

Sargasso 2002-I

Sargasso, a journal of Caribbean literature, language, and culture edited at the University of Puerto Rico, publishes critical essays, interviews, book reviews, and some poems and short stories. *Sargasso* particularly welcomes material written by and/or about the people of the Caribbean region and its diaspora. Essays and critical studies should conform to the style of the *MLA Handbook*. Short stories should be no more than 2,500 words in length, and poems should be kept to no more than twenty to thirty lines. All correspondence must include S.A.S.E. For electronic submission, write to: lofiet@isla.net

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The Ph.D. Program in Caribbean Literature and Linguistics, Department of English, College of Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico publishes *Sargasso*. It also hosts the annual Caribbean Doctoral Studies Symposium, an extension of the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Caribbean 2000 Project, 1994-1999, and frequently publishes papers presented as part of the Symposium. The current volume includes the papers selected from the 2001 and 2002 Symposium sessions.

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Memorial del olvido*

Ana Lydia Vega**

El 7 de noviembre de 2002, en el hospital Auxilio Mutuo de Río Piedras, se despidió del mundo el escritor Pedro Juan Soto. Re señas y noticieros nacionales rindieron amplia cuenta de una existencia signada, a partes iguales, por la creación y la tragedia.

La muerte de un chofer ponceño, ocurrida en una casa de convalecencia norteamericana el 28 de diciembre de ese mismo año, pasó casi inadvertida. Víctima de la insidiosa enfermedad que va deshilvanando la fina tejedura del ayer en el cerebro, discretamente desapareció de la tierra Julio Ortiz Molina.

¿Se habrían borrado de su mente las imágenes espantosas que ligaron para siempre la vida del chofer a la del escritor? ¿Se llevaría también el torrente turbio del olvido los sucesos de aquel siniestro 25 de julio?

Ha transcurrido casi un cuarto de siglo desde el asesinato político que punzó la sensibilidad del país. El polvo se ha asentado sobre los archivos. Las gavetas legislativas han devorado cientos de documentos, producidos durante más de una década de pesquisas inconclusas en torno al crimen del Cerro Maravilla.

La política entrampó a la historia. Los culpables se enmascararon de silencio. Para quienes guardamos todavía el luto severo de esa época, no han dejado de arder las cenizas de la memoria. Con la mirada inerte que nos interrogaba entonces a través de la pantalla del televisor, los

* *El Nuevo Día*, "Perspectiva" (6 de febrero de 2003): 128.

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Zadie Smith. *White Teeth*. New York: Vintage International, 2000.

The Caribbean has long been considered a prime site to examine the process of cultural mixing. Whether under the name of transculturation (Fernando Ortiz), creolization (Kamau Brathwaite), relation (Edouard Glissant), or the cross-cultural imagination (Wilson Harris), a variety of thinkers have identified the Caribbean as a crucible within which a new conception of identity is being fashioned. In the novel *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith has extended the borders of the Caribbean to include London. She shows how Caribbean people have moved into London and made it their own, and how Caribbean culture has become a central part of the culture of the city: for example, the youth language which the novel celebrates is heavily influenced by Jamaican phrases and rhythms. Even more than that, the novel depicts London as a womb-space, a site of creolization, a far-flung island of Caribbeanness adrift in the sea of the English countryside. *White Teeth* shows how London has become a contact zone for cultures from around the world.

That London turns out to be "Caribbean" is typical of Smith's ironic sense of humor, but also of her more serious anti-essentialist agenda. The novel undermines bordered constructions of Englishness, but also of Caribbeanness. Caribbeanness is never an essence but rather a process, the borders of the archipelago infinitely fluid. At the same time, *White Teeth* is never a blind celebration of cultural syncretism. The novel explores the ramifications and outcomes of cultural mixing, aware of the dangers and possibilities of a globalized world in which hybridity is the rule. The future for London immigrant subcultures cannot be reduced to either assimilation or marginalization; instead, Smith shows us the emergence of something else entirely, a London that is British and Caribbean and South Asian and American all at the same time.

At its simplest level, the novel tells the story of three families: the Jones family, the Iqbal family, and the Chalfen family. The Jones' patriarch, Archie, is the typical Englishman, a working stiff whose moment of truth occurred half a century ago during World War Two. His wife, Clara, came to England during the enormous West Indian migrations in the years after the war. They have a daughter, Irie, who must struggle with growing up black and British. Samad and Alsana Iqbal are from Bangladesh; Samad and Archie fought together in Eastern Europe. They have a pair of twin sons, Magid and Millat. Magid, harder working and

more intelligent, is sent back to Bangladesh for a traditional education. Millat, the better looking and less serious of the two, stays in London to struggle in school. Finally, Dr. Marcus Chalfen, of Jewish descent but the novel's bearer of Englishness, works as a scientist trying to create a genetically cloned mouse. His wife, Joyce, takes an interest in cultivating plants and wayward children like Millat, while their eldest son, Joshua, befriends Millat and Irie.

Having given us such a multicultural cast of characters, Smith proceeds to perform a bait and switch; just when we think that each character represents a certain type, she shows us that the stereotypes are more complicated. She plays on the ironies of inheritance: privileged Josh, rebelling against his father, joins a radical animal rights organization; Magid gets his traditional Bangladesh education, but this education Westernizes him and leads him to become a lawyer for Dr. Chalfen; and Millat, left behind in London, turns to fundamentalist Islam. She plays especially on the ironies of Millat's fundamentalism. On the one hand, Millat and his friends are poster-children for corporate globalization, borrowing from African-American, Italian-American, Latino, Afro-Caribbean, and Far Eastern cultures, all apparently via Hollywood. Yet these boys wear their Hollywood uniforms while they fight the forces of secularization and Western imperialism, in the name of a traditional Islamic way of life. Cultural purity is impossible, and inheritance is more than a matter of genes or location. Being in London does not insure one will become British; nor does returning to the motherland protect one from the far-reaches of Western culture.

The novel's structure is simple and precise. It is broken into four sections, each section having five chapters. The first section is "Archie 1974, 1945," the second is "Samad 1984, 1857," the third is "Irie 1990, 1907," and the final one is "Magid, Millat, and Marcus 1992, 1999." Leaving the fourth section aside, the first three are obviously parallel. Each section centers around the character from the title, and each takes place primarily during 1974, 1984, and 1990, respectively. Each features a chapter called a "root canal," in which we see that the insecurities and inadequacies in the lives of Archie, Samad and Irie all date back to a traumatic moment from their pasts. For Archie, his battles with the Nazis in World War Two have left him emotionally and physically crippled; for Samad, his great-grandfather Mangal Pande's heroism or buffoonery (depending on which history book one consults) in the Indian Mutiny of 1857 still haunt him more than a century later; and for Irie, her grandmother's conception due to rape by an English colonial officer still echoes through the family tree down to her. The metaphor

of the "root canal" suggests that shiny, happy, multicultural London is rotten beneath its surface, and that unless those rotten roots can be exposed and dealt with, the future will be one of decay.

The final section, "Magid, Millat, and Marcus 1992, 1999," departs from the patterns of the previous three to turn towards the future. In this section, Marcus's project to develop a cloned mouse emerges as the novel's allegory for fate and destiny. On the one hand, Joyce Chalfens' musings on gardening suggest that the only way for the English race to renew itself is through welcoming other genes. Joyce writes: "Where once gardeners swore by the reliability of the self-pollinating plant...now we are more adventurous, positively singing the praises of cross-pollination...a species cloning such uniform offspring runs the risk of having its entire population wiped out by a single evolutionary event...cross-pollination produces more varied offspring, which are better able to cope with a changing environment" (257-58). Yet Smith gives Joyce these lines ironically. Such thinking, in nakedly biological terms, is fine when discussing plants but is something else when applied to people. Joyce's efforts to transfer her skills at cultivating rare species to helping Millat show the limitations of her framework.

If Joyce's language of genetics, pollination, and hybridity are vaguely metaphorical, Marcus, in creating FutureMouse, works quite literally with genes and genealogy. *White Teeth* calls into question the pseudo-scientific discourse of hybridity, the discourse of choice for multiculturalism, by putting this language in the mouths of the Chalfens. The novel places Marcus' project, to create a mouse in which diseases and imperfections could be controlled or eliminated, as the inheritor of a long line of social projects based on supposedly scientific grounds, from colonialism's efforts to "educate" and "civilize" non-European people, to Nazi eugenics. *White Teeth* offers the position that while cultural mixing is something unavoidable, positive, and enjoyable, it is not something which should be prescribed, mandated or controlled.

White Teeth is a fun and readable novel, brimming with the linguistic excitement of postmodern, postcolonial London. Its contribution to British and Caribbean literature is to blur the boundaries between the two; written at the turn of the 21st century, the novel comes as proof that globalization is making national or even regional literatures endangered species. The novel is deeply suspicious of certain kinds of multiculturalism and the discussions surrounding cultural mixing, through keeping sight of the historical circumstances which

have brought about our fluid, hybrid world. In the end, though, *White Teeth* offers a celebration of contemporary London, a London neither Charles Dickens nor Sam Selvon could ever have imagined.

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**Elizabeth Núñez. *Bruised Hibiscus*.
Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 2000.**

In this novel, the dark force of patriarchy permeates 1954 Trinidad. The horror it engenders is inscribed on the bodies of the women: black and blue marks that flower on the surface of their skins, a gnawed face and gutted body floating ashore in a burlap bag, a black woman chopped up and fed to the pigs, implicit threats resonating across the island—"man-woman business" underlying and justifying the carnage. The labyrinthian twists and turns of the plot explore the many uses and abuses of humans as property. Núñez leads you into the dungeons of the mind to reveal how the characters are entrapped by ideas inhabiting the secret passages of perception and memory. The final and greatest horror is the realization that this is not just the product of Núñez' imagination. A look at daily newspaper reports on crimes of passion, domestic abuse and sexual harassment reveal that "man-woman business" is no fiction, but the gothic reality produced by tenacious ideas.

Bruised Hibiscus is the story of two childhood friends, Rosa and Zuela, reunited on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Virgin of Fatima. The summer they were twelve, they witnessed the rape of another girl behind a hibiscus bush. Twenty years later, when news of a brutal murder travels by word of mouth throughout the island moving swarms of fearful women to pray to the Virgin, the old friends are among them.

Rosa and Zuela hear of the murder from the lips of their husbands whose accounts include a rationalization and implicit threat which rattles the "seed that had been lying dormant in the friends' souls for years." These seeds were planted at the time they observed the rape behind the hibiscus bush. Rosa and Zuela have been incubating this memory which is now "catapulted from its protective encasement" by