

# INTRODUCTION

**Xavier PONS\***

"...Not chaos-like together crushed and bruised,  
But, as the world, harmoniously confused:  
Where order in variety we see,  
And where, though all things differ, all agree."  
Alexander Pope (1711)

The "Divergences & Convergences" conference was held at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, March 16-18, 2006 in a rather troubled atmosphere—public transport was on strike and much of the university campus was blockaded by students protesting against the new job contracts introduced by the then government (the contracts were later abolished). All the same, some fifty brave souls participated, including renowned writers Fred D'Aguiar from Guyana and Brian Castro from Australia, and gave stimulating papers, a selection of which are published in this special issue of *Caliban*.

The conference topic seems especially relevant in the current historical and cultural context, where dire warnings about the clash of civilizations and its attending violence come up against discourses positing that globalization is heralding the emergence of a "world" culture in which local peculiarities will merge into some kind of bland, homogeneous pap acceptable to consumers of whatever background—what Benjamin Barber called "McWorld." This is perhaps sufficient to suggest the perils of each kind of tropism when not balanced by its opposite.

Convergence is not always synonymous with harmony, any more than divergence necessarily means conflict. Convergence may occur simply because two cultures are on a collision course, as happened when the First Fleet sailed into Sydney Cove, effecting an unwitting convergence of British and Aboriginal cultures that turned out to be anything but harmonious. Conversely, when people agree to differ—to diverge, that is—a perhaps precarious kind of harmony can prevail.

Divergences and convergences, like the poor and transport strikes, are always with us. Because they are processes, they are by nature dynamic, and a challenge to the status quo. Cultures inevitably evolve under the direct or indirect pressure of what is happening with other cultures, near and far—no culture is an island. The outcomes of those processes are myriad, and practically impossible to predict—not so many decades ago it was widely assumed in white Australia that Aboriginal culture would die out, smothered by the superior culture of the British invaders. Fortunately, this has not happened.

In the best of cases, convergence succeeds in combining elements drawn from widely different cultures to produce positive outcomes for all concerned. I might

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mention the example of this travelling theatrical company which puts on performances in remote villages in Madagascar to alert the local farmers to the dangers of AIDS. The leader of the company thus explained how he went about his business. "What shall I tell those farmers?" he asked. "That AIDS kills? Death strikes so often here that people are unimpressed. That AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases will affect their health? There are so many diseases here that people don't worry about another one. That they should be faithful to their wives? This is not part of the local culture, and they won't listen." So in the end he resolved to draw on local traditions and local mythology. These hold that the ancestors of today's human beings were first made as statues. Then they were granted life by the gods, but on condition that they perpetuate life. It is therefore the duty of human beings to pass on life, not death, as they would if they became infected—they have a duty not to become infected, and not to infect others. Traditional messages about AIDS were ineffective because entirely divorced from the local culture. By making possible a convergence between a western prophylactic discourse and local cultural traditions, the company was in a position to make a real difference.

If we are to share this planet on an equitable basis, it is clear that some accommodation between cultures, that is to say a kind of convergence, has to be achieved. Conversely, however, if we are to preserve cultural diversity, which I think is no less essential to the future of mankind than the preservation of biodiversity, we have to accept that people have a right to be culturally different, to diverge from a white, western culture which tends to present itself as the only acceptable norm and would assimilate other cultures to itself or else relegate refractory cultures to the realm of the savage, the primitive, the unacceptable.

The nay sayers, those who prefer to diverge rather than converge, have always had a bad reputation. They beg to differ for all the wrong reasons. It's true that, in postcolonial terms, the refusal of convergence sometimes leads to advocacy of a mythical cultural purity to be maintained or re-discovered, to nativist attitudes, which are both an illusion and a dead end. But the desire to preserve or to enhance one's difference, one's specific and separate identity, has deep roots in the human psyche and there is no point in denying its power.

The issue of multicultural policies in such countries as Canada, Australia and New Zealand is a case in point. In Canada, multiculturalism is supposed to serve the cause of national unity, but risks exploding the very notion of a public culture, as Sandrine Tolazzi points out. It is forcefully argued by Aurélien Yannik that Canadian multiculturalism favours the coexistence of separate communities rather than their convergence. Yet some forms of convergence can be observed: Ariane Cyr notes that the Haitian minority in Canada finds linguistic common ground with the Quebec community and, despite the discriminations they experience, they want to converge towards a common civic culture. Not all Canadian communities strive to converge, however. As Florence Cartigny shows, the ethnic diversity of the Canadian West results in inter- and intra-regional divergences. Because of its small population, the region has fewer representatives in Parliament than the rest of the

country, which favours protest parties and separatist movements, though with a very limited influence.

In New Zealand, conservative calls for convergence—One New Zealand—instrumentalise multiculturalism, Corinne David contends, to undermine the country's bi-cultural model, seen as the "Maori gravy train," and promotes a bogus and no doubt counterproductive form of convergence.

As for Australia, Victor Oost writes that conservatives resent Aboriginal difference, and work at disempowering the indigenous population to effect a forced convergence between blacks and whites in which the former, forced to assimilate, are very much the losers.

In a postcolonial context, issues of divergence and convergence often revolve around the related questions of national and individual identities. Postcolonial nations, especially those that used to be settlers' colonies and those whose current population was in large part plucked out of their traditional homelands and forcibly transplanted there, need to differentiate themselves from the former imperial centre. They seek to promote a sense of national unity among the various ethnic communities which are part of the imperial legacy or which, through immigration, became part of the nation. Guyana is a case in point. As Lena Loza points out, the "Land of Six Peoples" is ethnically polarised, making it difficult for the country to achieve a sense of some national identity. But perhaps the growth of a mixed-race population will eventually reconcile the various ethnicities.

But then Guyana is part of the Caribbean and, culturally speaking, has much in common with the rest of the region. This, as Fred D'Aguiar insists, allowed the emergence of a Caribbean literary aesthetics springing from the land rather than the nation and resulting in what novelist Wilson Harris called "the literacy of the imagination," the point of which is to reconcile mutually opposed groups so as to include everyone who contributed to the history of the region. A common colonial past, and the persistence of problems associated with that past, such as racism, contribute to this sense of place in Guyana as well as in Antigua, as Claudia Marquis shows in respect of author Jamaica Kincaid.

While issues of divergence and convergence are of considerable political moment, it is arguable that politicians would do well to heed the insights provided by creative writers and other artists. Australian novelist Brian Castro, a self-described "linguistic saboteur" and "disorientalist," contends that, at least within the framework of a highly industrialized and homogenised nation like Australia, the writer should seek destabilize categories, to undermine the idea of authenticity, to explode the whole façade of identity and ethnic stereotyping. Pacific writer Epeli Hau'ofa would no doubt agree. As Nelly Gillet points out, he sees it as his job to challenge positive stereotypes about his own people and to subvert their own clichés.

But in the context of more divided postcolonial nations, the writer may see his/her task as one of reconciliation, of overcoming divergences. Christian Gutleben shows how New Zealand novelist Alan Duff, author of *Once Were Warriors*,

combines Western social realism with Maori cultural features (especially orality) in order to speak to all New Zealanders—at the price of some ambiguities.

Aboriginal novelist Kim Scott, Colette Selles suggests, also takes up the issue of reconciliation, which to him has to be based on the continuing of Aboriginal culture and the deconstruction of whiteness. Whites and Aborigines inevitably diverge in their respective senses of belonging in Australia, as several contributors argue. Estelle Castro focuses on the black point of view, examined through Aboriginal fiction, while Chantal Kwast-Greff demolishes white stereotypes as expressed in the movies *The Proposition* and *The Tracker*.

The issue of belonging is widely relevant across the postcolonial world, where recent and not-so-recent migrants face environments and peoples who diverge starkly from the norms the migrants carry with them and who turn the latter into outsiders. They may respond by reversing—and thereby actually duplicating—Old World attitudes which used to cast them as victims, and becoming victimisers, like the Irish settlers of Canada in Jane Urquhart's novel *Away* who, Claire Omhovère shows, dispossess the indigenous inhabitants just as they were themselves dispossessed by the British.

Yet different ethnicities do not inevitably diverge in their sense of belonging. Helène Godderis-Toudic's analysis of *The Pick Up*, by Nadine Gordimer, shows that whites can come to experience a sense of belonging in what would seem to be an outlandish environment, and that confronting other societies is indeed required to find a sense of identity. In similar fashion, Bénédicte Meillon argues that Barbara Kingsolver's white characters in *Congo* are identified with the black victims of colonialism, so that the novelist projects an anti-dualistic vision and seeks to reconcile antagonistic cultures to create a hybridized and multicultural perspective.

Whether this is truly sustainable, however, is open to question since, as Fiona McCann argues in respect of Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*, the truth is always partisan, inevitably nuanced through each individual's personal experience. Truth is always multiple, leading to divergence rather than convergence.

It would be an error to focus exclusively on content, since literary forms are no less significant of the creative interplay between divergence and convergence. Thus, Marie Herbillon charts Murray Bail's evolving approach to realism, diverging from its accepted conventions in *Holden's Performance* before effecting a convergence in *Eucalypt*.

To put it in a nutshell, both divergence and convergence are necessary. But, if one rejects at once cultural apartheid and assimilation, how can difference be accommodated within a national culture? This will largely be determined by the power relationships within the nation: cultural features emanating from minority groups will mostly have a hard struggle to establish their legitimacy—the majority will tend to regard them as "confronting," as Australian PM John Howard said of the burqa worn by some Australian Muslim women. People are by nature made uneasy by difference, whether physical or cultural. Difference is apt to arouse fear and

loathing, so that effecting or promoting a convergence between different cultures is never easy, never unproblematic.

As in most human affairs, it is often a matter of compromise, of surrendering sufficient cultural space to those who are not like us, of acknowledging that our common humanity is not brought into question by their difference. As former PM Paul Keating put it in respect of the Aborigines in his Redfern speech, "I think what we need to do is open our hearts a bit." I trust this conference has contributed, in a small way, to this opening of our hearts.