

Empire of Venerly: Tony Harrison's African Poems

Colin Nicholson

During the 1980s and 90s Tony Harrison enjoyed a reputation as England's unofficial and politically oppositional poet laureate. Combined with his extensive theatre work, his newspaper poems and his televised film poems brought verse to the attention of a wider audience who responded warmly to the revelation that a centuries-old tradition of English republican radicalism, seemingly moribund as far as conventional cultural outlets were concerned, had found outspoken continuance in strong lines, a fierce intelligence and compassionate anger organised by a voice that could be tender and loving; and delivered in bewitching rhythms. It now seems evident that the years from 1962 to 1966, when Harrison was lecturing at Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria's largest academic institution situated in the northern city of Zaria, were a crucial catalyst in the early development of his writing. It was at Ahmadu Bello that he staged his first drama; a Nigerian version of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* called *Aikin Mata*, co-written with the Irish poet James Simmons for a prize-winning group of university players and dedicated to Wole Soyinka. In partnership with Simmons, Harrison tailored *Lysistrata*'s Athenian origins to Nigerian contexts so that *Aikin Mata* uses local ethnicities and cultural forms, some of them from a Yoruba pantheon that Harrison the future President of the British Classical Association considered to be "every bit as rich if not richer than that of the Greeks" ("Shango" 89). In this locally oriented adaptation of classical script Aristophanes' sex-based and sometimes bawdy anti-war satire engaged successfully with the ethnic and religious divisions that within a few years would erupt into bloody and sustained armed conflict between Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north and Christian south. Given such a fraught political context, the play took risks of its own: in its cross-gender, inter-ethnic satire, Yoruba and Ibo players took Hausa and Fulani roles, and a mixed group of Yoruba and Ibo males played a chorus of old Hausa women.

Aikin Mata finds ways of bringing together its war-fighting Northern and Southern ambassadors, in part by commingling on-stage Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo women from a multicultural state where, Harrison dryly notes, they "have not yet reached political equality with men, and where the 'sex war' is a recurrent source of humour" (*Aikin* 9). Harrison took with him to Nigeria particular senses of how canonical texts operate socially and psychologically as ideological persuasion geared towards the shaping of a preferred subjectivity; and he had first-hand experience from his schooldays of how class-based speech codes mediate cultural and administrative power. Accordingly, in place of *Lysistrata*'s division between Athenian and Spartan

ways of speaking Greek, and to emphasize what Harrison called “the spirit of intertribal parody as a basic ingredient of the comedy of the adaptation,” the script exploited an already prevalent Nigerian division in speech practice by giving its northern characters Standard English dialogue and its southerners a dialectal “pidgin” variant (*Aikin* 10).¹ As in Aristophanes, comedy and tragedy are closely allied: three years after *Aikin Mata* was performed in the north of the country the secession of Biafra in the south led to a three-year civil war and over a million dead. On the threshold of this carnage, and with evidence of the impending disaster already manifest in the country, when Magajiya (*Lysistrata*) first unfolds a proto-feminist plan to withhold sexual favours from persistently war-fighting males, she states that their intention is to “give disturbed Nigeria peace” (17):

Out of the chaos and the formlessness
Of senseless war, of tribe with tribe, we’ll mould
With delicate skill a whole Nigeria. (40)

“If only for this day alone,” she adds in a closing plea for peaceful, plural coexistence (77); a hope for which the play works hard.

Harrison was twenty-five when he went to teach in Nigeria, arriving there two years after a British Prime Minister had announced to MPs in apartheid South Africa that a wind of change was blowing through the continent. Harold Macmillan’s 1960 declaration is taken to mark the British government’s first official acknowledgement that the days of Empire were numbered, and has been credited with speeding up the process of African independence. But the process was already well under way. French Equatorial Africa was anyway moving in that direction; and in 1960 what was then called the Nigerian Federation became independent. In 1962 British control of Uganda and of Tanganyika (now Tanzania) came to an end: Kenya, after a long and bloody struggle, achieved the same goal in 1963, and Malawi (then Nyasaland) in 1964. Also in 1964 Frelimo launched from bases in Tanzania its guerrilla war against Portuguese rule in Mozambique that would continue for over a decade. The abrupt termination in 1960 of Belgium’s system of misrule led to civil war in the Congolese Republic (subsequently Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), which raged until 1965. In that year Gambia and Bechuanaland (now Botswana) became self-governing, and nine African states broke off diplomatic relations with Britain for not using force against Ian Smith’s white supremacist declaration of independence for Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). During this violently transforming time Harrison was drafting and re-drafting the poems that would become his first full-length collection *The Loiners*. The imported imperial curriculum he was engaged to service in Nigeria figured as only one dimension, though for him a professionally significant one, in a social and cultural encounter with conflict that was military and physical, and stress that was intellectual and political, and where the tensions in his own schooling were, as he was to put it, “dramatically posed in black and white.” It was a context that com-

pelled him “literally to put in perspective [his] own education,” and given that he claimed to see in Africa’s colonial history what he later called “a very broad, dramatic portrayal” of some of the things he had experienced at Leeds Grammar School in the late nineteen-forties and fifties, it is now clear that working on *Aikin Mata* helped Harrison to define and refine a complex critique of race, class, power and language (Haffenden 236). He described the preparation of a Nigerian *Lysistrata* as a thawing out of his tongue (“Inkwell” 34), and that thawing helped to release powerful cross-currents of feeling. Africa was a formative period for him and he cited it as one of the reasons why his autobiographical sonnet sequence *From The School of Eloquence* (first version published in 1978) begins with a poem dedicated to two leaders of Frelimo, the nationalist liberation party of Mozambique which had been founded in 1962. A number of the “School of Eloquence” poems focus on the cross-generational conflicts induced in a Leeds baker’s son by a grammar school education whose primary business was class deracination and a consequent assimilation into governing values. But Harrison’s extended critique first found an effective voice with *The Loiners*’ first poem, “Thomas Campey and the Copernican System,” elegizing the Leeds street-trader from whose cart Harrison bought the second-hand books he read as a boy. Campey is the first Loiner (a local dialect term for a citizen of Leeds) we encounter; a character who lived and died on the cultural margins of a thriving industrial city. Through a politically scorching allusion to Milton’s Satan, the poem figures that city’s governing elite as an “Imperial Host / Squat on its thrones of Ormus and of Ind”² and thereby registers an imperial dimension for Campey’s plight (*Selected Poems* 14).³ In this scale of contrast Campey’s impoverished and diseased condition constitutes a local incidence of underdevelopment, where he symbolizes a “third-world” zone in a “first-world” city, and as such a figure who lingers in the mind as a reference point for other “Loiners” poems, including those with African settings. Harrison’s poem about Thomas Campey is the first to disclose an existential relevance for what Harold Acton called internal and external colonialism.⁴

Whereas the Leeds poems in Part 1 of *The Loiners* focus on memories of adolescence and young manhood, Harrison’s African monologues, with the exception of “The Heart of Darkness,” are delivered by ageing colonial expatriates. Each of these speakers, though, hails from Leeds and the first of them to speak on African territory is the “White Queen,” overweight and over fifty, a drink-sodden and “pathic” (i.e. favouring a receptive role in homosexual relationships) university teacher of English whose sight is failing. Aptly described by one reader as “a deviant but defiant character whose very marginality is a source of insight” (Spencer 27), this sallow-cheeked character, in a seemingly terminal state of health and on the point of returning from colonial territory to the imperial homeland, is mourning his lost youth while continuing to project promiscuous fantasies of himself as a “radiant white queen / In sub-Saharan scrub” during his final overseas teaching stint (*SP* 21). Another monologist in broken health and not looking forward to retirement back in England is the “PWD Man” (i.e. a Public Works Department engineer, engaged in Nigerian road-building)

whose vigorously heterosexual activities and self-indulgent racist appetites have contributed to his declining condition. Also included in *The Loiners* (but omitted from the *Selected Poems*) are translations which Harrison “cross-dresses,” as it were, by changing the original gender or sexual orientation of a speaker or an addressee. A note refers to numerous other translations from European and African languages undertaken but not included; of which “by far the greater number are homosexual variations on famous heterosexual love poems in English poetry” where gender is turned by minimal textual alteration (*L* 34). In the two that survive, male admires male across the racial divide. So altogether we encounter in part 2 of *The Loiners* a complicated triangulation of voices where any sense of an overall expatriate identity is assembled out of a matrix of subject positions that are sometimes inconsistent and sometimes in contradiction with each other. Harrison has testified that he re-drafted some of the poems forty or fifty times; the forms he developed for their evidently difficult transactions dramatizing what he later called “unresolved existential problems, of personal energies in ambiguous conflict with the stereotype, sexual, racial, political, national” (“Inkwell” 33, 34). There are undeniable if uncomfortable first person energies in the Christmas confessional performance called “The Heart of Darkness,” which is inserted between the other deviant and excessive characters in African contexts, and which involves lust, adultery and marital sex in a mode suggesting that Harrison might be speaking more directly *in propria persona*. Elsewhere he refers to “the British imagination in its imperial phase, when the gaps had all been filled, and the maps coloured cochineal projected its fear of itself onto the dark peoples it ‘pacified,’ and the shadowy creatures of its own id onto the vastness of the Dark Continent,” which suggests an appropriate psychological motif for some of these poems (“Black and White” 91), and in the “White Queen” sequence Harrison uses both first- and third-person modes of narration, moving between intimacy and detachment so that we seem at times to be dealing with projections of instinctive impulses. A year after *The Loiners* came out Harrison described its conversions of dark shadows in his skull as his “small-time self dramatisations of ‘silence, exile and cunning’” (“Inkwell” 32); but there is nothing small-time about the issues these poems address, nor is the writing which presents them amenable to any single, harmonious or authoritative reading.

The “White Queen” sequence has five movements and the title of the first of them, “Satyrae,” triggers several satirical possibilities. As woodland gods or demons partly human in form and partly bestial, Satyrs were supposed to be the companions of Bacchus, which would certainly fit the queen’s drinking habits: satyra might signify the female of the species. But Harrison was well aware that in the great Athenian drama festivals writers presented their work in trilogies, where originally every third play in a group of three tragedies would be followed by a satyr play written by the same author, which included “a chorus of what we can see as men in their animal condition, represented as half or three quarters man with horse or goat attributes and an erect phallus” (*Trackers* x). These plays were

lost centuries ago and Harrison is concerned that their historical absence from the canon has radically skewed our (mis)understanding of how classical tragedy signifies. Insofar as his African sequences give voice to libertine and prohibited pleasures within and against the enormous human tragedy of Empire and its aftermath, their speakers can be seen as satyr-like figures from this long since vanished classical chorus stepping forward into a circle of stage light and providing an ambiguous and sometimes tortured “spirit of celebration, held in the dark solution of tragedy” (*Trackers* xi). As they articulate deviant sexual politics in imperial and then post-imperial circumstance, the poems register existential pressures: they thereby generate an effect of alternating complicity and difference, which necessarily and inevitably, though hopefully at lesser levels of intensity or excess, implicates other white, male, European observers of a colonial or postcolonial world. It has rightly been suggested that by setting the white queen sequence against a “neo-colonial African ex-pat hell of booze, boredom, loathing and delirium,” Harrison is able to “play out the tension between illicit sexual desire and the lexical landscape which sublimates that desire into fantastic images of its own frustration and repression”:

With all the inheritance of European colonialism in Africa to inform the positioning of the protagonists (and their desire) and the poet’s own metrical and lexical options, the powerplay of *The Loiners*’ dialectical exploration of desire, repression, recollection and poetics is given a delirious twist. [...] The scenarios sketched out in the African poems, therefore, set up a typically Harrisonian thematic mirror whereby the poems can be read as being as much “about” the poetics of a colonialist inheritance (from the white neo-colonialist point of view) as they are “about” the discomfited, usually sexual desire. (Kelleher 5, 7)

Whatever repressed elements in his own psyche Harrison might be projecting, the contextual realities that his monologues articulate have been amply documented. Ronald Hyam has shown how the sexual excesses which significantly animate and define Harrison’s speakers could find congenial space in African territory. *Empire and Sexuality* delivers clear senses of how pervasive British sexual preoccupations overseas were, and how the empire provided for its colonial masters an unrivalled field for the maximisation of sexual opportunity and the pursuit of sexual variation. Readers of Harrison’s early poetry will not be surprised by Hyam’s opening reminder that “Britain has spread venereal disease around the globe along with its racecourses and botanical gardens, barracks and jails, steam engines and law books” (3). Venereal infection becomes a powerful metaphor in part 2 of *The Loiners*, with Harrison using a geographical detour in the “Travesties” section of his white queen sequence to identify sexually transmitted disease as a direct consequence of Europe’s predatory rape of the New World.

Since these adult explorations in the phallus and the id are in part concerned with insistent psychological and political returns of the repressed, it is at least appropriate that they open with Thomas Browne's aphorism—"there is all Africa and her progenies in us; we are that bold and adventurous piece of Nature" (*L* 19). This in turn comes from a paragraph which opens with a Latin tag described as "The only undisputed Axiome in Philosophy: 'There are no Grotesques in Nature.'"⁵ But the confidence of Browne's renaissance assertion is soon destabilized by the persona of the debauched and paedophilic white queen himself: even his gender-bending name which here signifies the effeminate partner in a homosexual relationship might also conjure up a Lewis Carroll looking-glass world whose mirror phase confounds rather than confirms any subject-identity; or alternatively it might figure in grotesque parody the nineteenth-century English monarch associated with global empire. Then, his opening declamatory and self-dramatizing identification as poet and provincial Dadaist registers both a truth about this queen's skill with words and a sense of his own out-datedness, since Dada's brief metropolitan moment after World War I signified an international rebellion against the reason, morality and religion which had ushered the world into its first collective experience of industrialized slaughter. But Dada also coincided with the post-war European carve-up of African space, when Harrison's queen ("past fifty" when he delivers the first of his monologues, as colonialism in Africa is coming to an end) would have been moving into adolescence. At any rate, a nihilistic "nothing" which became politically significant in the Dadaist lexicon retains its functionality for Harrison's ageing gay, now lusting ineffectually through the territory of empire's dying days: "It is this Nothingness and nothing else / Throbs in the blood" (*SP* 26). For Harrison's expatriate academic barfly on the lookout for the next pick-up, breaching what Judith Butler called "the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality" is a driven if increasingly inebriated necessity, no matter how incompetently performed (viii):

like an elephant
 That bungles with its trunk about its cage,
 I make my half-sloshed entrances and rage
 Like any normal lover when I come
 Before I've managed it. Then his thin bum
 That did seem beautiful will seem obscene. (*SP* 21-22)

In the queen's cross-looping consciousness, a literary archaism—"did seem beautiful"—pre-scribes an echo of Thomas Wyatt's renaissance courtier whose sex-life is in decline. In keeping with Harrison's often ironic and sometimes uneasy relationship to canonical English writing, the white queen character in this first monologue is trapped simultaneously in conflicting senses; of the radical distance between the pathos of Wyatt's speaker and the drunken discomposure of his own sexual predicament, as well as an uncomfortable awareness that for both of them sexual pleasure is

a failing option. Wyatt's figure has evidently enjoyed seizing the day whenever he could, now he regrets that day's passing: "I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek / That now are wild, and do not remember / That some time they put themselves in danger / To take bread at my hand" (32). In African space the white queen is still busily seeking the delivery of differently oriented sexual favours: "I hold my court / On expat pay, my courtiers all bought" (SP 21). But in colonial dispositions the cash-nexus that enables his relationships also distorts them, and he blames his mother for a seemingly inevitable monetarisation of desire—"I made this compromise / With commodities and cash for you" (SP 21)—while nonetheless continuing to "pour shillings" into the hands of a boy with whom he bungles sex. Even in his quest for adult partners, the gaze that Harrison's queen casts is white, European and paranoid, strikingly unlike the self-confident African Other who focuses his desire in cross-gendered renaissance cadence:

O he could move
 Like an oiled (slow-motion) racehorse at its peak,
 Outrageous, and not gentle, tame, or meek —
 O magnificently shameless in his gear,
 He sauntered the flunkied restaurant, queer
 As a clockwork orange and not scared. (SP 21)

So the white queen speaks in tongues: his sexuality is constructed as the libidinal unconscious of an order that produces its object of desire for consumption by an alienated desiring subject. "Hooked on the blacks" (SP 24) and cracking jokes "against myself about my taste in little boys" (SP 23), the Queen's sometimes cynical detachment breaks against the political and psychic reality of his activities.

Since projections of the Other usually incorporate repressed aspects of the self, the queen's relations with Africans are riddled with contradiction: his African Other in these poems figures as an object of both desire and derision, of envy and contempt, while the skin-colour that triggers the queen's need also focuses the "black, black, black" of his recurrent clinical depression. Because he is further condemned to see his sexual pursuits through already internalised cultural and economic forms, he discloses the corrupt political unconscious of exploitative systems masquerading as intimacy. As far as either his sense of isolation or his nihilistic response to it are concerned he is not alone. In Harrison's assemblage neo-colonial European figures in an African landscape are all going into the dark. According to a gay male who is always "conscious of the void," the shrivelled and unsatisfied Englishwoman in poem II of "Satyrae" moves in fear of "that great, black hole / Pascal had with him once, *l'abime ouvert* / he thought was special but is everywhere" (SP 23). She moves in the same social circle as the schoolmistress in poem IV who sees sex as "too much spawning," and who refuses the offered services of her Nigerian house-boys. "Nothing" beckons for her as it does for the queen, while copulation around her intensifies repression as racial hos-

tility: “black creatures claw / At one another in her packing straw” (SP 25). For the expatriate community these poems bring into view the eternal silence of infinite space that filled Blaise Pascal with terror forms an appropriate intertext. In poem V of “Satyrae,” the lines “Nothing is no little part / Of time’s huge effort in the human heart” compose an apt threnody for an exiled White Russian doctor, a displaced person whose medical duties give him access to private lives marked by a similar absence: “it’s not diseases but the void that kills.” This European émigré, who is additionally ostracised and wifeless, “reads instead / His damp-stained *Pensées* on their double bed” (SP 26). It is tempting to speculate that the book is open at Pascal’s assessment of man’s condition as “inconstancy, boredom, anxiety [...] equally incapable of seeing the nothingness from which he emerges and the infinity in which he is engulfed” (36). But if that were indeed the doctor’s text, he would glean limited satisfaction from it: Pascal may have conceived of God’s existence as “an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere” (89), but that seeming emptiness is also for Pascal something redemptively other and salvationally different. Pascal’s god was hidden but felt nonetheless to be all-comprehending, and that limited consolation is unavailable to the expatriate community limned in Harrison’s sequences, whose presiding spirit “cackles from Heaven at the desperate earth” (SP 23).

An earthly desperation is repeatedly signalled as venereal contamination over an extensive sphere of influence, including deprived areas in empire’s domestic territories; from post-war Leeds where Thomas Campey suffers from a degenerative condition in the spinal chord, “*Tabes Dorsalis*,” an effect of neurosyphilis (SP 13), to the doctor who knows from treating Europeans in Africa “how the slightest sweatrash on the crutch / Scares some and with good reason” (SP 26). Meanwhile, prostrate with drink, the white queen “fear[s] / This burning in my groin is gonorrhoea” (SP 32), and the PWD man gloats over escaping from infection (SP 42). In order to develop the perception of sexually transmitted disease as a sign of abusive power relationships into a broader indictment of the European imperial project, Harrison places the poem called “Distant Ophir” at the centre of his “White Queen” sequence. “Distant Ophir,” which has been properly described as “a powerful antidote to the romance of imperial trade celebrated in John Masefield’s ‘Cargoes,’ a once ubiquitous school anthology poem from which Harrison takes his title” (Spencer 30), represents an historical detour into the Caribbean. There it reconstructs a narrative moment from Girolamo Fracastoro (in the Latin used by Harrison Hieronymus Fracastorius), the Italian physician, astronomer, geologist and poet born “without a mouth” (SP 30). In his verse tract called *Syphilis, or the French Disease* (first published in Latin in 1530), Fracastorius proposed a scientific germ theory of disease 300 years before its laboratory validation, and rejected the notion that syphilis was brought back to Europe from the New World by Columbus’s first voyage (11). Harrison develops and exploits both the theory and the notion as an imperial political metaphor. Fracastorius combines Columbus’s numerous landings into one event when relating how he and his crew set down on Haiti (Ophyre). Using imported European power, Spaniards with the new

invention of portable guns shot “ornate birds [with] blue flashing wings contrasting with their red beaks, who [until then] passed untroubled through their native grove’s wilderness.” Using inserted European values, Fracastorius goes on to describe as sacred to Apollo, a Mediterranean god of poetry but also of constitutions and codes of law, Caribbean birds that retreated “flocking together in terror” to the high rocks (95). In Harrison’s poem one of these terrified birds delivers the prophetic curse that syphilis, “the malaise of the West,” will come into being at Europe’s first conquest of “quiet peoples until now quite free,” and will thereafter ravage Europeans down the ages (*SP* 30, 29). While “Distant Ophir” makes alternative narrative out of an actual historical moment when the very constitution of self and other is inseparable from their mutual contamination, an imaginative treatment of disease as historical interaction rather than an effect of the microbiological agent which causes it strongly implies that “orientalism” also has Caribbean roots. Harrison’s imperial ontology develops colonial and postcolonial resonance for George Bataille’s notion that “the sexual act is in time what the tiger is in space” (qtd. in Ashcroft 37). In such ways Harrison’s sequences magnify the perception that colonialism, in the English example, was no marginal activity on the edges of British civilization, but fundamental in its own cultural self-representation (Young 174).

An epigraph for the fourth movement of the “White Queen” sequence, called “Manica,” further implicates a colonial psychopathology in the depredations of empire by associating tropical neurasthenia with the unhealthy life-style of European incomers. But critique is one thing, change is another, and change associated with decolonization, as Franz Fanon had cause to know, is “always a violent phenomenon.” Fanon also realised that the most important element in this change lay in the fact that it was “willed, called for, demanded” by colonizing incomers as well as by subjected peoples:

The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonised. But the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another “species” of men and women: the colonisers. (*Wretched* 27)

As the colonial system breaks down in different African territories, the rapidly developing possibility of change opens up a terrifying (and terrifyingly imminent) future for the white queen. The “badly driven armoured truck” that keeps him awake in poem III of “Satyrae” signals his pending return to England (*SP* 23); or a disturbed nightmare of mental breakdown becomes daylight war-fighting: “some loud gun / Fires short distance shells into the sun. / Patrols and shots.” A new government takes over, promising the death penalty for “murder, looting, rape, / *Homosexuality*, all in the same breath,” and thoughts of return to Britain bring memories of an earlier mental collapse and hospitalization (*SP* 24). In the 15th “Zeg-Zeg” post-card poem “ter-

rifying cries” are heard by a protagonist more bothered by his dose of clap. He watches his steward: “still in white uniform and sash, / waving a sharpened piece of Chevie, ride / his old *Raleigh* to the genocide” (*SP* 36). Eschewing any narrative of progress, the poems that present the queen activate a colonial past and a post-independence present in different African locations. So he cavorts in complex space; his libidinal discourse giving access to a postcolonial imagination sometimes alert to the impossible possibility of escape from the effects of empire.⁶ It is an impossible possibility partly because one constant in the legacy of colonialism as it is filtered through the Queen’s internalised web of desire, complicity and revolt is that its Africans are consigned to a silence as insistent as his own anxiety. Nowhere do they speak, and their enforced muteness makes for Fanon an equally insistent return of the repressed, so that reading Fanon against the white queen produces immediately relevant disjunctions: “If the white man challenges my humanity, I will impose my whole weight as a man on his life and show him that I am not that ‘sho’ good eatin’” that he persists in imagining” (*Black Skin* 229). Elsewhere, the political psychologies that Fanon describes are pointedly relevant to poems whose formal variety discloses existential as well as socio-political realities.

As the white queen’s hectic drinking intensifies, “Manica,” the name of a province in Mozambique, begins to carry inevitable overtones of delirium fitting for a character whose “sex-life’s manic like a bad rondeau” (*SP* 31). And a condition of delirium seems additionally appropriate for the queen’s rewriting of colonialism as a history of excess:

Victorian hearse-plumes nodding victims in
To bouts of wifeless boredom and *El vomito*,
Shacking with natives, lovely Sodom’s sin,
Boozers with riff-raff in their *British* arms. (*SP* 31)

As blind to his ethnocentrism as he is indulgent of his sex-drive, the queen enjoys going native, adopting an “African Personality” and transgressively viewing his desired African Other as “the keeper of the impalpable gate that opens into the realm of orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 177). With gay abandon the queen’s bacchanalian mode subjects African historical figures to the same disparagement he turns on British colonials. During 1855 in the Gambia, smallest and oldest of Britain’s colonies in West Africa, a Muslim Marabout called Omar who had a few years earlier resisted the French in Algeria, organized attacks on British settlements (Gailey 39). Omar was astute enough to delay launching his campaign until the rains came, when the British would have difficulty moving their artillery and their rockets would be less likely to ignite the thatched roofs of Mandingo villages. He also reportedly took the opportunity to boost his local standing by cultivating the belief that through his delaying tactics he was turning white men’s bullets into water (Gray 391). In the white queen’s drunken and recklessly impolitic version this becomes:

Omar, not Khayam, the Gambia's mad Marabout
 Changed the Commissioners' bullets into water;
 Into water, being Moslem. I, being atheist,
 Am full of more potent potions when I'm pissed. (SP 31)

With uncanny directness Fanon speaks again to the white queen's iconoclasm: "colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (*Wretched* 169). Revelling in his intoxicated awareness of sexual deviance, this is precisely what the white queen hubristically does:

A century later, full of *Guinnesses and Stars*,
 I'm God's own Heaven, and as I slash I shout:
The white man's water turns back into fire!
 Braving castration at their scimitars,
 and single-handed put Islam to rout,
 And vanquish the missions with my bent desire,
 Spouting a semen capable of slaughter. (SP 32)

Alcohol-induced delirium damages both body and mind: consequently disease as diagnosis and as metaphor intensifies its insistence when the wheels that drum in rhythm to heart tremors during the queen's train journey home in "The Railroad Heroides" exaggerate their booming effect in "The Foreign Body," a phrase that serves as appropriately for the queen's presence in Africa as for the infectious insects that penetrate his flesh. In what is for Harrison's speaker a nightmarish reversal of history, the cases of tachycardia that Fanon witnessed in African victims of empire, "accompanied by anxiety, and by an impression of imminent death" (*Wretched* 236), now plague a postcolonial sybarite unwilling to let go: "Each blue horizontal thrust / into the red, rain-spattered dust / brings my tachycardia back" (SP 33). "A century later" than Omar would place the queen in Africa in 1955, when Cold War east-west hostility was at its height, dividing the world in terror. In the white queen's worsening condition, fevered imagery connects insect-pierced flesh with his own penetrations of, and in, African territory; and during the resulting night-sweats his dreams of Nazi genocide blur into Cold War apocalypse—"Boom! Boom! World War 3's / wagging in my arteries" (SP 34). A specialist vocabulary is deployed to generate a sense of besieging and pervasive infection—"anopheline," relating to mosquitoes; "diptera," winged insects; "Cantharides," Spanish-fly, thought to be an aphrodisiac but in fact a class one poison which causes irritation to the urethra and serious kidney damage; "tampan," a blood-sucking tick and carrier of African relapsing fever; "trypanosome," a parasite which causes African sleeping sickness. In aggregate here they combine their effects to specify imperial corruption, "red as an Empire or lipstick,"

and a worsening heart condition inescapably related to promiscuity: “randiness, my life’s disease” (*SP* 33). So by including but moving beyond its personal dimensions, the political pathology of the queen’s condition is made evident in a literalising of Browne’s epigraph. The body politic reduces to an anxious, isolated and stricken body and the “Africa and her prodigies” which the queen now carries within himself relocates physical and political geographies as fantasies of global dominion in a single, fevered, and onanistic self:

Desperately I call these apprehensions
Africa but the map
churns like wet acres in these rains
and thunder tugging at my veins.
That Empire flush diluted is
pink as a lover’s orifice,
then *Physical, Political* run
first into marblings and then one
mud colour, the dirty, grey,
flat reaches of infinity.

The one red thing, I squat and grab
at myself like a one-clawed crab. (*SP* 34)

By turns camp, crude, comic, and driven; half-blind and acutely perceptive, the queen’s Dionysian energies can nonetheless formulate desire with persuasive urgency. Even so, as *The Zeg-Zeg Postcards* demonstrate, whereas this metropolitan academic travels freely, his African lover who remains place-bound and illiterate, is represented in the gaze of an imagining power freely using the signifying systems at its command, and exercising them in the service of his libido. The seventh postcard registers both the queen’s advantage in prevailing power-relations and the complacency of a gaze that does nothing to disturb those relations:

I watch you pour the pure
well water, balanced up the mountain,
in blinding kerosene cans,
each lovely morning, convict,
your release date, nineteen years from now,
daubed in brown ink on your rotting shirt. (*SP* 35)

The (mis)placing of “lovely” speaks subliminal appropriation of a prisoner destined to rot, yet remaining a figure of desire in poems which also contrive to communicate the energies of pleasurable lust. But the queen also knows that “what begins in honest lust can end / with innocent blood on its hands” (*L* 41); and Fanon again haunts Harrison’s

text: "The landing of the white man," says Fanon, "inflicted injury without measure. The consequences of that irruption of Europeans [...] were not psychological alone, since, as every authority has observed, there are inner relationships between consciousness and the social context" (*Black Skin* 97). An apparent dialogic conflict between Fanon the African revolutionary and Harrison's debauched colonial expatriate continues: "An erection on Rodin's *Thinker*," Fanon suggests, "is a shocking thought. One cannot decently 'have a hard on' everywhere" (*Black Skin* 165). "What's that to me?" answers one of the queen's post-cards, "I can get a stand / even from maps of the Holy Land" (*SP* 36).

The white queen lusts after an African convict at his "Easter weekend Shangri-la, Pankshin." In the same place a soliloquist whose voice and fields of reference seems more autobiographically Harrison's casts a contorted candle-lit shadow during a Christmas power cut, and he puts testosterone levels on the line by harmonizing rhythms of orgasm with English literary precedent. Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" preserves the urbane tone in which an English mode typically constructed women as compliant consumers of male seduction rhetoric and as willing servants of the phallus; but Marvell's poem does not displace lust from its otherwise decorous construction of male sexuality. "The Heart of Darkness" celebrates a re-birth of that lust with a wife who first comes into focus as "my blurred light in the blind / concentric circles of blank mind" (*SP* 38). Selfhood is again the geography in prospect for an explorer whose ontology is a site of historical exploration: "this blackout makes our flesh and bone / an Africa, a Livingstone" (*SP* 38). The poem measures its climactic identification of Africa's "dark continent of fallen sex" against the Latin terms of Adam's necessary sin and the myth of the Fortunate Fall, and against the shadow and chant of a folk-tale giant who figures differently a macho swagger that Harrison's post-coital speaker also recognizes. The metaphorical Africa he carries within him is a difficult testing ground whose geography insists on a difference that is still resiliently other and as far beyond the reach of European signifying systems as at the poem's opening. When on another occasion Harrison itemised some of the equipment with which imperial Britons confronted different cultures: "phlegm, firepower, cerebral caution, exercise," he included "reason, that delicate transistor, tuned into very high frequency civilisation" ("Black and White" 92). Some years before Jacques Derrida deconstructed "The White Mythology" whereby the texts of Western reason oppose their light to the opaque materiality of its cultural others, Harrison is decisively challenging that supposed supremacy. Disconnected in place as he is energized by sex, his speaker realises that "Nigeria's Niger is not yet / harnessed to our wireless set" (*SP* 40). So the poem's ten octets discipline difficult intensities: their placing of instinctual pleasure at the heart of a cultural construction controverts Freud's idea that only by an ascetic renunciation of those instincts can libido be sublimated for the tasks of creating high culture. Then, by overwriting Christ harrowing Hell with the figure of a copulating male the poem further subverts codes that have historically sanctioned particular forms of personhood. The effect is to reconstitute pleasurable appetite as

redemptive promise, and thus to rework Christian mysticism into a politics of desire. Ending on disconnection, though, the poem resists closure in recognition of unfinished conflict. “We have not in the least liberated sexuality,” says Foucault, “though we have, to be exact, carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos; the limit of language, since it traces that line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence” (30).

In a chapter called “The Woman of Colour and the White Man” Fanon shows impatience with some African literary representations of cross-racial relationships, and quotes from a native woman writer introducing a sympathetic white male:

M. Campian is the only white man in Saint-Louis who goes regularly to the Saint-Louis Club [a club frequented by local young men, situated across the road from the exclusively European Civil Club]—a man of a certain social standing, for he is an engineer with the Department of Bridges and Highways, as well as deputy director of Public Works. [...] He is said to be very much of a Negrophile. (*Black Skin* 54)

“The Songs of the PWD Man” construct dramatic monologues in rhyming couplets for a sixty-year-old “negrophile” engineer of a certain social standing who parodies the bluff and down-to-earth Yorkshire stereotype: “Laying roads and ladies up as far as Kano town” (*SP* 42). Peter Porter noticed that this public works engineer is presented in rhythms derived from Rudyard Kipling and was surprised at “how well the old style comes up in emergent African dress” (“Bosom of the Family” 75). Certainly when Kipling bases his rhythms on music-hall songs and recitations he speaks a metre that Harrison has also made his own, and when Kipling utters the dialect of the tribe he talks a language Harrison knows well. As phrase and ideological construct “The White Man” is ubiquitously valorised in Kipling’s writing; and that might suggest an additional cause for Harrison’s dissident attention. Moreover, Kipling’s account of the conscription of a native fighter into Victoria’s service in “The Ballad of East and West” includes the phrase that Harrison subversively re-genders: “So, thou must eat the White Queen’s meat, and all her foes are thine, / And thou must harry thy father’s hold for the peace of the Border-line” (192). While the post-imperial perspectives of Harrison’s “PWD Man” borrow some and play radical havoc with others of Kipling’s grounding assumptions, Kipling’s inventive versifying and down-to-earth realism are effectively transposed and reconstructed. More immediately, Harrison’s “PWD” songs shape an intertextual dialogue with the white queen.

The queen regrets the fading of his “young Novello sheen” (*SP* 21); he hears a post-independence anthem blaring out “the new world like a Blackpool prom” (*SP* 24); he sees sex in terms of commodity consumption—“buttocks ... BUTOX, / marketable essence of beef”—and he makes *négritude* a matter of sexual preference (*L*

44). The PWD Man is differently positioned on the psycho-sexual spectrum of possibility, and his long-line conversational rhythms speak of heterosexual encounters where sexist and racist assumptions are internalised as casually as appetite runs riot. Counterpointing the self-conscious and sometimes tormented queen, the rough-edged engineer seems sometimes to refer directly if negatively to his expatriate fellow-Loirer: "I'm not your socialistic, go-native-ite type chap / With his flapping, nig-nog dresses and his dose of clap" (*SP* 42). But with counterpoint goes complementarity: as for the white queen, time's winged chariot is on the move for this Public Works Department engineer about to go back to Leeds and unwelcome retirement. Salving guilt with charity, his different register delivers different access to the white queen's world:

I have my finer feelings and I'd like to make it clear
 I'm not just itchy fingers and a senile lecher's leer.
 I have my qualms of conscience and shower *silver*, if you please,
 To their lepers and blind beggars kipping under trees. (*SP* 42)

The "sharpened piece of Chevie" that the queen's steward takes with him for blood-letting now becomes "those flashy Chevie fins / Honed up for knife blades or curled for muezzins / To megaphone the *Koran* from their mud mosques and call / The sun down from its shining with their caterwaul" (*SP* 43). Roaming Nigeria and, in "The Death of the PWD Man," the Gambia, this figure in a Bathurst (Banjul) graveyard echoes as he rewrites the Queen's "soft-shoe shuffle on the white man's bones" (*SP* 31). Like the queen, he prefers "the bottle to the Crescent and Star, / The bottle to the Christian's Cross" (*SP* 46), though he is more inclined to boast about his sex life: "They're pleased with my performance. I'm satisfied with theirs" (*SP* 42). When the engineer travels back to Leeds by train he figures a postcolonial journey related to the queen's in their shared heart condition connected to wheel rhythms, and in the associating metaphor that re-maps global dominion onto diseased anatomy: "there's a rash / The shape of bloody Britain and it's starting to spread. / My Belly's like a blow-up globe all blotched with Empire red" (*SP* 46). This Yorkshireman stripped of exotic powers and principalities looks out of the carriage window that brings him nearer to retirement, and senses a vacancy that the white queen would recognize: "I'm a sort of setting sun, all my light drawn in to shed / Only darkness on the living, only darkness on the dead" (*SP* 49). He is connecting transgressive desire with forgetfulness and oblivion and that, Jonathan Dollimore reminds us, follows a long tradition, sometimes religious, mystical, or romantic or sometimes a combination of all of these: "It also becomes an experience which indirectly registers the resilience of the individual's own immediate cultural past: forgetfulness and oblivion are the means of its escape, but become so in a way which registers its continuing presence" (339). A sense of continuing presence may not hold true for the queen, nor for his civil engineer compatriot; but perhaps it does so complexly for a poet resolved "to bring all

yesterday to mind” and for whom “Oblivion is darkness, Memory light” (*Gaze* 38; *Shadow of Hiroshima* 93).

Notes

- ¹ Tony Harrison, “Foreword” to *Aikin Mata* (10). Reprinted in Astley 84-87. For ease of reference critical essays reprinted in Astley will be cited from its pages.
- ² See *Paradise Lost*, Bk. 2, 1-6.
- ³ For ease of reference Harrison’s *Selected Poems* (abbreviated as *SP*) will normally be cited. Where the text of *The Loiners* differs from that of the *Selected Poems*, *The Loiners* will be cited, abbreviated as *L*.
- ⁴ Harrison quotes Acton in his interview with John Haffenden. Astley 236.
- ⁵ Cited by Harrison from Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, I.15. I quote from the Everyman edition (London: Dent, 1962), 17.
- ⁶ I borrow the phrase from Howard McNaughton, “The Speaking Subject: the impossible possible world of realised empire,” in *De-scribing empire: post-colonialism and textuality*, 218. See also “The Scramble for Post-Colonialism,” by Stephen Slemon, 15-32.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill. “EXCESS: Post-colonialism and the verandahs of meaning.” *De-scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and textually*. Ed. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson. London: Routledge, 1994. 33-44.
- Astley, Neil. Tony Harrison. *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies I*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1991.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde; Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- . *Black Skin, White Masks* [1967]. Trans. Charles Markmann. London: Pluto, 1993.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Trans. D. F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. New York: Cornell UP, 1991.
- Fracastoro’s *Syphilis*. Trans. Geoffrey Eatough. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1984.
- Gailey, H. A. *A History of the Gambia*. London: Routledge, 1964.
- Gray, J. M. *History of The Gambia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1940.
- Haffenden, John. “Interview with Tony Harrison.” Astley 227-46.
- Harrison, Tony and James Simmons. *Aikin Mata: The Lysistrata of Aristophanes*. Ibadan: Oxford UP, 1966.
- . “Black and White and Red all over: the fiction of Empire.” Astley 90-103.

- . “The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa.” Astley 32-35.
- . *The Loiners*. London: London Magazine Editions, 1970.
- . *Selected Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984
- . *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*. London: Faber, 1990.
- . “The Mother of the Muses.” *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1992. 38-45.
- . “Cheating the Void.” *The Shadow of Hiroshima & other film poems*. London: Faber, 1995. 93-102.
- Hyam, Ronald. *Empire and Sexuality: the British Experience*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *The Complete Verse*. Ed. M. M. Kaye. London: Cathie, 1990.
- Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer. Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1966.
- Porter, Peter. “In the Bosom of the Family.” *London Magazine* 10.5 (1970): 73-79.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1993.
- Wyatt, Thomas. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Joost Daalder. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975.
- Young, Robert J. C. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- . *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.