"Not Quite Ethiopian, But Not At All English": Ethnography, Hybridity, and Diaspora in Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*

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In a 2005 review of Camilla's Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* for *NOW* magazine, Susan G. Cole praises Gibb's bravery in choosing the topic of the Ethiopian diaspora for her third novel. "What distinguishes Gibb here," Cole writes, "is her willingness to face the outrage that's bound to dog a book about a culture and religion that are not her own" (par. 6). The novel tells the story of Lilly, a white woman of British descent who is raised Muslim and comes to identify herself as Ethiopian, first in the walled city of Harar and later as part of the Harari diaspora in Thatcher-era London. As a white Anglo-Canadian of British heritage whose scholarly work as a social anthropologist focuses on Harari culture, Gibb is open to accusations of cultural appropriation, what Graham Huggan calls "the fetishisation of cultural otherness that allows metropolitan readers to exercise fantasies of unrestricted movement and free will" and which "turns the literatures/cultures of the 'non-Western' world into saleable exotic objects" (10). Reviews of the novel emphasize themes of authenticity and ethnic difference, describing the novel as a glimpse "into the intimate lives of Muslim women and Ethiopian clan and national politics" (Cheuse par. 6) that "giv[es] readers an inside look at life … in a different culture than most of us experience" (Nesbitt 95). Built into Gibb's text, however, is a resis-

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tance to the reduction of otherness to a commodity through a theorization of the problems of ethnography and the genre's handling of identity and culture. Instead of simply presuming the authority to represent otherness, the novel foregrounds Lilly as a hybrid subject whose complex and liminal subject position—in terms of race, nationality, and religion—questions static and consumable constructs of identity. Similarly, the novel's complex handling of the relation between diasporic space and the homeland problematizes the binary between the home site and the field site. By refusing to construct the homeland, Harar, as a space of cultural authenticity and instead using the structure of the novel to posit a dynamic relationship between Harar and London, Gibb evades the fetishization of the field site. The novel's thematization of hybridity and diaspora does not simply revisit familiar postcolonial tropes but, rather, approaches them through the framework of Gibb's anthropological background to address directly the problematic of representing otherness.

From Translation to Commodification: Representing the Other

Alongside Gibb's background as a social anthropologist, it is crucial to consider her understanding of the disjunctions and similarities between anthropology and fiction. Anthropology has gained a reputation among many contemporary cultural theorists for promoting static, essentialized categories of ethnicity and cultural identity that reify difference, based on "ideas about ethnicity that focus on aggregates of people who share common static classifiable and unchanging characteristics and who are distinct from each other" (Khan 1). In contrast, theorists like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak "have argued for understanding and expressions of ethnicity that move away from notions of static, authentic, and original culture and identity" (1). Anthropology, however, has long been troubled by, and intent on troubling, notions of culture. Clifford Geertz describes the struggles to define the word culture within the discipline—and it is, he emphasizes, a *mot* and not a *chose* (12). He concludes that culture in the modern world must be understood "as a conglomerate of differences, deep, radical, and resistant to summary" (223–24). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also contrast "classical anthropology and its paradigmatic figure of otherness, the primitive" and "modern anthropology and its paradigmatic figure of the peasant" with a "global anthropology" capable of "abandon[ing] the traditional structure of otherness altogether and discover[ing] instead a concept of cultural difference based on a notion of singularity … without any [Eurocentric] foundation in the other" (125–26).

For Hardt and Negri, as for Geertz, anthropology may be the discipline that has produced static notions of culture and identity, but it is also the discipline capable of destabilizing these notions, with an ever-greater interest in "divergence and multiplicity" and "the noncoincidence of kinds and categories" (Geertz 246).

Sweetness in the Belly is based on the anthropological fieldwork Gibb performed in Harar, a predominantly Muslim city in Ethiopia, in the 1990s, as well as subsequent research with Ethiopian refugees and immigrants in Toronto. The story, however, deals not with contemporary Ethiopian immigration but with the 1974 revolution that ended the reign of Emperor Haile Sellasie and the consequent creation of the first widespread Ethiopian diaspora (Gibb, "Telling Tales" 40). In her research, Gibb has pointed out that the Ethiopian diaspora is not typical of postcolonial diasporas because Ethiopia was never colonized, giving refugees a different relationship to imperial powers like Britain. The Harari diaspora is also unique, both because Harar is one of the few Muslim areas of the largely Christian Ethiopia and because Harari identity is intertwined with the highly defined physical space of the walled city. As a result, displaced Hararis are particularly challenged to negotiate a new conception of a "collective identity that is so literally rooted in the notion of 'belonging' to a specific place" (Gibb, "Manufactured" 110). Gibb argues that Hararis in diaspora draw upon shared cultural-religious traditions to reconstruct a lost sense of embodied identity. *Sweetness in the Belly* explores and complicates this negotiation through debates over the meaning of home, community, and Harari identity articulated by various characters. Home is at times the left-behind city of Harar, kept alive through ritual and tradition (28); at other times it is the safety of the housing estate that provides protection "for men like Aziz whose absences haunt the halls, and the women who love them" (266). In Harar, home is defined by emotional connections rather than ethnicity or genealogy. Lilly notes silently to her lover Aziz that Morocco is no longer her home: "Not since the Great Abdal died. Not since I started teaching the children. Not since knowing you" (226). Home is the site of family and community, the place where you "put down roots" (10). It is revealed as both metaphorical and actual, a physical space of safety and comfort and an emotional space of belonging created through shared history.

Gibb's 2006 essay, "Telling Tales Out of School," reveals the degree to which varying conceptions of anthropology and its relation to culture and identity trouble Gibb's understanding of herself as a writer and of the relation between her fiction and ethnography. She argues that academic

ethnographies as a genre demand the elision of the specificity of the writing subject, depriving ethnography of the richness of an experience characterized by interconnection and community (43–44). Gibb shares with Geertz an emphasis on the vitality of fieldwork, defined "much less … by the more formal aspects of [her] research than by [her] relationships with people in the field" (43). Ethnography's insistence on erasing the presence of the anthropologist in order to construct an illusion of objectivity, for Gibb, constitutes an erasure of the truth garnered from experience. "What," she asks, "happens to your sense of what it feels like to be in a place, to your relationships to people in the field, people you care about? To the intimate experience of having been there? The sensory memory of it. What do you do with all that?" (43). Geertz similarly locates the "specialness of 'what anthropologists do'" in "their holistic, humanistic, mostly qualitative, strongly artisanal approach to social research" (93). The experience of fieldwork, rooted in the highly individual experience of a place and a community, gives anthropology its value.

These questions—of the difference between ethnography and fiction, and the importance of fieldwork—are central to ongoing debates within the discipline of anthropology. While James Clifford and Geertz have drawn attention to the nature of ethnographic writing as a form of representation (Karayan 134), at the institutional level anthropology continues to value academic modes of writing that are contrasted with the literary (Behar 153). Kirin Narayan argues that, in order for border-crossing work between ethnography and fiction to be meaningful, the borders that define both as genres and methods must first be articulated (143); in an attempt to do so, she defines ethnography as "a practice of writing about people that is explicitly rooted in fieldwork" (135). Ruth Behar, however, points out that some of the most interesting border-crossing work has pushed the boundaries of genre specifically because of the dissolution of any structural binary between the home site and the field site: "The very meaning of home gets stretched by ethnographers whose 'field sites,' through the process of everyday living, become home locations" (150). Contemporary transnational movements have further challenged this division between home site and field site. It is no longer only the anthropologist who can move between the two spaces. The former object of study becoming a mobile subject undermines static constructions of the field and challenges the familiar roles of anthropologist and native informant (Rasmussen 9–10). Through the figure of Lilly, an outsider who makes her home in the "foreign" space and thus whose conceptions of home and cultural identity

are radically destabilized, Gibb questions the relation between fieldwork and writing and the viability of traditional academic ethnography.

Gibb formulates fiction and ethnography as two different textual languages into which the experience of fieldwork can be translated (46). Yet for all her careful differentiation between fiction and anthropology, she concludes her essay by bringing the two back together again, arguing that they share the clarity of an outsider's perspective as well as an ethical stance based in empathy through the experience of difference: "Being able to engage with the experience of another is critical not only to knowing something about the other (being able to empathize, make connections, build relationships) but to knowing yourself" (52). Geertz similarly formulates a connection between anthropology and literature, ethics and empathy. Writers and anthropologists, alike in their professional obsession "with worlds elsewhere and with making them comprehensible" (83), improve "our capacity to feel our way into alien sensibilities, modes of thought … we do not possess" (76). An ethics of diversity is particularly central in an increasingly globalized world, wherein "seriously disparate approaches to life are becoming scrambled together in ill-defined expanses, social spaces whose edges are unfixed, irregular, and difficult to locate" (85). Geertz, however, does not limit difference to culture, ethnicity, or religion. "Foreignness," he argues, "does not start at the water's edge but at the skin's" (76), and a valuation of heterogeneity over homogeneity is central to all ethics insofar as they entail contact with an other. The task of the writer and the anthropologist find common ground, then, in helping us discover "at what sort of angle … we stand to the world" (75). By making the focus of her novel different forms of cultural hybridity that destabilize the binary of self and other, Gibb blurs the boundaries between ethnography and fiction and uses literature as a position from which to theorize identity and culture.

The figure of Lilly can in fact be read as an avatar of the anthropologist. Lilly is frequently asked by her white British coworkers to adopt the role of cultural translator:

> I've been called upon to assuage the fears of infibulated women in labour, to explain to a doctor that the scars on someone's back are not the result of abuse but the well-intended evidence of leeching or cupping, to help bedridden folk perform ablutions before prayer, even to read from the Qu'ran while someone slips away. (259)

By helping other refugees and immigrants adapt to British culture and translating the cultural specificities of Islam, Lilly, like the anthropologist, "serve[s] as cultural broker or 'translator' between these different worlds" (Rasmussen 9). Cultural translation is a politically loaded term. Huggan associates it with commodification, suggesting that "postcolonial writers [are] persuaded to represent their respective cultures, and to translate those cultures for an unfamiliar metropolitan readership" (26). Gibb occupies not the position of the native informant but the arguably even more problematic position of the white anthropologist functioning as a cultural translator for a white audience. However, by incorporating debates over representation and cultural translation into the text, Gibb demonstrates her consciousness of the difficult terrain she is navigating. Moreover, cultural translation is not necessarily an exclusive device of the "metropolitan readership," as Huggan seems to argue. In fact, Homi Bhabha explicitly associates cultural translation with hybridity, noting that "it is the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (56). Cultural translation is "always confronted by its double, the untranslatable—alien and foreign" (235). The attempt to translate cultures, then, does not necessarily reduce otherness to a commodity but can instead confront the reader with the incommensurability of cultural difference. While exoticism "renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (Huggan 13), other modes of cultural translation can be responsive to the "thicket of characterizations, distinctions, particularities, and labelings that makes up the who-is-what world of collective identities" (Geertz 225).

These questions of cultural appropriation and commodification of otherness are central to a reading of *Sweetness in the Belly*, which is certainly open to the accusations articulated by Huggan. Gibb is following "the postcolonial imperative to demystify 'foreign' cultures and, ultimately, to show the constructed nature of discourses about culture itself" but in so doing risks turning the "cultures of the 'non-Western' world into saleable exotic objects" (Huggan 19, 10). "Diversity," Smaro Kamboureli has argued, "is the ore to be mined for literary works that soothe the public's anxieties about multiculturalism. In this context, the figure of 80,000 copies functions as the benchmark of the cultural value of ethnicity" (88). The huge popularity of the novel, which made the *Globe and Mail* bestseller list and was short-listed for the Giller Prize in Canada, seems to confirm Huggan's and Kamboureli's arguments about the fetishization of ethnic literature.

Gibb, however, strategically resists the commodification of difference by emphasizing the problematics of representation and the difficulties of cultural translation. She draws the reader's attention to her own occupation as a social anthropologist through references to Richard Burton's Orientalist anthropology. When Robin Gupta, the Indian doctor who woos Lilly throughout the novel, tells Lilly he is reading Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa*, she informs him that "Hararis find Burton's portrayal of them very insulting": "'Mmm, it's fantastically romantic and condescending,' he agrees. 'It reminds me of much of the colonial literature about India'" (249). Lilly is reminded that Orientalized representations are not limited to her own culture, and the reader is reminded that there are different modes of representation available to both the anthropologist and the author. In Harar, Lilly encounters hostility from the religious leader Sheikh Jami because of her connection to Muhammed Bruce Mahmoud, Lilly's godfather and a professional tourist whose consumerist and fetishistic attitude toward Harar is signified by his possession of a copy of this book. Sheikh Jami thus associates Lilly with this tradition of Eurocentric anthropological discourse that declares Hararis to be "'religious fanatics,' 'bigoted,' 'barbarous,' 'course and debauched,' 'disfigured by disease,' with ugly voices: 'the men's loud and rude,' 'the women's harsh and screaming'" (213). There is a clear element of self-referentiality in Gibb's association of the white outsider with Orientalist anthropology, even as she works to subvert this image of anthropology.

Gibb does not unproblematically produce a consumable version of Harari culture for the sake of a white readership; instead she uses fiction as a medium through which to theorize cultural otherness and problems of representation. While "colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 101), Gibb attempts to move beyond the outdated framework of self and other, identity and difference. Hardt and Negri oppose this framework to a communally produced "common" that allows "the multitude … to communicate and act together" (xv). Through emphasizing alterity and the construction of community rather than the knowability of exoticized otherness, Gibb resists the commodification and fetishization of the cultures with which her text engages. Instead, *Sweetness in the Belly* theorizes the ethics of cultural translation through the hybrid and liminal figure of Lilly, who as a white British Harari Muslim troubles universalizing narratives of identity, recalling Lila Abu-Lughod's call for "ethnographies of the particular" (quoted in Narayan 140).

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Narrating the Hybrid Subject

Gibb's fiction proceeds from an understanding of anthropology, not as constructing falsely cohesive views of culture but as producing "ways of thinking that are responsive to particularities, to individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts, and singularities" (Geertz 224). From this notion of culture *Sweetness in the Belly* derives its complexity and its focus on alterity and hybridity. The first description of Lilly emphasizes her hybrid, almost paradoxical identity:

> My white face and white uniform give me the appearance of authority in this new world, though my experiences, as my neighbours quickly come to discover, are rooted in the old. I'm a white Muslim woman raised in Africa, now employed by the National Health Service. I exist somewhere between what they know and what they fear, somewhere between the past and future, which is not quite the present. I can translate the forms for them before kneeling down and putting my forehead to the same ground. (9)

Lilly occupies a liminal position between the dominant culture and the marginalized one, a liminality that is mirrored by the novel's constant movement between her past in Harar and her present in London. While her interstitiality clearly links her with theories of the hybrid, the question remains how hybridity is constructed in the novel. Hybridity, as Homi Bhabha defines it, is characterized by the rejection of essentialized cultures and identities. Rather, the "interstitial passage *between* fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (5, emphasis added). For Bhabha, culture is a site of negotiation and translation that is nonetheless constantly faced with untranslatability and incommensurability (235, 254–55). Robert Young describes Bhabha's construction of hybridity as "raceless chaos," which "produces no stable new form but rather … a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms"; he opposes this to "[h]ybridization as creolization," which "involves fusion, the creation of a new form, which can then be set against the old form, of which it is partly made up" (25). For Sadiq Mir, whose interest lies in the complex cultural negotiations of Muslims in diaspora, this division is less relevant than the hybrid subject's negotiation of identity: "Signalling *multiple* belonging(s), residence and/or loyalty, hybridity recognises the amalgam of (sometimes contradictory) cultural reference points that merge

during identity construction which, ultimately, place subjects 'between' cultural domains" (67). Hybridity suggests the new cultural forms that emerge out of the cultural stresses of liminality and multiple points of identification, including ethnic, religious, and linguistic. Mir warns, however, against the veneration of "dynamic, flowing and hybrid identities," pointing out a propensity for "groups and individuals [to] consciously try to slow down or resist processes of interculturation and cultural syncretism" and to "consciously impose boundaries around 'their' identities" (70–71). Gibb neither romanticizes nor attempts to define identity but, through the debates and conflicts of characters like Lilly and Amina, renders the negotiations of hybrid subjectivity open-ended and dynamic.

Gibb depicts London of the 1980s and 1990s as a space hostile to the increasing numbers of racially marked bodies. The influx of Ethiopian refugees only emphasizes Britain's loss of imperial power, a loss that causes some Britons to cling all the harder to "the illusory status symbol that cover[s] their bodies—their white skin—and the immutable cultural difference that it seem[s] to signify" (Dawson 6). The use of a white protagonist allows Gibb to "confront the fact that whiteness is not paradigmatic," revealing "the alleged invisibility of white bodies to be a myth" (Kamboureli 91). Lilly is constantly aware of her whiteness: in London it marks her as belonging to a culture with which she does not identify and differentiates her from the multi-ethnic community in which she participates, while in Harar it labels her as an outsider and colonial presence. Her confrontations with British racism reveal the perceived disjunction between her religion and her race: "*Would you look at 'is cunt! A white fu'in Paki!*" is shouted at Lilly when she wears a veil. "*Master race. Go' it?*" (Gibb 165). Lilly's use of the veil suggests that her embodied identity is at once physically encoded into the colour of her skin and a matter of performance, enacted in her wearing of Harari dress. By marking Lilly as at once white and an outsider to hegemonic British culture, Gibb constructs whiteness as neither universal nor invisible but a deeply ambivalent racial signifier (Kalra et al. 115). Kalra et al., arguing for the existence of white diasporas, point out that "whiteness is assumed to integrate seamlessly [into the metropole], to present no major problems and is therefore given the status of honorary native" (105). By wearing a veil that labels her as culturally other, Lilly resists the signification of whiteness as "a passport of privilege" that gives the bearer the freedom of unlimited movement (111). Her rejection of this privilege is reinforced by her rejection of her parents, who engaged in a sort of authenticity tourism until dying and leaving Lilly to be raised by Sufis in Morocco.

Lilly's whiteness leads others to perceive her relationship to Harar as one of cultural tourism rather than genuine belonging. Robin is surprised to hear that Lilly has "been to" Ethiopia and asks her to regale him with her "adventures in Ethiopia" (172). Lilly's internal response indicates the breach between how she is perceived and how she understands herself, as well as her resistance to the sort of whiteness modeled by her parents: "*Adventures?* Ethiopia wasn't some gap year experience" (173). In an Ethiopian coffee shop in Camden Market Lilly must explain why she speaks Amharic while Sitta, her Ethiopian friend's daughter, does not. The waitress asks her if she is a missionary (170).

Through the experience of being an ethnic minority in Harar, Lilly has come to understand whiteness as an identity potentially as marked by alterity as blackness is in Britain. In the streets of Harar, Lilly is followed by cries of *farenji*, or foreigner, a constant reminder that she is visually marked as not belonging. Even in the dark she is identified as other: "It's your skin," her friend Nouria tells her. "White shines" (95). Her arrival in Harar is the end of a pilgrimage made alongside her adopted brother, Hussein. Sheikh Jami, the holy man she has come to see, will have nothing to do with the *farenji*, particularly because of her connection to Muhammed Bruce Mahmoud (211–13). Lilly's whiteness also codes her as an untrustworthy and suspect colonial presence: "I would soon discover that rumour of the farenji who had arrived in Harar in a Mercedes was spreading as quickly as a cloud of locusts through a field. Rumour that seemed to neglect the fact that Hussein had arrived this way as well. But he was an Arab, a man and a Sufi, whereas I was an enigma and a threat" (53). In Harar, whiteness is not a marker of power or cultural authority for Lilly but combines with her gender to make her vulnerable. In fact hybridity, rather than being depicted as an uncomplicatedly positive force for transnational community-forming, often both results from and leads to trauma. Although Lilly is gradually initiated into Harari culture, given an "apprenticeship" in "becoming a young woman of Harar" (130), the dangerous marker of whiteness is neither obscured nor forgotten. When political upheaval threatens the status quo of Harar, Lilly's whiteness becomes a threat to herself and her friends through her perceived connection to the Emperor, whose association with the colonial powers is well known (364). Whereas in London Lilly's whiteness visually excludes her from her own community, in Harar it includes her in a dangerous community with which she in no way identifies. Even as Nouria and Gishta teach her how to perform Harari womanhood, buying her trousers and a veil, hennaing her hair and offering to tattoo her gums black (129–33), her whiteness—that

pervasive marker of imperial power—shines. As a result, Lilly does not understand her whiteness as paradigmatic or invisible, or as a valuable status symbol. It is one aspect of a hybrid and contingent identity that she negotiates constantly throughout the book.

While Lilly struggles against the connotations of her racialized identity, she adopts a more liminal position in relation to her British heritage. She shares a variety of traditions with her diasporic community, but she also possesses a childhood education that emphasized Britishness. The books she read as a child are "not part of the vocabulary [she and Amina] share" (247). Her British guardian "supplemented [her] diet of Islam with doses of other realities" (247–48). At the same time, she is able to vividly recollect the geographical details of North and East Africa while Europe remains "a bit of a white blur" (142). For Lilly it is not a contradiction to be a white Muslim with her past "permanently stapled" to Harar while "the roots of [her] history" are located in England (400). Contradictory hybrid identities become possible and even necessary in diaspora, where old boundaries are blurred and new transnational communities formed. For Sitta and Ahmed, second-generation children of dislocation and multiculturalism, contradictions like "a white Muslim woman who grew up in Africa making macaroni and cheese for them in a council flat in London" are neither troubling nor unusual (165). Diasporas are, after all, "heterogeneous and contested spaces" in which familiar categories such as nationality, family, and kinship are subverted and decentred by new identity formations that are "creolized, syncretized, and hybridized" (Hua 194, 197).

Lilly's negotiation of her racial and national identities is further complicated by the novel's central thematization of religion. Islam functions as a form of visual demarcation of Lilly's hybridity and as a means of mapping the space of the diaspora. In both Harar and London, characters like Lilly and Amina negotiate their identities through a deliberate employment of the veil's complex significations. Abu-Lughod questions the association between the veil and the subjugation of women by misogynist Muslim regimes, arguing that "veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life" (785). She warns against "the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom," an interpretation based in Orientalist tropes of saving women (786). Similarly, Khan points out the "plurality of ways of performing Muslim identity" and thus of "rescript[ing] notions of the original, the pure, and the stereotypical" (preface xx), another strategy of resisting Orientalist as well as Islamist constructions of Muslim womanhood. In her complex portrait of Muslim women, Gibb neither simplistically advocates for the

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veil as an indicator of multicultural acceptance nor associates the refusal of the veil with a Western-centric claim to agency. Instead, the wearing of the veil lies at the interstices of community, religion, culture, tradition, and diaspora.

In Harar Lilly's veil, which was appropriate for worship at the Sufi temple in Morocco where she was raised, is deemed too plain, and she is induced to buy a new veil that is worn "loosely over [her] head and draped … over [her] left shoulder, Harari-style" (59). The veil is a marker not simply of religion (unnecessary in the insular Muslim community) but of the complex ethnic and class affiliations that subdivide Harar, distinguishing between the poor Oromo farmers and the wealthy Harari merchants (63). Similarly, in London the veil takes on complex significations that Lilly and Amina must negotiate. Racist comments are directed at Lilly only on her way to "Friday prayers, the one time a week [she] wear[s] a veil" (165). Despite her awareness that a veil marks her as belonging to the community with which she identifies, Lilly often forgoes this external signification. When she does wear a veil, however, she marks herself visually as not just Muslim but Harari, "wearing a bright veil like the Harari women do and a gold shawl draped over [her] burgundy dress" (153). Of course the experience of Muslim women in London is not a simple matter of choosing or not choosing the veil. Within a racist society, the veil functions as a visual coding that, as a sign of alterity, puts Lilly and Amina in danger. When Amina "dons a heavier, darker veil" because "she says she feels more protected," Lilly "fear[s] it also draws more attention" and "dread[s] a day when Amina gets knocked about by one of those lager louts standing outside the tube station … for the sole purpose of menace" (142). Once again, hybridity can be a source of vulnerability as well as agency.

Islam provides means of asserting communal identity beyond the signification of the veil. The London housing estate where Lilly lives is home to a subversive multiethnic community that highlights one of the major transnational formations in the novel: community based on religion rather than ethnicity or nationality. The celebration of Eid el Fitr, which falls at the end of Ramadan, brings together a variety of guests, mostly but not exclusively Muslim. The feast allows for a shared communal identity through religion to take precedent over, and even make space for, the celebration of cultural difference: "One of the Harari women accompanies us on the drum as we sing dhikr, religious praises, known to all the Muslims in the room. We take turns singing our traditional songs" (158). Religious community, based in communal prayer and shared festivals, allows a diaspora to re-inscribe meaning into the alien spaces of the new world. Religion

is, for Lilly, "the only thing that offers me hope that where borders and wars and revolutions divide and scatter us, something singular and true unites us. It tames this English soil," allowing the immigrant to "remap a city like this, orient yourself in its strange geography, strew your own trail of breadcrumbs between salient markers … and diminish the alien power of the spaces in between" (34). She perceives religion as allowing the diaspora to reorder and render knowable strange geographies, creating loci of meaning that reterritorialize the community in its new locale. Recalling some anthropologists' attempts to break down the division between the home site and the field site, this relationship between religion and geographic space further disrupts any simplistic connection between place and identity.

These new communities based on religion rather than culture are not, however, unequivocally positive forces in the diaspora. As Gibb points out, Islam in Harar is characterized by "local interpretations of global traditions of Islam," with particular focus on the worship of local saints ("Manufactured" 111–12). In diaspora, however, the culturally specific aspects of worship have often been put aside in favor of "a more homogenized, globalized tradition of standardized practices reinforced by other Muslims" ("Deterritorialized" 6). The standardization of Islam allows for the formation of new transnational communities but erodes the shared traditions and the cultural specificity of the Harari diaspora. Lilly constantly juxtaposes her housing estate's celebrations, where cultural hybridity reigns supreme, with the homogenization of religion being preached at the mosque. She bemoans the loss of traditions, not only those of Hararis but of all the Muslims in diaspora:

> This is what happens in the West. Muslims from Pakistan pray alongside Muslims from Nigeria and Ethiopia and Malaysia and Iran, and because the only thing they share in common is the holy book, that becomes the sole basis of the new community; not culture, not tradition, not place. The book is the only thing that offers consensus, so traditions are discarded as if they are filthy third-world clothes. (403)

Lilly's desire to hold onto tradition in diaspora suggests the ambivalence of her position as a convert and a hybrid subject. She acknowledges that "the converted are often more self-righteous than those born to their station" (358), and Amina teases her for clinging to old customs, calling her "fashinn qadim"—old-fashioned—and scoffing that she is "such a habasha," a word that Lilly translates simply as "Ethiopian" (342). At the same time,

Lilly's hybrid identity has taught her to negotiate paradoxes, enabling her to envision a community that need not discard what it does not have in common. Identifying more with the Harari culture in which her race marked her as other than with the British culture in which her race would grant her insider status, Lilly recognizes and values alterity: "Perhaps I am very fashinn qadim, but to become as orthodox as this imam demands, I would have to abandon the religion I know … Why would I do such a thing? My religion is full of colour and possibility and choice" (404). Lilly's rejection of homogeneity is a plea for the embracing of non-festishized otherness and for the subversion of the binary of identity and difference.

Now and Then, Home and Away: Dismantling Binaries

As Lilly resists the homogeneity of Islam in the diaspora, so the novel resists the construction of the homeland as a site of cultural authenticity. Lilly's description of the traditional Harari feast eaten at Eid el Fitr tells the story of Harar's long history of transnational interactions through Egyptian soup, Indian samosas, and Italian spaghetti Bolognese (338). Cultural homogeneity is in fact a more pressing concern in London, where the desire for community leads to the elision of difference, than in Harar. Gibb resists constructing the "field site" of Harar in terms of a cohesive or unitary culture, emphasizing instead a complexity that defies easy translation.

Lilly's outsider status in Harar and her gradual incorporation into Harari culture constitutes "a critique of conceptions [of culture] which reduce matters to uniformity, to homogeneity, to like-mindedness—to consensus," opening up the "vocabulary of cultural description and analysis … to divergence and multiplicity, to the noncoincidence of kinds and categories" (Geertz 246). Lilly's commentary on how community is built undermines cultural homogeneity and authenticity:

> Once you step inside, history has to be rewritten to include you. A fiction develops, a story that weaves you into the social fabric, giving you roots and a local identity. You are assimilated, and in erasing your differences and making you one of their own, the community can maintain belief in its wholeness and purity. After two or three generations, nobody remembers the story is fiction. It has become fact. And this is how history is made. (126)

Lilly's gradual assimilation highlights the deliberate construction and performance of cultural authenticity, destabilizing notions of the homeland as the site of "cultural 'essence' or authenticity" (Bhabha 179). Similarly, Lilly's descriptions of Harar formulate culture as a site of heterogene-

ity, debate, and contestation, as Lilly and other characters, particularly Aziz, argue about religion, identity, and politics. Although she stresses the uniting power of Islam and struggles to find a place for herself in her new community through shared religion, Lilly gradually becomes aware of "the contradictions, the subtext, the spaces in between" (227). Through Aziz, Lilly learns about these internal contradictions: he challenges her dogmatic religious beliefs (358) and introduces her to a modern face of Harar, where young men and women gather together to discuss politics and watch television (116–17). Culture is presented by the text as "composed of a set of *singularities*" defined as "social subject[s] whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different" (Hardt and Negri 99). Gibb demonstrates how "[e]xploring the community as heterogeneous and contradictory complicates the singular vision of culture, allowing for notions of uncertain, shifting cultural meaning as hybridized sites of Muslim identity" (Khan 126).

I have discussed at some length Lilly's negotiation of race, religion, nationality, and community in both Harar and London. But complexity and hybridity are not exclusively characteristics of the novel's protagonist. Aziz, for example, understands himself as Ethiopian and Harari, even though his Sudanese heritage and dark skin mark him as different, as "African, slave, barbarian, pagan" (91). Aziz identitifes as "a Harari, born and raised" (90) because he shares the cultural traditions and community of Harar. His hybrid identity does not engender a desire to fit in but leads him to challenge the racist constructs that label him as an outsider in his own home: "I am an enigma to them. A black man with a Harari mother. A black man with a good education. They don't know where to place me." When Lilly suggests that Aziz is "a new kind of Ethiopian … A modern Ethiopian," his reply is to the point: "Well, the modern Ethiopian is an angry Ethiopian, then" (289). For Amina, the trauma of rape severed her emotional connection to Africa: "[I]t was the end of Africa for me … I would have died and gone to hell rather than stay" (234). But when her daughter, the product of this rape, is born in London, Amina chooses to perceive Sitta's birthmark as shaped like Africa (15). Amina's husband Yusuf, when he first arrives in London, feels like "an exile, a landless one, treading on alien soil, tiptoeing so as not to leave footprints" (236). But London provides Yusuf with the freedom to practice the religion that was denied him by the Marxist Dergue, and as Lilly contends, "To read the Qu'ran with your family around you is to be home" (235). Gibb disrupts "earlier versions of diasporic narratives with their fixed notion of home … where the homeland is perceived nostalgically as an 'authentic' space

of belonging, and the place of settlement as somehow 'inauthentic' and undesirable" (Hua 195). In so doing, she "quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (Bhabha 54). Gibb not only uses her construction of hybrid subjects participating in a transnational diasporic community to demonstrate how categories that might seem stable are always contingently constructed; she also extends this dissolution of categories to the community of Harar, where hybrid subjects like Lilly and Aziz challenge the equation of ethnicity with belonging, disrupting narratives of a homogeneous and authentic cultural homeland.

The structural division of the novel between Lilly's past in Harar and her present in London mirrors both the division between home site and field site and the complex relationship between diasporic communities and the homeland. The most decisive source of Lilly's communal identity and sense of belonging derives from the memories and past that she shares with other diasporic subjects, particularly but not exclusively other Hararis. Vijay Agnew, in her introduction to *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity*, points out how memories "establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and history)" (3). While diaspora allows for "a transnational sense of self and community … that transcends the borders and boundaries of nation states" it nonetheless creates a tension in the diasporic individual between here and there, past and present (4). Although the transnational community forged through shared memories exists in the here and now, the shared memories that create this sense of community are always tied to a past that is located elsewhere, often in a home that no longer exists. *Sweetness in the Belly* shuttles constantly between Harar in the 1970s and London in the 1980s and 1990s. The passages in Harar draw upon all the senses, from the sounds of "a sky crackling with a staggered chorus of muezzins" (56), to the "stench in the air" (51), to the crowded, colourful streets, emphasizing "the colours, the textures, the smells of the place, all the visceral responses to it, and, ultimately, the utter heartbreak of having to leave it" (Gibb, "Telling Tales" 44). Lilly's London, on the other hand, is bleak and colourless, limited to "the dimly lit concrete corridors of high-rises on the Cotton Gardens Estate" (*Sweetness* 9), the hospital that "largely cater[s] to the poor from these beleaguered housing estates" (8), and the "old pantry, complete with shelves lined with paper in the 1920s and a hidden stash of tinned war rations" (33) that Lilly and Amina use as the office for their Ethiopian community association. As the novel proceeds, and the love affair between

Lilly and Aziz—the narrative centre of her time in Harar—comes to its climax, the life Lilly leads in London becomes more vivid. Her developing romance with Robin leads her to suspect that her relationship to the past, and to the missing Aziz, is more complicated than she originally understood: "My feelings for [Robin] only threaten to grow, while those for Aziz remain fixed, like the one photograph I have of him—twenty-six years old, staring straight ahead, deadly still in black and white. Staring at me as if I am still nineteen years old" (351). Kamboureli writes that "the past is inscribed in the present yet is not its irreducible opposite, the site that always authenticates the now. The past is present only insofar as it produces and is represented by the present" (20). As Lilly learns to live in the present rather than the past, she also learns to understand how the past produces the present, and thus how her inability to move beyond the loss of Aziz has constructed a London that is only ever temporary, imbued with traces of a more vivid past.

The imaginary homeland can exist only in the past.

Lilly's relationship to Harar exists both as an independent narrative told in its own present day and as the ghostly presence of that narrative woven throughout her life in London. She suggests the tension between a lived present and a shared past in her description of her friendship with Amina:

> I am drawn to Amina because of what we share … fifty-four years of life between us stretched across an African canvas, one lip of which is permanently stapled to the wall of the Ethiopian city that once circumscribed our lives, the other lip flapping loosely over the motley tapestry that is London. One side is permanently hinged, even if only in our imagination. (22)

The imaginary homeland can exist only in the past; it is vital to Lilly's sense of self but complicates her attempts to create a new home in the present. The unstapled lip of their lives denotes the deterritorialized identities that both women negotiate in London and the necessity of constructing new identities that will make sense of the new spaces they occupy. Even as their multilocality in the past and present complicates the lives of both women, however, it is also the source of a sense of community based on shared experience rather than simplistic notions of ethnic identity.

The shared relationship to the past, however, is communal without being identical. For instance, Amina is unusual in her ability to put down roots and thus avoid becoming "a spectre in this landscape" (35), whereas Lilly is haunted by the ghosts of the past. The figure of Aziz recalls Lilly's struggle to hold onto the history that connects her to her community-in-

exile, while letting go of past traumas. In the final chapter of the novel, Lilly wonders "if Aziz has, in some ways, always and only ever been an apparition," defined more by his absence than by his presence (399). For Lilly, this burden of memory is an existential fact: "This is who I am, perhaps who we all are, keepers of the absent and the dead. It is the blessing and burden of being alive" (399). Through Lilly's ambivalent relationship to her past—her longing to at once cling to it and be free of it, and her conclusion that it will always remain as a present absence—Gibb evokes the complex relationship of the individual to her history. As Kamboureli points out, "[w]hile no subject can exist outside the history that has produced her," history is never "a finished product" (105). The interdependence of past and present undermines the possibility of a binary between now and then, home and away, without which culture is rendered fluid and indeterminate, never stable and commodifiable.

While the passages set in London explore the ways in which the past continually informs and produces the present, the passages in Harar engage with the desire to deny this interdependence. After the death of her parents and her conversion to Islam, Lilly attempts to disown her pre-Islamic past: "It was so much easier to keep them separate, to divide the world in two … It was easier to be bitter and condemn, deny the relationship and keep the distance, because without judgment, Aziz was leading me to discover, there lurked longing" (317). Longing, or desire, is the force that causes the past to irrupt constantly into the present. Lilly's attempt to cut herself off from her parents proves impossible. Even when the past is not being deliberately drawn upon as a vital component of identity, it continues to inform and shape the individual's negotiation of the present. While the groundwork of this realization lies in Lilly's relationship with Aziz, it finds its fruition in London: "For Amina, arriving in London was random; it could have been anywhere. But for me, England was the only logical place, where the roots of my history, as alien as these might seem, are actually buried. My journey ends here" (400). The past is not a completed construct with a unidirectional relationship to the subject. Instead it is in dialogue with the present, which in turn reinterprets and reconstructs the past as the relationship between the two is constantly renegotiated.

Sweetness in the Belly is rife with the dissolution of binaries: insider and outsider, home and away, past and present, self and other. It does not, however, dismiss culture, identity, and alterity as wholly untranslatable or unrepresentable. Instead, it resists the dangers of the commodification and exoticization of otherness by theorizing the subject's negotiation of hybridity, the relationship between diaspora and homeland, and even the

anthropological methodologies in which Gibb was trained. A discussion of the extent of an author's ethical and political responsibility, in terms of how a text circulates on the market and is consumed by a metropolitan readership, is beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, while no amount of close attention to Gibb's own artistic strategies can entirely liberate the text from the "culture of marketability" in which "the success of ethnic literary discourse is … measured by the success with which ethnicity can be translated into a commodity product" (Kamboureli 88), the care with which Gibb destabilizes and renders complex discourses of ethnicity and identity constantly undermines the construction of cultural otherness as a static, consumable commodity. In *Sweetness in the Belly*, the direct thematization of culture, identity, and the representation of otherness constitute a gesture toward an ethics of diversity that further bridges the space between ethnography and fiction as methods and genres of representing the other.

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