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Marginalities of Race and Class

Marginalities shift and change, especially over a period of forty years. Beryl Gilroy notes that the struggle to define them exists ‘not only between Black and white but between all those who find grounds on which differences could be pin-pointed and measured (for example, tribe, class, religion, politics, shades of colour, class and economics) – any ingredient that could produce dissension’;¹ that is to say, those who stand secure in what they regard as a dominant group, whether within a country or a football crowd, will marginalize those whom they perceive as not belonging there. Zygmunt Bauman argues that:

Modern culture is a garden culture. It defines itself as the design for an ideal life and a perfect arrangement of human conditions. It constructs its identity out of distrust of nature…It classifies all elements of the universe by their relation to itself. This relation is the only meaning it grants them and tolerates.²

And he comments, ironically, that in this garden culture, ‘weeding out is a creative, not a destructive activity’ (p. 92).

Marginalization, exclusion, has of course always been with us; Beryl Gilroy points out its ‘undying nature’,³ and we are still a long way from answering Maud Ellman’s plea that we ‘look beyond the pieties of identity politics to rediscover the radical singularity of human experience’.⁴ Raphael Samuel, looking specifically at Britain, observes that ‘Minorities have not normally had an easy time of it’, as ‘tolerance, though it enjoys an honoured place in the pantheon of national virtues…hardly survives historical scrutiny as a distinctive national strength’.⁵ He asserts that ‘the ideas of national character have typically been formed by processes of exclusion, where what it is to be British is defined
in its relations of opposition to enemies both without and within’ (p. xviii); and he concludes:

Politically, Britain may be a pluralist society, as it has been, notionally, through three centuries of representative government. Behaviourally, though, it is fearful of departures from the norm . . . In public discourse ‘British characteristics’ (as the Prime Minister [Thatcher] calls them) are still spoken of as though they were generic, the ‘British’ as though they were a single people, ‘the British way of life’ as though it were organic – a natural harmony which only the malevolent would disturb, a shared condition which newcomers must adapt to.

(p. xxii)

Bryan Cheyette agrees, arguing specifically that racial minorities in this country are vulnerable to ‘particularist definitions of Englishness predicated on the fixity of the past’.6 What is more, as Paul Gilroy observes, race itself is a complex, ‘cultural-biological’ concept that: ‘can change, assuming different shapes and articulating different political relations’.7

The most obvious marginalities in England throughout the period I am exploring are racial, but there are others. Those who are pregnant outside marriage, those seeking abortion, those whose sexual orientation is perceived as deviant, are some examples of those who in their time have been thrust to the margins, as have those who cannot cope with the lifestyle of their perceived group and break down. Then too there are those who are marginalized because of class, or the region of the country they come from. And there are the particular cases that result from war, such as refugees, evacuees, internees. Most of those who exclude insist on essentialist definitions of what is to be excluded: there tends to be a refusal to see this problem in terms of the individual, as putting a face on the enemy complicates the issue, and, of course, what is perceived as marginal will differ from group to group, and the emphases will shift over time. I shall in this chapter confine myself to issues concerning race and class which women writers have addressed.

Writing about such issues is inevitably full of pitfalls, since exploring prejudices can be read as a form of endorsement, as Gillian Rose warns: ‘it is possible to mean well . . . yet to be complicit in the corruption and violence of social institutions’;8 and it is certainly true, as Cheyette observes, that ‘while literary texts might well help to change perceptions over a long period of time, they rarely have a transformative impact that is not in itself intimately related to wider social issues’.9 Yet to address