

EDITORIAL

In December 1996 the Centre for New Ethnicities Research, at the University of East London, organised a conference in collaboration with the International Centre for Inter-Cultural Studies at the Institute of Education in London. Leading scholars, cultural practitioners and community activists from around Britain came together to take ideas about race, nation and ethnicity for a walk across the shifting terrains of 'Frontlines/Backyards'.

The aim was to create the framework for a different, more thoughtful and sensitive kind of public conversation than that which prevails at most academic colloquia or political rallies. Those of us who have spent eighteen years under Conservative rule, attending conferences which either ignored the prevailing political realities in the name of some superior insight on the world, or used these realities as the basis for mutual recrimination, felt that the time had come for a conference with a difference. Frontlines/Backyards would not be a conference dominated by the reading of academic papers, or the rehearsal of prepared political positions. PC posturing and moral admonition would no longer 'rule OK'. We wanted to create a sense of improvisation and excitement about engaging with those issues of politics and culture that had come in from the margins, and which are beginning to redefine what it means to live in this disunited kingdom, as it faces its uncertain future.

For this purpose we designed an event which wove together statements in music, song, poetry, drama, film and dance, together with political analysis, personal testimony and group discussion. Debate was organised around six workshop themes: rewriting histories of the nation; questioning race and generation; the centring of multiple heritages; the exploration of science fiction and dystopias; the significance of geographies of risk, fear and the city; and the consideration of the politics of immigration in the light of the increasing prominence in the late twentieth century of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Overall the event provided a platform for an emergent dialogue between some of the post-1968 generation who have been rethinking these issues in the 1980s, and a younger post-Thatcher generation – most of the 400-strong audience were under thirty – who not only crossed over many of the customary racial and ideological divides, but who moved easily between the worlds of political campaigning, cultural enterprise and academic scholarship in a way that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

This debate of the generations was given fresh impetus by the Youth Arts Programme. Over two hundred fourteen-to-seventeen year-olds

from six schools and youth projects in the East End of London worked with artists-in-residence throughout the autumn to produce an impressive range of paintings, posters, computer-art, and performance pieces based on the conference themes. Their work, and in some cases their presence, added a welcome vitality to the proceedings.

Nevertheless old habits die hard. There were those who wanted the conference to address racism, racism, racism and if every session did not do that, then (some concluded) there must have been some kind of insidious evasion going on. There were others, at the other end of the spectrum, who thought we should just forget about racism altogether and concentrate on celebrating the new ethnicities released by the postmodern turn. There were some who wanted everyone to go back to basic Marxism and reinvent the great wheel of universalism, while others again wished for nothing more than to put Marxism in the dustbin of history or, at best, flirt with its fragments.

Yet even the occasional bout of bad temper and backbiting failed to dampen the generally genial atmosphere. As one participant put it: 'Frontlines/Backyards was an event waiting to happen – it was a cross between a festival and a conference; it released a lot of creative and intellectual energy which is normally dammed up when we fight our own corners'.

Even so, the content of the conference generated its own predictable difficulties. Many of these centred on what could be implied by the conference title itself. Just how were the languages of frontlines and backyards to find common points of reference? How was it possible to move beyond the divisions of hope they represented? How could the discourses of equality and difference be reconciled? Just where did the priorities of academics, artists and activists connect? Was post-colonial textual theory ever going to have anything much to say to refugees and asylum-seekers struggling to survive in multiracist Britain?

In what follows we have tried to convey something of the style and the substance of the engagement with these issues. We have set out to represent the diverse registers in which this two-day conversation was conducted, and to give the reader – abstracted as ever in the mind of journal-editors – some indication of the range of arguments pursued. Inevitably we have had to be selective. Some material – the performance poetry most strikingly – does not translate well into a written-text on the page. And, to give another example, reading Tunde Jegede's text here is no substitute for listening to him play the kora. Those who want to heed Rilke's advice to learn the dance of the mind where 'words melt into what they cannot capture' will have to buy the video that accompanies this issue in order to get the full sense of the creativity of the contributions.

In choosing material for this issue we have concentrated on work which addresses one or more of the core conference themes in an idiom which is consistent with publication in *new formations*, whilst still remaining true

to the provenance of the journal. Out of all the possible contributions (over one hundred people were involved in some kind of way) we offer a sample, a rich enough cut'n'mix, we hope, to provide some substantial but still digestible food for further thought.