
The narrator of Sudanese Amir Tag Elsir’s Telepathy (2015), a moderately successful author, returns from a trip to Kuala Lumpur, where he has been gathering impressions, incidents, ideas, character traits and even potential characters for his next novel. However, back in Khartoum, he finds himself living in the peculiar fall-out of his previous novel, Hunger’s Hope, when he runs into a man with the same name as its improbably-named protagonist, Nishan Hamza Nishan.

At first the narrator thinks it is some kind of stunt. Or perhaps an overzealous fan has, in misguided tribute, changed his name.

But the ‘real’ Nishan only found out about the ‘fictional’ Nishan when a neighbour – Shu’ayb Zuhr, an unemployed graduate of the college of Public Relations and, it turns out, aspiring but uninspiring poet – brought Hunger’s Hope to his attention.

And, anyway, the ‘real’ Nishan has only read the first 120 pages. He does not know that in the second half of the novel the ‘fictional’ Nishan – whose biography up to that point is uncannily similar to his own – dies an untimely death.

The narrator recalls that writing Hunger’s Hope came to him much too easily – as if the ‘real’ Nishan had dictated it to him telepathically. Indeed, he concludes, telepathy is the only way the near identity of the ‘fictional’ and the ‘real’ Nishans can be explained; the divergences between their ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ lives are surely the result of the ‘real’ Nishan’s broadcasting telepathically but unconsciously. (The narrator’s mentor, the octagenerian playwright Abd al-Qawl, is little help; he merely recalls that one of his most controversial early plays was dictated to him through 26 dreams on 26 consecutive night.)

What is the narrator to do? What does he owe to the ‘real’ Nishan? Has he – by giving the novel that ending – condemned the ‘real’ Nishan to an early grave? And where has the ‘real’ Nishan suddenly disappeared to? And what should the narrator do when former communist Asim Ajib, once known as Asim Revolution, and now founder of the Nonaligned Publishing house invents a jacket blurb by him for a collection of Shu’ayb Zuhr’s poems? Are there plots and conspiracies, however absurd, afoot? And what exactly is the role of Najma, wannabe writer, not-exactly-fan/not-exactly-friend in all of this? And why has she chosen him as the father of the child she want to have?

Amir Tag Elsir’s short comic novel is full of curious incident and odd, often rather sad, characters, such as Murtaja, a young man who ‘was studying at the university and went mad. Now he declares confidently that he is Wikipedia … and that in his head are a billion pages on which the entire world is written’; he roams ‘around in torn shorts, staring at the ground while reciting odd stories from the version of the Wikipedia that lived in his head’. The narrator’s life and Khartoum itself are slightly out-of-focus jumbles of layered histories, of migrations and
separations, of differences of wealth, custom, tradition and rank.

A quick and easy read, *Telepathy* piles up rather more questions than it answers. Its conclusion is deliberately abrupt. A final sentence screeches the novel to a halt, reframing (but not explaining) everything that has happened (or not happened) before.

Tag Elsir, born in Sudan and now resident in Qatar, is the nephew of Tayeb Salih, author of *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) which was one of my top reads of 2016; it is much too soon to decide whether *Telepathy* will make this year's list.

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This fifteen-story collection emerged from an sf writers' workshop in Malawi, for which the final assignment was to write a story set 500 years in the future.

It opens with the bleakest of them, Muthi Nhlema's 'One Wit' This Place'. After the geo-engineers have failed to save the world from devastating climate change, at the 'terminus between the Oce and the Sah', a woman awaits the return of her soldier husband. He is a traumatised as the Earth is scorched, and catastrophe keeps coming.

Other stories are set after the apocalypse has been and gone. Dilman Dila's 'Snake Blood' is an almost-fantasy tale of dynastic and domestic struggles years after The Great Disaster. In Catherine Shepherd's 'Xaua-Khoe', an old man recalls his grandfather explaining to him when he was a child that the 'giant metal flowers' dotting the 'arid landscape' are 'defunct wind turbines ... Clean energy that came too late'. Disease has swept the world in Lauri Kubuitsile's 'When We Had Faith', leaving only a brutal fundamentalist regime unscathed. Aubrey Chinguwo's 'Closer to the Sun' imagines a crazy plan to wipe out all human life on Earth, apart from a new Adam and Eve, which is news to one of them. In Derek Lubangakene's 'Transit', some genius has only gone and made all the men on the continent impotent, which may or may not be the apocalypse, the jury is still kinda out.

In Tuntufye Simwimba's 'Tiny Dots', the world still hangs in the balance: global warming is intensifying, cancer is like a wildfire, but in all of this, it is still possible for an accident – and an *Empire Strikes Back* joke – to reunite an estranged father and son. Somehow, in Wole Talabi's 'Necessary and Sufficient Conditions', humanity won the Singularity War, and new technologies have led to an African ascendance, but even in this continent-wide Wakanda there are reasons for a son to want to murder his father. Similarly, in Musinguzi Ray Robert's 'Unexpected Dawn', a united Africa arose in the aftermath of the Eighth World War and survived a Ninth – and there is nothing a recalcitrant Texas can do about it.
Other stories imagine a future of more or less endless capitalism and patriarchy. In Hagai Magai’s ‘Those Without Sin’, a thirty-something son, who got himself imprisoned to escape a world of whose changing values and priorities he despair, returns home to find everything changed and still changing. Frances Naiga Muwonge’s ‘After Market Life’ depicts Nama’s last day selling actual, non-synthetic food in Kampala’s market as she anticipates her new life with an American husband. In Hannah Onoguwe’s ‘A Is A Four Letter Word’, some little shit blackmails his teacher, who is also his best friend’s mother, for sex, because he knows a secret that could destroy her (and because he is a little shit with no compunction about behaving like that). In Tiseke Chilima’s ‘Women Are From Venus’, women long ago had the good sense to decamp to our sister world, even if it required massive biological transformations, but it has only made women-traffickers all the more devious.

The Venus we do not see nonetheless points to some utopian possibility, as does Stephen Embleton’s ‘Land of Light’, with its vision of a rebuilt Africa united into two fraternal states, and of reconciliations and spiritual connection.

But personally, I found the utopian trace with which Chinelo Onwualu’s ‘The Wish Box’ ends more appealing. A cunning indictment of the philanthropy of its well-meaning protagonist, the story culminates with the sudden flowering of class-consciousness, and rage, in the glinting of a child’s eyes.

*Imagine Africa 500* is a smart and engaging addition to the growing number of anthologies of African sf, not quite as literary as Nerine Dorman’s *Terra Incognita*, nor quite as pulpy as Ivor Hartmann’s *AfroSF* collections. Billy Kahora, The Story Club and Pan African Publishers are to be congratulated for setting this all in motion, for their commitment to developing new writers, for their efforts to address the domination of African sf by South Africa and Nigeria – *Imagine Africa 500* includes five authors from Malawi, four from Uganda and one from Botswana, as well as three Nigerians and two South Africans – and by male writers – two-fifths of the stories are by women, which is not parity but is heading in the right direction.

[My thanks to Trine Andersen for providing a copy.]
We live in a world being made monstrous.
By us. Inhuman and obscene (and anthropocene). Not merely unhomely but uninhabitable.

And it is a time of monsters.
Aliens and kaiju, zombies and mutants, giant robots and costumed freaks lay waste to our cities. Rumbling urban smackdowns between unknowable forces scorch the Earth for those with an eye to the main chance. Property developers. Gentrifiers. Buy-to-let landlords. Their snouts in the tattered remains of a public purse no longer really intended to serve the public. At the same time, politicians and journalists casually – and with the most deadly of intentions – label people on our borders and estates and social security as not really human at all.

Monsters mean.
They are good for thinking with – from Marx’s vampire capitalists and cyborg factories to the brain-eating undead ghouls that shamble relentlessly across all our post-millennial screens, large and small, dragging the mechanisms by which biopolitical states of exception operate out into plain sight.

Even though monsters might not exist they are the most material of metaphors, and more than mere metaphor.

They matter and make meaning.

Monsters refuse monstrosity.
In Tade Thompson’s ‘One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sunlight’, a deliberately self-interred then accidentally disinterred West African vampire tells his tale. He turned his back on the human world, but had to return to it to learn how to be in a world to which he could never belong. With chilling composure he observes armies clash and people kill for reasons he cannot fathom. He remembers a tale he was told in childhood in which – reworking Dracula’s voyage to Britain – one of the vampire kind, taken unknowingly, broke free in a slaveship and killed everyone onboard. Despite this, the monster, it is clear, was not the real monster. Like the protagonist, the monster refuses – rather than denies – monstrosity. The monster resists and refutes it. He buries himself. He walks away.
‘He had the combined face of a pig and a monkey, which comforted her.’ And so it should. All of us. Even if we must rip this line from Dilman Dila’s ‘Monwor’ completely out of context.

You must look closely to spot the monster. Although it’s not hard.
The eponymous and implied monster of Tendai Huchu’s ‘The Chikwambo’ is a motley being, an exquisite corpse: it has ‘the face of a new born baby’, albeit with ‘the head dan[g]ling to the side as if stitched up to the neckless body’, and the ‘hands’ of a ‘monkey, the legs of a baboon and [a] torso made of a patchwork of cloth and dried animal skins, fur from rabbits and cows’. A Chikwambo is created by huruyi, or witchcraft, usually for a businessman looking to get rich. All he needs to do is feed it with a relative’s blood and ‘that blood metamorphose[s] into money’.

It’s a labour-power equation. The Chikwambo can eat or die; the businessman should fuck off and die.

Likewise, in Chikodili Emelumadu’s ‘Bush Baby’, there’s a wastrel gambler turned thief, the gwei-gwei pursuing and torturing him for stealing its mat, and the men who lied to the wastrel gambler thief, tricking him into stealing from the forest-spirit even though they know it will cost him – agonisingly – his life. Spot the monster.

Is there some calculus by which we can determine the moment at which the becoming-monstrous occurs? At which capital is embodied and the capitalist becomes capital?

When the monster is monstrated and the line is drawn, the monstrator is always on the wrong side of it.
See Apartheid (cf. James Bennett and Dave Johnston’s comic ‘A Divided Sun’).

Monsters are the world.
In Zambia’s Ndola sunken lakes the Ichitapa lurks. If your shadow falls on the water, the monster will cut it from your body, and you will fall into the water and be devoured. There were thing here before us, Jayne Bauling’s ‘Severed’ tells us, things we cannot account for. Things that will remain long after we – individually and as a species – are gone. They predate us, and they pre-date us, and they will be our post-.

There might be a time when the only ethical thing left for us is, as a character in Vianne Venter’s ‘Acid Test’ seems to think, a radical green accelerationism. Bring it all down, and let the world return.

(Delightfully, and perhaps instructively, Ndola is a twin town of Aldershot.)

Your description of the monster misdescribes the monster and destroys it.
In Joe Vaz’s ‘After the Rain’, strange and deadly things emerge from the abandoned mines swiss-cheesing the ground beneath Johannesburg. Even the bugs in the mountainous mine dumps fear these creatures. They prey on township folk, like some contorted repressed returning, a reminder of the suffering and immiseration and state violence under Apartheid and since.

Mistaken for ‘long skinny men with dog-heads’, the creatures turn out to be dogs, ‘standing on long hind legs, balancing [their] weight on the tips of [their] paws’, a correction that is also mistake. Whatever they are, they are that, not something or some other thing that they resemble. Not the isomorphic protagonist, who got out as a nine-year-old back in 1986 and only now, thirty years later, returns.

But this is what happens when the monster ventures from its lair into normalcy.

Its angularity, its awkward and improbable being, its ferocity and anguish, get domesticated. Like a dog.

‘History is what hurts’, Jameson tells us, failing to add: ‘That, and monsters’.
They hurt and they hurt. They are in pain, and they bring pain.

Like the witch in Sarah Lotz’s ‘That Woman’ and the women who support and protect her because justice is not going to come from patriarchy or the state. Like the daughter of the old witch in Joan De La Haye’s ‘Impundulu’, who unleashes her just rage and anguish – and the eponymous lightning bird – not only on the man who raped her and made her miscarry but on all those who would take his side. On what we, often glibly, call rape culture and patriarchy.

As if naming them contains them.
The other has just as much right (and wrong) as the self.
Which doesn't mean it's easy or comfortable, as Su Opperman’s grotesque comic ‘The Death of One’ shows us.

Although maybe I’m reading it wrong. Maybe what I should be paying attention to is the page split into four panels, across the top two of which the man says ‘the death of one is...’ and across the bottom pair of which the sawtooth-beaked, bird-headed man-thing with too many eyes concludes ‘...is life to the other’. This is not some Lion King circle-of-life pablum, but a call for the dissolution of the monadic subject (and his comedy sidekick, the rational economic actor). An invocation of full communism.

‘If you see a monster at your doorstep’, Grandma says in Nnedi Okorafor’s ‘On the Road’, ‘the wise thing to do is shut the door’. Grandma is wrong.
The other is not really other, Lacan says, it just reflects and projects the ego. The Other is radical alterity. It cannot be identified with. It cannot be assimilated. It is unique and beyond representation and it is also the system of representation – the symbolic – that mediates the relationship between the radical, unassimilable alterity of subjects. The Other we first encounter is – quelle surprise! – the mother, defined of course by her phallic lack, which in turn figures the signifier that is always missing.

‘There is an abyss between this world and the next,’ the narrator of Toby Bennett’s ‘Sacrament of Tears’ writes, ‘I fear my nephew looked deep and could not make sense of what he saw’.

But perhaps the abyss is not a vagina, and the vagina is not an abyss.

Perhaps difference is not a lack at all.

Perhaps difference is an opening-out, a flowering into the realm of monsters. Which is where the monadic phallic white subject already, unbeknown to himself, lives. Along with us all.

Perhaps, like the queer, monster-embacing protagonist of Nerine Dorman’s ‘A Whisper in the Reeds’, we should not focus so much on the monster entering our world but instead on going away from here with the monster. On becoming monster.

Because difference is an opening-out onto that place beyond, which is called hope or utopia.

Not just full communism.

Full-on communism.
Last week, we used the first half of the novel to explore the ways in which Smith constructs London as a matter-of-fact multicultural city. Deep in the fabric of the place – and of the novel – is difference, constantly shifting and reorganising, but never monadic or monolithic. This week we focused on the ways in which class is just as deeply embedded.

The first part of the novel is told in third-person from the viewpoint of second-generation Irish immigrant, Leah. The opening scene of the novel establishes that, living in a basement flat four doors down from the council estate where she was raised, she has not quite escaped her working class roots, despite the middle class accoutrements of her daily life. She was the first of her family to go to university – and she chose to study philosophy among the privileged children of the wealthy bourgeoisie at Edinburgh University. She recalls the mortification of being a working class autodidact who spoke in class about ‘a two-syllable packing company Socrates, a three-syllable cleaning fluid Antigone’ (33); later, her friend Keisha (who will change her name to Natalie), recalls she and her boyfriend similarly ‘sound[ing] the T and the S’ in Albert Camus (193). I suspect if you’ve not gone through this you don’t get how agonising and confidence-destroying it can be – as a working class kid you often feel you do not really belong at university, and moments like this reinforce that anxiety.

It is a measure of how material wealth is connected to cultural capital, and of what it is like to grow up in a culturally impoverished environment (and it is why the current government’s war on libraries and on state education is so iniquitous – and with so many politicians coming from money, they just fundamentally do not get it).

The different treatment different classes receive is also flagged up when, in part two (which is told from the viewpoint of Felix, who will become the victim of knife crime), when Felix’s dad’s neighbour Phil notes:

“They always say “youth” don’t they? ...Never the boys from the posh bit up by the park, they’re just boys, but our lot are “youths”, our working class lads are youths, bloody terrible isn’t it?” (112).

This is reiterated in the first chapter of the novel’s third part, told from the viewpoint of Natalie (formerly known as Keisha). Remembering how she and Leah met thanks to a near-drowning in the outdoor pool in the park:

“They had a guard up on the hill, in Hampstead, for them. Nothing for us.’ (173)

And again, when Nat reflects on the different educational experience of wealthy fellow student and later husband Francesco De Angelis, who looks ‘like he was born on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean and raised by Ralph Lauren’ (204):

Some schools you ‘attended’. Brayton [Leah and Nat’s school] you ‘went’ to. (206)

When Leah and Nat were growing up, neither of their mothers (Pauline and Marcia, respectively)

was in any sense a member of the bourgeoisie but neither did they consider themselves solidly of the working class either. (177)

This sense of not quite belonging, of being trapped between identities, marks the lives of both women and their daughters in multiple ways (Smith explores this in terms of being between classes rather than between races/ethnicities/cultures – which is is common in British Asian cinema). While Leah and Michel do reach the middle class, there is an element of precarity to their lives; in contrast, Nat and Frank are comfortably well off, thanks to his
family’s wealth and her career as a barrister, even more so after she moves from legal aid work defending working class people to practicing corporate law. Leah is acutely aware of the growing class gulf between them, which is highlighted every time she and Michel are invited to a dinner party, ‘where she and Michel ... provide something like local colour’ (85). And Natalie and Frank often take over telling Leah and Michel’s stories:

Natalie’s version of Leah and Michel’s anecdote is over. The conversational baton passes to others, who tell their anecdotes with more panache, linking them to matters of wider culture, debates in the newspapers. (86)

At one point, Frank jokingly asks Leah, ‘Why is it that everyone from your school is a criminal crackhead?’, to which she replies, ‘Why’s everyone from yours a Tory minister?’ (61).

Another comparison:

Leah passes the old estate every day on the walk to the corner shop. She can see it from her backyard. Nat lives just far enough away to avoid it. (63)

Or take this scene, which captures so many of the insecurities and anxieties of not having come from money and now having a little:

On the way back from the chain supermarket where they shop, though it closed down the local grocer and pays slave wages, with new bags though they should take old bags, leaving with broccoli from Kenya and tomatoes from Chile and unfair coffee and sugary crap and the wrong newspaper.

They are not good people. They do not even have the integrity to be the sort of people who don’t worry about being good people. They worry all the time. They are stuck in the middle again. They buy always Pinot Grigio or Chardonnay because these are the only words they know that relate to wine. They are attending a dinner party and for this you need to bring a bottle of wine. This much they have learnt. They do not purchase ethical things because they can’t afford them, Michel claims, and Leah says, no, it’s because you can’t be bothered. Privately she thinks: you want to be rich like them but you can’t be bother with their morals, whereas I am more interested in their morals than their money, and this thought, this opposition, makes her feel good. Marriage as the art of invidious comparison. (80)

Here, as elsewhere in the novel, an extra layer is added by the narrator’s voice (which is of course not to be confused with Smith herself), which implies an omniscient perspective but which also sounds like someone from a different class background – the final sentence does not sound a lot like Leah. The narrative voice, sometimes right up close to the character, sometimes quite distant, here is rather slippery: is Leah ironically observing her own foibles, or is the narrator passing judgment on her?

Michel starts trading penny shares online,

dreaming of a windfall that will transport them to another urban suburb more to his taste, which means no more African, less Caribbean. (90)

This is part of the much larger logic of class mobility and of house prices in the city. When Nat and Rodney, her boyfriend from church whose mum was a dinner lady and dad a bus driver, are studying for their A-levels, the narrator tells us of their ambitions:

They were going to be lawyers, the first people in either of their families to become professionals. They thought life was a problem that could be solved by means of professionalization. (202)
Around about that time, Nat recalls Leah's mum's enthusiasm about moving house:

'It's practically Maida Vale' (197).

And when it comes to house prices:

The mistake was to think that the money precisely signified – or was equivalent to – a particular arrangement of bricks and mortar. The money was not for those pokey terraced houses with their short back gardens. The money was for the distance the house put between you and Caldwell [the estate they came from]. (252)

Leah's moment of crisis is finally brought about after she and Michel allow Nat and Frank to persuade them not to attend the Notting Hill carnival, but to instead go to a party in a flat overlooking the carnival. They watch rather than participate; the mass of people to which they used to belong are reduced to a spectacle for the wealthy, to their entertainment value, and are kept as far away as possible.

In a similar vein, Nat is agonisingly aware of how she is changing into someone else. When Frank blames Nat's mum, brother and sister for their own poverty – Jayden could get a job, Cheryl could stop having children by various fathers – she stands up for them:

'They don’t refuse to help me, Frank – they can’t!' cried Natalie Blake, and launched into a passionate defence of her family, despite the fact she was not speaking to any of them. (228)

She realises, too, that she has turned Rodney, ‘in many ways himself a miracle of self-invention’ like her, ‘into a comic anecdote to be told at dinner parties’ (194).

Later, in a supermarket queue behind a working class mother trying desperately to find the money she needs to pay for her groceries, and having to ask the cashier to take back this and that item, Nat realises that she had completely forgotten what it was like to be poor. It was a language she’d stopped being able to speak, or even to understand. (276)

To wrap up our discussion of class in the novel we took a look at a passage from part two of the novel, chapters 125–8 (pp.242–5), in which Nat joins her first law firm and runs into her cousin Tonya, to think about class signification, difference and experience.

A key part of the novel’s consideration of multiculturalism and of class is its emphasis on the flux and constant becoming of urban identity – that it is not monolithic and fixed, but like the city itself fluid and always in transformation, constantly emerging as something new. Keisha – who in her teens has not yet changed her name to Natalie – first realises how unfixed identity is, how prone to change, when Leah starts hanging out in Camden and developing a taste for Baudelaire or Bukowskii or Nick Drake or Sonic Youth or Joy Division or boys who looked like girls or vice versa or Anne Rice or William Burroughs or Kafka’s Metamorphosis or CND or Glastonbury or the Situationists or Breathless or Samuel Beckett or Andy Warhol or a million other Camden things, and when Keisha brought a wondrous Monie Love 7-inch to play on Leah’s hi-fi there was something awful in the way Leah blushed and conceded it was probably OK to dance to. They had only Prince left, and he was wearing thin. (185)

This sudden change, and the accompanying dislocation of their friendship, leaves Keisha wondering whether she herself had any personality at all or was in truth only the accumulation...
Similarly, while transcribing a song she and her friend Layla are writing for their church group, Keisha looks in the mirror across the room:

Two admirable young sisters, their hair still plaited by their mothers, sat on the edge of a makeshift stage, one singing and the other transforming music into its shadow, musical notation. That's you. That's her. She is real. You are a forgery. Look closer. Look away. She is consistent. You are making it up as you go along. She must never know. (188–9)

As she and Leah drift further apart – as she loses the condition at school of ‘being Leah Hanwell’s friend’ and is ‘now relegated to the conceptual realm of “those church kids”’ (191) – Keisha plumbs the depths of adolescent angst:

She considered herself peculiarly afflicted, and it is not an exaggeration to say that she struggled to think of anyone besides perhaps James Baldwin and Jesus who had experienced the profound isolation and loneliness she now knew to be the one and only true reality of this world. (192)

At the end of a trip down from Edinburgh to visit Keisha – now called Nat – at Bristol university, Leah tells Nat ‘You're the only person I can be all of myself with’, which makes her cry:

not really at the sentiment but rather out of a fearful knowledge that if reversed the statement would be rendered practically meaningless, Ms Blake having no self to be, not with Leah, or anyone. (208)

Soon, Nat breaks up with Rodney and becomes ‘crazy busy with self-invention’ (209). By the time she graduates and begins training to become a barrister, she has chased after experience, fashioned a self. But she never seems to realise that Leah – and everyone else – is caught up in self-creation, bound in various ways to their roots but also always headed into becoming. This is suggested when Frank, with whom Nat did not become involved at university, suddenly turns up, also training to be a barrister:

And there was indeed something intimate about the way they spoke to each other, heads close, looking out across the room. Natalie fell so easily into the role, she had to remind herself that this intimacy had not existed before tonight. It was being manufactured at this present moment, along with its history. (216)

Some years later, Nat is still not sure she is, and in rapid succession completely fails to recognise herself in three descriptions of her given by her brother Jayden (264), Leah (268) and Layla (277–8). This leads her to muse, in the single paragraph chapter 170 called In drag:


Identity, it seems, is a collection of roles she plays, all partly pre-scripted by the expectations of others (or her anticipation of others’ expectations) and the signifiers of costume, demeanour, language and so on deemed appropriate. Perhaps she has been reading Judith Butler. She certainly has a well-developed sense of the quotidian performativity required by the complex urban environments she inhabits and through which she moves. Maybe that early intuition about being an accumulation and reflection of the socio-cultural realm is not so far wrong; maybe all subjectivity is is the chaotic non-linear determinism of constant becoming.
In the closing pages of the novel, as Nat roams north-west London in the company of Nathan Bogle – he was at school with her and Leah, he had an actual try-out for professional football team, but has long since drifted into a life of petty crime – it eventually dawns on her that he was involved in the fatal stabbing of Felix (with which the first and second sections of the novel ended). Twice Nathan comments on some of the bad things he does to get by, adding ‘you know that ain’t the real me. You know me from back in the day’ (305) and ‘You remember me. You know who I am’ (316). He clings to the image of a whole self, a true self, that once existed and somewhere beneath the mess of his life still exists. He is stuck in that combination of false memory and denial.

Frustratingly, this encounter leads her to tell the depressed Leah, who is wondering why she has the life she has, why she was one of the ones who succeeded in getting away from her working class roots, that

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we worked harder. ... We were smarter and we knew we didn't want to end up begging on other people's doorsteps. We wanted to get out. People like Bogle – they didn't want it enough. I'm sorry if you find that answer ugly, Lee, but it's the truth. This is one of the things that you learn in the courtroom: people generally get what they deserve. (332)
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It is a horrible, arrogant and self-deceiving speech, and it is hard to tell how much Nat believes it. It is certainly a change of tune. And by the novel’s own logic, this hardening of attitude (which echoes the opinions of some of the more privileged characters, with whom she has hitherto disagreed) is a deadly mistake. Just as Nathan was stuck in the past, so this speech’s performance of certainty seeks to draw a line under her past, to deny it, and thus to fix a monolithic identity in place.

Moments later Nat phones the police to inform on Nathan.

The final sentence of the novel – which might be addressed to the police, or to Leah about something else entirely – fortunately returns some uncertainty and ambiguity to her:

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'I got something to tell you,’ said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice. (333)
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This was the final week of the module in terms of teaching – week 24, which I will not blog about, is devoted to final assignment preparation. All being well, I will next year blog about my new second-year module, _Genre and the Fantastic_, which I am starting to plan in the gaps between wrapping up this year's teaching and marking.

**Recommended critical reading**


**Recommended reading**

For other contemporary British Afrodiasporic fiction, try Two Fingers and James T. Kirk’s _Junglist_ (1995), Andrea
Recommended viewing
Afrodiasporic British cinema includes Pressure (Ové 1976), Black Joy (Simmons 1977), Dread Beat an' Blood (Rosso 1979), Babylon (Rosso 1981), Burning An Illusion (Shabazz 1981), The Passion of Remembrance (Blackwood and Julien 1986), Playing Away (Ové 1987), Welcome II the Terrordome (Onwwurah 1995), Dog Eat Dog (Shoaibi 2001), A Way of Life (Asante 2004), Bullet Boy (Dibb 2004), Kidulthood (Huda 2006), Life & Lyrics (Laxton 2006), Rollin’ with the Nines (Gilbey 2006), Adulthood (Clarke 2008), Shame (McQueen 2011) and My Brother the Devil (El Hosaini 2012).

The City in Fiction and Film, week 22: Zadie Smith’s NW, part one (pp. 1–169)

week 21

Over the last few weeks, we’ve been bandying about the word ‘multiculturalism’ in a pretty loose sense, as if everyone knows and agrees on its meaning. The HarperCollins Dictionary of Sociology (1991) seems pretty clear in its definition:

> the acknowledgment and promotion of cultural pluralism ... multiculturalism celebrates and seeks to promote cultural variety, for example minority languages. At the same time it focuses on the unequal relationship of minority to mainstream cultures.

But like all dictionary definitions, it obscures the extent to which such terms are politically alive, wrestled over in and by our culture, meaning different things depending on who is saying them, where, when and for what purpose. It is a contested term, with multiple competing meanings, and is often used without any attempt at precision – especially in popular political discourse.

The term dates back to 1960s and 1970s, when – as part of the complex politics of white settler nations within the British Commonwealth – Australia changed its immigration laws to allow entry to previously excluded Asian migrants, and when Canada was not only changing its immigration laws but also wrestling with the relationship between an Anglophone majority and a Francophone minority, primarily Québécois, and with growing First Nations activism. Generally speaking, new migrants were encouraged not to assimilate (as in America’s melting pot, in which everyone is equal so long as they adopt white middle class values) but to integrate (as in Canada’s alternative metaphor of a mosaic of peoples); that is, they were enabled to retain their ‘home’ or ‘natal’ culture, and the development of ethnic community infrastructures was encouraged as a mechanism to foster integration.

In the UK, the then Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, pursuing a similar policy, said in 1966:

> Integration is perhaps a rather loose word. I do not regard it as meaning the loss, by immigrants, of their own national characteristics and culture. I do not think we need in this country a
"melting pot", which will turn everyone out into a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone's misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman ... I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of uniformity, but cultural diversity, coupled with equality of opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance ... If we are to maintain any sort of world reputation for civilised living and social cohesion, we must get far nearer to its achievement than is the case today.

Of course, while this massive conceptual, political and cultural shift was occurring, already discredited ideas of race as a meaningful biological concept still circulated, so it was often still the case that migrant populations were regarded as racially different. For all that 'multiculturalism' emphasises culture, this deep-rooted shadow meaning persists (when we hear politicians and others attacking multiculturalism, they are as often as not talking about race).

While there are all kinds of brilliant positive things about integration in contrast to assimilation, it has also been the subject of political manipulation. An approach that encouraged cultural diversity has been blamed for 'failures of assimilation' (which were of course never the goal, so they cannot honestly be regarded as failures). Furthermore, it is often retconned into a racist narrative that says multiculturalism was introduced because it is somehow impossible for different races to assimilate. Hostility around perceived racial difference has thus been blamed on the racially other for their failure to be assimilated rather than on the host nation's inability and frequent unwillingness to integrate properly – which would include the education of the host population around such issues. And while there are often instances of migrant communities being unwilling to relinquish their cultural distinctiveness, that is exactly the point of multiculturalism – it is not a glitch, it's a feature.

It is also important to remember that multiculturalism is not just about immigrant populations. Yes, it is about immigrant minorities, such as South Asians and Afro-Caribbeans in the UK. But it is also about substate national minorities, such as the Québécois in Canada, and about similar populations more geographically dispersed within a nation, such as African American population. And it is also about indigenous peoples: First Nations in Canada, Native American Indians in the US, Aborignal in Australia, Maori in New Zealand, and so on. Each of these groups, and each of these kinds of groups, have their own distinctive histories and their own particular needs to be met within a multicultural state.

Keith Banting, Will Kymlicka, Richard Johnston and Stuart Soroka, in a piece of research examining whether multicultural policies have a negative effect on the welfare state across a number of European and other nations, identify eight key kinds of policy that multiculturalism implies:

- constitutional, legislative or parliamentary affirmation of multiculturalism at the central and/or regional and municipal levels
- adoption of multiculturalism in the school curriculum
- inclusion of ethnic minority representation and sensitivity in the mandate of public media or media licensing
- exemptions from dress codes (e.g., Sikhs wearing turbans rather than crash helmets or school caps), from laws banning Sunday trading, etc.
- allowing dual citizenship
- funding ethnic group organisations to support cultural activities
- funding bilingual education and mother-tongue instruction
- affirmative action for disadvantaged groups

They then examined their sample nations in terms of their commitment to such policies:

- **Strong adopters** (6-8 policies): Australia, Canada
- **Modest adopters** (3-5.5 policies): Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden, UK, USA
- **Weak adopters** (under 3 policies): Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland

So next time you hear a British politician banging on about 'the failure of the multicultural experiment', remember the UK falls into the ‘didn't actually try all that hard’ group.
NW (2012) is Zadie Smith’s fourth novel, following *White Teeth* (2000), *The Autograph Man* (2002) and *On Beauty* (2005). She was born in Brent in London in 1975, to a Jamaican mother and Anglo father; and she wrote much of her first novel in the final year of her English Literature degree at King’s College, Cambridge (at Cambridge, she failed an audition to be in the Footlights, rejected it is said by Mitchell and Webb). Her novels are, among other things, concerned with the matter-of-fact, normalising representation of the multicultural city, especially London. Her work is also defined by a kind of stylistic restlessness, as if each novel is as concerned with finding the voice in which to write as it is with the characters or narrative. This is emphasised in *NW* by the variety of approaches she brings to third-person narration in each of the novel’s sections – and even sentence-by-sentence as she manipulates the proximity of the narrator’s voice to the viewpoint character’s perspective.

We began by reading the opening chapter together, seeing how Smith establishes setting, mood, atmosphere, character and theme. It begins with a too-hot spring day, the sun altering how the periphery of a Willesden council estate looks from just a few doors down, where Leah, born on the estate, reclines in a hammock in the shared garden behind her basement flat. Significantly, she has moved on in to private accommodation, just not very far. A caricatured sunburned and overweight-in-a-crop-top working class girl smokes a fag on a balcony in the nearby block of flats, talking too loud on her mobile phone. Leah is a second generation Irish immigrant, pale-skinned and red-headed. The gap between her and her loud neighbour troubles her: physical proximity to her past assuages some of the guilt she feels about her class mobility, even though has not ascended the hierarchy that far. She has also just found out she is pregnant by her Nigerian-French husband Michel; he wants kids, she does not.

We also read chapters 9 and 10 of the first section together. The former is a googlemaps-style set of directions to walk from an address in NW8 to another in NW6; the latter is a dérive, a trek along the same route described as a succession of sense impressions – smells, glimpsed commodities, adverts, leaflets, music from passing cars – which capture the experience of moving from bustling, working class streets to the wealthier and more barricaded areas around Regent’s Park and St John’s Wood:

*The Arabs, the Israelis, the Russian, the Americans: here united by the furnished penthouse, the private clinic. If we pay enough, if we squint, Kilburn need not exist.* (40)

This pair of chapters captures something essential to the novel’s project – the filling in and fleshing out of the city not as an abstract space but as a place (or a nested and interlocking array of places), rich in history and memory, both public and private. The city no more precedes these places than a map precedes the territory.

Branching out from these chapters, we were able to discuss the ways in which Smith captures the ethnic diversity of London, from ‘a life-size porcelain tiger’ to the many various ways in which muslim women observe (or not) strictures about headdress, which bear ‘no relation to the debates in the papers, in Parliament’ (39). It is there in the built environment, too, with ‘the Islamic Centre of England opposite the Queen’s Arms’ (40).

We will return to the novel next week, to consider the ways in which it talks about social and economic class, and suggests that urban identity is not a fixed thing but something that, for all its roots, nonetheless constantly emerges in the moment.

We also took a look at *Attack the Block* (Cornish 2011), a British *banlieue* movie that probably owes more to *District 13* (Morel 2004) than *La Haine* (Kassovitz 1995), and a lot to US hip-hop/ghetto cinema, but which nonetheless has something of *Passport to Pimlico* (Cornelius 1949) about it. It recalls our work on *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton 1991) in its focus on how the protagonists are trapped within their South London estate (filmed on the Heygate estate before it was demolished, complete with multiple scandals) but its greater significance in relation to *NW* is the way in which it fills in and fleshes out. It starts with a young white woman, Sam (Jodie Whitaker), walking home at night, and being mugged at knifepoint by a gang of youths in hoodies. The gang is multiethnic – and the film never highlights nor makes an issue of this – though no doubt David Starkey would say something racist about them all being ‘culturally black’. At the same time as it invests in a romantic narrative of gang loyalty and redemptive male violence, the film does also work to undermine these ideas. Perhaps
the key moment comes at the end, when the Jodie stands by her erstwhile mugger, Moses (John Boyega), when the police arrest him – he is, after all they have gone through, her neighbour. Part of her community. It is all a little too glib and easy, but it hits an affective chord.

We also could not quite figure out what it means that this multicultural gang – a stand-in for a multicultural community – defend the block against violent, featureless black male monsters from outer space. A little too much like Zulu (Endfield 1964) or Black Hawk Down (Scott 2001) in its use of this fundamentally racist colonial adventure narrative set-up.

week 23

**Recommended critical reading**


**Recommended reading**


**Recommended viewing**

Afro diasporic British cinema includes Pressure (Ové 1976), Black Joy (Simmons 1977), Dread Beat an’ Blood (Rosso 1979), Babylon (Rosso 1981), Burning An Illusion (Shabazz 1981), The Passion of Remembrance (Blackwood and Julien 1986), Playing Away (Ové 1987), Welcome II the Terrordome (Onwwurah 1995), Dog Eat Dog (Shoaibi 2001), A Way of Life (Asante 2004), Bullet Boy (Dibb 2004), Kidulthood (Huda 2006), Life & Lyrics (Laxton 2006), Rollin’ with the Nines (Gilbey 2006), Adulthood (Clarke 2008), Shame (McQueen 2011) and My Brother the Devil (El Hosaini 2012).
Lee Scratch Perry’s Vision of Paradise (Volker Schaner 2015)

There is a moment in Lee Scratch Perry's Vision of Paradise (2015), when Volker Schoner shows some poor journalist asking Perry what his typical day is like and then sitting there bemused as he improvises a rambling reply, which ultimately comes down to something like ‘I wake up and see what’s on my to-do list’. But it doesn't sound anywhere near as mundane as that. (The haplessness of the journalist reminded me of that time The Word sent some child to interview Henry Rollins, and she asked him what music he listens to. He describes playing the first four Black Sabbath albums back-to-back; the journo, who clearly does not know Black Sabbath other than as the name of some band to whose wax cylinders her grandpa used to listen, asks ‘what is that like?; Rollins replies, ‘Dunno, have you ever been killed?') This is quite a cunning move by Schoner, a sneaky displacement of his own bemusement – but he is clearly also often baffled by his subject.

The film is rightly being touted as a portrait of Perry since it offers no real insight into him, but allows you to spend 100 minutes in his impish company, which is frequently delightful, always entertaining. He has the most fabulous laugh, and clearly is often just messing with the filmmakers, being mischievous, playing up and playing on his image and reputation. And there is also a seriousness to his Rasta politics, from which he never shies away; this is accentuated in the final twenty minutes of the film when the occasional, playful animations become increasingly apocalyptic.

The film also offers little in the way of history. There is discussion of the Black Ark studio, now sadly in ruins, though that is largely Perry’s own doing, since it was him who set fire to it. And there is an effort to get the scoop on Perry’s relationship with Bob Marley.

But mostly we see Perry in various situations and contexts just doing his thing: he doesn’t really do conversation so much as improvised discourse built around patterns of repetition and rhymes and variations (in this, he reminded me of Lord Kitchener and other calypso singers who predate reggae and dub).

We missed the film when it screened at the Cube, so took a train over to Cardiff to catch it at the Chapter Arts Centre (trip and tickets came to roughly the cost of seeing a film in Leicester Square – but with none of the regrets that come with paying that much to see 30 Days of Night (Slade 2007) or Battleship (Berg 2012)). We were joined by a dozen other white folks in a 48-seater, we were probably the youngest people there, and occasionally I found myself worrying people were laughing at rather than laughing with Perry. But if it was the former, that is largely a product of how the film stays outside its subject – he remains an elusive and impenetrable subject, but that is part of why he matters so much.
This week we entered the final block of the module, looking at the multicultural city. Our focus this week was fiction the experience of coming to England – and to London – as an emigrant from the Caribbean. We looked at extracts from Jean Rhys, George Lamming and Sam Selvon – and then ran out of time for VS Naipaul.

Jean Rhys (1890-1979) was born in Dominica; her father was a Welsh doctor, and her mother ‘third-generation creole’. She lived mostly in the UK from the age of 16; not a huge success at RADA, she became a demimondaine, a chorus girl, an artists’ model – which certainly informs the opening of Voyage in the Dark (1934), a novel in which Anna Morgan is relocated (by her indifferent stepmother) from the Caribbean to the UK after her father’s death. Anna becomes a chorus girl, and then a wealthy man’s mistress. After they break up, she slowly descends into poverty and ultimately nearly dies having an abortion. The novel’s title plays on Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899), reversing the direction of colonial exploration of a strange land; at the same time, Rhys displays her modernist credentials through passages of interior monologue that include flashbacks to Anna’s Caribbean childhood.

Our focus was on the first three pages of the novel, to see how England and the Caribbean were contrasted. A lot of this is achieved by appeals to the senses, and by mixing memories and imaginative recall into the different present. The Caribbean is associated with ‘heat’ (and not the mere warmth of a fire or of bed clothes) and ‘light’ and exotic ‘purple’; England with ‘cold’ and ‘darkness’ and ‘grey’ – with Southsea’s grey streets and ‘grey stone promenade’ and ‘grey-brown or grey-green sea’. The Caribbean was rich with smells (frangipani, lime juice, cinammon, cloves, ginger, syrup, incense) as well as – and indicative of race/class distinctions there – the smell ‘of niggers and wood-smoke and salt fishcakes fried in lard’. It was a wide open space, with breezes off the land and sea. In contrast, the small towns Anna and her friend Maudie visit with their theatrical troupe are devoid of variety and ‘always looked so exactly alike’. Motion becomes stasis – ‘you were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same’ – and the nearest to escape is an architecture that mocks you with the memory of transit: ‘rows of little houses with chimneys like the funnels of dummy steamers and smoke the same colour as the sky’ (so grey, I’m guessing). And the laundry hangs limply on the line ‘without moving, in the grey-yellow light’.

The theatrical troupe does bring a slight sense of the scandalous and exotic to dreary Southsea: the landlady initially mistakes the two chorus girls for prostitutes, and her opinion of them does not improve when they do not rise until after lunch-time, and Maudie swans around in a nightgown and a kimono that is, significantly and of course, torn.

Idling on the sofa, Anna reads Zola’s Nana. Its cover features a stout woman with a wine glass, dandling a little incongruously on ‘the knee of a bald-headed man in evening dress’. It is a cautionary foreshadowing. The incense of the Corpus Christi processions a few paragraphs earlier gives way to the image of a tree in the back garden which has been cut back so awkwardly it ‘looks like a man with stumps instead of arms and legs’. The body of Christ becomes an amputee, symbolically castrated. (The novel opens with a broadly Christian – and theatrical – image of death and rebirth: ‘It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again.’)

Anna is a bit ambivalent about the dirtiness of her ‘dirty book’, and Maudie, who here is Rhys’s mouthpiece, implies the intentions of her own semi-autobiographical novel: ‘it’s about a tart. … I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another’.

Zola’s novel – or, at least, the idea of it – underscores Rhys’s complex blend of the exotic and the mundane, a constantly-breaking-down binary opposite that recurs in the fiction of Caribbean emigrants to Britain.

Next we turned to emigrants of the Windrush era. George Lamming (1927-) was born in Barbados of mixed African and English parentage. He taught in Port of Spain, Trinidad (1946-50) before emigrating to England, where he became a writer and a broadcaster on BBC Colonial Service. He became an academic in 1967, and subsequently worked at universities in Jamaica, US, Denmark, Tanzania and Australia.

We explored a long and rather curious section in his The Emigrants (1954). The novel follows a disparate group of
Caribbean emigrants sailing to the UK; once in London, they slowly drift apart, but their lives intertwine and occasionally intersect. We looked at the end of the first, shorter part of the novel, after the ship has docked in Plymouth. Here, the wind is associated with Britain, but it is a ‘keen’ wind, bringing with it dark clouds, the threat of rain, and a coldness that has even the Devon locals constantly rubbing their hands together to stay warm.

Again, there is a sense of the colonial adventure narrative being inverted. The dockworkers

were bewildered by this exhibition of adventure, or ignorance, or plain suicide. For a while the movies seemed truer than they had vouched for, the story of men taking ship with their last resources and sailing into unknown lands in search of adventure and fortune and mystery. England had none of these things as far as they knew.

Although to emigrant, of course, England will at least have adventure and mystery – and fortune (if not fortunes) will have a hand in what befalls them, good or ill or indifferent.

The dockworkers conclude that the ‘archipelago of unutterable beauty’ they imagine the emigrants have come from has ‘bred lunatics’:

How could sane men leave the sun and the sea ..., abandon the natural relaxation that might almost be a kind of permanent lethargy, to gamble their last coin on a voyage to England. England of all places.

In the next few lines, the emigrants are described as having ‘childish curiosity’ and behaving like ‘timid spaniels’. Which prompted a discussion as to where such imagery – Lamming attributing racist stereotypes of black people to white characters – comes from; while the power relations of race mean that Lamming cannot be being racist about whites her, is he prejudiced about them? Or does he share a class/race prejudice against Caribbeans of a lower class and educational level than himself? There is insufficient evidence in the extract to draw any firm conclusions, but we returned to some of these issues in relation to the Selvon extract.

After three pages of the roaming third-person narrative typical of the novel, it suddenly changes form into something closer to poetry or competing dramatic (and distracted) monologues. The train journey to Paddington is depicted through a cacophony of voices and thoughts, snatches of dialogue and musings, in dialects and pidgins and patois rarely attributable to any specific one of the characters encountered in the preceding hundred pages.

It is a remarkable passage, which gives a good sense of how strange England is. Sugar rationing and saccharine are as mystifying when you come from sugar plantations as the notion of tea without milk. As English beer. As terms of friendly familiarity and slang like ‘spade’. As the British obsession with newspapers and legalities and the football pools. As the English’s ignorance of the range and variety of the Caribbean – and their surprise that a citizen of the Commonwealth, formerly the Empire, should speak English better than the French do. As the billboards advertising cold cream and razor blades and ‘Hermivita’ and ‘dissecticide’.

This passage also ends with foreboding. The train comes to a stop. There is impenetrable smoke everywhere. Catastrophe is intimated.

But it is just the London smog:

Tell me, Tornado, tell me.
What, man, what?
When we get outta this smoke,
When we get outta this smoke, w’at happen next?
More smoke.

Next we turned to Sam Selvon (1923-94), my favourite of these writers and the one whose work I find hardest to talk about. He was born in Trinidad to East Indian parents – his father an emigrant from Madras, and his maternal
grandfather was Scottish. He was a journalist on the Trinidad Guardian (1945-50). He emigrated to London and clerked in the Indian Embassy, then relocated to Canada in the 1970s.

Sam Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners (1956) depicts roughly three years in the life of sundry emigrants in London, most centrally Moses Aloetta. He has been there a decade, achieved little beyond survival and is getting increasingly homesick for Trinidad. There is no overarching plot as such, just incidents that befall characters – and their tall tales and boasts – as they look for lodging, jobs, loans, sex and other pleasures. The third-person narration breaks new ground by being in the same creolised English that the characters use (and there is a remarkable stream-of-consciousness passage about the London summer).

The novel opens, of course, ‘one grim winter evening’. The cold will be a key feature of the novel’s opening as, in the most comical of the colonial inversions, the newly arrived Henry Oliver – aka Galahad – steps off the train at Waterloo wearing ‘a old grey tropical suit and a pair of watchekong and no overcoat or muffler or gloves or anything for the cold’.

For Moses, who has agreed to meet this stranger and get him started in London, there is a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if it is not London at all but some strange place on another planet.

Selvon also comments on the English obsession with the newspapers (and radio), which they believe without question. And Moses has been here so long he has started to behave in the same way, albeit unknowingly – he considers the new arrivals to be ‘real hustlers, desperate … invading the country by the hundreds’, regurgitating the language of folk-devils and moral panics the British press are so accomplished at creating. There is a journalist at Waterloo, talking to the arrivals and taking pictures, and it is not entirely clear whether it is his copy or his editor’s revisions which produce yet another scare-mongering story about not just lone workers but now whole families arriving. And like all ‘English people [he] believe[s] that everybody who come from the West Indies come from Jamaica’.

This time it is Tanty, who has begrudgingly emigrated with her children and grandchildren, not baffled British dockworkers, who questions

Why all you leaving the country to go to England? Over there it is so cold that only white people does live there.

Indeed it is so cold that, Galahad says,

‘I find when I talk smoke coming out my mouth.’
‘Is so it is in this country,’ Moses say. ‘Sometimes the words freeze and you have to melt it to hear the talk’

The opening pages also give a sense of the housing discrimination and landlord-exploitation emigrants faced (and were, paradoxically, blamed for). Later in the novel, the intersections of race and class are elaborated upon when the narrator observes that ‘wherever in London that it have Working Class, there you will find a lot of spades’; and in one of the most moving passages in the book, Galahad, works out that it ‘Is not we that the people don’t like, … is the colour Black’, and begins to talk to the colour of his own skin as if it is somehow a separate and distinct entity.

We closed with a brief discussion of Basil Dearden’s 1951 film Pool of London. An Ealing crime thriller cum social melodrama (with moments of post-The Third Man expressionist lighting, of Humphrey Jennings/GPO-like poetic realism and of pre-Free Cinema procedural documentary), it is set around the Thames when London was still a freight port – and a city of wartime ruins. (One of the delights of the film is the skyline – you can actually see Nelson’s Column from the South Bank!)
champion of civil liberties’. It is dazzling sleight-of-hand. It features the first starring role for a black actor in British film since Paul Robeson’s films in the thirties. It is stolidly, agonisingly liberal and reasonable. And it sidesteps the contemporary story of immigration by showing only one black character, Johnny (Earl Cameron), who although he arrives by boat is not an immigrant.

Johnny works on a cargo vessel that treks back and forth between London and the continent. He is only ashore when his ship is in port, and has no intention of staying. He meets a nice white middle class girl and although they are drawn to each other, the nearest they come to touching is when the bus takes a corner too quickly (this is not Sapphire (Dearden 1959) or Flame in the Streets (Baker 1961)). He is restrained and respectful, and avoids confrontation on the odd occasion someone says something overtly racist. He loses control just once, when he has been steered into a dive bar – coincidentally the only place in the whole of London where we glimpse, momentarily, another black face – to be robbed.

And, most importantly, he leaves.

Week 20.

Recommended critical reading

Recommended reading
The experience of Afrodiasporic migration to Britain is also captured in Buchi Emecheta’s In the Ditch (1972) and historical novels such as Caryl Phillips's Final Passage (1985), Beryl Gilroy’s In Praise of Love and Children (1996) and Andrea Levy’s Every Light in the House is Burnin’ (1994) and Small Island (2004). Sympathetic treatment by a white British author can be found in Colin MacInnes’s City of Spades (1957); his Absolute Beginners (1959) culminates in the 1958 Notting Hill race riots.
The classic Arabic text of emigrating to Britain is the Sudanese Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North (1966).
The Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène’s Black Docker (1956) is a semi-autobiographical account of his years in France.

Recommended viewing
The Nine Muses (Akonfrah 2010) is an intriguing account of post-war emigration from the Caribbean and India to Britain. The BBC documentary Windrush is a more detailed, conventional account of West Indian emigration to Britain.
Pool of London is one of several films to address Windrush-era migration of Afro-Caribbeans, along with Sapphire (Dearden 1959), Flame in the Streets (Baker 1961), A Taste of Honey (Richardson 1961), The L-Shaped Room (Forbes 1962) and To Sir, With Love (Clavell 1967). Absolute Beginners (Temple 1986), adapted from MaclInnes’s novel, is also of interest.
Earlier, the African-American singer Paul Robeson starred in several British films, including Big Fella (Wills 1937) and The Proud Valley (Tennyson 1940).
The first feature film by a black British filmmaker is Horace Ové’s Pressure (1976), co-written by Sam Selvon.
Sembène’s 1966 La Noire de.../Black Girl, adapted from his story ‘The Promised Land’, depicts a migrant Senegalese worker in France. Kent MacKenzie’s The Exiles (1961) is about Native Americans who have had to migrate within the US to Los Angeles. El Norte (Nava 1983) and Sin Nombre (Fukunaga 2009) follow Latin Americans migrating to the US.
The US. *The Brother from Another Planet* (Sayles 1984) tells the story of a black alien who crash-lands in New York.

March 8, 2016  African/Afroaspiric culture, Books, Film, The City in Fiction and Film  andrea levy, basil dearden, beryl gilroy, bryan forbes, Buchi Emecheta, cary fukunaga, caryl phillips, Colin MacInnes, earl cameron, george lamming, gregory nava, horace ové, james clavell, jean rhys, john akomfrah, John Sayles, Joseph Conrad, julien temple, kent mackenzie, michael balcon, Ousmane Sembene, paul robeson, roy ward baker, sam selvon, tayeb salih, tony richardson, vs naipaul, zola  Leave a comment

The City in Fiction and Film, week 18

Week 17

This week we turned to African-American cinematic representations of the city, from blaxploitation and the LA Rebellion group up to the New Jack Cinema and *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton 1991). We were guided by Paula J Massood’s argument in *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* that:

*In the 1960s and 1970s, the American terrifying other was a generalized inner-city ghetto; in the 1990s, it became the young black man.* (166)

Last week, we ended with *Taxi Driver*’s vision of an infernal Manhattan populated by a profoundly fallen humanity (Scorsese is nothing if not a Catholic director). It is an overtly stylised world, often seen through the windscreen of the vehicle which lends Travis mobility while separating him from the world outside. Typically, blaxploitation has a rather different sense of the city and explores it through different aesthetic choices. These points came up in our discussion of the opening sequence of *Shaft* (Parks 1971):

- daylight shooting
- long shots (and some long takes) using zoom lenses on frequently uncontrolled locations
- concealed – or apparently concealed – cameras so as to not draw the attention of passersby unaware that they are being filmed
- the city is shabby, run-down, collapsing, but also lively – and there is an everyday rather than demonic quality to the hustling
- Shaft (Richard Roundtree) moves through the crowded streets with a confidence that Travis Bickle lacked, untraumatised it seems by his experience of being in the world, mixing freely with others both black and white as if by his sheer presence he can command a world without racism
- different kind of soundtrack, and different relationship between soundtrack and image

Manthia Diawara argues that

*space is related to power and powerlessness ... those who occupy the center of the screen are usually more powerful than those situated in the background or completely absent from the screen.* (qtd in Massood 173)

The opening of *Shaft* also points to this key factor in blaxploitation – for the first time since the threadbare and now
mostly lost race movies of the 1920s and 1930s, large numbers of African-Americans (not just Sidney Poitier or Harry Belafonte, etc) got to occupy centre (and sometimes pretty much the entire) screen of a significant number of movies, as well as working in numbers behind the scenes. Richard Roundtree strutting easily through Manhattan to the sound of Isaac Hayes was and remains so utterly cool that we can perhaps still get some sense, 45 years later and an ocean away, of how important that moment must have been (even if we might be even more inclined now to question the gender politics and Shaft's tendency to extract himself from the African-American community).

According to Thomas Doherty's *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Cinema in the 1950s*, the 'exploitation' in 'exploitation films' refers to:
1) the way in which a film was advertised and marketed to entice an audience into the theatre
2) the way in which the film endeared itself to its audience – content
3) and finally as a particular *kind* of film

This kind of “exploitation” became a cohesive production strategy with three elements:
1) controversial/bizarre/timely subject matter amenable to promotion
2) a substandard budget
3) a teenage audience
i.e., triply exploitative – exploiting sensational events for story value, their public notoriety for publicity value, and a teenage audience for box office value

This is also pretty much the sense in which the ‘xploitation’ in ‘blaxploitation’ is intended.

In the early 1970s, African Americans constitute 25-40% of Hollywood's US audience. Following the success of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Davis 1970), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles 1971) and *Shaft* (Parks 1971), a low- and medium-budget production cycle helped to restore Hollywood profitability, but was then abandoned with the emergence of blockbuster cinema – *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975), *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977), etc – and of different modes of distribution and exhibition, a process aided by the closure and/or grindhousing and/or pornification of downtown cinemas and an increase in suburban cinemas.

Ed Guerrero argues in *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* that blaxploitation was part of a larger ‘black film boom' that saw ‘ninety-one productions' in 1971-73, ‘of which forty-seven can be considered models of the Blaxploitation formula’ (95) – a formula that usually consisted of a pimp, gangster, or their baleful female counterparts, violently acting out a revenge or retribution motif against corrupt whites in the romanticized confines of the ghetto or inner city. These elements were fortified with liberal doses of gratuitous sex and drugs and the representation of whites as the very inscription of evil. And all this was rendered in the alluring visuals and aggrandized sartorial fashions of the black underworld and to the accompaniment of black musical scores that were usually of better quality than the films they energized. (94)

Blaxploitation had African American critics of this sort from the outset. The term was coined by Junius Griffin, the head of the NAACP's Beverley Hills-Hollywood branch, when he was quoted in *The Hollywood Reporter* decrying such ‘black exploitation films' as *Super Fly* (Parks Jr 1972). Within days, he resigned from his post and co-founded the Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB), with the support of various of the more conservative civil rights organisations (e.g., CORE, SCLC). In ‘Black movie boom – good or bad?' (*The New York Times* 17 December 1972), he argued that

> If black movies do not contribute to building constructive, healthy images of black people and to fairly recording the black experience, we shall have lost our money and our souls [and] have contributed to our own cultural genocide by only offering our children the models of degradation, destruction and dope’ (D19)

Griffin was by no means representative of all African Americans. In the same *The New York Times* piece, Gordon Parks describes the audience's response to a crowded 4am screening of his *Shaft*:
Everything was ‘right on’! A new hero, black as coal, deadlier than Bogart and handsome as Gable, was doing the thing that everyone in that audience wanted to see done for so long. A black man was winning. (D3)

Parks says of the ‘so-called black intellectuals’ demanding an end to blaxploitation that:

it is curious that some black people, egged on by some whites, will use such destructive measures against black endeavors. ... The most important thing to me is that young blacks can now ... enter an industry that has been closed to them for so long. (D3).

In Isaac Julien’s documentary *Baadasssss Cinema* (2002), blaxploitation star and occasional director Fred Williamson criticises NAACP and CORE for coining the implicitly derogatory term, asking

Who was being exploited? All the black actors were getting paid. They had a job. They were going to work. The audience wasn’t being exploited. They were getting to see things on their screens they had longed for.

Blaxploitation star Gloria Hendry adds,

the organizations failed to understand that the community was really in need of their own heroes and black movies.

And *The Black Panther* newspaper devoted the entire 19 June 1971 issue to Huey P. Newton’s review of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, which concludes ‘We need to see it often and learn from it’ (in *To Die for the People* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2009) 148).

Many blaxploitation films have an original music soundtrack, including Earth, Wind & Fire on *Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, Millie Jackson on *Cleopatra Jones* (Starrett 1973), James Brown on *Black Caesar* (Cohen 1973) and Edwin Starr on *Hell up in Harlem* (Cohen 1973). Sound itself is also often used in interesting ways – partly post-classical stylistic innovation, partly symptomatic of the films’ extremely low budgets which relied on shooting without sound and dubbing later. For example, the opening ten minutes of *Super Fly* (Parks Jr 1972) contains extended sequences of a couple of would-be muggers walking through New York streets, Super Fly driving through the streets, and then chasing one of the muggers through the streets, much of it to Curtis Mayfield’s soundtrack; there are several similar sequences later in the film, including on using split screen arrangements of still images. On one level, an economy-driven necessity, it becomes an aesthetics concerned with occupying the screen (and soundtrack) space, and key to an actualité-ish depiction of black urban life.

Blaxploitation was often immensely profitable across the budgetary scale, especially in terms of box-office to outlay ratios. MGM budgeted $1.2 million each for *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Shaft*; the former grossed over $8 million domestically, the latter over $10.8 million in its first year of distribution. Low-budget Cinerama Releasing Corporation spent $200,000 on *The Mack* (Campus 1973), which grossed over $3 million, and AIP spent $500,000 on *Coffy* (Hill 1973), which grossed $6 million. The independent *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* cost an estimated $500,000 and took $4.1 million on its initial domestic release, dislodging *Love Story* (Hiller 1971) from number one at the US box office, and eventually grossed $10-15 million.

The soundtracks were also often successful. The soundtrack albums for *Shaft* and *Cleopatra Jones* (Starrett 1973) sold hundreds of thousands of copies. *Super Fly*, the first entirely black-financed film to be released by a Hollywood Studio, and the first to employ an almost entirely Black and Puerto Rican crew (mostly drawn from Third World Cinema Corporation, a Harlem-based collective co-founded by Ossie Davis in 1971), had an estimated budget of $100,000 but took $6.4 million during its initial run, eventually grossing over $12 million. Controlled and released by his own publishing company and independent record label, Curtis Mayfield’s singles ‘Super Fly’ and ‘Freddie’s Dead’ sold over 1 million copies each; the soundtrack album sold 12 million copies, earning him over $5 million. (See Eithne Quinn, “‘Tryin’ to get over’: *Super Fly*, black politics, and post-civil rights film enterprise’. *Cinema Journal* 49.2
Next, we moved from East Coast to West, to take a look at the sequence in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* after Sweetback beats the cops to death and goes on the run. Van Peebles's stylisations are even more overt than those of Scorsese, layering images, saturating them in psychedelic hues, and cutting with the rhythm of the music, which itself often seems to be improvised in conjunction with the images. Los Angeles is a disjointed, ruptured wasteland, more or less devoid of humanity. It is low and close to the ground in contrast to New York, and seems to stretch on forever. Others might escape by plane, but all Sweetback can do is run and run and run.

And then we moved from blaxploitation – a category in which *Sweetback* does not always seem to fit easily, despite its massive importance to the cycle – to the LA Rebellion group. This network of African-American filmmakers, who studied at UCLA from the late-1960s onwards, made films that set out to resist Hollywood – and blaxploitation – norms, embracing the influence of Italian neo-realism and other European art cinema, and of politicised and postcolonial Latin American and African filmmaking. They made experimental and documentary shorts, documentary features and, later, videos, but the easiest of their work to access is their fiction features, including: Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1978); Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977); Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991); Jamaa Fanaka's *Penitentiary* (1979); Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama* (1976) and *Sankofa* (1993); and Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1983).

We took a look at an early sequence from *Killer of Sheep*, in which African-American kids throw stones at each other and play in the wasteland between railroad tracks. While the landscape itself seems familiar from *Sweetback*, the grainy – but often beautiful – black-and-white photography (another intersection of budget and aesthetics) contrasts with Van Peebles's restless (and desperate) innovations. It recalls, in different ways, a number of films we have already watched on the module (*Bicycle Thieves*, *The Third Man*, *Passport to Pimlico*, *Cléo from 5 to 7*, *Ratcatcher*).

The soundtrack is likewise naturalistic, just voices and sounds of the city, creating a rather different effect than blaxploitation's commitment to cutting edge soul and funk (and to *Bush Mama*'s more experimental layering of fragmentary voices on its soundtrack).

The New Jack Cinema ran from roughly 1989-95. Its key filmmakers and films were


Leslie Harris: *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (1992)


As with the more or less simultaneous New Queer Cinema, it had a strong focus on male experience, and made efforts to diversify representation without reiterating stereotypes or insisting on ‘positive’ images. Its primary focus on African American urban experience was influenced by blaxploitation’s and the LA Rebellion’s use of actual locations, but was also intertwined with the emergence of hip-hop culture over the preceding decade and more. The New Jack Cinema often depicted gang life, violence, misogyny and drug use in negative terms, but frequently also succumbed to the spectacle such things offered. There were also strong elements of melodrama and liberal handwringing, and a championing of education and middle class lifestyle choices. Unlike *Beverly Hills Cop* (Brest 1984), New Jack movies tend not to take a single black protagonist out of his own community and relocate him in a white community – a strategy also deployed by many post-New Jack movies, such as *Training Day* (Fuqua 2001) – but instead builds a picture of an ethnically, culturally, linguistically and generationally diverse neighbourhood, with a history

It is important to bear in mind bell hooks's comments on the historical, political, economic, cultural and social context of gangsta rap:

*The sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta...*
Like blaxploitation, the New Jack Cinema was often extremely profitable. *She's Gotta Have It* was shot in 12 days for $175,000 and took over $7 million in the US alone. (It is relatively unusual in being woman-centred, but is problematically centred on a woman whose choice to have multiple sexual partners is repeatedly eroticised and spectacularised.) *Do the Right Thing* cost $6 million, and took $60 million in the US, with two Oscar nominations (best screenplay, supporting actor). Newspapers worried its ambivalent conclusion would lead to riots. *Just Another Girl on the IRT* was shot in 17 days for $100,000, took $500,000 at US box office (again relatively unusual, not only in that it focuses on female experience, but on teen female experience and was made by a woman). Like *Boyz N the Hood*, it ends in blood, but not a drive-by or gang-killing. Instead, it culminates in a long scene of protagonist Chantel's (Ariyan A Johnson) agonising premature childbirth – she is in denial about and has concealed her unwanted pregnancy, and thus is completely unprepared. *Boyz N the Hood* cost $6 million, and took $60 million in the US alone; 23-year-old John Singleton was nominated for best director and best original screenplay Oscars.

We focused primarily on the kinds of spaces the film depicted and how they were shot. There is none of the excessive stylisation of Scorsese, no attempt to depict South Central as infernal. There is no attempt to depict the area as a crumbling ruin, as in the views of Manhattan in *Shaft* and *Super Fly*, or as an urban wasteland, as in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Killer of Sheep*. In fact, the ‘natural’ daytime light and often pastels palette imbues the hood with the sense of a potentially idyllic suburb of evenly spaced houses in a variety of styles, each set in a neat little garden. Unlike *Fahrenheit 451* and despite the ubiquity of television, people still sit on their porches, chatting and whiling away the time. This is countered, to some extent, by the high walls around the backyards and fence around some front yards; by the invisible but nonetheless affectively tangible walls around neighbourhoods and the city; by the role of mass unemployment and limited future prospects in all that porch-sitting; by the eruptions of gang violence and police violence; by the junkie mother who cannot look after her children (even if everyone else in the neighbourhood watches out for them); and by the almost constant nocturnal sound of police helicopters patrolling the skies above.

While Sweetback can at least run past LAX (and run), *Boyz* begins with a stop sign (while a jet climbs into the sky behind it). Such entrapment – such limited mobility in a city built for cars – is central to the film.

(As, rather more problematically, is its focus on the need for fathers to raise sons as real men so as to end ghetto immiseration and violence, since this involves constantly blaming mothers – reiterating a strong current in the period’s far from progressive political discourse. This goes so far as to undermine its own advocacy of such middle class values as education, responsibility and property ownership by finding fault with aspirational black women.)

**Week 19**


**Recommended critical reading**


African-American, Latino/a and Chicano/a ghetto fiction can be traced back at least as far as Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), Rudolph Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho* (1928) and *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), and more autobiographical work, such as Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), Iceberg Slim's *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967) and Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967).

It also draws on the pulp crime fiction of Chester Himes (e.g., *A Rage in Harlem* (1957)) and Donald Goines (e.g., *Dopefiend* (1971)), on blaxploitation cinema, New Jack cinema and hip-hop culture.


**Recommended viewing**

Key blaxploitation films include *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles 1971), *Shaft* (Parks 1971) and *Superfly* (Parks Jr 1972).

The LA Rebellion group’s more neo-realist depiction of black urban life can be seen in *Killer of Sheep* (Burnett 1978) and *Bush Mama* (Gerima 1979).

Key New Jack cinema films include *Do the Right Thing* (Lee 1989), *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (Harris 1992) and *Menace II Society* (Hughes brothers 1993).

Depictions of ghetto life have become a significant part of world cinema, including such films as *La Haine* (Kassovitz 1995), *City of God* (Meirelles and Lund 2002), *Jerusalema: Gangster's Paradise* (Ziman 2008) and *Attack the Block* (Cornish 2011).
Azanian Bridges is a neat little thriller, set in more or less the present-day South Africa but in a world in which Apartheid continues. A quick and compelling read, it does a couple of rather cunning things.

The first is its choice of alternate history premise.

There are a number of African alternate histories which invert or rewrite elements of European colonialism (e.g., Abdourahman A. Waberi’s In the United States of Africa (2006), Africa Paradis (Sylvestre Amoussou 2006) – and Nisi Shawl’s Everfair (2016) to look forward to).

There is a future history imagining the conditions for the emergence of something akin to Apartheid (Arthur Keppel-Jones’s When Smuts Goes: A History of South Africa from 1952 to 2010, first published in 2015 (1947)).

There is an array of near-future thrillers that anticipate the end of Apartheid (Anthony Delius’s The Day Natal Took Off (1960), Gary Allighan’s Verwoerd – the End (1961), Iain Findlay’s The Azanian Assignment (1978), Randall Robinson’s The Emancipation of Wakefield Clay (1978), Andrew McCoy’s The Insurrectionist (1979), Larry Bond’s Vortex (1981), Nadine Gordimer’s July’s People (1981), Frank Graves’s African Chess (1990)).

And there is an alternate history with the brilliant premise of aliens arriving in the skies over Johannesburg during the Apartheid era, although sadly District 9 (Blomkamp 2009) doesn’t have the faintest idea what to do with it. (Read Nnedi Okorafor’s Lagoon (2014) instead.)

But, as far as I know, Azanian Bridges is the first story to project Apartheid beyond 1994.

In doing so, Wood sketches in some sly geopolitical changes. The Soviet Union did not withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989, but has spent thirty years ‘haemorrhaging men into their Afghan ulcer’ (31). Perestroika and glasnost seem not to have happened, and the USSR is intact, apparently governed by generals. The Berlin wall has not fallen, nor has the Eastern bloc collapsed. Consequently, ‘the old anti-communist arguments for supporting’ South Africa (163) held sway rather longer among Western powers, and it comes as little surprise that Bush and Blair were both supporters of the Apartheid regime. But now President Obama – along with his ally, the US-backed mujahideen leader Osama bin Laden – are involved in peace talks with the Soviets. The Cold War might finally be limping into its terminal phase, and with weakening Soviet influence in Africa, China is investing heavily across the continent.

Meanwhile, in a South Africa ruled by President Eugène Terre’Blanche’s Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, Mandela did not leave Robben Island and FW de Klerk is still in prison for trying to bring Apartheid to an end in the 1980s.

All of which is sketched in with greater economy than I have just managed, not least because the layers of paranoid security and firewalling significantly restrict all South Africans’ access to the internet and other global media.

Phones with cameras are also banned since they are a ‘potentially easy source of troubling video’ (45) – a nice touch that captures the novel’s relevance to our #blacklivesmatter times.

The second (and really really) cunning thing that Wood does is make a connection between the new experimental technology introduced into this alternative near-present and the form his narrative takes: the Empathy Enhancer allows one to experience the experience of others, and vice versa; the novel’s chapters alternate between Sibusiso Mchunu, a young amaZulu on the edges of anti-Apartheid struggle who is deeply traumatised when a friend dies in his arms, shot to death by the police at a protest, and the white (but as-yet not very committed) liberal, Dr Martin Van Deventer, the neuropsychologist treating Sibusiso and co-inventor of the Empathy Enhancer.

The security services want the EE device for use in interrogations. Anti-Apartheid groups want to use it to undermine the regime, person-by-person. It is not clear why the Chinese want it, but they do. So when Sibusiso goes on the lam with the device, and Martin sets out in pursuit, the alternating chapters set you up to expect a tensely intercutting thriller, as pursuers become the pursued.

And there are a number of tense sequences and suspenseful passages.
But Wood is playing a very different game, subverting the form to make the reader focus on the twin protagonists’ very different experiences of living in a racist state which sees them both, in different ways, as its enemies. This ranges from the most perilous things – run-ins with the security services – to the most quotidian: when Martin is told to destroy his cell phone so it can’t be used to trace him, he simply ‘grind[s] the phone under [his] heel’ (153); when Sibusiso’s phone is simply taken from him and tossed into the sea, he is ‘upset and angry’, in large part because ‘we have been taught to throw nothing away’ (129).

Such contrasts are the point of the novel.

_Azanian Bridges_ itself is the Empathy Enhancer. Read it and weep.

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In 1993, Claire Sponsler argued that cyberpunk reworked earlier post-nuclear-holocaust narratives (<<Alas, Babylon>>, _A Canticle for Leibowitz_, _Riddley Walker_) which depicted, with ‘angst and ambivalence’, a ‘physical world [that] is unfriendly, unyielding, and unforgiving’, a ‘hostile and forbidding … no-man’s land where humans must struggle to survive’ (257). In contrast, for cyberpunk ‘destruction of the natural environment and decay of the urban zones are givens that are not lamented but rather accepted’ (257). In ‘decayed cityscape[s]’, cyberpunk found ‘a place of possibilities, a carnivalesque realm where anything goes and where there are no rules, only boundaries that can be easily transgressed’ – and where entry into cyberspace, a disembodied realm of deracinated liberation, is ‘encouraged, not hampered, by a milieu of urban decay’ (261).

Thomas Foster’s _The Souls of Cyberfolk_ criticises this view, reminding us that part of the cultural backdrop against which the cyberpunk imaginary emerged was the discourse of urban planning and development that came to the fore in the US in the 1970s and 1980s – and that its ‘language of urban “ruin,” “decay”’ or “blight”’ possessed ‘ideological and often specifically racist subtexts’, providing an encoded way of talking about ‘racialized inner-city ghettos than cities in general’ (206). (It is well worth having this is mind when reading Delany’s _Dhalgren_, too.)

Steven Barnes’s _Aubry Knight_ trilogy – among the trashiest of afrocyberpunk fiction and in some ways much more _afro_ than _cyberpunk_ – gets closer than any other cyberpunk I have read to acknowledging this urban-planner/property-developer discourse and its racial content.

Written before William Gibson’s _Neuromancer_, _Streetlethal_ (1983) sits alongside cyberpunk, developing similar
material rather differently. The trilogy’s ongoing negotiation with cyberpunk is most evident if we judge Barnes’s novels by their covers. Barclay Shaw’s 1983 cover – where it is difficult to tell that the protagonist is black – combines 70s martial arts imagery with hints of a post-apocalyptic scenario, perhaps like The Ultimate Warrior (Clouse 1975). It alludes to Mad Max, but the overturned car and shattered road bridge give way to an airy futuristic metropolis. The jacket blurbs point to a conservative tradition of adventure sf (Larry Niven), made a little more decent (Gordon R Dickson) and perhaps a little edgier (Norman Spinrad) (Firedance (1994) adds a blurb from Peter O’Donnell, the creator of Modesty Blaise). The 1991 reissue of Streetlethal retains these three blurbs but has a new cover by Martin Andrews that builds on the imagery of Luis Royo’s cover for Gorgon Child (1989) (rather more effectively than Royo’s cover for Firedance). Aubrey is definitively black. His costume suggests a black urban cool coming out of the dancier end of hip-hop. His dark glasses turn cyberpunk’s mirrorshades black. The urban backdrop is more ambiguous, with hints of futurity and ruination. The female figure is like a rock video version of Molly, Gibson’s street samurai. (The relationship between the women on the covers and the female characters in the novels remains mysterious to me).

From its first sentence, though intermittently, Streetlethal draws on noir imagery and, like Gibson, science-fictionalises it. The novel begins:

Naked and transparent, the woman’s smooth white body undulated slowly, beckoning to the empty streets. The streets were still slick from the afternoon rain; the hologram reflected back from the wet asphalt, an erotic mirage.

...[Maxine] steered him further down the street, past the fluxing, beckoning projections that lined Pacific Coast Highway. Soundloops triggered by their passing cajoled, promising the finest in services and goods, the ultimate in intimate experience. A hungry taxi-drone paused on its eternal run down the central guidestrip, and Maxine waved it on. (1, 2-3)

The overall plot is also rather noirish. Maxine uses sex to betray Aubry, framing him for murder as part of his punishment for quitting work as muscle for the Ortega gang. He is arrested and imprisoned in the Death Valley Maximum Security Prison; he escapes, makes his way back to Los Angeles, wreaks revenge.

Unlike Gibson, Barnes also works in a blaxploitation mode. Aubry is large and immensely powerful figure, a streetfighter turned Nullboxer – a kind of zero-gravity MMA. Inhumanly strong and determined, there is at times something of Jim Brown, Richard Roundtree and Jim Kelly to him. He is not very smart, though, or well-socialised; the later novels gradually cure him of this emotional/psychological stuntedness, turning him from a kind of Luke Cage into someone more like T’Challa, the Black Panther. Barnes draws on cultural-political strains of black power, Afrotopianism, Afrocentricity and Pan-Africanism (In Firedance, Aubry discovers he is actually African, an child of the Ibandi tribe of warriors who was orphaned in the US. He returns to Africa to topple the insane, Japanese-backed insane military dictator of Pan-Africa, which is composed of six countries: Zaire (Congo), Tanzania, Uganda, possibly Kenya and two never-named others.) Barnes presents a matter-of-fact multiracial and mixed-racial future. More awkwardly, but in a generally positive way, he includes a lesbian separatist community and a group called the NewMen – physically imposing, genetically-engineered warriors, who are all also homosexual. (This sort of diverse future caught between the ghetto, the gang and the New Jim Crow is developed in Erika Alexander and Tony Puryear’s Concrete Park.)
At the centre of Streetlethal is the Los Angeles downtown:

Downtown Los Angeles covered some of the most expensive real estate in the world, and in the 1960’s and ‘70’s it had become run-down. Property values were slipping. There was a major effort to clean the area up, to bring in investors. ... [Impoverished, homeless] Scavengers have existed for ... maybe a century. They move into ruined neighbourhoods, slums, anywhere nobody else wants to live or work, and reclaim. People have been doing it forever, but I guess they just started organizing during the Second Depression, in the eighties. (177, 180)

Although fleetingly evoked, this historical context points to the still ongoing real-world conflicts between a city government enamoured of property developers and the residents of the garment district, skid row and other communities/areas that also occupy the downtown.

Barnes’s LA differs from the real LA not just because of that Second Depression but also because the Big One finally hit.

It was easy to remember when there had been skyscrapers here. The Great Quake, and the even more ruinous firestorm that followed, had razed the city, sending businesses fleeing to the valleys and peripheral areas. Already decaying by the turn of the century, no one cared about central L.A. anymore. The slums remaining in the area were simply referred to as the Maze, and only the hopeless made it their home. (60)

[It] must have been a street, once. It was hard to tell, with the accumulated layers of trash and debris, shattered fragments of buildings, and the gut-punched wreckage of a bus, stripped of rubber and glass and most of its metal, only a framework of rust remaining. ... The wreckage was incredible, as if an orgy of wholesale looting and vandalism had destroyed what little was left by the natural disasters of earthquake and fire. (108, 109)

The Maze is home to the Scavengers, a subterranean co-operative community developed from those earlier scavengers. They live in the ruins, including the secretly renovated PanAngeles Multiplex, ‘the largest underground living complex in the western hemisphere’ (177). And they have a semi-official government franchise to recover valuables and salvage materials from the ruins. The state sees them as ‘hoboes scratching at a trash heap’ (176) and have no idea how wealthy they have grown, how far their trade network reaches, how much their influence and range of alliances have grown.

The most depressing aspects of the trilogy is that by the start of Firedance, the Scavengers have themselves turned property developers, using ‘the leverage of property, money, and manpower, combined with generous grants and federal tax breaks’ to create ‘an empire’ (9). They have turned the Maze into Mazetown, a new and more ethnically diverse downtown – and the label “Mazie” seemed less an insult than a celebration of an individual choice’ (17). The new population might have ‘skins tinted every color of the rainbow ... cloaked in the raiment of a dozen lands’ (17), a dozen languages and a hundred dialects’ might fill ‘the streets’, and there might be a ‘thousand savory collations from around the world’ being sold by ‘ten thousand street vendors’ (33), but they also look and sound and smell of gentrification. As if capitalism somehow suddenly – and in LA of all places – dropped its racialising and racialised dynamics.

Works cited
Follow-up emails also typically result in higher response rates: Yesware's data, for example, reveals that if you don't receive a reply to your first email, you still have a 21% chance of receiving one to your second email. Fast Facts About Email.

Now that you have this objective in mind, you can think about how to achieve it via your email. For example, you might decide to send a piece of educational content about your product or service that requests a follow-up conversation.

2. Create a Snappy Email Subject Line. The Follow Blog Widget enables your readers to sign up to receive your posts via email. Looking for more ways to add a subscription form? You can use the Subscription Form block! The reader will see this message followed by an email field and follow button. Follow button text – Enter the message to display in the subscription button. (e.g. Follow, Sign me up).

Click here to see how to find more information about widgets’ configuration and visibility conditions. Versatile plans an Email subscribers are 3 times more likely to share your content via social media than visitors from other sources. – QuickSprout.

72% people prefer to receive promotional content through email, compared to 17% who prefer social media. The follow up emails themselves don't need to be complicated. Just keep them simple and relevant.

Follow Up Email Example Template #1: “Hey [first name], how is it going? Can we schedule a time to talk this week?”

Follow Up Email Example Template #2: “Hey [first name], we got some new press coverage [link].”

Brian Dean, who built his blog Backlinko to over 100k visitors per month, spends 80% of his total content marketing time on promotion. In other words, for every hour he spends writing, he spends 4 hours promoting what he wrote.