

Swamping the Country. Ingrid Pollard's Cartography of Englishness

Francesco Cattani

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ABSTRACT

Francesco Cattani, *Swamping the country: Ingrid Pollard's cartography of Englishness*

The British-Guyanese Ingrid Pollard's photographs, in their apparently harmless simplicity, clash with dominant codes of Englishness and contest the idea that the Black British experience is typically and "exclusively an urban phenomenon" (Stuart Hall). The works collected in Pastoral Interlude (1987), Seaside Series (1989) and Wordsworth Heritage (1992) stage a cultural and geographical investigation of the multi-ethnic topography of British culture. Playing on common old fears of invasion by immigrants, Pollard's pictures display how prejudices and preconceptions turn into patterns of representation and grids of distribution. By simply placing her Black subjects in the countryside (the historical, patriotic, English country), and staging their holidays more than their jobs, Pollard examines the accepted and acceptable ways of looking back at and construing the myth of a white, homogeneous landscape populated by local characters. These spatial representations become a vehicle for a confrontation with the national heritage: where does the Black British experience belong to? What does belong to the Black British experience? Combining personal, intimate, images with traditional, public views of the English countryside, Pollard questions the concept of Englishness and discloses a visual exemplification of the fact that, as Paul Gilroy has underlined, the peculiar synonymy of the terms English and white cannot continue (After Empire).

Borrowing, or better kind of forcing Roland Barthes' notion of Punctum, what is the "...element which rises from [Ingrid Pollard's photographs], shoots out of [them] like an arrow, and pierces me...?" (p. 26) Is it the Black subject or the romantic landscape? The answer is their union, the black subject inhabiting the countryside.

I would like open this presentation showing you a completely different work *Effnik* a 1996 collaboration between Joy Gregory and Yinka Shonibare. It is a series of 'classical' portrait in which the Nigerian "artist appears in the guise" of an XVIII century nobleman.

Mark Sealy and Stuart Hall, in their study on Black photography entitled *Different*, describe it as an "impudent act of impersonation", in which Shonibare presents himself in "heavy historical disguise", "[i]n a spirit of calculated insolence". The artist "is 'done' in the formal style of the period - a Gainsborough or Reynolds grand portrait: evoking a moment in British art history... symptomatic of a certain kind of 'Englishness'... He has the air of... a lord *and* a slaver,... But there is no escaping the artist's black face... Who is he - this intruder, this interloper...? What is he doing *there*?" (p. 64).

The artifice of the camouflage is a means to uncover the connection between black people and England, in the style of the Saidian contrapuntal reading which I think characterises Shonibare's entire art.

My aim is not to criticize *Effnik* or Mark Sealy and Stuart Hall, but it seems to me that in relation to Ingrid Pollard's works, this "calculated insolence" can be in a way more easily accepted by a white audience. For two reasons.

First of all, being a historical disguise seems to concern more the past than the present, and as an act of impersonation, it represents literally a dressing-up as something else, something which is different from what one normally is: that is not what happened in reality.

But more than this, I think that we are more aesthetically used to images like these: giving black people as rare and precious objects and using them as pageboys was typical for example since late Renaissance. And we are more aesthetically used to it because the history of art has recorded it:

Tiziano "Ritratto di Laura Dianti" 1523

Paolo Veronese "Convito in Casa Levi" "The Feast in the House of Levi" 1573

Giovan Battista Tiepolo "Banchetto di Cleopatra" "The Banquet of Cleopatra" 1742 c.

Ingrid Pollard's pictures instead in their simplicity can result more disrespectful, disturbing, unheimlich according to Freud's double meaning as unfamiliar and uncovering what should remain hidden. Simply placing her Blacks in a rural setting, far from the city where they are supposed to live and stay; showing them roaming about the country (with all the possible declinations of the word), she displays something different. And it is on the degree of this difference that I would like to concentrate.

The simplicity is obviously more apparent than real. Her rural settings are as structured as any urban settings. Talking about her first work *Pastoral Interlude*, a 1987 series of five hand-tinted prints, she said that she started to see how in the countryside, just like in a city, everything is organized to speak of divisions, ownership, to immediately recognize what is inside/outside, local/foreign,.

"The stylised posed figures, the use of historical details about a particular place. It started off unconscious, but then... it became quite deliberate.

Nothing about the scene is really 'natural'. It's as manufactured and deliberate as the assumptions and stereotypes about black people".

Following the traces that these images seem to suggest, one discovers how history and geography are interweaved. Entering a landscape means plunging in a net of 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' references, moving contemporarily between space and time.

Just like the landscape, Ingrid Pollard's pictures are not natural but manufactured (hand-tinted) and deliberate ("stylised posed figures"). Moreover, they are not simply photographs, they are an assemblage of an image and a caption. The first one completed would be like this:

"... it's as if the Black experience is only lived within an urban environment: I thought I liked the Lake District where I wandered lonely as a Black face in a sea of white. A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease, dread..."

The title of the series is obviously part of the work. Firstly the 'interlude' represents a pause, a break contrasting from what is there before and after. The idea of the interval is

conveyed also through the dots that appear before and after each captions giving a sense of in-betweenness.

It is a reference to what she was doing, taking pictures (rural pictures) of New York and these pictures made her think about the English countryside, thus a pause in her work. But it represents also a break from the normal, usual representation of the English countryside. The adjective “pastoral”, then, refers to a way of portraying or evoking the country life, typically in a romanticised or idealised way.

The reference to Lake District opens a dialogue with a particular setting standing also for a particular literary history. Lake District is one of those area which shaped the character of the nation, a national point of reference. It is a super-English setting, recalling immediately a “certain kind of Englishness”, an image of a ‘pure’ England of the past; there the wandering in a “sea of white”, a direct reference to Wordsworth’s “The Daffodils”: “I wandered lonely as a cloud/ That floats on high o’er vales and hills”.

These images can be easily read by someone who heard speeches about swamping the country as an intrusion, an invasion (a word which will come back later). But they represent also an encounter with and an immersion into the English history. Not by chance the images are hand-tinted, ‘post-coloured’ to give a more elegiac atmosphere, but also to make them look older, thus making what they represent older. The result is to give historical depth to the figure of the migrant, moving him/her away from that present always present which associated to urban peripheries (Paul Gilroy in *After Empire: the migrant as “devoid of historicity”* (p. 135)).

I would like also to question what are technically these works. Beside the fact that they are an assemblage, I cannot manage to simply see them as photographs. Considering only the image I wonder if it is more a collage, assembling two different realities which are not supposed to be together (which are supposed to exclude one another) and creating a new set of relations between them.

This sense of separation is testified also by the presence in each picture of gates, fences, obstacles or simply lines which literally divide the scene, forbidding or not allowing the passage from one space to the other. The wanderers are always caught on a limit.

Anyway, besides the idea of the collage, the different form of barriers clearly tell of an attempt to belong. Lake District becomes a point of departure for an exploration in the present as well as in the past. But anyway it is a matter of belonging here, not somewhere else. I want to show you another *Pastoral Interlude*:

“... Searching for sea shells, waves lap my Wellington boots, carrying lost souls of brothers & sisters released over the ship side...” She seems to peer at a sea, and it is a clear reference to the Black Atlantic. But here the ocean is the countryside, England, another sea

carrying lost souls of brother and sisters, as important as the other one for the histories and stories of the Black experience.

(I don't know if I quote it in the right way) T. S: Eliot quoted by Caryl Phillips' *The Final Passage* "History is now and England"

The confrontation with the national English landscape is more evident in *Wordsworth Heritage* (the latest of the three Ingrid Pollard's work that I want to analyse). It's a billboard poster commissioned by BBC and first exhibited in 1992 at various sites. Once again it offers a starting point for a lecture in history as well as geography. And once again I think the key is in the title.

Wordsworth, as we have seen before, is one of those national poets who contributed to the creation of a national image around which a community could identify: naming Wordsworth means to summon up a certain kind of England, an English England. Then 'heritage': how do we have to consider it? Who and what is the heritage? In her presentation of the work Pollard said:

"I placed walkers in these locations, thinking about an heritage that Wordsworth wrote about, looking back to a received heritage and forward to a future inheritance". The key is in this double meaning: these black walkers, are an inheritance for Wordsworth, for the English history, but at the same time Wordsworth is part of their heritage, he is one of their ancestors.

It's interesting how the poster generated unexpected reactions, especially in the Black British viewers: "'Heritage is about Africa, the Caribbean and Brixton!' I heard Black people [say]. 'Heritage? Whose heritage?'... 'Wordsworth my foot!' looking with disbelief these statements simultaneously embraced and denied what was in front of them. What is the connection between Brixton and Africa? No simple stories, no simple reactions".

By the way, taking an interlude, at the beginning I said I was forcing Barthes' notion of Punctum. Sticking to the French critic and *Camera Lucida*, probably here it is more a question of photographic 'shock', which "... consists less in traumatizing than in revealing what was so well hidden" (p. 32) --- Freud's *unheimlich*.

In my opinion, then, these images function more than a simple act of cultural translation which, according to Homi Bhabha, "desacralises the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy... [demanding] a contextual specificity... within minority positions"(305). Re-contextualising, changing the context, which is always according to the 'official' position a lowering of the context, changing the viewer, cultural translation offers the possibility to enter in a perspective of historical and geographical relativism. It is an act of calculated insolence like Gregory's and Shonibare's *Effnik*.

But Ingrid Pollard's images are not simply an act of insolence; not even of re-possession. They work more as an act of belonging. If the series of *Pastoral Interlude* represents an

attempt to belong (as testified by the obstacles forbidding to be one with the landscape), *Wordsworth Heritage* is more a statement, a sort of identity card for the Black British experience.

Between *Pastoral Interlude and Wordsworth Heritage, Seaside Series* (1989). “[These postcards show] me at the seaside” says the artist. They represents a day-trip along England coastal border, a geographical border this time much more historically connoted: Hastings. (14 Oct 1066).

Just like Lake District, it stands for an encounter with another piece of ‘pure’ England, in this case the Anglo-Saxon England. But Hastings is the place where King Harold II was defeated by William of Normandy, where the Anglo-Saxons, who still define the constitutive part of the nation, where conquered by some forces coming from outside.

Two examples:

- “1066 a date remembered throughout the world as marking the final invasion of Britain”.
- “And Hastings is of course linked with the last successful invasion of Britain”.

According to Ingrid Pollard, the choice of the word invasion wants to be a reference to “Margaret Thatcher’s talk of Britain being ‘swamped by alien cultures’ and Enoch Powell’s Rivers of Blood speech”, and to the idea of “The colonized returning to colonize the colonizers”.

Each plate, a sort of travel brochure, is constituted by a photograph, an object and a caption (except two). The objects are those souvenirs that we take home as a record for the day, trinkets that usually are far from local, being made in China or Italy. The captions articulate a questioning journey through the landscape and through the past. Nothing about the scene is ‘natural’: the space is a net of references and relations going back and forward through time and space. According to Ingrid Pollard:

“Part of my job is to make the apparent obvious; to see those who appear not to belong; to cross the border and leave a mark.

...the borders are constantly moving. History and the seashore shift. Battle moves inland...

Look at me in this postcard. I’m looking to see which part of Africa I came from”.

But Pollard is questioning the place not only of the Black experience in the History and geography of Britain, but of the white experience as well. *Seaside series* represents an encounter with the Ocean, the sea of history, but also the sea from where this history came. And this sea is important for the Black History, but it is totally related to the history of England as well: in all her works it is a question of finding, or better showing how things can be in common, how the past belong to one another. Once again it is a question of heritage and inheritance.

All these postcard are related in a way or another to the sea, through the images or the trinkets. It is interesting how they show the same Ingrid Pollard as blurred or partial, sometimes difficult to spot; but when entire, completely visible, immediately questioned for her blackness, for her not Englishness: "... *and what part of Africa do you come from?*" Inquired the walker...". I quote: "There are a sizable number of day-trippers. A strange exchange of looks goes on - decisions about who's alien, who's local, who's not". This image is strikingly similar (I don't know if there is any direct relation between them) to the one represented in Jackie Kay's poem "In my country", from the collection *Other Lovers* (1993):

walking down the water
down where an honest river
shakes hands with the sea,
a woman passed round me
in a slow watchful circle,
as if I were a superstition;

or the worst dregs of her imagination,
so when she finally spoke
her words spliced into bars
of an old wheel. A segment of air.
Where do you come from?
'Here,' I said, 'Here. These parts.'

I want to show you the work of another artist called *A Picture Book of Britain*. Henna Nadeem.

She normally works on found photographs and in this case she has worked directly on images from *Country Life Picture Book* a series of books published all along the XX century (of London, of Scotland, of the Lake District, of East Anglia). They were not a tourist guide, "rather [a collection] of landscape 'views' that claimed to represent scenes typical of Britain's 'essential character'..."; characterised by a nostalgic tone; they saw the countryside as "a means of ... declaring membership to an essential British club".

Especially during the post-war period, the series became part of a wider trend "... centred on the preservation and packaging of a historic British past", a symbolic inventory of a landscape under threat.

In her *Picture Book of Britain* Henna Nadeem superimposes to images taken from the *Country Life* series pattern derived from non-Western traditions, in particular from her other Islamic tradition (her parents coming from Pakistan).

Making it difficult for our eyes to settle, her photo-collages represent a challenge. They undermine the solidity that centuries of literature and art have attributed to the English countryside. They complicate it with the presence of another viewer: her rural landscapes literally carry the signs of the different cultures inhabiting England.

Many have seen in them a sense of menace. But at the same time there is a sort of delicate innocence and playfulness, and seeing them, I cannot help but thinking about the view from a kitchen, through the curtains made by a mother.

I would like to conclude this discussion going back to *Wordsworth Heritage*. Talking with a friend about this paper he pointed my attention to something which I hadn't noticed the first (and second, third time). In the last image, Ms Pollard's party is looking at a map. This friend said that it was interesting because it represented how they still had to orientate in a new land and to find their place in the white country. Then I thought it could have been much simpler than that, only a plain tourist map. And it reminded me of what Paul Gilroy has said "Isn't there a problem in being seen as transgressive all the time? What about the right of Blacks and gays not to be exciting?".

Anyway this map is a simple tool leading to a much bigger and complicated question: what are we seeing in these photographs? Black subjects or English subjects? - A question that Ingrid Pollard poses to the white spectator as well as to the black spectator.

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