

# PETER CHILDS

## Hyphen-Nation

### Introduction

Arguably, there has not been too much millennium blues—in comparison with Europe at the end of the nineteenth century there has been little *fin de siècle* doom-mongering. Yet the present itself has been widely deemed to be coming to an end. With regard to theory, this is an age that has reached the “post,” is supposedly even at the end of history; and it would be easy to describe the present as in some respects “post-national” in its mixtures of peoples and cultures, its spreading into the global and fragmenting into what is now being called the “glocal.” The present appears to see itself as transitional, as existing primarily in terms of what it is “after” —too aware of what has gone before it, insufficiently confident of what lies before it.

In amongst this, there are many rumours circulating about the end of Britishness. Tom Nairn’s twenty-year-old *The Break-Up of Britain* is a key point of orientation in the debate, followed up by his recent *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of*

Scotland.<sup>1</sup> But, in the context of Europe and devolution, there are, of course, a range of other millennial books on the same subject, such as John Redwood’s anti-Europe *The Death of Britain* or Andrew Marr’s book-of-the-television-series, *The Day Britain Died*.<sup>2</sup>



article by an expatriate, Andrew Sullivan, in the *New York Times* supplement on 21 February 1999 was called “There will always be an England” (see left). It uses the headline “Farewell Britannia” on every other page. Sullivan writes: “As the century ends, it is possible...to talk about the abolition of Britain without the risk of hyperbole. The United Kingdom’s

cultural and social identity has been altered beyond any recent prediction. Its very geographical boundaries are being redrawn. Its basic Constitution is being gutted and reconceived. Its monarchy has been reinvented. Half its Parliament is under the axe. Its voting system is about to be altered. Its currency may well soon be abandoned. And its role in the world at large is in radical flux.”<sup>3</sup>

Sullivan anticipates a post-imperial attempt at unbraiding: “By quietly abolishing Britain, the islanders abolish the problem of Britain. For there is no problematic “Great” hovering in front of Scotland, England or Wales. These older deeper entities come from a time before the loss of empire, before even the idea of empire. Britain...is a relatively

recent construct, cobbled together in the seventeenth century in the Act of Union with Scotland.”<sup>4</sup> The historian who has written most influentially about this cobbling together of a nation, Linda Colley, seems to predict this dismantling when she writes in *Britons* that “we can plausibly regard Great Britain as an invented nation superimposed, if only for a while, onto much older alignments and loyalties.”<sup>5</sup> Colley’s subtitle “Forging the nation 1707-1837” emphasises this point: Britain was forged together but was always also a forgery.

Additionally there are, of course, voices from Scotland and Wales that also look forward to the end of Britishness as the route to a fuller and better national future free from England. From Wales, R. S. Thomas writes that “Britishness is a mask. Beneath it there is only one nation, England.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, it is now twenty years since Gwynfor Evans, the former leader of Plaid Cymru published his book *The End of Britishness* in 1981, arguing that “Britishness is Englishness.” From Scotland, Robert Crawford writes that “It is hard to think today of what could be confidently called ‘British’ culture rather than English or Scottish culture.... Scottish culture seems to have moved into a post-British phase.”<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, as a last point of orientation, there are those more positive voices that consider culture, and identity itself, as pluralistic and multi-layered. These voices try to articulate a future for Britain while recognising the pressures that are currently questioning the limits of terms such as “Britishness.” Perhaps most prominently in these quarters, the “unsettling” of Britain has been detailed by The Parekh Report.<sup>8</sup> The report, commissioned by the Runnymede Trust, sees seven reasons why the idea of Britain is at a turning-point: globalisation, the country’s decline as a world power, its role in Europe,

devolution, the end of empire, the spread of social pluralism, and postwar migration. The report's conclusion is that Britain ought to be recognised as the "Community of communities" it has now come to be, and, for that matter, always was. Changes in the understanding of British culture and in the transmission of appropriate national stories, signs and symbols, can follow through from this appreciation of present and past pluralism.

The current government's latest initiative over questions of national identity has been for David Blunkett to announce a new Citizenship Course to start in secondary schools next year.<sup>9</sup> In terms of contemporary examples that might be considered on such a course, I want to look at some of the current images and perceptions of Britain.

### **Contemporary Britishness**

*The Observer's* recent review of the country, *Britain Uncovered*, asked the question, "What makes you most proud when you think of Britain?" In response to this question, 45% of people couldn't name a single thing; 11% said "history"; 11% said the "Royal family;" 8% said "the countryside;" 8% said "the people;" 7% said "freedom" or "free speech;" the responses of the remaining 10% were unreported.<sup>10</sup>

These are also the main topics of discussion of Britishness in the media. None is faring particularly well at the moment [April 2001], especially the royalty after "Sophiegate" and the countryside now that it is closed in response to foot-and-mouth. Also, for contemporary Britain, the fact that history heads the list is potentially worrying—and the overall focus arguably concentrates on the past. Oddly, art and culture do not feature in the list by name at all such that one might conclude that if,

according to one understanding of the concept, a nation is chiefly defined by its cultures, this does not seem to be widely appreciated in Britain. Is this for the same reason that language is not on the list? While there are many other languages in Britain, English is now perceived as a global American language of commerce and, in its many varieties, a local but not a national language. And arguably culture in Britain is primarily considered at these global and “glocal” levels too.

One prime example of global culture is perhaps the most successful Briton at the moment: Harry Potter. This Dickensian orphan *and* apprentice wizard is an English boarding-schoolboy immaculately conceived by a single mother from Edinburgh. Yet, in what ways *is* Harry Potter British? One review in 1999 described the genealogy of the books’ narrative ancestors as “the Once and Future King crossed with the Famous Five, with a bit of Tom Brown’s Schooldays thrown in.”<sup>11</sup> Another last year described the books as “Billy Bunter on broomsticks ... dispiritingly nostalgic for a bygone Britain which only ever existed as Greyfriars and St. Trinians.”<sup>12</sup> Referring to the books’ setting in an essentially timeless Britain, Suzanne Moore in the *Guardian* argued that US Americans—who had to create a separate children’s bestsellers list to cope with J. K. Rowling’s monopoly of the top fiction spots—love the Harry Potter books because they depict “Ye olde fairy-tale England, with real Tudor beams and a queen who rides around in a horse-drawn coach: that is not just how the rest of the world still sees us, it is how Potterites would have us see ourselves.”<sup>13</sup>

The demand for contemporary relevance and national representativeness is not really one that can be made of every children’s book—*The Lord of the Rings* does not usually get criticised for having nothing to say about the Empire Windrush and postwar

rationing. So, it would seem churlish to criticise J. K. Rowling alone because her books do not faithfully depict Britain at the millennium. However, what is of interest and open to inquiry is, first, the reasons for the popularity of the books, and, second, the methods of marketing them. To what extent are the images of national identity in the hands of Potterites, as Suzanne Moore calls them? Well, in the light of a new Government Citizenship Course, one of the facts that underlines the way the novels are perceived as representing Britishness is that they have replaced *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* at the top of the list of Labour MPs' favourite novels.<sup>14</sup> One of the selling-points in this context has been the perception that Harry is "classless." Perhaps, but as the most successful virtual Briton, Harry's world lacks a postcolonial dimension even though it has become so popular in a postcolonial world.

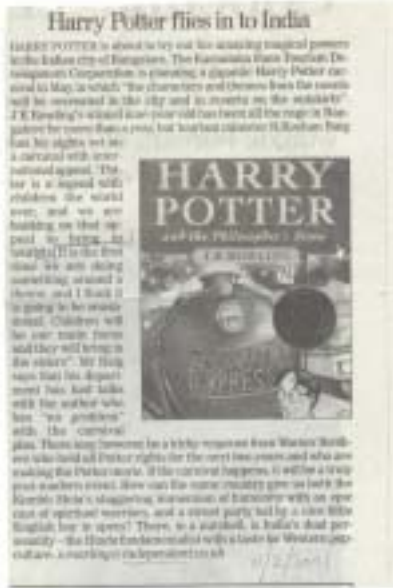
My context for concern about this stems from an essay on the teaching of British Studies by David Punter, in which he says,

We have to deal here with residues of British imperialism, both within ourselves and within any national group.... Nothing is innocent: there are international contexts in which British culture is a more apparently desired object than the US equivalent.... [A] wish for Shakespeare and the "British heritage" may or may not sell many British manufacturing products; it certainly will not affect the sales of Coca-Cola. But, what is crucial here ... is to grasp the salient fact that we are all post-colonials now.... Post-colonialism is not a constellation to be held only within the so-called Third World; it is a global movement...of the collective psyche...and everything we say and do takes its place within the decolonizing context.<sup>15</sup>

While I would support what I take to be Punter's intentions here, there are a couple of glosses I would like



to add. First, is to point out that everything is up for sale, and so while one would think that British Heritage cannot sell Coke, in a globalised culture, of course, it can (see right). Also, while we are all postcolonials now, we are not all postcolonial in the same way. Especially when an adolescent English wizard at a secret boarding school can be “a legend...the world over:” can be feted, for example, in Bangalore (see below). Perhaps what British Heritage can sell best is an understanding of part of Britain’s past as its present, an idea lengthily treated in Julian Barnes’s not-so-futuristic novel *England, England* (1998), where the Isle of Wight becomes a national theme park for tourists from



all over the world.

Ignoring the fact that the Harry Potter books, in their alternative and more expensive stylish black dustjackets, can be safely read by the over-twelves, I’d like now to move to the adult end of cultural production and consumption, and consider two books set in London and published at the millennium.

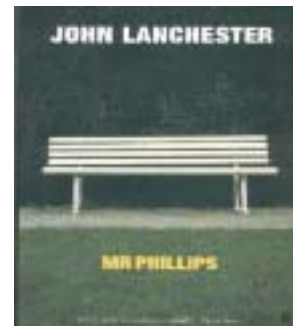
The first book is John Lanchester’s *Mr*

*Phillips*. It is an unusual novel—because so utterly

banal and entertaining at the same time—which has drawn comparisons even with *Ulysses*. This is in no way because of its style or complexity, but because it charts a day in the life of a pointedly ordinary man who wanders around the capital city in a way that seems reminiscent of Bloom in Dublin. Mr Phillips is a newly unemployed fifty-year-old accountant who feels redundant in almost every sense. The entire book, with its world of Neighbourhood Watch Associations, commuter belts, and Pre-Raphaelite paintings, has

a sense of suburban *faux* gentility attaching to it. Mr Phillips himself is the reserved, undemonstrative, insular, repressed and sex-obsessed white English archetype. The book cover shows an improbably clean, white, and unoccupied bench in a green and pleasant spot.

*Mr Phillips* is a book that marginalises issues of community and ethnicity to unexplored sidelines, implying them almost exclusively through their conspicuous absence. The book glosses Mr Phillips with the sheen of Ulysses, but his odyssey is one which contains no informal intimacy, no narrative high points, and nothing but quiet amusement as its protagonist walks through London's emblematic spaces of Britishness. These places, ranging from Battersea Park to the Tate Gallery via the sex-cinemas of Soho, are actually quite unfamiliar to the novel's protagonist; and when Mr Phillips travels on the bus through what he calls the "glamorous parts of London", he feels an outsider again. Pointing up Mr Phillips's sense of unbelonging, Lanchester's choice of epigraph is a quotation from the French philosopher Simone Weil's book entitled *The Need for Roots* (*L'Enracinement*, 1949): "A man left alone in the universe would have no rights whatsoever, but he would have obligations."



With a deracinated man at its centre, Lanchester's novel is a highly conscious exercise in nostalgia, filtering received images of behaviour through the mind of a man who feels he has lived his life, if not his national identity, vicariously, and now takes a day to explore the capital, where he feels he is an outsider. Mr Phillips is an individual who is in almost every sense in the middle of life but who Lanchester appears to have



made step out of the Britain of 1945, the year Mr Phillips was in fact born. Mr Phillips's embodiment of traditional, formal Anglicised Britishness is expressed in the narrator's refusal to address him by his fore name from first page to last. Because even Mr Phillips, whose ironic first name is Victor, thinks of himself as "Mr Phillips."

Edward Said has tried to argue in *Culture and Imperialism* that the imposition of national identity is implicit in the domestic novel in its boundaries, exclusions, and silences—the imperial interstices of society that contrapuntal reading can reveal by turning the narrative inside out, temporarily centralising its supposed margins.<sup>16</sup> This is what Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* seems to have done with the version of London in *Mr Phillips*. *White Teeth*, by contrast to the satirical consideration of the national stereotype in *Mr Phillips*, presents a series of metaphors for the heterogeneity of Britain since the war. Smith's title of course plays with the idea that everyone is the same under the skin, but the novel charts the variety of molars, canines, incisors, root canals, false teeth, dental work, and damage that constitute the history behind different smiles. The commonsensical idea of the uniformity of teeth, which can also be divided into a host of shades from pearly to black, is as much a fiction in the novel as the template of "Britishness" exposed with tender affection in *Mr Phillips*.

The prime exemplars of Mr Phillips's kind of Englishness in *White Teeth* are the Chalfens. The Chalfens are taken to be "more English than the English" because of their liberal middle-class values, and also their empiricism, which is Antony Easthope's core characteristic of Englishness.<sup>17</sup> However, they are third-generation Poles, originally Chalfenovskys: not more English than the English, but as English as anyone else. Smith rings this theme of hybridity and cross-fertilization through numerous extended

metaphors, drawn from horticulture, eugenics, the weather, and even the paradoxes of Zeno, whose philosophical arguments against material plurality can be paradoxically taken as examples of xenophobia (*Xeno(s)* meaning stranger in Greek).

The person in the novel who considers herself to be “a stranger in a strange land” is Irie Jones, whose mother is “from Lambeth (via Jamaica)” and whose father is a white war veteran from Brighton. In the novel’s metaphor, Irie sees no reflection of herself in the “mirror of Englishness.” She turns to her grandmother and Jamaica for a sense of her “roots” but concludes that the idea of belonging is itself a “lie.” The other central family of the book, the Iqbals, have come to England from Bangladesh. Their second-generation children spend their teenage years apart, the one in London, the other in Chittagong. Each finds his identity is located elsewhere: Millat, living in London, wishes to be an American gangsta-rapper before he becomes in the words of his father a “fully paid-up green bow-tie wearing fundamentalist terrorist,” while Magid, in Bangladesh, becomes “a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer.” Their mother, Alsana, expresses the overall view of the novel: “You go back and back and back and it’s still easier to find the right Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy-tale.”

Like the Harry Potter books, *White Teeth* itself could be considered a fairy-tale in that its view of race-relations, though far from perfect, seems more closely to resemble the Parekh Report’s hopes for Britain’s future than observations about its past. The book works politically far more at the level of representation than any kind of confrontation. But it is again harsh to expect *White Teeth* to do more than it has. The novel disseminates a multicultural view of London, where currently over forty per cent of

children are born to at least one black parent,<sup>18</sup> to stand alongside if not contradict Lanchester's *Mr Phillips*. And *White Teeth* as another Mr Phillips, Caryl, concluded in his review of the novel, ably dramatises the fact that: "The 'mongrel' nation that is Britain is still struggling to find a way to stare into the mirror and accept the ebb and flow of history that has produced this fortuitously diverse condition."<sup>19</sup>

Smith's horti-multi-cultural view of Britain is best summarised in this passage:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best—less trouble). Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his lover's bed after a midnight walk), despite all this, it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. There are still young white men who are *angry* about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist.<sup>20</sup>

## Englishness

It is not just these angry young men who have a problem. There has been a recent rush to defend Englishness from the present and recuperate it from the past. Of more than a dozen books published since 1999, I will only mention Roger Scruton's *England: An Elegy*, Simon Heffer's *Nor Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England*, and Jeremy Paxman's *The English: A Portrait of a People*. These and similar books have been

prominent in the debate over “the break-up of Britain” and their ideas of a singular, static national identity commonly draw upon a residual and mythical idea of a rural Englishness in opposition to the evidence of contemporary emergent cultures within Britain.<sup>21</sup> Yet, for those writers who want to find the English, it can be pointed out they will find them just as Daniel Defoe found them exactly 300 years ago. Even though he was the author of the first colonial English novel, which was anyway about the son of a migrant from Bremen, Defoe recognised only a few years before the 1707 Act of Union, that the English people, like those in other nations, are mongrels. Defoe’s ironic but denigratory *The True-Born Englishman* (1701) considers the heterogeneous English, after William of Orange’s accession, to be composed of the “auxiliaries” and “dregs” of Europe. Like Alsana Iqbal, Defoe notes that there is no true-born English person.

The value of Britishness, as opposed to Englishness, is precisely in the recognition of this mongrelization, a characteristic that the rhetoric of the nation usually seeks to deny. There are two anecdotes about national identity that could be cited here. The first is an article called “Are my roots showing?” from *The Observer*.<sup>22</sup> In it, Gary Younge, a Stevenage-born Briton with Barbadian parents, tells how he went to Barbados for his mother’s funeral, her not uncommon dying wish having been not to be buried in “cold Britain.” However, on the day of the burial, Younge was told by the pastor that he couldn’t attend the funeral. This was because he wouldn’t be allowed into the church with his hair in braids. Younge concludes: “while plaits in Britain were considered cool and an affirmation of my “blackness,” in Barbados they were tantamount to wearing a Mohican. They got me turned away from nightclubs and would provoke criticism from elders” because “only women wore plaits.” Younge’s reflection on his experience is

helpful. He says, “In my petulance, I condemned them for being small-minded, macho, conservative and insular. But as time went on, I realised that while there was a truth to all of that, it was a truth equally applicable to Britain—only I had learnt to navigate Britain’s prejudices and was reluctant to start again.”

Barbados, for Younge, represents the road not taken, the country not lived in. Similarly, Stuart Hall, one of the contributors to the Parekh Report, says of himself, “every identity that feels so solid is the result of excluding things you could have been. I go back to Jamaica and adore it, but I couldn’t be a Jamaican. I ache for a parallel life I could have lived. I also couldn’t disappear into Englishness. I understand Britain; but I’m only British in a hyphenated way.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Hyphen-Nation**

Yet, the British are *all* British in a hyphenated way. Britain has always not only *been*, like all nations, but also *represented*, a hybrid identity, an amalgamation. Some sections of the English still need to recognise this, many more need to appreciate it. Referring again to Sullivan’s article, with which I started, I think there are useful points to be made about the impossibility of returning to an identity supposedly free from the history of empire. The attempt to resurrect a pre-colonial identity is misguided, as Fanon and other postcolonial thinkers have shown. Its only purpose can be to mobilise a people to fight against oppression. But who are “the English” oppressed by? Instead “the English” could learn a lesson from themselves—from themselves as British: which is to say that Britishness is, and always was, braided.

In *Britons*, Linda Colley has suggested that for the early Victorians Britishness symbolised “an affective form of co-identity to which the various peoples of the Empire could lay claim in order to overlook their perceived national and racial differences.”<sup>24</sup>



Colley illustrates this view by using Sir David Wilkie’s *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo* (1822), a canvas that depicts Welsh, Scots, English and Irish troops, and a black bandsman, gathering to celebrate the British victory over the French (see left). Discussing the same

painting, Simon Gikandi, in his excellent *Maps of Englishness*, says that the painting shows that “if a modern British nation cannot be imagined outside the realm of empire, then imperialism becomes the *raison d’être* of Britishness itself.”<sup>25</sup>

Britishness has always been a hybridised and hyphenated identity. To insist, as the New Right has, that an individual show an allegiance to a narrow idea of Britain above or instead of another identity, national, regional, religious, or ethnic, is against the very idea of Britishness. The alternative to a recognition of hyphen-nation is a recourse to, among other things, discourses of Englishness that are once again surfacing in the press and which may seek to align England with a white Anglo-Saxon tribe. Whatever other allegiances people in the British archipelago feel, they may want to remain British in a hyphenated way; which is all anyone ever was anyway. With such a recognition it might be possible to celebrate the range of contemporary cultural achievement in Britain,

just as the English football team's success under Swedish management has resulted in the tabloids' invention of "Svengland." This may have more importance than at first appears, given that football violence, the most virulent focus of nationalism and racism, came top in the *Observer's* "Britain Uncovered" poll, when people were asked the question "What makes you most embarrassed when you think of Britain?"

Finally, Britishness is not different in being a hyphenated national identity but it is explicitly amenable to the recognition that it is hybridised, pluralistic, and diverse. As such, it stands not as a warning against but as a warning for all contemporary discussions about national reconfiguration. The best conclusion I can find about national identity as it is too often discussed in the British press at the moment comes from Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "'England,' said Christophine, who was watching me. 'You think there is such a place?' .... 'You do not believe that there is a country called England?' She blinked and answered quickly, 'I don't say I don't believe, I say I don't know, I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it.'"<sup>26</sup>

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London: Verso, 1977); *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London: Granta, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> John Redwood, *The Death of Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1999); Andrew Marr, *The Day Britain Died* (London: Pimlico, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Sullivan, *New York Times*, 21 February 1999, 40.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>6</sup> R. S. Thomas, quoted by Katie Gramich in Susan Bassnett, ed., *Studying British Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1997), 97.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-5.

- 
- <sup>8</sup> Lord Parekh *et al.*, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (London: The Runnymede Trust, 2000).
- <sup>9</sup> *The Guardian*, 15 October 2000.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Observer*, 18 March 2001.
- <sup>11</sup> Claire Armitstead, *The Guardian*, 8 July 1999, <http://books.guardian.co.uk>
- <sup>12</sup> Anthony Holden, *The Observer*, 25 June 2000, <http://books.guardian.co.uk>
- <sup>13</sup> Suzanne Moore, quoted by Holden, *ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Fiachra Gibbons, *The Guardian*, 9 March 2000.
- <sup>15</sup> David Punter, "Fictional Maps of Britain," in Susan Bassnett, ed., *Studying British Cultures*, 69.
- <sup>16</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993).
- <sup>17</sup> Anthony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- <sup>18</sup> *The Guardian*, 11 December 2000.
- <sup>19</sup> Caryl Phillips, *The Observer*, 9 January 2000, <http://books.guardian.co.uk>
- <sup>20</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), 326-7.
- <sup>21</sup> On the notion of residual, dominant, and emergent cultures see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-8.
- <sup>22</sup> Gary Younge, *The Observer*, 12 September 1999.
- <sup>23</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Guardian*, 8 July 2000.
- <sup>24</sup> Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1999) 29, on Linda Colley, *Britons*, 364-68.
- <sup>25</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 31.
- <sup>26</sup> Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 1996), 92.