Collage and Decollage: A Multi-Media Approach to Black and Asian British Identity

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Abstract
Black Britain is a space of transcultural transformations: a process of encounters and collisions which entails the disruption of a previous order. Its literature and visual art are not only concerned with displaying experiences of insertion and adaptation within British society, but also with exploring and expanding the borders of a multi-layered identity that implies, even in its situatedness, transnational and transcultural routes. Within this frame, a multi-media approach may offer a way to tackle these continual processes of dis-articulation and re-articulation. Stemming from Salman Rushdie's "stereoscopic vision" and Stuart Hall's "cut-and-mix", I will choose examples from black British and Asian British artists and writers (Hanif Kureishi, Yinka Shonibare, The Singh Twins and Ferdinand Dennis) and, drawing upon the techniques of bricolage, collage and decollage, I will analyse them as instruments both to construct and read a multiple narrative. Through the lenses of bricolage, collage and decollage black and Asian British identity may appear as a collective performance: the production of a community constantly transforming itself in a double act of mediation and re-mediation with past/present/future and of incorporation of the different traditions, heritages and geographies that shape it.
Key-words: black Britain, Asian Britain, identity, collage, decollage.

This essay stems from a reflection by the Australian art historian Ian McLean. Drawing on Paul Carter, he states that "in 'post-colonial' societies 'collage is the *normal* mode of constructing meaning', and it is a collage in which fragments are seized upon 'not at the expense of the whole but in its absence'" (McLean 1998: 147). He proceeds by affirming that, if European modernist collage was a means of subverting discourses (and I would add, drawing on Craig Owens (1980), if postmodernist collage was allegorically employed to denounce a commodified reality made of simulacra and fake

reproductions), "postcolonial collage is a means of 'constructing meaning' from within a loss" (p. 147).

I consider this *loss* as the point of departure not for a mourning or a retreat, but for the invention of a liberating aesthetics and the manufacturing of an identity able to bridge the geographically and historically diverse experiences and origins that constitute a particular condition. In this respect, the postcolonial collage becomes a form of strategic re-articulation: living a cross-cultural space turns for the postcolonial artist into a necessity to reject dominant codes of representation and mono-perspectival gazes in order to give voice to the various traces that (temporarily) compose a hybrid condition. The resulting accumulation may appear as unordered chaos, but it is a resource. Causing confusion is a decolonising gesture that opens up the stage for an identity in process and can be narrated only through multiple techniques, subverting any idea of linearity.

Focusing on a restricted group of texts belonging to different media – art, cinema and literature –, this essay tackles a possible multi-media approach to black Britain's forms of narration, applying the notion of postcolonial collage to its artistic and literary production. I have chosen to analyse a series of heterogeneous texts, both in terms of the media used and of the origins of their authors, conveying and intermingling experiences that are as different as they are shared.

It needs to be pointed out that politics of blackness developed in the UK of the 1970s and 1980s to embrace different and often conflicting ethnicities (of Caribbean, African and Asian origins) and as a way of overcoming their specificities to face communal experiences of marginalisation and discrimination. As expressed by Kobena Mercer (1994: 291-92):

> When various peoples – of Asian, African, and Caribbean descent – called themselves and each other /black/ they invoked a collective identity predicated on political and not biological similarities. In other words, the naturalised connotations of the term /black/ were disarticulated out of the dominant codes of racial discourse and rearticulated as signs of alliance and solidarity among dispersed groups of people sharing common historical experiences of British racism. The empowering effect of the transformed metaphor, which brought a new form of democratic subjectivity and agency into being, did not arise out of a binary reversal or a closed anti-

white sensibility, but out of the inclusive character of Afro-Asian alliances which thus engendered a pluralistic sense of 'imagined community'.

Blackness emerged as a political and cultural category rather than a biological one, while black Britain became a transversal community. Nonetheless, the idea has been critically and radically questioned over the past decades. For example, while in 1982 Paul Gilroy was underlining the importance of a trans-communitarian unity among Afro-Caribbean and Asian ethnicities often opposed by British institutions and Law and Order (Gilroy 1982), in 1987, in *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack*, he redefined the term "black" as a "powerfully empty and possibly anachronistic master-signifier: The symbolic and linguistic system in which political blackness made sense was a phenomenon of assertive decolonisation and is now in retreat" (Gilroy 1987: xvi). Moreover, in 1989, the writer Fred D'Aguiar declared himself "Against Black British Literature", as a marginalising denomination that, insisting on blackness, preserved and supported those boundaries created by discriminations (D'Aguiar 1989). In particular, as early as the 1980s the presence and activism of not strictly black ethnic groups was increasingly demanding a recognition that the use of the term "black" excluded (namely that of the Asian contribution), and was pointing to the inadequacy of a label considered, up to that moment, necessary to create a common front[1].

There are two well-known and often quoted concepts at the basis of this research: Salman Rushdie's "stereoscopic vision" and Stuart Hall's "cut-and-mix". The first was formulated by Rushdie in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" ([1982] 1991: 19):

> […] Indian writers in these islands, like others who have migrated into the North from the South, are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and at the same time insiders and

[1] Still, the latest black British literary anthologies, *Closure: Contemporary Black British Short Stories* (Ross 2015) and *The Good Immigrant* (Shukla 2016), seem to support once again the idea of black Britain as a cross-cultural and trans-ethnic community. Especially *Closure,* which uses the expression black Britain to group, among the many, authors as different as Bernardine Evaristo, Monica Ali, Loenie Ross, Peter Kalu, Tariq Mehmood and Fred D'Aguiar himself.

outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of 'whole sight'.

Migration is not seen by the writer as exclusion or rupture. It signals an opening up of possibilities which turns not into an ordered, simplified recomposition, with the consequent risk of silencing some of its constitutive parts (the whole sight), but into a positive explosion able to embrace a plurality (the stereoscopic vision). In the same essay Rushdie affirms:

> 'We are. We are here.' And we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage; which heritage includes both a Bradford-born Indian kid's right to be treated as a full member of British society, and also the right of any member of this post-diaspora community to draw on its roots for his art […]. (p. 15)

Rushdie is conscious also of the fact that for black and Asian British ethnic groups migration to Britain was an ambiguous double process of home-leaving and home-coming – due to that Empire that had created and imposed the myth of Britain as *their* mother country and of London as *their* capital. Therefore, he is rejecting any choices or selections, since identities are and have always been trans- and cross-cultural.

Similarly, in "New Ethnicities", Hall (1989: 30) underlines how, for those who have unsettled their geography, the relation to the past in terms of cultural roots:

> […] is inter-textual – mediated through a variety of other 'texts'. There can, therefore, be no simple 'return' or 'recovery' of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present.

Identities, especially those emerging from histories of displacement, transportation and migration, develop according to a double vector of continuity and rupture, similarity and difference[2]. The result is an aesthetics of "cut-and-mix", a process of displacement and

[2] See his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (Hall 1990).

recombination which, according to Hall, is a consequence of the fact that the black experience is a diaspora experience (p. 29).

Furthermore, Hall (1987: 45) had already defined in "Minimal Selves" blackness as an "unstable" position, always at the crossing of multiple histories and narratives – imposed, chosen, invented at the same time. Therefore, even if the expression black Britain must be read as a single word, this should not be done at the expense of the singularities of the two (as ever-multiplying) identities composing it, both influencing one another, both having to articulate their presence. Black British identity is a collective and *collecting* act, necessarily created in a performance that constantly blends categories of here/elsewhere, old/new, other/same, originality/mimicry.

How do "stereoscopic vision" and "cut-and-mix", this *two-in-one*, translate in terms of style?

In an essay on the transformation of the concept of creolisation in its movement from the peripheries to the centre, Mimi Sheller draws, among others, on Edward Kamau Brathwaite's dual process of ac/culturation and inter/culturation, and Kobena Mercer's "syncretic dynamics" as forms of appropriation through dis-articulation and re-articulation. Sheller (2003: 276), thus, defines creolisation as:

> […] achieving indigeneity through the migration and recombination of diverse elements that have been loosed from previous attachments and have reattached themselves to a new place of belonging. […] It also carries the connotation of a mobility and mixture […], in a way which specifically privileges subaltern agency against the power of a colonising 'centre'.

It is important to underline how the scholar retains the idea of subalternity that the term creolisation historically implies, to avoid the risk of emptying it "of its oppositional meaning" (p. 287).

Sheller's definition could be applied also to postcolonial collage, as a practice of de-composition and re-composition (a "cut-and-mix") which signals resistance, interdependencies and appropriation. Indeed, in this essay I will employ collage, along with the related techniques of bricolage and decollage, not simply as instruments black and Asian British artists and writers can employ to narrate their multiple and complex experiences, but especially as tools to read their *artefacts* and their re-orientation of (British) identity.

I borrow the idea of bricolage from Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind*. The anthropologist has defined the *bricoleur* as "someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman" (Lévi-Strauss [1962]1966: 16-17), resorting to the surplus and the heterogeneous material that has been left unused: "His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it […]" (p. 18). Lévi-Strauss' bricolage consists in a complete reorganisation of an elaborate structure, not through another elaborate structure, but "by means of events" (p. 22), through remains and debris.

Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears' movie *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) perfectly fits this description. For the films they made together[3], they pragmatically chose a low budget in order to preserve an impression of *authenticity* and to create a particular atmosphere that led Frederick Luis Aldama to define them as "magico-reels" (Aldama 2003). The film describes a London set on fire by riots, completely dilapidated and populated by strange creatures from all over the world, "dressed in bizarre variations of straight gear" (Kureishi 1988: 44). Nevertheless, it is from this apparent waste land, this "cesspit" (p. 32), that a regeneration is foreseen: walking past rubbish, police cars, ambulances and burning houses Rosie sees the revolts as "an affirmation of the human spirit", while Sammy joyfully states: "Leonardo da Vinci would have lived [here…] because the city is a mass of fascination" (p. 14). As two proper *bricoleurs*, Sammy and Rosie engage with what has been left after the riots of/in a post-imperial London, which is at the same time a forest of savagery, the place to be and a cabinet of curiosities.

There is an aspect in Lévi-Strauss' elaboration which I find difficult to apply to my reading of black and Asian British production: the passivity which seems to characterise the *bricoleur*. According to the anthropologist:

> His universe of instruments is closed […]. The set of the 'bricoleur's' means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project […] because the

[3] *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is their second film, after the success of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985).

elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy'. […] But the possibilities always remain limited by the particular history of each piece and by those of its features which are already determined by the use for which it was originally intended […]. The elements which the 'bricoleur' collects and uses are 'pre-constrained'. (Lévi-Strauss [1962]1966: 17-19)

If bricolage remains confined to casual disorganisation and exterior limitations, collage, then, can become more incisive. The climax in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is a scene where three couples have sex and the screen is literally split into three parts. In his screenplay, Kureishi (1988: 44) defines it a "collage of copulation images"; and, indeed, the entire film is a collage of *copulating images*, of copulating/clashing cultures (starting from the title itself disrespectfully pairing the little black Sambo and the pure English rose).

The film has been criticised for its lack of focus and proper characterisation. However, according to Kenneth Kaleta, what seems like a fragmented storyline is Kureishi and Frears' way of staging an aesthetics that derives from London ethnic and cultural tensions. For the critic, Kureishi achieves meaning and impact "not through blending but through fragmenting" (Kaleta 1998: 53); and Leonard Quart (1994: 242) has the same impression: "Frears' directorial style reinforces this vision by making use of split-screen, rapid, rhythmic cross cutting […] – a barrage of visual and aural fireworks to help disrupt our sense of order and affirm a life lived without conventional constraints".

The explosive editing, the "riotously busy montage" (Kaleta 1998: 56), allows the incorporation of different elements and reproduces a chaotic cross-cultural reality. Kureishi sees collage as a way to enhance multiplicity and becoming rather than being, in a (post) colonial subject deriving from hybridised histories, lacking but also rejecting a stable, exclusive identity.

By juxtaposing different cultural and spatial systems in a single composition, collage not only undermines accepted hierarchies and denies unitary illusions, but also combines traces and "constructs meaning from within a loss" which is turned into self-invention.

To paraphrase Thomas Crow in his seminal essay "Modernism and the Mass Culture in Visual Arts" (1983), by forcing different orders into scandalous identity, collage creates a productive

confusion and becomes an instrument to deal with a multi-layered environment in flux. The incorporation of diverse styles, objects, and often media, breaks the linear surface with *lateral* expansions and is also an act of re-vision. Arranging fragments and bits in a related composition allows the creation of something original from the re-combination of old histories and stories and offers a fresh start: the *intrusive* elements produce a renewed contact with both past and present.

Black and Asian British identities, often denied and constantly asked to perform themselves against stereotypes, can turn to collage as a means of objection and self-refashioning, a form of belonging that is also a constant calling into question.

By using a traditional technique that celebrates their Indian roots – the miniature –, the sisters Amrit and Rabindra Singh, known as The Singh Twins, create a particular form of collage. Born in London and raised in Liverpool, Indian and Sikh, they question their mixed identities by representing subjects which are at the same time ethnic, regional, national and global: in their paintings, *Indianness* is framed within a British context and the domestic environment is located in a postmodern society.

This can be seen in *Nyrmia's Wedding II*, which depicts the ceremony of drawing patterns on the hands of a bride-to-be, with children playing in the foreground. The traditional element does not clash with the cameras and technologies and it sets the ritual in the present, with western Batman and Power Ranger toys. But the idyllic harmony of the domestic scene is broken by Ronald MacDonald leaning *in* from a window open onto an industrialised wasteland (Quilley 2005: 7).

A perfect exemplification of Hall's "cut-and-mix", The Singh Twins' miniatures combine different backgrounds to produce multi-perspectival and multi-narrative compositions where the meaning arises "from a multiplying and polysemic overloading of the signifier emanating from the context of British-Asian culture" (Quilley 2005: 6).

Another example is *Lesmahagow Durbar*, based on the model of the court scenes typical of the Moghul dynasty, but also reminiscent of the *other* tradition, the conversation piece, which developed especially in eighteenth century England. The painting is part of a series dedicated to Lord Iqbal Singh, a known promoter of Scottish-

Sikh relations[4]. The composition celebrates cross-culturality and cross-fertilisation (as the planting of a tree in the foreground symbolises). The accumulation of culturally and geographically decorative elements does not result in a fragmentation, but in a dialogue which "ironically criticises all processes of cultural stereotyping through the reduction of complex identities and emblems" (Quilley 2005: 6): it is this collage that produces a critical consciousness and an alternative culture.

As well as bricolage and collage, another technique used to tackle the re-negotiation and re-articulation of Britishness is decollage, which deploys more unveiling than combining. Through a literal laceration of the surface, decollage interrupts linear visions and demonstrates how spaces and identity are palimpsests composed by, and around, different layers, connecting, clashing or contrasting: another passage from the "whole sight" to the "stereoscopic vision".

The same laceration of the surface seems to metaphorically characterise Yinka Shonibare's art. His installations – sculptures, videos, photographs and paintings – complicate histories and deconstruct cultural structures by engaging with them. Authenticity is key to his approach.

Shonibare himself has often explained how he began his career. Born in Great Britain to Nigerian parents who moved back to Lagos when he was still a child, he then relocated to London for his studies. His first works were influenced by the anti-Thatcherism of the 1980s, until he was questioned by one of his teachers about the choice of his subjects and why they were not African in theme. Intrigued by the idea that, as a person of African origin, he should make African art, he started to interrogate what this *Africanness* was, and which preconceptions and expectations defined it. From there, came the idea of dressing headless mannequins in (usually) Victorian garments re-made with African wax prints. What the European beholder immediately identifies as African in Shonibare's installations, the print textile, has in reality been historically produced in Indonesia for Dutch and British manufacturing companies, and redistributed to West Africa: what

[4] The title suggests a collage of different cultures: the Durbar, a term commonly used to indicate Indian Courts, and Lesmahagow, the Scottish town where Lord Iqbal Singh now lives in retirement.

is considered *originally* and *authentically* African is actually a story of cross-breeding and exchange.

Dressing up his mannequins, Shonibare is also *dressing them down*[5]. Just like in a decollage, in fact, the artist creates a symbolic (and scandalous) laceration in the British history, uncovering interconnections and interdependencies and disclosing what has been often concealed, namely the relationship between the wealth of the mother country and colonial exploitation. His art challenges the official record of the past by being excessive and disobedient:

> Excess is the only legitimate means of subversion […]. Hybridisation is a form of disobedience […]. The only legitimate form of naughtiness is to fail to satisfy all allegiances, to produce an art object that in its very ambivalences denies any notion of loyalty. (Shonibare qtd. in Fisher 2002: 27)

In 2007, the National Gallery of London commissioned the artist to create an installation to commemorate the abolition of slave trade. The result was *Scratch the Surface*. In the Gallery's Barry room, Shonibare chooses two celebrative paintings, *Colonel Tarleton* by Joshua Reynolds (1782) and *Mrs Oswald* by Johann Zoffany (1763-64), representing two figures linked to slavery: the former was famous for his brutality in the American War of Independence and for having opposed William Wilberforce's abolitionist campaign; the latter was raised in Jamaica where her father built a significant business on plantations. The artist substitutes the portraits with his headless mannequins shooting, or better shredding a pheasant, an activity related to their social class and status, but also a decollage unveiling a different story of brutality and concealment. In a Saidian contrapuntal reading (Said 1994: 51) the emerging question is also: where did their wealth come from?

Scratching the surface accounts for another aspect of Shonibare's production. He is not interested in a simple form of rejection and his headless mannequins are a commentary on the past, but also on the legacy of that past. His art, like the postcolonial practice evoked by Hall, "[…] re-reads 'colonisation' as part of an essentially

[5] *Dressing Down* is the title of one of his first solo exhibitions at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham (1999).

transnational and transcultural 'global' process – and it produces a decentred, diasporic or 'global' rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives" (Hall 1996: 247); but it also encourages us to re-read the present as a consequence of that transculturation. Describing his own installation *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996-97), where the British philanthropist's parlour is covered with African wax fabric decorated with repeated images of black footballers, Shonibare states:

> I am an African speaking English to you. The reason for that is because of the colonial period, empire-building, and the British encounter with Africa. The Victorian era in Africa coincided with the height of the British Empire so there are historical reasons for my interest in the period and its legacy in Africa. (qtd. in Downey 2008: 39)

Colonisation has produced cultural intimacies and hybrid identities that still resonate in the present through a process of different histories colliding. The deconstruction displayed by the artist is at the same time an act of re-vision and of rightful self-insertion: an affirmation of belonging through the appropriation of that past. For him, unmasking is at the same time a playful mocking, a critical unsettling and a form of complicity which is the direct result of history. The Victorian past is also Shonibare's (and black Britain's) past, and it is in scratching that past and being complicit with it that the artist discovers his multiple, heterogeneous Britishness.

The same method is used by Ferdinand Dennis in "The Prince and I", a short story that appeared in *Granta* in 1999. It is an autobiographical tale that could be defined as a political, historical and personal decollage centred around the Albert Memorial. The monument, erected at the peak of British colonial power as a tribute to Queen Victoria's dead husband, is made up of friezes celebrating human achievers and ideals and by four groups of statues representing the (then) four continents.

Reporting his various, more or less casual, encounters with the monument, Dennis unveils a history that the Memorial tells and hides while recounting the story of his education. "The Prince and I" is a coming-of-age story which also retraces the history of black Britain: a narrative about becoming British and black through a

"long and ambivalent relationship with Albert Memorial" (Dennis 1999: 313).

After his first visit as a schoolboy brought to London from Jamaica, when the Memorial inspired a mixture of awe and reverence and a desire to follow the steps of the greats remembered there, the writer returns to it through the years and "a powerful but unfocused feeling of race stirred inside [him]" (p. 318). The four continents at its corners especially puzzle him:

> AFRICA: an Egyptian princess sitting on a camel, with a half-naked sub-Saharan figure, a 'noble savage' resting on a bow and gazing at a European female. […]
> AMERICA: a Liberty-like figure sitting on a buffalo surrounded by two Europeans and a Red Indian.
> Where among these groups was I and the people like me? In Africa. But where were the islands of the Caribbean? Surely close to America.
> It puzzled me that nobody like me could be found in the American corner. (p. 316)

In the 1970s, a decade characterised by a rising sense of rage but also of political consciousness for black Britons, Dennis goes back to the Memorial with an activist friend who describes it as "a monstrous lie, a typical piece of European falsehood" (p. 319), and unveils how the groups of statues at the corners stand for areas of the former British Empire. In particular, "the African gazing at the European in the African corner was intended to represent the civilising influence of Britain on us 'Africans'. He pointed out the chain on the African's feet […] and mentioned slavery" (p. 320).

The story ends in a supposedly different London, with Dennis taking his ten-year-old daughter to the Memorial and feeling an uncomfortable ambivalence towards it, as the mark and cause of a history of slavery, discrimination and prejudice, but also as the source of inspiration which "supplied part of the ambition that turned [him] into a writer" (p. 323).

To conclude, reconsidering Shonibare's expression, black Britain can be read as an act of excess and disobedience, "locating itself at the intersections of a cultural domination and a politics of resistance" (Sheller 2003: 281). In its construction of an identity which is multiple and complex, it refuses any linearity and embraces a heterogeneous style which requires new instruments to approach it. As affirmed by

Hall (1996: 250), "[…] questions of hybridity, syncretism, of cultural undecidability and the complexities of diasporic identification […] interrupt any 'return' to ethnically closed and 'centred' original histories".

But the disobedience points also to an attempt to belong. Bricolage, collage and decollage can give witness to this. Putting together the heterogeneous elements that contribute(d) to a *black in Britain/Asian in Britain* identity, while unveiling at the same time how those elements have always cooperated in the definition of Britishness, they subvert hegemonic representations through experimentation, providing a valuable tool to undermine them and to include all active, constitutive components. Forcing proximities and scratching linear surfaces, they subvert and combine, offering the possibility to perform the chaotic co-presence of diverse, old, new, clashing realities. As narrativisations which are at the same time counter-narrativisations and re-narrativisations, collage and decollage in particular represent simultaneous acts of rejection and appropriation and signal new, heterogeneous forms of harmony.

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