

Cross/Cultures 145

Literature for Our Times

Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century



Edited by Bill Ashcroft, Ranjini Mendis,
Julie McGonegal, and Arun Mukherjee

Literature for Our Times

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145

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Literature for Our Times

Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by

Bill Ashcroft, Ranjini Mendis,
Julie McGonegal, and Arun Mukherjee

Introduction by
Bill Ashcroft



Amsterdam - New York, NY 2012

Cover image:

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Into the Light (2008; serigraph; 59.1 x 136.5 cm)

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www.susanpoint.com

Cover design:

Inge Baeten

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of "ISO 9706:1994, Information and documentation - Paper for documents - Requirements for permanence".

ISBN: 978-90-420-3453-2

E-Book ISBN: 978-94-012-0739-3

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Printed in The Netherlands

To the memory of Meenakshi Mukherjee
(*Kolkata 1937–†Hyderabad 2009)

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Preface and Acknowledgements

IT IS WITH IMMENSE PLEASURE THAT THE EDITORS OF THIS BOOK present this selection of essays from the 14th international Triennial conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, held in Vancouver, in August 2007.

Our theme, “Literature For Our Times,” elicited a wide range of presentations, drawing 468 registered participants from Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, West Indies, the USA, South America, as well as Canada, and many volunteers, all of whom made this a memorable and the largest conference in the 35-year history of ACLALS.

Our call for papers invited discussion of the role of literature in our troubled times. We asked: “Is literature a force for reconciliation and cross-cultural understanding or only an instrument for aesthetic pleasure of the privileged? Does literature provide us, in the famous phrase of Kenneth Burke, with ‘equipment for living’, or does it only obscure reality and deflect resistance?” The conference “continue[d] the arduous conversation” (to quote Hanif Kureishi, from our CFP; *The Guardian*, 19 July 2005), considering many aspects of literary praxis, such as: literature as resistance; literature as pedagogy; literature as a world language; literature of human survival; literature of apocalyptic and utopian imaginings; literature of real and imagined ethnicities; literature of cultural affiliations; literature in a global cultural economy; literature for promotion of peace and justice; literature of healing and reconciliation – and others.

The keynote speakers – Jeannette Armstrong, Henry Giroux, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Sivakami Palanimuthu, Robert J.C. Young – set the tone for each day, while 208 individual papers, 39 panels, programmed evening and ‘free-for-all’ noon readings, and several plenary sessions constituted the six-day programme. This book, which includes revised essay versions of some of

these papers, would have been even richer had we been able to include the Q&A session by Derek Walcott, the Commonwealth Writers Prize winners' roundtable, the many panel discussions, and the Anna Rutherford lecture by Stephen Slemon, which took the form of a multi-media presentation on mountaineering titled "Literature in the Age of Descent."

Acknowledged with much gratitude is funding support for the conference from the Commonwealth Foundation and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for major grants; the Canada Council for the Arts, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and the Writers Union of Canada for supporting the creative readings; the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (CIPSH/UNESCO) through the International Association for Modern Languages; the University of British Columbia, York University, Concordia University, the University of Calgary, Dalhousie University, Simon Fraser University, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Victoria; Jacquie Flanagan of *Alberta Views Magazine* (personal donation); *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*; *Interventions: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*; the University of Toronto Press; and Random House. As well, Kwantlen Polytechnic University generously funded a keynote speaker, granted me an Educational Leave to organize the conference, and approved a one-section teaching release in 2009 to work on this book.

Many thanks to members of the Canadian branch of ACLALS for helping in many ways, with very special mention due to Pamela McCallum, for her absolutely unstinting help for the programme; to the Aboriginal Participation, African Participation, Dalit and South Asian Participation Committees; the Local Committee in various capacities; and the Programme Committee. Also, to Margery Fee, for facilitating the major SSHRC application; Ashok Mathur and Gugu Hlongwane, for assisting with the Canada Council application; Bruce Raskob, for his most dependable help on site; Bernett Cody and Kevin Stranac, for attentively managing our conference website; the Public Knowledge Project, for their Open Conference Website, which not only kept participants informed of the evolving event but also enabled some delegates who were unable to travel to Vancouver to post their papers online; Wilma Maki, for publicity in Vancouver; the graduate student assistants Josh Fagan, Carol Linnitt, and Donya Tag-El-Din (all kind courtesy of ACLALS Vice-Chair Arun Mukherjee and York University's English Department) for document preparation; Allison Mackey, for proofreading this MS; and a warm thank-you to Wendy Robbins, for reviewing a section of essays for this book.

Special thanks to Gordon Collier for meticulous and caring attention to this book, as well as his good humour, which enabled this project to be brought to a pleasant and satisfactory close; to Arun Mukherjee and Julie McGonegal for their valuable work on the editorial team; and to Bill Ashcroft for so graciously pulling it all together.

A personal debt of gratitude to Harish Trivedi and John Willinsky for unwavering support and encouragement to stay the course; to Jean Mercer and Stan Briggs for attentive presence; to Ann Aldred for being a stalwart friend through toil and trouble; and to my daughter Sharmalene, for enduring the intense preoccupation of my ACLALS years while discovering her own sustaining postcolonial path.

RANJINI MENDIS



Some of the essays in this volume have already appeared elsewhere, in different form and in whole or part. Reproduced below are the notifications provided in the initial footnote to the essays concerned:

Debjani Ganguly, “Global Literary Refractions” — Republished, with revisions, from the *English Academy Review* 25.1 (May 2008): 4–19.

Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, “From Indomania to Indophobia” — This essay, originally delivered at the ACLALS conference in Vancouver in 2007, was developed into a longer version (directed to a somewhat different argument) and published in a chapter, entitled “‘Mixing a Little with Alien Natures’: Biblical Orientalism in De Quincey,” in *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions* (2008). Permission has been granted by Routledge for republication of portions of the text which first appeared in print in that volume.

Elena Basile, “Scars of Language in Translation” — A portion of this essay has appeared in Spanish as “Cicatrices lingüísticas que pican: pensamientos sobre traducción como una poética de curación cultural,” *deSignis: Publicación de la Federación Latinoamericana de Semiótica* (Buenos Aires) 12 (Spring 2008): 19–28.

Robert J.C. Young, “English in the Languages of Cultural Encounters” — A version of this essay has already appeared as “English and the Language of Others,” *European Review* 17.1 (2009): 203–12.

Pilar Somacarrera, “‘Witness is what you must bear’” — The following essay is a revised and expanded version, translated by the author, of Pilar Somacarrera Íñigo,

“‘Ser testigo es necesario’: la poética política de Margaret Atwood,” *Asparkia: Investigació feminista* 18 (2007): 119–37. [Extra consensual editing by Gordon Collier.]

Henry A. Giroux, “Collaterally Damaged” — This essay (here in places heavily revised) has also been published, with post-Bush adjustments, as “Disposable Futures: Dirty Democracy and the Politics of Disposability,” in *Education and Hope in Troubled Times: Visions of Change for Our Children’s World*, ed. H. Svi Shapiro (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2009): 223–40. Published in *Literature for Our Times* with further up-dating [by Gordon Collier].



Introduction:

A Convivial Critical Democracy

—— Post-Colonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century

BILL ASHCROFT

OVER TWENTY YEARS AGO, *THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK* WAS WRITTEN to bring together the textual attentiveness of Commonwealth literature and sophisticated approaches to contemporary theory that could evolve a way of reading the continuing cultural engagements of colonial societies. Looking back, it's hard to imagine a more frenetic or argumentative field of literary study than this one subsequently became over the next twenty years. Indeed, it often seemed as though to enter the field you had to critique the very idea of the post-colonial, while its demise was trumpeted by a jostling succession of Cassandras. Yet post-colonial studies has not only flourished, but has embraced its critics, channelling even their objections into the broad collective agenda of the creative cultural engagement with imperialism in all its forms. The question this volume addresses is: What is the field of post-colonial studies beginning to look like in the twenty-first century? We might also ask: What exactly are post-colonial studies? Does this field remain within observable or even locatable boundaries?

This volume continues the radical reflexivity of the field, the term 'post-colonial' hardly ever regarded as unproblematical by its exponents. Post-colonial theory may be defined as that branch of contemporary theory that investigates, and develops propositions about, the cultural and political impact of European conquest upon colonized societies, and the nature of those societies' responses. We might add some caveats to this: that the term refers to post-colonization and not post-independence, that it identifies neither a chronology nor a specific ontology – it is not 'after colonialism' nor is it a way of being.

Post-colonial is a way of reading. But its sudden and remarkable rise beyond its original conception was partly due to the fact that by the late 1980s the world was hungry for a language to describe the diversity of cultures and the intersecting global range of cultural production. Post-colonial theory provided that language, a way of talking about the engagement of the global by the local, particularly local cultures, and, most importantly, provided a greatly nuanced view of globalization that developed from its understanding of the complexities of imperial relationships.

The language of post-colonialism drove the cultural turn in globalization studies in the 1990s for three reasons. First, the systematization of post-colonial theory occurred at about the same time as the rise to prominence of globalization studies in the late 1980s. Second, it was around this time that literary and cultural theorists realized that debates on globalization had become bogged down in the classical narrative of modernity. Third, it became clear, particularly after Appadurai, that there were many globalizations, and that far from the homogenizing downward pressure of economic globalization and the Washington Consensus, a circulation of local alternatives could be seen to affect the nature of the global. It was through *cultural* practices that difference and hybridity, diffusion and the imaginary, concepts that undermined the eurocentric narrative of modernity, were most evident.

Indeed, a major feature of post-colonial studies has been its ability to analyse a vast array of cultural developments: race and racism; expressions of anticolonial nationalism; the paradoxical dissolution of the idea of nation along with the continuous persistence of national concerns; the question of language and appropriation; of the transformation of literary genres; the question of ethnicity and its relation to the state; the growing mobility of formerly colonized populations. But in this volume we get a clear sense of the wide range of contemporary post-colonial concerns. While the sections conform generally to existing areas of interest, we can detect within each one a pushing of disciplinary boundaries and a pushing into ever more expansive intellectual territory. Despite the multiple attempts at definition and the plethora of critics sounding its death-knell, this remarkable field has experienced more than its share of boundary-marking, boundaries inscribed, ironically, more often by its critics and doomsayers. But the field refuses to be contained. It is not amenable to boundaries but it does have what might be called a driving energy. It is concerned with justice and liberation and it explores this concern within the various forms of cultural engagement of colonized peoples with imperial dominance in its modes and manifestations. Broad as this may seem, it is the

driving force of the field, a centrifugal rather than centripetal energy, that explains the multiplicity of approaches it stimulates. The challenge for post-colonial theorists is to avoid the temptation to view ‘post-colonialism’ as a master-discourse. This is precisely why I continue to use the hyphenated form of the term. We need to acknowledge that it represents a rhizomic interplay of pursuits all directed in some way towards analysing the varied and continuing effects of imperial power. It is not a Grand Theory of everything but a range of interests and approaches living together in what Amartya Sen might call an argumentative democracy.¹

Whether we like it or not, post-colonial studies now extends far beyond the original moment of colonization. The field has come to represent a dizzyingly broad network of cohabiting intellectual pursuits, circulating around the general idea of an ongoing engagement with imperial power in its various historical forms. Clearly, the power dynamic of that originating moment and the forms of transformation it generated are still relevant to the range of areas of study in the field today. Post-colonial analysis has always intersected the study of race, gender, class, but these intersections have generated an ever-increasing range of specific interests, overlapping and cohabiting within the field. This volume demonstrates this phenomenon of ‘cohabitation’ quite comprehensively, and I would now describe the field of post-colonial studies as a “convivial critical democracy.” I take the term ‘convivial’ from Paul Gilroy’s advocacy of a “convivial multicultural democracy” in *After Empire: Melancholia of Convivial Culture* (2004). The term, derived from the Latin ‘con’ (with) and ‘vivere’ (to live), underpins his aim to see whether multicultural diversity can be combined with an hospitable civic order, whether a convivial acceptance of difference might be achieved in a different kind of convivial multicultural democracy than the examples presently available, particularly in Britain.

It seems to me that this etymologically faithful use of the term ‘convivial’ describes very aptly the present state of post-colonial studies. The determination of different approaches to ‘live with’ each other in a condition of productive debate and intermingling shows how the field may avoid becoming a Grand Theory. Conviviality does not obviate argument, but neither does argument obviate cohabitation. Because post-colonial study does not refer to a particular methodology (just as it doesn’t refer to a chronology or an onto-

¹ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

logy), this argumentativeness has been a characteristic, perhaps a *necessary*, characteristic of the field from the beginning. But conviviality has led to a radical expansion, an increase in what might be called post-colonial pursuits, as disciplinary boundaries become more porous, cultural and national distinctiveness more rhizomic, and the exploratory impetus of post-colonial scholars more pronounced.

There has always been a range of activities 'living with' each other in post-colonial studies: textual criticism, historical scholarship, cultural anthropology, literary theory, translation theory. There has been a rather tight but argumentative range of approaches to the questions of post-colonial engagement, centering on issues such as resistance, decolonization, the-book-or-the-barricade, on the one hand, and hybridity, transculturality, and transformation, on the other. The future of this conviviality appears to lie in the relationship between another range of fields emerging from the fluidity and permeability of global cultural relations. Cosmopolitanism, world literature (in the Goethian mode), world literatures, transnational literatures, as well as an expanding field of diasporic studies have all been pursued either consciously or implicitly in relation to post-colonial studies. This conviviality has led to an overlapping and at times interpenetration of what might seem to be distinct fields, all of which share an aggregation of theoretical languages. This conviviality has not been, nor should it be, without argument, for this is precisely how different ways of reading can be tested and refined. But it should be without bitterness and self-righteousness, which are the signs of philosophical insecurity.

This critical conviviality and recalcitrant border-crossing has a strategic dimension that places post-colonial studies at the centre of contemporary developments in knowledge-production. A transformation in critical scholarship in the humanities has paralleled the rise of post-colonial studies over the last twenty years. The field of social epistemology, or knowledge studies, developed from about the mid-1990s has been marked by an acknowledgement that older discipline-centred forms of scholarship were being transformed. One book that initiated the present debate in knowledge studies is *The New Production of Knowledge*. Written by an international team led by Michael Gibbons, it was published in 1994 and has since been very widely cited in the literature on research management, because it described nothing less than a paradigm shift across the entire field of knowledge-production. One of the most influential consequences of the book was its terminology (possibly because it suited governmental and institutional planners): Mode 1 represented

the traditional discipline-based form of research, Mode 2 the developing transdisciplinary practice. In Mode 1, “individual creativity is emphasized as the driving force of development and quality control operating through disciplinary structures organized to identify and enhance it”; knowledge is “accumulated through the professionalization of specialization largely institutionalized in universities.”² The alternative Mode 2 research in which transdisciplinarity was the privileged form produced new knowledge not from the core of disciplines, but in the ‘interstices’ between them, the pressure of innovation causing their boundaries to become increasingly “fuzzy.”³

I am not suggesting that post-colonial studies are necessarily interdisciplinary in the radical institutional way this concept emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. It conforms more closely to a conception of discipline-based interdisciplinarity represented by Julie Thompson Klein’s *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice* (1990), and *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity* (1996). Klein’s argument is that at present new knowledge is most often produced by boundary-crossing in the form of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research, and that this tends to be located in the shadow structures – the dynamic, informal networks and collaborations that form beneath and across the surface structures.

Today, such interdisciplinarity can be found in post-colonial studies in the research of people working from a strong disciplinary base and venturing across boundaries of all kinds – not just disciplinary but cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries. This, of course, is not new to literary scholars. The actual porosity of the boundaries of ‘English literature’ is recognized by anyone researching for a PhD. But this boundary-crossing becomes more prevalent in post-colonial studies as critics and scholars become committed to the worldliness of the text. For Edward Said, the worldliness of the text is its *situatedness*, its

status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency, [...] incorporated in the text itself, an infrangible part of its capacity for conveying and producing meaning.⁴

² Michael Gibbons, in Gibbons, Helga Nowotny & Camille Limoges, *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (Thousand Oaks CA & London: Sage, 1994): 9.

³ Gibbons, Nowotny & Limoges, *The New Production of Knowledge*, 147.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1983): 39).

For historical reasons, the disciplinary base of post-colonial scholars has been dominated by literary studies, and this involved, from the very beginning, a powerful compulsion to engage the text as a cultural practice. Despite the celebrity of poststructuralist colonial discourse theorists (who have, unfortunately, appeared to represent the whole field to the wider community), most scholars in the field have been committed to revealing the material and discursive connections between the text and its cultural grounding. Where literatures in English were concerned, the dismantling of the *filiative* relationship with the canon of English literature was accompanied by a commitment to explore the full range of cultural *affiliations* – the worldliness – of the literature written by formerly colonized people. Because of its constant interplay between the analysis of specific cultural materialities and the production of more global explanatory theories, the field has by its very nature always pushed against disciplinary boundaries.

Some time ago, I suggested that post-colonial studies were characterized by excess: an excess of insistence, of supplementarity and hybridity.⁵ To its detractors, this tendency to excess seems just too much, too insistent, and to some a sign of unrecoverable fragmentation, the evaporation of some phantom methodological core. But this excess of supplementarity has been the strength of post-colonial studies, not only in its numerous approaches but also in the range of its disciplinary border-crossings. Consider the aggregation of interests, subjects, and approaches this volume collects: affect studies; autobiography; Dalit studies; diaspora studies; gender studies; Indigenous studies; linguistics; migration; Orientalism; transcultural theory; transnationalism; trauma studies; and translation studies. It engages in debate with coterminous fields such as world literature, deals with overlapping concepts such as cosmopolitanism, and examines the literary dimension of ethics and human rights. It addresses contemporary global issues such as terrorism, neo-imperialism, globalization, and the postmodern state, while maintaining a tradition of close attention to individual writers, particularly those from formerly colonized nations. From the evidence of this collection, the field overlaps the disciplines of anthropology, history, sociology, political science, psychology, as well as extending radically the orbit of literary studies. As a way of reading, post-colonialism now extends into various realms of contemporary social politics and refuses to be confined. Clearly, post-colonial studies

⁵ Bill Ashcroft, "Excess: Postcolonialism and the Verandahs of Meaning," in *De-scribing Empire*, ed. Alan Lawson & Chris Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1994): 33–44.

is too dynamic and unruly to police. It has become a field with rich pasture and few fences.

The Field and Its Interlocutors

Perhaps the consequence of a history of boundary-crossing is the congenital habit among post-colonial scholars of questioning the existing formulations of the field. This often involves the examination of a range of interactions with other ways of conceiving global cultural production. One of the most topical of these at the moment is world literature, an interaction addressed by FRANK SCHULZE-ENGLER, who assesses the place of post-colonial studies in relation to it, and DEBJANI GANGULY, who indicates some of the more intractable problems of this formation. Working from somewhat different standpoints, both critics point out the considerable gap between world literature's utopian conception of the 'world' and its actual imperialistic formulation. World literature (not *literatures*) has become attractive to many post-colonial theorists, possibly because, like cosmopolitanism, it suggests an ethical dimension. It emerges, ostensibly, in Goethe's ideal of *Weltliteratur* – the dream of 'a common world literature transcending national limits' – an ideal more of its own time than ours. Despite their attempts, the various proponents of world literature fail to avoid the traps that lie in Goethe's original ideal. The parties to Goethe's imagined conversation transcending national limits are invariably national literatures, and world literature concerns the relationship of nation and nation. But if we take into account oral and traditional literatures within nations, these are engaged in no other conversation than one with their own readers. In the more interesting case of post-colonial writers appropriating English and thus choosing a world audience of English speakers, the conversation is not between nations, neither does it claim to be a world conversation. More troubling is the privileged place accorded by Goethe to European literatures in the world, a privilege leading directly to an almost parodic eurocentrism in theories such as Pascale Casanova's, in which the Paris-centric structure of world literature rehearses one of the more outmoded aspects of imperial geometry. Ganguly finds a way out of the eurocentric quagmire towards a post-colonial conception of world literatures. But the term 'world literature' begs the question of who can be included. First, who can be included in the world and, second, who can be included in literature. Neither of these memberships is very clear. While the aim of world literature is to transcend the fixation on national literatures, every consideration of such

literature is organized along national lines. 'Literature', on the other hand, seems to exclude everything but writing. While the interests of post-colonial literary studies reside principally in written texts, the presence and importance of oral literatures in the field is a given. Even more important perhaps is the transformation of 'literature' under the influence of those oral and vernacular appropriations of English. Ultimately, the 'conversation' of world literature is between writer and readers, not writers and writers.

A related, if not cognate idea with which post-colonial studies interacts is described by the increasingly popular term 'cosmopolitanism'. Although this volume offers no considered examination of the relationship between cosmopolitanism and post-colonial studies, the connection is not entirely unproblematical. Many post-colonial theorists have enthusiastically adopted this notoriously slippery concept, first, because it is a much more politically acceptable term for multiculturalism, but also because it appears to have at its centre a profoundly attractive ethical dimension. Building on Kant and Levinas, Ulf Hannerz defines the cosmopolitan thus:

an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity.⁶

The ethical dimension of cosmopolitan theory is its great strength and I admire its utopian orientation. But while 'cosmopolitan' is a useful adjective, it is a failure as a noun. Hong Kong and Shanghai, London and New York may be described as 'cosmopolitan spaces', but who is 'the cosmopolitan'? Within the cultural space of the 'cosmopolitan city', which category of its citizens may be constituted cosmopolitan subjects: expatriates, multi-lingual locals? Which narrative of identity in the transitional, open, and exogenous space of the world city frames a cosmopolitan subject? Who, exactly, is a cosmopolitan? Nevertheless, the rapid movement of post-colonial studies into the global dimensions of diaspora, transnationalism, and transculturalism means that the ethical dimension of cosmopolitanism, of openness to the other, will be increasingly taken into account. Being "at home in the world" appeals directly to post-colonialism's critique of the nation and its discourses of exclusion.

LINCOLN Z. SHLENSKY and PAUL SHARRAD approach the question of the changing field of post-colonial studies through analyses of specific works.

⁶ Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 103.

Shlensky shows how Jamaica Kincaid's writing confirms the capacity of literature to enter an ethical engagement with history, specifically through the efficacy of the autobiographical. We are reminded in passing that writers are understandably resentful at being labelled 'post-colonial,' 'postmodern' or anything else. This re-confirms the fact that the term is not ontological but critical – a way of reading – and that the writers themselves provide us with the tools to see the continued relevance of post-colonial reading. Sharrad, reviewing the need for transformation in the field, and focusing on *The Book Thief* by the Australian author Marcus Zusak, sees the strategic place of affect theory as one significant extension of the boundary-crossing flair of post-colonial studies. Both Shlensky's and Sharrad's essays perform the important function of grounding theory in the texts themselves.

In another essay on a settler-colony writer, NELA BUREU RAMOS discusses Robert Kroetsch's *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* Kroetsch has long been a major post-colonial poet, but his work achieves even greater assurance and grace in this collection. Bureu engages what may be a growing interest in the balance between time and space in post-colonial writing. She offers a direction for post-colonial literature that is worth quoting in full: that "literature for our times should be one capable of rescuing us from virtuality, taking us back to and making us aware of all the other spaces we inhabit. It should be a literature that may heal by embracing all forms of life, and also a literature that can help us break free of the tyranny of the 'before and after' and – even worse – of the 'too late' imposed by time" (86).

Orientalism

Edward Said's seminal thesis will continue to stimulate commentary and argument from all sides.⁷ DANIEL ROBERTS' examination of the movement in European attitudes from Indomania to Indophobia, a movement that may be demonstrated from Thomas De Quincey's writing, reveals the insecurities attending the imperialistic hubris even as it was articulated and hardened in the course of the nineteenth century. Roberts advocates closer attention to the roots of postcolonialism in the archive of colonialism. SATISH C. AIKANT focuses on the Indian rebellion of 1857 to demonstrate the complexity and over-determination of events that contest any unified, undifferentiated

⁷ See an account of the various critiques of Orientalism in Bill Ashcroft & Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said* (London & New York: Routledge, 3rd ed. 2008).

concept of Orientalism. Ruskin Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons*, by narrating the circumstances of two Eurasian women, Mariam and her daughter Ruth, opens a window on a critical period in India's colonial history, one that reveals the complex human consequences of historical events, and cautions against overly general theories of imperial history.

Translation

Translation has become one of the most prominent issues in post-colonial studies over recent years. The debates about translation in the field have revolved almost solely around the translation of indigenous texts into English. But the kind of 'inner translation' with which post-colonial studies deals, the inner translation that occurs when writers write in a second language, could be the point at which translation studies and post-colonial studies meet, not to fight over the disciplinary territory, but to be mutually helpful. While critics such as Ganesh Devy advocate translation of the South Asian literatures as a response to 'cultural amnesia', as part of the process of recovering an indigenous Indian literary tradition,⁸ the colonial relationship itself has brought translation to prominence. Despite the obvious power-relationship in the colonial linguistic landscape, the translation of English texts into local languages has often resuscitated many vernacular literatures themselves, particularly in South India.⁹ Translation is extremely important in post-colonial studies for the simple reason that it has always been the site of a power-struggle. The translation of indigenous tongues has been a method of political domination, and, conversely, the translation of indigenous texts into English has been seen to be a strategy of political resistance. This is particularly so in South Asia, where the proliferation of texts in indigenous languages has provided a huge resource contesting what some believe to be an anglocentric focus in post-colonial cultures.

While the centre of the debate has been located in South Asia, with very lively arguments about the importance of vernacular literatures, it is reason-

⁸ G.N. Devy, "After Amnesia" (1992), in *The G.N. Devy Reader: After Amnesia, 'Of Many Heroes', The Being of Bhasha and Countering Violence*, foreword by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2009): 110–34.

⁹ See Vanamala Viswanatha & Sherry Simon, "Shifting Grounds of Exchange: B.M. Srikantaiah and Kannada Translation," in *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett & Harish Trivedi (London: Routledge, 1999): 162–81.

able to suggest that NGŪGĪ' WA THIONG'O's refusal to publish his novels in English brought the question of translation to centre stage. Ngūgĩ is prominent in this volume also. Faced with the overwhelming reality of globalization, Ngūgĩ builds on his proposal in *Moving the Centre* for a multiplicity of centres by suggesting that translation is a key mode of negotiating the universal and the particular. "If the globe is seen as a circle," he says, "the languages should be seen as occupying their place in the ring, and all contributing to the human centre" (141–42). In a thoughtful development of his concern about the hegemony of English, Ngūgĩ proposes that translation is itself a vital technology of globalization, contributing to better understanding in the global community.

Since this section on "Translation and Transformation" is both initiated by Ngūgĩ's essay on translation and inspired by his decision to write in Gikuyu, we include discussion of his own work. JOHN HAWLEY demonstrates Ngūgĩ's own transformation of the novel form by examining its antithesis – the obsession with 'pouring concrete in one's own honour'. Ngūgĩ's parody of all demagogues' determination to repeat the failure of the Tower of Babel, in *Wizard of the Crow*, throws into relief the very fluid, orature-based, and amusing liveliness of his writing in English. Though Ngūgĩ might be an icon, his writing will never become an edifice. MUMIA OSAAJI revisits the famous decision by Ngūgĩ to reject English to escape 'mental decolonization'. While Ngūgĩ's decision has been the focus of a continuing debate, Osaaji gives a thorough account of Ngūgĩ's position, discussing it in terms of identity-formation, resistance, and subjectivity, while offering an African critique of his own.

ELENA BASILE develops the post-colonial connection into a transnational context, discussing the 'itch' of language and the dimensions of diasporic feminist translation in the work of the Hong Kong-born Canadian Jam Ismail. Investigating this very innovative concept, she examines the possibility that the 'itchiness' of the scars of language can be the site of cultural healing through processes of translation. ROBERT YOUNG interrogates the fact that English is the language of ACLALS itself, despite its inclusion of countries in which fifty-three different languages are spoken. Looking at the canonical texts of English literature, he shows that even here English is not one thing but already, before it leaves England, is a range of vernacular inflected appropriations. English, possibly because of its many source languages, has the constant facility for self-hybridization. Rather than keep itself pure, it has "languished in a constant state of desire for other languages" (193). English,

the most translated of languages, is also the most unstable and, for post-colonial critics and linguists, productively so.

Diaspora, Transnationalism, Transculturalism

The issues of diaspora, transculturality, migration, and exile have been prominent concerns in post-colonial studies for some time. There is no doubt that a route for post-colonial studies in the twenty-first century lies now in the dispersal and constant movement of diasporic populations who adopt English as a form of cultural articulation. Diasporas are communities usually understood as fundamentally absent from the nation, crippled by absence, loss, and alienation. But not only does this misunderstand the fluid constitution of nations and the proliferation of subject-positions within them, but it misunderstands the character of diasporas as flows within as well as beyond nations.

The essays in this section address many aspects of this issue. Sissy Helff proposes transculturality as a way into global literatures beyond questions of colonization and imperialism. This use of the term in this context extends the Ortiz–Pratt use of the term familiar to post-colonial studies. Focusing on the Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian, Irish-born writer-cum-visual artist Shani Mootoo, she makes a bridge between concepts such as *mestizaje*, hybridity, and transnationalism that proposes a new theoretical direction. She argues that Mootoo's is a "poetic voice [that] consciously dishevels any form of essentialist ideas of culture and identity by calling for a universal acceptance of living in a state of difference and diversity" (210). Mootoo reveals, perhaps, that, far from being alienated from the nation, diasporic writing may reveal that all subjectivity is already in-between, already inhabiting a state of transculturality.

The Caribbean has always been a rich ground for post-colonial studies: issues of exile, hybridization, and language transformation have made it a fertile field for analysis and the production of theory. A key aspect of the Caribbean literary psyche has been what might be called an 'Oceanic imaginary', linked with the memory of the Middle Passage, and the geographical reality of the surrounding ocean. John Clement Ball investigates the possibility that "ocean space may represent the restless and fluid mutability of migrant and diasporic identities" (229). The sea, both as subject, presence and even wave-like cadence in the writing is a constant reality in Jamaica Kincaid's writing. Ball uses a shift in Kincaid's use of the sea to indicate a change in

Caribbean and Black-Atlantic studies from “a terrestrial and national emphasis to an oceanic and transnational orientation” (230).

ANJALI ROY builds upon her extensive scholarship in the internal Punjabi diaspora to examine the inroads made by bhangra music into Punjabi society after returning from Britain. Roy argues against a simple hierarchical view of globalization as American neo-imperialism, by showing the endlessly innovative ways in which local communities transform dominant technologies. The term ‘boomerang effect’ is another way of describing the deeply transformative agency of post-colonial societies. India, far from being flooded by “alien American images,” saw an explosive Bollywood revival. Bhangra “returned back home” to India after having conquered Britain, crossing linguistic, regional, and class barriers to win itself a pan-Indian constituency, while at the same time invading American popular culture. Her analysis turns simplistic views of globalization on their head. The bhangra ‘revival’ confirms the global circulation of post-colonial cultural production as the development of vernacular forms in the metropolis return to transform local popular cultures.

India has a fascinating place in this dynamic of travel. For many, Indian identity begins and ends in geography, in the great mother Bharat, but this geography is itself a network of places of pilgrimage and lines of travel. Motwani¹⁰ has made a compelling, if provocative, claim for the migratory adventures of Indian peoples since about 8000 BC, migrations as far as Mexico, Turkey, Bali as well as the obvious migrations to South East Asia. For him, the Indian people have always been migratory and exploratory. This characterizes the Indian motherland itself. DOROTHY LANE cites Bhardwaj: “The whole of India can be regarded as a vast sacred space organised into a system of pilgrimage centres and their fields” (275). Lane examines the connection between India as a land of pilgrimage for both Indian and Western travellers, offering an extensive analysis of the differences between these two forms of dedicated exploration. KAVITA IVY NANDAN offers a personal account of the human consequences of racism against one particular Indian journey, that of the indentured Indian labourers transported to Fiji, whom she calls ‘Fijiindians’. Fiji’s entire social fabric has been all but destroyed by a succession of coups since 1987. Nandan celebrates the function of writing as

¹⁰ J.K. Motwani, “Indian Migratory Adventures: Global and Ancient,” in *Theorizing and Critiquing Indian Diaspora*, ed. Adesh Pal & Tapas Chakraborty (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2004): 39–68.

a healing process, one shared with exiled and diasporic peoples throughout the world, and one that generates hope for a healing of what Satendra Nandan calls “The Wounded Sea.”

Gendered Bodies

Gender has long been an important intersection in post-colonial studies. Women, like other colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonized’ by various forms of patriarchal domination. Women are thus doubly colonized and the concept of double colonization is well established since Petersen and Rutherford’s ground-breaking *Double Colonization* (1985). Early critiques of Western feminism as hegemonic are not dissimilar to some critiques of post-colonial discourse itself and the development of movements such as African womanism in the 1990s has led to a lively critical history.¹¹ Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate and empower the marginalized, and both have undergone similar trajectories moving away from strategies of simple reversal to those of transformation. Some issues remain prominent and the problems of women’s marginalization go deep into the culture of many post-colonial societies.

FEROZA JUSSAWALA revisits the continuing debate between Western and post-colonial feminists about the right to choose the veil as a statement of Muslim identity. In a reading of a wide range of texts, from Rokeya Hossain’s 1905 feminist utopia *Sultana’s Dream* to Azar Nafisi’s controversial 2004 novel *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, she demonstrates the social and cultural complexities surrounding the choice of identity-markers.

CHERYL STOBIE’s analysis of Chimamanda Adiche’s *Purple Hibiscus* makes a contribution to the analysis of African feminism – what has come to be seen as ‘womanism’ – by showing how the novel subverts the production of strict gender boundaries within the nuclear family and offers a hybrid and reformist view of gendered bodies within the family, religion, and society. The heroine, Kambili, comes to understand the pathology of her own family, with its authoritarian structures of patriarchy and religion, by encountering alternative models of motherhood and fatherhood. In contrast to many approaches to this text, which see it in terms of a simple patriarchal struggle, Stobie shows how the novel works to disrupt gender binarism, offering com-

¹¹ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English,” *Signs* 11.1 (Autumn 1985): 63–80.

binations of gendered attributes. This reveals the novel to be much more sophisticated and adventurous than is often thought. MARILYN ADLER PAPAYANIS investigates the strategic place of the literary text in bearing witness to apocalypse and the end of history. Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* and J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* reveal the relationship between trauma and testimony, and the ways in which the forces of imperialism and patriarchy impact on the bodies of colonized subjects. Papayanis discusses the place of gender in the relationship between trauma and testimony and the extent to which it features in an ethical responsibility for the Other.

Indigenous Literatures, Literatures of the Land

Not only does this collection demonstrate the unruly proliferation of interests in the field but it also extends these interests into innovative explorations of existing research areas. Indigenous societies have been seen increasingly as communities offering strategies for sustainable relations with the environment and JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG's meticulous analysis of the language of the Syilx Native American people shows not only their relationship with the land but the ways in which ideas about traditional myth may be radically revised through an understanding of the social function of their storytelling. This ground-breaking essay shows how the stories of indigenous relationship with land can provide an ethos for contemporary questions of sustainability.

SAM MCKEGNEY and MICHAELA MOURA-KOÇOĞLU examine the immense and emasculating pressure on indigenous males to perform their identity within masculine stereotypes demanded by the expectations of the surrounding societies. Because their connection with place is so complete, indigenous communities have had to bear the misperception of their static identity, a stasis rebutted by theorists such as James Clifford in his analysis of the movements of Pacific indigenous peoples. Connected with this propensity for stasis is, of course, a habit of stereotyping. McKegney examines the masculine stereotypes with which American popular culture has shackled the Native American male: semiotic configurations of 'Native-ness' as either impossibly masculine or impossibly feminine. Examining three novels, he argues that the "resurgence of healthy, non-dominative forms of Indigenous masculinity will only occur alongside the reinvigoration of indigenous principles of kinship" (386). Moura-Koçoğlu investigates the ways in which "the concept of the warrior is embraced, maintained, and re-asserted as an intrinsic

feature of modern Indigeneity” in Aotearoa New Zealand (395). The warrior image, supported by the Maori battalions in two wars, serves only as a source of disappointment for unmet promises of self-determination and a type tending towards social dysfunction.

A quite different literature of the land concerns a hitherto little-investigated literature, that of the Philippines. CHELVA KANAGANAYAKAM argues for the study of Philippine literature as a vibrant but comparatively unnoticed field of post-colonial studies. Unlike India, English is not a marginal language in the Philippines, but the determinedly local publishing of Filipino writers may suggest a reason for the lack of attention the literature has received. But he makes clear the fact that this literature shares much in common, both in theme, political strategy, and purpose, with other post-colonial literatures. Kanaganayakam quotes N.V.M. Gonzalez’ characterization of Filipino concerns as “a love for the land, a concern for community and a belief in salvation” (414). In his “Asia’s Christian-Latin Nation?” STEPHEN NEY also sees the Christianity of the Philippines as important and interrogates some common assumptions about the link between colonialism and Christianity. He makes the interesting point that while Europe has undergone significant de-christianization, Christianity has undergone significant postcolonialization, which undermines Derrida’s contention of the universalizing thrust of Christian latinity. Like Kaganayakam, he sees Philippine literature as a valuable object of study and in this case an ideal source for the examination of the postcolonializing of Christianity.

Dalit Literature

Dalit literature would seem to be a natural field of interest for post-colonial studies, but the controversy surrounding it has been remarkable. The discussion by K.A. GEETHA of the situation of Dalit women indicates that Dalit exclusion has become the subject of vigorous debate in India and beyond. Geetha addresses the overlapping problems of Dalit women who are doubly marginalized by caste and gender. While the key to post-colonial writing is the capacity to take hold of self-representation, the marginalizing of Dalit writing continues in the broader context of Indian literature. It is arguable that Dalit writing occupies the space of a microcosm of post-colonial literature as a whole. In this context, the double marginalization of Dalit women reveals the value of gender studies in the field.

P. SIVAKAMI speaks about the situation of Dalit women from the point of view of a novelist exposing the universalist aesthetic of the dominant castes that may be compared with the universalizing impetus of canonical English literature. Sivakami discusses the important role of literature in the political struggles of Dalit communities. Literature has a particular function in social representation arising from the oppressed status of these communities. “Dalit literature,” she maintains, “as a separate category, with its own ontological capacities, historical past, and ideological context, will continue to retain difference as an essential element” (447).

K. SATYANARAYANA surveys the political and organizational growth of the Dalit movement since the 1990s. As with Sivakami, the criticism is here contested that literature is universal while Dalit literature is casteist and politically narrow. To this is added the complicated Marxist criticism of a ‘Dalit middle class’. Critics such as Sivasankar see caste activism as a ‘limited’ consequence of middle-class concerns. To this the author responds with an analysis of the centrality of Dalit identity in Dalit poetry.

The City

The city has been a significant absence in post-colonial theory and the coming decades may see critics taking greater account of the prolific literature set in cities such as Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore, Cape Town, and Nairobi. The movement of diasporas to major metropolitan centres has also encouraged critics to see these as amenable to a post-colonial reading. The UK and London in particular have provided a steady stream of diasporic writing, often appearing as the centre, not so much of the empire, as of the empire’s fragmentation.¹² A relatively recent example is Zadie Smith, whose novel *White Teeth* and story “Stuart” evoke, for PAMELA MCCALLUM, “the fluid, multicultural, multiracial, intergenerational streets and squares of public spaces within contemporary Britain” (497) and reveals the potential for violence lurking within them. In a fascinating comparison with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, McCallum demonstrates the ways in which such diasporic texts as “Stuart” can vividly represent moments of social and cultural transformation.

¹² See John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Re-writing the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Perhaps even less familiar on the post-colonial terrain is juvenile cult fiction. VANDANA SAXENA and ANGELIE MULTANI launch an investigation of the English public school based on J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts, the institution at the centre of the Harry Potter sagas. Hogwarts becomes a metonym of the English public school with its fostering of elitism and patriotism. While the range of characters in Hogwarts seem to characterize the Potter stories as culturally inclusive "it is critical," say the authors, "to analyse both the extent to which they establish a new cultural paradigm and the extent to which the multicultural paradigm they employ itself becomes a repressive force in relation to race and nation" (482).

Terrorism, Trauma, Loss

Trauma studies have expanded over the last decade and it is hardly surprising that colonialism, marked by histories of cultural, racial and political trauma should offer material for post-colonial critics, material that now extends well beyond classic scenes of colonial trauma. Shoshana Felman's foundational analyses of trauma feature in these discussions as the ongoing reality of colonial and post-colonial trauma make their impact in the broader field of trauma studies. Colonial trauma is extended into the politics of mourning in the aftermath of the Air India bombing in the 1980s as FRED RIBKOFF reveals the paralyzing suspension of people affected by this tragedy, caused by the interstitial nature of the victims – both an Indian and a Canadian disaster but one disavowable by both of those societies. In an increasingly migratory and cosmopolitan world, the cathartic expression and closure of grief over the consequences of such catastrophe become ever more problematical. SUSAN SPEAREY compares two very different African 'post-conflict' memoirs in the South African journalist Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, focusing on the time of her assignment reporting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the American journalist Philip Gourevitch's report on Rwanda, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow we will be Killed with Our Families*. Both reveal that "the ways in which testimony is – or fails to be – assimilated and circulated suggests that each reader plays an ongoing role in the histories of mass violence" (538) and in shaping the way we live with the legacies of violence. The phenomenon of terrorism, one that affects the West more than the formerly colonized – 9/11 having now stamped what many now regard as the character of the twenty first century – is nevertheless one that lies squarely in the purview of post-colonial studies. One person's martyr is another's ter-

rorist, and terrorism may be seen to be a consequence of successive iterations of imperialism. SUMMER PERVEZ examines Kureishi's play *Borderline*, his novel *The Black Album*, and his short story "My Son the Fanatic" in order to demonstrate the local reality of 'international terror'.

In the final essay in this section, PILAR SOMACARRERA argues that Margaret Atwood has, for her entire career, been committed to the political, to human rights, to the role of the writer to 'speak truth to power', as Edward Said put it. While Atwood has variously been regarded as an outspoken feminist and as a post-colonialist, Somacarrera provides a comprehensive overview of Atwood's poetry to show the continuing urgency of the political, the need to advocate freedom of speech, to expose the operation of power, and the violence, pain, and atrocities to which it can lead.

Afterword

In concluding the volume, the self-exiled American HENRY A. GIROUX launches a trenchant attack on the connection between imperial pretensions and the denial of human rights in George W. Bush's USA. Once again we see that a global reality that seems to lie outside the scope of the field may render itself a prime target for a post-colonial reading. We are reminded that, varied as the effects and traumas of contemporary globalization may be, their inheritance of the structures and discourses of imperial control make the contemporary world a rich field for post-colonial analysis.

The Yalta conference in World War II seemed to confirm America's belief in its own anti-imperial innocence when it made its support for the allies conditional upon the break-up of the old colonial empires. But national self-interest ensured that that support resulted in the largest military force and armaments industry the world has even known. Consequently, "as the accumulation of all previous imperialisms, the pursuit of the American dream as a global dispensation laid the basis for hyper-imperialism, in which America subsumed the rest of the world as its own back-yard, to be known and engaged with in purely American terms."¹³ The civilizing mission that provided at least some sort of objective moral justification for classical imperialism, however illusory, has now become inextricable from the hyper-nation's self-interest. This self-interest becomes the world's self-interest by means of two

¹³ Ziauddin Sardar & Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?* (Cambridge: Icon, 2002): 139.

myths – ‘Security’ and ‘Freedom’. In assessing the role of post-colonial studies in the twenty-first century, therefore, the realities of globalization and hyper-imperialism appear unavoidable. The centrifugal dynamic of this diverse field of study has enabled it to address the continuing realities of imperialism in all its forms, and it seems likely to continue to do so for some time.

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THE IDEA OF (POSTCOLONIAL) LITERATURE:
CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The Commonwealth Legacy

—— Towards a Decentred Reading of World Literature

FRANK SCHULZE—ENGLER

IRONICALLY ENOUGH, AN ESSAY ON “THE COMMONWEALTH LEGACY” in the proceedings of a Triennial Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies these days is an oddity likely to generate stifled yawns or, at best, raised eyebrows: although ACLALS continues to bear the term ‘Commonwealth’ in its name, there seems to be an overwhelming consensus that the idea of ‘Commonwealth literature’ constitutes a largely dysfunctional, perhaps even embarrassing, semantic leftover. ‘Commonwealth literature’ thus seems to derive from what is now habitually regarded as the prehistory of our field, a somewhat antediluvian phase of academic activity characterized by political naivety and theoretical unsophistication which was eventually terminated by the celebrated transition from ‘Commonwealth’ to ‘postcolonial’ in the mid-1980s.¹

¹ For an account of the transition “from Commonwealth to Postcolonial,” see *From Commonwealth to Postcolonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Sydney & Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1992). For some examples of the transitional pioneer phase of postcolonial theory before the publication of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, see: Gareth Griffiths, “Imitation, Abrogation and Appropriation: The Production of the Postcolonial Text,” *Kunapipi* 9.1 (1987): 13–20; Stephen Slemon, “Postcolonial Allegory and the Transformation of History,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23.1 (1988): 157–68, and “Re-visioning Allegory: Wilson Harris’s *Carnival*,” *Kunapipi* 8.2 (1986): 45–55; and Helen Tiffin, “Commonwealth Literature: Comparison and Judgement,” in *The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature*, ed. Dieter Riemenschneider (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1983): 19–35, “Commonwealth Literature and Comparative Methodology,” *World Literature Written in English* 23.1 (1984): 26–30, “Postcolonial Literatures and Counter-

This essay confronts this consensus with a rather more critical look at this transition, and it also suggests that what I have – in a deliberately provocative manner – termed “the Commonwealth Legacy” constitutes a set of unfinished business that is far from antediluvian, but continues very much to be with us even in our current state of theoretical sophistication. The second part of this essay takes a critical look at recent attempts to reformulate the idea of ‘world literature’ in the field of comparative literature and, in the final section, sets out why the field of the comparative study of English-language literatures offers a chance to move beyond some of the shortcomings to be found in comparative literature’s account of ‘world literature’.

What, then, constitutes the ‘Commonwealth legacy’ and what is its significance for contemporary literary studies? In a nutshell, this legacy consists in a latent field and an unsolved problem.

To begin with the field: the ‘Commonwealth legacy’ is arguably grounded neither in a theoretical model nor in an explicitly elaborated methodology (both of which ‘Commonwealth literature studies’ notoriously failed to develop) but, rather, in a transnational academic practice and an implicit dialogic comparative methodology that together constituted a new field of enquiry. The contours of this field may have become increasingly blurred in the last two decades, but in pragmatic terms it is still very much with us and continues to circumscribe the practice of teaching and research of scholars who are institutionally based in English literary and cultural studies. The transnational academic practice just referred to was established by adventurous English departments (or, at least, individual members of such departments) that began to explore the dynamics of English-language literatures emerging in various parts of the world. These departments were initially often staffed by British expatriates, but soon involved scholars from a vast variety of national and cultural backgrounds and a large number of universities in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as well as Europe and the USA.

The implicit comparative methodology that emerged together with this academic practice was based on what from today’s vantage point might be called an inherent transcultural approach of relating English-language litera-

Discourse,” *Kunapipi* 9.3 (1987): 17–34, “Postcolonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Postcolonial History,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23.1 (1988): 169–81, and “Rites of Resistance: Counter-Discourse and West Indian Biography,” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 3.1 (1989): 28–46.

ture to a wide variety of cultural and social backgrounds. For this implicit methodology, the idea of a comparative practice based on literature in one language was vital: it moved beyond conventional notions of literary comparison based on an identification of language and culture and began to address the complex location of English-language literatures embedded in more than one 'national' or 'regional' culture. Thus, the practice of 'Commonwealth literature studies' often rested on a genuine interest in newly emerging life-worlds that had come into existence in the aftermath of colonialism and in the role of English-language literatures in exploring these life-worlds. Another major characteristic of this implicit methodology was a principle of dialogicity based on actively sought-for and intense exchanges with writers; what thus emerged from both the academic practice and the implicit methodology was a discursive field encompassing writers, critics, and literary scholars who often shared an acute sense of critical participation in momentous literary, cultural, and social changes in an increasingly globalized world.

What about the unsolved problem, then? One problem this field undoubtedly had to face was a continuing suspicion that it promoted a 'hidden agenda' based on a hierarchical view of English-language literatures that kept 'English literature' in a privileged position. As Salman Rushdie famously put it in an essay entitled "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist,"

England, which as far as I'm aware, has not been expelled from the Commonwealth quite yet, has been excluded from its literary manifestations. For obvious reasons. It would never do to include English literature, the great sacred thing itself, with this bunch of upstarts, huddling together under this new and badly made umbrella.²

What seems even more important in retrospect, however, is a fundamental methodological problem that 'Commonwealth literature' (which did, of course – *pace* Rushdie – very much exist as an academic field) never managed to solve. In its early years, 'Commonwealth literature' was quite literally equated with the literature of the member countries of the Commonwealth, which soon produced acute embarrassments – for example, when South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1961 (or Pakistan in 1972), and prompted the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* to add an "Appendix" to its annual regional bibliographies in response to these embarrassments. What was even more problematical than this politically induced taxonomic appen-

² Salman Rushdie, "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist" (1983), in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1992): 62.

dicitis, however, was the tacit equation of 'Commonwealth literature' with "national literature," although English was only one of several languages in many African countries or on the Indian subcontinent. On the other hand, many exponents of 'Commonwealth literature' continued to toy with the idea of a 'common culture' transported through the English language. The emerging field of 'Commonwealth literature' thus effectively got stuck between a territorial understanding of 'the English-speaking world', on the one hand, and a culturalist understanding of 'the English language', on the other, both of which effectively blocked the development of a methodology geared towards an understanding of the complexity of culture and language in a globalized world. 'Commonwealth literature studies' thus failed to generate a theoretical and methodological model for the comparative study of English-language literatures as a transcultural field, and it is this open problem that continues to haunt the comparative study of English-language literatures even today.

The transition 'from commonwealth to postcolonial' has often been seen as having done away with the problems that typically plagued Commonwealth literature studies. This transition undoubtedly opened up a wide horizon of interdisciplinary perspectives and brought what many had regarded as a notoriously undertheorized field into close contact with some of the most exciting postmodern and/or poststructuralist theories available in international academia. In terms of the field of the comparative study of English-language literatures, however, this transition has been double-edged; since the gains entailed in this transition have frequently been recounted in the last two decades or so, the following reflections will focus on some of the losses.

If we take *The Empire Writes Back* as an important marker in this transition from Commonwealth to postcolonial, it is quite obvious that the authors of this seminal study indeed intended to provide a specific methodology for the comparison of English-language literatures – for example, in their famous chapter on the abrogation and appropriation of English that provided an immensely useful stepping-stone in this direction. Yet, beyond and possibly contrary to the intentions of those who initiated the transition from Commonwealth to postcolonial, the impact of postcolonial theory quickly began to transform the way in which the field, in the most general way, looked at itself. The newly emerging field of postcolonial studies encompassed a wide variety of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, many of which took little or no interest in literary studies, let alone in the comparative study of English-language literatures. While, in pragmatic terms, postcolonial studies has in most cases not led to the institutionalization of a new, integrated discipline, but has

continued to function as a loose alliance of 'postcolonial' approaches in various older disciplines, theoretical debates on present tasks and future perspectives of postcolonial studies have often tended to suggest that what was needed was, in fact, such a new discipline (subversively designed, of course, to challenge disciplinarity as such).

In this process of a metadisciplinary self-fashioning amidst older disciplinary realities, the field of the comparative study of English-language literatures has not only become increasingly blurred, but has effectively been torn apart. Since postcolonialism has not been able to produce even the most basic consensus about the shape of this metadiscipline, 'postcolonial' is today widely used as a successor term both to 'Commonwealth' and to 'Third World'; in the first case, it explicitly includes Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, in the second, it explicitly excludes them.³ Stephen Slemon's passionate if terminologically not very successful plea for the postcolonial study of 'Second World literatures' (by which he meant the literatures of the former settler colonies) is an example of the first position; Robert Young's definition of postcolonialism as a latter-day "Tricontinentalism" based on the idea of Third-World liberation is an example of the second.⁴

It is, of course, possible, to see this fundamental dissent as a sign of an open-minded culture of critical debate; it is also possible, however, to see it as an indicator of the fact that the unfinished business of Commonwealth literature has remained largely unfinished even in postcolonial times. In the eventual rush for a postcolonial metadisciplinarity, the development of a specific methodology for a transcultural comparative study of English-language literatures has once again been neglected. Instead of perceiving the field of English-language literatures worldwide as an eminent opportunity for researching into the complex relations of culture, society, language, and literature in a globalized world, a lot of recent postcolonial discourse has tended to see the prevalence of English-language literature in the field of postcolonial studies as a residual flaw soon to be overcome by even more energetic interdisciplinary efforts.

³ For an analysis of the terminological inconsistencies in current usages of the term 'postcolonial', see Schulze-Engler, "Exceptionalist Temptations – Disciplinary Constraints: Postcolonial Theory and Criticism," *EJES: European Journal of English Studies* 6.3 (2002): 287–303.

⁴ Stephen Slemon, "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World," *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990): 30–41; Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

The argument presented so far could easily be extended by taking a closer look at some of the more serious shortcomings of postcolonial theory such as the habitual recourse to the ideology and politics of anticolonialism, which, one could argue, is not exactly helpful in coming to terms with the complex social, cultural, and political realities of the so-called postcolonial world, or by analysing the increasingly acerbic debates in contemporary postcolonial theory that often seem to engage in a latter-day scholasticism rather than in a critical analysis of concrete societies, cultures or literatures. The second part of this essay will embark on a completely different approach, however, by contrasting what I have termed ‘the Commonwealth legacy’ with recent attempts in comparative literature to come to terms with the realities of contemporary world literature. While these attempts have often explicitly embraced ‘postcolonial literature’ and have even been acclaimed as having brought the voice of marginalized authors to the attention of the literary establishment, there is ample reason to be highly suspicious of the theoretical and methodological bases of this embrace. As will be shown presently, not all embraces are friendly.

The *pièce de résistance* of this essay is, of course, Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), but before taking a closer critical look at her attempt to reformulate world literature in terms of a world system of domination and dependency, I would briefly like to touch on Franco Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000). In this seminal if deeply problematical article, Moretti acknowledges the fact that literary developments outside Europe (the traditional haunt of comparative literature) have become so important that a eurocentric view on world literature will no longer do. Faced with the undeniable fact that no single person can possibly hope to read all these literatures, Moretti introduces two ideas designed to save the day for comparative literature. The first one is that of “distant reading,” whereby “world literature” becomes a “hypothesis” elaborated and tested out by comparative-literature scholars who leave the actual reading of the literary “raw material” to knowledgeable colleagues in more specialized disciplines; the second one is the idea of analysing world literature in terms of the World System Theory developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, which, for Moretti, provides the basis for the audacious hypothesis required to constitute “world literature” as a field of theoretical analysis.

Although, as several commentators have noted, Pascale Casanova doesn’t acknowledge Moretti’s ideas, her *World Republic of Letters* is based both on a Wallersteinian notion of “centres” and “peripheries” as well as on a sustained

practice of “distant reading” with regard to non-European literatures.⁵ In a nutshell, her study seeks to analyse “literary space as a worldwide reality,”⁶ a procedure designed not only to reveal the ultimate truth about the historical emergence of international literary relations, but also to disclose the innermost meaning of each and every work of literature. Drawing on Henry James’s essay “The Figure in the Carpet,” Casanova claims that

It is the global configuration, or composition, of the carpet – that is, the domain of letters, the totality of what I call world literary space – that alone is capable of giving meaning and coherence to the very form of individual texts.⁷

According to Casanova, this world literary space is hierarchically ordered; the old literatures of the centre, which have been hoarding cultural capital for centuries and have managed to establish a sphere of “literary autonomy,” dominate the newer, impoverished, and deprived literatures of the peripheries where “literary autonomy” has not yet been achieved. At the centre of this system lies what Casanova calls “the Greenwich meridian of literature,” “a common standard for measuring time, an absolute point of reference unconditionally recognized by all contestants,”⁸ which, according to Casanova, is located in Paris:

what might be called the Greenwich meridian of literature makes it possible to estimate the relative aesthetic distance from the centre of the world of letters of all those who belong to it. This aesthetic distance is also measured in temporal terms, since the prime meridian determines the present of literary creation, which is to say modernity.⁹

This model, which Casanova goes on to apply to a wide variety of literature from all over the world (including a large number of ‘postcolonial’ authors), is based on an equally persistent and self-contradictory identification of literature and nation. In her preface to the English-language edition, Casanova claims:

⁵ See Casanova’s own comments on the relationship between her model of world literature and that of Moretti, in *The World Republic of Letters*, tr. M.B. DeBevoise (*La République mondiale des lettres*, 1999; Convergences; Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2004): 80.

⁶ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 5.

⁷ *The World Republic of Letters*, 3.

⁸ *The World Republic of Letters*, 88.

⁹ *The World Republic of Letters*, 88.

The purpose of this book is to restore a point of view that has been obscured for the most part by the “nationalization” of literatures and literary histories, to rediscover a lost transnational dimension of literature that for two hundred years has been reduced to the political and linguistic boundaries of nations.¹⁰

The idea of the *transnational*, however, quickly evaporates from her text, which is simply and squarely concerned with the *international* relations between “national literary spaces” and relentlessly sorts each and every work of literature into its respective “national space.” As Christopher Prendergast put it in his astute critique of *The World Republic of Letters*,

It is a major shortcoming of her book that Casanova treats every single literary/linguistic community from the sixteenth century onwards as if it were, actually or aspirationally, national in character.¹¹

As a result of this optic, Casanova’s readings invariably reduce the rich complexity of individual literary works to the one and only pattern she is interested in: their contribution to the creation of “national literary space.” Thus, her account of Chinua Achebe, to take only one particularly notorious example, conveniently reduces his oeuvre to his first four novels, which are further condensed into an account of *Things Fall Apart* as a paradigmatic example of a novel with the ambition “to provide Nigeria with a national history and to teach this history to the people.”¹² Neither the paradigmatic break with this programme embodied in *A Man of the People* nor, indeed, the very existence of *Anthills of the Savannah*, which further unfolds Achebe’s reassessment of the role of the writer and literature in contemporary Africa is acknowledged in Casanova’s text. In a more recent essay entitled “Literature as a World,” Casanova has describes literature as “a long and merciless war”;¹³ the omissions noted above are an interesting example of the collateral damage to be expected by a practice of “distant reading” that can’t be bothered by the nitty-gritty details of the raw material it is feeding into its epistemological gristmill. The figure in the carpet that Casanova purports to discover in the texture of world literature is thus nothing more than the pattern she herself has assiduously woven into the fabric of her own text.

¹⁰ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, xi.

¹¹ Christopher Prendergast, “Negotiating World Literature,” *New Left Review*, New Series 8 (2001): 110.

¹² Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 196.

¹³ Casanova, “Literature as a World,” *New Left Review*, New Series 31 (2005): 90.

A second major flaw in Casanova's account relates to her understanding of modernity. Modernity, for Casanova, is unitary; it is something owned by the centres of the world system and aspired to by the peripheral outsiders. This nostalgic view of a monolithic modernity has long since been superseded in the social sciences: globalization theorists such as Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens or Ulf Hannerz have rejected such 'eurocentric' or 'westocentric' accounts of modernity based on proprietary claims by the former imperial centres in favour of models of a "decentred modernity."¹⁴ As Shmuel Eisenstadt puts it in a seminal essay on "multiple modernities,"

The undeniable trend at the end of the twentieth century is the growing diversification of the understanding of modernity, of the basic cultural agendas of different modern societies – far beyond the homogenic and hegemonic visions of modernity prevalent in the 1950s. [...] All these developments do indeed attest to the continual development of multiple modernities, or of multiple interpretations of modernity – and, above all, to attempts at "de-Westernization," depriving the West of its monopoly on modernity.¹⁵

Closer to our own field, a similar debate has been sparked off by Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, which also rejects a 'universalized' account of modernity in favour of a decentred perspective focusing on the complex articulations of modernity in the Indian context.

What, then, could an account of world literature look like that avoids the pitfalls of a renewed reification of 'national literary spaces' and a recycled eurocentric account of modernity? At this point it may be helpful to take a second look at the idea of the 'Commonwealth legacy', because the comparative study of English-language literatures opens up the possibility of an alternative perspective on 'world literature'.

First and foremost, once English-language literatures worldwide are seen as a discursive field rather than as an imaginary assembly of national literatures, a genuinely transnational and transcultural perspective can emerge that is capable of encompassing both the literary practice of writers who can no longer be related to one particular "national literary space" and the complex articulations that link individual works of literature not only to local or

¹⁴ See, for example, Ulrich Beck, *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003), Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives* (London: Profile, 1999), and Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁵ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129.1 (2000): 24.

regional modernities with their specific social, linguistic, and cultural constellations, but also to the worldwide field of English-language literatures and specific forms of communicative interaction and political conflict engendered by it.

Secondly, such a perspective allows us to move beyond the aporetic dichotomy of ‘distant’ and ‘close’ reading that underlies accounts of world literature such as those offered by Moretti and Casanova. In engaging in a comparative study of literatures in English, we are necessarily ‘distanced readers’, because we are continuously forced to reflect on the fact that we are operating within a transnational network of significations that allows us only partial access to the full complexity of the social, linguistic, and cultural articulations to be encountered in individual literary works. At the same time, we are – for at least two reasons – also ‘close’ readers: on the one hand, we are reading in a language that is ‘ours’, not by token of some underlying cultural glue that joins users of the English language together, nor indeed because we are part of some neo-imperial conspiracy to extend the realm of ‘Eng.Lit.’, but because we are part of the communicative network performatively established by English language users; on the other hand, reading individual literary texts in order to analyse their specific intervention in the imaginative shaping of specific local or regional modernities only makes sense if we invest our critical energies in a detailed exploration of the specific writing projects, formal constraints, and literary innovations that have shaped these texts.

All of this, of course, does not mean these things can only be done in the field of the comparative study of English-language literatures, nor does it imply that we should set up this field as a fetish that stands in for the actual richness of world literature constituted by a wide array of literatures in other – large and small – languages. Quite the contrary: focusing on the specific features of the field constituted by English-language literatures is a major step in guarding against what Jonathan Arac has termed “anglo-globalism”: i.e. the neglect of “the actual role of English in contemporary globalization.”¹⁶ This role, after all, cannot be analysed by simply condemning English, but only by a careful analysis of its actual functions in an emerging world society, to which literary studies can undoubtedly make a major contribution.

The task of the comparative study of English-language literatures is thus not to celebrate the emergence of a worldwide ‘Eng.Lit.’, but to critically analyse the worldwide communicative framework formed by these English-

¹⁶ Jonathan Arac, “Anglo-Globalism?” *New Left Review*, New Series 16 (2002): 35–45.

language literatures, and to explore the complex articulations between this framework and the specific local and regional modernities negotiated in individual literary texts. In this manner, we can develop both a sound disciplinary base and a capacity for interdisciplinary research into the contours and dynamics of globalized modernity – not as literary war correspondents blurt-ing out triumphalist universal truths about putative centres and peripheries, but as cautious participants in a multi-sited communicative negotiation that – as we well know – always encompasses more than we are familiar with.

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Global Literary Refractions*

—— Reading Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* in the Post-Cold War Era

DEBJANI GANGULY

IN 1952, AFTER ENDURING A LONG PERIOD OF EXILE FROM NAZI GERMANY and writing his magnum opus *Mimesis* in Istanbul, the renowned philologist and comparatist Erich Auerbach wrote from Princeton: “literary criticism now participates in a practical seminar on world history.” He added: “Our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation.”¹ Auerbach was signalling the urgency of comparative literature at the time to engage with its maximum geographical dimension, the world itself, in the aftermath of an age of expansion, conquest, genocide, and warfare. The end of World War Two allowed scholars like Auerbach a moment of global vision – at once promising and unnerving – before it was fractured yet again by binary divisions of the Cold War and emergent nationalisms of Asia and Africa. Auerbach himself retreated into mourning the irrevocable passing of the glory of European humanism.

Post-1989, Auerbach’s global or world vision for comparative literary studies, but this time unmoored from its European legacy, has re-emerged in many forms against the backdrop of a radically transformed, though no less crisis-ridden, geopolitical scenario. Works by Emily Apter, Christopher Pren-

* Republished, with revisions, from the *English Academy Review* 25.1 (May 2008): 4–19, substantial portions of which are drawn from Ganguly, “Edward Said, world literature and global comparatism,” in *Edward Said: The Legacy of a Public Intellectual*, ed. Ned Curthoys & Debjani Ganguly (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 2007): 176–201.

¹ Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” (“Philologie und Weltliteratur,” 1951), tr. Edward Said & Marie Said, *Centennial Review* 13.1 (Winter 1969): 1–17.

dergast, Franco Moretti, David Damrosch, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak have articulated aspects of this vision.² With so many contemporary works produced, circulated, and received, often in translation, at the interstices of local, national, and international borders, these scholars acknowledge that the axes of comparison have become very complex and are no longer based primarily on national or linguistic differences. Nor, they suggest, is it tenable to envisage a world literary space determined solely by postcolonial geographies of French and British Empires and their liberated colonies. The collapse of the Soviet imperium has reconfigured Europe and Central Asia, generating in the process new forms of literary postcoloniality and transnationalisms. Also significant has been the global impact of the emergence of a vocal, non-territorial demographic of the Muslim world, urging comparativists to engage actively with writing from the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa.³ Comparativists of this post-Cold War age have identified many new heuristic challenges in undertaking critical studies of ‘world literature’ – global translation, multi-media publications/adaptations, linguistic imperialisms, new humanisms/cosmopolitanisms, and postmodern/ethnic/religious (trans) nationalisms. They have also critically addressed the problem of the ‘great unread’ – that to do world literature is to recognize the impossibility of ever reading and knowing all. As Franco Moretti says, “The literature around us is unmistakably a planetary system.” Yet, “reading ‘more’, [while] always a good thing, [is] not the solution” to the problem of how to do world literature.⁴ To adopt a conceptual apparatus that presumes to speak for the totality of world literary space is untenable, as it is now untenable to talk of histories of the world through Hegel’s world-history model. What is possible, however, in the present literary scenario of rapid exchanges is to ‘read the world’ through an optic

² Emily Apter, “Universal Poetics and Postcolonial Comparatism,” in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006): 54–62, and *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2006); *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004); Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (*Atlante del romanzo europeo, 1800–1900*, 1997; London: Verso, 1998), and “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000), in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004): 148–62; David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2003); Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003).

³ See especially Gayatri Spivak in *Death of a Discipline*, 85–87.

⁴ Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” 148–49.

that traces difference and connectivity – between genres, themes, styles, chronologies – across discrete translocal sites.

This essay proposes to analyse Pascale Casanova's mapping of the world literary space in *The World Republic of Letters* (2004) against the backdrop of both this critical corpus and a world order that has emerged since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Published in 2004 in the Harvard series 'Inventories of the Present', it has had an amazing press, with critics such as Terry Eagleton hailing it as "a milestone in the history of modern literary thought" for being both an exemplary account of current world literary flows and an innovative conceptual and historical analysis of late-modern literary globalization.⁵ Casanova's main purpose in the book is to designate the realm of world literatures today as one of inequality, conflict, and competition, rather than as a realization of the Goethean ideal of civilized cosmopolitan conversation in a world of enhanced economic connections. Her primary argument is that the overt dependence of literary production on the politics of nation-making in the last three hundred years has generated a field of global competition wherein those national languages that have had the advantage of accruing more 'capital' due to their dominant status in world affairs, emerge as leaders in the literary realm. They create powerful urban centres such as Paris, London, and New York that act as exchange alleys through which writers have to pass (in translation) in order to be transported to the autonomous, world-making realm of literary universality. What these writers accrue in the process is not enhanced aesthetic worth due to any literary innovation, but merely a "speeding up of literary time," becoming 'up-to-date', as it were.⁶ Casanova metaphorically designates the world-making urban capitals such as Paris, New York, and London, but especially Paris, as the 'Greenwich Meridian', or the controller of the rhythm of literary time and the ultimate arbiter of the latest in world literary tastes. These urban nodes are the repositories of substantial literary capital determined by the longevity of their literary traditions, their canonical classics, evolved professional milieu of publishers, editors, reviewers, and critics, and informed reading publics. This singular world literary force-field is constantly subject to dynamic shifts depending on the way writers from the

⁵ See Eagleton's review, "The empire writes back: Should the literary realm be seen as its own republic, complete with frontiers, legislators and rivalries?" *New Statesman* (11 April 2005), <http://www.newstatesman.com/200504110041> (accessed 5 October 2007).

⁶ See Sunil Agnani's review of the book, "On the Purported Death of Paris," *Postcolonial Studies* 9.3 (September 2006): 332.

'periphery' negotiate the Greenwich Meridian of literary taste: they can *assimilate* like V.S. Naipaul, or *rebel* by withdrawing into their national traditions like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, or be *revolutionary* and storm the metropolis like Joyce, Rushdie, and Beckett. The centre of the literary world (Paris), however, continues to hold firm through these tectonic shifts.

This summary signals, notwithstanding Eagleton, the extent to which *The World Republic of Letters* is at odds with current trends in literary internationalism and postcolonial/global comparativism as discussed briefly in the opening paragraphs. In the first place, the book aims at nothing short of providing a comprehensive template to account for all aspects of international or world literary topography as it stands today, an exercise that most critics would currently shy away from. This template is founded on Bourdieu's idea of 'literary capital' as it emerges in competition between multiple national literary cultures around the globe. It is also aligned with an evolutionary narrative of literary/aesthetic worth such that traditions with impoverished capital are designated as 'inferior' till they catch up with the Greenwich Meridian of Parisian literary taste. Second, the book problematically names all linguistic and literary collectivities since early modernity only in terms of the dynamics of 'nation-making'. Third, it locates the centre of the world literary space not just in Europe but in Paris. Recognition in Paris enables writers from around the world to extricate themselves from the influence of their national-political domains and graft themselves onto an autonomous, world-making aesthetic space. It is, thus, resolutely eurocentric in the classic sense of the term and appears to have no engagement with postcolonial and post-Soviet modalities of re-situating Europe in the global scheme of things. Fourth, it categorically invests in a singular idea of modernity and appropriates the postcolonial period in the making of a postwar world literary space to the *longue durée* of European imperial historiography. Finally, it purports to study the making of world literary space in the twenty-first century while resolutely ignoring all non-Euroamerican literary historiographies.

The exposition that follows addresses these concerns in three stages. First, it examines Casanova's templates of 'internationalization of literatures' and 'world literary historiography' in the light of postcolonial and especially post-Cold War debates on global literary comparativism. Second, it asks whether her Bourdieu-derived 'field' approach, with its overwhelming conceptual dependence on a market and nation metaphor, really equips her to make valid qualitative judgments on vast swathes of non-European literary spaces. Finally, it discusses alternative ways of studying world literary spaces and histories

that have emerged in recent years, particularly in the works of David Damrosch and Franco Moretti. In the process, it also weaves in aspects of a post-1989 anglophone world literature project I am currently working on and whose theoretical and geopolitical assumptions are in quite some tension with those of Casanova's book.

Internationalisms New and Old

There is a broad consensus among political analysts, social theorists, and cultural historians that, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall in 1989, the world has entered a different phase of international politics, and economic and cultural exchange.⁷ The post-1989 period has been labelled the era of intense globalization via a technologically advanced capitalist and information expansion and the age of unprecedented transnational networks of migrancy, violence, and terrorism.⁸ In the wake of the collapse of the bipolar antagonism of the Cold War, the years between 1990 and the present have witnessed the emergence of a collaborative network of global capital with the USA as a politically central node. This neoliberal capitalist world order has had to contend with radical political imaginaries such as those of Al-Qaeda and other extremist/fundamentalist networks around the globe in ways that continue to have grim implications not only for governance but also for human sociality as a whole.

This contemporary world order, say the philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,

can no longer be understood adequately in terms of imperialism as it was practiced by the modern powers, based primarily on the sovereignty of the nation-state extended over a foreign territory. Instead, a 'network power', a new form of sovereignty, is now emerging and it includes dominant nations along with supranational institutions, major capitalist corporations and related powers.⁹

⁷ Daniel Archibugi & David Held, *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order* (Cambridge MA: Polity, 1995); *The Role of the United States, Russia and China in a New World Order*, ed. Hafeez Malik (New York: St Martin's, 1997).

⁸ Birthe Hansen & Bertel Huerlin, *The New World Order: Contrasting Theories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Robert Kagan, *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in a New World Order* (London: Atlantic, 2003); George Monbiot, *The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order* (London: Flamingo, 2003).

⁹ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004): xii.

As a supplement to this scenario of network power and resisting Hardt and Negri's *presentist* reading of the reach of capital, Gayatri Spivak speaks of a "return of the demographic, rather than territorial, frontiers that predate and are larger than capitalism." These demographic frontiers, she adds, respond to large-scale migration of our era and create "parastate" collectivities that in the past belonged to "multicultural empires that preceded monopoly capitalism."¹⁰

The last decade and a half has also witnessed the emergence of unprecedented forms of literary exchange through mass-scale translational activities in the major world languages – exchanges that herald new transcultural literary spaces and that counter misguided globalisms heralding visions of a monochromatic, unified, homogeneous world. Further, we see the publication of literary works that are *immanently global*, in that the writing is generated and informed by political, cultural, and linguistic forces not limited to any single nation or region.¹¹ At least two illustrations of the latter would be John Murray's collection of short fiction *A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies* (2003) and Peter Dale Scott's *Coming to Jakarta: A Meditation on Terror* (1989). Murray is an Australian citizen who has worked as a medical researcher for many years in the USA and then spent a few years as a doctor in countries like India and Rwanda, among others. His collection of short fiction is immanently global with overlapping/cross-hatched stories of late modern societies in India, Central Africa, the UK, the USA, and Australia. Peter Dale Scott, a scholar-poet from Canada, a diplomat during the American War in Vietnam, and currently an academic in the USA, wrote his long poem *Coming to Jakarta: A Meditation on Terror* as a way to contemplate his multiple worldly affiliations in this era of global terror. His varied intellectual and cultural debts to the world's knowledges and cultures is manifested in the rich array of references in his poem from the *Mahabharata*, modernists such as Ezra Pound, East Asian verse forms, hybrid diasporic verse genres from the American West Coast such as Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, and a vast amount of contemporary historical and political scholarship.¹² Writers like John Murray and Peter Dale Scott bring the globe inside the text.

¹⁰ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 15.

¹¹ See John Pizer, "Goethe's 'World Literature Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization,'" *Comparative Literature* 52.3 (Summer 2000): 213.

¹² For a brief discussion of Scott's unusual work, see Katie Trumpener, "World Music, World Literature: A Geopolitical View," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006): 196.

Notwithstanding its claim to rediscover a “lost transnational dimension of literature that for two hundred years has been reduced to the political and linguistic boundaries of nations,”¹³ my contention is that Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* is not in tune with these contemporary forms of literary transnationalism and globalism. In the first place, it sees the ‘transnational’ as a supplement to the ‘national’ with the latter’s genealogy firmly embedded in European history. Further, its tightly-knotted nation/market interdependency argument continues to draw on ‘developmental’ and ‘dependency’ models of internationalism prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s.

In order to explicate further, I need to briefly mention the three historical phases of the genesis of international literary space in the modern world as identified by Casanova. They are:

1. The Renaissance, beginning with the sixteenth century and its “revolutionary vernacular thrust of capitalism.” This period challenged the exclusive use of Latin among the educated and witnessed a rising demand for an intellectual acknowledgement of the value of vulgar tongues which gradually led to the creation of modern literatures in the ‘vernaculars’ of Europe. Practitioners and critics of these literatures saw these works compete for grandeur with the classical literatures. An example cited by Casanova is that of Du Bellay challenging the dominance of Latin in his 1549 tract “The Defence and Illustration of the French Language.”
2. The Age of Empire, particularly from the late-eighteenth century and unfolding throughout the nineteenth century: This period has been referred to as the age of “philological-lexicographic revolution” by Benedict Anderson.¹⁴ It is marked by the emergence in Europe of new nationalist movements associated with the “invention of self-consciously national languages and subsequently the creation of popular literatures, summoned to serve the national idea and to give it the symbolic foundation it lacked.”¹⁵ Casanova names this period that of the “Herder-effect,” for it witnessed the

¹³ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, tr. M.B. DeBevoise (*La République mondiale des lettres*, 1999; Convergences; Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2004): xi. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983): 80.

¹⁵ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 48.

emergence of the category of folk or people's literature. It was also the age when nation-making was seen as expansionary, extending to colonies across the globe and creating new reading publics for the national literatures of English, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese empires.

3. The phase of decolonization from end of World War Two to the present: For Casanova, this period marks the third major phase in the enlargement of the world literary space. She specifically reads it as marking the entry into "international competition of contestants who until then had been prevented from taking part": i.e. literary works from the ex-colonies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. She interprets this phase in *developmental* terms, where 'minor' literatures from non-European parts of the world have begun catching up with Europe in the production of 'proper' literature. There is no recognition in her analysis of their precolonial literary heritage. They are assumed to be 'pre-literary' until they establish themselves on the European market.¹⁶

In Casanova's scheme of things, we are continuing to live in the phase of decolonization and all current struggles for space in the international literary market space can be understood in terms of an imperial-national model where emerging literatures from newly liberated nations continue to clamour for space and recognition amidst the post-imperial dominance of established English and French literary traditions. They are wholly dependent for their 'world status' on such recognition. Hence, only those writers who can establish themselves, literally, either in London or Paris, especially Paris, are 'world' writers. In her template of internationalization, the impact of old European empires still sways supreme. The template does not address the dramatic shifts wrought on both literatures in English and French with their globalization as 'world' languages.

It is important to remember that the postcolonial phase of literary internationalism did not just bring literary cultures of the ex-colonies into alignment with those of the metropolitan French and British traditions. It was not just a process that allowed hitherto 'pre-literate' cultures access to the 'literary' wealth of European civilization. It was a phase of vigorous exchange and challenge, albeit often on unequal ground, that irrevocably transformed the

¹⁶ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 47–48.

world literary space. It generated seismic geocultural shifts and questioned the very foundations of European literary canon-making by catapulting onto the world stage diverse modalities of literary creativity – textual, oral, performative – some of which had traditions that went far back in antiquity. Concepts such as diaspora and hybridity, reflecting the mass migrations of the post-War period, also challenged the overweening dependence of comparative literature on nation-based models and the isomorphism of European national literary traditions. Postcolonialism, thus, cannot be unproblematically annexed, as Casanova does, to a seamless history of the emergence of world literary space in European modernity and of the foundations of comparative literary practice. A recent reading of *The World Republic of Letters* by Elinor Shaffer, disconcertingly commends Casanova's book on precisely these grounds:

[In] Pascale Casanova's excellent *The World Republic of Letters* [...] the formation of a literary sphere of value and influence is examined through the model of France, itself built upon Roman and Italian Renaissance forerunners, as it was challenged in the late eighteenth century by the Herderian model of a variety of 'folk' cultures, which in their European forms nevertheless required validation as national literary cultures during the nineteenth century, and now by postcolonial nations still enacting the struggle for cosmopolitan recognition at the 'centre' while seeking to gain or regain an independent indigenous culture. These and related considerations were at the foundations of comparative literature in the immediate postwar period; many of the founding works of comparative literature had a similar scope and mission.¹⁷

Both Casanova and Shaffer execute what Sunil Agnani has called "postcolonial theory in reverse," annexing within their Euro-comparativist template "all late arrivants, all the literatures produced in the wake of decolonisation."¹⁸

The problem with Casanova's delineation of the three historical stages of the emergence of world literary space is that it draws heavily on geopolitical transfigurations from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century, but pays no attention to late-1960s postmodern and the 1990s post-Cold War realignments of the global capitalist order and the mobilities and transformations they have wrought on cultures of the world and that can no longer be theorized in terms of a nineteenth-century empire-nation model. Her lack of

¹⁷ Elinor Shaffer, "World Literature Tomorrow," *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1–2 (2006): 79–80.

¹⁸ Sunil Agnani, "On the Purported Death of Paris," *Postcolonial Studies* 9.3 (September 2006): 332.

engagement with the complex shifts in literatures and cultures of the world since the early 1970s is evident in her curiously narrow economic reading of 'globalization' in homogeneous terms. In consciously rejecting the notion of 'globalization' in favour of the idea of 'internationalization', she says:

The internationalization I here propose [...] signifies more or less the opposite of what is ordinarily understood by the neutralizing term 'globalization', which suggests that the world political and economic system can be conceived as the generalization of a single and universally accepted model. In the literary world, by contrast, it is the competition among its members that defines and unifies the system while at the same time marking its limits. (40)

What she misses out in such a reading are new alignments of both power/hierarchy, on the one hand, and collaboration/connectivity, on the other, that the current phase of globalization has made possible and in which it is no longer possible to theorize 'competition' among literary nations in terms of an imperial model of Europe's preeminence. As Hardt and Negri put it,

there are two faces to globalisation. On one face, Empire spreads globally its network of hierarchies and divisions that maintain order through new mechanisms of control and constant conflict. Globalisation, however, is also the creation of new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters. This second face of globalisation is not a matter of everyone in the world becoming the same.¹⁹

What I am questioning here is not so much Casanova's emphasis on the undisputed global positions of English and, to some extent, French, as sites of world literary production (which they undoubtedly are) as her inability to theorize their world status except through dependence on a nineteenth-century language-nation model. What this dependence does not allow her to see is that, in the present, the world status of neither world literatures in English nor world literatures in French is dependent on the continuing political and literary dominance of England and France in the global scheme of things. Rather, they bank on the large corpus of writing emerging from what, in Casanova's scheme of things, are utterly 'peripheral' sites – South, Central, and West Asia, Australia, Canada, and the African continent – that bring into the global literary space diverse cultural capitals that are not necessarily 'impoverished'. These regional mappings are further complicated by the global emergence of

¹⁹ Hardt & Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, xiii.

large-scale migratory and diasporic enclaves from within which so much of 'world' writing now emanates. To talk of the globe is, of course, not to reject the nation as to challenge its dominance as a paradigm for literary and historical analysis.

What is not reflected in Casanova's analysis of internationalization is that, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "the sources of literary agency have expanded beyond the old European national literatures."²⁰ Spivak is, of course, radical in her critique of even contemporary attempts to categorize world literatures in terms of global language groupings – thus advocating that we move beyond "anglophony, francophony, teutophony, lusophony and hispanophony." Her vision for new comparative literatures is to make the languages of the global South "active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant."²¹ Staying for the moment, however, with the global-languages model of world literature, it is worth emphasizing that anglophony and francophony today mean more than just a relationship between literary cultures of metropolitan Britain or France and those of their erstwhile colonies. The terms signal "linguistic contact zones all over the world"²² in which English or French circulate amidst a plethora of other languages and even on the contested thresholds of so-called 'standard' tongues, what Colin McCabe has called "the eloquence of the vulgar,"²³ by which he means the proliferation of creole, slang, dialect or vernaculars that scatter off the surface of a standard language and that, in literary works, "transcode linguistic politics into narrative structure."²⁴ Further, these world-making, refractory linguistic/literary zones often intersect with other non-national cartographic imaginaries such as the 'oceanic' or the 'transcontinental', thus unyoking the terms of literary critical engagement from 'nation' and 'empire'.

Negotiating the poles of global aspiration and nationalist interpellation today is very different from the journeys made by Joyce and Beckett from Ireland to Paris, Casanova's paradigmatic instances of world-making literary journeys. For her, such journeys lead straight to the heart of Europe. What her

²⁰ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 6.

²¹ *Death of a Discipline*, 9.

²² Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 55.

²³ Colin McCabe, *The Eloquence of the Vulgar: Language of Cinema and the Politics of Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

²⁴ Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 190.

'euro-chronological' template cannot innovatively theorize are the makings of a world literature where the journeys are multi-linear and where literary capital can be found in works that are locally inflected and have both regional and global purchase. Instances include the works of writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Assia Djebar, Naguib Mahfouz, Vikram Seth, Maryse Condé, Nuruddin Farah, Wole Soyinka, and J.M. Coetzee, to cite only a few. In short, Casanova is unable to theorize a global-local dynamic in terms of a metaphoric of transmission, exchange, and collaboration, in terms of unforeseen matings, crossbreeding, and braiding where Europe is one important node among others and not the final destination. Such theorization requires different readings of contemporary flows of literary-critical history.

Literary Capital versus Literary Quality

I now turn briefly to another unsettling observation about *The World Republic of Letters*. Casanova's social-scientific analysis of world literary competitiveness based on Pierre Bourdieu's 'field' model is too deterministic and does not make room for valid qualitative analysis of literary works except in terms of their 'capital' in the world literary market. This 'capital', as we saw, is only progressively acquired by writers from the periphery, the more they eschew local-national engagement and aspire to an autonomous and universal aesthetic amidst the rarefied environs of Paris. French literature is, of course, always already 'universal'. Since Casanova's idea of 'literary capital' and inequities therein is so bound up with her nation-imperium model and with the polarities of 'politico-literary' and 'autonomous', it not surprisingly leads to her make adverse qualitative judgments on vast literary fields that are on the 'periphery' of what she considers to be the Greenwich Meridian of world literature – Paris. To mark hierarchies in the 'field' on the basis of economic and political disparities among nations is one thing, as she does in the following passage:

The original dependence of literature on the nation is at the heart of the inequality that structures the literary world. Rivalry among nations arises from the fact that their political, economic, military, diplomatic and geographical histories are not only different but also unequal. Literary resources, which are always stamped with the seal of the nation, are therefore unequal as well. (39)

To allow such hierarchies to determine the qualitative worth of whole swathes of literary fields is quite another. As a matter of course, the book uses the

terms ‘impoverished’, ‘destitute’, ‘small’, ‘weak’, ‘least endowed’ to describe literatures on the ‘periphery’. Thus, V.S. Naipaul chose to ‘assimilate’ to English because of the “absence of any literary tradition in his native country.” Here is Casanova’s narrative of Naipaul’s predicament:

V.S. Naipaul, born on the outer edges of the British Empire, is an outstanding example of a writer who wholly embraced the dominant literary values of his linguistic region; who, in the absence of any literary tradition in his native country, had no other choice but to try to become English. (209)

There is no mention of his multiple cultural and literary inheritances that spread across a transcontinental arc from the Caribbean to the Indian subcontinent. Again, in talking about the decolonization phase of ‘internationalization’ of literatures, she says: “the newly decolonized countries had often inherited languages having no *real* literary existence” (80), a statement that is completely erroneous in the context of ‘new’ nations such as India, even if one for the moment accepts her very narrow definition of ‘literature’ as imaginative works in print. To stay with India’s literary traditions (or “existence,” as Casanova puts it) for just a while, there are currently fifteen languages in which literary works are produced, and quite a few of them have histories that go back to the early years of the second millennium – Kannada and Marathi, for instance. Others, like Tamil, have a continuous history of three thousand years. These languages belong either to the Dravidian family or to the Indo-Aryan one. They emerged in the second millennium and their history is one of intimate exchange with not only the ancient literary traditions of Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit but also those of the period of Islamic rule such as Persian and Arabic. In the last three hundred years, their evolution has been marked by the influence of modern European languages, especially English, but also, in some cases, French and Portuguese. Thus, postcolonialism, and particularly the impact of English, in the context of literary production in India is but one recent stage in the long history of the evolution of Indian literatures. While there is no doubt that British colonial practices, foremost in the domain of education and culture, led to a reconfiguration of linguistic and literary hierarchies, the reception of English in India was mediated at every stage by literary traditions in different parts of India. Hence, a postcolonial literary history of India cannot be reduced to a narrative of the dominance of English over gradually weakening regional/local literary traditions. In fact, in terms of reading publics in India there are substantially more readers in Marathi, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi than in English. Bengali, Urdu, and Tamil

have transnational reading and reception spheres across Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka respectively. The dominance of English appears to be evident primarily in India's global literary mediations, mainly with the West. This, of course, is all that matters in Casanova's template. But one can well argue that, in the light of late-twentieth-century postcolonial and global critical reconfigurations of world literary history, it is more fruitful to see works in English from India not so much in terms of a polarization of 'global' and 'national/regional' as in terms of their location along multiple sites of literary production, circulation, and reception within a complex plural culture characterized by urbanization, translation, and bilingualism.

What is ironical is that Casanova's avowedly historicist tracing of the 'invention' of the idea of 'literature' in mid-eighteenth-century Europe does not make her own analysis of literary capital in the late-twentieth century historically nuanced, complex, and inclusive enough to account for the diversity and amplitude of past and contemporary literary practices. As Christopher Prendergast notes in his edited volume *Debating World Literatures* (2004), there are 'anthropological' and 'historical' dimensions to the meaning-making of the term 'literature':

For instance, what in the West is called "literature", in India is called "kavya" and in China "wen"; though cognate terms in some respects, they are clearly not identical. Thus, the suggestion that "all countries hitherto excluded from the very idea of literature proper (in Africa, in India, in Asia)" presumes a view of what is "proper" to literature that works only if it excludes vast swathes of Indian and Chinese writing that sit quite comfortably within the system of *kavya* and *wen*.²⁵

In thus ethnocentrically narrowing the very notion of 'literature' and then tying it to a dated and deterministic reading of literary value vis-à-vis global geopolitics, Casanova's template of a world republic of letters cannot offer much in the way of a viable world literary-critical analytic for our present times. What, then, constitute viable conceptual and historiographical alternatives to Casanova's dated eurocentric approach to global literary comparativism? The final section of this essay briefly considers a few such alternatives.



²⁵ Christopher Prendergast, *Debating World Literatures*, 22.

Global Literary Comparativism For Our Times

In what has become a tour de force in the field, Franco Moretti's essay "Conjectures on World Literature" visualizes the problem of 'doing' world literature not in terms of an ever expanding ambit of reading to encompass the globe, but in Weberian terms as a quest for a "new conceptual interconnection of problems"²⁶ that can generate new theories and methodologies. Drawing inspiration from models of world-systems theory, he envisages a world literary system of interrelated literatures that is 'one and unequal', but that enables uncanny forms of comparativism constituted of 'distant' theoretical readings difficult to imagine by means of conventional nation-based methodologies fixated on the close and fine-grained analysis of primary texts. An example Moretti offers is that of "comparative morphology,"²⁷ a systematic study of variations in the genesis and evolution of literary forms across space and time. His own magisterial *Atlas of the European Novel (1750–1950)* is a brilliant illustration of comparative morphology tracing the two-hundred-year-old global travels of the European novel and its cross-fertilization with the literary forms and cultural politics of regions on all major continents. For this, Moretti did not so much read novels from all non-European literary traditions as engage with critical analyses by national/regional critics of these traditions to finally emerge with his synthesis.

At first glance, Moretti's adoption of the 'one and unequal' thesis from Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory to account for the uneven contours of world literary space, replete with familiar categories of the 'metropolitan' and the 'periphery', the 'major' and the 'minor', appears similar to Casanova's scheme of literary hierarchies. But he does not repeat her mistake of grading these in terms of aesthetic worth and reducing all notion of literary 'value' to a market of tastes dominated by Europe. His approach is polycentric, as he focuses instead on patterns of transmission and exchange that take on different forms depending on the vantage-point of comparativism and sites of reception. He theorizes these forms in terms of two conceptual metaphors – the tree and the wave – to demonstrate the complementary and at times antagonistic forces of national literary traditions and the global marketplace respectively. The world literary system witnesses a tension between evolutionism and economism – the 'philological tree' and the 'market wave' that demarcate the parameters of literary historiography:

²⁶ Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 149.

²⁷ Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 158.

Trees need geographical *discontinuity* (in order to branch off from each other, languages must be separated in space, just like animal species); waves dislike barriers, and thrive on geographical *continuity* (from the viewpoint of a wave, the ideal world is a pond). Trees and branches are what nation-states cling to; waves are what markets do [...]. Cultural history is made up of trees *and* waves – the wave of agricultural advance supporting the tree of Indo-European languages, which is then swept by new waves of linguistic and cultural contact [...]. And as world culture oscillates between the two mechanisms, its products are inevitable composite ones.²⁸

Moretti's 'wave' metaphor to describe global literary flows exposes the limits of Casanova's evolutionary reading of the world literary space in which peripheral literatures move up in the scheme of literary value the closer they are to Paris. French or English hardly constitutes the phylogenetic tree of world literature. But it is not difficult to imagine their global impact in terms of a transnational wave theory, just as it is quite productive to imagine literary genres or forms – novel, epic, lyric poetry, drama – afloat in a sea of influences and engendering, for literary critics, what Moretti calls "comparative morphology" or Emily Apter "a cartography of cultural capital in transit."²⁹

Another recent attempt to demarcate the conceptual and methodological terrain of world literature in this era of globalization is David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* He reads the terrain in terms of works that are also networks or conduits of conversation beyond national or ethno-cultural borders and in which translation features as a key problematic. In doing so, he resolutely moves away from the great European canon/classics model as the standard-bearer of taste and value to which literatures of the rest of the world aspire. Nor does he, in talking about translation, appear overly concerned about the spectre of anglo- or francoglobalism. As he puts it,

A central argument of the book [... is that] world literature is not at all fated to disintegrate into the conflicting multiplicity of separate national traditions; nor, on the other hand need it be swallowed up in the white noise that Janet Abu-Lughod has called "global babble". My claim is that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike [...] just as there never has been a single set canon of world literature, so too no

²⁸ Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 160–61.

²⁹ Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 80.

single way of reading can be appropriate to all texts, or even to one text at all times.³⁰

Added to this lateral, polycentric, and heterogeneous approach to the world literary space is Damrosch's insistence on a 'phenomenological' rather than an 'ontological' approach to a literary texts,³¹ for the important question in global comparativism and world literature is less 'what' constitutes a work as literary in any singular sense than 'how' it manifests itself as literature in diverse ways through different optics of reading from different locations. It is not hard to see how far removed such an approach is from Casanova's insistence on a Greenwich Meridian of literary value and a singular view of literary worlding.

In tandem with the interventions of postcolonial literary and critical theory, Damrosch's and Moretti's theorizations of world literary comparativism in our globalized age have opened up many productive conceptual, historical, and methodological avenues of studying 'world-making' through literatures today. I conclude this essay by giving the outlines of one such world literature project I am currently working on. This work seeks to analyse anglophone writing from around the globe in a period I designate as being of epochal import – the post-Cold War stage in world history from 1989 to the present. The literary works I focus on both reflect and are constituted by the global immanence of terror, warfare, and genocide that has become a sign of our times. Such a study offers an alternative account of the geopolitics of literature to that put forward by Casanova, on many grounds. It acknowledges the impossibility of ever accounting for all world writing and settles for one particular archive within a specific time-frame, while at the same time identifying this corpus as world-oriented and globally significant. I argue that what we see in this body of writing is the emergence of a global literary space that is intimately tied to the post-Cold War political landscape. No matter what their point of origin – South Asia, Central and West Asia, Central and South Africa, Australia, North America, and the UK – these works in English display a deep engagement with key geopolitical shifts since the fall of the Berlin Wall. These include neoliberal capitalist domination and the concomitant rise of ethnocentric warfare and religious fundamentalism, the rise of the internet and its role in fostering transnational networks of migrancy and terrorism, the war against terrorism, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the

³⁰ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 5.

³¹ Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 6.

wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of the works I seek to analyse are: Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Andrew Miller's *The Optimists*, Thomas Keneally's *The Tyrant's Novel*, Salman Rushdie's *Fury* and *Shalimar the Clown*, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*, John Murray's *A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies*, Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist*, and John Updike's *The Terrorist*. These works manifest a 'literariness' that is global, that which is oriented not toward an imagined 'national' community in the Herderian sense but toward common world concerns refracted onto local, national or metropolitan spaces.

From this brief description it is obvious that my project, though global in scope, does not claim to account for a world literary system in any totalistic way. It is much less ambitious in terms of historical and archival range than Casanova's book. It is also less focused on literary hierarchies than on literary alliances on a global scale, less economistic and sociological in its assessment of the literary marketplace and more oriented towards patterns of cultural and aesthetic exchange in a domain of palpable inequity and imbalance. What it shares with Casanova's book is an acknowledgement of the role of world languages such as French and English in worlding the literary canon in the post-war period. But it seeks to historicize the emergence of English as a global language of creative expression, not by just limiting it to Casanova's 'internationalization' model based on a nineteenth-century imperial-national dynamic, but by tracing its links to the dominance of an Anglo-American world-view. What it resists, though, is reading this global literary archive in English deterministically as a sign of an Anglo-American form of cosmopolitanism – where America's vision of itself is the world vision. So, when I talk of the geopolitics of anglophone writing, I do not assert a structural dependence that subjects literary practices to global political authority-networks; rather, I explore how literary texts from 1989 to the present mediate crucial events and trends and constitute multiple, interconnected transnational responses to terrorism, ethnocentric tensions, and religious fundamentalism, migrancy, and globalization. My argument is that the literary fiction of this period both challenges and affirms notions of a globalized new world order dominated by neoliberal capitalism and neoconservative US imperialism. At the very least, it articulates a vision of a 'world in crisis' that goes far beyond the myopic Anglo-American optic of Western culture being under 'siege' from powers of unreason.

In reading these works as witnesses to the fraught transitional decade into the new millennium, my project also invokes a geo-ethical domain. It affirms an engagement with a cosmopolitical ethic, no longer as choice but as necessity, in this age of global networks and interconnectivity and emergent fascist ethnocentrism with global consequences. The literary works of this period are inflected with an acknowledgement of crisis – the mass of stateless people, the plight of refugees, the experience of war and terror, genocidal reprisal – and seek urgent strategies of affiliation. Written on the cusp of what has been a horrific century of wars and ethnic carnage and a new millennium that does not augur much better, such works express a new kind of humanist ethic, a new kind of ‘internationalism’ built on a shared dread of the human capacity for evil coupled with a deep awareness of the ambiguities of sharing grief across large expanses of devastated humanscapes. They highlight the fact that the notion of the rights-bearing human has faced its most severe test ever in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the new millennium, when human beings have had to live through catastrophes that have destroyed entire social networks defining our moral universe. The literary works I study articulate, in short, a new humanism of common corporeal vulnerability, and ask, after Judith Butler, “what makes for a grievable life?”³²

To read the ‘world’ in literature today is, thus, to confront both plurality and the prevalence of difference, and a myriad of often unpredictable nodes of connectivity; it is also to confront the largeness of a world that only too often surpasses the narratives and conceptual categories we have to hand. The project of imagining the world literary space is rendered futile if, in the final analysis, its locus of activity is made to seem concentrated in the hands of a few powerful cosmopolitan intermediaries in the publishing houses and salons of Paris, London, and New York, as it appears to be in Pascale Casanova’s world republic of letters.

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Not (Yet) Speaking to Each Other

—— The Politics of Speech in Jamaica
Kincaid's Postcolonialism

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CRITICS AND ANTHOLOGISTS OFTEN FILE JAMAICA KINCAID'S OEUVRÉ under the rubric of postcolonial literature, even when they acknowledge that Kincaid herself would reject that descriptor, or any other conventional taxonomy, as overly confining. Not all of Kincaid's critics, however, take her political demurral seriously. Moira Ferguson, for example, who has written extensively on Kincaid, interprets the early novel *Annie John* (1985) as a prelude to "the mature, radical politic"¹ of Kincaid's subsequent long essay *A Small Place* (1988). "Incontestable denunciation in *A Small Place*," Ferguson asserts, "has replaced the implicit jabs of *Annie John*."² In arguing that the later work decodes and politicizes what she calls "the repressed subtexts"³ of the earlier novel, Ferguson's overly teleological suggestion is that the early trajectory of Kincaid's writing, from immature naturalism to a mature politics, establishes her status as a postcolonial writer. The insightful Diane Simmons has more circumspectly noted the difficulty of categorizing Kincaid's work. "Although Kincaid sees writing as an act of liberation, she [has] refused to claim membership in any literary 'army,'" Simmons writes, using a military metaphor apparently of Kincaid's own devising.⁴ Simmons recalls Derek Walcott's admiring observation that the psychological "tem-

¹ Moira Ferguson, *Colonialism and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean Connections* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993): 133.

² Ferguson, *Colonialism and Gender Relations*, 135.

³ *Colonialism and Gender Relations*, 138.

⁴ Diane Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Twayne, 1994): 17.

perature” of a Kincaid sentence is that it “heads toward its own contradiction.”⁵ This contradictory quality at the level of the sentence, Simmons implies, extends to the body of Kincaid’s works, which therefore tend to thwart literary or sociological classification.⁶ Kincaid’s open refusal to join the camp of postcolonial writers, however, does not mean that she dismisses as unimportant the history of colonization in the Caribbean, nor that her writing lacks a profoundly postcolonial dimension. In what follows, I wish to explore the question of why the postcolonial politics of Kincaid’s oeuvre deserves particular attention, and how Kincaid’s writing helps to reconceptualize postcoloniality as a performative rhetorical mode. I want to argue that Kincaid’s work construes postcolonialism anew in a globalized context as a discourse whose task is to theorize the political and aesthetic tensions that threaten, but may also unexpectedly preserve, the possibility of an autonomous ethical agency within a profoundly inequitable economic and cultural order.

I choose to address the ethico-political philosophy of Kincaid’s writing at a time when the relevance of postcolonial discourse, according to some, is in greater doubt than it has ever been, as David Jefferess et al., Diana Brydon, and Kalpana Sheshadri-Crooks among others have argued, or, as Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and E. San Juan, Jr., claim, is already a dead letter. The most salient recent arguments against the relevance of postcolonial discourse in the present suggest that it has become a field suffused with melancholia and discouragement, and that the field’s putatively perverse attachment to the past eclipses its practitioners’ ability to theorize new political realities and cultural reformulations in the present. My argument is an attempt to intervene in this discussion by showing how Kincaid’s writing recovers and reframes the mediating gesture through which literature, and the literary itself, enables an ethical engagement with history that neither brackets it as a dead letter in the present, nor simply elides the distinction between the concerns of the present and the alterity of the past. Kincaid’s oeuvre, in my reading of it, compellingly albeit indirectly addresses both poststructuralist critics, who accuse postcolonialism of reinstating a new totalizing narrative, and Marxist detractors, who loudly denounce the absence of a materialist historical account in postcolonial studies. This is particularly evident, as I want to show in this essay, when one reads the autobiographical

⁵ Walcott’s comment first appeared in Leslie Garis, “Through West Indian Eyes,” *New York Times* (7 October 1990), Late ed., sec. Books: 42.

⁶ Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid*, 4–5.

in her texts – both the fictionalized and the nonfictional – as Kincaid’s attempt to displace, but emphatically not to deny, the constraints imposed in speaking of and for an historically constituted but politically disenfranchised Other. In this she bears out Gayatri Spivak’s remark:

Women must tell each other’s stories, not because they are simple-minded creatures, but because they must call into question the model of criticism as neutral theorem or science.⁷

The implication of Spivak’s comment is that there can be no theory of alterity without the autobiographical, but that the autobiographical is that which has no place in the theory, and so the practice of autobiography must remain necessarily strategic, and not essential, in postcolonial critical formulations. Kincaid has managed to maintain this strategic tension in her writing, but its coherence is often overlooked because there has been relatively little interrogation of her writing as a reformulation of postcolonial agency in and through a relation to post-traumatic alterity. Kincaid’s strategic autobiographical voices are melancholic in their search for identity and autonomy in just the way that postcolonial critics have alleged of the field itself; it is in this way, however, that her work rehearses the self-critique that allows her to restore a post-traumatic politics of incompleteness and potentiality to Caribbean history.

An aspect of Kincaid’s writing style to which I will draw attention here is her use of a formal technique that I call the “ambiguated narratorial voice,” a technique which is similar to, if not drawn from, the stylistic device known as Free Indirect Discourse. I want to begin my discussion of Kincaid’s work, and what I see as an important but underappreciated contribution she makes to understanding the traumatic historical status of postcolonial ethics, by exploring her use of an ambiguated narratorial enunciation as one among a range of formal gestures she uses to uniquely counterdiscursive effect. The term *style indirect libre*, often translated as ‘Free Indirect Discourse’, which Proust most famously invoked in his 1920 analysis of Flaubert’s style, refers to a stylistic device that can be understood by contrasting it with the use of direct and indirect discourse. A textual narrator who uses direct discourse reports directly what another speaker has said at a different time by setting off that speaker’s utterance in quotation marks or by using a similar graphical marker. In contrast, a narrator using indirect discourse reports another speak-

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988): 15.

er's utterance by integrating it syntactically into the narrator's own written sentence structure. Free Indirect Discourse is an additional method of reporting another's speech (and sometimes another's thoughts) which falls between the direct and indirect modes of discourse, occupying an indeterminate middle ground. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* derives its ambiguating power from the propensity of the narrator's third-person voice to lapse intermittently into what appears to be the first-person perspective of Emma Bovary herself, but without a clear deictic indication of the change in perspective. What made Flaubert's novel so scandalous at the time of its publication, as Dominick LaCapra points out, was that it was never entirely clear, due to the ambiguity of perspective Free Indirect Discourse introduces, whether or not Flaubert approved of Emma Bovary's adultery.⁸

Theoretically, one might add, the uses of Free Indirect Discourse or of the variant I am proposing, ambiguating narratorial speech, need not be limited to narratives that are written in the third person. An excellent example of this variation forms the central axis of the poem "In the Waiting Room," which appears in Elizabeth Bishop's final volume of poetry, *Geography III*.⁹ Bishop's poem, which is not typically counted as an example of postcolonial literature, describes the experience of a young girl, on the cusp of her seventh birthday, who accompanies her aunt, Conseulo, to an appointment at a dentist's office in 1918. While she sits in the waiting room, the girl shyly glances at a series of strange and fascinating images in a *National Geographic* magazine. Among these are photographs of the American explorer couple Osa and Martin Johnson in high safari costume; a dead man "slung on a pole" accompanied by the disturbing caption "Long Pig"; babies, presumably African, "with pointed heads," wound round with string; and women similarly adorned and transformed by high coiled necklaces "like the necks of lightbulbs." The girl speaker's sense of distance from the people depicted in these images is accentuated when she says of these African women, "Their breasts were horrifying."¹⁰ Still transfixed by the magazine, she continues, "Suddenly, from inside, / came an *oh!* of pain / – Aunt Consuelo's voice – / not very loud or long."¹¹ The "*oh!*" of her aunt's voice is not set off in quotation marks in the

⁸ Dominick LaCapra, *Madame Bovary on Trial* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1982): 45, 127.

⁹ Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room," in Bishop, *Geography III* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976): 3–8.

¹⁰ Bishop, "In the Waiting Room," 4.

¹¹ "In the Waiting Room," 4–5.

poem, but only with an exclamation point, and in italics – a graphical marker used elsewhere in the poem for emphasis.

Bishop's decision not to render the aunt's "*oh!*" in quotation marks thus introduces an ambiguity: is this, as the next line of the poem states, the voice of the aunt in the dentist's chair, or that of the young girl narrator, as she adopts the perspective of her aunt? While such an ambiguity in the enunciation of a first-person speaker is not typically associated with Free Indirect Discourse, I would argue that Bishop's poem simply employs a less-recognized version of the style, which accomplishes much the same thing as its third-person variant. "In the Waiting Room," indeed, helps us to draw this conclusion by allowing the girl speaker herself to arrive at a new realization about the ambiguity of personal voice, and the consequences of that ambiguity for any intersubjective differentiation between self and other. As the poem unfolds, the speaker discovers an uncomfortable truth about her own identity:

What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I – we – were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.¹²

As the realization dawns on her that the "*oh!*" she had initially attributed to her "foolish aunt" might just as easily be a cry escaping from her own mouth, the girl narrator retroactively justifies the poet's decision to leave undecided the question whether the earlier exclamation belonged to the aunt or to the poem's speaker. Bishop's use of ambiguously represented speech thus accomplishes a twofold end: she presents her young speaker in the process of jettisoning a detached, emotionally immature, identity while understanding, for the first time, that she and her aunt, and even the African women with "those awful hanging breasts" in the *National Geographic* magazine, are intimately, if tenuously, linked to each other in a world of representations that exceed their control.

¹² Bishop, "In the Waiting Room," 5.

Beyond its heuristic value in demonstrating an inventive use of narratorial ambiguity in a modernist postcolonial context, I have another reason for discussing “In the Waiting Room” here: within two years of its publication, the Antiguan-born and raised Jamaica Kincaid, newly embarked on her writing career in New York City, was to begin publishing her early short stories. Kincaid’s first story, entitled “Girl,” consists of a single, 650-word sentence, published on one page of the *New Yorker* magazine in 1978. The story’s unusual structure, undivided by paragraphs, suggests that it is something of a prose poem, indeed, more than a short story. It was written, Kincaid revealed in an unpublished 1993 interview, with Elizabeth Bishop’s poem in mind.¹³ Like “In the Waiting Room,” Kincaid’s story involves a young girl’s troubling encounter with the adult world into which she is about to emerge. The story is told almost entirely through the words of the anonymous mother of the unnamed girl. The story begins:

Wash the clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk bare-headed in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off....¹⁴

The mother’s didacticisms are not always as neutrally phrased: “always eat your food in such a way that it won’t turn someone else’s stomach,” she admonishes, and then she continues, more scathingly, “on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming.”¹⁵ The daughter replies twice during the course of the story. The daughter’s words, and perhaps their tone as well, are graphically indicated in italics, as at the end of the story, when she responds to her mother’s instruction to squeeze bread to test its freshness: “*but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?*” Her mother then adds a final self-fulfilling jab: “you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?”¹⁶

What is most formally complex about Kincaid’s “Girl,” in addition to the story’s relatively short length and single-sentence format, is its means of posing the epistemological question *Who is speaking?* That question, which is

¹³ Diane Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Twayne, 1994): 15.

¹⁴ Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983; New York: Plume, 1992): 3.

¹⁵ Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River*, 3.

¹⁶ *At the Bottom of the River*, 5.

also the central ambiguity of Free Indirect Discourse, is not a simple matter to establish in this short fictional work. For, without indicating by any graphic or deictic means, Kincaid's story nevertheless implies that its true speaker is neither the mother nor the daughter in the fictional diegetic space and time. The story's dialogue, rather, is enunciated by an unseen and unheard narrator. As Line Brandt points out in a brief reference to the story, "this is an example of a narrator who is not only invisible; it is *mute* as well."¹⁷ Brandt's claim is true if one does not consider the title of the story to be the one word the narrator utters in its own voice. In writing "Girl," then, Kincaid seems to have adapted a formal technique that Bishop deploys in her poem – a single word enunciated by an ambiguous speaker – and to have extended that technique to a formal extreme in creating an entire narration whose narrator is only implicitly, if at all, present. In doing so, Kincaid essentially inverts the effect of Bishop's use of the stylistic device. What Bishop's Elizabeth realizes, in the ambiguously enunciated exclamation "*oh!*" of the poem, is that she must re-evaluate the buffering distance she has allowed herself to maintain from her aunt and from others, including those depicted and objectified in the *National Geographic* magazine. As the unreliable authority of enunciation sinks in, Elizabeth is compelled to ask what "made us all just one?"¹⁸ Kincaid's story offers no such hint of a potential resolution. The implied narrator's reporting of the mother's words, in the absence of any stylistic markers of distance, suggests the absorptive capacity of the mother's perspective and the psychological problem, faced explicitly by the story's girl character, of mother–daughter differentiation. That which, in Bishop's poem, is a quest for identity through psychic unity is thus, in Kincaid's story, a recognition of the daughter's need to achieve and maintain psychic autonomy and intersubjective difference. Both texts exploit variations of Free Indirect Discourse – a purely literary form that, as Ann Banfield points out,¹⁹ does not exist in spoken language at all – to convey their ethico-political concerns. But Bishop's poem does so in order to celebrate the redemptive possibility of transcending individual and cultural barriers, while Kincaid's fictional narrative, in contrast, suggests the dangers posed by blurred subjective boundaries.

¹⁷ Line Brandt, "Explosive Blends: From Cognitive Semantics to Literary Analysis" (doctoral dissertation, Roskilde University, 2000): 41.

¹⁸ Bishop, "In the Waiting Room," 7.

¹⁹ Ann Banfield, "Where Epistemology, Style, and Grammar Meet Literary History: The Development of Represented Speech and Thought," in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, ed. John A. Lucy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993): 340.

Kincaid's text, however, much more extensively than that of Bishop, experiments with the traversing of psychic and perspectival boundaries that ambiguous enunciatory acts permit. Kincaid's story "Girl," indeed, is radically given over to such ambiguity, whereas Bishop's poem permits only a single occurrence of it. With its mute implied narrator, "Girl" thus seems to offer a form of literary access to the other — in this case, the importunate voice of the mother — which overwhelms the essential autonomy of the narrator's voice in the same way that the mother's opprobrium threatens to efface the subjectivity of her daughter. In reducing the narrator's establishing authority to an unconfirmable supposition, the story engenders an experience of disorientation in the reader that does not merely *represent* an attempted effacement of identity but actually *enacts* it. Like much of Kincaid's writing that would follow, "Girl" explores a topos that postcolonial literature has repeatedly traversed: the epistemological possibility, the ethics, and the political and psychological consequences, of attempting to give voice to alterity. Jamaica Kincaid's work, I want to argue in the remainder of this essay, deploys ambiguating narratorial enunciation to conduct this exploration in ways uniquely sensitive to her own investment in, yet nevertheless intent on undoing, the modes of cultural discourse that enable unquestioningly authoritative representations of an historically subordinated Other.

Kincaid's apparently ambivalent desire to make contact with an imagined Other in her work comes to a head in her harrowing and acerbic texts of the late 1990s, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, published in 1996, and *My Brother*, published the following year. *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a strange, cold, and pessimistic novel that, in fictional autobiographical form, chronicles the coming of age and adulthood trials of its principal character and narrator. Kincaid's earlier novels of education, *Annie John* (1983) and *Lucy* (1990), conclude with their narrators' recognition that the exhilaration of psychological liberation (from the mother, and from the elaborately traumatic cultural and psychological nexus she embodies) is counterbalanced by an unexpected sense of loss. *The Autobiography of My Mother*, by partial contrast, concludes on a note of utter desolation and bitterness, unaccompanied by any existential or psychological victory. Kincaid's narrator in the novel, Xuela, is precisely the opposite of the implied narrator of "Girl": the narrative is so exclusively given over to her voice that any apparent ambiguating narratorial enunciation nearly disappears in this novel. Not only are characters in the novel not permitted to speak directly, but Xuela as narrator

almost never incorporates a representation of their speech, much less their autonomous perspective, into her narration. The effect is that *The Autobiography of My Mother* utterly rejects any possibility of dialogue between Xuela, as the narrating subject, and all those others whose lives necessarily impinge on her narrative. This novel, in other words, seems to offer the very opposite of what Mikhail Bakhtin would have described as being the heterogeneous project of a polyphonic text: *The Autobiography of My Mother* is, by all appearances, an essentially monological novel.

What, then, is Kincaid up to? Why would an author whose early writings exhibit her commitment to textual heteroglossia be tempted to write a novel that so obviously rejects such formal dialogism? The answer, I think, is that *The Autobiography of My Mother* represents Kincaid's attempt to write a novel that would reflect her pessimistic assessment of the potential for equitable intersubjective exchange and social communion across geographical or temporal boundaries where psycho-historical trauma is the governing social context, as her texts suggest of the contemporary postcolonial Caribbean. Kincaid indicates the extent of this pessimism in an episode in *The Autobiography of My Mother* in which Xuela, as a child, and her schoolmates, helplessly watch a young boy drown when he is lured into deep water by the apparition of a beautiful dark-skinned siren.²⁰ The children explain to their elders what happened to the boy, but no one believes them. "If our schooling was successful," Xuela reflects, "most of us would not have believed we had witnessed such a thing."²¹ That the education she has received was not entirely successful in producing her as a perfect colonial subject can be measured, conversely, by her credulous response to this mythic encounter.²² Growing up in a colonial society, being interpellated within it and subject to the trauma of postcolonial historical abjection, necessarily entails for Xuela, as for Kincaid, a kind of radical isolation from others with whom one might otherwise find common cause or at least common recognition. Of her classmates, Xuela says:

²⁰ Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996): 35–36.

²¹ Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 49.

²² This siren-story is, of course, a syncretism of the widespread Afro-Caribbean lore of the diablesse and mama-dlo. See, for example, the entries for 'djablès', 'mama-glo', and 'water-mama' in *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, ed. Richard Allsopp (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 1996).

We were not friends; such a thing was discouraged. We were never to trust each other. This was like a motto repeated to us by our parents; it was part of my upbringing, like a form of good manners.²³

Xuela explains this general mistrust of others in the Caribbean as a form of historical displacement:

The people we should naturally have mistrusted were beyond our influence completely; what we needed to defeat them, to rid ourselves of them, was something far more powerful than mistrust.

She does not indicate explicitly what this more powerful “something” is, but she implies its possible precondition, in continuing: “To mistrust each other was just one of the many feelings we had for each other, all of them the opposite of love, all of them standing in the place of love.”²⁴

Xuela’s scorn for other Dominicans, and her refusal, as narrator, to let them speak in their own words, can be said, then, to perform the very displacement of mistrust that she identifies here as an outcome of historical trauma. Her narration is at once an act of resistance and a confirmation of her own bleak analysis of the postcolonial situation: “Everything about us,” she insists,

is held in doubt and we the defeated define all that is unreal, all that is not human, all that is without love, all that is without mercy. Our experience cannot be interpreted by us; we do not know the truth of it.²⁵

To articulate a counter-logic to that of traumatic history, to oppose colonial power and knowledge with a belief in the possibility of a viable collective response to oppression, is ruled out in Xuela’s formulation here, and in her life as it is presented in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Xuela’s claim – that those whom she calls the “defeated” can neither know their own history nor escape its destructive impact – is countered, however, by her own perceptive and eloquent, if not ultimately redemptive, narrative. She, like Kincaid, seems to know her personal history, and that of her island and its people, extremely well, indeed intimately, and although her narrative finally descends into a bitterness matched by her own life’s lovelessness, she offers an ineffaceable response to official history in the form of a fictive narrative that is coextensive with Kincaid’s novel. If Xuela is an archetype of the Spivakian subaltern, and

²³ Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 47.

²⁴ *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 48.

²⁵ *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 37.

if *The Autobiography of My Mother* is Kincaid's attempt to write a fictional postcolonial history with Spivak's paradox of the voiceless in mind, then Xuela's narrative itself is anything but an apposite example of the ethical and epistemological conclusions her story seems to draw about historical traumatization. Like the logical conundrum of the title of the novel itself, Xuela's narration may function as a ruse which Kincaid adopts merely for strategic or heuristic purposes to call attention to the risk posed by a highly dubious and ideological fiction of empathy where the barriers to knowledge, as in trauma, constitutively resist transcendence. This may be the meaning of the signal comment Xuela makes after she recounts the mysterious drowning of the boy in her childhood: "I then and now," she says, "had and have no use for redemption."²⁶ Redemption, in this novel, is the empty promise of an indefinite future to which the "defeated" cling when empathy, the evocation of the other in a condition of imaginary equality, remains structurally – that is to say, politically – foreclosed in the here and now. Redemption, in this view, is the false theological counterpart to psychoanalytic working-through: it implies that healing is the somatic and psychological precursor to getting over the traumatic past. Redemption's precondition in Christian theology, apocalypse, likewise suggests the image of a crossing-over to the other side, literally a drawing away of the veil. It is this too easy traversal, or perhaps transference, that Kincaid's novel treats as the corrosive fantasy of the postcolonial moment, when, as the postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi has suggested, the impulse of the formerly colonized is to imagine starting society anew, without the burden of the past.²⁷ *The Autobiography of My Mother*, in its performative rejection of universalized empathy, serves as a warning of the dangers of that fantasy.

Perhaps because of the ethical and artistic dead end with which *The Autobiography of My Mother* concludes, Kincaid's non-fictional memoir *My Brother*, published just a year later, in 1997, feels like a twin to the earlier novel. *My Brother* is an account of the illness and death of Kincaid's brother, Devon, who contracted HIV in Antigua and died there of AIDS at the age of thirty-three in 1996. Kincaid hardly knew her brother until he neared the end of his life, because she had left Antigua when he was still young and they did not stay in close touch; but she re-established a connection with him during the course of his illness. Her book pays homage to her brother's life, although

²⁶ Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 49.

²⁷ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998): 4–8.

it does not paint a flattering portrait of him, and she admittedly never manages to understand him well, discovering only in retrospect that he had been a closet homosexual. Her distance from him, however, does not detract from the book's eloquence and cogency; it only adds to the poignancy of her depiction of him as a man whose identity remained deeply concealed. His silence about himself was, for a time, matched by her own. After her brother died, she was initially speechless:

I could not write about him, I could not think about him in a purposeful way. It was really a short time between the time that he became sick and the time he died, but that time became a world. To make a world takes an eternity, and eternity is the refuge of the lost, the refuge for all things that will never be or things that have been but have lost their course and hope to recede with some grace....²⁸

Kincaid seems to indicate here, in a thought that she does not complete, that the process of her brother's dying was akin to what trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub, drawing on Freud, have described as a latency period;²⁹ but with equal justification, as she suggests, this sense of latency might just as easily describe an iteration of the creative process that an artist or writer goes through when inventing an imaginative world. The end of the above passage echoes, indeed, the penultimate words of her earlier book: "This account," Xuela says, referring to her own story, "is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become."³⁰ But Kincaid's words in describing the death of her brother and her attempt to create art from that death, while never blithe, are considerably more hopeful than is the end of Xuela's narrative. There is something I would even venture to describe as *redemptive* in Kincaid's description of her writing process here – of the ritualized time that memory and reflection create as reality, and of a world whose loss, not its presence, is the condition of verbal expression. The hopefulness of this passage is emphasized elsewhere, when Devon's symptoms abate temporarily after she brings him a

²⁸ Jamaica Kincaid, *My Brother* (1997; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux/Noonday, 1998): 91–92.

²⁹ Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction" and Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995): 3–12 and 61–75 respectively.

³⁰ Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 228.

course of AZT, unavailable in Antigua at that time. She returns to her husband and children in the USA, but complains:

I missed my brother, being with him, being in the presence of his suffering and the feeling that somewhere in it was *the possibility of redemption of some kind*, though what form it could take I did not know and did not care, only that redemption of some kind would be possible and that we would all emerge from it better in some way and would love each other more.³¹

Such a sentiment seems entirely absent from *The Autobiography of My Mother*, although perhaps that is only because the earlier novel expresses ideas from which Kincaid apparently distances herself in writing *My Brother* – ideas she may already have begun to disavow, indeed, as the earlier novel’s composition came to a close. What I am describing as an important revision, if not an outright reversal, does not, of course, transform her work into something fundamentally other than what it had been earlier. There is nothing literal about the redemptive ideal she articulates in *My Brother*, but, as with Free Indirect Discourse, it is suggestive of an authorial, or authoritative, uncertainty that decentres this and subsequent texts, such as Kincaid’s 2002 novel, *Mr. Potter*.

An indication of this potential uncertainty is suggested in a passage in which Kincaid, visiting Antigua to attend to her sick brother, notices that a lemon tree he had planted behind the family house is missing. She asks her mother about the tree,

and she said quite casually, Oh, we cut it down to make room for the addition. And this made me look at my feet immediately, involuntarily; it pained me to hear her say this, it pained me the way she said it, I felt ashamed. That lemon tree would have been one of the things left of his life. Nothing came from him; not work, not children, not love for someone else.³²

Kincaid does not set her mother’s comment off in quotation marks, as she usually does with reported speech elsewhere in the book; she merely indicates its separateness from her own narrating voice by capitalizing the first word, “Oh,” of her mother’s response (here, perhaps, is Bishop’s “Oh” once again). The words could be coming from Kincaid’s own mouth, but that they are not is as subtle a distinction as her own belief in the thwarted, perhaps even redemptive, potential of the lemon tree that her mother has cut down. Kincaid

³¹ Kincaid, *My Brother*, 50. (My emphasis.)

³² *My Brother*, 13.

later writes of seeing, at a major traffic intersection, a broken stoplight that has not been fixed, because spare parts for it are not available on the island. "Antigua is a place like that," she says, in a Naipaulian mood. "In Antigua itself nothing is made."³³ Antigua's autonomous existence is at risk because, like her brother in his lifetime, it makes nothing. And yet Kincaid is not ready to give up on Antigua, as she did not give up on her brother: her writing, with its indirection and its mesmerizing, repetitive recursiveness, suggests that she constantly strives to involve her reader in the ritualized temporality of reading and to invest her writing with voices not entirely under her narrators' control: two experiences, if you will, of traumatic dis-possession. It is in this way that she gives to her writing a protean autonomy, like the Obeah her mother practised, that does not merely assimilate its present readers or absent characters. Writing about her brother, which she describes as akin to "the act of saving myself," entails giving herself over – traversing an empathic threshold – in order, as she says, to "understand his dying, and not to die with him."³⁴ It is in this arguably redemptive act that she allows another voice to inhabit her own writing, and thereby unexpectedly rehumanizes, by permitting to remain ontologically other, those whom her character Xuela had described as the "not human." In this, Kincaid elaborates the critical tension between humanism and an epistemology of traumatic unknowingness which underpins a post-colonial ethics in need of constant reinvention.

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³³ Kincaid, *My Brother*, 24.

³⁴ *My Brother*, 196.

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Frailty and Feeling

—— Literature for Our Times

PAUL SHARRAD

IF WE LOOK AT THE CURRENT GLOBAL SALES OF *THE DA VINCI CODE*, both book and film, then clearly *this* is literature for our times. As a tale of conspiracy, a global corporation engaged in cover-up, religious fanaticism and secret codes, it's not hard to see why it might strike a chord in readers around the world in an era of transnational commercial political and ideological scheming. Increasingly, we seem to find a neo-imperialist media export of dreams of total security sustained by action heroes who emulate the gung-ho figures of colonialist romance, but who are backed up by a massive technology of military and surveillance powers that make Napoleon and Queen Victoria look like minor potentates.

Lessons that postcolonial writing might derive from all this relate to the *Da Vinci Code*'s central figure of the right reading of signs. As with all the suspense-action movies and pulp fiction of conspiracy, we do need to read the signs that reveal truths; we must continue (perhaps with even more urgency than before, now that world media ownership is being limited to a few corporations located in one or two centres of global commercial networks) to uncover secrets, expose violence, and decipher the double-speak of power. We cannot afford to be bogged down only in exercises in academic cleverness or yet more visits to colonial discourse and literary 'writing back'. Nor can we let ourselves as critics of culture and power be stymied by our theorizing so that difference and deconstruction disable the kind of agency implicit in universals such as human rights.

At the same time, we should be wary of how such universals are co-opted by those holding economic or political power to promote forms of neo-

imperialism. In the name of populist ‘plain speaking’, conservatives have sought to corral and discredit our potential for disturbing the status quo of corporate capital and aggressive democracy. Under Bush, Howard, and Blair, media columnists attacked ‘political correctness’ and with it anything labelled ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postmodern’ as either dangerously radical iconoclasm of difference or irrelevant arcane scholasticism. Teachers are pushed aside as leftist underminers of national cohesion, ideologues bent on destroying the benefits of progress brought to all by globalization, at once ineffective hypocrites and destroyers of right thinking. This is done in the language of mindless patriotism and a narrow exclusivism that protects the wealth of a comfortable middle class. It speaks the language of simple truths in words that seem transparent and singular in their reference, while dealing in Orwellian duplicity and discourses of public disempowerment in the name of state security. Empires of all kinds have dealt in this kind of literalist fundamentalism and are now reaping the whirlwind as Taliban, Hindutva, and Christian alike break from liberal traditions seen as Western or elitist decadence.

One of the underlying concerns of this essay is to find a path through the competing aspects of postcolonial literary studies represented by the turn to engaging ACLALS in the wider decision-making processes of the Commonwealth. As with postcolonial literary theory, there is a danger of over-reaching ourselves and being shown lacking, on the one hand, and underachieving, on the other, by presenting textual-cultural abstractions that seem esoteric or irrelevant.

There can be no doubt that the Association and what we do as postcolonial critics (even as ‘old guard’ Commonwealth literary critics) is founded on, and should continue to be informed by, political ideals of cultural respect and rights to self-determination. But I think there is a case for seriously considering the radically modest outlook of J.M. Coetzee’s work, which points out that writers and critics deal in words and the small dramas of individual lives. Our responsibility is therefore to find the exact word for a situation and to refrain from exceeding our brief.¹ It is an ethical action, and a necessary one, but it is not the grand programme of social reform, even though it may well,

¹ Dick Penner, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (New York: Greenwood, 1989): 87; James McCorkle, “Cannibalizing Texts: Space Memory and the Colonial in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*,” in *Colonizer and Colonized*, ed. Theo D’haen & Patricia Krüs (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2000): 488.

by its very modest precision, show up the hypocrisies and inflations of large-scale political systems.

Sticking to our literary lasts as good word-cobblers does not prevent us from taking part in political action, but the two spaces do not necessarily overlap tidily. We might take the example of Arundhati Roy, who writes as a novelist of 'small things', the tragic minutiae of local life as seen by children. Like Coetzee's Michael K, her god of small things leads a reductivist life, slipping aside from the whirlwinds of major cataclysms with hands in pockets, consoled that things could be worse. This doesn't seem heroic, or productive, but it is the kind of realistic subaltern small-scale subterfuge that de Certeau talks of, and it certainly shows up ironically that things *are* worse: the genteel family system of a Syrian Christian elite has become nastily dysfunctional, and the economic and political power-brokers in Kerala have become corrupt. Roy's literary drama may be small-scale in its focus, but it doesn't prevent the author, outside of her novel-writing persona, from taking on the big gods of state power and NGOs. Literary analysts might follow suit.

Postcolonial praxis has operated across assertions of absolute difference of identity, experience, and specific circumstance, on the one hand, and common patterns of expressing difference, on the other: shared goals of equality and liberation, and the need for a common language in which to communicate these goals with the oppressors. The politics of difference have usefully shown that there are more than two sides to a social 'problem', according to the number of interested parties, and that not all parties speak/understand the issue with enough terms in common to admit straightforward compromise or reasoned consent to a course of action not everyone completely assents to. We have often shown how the idea of reason itself is part of the problem, excluding the voices of subaltern passion. This has all been productive in teaching dominant groups to be cautious and more respectful of constituent interests, and perhaps this is our best contribution to groups like UNESCO or the Commonwealth Foundation, but it has also tied us up in theoretical knots, such that no sufficient grounds for agreement on policy are arrived at. We might survey all the various approaches to female circumcision or the Rushdie fatwa as instances of this, particularly as they move from discussing fictional treatments of the world to actual world effects of real social and cultural practices – and this principled confusion will not help the refugees in Darfur, or the flood victims in Bangladesh, or the deliberations of the UN on either phenomenon.

Postcolonial theory and praxis also worked across claims of ontological, sometimes biological, identity, with deconstructive theories of liberation being possible only because all identities are social constructs of relational signs. We have the long-running debate between broadly Marxist postcolonial critics such as Fredric Jameson, Benita Parry, and Ella Shohat in alliance with minority-group activists, and poststructuralist theorists like Homi Bhabha and R. Radhakrishnan as evidence for this, and the debate is specifically addressed in the work of the last two in Bhabha's essay "The Commitment to Theory" and Radhakrishnan's discussion of minority politics in the USA, "Ethnic Identity and Post-Structuralist Difference." As ever, Gayatri Spivak's work moves complexly across both modes of handling postcolonial analysis and action. Part of the play in and across these 'camps' is between thinking of texts as particular 'small' fields, loosely related to larger matters, and as the only – very big – field there is. Even accepting the latter claim, there is still a debate over the place of literature within the textual field as a whole, and how political assertiveness emerges out of discursive systems, literary or in general: is there some inherent base for it, or is it a construct in debt to the hegemonic discourses that both create and seek to repress or contain it?

One tool that has been coming into play in humanities work (via psychology, language-learning theory, and mainly through cultural studies' interest in the social effects of non-verbal texts such as music or cities) is affect theory.² Affects are biologically located and experienced, but socially responsive and culturally modulated. They offer a small window, perhaps, through which to connect the world of the literary writer and critic with the world of social and political action; they seem to bridge the universal biological as personally experienced and communal experiences interconnected to social meanings. As Nigel Thrift acknowledges, there is an intersection with postcolonial interests, in that "in at least one guise the discovery of new means of practicing affect is also the discovery of a whole new means of manipulation by the powerful,"³ and affect studies continue debates about the links between postcolonial studies and postmodernity if we consider Fredric Jameson's lament about "the waning of affect" in a postmodern world of simulacra and

² Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect," *Geografiska Annaler* 86B (2004), vol. 1: 57–78.

³ Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling," 58.

commodification of retro style.⁴ In response, we might supplement Linda Hutcheon's argument about postcolonialism's politicized irony⁵ by suggesting that the postcolonial clings to assertions of affect, not as some sign of pre-postmodern delayed arrival at postmodern 'cool', but as a mode of difference in which the agential subject is not yet discarded as a possibility.

To some extent all this covers, from a slightly different angle, the ground already mapped by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, but thinking about affect is a useful addition to the re-insertion of the body and of haptic experience into the intellectualized and cybernetic post-human critique.⁶ Katherine Hayles notes that the attack on the universalist aspects of the liberal-human subject has been made possible by the separation of 'self' from body, and that post-human critiques (cyborg images, for example) in fact continue this abstraction of self into a "set of informational processes." She calls for a reconsideration of the place of bodies and bodily difference even within cybernetic interactions.⁷ Once we re-insert the body into our models of the human, we also take on the processes of the body, and that includes emotions, their affective sources, and their social meaning and management. In turning to affect, however, we do not have to surrender the theoretical tools of constructionism and deconstruction.

The argument between constructivism and biologism is resolved succinctly by Elizabeth Grosz: "The body produces culture at the same time that culture produces the body,"⁸ though Butler goes a step further in trying to blur the binaries indicated here as mutually constitutive. I am not suggesting that 'affect' is some pre-discursive biological universal that guarantees a basis for individual and collective agency, but that, like Judith Butler's treatment of 'sex' as opposed to 'gender', there is a dynamic relationship between what is discursively pre/constructed and what lies at the limits of discourse. If affects

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 1995): xvii, 15.

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonialism and Post-modernism," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 20.4 (October 1989): 149–75.

⁶ Maria Angel, "Brainfood: Rationality, Aesthetics and Economies of Affect," *Textual Practice* 19.2 (June 2005): 323–48.

⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1999): 4–5.

⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994): 200.

can be thought of as ‘prior to’ socio-cultural emotions, they exist nonetheless, like the bodies they work in and for, “within the productive constraints of certain highly [...] regulatory schemas.”⁹ The ‘materiality’ of affect is something different from a social construct but also an effect of sedimented patterns and performativities that make it an “effect of power [and] power’s most productive effect.”¹⁰ Such a recourse to the body and to affect enables us to posit “a project that preserves [textual and personal] practices as sites of critical agency”¹¹ without subscribing to any universalizing individual humanism.

Feelings have usually been treated as very much a personal matter, at least in literature. They define characters and explain their interactions, and, frequently, writing is about the refinement of feeling as a mark of personal growth, both in story and in readers. When feeling has been attached to collectives, it has generally been discredited by writer and/or critic as a dangerous whipping-up of mob passion or a para-artistic revolutionary didacticism. Affect takes us away from this either/or duality; it ‘translates’ feeling from the private to the public space, and as such may be an effective critical pathway for defending the value of postcolonial literatures seen as being too committed, too passionate, to attain full acceptance as works of art. Affect works via ‘connectivity’ and ‘community’ as well as from individual impulse and action, and is a process among contingencies in which any limited scale across ‘global’ and ‘local’ is opened up to multiple and reflexive mixings of the abstract/cognitive and the material/emotional.¹² Of course, as with postcolonialism and postmodernism, affect theory can also be taken up as one more fashionable panacea that displaces critical work from meaningful socio-cultural political engagement.¹³

Originally mapped out by Sylvan Tomkins in the USA of the 1960s, it was a libertarian reaction to the biological determinism of Freud’s unconscious basic drives. But it also located the sources of action in material phenomena, located in the body, even as it allowed for individual permutations and combinations of affects and the cultural mediation of affect as a social exchange

⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993): xi.

¹⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 8, 9, 15, 2.

¹¹ *Bodies that Matter*, x.

¹² Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling,” 59.

¹³ Clare Hemmings, “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn,” *Cultural Studies* 19.5 (September 2005): 548–67.

feeding back into cognitive processes. Described as “the doing of emotions,”¹⁴ affect can also be regarded as a form of thinking-in-the-body and an ‘intensity’ that turns personal feeling into an impulse for socially meaningful action: “a sense of push in the world.”¹⁵ Although it clearly works with feelings and emotions, and is embodied experience, affect is not reduced simply to a-rational biology, to the personal, the subjective impression, or to psychologism; at the same time, it is more than feeling. As Teresa Brennan puts it, “the things that one feels are affects. The things that one feels with are feelings.”¹⁶ Although she seems to posit an opposition between language and affect,¹⁷ she does admit that affective mini-programs carry paralinguistic potential for meaning, and it is not difficult to see how a text might utilize certain aspects of affective intensity to induce feelings in a reader. These occur as personal experience but, like the ‘atmosphere’ in a room arising from affective impulses, can be transferred to communal and public contexts. Affect, then, as an ‘intensity’ beyond though at the edges of and folded into the social, may perform a catalytic role in ‘moving’ someone, from which engaging with someone else to start a movement may result. Nigel Thrift observes how

Disciplines like psychoanalysis have been very good at searching out the violence done and the costs that have to be borne and laying them bare through such indices as physical trauma and tears. But, at the same time, we still lack a politics of emotional liberty or hope which can be both productive and not so attached to Euro-American individualism that it simply reproduces the assumptions of the West in what it strives for.¹⁸



A novel that has done very well as a young-adult book, but which can be read equally well as an adult work, is *The Book Thief*, by the Australian Markus Zusak. Based on stories told to him by his German and Austrian parents

¹⁴ Katz, in Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling,” 60.

¹⁵ Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling,” 64; Brian Massumi, “Introduction” and “The Autonomy of Affect,” in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Post-Contemporary Interventions; Durham NC: Duke UP, 2002): 1–22, 23–45.

¹⁶ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca NY & London: Cornell UP, 2004): 23.

¹⁷ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 145–46.

¹⁸ Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling,” 69.

(Moran),¹⁹ it is, I believe, an interesting experiment in using the tools of affect to envisage such a politics of hope that is personally grounded but communally realized, a book that holds to a sense of common humanity but admits to limits of difference. *The Book Thief* is “a long, achingly sad, intricately structured book about Nazi Germany narrated by Death itself.”²⁰ In a context of teenagers apparently knowing less and less history and living in a postmodern media present, how does one interest a young reader in the Holocaust? Information, whether from history lessons, war films, or Holocaust museums, lacks affective connection unless some intimate detail can generate a bodily echo.

In *The Book Thief*, from 1939 Liesel Meminger has her life followed through the Second World War to old age as a migrant in Sydney. We first see her witnessing the death of her brother on a train in the snow. Her father has gone, and her mother sends her for adoption to the working-class family of the foul-mouthed washerwoman Rosa and the accordion-playing house-painter, Hans. We discover that her parents have been ‘disappeared’ by the Nazis for their Communist allegiances. In a small town, we see the activities of history reduced to personalities, to pragmatic compromise and individual stubbornness, to quiet refusal to conform, to childhood bullying, and to orchard-raiding to supplement meagre wartime diets. The novel insists on its “smallness” (though it is 584 pages long!), breaking up the total narrative into dot-point summaries, letters, quick views of a character’s thoughts, documents: a “small story”²¹ expressing “a small, sad hope” (528). At times it sounds like an eighteenth-century tale of much foreshadowing and, at other times, like postmodern bricolage (dice and plot options, palimpsests, statistics) admitting the impossibility of capturing the whole historical period. In fact, Death is the only narrator who can tie up all the loose ends to this tale (555–56), and he does only a partial job of it. Of course, the big gods of power catch up with everyone in one way or another, but their history is shown to have alternative readings and different stories hiding within it.

One of these is the debt Hans Huberman owes to his First World War companion in arms, a Jew who got him out of battle duty and died, bequeathing

¹⁹ Jennifer Moran, “Shooting Fears of Greatness,” *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane; 27–28 August 2005), BAM: 6.

²⁰ John Green, “Fighting for their Lives,” *New York Times Book Review* 111.20 (14 May 2006): 26.

²¹ Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (Sydney: Picador, 2005): 6, 499, 558. Further page references are in the main text.

him his accordion. Erik Vandenberg's son Max is now on the run from the Nazis and claims sanctuary in the Huberman's basement. He and Liesel develop a strong friendship in which they make stories for each other: hers giving Max a window onto the outside world of the town; his giving her parables of the workings of power and human kindness. As the Nazis commandeer more basements for air-raid shelters and as Max's underground life saps his health, he realizes that he endangers his hosts both alive and dead, since they would have to dispose of his body. He leaves, only to be found by Liesel much later among the half-dead Jews being herded to Dachau. She asserts human friendship at this point by walking with him and taking a beating as a result. Another central relationship develops between Liesel and the mayor's wife, a wraith-like figure mourning her dead son. Liesel begins to steal books from her library until she realizes that the woman is deliberately allowing it, and after a bombing raid kills her immediate family and friends, Liesel moves into the mayor's house, adopted for a second time.

Zusak is, as Candice Francis notes of his other work, able to see "the beautiful in the ordinary" (we might add: and in the dreary and desperate) and to show that "ordinary people can do extraordinary things."²² Liesel's ratbag friend Rudy places a tattered teddy bear next to a dying British airman; Liesel brings flowers and stones and stories to a worn-out fevered refugee each day in the hope that he will find interest in these sufficient to inspire recovery. Death is able to note shades of colour in the sky and the texture of souls as he collects on the killing fields. Sometimes these colours are rather heavily symbolic (the red, black, and white of three opening scenes combining to overtly reference Nazi insignia); more often they are impressionistic. It is this impulse to beauty and memorable image that leads characters and readers into the affective inspiration for small remarkable acts in the face of cruelty and blind fate. In *The Book Thief* it is manifest mainly through what reviews have labeled its 'poetic prose'.²³

There is an air of disapproval lurking in such descriptions, as if the 'light' style is somehow schmaltzily detracting from the great horror of the Holocaust, or the personalized story is misguidedly humanist in the face of a massive systemic breakdown in Western civilization. But we might consider the way affect works, according to Brian Massumi, and see that solemnity and

²² Candice Francis, "The Story of your Life," *The Age* (9 May 2005), All about Books: 4.

²³ Sunanda Creagh, "Hope amid the Flames," *Sydney Morning Herald* (24–25 September 2005), Spectrum: 20–21.

poststructuralism would be a kind of surrender to the tyrannies depicted. Masumi points out that there is no necessary direct correlation between content and intensity, and that the latter (the affective impulse) “is characterised by a crossing of semantic wires: [...] sadness is pleasant.”²⁴ Thus a teddy bear in a wrecked fighter cockpit may have a greater intensity of impact on readers than a realistic, consistently dignified, large-scale treatment of the incident. Death as a weary and troubled bureaucrat may be that much more compelling than the Grim Reaper or a cynical existentialist (though John Green finds him “innocuous” and Michelle Griffin says he “stomps all over the scenery telling us what to think,”²⁵ and at times I’d have to agree). But the fourteen books that Liesel steals have little in common (a gravedigger’s manual from which she learns to read, a Jewish symbolist fiction snatched from a Nazi bonfire, etc.) and that is their effect: they offer alternative visions more affectively compelling because of their lack of reasoned connection. They provide relief for the people of Himmel Strasse (heaven/sky street) as Liesel reads to them in the air-raid shelter dark.

At many moments in the book, Zusak could be called to account for manipulative sentimentality – Zusak himself was pleased that his father admitted the book had made him cry.²⁶ However, this is offset by the distanced viewpoint of Death, puzzled, saddened, and fascinated at the strange and contradictory ways of humans. The story is also realistic: Liesel cannot become a Jew; she is separated from Max. There is no redemptive outcome from her act of feeding and marching with the Jews save for its resistant assertion of cross-racial human community and its momentary mutual strengthening of wills for her and Max. Good people die, usually by stupid chance, frequently by stupid military strategies beyond their ken or influence. Liesel’s long-time boyfriend, Rudy, a natural anarchist who blackened himself all over and took up running as a fan of Jesse Owens, dies before they can acknowledge their love for each other. Most of the town is blown to bits in a bombing raid that mistook its target close to the war’s end. Obviously there is more of a danger for the reader of coming away with a cynical sense of life as mere absurdity.

²⁴ Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Post-Contemporary Interventions; Durham NC: Duke UP, 2002): 24.

²⁵ Michelle Griffin, “Stolen Moments,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (3–4 December 2005), Spectrum: 30.

²⁶ Creagh, “Hope amid the Flames.”

The style lends itself to such a reading. While she finds the novel a success overall, Michelle Griffin observes: “At times this is an exceedingly noisy book, with prose that capers like a circus acrobat.”²⁷ Zusak himself, perhaps with an eye to younger, often reluctant, readers, tries to ensure a good turn of phrase or captivating image on each page.²⁸ This style, plus the recourse to hand-drawn pictures and reproduced hand-written text, carries echoes of Kurt Vonnegut (obviously his war novels, but more so the tone and technique of *Breakfast of Champions*) and, for me, also of Arundhati Roy’s style in *The God of Small Things*. The partly child-like viewpoint (Death gives us Liesel’s diary entries as well as his own omniscient commentary), the self-conscious curiosity about words as Liesel slowly learns to read (one chapter is titled “The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus”), and the recurrent disjunctive, reductive, proleptic, ironic codas are all common elements. Compare these with Roy’s ‘tags’ at the end of each narrative unit:

If her mother loved her, why leave her on someone else’s doorstep? Why?
Why?

Why? (32)

Sister Maria.

Was not impressed. (80)

Speeches would be made.

A fire would be lit.

A book would be stolen. (116)

No final goodbye.

No final grip of the eyes.

Nothing but goneness. (209)

For some critics, all this textual play detracts from the book’s overall success because of its seeming flippancy and inappropriate showing-off while presenting Jewish death marches, the battle for Stalingrad, and the haphazard bombing of civilians. Again, I think we can make a defence for both Zusak and Roy of the incongruity, the lack of decorum, in terms of the affective intensity generated through the paradoxically ‘cool’ style. To quote Massumi again, “An emotional qualification breaks narrative continuity for a moment to register a state – actually to re-register an already felt state” and this reso-

²⁷ Griffin, “Stolen Moments.”

²⁸ Creagh, “Hope amid the Flames.”

nance “is not yet activity,” but carries the seeds of movement by bringing together in oscillation “two interacting subsystems following entirely different rules of formation.”²⁹ The result is less the sentimentality of invoking conventionally coded emotions such as ‘pathos’ than it is a setting-up of intensities as potential for thinking differently.³⁰

Brian Massumi claims that “affect is synaesthetic.”³¹ *The Book Thief* often uses this as part of its expressive tool-kit, speaking of “the sound of the smell” of Death’s footsteps, or “the smell of friendship” (76), and “calm, warm, soft contentment” (524). Following Maria Angel’s analysis of several texts’ use of disgust and taste – key aspects of Tomkins’ taxonomy of affect – we can note how Zusak uses the increasingly disgusting soups of his heroine’s adoptive mother as an index of that woman’s domineering nature, of the worsening conditions of life under the Third Reich, and of Frau Huberman’s redeeming refusal to give up on rituals of sustaining family and giving succour to the sick and to guests. Again, under affective impulse, a personal emotive reaction becomes also a communal activity.

If it engages with the world of affective experience, the novel (as its title suggests) does not give up on the power of the text. Max, the fugitive Jew, is saved just by carrying a copy of *Mein Kampf*, and later he writes an illustrated fable for Liesel (on pages from *Mein Kampf* painted over in white house-paint) in which he states that a dictator erects his regime on words (475). The corollary is that words can also undermine the dictator,³² but also (and we might think of the Chaplin film) that other things can do it as well: non-verbal affirmations of individuality and community: enduring friendship – the ‘small things’ of affect. There is, I think, a difference between whipping up mob affect in a performativity of intensity (the repeated concentration of conventional feelings until visceral experiences of rage, fear, etc. are generated), and private or ‘critical’ affect which arises from pre-social synaesthetic cues that lead to contextual processing into emotions. Both aspects of affect management are depicted when Leisel chooses to demonstrate her enduring friendship before an uncomprehending crowd by marching with Max and the captive Jews. She holds his hand and takes a public beating as a challenge to the

²⁹ Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” 25, 26.

³⁰ Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” 32.

³¹ “The Autonomy of Affect,” 35.

³² Zusak, in Jennifer Moran, “Shooting Fears of Greatness.”

brute force and mindless prejudice of the supporters of the Führer and, in doing so, disturbs the awareness of the community.

The postcolonial writer or scholar, like Liesel the reader and writer, has to work across a complex set of tactics to resist the strategic disempowerment of art and intellectual work by populist politicians and totalitarian regimes. We have to admit the narrow limits of what we do but also insist on the larger social effect of literature. We must continue to assert our right to the tools of specialist analysis, just as quantum physicists and gene-mappers do, and to argue for its importance as a means of generating cultural health alongside other valuations of material well-being. (And this is not the same thing as the old claim that literature will make us all better people; not at all.) At the same time, we need to reassert our hold on humanistic universalisms of human rights and civil liberties even as we show that this does not mean simply a 'manifest destiny' of assimilation to one model of Western civility. And we have to recover a radical re-engagement with plain speaking and the cold facts of extra-textual differentials of access to food, money, cultural respect, and political rights across the globe. Postcolonial writing and criticism must engage with this difficult 'writing back'. In the face of many fundamentalisms (including First-World globalizing capitalism), we must affirm the right to relativist sensitivity, to symbolist ambiguity, to the small frailties that tie us all together. Brian Massumi argues that affect "holds a key to rethinking post-modern power" in spaces that "are not defined overall by ideology,"³³ and works such as *The God of Small Things* and *The Book Thief* provide illustrations of how this might be so.

To go back to *The Da Vinci Code* as the literature of our time, the stories of airport thrillers all invoke the idea of the hero protecting the ordinary citizen, the little person, the underdog. But the machinery of the fiction overall supports a totalizing technology of data-gathering and an economy of weaponry that supports the military/security culture of a First World and demonizes small groups of disaffected foreigners and/or religious fanatics. The implied underdog is a faceless audience, a deserving working and middle class who are positioned as having only the power of consuming product and who need strong leaders to protect them. Whether this is Stalin or Hitler, Thatcher, Mugabe or Pinochet, the underlying discourse is a totalitarian one, destroying liberal democratic agency in the name of conserving liberal freedoms. If this is the literature of our times, then perhaps what we have to do is

³³ Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," 42.

advance a counter-literature that, armed with all the critiques postcolonial thinking has marshalled against the limits of the Western liberal subject, asserts the dignity, capacity, and multiplicity of the people. We need to side with the secret truth of complex humanity, with frailty and feeling against the cruel simplifications of doctrine and the cold machinery of power – we need a literature engaging with affect and the gods of small things. And I do not have to remind this readership that many postcolonial writers, people as different as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Wilson Harris, have been saying this for a long time, but also showing how the small things come together to reveal the working of large forces. Maybe, as Commonwealth literature studies have been globalized into postcolonial writing and theory, there emerges a new intensity of need and new possibilities for promoting this vision.

So I think ACLALS is doing the right thing in joining with the Commonwealth Foundation and other such agents of change as another way of fulfilling our particular political agenda of cultural self-determination for nations and minorities within nations in the face of neo-imperialist globalization. But as representing literary scholarship, the challenge is to see how our theories of 'who speaks, and with what authority, within which discursive fields in order to achieve what goals?' can make a meaningful contribution to inequities of wealth distribution and actual racist conflicts. It is, in a sense, an experiment in seeing how the gods of small stories might engage productively with the big storm-gods of global history.

At the same time, as mentioned earlier, we must not pretend to speak from spaces too removed from our expertise. The wider interdisciplinary field of postcolonial studies includes economists and political scientists, and we should be in dialogue with them, but we should also assert the affective world of the arts that is our area of interest. While some of us do deal in ecocriticism, and one or two actually have science degrees, our scientific credentials as a body of literary critics might well be questioned if we do more than borrow stats on ecological issues, but there is plenty we can say about how writers respond to such issues and how they depict people being affected by them (the double meaning is intended). We must also attend carefully, in line with our own critical systems, to the differing voices and constituencies within our own ranks, setting up protocols so that recommendations carry the weight of as many members and as many significant alternative views as possible. Affect may offer us a way of holding to our small craft while connecting to the wider community it reflects and re-imagines.

This is, therefore, a call to stay true to what we profess: the affective power of the literary text and its real capacity to influence thinking and therefore action, while at the same time holding to a vision of social activism that encompasses cultural analysis and, indeed, stresses the importance of culture in social and political change. And we need to be ever conscious of the problematical and thickly mediated connection between text and social context so that we do not kid ourselves that literary criticism or textual theory is the same thing as social action or devalue our own scholarship in deferring to social action willy-nilly as a purer form of change than cultural critique. That is to say, Markus Zusak is not saving the world by writing a novel. But without his text and its critics, a world of recurring holocausts would be a much bleaker place.

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Spaces of Desire

—— A Pleasant *Séjour* in Robert
Kroetsch's *The Hornbooks of Rita K*

NELA BUREU RAMOS

We are always too young to be old,
too old to be young¹

You pay a high price for using the first person,
for getting at that awareness of subjectivity²

AT THIS STAGE OF MY LIFE, NO LONGER YOUNG, STILL NOT OLD, my perception of the passage of time hinges on two philosophical – and apparently contradictory – definitions of this category within which our best hopes and worst fears necessarily operate. At this stage of my life, I gladly accept the risk of being subjective. Is there any such thing as an objective subject?

In the *Timaeus*³ Plato describes time as ‘the moving image of eternity’, a description rooted in a transcendental conception of existence, also suggesting

¹ Robert Kroetsch, *A Likely Story* (Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1995): 65.

² Shirley Neuman & Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest, 1982): 168.

³ Plato, *Timaeus*, translated with a running commentary by Francis McDonald Cornford (1937; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952): 132. Also available online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html>. The speakers in the *Timaeus* are: Socrates, Critias, Timaeus, and Hermocrates. Plato puts the following words in the mouth of Timaeus: “the Demiurge began to think of making a moving image of eternity: at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This, of course, is what we call ‘time’.” And he goes on to say: “[The Demiurge] brought into being the Sun, the Moon, and five other stars, for the

a kind of celestial lulling to which Christianity eventually added the convenient calm-before-the-storm warning. The natural human demands for order, coherence, and story with beginning and closure were, after Plato and the Christian adoption and adaptation of his philosophy, relatively satisfied for centuries – at least in the Western world – despite the menacing thunder of the Four Horsemen.

I was born and brought up in this context of linearity and divine clock-work. The fear of God as Time Master, exacerbated by the impossibility of ever understanding his *modus operandi*, pervaded most of my childhood nightmares and experiences. I sensed his power in thunder and lightning, his benevolence in rainbows, his disturbing presence in the rustling of starched soutanes, in the rancid smell of the voice coming from dark confessionals, and in the pungency of incense and white lilies in the school chapel. Fortunately, childhood tales provided both a necessary relief from, and healthy complement to, this educational diet. And yet, despite this deeply imprinted sense of walking on tiptoe before falling off the tightrope between the Genesis account of Creation and a dreaded Doomsday, time was not an enemy during my childhood years.

Time is seldom hostile to children. Unlike adults, children do not make foolish, reproving demands on time. They live space intensely, inclusively. Perhaps this is what innocence means: to experience the relative comfort of space as opposed to the urgent pressure of time. By the same token, the loss of innocence occurs when the clock begins to race and time's chariot hurries near. The shift of emphasis from space to time occurs in our life at different moments, and for different reasons. What matters is not when or why this shift takes place but that it does so. In an article on *Seed Catalogue*, Dennis Cooley suggests that the loss of innocence experienced by Robert Kroetsch coincided with his falling, when he was only eleven, off a horse that was standing still.⁴ The incident elicited the scorn of the hired men and the

begetting of time. These are called 'wanderers' [planêta], and they stand guard over the numbers of time. [...] And so people are all but ignorant of the fact that time really is the wanderings of these bodies."

⁴ Dennis Cooley, "'What it was I knew my father felt, what I felt': Hidden Grief/Unspoken Desire in Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*" (2006), in *Flaming Embers: Literary Testimonies on Ageing and Desire*, ed. Nela Bureu (New York: Peter Lang, 2010): 249. These are Cooley's words: "What do we have? There is a boy who has just fallen, in the garden. There is an open invitation if ever there was one to read the event as transitional, as symbolically transforming."

bewilderment of his father, but also the loving intercession of his mother, as Kroetsch himself suggests in perhaps one of the most widely quoted passages in the long poem *Seed Catalogue*, which Cooley also includes in his essay:⁵

Winter was ending.
This is what happened:
We were harrowing the garden.
You've got to understand this:
I was sitting on the horse.
The horse was standing still.
I fell off.

The hired men laughed: how
in hell did you manage to
fall off a horse that was
standing still?

Bring me the radish seeds,
my mother whispered.

The falling off a horse that was standing still suggests interesting ideas, all of them related to space rather than time. Had the boy fallen off while riding the animal, the symbolic transition from one category to another – from innocence as stasis to experience as motion – might have been easier to establish. But how can we associate this incident with a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, from space to time? He was still, and remained still. Robert Kroetsch never rode away from his 'garden'. And yet, the falling is, despite the predominance of space and therefore stasis, a catalyst of change. We cannot be sure that after this incident Robert Kroetsch's internal clock began to race. Perhaps only his unconquered space on horseback began to shrink inside into the core of what he eventually expanded into the imagined space of prairie literature. One thing is certain: the intimate relation between the land and the child, and later, the adolescent boy, still guides the writer's pen.

The kind of literature I grew up with – except for the many childhood tales which shaped my mind and personality in ways I will never fully understand but for which I am grateful – was basically a time-oriented literature. The muses in Spain, and in Europe as a whole for that matter, are children of

⁵ Robert Kroetsch, *Completed Field Notes* (1989; Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2000): 20–30. Also in *Seed Catalogue: a poem*, ill. Jim Westergard (1977; Calgary, Alberta: Red Deer Press, 2004): 6.

memory. They are also kin and kind to place, but time, whether sacred or secular, has governed the production and teaching of the so-called 'canonical' texts, the only texts from which I derived a sense of what literature was: basically, something outside my life, my experience, and often my liking – except for the adventures of the picaresque rogue.⁶ Literature had little or nothing to do with me. It was a 'subject', both at school and at university, something I had to read and analyse under a teacher's guidance or in accordance with the critical orientation of a university tutor. It was an alternative fictive reality which had evolved in parallel with the real world from which it had derived its sustenance. And it was a closed world. Writers were writers. How they had reached that status was never a matter of analysis. They had been born that way, or had acquired the gift of writing from parents or congenial teachers. Readers were readers. There were also teachers and critics. To each his niche. Order and hierarchies mattered. And they continued to matter until age and Canadian prairie literature (in this order) forced the god of verticality to bend, walk askew, and even fall flat like the rest of us mortals.

As Susan Sontag has put it, "growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination";⁷ but it also has its advantages. To paraphrase Robert Kroetsch, you arrive in your life twice.⁸ And then you rebel against any kind of imposed authority, not only for the sake of rebellion, or self-assertion, as during adolescence, but because you do not want anything or anybody to interfere with your desire to discard the inessential from your life and concentrate on what is really valuable and meaningful to you (a kind of autumn cleaning). And, in a way, this is a process that takes us back to space, the reality we have been

⁶ In Spanish literature, especially that of the Golden Age, the *pícaro* is a roguish character whose travels and adventures are used as a vehicle for social satire. The anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), which relates the life and adventures of one such character, is thought to be the first of the genre known as the picaresque novel, or *novela picaresca*. Other well-known picaresque novels were written by Cervantes (*Rinconete y Cortadillo*, c.1604), and Quevedo (*El Buscón*, 1626).

⁷ Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging" (1972), in *The Other Within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Westview, 1997): 19.

⁸ Robert Kroetsch's words are: "I arrived on the prairies twice. One time I was, as the verb has it, delivered; one time I motored on my own. I was born in Alberta in 1927; I drove into Winnipeg from Upstate New York in an aging green four-door Dodge Dart in 1978. By that duplicity I might have wished to gain a surplus of perception. Accidentally, I inherited two deaths." *A Likely Story* (Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1995): 65.

trained to subordinate to the demands of time. We could say that ageing and the process of learning stand in inverse proportion to each other: as time adds age to your body, you acquire knowledge by erasing data from your mind. You make room for space and the freedom that comes with it. I am not sure, but perhaps “hornbook # 10” goes in this direction when Robert Kroetsch says: “We write by waiting for the mind to dispossess.”⁹ Significantly, writers of all times have gradually pruned their style, adding depth and breadth to their writings as they grow older. Allow me a leap into the far past to recall that Kenneth Muir made the following distinction between the Milton of *Paradise Lost* and the Milton of *Paradise Regained*, saying that in the latter

Milton displays the kind of simplicity which is never found in the early work of poets and which seems to result from a process of purification. It is a style that (like the best of Wordsworth’s) continually risks the charge of being prosaic but it saves itself by what one can call spiritual integrity.¹⁰

And Samuel Beckett, for whom Robert Kroetsch has expressed his admiration, and to whom he is indebted,¹¹ moved away from Irish/modernist eloquence towards the austerity we all know. About this conscious change Beckett said:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one’s material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.¹²

It should be pointed out here that the terms ‘adding’ and ‘subtracting’, as used by Beckett, reinforce the idea that any process of intellectual, aesthetic, or attitudinal simplification lends itself easily to interpretation as a return to

⁹ Robert Kroetsch, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2001): 3. Further page references are in the main text.

¹⁰ Kenneth Muir, *John Milton* (1935; London: Longman, 1968): 174.

¹¹ Robert Kroetsch has said: “Somebody like Beckett is terribly fascinating to me because he’s always facing that question of language which, as I say, I’m interested in. And he’s always looking at the problem inherent in the act of creation itself – always asking why one bothers to go through that particular form of self-torture, self-pleasure.” *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*, ed. Shirley Neuman & Robert Wilson (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest, 1982), vol. 3: 29.

¹² Quoted by James Knowlson in *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (1996; London: Bloomsbury, 1997): 352.

spatial, more static domains, as opposed to a linear or forward-urging existence. Despite the fact that Robert Kroetsch has never left his imaginative prairiescape, it seems to me that in the *Hornbooks of Rita K* he is more prone to spatial silence, and more austere, than in any other of his works. He is also more intimate. *Letters to Salonika* or *Sounding a Name*, both reprinted in *Completed Field Notes*, are perhaps more in-your-face intimate, but the kind of intimacy that pervades the *Hornbooks* is an opening not only to himself, letting you overhear, as in the volumes I have just mentioned. It is a more detached intimacy with the reader, with himself and his life, and with the prairie community – also with history, and, of course, with literature and the details of the intercourse between writer and reader. And, to a great extent, this detachment accounts for the sense of space the *Hornbooks* elicit from the reader. It goes without saying that Kroetsch is also playful and ironic, but it is the quiet, unassuming lyric integrity that captivates the reader. I am giving to the term ‘lyric’ the same meaning as that intended by Andre Furlani in a stimulating article on Jan Zwicky,¹³ that of “sympathetic resonance” and “echo of the image of integration,” which I understand as a generous emptying out of personality, a kind of self-effacement on the part of both writer and reader, in order to absorb, enjoy, and reflect any aesthetic vibration that is perceived by intuition as being genuine and containing some form of truth. *The Hornbooks* are open, playful, inviting, radiating honesty, echoing personal and collective truth. And they also possess the spatial quality so present in Kroetsch’s works as prairie writer, but also as an ageing, more mature individual. Here is a taste of them:

[hornbook # 28]

A poem is an empty house

[Stranger, you must enter, then knock.] (68)

[hornbook # 51]

Poetry is excrement, a discharge of the body. It is marginally useful as fertilizer. In using it as fertilizer we run the risk of transmitting a variety of venereal diseases. (44)

[hornbook # 44]

The castle at the end of the curled road
sings fado. The pale trees weep leaves,

¹³ Andre Furlani, “Jan Zwicky: Lyric Philosophy Lyric,” *Canadian Literature* 191 (Winter 2006): 50.

offering embrace to stone.
I become the voice I hear. (38)

[hornbook # 7]

I am attempting to write an autobiography in which I do
not appear. (29)

I had read the poetry of Eli Mandel, a seminal prairie poet, before becoming acquainted with the work of Robert Kroetsch. And I was immediately attracted to the poems of Mandel for the same reasons as I am now attracted to the poetry of Robert Kroetsch, basically because of their here-and-now honesty, lyrical depth, and austerity of tone and diction. Consider these lines by Mandel from “Wabamun” in the collection *Stony Plain* (1973):

to have come to this
simplicity
 to know
only
 the absolute
calm
 lake

before

night¹⁴

Robert Kroetsch is much more of a trickster than Eli Mandel. He tends to disguise integrity, compactness of thought and mind, by playing the postmodern game of disintegration, or perhaps I should say ‘deconstruction’, which is indeed a form of integrity – meaning both unity and honesty – as the vacuum created by disintegration is used, still full of resonances, to produce, or attempt to produce, the thing-in-itself, pure and detached from any meaning other than its own, detached even from language. After all, poetry is basically an attempt to explain what ordinary language fails to communicate. It is, ultimately, an attempt to turn language against itself, to get rid of anything except pure, wordless meaning. This repeated game of destruction and construction, absence and presence, rim and depth, allows the creation of a wide space where all these phases of the writer’s craft coexist. For the reader, it is like

¹⁴ Eli Mandel, *The Other Harmony: The Collected Poetry of Eli Mandel*, vol. 1, ed. Andrew Stubbs & Judy Chapman (Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2000): 162.

watching a landscape from a plane before landing; a bird's-eye view of his art. Patterns of meaning lie side by side without competing for priority. Size, colours, and textures combine in multiple ways to create different illusions of unity and harmony. Like Beckett, the mature Robert Kroetsch communicates by relinquishing rather than retaining, purifying rather than piling up. But he also – and in this he is, above all, a prairie poet – fans out all the fragments, varnished and unvarnished, of his personal mosaic. Kroetsch, like Eli Mandel, is a poet of space, open as his native prairie, and equally resistant to boundaries or closure. The prairie as mindscape allows endless directions and possibilities, but grants none, or very few. You may move along trails created by other prairie writers, but, as any quest for meaning demands, you have to venture out in personal, unexplored directions. Significantly, Kroetsch's first hornbook, after the introductory marginalia section, is about absence, about the disappearance of Rita Kleinhart in the Frankfurt Museum of Modern Art, and about her lover, Raymond, who takes up the task of sorting out for posterity the heap of poems, mostly unfinished, left behind by his absent beloved. Rummaging through the scraps of paper with their scribbles, Raymond lights upon Rita's unpublished hornbook # 99, through which Kroetsch announces a volume containing bits and pieces of personal memories entangled in imagination, broken by time, and glued together randomly on a space/text in another craftily failed attempt to map a story – one of the avowed obsessions of Robert Kroetsch, or Robert Raymond Kleinhart, who write(s):

[hornbook # 3]

Once upon a time, long ago.
 Long a time. Once upon a go.
 Long upon ago a once a time.
 A time ago upon. A long. A once. (31)

And in hornbook # 99 we read:

The question is always a question of trace.
 What remains of what does not remain? (8)

To which peripheral philosophical consideration, the familiar deflated, down-to-now centrality is attached:

I am watching the weather channel.
 It is that kind of day. (9)

The kind of immediate conclusion I am now interested in drawing from the above quotations, and those preceding them, is that the ageing mind tends to gravitate towards silence, the space that protects experience beyond words, just as metaphor is the space that protects meaning. In Kroetsch, as in Beckett, the embracing of silence is very much in the line of what Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus*: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen” (“of what one cannot speak, one must be silent”¹⁵). Silence, for Wittgenstein, or Beckett, or Kroetsch, does not mean a refusal to speak. It is a kind of “tense stillness,”¹⁶ some form of “wordless faith”¹⁷ – though in Kroetsch it can also take the form of ‘faithless words’ – both modalities so physically present in his poems, and in the poems of Eli Mandel, to whom, as I have already indicated, he is also indebted.

Anybody acquainted with Canadian prairie poetry will know how important and how pregnant with meaning silence is in the work of prairie writers, who say that silence is space, hence the voice of the prairie. Silence suggests failure to describe the experience of living on the Canadian plains, though in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* Robert Kroetsch makes this failure coextensive with the rest of Canada when he writes: “Canadian writing is obsessively about the artist who can’t make art.”¹⁸ Silence is also a sign of respect for that which cannot be named. It is the ‘tense stillness’ before the word. Though it can also be the last refuge of the individual, after everything has already been said in a multitude of different ways, and there is no longer anybody willing to listen. Margaret Atwood has Elaine, the protagonist of *Cat’s Eye*, say: “Everything is post these days, as if we’re all just a footnote to something earlier that was real enough to have a name of its own.”¹⁹ But silence is, above all, an appeal for meaning.

The idea of silence as ‘tense stillness’ allows me to return to the beginning of this essay, where I said that my perception of the passage of time hinges on two philosophical – and apparently contradictory – definitions of this category. Plato’s conception of time as ‘the moving image of eternity’ is one. It is, as has been suggested, a definition (pre)supposing some form of space–time

¹⁵ As quoted by Andre Furlani, “Jan Zwicky: Lyric Philosophy Lyric,” 54.

¹⁶ Furlani, “Jan Zwicky: Lyric Philosophy Lyric,” 53.

¹⁷ “Jan Zwicky: Lyric Philosophy Lyric,” 58.

¹⁸ Robert Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford UP, 1989): 24.

¹⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* (Toronto: McClelland–Bantam, 1989): 90.

continuum where time would be nothing other than the corrugations space makes in its oscillations. All this under the care of an all-knowing Maker. Jean Baudrillard²⁰ provides a different, more immediately frightening perception. The French philosopher has defined time as “une bombe à retardement” (a time-bomb), suggesting an engineered calm-before-the-storm under human control. A process of aimless acceleration seems to have taken place between these two conceptions of time, a process that Baudrillard himself explains: “Toutes les choses,” he says, “s’accélèrent dès qu’elles on perdu leur principe.”²¹ As for silence, Baudrillard, like Wittgenstein, advocates respect for the space words make to heal the wounds caused by usage. He writes: “Il ne faut pas fatiguer le langage, il ne faut pas le forcer à dire ce qu’il n’a pas envie de dire.”²² And Baudrillard, like Kroetsch, or Beckett – although Beckett is much more explicit in this than Kroetsch – also insists on the failure of language as a vehicle for communication to alleviate our sense of existential orphanhood. Baudrillard’s advice is “ne jamais chercher l’autre dans l’illusion terrifiante du dialogue.”²³

Baudrillard’s perception of time is, sadly, justified. So is his reminder that life is a solitary adventure. He does more than sound a pessimistic note about a society bent on self-destruction through violence, terrorism being the most perverse manifestation of this. He also warns us against self-obliteration by creating simulacra of ourselves: “Le virtuel,” he writes, “la duplication de la réalité, une forme de destruction subtile,”²⁴ and he goes on to say:

Auparavant, c’était Dieu qui faisait le travail de repréailles, maintenant c’est nous qui le faisons. C’est nous qui avons entrepris de nous infliger le pire et d’aménager notre propre disparition sur un monde extrêmement complexe et sophistiqué afin de rendre le monde à l’état pur où il se trouvait avant que nous y soyons.²⁵

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Les Exilés du dialogue* (Paris: Galilée, 2005): 13–15.

²¹ Baudrillard, *Les Exilés du dialogue*, 16; “all things undergo a process of acceleration when they are no longer driven by their original purpose or principle” (my tr.).

²² Baudrillard, *Les Exilés du dialogue*, 19; “We must not put too much strain on language, we must not force words to say what they do not want to say” (my tr.).

²³ Baudrillard, *Les Exilés du dialogue*, 13; “one should never look for the other in the terrifying illusion of dialogue” (my tr.).

²⁴ Baudrillard, *Les Exilés du dialogue*, 39; “Virtuality: A duplication of reality, a subtle form of destruction” (my tr.).

²⁵ Baudrillard, *Les Exilés du dialogue*, 46; “Once it was God’s task to retaliate against us. Now we do the job ourselves. We have wished ourselves the worst, and have designed the

Robert Kroetsch is apparently not as transcendently oriented as Plato was. In the *Hornbooks*, Raymond says that back doors were, for Rita Kleinhart, “the escape from transcendence,” and also: “the escape from so-called good neighbours and possibly from language itself” (10). Nor is Kroetsch as pessimistic as Baudrillard. At the risk of generalization, I would say that Europeans have always been much more pessimistic and sombre than Americans or Canadians. No pessimist embarks on a dangerous Atlantic crossing to start anew in another land, even if pressed by penury. At this point it may be enlightening to quote Sandra Djwa’s comments on the Canadian soldiers returning to their homes after the Great War:

In Europe and in the United States, the reaction to the war had been one of profound disillusionment. But in Canada, despite the appalling casualties of the war, the mood of the post-war years was buoyant. In effect, the war represented a political coming of age. For some of the returning soldiers, there was a sense of optimism and hope, and this hope for the future was centered in that which distinguished Canada from older Europe – in the land itself. In effect, they were leaving behind the waste lands of the battlefields of Europe, for the fresh, clear, northernland of Canada.²⁶

The key phrase here is “in the land itself,” a geography shaped by desire rather than war, hence full of possibilities. The pioneering and hopeful spirit has, in greater or lesser degrees of intensity, always pervaded prairie literature, restlessness as opposed to stagnation (not to be confused with stasis) being one of the many aesthetic forms in which this industrious spirit is rendered. However, to this positive idea of movement, enhanced by the possibilities offered by space, must be added the perception of time proposed by Baudrillard. Contemporary societies live fast. Terrorism is a world cancer. The wish to escape into virtual realities is widespread. This may have consequences that are difficult to predict, though Baudrillard’s disturbing and thought-provoking idea of the simulacrum, of destruction through duplication, remains a potent intimation of the consequences. It also poses an interesting paradox: one of the many functions of literature has always been to provide temporary shelter, an alternative reality, a spa for the mind. One goes to literature to come to terms with life, to sit at the banqueting table laid by art, but

destruction of an extremely complex and sophisticated world in order to restore the primeval purity that existed before we came into being” (my tr.).

²⁶ Sandra Djwa, “The 1920s: Pratt, Transitional Modern,” in *The E.J. Pratt Symposium*, ed. Glenn Clever (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1977): 56–57.

one comes back to what we have always called “the real world.” And this shuttling between life and literature is a healthy exercise. But virtuality seduces in a different way; we run the risk of becoming mere lotus eaters.

Thus, literature for our times should be one capable of rescuing us from virtuality, taking us back to and making us aware of all the other spaces we inhabit. It should be a literature that may heal by embracing all forms of life, and also a literature that can help us break free of the tyranny of the ‘before and after’ and – even worse – of the ‘too late’ imposed by time. Robert Kroetsch has reflected on the danger of living in harness to rigid binaries:

If we make the binaries too rigid we get into trouble, and the West that I was criticizing had, it seemed to me, made them very rigid, especially in matters of genre. And I think that has changed enormously right now.²⁷

Although he does not explicitly refer to time, the idea that the habit of pairing opposites may constrict rather than broaden thought is applicable to our deeply ingrained perception of life as linear, temporal sequence, which prevents us from perceiving our existence as a mosaic of spaces, an open field where different realities may coexist and interact in more democratic ways than the way of time. A literature for our times should not give up on the attempt to explain the inexplicable. Literature should protect meaning by claiming none, yet desiring all. And, finally, we need a literature that is not afraid of subjectivity. After all, when the “I” steps onto the page it loses part of its individuality. The “I” is only a visible symbol of the wall against which the writer necessarily leans, not just the token of the writer herself. As Robert Kroetsch reminds us in *The Hornbooks*, “Autobiography is not memory” (23). Significantly, the Canadian Lieutenant Governor’s Award for Literary Excellence in 2007 was granted to an autobiographical book by Patrick Lane, *There is a Season: A Memoir in a Garden* – a highly personal, honest, and lyrical volume, also one rich in local colour; and a testimony deeply rooted in space, real and imagined.



I find all these ingredients in prairie literature, in the poetry of Robert Kroetsch, and in *The Hornbooks of Rita K* in particular. The latter book is imaginatively autobiographical. Both Rita Kleinhardt and Raymond, who is, as

²⁷ J’an Morse Sellery, “Robert Kroetsch and Aritha van Herk on Writing & Reading Gender and Genres: An Interview,” *Canadian Literature* 170–171 (Autumn–Winter 2001): 25.

he defines himself, Rita's intimate friend, biographer, and "half lover of the plain truth" (7), run through the veins of their creator. Rita may very well stand for all the women in Kroetsch's life and, to judge from the initials "R.K." and the false modesty of the small-hearted speaking name, for the woman inside himself; all of them intensely alive through absence. Women have indeed been important in Kroetsch's life; he has repeatedly acknowledged their influence, both in his poetry and in interviews. Again, it is Dennis Cooley who reminds us of this influence:

Before writing "Sounding the Name," Kroetsch confessed to the force of his mother's memory and the weight of her loss [...]. In that same interview Kroetsch speaks to his own ambiguous position as tender of the garden, a largely female site which in his words marked him as something close to a failed male.²⁸

Raymond is, in many ways, a "failed male." He is clearly less active and productive than Rita, who at more than one point urges him into action. First, in "[hornbook # 48]," she says to him: "You are a prisoner of space, not I, Raymond" (48). And then, in "[hornbook # [blank]]": "Dear Raymond. You are lost in your own prologue. Get a life" (73). Raymond is Kroetsch, but he is also the reader – an open invitation, this, to read and write ourselves into spatial existence. About the *Hornbooks* Kroetsch says: "In my *Hornbooks of Rita K*, I play with male and female, poet and reader, and a number of other possibilities, so the reader has a voice in the poem."²⁹ Through Raymond we learn that "Rita disappeared on June 26, 1992, at the age of 55," and he goes on to say:

Kleinhart was invited, during the late spring of 1992, to visit Germany and lecture briefly to the Canadianists at Trier University. On her way back from Trier she paid a visit to the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt and while at the museum mailed a number of postcards to friends. She was not seen alive thereafter. (8)

Rita and Raymond enact the erotics of art as practised by Robert Kroetsch by consciously spacing meaning. The *Hornbooks* are intensely erotic in every way. Writer Rita, who is also a reader, and reader Raymond, who is also a writer (a tongue-twister might be enlightening here), give life to each other, and both to Kroetsch. Raymond gladly summons up remembrances of sex past, while he is sorting out Rita's papers. Rita's obsession with back doors

²⁸ Dennis Cooley, "'What it was I knew my father felt, what I felt,'" 252.

²⁹ <http://www.paulodacosta.com/robert.htm> (accessed 25 July 2008).

may be interpreted in various ways – as an escape from transcendence, from neighbours, from language, and also from time, as this obsession with back doors certainly suggests sexual intimacy, both with Raymond and with literature. In “[hornbook # 43]” Kroetsch invites the reader again to enter his text, without prejudice: “We write as a way of inviting love. Each text is a request that says, please, love me a little” (19). The deferral of meaning in the writings of Kroetsch is also an affirmation of the individual act of writing, a defence of freedom from the tyranny exerted by the expectations created by, again, a too-rigid and linear conception of literature. These are his words:

It seems to me that the important distinction is the distinction between writing and literature. The minute we talk about literature, we run the risk of bric-à-brac and heirloom. Then what we have to do is a recovering – or foregrounding – of the notion of writing itself. So I have to balance off my sense of literature (which is a pretty overwhelming sense) against the fact that I am writing, the act itself. And that’s where I get into my obsession with the deferral of meaning because I think the notion of literature is a kind of victory of meaning over writing [...] I have to very consciously assert myself to keep involved in the act of writing over literature.³⁰

A conscious deferral of meaning is an invitation to have a pleasant *séjour* in spaces where writer and reader find each other. To postpone meaning may also be beneficial in a world increasingly ruled by the god of immediate gratification. Literature should take us back to the pleasures and benefits of thought, of mental preliminaries, to the excitement of reading as an act of discovery and creation. Further, I should say (even at the risk of contradicting myself) that literature should seek not to unveil the mystery of being, but to preserve its magic. Writers should continue to dignify language despite its limitations, which are, after all, a reflection of our own deficiencies. In Robert Kroetsch, as in most prairie poets, language sounds as if the Fall had never taken place. Remember that the child Robert fell off a horse that was standing still. Each word is returned to its original primeval space before being colonized by successive hordes of meaning. Significantly, Kroetsch’s comments on the poetry of Eli Mandel go in this same direction:

One of the things that intrigues me about his work is the movement from what I would call belatedness toward innocence. Like many modernists he felt that he had come on the scene too late, he found himself overwhelmed by a tradition

³⁰ Shirley Neuman & Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*, ed. Neuman & Wilson (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest, 1982): 3.

which said everything that might be said. And his journey has been a journey from that belatedness toward a state of innocence, a journey which might allow him to speak.³¹

It is no wonder that the trope of the garden, of a space-before-time existence, remains a favourite one among prairie writers. Karen Clavelle reminds us that “the imagining of the garden was central to the question of settlement in the Canadian Northwest from the beginning of European contact with the great Plains,” and she traces the use of the myth of a new Eden through the writings of explorers, prairie promoters, historians, and artists – Robert Stead, Martha Ostenso, F.P. Grove, Arthur Styringer, Francis Benyon, Nellie McClung, Sinclair Ross, W.O. Mitchell, Wallace Stegner, Margaret Laurence, and Robert Kroetsch.³² Patrick Lane can be added to this list.

Indeed, in *The Hornbooks* references to the prairie as garden abound. In “[hornbook # 29]” there is a multitude of local, historical, and biblical echoes:

Flightless as snakes, we read flatly what cannot be flat. The
open prairie conceals a chasm. How does one dare walk
through tall grass? (23)

But in “[hornbook # 22]” the prairie conceals no danger. It is home. There is no doubt of this fact after reading Raymond’s description of the familiar environs of Rita’s ranch:

The long lane that leads from the paved road to her ranch
house is indeed covered with crushed red shale.
Saskatoons and chokecherries grow in patches here and
there, along the lane. Pasture sage finds a place in the
bunch grass. Wild roses. A slough with its ring of willows
and trembling aspen. (26)

Though it is also true that a home can turn into a prison, as “[hornbook # 40]” suggests:

Home is a door that opens inward only.
So how will you get out, stranger? I say
to myself. (33)

³¹ Robert Kroetsch, “Mandel’s Unwritten Text: Paradoxes of Archaeological Remains,” in *The Politics of Art: Eli Mandel’s Poetry and Criticism*, ed. Ed Jewinski & Andrew Stubbs (Cross/Cultures 8; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1992): 121

³² Karen Clavelle, “Home in the Garden: Imagine.” Unpublished essay prepared for the “Homesteading Reconsidered” Conference, Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska at Lincoln, May 17–19, 2007: 18–19.

But again, the prairie becomes a place in Rita's mind and heart in "[hornbook # 19]":

A patch of scarlet mallow appears each spring in the
grasses on the edge of the coulee directly in front of my
house. That little patch of orange-red blossoms, emerging
on a dry, south-facing slope, is one of my reasons for living. (36)

And further down, in the same hornbook:

In the end, we are defeated by gardens. They know too much. (36)

Kroetsch's rupturing of linearity, his wild zigzags across geographies of mind and land, of bodies, through densities of absence and desire, lightness of concept, or loops of detail, together with the randomness and spontaneity informing Raymond's display of, and comments on, Rita's hornbooks – all these contribute to emphasizing space over time. In spite of the story we are told, with even some suspense added – as when Raymond thinks he has seen Rita in Singapore – the reader may open the book at random, just as Raymond finds Rita's hornbooks, and make his or her own sense-sequence. Who knows, we may even happen to hit "hornbook #1." It would not matter, anyway; beginning and/or end are ill-fitting concepts on the prairie. Or is it that they fit the prairie so well that we cannot tell one from the other? This is very likely the case, because Kroetsch likes curves and circularity much more than linearity. Raymond takes delight in remembering Rita's "perfect behind" (30). First things first. Circularity is also, in the *Hornbooks*, desire for (w)holeness. It is a desire for self-erasure and an obsession with the filling of emptiness, a full(filling) obsession, as suggested by "[the hollow hornbook]":

Again, the hole in the middle of things. And that is the
question, with poetry. The poem itself is at best a trace of
what is fundamental and now is forgotten. Mere
psychoanalysis will never get us there. One must attempt
the impossible poem. To write what is possible is to
concede victory to the unspeakable. How then give it a
surface that lets the eye hear?

Or to put it another way, Rita presents to me my
absence. I can only assume she wrote this hornbook
intending to throw it away. Granted, every poem is a
casting out, an abandonment, but Rita went too far. She
loved to leave me fretting and stewing about the
significance of every emptiness she was able to uncover.
The poem as vacated crypt. As wound. As pothole. (101)

Robert Kroetsch's conception of emptiness, of (w)holeness, the whole structure of the *Hornbooks* seem to be responding to a particular cosmology, as if he were fanning out the story of his personal universe: The marginalia section would be the immediately adjacent area bordering his own life-experience: a small margin of safety, of singularity, before the self expands into different beings that organize themselves partly randomly, partly in obedience to pre-existing forces or laws. The unexpected, unpredictable numbering of the hornbooks attests to this 'post-Small-Bang' event. Towards the end, the letters of the alphabet take over from numbers in imposing some kind of orderly sequence: from hornbook A to hornbook I. Such order is, however, short-lived, as Kroetsch gets rid of both letters and numbers to attempt an impossible synthesis, as suggested in the closing section, where he combines numbers and letters – locked within single or double square brackets – with full titles, suggesting revisions, apocryphal writings, and, above all, emptiness: "the whole in the middle of things."

I was read Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* not long ago while I was working on this essay. The connection with Kroetsch was bound to suggest itself. Bryson's reference to 'vacuum energy' was simply too congenial to Kroetsch's understanding and rendering of the concept of emptiness. These are Bryson's words:

Although everyone calls it the Big Bang, many books caution us not to think of it as an explosion in the conventional sense. It was, rather, a vast, sudden expansion on a whopping scale. So what caused it?

One notion is that perhaps the singularity[*] was the relic of an earlier, collapsed universe – that ours is just one of an eternal cycle of expanding and collapsing universes, like the bladder on an oxygen machine. Others attribute the Big Bang to what they call 'a false vacuum' or a 'scalar field' or 'vacuum energy' – some quality or thing, at any rate, that introduced a measure of instability into the nothingness that was. It seems impossible that you could get something from nothing, but the fact that once there was nothing and now there is a universe is evident proof that you can.³³

No poem by Robert Kroetsch is perceived as an emptiness. They are too full of what we have already termed 'sympathetic resonances', echoes of former prairie writers and of world literature, but above all, echoes of prairie desire

³³ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Almost Everything* (2003; London: Black Swan, 2004): 31. Bryson uses the term 'singularity' to refer to "the spot so infinitesimally compact that it has no dimensions at all" (27). It was out of this unimaginably small, compact, and powerful 'singularity' that the universe could have burst and expanded into existence.

for the sensuality and sinuosity of meaning inside and outside language. It must be this. It must be the all-embracing space of the prairie that has seduced so many prairie writers, making them gather to form one of the most enthusiastic and fertile communities of artists in the whole of Canada: Robert Kroetsch, Dennis Cooley, Karen Clavelle, David Arnason, Aritha van Herk, Di Brandt, Douglas Barbour, Jan Horner, Birk Sproxtton, who passed away recently and for whom the whole prairie family is still grieving. To all of these, to so many other prairie writers I admire, to Robert Kroetsch, my profound gratitude. And now I draw another breath to say: Robert, too, has left us, and I must call my memorial gratitude after him. I hope he has found plenty of light and space and that his “hole in the middle of things” is now a bright and peaceful whole.

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AFTER SAID:
IMPERIAL SCHOLARSHIP,
RACE, AND ETHNICITY

From Indomania to Indophobia

—— Thomas De Quincey's Providential Orientalism*

DANIEL SANJIV ROBERTS

Under the connecting feeling of tropical heat and vertical sunlights, I brought together all creatures, birds, beasts, reptiles, all trees and plants, usages and appearances, that are found in all tropical regions, and assembled them together in China or Indostan. From kindred feelings, I soon brought Egypt and all her gods under the same law. [...] I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things, amongst reeds and Nilotic mud.¹

THOMAS DE QUINCEY'S OPIUM NIGHTMARES REPORTED to sensational acclaim in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) have become a touchstone of Romantic Orientalism in the wake of Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). In a passage which finds quotation in all the standard anthologies of Romantic literature, one may recognize a formative expression of a stereotypical English view of a teeming, undifferentiated, and deeply repulsive Orient: the attitudinal basis, as Said has argued, for Orientalism's imperialist progression through the nineteenth century. Under the stimulus of opium, it would appear that the entire panoply of

* This essay, originally delivered at the ACLALS conference in Vancouver in 2007, was developed into a longer version (directed to a somewhat different argument) and published in a chapter, entitled "'Mixing a Little with Alien Natures': Biblical Orientalism in De Quincey," in *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions* (2008). Permission has been granted by Routledge for republication of portions of the text which first appeared in print in that volume.

¹ Thomas De Quincey, *The Works*, vol. 11: *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, 1821–1856*, ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000): 71.

Eastern “usages and appearances” were lumped together by De Quincey in a way that corresponds to Said’s influential thesis. Despite the controversial reception of Said’s work and his subsequent qualification of it in some respects, this fundamental binary separation between East and West is an aspect of his critique that he has stood by in later publications, and it remains influential as a basic parameter of postcolonial criticism:

Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their ‘others’ that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident. [...] the division goes back to Greek thought about barbarians, but, whoever originated this kind of ‘identity’ thought, by the nineteenth century it had become the hallmark of imperialist cultures as well as those cultures trying to resist the encroachments of Europe.²

Said’s insistence on the cleavage between East and West is, of course, crucial to his critique, and without admission of it, his thesis fails (somewhat paradoxically) to cohere. Yet he himself is imprecise about the origins of “this kind of ‘identity’ thought,” as he styles it – though he is clear that it is fully in place on both sides of the imperial divide by the nineteenth century.

While De Quincey’s opium nightmares are often cited as evidence of the operation of Said’s binary thesis regarding Orientalism, and while De Quincey himself has been increasingly criticized for the rampant imperialism of his later political journalism – an aspect of his thinking that is undoubtedly foreshadowed in earlier canonical works such as the 1821 *Confessions* – yet his development of these ideas has, I believe, not been properly examined so far. My essay proposes to address the issue of De Quincey’s development of an orientalist mentality, and to see if his example sheds any light on the hardening of imperialist attitudes by the nineteenth century that Said indicates, albeit in elusive and unspecific terms. At the outset, I will adduce three factors of importance to this examination: i. De Quincey’s late-eighteenth-century evangelical upbringing and the attitudes implied thereby; ii. the Orientalist, biblical, and classical studies of the late-eighteenth century which were tightly interlinked with each other; and iii. the commercial and utilitarian aims of imperialism, which were often opposed to missionary interests in the colonies.

² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1993): 266.

In the first chapter of his *Autobiographic Sketches*, De Quincey identifies the favourite item of his nursery days as an illustrated Bible, which, he explains, was the source of his first visual imagining of the Orient:

It had happened, that amongst our vast nursery collection of books was the Bible illustrated with many pictures. And in the long dark evenings, as my three sisters with myself sat by the firelight round the guard of our nursery, no book was so much in request with us. [...] Our younger nurse, whom we all loved, would sometimes, according to her simple powers, endeavour to explain what we found obscure. [...] The nurse knew and explained to us the chief differences in oriental climates; and all these differences (as it happens) express themselves, more or less, in varying relations to the great accidents and powers of summer.³

De Quincey's fond description of his nursery points to the use of the Bible as a tutelary aid for the education of children during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period in which the Bible itself became a chief object and often a target of Enlightenment critique. In particular the higher biblical criticism, as it was called, of scholars such as Robert Lowth, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, and J.D. Michaelis sought to historicize the Bible, typically reading the scriptures as an oriental literary product, hence subject to oriental 'usages and appearances'. Evangelical codes of education, such as those evoked by De Quincey, sought to accommodate these modes of thinking within a Christian framework, rendering biblical criticism compatible with evangelical orthodoxy. The simple younger nurse in De Quincey's description is an ideal teacher of the Bible, in that her knowledge, though informed by oriental geography, is uncontaminated by the subversive aspects of biblical criticism.

This kind of conservative and rationalizing impulse behind evangelical adaptation of biblical criticism from the late-eighteenth century resulted in the production of 'family' bibles which presented themselves as educational books, with maps, pictures, and notes. As David Daniell notes,

Romantic interest in the exotic East was a strand in the growing fashion, towards the middle of the [nineteenth] century, for books recording with new accuracy both the places mentioned in Scripture and the traditions found there.⁴

In the *Autobiographic Sketches*, then, De Quincey was recording with nostalgia the beginnings of this trend. An early example of the kind of Bible that the

³ Thomas De Quincey, *The Works*, vol. XIX: *Autobiographic Sketches*, ed. Daniel Sanjiv Roberts (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003): 10–11.

⁴ David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 2003): 675.

child De Quincey may have read in his nursery was *The Protestant's Family Bible* (1780–81), with engravings by William Blake. This Bible contained several maps and illustrations accompanying key scriptural passages, and thus brought a certain realism to the reading of the Bible. Its footnotes identified oriental customs and sought to explain perplexities of the Biblical text to lay readers. The resultant depiction of the Orient was, in fact, of a strongly favourable nature, portraying the oriental nations as being in general simple, honourable, hospitable, and wise. De Quincey's family Bible would typically have been one such production, a treasured possession which he recalled in later years as his first introduction to the Orient.

In his fine study of the scholarly inflections of British Orientalism in India entitled *Aryans and British India* (1997), Thomas Trautmann has shown how British 'Indophobia' of the mid- to late-nineteenth century had, in fact, been preceded in the late-eighteenth century by what he calls "Indomania." Indomania (as described by Trautmann) may be understood as the early European enthusiasm for classical Indian civilization following recognition of the great antiquity of Indian civilization (comparable to the Egyptians) by early scholars such as Sir William Jones and Charles Wilkins – East India Company officials who were encouraged in their scholarly activities by Warren Hastings, governor-general of India until 1784. Their scholarship, especially the Mosaic ethnology and linguistic researches of the pre-eminent Sir William Jones, displayed a powerful synthetic impulse to link Hindu and generally oriental thought and practices with Christianity in a way that initially appealed to conservative and evangelical interpretations of Indian/Hindu civilization as being in a radical sense compatible with Christianity. According to this Mosaic ethnology of Jones's, Indian civilization could be traced back to the diasporic rehabilitation of the earth following Noah's flood. The ancient nature of Indian civilization, and its pristine preservation by the Brahmins, accordingly suggested that this ancient civilization was a well-preserved version of Biblical patriarchy. Hence, Christianity, as a development of Judaism, could find confirmation in India. A tattered but in this context crucial manuscript of De Quincey's illuminates the impact of Jonesian scholarship on De Quincey's evangelical mother:

(My mother's fancy – yt Sir W. J had found in the East proofs of Xty. – having gone out an Infidel. – To do her justice, <she> never once after she had adopted a theory of Xty. – did she inquire further or feel anxious about it's proof. But to review the folly {torn} this idea –.

1. That Xty. There where it reigned and was meant to reign should be insufficient in it's proofs, but in a far distant land <hid in> lurking in some hole or corner, should be proof of it's <exis> truth. Just precisely where these proofs were not wanted. And again reserved for one scholar rambling <out> into a solitary path, where in a moral sense nobo<by>dy could follow him (for it is nobody – this or that oriental scholar). And we are sure yt <H> his proof was not of that order to shine by it's own light: else it wd. have resounded thro' Engld.
2. That for thousands of years Xty. should have been received – genern. after genern. should have lived under its vital action – upon no sufft. argt.: and suddenly such an argt. shd. turn up as a reward to a man {↑in a country not Xtian} for <his> being more incredulous yn his neighbours – how impossible!⁵

It is not difficult to piece together De Quincey's argument here. He is responding to the supposition that Sir William Jones had gone to India as an atheist, and 'discovered' proofs of Christianity there through the linkage between Indian civilization and the Mosaic dispensation (whereby Indians were seen as descendants of Noah's son, Ham). Such a notion had presumably made a great impression on his mother, a fervent Christian and a follower of the evangelical Hannah More, who found it all the more convincing that a reputed sceptic such as William Jones could have been convinced by such proofs and converted to Christianity thereby. De Quincey suggests, however, that it was very unlikely for someone like Jones, supposedly ignoring the Christian presumptions of his original English society with culpable negligence, to simply discover Christian truth in a land which was not Christian at all. Why should such important divine truths be buried in a non-Christian land? Why would God's light be hidden under a bushel?

In fact, then, De Quincey implies, the Jones phenomenon was something of a hoax. Jones's arcane scholarship was an area where few people could follow, nor was it likely to lead anywhere significant. It must be remembered, however, that these views of De Quincey are certainly post-1841 responses to scholarship of the 1790s and as such represent a revisionist view of eighteenth-century Orientalism by De Quincey. In order to understand why De Quincey returns so suspiciously in later years to scholarly arguments that he had read decades earlier, I would suggest that we need to return to the context of changing attitudes to the Orient in the period. Reverting, then, to Trautmann's account of "Indomania" yielding to "Indophobia" in the course of the

⁵ Thomas De Quincey, *The Works*, vol. XXI: *Transcripts of Unlocated Manuscripts; Index*, ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003): 417.

nineteenth century, we should find it notable that the chief instigators of this movement, according to Trautmann, were the new evangelical faction of the East India Company and the Utilitarians, led by Charles Grant and James Mill respectively. Their effects were felt in British attitudes from the first decade of the nineteenth century, commencing in the decade after Sir William Jones's death in 1794. Like De Quincey, these later interventionists in India, for different reasons characteristic of their position, poured scorn on Orientalist scholarship and mocked its pretensions. For the evangelicals concerned with conversion, the idea that Hindu religious customs were in any way allied to a Christian tradition was to be rebuffed strenuously, and for Utilitarians such as Thomas Babington Macaulay and James Mill concerned with governance, the privileging of European learning was to be asserted at all costs in favour of commercial and imperial interests in India. The Indian practice of sati, the immolation of Hindu widows on their husbands' funeral pyres, was, of course, the cause célèbre of evangelical attacks on India and Hinduism. Far from being the representatives of an unalloyed patriarchal tradition of natural religion, the Brahmin priests were now seen as the corrupt agents of 'priestcraft' and institutional oppression of the common people. An anonymous watercolour of a sati scene from the early 1800s shows the woman raising her hands in supplication – a standard gesture in sati representations – while the Indian men are shown stoking her pyre, or brandishing swords or making music in unholy adoration of the *sati mata*, as she was known. Similarly, De Quincey's reference to the "mighty Juggernaut of social life"⁶ makes reference to the Jaggarnath chariot procession of Orissa, which several evangelical reports described as a licentious and gory Hindu carnival, marked by numerous deaths of devotees beneath the wheels of the relentless chariot even while the Brahmin priests engaged in sexual misconduct.⁷ Such writings and visual representations, as they emerged in the aftermath of the so-called Vellore massacre of 1806 and in the context of the puritanical backlash against the corruption of East India Company officials, have been described as a pamphlet war between the older commercialist policies of non-interference and the new evangelical spirit that was promoting a more interventionist approach

⁶ De Quincey, "The Household Wreck" (1838), in *The Works*, vol. IX: *Articles from Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine and Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, 1832–8*, ed. Grevel Lindop, Robert Morrison & Barry Symonds (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001): 211.

⁷ Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900* (Thousand Oaks CA & London: Sage, 2006): 75–83.

to Empire on moral grounds. De Quincey's narcotized repugnance in the *Confessions* to the "ancient, monumental, cruel, and elaborate religions of Indostan,"⁸ as may be now evident, owes a great deal to such evangelical representations of the East. Clearly these religions were to be dissociated at any cost from Christianity, which could now provide a moral and benevolent aspect to Empire. The resultant shift from commercialism to a supposedly moral agency as the basis of Empire, I would suggest, provides a parallel contrast to that which Julie McGonegal has suggested in relation to the supposed benevolence of Western gift-giving and the economic deprivation of so-called Third-World countries that continues to thrive in the global economy today.

To return to De Quincey's oriental nightmares with this context in mind, it is not surprising to note that the dream linkages he finds between India, China, and Egypt had been anticipated by a good deal of orientalist scholarship. In his famous anniversary discourses as President of the Asiatic Society, William Jones had influentially suggested an oriental ethnology linking the Greeks, Egyptians, and Indians as being of similar racial stock and sharing the same popular religion. He also suggested, drawing on Hindu traditions, that the Chinese were an outcaste from Hindu society, being lapsed Kshatriyas who had established themselves north-east of Bengal and had gradually taken over the vast area of China. Another eighteenth-century scholarly authority whom De Quincey had certainly studied in some detail as a schoolboy was James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, the author of two dauntingly ambitious scholarly works, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (6 vols., 1773–92) and *Ancient Metaphysics, or the Science of Universals* (6 vols, 1779–99). In these works, Monboddo argued that Egypt could be considered a parent-country of language and the arts to both Europe and western Asia, the "Egyptian and Greek languages being originally the same"⁹ and that, furthermore, Sanskrit and Greek were "dialects of the same language: And that language could be no other than the language of Egypt, brought into India by Osiris."¹⁰ Both Monboddo and Jones, then, agreed on the nature of Sanskrit's antiquity; its great perfection, superior to Greek, was ascribed to the conservatism of the Brahminical tradition. De Quincey's nightmares bringing together Hindu and

⁸ Thomas De Quincey, *The Works*, vol. 11: *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, 1821–1856*, ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000): 70.

⁹ James Burnett (Lord Monboddo), *Ancient Metaphysics, or the Science of Universals* (London: T. Cadell, 1779–99), vol. 1: 466.

¹⁰ Monboddo, *Ancient Metaphysics, or the Science of Universals*, vol. 4: 323.

Egyptian dieties seem less mystifying perhaps in the light of such knowledge: "I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia: Vishnu hated me: Seeva laid wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris."¹¹

Despite the high moral ground he adopts in his writings with regard to other religions and cultures, it should be evident by now that De Quincey's sense of Christianity, and of the Biblical text in particular, as in an original sense 'oriental' in nature, opens up some radical suspicions with regard to Western appropriations of its sublime truths. Was Britain truly qualified to reclaim the East in a spiritual sense (as his mother had hoped with regard to India) – or were its territorial and commercial interests too strong for that? Had the West truly shed its own pagan past, or did these live on in the bloody and barbarous progress of European imperialism? Such doubts exposed a "dreadful ulcer" such as he feared in "The Vision of Sudden Death," "lurking far down in the depths of human nature." It is in one's dreams that such fears regarding human nature, "its deep-seated Pariah falsehood to itself," are revealed.¹² Yet the anxieties of his dreams betray a more tenuous position than he overtly allows. Recent attempts to pathologize De Quincey as an incest-ridden or paedophilic writer by recent critics such as John Barrell and Margaret Russett tend, in my view, only to distance his work from those of his contemporaries, his imperialism becoming apparently a function of his childhood traumas and repressions. Yet most of his contemporaries who knew him personally judged him differently, and, in the context of the high imperialism of the Victorian period, his views are perhaps no more extraordinary than those of many another imperialist spokesman.

In the light of present-day fears over Islamic terrorism and a clash of civilizations between the West and its alleged enemies, however, De Quincey is alarmingly contemporaneous, and not defunct; his writings articulate in shifting and evolving ways the kinds of separation between 'us' and 'them' that emerged (as Said maintains) by the nineteenth century, and that have become endemic to political discourse today. In his later life, De Quincey became a staunch imperialist advocating hard-line genocidal policies with regard to China and India. The ease with which the Christian providentiality he repre-

¹¹ Thomas De Quincey, *The Works*, vol. 11: *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, 1821–1856*, ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000): 71.

¹² Thomas De Quincey, "The Vision of Sudden Death," in *The Works*, vol. XVI: *Articles from Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal, The Glasgow Athenaeum Album, The North British Review, and Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 1847–9*, ed. Robert Morrison (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003): 432.

sents could move from hopes of christianizing the East to dominating and destroying its peoples through explicit retribution and warfare, allowing ends to cynically override means, prefigures for us the rhetoric of democratic, civilizational, and cultural values which slips easily into the commercially fuelled and nakedly aggressive foreign policies of the British–American alliance of recent years. Yet, the extent to which these discursive strains are in evident conflict in De Quincey helps us to understand the process by which Said’s binary separation was wrought. His works help us to understand the insecurities and anxieties attending imperialistic hubris even as it was articulated and hardened in the course of the century. Working in the discipline of literary studies within the academy today, it is important to retain a sense of the historical development of the new national and postcolonial literatures out of the fluid and globalizing tendencies of colonialism through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At a time when nations and communities pull apart on grounds of race and ethnicity, and when our own discipline of literary studies is compartmentalized into national and period categories, it is all the more important for us to regain a global perspective in literature of the constructed nature of such categories. Said himself pointed crucially to the late-eighteenth century as a crucial period for the growth of Orientalism and advocated the reading of Commonwealth literature in a contrapuntal way rather than instigating a disciplinary separation between colonialism and so-called post-colonialism in our study of literature.

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Rebels of Empire

—— The Human Idiom in Ruskin
Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons*

SATISH C. AIKANT

THERE IS CONSIDERABLE DEBATE ON WHETHER 1857 WAS A MUTINY, a peasants' revolt, an urban revolution or a war of independence. Indian historians have, in general, found the term 'Mutiny' a misrepresentation of both the events that led to and those that followed the outbreak of violence in 1857. It was reported to the British Parliament that the incidents of violence were a "wholly unpatriotic and wholly selfish 'sepoymutiny' with no native leadership and no popular support." In fact, the enduring representation of the events of 1857 in British historiography as a 'sepoymutiny'¹ reflected a determination to preserve Britain's reputation as an imperial power. It is often contended that forcing Western ideas on an Eastern people fundamentally backfired, and the 'divide and conquer' tactics employed by the British in India ultimately sowed the seeds of the rebellion.²

¹ See John William Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India, 1857–1858* (London: W.H. Allen, 1864). Kaye's history regarded as the authoritative account of the Mutiny in the nineteenth century is replete with Victorian prejudices regarding Indian character. For a more balanced perspective see Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974). Some recent works are Surendra Nath Sen, *Eighteen Fifty Seven* (Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1995); P.O.J. Taylor, *What Really Happened During the Mutiny: A Day-by-Day Account of the Major Events of 1857–1859 in India* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999); Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003); Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Spectre of Violence: The 1857 Kanpur Massacres* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2007).

² Colonel G.B. Malleon, *The Indian Mutiny of 1857* (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1891): 81.

What happened was, understandably, a direct consequence of the imposition of British rule and cultural practices that were largely incompatible with native culture, not yet exposed to European modernity. This instability is underlined by Robert Young, who speaks of an inner dissonance that marks a resistance to Western culture within Western culture itself.³ Nonetheless, 1857 became a seminal event in the history of British India and the acts of unbridled violence committed on both sides left a legacy of bitterness.

Some British historians, in view of the defiance of the Peshwa, the Rani of Jhansi, and other rulers, attributed the event to the machinations of Hindu princes, while others believed that, as the rallying point of the rebels was Delhi, the powerless titular Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was to be held responsible for the conspiracy which V.D. Savarkar, a militant Hindu nationalist, dubbed India's First War of Independence.⁴ But, as a matter of fact, instead of the single coherent Mutiny or national war of independence, there was a chain of very different uprisings and acts of resistance, whose form and fate were determined by local and regional situations, passions, and grievances.⁵

The Uprising has to be seen not in exclusive terms of nationalism, imperialism, Orientalism or other such abstractions, but instead as a human event of extraordinarily complex and tragic outcomes. It allows us to look into the lives of the individuals caught up in one of the great upheavals of history. Public, political, and national tragedies, after all, consist of a multitude of private, domestic, and individual tragedies:

It is through the human stories of the successes, struggles, griefs, anguish and despair of these individuals that we can best bridge the great chain of time and understanding separating us from the remarkably different world of mid-nineteenth century India.⁶

³ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁴ V.D. Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence, 1857* (1909; New Delhi: R. Granthagar, 1970).

⁵ "The 'mutiny' [...] was an assertion of autonomous power, a force that threatened to sweep away symbols of colonial power in northern India. The nature of the outbreak and the rapidly evolving political dynamics during the course of the mutiny represented a severe threat to established hierarchies in indigenous society." Sabyasachi Dasgupta, "The Rebel Army in 1857: At the Vanguard of the War of Independence or a Tyranny of Arms?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 42.19 (12 May 2007): 1729.

⁶ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2006): 13.

The Uprising was not merely a mutiny on the part of disgruntled soldiers. It was not one unified movement but many, with widely different causes, motives, and natures. It was a response to multiple grievances among the Indian people, triggered by British cultural practices. These practices grew out of the colonial encounter which critics and commentators like Edward Said have brought into sharp focus as colonial discourse.

While one would generally agree with Said's basic contention that knowledge of the Orient is linked to the exercise of colonial power, his sense of an unbroken, unchanging tradition of European representation of the East from the earliest times to the present times, which rests on his model of a unified, undifferentiated concept of Orientalism, pays insufficient regard to historical developments. As James Clifford maintains, Said's "critical manner sometimes appears to mimic the essentializing discourse it attacks."⁷ It also ignores the alternative discourse that emerges within the dominant hegemonic formation, which Dennis Porter calls "counter-hegemonic thought."⁸ The opposites posited by Said – East/West, colonizer/colonized, Self/Other – should not be taken as rigid binaries. The concept of an identity that is shifting, diverse, and responsive to various affiliations can be applied to Europe's Self and its Others. Considered thus, India was not always an antithesis of Britain but also its analogue.

The various representations of the Uprising of 1857 have found expression in several historical, social, and literary accounts. A literary text in particular becomes a site of cultural control, a stage on which the issues of race, gender, and culture are enacted. It can be used to re-imagine racist ideology. The reports of the 'Sepoy Mutiny' that reached home to the English audience at the time had such a powerful effect on the reading public that it became hard to separate fact from fiction.⁹ The message that came through in contemporary

⁷ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1988): 262.

⁸ Dennis Porter, "Orientalism and its Problems" (1983), in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. & intro. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (1993; London & New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994): 152.

⁹ Mrs. Harris's *Lady's Diary* (1858) was a widely read 'survivor journal', full of the images people back home wanted to read about. Harris wrote of 'Many ladies and children [who] have fortunately made their escape from different small stations in the district, just in time to save their lives, leaving all their worldly goods to be burnt and plundered [...] gentlemen bayoneted on the spot, wives and children looking on.' Mrs. Harris, *A Lady's Diary of the Siege of Lucknow: Written for the Perusal of Friends at Home* (London: John Murray, 1858), np. Some of the accounts of the Mutiny were highly invidious. Jenny

accounts, with few exceptions, as well as in the early histories of the event sought to justify the imperial mission through constant reinforcement of ideas of racial superiority, and of indignation against the native. As Andrew Ward acknowledges in *Our Bones are Scattered* (1996), there is a dearth of primary material from the Indian side of the equation. "The Indians at the time – at least those writing in English – told the British only of what they wanted to hear."¹⁰ Ruskin Bond's novella *A Flight of Pigeons*,¹¹ which is based on actual historical incidents, is a reflective narrative that deals with the individual lives and the particular rather than with the abstract or homogenized collectivities.

This nationalist movement began in Meerut on 10 May 1857, when the Indian soldiers in the Company's force rose against their officers and took charge. Soon resistance spread to other cantonment towns and throughout the princely states, challenging the Company's annexation of or interference in their kingdoms. *A Flight of Pigeons* provides both the British and the Indian interpretations of these events: the first-person account sensitively presents the impact of the violence on innocent Europeans, while a series of political and social uprisings indicate that it was not an isolated 'mutiny' of the *sepoys* ('soldiers') but a grassroots freedom movement that was orchestrated by leaders of all segments of the population, both Hindu and Muslim, army and civilian.

The centre of interest in this story is the fate of two Eurasian women who are caught in the holocaust: they are Ruth and her mother Mariam, who is of mixed French and Muslim blood and the wife of the Frenchman Mr Labaddor. The Europeans are attacked while the church service is in progress at St Mary's in Shahjahanpur. Mr Labaddor is killed, along with many British officials and their families, but Ruth escapes and joins her mother in their hiding place.¹² After hiding in their Hindu benefactor's house for a month, Ruth,

Sharpe, in *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Women in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), discusses at length the rumours and hysteria that pervaded the discussions of British women and their treatment during the Mutiny.

¹⁰ Andrew Ward, *Our Bones are Scattered* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996): 555.

¹¹ Ruskin Bond, "A Flight of Pigeons," in *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1991). All page references are to this edition and are given in parentheses. *A Flight of Pigeons* was first published in *Imprint* (November 1975). It was later made into a Hindi film called *Junoon*, directed by Shyam Benegal.

¹² Mariam's story is the subject matter of another narrative, J.F. Fanthorne's *Mariam: A Story of the Indian Mutiny of 1857* (Benaras: Chandraprabha Press, 1896). It gives an

Mariam, and other members of their extended family are caught by Javed Khan, one of the Muslim leaders of the resistance in Shahjahanpur. However, he cannot bring himself to kill Ruth. He takes them to his home because he admires Mariam for protecting her daughter and also because he has become infatuated with Ruth's beauty. Javed Khan is a Rohilla Pathan, who is suspected of having set on fire at night the Redmans' bungalow.¹³

Since the narrator is a helpless young girl in hiding, the spatial canvas as well as the point of view of the narrator are naturally limited. However, Shahjahanpur, a small cantonment 250 miles east of Delhi, where the story is set, represents India in microcosm. We find here all the major religious groups and communities; the existence of the feudal and the colonial order, as well as the presence of contesting political forces. Bond is fascinated with small towns, as he thinks they reveal the true face of the country. In the Introduction to *Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories*, Bond writes, "Small town India – that's my India," and adds, "There is a timelessness about small-town and cantonment India." In order to lend historical authenticity to his story, Bond studied the gazetteers of that period and other available accounts, and visited the site of action in Shahjahanpur. In the Notes appended to the novella he writes:

I first heard the story of Mariam and her daughter from my father who was born in the Shahjahanpur military cantonment a few years after the Mutiny. That and my interest in the accounts of those who had survived the 1857 uprising, took me to Shahjahanpur on a brief visit in the late 1960's. It was one of those small U.P. towns that had resisted change, and there were no high-rise buildings or blocks of flats to stifle the atmosphere. I found the old Church of St. Mary's without any difficulty, and beside it a memorial to those who were killed there on that fateful day. It was surrounded by a large, open parade ground, bordered by mango groves and a few old bungalows. It couldn't have been very different in Ruth Labadoor's time. The little River Khannaut was still crossed by a bridge of boats (164).

'Indian' perspective – almost unheard of in Mutiny writings. It went on to make one of the most fervent appeals for inter-racial harmony urging "the European to recognise the common fraternity of the two races and to descend from the high level of morality and social superiority which he has assumed [...] and behave more considerately to, the 'nigger' than he does at present" (iv).

¹³ The acts of violence against British men, women, and children shocked and angered the Victorian public. In an age when domesticity was celebrated and was central to the idea of British nationhood, the murder of these very symbols, women in particular, on foreign soil prompted outrage and calls for revenge.

Bond has brought vividly to life this old-time world and through Ruth opened a window on a critical period of India's colonial history. Mariam and her family find shelter in the hut of Triloki, a mason. From here they are escorted by Lala Ramjimal to his house. The Lala risks violence at the hands of the frenzied mob when he gives succour to these helpless women. But Bond does not highlight the conflict between the Indians who kept their distance and those who joined hands with the mutinous sepoys. The conflict and its aftermath, as history records it, took the form of intense suspicion and vendetta on both sides.

When Javed Khan takes the women away as guests of his Muslim household, Ruth and Mariam assume Muslim identities, as they know that their only chance of survival is by gradually shedding their European identity to win native approbation for exercise of control over them. Viewed from a different perspective, it could be understood as a success of the Imperial mission, to the extent that the colonizers can move easily between Indian and British culture, using disguise as a temporary erasure of cultural identity. Mariam's impressive Muslim ancestry, her knowledge of Muslim culture, and her ability to speak fluent Urdu enable them to communicate with and be trusted by Javed Khan's family. She is thoroughly familiar with the Muslim way of life and customs. The ritual of the bath, the *baisakhi* celebrations, the superstitions about spirits and pigeons on graves, all have a familiar ring and come as ready references while she spends time with the Muslim household. Explanations like that of the term *Hafiz* or the name Zohra, along with turns of phrases that reflect the Muslim style of speech give an earthly authenticity to the story. Above all, in this closely observed Indian way of life there is none of the implicit criticism of the native way of life to underline the superiority of the British ruling class. The story dispels mutual stereotypes that Muslims and Europeans have of each other. As Ruth recalls in her narration, the Muslim women

were agreeably surprised to find that we delighted in hard work, that we loved needles and thread, and that, far from seeking the company of men, we did our best to avoid them. (133)

These Western women are sensitive to concerns and cultural practices of the 'natives' and provide a model of cultural assimilation and acceptance. Such a depiction of the East-West encounter is very different from the uncharitable, stereotypical portrayal in several colonial accounts. On the other hand, there

is perfect understanding of the distinctiveness of nationalities, as when Ruth says:

It was in our interest to forget that we had European blood in our veins and that there was any advantage in the return of the British to power. It was also necessary for us to *seem* to forget that the Christian God was our God, and we allowed it to be believed that we were Muslims. (123–24)

While describing the predicament of the characters caught in the flux of events, Bond brings out their essential humanity. Mutual suspicion notwithstanding, the urge for cooperation and concern for the ‘Other’ forms a steady undercurrent. In the last analysis, it is the spirit of a syncretic culture that had held sway in precolonial India, prevails, and is not smothered even in the violent conflicts.¹⁴ When the Uprising breaks out, not merely do the Hindus and Muslims reach out to each other, but they also show concern for the hapless Britishers, belying the definition of the ‘Other’ in the Orientalist categorization in terms of essentialization of the Hindu–Muslim antagonism and its institutionalization in political discourse.¹⁵

As the news gradually trickles into the obscure Shahjahanpur, Ruth and her mother impatiently await a change in the fortunes of the British army. Mariam’s prospects of survival fluctuate with the fortunes of the Company. Twenty-five days after the massacre in the church, she hears the beating of drums and the sound of the fife, the tramping of horses and the shouts of cheering crowds. It is a moment of tense uncertainty; the Lala later informs Mariam that the dissolute Nawab Quadir Ali has been ousted. His place had been taken by Ghulam Qadir Khan, pious, energetic, and determined to free the land from foreign yoke. For Mariam, the only uncertain consolation is that he has some regard for the Labadoors and was also against the senseless slaughter of women and children. “I will have nothing to do with the murder of the innocent” (113), he asserts.

¹⁴ The colonial accounts carried the repeated misrepresentation that native India was too fragmented into warring factions – vertically by caste and horizontally by religion, race, and region – ever to achieve political cohesion of its own making. See Lewis D. Wurgaft, *The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in Kipling’s India* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan UP, 1983): 44.

¹⁵ See Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, ed. *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1993): 12.

For Mariam and Ruth, time moves at a slow pace along with their hopes and fears. Their solace is the sympathy and warmth of the women of the household, and the occasional delayed news that the conflict was yet unresolved. Their hopes are revived when there is an indication of the reversal suffered by the nationalists in the prophecy of the black-robed fakir:

“the restoration of the *Firangi* rule was as certain as the coming of doomsday... See here they come!” he cried, pointing to the north where a flock of white pigeons could be seen hovering over the city. “They come flying like white pigeons which, when disturbed, fly away and circle, and come down to rest again. White pigeons from the hills!” (139)

The news of the fall of Delhi, when it finally reaches Shahjahanpur, is passed on in whispers in Kothiwalī’s house. For Mariam and Ruth, it augurs well as far as their prospects are concerned:

Our hearts leapt at the news, and tears came to our eyes, for a British victory meant a release from our confinement and state of dependence; but Delhi was a far cry from Shahjahanpur, and we did not give any expression to our feelings. (148)

The women in the household in general are indifferent to the political upheavals and changes. Politics, as Ruth on another occasion notes, is the domain of men.

Politics seldom ever entered the four walls of the zenana – wars and deeds of violence were considered the prerogative of men. Seldom was any reference made to the disturbances that were taking place throughout the country, or to our own troubles. (133)

However, for those embattled, survival would be dependent on the political course of events and their outcome.

Mariam constantly fears for her security: “We had no idea how we would fit in with their future plans should the British reoccupy Shahjahanpur” (152). The emperor Bahadurshah Zafar had been made a prisoner, the Nawab’s men led by Nizam Ali routed, and now, months after they had taken Delhi, the English army is moving towards Shahjahanpur. A year after they fled from their burning house, Mariam and Ruth are “in flight again” along with the Kothiwalī’s household – now, perhaps, as hostages. As Mariam discreetly tells Kothiwalī, “‘for the present we are identified with you all, and we must go where you go’” (155). For the time being, they have to share a common destiny, till their ways finally part, but not without a profound sense of loss.

History is not merely a backdrop in this novella, certainly not in terms of generalized or abstract statements involving faceless men and women. It is, rather, a story recounted in subjective and humane terms. The story of the Uprising here takes the form of Ruth's story. When Bond learnt the story from his father, it prompted him to explore both the site of the happenings as well as the contemporary historical records. His interest was aroused by the survivors of the Labadoor family and the extraordinary circumstances of their ordeal and forced confinement. Bond does not allow his narrative to be lost in the maze of the superfluities of the trappings of history, nor does it meander in the fantasies of fictional discourse. *A Flight of Pigeons* is a piece of fiction that brings facts alive and projects a credible point of view.

The Uprising was a clash of nations – the ruling colonial power and the people of the land. Like the historian, the writer of fiction has to hand conflicting versions of the nature, causes, and outcome of the struggle. Besides this, in determining his perspective Bond has tried to elicit sympathies of the reader where they are due. The narrative shows how the survival of Labadoor's family depended on the loyalty of friends, acquaintances, and servants, in a spirit of human give-and-take that does not discriminate between races. The general masses are uninvolved in the politics of the conflict. However, the protagonists of the story do have conflicting views about the Uprising. Javed Khan reproaches Kothiwali for her sympathetic attitude to the British, because the British Collector had consoled her in her grief. She, however, adds, as a palliative: “‘don't think I wish to run down the cause you have made your own – the rebel cause, I mean’.” At which Javed Khan retorts:

“The *rebel* cause! Why do you always call it the rebel cause, *chachi*?” Javed Khan looked very upset. “Rebels against whom? Against aliens! Are they not to be expelled from the land? To fight them is not rebellion, but a meritorious act, surely!” (144).

Bond's story is not a comment on history, and he takes no sides. Ruth, with all her fears of what she might suffer at the hands of her captors, holds no brief for the British cause. She and her mother no doubt look forward to the reoccupation of Shahjahanpur by the British – but only because it would mean the end of their captivity. Their concern for victory is related to their survival and freedom. As Ruth explains,

Our motives in hoping for the restoration of British authority were, therefore, entirely personal. We had, during the past months, come to understand much of the resentment against a foreign authority, and we saw that the continuation

of that authority could only be an unhappy state of affairs for both sides; but for the time being, it was in our interest to see it restored. Our lives depended on it. (150)

Like Kothiwal, who “dealt in individuals, not in communities,” Bond, too, is concerned with the lives of individuals. Often writing in semi-autobiographical mode, he presents a galaxy of characters drawn from those whom he has known and adds to these creations of his imagination, the impetuous Javed Khan, the repressed Khan Begum, the cordial Kothiwal, and the well-meaning and down-to-earth Lala Ramjimal. The most impressive of these is Mariam, fearless, defiant, and at the same time tactful and discreet. These make the moving panorama of life where each plays his part and moves off-stage, leaving, most certainly, his human imprint. And, finally, there is Mangal Khan. Why Pilloo decides to stay with the Pathan may be incomprehensible to Ruth, but they are true to their instincts. His kinship with Mangal Khan defies even the ties of blood. Throughout their ordeal, Ruth and Mariam are helped by the British, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. The overall impression is that of the realization of the futility of war in which both sides burn and loot houses, riot and rape, and kill innocent women and children. In the orgy of violence at the beginning of the novella, there is the simple description of two Muslims burying the mortal remains of the Christians who had been killed, though well aware of the risk in doing so. In the end, Mariam even promises to use her influence to protect Javed Khan’s family and to prevent British retribution against him.

Despite his savagery at times and his ruthlessness, Ruth has a kind word for Javed Khan, too. His love for Ruth may not have been reciprocated by her in the conventional manner, but his final mute encounter with her is a triumph of his love, which is evident when she makes her assessment of him as she concludes her story:

looking back on those months when we were his prisoners, I cannot help feeling a sneaking admiration for him. He was very wild and muddleheaded, and often cruel, but he was also very handsome and gallant, and there was in him a streak of nobility which he did his best to conceal. (162)

The final remark is not only a warm-hearted assessment of Javed Khan, but also establishes the innocent humanity of the young storyteller.¹⁶

¹⁶ This, again, contradicts the usual accounts in which the native was stereotyped as overly libidinous and unruly, and a threat to innocent white women. This image persists

A Flight of Pigeons bridges barriers by giving a human face to historical forces. Atrocities are committed by both sides in an impersonal manner, yet, when the enemies are encountered as real people, they are seen as innocent victims of circumstances and are given protection. Interestingly, but also ironically, all the Europeans who survive in the story do so with the help of their Indian servants. The Redmans hide in the house of their washerwoman, and two Muslims risk their lives to bury the dead Europeans in the church. In fact, Mariam's half-brother, Pilloo, prefers to continue living with his Hindu protector and is adopted by him. Bond's narrative, however, does not gloss over the dichotomies of colonial relations. Nor does it play down the antagonisms, or the oppositional positions. He does not tone down the cruelty of the rebels or of those who put down the rebellion. As the characters grow beyond racial antipathies, a new light is thrown on the notions of human affiliations, as well as on all forms of piety, and on possibilities of mutually enabling acts in the social life of India, even in the shadow of horror and strife.

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through the early part of the next century in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet*. According to Jenny Sharpe, the alleged rape of white women by Indian men could be seen as a metaphor for the crisis of British colonial authority. See Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, 7.

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TRANSLATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

A Multi-Centred Globe

—— Translation as the Language of Languages

NGŨGĨ WA THIONG'O

To claim that the subject is itself produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations is not to do away with the subject, but only to ask after the conditions of its emergence and operation

there is an 'outside' to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute 'outside'

a return to the notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but *as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*¹

What is at stake is [...] the means by which social interaction shapes biology²

LITERATURE FOR OUR TIMES? IT THEREFORE BEHOOVES US TO LOOK AT what characterizes our times. Looming large over that character is globalization, whose speed and sheer magnitude are generating tensions between peoples, cultures, and regions. In that context, we do need a language that can bring colours and languages together, and that language, in my view, now has a name: Translation.

In my book *Moving the Centre*, I have argued for a multiplicity of centres from which to view the world, the real question being only the relationship between them, meaning a move away from a nation-centric or regio-centric

¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993): 7, 8, 9.

² Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca NY & London: Cornell UP, 2004): 74.

(e.g., eurocentric) view of the Universe to a genuinely multi-centric vision of the same. What I did not argue about was the centrality of translation in this visionary dream.

In emphasizing translation and its role in bridging cultures, we are not saying anything new, and in a sense we are drawing attention to what already 'is'. Translation is part of the everyday and sometimes we are not even aware of how much it is part of our lives.

The first book I ever read as a newly literate way back in the late 1940s was a torn copy of stories culled from the Old Testament. It was in Gikuyu, my mother tongue, and it was only years later that I learnt that it was a translation put together by Christian missionaries. The translation was almost certainly from the English-language Bible, itself a translation from the Greek and Hebrew originals, themselves translations from the many tongues, Aramaic included, that the various biblical characters must have spoken in real historical life. So the founding text of my literate culture was a translation of a translation of several translations. Not that I was aware of it, but even if I had been, it would not have worried me in the least. I found the stories interesting and my only concern was the fact that the pages were literally falling apart. I was happy when, years later, I was able to own a copy of the whole Bible, again in Gikuyu.

The Bible as a translation is the founding text of Gikuyu-language prose, and it has played a similar role in many literary national traditions. The entire Christian world community is able to realize itself through translations, as I am sure the Muslim world is through its Qur'an translations. Not just literary and religious but also social, and it is not too far-fetched to say that even human society, religious or not, is itself founded on the practice of translation.

In *The German Ideology*, young Marx and Engels see the entire but complex process by which humans act on nature to produce their means of life as a language, what they call *the language of real life*, meaning the practice by which humans take from the language of nature and put that learning to their own use, thus putting knowledge from one environment, in this case, the natural, in terms of another, the nurtural.

Humans are from nature like plants, animals, air, ecology, and yet they stand outside it, as it were, act on it and reproduce themselves and give rise to processes that are clearly not identical with the nature of which they are a part. And yet, what humans have achieved is a translation of the various aspects of nature. The most wonderful technology is a translation, and then extension, of the human hand. The furthest-seeing telescope is a translation,

hence extension, of the eye. So also are the speediest vehicle, rockets, and space-ships, for instance, which are a translation, hence an extension, of the leg. And computers? Don't they translate the human brain? So the translation of the language of nature into their own terms has enabled humans to cultivate nurture out of nature. The nurtural world of the human, nurture, is an endless reproduction of what obtains in the natural, nature, and even the word 'cultivate' gave rise to the concept of culture as social practice. Agriculture and social culture have a common root in the notion of cultivating nature, itself a process of translation from one environment to another. In short, the humanization of nature is itself a process of translation and bespeaks the centrality of translation in the makeup of the human community.

Aristotle said that poetry was more universal than history, since history dealt with particulars while poetry dealt with what could be; but there is a way in which we can say that the subject of translation is the universals embedded in the particulars of the natural and social experience. Every phenomenon of nature, society, and human thought contains its own particularity, its form that gives it individuality, so to speak, and also the universal that connects it to other phenomena. But the universal does not exist outside its particularity. An individual human being has his particularity in terms of height, weight, shape of face, but he or she contains the universal that we call human. The capacity to speak, language as organized sounds to express meaning, is universal to all humans, yet it does not express itself in its universality but in its particularity as specific languages spoken by different peoples. So also the universals of the twin struggle with nature and with one another expressed in the particularities of different languages and cultures. Translation takes the universal in one particularity to express it in another particularity. It divests the universal of its particular linguistic robes, so to speak, to give it new robes. That is why it enables contact. But it is a complex process – simultaneously an imitation, an expression of identity, difference, edition, interpretation, and reproduction, and that is why no two translations can be the same, or, rather, they are the same, insofar as they touch on the universal they are trying to convey, and yet different, because conveyed in particularities coloured by different experiences and outlooks, both individual and collective.

Not surprisingly, translation with all its contradictions is noted in both myth and history. In Plato's *Cratylus*, Hermes, the god of translation, is an *interpreter*, a *messenger*, a *thief*, a *liar*, or a *bargainer*. A translation is an interpretation; it is a conveyance from a source to a target; which involves taking from one, stealing, and putting into another; but it is also lying, be-

cause, being an interpretation, it cannot convey exactitude. It is a bargaining-process because it involves negotiations between source-language and culture and a target-language and culture. So, a translator as a liar? A thief? All those contraries do apply to the act and process of translations, because it is decidedly not a neutral process. Not only do particularities differ, but the very context of their production and application, whether of equality or of ordination and subordination, conditions the uses, negative or positive, to which they are put, and they may become messengers of healing, robbing, or distorting. Translations can be agents of equal or unequal exchange and this is borne out by the uses to which Translation has been put in history.

In his book *Hellenic Philosophy: Between Europe, Asia and Africa*, Christos C. Evangeliou talks movingly, though analytically, of the historical interaction between peoples and cultures of those regions around the Mediterranean, particularly between the ancient Hellenes and Egyptians. Quoting Herodotus, he tells that the cooperation between the Ionians and the Egyptians began in the reign of Psamitichus I, who, in response to the help he got from the Ionians in defeating his enemies, granted them land and gold and silver, and ““even went so far as to put some Egyptians boys in their charge to be taught Greek; and their learning of the language was the origin of the class of Egyptian interpreters’.”³ Here translation is seen as helping in cementing the relations between two cultures on the basis of mutual aid, respect, and acceptance.

That was in times of cooperation, but, of course, in times of mutual strife even among the hitherto friendly and cooperative, translation can and does play the role of reproducing the culture of domination and subordination, and colonialism provides a good example. In my book *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*, I have cited another instance in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century contact between Western Europe and West Africa in which Africans are lured onto English ships and taken to England, where they are taught English and thus later provide translators/interpreters for English explorers, the fore-runners of slave raiders. In fact translators, translation, and interpretation are an integral part of the colonial enterprise from its beginning stages as exploration and conquest to its later stages as occupation, settlement, and control. Not surprisingly, the character of the translator/interpreter is a most satirized figure in anticolonial narratives, where he is often seen as a messenger of the

³ Christos C. Evangeliou, quoting Herodotus, in *Hellenic Philosophy: Origin and Character* (Aldershot & Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2006): 13.

foreign, a thief and a liar into the bargain, the celebrated mythical Hermes in colonial robes. But translations have also played a role in resistance and transformation, and I recall the terror that Marx's Communist *Manifesto* seemed to strike in the hearts of our colonial educators, who constantly warned against it, even though they had removed it from school and public libraries.

It is, in fact, during the colonial process that the relationships between languages become really distorted and translation becomes dictation from the dominant culture to the dominated culture. Just as in the realms of economics and politics, so in cultures the world became divided into a handful of the dominant and hundreds of the dominated, a situation reflected in the relations between languages today. In more ways than one, the global world is an inheritor of global colonialism. A handful of languages literally dominate all the other languages of the globe. Some languages, with all the knowledge they contain, are even dying under the pressure of linguistic and cultural homogenization. The world of languages and cultures has thus become divided into a dominant few and a marginalized many. Whereas translation has been a two-way traffic among the dominant, it has become dictation between the marginalized and the dominant, with the dominant determining the interflow, with the result that many intellectuals of the postcolonial world have abandoned their languages altogether to write, theorize, and scholarize in the dominant. They may argue that they are using the borrowed dominant differently, and this is largely true, but the fact remains that, at the end of the day, it is the languages and cultures of birth of these intellectuals which have been deprived. The intellectuals may be excellent spokespeople for their own cultures through their mastery of the dominant, English may even give them a world stage to display the dynamism of their cultures, but this is a case of the dominant *enabling* while *disabling*. It enables such intellectuals and the cultures they represent to voice their originality, but it disables the voice of those cultures and languages by depriving them of some of their best minds and genius. And between the marginalized, almost total silence! There is hardly any interaction between Gujarat and Yorùbá. Igbo and Zulu, African and Native American languages, between Turkish and African languages, or between African languages and those of Eastern Europe.

And yet, given the speed of globalization and the tensions it is generating, the need for genuine dialogue between cultures and languages on the basis of quality and mutual respect has never been greater – hence the need for translations as conversation, as opposed to one-way traffic or dictation.

That's why we need to rethink the Centre and the Margin and reconfigure the relationship of centres in terms of the circle. If the globe is seen as a circle, then languages should be seen as occupying their place in the ring, and all contributing to the human centre. The challenge is in creating a model for the practical or, rather, creating a paradigm for a model of a practice that enables the dream.

For, if the globe is a circle, we are part of that circle, and what is interesting about a circle is the interconnectedness and the equidistance of those standing in the circle to the common centre. This calls for a model for conversation among languages; among the marginalized themselves and between the marginalized as a whole and the hitherto dominant. The aim should be to encourage the making visible of genius, even in the most marginalized of languages. In such a scenario, we want to pose different questions and challenges to dominant languages – English, for instance. Given the position history has thrust it into today, English *can enable* without *disabling*.

Personally, I believe that translations, in both the narrow sense as linguistic and in the broad sense as cultural, can contribute to better understanding in the global community, but only if it is seen and practised as cultures and languages in conversation. Translation theories and practices will help in maintaining the integrity of languages and cultures while enabling them to share in each other's triumphs. All languages should be seen as tributaries to the common sea of our humanity. Translation should help in countering the dictatorship of monolingualism. Nature is multilingual, not monolingual, and everywhere modern progress is killing the multilinguality of the universe. There is beauty, power, and glory in many languages, but monolingualism has blinded nations into having a mono-view of reality. Perhaps we should learn from nature – the flower, for instance.

What is significant about a flower is that it is not only a very visible expression of a plant; it also contains the seeds for the future reproduction of the tree. Flowers come in different colours, and we do not say that a flower is a flower only if it expresses itself in one colour. Even roses are not all red, which is, of course, also their attraction. But no flower can claim to be more of a flower than other flowers and they all contribute to the celebration of beauty and reproduction of life that we have come to associate with flowers. Languages can learn from flowers. Many languages do not devalue any one language, and in the world of many languages expressing our humanity, translation can play a most important role in enabling free and creative conversation among them, to the benefit of us all, to create a commonwealth of

letters to feed the commonwealth of the human spirit. We should join hands and minds to make the art, practice, and theories of translation help in creating a community of free and equal languages and cultures whose fruits and achievements we shall all share equally, as our commonwealth of the spirit.

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Ngũgĩ's *Wizard of the Crow* and the Edifice Complex

JOHN C. HAWLEY

AMONG THE NEWEST TOURIST SPOTS IN MOSCOW SINCE THE FALL of communism is the Graveyard of the Fallen Monuments, where statues of Felix Dzerzhinsky (which once stood outside the KGB building in Lubyanka Square) and a three-metre-high Stalin (with nose lopped off) have been moved. Among the most memorable images of the fall of Saddam Hussein are the videos of the removal of his imposing statue, accompanied by those of his retrieval from the underground cubby-hole. Such concrete representations of the fall of the mighty makes one consider the travel posters of Neuschwanstein, the French chateaux and palaces, the Forbidden City, the pyramids of Egypt and Mexico, the ruins of Ayutthaya and Angkor Wat, the Taj Mahal and Akbar's sixteenth-century abandoned city of Fatehpur Sikri, and against that backdrop one thinks, too, of the twin towers in New York, the before and after. Inevitably, for the literary, Shelley's "Ozymandias" springs to mind: the impermanence of power, the deceptive sense of control that the powerful hope to wield over their fate – to *shape* it, in fact, in steel and stone. Deyan Sudjic, architecture critic for the *Observer*, notes that

Every kind of political culture uses architecture for what can, at heart, be understood as rational, pragmatic purposes, even when it is used to make a symbolic point. But when the line between political calculation and psychopathology breaks down, architecture becomes not just a matter of practical politics, but a fantasy, or a sickness that consumes its victims. [...] The appeal of architecture to those who aspire to political power lies in the way that it is an expression of will. To design a building, or to have a building designed, is to suggest that this is the world as we want it. This is the perfect room from which to run a state, a

business empire, a city, a family. It is the way to create a physical version of an idea or an emotion. It is the way to construct reality as we wish it to be, rather than as it is.¹

Even Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, understood that time takes its toll on monuments to the dictator's glory, and thus he developed his theory of 'ruin value', which specifically intended a return to the building materials of classical Rome so that, even hundreds of years into the future, they would not crumble into dust but would instead attain the grandeur of the coliseum: a reminder that lingers in the memory long after the present ruler has gone to his eternal reward.

But this question of structures immediately points out the difference between a monument and a story about that monument. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o mentions in response to a question of how he wrote his latest novel, *Murogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*),

the writing of *Wizard of the Crow* was more of a possession than conscious plotting. The structure developed with the story. As they dawned on me, many incidents were a surprise to me too, often eliciting laughter.²

The question of an obsessive fantasy that takes shape in the minds of those with an edifice complex, to which Sudjic refers, also echoes imaginatively and with a quite opposite import in this same conversation with Ngũgĩ. When asked what he found to be the attractions of myth and fantasy in storytelling, and particularly with regard to any distinctions he would wish to make between orature and literature, Ngũgĩ remarks that he is

fascinated by how myths are made and how they grow. A person witnesses an event, say a car accident. In order to convey the essence and reality of the horror to another who was not present, he exaggerates. The recipient of the slightly exaggerated adds his own suggestion when telling the story to somebody else. And soon the story becomes almost larger than the actual event but it retains the essential truth.³

Thus it is no surprise that the role of art, and specifically storytelling, is central to Ngũgĩ's book, whose premise is explicitly Biblical in its propor-

¹ Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World* (New York: Penguin, 2005): 12, 14.

² Matt Cheney, "Q & A: Ngugi wa Thiong'o," *LitBlog* (11 Feb 2007), http://www.lbc.typepad.com/blog/2007/02/qa_ngugi_wa_thi.html (accessed 28 June 2007).

³ Cheney, "Q & A: Ngugi wa Thiong'o."

tions: the rule of Aburiria, an imagined country much like present-day Kenya, and the whole country through him,

had decided unanimously to erect a building such as had never been attempted in history except once by the children of Israel, and even they had failed miserably to complete the House of Babel. Aburiria would now do what the Israelites could not: raise a building to the very gates of Heaven so that the Ruler could call on God daily to say good morning or good evening or simply how was your day today, God? The Ruler would be the daily recipient of God's advice, resulting in a rapid growth of Aburiria to heights never before dreamt by humans.⁴

The project would be called Heavenscape or simply Marching to Heaven. As Minister Machokali announces proudly,

our project will be the first and only superwonder in the history of the world. In short [...] Marching to Heaven was the special birthday cake the citizens had decided to bake for their one and only leader, the eternal Ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria. (17)

The ludicrous nature of the enterprise is, of course, clear to readers from the start, and Ngũgĩ's lampoon is underscored by his narrator, who notes that "nobody clapped, but nevertheless Machokali thanked the entire assembly for their overwhelming support." He enjoins the common folk to come forward to congratulate the Ruler, and only one man accepts the invitation. Whether knowingly or not, he steps to the microphone and intones imagined grandiose titles for the Ruler: "Cheap Excellency," "Cheap Arsehole," "His Holy Arsehole."

Though undeniably the grandest, this would not have been the Ruler's only significant building project. Earlier he had decided to respond to his wife Rachel's independent style of living by building her a house on "a seven-acre plot that he surrounded with a stone wall and an electric fence" (7), and all the clocks in the house were to be frozen at the second that she had raised the question of why he felt the need to have sexual relations with schoolgirls. Much like Yahweh, the Ruler envisions himself as a lord not only of space, but also of time: "I am your beginning and your end. [...] I am the past and the present," he tells her (8).

Thus, quite early in this massive novel we have a memorable caricature of the typical despot of this or any age. He is in no way singled out for special

⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow: a novel* (Murogi wa Kagogo; New York: Pantheon, 2006): 16. Further page references are in the main text.

scorn, since he is metonymic of the type. Indeed, at the end of the book, after a rather mysterious coup by the director of the Marching to Heaven project, the pattern seems to repeat itself, even if the particular Heavenscrape building project is abandoned when the Global Bank decides against funding it. Minister Tajarika demolishes the Mars Café, where insurrectionists were said to have plotted their insurgency:

the site was fenced off with a wall of corrugated iron sheets. By the side was a big billboard: UNDER CONSTRUCTION: GLOBE INSURANCE CORPORATION: THE TALLEST BUILDING IN AFRICA; A REAL MARCHING TO HEAVEN. (762)

By book's end, the urge to pour concrete in one's own honor has by no means abated: in fact, the new ruler has simply adapted more efficiently to changed times and replaced the purported wisdom available by a daily visit to god with the apparently surer safety of an insurance company backed by the IMF. Readers by this time have seen Aburiria move beyond a postcolonial age and on to the brave new world of globalization.

If asked to recall massive building projects throughout history, one would not immediately think of Africa. Aside from the odd pyramid, that continent's history has not recorded many buildings that are memorable. As a remarkable exception, we might recall Félix Houphouët-Boigny's cathedral:

The world's largest Christian church is in the Ivory Coast capital of Yamoussoukro. The multi-million-dollar basilica rises out of the slums of the city and was supposed to provide social services for the poor in the developing African country. But the social projects never materialized, and the church sits mostly empty during Mass.⁵

What is even more startling is that less than ten percent of Ivory Coast's fifteen million people is Catholic. The former president Houphouët-Boigny was the mastermind of the cathedral, and he figures in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals* (1998), in which the central dictator of the book, Koyaga, apparently modelled on the former ruler of Togo (Gnassingbe Eyadema), spends some time with the other despots whom Kourouma skewers: Guinea's Sekou Touré, the Central African Republic's Jean-Bedel Bokassa, Morocco's King Hassan II, Congo-Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko, Ethiopia's Haile Selassie, as well as Patrice Lumumba, and Belgium's King

⁵ Jason Beaubien, "Ivory Coast Cathedral Is World's Largest Christian Church," *Vermont Public Radio* (24 March 2005), Morning Edition, <http://www.vpr.net/npr/4558634/> (accessed 10 June 2011).

Leopold II. Writing his novel as if he were recording the glorious history of this Koyaga, Kourouma notes, for example, that

as soon as you become uncontested master of the Republic of the Gulf, your first concern is to construct in you native village in the mountains, in Tchaotchi, a vast estate, an estate as vast as the one you visited in the Republic of the Ebony People. Construct as sumptuous an estate as the one that the dictator of the crocodile totem built in his native village. [...] In the middle of this construction, there is a traffic circle around a tall bronze statue set on a monumental pedestal. It is a statue of Koyaga as general of the army, facing east and pointing the way with his finger. The traffic circle is located at the intersection of two crossing boulevards. Thus, four roads head off from the circle. They are all bordered on both sides with monuments to Koyaga or his mama. [...] The ways to the east and west are dominated by great arches of triumph from which fly banners with slogans glorifying Koyaga and his mama.⁶

The understandable tendency in African fiction to fixate on despots (think, for example, of Moses Isegawa's recent *Abyssinian Chronicles*) generally shares not only a topic, but frequently enough also a response: that of absurdism, a bemused gaze or slapstick double-take at a leader's incredible level of egoism and cruelty. But the emphasis in Kourouma's novel, and more insistently in Ngũgĩ's, on building projects as visible extensions of one's intentions to shape space and time to one's self-concept, is something a bit new in African writing; it is, though, a theme that plays well with the ridicule of despots in other times and places.

What is more interesting are the forces not only of nature but also of the long-suffering people in such countries that well up as a counterforce against the stolid fixity of dictatorship. As Immanuel Wallerstein writes,

the modern world-system is in structural crisis, and we have entered an 'age of transition' – a period of bifurcation and chaos. [...] it is clear that the issues confronting antisystematic movements pose themselves in a very different fashion than those of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. [...] those in power will no longer be trying to preserve the existing system (doomed to self-destruction); rather, they will try to ensure that the transition leads to the construction of a new system that will replicate the worst features of the existing one – its hierarchy, privilege, and inequalities. [...] A strategy for the period of transition ought therefore to include four components. [...] a process of con-

⁶ Ahmadou Kourouma, *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*, tr. Carrol F. Coates (*En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, 1998; CARAF Books; Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998): 200–201.

stant, open debate about the transition and the outcome we hope for [...] short term defensive action, including electoral action [...] the establishment of interim, middle-range goals that seem to move in the right direction [and the] develop[ment of] the substantive meaning of our long-term emphases, which I take to be a world that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian. I say “relatively” because that is realistic. There will always be gaps – but there is no reason why they should be wide, encrusted or hereditary. [...] We need to stop assuming what the better (not the perfect) society will be like. We need to discuss it, outline it, experiment with alternative structures to realize it. [...] And if this programme is insufficient, and it probably is, then this very insufficiency ought to be part of the debate.⁷

And this supports, in a sociological and economic framework, the brilliance of the methodology of Ngũgĩ’s novel, which is emblematic of oral storytelling and which flies in the face of the stolidity of the typical architecture of a novel with beginning, middle, and end. As Scott Esposito has noted, “the Wizard’s evolution exemplifies what is possibly the book’s greatest innovation: the zigzagging paths that each of the main characters take through the novel,”⁸ so that we are left at the end of 765 pages with a very inconclusive ending: it is true that one dictator has been overthrown, but he has been replaced with another. It is true that the Wizard has come closer to finding his political voice, but his is not really there yet. Characters, whether basically good or bad, are not clearly divided along those lines by the end of the novel. In fact, with each twist and turn of the story, the characters develop greater complexity. In other words, they are made to exist *in time*, as an oral story does, and not *fixed* in time, as a building is. Despite the ironic stolidity of the huge tome that Ngũgĩ has put together, in it he has found a structure that aptly demonstrates the living and changing nature of a story told by several people, each with his or her version, his or her part to play, etc.

This is not everyone’s cup of tea. As John Updike writes,

the narrative [...] is a journey without a destination, and its characters are improv artists. This ambitious, long-mulled attempt to sustain the spell of oral

⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2004): 272–73.

⁸ Scott Esposito, “Thrice Told Tales: How Stories Become Reality in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow*,” *The Quarterly Conversation* 7 (Spring 2007): 6, http://www.quarterlyconversation.com/TQC_7/Storytelling.html (accessed 28 June 2007).

narrative in an era of electro-visual distractions leaves the Wizard where the reader finds him, up in the air.⁹

But this is just what Ngũgĩ intended. As he told Charles Cantalupo while writing the book,

"the characters are engaged in the constant performance of their own being for the narrative. You never quite know where or how the whole novel is going to end except in the constant performance of their own being."¹⁰

Updike acknowledges that the book is

a translation from a language whose narrative traditions are mostly oral and heavy on performance; the tale is fantastic and didactic, told in broad strokes of caricature. Its principal political actors wear physical distortions like large, firelit masks.¹¹

In other words, it is not the Ngũgĩ we see in earlier novels like *Petals of Blood*, realistic and grim, firmly anchored in the nineteenth-century European novel with strongly plotted twists and turns that end with the click of a closing music box. But the movement to a narrative technique somewhat closer to orature is a choice Ngũgĩ has made and advocated some years now. Isidore Okpewho notes:

An oral epic is fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a man or men endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context and it is of significance in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people. It is usually narrated or performed to the background of music by an unlettered singer working alone or with some assistance from a group of accompanists.¹²

While Ngũgĩ's novel is therefore not literally an oral epic, Updike's critique would seem to offer evidence that *Wizard of the Crow* imitates oral literature in its emphasis on the performativity of its characters, and in the protean

⁹ John Updike, "Extended Performance: Saving the Republic of Aburiria," *New Yorker* (31 July 2006): 78.

¹⁰ Charles Cantalupo, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*: An Interview by Charles Cantalupo," *Left Curve* 23 (1999), <http://www.leftcurve.org/LC23/webPages/lc23toc.html> (accessed 3 August 2006); quoted in Updike, "Extended Performance: Saving the Republic of Aburiria," 78.

¹¹ Updike, "Extended Performance: Saving the Republic of Aburiria," 76.

¹² Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1979): 34.

semi-nonlinear motion of its plot. And when Updike charges that “the author of this bulky book offers more indignation than analysis in his portrait of postcolonial Africa,”¹³ he makes a point that might as easily be brought against *Beowulf* or the *Odyssey* and the highly metaphoric ‘analysis’ of their respective societies. In other words, what Updike seems to regret about the novel, and portrays as a falling-off of Ngũgĩ’s talent, can be seen instead as an authorial choice parallel to (and arguably consequent to) his earlier decision to write in Gikuyu. Jeff Turrentine recognizes the intention to write a modern oral epic – “it’s hard to think of another recent novel so heavily steeped in oral traditions; at the level of language and cadence it recalls a long yarn told by firelight” – but he goes on to lament that the book lacks “the distilled smoothness of a story passed down over many generations.”¹⁴

The Movement for the Voice of the People that opposes the Ruler is as inchoate at novel’s end as it was in the beginning; its membership is as shifting. Its leader, Nyawira, has shared the identity of Wizard with Numiti, and he, in turn, gradually assumes the political role she has embodied throughout the book. But he is like all the characters in the novel, and does not really take a role of preeminence: he is not a Beowulf or a Roland; he is not el Cid. Nor, on the other hand, is he only the trickster of folklore tales. This semi-ragged characterization that leaves the reader with an aftertaste that is somehow not quite fully satisfying – or satisfied – underscores the narrative experiment that Ngũgĩ is attempting in this major allegory not only of Kenya, but of the past two thousand years of the African continent. In this regard, its very sense of incompleteness is the only really optimistic feature of the comic but pitifully familiar tragic farce: if the narrative edifice is not complete, then maybe there is still hope for how it may turn out. Ngũgĩ’s point seems to be that we all need to constantly examine ourselves, be true to ourselves, and find a voice to express that individuality in a larger social context of responsibility. His characters, while sharing a family resemblance to the heroes and anti-heroes of folk epic, are not fully defined by the distance at which such characters are typically held by their authors. Numiti and Nyawira still carry the only-too-familiar idiosyncratic overtones of personal failure that define not only the characters of *Petals of Blood*, but the lives of Ngũgĩ’s readers, as well.

¹³ Updike, “Extended Performance: Saving the Republic of Aburiria,” 78.

¹⁴ Jeff Turrentine, “The Strongman’s Weakness,” *New York Times Book Review* (10 September 2006): 22.

Randy Boyagoda regrets the essentialist racialized structure of the book's analysis of contemporary power-structures (while underscoring the border-crossing corruption on both sides of the line), and what he judges to be a typically Ngũgĩ-esque retreat to Marxist political pamphleteering to end his novels, but nonetheless recognizes in this book's closing page an implied identification of Ngũgĩ with A.G., who, it turns out, has been telling this story, while also appearing in it as a compromised member of the power elite, but finally as an unexpected saviour of the novel's central characters, and as the reader's ultimate interpreter of their actions. As Boyagoda puts it,

[Nyawira's] gratitude [is] not simply a response to A.G.'s rescue of her and Kumiti from the state's rough justice; she is also thanking him for the gift of preserving and telling the story of that life. A.G. takes it upon himself, at no small risk, to be an active witness to the difficulties of others, one who discerns the value and dignity of a human life in its telling.¹⁵

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* effectively and with great imagination demonstrates the opposition between the massive intransigence symbolized by temples, palaces, and the Big Men who build them, versus the monsoon, the earthquake, the sardonic laughter, the common human empathy, the telling folktale – even the apparent magic and encroachment by something transcendent – that recurs, almost as if on another plane of existence, in the same societies. If individuals like Ngũgĩ, who know suffering at first hand, can continue to find in literature an avenue that may speak truth to power, we readers can be reminded that writing is not just the distraction that many imagine it to be, but is instead a recurring reminder of the common humanity that is finally more enduring than the ego, or detritus, of many a world leader – whether political, religious, or financial.

A central irony of all this talk about those with an edifice complex is that it happens for Ngũgĩ in a continent where homes are lightweight and fleeting. It is the sort of subject that fascinates an historian like Dipesh Chakrabarty, who titles a haunting chapter in *Habitations of Modernity* "Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling." The chapter is a reflection on sixty-seven essays written as memories by former inhabitants of eighteen districts in East Bengal following Partition. He writes:

¹⁵ Randy Boyagoda, "Magic and Greed: Ngugi wa Thiongo's New Novel," *Harper's Magazine* 313.1876 (September 2006): 96.

There remains the question of what people do not even wish to remember, the forgetting that comes to our aid in dealing with pain and unpleasantness in life. Memory, then, is far more complicated than what historians can recover.¹⁶

There are dangers of self-deception in such ‘memories’,” and very likely there is romanticization in memories of things forgotten – but this, too, is at the heart of the folktale, the ‘exaggeration’ of what happened, the whiling away of time in front of a fire while we spin tales – cognizant, as the more powerful may have forgotten, that we have not here a lasting kingdom.

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¹⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002): 115.

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Re-membering the Dismembered

—— Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Language,
Resistance, and Identity-Formation

MUMIA G. OSAAJI

‘In which language do you dream?’: An Overview

SOMETIMES IN THE 1980s, THE DEPARTMENT OF LITERATURE at the University of Nairobi erupted into an interesting but curious debate at the centre of which was the question: “In which language do you dream?” If your answer to this question was that you dreamt in any of the indigenous African languages, you were perceived to be ‘mentally decolonized’; if you dreamt in English, French or any other non-African language, you were deemed ‘mentally colonized’.

This anecdote, perhaps, provides a fitting start to this essay which analyses Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s commitment to and advocacy for writing in indigenous African languages. In this essay, I examine Ngũgĩ’s mission of resisting past and present foreign domination and of forging an authentic African identity through writing in Gikuyu.

This analysis is based on four of Ngũgĩ’s books of essays: *Decolonising the Mind*; *Homecoming*; *Moving the Centre*; and *Writers in Politics*. It is noted that, since he launched the movement in the late 1960s to rename the Department of *English* at the University of Nairobi, the Department of *Literature*, Ngũgĩ has continued to ceaselessly explore ways of defining the true identity of the African. Convinced that the African body and soul are dismembered, Ngũgĩ is committed to ‘re-membering’ these broken and scattered parts.

Which is why he ‘decolonized his mind’ by writing the following works in Gikuyu: *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (translated as *Devil on the Cross*), *Matigari Ma Njiruungi*, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, *Maitu Njugira* (with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii), *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi i Mathagu*, and *Murogi wa Gagogo* (translated as *The Wizard of the Crow*), among others. It should also be mentioned that, in keeping with this vision, Ngũgĩ founded the Kamiriithu community theatre troupe that performed plays in the Gikuyu language.

I will explore this Ngũgĩan standpoint for its strengths and weaknesses. While drawing on the (post)colonial approach, I analyse Ngũgĩ’s use of language to shape both a dominated people’s resistance to asphyxiating foreign influence(s) and the formation of their distinct identity. The essay also seeks to answer the question: Can literature in indigenous languages communicate to a wider audience?

In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ declares:

In 1977, I published ‘Petals of Blood’ and said farewell to English language as a vehicle of my writing of plays, novels and short stories. All my subsequent writings have been written directly in Gikuyu language. ‘Decolonising the Mind’ is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on, it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way. [...] The call for the rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with [...] the real language of humankind.¹

For Ngũgĩ to make such a bold (rather controversial) statement, there must have been certain experiences and observations that motivated him. One may recall that Ngũgĩ had published *Weep not Child*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, and *Petals of Blood*, as well as *Homecoming*, in English.

So, what are the factors that impelled Ngũgĩ to not only advocate but also take practical action by writing in an indigenous African language? He contends that

I am lamenting a neo-colonial situation which has meant the European bourgeoisie once again stealing our talents and geniuses as they have stolen our economies. One of Imperialism’s potent weapons is the cultural bomb to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, languages, their environment, their heritage, their unity and capacity. [...] This makes them want to identify with other people’s languages rather than their own. [...] Language and literature were taking us further and further away from ourselves to other selves, from our world to

¹ Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind: Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986): 108.

other worlds. [...] Language was the means of the means of spiritual subjugation.²

In this Ngugian construct, the colonial and neocolonial tragedy in Africa has continued to flourish partly because of the linguistic alienation of the people from their indigenous languages. In other words, Africans, having been torn from their linguistic roots, have found themselves increasingly tied to the languages of Europe. According to Gilian Gorle,

The 1885 Berlin Conference imagined artificial boundaries on the African landscape and ever since, Africans have been defined (and continue to define themselves) in terms of the languages of Europe as either English-speaking, French-speaking or Portuguese-speaking countries. In so doing, Europe, according to Ngugi, “planted its memory on top of other African memories, its layer on native layer.”³ “Language is power. Language has power to upset, uproot, and shackle. [...] Which may explain why much postcolonial writing reveals the continuing struggle over the word.”⁴

As a result, European languages have been raised to the pinnacle of enlightenment in step with the submerging or diminishing of the languages of the (neo)colonized. This scenario also marginalizes the memory that African languages carry. In other words, Africa’s global visibility in European languages has meant Africa’s invisibility in African languages. As Ngũgĩ avers,

If you name the world, you own it. [...] Both the (neo) colonialists and the African elite who succeeded them, see the world through the eyes of the conquering west, effectively burying African memory under European memory.⁵

Today, European and African languages relate to each other not as progressive or backward but in terms of the long history of oppression on the one hand and resistance on the other.⁶

² Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 1, 12, 9.

³ Ngugi, “European or African Memory: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Intellectual in the Era of Globalisation,” in *African Intellectuals: Re-thinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, ed. Thandikwa Mkandawire (London: CODESRIA/Zed, 2005): 158.

⁴ Gilian Gorle, “Fighting the Good Fight: What Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* Says About Language and Power,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 27 (1997): 180.

⁵ Ngugi, “Re-Membering Africa: Planting European Memory on Africa,” public lecture at Nairobi University, 15 January 2007; originally delivered as the first McMillan Stewart Lecture at Harvard University, 14 March 2006.

⁶ Ngugi, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1993): 35.

On the global scene, African languages do not occupy any place of honour: at the United Nations, for instance, no African language features among the official languages.⁷

It is instructive to note that there are no journals or magazines published in indigenous African languages in Kenya. This means that those who write in African languages are confronted with a dearth of outlets for publication and therefore platforms for critical debate among those languages. Kithaka wa Mberia sums up this situation in the following words:

It is not fashionable in Kenya to write drama in Kiswahili or other indigenous languages. There is a tendency to see English as the language of choice. Writing in indigenous languages and Kiswahili is considered the business of writers who should not be taken seriously. Yet Kiswahili is the largest language in terms of geographical spread and number of speakers in Kenya.⁸

In confronting this disturbing reality, Ngũgĩ appears in sync with Bakhtinian realism, which sees the literary realist as a professional iconoclast, bent on shattering the false images of his day.⁹ Ngũgĩ can be seen as echoing Ousmane Sembène's declaration that "I am a fighter, I know what I want to change in society and this facilitates my work as a writer."¹⁰

Traits of the Brechtian inspiration of the Ngugian project are equally unmistakable. Ngũgĩ is, therefore, playing true to realism by

discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions to the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development/making possible the concrete.¹¹

⁷ *Moving the Centre*, 38.

⁸ Kithaka wa Mberia. "Kiswahili and Other Indigenous Kenyan Languages in the Performing Arts," *Nairobi Journal of Literature* 1 (March 2003): 61.

⁹ Cf. Hirschkop, Ken. "Introduction: Bakhtin and Cultural Theory," in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop & David Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989): 33.

¹⁰ Quoted in Mineke Schipper, "Knowledge is like an ocean: Insiders, outsiders and the academy," in Schipper, *Imagining Insiders: Africa and the Question of Belonging (De boomstam en de krokodil*, 1996; London & New York: Cassell, 1999): 151.

¹¹ Bertolt Brecht, "Popularity and Realism" (1938), in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (1992; Oxford, Malden MA & Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 1993): 501. See also George M. Gugelberger, "Marx-

He is equally engaged in a popular cause, defined in Brechtian terms as

intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression / assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it / representing the most progressive section of the people [...] relating to the traditions and developing them.¹²

Identity-Formation

We have already noted that not only is the African memory asphyxiated but that whatever visibility it has is a function of a European linguistic prism. As Fredric Jameson observes,

the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.¹³

Joost Smiers expands the implications of this in the following:

When nothing is sure, when everything can disappear, when someone's deepest belief is just an accident of history, when no value has the chance of being respected, and when every work of art is just an ephemeral occasion that can be replaced by any other happening, then the individual person as a subject is the loser. What else is left to give one a grip on life, to contribute to the development of self-esteem and to proclaim one's own values as a human being?¹⁴

And, while admitting the role of art in guiding people in their human existence, as well as in contributing to the development of personal and collective identity, Smiers argues that it is important to reclaim a space for the development of strong, stable cultural identities shared by people who live in a particular place or who are connected with each other in some other way. He sees a well-developed cultural identity as encompassing shared strong feeling in common artistic expressions that make people what they want to be and at the

ist Literary Debates and Their Continuity in African Literary Criticism," in *Marxism and African Literature*, ed. Gugelberger (London: James Currey, 1985): 10.

¹² Bertolt Brecht, "Popularity and Realism," 500.

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 1991): 16.

¹⁴ Joost Smiers, *Arts under Pressure: Promoting Cultural Diversity in the Age of Globalization* (London & New York: Zed, 2003): 128.

same time exclude other artistic expressions that tend to disturb their lives. In other words, identities are the demarcations of differences.¹⁵

And, in relation to Ngũgĩ, the question is: What form of identity is Ngũgĩ advocating for? Let us examine these statements from *Writers in Politics*:

The choice of language and the use of such language is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe. African countries as colonies and as neo-colonies, came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe: English-speaking, French-speaking, or Portuguese-speaking African countries.¹⁶

Why not create literary monuments in our own languages? I believe that writing in Gikuyu language is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African Peoples.¹⁷

So I would like to contribute towards the restoration of the Kenyan child to his environment. [...] With harmony between his environment, his language and himself, he can learn other languages and enjoy other people's literatures.¹⁸

Here, Ngũgĩ cuts the image of an unequivocal purist. He appears to see a clear-cut battle-line between African and European languages: "Africa has a past and a culture of dignity and human complexity [...] True African literature must be written in African languages."¹⁹

What we have produced is another hybrid tradition, a minority tradition in transition that can only be termed as Afro-European literature, literature written by Africans in European languages.²⁰

The reality of hybridity or hybridization of the African writer appals Ngũgĩ. On hybridity, Joost Smiers notes:

No culture is a hermetically sealed entity and certainly not locally bound [...] and thus arts from all parts of the world merge, fuse and mix. [...] our existence is [...] a web of times and places, memories and imaginations [...]. All cultures are in a constant flux. Images, sounds and texts invade from all corners of the world. [...] Our perception of reality has become decentred. We are living in overlapping polycentric circles of identity. Purity of form and content is a non-concept; every cultural form is quintessentially hybrid.²¹

¹⁵ Smiers, *Arts under Pressure*, 123.

¹⁶ Ngũgĩ, *Writers in Politics: Essays* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1981): 4.

¹⁷ *Writers in Politics*, 8.

¹⁸ *Writers in Politics*, 28.

¹⁹ Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, 24.

²⁰ *Decolonising the Mind*, 26.

²¹ Smiers, *Arts under Pressure*, 125.

Hybridity, according to Benita Parry (paraphrasing Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Gyan Prakash),

is a heritage of the continuing undeniable postcolonial situation which the critic should intimately occupy but with a view to deconstruct, to change it, to re-read it. This type of criticism puts the writer neither inside nor outside western domination but at a tangent [...] The task of the postcolonial work is not to address victimage “by the assertion of identity”, but to tamper “with the authority of Europe’s storylines [...] by reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value-coding.”²²

Pursuing this line of thought is the Moroccan intellectual Abdelkebir Khatibi, who appears to side with both Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in urging the creative domestication and refashioning of the colonial languages.²³

Resistance

Ngũgĩ’s apparent rejection of hybridity puts him firmly in the hands of resistance. Neil Lazarus observes, of a study by Barbara Harlow which also deals with Ngũgĩ’s anti-imperialist views on language use, that

Resistance Literature, like the resistance movements in which it participates, renders itself immune from the depredations of mainstream western criticism, by demanding recognition of its own independent status but also presents a serious challenge to the literary codes and canons of the west. The resistance writer, like the guerrilla, is engaged in an urgent historical confrontation.²⁴

Resistance identities are normally formed in dangerous unstable situations by excluded groups. Resistance identity is, in fact, a kind of violent, extremist self-expression in circumstances where the possibility of peaceful and dialogue-based relations is denied.

Ngũgĩ’s daring proposal of KiSwahili as the language of the whole world at the expense of English serves to cement his determination to ‘move the centre’ from Europe.²⁵ In this resistance to any rapprochement between Afri-

²² Benita Parry, “The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?” *Yearbook of English Studies* 27 (1997): 11.

²³ Neil Lazarus, “Comparative Resistance,” review of Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature, Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 23.3 (Spring 1990): 318.

²⁴ Neil Lazarus, “Comparative Resistance,” 319.

²⁵ Ngũgĩ, *Moving the Centre*, 40.

can and European languages, Ngũgĩ appears to incline himself towards Afrocentricity. According to Molefi Ketí Asante,

Afrocentricity, or Africentricity as some prefer to name it, is a counterdiscourse that places Africa at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior. [...] It often has to normalize and accept ethnocentricity as a positive.²⁶

This unshackling of self into identity through language also aligns him with Edward Said, who outlines the work of the postcolonial anti-imperialist writer thus: “one of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land” along with “an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language.”²⁷

As Manuel Castells explains,

In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. [...] People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are.²⁸

The same sentiment is shared by Mark Warschauer, who argues that “throughout the world [...] movements have arisen to defend national languages against the encroachment of global English. [...] Through choices of language and dialect, people constantly make and remake who they are.”²⁹ The significant role played by language in defining identity is echoed by John Corbett, who notes that “languages are linguistic markers of community identity.”

In his opposition to linguistic eurocentrism, Chinweizu avers that

African literature is an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures. It has its own traditions, models and norms. Therefore, borrowing or adopting western art leads to non-authenticity, a sign of westernisation, and colonisation of the mind.³⁰

²⁶ Molefi Ketí Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia PA: Temple UP, 1989): 125.

²⁷ Edward W. Said, “Yeats and Decolonization” (1988), in Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson & Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990): 86.

²⁸ Manuel Castells, “Prologue” to Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000; Oxford & Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd ed. 2010): 3. (1–26)

²⁹ Mark Warschauer, “Language, identity, and the Internet,” *Mots Pluriels* 19 (October 2001), <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1901mw.html> (accessed 25 July 2006).

³⁰ Onwuchekwu Jemie Chinweizu & Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*, vol. 1: *African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (Washington DC:

Critics have pointed out the incapacity of African languages to handle complexities of thought due to their inadequate vocabulary. Ngũgĩ, however, would hear none of this. He cites the Asmara Declaration, which calls on African states and intellectuals to develop the capacities of African languages for science and technology. To encourage this process, Ngũgĩ points to Africa's own positive examples, including Tanzania's effort in developing a massive vocabulary of KiSwahili in all branches of learning, Ethiopia's long history of continued scholarship in Amharic, and Gatua wa Mbugua's Master's thesis in the technical field of crop science, which he wrote in Gikuyu at Cornell University.³¹

Ngũgĩ's standpoint resonates well with Kithaka wa Mberia, who appears to celebrate the fact that there has been a remarkable patronage by Kenyans of dramatic performances staged in KiSwahili and indigenous languages and gives the plays of Wahome Mutahi and Wahome Karengo as examples. Kithaka also notes a similar trend in the immense success of Congolese singers who perform in Lingala, which contrasts sharply with the pitiful failures by Kenyan artists trying to sing in English. Prompted by these observations, Kithaka glows with glee over what he calls "the emotive and communication superiority of Kiswahili and local languages over English."³²

Both Ngũgĩ and Kithaka agree that countries such as South Korea, Japan, China, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have continued to use their national languages while at the same time employing English for international transactions – without contradictions. While celebrating the achievements of great writers such as Goethe, Bertolt Brecht, and Henrik Ibsen, Kithaka supports Ngũgĩ's view that the power of the African languages could be raised through enriching them, restoring them by way of translations from European languages and by encouraging intra-African language translations.³³

Howard UP, 1983): 4. Quoted in Maria Eriksson Baaz, "Introduction: African Identity and the Postcolonial," in *Same and Other: Negotiating African Identity in Cultural Production*, ed. Maria Eriksson Baaz & Mai Palmberg (Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet – Nordic Africa Institute, 2001): 8.

³¹ "European or African Memory: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Intellectual in the Era of Globalisation," 161.

³² Kithaka wa Mberia. "Kiswahili and Other Indigenous Kenyan Languages in the Performing Arts," *Nairobi Journal of Literature* 1 (March 2003): 65.

³³ Kithaka wa Mberia. "Kiswahili and Other Indigenous Kenyan Languages in the Performing Arts," 69.

Subjectivity

Ngũgĩ's mission is geared towards giving voice to the 'voiceless' African languages, communities, and cultures. By allowing African languages to 'speak' themselves, and to 'speak about others', he is resuscitating the submerged subjectivity of these languages.

Roy Boyne says the following about subjectivity:

The concept of subjectivity entails individual human beings who are able to freely decide upon the actions that they take. A subject is sufficiently powerful as to be autonomous, discovering and therefore, responsible for its own actions.

The 'I' is the first cause of its own intentional actions.³⁴

In other words, Ngũgĩ is committed to displacement of European languages from their current umbrella status of defining, describing, and naming African languages, cultures, and people.

A Critique of the Ngugian Project

Do we notice any weakness(es) in the ensuing Ngugian construct? The answer is yes. Critics have observed a shifting of ideological allegiance in Ngũgĩ. For instance, Ngũgĩ has returned to English even after a categorical vow never to do so.³⁵ It is noted that, though he has kept *Mutiiri* alive, and has published *Murogi wa Gagogo*, he has, conversely, written his recent literary essays in English. These are the latest edition of *Writers in Politics* as well as *Gunpoints, Penpoints, and Dreams*.

This incredible shift has displeased Simon Gikandi, who fears that the reality of exile and the rigours of American professional life could be taking their toll on Ngũgĩ's determination to use Gikuyu as the language of his fiction and critical discourse. Gikandi has an even bigger worry: that Ngũgĩ's traditional and much-vaunted audience – the peasants of Kamirithu – may have given way to a different set of audience – an intelligentsia in exile. Gikandi asks, rather uncomfortably: "could the switch to the language of globalization – English – signal Ngũgĩ's unease with the native informer and with the idea of a unanimous African culture?"

³⁴ Roy Boyne, *Subject, Society and Culture* (Thousand Oaks CA & London: Sage, 2001): 5.

³⁵ See, for example, Simon Gikandi, "Traveling Theory: Ngugi's Return to English," *Research in African Literatures* 31.2 (Summer 2000): 194–209.

This identifiable crisis of Ngũgĩ's audience appears also to animate Henry Indangasi:

Ngugi's extremist and dogmatic positions have transformed his ideal reader from the relatively complex, sophisticated persona of the 1960s and 1970s to a fairly simple and unsophisticated individual in search of quick, clear cut solutions to the most intricate of problems.³⁶

Similarly, Ngũgĩ's uncompromising Afrocentricism seems to oppose the reality of 'hybridity', which raises the question of whether he is not in self-denial, considering that his life and works resonate with a reasonable depth of hybridity. More questions are also asked about what happened to his Marxist-socialist stance after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. We are yet to hear the vintage Ngũgĩ come out strongly in response to Wole Soyinka's loud and perhaps narcissistic celebration of the ideological uprooting of the orphans of Marxist-socialism.³⁷

On matters technical, Ngũgĩ's essayistic style is rather polemical. He makes no effort to embrace the essential stylistic features that define the traditional literary essay. Ngũgĩ appears to dispense with persuasive devices, ironic undertones, the credible and balanced essayistic persona, understatement, and the conversational mode that acknowledges the presence of the reader.

Conclusion

The debate on the role of language in defining people's identity and in shaping their resistance to foreign domination is still raging. The growing popularity of (post)colonial studies has seen the centralization of this language

³⁶ Henry Indangasi, "Ngugi's Ideal Reader and the Postcolonial Reality," *Yearbook of English Studies* 27 (1997): 200.

³⁷ If revolutionary in his socio-political commitment and, in the past, an endorser of socialism, despite the flippancy of the allusion in "Orphans of the world / Ignite! Draw / Your fuel of pain from earth's sated core" (*A Shuttle in the Crypt*, 1972), Soyinka has often been attacked as a fence-sitter by African Marxist critics, not least for his essay "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies," *Black American Literature Forum* 15.4 (Winter 1981): 133-45. See esp. the survey by F. Odun Balogun, "Wole Soyinka and the Literary Aesthetic of African Socialism," *Black American Literature Forum* 22.3 (Fall 1988): 503-30, and Florence Stratton's defensive explanation of why Soyinka rejects Marxism's deterministic view of history: "Wole Soyinka: A Writer's Social Vision," *Black American Literature Forum* 22.3 (Fall 1988): 531-53.

debate in literary criticism. But globalization and the unparalleled Anglo-Saxon domination of the world are perhaps the greatest challenges facing the Ngugian advocacy for the prolificity of writings in indigenous languages. Though Ngũgĩ suggests ‘intra-language’ and ‘inter-language’ translations to bridge the gap between dominant and weaker languages, the problems racked up against this enterprise in Kenya and much of Africa are legion. Finally, the fire that animated Ngũgĩ’s earlier campaigns in defence of indigenous languages seems to be slowly fading. And maybe this is the time for new disciples to join the Ngugian struggle.

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Scars of Language in Translation

—— The ‘Itchy’ Poetics of Jam Ismail*

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What did you say about language scars [...] i ask helene [...] well, she says dreamy into the phone, they itch.¹

COMMONLY, AN ITCHY SCAR — OR, MORE PRECISELY, A SCAB — is read as a sign that the skin has begun to heal, growing new tissue from under the crust of blood that had formed to protect the wound, and slowly peeling away at it. The itchiness denotes both the skin’s impatience to return the body to a state of integrity and the dried blood’s stubborn persistence, the remnants of its spillage testifying to the body’s past violation: a reminder of trauma as much as a protection from it. The space between the healing tissue and the crust of blood marks a border, a fragile boundary of transformation where the body’s surface silently works to re-adapt to changes imposed from outside while visibly displaying the signs of its own wounding. What does it mean, then, to think about *language* scars? Where do we map the *skin* of language(s)? And what exactly does it mean when language scars start *itching*? Can we talk about this *itch* as a process of cultural healing?

Language scars may not be as visible as skin scars, yet they do exist, if anything because the evolution and change of languages goes hand in hand with the evolution and change of civilizations, with the manifold histories of

* A portion of this essay has appeared in Spanish as “Cicatrices lingüísticas que pican: pensamientos sobre traducción como una poética de curación cultural,” *deSignis: Publicación de la Federación Latinoamericana de Semiótica* (Buenos Aires) 12 (Spring 2008): 19–28.

¹ Jam Ismail, “Diction Air,” in *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from Tessera*, ed. Barbara Godard (Toronto: Second Story, 1994): 102.

love and violence that inform their, in turn, expanding and collapsing boundaries, the movements of people within, between, or against them. The last thirty years have witnessed, in conjunction with hegemonic processes of neo-colonial capitalist globalization, the emergence of an array of political movements that seek to facilitate empowering practices of border-crossing, whether these be the geographical borders of migration and diaspora, the socio-symbolic boundaries of gender, sexuality, and ethno-racial belonging, or any combination thereof. In the writings of many contemporary theorists (Bhabha; Friedman; Glissant), translation increasingly figures as a key trope for articulating these phenomena of multiple border-crossing and the specific problems attendant on their geographical and socio-symbolic localizations. Prominent among the problems raised are questions of power, and the ethico-political need to redress the historical violations which make the transgression of imposed borders both necessary and desirable.

The general suggestion of this essay, then, is that ‘itchy’ language scars can be read as symptomatic of a process of cultural healing, particularly a healing of the wounds left on language(s) by the historical violations of heteronormative, androcentric, and colonial arrangements of culture. In particular, I suggest that *translation* constitutes for many contemporary writers the poetic tool of choice in this process – a tool capable of articulating the wound, the scar, and its itch in ways that prefigure new cultural formations. The essay will focus specifically on an example of diasporic feminist translation in Canada, which came out of a formidable historical conjunction in the 1980s, when there seemed to emerge a veritable phenomenon of feminist translation poetics in North America.

1. Feminist Translation in North America and Canada

Here are some dates: In 1987, the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa publishes *BorderLands/La Frontera*, a powerful assertion of translation as a tool for the formation of a new mestiza identity capable of dwelling on the *living* borders of multiple subject-positions. In the same year, in Quebec, Nicole Brossard publishes *Le désert mauve*, a novel where translation is an erotically charged practice inscribing female agency against the grain of patriarchal violence. In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translates three short stories by the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, and spells out the stakes of postcolonial feminist translation (into English) as a practice that pays attention to the “mingling of

historico-political specificity with the sexual differential in literary discourse.²

The list is admittedly partial; nonetheless, it offers an idea of how widespread the issue of translation had become in the second half of the 1980s, at a time when the linear and colonizing dream of global sisterhood in the feminist movement was giving way to more complex accounts of *difference* among women. This shift was also facilitated by an unprecedented focus on the role played by language in the constitution of gendered subjectivity at the beginning of the decade, when many writers started to explore strategies of linguistic subversion that would write the gendered/desiring body back into culture, undoing binary codings of femininity in Western modernity, and simultaneously producing new non-normative inscriptions of gender/sexuality in the process. At the beginning of the 1980s, *écriture féminine* – first articulated by Hélène Cixous – became the most invoked notion in North America for describing this practice. It soon became clear, however, that the subversion of *patriarchal* language could not travel between *actual languages* without exposing the geopolitical asymmetries among them, asymmetries which condition how signifiers cross over between cultures and within what kind of denotative–connotative networks they travel.

This issue became particularly visible in Canada, where the context of a bilingual state characterized by a (post)colonial³ settler society struggling to assert its own cultural autonomy from both its imperial ancestors and neighbour (France, the UK, and the USA) facilitated an intensive focus on translation among feminists. Critics have generally recognized the role of Canadian writers and scholars in developing poststructuralist theories of feminist translation in the 1980s.⁴ Their analyses, however, have privileged the cross-cultural exchange between Québécois and anglophone writers, not noticing the presence of other voices therein, which opened this exchange to more complex relations of difference, where hybrid textualities stood side by side with

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988): 177.

³ I bracket ‘post’ because the Canadian state remains colonial in relation to its First-Nation peoples.

⁴ See, for example, Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993); Sherry Simon, *Gender and Translation: Culture, Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (New York & London: Routledge, 1996); Luise von Flotow, *Translation and Gender: Translating in the Era of Feminism* (Manchester: St Jerome & Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1997).

recognizably inter-linguistic translations, and contributed to re-thinking some of our common-sense understandings of translation altogether. In the next pages I focus on one such example of hybrid textuality, titled “Diction Air,” which first appeared in 1988 in an early volume of *Tessera*⁵ – indeed, the most representative journal in Canada at the time to pointedly discuss and creatively theorize issues of a feminist poetic of translation. The text was written by Jam Ismail, a Hong Kong-born poet of South-Asian descent living in Vancouver at the time and whose numerous self-descriptions situate her on the travelling cusp of multiple languages and city-bound (rather than nation-bound) cultural identities.⁶

“Diction Air” is a text in which translation is not employed in what we understand to be its most ‘proper’ application: i.e. interlingually between two languages. Rather, we see it at work as a vital poetic tool that scrambles the lines of national linguistic enclosures and re-articulates problems of embodiment and subjectivity in a context of radical linguistic and cultural displacement. “Diction Air” inscribes translation as a compositional tool that interrogates the constitutive hybridity of English as an imperial language and successfully comes to terms with the multiple layers of wounding alienation that characterize the diasporic subject’s inhabiting of it. In this text, the wounds inflicted on the subject by the historical violence of linguistic colonization become a resource for a positive dis/placement of difference. Focusing on particular words, Ismail explores their itchy historical legacy, so to speak, play-

⁵ *Tessera*’s first four issues were published not as an independent journal, but were hosted in the pages of other literary journals. Issue number 4 was piggybacked on the pages of *Contemporary Verse* 2 (11.1–2). It was the last of *Tessera*’s issues to be piggybacked on another journal. “Diction Air” appeared in that issue, and was reprinted in 1994 in the anthology of *Tessera*’s writings edited by Barbara Godard, *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from Tessera* (Toronto: Second Story, 1994). This reprint contains an additional page omitted by mistake in the first journal publication. My quotations from the poem are all from the 1994 publication.

⁶ Her most recent bio, available online in the pages of the “The Man Hong Kong International Literary Festival 2007,” reads:

Jam Ismail was born & raised in the British crown colony of Hong Kong. Routes include Kweilin, Kunming, Bombay, Calcutta, Edmonton, Vancouver and London. She has studied & taught in Western Canadian & Hong Kong departments of English. Ms. Ismail’s works include texts from *Sexions* (1984), *Diction Air* (1989), *Scared Texts* (1991), *Jamelie-Jamila Project* (with Jamelie Hassan, 1992), *Translit* (1997), and *Perch* (2001). Ms. Ismail currently lives in Hong Kong, China.

— <http://www.festival.org.hk/2007/bio.php?author=Jam+Ismail> (accessed 29 May 2008).

fully articulating the multilingual echoes at play in their sounds, and in this way disrupting the unitary fiction of distinct language systems and making space for new meanings to emerge between the lines of historically saturated cultural palimpsests.

2. The 'Itch' of Definition: "Diction Air"

A "resistor's dictionary," as Barbara Godard aptly calls it,⁷ "Diction Air" burrows into the complex and violent transnational histories that thicken signifiers into the opaque and enigmatic consistency that dictionaries naturalize as 'national' languages. Making parodic use of the typical dictionary entry,⁸ Ismail delves into the enigmatic opacity of what she calls "word-things."⁹ Troubling expectations of explanatory transparency that guide our approach to the dictionary form, she transforms the dictionary from an instrument of linguistic "policing"¹⁰ into a subversive commentary about the political economies that govern language use/circulation.

"Diction Air" makes an explicitly *improper* use of translation, which subverts the normative effects that translation produces in dictionary entries, where it functions both intra- and inter-lingually to fix single signifiers onto a coherent and paradigmatic chain of semantic equivalences or synonyms. Precisely by taking advantage of the dictionary's contradictory "tendency to definition by polyglot synonymy" (101), "Diction Air" makes multilingual *slip-pages* seep into the set of *equivalences* and paradigmatic substitutions that in dictionaries work to naturalize a word's belonging to a national language, thus parodically inverting the territorializing function of dictionary definitions, and simultaneously exposing the colonial and heteronormative histories embedded in the cross-cultural travelling of words.

In her brief afterword to the text, Ismail lays out the political stakes of this operation, inscribing the genesis of her personal "dictionaries" in a complex

⁷ *Collaboration in the Feminine*, ed. Godard, 301.

⁸ The formal layout of the text is in fact that of a dictionary proper: i.e. an alphabetically ordered list of words in bold type, slightly indented to the left, each followed by a series of definitions printed in normal type, occasionally accompanied by an illustration.

⁹ Jam Ismail, "Diction Air," in *Collaboration in the Feminine*, ed. Godard, 101. Further page references are in the main text.

¹⁰ Larissa Lai, "Foreword," in Monika Kin Gagnon, *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture and Canadian Art* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2000): 20.

dynamic of private transnational impingements upon the public order of given linguistic/cultural boundaries:

some dictionaries are born in times of great cultural turmoil & renewal, when the house is such a mess of wires, pipes, & broken walls that all i can do is put word-things in alphabetical order. (101)

Ismail cannily manipulates the reader's chain of associative thinking by short-circuiting the loftily abstract public heights of "*times of great cultural turmoil*" into the prosaic everydayness of a domestic space turned inside out, with its inner workings *exposed* (the house has become "a mess of wires, pipes, & broken walls"). The shift from the public space of history to the private space of a dismantled house situates the writer's agency on an interesting cusp, whereby an apparent lack of power in relation to her immediate material surroundings metonymically morphs into a powerful methodic ordering of signifiers ("word-things") along a paradigmatic axis of cultural abstraction (an "alphabetical order").

The poet (re)orders the public sphere of culture in response to a lack of power within the material "mess" of her domestic space, scrambling thus the boundaries that guarantee each sphere's transparent self-identity in times of cultural "stability." Indeed, to paraphrase Jameson's use of a different and yet similarly loaded metaphor of enclosed space, we can say that Ismail's dictionary catalogues the displaced "wires" of the "prison house of national languages." The text's improper use of translation expands here also to include a thorough deconstruction of translation's traditional hegemonic function as a tool of epistemic mastery and colonial regulation of the public boundaries of the nation. Guiding this improper use of translation is a molecular politics of language,¹¹ where the poet dismantles and reassembles signifiers into aleatory sound-units which form the basis upon which Ismail constructs her displacing definitions: i.e. her subversive openings towards exposing the consti-

¹¹ I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari the notion of a molecular politics, which stands in tensive opposition to a molar politics. In Deleuze and Guattari, the molecular – like the rhizomatic and the minor – indicates an approach to signifying practices that privileges the part rather than the whole, bits and pieces of potentiality that can no longer or not yet be made to coalesce/crystallize around one stable, institutionalized and univocally coherent meaning. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* I, tr. Mark Seem, Robert Hurley & Helen R. Lane, preface by Michel Foucault (*L'Anti-Oedipe*, 1972; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983).

tutive embeddedness of word-use and circulation in transnational histories of colonial appropriation and resistance.

The text's purposefully multilingual and hybrid character inscribes translation as a *compositional tool*, a space of cultural/linguistic becoming which, in "unfolding to an outside,"¹² exposes the jagged seam of historical appropriations that arbitrarily suture words to the territorialized definitions of a national language structured by the hierarchies of capital, gender, and race. One of the three entries on "words" offers a revealing commentary in this regard:

words, incited (see also **metonymy**). Words ar like money they hav no backing other than us. 'man' still includes 'woman'. 'she' used to refer to 'he' as well, and 'girl' used to mean 'boy' too (*oxford*). dorothy richardson said it, people go on writing books using the same words with diffrint meanings, which may not be the most efficient way to run a country. As goebbels said to fritz lang, mr. lang, *we* are the ones who decide who a jew is (colette, 41). talk about sementics. no wonder words slip, slide, perish, will not stay still. struggle, the *secular haggadah* says, is better than boredom. PALESTINIANS AGREE. (101)

By comparing "words" to "money" that has "no backing other than us," Ismail effectively situates the question of language within the framework of political economy, highlighting its dynamic existence as part and parcel of social exchange flows and simultaneously drawing attention to the historically contingent nature of the deictic "us" who "back up" the truth value of any one word. The metonymic definition then zooms in on the contingencies of this "us," exposing its constitutive embeddedness in social relations of power, and gesturing with historically aware irony to the violent effects of their ideologized deployment. Ismail quickly takes note of the asymmetrical inscriptions of gender in the English language. However, the greater part of her definition situates the political economy of words within the context of differentiated and discontinuous racial interpellations, which shuttle uneasily between the annihilating horrors of Nazi antisemitism and the ongoing anticolonial struggles over naming in Palestine. In both cases, Ismail's deceptively lighthearted and paradoxical formulations around the 'slipperiness' of words show a deep concern for the effects of violent exclusion produced by the historical hegemony of racialized inscriptions of citizenship and national belonging.

¹² Barbara Godard, "Millennial Musings on Translation," in *La Traduzione*, ed. Susan Petrilli (Rome: Meltemi, 1999–2000): 55.

Another revealing example of Ismail's methodic prying open of what I would call the 'constitutive hybridity' of the imperial language is visible in her mock etymology of the word 'serendipity':

about serendipity. *oxford & britannica* hav it that sarandib, a former name of ceylon (now sri lanka), is an arabic 'corruption' of the sankrit simhaladvipa (dwelling-place-of-lions island); & that an englishman hitched -ity onto serendip to make serdipity. well that's one way to do it. english a word by romanizing an arabesque of sanskrit & grafting on a latin tail. it's a tail that wags the dog, for latin sends on its imperializing ways. [...] one could learn by it to re-suffix *paris-ian* with an *-ite*, or decline 'british' to 'brutish', me, i like e.s.l. trips, such as 'united sates.' (102)

Giving historical depth to "*oxford and britannica*"'s official definition, Ismail's parodic re-enactment of the colonial etymology of "serendipity" not only exposes the word's embeddedness in the historical dynamics of imperial geopolitics (i.e. imperial English consolidating its appropriation of the newly colonized Sanskrit by invoking continuity with imperial Latin), but also re-appropriates and re-signifies the molecular logic of its historical mutations across different languages so as to re-direct the colonial gaze back onto the colonial centre. The synecdochic signifiers of past and contemporary imperial hegemony are thus subverted via substitution (of suffix in "paris-ian > paris-ite"; of vowel in "british > brutish") or via elision (of consonant in "United States > united sates"), in ways that expose the ugly underside of their historical dominance.

Ismail, however, clearly seeks to elaborate further the questions raised by her playful etymological probing. In the following paragraph she explores the intimate connections between the word's macro and micro-historicities, tracing the vicissitudes of the *affective* cathexes triggered by the word in a postcolonial subject whose personal history bears witness to a similar trajectory of travelling displacements:

when serendipity was coined in the 1750s it meant 'the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident.' a brutish example, from the 1750s, might be the takeover of Bengal; which financed the english 'industrial revolution', and so england went on to Empaaah. no of course i hadn't it figured this way when the word first buzzed me, testily, in the 1960s in hong-kong. herstory comes & history goes and sensor's always there. it bothered me that the word was plucked from native tongues i could not speak. i dint want to ape the brits, stopped passing it, it went in bardo with other words i couldn't use until, well, untilld. not that serendipity lived up to its meaning in english

mouths, they often wore it like a meddle. i like the word, it still feels acute ...
in its lap of sound & sens. (102)

This micro-narrative of the author's own ambivalent relation to a word connotatively saturated by both its colonial history and by its appurtenance to "native tongues" she "could not speak" (but to whose cultural roots she could trace her ancestry) keenly highlights the constitutively libidinal dimension of language practice and use – its material capacity to convey and trigger specific orientations of affect, specific postures of embodied signification, depending on *who and where* one is speaking. Whereas the diasporic author finds herself at one point completely unable to make use of the word ("it went into bardo"), "english mouths" keep wearing it "as a meddle." Beyond these observations, Ismail's steady quest for finding ways to produce a fully decolonized resignification of "serendipity" draws attention to the polysemic potential of the word's affective resonances, a process in which the signifier becomes "untitled" from its heavy semantic yokings, thanks to a renewed attention to the materiality of its "lap of sound & sens":

later on i remembered [the word]. the news is that while i was typing the text, something else came along like a part of the water or wink of sun & tapped itself in, 'serene dippity'. now that's what i call evening, serendipity coming out. what did you say about language scars last year at sechelt, i ask helene ... well, she says dreamy into the phone, they itch. (102)

In order to heal the word from its violent colonial associations, Ismail resorts to a strategy familiar to poststructuralist feminist translators of the time, a strategy identified by Luise von Flotow as one of "mimetic translation,"¹³ and nicely condensed by Barbara Godard as one in which the translator pays attention to how sound can "tease out sense."¹⁴ Ismail follows precisely this strategy of "teasing out sense" from the "lap of sound" by means of a paronomasic intra-linguistic translation, which separates "serendipity" into "serene dippity" – indeed, a vivid sound rendition of the "itchiness" of the word's colonial scar.

¹³ Luise von Flotow, "Sacrificing Sense to Sound: Mimetic Translation and Feminist Writing" (2003), in *Translation and Culture*, ed. Katherine M. Faull (Cranbury NJ & Lewisburg PA: Bucknell UP, 2004): 94.

¹⁴ Barbara Godard, Susan Knutson, Kathy Mezei, Daphne Marlatt, Gail Scott & Lola Lemire Tostevin, "Vers-Ions Con-Verse: A Sequence of Translations" (1989), in *Collaboration in the Feminine*, ed. Godard, 158.

I insist on calling Ismail's strategy a 'paronomasic intra-linguistic translation' rather than a simple 'paronomasia' for two reasons. First, the allusive multilingual puns of "Diction Air" gesture to the signifier's layered histories of travel between languages. Second, the context of "Diction Air"'s first publication, *Tessera*, prompts a comparison with the feminist inter-lingual translation poetic explicitly pursued and theorized in the journal – most notably along the axis of French–English translation. *Tessera*'s founding editorial collective (Daphne Marlatt, Barbara Godard, Gail Scott, and Kathy Mezei) was at the time engaging precisely in a series of experimental collaborations with francophone writers (Nicole Brossard, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Yolande Villemarie and others) where strategies of inter-lingual paronomasia and word-play were the most frequent choices. These enabled writers to theorize translation as a creatively deconstructive practice, capable of teasing out and interrogating patriarchal epistemologies encoded in both French and English, so as to wed a trans-lingual ethic of sexual difference to a pluralizing feminist ethic of cultural difference. The inter-lingual experimentations in English–French translation of the time were governed by the idea of following through on the "illicit pleasures of language"¹⁵ in an act of response-able fidelity to another woman's words.

Compared to this affective orientation in *Tessera*'s translation practices,¹⁶ Ismail's text reveals a very different engagement with a language seen as traversed at its roots by the wounding violence of colonialism. At stake here is a literal need to scratch at the surface of "language scars" whose "itch" affects the subject's very capacity to *speak*. Ismail draws attention to the colonized subject's *inaugurally wounded* relation to English as the language of empire – a wound whose traumatic legacy affects the subject's capacity for agential dwelling in her own language and requires a complex process of re-appropriation. This is an experience of "translation-as-violation,"¹⁷ which retains a degree of structural incommensurability with the *voluntary* vulnerability to being 'bruised' by the language of the other, which was being invoked in the anglophone–francophone collaborative dialogues on translation at the time.¹⁸

¹⁵ Godard, "Vers-ions Con-Verse," 158.

¹⁶ And the theorization thereof, most notably in *Tessera*'s sixth volume, *Translation in the feminine/La Traduction au féminin* (1989).

¹⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1999): 162.

¹⁸ For example, Daphne Marlatt describes thus her experience of translating Nicole Brossard's poem *Le désert mauve*:

The figuration of translation as an erotically transgressive act in these latter dialogues and anglo-francophone experiments in collaboration was taking place in a context of complicit trans-cultural reading–writing among women, each of whom enjoyed a certain degree of entitlement to a territorialized language. Their *gendered* discovery of patriarchal wounding in their own language takes place in what is otherwise a racially unmarked (thus hegemonic) dwelling within it. Ismail’s point of departure, by contrast, is an *already minor* English, specifically a *racially* minoritized relation to the imperial language, which she cannot inhabit freely without first taking stock of her own internal displacement in it. Thus, what may superficially be described as simple word-play on English signifiers turns out to be part and parcel of a complex inter-cultural strategy of creative resignification of the imperial language’s *constitutive hybridity*. This strategy places the question of translation at the core of subjectivity, or, more precisely, at the core of an historico-cultural relation to language which marks the subject’s capacity for self-identity as a belatedly acknowledged wounding – an “‘alienation’ without alienation,” to put it in Derridean terms.¹⁹

3. Inaugural Wounds and Healing Processes

What I wanted to highlight in my ‘exemplary’ reading of Jam Ismail’s text is a poetic practice of translation that is less about ‘inter-cultural’ mediation between distinct and distinguishable subjects (of linguistic and cultural entitlement) than it is about wrestling with an internal dissonance of languages at play within the subject herself. There is little possibility of ‘mediation’ with an ‘outside’ when the diasporic subject comes to language already internally traversed by the hierarchized layers of colonial and colonized languages. Translation here inhabits the very constitution of the subject, it affects her

There is the horizon line of language which represents the edge thought comes to, and then there is the leap beyond that borderline of words, beyond the edge of the page, which I came to see as a leap beyond the separateness of two languages, two minds. Paradoxically – since it is through language that separates us that meaning flowers in the brain, seeping like a *bruise*, a transgression of limits.

— Daphne Marlatt, “Translating *Mauve*: Reading Writing,” *Tessera* 6 (Spring 1989): 29. (My emphasis.)

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, tr. Patrick Mensah (*Le monolinguisme de l’autre: ou la prothèse d’origine*, 1996; Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1998): 27.

agency within language(s) and needs to be productively put to use as a *generative* practice of interruptions, interrogations and reversals – a practice capable of enabling a different *dwelling* in language as a space of constant semiotic reshaping. In this space, the intra-subjective, intra-linguistic, and intra-cultural is *always already* inhabited by the inter-subjective, the inter-linguistic, and the inter-cultural. Ismail does not make use of translation as a trope of recovery of an original integrity (of an uncolonized language) lying under imperial domination. The scars left by empire are not removed but creatively re-contextualized. For Ismail, the inaugural wounding of English as the language of empire does not give rise to a search for “origins” which invariably “keep moving” – as she writes in her entry on “race,” tellingly defined as “leak of nations” (97). Rather, the imperial “scars” form the enabling moment for an “itchy” practice of language that explodes the gate-keeping function of the dictionary and its fiction of linguistic enclosure.

At the beginning of this essay I suggested that we read translation as a poetic tool for facilitating a process of cultural healing. The text presented offers a very interesting example of this process, which burrows into the fissures of language norms, exposing the gendered, heteronormative, and geopolitical violations that sustain them. This exposure is also an enabling moment of creative re-signification, which draws out the word/sound’s potential to signify in multiple languages at once, and allows Ismail to ‘stretch’ the skin of language in previously unthought of ways. Far from becoming an all-encompassing celebration of hybridity, however, “Diction Air”’s careful staging of this ‘stretching’ suggests that the peculiar kind of healing carried out by translation is not the easy fast-patch solution to the problems of global communication in times of neocolonial rule that some trendy usages of hybridity might suggest. On the contrary, at the centre of Ismail’s poetic practice of translation is a patient work on specific historico-political conjunctions of power – a work whose content cannot be indefinitely generalized, but whose ethic bears witness to that “responsibility to the trace of the other in the self”²⁰ without which no violation (cultural or otherwise) can ever expect to be properly healed.

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993): 179.

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English in the Languages of Cultural Encounters*

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I

I WANT TO CONSIDER THE IDEA OF THE CULTURAL ENCOUNTER between English and other languages, the languages of others, but at the same time also to think about English as a language of cultural encounter, an idea which connects to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument that translation is "the language of languages."¹ Related to this are the ways in which English literature has for some time been marked even in the categories used to define it by other cultures: world literatures in English, anglophone, postcolonial, Commonwealth literature(s). All these ways of describing literatures in English written outside Britain have particular implications, but the general assumption, as with 'English literature', is that they are written, or read, in English.

A simple example of how this cashes out in practice would be the Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS). English is the official language of the Commonwealth, which hosts, in addition to ACLALS, organizations such as the English Speaking Union, whose formation pre-dates the Commonwealth itself. Any country that wishes to be a member of the Commonwealth – even those members such as Mozambique, which have no historical links to the British Empire – is re-

* A version of this essay has already appeared as "English and the Language of Others," *European Review* 17.1 (2009): 203–12.

¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, lecture given at the ACLAS conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, 22 August 2007. See Ngũgĩ's essay above, p. 117.

quired to accept the rule that the English language is the means of Commonwealth communication. The ACLALS conferences rarely infringe this rule: in my experience, even in India, all the papers are given in English. It is noticeable, on the other hand, that the name of the organization ‘the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies’ deliberately avoids specifying English as the official language which ACLALS studies. I cannot find any information on any of the many Commonwealth websites about how many languages are spoken in its fifty-three countries by its nearly two billion citizens, about thirty percent of the world’s population. However, the website ‘ethnologue’ claims that there are 6,909 living languages in the world, so with thirty percent of the world’s population, we might guess that on a proportional basis the Commonwealth hosts around two thousand languages.²

The Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, by contrast, considers books in only one of them: i.e. books written in English, the official language of the Commonwealth. To get a prize, you have to write in English, to be a producer of ‘English’ literature in some sense. But what exactly, aspiring writers might ask, is the English of English literature? In order to answer this question, I thought I would start at an obvious place, with a few examples of mainstream canonical English literature, drawn from the writers I studied when I was ‘reading’, as they say, for my BA in ‘English Language and Literature’ at Oxford University – surely the place, if anywhere, that represents the heartland of English, of pure English English and English literature proper.

My first example is a poem I was given to read in my very first term, on arrival in Oxford.

Oft him anhaga	are gebideð
Metudes miltse	þeah þe modcearig
geond lagulade	longe sceolde
hreran mid hondum	hrimcealde sæ,
wadan wræclastas:	wyrð bið ful aræd!
Swa cwæð eardstapa...	

So here, it seems, is authentic English literature, straight from the Oxford BA course on English Language and Literature. Perhaps someone should try submitting a book for the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize written in Anglo-Saxon.

² “Statistical Summaries: Summary by area,” *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, ed. M. Paul Lewis (Dallas TX: SIL International, 16th ed. 2009), <http://www.ethnologue.com/> (accessed 29 July 2011).

³ *The Wanderer*, ed. T.P. Dunning & A.J. Bliss (London: Methuen, 1969): 105–106.

You might object, though, that the claim by Anglo-Saxonists to call their object of study ‘Old English’ forms part of a particular, now historical ideology about the origins of English in Anglo-Saxonism.⁴ So let us look at something more recent. I could cite some Chaucer, whose language resembles modern English a little more than the poet of “The Wanderer,” but I thought John Donne might be fairer as a more comparatively recent canonical figure of English literature:

Qvot dos haec Linguists perfetti Disticha feront,
Tot cuerdos Statesmen, hic livre fara tunc.
Es sat a mi l’honneur d’être hic inteso; Car I leave
L’honra de personne n’être creduto tibi.⁵

You might argue, though, that the Renaissance is in some sense different from more modern literature. So let us move right up to the nineteenth century, and take a poem from the Dorset poet William Barnes of 1863:

’Tis zome vo’ks jaÿ to teäke the road,
An’ goo abro’d, a-wand’rèn wide,
Vrom shere to shere, vrom pleäce to pleäce,
The swiftest peäce that vo’k can ride.
But I’ve a jaÿ ’ithin the door,
Wi’ friends avore the vier-zide.⁶

Or here is his contemporary, the more urban, and urbane, Dante Gabriel Rossetti:

Per carità,
Mostrami amore:
Mi punge il cuore,
Ma non si sa
Dove è amore.
Chi mi fa
La bella età,
Sè no si sa
Come amerà?

⁴ See Robert J.C. Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Blackwell Manifestos; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

⁵ John Donne, *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins (Harlow: Longman, 2008): 110.

⁶ William Barnes *Poems on Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect, Second Collection* (London: John Russell Smith, 2nd ed. 1863): 72.

Ahi me solingo!
 Il cuor mi stringo!
 Non più ramingo,
 Per carità!⁷

Perhaps, you might argue, though, that Dante Gabriel Rossetti is hardly a central canonical figure of English literature. So let us take the Poet Laureate of the Victorian era, Alfred Lord Tennyson, writing here in a poem called “The Northern Farmer: New Style” (1864):

Me an’ thy muther, Sammy, ’as beän a-talkin’ o’ thee;
 Thou’s beän talkin’ to muther, an’ she beän a tellin’ it me.
 Thou’ll not marry for munny – thou’s sweet upo’ parson’s lass –
 Noä – thou’ll marry for luvv .. an’ we boäth on us thinks tha an ass.

Seeä’d her todaäy goä by – Saäint’s-daäy – they was ringin the bells.
 She’s a beauty thou thinks – an’ soä is scoors o’ gells,
 Them as ’as munny an’ all – wot’s a beauty? – the flower as blows.
 But propotty, propotty sticks, an’ propotty, propotty graws.

Do’ant be stunt: taäke time: I knaws what maäkes tha sa mad.
 Warn’t I craäzed fur the lasses mysén when I wur a lad?
 But I knaw’d a Quaäker feller as often ’as tow’d ma this:
 ‘Doänt thou marry for munny, but goä wheer munny is!’⁸

My final example is taken from the doyen of both British and American literature, T.S. Eliot, the modernist imitated by generations of those all around the world in the twentieth century who aspired to write poetry in English. Here is part of a poem of Eliot’s, written shortly after *The Waste Land*, in 1925:

Le garçon délabré qui n’a rien à faire
 Que de se gratter les doigts et se pencher sur mon épaule:
 ‘Dans mon pays il fera temps pluvieux,
 Du vent, du grand soleil, et de la pluie;
 C’est ce qu’on appelle le jour de lessive des gueux.’⁹

⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “Barcarola,” in *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William M. Rossetti (London: Ellis & Elvey, 1890), vol. 1: 374.

⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, Green, 1969): 1189–90.

⁹ T.S. Eliot, “Dans le Restaurant,” in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963): 53.

So there we have 'English' literature. It turns out that English literature is written in many languages. One of the most interesting features of *The Waste Land* (1922) is that it is a poem written in seven languages (Latin, Greek, French, German, English – including Cockney English – Italian, Sanskrit). In that sense, *The Waste Land* demonstrates a characteristic that brings it close to the particular defining feature of what used to be called Commonwealth literature: while all the different countries of the Commonwealth have a legal link to English, English is situated at each place in polyglot environments that means that it never marks the boundary of language or of writing – just as English literature, as my examples show, has never been wholly written in standard English or even English at all.

However wide the spread of the language, to write or read in English is not the same all over the world. To speak in English in Canada, for example, rather than a few miles south in Seattle, is to speak in just one of the two official languages of the State; in other respects, however, English is also just one of the eighty-five living languages recorded as spoken in Canada today. In most other countries, English has the same status – that is, it is surrounded by other languages. Most postcolonial societies are multilingual. So, although it does not get reflected in much postcolonial criticism, one of the distinctive things that emerges in any study of postcolonial literature is the degree to which many if not most postcolonial societies, and the writers in them, operate in a multilingual environment. To write in English is not the same all over the world as it is as if you were writing in England – though, having said that, in fact if you walk through the streets of London, you will hear almost every language on earth. In most countries where writers are writing in English, English is surrounded and permeated by other languages. At every site, in every language zone, rhizomatic contact occurs, transforming the languages in the process.

How is English affected by these cultural encounters around the world? By what different situations of production and reception? Let us take India as an example. 'Indian English' is now possibly the most widely spoken form of English on earth – or so David Crystal somewhat improbably claims.¹⁰ So those who complain about the globalization of English should perhaps start with India, except that they need to remember that there the language locks

¹⁰ David Crystal, "Mother-tongue India," *Talk for Lingua Franca* (ABC, Australia, January 2005), http://www.davidcrystal.com/DC_articles/English5.pdf (accessed 17 March 2011).

inexorably into a Hindi which is itself spattered with English and ‘chalta hai’! English has shifted. Hinglish has reached. Let’s prepone this talk!

Perhaps it is not so much that English has been globalized, overpowering all other languages, as that it has a constant facility of self-hybridization, mixing with other languages in a recurring make-nice. English has long been a lingua franca, ever since it came into being, as Sir Walter Scott put it in *Ivanhoe*, as “the [...] mixed language, in which the Norman and Saxon races conversed with each other.”¹¹ English, you might say, is at least suited to be a global language, since it is already a hybrid compound of the languages of Europe: just as with Conrad’s Kurtz, all Europe went into the making of it. Now it is merging even more quickly with other languages of the world, picking up not just individual words but developing new hybridized forms – Banglish, Chinglish, Punglish, Singlish, Spanglish, Hinglish ...

That Flintoff, yaar – he’s too good, innit?

Hey Bhai, did you ask that rasmolai on a date or what?

That boy is a good for nothing badmash!

These phrases are taken from Baljinder J. Mahal’s *The Queen’s Hinglish: How to Speak Pukka*.¹² It’s a sort of modern Hobson-Jobson, the difference being that while Hobson-Jobson charted the dialect of the British in India, and the development of Babu English – ‘We are happy to inform you that your request has been rejected’ – *The Queen’s Hinglish* charts the ways in which South Asians in Britain are blending English with Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi, changing the language in a way that is already apparent in contemporary literary works such as Suhayl Saadi’s *Psychoraag* (2004), Gautam Malkani’s *Londonstani* (2006), or Daljit Nagra’s collection *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (2007).¹³ Is there something about English that facilitates this kind of absorption? Mahal writes:

English is and always has been a greedy language. Throughout the centuries it has been gathering exotic words from other tongues like a wildly successful

¹¹ Sir Walter Scott *Ivanhoe*, ed. Ian Duncan (1819; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996): 27.

¹² Baljinder J. Mahal, *The Queen’s Hinglish: How to Speak Pukka* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2006).

¹³ On Hinglish more generally, see Rita Kothari & Rupert Snell, *Chutnefying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2011).

gambler hoarding chips [...] its relentless appetite for the new, making it at once the largest and most versatile of all the world's languages.¹⁴

English, it seems, has always been voracious, and far from trying to keep itself pure, has languished in a constant state of desire for other languages. So, on the one hand, English is engaged in a constant practice of mixture, absorbing other languages and dialects, a process that provides the context for much writing in the Caribbean, as in the work of Sam Selvon, Erna Brodber or even Derek Walcott or V.S. Naipaul, who move across different registers between standard English and multilingual creoles, or, in a different way, in West Africa, in books such as Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985).¹⁵

On the other hand, this idea of languages as essentially mixed, as engines for producing mixture, constantly transgressing all forms of fixity and purity, is the very opposite of the way in which language has generally been thought of for the past two or three hundred years. A predominant idea in England, starting in the nineteenth century, was to try to remove the later encrustations of French and scholarly Latin and restore English to its purer plain Anglo-Saxon forms, a strategy endorsed by many from Hazlitt to Hopkins to Herbert Spencer, from George Eliot to George Orwell. This sort of linguistic eugenics was also the basis of the creation of modern Turkish with a romanized script in the 1920s, in which Kemal Atatürk's linguists at the same time attempted to remove all trace of Persian and Arabic words from Turkish (where this was impossible, they simply declared that the Iranians or Arabs had taken over words that were originally Turkic). A similar kind of linguistic eugenics, propelled by political and communal interests, has also driven the creation over the past two hundred years of the literary and even spoken forms of Hindi and Urdu, whereby one language was divided into two, with two scripts, Perso-Arabic or Nagari, with each trying to rid itself of words associated with the wrong influence – Persian or Sanskrit. The intense history of the language politics of South Asia means that there the choice of language can never be separated from cultural, religious, and class or caste issues. I used to think that

¹⁴ Mahal, *The Queen's Hinglish*, v.

¹⁵ See Dora Ahmad's excellent compilation *Rotten English: A Literary Anthology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), which collects different examples of literary broken English from around the world; also Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2006), and Evelyn Nien-Ming Chien, *Weird English* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2004).

language was truly a demotic force, a matter of the power of people, that those at the top could not control the shifting modalities of language that the people produced. But it is much more complicated than that, as these examples show. What we often see is a tension between those at the top, seeking to preserve and maintain a pure or purified language, and the uncontrollable demotic transgressive elements below, a power struggle between the classes – as described in the dialogism of Bakhtin or Voloshinov's struggle for the sign.¹⁶

II

I was recently asked to participate in a seminar on the newly emergent topic of the medieval postcolonial. As people spoke at the seminar, I was struck by the degree to which the medieval European world was also multilingual, often, as in England, with separate languages for the aristocracy and peasantry, and all spoken vernacular languages separate from the written (Latin). Latin operated as a universal language across the whole of medieval Europe, which means that much so-called French or English literature of that period is, in fact, written in Latin, while for two hundred years French was the official language of England. People often forget that English was not always the official language of England. French, too, is also but a bastardized creole version of Latin. Much medieval French literature was in fact written in England, even though it now is seen as an integral part of 'French' literature. Meanwhile, at that time, the dominant language of English literature in its broad sense (the modern narrow sense of literature is a nineteenth-century invention) remained Latin. Latin and French were gradually abandoned with the Reformation and the rise of mother-tongue ideology, and the attachment of the vernacular to notions of authenticity. Anyone who has carried out research at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, will recall the fact that in order to get a reader's ticket, you are required to read out the Bodleian oath.¹⁷ The original is in Latin, but each individual is asked to read it out in their own vernacular,

¹⁶ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (sel. from *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, 1975; University of Texas Press Slavic Series; Austin: U of Texas P., 1981); V.N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, tr. Ladislav Matejka & I.R. Titunik (*Marksizm i filosofija ijazyka*, 1929; New York: Seminar Press & Cambridge MA: Cambridge UP, 1973).

¹⁷ "I hereby undertake not to remove from the library, or to mark, deface or injure in any way, any volume belonging to it; not to bring into the library or kindle therein any fire or flame, and not to smoke in the library; and I promise to obey all the rules of the library."

and for this purpose the library has translated the oath into almost every language on earth. Here we might note we find two competing forms of authenticity – between speaking in the mother tongue and speaking in the original language or in a translation. Which is the most authentic? Setting aside the question of translation, in general we assume this linguistic framework as natural: i.e. that your mother tongue, the one you speak first, is the most authentic form of expression and therefore that the vernacular should be the language of the national literature. Except that national literatures tend to specify one language only, whereas no nation on earth operates with a single uniform language.

All such ideas of national or regional literatures are based on the Protestant ideology of identifying a necessary connection between the oral and the written that produces authenticity – Cordelia’s “I cannot heave my heart into my mouth.” But is there any particular reason for the whole world to conform to the dictates of seventeenth-century Christian Protestant linguistic ideology? Why should we have to write in the same language that we speak? Especially since the language that we write rarely corresponds very closely to the language that we speak, even when it is ostensibly the same language, and nowhere is this truer than in the realms of postcolonial theory. The Protestant mother-tongue ideology was an important factor in the development of ideas of nationalism.¹⁸ As historical philology in the early nineteenth century developed identifications of race, or nation, with language, so races, languages, and literatures came to be seen as discrete entities conceived according to the dominant hierarchical model of linguistic evolution – specifically, Schleicher’s *Stammbaum* theory of the family tree of languages according to which all languages had a genetic relationship on the model of biological descent.¹⁹ Some languages formed part of one family and were related, others were not. One of the interesting effects of the family-tree model of the origination of languages was that it created bonds of invisible sympathy between people who had previously never imagined that they had any particular connection – between Sanskrit and European languages, including English (memorialized in a plaque of friendship written in English and Sanskrit at the entrance to the old Indian Institute Library in Oxford), or with Celtic, which produced the invention of the ‘Celtic’ peoples, as well as divorcing peoples who had histori-

¹⁸ Christopher Hutton, *Linguistics and the Third Reich: Mother-Tongue Fascism, Race and the Science of Language* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁹ August Schleicher, *Die deutsche Sprache* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1860).

cally been connected for centuries – the most notorious example of which would be that of the Germans and the Jews, who spoke a form of German, Yiddish. Having seen some of the effects of racialized nationalism that philology had produced, linguists such as Max Müller and Ernest Renan, from 1860s onwards, strenuously denied the identification of language and race, but, as the historian Edward Freeman pointed out in his essay on “Race and Language,”²⁰ by that stage the linguists were trying to shut the stable door after the horse had bolted. The identification of language and nation or race (words that were used synonymously in the nineteenth century) had already moved into a populist conception producing pan-German, pan-Slavic, and other nationalist language movements. Because of the tree/filiation model, an idea of nations developed in which it was assumed that they should be a sealed homogeneous unit, ideally of a single race, comparable to a bounded language, with the corollary that the nation should have a single language with borders as clearly marked as those of the state on the map. Yet, even for linguists, drawing the boundaries of any individual language is always an almost impossible task. Where, how, does it stop? Saussure, interestingly, when he gets to this point of defining the limits of a language in the *Course in General Linguistics*, a concept that is absolutely necessary for his theory of language as a functioning system, simply invents a word, *ethnisme*, to define the ‘social bond’ that maintains the boundaries of a language within any speech community.²¹

But what if we used a more creolized or syncretic model of language, in which languages merge and interact such as the Hinglish of which I spoke earlier – a model of networks? How would that affect our notions of nation, or of ethnic belonging? How would that change assumptions about language in terms of writing, not having to decide on a single, pure language which excludes all others, or acknowledging that language itself often lives in its spoken form as a mixture, as outlined in Feridun Zaimoğlu’s *Kanak Sprak* (1995), or in the German-Turkish novel *Mutterzunge* [Mother Tongue] (1998), by Emine Sevgi Özdamar. One interesting feature of this kind of writing is that it is untranslatable. *Mutterzunge* has been translated, but translated into a standard English which misses the point of the book entirely. Similar

²⁰ Edward A. Freeman, *Historical Essays: Third Series* (London: Macmillan, 1879).

²¹ Robert J.C. Young, “Race and Language in the Two Saussures,” in *Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity*, ed. Peter Osborne & Stella Sandford (London & New York: Continuum, 2002): 66–68.

problems occur with any attempt to translate the work of Sujata Bhatt, who writes in a mixture of Gujarati and English, in different languages and scripts.

To write in English in Asia particularly is to submit to a multilingual world of language rivalries. So Indian literature in English is always part of something else – being written in a country with as many as eight hundred languages, two thousand dialects, twenty-three official languages and major written literatures in twelve or more of them in a tradition which goes back two thousand years. For any Indian in India, writing in English involves the exercise of a choice which includes an implicit relation to other local languages. What is English's relationship to them, beyond its historical identity as the language of the former colonizer? Do the different languages exist in isolation from each other, like a mosaic, according to different discrete traditions, as in the European model, or do they exhibit more intimate relations that affect the internal dynamics of the language and how it is expressed?

In the nineteenth century, Indian intellectuals were certainly influenced by the tree/filiation *Stammbaum* model of languages developed by European historical philologists, which produced the idea that nations and races should be sealed homogeneous units comparable to a language, with the corollary that the nation should have a single language with national borders. Although the emphasis in the post-independence era usually gets placed on communalism and religion, language politics are at least as important in the recent history of South Asia. Pakistan's decision to make Urdu the national (but not official) language of the state was the primary catalyst to the Bangla movement in East Pakistan in the 1950s and its eventual secession into Bangladesh. Sri Lanka continues to suffer from the after-effects of a civil war whose origins are generally traced back to the Sinhala Only Language Act of 1956. So here are two secessionist civil wars that were partly produced by language policies derived from ideas of nineteenth-century European philology. It was while he was in England, where he heard about the language politics of Welsh nationalism, that Gandhi decided to switch from writing in English to Gujarati. Intimately linked both to the independence movement and to the events of Partition, as Jyoti Das Gupta has shown in his magisterial account in *Language Conflict and National Development* (1970), the title of which aptly sums up the contradictions between language practices and the idea of 'the' nation, India has its own complex history of language movements, particularly with respect to the development of Hindi as a national language, which, as with Urdu in Pakistan, also produced a counter-reaction from other language groups, above all from Bengalis and those from the Indian south. The lan-

guage movements were the primary catalyst for the reorganization of the states according to languages in 1956 from the provinces of British India to their modern form and were also instrumental in preventing Hindi from becoming the single national language as Gandhi had envisaged – with the result that it shares that position today with English.

Since 1956, Indian literature or literatures has been duly required to reflect these paradigms of state/language formations – rather like the languages that are printed on the Indian banknote. It is notable that even here not all the languages of India are represented. There is no Sindhi on the banknote, the reason for which is quite complicated. When the English annexed Sindh in 1842, Sindhi was being written in three different scripts. It still does not appear on the icon of different languages on Indian banknotes, because Indian Sindhis still cannot agree on a common script. The result is that, in the literary accounts of Indian literature, such as Nalini Natarajan's *Handbook of Twentieth Century Literatures of India* (1996), Sindhi does not exist – because Sindh, of course, is in Pakistan, even though millions of Sindhi Hindus live in India.²² And those ungovernable states struggling for independence on the peripheries of India, such as Kashmir in the north-west or in the Naxalite band across the north-east, have also become invisible. Arguably, Hyderabad, an internal colony, has had its Urdu repressed in a classic colonial strategy.

A further problem with the literature/state/language ideology is that it assumes a monolingualism of both the state and the writer, and neatly divides the different languages up as if they never interact, cross or interfere with each other in everyday life. As a writer, you are supposed to choose just one, and certainly not move between languages, even if that is often the way people speak (so, too, serious writers never just lamely follow nationalist ideology, linguistic or otherwise). This ideology, matching state, language, and literature, is one reason why the writing and production of books in indigenous languages has to be supported by the state. At the same time, for many Indians educated in English-medium schools, there is no necessary correlation between the language which they speak at home and the language in which they write – a situation comparable to Latin in medieval Europe (for Bapsi Sidhwa, Gujarati/Urdu; for Amit Chaudhuri, English/Bengali²³). So, whereas

²² Rita Kothari, *The Burden of Refuge: The Sindhi Hindus of Gujarat* (Chennai: Orient Longman, 2007).

²³ *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, comp. Amit Chaudhuri (London: Picador, 2001): 39.

some early writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand were regarded as provocative pioneers, today writing in the indigenous so-called regional, or bhasha, language is customarily considered to be more authentic, with the corollary that those who write in English find themselves being accused of somehow betraying their nation and its many mother tongues (here Hindi functions as both a national and regional language) – a position most identified with Harish Trivedi, who, however, himself continues to write in English, himself subject to the modern condition that actually it is academia that expects (though does not mandate) the use of English, much more than literature itself. The paradox is that those who are most bothered about the literary status of English in India seem generally to be critics who themselves write in English.

English-language authors such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri have been criticized for displaying what Meenakshi Mukherjee has described as “an anxiety of Indianness,”²⁴ driven, she argues, by an interminable desire ‘to explain India’ to non-Indian audiences, anglicizing it and homogenizing it in the process. This *firangi-desi* argument denies the possibility that a non- or trans-national literature may be in the process of formation, or a diaspora literature creating entirely imaginary homelands – in other words, that national literatures no longer exist in the way they were conceived in the heyday of European nationalism in the nineteenth century. Today, we might say, we are in the era of literatures of no fixed abode.²⁵ In contrast to Rushdie or Roy, it is noticeable that Vikram Seth, although he lives in the USA, has been received very differently. In 1998, the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* was hailed as being more authentic than the English original, and enthusiastically welcomed as a coming home, rather as if the Greeks had come out to welcome back the Elgin Marbles (ironically, this merely repeated a much earlier welcome given to the Urdu translation of Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* of 1940, a novel lamenting the decline of Muslim Urdu culture in Delhi and, paradoxically, written in English). Yet, as Rashmi Sadana has pointed out, the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* is peculiar in one respect: it omits the whole episode where Haresh goes down to a Chamar community

²⁴ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000).

²⁵ Ottmar Ette, *Literature on the Move*, tr. Katharina Vester (*Literatur in Bewegung: Raum und Dynamik grenzüberschreitenden Schreibens in Europa und Amerika*, 2001; Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 68; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003).

of leather workers to inspect the cleaning of leather and making of shoes, a topic regarded as distasteful and polluting for an upper-caste Hindi readership.²⁶ This discrete and silent caste-based censorship in the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* on behalf of the delicate sensibility of its Brahmin readers suggests that writing in English allows Indian writers to broach topics that remain unsayable in Hindi or other bhasha languages, and puts a different perspective on the hostility often shown towards Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), a novel centred on the story of caste transgression and its violent social suppression. At this point, we may note that while the literatures of India are generally classified according to the different regional languages, there is also a separate category allocated to Dalit or untouchable literature, not defined in terms of its language but, rather, by the stigmatized social status of its writers, even though, following Ambedkar, much Dalit writing has been written in Marathi, or otherwise in Tamil. In this context, English represents a language identified with a secular Nehruvian perspective, comparatively free from caste or nationalist (though not class) signifiers. This is one reason why it has become increasingly attractive to secular-minded writers, not just those such as Seth or Amitav Ghosh, but also Dalit writers, such as Narendra Jadhav (*Untouchables*, 2005) or to others such as Joseph Macwan (*The Stepchild/Angaliyat*, 2003) who have welcomed the translation of their writing into English.

All these issues complicate the classic formulations of the problem of what language a writer in a multilingual environment should choose to write in. The author most associated with this dilemma is the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who in 1977 changed from writing in English to Gikuyu (his first novel to be written in Gikuyu was *Devil on the Cross*, 1982).²⁷ For Ngũgĩ, the practice of writing in English, the language of his former colonial master, became unthinkable, a betrayal of his own culture. Ngũgĩ's situation, however, was complicated by the fact that his 'nation' operates in a multilingual environment in which different languages are spoken by different ethnic groups. His decision to reject English, therefore, and to write in his mother-tongue Gikuyu, was in part an anticolonial strategy, but also simultaneously an assertion of a minority language against the dominant language of Kenya, KiSwa-

²⁶ Rashmi Sadana, "A Suitable Text for a Vegetarian Audience: Questions of Authenticity and the Politics of Translation," *Public Culture* 19:2 (Spring 2007): 307–28.

²⁷ See also Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

hili. Although Ngũgĩ now writes in Gikuyu, in a particular idiom that reflects the ways in which Gikuyu was spoken before his exile from Kenya, he then translates himself into English, which remains the language in which his novels are largely read. So, in the end, it seems, he has to succumb to the power of English anyway – or, more interestingly, as he might say, to the power of translation. His more recent emphasis on translation represents an important shift from a binary opposition between languages to a language politics of mediation.

If translation is the language of languages, you could also argue that English has taken over a special role as the language of translation. In many senses, English is in a perpetual process of translation. It is by a long way the most translated-into language, the largest target language on earth. This means that, as in the case of India, where English is the official language of communication between the state and those states that have other official languages than Hindi, it becomes a kind of mediating vehicle between languages. Should we allow a different role to translation in this context than was customarily the case with European literatures? Is translation an intrinsic part of literature, rather than something supplementary and extrinsic to it? Once again, it is the ideology of authenticity that puts translation beyond the pale of proper literature.

Reconciled to Deleuze and Guattari's observation that "he who has the misfortune of being born in the country of a great literature must write in its language,"²⁸ other writers have developed an alternative to Ngũgĩ's dilemma, in which they have simply written in English instead. But in this case, rather than write in regular English, they have sought to transform or translate English to some degree back into the unwritten local language. You could say perhaps that they have not so much written *in* English as written *out of* English – or perhaps, better, written *into* English. You could think of such writing in English as what Walter Benjamin, endorsing Schleiermacher via Rudolf Pannwitz, advocates – foreignizing the language rather than domesticating cultural difference.²⁹ Arguably, it was the Irish who invented this strategy,

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, tr. Dana Polan (*Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*, 1973; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986): 18.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" ("Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," 1923), in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. & intro. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (1970; London: Collins/Fontana, 1973): 80–81. Also (revised translation by Harry Zohn) in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1996): 261–62.

just as they invented most anticolonial strategies: J.M. Synge translating Aran islanders' Irish into a Hiberno-English ("Father Reilly's after reading it in gallow Latin") full of untranslatable words – 'pampootie', 'streeleen', 'banbhs', 'cnuceen', 'loy'.³⁰ This technique is different, in that it can be anti-colonial and anti-nationalist at the same time, as is the case with James Joyce, who refused the language nationalism of the Gaelic League, just as Gabriel rebuffs the language nationalism of Miss Ivors in "The Dead" when she chastises him for not writing in his 'own' language – Irish. So Joyce himself was attacked, even though in fact he did not have the luxury of choosing to write in 'his own' language, for the simple reason that he did not know his own 'mother tongue' Gaelic or Irish – the language that, as Derrida puts it in *Monolingualism of the Other*, was his 'mother tongue' that was never his, an original that he never knew. "You see, never will this language be mine. And truth to tell, it never was."³¹

He felt with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson. He thought:

—The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.³²

While Stephen Dedalus' words are sometimes cited as a nationalist argument for using a native language against that of the colonizer, what this interpretation misses is the fact that these words are written in English, not Irish. Joyce's war of manoeuvre in this situation was to corrupt a masculinist English into the femininity of Irish Gaelic – producing a new language that he liked to call 'Girlic'. Outside Ireland, this ambivalent strategy, of translating the dominant culture back into your own mother tongue as you write in its language, was followed by Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* (1935), by Raja

³⁰ John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World: A Comedy* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1907): 71, 19, 21, 32, 79.

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin*, tr. Patrick Mensah (*Le monolinguisme de l'autre: ou la prothèse d'origine*, 1996; Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1998): 2.

³² James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Egoist Press, 1917): 189.

Rao indigenizing English in *Kanthapura* (1938),³³ by G.V. Desani in *All About H. Hatterr* (1948), by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and then, perhaps most famously, by Salman Rushdie, who, in *Midnight's Children* (1981), hybridized English into 'Anglo-Indian', a hotch-potch of English, Indian-English ("‘That one,’ Mary said, ‘What does she know about politics-politics? Only to get her nails into my Joseph she will repeat any rubbish he talks, like one stupid mynah bird’"³⁴), and Hindi/Urdu words or translations – particularly of swear words ("‘sistersleeping pigskin bag’,” swears Tai the boatman at Dr Aziz in a somewhat euphemistic translation of the Hindi ‘behn-chod’.³⁵). All of these writers have subjected proper English to the improprieties of polyphonic processes of code-mixing from which broken English will never recover. But then, to hybridize English is, in a way, as I have suggested, simply to take coals to Newcastle, English to the Angrezi, a process of code-mixing which in some ways is a kind of translation, but a translation that goes on *within* a language as well as *between* languages – what Roman Jakobson calls not ‘inter-lingual’ but ‘intra-lingual translation’.³⁶ Global writing in English is not a fixed form but one engaged in a constant process of intra-lingual translation, merging with the languages of the world but always responding specifically to the particular demands of different localities, becoming and being transformed into what Sheldon Pollock has termed a kind of “cosmopolitan vernacular.”³⁷ English, indeed, has reached.

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³³ See Rumina Sethi, “The Nativisation of English,” in Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999): 39–58.

³⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981; London: Vintage, 2006): 140.

³⁵ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 19.

³⁶ Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1959): 232–39.

³⁷ Sheldon Pollock, “The Cosmopolitan Vernacular,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57.1 (February 1998): 6–37. Pollock argues that the circulation of texts on Sanskrit poetics was a factor in the creation of a Sanskrit cosmopolis (200–1300) and at the same time provided a framework within which local poetics could be conceptualized (1000 onwards).

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LITERATURES OF DIASPORA AND MIGRANCY

The Missing Link

—— Transculturation, Hybridity,
and/or Transculturality?

SISSY HELFF

TAKING MY CUE FROM THE POETIC WORK OF THE INDO-TRINIDADIAN, Irish-born, Canada-resident, writer-cum-visual artist Shani Mootoo, I seek to read Mootoo's poetic migratory images alongside recent critical theories introduced in migration studies. Mootoo's poetic images address mass migration movements with their formations of hybrid and transcultural identities. I will argue that Mootoo's poetic voice consciously dishevels any form of essentialist ideas of culture and identity by calling for a universal acceptance of living in a state of difference and diversity.¹ As my argument unfolds, I aim to show that this claim for heterogeneity and diversity is not at all new – on the contrary, it continues a discussion which became known as the 'cultural turn' in cultural studies in the early 1980s and has ever since characterized a turning-point in cultural theory.² A positive feature of this

¹ The British sociologist Nikos Papastergiadis sees poststructuralist theory as a main source of an increased acceptance of difference; thus, he argues: "One of the 'achievements' of poststructuralist theory was to liberate the subject from notions of fixity and purity in origin. And in a social context where the political structures for mobilizing and integrating emancipatory projects were also fragmenting, it was almost a form of succour to remind ourselves of our 'multiple subjectivities'"; Papastergiadis, "Tracing Hybridity in Theory," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner & Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997): 257.

² See, for example, Eberhard Berg and Martin Fuchs's chapter "Phänomenologie der Differenz: Reflexionsstufen ethnographischer Repräsentation," in *Kultur, soziale Praxis, Text: Die Krise der ethnographischen Repräsentation*, ed. Eberhard Berg and Martin Fuchs (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999): 11–108.

claim for difference, diversity, and heterogeneity is that it points to the constructed nature of identity and subjectivity while acknowledging that within self-formation 'difference' does not inevitably betoken failure.

Against this backdrop, concepts such as creolization, *métissage*, *mestizaje*, transculturation, hybridity, and transculturality were eventually introduced, and critics have already started carving out various meanings for these concepts. Because each concept is introduced in a particular time-frame and against a single historical moment, it becomes apparent that the critic's private world and his or her political beliefs add integrally to and sometimes even play into the process of conceptualization involved. Thus, each concept and theory, in a way, reflects layers of a critic's life-world (*Lebenswelt*) on a meta-theoretical level. Following this train of thought, we can break with naive assumptions that concepts like transculturality or hybridity are themselves stable concepts: rather, they suggest diverse meanings. While transculturality as a theoretical vantage-point is still in its infancy, cultural encounters are often described and explained in the light of hybridity. So, if we start acknowledging the fuzzy edges of hybridity, we have to come to terms with the fact that Stuart Hall's reading of hybridity differs immensely from Gayatri Spivak's or Homi Bhabha's.³ Thus, the need to contextualize a term, systematically, within its terminological and socio-political history becomes more than pressing.⁴ In the first part, I seek to sketch my picture of global migration and transculturality in the light of Mootoo's poetry before I discuss transculturality with its intersections to Ortiz's concept of transculturation and Bhabha's notion of hybridity in the second part. Finally, I intend to elucidate perspectives and predicaments transcultural theory faces when it engages with cultures in process.

³ For an excellent critical overview and analysis of the usage of hybridity in Hall, Spivak, and Bhabha's work, see Papastergiadis, "Tracing Hybridity in Theory," 257–81.

⁴ In his article "The Politics of Postcolonial Critique," Robert Young highlights this need in the context of postcolonial criticism and its political discourse:

Theories also have a history, and must be historically situated if their politics are to be understood. Without such directedness, postcolonial theory can easily find itself making anti-imperialist arguments that have already become part of the new dominant ideology of transnational capitalism. Theory cannot operate politically if it is conceived as operating only at a disembodied synchronic level, as if it exists in an atemporal space, without consideration of its impact in relation to specific conditions.

— *Anglistentag Mainz 1999*, ed. Bernhard Reitz & Sigrid Rieuwerts (Trier: WVT, 2000): 137.

I. Witnessing Cultures in Process

Mantra for Migrants

Always becoming, will never be
 Always arriving, must never land

 Between back home unfathomable, is me –
 By definition: immigrant

 I'll always be oh glorious
 Glorious unchangeable

 In truth, I am in flux
 Immigrant I will forever be

 Migrant oh yes, oh migrant me
 Migrant immutable amazing unchangeable

 Always becoming, will never be
 Always arriving, must never land

 I pledge citizenship, unerring
 Loyalty, to this State of Migrancy⁵

Mootoo, who came to Canada as a young woman and now has Canadian citizenship, is particularly interested in modern transcultural predicaments. In her recent volume of poetry *The Predicament of Or*, Mootoo negotiates modern identity in the context of transcultural realities and the condition of migrancy. The examination of migrancy in Mootoo's poetry takes place on different levels. Sometimes the poems deal with migration while directly referring to Mootoo's own biographical experiences, as may be seen in her poems "All the Irish I Know" and "All the Hindi I know."⁶ At other times, the poetic voice takes a cultural-activist stance and casts a critical eye on the political and social concerns of migrants, as in "Mantra for Migrants" above. Through this orchestration of poetic speakers, Mootoo's verse provides a poetic panorama of voices that constantly debate transcultural realities and modern globalized life-worlds.

In "Mantra for Migrants," the persona suggests that the modern home-worlds and transcultural practices of many people in our globalized world are increasingly marked by experiences of migration. As the title already sug-

⁵ Mootoo, *The Predicament of Or* (Vancouver: Polestar, 2001): 81.

⁶ Mootoo, *The Predicament of Or*, 95, 96.

gests, the poem affirms that migrants have become an integral part of modern societies and are worthy of a poem written in their honour.

Although the poem invokes the social and political acceptance of migrants, it intones its claims in an almost ironical, celebratory melody. This tone discharges its political message only in the poem's closing couplet. Accordingly, in this last couplet the speaker pledges a poetic vow for citizenship, a citizenship for people who are in "this state of migrancy." This poetic claim underlines a positive understanding of permanent movement. But what is most pertinent here is the fact that the poetic voice does not see migrancy as a singular phenomenon but, rather, introduces it as a commonplace social reality.

Interestingly enough, "Mantra for Migrants" invites political and social acceptance of migrants as active members of a world society. Mootoo's poetic orchestration of migratory processes urges a rethinking of identity against the backdrop of globalized modernity and thus formulates and echoes recent debates, such as those taking place in migration studies.⁷ "Mantra for Migrants" is a pledge for the political integration of migrants as members of a global community; people in constant movement have become characteristic of modern social life. This restlessness must be distinguished from earlier migratory movements. In migration studies, these developments have lately been conceptualized as transmigration.

This altered view on migration suggests a general shift in the perception of "homes" and "hosts."⁸ While a more conventional understanding of migration views the movement of workers from poor home countries (peripheries) to wealthier host countries (centres) as the dominant and sole global reality, current studies of migration question these assumptions.⁹ In contrast to tradi-

⁷ See, for instance, Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch & Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration* (New York: New York Academy Science Press, 1992). In this study, Schiller et al. introduce the term 'transmigrant' in order to highlight a new quality in migration practices and experiences against the background of globalized modernity.

⁸ Umut Erel, Mirjana Morokvasic-Müller and Kyoko Shinozaki state that, while times are long gone when migration had been a "malestream" and common knowledge perceived migrations worldwide as "increasingly feminised," there is still "a sine qua non assertion in scholarly work and in international reports on migration" neglecting women's experiences of migrancy; *Crossing Borders and Shifting Boundaries*, vol. 1: *Gender on the Move*, ed. Erel, Morokvasic-Müller & Shinozaki (Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 2003): 9.

⁹ For detailed discussion of modern migration movements, see: Thomas Faist, *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000); Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, *Towards a Transnational Perspective*

tional perceptions, recent migration studies show that the structures of migration and the perspectives on residence have changed. The home-worlds of migrants are increasingly characterized by a new transnational mobility, a two-way flow of images, information, and influences. Transnational migration generates modern transcultural practices and new transnational social spaces which again strongly impinge on the transcultural imaginary. The latter thus focuses not so much on bipolar essentialisms as on heterogeneous home-worlds with multiple subject-positions.¹⁰ This idea is made explicit in Mootoo's poem "Point of Convergence," where the poetic voice, fashioning a migrant's identity, compares it to the following:

[...] a seamless concoction,
like mulligatawny: cooks long and slow,
neither jheera, cardamom, hurdi
nor clove
stand alone [...]
where neither Nepalese great-grandmother
nor mother, lover, government
define I
nor am
I
mindless of these¹¹

In broad terms, migrants are both products of and agents in a globalizing world. Their life-worlds combine individual experiences and practices with

on Migration; Glick Schiller & Fouron, *Georges Woke Up Laughing* (Durham NC & London: Duke UP, 2001); Mirjana Morocvasic, "Pendeln Statt Auswandern: Das Beispiel der Polen," in *Wanderungsraum Europa: Menschen und Grenzen in Bewegung*, ed. Mirjana Morocvasic & Hedwig Rudolph (Berlin: Sigma, 1994): 166–87; and Steven Vertovec, *Transnational Networks and Skilled Labour Migration* (WPTC-02-02–ESRC Research Programme on Transnational Communities; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

¹⁰ Barbara Korte and Klaus Müller come to a similar conclusion when they write about Englishness and British national identity: "Today it is widely accepted that Britain is in the process of re-defining itself along flexible terms that derive from modern and contemporary identity concepts, concepts of a pluralised self, and this is increasingly expressed in contemporary writing." See "Unity in Diversity Revisited: Complex Paradoxes Beyond Post-Modernism," in *Unity in Diversity Revisited? British Literature and Culture in the 1990s*, ed. Korte & Müller (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1998): 16.

¹¹ Mootoo, *The Predicament of Or*, 102.

perspectives and behavioural patterns of transnational communities.¹² In their world of high modernity, as Roland Robertson remarks, the correlation between national and ethnic identities is increasingly characterized by “distinctive different entities, while at the same time, international frontiers become increasingly insignificant as such.”¹³

As already indicated in the poems by Mootoo discussed here, migrants feel simultaneously rooted yet also rootless when adopting existing cultural codes, adding particular nuances and re-inventing different aesthetics, rhythms, and life-styles.¹⁴ Anthony Giddens describes this cultural mobility as a “‘decentred’ reflexive process characterized by links and cultural flows which work in a multidirectional way.”¹⁵ What is at issue here is the need to understand both what individuals and groups do with culture and how ‘new’ cultural practices restructure their modern home-worlds.¹⁶ In this respect, it is an important task of literary and cultural studies to contribute to an understanding of these transcultural practices and modern home-worlds that increasingly mark contemporary postcolonial literatures in English. Experiences of migrancy constitute a prominent trope in these literatures and involve constant negotiation between different subject-positions, which often generates a mental opening for an imagined space of multiple identifications. These identifications, as presented in Mootoo’s poetry, describe both mental fragmentation and supplementation while not implying discrete, subversive manoeuvres. As I have suggested in previous work, such representations of cultural encounters might be seen as a fresh transcultural quality which sometimes characterizes not only the content but also the very fabric of a text.¹⁷ Interestingly enough, such representations of cultural encounters have been

¹² See Faist, *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*, and *Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*, ed. Ludger Pries (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

¹³ Roland Robertson, “Mapping the Global Condition: Globalization as the Central Concept,” in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization, and Modernity*, ed. Mike Featherstone (Thousand Oaks CA & London: Sage, 1990): 22.

¹⁴ Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1995): 23.

¹⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Oxford: Polity, 1991): 59–60.

¹⁶ See Frank Schulze-Engler, “Literature in the Global Ecumene of Modernity: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason* and *In an Antique Land*,” in *English Literatures in International Contexts*, ed. Heinz Antor & Karl Stierstorfer (Heidelberg: Winter, 2000): 373–96.

¹⁷ Sissy Helff, “Shifting Perspectives: The Transcultural Novel,” in *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities*, ed. Frank Schulze-Engler & Sissy Helff (Cross/Cultures 102, ASNEL Papers 12; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009): 75–89.

often inappropriately read in the light of hybridity while the transcultural dynamic depicted in the text has been neglected.

II. A Brief Survey of Cultures in Process in Critical Theory

The last twenty-five years have witnessed an exponential growth in critical approaches analysing cultural encounters. While transculturation, as one of the most influential concepts describing culture-contact and cross-cultural practices, was introduced by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz already in the 1940s, it is even more surprising, then, that German scholars have only very recently rediscovered Ortiz's concept for their critical project of grasping cultural encounters in general and cultures in process in particular.¹⁸ Specialists in Latin American studies, for example, have convincingly pointed out the continuing relevance of Ortiz's work to the analysis of Latin American modernities. Taking my cue from Friedhelm Schmidt-Welle's work,¹⁹ the following is concerned with the applicability of the concept of transculturation to diasporic situations and globalized modernities. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how Ortiz originally introduced the concept by focusing on moments of cultural encounter:

I am going to take the liberty of employing for the first time the term *transculturation*, fully aware of the fact that it is a neologism. And I venture to

¹⁸ See, for example, the section "Transkulturalität" in *Differenzen anderes denken: Bausteine zu einer Kulturtheorie der Transdifferenz*, ed. Lars Allolio-Näcke, Britta Kalscheuer & Arne Manzeschke (Frankfurt am Main & New York: Campus, 2005): 289–354. Apart from its introduction, the chapter comprises three texts; the first is an abridged version of Fernando Ortiz's classic *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar* in German translation, the second introduces the concept of transculturality by the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch, and the third, by Matthias Hildebrandt, seeks to draw a connection between studies of transculturality and transdifference. A fine example of how Ortiz's concept is used in Latin American studies is depicted in Friedhelm Schmidt-Welle's essay "Transkulturalität, Heterogenität und Postkolonialismus aus der Perspektive der Lateinamerikastudien," in *Inter- und Transkulturelle Studien: Theoretische Grundlagen und interdisziplinäre Praxis*, ed. Heinz Antor (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006): 81–94. While most recent literary criticism dealing with transculturality refers to Wolfgang Welsch's concept, Mark Stein's recent article "The Location of Transculture," in *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities*, ed. Frank Schulze-Engler & Sissy Helff (Cross/Cultures 102, ASNEL Papers 12; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009): 251–66, takes its cue from Ortiz's work.

¹⁹ Schmidt-Welle, "Interkulturalität und Transkulturelle Studien," 81–94.

suggest that it might be adopted in sociological terminology, to a great extent at least, as a substitute for the term *acculturation*, whose use is now spreading.

Acculturation is used to describe the process of transition from one culture to another, and its manifold social repercussions. But *transculturation* is a more fitting term.

I have chosen the word *transculturation* to express the highly varied phenomena [...] of extremely complex transmutations of culture [...].
[...]

I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation.²⁰

While Ortiz's concept of transculturation does not refer to any form of acculturation, it simultaneously considers the impact of power imbalances on processes of cultural transformation. A problematical edge to Ortiz's concept, however, is that he suggests a homogeneous Latin American cultural landscape that evolves from three cultural bases: a harmonious mestizian culture; an enforced tension between rural and urban spaces; and, finally, the growing pressures of modernization. Such conceptualization of a Latin American modernity is troublesome, since it considers neither reciprocal dynamics nor the existence of an indigenous modernity that is able to stimulate and influence processes of development.

The idea of an indigenous modernity is to some extent also integral to Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity when he points to the heterogeneous dimensions of postcolonial societies and subjects and thus grants the 'subaltern' scope to claim their own voices as well as an individual agency:

The process of reinscription and negotiation – the intersection or intervention of something that takes on new meaning – happens in the temporal break in-between the sign, deprived of subjectivity, in the realm of the intersubjective. Through this time-lag – the temporal break in representation – emerges the process of agency both as a historical development and as the narrative agency of historical discourse [...]. It is the contingent tension that results, that sign

²⁰ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, tr. Harriet de Onís, intro. Fernando Coronil & Bronislaw Malinowski, prologue by Herminio Portell Vilá (*Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar*, 1940; tr. 1947; Durham NC: Duke UP, 1995): 97–98, 102.

and symbol overlap and are indeterminately articulated through the 'temporal break'. Where the sign deprived of the subject – intersubjectivity – returns as subjectivity directed towards the rediscovery of truth, then a (re)ordering of symbols becomes possible in the sphere of the social. When the sign ceases the synchronous flow of the symbol, it also seizes the power to elaborate – through the time-lag – new and hybrid agencies and articulations.²¹

Bhabha's hybridity can neither be read as a listing of difference, nor is it to be found in the sum of its parts. Hybridity emerges "from its process of opening [...] a third space within which other elements encounter and transform each other."²² Bhabha's concept, however, essentially suggests that all negotiations are carried out between colonial/imperial and postcolonial parties and thus remain fixed in this very nexus. Such an understanding of cultural contacts and encounters, however, seems too static for describing modern lives in an increasingly globalized world. As highlighted earlier in this essay, recent migration studies (as well as studies in social anthropology) seek to dismantle the clear-cut distinction between the colonial/imperial and the postcolonial by introducing concepts such as transmigration and transculturality. These concepts seem particularly relevant for describing post-diasporic societies and identities and thus could present conceptual exit routes out of the theoretical limitations mentioned.

III. Transculturality: The Missing Link?

The historical shift in the way the world is identified is noteworthy. The former logics of class and gender were, at least, clearly modernist and universal. It was a question of the unity of similarities, workers of the world, women and youth. These are transversal identities, transnational and therefore essentially non-cultural in the sense of geographical or even diasporic specificity. The attempt to combine these identities within the category of ethnicity produces the kind of havoc associated actively with the notion of hybridity. Now, without going into the fact that hybrids are, in biological terms, often sterile – clearly an oversight by the self-identified – a hybrid has an internal structure of its own, which is just as unitary as that of any 'purer' organism (whatever that might mean). The ambivalence is so obvious here as to be unavoidable: unity versus confusion; organization versus juxtaposition. These are the real terms of

²¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 191.

²² Nikos Papastergiadis, "Tracing Hybridity in Theory," 258.

this discussion. There is no solution in so far as all successful identification implies homogenization.²³

In this passage, Jonathan Friedman points to the problematical edges of hybridity, which to some degree are overcome by transcultural criticism. While numerous postcolonial readings almost obsessively try to grasp notions of difference, diversity, and the subversive, many theories of hybridity, and I guess Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is a primer in this respect,²⁴ have become frozen in unbridgeable cultural difference in order to establish the concept as an antidote to essentialist subject-positions. Ironically, this association bears in itself an essentialist stance that neglects cultural encounters and experiences which do not address diversity in a subversive way. Clearly, it would be folly to deny that culture as an analytic concept always resembles a matrix of various cultural codes, modes, and histories. This argument points to the conceptual strength of transcultural criticism, especially when it highlights cultural amalgamation processes as its very foundation. These processes of amalgamation are 'limitless' in a geographical, historical, but also socio-political sense. These processes, to repeat, are neither particularly amenable to difference nor to homogeneity. In this respect, they do not necessarily entail subversive manoeuvres. They simply exist – and this is enough for their procedures. Such a conceptualization challenges postcolonial theory at its base and poses questions addressing hybridity as well as post-colonialism's relevance in a globalized modern world. We do not need to, and will probably not be able to, answer the question now. But if we agree on the fact that these concepts are based on diverse frameworks, we cannot avoid the question of how transculturality and hybridity can interact. Is there a chance that transcultural and postcolonial criticism can bridge their mutually exclusive methodologies?

Seeking answers to these and other questions, a number of postcolonial critics have started to connect postcolonial approaches with transcultural readings while warning of the consequences if the postcolonial should be fully

²³ Jonathan Friedman, "Global Crises, the Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans Versus Locals, Ethnic and Nationals in an Era of De-Hegemonisation," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner & Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997): 87.

²⁴ Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993): 66–111.

absorbed by the transcultural.²⁵ Following this pattern of thought, postcolonial critics are increasingly wondering whether one can identify something like a distinct postcolonial quality that characterizes not only the very field of interest, postcolonial and transcultural literatures, but furthermore highlights the continuing validity of the discipline. Accordingly, the British postcolonial scholar John McLeod asks “whether the protocols of postcolonial theory are always suitably sensitive in bearing witness to the aesthetics and politics of the literatures which are termed ‘postcolonial,’ especially writing which has emerged in the 1990s.”²⁶

Based on a different conceptual premise,²⁷ but nevertheless prompted by similar questions, the German critic Frank Schulze-Engler supports a change in perspective, since “transnational and transcultural connections have long since become the lived reality [...] shaping modern literature in ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ settings alike.”²⁸ To him, postcolonial methodology seems

²⁵ See, for example, Graham Huggan’s article “Derailing the ‘trans’?: Postcolonial Studies and the Negative Effects of Speed,” in *Inter- und Transkulturelle Studien: Theoretische Grundlagen und Interdisziplinäre Praxis*, ed. Heinz Antor (Heidelberg: Winter 2006): 55–61.

²⁶ John McLeod, “‘Wheel and Come Again’: Transnational Aesthetics Beyond the Postcolonial,” *HJEAS: Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 7.2 (2001): 85.

²⁷ Reading literature as cultural products of modernity, Frank Schulze-Engler demonstrates how Max Weber’s genealogy is echoed in critical theory by warning of the dangers of a non self-reflexive postcolonial approach to culture in general and literature in particular:

There is ample evidence, however, that this ingrained topography of the ‘modern’ and the ‘non-modern’ that shaped the era of ‘old’ or ‘first’ modernity is beginning to dissolve in the transition to a globalized ‘new’ or ‘second’ modernity. As far as a theoretical grasp on this topography is concerned, postcolonialism is fully involved in this transition. On the one hand, it has significantly contributed to undermining categories of racial, cultural and political ‘otherness’ that helped to distinguish old modernity in ‘the West’ from ‘the Rest’; postcolonialism has thus become a prime agent of the globalization of modernity. On the other hand, the different theoretical strands that in their conflicting interaction constitute what is now known as ‘postcolonialism’ still cling to various residual notions of ‘the other’ of modernity, thus perpetuating a socio-cultural ‘alterity industry’ and risking to lose their grasp on the social, political and cultural realities of globalized modernity.

—Frank Schulze-Engler, *Shared World: Experiences of Globalized Modernity in African, Caribbean and Asian Literatures in English* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, forthcoming): 35. The study concludes that a new self-reflexive critical approach to New Literatures in English is imperative in order to examine the “lifeworlds and experiences, [...] which] form part of the shared worlds of modernity that we have come to inhabit” (*Shared World*, 311).

²⁸ Frank Schulze-Engler, “Literature in the Global Ecumene of Modernity,” 375–76.

problematical, since it irrefutably echoes an ‘alterity industry’ which simply cannot do justice to the transcultural dimensions of culture.²⁹ While I mostly agree with this argument, I also have some reservations concerning the political scope of transcultural criticism. Understanding transculturality as an amalgamation of cultures, which surely reflects not only one quality but, rather, different qualities of transculturality, there seems, despite everything, little space for describing experiences which express the liminality of groups that represent the margins of society such as refugees and illegal migrants. Interestingly enough, these groups either live in no-man’s land (such as the highly ‘protected’ detention-camps at international airports) or they do not even appear on any immigration record. Their existence in non-places thus becomes a challenging space for all criticism.

While transcultural theory, as introduced by German-based English cultural and literary studies, would seem to be particularly suited to the analysis of radicalized diasporic situations, liminal groups including gypsy clans and asylum seekers who actually never officially arrive and settle anywhere do not feature in transcultural criticism. These groups to some degree lead more ‘solitary lives’ which are not significantly influenced by interactions with other groups or their host societies. While I do believe in the overall conceptual validity of transculturality, there is no denying that a major shortcoming can be seen in the development of a ‘regionalism’ which does not include the experiences of living in non-places and, furthermore, focuses almost exclusively on ‘former Commonwealth societies and their literatures’. In this respect, concepts of transculturality reduce the multi-regional and multicultural reality of modern societies.

I must admit that I am particularly reluctant to jettison all too easily the great anti-imperialist potential of postcolonial criticism. Yet, as already argued above, a methodologically neat and easy connection between the two theories is nowhere in reach; what we are left with, then, I would argue, are possibilities of differentiated strategic alliances where both concepts’ “productive though not always amicable relationship form the basis of any serious consideration of local modernities [...] and of global modernity at large.”³⁰

²⁹ For a critique of the shortcomings of the transcultural paradigm, see Graham Huggan’s article “Derailing the ‘trans’?” and John McLeod’s “‘Wheel and Come Again’.”

³⁰ Graham Huggan, “Imagining Disaster in the African Postcolony,” in *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe*, ed. Elisabeth Bekers, Sissy Helff & Daniela Merolla (Matatu 36; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009): 315–30.

Following this train of thought, if we attempt to understand cultural encounters in the light of globalized modernity, we might at times find ourselves confronted with a close relationship between experiences and localities, in short, individual life-worlds – life-worlds that often metaphorically echo colonial and postcolonial realities in one way or the other. Viewed from this perspective, one can envisage locality itself as subjectivity – subjective, in the sense that localities are transformed not only by existing socio-political powers but also by a ‘spirit’ (*Zeitgeist*). Depending on the time and the age and the particular spirit, the meaning of localities changes and so do their readings. While it would be inappropriate to read modern life-worlds only through a postcolonial lens, it is similarly unsuitable to read colonial experiences only in the light of transcultural encounters. Indeed, the latter might be an interesting avenue of approach, but only when transcultural encounters become critically contextualized in history. In this respect, the present non-distinct conceptual and ideological apparatus that governs transculturality invites propagating a utopian and therefore all too simplistic idea of transculturality. For me, such a reductive approach informs a cultural theory that is based on the dismissal of questions of power and hierarchy, and, indeed, such a dismissal has already become a tender spot in transcultural theorizing, as some more recent studies painfully demonstrate. We should not forget, and I think it goes without saying, that cultural encounters do not necessarily always take place at eye-level.

While at the moment this conglomerate of ideas and its impetus cannot be fully determined, in English literary and cultural studies neither postcolonial criticism nor transcultural theory can do without the other. At the moment, transcultural discourse is still very much concerned with its own conceptual location. Yet critics should start turning their attention towards critical perspectives which read the concept in conjunction with an intensified political discourse – a discourse which was and remains of major importance for cultural and literary studies dealing mainly with ‘Third-World literatures’. The general argument that emerges from this essay, then, is that if transcultural criticism wants to establish a more broadly based and fruitful critical practice, theories need to consider both the macrological and the micrological level, because it is here that transcultural criticism engages in one or other way with ideology.

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Drickie Potter and the Annihilating Sea

—— Reading Jamaica Kincaid's
Waves of Nothingness

JOHN CLEMENT BALL

THE REPETITIVE, WAVE-LIKE CADENCES OF JAMAICA KINCAID'S PROSE in her novel *Mr. Potter* (2002) mimic the incessant rhythms of the surf that endlessly pounds against Caribbean shores. The ocean, the sea, and the liminal space of the shoreline are overdetermined locations in Caribbean history, geography, and literature. As the blank, silent surface under which a dark history is buried, the sea may signify the salt sweat of slavery and indenture and the circumscribed possibilities of what V.S. Naipaul has called the region's "shipwrecked" and stranded historical and geopolitical condition.¹ More positively, ocean space may represent the restless and fluid mutability of migrant and diasporic identities: the multiple affiliations and intricate, far-flung interrelations of what Paul Gilroy calls "the Black Atlantic." The watery spaces of ocean and sea feature prominently throughout Kincaid's work; indeed, she often positions her home island of Antigua as a crossroads between two vast and contiguous bodies of salt water. As Mr. Potter drives his car, for instance, "he could see the great sea of the Caribbean on one side of the road and the great ocean that was the Atlantic on the other."² Kincaid locates the island similarly in her polemical non-fiction diatribe on Antigua, *A Small Place*, where the island is "surrounded by a sea

¹ See, for example, *The Mimic Men* (1967; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969): 118. Cf. Walcott's response in "The Muse of History: An Essay," in *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean*, ed. Orde Coombs (Garden City NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1974): 7.

² *Mr. Potter* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2002): 27. Further page references are in the main text.

and an ocean – the Caribbean Sea on one side, the Atlantic Ocean on the other,”³ and also in her early story “Antigua Crossings,” where an evaluative line demarcates the Atlantic from the Caribbean: the Atlantic, she says, “does not matter much to us,” because “it shares itself with too many other people who are too different from us,” whereas the Caribbean “is ours and we share it with people who live on islands like us.” She takes this distinction between ocean and sea further in that passage, describing how “All these islands surround the Caribbean Sea like a ring around the rosy pocket full of posey games, preventing it from spilling out into the larger world of seawater.”⁴

This whimsical image of a pan-Caribbean embrace of the sea that joins “us” together and that “we share,” protecting the sea from the ocean that “shares itself” with European, American, and African “other[s],” is compelling in its own right; but even more interesting is the way, years later, Kincaid seems unwittingly to misread that passage – indeed, to completely reverse its meaning – when Selwyn Cudjoe quotes it to her during an interview and asks for comment. Kincaid expresses amazement at this early work and deems it “very beautiful and very true – the idea that the Caribbean Sea embraces the West Indies in this way.”⁵ Are the islands joining hands ring-around-the-rosy-style to embrace the sea, as the original story suggests, or is the Caribbean Sea embracing the islands, as she re-interprets it in the interview? In the latter case, what has become of the Atlantic: if it is on one side of the island, then is it not part of that embrace, despite its more alien associations?

I want to use Kincaid’s apparently unintended inversion of her own geographical metaphor – this role-reversal that transfers the power of embracing containment from land over sea to sea over land – as a figure for a shift in Caribbean and Black Atlantic studies over the past two decades from what might be called a terrestrial and national emphasis to an oceanic and transnational orientation. Alison Donnell articulates and forcefully critiques this shift in her important book *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* (2006). In the course of what one reviewer calls her “comprehensive mapping and rigorous interrogation of Caribbean literature and its critical tradition,”⁶ Don-

³ *A Small Place* (New York: Penguin/Plume, 1988): 4.

⁴ Quoted in Selwyn R. Cudjoe, “Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview,” in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. Cudjoe (Wellesley MA: Calaloux, 1990): 224.

⁵ Cudjoe, “Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview,” 224.

⁶ Lara Cahill, review of *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, by Alison Donnell, *Arthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*

nell shows how Paul Gilroy's influential book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) inaugurated a new phase in Caribbean criticism in which hybrid, migrant, and deterritorialized identities and texts have been favoured, whereas authors and "texts focused on the located and the local" have been marginalized.⁷ Donnell aims to redress what she sees as a critical imbalance that has come to distort Caribbean literature and literary history by unduly emphasizing "dislocation over location, rupture over continuity, and elsewhere-ness over here-ness,"⁸ to which list one could add the global over the local, transnational mobility over national dwelling, and routes over roots. The springboard from which I plan to dive into the bracing depths of that debate – or at least its more scenic shallows – is Kincaid's *Mr. Potter*, an autobiographical novel in which the pairing of island with sea may be fruitfully compared to its central pairing of protagonist father (Roderick or Drickie Potter) and narrating daughter (Elaine Potter Richardson, aka Jamaica Kincaid). Both pairings are intimately relational while remaining strongly oppositional; their oscillations between connection and separation, proximity and distance, embrace and retreat generate a geographical, interpersonal, and textual space where meaning is made and then negated, inscribed and erased, like writing in the sand washed away by the next wave.

Derek Walcott once wrote that a typical Jamaica Kincaid sentence "heads toward its own contradiction"⁹ – in other words, it embraces its own opposite. *Mr. Potter* continues this stylistic habit as its circular narrative bestows textual life yet routinely denies meaning to Kincaid's biological father, who was absent in her life but is burdensomely present in her consciousness and prose. The possibility of Mr. Potter's having attained such good things as significance, self-knowledge, or bonds with others during his seventy years of life is regularly offered up and then taken away, slammed shut by the insistence that "Mr. Potter did not think that any part of him was reflected in this sight before him" (5); that "all the songs that he sang to himself [...] meant nothing" (140); that "events great and small did not enter his mind, nothing entered his mind (27); that "history had made [him] into nothing" (23); and that to "the

5.1 (Spring 2007), http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume_5/issue_1/cahill-rev-donnell.html (accessed 4 February 2009), para. 12.

⁷ Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006): 77.

⁸ Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, 83.

⁹ Quoted in J. Brooks Bouson, *Jamaica Kincaid: Writing Memory, Writing Back to the Mother* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2005): 2.

rest of the world,” “Mr. Potter, the entity that made up Mr. Potter, was nothing itself, nothing in the sense of something without worth, nothing in the way of a lighted matchstick when it is not needed” (19). With the constant repetition of “nothing,” Kincaid echoes an enduring rhetoric of negation in Caribbean discursive history that dates back to writings of the earliest European visitors and continued most notably with the historians Edward Long in the eighteenth century and James Anthony Froude in the nineteenth.

In the early-sixteenth century, not long after Columbus arrived in the region, the Dominican Tomás Ortiz wrote of New World people as follows:

There is no justice among them. They go naked. They have no respect either for love or for virginity. They are stupid and silly. They have no respect for truth, save when it is to their advantage. They are unstable. They have no knowledge of what foresight means. [...] There is no obedience among them, or deference on the part of the young for the old, nor of the son for the father. They are incapable of learning.¹⁰

Almost three centuries later, Long, in his three-volume *History of Jamaica* (1774), described the island’s African slaves in similar terms:

In general, they are void of genius, and seem almost incapable of making any progress in civility or science. They have no plan or system of morality among them. [...] They have no moral sensations; no taste but for women; gormondizing, and drinking to excess; no wish but to be idle.¹¹

This tradition of negation continues, in a more broadly targeted and less moralizing fashion, in Froude’s travelogue *The English in the West Indies* (1888), in which he writes of the West Indian colonies,

They were valued only for the wealth which they yielded, and society there has never assumed any particularly noble aspect. There has been splendour and luxurious living, and there have been crimes and horrors, and revolts and massacres. There has been romance, but it has been the romance of pirates and

¹⁰ Quoted in David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992): 217.

¹¹ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica: Reflections on Its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government* (1774; Montreal & Kingston, Ontario: McGill–Queen’s UP, 2002), vol. 2: 353. Howard Johnson lists as an influence on Long’s views these similarly negating remarks by David Hume: “There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences”; quoted in Johnson, “Introduction” to Long, *The History of Jamaica*, vol. 1: ix.

outlaws. The natural graces of human life do not show themselves under such conditions. There has been no saint in the West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one of out of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own.¹²

That passage notoriously forms the epigraph of V.S. Naipaul's own travelogue of the West Indies, *The Middle Passage* (1962), where it anticipates Naipaul's dismissive negation of the region in the first chapter when he is still crossing the Atlantic to get there:

In the West Indian islands slavery and the latifundia created only grossness [...]; a society without standards, without noble aspirations, nourished by greed and cruelty. [...] How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? [...] History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.¹³

As J. Edward Chamberlin notes, the final sentence of that passage from *The Middle Passage* "stunned so many West Indians" that it, and the word 'nothing' in particular, "has echoed through [their] literature and history" ever since.¹⁴ Direct echoes can be found frequently in the poetry of Derek Walcott, for instance,¹⁵ and nothingness and negation are ubiquitous in Kincaid's novel, too. Because Drickie Potter was fatherless, he was born with "a line drawn through" him; and as an adult he "ceded" this dubious identity to the narrator, who thus has her own line drawn through her (100). He treated his daughter Elaine "as if I were nothing to him at all" (146), and his many other daughters no better. On one level, then, Kincaid's text is a form of revenge, a negation of the man who negated his offspring through his total disconnection from their lives.¹⁶ But as the narrator bestows textual life on the man who

¹² James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888): 347.

¹³ V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (1962; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969): 28–29.

¹⁴ J. Edward Chamberlin, *Come Back to Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993): 31.

¹⁵ See Walcott's "Air" (1969), in *Collected Poems 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux/Noonday, 1986): 113–14, which cites part of the same Froude passage as its epigraph, and also "Origins" (1964) (*Collected Poems*, 11–16) and "The Castaway" (1965) (*Collected Poems*, 57–58), among others.

¹⁶ In an interview many years before Kincaid wrote *Mr. Potter*, Cudjoe asks her, "So you don't know your real father?" (since she grew up with her step-father), to which she replies, "Well, actually I do, now. I know a sort of person who is my father. We see each other, but I

helped give her biological life, she also explores, with understanding and some compassion, the racial, historical, and familial contexts that help explain Mr. Potter's attenuated self. After a career of writing about her mother, Kincaid creates *something* – a narrative of her father – where before there was nothing; but in a kind of will-to-power she repeatedly obliterates the man she inscribes and, like *King Lear*'s Cordelia, makes the word “nothing” the key expression of her daughterly relationship to him.¹⁷

Early on, the narrator notes that “Mr. Potter was afraid of the sea and then he hated the sea, so much water it was, so much nothing, and that nothing was only water.” It may be nothing, but he hates it and “long[s] to feel superior to” it, the next sentence tells us, because it “had such power over him” (12). What is the source of that watery nothing's power? In the previous paragraph the narrator writes, “The sea, the sea, the sea that was so vast, so vast, and vast again [...] held such peril, such dark memories” (10). Those memories, it is implied, are on one level ancestral memories of the Middle Passage – of slavery and suffering, displacement and death. The ocean's nothingness is therefore the blankness with which its surface reflects (or rather doesn't reflect) the brutal history that took place on it. As Alain Corbin remarks, in contradistinction to the land, “human activities leave no trace upon the sea”;¹⁸ similarly, Derek Walcott has made much of the sea as a space whose surface instantly erases history while its depths, however inaccessibly, contain a grim archive of wrecked ships and dead bodies.¹⁹ Kincaid conveys this same duality of absence and presence when she writes in *Mr. Potter* of “the silence of the sea (for the sea is silent and only its actions elicit sounds: wails, screams, cries; and then comes grief, remorse, despair)” (12). But beyond ancestral and historical contexts, on a more personal level the peril and the dark memories

can't get myself to call him 'father.' He's sort of typical of West Indian men: I mean, they have children, but they never seem to connect themselves with those children”; Cudjoe, “Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview,” 218–19.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *King Lear* I.i.87–93. In this regard, *Mr. Potter* may paradoxically echo Naipaul's something-from-nothing novel about his father's life, *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), but without its affection, humour, or expansive characterization and narrative; the allusions to *Lear* in Naipaul's novel are well documented.

¹⁸ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1760–1840*, tr. Jocelyn Phelps (*Territoire du vide: l'Occident et le désir du rivage, 1750–1840*, 1988; tr. 1994; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995): 125.

¹⁹ See Walcott, “The Sea Is History” (1979), for example (*Collected Poems*, 364–67).

Mr. Potter associates with the sea are implicitly sourced in his young mother, Elfrida, who abandoned him at the age of five by committing suicide; she

walked into the sea, as if the sea was life and so was to be joyfully embraced, and the sea swallowed her and then twisted her dry like a piece of old clothing and then ground her into tiny bits and then the tiny bits dissolved and vanished from sight, but only from sight, for they are still there, only they cannot be seen. (76)

On this personal level, too, then, the sea forever contains the remnants of the very history it causes to disappear. The sea may also dredge up a more distant memory of the father Mr. Potter himself never knew, a fisherman named Nathaniel whose “life’s support” came from “the boundless goodness of [...] God, the vast waters of the sea on which he sailed in his boat” (45). One day, however, he discovered his fish pots “filled with nothing, and on that day he needed them to be filled with fish,” and, similarly, “when he cast his nets, he caught nothing” (43); after many more such days, he cursed God, became covered in boils, and died. As with the ancestral, historical memories and experiences of the sea, these parental ones involve paradoxical combinations of life and death, plenitude and emptiness, inscription and erasure – oppositions that are consistently invoked and then broken down in Kincaid’s text.

Indeed, the most seemingly basic and fundamental of Caribbean binaries – land and sea – is also disrupted. Although Corbin, in discussing the sea’s unreadable blankness, calls it “a barren landscape that [we] can neither arrange nor endow with moral significance,” making the sea therefore “the antithesis of the garden” or inhabited landscape,²⁰ geologically islands are far from fixed or permanent or even separate from the embracing sea. As Rachel Carson writes in her classic study *The Sea Around Us*, in geological terms “islands are ephemeral, created today, destroyed tomorrow”;²¹ they erupt or emerge from the sea, and then are eroded back (or simply sink back) into it – often with astonishing suddenness. Even in less precarious island settings, the regular ebb and flow of tides make shorelines and beaches the most indeterminate of boundaries – in fact, it makes them liminal, constantly transformed areas rather than “lines” per se – and so in a more quotidian way the land–sea antithesis is undermined.²² These material contexts suggest a symbiotic rela-

²⁰ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea*, 125.

²¹ Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (New York: Oxford UP, 1951): 83.

²² As Carson observes, “The tides present a striking paradox, and the essence of it is this: the force that sets them in motion is cosmic, lying wholly outside the earth and presumably

tionship between land and sea that plays into the seemingly contradictory ways islands figure in the human imagination and in cultural theory. Islands appeal to ideas of boundedness, self-containment, possession, and what the New Zealand writer Janet Frame once called the “tyranny of completeness”,²³ they thereby often become a focus of longings for paradise, for perfection, for new beginnings and utopias and possibilities of (re)invention. But islands also, in their insularity, can lead to a need and desire for connections beyond. As Chris Bongie writes in *Islands and Exiles*,

The island is a figure that can and must be read in more than one way: on the one hand, as the absolutely particular, a space complete unto itself and thus an ideal metaphor for a traditionally conceived, unified and unitary, identity; on the other, as a fragment, a part of some greater whole from which it is in exile and to which it must be related [...]. The island is thus the site of a double identity – closed and open.²⁴

In the same vein, Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith note that islands as signifiers “can perform as images of both separation and connection. This dialectic of boundedness and connection allows islands to be related more readily to the human psyche than other geographical configurations.”²⁵

Mr. Potter, the insular Antiguan who fears and hates the sea, is psychically a kind of island. He comes into focus initially as Bongie’s first kind of island – disconnected, closed, self-contained. As he “looked at the ground beneath his feet, the ground in front of him,” Kincaid writes, he perceives that “the world was everything he could put his hands on and the world was everything from which he could make nothing” (112). He is limited and self-limiting. But as a representative of what Robert Antoni calls “a figure infamous in West Indian circles but conspicuously absent from the literature of the region: the womanizing male who lives alone [...] and takes little responsibility for the

acting impartially on all parts of the globe, but the nature of the tide at any particular place is a local matter, with astonishing differences occurring within a very short geographic distance” (*The Sea Around Us*, 153).

²³ Quoted in Rod Edmond & Vanessa Smith, “Introduction” to *Islands in History and Representation*, ed. Edmond & Smith (London & New York: Routledge, 2003): 2.

²⁴ Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1998): 18.

²⁵ Rod Edmond & Vanessa Smith, “Introduction” to *Islands in History and Representation*, 4.

children he fathers,”²⁶ his identity is part of a wider social phenomenon. And as the subject of Kincaid’s “autofiction” or “alterbiography,” as one critic has called this text,²⁷ Mr. Potter is related directly to Kincaid in a way he was not in life except genetically, and is positioned also in relation to his own family history and its particular tradition of fatherlessness through previous generations. In addition, the narrator imagines how Mr. Potter would have been seen through the eyes of people he knew, as well as how he would have seen them – in both cases, frequently as “nothing.”²⁸ And so, as her wave-like, conjunction-laden prose pounds on its subject, Kincaid erodes Mr. Potter’s veneer of separateness and uniqueness to reveal a complex relationality, even while conveying and angrily critiquing his essential solipsism, “self-love” (24), and disregard of others. Through his new, posthumous textual life, Mr. Potter becomes an island in Bongie’s second, relational sense. Four centuries ago, John Donne articulated this second way of seeing the island as a direct corrective and supplement to the first, in lines that have since become well known:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. [...] Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.²⁹

That passage could have been Kincaid’s epigraph – or Roderick Potter’s ironic epitaph.

With that resonant metaphoric equation of geographical and personal identity in mind, along with the dialectic of containment and connection that informs all of the binary pairings Kincaid’s work has summoned forth so far – closed and open, insular and involved, land and sea, Caribbean and Atlantic, local and global, self and other, us and them, nothing and something, erasure and inscription, and father and daughter – *Mr. Potter* can provide a compelling entry-point into Alison Donnell’s discussion of the post-Black Atlantic

²⁶ Robert Antoni, “Fatherless Child,” review of *Mr. Potter*, by Jamaica Kincaid, *Washington Post* (5 May 2002): BW06.

²⁷ Jana Evans Braziel, “Kincaid’s Biographical Autograph in *Mr. Potter*,” *Antigua and Barbuda Country Conference Pre-Prints* (University of the West Indies, 2004), <http://www.cavehill.uwi.edu/bnccode/antigua/conference/papers/braziel.html> (accessed 13 August 2007).

²⁸ See, for example, Mr. Potter and Dr. Weizenger’s perceptions of each other in the novel’s first section (esp. 10, 19, 23–25).

²⁹ John Donne, “XVII. Meditation” (1624), in *Seventeenth-Century Poetry and Prose*, ed. Alexander M. Witherspoon & Frank J. Warnke (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 2nd ed. 1963): 68.

critical moment. Donnell laments the fact that ascendant critical trends “have reconfigured the Caribbean as a cultural idea rather than an actual region, a dislocated, mobile, hybrid space attractive to the demands of postcolonial theory and its alliances to migrant subjectivities and writings.”³⁰ With its over five-hundred-year-long history of migration and diaspora, and with so many of the region’s writers since the 1950s living in London or Toronto or New York and writing about the pleasures of exile, the enigma of arrival, lonely Londoners, or people in another place, not here,³¹ such an orientation isn’t unwarranted; but Donnell argues that this critical preoccupation with people on the move has marginalized more rooted, place-based texts and identities and thereby distorted our understanding of the region. Paul Gilroy’s figure of the ocean-crossing ship, James Clifford’s travelling theory, Homi Bhabha’s third space, and other influential critical concepts have helped turn the Caribbean from a “geographical location” into a “cultural construction” in the eyes of their critical successors.³² In a chapter called “Global Villages and Watery Graves: Recrossing the Black Atlantic,” Donnell suggests that

it would be both misleading and unfortunate if we allowed the discourse of diaspora to move us away from the Caribbean as a real location. I wish to argue that looking at the Caribbean, in all its regional complexity and diversity, might help us to re-think ways of theorizing diasporic identities and the writings which engage with these.

With its diverse mix of peoples from several continents, she says, “the Caribbean is a particularly interesting location for discussions about ‘here’ and ‘there’.”³³ As she strives to re-balance a critical binary, Donnell deploys strategic readings of overlooked writers and texts to challenge the epistemic purchase of the binary itself. “In the Caribbean model of the Black Atlantic,” she asserts, “the nation is not the opposite of the transnational, just as the sea is not the antithesis to the land, nor the ship to the shore, nor the oar to the spade.”³⁴

³⁰ Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, 3.

³¹ The preceding list is adapted from titles of well-known texts addressing West Indian migration by George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, and Dionne Brand, respectively.

³² Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, 94.

³³ *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, 94.

³⁴ *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, 95.

This, I argue, is the lesson of Kincaid's text, too. The Caribbean as a name signifies, on the one hand, a collection of (mostly) island nations, and on the other, the sea that separates and conjoins those islands – the sea, that is, that embraces each of them and that they, collectively, may be said to embrace. If we follow Kincaid's distinction between the global Atlantic Ocean on one side and the more local and regional Caribbean Sea on the other, then the critical emphasis in recent decades has been on the former – the Atlantic – as the space of intercontinental migrancy, diasporic scattering, deterritorialized identities, and transnational affiliations. But just as that division between fluid, adjacent bodies of water is more viable imaginatively and cartographically than literally – they may be on either side of the islands, but the ocean and the sea are physically inseparable – so the novel's island setting prompts us to recognize both the autonomy and the interrelatedness of its opposed elements, including the central ones of land and sea, father and daughter.³⁵

Donnell's admirable interrogation of some stubborn binaries and biases is not an isolated critical caprice. The same year her monograph was published, Helen Scott's *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalization* (2006), while acknowledging that "concepts such as transnationalism, hybridity, nomadism, syncretism, [and] creolization continue to be central to critical exploration of Caribbean culture," argued that each island nation's experience of national and international influences is distinctive. Scott's study insists on the nation

³⁵ A feminist reading of *Mr. Potter's* ocean imagery, which is beyond the scope of this essay, suggests itself here in outline form. Beginning with those ancient but intractable associations of women and the sea so deftly summarized by Cynthia Behrman in *Victorian Myths of the Sea* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1977) – "The sea, like a woman, was [to Greeks and Victorian Britons alike] unpredictable and uncontrollable" (15) – it might go on to examine Kincaid's frequent associations of troublesome maternity with the sea: e.g., "my mother [...] would become that to me, an ocean with its unpredictable waves and undertow" in *Mr. Potter* (135); and the dream of mother–daughter unity followed by terrifying distance and fear of abandonment during a swim in the ocean in *Annie John* (41–45). Finally, it might consider whether the narrator's discursive reach across the sea to the island-bound Mr. Potter, and her apparent will-to-power over him and desire to textually overwhelm/annihilate him (or drown/suffocate him?), is on some level a compensatory response to what Lynda Boose considers the "asymmetrically proportioned" nature of the father–daughter relationship in Western cultural ideology, where "the father weighs most and the daughter least" in the family in terms of authority and privilege (20) – indeed, where the daughter is constructed as a *discursive* absence (as opposed to the father's discursive presence), even though the father is the family member most likely to be, *à la* Mr. Potter, *literally* absent from domestic space (see Lynda E. Boose & Betty S. Flowers, "Introduction" to *Daughters & Fathers*, ed. Boose & Flowers [Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989]: 7).

as the primary organizing category and as “stubbornly material fact, [since] borders and states continue to circumscribe peoples’ mobility and lived experience.”³⁶ Her whole book is a delicate, balanced negotiation of the national local with the transnational global in Caribbean women’s writing. Two years earlier, Shalini Puri’s *The Caribbean Postcolonial* (2004) critiqued Gilroy’s model of transatlantic hybridity for privileging the metropolitan (US and British) black communities over Caribbean ones.³⁷ Curdella Forbes, in an important article, positions *Mr. Potter* quite brilliantly in the context of representations of individuality and collectivity, and of international and national space.³⁸ To round off my own reading of the text, I will briefly turn my critical back on the sea in order to consider one of the novel’s other key images, a recurring representation of Mr. Potter that is so local and terrestrial that it virtually fixes the fatherly object to a static position in island-bound space and time, even if its source is every bit as global as the ocean. The image in question is the novel’s memorably repeated invocation of another iconic element of the Caribbean natural world – the sun that beats so incessantly and mercilessly on Mr. Potter.

The novel begins with a very distinctive rendering of the sun:

And that day, the sun was in its usual place, up above and in the middle of the sky, and it shone in its usual way so harshly bright, making even the shadows pale, make even the shadows seek shelter; that day the sun was in its usual place, up above and in the middle of the sky, but Mr. Potter did not note this, so accustomed was he to this, the sun in its usual place, up above and in the middle of the sky.... (3)

This opening sentence continues in a similar vein for several lines, and its key phrases recur frequently throughout the text. There is a particular quality to the Caribbean sun being evoked here – a local experience of its daily presence that Kincaid has written about elsewhere:³⁹ in her essay “On Seeing England

³⁶ Helen Scott, *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalization: Fictions of Independence* (Aldershot & Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2006): 11, 18.

³⁷ Shalini Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 28–29.

³⁸ Curdella Forbes, “Fracturing Subjectivities: International Space and the Discourse of Individualism in Colin Channer’s *Waiting in Vain* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Mr. Potter*,” *Small Axe* (February 2008): 31–37.

³⁹ In addition to the passages quoted hereafter, Kincaid’s remarks on the sun in Cudjoe’s interview with her are noteworthy: “I grew up in this extraordinary light, this blinding, thick light of the sun, that seems to give off a light that makes things transparent. [...] But the sun

for the First Time,” where the Antiguan “sun shone with what sometimes seemed to be a deliberate cruelty; we must have done something to deserve that”;⁴⁰ and in *A Small Place*, where the sun “is always overhead as if on permanent guard, ready to stamp out any cloud,”⁴¹ and where the unique qualities of the light in Antigua contribute to a sense of impossible beauty and a negation of the place’s very reality. She writes:

Antigua is beautiful. Antigua is too beautiful. Sometimes the beauty of it seems unreal. Sometimes the beauty of it seems as if it were stage sets for a play, for no real sunset could look like that; no real seawater could strike that many shades of blue at once; [...] no real day could be that sort of sunny and bright, making everything seem transparent and shallow, and no real night could be that sort of black, making everything seem thick and deep and bottomless. No real day and no real night could be that evenly divided – twelve hours of one and twelve hours of the other; no real day would begin that dramatically or end that dramatically (there is no dawn in Antigua: one minute, you are in the complete darkness of night; the next minute, the sun is overhead and it stays there until it sets [...]).⁴²

She goes on to consider the effects on Antiguan of this unreal, constant beauty and the qualities of light and darkness that make it so:

And what might it do to ordinary people to live in this way every day? What might it do to them to live in such heightened, intense surroundings day after day? They have nothing to compare this incredible constant with, no big historical moment to compare the way they are now to the way they used to be. No Industrial Revolution, no revolution of any kind, no Age of Anything, no world wars, no decades of turbulence balanced by decades of calm. Nothing, then, natural or unnatural, to leave a mark on their character. It is just a little island.⁴³

If the apparent negation of history and historical experience in this rather Froude-like, Naipaul-esque passage seems inexplicably to erase the turbulent collective experiences of slavery and colonization, Kincaid goes on immediately to acknowledge that history and to make it baldly clear that she

is almost hellish, really. Sometimes it would turn from something wonderful, the light of the sun, into a kind of hell” (231).

⁴⁰ Kincaid, “On Seeing England for the First Time,” *Transition* 51 (1991): 36.

⁴¹ Kincaid, *A Small Place*, 13.

⁴² *A Small Place*, 77–78.

⁴³ *A Small Place*, 79–80.

favours the “noble and exalted” slaves over the “human rubbish” from Europe.⁴⁴ Unpacking the layered ironies that inform Kincaid’s various non-fictional representations of ‘nothingness’, which sometimes is asserted as a state of being and sometimes as a pernicious imperial construction, is seldom easy – as, for instance, when she writes in “Seeing England” that reading English literary representations of evening light when she was growing up in Antigua “made me really feel like nothing” because her own experience of day and night included no such evening: “they came and went in a mechanical way: on, off, on off.”⁴⁵ And yet, she says,

To avert my gaze [from England to Antigua] was to fall back into something from which I had been rescued, a hole filled with nothing, and that was the word for everything about me, nothing.⁴⁶

Like the notorious Wordsworth daffodils that so many West Indian writers have held up as a symbol of English literary and cultural imperialism, Kincaid here suggests that the experience of twilight available at northern latitudes, which many European authors have eloquently evoked, becomes through the Empire’s self-imposed cultural authority a reality or norm against which the Caribbean, lacking this experience, becomes unreal, nothing – even though, ironically, Caribbean people’s personal experience in their islands actually makes twilight unreal and ‘on-off’ light real.

Elsewhere, I have examined Ralph Singh’s obsession with evening light’s gradualness in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* (1967) and related it to the ways twilight was invoked by several Caribbean writers as a metaphor for the post-war fading of the British Empire: the global empire on which the sun was said never to set.⁴⁷ In the context of that regionally specific semiosis of sunlight and twilight, what are we to make of Kincaid’s incessant portrayal, throughout her book, of Mr. Potter in a light that beats down harshly, always in its usual place in the middle of the sky until the moment of his death? (“The day into which Mr. Potter had died,” she writes, “was so much the opposite of the day into which the sun was always in the middle of the sky; the sun was blotted out, blotted out by an eternal basin of rain,” 182.) Does the constant, centrally located, on-high vertical light illuminate Mr. Potter, with all his defects,

⁴⁴ Kincaid, *A Small Place*, 80.

⁴⁵ Kincaid, “On Seeing England for the First Time,” 34, 35.

⁴⁶ “On Seeing England for the First Time,” 36.

⁴⁷ See John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004): 143–50.

as a creature of empire and thereby contextualize him globally, as the ocean imagery does, in the expansive time and space of imperial slavery and colonization, and if so, does that exonerate him somehow? Or does the uniquely Caribbean quality of the light fix him in his tiny national, island-bound place as a more local entity, a character so flat and detached – so “without character and purpose,” as Naipaul would say – as to be the very embodiment of West Indian nothingness and unreality? Alternatively, is the harsh and merciless sun, like the pounding surf, a figure for Kincaid herself, the daughter thrusting her absent father onto that impossibly beautiful stage-set, into the spotlight where he can be exposed for his neglect and irresponsibility, qualities that the Empire itself has been frequently accused of by the region’s historians and writers? As my last two questions reveal, even the most local and particular interpretations of this image keep extending beyond the island’s shores into the realm of the global and historical. Scholars of Kincaid’s earlier work debate whether and to what degree we should read her mother–daughter representations allegorically and historically in terms of Imperial relations,⁴⁸ and this novel similarly keeps diverting our focus from Antigua and Mr. Potter to their wider regional and socio-historical and transnational/transatlantic contexts.

Born in 1922 and buried in the Columbus anniversary year of 1992, this man whose inarticulate voice is said to be “full of all that had gone wrong in the world for almost five hundred years” (23) can be read in multiple, concentric-circle-like contexts of expanding space and time, however oblivious he himself is to virtually any contexts outside himself. First, he comes into view as his hermetic and isolated, negating and negated self: the man who would be an island. Second, he is an example of the regional Caribbean type of the womanizing man who becomes an absentee father. Third, he is one half of a bilateral, mostly one-way, and almost entirely textual father–daughter relationship⁴⁹ that reaches from the migrant daughter’s America to the island-bound father’s Antigua, from continent to island across the Caribbean Sea.

⁴⁸ See, for example, books by Ferguson, Alexander, Bouson, and Brancato. In Ferguson’s words, Kincaid “demystifies the ideology of a colonial motherland. That doubled articulation of motherhood as both colonial and biological explains why the mother–daughter relations in her fiction often seem so harshly rendered”; Ferguson, *Colonialism and Gender Relations*, 1.

⁴⁹ The narrator in *Mr. Potter* sees her father just twice: once when she waves to him from a distance as a four-year-old and he ignores her (124–27); and once when, in his final years, he briefly visits his thirty-three-year-old daughter at her US home (165–70).

Fourth, he exists in relation to the few transatlantic migrant characters with whom he is involved, most notably the Lebanese Mr. Shoul (the owner of his taxi) and the Holocaust-fleeing Czech Dr. Weizenger (one of his customers). Fifth and finally, Mr. Potter is explicitly positioned as a sad legacy of the historic migrations and dislocations of the slave trade and British colonialism, which reached across the ocean and the sea from other continents to the Caribbean islands. While Roderick Potter presents himself as the epitome of what Donnell might call a nation-based, located identity – a man for whom people and “complications involving the world beyond the horizon did not [...] exist” (34) – even this quintessentially insular islander is a fragment of a larger transnational, continental, and oceanic whole. Édouard Glissant defines the Caribbean as “a multiple series of relationships” and a “sea [that] exists within us” (139), and it is that connectedness that redeems Roderick Potter, at least as a textual entity, from the vacuous emptiness and nothingness that otherwise typify him. And it is that relational identity that makes this sea-hating and sea-fearing man a creature of the ship, even as he and his story plant themselves firmly on the national shore that the latest critical waves keep threatening to wash away.

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Bhangra Boomerangs

—— Re-Imagining Apna Punjab

ANJALI GERA ROY

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM, DEFINED AS THE WORLDWIDE DIFFUSION of American products, life-styles, and ideas, is predicated on an elision between americanization, McDonaldization, and globalization. There is no denying the fact that America, as the sole superpower in the present globalized context, occupies a dominant position and that global consumerist flows largely emanate from the North American continent.¹ American cultural products such as the Hollywood film, TV programmes, sports, music, fashion, and food undoubtedly constitute America's largest exports to the world. American popular music, in particular, is considered a prime instrument in the homogenization of global culture by the American 'superculture'. But the cultural-imperialism thesis is predicated on contested models such as the nation-state, the broadcast-theory of media, one-way information flows, the centre and the periphery. As a consequence, opposition to 'cultural imperialism' also continues to be defined in terms not in tune with ground realities. Recent critiques of the theory have convincingly argued against reducing contemporary global hegemonies to a national cultural hegemony. Even if one were to read globalization simplistically as americanization, the nightmare of indigenous cultures driven out by an American cultural blitzkrieg denies receiving cultures agency and underestimates their capacity for appropriating alien cultural inputs to their own needs.

¹ Alex Seago, "'Where Hamburgers Sizzle on an Open Grill Night and Day': Global Pop Music and Americanization in the Year 2000," *American Studies* 41.2–3 (Summer–Fall 2000): 121.

Through tracing the reverse musical flows of bhangra, a North Indian performance tradition, this essay juxtaposes 'the boomerang effect' against the American cultural-imperialism thesis in order to unpack the workings of new global hegemonic structures and resistances. 'The boomerang effect' is defined as receiving cultures' selective appropriation of alien cultural elements, which are re-exported to the invading culture in an altered form so as to modify its character. The Punjabi harvest dance bhangra, re-invented in the mid-1980s in Britain through its hybridization with black sounds by British Asian youth, was hailed as Asian dance music by the British media and 'returned back' to India, where it was being modernized as bhangrapop through its integration of Western rhythms.² Thus, instead of the Indian skies being deluged by alien 'American images' and sounds after India's 'satellite invasion' as apprehended, the Indian popular music scene was taken over by a regional folk-performance tradition.³ Disproving those who detected a grand American impositional design of a global monoculture engulfing autochthonous India cultures, the bhangra resurgence appears to have ignited a folk-cultural revival. Bhangra's re-emergence proves that local cultures are equipped not only to counter global monocultural invasion but also to appropriate it for re-inventing themselves.

The bhangra explosion of the 1990s forces us to view hegemony in ways other than as national dominance. Bhangra is an example of a 'third culture' marked by multidirectional flows across all bhangra sites that cut through national boundaries. It signals a folk-music revival ushered in by the combined impact of global media, transnational musical corporations, advanced communication technologies, and multicultural politics. Ulf Hannerz's concept of creolization is particularly relevant to the complex interaction of bhangra music and local identities in the context of globalization. The music is hybridized with other musical sounds to make it palatable to a westernized audience and marketed as exoticized music.⁴ The transnational corporations

² It is interesting that, even though Bhangra was resignified as British-Asian popular music, its return to India in the wake of globalization led to its being confused with American popular music.

³ Bhangra 'returned back home' to India after becoming a rage in Britain, crossing linguistic, regional, and class barriers to win itself a national constituency. Going by the number of Bhangra competitions held in US colleges and universities in the last few years, Bhangra promises to be as much a part of multicultural USA as it is of India or the UK.

⁴ Rupa Huq believes that Bhangra does not fall strictly into the world-music category. See "Asian Kool? Bhangra and Beyond," in *Disorienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New*

involved in producing and marketing bhangra are less interested in promoting any national agenda than in maximizing their profits. Bhangra practitioners, both folk and modern, are complicit with market forces in the reification of their music and their bodies. Yet, despite the mutual co-option of all bhangra participants in the space of Indian public culture, resistance of a passive nature is still visible on several levels in bhangra production and consumption. As folk tradition, it contests national/classical domination; as indigenous Indian music, it resists the homogenizing impact of global monoculture; as popular culture, it participates in the low/high opposition. Punjabi speakers, at home and in the diaspora, continue to perform this harvest ritual to re-enact their collective memories. In the UK and the USA, it serves as the most visible signifier of ethnocultural Asian identity while global youth converge on it to constitute a different youthful subjectivity. But the reification of ethnic difference in bhangra's marketing, in which music companies, television channels, and bhangra practitioners are equally complicit, is a serious cause for concern.

Why do fears of an impending global culture invariably manifest themselves as a suspicion of americanization? Are there sufficient grounds for the elision between American and the global? Richard Pells celebrates the essential features of American popular culture, which make it truly global in character and scope. Arguing that America has been the largest importer and redistributor of foreign cultures, Pells depicts the American cultural space, having been constructed by multiple immigrant traditions, as highly eclectic in its borrowings. He attributes American popular culture's global appeal to its multicultural character. "Its incorporation of foreign styles and ideas", he says, has "made it popular for so long in so many places,"⁵ Pells also attempts to explain why American popular culture came to be identified with global culture.

Asian Dance Music, ed. Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk & Ashwani Sharma (London: Zed, 1999): 61–80. But Bhangra is often classified as world music. Punjabi MC was awarded the Club Global Award for World Music 2004. Although I accept Huq's distinction, I believe that Indian audience receives most Western popular music as American/Western popular, where finer distinctions are lost. Bhangra returns to India along with other ethnic music packaged as world music as well as Western popular.

⁵ Richard Pells, "American Culture Goes Global, or Does It?" *Chronicle Review* (12 April 2002): B1.

Americans have specialized in selling the dreams, fears and folklore of other people back to them. That is why a global mass culture has come to be identified, however simplistically, with the United States.⁶

Alex Seago, however, puts the blame on US pop music's dominance in the multibillion dollar communications industry, which causes it to be regarded as "a prime culprit in the homogenization of global culture."⁷ This negative identification of American popular with global culture results in anxieties about an alien cultural invasion in the wake of globalization in India that translates as americanization. India's occidentalizing tendencies are apparent in its lumping together all European traditions as the West, which denotes America in the contemporary Indian imaginary.

Reinhold Wagnleitner's contention that "without the global diffusion of popular culture there would be no Beatles" may be modified with respect to bhangra.⁸ Without the global diffusion of popular culture there would be no Apache Indian. Bhangra's return to India was really initiated in British popular culture, where second- and third-generation diaspora Punjabis hybridized the Punjabi harvest ritual with reggae and hip-hop beats to invent a new genre. But its inflow to India was channelled after the privatization of the Indian skies by a mega-media machine concentrated in America and dominated by American popular culture.⁹ "What Americans have done more brilliantly than their competitors overseas," Pells asserts, "is to repackage the cultural products we receive from abroad and then retransmit them to the rest of the world."¹⁰ Brit-Asians might have re-invented bhangra, but Americans repackaged it and re-transmitted it back to India and the rest of the world.

⁶ Pells, "American Culture Goes Global, or Does It?" B1.

⁷ Alex Seago, "'Where Hamburgers Sizzle on an Open Grill Night and Day,'" 119.

⁸ Reinhold Wagnleitner, "'No Commodity Is Quite So Strange As This Thing Called Cultural Exchange': The Foreign Politics of American Pop Culture Hegemony," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 46.3 (2001): 454.

⁹ Despite refuting the cultural imperialism thesis, Alex Seago concedes that US pop music is "a prime conduit of cultural globalization" ("Where Hamburgers Sizzle on an Open Grill Night and Day," 119). Though contemporary popular culture is global rather than American, it continues to be equated with American popular culture for various reasons. I have used the term American popular culture to denote this space. "Bhangra doesn't come from India anymore. Actually, I think of bhangra as British music," says the New York DJ Rekha; "It's not really fair to lump bhangra together with Indian music that comes out of India," she explains. "It's more accurate to say it's Punjabi music than Indian, because Punjabi is India and Pakistan."

¹⁰ Pells, "American Culture Goes Global, or Does It?" B1.

Since 1995, when it was being hailed as a primarily British-Asian act, bhangra has travelled all the way back to India even as spills over into the USA and Canada. Its ubiquity has robbed it of its specific location in Punjabi folk-regional and black-British cultural politics. It returns to the subcontinent not only divested of its Punjabi or British Asian specificity but repackaged as American popular culture, which is at once the source of its appeal and its denigration. Its re-transmission through American media and circulation networks requires that it be repackaged to suit the tastes of a global audience literate in American popular cultural lingua. Bhangra's distinctive local dialects are overwritten by a familiar global American slang to make it audible to an Americanized global audience. This is illustrated by Punjabi MC's celebrated crossover success by giving American listeners what they were ready for. The rapper gave the song a certain familiarity, but the traditional Indian breakbeats were something new. "It's different, and it doesn't hurt that Jay-Z is on it," says Dana Hall, former r&b editor at *Airplay Monitor*. "It's just the right combination of him [Jay-Z] and a new, interesting beat that is exciting for programmers to play."¹¹ The global domination of this voice is asserted through the implicit understanding that local cultural forms must be recast in the predominantly americentric format normative in the contemporary global culture and media industry. Local musical genres are transmitted and re-transmitted to the world and the sending areas as an identifiable American package.

Apart from demanding that local content be adjusted to American popular cultural preferences, American popular cultural space also alters their character through its technologies such as format, programming, marketing, and advertising. Local musics are inserted into programmes with a clear American slant, which might now have become the shared culture of certain kinds of global viewers. They are introduced by deejays or veejays, raised on a standard American musical diet, who approach all local musics with a characteristic American enthusiasm for exoticized local cultures. Thus, the repackaging of local cultures that Pells celebrates defamiliarizes them for the local audience. Pells' contention that the success of the American popular cultural machine lay in its skill in "selling" the "folklore of other people back to them" is precisely the way bhangra was sold back to India. The American popular-

¹¹ Steve Jones, "Jay-Z remix spices interest in Panjabi MC," *USA Today* (21 May 2003), http://www.usatoday.com/life/music/news/2003-05-19-panjabi_x.htm (accessed 18 July 2005).

culture machine employs the mediascape of MTV, which, until its recent weakening into insignificance thanks to YouTube, was seen to symbolize the McDonaldization of the cultural sphere. MTV is a multicultural *mela* or fair, which brings together the world's diverse musical traditions packaged in American costume under a single *shamiana* or marquee. Local music traditions, decontextualized and deterritorialized, are made to tango together under this pavilion. Algerian rai and Mexican salsa, American rap and West Indian reggae, Pakistani qawwali and British pop are let loose in a multiracial, multi-ethnic, multicultural nightclub mediated by American popular cultural terminology and politics. The role of American popular cultural space in enabling widely disparate local cultures to encounter one another cannot be denied. This space makes room for all, from Björk to Nusrat Futeh Ali Khan, who are willing to submit to the laws of popular cultural commerce.

Bhangra's return as American popular culture accounts for its contemporary popularity as well as denigration. Due to its imbrication in the discourses of globalization, postmodernism, and hybridity, its reception in India was coloured by a suspicion of the global. Bhangra hybrids were dubbed alien cultural imports and became the target of resistance to 'American cultural imperialism'. The americanization thesis has dominated cultural nationalist opposition to globalization exhibiting an elision between American and the global. 'Americanization' is interpreted as commercialization of a folk tradition through its contamination by alien cultural elements. Resistance to bhangra converges on the issues of hybridity, vulgarity, and foreignness as it earns the wrath of the *swadeshi* or the nativist brigade intent on evicting all foreign cultural imports. While one may concede that the explicit sexuality of some bhangra albums crosses permissible Indian 'decency' limits, the charge of vulgarity and reification is really contingent on the musical location in which bhangra is received. Although the Indian audience, accustomed to a popular Indian musical grammar, might find hybrid bhangra music videos offensive, they are no more or less 'vulgar' than others circulating through American popular cultural space. The pornographic camera gaze, the sexualized body and bodily movements, the genre-mixing, the reification of music – this is all part of the music-video grammar routinely employed in American popular culture. The moment bhangra consents to its insertion in this space, it is forced to compromise by participating in its economics and politics, including the system propped up on stars, bestsellers, fans, promotionals, and ratings. The blasphemy occurs, not through the exposure of the female body

or overt display of sexuality, but though the desacralization of the harvest ritual through its insertion in a field of commerce.

Puritan resistance to imported bhangra music itself became the source of bhangra's irresistibility to Indian teens, particularly urban middle class. Urban middle-class Indian youth, schooled to reject anything traditional, vernacular, and folk as 'native', embraced folk music with alacrity when it 'returned back' as American popular from Britain across music television and the internet. Generation X, keen to keep up with global sonic trends, was more than willing to lap up Punjabi peasant fare so long as it was packed by transnational music giants as world music or American popular music. One is forced to concede that 'American cultural hegemony', if there be one, was a "hegemony by invitation."¹² The answer to the question "Why is American Popular Culture so Popular" is provided by Berndt Ostendorf:

the success of American popular culture lies not in any of its individual formal or aesthetic properties, but in its overall design which is that of a consciously constructed liberal New World utopia.¹³

The association of America with wealth, power, youth, and consumption is perhaps the reason why popular culture comes to be regarded as an exclusively American product. Reinhold Wagnleitner offers a slightly different explanation:

the major attraction of an opposition to American popular culture for young people lies in the fact that it always contains an element of rebellion: a rebellion against the tastes of politicians, priests, the military, and teachers.¹⁴

Both these impulses could explain middle-class urban youth's espousal of a marginalized folk tradition even as the parental generation denigrated it. American culture signifies, for Indian youth, modernity and "a pursuit of happiness" in "its most up-to-date pursuit of consumption," but also rebellion. Its packaging as American popular culture makes bhangra partake of features the youth associates with American culture. It matters little whether the signifiers denoting Americanness refer to any signified in real America. America has

¹² Reinhold Wagnleitner, "'No Commodity is Quite so Strange as this Thing called Cultural Exchange'," 450.

¹³ Berndt Ostendorf, "Why is American Popular Culture so Popular? A View from Europe," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 46.3 (2001): 339.

¹⁴ Wagnleitner, "'No Commodity is Quite so Strange as this Thing called Cultural Exchange'," 447.

invaded Indian youthful subjectivities, as a brand image, signifying freedom and opportunity. In switching over to bhangra, they believe themselves to be tuning in “to the alluring messages of western consumerism’s chief propagandist, American popular culture.”¹⁵ In spite of the dilution of “the link between pop music and an Anglo-American cultural axis” that Seago speaks of, popular culture continues to be identified with an essentialized Americanness in several parts of the world, including India, and is loved and hated for the same reason. Indian puritanism’s fixation on bhangra’s alien mixes and semi-clad female bodies in the music videos also makes it blind to bhangra’s resistive character. Bhangra is denigrated for the wrong reasons. Bhangra’s *denigration*, its ‘blackening’ through its being mixed with Black-Atlantic musical beats like rap, reggae, and hip-hop, goes completely unnoticed in the Indian fetishization of American popular culture.

Paul Gilroy points out that American popular culture is composed of the musical legacy of the descendants of slaves from Africa.¹⁶ Neil Lazarus agrees that the black core that modern African music co-opts is essentially Africa’s contribution to the shaping of American popular culture.¹⁷ Pells turns this argument around to refute the American cultural-imperialism thesis.¹⁸ He regards American popular culture as a space constituted by immigrants contributing their unique talents to the vast melting pot. Pells argues that this space, far from promoting any nationalist agenda, acts as a hub where the world’s cultural diversity is stored and disseminated. American popular culture, disseminated through transnational media networks, has undoubtedly become the meeting-ground of cultures not even remotely connected. Bhangra became fused with Afro-rhythms in the real British and the virtual American popular cultural space, propped up on a black musical base. The politics and economics of the British Empire created the proxemics resulting in the evolution of hybridized bhangra. But the black/brown global youthful dance, in the diaspora and homeland, now occurs in a popular cultural space that emancipates and indentures both black and brown bodies in unpredictable ways. American popular culture adds a different slant to the politics of immi-

¹⁵ Wagnleitner, “‘No Commodity is Quite so Strange as this Thing called Cultural Exchange,’” 448.

¹⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1993): 208.

¹⁷ Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999): 198.

¹⁸ Pells, “American Culture Goes Global, or Does It?” B7.

gration within the Empire, which inflected black/brown relations in a certain direction. As George Lipsitz puts it in his introduction to the German edition of *Dangerous Crossroads*,

The popularity of contemporary bhangra music in Britain reveals another instance of how commercial culture can bring into focus previously blurred histories of imperialism.¹⁹

The popular cultural space initiates a conversation between black and brown unshackled for the first time from essentialist self-definitions. The space of popular culture proves to be emancipatory here, to the extent that it enables a dialogue between two local cultures hitherto oblivious or suspicious of one another. The borrowing from the black core of American popular that was also the bedrock of black-British culture leads to a meeting of two orally oriented cultures in Britain's Afro-bhangra fusion. Bhangra, reggae, rap, and hip-hop are all diasporic voices whose roots go back to the rich oral cultures of Africa and India. The global diffusion of American popular culture sets off a hitherto unheard duet between orally oriented local cultures.

One needs to understand that cultural battles in India are not restricted to the high/low, classical/popular cultural binary. Popular culture itself is a contested zone. The high/low dichotomy has been visualized in India as an interdependency of Great and Little Traditions. The Indian cultural master-narrative projects India's multiple Little Traditions as feeding into the Great Indian Tradition. But the Great and Little Traditions interdependency is essentially hierarchical, because the Little Traditions have always occupied the low end of the scale. Indian popular cultural space reveals a similar asymmetry between the national and the regional. The film-dominated Indian popular cultural scene is defined almost completely by Hindi film music. Regional film music is popular in small linguistic pockets, and non-film music has a minute share of the music market. Popular culture space, inherently suspicious of modernity's high/low opposition, has interrogated its privileging of high cultures by breaking down the boundaries between high and low. Bhangra, a marginalized folk tradition, re-entering Indian cultural space via this popular cultural space, is thereby able to challenge traditional hierarchies. Its acquisition of global visibility, as it is circulated through this space, destabilizes the Indian cultural master-narrative in which regional and folk-cultural traditions

¹⁹ George Lipsitz, "Dangerous Crossroads," introduction to the German edition of *Dangerous Crossroads* (September 1998), <http://www.translocation.at/d/lipsitz.htm> (accessed 12 February 2004).

are relegated to a secondary status. The global space has thus proved to be beneficial to local vernacular traditions, which had remained buried under the national master-narrative. In destabilizing traditional boundaries and hierarchies, it has redefined the Indian cultural sphere in which regional and folk cultures now play an increasingly important role. Therefore, the global visibility accorded to a regional folk culture in this global space has facilitated its nationalization. The willingness of non-Punjabi speakers in different parts of India, who were introduced to bhangra through MTV, to sing along and dance to bhangra tunes accords it a national character. Bhangra's incorporates 'American' inputs to re-invent itself as a national music, in the process destabilizing the Indian cultural master-narrative. Bhangra hybrids integrating American popular cultural elements have become a national music which goes by the name of bhangrapop.²⁰ Although a room might have been created for bhangra by British-Asian bhangra on the national cultural landscape, bhangrapop has taken over the national popular consciousness. Bhangrapop circulates through the music videos of stars like Daler Mehndi but is also mainstreamed through its large presence in popular Hindi film. Its popularity is reflected as much in the number of albums sold as in the impact it has had on other regional musics. Surfing through multiple regional language channels, one is greeted with Tamil, Telugu, Bengali or Oriya imitations of Hindi-film-influenced bhangra. Bhangra's popularization has deconstructed the Hindi national hegemony by inserting a regional culture into the popular space of the nation, thus opening a path for other marginalized regional cultures.

John Tomlinson defines cultural imperialism as a discourse in which resistance to such imperialism is also outlined in terms familiar to the West.²¹ But native cultures have always possessed the means and capacity to transform

²⁰ I have used the term 'Desibhangra' to describe bhangra hybrids with a pan-Indian appeal instead of 'bhangrapop'. They may be distinguished from British bhangra or 'Vilayetibhangra' or the music produced in or targeted at Punjabi 'Punjabibhangra'. The best known practitioner of bhangrapop is Daler Mehndi, whose bhangra album was the first to break the national mainstream charts. Daler stormed the Hindi film music dominated popular culture industry with his eclectic blend of Punjabi with 'American' popular culture. Unlike British bhangra practitioners, whose mixings are with specific forms of American popular music such as reggae or dancehall, Daler and other bhangrapop practitioners based in India mix bhangra at random with whatever appeals to them in American popular music.

²¹ John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991): 6.

themselves by appropriating alien cultural elements to their own needs. Bill Ashcroft calls this postcolonial transformation.²² It is interesting that he should name Bollywood's appropriation of Hollywood formulae as an example of postcolonial transformation.²³ Indian popular music might be added to this list in which bhangra takes the lead. Transformations in the reception, production, transmission, and consumption of bhangra reappropriate it for the folk and alter the character of contemporary global/American popular culture.

Seago asks "whether or not the global presence of MTV in itself signifies the development of a uniform Americanized capitalist monoculture."²⁴ Warning against conflating the simple presence of cultural goods with the attribution of deeper cultural effects, Seago shows that apprehension about the birth of an americanized global MTV generation was refuted by the indigenization of contemporary pop culture, and he cites India as one of the most obvious examples. That might be true, but a MTV generation was certainly born after India's 'satellite invasion', which regularly tunes in to the commodified images of American culture.²⁵

Bhangra retains in India only a generational and low-cultural rebelliousness, losing the class, gender, race, and ethnic resistance it performs in Britain. Indian youth subcultures mimic American counter-cultural angst sans its affluence. While Indian middle-class youth might affect American counter-cultural postures, the background of poverty and unemployment nips potential revolt in the bud. Produced on the boundaries between compliance and resistance, middle-class Indian youth subcultural resistance assumes less overt forms marked along generational rather than class, race or ethnic markers. Deprived of opportunities for overt political action, middle-class Indian youth subcultures resist by acts of petty rebellion such as expressing a preference for

²² Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001).

²³ Ashcroft, "Resistance," in Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 32. A fuller account (from a 2009 paper given at a National University of Singapore conference on South Asian film) can be found in Ashcroft's "Bollywood, Postcolonial Transformation," chapter 1 of *Travels of Bollywood Cinema: From Bombay to L.A.*, ed. Anjali Gera Roy & Chua Beng Huat (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, forthcoming 2012).

²⁴ Alex Seago, "'Where Hamburgers Sizzle on an Open Grill Night and Day'," 125.

²⁵ MTV India managing director Alex Kuruvilla claims that MTV India reaches 25 million homes. "An Interview with MTV India managing director Alex Kuruvilla" (19 July 2002), <http://www.indiantelevision.com/interviews/y2k2/executive/alex.htm> (accessed 5 February 2004).

a life-style that the previous generation disapproves of. Since the parental generation is committed to a nationalist agenda, the generational war on the Indian subcontinent is fought over the selective adoption of 'Western' life-styles – language, dress, music. As Ulf Hannerz has noted in the case of Nigeria, middle-class, urban Indian youth aspire in this way to participate at the centre.²⁶ Unlike British-Asian youth, they do not use the space created by world music to assert ethnic difference but to participate in metropolitan culture. The poignant incongruity brought out by Arjun Appadurai in the replication of cosmopolitan cultures on Third-World sites may be seen in the imitative gesture of middle-class urban Indian youth's turning to world music. Indian youth turns to its own music with the gaze of the Western Self that imbues Indian music with an exotic otherness. It reproduces the Self's exoticization of the Other, unaware that it occupies the Other's space in the Western imagination. While British bhangra or Vilayetibhangra draws on ethnic difference in forming British-Asian subcultures to separate itself from white cultural hegemony, Indian bhangra or Desibhangra exoticizes difference to identify with the dominant culture. Middle-class urban Indian youth cultures 'other' regional ethnic cultures just as white American youth counterculture valorized and othered non-Western cultures. For middle-class urban Indian youth, folk music is the zone of pleasure that it accesses as a spectacular costume party. In an ambivalent fascination for 'authentic' values of the 'folk' similar to American countercultures, it succumbs to the authenticity-narrative with which world music is underwritten. In the imaginary of middle-class urban Indian youth, folk cultures are imbued with a vitality and authenticity that parental cultures are believed to lack. It opposes these parental cultures through a metropolitan appropriation of 'folk' values. Thus, middle-class urban Indian youth culture constitutes a "different, youthful, subjectivity" along generational lines rather than those of class or ethnicity, unlike British-Asian youth subcultures. But a move away from cultural essentialism in favour of elective identities similar to Vilayetibhangra may also be observed in the formation of middle-class urban youth subjectivities. As in Vilayeti-bhangra, middle-class urban Indian youth demonstrates that you don't have to be Punjabi to dance to bhangra. Besides, middle-class urban Indian youth, without intending to, deconstruct the cultural narrative of the nation and reverse its high/low hegemony. They displace nationalist projections of cosmo-

²⁶ Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), in Christopher Pinney, *Pleasure and the Nation* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001): 11.

politanism and regionalism by espousing the regional as both local and cosmopolitan. They thus oppose high-cultural hegemony with the folk-popular. In contrast to British bhangra, Indian bhangra's resistivity is restricted to a generational revolt against both the high and the popular cultural preferences of their parents. Inadvertently, it ends up dismantling several hegemonic centres. While its appropriation of American popular music in generational resistance would reconstruct the binary division of American/Indian, modern/traditional, popular/high, middle-class urban Indian youth's espousal of MTV-routed indigenous musics like bhangra embroils it in a national cultural politics.

The appeal of the American Dream is not restricted to urban middle-class Indian youth. 'The soteriological aura of American goods' has been as seductive to those faking want as those 'who suffer from actual material want.'²⁷ The images of abundance and material aspirations inscribed in American popular culture, circulated over MTV India, are shared by all regions and sections where they awaken a sensory response. Others access them indirectly through national channels and Hindi film music. In the process, bhangra reaches the majority of Indians as a hybridized music. If urban middle-class Indian youth turn to an exoticized bhangra as folk authenticity, working-class rural and urban youth recognize in it the vernacular voice, albeit defamiliarized. In a strange case of mutual cannibalization, as American-popular-culture-directed urban middle-class Indian youth turn to folk as authentic and natural, youth in both urban and rural working-class neighbourhoods mimic their movements in an attempt to appropriate privilege and status. Unlike middle-class urban Indian youth emulating an 'American' life-style, these youth repeat 'americanized' gestures in the process of imitating their urban, privileged counterparts. As working-class youth parody hybridized bhangra movements on Mumbai's streets and Bhatinda's wheatfields, they repeat them with a difference that reappropriates bhangra from its popular cultural location.

The cultural-imperialism thesis, in positing local audiences as mute spectators, denies them agency. Bhangra's marketing in the West depends on the exoticization of ethnicity and rusticity, which results in its being 'othered'. Middle-class urban Indian youth, too, become complicit in auto-exoticization, approaching bhangra as they do through the frame of American popular cul-

²⁷ Berndt Ostendorf, "Why is American Popular Culture so Popular? A View from Europe," 362.

ture. The appropriation of elements of American popular culture in working-class youth's performance of indigenous folk traditions, on the other hand, reverses the process of exoticization. The folk's incorporation of American cultural vocabulary in their repertoire makes a mockery of myths of purity and origin. Hybrid bhangra performed at the Ganesha festival or at any other celebration on a Mumbai street recovers for the folk tradition the robust energy and harvest-song origin that it loses as the global city's dance music. Thus, the mute object of cultural imperialism gains agency not only through the exercise of choice but also through use. Bhangra returns to India othered by American packaging. Working-class Indian youth open the same package, recovering it as its own. In the process, it transforms traditional culture as well as the invading alien culture. One would find as many working-class imitators of American youth subculture, rural and urban, as middle-class. But working-class earthiness recovers in bhangra the subcultural resistance attaching to American youth cultures as they reply to the classical, national narrative in a folk vernacular. While middle-class urban Indian youth might converge on bhangra in search of a lost folk 'authenticity', working-class youth redefine it in both a contemporary rural and an urban context. Middle-class urban Indian youth, in opposing received parental culture with an 'americanized' indigenous tradition, inadvertently collaborates with it in reinstating a marginalized regional vernacular, destabilizing national cultural hierarchies.

Simon Philo examines MTV against the cultural-imperialism debate, "Does MTV's near global reach necessarily signal the end for local, regional or national differences"? he asks, and sets out "to challenge the still widely-held premise that MTV's now global reach makes for a kind of Invasion of the Body Snatchers-scenario."²⁸ Agreeing with Seago that an americanized MTV culture has not been able to make inroads into the heart of India due to stiff competition by homegrown music channels, I would add that MTV itself has been forced to indigenize for the same reasons. MTV India, launched in 1994 as part of MTV Asia, has capitulated to Indian taste by switching over to a format dominated by Hindi film and peppered with small doses of regional and non-film music, much to the dismay of a segment of 'americanized' Indian youth. Except for the standard *Select* and the American show *Love Line*, MTV focuses on the homegrown music scene and local practi-

²⁸ Simon Philo, "Getting Dumber and Dumber: MTV's Global Footprint," Proceedings of the Second Cultural Studies Seminar, Ege University İzmir, Turkey, May 1997, MTV Online, <http://members.tripod.com/~warlight/PHILO.html> (accessed 12 February 2004).

tioners rather than Western stars. Fears of an American cultural invasion have been allayed by indigenous music channels' continuing domination of the popular-music sphere. Instead, the prime instrument of 'americanization', MTV, as "both symbol and carrier of an all-pervasive global pop culture dominated by Anglo-American products and tastes," has inadvertently become an agent of the reinvention of traditional Indian cultures. The arrival of MTV and the Star package caused regional and national indigenous channels to reinvent themselves and revamp their programming. Most of these channels appropriated Star and MTV's American format for an Indian audience and conditions in Indian languages.

When the satellite channels were introduced in the mid-1990s, it was assumed that globally focused, English-aspiring Indians would prefer to view Western-style programmes. This predicted viewership model directed MTV, the global music channel, to beam international pop and rock content. But MTV broadcasts turned out to be a major flop, compelling a shift in policy. Dominique Jackson in the *Guardian* in August 1994 suggested that its "new policy of tailoring output more closely to national markets" was the inevitable result "of commercial considerations, themselves born of sea-changes in political mood."²⁹ The Viacom-owned MTV's initial unwillingness to localize led to its parting ways with Star TV. MTV was forced to indigenize after competition from Rupert Murdoch's Channel V, which had abandoned the global pop ideology and announced its arrival in pure Hinglish "We are like this only." While condescending to play Indipop, MTV still refused to play Hindi film music. The sole winner in this was the low-budget Indian channel Zee TV, which captured the market because of its Hindi slant.³⁰ When MTV returned on its own, "it was western, but it did a flip and went Hindi," as Channel V Asia's managing director Steve Smith put it.³¹ MTV localized by getting the right Hindi English mix and gained critical mass. By 1999, seventy percent of its music was Hindi film music and the MTV success story was being hailed as a case study in *adaptation*, or a generic strategy against semi-

²⁹ Simon Philo, "Getting Dumber and Dumber."

³⁰ By early 1994, Zee's prime-time audience share in three metropolitan cities was up to 37%, compared to 39% combined share of Doordarshan National Network and Metro Channel, and a meager 8% combined share of the STAR platform.

³¹ Steve Smith, interview with Channel V Asia Managing Director Steve Smith, "I Expect a New Look Channel V by May 1999," *Indian CAB and SAT Reporter* 1.20 (8 February 1999), <http://www.indiantelevision.com/newsletter/080299/interview80299.htm> (accessed 11 February 2004).

globalization. David Flack, Senior Vice President of MTV Asia's Creative and Content Division, had learnt to sing the globalization tune the hard way by the end of the century.

Despite MTV being a global brand, we are local in approach. We reflect the taste and demands of our viewers and this differs in each market. Thus the need to create specific channels (in each country) that meet the needs of our target audience," he bravely announced at the C21 World Marketing Conference in 2000.³²

MTV was revitalized with the infusion of local culture; its accessibility to different audience catapulted its ratings. IRS (Indian Readership Survey) 2002 revealed an impact on the MTV's viewership and reach, which turned out to be thirty-six percent more than the second-placed channel. By 2003, MTV had gone completely 'filmi' and reportedly was not making much profit. One can visualize Vir Sanghvi's trademark smirk when he asks, "What happened to global rock and roll? What happened to Baywatch and The X Files?" He himself provides the answer: "India ignored all existing models of TV development and evolved its own."³³ Today, the programming on MTV is hardly different from that on other music channels, with the exception that the programmes are in English or Hinglish rather than Hindi or other regional languages. MTV also appears to be showcasing local, previously obscure, practitioners, which brings them mass popularity and helps the domestic music industry flourish. It not only brings local music out of obscurity locally, but also brings global visibility and recognition through events such as the MTV Asia awards. Kenny Santana begins with a teaser: "MTV is American? Think Again," and concludes: "It's a global brand that has turned local and is helping local music turn global."³⁴ Does the Birmingham-based bhangra practitioner Malkit Singh, who was recently knighted by the Queen, agree?

The thesis of American cultural globalization is also premised on a globalized market's appropriation of local voices and control of local industry through its vast resources. But 'the duped-native' theory appears too simplistic in this situation. On the face of it, diasporic practitioners might appear to be collaborating with a global music industry in cannibalizing the folk for

³² Kenny Santana, "MTV goes to Asia," *Yale Global* (12 August 2003), <http://www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/cultural/2003/0812mtv.htm> (accessed 12 February 2004).

³³ Vir Sanghvi, "Inventing Our Own Model," www.india-seminar.com/2003/521/521%20vir%20sanghvi.htm (accessed 12 February 2004).

³⁴ Kenny Santana, "MTV goes to Asia."

self-promotion or anthropologizing it for Western consumption. But the sonic collaborations between diasporic metropolitan and Punjabi folk practitioners reveal a mutual co-option that demystifies the 'duped-native' myth. Folk practitioners willingly consent to the hybridization of their music by diaspora practitioners in the hope of gaining global visibility. If the diasporic practitioner or global music industry appropriates folk voices as exotic or authentic, the native practitioner seems only too happy to play along and be party to his self-exoticization as a marketing move. Bhangrascape is a space of mutual co-option and cannibalization refuting the victim and victimizer fallacy. Bhangra practitioners resist within and despite their participation in global sonic commerce.

The postmodern space has made room for native voices. But the native is allowed to speak only as the Other. A new ethnography is at work, often replicating the ethnographer/native collaborator nexus, in anthropologizing and archaizing the native. The native is once more subjected to the ethnographic gaze, which renders him speechless by appropriating or mediating his voice. The bhangra practitioner is 'the native in his frame' defamiliarized by being plunged into a foreign setting that essentializes his difference. The camera juxtaposes him with these images and decontextualizes the native practitioner to articulate his foreignness. The turban, the beard, and the bhangra costume are obvious ethnic signifiers standing out against the metropolitan ambience of the setting. In the absence of these visible identity-markers, skin colour and bodily structure are highlighted to signify ethnic difference. The subordination of the lyrics to the sound and the beat in contemporary bhangra texts inserts Punjabi into an alien context that proclaims its foreignness. As lyrics cease to signify meaning, they can safely be replaced in the remixes with English.

Bhangra legends locked in their frames and silhouetted against a modern Euro-American background appear to be denuded of dignity and interiority. Embedded in a discourse of otherness to pander to the West's fantasies of the self, the native practitioner redefines the self within this space. He follows a smart strategy for resisting his objectification. By doing the unexpected, by refusing to remain 'within the frame', he inserts himself forcefully in the global cultural space. Although the folk practitioner might participate in the game of the American popular-culture industry, he makes sure that the game is played on his terms. The folk practitioner uses the outsider's ignorance to protect his personal space. Consenting to play the game by its rules, he nevertheless exploits the outsider's ignorance of native traditions to set new rules.

He might insert a pure folk composition in a hybridized setting or compose a hybridized text when required to pander to metropolitan yearnings for purity. Singing in his own language and improvising his own dance steps, the folk practitioner exploits the global space made available to him to gain global visibility for himself and his music. Having gained a foothold in this space by agreeing to hybridize, it is not long before he has the world dancing to pure folk tunes. The myth of the native practitioner exploited by global musical giants is refuted by the practitioner's manipulation of the global popular cultural space to corner a larger share of the market than his regional location would allow. The practitioner, while making cosmetic alterations to adapt to global tastes, remains grounded in a specific indigenous musical heritage. The American popular-cultural format attempts to contain the native's voice in the discourse of otherness. But this voice breaks through at several moments to insert itself powerfully into the spaces of the self as an otherness redefining the self. The American popular cultural format has made him sound like an exotic curiosity, but the native is certainly speaking to those who can understand his language. Bhangra beat sounds inclusive, but bhangra's Punjabi lyrics lock into a Punjabi space protected from the outsider's profane gaze. Placing Punjabi difference in lyrical untranslatability, the bhangra practitioner speaks to the Punjabi folk. The outsider eavesdrop on Punjabis 'talking that talk', in which the outsider becomes the object of the native's gaze. Despite the attempt to recast bhangra in an American vocabulary, bhangra retains its folk and regional specificity in its Punjabi lyrics and ritualized movements, and continues to speak to the folk.

The prospect of a global musical conglomerate driving local competition out of business is reversed by the emergence of a local music industry cashing in on bhangra's popularity. The model of a single producer imposing national cultural agendas on many gullible consumers is disturbed by the presence of a strong local music industry controlling and dominating the Indian music market. Like MTV, transnational musical giants like Sony control a very small proportion of the huge Indian music market. The signing of bhangra stars by such international giants might have converted them into global brand names. But it was also feared that they would sacrifice artistic and musical integrity in the interests of marketability. As pointed out earlier, native practitioners managed to retain their integrity within the constraints imposed by a gigantic music mart. But they also found an alternative to their commodification and anthropologization by launching their own labels. Bally Sagoo, often accused of complying with international music trends and markets, not only

promotes his own music under his label *ishqrecords* but also showcases new ethnic talent in a move to sidestep the music market's hegemonic structures. If a practitioner like Bally Sagoo manages to resist within the market system, the music market itself demonstrates democratizing trends. The bhangra music market today is dominated by a virtual newcomer in the Indian music industry called T Series, which broke into the monopolistic Indian music market by creating and exploiting a niche for regional music and musical genres neglected by the music industry leader SAREGAMA HMV. Although T Series is often accused of indulging in unethical practices, its growth path charts a musical success story which challenged other national and global monopolistic structures. While SAREGAMA HMV concentrated on traditional Hindi film music segment, T Series India diversified into new popular music segments led by bhangra. Before SAREGAMA could say *shava shava*, T Series had created and cornered a huge regional music market. T Series' strategy for taking on the national behemoth was large volumes and low pricing as a step toward musical democratization. T Series' low-priced cassettes, which brought recordings (copied or printed) of global as well as Indian practitioners within the reach of the average Indian consumer, percolated through to the working classes as 'americanized' regional music. Few Indians could afford to buy Nusrat Futeh Ali Khan under the world music label. But they could listen to his re-recorded mixes as well as those of other world-music practitioners in a single music cassette for a fraction of the cost. Thus, the diffusion of American cultural values in India took place though a little-known Delhi-based music company owned by a former owner of a fruit-juice stall.

T Series' marketing strategy, like youthful preferences, disturbed several hegemonic structures. Its turning to regional and folk music to capture a niche market heralded the arrival of regional folk, primarily bhangra, on the national cultural scene, giving Hindi film music a run for its money. Its cost-saving measure of avoiding stars made the reputations of numerous little-known bhangra practitioners. Finally, its uncanny ability to tune in to the musical tastes of the Indian masses translated hybrid popular musical genres into a familiar popular dialect. In this process, T Series reclaimed the 'othered' bhangra of American popular cultural space for the Indian masses making it its own, albeit transformed by alien influences. Having instilled in the Indian masses a taste for both folk and hybrid bhangra mutants, T Series today is seen experimenting with bhangra remixes to grab a share of the global remix industry. In providing visibility to practitioners better known in India than

globally, T Series also defeats the authenticity cult promoted by the global music industry by privileging practitioners who fit in with global trends and agendas. T Series, like the native practitioner, enters the global space to wrest 'othered' indigenous cultural forms back for the Indian masses and disturbs the space through its economics rather than politics. The fear of an alien cultural invasion proves unfounded because indigenous music companies like T Series defeat the global giants' hegemonic intentions by undercutting their prices. The flooding of the Indian market by music produced by indigenous companies deconstructs the model of one global producer and many local consumers and the notion of unidirectional flows. The availability of locally produced music ensures that the tastes of the Indian masses are not dictated by a multi-billion-dollar American conglomerate. Instead, the local market shapes the global market, altering global taste-hierarchies in the process. The professed localization of American transnationals translates into a true indigenization as local musical preferences influence the composition of American popular culture. The presence of a vibrant local industry also ensures its autonomy. A transnational American popular culture would remain confined to certain local taste groups while the masses would remain free to exercise their preference for particular forms of music and stars through their purchasing power. Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo would have to play second fiddle to homegrown stars like Daler Mehndi or Pammi Bai.

Though bhangra has played a crucial role in the redefinition of Asian ethnicities in the UK, Canada, and the USA, it can redefine the popular cultural space only after its mainstreaming. As Andy Bennet points out, bhangra's impact in Euroamerican locations is greater in areas with concentrations of Asian immigrant populations than in the rest. It percolates through to the larger white majority and other minority groups only as it enters the mainstream. Bhangra's participation in black musical culture made it acceptable to white audiences to whom black music, as opposed to Asian music, has always seemed the core of American popular culture. Musical collaborations between bhangra and reggae, rap, and hip-hop practitioners or remixed versions of bhangra have been a major reason for its mainstreaming. Even those ignorant of its specific roots might have encountered it in reggae, rap or hip-hop remixes.

But bhangra underwent a transformation from an 'Asian noise' to an international sound when Asian bhangra practitioners became names to be reckoned with on the pop charts or were included in main, rather than special, categories. Since bhangra first resurged in Britain, the UK charts are the first

reflection of bhangra's mainstreaming. The first Asian practitioner to cross over into the mainstream was Apache Indian as the first and only Asian practitioner to have ever been nominated for a National Brit Award. His Top Twenty hit single "Arranged Marriage" was voted 'Best Contemporary Song' by the British Academy of Songwriters, Composers & Authors in 1993. But bhangra's incursion into American popular culture occurred via American film and television. Apache Indian's hit "Boomschackalak" has been used in fifteen world national TV commercials (including *Lynx*, featuring Jennifer Aniston) and five Hollywood films, including *Dumb and Dumber*. The current popularity of Bollywood and Indian diasporic films has introduced the American and the global audience to filmed versions of bhangra. The three diasporic hits of a decade ago, *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *Bend it like Beckham* (2002), and *Bollywood Hollywood* (2002), depend heavily on bhangra and other Punjabi music. Bollywood also transmits bhangra movements globally through Bollywood films' mandatory bhangra number, such as *shava shava* in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) or *mahi re* in *Kaante* (2002). Bhangra traced a circuitous route to the USA, mostly through hip-hop. Following the influx of West Indians, desis from Trinidad and Guyana, it is not surprising that it became big at the same time dancehall broke into the USA and was assimilated into the American soundscape through sampling and remixes just as rap and dancehall was.

Bhangra's separation from black music, its acquisition of a distinctly Asian voice, and its incorporation by pop practitioners like Jay-Z, Britney Spears, and Ricky Martin signals another phase in its boomeranging on the American popular cultural scene. As Britney Spears, once the most visible icon of American popular culture, hip-hops to a bhangra tune, bhangra could be said have ingrained itself in a global American popular cultural imagination. The first bhangra hit to cross over to the mainstream in the USA was England's Punjabi MC's international hit "Mundian to bach ke." It reached the top twenty on the rhythmic Top-Forty airplay chart and was the thirty-seventh most-listened-to song in the country in mid-May 2003, moving subsequently into the top five. When Jay-Z rapping over Punjabi MC's "Mundian to bach ke" in *Beware of the Boys* is hailed as a "new sound imported to US pop airwaves" the reverse flows have truly begun. But *Beware of the Boys* is also believed to have increased the sales of Punjabi MC's album. *Beware of the Boys* was described as 'the ultimate postmodern pastiche – an americanized version of contemporary bhangra music, which is itself an anglicized version

of traditional Indian folk music.”³⁵ This could be cited as an example of reverse flows, as a rustic Punjabi music, in the process of being americanized, returns to the American popular cultural mainstream to transform its character. Bhangra’s global flows from the Punjabi village to America across the UK enable it to participate in the USA’s domestic politics as Jay-Z mixes his Brooklyn braggadocio with antiwar sentiments in “Beware of the Boys.” The invasion argument appears to cut both ways, because, if American popular culture has ‘invaded’ others’ spaces, its own cultural space has also been ‘othered’ in the process. The coverage in *Time Out New York* of *Basement Bhangra*, a popular South Asian-oriented party started by DJ Rekha, a pioneer on the local Asian underground scene with DJ Joy, testifies to the bhangraization of the Manhattan cityscape.

The scene inside S.O.B.’s would seem unusual even to the most been-around-the-block New Yorker: A multitude of men in traditional Punjabi turbans and Tommy Hilfiger shirts throwing down with an equal number of beautiful South Asian women to indigenous Indian music overlaid with pounding, bass-heavy beats. Meanwhile, Japanese clubbers, dreadlocked hip-hoppers, art-school kids and a range of other downtown types dance feverishly, with arms and legs flailing. Is this an off-the-hook mixer for the children of UN delegates? Nope. You’ll find it on the first Thursday of each month at the Basement Bhangra party (the next one falls on Thursday 7).³⁶

American popular culture is no longer to be confused with the Anglo-American axis; it comes from everywhere and anywhere.

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³⁵ Bas Dreisinger, “Hip-hop by Way of India,” *The Times* (8 June 2003), <http://www.calendarlive.com/printedition/calendar/suncal/cl-ca-> (accessed 8 February 2004).

³⁶ Sage Meridith Jacobs, “The Big Bhangra Theory: A Cross-Cultural Crew Digs the Subcontinental Groove Basement Bhangra,” *Time Out New York* 259 (September 7–14 2000), <http://www.timeoutny.com/clubs/259/259.clubs.opener.bhangra.html> (accessed 12 February 2004).

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“Trading Places in the Promised Lands”¹

—— Indian Pilgrimage Paradigms
in Postcolonial Travel Narratives

DOROTHY LANE

THE VATICAN DECLARED 2000 TO BE THE ‘YEAR OF THE PILGRIM’, calling upon Roman Catholics to engage in a religiously motivated journey. But such apparently easy allusions to ‘pilgrimage’ suggest multiple meanings, specifically located in particular faith traditions, cultures, and spaces. In the afterword to *Mapping the Sacred* – subtitled “Keeping Our Feet on the Ground and Our Heads Up” – Gareth Griffiths states that ideas of sacred space are “tied directly to the recovery of the importance of physical land,” which “mixes the categories of the material and the spiritual.”² He concludes:

Across the numerous differences among postcolonial societies and the various people [...] who share these lands and landscapes, literary and other representations of the practices of ritual, the construction of sacred spaces, and linkages between these ritual practices and specific material locations offer powerful *topoi* for [...] fruitful research.³

¹ Sarah MacDonald, “Trading Places in the Promised Lands,” in MacDonald, *Holy Cow: An Indian Adventure* (New York: Broadway, 2002): 164 (chapter title).

² Gareth Griffiths, “Afterword: Postcoloniality, Religion, Geography: Keeping Our Feet On the Ground and Our Heads Up,” in *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography, and Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. Jamie S. Scott & Paul Simpson-Housley (Cross/Cultures 48; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2001): 446.

³ Griffiths, “Afterword: Postcoloniality, Religion, Geography,” 460–61.

It is intriguing how the expression “feet on the ground and heads up” overlaps with the aims of postcolonial reading and writing strategies, and ideas of pilgrimage.

This essay examines pilgrimage paradigms in two contemporary travel narratives from settler–invader cultures: the Canadian writer Sylvia Fraser’s *The Rope in the Water* (2001) and the Australian writer Sarah MacDonald’s *Holy Cow* (2002). Initially, I was fascinated and dismayed by the Western preoccupation with India as the focus of pilgrimage accounts, suggesting the continuing construction of India as ‘Oriental’. I have drawn the image of ‘trading places’ from Sarah MacDonald’s book, but I also deliberately allude to Orientalism as both attitude and policy – conflating commercial and cultural aims and products – of English governors in India; the British East India Company translated and transported aspects of India to England with their accumulated wealth.⁴ Three decades ago, Edward Said argued that the label ‘Orient’ “is *for* the European observer,” and is “a place of pilgrimage,”⁵ and Steve Clark describes this as “an over-determined term, which conflates empirical reference to the biblical domain; a residual context of medieval journeying; and an internalization of this as spiritual quest.”⁶ Travel narratives from settler–invader cultures seem to hit a resounding and disappointing single note: recounting internal speculation and external journey, death and rebirth, loss and recovery; and simultaneously appropriating India materially for the ‘home culture’. But the conjunction of what Griffiths terms “ritual practices and specific material locations” also offers an opportunity for re-examination of these labels and their articulations.

Western scholarship and pedagogy repeatedly focuses on the geographical space of the subcontinent as ‘Sacred India’.⁷ Indian religions are still char-

⁴ On 31 December 1600, Queen Elizabeth I signed a charter granting monopoly to “The Honourable Company of Men Trading in the East Indies” who were competing with the Dutch for control of trade. By 1623, their interest shifted to India, and they obtained concessions from Mughal Emperor Jahangir to establish a trading post and factory (storehouse) at Surat. Throughout the seventeenth century, they built factories around the coast – Madras in 1640, Bombay in 1665, and Kalikata (Calcutta) in 1690.

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978): 158 (emphasis in the original).

⁶ Steve Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, ed. Steve Clark (London: Zed, 1999): 11.

⁷ See, for instance, the description of the University of Saskatchewan’s study-abroad programme – “India 2006” – at <http://www.usask.ca/reilst/India/courses.html>, and the syllabus for “Sacred Sites of India.”

acterized as irrational, mystical – emphasizing “religious knowledge gained by means of an extraordinary experience or revelation of the divine.”⁸ In religious scholarship, “the West is liberal, egalitarian, secular and modern, whereas Indian culture is authoritarian, hierarchical, religious and traditional”; India is “mystically inclined, is quietistic, otherworldly and lacking a social orientation.”⁹ Even the labels used to identify Indian religious expressions are based on Western constructions; Richard King concludes:

what is required [...] is an attempt to think across or beyond traditional Orientalist representations – to ‘transgress the boundaries’ imposed by normative Western models of ‘religion.’¹⁰

The account of pilgrimage, its underlying assumptions, is potentially based on a comparable ‘thinking across’ – a visible grappling with translation and cross-cultural dialogue.

The meaning of ‘pilgrimage’, however, differs according to culture, place, and language, despite the fact that the Sanskrit term *tirtha-yatra* is invariably translated into English as ‘pilgrimage’. Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj acknowledges that the travels of pilgrims to sacred sites “have given meaning to India as a cultural entity,” and he also states that “The concept of pilgrimage exists in all major religions, although [...] its meaning varies widely within the canonical structure of each religion.”¹¹ Even within the Indian subcontinent, there are multiple ideas of pilgrimage and sites, though these are often conflated in narratives and studies. Recent studies such as *Pilgrims, Patrons, and Place: Localizing Sanctity in Asian Religions* (2003) use the English word but underscore its local meanings.

The English term ‘pilgrimage’ derives from the Latin *peregrine*, suggesting emphasis on the ‘foreign’ or ‘strange’. In one recent pilgrimage guide, Phil Cousineau argues that

another derivation, more poetic, reveals that *pilgrim* has its roots in the Latin *per agrium*, ‘through the field.’ This ancient image suggests a curious soul who

⁸ Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire*, 7.

⁹ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the ‘Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999): 32.

¹⁰ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 210.

¹¹ Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography* (1973; New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, rev. ed. 2003): dedication, and 1.

walks beyond known boundaries, crosses fields, touching the earth with a destination in mind and a purpose in heart.¹²

Cousineau's definition presumes 'pilgrim' as a 'universal' term describing a horizontal, individual journey from familiar to foreign territory, although it emphasizes that "any traveler can transform any journey into pilgrimage."¹³ In fact, the foreword to this guide by Huston Smith explicitly obscures the idea in diverse places and traditions:

Travel brings a special kind of wisdom if one is open to it. [...] With its phantasmagoric, kaleidoscopic character laid bare, we see [the outward scene] for what it truly is – perpetually perishing *maya* – and the world loses its wager. We can understand how perpetual wandering can be a spiritual vocation, as with dedicated pilgrims and *sannyasins*.¹⁴

On the other hand, the Sanskrit term *tirtha-yatra* alludes to both horizontal and vertical crossings, as well as individual and social enterprises. It can be translated as 'undertaking [a] journey to river fords' – where the 'river ford' is a threshold between material and immaterial worlds. The term has been associated with external places – such as rivers, running waters, hot springs, hills, and forests – and with an internal state. The literature articulating Indian *tirtha-yatra* is comparably extensive: epic and Puranic texts; medieval works based on the *Puranas*; travel writing by Christian missionaries; descriptive and analytical works by twentieth-century scholars; pilgrims' guides; gazetteers and reports; and pilgrim registers kept at various sites.¹⁵ The *Mahabharata*, for instance, describes a "grand pilgrimage of almost the whole of present India."¹⁶ One can acquire religious merit by *darshan*, visiting a holy person, singing devotional songs, and bathing in life-giving waters.¹⁷ *Tirtha-*

¹² Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (Boston MA: Conari, 1998): 13–14.

¹³ Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*, xxvi.

¹⁴ Huston Smith, "Foreword" to Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*, xi.

¹⁵ Bhardwaj describes the missionary literature from the nineteenth century as "primitive ethnology with strong biases" (*Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*, 20).

¹⁶ Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*, 56.

¹⁷ Bhardwaj identifies the main purposes of *tirtha-yatra* in Hinduism as *yatra* – translated as 'undertaking' the journey itself; *darshana* – translated as 'visiting the deity' (*Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*, 153); and *snana* – bathing in sacred waters. The site can also coincide with an 'ashram' – an abode or residence, usually of a saint, holy person, sadhu; these ashrams usually incorporate some form of religious education, and writers note that contribution or payment is required to engage in these activities. Bhardwaj notes that at

yatra can allow people unusual social interaction, though boundaries are often drawn at the sites themselves. *Tirtha* is sometimes interpreted as a place of vertical passage from *samsara* – the cycle of death and reincarnation – to liberation or *moksha*. The *tirtha* can be regarded as a threshold of both downward and upward crossing: the gods descend so that pilgrims can ascend. But Bhardwaj notes that the *Puranas* refer to "truth, forgiveness, control of senses, kindness to all living beings and simplicity" as *tirthas*, thus not requiring any physical journey at all. In addition, *darshan* itself has been variously described as an experience of the god, communion, or physical viewing of a saint, avatar, or icon.

The association of *tirtha-yatra* primarily with extensive horizontal journey to a place associated with vertical crossing intersects with ritualized Hinduism, and absorption of local cults. Hindu *tirtha-yatra*, in effect, mapped the subcontinent by marking its geographical margins, but Bhardwaj notes that "the central and northeastern forested plateau regions may have been unfavourable areas for religious as well as commercial interaction."¹⁸ He states:

The number of *Hindu* sanctuaries in India is so large and the practice of pilgrimage so ubiquitous that the whole of India can be regarded as a vast sacred space organized into a system of pilgrimage centres and their fields.¹⁹

Hardwar and Rishikesh, the pilgrimage site incorporates religious education, rest houses, medical aid, motorized boat rental, charitable works, publications, medicines. There are seven sacred cities in Hindu India: Varanasi and Hardwar on the Ganges; Ayodhya (birthplace of Rama); Mathura (birthplace of Krishna); Dwarka (place where Krishna was made king); Kanchipuram (Shaivite temple city); Ujjain, site of the Kumbha Mela festival held every twelve years. Hindus also believe that it is significant to journey to the four divine 'abodes' at cardinal compass points of India's mythological map: Badrinath, Puri, Rameshwaram, and Dwarka.

¹⁸ Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*, 56.

¹⁹ Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*, 7 (my emphasis). Bhardwaj notes that the act of pilgrimage is only generally mentioned in Vedas, though mountains, rivers are identified as sacred spaces. The epic *Mahabharata* has pilgrimage sections (350 BC) and mentions some three hundred sites; the *Puranas* (second–fifteenth centuries AD) increase the list of sacred sites. In the *Mahabharata*, the association of 'tirtha' with water enlarges to allude to any sacred place. Tirthas are mostly places where a god is reputed to have dwelled or visited, but also includes saintly people, temples; this could be up to two thousand sites. In general, there is a focus on Four Dhams or Divine Abodes at four compass points; Seven Sacred Cities; temples; Kumbh Mela sites; Vaishnava sites; temples of planets; seven sacred rivers.

Thus, both ‘pilgrimage’ and *tirtha-yatra* can suggest practical incentives and material results. In both articulations, extensive journey through material space often attracts the population with greater social and economic mobility. The Western translation of ‘*tirtha-yatra*’ may prescribe a ‘grand tour’ of India – simultaneously echoing the ‘Grand Tour’ required of the scholar in early modern Europe. Again, India is often pre-written as pilgrimage site; for instance, Martin Gray’s *Places of Peace and Power: Teachings from a Pilgrim’s Journey* identifies the tradition as strong in India, and refers also to Diana Eck’s *Banaras: City of Light* as a source of information.

One feature of Western pilgrimage that distinguishes it from Indian articulations is its apparent fixation on both undertaking the journey and writing about it. While the focus of the pilgrim is often individual communion or release, it clearly involves collective action and interaction, in effect ensuring repetition of the cycle of death, rebirth, and textual reincarnation. The pilgrimage account suggests several internal contradictions: the narrator as both witness and participant; self-presentation as both liar and truth-teller; what Cousineau terms both a “presence of place”²⁰ and written reconstruction that effectively undermines it. The account narrates a crossing in the past, even though pilgrimage itself demands attention to the present moment. Cousineau summarizes:

How can we capture time when we come home? Complete your journal. Finalize your sketches. Create an original style of photograph album that *enshrines* your journey. [...] Ask yourself if you feel like *you are a different person*.²¹

As Clark argues,

the narrative voice places the action in the past [...] but that past itself has a future which is the temporal progression of the journey, and which can never be regarded as simply synonymous with the older self.²²

Some articulations of Western and Indian notions associate material contribution with spiritual benefit; the medieval idea was equated with payment of indulgences, while Hindu ideas often equated donation to priests with acquisition of merit. The Protestant Reformation in Europe – similar to reforms in

²⁰ Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*, 183.

²¹ Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*, 225. (Emphases mine.) He speculates: “*Maybe we die twice. Once when our heart stops. Again when the living stop telling stories about us*” (232).

²² Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire*, 13–14.

India downplaying or eliminating the role of priest – effectively ‘secularized’ the pilgrimage; religious leaders criticized the notion of paying indulgences, but commercial vendors still promoted purchase of religious icons and material tokens at sites.

The pilgrimage account is one of the earliest types of European travel narrative. It incorporates practical information, advice for future travellers, and entertainment.²³ Barbara Korte notes:

travel writing is defined by the interaction of the human subject with the world. Naturally, this world will be ‘foreign,’ but the traveler’s own country may equally be the object of his or her investigation. Accounts of travel let us participate in acts of (inter)cultural perception and cultural construction, in processes of understanding and misunderstanding.²⁴

The pilgrimage became “a highly organized affair and mobilized a fairly large proportion of the populace” in medieval Europe.²⁵ By the thirteenth century there were published pilgrim’s guides to sites such as Santiago de Compostela and Canterbury. Mandeville’s *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* – dated 1332 – was regarded as factual until the sixteenth century, especially its depictions of spaces made familiar by texts such as the Christian Bible. Early European pilgrimage accounts, however, “are particularly uniform and [...] hardly record the experience of a foreign, an ‘other’ world, at all”; “holy lands” were already made familiar by “holy stories,” the end of the journey always known,

²³ Clark notes that the “travel narrative is addressed to the home culture; by its very nature, however, that to which it refers cannot be verified, hence the ready and habitual equation of traveller and liar [...] Yet this classification of precisely observed particulars remains in close conjunction with parody, high fantasy: the credibility of imaginary voyagers such as More and Swift depends on a kind of hyper-empiricism” (*Travel Writing and Empire*, 1–2). Thus, he argues,

the genre presents a problem for academic studies. It seems too dependent on an empirical rendition of contingent events, what happened to happen, for entry into the literary canon, yet too overly rhetorical for disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, geography, or history. [...] Over the last two decades, however, post-colonial studies has seized on upon this very impurity of the form as an exemplary record of cross-cultural encounters between European and non-European peoples. Its powerful and innovative models of reading have made the question of travel inseparable from that of power and desire: asking not only, who shall be the master, but also what does the master want? (2)

²⁴ Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, tr. Catherine Matthias (Houndmills: Palgrave, 1996): 5.

²⁵ Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, 23.

and curiosity was regarded as a suspect motive for pilgrimage.²⁶ In works such as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, personal reaction is evaded by references to the traveller in the third person:

the holy places are given more significance than the act of traveling itself. Consequently, the narration of the pilgrim's journey is subordinated to the description of places and a relation to the [past] holy stories associated with them.²⁷

Only as Mandeville's narrator visits the "Far East" does curiosity become clearly evident.²⁸

The distinction between the pilgrimage guide and the literary travel narrative is disregarded by writers such as Cousineau, who seeks the "telltale patterns" of "pilgrims" as diverse as the biblical Abraham, Basho, Saint Jerome, Chaucer, Dante, Thomas Merton, Ray Kinsella, and Isak Dinesen. Cousineau states that his own guide is in that tradition: "At the heart of this book," he claims, "is the belief that virtually any traveler can transform any journey into pilgrimage with a commitment to finding something sacred along the road."²⁹

The reinscription of the pilgrimage – especially in Western accounts of travel to India – can obviously be read as complicit in imperialist and neo-imperialist practices, potentially appropriating territory as prescribed. The travel narrative is invariably addressed to the home culture, assumes a return to that culture, and cannot be verified as fact; therefore, it is often regarded as an "exemplary record of cross-cultural encounters."³⁰ The so-called hyper-empiricism of the account often invites self-parody, and "the ready and habitual equation of traveler and liar."³¹ As Clark argues, the genre intersects with other significant discourses of imperialism:

bureaucratic instruction, demographic report, geographic mapping, military order, journalistic propaganda... and the journey itself encodes inevitable ideological aspects: spiritual pilgrimage... mercantile prospects... mercenary campaign... colonial expedition... the self-reflexivity of the journey/quest motif, its

²⁶ *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, 26, 23.

²⁷ Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, 23. Korte notes that *curiositas* was regarded as a suspect motive during medieval times. Even in accounts of Palestine, the land already is made familiar by other texts, especially the Bible; in fact, the place does not appear to exist as significant in the present tense.

²⁸ In this portion, the travels of Marco Polo and William of Rubruck – who had no prescribed itineraries – are drawn on.

²⁹ Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*, xxvi.

³⁰ Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire*, 2.

³¹ *Travel Writing and Empire*, 1.

intricate layering of temporalities; and its allegorical resonances with regard to the traveler's own culture.³²

Western pilgrimage accounts of India promote unity and conformity, even as they uphold individualism and challenge to central authority by the pilgrim.³³

The ambivalence increases when a narrator is female, although travel writing to some extent presumes economic superiority and mobility. Some scholars have argued that women's travel writing is more empathetic, and focuses on somatic reactions. Thus,

The ways in which [women's travel narratives choose] to conform, exploit or resist within the framework of [social] forces leads to a textual and lived individuality outside the binarisms associated both with traveller as coloniser and man as coloniser.³⁴

³² *Travel Writing and Empire*, 3. Clark notes that, according to Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992), for instance, the collective European subject displays an "obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself" (6): a model of power precisely mirrored in the patterns of signification internal to the text" (5). Pratt begins with the overall question: "How has travel writing produced the rest of the world for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist trajectory" (5).

³³ The term 'Orientalism' is explained by Said thus:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. [...] The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.

— Said, *Orientalism*, 1, 5.

³⁴ Wendy S. Mercer, "Gender and Genre in Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing: Leonie d'Aunet and Xavier Marmier," in *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, ed. Steven H. Clark (London & New York: Zed, 1999): 163. Clark notes that "female travel writers were a comparative rarity before the nineteenth century, and almost exclusively aristocratic" (*Travel Writing and Empire*, 19). Wendy Mercer studies two female nineteenth-century travel writers, and raises the expectation that such writing should be distinctive:

Feminists have argued that the pretended objectivity of scientific discourse, its deliberate distance from the object of study, and the conspicuous absence of the bodily specificity of the author are based on the assumption that the specificity of the (male) author is the standard or "norm" against which all "others" may be measured [...] Where travel writing by women exists, we would therefore expect to find a different "feminine" set of values appearing in the text: the boundaries between subject and surroundings would be less clear, "objective" analysis would give way to involvement, mind to

Even apparently postcolonial texts are not free of the imperialist assumptions of traditional European pilgrimage accounts. Narratives by settler-invasader writers such as *The Rope in the Water* and *Holy Cow* trace remarkably similar journeys to each other, conflating multiple notions of 'pilgrimage' and *tirtha-yatra*, and even visiting identical geographical areas of India. Fraser's *A Rope in the Water* begins with psychic dislocation sparked by recollection of sexual abuse by the pilgrim's father, and ends with recovery of the memory of dead relatives and friends; MacDonald's *Holy Cow* begins with a reluctant return to India "for love," and ends with a return to Australia anticipating the birth of a child. Both narratives describe second journeys to India, re-inscribing territory explored at earlier stages in the narrators' lives.

But the subtitles of the books immediately suggest distinct revisions of the typical pilgrimage account – Fraser's is subtitled *A Pilgrimage to India* and MacDonald's is *An Indian Adventure*. MacDonald explicitly parodies the pilgrimage account, as well as ideas of liberation, enlightenment, and rebirth that are treated more earnestly in books such as Fraser's and Cousineau's. Not surprisingly, then, Fraser's text has been criticized as repeating Orientalist construction,³⁵ MacDonald's has been both commended as refreshingly irreverent, and censured as self-indulgent, and even offensive.

body. There would be a refusal to prioritise and judge or to measure and order; this would constitute an example of what Hélène Cixous terms "écriture féminine."

— Mercer, "Gender and Genre in Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing," 148.

³⁵ See, for instance, the description of the session "Pilgrimages to India" – which brought together the writers Anita Rau Badami, Sylvia Fraser, and Pramila Jayapal with the moderator Sabita Majid in Vancouver, 20 October 2001. After Fraser told her experience of the miraculous rope in the water, Badami noted that

she is unable 'see' her country as a visitor can. An Indian, she claims, is busy trying to live 'without drowning or dying while catching a bus' among other daily concerns. For her, religion is 'almost in the realm of fiction,' as she was raised in a Hindu household, but received a Catholic education.

Moreover, Jayapal's book, titled *Pilgrimage to India*, is an intriguing revision of the pilgrim account, since it addresses the practical issues of women and children. Having made her "pilgrimage," she was aware that, "unlike the women around her, she knew she was privileged because she had the option of leaving and returning to her comfortable home in the States." Both the NRI writers and members of the audience stressed that

characterizations of India as possessing a unique spiritual connectedness are certainly questionable, in light of caste and religious divisions. Moderator Majid asked the authors' views on the North American sense of community, to which Fraser quickly answered that catastrophic events seem necessary for this to emerge. Her statement

In both accounts, the narrator alternates between witness and participant roles – in some places adopting an ethnographic perspective, and in others concentrating on reactions, feelings, and their own physical responses. Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* underscores the "specularity of imperial ownership and the assimilation of otherness"; for Greenblatt, "seeing is not merely seeing: it is, in this context, 'witnessing' – an act implying a special social function and gravity."³⁶ Moreover, the 'time-lag' between the act of seeing and recording of the journey undermines its self-presentation as 'pilgrimage guide'. The witness is also a participant in various courses, programmes, and acts of worship that draw attention to internal contradictions.

Fraser's text more earnestly imitates the prescribed 'pilgrimage guide' by including maps, glossary, and bibliography – including the *Lonely Planet Guide* and Western ethnographic studies. Her recorded discussions with vari-

was emotionally charged, and took the audience [...] aback. To prevent the discussion from taking a dangerous turn, the moderator soon posed a different question. The discussion was shifted away from opinions on recent world events, and back to perceptions of India.

— The Simon Fraser student newspaper published this review online: www.peak.sfu.ca/the-peak/2001-3/issue9/ar-pilgrim.html

³⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991): 35. Brian Musgrove underscores the connection of travel writing and imperialism:

travel is [in some narratives] the key operation, in language and fact, that makes the colonial adventure possible. This somewhat monocular view which itself seeks to explain the one-eyedness of eurocentric representations, is underscored by what I call an environmental concern for the humanist mindscape – 'look at how we have blighted worlds of otherness.' (And in so doing, parenthetically observe how we have polluted our own intellectual streams of consciousness.)

— Musgrove, "Travel and Unsettlement: Freud on Vacation," in *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, ed. Steven H. Clark (London & New York: Zed, 1999): 32. Musgrove refers to Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions*, in which he

withdraws briefly from historical complexities to consider the specularity of imperial ownership and the assimilation of otherness to European culture. In so doing, Greenblatt refers to 'the primal act of witnessing around which virtually the entire discourse of travel is constructed.' [Greenblatt] continues: 'Everything in the European dream of possession rests on witnessing understood as a form of significant and representative seeing' (Greenblatt 1991: 122).

— Musgrove, "Travel and Unsettlement," 34–35. Thus, for Greenblatt, seeing is "witnessing"— an act that, for Musgrove, implies "a special social function and gravity" (35).

ous people often sound much like staged interviews.³⁷ She opens with the statement that her “purpose in traveling to India was to spiritually transform myself.”³⁸ As she explains, “I was born into a staunchly Protestant family” and favoured “the pragmatic, the rational and the intellectual” (xiii–xiv). This pragmatism is altered when she “spontaneously” recalls sexual abuse by her father, and subsequently has paranormal experiences. Her “strong ego-for-tress” becomes imprisoning and she therefore decides to go on a “quest” for “spiritual renewal” (xv). The book narrates the dismantling of that “fortress” but ultimately upholds the status quo. In addressing the practical problem of encounter with material India and return to Canada, Fraser explains:

I intended to approach India less as a geographical location than as a fabulous dream in which everything that happens does so for the purpose of teaching me something of value. (xvi)

MacDonald’s text parodies the *Lonely Planet*, especially when one of her Australian friends threatens to include their house in the guide as a “sanctuary of sanity, my safe house on the other side of the looking glass, where things are in their place.”³⁹ The controversy around *Holy Cow* results primarily from MacDonald’s sometimes glib and judgmental descriptions of Indian religions and cultures, though she does not reserve that tone for India, but invariably turns it on herself and eventually on her culture.⁴⁰ Her narrative endorses India as an “open door country,” privileges social interaction, and criticizes separatist movements in various religions. At the Parsi temple, for instance, she notes that she sees a sign that states “no intruders [...] no non-Parsis” (186). She notes that the “pure Parsi faith” has been “polluted by the Hindu customs of their foster motherland” (192). Not only has this commentary been censured by Zoroastrians, but MacDonald’s rendering of Hinduism as inclusive and welcoming is simplistic: there are many signs excluding non-Hindus from

³⁷ See Fraser’s discussion with the disciple at the BK centre (52) and her “interview” with a matron about marriage practices at a wedding in Delhi.

³⁸ Sylvia Fraser, *The Rope in the Water: A Pilgrimage to India* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2001): xiii–xiv. Further page references are in the main text.

³⁹ Sarah MacDonald, *Holy Cow: An Indian Adventure* (New York: Broadway, 2002): 103. Further page references are in the main text.

⁴⁰ See the following website and blog on use of this book in a college class. There is also much material on the internet related to the depiction of Parsis in particular: www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2006/03/sarah-macdonalds-holy-cow-indian.html (accessed 25 July 2008).

inner sanctuaries of temples.⁴¹ In effect, she communicates high regard for Hinduism in its ideal form, which, she argues, is a "faith of almost infinite diversity" that also "caters brilliantly to the individual" (143).

The book opens with reversal of the typical pilgrimage account, and of India as a space for individual enlightenment. She notes repeatedly the crowded environment and the impossibility of finding solitude. Further, she satirizes the repression and recovery of childhood trauma as a motive for her journey:

I have a dreadful long-term memory. I only remember two traumatic events from my childhood – my brother's near-death by drowning and my own near-death by humiliation when I was rescued by a lifeguard. (6)

This recurring motif of drowning and rescue emerges in both texts; Fraser earnestly tells a story of rescue by Indians and a mysterious "rope in the water."

MacDonald repeatedly describes India as "Wonderland" – the other side of the looking-glass from quiet, comfortable Australia. She identifies New Delhi, for instance, as the mirror-image of Canberra.⁴² At the same time, with every attempt at interpretation and judgment, there is an immediate challenge. After constructing the Australian sanctuary in Delhi, for instance, the comfort of this space wears off rapidly. She declares that "it's pointless to try" to figure India out, since it is "beyond statement" (107). This reflection also issues a challenge to self-judgment:

In Australia, in my small pocket of my own isolated country, I felt like I understood my world and myself, but now, I'm actually embracing not knowing and I'm questioning much of what I thought I did know. (107)

⁴¹ MacDonald notes some features of this "contamination": "Parsis wear a sacred thread like Hindu Brahmins, most don't eat beef and they throw flowers into sacred waters. Some [...] even believe in reincarnation" (192). Moreover, she focuses on the Australian Parsi community, which is powerful in Mumbai: "they are not outrageously funny and have little of the Aussie capacity to tell endless self-deprecatory jokes" (192). Her account ends with a wish for the Parsi community: "May they welcome cuckoos into their cozy nest and may they learn to ride the winds of change before their fire is extinguished forever" (193).

⁴² Pramila Jayapal's *Pilgrimage to India* is described in an excerpt from Paul Hawken's review using an almost identical metaphor: "Pramila Jayapal has slipped through a looking glass and takes the reader into an India that no contemporary literature touches in the same way, a contradictory and iridescent land that is as palpable as your breath, maddeningly unjust, yet profoundly sacred" (back cover).

Emotional and psychological ambivalence is highlighted in statements such as “I feel increasingly dismayed and guilty,” “I feel angry,” “I feel confused and confronted” (111).

The first pilgrimage site visited in both books is Rishikesh. Fraser wanders through the area at the beginning of her story, seeking an ashram. She steps into the Ganges impulsively, and senses that time stops; ironically, though, she declares that she is still “documenting, not dreaming.” At the Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University, she narrates a transformation, when she “spontaneously” begins humming childhood hymns during a walk through the hills near Mount Abu, and later translates a picture of Baba Brahma as the faces of her own family and friends.⁴³ She provides a list of suggestions for meditation and for integration of such extraordinary experiences into everyday life. Although she questions how the discipline of the Brahma Kumaris group can be “liberating,” she repeats ideas of biblical “promised lands”: “What I’m being offered is the portal to a beautiful and attainable Peaceable Kingdom” (65).

MacDonald’s account also takes us to Rishikesh, but the tone is tongue-in-cheek. She and her partner Jonathan visit a local astrologer, who declares that she has returned to India “for a good shaking. Here you will dance with death and be reborn” (21). At the end of the section, she, too, walks into the Ganges, “willing the rivers to cleanse my sin. [...] But the water doesn’t feel holy – it feels freezing and silty and it smells like sewage” (22). And this prophecy of a “good shaking” is followed by an earthquake.

Both books narrate an early encounter with an Indian followed by a somatic response by the witness – a serious illness and recovery. Fraser reads the face of a little girl begging in Delhi as a reflection of her repressed childhood self: “Her face is dirt streaked, her hair spiky, her eyes fierce as she clings with hands like suction cups – poignant yet monstrous” (72). Fraser almost immediately relates this face to herself, chiding the girl for following her to India, and fearing that the trip itself will be a reprise “*of all the dark corners of my psyche*” (72). As she continues to Rajasthan for the Pushkar Camel

⁴³ As she climbs the hills around Mount Abu, for instance, she finds herself humming “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder” and “Unto the Hills” (34). She notes that most of the other students at the University are Western professionals – professors, doctors, lawyers, journalists, scientists. Later, she alludes to Christian hymns again, comparing a temple she visits with the United Church where she was confirmed, and recalling her mother’s own struggle against the church. Her mother would resist the rigidity and lack of emotion in the church by singing loudly, especially hymns such as “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and “Rock of Ages” (80).

Festival, she develops laryngitis, which she interprets as the manifestation of her psychic struggle: "Deprived of my voice, I feel my persona dissolve" (76). As Pushkar is the "Pilgrim City" reputedly founded by Lord Brahma, and she is told that Brahma is the only god who committed incest, she interprets the encounter, her illness, and the visit to Pushkar as significant in the context of her repressed memories.⁴⁴

In MacDonald's account, she returns from a party in Delhi and encounters an *aghorī sadhu* whose "eyes look straight at me and through me. It's a look from another world, a window to *nothingness*, and a black hole of *emptiness*" (2; my emphasis). She interprets the encounter as a curse, especially when it is followed by a bout of pneumonia, hospitalization, and gastro-intestinal illness. As she recounts, "A week later I'm sent home in a different body" (37). Notably, it is not recovery of self but an illegible 'otherness' that strikes her in this encounter.

Another point of overlap in the books is the Buddhist *vipassana* course; both narrators initially hear about it from acquaintances in Canada and Australia – Fraser is actually handed a brochure by another Western traveller, while MacDonald has heard about it in Sydney. More intriguing, though, both texts narrate the course in minute detail, with a daily log, despite restrictions on writing and reading materials.⁴⁵ The *vipassana* course includes eleven-hour daily meditation over ten days. Both accounts are chronological, describing each day, the schedule, other disciples, and physical sensations. On the final day, Fraser becomes uncharacteristically angry and judgmental, and experiences the negative reaction physically:

I recognize that what I'm undergoing is just a predictable inner revolt: my ego, already tasting freedom, is attempting to regain control of my psyche by debunking my teachers. (278–79).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ At a small temple, she concludes she was brought to this place because of the association of Brahma with incest; she looks down a well and describes the darkness: "Here is your past" (84).

⁴⁵ In Fraser's book, she gets a brochure about the *vipassana* course from "Chuck," a Canadian Buddhist. MacDonald decides on a *vipassana* session in Dharamkot, after hearing about the courses from friends in Sydney.

⁴⁶ On Day Nine, for instance, MacDonald notes perceptively that it's been "ten days without a mirror and not seeing the thing that most people recognize as me makes me less aware of the boundary of self. My concerns about losing my identity while unemployed in India begin to fade into irrelevance" (79). She then relates this to her perception of India as

Holy Cow demonstrates a similar preoccupation with recording and witnessing; but MacDonald initially labels the course a “brain enema” and parodies the practice of meditation to “realize subtle truths” (71). She lists such “truths” as her need for a theme song each day, attention to the difference in her nostrils, and recognition that she is “hyperactive and insane. [...] My thoughts don’t make sense, or come to any conclusions or insights” (71). She summarizes Day One: “I feel like I’m trapped in a TV episode of *Survivor Spiritualists*. The last one left gets enlightenment” (72). (As an aside: both MacDonald and Fraser identify the difference in their nostrils, but Fraser interprets this as breathing “through the nostril that corresponds to the side of the brain that I’m using,” 270.)

MacDonald thus challenges the notion of pilgrimage and *tirtha-yatra* as horizontal and vertical crossing of a threshold from imprisonment to liberation; in fact, she states explicitly that “I’m flunking Freedom 101” (75). The narrative alternates between earnest and ironic tones; even the ominous final statement – “I definitely feel I’ve purged something and I’m ready to be reborn. Unfortunately, I have more dead parts of myself to shed” (81) – is followed by the next chapter’s description of her massive hair-loss.

Both Fraser and MacDonald describe Amritsar, another traditional Indian pilgrimage site. While both witnesses/participants focus on the Western Sikh community, Fraser’s link to this community is again seriously-presented: “I studied yoga with a Western Sikh teaching foundation located in Toronto” (121). When she visits the Golden Temple, she associates Indian Sikhism with aggression and gender inequality. By contrast, MacDonald compares the children at the school for Western Sikhs to the “telepathic alien children in the movie *Village of the Damned*” (91). It seems strange to her that these children – and their whole community – have embraced a rule-bound culture, and she harshly criticizes this group, in effect empathizing with the Indian Sikhs who reject the Westerners at the Temple:

This new version of Sikhism seems to be a synthesis of age-old knowledge and modern self-loving Americanism – its saccharine self-absorbed smugness is a bit much for me. (95)

“Wonderland”: “India is in some ways like a fun house hall of mirrors where I can see both sides of each contradiction sharply and there’s no easy escape to understanding” (107).

(Note that MacDonald often identifies the characteristics she abhors as "American," and her depiction of the "Australian personality" draws extensively on stereotypes of easy intimacy and sarcasm.)

Clark notes that Western pilgrimage accounts can be read as *memento mori*: the

traveler is always leaving; both voyaging and narration presuppose continuous deferral. [...] Even the modern tourist itinerary with its echoes of medieval pilgrimage in sacred sites, liminal zones, holy relics, possesses something of the same *memento mori* quality. (18)

In *The Rope in the Water*, this element emerges resoundingly during Fraser's trip to Varanasi, "India's holiest city" (281). It is here that she focuses explicitly on death and the Sanskrit *tirtha*, which she translates as "a crossing place where heaven and earth meet, like the finger of God stretching across the abyss to man, nearly touching" (292). Although her visit to Varanasi seems preoccupied with cremation – the so-called "burning ghats" – it concludes with a notably 'Western' reflection: "I am the keeper of the memories. Nothing of my intimate past exists except as I remember it, and when I die, all that will dissolve for want of *witnesses*" (309; my emphasis).

Fraser's apparent 'rescue' during her 'rope in the water' experience also emphasizes the *memento mori*. She struggles with the meaning of the rope throughout the second part of the book, concluding that "I – the conscious I writing this book – don't know what happened at Kovalam" (322); she alternates between rope as hallucination, rope as miracle, and an ordinary rope that she was "lucky to have found when [she] stuck [her] hand down in the ocean" (322). Intriguingly, she prefers not to view it as a link with the Indians who rescue her! MacDonald's moment in the water – "undertaking journey to river fords" – takes place at the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad. Despite an apparently cynical attitude throughout most of the festival, she impulsively kneels in the river and splashes water on her forehead at the end of the chapter; she states: "I sense strength and grace; I swoon with a dose of the divine and a feeling that I'm part of a universal force" (147). Her moment of presumed enlightenment is contextualized by the living crowds of Indians who join her in the water. Again, this moment is, however, undermined when she visits the Karmapa Lama and admits that she is "too ignorant to see the *bodhisattva* in him" (156).

MacDonald depicts many encounters in which she probes the Sanskrit *darshan* and the Western notion of 'witnessing'; while she physically sees in-

dividuals such as Amma and Sai Baba, for instance, she is repeatedly frustrated by her inability to glimpse their divinity. At Amma's ashram, for instance, there is a "darshan day," and she distinguishes between Western and Indian pilgrims:

The Indian devotees are enjoying the ashram like it's a holiday camp with a divine counselor. [...] The Westerners, in contrast, seem pious and precious. Many are sullenly silent, a number are frequently crying and some are very snappy [...] I observe a lot of pettiness, pushiness, jealousy and competitiveness for Mother's closeness and attention.

"This family," she concludes, "seems dysfunctional" (204). At the same time, she commends Amma's challenge to Indian restrictions on physical contact.⁴⁷ While her prayer to Amma for "bigger boobs" – followed in the next chapter by an alarming increase in breast-size – is disturbingly irreverent, she admits to feeling "a touch of a pure soul, of a saintly grace" (208). She is never, however, prepared to say that she has experienced *darshan* or that she has 'witnessed' the divine incarnate.⁴⁸

MacDonald's description of a serendipitous encounter with the Israeli community in Dharamsala – and reflection on Judaism's idea of 'promised land' – is perhaps the most explicit allusion to pilgrimage in the book. For the young Israelis, India represents freedom; while MacDonald shares the reading of India as "wonderland," she notes that the Israelis are likely alluding to Disneyworld, not *Alice in Wonderland*. She is first welcomed into this com-

⁴⁷ MacDonald's description of Amma's ashram is impressive:

Through the heat of the day, Amma hugs eight thousand pilgrims at a rate of twenty a minute and twelve hundred an hour. She finishes at three-thirty, and at five is back in the auditorium to sing. The crowd has swelled again. More than fifteen thousand people are here for a hug. [...] This is the external manifestation of Amma's oneness with the Supreme where she'll take off two of the veils that separate we mortals from the divine, enabling us to glimpse the ultimate truth of existence. It's like waiting for the opening show at Mardi Gras. (206)

⁴⁸ See, for instance, her visit to Sai Baba's ashram; Sai Baba, she explains, claims to be a *purna avatar* or manifestation of divine in human form. In her description, MacDonald is harshly ironic:

Then God performs another miracle. Sai Baba is the first Indian I've ever seen arrive early. [...] His divinity has not been revealed to me, but Sai Baba has been charged with revealing much more to other Westerners" (241). When she finally admits to a Swedish disciple that she is leaving without seeing his divinity, she is told to pray for him to come in her dreams; again, the end is ironic and cynical – in her dream that night, "Coming across me across the waters is an Australian god of TV." (242)

munity, and then "kicked off the team" when a more conservative group assumes authority in the community. Despite this rejection, she goes to Mumbai to visit members of the Bene Israel community, who "balance precariously on the oldest branch of the Jewish evolutionary tree and are fast heading for extinction" (175). The young Israelis share not only the physical space of Dharamsala with other pilgrims, but also notions of liberation and transgression of boundaries. She concludes:

In India I've traveled a soul's journey: from hedonism to sickness, from silence to song, from violence to peace, and from learning to die to celebrating life. If I were Jewish, such a story would end with my *liberation in the "promised land"* ... [A small] flame within me has been lit by what I've shared, a flame that warms me with a realization. India: *a land that shares its sacred space, seems a spiritual home worth having.* (177; my emphases)

While Fraser focuses primarily on her own journey, MacDonald is acutely aware that she, too, is an object of curiosity. The focus on "trading," sharing, linkages – the emphasis on India's social space – is striking in MacDonald's account. (An Indian who takes a photograph of her, for instance, makes a "fair exchange" for her "voyeurism.") She focuses on the diverse people she encounters, often blurring boundaries between sacred and profane, spoofing Western 'New Age' philosophies, and referring to Aarzo – who takes her shopping and clubbing – as her "guru girlfriend" (226).⁴⁹ She enthusiastically takes on the topic of cultural imperialism, noting:

India's one billion people simply refuse to play by the new Raj rules, and their rich traditions and absorbent, flexible Hindu faith may well survive the global onslaught. (222)

While her home in Australian settler-invader culture associates her with what Clark terms "the mobile possibility of exploitation via sacralisation" it simul-

⁴⁹ MacDonald incorporates "clubbing" as a kind of pilgrimage when she returns from Australia, reflecting also on the Indian adoption of Western culture. She finally argues that "American cultural imperialism" will not succeed in India – "Indian culture may just be strong enough to take what it wants... and reject what it doesn't" (222). She refers to American imperialism as "the new Raj" and to Hinduism as flexible and India as nationalistic: "Hinduism is like a sponge – it's already an amalgam of thousands of local beliefs and faiths and I believe it will continue to move with the times and with the people" (222). This is followed by her attendance at a New Age seminar which is popular with Non-Resident Indians [NRIs]: "the course finishes with some *chakra* cleaning, pop psychology and self-indulgent crap... Get me out of this New Age nightmare. I'm going back to my guru girlfriend" (226).

taneously permits a “potential confusion of established order whereby disunification becomes cultural dysfunction” (39). MacDonald’s stereotypical depiction of Australia as clean, empty, open, and easy is further challenged after 9/11. One of the first connections she makes is by long-distance telephone with an Indian friend who has emigrated to New York – having, in effect, ‘traded places’; her friend’s husband has been rescued from the base of the World Trade Center, and the friend advises her to leave India immediately – “too much bad karma.” But MacDonald also witnesses, from the distance of India, the US decisions to invade Afghanistan and Iraq and the astonishing complicity of Australia. Her reflection is again self-deprecatory, simultaneously repeating and challenging Australian stereotypes:

after nearly two years traveling India’s spiritual supermarket I’m still a self-occupied, selfish, pathetic, pessimistic bitch who’s dropped any faith at the first sign that things aren’t going well. (261)⁵⁰

“Australia,” she states, “is supporting the war against Afghanistan but is refusing to accept Afghan refugees”;

it’s at the end of an election campaign fought over a boatload turned away, while poor crowded Pakistan somehow struggles with two million Afghan refugees. What I’ve missed most about Australia is its low density, its space and its capacity for solitude. [...] This war has shattered my Great Australian Dream. (270).

Although final statements conflate the terms “adventure” and “pilgrimage” – she concludes that she has learned about the “redeeming power of love” (271), a universalist notion if ever there was one – the reflection and its con-

⁵⁰ MacDonald’s immediate anger on hearing of the events is intense:

How could Yaweh create such dreadful beings as we? How could Allah let murderers into heaven as martyrs? What kind of bad karma meant people could deserve to die like that? Where was the Sikhs’ spiritual strength to withstand hatred? The Buddhist focus on non-violence and happiness seems naïve, the Parsis’ push for survival useless. If Sai Baba could take the moon from the sky, why didn’t he stop this? Where was the love of the Holy Mothers? The human race seems headed for self-destruction. (254)

However, she goes on to reflect that “If I can be strong enough to use my Buddhist training by not giving in to anger, then I become less like them; I can help stop the cycle of hatred and violence. I realize life is precious and tenuous and I need to focus on what I do believe in and what sustains me” (255). She also notes that India does not seem as affected by the events, because it was never in a bubble of safety as was the West.

text underscores her "cultural dysfunction."⁵¹ MacDonald summarizes the unsettling of the settler–invader culture:

I want it all – to be part of a war but not to face its consequences, to be part of the global community but not a port for its refugees. [...] The worship of land ownership, the body beautiful, self-help and self-obsession for beings blinded by option overload is strangely unfamiliar. (289)

Fraser concludes with a clearer sense of the purpose and limitations of the individual quest, but she does not recount the collective experience of pilgrimage.

While the lure of golden windows may fuel our youthful journeys, the motivation and the energy for those marking life's second half are more likely to come from converting our own dark matter – the neglected gifts, forgotten dreams, blind spots, blocks and prejudices, which, like the dark matter in the universe, may contain a powerhouse of unrealized potential.

"This alchemy," she concludes in the Indian Christian Cemetery in Delhi, "is the task of the bold and hardy innocent fool also lying dormant in each of us. And the reward? Another paradox: fool's gold" (323). In contrast to MacDonald's, Fraser's finale is set in Delhi's Christian Cemetery – alone, under a bodhi tree, sharing the space of the dead. She does not explicitly recount crossing the threshold back to Canada, whereas MacDonald stresses her ambivalent reaction when she sees the coastline of Australia from her plane window.

Epilogue

The American writer Elizabeth Gilbert's now best-selling travel narrative *Eat, Pray, Love* – subtitled *One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* – repeats patterns of pilgrimage guides and their settler–invader translations. Like Fraser, for instance, Gilbert states that this book is

⁵¹ As MacDonald returns to Australia, she notes:

I feel my soul swell at the sight of my land so red raw and bumped like an ancient crocodile back or stretching with blue salt pan veins on the palm of an ancient hand. These mountains of worn rock, these silver blue seas and white sands all seem so empty; scoured by millennia but not humans, they have an energy and vitality that swells my heart. [...] In Sydney I rediscover my relationship with nature. The ocean becomes my temple and my Ganges. I bathe with an inner joy; floating in clean water, my body is buoyant with the love of life. (288–89)

an account of her search for truth, but notes that such a search “is not some spazzy free-for-all, not even during this, the great age of the spazzy free-for-all.”⁵² She opens with the breakdown of her marriage, and her prayer on the bathroom floor which she offers, mysteriously, in English, Italian, and Sanskrit. Moreover, she describes herself as “culturally, though not theologically [...] a Christian. I was born a Protestant of the white Anglo-Saxon persuasion”; unlike Fraser, who rejected all mysticism, Gilbert claims that she has

always responded with breathless excitement to anyone who has ever said that God does not live in a dogmatic scripture or in a distant throne in the sky, but instead abides very close to us indeed. [...] In every religious tradition on earth, there have always been mystical saints and transcendents who report exactly that experience. (14)

Universalism – along with Western and Protestant individualism – appears throughout the book.

Gilbert’s parodic repetition of the conversion narrative, when she prays on the bathroom floor and hears a voice telling her to go to bed, is also striking; yet she distinguishes this experience from the typical conversion, noting that she was not transformed, saved, or born again at that moment, but only experienced “the first words of an open and exploratory dialogue” with the divine (16). Drawing on advice to be “grounded on earth yet look at the world through her heart” (27), she decides to explore one aspect of herself “against the backdrop” of three countries:

the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two. It was only later [...] that I noticed the happy coincidence that all these countries began with the letter *I*. A fairly auspicious sign, it seemed, on a voyage of self-discovery. (29–30)

The account of Gilbert’s journey to India and her transportation repeats this preoccupation with self-discovery and simultaneously alludes to the Indian idea of *tirtha-yatra* (205). She concludes the section with a poem probing the word ‘hobo’ – colloquially associated with the homeless wanderer – and its etymological roots in the expression ‘homeward bound’; the idea that one can be both ‘bound’ [*yatra*] and yet crossing a threshold [*tirtha*] is emphasized in this poem.

⁵² Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (New York: Penguin, 2006): 2. Further page references are in the main text.

Contemporary accounts of pilgrimage thus seem to repeat the preoccupation with written record and individual enlightenment; they are one of the clearest reproductions of Orientalism, and seldom acknowledge a true 'crossing' or an experience of the 'foreign' encapsulated in the term 'pilgrim'. MacDonald reverses the stereotype of India as place of solitude and underscores Western cultural dysfunction; but she still concludes by claiming both territories as her own: now she has two spiritual homelands, "the quiet empty lands of my birth and the cataclysmic crowded lands of my rebirth" (289). It is the internal contradictions of such narratives that seem most promising: the pilgrim sometimes stumbles over prescribed territory that is still intangible and foreign, and the boundaries themselves become confused even where the ending is prescribed. In these accounts, then, there is a fascinating intersection of exploration, settlement, pilgrimage, and *tirtha-yatra* – both horizontal and vertical crossings of thresholds – along with persistent overlap of the material and metaphorical: "Feet on the Ground and Heads Up." One can read such settler-invader accounts as practical attempts at economic, commercial, and political appropriation – at each site, the Western pilgrim is set apart, pays a larger sum of money, and is also encouraged to purchase kitsch to bring back home. The accounts seem to owe much more to Western paradigms than they dare to admit. (Notably, criticism of commercial exploitation appears almost exclusively in descriptions of Muslim and Hindu sites in Fraser's account.) However, one can simultaneously focus on the *trading* of spaces and perspectives. Following the theme of trading and exchange, it makes sense to continue this study with an examination of books such as Pramila Jayapal's *Pilgrimage to India: A Woman Revisits Her Homeland* (2000). Again, it is these linkages that make pilgrimage motifs perhaps too easily transportable, and yet fruitful territory for cross-cultural conversation.

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Writing as Healing

—— Fijiindians – The Twice Banished?

KAVITA IVY NANDAN

Most of us know the parents or grandparents we come from.
But we go back and back forever; we go back all of us to the
very beginning; in our blood and bone and brain we carry the
memories of thousands of beings.¹

I VISITED THE TOWN OF LEVUKA, FIJI'S FIRST CAPITAL, on the island of Ovalau, one of Fiji's 333 islands in the sun, for the first time. Having completed a research project on Fijiindian² migrants to Australia and New Zealand in early 2007, I was keen to view the monument to the *Leonidas* – the first ship to arrive in Levuka Harbour through the Waitovu passage on 14 May 1879, carrying 463 Indian indentured labourers.³ In my

¹ V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World* (London: Heinemann, 1994): 9.

² I use the term 'Fijiindian' instead of the commonly used ethnic marker – 'Indo-Fijian' for Indians born in Fiji in order to show the merging of once very separate identities, 'Fiji' and 'Indian', and the formation of the unique identity of Fiji Indians over the past 128 years.

³ After Fiji was ceded to Britain on 10 December 1874, Indian indentured labourers were introduced in Fiji in 1879, by Fiji's first Governor Sir Arthur Gordon. It was decided that the plantation system was to be the mode of economic development in Fiji and that sugar was the main crop. The Australian-owned Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) was invited to establish itself in Fiji which it did so from 1882 to 1973. As it was the Governor's native policy to protect the Fijian way of life from 'outside influences', an alternative source of labour was needed. Gordon had previously been the Governor of Trinidad and Mauritius and witnessed first hand the success of Indian indentured labour. For further details, see Brij Lal's book *Bittersweet*, where he sums up, with the objective gaze of the historian and I believe the bittersweetness of a descendant of indentured Indians: 'European capital, Indian labour and Fijian land underpinned the Fijian economy in the century between cession and

search down the one-street town with its historical colonial buildings, now shabby with disrepair and time, I stopped on the way at historical repositories and significant checkpoints: the Museum, the Deed of Cession obelisk, and the tuna cannery, Pafco, the main source of employment for the locals. I asked the Fijian woman manning the museum where exactly I could find this memorial. She smilingly responded there was no such monument or commemorative plaque; the Kiribati lady in the second-hand shop had not heard of the *Leonidas* and a group of young Fijiindian tourists from Suva were more intent on enjoying themselves than answering my bothersome question. The two Fijian teenagers making out at the War Memorial on the hill which has only European and part-European names on it⁴ pointed in the vague direction of the lone Anglican school. Not surprisingly, I did not find it there, either. No one seemed to know where this monument was, or, for that matter, really care. I began to realize it didn't exist. I came back to Suva and persisted with a friend whose former home was Levuka. She looked at me with surprise, herself from a mixed Indian and Fijian background, saying regretfully: "You're right, there is no monument. Why?"

In 1979, Fiji commemorated the centenary of the arrival of the indentured labourers with a fifty-cent coin minted by the Royal Australian Mint. On May 14 of 2007, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, the former Vice-President of Fiji, said in a speech at the launch of a famous Fijiindian poet, that Fiji should institute a national holiday on this day to mark the girmity⁵ experience. Incidentally, on 14 May the first Fiji coup in 1987 was carried out. Belatedly, the Fiji Museum located in the heart of Thurston gardens in downtown Suva devotes a room to the girmityas, the ancestors of most Fijiindians.

independence"; *Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience* (Canberra: Pandanus, 2004): 6. See also K.L. Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1962).

⁴ Even though they fought in the same world wars, there is a separate War Memorial, on flat ground, in the middle of the taxi stand engraved with the Fijian names. Metuisela Tabaki, a Levuka tourist guide said, with the typical irony of the local towards the ex-colonizer, "We have the Fijians down below and the Europeans on top."

⁵ 'Girmity' is a distorted version of the word 'agreement' or contract between the indentured labourers and the colonial Fiji government. The 'girmityas' could not say the word agreement as most of them were illiterate. The book launched was Satendra Nandan's *The Loneliness of Islands: Collected Poems, 1976–2006* (Nandi: Ivy Press International/Pacific Writing Forum, 2007).

Sadly enough, apart from these types of gestures made to value a minority population of Fiji, once more than half the population, Fijian experiences have not entered deeply into the historical, national or literary imaginary of Fiji. The consequences of this absence or wound has been palpable in Fiji since the two coups of 1987⁶ and has been strengthened by the coup on 19 May 2000.

The first coup in Fiji was carried out at 10.10 am on 14 May 1987. As Satendra Nandan, the poet and Minister for Health, Social Welfare and Women's Affairs for merely one month in the Bavadra government, says in his autobiography,

It is often said that Fiji had a bloodless coup. There is nothing like a bloodless coup just as there is nothing like a bloodless stroke. There is no blood in a heart seizure but we know the pain is killing and every cell in your being is affected. That is precisely what happened in Fiji. If we had expected a coup, the pain of treason and betrayal would have been less.⁷

From the seventy interviews I conducted with Fijians in the major cities of Australia and New Zealand, I sensed a developing disillusionment with a nation that is mired in a coup culture. Many interviewees expressed regret and bitterness at the 1987 coups; it was as if the coup put a full stop to their lives in Fiji and they would never know how life would have turned out if they had remained: According to one interviewee, "Fiji is a sad reminder of what it could have been. I could have had a good life there if the 1987 government had worked out. I feel sadness for Fiji... no sense of freedom... bars on every window." Often we don't realize the personal and social costs of a coup. When a way of life is disrupted sometimes the consequences can be fatal. "Perhaps my son's life would have turned out differently as well" (an anonymous interviewee from Ba; migrated to Adelaide in September 1987). Unfortunately, her son died. Another interviewee said: "The coup made me feel like

⁶ Finally, after eighteen years of dominance of the Alliance Party in Fiji since independence, Indians had fair representation in the Labour Government which came to power in April 1987. This fact, however, was ignored, and instead Indian representation was demonized by those who had lost the election and wanted to sabotage the new government by playing the race-card. Those outside Fiji who were ignorant of Fiji's history, in particular that of the Indian indentured labourers, drew the common but erroneous parallel between the Fiji situation where the Indians came as victims of this colonial system, not colonizers, and the white colonization of the indigenous people of Australia and New Zealand.

⁷ Satendra Nandan, *Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story* (Canberra: PIP, 2001): 33.

a foreigner in Fiji” (Sushma Anand from Nadi; migrated to Brisbane in 2007).⁸

Since then there have been a spate of tragedies in Fiji, which continued on 19 May 2000 with the kidnapping of the elected government by George Speight when Fiji experienced its first political bloodshed. A colonel of the Royal Military Forces had established the paradigm for political treason. ‘Stephen and George have done it; next time it will be Jim, if not Jone’, we thought. This time, on 6 December 2006, it was Frank. This latest coup is seen by many people of Fiji ambivalently. For a country that has suffered deeply as a result of its coups, this is a provocative statement that needs explaining. I believe that at least half of Fiji’s population are in two minds about this coup because it confronted the structural racism built into Fiji’s democratic system, including the 1997 Constitution (following on from the 1970 and 1992 Constitutions) and openly espoused by the Qarase government of 2001–2006, a product of the 2000 coup. An appropriate example, and not necessarily an isolated one, came on 28 July 2002, when the Fijian Minister for Women and Social Welfare, Asenaca Caucau, “likened Indo-Fijians to weeds taking up space in the country.”⁹ The Prime Minister did not condemn her publicly. Labour “parliamentarians said it was unfortunate that Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase was silent on the matter. This silence, they said could be presented as condoning the racist attitude of the cabinet minister.”¹⁰ What seemed like a community, stuck in communalism and racial politics, and unable to submit to self-criticism, appeared to be changing; possibly the work of the interim government. The interim Prime Minister has declared most emphatically that racism will have no place in Fiji’s constitutional politics.

We are reluctant to admit it, but Fijiindian people have been a culture in trauma. The country I had grown up in until I was eighteen years old, left in 1987, and returned to in 2005 was not the same. I saw Fijiindians with lowered heads and depressed faces. Open fear of violence and the desire to leave at the first opportunity were palpable. There were beggars on the street and there were burglar bars on every house and shop, which was not the case

⁸ These and other excerpts in this article are from interviews conducted during my research conducted in 2007 and have been transcribed in an unpublished paper, “From Girit to Global.”

⁹ Vasemaca Rarabici, “Minister offends women,” *Fiji Times* (1 August 2002): 2.

¹⁰ Serafina Silaitoga, “MPs demand apology for racist remarks,” *Fiji Times* (2 August 2002): 3.

before 1987.¹¹ The hope and optimism that we had as citizens of a multiracial society had faded; with the years of indigenization and discrimination against Fijiindians, despair had set in. I grew up with calls for all Indians to be put on a boat and sent back to India embedded in my young psyche. At the same time, I was reassured by the adults around me that I was not to worry about what was said. Sakiasi Butadoka, a Fijian politician, introduced a motion to the House of Representatives to agree

“that the time has arrived when Indians or people of Indian origin in this country be repatriated back to India and that their travelling expenses back home and compensation for their properties in this country be met by the British Government.”¹²

I was five years old at the time. With the way things have gone in Fiji, voices like his cannot be so easily dismissed now.

Fiji was a multicultural society but it is becoming increasingly monolithic. Some perceive the Bainimara takeover as an attempt to question the racism of this descent into monoculturalism. The question of indigenous sovereignty is not so clear-cut. Recently, a motion was passed in the United Nations recognizing the rights of the indigenous peoples of the world. When indigenous people assert themselves, there can be others who do not fare so well. In Fiji’s case, the indigenous people do not have to assert themselves in the same way as in Canada, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand, as they own approximately ninety percent of the land and enjoy strong cultural protection and promotion. According to the documentary *Struggling for a Better Living: Squatters in Fiji*, “12.5 per cent of Fiji’s population today is living in over 182 informal or ‘squatter’ settlements around the country.”¹³ It shows that the expiry of land leases of Fijiindian farmers and the refusal to renew them by Fijian landowners has significantly contributed to the rapidly increasing number of squatters.

Fijiindians are in survival mode – they are trying their best to make ends meet, avoiding politics, and getting their overseas relatives to sponsor them. Rather, the form that resistance has taken for many Fijiindians is migration.

¹¹ On 24 July 2002, it was reported in the *Fiji Times* “that 54 per cent of the nation was living below the poverty line” (5).

¹² Pat Stanton & Ashwin Singh, “PM defends Indian Role in Fiji,” *Fiji Times* (10 October 1975): 1.

¹³ Larry Thomas, dir. *Struggling for a Better Living: Squatters in Fiji* (prod. Citizens’ Constitutional Forum Limited (CCF); Suva: Regional Media Centre, 2007; 50 min.).

Nandan says: “The simple and perhaps the only reason for peace in Fiji, so far, has been the lack of violent resistance tactics by the victims of the coup.”¹⁴ Faced with limited options, Fijians are leaving for other pastures. There is a second exodus happening right now, and while this reality may not be reported in the news, I have yet to meet a Fijian who does not have at least one relative overseas. Since 1987, at least 120,000 Fijians, of whom the vast majority are Fijians, have migrated to four countries on the Pacific rim: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA. A total that is more than the original gimit of 60,000. After more than 125 years, Fijians still do not feel at home in Fiji; unable to rest, they are always on the move, seeking ways to migrate and being ready for the next migration if necessary. Navin Anand from Ba, who first migrated to New Zealand in 1987 and then a second time in 2003 to Australia, says: “Fijians need to be willing to change, after all they could be somewhere else in the next ten years.”

Writing: A Healing Process

For me, researching and writing about the Fijian diaspora is personal. Reading writers like V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, and so many others, has comforted me. Their writing has offered me a multi-faceted way of thinking about the diasporic life – a life uprooted by migration and transformed partly through the new home. Rushdie in particular has made me look at loss and ambivalence in a positive and energizing way. A potent image of the migrants’ memory is the metaphor of broken glass which, according to Rushdie, is not merely a mirror of nostalgia but also a useful tool with which to work in the present. Rushdie’s and Naipaul’s ideas of transformation, reinvention, and rebirth have helped me to cope with the losses of home by recognizing that belonging to more than one world can be both challenging and liberating and that writing itself can be a kind of home; a creative nest.

My own creativity has made me reflect on the past and write about it in a way that has allowed me to experience some degree of healing. Although I realize that the diasporic life assumes the quality of brokenness, writing has been a way to make meaning out of the rupture of the past. Writing allows us to give some structure or recuperate some degree of wholeness. However, this process does not become stagnant or complacent; rather, the fluid space of writing retains a necessary sense of incompleteness in order to acknowledge

¹⁴ Nandan, *Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story*, 65.

the loss. Naipaul's writing, specifically, has given me the gift of understanding that writing does not have to be a way to escape into an imaginary life; rather, it can be the beginning of self-knowledge and a way to overcome a sense of alienation in this world of homes and homelessness.

Inspired, in 2005, I edited *Stolen Worlds: Fijiindian Fragments* – a book of memoirs or life writing written by Fijiindian migrants commemorating the 125th anniversary of the arrival of Indians to Fiji. The idea of this book was to record the memories of those who remember Fiji from the outside. I wanted to suggest that Fiji does not only belong to those who live there but also to those who have migrated and return to bury their dead; often they do make their journeys to the funeral of a loved one. More and more marriages are taking place in the new country. Not all these writers were born in Fiji and only a few of them live and work in Fiji, but all of them grew up in Fiji and this common experience is the impetus of *Stolen Worlds*.

The title resonates on a few levels. First, in the sense that, when the ancestors of Fijiindians were largely coerced into accepting the offer of 'working' in Fiji and made the long and torturous journey over the *kala pani*,¹⁵ they were unaware that their worlds and lives were being silently and brutally stolen from them. And when they worked virtually as slaves on the sugarcane plantations from dawn to dusk, they kept secret tokens of the worlds they had left behind in their memories, such as stanzas from religious texts like the *Ramayana* or couplets from popular village songs. For the descendants, the 1987 and 2000 Fiji coups stole their worlds from them, and discrimination and racism continue to do so for those still living in Fiji. This might change with recent political developments; it is hard to tell yet. Like their ancestors, many took these worlds, in suitcases, parcels, and their imaginations, often covertly, to their new homes on other shores and cities.

The writers of *Stolen Worlds* go back to the beginning, back to their childhood homes, places, friends, schools, relations, first jobs, first loves – any experience that formed them, that they can use to understand the heart of their identities. It would appear that identity-formation starts with memory, especially repressed memories. The indenture period was seen by our great-grandparents and grandparents as a time of *narak* (hell) or deep shame and humiliation, and therefore it was not something talked about often. While the modern

¹⁵ *Kala pani* literally means 'black water'; metaphorically, it alludes to crossing the forbidden seas to a new and often hostile life.

Fijiindian is more willing to talk about his/her migration, there is still that reluctance to go too far because of the pain associated with leaving.

Moreover, many of these memoirs go back to a past time to which the writers no longer have any connection except through their fractured memories. These biographies often move from the present moment of privilege – they are successful professionals – to a time of growing up in Fiji, usually in circumstances of poverty, and beyond that to a time of their parents or grandparents who came as *girmitiyas* to Fiji. Memory allows them to bring a distant past into the present.

Life-writing takes part in creating alternative historical narratives and can be political acts as well. Milan Kundera, in his political satire *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, writes: “It is 1971, and Mirek says the struggle of man against power is the struggle of remembering against forgetting.”¹⁶ Excised from the national imagination, migrants now, the writers of this book negotiate their own identities and histories. Only a handful of them have written before, most of the contributors are not strictly ‘writers’. However, John Glad perceptively says: “People who might never have taken up the pen under normal circumstances react to exile with a burst of creativity.”¹⁷

One way Fijiindians interpret their present circumstances of migration and exile is by reflecting on the first banishment from India. One of the contributors to *Stolen Worlds*, Chintamani Naresh, who migrated to Canada in 1974, writes in his piece “Homesteads: Along the Rewa”:

Things were very difficult for the extended family and my father, along with two other men, left the village to look for some work [...] and the rest is not clear and I couldn’t be insolent enough to ask him. They never returned to the village but came to Fiji instead on SS Fultala # 3 in 1905.¹⁸

This lack of knowledge of our ancestors’ past has led to Fijiindian writers of the third and fourth generations to create a past; from fragments of memories – their own and others.

It is the heterogeneous nature of memory (it is highly subjective and individual, and depends entirely on the storyteller) that allows us to heal the

¹⁶ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, tr. Michael Henry Heim (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981): 3.

¹⁷ John Glad, in *Literature in Exile*, ed. Glad (Durham NC & London: Duke UP, 1990): viii.

¹⁸ Chintamani Naresh, “Homesteads: Along the Rewa,” in *Stolen Worlds: Fijiindian Fragments*, ed. Kavita Nandan (Suva: Ivy Press International, 2005): 250.

hurts of history. So when the eponymous hero Biswas from Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* rewrites his past in a way that dilutes the pain and disorder of his family life, he is making a positive choice.

Memory is dynamic and empowering. It is not lying static underground waiting to be unearthed like an antique pot. We represent while we remember, we reconstruct while we remember. The recording/writing of our memories undergoes a creative process – our memories are made up of invention, imagination, fact and fiction. Remembering creatively is important for empowerment – it is the human spirit responding to the loss of a grandparent, a home, a country, or even a memory. As the Hawaiian poet Juliet Kono says, “Our ability to reflect on and consider the past – as well as acknowledge it and honor it – may well be one of our best and most under-valued traits as creative and thinking beings.”¹⁹

Their stories suggest how the contributors to *Stolen Worlds* have carried the past within them for so many years despite the fact that they have new and different presents and futures. Memory acts like a thief, stealing and preserving the past, albeit in a faraway place in the heart. But these stolen memories are also released through acts of remembering and writing. Similarly, Kono says:

I've gone back to Hilo in my mind, which for me, has been substantially richer and more rewarding than were I to be actually living there. While my writing has brought me back to some of my strongest desires and pain, it has also released me from them.

Going back to the homeland imaginatively can be healing in a way that physically going may not be.

While there are some younger voices in this collection of memoirs, the viewpoints expressed here are mainly from an older generation or third generation of Fijiindians – the generation that contemplated, to a greater extent than its subsequent one, the meaning of their identity to India, which was located both in the lost past of their parents and grandparents and in their own experiences of studying and travelling in India. But, more importantly, they expressed in their stories what Fiji meant to them in the present, particularly through the language of loss.

Satendra Nandan is a pioneer writer in the Fijiindian literary landscape, as are Subramani and Raymond Pillai. The event that Nandan's writing keeps

¹⁹ Juliet S. Kono, “A Sense of Place,” in *Kū Kilakila: Writing from the Big Island*, ed. Seri Luangphinit (Hilo: Department of English, University of Hawai'i at Hilo, 2007): 17.

coming back to is the 1987 coup – it seems to symbolize that moment of irreparable wound.

What emerges, for example, in his book of poetry *Lines Across Black Waters* (1997), though it traverses many lands and landscapes, languages, and lives, is a sense of betrayal – that, once again, like their ancestors, Fijians are forced to leave their home because someone decided they were a little less than human. One of the most prevalent images of the collection is that of the wound:

Small wounds, slowly weeping
To the cruel rhythm of a whip
Those blows resound still
Healed by the sun and the salt water
While the wind howled in the welts
A language of its own intensity.
In the shadow across the moon
My father saw his lonely country.²⁰

The lines hauntingly imagine the brutal experience of indenture. And the wounds do not stop here, in the next generation, the poet's own, the wound continues to bleed.

It seems in the grafted hibiscus
A few petals are deepening
Turning the dust into blood red
From the broken arteries of the living dead.²¹

Here, the poet is referring to the coup and its wounding of the Fiji people. It is no coincidence that the hibiscus, a national symbol of Fiji, is “grafted,” symbolic of the migrant people of Fiji. His first novel is called *The Wounded Sea* (1991).

This focus by Nandan on the pain of the past and present and a sense of betrayal as a result of a second wounding has not been easy. Outsiders want to believe in the gentle Pacific way and the innocence of the islands. Insiders feel that the focus on the past is too much of a black-arm-band view of history. So it requires a certain boldness to reiterate these themes over writing that spans more than thirty years, and to express belief in the possibilities of

²⁰ Satendra Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters* (Adelaide: CRNLE/Academy Press, 1997): 9.

²¹ Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters*, 19.

healing by making sense of history's fate and fatalities through creativity. And it has, indeed, allowed the poet and readers to experience a degree of healing. Even though Nandan migrated to Australia after the coups in 1987, he never stopped writing about Fiji, that small insignificant dot on the map. Despite the political occurrences in Fiji, Nandan's writing continues to reflect a positive sense of Fiji and its future. This can be seen in his return to Fiji in 2006 and his new book of prose, *Between the Lines* (2009).

Raymond Pillai, well known in Fiji for his collection of short stories *The Celebration*, migrated in the 1990s to New Zealand, where he continued to write in the same vein – realistic short stories about subjects that were pertinent to Fijians. For instance, there is his story "Factory Fodder," published in the anthology *Writing the Pacific* (2007) and dealing with the exploitation of women in Fiji's garment factories. In an interview with Pillai just months before he passed away, he said that there was no audience for his kind of writing in New Zealand, but he continued to write anyway. It seems that his writing, which he started in Fiji and continued after he had migrated, provided some kind of solace for him. The strength of Pillai's writing is that it conveys a very specific local Fiji environment. It possesses the kind of simplicity that might make you miss the significance of what he is saying – the plight of nameless, faceless, insignificant Fijians, in this case, women factory workers. Pillai, like Nandan, although through a different creative style, relates the present exploitation to a past of indenture and coups:

Renu couldn't hold back the tears. 'It's true what you said about Boss. How can our people do such things to us?'

'This is nothing new, beti. It was our own people who lied to us, looted us of our innocence and sent our forefathers to do girmity in this country. It's been happening since the first coup, and it's going to get worse after this one. We have no choice if we want to keep our jobs.'²²

It seems that the older generation of writers have an attachment to the homeland, whichever space they occupy – Fiji or overseas. Writers of the younger generation who live overseas, like Shalini Akhil and myself, continue to try to negotiate our Fiji identity – the journey has not ended. Akhil, who migrated to Australia when she was a young girl, wrote the popular novel *Bollywood Beauty*, which traverses both worlds, Fiji and Australia; the style and content are more suited to an Australian mainstream readership, but it is still her attempt to understand the calling of this parallel world and identity. I am writ-

²² Raymond Pillai, "Factory Fodder," in *Writing the Pacific* (2007): 121.

ing my first novel, also set in Fiji and Australia; an extract from which appears in the very first anthology of Fijiindian Australian writers, edited by Subramani.²³ Having myself lived in Fiji for three years (2005–2007), this space is kept alive and fresh from the flow of the homeland and contributes to this broken journey of creating a sustaining self-image through writing.

If we look at the writing, both poetry and prose, of Mohit Prasad and the prose fiction of the younger writer Mary Daya, one can see a definite attachment to Fiji, but of a different kind from the older generation. This is also related to the space they occupy.

Mohit Prasad lives in Fiji as well as journeying back and forth to Australia, where his family is located. In “When Cargo Came,” he remythologizes the journey of indenture through an allegorical style: man symbolizes destiny and woman, muse. He starts with a definite stance: “I did not get tricked, coerced or raped. I have a destiny.”²⁴ He replaces the traditional indenture narrative as one of coercion and disempowerment with a narrative that suggests adventure, excitement, and rebirth. Thus, Prasad creates a narrative in which not banishment but the possibilities of a new destiny are tentatively celebrated:

On the island the sands seemed to shift beneath them... The muse walked away from the rest and stood against a coconut palm. A small hermit crab crawled out of the base of the palm waving like a new born child greeting a visitor. She picked up this strange creature, worked out the logic of its life within a shell, and began to whistle softly into the pink edgings of the lips of the coral.²⁵

Mary Daya lives in Fiji and is of mixed Indian and Fijian parentage. She negotiates these multiple identities through a narrative of colonization and migration, signifying both death and leaving, as well as life and arriving at new destinations. The struggle is represented in term of finding a language in which to represent the complexity of her makeup: past and present, Indian, Fijian, and westernized identities:

My words have yet to arrive. Sometimes I have imagined them to be foreign little people with foreign little hats, waiting at the door of my mouth, begging to be spoken. I need words with the crisp of pears, the cold of raspberry ices, to speak my forgetting. I cannot do it in Tamil, or Fijian, or English. These are the

²³ “After the Rains (Extract),” in *Shifting Location: Indo-Fijian Writing from Australia*, ed. & intro. Subramani (Casula, NSW: Casula Powerhouse, 2009): 107–17.

²⁴ Mohit Prasad, “When Cargo Came,” in *Writing the Pacific* (2007): 124.

²⁵ Prasad, “When Cargo Came,” 132.

languages of my remembering. Their words sit warm and familiar in my palate.
Keen to roll out voices.²⁶

Prasad and Daya make sense of a present which is inclusive of local and global flows of multiple spaces and identities by re-ordering the past in their narratives. As they are even more disconnected from the ancestral past than Pillai or Nandan, the allegorical style suits them well, as does an almost post-modern sensibility:

are you the one, Kipling Baba, sorry Sahib, who will get it right, this story of women, men, ships, power, knowledge, coups, islands and a few footless people.²⁷

While colonization and migration have produced the wound, storytelling has become the healing process, a home for the multiple spaces of identity.

Writing is a way in which local and diasporic writers can revisit memories, even if they “led to [...] trapdoors into a bottomless past,”²⁸ and can reconfigure their histories and homeland(s) in order to have a greater understanding of their own identities. Through the process of writing, Naipaul discovered the importance of going back to one’s past. In *Finding the Centre*, he writes:

To become a writer, that noble thing, I had thought it necessary to leave. Actually to write, it was necessary to go back. It was the beginning of self-knowledge.²⁹

Where, initially, writing had been a way to escape,³⁰ Naipaul later recognizes that writing strengthened him; “it quelled anxiety.”³¹ These simple but powerful notions of Naipaul’s relate, to different extents, to the Fijiindian writers discussed in this section of my essay. There is still a level of anxiety in the young Fijiindian writer, but perhaps because of their youthfulness and newness as writers there is also a quality of freedom in their writing.

²⁶ Mary Daya, “Sepia (Extract),” in *Writing the Pacific* (2007): 34–35.

²⁷ Mohit Prasad, “When Cargo Came,” 130.

²⁸ V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (London: André Deutsch, 1977): 10.

²⁹ V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985): 40.

³⁰ Naipaul writes: “The wish to be a writer didn’t go with a wish or a need actually to write. It went only with the idea that I had been given of the writer, a fantasy of nobility. It was something that lay ahead, and outside the life I knew – far from family and clan, city, colony” (*Finding the Centre*, 38).

³¹ Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 154.

The Complex Fate of the Contemporary Fijiindian

The contemporary Fijiindian grapples with three forces of identity: their 'new' connection with the West, their organic connection with Fiji, and their ancestral connection with India – this last point less so.

Asha Chand, the co-curator of *Chutney Generations*, an exhibition held in early 2007, said that the Fijiindian in Australia remains on a "threshold" or "the sill of a doorway" – and "has neither fully settled in Sydney nor left homeland Fiji totally." She does not say that Fijiindian-Australians have to make a choice; rather, she explains the dynamic and complex nature of migrancy: "This sill has to be crossed when entering or leaving a house, thus evoking images of passages, crossings or change."³² In another time and place, eighty-seven years ago, E.M. Forster described this idea of the passage in his classic novel *A Passage to India* (1924):

Thus was He thrown year after year, and were others thrown – little images of Ganpati, baskets of ten-day corn, tiny tazias after Mohurram – scapegoats, husks, emblems of passage; a passage not easy, not now, not here, not to be apprehended except when it is unattainable: the God to be thrown was an emblem of that.³³

The Hindu ceremony (the birth of Krishna) that was taking place in the Hindu state of Mau (an Indian state not controlled by the British at the time) could heal the spiritual rift, if not the political one, between the English and the Indians. This ending brought some kind of closure or provided a symbol of hope for the future. Forster suggested that friendship was only possible between the two races when there was political equality: i.e. the British must leave India first. In this case, Fijiindians are leaving Fiji, but not as colonizers; hence, a similar hope does not exist – rather, there is a bitter sense of betrayal.³⁴

³² Asha Chand, "Introduction" to *Chutney Generations: What Is It About?*, comp. Asha Chand (exh. cat.; Sydney: Liverpool Regional Museum, 2007): np.

³³ E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924; New York: Readers's Digest, 1989): 309.

³⁴ A sense of betrayal perhaps, because, as Nandan points out, "one thing about the girmityas and their descendants impresses me particularly: I've not known any country where a migrant race, which came not as colonisers but as victims of colonialism, did so much to protect the indigenous way of life. In Fiji, the native Fijians own 87 per cent of all land, they have more seats in the Parliament, more ministers and top government positions, more money spent on their education, almost 100 per cent of the army." *Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story*, 15.

The second banishment not only indicates the political rift but has resulted in a spiritual rift from the motherland. At this point Fijiindians still identify themselves as such. But their having been rejected from Fiji and carrying the knowledge of their ancestors' 'banishment' from India and the coups reinforce a permanent sense of separation.

The narrative of banishment starting from the history of the indentured labourers is written in depth by V.S. Naipaul:

We didn't have backgrounds. We didn't have a past. For most of us the past stopped with our grandparents; beyond that was a blank. If you could look down at us from the sky you would see us living in our little houses between the sea and the bush; and that was a kind of truth about us, who had been transported to that place. We were just there, floating.³⁵

But there is another kind of truth as well. The perspective of the Fijiindian has become increasingly global, whereby they are beginning to recognize the agency of having multiple connections. As the interviewee Navin says, "Fijiindians need to be aware that their environment is ever-changing but technology allows one to keep in touch with family without having a base." The journey of personal freedom, self-discovery, and an expanding perception of home has been made more possible in these migrations. The mystery of our inheritance, the lack of a solid background, is the very thing that has given Fijiindians the resilience and talent to adapt each time to new circumstances. It has obliged Fijiindians to survive and prosper in spite of this imposition of alterity or otherness that has refused them an acceptable Indian-ness, a Pacificness, and an Australianess....

Many of their ancestors came from land-locked villages and were picked up by unconscionable *arkatis* (recruiters) while they were drifting from their villages to the cities to seek employment,³⁶ whereas the Fijiindian has greater agency: not shipwrecked, but an islander who can build a boat and travel to the next shore if need be. The sea remains their mother. For Fijiindians this is their second crossing of the *kala pani*, but perhaps they are no longer the twice-banished. In our theorizing of the Fijiindian diaspora, we need to see the Fijiindian experience in a more complex way. No longer does the Nai-

³⁵ Naipaul, *A Way in the World*, 79.

³⁶ Brij Lal notes that there were significant changes taking place in agrarian land relations such as, the introduction of private ownership and steeper lease payments; in combination with famine and drought this resulted in, as he rather strikingly puts it, "a desperate mass of uprooted peasants" (*Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience*, 7).

paulean sense of “shipwreckness,” “general unease,” “placelessness,” and “restlessness” have to dominate. At the same time, I acknowledge, for the second diaspora, that with each journey “it fractures; the bone has to be set anew each time.”³⁷ So that it can heal again and again and again.

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³⁷ V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (1967; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969): 180.

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GENDERED BODIES

To Veil or Not to Veil

—— Muslim Women Writers Speak Their Rights

FEROZA JUSSAWALLA

MUSLIM WOMEN FROM EX-COLONIAL COUNTRIES, whether Commonwealth or not, from cultures as diverse as India, Iran, and Iraq, have been writing in a feminist mode and often in English since the early turn of the century. I use the word ‘feminist’ with caution. Roushan Jahan, the editor of one of the earliest ‘feminist utopias’ conceived in India, Rokeya Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905), urges this caution. Jahan writes: “One hesitates to use a term that is not context free and does mean different things to different people.”¹ Jahan uses the word to describe the liberated attitude of Hossain (1880–1932) in asking for men to go into seclusion while women go to war. I use ‘feminist’ to describe the writings of women who are consistently resisting dominant hegemonies and writing against the grain, whether of Islam or that of Western attitudes, writing for their cultural rights. Several of the books I examine, from *Sultana’s Dream* and Attia Hosein’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) to Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003), and Samina Ali’s *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004), all have ambivalent attitudes towards Islam and the practice of it. In some situations, it could mean that they speak for or against the veil. In other situations, it could mean the ability to speak out on their own and criticize Islam, as in Taslima Nasrin’s *Shame*

¹ Rokeya Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream and Selections from the Secluded Ones*, ed., tr. & intro. Roushan Jahan (New York: Feminist Press, 1988): 1.

(1997). All these works require us to consider *differential cultural rights* as we read them, where the right to be different is exercised.²

The fact that women on the Indian subcontinent and in the Middle East have been writing for and about their rights to do as they deem liberatory for them can be seen as the effect of British colonialism and education, or even just the effect of the presence of westernization. For instance, Iran was never colonized by the British, but the British presence was felt acutely from the early 1900s onwards. The British presence on the subcontinent and in the Middle East had a great effect on the roles of women and on the education of the populace in general. Although colonized for hundreds of years, countries like India came to modernization after the industrial revolution in Britain. With this modernization and westernization came the ‘unveiling’, as it were, of women and their greater freedom to speak out. In fact, it was their menfolk who encouraged many of the leading feminist writers at the turn of the 1900s and even encouraged them to free themselves from cultural restraints. Two examples from Roushan Jahan’s edition of Rokeya Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream* come to mind: she writes about how Hossain wrote in English to “demonstrate her proficiency in English to her husband,” and Hanna Papanek, in the “Afterword” to that work, writes about how a woman named Hamida Khala was devoted to purdah, but her husband finally made her throw her *burqa* out the train window because he wanted her to be civilized. These notions were no doubt coming from exposure to the British.

It is interesting to see how, with current exposure to ‘the West’, as diaspora peoples, or as peoples resisting the influence of the West on their countries today, women in these parts of the world have begun to espouse their right to remain veiled and are speaking out for laws that ‘Western’ feminists today or previous colonizers would have considered oppressive. This turn of events is indeed fascinating, where the outspoken Muslim women writers are speaking out for their cultural rights – rights that would previously not have been considered ‘rights’ but as forms of oppression. At the same time, they are also criticizing their culture and sometimes speaking out against fundamentalist Islam. This raises a very interesting question regarding the ‘Orientalism’³ of

² On this general topic, see also my earlier article, “Are Cultural Rights Bad for Multi-cultural Societies?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.4 (Fall 2001): 967–80.

³ Edward Said has described the depiction of the Muslim world by Western scholars as “Orientalist,” particularly when certain stereotypes are applied to the peoples of the Middle East. This argument has been extended by Azar Nafisi in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (see below).

Western viewpoints – especially those of Western feminists who are unable to see how Muslim women might want to ‘regress’ to what the West considers ‘oppression’. Interestingly, the wearing of the veil has become a statement of resistance to homogenizing Western influences. In this, it has become a feminist and religionist statement by Muslim women. In Turkey, for instance, young women are exercising their right to wear their veils to college in the face of Turkey’s explicit ban on wearing religious symbols on campuses.⁴ By looking at a variety of Muslim women writers’ works and their effects on the US students I taught in a Muslim women’s writing class (Fall 2005), I would like to make a case for ‘cultural-rights theory’ as a new direction in considering Commonwealth and/or postcolonial women’s writing.

As Commonwealth and postcolonial scholars, we have often quoted Macaulay’s 1835 Minute on English education in India, where he wrote:

We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother tongue. The claims of our own language, it is hardly necessary to recapitulate.⁵

But then Macaulay adds what he considers to be the advantages of English education: “that having become instructed in European knowledge, [the natives] may in some future age, demand European institutions [...] desirous and capable of all the privileges of citizens.” Indeed, westernizing and ‘liberating’ women from practices often considered ‘oppressive’ from the point of view of the ‘West’ or contemporary ‘feminists’ may be considered part of these freeing European institutions! Macaulay was bent on ‘civilizing’ the ‘native’ because those would be “the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism.” Thus the sun would never set on the British Empire: “that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws.”⁶ The British placed a strong emphasis on education. Cultures such as those on the subcontinent and in the Middle East quickly espoused their values. They were identified with modernization and success. They were quick to undertake the ‘assimilation’ and the ‘hybridity’ that we, as postcolonial critics, so enjoin today. It is interesting to see how our contemporary effort at ‘freeing

⁴ Aisha Labi, “A Symbol of Oppression, or a Sign of Faith?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (3 February 2006): A44.

⁵ Macaulay, quoted in Feroza Jussawalla, *Family Quarrels: Towards a Criticism of Indian Writing in English* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985): 1.

⁶ Macaulay, quoted in Uma Parameswaran, *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1976): 3.

women' has ironically become part of what contemporary Muslim women consider an imperialistic venture.

When I offered the class referred to above, in Muslim women's writing, US students were generally in a state of shock. 'Is there such a thing?' they asked. Muslim women's writing per se is generally contrary to all Western expectations. Arundhati Roy has said that President Bush made it seem as though the war against Afghanistan was meant to liberate women from purdah. Women writers such as Roya Hakakian from Iran have felt self-conscious about their writing, as they did not want to make it seem as though they were criticizing their cultures to benefit the Western point of view. Hakakian puts this poignantly when she writes, in *Journey from the Land of No* (2004):

When you belong to a breed on the verge of extinction... one small slip can turn you into a poster child for someone else's crusade. And you know nothing more suspect than a crusade. Memory is the membrane in which the past is sealed and also the blueprint of what you once, when you were at your most clearheaded, envisioned as the future.⁷

Bush's persistent reference to the oppression of women in the Islamic world, so typical of Western notions about Muslim women in general, sought to make 'poster children' of any women criticizing Islam. This juxtaposing of 'us', the civilized, with 'them', the uncivilized, highlights '*différance*' and 'otherness' in much the same way as Western feminism does when it seeks to liberate women not considered liberated by their standards, and refuses to acknowledge their contributions to their own culture and to literature at large. Such thinking by those of us located in the West creates cultural assumptions that actually engender inequalities because they do not see the Third World, particularly Islamic women, in their true light and consequently foster further gender inequalities, forms of marginalization, and stereotypes that cause exclusion from the work force or discrimination in societal settings such as we are seeing currently in France. They also cause political hostilities among countries, 'Muslims' versus 'secularists' and 'national groups', or 'Bangladeshis' – for instance – who then get equated with terrorists.

Some of this is seen in the increasing conflict about the veiling of women in the schools in both Britain and France. While Muslim women increasingly wish to pursue this option, as a marker of their difference, 'we' in 'the West'

⁷ Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Three Rivers, 2004): 14.

see it as oppression. Muslim women have written both pro and contra this issue – but they have wanted to be, and continue to be, the ones who wish to speak their own mind on this issue, rather than having it legislated either by Western notions or by feminisms.

In fact, women in the Muslim world, whether in India, Iran, Iraq or Egypt, have had a mind of their own and have consistently expressed it, even as they have used it in times past to complain of being segregated and not allowed to be educated. We see both points of view in a work like Azar Nafisi's contemporary blockbuster *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004). The author herself criticizes the return to veiling, a practice women were freed from by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1936 as a controversial symbol of modernization.⁸ When it is re-imposed by the Khomeini-era mullahs, Nafisi talks about going to protest against the imposition of the veil (110). She has noticed that her student Sanaz looks bent down when pressured to wear the veil (27). She pictures the tall and upright Sanaz bending down as she walks past slogans on walls that say 'Veiling is a woman's protection' (27). But she talks of her own student Mah-tab, with whom she was quite close, wanting to embrace the veil as a way of resisting the imperialists. Liberated and Western-educated as she was, Nafizi left the Iran she considered to be regressing. But, as she says in her epilogue, "I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me" (341). This is almost like the Indian writer Raja Rao's proclamation, in *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960): "My India I carry with me." So, on some level, despite much westernization there is a core indigenouness whether it is expressed as Iranian-ness or Indianness, or, as with Taslima Nasrin, as Bengali-ness. Bengali Muslim women's Bengali nationalism extends all the way to Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), set in Bangladeshi London.

This is also the continuous dichotomy of Muslim women's writing from the 1900s to today: they use their writing to criticize their societal injustices, yet are strongly rooted in their religion and their traditions, which they defend. They want to criticize their own culture that 'oppresses' them, which they sometimes see as oppression and sometimes not, and yet, in the face of Western stereotyping of their culture or ways of being, they want to defend themselves as Muslims, even as Islamists. Often, in their own ways, they have found liberation from the cultural assumptions that oppress them, yet have defended those same cultural assumptions when faced with criticism, particu-

⁸ Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2004): 112. Further page references are in the main text.

larly from Western hegemonic homogenizing powers, whether of colonialism, their own societal patriarchy, or the contemporary West, which they see as neo-imperialistic.

The recent worldwide criticism of veiling has raised the issue of Muslim women's cultural rights, their right to express themselves and their culture by adopting *différance* as a form of strategic resistance. I hope to show this as I contextualize Muslim women's writing from the subcontinent on the larger canvas of contemporary Muslim writing from the Middle East and in the contemporary events that centre on the assertion of the cultural rights of Muslims to be different.

Traditionally in postcolonial theory, we have seen Jacques Derrida's term *différance* as indicating the difference of the 'Other' as the oppressed *other* of Europe, thereby establishing a binary opposition resulting basically in oppression. *Différance* has been an indicator of, or a reason for, oppression. Derrida tells us: "*Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences," or a marker of the activity of "originary" differences.⁹ But, in "The Violence of the Letter" in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida shows us how *différance* goes from *enslavement* to *liberation*. This is what has happened with the veil. It has become a marker/signifier/trace which at one time was of oppression and is now of liberation – the freedom to be Muslim in the face of opposition or discrimination or distancing. Derrida indicates it thus:

What is going to be called *enslavement* can equally legitimately be called *liberation*. And it is at the moment that this oscillation is *stopped* on the signification of enslavement that the discourse is frozen into a determined ideology.¹⁰

South Asian Muslim women's writing, when placed in the global context of Muslim women's writing from the rest of the countries affected by the British presence and the assertion of cultural rights through that writing, demonstrates this dichotomy of how Muslim women's differences become enabling when they exercise their *différance* by veiling or, as in Taslima Nasrin's case, by locating herself as a Bengali Muslim who can freely criticize the violent practising of Islam in Bangladesh.

However, in the face of both British colonialism and contemporary Western criticism, a common assumption is that Muslim women in particular need

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Différance" (1968), tr. Alan Bass, in *Critical Theory since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams & Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986): 126, 128.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*De la Grammatologie*, 1967; Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976): 131.

to be rescued from their own culture and peoples. In Spivakian terms, it is a case of 'white women' and 'white men' saving 'brown women' from themselves. Gayatri Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," argues for the right of the Hindu woman to commit *sati* if she so wishes. She tells us that it is impossible for "Western intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe."¹¹ Her classic conclusion is that by banning *sati* "white men [and white women] are saving brown women from brown men."¹² While not buying her theory entirely, we have to make a case for indigenous rights and the 'indigene's' ability to 'speak for herself'. Of course, by Spivak's convoluted argument, when we do so we are creating a "nostalgia for lost origins," of which she does not approve. But she does us the favour of pointing out that the 'post-representational' vocabulary: i.e. the vocabulary of hybridity that has been developed by more recent postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, hides an 'essentialist' if not assimilationist agenda. It is this assimilationist agenda that contemporary Muslim women are resisting by turning inward to Muslim practices. The point I was trying to make with my students, in my Muslim women's writing class, was that we need to respect the 'cultural rights' of the women who wish to go into 'arranged marriages' – or wish to 'be veiled' or to undergo 'clitorodectomy', all practices which we, in our infinite wisdom, have labelled torturous or oppressive. I would like to make the same point with regard to reading Muslim women's writing as feminist. Exercising one's cultural rights is also an important praxis.

What are "cultural rights?" Will Kymlicka writes that considerations of cultural rights arose most recently from the controversy around Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988), where the Muslims of Britain exercised their right to see this book as blasphemous:

It was this case, perhaps more than any single event, which has led people in the West to think carefully about the nature of "multiculturalism," and the extent to which the claims of minority cultures can or should be accommodated within a liberal-democratic regime.¹³

¹¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (1993; New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 75.

¹² Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 92.

¹³ Will Kymlicka, *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, ed. Will Kymlicka (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995): 3, quoted in Daniel I. O'Neill, "Multicultural Liberals and the Rushdie Affair: A Critique of Kymlicka, Taylor, and Walzer," *Review of Politics* 61.2 (Spring 1999): 220.

Did the Bangladeshi Muslims of Brick Lane satirized as “Brick Hall” have the right to burn Rushdie’s book? Or, from ‘our’ Western points of view, was that censorship? What this raised for us as postcolonial critics was whether the ‘othered’ people, the colonized, the marginalized, whom we most wish to support and presume to ‘speak for’, had the *cultural right* to practise their own culture without interference, albeit in foreign lands. Conversely, when they argued for the resurrection of antiquated British laws of blasphemy to be applied to Rushdie’s book, questions were raised about their right to interfere with the laws and rights of the land they had emigrated to.

Cultural critics and philosophical theorists from Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, and Daniel O’Neill have promulgated Stanley Fish’s idea of ‘boutique multiculturalism’, which is further divided into that of strong multiculturalism and weak multiculturalism. O’Neill associates ‘strong’ multiculturalism with the work of Kymlicka, Taylor, and Walzer:

Strong multiculturalists are committed, in certain circumstances, to the defense of differential (or special) citizenship rights for minority groups based on their culture. [...] The second level of multicultural argument I refer to (for lack of a better term) as “weak” multiculturalism. Weak multiculturalists do not argue for differential citizenship rights, but seek a range of different goals. In the United States, these have included, for example, expanding the academic curriculum to reflect more fully the contributions of minorities.¹⁴

It is these *differential cultural rights* that we have to take into consideration when Muslim women speak of their preference for veiling. Similarly, it is this differential cultural right that the dominant Muslim hegemony needs to consider when the women wish to speak out against what they see as wrongs in their own culture, or what they see as wrongs in the practice of their religion – such as the violence that Taslimia Nasrin objects to. All this calls for what Charles Taylor has called “an *inspired adhocery*”:

The acute problem arises from the fact that international migration is making all societies less culturally uniform. There are large Muslim minorities in “Christendom.” We are going to need some *inspired adhocery* in years to come.¹⁵

“*Adhocery*” is not going to work in the face of violence or in the face of the urgent need on the part of migrant communities to be legitimated. We see that the suspicions of immigrants who keep their cultures are beginning to multiply. Tariq Modood, a Senior Fellow at the Policy Studies Institute, has indi-

¹⁴ O’Neill, “Multicultural Liberals and the Rushdie Affair,” 222.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, “The Rushdie Controversy,” *Public Culture* 2.1 (Fall 1989): 121.

cated what he calls ‘cultural racism’, which he defines it as a “hardening” of “attitudes against groups seen to be assertively different and not trying to fit in, such as Asians and Muslims”; white youth willingly incorporate black and other minorities into their groups but not those labelled ‘Muslims’, for instance.¹⁶ The same is true for women who might go to work veiled.

The recent focus on the banning of the veil from schools in France is also not a new issue. As far back as 1986, the British-Pakistani and radical Muslim writer Hanif Kureishi was writing against the edicts of Ray Honeyford, headmaster of Bradford’s Drummond Middle School. This is interesting because Kureishi under no circumstance considers himself Muslim or Islamic; he rejects it outright with the question, “What? Me fundy?” But he defends the right of young Muslim women to stay veiled in their schools. Consequent on what was seen as Honeyford’s racism, a new school, the Zakariya School for Girls, was to be opened, and Bradford became, in Kureishi’s words, “a microcosm of a larger British society.”¹⁷ Kureishi quotes a Sir Michael Shaw, MP for Scarborough, speaking to the Muslim community of Bradford:

“You have come into our community, [...] and you must become part of that community. All branches must lead to one trunk, which is the British way of life. We mustn’t retire to our own communities and shut ourselves out. Yet you have felt you have needed schools of your own.”¹⁸

This is the assimilationist argument, not very different from a call for ‘hybridity’. Kureishi noted in that article that Shaw was “speaking” out of a notion of “Britishness” (sort of like my students reacting to Muslim women’s writing out of their notion of Western feminism). Kureishi wrote:

There is a word you hear in Bradford all the time, in pubs, shops, discos, schools and on the street. The word is “culture.” It is a word often used by the New Right, who frequently cite T.S. Eliot: that culture is a whole way of life, manifesting itself in the individual, in the group and in the society. [...] For Eliot culture “includes all the characteristic activities of the British people: Derby Day, Henley regatta, Cowes, the 12th of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, 19th century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Tariq Modood, quoted in Stuart Wavell, “Wrestling for an Equal Share,” *Sunday Times* (26 March 1995): 9.

¹⁷ Hanif Kureishi, “Bradford,” *Granta* 20 (Winter 1986): 150.

¹⁸ Kureishi, “Bradford,” 156.

¹⁹ Kureishi, “Bradford,” 168.

It is because of these notions of what constitutes ‘our’ culture that we object when individuals like Muslim women wish to practice *différance*. It is currently very fashionable in the cultural, literary-critical, and ‘theoretical’ world to argue against such differences and against specific indigenous identities. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s book *The Ethics of Identity* (2005) has raised the issue of ‘whose culture is it?’ Appiah argues instead for cosmopolitanism, which automatically translates into the same assimilationist agenda and hybridization that the conservative forces of our governments advocate. Muslim women today refuse assimilation and have long been unafraid to assert their right to live their own lives, to criticize their culture and their religion and yet to defend their right to function within it.

India and the Indian subcontinent per se is the geographical region with perhaps the longest history of Muslim women’s writing. In her memoir-essay “Lihaf” (1941), Ismat Chughtai wrote of lesbian fantasies in segregated quarters. Her later sister Sara Suleri, writing in *Meatless Days* (1989), also describes lesbianism in purdah quarters. Rokeya Hossain’s feminist utopia, the previously mentioned *Sultana’s Dream*, is a satirical treatment, reversing the traditional roles of men and women and showing how women are smarter than men. Attia Hosein, the famous alumna of Jamia Milia University and celebrated in their institute dedicated to her, wrote in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) of a young heroine, Laila, seeking education, resisting an arranged marriage, going on to becoming a doctor, but also functioning as a religious Muslim. The book starts with the narrator at the age of fifteen and goes up to when she says: “the second half of the century is now two years old,” presumably 1952. Although it is usually regarded as a novel about India’s coming of age in independence, it is also a novel about Muslim women’s rights coming to age. Laila is the bookish tomboy who watches a marriage being arranged for her cousin, questions the treatment of her maiden aunt, expresses her own desire for education, criticizes the separation of men and women, and eventually becomes a doctor. She is married and widowed.

Taslima Nasrin’s *Shame* (1999) has been much criticized by the Islamic world as being anti-Islamic because she criticizes the senseless violence of Islamic fundamentalists clashing with similarly fundamentalist Hindus. But she shows the violence on both sides by Muslims and Hindus and the effect it has on young women’s bodies.

The Pakistani writer Tehmina Durrani’s ‘kiss and tell’ memoir *My Feudal Lord* (1995), like Mayada’s story recounted to Jean Sasson in *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq* (2004), tells of a woman and her family’s involvement in

the politics of their respective countries. Tehmina Durrani is a young woman who marries a well-known politician by the name of Mustafa Khar. Even today, Khar is often seen in the current press as making another run for political office in Pakistan. Mustafa was a close associate of the Bhuttos. Durrani's memoir describes the horrific domestic abuse suffered at the hands of Mustafa. The book is billed as a "devastating indictment of women's role in Muslim society." Yet the woman who has suffered much abuse, even to the point of being beaten up on a hospital bed, remains religiously 'Muslim'. She talks of severing her ties with her husband and her parents, who had both ill-treated her. She fights her parents in the name of Islam:

On Ashura, (the tenth day of the tragedy of Karballa, when the Prophet's grandson Imam Hussain and his family were brutally slain by the tyrant caliph Yazid) I called my mother and said, "I want to inform you that I have left this battle to God, Islam does not give the sole responsibility of love and duty to the children of parents who do severe injustice to them. Islam fights injustice."²⁰

It is this strong and continuing faith in Islam that is so typical of the women who are writing against it and against the practice of it. She talks about sitting on her prayer mat and crying and offering thanks for compassion like a beggar. This is the continuing conundrum of Muslim women writers.

Mayada tells of the horrific abuse suffered by a woman journalist who seems to have charmed Saddam Hussein yet suffered at his hands and in his prisons. She is supported by a prayer group of strictly Islamic women in his jails. The book gives an interesting insight into why the secular peoples of Iraq turn to Islamicization. In their current anti-war sentiments, feminists and liberals in the West have dismissed the book as created for Western propaganda. Yet it shows us the strength of Muslim women who speak out. Both women, through sheer strength of personality and, interestingly and ironically, religious faith and prayer, survived to tell their tale.

Most recently, Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004) tells the story of a young girl, Layla, who was raised in America but was sent 'home' to India to have an arranged marriage with a man who turns out to be gay. Consequently, she turns inward to veiling and 'nativization'. She steps out into the old city of Hyderabad, after a muha'ram procession, in a black chador, a free woman, free not to marry a gay man, but free in her veil: "I was invisible. [...] My body hidden and safe under the chador, belonging only to me."²¹

²⁰ Tehmina Durrani, *My Feudal Lord* (1994; London: Corgi, 1995): 368.

²¹ Samina Ali, *Madras on Rainy Days* (New York: Picador, 2005): 307.

And so it is that the chador and Islam as religion offer solace in such a way that women fight for their rights to retain them.

The other very interesting thing about these novels is that they are all, except for Rokeya Hossain's dream, female *Bildungsromane*, growing-up novels through which the child comes to a recognition of herself as definitely Muslim, having gone through the questioning of cultural practices. This is true of all the recent Muslim women's novels mentioned in this essay. Somehow, it seems to be easier to voice their subversive thoughts through children. Nasrin's *Shame* depicts the horror of what could have happened to the young girl Maya. How many times was she raped, by whom and why? Only because she was not Muslim? As an attempt to force her to convert? When the grown Maya sees another Hindu girl reciting *Al Hamdalillah*, she understands what has happened to her. Yet she also advocates conversion to her family, not just as a political move, but as a belief.

It seems almost as though the issues that Muslim women in Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan are facing today are issues that Muslim women on the subcontinent dealt with almost a generation ago: to veil or not to veil, to agree to arranged marriages or not, to speak out against their religion and its mullahs and their interpretations of their laws or not, to speak out against the violence perpetrated in the name of religion, by their religious brothers. This last is the issue that has dogged Taslima Nasrin the most. Faced with Western cultural domination, Muslim women seem to be walking the fine line of both asserting their 'cultural rights', such as wanting to wear the head-scarf in France, and trying to remedy certain cultural ways of being, fighting the rape of women, fighting female genital mutilation yet asserting the right to it. The inability to speak out against Islam from within the culture also raises the dichotomous critical issue where, from current postcolonial theoretical perspectives, the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin, like Iran's Azar Nafisi, has been criticized for being 'Orientalist', for portraying her own people critically and supposedly through a Western lens, an issue that Salman Rushdie had to face with his *Satanic Verses*.²² In actuality, these women are speaking out for the right to be Muslim in a secular way – to be able to criticize the functioning of Islam and yet to say, 'We are Muslims, and we don't want our culture to be desecrated by our own people!'

²² I have discussed this at length in "Resurrecting the Prophet: The Case of Salman, the Otherwise," *Public Culture* 2.1 (Fall 1989): 107–17. See also my essay "Rushdie's *Dastan-e-Dilruba*," *diacritics* 26.1 (Spring 1996): 50–73.

Taslima Nasrin was exiled from Islamic Bangladesh for speaking out against the Muslim atrocities following the demolition of the Babri Masjid by fanatical Hindus. In essence, her novelized version of the atrocities, the attempt to drive out Hindus who have lived side by side with Muslims, is a critique of both religions. In fact, her story tells the story of how these religious battles are fought on the bodies of women. Like the Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1992), *Shame* tells the story of a young child, Maya, who at the age of six is taken away/kidnapped by Muslims who, after committing atrocities on her body, send her home brainwashed to recite "I am a Muslim," "I believe in Allah."²³ While Taslima Nasrin never really comes out and asks why atrocities are perpetrated on the bodies of young women, or why young women are the subjects before whom atrocities are perpetrated, it underlies her novel *Shame*. Since being exiled for asking these difficult questions, Nasrin has wandered homeless, most recently struggling to have her Indian visa extended so that she can have a platform from which to speak freely. But she has not given up her essential subcontinental cultural self. She moved back to India after having been thrown out of Europe. In "Banished Within and Without," she writes: "The moment I set foot on Indian soil, I knew I belonged here and that it was, in some fundamental way, inseparable from the land I called my own."²⁴ She sees her struggle as one for Bengali nationalism and secularism of an undivided India open to all faiths, with open arms.

Interestingly, to avoid the religious oppression of women as depicted in *Shame*, Rokeya Hossain in *Sultana's Dream* (1905) dreamt a feminist utopia, where the women go to war and the men stay at home in secluded quarters to execute duties traditionally considered female. Confidently, she challenged *hadith*. This book is a true work of art that shows how in any society women can overturn the factors that create and foster gender inequality. In five articles published between 1903 and 1904, "The Degradation of Women," "The Female Half," "The Good Housewife," "The Cloak (Burqa)," and "Home," Rokeya Hossain challenged not only these cultural assumptions but also Islamic law. In much the same way as Elizabeth Cady Stanton did in her *Woman's Bible*, Rokeya questioned a fundamental assumption of the religion

²³ Taslima Nasrin, *Shame*, tr. Kankabati Datta (New York: Prometheus, 1999): 33.

²⁴ Taslima Nasrin, "Banished Within and Without," *Times of India* (10 February 2008):

of the peoples of the Book – whether Judaeo-Christian or Islamic – that women are created inferior. Roushan Jahan writes:

On the improbability of divine ordination [of the inferiority of women] Rokeya wrote, referring to the Islamic legal stand of recognizing two women as equivalent to one man: “Had God Himself intended women to be inferior, He would have ordained it so that mothers would have given birth to daughters at the end of the fifth month of pregnancy. The supply of mother’s milk would naturally have been half of that in case of a son. But that is not the case. How can it be so? Is not God just and merciful?” She concluded that “men are using religion as an excuse to dominate us at present. [...] Therefore we should not submit quietly to such oppression in the name of religion.”

This required great courage on Rokeya’s part, for she was questioning a legal position based on the text of the Qu’ran itself. While Muslim scholars and jurists do not hesitate to debate the *hadith* – the body of traditions based on sayings or actions of the prophet and his companions – few Muslims dare to challenge the revealed text of the Qu’ran which they are expected to accept unconditionally.²⁵

We all know what happened to Salman Rushdie when he took the Qur’an apart chapter and verse and made implications about its reasonability and validity. However, this was not the fate of Rokeya Hossain under British colonialism. She was never censored or persecuted even when religious fervour divided the subcontinent.

Today, by contrast, Taslima Nasrin is struggling against Islamic fundamentalists, both Indian and Bangladeshi, who do not allow her to criticize their violence. However, Nasrin criticizes Islamic fundamentalists and communalists alike – while still seeing herself culturally as Muslim, which is why she ached to return to a space like Hyderabad after twelve years in Europe.²⁶ This is the conundrum in my essay – I am arguing that Muslim women have always been liberated and have always spoken their minds, and that there is a wide range of beliefs in their writing, from the early search for liberation to the more recent inward turn to espousing religion as an activity subversive of the hegemony of ‘the West’. And all this is done while remaining Muslim and asserting their rights to a quintessential Muslimness.

The very existence of Muslim women’s writings shows how feminist and liberated Muslim women actually were and are, even if they were kept in se-

²⁵ Roushan Jahan, in her “Rokeya: An Introduction to Her Life,” in Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream and Selections from the Secluded Ones*, ed., tr. & intro. Roushan Jahan (New York: Feminist Press, 1988): 48.

²⁶ Nasrin, “Banished Within and Without.”

gregated quarters, sometimes denied education (though in India they were often provided extensive education), and/or experienced much abuse – sexual, ritualistic, and spousal. In fact, these women, in speaking out, had managed to resist cultural and religious barriers and are thus asserting their rights.

From Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* (2003) to Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, these works depict the quiet but effective resistance that the women engage in. All of these works identify factors in Islamic cultures that create and foster gender inequality. But they (these works and the women writing them) in their own way create systems that overturn these forms of inequality. Satrapi's animated comic book is perhaps the quietest yet most creative form of subversion. Satrapi illustrates the first re-introduction of the veil in 1980, where a little veiled girl is shaking an unveiled girl threatening "execution in the name of freedom."²⁷ Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Teheran* is an example of how one woman academic, through gathering up her students outside the formal structure of her university, exhibits resistance and educates not only her students but also others caught in the net of the oppressive regime.

How can we alleviate the 'plight' of Muslim women in France, especially if they don't see veiling as a plight but instead consider the stricture 'not to veil' as a plight? Conversely, how can we assist in alleviating the plight of women coming to Europe to escape FGM – but who still won't be poster figures for what we consider oppression? The Somali writer Waris Dirie's *Desert Flower* and *Desert Dawn* are examples of memoirs where a truly subaltern voice emerges – but one that refuses to be co-opted into creating a stereotype of the injustice done. Dire, for instance, refused to appear on the Oprah Winfrey show. She writes:

I couldn't understand why Oprah Winfrey wanted me to talk about spirit and have a white girl [Calista Flockhart] who was never infibulated talk about FGM. What kind of spirit did I have to remember anyway?²⁸

Women choosing to be veiled say, "I am Muslim. It is a sign of my faith."²⁹ And by the very act of writing itself, either under tyrannical families or tyrannical governments and now espousing the veil, these women appear more liberated than most Western feminists, who seldom engage in auto-

²⁷ Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (New York: Pantheon, 2003): 3.

²⁸ Waris Dirie, *Desert Dawn* (London: Virago, 2002): 30.

²⁹ Labi, "A Symbol of Oppression, or a Sign of Faith?" 44.

critique and simply espouse uncritically what they take as feminist standards. The large body of writing produced by Muslim women today shows that these women have come into their own voice. Most of the works we see in the press today are memoirs or testimonials that have resurrected the author into a speaking voice, a speaking subject, which needed no other, supposedly more liberated, voice to speak for them. A cross-cultural global understanding of women's rights as depicted in these works is urgently needed in postcolonial theory and feminism today. Do women who want to remain veiled in France have the right to do so – or should we, as Western feminists, be liberating them? Can we not see women who act on behalf of themselves as liberated if they don't meet our own standards of what we consider feminism? Can the subaltern 'speak' for herself – or will we only see her as liberated if there is a Western woman speaking for her?

Postcolonial theory, in its moves towards accepting migration and diaspora and its turn away from nation-state and its narratives, has wanted to push societies towards so-called hybridity – what Bhabha calls the "worlding" of literature and, by extension, of the human condition. But those living under conditions of hybridity are given little or no legitimacy, and here the issue of 'subalternity' becomes important.

I believe that listening to each of these voices and trying to understand the contexts in which they are expressing their experiences helps us understand their world and ours, in such a fashion that we can grant them their *cultural rights* to deal with their situations. We can also shape our understanding to accept them for who they are in our worlds, granting them their *cultural rights* – regardless of whether they seem liberated to us or not – and thus helping shape public policy in ways that permit them to function with our precious constitutional freedoms – the freedom to practise religion as we choose, for instance. If we can do this, I believe there will be less violence such as we have seen in France – over slight incidents like the wearing of the veil in schools. This is why reading the works mentioned in the present essay is not only important but also enlightening.

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Gendered Bodies in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus**

CHERYL STOBIE

THE NOVEL *PURPLE HIBISCUS*, BY THE NIGERIAN AUTHOR Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, explores the implications of gendered bodies within (and beyond) a patriarchal nuclear family. The text is a *Bildungsroman* which charts the development of the fifteen-year-old protagonist and compares it with that of her seventeen-year-old brother. Adichie clearly reveals the brutality of patriarchal power, and also provides alternatives to the binary extremes of masculine dominance and feminine subordination. The novel is conceived and marketed as global literature, and it is therefore appropriate to analyse it with the theoretical aid of commentators from the African continent and outside it. The theories I employ include black feminism, or womanism, as interpreted by Alice Walker and Chikwenye Ogunyemi, postcolonialism, hybridity, and bodily symptoms associated with voicelessness, as expressed by Hélène Cixous and Marlene Nourbese Philip. I argue that over the trajectory of the novel the coming of age of the main character and that of her brother are represented in terms of gendered bodies and psyches which are appropriately complex for a novel which uses as its main symbol the hybrid purple hibiscus.

The first-person narrator of *Purple Hibiscus* is Kambili Achike, whose father, Eugene, is the undisputed patriarch in his family, a respected benefactor in the Roman Catholic church, and Big Man in the community. The novel begins *in medias res*, with a short chapter whose events occur chronologically

* This essay is the companion-piece to Stobie's "Dethroning The Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy and Politics In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*," *Literature and Theology* 24.4 (December 2010): 421–35.

after some three-quarters of the events in the text, and which encapsulates the major themes of the novel, including the issue of gendered bodies. The first sentence reads:

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère.¹

This sentence effectively sets the scene regarding Eugene's character and the gendered dynamic within the Achike family. In addition, the novel makes reference to Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, which likewise focuses on a character whose inflexibility is his undoing. However, while Adichie is paying homage to her famous literary forebear she is also writing back to him from the perspective of a contemporary woman author with an interest in the representation of gendered forms of oppression and the position of women in Nigerian society. As Florence Stratton aptly notes, when *Things Fall Apart* is read

with a view to examining its relation to patriarchal ideology, the portrayal appears as a means of legitimizing male domination. For, despite his critical stance, Achebe does not relate the brutality of masculinity to the excess of power a patriarchal society makes available to men.²

Adichie addresses a crucial lack in Achebe's text by foregrounding the physical and psychological transformation of a female character, Kambili. As Stratton further comments,

In certain important respects, the female *bildungsroman* stands in opposition to the entire African male literary tradition – a tradition to which the very notion of female development is alien. For it is a form which, by its very definition, characterizes women as active and dynamic – as developing. Women are, in other words, conceptualized not as the Other but as self-defining. Furthermore, their status as historical subjects is given due recognition. This [...] form [...] seeks to subvert the Manichean allegory of gender by putting female subjectivity in process.³

¹ Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003; London: Fourth Estate, 2004): 4. Further page references are in the main text.

² Florence Stratton, *Contemporary Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994): 37.

³ Stratton, *Contemporary Literature and the Politics of Gender*, 107.

Over the trajectory of *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili, the female hero of the *Bildungsroman*, moves from an inability to express herself for fear of her father to an ability to speak, smile, and laugh, indicating her developing control of her own body, subjectivity, and destiny. Her position shifts from adoration of the paterfamilias whose word is law to a much more ambivalent attitude towards both her parents. This shift occurs after she has been exposed to interactions with her aunt, Ifeoma, and her children, Amaka, Obiora, and Chima; her paternal grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu; and a progressive young priest, Father Amadi. Through Kambili's *Bildung*, Adichie explores the construction of gender within a rigid patriarchal framework, as well as the benefits – both physical and psychological – to be gained by adopting values associated with being female.

Eugene flings his missal across the room after his son, Jaja, has defiantly refused to go to communion. Kambili notes that communion is of great importance to her father, who is the first of the congregation to receive it:

Most people did not kneel to receive communion at the marble altar, with the blond life-size Virgin mounted nearby, but Papa did. He would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace, and then he would stick his tongue out as far as it would go. (4)

Eugene's contorted expression indicates his zealotry; in addition, while he bows the knee to religious authority, he accrues power via the tongue, a gendered bodily signifier of power over language, in his patriarchal religion. Eugene practises his religion with such fervour that, as sanctioned head of the family, he uses it as a weapon to control and intimidate his wife and children. Adichie links anxious, overbearing masculinity with absolutist religion. Eugene's act of violence breaks the figurines treasured by his wife, Beatrice. The episode is central to the representation of gender in *Purple Hibiscus*. Eugene's determination to be in the right has a positive side in his work, as he is the fearless publisher of a newspaper which criticizes undemocratic practices of the state. He also performs numerous acts of charity. Behind closed doors, however, he is a tyrannical patriarch, and, even if there are suspicions of violence, members of his church, including the priest, and members of his village community conspire to keep him safe from censure because of his generosity and status. So revered is he that, ironically, Kambili and the community view him as a Christ-like figure, as is illustrated when "many hands [...] reached out to grasp his white tunic as if touching him would heal them of an illness" (91). Kambili is desperate to secure her father's approval, and

when he confers it she feels as if her mouth “were full of melting sugar” (11). Yet the “love sips” of his tea which he offers to Jaja and Kambili in a parodic version of the eucharist are always too hot, painfully burning their tongues. Kambili continues: “But it didn’t matter, because I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa’s love into me” (8). Eugene’s love for his family comes at a price, and Kambili’s rationalization of the bodily pain involved indicates a manichean split between body and mind.

Within the family unit, then, Eugene functions as patriarch and enforcer of religious edicts which he considers to be channelled through him from God. Although the breaking of Beatrice’s ornaments is accidental, the episode is symbolic of gendered differences in the Achike family structure. Eugene employs his church missal as a missile to lash out with violence; the domestic despot is bolstered by phallogocentric religious authority. The title of the first section of the novel, “Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday,” highlights the lack of connection between the Christian festival and the family which should be joyously celebrating it. Shared joy is absent in this family because of the tyranny at its heart. The breaking gods of the section’s title are gendered, as I shall illustrate. On the one hand, Beatrice’s broken figurines represent a smashing of her belief in feminine passivity and docility. On the other, by this loss of control Eugene’s godlike paternal authority is called into question.

Beatrice’s numerous figurines are “beige, finger-size ceramic figurines of ballet dancers in various contorted postures” (7). They are diminutive, static, beautiful, and perfect, and represent a monochromatic, eurocentric model of the perfect body. In addition, in their sylph-like appearance they evoke youth, and are in opposition to matronly and maternal physiques. They are also lithe, and by their ‘contorted postures’ suggest stylization, ritual, and the discipline undergone by ballet-dancers in their training. In ballet, it is generally the female form that is prized. These tiny objects, then, are a fitting objective correlative to Beatrice’s fantasy-world. Beyond these associations, however, the figurines have served as fetishes to comfort Beatrice after the beatings she has endured at the hand of her husband. They have assisted her in forgetting her pain, fear, and humiliation, as well as her imperfect, limping body with sagging breasts, and in immersing herself in female control and a ritual of purification and care. Kambili remembers:

Years ago, before I understood, I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard the sounds from their room, like something being banged against the door. Her rubber slippers never made a sound on the stairs, but I knew she went downstairs when I heard the dining room door open. I would go down-

stairs to see her standing by the étagère with a kitchen towel soaked in soapy water. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face. The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple color of an overripe avocado, she had rearranged them after she had polished them. (10–11)

When Kambili enquires whether her mother will replace the broken figurines, she replies in the negative, implying that she will act to end her role as battered woman who is complicit in her own abuse.

Eugene, too, becomes a broken quasi-god in the first section of the novel. This is presented as an inter-generational challenge to his masculine authority as his son flexes his autonomy and refuses to obey his father, even upon threat of spiritual death as a consequence of refusing communion. While the white priest, Father Benedict, “referred to the pope, Papa, and Jesus – in that order” (4), his subsequent reference to the recent coup in Nigeria suggests cyclical shifts of power. The institutions of Church and State are revealed to be interconnected systems of patriarchal power, which finds its most intimate form within the confines of the heterosexual family, yet which is subject to alteration. Adichie thus begins her novel by emphasizing the possibility of overturning pathological forms of power from within, by the courage of committed individuals. Eugene is not only challenged by Jaja, but his own bodily integrity is compromised by his absolutist rage for control, as is conveyed by the angry pus-filled rash which Kambili notices spreading across his face after episodes of violence. The forces that Eugene’s anger unleashes are corrosive to both others and himself. Hypermasculinity is shown to be threatening to the health of the body politic, as is its binary opposite, hyperfemininity.

While these extreme forms of gendered expression are criticized in the novel, Adichie also makes it clear that alternative forms of bodily enactment are possible. Although she is supplying a narrative field which conceives of female bodies as central, she does not demonize male bodies. This balance is central to Adichie’s project, which is reformist rather than revolutionary, in line with her own commitment to Roman Catholicism⁴ and to a viewpoint consonant with aspects of womanism as described by the Nigerian theorist Chikwenye Ogunyemi:

⁴ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, interview by Wale Adebani, “‘Nigerian Identity Is Burdensome’: The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Interview,” *Nigeria Village Square* (2004): online (accessed 15 January 2006).

More often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a black woman writer is likely to be a 'womanist.' That is, she will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy.⁵

In 1983, Alice Walker's book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* was published. Walker's use of the term 'womanism' is better known than Ogunyemi's, but according to Ogunyemi, she conceived of the term independently, and publication of her article was delayed.⁶ Walker defines 'womanist' first as referring to a "black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression [...] 'You acting womanish' [...] Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behaviour."⁷ Secondly, she defines the term as referring to a "woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually" and, by extension:

Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. [...] Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented."⁸

Finally, Walker makes a memorable and, for my purposes, significant comparison: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."⁹ The novel for which Walker is most famous is *The Color Purple*. As Brenda Cooper notes,

A black woman writing fiction, especially while resident in North America and using "purple" in the title of her novel, acknowledges Alice Walker's contribution as an alternative inspirational source to the Western canon.¹⁰

This is true, but I would argue that Adichie's use of Walker is more far-reaching than Cooper suggests. Walker, who has acknowledged that she is bisexual, has aroused considerable antipathy among African womanists because

⁵ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," *Signs* 11.1 (Autumn 1985): 64.

⁶ Susan Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures*, tr. Isabel Cole (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2002): 38.

⁷ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983; London: Women's Press, 1984): xi.

⁸ Walker, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.

⁹ *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, xii.

¹⁰ Brenda Cooper, *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2008): 127.

of her inclusion of same-sex desire in her definition. So, for instance, Mary Kolawole and Ogunyemi firmly distance themselves from the notion of lesbianism, which they view as irrelevant to the African context.¹¹ In this regard, Obioma Nnaemeka pronounces, with distaste: “Womanism or no womanism, Alice Walker is a mainstream Western feminist.”¹²

Adichie’s use of the purple hibiscus of her title is clearly deeply significant. By juxtaposing her characters with the topos of the garden, Adichie suggests that the cycles of nature are never static, but move through change, decay, and new blossom. Further than this, however, I would argue that the connection of the hybrid purple blooms with Jaja, rather than Kambili, functions to queer¹³ the text, and connects her with Walker’s version of womanism rather than with its more homophobic counterparts. This is not to make a crude claim that Jaja is coded as gay or bisexual; his personal sexuality is not aired in the text. However, his personal symbolic colour in the garden of the novel is purple, with its hybrid and queer associations. Kambili expresses anxiety that she does not show an appropriate interest in the purple shrub which indicates that she feels that gardening would be an activity suitable for her gender. To return to the resonant first section of *Purple Hibiscus*, the reason which Jaja advances for not attending communion is that “the wafer” gives him “bad breath” (6). This comment indicates a high degree of self-consciousness in the context, which is desacralized by use of the word “wafer” instead of ‘host’. Jaja follows this comment up with a further complaint: “‘And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me’” (6). It is noteworthy that he does not name Father Benedict, but alludes to him by his role – a role which is presently, outside the world of the text, under suspicion of inappropriate physical contact. Jaja also expresses disgust at the repeated contact with his mouth, an intimate zone. As Kambili has not noticed such acts, despite her hypersensitivity, one can infer that Adichie is leaving open possible speculative interpretations that Jaja has been a particular target, or that, although intimate contact between men is an area of painful recognition for him, he is repelled by this particular man. It might be further noted that in *Things Fall Apart*, a prime anxiety is the charge of having a womanly,

¹¹ Susan Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 52.

¹² Quoted in Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 65.

¹³ I am using the verb ‘queer’ to mean ‘render queer’. Where I use the word as a noun or adjective, I mean it to refer to sexualities which differ from the heterosexual norm, and which extend sexual politics beyond fixed identity-politics of gay or lesbian identities.

queer male relative – particularly a son; and as Adichie is clearly responding to Achebe in various ways, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality, it is highly likely that she intended readers to pick up the significance of the parallels between Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, and Eugene's son, Jaja.

Adichie's interest in queer themes is obvious in her collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, where three of the twelve short stories deal overtly and sympathetically with such issues. In the case of *Purple Hibiscus*, I would argue that the subliminal queering functions to broaden the exploration of taboo areas of experience, and to disrupt models of hetero-patriarchy which are shown to be damaging to relatively disempowered members of the nuclear family unit, regardless of gender.

In general, the paterfamilias is able to access power by virtue of his gender; however, in the case of Eugene his excessively punitive control is given a plausible cause in the form of the punishment meted out to him by a priest who discovered him masturbating as a child. The priest poured boiling water into a bowl and soaked Eugene's hands in it, in order for the offending hands to receive such memorable punishment that they would not "sin" again. He conceives of the brutal punishment as having been administered "for my own good" (196). This is the same extremist and rationalizing *modus operandi* employed by Eugene to discipline his wife and children.

Some acts of violence are carried out regardless of the gender of the recipient. These include pouring boiling water over the feet of Kambili and Jaja after they have "walked into sin" (194) by spending time in the same house as their dying grandfather, with whom Eugene avoids contact, as he considers his father to be a "heathen." This act is recounted from Kambili's point of view, and the effect of a body in exquisite pain is powerfully and agonizingly conveyed. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, comments that there is an unbridgeable gap between torturer and tortured.¹⁴ Yet, in the case of Eugene, the domestic violence he perpetrates affects him, collapsing this gap and even reducing him to floods of (unmanly) tears. Although he bolsters his delusions by persuading himself that he serves the wishes of his God, to assuage his tender feelings he requires further, cruel steps of collusion on the part of his victims: a reassurance that, despite graphic evidence to the contrary, they are not hurt; and complicit silence about the abuse they suffer, which enables him to commit fresh atrocities.

¹⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985; New York: Oxford UP, 1987): 36–59.

In some cases, the acts of violence performed by Eugene assume a particular form because of the gender of his victim. One of Jaja's fingers is deformed on account of an injury visited on him by his father for failing to achieve full marks in his catechism test. This injury is to his left hand, as he writes with his right, showing that the acts performed by Eugene are premeditated, rather than being simple effusions of rage. The maimed finger also acts symbolically as a sign of impairing the senses of the son, or even as a notional castration.

In other cases, the assaults occur because of Eugene's absolutist intolerance of women's biological functions. The female body is a realm that Eugene, with his pathological body-hatred, has no understanding of or patience with. In one scene, Kambili experiences severe menstrual cramps, which make her imagine "someone with buckteeth rhythmically biting deep into my stomach walls and letting go" (100). With the support of her mother and brother, Kambili eats food to allow a pain-killer to take effect. When Eugene, who is portrayed as having a near-supernatural ability to detect misdeeds, sees Kambili eating, thus breaking her fast before Mass, Beatrice explains the circumstances, but to no avail, and Jaja's characteristic attempt to protect Kambili and his mother by altruistically claiming all the blame for himself likewise comes to naught. Eugene beats the entire family with his heavy belt, since all three are guilty, in his eyes, of satanic behaviour. During this beating, Kambili reflects that her father reminds her of nomads herding their cattle, using sticks to goad them in the right direction. This image points up the power-relations between the dominant patriarch, figured as human, and his subordinates, figured as dumb beasts. The three victims are indeed cowed, barely moving to escape the blows. After this episode Eugene again seeks reassurance that his victims are not hurt or their skin broken, and all four family members change their clothes and wash their faces, in a ritual suggesting fresh beginnings and purification, before they attend a later Mass together – which would have been the first option in a more reasonable household.

Beatrice, too, faces dehumanizing treatment because of her gendered body. She is delighted to fall pregnant some six years after a previous miscarriage, but is stricken with morning sickness, which leads her to suggest that she should stay in the car instead of accompanying Eugene, Jaja, and Kambili to visit Father Benedict. This is construed by Eugene as selfishly thwarting God's will, and he viciously beats her, so that she miscarries again. Kambili observes her being carried, unconscious, by her husband: "Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme border" (33). Beatrice is reduced to an inanimate commodity, less

even than an animal. Yet Eugene's own status in the community is lowered because his family is so small; hence, causing his baby's miscarriage is both murderous and senseless. Jaja had promised to Kambili that they would protect their unborn sibling from their father, but they were unable to do so. The trauma of seeing the blood from her mother's body haunts Kambili, and links her to a female destiny of pain and mourning:

I [...] sat staring at my textbook. The black type blurred, the letters swimming into one another, and then changed to a bright red, the red of fresh blood. The blood was watery, flowing from Mama. Flowing from my eyes. (35)

Kambili's leaking female body, constructed as polluted and sinful in terms of phallogocentrism, hampers her access to the power of the word, either written or spoken. By contrast, Eugene (unlike his literary forebear, Okonkwo, who stammers) is in command of language as a means of masculine control. During the grievous bodily harm Eugene visits on his family, he self-righteously uses techniques of asking rhetorical questions and the lexicon of the Inquisition: sin, desecration, hell, heathen, thwarting God's will, ungodly, devil, sacrilege. He possesses the power of language to judge and admonish. Language can even be adjusted to suit his purposes, as in the use of the bland euphemism "accident" to refer to the consequences of his brutality, in the cases of the mutilation of Jaja's finger, Beatrice's miscarriage as a result of being beaten by Eugene, and his near-fatal beating of Kambili. By virtue of his gender, Jaja, too, to a lesser extent, has access to language, and he also self-reflexively refuses to utter the requisite words of approval to his father, in a deliberate act of defiance during the introductory section of the novel. Beatrice, however, is practically silent, and Kambili's lack of control over her voice and language is a source of immense anguish to her.

At school, Kambili responds with physical panic when asked to lead the pledge: "I cleared my throat, willed the words to come. I knew them, thought them. But they would not come. The sweat was warm and wet under my arms" (48). This depiction calls to mind Scarry's observation, of the extreme case of torture, that the goal is to "make the [...] body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the [...] voice *absent* by destroying it" (49). She further observes that great pain, such as torture, is mimetic of death, where there is only body and no voice. As can be seen from Kambili's tortured thoughts as rendered above, the victim of domestic abuse internalizes and enacts the physical dynamic wrought by the abuser, whereby the suffering body is placed at the forefront of consciousness and the ability to

come to voice is suppressed. While Scarry does not deal with gender, it is clear that the gender of the body has a bearing on relative voicelessness. Hélène Cixous' description, in "The Laugh of the Medusa," expresses this forcefully:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away – that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak – even just open her mouth – in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine.¹⁵

There are further vectors of oppression at work, however, apart from gender alone. Marlene Nourbese Philip expresses the painful difficulty of entry into speech for the postcolonial woman subject in her polyvocal poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language," which juxtaposes stuttering first-person discourse, torn between father, mother, and the English language, with discourses including a myth of maternal care and linguistic empowerment; edicts associated with slavery; textbook-like biology with racist and sexist assumptions; and a questionnaire about the organs of speech and their possible relation to gender and power. Part of this rich poem reads:

English
is my mother tongue.
A mother tongue is not
not a foreign lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
– a foreign anguish.

English is
my father tongue.
A father tongue is
a foreign language,
therefore English is
a foreign language
not a mother tongue.¹⁶

¹⁵ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" ("Le rire de la Méduse," 1975), tr. Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (Summer 1976): 881.

¹⁶ Marlene Nourbese Philip, "Discourse on the Logic of Language," in Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989; London: Women's Press, 1993): 30.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, English is likewise a father tongue, as the maternal Igbo is silenced by the mimic man Eugene. Faced with oppression as a victim of violence, as a girl, and as the user of an alien, androcentric tongue, Kambili struggles in various ways to express herself. In addition to stuttering, she has trouble swallowing, fakes a cough to avoid speaking, chooses silence, asks questions to which she knows the answer, in order to avoid the discomfort of taboo topics, parrots answers she feels will please her interlocutor, or whispers instead of speaking audibly. More originally, Adichie portrays Kambili as constantly using the optative mode in her textual narration, followed by an evasive utterance which avoids confrontation as a result of being couched in the passive voice.¹⁷ A prime example of this occurs after Eugene has broken Beatrice's figurines. Kambili finds herself wanting to say something but instead behaving like a ventriloquist's dummy, will-less, immobile, and mute: "I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, 'I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama'" (10).

Despite all of these instances of Kambili's muting and lack of agency, the novel's function as a *Bildungsroman* necessitates a shift from childhood to adulthood, from obedience towards autonomous authority, from sexual latency to romantic desire. As part of this trajectory of development, a semiotic device used by Adichie to good effect is one that acts to offer a covert language of resistance between Beatrice, Jaja, and Kambili, but particularly between the structural opposite-gender 'twins' Jaja and Kambili. This language of the eyes, which Kambili refers to as "speaking with our spirits" or "*asusu anya*," offers a mystical connection between the siblings. This communication, which allows warnings or reassurance to be given non-verbally, strengthens the bond between the victims of Eugene's domestic tyranny. However, it also functions to preserve the status quo of abuse. As Kambili notes, when she and Jaja visit Nsukka, their intimate mind-speech is ruptured. Nsukka is the home town of Eugene's sister, Ifeoma, a university lecturer whose husband has died, and her three children, Amaka, a girl of Kambili's age, Obiora, a boy of fourteen, and a younger son, Chima. Away from the panopticon of the parental home, Kambili and Jaja have the opportunity to verbalize secrets

¹⁷ Daria Tunca discusses this phenomenon in more elaborate terms, employing the linguistic concept 'mind-style'. See Tunca, "An Ambiguous 'Freedom Song': Mind-Style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*," *Postcolonial Text* 5.1 (2009): 1–18, online (accessed 12 August 2010).

and to move beyond their state of arrested childhood and mutual dependency towards adulthood and autonomy, as gendered bodies.

In *Nsukka*, Jaja breaks the imprisonment of silence to tell his aunt about the cause of his deformed finger. He also undergoes a ritual entry into manhood by killing a chicken. However, as mentioned previously, his masculinity is represented ambiguously, by virtue of his association with the purple hibiscus, one of the unusual flowers which Ifeoma only allows “the altar girls” to pick, and which Jaja, “running a finger over a flower petal,” finds “‘so beautiful’” (128–29). Jaja’s masculinity differs radically from the hypermasculinity so damagingly embodied by his father. Jaja’s masculinity is non-hegemonic and hybrid, as he successfully completes a rite of passage into male adulthood, but embodies a nurturing ethic of care and concern for life in varied forms, as well as an aesthetic responsiveness, which are stereotypically associated with femininity. Adichie is thus endorsing gentle forms of masculinity which are derided traditionally and in texts such as *Things Fall Apart*.

However, the main focus is on Kambili’s development. In *Nsukka*, she is provided with an alternative mother-figure in the form of her aunt Ifeoma, and she also learns from her female cousin Amaka. She learns respect for the traditional religious convictions of her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, and she falls in love with the progressive Roman Catholic priest Father Amadi. All of these characters open Kambili’s eyes to new possibilities, and enable her to adopt a bolder gendered body from the muted, quiescent one she occupied previously. Further, she experiences an epiphany as a result of seeing a vision of the Virgin Mary, representing a female form of the divine.

Ifeoma acts as a powerful role-model for Kambili, who imagines her as

a proud ancient forebear, walking miles to fetch water in homemade clay pots, nursing babies until they walked and talked, fighting wars with machetes sharpened on sun-warmed stone. She filled a room. (80)

Ifeoma is larger than life, and seems to Kambili to embody traditional feminine and masculine attributes. In this and other ways she bears the attributes discussed by Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” In appearing as a combination of conventionally gendered qualities, Ifeoma is an exemplar of what Cixous (somewhat misleadingly) terms “vatic bisexuality.”¹⁸ The word “bisexuality” here is not used in its contemporary meaning of sexuality, but in an earlier, biological sense, of combining characteristics of both sexes, or what

¹⁸ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 884.

today would be called intersexuality. The word “vatic” means ‘of or belonging to a prophet or seer’. “Vatic bisexuality,” then, refers to a spiritually numinous state in which characteristics of both sexes are conjoined in one individual. Cixous notes that, from her perspective,

at present, for historico-cultural reasons, it is women who are opening up to and benefiting from this vatic bisexuality which doesn’t annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number. In a certain way, “woman is bisexual”; man – it’s a secret to no one – being poised to keep glorious phallic monosexuality in view.¹⁹

I would argue, however, that in *Purple Hibiscus* the ideal state is the reduction of simple opposed binaries of gendered difference, and the proliferation of combinations of gendered attributes. Moreover, while Ifeoma is a prime example of “vatic bisexuality,” and consonant with Adichie’s womanist vision, this is also a possibility for male characters, such as Jaja.

Other striking attributes of Ifeoma’s are the fact that her body is large, unlike Beatrice’s diminutive frame; she is fearless and outspoken, and smiles, laughs, and sings exuberantly. She is unafraid of her brother, and maintains her integrity, refusing to comply with his demands and prohibitions, even for rewards:

“Have you forgotten that Eugene offered to buy me a car [...]? But first he wanted us to join the Knights of St. John. He wanted us to send Amaka to convent school. He even wanted me to stop wearing makeup! I want a new car, *nwunye m*, and I want to use my gas cooker again and I want a new freezer and I want money so that I will not have to unravel the seams of Chima’s trousers when he outgrows them. But I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things.” (95)

Adichie’s inclusion of the character Ifeoma, who functions as an alternative mother to Beatrice, answers Cixous’ question: “What about she who is the hysterical offspring of a bad mother?”²⁰ Cixous reflects on her question by observing:

The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was ‘born’ to her.²¹

¹⁹ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 884.

²⁰ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

²¹ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

This notional ideal mother is “a force that will not be cut off but that will knock the wind out of the codes.”²² Kambili comes to be inspired by the colourful persona of her aunt, who functions in the way suggested by Cixous. Ifeoma will not compromise her sense of self, and she expresses her pride in characteristically humorous and physical terms. Ifeoma’s reference to licking her brother’s buttocks, and her playful tweaking of Kambili’s breast to indicate her development, show that she is comfortable with the physical dimensions of life, and with expressing them without conforming to codes of feminine decorum. Ifeoma easily code-switches between English and the mother tongue of Igbo. The word constantly used of her laughter, cackling, has associations of un-selfconscious, anarchic heartiness, but also of witches, which brings to mind Cixous’ reference to the laugh of the Medusa, a phallogocentric, anxious myth of women as castrating demons: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.”²³ Unlike Beatrice, who venerates the institution of marriage, which mutes and renders abject her and her children, and parrots the cliché, “‘A husband crowns a woman’s life’” (75), Ifeoma mocks marriage as ownership and commodification of women. She notes:

“Six girls in my first-year seminar class are married, their husbands visit in Mercedes and Lexus cars every weekend, their husbands buy them stereos and textbooks and refrigerators, and when they graduate, their husbands own them and their degrees.” (75)

Ifeoma fosters a questioning attitude, and assists Kambili in gaining enough self-confidence to express herself freely. However, the departure from Nigeria of Ifeoma and her children towards the end of the novel signals Kambili’s ability to function as an autonomous agent, without the aid of her ideal mother or fairy godmother, Ifeoma.

Another significant character-pairing in *Purple Hibiscus* is that between Kambili and her cousin, Amaka. As Kambili and Jaja function as opposite-sex ‘twins’, so Kambili and Amaka function as alter-ego children of another opposite-sex pairing, between Eugene and Ifeoma. Amaka, who is a sharper-tongued copy of her mother, initially misreads Kambili’s silence as snobbery and boredom, but gradually warms to her, until Kambili feels sufficiently emboldened to confess to her cousin that her father beat her, leading to her

²² Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 882.

²³ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 885.

hospitalization. This breaks the deadlock of secrecy which had choked her. It is also Amaka who shows Kambili what appropriate behaviour is for a girl of fifteen. However, Amaka is not represented as a typical teenager who is subject to consumerist peer-pressure, but is shown to have a mind of her own, like her mother. As Cixous notes, song is often associated with the realm of the maternal,²⁴ and Beatrice as well as Ifeoma and Amaka love music. However, Amaka is also particularly fond of Nigerian music with a political message, thus revealing her intelligence, independence, and activism. She also refuses to accept an English name for her confirmation, arguing that an Igbo name is just as holy, thereby showing her transgressive streak.

Amaka is also deeply attached to her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, and through observing this connection Kambili comes to realize how cruel and unnatural her father's prohibitions are regarding contact with him. When she observes Papa-Nnukwu performing his *itu-nzu*, or declaration of innocence, she is struck by the generosity of his spiritual vision, in that he prays not only for his daughter, Ifeoma, but also for his estranged son, Eugene, who shows him no filial warmth. It is significant that after this ritual Kambili observes her grandfather's nakedness:

I did not look away, although it was sinful to look upon another person's nakedness. The rumples in Papa-Nnukwu's belly did not seem so many now, and his navel rose higher, still enclosed between folds of skin. Between his legs hung a limp cocoon that seemed smoother, free of the wrinkles that criss-crossed the rest of his body like mosquito netting. (168–69)

The prohibition on observing another's nakedness is a general one, but given the relative acceptance of the male gaze directed towards the nude female body, a girl looking at her grandfather's nakedness constitutes the breaking of a major taboo. However, this act occurs against a backdrop of different spiritual beliefs, innocence, and forgiveness. Kambili is able to gaze upon the signifier of masculine power and construe it as a limp, smooth cocoon – merely a body-part, a penis, rather than a threatening, symbolically overdetermined phallus.

Papa-Nnukwu is a sympathetic character whose precolonial traditional religion is more generous and forgiving than his son's fanatical Catholicism; however, Adichie does not present the grandfather or the traditionalism that he embodies as perfect, as she describes a number of incidents where he un-

²⁴ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 881.

wittingly reveals the sexism of his culture and its spiritual practices. While the tone of some of these exchanges is light-hearted, it is clear that in the eighty-year-old man's culture women "do not count" (83). In the private domain, the traditional prioritizing of masculinity is revealed by his prayer that his widowed daughter will find a good man to "take care" of her and her children (83); however, her dry response that she instead aspires to promotion reveals a modern shift in perspective on gender issues. In the public domain of spiritual worship, Papa-Nnukwu voices traditional assumptions about power and gendered prohibitions by commenting that the female figures in a masquerade are harmless, but the most powerful ones may not be viewed by women, which again emphasizes the culturally constructed transcendental sanctity of the male body. While Papa-Nnukwu is portrayed in a generous light as a wise elder, the shortcomings of his beliefs are also revealed, and he is not idealized. However, having seen him exposed as a body at worship, Kambili notes that his ritual *itu-nzu* leaves him smiling and filled with joy, unlike her own nuclear family who grimly and dutifully complete their own religious observances.

Similarly, Father Amadi is shown in a positive light, attempting as he does to make Catholicism relevant for a contemporary Nigerian congregation by the use of the Igbo language and songs, and paying attention to Kambili, encouraging her to explore the strength associated with masculinity by playing football, and to express herself. He fulfils a crucial role in Kambili's formation, as she falls in love with him, displaying classic bodily symptoms such as shaking hands, heaving chest, and a feeling of "liquid fire" (174) raging inside her. Kambili emulates her aunt, Ifeoma, and cousin, Amaka, by putting lipstick on to look attractive, but then rubbing it off; however, Father Amadi notices the traces and his guess that this is the first time Kambili has worn lipstick makes her smile. Her thoughts on her bodily sensations echo her previous comments about interpreting her father's approval as sweetness, showing the way in which Father Amadi has supplanted her father in her affections:

I had smiled, run, laughed. My chest was filled with something like bath foam. Light. The lightness was so sweet I tasted it on my tongue, the sweetness of an overripe cashew fruit. (180)

A further reference to Father Amadi and Kambili's tongue reminds the reader of Jaja's complaint about the priest touching his lips: "He gave me communion and when his finger grazed my tongue, I wanted to fall at his feet" (241).

Kambili is shown as being transformed in confidence by falling in love, and she contemplates the idea of having sex, but because the object of her affections is a priest she cannot enter into a relationship, hence avoids the dangers warned about by Ifeoma. Her emotions are stirred, but her body remains virginal. Given his position in the priesthood, Father Amadi's encouragement of Kambili's adoration is viewed ambivalently, and he, too, is revealed to be fallible, both personally and as a representative of a religion that Adichie depicts as being in need of reform with regard to gender, body-shame, priestly chastity, and postcolonial conceptualizations.

A further stage in Kambili's development occurs when the image of the statue of the blond Virgin is overlaid by her transcendent vision of the Virgin Mary attained through the catalyst of a village girl, in an African variant on the apparition of Our Lady of Fátima:

When the young girl was led out, the flame-of-the-forest swayed and flowers rained down. The girl was slight and solemn, dressed in white, and strong-looking men stood around her so she would not be trampled. She had hardly passed us when other trees nearby started to quiver with a frightening vigor, as if someone were shaking them. The ribbons that cordoned off the apparition area shook, too. Yet there was no wind. The sun turned white, the color and shape of the host. And then I saw her, the Blessed Virgin: an image in the pale sun, a red glow on the back of my hand, a smile on the face of the rosary-bedecked man whose arm rubbed against mine. She was everywhere. [...]

"I felt the Blessed Virgin there. I felt her," I blurted out. How could anyone not believe after what we had seen? Or hadn't they seen it and felt it, too? [...]

Aunty Ifeoma glanced at me [...]

"Kambili is right," she said. "Something from God was happening there."

(274–75)

As in many such instances, it is the body of an adolescent girl that acts as a conduit for a mystical experience of the female form of the Christian deity, Mary. Interestingly, Kambili does not perceive Mary as an embodied presence, but as a transformative, suffusing spirit. She is seen as one who blesses, one who delights, one who is omnipresent in nature and among receptive ordinary people. This image evokes the Virgin of Fátima, especially "the miracle of the sun," a phenomenon during which the sun was visible to the naked eye without pain, and various effects were discerned by different viewers. A further set of associations is implied, with the Virgin of Guadalupe, a South American version of the Virgin, discursively associated with race, gender, and sexuality. The powerful syncretic African Virgin Mary

evoked by Adichie endorses Kambili's virginity as symbolic of her bodily autonomy.

One final factor, psychologically necessary but shocking to the reader, contributes to Kambili's movement into adulthood. This is the act of murder performed when Beatrice poisons Eugene's tea. It occurs after two episodes of violence by Eugene. In the first, he beats Kambili to the point of death when she embraces the fragments of a painting of his deceased father, her personal symbolic memento of the time at Nsukka, equivalent to Jaja's purple hibiscus. From Eugene's perspective, instead of accepting his views as infallible, Kambili seems to him to have transferred her allegiance to an alternative patriarchal and religious order, illustrated by her veneration of the work of art. In the second episode, Eugene breaks a glass table on his pregnant wife's belly, a table which houses the Bible, and this causes another miscarriage. Beatrice's prime domain has been posited as motherhood, but she has been unable to protect her own born or unborn children; she has been forced into the role of bad mother. As Michel Foucault reminds us, "no matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings."²⁵ Over the course of the novel, covert acts of resistance and disobedience are replaced by an overt return of the repressed, culminating in an act of mariticide, the unfamiliarity of the term revealing the rarity of husband-murder and the horror with which it is associated. Jaja, characteristically, takes the blame for the murder and is imprisoned for three years. Ifeoma and her family move to the USA, and Father Amadi is transferred away from Nigeria. Kambili is thus returned to her own resources after having been exposed to alternative modes of behaviour and the transforming power of love. The novel, in a shift to the present tense, ends with Jaja shortly to be released from prison, with Beatrice appearing to be regaining her power of speech and now smiling, and with Kambili as the visionary linchpin who will hold the family together. She is now fully autonomous, and she laughs and visualizes hopeful plans for the future, plans in which Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, symbol of hybridity and nonconformity, and she will plant ixora, so that the family can all suck its sweet juices. Kambili no longer needs her father or Father Amadi to provide sweetness, but can satisfy this need herself.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power" ("Espace, savoir et pouvoir," 1982), in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 3: *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 1994): 354.

From a viewpoint which is at once traditional, religious, African, and reformist, Adichie reveals deep scepticism towards absolutism, patriarchy, infallibility, and a hierarchical relationship between God and believers, and between men and women. Instead, she offers a hybrid, creative, and freshly dialogic view of gendered bodies, the family, religion, and Nigerian society seen in a global framework.

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Bearing Witness

—— Gender, Apocalypse, and History

MARILYN ADLER PAPAYANIS

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹

THE *MEMOIRS OF A SURVIVOR AND WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS* are novels in which history and apocalypse – the end of history – are uneasily juxtaposed. In my reading of these two texts, the apocalyptic moment is inextricably tied to two ‘symptoms’ of the modern condition. First, there is the troubled imbrication of Self and Other – where the ‘Other’ stands in for a range of real and imagined threats to the psychic – and literal – survival of the ‘civilized’ world in its all its barbarism, vulgarity, and decrepitude. The second relates to the particularly modern technologies of oppression by which power operates on its subjects. And while both texts are apocalyptic in nature, it is not the coming of the end that commands our critical attention but, rather, the fact of the narrator’s placement as witness and conscience. That is to say, the narrative function is productively situated at the improbable

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940/50), in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. & intro. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (1970; London: Collins/Fontana, 1973): 259–60.

intersection of bearing witness to trauma and spiritual autobiography – in its secular guise, to be sure – the one a movement outward to external events, the other turned inward toward an unrelenting work of the self. The one is a record of history, the other the workings of history upon the self. If the critiques enacted thereby are, to a great extent, anti-enlightenment, it is also true that progressive thought prompts us to care deeply about these issues. *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* testify to that as well.

We begin with the most basic question: why read these texts together at all? Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* explores the moral ambiguities of 'the one just man' caught, by surprise, as it were, by his implication in the crimes of empire. Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is a fable of psychic and social fragmentation in an unnamed cosmopolitan dystopia of the future. To be sure, they are both apocalyptic in vision and both are narrated by older narrators who remain nameless, and whose mediating function is, in some sense, tied to their socialization in the time of 'before', the so-called 'normative' time. Both are allegorical or quasi-allegorical. But Coetzee's Magistrate is an active participant in the narrated events; indeed, his status as magistrate, as the agent of empire, makes him the ideal witness to the workings of imperial power. Lessing's narrator is mostly a prisoner of domestic space; she records the so-called 'real' events, many of which occur outside her window, and the inside events or experiences that occur in the domain beyond her living-room wall. She nevertheless is midwife to the novel's resolution, when all the characters pass through the wall as the 'real' world collapses. The points of convergence, and what the body of my essay will explore, are, first, the relationship between historical trauma and testimony; second, an ethical model in which responsibility for the Other is paramount; and, third, the gendered form in which the awakening to or representation of this ethical relation is represented.

It will be useful, I think, to begin with reference to Shoshana Felman's provocative discussion of literature's ability to bear witness to historical trauma and, in so doing, transform history. She is referring, of course, to the Holocaust, but her concern here is not with its impact on the victims but, rather, on its "historic *onlookers*: its *witnesses*."² We can draw upon a number of her insights to read *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* as a form of testimony that, like those on which she focuses her anal-

² Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 96.

ysis, bears witness to victimization. Literary testimony, she argues, awakens in the reader, to whom she refers as the “belated witness,” the imaginative capacity of seeing history or “what is happening to others” in his or her own body.³ This means assuming responsibility for the crimes committed and acknowledging one’s implication in them.

Writing of Camus’ *The Plague*, Felman argues thus:

Bearing witness to the way in which “this history concerns us all,” *The Plague* partakes of an apprenticeship in history through an apprenticeship in witnessing. [...] The historical apprenticeship takes place only through a *crisis in*, and a consequent *transformation of*, the witness. And it is only through the medium of that crisis that the event can speak, and that the narrative can lend its voice to history. If the narrative is truly *claimed* by history, it is by virtue of that radical discontinuity, that radical change the witness has undergone.⁴

In order for the narrative to be efficacious, the historical crises must effect a form of ‘cognition’ in the witness. The witness/narrator must “*learn[s]*” something from the witnessing and from the telling, and his testimony takes stock of this knowledge.”⁵ “The task of testimony,” she writes, “is to impart that knowledge, a firsthand, carnal knowledge of victimization,” of what it means to be in the place of the victim and the way in which history is both “everybody’s business” and “the body’s business.”⁶ The witness’s and the narrative’s veracity flow from this communal knowledge and shared vulnerability.

If the apprenticeship to history is enabled through a crisis in and transformation of the witness, the testimony produced thereby concerns itself with the outside world, with “what is happening to others.” There is another story to be told, however, and that is the story of the witnessing self and its ethical or spiritual development. This is the work of what I will call ‘spiritual autobiography’. I use the term for lack of a better word, for I do not mean to suggest a narrative that adheres strictly to any generic model but, rather, one in which the narrating self charts its attainment of a certain kind of wisdom, ethical, spiritual, or otherwise. That said, new and existing models of spiritual autobiography can be useful interpretative tools, especially insofar as they help us attend to the gendered nature of the way the self achieves enlightenment.

³ Felman & Laub, *Testimony*, 108.

⁴ *Testimony*, 110.

⁵ *Testimony*, 110.

⁶ *Testimony*, 111.

In “The Web and the Quilt,” Ruth Ray and Susan McFadden contrast the solo quest narrative, the masculine model of spiritual development, with models that are more attuned to woman’s experience. The former is based on a concept of growth, predicated upon “isolate individualism,”⁷ that is rooted in male privilege – white, educated-class privilege, specifically – and does not take account of the more “fragmented” and “improvisational” nature of women’s spiritual development resulting from “the contingencies of women’s lives and the necessity of integrating the public and private spheres.”⁸ Because of their social positioning,

women and minorities tend to value group identity over individualism, finding power and agency in collectivity. Their lives (and life stories) are more communal than individualistic and more heavily populated than the solo quest narrative.⁹

Waiting for the Barbarians and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* are illustrative of, but also complicate, this distinction.

Any discussion of victimization must perforce take account of the process of othering by which a community stigmatizes those who are perceived as being, in some way, different, consigning them, frequently, to a moral wilderness beyond the bounds of ethical conduct. The term “barbarian” is one that immediately invokes the idea of otherness. One of the links I would like to trace out between the two texts is the constellation of issues that flow from the idea of ‘barbarians’. The term ‘barbarian’ juxtaposes itself with the idea of the civilized; however, as in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the agents of empire are often revealed to be the true barbarians, whereas the actual barbarians of the text are nomadic tribes who, the narrator suggests, not without envy, “live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children”¹⁰ until their pastoral existence is disrupted by the incursions of empire. “It is the fault of Empire,” the Magistrate proclaims. “Empire has created the time of history” (133). And, of course, history overtakes them in, precisely, the form of empire, and empire consolidates itself through the real or imagined threat of invasion,

⁷ Ruth E. Ray & Susan H. McFadden, “The Web and the Quilt: Alternatives to the Heroic Journey Toward Spiritual Development,” *Journal of Adult Development* 8 (June 2001): 282.

⁸ Ray & McFadden, “The Web and the Quilt,” 282.

⁹ “The Web and the Quilt,” 282.

¹⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980; New York: Penguin, 1982): 133. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

drawing them into the endless cycle of conquest that history recites. They are ‘Other’ both in the sense of being alien (hence, unknowable) and of being utterly known, because produced by empire. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, we need not look far for the barbarians, for they are here in our midst: the unsocialized who, for whatever reasons, are impervious to the various disciplinary mechanisms that seek to render the subject of civilization productive, propertied, and docile. They appear as a kind of social dirt in the interstices of a well-functioning and disciplined bourgeois social structure. Finally, they are our own children, savage, uncivilized. The barbarian is the crucible, the limit case, pushing the issue beyond justice, as though justice could be unproblematically meted out, toward a consideration of ethics and the self’s infinite responsibility for the Other. The acknowledgment of this absolute asymmetry and non-reciprocal relation between Self and Other is the ethical work of the narrating self.

I invoke here Levinas, whose theorization of responsibility as the foundation of subjectivity provides an apt interpretative framework for the task at hand. He writes:

Before the Other, the I is infinitely responsible. The Other is the poor and destitute one, and nothing which concerns this Stranger can leave the I indifferent. [...] The plenitude of power through which the sovereignty of the Same maintains itself does not extend to the Other to conquer him, but to support him. But to support the burden of the Other is, at the same time, to confirm it in its substantiality, situating it above the I. The I remains accountable for this burden to the one that it supports. The one for whom I am responsible is also the one to whom I have to respond.¹¹

And, further:

To be an I means then not to be able to escape responsibility, as though the whole edifice of creation rested on my shoulders. But the responsibility that empties the I of its imperialism and its egoism, even the egoism of salvation, does not transform it into a moment of the universal order; it confirms the uniqueness of the I. The uniqueness of the I is the fact that no one can answer for me.¹²

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height” (“Transcendance et hauteur,” 1962), in Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996): 18–19.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense” (“Signification et sens,” 1964), in Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996): 55.

I will suggest that the ethical movement traced out in the novels is beholden to a similar impulse.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, life in the quiet oasis settlement on the outermost frontier of empire is disrupted, not by a barbarian invasion, but by a servant of empire, an official of the “Third Bureau of the Civil Guard [...] specialists in the obscurer motions of sedition, devotees of truth, doctors of interrogation” (9), who has come to ascertain the truth concerning rumours of a barbarian uprising. Witnessing the effects of gratuitous brutality committed against the barbarian captives, torture inflicted in the name of eliciting “truth,” the Magistrate undergoes a kind of spiritual crisis – more precisely, perhaps, a crisis of conscience. He takes in a barbarian girl who has been maimed by the authorities. The nature of this relationship has been the subject of much critical attention, for the Magistrate does not keep her as a mistress but, rather, enacts certain rituals upon her – bathing her, massaging her, attempting to “read” the scars, to elicit another kind of truth from her. Testimony, perhaps, of her ordeal, which she does not provide. Upon realizing his complicity with her torturers, the ‘softer’ face of empire, he resolves to undertake the arduous journey, not unlike a quest, beyond the bounds of empire to return her to her people. When he returns, he is accused of treason, imprisoned, humiliated, and dehumanized. Ultimately, the imperial army departs, having experienced defeat at the hands of the barbarians. The Magistrate, over time, recuperates his sense of self and his position and waits, with the inhabitants of the town, for the barbarian invasion. Invoking Althusser, one might argue that the Magistrate’s narrative records the workings both of the repressive state apparatus in its use of the technologies of power upon the human body and of the ideological state apparatus in the subject of the Magistrate himself, who refers to himself at one point as “the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy” (135).

The chief event in Coetzee’s novel is not the apocalypse itself but, rather, the Magistrate’s growing outrage when he is confronted with the truth about the torture of the barbarian prisoners. In a wholly unmotivated way, he comes to act against his own self-interest and to acknowledge, provisionally and in a highly mediated fashion, the primary ethical relation of responsibility for the Other. His experience of ‘conversion’, if it can be called that, consists in his repudiating imperial authority by and through the recognition of his own complicity in the acts of barbarism committed in the name of empire. The punishment he endures for this is imprisonment, humiliation, psychological torture, and disgrace, a thoroughgoing process of self-dismantling in which he comes

to resemble Primo Levi's "musselmen" or living dead, the lost souls of the Nazi death camps. Giorgio Agamben describes these figures thus:

the terminus, the quintessential result of the organization of the camps, namely, the stripping away from the human of any significant intentional relation to the world whilst nonetheless remaining alive.¹³

Unlike the Holocaust victims, however, the Magistrate is able to reclaim his subjectivity, hence the ability to bear witness, and his former status. That said, there is no deliverance at the end of the Magistrate's ordeal.

Grace, if it is to be glimpsed at all, is in the retrograde Arcadian vision of a world outside of history, a form of exoticist nostalgia – only called into existence by the condition of its impossibility. The real barbarians, the Magistrate observes, will be easily corrupted by the ways of civilization. And the real barbarians, to whose suffering humanity the Magistrate bears witness, cannot, on the novel's terms, achieve redress without reciprocal violence.

Waiting for the Barbarians is a masculinist text; it concerns itself with the Law, the ways of power, the workings of the State, and the narrator's own anxieties regarding the status of his own potency, as both a subject and a sexual agent. It is a text without fully realized characters (other than the narrator himself, and, even here, the domain of the social or interpersonal is utterly lacking), haunted by anxieties about authority and control. What is more, the very invocation of the term "one just man" suggests a gendered fantasy of autonomy and agency. It is true that the Magistrate's spiritual development requires a relinquishment of this fantasy. Becoming "unmanned" is not only becoming Other to oneself, but a necessary dismantling of the self that attends a kind of spiritual growth. But it is provisional. There is no triumphal return. The Magistrate's disidentification with Authority leaves the structure of empire intact, just as his sexual function, his "manhood," reasserts itself at the end of the novel. He stands against, but does not stand for, seeking refuge in the reassertion of his mundane duties, a quiescent malingering on the brink of annihilation. And maybe this is the point. As Klaus R. Scherpe writes, citing Lyotard,

The producibility of the catastrophe is the catastrophe. If this formulation is valid pretext for the postmodern condition, beyond the historical trends and

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, paraphrased in J.M. Bernstein, "Bare Life, Bearing Witness: Auschwitz and the Pornography of Horror," *Parallax* 10.1 (January–March 2004): 6.

exhausted “grand narratives [...] then there really is no more space for a narrative dramatization of the end of the world.”¹⁴

There is, however, his “testimony.” The history recited in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, while rooted in that of South Africa, is the history of empire and the trauma visited upon the colonized. We are all implicated in the crimes committed in its name. This is the lesson. The Magistrate experiences the victimization of the barbarian prisoners in his body; the crisis he thereby undergoes and the acknowledgment of his own implication in the crimes are part of his transformation from disinterested party to an apprentice to history. Through his testimony, the belated witness – the reader – comes to experience and feel, in the body, the historical trauma, comes to feel “what it means to be in the place of the victim” and the way in which history is both “everybody’s business” and “the body’s business.”

At the intersection of witnessing and spiritual autobiography, *Waiting for the Barbarians* draws together history and conscience in a way that attends to the self-justifying workings of power in a movement that acknowledges both one’s responsibility for the Other and one’s implication in the crimes of the State. It is through the narrating subject’s abjection, his disidentification with the State, that he comes to relinquish the logic of empire “which has created the time of history. [...] Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era” (133). The *telos*, the novel suggests, is merely conquest by a new empire. Musing on the ruins of a prior civilization, the Magistrate imagines that “perhaps ten feet below the floor lie the ruins of another fort, razed by the barbarians, peopled with the bones of folk who thought they would find safety behind high walls” (15). For the barbarians are always already poised on the brink. “‘We think’,” the Magistrate tells a newly conscripted young officer,

“of the country here as ours, part of our Empire – our outpost, our settlement, our market culture. But these people, these barbarians don’t think of it like that at all. We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients. [...] they will outlast us.” (51)

¹⁴ Klaus R. Scherpe, “Dramatization and De-Dramatization of ‘The End’: The Apocalyptic Consciousness of Modernity,” *Cultural Critique* 5 (1986–87): 96.

The awakened consciousness has no place to go, no redemptive state. The logic of empire admits of no way out. For even the now triumphant barbarians will be enfolded into the time of history, “our” time.

“When the barbarians taste bread, new bread and mulberry jam, bread and gooseberry jam, they will be won over to our ways. They will find that they are unable to live without the skills of men who know how to rear the pacific grains, without the arts of women who know how to use the benign fruits.”
(155)

And so, “like a man who lost his way long ago” (reversing the logic of getting lost and getting found in spiritual autobiography), the Magistrate “presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (156). In this, he is like Benjamin’s Angel of History.

When we meet the narrator of Doris Lessing’s *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the modern world, seen in microcosm, is already in the throes of entropy. The catastrophe, referred to elliptically as “it,” is related to a complete breakdown of the State and its ability to impose order and furnish necessary services. Authority, except in the most remote and yet threatening manner, it is intimated, is absent. If Coetzee’s Magistrate comes to experience his own abjection as a brutal form of self-dismantling, Lessing’s narrator is, in a sense, a subject already abject: isolated, affectless, emotionally disengaged, and, if we read the text through its psychological valencies, fragmented, broken, a reflection of the world around her. She has no apparent past; no family or relatives. One day a stranger appears in her flat and delivers a young girl into her care, Emily. It is through Emily that the main events of the realistic frame are lived.

The novel chronicles the growing collapse of social structures; groups of young people gather on street corners, form tribes, and move on. The countryside is beset with migrating gangs that are sometimes violent, sometimes not. New social structures arise and new economies and industries develop, based on the refuse and cast-off commodities of the fallen world. Despite the hopeful nature of these new forms of social organization, loosely based on ‘barbarian’ principles, which is to say migrancy, communalism, resistance to the centripetal force of the State (but still stubbornly sexist), a new and even more terrifying form of threat emerges: young children who emerge from the underground, children who have never experienced what still passes for ‘normative’ rules of human interaction. They are, in short, bestial, murderous, and thoroughly amoral. Lessing’s ‘barbarians’, then, are neither the colonized nor

the oppressed but, rather, the product of our own – that is to say, civilization's – decline. They represent, literally, the absence of a future. I am tempted to think of them as maggots feeding on the festering carcass of the modern state. The final stage of decomposition.

Unlike *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is concerned with women's experience: dependency upon the validation of parents and lovers, the refusal or incapacity to lead in one's own right, the feeling of limitless need, but also the ability to forge connections, to nurture, and to make commitments. We see all this enacted through the character of Emily, who, in a telescoping of time, matures from young girl to young woman in a very short period. The passage of time is reflected in the various stages of Emily's maturation process, culminating in her involvement with Gerald, a young leader of the new, fragmentary social order. She falls in love with him and loses herself at times in the emotional vortex of first love. Together they form a commune and care for orphaned children. We see that, despite her need to grow up, and to grow up quickly once she leaves the safety of the narrator's flat to take her place in the evolving culture of the streets, she remains true to those who have loved and cared for her. And it is desire for connection rather than individuation, so common to women's experience, that fuels Emily's continuing commitment to the narrator and, more importantly, to Hugo, her pet, the strange bulldog-like creature with the face of a cat. This fidelity sets her apart from most of the young people who have joined tribes and quit the crumbling city.

Other dimensions of Emily's life are revealed in the space behind the wall. And although the narrator's experiences there are, nominally, replays of Emily's childhood, the settings in which these occur are more consistent with the historical time of the narrator's childhood. Of course, being a futuristic text, none of this makes a great deal of sense anyway, except insofar as the setting confers upon the girl an iconic or archetypal status. Central to the narrator's – and Emily's – psychic lives, and these lives are intimately related, is the oppression of what the narrator refers to as the "personal." The domain of the personal is that of the family, the powerlessness of the abject girl-child, the stifling garments, always faintly contaminated by the suggestion of bodily excretions, the unquenchable neediness, the subordination of her needs to those of the new male baby, a baby she loves beyond reason when it is placed in her arms, despite her resentment. The personal represents "The unalterable

laws of this world.”¹⁵ And we can note the ways in which the mature Emily carries forth this legacy, a legacy inherited from her mother and, doubtless, her mother before her.

Juxtaposed with the domain of the personal is the domain of possibility and change, of problems to be solved and work to be done. There are rooms to be cleaned out and painted, repairs to be made, often many times over. The most striking image is that of a lifeless carpet with an intricate design, which only comes to life when people, working collectively, lay pieces of discarded fabric on the design. The project is collective; it reminds me of the Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam* or ‘repairing the world’.

And the world, as it is revealed in the realistic frame, has collapsed. The old way of life – life under capitalism along with the social systems that support it – has somehow imploded. The narrator’s flat, in a building described as a model “of what such buildings should be for solidity and decency” (6), is later described as a machine that has died. Civilization, as we know it, has come to an end. In the absence of any institutional or socio-cultural machinery to impose order and discipline, barbarian values supplant those of the dwindling bourgeoisie. For those who choose to leave the crumbling city and become migrants, there is an anarchic joy. “Free. Free, at least from what was left of civilization and its burdens” (164). For the interlocking disciplinary regimes which enable the productivity – indeed, the very existence of the capitalist state – perpetrate a kind of violence against the self, a different kind of violence, to be sure, from the torture inflicted upon Coetzee’s barbarian prisoners, but one keenly felt in women’s experience and the experience of the marginalized as well.

The historical trauma to which the narrator bears witness in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is of another order than that recited in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. For one thing, it is a future history; it has no referent in the present. Moreover, the trauma is both external and internal to the narrator. The external one is, of course, the apocalypse itself – the end of the modern world as we know it in the West; the internal one, a state of psychic malaise. These come together in the area of gender, where the ‘personal’ and the public bleed into one another. I do not suggest that the novel works as testimony in precisely the way Felman has laid it out, particularly insofar as that model of witnessing bears a certain semblance to the solo quest narrative. History here is

¹⁵ Doris Lessing, *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974; New York: Vintage, 1988): 136. Further page references are in the main text.

far more intimate, being so highly indexed to the ‘personal’ and to the story of a girl’s coming of age. Emily’s ‘back’-story, revealed in the space behind the wall, is where trauma is experienced in the body; lived both by the narrator and the reader. And I think we could say that Emily’s trauma represents the violence of patriarchy, not in the universal sense but in the way it operates in the modern capitalist state. And just as Coetzee’s narrative is concerned with opposing representations of official conduct, Lessing’s treats a society cut off from authority, operating on the level of the street. Victimization, therefore, is imagined differently. It is internalized, and to this extent it is possible that the “we” with which the novel begins is an acknowledgment that we, in the communal sense, are all complicit in the logic of a socio-economic system that perpetrates a ‘soft’ victimization (ideological) on the level of gender and social class (and these categories are dealt with specifically in the novel). I would suggest, and this remains to be thought through, that Lessing’s ‘history’ of everyday life at the end of the world reflects certain Eriksonian insights: first, that there is a relationship between our capacity for self-destruction and our first intimation of an all-inclusive notion of what it means to be human, and, secondly, that “we must extend our psychological and moral imaginations in order to hold off precisely what we begin to imagine.”¹⁶ And this brings me back to the question of the barbarian children, the system’s own excreta coming up from the sewers to wreak havoc among the surviving citizens.

It is, in fact, Gerald, and not Emily, who refuses to give up on the children, who invites them into the commune and watches helplessly as they destroy the household. Still, he will not abandon them. Despite his best intentions, however, he is eventually persuaded by Emily and the narrator to leave the children or be murdered by them. These children are crucial to my understanding of the novel’s resolution, because, in the final scenes of the novel, when its two frames coincide – the real world of catastrophe and the narrator’s putative inner world on the other side of the wall – the moment of transcendence (or grace, however one might define it) is intimately connected with their recuperation. At the end, the last possible moment, the wall opens and the narrator summons Emily, Hugo, and Gerald. They all pass through, and find themselves in a mystical place with “a house roof like a forest floor

¹⁶ Robert J. Lifton, “The Image of ‘The End of the World’: A Psychohistorical View,” in *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?*, ed. Saul Friedlander, Gerald Holton, Leo Marx & Eugene Skolnikoff (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985): 165.

sprouting grasses and birds' nests." Emily's parents are there as well. "That world" we are told, "was folding up as we stepped into it, was parcelling itself up, was vanishing" (212). At that point, the narrator catches a glance of the animating female presence, a vision that the narrator cannot translate into words. As the "One" leads the way out of the "collapsed little world," she is followed by Emily and Hugo, the latter now transformed into a resplendent creature. Gerald lingers behind, irresolute. Finally, "at the very last moment, they came, his children came running, clinging to his hands and his clothes, and they all followed quickly on after the others as the last walls dissolved" (213). While we understand the importance of keeping faith with the Other, particularly in regard to Emily's sense of responsibility to Hugo and the narrator, nothing is quite so startling as this final scene of reconciliation.

And yet, the theme of responsibility is announced at the very start of the novel when the mysterious stranger delivers Emily over to the narrator's care. "This is the child," he says to her. The narrator begins to voice an objection. "No, there's no mistake," he says. "She's your responsibility" (15). And that's it. No biological connection, no prior relationship, no reason at all is given. Nothing but naked responsibility. And, of course, the narrator accepts.

The narrator's voice, to me, has always been an enigma. She speaks as a survivor and one who bears witness – but from where does she speak? She passes through the wall with the others but remains behind in the "collapsed little world." She is not part of the "new family," though she does, in a way, give birth to it. Does the narrator, then, remain in the collapsed little world? In what sense is she a survivor? The ending of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is famously troublesome. Its redemptive nature, however, renders the text far more traditionally apocalyptic than *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and suggests to me a possible reading as spiritual autobiography, especially in the light of new feminist re-imaginings of the male paradigm.

In what way is *The Memoirs of a Survivor* a spiritual autobiography? I would argue that the narrator, through her engagement with Emily – and with Hugo, and in her role as caregiver and mentor as well as her experiences beyond the wall, is able to realize a way out of her initial isolation and abjection and achieve a kind of spiritual wisdom. Judith Jordan writes of the interpersonal, relational dynamic in woman's lives where "the deepest sense of one's being is continuously formed in connection with others and is inextricably tied to relational movement" and where "growth occurs in becoming part of a

relationship rather than apart from relationship”¹⁷ as in the masculine model. In the novel, the experimental communities that form in the ashes of the collapsed state are communal; everything in the novel is driven by relational movement. Even in the more mystical sections, there is the image of the lifeless carpet animated by collective labour which the narrator describes as being like a child’s game but “serious, important not only to the people engaged in this work, to everyone” (78); and, what is more, “there was no competition here, only the soberest and most loving co-operation” (79). And here, behind the wall, the narrator experiences a feeling of grace:

I was being taken, was being led, was being shown, was held always in the hollow of a great hand which enclosed my life, and used me for purposes I was too much beetle or earthworm to understand. Because of this feeling, born of the experiences behind the wall, I was changing. A restlessness, a hunger that had been with me all my life, that has always been accompanied by a rage of protest (but against what?) was being assuaged. (100)

Among the metaphors that might supplant the masculinist solo quest and better reflect female spiritual growth, Ray and McFadden pose the quilt with its multiple layers and suggestion of process. An important aspect of quilt-making, they write, “is that although parts of the quilt (its ‘blocks’) may be crafted individually, the whole quilt is traditionally the outcome of people gathering to stitch it together.”¹⁸ What better way to describe Lessing’s carpet brought to life by the collective endeavor of individuals applying their own fragments of material to the design?

Ultimately, the novel presents us with a glimpse of wholeness commensurate with our capacity for self-destruction; however, the underlying logic is that of the futility of human endeavour. In both frames, the idea of alternative futures, of *tikkum olam*, is overridden. Grace, it seems, is untranslatable into human terms and the subject who would bear witness speaks from nowhere, speaks as a non-subject. And this absence may, perhaps, be the enabling fiction itself.

Unless, of course, we read the novel as a wholly metaphoric enactment of psychic breakdown and repair. The narrator ‘survives’ and, presumably, re-enters the world to bear witness. After all human endeavour proves futile, the one singular idea that remains crucial to the novel’s vision of redemption is

¹⁷ Judith Jordan, quoted in Ray & McFadden, “The Web and the Quilt,” 202.

¹⁸ Ray & McFadden, “The Web and the Quilt,” 205.

the Self's foundational responsibility for the Other, a responsibility that is neither reciprocal nor instrumental.

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INDIGENOUS LITERATURES,
LITERATURES OF THE LAND:
AN ETHOS FOR THESE TIMES

Literature of the Land

—— An Ethos for These Times

JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG

IN THIS ESSAY, I AM PRESENTING A SECTION OF MY DOCTORAL RESEARCH on Syilx (Okanagan) environmental ethics as articulated in the Syilx oral literatures. I address notions of orality, literature, and Indigeneity. In particular, the focus of this essay is on questions concerning the way in which oral literature arises out of the experience of the land and shapes the Syilx world-view and social paradigm.

In my research, I wish to develop a theory with regard to Syilx orality as the reflection of long-term knowledgeable experience of the land. I am sympathetic to the assertion that indigenous oral literatures of the Americas represent “those voices that speak for all the land and all the people.”¹ I rely on the extensive research by John Clarke on writing traditions across a wide variety of disciplines, cultures, and time periods, representing examples of *Voices of the Earth*, as his title asserts. As he suggests,

in a very important sense, we do not *discover* the natural world but rather *construct* it [...] we do not experience reality direct, but rather in a form which is filtered through the lenses of our conceptual and symbolic creations – our mythologies, sciences, philosophies, theologies, through language itself.²

For the purposes of this essay, I shall focus on the way in which the Syilx world is *constructed* by *captik*³ (ancient Syilx oral narratives), which re-

¹ Simon Ortiz, in *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, ed. Ortiz (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1998): xviii.

² J.J. Clarke, *Voices of the Earth: An Anthology of Ideas and Arguments*, ed. Clarke (New York: George Braziller, 1994): 3, 4.

shapes knowledge in each new generation through its role as a mode of oral documentation. The intimate relationships between land and people, mimicked in the active images of oral story, are transferred as an environmental ethic common to the Syilx people. My thoughts in this essay are limited to discussion of *captik*³ literary texts and the way 'story' expresses the land's requirements by shaping the migration of human thought over generations, speaking its realities without enlisting the formal arguments of an 'environmental ethic'.

I also find reinforcement in the scholarly work of the Native-American writer N. Scott Momaday, in his well-known essay *Man Made of Words*, where he asks the question "What is oral tradition?" In the course of answering, Momaday observes:

oral tradition suggests certain peculiarities of art and reality. Moreover, myth, legend, and lore according to our definitions of these terms, imply a separate and distinct order of reality.

He goes on to define the art as involving such "considerations as memorization, intonation, inflection, precision of statement, brevity, rhythm, pace, and dramatic effect." He comments that the "concern" seems to be "not so much with an accurate representation of reality, but with the realization of imaginative experience."³

I particularly agree with his view that "storytelling is imaginative and creative in nature [...] a process in which man invests and preserves himself in the context of ideas" and that "the state of the human *being* is an idea, an idea which man has of himself." Momaday states that, in literary terms of reference, "man achieves the fullest realization of his humanity in such an art and product of the imagination as literature" and that "literature is itself a moral view, and it is a view of morality."⁴

I question the use of the word 'mythology' as a way of approaching and categorizing Syilx oral story. I argue for the adoption of a better term to contextualize or 'textualize' the oral literatures of the Okanagan as a container for the transmission of the knowledge of 'good' relationship by humans as an integral part of the natural world.

I see the position of Syilx oral story as being predominantly a literary expression of ethics, guiding behaviour and interaction with the environment,

³ N. Scott Momaday, *Man Made of Words: The Remembered Earth*, ed, Geary Hobson (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1979): 167.

⁴ Momaday, *Man Made of Words*, 168.

my hope that some insight into the unique features of Nsyilxcen, as an orality-based language, in the particular ways in which its literature is constructed to transmit an ethos of reciprocity with the land, might be of value in reclaiming other 'literatures of the land'.

The Syilx Okanagan language is an 'orality-based' schema, organized in a way that facilitates collective memory transmitted through story and as an ethic arising out of a long term association with one place. In this regard, David C. Rubin examines how themes, scripts, story grammars, and associative networks function in oral traditions. He writes:

In terms of oral traditions, a listener does not hear a song in isolation but in relation to past events, especially but not exclusively, in terms of the songs heard from that tradition.

He suggests that

the meanings of words and larger units of a song in an oral tradition are not to be understood in terms of the text in which they appear but in terms of the entire tradition to which that text belongs.⁸

The Okanagan Nsyilxcen, as an example of an 'indigenous' language, is fixed in orality and thus offers a unique way to 'read' through it as a foundation for assaying the literature in that language. The scholarly work of Anthony Mattina on the Nsyilxcen language as well as the extensive research conducted by Aert Kuipers on Salishan language cognates, including Nsyilxcen (Colville/Okanagan), has been a valuable reinforcement of my own views with regard to the etymology of Nsyilxcen morphemes.

My primary concern here is to examine how an 'orality-conscious' language schema might operate within Syilx story-structure. For that reason I refrain from using 'grammatical' or linguistic terms, which may confuse. My analysis is more about examining the root and affix 'images' which make up words, as being highly *connotative* through implying and/or associating meaning with active images or processes in nature to construct meaning in the Nsyilxcen language.

Let me first draw on conclusions the foundational morphemes of the Nsyilxcen language. These small segments of a word are the parts that initiate meaning and express active aspects of the natural world. Particularly useful in this connection is the work of Aert Kuipers, who constructed a *Dictionary of*

⁸ David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995): 23, 24.

Proto-Salish with its roots and suffixes, thus revealing how Nsyilxcen has evolved from an original language, reconstructed through analysis of living Salish language cognates, to make a proto-Salish lexicon.

Root and affix morphemes combine in a vast variety of different ways to make up our words. Nsyilxcen words are more like phrases or even sentences and are experienced as a series of animated images when spoken. The closest parallel for me is the ‘spoken-word’ experience of English words that are onomatopoeic in origin, conjuring up a single unconnected image in progress; an example is ‘gurgle’. With Nsyilxcen, the *experience* would be similar to a string of onomatopoeic words, triggering small active fragment images, to make a sentence. Root and affix morphemes, as fragments of a word, each produce their own small active images mimicking a fragment of the real world. These images when hooked together to form what I will refer to as an active ‘clip’ reproducing an animation-like moment of perception which associates with the real world.

I experience the Nsyilxcen language internally in a very different way from the way I do English. I experience Nsyilxcen as closer to ‘visualization’, or, as some highly fluent speakers have put it, ‘more like a movie I’m watching than like thinking in English words’. I experience English as a structuring of *words* which then produce *understanding* through reference to bare bones or abstract concepts, that in turn produce a reality – images created by adding descriptor words. Objects and actions as words are *enhanced* in their abstractness by other words in the sentence which produce real-world imagery, such as in ‘ornate satin chair’ or ‘spoke quietly’. Of course, English contains many motion verbs, like ‘rolled’, that contain onomatopoeic triggers reproducing fragmentary active images, and the *process* by which meaning is achieved is experienced in a manner more akin to how the morphemes within Nsyilxcen words seem to prompt a high level of ‘visualization’.

By way of example, the word ‘table’ in English conjures up the basic stylized physical form of a table as an object. In a sense, it is a meta-table, or a sort of universal table as an object with legs and a flat surface. The only way we know from the word how the table relates to people is having learned that tables are functional objects. The internal sounds or syllables of the word are of no consequence to what a table is. The word ‘table’ is simply an abstract sound symbol which serves to conjure up the right general object in the mind. In that sense, English seems to be structurally conducive to a written system of documenting information.

In Nsyilxcen, the word for table, *kʷ iʷ ntn*, is made up of three active images: a prefix *kʷ* (flat surface), a root *iʷ n* (eating), and a suffix *tn* (instrumental-for-using). Thus the Syilx word for 'table' conjures up images of *what the table does in relation to people in the real world*. A similar word is 'chair', *snkʷ mutn*, made by prefixing both *sn* (a thing-locator in) and the prefix *kʷ* (flat surface) to the root *mut* (buttocks bent-sitting form) and suffixing *tn* (instrumental-for-use) to generate the images of what a chair does for people in the real world. The difference seems to be that words are constructed out of active image-provoking fragments to achieve meaning. Perhaps, for English speakers, this seems a cumbersome way to speak, but in Nsyilxcen, the images are alive and coherent, in that you can 'see' the table's and the chair's real meaning in the context of the active relational world. In this way, Nsyilxcen seems, as I said, to be structurally conducive to an oral system of documenting information.

There are four terms I would like to take apart as an example. The first is *Syilx*, describing our political, linguistic, and cultural identity. The second is *tmixʷ*, describing the life-force or all life. The third is *tmxʷulaxʷ*, describing the land. The fourth is *captikʷ*, our word for our oral literature. I offer to visit these words for the purpose of this essay because each of these terms contains a unique view of what 'indigenous' might mean in Nsyilxcen. These words also provide an example of how Nsyilxcen orally constructs meaning and the relationship to the natural world.

The word *Syilx* is used to differentiate us from other Salish peoples. Each part of the word, including prefix and suffix, can be examined for meaning. *|s|* is called by linguists an absolute ('it is...'). I think of it as turning an action into a thing. *|yil|* is a root morpheme meaning 'to twine or coil'. The *|x|* implies 'those doing'. So, taken together, it forms a thought much like a sentence, 'Those who twine and coil'. The meaning might simply be dismissed as self-identification as hemp-rope makers, were it not for many other words carrying unmistakable references to 'many strands' in describing 'land' and 'the life-force of the land'.

Let us now look at our term for the life-force of the land. The word *tmixʷ*, when broken down to its root images, is highly interesting. For me, there seems to occur a layering of images: the *|t|* is taken as a *stative prefix*: i.e. a state-of-being type of prefix to the root *mixʷ* (as used in describing loosened hair from the head or fringeing on a hide). However, the *tm* immediately implies the negative prefix *tm* ('nothing' as a state, as used in *tmsqlaw*, 'no money', *tmsqist*, 'no name') and could be layered over the stem *ixʷ* which

makes roots like *-tix*™ (action of gathering food), or *nix*™ (more of...) or as in the suffix *wix*™ (with each other), and in that case appears to reference a state of recipient action. So, interestingly, this word is experienced in its image-‘meaning’ as definitely implying a ‘nothingness’ before directly referring to ‘many strands spreading outward from one source’. Whether the linguist can reconcile theory between how the word is linguistically structured and how its imagery is ‘experienced’ isn’t for me to try to answer here.

Our term for the land, which is *tmx*™*ulax*™, is equally interesting. As can be appreciated, one of the roots of that word is the term *tmx*™, or (*tmix*™ shortened to accommodate pronunciation) combined with the second root, *ulax*™, which is broken into its component parts: *ul* (a root implying a cyclical motion, as in *x*™*ulk*™*p*, ‘fire drill stick’, or as used in the transitive root-repeat *ulpn*); *la* (‘right here’, *ala*); and the two put together as *ulax*™ (conjuring images referencing the here and now, as *place* is cyclical). The whole word, imaged altogether, is interesting in its references to ‘nothingness’ and ‘many strands spreading outward’ ‘right here (now)’ ‘as cycles’.

Captik™♣ is our term for the genre of story, usually classified as myth or legend. When broken into its component parts, the first part is *cap* (split off in a thin sliver, as in the whole fingernail separating from the finger, *k*’*capqynkst*) and *t*™*ḷk*™ (glowing as a live ember), with the expressed-goal suffix ♣ (in the future, to be done by someone). So, taken together, in imagery the word implies a very interesting meaning, ‘splitting off thin slivers’ and ‘ember glowing’ and ‘to be done by someone’.

In examining the meanings presented by the foundational image-making parts embedded in each word, one can gain an insight into our Syilx understanding of the ‘many strands’ or ‘biodiversity’ that we are intertwined with – strands which we must ‘in-volve’ ourselves with and be strengthened by in our actions. We can see this through the meaning of the word *Syilx*, as a defining relationship with *tmix*™ or the life-force continuously spreading outward, here, in the *tmx*™*ulax*™, as continuous cycles that we, as humans, live an imperative to continuously bring the strands together. The word *captik*™♣ tells us that small slivers of doing so can be split off and held in the mind to be re-kindled by someone, like a glowing ember waiting to become a flame to light the way. We can see from that the depth of meaning attributed to *captik*™♣ is far more complex than the idea that genre, legend or myth might encompass.

Arising out these four words, we can appreciate that Nsyilxcen may present a very complicated and sophisticated view of what our connection to the land might be. It is a complex view stating the mystery of origination as well

as a deep understanding of the physical world. It is a concept of displaying time and space and a knowledge of diversity and an ecological awareness of the seasonal cycle of the natural world and our part in that grand scheme.

To be *Syilx*, then, is to heed a societal imperative to twine the many strands together to continuously sustain a unity of existence within the generation-to-generation, year-to-year, season-to-season cycles that we are a necessary and integral part of. Like every other living thing, we have an important role in the health of the *tmx^wulax^w* and a specific purpose as humans in the life-force of the land, and the *captik^w* of the *Syilx* are there to continuously rekindle the light of its truth.

Nsyilxcen, simply translated into its parts, is ‘*syilx*’ and ‘*cən*’ emanating from the mouth. The language is an oral manifestation of us as *Syilx*, so the imperative in the word ‘*Syilx*’ extends to the speaking of the language. The language speaks what the *Syilx* must continuously be.

I want to offer briefly a concept of ‘story’ and its correlation with orality (hence, oral literatures) as a way to look at ‘what the world speaks (teaches)’, thereby contextualizing or ‘textualizing’ oral literatures as a land ethic. Gregory Bateson, in *Mind and Nature*, says, in speaking about story: “I come with stories [...] built into my very being. The patterns and sequences of childhood experiences are built into me”; and he goes on to say: “I offer you the notion of context, of pattern through time [...] context is linked to another undefined notion called ‘meaning’. Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all.”

I think about the patterns and sequences which were built into the speaker of pre-Columbian *Nsyilxcen*, and think of the stories which surrounded and permeated that person’s being and patterns and sequences, transferred through their language and *captik^w* to me. I argue for Bateson’s meaning about context and prefer to use the word *captik^w* to classify our stories, because, as I indicated above, of the limitations imposed by the terms ‘myth’ and ‘legend’.

To examine *captik^w* from within the context of the Okanagan land/environment as the cultural framework of such ‘oral literatures’, we can think of the language as ‘animation in the mind’ and enhance that imagery twofold by constructing story peopled by the flora and fauna of the land. This type of ‘animism’ is what underpins *Syilx* literatures. The living parts of the *tmix^w* that make up the *tmx^wulax^w* are the characters that ‘people’ our oral stories – each one being one of the many strands that are continuously being bound with others to form one strong thread coiling year after year into the future as

the life-force of the land. This strong thread, which, as humans, we are responsible for learning to move forward into the future as a social and cultural imperative, is *captik* "ᑭ, the story. We have a word that describes the unwinding of the thread as the word used to describe the unwinding of the 'story' through time as the foundation of our being, the very 'laws' of our existence.

To glimpse *captik* "ᑭ story in that context, we can position how the 'stories' act as tongue, as organ of speech of the 'tmix' " from which it springs forward to the mouths of its human tellers and influences 'cultural literacy'. *Captik* "ᑭ have been classified as the mythology or legends of the Okanagan people. They may be both or they may be neither. They may be *Chaptik* "ᑭ.

I now call on a 'story' handed down from the pre-Columbian indigenous society of Okanagan Syilx. I call on this story and will relate relevant parts to provide an insight into its workings. It is one small part of a larger story; however, it will suffice for the purpose of talking about our *captik* "ᑭ stories.

Turtle Races Eagle

In the world before, all the tmix " were asked to decide how the world would be for the people-to-be. Nobody had any ideas. Eagle challenged everyone to race him, and if they lost, then they would have to work for him and he would decide that was how the world was going to be. One by one they all lost. Finally Turtle came along. Turtle felt sorry for all the other creatures, who now worked for Eagle and could not just be themselves. Turtle decided to race Eagle if Eagle would set everyone free. Eagle agreed. Turtle had a dream: in his dream he was shown how he could beat Eagle. Eagle told Turtle that he could decide where they would race. They met in the morning at the big meeting tree. Turtle told Eagle to hoist him onto his back and fly to the top of the tree and they would race to the ground. Turtle fell faster than Eagle. Turtle set all the creatures free.

This is an abbreviated version of the story of turtle. This story arises from an Indigenous view of the Syilx, and occurs as "story from the world before" and is the underpinning of the Syilx principles of leadership through compassion and an embracing of diversity, speaking to Syilx civil liberties. It is a story expressing a philosophy of selflessness, of inclusiveness and egalitarianism. It is a story which metaphorically speaks of the wisdom of using non-aggressive methods to defend community, and it speaks through the song of Turtle's emergence to light, of the emergence from the depths of ignorance to the light of knowledge about the land for the future. It is obvious that, in the English telling, it employs allegory, symbolism, and metaphor and calls on classic

archetypes embedded in character and plot. None of these devices is unique or new.

What may be different is the whole other layer of meaning to be appreciated in terms of the way the smaller meanings within the Okanagan language, in the original version, create an interplay of information. One small example comes from Turtle's emergence song. The way the words are constructed in the line *emmmcnit kwa* as story simply means that Turtle landed on the shore. However, there is a layer which starts with the beginning of the song and the sound *emmm*; by stretching the vowel in the song, we get another word which implies the compassion that you would show a tiny baby, and, stretching the next sound, as in the song *cnnnn*, we get another word which suggests the powerful sound of water, as in a river over a waterfall, and develops the concept of immense strength in compassion; and the last sound, *kwa*, separated out on its own as in the song, asks the question "How else could it be?"

The meanings in this 'story from the world before' is a Syilx 'Indigenous' view of 'story' arising from the Syilx meaning of our word for 'story from the world before' as 'that which provides the spark of knowledge'. It is made up of a world 'peopled' by animals of the natural world surrounding the Syilx as aspects of the land superimposed upon the story of the people-to-be in preparation of the world to come. As, indeed, this story does, for our people, for it is the story outlining the laws and principles of our society.

I position Indigenous oral literature as the 'voice of the land', as a record of the way land itself established how humans, over the generations, might speak its required realities.

I choose to describe our relationship to our land as having been an 'unqualified regenerative' relationship and to characterize the relationship arising out of a 'regenerative ethos' carried in the *captik* ^{wz}, rather than of simply a view of environmental conservation. I choose to describe it in the manner theorized by Aldo Leopold as something desirable of achievement in society as an "ecological conscience," because it describes a relationship of unmitigated interdependence and reciprocity with nature, rather than one of 'sustainable use'.

I argue that to be Syilx within a 'unqualified regenerative' view is to live according to a strict imperative to continuously sustain unity of existence from generation to generation, year to year, season to season, in a knowledgeable and principled way through intimate familiarity with the land of which we are a necessary and integral part. It is to know that, like every other

living thing, we have an important role in the health of the environment, fulfilling our human purpose in its life-force.

The unique environmental ethic of the Syilx peoples, in the particular 'unqualified regenerative' way they have occupied the Okanagan landscape for countless generations, was not accidental but the result of the language and the literatures of the Syilx way of life, which evolved both within and as a result of the ecology of the Okanagan.

Indigenous culture and the identity of the Syilx were intrinsically shaped by land through 'stories of the land' residing in the collective memory with its succinct and valuable imperatives of environmental ethics, thus offering a way to 'read' a culturalization that is intent on sustainability.

The Syilx ethic practised in the cultural tradition of our homelands is an historical record contained in story, but, more than that, it is a way of transferring significant practices to honour the land, the animals, and other life-forms, practices that are preserved and presented like cultural artifacts in the stories.

These are observations I tender as a contribution to the question: What should a literature for our times be? Should it not be to strive to be a part of finding new ways in which the old earth 'story' might be remembered by the people of these times, through literature as 'story'? Should it not be a time to reconstruct what the narrow confines of 'literature' might be in order to begin the task of transforming the stories we tell to the people-to-be?

Our times are such that we need to listen to the voice of the land, to hear the stories of the land retold and, in the retelling, kindle a new fire from the small embers still glowing. These are times to light up the writing on the cave-wall. It is a time for a new fire, inside this dark age of such vast ecological illiteracy and frightening zealotry in the perfection of the science of 'consumption'. It is a time of ignorance and madness, and we stand at the edge of an abyss, the depth of which we cannot imagine.

To transform the people-to-be, we must begin to raise up the pillars of how we need to relate to each other and how we need to relate to the land, in the minds of all who will hear the stories. Transformation is necessary in order for 'regeneration' of the land and ourselves to occur.

Like Turtle, the emergence into light is born of compassion and courage in the face of the greatest of odds. It is not only possible but it will come to be, because the story has been told. Each of you out there is a story-maker. You are the story in the making.

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Masculindians

—— The Violence and Voyeurism of Male Sibling Relationships in Recent First-Nations Fiction

SAM MCKEGNEY

Growing up ‘Indian’ in this country is very much about not having the power to define yourself or your own reality. It is being denied the right to say, ‘I am!’ – instead finding yourself saying ‘I am not!’¹

THIS ESSAY EXAMINES A CRISIS OF MASCULINITY ENGENDERED, at least partly, by the projection of externally constructed, dehumanizing, and incongruous models of Indigenous masculinity on First-Nations communities and the coterminous corrosion of viable masculine roles and responsibilities within the communities themselves. The Métis writer Kim Anderson argues that “[Native] men’s responsibilities have been greatly obscured by the colonial process,” adding that “it is more difficult for men than it is for women to define their responsibilities in the contemporary setting and reclaim their dignity and sense of purpose.”² The Mohawk activist Sakej Ward contends that, although Native people “try to bring back roles and responsibilities, [...] we always fail to bring back the traditional role that encompasses half of our people: the male population.”³ Thus, in the words of Timothy Sweet, the expressed “project” for Native communities “of ‘recover-

¹ Patricia Monture-Angus, *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks* (Toronto: Fernwood, 1995): 3.

² Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Toronto: Second Story, 2000): 239.

³ Sakej Ward, quoted in Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (Toronto: Broadview, 2005): 67.

ing the feminine,' [...] must be complemented by an endeavour to recover the masculine."⁴ This essay argues that understandings of Indigenous masculinity (or, better, masculinities) have been problematized by rhetorical and semiotic configurations of Native-ness as either impossibly masculine or impossibly feminine, neither of which supports, validates, and undergirds male lived experience. Many young Indigenous men are thus drawn in conflicting directions by images that either exclude them or misrepresent their experience in the same moment those images claim to identify what Native-ness *is*. Young Indigenous men can be thus shown by the semiosis of Native-ness to be not masculine enough or not feminine enough and all the while not Native enough.

On the one hand, young Indigenous men are subject to the hypermasculine images of the Hollywood Indian, which identify Native-ness through a closed system of masculinist traits, from emotionless stoicism to rugged virility to rage, fury, and bloodlust. According to Brian Klopotek,

For at least the last century, hypermasculinity has been one of the foremost attributes of the Indian world that whites have imagined [...]. Indian tribes are populated predominantly by noble or ignoble savages, wise old chiefs, and cunning warriors. These imagined Indian nations comprise an impossibly masculine race.⁵

Such images – the products of a settler imagination – dehumanize, even as they offer potential feelings of empowerment for men in the short term, because they are radically one-dimensional, humourless, and tied to a simulated past. The Kanien'kahaka scholar Taiaiake Alfred told me recently in an interview: "There's no living with [the image of the Hollywood Indian], because it's not meant to be lived with; it's meant to be killed, every single time. They're images to be slain by the white conqueror."⁶

On the other hand, young First Nations men are subject to a postcolonial or traditionalist response to European patriarchy that holds aloft femininity or gynocratic power as the core of Indigeneity. In *The Sacred Hoop*, the

⁴ Timothy Sweet, "Masculinity and Self-Performance in the Life of Black Hawk," *American Literature* 65.3 (September 1993): 475.

⁵ Brian Klopotek, "'I Guess Your Warrior Look Doesn't Work Every Time': Challenging Indian Masculinity in the Cinema," in *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, ed. Matthew Basso, Laura McCall & Dee Garceau (New York: Routledge, 2001): 251.

⁶ Personal interview, Victoria, 23 April 2007.

Laguna/Sioux writer Paula Gunn Allen argues that “traditional tribal lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not and they are never patriarchal.”⁷ As a result, the Diné critic Laura Tohe argues that there is “no need for feminism” in Indigenous societies, “because of our matrilineal culture.”⁸ In the Canadian context, the Cree writer Tomson Highway has depicted the colonization of the Americas as “the killing of one religion by another, [...] the killing of God as *woman* by God as *man*.”⁹ Each of these Indigenous intellectuals champions the feminine as integral to Indigenous lifeways in a manner that de-emphasizes the masculine. And although these are, in many ways, strategically essentialist responses to the particular conditions of colonial domination, they can lead young Indigenous men to wonder, as a Cree student asked in one of my classes, “Where am I in all of this? How does this speak to me?”

Indigenous masculinities thus currently struggle for expression in a tenuous realm between colonial simulation and postcolonial response. Looking in neither of these directions do young Indigenous men tend to see their images reflected. They cannot hope to emulate the Plains Cree warrior on horseback that occupies the North American mainstream imagination; nor, however, can they hope to embody a pristine Indigenous femininity. So, where can they look to find their existences validated? These concerns are grappled with in several recent novels by young Indigenous authors, three of which I will discuss in this essay: *Three Day Road* by the Irish/Scottish/Métis writer Joseph Boyden, *The Lesser Blessed* by the Dogrib writer Richard Van Camp, and *Blood Sports* by the Haisla/Heltsiuk writer Eden Robinson. In each of these works, the difficulty of occupying a healthy and empowered masculine identity is examined through the relationship between a somewhat anxious, introverted, and unpopular protagonist and a suave, sexy, and sophisticated mentor figure with whom the protagonist performs acts of brotherhood. Each protagonist must in some way resist the siren pull of his would-be brother’s enormous social capital and the captivating draw of that brother’s propensity

⁷ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston MA: Beacon, 1986): 2.

⁸ Laura Tohe, “There is No Word for Feminism in My Language,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 15.2 (Autumn 2000): 110.

⁹ Tomson Highway, quoted in Heather Hodgson, “Survival Cree, or Weesakeechak dances down Yonge Street: Heather Hodgson speaks with Tomson Highway,” *Quill & Quire* 64.11 (1998): 2.

toward violence in order to construct a masculine identity that is not ultimately defined by destructiveness.

Although my research at this point remains exploratory rather than conclusive, I would like to hypothesize that these narrative explorations of contemporary Indigenous masculinity through the surrogate sibling relationship perform three important tasks. First, they betray a significant anxiety about the lack of healthy models for masculine behaviour available to Indigenous youth. Second, in the absence of viable Indigenous models for masculine behaviour, these texts demonstrate the dangers of being seduced by violent individualist forms of masculinity enacted by mentor figures readily welcomed into the mainstream; in other words, they suggest that just because Indigenous masculinities have been contaminated by colonialism and its attendant simulations does not mean one should simply turn for masculine validation to broader mainstream characterizations. Third, through the use of surrogate rather than biological brotherhood as the relationship central to their examinations, these novels suggest that the resurgence of healthy, non-dominative forms of Indigenous masculinity will occur only alongside the reinvigoration of Indigenous principles of kinship. What I mean to suggest here is that re-imagined Indigenous masculinities, according to these texts, are contingent on recognition of responsibilities to the family, but not simply the family as defined by the eurocentric/capitalist fiction of the biological nuclear family unit as *the* natural form of human social organization. Again to quote Taiaiake Alfred:

The way to confront [the crisis of masculinity] and defeat it and to recover something meaningful for Natives is to put the image of the Native male back into its proper context, which is in the family [...] with responsibilities to the family – to the parents, to the spouse, to the children (or nephews, nieces, whatever or even just youth in general).¹⁰

It is no secret that colonial policy in Canada, as elsewhere, has sought to decimate extended kinship ties, traditional systems of lineage, and communal child-rearing practices, and to fragment Indigenous communities into discrete nuclear family units readily assimilated into the capitalist framework of the nation entire. As with many culturally genocidal endeavours, colonial policy in this regard has been far more ‘successful’ in the destructive, rather than re-creative, aspect of this two-pronged attack. While the encouragement by the State of economically fruitful, healthy, and loving nuclear family homes

¹⁰ Personal interview, Victoria, 23 April 2007.

throughout Indian country was never undertaken with great fervour, the dismantling of pre-existing relations was pursued rapaciously and with devastating results (through residential schooling, extra-cultural adoption, missionary endeavour, and the legal interventions of the Indian Act). The three novels under analysis in this essay all document the contamination of familial structures by destructive forces while simultaneously dramatizing the inadequacy of the nuclear family as a supposedly ideal replacement.

For instance, breakdown of the family is woven right into the structure of *Blood Sports*, which commences with a letter from the protagonist Tom, an absent father, to his eighteen-year-old daughter. Although the circumstances of his departure are revealed in the novel to be extremely complex and not entirely within Tom's control, the recurrence of family breakdown throughout the tale suggests his absenteeism to be symptomatic of a broader contagion rather than an isolated incident. In the letter, Tom describes his own parents in terms of negligence. "[My father] Eugene," he explains, "went MIA when I was two. [My mother] Chrissy phones it in. [...] I'm not trying to discourage you from meeting them," he explains, "but be warned they're big talkers. Their promises are sugar-covered shit."¹¹ Unsurprisingly, given this introduction, Tom's home-life proves in the course of the novel to have been painful and lonely, conditioned by wretched poverty and his mother's alcoholism. In *Three Day Road*, the breakdown of the family is more explicitly connected to colonialism through interventions of, first, residential school and, then, the military in the lives of the protagonist Xavier and his surrogate brother Elijah. "I barely remember my mother," claims Xavier. "She gave me up when I was just old enough to begin having memories, and the nuns took me in. Elijah was the first boy I met. He became my only friend."¹² Although they both eventually secure release from residential school, their disconnection from family members is maintained through the schism between the boys' traditional life-style in the bush of northern Ontario and Xavier's mother's more urbanized and assimilative, albeit impoverished and self-destructive, life-style. This alienation from family is then exacerbated in the novel by the perils of war that threaten Xavier's remaining relationships. Residential school looms similarly heavily over *The Lesser Blessed*, the story of an adolescent Dogrib boy's search for self in the shadow of horrific familial abuse conducted by his father, a former residential school student. The wounded

¹¹ Eden Robinson, *Blood Sports* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006): 7.

¹² Joseph Boyden, *Three Day Road* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2005): 151.

history that has set ablaze the boy's familial existence is symbolized painfully by the burn marks on his back. The protagonist, Larry, gives voice to this generational destruction in the cryptic statements, "'I am my father's scream'" and "'I believe ... it is every parent's dream to watch his child burn'."¹³

In each of these cases, the fragmented family structure leaves the protagonist bereft of the default model of masculinity, at least in a biological sense: the father. Two of the three never knew their fathers while the third wishes he hadn't and appears to have been personally responsible for that father's death. While I am leery of falling into the trap of naturalizing the nuclear family or, as bell hooks warns, of "buy[ing] into the romantic myth that if only there was a [...] man in the house life would be perfect,"¹⁴ these significant absences leave psychological imprints on the young men at the centre of these stories, coaxing them to explore different models of masculine behaviour. And in the absence of lived experiences of positive masculine behaviour by male role models, the images of Indigenous masculinity available to the protagonists in the semiotic field of popular culture remain impossibly restrictive stereotypes, immovable simulations that cannot hope to capture the vicissitudes of their contemporary lives. Finding neither human behaviours nor stories nor images that reflect and therefore validate their existences, the young protagonists sink slowly beneath feelings of inadequacy, alienation, and despair. When asked to draw a self-portrait, Larry of *The Lesser Blessed* hands in a picture of a forest. To his therapist's comment that "'there is no one'," Larry replies, "'Look, there. I am already buried'."¹⁵ A powerful metaphor for Larry's inability to see his own image in the world around him, the portrait suggests a personal lack, an immense internal void. Similarly, as he becomes more and more isolated in the violent world of trench warfare, Xavier describes himself as "becom[ing] more invisible. A brown ghost."¹⁶ His indigeneity a hindrance to absorption into the surrogate homosocial community of the allied front, Xavier feels intense anxiety about the validity of his personhood. Unseen by others – a "ghost" – he begins to doubt himself. Tom, meanwhile, continually questions the veracity of his own experiences

¹³ Richard Van Camp, *The Lesser Blessed* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996): 38, 10.

¹⁴ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 102.

¹⁵ Van Camp, *The Lesser Blessed*, 1.

¹⁶ Joseph Boyden, *Three Day Road*, 65.

due to his amnesia and epilepsy, unsure if he has mistaken, misremembered, or been duped regarding what has gone on around him.

So, where do these unfortunate souls look to have their humanity recognized, to have their personhood validated, to leave their spectral purgatory and perceive themselves as men of agency, as empowered to act? Enter the surrogate brothers and potential mentor figures: young men with the looks, the words, and the demeanour to seize the kind of social recognition which constantly eludes our protagonists. Each surrogate brother manifests qualities and forms of behaviour identified within his social circle as both masculine and powerful, hence desirable to the socially disenfranchised (and note that none of these social circles is expressly or homogeneously Native, which suggests the concerns of these authors to include the contemporary urban Native experience). Elijah, as foil to the retiring Xavier in *Three Day Road*, is relentlessly visible to his soldier colleagues by virtue of his charismatic personality, his ability to wield death as a renowned sniper, and his eloquent use of English to weave tales of his own heroism. As Xavier laments,

Elijah can out-talk even the officers with his nun's English and his quick thinking. The others in our section are drawn to him and his endless stories. I am forced by my poor English to sit back and watch it all happen, to see how he wins them over.¹⁷

Meanwhile, in *Blood Sports*, set in the stark setting of Vancouver's Downtown East Side, Jeremy boasts five forms of social capital that his impoverished epileptic cousin Tom lacks: striking good looks, access to drugs, mastery of violence, wealth and its paraphernalia, and the attraction of beautiful sexualized women. In her description of meeting Jeremy, an ex-lover says,

"Jer stuck out. He was the only guy who showed up [at the party] wearing a suit. Not a stuffy old business suit – a sleek black Armani suit, his shirt casually unbuttoned at the top. Light tan on his face except for a faint outline of sunglasses. His dark brown hair had that just-stepped-off-my-yacht, didn't spend a lot of time (yes, I did) on my hair look."¹⁸

Similarly, Johnny Beck, the defiant and alluring foil to the gangly, unobtrusive Larry Sole in *The Lesser Blessed*, betrays characteristics immediately recognizable as manly and therefore desirable in the social atmosphere of Fort

¹⁷ Joseph Boyden, *Three Day Road*, 65.

¹⁸ Eden Robinson, *Blood Sports*, 166.

Simmer's high school. Describing his first sighting of Johnny at school, Larry says:

His hair was feathered and long, his eyes piercing and blue [...] the thing I remember about Johnny was the look on his face. He looked like he didn't give a white lab rat's ass about anything or anybody [...] like he was carrying the weight of Hell. All the girls were saying, 'What's his name? Find out his name!'¹⁹

Each of these figures becomes a beacon of recognizable masculinity for his surrogate brother, a model to emulate in the hopes of performing a more empowered and therefore internally endorsable identity. However, the magnetic force of each more charismatic brother's masculine persona comes at a price. In the case of Johnny Beck, we find that beneath the outward confidence he is locked into a self-serving life-style of use and manipulation that leads him to abandon the novel's love-interest, Juliet Hope, whom he has impregnated, thereby replicating his own father's absenteeism. Elijah becomes more and more entranced with his ability to end life, ultimately nourishing his death hunger through cannibalism in the manner of the Windigo, a horrific creature of Ojibwe myth. Jeremy proves a sadistic sociopath infatuated with voyeuristic violence, dominative sex, and manipulative control who tortures and torments Tom (among others), ultimately forcing his surrogate brother to commit the act of murder.

Okay, so what's going on here? Why does each of these three novels depict the struggles of an unconfident, fatherless young man who is drawn into the circle of a much more socially savvy surrogate brother figure, only to suffer the burden of that brother's violence? What is each novel suggesting about masculinity, violence, and Indigeneity? First of all, these novels dramatize quite powerfully the lack of healthy models of masculinity available to Indigenous youth, given the cyclical violence and abandonment emerging in the wake of colonial interventions in Indigenous kinship relations and given the hyperbolic simulations of Indigenous masculinity *and* femininity emerging from colonial rhetoric and postcolonial response. In the absence of realistic images that reflect the existences of young Indigenous men yet provide a viable, empowered, and non-dominative masculine role to which they can aspire, *alternative models will understandably fill the void*. In these novels, we see surrogate brothers whose attractiveness as replacement mentors lies in their ability to seize recognition and social status within the broader (largely

¹⁹ Richard Van Camp, *The Lesser Blessed*, 2.

non-Native) community in which both protagonist and surrogate brother find themselves. By filling the void with Elijah, Johnny, and especially Jeremy, these novels illustrate the perils of performing masculinity to serve the desires of a broader social sphere. In other words, if the absence of viable Indigenous models of masculinity is combatted by modelling Indigenous youth after those most readily recognized as manly and powerful by the mainstream, then young Indigenous men (and their communities) are in trouble.

To conclude, these novels develop three very different scenarios for dealing with the magnetic pull of the corrosive mentor. In *Three Day Road*, Xavier ultimately rejects the individualist masculine violence endorsed by Elijah and kills his Windigo-possessed surrogate brother. This act, which threatens to equate Xavier with the power-lust of Elijah through the wielding of death, proves to be a provocative re-imagining of masculinity – Xavier is symbolically castrated through the loss of his leg in the bomb-blast that accompanies Elijah's demise. Xavier then consummates his condemnation of the perverse masculinity of his surrogate brother by returning both literally and metaphorically to a traditional Cree setting (signalled by the novel's final word: "home") in which he is nursed back to spiritual health by his aunt, who offers the possibility of non-dominative and respectful kinship relations that celebrate female strength. *Three Day Road* is thus a narrative of return in which the crisis of Indigenous masculinity can be transcended by the re-awakening of traditional roles and responsibilities. In *The Lesser Blessed*, Larry ultimately renounces his surrogate brother, allowing his creative energy as a storyteller to envision an eventual masculine identity (in progress), beyond the parameters of Johnny's sexual domination. The novel ends with the poetic lines:

and I wept because... I was not owned
not with mate
but I smiled too knowing this because I knew my life was still unwrapped
I would in time
find one to call my own
mine to disappear in
to be...²⁰

Note that this creative and imagined identity begins with the idea of ownership – "to call my own" – but then grows beyond the confines of possession to the selflessness that enables one, as Van Camp writes, "to be...." While

²⁰ Van Camp, *The Lesser Blessed*, 119.

Boyden imagines a return to traditional Cree masculinity and Van Camp imagines a re-created Dogrib masculinity that is absorbed and actuated by a form of selfless kinship, Robinson presents something much darker in *Blood Sports*: the trials of one who fails to return, who fails to imagine something new, who remains locked in the economy of violent masculine exchange created for him by his sadistic mentor. *Blood Sports* ends with the congenitally non-violent and loving Tom committing the act of murder and leaving his infant daughter because he ultimately submits to the fiction of Jeremy's world order. He goes along with Jeremy's mantra of "I want you to be good.... No arguing. No debates. No whining,"²¹ naively believing that, despite it all, Jeremy offers a reasonable exchange of reward or punishment for different forms of behaviour. He gives in.

And yet, I read Tom's failure at the end of *Blood Sports* as the most powerful cry in recent Indigenous fiction in Canada for serious examination and re-imagining of Indigenous masculinities, because he dramatizes the effects of being co-opted, of being created from without in the absence of clear understanding from within. And this becomes all the more powerful in the light of the fact that, as those who have read the novel are aware and I have thus far neglected to mention in this essay, Tom and Jeremy are actually white.

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²¹ Eden Robinson, *Blood Sports*, 78.

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From Noble Savage to Brave New Warrior?

——— Constructions of a Māori Tradition of Warfare

MICHAELA MOURA—KOÇOĞLU

FUELLING THE DEBATE ON VIOLENCE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S Māori community, scientists have claimed that what has been dubbed the 'warrior' gene is dominant in Māori males.¹ The study contends that the gene, associated with aggressive and antisocial behaviour in general, might contribute to explaining the over-representation of Māori in violence statistics.² Although ostensibly one-sided and ignorant of the broader socio-economic context, such assertions create the need to interrogate the biased image of Māori people as 'warriors' – by Pākehā as much as by Māori – and its import for Indigenous culture today. By way of examining instances of Māori warriorhood across socio-historical and cultural categories, changing notions of a Māori tradition of warfare are explored, interrogating the ways in which the concept of the warrior is embraced, maintained, and re-asserted as an intrinsic feature of modern Indigeneity, a process which reverberates in contemporary Māori writing.



¹ "Warrior gene theory sparks debate and highlights domestic violence in New Zealand," *Medical Research News* (9 August 2006), <http://www.news-medical.net/?id=19383> (accessed 8 August 2007).

² New Zealand Department of Justice, *Conviction and Sentencing of Offenders in New Zealand: 1987 to 1996* (Wellington: Department of Justice, 1997), and *New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims* (Wellington: Department of Justice, 2001).

Colonial or 'Other' Gazes

Contemporary stereotypes about Māori men frequently reduce their image to an instance of physicality, prowess, and often brutality, manifesting the Māori warrior as a cliché which is a perpetuation of colonial 'Othering' discourses. Such constructions negligently ignore and silence Indigenous cultural complexity and dynamics while at the same time reinforcing colonial notions of the 'noble savage'. The tradition of warfare seems to have emerged during the fourteenth century, a period that saw

the creation of an outstanding art and architectural tradition around the construction of finely carved and decorated meetinghouses; the development of an advanced science of horticulture; the formulation of a highly esoteric religious system; and the development of a complex social organization based on tribalism and chieftainship.³

This cultural dynamic generated complex Indigenous communities, for which warfare was appropriated as a salient aspect of tribal life:

Warfare was an extension of tribalism [...] and was so institutionalized that it permeated all areas of Classic Maori life: in art, meetinghouse carving served a powerful warrior-ancestor cult; chieftainship provided an energetic leadership system; and religion contributed a combative priesthood and spiritual support. Every tribal man, woman, and child served the institution of warfare.⁴

Colonial constructions of Māori warriorhood that hark back to traditional practices manifest themselves in oral tradition, colonial accounts, and archaeological evidence remain wilfully silent about the cultural complexity of the Indigenous people at that time, de-contextualizing warriorhood by means of reducing the concept to an image of 'uncivilized' savagery and cannibalism. Even before settlers invaded the country at the close of the eighteenth century, colonial images of the savage 'warrior' were perpetuated by explorers to the Pacific, whose encounters with the Indigenous people in some part resulted in lethal confrontations or at least open hostility, as in the following manuscript of a journal entry from James Cook's first Pacific voyages:

When ever we [were]viseted by any number of them that had never heard or seen any thing of us before they [generally] came off in [their] largest Canoes

³ Alan Taylor, *The Maori Warrior* (Pamphlets Polynesia; Hawai'i: Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1988): 2.

⁴ Taylor, *The Maori Warrior*, 2.

[...]. In each Canoe were generally an Old man, in some two or three these use'd always to dire[c]t the others were better Clothed and generally carried a halbard or battle ax in their hands [...]. As soon as they came within ^{about} a stones throw of the Ship they would there lay and call out Haromai hare uta a patoo age that is come here, come a shore with us and we will kill you with our patoo patoo's and at the same time would shake them at us, at times they would dance the war dance, and other times they would [trade with and] talk to us and answer such questions as were put to them with all the Calmness imaginable and then again begin the war dance, shaking their paddles patoo patoo's [...] and as soon as they had worked themselves up to a proper pitch they would begin to attack us with stones and darts and oblige us whether we would or no to fire upon them.⁵

Such cannibalistic warrior images⁶ served to demonize and exoticize the native 'Other' in order to set up a stark contrast to the 'civilized' white man, conjuring up the moral need for colonial subordination.⁷ Tropes of the warlike race⁸ during the colonial era were prone to ambiguity:

What different European writers meant by the claim that the Maori were warlike depended upon who they were and where they stood in relation to the inhabitants of New Zealand.⁹

Thus, while some accounts served to justify settlement and conquest by relegating the Indigenous people to the status of 'primitives, others conjured up the trope of the 'noble savage' worthwhile of the civilizing mission: "In the early 1800s whites generally viewed the Maori as Noble Savages, amenable both to civilization and to survival."¹⁰ In addition, the Polynesian people were

⁵ "The Journals of James Cook's First Pacific Voyage, 1768–1771, Manuscript 1" (2004), *National Library of Australia Online* (7 August 2007): 211, http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jml-cook_remarks-058 (accessed 25 August 2007).

⁶ Cf. Thomas K. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Anthony Flew (1798; 1830 ed.; Penguin Classics; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983): Book I.

⁷ See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London & New York: Zed & Dunedin: U of Otago P, 1999).

⁸ Cf. Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the countries visited during the voyage round the world of H.M.S. Beagle* (1839; 1860; London: John Murray, 1913): 446 ("warlike race," "warlike spirit"), 457 ("warlike country").

⁹ Christina A. Thompson, "A Dangerous People Whose Only Occupation Is War: Maori and Pakeha in 19th-Century New Zealand," *Journal of Pacific History* 32.1 (June 1997): 113.

¹⁰ Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800–1930* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 2003): 156.

deemed superior to the Natives in the 'New' World.¹¹ These images were propagated well into the twentieth century, profoundly distorting the image of Māori within a modern context.¹²

It comes as no surprise, then, that the outlook for the Indigenous people in post-contact Aotearoa New Zealand was generally bleak: marginalized, dispossessed, and dubbed a 'dying race' during the nineteenth century, the *tangata whenua* (people of the land) experienced fundamental military as well as political setbacks.¹³ The early-twentieth century held no promise of change for the better, where the lumbering achievements of the legally installed Māori parliament in the 1920s and 1930s played their part in reinforcing disillusionment and discontent with what was perceived as a Pākehā or white world.¹⁴ The desolate socio-economic situation discouraged every aspiration to regain a place and status in society.

It is against this background that Māori enthusiasm at dispatching the 'sons of Tumatauenga' – the god of war in Māori mythology – to the First and Second World War can be understood: as seizing an opportunity to restore the *mana* (prestige; authority) of the *tangata whenua*.¹⁵ Following the Pioneer Battalion of 2,200 Māori volunteers in World War One, calls for an exclusively Indigenous military unit during World War Two resulted in the formation of the 28th Maori Battalion.¹⁶ Up to 17,000 volunteers took to battle, and the Battalion was highly acclaimed and honoured for its achievements upon their return. Evidently, the Māori tradition of warfare became a medium to assert pride in Indigenous culture and history and a means of self-identification, setting up a counter-image to the colonial notion of the 'noble

¹¹ See: Reverend Samuel Marsden, *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of the Rev. Samuel Marsden of Paramatta* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1858); John Savage, *Some Account of New Zealand: Particularly the Bay of Islands, and Surrounding Country; with a Description of the Religion and Government, Language, Arts, Manufactures, Manners, and Customs of the Natives* (London: John Murray, 1807).

¹² See: Felix Maynard & Alexandre Dumas, *The Whalers* (London: Hutchinson, 1937); Edward Tregear, *The Maori Race* (Wanganui: A.D. Willis, 1904).

¹³ See Ranginui J. Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle Without End* (Auckland: Penguin, 1990).

¹⁴ See Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle Without End*; Michael King, *Nga Iwi O Te Motu: 1000 Years of Maori History* (Auckland: Reed, 1997).

¹⁵ See Chadwick Allen, *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2002).

¹⁶ Joseph F. Cody, *28 (Maori) Battalion* (Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–1945; Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1956).

savage'. As Wira Gardiner underscores in his account of the Battalion in the Second World War,

the repetition of tribal history focusing on famous chiefs and their battles, and the recitation of whakapapa, or genealogical relationships, reminded the Maori of their military heritage.¹⁷

Thus, Māori participation in both World Wars reinvigorated a positive self-image for many, or as Sir Āpirana Ngata put it, served to “uplift the Maori race spiritually, culturally, and economically.”¹⁸ Accordingly, the way in which Māori military history is remembered, re-asserted, and renegotiated contributes profoundly to contemporary constructions of the warrior concept, while at the same time imbuing the tradition with fresh meaning.

As a consequence, the cultural cliché of the Indigenous warrior continues to be endorsed in postcolonial Aotearoa New Zealand, but the meaning and cultural relevance of the notion is no longer imposed on Māori by Pākehā New Zealanders in solely essentialist terms. Increasingly, the notion of a tradition of warfare is negotiated from within Māori society, and employed as a means of self-projection that manifests Māori *mana* and status, a development which resonates in contemporary Māori writing.

Literary Manifestations of Warriordom

I remember the uncle-from-parliament saying at the time the Battalion was formed that once the brown man had fought in the white man's war, maybe then he'd be deemed equal. [...] It was being said too that war was part of our inheritance, part of our history, and that because of this we must have some kind of inborn aptitude. Here was an opportunity to show this special ability to the world. It was being said that this was the opportunity to demonstrate pride of race.¹⁹

In Grace's 2004 novel *Tu*, the story-line revolves around the battles of the Maori Battalion in Italy during World War Two. Out of three brothers joining the Battalion, only the youngest, with the telling name Te Hokowhitu-a-Tu, or

¹⁷ Wira Gardiner, *Te Mura O Te Ahi: The Story of the Maori Battalion* (Auckland: Reed, 1992): 8–9.

¹⁸ Ikahara Porutu Puketapu & Robert Ritchie Alexander, “NGATA, Sir Apirana Turupa (1874–1950),” in *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, ed. A.H. McClintock (Wellington: R.E. Owen, Government Printer, 1966), vol. 2: 686.

¹⁹ Patricia Grace, *Tu* (Auckland: Penguin, 2004): 278.

Tu for short, returns. Based on an epistolary structure, two narratives unfold in the novel. One centres on Tu's war journal, disclosing the secret of his survival and return to Aotearoa; and the other is conveyed by personal letters to his niece and nephew, disclosing the secret of their birth.

It is specifically Tu's war memories that put the purpose and meaning of Māori participation in World War Two into critical perspective:

[It was] all about being true citizens, being equal, proving worth, having a prideful place. It was nothing to do with God and King, and we were too far away for it to really be about our country.²⁰

By contradicting the 28th Maori Battalion marching song's refrain – "For God? For King! And for country!" – the text here instantiates a scathing criticism of the discriminatory power-dialectic within Aotearoa New Zealand, indicating that equal citizenship was one of the key incentives for Māori organizations and politicians to demand a full Māori combat unit. Following the war, the Indigenous minority insisted on socio-economic improvements, as well as equal citizenship with the dominant Pākehā. Echoing disappointed hopes of social reality, the novel ends with a disillusioned perspective: "Now that you're home, know your place Maori boy."²¹ In this instance, the author underscores the fact that race relations in Aotearoa New Zealand were a far cry from being conciliatory and harmonious, despite the Māori war effort.

It is Tu's reflections on the meaning and purpose of the war, and the role Māori played in it, that the text foregrounds in its critical appraisal of the notion of warriorhood. Initially, the protagonist is convinced of having found a proper place in the army: "I belong nowhere except with my Battalion."²² Tu nonetheless puts the stereotypical picture of the 'Māori warrior' into critical perspective. However, the text clearly states socio-economic and cultural reasons for Māori to embrace the soldiering profession during World War Two:

Some joined for a coat and a pair of boots, for food, army pay, and so as not to be another mouth to feed at a time when there was no work, no money for them. There were some who had been ordered by elders to go, some giving up their schooling to be part of this 'pride' [...]. There were those who were running away from monotony, who were off to see the world, off on the biggest

²⁰ Grace, *Tu*, 278.

²¹ *Tu*, 279.

²² *Tu*, 255.

adventure of their lives. Others had absconded from marriages or difficult family situations, or from trouble with the law.²³

Accordingly, the novel, challenging romanticized versions of a 'warrior people' on the lookout for a chance to prove themselves in combat, strenuously underscores the complex motivations for becoming part of this enterprise. Even though the promises of economic improvement along with an ideological resurrection of the *tangata whenua* did not for the most part materialize, the Maori Battalion retains its iconic status today, representing a source of pride and impinging vitally on contemporary articulations of Māori warrior-dom. Fictional texts, however, place the concept within a critical framework that undoubtedly elicits cultural significance while interrogating nostalgic interpretations, as Witi Ihimaera's novel *The Uncle's Story* shows:

'Ka tuwhera te tawaha o te riri, kaore e titiro kit e ao marama. When the gates of war have been flung open, no man takes notice of the light of reason. This ancient proverb comes alive again today with the decision of our three boys have made to fight in Vietnam. It is good to see three of this generation carrying on the tradition of their forebears from the Maori Battalion.'²⁴

In this instance, the intersection of traditional and modern cultural practices becomes transparent: the character Arapeta, a World War Two veteran and a Māori leader of high birth, employs the traditional concept of *mana*, which warriors allegedly gained in warfare already in precolonial time. This notion is projected onto contemporary life, with Arapeta's son and friends joining the White Man's battle in order to acquire *mana* for their people. Hence, the Maori Battalion in itself symbolizes a major change in tradition, in that the novel's character invokes the Battalion as part of the Māori warrior tradition to justify the participation of Aotearoa New Zealand's Indigenous people in yet another battle: namely, the Vietnam War. In this light, the novel renders fallacious the view of warrior-dom as a supposedly 'static' traditional practice:

'Our ancestors have always been fighters,' Arapeta began. 'The Maori has never been loath to fight. In World War Two our people volunteered to go and fight Hitler, and our contribution was unequalled by any other race or people drawn into the conflict.'²⁵

²³ *Tu*, 259.

²⁴ Witi Ihimaera, *The Uncle's Story* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2000): 42.

²⁵ Ihimaera, *The Uncle's Story*, 39.

While Arapeta invokes the notion of a pristine warrior heritage, it becomes clear that his constitutes a decidedly transcultural perception of a cultural practice that is characterized by blending colonial and postcolonial battle-grounds with the Indigenous history of tribal warfare. In Ihimaera's novel, Māori history represents a critical source for comprehending culture change. At the same time, the novel recognizes the changing impact of a globalized society that impinges significantly on perceptions and formulations of Indigeneity. The author's critique of a supposedly 'traditional' notion of warriorhood becomes evident when Arapeta finds out about Sam's homosexuality:

'In traditional times, son, people like you never existed,' Arapeta said. 'They would have taken you outside, gutted you and left your head on a post for the birds to eat. Men like you abuse the sperm which is given to man for only one purpose'. [...] 'You are supposed to be a warrior. Instead, you are a woman.'²⁶

In order to become a valiant cultural practice and source of Indigenous identification, Ihimaera implies *ex negativo*, there is a need to jettison pristine and gendered notions of warriorhood, and to re-negotiate the concept to establish a viable source of identification for contemporary Māori.

Distorted notions of the Māori warrior tradition are also at the core of Alan Duff's novel *Once Were Warriors*, which pointedly illustrates how a globalized modern society generates cultural transformations that undermine Indigenous self-assertion. In this disillusioned portrayal of the dysfunctional Māori community of Pine Block, a suburban New Zealand ghetto, Jake is the embodiment of a failed existence and a perverted notion of the Māori warrior. Poverty, unemployment, welfare-dependence, alcoholism, and a distorted perception of a tradition of warfare induce the character to engage in a vicious circle of aggression and violence:

And he stood there, waiting while the jugs were filled, aware of people's awareness of him; he felt like a chief, a Maori warrior chief – no, not a Maori chief, I can't speak the language and people'll know I can't, and it'll spoil it – an Indian chief, a real Injun, not one of them black thieving bastards own half the fuckin shops round town, a real Indian from comics and TV and America [...]. I know! Like Sitting Bull. Chief Sitting Bull.²⁷

Able to develop a sense of pride only by being the physical alpha male in his regular bar, the pugnacious character espouses a perverted warrior image. It is

²⁶ Ihimaera, *The Uncle's Story*, 257.

²⁷ Alan Duff, *Once Were Warriors* (London: Vintage, 1990): 65–66.

not only reduced to physical prowess and violence, but ironically orientated towards hero-images conveyed by the media. From Jake's perspective, all that has been translated of the traditional warrior concept into modern Aotearoa New Zealand becomes reduced to the internationally acclaimed 'All Blacks' rugby team. Jake's eldest Nig follows in his steps by applying to join the brutal and ruthless Brown Fists gang, which offer the young Pine Blockers a sense of belonging which the disintegrated concepts of home or family no longer seem to possess. Imposing a mutilated notion of family, where loyalty is measured in levels of brutality and rape of 'sistas' is a common feature, it is not only the concept of *whānau* (extended family) that the gang translates onto a counterfeit canvas. Another example is the Indigenous traditional practice of tattooing:

And those shades, man: cool. I mean cool. Wraparounds. Make ya look meaner 'n a snake. And tats, man, everywhere tats. On faces, arms, hands, you name it. Got my own share of'em. Done em myself. Dint make a sound neither when I was puttin em on.²⁸

However, the gang cannot keep to its pledge of security and home, denouncing and casting out members not willing or fit to subscribe to crime and murder. Jake and Nig are set in stark contrast to Te Tupaea, a Māori leader who instils in Jake's wife Beth the will to change the fate of the neglected and abandoned street kids of Pine Block by re-connecting them with their heritage, engendering a sense of pride in their being Māori. Discovering and re-integrating Indigenous culture seems also to be a path out of Pine Block for Beth's younger son, Boogie. A state ward under control of the child-welfare authorities, Boogie is re-introduced to Māori customs by his welfare officer. Both he and Beth succeed in gaining a sense of pride in being Māori. Thus, in the end, a woman, deemed unworthy for being a female, and a boy, rejected by his father Jake for not being able to fight, become the bearers of hope for a renewed sense of identity and belonging.

²⁸ Alan Duff, *Once Were Warriors*, 137. The overreaching whole-body tattooing proudly itemized here is doubtless intended by Duff to represent a Hells-Angels-type degradation of the traditionally selective corporeal adornment practised by Māori (the buttocks for men; facial tattoos or *moko* for both sexes, with gender-specific patterns).

Contemporary Notions of the Māori Warrior

Today, with the country geared towards a bicultural policy on educational and institutional levels, Indigenous culture is incorporated into the national agenda in a drive to shape a set of potent icons for a truly bicultural society, icons that are increasingly permeating popular culture. The notion of Māori warriorhood, for instance, has been institutionalized in the New Zealand Army, which has appropriated the Indigenous ‘Ngati Tumatauenga’ as its name – literally ‘tribe of the god of war’ – to provide a sense of belonging and identification:

As one people we are one tribe. Ngati Tumatauenga reflects our oneness and our unity; it has seen us develop our own New Zealand military cultural practices and ceremonial guided by Tikanga Maori on the one hand and British and European custom on the other.²⁹

On its website, the New Zealand Army appeals to martial traditions of “the British soldier and the Maori warrior,” again invoking the history of Indigenous warfare and the accomplishments of Europeans on the battlefield in an obvious attempt to constructing a bicultural institution. Apart from obnubilating the inherent ethno-cultural diversity of contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand society by subscribing to a solely bilateral identification, the army invokes a transcultural notion of warriorhood. The establishment of a national *marae* (traditional gathering place) for religious and official services in observance of Māori protocol, as well as the performance of *haka* on special occasions is proof of this. The war-like chant and performance represent a custom of high social importance on the *marae* (ceremonial grounds) for different occasions.³⁰ Thus, the *haka* as a symbol of Indigenous warriorhood has become institutionalized and blended into a modern context, where the expression of *mana* is not restricted to Māori only. The ‘war-dance’ has become

²⁹ New Zealand Army, “NZ Army Culture: Ngati Tumatauenga,” *The New Zealand Army* (8 August 2007), <http://www.army.mil.nz/culture-and-history/nz-army-culture/ngati-tumatauenga.htm> (accessed 25 August 2007).

³⁰ Timoti Karetu, *Haka! The Dance of a Noble People* (Auckland: Reed, 1993). It should be pointed out that the *haka* is by no means a ‘declaration of war’ despite the pugnacious vocalism and aggressive gestures involved. It is much more sophisticated than this, and constitutes a complex choreographing of welcome, or a ‘declaration of peace’, on a much more elaborate level than, but analogous to, the shaking of hands to indicate that one was not holding a sword. That the *haka* cannot be implemented as a gesture of unambiguous aggression is indicated by the fact that Māori-rights activists, after warmly welcoming Queen Elizabeth II by performing the traditional dance, nevertheless expressed their resistance to the Crown by turning their backs on her and displaying their bare buttocks.

established as an art form, and is taught in schools and universities, embedding this particular cultural practice in a modern context. Another critical instance of a transcultural blend is the centrality of the *haka* in sports, where it has become incorporated as a tradition of Aotearoa New Zealand's national rugby team, the All Blacks.³¹ Recently, the New Zealand government assigned intellectual property rights in the Ka Mate, the *haka* employed by the All Blacks, to the Ngāti Toa in Northland,³² which constitutes a significant symbolic step towards acknowledging Māori cultural ownership, and a step away from blunt tokenism, or non-Indigenous misappropriation.

The image of the native New Zealander warrior also plays a key role in the tourist industry, where the performance of the *haka* by tattooed artists serves global demands for local exoticism. Stephen Turner has outlined the re-conditioning of images of self and place for requirements of the marketplace, claiming that "the integrity of [New Zealanders] cultural identity is manufactured for others."³³ A portrayal of 'the' Māori warrior that remains reduced to tongue-poking and *haka*-performing, Turner argues, trivializes the complexity of modern Maoridom. Accordingly, the institutionalized and commercialized integration of Māori cultural elements in Aotearoa New Zealand seem prone to mere tokenism, rejected as a prolonged arm of neocolonial practices through the appropriation of Indigenous symbols detached from their specific cultural contexts:

Obvious examples of this are the adoption of Maori names for government departments, the symbolic use of opening ceremonies, welcome ceremonies, tapu-lifting ceremonies and the printing of official pamphlets and reports in Maori and English.³⁴

³¹ Steven J. Jackson & Brendan Hokowhitu, "Sport, Tribes and Technology: The New Zealand All Blacks haka and the Politics of Identity," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26.2 (May 2002): 125–39.

³² Ellen Connolly, "Maori win battle to control All Blacks' haka ritual," *The Guardian* (12 February 2009), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/12/new-zealand-haka-maoris> (accessed 11 April 2009).

³³ Stephen Turner, "Colonialism Continued: Producing the Self for Export," in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, ed. John Docker & Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: U of New South Wales P, 2000): 221.

³⁴ Jeffrey Sissons, "The Future of Biculturalism in Aotearoa/New Zealand," in Geoffrey Walter Kearsley, Jeffrey Sissons & Joseph Anthony Diorio, *Social Science and the Future of New Zealand* (Dunedin: U of Otago P, 1989): 18.

Māori have recently started to actively market an Indigenous people who are not merely clinging on to what is rendered 'authentic' in the sense of 'static' traditions, but presenting a more complex culture which succeeds in generating meaning out of Indigenous traditions and practices, not least through Māori literature.

Conclusion

The trope of Māori as a 'warrior race' is subject to manifold interpretations in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand: In popular culture and on the institutional level, warrior images tend to be romanticized and appropriated as tokens of bicultural harmony. To resist such stereotypical essentialisms, Māori actively market themselves as an Indigenous people who are not merely clinging onto what is rendered as 'authentic' traditions, but who present the intricate and diverse manifestations of the Māori cultural canvas. Cultural practices encompass not only the traditional arts of *haka*, carving, and weaving, but also modern performance, art, literature, and music, thus underscoring the inherent complexity of today's Indigenous culture.

Contemporary Māori writing elicits these predicaments of establishing viable identity spaces as a 'warrior' people in a modern socio-cultural framework. Contemporary Māori writing reinforces the image of a people with a history and tradition of warfare, as in Ihimaera's *The Uncle's Story*, Patricia Grace's *Tu*, and Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors*. However, all three novels defy a simplistic duality of 'traditional' versus 'modern' warrior, exposing the pitfalls of a pristine and supposedly 'authentic' tradition of warfare. Thus, the literary re-negotiation and re-assertion of the Māori warrior tradition in a globalized modern framework manifests novel expressions of Māori identities that allow us to better comprehend the cultural complexity and dynamics of modern Indigeneity.

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A Native Clearing Revisited

—— Positioning Philippine Literature

CHELVA KANAGANAYAKAM

IN 1998 THE PHILIPPINES CELEBRATED 100 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE, an event that was accompanied by considerable fanfare, orchestrated by the state. In literary circles, the centennial remained largely unnoticed, the one major exception being the decision taken by the University of the Philippines Press to reprint one hundred literary texts, many of which were available only in libraries. In comparison, the celebration of fifty years of independence by India, and the literary response thereto, was striking, with a number of international journals and magazines, including *ARIEL* and the *New Yorker*, bringing out special issues to mark the occasion. From a post-colonial perspective, the literature of the Philippines has generated very little international interest during the last two decades, much less than the number of shoes that Imelda Marcos owned. The objective of this essay is to reiterate the need for recognizing writing from the Philippines as a distinctive and important segment of postcolonial writing in English. While this essay does not seek to discuss the specificities of a Filipino poetic, it attempts to provide a frame and a backdrop as a way of initiating discussion about postcolonial notions of canonicity.

In general, anthologies of postcolonial literature have tended to pay little attention to writing from the Philippines, and while the growing corpus of Asian-American literature often includes Filipino writing, it focuses on North America, or diasporic writing, rather than on literature from the 'home' country.¹ As a Filipino writer, Jessica Hagedorn is much better known in postcolo-

¹ A case in point would be *Concert of Voices: An Anthology of World Writing in English* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1995), edited by Victor Ramraj, which includes Africa,

nial circles than, say, Nick Joaquin or Alfred Yuson.² Curiously enough, while other postcolonial literatures have moved from obscurity to prominence, the reverse has happened with Filipino writing. Filipino writing was better known in the 1940s and 1950s in North America than it is today. Despite the complex relation between politics and literature in the 1970s and 1980s, and the substantial body of important literature it produced, very little critical attention has been paid to that body of writing. Despite the censorship of the Marcos era, literature flourished. But literary giants such as Joaquin have never been considered for major literary awards given in the West. San Juan sums up the situation by saying:

Complex historical reality always defies 'postcolonial' wish-fulfillments... Born from the violence of colonial occupation, Filipino writing in English, for example, has never been recognized by U.S. arbiters of high culture upholding canonical standards of taste.³

The reasons for this chronic neglect by postcolonial studies are unclear. Some countries, such as Malaysia, are often under-represented in postcolonial studies, but at least that might be justified on the grounds that, in quantitative terms, the output from that country is relatively small.⁴ Singapore, Fiji, Bangladesh, etc., may well fall into this category, although Singapore has in fact asserted its presence effectively. Apart from the argument that, strictly speaking, the term "Commonwealth" does not include the Philippines, there is no rationale for the neglect of a corpus whose literary history is as rich as that of other postcolonial nations. *Man of Earth*, the anthology edited by Gemino Abad and Edna Manlapaz, begins with a poem published in 1914, and this is

Canada, the Caribbean, India, the South Pacific, the UK, and the USA as its major regional categories, thereby excluding the Philippines. The only Filipino writer who is included is Jessica Hagedorn.

² While Hagedorn is a diasporic writer, Joaquin and Yuson have remained in the Philippines, as has the most prolific novelist, F. Sionil José.

³ See E. San Juan, Jr., *Reading the West/Writing the East: Studies in Comparative Literature and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992): 28.

⁴ Nevertheless, Malaysian writing is healthily promoted by such publishers as Skoob (London), in their Pacifica series, although, once again, creative writing from the Philippines barely gets a look-in. Curiously enough, though other South Asian writers are represented by extracts from their longer fictional works in Skoob's Pacifica Anthology No. 2, *The Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword*, intro. John McCrae (London: Skoob, 1994), the only Filipino writer included, F. Sionil José, is represented solely by one of his political essays and a critical study on him by Dudley de Souza.

not even the first work to be published in the Philippines.⁵ The trajectory of literary history in English begins at least one hundred years ago.

Strangely, Jose Rizal's work has been known internationally for almost a century, although he wrote his novels in Spanish. Jose Garcia Villa enjoyed and continues to enjoy a reputation in North America, but it can be argued that he turned his back on the Philippines after he moved to the USA. But they were, nonetheless, products of the Philippines. And yet the corpus as a whole continues to be neglected. The lack of international recognition has not, however, been a serious deterrent for Filipino writers. Their output, significantly, has been both consistent and prolific. But a crucial difference has been that the publication of this literature has been confined to the Philippines. Local publishers with limited print runs have accounted for much of the material that is currently available. One thinks of New Day, Anvil, and Kalikasan, for example, which printed or published so many texts written by local authors, including Joaquin, Bienvenido Santos, and N.V.M. Gonzalez. Sionil José, yet another prolific author, published his own works under his Solidaridad imprint, though several of his novels have also been published by major US imprints. It is only with the University of the Philippines Press entering the market more aggressively that the situation has changed to some extent. Even so, in comparison to, say, Indian authors who choose mainstream publishers in the West, writers from the Philippines have remained consistently local.

Regardless of international neglect, the fact is that there is intense activity and excitement about literature and its role in the Philippines itself. Admittedly, English is not seen as the language of the masses; consequently, literature in English does not have the same immediacy as, say, Tagalog. But English is not a marginal language as it is in India. The widespread use of Taglish ensures the presence of English as an everyday language. The writing workshops, located in Siliman and Manila, for example, have produced excellent writers. Among critics and authors, and the groups that espouse different stances, the ongoing discussions about the relative value of writing in English as against Tagalog and other vernacular languages etc. have ensured a lively literary atmosphere. But debate about what needs to be valued and what literary responses are appropriate has remained localized. It does not matter to

⁵ *Man of Earth: An Anthology of Filipino Poetry and Verse from English 1905 to the Mid-50s*, ed. Gemino H. Abad & Edna Z. Manlapaz (Quezon City: Metro Manila: Ateneo de Manila UP, 1989).

writers or readers in the Philippines whether they gain admission to the house of postcolonial writing; they are quite self-sufficient. But it certainly makes a difference to us whose interests are comparative and who wish to be as inclusive as possible in our approach to postcolonial studies. By neglecting Philippine writing, we are ignoring a wholly different historical dimension that does not exist elsewhere.

To make this statement about neglect is not to discount the work of scholars such as San Juan or the presence of anthologies such as *Brown River, White Ocean*, or *Returning a Borrowed Tongue*.⁶ Such works do have a readership. However, in the process of framing postcolonial studies along certain lines, we have, I think, denied ourselves the opportunity to confront some of the distinctive questions posed by this body of writing. The conceptual frame of Philippine writing is unique in its own way, and sidelining this corpus impoverishes postcolonial literature as a whole. Canonicity in postcolonial studies is a complex topic, but it can hardly be denied that the canon has shaped what we choose to foreground.

It is against this backdrop that the present essay draws specific attention to an anthology edited by Gemino Abad in 1993, titled *A Native Clearing*.⁷ This collection, together with the aforementioned anthology *Man of Earth*, constitutes more than a gathering of material that had hitherto remained forgotten in occasional journals and newspapers. These anthologies, along with their critical introductions, were an attempt at literary history – to bring together, classify, and evaluate a century of writing in English. The first collection includes almost eighty poets, the second fifty. The task, as the editors points out, is hardly over, and there is much more that needs to be done by way of collecting and editing. While anthologies had appeared before, here was a pioneering attempt to classify and anthologize a body of work on the strength of aesthetic value and literary tradition. In making the selection, the editors also felt the need to provide a critical frame for both poetry and literature in general. Clearing a space becomes a central trope for their project, and it serves as a valuable motif for this essay as well.

⁶ *Brown River, White Ocean: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Philippine Literature in English*, ed. Luis H. Francia (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 1993); *Returning a Borrowed Tongue: An Anthology of Filipino and Filipino American Poetry*, ed. Nick Carbó (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1995).

⁷ *A Native Clearing: Filipino Poetry and Verse from English Since the 50s to the Present: From Edith L. Tiempo to Cirilo F. Bautista*, ed. Gemino H. Abad (Quezon City: U of the Philippines P, 1993).

The two introductions that precede the selections are notable contributions to literary criticism, in that they position themselves, tactfully but forcefully, in relation to much that has been said in order to justify or critique Filipino writing. While celebrating a century of literary activity, the editors also feel the need to offer ways of reading this literature. Implied in the introduction is an idea of poetics that many other critics have failed to acknowledge. One thinks, for instance, of the Lopez–Villa controversy about the purpose and value of art.⁸ The Marxism of the one and the formalism of the other paved the way for a very interesting exchange of ideas, but neither was willing to transcend a simplistic binarism. One thinks of all the essays of N.V.M. Gonzalez that provide a window to his own sense of the shaping influences in Filipino writing. One is reminded of Nick Joaquin, who once wrote: “Before 1521 we could have been anything and everything *not* Filipino; after 1565 we can be nothing *but* Filipino,” thereby drawing attention to the complex historical and cultural genealogy that shapes the present.⁹ Into this mix, Abad and Manlapaz bring their own justificatory argument. While constructing a literary history, they also feel the need to establish a critical frame that does not simply relate text to context. The relation between the two is inevitable, since writers obviously belong to their time. The significance of their position is that they demonstrate that the text – in this case, writing in English – also shapes the perception of context. Writing in English, because located in that strangely fertile space created by historical circumstance, was in a position to shape and conceptualize the nation in singular ways. As Abad puts it,

If language fixes the forms of the world we inhabit and forges there our sense of our own native reality, then it can be said that through Spanish and English *as we had adopted them to our purposes*, we have in fact shaped our Filipino consciousness, with much the same force as through our own native tongues.¹⁰

He adds:

If with English we saw things in another light, we also began to criticise that way of looking and created our own clearing within it. Even where we have made peace (having no choice) with foreign powers and colonizers, we insist upon our own native ground.¹¹

⁸ For a critical introduction to the lively debate, see Salvador P. Lopez, *Literature and Society: Essays on Life and Letters* (Manila: University Publishing, 1940).

⁹ See Nick Joaquin, *Culture and History* (Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil, 2004): 170, 21.

¹⁰ *A Native Clearing*, ed. Abad, 9 (italics in the original).

¹¹ *A Native Clearing*, ed. Abad, 20.

There is no easy consensus about this native ground. In fact, the major authors and critics have, over a period of time, expressed their own stands and stances about how to articulate the contours of this native ground. Gonzalez, for example, speaks of “a love for the land, a concern for community, and a belief in salvation” as constitutive elements in all Filipino writing.¹² Abad’s views in his introduction may not necessarily be the most popular ones, but he certainly advances an authoritative perspective about the manner in which language and literature offer the possibility of understanding and defining the land, its history, and its people. The struggle with language thus becomes a struggle with ethos. It is against this backdrop that one needs to evaluate Abad’s anthology, which has to justify its choices as it undertakes the task of providing a literary history of sorts.

The terms in which postcolonial discourse has functioned are not wholly alien to the Filipino context. The similarities are in fact quite striking. Resistance, politics, and religion, for example, remain important in ways that are familiar. Colonialism and nationalism are familiar tropes in the Philippines, where the people had to resist the Spanish, the Americans, and the Japanese in the compass of less than a century. But their narratives about the land, about their perception of the world they inhabit, have their own distinctive quality. To say this is not to essentialize and exoticize a relatively unfamiliar literary world. But a Filipino tale such as “How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife,” by Manuel Arguilla, is very different from, say, “The Drover’s Wife” which has a particular relevance to the Australian context.¹³ Such stories become master-narratives because they embody the nuances of a culture. Arguilla’s story is about a village, and the plot itself has a familiar ring to it. The trope of the village runs through much of African and Indian literary history. But Arguilla’s mode of narration hints at a particular confluence of perspectives that makes the Filipino experience quite different from that of other postcolonial nations.

Joaquin’s views about literary history are often considered idiosyncratic, but he certainly has moments of insight that are truly remarkable. Focusing specifically on that crucial moment of transition from Spanish to English, he

¹² N.V.M. Gonzalez, “The Novel of Justice,” *Chicago Review* 39.3–4 (1993): 39.

¹³ Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” (1892) and Arguilla’s “How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife” (1940) enjoy the reputation of being ‘national’ stories that encapsulate elements that are specific to their respective countries. Even a cursory reading of the two would reveal the fundamental differences between the respective contexts.

advances the argument that after several centuries of visual culture, a complex intermingling of the visual and the oral now became possible. English, too, was foreign to the Philippines, but allows a kind of vernacularization that Spanish never permitted. As Joaquin puts it, “on the one hand the Filipino writer in English is joined to the Filipino writer in Spanish. On the other hand he is joined to the Filipino writer in the vernacular.”¹⁴ In short, Arguilla is now able to produce a story that is deeply rooted in the oral but is no longer dependent on the diachronic movement of oral tales. It is this particular combination that enables the resurgence of a very different kind of literature.



In a useful essay about the ambiguities of the term ‘post-colonial’, Niyi Osundare, referring specifically to African literature, makes the observation that

the tag ‘post-colonial’ is more useful for those who invented it than it is for those who are supposed to wear it, its passive signifieds. It rings truer for those who have ‘posted’ colonialism in posh conference halls and arcane seminar rooms conveniently far from the real battleground of colonial encounter.¹⁵

The issue, for me, is not the term itself, since we have now learnt to accept it with all its limitations. More pertinent for the present purpose is the hegemony of a particular set of conventions that closes off the possibility of new influences.

Abad’s preoccupation in his introduction is fundamentally with language. Ultimately, the challenge for the writer, according to him, is about writing in and writing from the language that was made available. And this is not because other languages were not available. There were the so-called vernaculars, and there was the possibility of Spanish. But writing in English was a necessary act, for it not only brought newness but also facilitated the shaping of a new world. There is a kind of systemic circularity involved. One needed to engage with the language in order to shape one’s own view of the world. In political and economic terms, a world was imposed on the writer and the public. It was up to the writer to reshape that world, and that was the responsibility of the writer. The obstacles and the possibilities changed, depending on circumstance, but the writer’s task was always to reinvent and refashion language. This, for Abad, is the thread that ensures continuity. And, given the

¹⁴ Nick Joaquin, “The Filipino as English Fictionist,” *Manila Review* 4.2 (1978): 5.

¹⁵ Niyi Osundare, *Thread in the Loom: Essays on African Literature and Culture* (Trenton NJ: African World Press, 2002): 208.

specific cultural and historical personality of the Philippines, the manner in which this process occurred is something new.

The first stanza of his remarkable poem “Jeepney” demonstrates Abad’s preoccupation not only with the boundaries of language but also with an ethos that shapes and is shaped by language:

Consider honestly
this piece of storm
in our city’s entrails.
Incarnation of scrap,
what genius of salvage!
Its crib now molds our space
its lust gewgaws our sight.¹⁶

As the poem moves from the religious to the secular, from the celebratory to the ironic, from the historical to the quotidian, it is the language that shapes the reality of the Jeepney – this ubiquitous form of transport created ingeniously from American military vehicles left behind after the Second World War – into something far more symbolic and significant. The intertextual references to canonical British and postcolonial authors are deliberate. They demonstrate a debt to the literary world outside while insisting on difference and originality.

Naturally, the literary activity in English itself appears to forge ahead in multiple directions. Take, for instance, the four major writers – Bienvenido Santos, Sionil José, N.V.M. Gonzalez, and Nick Joaquin. The impulses that drive their writing are remarkably different, and there is no consensus about which one constitutes a richer stream. And then there are the more recent authors, Jose Dalisay, Charlson Ong, Eric Gamalinda, Linda Ty-Casper, and Alfred Yuson, for example, who move in other directions, giving expression to other voices, absorbing the diaspora, and striving for a more internationalist focus. They mark a point of departure. And, of course, there are the diasporic writers such as Jessica Hagedorn, who write from a global and diasporic perspective.

The issue, then, might well be that some of the terms employed in post-colonial criticism might not work so effectively when applied to Philippine writing. The historical context also defamiliarizes much of the subject-matter, since the common British element no longer applies in quite the same way.

¹⁶ Gemino H. Abad, “Jeepney,” in *Returning a Borrowed Tongue*, ed. Nick Carbó (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1995): 5–7.

The struggle with language, too, is of a different kind. But there is, one might argue, a central element in Filipino writing that allows for a distinctive framing of this literature. Abad's introduction is a way of saying the same thing in a different way. The transition from an oral to a written culture did occur with the Spanish, and in the intellectual ferment of the nineteenth century. This is familiar territory in previously colonized nations. The transition from Spanish to English in the Philippines was a particularly striking moment that was both challenging and empowering. English was a beachhead in the confluence of the vernacular and Spanish, as it were, with the consequence that writing in English occupied a special status. The space cleared by English was unique, and any attempt to conceptualize Filipino writing in English must recognize this particular dimension. English was the language of the colonizer, but it came to the Philippines without the baggage that one encounters elsewhere. English established a frame, but it also allowed for empowerment within that frame. In literature and culture, a new conceptual mode was made possible by this curious transition from Spanish to English.

One would require a much longer essay to demonstrate the specificities of this claim with examples from literature. Suffice it to mention that writing from the Philippines needs to be seen as much more than one more practical proof of the theories we have formulated to understand postcolonial literature. It has to be recognized as a distinctive corpus with its own claims, strengths, and challenges. Our failure to pay attention to Philippine writing in English is unfortunate — a major blind spot in our perspective on postcolonial literature.

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Asia's Christian-Latin Nation?

—— Postcolonial Reconfigurations
in the Literature of the Philippines

STEPHEN NEY

A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF LITERATURE — EVEN, IRONICALLY, of postcolonial literature — is easy to formulate. An oft-cited text in this regard is Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquests* (1989), which argues that English literature, as a body of texts associated with a certain morality, history, and educational system, was not just *deployed* but actually *formed* as part of the British colonial project in India. Viswanathan shows that Christian missionaries in India also had a hand in defining what English literature came to mean in India and, ultimately, internationally. Viswanathan's argument here recalls the work of her teacher Edward Said, in that it urges us to read literary texts as worldly; and the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in that it urges us to insist on teaching novels, plays, or poems in the light of the histories of domination that have left their mark on the texts, and to which the texts themselves have at times contributed. Walter Mignolo adds to this postcolonial critique of postcolonial literature by charging literary educators that

instead of assuming that there is something called literature [they should strive, when they compare literary works, to] illuminate the processes by which certain aural and visual practices came to be conceived as literature and bestowed with the colonality of power.¹

¹ Walter Mignolo, "Rethinking the Colonial Model," in *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, ed. Linda Hutcheon & Mario Valdés (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002): 170.

In this essay, I raise the question of the place of Christianity in those processes.

Jacques Derrida, in his later years, gave this question some thought as he meditated on the cultural institutions that define Europe. Is there not something undeniably Christian about the institution that we call literature? Like the scholars I have already mentioned, Derrida wants to show that the category of literature is contingent, not necessary, and that it has a specific history. In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* he works to de-universalize 'literature' by suggesting that it may only exist because of the universalizing thrust of Christian latinity – which is to say, of Christendom.² Derrida is responding here to the word 'literature', which in European languages can be traced back to the Latin *litterae*, the intellectual resources of a literate elite. Literature, then, names texts that comprise a reference point for, and a mode of transmission of, the aesthetic, moral, and historical judgments that Matthew Arnold would call *culture*. In the view Derrida suggests, literature does not go back to the first *Homo sapiens* but does go back further than the German Romantics who promoted the idea of a national canon and the Protestant Reformers who promoted the printed text. It arose side-by-side with the Christian–Roman empire, and for that reason Derrida notes that what we today call “Japanese literature” or “Third World literature” is a radical redefinition of the word. In *Donner la mort*, Derrida acknowledges what many call the secularization of literature – for few texts in today's literature classes are committed to a Christian orthodoxy or a latinate global civilization – but insists nonetheless that literature remains one of the remains of religion, a link to and a substitute for sacrosanctity in a society without God.³ Modern literature is therefore, Derrida says elsewhere, always asking for forgiveness “for having forgotten or betrayed the Christian origin of literature, of writing.”⁴

If there's any truth to this, how does the field of postcolonial literary studies respond? Resist literature? Recuperate literature from Christian latinity? We have worked hard on recuperating literature from latinity. Our strategies have been, on one hand, to demonstrate that writing that situates itself outside the genealogy of European classics is not necessarily deficient in any of the

² Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, tr. Elizabeth Rottenburg (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2000): 25.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999): 205.

⁴ Mark Vessey, “Reading Like Angels: Derrida and Augustine on the Book (For a History of Literature),” in *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*, ed. John D. Caputo & Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000): 208.

qualities taken as defining literature and, on the other, to expose the canon of so-called great literature as by and large a construct, the product of a particular context, subject to the influence of various political and social powers.

One indication that Derrida might be right about the trace of Christianity in literature is all the effort that many canonical writers have spent to recuperate literature from Christianity. I have in mind here the Romantic poets, who, two hundred years ago, proposed the literary imagination as a better alternative to religious dogma, or, after them, the modern existentialists, who propounded an ethic of individual authenticity as opposed to the irrational and religious herd of society.

More recently, in a postcolonial context, I have in mind Edward Said's arguments for keeping literature and religion separate.⁵ Said often characterized his own work as "secular criticism." For him, this was not just a rejection of the fundamentalisms that were destroying Egypt and Palestine but, more importantly, a statement of methodology, for he saw Orientalist discourse (the object of his consistent critique) as similar to religious discourse:

each serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly.⁶

Each "expresses an ultimate preference for the secure protection of systems of belief (however peculiar those may be) and not for critical activity or consciousness."⁷ Said here aligns himself with Salman Rushdie, who argues that literature is irreconcilable with religion in the sense of dogmatic and other-worldly belief⁸ – a point that I think is made especially clearly in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. Part of why that novel generated such furor is that it proposed to bracket out religion, and instead regard the Qur'an as a work of literature, and thus a work open to the set of questions we typically ask about

⁵ For a critical appraisal of Said's approach, see Darren E. Dahl, "Criticizing 'secular criticism': Reading religion in Edward Said and Kathryn Tanner," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 31.3–4 (2002): 359–71.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1983): 290.

⁷ *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 292.

⁸ Salman Rushdie, "Is Nothing Sacred?" (1990), in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta/Penguin, 1991): 420.

literature: authorial intention, mediation, historical context, poetic artfulness, genre, reception history.⁹

But I would like here to consider what it would mean for Rushdie's and Said's staunchly secular definitions of literature if Derrida were right – that is, if literature bears the indelible mark of Christian latinity, notwithstanding a scholar's secular commitments. And I would like to ask what kind of a post-colonial response might be called for by an unsecular understanding of literature.

To start with, postcoloniality would then need more directly to address Christianity in a similar way to how it addresses eurocentrism. Postcoloniality addresses eurocentrism by demonstrating that writing that situates itself outside the genealogy of European classics is not necessarily deficient in any of the qualities taken as defining of literature and, on the other hand, by exposing the canon of 'great works' as contingent and inevitably biased, the product of a particular context, subject to the influence of various political and social powers. Just as postcoloniality recuperates literature from its histories of colonial domination, it would somehow need, if Derrida is right, to recuperate literature from Christianity. And Said's secular criticism would be premature: it fails to wrestle with the inherent religiosity of literature.

What complicates this question extraordinarily is that, while Europe has undergone significant de-christianization, Christianity has simultaneously undergone significant postcolonialization.¹⁰ No sooner do we consider, with Derrida, how literature is still allied to Christian latinity than we must admit that we can no longer view Christianity as a unity, and thus what might be the 'universalizing thrust of Christian latinity' is unclear.

⁹ See chapter 8 of Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993).

¹⁰ The literature here is voluminous, and mostly very recent. Most helpful to me, because it deploys a linguistic model to understand the global spread of Christianity and because of its detailed African historical analyses, is Lamin Sanneh's *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989). Most widely read and accessible is certainly Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002). Most committed to the political and intellectual projects associated with postcolonialism are the numerous books of R.S. Sugirtharajah – for example, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005). For the history of this "postcolonialization," see the excellent collection *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 8: *World Christianities c.1815–c.1914*, ed. Sheridan Gilley & Brian Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006).

I would like to pursue this inquiry into both the Christian latinity of literature and the postcolonialization of Christianity over terrain unfamiliar to postcolonial studies: two Philippine novels. Now, Derrida's assertion can hardly be proved or disproved by means of a small set of texts, for he is commenting about the kinds of culture and of ideology that can produce what we call literature. What I hope to do is merely to determine how Derrida's assertion resonates with some literary texts.

Two novels will have to suffice as introduction to the voluminous and multilingual literature of the Philippines, a country often known as Asia's Christian nation (over eighty percent), and, by virtue of its long embrace by Spain, quite possibly Asia's most latinate nation. No Asian nation has been under Western imperial control as long as the Philippines, which even since its ostensible independence has been, politically and culturally, exceptionally pro-Western. Less than a hundred years ago there was a healthy Spanish-language literary and intellectual culture. But one of the important implications of the US takeover in 1898, which President McKinley announced as aiming "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them," was the gradual (though by no means total) anglicization of Philippine intellectual culture.¹¹

One of the first surprises offered by Philippine literature is that the nation's hero, as taught to all schoolchildren, is a novelist: Jose Rizal. Rizal wrote in Spanish, though today most students read translations of his novels into Filipino, the official national language that was standardized and become dominant because of late-twentieth-century nationalist politics.¹² But Rizal and those who study him are well aware of the advantages gained by the person who can turn a multilingual situation to his or her profit. Identifying the weakness of the Spanish colonizers, he said, in 1889, "Knowledge is power. We are the only ones who can acquire a perfect knowledge of our country, because we know both languages."¹³ Philippine literature has followed in the footsteps of its most illustrious progenitor by navigating between the domi-

¹¹ This is examined sensitively by the Philippine writer Nick Joaquin, most directly in his play *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino: An Elegy in Three Scenes* (Manila: Florentino, 1966).

¹² For a literary treatment of this controversial process, see Renato E. Madrid's novel *Mass for the Death of an Enemy* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila UP, 2000): 82.

¹³ Quoted in Carolyn S. Hau, *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila UP, 2000): 89.

nant but imported conventions of language, form, and theme and their indigenous alternatives. This hybrid linguistic and cultural situation explains the question that fascinates the best-known Philippine literary critic, Epifanio San Juan, Jr., in his *Allegories of Resistance*:

How have Philippine writers succeeded in transcending the either/or dilemma of choosing between abrogation through appropriation, or unilaterally privileging the indigenous?¹⁴

Given the primacy of this question, it is odd that Philippine literatures are considered so cursorily, if at all, in the same introductions and anthologies that focus on the literatures of India and Africa. True, in the 1960s and 1970s, when anglophone novels and poems from Africa and South Asia were for the first time finding a large readership in the West, few anglophone Philippine works were being published, and very few were available in the West; but that situation has changed dramatically in the past three decades.¹⁵

Looking at Christianity in Philippine literature requires that we transcend the either/or dilemma that San Juan delineates. From the start, Christianity in the Philippines dwelt primarily in the vernacular rather than in Spanish.¹⁶ Because it was articulated through indigenous words and their associated conceptual worlds, thus divorced from missionaries' definitions, from the start it was a force simultaneously for indigenous resistance and Spanish control. Philippine Christianity is a vernacular Christianity. And, at least from the outside perspective of Euro-Christian orthodoxy, it is a Christianity in which the sacred and the profane coexist in uncanny juxtaposition.

Both of these recent novels are about a part of the Philippines called Cebu, which is, in fact, a good place to start our discussion about postcolonial literatures and latinity or eurocentrism and Christianity. As Griffiths, Tiffin, and Ashcroft observe, "The gap which opens between the experience of place and the language available to describe it forms a classic and allpervasive feature

¹⁴ Epifanio San Juan, Jr., *Allegories of Resistance: The Philippines at the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* (Quezon City: U of the Philippines P, 1994): 66.

¹⁵ Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, "The Philippine Novel in English into the Twenty-First Century," *World Literature Today* 74.2 (Spring 2000): 333.

¹⁶ Vicente L. Rafael's 1988 *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1988) seems to be the only monograph on the Philippines that is commonly cited in international postcolonial criticism. In great detail, it analyses how colonial, Christian power could be transformed and resisted as it crossed from Spanish into the vernacular.

of post-colonial texts.”¹⁷ In the case of these two novels about the island of Cebu, the importance of place, and the challenge to articulate place, is in part because of the religion associated with the place: in this case, a vernacularized Christianity. Cebu City is where, in 1521, the explorer Ferdinand Magellan, the first European to reach the Philippines, planted the large Christian Cross that has become a symbol of Christianity in the Philippines. Cebu became the first Spanish settlement, and the place from which the gospel and alphabetic literacy spread out.¹⁸

Of course, that the vast majority of Cebuanos are, and have long been, Christians does not mean that Magellan inaugurated a complete demolition of the religion of those who welcomed him in 1521. Some of this religion survived. One of the islands adjacent to Cebu is Siquijor, which, five centuries after the arrival of Christianity, is still regarded as the center of black magic in the Philippines, the home of shamans and witches. The annual Siquijor witches’ convention harmonizes nicely with Christianity, for it takes place on Black Saturday, sandwiched between the nation’s two largest holidays: the day of Christ’s crucifixion and the day of his resurrection. Sacred and profane, Christian and pagan intermingle.



On the cover of Peter Bacho’s 1991 novel *Cebu* is a large image of a lifeless man hanging on a white cross. The man looks like a Filipino, and his black clothes and white collar indicate that he is a priest. The cross, placed as it is beneath the large red word “CEBU,” is surely intended to recall Magellan’s Cross, Cebu’s vaunted tourist attraction and symbol of the Spanish conquerors’ religion. After Magellan erected the cross, he baptized several hundred of Cebu’s inhabitants – but the meaning of this action in the minds of the baptized is hard to ascertain, given that local religion already entailed healing rituals that made use of holy water.¹⁹

¹⁷ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989; London & New York: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2002): 9.

¹⁸ At least in Luzon, a syllabic mode of writing called *Baybayin* pre-dated the Spanish. But soon after the Spanish conquest it became extinct, and does not stand in a relationship of continuity with today’s alphabetic and narrowly latinate mode of literacy.

¹⁹ Rolando M. Gripaldo, “Roman Catholicism and Filipino Culture,” in *Relations between Religions and Cultures in Southeast Asia*, ed. Donny Gahral Adian & Gadis Arivia (Washington DC: Council of Research in Values and Philosophy, 2009): 129.



Symbols like baptism and a cross are polysemous in this context, and so, though the novel's title refers to Cebu, Philippine Christianity's heart, Siquijor and Philippine paganism are not far away. In the novel, the man who hangs on a cross is not Jesus but Carlito, an elderly Filipino who kills himself on a Good Friday, in self-imposed penance for past sins and in the hope that God will be prevailed upon to heal his sick granddaughter. Every Good Friday, in fact, in an act that to Catholics might seem much closer to the religion of Siquijor than of Rome, many Filipinos have themselves crucified, though, unlike Carlito, they almost never go all the way. "That's not Catholicism'," ²⁰ says the horrified protagonist Ben, a Filipino-American priest who visits Cebu to bury his mother. To him it's "'blasphemous and [...] fundamentally antireligious'" (86); "'it's a little different around here'" (87), replies his host, the cynical Aunt Clara.

²⁰ Peter Bacho, *Cebu* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1991): 76. Further page references are in the main text.

The focus of the novel is on the protagonist's inner journey, and particularly on how his visit to Cebu calls into question all that he held certain. Being Christian and being Filipino are the centre of Ben's public and private identities, as he works a priest in a predominantly Filipino parish in a suburb of Seattle, Washington. Yet visiting the Christian Philippines accomplishes exactly the opposite of reinforcing the Christian and Filipino identities Ben uses to define himself against an American culture.

In Cebu, Ben encounters what he has had to repress in order to stabilize his American life: what is illogical about his faith, what is sinful about his soul, and what contradicts Christian doctrine in the cultural norms of Seattle's Filipino community. After breaking his priestly vow of chastity by sleeping with the woman, Ellen, whom his aunt Clara delegated as his tour guide in the Philippines, Ben has an anxious dream in which he is speaking to his mother. He tells her about his feelings of disorientation when he sees crowds of eager Filipino Catholics venerating a wooden statue of Jesus – but clearly his anxiety is only partly because this strange mode of worship challenges his own American-Catholic practice. It is also because his strange sexual experience challenges, or even invalidates, the vows he made on becoming a priest, and perhaps even the authority of the Church that prescribes these vows: “‘I’m confused. With you dying and Mahogany Jesus – hell, that’s not religion. If it is, maybe I’m not...’” (124).

Ben's mother is, for him and throughout the novel, the symbol of an absolute, uncompromised, and presumably unaccommodated Catholic belief that is at home on either side of the Pacific. But Ben's experience – as an immigrant child in 1960s America, as a friend of many young people whose lives are destroyed by inter-ethnic gang violence, and finally as a visitor to a ‘homeland’ that feels completely foreign – makes everything relative. Compromise and accommodation will be necessary for survival.

But Ben does not survive. He cannot overcome his guilt over sleeping with Ellen then abandoning her – which leads him to a suicide attempt after his return to Seattle. He cannot allow himself to offer forgiveness to a young, guilt-ridden Filipino gang member who comes to him for confession after having killed another man – unless the murderer resolves to leave his group of delinquent friends. From the cultural perspective of the young man, leaving your group of friends (your *barkada*) is a fate worse than death, and Ben knows this. The young man's response to the priest's intransigence is to pull out his gun and shoot him. This explains why Ben, rather than Carlito the peasant, is depicted as crucified on the front cover of the book. This raises the

hopeful possibility that Ben's death is an act of self-giving, for the good of others, like Christ's. Actually, however, Ben is 'crucified' out of fear and self-doubt rather than out of love and forgiveness. The narrative does not offer a hopeful interpretation of its protagonist's death; its shape is of tragedy, not comedy.

Still, the villain is not the whole Christian cultural and epistemological framework. Ben apparently had the option to take hold of a new kind of Christianity, one that was more Filipino, more fluid, and less sterile. A kind of Christianity that would engage with the cycles of violence among Filipinos on both sides of the Pacific is available to Father Ben, but it is not taken.

With regard to my question on the role of Christianity and latinity in the institution of literature, Bacho provides the possibility of a novel drawing heavily and intelligently upon a Christian cultural context, while distinguishing that Christianity sharply from what we might call normative eurocentric Christianity – and the novel does this without any traces of the dogmatic and premature closure that Said and Rushdie worry will creep in whenever secularity is kept out.

The second novel I would like to introduce has little in common with the first: its publisher and, I think, its implied readership are Filipino, and it evinces no concern with globality, diaspora, or cultural difference; the shape of its plot is the romance and its tone is consistently comic and chatty; it delights in long, irony-laden, and psychologically complex descriptions rather than *Cebu's* sparse, action-centred prose. Renato E. Madrid is the pen name for Msgr. Rodolfo E. Villanueva, a priest in Cebu City, and *Mass for the Death of the Enemy: a Novel* is his very funny apology for the folk wisdom, the raw resilience, and the dogged anti-clericalism of the Filipino people. In spite of his steady focus on the particularities of a particular village, Valladolid, in Cebu, Madrid envisages his work as a local case study to represent the entire, essential Filipino national character. The description on the back of the book says the author's project is to examine "the inner Filipino, with the tensions and contradictions bred of his quasi-religious, yet gleefully worldly orientation."

If the Filipino common man is the hero, the clerical establishment is the enemy. On the other hand, in spite of Madrid's steady and often hilarious criticism of the corruption and impotence of the Catholic church's hierarchy, he never raises the possibility that Christianity might be anything other than a necessary component of Filipino thinking.

The plot centres on two events that seem designed to illustrate an irresolvable tension in Philippine life between the sacred and the secular, between the sublime and the mundane. The first is a theatrical battle that pits Valladolid against a larger neighbouring town and that illustrates what the narrator calls the people's "natural inclination toward the interpreted life."²¹ To be specific, each town produces an elaborate *zarzuela* – a production that, like an operetta, mixes dance with sung and spoken dialogue, and that follows a romantic story-line – trying to outdo the other. The good people of Valladolid, led by Capitan Delfin, develop a scheme to sabotage their opponents (176). The second event is the intrigue, following a mysterious death on Capitan Delfin's farm (186), in which his family tries to vindicate their name against the schemes of the sinister priest, Padre Constancio, who seems convinced that his graceless legalism is the only protection for the "village's ignorant majority," who are themselves always in danger of a "resurgent paganism" (64). The book's title refers to a clandestine mass that the priest is planning, that will secure divine help in bringing about the death of Delfin.

The irony that pervades the novel consists in the dismantling of the binary distinctions between sacred and secular, between Christian and pagan, and between Cebu and Siquijor. Aurelia, the mother-figure in Delfin's family, who was raised in Siquijor and trained as a witch, always uses her powers with compassion and kindness (66, 254, 357). As a good pagan, she is thus a foil for the evil priest, whose Mass for the Death of an Enemy epitomizes the darkness we might associate with "paganism." But the voice of the author speaks loudest through the common people, less educated and less introspective, who have the ability to transcend these limiting binaries: Valladolid's elderly people, according to the narrator,

were the only ones possessed of a faith that allowed them to be moved by mountains, forests, streams, and the like, at the same time that they were actually enthralled by the comparatively recent story of a loving God who allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross. (27)

Like these elders, the novel rejects neither traditional Philippine religion nor Christianity, but loosens up both, in order to accommodate cultural change and in order to facilitate compassion for human needs. The author is committed to transcending the inadequate dichotomy of sacred vs secular,

²¹ Renato E. Madrid, *Mass for the Death of an Enemy: a Novel* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2000): 73. Further page references are in the main text.

which has often had hegemonic sway in the modern, colonial world. More importantly, the author never allows the reader to doubt that everything will turn out well in the end, because he has faith in a God who transcends that dichotomy, too. Sometimes that faith is rendered explicit – for example, in introducing the final demise of Padre Constancio:

But God, in his infinite playfulness, saw fit to give Padre Constancio the foolish desire to pursue his enmity against the family of Capitan Delfin. (318)

But that faith is implicit throughout – for example, in the description of the social cohesion and compassion that flow from the murder-suicide of a local family, which the narrator summarizes as an “ultimately healing though bloody act” (60). The novel’s comic tone is uninterrupted by the various crises, and the narrator always gives the impression that all will be well.



It strikes me that, though these Christianities are coming to us via the English language, they are only at home in the Cebuano vernacular, and Madrid in particular is forced to use a host of non-English words to depict the religious life of the people of Valladolid. This is truly a linguistically pluralistic situation like the one Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has been advocating from his 1986 *Decolonising the Mind* up until the essay contained in the present volume. Acknowledging the threat of the linguistic hegemony of English (Ngũgĩ would say linguistic hegemony always implies a certain degree of cultural and intellectual hegemony) does not necessarily implicate Christianity, for it is translatable. In spite of President McKinley’s great vision of christianization and civilization, the Christian faith in these two novels – and other Philippine literary works like them – comes across to us as foreign, for it comes into English from the foreign world of Cebuano.²² We are like Ben Lucero, the priest from Seattle, for to us much of this religion is lost in translation.

This accords well with Philippine religious history. From an historical perspective, the Philippine scholar José Mario Francisco writes that Christianity in the colonial Philippines “translated” the Christ story, thereby transforming

²² Furthermore, it came into Cebuano through another foreign language, Spanish. And, of course, Spanish Christianity was a translation, too. And so on: the linguistic solid ground is elusive. This inherent instability characterizes all Christianities and provides an intriguing opening for postmodern readings. As Sanneh explores in *Translating the Message*, the words of Christianity’s founder are always already translated, for they enter the textual tradition in Greek rather than Hebrew/Aramaic.

the vernacular into a language of liberation and providing an epic paradigm for leading individual and social lives in terms of solidarity with Jesus. "This story's many textual incarnations and communal performances created [...] imaginative space for them to envision social bonds other than colonial relations."²³ If this is the case, it provides an historical precedent to help explain why the novels I have discussed are able to re-present the colonizer's religion with so little anticolonial critique or postcolonial anxiety.

It is surely because Christianity is assumed to coincide with eurocentrism that postcolonial studies pays so little attention to the former. Postcolonial studies arguably inherit from thinkers including Marx, Nietzsche, and Said the assumption that religion by and large impedes both individual enlightenment and group emancipation. But religions, including Christianity, have played a larger role in the development of postcolonial thought than the volume of pages devoted to them in postcolonial writings would suggest.

What do we overlook when we take religion as epiphenomenal or marginal? There are no articles or sections on religion in many key postcolonial introductions and anthologies.²⁴ When religion is addressed in postcolonial scholarship, it is often taken as merely one facet of culture, alongside clothing or music. Robert Young is an exception to this rule, for, thinking particularly of Hinduism and Buddhism, he decries how,

as a result of its Marxist orientation, an absolute division between the material and the spiritual operates in postcolonial studies, emphasizing the degree to which the field is distinguished by an unmediated secularism, opposed to and

²³ Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Christianity as Church and Story and the Birth of the Filipino Nation in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 8: *World Christianities c.1815–1914*, ed. Sheridan Gilley & Brian Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006): 540.

²⁴ For example, *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gaurav Gajanan Desai & Supriya Nair (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005); *Relocating Postcolonialism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg & Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998); *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996); *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (1993; New York: Columbia UP, 1994). This is not to discount the existence of collections of postcolonial studies devoted exclusively to aspects of religion, such as *"And the Birds Began to Sing": Religion and Literature in Post-Colonial Cultures*, ed. Jamie S. Scott (Cross/Cultures 22; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1996) and *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. Jamie S. Scott & Paul Simpson-Housley, afterword by Gareth Griffiths (Cross/Cultures 48; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA, 2001).

consistently excluding the religions that have taken on the political identity of providing alternative value-systems to those of the west [...].²⁵

This essay has suggested that Young's concern about the field's secularism is also in danger of occluding the relevance of Philippine Christianity. This "absolute division" certainly does not characterize Philippine literature, and nor should it characterize criticism of this literature.

My purpose in surveying these two novels about Cebu has been to suggest a postcolonial extension to Derrida's suggestion that there is an indelible mark of Christian latinity on literature. These literary works fragment the notion of Christian latinity by making manifest a de-universalized kind of Christianity that has already been cured of eurocentrism, and that is too grown-up, self-confident, and independent already to theorize in the simplest of postcolonial terms: namely, resistance and recuperation. Philippine Christianity, mingled as it is with practices and beliefs we might associate with Siquijor, feels little need to resist religious imperialism or to recuperate religion from imperialism. It is because of this postcolonial Christianity, which both novels evoke, and because of the inadequacy of a fully secular conception of literature, which I demonstrated at the start of this essay, that postcolonial need not mean post-Christian.

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²⁵ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford & Malden MA: Blackwell, 2001): 338.

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DALIT LITERATURE AND ITS CRITICISM

A Dalit Among Dalits

— The Angst of Tamil Dalit Women

K.A. GEETHA

THE CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA HAS SEGREGATED THOUSANDS OF DALITS¹ from mainstream culture to a subhuman and debased existence. In the 1930s, Ambedkar spearheaded a Dalit liberation movement in Maharashtra. Dalits articulated their dissent against the dominant ideology not only on social and political platforms but also through literary forms. Literature became an effective tool to express their protest and anguish at the domination of the Caste Hindus.² Dalit literature not only reveals the angst of being a Dalit in a caste-driven society, but it simultaneously registers a revolutionary discourse that challenges the hegemonic caste structures of society. For Dalits, literature has become a site for asserting resistance and affirming a distinct Dalit consciousness and sensibility. The burgeoning of Dalit literature began in the 1950s and 1960s in Maharashtra. In less than two decades, the literary movement spread to other languages such as Gujarati, Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil.

¹ Based on caste norms of purity and hierarchy, the Hindus in India are segregated as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The 'untouchables' were outside the fourfold divisions of the caste system and were referred to as 'Depressed classes' or 'Harijans' (coined by Gandhiji), during the colonial period. Rejecting Gandhiji's nomenclature 'Harijan', Ambedkar asserted that 'Dalit' was the most appropriate term to refer to untouchables. Meaning 'oppressed' and 'rooted in the soil', the term not only signified the oppressed state of the untouchables, but also imbued them with a sense of pride in their unique identity as Dalits. Constitutionally, Dalits are referred to as 'Scheduled castes'.

² Hindus who are not Dalits or Shudras are referred to as 'Caste Hindus' in recent times. They are also referred to as 'upper castes'. In this article, the terms 'Caste Hindus' and 'upper castes' are used interchangeably.

Contemporary Tamil Dalit Literature

In Tamil, Dalit literature is a recent phenomenon. It was only in the 1990s that it became a significant presence in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Dalit literature has a specific history that sets it apart from Marathi Dalit literature. While the latter owed its emergence mainly to the liberation movement spearheaded by Ambedkar, Dalit writers in Tamil Nadu were equally influenced by the thinking of E.V. Ramasami Naicker (popularly known as Periyar). Tamil Dalit writing also has a major influence in the Self-Respect movement³ started by Periyar, who championed the cause of the under-privileged through his anti-caste and anti-religious propaganda.

As a genre, Tamil Dalit literature marked its identity on the literary map in the 1990s. However, recent studies reveal that Dalit consciousness and sensibility in Tamil Nadu pre-dated Ambedkar's struggle against caste oppression in Maharashtra. Ambedkar's disillusionment with Hinduism and subsequent conversion to Buddhism was preceded well ahead of his times by Dalit intellectuals in Tamil Nadu in the late-nineteenth century. Scholars like Geetha and Rajadurai point out that Tamil Dalit writing existed as early as the 1890s.⁴ The struggle for Dalit liberation began in Tamil Nadu under the leadership of Iyothee Das Pandithar, who founded the Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1881 and was propagating Buddhism in Tamil Nadu long before Ambedkar. In 1907 he started the weekly journals *Oru paisa Tamilan* and *Tamilan*, which espoused the cause of Dalits, who were then referred to as a 'Depressed Class' and later, in the 1930s, as 'Adi Dravidars'. However, a distinct Dalit politics and sensibility, cultivated by Panchamar⁵ intellectuals such as Iyothee Das Pandithar in the early decades of the nineteenth century, failed to sustain its drive in the middle years. Their alignment with the Self-Respect and later with the Marxist movements in the mid-nineteenth century suppressed their distinct voices. The later failure of the Dravidian movement

³ The Self-Respect movement started by Periyar in 1932, strongly denounced Brahmin ideology and interrogated the established notions of caste and religion. The Self-Respect movement scathingly attacked the existing social systems of religion, caste and gender and articulated a rationalistic world-view which would pave way for a radical change in the social order.

⁴ V. Geetha & S.V. Rajadurai, "Dalits and Non-Brahmin Consciousness in Colonial Tamil Nadu," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23.39 (1993): 2091–98.

⁵ In the early years of the twentieth century, Iyothee Das Pandithar, who worked for the emancipation of the untouchable communities, insisted that these communities should be referred to as *Panchamar* ('fifth caste').

and the Communist party to grapple with the specific problems of Adi Dravidars (present-day Dalits) led to the formation of distinct political and social organizations. Thus, in the 1990s, Adi Dravidars achieved a specific social, political, and literary identity.

The term 'Dalit' itself gained popularity in Tamil Nadu only in the 1890s. Before that, up to the 1880s, Dalits were referred to by the Tamil equivalent *taazhtapattor* (those who have been put down) or *odukkapattor* (the oppressed) or Adi Dravidars. As a genre, Tamil Dalit literature became widespread after the 1994 centenary of Ambedkar's birth. These nation-wide celebrations were a driving force among Tamil Dalits, bringing to the fore Ambedkar's ideals and thoughts. Exposure to his writings was a great inspiration and led to a distinct Dalit political and literary movement in Tamil Nadu in the 1990s. Since then there has been a rich production of Dalit literature in several genres – novels, short stories, poetry, and autobiography. While Dalits in general are oppressed on the basis of their caste, the problems of Dalit women are compounded by the fact that they are additionally oppressed on the basis of their gender. The specific problems of Dalit women had to be articulated through a distinct political and literary movement which culminated in the formation of the Dalit feminist movement.

The Emergence of Dalit Feminism

The feminism that developed in the 1970s focused on three areas central to feminist theorization: the categories of women, experience, and personal politics. But these categories posed theoretical problems. Since many feminist were white, educated middle-class women, their experience was considered as 'women's' experience.⁶ Scholars such as Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana point out that the normative man in India is structured as "upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu and male," whereas the normative Indian woman is structured as an "upper-caste, middle-class Hindu."⁷ Since the upper-caste Hindu woman is considered normative, the women's movement focused only on issues related to her. As Mohan Lahir, a Tamil critic, argues,

⁶ Sharmila Rege, "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint," in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003): 90.

⁷ Susie Tharu & Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," in *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Shahid Amin & Dipesh Chakravarty (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996): 240.

A norm can never be applicable to all contexts and situations. Like all other norms feminist notions of gender can never be universalized. While the issues pertaining to Indian women are radically different from women in the west, within Indian women there are further disparities based on caste, region and class.⁸

The feminist movement in India had by and large failed to engage with the problems that women from the lower castes encounter. The feminist movement has often colluded with forces of the right to exclude Dalits and to occlude the oppression of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular.⁹

Sharmila Rege argues that left-based women's organizations highlighted economic and work-related issues, while the autonomous women's organization made public and politicized violence against women. Leftist women's organizations subsumed caste under class and the autonomous women's organizations considered the notion of sisterhood pivotal, thereby sidelining issues relating to caste. Both of these movements left caste-related issues unchallenged and a feminist politics focusing on women from marginalized communities could not emerge.

it may be argued that since the categories of experience and personal politics were at the core of the epistemology and politics of the Dalit Panther and women's movement, this resulted in a universalisation of what in reality was the middle class, upper caste women's experience or alternately the dalit male experience.¹⁰

Gopal Guru justifies "Dalit women's need to talk differently" on the basis of certain external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenizing the problems of Dalit women) and internal factors (patriarchy within the Dalit community). He underlines the fact that social location determines the perception of reality; hence, the representation of the problems of Dalit women by non-Dalit women's organizations was less authentic. The suppression of Dalit women's problems by Dalit leaders has also contributed to the need for Dalit women to take up a position against Dalit male leaders and non-Dalit feminists.¹¹

⁸ Mohan Lahir, "Dalit Penniyam-Or Arimugam," in *Dalit Penniyam*, ed. Anbukarasi & Mohan Lahir (Madurai: Dalit Adara Maiyam, 1997): 6. (My tr.)

⁹ Tharu & Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," *passim*.

¹⁰ Sharmila Rege, "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint," 91.

¹¹ Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003): 81.

The sufferings of upper-caste women in India are strikingly dissimilar to the sufferings of Dalit women. Among upper-caste women, domestic violence and cases of dowry connected with torture and murder are more frequent. Although family violence related to dowry is less prevalent among Dalit women, they face the collective threat of sexual molestation and rape from upper-caste men. Dalit men are unable to protect their women from these dominant forces, a situation which can be perceived as collective weakness and vulnerability. The anger of the upper castes is thus generally directed at Dalit women, and in any communal clash the worst-affected are Dalit women. When such clashes draw to a close, the atrocities suffered by Dalit women are generally ignored. Dalit women thus face double oppression – as Dalits and as women.¹²

The specific problems of Dalit women were thus sidelined not only by the feminist movement but also by the Dalit movements. The Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra did launch a cultural revolt in the 1970s by asserting their rights, but Dalit women, both in their writings and in their programme, remained firmly encapsulated in the roles of the ‘mother’ and the ‘victimized sexual being’.¹³ On the issue of gender discrimination, Dalit women share a common space with the feminist movement. In terms of caste suppression, they share a common space with the Dalit movement generally. But the interlocking oppression of caste and gender makes them stand apart from both groups.¹⁴ Margaret Swathy has observed that the peculiar positioning of Dalit women often becomes invisible within the mainstream feminist movement. Since the problems of Dalit women are subsumed under the mainstream male Dalit movement and the upper-caste feminist movement, Dalit women have endeavoured to create a distinct space for themselves by mobilizing a Dalit feminist movement.¹⁵

Based on social relations that convert difference into oppression, a Dalit feminist standpoint focuses on the cultural and material dimensions of the

¹² Gabriele Dietrich, “Dalit Movements and Women’s Movements,” in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003): 58; Lapid, “Dalit Penniyam-Or Arimugam,” 10.

¹³ Sharmila Rege, “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint,” 91.

¹⁴ T.M. Yesudasan, “Caste, Gender and Knowledge: Towards a Dalit Feminist Perspective,” *Haritham* 8 (1996): 77–90.

¹⁵ Margaret Swathy, “Dalit Feminism” (2005), <http://www.countercurrents.org/feminism> (accessed 24 July 2006).

interface between caste and gender.¹⁶ The Dalit feminist standpoint provides a more objective and emancipatory feminist position, since they know “what it would take to change [the world and in] identifying the central relations of power and privilege that sustain it and make the world what it is.”¹⁷ The subject or agent of a Dalit feminist standpoint is embodied and visible (it begins with the visible lives of Dalit women) and is thus emancipatory. It emphasizes individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, protean power-relations of caste, class, and ethnicity that construct such groups. Since ‘Dalit women’ is not a homogeneous category, the subject/agent of the Dalit feminist standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous, and open to liberatory interrogation and revision.¹⁸

Anupama Rao suggests that the Dalit feminist standpoint would re-examine gender relations as fundamental to the broader ideologies of caste in Indian society:

By drawing attention to the relationship between caste ideology, gender relations in the intimate and public sphere, and broader struggles for democracy and social justice dalit bahujan feminists are demanding a changed politics of feminism.¹⁹

Drawing on the observations of the Tamil Dalit theatre artist A. Guna-sekaran on Dalit feminism, Mohan Lapid enumerates three basic tenets of the Dalit feminist movement. The first is to identify the contradictions in the thought and praxis of mainstream feminist movements, which deny space to Dalit women; secondly, to mobilize Dalit women and work towards freedom and self-respect; and, thirdly, to seek an identity as a Dalit and woman.²⁰

‘Dalit Penniyam’²¹ is not against mainstream feminism but, rather, tries to bring to light its inherent contradictions and find means to remove them. By bringing such contradictions to the fore, Dalit feminism endeavors to build a feminist movement without disparities.²²

¹⁶ Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonies* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006): 74.

¹⁷ Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1993): 213.

¹⁸ Sharmila Rege, “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint,” 99.

¹⁹ Anupama Rao, “Introduction: Caste Gender and Indian Feminism,” in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003): 4.

²⁰ Mohan Lapid, “Dalit Penniyam-Or Arimugam,” 13.

²¹ *Penniyam* is the Tamil word for feminism.

²² Mohan Lapid, “Dalit Penniyam-Or Arimugam,” 13. (My tr.)

Dalit feminism gives Dalit women a legitimate space to articulate their distinct, specific experiences as Dalits and women. Organization such as the All India Dalit Women Rights Forum and the National Federation of Dalit Women (established in 1995 by the Dalit woman activist Ruth Manorama in Karnataka, India) serve as a platform for Dalit women to address their concerns. Similarly, Dalit feminist literature exposes the myriad of problems besetting Dalit women, compounded by caste, gender, and class structures.

Tamil Dalit Women Writers

Although the Dalit feminist movement is slowly gaining ground in Tamil Nadu, from the 1990s the problems of Dalit women have found a distinctive voice in the works of Sivakami, Bama, Sugirtharani, and Aranga Malliga.. Their works attest to the fact that Dalit women suffer in both the public and the private domains. Contrary to the general belief that Dalit women enjoy more freedom in domestic spaces (since her labour is indispensable for economic survival), *Pazhayana Kazhithalum* and *Sangati* reveal the magnitude of Dalit patriarchy.

Critique of Dalit Patriarchy: *Pazhayana Kazhithalum*

The Tamil Dalit woman writer Sivakami considers writing as a process of understanding, sharing, and exploring the inexhaustible mysteries of caste and gender.²³ A member of the Indian administrative service, Sivakami has published four novels and four short-story collections. Her novels *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum* and *Anandayi* reveal the pathetic existence of Dalit women, who are subjugated not only by caste but also by their gender.

Her first novel, *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*, written in 1989 and translated into English as *Grip of Change* in 2006, was strongly critical of the shallowness of Dalit politics and the patriarchy prevailing within the community. The novel prompted a great deal of discussion because it was critical of both the Dalit movement and Dalit patriarchy. The novel articulated the longing of young Dalit women eager to be liberated from the shackles of caste and gender oppression.

The novel is an unsparing critical portrayal of Kathamuthu, a local Dalit leader, tyrannical and corrupt. A popular and respected leader of the people of

²³ Sivakami, "Introduction" to Sivakami, *The Grip of Change (Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum)*, 1989; Chennai: Orient Longman, 2006): vii.

Athur and the nearby villages, he is tactful and shrewd and has a certain reputation for helping people in distress. Since he is busy sorting out disputes in the village, he has little time to cultivate his lands. But his meagre income does not prevent him from taking two wives. “Kathamuthu’s household was like any other with two wives – haunted by petty quarrels and bickering.”²⁴ The novel brings to light the precarious existence of Dalit women and their inability to fight against the polygamy of their husbands. Excepting a few quarrels and arguments, Kathamuthu’s first wife, Kanagavalli, could do practically nothing to stop her husband from bringing Nagammai (his second wife) into the household. “‘I’m a man with some say in the community, as you know, once even elected president in the *panchayat*. No one can question me’” (10). An upper-caste widow, Nagammai, disillusioned with her family and community, settled to live with Kathamuthu, though lower-caste. Kathamuthu was then president of the *panchayat* board and his power and charisma enabled him to lure Nagammai. But life had not been easy for Nagammai, either. She becomes a constant point of reference to prove Kathamuthu’s magnanimity and good spirit: “I am living with this woman who doesn’t belong to this community. She’s upper caste. She was a struggling widow, so I provided her a safe haven” (10).

The novel pivots on a single incident – Thangam, a widow from the parayar community, is brutally attacked by the relatives of her landlord, Paranjothi Udayar, with whom she was forced to have a clandestine affair. Thangam approaches Kathamuthu for justice. The novel unfolds the shrewd manipulation of Kathamuthu to trigger a caste riot in the village by distorting the facts of the incident. He urges Thangam to lodge a false complaint that she was attacked by upper-caste persons merely because she dared to walk through their streets (forbidden for Dalits). Kathamuthu’s behaviour reveals the dark side of Dalit politics in the fight for liberation from caste prejudice. A vicious womanizer, Kathamuthu succeeds in making Thangam his third woman by gaining easy access not only to her body but also to her five thousand rupees (an amount given to her as compensation by the upper castes).

The novel does not stop at shedding light on the atrocities of Dalit men like Kathamuthu but also exposes the longings of Dalit youth like Gowri and Chandran (Kathamuthu’s daughter and niece) for radical changes in the lives of Dalits (especially women) caught in the social structures of caste and gender. The youth-liberation movement (which includes all castes) mobilized by

²⁴ Sivakami, *Grip of Change* (2006): 15. Further page references are in the main text.

Chandran is a perfect foil to the leadership of Kathamuthu, which hinges on deceit and guile. At the same time, Gowri emerges as an intelligent, independent woman, not cowed by male domination.

Gowri constantly goaded Kanagavalli and Nagammai with talks of women's liberation. However, both women were used to bending to Kathamuthu's demands. (125)

As Meena Kandasamy rightly observes,

Sivakami criticizes the dalit movement and exposes the cruel face of dalit patriarchy through feminist eyes, and yet, clearly veers away from becoming a 'caste traitor' because of her engagement with the search for solutions.²⁵

The most remarkable thing about this novel is that Sivakami has written a sequel, the re-rendering and re-interpretation being her attempt to examine the novel critically in the light of contradictions and debates that the work generated among Dalit and literary ideologues. Sivakami writes:

After about ten years, I went back to my novel as a third person, with the hope that I could see the author more objectively. The second book *Asiriyar Kurippu*, is the result of such an attempt. To my surprise, in spite of my efforts to analyse the novel critically, I found that I had actually ended up justifying my views. Thus the novel *The Grip of Change* is a process of understanding the dynamics of caste and the 'woman' who was inextricably involved in the process. [...] That it is natural for me as a Dalit and a woman – factors decided by birth – to write about those factors. And thereby I firmly place myself within a circle, influencing the politics surrounding those factors. (vii)

The re-visiting of the novel is an effort on the part of Sivakami to deconstruct it both as an author and as a critic. In a conversation between the novelist and the critic, the novelist had to face some dark questions: "Why didn't you just write about the experiences that affected your life? Why did you have to mock the Dalit leadership?"²⁶

The novelist attributes such questions to a gross misunderstanding of the novel by its readers.

Caste is still an indomitable force, challenging all those who try to break it down. The combined effort of all oppressed castes is necessary continuous focus on the problem of caste is necessary.²⁷

²⁵ Meena Kandasamy, "Afterword," in Sivakami, *Grip of Change*, 195.

²⁶ Kandasamy, "Afterword," in Sivakami, *Grip of Change*, 151.

²⁷ Kandasamy, "Afterword," 150.

To the accusation that the novel had criticized Dalit leadership when the Dalit movement was gaining ground, the author answers:

It wasn't simply that the upper castes exploit the lower castes. A lower caste leader might exploit his own people. It is not upper caste men who prey upon lower caste women. Men like Kathamuthu are perfectly capable of taking advantage of vulnerable women. The overall picture presented by the novel is that rich or poor, upper caste or lower caste, the seeds of corruption exist at all levels.²⁸

Indomitable Strength: *Sangati*²⁹

As an exponent of Dalit feminism, the Tamil Dalit woman writer Bama has found in her *Sangati* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Sangati* is not only a revelation of the bitter reality of the social ills confronted by a Dalit woman, but also brings to light the inner strength and vigour of Dalit women. *Sangati* opens up new perspectives on Dalit women. Centuries of oppression have not succeeded in completely sapping the vitality and inner strength of the Dalits. Dalit women, in particular, have enormous strength and vigour with which to bounce back against all odds.

Sangati appeared in 1994, two years after Bama's first book *Karukku* was published. While *Karukku* depicts the sufferings of a single woman, *Sangati* moves away from the individual to the collective. *Sangati* defies generic conventions and has no plot in the normal sense, but is instead a series of anecdotes. The book could be considered an autobiography of a community, for it describes Dalit women from different generations. It is a statement of pride underlining the inherent liveliness and indomitable spirit of Dalit women in the face of oppression. As Bama herself writes in the preface to the book,

In *Sangati*, many strong dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanchd their tears. *Sangati* is a look at a part of the lives of those women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt.³⁰

²⁸ Kandasamy, "Afterword," 149.

²⁹ This section has already been published, in slightly different form and under the joint authorship of K.A. Geetha & K. Srilata, as "From Subjugation to Celebration: A Study of Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*," *Language Forum* 33.1 (January–June 2007).

³⁰ Bama, "Preface" to Bama, *Sangati: Events*, tr. & intro. Lakshmi Holmström (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2005): vi.

‘Sangati’ means ‘news’, and the book is full of interconnected events – the everyday happenings in the Dalit community. Bama states the purpose of writing the book thus:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes; stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversaries by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories.³¹

The narrative abounds with stories of Dalit women who had the resilience to negotiate their existence in a male-dominated society. Vellaiyamma kizhavi, the narrator’s *paati* (grandmother), had got married at the age of fourteen, and is deserted by her husband Govindan at a very young age. After several years of futile waiting, her *paati* daringly takes away her mangalsutra (*tali* in Tamil), signifying the mental courage of the Dalit women to parent her children single-handedly:

It seems paati waited and waited for Goyindan to return, and at last, when there was a terrible famine, she took off her tali and sold it. After that she never wore a tali or geeli ever again. She told herself she had become a corpse without a husband and struggled single-handedly to care for her two children.³²

The book dwells at length on the gender bias faced by Dalit women right from childhood. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, discussing gender bias in the African-American community, writes:

For, in stable societies, gender, in the sense of society’s prescriptions for how to grow up as a man or as a woman, is indicated in tandem with and indissolubly bound to the child’s growing sense of “who I am” to be an “I” at all, to be a self, is to belong to a gender.³³

Similarly, the inferiority of a Dalit girl is emphasized right from her childhood. Girl babies are always considered inferior and are taken less care of:

³¹ Bama, “Preface,” ix.

³² Bama, *Sangati*, 5. Further page references are in the main text.

³³ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “My Statue Myself: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women,” in *Reading Black – Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990): 187.

If a baby boy cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with girls [...] a boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast. (7)

Her family depends on the income that she brings in as a child labourer in a match factory. Dalit girls are made to do all the domestic work such as “cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, clothes, and so on” (7). Girls have very little time to play, since, along with domestic chores, they are entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings. Maikanni is one such girl who started to work from “the day she learnt to walk” (20).

Sangati exposes the patriarchal norms that prevail in the Dalit community. A Dalit woman is a Dalit among Dalits. A Dalit man faces oppression by the upper castes. Once he returns home, he rules his family, who are suppressed and dominated. His pent-up anger and frustration is taken out on the women in the family: “they control their women, rule over them and find their pleasure; within the home, they lay down the law; their word is scripture” (59).

Dalit women, by contrast, suffer in the public domain as well:

From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and on the fields. At homes their husbands and children pester them; in the fields there is backbreaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husband's pleasure. Even if a woman's body is wrecked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. (59)

Some Dalit women do not have the mental strength to fight against the oppression and become mentally ill; but most of them survive against all these odds.

Sangati also reveals the innermost feelings of Dalit women. In spite of all their sufferings, Dalit women consider themselves to be more privileged than caste Hindu women. Through *Sangati* we get to hear the inner voices of Dalit women. In their private spaces, Dalit women ridicule caste Hindu women. They take pride in having the liberty to swim and bathe in a pond, whereas the upper-caste women are confined to the wells in the house.

“They are all scaredy-cats, di. They can’t swim at all, that’s the truth. They stay at home, get a couple of buckets of water which they dip into and pour over themselves little by little. God knows how they manage to bathe in such small, small amounts of water. How different it is to go right under the water like this.” (116)

Dalit women also take great pride in the fact that they are financially independent and capable of doing the toughest of jobs:

“Ask these upper caste women to do the work we do – to transplant paddy in the wet fields, to do the weeding, to reap the grain and carry it home. You’ll see soon enough. They’ll give it up in no time and go and lie down.” (114–15)

Akin to the African-American concept of black aesthetics, where black is considered beautiful, the Dalit women considers her dark skin beautiful and superior to the fair-skinned upper-caste women

even if our children are dark-skinned, their features are good and there’s a liveliness about them, Black is strongest and best, like a diamond. Just go to their streets and look about you. Yes, they might have light skins, but just take a close look at their faces. Their features are all crooked and all over the place, inside out and upside down. If they had our colour as well, not even a donkey would turn and look at them. (114)

Nellie V. McKay finds that a bond of solidarity helps African-American women to prevail:

For women, there is always a strong female bond that exists with forbears, and this invests them with the power to resist, survive, and transcend their own oppression.³⁴

Sangati reveals the inexplicable and unarticulated bond that strengthens the spirit of the Dalit women. In the midst of all the misery there is an inseparable liveliness in the Dalit women. They would always laugh and chatter: “even though they left at dawn and hardly ever came back until after dark, they still went about laughing and making a noise for the greater part” (76).

The language of Dalit women is rich and resourceful, drawing on a treasure-house of proverbs, folklore, and folksongs. The women have an innate talent to give appropriate nicknames to others. Seyarani is called ‘*mai-kanni*’ because she has ensnaring eyes. Sanmuga kizhavi is called ‘*maikuzh*

³⁴ Nellie V. McKay, “The Soul of Black Women Folk in the Writings of W.E. Du Bois,” in *Reading Black – Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990): 232.

kizhavi’ because she takes only *ragi kuzh*.³⁵ Gnaanambal is called ‘*dammatta maaadu*’ because she goes around like a young bullock, drugged and dazed, without knowing what is going on. Dalit women also possess an inborn talent to spontaneously sing songs befitting any occasion.

I really don’t know how they could make up songs like that, in an instant, quick as anything. [...] They used to sing, lullabies, roratti songs to the babies in their cradles... If anyone died, the women sang opparis and wept loudly. Thinking about, from birth to death, there are special songs and dances. And it’s the women who perform them. Rorratu to oppari it is the women who sing them. (77–78)

Johan Louw Potgieter and Howard Giles, discussing the role of language in identity-formation, point out that a dominant group in a society imposes its notion of selfhood on less powerful groups. The subordinated groups might find strategies to reject the imposed identity and assert their position in society. Language is central to identity and strategies to deny an imposed identity centre on language.³⁶ Giles and Jonson observe that, in the process of rejecting an imposed identity and reconstructing their own social identity, members of the dominated group might proudly display their dialect or slang (which had been stigmatized by the dominant group) as a means of registering their protest.³⁷ The everyday happenings recounted in *Sangati* reveal the double oppression of Dalit women. In keeping with the ordinariness of the events discussed, the choice of language used by Bama is the everyday language of Dalits and not standard written Tamil. The spoken Dalit Tamil that is found in her works signals her courage to break free of the grammatical rules of standard Tamil and, in turn, of the rules governing hegemonic discourse. Responding to the criticism that her language has elicited, Bama writes:

Though I have been strongly criticised for using the spoken dialect of my region in my works, I continue to use it. That language is vibrant, pulsating and full of life; it is capable of strongly expressing the nuanced and intense feelings, intricate relationships and rich cultural heritage of Dalits. While using that language not only do I merge with the women in my works but also with

³⁵ *Ragi*, ‘porridge’.

³⁶ Johan Louw Potgieter & Howard Giles, “Imposed Identity and Linguistic Strategies,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 6 (1986): 261–86.

³⁷ Giles and Jonson, quoted in Potgieter & Giles, “Imposed Identity and Linguistic Strategies,” 281.

the life-style of Dalits. I derive immense pleasure in identifying myself with my people by using my language.³⁸

An overt criticism of patriarchal, caste-ridden society, Bama's *Sangati* has pioneered a Dalit *Penniyam*, a Dalit feminist perspective in Tamil. In *Sangati* Bama simultaneously depicts the subjugated existence and the resilience and dauntless spirit of Dalit women. The book renders a positive identity to Dalit women, highlighting their inner strength and vigour. It celebrates the grit and determination of Dalit women to carve out their own worthy existence in a male-dominated, caste-structured society:

The ideals Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil 'feminine' ideals of *acham* (fear) *naanam* (shyness) *madam* (simplicity, innocence) *payirppu* (modesty) but rather courage, fearlessness, independence and self-esteem.³⁹

In *Sangati*, Bama celebrates her admiration with pride.

Viramma: Internalized Subordination

The ethnobiography of a Dalit woman, Viramma, by Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine in *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* reveals the inequities suffered by Dalit women in an agrarian society, owing to caste and class repression. This oral-narrative transcript by the Racines (after listening to Viramma for nearly a decade) brings vividly to light Viramma's individual, familial, and collective memories, which represents the cultural universe of Dalit women. The narrative was originally translated into French from taped material in Tamil by the Racines in 1995. Later, in 1997, the French version was translated into English by Will Hobson.

In the afterword, "Under the banyan tree," Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine write that they had not attempted to present a comprehensive socio-political analysis of Tamil Dalits: "Rather than talk *about* Dalits, we have talked *to* one of them."⁴⁰ Viramma's narrative does not have the bitterness and fury of an educated Dalit woman (like Bama), while recounting an oppressive past.

³⁸ Bama, "Dalit Ilakiyam: Enathu Anubhavam," in *Dalit Ilakiyam: Enathu Anubhavam*, ed. M. Kannan (Pondicherry: French Institute of Pondicherry & Vidiyal: Coimbatore, 2004): 100. (My tr.)

³⁹ Lakshmi Holmström, "Introduction" to *Sangati*, xix.

⁴⁰ Josiane & Jean-Luc Racine, "Under the banyan tree: Speaking from the ground," in *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable*, tr. Will Hobson (London: Verso, 1997): 310.

Rather, Viramma belongs to a generation of women who accepted caste hierarchy as something natural to be followed, and who silently surrendered to the system of oppression. “Viramma bears testimony to an ideological system representative of the old order of the world.”⁴¹

Viramma narrates her personal life right from her childhood through her marriage with Manikkam in her pre-puberty days, her happy married life with Manikkam, “who looked old,” her delivery of twelve children, of whom she lost nine. But her personal life is never complete without her public life. The book details Viramma’s experiences as a girl, a wife, a mother, and a bonded labourer to the Reddiars. The narrative, interspersed with songs, presents the lively existence of Dalit women.

Viramma’s life story is not a dalit text (as in the present day connotation) which expresses a deep sense of anger and revolt against an established social order, but nevertheless it is “still a text of a dalit”. It is an insider’s account who had submitted to the dominant social norms of the society. “but Viramma’s story is nevertheless, the text of a Dalit, if we give to this word its basic meaning of one who is ‘oppressed and crushed’ without political or ideological implications. It is not, in a primary sense, a text attacking oppression, but it is a narrative which tells how an oppressed woman lives and thinks.”⁴²

In spite of succumbing to caste hierarchy, Viramma is not a mute spectator of caste distinctions. Nor is she unaware of the predicament of the existence of Dalit women. Her narrative does not spare the reader an account of the sexual molestation and harassment that Dalit women are forced to endure.

“These gentlemen of the *ur* talk a lot about the uncleanness of untouchables [...]. We’re the ones they get up to all their dirty tricks with; [...]. All of them make passes at us, from the doctor to the sweeper [...]. The doctors pretend to listen to our hearts so they can feel our breasts [...]. We’re harassed non-stop down there. But we don’t dare shout to make a scandal: we’d be called liars, our names would be crossed off the hospital registers and we wouldn’t be given any more treatment.” (52)

The hard labour of Dalit women which Bama describes in *Sangati* is similarly expressed in Viramma’s account:

“we can’t stay beautiful as long as you. Young, yes, we’re strong as tamarind seeds, but after children start coming, it’s all over. We lose blood with each

⁴¹ Racine, “Under the banyan tree,” 313.

⁴² “Under the banyan tree,” 313.

child and, on top of that, there's all the work we get through: planting out, weeding, harvesting looking after the cattle, collecting cow dung, carrying eight jars of water, and then pounding, winnowing the millet, hulling the paddy, taking it to the rice mill in Tirulagam, and all the work at home and in the *ur*. A pariah woman loses her strength and beauty very early. The Reddi women only have to sleep, eat and do a few little jobs in the kitchen: they can keep very clean, very civilized. We come home in the evening exhausted, covered with sweat. We don't have the same life! And yet we're the ones they try and sleep with!" (52)

Being a serf on the lands of Reddiars, Viramma considers the Reddiars to be the most powerful in the village, by the very fact that they are the richest. The village seems to have displaced caste with class hierarchy. Defying the general belief that the Brahmins form the apex in the caste hierarchy (hence demand more respect), Viramma considers Brahmins to be inferior and even makes fun of them.

"Brahmins own nothing or almost nothing apart from the temple land. We never go and work for them, they only employ *Kudiyanar*. That's why we can make fun of them. The *Pappan* are the Reddiar's priests for marriages, the *puja* of the ancestors, for this part or that rite and for the funeral ceremonies on the sixteenth day as well. They are lower than the Reddiar and like other servants they get uncooked food from them. They take it raw because they're in contact with God and they must be pure: they have the food cooked at their homes. We prefer to get it cooked: It saves us the time and cost of cooking." (158)

Viramma's concern had always been to be free from hunger, a single thought that governs her life. She does not contemplate her subservience to the landowning Reddiars as a system of oppression. Rather, she accepts it as a material fact.

"The reason is that we don't own any land. God only left us these eyes and these hands to earn *our* living. By working hard at the Reddiars we've been able to lead our lives in the proper way." (156)

The irony is that Viramma is proud to be bonded to a powerful family like the Reddiars:

For her, as for so many, meaning and identity are found in a place, a community, a framework of life and thought, and an established order of things, even if that framework and that order justifies what can only be defined as oppres-

sion, obstructing emancipation. Her's is essentially an example of how oppression is internalized.⁴³

Contrary to Viramma's surrender to the system of power and domination prevalent in the village, her husband Manikkam and son Anban reject the old rationale of internal submission. Anban strongly criticizes the unequal relationship between the caste Hindu landowners and Dalit labourers:

"Mother is always strict with me, Sinnamama. She always argues in the old way. The truth is that the people from the *ur* don't want us to rise up and be educated like them. Why? Because if we manage to own a bit of land tomorrow as well, then they won't be respected anymore, they won't find cheap labour at a cheap price, they'll have no more serfs. That's what they're afraid of! That's why they insist on the old rules." (192)

Behind Viramma's submissiveness to the dominant social system lies a wonderful strength which enables her to negotiate her existence in casteist and patriarchal society. Viramma is a vivid portrait of a Dalit woman caught between traditional norms that discriminate against her (as Dalit and woman) and her energy and vivaciousness to find autonomy within the constraints of traditional structures. Though Viramma is not a feminist in the true sense of the term, Jean-Luc and Josiane Racine argue that

Offering her testimony, however submissive it may appear to some, is not irrelevant. To preserve this voice, and this memory of the past, is also to contribute to the building up a future which will give each woman and man a share of dignity, a share of truth.⁴⁴

Verses of Sugirtharani and Aranga Malliga

The verses of Sugirtharani and Aranga Malliga articulate the repressed fury and anguish of oppressed Tamil Dalit women. A teacher by profession, Sugirtharani has written three poetry collections: *Kaipatri en Kanavugal*, *Iravumirugam*, and *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal*. Her poems explore the resources of female power in a caste-ridden patriarchal society. Contesting male-centred perception, which celebrates woman as reified body, beauty, and sexuality, Sugirtharani's poems explode with the powerful secret longings and desires of women.

⁴³ Racine, "Under the banyan tree," 313.

⁴⁴ "Under the banyan tree," 316.

In a language sharp and precise, Sugirtharani weaves through her poems the subtle nuances of womanhood. She brings to light the sordid existence and the indomitable will of Dalit women which make their experiences unique. The poem “The Colours of Poverty” reveals the plight of a mother who is forced to work for her survival despite having very recently delivered a baby.

The Colours of Poverty

In those bent branches
the new born is awake
in the cradle
with its eyes closed
with the remains of its umbilical cord
yet to dry.
Her body doubled and bent,
her feet rooted in the slush,
She plants the seedlings.
Her tattered blouse has
holes unconcealed.
Her hair drenched by the
tears flowing unending,
Her feet wobbling
Unable to bear her
Battered body,
She plants the seedlings.
with even the sour porridge over
what will she have for supper?
The cries of the new born
distract her thoughts.
with milk flowing from her breast
with blood oozing between her legs
The green bed of seedlings
was slowly turning red.⁴⁵

A lecturer in Tamil, Aranga Malliga has published two books, *Tamizh Illakiyamim Penniyamum* and *Penniya Kural Adirvum Dalit Penniya Udal Mozhiyum*. Her poetry collection *Neer Kizhikum Meen* was published in 2007. Her poems give profound expression to the agony and pain of women labouring in the fields. Nevertheless, their grit and determination are never sapped:

⁴⁵ Sugirtharani, *Avalai Mozhiyarthai* (Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2006): 54. (My tr.)

Luminous India
 In the scorching heat
 Defying sultry and thirst
 She plucks the blackgram.
 Beads of perspiration
 Glisten and flow,
 Like a water spring,
 As she struggles to satiate
 The hunger stokes
 Burning inside.
 Oblivious of pleasures,
 In labour and pain,
 Her life dangles eternally
 There! In her bent and hunched back
 Lies our luminous India.⁴⁶

Inner Strength – Source of Emancipation

Apart from making audible the silenced voices of Dalit women, Tamil Dalit literature presents the different facets of Tamil Dalit feminist identity. Literary works by Dalit women exemplify the fact that despite their subordinate status in society, uneducated Dalit women working as field labourers have also created ways of interpreting and asserting their identities through constant negotiation. Although they are under constant pressure imposed by caste and gender norms, they are not consigned to a state of hopelessness. Their vital, indomitable nature gives them enormous strength to assert their identity against all odds. It is perhaps these qualities in Dalit women that will enable empowerment and liberate them from their oppressed condition.

Whatever have been the tragedies and trials of existence never has the sap of life dried up under the bark. And here lies in the depth of the minds of these apparently submissive Dalit women an extraordinary source of energy waiting to be tapped for emancipation.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Aranga Malliga, "Payanam-2," in *Neer Kizikum Meen* (Chennai: Palam, 2007): 67. (My tr.)

⁴⁷ Racine, "Under the banyan tree," 316.

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Tamil Dalit Literature

—— Some Riddles

P. SIVAKAMI

THE GRIP OF CHANGE, MY MOST RECENT WORK, IS AN INTRODUCTION and an invitation to a dialogue on caste. In this novel, I tried to depict the caste hierarchy that exists in the Indian villages and its visible and yet intricate links with the village economy and human relations. In the first part of the novel, “Kathamuthu,” a leader of the Dalit community plays the role of saviour and fights against the atrocities and injustices committed against Dalits. But he has his own drawbacks. In the second part of the novel, “Gowri,” Gowri, the daughter of Kathamuthu, plays the role of watchful observer and critic; through her, Kathamuthu’s corruption, polygamy, and tyrannical behaviour towards his family are exposed and reviewed. The novel provoked a great deal of discussion, as it was the first of its kind to spark a dialogue on caste in all its dimensions in the form of a work of fiction. It has its limitations. It is not the complete story of the Dalit; nor has it been designed to make any such claim. However, the content and presentation of the text will, I hope, initiate broader discussion of issues of Dalits and Dalit literature.

In this essay, I shall try to trace the common trends in Dalit literature and the issues in Dalit politics that impinge upon literature. At times, I may come across as absolute in my views. Nevertheless, let me assure you that I am perfectly sincere in my desire to humanize the thus far acrimonious dialogue.

Untouchability, like slavery, is a unique phenomenon. But I hope that freedom of thought and expression will act like a cleansing agent on the neuroses and deep-rooted beliefs of the current liberalized generation. For me, Dalit

literature, which is the rebellious expression of a new awakening among educated Dalits, is one such agent.

Literature by the dominant castes, particularly in Tamil Nadu, has been cleverly avoiding open dialogue on caste for a long time now. The justification for such an elusive attitude was drawn from the universalist aesthetic that largely characterizes the literature of the dominant castes. A universalist aesthetic claims that in literature there is no distinction between the dominant and the oppressed. The reluctance and relative silence on the part of non-Dalits on issues of caste amount to an assumption that confronting casteism and untouchability is the sole responsibility of Dalits, just as it was assumed that confronting gender inequalities was the job of feminists.

In the postcolonial period, colonial domination was the major preoccupation of almost all writers. Hence, the precolonial roots of caste, gender, and class discriminations became subsidiary. The core principles of the non-brahmin movement were atheism, anti-brahminism, rationalism, and the unity of the Dravidian race. Although this movement gained popularity during the period of E.V. Ramasami Naicker, commonly known as Periyar, the true founder is Pandit Ayodhi Dasar, a Dalit who lived long before Ramasami. It is a different story that the Dalits discovered Ayodhi Dasar only after the centenary celebrations of Dr Ambedkar. Attracted by the principles of the non-brahmin movement, most Dalits joined the movement. But, to their dismay, they discovered later that the single objective of the movement was to share power among the non-brahmin and non-Dalit communities, and not the abolition/ annihilation of caste. During the non-brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu, writers completely overlooked issues specific to Dalits and the interventions of Dalits, especially of Ayodhi Dasar. This invisibility, coupled with atrocities perpetrated on Dalits and day-to-day deprivation, has led to the recent autonomous assertion by Dalits in the field of literature.

The late 1980s witnessed the emergence of Dalit writers on both the regional and the national level. The pioneers were from Maharashtra and Karnataka. Now there are numerous Dalits writing in almost all the Indian languages. In Tamil alone there are about a hundred writers and the number is likely to increase. Some of their works have already found a place in university syllabi. Several research scholars have chosen Dalit literary works for their theses. The Sahitya Akademi (the National Academy of Letters, a quasi-governmental institution) brought out a special feature of Tamil Dalit literature in 2001.

However, recognition for Dalit works, despite their growing volume and merit, is still lamentably poor. While the Sahitya Akademi came forward to organize a special forum for women writers, it is reluctant to organize the same for Dalit writers. Nevertheless, the Dalit Intellectuals' Collective and the South India Dalit Writers and Artists Forum have periodically organized seminars and workshops on Dalit art and literature. The formation of such organizations by Dalits initially set off a serious debate, drawing responses from both Dalit and non-Dalit writers. The claim of the Forum's organizers that it was created mainly to create a space for upcoming Dalit writers who found it hard to publish their work in the mainstream magazines and publications, because these recognize only those writers who accept mainstream values, was disputed by Imayam, an established Dalit writer, who refused to join the Forum. He claimed that he had been generously helped and recognized by the mainstream and saw no need for a special forum for emerging Dalit writers. Similarly, the Progressive Writers Associations (Marxist), during a meeting at Trichy, condemned the formation of the Forum as 'communal'. But these debates appear to have subsided. The silence presumably implies that these organizations have been accepted into the postmodern framework of 'difference'.

Dalit literature has come to occupy a pivotal place in contemporary Tamil literature, with several factors playing a constitutive role in this. However, acceptance of Dalit literature as a category of its own has not resulted in an appreciation of its merits. There are debates on questions of difference, aesthetics, and the course and relevance of Dalit literature in our changing world. These debates are focused more on abstract categories than on the issues raised by Dalit literature, such as Dalit inequality and oppression by caste Hindus. Further, critics assume that Dalit literature is a new and ephemeral trend that will vanish with time.

It is therefore necessary to examine the basis for Dalit literature as a separate category. I suggest that the yardsticks involved have to be different from postmodern notions of 'difference'. With this broad framework in mind, I propose to move on to some of the issues and riddles concerning Dalit literature. I will engage with the criteria applied by mainstream critics and reviewers and challenge their notions of aesthetic value. And I will speak about the major preoccupations of Dalit literature.

There are several questions related to the criteria or yardsticks used by the mainstream to put down Dalit literature. For example: is the different nature of Dalit literature simply a trend or passing phase, or an essential element?

Further, is the difference that marks Dalit literature the result of narrow identity-politics or of a dialectical relationship to universalism? Although marginalized communities are declared to be straying from universal humanism, it is, in fact, they who are truly universalist, as their claims are grounded in demands for equality and justice. For example, the First Nations' claim on their land cannot be termed racial exclusivism. In fact, self-assertion on the part of First-Nations peoples is a threat to racial theories. Similarly, the Dalits' struggle in India, though it appears to be a form of narrow identity-politics, has implications for oppressed communities everywhere.

It is imperative for Dalit politics that difference be historically located in the real struggles of Dalits. Categorization based on difference is not about identity, but it is significant in the existing socio-economic, political, and ideological contexts. And this categorization is at once a natural and conscious construction. Here I would like to mention that the great Dalit leaders such as Rattaimalai Srinivasan, M.C. Raja, and Meenambal Sivaraj are hardly mentioned in contemporary Tamil literature. Thus, if there is difference, it is because the mainstream has shunned Dalits. The silencing and distorting of Dalit concerns is evident from how the novel *Kuruthipunal*, by a Brahmin writer named Indra Parthasarathi, depicted the massacre of forty-two Dalit agricultural labourers in Kilavenmami, a village in Tanjore district, as a problem caused by the sexuality of the murderer, Gopalsamy Naidu.

Thus, the marker 'Dalit' is not a mere linguistic construct, as high-caste critics treat it, but has emerged from the revolutionary struggle of the Dalit people. The category reflects an ontological need on the part of Dalits to identify with other similar categories that have emerged from the struggle for human rights: categories such as race, gender, class, and sexual difference. This categorization has a definite purpose, and is positive and progressive.

Defined by this identity as Dalit, Dalit narratives largely focus on the past and present experiences, historical struggle, language, and culture of Dalit people. However, this trend is being criticized by mainstream literary scholars as subjective and based on narrow identity-politics. Critics claim that Dalit literature constitutes a celebration of the marginal and a denial of all other concerns. For example, Avvai Natarajan, former Director of Tamil Development and the author of several books, recently, when comparing Dalit writers with Western writers, stated that Dalit writers should take up new themes such as environmental issues, pollution, acid rain, etc. instead of writing about caste and poverty. S. Kandasamy and G. Thilagavathy, who are Sahitya

Akademi prize-winners, have constantly campaigned for a 'caste-free literature'.

Tamil literary works, in their focus on individual subjectivity – I should say: high-caste individuals' subjectivity – have scrupulously avoided the subject of caste or untouchability. When the subject did figure, it was in a casual or partial manner, and it exposed the mean-mindedness of the respected authors who referred to it in derogatory terms. Such treatment revealed the vulgar psyche of the superior majority and an attitude of dominance. For example, some writers openly advocated and defended the caste system. They maintained that the present-day Dalits were sinners in their previous incarnations, and that their salvation lay in their next birth. Although this idea may seem outdated, if not bizarre, and I may sound like someone espousing it adamantly, I wish to reiterate and place on record that this idea is found repeatedly in contemporary Tamil literature. Some writers think that the remedy lies in the self-realization of the benevolent oppressors. Marxists are categorical in their approach and refuse to accept caste as an essential ingredient in the class struggle. Thus there are many ways in which non-Dalit writers refuse to listen to Dalit voices and instead propagate their own 'solutions' to Dalit problems. In the end, however, all of them contribute to maintaining the caste hierarchy unbroken. The factors that are common among them, apart from their subjectivity, are that they are not Dalits and they are universally against the category Dalit. This ideological divide between Dalits and non-Dalits has to be resolved through constant dialogue. And such dialogue must take place not from the standpoint of universalism vs difference but from the standpoint of universal humanism. I do have my misgivings about the concept of universalism and the way the term has been used by dominant sectors. I prefer the term 'collective individualism'.

From this standpoint I conclude that the category 'Dalit literature' has the same function of reporting on the normative social order as any other work of art, but with a difference, which arises from their oppressed status. And for this reason, Dalit literature as a separate category, with its own ontological capacities, historical past, and ideological context, will continue to retain difference as an essential element.

The next question I would like to address is this: is the Dalit aesthetic the product of historical seclusion or does it have an ontological basis, and, does using the category of difference in a work of art hamper its merits?

Although the aesthetic is considered to relate to perception and a sense of 'beauty', I believe that it is predominantly related to the mind, which is a

socio-economic and cultural construct. Depending on circumstances, both order and disorder can be aesthetically perceived. The existing hierarchical social order based on caste as well as the rebellious Dalit order based on equality attract their respective beneficiaries. The dichotomy is between the 'beautiful beast' and 'beauty', if rationalism is taken to be the underlying principle, and not beauty-based aesthetics. Who can ever stop admiring a caged lion for its majestic appearance? But it is our innate fear that projects the lion as a dangerous beast, especially if one is left alone in its company in a forest. Beauty in its abstract form does not exclude a lion from its purview. But if rationality is applied, then a lion, free in the forest, would not stand the test of beauty. Taming the beast, the beast of inequality and injustice, should therefore be the essence of literature and the aesthetic and not beauty *per se*. The literature of the oppressed therefore rejects the valorized notion of aesthetic spontaneity promoted by mainstream critics. However, it does not mean that Dalit literature is not aesthetic; the aesthetic is but an inevitable accessory of a powerful work of art, like the fragrance of a flower.

By a Dalit aesthetic, I do not mean standardized expressions that can be sampled according to a touchstone. A Dalit aesthetic is a perspective drawn equally from the Dalits' historical seclusion and from their ontological and hermeneutical abilities.

Mainstream critics consider scatology to be the hallmark of the literature of the marginalized. Dalit literature has survived this ridiculous titling on the strength of its substance and thanks to the resurgence of Dalit politics. The absence or presence of scatological elements is related to strategic situations. There can be no literary morality guiding its usage in a given text, and it is an authors' prerogative as well as responsibility to put it in context. Scatological usages are commonly found in Dalit literature, whereas in the literary works of others they are absent. This was the reason that my Tamil manuscript *Pazhayana Kazhidalum (The Grip of Change)* was initially rejected by Tamil Puthakalayam. In all the literary reviews, there were suggestions that I should remove scatological references from the text.

Beef-eating was common to all communities in India until the sixth century, but became a taboo later on. The rationale in certain communities behind not eating beef does not make it immoral. The contingent, ambivalent or tentative decisions of the dominants have no binding force over the moral sensibility of marginals. On the contrary, they have only a negative bearing. Arguably, the eager attention paid to scatology in Dalit literature by the dominants

stems from their seemingly superior moral capacity, derived from blind adherence to tradition, that makes them revere the cow and shun beef.

The Dalit aesthetic is not passive or rigid. It is dynamic and occupies a conceptual space in Tamil literature that draws strength from the writings of Pandit Ayodhi Dasar and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It is interesting to note that the Dalit aesthetic defies any attempt to type-cast or standardize it. The category 'Dalit' was referred to in several ways by Ambedkar, depending on the context. With the British, he used the term 'Depressed classes'; with the caste Hindu, it was the term 'outcaste'; in a political context, he used the term 'Scheduled castes'; and with his fellow Dalits, he used 'Dalit'. These different or, rather, differentiated usages by Ambedkar were not without a purpose. They were deliberate attempts to defy the oppressor's goal to bring Dalits into the Hindu fold as Avarna (beyond the castes), Panchama (the fifth or the lowest caste), or Harijan (children of Lord Krishna), etc.

According to Ambedkar,

the Depressed classes cannot be employed in the army, navy and the police, because such employment is opposed to the religious notions of the majority. They cannot be admitted in schools, because their entry is opposed to the religious notions of the majority. They cannot avail themselves of Government dispensaries because doctors will not let them cause pollution to their persons or their dispensaries. [...] So rigorous is the enforcement of this Social Code against the Depressed classes that any attempt on the part of the Depressed classes to exercise their elementary rights of citizenship only ends in provoking the majority to practise the worst form of social tyranny known to history.¹

Going by what Ambedkar has said, the category 'Dalit' is discursive and promotes both cognitive and emotive responses on the part of Dalits. It is necessary to understand the category 'Dalit' in order to grasp the notion of 'a Dalit aesthetic'. Following Ambedkar's notion of Dalithood, we can say that a Dalit aesthetic is the expression of the struggles of Dalit people against exploitation, repression, and marginalization. Hence, using the category of a Dalit aesthetic helps us understand and situate a Dalit text in the broader category of Dalit literature.

¹ Statement submitted on behalf of Bahishkrita Hitakarini Sabha to the Indian Statutory Commission, 29 May 1928, in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches*, vol. 2, ed. Vasant Moon (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1982): 445.

The last question before us is whether Dalit literature will cease to exist if the socio-economic location of Dalits undergoes substantial change. There are some scholars who believe that Dalit literature, being an expression of material and social experience, will fade away once socio-economic locations change. They support this with the example of Dalits who have 'moved up in the hierarchy'. There is some truth in this view, and it cannot be ignored. However, there seems to be a tendency in such views to gloss over differences and to prioritize the elements of commonality. Moreover, the provisional achievements of the few and limited examples of their patterns of behaviour are inadequate to helping us come to any conclusion about the future.

It is heartening to note that, though the term 'Dalit' represents multiple identities, they are not hostile to or exploitative of each other. Their common condition of poverty and deprivation makes them empathetic towards each other. In rural India, untouchability is linked to landlessness. Most landless agricultural labourers are Dalits. All the major castes among Dalits – Pallars, Paraiyars, and Chakkiliyars in the southern, northern, and western parts of Tamil Nadu respectively – depend on landed-caste Hindu agriculturists for their livelihood. Further, the middle class among the Dalits represents only a minuscule section of Government employees. Even among these employees, scarcely five percent carry out Class I services. The hierarchy among the above castes is thus superficial, inasmuch as it is not supported by material experiences.

I have called the internal caste-based hierarchy among Dalits superficial in response to those who defend the hierarchical basis of upper-caste behaviour towards Dalits on the grounds that Dalits practice caste-based hierarchy as well. It is true that there is no inter-caste marriage between the Pallars, Paraiyars, and Chakkiliyars, owing to different geographical locations and language (most Chakkiliyars speak Telugu). Also, the numerical majority of certain Dalit categories has been a source of tension. As per the 1961 census, the Paraiyars of northern Tamil Nadu are the numerical majority, followed by the Pallars of southern Tamil Nadu. This has resulted in the request for separate reservation for Chakkiliyars within the eighteen percent reservation for Scheduled Castes. Nonetheless, all of these castes share a common heritage and history of oppression, and I believe that this shared history can become a lever to bring them together in a common struggle.

The general category 'Dalit', then, denotes not a seamless unity but a deliberate effort to find common ground. Dalits negotiate their differences

through mutual tolerance and meaningful coexistence. The emergence and evolution of the category 'Dalit' is based on Dalit collectivity and cannot be easily injured by any external (either national or international) agencies for long.

If the world of Dalits is not homogeneous and its internal pluralities must be negotiated, it is surrounded by hostilities of two kinds: impulsive and constituted. The issue of caste as a social condition has received no theoretical treatment at the hands of those at the helm of the nation-state. The pragmatic politics of opportunist forces targets only charity-based vote banks. Land reform appears to be a remote hope, given the present level of illiteracy, and NGO interventions based on compromise and appeasement only make matters worse. Leftist and feminist interventions are far too inadequate when assailed by caste majorities. Driven by these dismal realities, the Dalit movements across the country make do with temporary benefits by forming alliances with numerical majorities.

These short-lived victories have led to interrogations and revisions in Dalit politics and identity-politics in general. For example, the alliance of the BSP led by Mayawati with BJP earlier and recently with the Brahmin community, and Thirumavalavan's alliance with the Dravidian parties have empowered them. However, this empowerment has not resulted in any considerable change in the feudal land-based structure in the villages.

As for those who point the finger at Dalits' internal hierarchies, I would ask them why calls are made only for the Dalits to change. Why do those in power not examine their caste-based privilege and think about how to share it more equitably? State-instituted change in small instalments doles out a few benefits to the victims but never challenges the oppressors' ideology and their resistance to change – rather, their passivity.

The state-driven reforms are no better than band-aid solutions, really. Unless and until land reform is introduced to remove the dependency of agricultural labourers, their oppression will continue. The atrocities committed against Dalits by landowning castes are ample proof that land reform is the key to Dalit liberation.

Given that radical land reforms are nowhere in the offing, the passive mainstream forces will not change, despite the growing number of transgressions against Dalits. Dalit literature is thus certainly not going to disappear, despite the predictions of mainstream cultural czars who paint rosy portraits of Dalit upward mobility and assimilation into the middle class. Dalit literature will LIVE for a long time to come.

Dalits no longer depend on the largesse of the mainstream cultural institutions. A number of Dalit magazines have emerged during the last decade. As they generally depend on individual resources, print-runs are limited; nevertheless, it is heartening to note that they cover the issues that concern Dalits and reach their intended audience independently. *Pudhiya Kodangi*, published as a monthly, is a pioneer. *Dalit Murasu*, *Bodhi*, *Dalit*, *Damma*, and *Eluchi* are some of the other Dalit-run magazines.

Dalit magazines and Dalit literature focus mainly on the issue of land and land struggles, the analysis of Ambedkar's and Ayodhy Dasar's writings, the revival of Buddhist/Dalit culture, the critical examination of Government policies, and questions relating to tribals, the transgendered, and women. I consider these trends to be healthy and crucial for Dalit liberation. Dalit literature, as a crucial pillar in the Dalit struggle for liberation, cannot afford to rely on literary theories that adhere to 'universalist', 'caste-free', and 'spontaneity' criteria of literary expression. It is time that the mainstream, instead of finding fault with Dalit literary expression because it does not conform to such criteria, examine the embedded class and caste privileges of the criteria that claim universality but are actually based on unexamined privilege.



Categories of Caste, Class, and Telugu Dalit Literature

K. SATYANARAYANA

I SEEK TO EXAMINE THE FORMATION OF THE CATEGORY OF TELUGU Dalit literature in the 1990s. I suggest that it is through the establishment of a new set of Dalit social and cultural organizations, forums, and small journals that Dalit writers have shaped the new category of Dalit literature. Mapping the consolidation of the Dalit community as a distinct social group in the context of the Dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh in the 1980s and 1990s, I further argue that the category of Dalit literature was conceptualized as an oppositional category to the dominant modern form, revolutionary literature. I will present some of the debates between Dalit critics and liberal/leftist critics in order to show how the former highlighted the failure of the revolutionary writers to represent Dalit life. I conclude by suggesting that Dalit critics posit a new politics of caste in the Telugu literary domain. I will draw on debates on Dalit literature and poetry and a few Telugu Dalit poems to illustrate my arguments.

New Spaces and New Voices

In the 1990s, Dalits formed a set of new organizations in the social, political, and cultural domains. Dalit Mahasabha is one such important social organization that emerged with an agenda of mass mobilization against caste discrimination, atrocities against Dalits, and other issues. Established in the wake of the Karamchedu massacre of Dalits,¹ it brought together a group of Dalit

¹ The dominant Kamma peasant caste landlords killed six Dalit men and raped three Dalit women in broad daylight on 17 July 1985 in Karamchedu, a village in Prakasam district in

intellectuals, activists, and students from various political formations.² Originating in the coastal Andhra area, it soon expanded into a state-level organization with branches in the Rayalaseema, North Andhra, and Telangana regions. Several Ambedkar youth organizations were established throughout the state. In 1993, Dalit writers and intellectuals, along with some Backward-Caste intellectuals, formed Dalit Rachayitala Kalakarula Ikya Vedika (Darakame).³ Several other small Dalit student and youth forums were established during this phase – examples of these short-lived forums include the Samata Volunteer Force and the Satya Sodhak Intellectual Forum.⁴ The Dalit movement took a political turn with the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Almost all of the leaders of Dalit Mahasabha and other Dalit organizations joined the BSP on the eve of the 1994 Assembly elections. However, the BSP failed to consolidate in Andhra Pradesh. The significant development in the second half of the 1990s was the rise of Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS), a forum of Madigas, one of the untouchable castes of Andhra Pradesh. This phase witnessed the formation of a number of sub-caste organizations such as Malamahanadu, Relli Hakkula Porata Samiti, the Golla-Kurma Association, and Rajaka Sangham. The central issue on the agenda of these organizations was how to achieve equitable apportionment of the reservations and other welfare benefits offered by the government on the basis of specific caste identities among the Scheduled Castes and Backward Castes.⁵ Dalit and other caste-based forums raised a number of issues and spearheaded a series of debates in the public sphere. These forums established small journals such as *Dalitarajyam*, the *Bahujan Samaj*, *Ekalavya*, *Godavari Keratalu*, and *Edureeta*. Journals like *Dalit Voice* from Bangalore, and

the prosperous coastal Andhra. This particular incident marks the beginning of a series of similar massacres in the 1980s and the 1990s. Karamchedu incident led to large-scale protests throughout Andhra Pradesh and on the national level.

² Srinivasulu, "Caste, Class and Social Articulation in Andhra Pradesh: Mapping Differential Regional Trajectories," Overseas Development Institute (London; Working Paper 179, September 2002), http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/working_papers/wp179.pdf (accessed 20 June 2007): 46.

³ For the manifesto of Darakame, see B.S. Ramulu, *Gabbilam* 1.2 (1995): 55–56.

⁴ U. Sambasivarao, "Preface" to *Dalitarananninadam*, ed. Sambasivarao (Hyderabad: Edureeta, 2005): np.

⁵ The left organizations formed separate associations to address the question of caste. For further details, see K. Srinivasulu, "Caste, Class and Social Articulation in Andhra Pradesh: Mapping Differential Regional Trajectories," 53.

Nalupu, established by the Hyderabad Book Trust in the 1980s, provided space for theoretical discussions on caste issues and Dalit politics.

Both the Dalit forums and the small journals shaped Dalit literature in the 1990s. One can find many new names of writers and critics in these journals expressing their views on Dalit politics. In the literary domain, Dalit poets and writers formed a number of new publishing forums such as Dalitasana, Kala, Neelagiri Sahiti, Gosangi Prachuranalu, Spruha Sahiti, Ekalavya, the Vishala Sahitya Akademi of Darakame, Sreeja, and Alice. Dalit students formed literary forums (Vispotna, Madiga Sahitya Vedika, etc.). Many of these publishing forums were of short duration, but Lokayuta Prachuranalu, established by Katti Padmarao, the founder-secretary of Dalit Mahasabha, and the Hyderabad Book Trust have been consistently publishing Dalit writing and Dalit theoretical works. Khaja, a Dalit Muslim poet, tells us the history of Kala Publications, a small initiative set up by four young poets – Madduri Nageshbabu, Akbar, Krishna, and Khaja himself – in the 1990s, with the aim of providing a focus for Dalit literature. This publishing unit operates from a small room in the offices of Krishna Ads, a painting agency. These young poets published three important Dalit collections of poetry – *Nishani*, *Kastasisgupadadam*, and *Ooru Vada*.⁶ Many of the publishing forums and discussion forums are places like these painting shops, tea shops, street corners, and small meeting-places in villages and towns. On many occasions, Dalit poets publish their poetry by contributing money from their own pocket. Madduri Nageshbabu recalls how they collected two hundred rupees each from the poets and Dalit employees to bring out the collection of Ambedkarist Dalit poetry titled *Vidiaakasham*.⁷ He blames those who did not pay on time for the delay in publishing this book.

It is important to note here that the mainstream press and journals slowly began to grant space to critical writings on caste and Dalit politics and also on Dalit literature in the 1990s, owing to tremendous pressure from Dalit mobilization. If we examine closely the publication history of the Dalit poems in Telugu, it can be seen that they initially appeared in both the mainstream newspapers and journals such as *Udayam*, *Andhrajiyoti*, *Andhra Bhoomi*, *An-*

⁶ *Nishani*, ed. Varadaiah et al. (Palvancha: Kala, 1995); *Kastasisgupadadam: Dalita Sangheebhava Kavitvam*, ed. Madduri Nageshbabu & Khaja (Palvancha: Kala, 1996); *Ooru Vada: Sankara Kavita*, ed. Rani Şivaşankar & Madduri Nageshbabu (Palvancha: Kala, 1997).

⁷ *Vidiaakasham: Ambedkarist Premakavitam*, ed. Madduri Nageshbabu (Vijayawada: Dalitasana, 1999).

dhra Prabha, and *Suprabhatam*, and in such Dalit journals as *Dalitarajyam*, *Ekalavya*, *Edureeta*, *Gabbilam*, and *Godavari Keratalu*. Most of these poems were later published in two large volumes, *Chikkanavutunnepata* and *Padunekkinapata*. What is striking is that these poems, with few exceptions, were not published in leftist literary journals.

I am suggesting here that the Dalit writers and critics have been speaking from a new public space created in the 1990s. They succeeded in acquiring this space in the mainstream newspapers and journals through their open criticism of the upper-caste character of this space. Although left-wing and revolutionary critics accused the mainstream media of providing space to Dalit writers through which they were attacked, it is clearly the emergence of a new wave of writing that forced the mainstream media to accommodate Dalits in their columns. Particular mention must be made of the daily newspaper *Andhra-jyoti*, known for its special Sunday supplement called *Adivaram Andhra-jyoti*. In this special supplement, some space was allotted to literary discussions. Chekuri Ramarao, a linguist and literary critic, used to write a column on poetry called “Cheratalu,”⁸ with a critical appreciation of a poet or a collection of poems every week. This column was given in the 1990s to G. Lakshminarasaiiah, a critic and former member of the A.P. Revolutionary Writers’ Association or Andhra Pradesh Viplava Rachayitala Sangham (popularly known as VIRASAM in Telugu literary circles). He devoted substantial space in his column to critically appreciate Dalit poetry and other writings. He edited the first two major collections of Dalit poetry in the 1990s and formulated the terms of debate on Dalit literature in Telugu. When Chekuri Ramarao was writing, there was no scope for discussion of what was published in the column; when Lakshminarasaiiah began writing, the editor of the paper encouraged such debate. The availability of space in the mainstream media for Dalit writing is an indication of its powerful presence.

In the context of Andhra Pradesh, the Dalit community consisting of intellectuals, writers, poets, activists, and students formed themselves into a distinct group under the broad category of ‘Dalit’. K. Srinivasulu rightly points out that this category represents “a community of oppressed castes with specific experience of being treated as untouchables and being humiliated through the conscious denial of self-respect and honour by the caste Hindus.”⁹

⁸ A selection of critical essays published in this column was later edited by Devipriya as *Sahitya Vimarsa-Paramarsa* (Hyderabad: Charita Prachurana, 1991).

⁹ K. Srinivasulu, “Caste, Class and Social Articulation in Andhra Pradesh,” 30.

It was the Malas and Madigas, two numerically and socially dominant sub-castes in the untouchable castes (classified as scheduled castes by the government), who occupied the category of Dalits in the 1990s. In the 1990s, the Dalit intelligentsia acquired new visibility through their social and cultural organizations and their powerful Dalit literary movement. Dalit writers and critics not only formed a distinct space for themselves but also intervened and shaped discussion in the mainstream public space as well as in the leftist and other public arenas.¹⁰

Literature and 'Casteism'

Let us examine some of the arguments of the liberal/traditional and leftist critics about the newly emerging category of 'Dalit literature'. S.V. Satyanarayana's collection of Dalit literary debates is useful for my analysis.¹¹

The liberal and traditional Telugu critics advanced an argument that modern Telugu literature is a domain of universal values, whereas Dalit literature is casteist in character and is associated with narrow political goals. R.S. Sudarshanam, the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award and a reputable literary critic, contends that 'Dalit literature' assumes the character of a political catchphrase and that it is instrumentalized in an attempt to bring caste politics into the literary domain.¹² He cites Gurajada's play *Kanyasulkam*,¹³ which, he argues, represents a "human touch" (*manavata sparsa*) and therefore appealed to later generations of readers. He rejects the Dalit contention that *Kanyasulkam* is a Brahminical play. Arguing that Dalit characterization of modern Telugu literature as Brahmin literature is wrong, Sudarshanam suggests that literature represents "essential humanity" (*moulikamaina manaveeyata*). He

¹⁰ All of the left-wing literary organizations consciously debated caste issues in their committees and journals after 1990s. The publication of *Antaranivasantam*, a novel about three generations of Dalit life in coastal Andhra, was serialized in *Arunatara*, the official organ of VIRASAM. The author of the novel, Kalyan Rao, is a senior member of VIRASAM. Dalit critics argue that this novel was made possible because of the Dalit movement and its impact on Telugu society.

¹¹ S.V. Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu* (Hyderabad: Vishalandhra, 2000).

¹² Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 16–19.

¹³ Gurajada Apparao (1862–1915) was a playwright, poet, and social reformer. Popularly known as Gurajada, he is regarded as the modernizer of Telugu literature and the Telugu language. His play *Kanyasulkam* (1897; Hyderabad: Visalandhra, 3rd ed. 1986) is cited as one of the first texts to articulate modernity.

complains that Dalit literature is spreading hatred against the upper castes.¹⁴ Several other liberal (upper-caste) critics such as Mo, R. Sitharamarao, and Dwa. Na. Sastry share a similar view. The latter believes that ‘Dalitvadulu’ (Dalit critics) did not forget caste and that they are spreading hatred against Brahmins. He suggests that our literary movements should not create gaps between human beings.¹⁵ Similarly, R. Sitaramarao criticizes Dalit writers for producing poetry that would perpetuate the caste system. He believes that Telugu Dalit poetry reflects anti-Brahmin and anti-upper-caste hatred and it is “Dalit porno poetry,” as it employs abusive and obscene language.¹⁶ Framing Dalit literature as a “literature of casteism” is a modernist view of caste – a view voiced strongly by Indian sociologists during the Mandal controversy in 1991.¹⁷ In this view, Dalit literature, in foregrounding caste, constitutes the Other of universal modern Telugu literature. Dalit literature is accordingly narrow, sectarian, and divisive, as it reproduces pre-modern identities of caste. Interestingly, Dalit critics, in the course of their struggle, successfully mark, in their writings, this modernist view of caste identities and Dalit literature as the upper-caste view.

Vegunta Mohan Prasad voices the modernist view of caste:

the images of Dalit poetry are of dying villages. Today, making chappals is not a caste occupation. The upper castes are also famous for the business of chappal-making. No barber comes to your house to do service in the towns. We have washing machines in the place of rajakas. We have bearers in bars instead of tappers who bring down toddy.¹⁸

Prasad, popularly known as Mo, declares that there is no Manu in this modern society of urbanization and the expanding middle class.¹⁹ The understanding

¹⁴ Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 18.

¹⁵ *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 251.

¹⁶ *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 121–24.

¹⁷ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001): 275–96. Based on a report known as the Mandal Commission, the Government of India declared its decision to allot twenty-seven percent of ‘reservations’ (special provisions) to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in education and employment in central government institutions. Elite-caste students opposed reservations and protested publicly through demonstrations and a nation-wide boycott of classes. The OBC and Dalit students also responded with a movement demanding implementation of the Mandal Commission report.

¹⁸ Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 21.

¹⁹ Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 25. Manu was the author of *Manusmriti*, an im-

implied in this view is a typical anthropological definition of caste as a system of hierarchy based on pollution. Mo assumes that the changes brought about by modernization in terms of “dying village occupations,” mobility of Dalits and Backward castes, and urbanization rooted out caste discrimination. What we have, it was suggested, is only a middle class wholly devoid of any symptoms of caste bias. Such an assumption undermines the view that caste resurfaced in the modern public domain in the 1990s and also the Dalit critique of reconfiguration of caste in modern Telugu literature and other modern domains.

The Dalit literary movement poses a challenge to the project of modernization. Dalit poets chose to write *vachana kavita* (‘free verse’) to contest the representations of life and identity in modern forms of Telugu poetry. Mo argues that free verse is not a suitable form for Dalit poets to represent Dalit experience. Valorizing the oral tradition of Dalits, Mo clearly undermines the significance of the Dalit challenge to modern Telugu poetry, and describes the Dalit literary assertion as an enterprise of a group of discontented individuals seeking personal benefit.²⁰ “To make literature universal,” Mo announces, “first Dalit elites, Dalit Brahmins and Minorities should go out of this movement.” That the Dalit/OBC middle class is “an illegitimate” class to share the reservation benefits is one of the arguments in anti-Mandal discourse. What is striking in the responses to the entry of Dalit poets into the public literary sphere is that the Dalit middle class is not a true representative of the poor Dalits and its claims to ‘recognition’ in the literary domain are illegitimate. This attitude is not about the literary quality of Dalit poetry but a stereotypical argument that endorses upper-caste literary privilege.

It is the Marxist critics who elaborated their criticisms of the ‘Dalit middle class’ with respect to Dalit literature. Papineni Śivaśankar, a Marxist critic and short-story writer, contends:

What is there and visible is the consciousness of the middle class and the lower middle class. We have to recognise the power of that consciousness and the special identity questions that it is bringing to the fore. We have to find solutions to these. At the same time, we have to recognise the scope and limitations of this consciousness. Feminism and Dalitism (streevada dalitavadalu) do not represent

portant religious text in the Hindu Dhramasastra tradition, and known as the first religious text to codify the Varna system prescribing severe punishment to be meted out to the lower castes. Manu is regarded by Dalit writers as a representative of the brahminical tradition.

²⁰ Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 25.

a comprehensive worldview and therefore, they cannot be considered mainstream literatures. When these trends do not have any social movements to support them, they can only continue as strong literary trends. These trends will have special significance in the complete social revolution. They should have this significance.²¹

Śivaśankar's analysis of Dalit literary movement is from a Marxist point of view. While recognizing the significance of "the special identity questions," he emphasizes the "limitations" of these questions as middle-class concerns. What is important to note here is the appropriation of Dalit literary consciousness into the project of total revolution in the politics of the revolutionary left. Most of the Marxist critics tried to reconcile the contradiction between Dalit writing and progressive and revolutionary literature by characterizing the Dalit movement as "a limited" project that can be accommodated within the leftist project of total revolution. The Arasam leader S.V. Satyanarayana and the VIRASAM leader and prominent revolutionary poet Varavararao argued that the Dalit literary movement is a continuation of progressive and revolutionary literary movements.²² What is implied in these Marxist interpretations is that the Dalit literary movement is not an independent and separate movement with its own distinctive new agenda. By marking it as an expression of middle-class consciousness, the Marxist critics have reiterated their category of 'class' and are unwilling to acknowledge the category of 'caste' as constitutive of the literary imagination and critical analysis. In Marxist criticism, the category of 'Dalit' is described as middle-class; thus caste identity, which is at the core of the category of Dalit, has been obscured.

I think it is relevant and important here to sketch out VIRASAM's conceptualization of Dalit writing. Let us examine the ways in which VIRASAM responded to Dalit and feminist critiques in its review of its twenty-five years of practice in the literary sphere.²³ First, VIRASAM clarifies the fact that both the Naxalbari political path and the literary practice of VIRASAM took up caste and women's issues. The Communist Party of India (M-L) included in its political resolution in 1969 "the public burning of Harijans, reminiscent of medieval times and brutal social oppression" and, in its party programme in

²¹ Papineni Śivaśankar, "Introduction" to *Katha-1994*, ed. Vasireddy Naveen & Papineni Śivaśankar (Secunderabad: Kathasahiti, 1995): np.

²² Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 11.

²³ A P Viplava Rachayitala Sangham, *Viplava Sahityodyamam (1970–1999)* (Nellore: Viplava Rachayitala Sangham, 1996): 14–17.

1970, the abolition of the caste system and all kinds of social inequality based on caste, religion, and gender. Second, VIRASAM points out that it welcomed the Dalit Panther movement of Maharashtra, conducted a national seminar on “caste and class,” and produced literature dealing with issues of caste. He thus claims that it provided the basis for the emergence of the Dalit and feminist movements through its practice of rebellion in Telugu literature from the 1990s. While extending critical support to Dalit and feminist literary movements, VIRASAM went further:

The Dalit and feminist leadership demands changes and reforms within the parliamentary framework and the legal limits of the State. Virasam has declared its resistance to parliamentary procedures and the State generally. The Dalit leadership says it cannot take up the issue of class issue until the caste issue is resolved. Virasam argues that the caste issue will be resolved as part of the class struggle. Similarly, the feminist leadership feels that the patriarchal system is the main enemy of women, not the State.²⁴

VIRASAM frames the Dalit critique in terms of a problem to be addressed and solved in order to actualize democratic revolution. It appropriates the Dalit question as one more issue to be taken up on its agenda. It reduces the whole range of Dalit critical issues to a mere “negative attitude” on the part of Dalit critics, who, they believe, are anti-Marxist. What is at stake in this view is the failure of VIRASAM to address caste as a theoretical category and its implications for rethinking Marxism. VIRASAM reduces caste to that of a ‘problem’ to be solved within this latter framework. Although VIRASAM reorganized Telugu literary sphere by including peasants, workers, and women in its project of “new democratic culture,” the framework of literature proposed and practised by VIRASAM remained elite and upper-caste in its composition and character. The contribution of Dalit critics is in pointing out this limitation in VIRASAM’s framework.

The Centrality of Dalit Identity in Dalit Poetry

Both liberal and Marxist critics present a caricature of the Dalit critique. Let us examine what the Dalit critics say, so that we can have a better understanding of the Dalit critique and its literary politics. Dalit critics have interrogated the canon of modern Telugu literature and marked it as a brahminical upper-caste tradition through their reading of a series of debates, controversies, and

²⁴ A P Viplava Rachayitala Sangham, *Viplava Sahityodyamam (1970–1999)*, 17.

discussions around the key figures of modern Telugu literature as well as the key texts/anthologies.²⁵

U. Sambasivarao, a Dalitbahujan scholar (known in Telugu literary circles as U. Sa.), critiques the progressive and revolutionary literary movements in the context of the emergence of Dalit writing. While accepting that both progressive and revolutionary literatures emerged as oppositional and alternative movements, in the 1940s and 1970s respectively, to “the statusquoist forces,” they have themselves become “statusquoist” movements and have failed to represent “the contradictions between different social forces and the reality and the specificity of these contradictions.”²⁶ This resulted, Sambasivarao argues, in the rise of Dalit and feminist literary movements. The rise of new literary movements indicates the contradictions between VIRASAM and the new movements. Sambasivarao says that a conflict between “the statusquoist traditionalists in VIRASAM and the social revolutionary forces”²⁷ surfaces in the Telugu literary sphere, whereas the normative perspective in modern Telugu literature is that of the upper-middle or middle class. The Dalit and feminist literary movements represent women, oppressed castes and classes, and Dalits.²⁸ The new subject of contemporary Telugu literature is constituted on the basis of a new logic of representation in terms of new identities of caste, gender, religion, and region.

In the preface to *Chikkanavutunnapata*, G. Lakshminarasaiiah declares:

The truth is that the ‘progress’ proposed by the hitherto existing progressive literature known as people’s literature did not recognise the fundamental social realities and specific problems of the majority of people. The well-known writers portrayed the oppressed in the abstract (*Amurta peeditulu*) and proposed an abstract notion of progress (*Amurta Abhyudayam*).

As per this abstract notion of progress, the oppressed are those who were subjected to economic oppression and inequality and the denial of rights....²⁹

²⁵ Dalit critics contested the construction of Gurajada as a modernizer of Telugu in the 1990s. Similarly, They discovered Jashuva (1895–1971) as a forerunner of Dalit poetry in the 1990s. I have analysed some of these debates in my dissertation, “Nation, Literary History and the Lens of Caste” (EFL University, Hyderabad, 2008).

²⁶ Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 9.

²⁷ *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 10.

²⁸ *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 13.

²⁹ G. Lakshminarasaiiah, preface to *Chikkanavutunnapata*, np.

The reality of caste is “the fundamental social reality” of this country. Revolutionary poetry did not address the problems of “the majority people.” The category of “people’s literature” is critiqued for its failure to represent caste identities and Dalit life. Therefore, there is a need to propose a new category. Lakshminarasiah defines the new category of Dalit poetry as that written by oppressed castes and minority poets. He specifies the oppressed castes as SC, ST, BC poets and the minority poets as Muslim poets.³⁰

The revolutionary critics posit ‘the poor’ as the unmarked ‘human subject’ of their project of ‘democratic revolution’. The normative middle-class, upper-caste, Hindu male writer of the revolutionary literary movement mediates the experiences and the life of ‘the poor’ in their literary representations. The proposal of Dalit and Bahujan critics that the producers of Dalit literature must be SCs, STs, BCs, and Muslim minorities is a big challenge to leftist and liberal critics. Critics like Kopparti rejected this proposal, saying that consciousness expressed in poetry determines the character of literature, not caste and religious identity.³¹ In the 1990s, both the upper castes and the oppressed castes organized themselves along caste lines in order to mobilize their own people. Dalit and OBC mobilization along caste lines demanding reservations is a case in point. The same principle of social origin is invoked in entering the Telugu literary public sphere. Dalit critics posited caste as a positive identity in their demand for equal space in the public sphere. The Dalit poet and critic Sikhamani voices the concern of many Dalit writers when he says: “Birth, life, and experience are the prerequisites to express the anguish of your community. If you were not born a Dalit, then the authenticity and punch essential to express angst will be missing.”³²

The formation of identity based on social origins is at the core of Dalit, feminist, and Muslim minority literatures in Telugu. The new identity of caste/sub-caste problematizes the humanist conception of literature as a domain of universalism. Literature is a site of contestation of identities and ideologies. Self-representation is one of the central features of the new mobiliza-

³⁰ The Indian Constitution classifies certain communities as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) to provide constitutional remedies for social and economic disadvantages. Similarly, Backward Castes (BC) refers to socially and educationally middle castes in the caste hierarchy.

³¹ Kopparti says “Consciousness is important for poetry, not the poet.” See Kopparti’s contribution to the collection by Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada*, 56–60.

³² Sikhamani, *The Black Rainbow: Dalit Poems in Telugu*, 42.

tions of the populations of Dalits and other social groups. As a result, both the liberal and Marxist theories of representation face a crisis.

Let us turn to the discussions of Dalit poetry in the 1990s. The first two extensive collections of Dalit poetry, which I have already referred to, are *Chikkanavutunnapata* and *Padunekkinapata*. 'Vishpotana', a literary forum of students at the University of Hyderabad, published a collection of Dalit poetry called *Dalit Manifesto* in 1995, on caste and Dalit identity.³³ Dalit critics did not consider this collection to be one of the first and significant collections of Dalit poetry. Possible reasons for this are that the *Dalit Manifesto* included poems by Dalits and non-Dalits, and that the collection claims the legacy of the revolutionary movement and its literary and political ideas (particularly Marxism).³⁴ The Dalit public and critics consider *Chikkanavutunnapata* and *Padunekkinapata*, both edited by G. Lakshminarasiah, to be the first anthologies of Dalit poetry, thus launching the Dalit literary movement in Andhra Pradesh.³⁵ I will discuss the debate on these two collections and other writings of Dalit poets and critics presently.

The literary critic Lakshminarasiah argues:

it is surprising to know that no anthologies of Dalit poetry were published till 1995 though Dalit poetry was available in the form of individual poems from 1985. A collection of Dalit poetry, *Chikkanavutunnapata*, released in 1995, brought lower-caste poets across the state into one forum. The book was released in public functions organized in all the districts in the state. Dalit poets and fans and readers of Dalit poetry organized these public meetings at 35 places in the state. This is the first time in the history of Telugu literature that so many meetings were held for the release of a single anthology. Two thousand copies were sold in five months, indicating the popularity of the book. The debate on this collection continued for one year in literary journals, either positively or negatively.³⁶

³³ P. Kesavakumar & K. Satyanarayana, *Dalit Manifesto* (Hyderabad: Vispotana Prachuranalu, 1995).

³⁴ I am one of the editors of this anthology. It is clear to me now that I was not able at the time to grasp the implications of the new Dalit politics.

³⁵ *Chikkanavutunnapata: Dalita Kavityam*, ed. G. Lakshminarasiah & Tripuraneni Srinivas (Vijayawada: Kavityam Prachuranalu, 1995); *Padunekkinapata: Dalit Kavityam*, ed. G. Lakshminarasiah et al. (Vijayawada: Dalita Sana Prachuranalu, 1996).

³⁶ Lakshminarasiah, *Dalita Sahityam: Tatvikadrukpadam* (Vijayawada: Dalitasana Prachuranalu, 1999): 13.

This description indicates the arrival of a new revolutionary phase in Telugu literature.³⁷ About forty collections of Dalit poetry were published by a group of about a hundred Dalit poets, most of them young (all below the age of thirty-five years).³⁸

Before we take up the discussion on *Chikkanavutunnapata*, it is relevant to point out that the rise of the Dalit literary movement, particularly Dalit poetry, is not the sudden development that Lakshminarasaiiah makes it out to be. K. Srinivas, a prominent Telugu literary critic, traces the context and the concerns of Dalit poetry in the 1990s, particularly the period before the publication of *Chikkanavutunnapata*. Marking the distinctive character of new Dalit poetry, Srinivas, arguing that it is different from the revolutionary sort, calls it democratic poetry. As he puts it,

The generation that emerged in the 1960s placed “Kotesulu” on the agenda. The resistance of the likes of Kotesu began in Karamchedu. The Karamchedu and Chundururu incidents and agitation for reservations provided the context for the existence of Dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh today. Dalit consciousness was strong in the cultural arena. Revolutionaries, writers, and balladeers participated in this process. Some Dalit intellectuals decided to distance themselves from the revolutionaries, and there was serious debate between the two camps. These are all recent developments.

It is not that no one has written about caste issues. During Telugu Desam rule, “de javu,” Varavara Rao’s poem about anti-reservation agitation, was the best expression of solidarity with Dalits. The poems announced by revolutionary writers during the anti-Mandal agitation all deserve appreciation. However, these poems do not constitute the sole focus of ‘Dalit identity’.³⁹

As I pointed out earlier, Srinivas is suggesting that the Dalit poetry of 1990s is distinctive for its construction of “only ‘Dalit identity’” as its centre. Bojja Tarakam, the well-known former civil-liberties leader and Dalit intellectual, wrote a poem titled “I am an untouchable” in the 1970s. This poem, too, though powerfully expressing caste oppression, adopts the conclusions of progressive and revolutionary poetry. Srinivas says that Tarakam wrote this poem as a communist, and he also identifies Satishchandar, a powerful voice

³⁷ A noted Dalit poet and critic, Kalekuri Prasad, describes the 1990s as “the epoch of Dalits – the Dalit literary epoch”; *Dalita Sahityam* (Vijayawada: Dalita Stree Parishat, 1993): 22.

³⁸ Lakshminarasaiiah, *Dalita Sahityam*, 14.

³⁹ K. Srinivas, “Dalita Suryodaya Kavita,” in Satishchander, *Panchamavedam* (Hyderabad: Navya Prachurana, 1995): 79–80.

in Dalit poetry in the 1990s, as a Marxist who turned to Dalit expression in the 1990s.

What Lakshminarasiah did was to build on these new initiatives of poets like Satishchandar and others active in the 1980s and early 1990s, publishing their poems in *Chikkanavutunnapata*. This effort consolidated Dalit poets as a distinct group with an agenda of their own. However, it is not an easy task to establish Dalit poetry as a 'legitimate' form of writing. Dalit poets and critics have to wage a struggle and win their space in the literary public sphere. I would point out that *Chikkanavutunnapata* proposes 1) a critique of the abstract term 'oppressed' (*peeditulu*) with its economic connotations, 2) a specific definition of 'Dalit' as a category of SC, ST, and BCs based on their caste identity, as also Muslim minorities based on their religious identity, 3) that upper-caste writers could play the role of 'mediators', and 4) that native Marxism would be the ideology of Dalit poetry.⁴⁰

I have already discussed the liberal and leftist critics' arguments about the proposals of Dalit poets and critics. Here, I will focus on the critiques of *Chikkanavutunnapata*.

Telugu literary critics seriously contested the positing of caste and religious identities to define poetry. One argument is that the very positing of caste and religious identities is wrong, as these identities are 'unmodern' and 'primordial', reinforcing casteism and religious chauvinism. This position is represented by both liberal and leftist critics. There are others, such as Kopparti, who argued that the expression of consciousness is the primary criterion for defining poetry.⁴¹ That caste and religious identities are 'pre-modern' is implied in this view, too. Another argument is that the very categories of SC, ST, BC, and minorities are problematical; too broad and vacuous. One of the powerful voices of Dalit poetry, Satishchandar, put forward this view forcefully. He argued that the experiences of the BCs and the SCs are dissimilar. Making a distinction between 'Ooru' (village) and 'wada' (Dalit colony outside the village), Satishchandar says that the problems of those who live in the village (BCs) and the wada (SCs) are quite different. Similarly, he is apprehensive about the fact that the poetry of Muslim minori-

⁴⁰ Telugu literary critics have criticized the concept of 'native Marxism', a combination of Ambedkarism and Marxism. Lakshminarasiah changed his position on this and argued later that Dalit poetry represents Ambedkarist ideology. See the "Introduction" to his *Dalitasahityam*.

⁴¹ Satyanarayana, *Dalitavada Vivadalu*, 56–60.

ties does not deal with caste annihilation. Satishchandar, a prominent Dalit poet along with several others, contested the new inclusive category of Dalits as SCs, STs, BCs, and Muslims. The definition of Dalits as untouchable castes is the consensus view of the critics participating in this debate. In this view, caste identity is retained as the essential criterion to be included in the category of 'Dalit'.

Let me contextualize Lakshminarasiah's category of 'Dalits' as SC, ST, BC, and minorities. The pro-reservation agitation for BC reservations in 1986 in Andhra Pradesh and the pro-Mandal agitation in 1990 on the national level forged unity on the intellectual level between the untouchable castes and Backward Castes, particularly in Andhra Pradesh. The demolition of Babri Masjid by the Hindutva forces in the 1992 and the threat from Hindutva forces brought the Dalits, OBCs, and Muslims together. Although these gestures of solidarity are mainly symbolic, the victory of the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh is seen as a concrete manifestation of the unity of Dalit–Other Backward Classes (OBCs)–minorities that prevented the advancement of Hindutva forces.

'Dalit' acquires a new definition as a broad category of SC, ST, OBC, and minorities when viewed in this context. Some critics have argued that this definition of 'Dalits' is nothing new and that it is similar to the broad definition of the Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra and also the Dalit Mahasabha of Andhra Pradesh. I would, however, insist that the definition of Lakshminarasiah and of Dalit critics in Telugu is a distinctly new proposition. While the Dalit Panthers, in their manifesto, defined Dalits as "Members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion,"⁴² the Dalit Mahasabha argued that the category of Dalits include all those who are socially oppressed, including peasants and agricultural labourers, adding that generally all upper castes are feudal and rich and the backward castes are poor peasants and workers.⁴³ Both of these definitions are so broad that you can include all sections of people except the upper castes. These definitions are still informed by the hangover of Marxism and its category of class. It is a well-established view that the Dalit Panthers and

⁴² Barbara R. Joshi, *Untouchable: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement* (London: Zed, 1986): 144.

⁴³ Katti Padmarao, "Andhra Pradesh Dalita Mahasabha Pranalika," in *Dalitaramaninadam*, ed. U. Sambasivarao (Hyderabad: Edureeta, 2005): 11.

the Dalit Mahasabha were influenced by Marxist as well as by Ambedkarite thought. Neither of these organizations foregrounded caste identity or argued for the inclusion of minorities. My argument here is that the 1990s represent a new phase of politics – the Dalit politics of caste. However, that the category of ‘Dalit’ was subsequently split into BC, minority, and Adivasi identities and that today we have literatures of BCs and Muslims separately in Telugu, is a ‘split’ that does not diminish the political and theoretical thrust of caste-identity politics.⁴⁴ What is significant in this assertion of group identity is that the category of ‘Dalit’ continues to be invoked as a collective concept for these distinct identities.

Let us read some poems to get a feel for Dalit poetry and its critique of modern Telugu literature viz. revolutionary literature.⁴⁵ First, I will introduce the Dalit poets. There are at least three generations of poets who wrote for the Dalit community. The first generation is the one represented by the revolutionary-left tradition. In this group, we have the well-known poet and balladeer Gaddar, G. Anjaiah, Sivasagar (K.G. Satyamurthy), Salandra, and Bojja Tarakam, among others. These poets wrote about Dalit life from a Marxist perspective. The central category in this poetry is the abstract ‘poor’. The second generation of poets includes Katti Padmarao, Yendluri Sudhakar, Sikhamani, Satishchandar, Kalekuri Prasad, and a few others. This group began writing even before the advent of the Dalit literary movement in the 1990s but, with the rise of the Dalit social movement, turned to specifically Dalit themes. Sikhamani recalls how he used to pay special attention to poetic form and how he innocently believed before the 1980s that literature had no caste. His poem “An Apology” (“Kshamapana”) is a critique both of Telugu poetry and of his own early poetry.⁴⁶ The third generation is completely new to literary activity. This group of younger poets were part of the Karamchedu

⁴⁴ For a collection of poems by Backward-Caste writers, see *Ventade Kalalu: Venukabadina Kulalu*, ed. Juluri Gourishanakar (Kodada: Spruha Sahiti Samsta, 2001). For a selection of contemporary Muslim writing, see *Mulki Kholupula Dastar*, ed. Vemula Yellaiah & Skybaba (special issue of *Muslim Sahityam, Nalgonda: Golkonda Muddera*, December 2003–May 2004).

⁴⁵ I have deliberately chosen poetry, as this form of Dalit literature is the most vibrant in the Dalit literary movement in Telugu.

⁴⁶ The poem “An Apology” can be found in Sikhamani, *The Black Rainbow: Dalit Poems in Telugu*, tr. Kiranmayi et al. (Hyderabad: Milinda, 2000): 15–17. For the original Telugu version, see *Padunekkina Pata: Dalit Kavivam*, ed. Lkahminarasaiah (Vijayawada: Kavivam Prachuranalu, 1996): 235–37.

and the Chundururu Dalit agitation and pro-reservation movements of the 1980s and 1990s. It includes Madduri Nageshbabu, Pydi Teneshbabu, Nagappagari Sunderraj, G.R. Kurme, Vemula Yellaiah, G.V. Ratnakar, Pagadala Nagendar, Sambhuka, Koyi Koteswararao, J. Gowtham, Kattula Kishore, Kanakaiah, and others. The group of Dalit women poets who appeared in public with their poems in *Padunekkinapata* were part of this generation. They are Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Madduri Vijaysree, Darise Nirmala, G. Vijayalakshmi, Karri Vijayakumari, Nakka Vijaya Bharati, J. Indira, Putla Hemalatha, Jajula Gowri, and a few others. While the first generation started thinking afresh about their poetry in the 1980s and the 1990s and attempted to address questions of caste and Dalit identity, the second- and third-generation poets voiced the experiences, anger, and anguish of the Dalits in an even more systematic manner.

Let me briefly discuss the aforementioned poem “An Apology” by Sikhamani, a prominent Dalit poet, in which he critiques modern Telugu poetry. The modern Telugu poet offers his regrets for his failure to depict Dalit life and problems:

I apologise, dalit!
 I am a poet, a rare poet
 Why my name
 my background?
 I'm a Brahmin
 with a glorious lineage
 Oh, please accept my apologies, dalit!
 Never had the time to write
 a line about you
 the past thousand years
 so engrossed was I in
 amorous and ascetic literary pursuits.

Our old poet
 calls Sudra's poetry
 the sweet pudding
 maligned by crow.
 You are not even a Sudra!
 how can I write poetry about you?
 My apologies, dalit,
 I'm a poet, a modern poet
 and a postmodern poet

How can I write poetry about you?
 I can write about the
 great Vietnam
 Tiananmen Square
 the fall of the Berlin Wall
 and hunger in Somalia
 but not
 about the wound of Chundur
 the pestles of Karamchedu and
 the flame of Neerukonda.
 I am an international poet
 I certainly cannot write
 poetry about mala colonies

 I sang, to my heart's content, the heroic
 deaths of martyrs of revolution
 but the swollen, stabbed corpses of
 butchered dalits
 didn't move me.
 I cried about alienation
 alas, I cannot be
 moved by dehumanization
 I have lamented curfew
 in evocative poetry
 but cannot expend a drop of ink
 to condemn caste killings.

The poem is a critique of revolutionary poetry in Telugu, the dominant form of modern poetry in the 1970s and the 1980s. Sikhamani highlights the failure of the revolutionary poet, who is marked as a Brahmin, to represent "caste killings." Karamchedu, Chundur, and Neerukonda are not just villages that were the site of Dalit massacres by the upper castes. They are the tragic events that opened up a new understanding of society. They are the contexts that showed up the limitations of revolutionary poetry. Dalit mobilizations around these massacres shaped a new thinking through the category of caste. The international outlook of the revolutionary poet is so limited that it could only present the American War against Vietnam, the student struggle at Tiananmen Square in China, and the starvation in Somalia – but not Dalit life, *malavadas* (mala colonies), and the massacre of Dalits. What is at issue here is not just themes of poetry but a critical perspective on the life and struggles of the people. The revolutionary poet views the world with his concepts of

imperialism and revisionism. The Vietnam War becomes an important theme in revolutionary poetry, as it is seen as an historic anti-imperialist struggle against America. Similarly, the famine in Somalia is a product of imperialist exploitation. And the Chinese students' struggle is viewed as one against revisionist Marxism. The centrality of the State, Sikhamani indicates, is implied in the themes of 'alienation' and 'curfew' in revolutionary poetry.

Sikhamani's poem effectively sums up the Dalit critique of modern revolutionary Telugu poetry. Sikhamani concludes by saying that one needs "a lifetime to understand the portrait of this nation."⁴⁷ Dalit critics have highlighted the failure of revolutionary poetry and have simultaneously emphasized the Dalit perspective and the centrality of caste identity to literary representation. When K. Siva Reddy, a popular and highly regarded revolutionary poet, published his collection *Ajeyam*,⁴⁸ the Dalitbahujan critic Lakshminarasaiah criticized him for his silence on Dalit issues.⁴⁹ Lakshminarasaiah sums up the themes of *Ajeyam*: 1. defending the revolutionary movement, 2. solidarity with women's issues, 3. criticizing existing human relations, and 4. advocating secularism. He asks:

why the poet who responded to several issues in life is not able to respond and write about Dalit issues. There is not a single poem on caste issues in this book of 120 pages. He did not recognise the fact that even the revolutionary movements accepted that they had made a mistake by ignoring caste. Even after acknowledging it, does he think that it is wrong to recognize caste? Whatever it may be, why did he not express even that? Where are the poets who could not

⁴⁷ Sikhamani does not single out the revolutionary poets for their failure to understand the nation and to represent Dalit life. He subjects himself to self-critique in the same poem:

I can write about
flower-vendors and blind beggars
in words tender like flower petals
but none to describe the insults of Padirikuppam.

Sikhamani had written about flower-vendors and blind beggars in his early collections of poetry, but had neglected to write about such atrocities as took place in Padirikuppam (a village in Chittoor district).

⁴⁸ A generous selection from thirteen of Siva Reddy's volumes of poetry is available in English, in *Mohana! Oh Mohana! and Other Poems*, tr. M. Sridhar & Alladi Uma (2005; New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007).

⁴⁹ G. Lakshminarasaiah, "Ajeyam: A Review," *Andhra Jyothi Dinapatrika* (21 August 1994).

respond to the changing social environment? Where is he going? When you read *Ajeyam*, you get these doubts.⁵⁰

Siva Reddy emerged as a prominent revolutionary poet in the 1980s and the 1990s and won the Sahitya Akademi Award for his poetry. His inability to write about the major incidents of massacres and to relate to the debates on caste inequality in Andhra society indicates the limitations of both his caste background and his perspective. Some readers who responded to this discussion about *Ajeyam* argued that the poets write their experiences or whatever they want to communicate. So the critic should not ask writers and poets about what to write and how to write. They should comment on what is written.⁵¹ What is invoked here is the notion of the poet as a superior being enjoying the freedom to write whatever he feels. The poet, in this view, should not be questioned for not writing about Dalits. Lakshminarasiah rightly rejects this view, arguing that “a poet is not a dictator” and that the critic is a guide who has the responsibility to evaluate poets with discrimination. What is undermined in this debate by Dalit critics and poets is the view that literature is a ‘pure’ domain and the poet an elevated being capable of churning out universal truths. The cases of Siva Reddy and the other revolutionary poets reveal a larger problem: that of the categories of representation.

The Marxist categories of ‘class’ and ‘state’ are inadequate to represent Dalit life. Consequently, the claim of the revolutionary poets that they represent ‘the people’ and that their poetry is ‘universal’ cannot find acceptance by Dalit critics.

Conclusion

I have attempted to map the contestations and negotiations of Dalit writers and critics in the domain of Telugu literature in the 1990s. I have suggested that Dalit writers and critics forged a new category – Dalit literature. While acknowledging the historical role of revolutionary writers in changing the composition and character of the literary domain, it was suggested that the revolutionary writers failed to recognize the centrality of caste in Indian society and literature. Dalit critics and writers propose a new perspective to represent the life-worlds of Dalits and other oppressed castes.

⁵⁰ Lakshminarasiah, “*Ajeyam*: A Review.”

⁵¹ Uma Madhav, “Yedi Romanticism?” *Andhra Jyothi Dinapatrika* (4 September 1994).

It is the subject-matter of another essay to analyse the new perspective and the Dalit politics of caste that reconfigures the domain of literature as an arena for depicting the struggles of the Dalits, OBCs, and minorities.

I will end my discussion by quoting a few stanzas of Madduri Nageshbabu's poem "What do I want?"⁵² The angry young poet, who passed away recently, dreams of a new world and sums up many of the concerns of the Dalit poets of the 1990s.

I want a little breeze
 a glass of water
 some warmth
 a little sky in this dungeon
 a little land for me in this country of mine

 will you give it?
 I want a life where I don't have to move away
 I want to walk without having to cringe
 I want the food that Manu has stolen from my plate
 I want those curtains of separation to go
 More particularly
 I want my throne back
 will you give it?
 [...]
 Man
 I want real citizenship
 Will you give it?
 [...]
 Friend, I want this country to be ours
 This land should be levelled for us to walk without ups and downs
 Do you want to come?

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⁵² See *Twentieth Century Telugu Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Velcheru Narayanarao (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002): 240–41. For the original Telugu poem, see Nageshbabu, *Meeremutlu*, 60–61.

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THE CITY

Plotting Hogwarts

—— Situating the School Ideologically and Culturally

VANDANA SAXENA and ANGELIE MULTANI

MAGIC AND FANTASY ARE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF Hogwarts – the institution which lies at the centre of the exciting world created by J.K. Rowling. Hogwarts, the place of the fantastic, is also a personal escape for Harry Potter. From the outset we are told that Hogwarts cannot be plotted on an actual map; it is completely hidden from non-magical people by powerful enchantments and spells that also make it inaccessible to most magical folk. It becomes the bone of contention, the primary space of the war between good and evil. However, this essay focuses on another equally significant fact – that Hogwarts is, above all, a school. Our endeavour in the present essay is to locate the school in the cultural space of a heterogeneous and multicultural society.

Several critical studies have traced the link between the genre of boarding-school stories and various phases of British Empire-building. Unlike her predecessors in this genre, Rowling creates a school which is open to pupils of different social strata and ethnic backgrounds. By studying it alongside other fictional schools, we are attempting here to understand the ‘culturally inclusive’ nature of Hogwarts as depicted by Rowling.

In Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, one of the first books of the genre, the two friends, Tom Brown and Harry East, part at the end of their schooling – Harry goes to India to bear the ‘white man’s burden’, while Tom joins the intellectual force of Britain to legitimize the British self-image and its ambitious enterprise to ‘civilize’ the world. In Rudyard Kipling’s *Stalky & Co.*, Stalky, the chief protagonist, joins the Army to fight a group of tribesmen on the North-West Frontier of India with the same élan as when he broke

the rules at his boarding school (which Kipling based on the United Services College). Thus, patriotism is clearly an important ingredient of school stories; however, it changed from the love for English ways demonstrated in Thomas Hughes's work to Kipling's consciousness of paternal imperialistic duty. The fictional school of Kipling and those of subsequent writers had to take into account the fact that

Some beneath the further stars
Bear the greater burden.
Set to serve the lands they rule,
(Save he serve no man may rule)
Serve and love the lands they rule;
Seeking praise nor guerdon.¹

Rowling's school story belongs to this venerable genre. However, in re-creating the genre for the contemporary world, she induces twenty-first-century concerns of nation and race. The series' representation of ethnic minorities and non-Europeans might pre-empt any enquiries into racial or ethnic biases. It must be noted that Rowling's series does represent minorities, unlike most of her predecessors. Hogwarts does have students of Asian and African origin studying along with Europeans. Parvati and Padma Patil, as their names suggest, could be from India. Similarly, Cho Chang could be of East Asian origin. Due to the reference to his dreadlocks, Lee Jordan, has been assumed to be of African origin. Angelina Johnson, Rowling writes, is "coloured."² Most of these students are brave enough to belong to Gryffindor, the house to which Harry and his best friends belong. Cho and Padma are witty enough to belong to Ravenclaw, known for selecting only exceptionally intelligent students. However, it is at this point that Rowling's ode to Britain's multicultural society comes to a halt. None of these characters have much else to do in the story. Therefore, the question that arises is why they are there at all. Has Rowling merely chosen some names at random for her characters? And if so, then why do none of the characters in the core group bear non-English names? South and East Asians represented in the series bear a specific relation to Britain – that of colonial domination. Studying what Edward Said calls the "*strategic formation*" of the text that analyses the "relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even

¹ Rudyard Kipling, *The Complete Stalky & Co.*, ed. & intro. Isabel Quigly (Oxford World's Classics; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009): epigraph.

² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000): 230.

textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large,”³ we find that all the names mentioned above come loaded with surplus meaning in the social and historical context – something that the series does not take into account in its flattened representation of Britain’s multicultural society. They are all intertextual in their associations with various other cultural texts. Rowling’s unproblematical representation of ethnicity can refer to an integrationist world-view where the past has been forgiven and forgotten or to the greater role, growing power, and increasing visibility of these ethnicities in the contemporary world.

Most of these characters come from former British colonies. What is dubious is that neither Parvati or Padma or Cho or even Angelina demonstrates any anxiety caused by uprootedness, or any sense of alienation. Such anxiety and alienation, which characterizes the diaspora and its cultural expressions, is wholly absent from Rowling’s representation of diasporic Asians and Africans. The series is silent about their histories, the reason why they, or their ancestors, ended up in Britain (immigration from the colonies, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s when the colonies were gaining their independence, changed the demographic profile of the imperial metropolis sharply). Does Rowling’s text ignore the complex relationship between the two sides or is it dealing with the issue in the guise of fantasy?

In the context of the fantasy itself, Harry is the Other with respect to his surrogate muggle family, the Dursleys. Harry and his world of magic represent a revolt against the conventional, normal, and rule-bound life of muggles like the Dursleys who represent the middle class of ‘normal’ England. Like the traditional bad penny of the Victorian narratives who was banished to the colonies, Harry is a misfit in ordered English society. In such a context, as Giselle Liza Anatol points out, Hogwarts and the entire wizard world seems to be a colony of the ‘normal’ rational city.⁴ But the magical world in Rowling’s series subverts the primacy given to the real world of middle-class England. So, if one takes the series as subversive, with the presence of a magical adolescent super-hero, then one needs to ask how subversive it remains in its flirtation with racial equality.

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978): 20 (Said’s italics.)

⁴ Giselle Liza Anatol, “The Fallen Empire: Exploring Ethnic Otherness in the World of Harry Potter,” in *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*, ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (Westport CT & London: Praeger, 2003): 163.

Because the Potter books seem to be culturally inclusive, it is critical to analyse both the extent to which they establish a new cultural paradigm and the extent to which the multicultural paradigm they employ itself becomes a repressive force in relation to race and nation. Rowling has chosen to write in a genre closely associated with the discourse of colonialism, yet she sets herself apart from her predecessors. Hughes, Kipling, and Enid Blyton, writing during the crucial phases of the British colonial enterprise, associated nationalism with racial supremacy. Children's literature, particularly that meant for little boys, was an expression of Britain's overseas activities. As is clear from the career paths of the two protagonists of Hughes's story, colonial enterprise was supplemented by institutional logic whose essential values were singularly English. A similar pattern can be traced in Rowling's story. Charlie and Bill Weasley fight dragons and bring 'home' ancient treasures from distant lands; the father and the older brother, Percy, work for the Ministry of Magic in London – strengthening the community at home. School stories thus brought two strands of thought together: first, the idea of British supremacy was linked to the idea of the bourgeoisie: and, secondly, the monocultural (i.e. exclusively English) nature of education and educational institutions was conducive to furthering Britain's imperial ambitions. As David Theo Goldberg points out,

monoculturalism as insitutional ideology only emerged late in the nineteenth century to create the impression of an intellectual tradition [...] The perceived need for tradition was fulfilled by the impression, a reconstructed reflection, of (and on) European cultural production, separate and unequal, represented in Arnoldian terms as "the best that has been said and thought in the world." The universe of discourses that the idea of the university has been taken conceptually to signify gave way immediately to (if it did not already conceptually presuppose) the discourse of universality, the insistence that the university stood for and on the unwavering and singular standard of universal truth. Local knowledge was effaced in the name of universalizing local standards as rationally required.⁵

Racism expressed in such institutionalized forms is covert and appears unintentional. It is implanted in everyday routine practices and organizational functioning, almost like an 'objective phenomenon'. Thus, the institution of schooling emerges as an important site for the politics of race, nation, and

⁵ David Theo Goldberg, "Introduction: Multicultural Conditions," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Oxford & Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1994): 3.

Empire-building. According to Karen Manners Smith's analysis of boarding-school fiction as a reflection of 'true' English schools, the so-called 'public' schools have been a means of maintaining the cultural status quo by their influence, their 'client' list, and their expensive price tags.⁶ They are meant not only to impart education but, by appropriating all the spheres of a pupil's life, they become vehicles to impart 'Englishness' itself. Fiction goes beyond depicting this discursive construction; it becomes in itself part of that discourse: i.e. boarding-school fiction itself has been useful in shaping the image of British public schools.

Central to most boarding-school stories is the construction of an 'ideal' English citizen. In the UK, the rise of the boarding schools in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries corresponds to the growing distance between the middle and working classes and also to the rise of imperialism. The ideal of an English citizen encodes the covert message of the superiority of the British Empire and of a certain group within that Empire. As Manners Smith says,

Early in the twentieth century, when boys' public schools began to be regarded as training places for the administrators of the British Empire, school story fiction celebrated the manliness, athleticism, and ethnocentrism considered necessary qualities for the tribunes of Empire.⁷

Thus, schools in most boarding-school fiction emerge as miniature models of the Imperial metropolis. In the third book of Blyton's Malory Towers series, a student from America, Zerelda, comes in for censure for her obsession with appearance, her ambition to become a film-star, and her ingratitude for the 'privileged' English education that she has been given access to. Malory Towers, Zerelda discovers, has "different standards." According to her, "Life was easier in America." In this context, this implies less demanding schooling – physically, academically, and, most significantly, morally. It is evident that, to fit in, 'outsiders' have to first recognize and acknowledge the deficiencies of their previous life and work harder to conform to the official value-system of the school and therefore of England itself.

⁶ Karen Manners Smith, "Harry Potter's Schooldays: J.K. Rowling and the British Boarding School Novel," in *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*, ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (Westport CT & London: Praeger, 2003): 83.

⁷ Manners Smith, "Harry Potter's Schooldays: J.K. Rowling and the British Boarding School Novel," 83.

'Englishness' thus forms the central core of Blyton's schools. Their values are disseminated as 'English' virtues. Blyton's schools mould women to be sensible and dependable 'for the world to lean on' – in other words, fit to carry the legacy of the Empire. An excerpt from Blyton's autobiography quoted by Bob Dixon in his essay "The Nice, the Naughty and the Nasty" provides an interesting insight into her mission:

Quite apart from my million of English-speaking readers, I have to consider entirely different children – children of many other races who have my books in their own language, I am, perforce, bringing to them the ideas and the ideals of a race of children alien to them, the British. I am the purveyor of those ideals all over the world, and am perhaps planting a few seeds here and there that may bear good fruit.⁸

The above lines reveal a crucial element in the concept of 'Englishness' – that of elitism. Clearly, the discourse of culture and education in culture conceals the tension between the classes and tilts the balance in favour of the middle classes, who take on the role of the 'educators' of the lower classes. While Doctor Arnold of Rugby saw a school as the microcosm of society, Chris Baldick insists that "his son [Matthew Arnold] often seems to envisage society as a large school in which the conduct of the teachers and monitors is decisive."⁹ The teachers and monitors are the intellectual elites and bourgeoisie. According to Alastair Bonnett, this is the literature of white supremacy as well as the literature of white crisis. Bonnett locates this crisis in the exclusivist myth of whiteness which was split down the middle by class consciousness. It is clear from Arnold's writings that it was this small segment that gave its character to the national life and culture. This segment was constantly vulnerable, or imagined itself to be so – vulnerable to being swamped by the inferior whites – the whites who were the 'enemies' of whiteness. It employed myths like identification with social and geographical roots in the hardy country life of pre-industrial rural England. Tom Brown does come from such a background. The first part of the book describes life in the country, the relationships within Squire Brown's family, Tom's relationship with the lower class of the servants and his fondness for hunting, country fairs,

⁸ Enid Blyton, "Preface" to *A Complete List of Books: Enid Blyton* (Edinburgh: John Menzies, [1950]): 3, quoted by Bob Dixon, "The Nice, the Naughty and the Nasty: the Tiny World of Enid Blyton," *Children's Literature in Education* 15 (1974): 58.

⁹ Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848–1932* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983): 33.

and wrestling. Even in girl's school stories, the country stock are associated with basic honesty, loyalty, and hardiness. Wilhelmina, or Bill, in Blyton's *Third Year at Malory Towers*, it is repeatedly emphasized, is honest and straight despite her lying to the teachers, inattentiveness in class, and rule-breaking. Set against the depiction of the degenerate city, the myth locates the British middle class as "the progeny of natural winners, [...] inheritors of a fighting stock."¹⁰ Such Darwinism provided ideological weapons for race as well as class rule by demonstrating their superiority through the struggle for survival. According to Bonnett, such literature also tells about the contradictions within the myth of racial supremacy by dismissing the bulk of whites as inadequate and beyond the 'superior' white race. Thomas Hughes portrays various social classes as integral to country life. However, they are firmly in place and, despite their close interactions, there is no cross-cultural 'contamination'. School stories serve to strengthen this association of whiteness with the bourgeoisie. Michel Wieviorka cites an important argument of Hannah Arendt's in this context:

that racism is primarily an invention of the middle class, which wanted "scientists who could prove that the great men, and not the aristocrats, were the true representatives of the nations, in whom the 'genius of the race' was personified."¹¹

Despite the apparent openness and democratic framework, the traditional structures are constantly privileged. In the second book of Blyton's Malory Towers series, Ellen, the 'scholarship' girl, and Daphne, who pretends to be rich to win admiration, are reformed by the efforts of Darrell Rivers, the main protagonist, who comes from a well-off middle-class family. To compete with others, Ellen resorts to cheating, while Daphne tells tall tales about her family. Both are caught, suitably punished, and 'put in their place'. Ellen's and Daphne's 'reformation' confirms their powerlessness. The entire episode shows how dominance is grounded in material conditions. The behaviour, the failures, and the choices of both girls have an important economic dimension. The reliance on institutional funding and a peer group that is confident of its place on the social ladder adds a new dimension to their helplessness, that of

¹⁰ Alastair Bonnett, "Whiteness and the West" (2003), in *New Geographies of Race and Racism*, ed. Claire Dwyer & Caroline Bressey (Aldershot & Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2008): 21.

¹¹ Michel Wieviorka, *The Arena of Racism*, tr. Chris Turner (*L'Espace du racisme*, 1991; London, New York & Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 1995): 28.

“psychological impotence, the inability to fend for themselves.”¹² According to Ivan Illich,

even with schools of equal quality, a poor child can seldom catch up with a rich one. Even if they attend equal schools and begin at the same age, poor children lack most of the educational opportunities which are casually available to the middle-class child. [...] So the poorer student will generally fall behind so long as he depends on school for advancement or learning. The poor need funds to enable them to learn, not to get certified for the treatment of their alleged disproportionate deficiencies.¹³

Ellen and Daphne are conscious of the ‘deficiencies’ in the school.

Such a schism reveals the internal split in the concept of whiteness. Written immediately after the Second World War, Enid Blyton’s boarding-school fiction, like most of the adolescent fiction of the time, seems to be an attempt to bolster the spirit of the sagging British nation over the rest of Europe and America. The ethnic ‘otherness’ in the Enid Blyton series remains limited to a few girls who come to Malory Towers or St. Clare’s from the European continent or from North America. Written around the middle of the twentieth century, these stories largely ignore the world beyond Europe and America, though, ironically, it was a time when numerous immigrants from the former colonies moved to Britain, contributing to its ethnic diversity. That Asian or African children could study at the same schools seems to be beyond the author’s imagination. Blyton’s fictional schools are the repositories of national identity, which in the real world was being questioned by the conflicts inside and beyond the nation. The misfit of the school, like Zerelda, though she is an American, has the ability to fit in because she has British genes from her English grandmother. The reference to Zerelda’s pedigree seems to be a comment on the founding fathers of America and its historical and cultural proximity to Britain.

Whereas Blyton seems to expound her vision confidently, the absence of a large section of people who now formed a part of the English nation leaves a gap that reveals the covert messages of the text. However, the subsequent writers in the genre have to deal with the changing global landscape, power equations, and economic scenarios. While the opposition between whiteness and colour has become questionable, it has been superseded by another binary category which defines cross-cultural encounters – the Occident and the

¹² Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: HarperColophon, 1971): 4.

¹³ Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 9.

Orient. The colonialist ideology was founded on the distance between these ‘races’. This distance and difference immediately took on the binary distinction between irrational/rational, raw/cooked, evil/good, legitimizing the control of one group by another. Although colonial domination in its older incarnation is mostly dead, these binaries are not easy to erase from the collective psyche of both sides. The key to such racist ideology, as pointed out by theorists such as Loomba and Wieviorka, lies not in the dread of foreignness but in the anxiety caused by underlying semblance. The fear arises out of seeing one’s double in the Other; it is more disturbing than difference. The near-absence of any differential characteristic in the students from Asian or African backgrounds in the Potter series hints at a similar dread. Rowling devotes close attention to the appearance of her characters. Every book in the series has a reference to the vibrant red hair of the Weasleys, to Hermione’s bushy hair, and Harry’s green eyes and unkempt appearance. Minor characters like Sybil Trelawney, Alastor Moody, students from Beauxbatons and Drumstrang – all receive their due share of attention. By contrast, the attention given to the Patil twins and Cho is rare but worth a look. The Patil twins go to the Yule Ball with Harry and Ron. What they look like is never told directly, though Dean Thomas does wonder how Harry and Ron “got the best-looking girls in the year.”¹⁴ Later, there is a vague description of Parvati and Padma Patil

Parvati was waiting for Harry at the foot of the stairs. She looked very pretty indeed, in robes of shocking pink, with her long dark plait braided with gold, and gold bracelets glimmering at her wrists.¹⁵

‘Hi,’ said Padma, who was looking just as pretty as Parvati in robes of bright turquoise.¹⁶

Cho, however, has an important role to play as Harry’s first girlfriend. She is vaguely described as a pretty girl with long black hair. The focus is on Harry’s thoughts and reactions. Lack of any reference to their appearance on the basis of their ethnic origin hints at a more significant issue – that, despite their difference, they are the same. Despite belonging to different ethnicities, Parvati or Cho belong to the same world as Harry and his friends. In the post-colonial world order, it is not easy to distance somebody with reference to the

¹⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 358.

¹⁵ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 358.

¹⁶ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 359.

colour of skin or eyes. Nor is stereotyping of a non-European native a politically correct strategy. Twentieth-century white identity does not have the support of the scientific projections that established the difference between the races and immediately formed the basis of the hierarchical organization of races; nor do ethnographic studies leave any grounds for superiority based on culture, knowledge, or progress. The picture gets further complicated with the global movement of population, especially with the issue of the immigrants – the Others, often the erstwhile colonized, living amidst the English and claiming to be English. Rather than difference, it is this sameness that is problematical. Physical appearance can thus no longer establish distance and hierarchy; these need to be established by other strategies.

Complete ‘colour-blindness’ of the series seems to be one such unconscious strategy. The Other races are not really different except in their names. Apart from that, everybody is the same – and ‘same’ does not mean equal; it means that beneath the cultural differences all the students share the normative white identity. Anatol points out the ideological bind that Rowling finds herself in:

while she perhaps attempts to display a “colorblind” society where everyone is distinguished solely by magical ability, she makes it supremely easy for the reader to forget (or ignore) the multiethnic surroundings that she initially seeks to establish.¹⁷

Anatol identifies the trap into which the text falls.

In stressing the liberal humanist message of “we are all the same beneath the surface”, and asserting that race and ethnicity should not be important in judging another person, Rowling’s text conveys the message that race and ethnicity are not important for those who experience life from this position – hardly true of late twentieth/early twenty-first century Britain, Canada, the United States, or much of the rest of the world.¹⁸

The multicultural associations are further called into question by the presence of stereotypes. In fact, stereotyping is carefully used to distance the central coterie from the peripheral characters. Cho Chang is important only as part of the romantic sub-plot. Her romance with Harry ends abruptly because, as we are told in the last few pages of Book 5, Cho “cried too much,” thereby fitting into the gender stereotype like the Patil twins, who often behave in a silly manner.

¹⁷ Anatol, “The Fallen Empire: Exploring Ethnic Otherness in the World of Harry Potter,” 174.

¹⁸ Anatol, “The Fallen Empire,” 173.

On the other hand, Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger are important because of the aid they can provide in Harry's quest. Though romantically involved, they are also crucial to the main narrative. They fight along with Harry to save the world. In the Yule ball held during the tournament, most of the couples are interracial – Cedric and Cho, Fred and Angelina, Ron and Padma, and Harry and Parvati. And cultural otherness is assigned to the female characters. According to Ania Loomba, "'Race' as a concept receives its meanings contextually, and in relation to other social groupings and hierarchies, such as gender and class."¹⁹ Despite the cross-cultural love affairs, an endogamic principle is reflected in the happier romantic liaisons of Harry as well as Ron.

Apart from the ethnic minorities in the school, the non-European wizards are conspicuous by their dubious presence at the Quidditch World Cup and by an even more significant absence from the Triwizard tournament. In the campground of the World Cup, Harry sees witches and wizards from other nations. The representations are brief but fairly stereotypical:

Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire, while a group of middle-aged witches sat gossiping happily beneath a spangled banner stretched between their tents which read: *The Salem Witches' Institute*.²⁰

An African referee in the final game of Quidditch World Cup between Ireland and Bulgaria cuts a ridiculous figure.

Harry looked down at the pitch. Hassan Mostafa had landed right in front of the dancing Veela, and was acting very oddly indeed. He was flexing his muscles and smoothing his moustache excitedly.

'Now, we can't have that!' said Ludo Bagman, though he sounded highly amused. 'Somebody slap the referee!'

A mediwizard came tearing across the pitch, his fingers stuffed in his own ears, and kicked Mostafa hard on the shins. Mostafa seemed to come to himself; Harry, watching through the Omnioculars again, saw that he looked exceptionally embarrassed, and was shouting at the Veela, who had stopped dancing and were looking mutinous.²¹

¹⁹ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998): 21–22.

²⁰ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 76.

²¹ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 100.

Thus, by stereotyping and distancing the Other, the centre of power is firmed up through distancing the Other on the periphery through various means. The Other becomes part of the culture, but the point of assimilation is marked with tension. She is an insider and an outsider simultaneously, a marker of the boundaries which have to be perpetuated to maintain the centre. Even as the margins are appropriated, their location has to remain the same for the centre to define itself with respect to it.

Within the series, racism functions at a level which is not a

direct, immediate transcription of representations and perceptions of the Other and of prejudices, but, rather, an expression distanced from it to a greater or lesser degree, a set of practices which have acquired a certain autonomy and a dynamic of their own, but a dynamic which is shaped by contradictory affects and interests arising out of history and the work of society on itself.²²

So Wieviorka points out the paradox that, “by institutionalizing itself, [racism] is able partially to elude the consciousness of the actors and, at the same time become an integral part of various fields of social life.”²³

In peaceful times in the Wizard World, there is no project to separate the other groups. But the disturbing subtext of the ‘inclusive’ world of Potter becomes clearer when one considers the treatment of magical races. Anatol points out actual racial characteristics given to the fantastical races like the house-elves in their appearance and their ‘fitness’ as slaves, the giants in terms of their tribal organization, and the werewolves, where the attitude to the problem (whether medical or racial) is ambivalent. Harry as well as the reader learn about other races from Ron. Ron is an important character in this respect, since he comes from a middle-class English family. Ron has been living in the magical world all his life. He has not only imbibed a thorough knowledge of its institutions but also its prejudices, which he mouths in an extremely un-selfconscious fashion. Throwing garden gnomes in the air is a great way to vent frustration; giants are evil; house-elves like to slave away their lives. When Remus Lupin, the best Defence Against Dark Arts teacher, turns out to be a werewolf (his surname is a giveaway), Ron cannot bear being touched by him even when he is saving Ron’s life. While other characters including Harry treat Lupin’s lycanthropy as a medical problem, Ron’s attitude hints at the socio-historical attitude of the wizards towards other races. What he cannot see is that the prejudices levelled against various fan-

²² Wieviorka, *The Arena of Racism*, 65.

²³ *The Arena of Racism*, 65.

tastic races are social, political, or cultural. The mythic narratives about the cruelty of giants and werewolves are challenged by the very presence of characters like Grawp and Lupin. While Ron insists that house-elves like slave labour, we have Dobby, who likes his freedom and wages. The presence of these characters on the borderline of the text challenges the apparent solidity of an authentic centre by juxtaposing unexpected alternate narratives. It leads to a crisis for the player from the dominant field, like Ron, who fears that he is threatened and therefore uses the “fund of historical and cultural reference [...] the elements of non-social identity which is negative for the Other-classed as evil and inferior – but positive for the racist actor.”²⁴ Thus Dobby is a freak, while the normative behaviour for the house-elves is espoused by Winky, Hokey, and even Kreacher, all of whom, though loyal, are yet not intelligent enough to discriminate between good and evil. Through Kreacher’s treachery, the mythical image of the house-elves, the Other race, is naturalized and demonized. Dobby’s individuality is an anomaly in such a collectivity.

It is also interesting to note the spatial segregation of various races in the magical world. Centaurs live in the forests, merpeople in the deeps, giants have been sent to the faraway mountains. Even in the domestic sphere, house-elves are rarely seen outside the kitchen. Such segregation might be a basis of security and resources for an individual but assumes a different character when seen in racial terms, when it is reinforced by discrimination.

However, while Ron’s attitude can be seen as a kind of xenophobia linked to the communal identity of the wizard world, it is still disjointed. Once his fears about Hagrid and Lupin, that they are out to destroy the wizard race, are allayed, Ron is comfortable in their presence, provided they behave like true wizards. On the higher level, racism becomes a principal political force. At Hogwarts, functioning under the aegis of the Ministry of Magic with Dolores Umbridge at the helm, racism is political, inspiring debate and pressure, creating contexts favourable to violence, or using that as an instrument to seize control. Umbridge’s attitude to giants, werewolves, and centaurs does not stop at personal prejudice; it takes the form of an ideological force formulating policies that promote discrimination and segregation.

The final stage is, of course, achieved by the Voldemort, whose Death Eaters are organized along racist lines. Programmes for exclusion and extermination form a major part of the organizational activity. Knowledge, institu-

²⁴ Wieviorka, *The Arena of Racism*, 50.

tions, values – all are subordinated to the racial principle that elevates the pure-blood wizards above all the rest. There is no possibility of debate or protest. Thus the Ministry and the Death Eaters exemplify what Wiewiorka calls two “logics of racialization”: the logic of difference, as in the case of Voldemort’s Death Eaters, who believe that there is only one dominant race of the pure bloods to which other races can only bear the relation of being dominated; and the logic of inequality: i.e. Ministry’s racism, which functions by segregation and exclusion, since each alternative order represents a potential threat. Thus, although, on the initial level, racialism is governed by social conflicts and structural stratification of society, on the subsequent levels, as exemplified by the Ministry and the Death Eaters, it is closer to calls for homogeneity, purity, and the expulsion of heterogeneity and difference.

In making this criticism, we do not mean to advocate any rule in which all stories must represent, and ‘justly’ so, at least one character of Other ethnic or racial background; nevertheless, it does throw light on covert traditional attitudes that underline various approaches to postcoloniality and multiculturalism today. The importance of such questioning lies elsewhere. What is the text trying to constitute in terms of identity? With the issue of immigration, the global movement of population, and late capitalism, which does not allow for any identification between the economic enterprise and the nation, most nations seem to be dealing with an identity-crisis. What constitutes British identity today? The question is especially relevant in the context of the boarding-school story, whose central concern has always been the ‘true’ British citizen. Rowling’s fantasy deals with the silence that greets the question of identity. Fantasy works constantly to exacerbate anxiety and consolidate the centre. Harry, through a series of fantastical events, becomes the centre of the series, the only person who can save the world. Characters from racially different backgrounds as well as the main characters, who are, of course, English, remain ignorant of any issue of difference. They may be Indians, or Chinese, or Africans, but they are all British – citizens of an assimilationist society where the core values are those of the historically hegemonic class and racial culture. Blending with the mainstream English population means “renouncing – often in clearly public ways – one’s subjectivity, who one literally was: in name, in culture, and as far as possible, in color.”²⁵ Rowling’s magical world may depict twenty-first-century diversity; nonetheless, such (non-)representa-

²⁵ David Theo Goldberg, “Introduction: Multicultural Conditions,” 16.

tion is highly ambivalent. Rowling's position therefore looks more like what Goldberg calls "weak multiculturalism" – a token tribute to plurality.

This consists in a strong set of common, universally endorsed, centrist values to which everyone – every reasonable person, irrespective of the divisions of race, class, and gender – can agree. These universal principles are combined with a pluralism of ethnic insight and self-determination, provided no particularistically promoted claim is inconsistent with the core values.²⁶

Rowling does try to present some platforms for incorporation of group identities – for instance, the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, or SPEW, instituted by Hermione Granger. However, not only does the Society suffer from the attitude of mainstream characters like Ron and his brothers, there is a problem with the attitude of Hermione as well. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Dobby is satisfied with his few days off and meagre wages, which for Hermione are still too little, too exploitative.

'And Professor Dumbledore says he will pay Dobby, sir, if Dobby wants paying! And so Dobby is a free elf, sir, and Dobby gets a Galleon a week and one day off a month!'

'That's not very much!' Hermione shouted indignantly from the floor, while Winky continued screaming and fist-beating.²⁷

Hagrid's opposition to her project highlights its basic weakness. Hermione cannot see that house-elves and their way of life is different from that of the wizards. The values of the dominant order, their definitions of freedom and equality, are the rational and the right values. If Ron's attitude smells of racial prejudice, Hermione can be seen to be suffering from the paradox faced by intellectuals who saw westernization as a source of liberty that led to decolonization.

Rowling's position therefore resembles what Stanley Fish calls boutique multiculturalism, characterized by "ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals" ... a 'cosmetic relationship' to the Other. The interesting thing is that the boarding-school genre had been more or less dead for many years before J.K. Rowling resurrected it, and now it has become a huge success. This is what makes the questioning or, rather, examining of the representation of this social image relevant.

²⁶ David Theo Goldberg, "Introduction: Multicultural Conditions," 16.

²⁷ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 330.

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Streets and Transformation in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and "Stuart"

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FEW FIRST NOVELS HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED TO THE ACCLAIM that accompanied Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* in early 2000. Smith was only twenty-four years old; the first publicity photos showed a pensive writer with short hair and funky glasses. She had just completed her undergraduate studies at Cambridge University, and, as the daughter of an English father and a Jamaican-born mother, she was heralded as a voice of the new multicultural, multiracial Britain that *White Teeth* chronicles. The novel circles around the lives of three families: Samad and Alsana Iqbal, Bangladeshi immigrants with twin sons, and Archie and Clara Jones, an English-West Indian family with one daughter, who are linked in a friendship forged when the two fathers served together in the Second World War; the third family, the Chalfens, are white Londoners, intellectuals and writers, whose eldest son attends the same state school as the others' children. Through the conjunctures and contradictions generated by these character groupings, *White Teeth* explores such wide-ranging issues as history, racism, imperialism, generations, legacies of Empire, genetic manipulation, and contemporary urban spaces. Writing in the *Observer* shortly after the novel was published, Stephanie Merritt describes it as "a broad, teeming, comic novel of multiracial Britain."¹ Her fellow novelist Caryl Phillips commends *White Teeth* for the pressing significance of the issues Smith tackled. "The plot is rich," he writes, "at times dizzyingly so, but *White Teeth* squares up to the two questions

¹ Stephanie Merritt, "She's young, black, British – and the first publishing sensation of the millennium," *The Observer* (16 January 2000), <http://books.guardian.co.uk> (accessed 4 April 2008).

which gnaw at the very roots of our modern condition: Who are we? Why are we here?"² In North America the novel was received with equal enthusiasm. The *New York Times* reviewer Anthony Quinn praises Smith's ability "to inhabit characters of different generations, races and mind-sets" and sums up *White Teeth* as "an eloquent, wit-struck book."³ Later commentaries offered similar assessments; in 2006, Jonathan P.A. Sell notes:

In tune with the *zeitgeist*, the novel's fusion of 'dirty realist' aesthetics and the social politics of multiculturalism was laced with a savvy, at times rollicking humour.⁴

Writing an early retrospective assessment in 2004, Bruce King calls *White Teeth* "the publishing sensation of 2000."⁵ Summing up the reception of the novel, Tracey L. Walters writes:

critics applauded Smith's ability to address a multiplicity of themes – religious fundamentalism, postcolonialism, hybridity aesthetics, and multiculturalism – in a single novel, complemented by a touch of humor.⁶

In anticipation of the novel's North American publication, Smith was invited by the *New Yorker* magazine, perhaps the most prestigious periodical venue for a writer in the USA, to contribute a short story to their December fiction issue. The result was "Stuart," a story that revisits the fluid, multicultural, multiracial, intergenerational streets and squares of public spaces in contemporary Britain, but represents the subtle and overt potential for violence lurking within these familiar sites. In *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004) John McLeod situates "the exuberance and wit" of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* in a set of emergent writings in which London is "confident, cognizant of its transcultural past, optimistic, full of creative energies nurtured from the conjunction of different times and places in both

² Caryl Phillips, "Mixed and Matched," *The Observer* (9 January 2000), <http://books.guardian.co.uk> (accessed 4 April 2008).

³ Anthony Quinn, "Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*," *New York Times Book Review* (30 April 2000): 8.

⁴ Jonathan P.A. Sell, "Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Auto-graph Man*: A Model for Multicultural Identity?" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.3 (September 2006): 28.

⁵ Bruce King, *The Internationalization of English Literature, 1948–2000* (Oxford English Literary History, vol. 13; Oxford: Clarendon, 2004): 289.

⁶ Tracey L. Walters, "Introduction" to *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, ed. Walters (New York: Peter Lang, 2008): 2.

city and self.”⁷ In a similar way, John Clement Ball draws on the urban theorists Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett to highlight the potential in the city streets for “productive disorder and intermixture, and for stimulating the imagination to roam in both familiar and ‘previously unthought’ directions.”⁸ In “Stuart,” Smith depicts a different London, one that is still “full of creative energies,” but with a telling difference – these energies bristle with the potential to set off contingent and unexpected violence. “Stuart” begins with a detailed description of daily activities on a crowded urban street, in ways that are sometimes evocative of the dazzling opening pages of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, and ends, unexpectedly, with a horrific clash that leaves a young man seriously hurt. If *White Teeth* is, as critics and reviewers have suggested, a novel celebrating the multicultural mix of late-twentieth-century London, “Stuart” articulates a more ominous reading of the city streets that are sites of incipient anger and fury.

In what follows, I will explore the intersections among ideologies of nation, ethnicity, and class that circulate on contemporary streets. In particular, I will foreground Smith’s use of the trope of metamorphosis to depict the tensions and contradictions with the construction of ‘Europe’ and ‘European’. “Stuart” is a story that reminds its readers that Europe is not a homogeneous entity, not just in a simple and direct way (many countries with many languages), but in a more complex entanglement of narratives about origins in classical Greece and Rome that exist in an uneasy tension with persistent assumptions (often unacknowledged) about northern and southern parts of the continent. Smith re-functions the stories of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to construct and represent another history of change: the overlapping and foundational stories of European democracies and contemporary immigration patterns from southern to northern Europe.



⁷ John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004): 188.

⁸ John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004): 25. Roger Luckhurst offers a much more nuanced discussion of MacLeod and Ball’s books than I can enter into here. Luckhurst, “Literary London: Post-, Ex-, Trans-, Neo-?” *English Studies in Canada* 31.2–3 (June–September 2005): 293–305.

I. Metamorphoses and the Streets of *White Teeth*

The hills, meadows, streams, and forests around Mount Olympus that are the sites for the tales recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are surprising, often dangerous places for those who traverse them. *Metamorphoses* chronicles stories of unexpected, sudden, and violent transformations, of moments when unanticipated turns of events alter human lives forever, when desires are reversed, often with the most brutal effects. Readers have only to recall some of the most famous of Ovid's short narratives: Daphne, pursued by Apollo, changing in a laurel tree ("Her soft breast was enclosed in thin bark, her hair grew into leaves, her arms into branches, and her feet that were lately so swift were held fast by sluggish roots"⁹); Callisto, becoming a bear ("her hands curved round, turning into crooked claws, which then served her as feet [...] A harsh growling issued from her throat, angry and quarrelsome, frightening to hear"¹⁰); Actaeon, the hunter, turned into a stag and fleeing his own hounds ("while [two dogs] held their master down, the rest of the pack gathered, and sank their teeth in his body, till there was no place left for tearing"¹¹). Metamorphosis was traditionally understood as a sign of divine presence, either bringing retribution (Actaeon, Callisto) or protection (Daphne). In the opening lines of his collection, Ovid calls on the "heavenly powers [...] responsible for these changes"¹² to look favourably on his attempts to re-tell the stories.

And yet, the first sentence of the *Metamorphoses* suggests a somewhat differently inflected interpretation, a more secular reading. "My objective," Ovid writes, "is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind."¹³ It is perhaps this stress on bodies altered that has made the *Metamorphoses* such an influential intertext in contemporary literatures which undertake to investigate changing attitudes to race, ethnicity, migration, and social transformation: think of the white girl turned brown girl in Suzette Mayr's *Moon Honey*, of the exploration of "becoming dog" in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, of the changing refugee mothers across centuries in Marina Warner's *The Leto Bundle*.

⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984): 43.

¹⁰ *Metamorphoses*, 63.

¹¹ *Metamorphoses*, 80.

¹² *Metamorphoses*, 29.

¹³ *Metamorphoses*, 29.

Like many of Ovid's tales, the plotline of "Stuart" is brutally stark, incorporating such familiar Ovidian motifs as the unexpected incident, the ensuing chase, and the final transformation.¹⁴ The story opens with a focus on two Greek immigrants working a hot-dog stand on a school holiday in the streets of a large, contemporary city, probably London. Their customers are three adolescents, who order hot dogs and drift about, drinking beer, awaiting the cooking of their fast food. Through a series of mishaps, initiated when one of the boys throws a beer can into a plastic tub containing paper napkins, one of the Greek vendors ends up chasing the half-drunk boy through the crowded streets. The final catastrophe unfolds when the Greek collides with a hugely overweight man, Stuart, violently knocking him down. Because of the force of the blow, because of Stuart's general awkwardness, or because of his immense weight, he is badly injured: "[his] stubby sausage of a right leg is bent backward at the knee. His foot is back-to-front. He is faced with his own heel like a puppet doing the cancan."¹⁵ Stuart's body is transformed, perhaps forever.

In *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*, Marina Warner comments that "metamorphosis often breaks out in moments of crisis"; she continues:

tales of metamorphosis often arose in spaces (temporal, geographical and mental) that were crossroads, cross-cultural zones, points of interchange on the intricate connective tissue of communications between cultures.¹⁶

These stories emerge where cultures and civilizations come into contact with each other:

all round the edge of the Mediterranean, in Egypt and in the great ports of Venice and Naples [...] along trade routes from far and wide, circulating via the bazaars and caravanseri of the Middle East....¹⁷

In other words, tales of metamorphosis are associated with sites in which interaction, or confrontation, with otherness cannot be avoided. They narrate,

¹⁴ Drawing on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* when he writes about Smith's 2003 novel *The Autograph Man*, Sell comments that "Smith is not engaged with cause or effects, but with the process of change itself" ("Chance and Gesture," 38–39).

¹⁵ Zadie Smith, "Stuart," 67. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

¹⁶ Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002): 16, 17.

¹⁷ Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*, 17.

sometimes obsessively, a fascination with 'being Other', with its dangers and anxieties, with the threat to what one is, alongside the parallel gravitation towards being something one is not. In this way, stories of metamorphosis manage the apprehensions aroused by otherness by giving imaginative form to transformations and to the process of change.

If, as Warner concludes, "it is characteristic of metamorphic writing to appear in transitional places and at the confluence of traditions and civilizations,"¹⁸ then the streets and public spaces of the multicultural metropolis would be an appropriate contemporary equivalent to the Silk Road cities and trading ports of earlier centuries. Saskia Sassen describes city spaces as "a geography of strategic places on a global scale, as well as the micro-geographies and politics unfolding within these places."¹⁹ Indeed, in *White Teeth* Smith often turns to the streets to represent the changes and transformations that have taken place in British society. From her perspective, the streets, parks, and playgrounds are the sites where the history of immigration in the twentieth century takes form in the diversity of human interactions. Her depictions should not be read in the simple sense that people of different races and ethnicities are present; rather, she underscores the contradictions encoded within the population:

you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish ponds, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete with them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks.²⁰

The children of mixed marriages (Jewish/East Asian; Celtic/South Asian; East Asian/Jewish (Irish?); Jamaican/English; these are only speculations) bear names encoded with the histories that precipitated their parents towards England. Did Isaac Leung's grandparents flee the Holocaust? Were Quang O'Rourke's parents boat people? What conflict might Danny Rahman's father have fled? Whereas the children play apparently unmindful of the pasts their names imply, the histories of twentieth-century migration – escapes from familiar villages or cities, long voyages and interminable waiting, the strange-

¹⁸ Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*, 18.

¹⁹ Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks CA: Pine Forge, 2nd ed. 2000): 4.

²⁰ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000): 326. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

ness of “cold arrivals” in facing both the harshness of immigration officials or refugee boards and a gray chilly climate – are an inescapable part of their families’ lives in England, or, in Pilar Cuder–Dominguez’s words, “a much longer history of colonization.”²¹ The verb “secretes” carries with it the sense of ‘hidden’ associations that a son or daughter might try to forget, together with the sense of ‘a return of the repressed’ that might seep back at an unanticipated, disconcerting moment, just as the Iqbal son Magid returns from Bangladesh an enthusiastic anglophile and not a devout Muslim, or as the Nazi Dr. Sick makes an unexpected appearance decades after the war.

But this is not all.²² Smith goes on to write about “best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best – less trouble)” (327), underlining the social assumptions about race (all too often unacknowledged) that are at work when people react to the two young friends: Sita must be brown, Sharon white, an easy supposition that the skin of the two girls confounds. When she has drawn her readers’ attention to mixed-race children in a playground and two girls’ inter-racial friendship (affirmative images, inflected with her now-famous humour), Smith takes up the more insidious racist reactions to the multicultural society that England has become. Here the wordplay of “secrete/secret” opens out into the horrific violence of racism concealed in the obscurity of urban darkness: “young white men who are *angry* [...] who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist” (327). This abrupt deflection from children at play to drunken racist thugs looking for a fight is an astonishing metamorphosis – one that is latent in what Smith calls “the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white [...] the century of the great immigrant experiment” (326), always threatening to break out. If Smith’s paragraph began with the optimistic figure of youth at play (children are traditionally figures of hope for the future), it nevertheless ends with a frightening metonym of racist violence – the fist curled around a knife, angry young toughs, primed for a fight.

²¹ Pilar Cuder–Dominguez, “Ethnic Cartographies of London in Bernardine Evaristo and Zadie Smith,” *EJES: European Journal of English Studies* 8.2 (August 2004): 183.

²² Critics (for example, Ball, *Imagining London*, 242; Cuder–Dominguez, “Ethnic Cartographies of London,” 183) cite this passage to stress Smith’s representations of hybridity and the continuing effects of colonization. They do not explore the connection to Smith’s subsequent figure of the racist young men on the following page.

In other parts of *White Teeth*, the streets conceal and disclose uncanny markings of personal pain and historical conflict. Near the climax of the novel, Millat Iqbal, now a young Islamic radical, pauses to contemplate a curious marker of family history in that most iconically English space of London, Trafalgar Square. Millat seeks out a bench under which is a scrawled name, "Iqbal." Years earlier, his father Samad had written his name in blood from his bleeding thumb, injured in a workplace accident, and then scratched the letters into the stone with a pen-knife, leaving the "murky rust" (505) that Millat can still perceive. Almost immediately, Samad regrets the gesture; it expresses his desire to "write *my name on the world*. It meant *I presumed* (505)." He goes on to connect his action with the histories of colonialism in the distant and near past:

Like the Englishmen who named streets in Kerala after their wives, like the Americans who shoved their flag in the moon. It was a warning from Allah. He was saying: Iqbal, you are *becoming like them*. That's what it meant. (505–506)

For the first-generation immigrant Samad, the act of writing his name in a moment of physical pain and psychic despair represents a cautionary lesson, a portent that he is slipping away from his faith and taking on the possessive individualism of a citizen of capitalism. For the second generation, however, the gesture is simply a confirmation of the insignificance of an immigrant restaurant worker ("a faulty, broken, stupid, one-handed waiter of man, who had spent eighteen years in a strange land and made no more mark than this," 506). In Millat's view, "It just meant *you're nothing*" (506). There can be no doubt that the son's dismissive assessment locates a moment of truth for his father, whose work as a waiter subjects him to daily condescension from co-workers and constant slights of paltry tips from customers (54–58). At the same time, Samad's fear underlines a more insidious process, a wearing-away of the internal qualities that define him as a man, a father, a husband, a friend, a member of a community, and a resituating of him within the constructions of individualism in advanced Western capitalist countries. Smith emphasizes that migration to the North is not only a spatial displacement, but also a psychological transformation. She will return to similar issues in "Stuart."

That Samad has scratched the Iqbal name under a bench in Trafalgar Square nevertheless carries a certain weight of signification, inasmuch as it inscribes the presence of a Bangladeshi immigrant in a celebrated space of central London. Trafalgar Square is bounded on the north by the National Gallery with its magnificent collection of European and English art and the

National Portrait Gallery with its historically themed images of the great men (and some women) of the nation. At the Square's centre is the statue of Viscount Horatio Nelson, the admiral who defeated the French and Spanish fleets during the Napoleonic wars and who used the English ships under his command to harshly repress an Enlightenment-inspired uprising against a Bourbon monarchy in Naples; to one side is a statue of Sir George Havelock, the general who suppressed the Indian Mutiny with unrestrained brutality, and the very man who ordered the execution of the Iqbal ancestor and instigator of the rebellion, Mangal Pande.²³ When Millat turns away from the bench under which his father's name is scrawled and walks towards Havelock, he reflects on colonization and modes of domination: "That's why Pande hung from a tree while Havelock the executioner sat on a chaise lounge in Delhi. Pande was no one and Havelock was someone" (506), and whispers to the father he had dismissed as "nothing": "*That's it. That's the long, long history of us and them. That's how it was. But no more*" (506). As Rebecca Dyer points out, the social and cultural emotions that memorials generate can never be controlled; Smith "undercuts official British memorialization by demonstrating that the desire of 'Englishmen' to 'never forget' can have quite unexpected consequences."²⁴ Whereas Samad had repeatedly faced the derision of his sons (and others) when he told his stories of Pande's resistance to British colonialism,²⁵ now that Millat is face-to-face with Havelock's statue the narratives resurface in a gesture of defiance to the erasure of his family's and his nation's history: "Ding, ding, said Millat out loud, tapping Havelock's foot.... Round two" (507). That Smith figures Millat's challenge in the image of a boxing match

²³ Padmaja Challakere notes "the complexity of the relation" between Pande, a Hindu, and Samad, a Muslim, who claims him as an ancestor; Challakere, "Aesthetics of Globalization in Contemporary Fiction: The Function of the Fall of the Berlin Wall in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Nicolas Royle's *Counterparts* (1996), and Philip Hensher's *Pleasured* (1998)," *Theory and Event* 10.1 (2007), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_&_event (accessed 25 May 2006), para. 16. Astrid Erll reads the Hindu great grandfather of a Muslim as an instance of "the constructedness of memory," suggesting that Samad might have adopted the figure of early resistance to colonization as an ancestor; Erll, "Re-writing as Re-visioning: Modes of Representing the 'Indian Mutiny' in British Novels, 1857 to 2000," *EJES: European Journal of English Studies* 10.2 (August 2006): 177.

²⁴ Rebecca Dyer, "Generations of Black Londoners: Echoes of 1950s Caribbean Migrants' Voices in Victor Headley's *Yardie* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*," *Obsidian* 111 5.2 (Fall–Winter 2004): 94.

²⁵ See, for example, the reactions of Millat (225–26) and of Mickey–Abdul, the owner of O'Connell's Pool House (247).

underscores an unsettling combination of candour and artificiality. The young man's challenge is a heartfelt recognition of the suffering of subordinate populations, but its flamboyance – imitating a bell, touching the foot – is made possible by the inert bronze of the statue. At the same time, his intensity indicates, as Dyer suggests, that “Millat has come to care deeply about Pande's execution and to desire revenge for it”;²⁶ the most important aspect of this transformation (another metamorphosis) is “an indication that his father's stories did have an effect.”²⁷ In Smith's *mise en scène*, it is the urban space of large city square in which the juxtaposition of the private anguish of a dispirited immigrant and the public memorializing of the heroicized figures of colonialism facilitates a son's movement towards the father he had rejected.

II. “Stuart” and Witnessing

How do people watch an urban street? How do pedestrians track the movement around them? What is noticed and what is ignored? These are some of the questions raised in the story “Stuart,” Smith's most focused exploration of metamorphosis and the casual behaviour through which race and class are constructed in the crowded streets of the contemporary city. The story's narrative begins with an epigraph from Russian popular culture (“He lies like an eyewitness,” 60). This distrust of visual reportage is immediately denied by the narrator in the first line of the story – “This is the truth, whichever way you look at it” (60) – a claim that promises an accurate eyewitness account. Through such obvious contradiction, Smith draws readers' attention to the tensions that circulate in and through the streets of the metropolis – like Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, that loiterer on city streets, whose long walks through the metropolis offer the opportunity to witness, feeding, as Benjamin puts it, “on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes.”²⁸ Writing about Paris in the Second Empire of the mid-nineteenth century, Benjamin locates the emergence of a *flâneur* literature in the *physiologies*, little books, “modest-looking, paperbound, pocket-sized volumes,”²⁹ that investigated the diversity of people to be found on the urban street. “From the itinerant street vendor of the boule-

²⁶ Rebecca Dyer, “Generations of Black Londoners,” 96.

²⁷ Dyer, “Generations of Black Londoners,” 96.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1999): 417.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, tr. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973): 35.

wards to the dandy in the foyer of the opera-house,” writes Benjamin, “there was not a figure of Paris life that was not sketched by a *physiologue*.”³⁰ Influenced by this reportage of street life, the *flâneur* has a strong affiliation with the journalist, hence with the structural positioning of the eyewitness: “Once a writer had entered the marketplace, he looked around as in a diorama.”³¹

One of the books about witnessing the city that inspired Benjamin in writing the *Arcades* project was Louis Aragon’s collection *Le paysan de Paris* (translated as *Paris Peasant*).³² Consisting of two long essays, the first on “the passage de l’Opéra,” the final surviving nineteenth-century arcade, slated for demolition and redevelopment when Aragon wrote, and the second on the “Parc des Buttes-Chaumont,” a crescent-shaped park in the Belleville district far from the prestigious spaces of the Tuileries or Luxembourg. Aragon’s title does not imply a rural visitor newly arrived in the city. Rather, he evokes the city-dweller who invests urban spaces with the warm attachment and deep knowledge with which a peasant regards cultivated and grazing land. Just as a rural peasant has an intimate awareness of the slope of a hill, the texture of soil, so Aragon’s “Paris peasant” lovingly observes and contemplates the city streets, shops, pedestrians, and their interactions. He notices the “glaucous gleam”³³ of the light seeping through the dirty glass of the arcade; he enumerates the startling variety of canes in a shop, their “bouquets of pommels”³⁴ carved from precious woods, ivory, rattan, and horn; he spins out a whole “palette of blondnesses,”³⁵ reflecting on the cut strands fallen onto the floor of a hairdresser’s shop; he inserts into his text the signs he encounters in the arcade: a list of theatre ticket prices; the charges for drinks posted over a bar.³⁶ Falling into a playful reverie, he muses on a series of puns around “ephemeral” (“ÉPHÈMÈRE,” “Les faits m’errent”; “LES FAIX, MÈRES”³⁷). The sequence of puns – I have quoted only a few – underlines what is the per-

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 35.

³¹ *Charles Baudelaire*, 35.

³² Benjamin’s short essay “Arcades,” written in 1927, draws on *Paris Peasant* and Aragon’s account of the Passage de l’Opéra, published in the previous year. See *The Arcades Project*, 871–82.

³³ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, tr. Simon Watson Taylor (*Le paysan de Paris*, 1926; London: Jonathan Cape, 1971): 28

³⁴ Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 35–36.

³⁵ *Paris Peasant*, 52.

³⁶ *Paris Peasant*, 42–46, 81, 91.

³⁷ *Paris Peasant*, 103.

haps the most characteristic of the arcade and the streets – constant change, movement, motion.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Smith's narrator, watching the urban street, focuses first on one of the most mobile forms of commerce in the city: "a hot-dog stall, with no name that you'd notice" (60). Unlike the heavily marked fast-food franchises that line city streets, the hot-dog stall is portable, without walls, open to the movements of passersby. The stall attracts customers from the street, serves its merchandise, and sends them back into the motion of the city crowds. Of the two Greeks who run the stall, one is "huge as hell, with a melon for a face: round, yellowish, moist, pitted with black-headed acne – and yet, genial, all the same" (60). The narrator goes on to comment: "It's a triumph on his part not to look cruel. But then maybe he's just not rich enough to do cruel. Maybe cruel takes more money" (60). The other Greek is smaller, shorter, "bull-browed and rivet-jawed" (60), and described as "mean looking, which can often be a mere accident of physiognomy but other times proves to be right on the money" (60). The narrator therefore sets up a tension between a viewers' initial impression, which all too often is the only awareness of another on city streets: the first Greek looks unnerving, but is good-humoured; the second looks brutal, but might not be. In concluding her description with a colloquial metaphor drawn from betting, "right on the money," Smith enmeshes viewers' judgments with the exchange economy of the marketplace and with the chance of placing a bet. First impressions might be all that the contemporary *flâneur* has, but they are as shaky as betting money on a horse race, never a sure thing.

Like the lying eyewitness in the Russian proverb, Smith's narrative is constructed around the multiple misrecognitions that characterize the streets of the metropolis. As she writes, "In this city, you might miss your nemesis in a crowded shop in the morning and fight your friend in a park in the afternoon, never knowing your mistake" (64). Misrecognition is complicated by the tangle of animal and natural imagery with which the characters are repeatedly described: the boys have "limbs like the extremities of flamingos" (60) and "they are always in a pack and on the move" (61); in the chase one runs "darting like an okapi" (66); the young girls "twitter" like birds (61); the smaller Greek is "bull-browed" (60). The narrator's description of the hot-dog vendors stresses bodily excretions ("the battalion of sweat advancing from the armpits," 60) and tenacious dirt ("for somebody who is preparing food for the public, his nails leave a lot to be desired," 60), positioning them as sheer physicality, sheer body. Smith's figurative language creates an

imaginative world in which the intersection of the human, the animal, and biology are foregrounded. Discrete categorizations seem to break down and dissolve in the motion of the city streets.

III. North and South in the City

The narrator's descriptions of the two men that stress their bodies (a "battalion of sweat"; "front-line grime on collars, on cuffs"; "hairy" digits, 60) situate the immigrant Greek vendors within a persistent social, economic, and ideological division of northern and southern Europe, a split that separates the continent into an industrialized, wealthy, efficient North and an agricultural, impoverished, wasteful South. Antonio Gramsci succinctly characterizes the ideological assumptions that circulate around these ideas as follows:

Southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or total-barbarians, by natural destiny; if the South is backward the fault does not lie with the capitalist system or with any other historical cause, but with Nature, which has made the Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric – only tempering this harsh fate with the purely individual explosion of a few great geniuses, like isolate palm-trees in an arid and barren desert."³⁸

Gramsci is commenting on the north/south division within Italy, but his description accurately portrays a broader split in Europe as a whole. There is no doubt that the oppositions within this powerful ideological complex can certainly function in reverse, so that the South becomes a space of sensuality and freedom from the relentless, routinized monotony of the North. Fictions as diverse as Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of a Dove*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, E.M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View*, more recently Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, Angela Carter's "The Tiger's Bride," and Patricia Duncker's *Hallucinating Foucault* amply demonstrate a configuration where the South is a site of liberation from the North. It is, however, the opposition figured by Gramsci that motivates internal European migration as the inhabitants of the more impoverished South seek work, modernity, and different lives, in the wealthier North. Beginning with the prosperity of the mid-1960s and 1970s, Europe experienced a massive internal migration in which labourers from Turkey, Greece, Spain, Italy, Yugoslavia,

³⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. & tr. Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971): 444.

and Portugal were recruited as guest workers in the booming economies of the North. As John Berger and Jean Mohr point out in their classic study *A Seventh Man*, in 1975 one of every seven labourers in Europe was a migrant or 'guest' worker.³⁹ With the emergence of the European Union and the flexibility of older national boundaries, economic migration has increased, and it is undoubtedly as part of this global traffic in human bodies that the Greeks have found themselves selling hot dogs in an English metropolis. Indeed, their small marketplace has adopted the values of the North: "Everything runs pretty smoothly. Organized. Efficient. That's the only way to make it in this country. And you don't need to tell these guys that" (60). And yet, the thrifty productivity of the hot-dog stand cannot remain only economic; it has the power to transform the two Greeks, to wear away, bit by bit, who they are. Berger and Mohr point out that the migrant worker has value only through labour:

It is not men who immigrate but machine-minders, sweepers, diggers, cement mixers, cleaners, drillers, etc. This is the significance of temporary migration. To re-become a man (husband, father, citizen, patriot) a migrant has to return home. The home he left because it held no future for him.⁴⁰

Just as Samad in *White Teeth* cautioned himself that he was in danger of losing the spirituality and community that had shaped him, so the Greek vendors in "Stuart" become little more or less than the actions that define their work:

Whoever has a hand free deals with the money. Wipes one hand on the corner of his apron, deals with the money. Exchanges coins, folds notes, opens and closes the cashbox – all with one hand. (60)

The easy substitution of one man for the other, the anonymity of the description ("whoever," "one hand"), and the lack of a subject in two sentence fragments ("Wipes..." "Exchanges...") – all this underlines the precariousness of the vendors' work: others (from Turkey? from Russia? internal migrants from Sheffield or Glasgow?) could easily replace them.

An awareness of the insecurity of their work is perhaps one reason why the vendors embrace their Greek identity. The apron of the big man is decorated

³⁹ Berger and Mohr's title also alludes to the Hungarian writer Attila József's poem "The Seventh."

⁴⁰ John Berger & Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man: The Story of a Migrant Worker in Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975): 58.

“with a coloured sketch of five famous Greek things: the Acropolis, a kabob, Socrates, Zeus, and, finally, defiantly, the Elgin marbles” (60). Mixing high culture and commonplace food (the Acropolis and the kebab), ancient history and mythology (Socrates and Zeus), and more recent colonial history (Lord Elgin’s snatching of the Parthenon marbles in the early 1800s), the apron signifies a general sense of ‘Greekness’. The smaller man’s apron is emblazoned with a flamboyant announcement, “Greek men do it better,” that might be a simple proclamation of macho bravado, but might also be a more complicated recuperation of masculinity in the face of work with little status. At the same time, however, by insisting on their Greek identities the two vendors situate themselves within another, competing ideological complex— the traditional historical narrative which locates the cultures of the Mediterranean, especially Greece and Rome, as the sources and origins of western European civilization. More significantly, the narrator repeats a bold commentary of hyperbolic self-justification that runs like a chorus through the big Greek’s mind: while the ancestors [of the English] “were swinging through the trees his were writing great books and sculpting white bodies; bigger than men and smaller than the gods; halfway between here and heaven” (64). Laying claim both to the historical achievements of Greek culture in its philosophy, literature, architecture and art, and, crucially, to an identity with the North (“sculpting white bodies”), the Greek negotiates an imaginary relationship with the real conditions (lower-class street vendor) of his existence. In a pivotal shift, the adjective “white” slips from one referent, the colour of the marble sculptures, to another, the “white” races of Northern Europe for whom the achievements of ancient Greece form a foundational culture. Although the narrator’s descriptions situate the Greek vendor alongside migrant workers from the South, his own self-image is aligned with ancient Greek civilization and all that it implies. Decisively, at the moment when he loses his temper and hits the boy, he also loses his ethnicity:

From now on, when people ask him where he’s from, he will have to think for a moment. Soon the answer Greece will feel as strange in his mouth as chalk. From now on, he’s from *Here*, subject to all the daily cruelties of this place. (65)

By losing his temper with the adolescent, he shifts into the harsh and precipitate judgments of the street, and, most significantly, slips away from the Platonic ideal of the man whose appetites, anger, and indignation are subordi-

nated to reason.⁴¹ This slippage is figured in the tone of Smith's narrative. Once the blow has drawn blood, the choral repetition which Smith's omniscient narrator had situated in the Free Indirect Discourse of the Greek's own mind is now re-stated externally:

The blood is a carmine red. Marios's ancestors were making wine that color, pouring it into goblets, comparing it to the sea, while everyone on this pavement was swinging from the trees. (65)

With the adjective "carmine," the reference to "goblets," and the allusion to the Homeric "wine-dark sea," Smith's narrative subtly detaches 'being Greek' from the angry hot-dog vendor and re-situates it within the cultural ideologies that circulate around the timeless achievements of Greek literature and philosophy. He becomes one more irritable and infuriated person on the crowded street, abandoning his geniality to start a fight with a young man barely more than a child.

The metamorphosis that Smith narrates here is the transformation of the migrant from the South into the inhabitant of the advanced capitalist North. Throughout the story, she depicts people in figurations of nature that evoke Ovid's tales: the boys' "spindly limbs like the extremities of flamingos" (60); the big Greek's "melon face" (60); the "bull-browed" smaller Greek (60); the "twittering" little girls (61); the centaur ring (60). The most crucial of these metaphoric transferences occurs in the incident that sets the fight in motion. The Greek attempts to throw the half-empty beer can into a street trash container, "a mouthy black bin, an obedient bulldog called to heel next to a traffic light" (63). In this metaphoric transformation, the familiar street object of a trash bin becomes a bulldog, the squat overshot jaw and brooding brows of that conventional symbol of Englishness. The bin's "refusal" – acting as an animate creature, not an object – to accept the can ensures the violent outcome, and motivates the conversion of the genial Greek into the infuriated man whose rage, unleashed on the crowded streets of the metropolis, is so disastrous for Stuart. At this critical moment in the story, it is almost as if the street bin has become alive to assert its Englishness against the Greeks who have migrated to the North. In his analysis of public spaces in Paris, Aragon stresses the mysterious power that persists in material artifacts: "Wherever the living pursue particularly ambiguous activities, the inanimate may sometimes

⁴¹ See Plato, *The Republic*, tr. & intro. Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1945): 129–38.

assume the reflection of their most secret motives.”⁴² Commenting on this paradoxical life of the inanimate, John McCole notes “in Aragon’s account the unconscious thoughts and secret motives that a slip of the foot can reveal attach to the place itself, not to the stroller.”⁴³ In this instance, the intention of the Greek vendor to pitch the beer can into the bin is thwarted by its metaphorical presence as an “English” bulldog that declares its claim to the street, and unleashes anger, punches, and the chase.

Other metamorphoses rapidly follow: the boy loses his adolescent awkwardness and loutish afternoon drunkenness, becoming a swift, supple runner (an Olympic sprinter, a Russian gymnast, 66); Stuart is cast out of his casual, languid stroll, and thrown into a world of suffering (“his whole body reverberates with the pain,” 67); the crowd on the street is roused from their conventional contempt of an obese man to sympathy for an injured pedestrian; Stuart is transformed from a man who walks, however awkwardly, to someone who is seriously harmed, possibly permanently disabled; finally, the incident itself is altered in the various accounts that onlookers – the eyewitnesses about whom Smith cautioned her readers in her story’s opening words – will tell and re-tell (“already [Stuart] has passed into anecdote, and those who didn’t see it are being told about by those who did,” 67). But perhaps the most significant transformation is the way globalization marks the streets of the metropolis. The focal point of “Stuart” is a pair of Greek vendors who sell hot dogs, a snack food with origins in the German frankfurter, popularized in the USA. The title character, Stuart, works in what must be the most widely recognized global fast-food companies – McDonalds – where the other employees (“Somalian, or Indian, or Caribbean,” 66) underscore the reliance of restaurant businesses on immigrant labour.

IV. Conclusion: Southern Migrant, Northern Metropolis

Arundhati Roy, the Indian writer and activist, comments on the difficulty of understanding increasingly complex global patterns, “What is happening to the world lies, at the moment, just outside the realm of common human understanding.”⁴⁴ She goes on to challenge artists and writers to “translate

⁴² Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 28.

⁴³ John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1993): 233.

⁴⁴ Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics* (Cambridge MA: South End, 2002): 32.

cash-flow charts and scintillating boardroom speeches into real stories about real people with real lives”⁴⁵ – in other words, to articulate in concrete forms the global flows of capital and the bio-power of labour. From a different but overlapping perspective, Ashley Dawson notes that “aesthetic works have a vital role to play in offering more sensitive and multifaceted accounts of the lived experience of migrants.”⁴⁶ In her story “Stuart,” Zadie Smith offers a nuanced account of an incident on the street of a contemporary metropolis that explores the struggles of migrant workers to maintain a sense of ethnic pride and self-esteem while the indignities of low-status labour and the incipient conflicts of crowded streets work to wear it away. Even the inanimate material objects on the street seem to spring into life against them. Smith invites her readers to consider how ‘Europe’ and ‘European’ circulate around a contradictory appropriation of the classical cultures of the South as foundational moments at the same time that the inhabitants of the South are often characterized as social and cultural inferiors. At a time when European Union policies encourage widespread movement of working populations, to see Europe as a homogeneous entity is, “Stuart” reminds readers, a crucial misperception.

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⁴⁵ Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics*, 32.

⁴⁶ Ashley Dawson, “The People You Don’t See: Representing Informal Labour in Fortress Europe,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 40.1 (January 2009): 126.

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TERRORISM, TRAUMA, LOSS

Bharati Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief" and the Politics of Mourning in the Aftermath of the Air India Bombing

FRED RIBKOFF

CLARK BLAISE AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S 1987 NON-FICTION WORK *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* opens with a statement of the facts on the bombing at Narita Airport in Tokyo, Japan and the one that took place

110 miles off the southwest coast of Ireland [...] in the forward baggage hold of Air India Flight 182, bound for New Delhi and Bombay, from Toronto and Montreal.¹

This statement concludes by emphasizing the fact that "Over ninety percent of the passengers [on Flight 182] [...] were Canadian citizens" and that this was "the worst at-sea air crash of all time [...] and] the bloodiest [act of terrorism] of the modern era." Blaise and Mukherjee's book attempts to counteract and expose a seemingly endless series of literal, political, institutional, and cultural acts of erasure evident in the history of the Air India disaster. In order to make their case, they provide a history of the roots of this disaster and interviews with various individuals, most notably the family of the victims of Flight 182. As they state in the introduction to their book,

When we began our research in January 1986, it seemed as though the Air India disaster (as it has come to be called) was in the process of disappearing from the larger Canadian consciousness. Politically, the tragedy was 'un-

¹ Clark Blaise & Bharati Mukherjee, *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (New York: Viking, 1987): 1. Further page references are in the main text.

housed', in that Canada wished to see it as an Indian event sadly visited on these shores by uncontrollable fanatics, and India was happy to treat it as an 'overseas incident' with containable financial implications. (ix)

Moreover, in the wake of the spectacular and surreal horrors of 9/11, undeniably the "the bloodiest [act of terrorism] of the modern era," an *American Tragedy* captured on film and replayed over and over again to the astonishment of all the world, with its own attendant wars on terrorism and ongoing public displays of grieving, the chances of the Air India tragedy, essentially a Canadian tragedy, of penetrating "the larger Canadian consciousness" to any significant and longstanding degree are slim. But, then again, there was, as it is commonly referred to, the Air India Inquiry, an event that permeated Canadian media, if not "Canadian consciousness," in 2006 and 2007.

The establishment of the Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182 was, in the spring of 2006, a controversial move on the part of the Canadian government under Harper. There were those, like the *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffrey Simpson, who believed that this Inquiry was simply an exercise in "ethnic politics," that it would uncover nothing new, and cost the Canadian taxpayer a great deal. Nonetheless, after the widespread media coverage of the emotional testimony of the family members of victims of the bombing in the fall of 2006 and the shocking testimony of people like James Bartleman (the senior intelligence officer in the Department of External Affairs in 1985) in the spring of 2007, it is far more difficult to question the value and need for the Inquiry. As a woman who lost her father on Flight 182 stated in early May of 2007 while the Inquiry was in full swing: "'We have had one trial, one independent review, and this an inquiry. Only now are some people coming forward with their knowledge'."² Prior to the Inquiry, Bartleman had never come forward with the fact that "he was shown a document citing a specific terrorist threat against an Air India flight, for the weekend of June 22–23."³ The Inquiry has uncovered new information, provided an opportunity for mourning for those most effected by this disaster, and, if nothing else, has served to underline just how much this tragedy was and is a Canadian tragedy: the lives lost on Air India Flight 182 on 23 June 1985 were largely Canadian; all indicators suggest that the terrorist plot was planned and carried out by Canadians; it was Canadian law-

² Quoted in Brian Hutchinson, "'Will justice ever be served?'," *National Post* (12 May 2007): A5.

³ Hutchinson, "'Will justice ever be served?'"

enforcement and security forces that failed to prevent this preventable and catastrophic crime; and it was the Canadian legal system that failed to convict anyone for the bombing of Flight 182. As Blaise and Mukherjee point out,

At a Toronto-area memorial service one year after the tragedy, the prime minister's office was still referring to the disaster as a tragedy for the "Indo-Canadian community," and it was left to an Opposition member of Parliament, Roland de Corneille, to state openly, "Not enough Canadians are deeply touched. Not too many realize it was Canadians who were killed. There still remains racism, a separatism that the loss affected them, and not us." The failure to acknowledge the victims of the crash as Canadians remains for most of the families the enduring political grief of Air India 182. (203)

The calls for a public inquiry by the families of those who were murdered were longstanding and the product of various forms of unresolved and complicated grieving processes. These calls, and the "political grief" manifest in them, were particularly resonant after the acquittals of 2005. In 2006, with a new conservative government in power, the calls of family members were heard and acted upon, but can a judicial inquiry conceived of and operating within the confines of the very judicial and security system that failed in the past satisfy and further the demands of mourning?

Despite the undeniable value of the Air India Inquiry, its two major goals appear to be at odds with one another and, to some extent, based on generally accepted, institutional, legal, political, cultural modes of conceptualizing and responding to loss and trauma that warrant critical examination. In his 1 May 2006 announcement of the Inquiry, Prime Minister Stephen Harper repeatedly suggested that the Inquiry will 1) help "bring closure to the families of the victims" and 2) "help prevent future terrorist acts against Canadian citizens [...] by seeking answers and confronting shortcomings in our current system."⁴ In other words, in addition to addressing 'systemic' and security issues, this Inquiry was intended as a means to mourn losses and heal the unbearable wounds of the bombing and everything that has happened since.

Was this a realistic and appropriate goal for what was essentially a judicial inquiry, one operating within the physical and procedural limits of a judicial system subject to political forces, to the extent that it was derailed by politically charged disputes, such as the one over the inclusion of secret docu-

⁴ Harper, Throne Speech (1 May 2006), <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1143> (accessed 5 May 2006). See also Jeffrey Simpson, "Harper chasing ethnic vote with Air-India inquiry," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto; 6 May 2006): A17.

ments? In April of 2007, John Major, the former Supreme Court judge who was in charge of the Inquiry, threatened to put a halt to the Inquiry if hundreds, if not thousands, of secret documents – ones that he had already seen – were not made available to the families of the victims and media.⁵ This Inquiry was, after all, a *public* inquiry. But how was the public nature of this Inquiry important to the goal of closure? What is ‘closure’, anyway?

It appears to mean different things to different people. For the Indian cabinet minister who spoke on 23 June 2005 at the annual memorial to the Air India disaster held in Ireland, the conviction of the two men acquitted of responsibility for the bombing would have meant justice, and thus closure.⁶ In 1997, with the improvement of communication between those responsible for the RCMP investigation into the bombing and the families of the victims, one British Columbia civil servant suggested that “‘It [justice] cannot convert a crime against humanity into a bearable life experience, [...] but it will help to heal the pain’.”⁷ Can anything – any institutional or therapeutic process – convert a crime against humanity into a “bearable life experience”? And if not, is it still possible, after the controversial acquittals of 2005, to “heal the pain”? As one woman who lost her two sons on Flight 182 testified at the Inquiry in September of 2006,

For 21 years, we have hung in limbo with no closure, as living dead.[...] We want to know how, where, why the system failed us Canadians. Only the truth will set us free and help us heal. I cannot take the sole responsibility that as a mother I put both sons on that plane.⁸

Administering punitive, legal justice is beyond the mandate and powers of the Air India Inquiry, but can it help to provide closure and healing? What is the relationship and distinction between closure and healing? If justice translates into closure, and justice is the only means to “heal the pain,” it is clearly unrealistic to expect the Air India Inquiry to provide closure.

But as one family member of the victims speaking in the aftermath of the 2005 acquittals has suggested,

⁵ Jim Brown, “Air-India inquiry set to resume despite dispute,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto; 3 March 2007): A7.

⁶ Kim Bolan, *Loss of Faith: How the Air-India Bombers Got Away with Murder* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005): 371.

⁷ Quoted in Barry Came, “A Community Trauma,” *Maclean’s* 110.33 (1997): 33.

⁸ Kim Bolan, “We are still shedding tears,” *Vancouver Sun* (27 September 2006): A5.

"This senseless mass murder [...] continues to rob us of our right to privacy, dignity, and justice. [...] The verdict appalled and decimated back to ground zero. All repressed memories of horror and terror returned. No one was accountable. [...] Is no one accountable except us who put them on a plane? Are we never destined to find closure?"

"Do not trivialize the magnitude of this tragedy by saying nothing can be done or twenty years have gone by. History will never forgive the impotence of our inaction. It is our belief that not having a public inquiry will just do that."⁹

If I read this statement correctly, closure, at least a measure of it, is possible and dependent on a public inquiry for it to occur. Closure is dependent on people in positions of power and responsibility being held "accountable." As one journalist stated after the 2005 acquittals, "If there cannot be justice for them [the family of the victims], it's time for accountability."¹⁰ The "impotence of [...] inaction" is the opposite of closure; in other words, closure comes with a sense of control and consequent relief from ongoing, torturous, unwarranted, unjust feelings of guilt. It seems that, until this burden of guilt is relieved and a sense of control is established, family of the victims (and others) will be subject to the re-emergence of repressed and unbearable memories and feelings of rage, outrage, and alienation. One man who lost his cousin took the stand at the Air India Inquiry in September of 2006 and said: "It is almost like we never existed. It is almost like I am not a human being."¹¹ But as Kim Bolan, the Vancouver reporter who has covered the bombings from the outset, stated about the initial days of testimony at the Air India Inquiry,

Two decades of frustration poured from the freshly opened wounds of family members who said they were grateful to finally be able to officially tell their stories.¹²

There is a sense of justice and control that goes beyond the legal conviction of those directly responsible for the crime. It appears to be born out of or dependent on a communal, nationwide, ritual mourning process fostered by, of all things, a judicial inquiry operating within and negotiating the limits of a

⁹ Quoted in Bolan, *Loss of Faith*, 372.

¹⁰ Ken MacQueen, "It Can't End Here," *Maclean's* 118.13 (2005): 18.

¹¹ Quoted in Kim Bolan, "Victims' families recall their despair," *Vancouver Sun* (26 September 2006): A14.

¹² Bolan, "Victims' families recall their despair."

Canadian legal and security system that has proven to be incompetent and racist or, at the very least, insensitive to Indo-Canadians. In his testimony at the Inquiry, Bob Rae, the man who conducted the initial review that led to the Inquiry, suggested that there was no apparent history of racism in the Air India investigation before and after the bombings, although “‘there is this issue of cultural insensitivity’.”¹³ Where is the line between racism and “cultural insensitivity”? Is there one?

Only if the Air India Inquiry answered or unearthed these questions will feelings of helplessness, dissociation, alienation, and misplaced guilt have been addressed and justice done. This is a tall order. There is indeed a sense of justice experienced with the relief of unjust guilt in particular. Unwarranted guilt of the kind experienced by those family members who survived may be a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, a disorder distinguished by what are commonly referred to as ‘flashbacks’ or the re-living of traumatic events *and* extreme feelings of guilt and shame related to overwhelming feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. According to Judith Herman, for trauma victims

Guilt may be understood as an attempt to draw some useful lesson from disaster and to regain some sense of power and control. To imagine that one could have done better may be more tolerable than to face the reality of utter helplessness.¹⁴

But, as all trauma theorists agree, in order to be free of post-traumatic stress disorder and mourn the losses associated with trauma, “the reality of utter helplessness” must be faced. In this case, however, helplessness and “cultural insensitivity” are inextricable. The process of facing helplessness and its accompanying feelings of guilt and shame requires that the trauma victim act as a witness by telling the story of trauma in full affective¹⁵ detail “in a dialogic context and with an authentic”¹⁶ or “empathic”¹⁷ listener who acts as survivor

¹³ Quoted in Jeff Sallot, “Judge asks about racism in Air-India crash probe.” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto; 5 October 2006): A6.

¹⁴ Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997): 54.

¹⁵ Henry Krystal, “Trauma and Aging: A Thirty-Year Follow-Up,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995): 788.

¹⁶ Dori Laub, “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Caruth (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995): 74.

¹⁷ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 136.

of trauma "by proxy,"¹⁸ but were the Canadian government and people equipped to hear and understand the tortured testimony of those whose family members were literally erased from existence? It is one thing to recognize and sympathize or even empathize with loss, but another to recognize and identify with minority voices whose community and sense of self have been violated and traumatized by terrorists as well as Canadian security, legal, and political processes. If the Canadian people undergo such a process of identification, they would be confronted with just how vulnerable and afraid they are as human beings and as a culture. On an individual and, ultimately, cultural level it would be to face the imminence and inevitability of their own death. According to Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist and author of the 1975 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*, culture is and has always been the primary means of death-denial. If this is the case – and, given the degrees of blindness and indifference of the Canadian security and political systems with regard to the handling of the Air India disaster from its earliest stages of conception, this seems to be the case – significant recognition of the vulnerability and humanity of the victims and family of the Air India bombing would lead to the re-evaluation of the very foundations of Canadian culture. According to Robert Jay Lifton, a psychotherapist who has treated survivors of both Hiroshima and the Holocaust, the "survivor by proxy" – potentially the Canadian public in this case – although "not exposed to what they [the survivors of trauma] were exposed," must "take [his or her] mind through, take [his or her] feelings through what they went through, and allow that in."¹⁹ As psychotherapists who treat trauma victims agree, this is a painful and problematical process for both victim and listener, both of whom are subject to "the central dialectic of trauma": "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud."²⁰ What if, as is the case here, the Canadian listener is directly or indirectly – as a member of the culture responsible for allowing the disaster to happen and the mishandling of the case and those most affected – also the victimizer? In *The Sorrow and the Terror*, Blaise and Mukherjee state:

¹⁸ Robert J. Lifton, "The Image of 'The End of the World': A Psychohistorical View," in *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?*, ed. Saul Friedlander, Gerald Holton, Leo Marx & Eugene Skolnikoff (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 145.

¹⁹ Lifton, "The Image of 'The End of the World'," 145.

²⁰ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1.

the Air India disaster was a Canadian tragedy from the beginning, growing in part from a national character flaw: the comfortable myth of instinctive goodness. The bedrock certainty of “it can’t happen here,” which translates into complacent airport security, yields only slightly to partial revision: “Sad as it is, it’s not really our problem.” That attitude lay behind the misplaced condolences in Prime Minister Mulroney’s call to Rajiv Gandhi on learning of the crash: it’s theirs, not ours, and it’s a terrible pity. It *still* hasn’t happened here. (203)

Leading up to the above statement, the authors expose the underbelly of the Canadian sense of identity and the systemic perpetuation of it:

Canada’s uneasy balance between authoritarianism and liberal democracy is upset only when threats to its stability are perceived as challenges to mainstream society. This is consistent with British political traditions, in which Parliament, not the individual, is sovereign. (Other examples of reversion to authoritarianism are the uprooting of west coast Japanese Canadians in World War II; the mustering of a small flotilla of naval gunboats in the “*Komagata Maru*” incident to oust a boatload of would-be East Indian settlers in Vancouver in 1914; and, of course, the military actions against Louis Riel’s short-lived *Metis* (French-Indian) “nation” in western Canada in the 1880s.) Race has been a prominent issue, a challenge to white supremacy, in most of these major overreactions. However, if mainstream society is not directly affected, incidents like the Air India disaster or the communal tensions leading up to it can be treated as something “ethnic,” a disturbance in the multicultural mosaic. Many of the grieving Air India families and many anti-Khalistani Sikhs wonder why their requests for government review of slanderous broadcasts and libelous editorials in Canada’s Punjabi-language media, of death-threats and even assaults were not followed up. Some feel that strong government action in 1983 and 1984 would have indicated to the Khalistanis operating in Canada that they were under close surveillance, and not exempt from accountability. (201)

Was the Air India Inquiry a break with this tradition of racism or simply a continuation of it – or a bit of both? But perhaps that is the wrong question. Perhaps the right question is: Did the Inquiry manage to unearth systemic failures and prejudices and foster a genuine communal mourning process in which the limits and blind-spots of Canadian culture were exposed? Given the obstacles inherent to the psychotherapeutic process of treating trauma victims, how is it possible for those in a courtroom or those in the larger Canadian population to engage in an ‘authentic’, fully affective, empathic process and help foster what one trauma theorist has called “the holy grail of an integrated

personality"²¹ on individual, communal, and national levels, given that those testifying to loss are expressing extreme feelings of outrage?

If anything close to such integration, or closure, for that matter, took place with the help of the Air India Inquiry, those listening to the testimony of family members of the victims must, it seems, have undergone the painful work of acting as "survivor by proxy." The former Supreme Court Justice John Major's insistence that the testimony of family members of the victims occupy the first weeks of the Air India Inquiry was and is, from this psychotherapeutic perspective, absolutely appropriate and necessary, despite the reality of the politics of mourning (political and legal disputes, contradictory testimony, secrecy, etc.) inherent in this public Inquiry. The Inquiry was a necessity for the people closest to those who were murdered and those on the outside attempting to integrate this crime against humanity into their conception of themselves, their nation, and humanity. But those on the outside must somehow allow the unimaginable horror of the traumatic event and its impact on those who lost family and friends *in*, if such communal mourning and integration is ever going to occur.

Indeed, the problems with the ongoing criminal investigation and the Air India Inquiry appear to be rooted in more than systemic failures in security and policing, racism, conspiracy or cover-ups by authorities, the literal erasure of essential wiretaps, and the absences inherent to this crime without a surviving witness and minimal material evidence. The problems appear to be rooted in a form of denial – death-denial, to use Robert Jay Lifton's terms – "That," to quote Cathy Caruth in an interview with Lifton, "puts it ['false witness' in the form of death-denial] at the center of every politics."²²



Having suggested this, I will now turn to a short story in order to illustrate the ways in which a piece of literature of our times serves to shed light on the inherent political, cultural, social, and psychological problems associated with processing mass trauma on both communal and individual levels.

Bharati Mukherjee's 1988 story "The Management of Grief" unearths potential problems with an institutional response to traumatic loss of this kind.

²¹ Michael O'Loughlin, "Bearing Witness to Troubled Memory," *Psychoanalytic Review* 94.2 (2007): 202.

²² Cathy Caruth, "An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Caruth (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995): 142.

Specifically, this story, based on Blaise and Mukherjee's research for *The Sorrow and the Terror*, illustrates inadequacies and dangers of institutional, textbook responses to traumatic losses experienced by people astride different cultures. The story is a fictional account of the mourning processes of Indo-Canadians who lost members of their family in the Air India bombing. Its central character, and the narrator of the story, Shaila Bhawe, has lost her husband and two sons on Air India's Flight 182. The narrative begins with a description of her feelings of detachment and disorientation – in psychotherapeutic terms, a form of dissociation typical of those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder – as members of the Indo-Canadian community gather at her house after the news that Flight 182 has gone down. Shaila is taking valium pills and experiences “Not peace, just a deadening quiet.”²³ (305). The “screams” of her husband and sons haunt and, as she says, “insulate” her “like headphones” (305). In conjunction with the valium, the trauma of horror and loss has fostered a dissociated post-traumatic perspective that creates the feeling of being an outsider or “freak” within her own Indo-Canadian community, but affords her a unique, disturbing perspective on her position as insider and outsider within and without culture.

After situating the reader in Shaila's home while it is overtaken by the members of her Indo-Canadian community who attempt to support her, the story suddenly shifts forward in time to the arrival of Judith Templeton, a white, blonde, conservative-looking provincial government representative with “contact lenses [that] seem to float in front of her light blue eyes” (306). Miss Templeton wants Shaila to help *her* break down barriers of culture and language in order to accomplish *her* task of helping the families of the victims of the bombing. She has sought out Shaila because she believes Shaila's calm represents strength. But, as Shaila tells her,

“By the standards of the people you call hysterical, I am behaving very oddly and very badly, Miss Templeton.” I want to say to her, *I wish I could scream, starve, walk into Lake Ontario, jump from a bridge*. “They would not see me as a model. I do not see myself as a model.’ I am a freak.” (307)

In her post-traumatic state, Shaila is not the “model,” ideal mourner this white, blue-eyed Canadian believes her to be. Nor is she behaving according to “the standards” of her “people.” With the loss of her family she has lost

²³ Bharati Mukherjee, “The Management of Grief” (1988), in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, ed. Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter & Kelly J. Mays (New York: W.W. Norton, 9th ed. 2005): 305. Further page references are in the main text.

herself. She is floating in a post-traumatic space above culture and the actions, rituals, and theories of mourning that define them. She is, in fact, a witness to the politics of mourning and a conflict of cultures.

Later in the story, this blue-eyed government representative reveals that she has assessed the psychological state of family members of the victims of Flight 182 according to "'the textbooks on grief management'": "'there are stages to pass through: rejection, depression, acceptance, reconstruction'" (312). The narrator then explains that this government representative

had compiled a chart and finds that six months after the tragedy, none of us still reject reality, but only a handful are reconstructing. 'Depressed Acceptance' is the plateau we've reached. Remarriage is a major step in reconstruction (though she's a little surprised, even shocked, over *how* quickly some of the men have taken new families). Selling one's house and changing jobs and cities is healthy. (312)

The absurdity of this accepted, institutionalized model of grieving is immediately apparent to readers. Earlier in the story, the narrator explains the predicament of Indo-Canadian men who had, like herself, flown to India after flying to Ireland to identify the bodies of family members:

Already the widowers among us are being shown new bride candidates. They cannot resist the call of custom, the authority of their parents and older brothers. They must marry; it is the duty of a man to look after a wife. The new wives will be young widows with children, destitute but of good family. They will make loving wives, but the men will shun them. I've had calls from the men over crackling Indian telephone lines. "My parents are arranging a marriage for me." In a month they will have buried one family and returned to Canada with a new bride and partial family. (311)

Obviously, the fact these men have married has nothing to do with "reconstruction" as Templeton and the "textbooks on grief management" understand it. In this case and others, Shaila cannot bring herself to explain the extent of the inappropriateness and danger of the assumptions on which Templeton's psychological assessment is based. As the story approaches its final scene, Shaila accompanies Templeton on a visit to an elderly Sikh couple who have lost their sons on Flight 182 and refuse to sign government documents that would enable government authorities to help them. After this visit, Templeton and Shaila are driving to another household devastated by this tragedy when the narrator explains, "I want to say, *In our culture, it is a parent's duty to hope*" (314). But instead of doing so, she suddenly says: "' – Let me out at

the subway’” (314). The cultural impasse between this government representative and Shaila is torturous and seemingly insurmountable, and Shaila can only run away. Templeton’s “cultural insensitivity” has no bounds and is altogether blind, as she is desperate to do her job, and in the process exacerbates this divide and Shaila’s feelings of alienation and guilt.

Shaila herself, like others who have lost family on Flight 182 with whom she keeps in contact, *has* and *has not* reached the stages of “acceptance” and “reconstruction” – such terms and goals are, in this multi-ethnic, post-traumatic Canadian context, altogether incomprehensible and absurd. In *The Sorrow and the Terror*, Blaise and Mukherjee comment:

The pattern seems to be universal. Denial. Acceptance. Reconciliation. Eventually [...] though none have arrived there yet, despite a spate of adoptions and remarriages [...] reconstruction. (90)

Such “universal” patterns and abstract terms of assessment are removed from the realities of each individual case of grieving. As Shaila explains to Judith Templeton early on, “‘We must all grieve in our own way’” (307). Dr Ranganathan, who, according to Shaila, “has lost a huge family [in the bombing], something indescribable” (308), has sold his house and changed jobs, but is he “healthy”? He has moved to Texas, “where no one knows his story and he has vowed not to tell it” (315). As one trauma theorist has stated, “‘there is absolutely no controversy about the significance of constructing a trauma, and telling it to an empathic other, in recovering from trauma’.”²⁴ But “recovery” seems to be somehow beside the point for Dr Ranganathan, who chooses not to speak the unspeakable. This silence may not be therapeutic, but is, it seems, sacred.

On the other hand, Shaila’s post-traumatic calm, which is perpetuated by the personal, cultural, and theoretical limits of those around her in Canada and India, forces her to cope with her trauma on her own. As the narrator suggests, her mother in India “grew up without parents, raised indifferently by an uncle,” thus her mother avoids the pain of abandonment and loss at all costs. Moreover, as the narrator spells out for the reader, her “parents abhor mindless mortification” (310) of the kind she is experiencing. After Shaila’s husband “descends to” her “in an abandoned temple in a tiny Himalayan village” and demands that she “*finish alone what we started together*” (311) she returns to Canada. She eventually sells her home, moves, and is in search of “a

²⁴ Quoted in O’Loughlin, “Bearing Witness to Troubled Memory,” 203.

charity to support" (314). And, although "the voices and the shapes and the nights filled with visions ended abruptly several weeks ago," she "heard the voices of [...] family one last time. Your time has come, they said. *Go, be brave*" (315). At this point she "dropped [a] package on a park bench and started walking" (315) and the story ends. But her "voyage" (315) out of the bell jar of disaster has only just begun. There appears to be some form of "acceptance" and an effort at "reconstruction," however disoriented, but there is no "closure," however one defines it, and there is no apparent opportunity for the empathic, fully affective,²⁵ "dialogical process"²⁶ of integration.

Shaila, the narrator looking back on her psychological and social condition immediately after the loss of her family, remains caught in the central dialectic of trauma: she is compelled to tell her story to an unknown listener who may or may not be an 'authentic' one and alone in Canada after having experienced the denial of her feelings of loss in India. Shaila is a fictional character talking to no one in particular. It is all apparently meaningless. Except that Mukherjee is telling her story to us after having interviewed the family and friends of those left behind after the bombing. She has been, and continues to be in the writing of this story, an 'authentic' listener and witness to the overwhelming grief and alienation experienced by the families of the victims situated within diverse and psychologically brutal cultures of death-denial. Mukherjee is attempting to break down her readers' emotional distance and situate them outside or above normal cultural barriers to empathy and social-psychological integration.

For Shaila, life seems to have become "a meaningless void," to use the phrase one of the family members of the victims of the Air India bombing used at the Air India Inquiry to describe the "complete devastation" that followed the news of the loss of her husband and two daughters. As she stated on that first day of the Inquiry,

"Nothing in life can prepare anyone for such a totally crippling tragedy, the snuffing out of one's entire family in such a sudden and horrific way is an act of cruelty one can never imagine."²⁷

Perhaps, however, her testimony, and that of others, and even the political and legal wrangling that accompanies it, served to frame what is, ultimately,

²⁵ Henry Krystal, "Trauma and Aging: A Thirty-Year Follow-Up," 88.

²⁶ Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," 74.

²⁷ Quoted in Kim Bolan, "Victims' families recall their despair."

unimaginable and beyond the reach of judicial and therapeutic channels of mourning – the truth in all its ambiguity and inaccessibility rather than mere meaninglessness. Perhaps the Air India Inquiry – like Mukherjee’s story – left an imprint of this unimaginable loss of life and knowledge – this truth, this void – on the Canadian psyche. Mukherjee’s story ends with the narrator’s description of herself in Toronto, “walking through the park from the subway to my apartment,” stopping to hear “the voices of my family one last time,” before she says:

I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take. I dropped the package on a park bench and started walking. (315)

There is no closure. There is no reconstruction. But there is – perhaps – a sense of acceptance and direction. The ending of the story is altogether ambiguous. If the truth of the impact of the Air India bombing ever sinks into the Canadian psyche, this social-psychological process will be the product of an exposure of the politics of mourning from ‘above’ – that is, from the complex and disturbing vantage-point of someone like Mukherjee herself, who can empathize with the loss and devastation at the same time as she in essence analyses the dynamics of denial inherent in classified and racialized cultures-within-cultures. In fact, after the scene in which Shaila attempts to bridge the gap – the chasm – of cultural difference between Templeton and the elderly Sikh couple, Shaila says, “‘They are Sikh. They will not open up to a Hindu woman’” (313), and then acknowledges to herself her own recently developed prejudice against Sikhs in the wake of the Air India disaster. There is no cultural centre and “culturally sensitive” means of mourning in this story. There is, however, the attempt to expose and analyse a crisis of mourning caught up in the politics of grief in Canada and India. On the other hand, between the initial scene in Canada and that in India, the story is set in Ireland, where the mourners have come to identify the dead. Here they mourn among themselves and encounter another kind of culture. As the narrator tells the reader,

The Irish are not shy; they rush to me and give me hugs and some are crying. I cannot imagine reactions like that on the streets of Toronto. Just strangers, and I am touched. Some carry flowers with them and give them to any Indian they see. (309)

Here, in Ireland, there is the suggestion of the way out of the crisis of mourning, but it is temporary and, it seems, in India and Canada impossible.

When read in conjunction with one another, *The Sorrow and the Terror*, "The Management of Grief," and newspaper coverage of the testimony of the Air India Inquiry, it does, however, seem possible that feelings of closure embodied in a sense of control *and* the systemic changes needed to prevent such preventable tragedies will materialize. That is, the two goals of the Air India Inquiry – systemic analysis and mourning – are not only incompatible, they are inextricable. In fact, although the word 'closure' implies a shutting-down, the Air India Inquiry appears to have opened up the imagination and the heart to the unimaginable and unbearable in a communal, potentially empathic forum which exposes the inherent limits of the Canadian judicial system from within, as the heartbreaking testimony of family of those murdered stood up against the testimony of those politicians and functionaries of the state who failed them for all of us to see and hear, if we chose to. In *The Sorrow and the Terror*, Blaise and Mukherjee quote a man who "lost his wife and two children" to the Air India bombing:

"Let me remind you [Canadian politicians] that the Indian community has done very well even though you people don't recognize us as Canadians but only as 'immigrants.' We don't need their money and their bureaucratic support system. We need to be treated in a caring way. We need to be made to feel that we are first-class citizens." (92)

From the outside, it appears that the Air India Inquiry provided – at least to some and to some extent – this very feeling for the family of those murdered, but it is yet to be seen if the wounds of this Canadian tragedy will ever heal and lead to concrete insight into and alteration of the politics of mourning that, more often than not, cripple Canadian empathy and perpetuate systemic forms of cultural hegemony and death-denial in the form of scapegoating and indifference. In other words, how much of an imprint or impact has this Inquiry ultimately made on the psyches and systems of Canada? We will see.

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Affect and the Ethics of Reading 'Post-Conflict' Memoirs

—— Revisiting Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* and
Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You that
Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families**

SUSAN SPEAREY

TWO STORIES OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITION FEATURED prominently in the international media in 1994: the inauguration of South Africa's Government of National Unity on the heels of its first democratic election, and the accession to power in Rwanda of the RPF at the conclusion of the notorious one hundred days of slaughter. Four years later, two memoirs were published in which journalists put forward sustained and self-reflexive accounts of their respective experiences of reporting on these 'post-conflict' societies. *Country of My Skull* takes as its focus the term of Antjie Krog's assignment as chief correspondent for SABC Radio's coverage of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, while *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* offers an extended meditation on the *New Yorker* staff writer Philip Gourevitch's travels throughout Rwanda and across its borders over the course of three years following the 1994 genocide. The forms and duration of the hostilities whose legacies each memoir examines vary as markedly as do the writers' respective positions in relation to the events and testimony upon which each concentrates. Krog, an established Afrikaans poet and long-time supporter of the anti-apartheid struggle, tackles an assignment that brings her face to face with

* With many thanks to David Fancy, Grace Kehler, Mathew Martin, Taiwo Osinubi, and Petra Rethmann for their generous and incisive feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.

a history in which she is enmeshed in complicated ways as a consequence of her personal, familial, cultural, and linguistic heritage as well as her political commitments. Gourevitch chooses to travel to Rwanda for the first time in 1995, almost a year *after* the RPF's declaration of ceasefire and the international community's commencement of relief efforts, which together marked the official conclusion of the genocide. While he acknowledges his implication as an American, a Westerner, and a journalist in the global institutions, histories, and networks that have shaped the advent of the genocide as well as enabling, in its aftermath, the open re-militarization of *interahamwe* forces in UN refugee camps, he, like many of his potential readers, approaches his interlocutors and the specificities of the Rwandan situation from a certain cultural, geographical, and temporal distance. Both memoirs, however, are keenly attuned to the ways in which the dynamics of past conflicts continue to be played out in the present, and both explore how such obstacles to transformation might best be confronted; both foreground the complex problems that emerge as narratives that respond to traumatic histories are produced and circulated through the mass media; and both experiment with techniques of address and representation that break with the protocols of conventional journalistic reportage in order to involve readers, dialogically, in ongoing processes of meaning-making. If, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have argued, a crucial function of the arts is to bear witness to "*what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times*,"¹ Krog's and Gourevitch's memoirs are intimately engaged – and, in turn, seek to engage their readers – in precisely this project.

While literature that examines 'post-conflict' conditions may enable us to access information *about* our contemporary world, I am principally concerned to investigate the cultural work these texts perform at the very points at which their mimetic operations fail – that is, as readers and writers, situated at various historical and geographic removes from the zone of conflict in question, encounter "crises of witnessing."² It strikes me as significant that Felman and Laub open their book on testimony with a chapter in which Felman emphasizes practices of *reading* as she traces connections between the advent of specific historical crises, the crises of representation that issue from the efforts of artists to bear witness to these events, and the further crises that can emerge

¹ Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992): xx (italics in the original).

² Felman & Laub, *Testimony*, i.

at the points of reception of these often estranging and unsettling testimonies. Felman's chapter, in which she posits literature as "the *alignment between witnesses*," is immediately followed by Laub's account of the "vicissitudes of listening," which similarly foregrounds the significance of the conditions of testimony's reception in determining the understandings and possibilities to which its articulation gives rise.³ The pronounced concern in *Country of My Skull* and *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* with the ways and means according to which testimony is – or fails to be – assimilated and circulated suggests that each reader plays a vital role in the ongoing processing of histories of mass violence, and in shaping the ways that we in the present live with and live out the legacies of such conflicts. These legacies are, of course, inherently bound up with how and by whom a given history is narrated and disseminated, what is occluded in each telling, how redress is conceived, and where agency is 'allocated' for instantiating practices of restitution.

I have argued elsewhere that *Country of My Skull* enacts "a processing of the process of witnessing," and that this witnessing "is always and necessarily dialogic."⁴ Put differently, the crises of witnessing that are repeatedly staged in Krog's memoir are most saliently registered in moments of physical, emotional, psychic, linguistic, and/or epistemological breakdown. At such moments of destabilization, Krog's autobiographical narrator addresses herself to or invokes other witnesses, including those who have come forward to testify at the TRC hearings, her colleagues and associates, TRC staff and interpreters, psychologists, academics, family members, and members of her SABC audience and *Mail & Guardian* readership who respond to her reports with letters and phone calls. In other words, the provisional understandings towards which the memoir gestures, and which it continues to engender as it is engaged by readers, emerge precisely when breakdowns instantiated through crises give rise to dialogic acts of witnessing. Although occasioned by experiences of destabilization, these acts of witnessing are not indexed to re-establishing previous relationships or re-instituting existing frames of reference, but to the careful and collaborative negotiation of new terms of inter-

³ Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard UP, 2002): 2 (italics in original); Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Caruth (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995): 57.

⁴ Susan Spearey, "Displacement, Dispossession and Conciliation: The Politics and Poetics of Homecoming in Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*," *scrutiny* 2 5.1 (2000): 65.

relation and practices of interpretation. Krog draws an etymological parallel as she considers one of the key concepts with which she is grappling:

The dictionary definitions of 'reconciliation' have an underlay of restoration, of re-establishing things in their original state [...]. But in this country, there is nothing to go back to, no previous state or relationship one would wish to restore. In these stark circumstances 'reconciliation' does not even seem like the right word, but rather 'conciliation'.⁵

I propose, then, that Krog's memoir stages an attempt, through numerous gestures of witnessing, to forge provisional understandings and enactments of conciliatory relations.

In teaching *Country of My Skull* in a variety of contexts⁶ over the decade or so since its publication, it has been my consistent experience that the moments of crisis within the text that prompt Krog to engage in dialogue with various interlocutors also and unfailingly provide the chief focus for students' discussions of and reactions to the text. In other words, these crises of witnessing, and the dialogic responses that they engender, extend beyond the memoir: to lecture, seminar, and on-line discussions of *Country of My Skull*; to e-mails and office-hour visits I have come to anticipate; and presumably to further conversations to which I am not privy, as students attempt to process with me and with each other their own experiences of destabilization; to attend carefully to the excess of meaning with which the events and testimonies they encounter – as well as their own reactions – are shot through; and to begin to formulate strategies of response. Introducing the memoir in a classroom setting has required me to engage not only with the conceptual complexities of the issues that the text addresses, but also, in increasingly intricate ways, with the affective and ethical dimensions of the crises that *Country of My Skull* both stages and produces. Of course, students' responses to the text are far from uniform, and are influenced to a considerable measure by the particularities of the subject-positions and experiences through which

⁵ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House South Africa, 1998): 109. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

⁶ These include second-year undergraduate courses in postcolonial literature and South African literatures of transition, as well as an interdisciplinary MA course on Social Justice and the Arts at Brock University in St Catharines, Ontario; a graduate seminar on memoir in the English and Cultural Studies Program at McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario; and, in January 2007, a summer school course on 'post-conflict' literature at the University of Cape Town.

each reading is mediated, but what has fascinated me repeatedly is the extent and tenacity of their various engagements with the difficult questions that the memoir raises. Where other similarly elaborate critical analyses of sociopolitical conflict often intimidate students or inhibit discussion, the spaces opened up by Krog's staging of crisis, and by her posing of increasingly challenging questions, offer readers multiple points of entry into urgent dialogues and debates, and elicit, in turn, responses that are startlingly animated, probing, sensitive, and nuanced.

We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families is no less dialogic.⁷ As Gourevitch examines the legacy of Rwanda's recent history, he, like Krog, invokes a range of interlocutors. These include survivors of the 1994 massacres, NGO and health workers, prominent political and public figures, and even accused perpetrators of genocide with whom he conducts detailed interviews or converses informally. Moreover, he calls upon readers to participate in the processing of events that refuse to yield singular and stable meanings. Throughout the memoir, Gourevitch addresses his prospective audiences directly in the second-person "you," inviting us at significant junctures to reflect upon our own particular assumptions, motivations, and interpretative roles, on the specific practices through which we enact social relations in our own times and places, and on the processes according to which we respond to the stories he relates. He challenges us to consider, for example, why we have chosen to read about the genocide, and to contemplate what is at stake in such a gesture:

Like Leontius, the young Athenian in Plato, I presume that you are reading this because you desire a closer look, and that you, too, are properly disturbed by your curiosity. Perhaps, in examining this extremity with me, you hope for some understanding, some insight, some flicker of self-knowledge – a moral, or a lesson, or a clue about how to behave in this world: some such information. I don't discount the possibility, but when it comes to genocide, you already know right from wrong. The best reason I have come up with for looking closely into Rwanda's stories is that ignoring them makes me even more uncomfortable about existence and my place in it. The horror, as horror,

⁷ I have only taught *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* once to date, in a short lecture-format course, so I have not had the opportunity to observe and participate in students' ongoing processing of their responses to the text as I have had when teaching *Country of My Skull*. In teaching the latter, I have had the advantage of small seminar groups and supplementary on-line discussions, over the period of at least one academic semester.

interests me only insofar as a precise memory of the offense is necessary to understand its legacy.⁸

Here as elsewhere in the memoir, Gourevitch foregrounds the potential problems of witnessing, acknowledging the propensity for voyeurism and exploitation of the pain of others, while also troubling the notion that witnessing serves a clear purpose or bears a direct relationship to the enactment of justice. His qualification, “the best reason I have come up with for looking closely into Rwanda’s stories,” indicates that even his own rationale for writing the memoir remains at least partially obscure, and that perhaps the point of our engagements with histories such as Rwanda’s is not to *know* either the events by which they have been constituted or the pain of their casualties and survivors, but precisely to recognize and begin to examine the impediments to such knowledge. By situating readers as participants actively involved in the process of “examining this extremity with me,” and attempting to understand its *legacy*, Gourevitch positions us within the proliferating circuits of testimony’s transmission, and intimates that bearing witness to histories of conflict is never entirely a retrospective gesture, that it is either explicitly or implicitly about how we, in any given here-and-now, might contribute in ongoing ways to – or impede – processes of transformation.

The Dialogism of Affect

Given that crises of witnessing often destabilize the very processes of interpretation through which we attempt to secure knowledge of our world, leaving readers and writers alike on shaky epistemological ground, I argue that the significance of the affective responses that these texts register, and in turn, engender, is especially important to consider. Both memoirs suggest that conflict issues from conditions and habits that are deeply embedded in bodies and psyches as well as in social and political institutions, and played out in manifestations of physical and discursive violence as well as in quotidian habits of movement and interchange. And both repeatedly demonstrate that bearing witness pushes subjects beyond the limits of cognitive response. As Krog and Gourevitch respectively examine the interpretative practices through which South African and Rwandan histories come to be ‘accessed’

⁸ Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998): 19. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

and assimilated, they attend carefully to the affective dimensions of their own – as well as their interlocutors' – encounters with crisis. Krog, for example, deals candidly with the impacts of her experiences of nervous breakdown, of descent into wordlessness, and of uncharacteristic outbursts of rage or even laughter as she reports on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, as well as with a range of somatic symptoms that are manifested during the course of her assignment. These states of emotional, embodied, and semantic excess confront her with fundamental dilemmas as a writer, and force her to search for apposite ways of engaging with and *communicating* the TRC experience. In the aftermath of a Human Rights Violations Hearing in Nelspruit, for example, she writes:

My hair is falling out. My teeth are falling out. I have rashes. After the Amnesty deadline I enter my house like a stranger. And barren. I sit around for days. Staring. My youngest walks into a room and starts. 'Sorry, I'm not used to you being home.'

No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this.

So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for their words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die. (49)

While this passage could be read as registering a moral dilemma requiring Krog to make difficult and definitive choices that will ultimately be measured in terms of 'right' and 'wrong' (she finds herself caught between the urgency of addressing "the price people have paid for their words," the risk that writing may "exploit and betray," and the understanding that silence is tantamount to disengagement), it is clear that any one of these choices will come at a considerable cost and reduce the capacity of her potential readers to engage with the legacy of the TRC. It may be more generative to read these reflections as registering a breakdown of the multiple structures that constitute the writer's relationships to selfhood, language, and community, all of which require painstaking recalibration. And it is precisely this work of recalibration that the memoir elicits through its many dialogic gestures. Krog is keenly aware of the limitations of language to encompass the multiple valences of her experiences of witnessing; attentive to the many levels of self-estrangement, disorientation, and disconnection that frame the process of writing; and profoundly concerned with the potential – if unforeseeable – consequences of any writing she produces. It is to the task of addressing these conditions of

meaning-making that she commits herself, and she does so by addressing herself, again and again, to others.

Gourevitch, even from his position of relative distance from Rwanda's history of genocide, examines acts of psychic and somatic resistance to accounts of traumatic events, troubling the notion that such accounts can be objectively and transparently communicated. He wonders, for instance,

whether people aren't wired to resist assimilating too much horror. Even as we look at atrocity, we find ways to regard it as unreal. And the more we look, the more we become inured to – not informed by – what we are seeing. (196)

In the light of this tendency to shield ourselves from what we experience, he sets out to examine "the peculiar necessity of imagining what is, in fact, real" (7). In his account of his visit to Nyarabuye, one of the genocide memorials at which the dead have been left unburied rather than ceremonially committed to consecrated mass graves, Gourevitch demonstrates his own inability to make sense of the direct empirical evidence with which he is confronted, in spite of the fact that he has come to Rwanda precisely because of his firm conviction that the story of the genocide and its aftermath needs to be carefully addressed. He writes:

I had never been among the dead before. What to do? Look? Yes. I wanted to see them, I suppose; I had come to see them – the dead had been left unburied at Nyarabuye for memorial purposes – and there they were, so intimately exposed. I didn't need to see them. I already knew, and believed, what had happened in Rwanda. Yet looking at the buildings and the bodies, and hearing the silence of the place, with the grand Italianate basilica standing there deserted, and beds of exquisite, decadent, death-fertilized flowers blooming over the corpses, it was still strangely unimaginable. I mean one still had to imagine it. (16)

Gourevitch makes clear that the work of imagining the genocide requires much more than observation and documentation, and that this work has yet to commence, is somehow *pending*. Even after careful reflection upon his initial reactions, he concedes,

I couldn't settle on any meaningful response: revulsion, alarm, sorrow, grief, shame, incomprehension, sure, but nothing truly meaningful. I just looked, and I took photographs, because I wondered whether I could really see what I was seeing while I saw it, and I wanted also an excuse to look a bit more closely. (19)

Even as he signals the inevitability of an excess of meaning, of our not being able to 'know' in the face of evidence with which we are directly confronted, Gourevitch does not attempt to bring his preliminary and unformulated responses to any kind of synthesis or resolution, to fix meaning, but suggests, rather, that representation carries with it an ethical obligation to remain in dialogue with what is witnessed, and to attend particularly to those dimensions of experience that cannot readily be assimilated, to understandings that, as Felman puts it, are not "*congruent*" but, rather, "*dissonant*" with what we already know.⁹

In my readings of both memoirs, then, I am concerned to examine the implications at the level of affect of the strategies of representation each writer enlists when faced with "events in excess of our frames of reference,"¹⁰ bearing in mind that that these frames of reference will vary from reader to reader, and potentially also from reading to reading. I also aim to consider how the *dialogic operations* of bearing witness, and the *circulation* of testimony, both within and beyond the frames of these memoirs, is figured and enacted within the dynamics of affect for both writer and reader. And I wish to explore how a mobilization of the dynamics of affect presented by Krog and Gourevitch provides a sense of the possibility for ethical response to traumatic events that can contribute to more pervasive and ethically efficacious processes of social reconstruction. As I have already begun to argue, each memoir suggests that it is in the very *excess* of affect, in its plurality and incoherence, that the indeterminacy as well as the transformative potentiality of 'post-conflict' conditions is most saliently realized, and each demonstrates that it is in the formulation of intersubjective responses to this excess that ethical negotiation becomes possible. I contend, then, that moments in which affect is powerfully manifested, either within or beyond the frames of the text in question, provide an important index of the potentiality for witnessing to issue either in transformative patterns of expression, movement, and interrelation, or, conversely, to prompt a retreat to the security of established interpretative, moral, and socio-political frameworks.

⁹ Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious*, 53.

¹⁰ Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious*, 5.

Navigating Conditions of Uncertainty

When writers and readers endeavour to respond to events that “cannot be constructed as knowledge, nor assimilated into full cognition,”¹¹ how, precisely, might ethical engagement enter the equation? To what extent, and according to what imperatives, might we feel compelled to resolve indeterminacy or to ‘stabilize’ understanding by re-invoking the authority of inherited interpretative and moral frameworks and the social structures that they serve to sustain? To what extent, and under what conditions, might we choose to explore more fully the transformative possibilities that issue from these moments of destabilization, and to begin not only to ‘know’ but potentially also to *reconstitute* our “lived historical relation to events of our times”?¹² As will already be apparent, my readings of *Country of My Skull* and *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* are deeply indebted to Felman’s work on the relationship between trauma and pedagogy, on the performative and dialogic dimensions of testimony’s transmission, and on the enactment of change through “bringing-to-crisis.” While Felman’s analyses frequently register the psychic and somatic dimensions of crisis, as well as the often fraught ethical questions that traumatic histories bring to light, Brian Massumi’s account of ethics as the intersubjective navigation of conditions of indeterminacy, and his positing of affect as the locus of hope, have been invaluable to me in my attempts to begin to address and tease out the relationship between bearing witness to traumatic histories and engaging ethically with their intricate legacies.

Massumi argues that an ethical action, as opposed to a gesture motivated by a fixed moral principle, is open-ended, and can be judged not according to the future outcomes towards which it is indexed, or the precepts on which it is predicated, but only in terms of the range of possibilities it opens up and sets in play in the present. He contends that ethics is “completely situational,” “completely pragmatic,” and “that it happens *between* people, in the social gaps.” He continues:

There is no intrinsic good or evil. The ethical value of an action is what it brings out *in* the situation, *for* its transformation, how it breaks sociality open. Ethics is about how we inhabit uncertainty, together.¹³

¹¹ *The Juridical Unconscious*, 5.

¹² Felman & Laub, *Testimony*, xx.

¹³ “Navigating Movements: A conversation with Brian Massumi,” in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*, ed. Mary Zournazi (New York: Routledge, 2003): 218.

Massumi's account of ethics strikes me as resonant in the contexts with which both memoirs engage. The societies depicted in *Country of My Skull* and *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* are shown to be grappling with increasingly complex questions as stories about recent histories of state-orchestrated violence and its repercussions gradually come to light. Like Krog and Gourevitch themselves, we as readers witness South Africans and Rwandans in the process, on the one hand, of contending with the living legacies of conflicts that have not been eradicated, but rather contained, suppressed, or rearticulated under the auspices of a new – and always precarious and contested – political order; and, on the other, facing the momentous task of attempting to reconstitute the political structures and social relations from which these manifestations of mass violence have issued. Both writers are alert to the indeterminacy that characterizes 'post-conflict' conditions, and to the precariousness of the choices facing those, including writers, who endeavour to respond to such legacies. As Gourevitch succinctly puts it,

In writing the history of events that are still unfolding in a state that is still unformed, it is impossible to know which tendencies will prevail and at what price. (188)

If Massumi's contention that "ethics is about how we inhabit uncertainty, together" provides a framework in which to begin to discuss the potential for witnesses both within and beyond the memoirs to negotiate the conditions of indeterminacy with which they – we – are confronted, to respond to the epistemological "undoing" to which crises of witnessing give rise, Massumi's account of affect illuminates how such a negotiation might begin to be orchestrated. Separating hope from "concepts of optimism and pessimism, from a wishful projection of success or even some kind of rational calculation of outcomes," Massumi equates it instead with "affect," defined variously as "the *virtual co-presence* of potentials"; "the passing of a threshold" marked by the experience of a "change in capacity"; or as "ways of *connecting*, to others and to other situations."¹⁴ By discussing affect in these terms, Massumi makes clear that it is not simply reducible to the surfacing of emotion, which is often sceptically equated with a loss of reason, and thus seen as potentially incapacitating, especially to the extent that emotions can be readily manipulated or instrumentalized. Nor is affect a purely subjective or interior experi-

¹⁴ Brian Massumi, "Navigating Movements," 213; 212; 214.

ence. Rather, Massumi understands it as an embodied and *intersubjective* experience – a correlative of dialogism – that confers agency, insofar as it enables us collaboratively to rupture or interrupt the momentum, or loosen the constraints of conditioned ways of thinking, moving, interacting. Accessing some of the virtual potentialities that our habituated responses often prevent us from recognizing in a given situation enables us “to break sociality open,” to find new pathways of movement and connection rather than inadvertently re-tracing the well-worn routes along which certain epistemological assumptions guide us.

Massumi suggests that the most radically transformative actions are instantiated by tapping in to the intensities of embodied and intersubjective experience in any given present moment, arguing that the body’s capacity for *affecting* or *being affected*

are not two different capacities – they always go together. When you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before.¹⁵

By situating ethical action in the fluid and shifting spaces between subjects – subjects who are continually affecting and being affected by one another – and by re-orienting hope away from a constantly deferred and remote future and towards the “boundary condition” of the present, Massumi’s proposition offers a particularly rich set of possibilities for ‘post-conflict’ societies such as South Africa and Rwanda.¹⁶ In these settings, the recent memory of brutalities on a mass scale might seem to demand and even justify a rhetoric of good and evil, while relegating prospects for healing or conciliation to the far-distant future, or pinning the success of social reconstruction too narrowly on the definitive judgments of public mechanisms such as truth commissions and Gacaca courts. Massumi’s model opens space for subjects, including writers and readers, to engage not only with political and quasi-legal mediations of social relations, but also to tap into what he sees as “more *moving* dimensions of experience,” to “other kinds of practices that might not have so much to do with mastery and judgment as with affective connection and abductive participation,” and, in so doing, to explore in active and ongoing ways alternative

¹⁵ Massumi, “Navigating Movements,” 212.

¹⁶ “Navigating Movements,” 212.

configurations of justice and possibilities for conciliation and reconstruction.¹⁷

Literature as “*the alignment between witnesses*”

As *Country of My Skull* and *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* reflect upon the journalistic assignments of their respective authors, the deep commitment of each writer to bringing to public awareness the plight of those living the ongoing legacies of conflict becomes increasingly evident. And yet, both Krog and Gourevitch use the memoir form to challenge certain conventions of journalistic reportage as well as the practices of reception that it typically assumes, and indeed, engenders. If journalism purports to convey information, to provide up-to-the-minute accounts of current events, to level critiques, and to advance analyses, the temporal parameters that frame its production and reception, as well as the material conditions that determine the means and modes of its circulation, may leave its audiences in danger of too hastily hardening emerging empirical evidence into established certainties, and of failing to engage with the excess of meaning inherent in any articulation of testimony. Literary texts, like journalistic reports, are, of course, also produced and circulated according to the dictates of market forces, shaped by publishers' perceptions of the demands and expectations of their target audiences, and subject to the rigours of editorial gate-keeping. Nevertheless, literature offers us a valuable means of beginning to *process* “what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times” precisely because of its durational temporality, its potential to continue to circulate among widely dispersed audiences, its capacity to speak to different dimensions of our experience and to resonate in increasingly subtle ways over time, and its many and often explicit resistances to fixed signification.¹⁸ Moreover, because it is fundamentally a form of address, literature – whether explicitly or implicitly – calls upon us to respond. Carrol Clarkson argues that, “in its precipitation towards a future meaning, towards potential sites of reception, a work of art is primarily an *address*, even if that address is inflected by risk and uncertainty, by temporal and spatial drift.”¹⁹ As

¹⁷ Massumi, “Navigating Movements,” 220.

¹⁸ Felman & Laub, *Testimony*, xx.

¹⁹ Carrol Clarkson, “Drawing the Line: Justice and the Art of Reconciliation,” in *Justice and Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, ed. François DuBois & Antje DuBois-Pedain (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008): 275.

each memoir traces its courses towards its many “potential sites of reception,” and endeavours to speak across various spatio-temporal boundaries, it orchestrates the very “*alignment[s] between witnesses*” that enable its future meanings to continue to be generated.²⁰ This capacity is crucially important, given the belatedness and inevitable incompleteness of understanding inherent in acts of witnessing, and considering the significance of the *process* – as opposed to the manifest content – of testimony’s articulation.

For Krog, the memoir form offers the opportunity and the scope to shift register, to explore the impacts of the work of the TRC not only through documentary modes and political analyses that speak principally to the intellectual and ideological sensibilities of readers, but also by touching on other modes of apperception and by gesturing repeatedly towards what lies beyond language, to all that witnesses may have seen, heard, or felt, but been unable to comprehend. In *Country of My Skull*, Krog’s accounts of the specific facts and details that emerge in the course of the TRC hearings constitute only one component of the densely layered narrative, and are juxtaposed with and informed by sensual poetic expressions of loss and longing, impassioned letters from readers, fragments of philosophical speculation, citations from editorials, recountings of conversations, fictionalized explorations of betrayal, lyrical prose meditations, and deeply personal reflections. This narrative structure situates the reportage of evidence in a broader context, preserving its articulation in a public domain, but also inviting readers to engage with the excess of meaning that refuses to be contained in any presentation of ‘facts’ or analysis.

Gourevitch explicitly examines and reworks the terms according to which readers and writers of journalism engage with contemporary histories of mass brutality, scrutinizing, on the one hand, the epistemic violence that conventional reportage often inadvertently reproduces, and exploring, on the other, how the representational limits of accounts of traumatic events might be negotiated. He attributes his motivation to travel to Rwanda for the first time in 1995 to his mounting frustration as a *reader* with the limited possibilities for response afforded him by mass-media coverage of the genocide and its aftermath. He articulates a pressing need to find an alternative to reportage that invariably documents “epic struggles” between “equally insupportable” factions; that laments the futility, hopelessness, and inevitability of such conflicts; and, perhaps most crucially, that advances analyses which make dis-

²⁰ Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious*, 2 (italics in original).

engagement and horrified bewilderment, or at best, token gestures of material assistance, appear to be the only viable responses (185). Citing the *New York Times* as a specific case in point, Gourevitch offers the following synopsis of the typical pattern of journalistic reportage:

The piled-up dead of political violence are a generic staple of our information diet these days, and according to the generic report all massacres are created equal: the dead are innocent, the killers monstrous, the surrounding politics insane or non-existent. Except for the names and the landscape, it reads like the same story from anywhere in the world: a tribe in power slaughters a disempowered tribe, another cycle in those ancient hatreds, the more things change the more they stay the same. As in accounts of earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, we are told that experts knew the fault line was there, the pressure was building, and we are urged to be excited – by fear, distress, compassion, outrage, even simple morbid fascination – and perhaps to send a handout for the survivors. The generic massacre story speaks of “endemic” or “epidemic” violences and of places where people kill “each other,” and the ubiquity of the blight seems to cancel out any appeal to think about the single instance. These stories flash up from the void and, just as abruptly, return there. The anonymous dead and their anonymous killers become their own context. The horror becomes absurd.

I wanted to know more. (186–87).

This account of the “generic massacre story” and of the catalogue of tropes upon which it relies exposes the processes according to which complex historical struggles are reduced to familiar archetypal patterns: “endemic” and “epidemic” violence comes to be encoded as natural and unpreventable, while moral absolutes such as “monstrosity” and “innocence” are invoked and reproduced. Just as critically, Gourevitch demonstrates how the conventions of the genre and the practices of interpretation that it anticipates position readers as, at best, indulgently liberal philanthropists and as, at least, distanced and perhaps world-weary observers of these ostensibly inevitable cycles of violence, and as consumers of information that has already been processed and made meaningful. In positing these stories as the “staple” of our “diet,” Gourevitch suggests that many of us are in fact sustained by this pattern of consumption, even as it both obfuscates our implication in the histories in question and curtails our potential agency to respond in alternative ways, requiring us only to affirm and reiterate the predictable analyses offered by established authorities. Moreover, he implies that the excitement that we are ‘urged’ to feel in response to this mode of coverage similarly serves to sustain

– rather than to interrupt or transform – existing social relations, a response that in Massumi’s terms would be emotional and subjective rather than affective and intersubjective.

As he endeavours to break with these patterns of response and to invoke more dialogic and nuanced modes of engagement, Gourevitch reflects on his own procedures of investigation. He returns to, and elaborates upon, the idea that the processing of histories of mass violence happens belatedly, and takes place *between people* as stories are shared and explored:

The more stories I collected, the more I began to realize that life during the genocide, by virtue of its absoluteness, had evoked a simpler range of responses than *the challenge of living with its memory*. For those who had endured, stories and questions tended to operate in a kind of call-and-response fashion – stories calling up questions, calling up more stories, calling up more questions – and nobody of any depth seemed to expect precise answers. At best they hoped for understandings, ways of thinking about the defiant human condition at the end of this century of unforeseen extremity. Quite often, I felt that these stories were offered to me the way that shipwrecked people, neither drowned nor saved, send messages in bottles: in the hope that, even if the legends they carry can do the teller no good, they may at some other time be of use to somebody, somewhere else. (183) (My italics.)

The pattern of and motivation for storytelling that Gourevitch outlines here aptly describe the structuring principles for his own narrative, which continually unseats the expectation of “precise answers,” while calling to mind Paul Celan’s observation in his 1958 Bremen Speech:

A poem, as a manifest form of language and thus inherently dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the (not always greatly hopeful) belief that it may somewhere and sometime wash up on land, on heartland perhaps.²¹

Like Celan, Gourevitch foregrounds the pronounced state of indeterminacy or ‘unsituatedness’ from which testimonial writing issues, and gestures towards the urgency of open-ended engagement with others, across time and space, of the crucial need to leave a legacy of sharing and responding to these stories, whose implications and ramifications become necessarily more freighted and complex as time passes. Rhetorically, the memoir initiates and continually renews the gesture of call and response in its repeated address to readers, and in its posing of further and increasingly challenging questions that issue from

²¹ Quoted in Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious*, 37.

each conversation in which Gourevitch partakes, and from each further meditation upon – and connection drawn between – the stories with which he has been presented.

Although Krog does not address the reader in the second-person pronoun, her memoir, as it proceeds, models and enacts the call-and-response processing that Gourevitch describes, inviting readers to re-enter the scene of witnessing in order to experience in all their plurality and incoherence the affective dimensions of testimony's articulation, and examining its proliferating impacts as it is disseminated to audiences at further and further removes from the TRC hearings. As readers, we can see our own roles modelled, for example, in those played by Krog's more immediate audiences, who respond to her broadcasts and articles in various ways: with anger or even death threats, with grief, with gratitude, or with personal stories that challenge her to reassess or refine her responses to particular events. Taiwo Osinubi has recently argued that "it is in [the] context of an affective network with invisible audiences that Krog should be read."²² Addressing the arguments of several critics who have, since the publication of *Country of My Skull*, denounced Krog for doing violence to the testimonies put forward at the TRC hearings, or for departing from conventions of mimetic realism in her analyses of the Commission and of its impact on South Africans, he challenges readers to situate Krog's tactics within the context of larger circuits of discursive exchange, especially those facilitated by communications technologies and the mass media, which have historically – and geographically – played key roles in structuring the operation and contestation of colonial and apartheid power. Osinubi contends that violence, in *Country of My Skull*, "is an operative force that 'rearranges' victims' lives,"²³ and invites readers to move beyond censure of Krog to a consideration of our own implication, as witnesses, in such processes of rearrangement, both as they were manifested during the period on which the TRC investigations focused and as they continue to be played out within and beyond the spatio-temporal parameters of the official TRC hearings. His reading of the memoir strikes a careful balance between examining the material conditions of textual production and dissemination, attending scrupulously to differences in power and privilege among those encountering

²² Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, "Abusive Narratives: Antjie Krog, Rian Malan and the Transmission of Violence," in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28.1 (2008): 112.

²³ Osinubi, "Abusive Narratives," 113.

the stories that the TRC brought to light, and encouraging the ongoing ethical engagement of readers. In doing so, it offers a valuable corrective to critical engagements with *Country of My Skull* that ultimately articulate a politics of blame and place responsibility for the enactment of epistemic and discursive violence exclusively on Krog's shoulders – or, for that matter, critical engagements that simply leap to Krog's defence. In either case, critics may, in the course of pursuing pressing and vitally important considerations, inadvertently speak the language of moral absolutes while pre-empting the ongoing dialogic, and ethical work that the text continually invites readers to take up. If the apportioning of blame tacitly – and disingenuously – situates the reader or critic in a position of 'objective' distance, and, even more problematically, of moral high ground, *Country of My Skull*, like *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, repeatedly challenges us to reexamine those positions.

Krog's treatment, for example, of the events surrounding the amnesty hearing of police captain Jeffrey Benzien, whose 'wet-bag' torture technique had been notorious for its brutality and efficiency, attends closely to the affective dimensions of testimony's transmission, and challenges the idea that horror can be processed by bringing into full visibility for our objective scrutiny a 'revelation' of the unsavoury truth, which may or may not provide the basis for some attempt to enact justice. She suggests that narrowing the focus and aims of witnessing to a search for empirical truths articulated in the manifest content of testimony – often in the form of facts or simple answers to complex questions – threatens to re-entrench, if only by inversion, the divisive logic of oppositional categories of identity, in this instance formulated in terms of traitor/hero or perpetrator/victim. Perhaps more disturbingly, she demonstrates that the failure to continue to engage with the excess of meaning that is unavailable to testimony's immediate witnesses, to reduce the multiplicity of significations and virtual potentialities inherent in the speech act to singular and transparent meanings, can all too easily freeze understandings of the events and motivations that occasion the testimony in an inherited epistemological and moral framework, thereby drastically narrowing the pathways along which transformation might issue.

While most media representations of this hearing focus on Benzien's confession to – and demonstration of – the use of the wet-bag technique, Krog describes this moment as a "spectacle" and as "one of the most loaded and disturbing images in the life of the Truth Commission" (73). Her own account documents the police captain's performance and the enthusiasm with which it

is received (“The judges, who have come a long way from meticulously sticking to court procedures, jump up so as not to miss the spectacle. Photographers come running, not believing their luck”); but shifts attention away from Benzien’s public re-enactment and acknowledgement of his methods of torture and the information yielded thereby, insistently gesturing towards wider contexts and contextualizing factors in order to complicate and open to further investigation any meanings that might be fixed to his testimony itself (73). Benzien’s hearing was, of course, unique, in that a number of former MK operatives whom he had once interrogated were given the opportunity to cross-examine their erstwhile torturer, a scenario that promised to dramatize both the fall from power of the apartheid state’s most physically violent agents and to foreground the imperative of accountability that was to be the hallmark of the new dispensation. And yet, Krog demonstrates that, even with the tables turned, with the policeman in the dock, with the full force of the institutional power of the media and of the government-sanctioned TRC – as well as the legal authority of the Amnesty Committee – mobilized to investigate allegations of the criminality of *Benzién*’s actions, the dynamic of past conflicts is still powerfully operating psychically and somatically. She observes:

A torturer’s success depends on his intimate knowledge of the human psyche. Benzien is a connoisseur. Within the first few minutes he manages to manipulate most of his victims back into the roles of their previous relationship – where he has the power and they the fragility. (74)

While it is obvious that no transparent ‘truths’ can emerge in such circumstances, and improbable that any beneficial social transformation will issue from the exchange, Krog does not simply invite readers to treat the evidence that comes to light in the course of this hearing with the same scepticism with which we might treat evidence extracted in the context of torture. Instead, she focuses on Tony Yengeni’s crisis of witnessing, his profound sense of the inadequacy of Benzien’s confession to provide any meaningful understanding. She observes:

The first indication of the complexity of the relationship between an infamous torturer and his victim is the voice of Tony Yengeni. As a Member of Parliament, Yengeni’s voice has become known for its tone of confidence – sometimes tinged with arrogance. When he faces Benzien, this is gone. From where I sit taking notes, I have to get up to make sure that it really is Yengeni speak-

ing. He sounds strangely different – his voice somehow choked. Instead of seizing the moment to get back at Benzien, Yengeni wants to know the man.

‘...What kind of man...uhm... that uses a method like this one with the wet bag to people ... to other human beings ... repeatedly ... and listening to those moans and cries and groans ... and taking each of those people very near to their deaths ... what kind of man are you, what kind of man is that, that can do... what kind of human being can do that, Mr. Benzien ... I’m talking now about the man behind the wet bag.’ (73)

Yengeni’s question may be read as rhetorical insofar as it highlights the callousness and brutality of Benzien’s actions, and may well be motivated by a desire to elicit knowledge, a confession or an expression of remorse; and yet, Krog notes that its articulation does not simply invert or replicate the terms and strategies of Benzien’s interrogation techniques or the power-relations informing them. Rather than seeking a violent extrapolation of ‘truth’, Krog speculates, Yengeni “wants to know the man”; in a choked voice, and through his faltering attempts to frame his question, Yengeni opens the possibility of forging a new path of connection between himself and Benzien that, in the course of addressing their former relationship, might nonetheless enable both to move beyond their respective positions as committed opponent and ardent defender of the now-fallen apartheid state. Although Yengeni may seek to achieve greater understanding through this encounter with his former torturer, he also attempts to break new ground, to move beyond tactics of vengeance or humiliation, and Krog registers the ethical possibility for recalibration of intersubjective relations opened up by this exchange.

The gesture, because it takes Yengeni into unknown territory, also involves considerable risk; Krog notes that the MP “has to pay dearly” for raising this question when Benzien reminds him, in the presence of the hearing’s immediate audience as well as the mass media, of the names he had given away in the course of torture, clearly a severe blow to an elected public figure. And yet, this is not an account of a risk taken and failed; it is a cautionary tale, to the extent that Krog complicates the notion that transfer of institutional power eradicates the operation of inherited conflictual dynamics, requiring us to attend carefully to the subtle levels of the deployment, resistance to, and/or redistribution of power as stories about past hostilities emerge; at the same time, the possibility that is opened by Yengeni’s gesture has been registered, and remains open to further exploration and elaboration. Just as significantly, Krog chooses not to conclude her treatment of the hearing by giving the ‘final word’ to any of the key players: where Benzien’s damaging assertions, or

rejoinders on the part of any of the former MK operatives, or statements by the Amnesty Committee, or even summary analyses of her own might have provided logical points at which to close the section, she cites instead an editorial column written by Sandile Dikeni in the *Cape Times*, which, in turn, takes us back to the scenario of witnessing, and calls upon us to consider the impacts and implications of our own responses to the hearing. Dikeni writes:

And so continues the torture of Tony Yengeni. Yengeni broke in under thirty minutes, suffocating in a plastic bag which denied him air and burnt his lungs, under the hands of Benzien. In the mind of Benzien, Yengeni, freedom fighter and anti-apartheid operative, is a weakling, a man that breaks easily...

I said I am not gonna write no more columns like this, but the torture of Yengeni continues, with some of us regarding him as a traitor to the cause, a sell-out, a cheat, and in some stupid twist of faith and fate, his torturer becomes the hero, the revealer, the brave man who informed us about it all.

Tony Yengeni in my eyes remains the hero. Yengeni is one of the many people in the ANC executive who stood by the TRC, knowing that certain issues about the ANC would be revealed in the most mocking and degrading way by the torturers. In my eyes, Yengeni of Guguletu is one of the people who still gives me hope amidst the caprice of the present.

And not only Benzien, but many of us, owe him an apology.

And now, as I look at Yengeni, yes, I see blood, his own blood on the hands of Benzien and the Apartheid state. I see blood. The blood of Yengeni's friends and comrades crushed and sucked out of their lungs by the heroes of Apartheid – in under forty minutes, says the torturer, in his clinically precise 'full disclosure'.

I said I am not gonna write no more columns like this.

I made a mistake. (76)

Dikeni is explicit about the fact that he feels impelled to break his self-imposed silence, to renounce his desire to disengage himself from the "capricious" conversations of the present, in order to complicate the equation of "revelation" with the enactment of justice. He attributes his motivation to speak out not to the events of the hearing itself, but to the way that Benzien's "clinically precise" evidence has been received and taken up in public discourse, and used as the grounds for fixed moral judgments about Yengeni. Dikeni's editorial calls upon readers to acknowledge the risk taken by Yengeni and other members of the ANC executive in participating in the TRC process, to think beyond the "twisted logic" that renders the former torturer "the hero, the revealer, the brave man who informed us about it all," and to acknowledge their – our – roles in the *ongoing* torture of Yengeni ("And not

only Benzien, but many of us, owe him an apology”). Krog, in concluding this section of the memoir with Dikeni’s editorial, once again foregrounds the operations of testimony’s circulation; extends her own gesture of unsettling responses that too easily harden into epistemological and moral certainties; and, by indicating that the article was published in the *Cape Times*, suggests that the working through and working out of the hearing’s implications will continue in exchanges among readers of the *Cape Times*, among her own readers, and in other proliferating circuits of transmission. She also highlights the opening-up of different “ways of connecting,” the recognition of “the virtual co-presence of potentials” as Yengeni addresses Benzien, as Dikeni addresses his readers, and, by extension, as she addresses her own audience. At the moment in which I am writing, when public opinion concerning Yengeni may have ossified further, giving rise to even more fixed and polarized moral judgments, Krog’s gesture of drawing our attention back to the possibilities that were opened by his encounter with Benzien may be all the more generative.

The Challenge of Living with the Legacy of Conflict

Both Krog and Gourevitch, then, enlist the memoir form to, on the one hand, document for posterity contemporary histories of societies attempting to address the legacies of recent and violent conflict. On the other hand, the memoir affords each a means of foregrounding the very dangers, dilemmas, and limits of documentary modes of representation, and of examining how the production and reception of ostensibly transparent historical accounts are caught up in the *perpetuation* of precisely the conflictual dynamic that serves to instantiate and sustain the momentum of such violent histories. Gourevitch notes:

Rwandan history is dangerous. Like all of history, it is a record of successive struggles for power, and to a very large extent power consists in the ability to make others inhabit your story of their reality – even, as is so often the case, when that story is written in their blood. (48–49)

Both memoirs challenge readers to consider how the consumption of information about contemporary histories of strife implicates us in the reproduction of these very strategies of coercion – of requiring others to “inhabit [our] story of their reality.” In different ways, Krog and Gourevitch suggest that to look carefully at crises of witnessing (our own and others’), to commit ourselves to

addressing the dimensions of testimony that are most vulnerable or explosive, and to respond to crises by engaging in dialogue with other witnesses, particularly those in whose blood our collective stories may be written, is to embark upon the painstaking work of recalibrating our relationships to knowledge, to social and political institutions, and to understandings of agency.

The gesture of distancing ourselves from events that fill us with horror, dread, or incomprehension, that leave us without language or any clear sense of how to respond, may be a common reaction to ethical complexity, and one to which we as readers are particularly prone to resort as we encounter crisis; to defer direct response or to defer to authority is to follow the path of least resistance, to place the risk-taking of participatory engagement on hold or in the hands of others. Equally commonplace is the impetus to pass judgment on the immediate participants or those deemed to be the prominent actors in historical conflicts, to apportion blame, or to fix and contain the significance of unsettling events within the reassuring parameters of established moral and epistemological frameworks. Both *Country of My Skull* and *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, however, call upon their readers to relinquish all pretence of distance, objectivity, and moral certainty. Instead, as we align ourselves with a range of other witnesses, we are invited to take up the ethical task of “inhabit[ing] uncertainty, together” and of grappling with the density of signification inherent in any enunciation of testimony. We are encouraged to work collaboratively, with no guarantee of any particular outcome, but with a determination *not* to repeat the patterns of the past, towards recognizing the subtle operation of conflictual dynamics in our everyday patterns of movement, thought, and exchange; and to endeavour to break new paths of connection. By drawing attention to the *intersubjective* processes according to which complex and fraught histories begin to be assimilated; by staging and often belatedly *producing* crises of witnessing; and by continually foregrounding the operation of the many circuits of exchange in which writers and readers are caught up, *Country of My Skull* and *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* open spaces in which readers can *participate*, in incremental ways, in ongoing processes of socio-political and epistemological transformation.

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Literature as Arduous Conversation

—— Terrorism and Racial Politics in Hanif Kureishi's *Borderline*, "My Son the Fanatic," and *The Black Album*

SUMMER PERVEZ

IN HIS ARTICLE "THE RIGHT TIME FOR AN ISLAMIC REFORMATION," Salman Rushdie writes:

When Sir Iqbal Sacranie, head of the Muslim Council of Britain, admitted that 'our own children' had perpetrated the July 7 London bombs, it was the first time in [Rushdie's] memory that a British Muslim had accepted his community's responsibility for outrages committed by its members. Instead of blaming U.S. foreign policy or 'Islamophobia,' Sacranie described the bombings as a 'profound challenge' for the Muslim community.¹

Rushdie's challenge, or call for Islamic Reformation, brings to mind Hanif Kureishi's work (fiction and non-fiction) on the relationship between the political discontent of South-Asian British youth and their resulting acts of terrorism:² namely, his recent essays, his 1981 play *Borderline*, his 1995 novel *The*

¹ Salman Rushdie, "The Right Time for an Islamic Reformation," *Washington Post* (7 August 2005), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/05/AR2005080501483.html> (accessed 20 October 2006).

² Owing to the ubiquitous nature and ambiguity of the phrase 'acts of terror', which has occurred as a result of broad American political usage since 9/11, I use instead the phrase 'acts of terrorism' to specify terrorist acts occurring on a national or international level that involve bombings, suicidal or otherwise, which lead to deliberate mass destruction of people. 'Acts of terror', then, is a more general term that suggests the attempt or intention to

Black Album, and his 1997 short story “My Son the Fanatic.” The child-terrorists in these fictional works are not responding to the state of the world, problems of globalism, or to US or British foreign policy; their problems are right at home, confined to England itself.

Hanif Kureishi is a cogent commentator on issues of ethnicity, politics, and anti-racism, having written powerful articles over the years such as “Bradford” (1986), describing a visit to the city in the wake of its race controversy. In *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (2002), he articulates his own experience of racial prejudice as a person of mixed race. In his next essay collection, *The Word and the Bomb* (2005), he also questions the forces at work within Muslim South Asian communities, especially the impact of religious fundamentalism. As a politically aware and internationally known prose-writer and filmmaker, Kureishi seems to have predicted where things have gone in Britain as a result of the issues surrounding South-Asian youth culture and their recent turn to acts of terror and Muslim fundamentalism. As Kureishi argues in his essay “The Word and the Bomb,”

the real differences in Britain today are not political, or even based on class, but are arranged around race and religion, with their history of exploitation, humiliation, and political helplessness.³

The parents of the protagonists in his fictional works indeed do have a “history of exploitation, humiliation, and political helplessness” that elicits a dramatic reaction on the part of their children, who are unwilling to sit back and do nothing in response to white hegemonic constructions and expectations of themselves as an ‘immigrant’ minority culture. These children are, after all, not immigrants, but British-born citizens who must carve out a space for themselves within the nation. Overall, in his work on race relations (plays, stories, novels, and essays), Kureishi usefully foreshadows today’s political world, steeped in the climate of global terror, but the solutions offered – in the form of race riots and terrorism – are not necessarily the most constructive responses to Britain’s internal differences.

The history of South-Asian immigration to England, and the historical treatment of those immigrants, needs to be kept in mind when addressing the question of why terrorist acts such as the deadly London bombs of 7 July 2005 have occurred. Within the time-frame of Kureishi’s life and

intimidate through more varied displays and threats of violence; it is, however, also inclusive of acts of terrorism.

³ Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005): 6.

work, in the 1960s and through the 1980s, the British wish under the governments of Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher was to assimilate South-Asian immigrants and essentially britishize (anglicize) them, while eliminating any sense of difference. Powell's, and also Thatcher's, strategy was one of simultaneously including and excluding black and Asian immigrants by both inviting them into the English nation as workers and also keeping them out of that very nation as 'invaders'. Useful to an understanding of these policies is Anna Marie Smith's discussion, in her *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*, of Thatcher and Powell's similarly hegemonic political strategies. Smith quotes from a 1988 Thatcher speech that illustrates the paradox at work – a strategy of simultaneously including and excluding non-white immigrants:

People with other faiths and cultures have always been welcomed in this land, assured of equality under the law, of proper respect and of open friends. There is absolutely nothing incompatible between this and our desire to maintain the essence of our own identity.⁴

Smith argues that speeches such as this reveal Thatcher's adopted Powellian strategy of couching questions of race and gender within popular national and/or local issues, with the aim of recovering "an unchanged Britishness."⁵

What Kureishi sees occurring here is a problematical desire for a British unity – or the desire for what he calls an "Orwellian idea of England" in *The Black Album*⁶ – that

can only be maintained by opposing those seen to be outside the culture. [...] And of course from the New Right's talk of unity, we get no sense of the racism all black people face in Britain: the violence, abuse and discrimination in jobs, housing, policing, and political life.⁷

The upshot is that the strategic use of language of inclusion actually works to *exclude*: "[South] Asians are accepted as long as they behave like whites; if not, they should leave."⁸

⁴ Anne Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain 1968–1990* (Cultural Margins; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994): 1.

⁵ Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*, 24.

⁶ Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995): 117.

⁷ Hanif Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002): 78–79.

⁸ Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*, 77.

Sadly, similar sentiments to these are still echoed by many native Britons today; the frames of reference, however, have altered. The London bombs of 2005 serve as a useful starting-point to frame the discussion of contemporary racial politics and attitudes toward minorities in Britain. Why this series of bombings has occurred at all is a question for debate. In *Londonistan*, Melanie Phillips suggests that the British government should have expected this, as they have been too lax with its immigration policies in the hope of creating an effective multicultural society. It has born and bred terrorists within the nation by turning a blind eye to Muslim fundamentalists and their rapid growth over the last decade. This is not something that was the aim of the British government, but what has resulted is a nation in which minorities now have more power, and this has altered white Britain's sense of identity.

Phillips argues that Britain is in a state of widespread denial about this; it does not understand why it faces a threat from Islamists. What has really happened, according to her, is that

jihadi Islamism, whatever its historical or theological antecedents, has become today the dominant strain within the Islamic world, [and] its aims if not its methods are supported by an alarming number of Muslims in Britain [...] to date, no Muslim representative institutions have arisen to challenge it.⁹

She goes on to say that

many do not accept the terms on which minorities must relate to the majority culture in a liberal democracy. Instead of acknowledging that Muslim values must *give way* wherever they conflict with the majority culture, they believe that the majority should instead defer to Islamic values and allow Muslims effectively autonomous development.¹⁰

The blame lies squarely on the British government itself, but the intensity of her language when targeting immigrants is undeniable: she suggests that immigrants have invaded "our" country and taken advantage of our hospitality, and we have been too nice to them. She wants to keep the minorities just that: minorities that lie *outside* the frame of the majority culture, and do not attempt to disturb that majority. Both minority and majority in this construction are forced to remain static, with clear demarcations between them – a bizarre concept in today's transnational and globalized world.

⁹ Melanie Phillips, *Londonistan* (New York & London: Encounter Books, 2006): xix.

¹⁰ Phillips, *Londonistan*, xix. (My emphasis.)

Phillips' justification for this view is that Britain has been made to feel so bad for having an Empire that its citizens have now come to believe that the nation's policies actually *are* racist, nationalistic, and discriminatory. They are really not, Phillips is suggesting, but a loss of values has occurred nonetheless. Britain has become a post-Christian society; its values are not even being taught in schools anymore. She blames Muslim immigrants for this, for it is they who have made Britain too hyperconscious, causing the nation to lose its homogenized sense of self. She goes as far as to say that Britain has tolerated minority rights so much that the minorities are now blackmailing the nation: the British state, she claims, has had to "dump *its* most cherished values in order to placate the Muslim minority."¹¹

This is a case of a minority culture, lying at the edges of the majority, working to unsettle it; but Phillips does not see this as a positive development.¹² The problem with this view is that it assumes Britain is homogeneous, and deems homogeneity a value worth maintaining – something that eerily echoes the discriminatory policies of Powell and Thatcher in the 1960s–80s. Kureishi, however, does not believe there is such a thing as a homogeneous England.¹³ He quotes Sukhdev Sandhu, and agrees with Salman Rushdie, when he states there is no such thing as a "pure" Englishman. Kureishi's opinion on why the bombs have occurred differs from Phillips in a key way: as he argues,

¹¹ Phillips, *Londonistan*, 12 (emphasis in the original).

¹² I am thinking here of the concept of "minor literature" as posited by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minority Poetics* (1986). Because the British-Asian diaspora poetic highlights a nomadic subjectivity that is "ethically accountable and politically empowering" (Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* [Cambridge: Polity, 2002]: 2), it can be seen to operate in the context of a 'minor literature'. This poetic bespeaks a type of literature, or art in general, as a production machine that operates as an open multiplicity, transmitting the flows and intensities inherent in lines of flight that are opened and closed during the process of identity-formation. More importantly, such a minor poetic is "immediately social and political, affected by a high level of linguistic deterritorialization and expressive of a collective assemblage of enunciation" (Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Literature* [New York: Routledge, 2003]: 59). In other words, in order for a minor culture to represent itself, it must subvert a major language by deterritorializing that language and imbuing it with a minor tradition. In her view of 'minority' cultures in Britain, it is this suggested process of subversion and imbuelement that Melanie Phillips may be resisting.

¹³ Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, 5.

One of the most significant reasons for the rise of Islamic extremism [...] in the Third World is [...] lack of free speech, and the failure to make space for even the mildest political dissent.¹⁴

This is somewhat true of minorities in the UK as well: there is a history of exploitation, humiliation, oppression, and political helplessness in Britain on the part of the minorities.¹⁵ Kureishi points out that he has “heard calls among the British for the re-installation of Englishness, as though there has been too much multiculturalism, rather than not enough; [this points] to a wish for rigid, exclusive identities” that actually mirrors Islamic fundamentalism itself. It is an attempt, in short, “to counter fundamentalism with more fundamentalism.”¹⁶

What, then, is Kureishi’s own view of why the bombs have occurred? A look at his fiction suggests an answer. Both *The Black Album* and “My Son the Fanatic” were published approximately ten years prior to the London bombings; as such, they offer an uncanny prediction of the direction the state in which England has developed over the last few years. In *The Black Album*, a group of Muslim fundamentalists are suggested to have bombed the Victoria tube station, as well as several local shops. In “My Son the Fanatic,” Parvez’s son Farid organizes an attack on the prostitutes of Bradford with help from fundamentalist friends as well as a *maulvi* (an Islamic expert) they have invited from out of town. In both texts, as well as in the play *Borderline*, South-Asian youth are countering the race problem in Britain by deploying Muslim-fundamentalist rhetoric to justify violent threats, displays, and acts of terror.

The most prevalent issue in the minds of nearly every character in *Borderline* is British racial politics under what Anne Marie Smith labels “the hegemonic project” of Thatcherism.¹⁷ Each character in the play is aware of the race problem in England, but each responds to it in a different way. On the whole, the differing responses can be seen as generational, but for Kureishi this is a much too simplistic way of presenting the race relations in the early 1980s. Four types of responses can be seen in the play: some choose to ignore the problem (Amjad), some see some form of racial integration or hybridity as the solution (Anil and Amina), others actively and

¹⁴ Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, 6.

¹⁵ *The Word and the Bomb*, 7.

¹⁶ *The Word and the Bomb*, 9.

¹⁷ Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*, 28.

politically strike out against it in acts of revolution and terror (Yasmin and Anwar), and still others simply refuse to engage in such retaliatory acts, urging instead political engagement through discourse and a questioning of the system itself (Haroon). Ultimately, each stance can be seen as a political move either for or against Thatcher or the Labour Party. The play makes a clear political point: through a range of stances and responses to racism, Kureishi exposes the relation between race and acts of terror in England, especially towards and by Asian Britons themselves. *Borderline* is a play that offers no single solution to the 'race problem', but strives merely to 'act out' the consequences of Thatcherism's new racism.

In all three texts, Kureishi usefully foreshadows today's political world, steeped in the climate of global terrorism. An immediate question comes to mind as one re-reads his work in the present decade: along with being a record of historical culture, can literature can also predict our political future? In short, in today's age of national and international terrorism, can Kureishi's political fiction (as well as other contemporary literature such as Gautam Malkani's 2006 novel *Londonstani*) serve as a force for reconciliation and foster cross-cultural understanding between communities in Britain?¹⁸ In his essay "The Arduous Conversation Will Continue," Kureishi suggests that this may indeed be the function of literature:

¹⁸ Both Kureishi's and Malkani's works are comments on identity-formation, but the manner in which the race problem is addressed is radically different. Kureishi presents violent acts of terrorism on a national level as a response: his work depicts extreme destructive reactions and does not offer much hope for solutions, short of leaving or exploding. While national and international acts of terrorism call attention to the problem, they do nothing to resolve it. Malkani, by contrast, creatively suggests that a positive solution can be found from within the nation itself: the healthy way out is the formation of a subculture that works to resist in a non-violent manner. *Londonstani* is not about race riots or terrorist acts; rather, the characters form a hypermasculine gang as a response to their parents' lack of adequate reaction to the racial, religious, and political differences in the UK. Malkani's novel suggests that the creation of the desi rude-boy gang, which is really the making of a unique and hybrid subculture, ultimately serves as a more constructive act of resistance than any violent and destructive acts of terror. Overall, then, there is positive value to the construction of the rudeboys: their ethnic essentialism can be seen as an empowering response to the history of racism in Britain. What else can the immigrant do, apart from leave or turn to desperate acts of terrorism? Perhaps find a more hospitable way to live. This gang is ultimately non-violent: they are seen and heard, but their acts of resistance are constructive rather than destructive.

the only patriotism possible is one that refuses the banality of taking either side, and continues the arduous conversation. That is why we have literature, the theatre, newspapers – a culture, in other words.¹⁹

The question of the value and purpose of literature becomes of central importance to Shahid, the protagonist of *The Black Album*, in 1989, the year of the Rushdie Affair. The novel opens with the development of a friendship between Shahid and the poet/political activist Riaz Al-Hussain. To determine whether Shahid will be a useful member of his group of political activists, Riaz must first determine if Shahid is feeling the same marginalization in England that he and his posse feel. Over lunch, Riaz asks Shahid pointed questions about his frustrations as a Pakistani in Britain. It is when Shahid speaks of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* that Riaz finds his answer. Shahid is not clear yet on what "the issue," or the source of his frustration, is. For the most part, until coming across the Rushdie Affair – a watershed moment in British-Asian literature – Shahid is suggested to have been existing in a whitewashed world, embracing all that is conventionally British and in denial of the issues his own people are facing. Reading Rushdie causes Shahid to finally notice the problems of the immigrant, and recognition of these makes him burn with an anger and resentment he does not yet fully understand but nonetheless attempts to articulate to both Riaz and Chad:

I saw the author on television attacking racism, informing the people how it all arose. I tell you, I wanted to cheer. But it made me feel worse, because I was finally recognizing something. I began to get terrible feelings in my head.²⁰

The "terrible feelings" in Shahid's head lead to a desire on his part to counter racism with racism, or take some kind of action in response to what the author has articulated as the state of minorities in Britain. The Rushdie Affair has been a watershed moment not only because it allowed Muslims to realize that their disapproval could be powerful when organized, but also because of the issues brought forward in the book itself: much as in Shahid's case, it is from reading Rushdie's novel that Britons began to realize and acknowledge the history of racism faced by South-Asian immigrants in the UK. In particular, the racist mistreatment of Saladin Chamcha – horned as symbol of his difference at the hands of British authorities – serves as a

¹⁹ Kureishi, "The Arduous Conversation Will Continue," *The Guardian* (19 July 2005), repr. in *The Word and the Bomb*, 92.

²⁰ Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 29.

sharp comment on the state and its treatment of Asians in Britain. It is in this example that the British wish is revealed: that of rigid and exclusive identities that fit the vision of the homogenized nation advanced by politicians such as Powell and Thatcher. Sadly, in 1989 and today, the Muslim response is to counter this rigid fundamentalism with more fundamentalism; rather than create dialogue, such a response has led to increased bitterness, fragmentation, racism, and resentment. As Kureishi articulates in *The Word and the Bomb*, Orientalism has been responded to with Occidentalism. This is precisely the pattern that has emerged by the end of Kureishi's story "My Son the Fanatic": the father's response to his son's embrace of fundamentalism, or religious fanaticism (which is itself a response to British-fundamentalist ideas of identity), is more fanaticism and fundamentalism expressed in the form of violence. Thus, violence becomes the outcome of sheer desperation.

Shahid joins Riaz and his fundamentalist friends – he wants to “belong to his people”²¹ – but does not participate in all of the violence that the group perpetrates. Instead, he studies under the professor Deedee Osgood and finally learns the history of colonialism and of his people. These studies leave him in “a fog of inchoate anger and illumination.”²² It is only at the novel's end that Shahid begins to realize that he is against the violence of book-burning and blowing up shops and tube stations. Shahid has to read between the lines, as does the reader, to figure out for himself who has bombed the Victoria tube station. Kureishi never spells out who is responsible, but enough hints are given that it is dissatisfied Muslims like Riaz and his posse who have done this as a desperate response to not being seen or heard.

Terror also becomes the central focus in *Borderline*, and it is once again presented as a desperate response to being ignored. But the play opens with the question of race relations and the nature of South-Asian immigration to the UK. Amina's father Amjad is representative of the South Asian who has migrated in order to provide his family and himself with a better life than they had in politically and economically turbulent Pakistan. Amjad believes in Britain's ideals and is convinced that his family's life will be better there. While his desire to keep his family happy is an honourable one, the play suggests that Amjad's unrealistic patriarchal desires will never be fulfilled. Amjad's family is not happy under his domination, and do not agree with his

²¹ Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 102.

²² *The Black Album*, 38.

view of, or response to, British racism. Neither his wife nor his daughter lives in the manner she desires until after Amjad's death, when Banoo returns to Pakistan and Amina becomes 'westernized'.

Amjad, while keenly aware of the racism he both faces and advocates, chooses to ignore the problem, much like other men of his generation in England – such as Haroon's father. While aware that he, too, faces racism, Amjad insists that "mostly the English are good. It's two – maybe five – who do mad things."²³ Amjad has faith in Thatcherism and its political agenda regarding race relations. In essence, he is representative of what Anna Marie Smith calls the "cynic" who falls into the trap of Thatcherite hegemony as naturalization: while he may actually disagree with the content of the project, the promise of the hegemonic project "to transform social fragmentation into an ordered totality" causes Amjad to "give that same project [his] cynical consent."²⁴ As Smith states,

The cynical subject already knows the falsehood behind the truth claims and is already well aware that particular interests are being represented as universal interests, but still refuses to renounce the claims.²⁵

Amjad's awareness of the race problem in Britain is evident when he questions Amina: "Did those boys call you Paki in the park?"²⁶ Despite this recognition, Amjad seems to have faith that the race problem is temporary and will soon be solved by the British government. Amjad tells Susan that, while he is for the Labour Party, the Labour Party is not for him,²⁷ indicating that he is aware of the difference between the ideology of the party and the social reality. However, while Amjad may be "quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality [of racism ... he] nonetheless insists upon the mask."²⁸

Amjad chooses to ignore the racial issues by denouncing the Asian Youth Movement (as does Haroon's father) and also denies to Susan that he has "had any racial trouble."²⁹ Banoo is at the opposite end of the spectrum:

²³ Kureishi, "Borderline," in Kureishi, *Plays 1* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992): 129.

²⁴ Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*, 40.

²⁵ *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*, 38.

²⁶ Kureishi, "Borderline," 105.

²⁷ "Borderline," 125.

²⁸ Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*, 40.

²⁹ Kureishi, "Borderline," 123. Unless otherwise indicated, page references to the play are henceforth in the main text.

she is aware of racism and wants to tell Susan about it in the hope that the latter's work might change the system and end the problem somehow. Both Banoo and Amina, unlike several of the other characters, embrace Susan as a positive force and not as an interference in the affairs of the Pakistani community (114), for Susan encourages their personal transformation. Banoo can no longer hold the problem "inside" and not talk about it (124). Despite her husband's wish for her to ignore the problem alongside him, Banoo speaks up and openly declares that she is unhappy in England because of the racism she faces there. She tells Susan that while "Amjad doesn't mind that everyone looks at us and laughs" (123), the racist laughter makes her feel inhuman (124). She tells her own daughter that she is happiest and feels "free" in the rain because there are "less people on the road" and consequently less racism to face (104). Banoo wants to acknowledge the problem of racism and, because of it, wants to return to Pakistan – something she is only able to do after Amjad's death.

As well as the racism he faces and generally denies, Amjad's own racist attitudes are also significant: he is against 'westernization' and does not want his daughter Amina to be "influenced by these Westernized children" (107). An already influenced child is Anil – a fine example of the type of westernized figure Amjad would dislike. Anil insists that, to solve the race problem, the Pakistani must learn to "integrate," something he tells Ravi he himself is beginning to do (109). Anil's integration manifests itself in a rejection of his wife in Pakistan and a preference for Valerie and white ideals. In contrast to Anil, Amjad finds Farouk to be a model Pakistani boy living abroad. In Amjad's eyes, Farouk has not integrated too much, if at all, and thus can prevent Amina from integrating and help her to maintain Pakistani ideals and values rather than embracing Western ones.

However, while Amina knows she is not allowed to be westernized, she herself has a clear desire to integrate with the West. Recognizing the tensions within her own hybrid identity, Amina tells her father that racism on the part of whites should not intimidate the Pakistani diaspora, and that everyone needs to do a lot of thinking concerning the issue (130). Amina blames the English for the racial troubles (129), a view her father denies. By "swallowing bleach" and becoming "whitewashed," Amina believes she has "gone all free" (136, 138). Amina's identity-crisis throughout the play is one that involves a crucial choice for her: she tells Susan that if she chooses to go "all free" she will make her parents unhappy, but if she chooses to do what they want and remain Pakistani, she will be hurting herself badly (142–43).

Amina's statement might also foreshadow her eventual choice to harm herself and others through a suicidal act of terrorism – a reaction to being unable to live a free life even after her father's death. She joins the Asian Youth Movement by the play's end, carrying petrol bombs to burn down the town meeting-hall. Unfortunately, the solution for her is found only in violence.

Haroon, Amina's lover, is the escapist who thinks the race problem will go away if he leaves the Asian community. He stops participating in the Youth Movement, denouncing both the Pakistani community – represented by his rejection of Amina and his own father – and the “prying” whites such as Susan who cannot possibly understand the diaspora and their situation in England (138, 143–44). Haroon is criticized for this attitude by both Amina and Yasmin at several points in the play. While Haroon once used to value the Pakistani aspect of his identity, to the point that he started the Asian Youth Movement, he has now changed his mind and wants nothing to do with the racial situation.

Yasmin and Anwar, by contrast, address the race problem head-on and comment on it. Yasmin tells Haroon that it is people like him and his father who hold the Youth Movement back (149). She criticizes Haroon's position and justifies the movement:

It's people like you and your repulsive father who hold us back.... How? You haven't noticed? By exploiting their own people. By not facing the issues. By pretending they've found a safe place here. By thinking that the fact they've made money gives us all position and respect in some way. What are we really all up against? Passport raids, harassment, interrogation, repatriation by intimidation, detention centres at Heathrow Airport. Haroon, you're in a bad way... I understand what you're going through, because it's happened to me. To many of us. You've taken all the conflicts inside yourself. But you can't live like that, as if race and contempt and all that was some kind of personal problem you can work through on your own. It'll tear you apart in the end. No we've got to organize and retaliate. (149)

Yasmin tells Haroon that his desire to live a normal life will never be fulfilled, and that the retaliation of the Youth Movement is strengthening the Pakistanis as a community (149). Furthermore, unlike Amjad's idealism of Thatcherism, Yasmin recognizes that the Labour Party remains a “stagnant racist organization” (150). To Yasmin, in terms of the race problem the political is personal, and the personal is political (151). Both Yasmin and Anwar see Susan as someone who will take their voice, replace it with the white one, and thus never be able to correctly express the situation of the Asian immi-

grant (132). Yasmin tells Susan that the white Britons want an exhibition of her misery, but before she goes “emotionally nude for them,” she wants them to “look at their own history” (141). While Yasmin is not against things in the UK, she sees that, with immigration, the effects of colonialism are still present and racist attitudes still exist. Yasmin and, indirectly, Anwar want the situation to be improved and hope that the Youth Movement is a step towards ending the dictatorship of both Pakistani parents and white racists (167).

On the whole, within the community presented in Kureishi’s play there is a borderline between ‘them’ and ‘us’ that can be seen from, and is often agreed upon by, both the white and the Pakistani side. This borderline cannot be denied, and racist attitudes emerge from both sides. The whites fear the ‘otherness’ of the Pakistanis, something that is a continuation of colonialist attitudes, and such racism is subtly perpetuated under Thatcherism. The example of Amjad shows how much of the population falls into the trap of the “hegemonic project” of Thatcherism. However, for the younger generation who have not witnessed the racism perpetuated under colonialism (such as Ravi), Thatcherism’s true agenda is clear: the UK has accepted South Asians but with a controversial necessary precaution. In short, immigrants are welcomed as a new work force, but the racial divide is subtly maintained. As a result of this clear borderline between the races, exclusive diasporic communities such as Southall and “Bradistan” (Bradford, with a play on Pakistan) have necessarily formed, and racism on both sides of the divide continues.

A range of reactions to British racial politics is presented by Kureishi; all are valid and problematical at the same time. By using theatre as his medium, Kureishi accomplishes what Jatinder Verma argues are the aims of Tara Arts and of Indo-British theatre in general. The medium of theatre allows Kureishi to make a link between “racism at one end of the spectrum of oppression, injustice, and discrimination,” and “things that might be going on within [... the] community,” such as “relations between parents and children.”³⁰ Following the practice of Tara Arts, in *Borderline* Kureishi is just as critical of the members of the Asian diaspora itself as he is of white England: racism is not one-sided, but is a two-sided coin that implicates both groups. Kureishi’s use of the English language and Western rather than Indian theatrical forms to present *Borderline* indicates his need to address the widest audience possible,

³⁰ Graham Ley, “Theatre of Migration and the Search for a Multicultural Aesthetic: Twenty Years of Tara Arts,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 52 (1997): 350.

thus effectively displaying and emphasizing the gravity of the race problem in British culture and politics.

What, then, is the connection between racism and terrorism, as argued in Kureishi's fiction? In speaking of the word and the bomb, Kureishi insists that there can only be two responses to violence:

The only way out is to condemn all violence [this is Shahid's solution in *The Black Album*, and also one of the solutions offered in the play *Borderline*], or [...] to recognize that violence is an important and useful moral option in the world.³¹

If violence is indeed a useful option, then one must ask: what is it that the terrorist wants? Perhaps it is to be heard, and be acknowledged. The terrorist, whether in the UK or elsewhere, does not become a terrorist out of a desire to kill. Acts of terrorism must be understood as fundamentalism responding to fundamentalism, motivated by sheer desperation at not being seen or heard, and at not being permitted to belong. This has special significance in the context of the UK's history of immigration, where Powell, Thatcher, and even political leaders today are working to erase differences and anglicize immigrants to the point of a complete obliteration of difference. Fear of the Other is still present in the UK today – the innocent Brazilian man wrongfully killed by British authorities immediately after 7/7 only indicates how deep this paranoia still runs.

My point here is that the seed of this resistance – to this whole “Orwellian idea of England,” as Kureishi puts it – was planted well before recent times, before any actual bombs went off. The terrorists in England today are responding to situations British Asians still face daily in their struggle to belong to a nation they have chosen to call home. In essence, nothing has changed; if anything, increased prejudice and profiling is occurring today based on religion as well as race. It is precisely the failure of resistance that has finally led to desperate violence on the part of the minority, fuelled by the rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism. The terrorist is willing to die for this cause.

As Kureishi insists, violence can be seen as a necessary and valuable option in the world. Sadly, for British South Asians it has had come to this for the majority to begin to pay attention: a literal explosion has been necessary for the voice of the oppressed and the marginalized to be heard. Kureishi's work was written ten years before 7/7, essentially foreshadowing the events of

³¹ Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, 92.

2005, *but failed to serve as a warning*. If literature is indeed “arduous conversation,” as he posits in his eponymous essay, then this conversation has not even managed to leave intellectual academic circles to have a significant impact on the state of the world.

The question of whether literature has potential to effect real change is one hotly contested by Shahid and Chad in *The Black Album*. At the novel’s end, Shahid decides to walk away from the violence and write about it instead. In his debates with Chad on the value of fiction, we learn that Shahid does indeed believe that literature can change the world. Ultimately, experiences of racism as a child are what provoke him to write in the first place, an activity Shahid undertakes in the hope that he might actually achieve an effect with his writing. Chad insists, however, that literature does not actually effect any real change or provide genuine solutions, but instead simply allows intellectuals and academics to elevate themselves above the fray. As he points out, to the troubled Muslim in the UK, literature is of no value, because it is neither written by nor targeted at the masses, but by and for the intellectual elite.³² Chad asks, “what do intellectuals know about good [and evil]?” (30). He explains that intellectuals, sitting in their ivory towers, do not experience the evil but, rather, talk about it in closed circles; they are not the ones burning with injustice and oppression, and therefore take no actual action against it. This later prompts Shahid to express the following to the intellectual Deedee Osgood: “you see through everything and rip everything to shreds but you never take any action. Why would you want to change anything when you already have everything your way?” (120).

Chad’s ultimate point is a valuable one: it is for the *intellectual* to read literature, as it is simply not relevant to the masses. After 7/7, we have learned that the ordinary South Asian *can and will* respond with action – the bomb rather than the word. In this context, it is easy to question whether literature such as Kureishi’s has been useful in contemporary Britain; its value is argued by intellectuals, but the discussion has failed to extend beyond the ivory tower to help the ordinary citizen. In the absence of tangible solutions, Muslims have become fundamentalists and terrorists. Rioting and burning down town halls has been insufficient; the London bombs *have* occurred.

In three separate instances – 1981, 1995, and 1997 – Kureishi has foreshadowed where Muslim fundamentalism is headed. But his audience is not ordinary Muslims, who in fact find Kureishi’s writing to be much more offensive

³² Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, 29.

than practically useful. His literary audience has been and continues to be, by and large, intellectuals and academics, and this readership has not actively responded to the warnings subtly outlined in his fiction. About a decade later, as predicted, the problem of Muslim fundamentalism has come to a head and bombs have exploded in central London. What does this say about the function of literature in Britain today? In the past decade, it has not been useful in terms of prevention, nor has it created enough arduous dialogue to effect any real change. 7/7 was the wake-up call to this realization – that literature, indeed, has done us no good. What did Kureishi know that we still do not comprehend? We have failed to listen.

As Kureishi insists in his most recent essays for the *Guardian*, literature needs to be valued as politically relevant and politically charged. We love to talk in intellectual circles about how literature is a reflection of our times, and how it can help us live in the world. But has this really taken place? Like Dee-dee Osgood, we dialogue in classrooms and at academic conferences, but take no actual action. We have been failing to hear Kureishi's message for at least two decades, and this very failure has left us shocked in the wake of the 2005 London Bombs. Sadly, it has taken an act of terrorism for us to pay attention, giving weight to Kureishi's claim that the bomb is, indeed, more powerful than the word. Perhaps it is time we started listening.

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“Witness is what you must bear”

—— Politics in Margaret Atwood’s Poetry*

PILAR SOMACARRERA

Introduction

ALTHOUGH CRITICS HAVE USUALLY IGNORED the democratic-socialist content of Margaret Atwood’s writing,¹ politics is essential to understand her career and works. As her biographer Rosemary Sullivan observes, she has become an effective spokesperson for political issues in Canada that have demanded writers’ attention, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, censorship, copyright law, obscenity laws, the status of women, and the environment.² She has been a member of Amnesty International and currently channels her political preoccupations through PEN International, of which she was a president from 1984 to 1986. In addition, she has always been at the cutting edge of societal concerns: in the 1990s, she took part in the debates about federalism and the recognition of Quebec as a distinct society, and in the early twenty-first century she openly expressed her views on the USA’s participation in the Iraq war in her “Letter to America.” Most recently (July 2011), she has mobilized her followers

* The following essay is a revised and expanded version, translated by the author, of Pilar Somacarrera Íñigo, “‘Ser testigo es necesario’: la poética política de Margaret Atwood,” *Asparkia: Investigación feminista* 18 (2007): 119–37.

¹ See Shannon Hengen, *Margaret Atwood’s Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* (Toronto: Second Story, 1993): 13.

² Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out* (Toronto: HarperFlamingoCanada, 1998): 327.

through the social network Twitter to protest against the privatization of the Toronto Public Library system.³

In Linda Wagner-Martin's words, becoming a spokesperson for human rights is one of the new roles Atwood took on in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁴ She moved away from specific gender concerns to become a poet of witness and speak about social wrongs. For the Canadian writer, her involvement with human-rights issues is "not separate from writing":

When you begin to write, you deal with your immediate surroundings; as you grow your immediate surroundings become larger. There's no contradiction [...]. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists do: I began to describe the world around me.⁵

Against the separation of art and social context imposed by the Leavisite critical tradition, she proposes the compatibility of politics and arts:

I point out to Americans who believe that art is over here and politics is over there, that it's not two boxes. Other writers in other countries don't have that problem. What people are afraid of here is that if they write political poetry, some reviewer is going to say it's not poetry and sure, you take that risk, but what is life without risks? [...] All I'm saying is it's an anomaly to say that political things are not artistic. Political engagement can give a writer tremendous energy.⁶

Atwood's own definition of politics is based on its concreteness and materiality:

Politics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom... It's not just elections [...]. Politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power.⁷

³ See David Rider, "Margaret Atwood fights library cuts, crashes petition server," *thestar.com* (22 July 2011), <http://www.thestar.com/news/article/1028941-margaret-atwood-fights-library-cuts-crashes-petition-server> (accessed 24 July 2011).

⁴ Linda Wagner-Martin, "'Giving Way to Bedrock': Atwood's Later Poems," in *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction and Novels*, ed. Lorraine M. York (Toronto: Anansi, 1995): 71–72.

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Second Words* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982): 14–15.

⁶ Francis X. Gillen, "A Conversation," in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, ed. Kathryn VanSpanckeren & Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988): 241.

⁷ Jo Brans, "Using What You're Given" (1982), in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1990): 149.

In her story "Postcolonial" from her collection *The Tent* (2006), she still used the definition of power as "who gets to do what to whom," to refer to the extermination of native populations ("them") undertaken by Europeans ("we") during the colonization of the Americas:

We muse about the Native inhabitants, who had a bad time of it at our hands despite arrows or, conversely, despite helpfulness. They were ravaged by disease... Also hunted down, shot, clubbed over the head, robbed and so forth. We muse about these things and feel terrible. *We did that*, we think, *to them*. We say the word *them*, believing we know what we mean by it; we say the word *we*, even though we were not born at the time.⁸

Drawing on Atwood's personal definition of power, this essay aims at showing the development of her interest in political issues in her collections of poetry, from *Power Politics* up to *The Door*, in order to demonstrate that she has always been involved in the defence of human rights and the denunciation of their violation. As I move chronologically through Atwood's politically committed poetic collections, I will also try to establish bridges with her fictional and non-fictional works, revealing, once again, the coherence and continuity of thought between the various literary genres of the Canadian writer's production. Whereas her commitment to political writing became more intense in the late 1970s and 1980s, with the publication of the poetry collections *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), *True Stories* (1981), her political thriller *Bodily Harm* (1981), and her dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), her interest in political affairs and, more specifically, the abuse of power, has continued in *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) and *The Door* (2007).

Political Poems from the 1970s:

Power Politics (1971) and *Two-Headed Poems* (1978)

Margaret Atwood has been interested in the topic of power since the beginning of her career. In fact, the issue of power politics is a wide-ranging and crucial topic in her work, one that was articulated for the first time in the poems of *Power Politics* and has persisted throughout her career. One of the texts that are fundamental to understanding the notion of power in Atwood's works is an often neglected piece from her early career, titled "Notes on Power Politics" (1973), in which she gives her personal definition of the concept:

⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Tent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006): 98–99.

Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air. [...] We would all like to have a private life that is sealed off from the public life and different from it, where there are no rulers and no ruled, no hierarchies, no politicians, only equals, free people. But because any culture is a closed system and our culture is one based and fed on power this is impossible, or at least very difficult.⁹

Although Atwood has confessed¹⁰ that her ideas about power do not come from literary theory but, rather, from reading Shakespeare and books about history and politics, it is easy to perceive certain similarities between her definition and Michel Foucault's theories about power. For Foucault, power as a noun, "le" pouvoir, does not exist.¹¹ Like Atwood, the French philosopher sees power as a kind of omnipresent energy which only manifests itself at the interaction between elements, the object of a permanent struggle.

As I mentioned above, *Power Politics* is the beginning of Atwood's poetic itinerary through the eponymous theme. The book can be interpreted as a literary response to Kate Millett's seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1971), in which heterosexual relations are defined in political terms.¹² Since I have already interpreted Atwood's poems from this collection as a treatise on the sexual power-struggle between men and women,¹³ in the present essay I will undertake a strictly political reading of some of the poems in this collection, beginning with the epigraph:

You fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye.¹⁴

The poem presents a shocking representation of sexual relations based in the abrupt transition from an image of domestic happiness – in the first two lines

⁹ Margaret Atwood, "Notes on *Power Politics*," *Acta Victoriana* 97.2 (1973): 7.

¹⁰ Private email correspondence with the author of this essay.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh" ("Le jeu de Michel Foucault," July 1977), in Foucault, *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980): 198.

¹² Karen F. Stein, *Margaret Atwood Revisited* (Boston MA: Twayne, 1999): 30.

¹³ See Pilar Somacarrera, "Power Politics: Power and Identity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge UP, 2006): 43–57.

¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Power Politics* (1971; Toronto: Anansi, 1996): 1.

– to that of violence in the last two. The simile for the romantic cliché of perfect lovemaking which relies on the domestic image of “hook” and “eye” as complementary clothing fasteners is suddenly transformed into a nightmarish vision of horror.¹⁵ However, beyond its sexual content, the poem makes a political declaration of much broader repercussions about violence and the abuse of power in any context, illustrating Atwood’s notion that power is “who gets to do what to whom.” Atwood confessed that the image in the last two lines was suggested to her by a scene from the surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* by Luis Buñuel, in which a razor blade enters an eye.¹⁶ The image will reappear in a later poetry collection, *Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written*:

The razor across the eyeball
is a detail from an old film.
It is also a truth.
Witness is what you must bear.¹⁷

Atwood’s warning, phrased as a person-to-person address, is clear: we cannot close our eyes to violence; we must bear witness to the abuse of power even if it is painful. Writers have a special obligation to be such witnesses, as Atwood confirms in several essays from the 1980s. According to the Canadian writer, “such material [on abuse of power] enters a writer’s work ... because the writer is an observer, a witness, and such observations are the air he breathes.”¹⁸ She also insists that writing “is also a witnessing”:

The writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for the others.
The writer bears witness.¹⁹

The second part of *Power Politics* opens with another short poem, in which, as George Bowering points out, the central metaphor transforms the female voice in Canada, whereas the “you” who is addressed is the USA:

Imperialist, keep off
the trees I said.

¹⁵ Somacarrera, “Power Politics: Power and Identity,” 46.

¹⁶ Private conversation with the author of this essay.

¹⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Selected Poems 1966–1984* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990): 265.

¹⁸ Atwood, “Amnesty International: an Address,” in *Second Words*, 394.

¹⁹ Atwood, “An End to Audience,” in *Second Words*, 348.

No use: you walk backwards,
admiring your own footprints.²⁰

Although the poetic voice calls the addressee “imperialist,” he appears as a pathetic subject who “walks backwards,” immersed in his narcissism. In this poem, Atwood denounces what Alfred W. Crosby calls the “ecological imperialism”²¹ exerted by the USA over Canada’s natural resources, a complaint that she also lodges in the opening sentence of her novel *Surfacing*, published in 1972, a year after *Power Politics*. “I can’t believe I’m on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south.”²² A similar dialogue between Canada and the USA occurs in the poem “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy” from her earlier collection *The Animals in the Country* (1968). In this poem, Canada, in spite of its situation of inferiority and the threat posed by the aforementioned pollution coming from the south, resists and “writes back”:

I am the horizon
you ride towards,
the thing you can never lasso

I am what surrounds you:
my brain
scattered with your
tincans, bones, empty shells,
the litter of your invasions.²³

The relations between opposing national constituencies (Canada/USA; English Canada/Quebec) are also the central motif of *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), but this collection also contains the poem “Footnote to the Amnesty Report on Torture,” which anticipates Atwood’s concern about torture as reflected in *Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written*, where her descriptions of this practice appear at their starkest:

The torture chamber is not like anything
you would have expected.
No opera set or sexy chains and
leather goods from the glossy magazines,

²⁰ Atwood, *Power Politics*, 15.

²¹ See Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986).

²² Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; London: Virago, 1996): 1.

²³ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 57.

porno magazines, no thirties horror
 dungeon with gauzy cobwebs;
 [...]
 It stinks, though; like a hospital,
 Of antiseptics and sickness,
 And, on some days, blood
 which smells the same anywhere,
 here or at the butcher's.²⁴

However, other than this prelude of sheer horror, soon to be expanded in two 1981 works – the novel *Bodily Harm* and the short-fiction collection *True Stories* – the collection focuses, as I indicated, on the tensions between English Canada and Quebec and on the restrictions on freedom of speech attendant on the imposition of the French language in Quebec. Judith McCombs situates the poems in the context of the events taking place in Quebec in the mid-1970s.²⁵ By 1976, French and English Canada had grown increasingly and mutually hostile over language and secession; although the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) bombings had stopped, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had made the country officially bilingual, René Lévesque's separatist Parti Québécois had been gaining power – and an English-Canadian backlash was looming and, indeed, already noticeable.

The sequence "Two-Headed Poems" is divided into eleven parts which explore two of Atwood's favourite topics: duplicity and language. Its epigraph is from an advertisement about Siamese twins exhibited at the Canadian National Exhibition around 1954: "Joined Head to Head and still alive." The author adds the following information:

The heads speak sometimes singly, sometimes
 together, sometimes alternately within a poem.
 Each speaks a different language.
 Like all Siamese twins, they dream of separation.²⁶

The twins represent English Canada and Quebec, but also Canada and the USA (Atwood always maintains the ambiguity about the two speakers in

²⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Two-Headed Poems* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978): 46.

²⁵ Judith McCombs, "Politics, Structure, and Poetic Development in Atwood's Canadian-American Sequences: From an Apprentice Pair to 'The Circle Game' to 'Two-Headed Poems'," *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, ed. Kathryn VanSpanckeren & Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988): 152.

²⁶ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 223.

conflict), two national entities that are condemned to be together, albeit in permanent conflict. At the end of the poem, the poetic voice concludes that what is going on between the two voices “is not a debate / but a duet / with two deaf singers,”²⁷ an image which perfectly reflects the impossible dialogue between opposed political factions.

Poem i refers to “a rift in the earth” which is making “everything / in the place [fall] down to Cincinnati” in Ohio, one of the American states which share a border with Canada. After this allusion to the growing split inside Canada and the increasing influence of the USA, the two voices refer to the meagre hopes for the future (“The rubble is the future”²⁸). The words accumulated by politicians are compared to corpses piled up in a cellar:

What will happen to the children,
not to mention the words
we’ve been stockpiling for ten years now,
defining them, freezing them, storing
then in the cellar. [...]
the death of shoes, fingers
dissolving from our hands,
atrophy of the tongue,
the empty mirror.²⁹

Poems i and ii are about Canada’s attempt to define itself through the definition of the ‘Other’, in this case the USA. As Judith McCombs points out, defining others first and oneself after by negative contrast is a Canadian reflex and a symptom of the lack of an independent identity.³⁰ Poem iv deals with linguistic issues, such as the politics of suppressing English which the Quebec Government implemented in Montreal, presenting it as a kind of genocide:

Cut this word from this mouth.
Cut this mouth.

(Expurgation: purge.
To purge is to clean,
also to kill.)³¹

²⁷ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 231.

²⁸ *Selected Poems*, 222.

²⁹ *Selected Poems*, 222–23.

³⁰ Judith McCombs, “Politics, Structure, and Poetic Development in Atwood’s Canadian–American Sequences,” 154.

³¹ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 225.

According to Atwood, those who impose certain words and purge others kill language and violate human rights. She also criticizes the obsession with codifying Canadian identity, a national identity which has been invisible and indifferent to world affairs: "Our flag has been silence, / which was mistaken for no flags / which was mistaken for peace."³²

Canada's complexities continue to elude definition:

We wanted to describe the snow,
the snow here, at the corner
of the house and orchard
in a language so precise
and secret it was not even
a code, it was snow,
there could be no translation.³³

As Atwood reminds us, snow, a ubiquitous natural phenomenon in Canada (like the iconic maple represented in the national flag), is in these lines a metonym for Canada itself: it "cannot be eaten or captured"³⁴ or translated (alluding to Canada's obsession with translating everything into the two official languages). Language itself becomes a central topic in poems vi and ix, where words are described in anthropomorphic terms. Like people, words age and get wrinkles:

Each
word is wrinkled
with age, swollen
with other words,
with blood ...
each word is empire.³⁵

In the line "each word is empire," the poet echoes the idea from postcolonial theory that language that exercises control over the language of others is one of the main features of imperial oppression.³⁶ It should be pointed out, of course, that although Atwood's discourse is polemical, it is also, as befits poetry, polysemous: the negative 'anti-imperialist' implication is offset by a

³² Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 224.

³³ *Selected Poems*, 225.

³⁴ Atwood, *Power Politics*, 37.

³⁵ *Selected Poems*, 226.

³⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989): 7.

positive attitude of wonder towards language, which throbs with life (“blood”) and carries cumulatively within it (“each word”) the trace of human history – and is worth defending, on these grounds, against suppression and expropriation.

“Two-Headed Poems” contains some of Atwood’s most caustic comments about politicians and their duplicity. They are especially dedicated to Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who was Prime Minister of Canada between 1968 and 1979. As Shannon Hengen observes, when the persona alludes to the “two voices” of the leader mentioned in the poems, she is referring not to his bilingual fluency but to his duplicity in French–English Canadian relations and in Canada’s relations with the USA.³⁷ Poem vii explicitly refers to Trudeau and his ability to manipulate language. Atwood has often expressed her lack of trust in politicians in her interviews and essays. “I don’t endorse political candidates,” she confessed to Jo Brans in an interview held in 1982,³⁸ and confirmed her views in a 2003 conversation:

Everybody mistrusts politics, of course politicians can lie ... they’ve been known to lie, they always have. However, there are rules about lying, everybody knows that you can lie to the electorate. If you lie to reporters, that’s expected, but you are not supposed to lie to Parliament.³⁹

In her essay about George Orwell, Atwood uses the example of *Animal Farm* to give her view on political speeches: “In the world of *Animal Farm*, most speechifying and public palaver is bullshit and instigated lying.”⁴⁰ Elsewhere, she accuses politicians of hypocritical abuse of power in their own interest:

Our leader
is a man of water
with a tinfoil skin.

He has two voices,
[...]
Most leaders speak
for themselves, then
for the people.⁴¹

³⁷ Shannon Hengen, *Margaret Atwood’s Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* (Toronto: Second Story, 1993): 77.

³⁸ Jo Brans, “Using What You’re Given,” 149.

³⁹ Unpublished interview with the author of this essay.

⁴⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent* (Toronto: Anansi, 2004): 332.

⁴¹ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 226.

Political Engagement in *Notes for a Poem that Can Never Be Written* (1981)

Already in the early 1970s, Atwood had begun to raise her voice against the abuses committed by authoritarian regimes which repress freedom of speech and exert violence, foreshadowing the outspoken denunciation articulated in *Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written*:

We hear nothing these days
from the ones in power
[...]
Fists have many forms;
a fist knows what it can do

without the nuisance of speaking:
it grabs and smashes.
[...]
Language, the fist
proclaims by squeezing
is for the weak only.⁴²

Atwood expresses similar ideas about how dictatorships restrict freedom of speech in an essay titled “An End to Audience?” where she explains that the first voices to be suppressed are those of artists and journalists:

In any totalitarian takeover, whether from the left or from the right, writers, singers and journalists are the first to be repressed. [...]. The aim of such suppressions is to silence the voice, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that's why so much trouble is taken to silence it.⁴³

Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written takes up the difficult issue of naming that which we prefer to ignore – violence, pain, atrocities. *Notes Towards a Poem* was published in her collection *True Stories* in 1981, the same year as her novel *Bodily Harm*. As so often happens in Atwood's novels, *Bodily Harm* expands on some of the themes that were only sketched in the poetry collection. The inspiration for these two books is a journey that Atwood and her husband, Graeme Gibson, had taken to the Caribbean island of St Vincent. As Nathalie Cooke reveals in her biography of Atwood, the

⁴² Atwood, *Power Politics*, 31.

⁴³ Atwood, *Second Words*, 350.

couple rented a house on the island, where people would come, “under the cover of night,” to tell their stories.⁴⁴

As several critics have remarked, the ordering of the poems in *True Stories* is carefully schemed.⁴⁵ The book is divided into three sections separated by a blank page, with *Notes Towards a Poem* occupying the central position. A book that is supposed to be about “true stories” opens with the often anthologized poem of the same title, which disrupts the reader’s expectations by warning that the concept of a true story is a pernicious illusion: “Don’t ask for the true story... The true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue.”⁴⁶

This opening is followed by poems about the narrator’s alienation and discomfort in a Caribbean island (“One More Garden,” “Postcard,” “Hotel,” “Dinner”). The collection goes on to approach, as Karen F. Stein points out, serious questions of language, epistemology, politics, the contrasting worlds of city and nature, the quest for a secure home in the world, relationships, stories and storytelling, and the power and limits of poetry.⁴⁷ In another poem from *True Stories*, “Small Poems for the Winter Solstice,” Atwood had already referred to the role of poetry in a world where torture is pervasive, foreshadowing the preoccupations of *Notes Towards a Poem* in the following rhetorical question: “How can I justify this gentle poem in the face of sheer / horror?”⁴⁸

If the order of the poems in *True Stories* is carefully designed, so is the organization of *Notes Towards a Poem*. Although it may at first appear as a chaotic and seemingly unlinked assemblage, the poems are organized in accordance with the musical principles of counterpoint and fugue, a technique which is “partly [...] a display of skill / like a concerto.”⁴⁹ The poems refer to at least five different places in the world that are mentioned explicitly or can be deduced. For example, we can infer the setting of “A Conversation” to be some kind of Caribbean resort, the location of “Trainride Vienna–Bonn” is the West Germany of that time, and the last section refers to the speaker’s own country – Canada – and El Salvador. This multiplicity of settings can be

⁴⁴ Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* (Toronto: ECW, 1998): 261.

⁴⁵ See Wagner–Martin, “‘Giving Way to Bedrock’: Atwood’s Later Poems,” 77; and Stein, *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, 116.

⁴⁶ Margaret Atwood, *True Stories* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981): 9–11.

⁴⁷ Stein, *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, 115.

⁴⁸ Atwood, *True Stories*, 27.

⁴⁹ *True Stories*, 68.

read as a comment on the global nature of the abuse of human rights: it does not just happen in one country, but everywhere. Special attention is paid to acts of torture inflicted on women, in the sections "Torture," "A Women's Issue," and "Christmas Carols," which serve as evidence that

Torture for the purposes of extracting a confession, which will in turn justify the torture, is not a thing of the past. It did not end with racks, stakes, and Grand Inquisitors, or with Cotton Mather. It is here with us now, and growing.⁵⁰

The poetic sequence consists of nine independent sections, the last of which bears the title of the series. The first three ("A Conversation," "Flying inside Your Body," "The Arrest of the Stockbroker") mix their apparently holiday-like and trivial setting with hints of violence, preparing the reader for the explicit horror to follow in the next ones. Atwood's penchant for surprise is at its best in "Flying inside Your Body," in which a moment of ecstasy is suddenly transformed into the moment immediately before an execution. In "The Arrest of the Stockbroker," she also deploys her surprise technique to illustrate how in an authoritarian regime everybody ends up becoming a victim, and, as mentioned before, journalists and artists are the first to fall victim.

In Foucault's words, nothing is more material and physical than the exercise of power.⁵¹ The materiality of power is embodied in the act of torture, which is precisely the title of the fourth section of the poem, describing various episodes of this atrocious practice used by authoritarian regimes. The two episodes depicted in this section, a woman whose body is tortured and thrown out in the streets,⁵² and that of a "flayed body untangled / string by string and hung / to the wall,"⁵³ appear in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Contrasting with other definitions found in Atwood's poems which trivialize the notion of power – "Power is wine with lunch / and the right pinstripes"⁵⁴ – in this section power is defined as something that is "not abstract, it's not concerned / with politics and free will, it's beyond slogans."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Atwood, *Second Words*, 332.

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, "Body/Power" (*Pouvoir et corps*, October 1975), in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980): 57–58.

⁵² Atwood, *True Stories*, 50.

⁵³ *True Stories*, 51.

⁵⁴ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 233.

⁵⁵ Atwood, *True Stories*, 50.

In the sixth section, “A Women’s Issue,” Atwood continues adding nightmarish visions to the catalogue of horrors of this poetic sequence. The section describes several acts of violence against women presented in a manner which resembles a catalogue in an exhibition. The scenes range from the chastity belt, through the mutilation of women’s genitals, to the collective rape to which women are submitted in wartime. The poetic voice remarks that what these scenes “have in common / is between the legs,”⁵⁶ that is, female sexuality. The female body is then compared to the land being fought over in wars, “enemy territory, no man’s / land, to be entered furtively,”⁵⁷ to conclude that the scene is from “no museum,” but from real life.

Continuing with women issues (the title is, of course, a pun, connoting both ‘matters’ and everything that proceeds from the female body, including progeny), the exaltation of maternity is satirized in the section “Christmas Carols,”⁵⁸ where Atwood declares that childbirth is not always a happy event:

Children do not always mean
hope. To some they mean despair.
This woman with her hair cut off
so she could not hang herself
threw herself from a rooftop, thirty
times raped & pregnant by the enemy
who did this to her.⁵⁹

In the seventh section, “Trainride Vienna–Bonn,” the sight of a man running in the woods prompts Atwood to evoke the persecution which took place in Germany under Nazism: “a man / running, and three others chasing / their brown coats flapping.”⁶⁰ As Lothar Hönnighausen points out,⁶¹ the narrator asks herself the decisive moral question about the Hitler and Stalin era that hardly anybody who is not a German ever asks herself:

⁵⁶ Atwood, *True Stories*, 54.

⁵⁷ *True Stories*, 54.

⁵⁸ This section is not reproduced in *Selected Poems* (1996–1984), the anthology published by Oxford University Press, perhaps because of its religious allusions and its polemical satire against anti-abortionist movements.

⁵⁹ Atwood, *True Stories*, 56.

⁶⁰ *True Stories*, 60.

⁶¹ Lothar Hönnighausen, “Margaret Atwood’s Poetry 1966–1995,” in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000): 111.

This is the old fear:
 not what can be done to you
 but what you might do
 to yourself, or fail to.
 This is the old torture.⁶²

We are now witnesses of a different type of torture, the psychological torture of realizing how you may also be an accomplice in the violence of totalitarian regimes by failing to denounce it.

Between "Trainride Vienna–Bonn" and the title section of the sequence, we find the poem "Spelling," which, despite the fact that it has been omitted from Atwood's best-known 'Selecteds',⁶³ contains some of Atwood's most emblematic lines. The writer begins with the domestic scene of her daughter playing with the letters of the game of Scrabble, then cuts to a catalogue of real atrocities:

I return to the story
 of the woman caught in the war
 & in labour, her thighs tied
 together by the enemy
 so she could not give birth.⁶⁴

Atwood has explained that this scene "is right out of Nazi Germany. It's real... All of the things in that poem sequence *Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written*, they're all real."⁶⁵

The best-known section of this sequence has the same title as the sequence itself, "Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written,"⁶⁶ and is dedicated to the American poet Carolyn Forché, whom, as Nathalie Cooke recounts, Atwood met at a reading she gave in Portland, Oregon.⁶⁷ Because of the eruption of Mt St Helens, Atwood and Forché had difficulties getting out

⁶² Atwood, *True Stories*, 61.

⁶³ It appears neither in *Selected Poems 1966–1984*, nor in *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965–1995*.

⁶⁴ Atwood, *True Stories*, 63.

⁶⁵ Jan Garden Castro, "An Interview with Margaret Atwood 20 April 1983," in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, ed. Kathryn VanSpanckeren & Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988): 230.

⁶⁶ The poem first appeared in a small-press edition in a limited edition of two hundred copies, presumably meant for fund-raising.

⁶⁷ Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, 262.

of Portland, and on the long ride to San Francisco Forché talked of the situation in El Salvador. She spoke about the terror people suffered in this country and complained to Atwood about how difficult it was to make the facts known. The poems in this sequence are “notes,” because they allude to acts of torture that would be too horrifying to describe and to read about in more specific detail. From the outset, these lines present a contradiction in terms: the poems cannot be written, but they seem to be written. Frank Davey tries to clarify this contradiction by explaining that the word “written” may suggest a dichotomy between the oral and written discourse: the poem cannot be written, but it can be imagined or cried out.⁶⁸ From the rhetorical point of view, these lines show the strong presence of pathos, which consists in appealing to the emotional response which a speech can provoke in an audience, as well as an effective use of parallelism.

The section begins with the poetic voice referring to the materiality of a geographical space, affirming the predominance of place over cognition and imagination:

This is the place
you would rather not know about,
this is the place that will inhabit you,
this is the place you cannot imagine.⁶⁹

Atwood is using the same notion of place as that found in postcolonial theory – place as a complex interaction of language, history, and environment.⁷⁰ After an itinerary through images from this and earlier poetic sequences (the tortured woman, the razor blade slicing the eye), in the final section of *Notes Towards a Poem* Atwood explores the predicament of the writer who seeks to have a political impact. She continues to use parallelism to contrast the situation in her country – Canada – and that of other countries which suffer wars or dictatorial regimes. Unlike what happens in these countries, Canada enjoys freedom of speech, but the political impact of literature is weak because Canadians prefer to escape from unpleasant violations of human rights taking place in other countries:

⁶⁸ Frank Davey, “What is a genre: Atwood’s ‘Notes Towards a Poem Which Can Never Be Written’,” in *Inside the Poem: Essays and Poems in Honour of Donald Stephens*, ed. W.H. New (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1992): 49.

⁶⁹ Atwood, *True Stories*, 65.

⁷⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, “Place,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Ashcroft et al. (1995; Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2006): 345.

In this country you can say what you like
 because no one will listen to you anyway,
 it's safe enough, in this country you can try to write
 the poem that can never be written,
 the poem that invents
 nothing and excuses nothing,
 because you invent and excuse yourself each day.

Elsewhere, this poem is not invention.
 Elsewhere, this poem takes courage.
 Elsewhere, this poem must be written
 because the poets are already dead
 [...]
 Elsewhere you must write this poem
 because there is nothing more to do.⁷¹

Atwood's statement about dead poets is, once again, not notional but veridical, referring as it does to the situation of writers during the civil war in El Salvador, mentioned in her essay "Witches": "How many poets are there in El Salvador? The answer is none. They have been shot or exiled."⁷² As Rosemary Sullivan recounts in her biography of the Canadian writer, Atwood's work with Amnesty International brought her into abrupt contact with the tragedies of the Latin American revolutionary wars of the 1970s.⁷³ As I said, *Notes Towards a Poem* is dedicated to Carolyn Forché, who had spent time in El Salvador in 1978 at the invitation of the poet Claribel Alegría and was witness to the violence rampant in the country. Forché left the country in 1980, advised by Archbishop Oscar Romero, just six days before he was assassinated. Atwood wrote a blurb for Forché's book *The Country Between Us*, describing her work as "a poetry of courage and compassion."⁷⁴ These two nouns – courage and compassion – can also be applied to Atwood's poetic stance in *Notes Towards a Poem*, particularly compassion in its etymological sense of "to feel and suffer with someone." Whereas Frank Davey states that First-World writers have dubious authority to represent victims of the horrendous oppression that occurs "elsewhere," when their

⁷¹ Atwood, *True Stories*, 70.

⁷² Atwood, *Second Words*, 332.

⁷³ Sullivan, *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out*, 326.

⁷⁴ *The Red Shoes*, 326.

“safe” position is so different from that of the victim,⁷⁵ Atwood urges writers to be a voice for these victims, as they are the only ones who can speak for them.

If we had to mention a single event that generates victims in considerable numbers and produces manifold varieties of torture, this would be war. Like Foucault, Atwood considers that war and power are related phenomena. The French philosopher has referred to the relation between power and war in the following terms: “power is war, a war continued by other means.”⁷⁶ Born in 1939, the year of the beginning of the Second World War, Atwood has demonstrated a preoccupation with military conflict throughout her career. In her essay “Notes on Power Politics,” she defines war thus:

The most obvious and visible form of the exercise of power, of men attempting to dominate each other, is of course war, the private form of which is murder. Killing other people, taking life, conferring death, is the ultimate power.⁷⁷

Wars originate in the minds of politicians who never have to participate in them: “All politicians are amateurs: wars bloom in their heads like flowers / on wallpaper, pins strut on their maps.”⁷⁸ When asked to what Atwood attributes the omnipresence of war in her works, she explains that it is a constant feature in history that you cannot get away from,⁷⁹ even in the safe realm of your home, invaded by the media (newspapers, television and, now, the internet):

In the evenings the news seeps in
from foreign countries,
those places with unsafe water.
We listen to the war, the wars,
any old war.⁸⁰

“For every year of peace there have been four hundred / years of war,”⁸¹ concludes the historian–narrator of “The Loneliness of the Military Historian,” a

⁷⁵ Davey, “What is a genre,” 52–53.

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures” (1977), in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980): 90.

⁷⁷ Atwood, “Notes on Power Politics,” 13.

⁷⁸ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 233.

⁷⁹ Atwood, private interview with the author.

⁸⁰ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 230.

poem (from her collection *Morning in the Burned House*) about the role of women in wars which provides a catalogue of familiar horrors:

In general I might agree with you:
women should not contemplate war,
should not weigh tactics impartially,
[...]
Women should march for peace,
or hand out white feathers to arouse bravery,
spit themselves on bayonets
to protect their babies,
whose skulls will be split anyway,
or having been raped repeatedly,
hang themselves with their own hair.⁸²

Note Atwood's characteristic ductus here, which plays with intolerable paradox: striking a ground-tone of 'impartiality', she in effect mocks the bloodless rationality of male politicians and warmongers, contrasting this with the helpless subject-position of women, condemned either to weak gesturing for either side or to acts of self-violence of last resort. As Atwood points out in "Notes on Power Politics," in actual wars women have traditionally been only observers or casualties, not participants. The narrator of "The Loneliness of the Military Historian" recalls the character of Tony in Atwood's novel *The Robber Bride* (1995) because of her active interest in wars. In *The Blind Assassin* (2000), a whole section titled "House fires" is dedicated to warfare, stressing the sameness of these conflicts throughout history as well as their devastating effects on the civilian population: "They have a generic look to them, these wars ... Overnight, whole portions of what had been acknowledged as reality simply vanished. This is what happens when there is a war."⁸³

Conclusion

As William Butler Yeats once remarked, poetry always needs a cause, a country or a god. If religious sentiment is mostly absent from Atwood's poetic production, national and political themes are constantly present in her work, as I hope to have demonstrated. These themes have also penetrated her

⁸¹ Margaret Atwood, *Morning in the Burned House* (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1995): 53.

⁸² Atwood, *Morning in the Burned House*, 50.

⁸³ Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000): 477–78.

writing in the new millennium, as the terrorist attack of September 11 has inaugurated new and even more terrifying modes of torture (physical and psychological), following on millennia of the wilful human infliction of pain:

With the legendary of 9/11 World Trade Center attack of the year 2001 [...] it appears that we face the prospect of two contradictory dystopias at once – open markets, closed minds – because state surveillance is back again with a vengeance. The torture’s dreaded Room 101 has been with us for millennia. The dungeons of Rome, the Inquisition, the Star Chamber, the Bastille, the proceedings of General Pinochet and of the junta in Argentina – all have depended on the secrecy and on the abuse of power, their ways of silencing troublesome dissent.⁸⁴

Politics, in the sense of “human power structures,”⁸⁵ has permeated Atwood’s poetic production since the beginning of her career as a writer, although the theme becomes more intense in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the publication of *Two-Headed Poems* and *True Stories*. It is in this latter collection and in her novels *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* that, as noted by Nathalie Cooke, Atwood turns to a literature of witness and underlines her growing commitment to dealing with human-rights issues and foreshadows her increasingly active involvement in human-rights organizations during the decade.⁸⁶

In her latest poetry collection *The Door* (2007), Atwood continues to give voice to the victims of war and torture. In a volume which is mostly autobiographical and confessional, she dedicates three moving poems (“War Photo,” “War Photo 2,” and “The Hurt Child”) to violence and the abuse of power. I would like to end with some lines from “War Photo,” where Atwood describes the beauty of the body of a dead woman, which becomes a source of faith for her:

Oh dead beautiful woman, if anyone
had the power to wrench me through despair
and arid helplessness
into the heart of prayer,
it would be you –

Instead I’ll make for you
the only thing I can:

⁸⁴ Atwood, *Moving Targets*, 337.

⁸⁵ *Moving Targets*, 337.

⁸⁶ Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, 262–63.

although I'll never know your name,
 I won't ever forget you.
 Look: on the dusty ground
 under my hand, on this cheap grey paper,
 I'm placing a small stone, here:
 o.⁸⁷

The narrator's gesture of placing a stone on a piece of paper becomes an homage to all the victims of torture and war, as well as a reminder that, as Atwood always insists, writers have a responsibility to leave behind testimony to these violent acts.

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AFTERWORD

Collaterally Damaged

—— Youth in a Post-9/11 World*

HENRY A. GIROUX

Introduction

BECAUSE OF THE GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE USA under the Bush administration, I migrated to Canada in 2004. Having now lived here for the last few years, largely under a conservative government, I am deeply concerned that Canada not emulate the domestic and foreign policies that were unleashed by the Bush administration – an administration that former President Jimmy Carter called “the worst in history.”¹ In fact, Carter’s assessment seems tame compared to comments made over the last few decades by writers as renowned as Robert Kennedy, Jr., Seymour M. Hersh, and Gore Vidal, all of whom have argued that the USA has all the earmarks of an authoritarian regime. Worth repeating is a *New York Times* editorial that appeared on the last day of 2007, insisting that under the administration of George W. Bush, the USA had become unrecognizable as a democratic country:

There are too many moments these days when we cannot recognize our country. [...] In the years since 9/11, we have seen [...] the president, sworn to de-

* This (here in places heavily revised) essay has also been published, with post-Bush adjustments, as “Disposable Futures: Dirty Democracy and the Politics of Disposability,” in *Education and Hope in Troubled Times: Visions of Change for Our Children’s World*, ed. H. Svi Shapiro (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2009): 223–40. Published in *Literature for Our Times* with further up-dating.

¹ “Jimmy Carter Slams Bush administration,” *Dallas Morning News* (19 May 2007), <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/politics/national/stories/051907dnnatcarterbush.91ad00.html> (accessed 23 May 2007).

fend the Constitution, turn his powers on his own citizens, authorizing the intelligence agencies to spy on Americans, wiretapping phones and intercepting international e-mail messages without a warrant. We have read accounts of how the government's top lawyers [plotted] to allow Mr. Bush to turn intelligence agents into torturers, to force doctors to abdicate their professional oaths and responsibilities to prepare prisoners for abuse, and then to monitor the torment to make sure it didn't go just a bit too far and actually kill them. [...] Hundreds of men, swept up on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq, were thrown into a prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, so that the White House could claim they were beyond the reach of American laws. [...] In other foreign lands, the C.I.A. set up secret jails where "high-value detainees" were subjected to ever more barbaric acts, including simulated drowning. These crimes were videotaped, so that "experts" could watch them, and then the videotapes were destroyed, after consultation with the White House, in the hope that Americans would never know. The C.I.A. contracted out its inhumanity to nations with no respect for life or law, sending prisoners – some of them innocents kidnapped on street corners and in airports – to be tortured into making false confessions, or until it was clear they had nothing to say and so were let go without any apology or hope of redress.²

Sidney Blumenthal, a former senior adviser to President Clinton, echoed these concerns, claiming that the Bush administration created a government that was tantamount to "a national security state of torture, ghost detainees, secret prisons, renditions and domestic eavesdropping."³ But Bob Herbert, an op-ed writer for the *New York Times*, went even further, arguing that all of the surreptitious activities of the Bush regime offered Americans nothing less than a "road map to totalitarianism."⁴

Under the administration of George W. Bush, the majority of Americans were compelled to watch the hollowing-out of the social state and its meagre government provisions along with a serious credit fallout and an unprecedented subprime mortgage crisis, resulting in millions of houses in foreclosure and providing an exemplary case of greedy financial markets out of control.⁵

² "Looking at America," *New York Times* (31 December 2007), OpEd: A20.

³ Sidney Blumenthal, "Bush's War on Professionals," *Salon.com* (5 January 2006), www.salon.com/opinion/blumenthal/2006/01/05/spying/index.html?x (accessed 2 January 2008).

⁴ Bob Herbert, "America the Fearful," *New York Times* (15 May 2006): A25.

⁵ Paul Krugman, "Banks Gone Wild," *New York Times* (23 November 2007), http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/23/opinion/23krugman.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&page_wanted=print (accessed 25 November 2007).

At the same time, Americans witnessed the Bush administration waste billions of dollars on a morally indefensible war in Iraq while offering billions of dollars in tax cuts to the wealthiest individuals and corporations in the country. In fact, we entered a new Gilded Age of robber barons, an age nourished by the politics of greed and by ruthless market fundamentalism, and increasingly celebrated by the dominant media. Spread out across this neo-liberal landscape are desolate communities, gutted public services, weakened labour unions, almost 44 million poor people, almost 51 million Americans without health insurance (until Barack Obama's Republican-gutted reforms), and a growing number of either under- or unemployed workers.⁶ If the Gilded

⁶ See Center for American Progress Task Force on Poverty, *From Poverty to Prosperity* (Washington DC: Center for American Progress, 2007): 1. Peter Dreier provides a list of the elements of the new class warfare that was being waged by the Bush administration at the time of his report:

For example, Bush has handed the pharmaceutical industry windfall profits by restricting Medicare's ability to negotiate for lower prices for medicine. He targeted huge no-bid federal contracts to crony companies like Haliburton to supply emergency relief, reconstruction services and materials to rebuild Katrina while attempting to slash federal wage laws for reconstruction workers. He repealed Clinton-era "ergonomics" standards, affecting more than 100 million workers, that would have forced companies to alter their work stations, redesign their facilities or change their tools and equipment if employees suffered serious work-related injuries from repetitive motions. He opposed stiffer health and safety regulations to protect mine workers and cut the budget for federal agencies that enforce mine safety laws. Not surprisingly, under Bush, we've seen the largest number of mine accidents and deaths in years. Bush's Food and Drug Administration lowered product-labeling standards, allowing food makers to list health claims on labels before they have been scientifically proven. His FDA chief announced that the agency would no longer require claims to be based on "significant scientific agreement," a change that the National Food Processors Association, the trade association of the \$500 billion food processing industry, had lobbied for. Bush resisted efforts to raise the minimum wage (which had been stuck at \$5.15 an hour for nine years) until the Democrats took back the Congress earlier this year.

—Peter Dreier, "Bush's Class Warfare," *Huffington Post* (21 December 2007), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/bushs-class-warfare_b_77910.html (accessed 2 January 2008).

Despite Obama's reforms, frustrated at every turn by Republican intransigence, the census figures for 2009 (a couple of which have been mentioned above) speak volumes. The following summary is drawn from *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009*, ed. Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor & Jessica C. Smith (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, U.S. Census Bureau, September 2010). The top five percent had 21.7 percent of the nation's money income in 2009 (Table 3, page 10); real per capita income declined by 1.2 percent between 2008 and 2009 alone

Age has returned with a vengeance, so has the older legacies of rampant unregulated capitalism, merger mania, a new class of robber barons dressed up as corporate power brokers with enormous political influence. Like its nineteenth-century counterpart, the new Gilded Age is marked by an increasing concentration of wealth among the privileged few while the number of poor Americans increases and inequality reaches historic high levels.⁷ As Peter Dreier pointed out,

Wealth has become even more concentrated during the Bush years. Today, the richest one percent of Americans has 22 percent of all income and about 40 percent of all wealth. This is the biggest concentration of income and wealth since 1928. In 2005, average CEO pay was 369 times that of the average worker, compared with 131 times in 1993 and 36 times in 1976. At the pinnacle of America's economic pyramid, the nation's 400 billionaires own 1.25 trillion dollars in total net worth – the same amount as the 56 million American families at the bottom half of wealth distribution. Meanwhile, despite improvements in productivity, the earnings of most workers have been stagnant, while the cost of health care, housing, and other necessities has risen.⁸

It gets worse. Bush's top-to-down class warfare nourished and strengthened a number of anti-democratic forces fostering a distinctive type of authoritarianism in the USA, including the militarization of everyday life, an imperial presidency, the rise and influence of right-wing Christian extremists, and a gov-

(Figure 3, page 13); in 2009, the official poverty rate was 14.3 percent, an increase over 2008 (Figure 4, page 14). In 2009, 43.6 million Americans were in poverty, 4.6 million more than in 2008 (Figure 4, page 13). This "is the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates have been published" (13). In 2009, 16.7 percent of Americans possessed no health insurance (1.3 percent more than in 2008), an increase from 46.3 million people in 2008 to 50.7 million in 2009 (Table 8, page 23). In no year since 1987 did so many Americans lack health coverage, despite a slight up-tick in government coverage in 2009.

⁷ On a global level, the inequality has risen to extreme levels. For instance, "the richest 2 percent of adults in the world own more than half the world's wealth." More specifically, the richest 1 percent of adults owned 40 percent of global assets in the year 2000, and [...] the richest 10 percent of adults accounted for 85 percent of the world's total. In contrast, the assets of half the world's population account for barely 1 percent of global wealth." Cited in Aaron Glantz, "Richest 2 Percent Own Half the World's Wealth," *Common Dreams* (22 December 2006), <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines06/1222-04.htm> (accessed 3 January 2007).

⁸ Bush's Class Warfare," *Huffington Post* (21 December 2007), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/bushs-class-warfare_b_77910.html (accessed 3 January 2007).

ernment draped in secrecy that was all too willing to suspend civil liberties.⁹ This emerging authoritarianism was largely legitimated through an ongoing culture of fear and a form of patriotic correctness designed to bolster a rampant nationalism and a selective popularism.¹⁰ Fear was mobilized through both the war on terrorism and

the sovereign pronouncement of a 'state of emergency' [which] generates a wild zone of power, barbaric and violent, operating without democratic oversight in order to combat an 'enemy' that threatens the existence of not merely and not mainly its citizens, but its sovereignty.¹¹

As Stanley Aronowitz points out, the national security state is now organized through "a combination of internal terrorism and the threat of external terrorism," which works to reinforce "its most repressive functions."¹² Finally, we have entered a period in American life where an all-pervasive market rationality strips democracy of any substance and consigns entire populations to what Orlando Patterson calls a kind of "social death."¹³ How else to explain the government response to Katrina,¹⁴ the increasing jailing of young people as adults, the massive growth of incarceration among the poor, especially people of colour, the racist discourse of purity and nationalism used by many Republicans to disparage immigrants from South America, and the increasing disinvestment in public life and government provisions for the poor?¹⁵

⁹ On the rise of Christian fascism, see Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

¹⁰ I take this theme up in detail in Henry A. Giroux, *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (Boulder CO: Paradigm, 2007).

¹¹ Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (New York: Verso, 2003): 29.

¹² Stanley Aronowitz, *The Last Good Job in America* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001): 160.

¹³ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1982).

¹⁴ I take up the relationship between race and Hurricane Katrina in Henry A. Giroux, *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* (Boulder CO: Paradigm, 2006). There is, of course, by now a massive literature devoted to Katrina and the betrayal of New Orleans generally, as well as a rich array of artworks, photodocumentaries, and films, particularly David Simon's HBO series *Treme* and feature films by Spike Lee.

¹⁵ I take up these issues in detail in Henry A. Giroux, *America on the Edge* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

The consequence of the new authoritarianism and its policies have had a particularly devastating effect on youth in the USA, especially those who are marginalized by class and race. No longer seen as a social investment or central element of the social contract, youth are now viewed as either consumers, on the one hand, or as troubling, reckless, and dangerous on the other. Young people have become a generation of suspects in a society destroyed by the marriage of market fundamentalism, consumerism, and militarism. This devaluing and assault against youth, if not the future itself, should not be underestimated for the implications it has not only for countries directly influenced by American power such as Iraq, but also Canada, whose conservative government in many ways has grown more friendly to American ideology and power. Of course, many Canadians were distrustful of, if not appalled by, Bush's foreign and domestic policies, and I think Canadian academics, politicians, journalists, and other intellectuals should give more attention to the forces at work in undoing American democracy. At stake here is not only the recognition that Canada is not immune to the problems facing the USA, but also the need to further acknowledge that Canada harbours on a smaller scale many of the anti-democratic tendencies – militarism, market fundamentalism, anti-immigrant hysteria, a culture of fear, an emerging surveillance society, national chauvinism, and religious extremism – that undermined any semblance of democracy under the Bush regime, tendencies that have the potential to gain in strength under the influence and power of the right-wing government of Stephen Harper, and forces that continue to sap the democratic aspirations of Obama's administration.¹⁶ Most importantly, the point here is not to merely to argue that youth are our lowest national priority, but to understand the importance of connecting the crisis in democracy to the current war against young people in order to remind adults not only of their ethical and political responsibility to future generations, but also to theorize afresh what it means to invest in youth as a central step in nurturing civic

¹⁶ Not least among these forces that involve the fate of young Americans are the USA's continuing crypto-imperialist military engagements in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan; for instance, in Afghanistan – where America's allies, sensing the futility of such engagement, are now pulling down their troops – more young US soldiers died in 2010 than in any other year of the war. As with Guantánamo, President Obama's statecraft has been largely impotent in a situation where the tail is wagging the dog and the military join increasingly with right-wing political extremists to dictate policy strategy. See, for example, Jonathan Stevenson, "Owned by the Army: Has the president lost control of his generals?" *Harper's Magazine* 322/1932 (May 2011): 34–36, 38, 40.

imagination and collective resistance in the face of the suffering of others, especially among young people. Youth provide a powerful referent for a critical discussion about the long-term consequences of current policies while also affirming the need to reinstate those conditions that make a democratic future possible. All too often, young people have become the ‘vanishing point’ of moral debate, considered irrelevant because they are allegedly too young or excluded from civic public discourse because they are viewed as dangerous and depraved. It is against this need to register youth as the theoretical, moral, and political centre of gravity that I want to address the urgent and related crises of democracy in higher education and the role of academics as public intellectuals.

The promise of democracy in the USA appears to be receding as the dark clouds of authoritarianism (if no longer White House-initiated, then seeded at state level) increasingly spread over every facet of state and civil society. Under such circumstances, war and violence have become the most prominent organizing principles of American life, evident not only in the ill-fated military intervention in Iraq and the quagmire of Afghanistan, but also in the increasing assault being waged at home on democratic values, social provisions, and increasingly on all of those populations considered either unpatriotic because they did not conform to the dictates of an imperial presidency, or othered still today, on grounds of ethnicity or ‘liberal’ leanings, by Republican demagoguery, or disposable because they have been relegated to the human waste of global neoliberalism. The war at home (the ‘war on terror’) gave rise not only to a crushing attack on civil liberties – most evident in the passing of the Military Commissions Act of 2006 – which conveniently allowed the Bush administration to detain indefinitely anyone deemed as an enemy combatant while denying them recourse to the traditional right to challenge his or her detention through legal means – but also to an assault on those populations now considered disposable and redundant under the logic of a ruthless market fundamentalism.

While the USA has never been free of repression, there was a special viciousness that marked the Bush regime. War, violence, and an attack on human rights, coupled with the assault on the social state and the further rise of an all-encompassing militarism, made this government stand out for its anti-democratic policies. The varied populations made disposable under a militarized neoliberalism occupy a globalized space of ruthless politics in which the categories of ‘citizen’ and ‘democratic representation’, once integral to national politics, are no longer recognized. In the past, people who

were marginalized by class and race could at least expect a modicum of support from the government, either through social provisions or because they still had some value as part of a reserve army of unemployed labour. That is no longer true. Under the ruthless dynamic of neoliberal ideology there has been a shift away from the possibility of getting ahead to the much more deadly task of struggling to stay alive. Many now argue that this new form of biopolitics is conditioned by a permanent state of class and racial exception in which “vast populations are subject to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.”¹⁷

Disposable populations are less visible, relegated to the frontier zones of relative invisibility and removed from public view. Such populations are often warehoused in schools that resemble boot camps, dispersed to dank and dangerous workplaces far from the enclaves of the tourist industry, incarcerated in prisons that privilege punishment over rehabilitation, and consigned to the increasing army of the permanently unemployed. Rendered redundant as a result of the collapse of the social state, a pervasive racism, a growing disparity in income and wealth, and a take-no-prisoners neoliberalism, an increasing number of individuals and groups are being demonized and criminalized either by virtue of their status as immigrants or because they are young, poor, unemployed, disabled, or confined to low-paying jobs. This is particularly true for young people, who are portrayed increasingly as a generation of suspects.

Critical thought and social justice seem to be in retreat, as everybody is now a customer or client, and every relationship is judged against the bottom line. Hence, the ever-proliferating consumer and entrepreneurial subject replaces the concept of the responsible citizen, as the former complies with the neoliberal mantra ‘privatize or perish’. Amid a proliferating social Darwinism – emulated daily on reality TV programmes – misfortune is viewed as a weakness and self-reliance is the ultimate virtue, which is another way of saying that people must face the increasingly difficult challenges of the social order alone. Private interests trump social needs, and the gauging of material profit becomes more important than social justice, while the commercialization of public space now defines what counts as the public sphere. Signs of a debased order of politics are evident in the diverse ways the dominant media, largely in the hands of a few corporations, now communicate through a language that requires no effort to understand, buries complexity, evades respon-

¹⁷ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” tr. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 40.

sibility, and erases, as a consequence, everything that matters in a substantive democracy. As it becomes increasingly impossible to connect individual problems with social issues, language is utterly privatized, substituting “emotional and personal vocabularies for political ones in formulating solutions to political problems.”¹⁸ The consequences for politics and public life are devastatingly obvious in the closing-down of democratic public spheres, the absence of civic participation by most citizens (if they are not Tea Party fundamentalists), the lack of resistance to the rise of the USA as an “endemic surveillance society,” the unchecked and growing gap between the rich and the poor, and the utter trivialization of democracy itself. In this winner-take-all society, inequality and private power rather than justice and equality now shape the larger social order.

One register of the growing racism, inequality, and poverty in America can be found in the endless stories of young people of colour dying because of a lack of adequate health care, as in the case of Deamonte Driver, a seventh-grader in Prince George’s County, Maryland, who died because his mother, lacking the health insurance to cover an \$80 tooth extraction, was unable to find an oral surgeon willing to treat her son. By the time he was admitted and diagnosed in a hospital emergency room, the bacteria from the abscessed tooth had spread to his brain and, in spite of the level of high-quality intensive treatment he finally received, he eventually died. Racism is also on display in the growing re-segregation of public schools in the USA as well as the wholesale resort to punishment and incarceration handed out to poor black and brown students. Howard Witt, a writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, reports that

In every state but Idaho, a *Tribune* analysis of the data shows, black students are being suspended in numbers greater than would be expected from their proportion of the student population. In 21 states [...] that disproportionality is so pronounced that the percentage of black suspensions is more than double their percentage of the student body. And on average across the nation, black students are suspended and expelled at nearly three times the rate of white students.¹⁹

¹⁸ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2006): 16.

¹⁹ Howard Witt, “School Discipline Tougher on African Americans,” *Chicago Tribune* (24 September 2007), <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-070924discipline.0,22104.story> (accessed 5 October 2007).

In other words, under the biopolitics of neoliberalism conditions have been created in which moral responsibility disappears and politics offers no space for agency or the provisions for a decent life.

Such examples raise the fundamental question of what it might mean, in the light of these antidemocratic tendencies, to take youth seriously as a political and moral referent in order not only to gauge the health of a democratic society but also to define the obligations of adults to future generations of young people. For over a century, Americans have embraced as a defining feature of politics at least the idea that all levels of government would assume a large measure of responsibility for providing the resources, social provisions, and modes of education that enabled young people to prepare in the present for a better future, while expanding the meaning and depth of an inclusive democracy. This was particularly true under the set of policies inaugurated under President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programmes of the 1960s, which were designed to eliminate both poverty and racial injustice.

Taking the social contract seriously, American society exhibited at least a willingness to fight for the rights of children, enact reforms that invested in their future, and provide the educational conditions necessary for them to be critical citizens. In such a modernist project, democracy was linked to the well-being of youth, while the status of how a society imagined democracy and its future was contingent on how it viewed its responsibility towards future generations. The end of that project can be seen in the new American reality under the second Bush administration. Instead of a federal budget that addressed the needs of children, the USA enacted federal policies that weaken government social programmes, provided tax cuts for millionaires, and undercut or eliminated basic social provisions for children at risk. As the Nobel Prize-winning economist and *New York Times* op-ed columnist Paul Krugman pointed out, compassion and responsibility under the Bush administration gave way to "a relentless mean-spiritedness" and "President Bush as someone who takes food from the mouths of babes and gives the proceeds to his millionaire friends." For Krugman, Bush's budgets came to resemble a form of "top-down class warfare."²⁰ The mean-spiritedness of such warfare could be seen in Bush's willingness to veto the Clinton administration's State Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides much-

²⁰ Paul Krugman, "Bush's Class-War Budget," *New York Times* (11 February 2005), <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/11/opinion/11krugman.html?ex=1265864400&en=c5baf37424e2a5d&ei=5088&> (accessed 13 February 2005).

needed health insurance to low-income children who do not qualify for Medicaid. As a result of this veto, it was predicted that “nearly one million American children [would] lose their health insurance.”²¹ And without any irony intended, Bush attempted to legitimate this disgraceful action by claiming that “it opens up an avenue for people to switch from private insurance to the government.”²² Bush gave new meaning to the neoliberal imperative to privatize or perish. The programme was fortunately then saved by President Barack Obama’s signing of the expanded provisions of the Children’s Health Insurance Reauthorization Act of 2009.

In opposition to the reactionary politics of the Bush administration, it is crucial to remember that the category of youth does more than affirm that modernity’s social contract is rooted in a conception of the future in which adult commitment is articulated as a vital public service; it also affirms those vocabularies, values, and social relations that are central to a politics capable of defending vital institutions as a public good and nurturing a flourishing democracy, especially public and higher education. A vocabulary that focuses on children’s current and future social importance has always been of particular importance to public and higher education, which often defined and addressed its highest ideals through the recognition that how it educated youth was connected to the democratic future it hoped for and to its claim as an important public sphere.

But just as education has been separated from a viable model of democratic politics, youth have been separated both from the discourse of the social contract and from any ethical commitment to provide young people with the prospects of a decent and democratic future. Punishment and fear have replaced compassion and social responsibility as the most important modalities mediating the relationship of youth to the larger social order. Youth, in the past quarter-century, have come to be seen as a source of trouble rather than as a resource for investing in the future and are increasingly treated as either a disposable population, cannon fodder in presumptuous military intervention abroad, or defined as the source of most of society’s problems. Hence, young people now constitute a crisis that has less to do with improving the future than with denying it. As Larry Grossberg points out,

²¹ Faiz Shakir, Nico Pitney, Amanda Terkel, Satyam Khanna & Matt Corley, “Bush Vetoes Kids,” *The Progress Report* (20 July 2007), http://www.americanprogressaction.org/progressreport/2007/07/bush_vetoes_kids.html (accessed 24 July 2007).

²² Shakir et al., “Bush Vetoes Kids.”

It has become common to think of kids as a threat to the existing social order and for kids to be blamed for the problems they experience. We slide from kids in trouble, kids have problems, and kids are threatened, to kids as trouble, kids as problems, and kids as threatening.²³

This was exemplified when the columnist Bob Herbert reported in the *New York Times* that

parts of New York City are like a police state for young men, women and children who happen to be black or Hispanic. They are routinely stopped, searched, harassed, intimidated, humiliated and, in many cases, arrested for no good reason.²⁴

That the USA is in the grip of a Foucauldian regime of ‘discipline and punish’ in the school system, with a Victorian ethos that mocks the nation’s progressive nineteenth-century pedagogical reforms, can be seen from the following Human Rights Watch report:

students received corporal punishment at least once during the 2006–2007 school year. Corporal punishment – which typically takes the form of one or more blows on the buttocks with a wooden paddle – is legal in public schools in 21 states.²⁵

No longer “viewed as a privileged sign and embodiment of the future,”²⁶ youth are now increasingly demonized by the popular media and derided by politicians looking for quick-fix solutions to crime and other social ills. While youth, particularly those of colour, are associated in the media and by dominant politicians with a rising crime wave, what is really rolling in this discourse is a punishment wave, one that reveals a society that does not know how to address those social problems that undercut any viable sense of agency, possibility, and future for many young people. For example, John J. Dilulio, Jr., a former Bush advisor, argued in an influential article published in the conservative *Weekly Standard* that society faced a dire threat from an emerging generation of youth between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, which he characteristically called “super-predators.”²⁷ Hollywood movies

²³ Lawrence Grossberg, *Caught in the Crossfire* (Boulder CO: Paradigm, 2005): 16.

²⁴ Bob Herbert, “Arrested While Grieving,” *New York Times* (26 May 2007): A25.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2009* (New York, 2009), http://www.catdem.org/cat/downloads2/Human_Rights1.pdf (accessed 13 June 2010).

²⁶ Lawrence Grossberg, “Why Does Neo-Liberalism Hate Kids? The War on Youth and the Culture of Politics,” *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 23.2 (2001): 133.

²⁷ For an analysis of the drop in youth crime in the 1990s, see S.D. Levitt,

such as *Thirteen*, *kids*, *Brick*, *Hard Candy*, and *Alpha Dog*, as well as reality shows like *Jackass*, consistently represent youths as either dangerous, utterly brainless, or simply without merit. An episode about youth on the widely viewed *Sixty Minutes* is suggestive of this kind of demonization. Highlighting the ways in which young people alleviate their alleged boredom, the show focused on the sport of ‘bum hunting’, in which young people search out, attack, and savagely beat homeless people while videotaping the event in an homage to the triumph of reality TV. As reprehensible as this act is, it is also reprehensible to vilify young people by suggesting that such behaviour is in some way characteristic of youth in general. Then again, in a society in which politicians and the marketplace can imagine youth only as either consumers, objects, or billboards to sell sexuality, beauty products, music, athletic gear, clothes, and a host of other products, it is not surprising that young people can be so easily misrepresented.

The popular demonization and ‘dangerousation’ of the young now justifies responses to youth that were unthinkable twenty years ago, including criminalization and imprisonment, the prescription of psychotropic drugs, psychiatric confinement, and zero-tolerance policies that fashion schools after prisons. School has become a model for a punitive society in which children who violate a rule as minor as a dress-code infraction or slightly act up in class can be handcuffed, booked, and put in a jail cell. Such was the case in Florida when the police handcuffed and arrested six-year-old Desre Watson, who was taken from her kindergarten school to the Highlander County jail, where she was fingerprinted, a mug-shot was taken, and she was charged with a felony and two misdemeanors. Her crime? The six-year-old had thrown a tantrum in her kindergarten class.²⁸ Couple this type of domestic terrorism with the fact that the USA is only one of five countries that locks up child offenders for life. In fact, while there are only a handful of cases in the other countries, the USA, in 2009, had 2,502 child offenders who will spend the rest of their lives incarcerated.²⁹ Another instance of how youth are on the

“Understanding Why Crime Fell in the 1990s: Four Factors that Explain the Decline and Six that Do Not,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18.1 (Winter 2004): 163–90.

²⁸ “Kindergarten Girl Handcuffed, Arrested at Fla. School,” WFTV.com (30 March 2007), <http://www.wftv.com/news/11455199/detail.html> (accessed 23 May 2007).

²⁹ “There are no juvenile offenders serving this sentence anywhere else in the world”; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2009*. See also Andrew Gumbel, “America has 2,000 young offenders serving life terms in jail,” *The Independent* (13 October 2005), <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines/05/10/12-02.htm> (accessed 28 July 2007).

receiving edge of the punitive society could be found in the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind policy, which provided financial incentives to schools that implement zero-tolerance policies, despite their proven racial and class biases. In addition, drug-sniffing dogs, metal detectors, and cameras have become common features in schools, and administrators willingly comply with federal laws that give military recruiters the right to access the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of students in both public schools and higher education – even though there have been numerous cases of rape and sexual abuse by recruiters who used their power to commit criminal acts against young people. Trust and respect now give way to fear, disdain, and suspicion, creating an environment in which critical pedagogical practices wither, while pedagogies of surveillance and testing flourish.³⁰

The impoverishment of the American educational system reflects the literal poverty of American children. The hard currency of human suffering that exerts its impact children is evident in some astounding statistics that suggest a profound moral and political contradiction at the heart of one of the richest democracies in the world: for example, the rate of child poverty rose between 2004 and 2009 from 17.6 percent to 20.7 percent, boosting the number of poor children from 12.9 million (2004) to 15.4 million (2009).³¹ In fact, in 2007 “about one in three severely poor people [were] under age 17.”³² Moreover, children make up a disproportionate share of the poor in the USA – in 2006, they made up “26 per cent of the total population, but constitute[d] 39 per cent of the poor.”³³ By 2009, children made up 24.5 percent of the total population, but constituted 35.5 percent of people in poverty; the chronic mis-relationship remains the same.³⁴ Just as alarmingly, 7.5 million children

³⁰ I have engaged in a detailed critique of No Child Left Behind in Henry A. Giroux, *America on the Edge* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

³¹ *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009*, ed. DeNavas-Walt et al., 14–15 (Table 4).

³² Tony Pugh, “US Economy Leaving Record Numbers in Severe Poverty,” McClatchy Newspapers (23 February 2007), <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines07/0223-09.htm> (accessed 5 March 2007).

³³ Cesar Chelala, “Rich Man, Poor Man: Hungry Children in America,” *Seattle Times* (4 January 2006), <http://www.commondreams.org/views06/0104-24.htm> (accessed 5 March 2007).

³⁴ *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009*, ed. DeNavas-Walt et al., 16.

lacked health insurance in 2009,³⁵ and millions lack affordable child care and decent early childhood education.

This inversion of the government's responsibility to protect public goods from private threats further reveals itself in the privatization of social problems and the vilification of those who fail to thrive in this vastly iniquitous social order. Too many youth within this degraded economic, political, and cultural geography occupy a 'dead zone' in which the spectacle of commodification exists alongside the imposing threat of massive debt, bankruptcy, the prison-industrial complex, and the elimination of basic civil liberties. Indeed, we have an entire generation of unskilled and displaced youth who have been expelled from shrinking markets, blue-collar jobs, and the limited political power granted to the dwindling sector of middle-class consumers. Rather than investing in the public good and solving social problems, the state now punishes those who are caught in the downward spiral of its economic policies. Punishment, incarceration, and surveillance represent the face of the new expanded state. Consequently, the implied contract between the state and citizens is broken, and social guarantees for youth, as well as civic obligations to the future, vanish from the agenda of public concern. As market values supplant civic values, it becomes increasingly difficult "to translate private worries into public issues and, conversely, to discern public issues in private troubles."³⁶ In this utterly privatizing market discourse, alcoholism, homelessness, poverty, joblessness, and illiteracy are not viewed as social issues but as individual problems: i.e. such problems are viewed as the result of a character flaw or a personal failing and in too many cases such problems are criminalized. Those who fall prey to social ills are doubly offensive to America's ethos of rabid capitalism because, in failing to 'get ahead', they threaten to reveal the flawed execution of an individualism that masquerades as meritocracy, and their very presence exposes the bankruptcy of America's ultimate measure of agency: the ability to consume goods. Unfortunately, consumer skills do not include translating private issues into public concerns.

Black youth are especially disadvantaged, since they are jobless in an economy that does not need their labour; hence, they constitute a surplus and disposable population. As Bob Herbert has pointed out,

³⁵ *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009*, ed. DeNavas-Walt et al., 23 (Table 8).

³⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1999): 2.

black American males inhabit a universe in which joblessness is frequently the norm [and that] over the past few years, the percentage of black male high school graduates in their 20s who were jobless has ranged from well over a third to roughly 50 percent. [...] For dropouts, the rates of joblessness are staggering. For black males who left high school without a diploma, the real jobless rate at various times over the past few years has ranged from 59 percent to a breathtaking 72 percent.

He further argues that “These are the kinds of statistics you get during a depression.”³⁷

At the current time, however, solutions involving social problems have become difficult to imagine, let alone address. For many young people and adults today, the private sphere has become the only space in which to imagine any sense of hope, pleasure, or possibility. Culture as an activity in which young people actually produce the conditions of their own agency through dialogue, community participation, public stories, and political struggle is being eroded. In its place, we are increasingly surrounded by a “climate of cultural and linguistic privatization” in which culture becomes something you consume, and the only kind of speech that is acceptable is that of the fast-paced shopper. In spite of neoconservative and neoliberal claims that economic growth will cure social ills, the language of the market has no way of dealing with poverty, social inequality, or civil-rights issues. It has no respect for non-commodified values and no vocabulary for recognizing and addressing social justice, compassion, decency, ethics or, for that matter, its own anti-democratic forms of power. It has no way of understanding that the revolutionary idea of democracy, as Bill Moyers points out, is not just about the freedom to shop, formal elections, or the two-party system, “but the means of dignifying people so they become fully free to claim their moral and political agency.”³⁸ These are political and educational issues, not merely economic concerns.

In order to strengthen the public sphere, we must use its most widespread institutions, undo their metamorphoses into means of surveillance, commodification, and control, and reclaim them as democratic spaces. Schools, colleges, and universities come to mind – because of both their contradictions and their democratic potential, their reality and their promise. In what follows,

³⁷ Bob Herbert, “The Danger Zone,” *New York Times* (15 March 2007): A25.

³⁸ Bill Moyers, “A Time for Anger, A Call to Action,” *Common Dreams* (7 February 2007), www.commondreams.org/views/07/0322-24.htm (accessed 5 March 2007).

I argue that youth as a political and moral referent is a central category for engaging the purpose and meaning of higher education and its relationship to a future whose democratic possibilities can only be seized if young people are provided with the knowledge, capacities, and skills they need to function as social agents, critical citizens, empowered workers, and critical thinkers. But such a task must begin by analysing the degree to which higher education's role as a democratic public sphere is being threatened by a number of anti-democratic tendencies.

Higher Education and the Crisis of the Social

The powerful regime of forces that increasingly align higher education with a reactionary notion of patriotic correctness, market fundamentalism, and state-sponsored militarism presents difficult problems for educators. As the twenty-first century unfolds, higher education faces both a crisis of legitimation and a political crisis. As a handmaiden of the Pentagon and corporate interests, it has lost its claim to independence and critical learning. Turning its back on the public good, the academy has largely opened its doors to serving private and governmental interests and in doing so has compromised its role as a democratic public sphere. In keeping with the progressive impoverishment of politics and public life over the past two decades, the university is increasingly being corporatized, militarized, and dummed, transformed into a training ground for corporate, military, and right-wing patriotic correctness rather than a public sphere in which youth can become the critical citizens and democratic agents necessary to nourish a socially responsible future. Strapped for money and increasingly defined in the language of a militarized and corporate culture, many universities are now part of an unholy alliance that largely serves the interests of the national-security state and the business policies of transnational corporations while decoupling all aspects of academic knowledge production from democratic values and projects.³⁹ College presidents are now called CEOs and speak largely in the discourse of Wall Street and corporate fund managers. Venture capitalists scour colleges and universities in search of big profits to be made through licensing agreements, the control of intellectual property rights, and investments in university spinoff companies. In this new Gilded Age of money and profit, academic subjects gain stature almost exclusively through their exchange-value on the market.

³⁹ Doug Henwood, *After the New Economy* (New York: New Press, 2005).

While the vision of education was being narrowed and instrumentalized, the Bush administration attempted to wield more control over colleges and universities, cut student aid, plunder public services, and push states to the brink of financial disaster. As higher education increasingly becomes a privilege rather than a right, many working-class youth either find it financially impossible to enter college or, because of increased costs, drop out. Those students who have the resources to stay in school are feeling the pressure of the job market and rush to take courses and receive professional credentials in business and the biosciences as the humanities lose majors and downsize. Not surprisingly, students are now referred to as ‘customers’, while some university presidents even argue that professors should be labelled ‘academic entrepreneurs’.⁴⁰ As higher education is corporatized, young people find themselves on campuses that look more like malls (the humanities building at the University of Alberta is a mall) and they are increasingly taught by professors who are hired on a contractual basis, have intolerable work-loads, and barely make enough money to pay off their student loans. Tenured faculty are called upon to generate grants, establish close partnerships with corporations, and teach courses that have practical value in the marketplace. There is little in this vision of the university that imagines young people as anything other than fodder for the corporation or appendages of the national-security state. What was once the hidden curriculum of many universities – the subordination of higher education to capital – has now become an open and much-celebrated policy of both public and private higher education.

Higher education was also attacked in the Bush days by right-wing ideologues such as David Horowitz and Lynne Cheney (Darth Vader’s wife), who viewed it as the “weak link” in the war against terror.⁴¹ Horowitz continues to act as the figurehead for various well-funded conservative student groups such as the Young Americans and College Republicans, which perform the ground work for his “Academic Bill of Rights” policy efforts to seek out juicy

⁴⁰ I discuss this phenomenon in Henry A. Giroux, *The University in Chains* (Boulder CO: Paradigm, 2007).

⁴¹ This charge comes from a report issued by a conservative group, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, founded by Lynne Cheney (spouse of ex-Vice-President Dick Cheney) and Joseph Lieberman (former Democratic Senator and now an Independent). See Jerry L. Martin & Anne D. Neal, *Defending Civilization: How Our Universities are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It* (February 2002), <http://www.goacta.org/publications/Reports/defciv.pdf> (accessed 24 July 2007). ACTA also posted on its website a list of 115 statements made by allegedly “un-American Professors.”

but rare instances of “political bias” – whatever that is and however it might be defined – in college classrooms. Not content with this, Horowitz, an erst-while New-Leftist, is the founder-president of the so-called David Horowitz Freedom Center and the founder of Students for Academic Freedom, an organization devoted to rooting out Marxist thought in academia. Left-oriented academics such as Ward Churchill and Norman Finklestein were fired or denied tenure because they were critical of the Bush government. Faculty who offer classroom readings that challenged official versions of US foreign and domestic policy had their names posted on websites, which often labelled them ‘un-American’ while calling on their respective universities to fire them. In some states, laws have been passed that allow students to sue professors whose political sensibilities are unsettled or challenged. In February 2007, the Republican majority of the state of Arizona attempted, to no avail, to pass a bill (which even David Horowitz opposed) that would fine faculty members \$500 for advocating a political position in the classroom or on military recruiting on campus. As one legislator put it, “You can speak about any subject you want – you just don’t take a position.”⁴² In Florida, a bill was passed legislating that social-studies teachers could only provide students with facts and were forbidden to teach them the skills of interpretation or critical analyses. There is more at issue here than a vile form of anti-intellectualism. A more political analysis would argue that what is developing in the USA are not only the jingoistic hyper-nationalistic practices that makes such a society incapable of questioning itself but also the public spaces that promote critical inquiry, dialogue, and engaged citizens. What was emerging under such conditions was more than an imperial presidency and a militaristic empire increasingly independent of government control (even under the dispensation of Obama), but also a new type of authoritarianism.

⁴² “\$500 Fines for Political Profs,” *Inside Higher Education* (19 February 2007), <http://www.insidehighereducation.com/layout/set/popup/layout/set/popup/news/2007/02/19/ariz> (accessed 23 February 2007). — Such subversions of the First Amendment, fortunately, do not always go unheeded. Under the auspices of the same Arizona Board of Regents entrusted with enforcing the projected gag-act, a non-partisan National Institute for Civil Discourse has recently been established at the same university. See, for example, Lucy Valencia, “UA unveils National Institute for Civil Discourse,” *Arizona Daily Wildcat* (22 February 2011), <http://www.wildcat.arizona.edu/news/ua-unveils-national-institute-for-civil-discourse-1.2009290> (accessed 24 June 2011).

Educated Hope in Dark Times

The corporatization, militarization, and dumbing-down of rigorous scholarship, and the devaluing of the critical capacities of young people, mark a sharp break from the USA's once-strong educational tradition, extending from Thomas Jefferson to John Dewey to Maxine Greene, which held that freedom flourishes in the worldly space of the public realm only through the work of educated, critical citizens. Within this democratic tradition, education was not confused with training; instead, its critical function was propelled by the need to educate students as citizens capable of defining and implementing democratic goals such as freedom, equality, and justice. If we were to value schools and universities as social tools, we could continue this tradition and support its role in fostering the pedagogical practices that enable a notion of citizenship marked by a "politically interested and mobilized citizenry, one that has certain solidarities, is capable of acting on its own behalf, and anticipates a future of ever greater social equality across lines of race, gender, and class."⁴³

In order that higher education can once again be a meaningful site for instilling in youth the requisite values for a democratic future, educators and others need to reclaim higher education as an ethical and political response to the demise of democratic public life. At stake here is the role of higher education as a public sphere committed to increasing the possibilities of democratic identities, values, and relations. This approach suggests new models of leadership, organization, power, and vision dedicated to opening higher education up to all groups, creating a critical citizenry, providing specialized work-skills for jobs that really require them, democratizing relations of governance among administrators, faculty, and students, and taking seriously the imperative to disseminate an intellectual and artistic culture. Higher education may be one of the few domains left in which students learn the knowledge and skills that enable them not only to mediate critically between democratic values and the demands of corporate power and the national-security state, but also to distinguish between identities founded on democratic principles and identities steeped in forms of competitive, unbridled individualism that celebrate self-interest, profit-making, militarism, and greed.

Addressing education as a democratic endeavour begins with the recognition that higher education is more than an investment opportunity, citizenship is more than conspicuous consumption, learning is more than preparing stud-

⁴³ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2006): 88.

ents for the workplace, however important that task might be, and democracy is more than making choices at the local mall. Reclaiming higher education as a public sphere begins with the crucial project of challenging, among other things, those market fundamentalists, religious extremists, and rigid ideologues who harbour a deep disdain for critical thought and healthy scepticism, and who look with displeasure upon any form of education that teaches students to read the world critically and to hold power and authority accountable. Education is not only about issues of work and economics, but also about questions of justice, social freedom, and the capacity for democratic agency, action, and change, as well as the related issues of power, exclusion, and citizenship. These are educational and political issues, and they should be addressed as part of a broader effort to re-energize the global struggle for social justice and democracy.

Academics and Public Life

If higher education is to reclaim itself a site of critical thinking, collective work, and public service, educators and students will have to redefine the knowledge, skills, research, and intellectual practices currently favoured in the university. Central to such a challenge is the need to position intellectual practice “as part of an intricate web of morality, rigor and responsibility”⁴⁴ that enables academics to speak with conviction, use the public sphere to address important social problems, and demonstrate alternative models for bridging the gap between higher education and the broader society. Connective practices are crucial: it is crucial to develop intellectual practices that are collegial rather than competitive, refuse the instrumentality and privileged isolation of the academy, link critical thought to a profound impatience with the status quo, and connect human agency to the idea of social responsibility and the politics of possibility.

Connection also means being openly and deliberately critical and worldly in one’s intellectual work. Increasingly, as universities are shaped by a culture of fear in which dissent is equated with treason, the call to be objective and impartial, whatever one’s intentions, can easily echo what George Orwell called the official truth or the establishment point of view. Lacking a self-consciously democratic political focus, teachers and students are often reduced to the role of a technician or functionary engaged in formalistic rituals, uncon-

⁴⁴ Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics* (Cambridge MA: South End, 2002): 6.

cerned with the disturbing and urgent problems that confront the larger society or the consequences of one's pedagogical practices and research undertakings. In opposition to this model, with its claims to and conceit of political neutrality, I argue that academics should combine the mutually interdependent roles of critical educator and active citizen. This requires finding ways to connect the practice of classroom teaching with the operation of power in the larger society and to provide the conditions for students to view themselves as critical agents capable of making those who exercise authority and power accountable. I think Edward Said was on target when he argued that academics who assume the role of public intellectuals must function within institutions, in part, as an exile, as someone whose "place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations."⁴⁵ In Said's perspective, the educator as public intellectual becomes responsible for linking the diverse experiences that produce knowledge, identities, and social values in the university to the quality of moral and political life in society at large. Such an intellectual does not train students solely for jobs, but also educates them to question critically the institutions, policies, and values that shape their lives, relationships to others, and their connection to the wider world.

In addition to their responsibility to prepare students to engage critically with the world, academics must also recognize the impact their students will have on a generation of young people twice removed from the university. Education cannot be uncoupled from democracy; and as such must be understood as an informed and purposeful political and moral practice, as opposed to one that is either doctrinaire, instrumentalized, or both. Moreover, a critical pedagogy should be espoused on all levels of schooling. Similarly, it must gain part of its momentum in higher education among students who will go back to the schools, churches, synagogues, and workplaces in order to produce new ideas, concepts, and critical ways of understanding the world in which young people and adults live. This is a notion of intellectual practice and responsibility that refuses the insular, overly pragmatic, and privileged isolation of the academy while affirming a broader vision of learning that links knowledge to the power of self-definition and to the capacities of students to expand the scope of democratic freedoms, particularly those that address the crisis of education, politics, and the social as part and parcel of the

⁴⁵ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon, 1994): 11.

crisis of democracy itself. This is the kind of intellectual practice that Zygmunt Bauman calls “taking responsibility for our responsibility,”⁴⁶ one that is attentive to the suffering of others and “will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep.”⁴⁷

In order for pedagogy that encourages critical thought to have a real effect, it must include the message that all citizens, old and young, are equally entitled, if not equally empowered, to shape the society in which they live. If educators are to function as public intellectuals, they need to provide the opportunities for students to learn that the relationship between knowledge and power can be emancipatory, that their histories and experiences matter, and that what they say and do counts in their struggle to unlearn dominating privileges, productively reconstruct their relations with others, and transform, when necessary, the world around them. Simply put, educators need to argue for forms of pedagogy that close the gap between the university and everyday life. Their curricula need to be organized around knowledge of communities, cultures, and traditions that gives students a sense of history, identity, and place. Said illuminates the process when he urges academics and students to accept the demands of “worldliness,” which include “lifting complex ideas into the public space,” recognizing human injury inside and outside of the academy, and using theory as a critical resource to change things.⁴⁸ Worldliness suggests that we not be afraid of controversy, that we make connections which are otherwise hidden, deflate the claims of triumphalism, and throw a bridge between intellectual work and the operation of politics. It means combining rigour and clarity, on the one hand, with civic courage and political commitment, on the other.

A critically engaged pedagogy also necessitates that we incorporate into our classrooms those electronically mediated forms of knowledge that constitute the terrain of mass and popular culture. I am referring here to the world of media texts – videos, films, internet, podcasts, and other elements of the new electronic technologies that operate through a combination of visual and print culture. Such an approach not only challenges the traditional definition of schooling as the only site of pedagogy by widening the application and sites of education to a variety of cultural locations but also alerts students to

⁴⁶ Cited in Madeline Bunting, “Passion and Pessimism,” *The Guardian* (5 April 2003), <http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4640858,00.html> (accessed 2 January 2008).

⁴⁷ Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 143.

⁴⁸ Edward Said, “Scholarship and Commitment: An Introduction,” *Profession* (2000): 7.

the educational force of the culture at large – what I have called elsewhere the field of public pedagogy.⁴⁹

Any viable notion of critical pedagogy should affirm and enrich the meaning, language, and knowledge forms that students actually use to negotiate and inform their lives. Academics can, in part, exercise their role as public intellectuals via such approaches by giving students the opportunity to understand how power is organized through an enormous number of ‘popular’ cultural spheres including libraries, movie theatres, schools, and high-tech media conglomerates that circulate signs and meanings through newspapers, magazines, advertisements, new information technologies, computers, films, and television programmes. Needless to say, this position challenges the neo-conservative Roger Kimball’s claim that “popular culture is a tradition essential to uneducated Americans.”⁵⁰ By laying claim to popular media, public pedagogy not only asks important questions about how knowledge is produced and taken up, but also provides the conditions for students to become competent and critically versed in a variety of literacies (not just the literacy of print), while at the same time expanding the conditions and options for the roles they might play as cultural producers (as opposed to simply teaching them to be critical readers). At stake here is an understanding of literacy as both a set of competencies to be learned and as a crucial condition for developing ways of intervening in the world.

I have suggested that educators need to become provocateurs; they need to take a stand while refusing to be involved in either a cynical relativism or doctrinaire politics. This suggests that central to intellectual life is the pedagogical and political imperative that academics engage in rigorous social criticism while becoming a stubborn force for challenging false prophets, fighting against the imposed silence of normalized power, “refusing to allow conscience to look away or fall asleep,” and critically engaging all those social relations that promote material and symbolic violence.⁵¹ There is a lot of talk among social theorists about the death of politics brought on by a negative globalization characterized by markets without frontiers, deregulation, militarism, and armed violence, which not only feed each other but pro-

⁴⁹ Henry Giroux, “Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy, and the Responsibility of Intellectuals,” *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 1.1 (2004): 59–79.

⁵⁰ Kimball, cited in Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind* (Boston MA: Beacon, 1996): 19.

⁵¹ All of these ideas and the quotation itself are taken from Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia, 2004): 142.

duce global lawlessness and reduce politics to merely an extension of war.⁵² I would hope that, of all groups, educators would vocally and tirelessly challenge this myth by making it clear that expanding the public good and promoting democratic social change are at the very heart of critical education and the precondition for global justice. The potential for a better future further increases when critical education is directed toward young people. As a result, public and higher education may be among the few spheres left in which the promise of youth can be linked to the promise of democracy. Education in this instance becomes both an ethical and a political referent; it furnishes an opportunity for adults to provide the conditions for young people to become critically engaged social agents. Similarly, it points to a future in which a critical education plays a central role in creating the conditions for each generation of youth to struggle anew to sustain the promise of a democracy that has no endpoint, but that must be continuously expanded into a world of new possibilities and opportunities for keeping justice and hope alive.

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