

Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory Culture and Race

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Chapter 1:

Hybridity and Diaspora

Walk through the majestic iron gates with which Greenwich Park faces the river Thames, and make your way up the steep grassy hill which overlooks the Isle of Dogs, and the level, desolate flats of East London. Follow the snaking restless river westwards towards Rotherhithe, where the Mayflower pub irreverently marks the spot from which the puritanical Pilgrim Fathers emigrated to America in 1620. Keep climbing upwards, taking care not to stumble against the roots of any trees. As you reach the top, you find yourself standing before a large eighteenth-century building with elegant Georgian windows overlooking the river. You are facing the Old Royal Observatory, Greenwich. Walk round its walls until you come to a brass strip set in the pavement. The smooth, gold band in the ground marks the Prime Meridian, or Longitude Zero. At the top of this small hill, you have found yourself at the zero point of the world, at the centre of time itself. Paradoxically, for Greenwich to be the centre of the world in time it must be inscribed with the alterity of place. Stand to the left-hand side of the brass strip and you are in the Western hemisphere. But move a yard to your right, and you enter the East: whoever you are, you have been translated from a European into an Oriental. Put one foot back to the left of the brass strip and you become undecidably mixed with otherness: an Occidental and an Oriental at once. It was with a supremely knowing gesture towards the future that in 1884, the division of the newly-homogenized temporal world into East and West was placed not in Jerusalem or Constantinople but in a South London suburb. In that gesture, it

was acknowledged that the totality, the sameness of the West will always be riven by difference. With each passing decade London has been ever more successful in living up to its officially proclaimed heterogeneous identity, so that now, turning back towards the river and looking down at the park laid out below you, at the Londoners stretched out on the grass or wandering to and fro according to trajectories unknown to anyone except themselves, just walking home or coming and going from one country to the next, you could scarcely imagine a more varied mingling of peoples, whose ancestors hark back to the Caribbean and Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Tibet, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Balkans, mixed and merged with others whose predecessors who turned up in the British Isles as Angles, Celts, Danes, Dutch, Irish, Jews, Normans, Norsemen, Saxons, Vikings.... The cleavage of East and West in that bronze strip on the hill has gradually been subsumed into a city that, with the powerful attraction of economic power exerting the magnetic field of force of the North over the South, has drawn the far-off peripheries into the centre. And with that historic movement of intussusception, the Prime Meridian, the Longitude Zero, the centre of the world, has become inalienably mixed, suffused with the pulse of difference.

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The Secret Agent, Conrad's tale of an attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, to destroy the imperial metropolitan centre at its heart, also charts a story of a complex cultural interaction taking place in the everyday life of the city. It shows that the London of 1894 was already defined by incongruous combinations of relationships, mentalities, genders, classes, nationalities, and ethnicities. For Conrad, the anarchic ambiguities of the narrative become identified with a rivenness within English culture itself. Today the Englishness of the past is often represented in terms

of fixity, of certainty, centredness, homogeneity, as something unproblematically identical with itself. But if this was ever so, which is seriously to be doubted, it is noticeable that in the literary sphere such forms of Englishness are always represented as other, as something which other people possess, often as an image of consummate masculinity—so, for example, in Jean Rhys' novels, it is the distant, unresponsive men whom the heroines look to lean on, that are always presented as possessing these untroubled characteristics. If we consider the English novel, we find that what is portrayed as characterizing English experience is often rather the opposite, a feeling of fluidity and a painful sense of, or need for, otherness. Perhaps the fixity of identity for which Englishness developed such a reputation arose because it was in fact continually being contested, and was rather designed to mask its uncertainty, its sense of being estranged from itself, sick with desire for the other.

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