

A Question of Black or White: Returning to Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*

Sara Upstone
Kingston University

I was only tangentially caught up in the events that consumed London on July 7th 2005. On my way to work at a summer school at South Bank University that morning, the Bakerloo Line train I was travelling on pulled into Elephant and Castle station, the last stop of the line. The usual silence which marks the end of the journey was replaced by an uncharacteristically benign Tannoy announcement from the driver, apologising for any disruption passengers may have experienced on their journey, due to a massive electrical surge which had affected all trains through Baker Street station. I thought little of it; in fact, like most passengers, I expect, I was hardly listening to the crackly, muffled voice as I departed. Only later that day, after finding a host of messages on my mobile phone, and a brief conversation to establish what happened before the signal gave out, did I realise that the power surge we had paid so little attention to was, in fact, the Aldgate bomb blast.

Certainly not a close enough call to be categorised as a brush with death, but enough to make me reflect upon the events that day—I can't help, for example, returning frequently in my mind to the Piccadilly Line train that, shortly after 8am, had strangely pulled into the District Line station at Ravenscourt Park near my home. I got on this train, fearing delays, and then got off again when the District Line train pulled into the platform as expected. I often ask myself, what happened to that train, packed with commuters? Did the delay, the unscheduled wait, throw those people (and potentially in another timeline when I didn't change trains, of course, myself) into the events at Kings Cross? Or did it keep those commuters back, held by some unknown twist of fate, chance, or however you might interpret it, in a space that saved them from the trauma that would follow? I don't know. I probably never will.

But these events have also provoked a more intellectual, even a more political, reflection. In the new academic year following the events of July, I was asked to give a guest lecture on Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* to a group of Media and Cultural Studies students. The bombings of July 7th asked all who live in Britain to reappraise their sense of what being British in fact means, and drew into stark relief the exclusions clearly complicit in it. Re-reading the novel for the first time in three

years, its resonance with these issues was plainly evident, only reinforced by the fact that 2005 marked the tenth anniversary of the novel's publication. Against the critical analysis of Kureishi's character development, his lack of effective comic device when compared with *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the limitations in his representation of women and the working-classes—on which I might previously have focused in my address—I found myself in the wake of July 7th instead drawn to the content of Kureishi's novel with an altered perspective. What had once been perhaps, in both my eyes and those of others, the largest flaw in Kureishi's novel, I now read as its most significant feature. The flaw referred to in this instance is the bombastic style which Kureishi employs—a heavy-handed points scoring which pursues its social vision without subtlety or complication. The warnings that Kureishi offers British society about the dangers of cultural alienation come in a straightforward prose and uncomplicated narrative that is almost impossible to misinterpret. For Mark Stein, *The Black Album* is a didactic novel; its “strict dichotomous structure is reminiscent of a morality play” (131). Equally, for Anthony Appiah, *The Black Album* fails due to Kureishi's inability to recognise that “a novel is not an argument”. Such criticisms strike at the heart of Kureishi's acknowledged status as a “political writer”, an identity seemingly incompatible with the postcolonial theory through which his work is largely interpreted.

But in the wake of July 7th, this flaw was now what made Kureishi's novel so powerful; the novel's message about the dangers of British Muslim violence demanded reconsideration. This need to reappraise *The Black Album* is in recognition not only of the power of its own social comment, but also its place within a history of social protest literature. Certainly, a novel is not a government statement. It is not even a survey. It is not a focus group that can be translated into a research report. But it is a perspective, and one which, in most cases, the author has painstakingly taken time to construct. And it is a representation, the capturing of something that to some degree is rooted in the world. The need to revisit Kureishi's novel is therefore framed by a recent history in which reading texts for such social significance, or valorising the concept of a unified message, has been seen as an unsophisticated interpretation of the text, whilst writers who are accessible to analysis in such terms are often seen as positing too-easy answers, as denying the reader the ultimate position in the creation of meaning, and as lacking the more sophisticated artistry of more ambivalent, illusive textual creations. Consider, for example, the alternate literary histories of two founding texts of American literature: *Moby Dick* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Both originally published in the same year, Melville's text was largely a commercial and critical failure, whilst Stowe's was a resounding popular success. Stowe's text stirred the debate which would lead to Civil War, whilst Melville's faded into obscurity until the beginning of the twentieth century. As that century progressed, readings of literature were increasingly influenced by Modernism, Postmodernism, and poststructuralist theories. The shift from New

Criticism to Reader Response challenged the concept a universal or “correct” meaning, whilst Modernism and Postmodernism privileged internal subjectivity over objective social comment. In this context *Moby-Dick* surpassed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in judgments of artistic worth. The very ambivalence that made *Moby-Dick* so unfavourably received on publication now heralded its superiority. In contrast, the didactic message of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was what signalled its relative inferiority, and consignment to study as social and historical document, rather than literary masterpiece. A work was now to be judged on its aesthetics, not its message, however successful—or culturally significant—that message might be.

Such a distinction traverses the field of literary study in the twentieth century. One might equally consider, for example, in a British context, the contrasting representations of the Modernist literature dominant in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and the social realism which would follow it. Although neither of these movements could be considered apolitical, like *Moby Dick* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* they are nevertheless distinguished from each other by the explicitness of their social comment and calls for social change. Like *Moby Dick*, the Modernist text would couch its commentary in a blur of multiple meanings and perspectives. In contrast, the socially realist text would make stark statements about the nature of society and its evils. Perhaps the most significant example of this is George Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. A damning critique of capitalist Britain, the central character Gordon Cormstock’s repeating motif of “down with money” is in stark contrast to the kind of abstract leitmotifs pervading the Modernist work, such as *Mrs Dalloway*’s “the leaden circles dissolved in the air”. Yet like the case of *Moby-Dick* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the clear message of 1930’s social realism has critically been undermined as of less literary value than its less direct predecessor. Orwell himself reflects this position: he later disowned his earlier, most socially realist novels, and displayed a self-hatred of his own writing stemming from the fear of being defined as a “pamphleteer” rather than an artist. For Orwell, the social circumstances of his writing, he suggests in his essay “Why I Write” (1947), demand of him an attention to the political, and to offering a definite social critique: “In a peaceful age”, he states, “I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties” (4). His statement that “What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art” (5) is to indicate the clearly perceived difference between the two, and to imply a hierarchy in which the latter is clearly more desirable: one would not, it seems, try to make art into political writing.

As for *Moby-Dick* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, critical approaches have taken up this literary hierarchy. Early comparisons between Modernism and the period of socially realism such as John Lehmann’s *The Craft of Letters in England*, published in 1956, cast the new socially realist texts, with their focus on material conditions, as sharply inferior to the focus on

internal subjectivity preferred by Modernist writers. Although the comparisons have become more measured in recent criticism, nevertheless the distinction remains: Bernard Bergonzi states in his preface to *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its Background, 1939-1960* that he claims to be trying “not to make the great the enemy of the good”, whilst Randall Stevenson in *The British Novel Since the Thirties* states that “So specifically concerned with changing values—social, sexual, material—not only *Room at the Top* and *Hurry on Down* but many fifties novels may be of more lasting sociological than literary interest” (129).

Certainly this is not to suggest that no critic values the more didactic text. But what these distinctions point to is how within the field of literary criticism, *in general*, those texts which state a firm and often outspoken message are undermined in the wake of a Modernist and Postmodernist impulse which has made such direction unfashionable. It is left to those critics concerned explicitly with social function, such as Alan Sinfield, to privilege those voices overlooked in general criticism.¹

There is an implicit connection between these concepts about the changing ways in which we appreciate literature, and Kureishi's *The Black Album*, which have potentially profound consequences. The present day world of publishing is not immune from the attitudes of past generations: Robert Newman's Marxist critique of global capital, *The Fountain at the Centre of the World*, for example, was rejected by numerous publishers because of its political context, despite Newman being an established author, and was only eventually taken up by Verso, noted for their commitment to political works.² It is in this context that Kureishi's work needs to be considered. Like the socially realist texts reflected upon here, Kureishi's work has been criticised for furthering simplistic and stereotypical representations, despite recognition of the fact that such representation is directly juxtaposed with its intentions and detailed close reading of the narrative (Ranasinha 92). Its preference for clear political meaning has been seen as detrimental to its literary status, rather than indicative of it. Yet whilst the judgment on earlier texts such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been retrospective, the judgment on *The Black Album*, contemporary with its publication, has prevented it from having the social impact made possible in relation to the former text because of its initial popularity. This has particular consequences in terms of social function; for whilst *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was able to have its intended political influence, texts today are caught within a mode of interpretation which immediately renders them ineffectual. Moreover, the overwhelming impression created by such a literary paradigm—that the best literature is more purely aesthetic and less overtly political—is that literature as a whole is not a medium for social influence in the same way that film and

¹ Sinfield pays considerable attention to socially realist authors such as John Braine dismissed by much literary criticism.

² See Robert Newman's documentary, *Scribbling*, and also *Independent on Sunday*, 'ANSWER THE QUESTIONS! Robert Newman—Writing? It's the lack of heavy'.

television might be regarded. It means literature is no longer looked to for social function. In the case of a text such as *The Black Album*, further interpretive frameworks, though well intentioned, exacerbate this problem. The concern over the “burden of representation” placed on “ethnic minority” authors has importantly emphasised the double standard in which connections are unfairly made between an author’s fictional world and the extra-textual environment, as in the case of the controversy surrounding Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*.³ However, one unfortunate side effect of the concern with the responsibility placed on “ethnic” authors has been that where such texts do actively imply a social comment and a real-world engagement, there is a discouragement to consider the value of text as a contribution to assessing the problems of contemporary society.

The Black Album represents, most interestingly, a particular irony in this regard. This is because its didacticism is in the service of forcefully stressing the value of the concept of plurality and cultural hybridity against systems of fundamentalist thought. That the multiple and unstable is presented as a necessary absolute is a contradiction which potentially undercuts its own value as a social belief system. It is this tension which is undoubtedly reflected in initial readings of the novel. Read within the framework of Western postcolonial theory, Kureishi’s evocation of hybridity strongly evokes the discipline’s central concerns. In contrast, the didactic way in which this hybridity is presented as the *only* successful belief system renders it at the same time incompatible with the values of fluidity and individual subjectivity which conventionally are equally important. The best representation of this position is offered by E San Juan, Jr., whose *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* draws our attention to the ways in which postcolonial theory’s claims to hybridity can in fact reinforce the aims of capitalism, offering a “refurbishing of the liberal individualist ethos geared to the ‘free play’ of the market” (10) which is as hegemonic as the models of identity it supposedly opposes. *The Black Album* is not the only text to expose this problematic, the sense in which an uncompromising discourse of cultural hybridity can potentially be as oppressive as the more conventional grand narratives that it supposedly challenges. However, in revealing such tensions so explicitly, Kureishi’s novel raises questions about the frameworks of postcolonial theory that perhaps initial commentators on the novel were unprepared to consider.

In the wake of significant developments in postcolonial theory, however, such tensions are no longer obscured and, consequently, the didactic nature of Kureishi’s hybridity perhaps need no longer be the difficult combination for postcolonialists that it once was. The laudably self-critical nature of postcolonial theory has led to fundamental critiques of its own practices, which include awareness that hybridity is rarely the escape to fundamental and absolute thought systems that it was once posited to be. Equally, the general movement in the twenty-first century away from postmodern discourses has resulted in a return to a more

³ See Mercer.

ethical and social criticism which postcolonial theory has not been immune to. The postmodern and poststructuralist theories often central to the discipline, at least in its most popular Western incarnation, have been revised to allow their compatibility with a recognised need for a more socially rooted and less abstract theoretical engagement. This answers a number of criticisms levelled at the discipline by theorists such as Aijaz Ahmad and Ella Shohat, who have argued that the use of the term postcolonial has encouraged a movement away from geopolitical critique, and has blurred significant spatial and temporal difference, distancing it as a concept from real-world political action.

Such a revised approach is exemplified in E. Juan Jr's call for an approach which moves beyond the semiotic play of theorists such as Homi Bhabha and realises that in much postcolonial theory of the 1990s "a transcendental politics of difference is substituted for a critique of hegemony and its material practices of social reproduction." (7), meaning that 'Urgent life-or-death questions are ignored [. . .] Questions of inequality of power and control over resources are elided' (13). Instead, Juan Jr. calls for alternatives which are "attempts to counter the universal deracination, loss of foundations, and totalized marginality posited by postcolonial theory" (51). Thus although postcolonial theory in its popular manifestations is still associated most notably with a poststructuralist influenced unbridled belief in deconstruction and instability, in its essence postcolonial theory in the twenty-first century is just as likely to be critical of these concepts as in favour of them.⁴ In this renewed theoretical context, Kureishi's firm mandate and his recourse to an earlier mode of social comment novel is no longer necessarily a factor in the novel which undermines its postcolonial credentials. Instead, Kureishi's didacticism simply affirms the now recognised fact that hybridity is itself a new grand narrative, rather than a counter to such concepts. Rather than Poststructuralism and Postmodernism thus being a bar to fixity as critics such as Neil Larsen suggests (141), hybridity itself is paradoxically a new incarnation of fixed meaning in itself, as it is evoked to the exclusion of alternative identities. Whether this in itself is good or bad is open to debate, but its implications are nevertheless that, taken out of the realm of discourse and into the real-world of social and political reform, Kureishi's hybridity makes *The Black Album* a central text for a more socially aware, materially concerned, and politically engaged postcolonialism. In the wake of July 2005, especially, this "political" nature of the novel has a renewed relevance. Kureishi's didacticism is transformed into a powerful, and overlooked, warning on the dangers of government policy towards Britain's ethnic minority populations.

In the rest of this paper, I want to explore, through an engagement with the relevance of the novel to the events of July 7th, what might have happened if Kureishi's social message had been read more seriously, a reading which requires a reassessment of the political and social—rather

⁴ For notable examples of this reflective practice see Chrisman, and Parry.

than aesthetic—role of literature. Within the context of the ideal reader who was so satisfied, so moved, and so motivated by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its message, that they spurred a government to act, I will ask what might we have learned if we had focused less on the aesthetic flaws of Kureishi's novel, and more on the social and cultural implications of its message. In doing so, I will suggest that whilst a narrative constructed to transmit meaning may not have the artistry of a more multi-layered, ambivalent and open text, yet to ignore texts such as *The Black Album* is to deny the situation of literature within culture, and the powerful influence that literature might have on how we conceive of society and, indeed, how that society is constructed, with potentially disastrous results. Such re-reading of Kureishi's text offers an attempt to engage with the practicalities of what a renewed and more socially responsible postcolonial theory means for the interpretation of literary texts.

Black and White: Tony Blair, Hanif Kureishi and the Politicising of the Popular

In the light of recent events, questions as to the potential value of the message offered by Kureishi in *The Black Album* can be framed in terms of their possible effect on how Britain, and particularly its government, conceives of issues of British identity. The general question as to what might have been learned by focusing on the social and cultural implications of *The Black Album* can be re-framed in the following terms: "What if Tony Blair read Hanif Kureishi instead of listening to the Beatles?" Not as strange a question as it might initially seem. Tony Blair's love of the Beatles is well known: he led the tributes on the death of the band's guitarist George Harrison, chose them as part of his Desert Island Discs selection on the BBC Radio Four show, and Bono of U2 even referred to Blair and Brown as "the Lennon and McCartney of global development" (Wheeler), raising the comic speculation as to which one of the two politicians was Lennon, and which one McCartney.

But it is also The Beatles who are the unspoken musical influence in Kureishi's *The Black Album*. As Bart Moore-Gilbert points out, Prince's Black Album from which Kureishi's novel takes its title is itself a reference to The Beatles' White Album. Moreover, Kureishi himself has shown in previous fiction his awareness of The Beatles' music, most notably in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. In moving to the Black Album from the White Album, Kureishi focuses attention in his second novel on an alternative musical tradition, with its own resonances and significance. Dialectically involving the Beatles through Prince's association, Kureishi sets up two alternative frames of reference: one black, one white. The former is entwined with the latter and exists in reference to it, but is at the same time a subversion of its purposes. And by privileging the Black, with the White as an unspoken and silenced Other, Kureishi offers us a particular model of identity that interrogates English culture. Thus Blair's choice of the Beatles as his cultural model sees him one step behind

Kureishi, who has retained but yet interrogated such associations. Blair's choice of the Beatles offers us the ability to imagine a world in which he makes a different choice—in which he, too, chooses the Black Album over the White, not only in terms of his musical taste, but in terms of how he constructs Britishness. Implicit in this choice would be not only the choice of Prince, but also of Kureishi.

What is expressed here can be read as the presentation of an ideology within which Kureishi considers that British identity should be framed. This ideological function once again affirms the didacticism of Kureishi's novel, and thus its problematic relationship to conventional notions of postcoloniality. In an interview in 2003, Kureishi stated that "Tony Blair doesn't have any ideology" (Brookes). Elsewhere, he has identified the reaction of young British Muslims as the forging of an alternative viewpoint to counter this supposed lack of rigorous social concern, asking in "The Road Exactly", his introduction to the screenplay of "My Son the Fanatic", "was this puritanism a kind of rebellion, a brave refusal of the order of the age—an over-sexualised but sterile society?" (53). Here Kureishi can be seen to engage with two contrasting definitions of ideology—the former being a coherent body of ideas that legitimates political rule, the latter being a form of thought or identity springing not from the ruling elite, but rather from a section of the populace. Whilst the former is a mode of dominance and control, the latter can equally be an expression not of majority opinion, but of the interests of particular marginalised groups.⁵ What unites these dominant and marginal ideologies, however, is their concern with power, and for defining a framework within which individuals locate themselves and their relationship to society, an Althusserian logic in which "ideology [. . .] is a particular organization of signifying practices which goes to constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the lived relations by which such subjects are connected to the dominant relations of production in a society" (Eagleton 18). In the absence of a dominant ideology, having one's own ideological position, whether accepted by the majority or not, becomes urgent as a way to make sense of one's identity—although a strong ruling ideology, one could argue, equally might provoke alternative formations as a form of counter-ideology and resistance. The formation of ideology is thus, again in Althusserian terms, deeply bound up with living in the world, with social engagement; it is formed not in cognitive isolation, but rather is "chiefly a question of "lived relations"" (Eagleton 21).

The ideological slant of Kureishi's model is reinforced by the critique of the continued blurring of left and right wing ideological standpoints in British politics, and their impact on social tolerance, which pervades the novel. Locating the Muslim community in the poorest part of London where, in the Thatcher era in particular, the gap between rich and poor was most prominently felt, Kureishi suggests here that poverty, as well as

⁵ For these competing modes of ideology, amongst others, see Eagleton, 1-7.

racism, is what fuels fundamentalist violence. It is poverty, Kureishi suggests, that fuels racism, by creating an underclass desperate to punish someone for their problems, and to create an inferior class to boost their own self esteem, particularly in terms of a masculinity that has been eroded by economic powerlessness. As much as young Muslims are marginal, so Strapper—the central white youth in the novel—is equally disenfranchised, a representative of an equally marginalised and desperate white underclass youth:

Strapper saw lads his age in Armani, Boss, Woodhouse; he glanced into the road and saw broad BMWs, gold-coloured Mercs and turquoise turbo-charged Saab convertibles. He saw five-floor shuttered houses owned by men in their thirties, with nannies, cleaners, builders. None of it would be his—ever. It just wouldn't be. (Kureishi, *Black* 198)

Akin to the arguments made by Gilroy and others at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the capitalist state is seen as central to the reproduction of not just class boundaries, but correlative racial dynamics.⁶ Whilst the state under the Labour Party which came to power in 1997 has no ideology for Kureishi, the Conservative Party—in power when the novel was published in 1995 and when it is set in the late 1980s—certainly does; in this contexts, the capitalist system continues to function as an agent of social discord and division. This damning class critique at the centre of the novel once again supports an argument for Kureishi's ideological interests, and draws attention again therefore to the affinity between postcolonial texts and what has previously been seen in readings such as Larsen's as a materiality to which they are opposed. It is poverty in the Asian community that fuels the sense of hardship and marginality which makes racism all the more difficult to deal with. Clearly, Thatcherite Britain has done little to alleviate these tensions: all that the values of Thatcherism offer the confused and the alienated is the opportunity to bury anxiety in affluence, sex and drug taking, a world that is one of over-consumption in all its senses, and allows you to deceive yourself, as Zulma does, with the belief that "the new money knew no colour" (Kureishi, *Black* 87).

Kureishi, however, not only challenges the Thatcher regime's denial of these issues, but also exposes the simplicity of left wing responses, in a way that also makes the book directly relevant to the contemporary situation. *The Black Album* directly confronts the failure of socialist politicians to deal with social tensions, and their implication on the rising frustrations of Muslim youths: they are "all talk" (Kureishi, *Black* 81). Chad tries the Labour Party before Riaz's gang, and finds them too racist (Kureishi, *Black* 108). Councillor Rudder is only interested in the Muslim position until the Labour party are re-elected (Kureishi, *Black* 179). There is thus in Kureishi's comment on Blair a precedent within *The*

⁶ As well as Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, see also Solomos, Findlay, Jones and Gilroy.

Black Album itself that sees left wing politicians as failing to offer an effective counter-ideology to capitalism and its racism manifestations.

Whether we agree with Kureishi's viewpoint on Tony Blair or not, we might explore the ideology and its consequences that Kureishi himself offers to British society in his positing in *The Black Album* of an identity that would provide an alternative not only to the Englishness of *The White Album*, but also to "whiteness" as a symbolic cultural signifier of Britishness, and at the same time to fundamentalism as itself a potential ideology. Against a lack of state ideology, *The Black Album* suggests that the only realistic alternative for an alienated British Muslim youth is a fundamentalist ideology which offers them the sense of rootedness and belonging so lacking in a depoliticised and apathetic British state. The central journey of the novel's chief protagonist, Shahid, is to find an alternative belief system that counters the British lack of direction, but nevertheless offers the freedom and subjectivity necessary for the expression of cross cultural hybrid subjectivity. It thus embodies what Bart Moore-Gilbert refers to as Kureishi's "'third way' between apoliticism and militancy" (115), neither mimicry or rebellion. More recently, Kureishi has re-stated this ideological commitment in a post-July 7th context. Rendering multiculturalism as a political solution, rather than an abstract or under-developed notion, again plays to the didacticism prevalent in *The Black Album*:

Religions may be illusions [. . .] but these are important and profound illusions. But they will modify as they come into contact with other ideas. This is what an effective multi-culturalism is: not a superficial exchange of festivals and food, but a robust and committed exchange of ideas—a conflict which is worth enduring, rather than a war. ("Carnival", 100)

To make such a claim for practice and for physical engagement again presents a reworked postcolonialism which is less overtly theoretical, and more strongly committed to social involvement. It is this which makes, I would suggest, Kureishi's work implicitly ideological, in the sense that ideology, as practice, is the opposite of cognitive theoretical engagement.⁷ Shahid's choices mark a self-conscious acknowledgment of choosing a lifestyle that is neither apathetic, nor fundamentalist: it is thus not simply the status quo, but rather an intentional political decision to pursue an alternative world-view.

In line with the awareness that the fluid identities espoused by postcolonial theory may be as prescriptive as those they replace, Shahid's commitment in these terms must be seen not as a refusal to be bound by ideology, but as an alternative ideology in itself. His new identity fits perfectly within the postcolonial definition of hybridity: "Hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves, like orderly pathways built from crazy-paving. Instead, they remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription"

⁷ For these distinctions in the work of Althusser see Eagleton 140-41.

(McLeod, 219). For Mark Stein, this ideology is one of post-ethnicity, in which the usual ethnic categorizations cease to hold a dominant sway over how we categorise ourselves or others. It might be better framed, however, in terms of Paul Gilroy's concept of a renewed universal humanism—in Gilroy's words a "planetary humanism" (*Between Camps*, 17)—which is no longer seen as a contradiction to hybridity's focus on subjectivity, but rather is in recognition of the fact that the false opposition between postcolonial and poststructuralist discourse of multiplicity, on the one hand, and universalism, on the other, no longer apply: a "radically nonracial humanism [. . .] conceived explicitly as a response to the sufferings that raciology has wrought" (*Between Camps*, 17,18).⁸ This fits well with the construction of Kureishi as problematic because he at once offers a renewal of the grand narrative, and at the same time a destabilising postcolonial response. It also equally destabilises the ideological foundations from which it springs, given the anti-humanist slant of many counter-ideologies.⁹ Ironically, it is on speculating on ideology therefore that Kureishi can be seen to challenge one of the continuing conceptions of postcolonial theory: that it is, itself, an ideology for the transmission of dominant Western bourgeoisie interests.¹⁰

That music might form the basis of such an alternative ideology is well established in discussions surrounding ethnic identity: just as Kureishi aims to identify an alternative to both the absence of ideological thought in government and the fundamentalist thinking that he sees as being the only relief from this position for many young British Muslims, so Humayun Ansari has noted how, in the wake of social alienation following The Rushdie Affair, British Muslims turned to the popular music of groups such as Fun-da-mental to explore their own identities.¹¹ Music here becomes the lived practice and engagement necessary for ideological development, framed within the context of an alternative lived experience of religious intolerance. That Kureishi thus posits an alternative musical ideology in the form of Prince offers to address the power of such popular forms, challenging the alternative ideologies/ideological absence of Fun-da-mental and The Beatles respectively on their own generic terms.

White in Black: The Origins of Violence

In order to identify Kureishi's alternative ideological formation, it is necessary to appreciate how *The Black Album* presents both white racism and fundamentalism as unacceptable, yet socially explainable reactions to the absence of a credible alternative. Kureishi's *The Black Album* can be seen to offer a representation of Islam that sends a message about violence and British Muslim identity. In the wake of the events of July 7th,

⁸ For a discussion of Gilroy's theory in a postcolonial context see Puwar, 34.

⁹ For an interesting discussion of Althusser's anti-humanism see Eagleton 136-7.

¹⁰ See, for example, Larsen.

¹¹ See Ansari 220.

Kureishi's novel reads as prescient and prophetic. Whilst the successful bombers of July 7th were not from London, those who attempted a second series of failed bombings on July 21st were. Yet in reference to both events, centred on British Muslim violence, Kureishi's story still seems a prophetic warning of the threat to London from members of religious groups. At several points in the novel before its explosive conclusion, real acts of violence and destruction centred around London are represented. Shahid's movements around the city are set against a backdrop of hostile and threatening acts against the capital.

Interestingly, major accounts of *The Black Album* seem to neglect this aspect of the text—the thread of violence, outside of Muslim activity, that underscores the narrative.¹² I would suggest, however, that this violence is central to the novel's representation of the relationship between identity and anti-social behaviour. Kureishi's violence refers, in fact, to the real IRA bombings in London in 1991 (although the novel is ostensibly set in 1989). Yet it is represented in such a way as to read as an apocalyptic warning of what might happen in the capital in the future if racial tensions are not addressed. The IRA are never named in these passages. Instead, violence is carefully constructed as unnamed and unattributed, so as to stand as a haunting spectre of the danger posed to the city by extremism in all its forms:

But which faction was it? Which underground group? Which war, cause or grievance was being demonstrated? The world was full of seething causes which required vengeance—that at least was known. (Kureishi, *Black* 103)

In particular, the passages describing the violence in the city are constructed so as to take the reader seamlessly from Riaz's gang of Muslim fundamentalists—with whom the novel's central character, Shahid, becomes intensely involved—to the descriptions of violence, connecting the former to the latter:

The gang sat up all night, sleeping on the floor in shifts. The next morning those who had lectures and college work left, and were replaced by others. Shahid, who had a clear day, didn't get away until afternoon, and by then a bomb had exploded on the main concourse of Victoria Station. (Kureishi, *Black* 101)

It is as the situation within Riaz's gang escalates that Kureishi returns to this spectre of violence; fifty pages before the end of the novel, “another bombing in the City” (Kureishi, *Black* 227) sets the scene for the final petrol bomb attack on the bookshop and its tragic consequences.

In relation to this violent representation of Islam, Kureishi has at times been criticised. At points in the novel, it is easy to find supporting evidence for this censure. Kureishi has little sympathy for Pakistan, which he describes in the novel as “a country which couldn't accommodate intelligence, initiative, imagination, and in which most endeavour bogged

¹² For example, Ranasingha, Kaleta.

down into hopelessness” (Kureishi, *Black* 54), and this critique of one nation’s interpretation of Islam in the service of the state is offered without recourse to alternative manifestations of Islam which would provide a more positive representation of the relationship between religion and politics. As Chris Wheedon notes, the novel “works with extreme binary oppositions in which the sameness and differences of ordinary everyday Muslims and Muslim life become invisible” (152). Thus there is little place it seems within Kureishi’s humanism for religious faith, which is categorised largely as absolute and uncompromising. Whilst Shahid may be the archetypal hybrid subject, there is little sense in *The Black Album* that this translates to a wider hybrid society, which would find space for those whose identities are less fluid, and more rooted in a particular belief system. It is in this sense, then, that hybridity becomes an absolute, and an ideology. Not only is there no place for strong and committed religious faith—an issue which, interestingly, Gilroy’s own model of humanism equally fails to address—but the suggestion that this is in juxtaposition to hybrid subjectivity is in stark contrast to the diverse reality of Islam, which defies the oppositional status to multiculturalism and hybridity often placed upon it.¹³ How different is this, we need to ask, from the assimilationist position taken by Naipaul; does it make any difference if the one identity that becomes acceptable is, paradoxically, a hybrid one? Moreover, the close association of the novel with Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, subject to a book-burning by Riaz’s gang, means that *The Black Album* has been seen as repeating the same supposed “crimes” of Rushdie’s novel in its lack of respect for Islam, although Kureishi’s un-naming of the book, like the IRA, may be seen to gesture towards a wider concern with censorship, rather than a desire to take on Rushdie’s critics specifically.

However, what is in fact significant about the novel is the extent to which, as a whole, it challenges this stereotypical presentation of Islam with a complex and insightful portrayal, with a particularly contemporary relevance post July 7th. Contending Mark Stein’s comment that Kureishi’s representation contains a flippancy that acts to “cast doubt on the sincerity of Kureishi’s attempts to understand the nature of ‘fundamentalism’” (131) what *The Black Album* suggests, in fact, is that Kureishi understands this fundamentalism very well.

Kureishi’s representation of Muslim “fundamentalist” violence makes it clear that such threats do not spring from nowhere, but are instead reactions born out of the specific ideological circumstances I have outlined. In a way that echoes reactions to the Iraq war and their implication in terrorist activity, Riaz’s gang see themselves as part of an international solidarity, declaring “We fight for our people who are being tortured in Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir” (Kureishi, *Black* 82). Their involvement in radical activity is part of a growing Muslim international

¹³ See Lewis, 59. For comments on the false opposition between Islam and concepts of plurality see Modood, 208.

consciousness, and cannot be separated from conflicts involving other Muslim populations, and the role of Britain in these conflicts. But more than this, Kureishi suggests that it is the racism that threatens young British Muslims which is the root cause of a growth in violent fundamentalism. Riaz and his gang are not born into extreme beliefs, nor are those who commit violence in the name of Islam, such as Chad, represented as inherently evil. Instead, against the violent conclusion to their campaign, Kureishi juxtaposes the evil that precedes it. In characters such as Jump, the stereotypical, Orientalist view of Asians is clearly still prominent:

You will slit the throats of us infidels as we sleep. Or convert us. Soon books and . . . and . . . bacon will be banned. Isn't that what you people want? (Kureishi, *Black* 191).

The spectre of racial violence, in the form of right-wing racism, is also ever-present:

The family had been harried—stared at, spat on, called “Paki scum” for months, and finally attacked. The husband had been smashed over the head with a bottle and taken to hospital. The wife had been punched. Lighted matches had been pushed through the letter-box. At all hours the bell had been rung and the culprits said they would return to slaughter the children. (Kureishi, *Black* 90)

Therefore, against the Blair government's suggestion that the events of the July 7th were disconnected from political motives or racial problems, and the casting of such acts as the subversion of young Britons by foreign extremists, Kureishi gestures towards a reality where it is racism, cultural alienation, and political discontent that breeds fundamentalism, and ultimately fundamentalist violence within Britain.¹⁴ The lack of state recognition of such a reality is the root cause of hostility towards British society.

Whereas the official reaction to July 7th suggested shock and disbelief at the level of alienation felt by some young male British Muslims, Kureishi's novel documents this alienation plainly and uncompromisingly. In particular, Kureishi emphasises the naivety of any suggestion that being born in Britain naturally results in belonging. Uncle Asif warns Shahid's brother Chillu that “It's easy for people, especially if they're young [. . .] to forget we've barely arrived over in England. It takes several generations to become accustomed to a place” (Kureishi, *Black* 54). At the same time, the experience for the British-born generation is different to its migrant forebears. However, this difference is characterised not by an easing of complexity, but rather a heightening of confusion. Whilst the immigrant generation, the novel suggests, may revert to a stable homeland, like Asif returning to Pakistan, the British-born generation is denied such luxury, permanently in-between as they

¹⁴ In the wake of events on July 7th, the Labour government claimed these events were unconnected to Iraq. See, for example, reporting of these events by Glover, and also the analysis of Dawson.

struggle to root themselves in two traditions that both fall short of their hybrid identities. Shahid's parents hate to talk of racism. This is exemplified in the reaction of his mother, who maintains a classic migrant's position of disbelief at the British reception:

More than anything she hated any talk of race or racism. Probably she had suffered some abuse and contempt. But her father had been a doctor; everyone—politicians, generals, journalists, police chiefs—came to their house in Karachi. The idea that anyone might treat her with disrespect was insupportable. (Kureishi, *Black* 73)

Continuing to maintain the illusion of class status as a counter to racial difference, Shahid's parents resist giving up their belief in the migrant's ideal England as a land of welcome and opportunity, despite the reality falling short of their expectations. Conversely, it is Shahid, British-born, who, with a sense of denied birthright, wants to challenge the prejudices of British society. Whilst his father declares his religion to be "working until my arse aches" (Kureishi, *Black* 92), it is Shahid who must explore religion as the potential answer to his insecurity.

In this context, it is significant that the men attracted to Riaz's talks in the East End mosques are not extremists, or recently arrived migrants, but "local cockney Asians" (Kureishi, *Black* 80). The choice of a term such as "cockney" is not incidental: placing these men in the East End, the heartland of London's skinhead national front membership, we can trace a direct connection between the attraction of Riaz and the oppression faced by these young men in their lives outside the mosques. Explicitly asking (an indicator of the novel's straightforward engagement), "Where did he belong?" (Kureishi, *Black* 134), Shahid is comfortable neither in the real of developing world politics and religious fundamentalism, or the exclusive English identity offered by Deedee, where apologies must be made for "taking him [Shahid] to places where there were only white people" (Kureishi, *Black* 66).

Similarly, Chad, seriously injured in his own violent arson, acts only as a response to his own lack of unbelonging, turning to fundamentalism as an attempt to correct his lack of a sense of self, raised in a white family, given an English name, and caught in the promise of an ideal which is itself identified, through Orwell, with a literature Kureishi's novel offers to challenge and subvert:

Chad would hear church bells. He'd see English country cottages and ordinary English people who were secure, who effortlessly belonged. You know, the whole Orwellian idea of England. (Kureishi, *Black* 106)

Both Chad and Shahid clearly experience their own otherness, and Kureishi draws on well-known models of racial alienation in the specifics of Shahid's and Chad's identity crises. In particular, Shahid admits near the beginning of the novel to flirting with racism, as does Chad, who functions in the novel as Shahid's alter ego, a dangerous warning of what Shahid may become if he fails to come to terms with what it means to be a

British Muslim. In this behaviour, both Shahid and Chad illustrate the desire to become their attacker which resonates with famous accounts of identity formation such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Within the context of their violence, this has particular relevance: as for the characters of *Borderline*, whose violent action for Bart Moore-Gilbert "suggests that in the end their tactics too closely mirror those of their immediate opponents" ("Fringe" 114), the models on which the gang's aggression is based, it seems, are not models taught from within the Muslim culture itself, but within a white racist culture, only then transferred to alternative acts of prejudice. Alienation not only drives British-Asian Muslims towards "mutual support" (Stein 132), but also towards destruction.

Black in White: the Subversion of Racial Absolutes

Yet what is equally significant about *The Black Album* is that it does not only offer a warning of the need to challenge Muslim alienation, it also offers a workable model of Muslim religion in Britain outside fundamentalist activity which suggests an alternative ideological position. This only increases the sense in which to deny the social role of literature is to obscure potentially significant points of view. In its offering of a positive alternative to fundamentalism, *The Black Album* was not only a warning of the possibility of events such as July 7th; it is also, I would suggest, a manifesto for their prevention.

Despite what is often characterised by critics as an attack on Islam, Kureishi also gives space to an alternative representation which reveals as problematic any simple association of the religion with isolationism and extremism. Riaz's gang are identified as part of a community which denies creativity (Kureishi, *Black* 69), exacerbated by their treatment of the offensive, unnamed book. But Riaz is in fact a creative and imaginative individual, whose own poetry suggests possibilities for him outside the limited framework he has found himself in. This suggests that at the heart of Islam is conviction expressed best not through rage, but through emotive expression. Whilst the bookshop burning ends in tragedy, Riaz's poetry is a powerful expression of his beliefs:

Shahid remembered reading:

*The wind-swept sand speaks of adultery in this godless land,
Here Lucifer and colonialists are in charge,
The unveiled girls smell of the West and envy the shameless.*
(Kureishi, *Black* 234-5)

Here Kureishi may be seen, as author, to be valorising the role of language in stimulating reflection. It is for his corruption of Riaz's words, more than anything else, that Shahid feels remorse. And whilst this may seem like an ironic re-creation of Rushdie's account of the satanic verses in secular form, it is also a critical comment that must not be ignored. To take another's sacred words, and deface them for your own pleasure, Kureishi suggests, is in itself an act of violence:

Shahid knew he couldn't explain, he felt too ashamed; he wanted to stop himself crying. Hat was right. They had burned a book; but what had he done? He'd abused a friend's trust without even considering it. How could he complain now? (Kureishi, *Black* 235)

Equally, the novel reverses classical assumptions about the role of Islam in issues such as gender politics. Tahira, the most prominent female member of Riaz's gang, is confident and assertive, echoing Kureishi's representation of Pakistani women in his films against cultural stereotypes (Sen 66). In contrast, Deedee, a proclaimed feminist, is represented as neurotic and needy. For women, at least, being a British Muslim offers space for self-development and esteem-building unavailable in the sex-driven and consumerist West. With defined boundaries, it not only defines the role of women, but also offers these women the possibility to control men. They exist not in denial of the hypocrisies of religion, but as confident critics of it:

She [Tahira] went on, 'Chad, I've noticed that you like wearing tight trousers.'
'I do, yes.'

'But we women go to a lot of trouble to conceal our allures. Surely you've heard how hard it is to wear the hijab? [. . .] You brothers urge us to cover ourselves but become strangely evasive when it comes to your own clothes. Can't you wear something looser?' (Kureishi, *Black* 105)

This alternative rendering of Islam is at its height in Kureishi's description of the London mosque. Worth quoting at length, it offers an image of Islam not as representative of essentialism, but of diversity. Against this passage, complaints as to Kureishi's "stereotypical portraits of British-Asian Muslims" (Ranasinha 82) seem to offer only their own selective reading of the text:

Arranged on three floors, the rooms of the mosque were as big as tennis courts. Men of so many types and nationalities—Tunisians, Indians, Algerians, Scots, French—gathered there, chatting in the entrance, where they removed their shoes and then retired to wash, that it would have been difficult, without prior knowledge, to tell which country the mosque was in.

Here race and class barriers had been suspended. There were businessmen in expensive suits, others in London Underground and Post Office uniforms; bowed old men in salwar kamiz fiddled with beads. Chic lads with ponytails, working in computers, exchanged business cards with young men in suits. Forty Ethiopians sat to one side of one room, addressed by one of their number in robes [. . .] There were dozens of languages. Strangers spoke to one another. The atmosphere was uncompetitive, peaceful, meditative. (Kureishi, *Black* 131-32)

Kureishi captures the Islamic ummat al-mu'minin, in which all people are united, across race or culture, before God. Here the mosque defines hybridity, rather than opposes it. At the centre of this representation also, however, is the diversity of London itself, which offers, it seems, a model of community that is intrinsically heterogeneous and allows the Islamic ummat al-mu'minin to be realised in its full potential. London in the novel

is in essence a “limitless city” (Kureishi, *Black* 57), and the attacks against it create a tragedy which is “the closest a city like London could come to communal emotion” (Kureishi, *Black* 103). Such presentation foreshadows not Blair’s comments in relation the events of July 7th, but instead those of London mayor Ken Livingstone, who proclaimed the diversity of London and its solidarity in response to an attack he identified as levelled at “ordinary, working-class Londoners, black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Jew, young and old”, in a city which would refuse to be divided as “everybody lives side by side in harmony” (Livingstone).

This sense of London as offering an urban experience in which Britishness can be redefined as inclusive is a common theme in Kureishi’s writing, both literary and cinematic, but is also a point he has made vocally in non-fiction terms. In the same 2003 interview quoted from earlier Kureishi makes this point explicitly, noting the value of London as a model to which Britain as a whole might aspire. He recounts the story of being in a pub in Hastings during the England-Turkey football match earlier that year, when everyone started chanting, “I’d rather be a Paki than a Turk”, and says “I thought, they wouldn’t sing that in London. I don’t think London bears any resemblance to England. It’s a right crummy place without London. I think if England didn’t have London, it’d be a fucking dump” (Brookes). Against its acknowledgment as a “potentially perilous place” (Stein 133) London is also somewhere that belonging can be provisional and easy:

His manor—that’s how he thought of it now. In London, if you found the right place, you could consider yourself a citizen the moment you went to the same local shop twice. (Kureishi, *Black* 193)

The mosque, with its diverse languages and nationalities, is not in conflict with this image, but at its very foundation. Thus against Mark Stein’s statement that Shahid “dwells in travel” (134), such a fitting postcolonial concept needs to be reworked with the “self-consciously postcolonial” approach Stein himself proffers. For against this migratory metaphor and fluidity, Kureishi in fact offers an aspect of London living—compete with its unique notion of relative rootedness—as a model for successful British identity, including British Muslims. The violence of Riaz’s gang, like that of the July bombers—and as noted in Livingstone’s reaction—is so imposing precisely because it is exactly that: an imposition. In these terms, reactions against Kureishi’s other writing might be re-considered. For example, Kureishi’s statement in “The Rainbow Sign” that fundamentalism is both a response to alienation and an aberration has been taken by Ranasinha as evidence of Kureishi’s hostility towards Islam (79). Yet, in the light of *The Black Album*, we might see instead that alienation and aberration are two terms not to be read as antonyms, but homonyms: it is precisely because it is rooted in alienation that fundamentalist activity is an aberration; to declare otherwise, Kureishi suggests, would be to

condone its origins in English racism.

Black or White: *The Black Album* as Ideology

In the end, Shahid does not succumb to the same fate as Chad: he does find a provisional resolution to his confusion in the acceptance to take life with Deedee a day at a time, “until it stops being fun” (Kureishi, *Black* 276). This may be seen to lack definitiveness, but then of course, and as always, that is Kureishi’s point—that it is exactly the grappling for such certainty which must be addressed, fluidity come to terms with by both black and white, if Britain is not to erupt into racial and cultural violence. In their agreement, Deedee and Shahid mark this acceptance of difference: one black, one white; one old, one young; one male, one female. Yet the most vital symbol for this way of thinking is Prince himself. Prince’s own identity, and indeed his music, is a mixture of hybrid influences, black and white, male and female, which makes him an encapsulation of Deedee and Shahid’s relationship in one single individual. His own nature of performance, reflected in Shahid’s use of make-up and women’s clothing, and in references to Madonna’s “vogue” (Kureishi, *Black* 117) which draw connotations of voguing, offers the enactment of different identities against biological determinism. With an American rather than a British background, Prince suggests alternative modes of belonging. Against Englishness, defined by race and tradition, there is the possibility of a Britishness based more on American founding principles, a nation whose motto, *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many, one), at least in its origins, suggests belonging defined by newness, by arrival, and by what you contribute, rather than where you come from.

So what if, in reading Kureishi, Blair actually started to listen to Prince instead of the Beatles, chose *The Black Album* instead of the *White*? How would the absence of ideology be addressed? Accepting this model, Blair might rethink how he conceptualises Britishness, and find the ideology that Kureishi yearns for him to identify: one in which hybridity, as an ironically absolute condition, is seen as the essential pillar of Britishness. This would have tangible consequences. For example, the guidelines for the new British citizenship test would need to be re-written. For whilst these Home Office guidelines announce “the diversity of background, culture, and faiths that living in modern Britain involves” (3), they at the same time maintain a dialectic that divides the British population, by stating that “Britain is historically a Christian society” (50), and describing the Church of England, and other Christian groups and their traditions (50-51, 53-55)—and therefore presumably requiring knowledge of them—but not other faiths or their religious occasions. In contrast to this singularity, Kureishi’s “ideology”, based on London’s unity-in-difference and the polymorphous figure of Prince, would ultimately mean looking less for certainty, and more for the power of instability, and truly emphasising hybridity by giving equal space to different ways of life. In the novel, this choice is figured in terms of the black and white that Prince and the Beatles each respectively represent.

We are offered the opportunity to posit what that which is labelled “black” (but is not exclusive) might offer in terms of a subversion of exclusive whiteness. Taking Shahid to the White Room, Deedee acknowledges, “The White Room’s very, well, you know, white” (Kureishi, *Black* 66). But following Prince’s model, a black room would not be a simple counterpoint, but a space that challenged whiteness through its hybridity, rather than an equally homogenous alternative. In his hybridity, Prince and his black album are a model for this world: defined by cultural diversity rather than cultural conformity, not just between individuals, but within them:

How could anyone confine themselves to one system or creed? Why should they feel they had to? There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity. (Kureishi, *Black* 274)

Kureishi identifies through Shahid a way to retain the importance and value of the self, but without reifying that self. Does this constitute an ideology? It depends, certainly, on the definition of that complex term which one chooses to follow. But one might speculate that it would satisfy Kureishi.

Conclusion

Kureishi’s novel itself asks for us to read literature as direct social engagement: defending the role of literature, Shahid asks: “But don’t writers try to explain genocide and that kind of thing? Novels are like a picture of life” (Kureishi, *Black* 21). In this discussion, I have attempted to explore the consequences of such reading practices, in keeping with a postcolonial theoretical approach which emphasises the value of firm social comment and political mandate. If texts such as Kureishi’s, in combination with important non-fiction reports produced in the 1990s, had received more critical attention, then the root cause of these events in a disaffected and alienation British Muslim population might have been more obvious. Instead, in the wake of July 7th, many social commentators reflected on issues as if the immense alienation of the British Muslim population was surprising or unexpected. Rather than the concern with a past Britishness metaphorically represented by The Beatles, a more concerted effort to be concerned with contemporary representations of Britishness such as offered by Kureishi could have yielded potentially life-saving results in terms of resolving the issues surrounding the existence of a disaffected youth available for exploitation, in favour of confident and strong British-Asian identities. Even if these texts were read now, they would offer a powerful and concentrated engagement with how to tackle the problems of British Muslim alienation.

Such comments may seem naïve, and I make them with an awareness of such potential criticism. Yet recent media texts on the current state of British race relations have indeed take up this role in a way which

suggests a growing recognition of the value of texts which prompt a more critical reflection of government policy. For example, the 2007 Channel 4 film *Britz* has provided a post-July 7th reflection on the reasoning behind British Muslim violence. Perhaps one of the most politically charged pieces of drama to appear on British television, the film directly attributes the conversion of young British Muslims to terrorism and suicide bombings to their alienation from an institutionally racist British society which has made Muslim faith and British citizenship incompatible in the post-9/11 world. Whilst Kureishi would see an acceptance of a universal hybridity as the solution to ethnic tensions, *Britz* suggests rather that a more multi-faceted Britishness—which includes the possibility of strong religious faith, and recognises the needs and political concerns of its Muslim subjects—is desperately needed if further violence is to be prevented. Yet whilst their approaches are markedly different, the fact that ten years after Kureishi's text a need is still being acknowledged for political drama addressing British Muslim identity reinforces not only the potential power of the fictional text (whether film or literature) as a political force, but also the continued lack of recognition of this power. It draws attention to the perils that potentially arise if these social commentaries continue to be ignored, and politicians continue to neglect the development of a detailed ideological position to address ethnic tensions.

As for all writers, we cannot read Kureishi as representative of what it means to be British Muslim, or even British-Asian. Nevertheless, we can see him as offering a particular insight into the alienation facing British-born ethnic populations. It is for its capturing of this reality, and for a gesturing towards its solution in the acceptance of a more plural society and more unstable identities that Kureishi's work deserves reconsideration and, with it, a reconsideration of the role of literature itself: a new awareness of the importance of a unified message, and the balance between aesthetics and representation, however problematic the latter term has now become.

Ultimately, this need not mean narrowing a novel like *The Black Album* to specific contexts, as such a reading may suggest. Rather, it asks for an examination of the parallels, both literal and more metaphorical, between representations of cultural identity and real-world tensions. Despite its current relevance to the events of July 2005 and how we might respond to them, *The Black Album* can also be read as a wider representation of the tensions bred by intolerance and their dangers. Again in interview in 2003, Kureishi could not foresee the resurfacing of British Muslim alienation in 2005. Nevertheless, his comments on his perception of the state of Britain at this time illustrate how, in a wider context, the racial intolerance of *The Black Album* was still relevant as a reminder of British racism and its potential consequences:

Well, when I was a kid [. . .] the racism was sort of casual. You'd go down the street and people would say things to you all the time. And at school, everybody would be

racist in a way they wouldn't be now. On the other hand, the way my window cleaner talks about asylum seekers—"these fucking asylum seekers, they come over here taking our jobs"—is exactly the same as what people said about Pakis when I was a kid. You just realise that the focus has changed. I think racism is where people talk about what they hate about themselves: greedy, money-grabbing, it's the same vocabulary that applies to the Jews, the blacks, the asylum seekers, the Pakistanis and the Irish. (Brookes)

At the same time that Kureishi "effectively represents" (Sen 78) even in the wake of his own recognition of the limits of representation, his writing speaks for a British problem that is larger than one particular religious or ethnic identity, in this case for "the many dimensions of rage which a single, fictional character may face" (Curry and Allison 164). We would do well not only to recognise the prescience of Kureishi's writing, but also its continued and expansive relevance.

Works Cited

- Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992.
- Ansari, Humayun. *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800*. London: Hurst and Company, 2004.
- Appiah, Anthony. "Identity Crisis." *Financial Times* <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/11/09/home/kureishi-album.html>> 17 Sept 1995. Accessed 10 Nov 2005.
- Bergonzi, Bernard. *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its Background, 1939-1960*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Brookes, Emma. "When you're writing, you look for conflict." *The Guardian*. <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,1086653,00.html>>. 17 Nov 2003. Accessed 10 Nov 2005.
- Britz. Written and Directed Peter Kosminsky. Channel 4. 2007.
- Solomos, John, Findlay, Bob, Jones, Simon, and Gilroy, Paul. "The organic crisis of British capitalism and race: the experience of the seventies." Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*. (1982) London: Routledge, 1992. 9-46.
- Chrisman, Laura. *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003.
- Curry, Renee R., and Allison, Terry L. "'All Anger and Understanding': Kureishi, Culture, and Contemporary Constructions of Rage." *States of Rage: Emotional Eruption, Violence, and Social Change* Ed. Renee R. Curry and Terry. New York: New York UP, 1996. 146-66.
- Dawson, Ashley. *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*. Michigan: U of Michigan P, 2007.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*. London: Penguin, 2000.

- . *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004.
- Glover, Julian. "Two-thirds Believe London Bombings are Linked to Iraq War." *Guardian Unlimited*.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/attackonlondon/story/0,16132,1531387,00.html>>. 19 July 2005. Accessed Nov 10 2005.
- Harris, Chrissi. "Insiders/Outsiders: Finding One's Self in the Cultural Borderlands." *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands*. Ed. Anna Maria Manzanias. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002. 175-87.
- Home Office (Life in the United Kingdom Advisory Group). *Life in the United Kingdom: A Journey to Citizenship*. London: The Stationery Office, 2004.
- Independent on Sunday*. "ANSWER THE QUESTIONS! Robert Newman—Writing? It's the lack of heavy." *Independent on Sunday*, 11/03/ 2003,
<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4159/is_20030511/ai_n12739612> accessed 10/09/2006
- Kaleta, Kenneth C. *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1998.
- Kureishi, Hanif. *The Black Album*. London: Faber, 1995.
- . "The Road Exactly" (1998). *The Word and the Bomb*. London: Faber, 2007. 53-59.
- . "The Carnival of Culture" (28 July 2005). *The Word and the Bomb*. London: Faber, 2007. 97-100.
- Larsen, Neil. "DetermiNation: Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism, and the problem of Ideology." *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks. Durham: Duke UP, 2000. 126-39.
- Lehmann, John. *The Craft of Letters in England*. London: Cresset, 1956.
- Lewis, Philip. "Being Muslim and Being British: The Dynamics of Islamic Reconstruction in Bradford." *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain*. Ed. Roger Ballard. London: C Gurst, London, 1994. 58-87.
- Livingstone, Ken. "Mayor's Statement, July 7 2005."
<http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/mayor_statement_070705.jsp>
Accessed Nov 10 2005.
- McLeod, John. *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004.
- Mercer, Kobena. "Black Art and the Burden of Representation". *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 1994. 233-258
- Modood, Tariq. *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005.
- Moore-Gilbert, Bart. *Hanif Kureishi*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001.
- . "Hanif Kureishi and the 'Fringe' Tradition." *English Literature in International Contexts*. Ed. Heinz Antor and Klaus Stierstorfer. Heidelberg: Carl Winter University, 2000. 105-117.

- Newman, Robert. *The Fountain at the Centre of the World*. London: Verso, 2003.
- . *Scribbling*. BBC Television. 2003.
- Orwell, George. "Why I Write" (1947). Reprinted in *George Orwell: Essays*. London: Penguin, 2000. 1-6.
- Parry, Benita. "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse." *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987): 27-58.
- Puwar, Nirmal. "Melodramatic Postures and Constructions." *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*. Ed. Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 21-41.
- Ranasinha, Ruvani. *Hanif Kureishi*. Plymouth: Northcote House, 2002.
- San Juan, Jr., E. *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*. London: Palgrave, 2000.
- Sen, Asha. "Re-Writing History: Hanif Kureishi and the Politics of Black Britain." *Passages* 2.1 (2000): 61-80.
- Shohat, Ella. "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'", *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks. Durham: Duke UP, 2000. 126-39.
- Sinfield, Alan. *Society and Literature 1945-1979*. London: Methuen. 1983.
- Stein, Mark. "Posed Ethnicity and the Postethnic: Hanif Kureishi's Novels." *English Literature in International Contexts*. Ed. Heinz Antor and Klaus Stierstorfer Heidelberg: Carl Winter University, 2000. 119-39.
- Stevenson, Randall. *The British Novel Since the Thirties*. London: B.T. Batsford. 1986.
- Weedon, Chris. *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*. Berkshire: OUP Press, 2004.
- Wheeler, Brian. "Bono Pushes the Right Buttons." *BBC News Online*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3701414.stm>. 30 Sept 2004. Accessed 10 Nov 2005.