

# Ethnic Characterizations in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*

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Gibson juxtaposes particular images of decaying technology, litter and waste, images which convey a materiality, a physical presence, with ethnically-marked characters in both *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*. Often, Gibson portrays these characters as symbols or examples of a traditional, stable, essential humanity, as opposed to the ambiguous humanity of AI or the cyborgs attendant to a dissolute corporate culture. For example :

"A thin black child with wooden beads and antique resistors woven tightly into her hair opened the Finn's door and led them along the tunnel of refuse. Case felt the stuff had grown somehow during their absence. Or else it seemed that it was changing subtly, cooking itself down under the pressure of time, silent invisible flakes settling to form a mulch, a crystalline essence of discarded technology, flowering secretly in the Sprawl's waste places." [*Neuromancer*, 72]

Gibson offers an ecological cycle of degeneration and growth attended by this black child who herself recycles antiquated technology in her self-ornamentation. Similarly, Gibson describes the Rastafarian Zion cluster in the Well, its "makeshift hull" like "the patchwork tenements of Istanbul" (103), as smelling of "cooked vegetables, humanity, and ganja" (104). Again, Gibson portrays irregularity of appearance, cooking, and a symbol of transgression, ecology, and religion (ganja) as manifestations of humanity. Cooking predominates in Gibson's images of essential humanity (see below), seemingly because of its stimulation of multiple senses, the competitor, perhaps, of jacking into the matrix. Yet, Case also describes Tessier-Ashpool as "an atavism, a clan" (203). He remembers :

"The litter of the old man's chamber, the soiled humanity of it, the ragged spines of the old audio disks in their paper sleeves. One foot bare, the other in a velvet slipper." (203)

Again, there is the combination of litter, waste, antiquated technology, material signs of humanity. What, then, is the difference between the humanity that the black child and the Zionites embody and Tessier-Ashpool's humanity ? There appears an element of dissipation, of degraded opulence, in the velvet slipper. Tessier-Ashpool's is a soiled humanity, soiled because, as Case explains, it was parasitical :

"Freeside's ecosystem was limited, not closed. Zion was a closed system, capable of cycling for years without the introduction of external materials. Freeside produced its own air and water, but relied on constant shipments of food, on the regular augmentation of soil nutrients. The Villa Straylight produced nothing at all." (226)

In *Count Zero*, the same images and relations occur. Bobby gazes at the Projects :

"Vast rectilinear structures softened by a random overlay of retrofitted greenhouse balconies, catfish tanks, solar heating units, and the ubiquitous chicken wire dishes... It had always looked good to Bobby, up there, so much happening on the balconies at night, amid red smudges of charcoal, little kids in their underwear swarming like monkeys, so small you could barely see them. Sometimes the wind would shift, and the smell of cooking would settle over Big Playground..." [*Count Zero*, 30]

Gibson gives similarly elaborate descriptions of the interior of the Projects, where a self-sufficient ecological system echoes that of Zion, but where the ethnic identity of Lucas, Beauvoir, Rhea and Jackie is bound up with the practice of vodou, a "street religion, [come] out of a dirt-poor place a million years ago" (77) as Beauvoir describes it. Ultimately, these images of ethnicity associated with a material and essential humanity are all related to the Caribbean islands, islands claimed by Europeans whose indigenous inhabitants were eventually exterminated and replaced by imported slave labor from West Africa. These slaves worked the vast sugar plantations introduced to the islands in order to solve the currency and agricultural crises that plagued Europe in the fifteenth century. What kind of metaphor for humanity, then, is Gibson offering here ? Should we be skeptical of his projection of these ethnic and certainly religious identities into the future, and his idealization of them as organic, self-sufficient, ramshackle and old ? Or does Gibson offer an antidote to the past and future vagaries of capitalism and corporate culture ?