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# Which Side Are You on? : Prosthetic Vaginas, Cross-dressing Madonnas, and Queer Theology in Virgin of the Flames and Narcopolis

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Thesis

Dr. Alexander

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Which Side are You on?: Prosthetic Vaginas, Cross-dressing Madonnas, and Queer Theology  
in *Virgin of the Flames* and *Narcopolis*

Both postcolonial literary studies and liberation theology have made much of the economically, spiritually and sexually disempowered but in two novels: Chris Abani's *Virgin of the Flames* and Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* these three areas of marginalization converge in the two protagonists. In Abani's novel this convergence challenges the discourse of disempowerment but in Thayil's it seems to further strip the characters of their agency. Both characters straddle various divides: cultural, racial, sexual and spiritual. Their personal narratives are composed of different narrative arcs which deal with: Dimple and Black's emergence into a spiritual identity, their othered and flexible genders, their poverty and their racial ambiguity. *Indecent Theology* and *The Queer God*, both by Marcella Althaus-Reid, an Argentine queer Catholic theologian, serves as a useful lens through which to examine the writing of Thayil and Abani because of this convergence of sexuality and spirituality. Althaus-Reid's work, "comprises an engaged theology paying attention to the body, the postcolonial condition, and change. She foregrounds human subjects who are marginalized in terms of gender, sexuality, poverty, race, and ethnicity" (Stobie 172). Her queer theology also seeks to dismantle heterosexual readings of the Scriptures by rejecting normative presentations of human bodies and heterosexuality. In Althaus-Reid's work as well as in *Narcopolis* and *Virgin of the Flames*, "the economic subject is an erotic subject, and economic theories deal with unique identities where sexual and racial components interrelate

with class and gender constructions, producing complex results in terms of oppression” (Althaus-Reid 166). This type of theology positions the Other not only as the sexually deviant but also the economically and politically oppressed. Because both novels take place in settings of economic poverty and deal with the sexuality and gender issues of socially marginalized characters, the goal of this paper is to dissect this tri-convergence while rejecting normative presentations, the ones in these novels as well as critical presentations, while reading *Virgin of the Flames* and *Narcopolis* through Althaus-Reid’s work.

Althaus-Reid’s theology materially unsettles/disrupts the normative body and sexuality as the physical map of the scriptural and literary epistemology. She asks for example, “[c]an we displace transcendental heterosexual ways of reading the Scriptures by sexually disconcerting the bodily logic of positioning the reader in the Scriptures?” (Althaus-Reid 3). Her literary theory as applied to the literature of Judeo-Christian scriptures posits that by accepting heterosexuality as the definitive familial, sexual and societal norm an accepted reading of the scriptures has emerged that materially mimics heterosexual positioning. Althaus-Reid’s work does concede that because the Christian scriptures themselves are of course constructed within the framework of heteronormativity/heterosexuality it is not surprising that the reading would mimic the presupposed norm, but she points out that the contradiction lies in the contemporary religious climate which claims that heteronormatively constructed scriptures are supposed to apply to all individuals, normative and non-normative. According to Althaus-Reid, “the point of departure is the understanding that every theology implies a conscious or unconscious sexual or political praxis, based on reflections and actions from certain accepted social codifications” (xi). Her works *The Queer God* and *Indecent Theology* reread scripture through a mixture of liberation theology and literary space theory, examining both the socio-political implications of poverty

and oppression in Latin America as well as spotlighting the ways in which religious rituals, iconography and sexuality is impacted by these codifications which, “configure [...] visions of life and mystical projections relating human experience to the sacred” (xi). The novels are set in divergent environments, *Virgin of the Flames* in East Los Angeles and *Narcopolis* in the back streets of Bombay but they both juggle themes of sexuality and spirituality amidst a backdrop of violence, poverty and disenfranchisement—much the same way that Althaus-Reid attempts to make sense of what she considers the inherent sexuality of the scriptures against a framework of violent Latin American political conflicts. In *Virgin of the Flames* and *Narcopolis* Abani and Thayil, like Althaus-Reid in her body of work, both seem concerned with dismantling the heterosexual codes within which their characters live, and the governance of the sacred experience. This dismantling is most evident in the lives of the two protagonists.

Thayil’s Dimple is a prostitute and a drug addict who was sold to a brothel at the age of 9 and then castrated to become a *hijra*— a fluid gender category. According to Jennifer Ung Loh, the *hijra* in contemporary Indian society can, “describe people who embody a wide variety of anatomical forms and perform a diverse number of gender and sexual practices and orientations” (23). Often *hijras* behave in a stereotypically “female” way in terms of cultural patterns of speech, dress and manner, “[a]lthough others behave ‘as men’, but might wear cosmetics, jewelry, and keep their hair long, transgressing normative gender presentations” (Ung Loh 23). Dimple lives in a brothel which houses only *hijras* but works part time at an opium den. She eventually leaves the brothel to live in the house of the opium den’s owner.

Dimple narrates the lives of the men who come to the opium den and also the life of a Chinese man living in Bombay named Mr. Lee who becomes a surrogate father to Dimple, who is from the northeast of India and is described as possessing very Chinese features, further

complicating her lack of fixed identity. Dimple does not operate outside of the familial structure prescribed by her society she in fact mimics it while at the same time challenging it. She is not an “independent woman” in the Western sense—she is under the authority of a surrogate male father but this surrogacy in itself is a challenge to fixity. Lee’s story of escape from the communist regime in China is interwoven with Dimple’s personal journey from a Hindu eunuch in a brothel, to become the sexual companion of the Muslim opium den owner, and finally her life masquerading as a *nasrani*, or Christian, Chinese man working at a rehab center for drug addicts. Dimple’s story is similar to Black in its setting of sexual deviance coupled with a deep theological grounding. Both characters’ sexual journeys parallel their spiritual and ethnic ones. In these novels gender and sexual artifice stand in for the artifice of the colonial and hegemonic structures of power by challenging codes of cultural, theological and sexual fixity.

Both Black and Dimple practice a sort of cultural, theological and sexual bricolage. According to Savastano bricolage, “is the process of accumulating, organizing, and integrating various idioms into a coherent whole as an act of religious devotion. One who practices the art of bricolage is a bricoleur” (Lardas qtd. in Savastano 11). Savastano explains how religious bricolage enables those of non-normative sexualities to form a sort of queer “spiritology.” He writes, “[t]hese concepts describe and define a possible response of gay men to the often-painful realization that there is in fact no religious tradition in the world that fully embraces them and their sexual practices without some caveat” (12). Savastano argues that by “invert[ing] these categories of gender and sexuality” bricoleurs become trickster or crossroads characters embodying characteristics such as: “(1) to be anomalous and ambiguous; (2) to be a deceiver and a trick player; (3) to be a shape-shifter; (4) to be a situation inverter; and (5) to be a sacred/ lewd bricoleur” (21). Black particularly practices ethnic or racial bricolage donning different racial

identities at will in order to find some sort of extra-racial identification. He feels the need to identify outside the boundaries of all races because he feels rejected by both sides of his racial heritage. He cannot find a “home” in either ethnicity so he tries to create one outside of both. Dimple is a religious bricoleur much like the gay men in Savastano’s ethnographic study who attempt to bridge the perceived moral gap between their sexuality and spirituality. She moves between roles as Hindu eunuch, Muslim wife, and Christian priest. Although both characters function as bricoleurs, Black is able to regain personal agency while Dimple, although she moves into situations of progressively greater economic freedom, continues to subscribe to the systems of oppression which bind her and never finds a space of personal agency.

*Virgin of the Flames* reads like a coming-of-age story. Its principal character is a young man named Black whose father is an Igbo man from Africa and whose mother is Salvadoran. The narrative follows Black along his journey through the urban landscape of Los Angeles and the internal battle of identity he faces as he navigates both his mixed-race and gender identities. Along the way the reader is introduced to Black’s waking dreams of both the Virgin and the angel Gabriel, and his circus-troop cast of friends which include Bomboy—a former Rwandan child soldier, Iggy—a psychic to the stars, and Sweet Girl—a transgendered stripper. The coming-of-age narrative is not one that focuses on Black’s maturity into conventional manhood but a coming of age as a spiritual crossroads figure. Abani infuses the narrative with shamanic imagery drawn from various religious and cultural traditions including Native American and Islamic figures. This complication of the traditional coming of age story imposes a secondary, spiritual parallel narrative that runs beneath the surface of *Virgin of the Flames*’ plot-driven backdrop.

Dimple and Black are both crossroads characters. Their narratives are two-toned, chronicling both their gender journeys and their passage into maturation as religious. They seem to bridge the natural and supernatural worlds. Dimple plays the role of a sort of priestly character to whom the clients of the opium den and brothel come to confess their sins. Black's story follows the arc of a traditional shamanic creation. While Dimple's sexual identity becomes the channel through which she works out her spiritual identity, Black's biracial identity serves the same purpose. However; Black's gender identity struggle problematizes his formational journey into a mature Shaman but also helps him understand what the role of a Diviner entails. The western literary world is most familiar with this character as the Jungian archetype the soothsayer, with deep roots in Greco-roman mythology like Sophocles' Terisias (Gary & Shamy 148). However, the Jungian shaman and the archetype of the shaman found in many African indigenous traditions have many similarities with a few divergences. For example, "in Jungian psychology the archetype of the Self is projected onto the individual in African traditional healing, however, the Self is projected onto the collective body" (Gearing qtd. in Geils 357). Black fits both the Western understanding of the Soothsayer and the African indigenous idea of the Diviner—terms that for the purpose of this paper will be used interchangeably. The Diviner traditionally endures a struggle or testing period, after which a fully-formed shaman emerges ready to serve the people. The novel chronicles Black in the throes of this testing period. He finds resonance in the lines of Wallace Stevens which read, "In the darkness/they wrestle, two creatures crazed with loneliness" (Stevens qtd. in Abani 93). Abani uses the Stevens' poem because this This crazed loneliness is an apt description of Black in his struggle. The two creatures are both Black as female/male, and Black as Diviner/not. His struggle to find his identity sexually and racially is a preliminary to his allo-identification as Diviner. Black needs to

come to terms with his racial identity before he can become whole as a religious character, and Dimple struggles with her place as an Indian *hijra*, a cultural figure which seems out of place in a quickly modernizing India amidst globalization .

Both novels present their characters against a setting which reads as a dreamscape which in *Narcopolis* mimics the opioid high of its narrators and in *Virgin of the Flames* is at times tinged with insanity. According to Gearing, “the Diviner is believed to receive a special calling often with symptoms of mental illness or significant dreams” (357). Abani spends much detail on the descriptions of Black’s dream life. Abani writes, “[d]reams of Iggy’s wedding dress chasing him through a desert [...] the desert floor was littered with the skeletons of sea horses” (126). Black also experiences hallucination as waking dreams. He most often hallucinates the image of the angel Gabriel. Abani writes, “so many odd things had been happening[...] not least of which was the fact that Angel Gabriel, sometimes in the shape of a fifteen-foot-tall man with wings, sometimes as a pigeon, had taken to stalking him (6). In a Western understanding these visions of Gabriel might in fact signal some sort of mental instability, but in the novel Gabriel often seems the voice of reason in Black’s chaotic psyche.

Black and Dimple both occupy a tenuous third space between spiritual, racial, national and gender identities. Chris Abani describes a scene where his main character Black and Sweet Girl, a transsexual dancer, have intercourse for the first time. Black hesitates as he begins to penetrate her anally because, “he couldn’t become her this way. He knew this thing; this intimacy he craved wasn’t about love, or even sex, but about filling himself.” (275). Black does not want sex, he wants, as Sweet Girl does, to transcend boundaries of gender and the physical dimensions of sex. Similarly Thayil’s narrator Dimple, a castrated biological male prostitute living as a woman, expounds on the nature of sex after Rashid asks, “What I want to know, do



you feel pleasure or not?” (124). Dimple responds, “Not like you do and not the way a woman does [...] I feel pleasure but not, what’s the word? relief?” (124). The lack of sexual fulfillment for both characters functions as a metaphor for widespread economic, racial and sexual disempowerment within the narratives. According to Hawkins, Cornwall and Jolly,

poverty and violence against women [is] at the top of the hierarchy of rights of poor communities. [...] Within this larger problem of fragmenting rights, relegating sexuality to the bottom of the hierarchy reflects a particular attitude towards poor people, which tends to consider them as asexual beings who do not have sexual needs. Yet in other contexts – and this is an interesting reversal – there is a tendency to view the poor as hypersexual ( 44).

Thayil seems to subscribe to this sexual relegation and in fact highlights it in the case of Dimple and several other characters in the book who occupy less privileged rungs of society. Dimple’s existence is centered around the production of pleasure—yet she is denied physical fulfillment. By day she tends the opium pipes for Rashid enabling the narcotic pleasures of those who can afford it and by night she works in the brothel serving the *giraks*, or customers. She is not the only character whose poverty is entwined with sexual disempowerment.

Dimple says, “I feel pleasure but not, what’s the word? relief?” (Thayil 124). She seems to be both referencing the physical experience of orgasm but also an achievement of agency through the bodily experience of sex. She intimates that she cannot reach orgasm, which is understandable physically because she cannot ejaculate. She is also unable to participate in the freedom that follows a fully consensual sexual act, a freedom which celebrates the bodily agency of the participants. Dimple is never in control of her own agency. She is never sexually nor economically empowered through the course of the novel. As a child the boundaries of her body

are transgressed upon by the adults that decide to sell her as a commodity and castrate her. As a prostitute, even when she does not resist intercourse with a customer, she does not have agency because she is a trafficked body coerced into sex for economic survival. As Rashid's companion she is again unable to consent free of any economic constraints, and as Father Sapporo she lives in fear of discovery and her celibacy is a necessary part of her cross-dressing role. The "relief" she lacks is both physical climax and personal agency.

Thayil spotlights a cast of characters who are ultimately *denied* what Dimple terms, "relief". For example, there is the nameless woman on the street who is hired by Rumi, a man who brags that he is, "pure Aryan, one of the elect" (Thayil 159). He pays her a small fee and asks her to perform oral sex—"She gave him a look, like she didn't do that, like she was out on the street selling sex but only on her own terms"(Thayil 168). Rumi incorrectly assumes that by selling her material body she has also sold dignity and agency. Rumi then penetrates the woman, "and she moaned, she liked it; she fucked him back" (Thayil 168). This seems to anger Rumi who then hits the woman. Her blood and fear excites him to the point of climax. He then, "put her on the ground [...] fondled her briefly and took the wad of notes folded into the whore's bra and drove away as slowly as he could (Thayil 168). There is also Salim, a young man who works as a low-level dealer for the *Lala*—local Muslim gangster, distributing contraband Johnny Walker Black and uncut cocaine. The man uses Salim and other boys like him both as cheap labor and private harem. Thayil writes, "the Lala walked into the back office and without a word bent Salim over the desk and pulled down his pajamas" (200). Salim responds by indicating the jar of coconut oil on the desk for lubrication, "[i]n response the Lala rammed harder and Salim felt something tear in his ass" (200). Salim then reaches a breaking point both emotionally and physically, he reaches for a knife on his desk and slices off the *Lala's* penis.

Dimple, Rumi's nameless victim and Salim are all seen as indecent bodies who represent an economic/erotic duality.. The term indecent here is taken from Althaus-Reid's characterization of lemon vendors in Latin America—bodies which represent the rule of “centuries of patriarchal oppression [a] mixture of clericalism, militarism and the authoritarianism of decency, that is, the sexual organization of the public and private spaces of society” (1). If Althaus-Reid's purpose is to write *Theology*, “to deconstruct a moral order which is based on a heterosexual construction of reality”, Thayil's indecent bodies “[dis]organize(s) not only categories of approved social and divine interactions but of economic ones too” (Althaus-Reid 2). In *Narcopolis* the melee of violence and exploitation is further complicated by religion and globalization of economic trade. In severing the Lala's phallus, Salim is not only castrating his attacker he is removing the physical violation which penetrates his bodily space but also symbolically removing the economic control (The Lala) that profits from his labor and uses his sexual being as a space of control to continue economic oppression. The *Lala* is a Muslim man who violates strict religious prohibitions on homosexual sex and trades black market western goods like whiskey and imported cocaine. Rashid and Dimple's relationship is also complicated by similar factors. The religious strictures prohibit homosexuality, and both men consider themselves good Muslims, yet they engage in flagrant homosexual encounters. Althaus-Reid writes, “the whole erotic/economic model relies on definitions and exclusions” (166). In this case the question is what is included as female or male and what bodies are included as decent and which deemed indecent.

Indecent bodies are economically colonized and de-spiritualized. That is, they are viewed in creaturely, not human terms. Their worth is measured in carnal animality and dehumanized. This is the standard which human exceptionalism applies to human relationship to animals: their

sexuality is co-opted by human masters to be bred to result in more animal labor force, and their labor supports human commerce. The problem is that this division of human exceptionalism opens the door to further abjection of *human* subjects by imposing a structure of rigid duality: animality/humanity. Bogg's *Americana Animalia* opens with a particularly pertinent example of when boundaries of the creature object and the human subject were redrawn in the modern era—the incidents at *Abu Ghraib*. Sergeant Smith, a U.S. army dog handler was convicted of six indictments related to the abuse of prisoners at *Abu Ghraib*. He apologized for *only* his conviction of indecency, when he had directed his dog to lick peanut butter from the breasts and genitals of other American soldiers. Boggs writes, “Smith apologized for the one act that involved other Americans and [...]situates his case within a practice that is foundational to the social order itself—the practice of constructing subjectivity from dividing human beings from animals” (1). Put, “ontologically and tautologically: “animals lack rights because they are animals, but those who lack rights like the abused detainees, are all too easily animalized” (Boggs 42). This logic is applied by Rumi and the *Lala* towards the nameless woman and e and Salim who are animalized by their economic oppressors. Boggs defines the animal as *object* and the human as *subject*, but Both Rashid and the *Lala* are able to justify these homosexual experiences because the bodies of Dimple and Salim and others, like the woman Rumi leaves for dead in an ally, in cycles of poverty are easy to dismiss as indecent bodies which become solely *economic subjects*. To them the economic subject is human bodies valued only for the potential economic capital gained through the sale of their labor or sexuality the way that animal bodies are assigned value. Dimple and Salim are a workforce whose working power lies in their erotic value—what Beatrice Preciado terms “orgasmic force” within a system of, “pharmacopornographic capitalism” (15). Although the erotic can be a powerful force in this

case, the subjects who possess the erotic power are stripped of their personal agency hence devaluing it as a source of power for these people.

To Rumi who, is a Brahmin (a member of the highest Hindu caste), the body of the nameless woman has become a purely economic subject. To him she has only economic value; she has no spiritual, moral or social significance. The economic subject is not only exploited but perceived as solely part of the system of capital. An object who, in the transition from subject to object, has forfeited the right to pleasure –the most service rendered for the smallest price paid, not a human subject but a transactional object through which commerce is conducted.

To Rumi and the *Lala*, an economic subject cannot claim pleasure, and in fact any attempt to regain some personal agency through the experience of pleasure is an act of subordination and a challenge to the transactional status of the exploited individual. The signs of pleasure the woman shows, pretense or not, angers Rumi him. He feels almost cheated because to him as the purchaser of pleasure he expects that the purveyor of pleasure ought to simply provide, not participate in the sex act. For the *Lala* he is not engaging in a homosexual encounter but instead an economic interaction one through which he derives both authoritative and erotic dividends. Preciado theorizes that bodies carry a potential for producing capital yet the body is not aware of this potential until it puts its orgasmic force to work—or in the case of Dimple and Salim, put to work by others exploiting this erotic capital. She writes, “femininity far from being nature, is the quality of orgasmic force when it can be converted into merchandise, into an object of economic work, into work” (15). In this way the male body can occupy, “a position of female gender in the market of sex work” (15). The biologically male bodies of Dimple and Salim become perceived as feminine in the way that they represent the capability for capital. This conversion mirrors the historical “feminizing” of the native male within the structure of colonial

political power for reasons of economic gain just as the *Lala* and Rashid see the subjugation of bodies as an extension of the capitalist system they themselves are trapped within. The bodies of Dimple and Salim become symbols of business profit margins; however, not all bodies represent the same profit in the economy of bodies.

Thayil writes about the *hijra* brothel describing the reasons that men frequent this place instead of going to a biologically female prostitute.

Their desire for [Dimple] was theoretical. It had no reality. It was the idea of a eunuch in a filthy brothel [...] They don't think of themselves as homosexuals. They have wives and children [...] It's all about money: they think eunuchs give better value than women. Eunuchs know that men want it in a way that other *randis* don't, they know men like it dirty. (125)

Here economic capital becomes the catalyst for erotic desire because the erotic body has become commodified to such an extreme that to desire the body, in this case Dimple's body, is to desire profit or value. The bodies of Dimple and the other *hijras* are not contained by a gender binary, they are physiologically neither male nor female. In shattering this binary they are also outside of another binary presented by religious societies—devout/non-believer. The *hijras* are no longer seen as spiritual or theological subjects only as purely economic or erotic ones.

This is the case which Althaus-Reid makes in *Indecent Theology*. She asserts that thinking about the scriptures in heteronormative terms has produced an epistemology for reading that functions parallel to the gender binary and any reading which is outside this dichotomous interpretation is considered indecent. According to Althaus-Reid, “[e]conomic desires walk hand in hand with erotic desires and theological needs” (166). This occurs for the *hijras*. By rupturing the male/female dichotomy they find themselves outside not only the parameters of accepted

gender but also outside the society's understanding of theological and spiritual subjects. Althaus-Reid writes, "the sexual stories that we hear most are those belonging to the top [class] mainly heterosexual, marital and reproduction stories" (135). She goes on to write about wealthy, aristocratic men who, "are heterosexual in their reproductive perspective but not necessarily straight" who fraternize with much younger men while maintaining large families (135). She says, "curiously there is no indecency in these stories [...] their homosexuality is spiritualized [while] poor gays are almost always indecent" (135). Likewise, the bodies of Dimple and the other *hijras* are considered indecent, because they are poor, and because they are poor and indecent their bodies become economic subjects. To those like the customers who consider themselves both morally/spiritually and economically a cut above, the economic subject is lacking any theological component.

The sexual/social disempowerment of Dimple and Black is evident particularly in the way that the authors deal with the material spaces of sex—the bodies of those who are deemed indecent. The material spaces of sex are not synonymous with indecency but in the indecent body those spaces carry yet a heavier social stigma of indecency. These bodies occupy a sexual space that is socially fractured into a theoretical business plan. Lefebvre writes, "[t]he space where [...] nature is replaced by cold abstraction and by the absence of pleasure, is [...]: the space of a metaphorization whereby the image of the woman supplants the woman herself, [...]. Over abstract space reigns phallic 'solitude and the self-destruction of desire. The representation of sex takes the place of sex itself" (309-310). The "representation of sex" often means bodies that are othered, because in non-normative bodies, according to Preciado lies, "the possibility of making the subject an inexhaustible supply of planetary ejaculation that can be transformed into abstraction and digital data—into capital" (15). In the brothel the *hijras* bodies are subject to

capitalist scrutiny both by the management of the brothel and the *giraks* or customers. Thayil's Xavier, a successful artist living in the United States known for his gory and excessively violent depictions of Christ on the cross stands in as a representation of the capitalist Western world, a modern capitalist colonialism and a capitalist understanding of bodies. He hires Dimple to spend the night with him at the brothel and while she is readying herself he converses with the *tai*, or madam of the brothel. Dimple overhears the conversation and it "filled her with dismay because of the way that he said the English word *eunuch*, as if to disparage her and women like her; he never used the word *hijra*" (47). He suggests modifying the bodies of the castrated *hijras* and, "augment the basic armature of penis, no testicles, with a pair of good quality breasts, the larger the better [...] a new breed of randi with big breasts and a show penis [...] she would recoup her investment [...] and from then on it would be pure profit (Thayil 47). Xavier's use of the English term eunuch is an affront to Dimple because the word implicitly parcels out her physical sexuality into the sum of its parts instead of the term *hijra* which connotes a societal space which she occupies. And although India's so called "third gender" has often been romanticized in the west as an elevated position while the reality is far more harsh, the term *hijra* hints at a whole identity, a place in society versus eunuch which tallies only the physical appendages. This is the anaphorization of abstract space under a contract of reciprocity that Lefebvre addresses saying, "while the apologetic term 'sexuality' serves to cover up this mechanism 'of devaluation, its natural status gone, [...] itself becomes no more than another localization, specificity or penalization, with its own particular location and organs (309). By abstracting the spaces of the othered and indecent bodies of Dimple and Salim the *Lala*, Rumi, the *tai* and the customers are able to denude their bodies from the spiritual/intellectual/emotional loci of their personhood and portion them out into goods and services to translate into economic capital.



While the indecent bodies of these characters are stripped of agency, they also occupy spaces which challenge hetero-norms. The sexual space of the vagina raises questions of subjugation and subversion in these novels. As biological males, neither Dimple nor Black have physical vaginas but the novels both have scenes which suggest almost prosthetic vaginal spaces for both characters, that is prosthesis as a metaphor not as a physical tool. Mitchell and Snyder contend that prosthesis is also a storytelling technique which tries to compensate for a void in the text. It is something that functions as “crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (49). This idea of “narrative prosthesis evolves out of this specific recognition: a narrative issues to resolve or correct — to ‘prostheticize’ [...] — a deviance marked as improper to a social context” (53). For Black and Dimple the prosthetic vagina is a metaphoric auxiliary body part or replacement that amends the original problem of the widespread understanding that biological sex overdetermines gender. According to Schobhack, “this [...] structural, functional, and aesthetic terms of those who successfully *incorporate* and *subjectively live* the prosthetic and sense themselves neither as lacking something nor as walking around with some ‘thing’ that is added on to their bodies” (22). This perspective on the prosthetic metaphor absolutely applies to Dimple who does not view the material absence of this vaginal space as detraction from her identity as woman, “[s]he said, I am a woman, see for yourself” (124). Schobhack’s idea of the prosthesis is helpful here because there is no physical, material space within Dimple’s body but she “lives” the prosthetic. Black however, sees his “vaginal space” differently, desiring to physically possess a vaginal space that can be filled.

Black wants to see the world in a female way. Lefebvre writes, “[a]s for a phallus that allegedly castrates the clitoris and diminishes the vagina, I cannot help feeling that something

essential is being overlooked amidst all this exchanging of low blows” (262). Black is looking for that something that has been overlooked. He seeks to channel not a male deity but a female religious icon, Fatima, through his art. Abani also presents a foil to Black’s understanding of his own sexuality in the character of Bomboy. Bomboy owns an abattoir and is a former child soldier. He brags that, “because of [him] five people have jobs. I also live in a nice place and drive a lexus so don’t compare yourself to me” (9). Bomboy embodies the stereotypical idea of masculinity in all its trappings. His sexuality is decidedly phallic in the way that Lefebvre defines the term “the space of the triune God, the space of kings, [...] the space of the written word and the rule of history. The space, too, of military violence - and hence a masculine space (262). However, his masculine identity is also problematized because his involvement in the violence of war is not chosen, he was a child soldier whose own agency was co-opted by his kidnappers. Bomboy, tries to pick up the pieces of a shattered childhood by the way he performs his masculinity: in terms of monetary success, violence, and control over others. He himself was an economic subject in the way that Dimple is but once he regains a sense of agency his world view is already formed on the basis of a transactional paradigm—human subjects have worth only as objects of capital and commerce. Even his friendship with Black is in part based on economic value. Early in the novel Bomboy needs Black to procure a fake green card for him and in order to get his friend to help him he promises to pay Black for his time. Black wants to experience his sexuality in a way that leaves behind those trappings of phallic sexuality. Black summarizes this difference when he concludes that he, “lived in a world of composition [...] one in which things blurred into one another [...] Bomboy, on the other hand, lived in a world of statements—often contradictory, but no less rigid and clear in time” (Abani 24). Black’s sexuality is more fluid. In one scene as he watches Sweet Girl cup her breasts and hold them up,

“as though in offering” he, “felt his own hands, delicate and incongruous given his weight, sliding up his sides, stopped just short of his own plump chest by her teasing smile” (Abani 23). He mimics Sweet Girl’s stage performance as a way to perform his own sexuality.

Although Black is not gay, he seeks contact with divinity in order to ease his loneliness, through his ecstatic actions and through the emasculating and freeing experience of donning women’s clothing. At one point in the novel, he experiences a persistent erection that lasts for several days. Black visits a prostitute in order to relieve himself but is unsuccessful, he even ties a bag of frozen peas around his groin to reduce the engorgement but again there is no relief. The erection is a symbol for longing, both a sexual longing and a spiritual one—he longs for a connection with the Divine. In a scene at the site of his painting of Fatima, Black undresses and orgasms at what he perceives to be her command. Abani writes,

He stripped down until he was nude. He had a hard-on again. Hard to splitting. It hurt, but he ignored the pain and folded his clothes carefully. [...] “Now what?” he asked. “Must I?” He sighed and bent his dick back between his legs, forming a mock vagina. He touched himself. The way Sweet Girl had at the club, with a wet finger. He came in minutes. (236)

Black is only able to reach orgasm through his vaginal mimicry. Black’s creation of what he calls a “mock vagina” is prosthesis in the way that Schoback uses the term, but it is also a sort of spiritual channel.

His sexual ecstasy is a step towards his acceptance of himself as a Diviner and spiritual crossroads character. According to Geils, “the African diviner serves as a conduit for the energy of the collective unconscious, and the wishes of the Self, for the group. In his or her shamanic role, he or she functions as a psychopomp, bringing messages from the spirit world” (359). Black

does not point to his phallus as a tool of divination, instead, he tries very hard to create within himself what Lefebvre terms, “the mundus” (242). The mundus is historically a deep pit into which a city’s refuse and unwanted newborn were cast. “A pit, then, 'deep' above all in meaning [...]a passageway through which dead souls could return to the bosom of the earth and then re-emerge and be reborn” (242). This is the abstract space that Black is trying to create –a passageway through which he can channel meaning. In the creation of this space he also creates a social space for himself to occupy.

The production of this vaginal space provides the channel through which he can find his spiritual and gender identities. He feels that by the creation of this space within himself he will have access to a different sort of knowledge. Not the knowledge created by a phallogocentric epistemology but a vaginocentric one. That is not to say that the production of this space would bestow a sort of instantaneous mystic knowledge upon him but Black seems to understand that by the experience of the vagina he commits a, “transgression of the traditional, approved sites of philosophical discourse” (Althaus-Reid 29). For Black the vaginal space is a way to tap into an alternative center of understanding. According to Lefebvre the mundus functions as an, “estuary of hidden forces and mouth of the realm of shadows, the mundus terrified as it glorified. In its ambiguity it encompassed the greatest foulness and the greatest purity, life and death, fertility and destruction, horror and fascination” (242). In the creation of his constructed vagina Black challenges accepted ideas of masculinity. The human body as Elizabeth Wilson argues, “is more than a biological entity. It is an organism in culture, a cultural artefact even, and even its own boundaries are unclear [...]gender binary has been used to subtend normative and oppressive practices of embodiment and domesticity (Sheffield 234). In blurring this gender binary by blurring the boundaries of his own body Black is able to dismantle ideas of masculinity.

Althaus-Reid makes the case that socially accepted norms are, “equated to a particular form of sexual action”—including the norms of masculinity (67). Black challenges ideas of conventional masculinity because he is not gay but he seeks to be penetrated sexually. He desires to understand the experience of being the receptive partner in the sex act.

This vaginal space and the inclusion of these “vaginal narratives” in the midst of already densely complicated plots is significant because of the historical emphasis on the phallus as a symbol of power. According to Lefebvre,

The Phallus is seen. The female genital organ, representing the world, remains hidden. The prestigious Phallus, symbol of power and fecundity, forces its way into view by becoming erect. In the space to come, where the eye would usurp so many privileges, it would fall to the Phallus to receive or produce them. The eye in question would be that of God, that of the Father or that of the Leader. (262)

Lefebvre also speaks of the phallus as traditionally occupying a space, “of force, of violence, of power restrained by nothing but the limitations of its means” (262). Lefebvre deals with space materially occupied by the phallus but for Althaus-Reid the phallic symbol also governs the way that literature is produced and received. She writes, “writing has been a production area privatized by men, from which women and even the Virgin have been excluded” (54). She calls this phallogocentric creation idea the “Spermatoc Word” (54). She contends that, particularly in the arena of Theology, the male god is seen as the divine author and that maleness is synonymous with written and spoken word whereas the feminine has been silent (or silenced). For Althaus-Reid the Virgin Mary (as a stand in for all women), “has no sharing in her symbolic construction of God’s speech acts. She is no word; she is only appearance” (54). For her the story of the

Virgin is a, “biography made basically of a sexual story written by automatic Spermatogenesis [...] not much of a piece of writing but rather a visual showpiece of pregnancy” (54). The vaginas of these characters become subversive spaces because they challenge the word/appearance dichotomy. Black and Dimple engage in acts of creation—Black in his works of installation art, and Dimple in her voracious reading and thirst for knowledge—creation versus procreation. Dimple is also one of the narrators of *Narcopolis*. The material words on the page read by the novel’s audience is in itself a challenge to the, “Spermatik Word” (Althaus-Reid 54). Dimple is the author of her story, subverting the phallic association with the Word.

The vaginal spaces of these characters are sites of rebellion. They are transgressive, performative spaces which perform and question ideas of gender, aesthetics and culture. This is further complicated because neither of the characters possess “true” vaginas in the traditional understanding. They transgress the boundaries of gender because it is uncommon to speak about biological men with vaginas and they also transgress religious boundaries because both characters, to an extent, subscribe to religious codes which operate within a tight web of sexual strictures. According to Drabinski, “Selfmaking is thus a making and an unmaking, a practice of subjugation and desubjugation that can remake the codes themselves” (2). The creation of the vaginal prosthetic is an act of self-making on the part of the characters. Black tries to create a vaginal space within himself. He asks Sweet Girl to show him how to push his testicles inside of himself and then tape his empty scrotal sack over his phallus in order to create the illusion of femininity. Black, “stared in wonder as she pushed [his penis] back into the shaft and then tucked it all under his empty scrotal sack [...] he could feel his penis in the empty space where it once was at the same time as feeling an incredible void. An emptiness” (283). The withdrawal and concealing of his penis and testicles challenges the very ideas of masculinity as aggressive and

penetrative which Black seeks to escape hence his reaction to Sweet Girl's ministrations. When the illusion is finished Black looks down and thinks, "his dick had disappeared. He was free" (283). Black creates a very real space within himself which stands in for the female vagina; however, in Dimple's case it is a metaphoric space.

Both Dimple and Black engage in a self-making process through the formation of these sexual spaces. According to Drabinski, "gender is not a choice, but a disciplinary apparatus that inaugurates us [...] and operates as a consistent norm by and against which we are summoned to produce ourselves. When Dimple leaves the brothel she shows her new patron her genitals, "[s]he lay on the cot [...] [h]er legs were open, the ridged skin stretched like a ghost vagina" (124). Freedom is integral to this scene, but not in the sense of a free-willing self"(1). It is against this apparatus that Dimple and Black attempt to create identities, refashioning individuality out of a miasma of sex trafficking, childhood abuse and political turmoil. The question posed is: does this refashioning result in agency for these characters? To more fully understand why this creation of vaginal space is revolutionary it is also necessary to examine criticism of the womb space.

Much has been written about the womb space in both Theology and Literary Studies but there is little that addresses the vaginal space. It is not that there is a direct prejudice against writing about this space instead, it is simply silently ignored. In Catholic theology the Madonna's womb has always been an object of fixation as the vessel which carried the male Christ. It is at once a "pure" space kept apart from sex in its virgin conception and also a hyper-sexualized space because its worth is in fact based on its sexual status. Althaus-Reid contends that much of the Mariological understanding of liberation theologians is deeply rooted in a colonial epistemology. For her sexuality and gender roles are, "political subordinates which have been

naturalized by colonization processes using the sexual order of God the Virgin in the continent” (40). By this she means that the elevation of virginity and maternity as a standard for all women has been justified through religious oppression. She argues that the Christian Mary has become the “opium of women (in the narcotic sense out of boredom as well as oppression)” (41). She claims that the Mariological ideology prizes virginity and promises a social elevation (which is never granted) through the achievement of motherhood Dimple lives in a culture which, although not Judeo-Christian in majority also subscribes to the same ideologies about virginity and maternity outlined above. Althaus-Reid’s use of Mariology as a lens to examine the treatment of women in post-colonial, patriarchal societies is useful for understanding Dimple’s place in the social fabric of Bombay because although Dimple lives in a predominantly Hindu and Muslim world the sexual strictures and colonial epistemology is similar or perhaps more stringent.

Dimple is still subject to the glorification of virginity and the double sexual standards governing male and female sexuality. The book is set during a time of political turmoil where riots between Muslims and Hindus erupt all over the city. During the peak of the riots Dimple finds a book that addresses ideas about, “the Christian god” and she realizes that, “she wanted, for the first time in her life, to go to church” (196). Prior to this she contemplates her place in Rashid’s, the owner of the opium den, life. The social space Dimple occupies is a sort of non-space—she is neither wife nor lover (in the emotional sense of the word) she is a body. Her body occupies material space but not any defined social space. She muses that, “his wives kept his home running [...] she on the other hand had no official standing [s]he could not bear children [...] all she could provide was sex (Thayil187). She does not possess a womb, unlike Rashid’s wives, and therefore she is of no value in the procreative economy of patriarchal India. Because she does not have this womb space she is not socially legitimized and Rashid, “didn’t like to be



seen with her in public” (Thayil 189). It is not a plural marriage which is the taboo here, after all Rashid is a Muslim and could have taken another wife had he wanted; however, Dimple is a biological male—unable to give him children. If Dimple had been a biological female Rashid might have married her even despite of her low social standing. Instead, he installs her in, “the apartment on the half landing between Rashid’s *khana* [opium den] and his home” (Thayil 187). However Rashid’s wives, although socially legitimized because of their procreative ability, are not treated with any more respect than Dimple. Rashid, “rarely mentioned his wives and if he did, it was to complain about some trivial domestic matter, as if they were employees and he was disappointed with the quality of their service (Thayil 187). Although they are valued as procreative vessels they are not valued as people any more than is Dimple.

With procreative ability as the patriarchal economic backdrop the womb space becomes valued far above vaginal space. It is not the vagina of a woman that authenticates her in this type of economy, it is the womb. Dimple’s vaginal prosthesis is revolutionary because it subverts the Madonna/whore dialectic, which ultimately is about paternity and a phallogentric idea of ownership—which man has fathered the child and the equation of penetration and possession. It also functions as a narrative prosthesis in the way that Mitchell and Snyder define prosthesis, allowing Thayil to critique long-held cultural norms. Dimple subverts ideas of penetrative possession by claiming female gender while being non-procreative. Of course Dimple’s role as a prostitute complicates this reading and some feminists have attempted to reclaim the trope of the whore by arguing that the character of the whore is actually more empowered because no single man “owns” her, and she works on her own agency. However, this argument is still problematic because it still allows sex to be codified as an act of ownership. Dimple subverts this economic system because she can be neither the Madonna nor the whore because her vaginal space is a

social prosthesis which cannot be penetrated by anyone—husband or client. Her vagina also challenges the idea of feminine sex as passive and receptive because it cannot receive a phallus. In a society and era that does not value the female vagina—particularly the vagina of a woman of color and a prostitute occupying a lower rung of a caste-driven society, Dimple’s vagina both fulfills and mocks the accepted standard of virginity for females. She both subscribes to the standards of sexuality imposed on women but also challenges them. She is a virgin because there is no material physical space to be penetrated yet she also cannot be a virgin, or occupy the social space reserved for virginal women, because she is a prostitute. Because she is a “virginal whore” this prosthetic space transgresses the imposed boundaries of bodies deemed decent/indecent. Although she is in the very technically literal sense a “virgin” because her vagina has not been penetrated, Dimple cannot fit the mold of the Madonna because the Madonna trope is the virginal mother (which necessitates a material womb space and is associated with the social domestic space) and the Whore is associated with the transactional space of the brothel, a space which Dimple leaves behind. Dimple cannot procreate and when she moves to Rashid’s home she inhabits a third space between his place of business on the first floor, and his home on the third floor, and therefore does not fit these molds.

Dimple’s story does however begin in a brothel. Her mother who, publicly, worshiped in Hindi in Hindu temples and privately prayed in English, “whispered to her kitchen cupboard, where her church was” gave her to a priest when she was very young (Thayil 54). She is then sold to a hijra brothel and castrated in a religious ritual. Thayil writes, “there was singing and dancing [...] the daima told me to chant the goddess’s name” (65). Dimple was about nine, “when you’re cut young you become a woman quicker [...] with older boys they removed only the testicles. Gelding. They used the English word. [...] In her case: gelding and docking” (65).

Both Dimple's testes and penis are amputated leaving a long transverse ridge of scar tissue which mimics the female vulva. Thayil writes, "[t]hey used a piece of split bamboo on my penis and testicles and held me down. The bamboo was so tight I felt nothing, until afterwards, when they poured hot oil on my wound" (65). The oil functions as a cauterizing agent in order to seal the wound but it is also a symbolic baptism into a new identity. In both cases, and throughout the book, Thayil draws a distinction between the acts and desires which are articulated in English (the actual gelding and docking) versus those which are uttered in local languages (the worship of the goddess) indicating a separation between the cultural and religious importance of the rituals and the sordid monetary gain they also represent. In emphasizing this language divide Thayil challenges the image of the sexualized native woman. Lim writes "in the Western canon, the familiar image of the lovelorn female Asiatic woman has been immortalized in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, or she appears as a hypersexual prostitute, as in *Miss Saigon*. In the social imaginary, she is the tragic Indian sati widow, and the oppressed Afghan woman in burka" (9). Lim argues that this male/female dyad composes, "the colonial deployment of East-West relations as heteronormative in structure. The uneven distribution of power is mobilized by codes of masculinity and femininity" (9). Dimple's biologically male body is what Lim terms the "native boy". "In one regard, the native boy is a sign of conquest, the trope of an Asian male or nation infantilized as a boy, a savage domesticated as a child, and a racially alienating body in need of tutelage and discipline" (8). Dimple's body is also an embodiment of the colonial castration of India by its "mother" nation—the English colonial power.

Conversely, Black's biological mother also fulfills the trope of the "castrating mother", although less literally than Dimple's. He is also deeply influenced by ideas of the Virgin Mother. Amidst the horrific physical and psychosexual abuse he receives from his mother he gets a

message from the Virgin herself. Abani writes, “Black heard the Virgin call to him. [...] this white-faced, red-lipped crumbling plaster Virgin of indeterminate pedigree” (134). The Virgin makes a request of him, “asked him to free her. Demanded. Ordered. Compelled” (134). Black proceeds to set the statue on fire and, “she became the Virgin of Flames” (Abani 134). Black continues to attempt to set the Virgin free in his embodiment of her, in Iggy’s wedding dress with face painted white, and lips painted red. The novel itself follows many Jungian precepts in its presentation of religious icons and figures—in particular, the Virgin. Jung theorized that in western culture, “religious symbols were no longer living symbols and had lost their power for many people” (Hollis qtd. in Geils 358). For Jung, these deceased religious icons manifest as dream symbols or visions. Black’s hallucinations of the angel Gabriel are a reflection of the “deceased” icon of the Virgin which he awakens in his re-representation of her in his painting of Fatima on the abattoir wall. According to Abani those who saw it, “would never be satisfied with any love they had, because they, like Black became infected by the desire for Fatima [...] this desire it would fill every pore of their body and drive them crazy (239). Black’s painting of Fatima in the *burkha* affects all that see it.

Both Dimple and Black are symbols of shame and fear to their mothers. For Dimple her mother fears that her secret prayers to her cupboard (Christian) church caused her husband’s death and attempts to atone for her perceived sins by sacrificing Dimple to the temple. And Black also experiences marginalization from not only the outside world but also from within the home. His mother berates him constantly and calls him her punishment for sleeping with his father before they were married and for disobeying her family and marrying a black man (Abani 107). This public/private divide is a struggle for Black. His mother changes his name to Black, as if to say that he is the embodiment of both his father’s race and her self-perceived sin but he still

identifies privately as something in-between. Black's mother likens her race betrayal to Judas betrayal of Christ and passes on that lineage of shame to Black who, "tasted every morsel, every grain of their shame" (Abani 107). Black finds his way out of this mirroring of shame through his emergence as a Diviner.

The maternal abuse heaped upon Black as a child, the years spent at Iggy's Ugly Store and his perpetual erection as he attempts to communicate with Fatima are hardly the ideal image of the shamanic stages but they are part of Black's personal journey. According to Gearing in "Jungian psychology, the shamanic archetype [...] can be considered to be a messenger and mediator between the conscious and unconscious [...] it is the pathway to the wholeness of the Self" (Geils 358). This "wholeness of self" is ultimately the goal that eludes Black as he tries to reconcile warring portions of his identity. And in fact, Black's identity is defined by others as a dichotomous one whereas, he himself attempts to find the middle ground and simply identify as himself. In order to do so he needs to make sense of his sexual identity which is complicated by his racial identity. According to Stone and Hornsby, "contemporary disgust toward non-heteronormative sexuality in the United States is conditioned by the racialization of certain representations of sexuality in the Bible, even where the biblical heritage and/or racialization is no longer obvious" (45). Because Black is not white his sexual experimentation is seen as deviant rather than daring.

Even in his racial identity he identifies within the third space between racial identities. Abani writes, "[w]ith an Igbo father and a Salvadoran mother, Black never felt he was much of either" (37). According to Nuttgens, "It is thought that children of interracial parentage are bequeathed a third racial status that does not match that of either parent" (357). This rejection of both parents' racial status is congruent with Black's understanding of himself. By his own

admission he says to Iggy, “I’m a shape shifter” (Abani 37). He practices bricolage in both his racial identity and his spiritual identity because in both areas of life he is marginalized. He is not accepted into mainstream religious identity because of his non-normative sexuality and he is not accepted into singular racial groups because he is mixed-race. Black is a character who desires to exist in a space of auto-identification in terms of race. When it comes to his gender identity however, he seems to toy with moving into the next stage of allo-identification and later submits to dressing in women’s clothing in front of Sweet Girl. Black is not only biracial but exhibits a penchant for non-racial or extra-racial identification; he tries to define himself outside of the ‘normal’ definitions of race. Abani writes, “he was going through several identities, taking on different ethnic and national affiliations as though they were seasonal changes in wardrobe” (37). Black’s ethnic makeup is Latino and African and yet, “[f]or a while, Black had been Navajo, the seed race: children of the sky people, descendants of visitors from a distant planet. That was when he built the spaceship” (37).

The spaceship, which is a rickety construction built on the roof of the Ugly Store is the physical manifestation of this transracial and transnational third space. Similar to Dimple’s habitation at Rashid’s between his work space and his home, Black’s spaceship functions as a metaphor for the liminal social space he occupies. According to Bolatagici—a mixed-race researcher out of Australia’s Deakin University—biracial discourse seeks to, “facilitate a movement beyond the dichotomy, which seeks to reduce us [mixed-race individuals] to the sum of our parts” (75). Bolatagici, herself Fijian-Anglo Australian speaks about her fascination with the fact that she is often misperceived as someone of another race. She writes, “it is a racial ambiguity that enables a fluidity that is situationally dependent” (75). Black exhibits this ambiguity and the discrimination leveled against him for this subversion of societally-structured

dichotomous ideas about race, leaves quite an imprint. Abani writes, “[h]e was the only biracial kid for blocks, and it set him apart. Everyone could tell he wasn’t one thing or the other, yet because his father wasn’t around no one could tell what he might be. Kids were cruel and didn’t cut him any breaks” (107). Even in a society that interprets the flexible concept of race as solid and non-liminal Black is forced to identify as “other”—between races. Black’s ‘in-betweenness’ is noticeable to Iggy who is, after all, a psychic. She describes him as, “someone who hadn’t shown up and yet was looking for someone someplace else” (Abani 241). What is Black searching for? From a queer theory point of view Black is searching for a gender identity that feels comfortable, and from a Freudian vantage point Black may be seeking a respite from the castrating mother of his youth; however, perhaps he is also seeking fulfillment as a Diviner.

Black is characterized into many of the same molds that would fit an African Diviner character. According to Bernard diviner-healers are commonly believed to have undergone some sort of spiritual baptism associated with, “and their association with bodies of “living water,” [...]. These sites could be classified as sacred in that they are hedged with taboos and rules of behavior” (2). Dimple’s baptism into a feminine life comes with the pouring of hot oil over the wound where her penis and testicles used to be. Black undergoes this sort of baptismal experience when he is at his most desperate and wants to jump from the bridge instead he looks down at the river and presses his knife against his face. The pain revives him and he decides to live. The water does play a significant role for Black. He says, “[t]his River was alive, this River was here before anyone knew this was a River, before anyone saw it and said, River” (Abani 135). Even the language of both Black’s idea of the river as ‘alive’ and the indigenous notion of “living water” is similar.

The African Diviner character does not simply go through an immersion in water, spiritual or otherwise, but also draws strength from creatures of the water. Bernard writes about the, “presence and role of water divinities (in the form of snakes and mermaids) in the calling of certain powerful diviners” (139). This becomes important for Black as well. In a later section of the book Iggy walks through a cemetery and sees a goddess figure painted on a headstone with Black’s signature on it. “It was well done, depicting a woman [...] wrapped around her waist, its head and neck dangling between her legs was a python [...] over her head was a banner that said *Mami-Wata*” (Abani 202). This dangling appendage can of course be read as a nod to Black’s sexual preoccupation with defining his own gender; however, it also fits into his formation as a Diviner. Black does not simply paint a woman with a snake around her neck he identifies this painting as Mami-Wata specifically. Black explains to Iggy, “Mami-Wata is an Igbo sea and River Goddess” (Abani 205).

Iggy mocks him saying, “Such authority in your voice, Black, but how do you know? You never even knew your Father much less had access to your culture” (Abani 205). Black is back lighted as a misfit, as a transnational character in the liminal space that is his habitation. He yearns for something of which he has innate knowledge and yet is denied access. Iggy’s condemnation of Black as someone who is not part of culture is at once apt and untrue. Black’s vocation as a Diviner character does place him outside of culture and posits him as an observer yet Abani’s description of him as an *iroko* would present a different angle to his character. The *iroko*, according to Bird, “is a sacred tree that symbolizes the union of seen and unseen worlds. It is where a living community converges with ancestors” (41). In one portion of the book Black is



described as, “an Iroko the wind could not uproot”(Abani 241). The *iroko*<sup>1</sup> is essential, “to understand the process of transatlantic folklore transmission and nature spirituality in the African Diaspora” (Bird 41). This is not an incidental or flippant description of Black. Abani has chosen his language precisely and carefully. An *iroko* is a type of tree that grows in Western and Southern Africa, and roots are an important image in Africanism. Abani’s description of Black as an *iroko* is particularly significant in light of Iggy’s accusation when she discovers the painting of Mami-Wata. Black, the *iroko*, is this union of both unseen and seen worlds and the manifestation of ancient traditions.

Dimple and Black bridge the living worlds and the world of the dead in a way that is reminiscent of the African (diasporan) ancestor figure, Legba. Dimple deals with death in the opium dens and slums of Delhi and Black bridges this divide in East Los Angeles. Perhaps the most blatant example of this is his affinity with dying animals—specifically dogs. Abani writes, “Black loved dogs but had a long and complicated history with them, somewhat shamanic and somewhat desperate” (15). Black’s relationship with the dying dogs of Los Angeles is probably the most convincing portion of the novel in terms of Black’s Diviner/Shaman archetype. Abani describes a scene at, “the 4<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge” where people throw unwanted dogs onto the sand below, “the poor creatures die slowly, blood and brains scattered everywhere [...] the gangs come along and use the dog corpses for target practice” (182). Black and Ray-Ray, a little person who works at the Ugly Store, witness the shooting of several dogs. Abani writes,

There were about ten dogs lying around. Dead or dying. [...] Black stood in the middle of the circle and began to cry. Then, raising his arms to the moon that was low and full in

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<sup>1</sup> The *iroko* is also sometimes referred to as *Libaka* or *Banyan*. These trees have been important in many enslavement narratives as a symbol of freedom. Spirits called “jumbie” were said to roost in the crowns of these massive trees and people would gather at these trees to dance and sing for their freedom (Bird 41).

the sky, he wailed, like a dog.[...] a dark huddled mass in shapeless old blankets, an eagles feather rising out of the top of his battered black felt hat, a mound of sage burning beside him, the dogs lying still [...] Black's voice rising like something old and long forgotten, breaking through the resistance of night (183-184).

The narrative of a Shaman character often falls into several stages: "initial resistance [...]" a period of training under a senior shaman, and the use of ecstatic techniques to communicate in a purposeful manner with the spirit world" (Gearing 358). Black's fumbling progress through this formation process is a subverted initiation into his role as a Diviner/Soothsayer. Black's journey is a perverse morphing of this vocational formation described. Abani even presents a vivid image of Black as a subverted spiritual figure. Abani writes, "[Black] remembered the time he bought an on-line revered-hood from the NewWineChurchofGod.com" (19). Black describes the technical difficulty downloading the document but notes, "the vocal section of the document was unaffected and [...] in the ghostly glow of the notebook's LCD screen it had almost been possible to believe it was the voice of God". In fact, Black imagines himself in a sort of priestly role, and longs to elevate seemingly mundane (profane) experiences into the realm of the sacred<sup>2</sup>.

This Eucharistic elevation happens initially only in Black's own mind but then begins to manifest itself physically as he attempts to embody the Virgin and transform his own flesh into the realm of the sacred. In the beginning of the novel Abani even uses Eucharistic language to call attention to Black's festering vocation. He describes a scene on the Santa Monica beach with teenaged couples groping in cars and homeless people, "spread out across the sand [...] like an infestation of ants" (Abani 17). Within this very worldly scene Black spots a woman standing in

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<sup>2</sup> This harkens to Durkheim's idea of the sacred and the profane as cultural rituals of initiation. According to Durkheim, the role of religion is to maintain a separation between the profane (rituals of everyday existence) and the sacred, and rituals reinforce this separation.

the surf. He imagines himself saving her, and imagines a very elaborate ritual in which he would ask her to kneel before him and he would pour sand over her head in a baptism of soil. Here is where the language of the Eucharist<sup>3</sup> is used but subverted. In Black's fantasy of the scene he speaks over the kneeling woman saying, "*This is our body. The one true home [...] Do this in memory of us. Don't forget*" (Abani 19). Black is already beginning to imagine himself in the role of Spiritual leader from very early in the novel.

This innate desire to fulfill the role of Diviner comes from Black's seeming disconnection with his own cultural heritage. Black is "othered" even by those with whom he might be expected to find a kinship. In a tense interchange between Black and Bomboy, Bomboy says, "you have no people, without people you have no lineage, without a lineage you have no ancestors, without ancestors you have no dead, and without the dead you can never learn anything about life" (Abani 255). Bolatagici claims that changing the notion of race as simply dichotomous, an either/or idea, transforms the third space into, "a liberating location of progressive resistance" (76). Black is trying to learn about life, not as a Black man, or as a Latino man, but as the ultimate "other", the Diviner who stands between worlds, his own "progressive resistance". After the interchange between Black and Bomboy, Black simply walks away and thinks, "[h]e should call Sweet Girl" (Abani 256). Under Bomboy's acrid critique, Black's thoughts turn to the symbol of his other location of hybridity—a gender hybridity.

Both Black and Dimple cross-dress in different ways. Black, in his makeup and Iggy's wedding dress is mistaken for the Virgin several times—the first time on the roof of the Ugly Store and hordes of people begin to camp out on the street praying to the apparition, Stobie writes,

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<sup>3</sup> See Corinthians 11:23-25

for a man, cross-dressing as a bride and as the Virgin Mary indicates the aspiration to enact femininity in its most potent aspects[...] the aim is not to appear perfectly as the other, but to appear in such an excessive, carnivalesque guise that the artifice is exposed, showing the tyrannical yet mockable nature of gender within culture and religion (175).

The second time is in an abandoned warehouse where he falls asleep wearing the dress and, “a small group of people had gathered below the window. They were holding candles and reciting Hail Mary’s. [...] He felt both an old and inexplicable terror and something akin to the sublime” (Abani 224-225). Black, although he had not consciously accepted his Diviner role, is being recognized by others as a spiritual figure. According to Althaus-Reid, “the Virgin Mary is a gender type, a dress code” (82) She argues that Mary and Jesus are subject to the same sexual “subjectification process as everyone else” (82). Here Black is still being recognized as the Virgin and not himself but in the act of crossdressing as the Virgin Mary he produces a sort of social chaos in the faithful gathered below the roof. Althaus-Reid writes that by displacing the, “gender identity of the Christian divinities in Mariology or Christology, we are dislocating and creating chaos [...] that gender chaos provokes the coming out of other discomforts and areas of tensions such as economics and racial structures of suppression (83). That is what Black achieves in his appearance as the Virgin. He brings out the economic tensions of social inequality in the poor neighborhoods of East LA which ends with Abani’s scene of chaos as the, “police arrived and [...] herded the crowd first this way then that, clubs and boots reinforcing old lessons” (290). It is not until the close of the novel that the skin of the dress is peeled away, and his character as a Shaman is revealed. His crossdressing is essential for his archetypal journey into the role of Shaman.

The wearing of the dress is significant in more ways than one. Iggy's wedding dress is significant because it leads him back to his mother and her wedding dress that he wore once as a young adolescent. The idea of dresses is also significant because as a child Black had been dressed as a female. In Black's Father's family, "all the boys are dressed as girls and sometimes even given girl's names until they turn seven [...] sort of a second birth" (Abani 100). This second birth is important because it is a representation of what happens at the close of the novel where Black, in Iggy's flaming wedding dress, stands above the street near the spaceship. The dress burns and is ripped away by the wind, leaving Black as a fully formed Shaman birthed through fire. Stobie writes that cross-dressing creates a, "dissonance between gendered body and the cultural performance of another gender. This dissonance signals desire to be other, to transgress the expectations of categories, but it also implies a journey between what is and what may be, or a liminal space between confining roles" (175). By dressing in feminine garb Black does not just portray femininity he locates himself in-between races and genders and spiritual belief systems—the ultimate other. Stobie also says, "Cross-dressing allows ludic reorganization of identity" (175). Black, as a mixed-race individual, subverts the unpleasant understanding of otherness and takes on the vastly important role of prophet of the people, "like a phoenix, all light and fire" (Abani 290). Through this taking on of the mantle of second sight he becomes empowered. He still inhabits a very third space between and not belonging but he can now do so with new strength. This on the edge idea is symbolized by his teetering perch on the edge of the spaceship as the dress burns and flies away the wind. He comes into himself inside the spaceship—the physical manifestation of his third-space occupation, and a Diviner is born.

Dimple cross-dresses across gender lines and across religious lines. When she moves in to the, "room halfway up the landing from Rashid's *khana*", Rashid gives her a *burka* (153). By

donning the burka she marks her new role as companion of a Muslim man and leaves behind her role as a Hindu *hijra*. She does continue to wear saris however. She discusses the difference in power that these two outfits give her. She lists the ways that a sari can be used to seduce and control but says of the burka that, “this was something very different. The tools were fewer” (Thayil 154). Dimple’s “tools” are her physical body parts presented in a way that incites lust—lust that can then be converted into capital to help her economic survival. She decides that men must have designed the burka and wonders, “how they must have feared their own desire. To want a woman to wear this thing you had to know the danger that lay in looking [...] but the costume only served to punish you further (Thayil 154). In the burka she realizes she still tantalizes men because the parts of her body which can be seen become hyper-sexualized. She continues to wear both garments, “she varied her costume depending on who she wanted to be [...] Hindu or Muslim” literally performing her religion and also performing a sort of religious bricolage (Thayil 155). Her final act of crossdressing comes at the end of the novel when she leaves Rashid’s home and enters Safer, a rehab center for drug addicts. There she takes up a new gender and racial identity as Father Sapporo Onar, a Christian Chinese man who acts as manager, priest and confessor for those at the center. She moves into the rectory near the center, the third space that she occupies in her sexual/spiritual journey—first the brothel, then Rashid’s, and finally the rectory. A drug addict who recognizes Sappora as Dimple says to her, “you don’t judge, you never did. You accept everything without condemnation [...] you were like a doctor or a priest” (Thayil 257). In her many roles Dimple has always acted the role of spiritual leader but it is in crossdressing as Father Sapporo that she comes into her own as a crossroads character who bridges the gap between the addicts and the lucid world.

The bricoleur characters of Black and Dimple present a transreligiosity which challenges the normative boundaries of gender, race and economic class strictures. A trans-religious epistemology allows the merging of the, “sacred and the lewd in a harmonious relationship is a threat and a challenge to the existing binary (and antagonistic) relations between spirit/flesh, pleasure/ asceticism, sacred/profane, male/female, and masculine/feminine” (Savastano 23). In the practice of bricolage, Dimple and Black are able to, “challenge the common perception that religious traditions are hermetically sealed off from each other with their distinct dogmas and doctrines” (Savastano 23). And in acknowledging the permeability of religious theologies they are able to reorganize the heteronormative epistemologies which accompany them. It was necessary to use a theologian and an ethnographer in addition to literary criticism in order to thoroughly dissect the dense intersection of economic suppression, sexuality and sacredness in *Virgin of the Flames* and *Narcopolis*. In dispositioning the normative codes which govern normative presentations of bodies, the novels displace the hegemonic colonial and patriarchal ideologies which are invoked when approaching texts that portray normative bodies.

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