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RETHINKING UTOPIANISM IN CARIBBEAN DIASPORIC NARRATIVES*

The aim of this paper is to analyse some Anglo-Caribbean literary texts where the utopian thoughts are seen under the light of Lucy Sargisson's transgressive utopianism (1996). Different ethnic communities contest the socio-political imaginary that locates them in the margins of an Eurocentric society and strive for alternative social structures that could resist the established system. Those imagined societies[1] are different from the traditional utopias that represented a perfect place (Greek eu + topos) nowhere (*eu* + *topos*). Writers of the so-called minorities reject the old closed utopias as being perfect blueprints and totalizing metanarratives of progress and they become part of a cultural movement that represents a new collective utopian mind through what I call 'metautopian' or 'neo-utopian narratives'. These narratives disclose processes of rereading a society 'in action' and motivate the people to desire infinite possibilities of change whose conditions of 'becoming' have to be created. This 'reinvention' of the 'possible' of the utopian thought aims at a social change in present. In this new scheme, past and future could be changed in the axial relativity of space/time where plurality and difference would be the basis for a 'new' society. It also counterpoises the postmodern thought, which with its reaffirmation of plurality perspires a critical cynicism to the possibilities of change. However, the concept of 'metautopias' or 'neo-utopias' is different from the concept of political utopias, which

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[1] The term 'imagined' is understood as a constructed idea by the imaginary of the people. It is derived from Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." (1983, 15). Anderson affirms that communities must not be distinguished by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. In this paper, I explore the utopian thought of the diasporic subject to reveal the style of the process of construction of an imagined diasporic identity.

refers to the everyday life of a society and the fact that any social struggle will turn into a revolution "within the sphere of human possibilities (...) here and now." (Szacki: 1972, 102).

This paper focalises on one of the "black British" (Stuart Hall: 1996) literary communities, the Anglo-Caribbeans and deconstructs the utopias that motivated their forefathers' diaspora dislocations. Three contemporary writers are the object of this study because they question, through aesthetic narratives, their own utopian thoughts in the processes of imagining and reinventing possible alternative societies that would help to transform their present and to destabilise those epiphanically crystalised utopias. Thus, they denounce what those utopias of the mind really are: dystopias or counter-utopias (Vattimo: 1992).

The narratives articulated in the play *Strange Fruit* (1980) by Caryl Phillips[2] show elements of the different utopias constructed by members of a Caribbean family who emigrated to London and found themselves trapped between two cultures. Phillips's text is analysed in contrapuntal relationship with John Agard's poems "Imagine", "Stereotypes", "Oxford Don" and Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Tings an Times* (1974), to reveal paradoxical attitudes of cultural resistance in the seventies and beginning of the eighties. For example, Agard's use of parody and irony is counterpoised with Johnson's cruel denunciation of reality in his historical present. The imagined utopias are seen in contrast with present dystopias and writers represent 'utopias in action' in their metanarratives in order to provoke a change in the social imaginary.

In multi-racial societies the images constructed by ethnic neo-utopian narratives interact with popular culture looking for a politics of recognition that could provoke structural changes in relation to racial equality and to the recognition of differences. Questions of race and ethnicity are in dialogic tension in the process of identification. Communities are thus represented in action, i.e. as agents of a process of resistance, which contests the utopias that have fed the imagination of diasporic subjects in their constant dislocations and counter-dislocations.

For example, people from the ex-British colonies (Arabs, Indians, Pakistanis, Caribbeans, etc.) struggle together for a politics of visibili-

[2] *Strange Fruit* was first produced at the Studio Theatre, Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, on 30 October 1980. It was directed by Jimi Rand and designed by Louise Belson with the following cast: Valerie Murray (mother), Yvonne Gidden (Vernice), Sylvestra Le Touzel (Shelley), Trevor Laird (Errol) and Paul Barber (Alvin).

ty within British society in a 'black' cultural movement. According to Stuart Hall (1996a, 441), the term 'black' acquires a political connotation because it gathers communities with different histories, traditions and ethnic identities which share the social consequences of practices of racism and marginalization. The term 'black' also represents a critique against the white discourse that has silenced 'black British' and has transformed them into objects to be represented. In this way, the black experience constructs a unifying system, independent of cultural and ethnic differences, becoming also hegemonic in relation to other identities. However, the illusory essence of a black identity becomes utopian as social practices reveal the great diversity of historical and cultural experiences of those diasporic subjects. Different ethnic communities undergo what has been identified as "epistemic violence" (Spivak: 1993) in the diaspora space. It is the outcome of the conflict generated by their sense of belonging and, simultaneously, the rejection they suffer from the ethnocentric power ('Us'). This tension becomes the field of discursive battles of denial between Us and Other, of political and cultural resistance of the Other due to the non-recognition of the image the dominant group has assigned to them. This last stage reveals the implications of transformations that take place in the "contact zone" (Pratt: 1992) where two groups geographically and historically distant enter in contact and establish asymmetric relations of power under conditions of coercion, inequality and conflicts. Nevertheless, the centripetal and centrifugal movements in relation to the totalising white European centre keeps a constant "delicate equilibrium" exercised by the oppression of the dominant power, or an "indelicate non-equilibrium" of equality exercised by the resistance of the Other (Izarra: 2001, 240). This position generates a transgressive utopian thought that will struggle for the creation of alternative contesting imagined societies (neo-utopias) and will provoke transformations in the diaspora spaces in search for new politics of representation.

Caryl Phillips, Linton Kwesi Johnson and John Agard share the same geographical origin, a eurocentric education and a diasporic geographical dislocation towards the metropolitan centre, England, in the end of the fifities, sixties and seventies respectively. The multiple voices of their narratives deconstruct the utopias that become part of the conscious processes of construction and recognition of identities within the English "diaspora space". Avtar Brah (1996, 181) defines it as a 'space' inhabited by various diasporic subjects and the indigenous. Both of them help to construct the hegemony of Englishness. Neo-utopias or meta-utopias written by Anglo-Caribbean writers are transgressive narratives because the diasporic subjects are

conscious that though historical circumstances have provoked 'naturalness' (in the light of Gramsci) nothing that exists is natural; everything is constructed. Consequently, diasporic writers construct counter-hegemonic narratives in terms of a relative conception of time and space, free from the cause-effect linearity in order to confront the ideological control and hegemony of the centre. The myth of utopia is already a counter-hegemonic narrative because it is a closed rational design of a perfect world that contests directly the establishment. However, the rationalisation of the world turns reason against itself and its emancipating perfection because the possibilities of the world becoming more and more perfect gives origin to the counter-utopias, or "negative utopias" (Vattimo: 1992, 78 & Szacki: 1968, 112).

In his writings, Caryl Phillips represents the interaction between the utopias constructed in the imaginary of the diasporic subject and the dystopias present in the diaspora space, and he creates a 'new metautopia (neo-utopia) in action' that is also defended by the poetic discourse of John Agard and Linton Kwesi Johnson.

In *Strange Fruit*, Vivien Marshall is a Caribbean teacher living with her sons Alvin and Errol in England for more than twenty years. She hopes her sons will have better education and opportunities in the 'mother-land', England. Her imagined utopia while she was in the Caribbean, was located in the present hegemonic space where the second class citizen's utopianism was possible only if she accepted being dislocated to the metropolis and abode by its conventions.

Paradoxically, her utopianism defies the traditional conventions of a closed model of perfection building up a dynamic world open to differences and with equal opportunities for everybody. Once in England, she realized that the intersectional immanent diaspora space was of exclusion rather than of an imagined inclusion. Though one of Vivian's voices portrays the misfortunes of her present dystopia brought about by her impossibility to cross cultural, social, racial, class and gender frontiers – not having any money to feed her children since, being a black woman, she cannot get a job might stand as an example – the other voices that belong to her memories and the historical past feed a utopian realization that does not allow her to accept that the same dystopian experience of exclusion is moulding new utopias in her sons' imaginary that will eventually deny hers. However, in her epiphanic revelation to her friend Vernice about the tension generated between her first experience of reality as fact and the existence as 'possibility' in the chosen land, she points out a historical past of colonization:

Vernice: You'd come to the wrong country.

> Mother: No. Not me. I was on the right island. I'd been reading the wrong books. Listening to lies. (52)

Vivien's utopia has escapist characteristics – "dreams of a better world that do not include a fight for that world" as Szacki affirms (1972, 23). She rejects her world of origin for another world that already exists and the projection of her desire confirms that she will be integrated if she subordinates. In the Caribbean, she condemned her present (not the system) because when her husband defied the colonial administration for a politics of recognition her marriage collapsed. Although he was the best cricket player in the West Indian team, when he ventured to become its leader, the white supremacy, as embodied in the figure of the coach, discharged him since he was afraid of the figure of the black man in a position of power within the team.

Exclusion led Vivien's husband to drinking and she fled with her children in search of a utopian world where she could be included by its system. Far from her homeland she invented her husband's death before it actually occurred and told her children paradoxical narratives of admiration of their dad's deeds and of nostalgia of her homeland. Her personal utopia came true after twenty years of hard work that allowed her to see her sons become university graduates. However, this 'brave new world' fell apart when her eldest son Alvin returned from the Caribbean where he had travelled to attend his grandfather's funeral.

While better education, professional opportunities and freedom are the constitutive elements of Vivien's utopia, which led her friend Vernice to accuse her of "thinking too white" (31), Errol and Alvin abide by political utopias that contest the ideology of the establishment. Errol's utopian thought is the embodiment of the affirmative politics of the blacks defended by Raftafarianism and Pan-Africanism whose belief in a psychological and geographical return to their African roots inspires their followers: "What we want is black bands. Black producers and arrangers and black singers to do their own thing. Black business means black music." (41). Africa is "the promised land. Freedom of spirit and mind. Freedom of body and action." (42). Errol's desire is the hope for the existence of a Patriotic Front in Britain: "Tomorrow the sun comes up on a sunken kingdom. An Empire in ruins." This will redeem the negroes with a liberty that they have been always denied.

> Our day is coming. The seeds will soon be plants and the plants will begin to bear forth fruit. (43)

> (...) When I get off that plane in Africa you know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna walk barefoot down the steps onto the tarmac, and kiss the ground like that white cunt, the Pope. I'm gonna sit out in the sun all day listening to the drums till I'm as black as coal. I'm gonna sit there and feel fine 'cos everywhere I turn they'll be as black as me. I'll find myself a family. A new family. Can't I take you to Africa with me! (44)

According to Richard Kearney, in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986) Paul Ricouer examines the "social imaginary" under two limit ideas – ideology and utopia. Though both construct a set of collective images, which motivate a society towards a certain mode of thinking and acting, ideology tends towards 'integration' and a sense of shared identity reaffirming and crystalizing the symbols that constructed it. Likewise, utopia produces a rupture within the social imaginary introducing a sense of novelty, difference and discontinuity (Kearney: 1991, 157). Errol's utopianism is contaminated by the ideological principles of Raftafarianism and leads him to defend them blindly regarding 'imagined' information as 'true'. For example, when he asks for the emission of his passport to go to Africa, he declares that his nationality is African and his place of birth is *"The Dark Continent."* On the other hand, Alvin's utopianism breaks with the social imaginary that constructed his identity through a politics of exclusion. This gives Alvin the possibility of *action*: to get away from Babylon and return to his 'home':

> And then my grandfather died and you suggested I went 'home' and I thought yes, 'home', and yes, this is Babylon and yes, yes, yes I've got to go to my people and yes, I should have just got a job, any job, and saved and gone along time ago, and yes, when I get back I'll want to take off for Africa so yes, I'll have to make plans to have some bread available to depart soon after I get back and we take over the leadership and yes, Errol was coming too. Answers. At last it was all happening, mother. The oscillation and the vacancy seemed to be coming to an end. First the West Indies then plunge into the deep end and visit the mother country – Africa. I bought a notebook in which I was going to keep notes for a book I was going to write about my two weeks in the West Indies and my trip to Africa. 'Out of exile: Free at Last' by Alvin Marshall. My first bestseller. Well go on then, laugh. (78-79)

A 'home' return would bring answers to the opposite utopias imagined by his mother and brother at the moment that his own utopia is in the process of 'becoming'. Alvin's history is part of the collective history of a people in exile, dominated by a foreign power, "far from 'home' and from the symbolic power of the myth of redemption" as Stuart Hall (1996) has remarked about the exiles living

in the decades of the seventies and eighties. After experiencing a counter-dislocation for only a fortnight, Alvin questions his utopia based on the 'myth of return' and sees it as a dystopia. He is received in his homeland as an outsider, as a "white coward" because he abandoned his real home for the colonizer's motherland. In the Caribbean he is identified as being part of the system he denies and is denied to him because in Great Britain he is also an outsider, an excluded. His memories of the time he left the Caribbean, when he was five years old, lead him to see his home coming as a second diaspora. For this reason his utopianism feeds the hope of returning home one day to look for answers and then to depart to his true motherland, Africa: "The most important part of knowing where you're going to is knowing where you've come from, right?" (77). Contrary to what Paul Gilroy (1993) affirms in his essay "It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at" where he defends the temporal and physical space of the present, Alvin needs the past to construct his future. His historical present does not belong to him; it is not his mother's utopia born from "reading the wrong books. Listening to lies." (52) His university degree and the search for a dignifying job do not suffice as answers to the discrimination and inequalities suffered in the diaspora space where empty rhetoric reveals people different from what they are. Alvin got tired of following the clichés of "a good white boy" (87):

> I want to know why I'm black. I want to know all that you know about being black. I want to know what blackness has meant to you – to your father, or your father's father. I want to know how to defend myself. I want to know how you've defended yourself, how my father coped, how we all have got this far, and sadly only you can give me the answers, but you refuse. I don't want no Africa or Caribbean any more; I don't want to compromise. I want answers, 'cos I'm going under, and if I'm not going to get any answers then I need help but the only people who can help me are either too busy playing white or too busy playing black, understand! Understand! (87-88)

Through Alvin's voice, Caryl Phillips breaks the taboo of silence and questions the unquestionable: the utopias that design the diasporas and counter-diasporas, and that do not allow the diasporic subject to locate 'elsewhere':

> What we supposed to do? Live on a raft in the middle of the Atlantic at a point equidistant between Africa, the Caribbean and Britain? (...) Leave us till we sink? Till there's no trace of us? Lost between two waves, yet another black generation is dispossessed. (99)

With an interrogative narrative, the Anglo-Caribbean writer and dramatist becomes the architect of black diasporic knowledge deconstructing the traditional utopias and building a new critical utopianism that negotiates cultural spaces with the past and present to transform the possibilities of the future. His narratives become a 'metautopia in action' that articulates what Gilroy (1993, 134) calls the "politics of fulfilment" and the "politics of transfiguration". He subverts the function of utopianism that aims at a perfect place nowhere that does not transgress the fictional frontiers imposed as 'natural' by the dominant system. Vivien's and Errol's utopias should fulfil the political and social promises of the past. However, they are after a social demand for justice expressed in a counter discourse that has an occidental rationality "which can assimilate the semiotic, verbal and textual" (Gilroy 1993, 135). Both utopias run the risk of not seeing the present dystopias, for either using the discourse of the dominator or defending an ideology. The "politics of transfiguration" strives "in pursuit of the sublime", in the negotiation of cultural spaces, emerging new desires, social relations and modes of association within the excluded community and between it and the former oppressors; it pushes towards "the mimetic, dramatic and performative" (*Ibidem*, 134) and Phillips' metadiscourse of *Strange Fruit* is a sign of it.

Gilroy draws attention to a counter-culture that defiantly constructs its own critical, intellectual and moral genealogy anew through a "community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural consumption and reproduction." (*Ibidem*, 134) Thus, the utopian thought creates a cultural movement of resistance that is materialized first through its music as Stuart Hall also refers to in "New Ethnicities". Linton Kwesi Johnson, an Anglo-Caribbean and reggae poet, is one of the pioneers of 'black' music and poetry of contestation and resistance in Great Britain. He calls his writings "dub poetry" as an analogy of "dub music". This is a special style of music connected with reggae in which the main part of the tune is removed and various special effects are added instead. As when the original voices on a film are changed to a different language, Johnson metaphorically reflects upon racism, radical politics, police oppression, discrimination suffered by the black youth in Great Britain, and denounces the dystopias lived by those minorities in the present. His poetic narratives express pain, impotence and resentment as "Five Nights of Bleeding" or "Sonny's Lettah" (an "anti-sus poem"), "New Craas Massahkah", or "Inglan Is a Bitch". However, the denunciation of some poems that is augmented by the rhythm of reggae

and rap (a hybrid form), paradoxically brings hope for changes and gives place to the construction of neo-utopias in action as in the poems "Mekkin Histri", "Beacon of Hope", "Sense outta Nansense", "Tings an Times", "Di Anfinish Revalueshan" and "Di Good Life" where he deconstructs political dystopias and looks forward to new times. Freedom cannot be postponed and Johnson shows like Gilroy and Phillips the importance of establishing a new dialogical relation between the place of origin and the place the diasporic subject is at:

> di time goin come agen
> yu can bet
> wen wi a goh march awn agen
> yu hear mi fren
> (...)
> far freedam is nat noh idealagy
> freedam is a human necessity
> (...)
>
> mi naw preach
> mi naw teach
> mi jus a show yu
> ow mi seit
> caw di trute well sweet
> jus like a African beat
> like wen yu si whey yu comin fram
> like wen yu site which pawt yu reach
> so me noh care if yu waan vex
> ar even gwaan like yu perplex
> mi jus a show yu whey mi si mistah man
> ("Di Anfinish Revalueshan", 60)

Johnson's device of resistance is the union of two languages, that of the oppressor's and of the music that identifies the oppressed. The English language, imposed historically by force, transforms itself into a means for expressing a cultural resistance and the subversive force of the oppressed. The political process of appropriation materially corrodes the official language of 'the queen' when a symbiosis of syntax, phonetics and intonation occurs in the musical rhythm and style of reggae, giving visibility to the pronunciation of 'black British'. The poet embodies the power of the centre and, in the use of repetitions, he silences the main tune and installs the voice of his community which not only comes to be accepted metonymically through the subversive force of the rhythm of his music but actually becomes 'a hit' within the established cultural center. In this way, the dub style of his poetry marks the diasporic cultural space of contestation.

John Agard also uses the 'queen's language' as a subversive gun and deconstructs the identities of the colonized assigned by the colonizer revealing the process of construction of a postmodern diasporic identity within the conception of a metautopia in action. Nevertheless, the tone of his poems differs from Johnson's as parody and irony are the constitutive elements that characterize his cultural resistance.

In "Listen Mr Oxford Don" (Agard: 1988) the *persona* defines himself as an immigrant contesting the image of being a violent and dangerous outsider constructed by the pre-established system. His only gun is the subversive use of the English language through which a collective excluded 'I' looks for the recognition of difference:

> I ent have no gun
> I ent have no knife
> but mugging de Queen's English
> is the story of my life
>
> I dont need no axe
> to split/ up yu syntax
> I dont need no hammer
> to mash/ up yu grammar

Accused of assaulting the Oxford dictionary "for inciting rhyme to riot" he reaffirms he is not violent and that "I only armed wit mih human breath".

In his poems "Stereotype" and "Imagine", Agard (*Ibidem*) subverts the Caribbean stereotypes when he describes with shrewd humour the eurocentric process of identification of the 'other'. In the first poem he parodies the West Indian image constructed by the colonizer, wearing a straw hat, having rhythm in his blood, displaying his taste for music, dance and colourful clothes without even omitting the way he walks. However, at the end of the poem, the colonized answers back. He thus defies the established power by using cricket as a metaphor and reducing the colonizer to an inferior level when he affirms he knows well all the stereotypes assigned to him because he is an anthropologist graduated at Oxford University:

> Yes I'm a fullblooded
> West Indian stereotype
> that's why I
> graduated from Oxford University
> with a degree
> in anthropology

In “Imagine” he parodies the arrival of the West Indian in England without any welcomes and the process of adaptation to mother England, making a pun on the word TEA, which is the cultural stereotype that identifies the centre. Ironically, that word is also present in the process of identification of the ‘other’, the newly-arrived, revealing how much the centre is present in ‘otherness’:

> When the stress of London traffic
> closing in on me
> I sipping my ANXIE-TEA/ANXIE-TEA
>
> I travelling in the tue at rush hour
> among all those faces locked up by urgency
> I doing like everybody
> And swallowing my ANONYMI-TEA/ ANONYMI-TEA
> or if I feel for a different brand
> I try IMPERSONALI-TEA/IMPERSONALI-TEA

Agard questions the ethnic minority (“minori-tea”), the insularity (“insulari-tea”) that the migrant experiences and his/her contesting attitude identified by the establishment as “brutali-tea”, a characteristic proper of the outsider. The utopian thought of integration and solidarity created by the fact that it is not important where you are from but where you are at (as Gilroy affirms), survives with the hope of the diasporic subject becoming an agent of change that recognizes the hybridity of “new identities” in the interrelation of cultures:

> meanwhile
> I done with brooke bond & typhoo
> and no white sugar fo me thank you
> is strictly honey
> in my cuppa of
> IDENTI-TEA
> IDENTI-TEA
> IDENTI-TEA

The tensions generated by the utopian desires that feed a politics of transfiguration resemble the established relations present in the intersectionality of discourses of contestation within the diaspora space. They have to be deconstructed for a better comprehension of the tensions that create discourses of similitude and differences, universalism and multiplicities, genealogies of dispersion or settlement, of becoming utopias and dystopias and that transform the constitutive elements of the process of construction of diasporic identities.

The desire for a simultaneous politics of fulfilment and transfiguration present in the analysed utopias cannot coexist. Nevertheless, they are intimately related due to the ambiguities and emptied significances that occur at the encounter of different cultures. When Stuart Hall describes the process of formation of the diasporic intellectual based on his own experience, he affirms that the diasporic experience is "far away enough to experience the sense of exile and loss, close enough to understand the enigma of an always-postponed arrival." (Hall: 1996b, 490). His postcolonial experience is both diasporic and postmodern in relation to the process of identification, always deferred by the bifurcation of meanings that occurs at the moments of *aporia*. It is a dialogic position of being simultaneously "inside" and "outside" the frontiers that territorialize diaspora cultures. The diasporic subject is a "familiar stranger" (*Ibidem*) because he belongs to his land of origin but he is a foreigner at the same time for not having experienced the changes undergone by his country during his absence. On the other hand, he accompanies the changes and tensions that occur in the diaspora space he inhabits but he is not recognized as part of it.

Concluding, the 'metautopias in action' show a diasporic hybrid subject renegotiating meanings from a past that has become atemporal in his utopian thought in relation to his historical present and critically pointing out the necessary transformations for a future transcultural society. The process of construction of diasporic identities is a process of translation of the tensions that occurred in the cultural, religious and political interrelations within the contact zone. Those tensions generated between belonging and becoming help the diasporic subject to have a wider perception of the alternative societies where multiple personal and collective histories construct different diaspora structures of understanding that should be contemplated. The cultural hybrid identities that are born out of these 'metautopias in action' contest fixed identities imposed by an Eurocentric discourse. Diasporic writers thus assume a historical and political position within their literary agenda to represent the voice of an ethnic minority in the process of comprehending the enigma of arrival always deferred, and of becoming instruments of change through their agency.

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