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# Ethnicity, multiculturalism and racism in a Young Offenders' Institution

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**In the UK, some young men find it hard to identify with the traditional Islam practised at home by their parents whose customs can seem staid when transplanted to modern Western countries. But they also find it hard to identify with Britain too, because we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream. David Cameron, Berlin. 5th Feb 2011.**

## The Kings Speech?

The idea that Britain has an identity problem is not a new one but it exercises the British Prime Minister because he feels it leaves young men vulnerable to the allure of violent extremism and exposes a collective inability to live together in peace and harmony. Cameron fears that people retreat into the kind of ethnic bunkers Ted Cante identified in his report into the riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in the spring of 2001. In this scheme of things people live parallel lives of avoidance and antagonism. The Prime Minister's speech suggests that state sponsored multiculturalism is at fault and promises that the coalition government will 'turn the page on the failed policies of the past'. Although it is not clear what's on the next page, the characterisation of multiculturalism's failure and the significance of a collective national identity to the prospects of future success indicate the trajectory of government thinking.

The speech implicitly evokes recurrent anxieties over the loss of a cohesive British national identity. It seems to have in mind a singular national culture that is largely fixed and stable into which people can be invited or included, rather than cultures that are a plural and dynamic process people in Britain are generating and renewing themselves. These issues of identity, culture and belonging were recently the subject of an extensive ESRC funded programme of research, Identities and Social Action, involving 25 different projects (see [www.identities.org.uk](http://www.identities.org.uk)). In this article I present some of the findings from one of these projects, 'Ethnicity, Identity and Social Relations in Prison', led by Coretta Phillips from the London School of Economics. This project involved an

ethnographic study conducted in HMYOI Rochester in 2006/7 to explore how young men in prison understand questions of ethnicity and identity.

## Complex multiculturalisms and multiculturalisms

Many young men arrive at HMYOI Rochester from London, where Black and minority ethnic youth are over-represented in the criminal justice system, but also from courts, or other prisons, in the neighbouring counties of Kent, Essex and Sussex where white ethnicities predominate. The prison accommodates up to 400 convicted young men, of which approximately 56 per cent were White British, White European or White Other. Black/Black Caribbean/Black African young men comprised 30 per cent of the population, while 7 per cent were of Mixed Heritage and 6 per cent Asian.

There was considerable evidence of state sponsored multiculturalism in HMYOI Rochester. This could be found in the prison kitchen and wing serveries where halal and vegetarian options were provided, and the appropriate separation of utensils observed. The menus provided a diverse range of meal options that reflect contemporary British eating habits and tastes, that is plenty of curry and pizza alongside sausage and chips. The prison chaplaincy employed the services of an imam to provide for the 19 per cent of prisoners that disclosed their Muslim faith. It also developed a large multi-faith area equipped with the necessary facilities for ablutions and storage of prayer mats. The fasting of Ramadan and the festival of Eid were fully accommodated in the regime procedures, alongside those of Christian festivals such as Christmas. These provisions sat within a comprehensive diversity policy that, among other things, deployed sophisticated computer software to monitor the ethnic allocation of prison disciplinary procedures and other services.

Multiculturalism was also immediately visible in the numerous shades of skin hues among the young men, from darkest black to palest white. It was 'hearable' in the accents and vernaculars of their talk, and the languages other than English that sprinkled the conversation of some prisoners. It could be heard in the music prisoners played that filled cells, landings and recreation facilities at various times of the day. It was

visible, again, in their styles of wearing prison issue clothes, their haircuts and physical interactions. Many Rochester prisoners, both black and white, often went 'backsy' with their green prison-issue trousers or grey jogging bottoms hanging down below their hips showing their undershorts. Hand greetings of fists touched knuckle to knuckle or more formal 'brotherly' hugs were commonplace, extending the repertoire of nods and handshakes that conveyed the various levels of familiarity between the young men.

For many black prisoners talking 'slangs' on the wing established their connections with other prisoners and gave voice to their identities. For some white prisoners familiarity with this vernacular, associated with urban black youth, helped establish a degree of common experience. It indicated they were at 'ease' with the diffused diversity of cultural life associated with London living. In interviews and other interactions, many of the white young men from London talked of growing up on the same estates as their black contemporaries, attending the same schools, living on the same streets and, in some cases, the same households. One bilingual young white man from West London (R41) went so far as to describe himself as 'White Asian' and talked proudly of a mixed heritage derived from his Asian step-father: 'My boys call me ['Switch'] cos I'm half white, half Asian so they say it was a [switch] of personality, so they call me ['Switch'], so I got that name... everyone that knows me will say that I'm the only white Asian who knows more about the Asian culture than Asians themselves.'

In these accounts and experiences the old racial logics of fixed essence and separation were thoroughly unpicked by the young men because their biographies told them another story. These young men often felt they had more in common with each other than they did with white prisoners from outside London. As both Les Back and Paul Gilroy have suggested there is emerging evidence of a new urban post-colonial conviviality, an ordinary cosmopolitanism among the modern urban young.<sup>2</sup> In this convivial culture differences once attributed to 'race' have become

almost completely unremarkable and are accepted as entirely ordinary.<sup>3</sup>

### The discomforts of visibility — seeing whiteness

Elsewhere in the multicultures of HMYOI Rochester were prisoners who regarded the idea of an ethnic identity with suspicion because it was something prescriptive or imposed, and hence unwelcome. Although this feeling was not exclusive to white prisoners, it was more common in their accounts. In the sections of our interviews where we enquired about ethnicity white young men would frequently express frustration and irritation about the terms and process of ethnic categorisation. One observed that 'It's just what you say when you tick an application form and that, that's what it means to me' (R47).

It is probably not uncommon, in areas of Kent, Sussex and Essex, to grow up in a largely white community without having any real sense that you are white, just as you would not expect a fish to have a sense of wetness. As numerous studies<sup>4</sup> confirm this quality of whiteness characterised as invisibility or absence does not mean it is non-existent. It tells of the power of its position in defining the norms and values of other ethnicities in relation to itself, without ever having to provide an account of itself. As this process of accounting begins

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to gather pace, more and more white people are starting to encounter the dilemmas of categorisation and its multiple possibilities, benign or otherwise.

In contrast to the apparent meaninglessness of ethnic categories, having a national status appeared more intelligible and straightforward to many prisoners. They easily offered varied and mixed national origins, often combined by complicated family connections that referred to experiences of either diaspora or migration. For some prisoners, though, this multicultural, multi-national hybridity of heritage could be problematically inclusive. According to this young white respondent (R4):

*The reason why I say that [White English] is because, like, British, you don't know what British is. You know what I mean, there's just*

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1. The name has been adjusted to preserve anonymity but hopefully retains some of the original nominative qualities.  
2. Back, L. (1996) *New Ethnicities and Urban Cultures: racisms and multiculturalism in young lives*, London: UCL Press; Gilroy, P. (2004) *After Empire: Melancholia or convivial culture?* London: Routledge.  
3. See Gilroy, P. (2004) *After Empire*.  
4. See Garner, S. (2007) *Whiteness: An Introduction*, Abingdon: Routledge.

so many ethnic minorities, not even minorities now, majorities should I say, do you know what I mean. They're everywhere and to me, and I mean they never say, the African minorities never say they're English, they say they're British, so I'd like to be separated from that. I don't wish to be too close to that. I know it's a bit controversial, but that's what I believe, you know what I mean.

In this account an inclusive, multicultural Britishness was resisted in favour of a more exclusive monocultural Englishness, with this sense of national belonging having fairly explicit, though disguised, racialised connotations. In this and other accounts, the assertion of Englishness over Britishness acquired a defensive, almost plaintive register. Britishness held little appeal to this respondent because it had lost its defining qualities, the unspoken 'whiteness' that similar respondents professed not to be able to 'feel' was registered as an absence. As Gilroy argues, this sense of loss is quite profound and difficult for some white people, for whom it once meant something quite specific. The reluctance to come to terms with this loss of entitlement and relative privilege provokes a depressive anxiety, a melancholia that is far from benign.<sup>5</sup>

However, 'ethnicity' as a personal or social attribute had a perplexing, paradoxical quality for many minority ethnic prisoners too. It could be regarded more as an external formal description rather than a lived experience. As this black respondent puts it when invited to nominate a category from the HM Prison Service ethnic monitoring codes, 'I don't really see the point of that, I say it's where I'm from but I don't really talk about it as much as if it's something special.' (R48)

As Phillips argues this reluctance to engage with ethnicity arises from a wider contemporary reticence with articulating difference and identities.<sup>6</sup> This is the difficulty alluded to by the Prime Minister in his Berlin speech. It is intensified by the specifically troubling conditions that surround race and ethnicity in the

modern prison landscape, particularly the long shadow cast by the USA's experience. Prisons exist to shape and categorise 'the self' of the convicted young men, to effect change in them. This prison context exacerbates the ways in which talk of ethnicity conveys a sense of oneself as constructed by others, of being objectified and being seen as 'something' rather than 'someone', reducible to a category. Resisting the implicit invitation to occupy a pre-prepared template of 'who you are' was expressed, with some vigour and frustration, by this young white British national (R41):

*What do you mean? I'm not an ethnic group, I'm just [Dimitri], I don't class myself as any ethnic group. If someone want to ask me where do I come from, I come from Cyprus and I don't class myself as any ethnic group. I'm just [Dimitri] and I don't feel this little communities with ethnic groups and whatnot, I don't care, I'm not interested. I don't get involved in that.*

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In such accounts from the young men in prison there might be something of the 'wise passivity' associated with Keats' notion of 'negative capabilities'<sup>7</sup>. This refers to a kind of intuitive awareness of powerful affective forces in the face of which it is wise to be passive. Prisoner's sometimes wary responses to our enquiries about ethnicity and identity suggest varying degrees of recognition and 'fit' with something of which they have a lived knowledge, but also an awareness that it also 'lives' as something else, such as racism, coercive categorisation, or even anti-racism. Negative capability is a frame of mind to let things be in whatever state of uncertainty they might be in, resisting a certain kind of knowledge because of an uncertain feeling for its power. In this case it takes the form of an incapacity or unwillingness to impose a

5. Gilroy, P. (2004) *After Empire*.

6. Phillips, C. (2008) 'Negotiating Identities: Ethnicity and social relations in a young offenders' institution', *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 313-331.

7. Although the term is conventionally associated with 'the artist/poet' struggling to achieve creative empathy and is controversial for lack of analytical specificity or rigour it is, nonetheless helpful here.

schema of knowing on a phenomenon, such as 'their identity'. However, as the examples above make clear, this ambivalent suspension of engagement may also be strategic and opportunistic, reflecting a particular balance of power which makes some options more viable than others.

### Con-viviality — living together behind bars

Prisoners' narratives frequently acknowledged the reality of diversity, and indicated that racial and ethnic difference was something they lived with easily enough. It is certainly feasible that the dislocations that accompany a custodial sentence, the continual surveillance, and the enforced proximities all combine to promote a desire among many prisoners to simply make life more bearable for each other and themselves. Making prison life liveable meant 'learning to live together' in the semi-permanent, semi-public space of wings and workshops, even if this meant suspending or suppressing privately held prejudices. One white prisoner (R6) from a rural area remarked on such a process by referring to his, outsider, impression of a racially segregated and dangerous multicultural London that contrasted strongly with his, insider, prison experience of multicultural conviviality:

*In here it seems to be going quite well. But if you live round London or something, white lad walks down the black country, mate, Bang! You're dead. You know, if a black lad's walking down the white country in London, Bang! You're dead, you know. You get that out on the up but in here it's different, you know. Blacks are mixing with Whites, the Whites are mixing with Asians, Blacks, the lot.*

Alongside the evidence of mixing and conviviality, however, our eight months of fieldwork and observations suggested that friendship, and other informal groupings, were frequently clustered around shared ethnicity, but that they did not appear to be antagonistic or exclusive. Fieldwork notes pointed to

the relatively relaxed inter-ethnic interactions between prisoner groups during leisure activities, in evening association and during freeflow<sup>8</sup>. Thus while friendship groups and informal gathering indicated a strong ethnic component this was low-key and did not appear to reflect rigid or harshly conflicted boundaries between prisoners of different ethnicities, faiths and nationalities.

Prisoners remarked frequently that the opportunities for informal and elective mixing were seriously constrained by the regime timetable. The removal of choice in movement, location and co-presence was identified as central to the ensuing social relations. As one black prisoner (R3) put it 'when you live in one place together, yeah, you get along, you're forced to live together in one place... On the outside you have choice; if you don't want to get along with someone then you won't see them the next day if you don't want to.' Another white prisoner (R39) echoed these views about the particular conditions that apply to prison living: 'You have to [mix] in here though don't you because there's no choice about it is there?'

Living together under these constraints was thus a conviviality mediated by the exceptional conditions of incarceration, a highly managed and closely ordered sociality. This con-viviality was conditioned by the specific, structural, modalities of life in HMYOI Rochester; the enforced proximity of 'lightly engaged strangers', specifically its impermanence and the imminence of moving onward elsewhere in the prison system on reaching 21 years of age or out of it altogether on release.

### Suppressing racism

The impression of mixing with relative equanimity was reinforced by an unexpected but consistent feature of our fieldwork in which there were repeated references to the relative absence of racism between prisoners. An Asian Muslim prisoner (R51) summed it up like this: 'my present experience, I've never found anyone to be racist or just 'I'm a Christian so I'm staying

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8. Where prisoners are unescorted by officers between the wings and place of work, education, gym, etc. It is a time of informal congregation in the rigid schedule of the prison day, allowing prisoners from different wings to chat, organize trade, or engage in illegitimate activities.

with my Christians', or 'I'm a Muslim and I'm staying with my Muslims'. For me, and for everyone on this wing that I know, it's not like that at all.'

A notable finding of this study was the extent to which overt or explicit racism between prisoners was suppressed within HMYOI Rochester by prisoners themselves. While there appeared to be a general acceptance of the simple facts of both ethnic diversity and ethnic grouping, the opposite was the case in respect of overt racism. Open expressions of racism were widely regarded as totally unacceptable. Any prisoner acting in an explicitly racist manner risked considerably more than disapproval from other prisoners, both black and white. Many prisoners referred to the existence of an informal code in which racist behaviour would be met with violent retaliation. We were told of some specific examples where such action had been taken, usually, but not always, by black prisoners and there appeared to be widespread acceptance of the legitimacy of this kind of behaviour.

However, this informal suppression of overt racism did not mean that the prison was free of tension, fear or anxiety around the questions of race and ethnicity. For example, there was a tendency, in the privacy of interviews with myself, the white researcher, for white young men to invoke the familiar narratives of white hostility and racial superiority. Some, for example, expressed indignant irritation with the prevalence of the linguistic and cultural stylings referred to above. For some white prisoners, it appears that racism remained, if only in private, a potent and comforting resource. As a result, public expressions of racist sentiments or slang were used sparingly and rarely in the 'mixed company' that characterised much of prison life. Nevertheless, the fieldwork revealed the resilience of racist language and hostility with terms such as 'the niggers', 'black pricks', 'Pakis' surfacing in less guarded moments. Thus, although there appeared to be a remarkably durable, consensual and stable 'surface' equanimity amongst an ethnically diverse prisoner population, this was relatively thin, concealing the persistence of submerged racialised tensions.

### White struggles

One of the most common ways white prisoners vented these tensions and anxieties was through the

vocabulary of racialised victimization, arguing that they suffered as a consequence of both the prejudice of black inmates and the existence of double standards in the recognition of what constituted 'racism'. Some white prisoners struggled to understand how their own use of racial terminology had no equivalence with those used by black prisoners. The epitome of this confusion, and frequently cited exemplar, was the use by some black young men of the term 'nigger', which provoked white prisoners to accusations of differential treatment and double standards. These sentiments were expressed with barely suppressed rage and eloquent incomprehension by one white prisoner (R53) like this: 'it's just the way they talk, like, 'That little white ting, and that little white prick,' you know and 'white this and white that'... But if we're sitting there going, 'Yeah that little Paki cunt,' or 'Big black prick', then all of a sudden, we're, we're labelled as a racist.'

The anxiety, confusion and resentment expressed in the accounts of some white prisoners is testimony to the deeply contested terrain that race and ethnicity occupies in current times.<sup>9</sup> The white young men's comments in our fieldwork reveal a deep and troubling uncertainty about how to navigate everyday contacts with black prisoners. Clearly, some experienced this more acutely than others and their

struggle to accomplish these contacts sometimes led to a resigned withdrawal in which they opted to nurse their bewilderment and resentment behind closed doors, and perhaps closed minds. With the risks of being labelled racist having such serious consequences in the prison, and the apparent non-availability of any compensatory refuge in their now elusive 'whiteness', some white prisoners attempted to avoid contact with black people altogether. We found firm evidence of this retreat in some of our interviews. It was accompanied by the privatisation of racism because the conventional affirmations of racial superiority could only be safely shared in exclusive white company, which the crowded, enclosed and highly structured prison environment tended to frustrate. These retreatist prisoners described how an active effort of separation was required, and also the resentment that expending this effort fostered. As this white young man (R13) indicates this could sometimes be an extension of earlier habits of 'white flight',

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9. Phillips, C. (2008) 'Negotiating Identities: Ethnicity and social relations in a young offenders' institution', *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 313-331. Also see Ware, V. (2008) 'Towards a Sociology of Resentment: A debate on Class and Whiteness', *Sociological Research Online*, Vol. 13, No. 5 [<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/13/5/9.html>].

social withdrawal and avoidance: 'I don't really talk to Black people... It's like I say, I don't really interact with Black, Black community in here, or Asian community. It just, it's about the same on road<sup>10</sup>, I don't really mix with them on road either.'

For these white young men the once familiar and reassuring privileges of racial hierarchy are manifestly not what they were, or where they were. Things have changed. The comforting fantasies of racialised hierarchy and white Anglo-ascendancy<sup>11</sup> appear withered by the persistence of lived contradiction, inside the prison and out.

### Religious identities, practices and collectivities

There is a tendency in the resurgent interest in Islam and the forms of political identification that accompany it, to neglect questions concerning the central position of Christianity, the prevailing religious faith on which the foundations of the prison as a social institution were built at the end of the 19th century. Just as the assertion of Muslim identities in the wider world has thrown into sharp relief some of the unseen assumptions and prejudices of 'The West' their presence in the prison system has prompted new lines of enquiry into the dynamics of faith in prison regimes and prison life.<sup>12</sup>

During fieldwork prisoners and prison staff frequently commented on the Muslim presence in HMYOI Rochester. Despite the considerably smaller overall population of Muslim prisoners, attendance at Friday Muslim prayers attracted a similar quantity of prisoners as the main Christian service (40-70). In both congregations white prisoners were in a small minority, with the fewer white members of the Muslim congregation drawn mainly from the prison's foreign national population. On the basis of fieldwork observations of both, there was far less evidence in Friday prayers of the mischief, expectancy of disorder and subversive humour than characterized young men's

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attendance at Anglican services. Sunday's Christian services attracted the close scrutiny of prison officers who were present throughout to support the chaplaincy staff in maintaining order in the service. Although they rarely intervened they maintained a close and watchful presence. By contrast, officers tasked with similar duties for Friday prayers found themselves largely redundant and superfluous, withdrawing to the periphery of the prayer meeting as the imam and his

prison assistants conducted their worship among themselves. It appeared that the authority of the faith, and the imam, was largely sufficient in maintaining order.

Several Muslim prisoners identified the routines of devout observance as assuming greater consequence in prison. One (R50) said 'I try to pray five times a day when I can. Read the Qur'an more, I read the Qur'an now and again. I practice my faith more now than I did on road, innit, because well, mostly all, I've got is, got more time, so you know, it's something constructive innit.' Islamic observance provided Muslim prisoners with a countervailing timetable to that of the routines of the prison regime, prison time. As on the outside, they serve as a reminder of another order to which their life is, or can be, directed. The disciplines of Islam co-exist alongside the notionally secular disciplinary regime of the prison and for some young men they provide an alternative set of

resources to endure their sentence.

Ironically, the strict observance of the five daily prayers bear more than a passing resemblance to Michel Foucault's picture of the religiously structured regime of prayers designed to reform the idealized Christian 'penitent' in 17th century France.<sup>13</sup> In the 21st century, the appeal of Islam is its exteriority to these historical conditions. Islam can represent the possibility of social solidarity, and organised collective autonomy, that in every other respect, the prison regime tends to prohibit. Perhaps as a result, it is regarded with considerable ambivalence by other, non-Muslim,

10. 'On Road' is prisoner's evocative term for life outside prison.

11. Hage, G. (2000) *White Nation — Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, London: Routledge.

12. Beckford, A., Joly, D. and Khosrokhavar, F. (2005) *Muslims in Prison — Challenge and Change in Britain and France*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

13. Foucault, M. (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.283.

prisoners. The concerns of some prisoner's, like that of some officers, focused on the sense of a de-limited collective presence in prison, potentiality operating with hidden agendas and unknown boundaries. In the atomised and atomising world of the prison, evidence of collective sentiments and social solidarity can seem threatening.

The seductive myth of a unitary, cohesive Muslim Brotherhood was widespread among non-Muslim prisoners but did not correspond with the diverse accounts of our representative sample of Muslim respondents who indicated a wide variety of forms of identification and observance. Despite this diversity of Muslim opinion and experience, the idea that many weak or vulnerable prisoners convert to Islam to avail themselves of protection, or were coerced into the faith, had considerable currency. Comments from non-Muslim prisoners such as 'if I turn Muslim half the population of the jail can't touch me because I've got half of the jail which are Muslim on my side' (White, British, R30) were common. Some Muslim respondents were quick to express scepticism and disdain at Islam's notoriety and prominence. One remarked 'They just do it because they think it's cool and it's the new phase that's going round London. It's a fast fame religion.' (Mixed Race, Muslim R15).

The accounts provided to us by prisoners, supplemented by our observational fieldwork, suggest that religious practice and identity in HMYOI Rochester are animated by the emergence of an Islamic presence. White prisoners' conspicuous absence from the main Christian congregation in the prison possibly indicates the limited capacity of conventional Anglican practice to offer young white men the kind of political vocabularies, emotional resonance and social motivations that others find in Islam.

## State multiculturalisms?

If the Prime Minister's speech in Berlin is any indication of the coalition government's intentions, a new page in multicultural policy may be about to be turned. The subtitle at the start of this article alludes to the popularity of the film, *The King's Speech*, starring Colin Firth as the stuttering new King who must overcome his impediment to deliver a speech that will inspire a bleak and downtrodden country to resist the Nazi menace. Notwithstanding the quality of the performances, much of the film's domestic appeal relies on an evocation of the traditional touchstones of British identity and history, the triumphs and resilience of two world wars and the monarchy. Audiences of the film are reportedly reduced to tears and rising as one to applaud it at the end. In this respect, it is less a celebration of quintessential Britishness than a morbid symptom of the post-colonial melancholia that Gilroy sees diverting the vitality of contemporary multi-cultures into the anxious nostalgic 'pleasures of a morbid militaria.'<sup>14</sup> David Cameron's speech targets the 'doctrines' of state endorsements of multicultural vitality because they '*have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream*'. Although this is probably a more accurate description of the career opportunities David Cameron acquired at Eton, our study of young men's social relations in a Kent prison found little evidence of this. The complex textures of racism, anti-racism and multi-cultural conviviality may be ill-served if the coalition Government prefers the simplistic myths of British culture to the evidence of this study and those of the wider Identities and Social Action research programme.

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14. Gilroy, P. (2005) 'Melancholia or conviviality: The politics of belonging in Britain', *Soundings*, <http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/articles/gilroy.html> accessed 03/02/2011.