

INDIAN OCEAN LITERATURE IN THE SHADE OF BANDUNG

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## Abstract

“Indian Ocean Literature in the Shade of Bandung” examines novels, plays, and nonfiction by contemporary writers from the Indian Ocean rim and its diaspora who have a strong interest in the effects of neoliberal economic policies upon the postcolonial nation-state. Focusing upon the contemporary Anglophone literatures of India and Malaysia, I locate middle-class skepticism regarding the feasibility—or even desirability—of constructing a postcolonial national imaginary that would be founded upon the politics of decolonization. At the same time, I find that important contemporary writers—Tan Twan Eng, Huzir Sulaiman, Arundhati Roy, and Aravind Adiga—express a marked ambivalence toward the rapid globalization of their national homelands; they critique the growth of a transnational consumerism with political, material, and cultural ties to the west. Highlighting connections between the mediation of a literary marketplace and the cultural production of a comprador bourgeoisie, I argue, enables each of these authors to stage a double critique of neoliberalism and reactionary nationalism—the latter of which may feed upon discontent sown by neoliberal policies among the region’s most economically underdeveloped communities.

Furthermore, each of these literary representations gestures toward a regional transnationalism that is oriented around the ideal geographies of the maritime Indian Ocean, which utopian inflection I trace to the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. I therefore place this contemporary writing into conversation with that of literary precursors—including Abdullah Hussein, Anita Desai, and Salman Rushdie—who were more immediately concerned with the legacy of Third World Internationalism.

In each case, I have been interested to know how works of contemporary fiction seek to capture the spirit of regional cooperation that marked Bandung, and how they employ it in the service of utopian imagination and ideology critique. Situating contemporary literature in relation to this earlier moment helps me to clarify role that Bandung continues to play in mediating a literary marketplace and local reading culture that are marked by the seductions and anxieties of global consumer culture. I conclude that these writers stage a recuperation of Bandung internationalism in an attempt to imagine a global middle-class—one that would be capable of enjoying the fruits of neoliberal economic development, while resisting the forms of political complicity that have historically marked the comprador bourgeoisie.

Director: Douglas Mao. Second Reader: Jeanne-Marie Jackson

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**Introduction:  
Indian Ocean Fiction in the Shade of Bandung**

This dissertation undertakes a comparative reading of global cosmopolitan middle-class writers from India and Malaysia who are engaged in an aesthetic-moral project of cosmopolitanism from below. In so doing, it seeks to contribute to scholarly discussion of the mediating role that Anglophone world literature plays in exposing global audiences to a post-Bandung political imagination. The writers on whom it focuses most centrally — Huzir Sulaiman, Tan Twan Eng, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Aravind Adiga, and Arundhati Roy — each have a complex relationship to a national homeland (Malaysia in the case of the first three, India in the latter) that may be described as a tension between cosmopolitan rejection of official nationalism and a melancholic desire for national belonging. In this context, my use of the terms “nation” and “nationalism” is by design somewhat indefinite, because I mean for it to designate a pliable imaginative formation in contradistinction to the (apparently) intractable forms of state power. Each of the readings below demonstrates how formal features of a literary text (fragmentation, repetition, allegorization, allusion, stream-of-consciousness, polyvocality, apostrophe, to name just a few) enable its author to represent a national imaginary while simultaneously performing an ambivalent self-relation to state power. Through this performative work, I conclude, each text provides an occasion for readerly engagement with the formation of global-cosmopolitan and middle-class subjects, the problem of how such a class-subjectivity might be ethically sustained, and whether it can persist in the face of enthralling historical forces.

In the critical vernacular of intellectuals affiliated with the postcolonial left, the writers I consider here would be members of the “comprador bourgeoisie,” meaning that they are subject to antagonistic class-cultural ties both to the capitalist west and to its others in the formerly colonized world. While acknowledging and indeed emphasizing this filiation, however, I hope to trouble established critical assumptions about the limitations that cultural identity imposes upon the scope of political intervention available to the middle class. The classic postcolonial-left articulation of a determinative relation between comprador identity and the middle class comes from Frantz Fanon. So powerful is this link for Fanon that he refers to the middle class of a postcolonial nation-state as its “bourgeois caste” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 181).<sup>1</sup> The authors I consider below do appeal to a global audience that is relatively affluent and westernized; however, they also gesture toward an ideological liberalism that can deliberate upon the problems and opportunities that have been presented to this middle position by our contemporary historical moment, because it bleakly refuses the temptation to equate pluralism with neutrality. If they eschew radical projects of national decolonization in favor of a realist political analysis that deplores the failure of postcolonial regimes to nurture healthy democratic institutions, they also turn this critical gaze upon ostensibly democratic regimes in the west. And they do so with an eye toward abetting new transnational sodalities that may be capable of resisting a global neoliberal order that undermines popular sovereignty of nations. Furthermore, if they represent the anomic voices of bourgeois-liberal subjects who feel cut adrift in the historic crosswinds of local nostalgia and economic globalization, they do so in a recuperative mode that aims to refashion the

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body politic into a sovereign vessel—one that is worthy to carry the collective burdens of political inscription and personal care.

I therefore read a utopian strain in the creative impulse that ushers these generally pessimistic voices into “the world republic of letters” (to borrow Pascale Casanova’s formulation for a system of literary capital that stands apart from the systems of political economy, affording its own dynamics of value, sovereignty, and power).<sup>2</sup> I will have more to say about world literature below, when I turn to the topic of world languages and the global Anglophone novel, but I should note at the outset that part of what links these authors is the critical acclaim they have received from metropolitan institutions with immense power to bestow cultural prestige and financial value on literary works. Two of the authors mentioned above have won the Man Booker Prize (Arundhati Roy in 1997 for *The God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga in 2008 for *The White Tiger*), and a third has been twice nominated (Tan Twan Eng, long-listed for *The Gift of Rain* in 2007 and short-listed for *The Garden of Evening Mists* in 2012). The fourth, Huzir Sulaiman, was a Yale World Fellow in 2007. While this recognition in itself does not entail a critical argument, it is nevertheless significant that substantial financial rewards can follow upon a successful literary performance of comprador subjectivity. Whether or not this pressure distorts the critical faculties that I ascribe to these authors must remain an open interpretive question—one that is ultimately beyond the scope of the following argument; nevertheless, its countervailing force remains implicit alongside every interpretive claim that I make on behalf a political intervention contra postcolonial nationalism, because there is an inverse correlation between allure of publishing in English and the coherence

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<sup>2</sup> Pascale Casanova. *The World Republic of Letters*.

of vernacular literature. This point lends practical urgency to a plausible counter-claim that the form of literary transnationalism I have characterized as “cosmopolitanism from below” may be deemed, from a cultural-materialist perspective, to be a case of “Re-Orientalism,” a self-interested representation that distorts the communal life of postcolonial nations by filtering it through the lens of exotic and potentially harmful tropologies. This literary-critical terminology, developed by Lisa Lau, which redeploys Edward Said’s familiar concept of “orientalism,” refers not to a misprision caused by refracted orders of knowledge, but a knowing misrepresentation within the work of a single author.<sup>3</sup> In turning to this dissertation’s specific theoretical framework, I do not wish to lose sight of this possibility.

In the remaining sections of this introduction, I will introduce relevant historical contexts for the production of contemporary Anglophone literature in South Asia and the Malay Archipelago. Beginning with a discussion of Richard Wright’s account of the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, I will provide a review of Third World internationalism that emphasizes the formative role played by the principles of non-proliferation and national self-determination in shaping subsequent cultural production in non-aligned member states. Turning to the national histories of India and Malaysia in particular, I will examine the role that states of emergency have played in exposing the institutional limitations of treaty organizations (such as the Non-Aligned Movement, which grew out of the Bandung conference) that do not provide a normative model of popular sovereignty. Next, I will consider the role that Indian Ocean regionalism plays in affording these nations’ comprador subjects with alternative forms

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<sup>3</sup> See Lau’s *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics* (2012) and *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English* (2014).

of political imagination. Finally, I will consider the implications of this history for a theory of Anglophone literary production within the region's transnational community of native English speakers.

Following the surrender of Japanese forces on September 2, 1945 and the signing of the U.S.-Japanese Treaty of San Francisco on April 28, 1952, the formerly colonized peoples of the earth found themselves living within a new world order dominated by two emerging nuclear superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. This began an era of U.S. military expansion into much of the world, laying the groundwork for a hegemony that would later prompt the political theorist Hedley Bull to remark that “post-1945 America” was one of only a handful of powers in world history that “seemed capable of overthrowing the system and society of states and transforming it into a universal empire” (16). By 1989, the long process of Soviet *perestroika* and a civil revolt had pushed the Soviet Union over the brink of collapse, leaving the United States as the sole world superpower.

Yet this bipolar — and then mono-polar — structure of geopolitical power after 1945 did not lead to conditions of stable peace; in the decades following this ominous military expansion, a Cold War pattern of nuclear stalemate (largely in the global North) and proxy wars (largely in the global South) set the society of states against itself. The half-century following the assumption of nuclear hegemony would see the great powers embroiled in almost continuous conflict that chewed its way through large swathes of the global south. It was against this backdrop, as it developed in 1955, that heads of state from many of the world's newly sovereign and formerly colonized nations gathered at the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia to discuss the possibility of a path toward

international military and development cooperation that did not rely upon a relation to either of the great powers. The most significant outcome of Bandung was that it set a precedent for an anti-imperialist subaltern transnationalism, which ultimately found its way into the United Nations Charter in the form of a universal declaration on human rights and (Chakrabarty “Legacies of Bandung” 4814).

Our present emphasis upon the Bandung principle of “dialogue across differences” (Chakrabarty, 4812), remains legible in the inter-state dialogue of regional organizations such as ASEAN and the SADC. In its most recuperative mode, Indian Ocean Studies produces an object of knowledge that Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal describe as “a shared communal space with intensely local capital and social intercourse” (3). As even these proponents confess, however, the “littoral” zone, where “the indigenes... today experience no anxiety at the penetration of exogenous cultural capital,” requires us to bracket the promise of “resistance” in recognition of the impending “apocalyptic... collapse of the current world system” (5) In the figure of “the bomb,” the discourse of nuclear hegemony provides a chronotope for the temporality of this subject-position, because atomic diplomacy continues to function as a universal limit-condition within post-war geopolitical imagination. No mere historicist literalism, such temporality positions sovereignty and the end of history in a mirror configuration, aligning narration with a historiography of the present. Borrowing a tropology from Kant, I read this temporal position between the “lamp” of reason and the “grave” of history to be an apt metaphor for the subjectivity of a particular class of authors – all reluctant members of the comprador bourgeoisie – whose narratives seem caught between the decolonizing imperatives of postcolonial nationalism and the untimely universalism of

world literature. Like the shadows inscribed by a nuclear event, these historical figures can only emerge within homogenous empty time through negations of the discursive self

Bandung is not only important for its successes, however. The collapse of Afro-Asian solidarity is important to historic memory for the contrasting light that it shines upon the neoliberal order that has supplanted it—Scott has this to say on the collapse of the Afro-Asian “Bandung experiments” in the 1980s:

...our postcolonial present is altered not only by the fact of the collapse of the noncapitalist experiments in the Third World or of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but also by the fact of a resurgent liberalism that has stepped onto the stage to claim for itself a victory, to claim in fact that it constitutes the only possible future.” (*Refashioning Futures* 144-145)

We can see this triumph prefigured in the tension, already present within Bandung idealism, between a conception of the state that emphasizes its role in performing and shaping national culture and one that emphasizes its role in channeling capital toward structural and developmental projects. One of the more problematic elements of the Bandung model of development, according to Chakravarty, is a Nehruvian legacy of “pedagogical politics” that prioritized “development over diversity” (“Legacies of Bandung” 4815). Arundhati Roy highlights this problem in her polemical nonfiction, where she lambastes India’s large dam-building projects for the massive displacement and expropriation they will inflict upon India’s native Adivasi community. In reflecting upon the Nehruvian tendency to call upon the nation to sacrifice in the name of its own “development,” Roy rejects “the assumptions of inherent morality” that, she claims, underpin both “the paternal, protective morality of Nehru’s “Soviet-style centralized State” and “the nurturing, maternal morality of Gandhi’s romanticized village republics” (*Cost of Living*11). The indifference of the developmental state toward this suffering

leads her to remark that the question of territorial ownership is “being answered in one voice by every institution at its command—the army, the police, the bureaucracy, the courts. And not just answered, but answered unambiguously, in bitter, brutal ways” (*The Cost of Living* 9). At least in the case of the “big dam builders” as Roy presents it, the unresolved contradiction between a univocal state sovereignty and the transnational flow of development capital, already latent within Nehru’s “pedagogical politics” of national sacrifice in the name of development, has been laid bare within the neoliberal order.

Another contradiction left unresolved by the Bandung principle of non-interference in matters of national sovereignty is the internal tension between national solidarity and minority racial and religious identity. Although I do not think we can lay blame for sectarian violence upon the principle of non-interference, these tensions were certainly apparent to Richard Wright at the time of the conference. One of the major concerns that Wright brings to the fore in his discussion of Bandung in *The Color Curtain* is a worry about who the proper historical subject of decolonization ought to be—an anxiety reflected in his curiously schematic first chapter, which begins not with a documentary account of the conference itself, or an overview of its historical backdrop, but with a series of ethnographic interviews that he conducts en route to Indonesia. Each subject whom Wright interviews is like a recipe made up of the raw ingredients of class, gender, race, language, religion, profession, and so forth. These could be highly problematic on Wright’s part, as in his diagnosis of “the Eurasian mind” of a “single, Singapore-born” woman, about whom he remarks, “This Eurasian girls replies shed more light upon a personal dilemma than upon the causes of that dilemma. At bottom, a simple and firm choice on her part could have eradicated her problem. She could have become

either British or Malayan and that would have been the end of it” (455, 462-463). Thus from the outset of *The Color Line*, we have an historical frame that presents the historical imagination in terms of personality schemas, and Wright is primed to evaluate the gathering of nations through its sectarian components.

Curiously, Wright seems to reject the idea that decolonizing development can be effected by the kind of subject whom we might be most inclined to expect to undertake the project of nation-building. His most striking example of the wrong-man-for-the-job is the Indonesian “socialist, patriot, intellectual” Sutan Sjahir. Painting the “modest, smiling” Sjahir as a sort of Benjamin Franklin figure of the Indonesian revolution, Wright credits him with conducting “delicate negotiations with the Dutch, who were hankering to regain their control over the potentially third richest nation on earth,” and with convincing the United Nations that Indonesia should govern itself. Nevertheless, despite praising Sjahir for being “sane, balanced, poised... honest, fair, good hearted, and filled with a love of freedom,” Wright doubts that the latter could “tame the Indonesian tiger.” The sheer mass, diversity, illiteracy, poverty, and lawlessness of the new country call for an “alert pragmatism,” Wright argues, not Sjahir’s “Western” socialism. For better or worse, the Indonesian people had awoken to a political situation that “reeked of urgency,” prompting Wright to reflect, “Was not Sjahir a man for a future time, when these basic problems had been solved? I could not imagine Sjahir instilling in these millions a sense of their historic destiny... it would take other and special kind of men for that work” (286).

For Wright, the most problematic historical subjects, other than white Westerners, are the newly independent middle-class. In post-liberation Indonesia, Wright finds, this

class has already become parasitic on the state. He recalls one Indonesian patriot, Mochtar Lubis, lamenting that Indonesia has grown sick because: “A country in which men make careers and fortunes out of government is a sick country.” And upon arriving in Jakarta, he immediately notes that “The suburbs of Jakarta are studded with lovely, newly built bungalows erected by the *nouveaux riches* from money gained in black market operations. There is no doubt that a new Indonesian middle class is rising and it is focusing attention, mostly unfavorable, upon itself.” These middle-class subjects, his guide notes, are “a class of Indonesians who are acting more or less like the Dutch.” This complaint, about a self-serving class of local bureaucrats and tradespeople who have become functionally indistinguishable from the former colonizers, is one that will continue to haunt decolonization.

Wright not only critiques the behavior of a *comprador* class but also performs a critique of the reader’s own complacency. Wright repeatedly issues dire warnings against the West, calling in the most strident terms for a cosmopolitanism that responds to the call from below—from the very *comprador* subjects whom he has been critiquing. This plea, or rather this warning, exhibits the formal qualities of a translation or interlineation, in that Wright is trying to make plain the historical significance of the Bandung communiqué to the West, from the lived conditions of a “sickened” Indonesia:

I repeat and underline that the document was addressed to the West, to the moral prepossessions of the West. It was my belief that the delegates at Bandung, for the most part, though bitter, looked and hoped toward the West.... The West, in my opinion, must be big enough, generous enough, to accept and understand that bitterness. The Bandung communiqué was no appeal, in terms of sentiment or ideology, to Communism. Instead, it carried exalted overtones of the stern dignity of ancient and proud peoples who yearned to rise and play again a role in human affairs. (593)

If the West should fail to heed this call, he adds in the most dire terms, then communism will step in to fill the breach, because “BANDUNG WAS THE LAST CALL OF WESTERNIZED ASIANS TO THE MORAL CONSCIENCE OF THE WEST!”

Wright’s conclusion, his warning, comes in almost apocalyptic tones and imagery. These are the final words of his account:

Seen through the perspective of Bandung, I think that it can be said that FEAR of a loss of their power, FEAR of re-enslavement, FEAR of attack was the key to the actions of the Russian Stalinists who felt that any and all efforts to modernize their nation would be preferable to a return to the *status quo*.... Today the Russians can feel bitterly, defiantly satisfied that they did what was brutally necessary, no matter how hard, inhuman, and terrible, to keep their power and industrialize their country. BUT MUST THIS TRAGIC METHOD, WITH ITS SECULAR RELIGIOSITY OF HORROR AND BLOOD, BE REPEATED ON THE BODY OF THE HUMAN RACE? Is there no stand-in for these sacrifices, no substitute for these sufferings? (609; original emphasis and capitalization)

Given the bloody half-century that would follow, Wright now seems justified in his fear that if Western powers should prove to be unsupportive of national independence movements in the formerly colonized world, then Russian and Chinese influence would fill the vacuum with a “bloody path” of revolution, in which “tenuous Asian-African secular, rational attitudes will become flooded, drowned in irrational tides of racial and religious passions” (608).

Taking a step back from Wright’s doomsaying prognostication, I want to consider the way in which he frames his appeal to Western-cosmopolitan values. Wright’s urgency—which is equally a warning—appeals to a particular temporality that we might call a moment of decision and disjuncture. In so doing, it performs an illusion of political sovereignty for—and if his rhetorical gesture sticks, within—the mind of the reader. The experience of being presented with this opportunity to choose between friendship and

enmity is one of some anxiety and premonition, but it is also a form of interpellation in that it impels readers to identify themselves with “the West” and through this identification to identify with idealized Western values. In other words, it simulates the production of an intersubjective stage upon which the reader can imagine himself or herself taking a heroic action by living up to the highest cultural and political ideals of his or her most expansive imagined community. When a reader thinks, “Yes, I will heed this call to my moral conscience,” then she inhabits a cosmopolitan identity as it has been occasioned by Bandung and mediated by Wright.

There are important parallels between this mode of interpellation and the performance of diplomacy that Wright represents. The theatre of state is itself an elaborate social performance designed to interpellate our membership in the imagined community it represents to us. James Sidaway develops this point in a cultural analysis of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the regional organization that has mediated state-to-state relations in post-apartheid Southern Africa. Sidaway argues that regions and states are both imaginaries that must be continually performed; and this performance requires a representational space — a stage — in which to signify. Moreover, because the stage is never coterminous with the territory of the state, the former may frequently suture the latter’s “undecidable geographies” by making the nation appear whole, even when it is riven by conflict. Bull makes a related point when he observes that “From the perspective of any particular state what it chiefly hopes to gain from participation in the society of states is recognition of its independence of outside authority, and in particular of its supreme jurisdiction over its subjects and territory” (17). Regional communities like the SADC provide a crucial source of

sovereignty to states, because they offer a diplomatic stage in which to perform the reality of their statehood: “We might say that rather than the state simply preceding and constituting (together with other such ‘sovereign actors’) the community, the latter allows the state to be invoked and made to seem real” (Sidaway 37). Bandung provided such a space for the performance of postcolonial nationality during a period when many of the nations represented had geographies that remained deeply undecided — as the territorial conflicts in South Asia would demonstrate graphically. How then might we describe the performative space that Bandung provided in 1955? In what ways might that space be recoverable through the work of fictions engage with historical memory? And how might attention to this imaginary affect our understanding of the ways that literature situates us in relation to acts of collective imagining? The remainder of my introduction will consider these questions.

Bandung helps us to imagine, relate to, and intervene in, the monarchic structure of the post-nuclear state and the state of exception (or “emergency”). One of the indirect accomplishments of the Non-Aligned Movement was to articulate a moral argument against the proliferation of nuclear weapons that would ultimately produce a worldwide anti-proliferation sodality. Under the section heading “Promotion of world peace and co-operation,” the final communiqué of the conference staked out a position against disarmament in the strongest possible terms:

The Asian-African Conference having considered the dangerous situation of international tension existing and the risks confronting the whole human race from the outbreak of global war in which the destructive power of all types of armaments, including nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons, would be employed, invited the attention of all nations to the terrible consequences that would follow if such a war were to break out.

The conference considered that disarmament and the prohibition of the production, experimentation and use of nuclear and thermo-nuclear

weapons of war are imperative to save mankind and civilisation from the fear and prospect of wholesale destruction. It considered that the nations of Asia and Africa assembled here have a duty towards humanity and civilisation to proclaim their support for disarmament and for the prohibition of these weapons and to appeal to nations principally concerned and to world opinion, to bring about such disarmament and prohibition. (7-8)

Nonproliferation would prove to be the most long-lasting principle of the conference to be put into practice, though it would ultimately break down. According to Christopher Lee: “A final setback to the principles of the communiqué was the gradual testing and acquisition of nuclear arsenals by China (1964), India (1974), and eventually Pakistan (1998)” (17). The centrality of this history to the Non-Aligned Movement is important to my reading of the legacy of Bandung in the Anglophone Indian Ocean, and it is for this reason that I grant prominence to Huzir Sulaiman’s play *Atomic Jaya* (1998).

Another of Scarry’s basic propositions is that aesthetic imagination plays a crucial role in support of moral reason, and in particular that principles of symmetry provide a skeleton on which to construct more robust conceptions of fairness. On these grounds, she argues that the grossly disproportionate power wielded by the United States military represents a severe travesty of justice, because it violates the principles of parity and reciprocity that underwrite the ideal of a just global order bound to international law. Most flagrant in this regard, she continues, is the U.S. arsenal of thermonuclear weapons that unilaterally suspend a Damocletian fire over the citizens of all nations. In this view, the “colossal asymmetry in the power to injure” that this destructive technology places in the hands of just one person, the President of the United States, makes nuclear weapons fundamentally incompatible with democratic self-governance (*Thermonuclear Monarchy* 2). This asymmetry is made especially acute by the President’s capacity to launch a pre-

emptive nuclear strike without a congressional declaration of war; Scarry concludes on this basis that the existence of nuclear weapons imposes a de facto “thermonuclear monarchy,” eroding the delicate balance of powers that the nation’s founders inscribed within the constitution. Thus at the heart of an argument about the most efficacious modes of thought for practical deliberation and effective governance, we find an argument about the nature of political sovereignty in an age of unspeakable violence. By violating the moral symmetry that would place the United State in a lawful relation to the global community of states, the nuclear option also disrupts the moral symmetry that binds the American public in a lawful relation with its own government.

In this conception of political sovereignty, public violence and public thought operate as mutually constitutive limits of democratic agency: war comes at the end of deliberation, and a resumption of deliberation (in the form of peace negotiations) is the only justifiable reason for waging war (Scarry 13). The rationale behind apportioning the sovereign authority to declare war to the most democratic branch of government is that doing so imposes a series of institutional “breaks” upon the societal build-up to war, which not only provide discrete exit-opportunities at each juncture in the war-making process but also qualitatively affect the execution of war. A democratic war, then, is not simply one executed on behalf of a people that hold their political system to be democratic; it must also be fought democratically, requiring a just distribution of sacrifice and risk across the social body of both belligerent states. Because nuclear arsenals erode the rule of law by dismantling the constitutional “check” on violence that a formal congressional declaration entails, they contribute to a fundamentally altered relation between democratically elected governments and the people whom they represent and

govern. The nuclear option, Scarry claims, represents a non-negotiated (and non-negotiable) transfer of sovereignty to political elites, and in countries (like the United States) that reserve the option of first-strike for their executive, this option effects a wholesale consolidation of national sovereignty in the hands of a single agent. Because a president can decide unilaterally whether to impose enmity between the peoples of his own state and others, she concludes, his sovereign power becomes absolute. What is preempted by the “first-strike,” we may infer, is the distributed power of a general will bound by social contract. Thermonuclear monarchy sutures a president’s symbolic authority to voice the general will to the presidency’s institutional power to order the body politic to war.

This argument has complex implications for an understanding of representation, which I will consider shortly. First, however, I want to revisit some issues of critical deliberation and civic authority in light of the absolute sovereignty that a post-nuclear regime seems to bestow upon the thermonuclear monarch. If literature is an occasion for public deliberation in the form of critical discourse, then we may hazard that we can draw fruitful analogies between the forms of authority that govern a post-nuclear order and the forms of artistic sovereignty that may be enacted within it. Bull raises a related parallel between the body and the bomb in relation to the qualitative difference between the form of sovereign decision entailed in a sudden nuclear strike, and the more prolonged form of decision entailed in conventional warfare:

It is only in the context of nuclear weapons and other recent military technology that it has become pertinent to ask whether war could not now both be ‘absolute in its results’ and ‘take the form of a single instantaneous blow,’ in Clausewitz’s understanding of these terms; and whether, therefore, violence does not now confront the state with the same sort of prospect it has always held for the individual (48)

Thus we may be able to locate an historic trace of thermonuclear monarchy in the forms of expression that flourish under its shadow. As a critical hypothesis, this supposition makes intuitive sense, because the pleasures and anxieties that drive literary consumption cannot be entirely disentangled from the political content of life within a post-nuclear (or any other) regime.

In at least one important respect, this approach is in keeping with Fredric Jameson's well-known (and contentious) argument that we should read "Third World" literature in terms of "national allegory" because "...in the third-world situation the intellectual is always in one way or another a political intellectual" (74). My readings do suppose that the production of nationality remains a problem for works of post-Bandung fiction, even when the latter have been written in English, have attained a global circulation through the international market for world literature, and have been written by writers whose cultural *bona fides* are decisively transnational. My reasoning and purpose for drawing attention to national allegory, however, differ somewhat from Jameson's polemical aim, which is to de-center the Western reader; in his words, the political imperative is "to remind the American public of the radical difference of other national situations" (77). To the contrary, I aim precisely to consider the ways in which these texts produce a strategic familiarity by routing the distant figures of national allegory through an immediate, at times intimate, set of middle-class concerns.

So for example, we might correlate the suddenness and absoluteness of nuclear violence to similarly decisive forms of emplotment (bearing in mind the potential for misrepresentation that remains inextricable from allegorical thought). One author whose work I read in this light is the Chinese-Malaysian novelist Tan Twan Eng. In my second

chapter, I argue that Tan's first novel, *The Gift of Rain*, which is set in occupied British Malaya during the second world war, enacts a symbolic closure of national identity when its protagonist, Philip Hutton, who is the British-Chinese son of a bourgeois factory owner in Penang, is spared beheading at the hands of the *Kempeitai* (Japanese military police) because his father volunteers to be executed in his place. With this literal cut, the novel figuratively severs its genealogical ties to the British empire and to the comprador-bourgeois Anglophilia of Malaysia's Straits Chinese minority. This personal loss subsumes Philip's guilt at having collaborated with the Kempeitai, allowing him to fill his destined role as one of the nation's most prominent industrialists. Subsequently, I argue that Tan's second novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, performs a similar allegorical work on behalf of the nation. Likewise set during the occupation, the latter novel correlates the unimaginable suffering of Chinese-Malaysian prisoners of war with the incomprehensible destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—in order, I argue, to imagine a form of regional solidarity that has been foreclosed by the unresolved traumas of Japanese imperialism. My point here is that both novels enact a sovereign gesture of forgiveness that has been geopolitically foreclosed to the Malaysian state; and in the moral logic of each narrative, this pardon relies upon the memory of sudden, decisive acts of violence in order to make sense of the allegorical substitution of history for diplomacy. The anti-hegemonic and anti-proliferation legacy of Bandung therefore provides a latent point of reference—an Archimedean fulcrum in time—from which to imagine alternative forms of sovereignty and community.

In *Thinking in an Emergency*, Elaine Scarry unpacks several models for preserving a normative social praxis even within states of emergency. Drawing upon case

studies that include the transnational invention of CPR, diverse community responses to natural disaster, and constitutional-democratic procedures for the declaration of war, Scarry argues that habits of social behavior may be scalable and translatable into unfamiliar contexts, provided we think carefully about the systems of representation and delegation that translate the general will into hierarchies of responsibility. Scarry's argument pertains most directly to conventional forms of civic behavior, such as responding to an unprovoked act war or provisioning community resources in preparation for an unforeseen disaster; nevertheless, it has intuitive affinities with the practice of literary criticism insofar as the latter, too, is a kind of social technology intended to prepare a community (in this case, a community of readers and writers) to respond to that which is unforeseen (in this case, a new or unfamiliar text) in ways that accord with preexisting values. I therefore want to unpack two aspects of Scarry's argument, her discussion of sovereignty and her discussion of representation, which I think are relevant to post-Bandung criticism.

One of Scarry's basic lessons is that institutional precursors have profound effects upon the development and application of social-behavioral technologies, such as CPR, that can prove to be life-saving in an emergency. Producing universal goods such as these requires systems of knowledge production that are well ordered, adequately provisioned, and directed toward the public good. Guided by a strong value discourse at the societal level, such institutions can distribute human intellectual labor in just and beneficent ways, irrespective of whether the societal needs that will ultimately be served by this labor remain as yet unforeseen. In other words, immediate political ends need not be given in order to justify investments in potential goods that broadly accord with societal values,

such as education and research. Likewise, whatever social practices we cultivate during the course of ordinary life will determine our patterns of response under emergency conditions that are not of our making, even in the absence of government services or democratic institutions. Thus in a state of emergency, she argues, our “habits of mutual aid” can preserve democratic values, because “while... the interaction between civil society and the state can take many different forms, it is the urge to protect against wrongfully inflicted injury that brings both into being” (*Thinking in an Emergency* 51).

The impetuses that bring a literary work into being are innumerable, and they may not always fall into alignment with each other, let alone with the critical impulses that we bring to the reading of literature. Yet many of the challenges facing civil authority are fundamental problems for criticism as well. How might we justly apportion scarce resources of attention, sympathy, and care? Can we bake methodological consistency into our habits of reflection and deliberation? What is the most efficient way to organize agency and to distribute collective responsibility? What tools may be necessary for an adequate response to emergent situations, and where shall they be found? How might we commend the good and dissuade from the bad? Thus we can draw parallels between civil and artistic formations in order to explore the habits of thought and feeling that may be fostered by each, the degree to which each remains open to experimental praxis, the arrangements of power enacted by each, the critical and creative faculties that each supplies, and the value claims that each seems to endorse.

It would not seem controversial to observe, in any case, that literary criticism is a form of public deliberation. In the cultural imagination of the West, Goethe’s ideal of a *Weltliteratur* (world literature) has traditionally performed this mediating function. The

classical model of world literature descended from Goethe and Schiller imagines nation to be a privileged container for the incubation of literary traditions, which outward-looking global elites circulate.<sup>4</sup> This national model has the strength of reflecting the historical centrality of nation-states for the expression of political aspirations in modernity, but it does not explain why literary nationalism has atrophied while the nation-state marches resiliently into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Nor does it account for the ways in which the plurality of traditions within a given state can differ widely in their approaches to transnationalism as such. Should we therefore define the object of literary analysis according to the forms of thought made possible therein, or is it more important to emphasize the material hegemony of a limited set of texts written in a few dominant languages? Whose experience provides the criteria for resolving this question? Are truly “indigenous” literary forms even compatible with the value system for which global representation matters? These questions are unimaginable without the historical experience of colonialism and decolonization, yet the variety and complexity of these experiences only complicates the problem. What “postcolonial” “comparative,” and “globalist” reading practices share is an ethical suspicion of institutionally constructed epistemologies that schematize national literatures as if artistic production entailed the well-ordered and periodic movement of objects contained within geopolitical space. As Edward Said famously argues, our familiarity with the “classics” of Arabic literature belies our utter blindness regarding the experiences and aspirations of contemporary residents of “the Muslim world” (a notion that is itself, Said argues, offensively

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<sup>4</sup> Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?*

reductive).<sup>5</sup> Like a sliver in the eye, *intimacy* – a value whose significance for literary study and democratic idealism is foundational becomes fraught in two ways: the myopia of colonial knowledge undermine our pretensions of descriptive objectivity; and whatever corrective supplement we provide cripples the aim of prescriptive neutrality.

These points take on particular significance in light of the exceptional status of English in contemporary literary production. The inability to affix authenticity to a middle-class subject who is seen to be imitating western patterns of behavior becomes especially problematic in relation to language, and English exacerbates this problem.<sup>6</sup> Simon Gikandi formulates this problem cogently in writing about the spread of global modernism to Africa's *comprador* artists:

English was a desire because it was the precondition for a new subjectivity, for entry into the class of mimic men; it was a lack because the subjectivities it created would always be few in number and imperfect, cut off from the mainstream of society and contained in a subjunctive space in the cultures of Englishness. (11)

There is an historical tension here between competing models of postcolonial development, with Gikandi's "mimic men" falling on the side of Anglophilic "African Writers," such as Chinua Achebe, who attended the Makerere Conference of 1962. On the other side of the question, we find the deliberate use of national languages by writers such as the Kenyan nationalist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'O, who attended the Makerere conference but later issued "farewell" to English, making the sociolinguistic case that decolonization requires African writers to author texts in their native tongues.

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<sup>5</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, 933-1044

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the movement in support of global English as a mediating language was already present at Bandung (Chakrabarty "Legacies of Bandung" 4816).

Anticolonial African writers who had written in "European languages," Ngũgĩ ignored "language as a determinant of both the national and class audience"(6).

The language debate raises a crucial theoretical question about the role of translation in shaping world literature. It is the assumption of translatability between formal elements that have been abstracted from radically disparate cultural sources, argues Emily Apter, that lead Franco Moretti's proposal for a literary Darwinism, and his even more mechanistic "quant-based" experiments, to produce a "contraction of the economy of interpretation."<sup>7</sup> Apter's wording here is suggestive of a broader comparatist ethos that is concerned with untranslatability as a political marker for the flourishing of linguistic and cultural diversity, which she elsewhere argues have taken a more problematic ethical turn following the events of September 11, 2001.<sup>8</sup> This argument lends socio-political substance to the idea that translation subjects *fabula* and *syuzhet*, story and style, to historical pressures that are "insoluble" in a postcolonial context.

What becomes of the politics of linguistic particularism, however, when a particular vernacular English informing the tastes, opinions, morals, and intellect of an author exists nowhere *but* in a postcolonial context? In such a case, does writing in global English necessarily delimit the audience to a preexistent comprador bourgeoisie, or does the interplay of patois, creole, and pidgin within a well-defined geographic space constitute precisely the sort of conflict whose outcome may redefine the entire ecosystem of a particular literary system? If so, then authors might leverage the full range of a

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<sup>7</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, (London: Verso, 2013), Ch. 2

<sup>8</sup> Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, (London: Verso, 2006), 12

regional sociolect to contest the binary separation between a local petit-bourgeoisie and “the people.” As Benedict Anderson observes in his landmark study of the rise of modern nation-states, the language of a given nationalist movement may be completely arbitrary so long as it functions to create the “imagined community” of a given nation-state:

It is always a mistake to treat languages in the way that certain nationalist ideologues treat them -- as *emblems* of nation-ness, like flags, costumes, folk-dances, and the rest. Much the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*. After all, imperial languages are still *vernaculars*, and thus particular vernaculars among many. [. . .] Language is not an instrument of exclusion: in principle, anyone can learn any language. On the contrary, it is fundamentally inclusive, limited only by the fatality of Babel: no one lives long enough to learn *all* languages. Print-language is what invents nationalism, not *a* particular language per se. (*Imagined Communities* 136)

Thus what may be at stake today for world-languages like English is not so much whether they can represent local politics to local audiences, but whether and how they do address them – what gestures of inclusion or exclusion they employ, and how they translate the politics of linguistic difference into literary form. Malaysian writers born decades after the end of British rule and provided an English-language education via local government schools might reasonably question whether their language preference constitutes a class determination, let alone a betrayal of the nationalist project *après la lettre*.

One of the most probing analyses of the imaginative potential of Bandung as a formal matter comes from Amir Mufti, who links the rise of world Anglophone literature to the collapse of an earlier, more “radical” formation that he refers to as the “social and cultural imaginary of Bandung” (*Forget English!* 91). In Mufti’s view, the historical window for Bandung internationalism begins to close in 1989, when *perestroika* and popular revolution pushed the Soviet Union over the brink of collapse. Here is what he

has to say, in relation to the shadow this collapse has cast over the resurgence of world literature, about the Bandung cultural imaginary:

its historic disappearance in the post-Cold War era is very much an element in the triumphalist “We are the world” tone so clearly discernible in the self-staging of world literature in our times. In many ways, the rubric “postcolonial literature” as used in the Global North now serves as a means of domesticating those radical energies—and not just linguistic or cultural differences—into the space of (bourgeois) world literature as varieties of local practice—as Indian, African, or Middle Eastern literary practices, for instance. And English as a global literary vernacular facilitates and intensifies this disappearance of those alternative practices of the international that were conducted and institutionalized in the shade of Bandung just a few decades ago. The modes of circulation of Anglophone world literature today, including as (supposedly “neutral”) medium of translation, thus serve to *naturalize* this specific version of the international or global, which is predicated on, and helps to reproduce, reading publics oblivious to the possibility of historical alternatives in the past or the present, even and especially in the Global South. (*Forget English!* 91-92; original emphasis)

From a market perspective, Mufti’s claim in this passage seems fairly straightforward.

Anyone who has ever browsed the bookstore at an airport in a non-English-speaking country can envision the pressure that English-language text exerts upon the rest of the world’s languages, squeezing them into diminishing lengths of shelf space. But other facets of Mufti’s argument require more subtle theorization. Read in the context of Mufti’s prior work, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, which concerns the incompleteness of secularizing national projects in the postcolonial state, the claim made here on behalf of the Bandung imaginary becomes much more profound. The reduction of “radical energies” to mere “difference,” Mufti argues, requires the production of a homogenous-empty time in which cultural production from different traditions can emerge within a relation of geographic equivalence. This claim is related to the recondite idea that world literature simultaneously enters and creates a space within “world literature” for

bourgeois “self-staging,” because this autochthonous performance implies a form of sovereignty that is not founded upon external forms of legitimation (ibid.).

Finally, there is the evocative “shade of Bandung,” which image I have cribbed from this passage for the title of this dissertation. As opposed to the more conventional *shadow*, which writers from Ralph Ellison to Amitav Ghosh have used to demarcate racial or religious difference, the many valences of *shade* suggest a more nuanced historical relation. *Shade* implies a subtle variation of degree rather than a difference of kind, a place of respite from the oppressive sun, a ghostly apparition, a relatively inferior position, a mediating surface that dampens a source of light. Finally, in black and/or queer vernacular, the expression “throwing shade” can refer to a subtle form of counter-signifying insult. Read in opposition to each other, I would argue, the homogenous-empty “bourgeois space” and the subtly inflected “shade of Bandung” signify competing ideals of cosmopolitan exchange—the former designating the imposition of a secular unity upon the hieratic field of national cultures, the latter gesturing toward a provisional space of resistance that remains available for recuperation but cannot guarantee a permanent or stable relation between the “radical energies” that activate its anti-hegemonic potential.

In a related talk, Mufti imagines the “Bandung Cultural Complex” to have been a planetary network of conceptual and institutional projects whose shared purpose was to rethink the nation in deference to local culture and belonging, to undertake more egalitarian forms of internationalism that imagine community from the periphery of the world system, to engage continental theory without adopting its core ideological principles, and to experiment with new “chronotopes” that encapsulate non-Western

chronologies.<sup>9</sup> Mufti's use of *chronotope* refers to a structural device that Mikhail Bakhtin developed to describe the formal distribution of representational "time-space." The application of this term becomes somewhat clearer if we consider what Bandung meant to the historical imagination of those nations represented at the conference.

Christopher J. Lee explains the temporal significance of Bandung in the following way:

In retrospect, it can be seen as a pivotal moment placed in mid-century between colonial and post-colonial periods, between the era of modern European imperialism and the era of the cold war. It summarized an alternative chronology of world events organized by intellectuals and activists of color who had been subjected to forms of colonialism, racism, and class oppression. (9)

To recognize the possibility of alternate temporalities in the legacy of Bandung is also to acknowledge the possibility of changing one's own subjective relationship to history by adopting a different perspective.

I will revisit the claim that Bandung enables a counter-hegemonic deployment of a new "chronotope" in my fourth chapter, where I relate Arundhati Roy's critique of neoliberal development to her literary handling of temporality in *The God of Small Things*. For now, I want to suggest that if the invention of a new chronotope is one way in which the "network" of post-Bandung culture can stage a political intervention, then the "shade of Bandung" functions as the imaginary site from which post-Bandung art may intervene into culture. Because a historical memory of the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference persists within network of post-Bandung culture, artists remain capable of imaginatively re-inhabiting that site. How might imagining the discursive space of Bandung help to shade the imagination against the conditions of postwar hegemony?

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<sup>9</sup> Mufti, Aamir. (Nov.20, 2013) "Edward Said and the Late Style of Bandung Humanism." Paper presentation at the, "The Right of Return to Edward Said," UCLA.

To unpack the idea that Bandung might be an imaginative resource, rather than simply an historic event, we might borrow a term, *heterotopia*, from Michel Foucault's discourse analysis. In contradistinction with utopias, Foucault defines heterotopias as follows:

First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (“Of Other Spaces” 3-4)

We might therefore refer to this way of conceiving the “shade of Bandung” as a *heterotopic* space in memory: an imagined space in which it becomes possible to perform cultural sovereignty from the outside of global consumer culture. But because it is heterotopic and not a pure utopian negation of “reality,” I would suggest, then its reclamation must be located within the order of things—a way of reading contingent opportunities for resistance within material history.

The political significance of the texts that I consider in this dissertation can be reduced neither to a tribunal on the merits and limits of “western” democracy nor to a psychoanalytic deconstruction of the “postcolonial subject,” as was the approach of much literature from the first-generation of decolonization. These stories engage with contemporary political crises that seem intractable because they pit urgent global problems — the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the dominance of the security state, the degradation of modernity's ecological substrate — against equally pressing local needs,

such as under-consumption and under-employment, mass illiteracy and urban overcrowding, or minority rights and the rule of law. Above all, they connect the universal search for human dignity, meaning, and belonging to its nuanced articulation in the social and domestic worlds of particular communities.

Yet far from championing a utopian cosmopolitanism, most of these stories have a bleakly melancholic outlook. The patterns of thought and behavior they depict offer an unstinting portrait of the human animal in the grip of desires that, though socially valuable individually, come into conflict with each other: the desire to be hale and productive, the desire to be well esteemed and socially useful, the desire to know and disseminate truth, the desire to be treated fairly, the desire to share in the common life of a community. Thus storytelling here raises the problem of circumscribed agency, and it posits a longing for varieties of social praxis that are readily conceivable but not yet possible, and which are imaginable only with a heroic effort. Imbued with utopian desire, these stories nevertheless withdraw the promise that a shared, clear-eyed political analyses will yield less coercive means of implementing the general will, a more reasoned and humane encounter between the citizen-subject and the force-of-law, than the international state system has hitherto allowed—developments that might, were they not foreclosed, translate into less bellicose forms of political sovereignty and a more egalitarian distribution of the social provision within and between transnational segments other than the state. Rather, they allow us to imagine more *deliberate* forms of cultural engagement in the near-term, and in consequence of this cultural reclamation, to envision a mode of global intimacy that transcends mere toleration. It is the performance of this

possibility, I believe, that situates these Anglophone texts within the “Bandung Cultural Complex.”

In one of the most important theoretical accounts of what freedom needs to be free, Herbert Marcuse argues in “Repressive Tolerance” that the form of liberal toleration enshrined in the sovereign right to free speech—the right to offend—has as its precondition the structure of class enmity. Marcuse argues that a system characterized by the violent repression of groups can extend “authentic” toleration only to those voices that possess the requisite social standing to inflict political violence with impunity. In this view, the tyranny of majority rule, so feared by J.S. Mill (whose defense of toleration Marcuse critiques), is in practice made into a form of democratic despotism by the very form of individual toleration that Mill proposes. Marcuse alights on the principal within Mill’s conception of liberalism that made it possible for the latter to defend empire: namely, the idea that primitive societies could only enjoy political sovereignty once their civilization had reached an adequate stage of maturity.<sup>10</sup> On this view, the false neutrality of liberalism makes the “status quo” unassailable, because the “majority is firmly grounded in the increasing satisfaction of needs, and technological and mental coordination, which testify to the general helplessness of radical groups in a well-functioning social system” (Marcuse 94). As long as the system continues producing material gains, Marcuse argues, the majority remain allergic to the truth of systemic violence, because they mistake stability for objectivity and “neutralization” for truth (97-98).

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of Mill’s view on empire, see: Bell, Duncan. “John Stuart Mill on Colonies.” *Political Theory* vol. 38 no. 1 (Feb. 2010) 34-64.

What I therefore want to emphasize, in returning to my opening remarks about exoticism within the Anglophone novel (and indeed, within this dissertation), is the significant freedom of expression that global patterns of consumption have afforded to individual authors in staging political interventions against the very networks that capture their subjectivity. Whether or not this freedom is a symptom of progress or of defeat—a cause for celebration or despair—depends upon each writer’s conception of the middle class. In my usage, the term “middle class” denotes a heuristic—one that is eminently cultural—for designating a hierarchical position within a system of social inequalities, while simultaneously repudiating the socio-political divisions that determine the structure of this system. Insofar as class refers to the relative status of individuals within a network of capital relations, it provides a taxonomic way to map individual social differences onto qualitative thresholds that emerge around key economic indicators of a group’s power to command systems of social production. When economists model changes in the relative class composition of a given society, for example, they frequently establish benchmarks that are meaningful not only for what they say about an individual’s capacity to access goods associated with distinct social categories, but also for what they say about the relative stability of this access over time.<sup>11</sup> From this socioeconomic perspective, having a middle-class income is synonymous with group access to a variety of institutions and services that insulate individuals from poverty, though it offers no guarantee that a given individual will successfully negotiate the complex social determinations of class inequality. Performing both designation and repudiation, the ideological function of the “middle” is therefore precisely to mediate the culturally undecidable role of “class”

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relative to the norms and systems that define a given society and set it apart from its competitors. The most common container for this division being the nation-state, despite the fact that, following the institutional collapse empire, globalization has enacted administrative reformations that bestow power onto increasingly globalized non-state actors, such as the multinational corporation and the non-governmental organization.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, one of the key tensions explored by these authors involves the distinction between the “global middle class” (a concept upon which neoliberalism has staked its central moral claims, but a reality that remains historically elusive)—and the politically determined “middle-class values” that are determined in relation to each state.<sup>13</sup>

Thus for my project, the designation “middle class” helps to define a set of thematic concerns that allow literature to mirror the broader cultural mediation of class identity, because they remap national and authorial sovereignty anew. The texts I consider here form a literature that is of the middle, by the middle, and for the middle—but not the center. To emphasize the middle is to stress mediation—not as a loss of freedom, but as the conceptual precursor to agency. It is precisely within the gap between Fanon’s structurally determined “middle caste” and the anthropologically indeterminate “middle class” that art exerts its authority. Problems of literary representation—above all, the complicitous link between social capital and narrative performance—provide means for individual authors to identify and situate themselves relative to the divided subject position of a national/global middle. Thus as readers of world-Anglophone fiction, what we purchase by exercising the limited control afforded to us over the manner and substance of our own immersion is a sense that cultural mediation itself becomes

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<sup>12</sup> Sassen, Saskia. *Territory, Authority, Rights*.

<sup>13</sup> Kochar, Rakesh. “A Global Middle Class Is More Promise than Reality.”

deliberate. Conditioned reading becomes action rather than reaction, because time flows away less rapaciously when we choose to identify with particular constellations rather than cultural wholes. World-Anglophone novels therefore provide readers with the means and the measure for situating themselves in relation to global devaluations of local belonging; they afford social capital to prove that personal consumption has kept pace with diminishing returns on deep cultural investment.

## **Chapter One**

### **Malaysian Historical Memory in the Novels of Tan Twan Eng**

In this chapter, I examine two historical novels by the Malaysian writer Tan Twan Eng, who depicts his nation's postwar emergence onto the world stage through the affluent eyes of its comprador bourgeoisie. These works reflect upon the outsized role played by the middle class in mediating Malaysia's intercourse with world culture, and thus with the global economic systems that underpin this culture. Yet they do so from across a sectional divide: Abdullah, a nationalist Malay writer, depicts a prosperity born of racial harmony to be the historical end of national. But for Tan, prosperous harmony in the present presents the historical occasion for problems of historical memory, because it occasions the suppression of minoritarian voices—in particular, the voices of “comfort women,” sexual slaves of the Japanese military during the occupation (1941-1942); and “running dogs,” a term used by communist guerrillas who opposed British rule to describe conspirators during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960);<sup>14</sup> both groups that fail to conform with the stereotype of comprador prosperity among Malaysia's ethnic Chinese. By linking the ongoing performance of national harmony to the suppression of a necessary historical dissidence, Tan implicitly critiques the discourse of an ethno-nationalist regime that curtails civil liberties in the name of prosperous development.

English-language novels can mediate this conflict, endemic to the post-Bandung state, by creating an alternative temporality in which readers can inhabit historical memory in order to create space for alternate imaginings of the nation's development. In what follows, I argue that the queer forms of intimacy modeled in Tan's work—a topic

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<sup>14</sup> See: Barber, Noel. *War of The Running Dogs: Malaya, 1948-1960*

that has been the focus of significant critical attention—enacts a self-conscious repudiation of comprador identity that relies upon the deliberate production of heterotopic space. Linking national history to historical memory, Tan maps the close but irreconcilable relationship between personal and national development, linking them at the site of an historic trauma: the exceptional state of the Emergency, which binds personal development in a common temporality with the nation as a whole.<sup>15</sup> The state cannot suture their historical wounds, because it remains implicated in the very forms of violence that inflicted those wounds. This historical fixation draws a line between the rights of citizenship and the duties of national belonging, because it binds the subject of memory to an alternative frame of historical reference, anchoring the subjectivity in anterior relation to duty (a hermeneutics of guilt), rather than within the progressive time of the memorialization (a hermeneutics of celebration). At the same time, this historical burden makes available new forms of personal sovereignty that rely upon this very impossibility. In consequence of having lived through emergency, the comprador subjects exhibit a preemptive worldliness, both in the sense of innocence lost and in the sense of experience gained. In their metaphoric role of cultural brokers, they remain simultaneously burdened and liberated by the necessity of operating at a distance from the life of the nation.

The English-language press has a long history of intercultural mediation in Malaysia. For decades, however, consumption of English literature in Malaysia declined, falling off from its post-independence peak in the 1960s even as English literacy and economic prosperity steadily improved under the moderate economic policies of the

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governing *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), until reading an English novel became a pastime that was largely reserved for the nation's university-educated elite. Now, however, the proliferation of large regional booksellers, such as MPH and Popular, has brought English world literature to any city, suburb, or small town with a proper shopping mall. The arrival of consumer material culture has increased the consumption and production of literary fiction in markets flooded with pulp: romance, thrillers, biography, religious devotionals, self-help business manuals, and more. And this proliferation has coincided with a rise to international prominence by a number of Malaysian authors writing in English, such as Tash Aw, K. S. Maniam, and Tan Twan Eng. It is too soon to call the resurgence of Malaysian Writing in English (MWE) a fait accompli, but the appearance of local writers on their own bookstore shelves alongside international staples—Haruki Murakami, J. K. Rowling, Charles Dickens—does indicate a powerful new market entry for national literature.

The reasons for this quiet revolution are manifold. The most basic is that the rise of a merit-based education system, in conjunction with robust state support for international education, has led to a burgeoning middle class, whose cultural expectations and western education make them a natural market for world literature. Many professionals in major cities like Kuala Lumpur or Penang are more proficient in English than in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), and this tendency is even greater among the Chinese and Indian minority. The consequence, not unfamiliar from other postcolonial situations, is that most Malaysians consume global media in English as well as in the language of their parents.

This wave of global culture has largely overwritten the political stigma attached to the use of the former colonizer's tongue, though one will still find opposition to an English-language public school curriculum among more conservative Malay-Muslims. As the language of the global marketplace, the status afforded to English paradoxically equalizes the linguistic field of regional literatures by putting the national language on an equal footing with the larger minority dialects; thus one may find a work written in English (for instance Tan's *Garden*) on the "Malaysian Literature" shelf of a major international bookseller, alongside canonical works written in Malay or Chinese, while a separate (much larger) section contains genre publications in the vernacular. Yet even in the vernacular section, the trace of English literariness is evident in the use of loanwords, such as *fiksi* (fiction) to denote popular genres.

The government has pushed back against this trend by promoting Malay-language education and writing, but it has also provided institutional support for the translation and publication of Malay-language classics into English, suggesting a practical recognition that Malay writers may struggle to reach world markets without institutional support. Singapore, by way of contrast, has instituted an aggressive state program of English-curriculum education for all primary and secondary students, and it has policed the use of "proper" English in government publications and (to a lesser extent) within the public sphere. Ironically, then, the Singaporean government has attempted to stifle use of the one variant of English—Singlish (a creole of English and other regional languages, predominantly Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Tamil)—that is unique to its national territory.

Furthermore, the apparent newness of English has granted it relative neutrality among the nation's various minority tongues, allowing it to mediate the politically charged field of Malaysian race relations. In addition to its already hegemonic position as the lingua franca of international business and scientific research, then, English has acquired the additional privilege of becoming the de facto language for sub-national dialogue. English has become the primary language of translation, meaning that a native Hokkien-speaker may very well choose to read a canonical work of Malay literature, such as Abdullah Hussein's *Interlok* ("Interlock"), in its English translation—even if that reader may use the national language on a daily basis. Consequently, it has also become a medium of choice for writers aspiring to represent the nation to itself and/as to the world.

Also significant to (and perhaps an effect of) the link between English and interracial dialogue has been a gradual slackening of artistic censorship over politically and morally sensitive topics—in particular, questions regarding the nationally traumatic events of May 13, when bloody anti-Chinese riots broke out in the national capital, Kuala Lumpur, and subsequently spread to neighboring parts of the country. As is to be expected, these sensitivities are most palpable in rural areas, where race mixing is less common—making the newly ubiquitous shopping mall a culturally transformative force on yet another level. Moreover, the censorship that does prevail mirrors a key thematic intervention made by many of the region's Anglophone texts, which frequently tie the state's prurient interest in censoring sexuality to undercurrents of racial policing. The normative value that prurience bestows upon moral censorship helps to provide moral cover for institutions engaged in political censorship. If censorship has had as its primary aim the preservation of moral "purity" within the public sphere, then we might

reasonably argue that the secondary effect—the stifling of discussions about miscegenation or the taboo on inter-racial courtship—has been the perverse supplement to this discourse of moral piety. The practical effect has been to curtail opposition to laws that enshrine the religious privilege of the Malay-Muslim ethnic majority, such as the statutes requiring a non-Muslim to convert in order to marry a Malay or assigning Muslim identity to the child of Malay coupling, regardless of parental objections that either party might raise.

Finally, this racial dynamic may be linked back to the comprador bourgeoisie because, in the Malaysian context, to censor discussion of race is to erase the history of anti-colonial struggle that lent a foundational justification to the ideals of national sovereignty. This point is one that will recur throughout the following chapters; however, I want to provide a brief example that will help to clarify my readings moving forward.

*Interlok* (1971), a historical novel by the Malay author Abdullah Hussein, offers a paean to interracial unity that has ginned up more controversy than it has assuaged. Originally published in Malay, it was reissued in an abridged version and then added to the national public school curriculum on a trial basis, in 2011, as part of the “1Malaysia” propaganda campaign, which aimed to foster interracial exchange (and thereby shore up the ruling coalition’s slipping grasp over the minority vote). Instead, “during a year-long national debate, punctuated by death threats and breathless news coverage, the book reopened the old but familiar wounds of ethnicity (or what Malaysians refer to as race)” (Roasa, no pag.). Abdullah’s essentialist depictions of race deeply offended the nation’s ethnic minorities, who viewed it as a painful reminder of the state’s domination over political dissent, primarily via a series of emergency measures that had been swiftly

imposed upon the populace, and then never fully suspended, following the riots of May 13, 1969. Viewed as a case study in the literary mediation of national culture, *Interlok* provides a uniquely clear instance of literature's central role in mediating the state's failure to institute a modern secular-national culture.<sup>16</sup>

The scant critical discussion of *Interlok* has been largely confined to the Malay-Muslim academic world, which parallels the epistemological circuits of western academic knowledge in many respects; but with few exceptions, it does so allomorphically, appropriating western theoretical concepts without necessarily engaging their discursive-institutional formation in any systematic way—a practice that lies beyond the scope of my argument, but which is worthy of extended discussion in its own right. The scholarly literature on *Interlok* has developed Abdullah's treatment of "Islamic teachings" (Tengku Ghani T Jusuoh). Syed Mohd Zakir Syed has defended *Interlok* as a "visionary" and "multicultural" representation of racial harmony; however, this argument is confined to the pages of *Malay Literature*, a "refereed" journal printed by the novel's original publisher, the Malaysian Board of Language and Literature (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka), which is an official organ of the state.

The novel depicts the class struggle of three scions, each representing (in the language of the state) one of the nation's principal "races," Malay, Chinese, and Indian. With these portraits, Abdullah attempts to represent the characteristic experience of each "race" during the waning era of British rule, then the Japanese occupation, and finally

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<sup>16</sup> Michael O'Shannassy, placing the novel within a larger context of minoritarian discontent toward the Malay regime's control of the educational system, has argued that its adoption and the subsequent "controversy has acted as a magnet for broader resentment of the Malaysian education system." At issue, O'Shannassy argues, is the state's "Islamic/Malay-centric bias" (167).

during the culminating period leading up to Malayan independence. In addition, each caricature reflects Abdullah's attempt to paint a just and balanced portrait of what he deems to be each race's essential qualities and, therefore, the distinctive contribution that it offers to the development of a national identity. The novel has been offensive to Malaysian Indian then, not merely for its reductive representation of racial character but also for the ideological link that it draws between this racial schema and the social preconditions for national strength. The problem is not Abdullah's portrait of the nation emerging from the trauma of a racist colonial regime, but his implication that racial topography constitutes a fundamental, necessary, and therefore permanent justification for unitary state power.

Seman, the token Malay, is an impoverished subsistence farmer. On the one hand, his ignorance and gullibility lead him to shuttle helplessly between traditional healers and moneylenders in a futile search to find medical aid for his dying father; on the other hand, his Islamic faith makes him pure, kind, and courageous—which traits become crucial during the pivotal lead-up to independence, when they cause him to side with his local neighbors instead of the occupying Japanese. (His decision in this respect is especially charged because the successful invasion of Malaya depended in part upon a sympathetic Malay response to Japanese propaganda promising an Asian “Co-Prosperity Sphere.”) Cing Huat, the token Chinese, is industrious and thrifty; these qualities bring him to the shores of Malaya, where he opens a small shophouse that becomes the center of Kampong (village) life—and that establishes him in the role of a local moneylender and trade monopoly, with the result that he eventually holds the deed to Seman's heavily entailed property. Predictably, Cing Huat's greed and indifference to suffering catch up

with him in the form of an opium addiction that wrecks his health, alienates him from his young daughter, and drives him into a social insouciance that leaves him blind to the portents that violent rebellion threatens to overtake him. Maniam, the token Indian, is a diligent but hot-blooded coolie, later a foreman, who performs the dangerous work necessary to clear Malaya's jungles for plantation farming.

In the novel's title may be read many of the historical features I have been highlighting: a loan word, it expresses an ambivalent fixity that has been imposed from beyond a translational divide. As a noun, *interlok* signifies the uneasy borrowing of a colonial category, race, to affix the emergent historical process of ethnic specification within a pre-national memory of domination: it does not say what or who wields the power to enforce this fixed relation in the present or what juridical provisions fixed the component interests of national development within a condition of dependence, as opposed to guiding them toward the identity-blind mutualism of liberal-democratic citizenship. The ideological aim of the conclusion is made explicit in the epigraph to the fourth book of *Interlok*, which announces itself to be the "SYMBOL OF THE STATE" and declares that "Unity, / Is Strength" (Abdullah 283).

The stakes of reducing ethnic becoming to a juridical category become clearer if we consider the novel's specific causes for offense. Part 3 of the novel follows young Maniam from his origins as a "pariah" caste member in Southern India to his new life in British Malaya. In the oceanic passage from South Asia, the Indian migrants are stripped of their caste sensitivities and are granted a newly secular identity on the mainland. The point is that Malaysia can foster a subaltern cosmopolitanism by imagining itself in reference to a greater Muslim Umma. Yet in performing this act of self-imagining, the

Malay perspective only re-inscribes caste difference as class difference—a point suggested by the outraged reaction to the novel within the Malaysian Hindu community, which rejected Abdullah’s claim that his use of the term pariah was in deference to “historic realism.” This defense misunderstands Indian opposition to “pariah” as a problem of language, when in fact it reflects a structural objection to the teleological way in which realism subordinates transnational ethnic and religious identities to the project of Malay nationalism.

Further, Maniam’s abject position as a coolie reflects the historical marginalization of Malaysia’s Indian community in reference to Chinese capital and a Malaysian welfare state. Maniam’s plantation labor contrasts with the elevation of swidden-agriculture that underpins romantic notions of life in the Malay Kampong, and this distinction creates tension between his subplot and the central plot thread, in which Cing Huat deprives Seman of his property, turning the latter into an itinerant laborer. Although Maniam participates in the revolution to oust the British Empire, he remains excluded from the structural reversal that follows, in which Seman’s property is restored to him by virtue of Cing Huat’s conclusion that his contractual obligations have been fulfilled by the service he performed in protecting the latter from Japanese violence. In this denouement, the future of the state passes out of the hands of a comprador bourgeoisie and into the receivership of a new ethnic middle class, but labor remains frustratingly excluded.

In the story of Maniam, the Indian character, the affixation of identity moves beyond specific local contexts and back to mother India, where a legacy of caste discrimination allows Abdullah to paper over the ongoing abjection of Malaysia’s coolie

class by scapegoating cultural heritage. Abdullah thus imagines a regional socius that, vis-à-vis the nation, remains historically primordial. And this external reference is crystallized into fixed social relation through the pressure of supranational historical forces: the chaotic rupture of independence not only breaks from a meaningful past, it also arrests the development of historical trajectories that would have altered the present arrangement of social life. Most significant, it arrests the downward spiral of Cing Huat's moral dissolution, suggesting a latent Malay desire for the comprador bourgeoisie to have departed with the decadent British.

In the restorative trope of Malay land, we can see how the ideal of racial unity endows the Malayan peninsula with a sacred geography that links the ideals of national and personal development into a schema that helps to steady the ship of state, making its course through history more predictable, more reliable—and therefore more suited for staging the complexities of domestic life. Race becomes an ingredient in the recipe for baking national identity into citizens' subjectivity, as it were, because it allows local identities to become knowable, a component of the harmonious body politic, within the context of a shared imaginary. In this creation of an imaginable terrain, the nation becomes a stage or ideal space, where culture may project a resolution of the social contradictions that remain immanent within the material world. And in its ideal form, this negative capability on the part of the nation—its capacity to absorb the contents of subcultures within its national culture—enables newly enfranchised citizen-subject to map a local identity and an inhabited world onto ever larger territorial spaces; it transforms empty space into sites and empty time into events, which together allow the

individual life and the life of the nation to resolve into forms of closure, satisfaction, and correspondence.

But also for rupture: in the cordoning-off heterotopic racial spaces, we find a breakdown of the national commons—and therefore of the lived experience of a neutral territory that would remain ideally open to every body springing from its soil. This breakdown may take the form of racial ghettoization, as in the case of the “coolie” quarters on a plantation. Alternately, it may take the form of a more utopian community such as the Malay *kampong*, the Indian plantation, or the Chinese shophouse. In all of these cases, however, the rupture of historical violence delineates the sacred proto-nation time from the present moment.

As we shall see in my readings of the work of Tan Twan Eng, literature is capable of holding this tension within our field of view. It can demonstrate, for example, how the pastoral Malaysian landholder of pre-national history becomes, through the historic transformations of capital, the romanticized investor, whose largesse enables the comprador bourgeoisie to imagine its own relation to a romanticized past. By leveraging the ambivalent neutrality of global English, I argue, the writers whom I consider below have opened an especially capacious imaginative space, in which local contradictions come to bear the structural features of the world-system beyond them. The narrative figures marking this resolution thus stand in a historical paradox relative to national culture: on the one hand, they stand apart from the nation, separated by the distance of cosmopolitan identity and comprador bourgeois privilege; on the other, they are the very perspective that enables the national imaginary to remain internally coherent as the forward movement of modernity begins to fray the schematic threads with which a novel

like *Interlok* has bound the nation to itself. The comprador-bourgeois narrator thus occupies the paradoxical status of a native outsider: the figure who may narrate the state's self-contradictions because (s)he has already been excluded as its perverse supplement. And recalling my point above, this perversity can be linked to sexual norms in a few key ways: as hybridity (implying miscegenation), feminism (implying a violation of gender taboos), queerness (implying emasculation), or indigeneity (implying a middle class that is "slumming" its subalternity).<sup>17</sup>

Whereas the post-colonial state finds its rationale in the harmonious integration of its legally enshrined racial groups, paradoxically, Malaysian writing in English often supplies discursive proxies for national authenticity through a celebration of cultural difference.<sup>18</sup> For example, oppositional-cosmopolitan authenticity is central to the work of Tan Twan Eng, whose work recalls the Japanese occupation of British Malaya through the eyes of its Chinese-Malaysian comprador bourgeoisie. Tan's first novel, *The Gift of Rain*, charts the story of Philip Hutton, the scion of a wealthy Chinese-Malaysian industrialist family that faces numerous travails as a result of its decision to remain in Japanese-occupied British Malaya during the Second World War. The Huttons may claim a kind of paradoxically authentic Malaysian-ness precisely because, unlike many of the novel's subaltern figures, they would be free to escape if they chose. And this paradoxical binding is reflected in Philip's linguistic identity. Philip proudly references his multilingual heritage when introducing of himself and his siblings: "We grew up

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<sup>17</sup> For an influential theorization of "slumming," the counterpart to the more familiar notion of racial "passing" (the performance of white identity by persons of color), see the discussion by Peter Hitchcock ("Slumming"). For a more specific discussions of "queer slumming," see Scott Herring (*Queering the Underworld*)

<sup>18</sup> Gui, Weihsin. *National Consciousness and Literaru Cosmopolitics*, ch. 6

speaking the local languages, as my father had himself. It would bind us to Penang forever,” he explains (9). By the novel’s conclusion, this son of a wealthy British capitalist has become fluent in English, Malay, Cantonese, and Japanese—the latter of which comes through the painful developmental pedagogy of his coerced service of the occupying Kempeitai.

Unlike many Anglophone works that emphasize the exoticism of global English, such as Huzir Sulaiman’s *Atomic Jaya*, considered below, *The Gift of Rain* is written in a prose that is rarely adorned by vernacular or local color—a quality of restraint, given that the protagonist’s polyglot upbringing is the single most determinative fact about him. This very quality makes Tan’s fiction exemplary of the Straits Chinese literary tradition, which has, since its very inception, turned to English in a “disavowal” of Malay political dominance. It is also worth noting that by making the *entrepôt* city of Penang the site of the Hutton family’s decision to remain in Malaysia, Tan reverses the ideological work of *Interlok*, which had emphasized the Malay pastoral elements of prewar life in Penang. Similarly, Tan disavows traditional nationalist enmities when shaping the novel formally. His movements back and forth in narrative time draw upon the Japanese martial art of *Aikido* for inspiration, despite the fact that Japan, in the novel as in history, has yet to apologize for the brutalities it inflicted upon the civilians of Malaya. Like the circular martial forms through which Aikido redirects the energy of an attacking force, the narrative distorts and redirects the social categories that threaten to define Philip’s identity.

The novel’s depiction of the Japanese occupation, which unfolds like a romantic interlude, opens onto vignettes of the realist present, when Philip has become a wealthy

and socially prominent member of Penang's comprador elite, and fables of the of the fantastical past. The narrative opens fifty years after the war's conclusion, when Michiko Murakami, a Japanese survivor of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima, arrives on the doorstep of Istana, the Hutton family home, to seek an audience with Philip, who is now the reclusive septuagenarian figurehead of the successful Hutton Corporation, reluctantly admits her. Michiko comes seeking information about the late Endo-san, Philip's former master and lover, who had been her lover in the idyllic past of prewar Japan. In the present, she becomes the ideal listener to whom Philip can unburden his conscience. As he gradually admits her into his confidence, the novel weaves back and forth in history from Philip's expansive account of his childhood and wartime activities to a vanishing present in which Michiko's cancer threatens to cut short their dialogue. Quietly paralleling this constraint is an impending celebration of the war's conclusion at the Penang Historical Society, at which Philip will be honored for his efforts to restore historical buildings in a city whose thunderous prosperity threatens to obliterate every trace of the past.

From the outset of the events recounted in the novel, Philip's social position is emblematic of the historical dilemma faced by members of the Straits Chinese diaspora: the only child of his father's late marriage to a local Chinese woman, he is the half-Chinese pariah of an extended British family. Philip's cultural hybridity causes him to offend his fully British siblings through a series of unintended slights, and he spends most of his days in quiet isolation on a pristine coastal island across the channel from his family's opulent mansion. This spatial arrangement too has significant overtones for Straits Chinese identity: the family home is named Istana, meaning "palace" in Malay,

which suggests that the Hutton family has usurped the authority of the Islamic Sultanate—the traditional seat of Malay power. Philip’s private refuge therefore parallels the island of Penang itself, where the Straits Chinese community has established a stable cultural enclave across the channel from the Malay-dominated peninsula. In Penang, Tan suggests, the Straits Chinese community dwells at a slight remove from the colonial forces that have sired it—but also from the Islamic authority of the Malay-dominated peninsula.

Thus it is symbolic of the role that the Japanese occupation has played for the Straits Chinese community when Philip’s childhood idyll is interrupted by Hayato Endo, a mysterious Japanese stranger who is referred to by his Japanese honorific Endo-san, meaning “master,” in recognition of his regal bearing and mastery over the Japanese martial art of Aikido. Soon they strike up a relationship that could be culled straight from schoolboy fantasy: Endo-san takes up residence on the island, where he begins training Philip in traditional Japanese arts. But Philip will come to know Endo-san as his master—also lover, teacher, and friend—in more profound ways, as well. Their encounter instates a painful developmental pedagogy between the sensei and his student, which reflects the historical abjection experienced by the Straits Chinese at the hands of Japanese occupiers. It also leads, however, to young Philip’s newfound maturity and power, which are symbolic of the dominant economic position of the Straits Chinese community following the war.

Also reflective of the Straits Chinese experience is the fact that Noel Hutton, Philip’s British father, happens not to be at home when Philip first encounters Endo-san on a lonely beach. This parallels the feeling among many comprador bourgeois Malaysians

that British weakness had left cities like Penang and Singapore vulnerable to Japanese occupation. Thus even as parental absence permits the boy and his Japanese guest to establish an early, uncomfortable intimacy, it also foreshadows the “sense of betrayal” that Philip later feels regarding the overnight capitulation of colonial forces: “So the British government already suspected that an attack would come, that Malaya would fall, and still they maintained daily that it would not, that the guns of Singapore would repel any such attempt” (195).

This historical treason is echoed in Philip’s own life. The war decimates the Hutton family, largely due to the intimacy that develops between Philip and Endo-san. Long after the war, Philip remains wracked by historical guilt for having inadvertently aided the hated *Kempeitai*, the Japanese military police who, in this novel and its successor, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, are responsible for inflicting tremendous suffering upon the island city and its inhabitants. After their sudden invasion, the Japanese offer Philip a position as their cultural liaison due to his familiarity with all of the local customs and languages—including Japanese, thanks to his relationship with Endo-san. In order to shield his family from being murdered and the Hutton Corporation from being commandeered in the name of decolonization, Philip reluctantly agrees to collaborate. It is clear, however, that he is also motivated by his desire remain intimate with Endo-san, whom the Kempetai have tapped to govern the city, due to his aristocratic connections to imperial Japan.

What Philip does not know, however, is that his fateful encounter with the mysterious Japanese stranger on the beach, which had seemed to be part of a romantically charmed boyhood existence, was in fact a part of Endo-san’s secretive work as a

Japanese imperial agent. As it dawns upon him that, under the guise of touristic interest, Endo-san had been exploiting his intimate knowledge of Penang and its people to help plan the Japanese invasion, Philip is forced to confront the realization that the love he feels for his master has been deliberately staged at the hands of a sly enemy. But Endo-san proves to have been a more than competent instructor. As the futility of his collaboration becomes clear, and his loved ones succumb to the brutality of war or Kempeitai justice, Philip begins to plan a betrayal of his own. He collaborates with Kon, “The White Tiger,” leader of a guerrilla resistance that has been inflicting heavy damages upon the occupying Japanese before fading into the jungle. Together, they lay a trap for the head of the occupying Kempeitai, the venal general Saotome. Endo-san, however, has outmaneuvered Philip; his superior command over the powers of mental warfare has enabled him to uncover the plot, and Philip is apprehended and imprisoned. Awaiting death, Philip despairs at the disenchantment of his boyhood innocence—only to find himself suddenly released. This sudden luck turns out to be a curse: Philip’s beloved father, his last surviving family member, has invoked a parental prerogative under Japanese law in order to offer his own life in exchange for that of his son. The novel’s final betrayal, however, is in fact an act of love: the British forces retake Penang, and Endo-san becomes a hunted war criminal. Rather than face ignominy, he requests an honorable death at the hands of his student. Philip agrees—and cuts his former master down with a sword, just as his father had been cut down.

Cut and counter-cut: the gesture enacted by the novel’s many betrayals, and the many forms of intimacy that cannot be distinguished from betrayal, is *chiasmus*—a rhetorical structure that occurs when inversion prompts us to reconsider the meaning of

an expression. In Lee Edelman's reading of modernist poetics, *chiasmus* can provide a figure for closure, wholeness, and love (7), as in Hart Crane, where *chiasmus* models positive forms of intimacy by poetically dancing through a series of tropes that name the same thing again and again—but with a slight difference each time. Philip's historical imagination develops along this pattern by crossing its characters' story lines up and down time, and back and forth between genealogies.

Endo-san teaches Philip *zazen*, a form of Buddhist meditation that enables him to glimpse the full network of identities that he and the novel's other characters have ever inhabited in their past incarnations.<sup>19</sup> *Zazen* meditation, which enables the consciousness to open up to states of perception larger than—and therefore encompassing—the self: “Soon my eyelids burned red beneath as the light filled the world. I no longer felt I was on the cold hard ledge but as if I were floating high above the land, close to the heat of the sun, whose light I could see inside my head, illuminating an expanse that seemed wider than the universe” (61). This expansion, which we may read as a magical-realist trope, parallels the perceptual expansion that is afforded to the citizens of Penang in consequence of their city's position within the colonial world-system. Because the island city is an *entrepôt*, a hub of import and export that mediates commerce between the mainland and the wider oceanic rim, otherness is constantly flowing *through* but not pooling *in* the city. Thus Philip can boast, “Within the island [he] could move from world to world merely by crossing a street,” while still developing a personal narrative within a relatively small network of actors (66).

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<sup>19</sup> For a fuller discussion of the novel's orientalizing use of Zen meditation, see David C. L. Lim, “The Zen of Japanese Imperialism in Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*.”

Tan echoes this formal structure in a pattern of networked identities. His characters develop identities within a shifting genealogical configuration that is historically deep but socially narrow, with each personality recurring in a discontinuous sequence of doubled characters. This parallelism bends the matrix of social differentiation around a set of key lineages, which map the novel's pre-modern, modern, and contemporary trajectories onto a mythological framework that is supple, malleable, but ultimately ineluctable. For example, Philip's contemporary double is the "White Tiger," Kon, whose courage and fierce loyalty underscore the shame that Philip feels about having collaborated with the Japanese. But Kon's historical counterpart is the "White Raja," James Brooke, whose legendary fearlessness led him to found and rule the Kingdom of Sarawak, on Borneo. Likewise, Endo has a contemporary double, the pacifist sensei, Tanaka, whose historical counterpart, Khoo, is Philip's wizened maternal grandfather. And this ancient Khoo had a student, the "lost emperor" of China. Each of the characters, in other words, exists within a mythical network of genealogies that connect them to a past that always feels more significant than a diminished time of narration because it signifies even greater patterns of historical cause and effect. The fact that Philip corresponds to the "lost emperor," within this network, signals the historical importance of his role in the war. The more he learns about the genealogies that unite the lives around him, the less arbitrary the cruelty of the war comes to seem.

Moving in the opposite direction, into contemporaneity, culture seems to degenerate into empty materialism, in which the vivid artifacts of memory have faded into inert signs. The symbolic order of the text radiates from a casuarina tree at the center of Istana's garden that is "as old as" Philip himself (88). The tree signifies Philip's

Chinese lineage, because it doubles the one in his grandfather's estate, which his mother had loved in her youth. Philip's father had this double planted at Istana when Khoo disowned his daughter for the sin of miscegenation with a white man. In the present, it stands firmly rooted and surrounded by "marble statues, a few with broken limbs lying on the grass, mold eating away their luminosity like an incurable skin disease" (ibid.). In a novel that elevates aesthetic experience to the level of truth, this diminished "luminosity" suggests the fragmented and corrupted ruins of western artistic production. The opulent home of Towkay Yeap, which is the novel's most significant representation of "Chinese" artistic production, fares little better. When Philip first visits the house after acquiring it at auction, he also passes through a garden: "although I had seen many derelict homes," he recalls, its neglected—no, abused—state shocked me. The roof was half gone and pieces of tile, broken into shards like the eggshells of a mythical bird, littered the bare, sandy lawn. The rosewood doors had been removed, used as firewood by squatters, and the Art Deco stained-glass windows were shattered" (171; original emphasis). The "disposable age" has left the magnificence of Hokkien craftsmanship just as fragmented and consumed by fire. If we recall that "Casuarina" derives from the Latin for bird feathers, then it becomes clear that the "mythical bird" of aesthetics has fared no better — and perhaps worse — in the Chinese rush to modernize.

The novel therefore remains ambivalent towards the question of whether the present really is preferable to the war years, despite the suffering and heartbreak that they brought. Secular institutions, such as the Penang Historical Society, attempt to mediate this question of historical value, but they prove to be inadequate. When Philip donates the priceless sword with which he cut down his master to the Society, its anticlimactic

response is a “rather lengthy speech” thanking him for his “generosity in donating a pair of invaluable weapons to the society” (432). This plain institutional formality stands in dull relief to the exotic past, like the ordinary frame of a surrealist painting. Philip attempts to salvage this decay using the considerable resources afforded to him through his control of the Hutton Corporation; however, even his wealth can do little more than fetishize the past. Philip’s dismay over the neglect into which the city’s traditional Chinese homes have fallen has led him to invest in restoration as a hobby: “Some people collect stamps,” he states wryly, “I collect houses” (169). With the wealth he has acquired by exploiting Malaya’s abundant natural resources, he pours money into renovating Towkay Yeap’s derelict home. The project’s considerable expense stems from Philip’s fetishistic desire to recreate the past in precisely the state in which it once existed. Both structurally and thematically, then, the novel considers the importance of ruins in contemporary Penang: the ruined bodies of its aged, its fragments of superstition, and the moldering mansions strewn between its gleaming corporate towers.

The novel moves between history and myth, seeking to resolve a “cycle of pain” that has joined Philip to Endo-san throughout their many past lives (218, 253). They are repeating the same story of love and betrayal; across lives and civilizations they transmigrate, inflicting perpetual hurt. This deep thematic movement, in turn, allegorizes Philip’s own inability to relinquish his desire for a liminal time between modernity and myth. The cycle finally ends with Endo’s ignoble flight as a war criminal and Philip’s willingness to reverse fate by executing his master. Philip makes it clear in the novel’s opening lines that the enchanted world existed specifically during the war years: “I was born with the gift of rain, an ancient soothsayer in an even more ancient temple once told

me. This was back in a time when I did not believe in fortunetellers, when the world was not yet filled with wonder and mystery” (1). If his grandfather’s picaresque adventures as the Shaolin teacher of a forgotten emperor did occur in the pre-modernity of imperial China, it is still the war that effects a reconciliation between the old man and his grandson, without which this charmed lineage would have remained invisible. The war years were a time in which triads—Chinese gangs steeped in Orientalizing lore—ruled the streets. Ancestors reminisced about their time in China’s Forbidden Palace, and it became possible to glimpse one’s past lives through the mystical practice of zazen meditation—a central part of the Aikido practice Philip learns from Endo. Even the British residents of Penang consulted the Snake Temple to have their fortunes told. It seemed, above all, a period in which individual action could shape history.

In contrast with the fall into myth, the rise into narration offers little more than the rhetoric of consolation. “While I now accept that the course of our lives has been set down long before our births,” Philip opines, “I feel that the inscriptions that dictate the directions of our lives merely write out what is already in our hearts; they can do nothing more.” Modernity has reduced the fantastic abilities of his youth to the capability for “love and memory” (431). One dimension of this ambivalence is the triangular relationship between Philip, Endo, and Michiko. Philip never marries, and the scenes of his domestic affection for Michiko raise the specter of his parents’ intensely passionate marriage. When Philip rows her out onto the firefly-lit river where his parents conceived him, for instance, he “touches her hand with the softness of a firefly alighting on her skin” (79). Yet their ghostly passion is diminished by a constant deferral to the man whom they have both loved vigorously: “When you sat so still, trying to catch a firefly

for me,” she tells Philip, “you reminded me so much of Endo-san. He could sit as unmoving and immovable as the statue of the Buddha in Kamakura” (78). Their geriatric love brings no promise of erotic fulfillment, just as the strictures of Japanese social mores kept Endo and Michiko from marrying in their youth. It is only during the war, when Philip’s alienation thrusts him into a domestic intimacy with his sensei, that an erotic space opens to him.

Although the course of their erotic love will determine the course that Philip and Endo-san will take through web of history, it is familial genealogy that binds each character within this signifying network, the novel displays a particular fascination with names. In particular, Tan seems invested in the figure of the aptonym—the name that contains a meaning within itself. The name Endo, for example, is a Romanization of the Japanese word meaning “within,” which suggests a personage who remains locked within himself—an echo of the novel’s epigraph, “My old life still burns within me, but more and more of it is reduced to the ashes of memory.”<sup>20</sup> This reference to one who is locked entirely within himself is indicative of Endo’s own mode of relating to familial ties: it is family honor, we learn, that compels him to abandon pacifism in order to further Hirohito’s designs upon Malaya. Endo-san is ruined by the excessive hold that he permits national culture to exert upon him. In contrast, Philip’s linguistic and cultural promiscuity is the source of an intense and public form of historical guilt, and the act of narration explicitly aims at resolving this burden so that Philip can “hear his name—his complete, dear name, given to him by both his parents and by his grandfather—used for the first time” (430). But the hybridity of Philip’s name—Philip Arminius Khoo Hutton—also

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<sup>20</sup> Tan’s epigraph is taken from Jean-Dominique Bauby’s autobiographical account of full-body paralysis (*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* 77).

signals a negative capability that allows him to eschew the excessive claims of culture upon his loyalty. Each sedimented layer of his identity represents an historic enmity that must be relinquished through sacrifice so that they might return to him in the disenchanted present.

In the novel's symbolic logic, this sacrifice is figured through the relinquishment of empire. Realizing the folly of Japanese imperial ambitions, Endo-san exacts a symbolic promise from Philip not to repeat his errors, and this allows the two of them to sever the cycle of mythical repetitions in which they have been bound through reincarnation. At Endo's direction, Philip enters his father's vacant study and finds his father's most prized butterfly, the Raja Brooke Birdwing, which is named for the "White Raja," James Brooke, set up his own kingdom on the island of Borneo. As the butterfly's "resurrected flight" carries it aloft, the imperial ambitions signified by this 'White Raja' are "lost in the brightness of the new day"(352). In order to perform the positive cultural work of opening genealogy to foreign influence, Tan implies, names must remain situated within the proper contexts; otherwise, they merely afford an empty form of cosmopolitanism—the kind that leads one to betray country and family, because it collapses the distinction between toleration and collaboration, capability and complicity.

Tan's remarkable second novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), revisits the problem of Straits Chinese in relation to the history of Japanese domination. By shifting perspective to a female, middle-class protagonist, however, Tan reveals the inadequacy of representing the experience of Malaysia's Straits Chinese in terms of a symbolic closure. To the contrary, Tan's second novel finds value in the continuous dialogue that a lack of historical resolution makes necessary.

*The Garden of Evening Mists* presents the story of Yun Ling Teoh, a Malaysian judge and former war crimes prosecutor, who narrates her struggle to resolve her troubled feelings about two earlier periods of her life, the Japanese occupation during the Second World War (1941-1945) and the Malayan Emergency. The novel's weave between these three times resembles the temporal structure of *The Gift of Rain*, but in a more compressed fashion. The deepest plot arc recounts her imprisonment in a civilian internment camp, where her sister, Yun Hong, was forced to serve Japanese soldiers as a "comfort woman." Following the war, Yun Ling is consumed by bitterness and hatred toward the Japanese—and by guilt and longing for the loss of Yun Hong, who did not survive the war. The second plot arc corresponds to the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960)—a period of martial law enacted in an attempt to quell communist insurrection, which extended through the nation's transition from a colonial power into the independent Federation of Malaya (1957). During this period, Yun Ling travels to the idyllic Cameron Highlands to stay on a tea estate, Majuba, which is owned by family friends Magnus Pretorius, an Afrikaner planter from the Transvaal, and his Chinese wife, Emily. While in the highlands, she is introduced to Frederik Pretorius, Magnus's nephew and the eventual inheritor of Majuba, and Magnus's friend and neighbor Nakamura Aritomo, who lives in the splendid Japanese garden Yugiri.

Aritomo, who had been the imperial gardener under Hirohito before fleeing Japan, quickly becomes the dominant force in Yun Ling's postwar life. At Magnus's urging, she visits Yugiri to commission a memorial garden for her late sister, Yun Hong, who had been deeply fascinated by the art of Japanese gardening. At first Aritomo dismisses her request; but then, after witnessing her genuine wonder at his creation, he

offers her an apprenticeship so that she can “learn to build it [herself]” (77). Reluctantly, Yun Ling agrees to become Aritomo’s assistant, and their intimacy develops into an all-encompassing spiritual, intellectual, and ultimately erotic force, which dominates her life and transfigures her understanding of the world. Ironically, it is Teoh’s tutelage under Emperor Hirohito’s gardener, then, that prepares her to preside as judge over the crimes perpetrated by Hirohito’s army, because it is in learning to love and be mastered by this enemy that she is able to overcome an all-consuming disgust toward Japanese culture that stems from her internment.

The third arc encompasses the narrative frame, when an aging Yun Ling—now Judge Teoh—is forced to retire from the Malaysian Supreme Court due to the degenerative aphasia that has begun to rob her of her memories. Yun Ling returns to the Cameron Highlands, where she is greeted by Frederick, who is now Majuba’s proprietor and the only surviving member of the close-knit community that, following the war, had helped Yun Ling to mourn the loss of her sister and move on to a productive life. Together, they reminisce about their experiences of the Malayan Emergency, when the Cameron Highlands had been thick with Communist guerrilla insurgents. Soon, Yun Ling moves back into Yugiri, where she plans to spend the rest of her lucid days in the company of Ah Chong, Yugiri’s faithful servant, recording her thoughts about the past and the mysterious disappearance of Aritomo, until her memories have been become submerged from her “like a sandbar, cut off from the shore by the incoming tide” (25).

Her plans are interrupted, however, by the arrival of the Japanese historian Professor Yoshikawa Tatsuji, who comes seeking information about the Aritomo’s little-known mastery of *horimono*—the traditional Japanese art of the full-body tattoo. Still

suspicious of the Japanese from her time in the camp, Yun Ling is at first reluctant to share details with Tatsuji. In time, however, their conversations about *horimono* and its complementary art of *ukiyo-e* (woodblock printing) lead Yun Ling to disclose more about herself and the nature of her relationship to Aritomo. Finally, she reveals to Tatsuji that Aritomo imprinted her with a *horimono*, but only after Tatsuji reveals his own role in the war, as a kamikaze pilot, and the tragic loss of Teruzen, his lover and commanding officer.

Yun Ling's *horimono* has thematic significance for the community of Chinese Malaysians who were imprisoned in large numbers during the occupation: in the novel's mythography, the empty space within Yun Ling's tattoo holds the key to a buried hidden treasure, a tremendous cache of gold, pilfered from Malaya, that the fleeing Japanese General Yamashita is fabled to have stashed somewhere in the mountains beyond Yugiri. In time, Yun Ling becomes convinced that the secret camp where she and her sister had been forced to labor was somehow connected to Yamashita's cache, and she therefore wonders whether Aritomo's sudden disappearance had anything to do with the pilfered gold and, by implication, her own internment. The gold also functions as a metaphor for the unresolved tension between the region's Chinese diaspora and the Japanese state, which has never issued an apology or paid reparations for its role in enslaving thousands of comfort women. The recovery of this gold, therefore, would symbolize a closure in the history of tensions between the state of Malaya—now Malaysia—and its former colonizers. When Yun Ling finally shows her *horimono* to Fredrick, he recognizes it for the map that it is and points out that the empty space corresponds to the garden that Yun Ling has built for her sister. This realization presents Yun Ling with a dilemma: how to

prevent the discovery of Yamashita's gold. Should the garden be altered (thus erasing the memorial to Yun Hong), or should the tattoo—Aritomo's masterwork—be destroyed? Thus at the end of her life, Malaysia's most eminent judge must decide whether to allow her tattoo to enter the public domain, which would amount to providing symbolic closure on Sino-Japanese relations and, by implication, the political form of the nation-state as the proper container for anti-hegemonic activism in the Malayan post-colony. In the end, Yun Ling opts for the latter path, placing individual memory above the symbolic fusion of Japanese and Malaysian culture that the *horimono* represents.

*Horimono* is one of many exotic tropes that the novel uses to place its historic narrative into a symbolic configuration, and its inscription of ink on skin functions as one of the novel's major plot motifs: the requisite "empty space" within its design—a feature essential to all *horimono*—functions as a metaphor for the unfilled, and unfillable, sense of loss that conditions Yun Ling's relation to the past. Beyond the immediate burden of survivor's guilt, the unbearable arbitrariness of being the one to live, Teoh is haunted by the knowledge that, in a very real sense, her own feminine body is what bound her sister in this perpetual agony: after Yun Hong's first suicide attempt, the guards coerce Yun Hong's submission by telling her, "Kill yourself, and your sister will take your place" (255). This formulation, which inverts the Kamikaze's sacrifice, also reverses the disciplinary logic of modern jurisprudence: if "the soul is the prison of the body," as Foucault argues, then the internment camp is precisely the location in which the comfort girl's body imprisons her soul.

As a result of this irrational guilt, Yun Ling has a perverse relationship with her own desire. She finds herself drawn to Aritomo's domineering personality, rather than to

Fredrick's more tender love for her, in part because of the masochistic relation that has been inscribed upon her soul by life in the camp. And this sexual masochism lies at the heart of Tan's political and philosophical intervention on behalf of the historic abjection of Chinese-Malaysian "Comfort Women," Japanese prisoners of war whom the Kempeitai have forced into prostitution in order to serve the "needs" of the military. This institution establishes a fundamental ambivalence between the novel's celebration of pleasure, on the one hand, and its suspicion of ethical claims made on pleasure's behalf. Her erotic connection with Aritomo therefore signals Tan's overarching concern with genuflection and sexual violence. For example, upon becoming Aritomo's student, she cannot bring herself to bow to him, because doing so recalls "too many memories of the times when [she] had been forced to do it, how [she] was slapped when [she] did not bow quickly or low enough" (53). Sexual slavery is the very essence of the camp, Tan implies, because it transforms even the minor dictates of courtesy—like the bow—into symbolic acts of rape.

Tan's response to the foreclosure of desire that history has imposed upon Yun Ling is twofold. First, Aritomo provides Yun Ling with models of ritual practice that deliberately re-inscribe her embodied memory of Japanese cultural forms. As Yun Ling's mind loses its linguistic hold on reality, her ability to rely upon the material relations between things to navigate the fog of Yugiri will become world-saving. And second, the novel's staging of intercultural dialogue within the medium of global English asserts a claim for the healing power of language to restore an embodied relation to memory.

Tan provides a figure for this power in a clever metonymy: the bow of genuflection, which internment has imposed upon Yun Lin's soul, is transformed into the

archer's bow, which she may then wield as an instrument of spiritual power. Through unhurried practice and gentle direction, Aritomo teaches her *kyudo*, the Zen practice of archery. As Teoh masters the ritualized movements of *kyudo*, her body gradually tames its feelings of guilt and hatred. Her submission becomes a form of power by internalizing the form of domination enacted upon her body. The novel's figure for this form of bodily inscription is *kyudo*, the Zen practice of archery, which serves "to train the mind... to strengthen our focus through every ritualized movement" (145).

Of the four categories of extrajudicial violence depicted in the novel—insurgency, martial law, internment, and mass rape—the last stands apart for its moral intractability. Whereas the decapitation, in *The Gift of Rain*, "merely" functioned as a symbol for the brutality of progress toward national sovereignty, the mass rape of comfort women refuses to be contained within the symbolic order of the state's national imagination. In Yun Ling's memory, her sister is singled-out by the Kempeitai for the most dehumanizing fate imaginable: to be fixed in place, starving and squalid, apart from even her fellow prisoners—and for her violation to be distributed in time, across interminable series of rapes, among the "common" Japanese soldiers. In this abjection, Yun Hong represents the essential relation between condemned bodies and sovereign power. In Yun Ling's memory, the sovereign figure Tominaga, the camp commandant, wields the power to release Yun Hong from her infinite torture:

The months passed. The monsoons came and left. I envied their freedom. Each time I spoke to Yun Hong, I would ask her to tell me more about Japanese gardens so I could use the knowledge whenever I talked to Tominaga. I asked Tominaga to release Yun Hong, but he refused. "I cannot free one and leave the others. It is not right."

"But it's quite all right to let her be raped again and again? I don't care what's right or wrong, Tominaga-san," I pressed on when he said nothing. All I want is for my sister not to suffer." I wondered if he had

also forced himself on her. Even though I knew my sister would never forgive me, I said, “I’ll take her place. Just get her out of that hut.”

“You are too useful to me, Kumomori [the name given to Yun Ling by the Japanese],” Tominaga said. (259)

Here Yun Ling’s desire to offer her own body in place of her sister’s encounters Tominaga’s “fascist math”—Arundhati Roy’s term for the icy cost-benefit analysis performed against harms that are categorically incalculable. By refusing to allow her *horimono* to chart a map to reconciliation between Japan and its former colony, Yun Ling withholds the power to memorialize the fate of the comfort women. Her symbolic imagination therefore practices the “algebra of infinite justice”—an insistence upon infinitude within images of suffering (“Infinite Justice”). Yun Ling’s unwillingness to displace the memory of Yun Hong’s suffering onto an inert memorial provides an allegory for the way in which members of her community have resisted assimilation within the myth of national unity. It is, so to speak, a way of holding open the interlocking networks of racial relations and, in so doing, of keeping the Malaysian state from settling easily into a position of developmental subordination to the region’s most powerful national economy—Japan.

The notion of developmental independence lends allegorical significance to Yun Ling’s relationship to Aritomo. Just as the ideal of development through domination provides a key trope for the relationship between Philip and Japan’s master military tactician, here it helps to frame the relationship between Yun Ling and the nation’s cultural master. The fact that, in taking on Yun Ling for an apprentice, Aritomo forces her to “learn to do it [her]self,” suggests the novel’s ambivalent relationship to the legacy of Bandung (77). Yun Ling clearly needs help in order to learn the craft of gardening, and she never does complete the garden she had intended to build for Yun Hong. On the other

hand, the fact that she and Frederick realize that Yun Hong's garden has existed "for forty years" suggests a cultural adequacy in the hybrid appropriation of the dominant culture.

The novel's setting reinforces this point by setting up a heterotopic space of self-sufficient economic activity. Most of the novel's historical action is set primarily in Majuba and its environs, which are located in the Cameron Highlands, at the very heart of peninsular Malaysia. Bucolic and surreal, this lush agricultural area climbs up into hills that, washed in cool mountain air, have historically provided respite for the colonial elite to escape the humid squalor of Kuala Lumpur and the febrile intensity of Singapore. It was and remains a kind of colonial hill station: even today, peninsular Malaysia's thickest jungles encircle the highlands in every direction, cloaking it from the ocean. It is quite literally a colonial dream, having been "discovered" for agriculture by a colonial surveyor who, in a fate worthy of Kipling, was taken by a tiger while on an evening stroll in the hills that bear his name. Yet the Cameron Highlands are big business, with all the economic and environmental entailments this classification implies: for example, massive deforestation there has produced some of the worst soil erosion in the world, a problem whose magnitude can be indicated by the fact that, during a period roughly corresponding to the economic boom time known as "The Asian Miracle," the effects of soil erosion in the Cameron Highlands cost the local population an estimated RM72.5 million in economic damages alone.□

There are limits, however, to the utopian possibility of a transnational community in the Cameron Highlands. Magnus is one of the few characters who can empathize with Teoh's trauma, having been himself a prisoner of both the British and the Japanese. He

too has lost a sister, Petronella. “She was sent to a concentration camp in Bloemfontein,” he tells Yun Ling, “...Petronella died of Typhoid. Or perhaps not—survivors later said the English had mixed powdered glass into the prisoners’ food” (41). In hinting at his sister’s horrendous death, Magnus offers an implicit defense of his decision to flee South Africa following the traumas of the Boer War. But this emigration represents the first of many thematic oppositions between himself and Yun Ling, which Tan employs in order to develop a rich analysis of comprador identity.

Like the novel genre itself, *Majuba* and *Yugiri* create a space for intimacy—for neighborliness—that enables characters to assert personal sovereignty over historical forces that would determine the fault lines of enmity. The Cameron Highlands therefore become a crucial site for mediating the same kinds of tension that, in *The Gift of Rain*, had been mediated by the island city of Penang, because it signals the power of the local to hold grand historical tensions at bay. Just as the isolation of Penang Island makes a figure of the world imaginable to Philip, it is the smallness of the Cameron Highlands that grants it a mediating power.

□ This spatial ideal is reflected in the novel’s handling of sexuality: the novel’s overt treatment of sexual perversity stands in contrast to its muted presentation, in the character of Frederick, of a failed wedding plot. Yun Ling encounters two suitors: one a conventionally reliable Afrikaner planter (Frederick) and the other an enigmatic and subversive aesthete (Aritomo). Each represents a colonizing culture—one Japanese, the other Boer South African; however, neither is the obvious historical agent of colonial power. Furthermore, the struggle for Teoh’s heart contains hardly a trace of enmity; indeed, as neighbors, the capitalist-planter and artist-gardener depend upon each other to

survive the war. In fact, Tan adeptly displaces the suspense of the courtship plot onto competing hegemonic systems, since we know early on that the war left her childless and dispassionately married to her work. The novel therefore asks not whom she will choose but how she will mediate, now that she is retired from the duty of passing judgment, the competing systems of power that jointly colonize her heart.

The complexity with which the novel transmutes enmity into intimacy is most clearly evident in its staging of global English. By remaining open to vernacular from *Afrikaans* and *Hokkien*, Tan's linguistic space provides a material corollary to the ideal of a welcoming cosmopolitan space, in Majuba. The negative capability of English to absorb global significations is on display, for example, in a scene where Yun Ling attends a *braai*—a traditional South African barbeque. The scene performs a plot function similar to the one played by balls in a typical Jane Austen novel: it provides a pastoral staging of the commons, where everyone who matters in the Cameron Highlands can see and be seen by their social peers. In this scene, Tan uses the playful image of “Boerewors,” a homemade sausage indigenous to Boer cuisine and imported to Malaya through South African emigration. Teoh first encounters this exotic fare at a braai held on the Majuba Estate: “The glistening tubes, I saw, were coils of uncooked sausages, each one about an inch thick and one and a half feet long.” Tan wryly juxtaposes the Boerewors against the assembled party, which Teoh describes in the paragraph that immediately follows as “a mix of Chinese, Malays and Europeans” (56). Magnus, the gregarious entrepreneur whose indiscriminate social tastes prompt him to host the braai, keeps watch over this congenial gathering like a patriarch among his family:□

In the shade of a camphor tree, Magnus watched over a  
barbecue grill that had been made from an old oil drum cut in half

lengthwise and laid on a trestle. The ridgebacks lazed at his feet, scratching themselves and looking up at me as I approached.

“Ah, you’ve been found!” Magnus said.

“I’ve never seen these at the Cold Storage,” I said, handing the tray of sausages to him.

“Boerewors. Made them myself.”

“They look like something Brolloks and Bittergal might leave behind.” The dogs glanced up at the sound of the names, their tails flattening the grass.

“Sies!” Magnus grimaced. “Put them on the braai. You’ll soon see how lekker they taste.” (56)

In this passage, Magnus and Teoh undertake veiled negotiation regarding the sexual desirability of his nephew, Frederik, which subtly slips into their differing relation to comprador norms of consumption. Here the pleasure of language is closely linked to the pleasure of comprador consumption. Magnus’s greeting conveys a friendly interpellation, the mild claim of having “found” Teoh that draws force from her inability to find Boerewors in Cold Storage—an elite purveyor of imported foodstuffs that draws social capital from its association with colonialism. Teoh’s diction reflects the ambivalence she feels about this consumption: the revolting description of “glistening tubes” recalls a phallus of absurdly exaggerated dimensions, prompts Teoh to compare the sausage with excrement. Magnus disarms her revulsion through the dexterity of his Afrikaner humor: the braai, which can refer to both the grill and the social event organized around it, will transform the unappetizing “glistening tubes” into something “lekker” — a savory morsel of onomatopoeia requiring no gloss. The possibility of delectation is unsettling, in part, because Teoh’s sexuality has been conditioned by the experience of life in the camps. Yet the scene of the braai resolves this tension by allowing her to disperse her revulsion into a joke: the ridgebacks “might leave behind” this sausage. Teoh’s euphemism leaves enough

ambiguity for us to read animal instinct as scatological or—in a more positive valence—disinterested.

Within the larger context of the plot, Tan's aural imagination expands the stakes of this exchange to world-historical dimensions: the sausages playfully evoke the "Boer Wars," assuaging both characters' anxiety by allowing them to recall a distant terror (a mutual struggle against the British) in order to displace a proximate one (the Malayan Emergency). The very fact of their presence at the braai provides a saving proof that although there are class enemies lurking just beyond the estate borders, history has overcome greater disparities in bringing together a Boer landowner and a Chinese girl from the internment camp. The power of wordplay is such that not only can it transform Teoh's disgust into play; but if we get the joke, then it can make us feel her tension melt away.

In the subtle wordplay of this passage, we can see how Tan deploys the mediating power of language, and of dialogue in particular, to foster intersubjective intimacy. Tan gestures to this utopian potential in the novel's dedication, where he associates it with the beauty of Afrikaans: jointly dedicating the book to his sister and to A. J. Buys, he writes, "Without you, this book would be twice as long and half as good. May your beautiful language thrive forever." Indeed, we may think of this dedication as emblematic of the psychic work affected in the narrative, which centers upon the theme of using language to mediate what cannot be resolved.

Development is also an importance aspect of the novel's aesthetic project, and Tan performs his own authorial development by offering more richly articulated characters and themes: the complexity of Teoh's narrative voice extends well beyond its

thematic function to incorporate deep psychological complexity, the minor characters are represented with more nuance and generosity, and the social context situates them more definitely as historical actors. The struggle for Malayan independence, for instance, develops in a more nuanced way. The resistance is depicted not through an heroic archetype like Kon, “The White Tiger,” but through rounded depictions of communist insurgents who are fully realized: they suffer fear and misery, and they are motivated by the concrete historical force of poverty.

This authorial development is reflected in the greater narrative maturity of Teoh, who is able to provide a more nuanced narrative frame because she has endured more suffering than Philip. Her relative lack of privilege and subaltern gender have made her more exposed to the war’s violence, and her subsequent work as a prosecutor of Japanese war criminals makes her an informed and discursively adept witness to history. Tan shifts his emphasis from symbolic closure to narrative mediation. Philip had represented the closure of his conflicted identity through the parallel beheadings of his father and master, which enacted a ritualistic severing of patrimony and a capacity to incorporate multiple identities within his name. In contrast, Teoh distances herself from the idea that her name should change in order to provide a means for historic closure:

My name is Teoh Yun Ling. I was born in 1923 in Penang, an island on the northwest coast of Malaya. Being Straits Chinese, my parents spoke mainly English, and they had asked a family friend who was a poet to choose a name for me. Teoh is my surname, my family name. As in life, the family must come first. That was what I had always been taught. I had never changed the order of my name, not even when I studied in England, and I had never taken on an English name just to make it easier for anyone. (28)

This passage reflects the fundamental ambiguity of Teoh’s relation to the past. On one hand, she stakes a claim for own authority over the representation of history, insisting

that “family must come first.” But on the other, the force of declaration bleeds into reticence as she qualifies the claim (“I had always been taught”). This dynamic is reflected in her prioritization of Asian genealogy over Western convention: she refuses to reverse the traditional order of patronymic and given name. This ordering suggests that, by “coming first,” family refuses to be superseded by the social imperatives (“to make it easier for anyone”). Her insistence upon the order of her naming fixes her identity position in historical time, geographic space, ethnic heritage, linguistic group, and familial relation; however, it is an ambiguous kind of fixity: to come first, in history, is to be subject to revision—to risk being overwritten by subsequent “education,” such that one’s words fall into the past-perfect of what “had been told.” Thus the inevitable belatedness of narration creeps into her language, seeming to rob her statement of its authority.

Even as Teoh insists upon the certainty of family, then, her authority rests upon a capacity to continuously bear an identity that she cannot, will not, elude. Her narrative therefore draws upon contemporaneity for a fundamentally different purpose than Philip’s: rather than re-inscribe the past in order to exorcise historic ghosts, she draws upon their haunting to lend meaning to the present. This distinction reflects a differing subject position relative to national development. Philip represents Penang’s cosmopolitan elite (a representation crystallized through his proud inhabitation of a comprador family name). Teoh’s systemic position is more tenuous, however. She is an affluent professional, but her origins are middle-class, and her power to influence the course of state therefore relies upon her continued ability to serve from the bench—a capacity that has begun to break down.

Having been educated in law at Cambridge, Yun Ling has a professional identity that underscores the association between Straits Chinese identity and meritocracy in modern Malaysian society. As her colleague Abdullah points out in English, “ignoring the sign in the courtroom dictating the use of Malay language in the court,” she is only the second woman appointed to this highest position (5). Thus Teoh’s retirement is neither triumphant nor willing. Her professional identity, which she has constructed upon a masterful command of language, has been privately undermined by encroaching aphasia and dementia. Eventually her illness will “completely unhinge her mind,” relegating her to a merely phenomenal existence (20).

Her capacity to retain the hard-fought gains of justice are therefore figuratively linked to her relation to interlocution; for it is in the gesture of discourse that both Yun Ling and Tan stake the production of historical truth. Tan again employs the narrative conceit of a privileged interlocutor: Michiko had provided a window for dialogue to elaborate the deep history of imperial Japan in *The Gift of Rain*, and a similar role is played by Tatsuji in *The Garden of Evening Mists*. Yet in the latter case, there is the crucial difference that Tatsuji had participated directly in the war effort as a Kamikaze pilot. If Yun Ling’s relationship with Aritomo is the experience that develops her capacity to judge the Japanese, Tan implies, her interactions with Tatsuji are what develop her capacity to represent the cultural origins of Japanese imperialism.

Tan deftly foreshadows Tatsuji’s role in binding her narrative together through repeated reference to the “knot of his tie” on different occasions: he “shapes the knot of his tie with his thumb” (20), and later “shapes the knot in his tie with his thumb and forefinger” (106), and finally “probes the dimple in the knot of his tie” (108). The subtle

progression of these gestures – from nudging, to pinching, to fondling – suggests an unconscious auto-eroticism. Earlier, the narrative frame connects this image to the site of writing: “Sitting at Aritomo’s desk,” Teoh tells us in prelude, “I realize that there are fragments of my life that I do not want to lose, if only because I still have not found the knot to tie them up with” (25). These images foreshadow the novel’s staging of a sadomasochistic identification, in which identity flows through those desires with which we are bound-up within memory. Yun Ling’s will to be inscribed stands in opposition to Philip’s desire to “cut... the eternal knot” (*The Gift of Rain* 340).

Their dialogue is liberating for two reasons. First, it functions to supplement the political logic of her captivity, because it enables her to imagine the war from a Japanese perspective that does not align with the icy rationality of the Kempeitai. It therefore proves to be a crucial precondition for her cosmopolitan imagination. Tatsuji provides a counter-narrative to the acculturation she experienced in the camps. Tatsuji discloses the story of his queer love, during the war, for a commanding officer, which helps to put Yun Ling’s own sexual relationship with Aritomo into perspective.

Likewise, the learning of the Kamikaze helps to put the difference between the death of an ordinary soldier who must die in the performance of his duty, and that of a Kamikaze lies in the tautological necessity of death for the execution of the latter’s duty. His body is not merely an objective casualty of state violence: it is the signifier of a ravenous empire, whose cannibalization has turned inward. In that sense, it is akin to the institutionalized rape of Teoh’s sister, which supplies the novel with a moral touchstone for Teoh’s historical judgments. The Kamikaze phenomenon is a kind of queering of the imagined community, the creation of a situation in which a male body could be subjected

to an experience approximating rape. Nevertheless, it retains a crucial difference: whereas the pilot's sacrifice occurs instantaneously, the suffering of the comfort girl is distributed and magnified through time. Moreover, the Kamikaze narrative disrupts the paternalistic ideal of a monolithic empire, genuflecting to Hirohito in synchrony with every sunrise. His story opens an imaginary space for comparison, which clears the way for her to link the infinite suffering of Hiroshima to the infinite suffering of the camp. "Hearing the emperor's name always took me back to the camp," she recalls, "it had been run on Japanese time; each day at dawn we had to bow in the direction of the emperor" (101).

More subtly, Tatsuji's open depiction of same-sex desire clears a transgressive counter-space, transforming Yugiri from a haunted ruin into a queer heterotopia in which Teoh may inhabit her own subversive forms of desire. She does so by revealing the existence of her *horimono* to the professor, implicitly disclosing the transgressive sexual relationship that she has shared with Aritomo, which had been from the beginning marked by masochism and subjection. Recollecting the process, she admits to growing "addicted" to the pain: "I had begun to anticipate what he would put on my body, and I had even started to enjoy the pain, because for those hours when his needles tracked across my skin, the clamour in my mind was deadened" (283). Nevertheless, it is a definite inscription precisely in the sense that it establishes the boundaries of the world explicitly and entirely: the site of memory is a garden precisely because it is walled-off, its changing light manipulating the historical perspectives. This seclusion is absolute: aesthetic, linguistic, phenomenal, and social. Interpersonal dialogue therefore resounds

within the immutable chamber that historical discourse has inscribed, its crosstalk bleeding into white noise.

To conclude, then: in Tan's work, the project of economic and cultural development is inseparable from the production of historical memory. These interactions are particularly fraught for Malaysia's Straits Chinese community, because a history of abjection has made it impossible to identify completely with the elite culture of a comprador bourgeoisie. Tan represents this problem, in part, as the burden of choosing to remain in place rather than to emigrate: Magnus founds the Majuba Tea Estate in the idyllic setting of the Cameron Highlands after fleeing South Africa and the traumas of the Boer War. This emigration represents the first of many thematic oppositions between himself and Yun Ling, which Tan employs in order to develop a rich analysis of comprador identity.

The war years function as an ideal space in which to suspend these contradictions; and the project of mediating their traumas allows Tan to challenge the presuppositions of national culture. In his novels, the war enables potential enemies to come together as friends, even as it instills enmity between men with similar class, religious, and demographic backgrounds. At the same time, this ethical capacity depends upon the novel's leveraging of global English, which admits free passage to Afrikaner language, enabling a trans-oceanic imaginary that stages—and critiques—the cultural practices of Malaysia's comprador bourgeoisie.

The novel's figure for this artistic device is *shakkei*: borrowed scenery, which concerns the effort to cultivate a garden in such a way as to create the illusion of having contained its surrounding environment in a meaningful configuration. The exoticism of a

re-orientalist imagination helps to draw these figures together: Tan's deep consideration of *zazen*, *horimono*, *kyudo*, and other traditional practices enables him to overcome Japanese-Malaysian enmity—and through this overcoming, to stage an artistic triumph within the world-literary field of global English. Yet there are ethical and practical limits to this capability: without a stable political mapping between the realist and fantastic worlds, these representations threaten to collapse into exoticism and kitsch. Tan attempts to capture the attention of west-centered global audience through a re-Orientalist staging of history.

In Tan's historical imagination, violence confers a ludic quality onto history by puncturing a space within time, through which can pour a phenomenal experience of suppressed mythical content. These fantastical eruptions are contained within the stable framework of everyday rituals that translate easily across cultural barriers: the mindfulness practice of *zazen*, for instance, or the (quintessentially multicultural) practice of sharing one's ethnic sausage at a backyard braai. Yun Ling's *horimono*, for instance, signifies all of the novel's major themes: the brutality of occupation and decolonization; the painful loss of her sister, who was coerced into becoming one of the camp's "comfort women"; and the arduous course of decolonization, which Tan depicts as another instance of domineering cultural influence—this time under a non-western form of enlightened discipline. It is a form of hegemony, however, that relies upon individual participation and consent.

Tan's novels, we might say, attempt to represent the (w)hole of national culture. Tan suggests that historical representation must remain inextricably linked to the decisions of individual persons and communities. History is literally inscribed within

bodies—more brutally for some than for others—so we cannot simply will away subaltern experience by implementing a project of "development" or integration from above. Nor can we unilaterally change the lived reality of other cultural worlds, whether by gun or by book, simply by being present with forceful good intentions. Our only option, on this view, is to figure out ways to change systemic privilege—as the beneficiaries of that very privilege—from within the social roles that make claims upon our capacity to represent. In other words, history asks us to be who we are while simultaneously changing the significance of that being. The difficulty here is that this demand troubles the most sacred liberal doxa—the neutrality of choosing how to identify—by implicating it with the privilege of being offered a choice. And it is this difficulty that my next chapter will consider.

Personal development falls out of sync with both national and global culture, the latter of which both entail a forward movement that is unimpeded—and indeed, impelled—by the production of historical memory. Moreover, the inability to fully relinquish the myth of national unity bars the subject of history from moving beyond the psychic territory staked out by the past; (s)he remains colonized by spectral desires to which there can be no direct access, because the trans-subjective self from which they originate has been lost to time.

## Chapter Two

### New Malaysian Voices: Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Huzir Sulaiman

*Joss and Gold* (2002), by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, depicts the cultural and economic opportunities that became available to members of Malaysia's Chinese middle class during the period of leading up to the race riots of May 13, 1969. In so doing, it revisits a familiar trope, most famously depicted by Lloyd Fernando in *Green is the Colour* (1993), in which the riots are depicted as the result of a cynical power-grab, and a tragedy primarily for the vibrant multi-cultural elite of Kuala Lumpur. By framing the topic of the riots from the perspective of an English-educated and well-heeled young Chinese woman, however, Lim offers a more positive representation of the conflict, one optimistic about the opportunities made available in the aftermath of violence though no less critical of the jingoistic nationalism that produced it.

Now primarily known as an Asian American poet and memoirist, Lim is a native of Malacca, one of the oldest *entrepôt* in Southeast Asia and, along with Singapore and Penang, part of the former Straits Settlements, which helped to secure British shipping in the region. In recognition of this heritage, Lim has chosen to identify herself as a “Nonya feminist”—reference to the hybrid community of Peranakan Chinese (Lim 314), known colloquially as *baba nonya*, a group that has been settled along the Strait of Malacca for centuries.<sup>21</sup> Lim's use of the term “Nonya” indicates a construction of hybrid regional

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<sup>21</sup> In Malay, *baba nonya* literally means “father [and] mother,” and in this context the colloquialism evokes a degree of cultural assimilation not afforded to the *Orang Cina*, literally meaning “Person [of/from] China,” which has a more pejorative connotation when used to refer to diaspora groups of more recent provenance. For

identity from abroad, but we need not read this fact as a contradiction: the Straits Chinese blend of Chinese and Malay cultural practices makes the community one of the most distinctive examples of pre-colonial cosmopolitanism in the region. It is therefore unsurprising that Lim's novel would contest the idea, central to the rhetoric of the riot's instigators, that the Chinese in Malaysia are not legitimate *bumiputera*, (literally meaning "sons of the soil")—not members of a caste of citizens in Malaysia whose native status gives them extended rights and privileges under the law. (In principle a form of positive affirmative action, the *bumiputera* privileges were conceived, and have been defended, as a decolonizing attempt to help the ethnic groups, primarily Malay, to catch up with the Chinese in their development.)

In reading Lim as a model of *nonya* subjectivity, I also draw upon the work of Weihsin Gui, which situates Lim's feminism in relation to Malay nationality. In Gui's analysis, Lim's performance of feminist subjectivity resists what Gui refers to as the "official multiculturalism" of Malaysia and Singapore. Gui reads the female perspectives focalized in *Joss and Gold* to be "in tension with the dominant postcolonial and national narratives that focus on the foundational role of men in the process of Southeast Asian nation-building" (125). I find Gui's reading compelling, because it links Lim's feminist political expression to an Adornian conception of cultural mediation, which allows a feminist praxis to emerge that is not simply limited to writing, but is engaged with a technics of self-fashioning. Emphasizing the role that the culture industry plays in inducing conformity among Southeast Asian female, Gui argues that Lim depicts a "psychic hinterland" through her negotiation of masculinist ethnic ideals centered upon

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a fascinating discussion on the politics of this term, see Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Hoakiau di Indonesia* [The Chinese in Indonesia].

the novel's male characters. In contrast to their developmental narratives, which Gui associates with the "female *Bildungsroman*," Lim, argues Gui, affords a model of "sentimental endurance" (160).

While I find this reading wholly convincing, what I want to emphasize in reading Lim's work is how she stages the class conditionality of this sentimental labor. At both the thematic and formal levels, we may read the novel, which Lim began writing in 1979, as a counter-factual autobiography imagining the life of a self who stayed behind. It is a novel about the possibilities made available through regional, rather than global, mobility. And it asks us to consider how the processes of globalism transform local power dynamics for subjects who are neither privileged nor abject, neither exiled nor fully at home. Lim uses the central trope of air travel to establish the globe as a structuring principle, which she then undermines through a variety of formal techniques. The first book, subtitled "crossing," is set in Kuala Lumpur during the "emergency" period 1968-1969. Two books follow: "circling," which is set in the Westchester County, New York of 1980, and "landing," set in Singapore the following year. Taken as an organizing principle, these images update the diaspora trope of oceanic crossing for the era of aviation-based emigration; by playing with this trope, Lim signals a concern that emigration has become a form of class privilege. Yet if this is so, the terrain and direction of these flows may not be as straightforward as we would expect. In Lim's plot, it is the West whose movement is made to seem unsettled, and Singapore to be desired.

Lim's protagonist, a brilliant and attractive young Chinese-Malaysian woman named Li An, remains firmly rooted within the former colonial territory of Malaya. As the narrative unfolds, Li An finds herself bursting with a mix of possibility and

frustration that seems difficult to contain; and indeed, one of the novel's thematic concerns is how the newly educated class of upwardly-mobile professional women represents an under-realized source of human capital. Even as it argues for the realization of this potential, however, the novel finds ways to contain Li An within her regional context. How can the nation make the investments necessary to elevate its global standing, Lim asks, when the lure of Western lifestyles both devalues the national character and draws a dividend from its human capital in the form of skilled emigration?

The novel opens with Li An beginning her first teaching assignment as a tutor of English literature at the University of Malaya. This role, which she likens to a "struggle of English words against unyielding minds" (7), implicates literature in the transmission of liberal sexual and political mores to local students who are either scandalized or unreceptive. Li An's commitment to humane discourse puts her at odds with the *données* of postcolonial literature; they might align her with a character such as David Lurie, the South African professor, from J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. But where Lurie's commitment to British Romanticism becomes a point of critique when it leads him to engage in an ethically questionable affair with one of his students, Li An's affair with Chester, an American Peace Corps volunteer, is surprisingly benign.

Central to Li An's development are her relationships with two men: the staid, gentle, but profoundly dull Henry; and the wild, empathic, but intellectually abrasive Chester. When the narrative opens, Li An and Henry are newly married. Henry, who comes from a prominent and wealthy Straits Chinese family, loves his wife with a kind of dogged worship undercut by his fondness for showing off her intelligence to his friends. When Li An befriends the fiery Chester, in Malaysia for a two-year stint teaching

woodworking, an intimacy develops between them that is as much intellectual as it is physical. Despite its generic predictability, their subsequent affair is historically contingent: it takes the May 1969 race riots to set off a chain of events that, ultimately, force them to shelter together in the home of a friend. Li An becomes pregnant from this tryst, but—contrary to every narrative and cultural expectation—she chooses not to inform Chester, who leaves for America soon thereafter.

For Henry, Li An represents the new sexual and intellectual possibilities that new mores of courtship and dating have made available to a professional class in which he, as an aspiring scientist, is firmly ensconced. Her education makes her enticing, but it also threatens to undermine the stability of patriarchal tradition. The stakes of their union are made clear in a scene recounting Henry's inadvertently proposes marriage:

He couldn't think with her head so close to him. "Marry me," he said, his cheek against hers. "Marry me, and stay with me. You won't have to teach. I'll pay off your government bond, and you won't be forced to go back to your town. You don't have to work if you don't want to."

His body was shaking as if he was hurting. He closed his eyes as her breath, a warm breeze, went by his ear. His lungs grew congested with fear, and he felt in such danger he could hardly speak.

He had not meant to say it. They had known each other for only three months. , since September, and he didn't approve of her. She had a reputation—not a bad one like a loose woman, but a reputation all the same—for being bold and free. (17)

This scene develops many of the tensions that global culture has made available to comprador subjects like Henry and Li An. By marrying a woman who is "bold and free," Henry embraces the promise of liberal self-cultivation rather than conforming to traditional gender norms; his inclination aligns his comprador identity with a new and attractive cultural liberalism. And indeed, by having Henry confess his desire involuntarily, Lim associates the liberalization of courtship with a thrilling cultural

revolution that Henry and Li An can feel coming but cannot comprehend. On the other hand, Lim's apparent celebration of neoliberal development and the opportunities for personal development that it affords do not provide the degree of female liberation that we might expect for an educated and westernized character like Li An. Without intending to, Henry and Li An reinscribe a traditional expectation that a woman's body should be the property of her husband, because there is the unstated shadow of a financial transaction, which remains latent for both characters, when Henry fumblingly offers to "pay off [Li An's] government bond" so that she would not need to "teach" or "work" (17).

Li An agrees to marry Henry, because she is "overcome with self-pity" and "terrified by the power of her isolation" (18). She understands the objectifying nature of Henry's desire, but she greets it with neutrality rather than enthusiasm or anger: "She thought she understood what Henry wanted when his body trembled, and if he insisted she might be willing. She was curious, and he would be grateful; he wouldn't hurt her" (18). Although her reaction lacks any hint of shame, it would still require Henry to "insist." Henry does not comprehend her ambivalence, because it proves impossible for him to imagine their relationship from her perspective—or indeed, to imagine that she could have a desire for self-cultivation that is independent of her socially inscribed role as a caregiver. From the beginning, then, their relationship proves to be somewhat beyond Henry's depth. When Li An protests that her "degree" is "all [she] has," Henry can only hear a challenge to his own status; it remains impossible for him to think of Li An's education in the way that she thinks of it herself, as a fundamental component of her self-definition and self-worth. Thus despite wanting to receive love, he offers only support.

What is most interesting about Lim's depiction of this courtship is how new forms of social contact prove not to be liberating but instead reenact, contrary to both characters' intentions, the very scripts that they were supposed to replace. Henry makes his objectifying offer, and Li An accedes to it, not because either of them has a clearly patriarchal understanding of the situation, but because the very conditions of globalism that free them to inhabit liberal norms also deprive them of a clear framework in which to negotiate the marriage, what might appear to be a feminist critique of traditional cultural mores in the name of globalization, at first glance, turns out to be something like the opposite: a critique of purely negative models of personal and cultural development. Lim therefore asks us to consider whether secular institutions—and in particular the university—can foster cultural intimacy in the absence of traditional social bonds. In this respect, Li An's English degree becomes vital, because it enables her to find work teaching at the University of Malaya, which in turn allows her to avoid the life of a domestic housewife. Her English education disarms the gender roles that she and Henry have unintentionally cast for themselves. Without this opportunity, Li An's mobility would almost certainly terminate with her marriage to Henry.

On the other side of things, Chester's Ivy League education has left him with strong anthropological biases about Malaysian culture and politics, which he interprets through a dogmatic post-colonial lens. The beleaguered Malaysian lecturer thus finds herself in an ironic position: defending British poetry against an American who questions the value of teaching G. M. Hopkins or A. E. Housman in the postcolonial context. Chester's dogmatic rebuke of Li An's love for Western literature is petulant: "It's not a sacred book, like the Bible. Look, I don't mean to be rude, but it's no good teaching these

kinds of poems any more. This is all British culture, get it? British. We had a revolution and threw them out with the tea bags, so I know what I'm talking about. You've got your own culture. That's what you should be teaching" (41). In lumping the United States in with other post-colonial nations, Chester is clearly taking pleasure in disavowing the ineluctable fact of this own national privilege; in other words, he is slumming within a Malay-nationalist discourse.

Latent within his challenge to his British culture, however, lies the same variety of hurtful ethno-populism that would restore an idealized pre-colonial civilization that never really existed. Soon after Chester befriends Li An and Henry, they invite him to dinner, where he starts an argument about the authenticity of his hosts' national identity. "Malay is the only real culture in this country," he quips, parroting his working-class Malay friends (42). As for the ethnic Chinese, Chester argues, "They're here for the money. They speak Chinese and live among themselves. They could as easily be in Hong Kong or even in New York's Chinatown" (43). Chester's dogmatic nativism ought to provide a corrective for Li An's naïveté; but because he speaks from a condition from inauthenticity, Li An is free to trot out a naïvely utopian rehearsal of secular national ideals. "You see," she opines, "what you are saying is quite wrong. Chinese and Indians are also Malaysians here. What matters is what you know you are, inside.... Give us a few more years and we'll be a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people." Thus she has no rebuff for Chester's charge that she "almost sound[s] like an American," which pinpoints the essential dilemma of her subject position (44).

What claim to recognition do Li An and Henry have in a rapidly decolonizing nation-state? At a more general level, this question becomes a problem of literary value.

The great American writers “Pound and Eliot and Henry James” spent their working lives in England, Li An remarks, but that makes them no less American (42). Furthermore, Henry argues, the notion of a “real” culture begs the question: what is real if not “My family? My friends?” (43). “Everything in Malaysia is champor-champor, mixed, rojak,” Li An concludes: even Islam, the cornerstone of Malay identity, comes “from Saudi Arabia” (44).

This ideal of mixing is attractive, but it also misses the appeal to historical specificity in Chester’s argument, which he has picked up through his association with woodworkers and Malay teachers. Li An’s conception of national identity is boilerplate multiculturalism; in a purely negative form, it is no less schematic than Abdullah Hussein’s racial essentialism. In contrast, Chester’s work in the Peace Corps does have the virtue of defamiliarizing the settled multiculturalism of his hosts, who posit the nation’s diversity as a categorical fact but remain isolated from the kinds of economic and educational mixing that tend to generate racial resentment. From the perspective of the nation’s impoverished majority, the pleasures of British literature have yielded no social cohesion, because they have remained wholly unavailable to the majority of working-class Malaysians.

This dispute about British Literature may say little that is conclusive about the status of A.E. Housman in a postcolonial context; however, it does say a great deal about all three characters’ relative privilege. Henry insists that he and Li An “don’t want to be in Hong Kong or what you [Chester] call Chinatown” (43). But this also misses the force of Chester’s argument, because the postcolonial criticism of comprador privilege that he parrots is not directed at forcing Henry and Li An into exile, but at including them more

fully in the life of the nation. The observation that cosmopolitan Chinese might easily relocate applies to the wealthy couple far more than it might apply to mainstream Malays or even other, less affluent Chinese. Chester misunderstands the nation not because he fails to diagnose its political tensions, but because he fails to understand that they are essential to the production of Malay identity.

If this recourse to class-consciousness seems arbitrary or even petty, it bears emphasizing that it is in keeping with the sociological mode of Lim's writing. Throughout the first book, she takes great care to depict the insularity and conservatism of a Chinese elite cut off from mainstream national life. The political antipathies in which Chester traffics, for instance, circulate in the "tea place" he frequents, "an open shack near Brickfields, an area so crowded with immigrant Indians that she [Li An] had never dared visit it" (47). But Li An thinks nothing of motor biking with Chester in her role as his guide to the culture; in the enabling presence of a foreigner, she reveals even to herself a Malaysia of bazaars and teahouses that she had never realized existed beyond the bookish nativism of her cultural training. Their scandalous cross-country rides thus take on the quality of a Siddhartha narrative: Li An partakes of a sense of limitlessness found in the global novel—but in a geographic expanse that is circumscribed by the range of her battered Honda motorbike. In comparison, Chester's truly global cosmopolitanism seems infinite: "He had been everywhere—America, Bermuda, now Kuala Lumpur. He seemed to her rich in experience, a prince passing through, while she was a frog sitting in a well" (48). This image, one of Mao Tse Tung's favorite illustrations, is doubly significant for the optics it describes and for its humorous expression of the Chinese disdain for parochialism: unable to see beyond his periscopic horizon, the frog concludes

that the sky is no bigger than the mouth of the well. With no need for the radical distance of exile, the foreign gaze reveals both host and nation as they truly are: deformed but not alien, unfamiliar and alive.

It would be too simple, however, to conclude that Lim glorifies Chester's unbounded experience over narrow local parochialism. In contrast with this semi- charmed existence, typified by the bare freedom to travel with a man who is not her husband, the novel offers the doomed affair of Li An's friends, Gina and Paroo. Unlike Li An and Chester, for whom profession and bloodless marriage provide the necessary cover to pursue a dalliance without arousing too much suspicion, Gina and Paroo are secondary teachers who remain dependent upon their families for support. Moreover, because Gina is a nonya woman and Paroo a Tamil man, their dalliance violates a social injunction against exogamy: upon learning that Paroo has scheduled a date for their civil wedding, Gina rages, "My father will disown me if I marry a keling-kwei, a Tamil devil" (52). Shortly thereafter, Li An learns that Gina has committed suicide, and her thoughts arrive at a poetic image for her friend's impossible liberation. In close third person, Lim writes, "Gina isn't in this world anymore. The entire blue sky and the hot air contained Gina nowhere" (55). This image of total negation expresses a desire to be free from confinement, but it also recognizes that to be totally free is to exist nowhere. Situated being, Lim suggests, necessarily implies the sublunary entailments of local belonging.

The second part of Lim's novel, headed "circling," describes not the physical movement of its focalized character—now Chester—but his equivocation upon learning that he may have fathered Li An's child more than a decade in the past. Set in the present, it depicts Chester's life in the affluent U.S. suburb of Westchester, New York. This droll

play on Chester's "West" draws our attention to the characteristic insularity that marks his community of academic and political elites. After leaving Malaysia, we learn, he attended graduate school at Columbia University, where he met his wife, Meryl, a driven bureaucrat and committed feminist who has suppressed any desire for children she may have once had. Their marriage is congenial, though it has settled into a middle-age routine dominated by professional and civic obligations. Meanwhile, Chester listlessly inhabits a career built on anthropological fieldwork that he completed nearly a decade ago during his stint in Malaysia.

We can locate the compass of his narrative in its orienting and bounding functions -- in the way it establishes boundaries and then contests them without any real action having taken place. The drama of this middle passage focuses upon Chester's attempts to confront his own finitude (symbolized by the vasectomy his pragmatic wife keeps pressing him to undergo) as well as the infinity of memory, especially memories of his year in Malaysia. In the interstices of mundane life, recollections of this time come over him in "a kind of panic," we are told:

...like the panic he felt when he saw the black smoke the night of the riots in Kuala Lumpur, a sensation of falling through space not knowing that there would be a landing. The same panic he felt when he read Paroo's letter about Li An's baby, and counted the dates and found that they matched. [sic] He had suppressed the panic each time and come through. After all, neither the riots nor Li An's baby had been his business. He could leave and did. Li An had never written to him, and although he already suspected what Paroo would later write -- that Henry had left her and that the baby was a scandal -- he had been saved by geography and the distance of cultures. (132-133)

To understand the moral weight carried by Paroo's letter, we need only recall that its writer is emblematic of the heavy penalty levied against miscegenation in Malaysian culture. For all Chester knows, his disinterest could have relegated Li An and her child to

a similar fate—or even worse, given the religiously tinged expressions of anti-Chinese sentiment that defined the conditions of social upheaval when he left.

With this detail, Lim compares Chester with an absentee scion—the archetypal colonial figure of patriarchal European men who abandon local families they have acquired in the colonies in order to return to the “legitimate” ones they have left behind in Europe.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the most famous postcolonial treatment of this theme is Indonesian Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s Buru tetralogy, in which Ontosoroh, a powerful Javanese *nyai* (concubine), becomes the source counter-hegemonic pedagogy for Minke, Pram’s protagonist, guiding him into revolutionary consciousness that ultimately catalyzes the overthrow of Dutch rule and the birth of the Indonesian nation. Christopher GoGwilt, reading Pram’s work genealogically, explains the significance of the *nyai* as follows:

Governed neither by the marriage system of European colonizers nor by the customs of the colonized, the status of the *nyai* constitutes a challenge to the social and legal conceptions of domestic relations within an international perspective. The formation and disappearance of *nyai* narrative form poses the question of international domestic arrangements as the shared problem of reading genealogies of English and Indonesian literary modernism. (153)

By employing his own counter-discourse, Chester is able to hold the image of chaos and horror in abeyance. The cost, however, is the self-alienation that results from his profound reification of this once-familiar world: he can only establish a salvific distance

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<sup>22</sup> In Western fiction, we may recall, Joseph Conrad critically deploys this trope of femininity and its other in *Heart of Darkness*, which suspends the allegorical journey between Europe and the Congo between two female characters: Kurtz’s “Intended,” whom Marlow insists upon leaving “out of it”—out of the masculine sphere of colonial questing—and Kurtz’s Congolese mistress, whose gaze Marlow likens to “the wilderness itself” (153, 168). Indeed, it Kurtz’s the desire remain with the latter that impels Marlow’s discretion in representing the events of his narrative to the former.

between himself and the real Malaysia by reducing a significant constellation of memories to that empty generality, “business.”

Lest we peremptorily emphasize his callousness, however, Lim allows us to glimpse the trauma that the “May troubles” have inflicted upon him. In an unguarded moment with his academic mentor, Chester recalls the period when “everything happened,” describing it as a form of mass hysteria: “Everyone I knew went kind of crazy, like a psychosis. People just cracked open. The nicest people...” (188; original ellipsis). Yet upon cross-examination, he reveals the source of his anxiety to be his own participation in the cruelty—his abandoning of Li An. In the eleven intervening years, these feelings have welled into a profound sense of shame and “curiosity” regarding his estranged child (189). Thus we find that, despite having secured tenure at a prestigious women’s college, Chester is as frustrated with his environment as, in the novel’s opening pages, Li An had been with hers. He finds the “solid materiality” of his students repulsive, and he feels “lost in an intensely pagan country” (137, 138). The avid consumerism of these female bodies throws his own bad infinity into relief: “he saw them enlarging into the future while he continued to drift among the shallows of his ever-lengthening present life (138). Within this context of malaise, the bilious reaction to painkillers he suffers following the vasectomy is but a final, physical manifestation of the nausea induced by his own finitude. Although he possesses the boundless power to “crush” his female students (at least in fantasy), what he lacks is the closure of parenthood. After eleven years of silence, then, and for purely selfish reasons, he chooses to return to Malaysia in order to meet his estranged child.

“Landing,” the final book of *Joss and Gold*, contains elements of homecoming and reconciliation; but formally speaking, it weaves a narrative of deferral and displacement. Chester returns to Southeast Asia in order to seek out Suyin and Li An; however, he quickly discovers that the region he remembers both does and does not exist:

Singapore in 1981, unlike the Kuala Lumpur of 1969, was no exotic tropic. Tall glassy buildings, steel road dividers, pounding lorries and blue taxis—it was an Anglo-Chinese detour, a metamorphic metropolis of old British imperial might and new Chinese puritanical capital. It was a city for sociologists advising on policies to determine what kind of people should compose the city rather than anthropologists curious about the ways in which people shaped a city. (195)

The features of Malaya’s cultural landscape do persist, almost uncannily, but time has reconfigured the network of power relations that once linked them into an intelligible configuration. Social progress thus takes the comical form of an historical closure; the principal characters have relocated from to the booming global metropolis, friends have become executives, and political affiliations have sprouted into business interests. For instance, the Malay politician Abdullah, who had been a spokesperson for militant nationalism in book one, has now risen to prominence within the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Yet globalism has simultaneously dampened his firebrand ideology into a legitimate form of commercial activity: he now works for “O.K.M.—Overseas Koranic Majulis—big time travel company bring Muslims to hajj in Mecca” [*sic*] (197). The ultimate historical trajectory of the Kuala Lumpur riots, Lim suggests, has been to normalize the role of Malay power in mediating the influx of foreign investment into the region.

Chester finds himself no less altered by this general transfiguration: “He had left Malaysia as a longhaired student,” he finds, “and returned to Singapore an esteemed

professor” (196). Time has also shuffled hierarchies, Li An’s invisibility at this time being a measure of her social importance – a fact that Chester learns when, unable to locate her himself, he turns to Paroo for help. “Li An is a very busy woman,” Paroo tells him, “I try for best date, maybe next week, maybe later” (199). The floating signifier of this reborn world is Li An’s daughter: her name holds a mystical quality for Chester, who “[falls] asleep concentrating on the power of the name *Suyin*” (199). Lim allegorizes this bewilderment at a psychological level through Chester’s inability to locate Li An within the changed landscape of urban Singapore. When Chester first and in her place at the former University of Malaya, now the National University of Singapore, she is nowhere to be found; but in her place, he finds signs of creative destruction: “bulldozers and cranes roaring and whining on stripped hillsides.” With bleak humor, Lim tags this allegorical link and all the historical complexity it obscures. When Chester asks his local host, a Malay friend named Samad, to help him locate Li An, the latter replies knowingly, in pidgin English, “Girlfriends not so easy to get back. Okay, okay, not like girlfriend. I know you got wife now. But like us Muslims, one wife not always the case, yes or not?” There is a spectral comparison at work in Samad’s question, which forces Chester (and the Western reader) to reexamine his own presumptions about Muslim polygamy. And there is also a surreptitious deprecation of Li An, as we have just encountered “transient Americans and Germans, oil-men on break from the Shell refineries in Brunei, lounging with their Thai and Indonesian girlfriends, whose English was restricted to hellos and good-byes” (195-196). Singaporean social progress, Lim suggests, can be measured in the extent to which prosperity inoculates Li An from the import of this comment.

To Chester, these changes are bewildering; they appear to have been wrought by a mystical agency. What Lim emphasizes, however, is the intense labor required to usher this new world into being. The act of giving birth is symbolic in this regard, because it reveals the shame that Malay conservatism exacted from Li An during the period of her pregnancy. We are told “for nine years she had avoided Kuala Lumpur” and its “women wrapped in black purdah like walking corpse.” But at a rhetorical level, the agency for resolving this shame falls upon the child herself. The narration continues:

She remembered the heat and her confusion from the months when she had carried Suyin, blotting her fear and grief with the vision of the baby, hanging from its umbilical branch, unsexed, complexion shrouded in a sac shot through with crimson pulsing webs. It was the web she wove to save her life.

Suyin had not wanted to come out; the branch would not break, and the doctor had had to cut it down. (201)

This image of birth—not excision or extirpation, but the forceful severing of a whole of genealogy—negates the easy equation of Asian values with orientalist notions of kinship. Ironically, it is Chester’s failure to enact this break from genealogical desire that makes him unfit to assume the duties of fatherhood. Earlier, we are afforded a glimpse of Chester’s tendency toward self-pity when, following his vasectomy, he induces a mild illness by overdosing on painkillers. Meryl reflects, “Though he had always argued that men should do their share of population control, he had never been keen on the prospect of vasectomy... Chester’s notion of responsibility never seemed to include himself” (156). In this scene, Chester’s hypocrisy ruptures the glassy surface of their marriage, because Meryl calls him out for contravening his own principles and second-guessing the wisdom of having the operation after it has already been completed. In the tense

exchange that follows, Meryl's accusation recalls the fatuousness of the frog-in-the-well's grasp on totality:

"Aren't you always preaching about starving babies in Asia and how the cultural structures are going to collapse because..."

"Damn it, Meryl. America isn't Asia."

"What about your Spaceship Earth concept? D'you mean it's okay for Americans to have kids but wrong for Indians?"

"I'm not talking about a litter of them."

"I like that. You're a sow if you have six, but okay if you have two."

"One, Meryl, one." (171)

The irony is that Chester already has "one" child, Suyin, whom he has never met.

Paradoxically, then, it is his vasectomy that prepares Chester to step into his natural role as Suyin's father: by pruning his own lineage, he clears a space for her in his narrow worldview. She will become his one.

But this possibility remains just that—a possibility, contingent upon Suyin's appetite for the truth of history. The novel ends with Li An granting Chester the "privilege" of meeting his daughter, but only on her own terms: Suyin is to grow to adulthood, then decide for herself whether she wishes to meet her biological father. In the meantime, Henry will continue to serve publicly in that capacity—despite the fact that he and Li An have long since separated. Claiming responsibility for a child not his own, Henry allows Suyin to claim him as her father, which puts an end to jeering taunts that she is a "Sin-ner" (301).

Drawing the western scion back into the ambit of his colonial exploits, Lim closes a historical circle that has been opened by narratives like *Heart of Darkness* and *Bumi Manusia*, both of which depict the violence involved in extracting colonial subjects from the local milieu that had been ordered around his signifying body. Her ending enacts a complete reversal of the historical injustice depicted in Pram's novel, where the wealth

and power of the *nyai* make her a target for colonial predation. In the precursor text, law deprives the *nyai* of an extrajudicial sovereignty that she already possesses; the Dutch colonial government robs Ontosoroh of her daughter, Annelies, while the latter is still in her youth, because it recognizes the claims of distant European relatives above those of local motherhood. The figure of the *nyai* therefore reveals the colonial logic as pure and open domination. In contrast, Singapore's newfound economic power enables Li An to shield her child from premature development, relinquishing Suyin to the world only in the fullness of maturity. Whereas the concubine represents antinomies at the heart of a racist colonial state because even the power afforded to her by capital accumulation cannot protect her from the reach of colonial law, the hybrid identity of Lim's *nonya*—a fully globalized and yet fully-assimilated Chinese-Malay professional woman—marks an eversion (a turning outward) of this impossibility. Thus if the figure of the *nyai* marks a central node of memory in the Malay region, as Christopher GoGwilt argues, then the Singaporean *Nonya* (Chinese-Malay woman) demarcates a contemporary limit of this field. Lim stages a transformation of juridical subjugation, which becomes the legal and economic promise of exceptional power over the white American male.

Significantly, Li An and Suyin's escape to Singapore does not blot out extant forms of postcolonial nationalist power. Rather, the pressures of globalization reroute sovereignty through contradictory nodes of power, such as the island nation where "sociologists... determine what kind of people should compose the city" (195). Turning the contradictions of capital outside-in. Lim consolidates economic and geopolitical power within the image of its historic negation: Li An's triumph suggests that even as the liberatory potential of globalization remains context dependent, its implementation

limited to particular social actors within specific cultural contexts, subjective liberation nevertheless has the power to transcend mere toleration, because it can fuse genealogies across the historical fault of sectional enmities—in this case, the ostensibly hegemonic relation between a western male and his jilted ex-“girlfriend.” The social forms of abjection, in one historical moment, may become the grounds for vindication in another.

We may find Li An’s transition from Malaysia to Singapore—a compact movement from one urban center to another that enables personal sovereignty without leaving her culturally bereft—mirrored in the life and work of Huzir Sulaiman. When Huzir’s *Atomic Jaya* was first performed in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, it was immediately clear that a major new voice had emerged to speak for the Malaysian opposition. Young, brash, urbane, the Princeton-educated native of Melaka typified the new generation of cosmopolitan urbanites who had begun to proliferate in the so-called “Tiger Cub” economies of the 1990’s. Yet as Kathy Rowland points out in her introduction to Huzir’s *Collected Plays*, this globalized identity is rooted in a regional diaspora stretching back into the colonial era. Of his “rich and varied family background,” she writes:

His forefathers were part of that large body of colonial subjects who journeyed through the outposts of the British Empire: Kerala, Calcutta, Rangoon before settling in Penang and Singapore. Successive generations parlayed their education and skills into prominent position in society, built upon a family tradition of civil and community service. These were the early cosmopolitans who established themselves at the interstices of multiple cultures. They built this with their new homes but maintained a cultural fidelity to their past. They simultaneously absorbed the productive, if not unproblematic narratives of imperialism. English was the family language, going back several generations; intermarriage resulted in a fluid ethnic identity. (19)

Rowland presses hard to universalize her subject. Her diction shifts the historic frame away from postcolonial dualisms like metropole/colony and onto the softer and more

graduated distinctions between peripheral "outposts" ("Kerala, Calcutta, Rangoon") and semi-peripheral entrepôts ("Penang and Singapore"). Rowland's term for this shift, "parlayed," hints at the dominant role that dialogic imagination plays in producing this transition as a social fact. Here, cosmopolitan discourse sutures the very "interstices" where much of postcolonial theory locates conflict, such as the junctures of embodiment and subjectivity, rootedness and migration, tradition and multiplicity, or loyalty and development. Of course, this historical procedure cannot evaporate the fluid tensions of postcolonial identity; it merely displaces them onto "not unproblematic" narrative problems.

Huzir's own identity is exilic, but only marginally so. The author of numerous monologues and several full-length ensembles, Huzir currently directs the playwriting workshop at the National University of Singapore. In a 2010 interview, he assigns himself the identity of a foreign-outsider who also belongs to the local community, stating that he is "at an interesting crossroads where [he is] not a Singaporean artist but a Singapore artist — while still obviously being Malaysian" (Quayum 59). Paradoxically, this minor form of exile grants Huzir a unique centrality, because it reflects the involuntary and partial split between Malaysia and Singapore—an historical severing that forced the latter to rely almost entirely upon its position as a regional financial center and trade hub for multinational corporations. In a sense, then, Singapore too is in exile; but this exile has arguably worked to its economic benefit, as Singapore has one of the highest standards of living in the world. As a designation of exilic culture, to be a Malaysian-Singapore artist is as intimate and refracted as the porous border separating the two states. This inside-outsider approach to the nation is also characteristic of the

Straits Theatre Company, which Huzir runs with his partner, the actress Claire Wong. By identifying themselves explicitly with the straits community, rather than either Singapore or Malaysia, they more actively perform the middle-class identity of both nations. In the case of Huzir, the child of affluent Indian Muslims, the capacity to perform this role within the life of the nation is emblematic of the nation's capacity to subsume the racial-religion schema that has been its essential political paradigm.

Huzir makes the task of overcoming the old national paradigm central to his work. By turns realist and experimental, grim and uproarious, Huzir's plots frequently concern the intersection of cosmopolitan subjects with the power of Malay nationalism. Taking direct aim at the failures of democratic institutions under a system of one-party rule, he portrays the differing and often contradictory ways in which Malaysians appropriate, contest, and reimagine global forces within the field of local political concerns. Many of Huzir's plays take aim at the exceptional state of Malaysian democracy under the ruling Barisan Nasional, the Malay-dominated regime that has continuously maintained power since the nation's independence from Great Britain in 1957. For instance, "Election Day," which was written as a direct response to the hotly contested General Election of 1999, notably ran afoul of government censors for its depiction of civil rights abuses and thinly-veiled references to Mahathir Mohammad, the country's longest serving prime minister and a staunch defender of the controversial system of Malay ethnic privileges known as the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Huzir's political vision connects the local materials of Malaysian-Singaporean culture to the structural processes of globalization. For example, he frequently includes voiceovers (VO) from radio and television within otherwise minimalist scripts in order to

highlight the textural quality of modern political discourse, which help to limn the relationship between divergent historical phenomena, such as Malay nationalism or the emergence of hip-hop culture in Kuala Lumpur, by referring them upwards to more forces, such as the totalizing imperatives of profit, the dehumanizing influence of state bureaucracy, or the consolidating force of national imagination. In framing these historical materials, Huzir focuses upon the meta-discursive role of English, as the neutralizing medium of global modernity, in order to identify and critique the pretense of transparency within public media.

For example, in “Election Day” Huzir transmits the election’s bleak outcome through a radio VO announcing news that the election has gone in favor of the country’s authoritarian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad:

**RADIO (VO) DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD SAID THE BARISAN NASIONAL (BN) VICTORY WITH MORE THAN TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY IN THE 10<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ELECTION SHOWED THAT THE BN IS STILL ENJOYING HIGH POPULARITY. THE PRIME MINISTER SAID THAT...** (192; original ellipsis)

Ending abruptly in mid-sentence, the play’s final lines highlight the way that represented speech glides unimpeded across the surface of a news broadcast, smoothing over the difference between claims and representations of claims by delivering them in a monotonous flow. This capacity—to defamiliarize the forms of discursive mediation that audiences are sure to encounter in the wild—is one that Huzir displays throughout his oeuvre.

The medium that Huzir defamiliarizes most radically, however, is the embodied voice of the actor. Often, Huzir’s scripts call for a single actor to narrate the crowded past. “Atomic Jaya” (1998), for example, lists sixteen characters “to be played by one

actor" (46). In "Occupation" (2002), a single actor plays five roles: a survivor of the historic occupation of Singapore by Japan, two women who interview her at different moments in history (the latter of whom is also the frame narrator, the former a tape she finds in Singapore's archives), and the latter's contemporaries. This vocal weave, this polyvocalism, sustains multilayered networks of signification: self-reflexive narrative structures, political schemata both local and global, nuanced aesthetic polemics — in short, an entire architecture of thought. Even when this verbal play is legibly governed by generic forms of emplotment, however, as in the musical rom-com "Hip Hopera" (1998); or the Chekhovian family drama "Those Four Sisters Fernandez" (2000), in which the truth of undecidable events are retroactively susceptible to narratorial interference.

By performing narrative in this way, Huzir demonstrates the refracting quality of narrative representation as such. Huzir favors dramatic monologue for the ironic potential of its tripartite narrative structure. Monologue allows mimetic passages to emerge within diegesis, freeing the extra-diegetic level to mediate whatever tensions arise between the story and the manner of its telling. Storyteller, character, and ventriloquist: the actor must perform all three roles in simultaneously and in such a way as to keep them distinct in the minds of the audience. Huzir exploits these possibilities to comedic and pathetic effect by leveling harsh and indiscriminate social criticism from within narrative frames that undermine, deftly and colloquially, the moral foundations of that critique. The result is a robust yet deliberate form of satire, one that places historical criticism on a level that is, morally and epistemologically, almost (but not quite) equivalent to its objects of censure. Within this highly suspicious framework, however, narrative gestures round out indiscriminate criticism, positioning the act of historical narration almost (but not quite)

on the same moral and epistemological level as their objects of critique. But what historical-political (or ethical-moral) positions may be encoded by these structures of voice?

This monologue form has a thematic implication, which is that middle-class representations are delimited by acts of confession. Read as a multiplicity, Huzir's narrators suggest an interpretive mode, a subjective order whose unifying principle lies not merely in socio-cultural determinations of identity (though it is marked by such factors as education and hybridity), but in a common mode of historical experience framed by gestures of recuperation.

Huzir articulates the promise and ambivalences of recuperation in “Notes on Life and Love and Painting” (1999), a dramatic monologue offering the nearest approximation of an artistic manifesto to be found among Huzir's published works. Its narrator, a successful local painter named Rashid, explains his use of exoticism in paintings about Malaysian life: "what this work is about, in part, is the kindness [we] should have had, from the beginning, unalloyed by suspicion or by [our] bigotry" (160). Such cosmopolitanism entails a communicative operation that recodes past differences, literally reframing them in light of a gentler, more tolerant present.

Yet even recuperation offers reasons to distrust. Rashid frames this aesthetic of kindness as a sardonic defense of his own artistic choices, and he admits to exploiting racial trauma in order to bestow a measure of international acclaim upon his paintings, which would otherwise be merely pedestrian. Rashid belongs to a class of new urbanites, professionals established within in globalized professions such as medicine, the sciences, and the law. A lawyer by training, Rashid characterizes his early, "mid-nineties"

experiments in abstraction as "Paintings of the law, for lawyers, by a lawyer. Art for professionals to hang in their living rooms and demonstrate their worldliness" (153).

Rashid's unabashed worldliness stands in contrast to the earlier notion of a "comprador bourgeoisie," the class of local elites that, in the literature of decolonization, had veiled its interests within the discourse of postcolonial nationalism. In contrast, Rashid's critique of bourgeois sensibility is more nuanced :

I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being a professional, or a lawyer, or a golfer. I'm proud to be middle class. I don't wish I were working class. The proletariat have no monopoly on sincerity and naturalness. I'm not naive. And I'm not aspirational: I have a horror of the upper class and their yachts and polo and their fundamental philistinism. I'm bourgeois. But a bourgeoisie that does not think and question and change deserves to be beaten like a dog. (153)

Referring opinions like Rashid's upwards to more universal phenomena, such as the totalizing imperatives of profit, the interests of state bureaucracy, or the consolidating force of a national imaginary, Huzir challenges the idea that the English language can play a meta-discursive role as the medium of neutrality. To quote another illustration, in "They Will Be Grateful" (2003), it is the discourse of business that flattens the contours between individual voices:

**Four** We are in agreement.  
**One** We can all agree.  
**Three** It's an important moment.  
**Two** We are witnessing something.  
**Three** A project is born.  
**Four** The road to success.  
**One** It's within our grasp.  
**Two** It's an achievement.  
**One** We must recognize this.  
**Four** We're all friends here. (Huzir 310)

Here the echo chamber of English mirrors the play's conceit, which is that four avaricious business partners are talking themselves into investing in China's newly

liberalized market economy. The play's title reflects the central ideological tension, which is that it becomes impossible to tell who "they" are, because the self-affirming discourse of business investment has overwritten their voices.

This idea—the performance of language overwriting the possibility of an original expression—produces a characteristic narrative form in which a lone narrator ventriloquizes the voices of others. In Huzir's plays, vocal structure limns the ethical import of history. Huzir foregrounds voice even when staging the complex threads of historical memory in his native Malaysia or his adopted country of Singapore, often routing the fraught racial politics of these young nations through a tension between narrative authority and the hybrid languages of their polyglot communities. Fragments of speech and thought comprise the surface of script, which frequently ventriloquizes loosely disjointed streams of thought, impressionistic sequences of memory, or an unordered series of absent voices. Most often, a character who directly voices other characters' verbatim dialogue while recounting the action of the plot will, at the play's conclusion, reveal his or her own role in shaping past events. Because this revelation often carries deep political significance, it prevents us from establishing the objective validity of events outside of the narration. This is the case in "Election Day" (1999), Huzir's play about the corruption and intrigue of Malaysia's tenth general election, which recounts the undoing of two young activists, Dedric and Fozi, who are campaigning for the Barisan Alternatif (opposition front). The basic premise is that an agent provocateur has been sharing a flat with them; and although they suspect a conspiracy, the chaos of the election makes it impossible for them to trace the infiltration. Meanwhile, as their lives unravel towards violence and betrayal, radio updates about the vote count

periodically confirm the election's foregone conclusion: the return of the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, which has continuously held power since Malaysia first achieved independence, with its authoritarian figurehead, Mahathir Mohamad, whose relatively narrow victory in the tenth general election would return him to the Prime Minister's office for the eighteenth consecutive year. Dedric and Fozi, who quip about electoral fraud even as they urge voters to side with the opposition, could hardly be surprised by this outcome. What neither they nor the audience expect, however, is that the portents of this conclusion—a threatening call from the landlord, an ominously severed brake line—are the work of the narrator, Francis, who is in fact an undercover police officer embedded as their flat mate to monitor their political activities.

Yet the final irony comes when Francis reveals that his motive for arresting the pair is not sedition at all, but rather to secure the affections of Natasha, Fozi's discontented Russian girlfriend. Speaking quietly while handcuffing the pair "so only the two of them could hear," Francis confesses, "This is not about politics.... This is not a political story. I don't care, Barisan this or Barisan that. But you bring this woman into the picture, she doesn't have to say a word, but she changes everything. To have a woman like this, I will put two thousand of you away. I do not care. I do not care" (173).

Despite the cynicism of this final gesture, Fozi and Daedric matter enough to Francis that he preempts their interpretation. But the meaning of this confession is deeply ambiguous: are we to view this betrayal more or less kindly because of its apolitical motivation?

Were the narrator to confess his motives publicly, or to a fraternal audience of police, the significance of this ending would be quite different. As written, the tone of insistence in his private disclosure betrays a thread of true intimacy, even of friendship,

between himself and his friends. This camaraderie - a natural consequence of having faithfully performed in the official role of "Francis," the activist friend, for so long - must be counted among the costs of fulfilling his duties as an agent of state power.

Yet this supplementary volition—Francis’ need to take it personally rather than politically—deprives him of the sovereign cover of bureaucratic duty. Because the nature of the friends' association is explicitly political, and the nature of their political struggle is to establish the rule of law, then Francis’s role as a citizen should inevitably preempt his role as a state functionary. His action cannot be apolitical, because his duty to uphold the rule of law is precisely what distinguishes actions that he may take in his official role as a police officer from actions that he may take in his private role as a citizen. Because he acts in contravention of this norm, he must be viewed as a private citizen acting in bad political faith, not a public servant acting as a private citizen.

We find an inversion of Francis in another of Huzir’s early plays, “Atomic Jaya,” where the figure of Dr. Mary Yuen, a Chinese-Malaysian with a PhD in Nuclear Physics from the University of Chicago, narrates her involvement in a Malaysian plot to develop a nuclear weapon. Whereas Francis had been a state figure claiming to act publicly but on behalf of private interests, Yuen acts privately to save the Malaysian public from itself. After completing her postdoctoral research at Los Alamos National Laboratory, Yuen has returned to her native Ipoh in order to inherit her grandmother’s property. There, she encounters General Zulkifli, a Malay autocrat whose machinations provide the means and justification for building a nuclear weapon. Zulkifli homes in on Yuen’s greatest vulnerability. He explicitly bypasses her patriotism and altruism to appeal to her boredom and pride. After exhaustively listing Yuen's academic laurels, he quips:

**General** I must say, Dr. Yuen. It's very interesting what you are now doing. It's very important that Malaysia understands how to preserve the rice and prawns. Very useful to the armed forces. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great European warrior: at the battle of Waterloo, disaster. His prawns had gone off. Humidity. Belgium very wet. (49)

As a mid-sized country with middling demographic and economic growth the idea that the Malaysia would pursue a nuclear weapon anytime soon seems risible. Huzir leverages this very fact to heighten the absurdity of national politics under Mahathir. Despite its far-fetched premise, it strikes obliquely at the heart of Malaysian political life. But from the perspective of a highly literate Malaysian would have glimpsed by looking westward in 1998, perhaps less so: on May 13, India stuns the world by revealing the successful test of five nuclear bombs; Pakistan follows suit just a few weeks later, on May 28. It is a catastrophe both for non-proliferation and democratic pluralism, prompting Tariq Ali to remark, "In the blistering heat of the plains the people, misinformed and miserable, were yesterday celebrating the explosion of their very own nuclear device. India had exploded a Hindu bomb. Pakistan had countered by detonating a Muslim device." Shortly thereafter, Saddam Hussein would expel U.N. weapons inspectors from Iraq, opening a space of plausibility for the Bush administration's phantasmal WMD's, and Osama Bin Laden would bomb U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

With nothing to gain and everything to lose, why might a nation whose prosperity is entirely dependent upon tourism and trade resort to such bellicosity? In a society riven by religious and ethnic suspicions, who would collaborate and who resist? How will the Malaysian people be impacted when the attempt to become a "superpower" fails – as it inevitably must given the geopolitical realities facing any Muslim nation with postwar nuclear aspirations? Perhaps most urgent for a democracy whose politics are

marred by censorship and corruption: how could the public ever begin to answer these questions?

The play opens with Yuen's admission that she played a role in the construction of Malaysia's first atomic bomb; however, she frames the problem of her involvement with the bomb in terms of her own femininity, rather than through her conflicted loyalties to the Malaysian state: "Okay. I turned 35 last year, and I thought to myself: Mary Yuen, now is the time when you're supposed to start hearing the clock tick. Tick tick tick tick tick boom. The thing is that instead of wanting to make babies I made bombs" (47). The asymmetries in this narrative framing are striking. Yuen displaces the desire she is supposed to have, "*wanting* to make babies," with the practice she does have, "making bombs." Similarly, we do hear a clock tick, just not the one that she "supposed to start hearing." Given the date of the play's first performance in 1999, she would be approximately the same age as the Malaysian state, which separated from Singapore in 1965. The history of racial suspicion that provoked this partition of the Federation of Malaya thus provides a veiled rationale for the "ticking clock" that threatens to erupt into violence. The task of Yuen's narration will be to translate this highly localized political symbolism into the topoi of geopolitics.

One way in which this transition occurs is through linguistic markers of cosmopolitan identity. The General's sly humor exemplifies the use of vernacular to achieve comedic self-parody, which is a staple of Huzir's dialogue. His is the clipped, informal speech of a career soldier accustomed to giving orders. But the shift in register also fits a broader leitmotif of Malay-speakers who employ colloquial "Manglish" (Malaysian English) when expressing generational impatience with old-fashioned,

ethnically marked ways of life. Thus when Yuen returns the General's banter, her own frustrations establish a perverse rapport between them. Her rather mercenary reason for returning to Ipoh, she quips, is to inherit a shophouse from her dying grandmother: "But we're waiting. She takes Calcimex, for healthy bones" (48).

Beneath this exchange about Calcimex and prawns, there is a subtext about the instrumental role that scientific rationality plays in preserving the status quo. Far from embodying the neutrality of a scientific education, the ambiguity surrounding Yuen's cosmopolitan presence stems from the fact that it is no longer clear whether she belongs to the community or has simply come to exploit it, like any other foreign interloper. Her tenuous capital ties to Ipoh provide no stable relation to her homeland, and her scientific contribution to the preservation of prawns would merely serve to perpetuate the mundane life of its common people. As we learn at the play's conclusion, her potential inheritance passes to another relative. Rather than symbolically evoking the rich cultural traditions of the Baba Nonya (the local term for mixed Chinese-Malay communities), "the Taiping shophouses and the Ipoh Garden House" that she fails to inherit function as empty placeholders for her sojourn in the country (42). In other words, the ancestral home becomes the chronotope of inherited wealth: neither producing nor erasing social distinction, it simply marks the passage of empty time.

In contrast to this static frame, Zulkifli's proposal offers to reinvigorate the symbols of Malaysian tradition with the dynamism of globalization. But the emptiness of this promise is reflected in the hollow language used by the "Minister," the play's token member of the political class. Employing a trope that has become familiar in contemporary global politics, Huzir depicts the feedback loop between corruption and

jingoism, which hollows out Malaysian political representation until the token politician becomes nothing more than a stooge for the characters who manipulate reality from behind a scrim of token representation. Yet this emptiness lends the minister a negative dynamism, as it presents ample opportunities for wordplay at the surface of language. He dissembles in response to accusations by the global news media that Malaysia has been developing a nuclear weapon. "As a result of the Western Financial Jewish Conspiracy," he claims, "our currency has lost value. We are therefore trying to reduce our dependence on foreign products. Such as the highly enriched Iranian, which comes from Iran" (51). On the surface, this quote helps us to pinpoint the historical context for the play during Mahathir's rule, when the financial crisis authorized the state to embark upon a trajectory of renewed nationalist fervor.

But if "the highly enriched Iranian" is a slip of the tongue, the performance of a stereotype about the bumbling Malay politician, it is also the unwitting revelation of a deep political truth. This parapraxis quite properly locates the greatest threat to Malaysian democracy in the figure of the corrupt ruler, on the model of the oil-enriched caliphate. Malaysia is a Sunni nation, and so the comment is in part an instance of anti-Shia suspicion. But it also reflects the immediate danger that financial weakness presents in exposing the Malaysian economy to foreign predation. At least from the perspective that motivated Mahathir to impose currency safeguards to shield the Ringgit from foreign speculation, the "enriched Iranian" threatens to become precisely the sort of investor against whom the monetary policy is supposed to defend.<sup>23</sup> Like one of Lewis Carroll's politicians, the Minister simultaneously conceals and discloses the truth of his speech

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See Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* ch. 4

through his unwitting confession: his self-justification is also a self-recrimination, since his own corruption places him in a class of "enriched" predators who impoverish the nation by pillaging its democratic institutions.

In addition to marking cosmopolitanism from above, by allowing us to catch the Minister in an ignorant misuse of English, Huzir also allows us to catch the play of language from below—from a position rooted in the vernacular. The play's title announces a hybrid cultural perspective. The term *jaya*, meaning "victory" in Bahasa Malaysia, is a Sanskrit loanword taken from the title of the middle section of the *Mahabharata*. Its usage here is not a device for establishing cultural distance, however. *Jaya* is an important term in the national imaginary of Malaysia, and it appears in many place names. Most notably, the federal administrative capital, Putrajaya, is a portmanteau combining *jaya* with the name of the first Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the greatest hero of Malay nationalism. Thus *Atomic Jaya* may be read as the focalization of patriotic sentiment around nuclear triumphalism, which is precisely what the play depicts. Despite the global import of its premise, the structuring forces in the plot are the local fault-lines of Malaysian democracy; an electoral system that, under the state of exception that has obtained since the government curtailed civil liberties in an effort to quell race riots shortly after independence, the state construes to be a hybridization of American-style Republicanism and "Asian Values." Under the special provisions of the NEP, this latter term has come to denote "guided" capitalism, cultural paternalism, Malay ethnic privilege, and the influence of Islamic jurisprudence. In fact, that such openly critical plays could be staged at all indicates the relatively liberal climate that has prevailed in the decades since the imprisonment of Mahathir's own vocally

critical Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, on trumped-up sodomy charges, sparked a movement towards *Reformasi* (anti-corruption reform) that continues to gain momentum today.

These frustrations are mirrored in the play's minor characters, who are merely stereotyped onlookers to the basic political transaction that occurs between Yuen and the General, who makes it pellucid that such tokenism is a deliberate tactic of the state. When introducing the team of scientists who will help her to build the bomb, he subordinates the cosmopolitan *schein* of their scientific expertise to the logic of Malaysian political representation:

**General** Dr. Ramachandran was Instructor in Physics at California State University at Fullerton. His field is the hydrodynamics of implosions and explosions. This is very important for building the bomb. But most importantly he is here so that we can have one Chinese, one Malay, and one Indian. Chinese do the work, Malay take the credit, Indian get the blame.

**Ramachandran** But we climbed the mountain. (55)

Zulkifli's glib pronouncement has the prismatic effect of faithfully representing the political complaints of various ethnic groups in a way that all can recognize but that, due to the circular logic of racial essentialism, none can definitively critique. The notion that equal representation means one Chinese, one Muslim, and one Indian reflects a tautological presumption that democracy in Malaysia is bound to perpetuate racism because Malaysian politics are inherently race-based. Ramachandran's feeble objection, "we climbed the mountain," provides a fitting metaphor for the indivisible contributions made by citizens of every race towards gaining independence from the British and then building a modern nation. But it also refers to the national hero M. Moorthy, an Indian member of the first Malaysian Army team to reach the summit of Everest.

Ramachandran's objection, which seems literally inaudible to the other characters, has become even more acutely ironic in the years since the play's debut. When Moorthy died in 2005, Malaysia's Syariah court ruled that he had secretly converted to Islam, and he was given a Muslim funeral against the objections of his wife, a Hindu. This symbolic act effectively claimed his accomplishments for the Malay-Muslim community. The fact that the secular high court ruled against Moorthy's family, on the grounds that it has "no jurisdiction" over matters of conversion, underscores the symbolic message of this passage: Indians are permitted democratic representation only as the supplement to Malay power.

The play uses the correlating symbol of "the bomb" to schematize this democratic supplementarity. In the image of nuclear forces binding atoms together, Huzir alights upon an apt symbol for the power of national imaginaries to command loyalty and obedience from the disparate constituencies who comprise the nation. The bomb is important to Malaysian "democracy" for two reasons. First, it will enhance the prestige of the Malaysian state – crucially, not among the global community, but in the eyes of its regional trading partners. Second, it provides a unifying symbol with which to correlate divergent ethnic attitudes regarding modernization and the inequality it has fostered.

These two forces converge in a "stirring patriotic song" that precedes the intermission:

Colonialism now is gone  
Now our government is strong  
We are proud to be Malaysian  
We are nice to our neighbor nations  
We trim the hedge, mend the fence  
Spend some money on defense  
So when they come from near and far  
Our atomic bomb will be a star  
..... :

We've got the atomic bomb!  
We've got the atomic bomb!  
The Malaysian atomic bomb!  
The Pride of our nation!  
We've got the atomic bomb!  
Our very own atomic bomb!  
The Malaysian atomic bomb!  
To keep our nation proud and strong! (63)

Here the chorus is a din of exclamation points, each of which performs the consolidation of national identity around its technological fetish. This song arrives in contrast with the play's opening stage direction, which calls for an inscrutable performance of "the old, slow version" of the national anthem, *Negaraku* (literally: "My Nation"). Thus the play's midpoint marks a transition from a song about *possessing* the nation to a song about *being* the nation.

This new song begins with what might be called the chronotope of an atomic superpower, by which I mean the rhetorical construction of a post-history in which the "star" of nuclear armament provides the sole constellation for the state's monological construction of national identity. Gone is the messy, zero-sum system of racial tokenism, in which the power of the democratic state does little more than contain and transcend the irreconcilable claims of competing racial groups. In this new temporality, the nation's international and domestic activities fully align, transforming the contradictions of capital development into mere housekeeping: trimming the hedge, mending the fence. In the final refrain, images of economic strength carry a freight of middle-class aspirations, which are embedded in the desire to be part of a global cosmopolitan order: "We learn and love and use IT / To earn the world community's / Respect, and they will see we're strong / Now we have an atomic bomb." But the details of this vision lend a satirical edge to the jubilee. Despite the unequivocal declaration that Malaysians "are now a

superpower,” the particulars of symbolic unity are decidedly modest: “Commonwealth Games and Everest / the MSC, the Twin Towers.”

Yuen's character is a supplement to this discourse in a precisely deconstructive sense. She is both the indispensable outsider whose expertise consolidates the national body and the contagious foreign presence that threatens to undermine it. Her eventual decision to sabotage the project, resulting in a failed nuclear test and a return to international relations as usual, follows a reinscription of hegemonic norms. The pithiest expression of these norms, which are founded upon *realpolitik* rather than morality, comes during a fleeting speech by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who responds to news of Malaysia's nuclear program by inverting the call to patriotism set forth in President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Speech, the ostensible purpose of which was ironically to promote alternatives to “nuclear diplomacy”:

**Albright** There will be serious consequences if Malaysia detonates a nuclear device. The United States stands by its policy to punish nations who arbitrarily assume nuclear powers, who contribute to the growing global nuclear arms menace. We have the might, and we have the right, and we will not hesitate to fight for the right to our might, and our might alone. We want to remind the people of Malaysia of the words of a great American president, who said, “Ask not what our country can do for you; rather ask what our country can do to your country. (71-72)

The point of this quote is not merely to point out hypocrisy in the moral rhetoric that the United States uses to justify its foreign policy; rather it is also to spotlight the way in which nuclear hegemony routes patriotism for one's own country through a kind of negation of U. S. hegemony. At a thematic level, Malaysia's continued exclusion from the club of nuclear states reflects its contested emergence into the more consequential sphere of first world economies. In one of the play's musical numbers, the Colonel links nuclear prowess to Malaysia's economic fortune - a bitterly ironic suggestion, given the crippling

economic sanctions that the Malaysian people would likely face as the initial phase of Western aggression in response to the nuclear ambitions of its political elite. Huzir's analysis of world politics is prescient: since the play's debut performance in 1999, the course of world history has confirmed the bellicosity of U.S. foreign policy towards perceived Islamic threats. Yet Malaysia's political relationship to the United States has, if anything, warmed during this period, which suggests a larger regional context for Huzir's sense of the world political climate.

As a member of the global scientific community, Yuen knows what the United States nuclear arsenal can do to her country. Thus after sabotaging the bomb, she returns to the United States, where she continues to make weapons that will, presumably, help to preserve the existing global order. Her account of this decision alludes to a global nuclear cliché, a line from the Bhagavad-Gita made infamous by J. Robert Oppenheimer, who quoted it upon viewing an atomic detonation for the first time. "A world is a big thing to eat," she reflects, "I decided to stick with being Mary Yuen, the eater of *popiah* [a type of spring roll common throughout Southeast Asia]" She settles back into her local identity after having imagined her situation from the perspective of world culture (31).

Yet this process has relevance for the discourse of Malaysian nationalism, as well. The immediate context for Yuen's decision to sabotage the bomb is a delicate staging and displacement of the play's racial stereotypes onto gender norms. One day in the lab, Yuen becomes alarmed when Dr. Ramachandran, caught up in recounting an argument he had with his wife about whether the bomb is really "for the good of the country" or merely a "potency symbol," begins carelessly handling fissile material. When Yuen cautions, orders, and then commands Dr. Ramachandran to "SECURE THE MATERIAL RIGHT

NOW,” his flippant response confirms his wife’s view that the country would be better off if he built “a stone *lingham* [Indian slang for phallus]... in the garden” instead (29-30). To deflect criticism from his actions, Dr. Ramachandran employs the discourse of globalization as a shield, chastising Yuen for being “high and mighty” on account of her American education and presenting the high cost of his Indian education, “all paid for from the catalogue,” as evidence of the legitimacy of his own credentials (30). This confluence of symbolism enables Yuen to reconfigure her own involvement in the project along feminist lines. It allows her to recognize the masculine discourse that has stood in place of any real answer to Dr. Ramachandran’s questions for her: “What is the point? What is the meaning? Why are you doing this?” The implication is clear: she decides to deny her native country possession of the bomb not simply because of ethnic or religious volatility, but also because it is the manifestation of the very nationalist masculinity that, as a globally successful female scientist, she has herself overcome.

This implication becomes more clear when Saiful, the token Malay scientist, relegates these questions to the category of “philosophy,” which he dismissively praises as “different” (31). By way of elaboration, he offers the example “*Men are from Besut, Women are from Dungun*” – a joke that relocates the gender distinctions of Western pop psychology within the conservative Malaysian state of Terengganu, where the fishing towns of Besut and Dungun are both located (31). In the local context, this joke expresses the double-standards by which Malay society judges male and female violations of Islamic custom: Besut is the port of departure for Pulau Perhentian, a tourist destination that is locally infamous for hosting “full moon” parties where locals drink, take drugs,

and carouse with westerners. Dungun is the port of call for sleepy Pulau Kapas—a destination for schoolchildren on field trips.

Yet if the moral logic of Yuen’s sabotage is so clear, why does the play require the same form of narrative confession that we observed in *Election Day*? Why not simply present a realist depiction of her capture by, and disentanglement from, the seductions of nationalist discourse? Put another way, what purpose does it serve to frame the tensions of globalization in the voice of a cosmopolitan technocrat whose affective neutrality forecloses any hint of virtue or heroism in her act of saving the Malaysian nation from itself? In the play’s final lines, Huzir permits Yuen to give an account not only of the other characters, but also of herself:

And me? My grandmother died. We didn't inherit the Taiping shophouses and the Ipoh Garden house. I've accepted a research post at Lawrence Livermore National Weapons Laboratory, USA. Yeah, I know. David Nussbaum is there too. It'll be good to see him. I have a story to tell him. Or a version of it. (78)

Although her return to the United States might suggest a repudiation of Malaysian identity following her entanglement with the corrupt political elite, Yuen’s momentary acknowledgement that her audience might find her decision to build American weapons objectionable suggests otherwise. At the level of *fabula*, the play follows a kind of “journey” plot, in which a protagonist loses her stable homeland, but then gains another. But at the level of *syuzhet*, Yuen’s phatic gesture – her “Yeah, I know” – reflects a continued identification with her local, Malaysian audience. The implication is that only an identity as riven as Yuen’s, that of a Chinese-Malaysian scientist who has studied in the west and now feels doubly exiled in her homeland, can adequately represent the complex of interrelations that entangle post-colonial nationality with the forces of

globalization. Her monologues present a counterpoint to the Malaysian polis at its least winsome: on the one hand, we encounter the hyper-intellectual voice of a female physicist who quotes Shakespeare; on the other, choral paeans to consumerism and the chintzy artifacts of populism, such as “the exhibition entitled ‘100 Years of Chastity Belts’ at the National Art Gallery” (19). Yuen’s identity, however, cannot be grounded in the customs of a given locale. Her personality is the verbal precipitate of a circuit of exclusions: a member of the Straits Chinese professional class, she is excluded from the class of *bumiputera* (literally “sons of the soil”), whose interests constitute an “authentic” nationalism in the official discourse of the state; yet as someone whose allegiance to her own cultural roots has been atrophied, adrift through the disloyal market of international defense spending, she is ripe to be recruited by this very regime. It is not that her cosmopolitanism seems incompatible with the interests of the postcolonial state; it has merely loosed its grasp enough for her to slip away.

There is a distinction to be made, however, between Yuen’s neutrality and the indifference that “Francis” displays at the end of *Election Day*. The key difference between these two narrators lies in the sequence of revelation and judgment created by the narration of each. Unlike “Francis,” who refuses to “care” about the judgment of his audience in deference to a higher authority, which predetermines the meaning of his revelation, Yuen unpacks her “ethics and recriminations and moral dilemmas” in a direct appeal to the audience: “I’m a good Malaysian, I used to think; I shouldn’t deal on all the murk of our souls. Don’t dig too deep. But Dr. Ramachandran was right to ask: why?” (31) Posing Dr. Ramachandran’s question in this way invites other “good Malaysians” to dig deep and ask difficult questions of their own political leaders.

In her introduction, Yuen not only admits the difficulty of penetrating official truth; she seems to embrace that effort as a valuable sort of effort, analogous to her labor as a working physicist. Likening the epistemological problems of narration to the challenge thrown up by “Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle,” she blurs the distinction between historical participant and observer:

**Yuen** When you’re the observer of a sequence of events and you want to tell that as a story, those events themselves change. Nothing is certain. You can’t trust your own point of view as an observer, because we now know that there is no such thing as a neutral observer. Great. What more if you were and actor, a participant in those events, as I was in the construction of the Malaysian atomic bomb. Then it becomes a very hard story to tell. (8)

Of course, Yuen is referring to the fabula to come. But her familiar register, which employs the colloquial use of the second-person (“you”), extends this ambiguity to the audience as well: “there’s no such thing as a neutral observer,” not even in the playhouse.

The official discourse of racial harmony, on the other hand, prompts subjects to perceive domination as the expression of their ownmost desire, because it presents the coercive power of the state as if it were the truth of a peace lying beyond the trauma of moral conflict. In an essay titled “What Went Wrong,” Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the figure whom Huzir critiques in *Election Day*, formulates the Malaysia’s history of interethnic violence in precisely these terms:

The Malays and the Chinese may live as neighbors. They may meet each other in their daily business and even socially. But when they retire, they retire into their respective ethnic and cultural sanctum, neither of which has ever been truly breached by the other. And in their own world their values are not merely different, but are often conflicting. (5)

On Mahathir’s view, the basic problem of the Malaysian national imaginary is the miracle of “harmony,” not only vis-à-vis the extremist fringes of domestic politics but

also in relation to regional others. Speaking in the officious voice of the state, Mahathir reinterprets ethnic conflict to be the historical call for penetration and extroversion by state power. Yet beneath the reified categories of race employed here, we might locate the structural impetus for historical violence in the lingering effects of British colonialism, which schematized racial categories in order to fit the needs of a hierarchical economic order. After nearly half a century, this system of racial inequalities exists to further the interests of new masters, both global and domestic. Rather than alleviating racial tensions, the NEP has become a perpetual irritant for native-born Malaysians who find themselves marginalized by the system of bumiputera privileges, and it befits the Malay ruling class to maintain a fine balance between stoking this ethnic strife, as a way of garnering electoral support, and deploying governmental programs designed to keep it in check. The NEP and concomitant social affordances together constitute a system of “Bumiputera privilege” that helps to bind Malay racial identity (from) within conditions of state dependency. Originally intended to be a wealth-equalization scheme, the NEP has been accused of fostering corruption, perpetuating Malay dependency at the expense of Chinese and Indian minorities, and serving as a political cudgel for provincial governments who oppose the ruling coalition. Gomez and Jomo, for example, link the NEP to Malaysia’s extensive system of political patronage, which they claim gums up the smooth functioning of democratic institutions and governmental bureaucracy. On the political-economic origins of the NEP, they write:

The primary objective of the New Economic Policy, announced in 1970, was to achieve national unity by ‘eradicating poverty’, irrespective of race, and by ‘restructuring society’ to achieve inter-ethnic economic parity between the predominantly Malay Bumiputeras and the predominantly Chinese non-Bumiputeras. This second prong basically involved

affirmative action for the Malays to reduce inter-ethnic economic differences, especially with the Chinese community. (24)

But what began as a market corrective for the historical inequities, they conclude, quickly developed into systemic inefficiencies that, somewhat perversely, may have harmed small Malay businesses most of all. The NEP therefore reinforces what they call “the development of a ‘subsidy mentality’ among the Bumiputeras” (118).

The question of how and why Malaysia maintains its harmonious development is the “black box” of Yuen’s narration. The cosmopolitan protagonist of this national drama, Yuen represents the obscene supplement to a schema of racial purity. Not only does Yuen’s narrative hold Southeast Asian traditions like eating popiah in tension with new social and sexual mores, but her occidental education (unlikely to have been subsidized by the Malaysian state because of her Chinese “race”) and the cosmopolitan mores it has fostered signify both the success of the NEP and the fallacy of its basic premises, because they are signs of the ways in which history has transmuted racial exclusion into a source of economic, professional, and cultural capital. By opening the corrupt process of governance to examination and drawing the deep historical contradictions of national identity into the light of contemporary life, Huzir subjects the static forms of cultural plenitude to the leveling force of secular capital; he reveals the linkages between political theater, nationalist propaganda, and the world system are revealed like the lines of a puppeteer, whose political stereotypes are shown to be marionettes, mere automata of the system. In this context, the discourse of racial essentialism cannot help but seem farcical, even jocular, despite the undercurrent of melancholy that shades Yuen’s performance of outsider identity—and the deadly stakes of the political gambit she plays.

In its reproduction of the Malaysian social world, the play draws volatile stereotypes together, compressing them onto the crucible-like stage where they threaten to attain critical mass and explode into violence. Contrary to the national mythologies about race, however, they do not explode. Instead of performing disaster, Huzir re-distributes it into a serial epilogue in which every character, no matter how minor, finds her or his trouble reconfigured by global possibilities – all satisfying, but none dependent upon another. Dr. Ramachandran emigrates to Australia with his wife, General Zulkifli becomes “Honorary Malaysian Consul” in Corsica, “The Minister is still speaking to reporters,” and so forth (42). From the her admission that an old male colleague will be at the “Weapons Laboratory” where Yuen is headed, we may deduce that her lot includes the possibility that she might resolve her childlessness in time.

This serial redistribution of social roles replaces visions of apocalyptic unity. "And this is the way the world ends," Yuen informs the audience, "—or doesn't end—not with a bang but a whimper. They all, inexplicably, lived happily ever after" (78). This allusion cleverly inverts T. S. Eliot's treatment of Guy Fawkes in "The Hollow Men," where the gunpowder plot offers a symbol of the secular democratic state's (for Eliot, problematic) triumph over religious conspiracy.<sup>25</sup> Thus Huzir triumphs over the corrupt bureaucrats pilfering Malaysia's democratic institutions by staging a play in which the central irony is that civil society has been saved by an individual act of treason by a cosmopolitan technocrat. The triumph of domestic order over nuclear armament, the victory (*jaya*) over the atom, is a comically hapless triumph of corruption and treason over the "atomic" divisiveness of racially essentialist democracy. Yuen's

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<sup>25</sup> It also misreads it, perhaps deliberately. In a 1958 interview, Eliot explicitly disavowed the now common association of his poem with "the H-bomb" (705).

cosmopolitanism internalizes her country's national contradictions, which she then makes present to her audience through the act of narrative confession. Her illocutionary claim—that truth necessarily collapses into untruth, without reference to falsehood—also has the perlocutionary effect of blurring the distinction between the event of narration and the communal act of national becoming.

For this reason, narrative functions like the logic of nuclear diplomacy itself (we pray need not be reminded) in that its representational power fails to signify, unless it is hermeneutically contained within an intersubjective loop. Huzir is circumspect in his approach to universality, because he recognizes that mass culture is itself *anxiolytic*, regardless of whether it displaces indigenous forms or simply appropriates them. In other words, culture under global capitalism *suppresses* the anxiety we feel about electoral fraud, political assassination, nuclear proliferation, or shifting sexual mores. In his plays, subjectivity unfolds not through narration (as in historical fiction), nor through auto-narration (as in memoir), but through an ethical engagement with the discourse of historiography. We might therefore conclude that, rather than imbricating the subaltern within a network of speech and text, Huzir's monologue projects dialogue onto the surface of representation. It is language as the skin of a world.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Comprador Dissatisfaction: Anita Desai and Salman Rushdie**

I have argued that Malaysian authors writing in English have staged positive cultural interventions into the class culture of a regional comprador bourgeoisie (the affluent diaspora community of English-speaking minorities on the Malayan peninsula). Their representations of the nation, I have claimed, cannot be reduced to straightforward performances of class interest. It has been my contention that, by raising problems of local culture in global English, these writers not only find ways to defamiliarize settled ideas about the political requirements for national sovereignty in the postcolonial and neoliberal state but also in so doing, have afforded readers at a distance with the imaginative tools for thinking with greater specificity and nuance about problems of global import. In other words, it has been my aim to show positive instances of world Anglophone literature mediating the joint production of local and global culture.

Focusing primarily upon Malaysia and Singapore, my readings have drawn links between counter-hegemonic forms of cosmopolitan discourse in the present and regional cosmopolitanisms with roots in the pre-colonial past. This frame of reference has had the benefit of bringing a common set of critical tropes—voice, topos, staging, representation, performance, schema—into a discussion of how social position mediates the cultural production of politically consequential social ideals such as race, intimacy, sovereignty, identity, and responsibility. This comparative approach to reading post-Bandung texts relies, however, upon an assumption that a common language has the power to guarantee the fundamental comparability of literary production across a range of cultural differences. It presumes that post-Bandung literature written in English can be meaningfully related to political sovereignty across a wide array of structural and

geographic differences, in part because the political form of the nation-state has established a broadly normative link between the representation of communal identity and the performance of national culture.

Against this assumption of comparability, we might argue that the effort to read middle-class literature in such a broad sociopolitical frame quietly relies on a model in which state power—symbolized most clearly in the executive capability to wage nuclear war—sets the limits of cultural sovereignty over political representation, because state violence may ultimately impose a veto on free expression. My critical interpretation of *Atomic Jaya*, for example, might be contested on the grounds that its avant-garde performance of nuclear sovereignty is merely therapeutic, because the form of the nation-state represents an essentially arbitrary check on the power of local culture to mediate its own relation to global capital. If we hold the position that what matters, from the perspective of a world literary market, is not simply *what* the middle class reads so much as *how* its consumption of texts is mediated by systems of cultural production and exchange,<sup>26</sup> then I may be presuming too much in claiming that Anglophone literature can do more than reflect the interests and anxieties of an English-literate reading public whose social and cultural interpellation, on the whole, occurs by other means.

In this chapter, I pull back slightly from close textual analysis in order to trace the development of formal interventions, primarily narratological in scope, in the practice of representing subaltern voices to/through a middle-class perspective. My aim is not to provide novel readings of the authors considered below; indeed, my interpretive claims

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<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the dynamics of the world literary marketplace, see: Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. M.B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2004.

are intended not to court theoretical or historical controversy, but to sketch several common (I am tempted to say “best”) practices—with the end of clarifying the readings of my final chapter. This middle-distance survey of exemplary novels will, I hope, outline a field of narratological and tropological conventions for handling problems of literary mediation within the production of a national middle-class. Ultimately, my argument will genealogically situate two “New Indian” novelists, Adiga and Roy, within a tradition (endemic to postcolonial novels from the Anglophone Indian Ocean) that stages narratological interventions into a biopolitical crises, foregrounded by neoliberal economic policies, of global overproduction and local underconsumption.<sup>27</sup> What each of these texts contribute to my project, then, is a clearer sense of how English-language writers translate the Fanonian imperative—to develop a political consciousness within the national middle-class—into the narratological problem of representing middle class-formation as if from below. In other words, I want to establish a framework for thinking about inter-subjective representations of middle-class cultural production and consumption, which the readings in my final chapter will trouble.

To begin, we might consider the problem of how to compare levels of consumption across epistemological boundaries, which haunts the comprador bourgeoisie like a shadow because. For in her role as a broker of cultural goods, the comprador subject can establish the relative value of creative products, but she has no access to an intrinsic value standard against which to measure their extrinsic worth—even to herself. Like muscle motions in the eye, the forces underpinning the vertical movement between a

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<sup>27</sup> On the link between underconsumption and neoliberal economic policies, see Amartya Sen’s discussion of demography in *Development as Freedom*.

cosmopolitan value claim and the work of intersubjective development must remain, by definition, actions at a distance.

To clarify, we might consider a public talk delivered in Harare, in 2011, by the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga, which deals with the problem of intersubjective comparison. Dangarembga contends that the reason overconsumption is common among “continentals,” middle-class Africans with transnational loyalties, is that they fail to perform acts of comparison within the proper regional frame, which erodes their “ability to identify satisfaction.” Dangarembga encourages her fellow “continentals” to be like her cat, which “never takes everything. No matter how much is there, no matter how much is there to be taken, a cat only takes enough.” For Dangarembga, this is not an essentialist problem of human nature versus cat nature, but an epistemological crisis. “We cannot have enough,” she explains, “because we do not know what enough is. Our situation is like the situation of those distressed women who suffer from bulimia trying to attain unattainable physical proportions that for some reason they believe they must have.” Thus, she continues, “continental” Africans have become “negations into which the productions of others can be emptied. Where we have at least reproduced, we have fallen upon that reproduction of ourselves, and we have torn it to pieces.” The solution she proposes is a return to regional economic cooperation, a “we-centered production that is globally competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” which would allow continentals “not only to speak, but to produce their own truth” (“The Question Posed by My Cat”).

This aspect of Zimbabwe’s developmental “bulimia” becomes clearer in Dangaremba’s first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), which recounts the story of an intelligent young woman from that country’s impoverished hinterland who progresses up

the social ladder from her rural village, eventually settling in with her comprador uncle and his family at their estate house in a private Christian boarding school. An important plot element of *Nervous Conditions* is that Tambu's teenaged cousin, Nyasha, suffers from bulimia as a result of the double-bind of having to imagine herself through the patriarchal frame of traditional African society and the colonial frame of England, where she was raised, while simultaneously confronting the history of colonial exploitation. Tambu links her cousin's "kamikaze" behavior to the irreconcilability of these frames, but her Anglophilic aunt and uncle send Nyasha to a psychiatrist who concludes that "Nyasha could not be ill, that Africans did not suffer in the way we had described" (201). It is this combination of being looked-over/overlooked that drives Nyasha's bulimic performance: as the expatriate subject of two nations, she risks identifying with her own cultural erasure.

This structural peril, suggests Dangarembga, entails a concomitant cultural risk that the very capacities of self-formation enabling middle-class subjects to adopt an ironic posture towards the enticements of global/consumer culture would also unclasp them from the grip of national belonging and cosmopolitan sympathy. In its positive dimension, irony may check the cynical drive to pander when representing the local to the world; however, it can also become debilitating. Tambu experiences the same pressures that drive her cousin to desperation—more intensely, in fact, because she does not have parental models of hybridity to emulate (her own family remains behind in the village). But Tambu does not succumb to these pressures, partly because her reading practice differs from Nyasha's. Tambu's reading consists mostly of British novels, which her cousin dismisses as "fairy tales." Yet her consumption of "everything from Enid

Blyton to the Brontë sisters” is crucial for her development, because it allows her validate the “other presence” she had always felt within her, and which had kept her apart from the experience of her family. Reading British novels is therefore crucial for “introducing [Tambu] to places where reason and inclination were not at odds. It was a centripetal time, with me at the centre, everything gravitating towards me. It was a time of sublimation with me as the sublimate” (93).

Dangarembga poses an interesting challenge to a normative Western conception of development. The clandestine aspect of bulimia, and the unaccountable belief that the body must conform to an external stereotype, together imply the existence of a structural projection—in psychoanalytic parlance, a “gaze” or “big Other”—from whose perspective one’s actions come to seem objectively meaningful. For Zimbabwe, one aspect of performing transnational cooperation involves participation in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional economic development organization that includes Zimbabwe along with fourteen of its fellow member states. The stated aims of SADC include cooperative development, the adoption of a single currency by 2018, and eventually a more formal economic union.<sup>28</sup> According to geographer James Sidaway, however, the SADC also performs an important ideological and diplomatic function for the region’s poorer states, like Zimbabwe, which have struggled to compete with South Africa’s dominant economy. For these states—among the world’s poorest—the SADC plays an important role in state sovereignty, Sidaway argues, by providing a venue for diplomatic theatre, a representational space within which national sovereignty can be staged. And this performance can have practical

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<sup>28</sup> SADC. “Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP).”

consequences: despite the fact that SADC projects generally do not have a regional import, Sidaway argues, the regional seal of the SADC helps to legitimize requests for international aid to fund development projects that are national in scope. Moreover, they allow states to assert sovereignty over the “undecidable territory” of a state whose governmental authority can be geographically uneven (Sidaway 49-89).

With these parallel conceptions of development in mind, Dangarembga’s fiction raises the specter of the double bind that Fanon ascribes to postcolonial development in the form of a comprador bourgeoisie itself: the subjects who are most capable of enacting a deliberately-bounded, self-regulating, and “we-centered” community of production – the imagined community of a modern nation-state—are the very class that most stands to gain by exploiting that community. Yet if this is the case, then Tambu’s example suggests that meritocratic institutions, like the government school, can help to break open this dynamic—not by leveling the economic disparity between local and global middle classes, but by introducing a bottom-up perspective on satisfaction. If a regional community is to enshrine communal values within the norms of middle-class consumption, as Dangarembga proposes, then its culture must represent the value of communal sovereignty over local production; but if that culture is to sustain and defend these representations, then its artists must model the production of personal sovereignty at the most local level.

This argument on behalf of representative upward mobility (we might draw an historic analogy with the notion of a “talented tenth” in the discourse of African American development) may be staged on the international scale as well. The Indian writer Anita Desai develops a version of Tambu’s social-mobility narrative in her novel

*Fasting, Feasting* (1999), where it is connected with a formal appeal to global-cosmopolitan concern about the perpetuation of traditional forms of discrimination in postcolonial India. The novel follows the development of Uma and her younger brother, Arun, as they grow up in a conservative household that is solidly middle-class but by no means affluent, even by Indian standards. The first half of the novel follows Uma's frustrated and alienated maturation into a marriageable woman—and then a series of subsequent disappointments that follow as her father is twice swindled out of her dowry. Disgraced through no fault of her own, she is compelled to live at home with her stifling parents, who spitefully reject any prospect of freedom that comes her way. For example, her devout aunt Mira-masi, believing Uma to be chosen by lord Krishna for a spouse, attempts to inculcate her within the religious life of an ashram. But Uma's parents send a male cousin to fetch her; which is perhaps just as well, because she has developed a nervous tendency to fall into sudden "fits" (101).

Desai uses a bioptic framing device: two siblings, excised from the social whole, with half of the novel devoted to focalizing the perspective of each. In different ways, the developmental narratives of Uma and Arun both exemplify the systematic failure of globalization to deliver cultural and material satiety to India's middle class. Desai ties this failure to the differing cultural expectations exerted upon genders; her portrayal reflects a schematic division of subjects into producers (feminine, reflective, silenced) and consumers (masculine, expressive, voiced). But this social division gains nuance from the novel's formal dichotomy; it rehearses a "spectre of comparisons," the phrase used by Benedict Anderson, quoting the Filipino nationalist José Rizal, to denote a distancing effect that comes into play when deep cultural immersion forces us to revisit

our most familiar cultural references.<sup>29</sup> In the novel's first half, Desai focalizes the perspective of Uma, the stunted and neglected daughter of a patriarchal Hindu family in which undernourished women cater, in apparently servile abjection, to the male appetites for food, sex, control—and above all, “proper attention.” This phrase then becomes thematically significant when Arun is born, because he immediately occupies the center of their parents' care and affection, simply because he is their first male child. Here class privilege, which Desai stretches across the skeletal traditions of patriarchal authority, remains anchored in inequities of bodily provision and gendered spheres of production: “when Papa returned from the office, he would demand to know how much his son had consumed and an answer had to be given: it had to be precise and it had to be one that pleased,” full stop (Desai 30). In this nuclear household, meritocratic ambition has collapsed the inter-subjective distance between patriarchal authority and rational discourse.

The most pointed depiction of the domestic suppression of female voices is the horrific subplot of Uma's beautiful and talented cousin Anamika, charm of the extended family. After a triumphant and lavish wedding, Anamika disappears into her husband's family until word of her immolation reaches her own kind. Her death remains unaccountable (a suicide, a murder, an honor killing—we never learn for sure), because her tyrannical in-laws have curtailed all contact between her and the outside world. The truth of her death gradually slips from a detailed reconstruction of the event (presumably from a police report) of how Anamika went about preparing to “set herself alight,” through her mother-in-law's testimony of how a “whimpering sound” led her to

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<sup>29</sup> *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 2 et passim.

“investigate” and find “a small fire flickering on the veranda... Anamika charred, dying.” Her death incites gossip, reports about who-said-what, that ultimately settles into a consensus that the event was “what god willed... Anamika’s destiny.” This treatment of subaltern voicelessness evokes Gayatri Spivak’s critical analysis of *sati*,<sup>30</sup> the ritual immolation of Hindu wives. Desai emphasizes the role that precise detail plays in supplementing official discourse, in what might otherwise have been a straightforward excoriation of traditional patriarchy; the precision with which Anamika’s death is recounted evacuates the force of outrage from the community’s response, because it allows them to speak for/about events that should remain incomparable. Thus the focus resolves upon Uma, who says “nothing” (150-151).

Desai also deploys silence to trouble the clarity of Arun’s make privilege. As it happens, he cannot enjoy the fruits of preferential treatment, because he is busy being driven toward a life of academic success in the West. This ceaseless toil rubs out his subjectivity, literally de-facing him when he finally receives a “fateful letter” admitting him to a university in the American Northeast:

Uma watched Arun too, when he read the fateful letter. She watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none. All the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing features Arun’s face might once have had. They had left the essentials: a nose, eyes, mouth, ears. But he held his lips tightly together, his nose was as flattened as could possibly be, and his eyes were shielded by the thick glasses his relentless studies had necessitated. There was nothing else — not the hint of a smile, frown, laugh or anything: these had all been ground down till they had disappeared. This blank face now stared at the letter and faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by Papa. (Desai 121)

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<sup>30</sup> “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

This passage evinces a form of intersubjective longing—a repressed need for comprehension and affirmation, if not solidarity, to pass between the siblings. The nearest we come, however, is “a stricken look” that Arun sends his sister just before he boards the train to Bombay, from where he will continue on to America.

Uma’s reading of her brother is not the final word, however, on what the experience of a western education should mean to him. The second half of the novel, which is told from Arun’s perspective, places these cultural tropes into a comparative perspective. If Uma’s life had been shrunken by parental tyranny — pulled from school, married hastily to a dowry swindler, denied access to missionary friends, and forced to work as a domestic slave in her own home — then Arun’s experience of American benevolence reduces him further still, because it denies him even a cultural framework with which to decode his erasure. Sent to board for the summer with the Pattons, a sitcom-normal suburban family that seems to have been wheat-pasted together by the bubbling optimism of its insecure mother, Arun finds that his identity can be obliterated simply through the well-intentioned desire to address needs that he doesn’t have. Desai notably unpacks this realization through a sustained critique of American consumerism, which is centered upon the family’s inability to comprehend Arun’s vegetarianism as mere difference, and not something to be corrected (as implied by Mr. Patton’s stern disapproval) or else recuperated (as when Mrs. Patton volunteers to become vegetarian too). There is a quiet symbolism in Mr. Patton’s love of grilling meat, for example, which seems to link the fire of American barbeque to the immolation of Anamika, as if to convey the horror and disgust that a vegetarian Hindu like Arun must feel at being offered a slab of rare cow flesh.

Through this lens of spectral comparison, American habits of consumption appear insanelly defensive and fetishistic. Mrs. Patton's joy, we are told,

lay in carrying home this hoard she had won from the maze of the supermarket, storing it away in her kitchen cupboards, her refrigerator and freezer. Arun, handing her the packages one by one—butter, yoghurt, milk to go in here, jam and cookies and cereal there—worried that they would never make their way through so much food but this did not seem to be the object of her purchases. Once it was all stored away in the gleaming white caves where ice secretly whispered to itself, she was content. She did not appear to think there was another stage beyond this final, satisfying one. (184)

Desai's critique in this passage aims not at greed, nor even at the ostentatious display of wealth, but at the crazed production of order as the only imaginable end of American consumerism. This America, Arun thinks, is like "a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing—which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught, and compromised—but the unreal thing—clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour, or nourishment" (185). In the whispering of "ice to itself" in "gleaming white caves," we might read a symbol for the foreclosure of intimacy enjoined by a patriarchal-capitalistic system that stretches, in an uninterrupted flow of material goods, from the private dinner table in a small Indian village to the untouched freezer in a Massachusetts suburb.

If Desai suggests an opportunity for art to intervene in this immutable system, it comes through her modeling of an empathic mode of sensuous comparison, in which the presence of an other-body in distress causes a moment of defamiliarization, rupturing the cultural script that we did not know we had been acting out. The hollowness of American plenitude comes out, as it were, through the bulimic collapse of the Patton's eldest daughter, Melanie. In the moment when Arun finds her seizing body, Desai pivots away from her caricature of the American family:

Staring at her, huddled on the ground and trembling, he feels this could be a scene in a film — a maiden at the feet of the hero, crying — but of course it is no such thing. It is not safely in the distance, flattened and reduced to black and white: it is daylight, three-dimensional and malodorous. They are not the stuff of dreams or even cinema: he is not the hero, nor she the heroine, and what she is crying for, he cannot tell. This is no plastic mock-up, no cartoon representation such as he has been seeing all summer; this is a real pain and a real hunger. (223)

At the conclusion of Arun's narrative, Melanie has been:

taken to an institution in the Berkshires where they know how to deal with the neuroses of adolescent girls: bulimia, anorexia, depression, withdrawal, compulsive behaviour, hysteria. (Mr. Patton has taken on a night job to pay the bills.) They send in reports on her progress. She is playing tennis. She has helped bake cookies in the kitchen. She is making friends. (226)

Arun's final gesture before departing is to place a brown shawl, an unwanted gift sent to him by his family, around Mrs. Patton's shoulders. As he does so, "an aroma arises from it, as if another land: muddy, grassy, smoky, ashen. It swamps him, like a river, or like a fire" (227). In this small gesture of abnegation, Arun has suddenly experienced, though perhaps without realizing it, an unwonted connection with his own sister. For at the end of Uma's own narrative, just as she mourns the self-immolation of a beloved cousin married into an abusive family, she "dips her jar in the river, and lifts it high over her head. When she tilts it and outs it out, the murky water catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire" (156).

Desai offers a marker for the realist depiction of class differences being imposed upon members of the same caste—and indeed, even within the same family—through the intersection of traditional societal pressures and emergent forces of class mobility.

Importantly, Desai maps the developmental trajectories of different states—the United States and India—onto cultural rifts in the form of modernity experienced by different

segments within each society, caste, and even family. Her narrative reinforces this segmentation by rigidly enforcing the focalization of each part: we learn nothing of Uma's experience during her brother's time in America; and even during the period when they live in the same household, we have no access to Arun's interiority. The effect is to create a perception of multiple national developmental trajectories within the boundaries of a single nation-state (India) as well as between states. Any cultural synthesis between these two perspectives, then, would seem to rely upon a movement upward, toward a transcendent perspective—the reader's—that is capable of forming a symbolic link between the two characters' experience of fire on water. Moreover, this mediating distance is allegorically linked to a middle-class perspective, because it comprehends the two siblings' divergent trajectories: as the novel ends, Arun is poised to return to the university for the semester, with the experience of having lived with the Pattons to smooth his transition into middle-class American life, while Uma's position—stuck at home and growing less eligible for marriage by the day—is in relative decline.

Desai's representation of middle-class dissatisfaction has troubling implications for the way her novel addresses western readers. Because we peer down into the lives of characters that seem incapable of comprehending each other, the capability to comprehend India's middle-class interests holistically seems to have been reserved for a transcendent, western reader. To be sure, Arun's viewpoint provides a critical perspective on American suburbia. But this perspective is not so radical as to defamiliarize critical frameworks that already exist within the west. At the end of his summer with the Pattons, for instance, Arun discovers that he has no space in his suitcase for a shawl and box of tea that his family has shipped to him, because "he is taking back precisely the same

number of shirts, books and underwear as he brought with him, [sic] he has used up and thrown away nothing” (226). The novel seems to demand only the weakest critical response, the most spectral self-reflection, precisely because the Pattons’ wastefulness is so obviously flawed, Arun’s abstemiousness so legibly virtuous. It would seem too easy for a western reader simply to agree with Arun that yes, American excess is indeed distasteful, but no, westerners do not deserve censure—but pity. An impulse to self-pity, then, lurks in the wings of the novel’s discursive critique of the west.

There is a third interpretive position, however, from which Desai’s critique becomes far stronger. What *Fasting Feasting* implicates, by shifting local perspectives from the inside (Uma) to the outside (Arun) of a given culture, is not our willingness to judge the Indian family, nor our failure to judge an American one, but our failure to recognize the reinscription of this divide within local culture. From this perspective, what Desai opposes is the insider presumption that without being told, we can distinguish “a real pain and a real hunger” from a false one. Like Dangarembga’s representation of Nyasha, the novel invites us to suspend a framework that, substituting distance for care, encodes Melanie’s bulimia as pathological. Desai invites us instead to interpret Melanie’s self-harm through the eyes of Uma, who, having been jilted for a second time, overhears her mother and aunt argue about whether she should have been sent to an ashram to live as the bride of Lord Krishna:

She wanted to point this out to Mira-masi and Mama, to say, “You see? It is not so easy,” but the two women sat silently beside each other, darkly brooding, and Uma knew, seeing them, their grim presences throwing dark shadows upon the wall, that she had not had their experiences, that hers was other: that of an outcast from the world of marriage, the world which, all the murmuring and whispering and muttering implied, was all that mattered. (96)

Uma's inability to speak her mind illustrates the importance of Desai's use of "fire" to thread various interpretive reference points together across the break in narrative frame. Desai's critique does not collapse into cultural relativism as it moves across perspectival breaks; rather, it seems to make the project of comparison a more urgent one, because it allows a distant form of critique to secure a more proximate one. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider comparable techniques that Indian authors have used to sustain critiques, at a much larger scale, of the erosion of middle-class norms following India's neoliberal economic reforms.

The English-language novel that has dealt most inventively with how to represent India's middle class has been Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). The novel presents the narrative of Saleem Sinai, the last surviving member of a venerable Muslim family. Saleem insists that he can represent the nation not despite its exceptionality, but because of it: having come into the world at the precise moment when his nation gained its independence from the British, Saleem possesses a magical capacity to communicate telepathically with the other "children of midnight" born in the fateful hour following independence. Saleem loses this power, as do the rest of midnight's children, when they forcibly undergo a "sperectomy"—Rushdie's metaphor for *Nasbandi*, the sterilization campaign instituted by Sanjay Gandhi, son of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, during the latter's declaration of National Emergency (1975-1977). With the motif of sperectomy, Rushdie indicates a combined excision of hope and reproductive futurity. Rushdie's emphasis upon the historic role that *Nasbandi* played in shaping the political imagination of India's middle class reflects his deep fascination with the role that families play in diffracting historical memory and binding disparate cultural systems,

such as class and religion, into a cohesive social order. The unifying power of family combined with religion is symbolized in the novel's opening when Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather, develops an internal "hole" as a result of having lost his belief in god. This hole leads Aziz—and then Saleem—on a lifelong search for fulfillment. This loss also introduces the novel's first magical-realist trope: when Aziz hits his nose on the ground, the drops of blood that fall transform into rubies, symbolizing the affluent future that awaits his family as a result of his secularizing profession.

The idea that modes of self-relation can have vast historical consequences recurs, to the point of parody, whenever Saleem finds himself unable to explain the connections between events. Thus for most of the novel, whenever the rationale of national progress seems to encounter the unreal horrors of mass cruelty and violence, Saleem is able to cobble together narrative closure by taking personal responsibility for the failure of the children's conference. This melancholic mode begins to fail him during the period of Partition, however, because his immediate family is killed by an Indian bomb dropped on their home in Pakistan during an air raid, and he is witness to the atrocities that accompanied the segmentation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh. There is therefore an implied link between the territorial integrity of the nation and his capacity to knit it together genealogically.

The family also knits India's national history together with the historic role of its comprador bourgeoisie. Aziz and Naseem move from Kashmir, in the Northernmost region of India (now a part of Pakistan), to Agra, further to the South, where the family begins its narrative entanglement with the life of the future Indian nation that eventually settles upon the Western coastal metropolis of Bombay. After seeing the violent

repression of the anti-Partition movement, Aziz becomes involved in local politics: he shelters one of the movement's organizers, Nadir Khan, after the assassination of its charismatic leader, Mian Abdullah, also known as "the Hummingbird" (45 et passim). From the start, however, the form of the family's political life centers upon a negation of its comprador class identity, as the need to fuel their expenditures conflicts with their personal values. This negative quality to political life is symbolized by the "hole" in Aziz, and it plays out in the plot leading to Saleem's conception and birth. One of the Aziz daughters, Mumtaz, becomes a caretaker to Khan during the period he remains hidden in the family basement. They fall in love and marry; however, when it is learned that they have not yet consummated their marriage, another of the Aziz daughters, Emerald, reports Khan's whereabouts to her own fiancée, Major Zulfikar. Khan flees, leaving Mumtaz available for the unremarkable businessman who will eventually become Saleem's father, Ahmed Sinai, to swoop in and marry.

Long before he is born, then, Saleem is entangled with politics, and this entanglement takes the form of a negation. If not for Khan's effective lack of virility, Saleem never would have been born. Likewise from the beginning, this involvement stands in tension with comprador class identity: his parents would have been unlikely to marry if this political fugitive had not first cleared way by leaving the grieving Mumtaz available for Ahmed Sinai to court.

By presenting India's national history through the frame of Saleem's personal odyssey in this way, Rushdie is able to negotiate the competing fictional imperatives of depicting a romanticized national history and conveying the subjective experience of having lived through history. The territory that Saleem must cover is so vast, however,

that he must appear to have played a role in an impossible number of historical events. As these historical details accumulate, and the force of historical tensions reaches a peak, it becomes increasingly clear that Saleem's basic conceit—that he has a special and essential connection to the nation—is an untenable one. The fabric of his allegory begins to unravel, and he grows defensive, frequently interrupting his narration to pose rhetorical questions that are aimed at shoring up the legitimacy of his claim to history.

As a result, Saleem begins to “crack up” in both the narrative and psychological frames. Frequently, his narration will rise out of the story and begin to discourse about his interactions with his interlocutor, Padma:

I feel cracks widening down the length of my body; because suddenly I am alone, without my necessary ear, and it isn't enough. I am seized by a sudden fist [sic] of anger: why should I be so unreasonably treated by my one disciple? Other men have recited stories before me; other men were not so impetuously abandoned. When Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, dictated his masterpiece to elephant-headed Ganesh, did the god walk out on him halfway? He certainly did not. (Note that, despite my Muslim background, I'm enough of a Bombayite to be well up in Hindu stories, and actually I'm very fond of the image of trunk-nosed, flap-eared Ganesh solemnly taking dictation!) (170)

As we see from this example, however, the crack-up is not an entirely negative aspect of Saleem's narration. It enables him to transcend the cultural divide separating Hindu from Muslim through the work of literary comparison. Also significant, it is associated with the entrepôt city of Bombay, where Saleem's narrative as a whole will end.

Paradoxically, then, his identity as a cracked-up Bombayite is what allows the novel to hang together. Nevertheless, this negative capability highlights an aspect of Saleem's narration to which I will have occasion to return: the existence of Padma, his interlocutor, seems to be the supplement necessary to the holding together of his identity. Even her brief moments of absence precipitate Saleem's coherence, because it enables him to feel

self-pity—and in feeling this pity, he adopts a comparison to the great Valmiki, which places him within a larger canon.

In response, Saleem adopts a “philosophy of acceptance,” leading him to adopt the cognomen “buddha” in reflection of the façade of indifference with which he greets the world during this period of his life (410). Thematically, Saleem’s newfound “acceptance” implies a willingness to go along with state power and the use of military force to settle political tensions that cannot be resolved through discursive means. As “the buddha,” Saleem enlists in the Pakistani army, where he participates in political coups and witnesses the horrors of the war to prevent the secession of East Pakistan-Bangladesh. This becomes a source of tremendous guilt, leading him to feel compelled to confess to the role he had to play in historical crimes.

But Saleem’s “crack-up” is not merely psychological; it also reflects a larger rupturing in historical reality as a result of the horrors witnessed during the war of secession, which seem to break the frame of what is comprehensible under the descriptive framework of a secular modernity. Saleem describes the atrocities that he and his fellow soldiers witnessed in Dhaka as “things that weren't-couldn't-have-been true.” And he struggles to convey the moral import of what he calls the “futility of statistics”:

During 1971, ten million refugees fled across the borders of East Pakistan-Bangladesh into India-but ten million (like all numbers larger than one thousand and one) refuses to be understood. Comparisons do not help: 'the biggest migration in the history of the human race'-meaningless. Bigger than Exodus, larger than the Partition crowds, the many-headed monster poured into India. (80)

Here Saleem suggests that apparently objective ways of accounting for history somehow distort historical truth. In part, this is because the consequences of historical events are

not determined by the facts alone; they are mediated by the experience of those who participate in them.

This realization lends irony to Saleem's claim to an exceptional capacity to represent the nation as a result of having come into the world at the event of its birth. In order to represent the nation, he must constantly fend off voices that grow more authentic than his own with the passage of time. Saleem acknowledges the inevitability of being subsumed in this way when he reflects upon the future of his narrative project:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (533)

Speaking from an imagined future, where the rise of India's teeming masses has become a reality, Saleem admits that the future of his narrative project—the creation of a cohesive nation—depends upon a substitution of other genealogies for his own. Here the “son who will not be his” refers to Aadam Sinai, the child of Parvati the Witch, Saleem's late wife and his greatest ally among the children of midnight. But Aadam is not Saleem's own progeny. The child's true father is Saleem's arch-nemesis, Major Shiva, who is in fact the true child of Ahmed and Mumtaz Sinai. The birth of Aadam Sinai therefore parallels one of the novel's central ironies, which is that Saleem, who stakes his claim to representing the national allegory upon the facts of his birth, was not in fact born into his own family. Saleem becomes his parents' child only when Mary Pereira, “a love-crazed virgin” who works at the hospital where Saleem is born, switches his “name-tag”

with that of infant Shiva, because she wants to give a poor child a chance to grow up in a middle-class household. The fact that Saleem cares for the child of Shiva and Parvati thus represents a bit of restorative justice, because it returns the Sinai name to its rightful owner.

Again, we find a reading that places the figure of chiasmus at the heart of a middle-class anxiety about the future of the nation. Mary's unchecked political impulse, well intentioned though it may have been, poses a crisis for national and personal sovereignty; it sets into motion a series of events that will ultimately undermine Saleem's ability to represent the nation as a whole—and the nation's ability to remain territorially sovereign. As a result of the child swap, the state undergoes a series of existential crises associated with its break-up into various forms of sectionalism. First, the historical violence of Partition amplifies Hindu-Muslim antipathies; and later, after the Sinai family has relocated to Pakistan, it contributes to the atrocities inflicted upon East Pakistan-Bangladesh. Mary's impulsive decision to switch Saleem, who is in fact the child of poor parents, unwittingly instigates an enmity between the two children. Shiva will grow to resent having been raised in poverty, and this leads him to become a brutal womanizer as well as "India's most decorated war hero" (468). Saleem, on the other hand, doesn't seem to mind his poverty, and much of the novel finds him freely associating with the artists and writers in Delhi's slums.

Ultimately, Pareira's swap will lead to the break-up of Indian solidarity. As another child of midnight, Shiva is able to access Saleem's mind through the Conference; and because he so resents having been denied a middle-class upbringing, he cynically opposes Saleem's utopian vision for the Midnight Children's Conference. The inability of

the children to settle their differences leads them to challenge and then abandon the legitimacy of Saleem's leadership. And this leaves them vulnerable to Indira Gandhi and sperectomy. The cynicism of one child, in other words, may lead to a loss of hope for all. By accepting Aadam Sinai as his own, Saleem provides a gesture of closure to the historical crossing opened up by Mary Pareira—a fact represented in his naming the child for its great-grandfather. He greets cynicism with belief.

The ideal of a genealogical recuperation, which Saleem describes as sons doing better than their fathers, is one that lies at the heart of novel's vision for the political role of art. By rendering *The Emergency* as a "sperectomy," Saleem draws attention not only to the novel's overarching concern with nation and natality, but also to the symbolic importance of connecting familial identity to the hope of the kind of valid representation that art provides. But whose identity and in whose language should art perform such a recuperation? Even the term sperectomy indicates a class bias, because its double meaning is available only in English—and therefore almost exclusively to the nation's largely urban middle-class—the very sort of subjects who might manage a chutney factory, granting them ample time to muse on the nation's history, while a devoted fiancée lavishes them with attention and stirs the chutney pot.

*Nasbandi* implicitly links the reproduction of private narratives and the capacity to reproduce national identity; the sperectomy facilitates Saleem's narration because it forces him to sublimate his creative energies into the production of art. But these energies are inherently self-limiting, because they cannot be passed onto the next generation in the form of traditional culture; instead, Saleem argues, they are "pickled" by the passage of time, transforming themselves into the "chutney" of national culture. Whereas India's

independence had granted powers to the children of midnight that allowed them to sublimate into an imagined community by holding conference in Saleem's mind, their sterilization has coerced them to sublimate at a purely embodied level, into the biopolitical imperatives of the state. The novel therefore stages the closure of an exceptional state—the historical frame in which national development seems to validate the internally coherent idea of India—with a state of juridical exception, in which the subjects of that history have been deprived of their right to perpetuate. This way of depicting national history too highlights the link between nations and natality, and it underscores the ethnic and religious sectionalism that has marked group conflict in South Asia. The future of the nation and the Sinai family story, therefore, both rest upon the efficacy of Saleem's acceptance of his enemy's child—whom he names Aadam after the child's own great-grandfather.

One of Rushdie's key insights is therefore that national unity is always a retroactive production of this kind. Saleem can ground his representativeness only through the negative work of nostalgia, in the middle-class world of his childhood, when it seemed possible to provide a coherent account of the nation through the lens of his personal narrative, and to ground that perspective in a stable relation to the national ideal. By accepting Aadam Sinai—the most admirable action of an otherwise morally ambivalent—Saleem pays off an historical debt.

But this way of narrating history—through a nostalgic lens that finds a realist accounting of events to be lacking—raises the novel's most central question: what is the proper imaginative frame for bending the representation of history in the direction of truth? It is in relation to this question that the novel's staging of a middle-class identity

becomes decisively important. Saleem must negotiate a middle position—a space from which to mediate—that is neither overly central nor overly peripheral, because the traumas of South Asia’s territorial crack-up have led him to conclude that “the philosophy of acceptance to which the buddha adhered had consequences no more and no less unfortunate than his previous lust-for-centrality” (410).

The solution implied by the novel’s method of narrative framing is a combination of conspiratorial thinking and anxious self-interrogation—a recipe that, from a formal perspective, produces a promiscuity of verbal associations, held together by an increasingly complicated tropology of key ideas and events. In order to suture the “cracks” in history, Saleem must resort to a narrative technique in which he proposes conspiracy theories about the essential connection between his own life and the life of his nation, which he then pitches in the form of rhetorical questions.

One implication of Saleem’s turn to conspiracy is that, by denying *Midnight’s Children* a lineage, the imposition of Emergency has ironically left the ideals of the *Midnight Children’s* Conference perpetually open for reclamation. The most important of Saleem’s conspiracy theories is that the true purpose of *nasbandi*—indeed, of the entire emergency—was to foreclose this possibility. By wresting control of the state away from the exceptional children, Indira Gandhi claims exceptionality for herself. This usurpation leads Saleem to declare that “Indira is India and India is Indira” (449). Rushdie’s imagery links to the potential for Bandung ideals to reform the state in opposition to Indira Gandhi’s usurpation of constitutional order. It is consequently the spectre of Bandung, Rushdie suggests, and not an actual communist threat to Indian democracy, that has motivated Gandhi’s imposition of the Emergency:

Yes, you see, the scraps begin to fit together! Padma, does it not become clear? Indira is India and India is Indira... but might she not have read her own father's letter to a midnight child, in which her own, sloganized centrality was denied; in which the role of mirror-of-the-nation was bestowed upon me? You see? You see?... [...] No, the Emergency had a black part as well as a white, and here is the secret which has lain concealed for too long beneath the mask of those stifled days: the truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight. (Whose Conference had, of course, been disbanded years before; but the mere possibility of our re-unification was enough to trigger off the red alert.) (491-492)

Here Saleem holds forth the possibility that, even after the Emergency, the national ideal could have been rescued by reclaiming allegiance with the decolonizing left (“the red alert”). This potential for solidarity is melancholic, because it has been historically foreclosed: not only was the conference “disbanded years before,” but even if they all made up their minds to support such a movement, the link between them has been severed.

If there is hope for the nation, Saleem suggests, it will come from the working class artists and magicians whom the state has singled out for extrajudicial violence. A new India would require a new midnight; there would need to be another historical rupture. Rushdie does extend such a possibility in the novel’s link between art and revolutionary praxis: Saleem adopts a new patrimony, for instance, when he chooses to identify Picture Singh, as another one of his surrogate father figures. Singh an impoverished snake charmer who is named for having had his picture made into an advertisement that the Kodak film corporation spread across India. As “The Most Charming Man in the World,” Singh threatens to follow in the steps of Mian Abdullah, the legendary “Hummingbird,” the charismatic anti-partition leader who, two generations earlier, inspired the anti-imperial loyalties of Saleem’s grandfather, Aadam Sinai. In one

scene during the Emergency, Singh is able to humiliate an upstart member of the Congress party who wanders into the slum, declaring that “all men are created equal.” Singh humiliates him by charming a king cobra from his basket, causing the youth to admit that he could never duplicate the feat. “You see, captain,” Singh explains to the youth, “here is the truth of the business: some persons are better, others are less. But it may be nice for you to think otherwise” (458). Singh’s authority over “the king cobra of language”—his capacity to command reality—would seem to grant a revolutionary political authority to art. Saleem reflects, “the magicians were people whose hold on reality was absolute; they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never forgot what it was.” In reflecting upon the powers of representation held by these slum-dwelling magicians of old Delhi, Saleem situates the power to “bend” historical representation away from mere reflection, and toward truthfulness; and in this sense, art too can provide closure to the chiasmic disruptions of history.

Under Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, however, the situation has changed. *Nasbandi* does not merely supply a trope for Rushdie’s depiction of Indian history: because it closes the off the nation’s access to its multiple rememberings of the past, (in the forum of a “midnight conference”), *nasbandi* imposes an epistemological limit upon the capacity to bend historical imagination toward a distant focal point. *Nasbandi*’s foreclosure of this imaginative possibility has consequences for the prospect of a middle class that is not beholden to comprador bourgeois values. From the outset, Saleem’s telepathic abilities are important for their ability to link the negative capability of childhood innocence—the potential to see the world in new lights—to the power to

internalize the cares of the adult world. Telepathy grants him access to “the confusion of other people’s lives... blurring together in the heat,” which threatens to engulf him within the schizophrenic contradictions of history (195). One of the most interesting ways in which this capacity plays out is in relation to his family’s comprador experience of commodification and consumption. For example, Saleem’s empathic telepathy allows him to see how his mother is “trying to fill up every nook and cranny of her thoughts with everyday things, the price of pomfret, the roster of household chores,” and it allows him to see “how’s she’s desperately concentrating on parts of her husband to love” (195). Drawing a connection between her habits of consumption and her approach to marriage helps to defamiliarize her willingness to perform a negative identity for her husband’s personality—her willingness to allow her husband’s interests to fill up her own sense of self.

Rushdie hints that this form of love is in fact a class construct. The image of Amina Sinai trying to fill herself up with bits and pieces—of consumer goods, of her husband—recalls the novel’s ur-metaphor for middle-class love: the peephole-courtship of Aadam Aziz. When Aziz was a young doctor beginning his practice in Kashmir, Naseem’s father had arranged their union by sending for the doctor on a regular basis to treat her ailments. Because of their modesty, Aziz must examine her through “a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the center” (4). As a result, Aziz gets to know Naseem’s body piece by piece before ever seeing the whole Naseem, and this drives him wild with love—and Saleem links this story to virginity when he notes that “the sheet, incidentally, is stained too, with three drops of old, faded redness” (ibid.). Just as the veil had separated, and therefore

produced, the exoticism of Aadam Aziz's desire, the voices of his elders divide Saleem from the immanent stream-of-consciousness of his narration. In contrast, Saleem's internalization of the experience of his female elders makes him something of a child Tiresias, allowing him to comprehend the nation across the epistemological divide of gender. In this sense, the narrative perspective functions like the scrim, a "sunlit sheet," whose "peephole" enables the consumption of other-stories (434). It pierces a veil that separates the "western" gaze from — and therefore both frames and induces desire for — the body of an other. Thus Saleem's desire to imagine a rebellion led by art is, like his meditations on his failure to bind the children of the midnight and the nation, fundamentally melancholic:

one day soon the snake-charmer Picture Singh would follow in the footsteps of Mian Abdullah so many years ago; that, like the legendary Hummingbird, he would leave the ghetto to shape the future by the sheer force of his will; and that, unlike my grandfather's hero, he would not be stopped until he, and his cause, had won the day... but, but. Always a but but. What happened, happened. We all know that. (477)

Saleem's impulse here—to dwell upon what could have come to pass but has not—is typical of his political imagination, which wavers between resentment toward a lost comprador world and guilt over the disastrous consequences of what little volitional action he has taken to intervene in history.

The act of narrating his past therefore requires Saleem to find a heterotopic space in which to mediate material consumption and artistic production. Saleem ends his journey in cosmopolitan Bombay, where he miraculously discovers that his old friend Mary Pereira has opened a chutney factory. There he is able to narrate his history to Padma, his fiancée, who provides an attentive audience and a critical interlocutor, alerting Saleem whenever his narrative grows dull or unbelievable. Much of this

communication is embodied. Padma's reception of Saleem's narrative is evident in the signs her body gives forth, not simply her words. They inform him when he has begun to drag on or has failed to perform up to the aesthetic task. She also performs the manual labor of stirring the chutney pots. And by being entertained, Padma implicitly transforms Saleem's self-memorialization into a form of legitimate labor. Ironically, therefore, the very historical conditions that have taken away Saleem's capacity to reproduce—the "sperectomy: the draining out of hope"—are the conditions that make it possible for him to produce a work of art (8). Without the his connection to the children of Midnight having been severed, Saleem would have no cause to suture the rifts in his consciousness.

Rushdie moves to rescue the coherence of the national allegory—and of Saleem's narrating voice—by imagining a recuperative mode of artistic production that he names "chutnification," the pickling of history (520). This invocation of chutnification has two consequences for the novel's projection of middle-class anxieties around consumption and reproduction. First, it implies that this class must sublimate genealogical futurity into aesthetic production in order to sustain its current cycle of unproductive consumption—a point underscored by Rushdie's deployment of Padma, whom Saleem agrees to marry but with whom he cannot reproduce. And second, Padma's sterile union with Saleem suggests a convergence of classes that stops shy of socialist unity; in the logic of the novel's presentation of middle-class anxiety, then, it represents a compromise position, in which Saleem can reproduce himself aesthetically, and in which he may continue a comprador lifestyle that does not require him to labor.

## Chapter Four Inter-Caste Violence: Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga

The problem of caste has shown a remarkable power to garner attention in readers from London to Delhi, New York to Mumbai, and Singapore to Bangalore—at least on the evidence of the success of two debut novels about inter-caste violence. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* are among the most widely read Anglophone novels in India’s storied literary history. In 2012, *The Guardian* published point-of-sale data compiled by Nielsen BookScan (a commercial service provider for the publishing industry) that listed *The God of Small Things* and *The White Tiger* as the third and fourth best-selling titles, respectively, among all winners of the famously lucrative Booker Prize.<sup>31</sup> By this limited measure, sales of these two novels outstripped even Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, a work so canonically Indian that it has prompted one critic to assert, “Midnight’s Children does not simply explore India; in some important symbolic sense, it *is* India” (Fraser 31, emphasis in original). The world seems hungry to know whether India can develop beyond the shame of caste inequity. Both Roy and Adiga have questioned whether and how cultural mediation can influence the apparent inflexibility of caste in relation to state power. Examining these writers, whose appeal has been demonstrably global, I suggest that we may attribute their

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<sup>31</sup> *The Guardian* lists *The God of Small Things* as having sold 597,117 copies over the six years since its publication; *The White Tiger*, 556,791 copies in just two. At the time, these figures were surpassed only by Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* (1,319,061 copies) and Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (633,133 copies). And they were nearly three times larger than the figures for Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, which had sold 201,959 copies since its publication more than three decades earlier, in 1981. (“Booker Prize 2012: Sales for All the Winners and the 2012 Shortlist, including Hilary Mantel.” n.p.)

market success, at least in part, to the way they address precisely this vexed question about the link between state power and the cultural production of caste.

Central to their representations of contemporary India is the idea that the Indian middle class, as it has been defined by global consumer culture, has undergone a sustainability crisis since the liberalization of national economic policies in 1991. For nearly fifty years following independence from the British Empire in 1947, India adhered to the socialist economic philosophy espoused by its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1991, however, poor economic growth and rising oil prices precipitated a sovereign debt crisis that forced the state to restructure, leading to a massive privatization of government assets under the terms of an IMF loan. One consequence of India's partial market liberalization has been that, alongside an explosion in the number of urban poor, there has been a corresponding (though by no means proportionate) growth in upward mobility for many millions of India's new middle class. The terms and significance of this growth are highly contested; nevertheless, there has been a sharp rise in the standard of living for many who make their home in India's swelling megacities.

The texts that I consider below represent caste tensions in the context of India's 1991 market liberalization. They show a relationship between middle-class privilege and state power that is distinct from that of its historical predecessor, the comprador bourgeoisie. Whereas the earlier comprador bourgeois had accrued the economic benefits of a *rentier* class—by appropriating bureaucratic power, the new middle-class does not intrinsically correspond with an entitlement to state power, because it relies upon market forces rather than political patronage to secure access to consumer goods. *The White Tiger*, for instance, offers an allegorical depiction of the historical movement away from

a model of class privilege that is centered upon the relationship between a landlord class and a servant caste to a less static model of class identity, in which the privileges of wealth remain, but they are based upon the continuous upward mobility of an “entrepreneur.” As Roy and Adiga show, India’s middle class remains caught within the historical tensions of a national development that is liminal and contested. Although the consumer remains subject to many of the same forms of structural paralysis that Frantz Fanon identified in the comprador bourgeoisie, in particular an inability to square its own class interests with the redistributive mandate of a postcolonial state, the middle-class characters in the texts I examine have nevertheless been able to internalize, through a recognition of their own vulnerability, a realization that the maintenance of human dignity remains contingent upon the capacity to regulate the norms and conditions of class production and consumption.

In South Asia, these regulatory norms have direct bearing upon the biopolitical life of the nation, and one key facet of each novel’s approach to inter-caste violence is to frame it in terms of the biopolitical pressure that South Asia’s population growth has exerted upon traditional genealogical structures, such as family and caste. A growing political awareness of the strain that demography has placed upon South Asia’s natural and societal resources becomes legible within literature as a crisis of futurity, which entails both the literal impossibility of reproducing a self, in the sense that marriage and sexual reproduction become thematically foreclosed, and the figurative impossibility of recreating the forms of aesthetic pleasure that have given rise to a particular class identity. *The God of Small Things*, for example, links caste exogamy to the disciplining of reproductive futures: the local police view enforcing prohibitions against inter-caste

sex as an implicit part of their social function; however, it is the urging of a comprador figure that instigates their disciplinary violence.

This worry enables Roy and Aidga to engage the problem of caste within the historical framework of national secularization, because the problem of Malthusian population growth ran deep through the political discourse and national imagination of postwar India. In the early 1990's, Jawaharlal Nehru—the independent nation's virtuous and charismatic first prime minister, at whose urging provisions for social justice had been enshrined into the constitution—wrote, “Population pressures and inequitable economic distribution of goods and resources have increased the unbridgeable distance between independent India's insular ‘haves’ and her ocean of ‘have-nots’” (qtd. in Wolpert 225). While the thesis of this observation is familiar (and contentious), the language Nehru uses to convey this idea is striking. The archipelagic metaphor—*islands of affluence in a sea of poverty*—inverts the utopian ideal of an Indian Ocean imaginary that is synonymous with prosperity and interconnection, such that the vicious circle of growth tied to consumption means that it is difficult to create systems of more equitable income distribution, such as a social safety net, without inflicting economic harm upon the population.<sup>32</sup> Thus “the one program . . . that has become political anathema is birth control,” partly because children in help to provide “old age security for parents who might otherwise have no source of financial support” (Wolpert 226). For the generation of Indians who grew up with the nation, this dynamic is no doubt reinforced by memory of the crippling stagflation (precipitated by a U.S. devaluation of the rupee) in the 1960's, an economic shock that dealt the first destabilizing blow to Indian democracy by

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<sup>32</sup> Hofmeyr, Isabel. “The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method.”

delivering the first major defeat to Indira Gandhi, who went on to become the independent nation's first autocrat (Wolpert 211). Gandhi's Emergency, instituted in response to political challenges to her government, helped to set in motion a series of circular ethnic and religious conflicts that continue to disrupt Indian stability today.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy is directly concerned with the historical erosion of a comprador bourgeoisie due to genealogical collapse. Roy depicts the decline of a Syrian Christian family (resembling her own) in a village in the southern state of Kerala. Roy's depiction of comprador norms is a harsh one, and it stems from the imperious discipline of the family matriarch, "Mammachi" (grandmother), who had for years been beaten by her husband "Pappachi," and who runs the household where Ammu lives with her two children as well as her older brother "Chacko," an Oxford-educated Marxist who ruins the family business and "Baby Kochamma" (Navomi Ipe), their pathologically narcissistic great aunt. As members of a relatively affluent minority in Kerala, the Ipe family begins the novel as large landholders and the operators of "Paradise Pickles and Preserves" (a clear allusion to Salman Rushdie's chutney factory in *Midnight's Children*).

The plot recounts the lives of Estha and Rahel, the children of Ammu, a headstrong but sometimes insensitive woman whose refusal to sleep with her husband's employer has led to a divorce, forcing her back upon her parochial and mean-spirited family. It centers upon a number of traumas faced by Ammu and her children, the most central of which are the death, by drowning, of Sophie Mol, Chacko's half-English daughter, who has come to visit Ayemenem from London; and the death, by savage police beating, of Velutha, a member of the Paravan caste and the children's most

beloved family friend. The parallel deaths of Velutha and Sophie Mol represent closures of caste-exceptionalism—of what seemed a possibility for Ayemenem (the village of the tale) to tolerate exception to its traditional political mores. In the figure of Velutha's beaten body, we find the end of a gradual narrowing of the novel's ability to imagine the space in which a figure like Ammu—proud, independent, intelligent, bourgeois—is able to navigate the social world. Velutha dooms himself by violating the caste prohibition against exogamy when he becomes Ammu's lover; but even prior to their union, he is depicted in exceptional terms as a figure that is able to love and remain loyal to Ammu and her children even as he participates in local communist party politics. Likewise, Sophie Mol is repeatedly described in exceptional terms: she violates the children's expectation by becoming their friend and demonstrates sensitivity and maturity by garnering the affections of a family whose members show each other nothing but antipathy. In Sophie Mol's drowning, there is a familiar trope in which rivers represent the threat that excessive cultural immersion will swallow up the western traveler; it recalls Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, or the conclusion of Anthony Burgess's *Malayan Trilogy*. Further, the two deaths create an opening for the local communist party to commandeer—and then sink—the economically productive engine of Paradise Pickles and Preserves, the family's petit-bourgeois factory—both as a literal economic unit and as a symbol for the capacity of English writing to produce a meaningful product for the world market.

This narrowing of opportunity is mirrored in the novel's depictions of geographic space. The novel's narrative structure follows a gradual contraction of the geographic and emotional terrain that is available for its characters to inhabit. Rahel's colonial prehistory

initially paints a wide geographic canvas for the comprador-bourgeois community of Syrian Christians in Ayemenem. When attempting to identify the historical origin of her plot, Roy writes:

Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy, before Vasco de Gama arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled sea serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag.

That is really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (33)

But as the plot unfolds, Rahel's psycho-geographic map contracts. First to the district of Kottayam; then to the village of Ayemenem; then to the family's compound; then to the house itself; then to the room where Rahel and Estha take refuge in each other's sympathy; and finally, in the last pages of the novel, to the heterotopic space of the body itself. The novel concludes with two forms of illicit love: the incestuous coupling of Estha and Rahel, which Roy depicts to be a form of therapeutic intimacy; and the inter-caste coupling of Ammu and Velutha, which Roy depicts in a moment temporal suspension. In both cases, there is a radical collapse of the ideal of a communal imaginary or field of empathy onto the dyad of lovers' bodies; in the novel's imagery, Ammu finds herself in "the cave of his [Velutha's] body" (320). Throughout their two-week affair, they must "put their faith in fragility. Stick to smallness" (321). Their one promise is to meet again "tomorrow" (the novel's final word)—a promise made poignant by the fact that we are already aware of Velutha's death (321).

The suspended temporality with which Roy ends her novel reflects her deep ambivalence towards a past that has been lost to economic development, environmental degradation, and the erosion of comprador domestic values. At the same time, she remains deeply critical of the caste system that underwrote the stability of pre-liberalization India. In the topography of Baby Kochamma's garden, we can read a figure for the gradual transition of Indian society, under Nehruvian socialism, from colonial stability to a present in which economic development have choked Ayemenem's rivers and threatened its settled caste hierarchies:

Recently, after enduring more than half a century of relentless, pernicky attention, the ornamental garden had been abandoned. Left to its own devices, it had grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks. The weed that people call Communist Patcha (because it flourished in Kerala like communism) smothered the more exotic plants. (27)

This passage conveys the passage of time at two levels. On the one hand, it allows us to position Baby Kochamma's middle-class malaise within a long decline that overlays the family's recent history of neglect atop the community's absence of due process. Baby Kochamma's satellite television provides the psychological compensation for the lack of any real social engagement with the community around her. It enables her to "preside over the world in her drawing room," Roy tells us, "Blondes, wars, famines, football, sex, music, coups d'etat — they all arrived on the same train. They unpacked together. They stayed at the same hotel" (27-8). Trashy taste notwithstanding, the sense of immediacy and presence that satellite television brings bestows a sense of sovereignty upon Kochamma. Each channel conveys the illusion that a cohesive totality, "a world," lies within the representational flow of her rapt absorption. In fact, however, this form of consumption is even more disabling than the rigid "attention" to her garden had been.

The pleasure of consuming media in this way is, in part, the result of an illusory sovereignty that this segmented reality grants the viewer. Kochamma's consumption escapes into a euphoric infinity — indeed, it must do so in order to maintain the pleasure of control. And this euphoria performs a kind of passive consolidation of her identity that departs markedly from the older garden model. The immediate cost is a loss of coherence--though at a phenomenological level, she consolidates her own desire through a series of flicks. She is interpellated by the medium itself. Granted, the garden had been “fierce, bitter... tamed... limited...” and a cause for her “war on the weather”; however, it was also “nourished” and centered, held in place by a “marble cherub” (26-7). Whereas colonialism had been repressive and exclusive, this opposition implies, it was at least orderly and productive. Roy seems unwilling to relinquish entirely the coherence of the vanished colonial world; her narration focalizes a deeply melancholic refusal to release this order and, as it were, go with the flow. Like gardens, architecture also employs a formalism that is inseparable from the human figure. We see this idea when Rahel is enrolled in architecture school, where her “careless, reckless lines were mistaken for artistic confidence” because they are done on a large scale (19). This is an implicit critique of an architectural imagination oriented to construction on a scale incompatible with human flourishing.

Roy's political writing links this fictional emphasis on smallness to a critique of the big-dam industry and the large-scale disruption that the neoliberal development projects they represent have inflicted upon India's poor. In part, her emphasis upon smallness makes a link between ethics and aesthetics: we cannot comprehend the full ethical import of the human suffering caused by displaced millions, Roy argues, because

we have translated representations of this violence into the very large numbers that define a “greater common good” (*The Cost of Living* 17-18). How is it possible, Roy wonders, to translate problems and their solutions into the scale of human action? Where the discourse of power seeks to deepen the contradictions between urban and rural in order to argue that big dams are therefore necessary to “save” India’s cities from underdevelopment, Roy argues, big dams will in fact undermine the salutary link between rural productivity and urban consumption.

In Roy’s vision of a neoliberal India that has lost its ability to identify the greater common good, the principle of “complementary opposition” takes on a renewed importance. In Bull’s model of how there can be order in the absence of an external power to impose it, “complementary opposition” refers to the idea that there is no social enmity that is not without correlative forms of dependence at a different scale (60). This principle becomes critically important for Roy’s imagination, because it allows her to find ways in which human connections might transcend the sedimented enmities, such as caste divisions, that hold modern Indian society within a stable political order. In the novel, complementary opposition allows Rahel to extend the lines that associate objects in the material world with the traumas of postcolonial history, extending them beyond her personal association until they converge in a satisfying historical arrangement deeper in the past. Like the ironic symbols and idioms that we will see Adiga deploy in *The White Tiger*, this requires a facility with the material of global English; but where Adiga performs something like this work through an allegorical construction of authority, Roy’s text resists the impulse to dig a well in which to dip her narrative pen. Instead, her language moves laterally, through the soundscape of verbal play. As readers, we may find

the range of Roy's verbal inventiveness to be charming and obscure. For example, there is "the chorus of the boat song [that] was whispered into the thick Jam" that Estha prepares in the pickle factory, shortly before launching on the river crossing that will claim Sophie Mol's life. The nonce words of his chorus, "*Theeyome / Thithome / Tharaka / Thithome / Theem*," provide the reader with no handle to grasp what he is thinking (188). Yet in the symbolic resonance of pickle factory, handed down from Rushdie's ideal of chutnification, Estha's act of jam making becomes an image for literary production. More subtly, in the example of Baby Kochamma's garden above, the "Communist Patcha" that riots "knotted and wild" stands apart from the rest of the vegetation, which it "smothers." This tonal specificity and contradictory valences of Roy's diction here express an ambiguity regarding the narrator's attitude about this lost world: does the ruggedness of this plant indicate a gesture of romantic longing, or is it the symptom of a class anxiety that Rahel feels about being similarly captured and smothered?

The attempt to form a common middle class imagination that would link readers' understanding of caste to Roy's own therefore encounters an aporia in her poetic use of language. Roy addresses precisely the dilemma of liberal intentions remaining locked on the outside of culture in a 2014 article, where she denounces the "shame" of India's caste system while holding the international community responsible for its silence on the issue:

Other contemporary abominations like apartheid, racism, sexism, economic imperialism and religious fundamentalism have been politically and intellectually challenged at international forums. How is it that the practice of caste in India—one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organisation that human society has known—has managed to escape similar scrutiny and censure? Perhaps because it has come to be so fused with Hinduism, and by extension with so much that is seen to be kind and good—mysticism, spiritualism, non-violence, tolerance,

vegetarianism, Gandhi, yoga, backpackers, the Beatles—that, at least to outsiders, it seems impossible to pry it loose and try to understand it. (“India’s Shame” n.p.)

Roy’s question indicates a crucial gap within the Bandung approach to international cooperation, which emphasized “non-interference” in the resolution of the “internal” affairs of the state. Despite the fact India’s caste system had been adamantly opposed by Jawaharlal Nehru, the nation’s first prime minister and one of the key authors of the Bandung movement, the term *caste* appears nowhere in the official communiqué that Bandung’s organizers addressed to the West. Instead, the document rhetorically settles the tension between individual rights and the imperatives of national sovereignty by focusing upon the category of race. For the sake of “confidence,” “goodwill,” and “tolerance,” states the section devoted to “the promotion of world peace and co-operation,” nations should “live together in peace with one another as good neighbors and develop friendly co-operation.” The communiqué then lists the bases for this neighborliness, which include “fundamental human rights,” “sovereignty and territorial integrity,” “the equality of all races and... nations,” “the internal affairs of another country,” and “mutual interests.” The relative importance of each value is reflected in the document’s phrasing, with sovereignty and rights demanding “respect,” racial equality demanding “recognition,” internality demanding “abstention,” and mutuality demanding “promotion” and “co-operation.” The rest of the principles ramify these values in relation to the political actors of the era, staking out parameters for nonalignment and self-defense in the context of a Cold War landscape shaped by the United Nations and the great powers (8-9). Of the many principles listed, only racism seems to demand an active intervention against the sovereign wishes of another state. The significance of this

distinction in relation to the caste struggle becomes clear when we consider the historical power of international opposition to racist social orders: does caste function more like class, in which case economic development provides a means of alleviating its violence? Or does it function like a racial distinction, in which case more forceful measures like condemnation and sanctions should be applied? Is caste a problem of culture, state institutions, or both?

The overarching interest of Aravind Adiga's fiction has been to address this knotty question in the context of India's neoliberal market reforms. Adiga depicts the disruptive impacts of globalization, both positive and negative, upon a wide spectrum of Indian society. Adiga pitches his creativity directly at problems of inequality and social anomie. A former journalist and financial correspondent for *Time* and the *Financial Times* in India, Adiga won the Booker Prize for his debut novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), which depicts the forcible re-arrangement of traditional family structures, the foreclosure of reproductive futures, and the vulnerability of humane institutions to corruption and violence. Undergirding each of these issues is the omnipresent force of caste prejudice, which informs Adiga's thinking about India, both thematically and imaginatively, in regard to nearly every social question.

In *Between the Assassinations*, for instance, we find that caste prejudice looms over Kittur, a coastal town that is charming enough to warrant a travel guide (a genre the novel mimics), during the period between the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the assassination of her son, Rajiv. Kittur's residents nevertheless remain locked in a pitched struggle to survive, to raise children, and to maintain personal dignity. Likewise in *The White Tiger*, the novel for which Adiga is justifiably most famous, caste provides the

premise for a murder-confession plot. Seething with cynicism, its plot unfolds through the unrepentant confession of Balram Halwai, a former servant who has murdered his corrupt but kindly master in order to finance a “start-up” with the latter’s bribe money. As a result of these works, Adiga has been situated at the center of a turn to writing about “Dark India,” and he has promoted his own work as revealing a side of the nation that gone previously gone underreported. In what follows, I will read these two works in conversation with each other in order to argue that Adiga rejects the notion that caste must be perceived in purely cultural or economic terms. It is, rather, the peculiar institution that paradoxically makes India a site of paradoxical universality, because it demonstrates how, from the biopolitical perspective of the neoliberal order, meritocratic self-uplift is simultaneously criminal and exceptional. Adiga frames “development” as a self-confirming social discourse in which the *fait accompli* offers proof of sovereignty.

Balram, née Munna (“boy”), relates his ontological development into a “human” following his violent reversal of social roles: from “a driver of masters into a master of drivers” (Adiga 259). The plot begins in Laxmangarh, a village in India’s impoverished rural hinterland, where Balram lives with his father, brother, and extended family in the home of his grandmother, Kusum. In Balram’s depiction, Laxmangarh is representative of a broader region that he refers to as “The Darkness,” his metaphor for the region’s extreme poverty and backwardness. In this “typical village paradise,” there is no rule of law, elections are purchased, and this juridical suspension has left the villagers vulnerable to the area’s corrupt landlords, who treat them like slaves, charging them for use of public amenities—and making free use of their bodies (16). The villagers, in turn, have encoded their rulers’ behavior into local folklore, naming each landlord after the

animal whose habits most resemble “the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him” (Adiga 20). In addition, there is, as Balram sees it, another layer of domination in which the laboring men of Laxmangarh are exploited by their kinswomen. The memory of his father, a rickshaw driver who dies of tuberculosis while unattended in a government hospital after a life of dehumanizing labor undertaken to support his extended family, has left Balram bearing a lifelong antipathy for the Indian family—both literally, in the sense of his own family, and figuratively, in the sense of the Indian nation.

Echoing a familiar pattern of urban migration, Balram recounts his transition from his country origins to this city destination and his gradual assimilation of urban norms and values. After the death of his father, a poor rickshaw driver, from tuberculosis, one of the landlords forces Balram to leave school and go to work in nearby Dhanbad, a small city near to Laxmangarh, in order to help pay off a loan that his family has contracted to pay for the wedding of his “cousin-sister” (30). In Dhanbad, Balram secures a position as a servant in the Sharma household, whose proprietor is none other than “the Stork,” one of Laxmangarh’s landlords. There he is assigned to be the driver of the landlord’s youngest son, Ashok, who has newly arrived from America with his wife Pinkey. When the couple moves to Delhi, they bring Balram along as their driver; from there, both servant and master become gradually corrupted. Soon after the family forces Balram to sign an affidavit admitting his guilt in a hit and run where Pinkey was in fact behind the wheel, he begins to realize how badly he has been exploited, and he makes up his mind to kill Ashok. He is prevented temporarily when Dharam, his nephew, arrives from Lamangarh. After they spend a day together at the zoo, however, and Balram sees a caged white tiger, he decides to act. He slits Ashok’s throat and takes a bag of money that

was intended for a bribe. With those funds, he flees to Bangalore, a city where “if a man wants to be good, he *can* be good” (262; original emphasis). He sets up a business, “White Tiger Technology Drivers,” shuttling workers to and from work in Bangalore’s bustling tech industry. Thus “a driver of masters” becomes a “master of drivers” (275).

The novel’s central moral tension revolves around the fact that, because he has murdered Ashok, the Stork will have his own family murdered in revenge. Sociologically and anthropologically, this fear—that a subaltern caste revolt, driven by a desire for personal liberation and material consumption, would threaten first and foremost the “Indian family”—is an overdetermined one. The Indian family whose destruction Balram represents is not simply his own, but that of a nation. The rooster coop is not an allegory for the poor only; it is also an allegory for the national imagined community as a whole. Balram underscores this distinction by aligning “The Great Indian Rooster Coop” (and here I think we are meant to hear the pun on ‘cooperative’) with the Communist party:

The Great Indian Rooster Coop. Do you have something like it in China too? I doubt it, Mr. Jiabao. Or you wouldn’t need the Communist Party to shoot people and a secret police to raid their houses at night and put them in jail like I’ve heard you have over there. Here in India we have no dictatorship. No secret police. That’s because we have the coop. (149)

Balram reinforces the fundamentally symbolic and regulatory functions of the rooster coop:

*The rooster coop doesn’t always work with minuscule sums of money. Don’t test your chauffeur with a rupee coin or two—he may well steal that much. But leave a million dollars in front of a servant and he won’t touch a penny. Try it: leave a black bag with a million dollars in a Mumbai taxi. The taxi driver will call the police and return the money by the day’s end. I guarantee it. (Whether the police will give it to you or not is another story, sir!) Masters trust their servants with diamonds in this country! It’s true. Every evening on the train out of Surat, where they run the world’s biggest diamond-cutting and -polishing business, the servants of diamond*

merchants are carrying suitcases full of cut diamonds that they have to give to someone in Mumbai. Why doesn't that servant take the suitcase full of diamonds? He's no Gandhi, he's human, he's you and me. But he's in the Rooster Coop. The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. (149)

The irony here turns not on the fact that the servant will not steal the money when given the chance: for this fact there are a number of quite simple, more or less cynical, explanations. (As we later learn from Balram, stealing such a large sum would make one a hunted man.) Nor does it have to do with the loyalty, per se, of servants to their masters. If this were so, then even the "minuscule sums of money" would undoubtedly be safe.

Balram's critique of servant ideology, however, tips into scapegoating of "*the Indian family*," both natal and national, which he refers to spitefully as "the pride and glory of our nation, the repository of all our love and sacrifice, . . . the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop" (150, emphasis in original). Naturally, critics have devoted significant attention to the hermeneutic problem of relating Balram's critique of the "rooster coop," a network of social relations that captures the servant class within its structures of power, from his antipathy towards his own family—and the concomitant problem of how to distinguish Adiga's own political views from Balram's *ressentiment*.

The problem of Balram's family, then, is not simply a question about how we should feel about the death of an impoverished family in Bihar; it is a problem of how we should feel about the death of the national family. Balram's image for a system of power that is centered upon the traditional Indian family is the "rooster coop," in which the labor of men is exploited by every segment above them. Balram's own family offer him up to the coop; and in so doing, they violate the principle of solidarity both at the caste and the class level. At a thematic level, the moral status of Balram's crime depends upon

the degree to which readers identify with his subject-position as opposed to that of his victim(s), and whether they are more apt to respond to his slum-voice with pity or revulsion. It would be a category error, however, to misread the figure of the rooster coop as a purely literal expression of, say, Balram's psychic need to confess or an irresponsible desire to exculpate himself by disclaiming agency over his actions.

The problem of the rooster coop asks us to weigh Balram's exceptionality against the social cost of his rebellion. Balram's willingness to sacrifice his family may also be read as a defense against marriage—and by extension, a defense against the idea that his life might have a socially transcendent purpose. At the end of the novel. When his granny, Kusum writes to Balram, she threatens to “arrange for your wedding on our own” and send his wife on a bus. By extension, it is a figurative defense against the ideal of self-transcendence that family represents. Rather than allowing his own purpose in life to be consumed within a communal project, Balram is individualistic to the point of narcissism; and it is this fact about his character that distinguishes his narrative from one in which we could ascribe guilt entirely to his circumstances. In this regard his narcissism is a form of post-human solipsism, which mistakes the symbols of self-perpetuation for the self-transcendent work of genealogy. Adiga hints at the connection between reproduction and silence when he has Kusum threaten to arrange his marriage if he does not send money home: “Every chance you got you just stared at yourself in a mirror with open lips, and I had to wring your ears to make you do any work.... After all, am I not your own grandmother? And how I used to stuff your mouth with sweets!” (224).

Thus the basic representational conceit—the miraculous transformation of a voiceless subaltern into hyper-vocal entrepreneur—is merely a performance; there is no

way of deciding whether Balram's claims on behalf of development--whether the nation's or his own—are truthful, because the explosive growth in scale and complexity of India's urban environment has outpaced and overwhelmed the modern geographic system that would situate and contain it: Balram writes from “Electronics City Phase 1 / (just off Hosur Main Road)” (2). Does this contradiction suggest that diaspora longing is inherently opposed to national desire (as the criticism of Rushdie's exoticism suggests); which is to say, can the culturally bereft adequately represent the hungers of the territorially full? Characters remain caught within the bio-political dilemma that impels them to marry, reproduce, and labor— but without consuming.

The truly paradoxical aspect of Balram's character, however, is not that he should speak in a sociolect that by rights does not belong to a member of his class—but that he should be so loquacious at all. In the picture of Balram's character that we receive from the novel's action, he appears to be an exceedingly reticent personality: not only does he remain silent when interacting with his superiors, but he seems to struggle with expression towards the fellow drivers (especially “Vitiligo Lips”) and even towards young Dharam. In fact, we find evidence of Balram's bestial mutism in the classical image where he strikes Dharam for daring to bring him unwelcome news, in the form of a letter.<sup>33</sup> We might refer the curious disparity between Balram's represented silence (his diegetic scarcity) and the bombastic representation of this silence (his extra-diegetic plenitude) to an allegorical or psychological transformation that he would have

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<sup>33</sup> More precisely, Balram is denying Dharam *parrhesia*, the “cover” of a juridical exception that would grant him the temporary status of a parrhesiastes — a person whose word has the juridical status of truth. See Michel Foucault's essay, “Parrhesia.”

undergone after assuming his master's identity. In other words: after Balram has "become Ashok," he begins to behave like a master.

Balram shows himself to have been capable of exercising poetic sovereignty even before slaying Ashok, however. In a brilliant passage, Adiga has Balram recount a scene in which he dictated an apparently heartfelt letter to his granny, Kusum, apologizing for his betrayal of the family. The contents of this letter and the scene of dictation, in turn, are mediated by the narrative envelope; and because Balram's awareness of this structure is evident in his representational strategy, we may confirm that he possesses sufficient eloquence to spin historical representation toward his own self-interest, but also the necessary cynicism to leverage the voice and perspective of a child for their sentimental power.

The scene occurs, Balram tells us, after he takes Dharam to the National Zoo. This setting matters for its power to draw together three of the novel's principal tropes: the differentiation of humanity, the link between aesthetics and sovereignty, and the grounding of freedom in a deliberate self-relation to power. The first idea Balram represents in the symbol of "the Old Fort," which leads him to muse, "The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave. To hell with the Naxals and their guns shipped from China. If you taught every poor boy how to paint, that would be the end of the rich in India" (236). The second he expresses in relation to a hippopotamus "lying in a giant pond full of mud." Chastising Dharam for "want[ing] to do what the others were doing—throw a stone at the hippo to stir it up," Balram recounts, he "told him [Dharam] that would be a cruel thing. Hippos lie in mud and do nothing—that's their nature. / Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That's my

whole philosophy in a sentence” (237). The third idea Balram performs. His realization that he must kill Ashok comes when he glimpses, “in the interstices of the bars,” a white tiger, “the creature that gets born only once in a generation.” He recalls:

I watched him walk behind the bamboo bars. Black stripes and sunlit white fur flashed through the slits in the dark bamboo; it was like watching the slowed down reels of an old black-and-white film. He was walking in the same line, again and again—from one end of the bamboo bars to the other, then turning around and repeating it over, at exactly the same pace, like a thing under a spell.

He was hypnotizing himself by walking like this—that was the only way he could tolerate this cage. Then the thing behind the bamboo bars stopped moving. It turned its face to my face. The tiger’s eyes met my eyes, like my master’s eyes have met mine so often in the mirror of the car.

All at once, the tiger vanished. (237)

Immediately thereafter, Balram swoons; and when he comes to, he is resolved to kill his master because he cannot “live the rest of [his] life in a cage” (239). He therefore dictates the aforementioned letter to his granny, Kusum, apologizing for the harm that will surely befall them after he murders Ashok. After Dharam is unable to fulfill Balram’s to compose an account of “everything” that happened with the tiger at the zoo, Balram commands him to take dictation, speaking so quickly that the latter is “writing so fast that his pen got black and oozy with overflowing ink” (238). In the letter, Balram’s guilt appears to gush forth in a melodramatic display of remorse over the vengeance that the rooster coop will shortly visit upon his family, when the Stork learns that he has betrayed Ashok.

...Uncle’s eyes were open now. “Are you all right, Uncle?” I asked. He took my hand and he said, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” I asked, “Sorry for what?” And he said, “I can’t live the rest of my life in a cage, Granny. I’m so sorry.” We took the bus back to Gurgaon and had lunch at the tea shop. It was very hot, and we sweated a lot. And that was all that happened today. (239)

Thus we receive a fleeting falsification of the stoic front that Balram erects regarding the carnage he authors in Laxmangarh. But there is a curiously reflexive narrative structure mediating this disclosure, which could be attributed to psychic defense or narrative guile: His most allegorical statement, “Uncle’s eyes were open now,” therefore enfold the metafictional convention of referring to oneself in the third person into the first-person voice of the *Bildungsroman*. Moreover, in the context of this representational Matryoshka, Balram’s imagery associates this impulse to confess with plenitude of literary creation: the reason he began to dictate to Dharam, Balram tells us, is that his charge could not adequately represent the scene himself. Most readers have interpreted this passage, and Balram’s subsequent fit, as the culmination of a narrative arc in which he develops into a politically aware, and therefore criminally motivated, fully-human subject. In this context, the zoo’s caged animals may be read in an allegorical, if not empathic, light.<sup>34</sup> By seeing his captivity within their own confinement, Balram enacts the utopian gesture of anthropomorphism: his own rebellion seems to hold forth the possibility of an inter-species ethics, even if this potential remains unrealized for the beings whose suffering precipitates it. And this problem—of never being able to properly locate the domain of a universal impulse—reflects a form of ambiguity that is characteristic of utopianism more generally.<sup>35</sup> The narrative and aesthetic crux of Balram’s ethical status are the same, because they both stage the impossibility of a

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<sup>34</sup> Shameem Black elaborates upon the link between animality and freedom in this scene, arguing that it offers a “perverse” reponse to human rights discourse. (“Post-Humanitarianism and the Indian Novel in English,” pp. 305-309.)

<sup>35</sup> Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal express this idea in their scholarly manifesto on behalf of Indian Ocean Studies, which begins: “The ocean must be anthropomorphized, as though it could not exist or possess a meaning were it not a mirror of humankind” (1).

unified interpretive community that would be able to subsume his criminal violence within a rational political order. Like “sending tickets through the air,” his action is directed at no socius, so its meaning cannot reflect back into his self-relational discourse, which remains stuck in the narrative mode of childish exceptionalism. He develops no inter-subjective being, so the subject position from which he speaks is radically other. Speaking for none other than itself, it purifies enmity.

Balram’s abnegation of communal responsibility has led critics of *The White Tiger* to fixate upon the question of whether Balram’s guilt may be relocated in Adiga’s equally strategic mediation of subaltern criminality. If we believe the accuracy of Balram’s representation of Laxmangargh, then what real-world actors deserve our censure? And if we disbelieve in his version of India’s poor, then what are we to feel about Balram’s unrepentant confession: fright or amusement, anger or pity, disgust or shame? These questions have tended to yield dissatisfying answers precisely because of Balram’s radically self-interested perspective, which has led to a series of questions about the author’s apparent satirization of India’s poor. Most critics presume that middle-class readers will be exercised by the dilemma of Balram’s moral culpability—or else that, identifying with poor Ashok, they will be stricken with fear of their own servants. And several have pointed to the fact that Adiga was a journalist for western publications like *Time* prior to the success of *The White Tiger*, which has in turn enabled him to become a full-time novelist. Numerous critics have challenged Adiga’s *bona fides* to represent, let alone satirize, the subaltern voices of India’s poorest communities.

Critics have been loath to grant these *bona fides*. And rightly so: the author who pens Balram’s narrative is anything but subaltern. Indeed, Adiga’s own family epitomizes

the Nehruvian “Congress Wallah” (Congress Party insider) class of secularized Hindus whose rule has been supplanted by the Hindu right. And the novel has been heavily marketed on the back of its realistic depiction of “dark” India, as Ana Cristina Mendes argues. Mendes likens the novel’s conflation of “Exotic India” with “Dark India” to larger debates surrounding the commodification of Anglophone literature from South Asia, arguing that we ought not overlook Adiga’s deliberately ironic “staging” of authenticity (276). Thus Mendes reads Adiga in continuity with, rather than marking a definitive break from, his strong precursor, Salman Rushdie. Comparing the novel’s depictions of poverty with Rushdie’s “formal experimentation and exotic spice-related metaphors,” Mendes questions whether the novel deserves the credit afforded to it by a Western critical apparatus of “taste makers,” who have praised Adiga for making a radical departure away from the perceived inauthenticity of Indian Writing in English (IWE) (282). In effect, Mendes claims that Adiga does not escape the influence of Rushdie’s precursor voice; Rushdie becomes the master signifier for a cartographic mapping of literary nationalism that in turn enables “literary works and authors to function as tradable commodities” (282). On this view, Adiga himself is becomes a coy self-marketer, someone whose praise of fellow Booker prize-winning authors is “artificial and strategic” (283). What right does Aravind Adiga—grandson of a bank chairman and a Congress politician, educated at Columbia and Oxford Universities—have to profit by ventriloquizing the poor? Is Balram to blame for his criminal activity, in which case the novel seems to be unfairly blaming the stigmatizing the urban poor; or alternatively, does its critique of India’s political institutions go too far, making the prospect of a political reform seem hopeless?

These questions court the danger of replicating, at a critical level, the hypocritical form of policing that Balram—with equal justification—so despises. The critical recognition of Adiga’s market savvy has led to polemical interpretations of *The White Tiger* that fault Adiga for his ventriloquism of poverty. It is this exploitative aspect of caste-ventriloquism that leads Megha Anwer, for example, to conclude:

The book becomes almost a treatise of management gurudom on how best to evade the crisis of a belligerent and recalcitrant servant class. It teaches the reader that doing absolutely the bare minimum – for instance, not laughing at the colloquial accents of their servants and tipping them generously for festivals and marriages – can ward off the mutinies of their domestic staff, and keep “crime and instability” in check. (311-2)

Anwer argues that *The White Tiger* neither re-orientates nor demystifies globalizing India; it merely reflects the “limitation of Adiga’s bourgeois-literary imagination” (313). This is so, she argues, because the novel’s claustrophobic individualism serves up a latent “anti-politics” rather than “a collectively enacted, structural reassessment of neo-liberal economics” (304).<sup>36</sup> Snehal Shengavi helpfully situates this debate in the context of touristic “slumming,” arguing that we should focus upon the novel’s subtle redirection of attention from class-conflict toward a more specific portrait of the growing resentment among poor members of India’s upper-castes against the constitutional reservations intended to uplift the *Dalit*, *Adavasi*, and other historically oppressed groups belonging to India’s “scheduled” communities (5).

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<sup>36</sup> Whereas the question of authenticity had left Adiga seeming either too little or too much like Salman Rushdie, the question of class solidarity paints Adiga to be merely cynical and reactionary. This view invites the response that Anwer’s own critical perspective is naïvely utopian about the coercive structural barriers to subaltern political organization. In effect, my argument here is that Adiga does envision the possibility of class solidarity; he simply deplores the right-wing Hindu nationalism that Balram would most likely capture its energies.

What I find interesting about this critical debate is that it illuminates the negative capability of satire, the way in which satirical fiction seems always to perform an end-run around the charge of inauthenticity, inaccuracy, and inhumanity by disavowing the idea that the politically-engaged literature must grant a space to realism and seriousness. The conventions of satire become immensely valuable for declaiming excessive truthiness at every level: they allow Adiga to wink over Balram's head (and perhaps even ours), just as Balram winks over his the had of his addressee, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. All of which serves to demonstrate that Balram understands the game of self-disclosure and has subtly included the reader in the ambit of re- crimination. As consumers in the global marketplace for Anglophone novels, we have something in common with Jiabao: namely, the risk that we might buy official yet inauthentic representations of India. How then does Adiga resolve, if indeed he does resolve, the tension between the dissemination of knowledge and the truth of interpretation?

These questions reveal the limits of two kinds of literary mediation: historical and formal. On one hand, they challenge the idea that a formal conceit can fully cordon off a narrative voice from that of its author; on the other, they reflect the contemporaneity of the novel and its author's success. I will consider each in turn.

First, Adiga's handling of narrative complicates the idea that his novel invokes middle-class social anxieties about a servant revolt—though it does suggest anxieties about the continued status of national representation. *The White Tiger* updates the epistolary novel form for the Internet age. In Balram's success, we find a metaphor for literary stardom: not unlike as Adiga, whose sudden emergence into the literary market felt like a pounce upon the mores of postcolonial literature, Balram's sudden

transformation requires a “tiger’s-leap” of the imagination. This leap makes an claim on behalf of representational sovereignty; Balram would like us to believe not that he is a representative of India, but that he has power to represent it to us. Globalization makes this uncanny form of representation possible, because it makes the distant present, as if by magic, without telling us how. And from its opening page, the novel asks us to consider how this loss of a contextual frame places language into context. Adiga presents this narrative through a series of E-mails that Balram sends to Chinese premiere Wen Jiabao in advance of the latter’s state visit to India:

**\*\*For the Desk of:\*\***  
His Excellency Wen Jiabao  
The Premier’s Office  
Beijing  
Capital of the Freedom-loving Nation of China  
**\*\*From the Desk of:\*\***  
“The White Tiger”  
A Thinking Man  
And an Entrepreneur  
Living in the world’s center of Technology and Outsourcing  
Electronics City Phase 1 (just off Hosur Main Road)  
Bangalore, India  
Mr. Premier,  
Sir.  
Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can only be said in English. (1)

Here Balram is already making an implicit case for sovereignty by putting himself on a level playing field with the Chinese premiere. This narrative conceit updates the epistolary novel for the neoliberal age, when globalization has made it possible for voices to address us intimately, instantaneously, from anywhere on earth. In Ulka Anjaria’s reading of the passage, this joke reflects the “undecidability” of Balram’s representation of modern India: because the language that Balram speaks is not his own, the novel’s temporality is not meant to convey a particular historical time and place, what Anjaria

refers to as “the closed time of linear history,” but rather a situation that could emerge at any historical moment for any “readers who recognize themselves in Ashok” (118).<sup>37</sup>

This uncanny power is marked by Balram’s rhetorical familiarity with Jiabao, which develops through the novel’s transition from a formal business letter into more familiar address. Ultimately, Balram will refer to Jiabao and himself as “old friends” (249).

Adiga’s creative use of e-mail to frame the action emphasizes not only the power that globalization affords to individual voices, but also the concomitant experience of being surprised by uncanny system effects that emerge from nowhere. We may view the novel’s ingenuous method of narrative framing as a poignant metaphor for the power of informal economic ties to assume increased importance in the absence of geopolitical order, creating the unsettled geopolitical conditions under which the entrepreneur and the head of state do seem to become equal representative of the national will and destiny. In its more utopian construal, this engagement between entrepreneur and head of state mirrors Bull’s “Anarchical Society of States”—the complex of autochthonous processes that may normalize international relations spontaneously, even in the absence of any unipolar monopoly on military power. At the level of national allegory, the conversation between Balram and Wen Jiabao represents an aesthetic reinscription of the Bandung imaginary. By invoking idea that there can be a conversation between subaltern yet

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<sup>37</sup> Anjaria’s reading is powerful for its capacity to align the novel’s aesthetic force with its thematic depiction of law enforcement in the global city. In the juridical order that Balram describes, the police do not enforce a normative link between rights-bearing subjects and the rule of law, and individual subjects are therefore forced to negotiate the tension between personal sovereignty and the juridical order without the benefit—or impediment—of collective representation. Likewise, Balram’s rhetorical power severs the normative link between reference and representation (Mohanty 57). We are therefore forced to negotiate the tension between artistic sovereignty and political authority without the tropes and limits of realist convention.

sovereign nations, Adiga stages a repetition of the historical *détente* between Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai, representing it within the western-dominated field of the global novel in English.

But if the novel's aesthetic moves cannot be politically reconciled with the author's privilege, as I argued above, then the irony of this recourse to diplomatic staging is that it situates Balram precisely within the middle class, because it holds open the possibility that "passing" and "slumming" are both inevitable functions of middle-class subject formation. Sociologically and anthropologically, the novel's central moral tension—the fear that a subaltern caste revolt, driven by a desire for personal liberation and material consumption, would threaten first and foremost the "Indian family"—is therefore an over determined one. The Indian family whose destruction Balram represents is not simply his own, but that of a nation.

The problem of Balram's guilt, then, is not simply a question about how we should feel about the death of an impoverished family in Bihar; it is a problem of how we should feel about the death of the national ideal. The critique of Adiga's authenticity has not generally been framed in the context of a struggle *internal* to the Hindu community; however, I want to suggest that Balram's narrative reflects a middle-class anxiety regarding whether national representation is to be schematized along primarily religious or secular lines. On its own, the concept of subalternity does not fully capture this struggle, because it denotes a class of persons that ramifies differently across sectarian lines. The novel's complexity may be attributed in part to the crisis of identity now facing secular Hindus in the wake of having had to cede control of the country's developmental

narrative to the Bharatiya Janata (BJP), India's right-wing Hindu nationalist party.<sup>38</sup> If we adopt the view the representational democracy necessarily speaks for the other, then a realist depiction of caste violence would find itself hard pressed to intervene directly into the field of electoral politics, because it would rely upon some external schema to perform the allegorical reduction of specificity (Laxmangargh and Dhanbad, Sharmas and Halwais) to representativeness (the darkness, the stork, the white tiger). If Balram's eccentricities of speech are in fact the vestige of his slum upbringing, as many readers have concluded, then the sovereignty that he gains in his role as narrator is undercut by his misreading of the reader (literally, Wen Jiabao; figuratively, us), who will judge his actions accordingly. The novel therefore confronts us not simply with Balram's crime, but also with his crude political beliefs, language, and contempt for women. This repulsion disrupts our sense that political violence can ever be founded in legitimate ends. The tension between the boast and the act forces us into a moral and psychological dilemma: how are we to assess the justice of politically motivated violence when its historic effects have been de-sublimated within the private sphere? The tonal ambiguity of Balram's self-presentation collapses the distinction between criminality and sovereignty, challenging us to recognize the political nature of legally authorized violence in a state, like Adiga's rendering of India, where the police are for sale. But even if we could reconstruct a model of positive institutional governance from Balram's

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<sup>38</sup> Anjaria uses the lack of narrative closure to mark a period transition that situates Adiga ahead of many "New Indian novels" that have appeared in its wake, and which are linked to an invigorated Hindu nationalism and the institutional success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose 2004 "India Shining" campaign performed "an overcoming of postcolonial melancholy... but also a celebration of India's putative global status, an abandonment of Nehruvian secularism, a concomitant celebration of capitalism, as well as an increasing use of Hindu nationalist tropes and themes" (21).

depiction of India, how could we move beyond that utopian ideal in order to imagine a precedent for meaningful political action? In other words: does Balram cripple our ability to envision positive reform for neoliberal India?

This might indeed be the case without the novel therefore becoming a reactionary work of art. If neoliberalism has indeed produced sites as dystopian as Laxmangarh and figures as abject as its inhabitants, then the attempt to inhabit their experience, though doomed to failure, would at the very least afford a palliative distraction—a kind of holding-still—from other, more harmful forms of consumption. The critical debate about Balram’s capacity to represent India reflects the tendency of our most immediate criteria for considering the novel a work of pure “entertainment” — its innocent and apolitical context — may be reduced to a third: the worry that we may be enacting complicity through the “dark” pleasure we derive from subaltern representation. Here, satire intervenes in the critical paranoia regarding the worldliness of world literature, revealing it to be a critical anxiety about the privilege of performing critical labor. It disenchant a professional discourse that would conceal the pleasures of literary consumption within a cloak of political activism. Yet this out comes with a catch: for if the defensive principle of *primum non nocere* to apply, then “entertainment,” a term that Adiga has used to describe his aims for his fiction, must negotiate several assumptions about the ways in which a novel like *The White Tiger* falls into our hands (“How English Literature Shaped Me”). First, we must consider whether it arrives innocently, uncontaminated by the systems of literary production and circulation that shape Indian Writing in English.

To help address this latter concern, we may consider the problem of mediation invoked above: how do we understand the novel’s presence in middle-class hands? This

latter question, which would seem to be purely a matter of an individual author navigating the world-literary marketplace, turns out also to have a significant bearing upon the problem of national imagination. A dark-horse debut novel, *The White Tiger* demonstrates a range of anxieties about its own canonicity, and much of what makes the experience of reading it pleasurable derives from the fact that it negotiates these anxieties so deftly. To understand Adiga's conception of artistic production and consumption, it is helpful to unpack the novel's quasi-mythical genesis. There are nuanced differences between Balram's fictional account of "Mr. Vikram Halwai, rickshaw-puller—thank you!" and Adiga's account of the rickshaw-pullers in Kolkata, whose stories he claims inspired him to write the novel. Adiga provides a poignant image for this interrelation when Balram describes the deformation of his father's labor-ravaged body:

My father's spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog's collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hip bones into his buttocks. The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen. (22)

The poor man's body is the Gordian "knot" binding together the many strands of identity that are woven into the novel's production. Irrespective of class, it is the figure that enables Balram to assign himself a poor man's identity: "A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. *Ours* are different" (22). Literally, it is the sign beneath which the novel, its narrator, and its author are all inscribed in the same "sharp pen." I will return to the novel's many figures for writing. But what I want to observe, at the outset, is the way in which this two-step mythology displaces a more common form of inscription afforded by belonging to a national community: military inscription, the literal assignment of citizen bodies to serve the collective will of the

nation has long been connected with the formation of a middle class and the creation of a petty-bourgeois citizen-subjects, and we see this expectation reflected in the hopes of Adiga's mythical (but ostensibly real) rickshaw-puller. The latter pins his hopes for the future upon the fact that his son has a fighting chance at upward mobility, so to speak, by enlisting in the Indian Air Force:

As he talked to me about his village in Bihar, a boy sat by his side — “my son”. While taking a customer about the city, he had seen an advertisement for the Indian Air Force. “I want my boy to join the Indian Air Force. He can do something for the nation; when he gets his pension, I can live off that, when my bones are broken from this work.” He made the boy write his name, in English, on my notebook. “Remember to tell the world that my son can write in English,” he said. (“Taking from the Heart of Darkness,” no pag.)

The symbolism of this transaction is so dense as to stretch the limits of factual credulity. Here the inscription of an English name upon the journalist's notebook functions in a way that is analogous to the inscription of labor on the rickshaw-puller's body, above: it sears the scene in memory as if with a “sharp pen.” As if by magic, Adiga transforms, before our very eyes, the knotted script of Devanagari into the symmetries of a Roman alphabet. The boy's life symbolically overwrites the one in which the rickshaw transformed his father into a coil, because it forced him into the seat of a labor “not fit for human beings” (ibid.). And this inhuman “fit,” a potent phrase that the rickshaw-puller recalls hearing “Pandit Nehru” many years earlier, ties this scene—and by implication, the novel it sires—back to the nation's founding. It is a tiger's leap, backward in time, that bypasses the sovereignty of “every prime minister” since Nehru, because it does what they could not or will not do abolishing an inhuman labor. The novel therefore closes an historical loop, at a symbolic level, that the Indian government must close, at a literal level, by granting an English-speaking soldier, son of a rickshaw-puller, a pension that is

sufficient to care for his work-broken father. In this light, Balram's opening declaration that "some things can only be said in English" acquires renewed significance, because it carves out a space of artistic sovereignty that is analogous with—and which contests against—the territorial space of national sovereignty. Like the "cuts and nicks and scars" that mark Vikram Halwai's body, however, this heterotopic space is provisional and painful. Confined to the surface of representation, it must "pull water from the well" of Indian literature just as surely as a Halwai must pull "a pyramid of middle-class flesh" behind him (23). Even without the Indian Air Force, Balram's narrative seems to suggest, the poor of India can assert themselves over the national imagination by breaking through the bar against subaltern voices.

To conclude, I want to suggest that Adiga's representation of Balram's liberation is not merely a negative performance of middle-class hypocrisy; rather, it is a provocation that challenges middle-class readers to think more rigorously about the political implications of their stated convictions, and a pedagogical tool for deliberative action. Here my argument has important overlaps with Toral Jatin Gajarawala's interpretation of the novel. Gajarawala uses the Nietzschean conception of resentment, which she glosses as "the province of the weak—a secondary, belated condition; it is the philosophical other of the morality of the noble.... resentment is the defining feature of the slave, and its tragedy is its reactive and negative quality" to situate Adiga within a group of authors who are all invested in the problem of caste-complicity within India's middle-class readership (380).<sup>39</sup> Without losing sight of this farcical quality, I want to

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<sup>39</sup> The novel is therefore ambivalent in its critique of Hindu nationality, Gajarawala suggests, because its "contemporaneity" stages "a continuation of the various forms of injustice of the past, but it is also the political moment of a re-privileging

emphasize the tone of nostalgia that is latent within *The White Tiger*—but pervasive throughout *Between the Assassinations*. Central to Adiga’s challenge of middle-class complicity, I argue, is the question of what role the consumption of literary fiction plays in mediating not only our political imagination, but indeed praxis itself. The novel’s political intervention cannot be definitively uncoupled from its representations of embodiment, because Adiga places a non-ironic ethical value upon the capacity to read inscriptions of labor and violence within embodied form.

Reading plays a crucial role in Balram’s own self-development, because it allows him to connect his *ressentiment* to the tradition of caste exploitation, on the one hand, and the commodifying force of print capital, on the other. Adiga’s trope for the former idea is the skin disease vitiligo, a skin-whitening disorder, which signals a hermeneutic that ascribes essential qualities based upon the signs that are legible upon the surface of bodies and things. The white spots function as a synecdoche for “the diseases of the poor,” which “can never get treated” (202). They also symbolizes the spiritual becoming-white of servants who have become urbanized, however; “vitiligo lips,” the character who has lost the most pigmentation to the disease, is also the driver who introduces Balram to the underworld of Delhi’s servant culture (thus ferrying his darkness from without to within). In the economy of signs that defines the servant caste experience, hierarchical structures of discipline and repression begin to flatten, and characters merely circulate a set of pre-given signs; like the “nicks” and “cuts” on the rickshaw-puller’s body, they become significant for what they represent about a character’s ontological status.

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of competition, meritocracy, jostling and climbing, and new forms of verticality, in which fellowship shows its true face to be farce” (381-382).

The trope of criminal reading subverts this idea. It first appears when Balram introduces us to *Murder Weekly*, a crime magazine that is popular with the servant class throughout India. The incident occurs partway through the novel, when Balram is still trying to gain his footing among the class of urban domestics. The cover of *Murder Weekly* compresses an entire pedagogy on the procedures with which the circuits of global capital have commoditized Balram's existence (and that of his father). He recalls glimpsing "a magazine with a catchy cover—a woman in her underwear was lying on a bed, cowering from the shadow of a man" (104). This image functions like an icon for the genre of suspense, as such: it depicts a criminal desire that has not yet been enacted—that, indeed, can only ever be enacted within a provisional temporality (the same provisional time with which Roy ends *The God of Small Things*). Balram tells us how "catchy" typography, superimposed over the image, caught his eye:

MURDER WEEKLY  
RUPEES 4.50  
EXCLUSIVE TRUE STORY:  
"A GOOD BODY NEVER GOES TO WASTE"  
MURDER. RAPE. REVENGE. (104)

In comparison with a conventional literary imprint of today, this front matter, which has been elevated to the cover but which omits the author's name, is both excessive and lacking.<sup>40</sup> It draws an implicit link between the "true story" of realist discourse and the domestication of desire within the "good body"—the disciplined body, which turns a profit ("Rupees 4.50" to be exact) because it "never goes to waste." Each line of the

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<sup>40</sup> Incidentally, the U.S. paperback edition of *The White Tiger*, published by Free Press, apes some of this marketing excess. The imprimatur on the cover, a Man Booker Prize medallion, and a blurb from *USA Today*, all seem to overcrowd the novel's imposing title. And a central cutout shows the tiger-striped image of a taxi, also swarmed with imprimatur, printed on the endsheet below.

cover refers to the next metonymically, linking to networks of meaning and valuation through which the magazine circulates. Together, they reveal, at the textual surface, the intersecting market forces that condition Balram's reception of the crime narrative. Within this circuit, "revenge" is the generic lynchpin, because it ties the motive that produces the criminal act to the societal response that ensures its exceptionality: the criminal is always caught, Balram tells us, and it is precisely this fact that makes him criminal. This manifestation calls for a paranoid form of reading in which meaning becomes immanent through a lateral movement of signs across the surface of things, because it asks us to identify the way in which the history of the objective world has been inscribed upon the surface of individual objects. Later, he makes this point more explicitly:

Now what happens in your typical Murder Weekly story—or Hindi film, for that matter? A poor man kills a rich man. Good. Then he takes the money. Good. But then he gets dreams in which the dead man pursues him with bloody fingers, saying, *Mur-der-er, mur-der-er*.

Doesn't happen like that in real life. Trust me. It's one of the reasons I've stopped going to Hindi films.

There was just that one night when granny came chasing me on a water buffalo, but it never happened again.

The real nightmare you get is the other kind. You toss about in the bed dreaming that you haven't done it—that you lost your nerve and let Mr. Ashok get away—that you're still in Delhi, still the servant of another man, and then you wake up.

The sweating stops. The heartbeat slows.  
*You did it! You killed him!* (269)

Balram suggests that we can perform a *critical* form of desublimation that locates truth not in representation, but in reference: a person has meaning, like things have meaning, based upon the function it/he/she performs within a system of persons and things. It locates the significance of his murder not in what it represents, as Murder Weekly does, but in terms of it has meant for his own capacity to act.

Balram first indicates a form of reading in the way he anthropomorphizes corpses. After murdering Ashok, he reflects upon the idea that the murder has given him an interpretive responsibility over his slain master: “Only you can complete the story of his life; only you know why his body has to be pushed into the fire before its time, and why his toes curl up and fight for another hour on earth” (39). Here the idea of toes coming to life is significant, in part, because they reflect a memory of his mother’s funeral pyre, where “a pale foot jerked out, like a living thing; the toes, which were melting in the heat, began to curl up, offering resistance to what was being done to them” (14). They also recall the symbolic connection between feet and servitude, and through that connection, the servant’s highly mediated way of relating to his own body. This scene suggests an apparent externalization of an agency where in fact there is none: if storytelling can bring the dead corpse to life again, then it can liberate the socially-determined narratives of *Murder Weekly* by elevating his act of rebellion into a form of art.

This form of reading will ultimately grant Balram a degree of sovereignty over his life, because it allows him to begin claiming back, in small increments, the forms of agency and blocks of time that the rooster coop has taken from him. Adiga’s clever metaphor here is the pinch: Balram begins to pinch himself anytime he engages in a behavior that he wishes to unlearn, and he begins to “pinch” time and money from Ashok using the latter’s car on the sly as a taxi-for-hire.

Adiga provides a contrasting model of reading in “Lighthouse Hill,” one of the vignettes in *Between the Assassinations*. “Lighthouse Hill” tells the story of Gururaj, a respected journalist who learns too late in his career that his small town is full of dark secrets and becomes trapped within his own mind as a result. After learning that a car

accident had been pinned on an innocent man, Gururaj becomes obsessed with finding out the truth behind every illusion; in consequence, he becomes obsessed with finding out the hidden truth to everything that had happened in Kittur's provincial history:

He was going to write a history of Kittur. An infernal history of Kittur—in it every event in the past twenty years would be reinterpreted. He took out old newspapers, and carefully read each front page. Then, a red pen in hand, he scratched out and rewrote words, which fulfilled two purposes—one, it defaced the newspapers of the past, and two, it allowed him to figure out the true relationship between the words and the characters in the news events. At first, designating Hindi—the Gurkha's language—as the language of the truth, he rewrote the Kannada-language headlines of the newspaper in Hindi; then he switched to English, and finally he adopted a code in which he substituted each letter of the Roman alphabet for the one immediately after it—he had read somewhere that Julius Caesar had invented this code for his army—and, to complicate matters further, he invented symbols for certain words; for instance, a triangle with a dot inside represented the word 'bank.' Other symbols were ironically inspired; for instance, a Nazi swastika represented the Congress Party, and the nuclear disarmament symbol, the BJP, and so on. One day, looking back over the past week's notes, he found that he had forgotten half the symbols, and he no longer understood what he had written. *Good, he thought, that is the way it should be. Even the writer of the truth should not know the truth entire. Every true word, upon being written, is like the full moon, and it daily wanes, and then passes entirely into obscurity. That is the way of all things.* (*Between the Assassinations* 163-164; original emphasis)

Here, literature reveals the fallenness—the duplicity—of journalistic media; yet this promise is constrained to heroic acts of interpretive resistance that are doomed to senselessness, because they remain locked within an individual world. The truth sequesters him within a private world, where the subject of knowledge has turned his back upon the larger interpretive community. On his way to insanity, he encounters an elephant (clearly symbolizing Ganesha, the god of wisdom), which grants him permission “in words so loud they seemed like newspaper headlines” to “go and write the true history of Kittur.” Thus as Gururaj uncovers more and more of the truth—or at least what

he believes to be the truth—he completely loses the capacity to communicate with other human beings; and ultimately, his transcriptions overwrite even his own inner truth, sequestering him from himself as fully as he had sequestered himself from the world. Naturally, he loses his position as the editor of the town’s newspaper. And when “four young journalists” go to investigate after a librarian calls them to “the municipal reading room in the lighthouse” because Gururaj “won’t say a word anymore,” they find him “sitting at a bench, reading a newspaper that [is] partially covering his face.” When they pull the newspaper down, they are shocked to find: “a moist dark hole in the innermost sheet of the paper. Pieces of newsprint stuck to the corners of Gururaj’s mouth, and his jaw was moving” (166). Adiga paints a complete transference between speech and print, language and meaning. Gururaj is finally restores himself to immanence, then—but only negatively, by erasing that within him that is himself.

In the attempt to write a “true history of Kittur,” we find, interpretation can only reveal truth to the degree that it segments it from the world. Without a dialogical relation between the storyteller and his world, interpretation quickly descends into solipsistic madness. The activity of interpretation breaks down into catachrestic nonsense as the body comes to rest —literally, in this case, it is a circuitous movement through the urban topography that spirals into the journalist’s obstructed mouth. Enlightenment (symbolized in the lighthouse that is also the keeper of history) therefore figures as the stillness granting absolute knowledge to the subject of truth, while depriving him utterly of meaning—even the subjective meaning of that which the body once understood about itself. No longer digesting language grammatically, word by word, sequence of signs whose meaning is self-transcending, the mouth consumes its language all at once,

stopping-up its voice in catachrestic jumble of masticated paper. Now the body is itself comprehended by its ruins: instead of a reading practice that produces meaning by relating knowledge to the world, the material of the world interposes itself between his knowledge and its meaning—depriving him of all understanding, even of what he had already known. We can hear the authorial anxiety latent within this image echoed in Adiga’s depiction of his own experience of having grown up in isolation in provincial Mangalore, where an immersion in English literature seems to have connected him to the world—but also to have isolated him from his surroundings:

Mangalore's libraries, though cut off from the world, did supply me a set of very fine writers, whose books amplified the central message of Nehru's English: that the world was a place full of light, and if spoken to in a rational language, would respond in one. This is, of course, not really true, and had I grown up in a big city I would have known it from the start. (“How English Literature Shaped Me” no pag.)

This context bestows a particular significance—a poignancy—upon Adiga’s journalistic work. In his account of the interaction with the rickshaw-puller, above, Adiga makes an implicit claim on behalf of the power of journalistic engagement not to represent the voice of the subaltern—but to rescue the authorial voice from irrelevance.

Read together, the motifs of criminal reading and bodily inscription suggest a model of poetic sovereignty that requires Balram to disclose his narrative in order for it to remain meaningful. In this respect, his narration is like the performance of diplomacy; it signals a staged conversation that becomes meaningful only when overheard by the reader; however, the very fact that this reader has been forcefully associated both with the western audience and the Indian middle-class suggests a historical difference between Balram’s staging of a subaltern conversation and the earlier “performance” represented in the Bandung communiqué.

Balram locates this motif in the heterotopic space of old Delhi's book market, which echoes Adiga's own Mangalore library in its heterotopic capacity to provide what Balram refers to as his "half-baked" education. The book market is important, in Balram's telling, because it enables him to educate himself—for free—in the history of subaltern rebellion. This reading practice, too, is criminal, in that he is stealing the time that he spends with these books from their booksellers. His ability to charm one of them, an old Muslim man, thus signals the importance of overcoming religious enmity to representing the model of sovereignty that he claims for himself. Indeed, although Balram panders to the bookseller by flattering him and calling him "Muslim uncle," their interaction is one of the only ones not premised upon some form of veiled enmity (216); if it is premised upon duplicity, we might say, this duplicity is of the same type as all diplomatic gestures. In the book market, Balram learns that his feelings of resentment toward Ashok have a deep history. By reading Muslim poets, "Rumi, Iqbal, Mirza Ghalib, and another fellow whose name [he] was told but [has] forgotten," he learns to connect his own experience to an immemorial class struggle. And these figures convince Balram that "a man [can] make himself vanish through poetry" (217). Here poetry represents the power of art to unify the nation across differences—a power that Balram claims for himself and, implicitly, for the nation. It can unify the subaltern Muslim and Hindu communities into a single, secular-nationalist of resistance.

Yet if this is so, then it is not entirely clear who the target of that resistance turns out to be. Balram will perform his vanishing act by becoming "The White Tiger," a beast can "vanish"—and therefore elude transform criminality into sovereignty—because of the striping of whiteness and blackness upon its skin. It is the hybridity of the tiger that

makes it impossible to locate. This image signifies a conjunction of western “whiteness” and non-western “darkness” that cancels both, allowing him to “disappear” into the anonymity of a global network mediated by the web. Balram’s symbol for this disappearance is his office, which is, he tells us, lit by its own chandelier:

It is a little before midnight now, Mr. Jiabao. A good time for me to talk. I stay up the whole night, Your Excellency. And there’s no one else in this 150-square-foot office of mine. Just me and a chandelier above me, although the chandelier has a personality of its own. It’s a huge thing, full of small diamond-shaped glass pieces, just like the ones they used to show in the films of the 1970s. Though it’s cool enough at night in Bangalore, I’ve put a midget fan—five cobwebby blades—right above the chandelier. See, when it turns, the small blades chop up the chandelier’s light and fling it across the room. Just like the strobe light at the best discos in Bangalore.

This is the only 150-square-foot space in Bangalore with its own chandelier! But it’s still a hole in the wall, and I sit here the whole night.

The entrepreneur’s curse. He has to watch his business all the time.

(5)

Here, too, we find a figure of striping in the Hindi film and the disco; the space from which Balram speaks is also one that has vanished. In the negative, heterotopic space of his office, Balram offers evidence of his own sovereignty in lieu of a justification for it. Later, he will connect the chandelier directly to his powers of narration, explaining that “when you forget something, all you have to do is stare at the glass pieces shining in the ceiling long enough, and within five minutes you’ll remember exactly what it is you were trying to remember” (98). In contrast to the exoticism of Rushdie’s chutney factory, Balram’s heterotopia invites the middle-class reader to identify with artistic sovereignty rather than simply to consume it, because it is a poetics that mirrors the “start up” in its provisional nature; unlike the provision of governmental favors that had underwritten the *rentier* wealth of the nation’s first generation of comprador bourgeoisie, Balram implies, his own wealth is the product of a meritocratic and ongoing engagement with business.

His private transportation contracts rely upon a portable capital and a movement of persons, with corruption sealing the arrangement in place; and if Bangalore had a proper transportation system, then White Tiger Technology Drivers may find itself hard-pressed to secure clientele.

What bearing does this representational schema have upon the critical question, broached above, of how the novel addresses itself to middle-class guilt? The legal binarism of personal innocence and guilt does not adequately cover the ethical framework of Balram's confession, because the rule of law cannot provide an *a priori* determination of the political status of his crime. To borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, we might say that the question is whether or not Balram's violence is historically "primordial" to the state. Which is to say, does the potential for a naxalite revolution constitute a legitimate existential threat to the existence of the state, in which case Balram's violence may be framed as the legitimate act of a citizen whose violence falls within a state of "emergency"; or alternatively, does it occur within a "permanent state of exception," in which case it remains fundamentally criminal?<sup>41</sup>

If Balram's narrative presence ineluctably mediates our view of his criminality, and we cannot gain an epistemological priority over his representation of India by deconstructing its misprisions, then it remains impossible to access a "real" India whose truth could resolve the political significance to his violent rebellion. It is therefore impossible to *decide* whether his violence is progressive or not, because the novel affords no figure whose sovereignty would be capable of deciding the political significance of his crime in our stead. Instead, we are compelled to *feel* a subjective relation to the

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<sup>41</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*, ch. 1

conditions that he describes. Balram's mythic exceptionalism, his repeated assertion about *having always been* a "white tiger," has as much in common with the disingenuous bootstrapping narratives of the business class as it does with the more sincere disclosures of the Victorian *Bildungsroman* Adiga so admires for its heterotopic capacity to occasion an experience of worldliness for a young version of himself, isolated within the backwater cloister of a Mangalore library. In this respect, Balram's voice is itself the lineament of sovereignty.

This point highlights the novel's structural dependence upon caste aggression in order to fulfill its vision of artistic sovereignty. Here again, Adiga's representation of Indian culture is deeply ambivalent. Within the logic of subject-formation represented in the novel, there can be no emergent middle class of "social entrepreneurs" in the servant economy without the domestic intimacy that the caste system bestows upon master/servant relations. This is the veiled implication of Anjaria's claim that the vehicle of China-India relations precipitates a radically indeterminate form of historical mediation: sovereignty is eminently bound up with the crime of enmity. Anjaria frames this openness in largely positive terms, because it solves the problem of "how to represent grievous social injustices whose natures are not known in advance and that are unfolding at the very moment of being written" (Anjaria 126). Yet we are equally justified in reading it as a melancholic invocation of the ghosts of Bandung internationalism, because Adiga makes the principle of non-interference historically inaccessible by hermetically sealing it within a cynical critique of aesthetic representation. When Balram writes, "To hell with the Naxals and their guns shipped from China," which I quoted above in relation to narrative development, we are

compelled to view Bandung in a double light: it is the foreclosed past of a secular-humanist diplomacy founded upon a mutual respect for culture, and it is the paradoxical condition for the “Indian” novel in an era when neoliberalism has severed the developmental ties between persons and nations.<sup>42</sup>

Balram chooses to kill Ashok, finally, because he recognizes himself to be *homo sacer*, the man whom all are free to murder with impunity.<sup>43</sup> This realization comes in consequence of the genuine double bind of self-recrimination into which the Sharma family forces him by coercing him to sign his name to a false affidavit. In signing away his freedom, Balram arrives at the realization that he is no longer covered by the social contract: always-already criminal, he remains a fugitive of the law prior to the commission of any crime. At no point can Balram reenter the juridical order as a rights-bearing subject, because he was never truly a part of it; he must remain a “social entrepreneur,” as he puts it, in perpetuity (150, 256). Within this generalized state of juridical exception, Balram’s normative gambit is to negate the exception to juridical order; which is not to say that he restores the rule of law, but he establishes norms, in the absence of legal authority, on the basis of a reasonable use of force.

Balram functions as a commissarial dictator, whose literal and narrative roles are to assert norms within a growing sphere of influence, beginning within his own body and progressing outward into the world. Balram’s recognition that he is *homo sacer*—the man whom all may kill with impunity. This is the consequence of the genuine double-bind of self-recrimination into which the Sharma family forces him by coercing him to sign his

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<sup>42</sup> For a more capacious historical argument along these lines, see Jed Esty’s argument, in *Unseasonable Youth*, that modernist formal experimentation reflects a crisis of national-imperial sovereignty.

<sup>43</sup> See Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*

name to a false affidavit. In signing away his freedom, Balram arrives at the realization that he is no longer covered by the social contract. In the epistemological logic of the novel, it is not the murder that undermines Balram's moral credibility, but the Rooster Coop itself: "I was in terror, and yet not once did the thought of running away cross my mind. Not once did the thought, *I'll tell the judge the truth*, cross my mind. I was trapped in the rooster coop." (151, emphasis in original). Balram is no hypocrite, though he could be a liar. If we believe his account of having compensated a family whose son was slain by his driver, in the novel's conclusion, then the systemic role he fills does indeed benefit from the history of subjugation that transformed him from a product of the darkness into a "social entrepreneur." The weak moral claims of meritocratic *comprador* rule are nevertheless stronger than the aristocratic *rentier* class it supplants. Although it is true that he is no "class warrior," it does not follow that he becomes "the very object of his critique" (Shengavi 5). In this respect, it is not Adiga who wavers between "passing" and "slumming" but the fused identity who has the necessary standing to narrate his own autobiography: "Ashok" neé Balram, born Munna.

Always-already criminal, Balram remains a fugitive of the law: at no point can he reenter the juridical order as a rights-bearing subject; he must remain a "social entrepreneur" in perpetuity. Balram's social-entrepreneurial subjectivity, and the narrative voice that it authors, both depend upon the perpetuation of inter-caste violence to maintain the perception of freedom. His artistic sovereignty, therefore, remains contingent upon the continued suspension of lawful rule (the constitutional failure of Indian democracy to abolish the system of caste in the name of human rights), which is the very juridical exception that had originally enslaved him. Within this generalized

state of exception, Balram's normative gambit is to negate the negation of juridical order; which is not so say that he restores the rule of law, but rather establishes a norm in the absence of law. In the negative, heterotopic space of his office, he offers evidence of his own sovereignty in lieu of a justification for it. By his own account, the flight from the rooster coop has had as much to do with inner regulation as it did with perceiving the self through an accurate social schema, and he must manipulate this representational tension in order to demarcate his own sovereignty if he is to sustain his exceptional claim to being a "white tiger," the creature who comes along "once in a generation" (32). In other words, he becomes a commissarial dictator over a growing sphere of influence that, beginning at the limits of his own embodied perception, progresses outward into the world.

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