailors and swimmers of British waters.

Leaky Vessels

I am rather attached to this piece [one of the

works in "Synapse"], which when installed measures

approximately forty feet in length. It should be

installed at an approximate eye level of five feet

five inches to six feet, so that in viewing it the

intention is for the viewer to experience,

momentarily, a strange feeling of submergence.[14]

--Sutapa Biswas

27.

At the heart of his exhibition, beneath the photo montage of a crucified, black body, Piper placed a rectangular, water-filled basin. At the bottom of this basin, under the water, he positioned a series of broken mirrors. The obvious allusion to Joyce should not prevent us from recognizing that this cracked looking-glass fragments one of the cannier aesthetic strategies for dismissing Britain's black subjects from the national portrait gallery. For if we cast a glance at this pool of water we will realize that Piper's submerged mirrors break the surface of Ruskin's philosophy of reflection. Looking down into these waters, we see not simply a reflection of the agonized black body which hangs above, we see that bleeding figure as if from beneath, from below the surface of the water. Manipulating a trick of light to reverse our optic of inspection and to reposition our space of observation, Piper's installation displaces the viewing subject, draws us beneath the water to gaze at the scene of violence played out above. The work forces us, if only for a moment, to occupy the submarine. Tumbled into this space, we see more than that submerged region of British history which Ruskin and his fellows forbid us to acknowledge, we now see from **within** this current of Britain's postcoloniality.

28.

The formal achievement of Piper's exhibit was complemented by an accidental accomplishment. Sometime during the run of the show the waterfilled basin began to leak.[15] And though I hesitate to celebrate this spill of waters over the floors of an art gallery, I cannot avoid concluding by registering my delight with this act of liquid disobedience. Trickling out of the artist's installation, meandering across the floors of the Birmingham gallery, wetting the feet of the exhibit's visitors, spilling lazily out the door and extending its routework in all directions, this unpoliced current of the postcolonial submarine reminds us that we do indeed have the good fortune of living "a shared process of cultural mutation," a "convergence that frees us from uniformity" (Glissant 67). To this note of celebration, I must however add a closing note of caution. If in some ways Piper's exhibit represents not only a space within the postcolonial submarine but a postimperial version of that "fluctuating zone of instability" in which Frantz Fanon and, more recently, Homi Bhabha have begged their readers to immerse themselves, then it realizes these liquidities within a fragile and guarded moment.[16] Departing the gallery we must wonder whether we can sustain this submersion. Can we, like Sutapa Biswas' surprised subjects, wade the submarine? Or will we dry our feet as we wander back to our everyday identities?

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Notes

1. See Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

2. See Joseph Conrad, Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces, ed. Z. Najder (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978).

3. See Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), especially 11-13.

4. See Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1992).

5. See Arkady Plotnitsky, Complementarity: Anti-Epistemology after Bohr and Derrida (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

6. As we move from a cartography of culture to a map of the human, the tropologies of the synapse reveal the self as that which is also simultaneously structurally determinate and structurally coupled to its environment. And as those terms at once imply and eviscerate the concepts of the without and the within, the problems of reading the material constitutions of the human are replaced by the task of plotting the synaptic networks which wire subjects and environments. If the cross-hatched Atlantic functions as the nervous system of empire, then the subject is wrapped by an entirely similar liquid skin, or, to revert to Fanon, by an atmosphere of certain uncertainties. It is this networked space, where the human is manifest alternately as subject or environment, and, simultaneously, as both, that defines the territory of a postidentitarian humanism.

7. In referring to the "Black Atlantic," I am alluding to the cultural territory sketched in Paul Gilroy's brilliant study The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Gilroy is, of course, not the first scholar to investigate the cultural economy of this transnational territory. Robert Farris Thompson, Kobena Mercer, Peter Linnebaugh and Marcus Rediker have all made significant contributions to the study of a cultural expanse which did not vanish with the abolition of the "peculiar institution." Gilory's work is distinct, however, in the systematicity of his quasi-totalizing cartography. I discuss his work at some slightly greater length later in this essay.

8. To the untrained eye of a reader whose education in the humanities revolved, too frequently, on a flight from the hard sciences, Maturana's work seems weakest at this point. He tends to assume the self-evident character of the organic "unity" as an uncontestable starting point and fails adequately to address the tension which his readings of structural-coupling place on his doctrine of structural-determinism.

9. The work in question is M.N. Hill's The Sea: Ideas and Observations on Progress in the Study of the Seas (New York and London: John Wiley and Sons, 1962).

10. See Patrick Wright, On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain (London: Verso, 1985).

11. Cited in Judy Edgerton, Making and Meaning: Turner, The Fighting Temeraire (London: National Gallery Publications Limited, 1995), 10.

12. These, and other images, together with Piper's comments on the exhibition, are reproduced in Keith Piper, A Ship Called Jesus (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1991).

13. The catalogue is not paginated, but by my count this comment appears on page 21 of A Ship Called Jesus.

14. "Frieze," the work in question, comprises a series of some fifty rectangular panels mounted in an undulating line. The image on each of the panels is a cropped version of the photograph of bathing women I discuss above. Distributed across the walls of a gallery, and through the course of a visitor's passage through that gallery, this image is thus encountered as an experience of repetition, with difference, across space and time, as, that is, an experience of the synaptic and the submarine.

15. This information is derived from a personal conversation with the artist, July 31, 1996.

16. Fanon calls his readers to this "fluctuating zone of instability" in his celebrated essay "On National Culture" in The Wretched of the Earth. Bhabha, who continues to disclose his debts to Fanon while proving himself one of Fanon's most original interpreters, offers his reading of this moment in The Wretched of the Earth in his essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 139-171.

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