

# Storms of the Heart

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There is a storm at the heart of this book\* a turbulence that accompanies the emergence of contemporary Black culture, that is reflected in the form of the text itself. Don't expect the pacific perspectives that most anthologies give, as they chart the progress of established genres and 'collect' examples of traditions and themes in *one* convenient place. It is precisely the absence of the conventional wisdom of a 'middle ground' narrative – the signal of the cultural anthropologist's art – that turns the encounter with this book into a challenging act of reading. 'There is a conscious articulation of diverse and disparate elements of creativity, often organised in new and exciting spaces', writes Owusu in his introduction, and perhaps the most exciting reorganisation of cultural space that is presaged in this book, for me at least, is its effective refusal of a unitary concept of culture.

As we move from David Dabydeen's essay on the political portraiture of Blacks in 18th-century English society to Ben Okri's telling observations on the dramatic ironies involved in identifying with Othello; as we turn from testimonies of media discrimination to the travails of finding a creative space – an empty, derelict church hall in Camden – in order to establish a Black Theatre Company; as we circulate between the severe experience of Broadwater Farm and the social reconstruction of Eritrean society; as

we move between the witness of photography and painting, poetry and interviews, contemporary jazz and classical Indian theatre and dance; as we are continuously positioned and repositioned as readers, spectators, viewers *on the cusp* of media institutions and advertising graphics, history and experience, politics and poetics, the classical, the modern and the postmodern *all at once*, we realise that there is no *one* convenient or consensual Time or Space from which can emerge a totalised image, or a unified subject, of the Black cultural experience. Indeed it may be the radical destiny of post-colonial peoples in the West, through their histories of diaspora, migration and cultural displacement, to disrupt those deterministic, often one-dimensional links between historical continuity and cultural community, whether they are made in the name of the 'people' or 'the class'. Such links emerge from a specifically *nationalist* history, and have been a central ideological feature in the chain of imperialist movements that have emanated from the dominant societies of the Western World.

I am suggesting, then, that the very structure of this book engages the 'cultural' as a signifying process that is politically effective *because* it explores the irresolvable, productive tensions between different levels of social experience. Cultural dis-

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Sutapa Biswas, *Housewives with steak knives*

social contradiction or antagonism are embodied in textual strategies and schemas of representation whose address to 'society' can never be an unmediated, transparent 'face to face' encounter. 'Culture', as a form of social knowledge and interpretation, is only politically crucial and transformative when it contests the closures of the commensurable discourses and dominant institutions. Transcendent images and narratives of totality that celebrate cultural synthesis or political consensus as if it were an 'end' in itself, forget that it is, more appropriately, a means necessary to the continual negotiation and revision of meanings, rhetorics, policies, practices, in the name of some agency of authority. Cultural traditions are always in the act of translation, most crucial-

ly so when we recognise them with a spontaneous immediacy as belonging to 'us', or representing 'our' people.

To commend this book for exploring such a perspective on culture as I've proposed above, leaves me in a rather disingenuous position. The representative claims made for Black Arts by the editor in his introduction, would hardly concur with my reading. He clearly reflects the majority view when he suggests that 'Black Arts' represent a synthesis and crystallisation of the contradictions and repressions inherent in Britain's racist history. Contemporary Black culture, through its introduction of indigenous traditions from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, 'objectifies' these contradictions, makes them historical, and provides black British culture with a teleological perspective, 'the raw material for a social and political resolution' (p 2). One major theme of such resolution is represented repeatedly in this book by the concept of *orature*:

It is the conception of reality of a total view of life. It is a capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. Orature is the universe of expression and appreciation and a fusion of both within one individual, a group, a community. . . . It is the beginning come full circle on a higher plane (p 215).

One major figure of such orature is seen in Cecil Gutzmore's illuminating essay on the seminal place of Marcus Garvey in the liberatory vision of Rasta myth. He is the figurative icon in the oratural languages of Reggae that attempt to create a community of the suffering, diasporic peoples by subverting the 'official' languages of cultural authority, 'a complex process of rejection/

inversion/reversal: everything is turned upside down' (p 279). This carnivalesque inversion seeks always to transcend the exploitative, often expropriative limits within which diasporic, Third World peoples have been located in the West. Beyond those limits opens up the horizon of a prophetic community of the Sons of Garvey whose power is unity, whose hour is now!

Whereas it is received wisdom that any form of cultural or political opposition requires solidarity, I wonder whether this necessarily needs to translate into an aesthetic of totality. Does a liberatory cultural community need to envisage its 'self-hood' and the identity of its artworks as a totality? For Fanon, the sign of profound cultural transformation is always the moment of 'occult instability'; for Wilson Harris, the coming together of contraries, which is his definition of post-colonial creativity, always produces an abyssal void, a moment of profound undecidability, a force that underscores plenitude. When Pratibha Parmar writes in her passionate and powerful essay on Sutapa Biswas that the 'images in her works provide a narrative of particular experiences: images of Asian women in our totality, women not on the margin, silent or mute' (pp 52-3), I cannot see why the emergence of a new and challenging voice or vision should have to be totalised ('a textual whole') in order to be powerful or effective. In fact, to my much less practiced eye, the strength of Biswas's *Housewife with Steak Knives* emerges from the audacious hybridisation of the image of Kali. The goddess becomes the rage and creativity and ex-



plotation of any black woman; her many arms are veined and massy, wielding a range of symbols from the eponymous knives to roses and flags; her neck is bedecked with the traditional necklace of skulls, this time made of men's faces; her dress is gashed with the repeated motif of 'openings' which could be wounds, or mouths or eyes, punning on the two most striking features of her portrayal; her open, unblinking eyes and her gaping mouth.

There is no totalisation of the image here; much more an artistry of articulation. The new Black image displays the process of fragmentation, juxtaposition and intervention, so that no boundaries and limits, textual or otherwise, are safe from appropriation; and no form is free from its hybrid doubling. This is apparent in the important visual materials that form their own text within this book. David A. Bailey's photographs often use popular images of Black peoples in order to reinscribe them with a meaning that is never totalising, but must be wrenched from and read within the struggle between the culturally sedimented response and the emergent idea. Sonia Boyce uses the narrative of stasis and silence to keep any totality of meaning at bay. In her mixed-media pictures, the 'telling' moment of narration is often the stillness, the gap: the predatory hand of *Mr Close-Friend-Of-The-Family* is frozen a hairsbreadth away from the breast of the frightened girl; the 'detail' of two hands in conversation on the kitchen table. *Conversational piece: kitchen table talk, strange dreams*, is separated by the richly embroidered table cloth that elaborates what is not said and keeps the hands apart.

The 'totalising' image as a sign of cultural independence is in danger of colluding with those practices of a dominating culture that they are intended to contest. They encourage the notion that cultural traditions can, or should, be seamless, transparent, or totalising for those who belong within them. This may be, in its effects if not in intention, not dissimilar from Western, post-Enlightenment notions of cultural organicism which have been the basis for forms of Western cultural nationalism. Indeed, the notion of an integral 'culture-in-itself', however radical, however provoked by discrimination, can only ever be a short-term strategic response. As a philosophy of culture it can only lead to forms of aesthetic idealism and

political separatism that combine to transfix us on recessive and transcendent myths of cultural origins.

Happily, the collage and bricolage of this fascinating volume does not allow, in the main, for any such simplistic, romantic solution. Amongst the most informative contributions are those that interrogate the policies and practices of institutions that supposedly promote 'Black Arts'. There are fascinating accounts of the effects of commercialisation on the presentation of Afro-Caribbean music, and an honest and angry musing by Rasheed Araeen on the institutional neglect of Black artists which is titled 'Come On, Cheer Up!' Kwesi Owusu contributes a haunting essay on the mythic history of carnival, which introduces a useful perspective on the 'translation' of cultural traditions as an effect of the history of migration. Gail Thompson, the saxophonist, talks of the trials and travails of a woman jazz artist who, having established herself professionally, is struck by a disease of the facial muscles. In a fine, brief essay called 'The Flexed Foot', Shobana Jeyasingh vividly captures the ironies of multiculturalism:

When a ballet dancer extends her leg and points her foot, she does so in the happy

knowledge that to the majority of people the long slim line she creates is the acme of elegance. To flex the foot is the comic inversion of the western norm. One of the primary stances of *bharat natyam* is the exact opposite of what is understood by the word elegance.

The interest of these pieces does not lie in an argument that can be extrapolated for a review. In each case, it is the tone of testimony that turns a generalisation about the fate of cultural marginality into the voices of community. Voices enriched by the tension and hybridity of their cultural location for they are able to draw on new strengths and meanings which emerge from both within and without the 'local' traditions of West and East. They are voices of culture and community that proclaim their distinctiveness, without making any restrictive or exclusive claim to being either 'pure' or unique. In the creativity of those who remember that their people were once colonised, as slaves, indentured labourers or colonial servants, we have the erasure of the cultural priorities of 'His Master's Voice'.

\* Kwesi Owusu (ed), *Storms of the Heart, an Anthology of Black Arts & Culture*, Camden Press, 1988, 307 pp, b/w illus, ISBN 0 918491 35 3, £12.95

## 50 min. with Nam June Paik

Jonathan Benthall

I first met Nam June Paik in London in 1968 with Tsai Wen-ying, the Chinese-American kinetic artist, when both took part in Jasja Reichardt's 'Cybernetic Serendipity' at the ICA. I interviewed Paik recently, on behalf of *Art Monthly*, during his visit to install his 'Video Works 1963-88' at the Hayward Gallery;\* and I was pleased to find that he shares my high regard for the work of Tsai, which he considers much under-rated. Each artist has stuck to a consistent line of development during these twenty years, but they are very different men. Tsai is single-minded, lucid, methodical and contained, a traditional artist and one who aims to create forms analogous to living natural organisms. Paik is fizzy and fuzzy, opportunistic, very much the disciple of John Cage in treating art as essentially a process of rousing or pro-

vocation, not (as Cage put it) a process of bringing order out of chaos or suggesting 'improvements in creation'. Paik also carries with him some of the aura of a shaman.

His mother in Korea, where he was born in 1932 and spent his childhood, was accustomed like many of her fellow-citizens to invite shamans to the house, even though this was against the law under Japanese rule. Maybe this experience did something to prepare Paik for the favoured place he has enjoyed in the American and European avant-garde since his meetings with Cage, Stockhausen, Beuys and others around the year 1960. A shamanic prestidigitation with ideas and words may not have helped him to be taken seriously by some of the more stringent commentators on art. He is certainly one of those artists whose personali-