The post-consensus novel: Minority culture, multiculturalism, and transnational comparison

A Conservative Party election victory in 1979 inaugurated a post-consensus era in British politics and culture. Decisively opposed to a lingering sense of national collectivity, prime minister Margaret Thatcher’s new government promised to liberate all of its constituents from unwanted, outdated social solidarities. But the Thatcher ascendancy redefined liberty by identifying it with divisiveness, and paradoxically by stimulating new constraints. The new government encouraged a resurgence of English nativism, xenophobia, and nostalgia for the British Empire’s centrality in international affairs. And it tried to contain the impact of immigrant communities on the languages, literatures, and traditions of Britain. While political and economic conservatism flourished, however, the project of cultural containment was largely unsuccessful. In the age of Thatcher, immigrant novelists such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Timothy Mo, Salman Rushdie, and V. S. Naipaul were transforming the Anglophone literary landscape. Their fiction brought international attention to contemporary British writing, consolidated the Windrush generation’s contribution to the English novel, and ensured that geographies, vernaculars, and political histories of India, China, Japan, and the West Indies would have a lasting prominence in English letters. In 1981 Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* won the Booker Prize, a major international award for English fiction. Since then, the prize (renamed the Man Booker Prize in 2002) has gone to Anglophone novelists who hail from Australia, Ireland, Canada, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, India, South Africa, and Scotland more than it has to writers born in England.

Immigrant novelists established three microgenres that remain dominant: the novel of minority culture; the novel of multiculturalism; and the novel of transnational comparison. Those genres now extend beyond the work of immigrants. In the past two decades a broad range of novelists have focused their attention on Britain’s neo-imperial ambitions; on the English legacy of Britain’s colonial ventures in Asia, Africa, and South
America; on longstanding tensions between England and national territories of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales; and on vernacular communities organized around sexual, ethnic, or social marginality. The English novel today is the product of many Anglophone cultures. While this chapter is limited to writers who have lived in Britain, it is surely true that fiction’s turn to minority culture, multiculturalism, and transnational comparison has been encouraged by global migrations of English-language books, which are translated and circulated faster than ever before, and by the address of those books to multiple niches and networks of readers around the world.

**The novel of minority culture**

The novel of minority culture includes both Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), about a Japanese woman who migrates from the ruins of Nagasaki to the English countryside, and William McIlvanney’s *Strange Loyalties* (1991), about a Scottish detective who tracks the economic and emotional hopelessness of Glasgow while investigating his brother’s mysterious death. Ishiguro’s novel, his first, takes aim at British stereotypes about Japanese character, at assumptions about the tranquility and desirability of English rural life for Asian immigrants, and at immigrant and native fantasies of pastoral “Englishness” rooted in soil and blood. *Pale View* associates postwar ethnic antagonisms with imperialist attitudes of superiority and self-righteousness. McIlvanney’s novel, his third featuring detective Laidlaw, shares *Pale View*’s implied criticism of British imperialism but does so from the perspective of “devolution.” Proponents of devolution in the United Kingdom, like those who called for the independence of Britain’s colonial territories abroad, argue that centuries of English rule have thwarted the economic growth and cultural autonomy of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Devolution’s advocates seek decentralization and elected national assemblies, an aim partially achieved in 1998 by the creation of the National Assembly for Wales and by the revival of Scotland’s Parliament. While *Strange Loyalties* does not refer to political aspects of devolution, it understands Glasgow’s economic and social depression in the context of English domination; and it replaces timeless, pastoral images of Scotland with scrupulously mean portraits of violence and urban poverty. By opening English literary history to British-Japanese memories and perspectives, and by focusing on Glasgow’s regional population, Ishiguro and McIlvanny’s novels illustrate a new thematic emphasis on the historical fate of political minorities.

Ishiguro, who came to England from Japan at the age of five, criticizes in *Pale View* both postwar English journalists, whose newspapers turn out clichés about Japanese suicide, and interwar Japanese politicians, who promote
militarism and suppress political dissent. Ishiguro’s double vision is also present in his next novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), in which American neo-imperialism of the postwar occupation is compared to Japanese expansionism of the 1930s. In *Pale View, Artist,* and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Ishiguro shows powerfully that Cold War rhetoric about nationalist loyalty, regularly animated by Tory politicians in the 1980s, echoes the interwar language of imperialist drumbeating. Ishiguro’s novels are sly: while seeming to focus on the aggressive nationalism of interwar Japan (*Pale View* and *Artist*) and Germany (*Remains*), they draw attention to British anti-Semitism of the 1930s, to US expansionism, and to English imperialist nostalgia in the 1950s—represented in *The Remains of the Day* by a villager who laments “all kinds of little countries going independent.” By “little countries,” the villager does not mean Wales or Scotland; he means British colonial possessions such as Burma, Ceylon, Malaya, Ghana, Nigeria, and India, some of which were geographically small, and some of which were only small from the economic and political perspective of England.

Because of Ishiguro’s subject matter and Japanese-sounding name, he has been understood as a writer of “Black British literature,” a catchall that was used in the 1980s to register the emergence of new writing by Britons of Asian, West Indian, and African origin. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Mo’s *Sour Sweet* (1982), Caryl Phillips’s *The Final Passage* (1985), Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1989), and Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) are regularly considered under this heading. Ishiguro’s early novels are not about his own immigrant experience in any autobiographical way: the narratives take place before or during the decade in which he was born. Yet they reflect on the history of immigration and on two divisive questions related to it. First, what constitutes a Japanese, American, or English community? Second, can the ethnic or cultural qualities of such community change? “Black British literature” continues to raise those questions about identity and transformation.

The novel of minority culture shows how novels by “Black British” writers intersect with works focused on other subcultural or micronational communities. One point of intersection is tone: novels of minority culture tend to emphasize difficult experiences of separateness, prejudice, and “making do” rather than “conviviality,” a term Paul Gilroy employs to describe the fluid, heterogeneous sociability we find in the novel of multiculturalism. In contrast minority culture novels often represent cultural separateness by incorporating vernacular idioms, local anecdotes whose referents are imperfectly explained, and neighborhood street names, housing blocks, and landmarks. *Pale View of Hills* fits the genre in two principal ways. It registers the alienation and racism that Japanese-British immigrants experience in England. And it
presents a Japanese-speaking narrator whose words appear in English and whose memories, like her language, are distant, translated, and halting. The translated voice, because it strives for the customary sound of English novels, suggests that national characteristics are themselves fictions. We see this when Etsuko, the protagonist of *Pale View*, says of the countryside that “it’s so truly like England out here” and when Ono, the protagonist of *Artist*, finds that the most “Japanese” songs of the 1930s – songs calling for military sacrifice – are pronounced divisive and contrary and not so Japanese in the late 1940s. Ishiguro’s novels engage minority culture by suggesting that national characteristics have an arbitrary nature, an ever-changing historical contingency. Such a perspective suggests, in turn, that the separate character of minority culture may also be somewhat illusory.

Ishiguro proposes that minorities, like majorities, are not prima facie either ethical or unethical. As we can see in his antagonism to both English provincials and Japanese nationalists, Ishiguro draws attention to the demonization of minority communities; but he is reluctant simply to replace bad images with good ones. Nor will he offer a more precise account of Japanese culture to counter narrow stereotypes. His reluctance is shared by several other writers of the period. Hanif Kureishi, in an essay responding to criticism of his screenplay for the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), complains about pressure on writers from immigrant communities to offer idealized portraits at the expense of complex realism: the film made some British-Asian viewers uncomfortable because it presents a love affair between a young British-Pakistani man of the middle class and a white, working-class man. Channeling James Joyce, Kureishi argues that “a serious attempt to understand present day Britain . . . can’t attempt to represent any one group as having a monopoly on virtue.” Accordingly Kureishi suggests that young minority writers should favor naturalism (showing things as they are) and complexity (resisting appeals to idealization or apology), and should avoid sanitizing “types, clichés and simplicities.”

McIlvanney makes sanitization the subject of *Strange Loyalties*. He aligns the cover up of a hit-and-run accident in the distant past with present-day obscuring of Glasgow’s slums by tourist images of Scotland. The protagonist’s brother is damaged by a legacy of the first cover up, but all of Glasgow, McIlvanney suggests, is damaged by the second. The brother’s desire to confront brutal reality is conveyed by one of his paintings, which Laidlaw remembers when he notices:

lighter patches on the walls where Scott’s paintings had been hanging. My memory rehung one of them. It was a big canvas dominated by a kitchen window. In the foreground on the draining board there were dishes, pans, cooking utensils. Through the window was a fantastic cityscape of bleak
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places and deprived people and cranes and furnaces. The people were part of the objects, seemed somehow enslaved by them. I remember a face looking out of a closed window as if through bars. It was meant, Scott had told me, to be an echo of the face that was looking at his painting... The whole thing was rendered in great naturalistic detail, down to recognizably working-class faces below the bonnets, but the total effect was a nightmare vision. On the left side of the kitchen window, like an inaccurate inset scale on some mad map, was a small, square picture. It was painted in sugary colors in vivid contrast to the scene outside. It showed an idealized highland glen with heather and a cottage pluming smoke from the chimney and a shepherd and his dog heading towards it. Scott had called his painting “Scotland.”

The style of the painting resembles the style of McIlvanney’s novel: in both, human agency is ineffective, working-class characters are given greater attention and greater value than upper-class characters, and routine domestic existence is in its banality more sane than cliched highland fantasy. Laidlaw’s critical gaze and poetic humanism (“My memory rehung one of them”) tempers naturalistic detail with an ethics of friendship. In contrast, the novel’s title invokes not only collective loyalty to false national images but also loyalty to personal convenience and self-protection at the expense of collective honesty and kindness. McIlvanney’s three Laidlaw novels, Laidlaw (1977), The Papers of Tony Veitch (1983), and Strange Loyalties mourn the ways that socialization, the effort to “fit in to society,” can stifle care (p. 278). Laidlaw, for all his failings as a father, lover, husband, and colleague, seems more willing than his police colleagues to sympathize with working-class communities they patrol, and to understand crime in the context of poverty and economic disparity.

Devolution and globalization

Other devolution novels focused on Scotland appeared in the 1990s, perhaps most famously James Kelman’s How Late It Was, How Late (1994), and Irvine Welsh’s Trainspotting (1993), which attracted a wide international readership with the release of a film adaptation. Both novels use Scottish vernacular as the principal language of narration, an innovation that Cairns Craig calls “the devolution of the word”: the use of Scottish idiom, Craig argues, asserts “at the level of culture an independence as yet unachieved at the level of politics.” Like McIlvanney’s Glaswegians, the protagonists of Kelman and Welsh’s novels are unable to alter or even to fully acknowledge the paralysis of their lives. Craig’s barbed comment comprehends authors as well as characters: the new Scottish novelists have achieved a place of influence within English letters, he suggests, but that prominence does
not match, and has done little to improve, the Scottish nation’s political influence within the United Kingdom.

While *Trainspotting*’s interest in Scots idiom is undeniable, the novel’s emphasis on globalization might be even more significant. Its narrator speaks in an Edinburgh slang punctuated by references to violent Hollywood action films. The novel begins, in fact, with a scene of movie-watching that self-consciously imitates visual priorities and “dramatic openings” in American fight-movies:

The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis just sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried tae keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme video.

As happens in such movies, they started oaf wi an obligatory dramatic opening. Then the next phase ay the picture involved building up the tension through introducing the dastardly villain and sticking the weak plot together. Any minute now though, auld Jean-Claude’s ready tae git doon tae some serious swedgin.8

In its physical description of Sick Boy suffering from heroin withdrawal, in its careless oscillation between the trembling friend and the narrator’s desire to watch Jean-Claude, and in its casual use of obscenity, Welsh’s initial scene is legible – for all its Scots idiom – to a broad range of younger Anglophone readers, who are well-versed in the global language of cinematic violence. We expect Welsh’s devolution novel to emphasize the accents and social mores of working-class Edinburgh, as it does; but we might be surprised by its suggestion that Edinburgh is saturated by American popular culture. But the novel’s Americanized Scottishness cannot be generalized into a national or even cross-generational phenomenon: Welsh’s text reminds us that the characters’ sarcasm about psychology, the state, and liberalism needs to be understood in the context of Edinburgh’s history as a source of Enlightenment reason. Like McIlvanney, then, Welsh describes a local way of life. And yet he associates that experience with new urban and even transnational customs linked with youth and the rejection of adult socialization. His characters rail against the legacy of British imperialism, but one notes with irony that they are critical, too, of those who would deny or seek to retract the nascent globalization of immaturity.

**Difficult arrivals**

From the perspective of youth culture, *Trainspotting* appears less like Kelman and McIlvanney’s novels and more like other novels about social marginality and newly constructed minority communities. Take, for
example, two books about very different minority cultures: Anita Brookner’s *The Latecomers* (1988), about German-Jewish emigrants in London, and Colm Tóibín’s *The Story of the Night* (1996), about an Anglo-Argentine community during the Falklands War and the AIDS crisis. *The Latecomers* appears to be a modest story of friendship, but it is also a moving account of survival and adaptation. The novel’s protagonists, Thomas Hartmann and Thomas Fibich, were among many German-Jewish children who were sent alone to England in the 1930s. They are “latecomers” in a broad sense, because they arrived long after Eastern European Jews who came to Britain in the late nineteenth century. But they are also “latecomers” in a narrower sense, because their unhappy experience of childhood delays their experience of adult equanimity.

Not Jewishness *per se* but a specific experience of thwarted childhood is central to Brookner’s account of minority culture in Britain. Because they lost their own families, Fibich and Hartmann are attracted to people whose parents are in some way missing: Fibich marries Christine, whose mother died prematurely and whose father and stepmother ignored her; Hartmann marries Yvette, whose father was a Nazi collaborator and whose French mother married an English businessman after the war. Neither Hartmann nor Fibich believe in God, nor do they participate in London’s Jewish institutions, but at the end of the novel their experiences as Jewish refugees remain determinative: Fibich leaves his son a notebook with an account of “your history and as much of mine as I can remember,” and with a prayer-like reminder that “Your grandfather’s name was Manfred. Your grandmother’s name was Rosa.”

Set in England and focused on a specific community of recent immigrants of limited resources, Brookner’s novel can be grouped with Naipaul’s fictions, which for decades have returned to the theme of difficult arrival. Caryl Phillips’s novels also relate the difficult experience of arrival, not only for those leaving the Caribbean, his place of birth, but also for those fleeing racial discrimination in Germany, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. Phillips often compares anti-immigrant racism to other systems of discrimination. *A Distant Shore* (2003), whose title encompasses several stories of arrival, asks us to notice that English villagers reject strangers of several kinds: a man from an unspecified African country whose family has been murdered; a British doctor with a conspicuously Jewish surname and children named Rachel and Jacob; and a retired urban woman who has been left by her husband and seems to be psychologically unmoored. Although Britain’s increased openness to emigrants since World War II is an historical fact, Phillips’s novel implies that the post-consensus emphasis on liberated differences and diversity has gone hand in hand with a renewal of self-centered
individualism and a diminished concern for social welfare and collective political responsibilities in global as well as national terms.

**Sexual minorities**

*A Distant Shore* picks up on a theme that has been explored even more vigorously in minority culture novels by Colm Tóibín and Alan Hollinghurst: intersections among racism, imperialism, and histories of sexual discrimination. Tóibín’s *The Story of the Night* gives us Richard Garay, a young gay son of an English mother and an Argentine father who was brought up in a British expatriate community in Buenos Aires. This community is not lacking in economic comfort, but it is isolated, provincial, and unprepared for military violence and economic downturn in the early 1980s. The novel begins with the first election of Thatcher and her response to Argentine invasion of the British Falkland Islands in 1982. Richard is an Anglophone narrator, but he feels Argentine, and he is disappointed when the British retake the islands at the end of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict. Still, Richard’s command of English endears him to US spies and businessmen who arrive in Argentina to exploit oil resources and support right-wing governments in the region. These connections, in turn, allow Richard to meet other gay men in situations that are, at least temporarily, exempted from the more traditional, homophobic society of Buenos Aires. From a visiting American diplomat, he first learns about AIDS, and from an Argentine lover who has lived in California, he learns about gay communities that have responded collectively to the AIDS crisis. While globalization brings American neo-imperialism to Argentina, it also brings, at least for Richard, greater access to anti-retroviral drugs, solidarity with other gay men, and financial independence.

In its concern with gay minority culture and the history of imperialism, Tóibín’s novel should be considered with Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which recounts the upwardly mobile adventures of bisexual British-Asian Karim, whose acting career succeeds the more he loans himself to commercialized representations of “minority culture”; and Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988), which presents young Will Beckwith, a narrator who thinks he is rejecting Britain’s imperial past and resisting sexual persecution but is in many ways reproducing both. Central to the effectiveness of *The Swimming Pool Library* is its glamorous, witty protagonist: Hollinghurst uses Beckwith’s charm to make the reader participate in his character’s naïveté. Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* (2004) also presents a young charmer, Nick Guest, who admires Henry James, prefers sex with black men, allows himself to be patronized
and manipulated by Tory families and prejudices, and seems oblivious – perhaps fatally – to his complicity in the divisive side of post-consensus sexual and racial politics in the 1980s. Another meditation on complicity is Tóibín’s *The Master* (2004), which finds occasion in a narrative about Henry James’s emotional intimacies with men to relate the earlier novelist’s experience of anti-Irish prejudice and British imperial arrogance during a visit to Dublin. Tóibín suggests in *The Master*, as he did in *Story of the Night*, that a character’s ability to move between public and private selves, as Richard Garay does with some success and as James does with less, may be aided by his experience of belonging to multiple national communities. By contrast, Hollinghurst is wary of characters who overestimate any commutability of sexual and racial politics. Both novelists are ultimately skeptical about the long-term political efficacy of intimate liaisons – even minority homosexual ones.

**The novel of multiculturalism**

The novel of multiculturalism shares with the novel of minority culture a concern with antiracist politics in the post-consensus era, but it tends to focus on collaborations and clashes among characters of different national and ethnic origins. If the minority culture novel emphasizes separation, which it attributes to national divisiveness and the assertion of traditional ethnic communities or sexual orientations, the multicultural novel privileges mixing, which it presents both as a spur to divisiveness and as an occasion for new collectivities. The novelists whose careers are most closely tethered to these concerns are Nobel laureate Naipaul and two-time Booker prize recipient Rushdie. Naipaul’s interest in mixed-up communities extends from *The Mimic Men* (1967), his early novel about Caribbean emigrants in London, to *The Enigma of Arrival*, based on Naipaul’s own emigration to rural England, to the later *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004). The last two novels tell the story of a mixed-caste Indian man, Willie Chandran, who is a serial emigrant, as it were, to London, to an unnamed Portuguese African colony, to Berlin, and to guerrilla communities in rural India. Naipaul’s books generously mock both the willful ignorance of colonial rulers and the apparent naïveté of anticolonial idealists. In Naipaul’s fiction cross-class and crosscultural solidarities are false, empty of real understanding, or simply embarrassing. To be Portuguese living in Africa, to be a Caribbean man in London, to be an Indian woman married to a German man, to be a Brahmin married to a “backward” – all of these mixed-up conditions, Naipaul suggests, lead to “half a life.” At the same time a whole life appears impossible, an enigma whose realization never arrives.
Multiculturalism refers to the belief that individuals as well as societies benefit from contact with different cultural, ethnic, and linguistic traditions, and from allowing themselves to be transformed by contact. It would be fair to understand Naipaul’s books, therefore, as novels of anti-multiculturalism, even though they offer some of the most compelling, moving accounts of postcolonial consciousness. Rushdie’s novels, by contrast, celebrate the “mixed tradition” that imperialism has left behind and that new forms of globalization continue to produce. Born in India but educated in England and now resident in New York, Rushdie embraces “eclecticism,” which he defines as “the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest.”

The mix-up has important resonances in Rushdie: it points to the mixing up of culture generated by colonialism and migration; it refers to misunderstandings that immigrants have about the culture they enter, and that colonial communities have about native cultures they are exploiting; it signals, too, the purposeful ruses used by Rushdie and some of his characters to unsettle exclusive conceptions of community.

In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie’s celebrated novel about Indian independence, the narrator is exchanged at birth with another infant and then raised by his non-biological parents. The novel takes up one of the English novel’s central concerns – inheritance – and suggests that colonialism forever disrupted India’s narrative, personal, political, and cultural beginnings. Rhetorically, the novel is full of what the narrator calls “chutnification,” a preservation of the past that is also an alteration – like the integration of an Indian condiment into the history of English fiction (p. 548). But whereas *Midnight’s Children* presents cultural mix-ups as the unintentional result of colonialism, Rushdie’s later novels and narrative fictions present immigrant characters who mix things up on purpose.

Linking Rushdie’s tactics in *The Satanic Verses* (1988) to South London antiracist riots in the early 1980s, which the novel describes, Ian Baucom has argued that the novel serves to “re-create England through an act of disorderly conduct.” Like devolution writers Welsh and Kelman who use Scots vernacular to decentralize the tradition of English letters, Rushdie uses references to Indian foods, popular culture, mythology, and idioms to make an English novel in the image of British multiculturalism. But unlike Welsh and Kelman, who tend to pit Scottish culture against English, Rushdie suggests that British culture has been mixed up from the start. One of the characters in *Satanic Verses* asserts, in a widely quoted stuttering sentence, “The trouble with Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don’t know what it means.” This jibe is meant to reverse the usual anti-immigrant litany directed against British Indians and other minorities by repeating – and interrupting – a rhetoric of impersonal
generalization. By “hissing” at history and comparing the English to a “dodo,” proverbially foolish and extinct, Rushdie’s character uses the insulting rhetoric of racist discourse for antiracist critique. He asserts that postcolonial immigrants know more about England’s history than the English do.

An epitome of Rushdie’s exuberant multiculturalism is “The Courter,” in a story collection East, West (1994), in which flirtatious mix-ups of a group of recent immigrants from “the East” offer a sharp contrast to the unfulfilling camaraderie in Naipaul’s novels. “The Courter” features more of the mixed-up English – what other critics have called “rotten English” or “weird English” – that we have come to associate with the literary idiom of Rushdie and other minority writers. The story’s title refers to an apartment house porter from Eastern Europe whose name is mispronounced by an Indian ayah. In her speech, “porter” becomes “courter.” The ayah’s mistake creates an accidental invitation: the porter, used to his employers’ angry epithets, decides to adopt his new identity: “‘Courter courter caught.’ Okay. People called him many things, he did not mind. But this name, this courter, this he would try to be.”

The porter becomes the ayah’s courtier, and they create together a temporary “wonderland” of private languages. Yet this community is permanently disrupted by violence: thugs pull a knife on the ayah and her employer, whom they misidentify as the family of another Indian man; when the porter runs out to save his beloved, he is attacked and badly injured. While Rushdie seems to acknowledge that mix-ups of language are no match for the rhetorical and physical thuggery that is racism, the story is not simply about the porter’s flirtation but about the narrator’s memory, which survives and flourishes as the literature, and the innovative novels, of mixed-up Britain.

Although “The Courter” looks back at the 1960s, it comments on 1990s Britain. As Rushdie knows well, it is not only in fiction that mixing up can provoke threats of violence. Many readers of The Satanic Verses were offended by its impious references to the Koran and the history of Islam. The novel was burned in some places and banned in others, and Rushdie was condemned to death for blasphemy by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran; the sentence was upheld by the Iranian government until 1998. The burning of The Satanic Verses by Muslims in Bradford makes an appearance in Zadie Smith’s White Teeth (2000), which signals its homage to Rushdie’s style, tone, and subject matter. Smith’s novel holds together overlapping stories of North London characters from English, Bengali, and Jamaican backgrounds. Like Midnight’s Children it moves back and forth among time periods, using well-known events from world history as well as private events from characters’ pasts to historicize present-day London.
If we follow a line of recent historical novels that also embrace Britain’s new diversity, we find our way, perhaps surprisingly, to Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), which begins in rural England of 1935 and ends in multicultural London of 1999. *Atonement* is focused on a child’s terrible lie and its relation to horrors of World War II, but in the final section we meet the now-grown child’s extended family. While class and ethnicity seemed to be transparent in the country-house world of the novel’s beginning, the grown narrator reflects at the end, while talking to her “cheerful West Indian” taxi driver,

> It is quite impossible these days to assume anything about people’s educational level from the way they talk or dress or from their taste in music. Safest to treat everyone you meet as a distinguished intellectual.\(^{15}\)

The novel’s embrace of multiculturalism is even more pointed. In its coda a homemade play about a tragedy of “extrinsic” marriages is performed by great-grandchildren of mixed national and social backgrounds (p. 346). There is no violent incident to interrupt this final scene, as there is in Rushdie’s story. Instead, *Atonement* celebrates a new public culture that James Proctor has tartly associated with “New Labour’s hegemonic vision.”\(^{16}\) Proctor argues that ethnic difference can only “make a difference” when we “historicize and challenge the forms of exoticist multiculturalism that prevail in the present” (p. 113). He refers here to the eager marketing of immigration that helped to make a bestseller of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), which celebrates London’s Bangladeshi immigrants; but Proctor is criticizing more generally a tone of multicultural triumph, which we find in *Atonement*, and which Proctor associates with the New Labour optimism of Tony Blair.

**The novel of transnational comparison**

The project of historicizing multiculturalism has been taken up forcefully by novels of transnational comparison. When we consider how many important British writers now live outside of the British Isles, or divide their time between Britain and other places, it becomes less surprising to find a wave of English novels that approach British history comparatively. Caryl Phillips and Peter Ho Davies have been recognized among the journal *Granta’s* “Best of Young British Novelists,” Phillips in 1993 and Ho Davies in 2003.\(^ {17}\) But Phillips, who was born in St. Kitts and educated in England, resides in both New York and London. Ho Davies, who is of Welsh and Chinese parentage and was raised in England, lives in the United States. Kiran Desai, who won a Man Booker Prize in 2006 for *The Inheritance of Loss*, was educated in
India, England, and the United States, and divides her time between the United States and India. Desai’s novel and Ho Davies’s *The Welsh Girl* (2007) are two of the most interesting recent examples of the transnational comparison genre.

Earlier examples include Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989), which asks us to consider the interwar activities of an English country house within several larger contexts – private, national, and international; Phillips’s *Crossing the River* (1993), *The Nature of Blood* (1997), and *A Distant Shore* (2003), which collate experiences of arrival that are separated by geography and sometimes by hundreds of years; and the novels of W. G. Sebald, a German-language writer who lived most of his adult life in England before his death in 2001 and whose novels have been recognized as significant contributions to British fiction. While the linked narratives of *The Emigrants* (English version, 1996) ask us to compare four Germans (three of them Jewish or part-Jewish) who emigrated to the US, France, or Britain, Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (English version, 1998) uses its narrator’s walking tour through Suffolk to sew together the history of British imperialism with other histories of violence, including the German massacre of Jews in concentration camps and the Allied fire-bombing of German cities. Sebald suggests that thinking about the Allied air war and European imperialism alongside the Holocaust can serve to correct, among British and US readers, an uncritical self-righteousness about German violence and Anglo-American liberalism. At the same time Sebald understands that, for German readers, comparing the Holocaust to other events can seem like denial or apology. Sebald’s novels of transnational comparison explore those contextual differences.

Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* also compares histories of European racism, showing where discrimination against people of African descent has intersected with anti-Semitism. Unlike *The Rings of Saturn*, which is framed by a single narrator whose interviews, conversations, and readings allow him to incorporate other voices, *The Nature of Blood* weaves among several narrators, each of whom lives in a different time and place. There is Stephan, a German Jew who has joined the Zionist cause in Cyprus in the 1940s; Eva, Stephan’s niece and a concentration camp survivor in postwar Germany and then in London; a third-person narrative about Jews accused of murdering a Christian child in Italy in the 1480s; a character called Othello, who visits a Jewish ghetto in Venice in the late sixteenth century; and Malka, an Ethiopian Jew who experiences racism in post-independence Israel, where she spends a night with Stephan. Phillips’s interwoven stories argue that racism in present-day Britain needs to be understood in the context of a much longer European history. To represent the connections between events separated by
time and place, Sebald and Phillips expand the scale of their novels well beyond the geography of any single nation.

In a truly comparative novel, expansion of scale means multiplication rather than simply enlargement of geographies. Sometimes this means that a single novel takes place in Israel, Cyprus, Italy, and England, as in *The Nature of Blood*. But sometimes, as in *The Rings of Saturn*, a novel will hew to a single county of England while the narrator’s memories, anecdotes, and commentaries range from the Congo and South America to Ireland and West Germany. Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* and Ho Davies’s *Welsh Girl* adopt a combination of those models, shuttling between multiple narratives set in disparate spaces and representing spaces that gather together characters of different origins. Desai’s narrative follows Biju, a young man from the Himalayas trying to survive as an illegal immigrant kitchen helper in New York, and Sai, a teenaged girl whose Indian parents have died while working in the Soviet Union and who comes to live in the Himalayas with her crusty Anglophile grandfather and his cook, Biju’s father. *The Inheritance of Loss* is not set in Britain, but it analyzes the consequences of British colonialism and global networks of migration that send young men like Biju into an underworld of New York restaurants. The novel ends not with a celebration of migration and the multicultural West but with Biju’s happy return to the Himalayas and Sai’s realization that “Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own mean little happiness and live safely within it.”

*The Welsh Girl* is filtered through the perspectives of Rotheram, a German-Jewish interrogator who fled Nazi Germany and later enlisted in the British Army; Karsten, a German prisoner of war who is imprisoned in Wales; and Esther, a Welsh girl who works in a nearby village and befriends Karsten. Their perspectives add up to one narrative, but their differences expose tensions between anti-British Welsh nationalism and anti-German British patriotism. *The Welsh Girl* is in some ways a devolution novel, because it represents the costs of British consensus: although anti-German sentiment helps to generate a fragile peace among Welsh locals and British soldiers, the unity suggests a likeness to the process that forged an anti-Semitic consensus as a basis for German nationalism in the 1930s. In line with its devolutionary mode, the novel embraces *cynefin*, a Welsh term for “the sense of place” that allows even a flock of sheep to recognize its territory as a specific locality. But *The Welsh Girl* also presents unexpected alliances that appear to move towards hitherto unrecognized transnational affiliations: the escaped German prisoner, Karsten, helps Esther, who has been raped by an English soldier, to maintain her sheep farm through the end
of the war; meanwhile, Karsten, despite feeling intensely ashamed of having surrendered to the British, extends friendship to Rotheram, who laments having fled Germany, where he was ashamed to think of himself as Jewish. The Welsh Girl admires transnational cooperation because nationalist solidarities, in comparison, seem everywhere compromised by internal histories of English colonialism in Wales and anti-Jewish sentiment in Germany. The novel’s transnational sensibility accommodates an ethics of hospitality, exemplified by Welsh farmers who offer to house German ex-prisoners after the war. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, the English novel looks back on the solidarity of wartime in order to find a model of collectivity that transcends national consensus by amalgamating a respect for localized cultural and historical differences with an understanding of transnational interdependence and affiliation.

NOTES
2 Mark Stein, Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004).
17 www.granta.com