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Welsh and West Indian, “like nothing ... seen before”: Unfolding Diasporic Lives in Charlotte Williams’ *Sugar and Slate*

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I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as a meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

If there's one thing to insist on in analysing Welsh culture, it is the complex of forced and acquired discontinuities: a broken series of radical shifts, within which we have to mark not only certain social and linguistic continuities but many acts of self-definition by negation, by alternation and by contrast.

Raymond Williams, "Wales and England"

In the preface to her 2002 autobiography, *Sugar and Slate*, Charlotte Williams offers, in just five lines, a highly specific and individualized account of her childhood that nonetheless signals strongly to many of the familiar tropes and terms that have gained currency in the burgeoning critical field of postcolonial literary studies and its vocabulary for speaking of diasporic lives: "I grew up in a small Welsh town amongst people with pale faces, feeling that somehow to be half Welsh and half Afro-Caribbean was always to be half of something but never quite anything whole at all. I grew up in a world of mixed messages about belonging, about home and about identity." Yet, despite this opening gesture towards a syntax of experience that might be effortlessly absorbed into postcolonial theorizations of hybrid and ambivalent identities, stretched across at least two distant continents and divided by the seemingly oppositional histories of the West and the Rest, what makes Williams' act of life-writing both valuable and theoretically compelling is her determined engagement with Welshness, an ethnicity and difference that troubles the familiar configurations of hyphenated identities and cross-cultural flows.

Williams' text is centrally concerned with her own twentieth century re-crossing of the Black Atlantic and the narrative is structured in three parts, ostensibly divided and named by each destination on her journey: Africa, Guyana and Wales. However, as the text proceeds, the clear lines indicated by this voyage, that also of course evoke the triangular circuits of the transatlantic slave trade that set her ancestors in motion, are immediately disrupted by the crisscrossing of memories, the interruptions of voices from other places and the messiness of encounters in the diaspora. As Williams journeys across a highly personalized triangle of Wales, Africa (the Sudan, Nigeria) and Guyana, the very idea or project of recovering her familial and ancestral past is opened up to intellectual and emotional scrutiny. Her acts of travel to these places remain very real to the material of the book in all senses, but it is equally significant that in each part the ideas of one place and the stories and memories that it accrues cannot be

“rooted” or contained by the geography that names its borders. Rather, the “arrival” at each destination is mapped as a literal movement in time and space but also as an affective journey across a tissue of land, sea and bodyscapes that mutually inform each other and that echo complicated ties and associations in which the personal is never fully individual and the located never fully bounded.

In her constant stretching and compressing of the distance between Wales, Guyana and Ghana, Williams not only retraces her intimate and highly particularized story of a black Atlantic family life, but she also writes in the voices and realities of forgotten subjects, summoning a density of lives across space and time that usefully complicates our understandings of how cultural difference and cultural identities operate between and within the tricontinental. Her narrative is energized by repeated shifts between the intimate and interpersonal frames offered up by the stories of family, neighbors, school, work and domestic life, and the wider geopolitical frames of colonial histories and the power dynamics they initiated between people and place. Through these shifts and the text’s persistent snipping away at ready-made frames for representing the past and its subjects, *Sugar and Slate* frays the broad explanations of cultural movements and population histories, pulling out threads to reveal a much more open and unruly weave of diasporic writing.

One of the most arresting and significant traits of Williams’ writing throughout this narrative is its ability to unsettle our sense of what needs to be known in order to tell the story of life and how much the story of one life is deeply entangled with those of others, both near and far. Her constant folding in of others’ documents, writings, letters and testimonies characterizes her approach to life-writing as a profoundly self-aware genre that constantly reflects on how stories of self are both informed by and, in turn, inform the telling of the lives of others. In particular, her methodology of textual collage creates space for these others to speak for themselves and alongside each other, inflecting her recovery of black Welsh subjects with a democratization of the historical record. This essay will try to unfold some of the intriguing complications that Williams’ text offers to current thinking about the production and negotiation of identity in relation to history, place, journeys and encounters.

A Subject at Sea? Welsh and West Indian

Words are his sails. The way they are set turns them into concepts.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

Although Williams navigates the choppy waters of the Atlantic within the first few pages of her story, we know immediately that we are not in the familiar territory of Caribbean diasporic subjectivity. Not only is the scene of "sitting drinking tea by the coal fire at home [in Wales]" an unlikely point of British settlement, but the journey of a Welsh woman and her four small daughters on a cargo ship to the Sudan announces a "to-ing and fro-ing" also not commonly rendered. Perhaps more tellingly still, what links these scenes is not the idea of home or belonging but rather the pressures exerted upon this claim or possibility. Williams' memory of Suzanne, her black friend from Cardiff whom she later associates with a more secure Welshness than her own, immediately alerts us to the complications of belonging: "I has this friend see ... with red hair and eyes as green as anything. She passes herself as white but Mam told her straight – you're black you is, BLACK! I know your mam and she's black as well so don't go putting on any airs and graces round 'ere.' She had a way of talking over her shoulder in conversation with her imaginary Mam" (*Sugar and Slate* 3-4). Her memories on board the ship to Sudan are of her mother's renegotiation of place: "Ma glanced over her shoulder but kept going. Wales was behind her now and she could only move forward as she had done many times before" (5). Within a diasporic frame, the curious symmetry of the backward glance that connects these two scenes most straightforwardly evokes the uncertainty and frailty of home as a given of accommodation and community to those who don't visibly "fit" with their surroundings. Yet its factoring in of hesitancy importantly foregrounds the lack of ease or transparency involved in making the past available to the present as an untroubled index of personal experience, or a self-willed history of events (in this way reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's angelic glance).

The switching from Suzanne's Mam's insistent disruption of the narrow fit between body, ethnicity and *Cymru Wen* (white Wales) to her mother's wistful gaze towards a horizon of water in which the idea of one's place becomes atrophied against the pull of history is a fitting opener to Williams' work. Both of these scenes are soon revealed to be Williams, as narrator, glancing over her own shoulder with her "memory eye," as she waits in transit at Piarco Airport in Trinidad on her way to Guyana. Her state of "transit" also appropriately signals the itinerant and provisional perspective that structures the narrative and energizes its disruption of the predictable sequencing of cultural identities and their claims to place. Likewise, the strong and immediate presence of movement as constitutive of the form, as well as the content, of the narrative helps us to grasp its investment in the shifts of perception and the traveling of identity, as well as in the small and defining details of place and person. The story-form here is

consciously crafted by a busy and intelligent imagination, the deft turn from the parlour to the cargo-ship an indicator of the wide bearings through which it will steer its course, as well as an early warning that its compass will be set neither towards the cosmopolitanism of a mixed metropolis nor at the return to an originary homeland. At once open and exploratory, Williams' writing proceeds through a complicated and often enchanting series of personal tales, small places and abandoned histories that cross back and forth between continents, writing in the capacity for intricate shifts between the demands of the global and local, as well as between the intimate connections of lovers and families and the wider historical connections of peoples and nations that refuse any neat or finished ordering of Europe, the Caribbean and Africa in relation to each other.

The glimpses of awkwardness and wistfulness that Suzanne and Ma present are also a fitting preface, in their summoning of a complicated affective as well as geographical terrain, to the story of Williams' parents' love affair. In many ways the relationship between her Guyanese father, Denis Williams, and her Welsh mother, Katie-Alice Hughes, is the only point of "origin" for Williams' own story and the triangle of affiliation she later re-traces. Again, it is a relationship that is pointedly unsettled and unsettling in its mappings of being and belonging. With characteristic lightness, Williams narrates how the bond that brings her mother and father together, and their family into being, pushes outwards against the normative logic of marriage, family and home as relations or institutions that close inwards, tightening and domesticating the ties between kinship and place:

So Ma and Dad became lovers, eventually married and moved on. That's how we began to learn about movement. It was movement that was home. Home was not a particular place for us in the very early years. Home was Ma. We arrived into exile; into a state of relocation that was both hers and his. And the journeys were more than physical journeys. They were travels across worlds of thinking, across generations of movements. (11)

As well as challenging the idea of the family as a unit of settlement and containment, Williams also disrupts the engrained logic of separation and loss as the formative historical conditions of diasporic lives.

This framing of movement as a condition for attachment, belonging and understanding can be read productively within a Black Atlantic critical paradigm that has sought to give weight and value to individual and cultural identities formed by acts of crossing and a dynamics of instability and plurality. As a framework which foregrounds the gains that might be recovered from the monumental losses of language, culture, the connection to a people, and often of life itself, that formed the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, the critical re-inflection of the ship and the sea as a space of creative exchange fits in well with Williams' project. Indeed, it is partly a measure of the success of postcolonial and Black Atlantic literary approaches that two decades after Homi Bhabha's groundbreaking study *The Location of Culture* (1984), the context for

William's own story is indeed one in which the "transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or political refugees ... [are] the terrains of world literature" (12). Moreover, one and a half decades after the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, "the pressing need to get black cultural expressions, analyses, and histories taken seriously in academic circles" (5), is now an argument for refinement and range rather than one about presence.

Certainly Williams' final sentence, "They were travels across worlds of thinking, across generations of movements," stylistically almost another backward glance, acknowledges the historical and conceptual thickness of these crossings, as well as her retrospective awareness that her family's persuasions towards movement were always already connected to those foundational journeys of black subjects in history, more particularly the Middle Passage and its obscene traffic in human lives that Gilroy characterized as "capitalism with its clothes off" (15). Indeed, Williams' text is acutely conscious that what it means to "be" in the world is not a given produced by the subject but rather a constant and often risky negotiation between the claims of place, history and community which may result in unbelonging, as well as in belonging. Moreover, for Williams, growing up partly in Africa and partly in North Wales, she also recognizes this as "a story in which somehow I am both looking at and looked upon" (*Sugar and Slate* 33). In one sense, this awareness positions Williams as the "enlightened" historian who knows herself to be both a part of the story and apart from it. It also however speaks of a specifically postcolonial identity. The sense of occupying two places at once, of experiencing oneself both as a knowing subject and also as an object of other's knowledge, speaks to Fanon's psychology of the colonized in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which similarly marks the desire to be in two places, even two identities at once.

We may read Williams' work then as investing in exile, homelessness or displacement as an energetics of possibility, a clearing of a space for new and non-originary identities to gain presence and thereby link this text to a major thematic concern in many recent studies of Caribbean writing. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, the centrality of diasporic lives within the study of Caribbean literature (and Black Atlantic cultural works more generally) has possibly led to a sense of the knownness of its coordinates, a familiarity with the outlines of its multiple, hybrid and syncretic identities and a confidence in what they may yield in terms of cultural understandings of the relationships between place, belonging and identity.¹ It is precisely the surprising points of disruption to this knowingness that I want to signify here as the particular value of Williams' narrative.

Indeed, if Williams' book is part of a tradition of postcolonial and diasporic writing, then it is also apart from it, a self-consciously minor relation or perhaps, more fittingly, a "black sheep" of the generic family. It is no accident that the fluency and familiarity of its language is disrupted above by the presence of "Ma." While much of Williams' story can be read fruitfully within the established paradigms of diasporic and postcolonial criticism, to flatten its meanings to the ready outlines of these would be to miss the signifying difference of her story, the

difference of a strong, white ethnicity that throws the dynamic between the powerful and powerless, familiar and strange, even colonized and colonizer, into disarray.

Williams' engagement with the issues of cultural identity, belonging and home asks many meaningful questions about what it means to "be" a Caribbean person and a person of African descent, but it asks them from a particular vantage point and in a highly localized voice. The reason that "Ma" sticks out within this familiar Caribbean vignette of migration stories and ocean crossings is because her presence registers that the demotic vernacular of this book is Welsh. In her study of Caribbean autobiography, Sandra Pouchet Paquet reads across an impressive historical range of works and concludes that "[t]heir common task is situated and embodied difference" (261). This strategy again offers both a point of correspondence and one of departure for Williams in relation to a Caribbean literary tradition, as the difference that she so insistently embodies in her writing is the strong presence of the Welsh.

Again, working both with and against familiar bearings in her story, Williams presents London as a place of unbelonging that first draws Katie Alice and Denis, and Welshness and West Indianness, into each other's orbits. It is widely known, and often from literary accounts such as the iconic Sam Selvon text *The Lonely Londoners*, that those West Indians who journeyed to the "motherland" in the 1950s were not greeted as the brothers or comrades they had often been accepted as during the Second World War, but as strangers and invading, inferior others to be feared and avoided. They encountered "a cold, grey and miserable motherland" (*Sugar and Slate* 9). The way in which English social orders licensed similar treatment of the Irish is also quite commonly recognized, but Williams' claim that, "[w]hen Welsh and Irish girls came to London looking for work they found the same lodging houses willing to let them in as the coloured chaps" (10), makes a less common assertion of social marginality that initiates her project to write in Welsh subjects as part of the minority group formed by the processes of metropolitan English othering.

However, while their shared position as strangers may have occasioned the material conditions under which her West Indian father and Welsh mother met and married, Williams is less concerned to explore the equivalence of their social positioning as she is to configure their different attitudes and responses to the cultural authority implied in this act of positioning. She is especially sensitive to how the gestures of accommodation available to and accepted by her father, but not her mother, may re-order our understanding of cultural minorities within Britain:

But Ma and Dad rubbed along the edges of a very glamorous London, moving in circles that included Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud and other equally well known artists. Dad was artist-in-residence at the Slade for a while. He became the interesting chap to have at parties; a curiosity, a poodle, the comfortable stranger. Ma was not so easy. She was Welsh and uncomfortably different. "You're the English one," she used to say to Dad, knowing in her heart that she was the real dark stranger. (10)

Allowing her Ma to occupy the space of the "real dark stranger" is Williams' provocation to all kinds of assumptions about and entitlements to identities of difference. As well as foregrounding the shared culture and language of colonized and colonizer for West Indian subjects that underpins Ma's pejorative "English," Williams is candid about the "cultural capital" possessed by Denis that, very probably, alongside his gender and class markings, allowed for localized assimilations that his wife could not access.

That Denis seemed English to Katie Alice may initially seem surprising, possibly even accusatory, given that the dramatic geographical and ancestral differences between these two could easily persuade us to map their sameness with Englishness onto their proximity. However, as a colonially educated Guyanese man who came to study in Britain on a British Council scholarship, the markers of English cultural value and, most significantly, his habits for negotiating these, were already part of Denis' behavioral repertoire. Furthermore, as part of the group who made London the cultural capital of the West Indies in the 1950s, Denis, along with "the West Indian chaps" with whom he mixed, was "not concerned with their position in the motherland" (10). These men formed a community of "Caribbean writers and artists and future leaders with visions and big thoughts ... [who] talked about imperialism, about colonialism and independence" (10). They tolerated the color bar, "so very polite and so accepted" (10), just as they tolerated other aspects of Englishness, not because they found them acceptable but possibly because they were already habituated to them and, probably, because they had a sense of wider horizons and more urgent struggles.

It is important to factor into our backward glance that when we think about cultural and political identities for black people in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, we need to think internationally. For many of the intellectuals, writers and artists who came to Britain in this period, international and transnational identifications seemed both more exciting and useful. The long established Pan-Africanist movement, the Bandung conference of 1955, the Organization of African Unity formed in 1963, and West Indian Federation from 1958 to 1962 had powerfully structured more expansive ideas of "imagined communities" even if it did not deliver them as political realities. For Denis Williams, secure in both his colonial education and his cultural milieu within English and West Indian artistic and intellectual communities, London became a place from which to participate in what Homi Bhabha has referred to as the "hybrid cosmopolitanism of contemporary metropolitan life."²

All the same, while Denis may have been received as a "comfortable stranger," the fact of his strangeness was still significant, not only marking a hospitality undercut by embedded ideas about race and Empire, but also finally marking the vanishing point of his development as an artist in Britain. After a series of patronizing and misguided reviews of his truly remarkable work, "The London of John Nash, Wyndham Lewis and Elgar ... very gently nudged them away with all its imperialist assumptions and its contradictions" (9). For Denis, a Caribbean man whose relationship to cultural space had inevitably been defined historically in relation to both Europe and Africa, the journey away from Europe to Africa is heavily encoded, if not over-

determined, in an uncomfortable way. The problematic nature of Denis' re-imagining of Africa is not within my discussion here though it should be registered as part of Williams' venture to map a continuum of postcolonial identities with equal honesty and attention. All the same, while Denis' journeys have a logic and familiarity that resonate across a Caribbean history and literature, the journey to Sudan may have been a journey on which Alice could join her husband, *Denis bache*, but it was not a journey that she could share with him.

“The Real Dark Stranger”: Recalibrating Difference

In Caribbean cultural formation, the white, European, Western, colonizing traces were positioned as the ascendant element, *the voiced aspect*; the black, “African,” enslaved, colonized traces, of which there were many, were unvoiced, subterranean and subversive, governed by a different “logic,” and positioned through subordination or marginalization. Identities formed within the matrix of colonial meanings were constructed so as to foreclose and disavow engagement with the real histories of our society or its cultural “routes.” Stuart Hall writes, “The huge efforts made, over many years, not only by academic scholars but by cultural practitioners themselves, to piece together these fragmentary, often illegal, ‘routes to the present’ and to reconstruct their unspoken genealogies, are the necessary historical groundwork required to make sense of the interpretive matrix and self-images of our culture and *to make the invisible visible*” (14; emphasis mine).

Stuart Hall's sketch of the historically dominant axes of invisibility and unvoicing within Caribbean cultural formation makes the precarious position of white Welshness evident. The effectiveness of this mode of criticism in making certain cultures visible should not be undervalued but the limit point of its horizon is nevertheless important to recognize. The syntactic streaming of “white, European, Western, colonizing,” leaves no space for a resistant whiteness that may fit uneasily, if at all, within this plotting of ethnicity along axes of social power. As Avtah Brah argues:

In Britain there has been a tendency to discuss diaspora primarily along a ‘majority/minority’ axis. This dichotomy surfaced in post-war Britain as an element underpinning the processes of racialisation. The term ‘minority’ was applied primarily to British citizens of African, Caribbean and Asian descent — a postcolonial code that operated as a polite substitute for ‘coloured people.’ (620)

It is on the issue of internal differentiation that Williams is especially alert and convincing, disrupting this post-war dichotomy from several angles. Her insistence on positioning Welshness itself as a minority identity generates a strong pull away from the axis of whiteness as a guarantee of Englishness. Arguably though, her imagining of what the category of black Welshness might look like plots an even more significant reordering of geographical and ethnic perimeters. In this way, Williams' text may be seen to issue a response to what Brah calls “the

interesting question” posed by the diaspora space of England, “how these British identities take shape; how they are internally differentiated; how they interrelate with one another and with other British identities; and how they mutually reconfigure and decentre received notions of Englishness, Scottishness, Welshness or Britishness” (632-33).

Although, Katie Alice may seem to embody a rather romanticized Welshness that feeds the nationalist rhetoric of a proud and independent people, her confidence in her distinctiveness—“she wore her difference like a banner”—and the capacity it affords her for strength in social interactions with the “English” and in assertions of justice—“I guessed, like Dad said, it was because Ma was Welsh and she wasn’t taking orders from anybody”—is a source of pleasure in the narrative, even though Williams herself recalls how she “longed for her to be ordinary” (*Sugar and Slate* 12, 8, 8). Moreover, Ma’s “steel will that pushed her away from all the chapel goodness, the village small talk, from the purples and the slate greys that invaded her inner landscape” (7), registers her identity as one in which resistance and movement are compatible.

This is important, at least partly, because migration has not been an associated motif of the Welsh. Rather, Welsh cultural identity seems to be “packaged” and presented most often as the very opposite of Caribbeaness—as completeness, unity, bonded to the land and with strong kinship ties.³ Her unfixing here also corresponds with Williams’ mapping of the cultural meeting points between Katie Alice and Denis as a portal for the wider possibilities of reading Welshness and West Indianness productively alongside each other. Indeed, Williams employs a consciously creolizing descriptive mode at strategic points in the text, switching subject and frame so as to position her mother in a cross-cultural space in which her Welshness is figured as fully compatible with her husband’s West Indianness. One early example is her lyrical reconfiguration of chain migration in which Ma becomes the improvisational figure most commonly associated with a history of black voices:

Africa had called for Dad and now he was calling for her; Kate sweetheart, his love and his mentor. He loved the rhythms and poetry of her thoughts. Her ideas fell together like jazz, the blue notes resonating across the staves with their own logic, defying the predictable sequences and the rudimentary facts. (8-9)

However, Williams’ writing in of Welshness in this way is to do more than complicate the structures of feeling associated with being of, if not in, more than one place, history and culture. It suspends the matrix of differences organized around ideas of white Britishness as homogeneous that arguably still dominate our understandings of postcolonial and hyphenated identities in as much as they stabilize the British “side” or simply ignore it as the uninteresting, unsignifying space of identity. In its positioning of Welshness as a strong ethnicity that both dissents from and resists the hegemony of Englishness, *Sugar and Slate* puts forward an engaging and serious challenge to the terms on which ideas of difference and counter-cultural identities have been calibrated and organized. It generates a new and much-needed conversation

about cultural minorities that complicates the dominant, though paradoxically weak, idea of Britishness.

Interestingly, this weakness can be witnessed quite startlingly in the context of Black British writings, in the majority of which Englishness, often unmarked ethnically under the sign of whiteness, emerges as an identity so uninteresting that it can only be engaged with when it is marked by a transgressive sexuality (as in Hanif Kuriyesi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*), an alternative ethnicity such as Jewishness (as in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*), or (as in Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani*) so emptied out of meaning and content that it can, indeed thirsts, to fill itself with the counter-cultural capital of black or Asian youth culture.

Yet it would be misleading to suggest that Williams only uses ideas of cultural conjuncture in a celebratory mode. One of the most striking lines in this text comes when she seeks to explain how she negotiated the presence of Africa within her Welsh life: "the Africa thing [that] hung about me like a Welsh Not, a heavy encumbrance on my soul" (3). A sign of transgression and an order to silence, the Welsh Not or Welsh Note, is privileged by Raymond Williams (another Welshman) in his 1975 essay "Welsh Culture," as a real act of cultural denial:

The language wasn't only driven back by the Industrial Revolution and its movements of people. It was also driven back by conscious repression, by penalty and contempt, and in a late phase by a deliberate policy in the schools. You can still see, as carefully preserved as the old tools, the little boards, the 'Welsh Nots,' which children caught speaking their mother tongue had to hang round their necks, for shame. (7)⁴

This prohibition against a mother-tongue clearly resonates strongly across the Caribbean. Historically, those Africans who were brought as slaves were separated from others speaking their language in order to prevent acts of communication, and therefore of community, not known to the coloniser. Even into the 1960s arguments had to be made about the validity and linguistic wholeness of Creoles, the contact languages that developed in the region, as a vehicle for intellectual or literary expression. Equally though, the Welsh Not speaks concisely and forcefully of the silence and the weight of Africa that could not find a context for expression or understanding in Charlotte Williams' Wales. It therefore stands as an internal critique of Welshness, as well as a simultaneous reminder of Wales' own colonial oppression. This involved and multi-dimensional plotting of a nexus of history, suffering and shared cultural vocabularies, that might offer a new mode of engagement unleashed from narrowly nationalist interests, is one of the characteristics of Williams' style of reasoning in this piece.

Sugar and Slate: Histories of Slavery and of Struggle

The charmingly aphoristic and alliterative phrase "sugar and slate" may most obviously frame Williams' narrative as a family memoir. Her father's Guyanese birthplace is a place of sugar, the single most resonant commodity that both literally and symbolically shaped perceptions of the landscape and determined a history fed by the exploitation of African slaves and Indian indentured workers, whose displacement and forced labor supported the cash-crop monoculture of colonialism in the West Indies. Her mother's birthplace is a place of slate, the Welsh-speaking, non-conformist, slate-quarrying community of Bethesda in Gwynedd, North Wales. Located in the mountainous terrain that is also often figured as a cultural geography resistant to invasion and sheltering a Celtic society, Bethesda was one of a number of connected communities that practiced a Welsh cultural solidarity expressed through the building of chapels and the sponsoring of communal education.

Given the Anglocentrism of colonial culture that has often obscured the political turbulence embedded in the different ethnicities circulating under the sign of Britishness, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is very little scholarly work on the connections between Wales and the West Indies, and very little work on the place of Wales within postcolonial studies more generally. While it is widely acknowledged that the unification of Great Britain was itself a part of the history of English imperialism, most attention to date has been focused on the Irish as the Celtic victims of colonial policy and rule, with some recent work on Scottish studies.⁵ All the same, the seeming invisibility of the Welsh, or rather their seeming absorption into English culture under the homogenizing force of colonialism, that possibly imagines them as the most peaceable nation in the union and an industrious, pious and loyal people, also conceals a deep cleft in terms of ethnicity and political affiliation.

In his short travel narrative entitled "A West Indian in Wales," published in 1974, in a special issue of *Savacou*, the journal of The Caribbean Artists Movement, dedicated to "Writing Away From Home," the Trinidadian writer and intellectual John La Rose charts his journey through a Welsh landscape where traces of hidden conflict, buried labor and resistant voicings made for an encounter less strange than familiar:

Roads crisscrossed the land everywhere, as in Barbados. Narrow well-kept roads brought on to the headlands and the long sandy inlets and bays like Nefyn and the whistling sands at Porth Oer and Abersoch. This was a Costa Brava, a coast, beautiful, rugged, wild like Trinidad's North East coast. Memory crossed the seas and returned. (111)

Significantly though, La Rose's oceanic memories not only evoke a sympathy of place. He dovetails his descriptions of the Welsh landscape with fragments of his poetry, as well as that of the Guyanese poet Martin Carter, to suggest a shared sensibility of struggle and hardship, indicating an affinity with people as well as with place. More still than this, stirred by his

encounter with Wales, La Rose's backward glance turns through an arc of time back to his classroom teacher, another Williams, who embodied "a violent condemnation of the English for their oppression and bloodletting" (109), and whose presence brought about an unexpected consciousness of the "real" difference between Welsh and English identities:

Names like Williams, Griffiths, Jones, I had always known. They were for me English names, or at least, names in English ... I do not know when I realized that Williams went with Wales, but it must have been about the same time that I began to learn that Cuffy was Kofi; that all white people were not the same and that some white people hated others even on their own island. (109)

It is not without significance that La Rose offers a moment of congruity between his awareness of African culture as having a life and a meaning beyond the weakened anglicized version accessed through a colonial culture, and his awareness of Welshness as a resistant, white ethnicity. Moreover, in a telling detail of this schoolboy memory, La Rose recalls how his teacher's English was "peculiar to his place, as was ours. He even said mon-arch instead of mon-ark on one occasion, and I faulted him mentally without overtly disclosing the detection" (109). La Rose's candid admission of his own response as that of a successfully schooled subject, alert and self-congratulatory in his superior assimilation of English, is significant here. In another reading, Williams' linguistic "fault" might be seen to mark the often-unsighted horizon of Welsh resistance to the cultural authority of Englishness. However, in the context of a colonial schoolroom, what it reveals are the stakes and compulsions involved for colonial subjects in claiming an internalized affinity to colonial norms; an act of learning and interpellation that would almost, by necessity, obstruct the possibilities for any allegiance between the Welsh and Caribbean subject based on shared dissent.

It is perhaps then no surprise that in her 1998 essay "Where Are All the Others?" the writer, sociologist and local historian Erna Brodber is still asking for news on the possible involvement of white ethnic minorities whose lives in the Caribbean remain lost stories of poverty, powerlessness and cross-cultural intimacy not accounted for by the acts of historical record that documented the overarching (violent and entrenched) power relations of white on black in West Indian societies:

I want to know what the Irish, the Scottish, the Welsh gave to the Creole mix as much as I want to know: "Is it Ibo, Fulani, what particular part of Africa is my heritage?" ... I will solve the African riddle, but who will tell me about the others? Where are the others? (75)

While I have not found Brodber's "others" in my researching of potential connections between Wales and the West Indies, I may have found, via Williams, yet other "others," still to be noted historically even in their absence, who would also fit Brodber's category of "subordinate whites." In order to uncover these others, I wish to explore another layer of historical

horizontality implied in the book’s neat collocation of sugar and slate. Specifically, I wish to address the shared, though different, history of English colonial and industrial exploitation in the West Indies and Wales, and the way in which the power dynamics of this history are being negotiated in the present time.

Although contentious and genuinely tricky territory in terms of its potential collapse of very distinct styles and scales of historical suffering, the mapping of possible ground on which the experiences of English imposition and colonial exploitation in both Wales and the West Indies can be set alongside each other is potentially important work for thinking through the questions of cultural crossover and resistance that Williams’ narrative provokes. I shall address the particular ways in which Williams herself takes on the task of historian in order to redress the exclusion of black Welsh subjects in the next section of this essay, but first I want to sketch the broad dynamics that appear to organize the historical links between Wales and the West Indies in our present moment that Williams’ own text both participates within and also supplements.

In recent years, the Welsh “nation” has sponsored several efforts to accommodate its “minority” subjects into the national narrative across a range of cultural platforms including Wales Office reports, speeches in the Welsh Assembly, S4 television and other broadcasting media, local history publications and museum work. It is beyond the scope of this piece to offer a full analysis of these interventions in terms of their remapping of the history and demography of Wales. All the same, my broad conclusion would be that these efforts have moved in two directions in terms of reshaping national narratives. The first is to invoke the historical alignment of the Welsh people to collective black struggles from abolition to anti-apartheid. The second is to “confess” to the colonial interests of certain Welsh subjects and draw attention to the way in which the expansion of Welsh mining industries was complicit with the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade.

In relation to the foregrounding of the Welsh as a people of solidarity in struggle, there is much material to suggest these historical alliances dating from the involvement of the poet Iolo Morgannwg, who penned a verse to commemorate the Act of Abolition in 1807. However, what is less attended to, is what these solidarities might mean in terms of an understanding of Welshness as an inter/national identity?

Perhaps most known and cherished within collective Welsh memory, is the strong bond that existed between Paul Robeson, the African American actor, singer and political activist, and the mining communities of South Wales. In his 1953 speech at the Peace Arch in Washington D.C., Robeson declared that it was “from the miners in Wales ... [that] I first understood the struggles of white and Negro together” (<http://www.folkera.com/probeson/press.html#speech>). Like La Rose after him, Robeson also went on to suggest something more than an understanding of shared political agendas: “When I went down into the coal mines—into the Rhondda Valley—went down in the mines with those workers, lived among them—later did a picture, as you know, called ‘Proud Valley’—and I

became so close that in Wales today, as I feel here, they feel me a part of that land” (<http://www.folkera.com/probeson/press.html#speech>). More than the repeatedly invoked evidence of Robeson’s visits to Wales, his singing alongside and his declarations of shared goals, this structuring of an empathetic engagement across the divide of race is particularly significant. Race was, of course, the very divide that had been constructed as the seemingly impervious marker of incompatibility between fellow citizens that defined both Robeson’s struggle and that of his fellow African-Americans, but it was also that of the many colonized nations and peoples struggling against British rule in the 1930s and 1940s.

What then may have made the Welsh available for identification in this way? Although I have only found traces of the place of Wales in the anticolonial networks within Britain that are already well documented as having exerted a curious reverse pressure on the idea of Empire, they do appear to tell a very different kind of story to that of the often eccentric English radicals such as Edward Carpenter who, as Leela Gandhi has argued, was allied in friendship and personal philosophy to Gandhi, or the “margin-to-margin interrelationships,” such as the Irish support for the Boers in 1899-1902, that Elleke Boehmer has so carefully catalogued.

It would seem that historically, the internationalist values found in Wales can be traced to more collective ventures and institutions such as the Briton Ferry and District Co-operative Society, and the later Independent Labour Party Center at Briton Ferry which attracted a truly global line-up of radical speakers including Sylvia Pankhurst, Emma Goldman, James Maxton and George Padmore. While it is widely reported that C. L. R. James finished *The Black Jacobins*, his masterpiece of subaltern historiography in the house of Brinley Griffiths, the Crynant Headteacher, and his wife Tillie, a Suffragist, it is also recorded that their library which attracted James was later left to the South Wales Miners’ Federation. Indeed, this link to the Welsh miners as a political group with an identity defined by collective struggle seems to be a crucial element in understanding the stories of wider solidarity. Acts of solidarity can be traced across the twentieth-century, most notably in the extensiveness of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Wales which was mobilized around both trade unions and churches. Importantly, these suggest a framework for expressions of support and a recognition of shared political sensibilities regarding liberation and self-determination that are not defined by ethnic boundaries and that configure political horizons beyond the national. More significantly perhaps, it suggests that outside of England and Britain, the Welsh could express their sense of themselves as distinct from the English and therefore share their nationalist ambitions as serious political ideals. The fact that they were able to build strong ties also indicates that from “elsewhere” they were also identified as a people in struggle.

To return now to the second trend to “confess” the colonial interests of certain Welsh subjects and draw attention to the way in which the expansion of Welsh mining industries was complicit with the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade, I want to return to the 2007 Wales Office Publication, “Wales and Slavery: Marking 200 Years Since the Abolition of the Slave

Trade Act." This document is very clear and fulsome in its outlining of the sustained and widespread involvement of the Welsh people in the slave trade:

...a great many Welshmen prospered from slavery and much of the wealth of Wales at that time was based on the trade ... They included Welshmen who owned plantations and slaves abroad; Welsh captains and seamen serving on ships that transported slaves; ship builders and their workmen, making ships used in the trade; people living in stately homes financed by the slave trade; labourers in industries financed by money from the slave trade; and crafts people making trinkets and other goods to be sold in exchange for slaves ... the names of some plantations in the Caribbean were linked to Welsh owners, such as Llandovery and Cardiff Hall in Jamaica.

http://www.oss.wales.gov.uk/Slavery_English.pdf

Certainly commodity histories and the shipping trade offer a useful way of tracing the links between Wales and the transatlantic slave trade. For example, Swansea was producing ninety percent of British copper by the turn of the nineteenth century, and this metal was directly embroiled in the exchange of African lives since copper bracelets and trinkets were desired objects of trade for African leaders. However, what is glossed over in this seamless listing of involvements is the way in which all enterprises such as shipping and trade were profoundly and consequentially also cut across by identities of class and gender. There can be little value in positioning the plantation owner alongside the laundry maid in his Welsh stately home; the elite seafarers such as William Morris of Anglesey alongside a copper miner whose body was emaciated by the toxic fumes; or the owner of the shipping line alongside the dockman loading cargo onto the ships. To argue simply that all of these "prospered" is to erase the significant and politically defining relationships between the powerful and the powerless within Wales, and to silence the configurations of power which operated internally within industries of oppression.

Evidently, the presence of Welsh plantation owners signals the most direct and transparently exploitative engagement of the Welsh in the West Indies. Before the depression of 1816, following the Napoleonic wars, Wales had not experienced mass emigration and most accounts suggest that those who chose to migrate did so because of their religious convictions.⁶ All the same, several Welshmen stand out against this absence including Henry Morgan the notorious privateer/pirate whose disastrous attack on Panama and dubious double-dealing with the English authorities somehow earned him the reward of acting Governor of Jamaica in 1674. Far less renowned but more interesting in terms of Williams' particular triangular configuration is the fact that one of the sugar estates in Guyana or, as it was then known, West Coast Demerara, was called Plantation Wales. Walter Rodney's *Guyanese Sugar Plantations in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Contemporary Description from the "Argosy"* is a survey of sugar estates from 1883 that gives a full description of the estate:

Wales ... is the last property the Gladstone family owned in this Colony. A few years ago, the present Premier of England and all of his kith and kin severed their long connection with the cane-fields of Demerara; and Wales became the property of its present owner, Mr. Mayers, who also manages the estate with great success. Before he became the owner, a set of vacuum-pan machinery with all the appurtenances was erected to supersede the muscovado plant at a cost which must have exceeded \$50,000. The area of the estate consists of 492 acres in canes, 30 in plantains and 250 uncultivated. The crop, including about 100 hogsheads made from villagers' canes, is 1,300 hogsheads (1,170 tons). The population was estimated at 71 Creoles, 13 of other lands and 416 Asiatics; but the Immigration Returns place the latter at 308 indentured and 135 unindentured. (42)

Whilst the intriguing connection of this plantation to Wales is not to be easily traced, David Hollet's *Passage from India to El Dorado: Guyana and the Great Migration* does make a Welsh connection in the story of Samueal Sandbach of Sandbach & Tinne (one of the "coolie" shipping lines) who was born near the Welsh border at Tarporley. Not only did Sandbach have business interests in Grenada and Demerara but presumably he used the profits derived from these interests to built Hafodunos Hall, Llangernyw, North Wales in the late 1860s. Intriguingly, there remains a possibility that Wales was one of Sandbach's interests as he returned to Britain in 1801, before Plantation Wales was bought by John Gladstone.⁷

However, the figure most often evoked in resources discussing the links between Wales and the slave trade, including this Wales Office publication, is Richard Pennant, later Lord Penrhyn and sometime Member of Parliament for Liverpool, who inherited the largest estate in Jamaica, at one point owned six hundred slaves, and whose interests in the West Indies and Wales most directly bring the histories of sugar and of slate alongside each other. In Alan Llwyd's 2005 study, *Black Wales: A History of Black Welsh People*, which offers a comprehensive survey of the presence of black people in Wales, this link between sugar and slate is rendered plainly as a flow of capital from the West Indies to Wales:

The slate industry in north Wales and the metal industries in south Wales flourished because they were primarily financed by the slave trade. Richard Pennant ... used a large amount of the profits acquired from his plantations to build roads in north Wales, to build a harbour at Port Penrhyn near Bangor (Abercegin), and to finance the Penrhyn Quarry in Bethesda. (19)

Llwyd goes as far as to suggest that, "The blood of the slaves flowed through every part of Wales ... and many a town and village were links in that chain" (21). In common with other sources, he lays out the case for Welsh industry growing rich on the slave trade, in particular through the metal and shipping industries. Clearly the profits of such industries are not to be denied, nor certainly the suffering that they enacted, both directly and indirectly, on the unfree and laboring bodies of African slaves and Indian indentured laborers. However, while Llwyd

names the wealthy landowners and shipping merchants who controlled such profitable enterprises and most fully enjoyed their profits, such as Thomas Williams, Anthony Bacon and Henry Wise, he arguably creates another layer of silence around the Welsh laboring bodies that were also crucially involved in these trades.

Every Welsh source that I have found connecting the trades in sugar and slate outlines a circuit of profit flowing from the West Indies to Wales, thereby reaffirming the broad geographical framework of capital flowing from the colonies back to the West. Whilst this is a patent historical truth, it should not obscure the fact that the human casualties of capitalist exploitation were to be found on both sides of the Atlantic. As Llwyd argues, Lord Penrhyn introduced new technologies of mining and transportation as part of his ambitious plans to expand the slate quarries, enhance export opportunities and generally make the industry more profitable. However, what is not foregrounded in these inter-linking accounts of colonial history is the impact of these so-called industrial "advances" on the Welsh workforce or indeed, the workforce in the copper mines and other heavy industrial sectors. Closer scrutiny of the working conditions of laborers employed in the new slate "galleries" suggests a high level of exploitation, as well as the creation of a pernicious system of dependency and penury. Not only were working conditions often dire and hazardous but, in Pennant's quarry, workers were also subjected to an involved and unjust system of payment according to the quality as well as quantity of their yields. Under this system, quarrymen were required to pay for their equipment, such as ropes and axes, often on the promise of uncertain and inadequate rewards. It was therefore not unknown for labourers to be in debt to the mine. Consideration of this practice, alongside the fact that most workers' struggled to pay for basic provisions such as grain because of the greed of landowners, and the fact that their dwellings, which accommodated large families, were usually tiny and inadequate, if not squalid, may open up space for a more nuanced matrix of human profit and exploitation; one that is capable of locating disempowered Welsh subjects, whose lives did not correspond to the generalized framework of Western subjects as the automatic beneficiaries of colonial expansion. Indeed, the stories of these Welsh workers certainly seem adequate to Bhabha's term "subject people," and it is one that has been granted little space within histories of Welsh development or colonial oppression.

In *Sugar and Slate*, Williams deliberately challenges the way in which this story of Lord Penrhyn is organised to affirm the primacy of African exploitation through her writing of Welsh and West Indian bodies connected by suffering. In a bolder move than that which positions her mother as the "real dark stranger," Williams points both to the fact that the quarrymen staged the longest strike in British history and that Bethesda supported the abolition movement, in order to affirm a kindred spirit of resistance as well as a collective suffering:

The shared plight of the factory slaves at home and the plantation slaves elsewhere had an echo right across Wales with the quarrymen, the iron smelters, the black-faced miners, all knew what it meant to be robbed, beaten down, have

their language, their culture, name and place stolen from them—what it was to be enslaved. (175)

The collocation of “suffering” is not a maneuver to be made without proper recognition of the forced migration and extreme violence of the plantation system that operated the systematic denial of African humanity. All the same, the recovery of the slate workers of Bethesda (Katie Alice’s place) as historical victims rather than agents of colonial oppression seems pertinent to the project of situating a complicated and uneven geography of exploitation, as well as an understanding of the antagonist relationship towards England that identifies the political structure of Welsh identity even today.

As Gary Younge sought to highlight in his review of Williams’ book for *The Guardian*, Wales is both a surprising and a contradictory site for the mapping of black history: “Wales is probably best known for the warm welcome its miners gave to Paul Robeson. Less well known is that it is the home to one of the first recorded mixed marriages in Britain in 1768, and some of the earliest racial disturbances, too” (Saturday, 1 June 2002 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jun/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview10>). It is not my aim here to engage in a detailed historical discussion of the intersecting of colonial interests in Wales and the West Indies, but rather to suggest that the power of Williams’ narrative lies not in the invention of an imagined space from which to articulate her own identity as a Welsh West Indian woman, but in the recognition that she speaks from and within a context of conjectural histories that is already fully present, if not fully articulated, within either official or alternative narratives of the nation.

Writing Us Back In: Black Welsh Subjects

Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and “makes the story.”

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Williams states early on in the book that for her, growing up in Wales, “black stood for nothing, nothing at all, and coloured stood for even less” (*Sugar and Slate* 47). However, by the end of the book she has not only revealed herself to be a literal archaeologist, helping her father to recover African artifacts, but also a cultural archaeologist—laying out an archive of black Welshness seldom acknowledged or discussed.⁸ Whilst, as I have argued, the history of mining may recover a compelling horizon from which to view both the shared exploitation of the Welsh and their acts of solidarity with oppressed black communities, the mining of history offers an equally fascinating and significant platform for revisiting ideas of Welshness. One of the major

contributions that *Sugar and Slate* makes to diasporic writing as a body of work that speaks to the diverse and often elaborate movements of peoples is its recovery of black Welsh subjects, an act that Williams herself has assertively described as "writing us back in" ("From Llandudno to Llanrumney" 30).

From the slave narrative of Valentine Wood, through the Congo boys of Colwyn Bay and Jack Du of Cricceth to the Pakistani girls of Newport, Williams mines Wales for a thick and diverse history that recovers the connections and the burials that might inform an archive of black Welsh history. Her commitment to the unburdening of these lives is evident. Williams devotes almost ten pages and the attention of a determined scholar to her telling of the remarkable story of the "Congo Boys" who were brought to the "land of chapels and churches, a land where there is a Bible in every house, and everyone can read it" (*Sugar and Slate* 29). Pasting in the hymns that they sang and reports of the attention these black preachers attracted, Williams captures the dynamic of their lives and the fascinating interplay of cultures that their presence set in motion:

Agbebi spoke at religious gatherings on behalf of the Institute and promoted the idea that the African was capable of advancement. He was educated to a level well above the average parishioner in Wales and spoke impeccable English. He advocated the voice of the African, not merely English sentiment rendered in an African language. The Africans stirred the hearts of the Welsh people. The Reverend himself preferred to pray in Welsh and the Africans in Wales gave spur to the congregations' efforts to sing and pray in their own language and to protect their culture in local chapels. Speaking Welsh was banned in schools in Wales and children caught speaking it were punished, but these Africans attested to the fact that English was not the only valid language. (31)

In this way, Williams' text constructs black Welshness as an identity that is not unknown or unknowable, offering a meaningful context to lives and the stories of lives that have previously been scattered and isolated, or circulated only as a mode of ethnocentric or "purely" historical knowledge. She successfully imagines a community and one to which she too belongs, "It took me a long journey to understand why the Congo boys are part of my Elmina" (26).

We might then, by the end of the book, reinterpret Williams' "nothing" of Welsh blackness in the same way that Derek Walcott reinterprets Naipaul's "nothing" of West Indian culture, arguing that, "Nothing will always be created in the [Wales] for quite a long time, because whatever will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before" (9). Or, equally deliberately, meddle with the title of Paul Gilroy's 1993 essay, "The Peculiarities of the Black English," and argue that what Williams begins to outline in this text are both the central issues and debates, but also the as yet silent archive, that would enable a more sustained discussion of the black Welsh. My playful corruption of these phrases is designed to position Williams' creative work alongside critical efforts promoting the need to recognise and

accommodate forms of being and becoming that demand a renegotiation of orthodox ideas of cultural identity as historically determined by ties to birthplace, or to homogeneous or singular cultures or ethnicities. She restores a history in which different Welsh and black subjectivities become possible and knowable although significantly not self-identical or homogenising.

Forms of Identity: Writing Self and the Lives of Others

The radical instability of the Caribbean as a cultural domain coincides with the radical instability of autobiography as a genre ... the way in which autobiographical culture facilitates representation of the multidimensionality and contradictoriness of Caribbean space.

Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography*

The most valuable idea in Welsh culture is that everybody should speak.

Raymond Williams, "Who Speaks for Wales?"

As I have hinted at throughout this essay, Williams' narrative voice is strategically modulated across this work. Just as she switches between different frames of the global and the local, between intensely personal events and frameworks of cultural record, she also mobilizes different registers and acts of writing. Autobiography, biography, academic prose, newspaper reports, letters, histories, journals and poems all jostle in a lively and sometimes cluttered textual canvas. The sense of voices released is, at times, palpable. Like many postcolonial works of life-writing, this heteroglossic narrative makes the point that stories of the self are powerfully connected to stories of others, and that stories of the powerless or minor figures always carry the charge of standing outside history, the extra weight of needing to be told.

For Williams, this is a lesson she learns early, intensely aware of herself as a subject in history, a representative of others whose lives she was yet to know:

I walked through my childhood carrying a heavy burden of expectations in my satchel. I was an ambassador and a pioneer and I knew it. It was a big responsibility. The need for recognition, for credibility and acceptance was always present—for myself, my family and something called "my people," whoever they were. (*Sugar and Slate* 47)

Arguably then, it is as a writer that Williams is most able to reach towards the idea of a people, to offer the imaginative links to each other that history has obscured from their view. Yet, if her summoning of black Welsh figures from the past frees her from the role of pioneer, she is now

tasked in the role of historian. As I have argued above, Welshness is the insistent content that disrupts the flow of ready-made understandings in this book, and Welsh the demotic vernacular that punctuates its educated prose. It is black Welsh subjects that she brings into view. However, in the shaping of these disruptions and recoveries she returns to the thematics of a Caribbean worlding and we might suggest that it is stylistically and methodologically that the narrative most clearly announces its West Indian and Black Atlantic bearings.

Williams herself commented that, "I found myself working with many of the themes from black writing—the sea crossings, the great house, return, sanctuary, slavery and so on. I didn't find so much of a point of departure from Welsh-Anglo writing" ("From Llandudno to Llanrumney" 33). More than this, I would argue that her intricate and busy life-writing style that works with a synchronicity and fluidity that keeps all its stories alive to each other is very much in keeping with the narrative forms that Sandra Pouchet Paquet describes in the work of early West Indian women's autobiography:

Their narratives reveal fluctuating levels of contact and interaction across the boundaries of race, class, and gender ... that illuminate tensions, contradictions, and interpenetrations between the dominant culture and subordinate or emergent cultures. (19)

Indeed, in refusing to allow her voice to assume control over the telling of these lives, the rhetorical structure of the narrative enacts what we might choose to identify as the quiet politics of the piece, which operates by unsettling rather than assertion, by voicing rather than professing.

Diaspora Discourses, Moving Lives

Increasingly, critical discourses around diaspora are being invoked to explain the realities of the global world and the identities of those who live in it. From the perspective of the educated middle-class West, travel and the journey have become metaphorical signifiers of a cultural mobility that overtakes the tracks of human footsteps in both its speed and its suppleness. Our understanding of ourselves as "worlded" subjects is being fed by ever expanding networks of knowledge as a result of the worldwide web and other electronic media. Our access to elsewhere is both immediate and, if we desire it so, framed in a language and value system we can understand. Our eyes are always set forward as if all we need to see can be within our focus. If we wish to travel we can choose "ethical" operators who maximize our cultural risk and guarantee meaningful encounters with "native peoples" whilst minimizes our polluting presence in an unnamed country whose agricultural systems we can also claim to enrich. And yet ...

I pause here to consider whether this knowledge might not block as well as yield a better, more progressive understanding of the nature of movement as it underpins the realities of real,

material subjects in the world today. What about those who do not “live” in the global world as it defines itself? What about those who are still compelled to undergo journeys in order to survive? What about those who cannot participate in the diverse transactional circuits of traveling capital? Or those who would choose not to participate if they could? Has our sense of rapid global movement really just held us in place, even prevented the backward glances that would have allowed us to glimpse those who came before us and those at the margins of our vision in such a way as to read ourselves differently?

Deliberately undercutting the teleology of a quest-structured narrative that moves towards a single destination or towards the recovery of a belonging denied by history, Williams’ text invests instead in an exploration of identities, her own included, that are mediated and created by lived encounters, long and short journeys and often unremarkable acts of belonging. Structured around backward glances that bring the storm and debris of Benjamin’s vision of history into view, Williams’ insistently grounds her history in an uneven constellation of memories, textual fragments and described practices of everyday life in order to render the messy human realities of competing claims to allegiance, estrangement and familiarity. Not only does her narrative write in many subjects whose presence niggles at the particular configurations of minority subjectivity, multiple belongings and diasporic identity as they have been circulated and embedded within critical discourses but it bustles with the specifics of lived experience that do not regard themselves as strange, unfixed or unfixing. It gives weight to the ties to place and the bonds and comforts of being known without yielding to the mistaken ideals of completeness.

Without showiness or smugness then, Williams’ narrative forces us to confront the gap that exists between “diaspora discourses” and diasporic lives. What is so engaging about *Sugar and Slate* is its refusal, despite having all the perfect ingredients, to submit itself to the shapes already outlined by the cake cutters of diasporic theory, Black Atlantic criticism or women’s autobiography. Indeed, what it ventures most powerfully are the lessons to be learnt about cultural negotiations and acts of belonging from those lives left in the scraps and edges of such ready-made frameworks.

From the very beginning of her narrative, Williams signals both her knowledge of and her resistance to the ready-made paradigms for telling the stories of diasporic subjects, most especially her own story. Framing the questions that she needed to work through in order to understand, if not untie, the cultural entanglements of her own “worlding,” Williams draws on the memory of an academic event:

Once at a seminar, one of those occasions when the word *Diaspora* crops up too many times and where there aren’t too many of us present, the only other Diaspora-person sought me out. His eyes caught mine in recognition of something I can’t say I could name, yet I must have responded because later as we chatted over fizzy water and conference packs, he offered quite uninvited and with all the

authority of an African: "People like you? You gotta get digging and if you dig deep enough you're gonna find Africa." (*Sugar and Slate* 3)

Clearly asserting her suspicion of the usefulness of such a category to respond productively to the questions of how to "be" in the world, Williams' challenge to the flattening out of diaspora as a category of experience and its status as a discourse allies more confidently to the papers of non-diasporic academics than the lived experiences of diasporic subjects becomes one of the most significant cumulative meanings that this book unfolds.

Notes

¹See Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, chapter 2 for a more sustained critique of the critical persuasions of the Black Atlantic paradigm.

²See Bhabha's "Re-Inventing Britain" manifesto proposal.

³For a sense of how and why this packaging might have occurred see Raymond Williams' "Welsh Culture" in *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture and Identity*, 5-11.

⁴Images of the Welsh Not can be accessed at <http://www.gtj.org.uk/en/neighbourhood-and-community/language-use/welsh-not/>

⁵Although still not widely discussed, the history of Irish subjects who were sold into slavery after Cromwell's defeat of the 1648 rebellion has attracted some scholarly attention. See, for example, *To Hell or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland* by Sean O'Callaghan. A significant aspect of this history in terms of the complicated layering of victims and perpetrators, is that while around 80,000 Irish were forcibly shipped to the West Indies (mainly Montserrat, St Kitts and Barbados) under Cromwell's "To Hell or Connaught," policy, certain Scottish Presbyterians loyal to his campaign were rewarded with West Indian lands and plantations. For work on Scottish and Caribbean connections see *Caribbean-Scottish Relations: Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language & Literature* by Giovanna Covi, Joan Anim-Addo, Velma Pollard and Carla Sassi.

⁶Williams discusses these figures and the way in which "the African and the Welshman were linked in a spiritual haven, a haven secure from the encroachments of the English" p.34.

⁷I would like to thank Nalini Mohabir for her assistance in tracking these references.

⁸The publication of Alan Llwyd's *Black Wales: A History of Black Welsh People* in 2005 has gone some way to correct this invisibility.

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