Sounding out the margins: ethnicity and popular music in British cultural studies

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Introduction

In their discussion of the development of British cultural studies,¹ Jon Stratton and Ien Ang point out that the ‘energizing impulse’ of the field has ‘historically ... lain in [a] critical concern with, and validation of, the subordinate, the marginalized [and] the subaltern within Britain’ (1996: 376). Accordingly, many of the field’s principal practitioners have paid a considerable amount of attention to questions of ‘race’² and ethnicity in post-war Britain (CCCS 1982; Gilroy 1987; Hall *et al* 1978). Much of this work has, in turn, centred on popular culture in general, and popular music in particular (Gilroy 1987: 117–35, 153–222; Hall 1992a; Hebdige 1979, 1987a; Jones 1988).

This chapter concerns itself with the ways in which Britain’s multi-ethnic margins have been handled in British cultural studies, and particularly that strand associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Taking popular music as a case study, it explores the field’s reception of immigrant-descended cultural practitioners, focusing specifically on its treatment of second-generation Irish rock musicians.³

To this end, the chapter re-examines Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture* (1979), a formative endeavour in the field’s engagement with questions of race, ethnicity and popular music, before going on to consider the more recent response of cultural studies’ practitioners to ‘Britpop’. This discussion draws attention to the narrow parameters of the ‘ethnicity’ framework underpinning this body of work. For if the field’s reception of second- and third-generation African-Caribbean and South Asian cultural practitioners has tended to foreground questions of race and ethnicity, it has been almost axiomatic in cultural studies simply to overlook the particular immigrant background of the second-generation Irish, who

have instead been subsumed in an all-encompassing, and largely undefined, 'white ethnicity'. Moreover, in a great deal of work on questions of race, ethnicity and popular music, second-generation Irish musicians have been recruited for a putative Anglo-Saxon 'centre' against which the descendants of African-Caribbean and South Asian immigrants can be differentiated.

This analysis of cultural studies' engagement with questions of race, ethnicity and popular music is explored in the second part of the chapter. I wish to begin, however, by re-considering the intellectual and institutional context from which this body of work has emerged. Here, I will retrace the development of questions of race and ethnicity in the field of British cultural studies,⁴ before re-visiting what is widely considered to be a formative text in this project: the Birmingham Centre's *Policing the Crisis* (Hall *et al.* 1978) (hereafter *Policing*). My analysis demonstrates that while the Irish ethnic group in England has been almost comprehensively overlooked in cultural studies' engagement with questions of race and ethnicity, its presence has often been intrinsically relevant to this body of work. The chapter suggests that an acknowledgement of Irish ethnicity might have been beneficial for the field in its endeavour to engage with Britain's multi-ethnic margins.

The margins and the centre: 'race', ethnicity and British cultural studies

Stuart Hall has explained that the 'decisive turn' of the Birmingham Centre (and by implication the field of British cultural studies) towards questions of race and ethnicity was 'a profound theoretical struggle, a struggle of which *Policing the Crisis* was, curiously, the first and very late example'. This 'turn', for Hall, 'was only accomplished as the result of a long, and sometimes bitter – certainly bitterly contested – internal struggle against a resounding but unconscious silence' (1992b: 283).

Stratton and Ang have suggested that the 'unconscious silence' identified here by Hall 'revolved around the implicit racial assumptions of Britishness and British identity'. They go on to explain that many of the progenitors of cultural studies in Britain (referring specifically to Raymond Williams, and, in parenthesis, to 'many others', by which they presumably mean Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson) 'did not query the naturalized equation of Britishness with whiteness' (1996: 382). The initial concerns of the field had been largely determined by the class-based focus of Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), in conjunction with

the field's other 'founding' texts: Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958), and Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) (Hall 1980b: 16). The apparent conflation of race and nation in these formative texts has been subjected to a substantial critique from black British cultural studies' practitioners, most notably Paul Gilroy (1987: 49–56). Roxy Harris has suggested that Gilroy 'signalled [a] moment of rupture' in the field 'when he attacked both Williams and Thompson for their silences or negative collusions on questions of "race"' (1996: 337).

By drawing attention to the 'naturalized equation' of race and nation in earlier work in the field, and providing some long overdue consideration of the historical experience of post-war African-Caribbean and South Asian immigrants and their descendants, this 'turn' towards questions of race and ethnicity clearly served to contest the status of 'black' people 'as Other to a taken-for-granted "white" British imagined community' (Ang and Stratton 1995: 18). This is not to suggest, though, that the field's handling of visible immigrants was necessarily even-handed. In the preface to *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982, hereafter *Empire*), for example, Gilroy acknowledged the relative lack of attention that the authors had paid to the South Asian ethnic group in Britain, explaining: '[we] have struck an inadequate balance between the two black communities. Only one of us has roots in the Indian subcontinent whereas four are of Afro-Caribbean origin. This accounts for the unevenness of our text' (CCCS 1982: 7).

Notwithstanding this particular asymmetry, though, the point that I want to make here is that while the field's 'turn' was effective in its endeavour to deconstruct the implicit conflation of whiteness and Britishness in previous work (and thereby pointed to a more ethnically diverse sense of Britishness), it simultaneously re-inscribed, albeit tacitly, the homogeneity of whiteness in England by taking it at face value. In other words, in its crucial move towards 'historicising and denaturalising "blackness"' (Ang and Stratton 1995: 19), the field appeared to take for granted the ostensible homogeneity of whiteness in England, and thereby served to re-produce a kind of ahistorical and re-naturalised 'whiteness'.

The 'turn' towards questions of race and ethnicity, then, was informed by a particular definition of race politics that pertained specifically to visible (and largely African-Caribbean) immigrants and their descendants. This particular emphasis was, of course, hardly peculiar to the field of cultural studies. On the contrary, it was symptomatic of the dominant 'race relations' paradigm that had been practised by sociologists in post-war Britain.⁵ As Mary Hickman and Bronwen Walter have pointed out,

this emphasis on visible difference was 'understandable at one level because of the systematic racism and discrimination which has characterized the experience of different collectivities of mainly British citizens who have migrated from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan, and their British born children' (1995: 7).

If the administering of cultural studies' 'turn' towards questions of race and ethnicity was forged in the context of these particular sociological practices and historical circumstances, then it was perhaps inevitable that, in the process of this manoeuvre, the field tended to overlook the ethnic heterogeneity of whiteness in England. However, by adhering to the dominant 'race relations' paradigm in this way, British cultural studies' engagement with questions of race and ethnicity has, like the sociology of 'race relations', 'dovetailed well with the concern of the British state to construct the problem of "immigrants" and of racism as narrowly constituted' (Hickman 1995: 4). In other words, this engagement with questions of race and ethnicity has, in one sense, taken at face value particular ahistorical notions about black immigrancy and white indiginity in which the Irish have been 'undifferentiated as an ethnic minority, part of an undeconstructed whiteness' (Sharkey 1997: 128–9).

Consequently, in the process of cultural studies' imperative endeavour to construct 'a more pluralistic, postcolonial sense of British culture and national identity' (Gilroy 1992: 190), the presence of a predominantly white ethnic group, such as the Irish, could only be rendered invisible. Accordingly, if the emphasis on class in the 'founding' texts and initial theoretical positions of British cultural studies had marginalised questions of race and ethnicity in general, then in the subsequent effort to foreground these issues, this Irish dimension was, once again, overlooked, and thereby doubly elided.

This abiding absence of an Irish dimension seems particularly anomalous in light of the fact that the formative years of British cultural studies coincided historically with an increasing Irish presence in England (Paul 1997: 90–110). And even if the presence of these immigrants, and their English-born children, was less visible than that of other post-war immigrant groups, a series of acts of political violence carried out by militant Irish republicans in the 1970s and 1980s served to heighten awareness, as well as generate anxiety, about the presence of the Irish ethnic group in England. Indeed, the city of Birmingham, the location in which cultural studies had been institutionalised (Hall 1980a: 58; Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg 1992: 9), and which had been an important receptor for post-war Irish Catholic labour migrants (Ziesler 1989: 171–

347), was, in November 1974, subjected to a bomb attack that demolished a section of the city, killing twenty-one (and injuring 162) of its inhabitants. In the traumatic aftermath of this bomb, Irish people in Birmingham were evidently subjected to particular forms of differentiation, and many Irish-related institutions were attacked (Ziesler 1989: 340–1).

Significantly, the manifestations of anti-Irish prejudice that unfolded in the aftermath of such acts of political violence made little attempt to distinguish between Irish-born immigrants and their English-born children. According to John Gabriel, second-generation Irish people became ‘the object of attacks’ in English schools, ‘during and after IRA bombing campaigns’ (1994: 85). Johnny Marr of The Smiths, one of the groups that practitioners of British cultural studies have conventionally theorised in terms of a homogeneous ‘white ethnicity’ (Stringer 1992: 21), has explained that, at school in the 1970s, he was called an ‘Irish pig’ by Mancunian classmates ‘who equated being Irish with explosions’ (Simpson 1996: 30). At the particular moment of British cultural studies’ initial engagement with questions of race and ethnicity, then, the Irish ethnic group in England was, in some ways, becoming increasingly visible, not least because of the malign consequences of Irish-related political violence. Moreover, at approximately the same time, particular academic and political discourses about ethnicity in contemporary Britain were endeavouring to provide recognition of Irish ethnicity (Greater London Council 1984; Ullah 1981, 1983). What the elision of Irish ethnicity in British cultural studies appears to point to, then, is the rigidity and vigour of the black/white binary division underpinning the field’s ‘turn’ towards questions of race and ethnicity.

Despite the fact that one of the co-authors of *Empire* concluded an endnote by asking ‘on what grounds ... have the “ethnicity studies” researchers singled out only the darker-skinned “ethnic minorities” as fitting objects of study?’ (CCCS 1982: 136), the adherence of cultural studies’ practitioners to the dominant ‘race relations’ paradigm has received little consideration in the field. It has on occasion, though, been informally broached. For instance, at the ‘Cultural Studies Now and in the Future’ conference held at the University of Illinois in April 1990, Paul Gilroy was asked by one of the conference discussants ‘why discussions of race and class in Britain never discuss the Chinese in Britain’. This question, which could arguably have been equally concerned with the exclusion of white ethnic groups, such as the Irish, from the agenda of British cultural studies, elicited an interesting response from Gilroy, who suggested that: ‘it’s probably got to do with who owns and manages and

controls the spaces in which such discussions appear and the *particular definition of race politics* that they want to trade in'. He also ventured that the reason some 'experiences aren't addressed or recorded as having any significance is because they're *perceived to be peripheral* to where the real action is supposedly identified' (quoted in West 1992: 701, my emphases).

Gilroy's remarks provide a useful perspective from which to consider the absence of an Irish dimension in *Policing*, the field's first major engagement with questions of race and ethnicity (Hall 1992b: 283; Turner 1996: 227). My decision to concentrate on *Policing* is based not only on its status as a formative text in the development of cultural studies, but also on the fact that its adherence to the dominant 'race relations' paradigm has been characteristic of much of the field's subsequent work on race and ethnicity.

Policing the Crisis: 'race', ethnicity and the Irish in England

As I have pointed out, the specificities of the dominant 'race relations' paradigm may explain, at least in part, the absence of an Irish dimension in British cultural studies' work on race and ethnicity. However, a further problem is presented by the fact that, in some of the field's major interventions in this area, the Irish presence in England has been intrinsically relevant, not to say centrally important. In other words, while the absence of an Irish dimension may be understandable when the express purpose of a particular project is to engage with, say, African-Caribbean or South Asian experience in England, this becomes problematic when, as has often been the case, the Irish ethnic group in England is implicitly relevant to the discussion at hand. In these particular instances, however, the Irish ethnic group is only tacitly included, and Irish ethnicity is simply rendered invisible. Gilroy's remark about perceived peripherality might be worth considering here: 'other experiences aren't addressed', he suggests, 'because they're *perceived to be peripheral* to where *the real action* is supposedly identified' (quoted in West 1992: 701, my emphases). By 'real action', Gilroy is presumably referring to instances such as the mugging in the Handsworth district of Birmingham in 1973 that instigated the project of *Policing*. We can perhaps infer, then, that the experience of the Irish in post-war England was 'perceived to be peripheral' to this putative focal point. This particular example of 'real action', however, had special resonances for the Irish ethnic group in England.

The absence of an Irish dimension in *Policing* is, of course, understandable, as its authors were primarily concerned with the 'moral panic'

about the culturally constructed notion of the 'black mugger' in Britain in the 1970s (Hall *et al.* 1978: 3–28). However, the particular historical event that initiated the project of *Policing* had a peculiarly Irish dimension. In their introduction to the text, the authors explain:

Until we started the study, crime was not a special field of interest to us. We became involved in a practical way when, in 1973, sentences of ten and twenty years were handed down in court to three boys of *mixed ethnic background* after a serious incident in Handsworth, Birmingham, in which a man on the way home from a pub was 'mugged' on a piece of waste ground, robbed and badly injured. (viii, my emphasis)

This man, we later learn (by virtue of a quote from the *Daily Mail*), was Robert Keenan, 'an Irish labourer' (91). Meanwhile, one of the boys who had attacked him, James Duignan, had migrated with his parents from Ireland to England as an infant. This detail is entirely absent in the text, despite the fact that the authors had implicitly described him as 'ethnic' in their description of the 'muggers', and subsequently quoted from a newspaper report that had made multiple references to Duignan's Irishness (Colling 1973; *Daily Mail* 1973). (His accomplices were Paul Storey, who had a West Indian father and white English mother, and Mustafa Faut, who was Turkish-Cypriot.) Here, the authors emphasise that this news report 'picked up the familiar themes of race and crime', quoting the paper's assertion that '[all] the sentenced youths are *either coloured or immigrants*' (Hall *et al.* 1978: 102, my emphasis). But they overlook the report's emphasis on Duignan's Irishness, and its distinction between 'coloured' and 'immigrants' (which clearly served as a tacit acknowledgment of Duignan's ethnicity and, by implication, that of the Irish in England).

Moreover, in the authors' lengthy analysis of letters that had been printed in local and national newspapers in response to the sentences of these boys (120–38), they quote from a particular letter that included a forthright expression of anti-Irish prejudice in tandem with other racist sentiments. The writer of this letter clearly drew attention to Duignan's Irishness, suggesting that 'by her name the woman who has 12 kids [Duignan's mother] is an alien too, an R.C. [Roman Catholic], she should be in Southern Ireland [sic] and you and the nigs and pakis back in the Jungle', before concluding: 'The 3 of them [the 'muggers'] have no rights in this country, just living off the Welfare State. Oh for Enoch Powell to clear the lot of you, back to your own land' (132). Although the authors of *Policing* record this reader's expression of anti-Irish prejudice, there is

little consideration of this dimension, and the authors fail to point out that it was directed specifically at Duignan and his mother. This is regrettable, not least because an overlooked implication of the letter-writer's racist logic is that Keenan, the victim of the 'mugging', would also have been considered an 'alien' by this reader, and would therefore have been subjected to their racist fantasy of Powellite repatriation.

The particular historical incident that instigated British cultural studies' first major endeavour to address questions of race and ethnicity was, then, immanently relevant to the experience of the Irish ethnic group in England. However, this dimension of the Handsworth 'mugging' evidently failed to coincide with the specific concerns of the authors of *Policing*, perhaps because the text, as Ang and Stratton have pointed out, 'relies on the continued reproduction of a rock-solid white/black dichotomy' (1995: 21). And while this binary division was, of course, symptomatic of the dominant 'race relations' paradigm, it is worth pointing out that a major sociological study of race and crime in Birmingham, published earlier in the 1970s for the Institute of Race Relations (John Lambert's *Crime, Police, and Race Relations*), had textually foregrounded the Irish presence in the city, and was permeated with references to both the first- and second-generation Irish (1970: vi, vii, xx, pp. 15–18, 45, 48, 53–4, 56, 60–5, 67, 73, 79–80, 88–90, 102–6, 123–7, 187–9, 212–26, 246, 266–9, 286–7). Admittedly, Lambert's work may have been somewhat of an exception in this regard, but it was nevertheless a project with which the authors of *Policing* were evidently familiar (Hall *et al.* 1978: 42, 44–5, 49–50, 280). In light of this, it would appear that the Irish dimensions of the Handsworth 'mugging' were considered to be especially inconsequential.

What this effectively constitutes, then, is a kind of disciplinary policing of Irish ethnicity in the field of British cultural studies, particularly in its engagement with questions of race and ethnicity. This has rendered invisible the presence, not to say the historical experience, of the Irish ethnic group in post-war England. However, given the political imperatives underpinning British cultural studies' endeavour to address the experience of visible immigrant groups, it would be churlish simply to castigate the field's principal practitioners for their failure to acknowledge the presence of the Irish ethnic group in England. Indeed, if Irish ethnicity has been one of British cultural studies' absences and silences, this omission has perhaps been less by denial or design (a sinister erasure of Irishness), than indifference or default (an insentient elision of an anomalous ethnic group). Accordingly, I am not suggesting that texts such as *Policing* should *necessarily* have engaged with the experience of

the Irish ethnic group (although, in light of the fact that the Irish were frequently relevant to the discussion at hand, it might have been useful to at least acknowledge their *absence*). Instead, my discussion of British cultural studies has primarily been an attempt to identify the particular critical and intellectual context from which scholarly discussions of immigrant-descended musicians have emerged. In the second half of this chapter, then, I will examine the ways in which these musicians have previously been contextualised, and the manner in which their ethnicities have conventionally been handled.

Ethnicity and popular music in British cultural studies

As Simon Frith has pointed out, ‘the dominant forms [of popular music] in all contemporary societies have originated at the social margins – among the poor, the migrant, the rootless, the “queer”’ (1996: 122). The field of British cultural studies has accordingly paid a considerable amount of attention to this realm of cultural production (Bradley 1980; Hebdige 1971; Willis 1972, 1974). In turn, much of this work has been specifically concerned with questions pertaining to race, ethnicity and popular music (Chambers 1976, 1985: 139–74; Gilroy 1987, 117–35; 153–222; Hebdige 1974, 1979, 1987a; Jones 1988). However, this body of work has tended to adhere to the practices of the dominant ‘race relations’ paradigm, re-producing the black/white binary division that has rendered Irish ethnicity invisible. This is not to say, though, that musicians of Irish descent have simply been overlooked. In fact, as I will demonstrate, musicians such as John Lydon have inhabited a crucial position in cultural studies’ engagements with questions of race, ethnicity and popular music. However, with few exceptions, these discussions have appeared to be wholly oblivious to the fact that musicians such as Lydon, as well as The Smiths and Oasis, are the immediate descendants of post-war Irish Catholic labour migrants.

The critical reception of other immigrant-descended musicians has, of course, been markedly different, and scholarly discussions of second- and third-generation African-Caribbean and South Asian cultural practitioners have tended to privilege questions of race and ethnicity, often at the expense of other considerations. For instance, in a discussion of ‘black’ independent film-making in Britain during the 1980s (particularly the work of the Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa), Judith Williamson points out that ‘the formal properties’ of particular ‘films have somehow, in most of the critical discourse surrounding them, been subsumed

into their “blackness” (1988: 110). In stark contrast, the field’s reception of second-generation Irish musicians has rarely even acknowledged their particular immigrant background. The absence of an Irish dimension in discussions of these musicians is not, of course, inherently problematic. Clearly an ‘ethnic’ dimension is not necessarily relevant to *every* discussion of *any* cultural practitioner. Moreover, the second-generation Irish musicians with whom I am concerned have rarely engaged with recognisably ‘Irish’ issues, and have tended to eschew identifiably ‘Irish’ musical styles. Consequently, their work appears to bear little trace of an explicitly ‘Irish’ dimension, and this has undoubtedly been a fundamental reason for the field’s apparent obliviousness to their particular immigrant background.

In the absence of this context, most cultural studies texts that have engaged with, or made reference to, the musicians with whom I am concerned, have customarily assumed that these musicians are straightforwardly and unambiguously English. Moreover, in some of the ‘canonical’ texts of British cultural studies, particularly those principally concerned with race, ethnicity and popular music, second-generation Irish musicians have functioned as representatives of a homogeneous white Englishness. Indeed, where questions of ethnicity have been invoked, it has been in terms of a largely undefined ‘white ethnicity’ that many of these texts have used to denote this ostensibly homogeneous white Englishness.

The musicians I discuss here are all English-born and have white skin colour, so to contextualise them in terms of a ‘white Englishness’ is, of course, hardly erroneous. I am not suggesting that these musicians should be excluded from discussions of ‘white Englishness’. (In fact, they have often been theorised productively in this context (see, for example, Stringer 1992).) Instead, what I want to draw attention to is the fact that this Irish dimension has rarely even been acknowledged in scholarly discussions of these musicians and that, in its absence, this work has assuredly posited second-generation Irish musicians as a kind of ‘white English’ centre with which to differentiate more ostensibly marginal immigrant-descended cultural practitioners. In doing so, this work has not only assumed that the children of Irish Catholic labour migrants are straightforwardly and unambiguously English (when in fact, as has been demonstrated elsewhere, their relationship with the host culture has been complex and ambivalent (Campbell 1999; Ullah 1985)), but it has also overlooked the precarious position that the Irish have historically occupied *vis-à-vis* whiteness. For instance, Lynda Boose has explained that:

[if] 'race' originates as a category that hierarchically privileges a ruling status and makes the Other(s) inferior, then for the English the group that was first to be shunted into this discursive derogation and thereafter invoked as almost a paradigm of inferiority was not the black 'race' – but the *Irish* 'race'. (1994: 36)

Clearly such notions of Irish racial inferiority have been historically specific, and it is imperative that we do not overlook the fact that whiteness is a modality of power in which predominantly white ethnic groups, such as the Irish, are, as it were, always already located. Nevertheless, as Richard Dyer has pointed out, the Irish have been 'rather less securely white than Anglos, Teutons and Nordics'. Moreover, if, as Dyer has put it, 'some white people are whiter than others', then the Irish have historically provided one of the 'striking instances' of 'maybe, sometimes whites, peoples who may be let in to whiteness under particular historical circumstances' (1997: 12, 51, 19). And while the particular context of post-war England might have constituted one such historical circumstance (Paul 1997: 90–110), this point has received little consideration from practitioners of British cultural studies, many of whom have, of course, been primarily concerned with questions of race and ethnicity.

The uneven handling of Britain's multi-ethnic margins in British cultural studies is evident in Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* (1979) – arguably the field's first major engagement with questions of race, ethnicity and popular music (Clarke 1982: 13) – and which, like *Policing*, has 'become something of a milestone in cultural studies' (Davies 1995: 23–4). In light of its formative status in the field's development (it was published only one year after *Policing*), it is perhaps unsurprising that *Subculture* largely adheres to the dominant 'race relations' paradigm, and thereby reproduces a black/white binary division that foregrounds visible immigrant groups while simultaneously rendering invisible the presence of white ethnic groups, such as the Irish. Nevertheless, Hebdige introduces a particular notion of 'white ethnicity', and frequently makes references to a second-generation Irish musician, the former Sex Pistols' vocalist and lyricist John Lydon. It is this particular aspect of *Subculture*, then, that provides the kernel of my discussion here.

'Punky reggae party': *Subculture*, John Lydon and 'white ethnicity'

In *Subculture*, Hebdige endeavoured to theorise a variety of youth sub-cultural styles as a set of 'differential responses to the black immigrant presence in [post-war] Britain' (1979: 29), but I am primarily concerned

here with his discussion of punk. In a particular sub-section entitled 'Bleached roots: punks and white ethnicity', issues of race and ethnicity are clearly foregrounded. Hebdige suggests, for example, that 'the punk aesthetic can be read ... as a white "translation" of black "ethnicity"' (64), proffering the notion that punk itself constituted a 'white ethnicity' (62–5). In the context of this discussion of punk, Hebdige makes numerous references to John Lydon, who was widely considered to be the principal icon of that particular phenomenon (Burchill and Parsons 1978: 78; Murray 1977a: 28–9). Lydon is not, of course, the principal object of analysis in *Subculture's* discussion of punk, which is more specifically concerned with punk style and its relationship with reggae. Nevertheless, Lydon (who is referred to in the text as Johnny Rotten, Lydon's adopted name as vocalist/lyricist for the Sex Pistols) pervades the text in a number of important ways, functioning as a representative icon of the broader cultural phenomenon of punk. For instance, a sketch of Lydon (based on a photograph in which a policeman stops Lydon in the street and takes his name; *Melody Maker* 1977) provides the illustration for the book's title page, and Lydon is subsequently mentioned and alluded to in various ways in the (140 pages of) main text (28–9, 61, 64, 90, 92–3, 98, 106, 109, 112) as well as in the endnotes (142, 151, 156–7, 161).

Moreover, Lydon is frequently positioned at a kind of interface in the punk–reggae nexus with which Hebdige is concerned. For instance, introducing Lydon's role in what he later refers to as punk's 'association' (66) with reggae, Hebdige quotes from a music paper in which an acquaintance of Lydon explained that reggae was 'the only music' that Lydon would 'dance to' (28–9). Hebdige also points out, here, that Lydon 'displayed a detailed knowledge of the more esoteric reggae numbers in a series of interviews throughout 1977' (28–9). Such points clearly serve to demonstrate the important position that Lydon inhabited in the affiliation between punk and reggae, and it is perhaps worth briefly re-tracing the development of this engagement here.

Before doing this, though, I should point out that despite Hebdige's emphasis on 'white ethnicity' in his discussion of punk, and the over-arching 'turn' throughout the text 'from an exclusive emphasis on class to assert the centrality of race in subcultural formations' (Clarke 1982: 13), *Subculture* offers no recognition of the ethnic diversity of whiteness in England. Accordingly, Lydon's particular immigrant background is simply rendered invisible, and remains a kind of 'present absence', to borrow a term from the text. However, by briefly revisiting Lydon's role in the punk–reggae interface, I will demonstrate that Irish ethnicity was

a salient dimension of his public persona, one that was frequently alluded to in the context of his engagement with reggae.

Lydon had initially demonstrated his interest in reggae in a much celebrated radio interview (in which he also displayed a familiarity with Irish traditional music) in the summer of 1977 (Captain Nemo 1977). In addition, he frequently appeared during this period in promotional photos wearing badges that publicised reggae groups (see for example Vermorel and Vermorel 1978: 99), and often discussed his interest in reggae in press interviews (including those in which his Irishness was also mentioned: see, for example, Murray 1977b: 23, 26). In fact, the extent of Lydon's association with reggae was such that, in the immediate aftermath of his departure from the Sex Pistols, reports in the music press suggested that he would form a reggae band. Significantly, when a music journalist asked Lydon to confirm these rumours, he responded by playfully positioning his Irishness in a multi-ethnic musical context: 'I'm forming an Irish Cajun Disco Afro Rock band' (Goldman 1978c: 22).

Lydon's public association with reggae, though, was perhaps most clearly demonstrated when, in February 1978 (only a few weeks after his departure from the Sex Pistols), he visited Jamaica with Don Letts, a second-generation Jamaican film-maker and disc jockey, described by Hebdige in *Subculture* as a 'black Rastafarian d-j' (1979: 29). The ostensible purpose of this highly publicised three-week visit (it was subsequently recorded as a serialised interview in the music paper *Sounds* (Goldman 1978b, 1978c), as well as in other reports and interviews (Goldman 1978a; Salewicz 1978), was to 'scout' for unsigned Jamaican reggae musicians. In these interviews, both Lydon and the *Sounds* journalist, Vivien Goldman, frequently allude to the singer's Irishness. At one point, Goldman announces: 'John's roots are Irish, and on average twice a day something happens that reminds him of the old sod' (1978b: 18). This emphasis on Irishness is underscored by Lydon's own comments. For example, in a discussion of his alleged mistreatment by the Sex Pistols' management, he indicates that Vivienne Westwood (the then partner of the group's manager Malcolm McLaren) had made an apparently derisive public gesture about his Irishness: 'Just go to her shop now if you don't believe me', he tells Goldman, 'read what she's wrote [sic] on the window about my connections with being Irish' (Goldman 1978c: 21).⁶

Significantly, Don Letts' recollections of the trip to Jamaica also make reference to Lydon's Irishness (Lydon 1994: 287). Moreover, he has framed his relationship with Lydon in terms of Jamaican and Irish ethnicity, maintaining that 'Irish and Jamaican people are definitely alike in spirit'

(a point with which Lydon concurs: 'Irish and Jamaicans definitely have a common bond') (1994: 287), and drawing attention to the ways in which Lydon was received in London reggae clubs: 'He could walk into places white people could never go with total immunity'. Letts goes on to explain that 'We all felt like society's outlaws', suggesting 'I think that's why John and I get on so well. In the development of England's history, there was a time when John's mob – the Irish – and blacks and dogs were thrown together' (Lydon 1994: 280, 287). (This is, of course, an allusion to the discriminatory notices in post-war London hotels from which Lydon's autobiography, *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* takes its title.)

Given that, in *Subculture*, both Letts and Lydon emerge as components in the punk-reggae interface, it is perhaps significant that Letts should frame his relationship with Lydon in terms of Jamaican and Irish ethnicity, a dimension that has clearly been overlooked by practitioners of British cultural studies.⁷ This is not to suggest, however, that Lydon's engagement with reggae pertained specifically to his Irishness, nor to imply that there is an inevitable or innate affinity between the second-generation Irish and other second-generation ethnic groups. Instead, what this demonstrates is the fact that this Irish dimension was considered to be significant (both at the time and in retrospect) by Lydon himself, by ethnic minority colleagues in the music industry (such as the Jamaican Letts and the Jewish Goldman), and by his white English band members: the other Sex Pistols apparently called him 'Paddy' (Murray 1977b: 23). In turn, this would appear to suggest that Lydon's position in the white English working class was not as straightforward as Hebdige seems to imply.

In *Subculture*, then, Irish ethnicity is entirely absent and, as a consequence, Lydon is implicitly situated on one side of a binary division between (black) immigrancy and (white) indigeneity, functioning as a straightforward representative of what Hebdige calls the 'indigenous working-class culture' (1979: 68). Indeed, there appears to be a quiescent convergence in *Subculture* of the terms 'immigrant' with 'black', and 'host' with 'white English', which implicitly racialises both immigration and indigeneity. Accordingly, the term 'second-generation' is tacitly racialised as non-white: Hebdige explains that '*second-generation immigrant* youth culture was closely monitored by those neighbouring *white* youths interested in forming their own subcultural options' (43, my emphases).

This is not to suggest that *Subculture* demonstrates an even-handedness towards visible immigrant groups. For instance, Gary Clarke has pointed out that, in *Subculture*, 'Asians are particularly noted by their absence'

(1982: 17). Accordingly, if, as Clarke has maintained, Hebdige 'tends to equate black culture with Jamaican culture' (1982: 17), then there is perhaps a corresponding equation of whiteness with Englishness. Lydon's Irishness is therefore absorbed into an ethnically undifferentiated working-class whiteness, and in the process of *Subculture's* formative engagement with questions of race and ethnicity, the second-generation Irish appear to have been remaindered, as it were, in the modality of class (although they were, of course, equally absent, or at least invisible, in many of the class-based accounts of earlier practitioners of cultural studies).

Hebdige's discussion of punk as a 'white ethnicity', and the text's implicit positioning of Lydon in this context, has frequently been restated in subsequent cultural studies' engagements with questions of race, ethnicity and popular music (Chambers 1985, 178; Gilroy 1987, 123–5; Jones 1988, 95–6). Consequently, despite the fact that Hebdige would eventually offer recognition of Lydon's Irishness (albeit in passing) in a later essay (1987b: 63), other accounts have served to (re)position Lydon in this 'white ethnicity'. Moreover, the particular critical paradigm that emerged in these texts has continued to be practised in more recent work, although with some important deviations.

Deconstructing Britpop: whiteness, 'race', and the politics of inclusion

In his discussion of Englishness and popular music in the 1990s, Martin Cloonan points out that while 'black English-born (or resident) artists [referring specifically to bands such as Cornershop and Fun-Da-Mental] have ... commented about the *condition* of England, they have seldom been held to *represent* it'. In an endeavour to demonstrate this point, Cloonan draws attention to a second-generation Irish musician, the former Smiths' vocalist and lyricist Morrissey, pointing out that 'while it is quite possible for the *Guardian* to talk of Morrissey [sic] as "a signifier of our (i.e. England's) broader disorder" ... such signification is rarely accredited to the 6% of the population who form the ethnic minorities' (1998: 69).

Cloonan is quite correct in making this point. Second-generation Irish musicians have, as I have demonstrated elsewhere (1998), functioned in journalistic discourses as representative icons of Englishness, a position that the descendants of other post-war immigrants have seldom held in critical discourses. Moreover, Cloonan's tacit assumption that Morrissey and, by implication, the second-generation Irish, should not be considered 'ethnic' is also understandable, particularly in light of the apparent vigour

and longevity of the dominant 'race relations' paradigm. Rather than simply disputing Cloonan's argument, then, the point to note is that in a scholarly discussion of ethnicity and popular music, a second-generation Irish musician is taken to be a representative of a white English 'centre' against which more ostensibly marginal musicians can be differentiated.

However, in a modified version of this article, Cloonan included an important endnote that offered recognition of the Irishness of second-generation musicians. In this version, Cloonan explained that '[there] is nothing inevitable about [the fact that 'black' musicians have rarely been held to represent England], as Wade has shown how in another context the music of an ethnic minority, namely blacks in Colombia, came to be associated with concepts of the nation. But mainstream pop Englishness has generally been defined by whites who have been born in the country' (1997: 59). At this point in the revision, Cloonan suggests that:

it is worth noting that the most strident nationalists – such as many campaigners for national language – are often not born in the country they espouse. This is replicated in pop, where some of the most allegedly 'English' of voices have had their roots elsewhere. In punk Johnny Rotten was of Irish descent, and Oasis – often portrayed as both 'English' and part of 'Britpop' – are led by the Gallagher brothers, who are also of Irish descent. (1997: 67)

If, in this adapted version of Cloonan's article, Irish ethnicity makes a kind of transition from absence to endnote, then in more recent work Irishness has made a further transition, from endnote to main text (albeit parenthetically). For instance, in a discussion of 'independent' music in 1990s Britain, David Hesmondhalgh makes a brief but insightful comment about Britpop, stating that 'the narrow nationalism of the term ... hardly needs comment (though the Irish roots of the two brothers, Noel and Liam Gallagher, at the centre of Oasis, make the[ir] relationship ... to the phenomenon quite complex)' (1999: 52). Clearly this acknowledgement registers an important shift in terms of the recognition of Irish ethnicity in British cultural studies. I want to develop Hesmondhalgh's point here, as it raises an important question about 'Britpop' and white homogeneity.

'Britpop' – which is perhaps best understood as a critical discourse (rather than an aesthetic style) – initially emerged in the London-based music press in the mid-1990s (see, for instance, Bennun *et al.* 1995; Richardson 1995). Although I do not have sufficient space to fully consider the politics of Britpop, which in any case have been discussed by Bennett

(1998) and Cloonan (1997), it is perhaps worth pointing out that the 'Britishness' of this 'defiantly nationalistic' (quoted in Shuker 1998: 36) discourse tended to manifest itself as a white Englishness. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that many second-generation African-Caribbean and South Asian musicians have expressed particular concerns about the racial connotations of Britpop. For instance, Aniruddha Das of Asian Dub Foundation has argued that 'Britpop is an attempt to reassert a sort of mythical whiteness. In that respect, I'd say it's implicitly racist' (Stubbs 1998: 46). Musicians of Irish descent have also made similar criticisms of Britpop. For instance, in 1996, former Smiths' guitarist Johnny Marr expressed his 'despair' about the 'nationalism' of Britpop in an interview in which he recalled his personal experience of anti-Irish prejudice (Simpson 1996). Marr underlined this point by expressing a particular antipathy towards the Union Flag, the principal signifier of Britpop (Boyd 1999).

However, despite the fact that musicians of Irish descent, such as Marr, have articulated an aversion to Britpop, they have nevertheless been critically appropriated as key Britpop figures, and have therefore been a crucial component in its construction of a 'mythical whiteness'. For instance, during the summer of 1995, at the height of Britpop, Marr's former group The Smiths (who had disbanded in 1987) were conscripted for what *Melody Maker* called 'the Home Guard of Britpop', while Marr, specifically, was honoured as a 'Britpop icon' (Bennun *et al.* 1995: 32–3). Accordingly, if Britpop was, indeed, implicitly racist, then this was arguably due not only to its exclusion of musicians of African-Caribbean and South Asian descent, but also its symmetrical *inclusion* of second-generation Irish musicians. In other words, Britpop's incorporation of the descendants of post-war Irish Catholic labour migrants suggests that its principles of exclusion were determined less by the historical fact of having an immigrant background, than by a discursive conflation of race and nation.

This convergence of race and nation has not, of course, been restricted to discourses about popular music. In fact, for Walter, such '[exclusionary] ideas about "race" lie at the heart of British national identity':

The term 'immigrants' has a racialized meaning which makes it synonymous with black skin colour ... Shared whiteness is thus a central reason for Irish inclusion. The power of racialized exclusion on grounds of skin colour would be seriously weakened if similar divisions within the white population were exposed. (1999: 93)

Clearly Walter's point, here, recalls the practices of the dominant 'race relations' paradigm (and thereby the origins of Irish exclusion from British cultural studies' engagement with questions of race and ethnicity). However, it also raises crucial questions about Britpop's assertion of a 'mythical whiteness'. For instance, in the face of Britpop's tacit construction of a monolithic 'white Englishness', perhaps an acknowledgment of Irish ethnicity in England could, by drawing attention to the immigrant-descended heterogeneity of this ostensibly homogeneous category, make visible the racialising logic that underpinned Britpop's mechanisms of inclusion.

However, discussions of Britpop in British cultural studies, and particularly those that have been concerned with questions of race and ethnicity, have been primarily concerned with its exclusionary practices. For instance, Andy Bennett has drawn attention to Britpop's apparent disregard for musicians of African-Caribbean and South Asian descent (1997: 29), a point that has been broached in other scholarly accounts (Cloonan 1998: 69). Britpop's principles of inclusion, however, have been taken at face value, and the particular implications raised by its incorporation of the second-generation Irish have tended to be overlooked.

Conclusion

The discernible shift towards a recognition of Irishness in recent scholarly work about music and ethnicity has coincided with an analogous departure in popular discourses. The British music press has conventionally overlooked the particular immigrant background of second-generation Irish musicians (Campbell 1998), whilst simultaneously privileging questions of ethnicity in discussions of musicians of African-Caribbean and South Asian descent. This practice has, however, undergone significant modifications in recent journalistic discourses. In the summer of 2000, for instance, the British music magazine *Q* ran a special theme issue, replete with glossy Union Flag cover, entitled 'The 100 greatest British albums'. In an apparent endeavour to quell simplistic celebrations of a racially exclusive Britishness, the issue included an ethnically sensitive editorial overview essay, entitled 'One nation under a groove'. Indeed, a pull-out quote from this article, used to illustrate the text, emphasised that 'Britain's multi-ethnic mix and links with the Commonwealth have contributed to a potent shebeen of home-grown music' (Maconie 2000: 83). In the actual text itself, though, this assertion was punctuated with a parenthetical recognition of Irish ethnicity, that read: 'Britain's multi-

ethnic mix (wherein the immigrant Irish have proved most crucial, from The Beatles to Oasis) ...' (84). Clearly this acknowledgement marks a striking deviation from previous journalistic discourses about ethnicity and popular music, for rather than being omitted, the Irish are in this instance privileged as the 'most crucial' ethnic group. And while the significance of this assertion may be somewhat diminished by its parenthetical status (not to mention its omission from the pull-out quote), it nevertheless serves as a gesture towards prising open the narrow parameters of the dominant paradigm.

This inclusion of an Irish dimension in recent journalistic discourses about popular music is perhaps indicative of a potential shift in contemporary thinking about ethnicity in Britain. In the recent report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (Parekh *et al.* 2000), the commissioners (including, significantly, Stuart Hall) endeavoured to incorporate an Irish dimension, demonstrating an awareness of the presence of the Irish ethnic group, as well as an understanding of their particular historical experience (*Guardian* 2000). And while this report has been widely received as a critical repudiation of the racial connotations of conventional notions of Britishness (Travis 2000), it might also be understood as a corrective to similarly conventionalised assumptions, held within British cultural studies, about white homogeneity. The conceivable paradigm shift that this might engender could perhaps facilitate a fuller understanding of the complex and diverse contours that constitute Britain's multi-ethnic margins.

Notes

- 1 As Kobena Mercer has pointed out, 'when people talk about "British Cultural Studies" they often seem to be involved in the construction of a new mythology which implies a unitary and homogenous field of endeavor' (1992: 447). Cultural studies, in Britain as elsewhere, has, of course, been a complex and contested field encompassing a diverse range of often disparate intellectual projects. A number of published accounts have endeavoured to chart the development of the field. See, for example, Clarke 1991a; Davies 1995; Hall 1980a; Turner 1996: 38–77.
- 2 Although Tariq Modood has suggested that it is 'a waste of ink to put race in scare-quotes' (quoted in Fenton 1996: 145), I have done so in this instance to indicate the term's problematic status. However, subsequent references to the term will, in light of its frequent usage in the text, not be placed in quotation marks.
- 3 I will focus specifically on John Lydon, perhaps better known as Johnny Rotten, former vocalist and lyricist for the Sex Pistols (1975–78). However, I will also make reference to The Smiths and Oasis. The Smiths (1982–87) despite their

- adoption of an archetypal English surname, consisted of four second-generation Irish musicians (Rogan 1994: 10–15). All five original members of Oasis (1992–) were also second-generation Irish (Hewitt 1997).
- 4 Mark Gibson has explained that ‘There is a noticeable weariness in some quarters with attempts to trace the history of cultural studies, particularly where that history is British. The theoretical development of the field has now been recounted so many times as to have become almost a catechism’ (1999: 139). However, there has been little consideration, in this narrativisation of the trajectory of British cultural studies, of the handling of Irish ethnicity in the field. In my endeavour to address this point, then, it has been necessary to trace, from this particular perspective, the field’s engagement with questions of race and ethnicity, and in turn, to consider, albeit briefly, the development of British cultural studies as a field of scholarly activity.
 - 5 According to Mary Hickman, this paradigm was ‘primarily designed to explain patterns of racism and discrimination experienced by migrants from Britain’s ex-colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. Its main premise ... is that racism is about “colour”: that is, about visible difference’, hence the ‘automatic exclusion’ of white immigrant groups, such as the Irish (1995: 4).
 - 6 Lydon fails to specify the particular nature of this evidently anti-Irish gesture.
 - 7 A notable exception in this regard is Simon Jones’s *Black Culture, White Youth: The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK* (1988). This was an ethnographic research project – based at the Birmingham Centre – on ethnicity and popular music in the city of Birmingham. In the study, Jones draws attention to the family background of Jo-Jo, a second-generation Irish youth who emerges as one of the dominant voices in the text. Jones explains: ‘Like many of the Irish families in the area, they had developed close ties with black neighbours by sharing the same survival strategies, living spaces and supportive child-care networks. (The parallel experiences of Irish and black migrant workers generally was an important foundation of much of the interaction between the two communities)’ (129–30). Later on, Jones points out that some working-class white youths in the city had ‘attempted to forge an identity with black people by drawing attention to parallel forms of ethnicity, such as Irishness’ (192).