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**Postcolonial  
Hauntings**

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Pamela McCallum

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**Notes from the Editor:  
Postcolonial Hauntings**  
Pamela McCallum

In his story “Seawall Sightings” the Chinese-Canadian writer Paul Yee recounts ghostly sightings on Vancouver’s seawall walkway: on a rainy evening a bicyclist inadvertently splashes a young Chinese couple, but when he wheels around to apologize, the couple has vanished; a retired businessman stops at a park bench where he watches an elegantly dressed Chinese couple walking arm in arm—she in an evening gown, he in a dark suit. As he gets up to continue his stroll, he realizes the couple has disappeared. What are the stories behind these strange apparitions? Why does the couple haunt the liminal space where land meets water?

Like those in many contemporary cities, Vancouver’s waterfront has in the past few decades been extensively redeveloped. The former industrial areas bordering on Burrard Inlet and Coal Harbour have been extensively transformed and now the waterfront is lined with expensive housing, elegant shops and pedestrian walkways. This remaking of the urban landscape is also a remaking of history, an effacing and burying of older habitations and streets, together with the memories of those who traversed them and the stories they hold. Yee retrieves these displaced histories in the story of two East Asian immigrants to Vancouver at the beginning of the twentieth century. Choi Jee-yun is the daughter of a wealthy Hong Kong businessman; her father is progressive enough to allow his daughter to be educated, but traditional enough to object to the poor young man, Yen Wah-lung, with whom she falls in love. The two young people decide to flee to Canada to begin a new life together. Wah-lung moves to Vancouver first, hoping to become established in Vancouver before Jee-yun joins him, but their dreams are frustrated by the Canadian government’s ban on Chinese immigration in 1923. Devastated by their enforced separation, Jee-yun attempts to enter Canada illegally; she is caught and imprisoned in the notorious “Pig Pen,” an immigration holding building whose barred windows and forbidding walls occupied the same space that is now redeveloped and

gentrified. When both Jee-yun and Wah-lung are deported, the ship carrying them is caught in a storm and sinks. The ghostly couple who appear on the Seawall, therefore, are fleeting signs of lives destroyed by racist immigration laws, haunting figures of the blockage of hopes for new beginnings.

Why is the couple seen dressed in elegant eveningwear, clothing they never wore in Vancouver? Yee situates this image in a comment Wah-lung makes to his beloved. He writes to her that he will find an apartment filled with sunlight, and when they are together again, “I will put on a new suit and you will slip into a long elegant gown and we will attend a symphony concert together” (53). The image of handsome clothing and attendance at an evening event is not so much a lost memory as an unfulfilled desire that existed only as a utopian glimpse of what their new lives might be. In this sense, Yee’s fiction constructs more than lost histories: it gestures towards the longings—many of which would never be actualized—that brought East Asian immigrants to the Canadian west coast.

“Hauntings” and “hauntology” have become familiar terms to literary and cultural theorizing since the publication of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* in 1994. In that influential book Derrida explores the inheritance of Marx and Marxism, especially for the historical moment following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the apparent triumph of western democracies and market economies. He mobilizes “the specter haunting Europe” [the specter of revolution] from the first sentence of Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* alongside one of the most well-known literary apparitions, the ghost of old King Hamlet on the ramparts of Elsinore castle in the opening scene of Shakespeare’s play, in order to represent the hauntings of history, the ways in which the past continues to interrogate the present. Just as King Hamlet provokes his son into seeing his death differently, as murder and usurpation, so an awareness of the spectres of history challenges the present to rethink its relationship with the past, to enter into a dialogue with what has been suppressed, discarded, marginalized or forgotten. The intellectual of the future who “loves justice” (*Specters* 176), Derrida suggests, must be open to dialogue with the ghosts of the past.

## Notes from the Editor: Postcolonial Hauntings

This issue of *ARIEL* explores a number of diverse postcolonial hauntings: situated readings that swirl around Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*; systemic racisms, so different from individuals' points of view, that are narrated in a Conrad novella; the resistances of a nineteenth-century Brahmin woman whose conversion to Christianity is reconstructed by others; traces of lost geographies that circulate in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*; persistent questions of women's inheritance and property rights in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Like Paul Yee's Vancouver story, these articles raise important questions for the discussion of colonial and postcolonial hauntings.

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## The Message

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Michael McIrvin

*And pluck till time and times are done  
The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun.*

W.B. Yeats

The solid leaf wall  
of this tree is towering  
injunction to a man  
without nerves, mute,  
violently silent except  
for the tiny electric  
sound of his skin  
twitching in the shadows  
where fallen fruit  
stinks like overwrought  
wine...but this too  
is a message  
from the earth  
even he can understand.

Love, the tree speaks  
with its involute tongues,  
can grow sad as metaphor,  
turn, fall forever toward  
the humus that begat it,  
recede until all but madness  
is equivocal, until  
a man must turn inward  
like the multifold whorls  
of this cambial heart,  
or die.

The man stares upward  
at the impenetrable  
exchange of shadow and light  
and tries to imagine a soul,  
mysterious and flammable,  
at centre, maybe, already aflame.

## In Defense of *Anil's Ghost*

Chelva Kanaganayakam

The echoes of Sir Philip Sidney and Percy Bysshe Shelley that my title invokes are, in some senses, deliberate, since there are striking similarities between the situations in which *The Defence of Poesie* (1595) and *A Defence of Poetry* (1821, published 1840) were written and the complex political and literary backdrop that frames Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000). Sidney's argument offers a taxonomy of the arts and sciences in order to establish the supremacy of poetry. The abstraction of poetry is turned into a sign of strength as Sidney discusses the limitations of disciplines that merely document and quantify. Shelley's essay, written more than two centuries later, traverses similar ground by exalting the imaginative strength of poetry without jettisoning its social and moral function. Both were written during times of heightened political activity when there were several attempts to reiterate the significance of the arts. Sidney and Shelley assert that poets may well rely on vision and emotion, but they remain, to use Shelley's famous phrasing, "unacknowledged legislators of the world." In a general sense, the opposition between a socially conscious literature and a form of art that is aesthetically complete but distanced from social or political realities has been the subject of recurrent debates, including the well-known exchange between Salvador Lopez and Gabriel Garcia Villa concerning the role and significance of literature in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

*Anil's Ghost* compels a reopening of the debate over literature's relation to politics through its overt preoccupation with a complex political backdrop, as well as a carefully articulated ambivalence about its project. Ondaatje's decision to write a so-called political novel is obviously a deliberate one, and the critical responses to it have been unexpectedly diverse. The multiple analyses advanced by critics have specific implications for the evaluation of Sri Lankan fiction in particular and for postcolonial literatures in general. Over the last decade, Sri Lankan

writing has been, for the most part, driven by politics, and Ondaatje's intervention needs to be seen as a significant attempt to champion a particular stance. This paper argues that, far from being biased, orientalist or otherwise irresponsible, Ondaatje's novel charts new territory by establishing a careful balance between political engagement and aesthetic distance.

That said, it can be argued that there is no real urgency to defend Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Despite its political content and its provocative subject matter, it did not invite the kind of censorship and public outcry occasioned by the works of Salman Rushdie. It did not even arouse the kind of controversy that Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* did.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the opposite is true. For almost a whole year the novel was on bestseller lists in Canada. And the list of awards it gathered is impressive. Within a matter of months it received several prizes, including the Governor-General's award, the Prix Medicis for foreign literature, and the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize; it was also the co-recipient of the prestigious Giller Prize. In a representative and clearly laudatory review, Silvia Albertazzi concludes that in this novel the author wants "to restate his commitment to pacifism and his denouncement of the brutality of war," a comment that establishes the text as benign and wholly appropriate (74). This defense, then, is of a particular kind in that this article addresses the concerns of "local" or Sri Lankan-born diasporic critics who see the novel as a shameless act of appropriation, essentialism, distortion or blatant prejudice. The fact that the Sri Lankan critics do not have a consensus about why the novel is flawed adds to the complexity of the problem.<sup>3</sup> The dichotomous situation caused by the praise heaped on the novel by the West makes the defense relevant, even urgent to some degree. One does not wish to privilege Sri Lankan critics and imply that their perspective is somehow more significant than that of Western critics, but the fact that the Sri Lankan response is generally negative raises a number of questions about critical practice, readership, and the literary marketplace.

Praise from the West, particularly for books that fall within the general rubric of "South Asian literature," seems fated to invite hostile opposition as well. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an example

of a work that elicited very different kinds of response in the West and the East, some very laudatory and others decidedly critical. The manner in which the strengths and weaknesses of such novels get configured points to significant differences in expectations among readers. *Anil's Ghost* appears to have prompted such a duality as well. The dichotomy in critical reception is not simply a matter of stylistics or narrative. Such a response was perhaps true of *The English Patient*, which was, in stylistic and formal terms, more typical of the Ondaatje aesthetic mode that appeals to some and irritates others. With *Anil's Ghost* the situation is arguably more complex, and the objective of this article is to raise several questions about the assumptions and practices that form the backdrop to this lack of consensus.

At the most obvious level, the duality of responses has to do with the relation between the ostensible subject matter and the literary marketplace itself. In this instance it refers to the kinds of circumstances that make it possible for the South Asian novel to find a huge readership in the West. In short, the argument would be that if the novel gave the West what it wanted to read, the success of the novel would be assured. An extension of the argument would be that the West has imagined a Sri Lanka, which the novel then corroborates. In turn exotic and savage in its description of local conditions, the novel, according to this reading, offers the West a biased representation of the Third World. In Edward Said's terms, the novel is part of a discourse that orientalizes Sri Lanka. The conviction that novelists are complicit in promoting a vision of the East for Western consumption also has the effect of forcing a closer scrutiny of the novel in the Third World by critics who are in a position to test the claims of the novel through comparative or "nativist" eyes. They are also aware, quite often, of the complexity of the political and social context that is evoked in the text. The divide between the two critical schools is not necessarily a spatial one, but the fundamental duality in critical reception remains intact. In other words, the comparative or nativist response would provide a corrective to the euphoria of the novel's success in the West. If the West finds in the novel a reassuring affirmation of an imagined nation, the Third World is dismayed by the novel's refusal to engage with the "realities" of the country.

As I mentioned early on, *Anil's Ghost* is by no means alone in eliciting both praise and condemnation. The last few decades have been the golden age for postcolonial writers and several of those who achieved tremendous praise in the West have confronted this ambivalence. *Anil's Ghost*, however, has a particular significance. Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* was seen as a semi-autobiographical about a family. It did not remain unscathed as critics faulted it for various reasons, and even his brother Christopher Ondaatje had reason to express some measure of reservation about its portrayal of family history.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, the personal nature of the narrative redeemed it. *The English Patient* was seen as the quintessential diasporic novel, and its internationalism was, given the displacement of the author, predictable. A more recent book of poems entitled *Handwriting* included disturbing political elements, but not enough to cause concern among the critics. *Anil's Ghost* is much more problematic in its subject matter and narrative stance. The novel is about the political events that sharpened animosities in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, and that specific focus, I would argue, makes it far less immune to the kinds of expectations that politically engaged postcolonial literature appears to generate.

Ondaatje's failure to satisfy many local Sri Lankan readers is also based implicitly on the premise that novels such as *Anil's Ghost* have the effect of producing meaning. Such novels become the window to the outside world, but they do more than reveal or reflect local reality. Their power lies in their capacity to generate meaning. It has been said anecdotally that one lawyer in Toronto used the novel as a form of judicial notice in defining the backdrop to his client's case. Presumably, the lawyer's decision to cite the novel as evidence was based at least partially on the premise that the judge would have read the novel and been aware of its relation to the conditions in the country. In such instances the novel is not simply a representation of the real. It is real to the extent that its accuracy cannot reasonably be questioned. In this case, the novel takes on the status of a document whose representation is sufficiently authentic to be considered a form of evidence.

The issue, from a postcolonial perspective, then, becomes one of trying to define an adequate critical stance to read or explicate the

novel. If the novel adopts a “public” persona, then its validity is that of allegory, in Fredric Jameson’s sense of the term.<sup>5</sup> Unlike *Running in the Family*, this novel almost announces its allegorical stance by saying that what happens in one village may well happen in another. Further, the fact that the novel begins outside Sri Lanka tends to reinforce its allegorical and universal element. Whatever problems one has with Jameson’s statement of the postcolonial project, the idea of allegory as a staple feature of postcolonial writing has remained with some measure of stubbornness. *Anil's Ghost* would be seen as an attempt to present in metaphoric form the turmoil of the country. By including an author’s note that highlights the political backdrop involving the insurgents, separatists and the government, Ondaatje deliberately forges the connection with “real” conditions before insisting on the fictive aspect of his novel.<sup>6</sup> Even a cursory reading of the “Acknowledgments” at the end would indicate that the author’s research was comprehensive and thorough.

Regardless of what the author/narrator claims, at one end of the spectrum is the critic who chooses to downplay the specific political elements of the novel. The novel, from this angle, belongs to a global tradition of writing and what is at stake is the formal aspect of the text. A second category claims the need for accuracy through an interrogation of the prior text that allegory assumes, and by shifting the focus of this critique from metaphor to metonymy. For critics who are committed to this approach, the history of conflict occupies an unambiguous space and what is important for the reader is to discern how close the novel gets to a sense of truth. The benchmark here is accuracy. Often, what tends to dominate this methodology is the position that Terry Eagleton calls a “normative illusion” that refuses to see the object for what it is. Eagleton adds that this approach “corrects’ [the novel] against an independent pre-existent model of which the empirical text is an imperfect copy.... The typical gesture of normative criticism is to inscribe a ‘could do better’ in the text’s margin” (11).

In some ways, these are different approaches that we often encounter in postcolonial criticism. Allegory of a particular kind offers some measure of distance, but it can also be capable of radicalism, depending

on how it is structured. A purely formal approach escapes the difficulties of context and tradition, and is particularly useful when dealing with transnational writers who need to be accommodated in national literary histories or when the target readers are not likely to be informed about local conditions. A more context-based approach works with texts that insist on the reader's awareness of local conditions. Topicality is the mainstay of such works.

Depending on who reads *Anil's Ghost* and where, any one of these approaches is likely to be adopted. Typically, the reviews that appeared in the *New York Times on the Web*, *Queen's Quarterly* or *Maclean's Magazine* appear to underscore the formal aspect, and in the process give the mantle of universalism or internationalism to the novel. Tod Hoffman, in his review, remarks that "Ondaatje's use of language is, it goes without saying, superb. His greatness lies in combining the poet's gift for word selection and rhythm with the novelist's sense of plot" (450). The *Maclean's* review gives priority to Ondaatje as an international writer first and a Canadian writer second. Writes Brian Johnson, "Ondaatje is our most international author. Quintessentially Canadian, his fiction deciphers identity and bleeds through borders" (67). Implicit here are certain assumptions about identity and nationality. Brenda Glover's essay appears to move in the direction of an allegorical reading, where the details of the novel, while important in themselves, also imply a larger process at work. "In each of his novels," says Glover, "Ondaatje creates an extreme situation with a small cast of central characters, through whom he is able to explore the dynamics of displacement, isolation and alienation, as well as strategies for survival" (79). Under this rubric the novel charts a personal quest, and the political context becomes secondary. Glover's assessment is not very different from Heike Härting's conclusion that "*Anil's Ghost* represents and ... regulates diasporic identity through both the construction of Anil as a nomadic subject and its narrative's modernist configuration of history" (50).

It would be simplistic to assume that essays by Western critics have not paid attention to the political events recorded in the text. But there are differences that need to be noted as well. Margaret Scanlan, for example, refers to Bosnia, Ireland, and Guatemala, and adds "one ob-

vious difference, however, between Sri Lanka and these other trouble spots, at least for North American readers, is its unfamiliarity” (303). Nonetheless, she claims that Ondaatje’s “distinctive achievement in *Anil's Ghost* is to create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror” (302). But her main concern is with the function of “abrupt breaks in time” that postmodern novelists use in order to move away from traditional linear narratives (303). Antoinette Burton is equally preoccupied with history and historiography, although her intention is to show how the novel tests the limits of historical narrative.<sup>7</sup> After a comprehensive and valuable explication of the novel, Paul Briens concludes with a reference to Ananda and the boy who reaches out to him: “such small gestures of compassion are all the book offers as counterbalance to the grotesque cruelty all around; but in the long run the concern of one human being for another is the only hope we have” (193).<sup>8</sup> All these commentaries have much to offer, but they do not, for the most part, interrogate the way in which the novel projects the political violence in Sri Lanka.

For the purpose of this article, the second category of criticism is crucial, since the articles that belong to it are ones that are critical of the novel for what they deem an inadequate portrayal of local conditions. And, this is precisely where the critical response becomes complex and problematic. The analysis of three Sri Lankan critics, all living and teaching in the West, demonstrates not only the multiplicity of critical response but also the difficulties inherent in finding a consensus among critics who adopt a similar approach. The three Sri Lankan critics whose work is looked at here are all unhappy with the novel’s representation of Sri Lanka, but for very different reasons. Their approaches are remarkably similar, but they arrive at very different conclusions concerning the novel’s referential claims. The issue, then, is not so much about methodology as it is about the novel’s vulnerability when the depiction of political conflict becomes an overarching concern in literary practice.

The first example is a long review by Ranjini Mendis who offers a comprehensive reading of the novel. Having drawn attention to Ondaatje’s failure to counter “the stereotype of the savage, violent South Asian”

(11), she goes on to conclude that “the absence of detail in historical context, however, works against an informed reading, leaving just a general impression of self-destructive violence as the major thread of the novel” (9). Mendis’s article stresses the significance of historically informed reading. The position is clearly comparative and mindful of authorial responsibility, of the critic’s task and of the urgency of post-colonial issues. She too, working in the West, is aligned with Ondaatje’s status as a “native-alien” of sorts, but her critique underscores the “native” element, which in her view the novel fails to capture. In other words, Mendis provides an analysis of the local situation against which the novel needs to be appraised. At the outset of the review, Mendis sets up her interpretation of local conditions. Having made the assertion about what needs emphasis, she goes on to demonstrate that the novel does not measure up. The intention here is not to take issue with the historical and political reading espoused by Mendis. But I would like to raise what appears to be an interesting problematic that arises out of such a stance. Her position is clear. Says Mendis:

In the last two decades, ‘Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,’ a guerilla organization ironically called ‘Freedom Fighters,’ has been attacking Sri Lanka’s socialist-democratic Sinhalese government and civilian population. Funded by Tamil immigrants in Western countries (‘Terrorism funds’), their goal is to cripple the power base and establish a separate homeland of nearly half the island for the 12% who are Tamil. (8)

Mendis is troubled by the fact that the novel offers a flawed view of the nation by stressing the atrocities of the government while ignoring the crimes of the Tamil terrorists. Again, to quote from the review, “Ceylon Tamils, with a different history from the Indian Tamils brought to Ceylon by the British for tea plucking, have fought for self-government and to move further south in the island ever since the early recorded history of Ceylon” (8). This is an authoritative position, offered not as historiography but as history. There is no ambivalence, no sense of contingency in her statement, and it is from this position that the partial truths and relativism of the novel are judged. In short, Mendis

maintains that the novel's perspective is a biased one that implicitly exonerates the Tamil Tigers while blaming the Sinhalese government.

In contrast, Qadri Ismail writes a polemical essay in which he maintains from the very beginning that some form of social commitment is a *sine qua non* for the novelist. Having thus established his critical standpoint, he then goes on to analyze the novel in some depth. He points to several "errors" in the text—a shortcoming that clearly weakens the referential veracity of the novel. His conclusions are totally unequivocal: "When all the significant actants in a story about Sri Lanka are Sinhala, when in addition all the place names noticed by the text when it sees the National Atlas of Sri Lanka are Sinhala ones, and when the novel's only list of the Sri Lankans disappeared contain exclusively Sinhala names, its country begins to seem very like that of Sinhala nationalism" (39, 41, 24). In a position that is the very opposite of Mendis, Ismail claims that in the novel "The JVP ... is portrayed as human; the LTTE [Tigers] in contrast, as inhuman terrorists, killers of children" (26). Ondaatje's bias in the novel, according to Ismail, is clearly in favor of a monolithic Sri Lanka in which the minority groups are irrelevant: "Sri Lankan history, to this text, is Sinhala and Buddhist history. A more humane history than we are used to hearing, yes; but not a multi-ethnic history, either. We now know whose side this novel is on" (27). In short, for Mendis, the novel is clearly anti-Sinhalese, and for Ismail the novel is blatantly against all minority groups and decidedly pro-Sinhalese.

A third position is established by Kanishka Goonewardena, who faults the novel for failing to capture the "truth of history." Clearly unhappy with statements such as "the reason for war was war," Goonewardena argues "beyond that transcendental tautology, anyhow, no character in the novel offers an insight into the condition of the human condition in war-torn Sri Lanka" (43). The universalist dimension of the novel—evident in references to the brutality in Guatemala, for example—and the refusal to engage directly with the origins and history of the violence in Sri Lanka are, for Goonewardena, both inadequate and potentially misleading. Goonewardena writes: "The decision to write an apolitical novel set in the tragic situation of Sri Lanka is profoundly

political” (43). In short, Goonewardena does not say that the novel is being partial by locating itself on one side or the other; instead, he maintains, that the author has a responsibility to go beyond effects to focus on causes, and to engage with the origins of the conflict. The approach here is broadly Marxist, and the critic is wary of a text that is inadequately informed about the historical context. Goonewardena is thus less concerned with the political bias of the novel than with the aestheticism that masquerades as universalism while it simultaneously moves away from the tragic realities of the country.

The three critics write forcefully, even authoritatively, about a situation in which their expertise is a given. However, the very fact that they adopt three decidedly different and contrasting positions also points to significant concerns about Sri Lankan literature and its current role. The lack of consensus among the three critics is also a salutary reminder to the reader that “objectivity” might well be an impossible ideal. In the process of insisting on authorial accountability, I would suggest that the critics themselves may have unwittingly foregrounded their own subjective positions. The last twenty years have been crucial ones for Sri Lanka as the country has undergone a number of significant political changes. This has also been a period of intense literary activity in which a number of authors, including Jean Arasanayagam, Yasmine Gooneratne, Romesh Gunsekera, Chandani Lokuge, Ashley Halpe, Carl Muller, Shyam Selvadurai, Rajiva Wijesinha and Rienzi Cruz have produced a body of varied and often controversial work. Their texts are certainly not politically neutral and regardless of whether they are “local” or diasporic, they shape the way the island is seen by the region and the West. Within this framework, no text is inconsequential, and certainly a novel by Ondaatje that explicitly addresses the political situation cannot be taken only as artifice or allegory. Arasanayagam, for example, is predominantly mimetic while Wijesinha is stubbornly allegorical. Importantly, Ondaatje locates himself somewhere in the middle, thereby frustrating the Sri Lankan critics who find the portrayal of Sri Lanka flawed.

It is interesting that Ondaatje himself has offered at least three different perspectives about the novel. In his acceptance speech for the

Governor General's Award, he spoke of reconciliation and forgiveness. "Pacifism,' 'reconciliation,' 'forgiveness,' are easily mocked words," says Ondaatje, "but only these principles will save us" (2). More importantly, in an interview he deflects the attention away from himself and toward individuals, their private demons and their moments of apprehension that matter to him as a writer claiming, "it isn't a statement about the war, as though this is the 'true and only story.' It's my individual take on four or five characters, a personal tunneling into it" (qtd. in Jaggi 6). It is of significance that the novel itself ends on a note of optimism and rejuvenation with the image of Ananda performing the Netra Mangala ceremony, thereby symbolically suggesting a new beginning. Similarly, the novel also begins with a prefatory note in which the author—"M.O."—comments that in the country the war is going on in a different form than the one depicted in the text. The narrator articulates yet another voice that does not always coincide with the author's opinions. I suggest that these are three different positions espoused by Ondaatje and his narrator in a deliberate gesture that maintains a measure of ambivalence. The shift from one register of emotion to another is a purposful one, since the novel reveals a deep-seated anxiety about the process of telling the tale. It is hardly possible to read the novel without an awareness of all three voices, not to mention the indeterminacy of the narrative mode. Any appraisal of the novel must be aware that while all three perspectives at times bleed into one another, they also occupy distinct spaces.<sup>9</sup>

The framing of the text, then, is very ambivalent. While Ondaatje explicates what he wants to do and what he does not want to attempt, the novel at times subversively contradicts him. An example of this can be found in the detailed description of a man being flung out of a moving train in ways that suggest a more personal and self-referential text was not outside Ondaatje's purview. This particular episode eschews all but a minimum of mimetic details, but it does so in a manner that reveals a shadow text that the author chooses not to write. For the critic who wants to see in the text a direct engagement with empirical realities, it is precisely this shadow text, with all its potential for conventional realism, that would have salvaged the novel.<sup>10</sup>

Given the multiplicity and complexity of political preoccupations, the novel does what it sets out to do, though there is an inevitable necessity about the way in which it is done. Critical practice might well occupy oppositional stances, but the text itself demonstrates the need for a productive middle ground. *Anil's Ghost* enacts a realization that the personal, the political, and the social are intertwined in ways that problematize clear ethnic, religious, or ideological categories. The novel insists on its artifice, not because life does not matter, but because it is the capacity of art to transform reality that allows for the perception of intersections. Anil's meeting with the old servant at the beginning of the novel is a case in point. Intertextually, the meeting recalls a poem in *Handwriting* that describes the poet's deep sense of guilt at having abandoned a servant. In the novel, the similar episode underscores the deep emotional bond that connects to potential antagonists, Anil, who is Sinhalese, and Lalitha, who is Tamil. For the two of them, ethnicity might not matter, but it certainly does to the granddaughter who works in a refugee camp in the North.

The novel is not autobiographical but it is intensely personal, and its quest is not for realism but rather for truth. The archetypal quest narrative, underlined by its modern counterpart the detective story, provides the structural basis for the novel. However, what drives the text is Ondaatje's own sense of grief, as is evident in the book of poems entitled *Handwriting*, and developed further in the novel. Speaking about what appealed to him in his novel, Ondaatje says: "I was thinking what do I like most about *Anil's Ghost*? It was a scene when Gamini doesn't want to embrace Sarath's wife because she'd discover how thin he is. For me, that was a heartbreaking moment, light years away from the official stories" (7). Memory does not constitute a dominant motif in the novel, but that is what drives the text and determines its form and content. The novel must then "invent" and in the process create a mask that would become a gateway to truth. It is the process by which Ananda, tormented by the death of his wife, deliberately constructs a different identity for "Sailor," thereby subverting the mode of detection, but reaching out to a truth that for him has greater significance. At this point, Anil, whose quest is framed by total faith in scientific rational-

ity, recognizes the metamorphosis of which art is capable: “[Ananda] had been standing outside, listening to them speaking in English in the courtyard. But now he faced her, not knowing that the tears were partly for him. Or, that she realized the face was in no way a portrait of Sailor but showed a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim” (187). By the same token, Palipana begins to “see” when his rational, scientific mode fails him together with his eyes. It could be argued that this is a relativist position, a kind of indeterminacy that sidesteps the turbulence of the present. If that kind of ambivalence smacks of a lack of commitment, it is also likely that Ondaatje’s identity may not coincide with that of the narrator.

Among the characters in the novel, Anil, Palipana and Ananda may well be considered artist-figures whose roles offer a metafictional commentary on the text. All three have their own convictions about (re)creating the identity of Sailor. They work together and their varied approaches complement each other, but each espouses different perspectives. Anil occupies one end with her faith in scientific rationality and Palipana occupies the other with his belief in intuition. If, in the end, no position is privileged, it can also be interpreted as Ondaatje’s reticence to endorse any single ideological position.

Graham Huggan points out in a discussion of Janette Turner Hospital’s *The Ivory Swing* and Yvon Rivard’s *Les silences du corbeau* that the quest novel, with some modifications, works admirably well within a general discourse of orientalism.<sup>11</sup> *Anil's Ghost* is clearly a quest novel and its plot line can be read in a manner that reinforces an orientalist perspective. If this novel veers away from such a position and avoids anthropologizing the nation, it is because it chooses to locate itself as a reflective work rather than an authoritative one. There is in the novel a genuine engagement with the dangers of false historiography and with the inability to arrive at a definitive position. The words that Lakma engraves in stone before Palipana dies are a version of the truth that will endure. But they remain ‘partial truths,’ valid only in so far as a particular mode of communication is privileged. As a novel that self-consciously questions the perspectives it offers, it could not have espoused a position in unequivocal terms. It is hardly an accident that Palipana,

the renowned epigraphist, who succeeded in claiming agency from colonial historians, begins to see the limitations of a nationalist historiography. He then “invents” the truth in a move that is described by the narrator as “not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance” (81). And the narrator adds a comment that is crucial to the novel as a whole: “A forgery by a master always meant much more than mischief, it meant scorn” (82).

When Anil first visits Palipana in the grove, he feels her arm to get a sense of her person. A particular kind of logic is at work here, and Anil is impressed by the scientific rigor of the man who requires a specific kind of objectivity. The reader is at the same time reminded of the allusion to the Biblical story of Abraham and his two sons Esau and Jacob, and the duplicity practiced by his wife Rebekah to ensure that one son is privileged over the other. The two narratives intersect to subvert the ostensible purpose of the scene. If Palipana serves the purpose of questioning nationalist and official versions of history, the allusion insists that Palipana himself is treated with a degree of irony.

It is equally important to remember that the political events in Sri Lanka during the last few years have borne out the risks of easy generalizations. In a country faced with the violence of ethnic strife, it has become increasingly clear that positions of power change, and agency shifts in curious ways, not to mention that categories that were shown to be homogenous have proved to be otherwise. Postcolonial authors, particularly in nations such as Sri Lanka, are confronted with the anxiety of uncertainty and are aware that positions that were once relatively straightforward have become complex.<sup>12</sup>

A comprehensive reading of the novel is not the objective of this article. Rather, the idea is to position Ondaatje’s novel as one that is neither aesthetically distanced nor overtly tendentious. That it is a paradoxical position, particularly in a South Asian context, hardly needs emphasis, although it is important to recognize the inevitability of such a standpoint. For writers like Ondaatje there is often no real choice about what they write or how they write. Regardless of the limitations of their perspective, it is also important to acknowledge that the myth of homogeneity can hardly be asserted in most nation states. There can be no

unified reading of the nation, any more than a unified reading of a text. Ondaatje is situated as a Sri Lankan-Canadian and therefore an insider whose ancestral memories go back to the time of Dutch rule. However, as a Burgher who left the country in the 1960s he is an outsider to the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

A historically informed position is a necessity for the postcolonial critic. Having moved away from a critical tradition that removes itself from the context altogether, it would now be futile for the postcolonial critic to jettison the need for a nuanced awareness of local conditions. But to insist that the novel must validate a particular position is to reduce the text to an ideological construct. To look for what the text says or does not say from the perspective of the historian or sociologist is also to deny the literariness of a novel. For the critic to wear the mantle of historian or sociologist can be risky, counterproductive, or even unfair, particularly when the effect is to tell both the reader and the author what merits attention. To make this claim is not to revert to a formalist position that subordinates political and social realities to aesthetic ones. Such distancing is likely to be equally hegemonic even when it masquerades as art. A culturally and politically sensitive reading fills the gaps, identifies connections that are made or deliberately suppressed, but in no way ignores the artifice of the novel. It is possible to look for and celebrate books that offer a strong and unequivocal message. And if we look hard enough we are likely to find one whose subjective position coincides with our own. But such texts do not test the limits of language, they do not reveal the struggle of the author to embellish the everyday with invention, they do not challenge the critic to question his or her own biases, and often, they do not endure. Responsible critics play a crucial role in positioning texts, for only they would know where realism ends and artifice begins. The critic's task, then, is to distinguish between realism and artifice in order to elucidate their functions rather than conflate them.

I do believe that it can be difficult to defend the realism of *Anil's Ghost*. The descriptions of landscapes, buildings and even characters do not convince the reader of mimetic accuracy. In fact Ismail documents several errors that have found their way into the novel.<sup>13</sup> The complex-

ity of the political situation may well be outside the reach of the novel. However, for critics to say that the novel is wrong-headed, misinformed or naïve is to miss the point that mimetic representation is not the text's primary aim. For the critic who brings to the novel a complex historical consciousness the challenge is to grant the text its autonomy, to appraise the novel within the terms it sets out for itself rather than from a position that reflects the critic's own subjective stance. Surely, the postcolonial critic should not wish to colonize the postcolonial novel.

Among the many approaches to the issue of authenticity is one that looks at vernacular literatures and their response to the events that form the backdrop to the novel. At least in Sri Lankan Tamil literature the response has been one that provides a curious perspective. In this corpus, it is not often that one encounters the kind of political analysis that one would normally expect in a vernacular text. The displacement caused by political strife might well be shown from the perspective of an old man who can no longer understand why his daughter-in-law has suddenly become hostile. A text might describe the bewilderment of a farmer who is told that he must move to make way for the security forces and does not quite understand who would attend to his plot of land. It is true that vernacular literatures have also been capable of profound mimetic accuracy and political analysis, but that is not necessarily the norm. In general vernacular writing tends to focus on effects rather than causes, while literature in English often favors abstraction. It can be argued that a novel like *Anil's Ghost* is difficult to write in the vernacular, and that it is also the strength of writing in English to produce such works.

That said, *Anil's Ghost* invites attention to its political engagement. It is, at some level, a rewriting of *Running in the Family*. The time period is approximately the same, and here again is an exiled subject who is returning to the home country after fifteen years. What the earlier work failed to do, this novel attempts, but on its own terms. *Anil's Ghost* offers political engagement without taking sides, and without the realism of mimetic detail. The earlier text pays little attention the insurgency of 1971, since its objective was to foreground the history of a family. *Anil's Ghost* is steeped in politics, but decides to problematize the events it painstakingly describes.

The text does, however, embody a deliberately fragmentary style that invites the kind of criticism that has been leveled against it. The novel's configuration of time and space, its gradual filling-in of information, and its micro-narratives that involve several characters, invite a particular kind of criticism. It must be noted, however, that in the micro-narrative that occurs on the train there is the nucleus of a plot, which, even in the hands of a second-rate novelist, could well become the structure of a novel. The story of Lakma, the girl who looks after Palipana, or even the story of Ananda would lend itself very easily to a plot that would lead to a kind of realism. The choice to write a different kind of novel, then, is deliberate.

One of the criticisms is that the novel insists on an allegorical dimension. What happens in one place happens everywhere. Guatemala is the same as Sri Lanka. Goonewardena expresses disappointment with such universalism. Alternatively, it can be asserted that what we have here is not the kind of allegory to which Jameson refers. *Anil's Ghost* is particularly specific about its local concern. The disgrace of a specific person, and the hunt for a specific victim are not peripheral to the narrative. These are not entirely allegorical pursuits. If Anil or Sarath at some stage do not see distinctions between the specific and the general, that does not necessarily deny the specificity of the quest. Individual characters, even minor ones like the old servant who appears at the beginning, do matter in the novel.

In structural terms, the novel is quite straightforward. The objective is to detect and unravel the identity of a murdered person. When that fails, we have a situation in which the form works against content. The identity of Sailor is established at the end, but it leads to no resolution, no *denouement*. It is thus no more than an aside. A whole epistemology is brought into question when the novel's form works against content. Anil, with all her faith in a western way of knowing, is made to understand that not only is rationality sometimes futile, it is also destructive. Sarath dies because of her insistence. He will be her ghost, her shadow. In fact, as the text says at the end, both Ananda and Anil carry within them Sarath's ghost.

And this is where the entire episode involving Palipana becomes

significant. Palipana is, in some ways, Senarat Paranavitana's *doppelganger*.<sup>14</sup> As readers, we are made to be aware of the intersection of fact and fiction. Palipana is accused of forgery. His is the power of artifice. If his forgery implies scorn, it is the scorn for a particular kind of realism. His power of vision is in direct proportion to his loss of sight. He exemplifies the paradox of existence: you see best when you are not involved any more. His forgery must be seen as imitation and as forging. In the process of distorting he also forges—creates anew—a reality that needs to be recognized as legitimate.

In both Mendis and Ismail, there is a deep concern with official narratives. And that is precisely what Palipana acknowledges and later abandons. Official histories are not dismissed in the process, but they too are seen as textual constructs, often driven by ideology. Palipana is also treated with some measure of irony, but that whole section in the grove reveals that what we know is less important than the artifice, which results from “facts.” By the same token, one needs to look carefully at Ananda—a name that recalls the chief disciple of Buddha. He too recognizes the limitations of rationality. As he recreates Sailor in the image of his wife, he privileges metaphor over simile and creates a dichotomy between signifier and signified. At the end Sailor might remain a shadowy presence, but the quest certainly does not fail.

The whole episode involving the *Walawe* to which Anil, Ananda and Sarath retire is in fact deeply problematic. Despite the plausible and rational reasons that are given for this choice, the fact remains that the entire episode can only be a staging of artifice. The entire image is preposterous in realistic terms. One needs to be completely ignorant of tropical jungles in order to accept the realism of that section. But that is also precisely the point. The metaphor is meant to accommodate opposites. The rational is tempted by the instinctual while the intuitive is captivated by the rational. Both succeed, in different ways, at different moments. The sheer artifice of the episode forces the recognition of opposites and contradictions, both of which are important markers in the novel.

It is possible to contend that the diasporic novel is at its best when it works with metaphor rather than metonymy. In practice, however,

the two often complement each other in significant ways. To confuse one with the other would be to misjudge the purpose of the text. *Anil's Ghost* is likely to remain flawed in its knowledge of the local scene. But its strength lies in its willingness to capture the contradictions without which a nuanced representation is hardly possible. The moral stance of the novel might well nudge the edges of elitism, but it is also an assertion of its commitment to a humanism that is cathartic. In relation to much that has been written about Sri Lanka in the recent past, by scholars and writers, this novel establishes its unique niche by demonstrating that if artifice takes liberties, it also has the capacity to hone perception and shape realities in ways that are profound. Ideological positions do matter, according to the novel, but more important is the human cost of conflict. By the same token, human misery, the text argues, cannot be decontextualized and aestheticized in universalist terms. Critics may well admire *Anil's Ghost* for its formal sophistication or critique it for its ideological position, but the novel, in the final analysis, defends its stance by establishing a sophisticated rapport between political engagement and aesthetic distance. Edward Said puts these ideas across admirably well:

Texts have to be read as texts that were produced and live on in all of sorts of what I have called worldly ways. But this by no means excludes power, since on the contrary I have tried to show the insinuations, the imbrications of power into even the most recondite of studies. And lastly, most important, humanism is the only, and I would go so far as to say the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history. (6)

*Anil's Ghost* does not jettison its commitment to represent ethnic strife and political violence, but it also insists that any engagement with the referential must recognize the discourse that determines what is said and how it is said.

#### Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive overview, see Lopez.

- 2 The combination of politics and gay sexuality in the novel did not find easy acceptance in Sri Lanka. During the first few years, the fact that the author did not launch his book in Sri Lanka was an indication of the hostility of the state.
- 3 I use the terms “Sri Lankan” and “local” in a very specific sense to underline the distinction between Western critics who have viewed the novel favorably and Sri Lankan born critics who are troubled by the politics of the novel. The fact that all three Sri Lankans referred to later live in the West does not alter the substance of the argument.
- 4 For instance, referring to the death of Lalla, Christopher Ondaatje writes: “In my brother’s book, Lalla dies when she is carried off in the great Nuwara Eliya flood. It is a marvelous piece of literature and true to her zany character, but in fact she died of alcohol poisoning. . . . That is a sadder and more depressing account than Michael’s. Nor was there much charm in seeing that crazy and eccentric old woman sitting on a stool in the busy, chaotic Nuwara Eliya market bragging to bemused strangers about her son, my uncle, then the attorney general of the island” (50).
- 5 Jameson’s well-known essay, which advances the argument that third world literatures tend to be national allegories, appeared in *Social Text* (1986).
- 6 In the note at the beginning, the author says: “From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government. Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents.”
- 7 According to Burton, “if *Anil’s Ghost* does not fully resolve the question of how to recuperate those stories that remain buried or are without a trace in the aftermath of history’s violence, past and present—or does not do so to our satisfaction—it nonetheless offers one example of how and why histories are made at a time when the traditional *matériel* of History (whether archives or bones) is proving increasingly unavailable and reliable” (52).
- 8 It is also of some significance that Brians, in his annotated bibliography, refers to a review by Dinali Fernando, which he glosses as “a nitpicking review in a Colombo newspaper that catches Ondaatje in a few errors of local detail” (193).
- 9 An interesting comparison with *Anil’s Ghost* would be Gunesekera’s *Heaven’s Edge*. The two texts reveal an “anxiety” about postcolonial realities, but while Gunesekera works at the level of allegory, Ondaatje straddles both allegory and realism.
- 10 Pages 31 and 32, which are not numbered, stand outside the main narrative, but its effect is to alert the reader to the kind of novel that the author chooses

not to write. The episode that is described is all the more horrific because it is not contextualized.

- 11 According to Huggan, “the formula is a familiar one: a restless Western writer takes temporary refuge in the East, hoping to find physical stimulation and/or spiritual enrichment there but discovering instead the limitations of his/her own culture, a culture to which he/she nonetheless returns, suitably ‘enlightened’ (46). With minor changes, the definition applies to Ondaatje’s novel as well.
- 12 The intervention of Norway and several countries to bring about a negotiated peace in Sri Lanka amounts to a rethinking of national politics, and the more recent split among the Tigers is a reflection of primordial loyalties that transcend ethnic ones.
- 13 Unlike Rushdie, who deliberately inserts errors in his novels, Ondaatje in *Anil's Ghost* unwittingly overlooks them.
- 14 The well-known archaeologist Senarat Paranavitana, who also made claims about interlinear texts, is deliberately invoked through the character of Palipana. Goonatilake refers to “the case of the hallucinatory inscriptions which the well-known archaeologist Paranawithana saw in his dotage” (46).

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## Racial Fantasy in Joseph Conrad's *Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

Tim Christensen

You couldn't see that there was anything wrong with him: *a nigger does not show*. (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* 32, italics added)

### I. The Problem of Meaning in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

Critics as disparate as Ian Watt and Fredric Jameson have asserted that Joseph Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* first published in 1897, provides one of the inaugural manifestos of literary modernism due to the ideas regarding language and representation that it sets forth.<sup>1</sup> Given the interest that both the novel itself and the short, seemingly inconsequential, preface have generated, it is interesting that the concept of "race" has so persistently escaped these discussions. Further, this elision seems noteworthy given the central importance of the overly racialized body of James Wait, the "Nigger" of the title, in both the novel and the preface. Although Wait's identifying feature in the title, the preface, and the story itself is his blackness, his racial status is customarily rendered irrelevant to the considerations of language and representation that are inspired by the book.<sup>2</sup> This critical blindness seems all the more significant if we consider Conrad's own fascination with the character of Wait in the preface, and the centrality of Wait's body to Conrad's inquiry into issues of literary representation within the novel itself. In fact, we could say that the question of meaning within the novel centers on Wait's black body, and that this question takes shape strictly in relation to his body's resistance to being inscribed with any stable meaning. As the narrator states toward the beginning of the voyage of the *Narcissus*, "*no one could tell what was the meaning of that black man sitting apart in a meditative attitude and as motionless as a carving*" (33, italics added). Wait's body is resistant to meaning, and it is around this body and in

relation to this resistance that questions of meaning unfold within the story.

Conrad is consistently attentive to the fundamental but paradoxical role of Wait within his story. In the preface, he writes that “in the book he [Wait] is nothing; he is merely the centre of the ship’s collective psychology and the pivot of the action ... the book [is] written round him” (xlv). In these remarks, Wait’s role in the formation of the community of the ship is presented as both contradictory and necessary. As the strangely absent inaugural point of the “ship’s collective psychology,” Wait is “nothing,” but he is simultaneously the center of the action. Wait is, in other words, the absent center within the community of sailors. Conrad’s emotionally ambivalent description of Wait further reinforces his role as a central fetish around which the ship’s community revolves. Within the preface, Wait is first described as “an imposter of some character ... scornful of our sentimentalism, triumphing over our suspicions” (xlv). Despite Wait’s triumphant scorn, which inspires both fear and disdain, the writer notes “in the family circle and amongst my friends” Wait, who “is familiarly referred to as The Nigger, remains very precious to me” (xlv). This “very precious” object that inspires both resentment and affection is shown to be the constitutive exclusion around which Conrad’s community forms, even in these very short passages. Conrad first opposes Wait to the “us” in the construction “mastering *our* compassion, scornful of *our* sentimentalism, triumphing over *our* suspicions”; his function, within this sentence, is that of the abject, excluded object, inspiring ambivalence, around which the group of “chums” coheres (xlv italics added). Moreover, the reiteration of the word “our” in this passage would seem to represent an attempt to shore up this community against the outsider through sheer repetition. With each “our” we witness the endeavor to exclude another aspect of Conrad’s imagined community from Wait: he does not share in the community’s “compassion,” “sentimentalism,” or “suspicions.” Instead, this need for repetition emphasizes the impossibility of such foreclosure, for the community attains its imaginary consistency only as a reaction to the traumatic, antagonistic kernel of the real that is Wait’s body. In other words, the repeated failure of the community of the ship to seal itself

off hermetically against Wait, its foundational exclusion, demonstrates his necessity to its social fabric. A few lines later, when Conrad refers to the "circle" of his "family" and "friends," Wait is similarly a "very precious" but obviously excluded and absent object. He is, in Conrad's own words, the "nothing" around which both of these communities cohere. We might say that Wait is the "exiled, foreclosed uncertainty which haunts the system and generates the illusion" of its unity and coherence (Baudrillard 6). Wait's body is, both in the preface and in the novel, shown to hold forth the possibility of an immaculate communion of sailors around which Conrad constructs the ideal totality of an imaginary community. Although it serves as the necessary condition of community that guarantees meaning, Wait's body is nevertheless repeatedly experienced as the very thing preventing the consummation of perfect community, and it is in this double role that questions of meaning come to focus on Wait.

By framing an examination of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in terms of Conrad's use of a single black body to serve as the necessary/impossible condition of community within the space of the ship, my interpretive claim about this novel will suggest a redefinition of the form that the recurring critical inquiry into the meaning of race in Conrad's work might take. By examining the role of the black body as the constitutive exclusion that forms the condition of possibility of Conrad's "brotherhood of the sea," I mean to provide an analytic frame that allows us to leave behind the critical dead end of merely asking whether or not Conrad was racist in the sense that he believed in the racist stereotypes of his contemporaries and utilized them in his writing (21). While my answer to this question would be a qualified "yes" (I think that Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa" made this case convincingly in a way that has not been addressed directly<sup>3</sup>), the way the question is framed suggests that racism within the context of colonialism is merely a matter of personal choice, rather than a fundamental mechanism according to which the colonial order is both conceptualized and made operative. I believe that by redefining the meaning of race in symbolic terms, we are able to free the question of Conrad's racism from the lethargy dictated by a behaviouralist definition of race that trivializes the matter from the beginning,

and effectively quarantines the question of race from formal problems of representation.<sup>4</sup> Within an interpretive frame such as the one that I utilize in this essay, we are better able to understand Conrad's fascination with racialized bodies, and recognize their centrality to his inquiries into the problems of literary representation.

## II. James Wait and the Imaginary Community of Sailors

Despite Conrad's oft-noted cynicism regarding utopian politics (witness, for instance, the portrait of political revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent*), critics have also frequently observed that the community of sailors within the space of the ship, and, more generally, the image of the sea, consistently remain outside of the scope of such skepticism. Caesar Casarino, for instance, notes that in Conrad's fiction (as in Herman Melville's) the "construction of the ship as a hermetic space is ... a central narrative condition of possibility" for imagining an ideal world in contrast to the emergent industrial capitalism that defines late nineteenth-century society. For Casarino, "the removed and privileged perspective of the ship" provides the narrative possibility of imagining an alternative existence (29). Similarly, David Simpson argues that within Conrad's fiction the sea frequently functions as "the image of completion, the repository and synthesizing medium of all created forms" (120). Within Simpson's analysis, the image of the sea provides a synthesis of the contradictions that define life on land in the industrialized metropolitan centers of empire, thereby escaping "complete conflation with the idols of trade." The sea connotes "the resumption of totality and the abolition of difference," and even suggests the possibility of an unalienated "prelapsarian consciousness" (120). While it is important to note that Conrad's use of sea imagery and the space of the ship to imagine an alternative, and sometimes utopian, society frequently escapes the scope of his political pessimism, it is equally important to observe that Conrad's skepticism prevails in a manner that extends to his portrayal of the ship's community in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* To do justice to the complexity of Conrad's imaginings of community among sailors, we must take the role played by the body of James Wait into consideration. In this article I will argue that James Wait's body functions as a mate-

rial manifestation of the Lacanian real, or as an *objet a* and that, as such, Wait's body enables Conrad's imaginings of an ideal community within the space of the ship even while it seems to thwart the realization of this ideal. Stated in somewhat starker terms, I contend that in this novel the very thing that enables an ideal community to be imagined (the black body) is simultaneously perceived as that which prevents the attainment of such a community. Wait's body therefore suggests the fantasy of an ideal communion within the space of the ship in the manner described by Simpson and Casarino but only at the cost of simultaneously rendering the fulfillment of this ideal impossible.

We notice that Wait is experienced as a disruption to the social hierarchy of the ship literally from the moment that his name is introduced in the text. As Mr. Baker, the first mate, performs roll call for the trip from Bombay to London, the crew assembles as a collective body for the first time, and this ritual coming-together at the beginning of the voyage proceeds smoothly until Baker reaches Wait's name. Wait's existence is first felt as an absence; his presence is first signaled by Baker's comment "I am one hand short" (11). Wait appears on the ship as Baker ponders the mystery of the missing sailor whose name appears as an indecipherable "smudge," and when Wait calls out his own name in order to elucidate the meaning of the smudge and signal his presence on the ship, Baker instead perceives the "deep, ringing voice" as a challenge to his authority, a command contradicting his order at the moment he has given up on deciphering the smudge and ordered the men to "Go below" (11). Baker is first disconcerted and "open-mouthed" and then "furious," and, unable to articulate a lucid response, instead babbles incoherently (11). Wait's presence, from the moment of his introduction, is experienced as a disruption of an otherwise smoothly-functioning authority. Yet, we must also recognize that this disruption occurs at the point when Baker first asserts his authority over the men. The fact that Wait's disruptive presence is introduced at the same moment that the crew is constituted as a crew through the ritualistic first gathering at roll call is emphasized by Conrad in this scene, for in the midst of the alternating silence, fury, babble, and fascination that is introduced with Wait's initial audible presence on the *Narcissus*, "the men approached and stood behind him

in a body” (12).<sup>5</sup> The first indication of their existence as a cohesive group, as opposed to a disconnected collection of individuals, therefore takes place as the fascinated crew is almost magnetically drawn together around Wait’s body in the space created by the auditory confusion resulting from the introduction of his name.

Within this context we are not surprised to discover that Wait’s straightforward factual statements, apparently intended to dissipate the confusion, only serve to deepen it. Thus, Wait’s declaration “I belong to the ship,” an unambiguous statement of fact, takes on a paradoxical set of meanings for the puzzled narrator and crew, much as Wait’s presence at the center of his “brotherhood of the sea” becomes a riddle for Conrad in the preface (21). While Wait’s words, on a literal level, serve as a simple explanation of his presence—he is reporting for duty because he has signed on for the voyage from Bombay to London—this meaning is by no means accepted as the entire significance of the statement. Wait’s statement of belonging is an obvious, accomplished fact—he is officially a member of the crew—but within the context of the passage this belonging is anything but simple. Although his presence is accepted as an unequivocal fact, it seems, nevertheless, simply impossible. Wait’s body, introduced into the text amidst the confusion caused by the mere enunciation of his name, is experienced as a manifestation of this confusion. The sense of impossibility that his presence inspires is overtly racialized from the beginning, when the men are “amazed” to discover that Wait’s face “was black,” which results in a “surprised hum ... that sounded like the suppressed mutter of the word, ‘Nigger’” (12).<sup>6</sup> While the crew of the *Narcissus* literally comes into being with the introduction of Wait onto the ship, his existence is experienced as deeply disturbing to the point that it causes amazement and confusion; his presence for some reason immediately inspires the sense of sheer impossibility, and this sense of impossibility centers on the same attributes that mark Wait’s racial difference.

In this scene, the narrator is able to meet this seemingly impossible and explicitly racialized physical presence only with a series of radically divergent statements. Wait’s body forms a space that can simultaneously contain diverse and even antithetical meanings, yet it refuses to yield

any definitive or satisfactory knowledge. He is first described as "calm, cool, towering, [and] superb," an overpowering impression, but one that cannot be sustained even for the space of a short paragraph. This description is immediately countered by a series of seemingly antithetical terms, for Wait also appears to the narrator to be "misshapen" and "tormented," "pathetic and brutal," "tragic," and "repulsive" (12). The violent ambivalence of the narrator and the seemingly equivalent response of the crew as a whole indicate that an *aphanisis*, or splitting of desire that forms "the essential division of the subject," has taken place on both a subjective and communal level around the body of Wait (Mitchell 16). According to Lacan, this "primal separation" (Lacan 83) gives birth to questions of meaning, for through this originary self-division "the subject appears on one side as meaning and on the other as ... disappearance" (qtd. in Mitchell 16). Readers witness an explicit narrative account of this process with the introduction of Wait in the text. Because Wait marks the origin of the symbolic realm of communication for Conrad's ideal community, his presence not only enables questions of meaning to be opened, but also marks their limit. Wait's presence is therefore experienced as an irruption of nonsense, as a material limit of meaning; his body is experienced as a thing to which meaning cannot cohere. No definitive meaning can stick to Wait's body, and we are therefore not surprised that his body, which seems to convey radically divergent and even contradictory impressions simultaneously, becomes the object of the narrator's fascinated gaze, which roams its surfaces as though it might reveal some secret.<sup>7</sup> He comments that Wait's hands "seemed gloved" and describes Wait's face as "inscrutable" and as a "mysterious ... repulsive mask" (12–13); Wait's individual body parts are described as though they each conceal some important, unsavory, and ultimately impenetrable truth. His face remains "indistinguishable" throughout the passage, despite the detailed observation of particular facial features, especially his eyes and teeth (12).<sup>8</sup> It quickly becomes apparent that Wait's simultaneously "superb" and "repulsive" physical presence poses a question of meaning, a question that is met with the silence of the crew and with persistent and thoroughly self-divided attempts at expostulation by the narrator. The narrator's attempts to unpack the truths he supposes are hidden behind "the

tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask” and within “a nigger’s soul” are never quite satisfactory (12), however, for after a great deal more obsessive scrutiny, several pages later the narrator unambiguously re-states the problem that Wait continually seems to put before him: “[N]o one could tell what was the meaning of that black man” (33). We come away from this scene, in which Wait first appears on the ship, with virtually no knowledge of him apart from an intimate awareness that he radically divides the desire of the narrator as well as the first mate and crew, thereby eluding any definitive or consistent response.

The initial scrutiny of Wait’s body only ends when attention is instead drawn to his booming cough, which strenuously re-emphasizes the disruptive aspect of Wait’s role in instantiating Conrad’s ideal community. The cough is described as “tremendously loud; it resounded like two explosions in a vault; the dome of the sky rang to it, and the iron plates of the ship’s bulwarks seemed to vibrate in unison” (13). Wait’s cough forces both the “dome of the sky” and the body of the ship to resound to its pulsation. The cough is so powerful as to seem to both interrupt and re-establish the natural rhythms of the material universe within which the ship exists. Described in such superlative terms, this cough seems to threaten to blow apart the ship, a threat that we obviously cannot take literally. Instead, we must interpret the narrator’s exaggeration as an expression of his sense that the cough somehow poses an immanent threat to the world in which he moves. In other words, Wait’s cough menaces his ideal society of the ship, his “small planet,” at the moment of, and at the point of, its formation (21). Wait’s physical and audible presence is not only distressingly resistant to meaning; it also seems to portend some form of devastating disruption to Conrad’s ideal society.

In the scene of Wait’s introduction, the community of the ship is threatened by the very object that marks the point of its origin, or the point around which it forms and re-forms, defines and redefines itself. Here, readers witness the dialectic of identity initiated by the introduction of Wait. If he brings the possibility of meaning initiated by the division of desire, he simultaneously marks the point of its “disappearance” and is therefore encountered as an irruption of non-sense in the midst of meaning. In sum, Wait is encountered as the inassimilable outside of the

symbolic order to which he gives birth, holding forth the possibility of its destruction, emphasizing its fragility and incompleteness with each groan, cough, or enunciation through which the community is re-instantiated by virtue of his always incomplete exclusion. Wait, who threatens to destroy the ideal community of the ship at the same time that he serves as its constitutive element, demonstrates that within the fictive world of the *Narcissus*, the very possibility of "the one," or of an ideal, self-identical totality, "is introduced by the experience of . . . rupture" (Lacan 26). In these terms, it is significant that the world of the *Narcissus*—described as an ideal, self-enclosed world, as "a fragment detached from the earth" that carries with itself a "great circular solitude" and is "guided by the courage of a high endeavor," which isolates itself from "the sordid inspiration of her pilgrimage"—can only be imagined through the prism of "The Nigger" who is the constant source of disruption within this ideal world, serving both as its center and its outside (21). It seems that the imaginary unity that defines Conrad's ideal society of the ship can only be thought through the prism of its own disruption.

Immediately following Wait's forceful, disruptive cough we are told that Wait's words, as he requests help with his luggage, "spoken sonorously, with an even intonation, were heard all over the ship, and the question was put in a manner that made refusal impossible" (13). While the narrator perceives Wait's cough to be so powerful as to establish the rhythms of the material universe, forcing the world to respond to its own cadences, in the latter passage Wait's voice has the same effect on the human universe. Just as the statement of his name is mistaken for a command counteracting the authority of the mate, his voice is perceived as issuing a demand, to which all within earshot have no choice but to respond. A seemingly banal request for help with luggage takes on the meaning of a forceful demand to which "refusal [was] impossible."

What is the nature of the strange demand that cannot be refused and that is issued by Wait through the simple fact of his physical and audible presence on the ship? In what way should we understand Wait's voice, which issues a demand that is strangely in excess of his seemingly simple and straightforward statements? How should we interpret the strange fascination of the lingering gaze that searches obsessively for a visible

clue to the riddle that is posed by Wait's body? It is a body that yields none of the truth that it seems to promise, and instead acts as a source of renewed desire in the form of a scopic drive that lingers on his physical features as though they conceal some important secret that always exceeds any knowledge that they yield.

In order to answer these questions, we should turn to the mutiny scene, in which the problems of meaning posed by Wait are staged in the starkest form imaginable.<sup>9</sup> As the story progresses beyond the introduction of Wait, the desire of the crew for some conclusive and final discovery regarding the mystery that he poses comes to focus on the issue of whether or not Wait is actually as ill as he appears to be.<sup>10</sup> Their inability to settle the question of Wait's illness culminates in an insurrection on the *Narcissus*, which is set off when Wait insists on returning to work, only to have his demand refused by the captain. The fact that the men rebel, however, is not simply a result of the belief that Wait has been faking his sickness and should have been working all along, or that he has been sick but has recovered from his illness and therefore deserves to return to his duties. Rather, the rebellion seems to result from the refusal to accept any final determination regarding Wait's condition. It is therefore only when the captain finally officially pronounces Wait to be ill that the crew engages in rebellion. The crew's cries of outrage indicate a continued irresolution regarding Wait's illness, varying from "We have been hymposed upon this whole voyage," implying that Wait was never actually ill, to "a sick chap ain't allowed to get well in this 'ere hooker?" implying that Wait actually was ill and should therefore now be allowed to return to work (89). As the confusion increases, the men lose any semblance of group cohesion and deteriorate into "gesticulating shadows that growled, hissed, [and] laughed excitedly" (89). In this violent reaction to any resolution regarding the ultimate meaning of Wait's illness, which threatens to erupt into the literal overthrow of the communal order of the ship, we discern what type of demand is passively issued by Wait through the very fact of presence. His indeterminately ill body cannot be declared definitely ill because any attribution of a definitive meaning to his body would rob it of its function as the central fetish around which Conrad's ideal communi-

ty is organized. This refusal to accept any resolution regarding Wait is staged most dramatically when Captain Allistoun effectively squashes the potential rebellion by directly confronting the crew with the question of their own desire, bluntly asking them, "What do you want?" (98). When confronted in this manner, the entire crew is struck dumb. Significantly, Conrad depicts this silence in terms of an imaginary confrontation with an obscenely grinning Wait, "chuckling painfully over his transparent deceptions" (98). As the crew engages in this imaginary confrontation with James Wait and attempts to put the confused, fascinated frustration that he somehow inspires in them into language, "all the simple words they knew seemed to be lost forever in the immensity of their vague and burning desire," and "although they knew what they wanted ... they could not find anything worth saying" (98–99). Their "desire" in this scene can only be collectively imagined in the form of a laughing, mocking Wait, and although this imaginary confrontation with Wait clarifies their desire—we are told that "they knew what they wanted" for the first time—"the immensity of their vague and burning desire" inspired by the imaginary Wait simultaneously dries up all of their words. Confronted with the object of their desire, the crew experiences a profound and definitive failure of enunciation, a failure that is never elucidated in the text, for the narrator never explains, or is unable to explain, the desire inspired by Wait. We might also note that this very failure is laboriously underscored as Captain Allistoun bullies the crew in the wake of this failure. He first asks if they want more food, then less work, and his questions are met with an "offended silence" (99).

The fact that the crew is offended by the Captain's insistence of attaching an object to their desire tells us something about the sort of desire that Wait inspires. Alenka Zupančič asserts that

desire can be defined precisely as the *pure form of demand*, as that which remains of demand when all the particular objects ... that may come to satisfy it are removed. Hence the *objet petit a* can be understood as a void that has acquired a form. In Lacan's words: "Object *a* is no being. Object *a* is the void presupposed by a demand." (18)

It would seem that Wait's body and voice fill this role, the role of the *objet a*, within the community of sailors on the *Narcissus*. As the narrator elaborately emphasizes in this scene, Wait's sick black body serves as the "void presupposed by a demand," the thing that inspires the purely formal demand that cannot be attached to any definitive end or limited by any object. His body acts, in other words, as a thing that inspires a "vague and burning desire" (Conrad 98) that no particular object can satisfy. The narrator emphasizes precisely this aspect of the desire inspired by Wait in his account of the crew's confrontation with the captain. In this scene Conrad's interrogation of the conditions of his persistent imaginings of the community of the ship baldly reveals the Nigger to be the thing that is denied symbolic existence in order that such existence might arise elsewhere. And this is, finally, Conrad's own view of the Nigger as set forth in the preface: the Nigger must simultaneously serve as the "centre of the ship's collective psychology" and remain "nothing," the thing with no being from which the being of the community arises (xlv).

With this staging of the crew's unwillingness to allow any definitive meaning to be attributed to Wait, we witness a dramatic exhibition of the Lacanian dictum that "desire is the desire of the Other" which cannot be positively conceived "other than by destroying ... oneself" (Lacan 38–39). Readers therefore realize that, on the one hand, the imaginary confrontation with the Nigger as the object on which their communal desire centres and through which it is defined and given the semblance of self-consistency, results in the near dissolution of the community. On the other hand, readers also come to realize that the strange demand, admitting of no refusal, which is somehow perceived in Wait's most banal statements, is in fact a demand that is placed upon him by the ship's symbolic order, which requires that he serve the function of sustaining desire. The crew's refusal to accept any final determination regarding the meaning of the symptoms of Wait's illness also demonstrates that this desire can only be sustained to the extent that Wait is preserved as an empty placeholder of the real, for we cannot help but see that their desire, in this scene, "implies a certain dialectical mediation: we demand something, but what we are really aiming at through this demand is something else—sometimes the very refusal of the demand in its literal-

ity" (Žižek 21). In the mutiny scene, the desire to force Wait to reveal his "secret" is demonstrated to be just such a demand.

The symptoms of illness, which on Wait's body acquire an uncanny quality, turn out to be nothing other than symptoms of illness, and the "mask" of Wait's face, we discover, conceals no mysterious secret, or at least none that can put to rest the desire inspired by its presence. Wait's face presents us with a Lacanian veil, an uncanny mask that hides nothing other than the illusion that it hides something (Lacan 111). Significantly, it is when Wait's death seems imminent and obvious that the crew displays the greatest confusion regarding his illness. In this light, the narrator's statement that "a nigger does not show" should, perhaps, be read as "a nigger *cannot* show," because, in the terms set out in this novel, "not showing" is what a nigger does (32). A "nigger," in other words, is precisely a human *objet a* that has the function of "not showing."

### III. Conclusion

In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* the examination of the problem of meaning leads Conrad to the discovery of the empty form of desire, and this empty form is figured in terms of the black body and voice of James Wait. Alternately, we might state that within this novel, the black body and voice consistently pose the question of meaning, and not of particular meanings, but the problem of how meaning is possible at all. We must therefore acknowledge that within *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* race cannot be adequately understood in terms of whether or not the author was a racist in a behaviouralist sense, although this question has largely defined the problem of race in Conrad's writing during the past thirty years. Such a critical frame is entirely inadequate for any substantive inquiry into the meaning of race in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* because race cannot be reduced to any particular content that can be dismissed as a superficial matter in relation to "deeper" or more fundamental issues of form. Even if we accept the opposition of form and content as both a useful distinction and a legitimate way to privilege certain issues over others, we have to recognize that race is, in fact, a formal issue within the novel. Race cannot, in this case, be construed as matter of a particu-

lar content that can be included or excluded while the formal integrity of the text is maintained. Rather, it is the racial body that opens up the space within which Conrad's inquiry into community and subjectivity take place. Within this novel, the single black body in the midst of an otherwise all-white crew serves as the constitutive exclusion around which Conrad's investigation into the possibility of ideal community takes place.<sup>11</sup> In his persistent inquiries regarding the possibility of an untroubled and self-identical being, the narrator is unable to imagine an ideal, unalienated existence without imagining this existence through the prism of a black body, a body that seems to thwart its fulfillment. What Conrad's narrator therefore discovers is not an edenic, untroubled being-for-itself; rather, in the course of his questionings, he reiteratively uncovers a racialized body functioning as an empty form of desire, an *objet a*, at the limit of the subject and the community.

### Notes

- 1 Watt comments on the role of this document as a transitional piece bridging nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic theories in his discussion of literary "impressionism" (76–87). See also his comments on this topic in "Conrad's Preface." See also Jameson's analysis of the language and aesthetics of *Narcissus* (206–80).
- 2 Although Wait's racial status has been the subject of many discussions of the novel, the question of the role of race is persistently separated from inquiries into the (characteristically modernist) problem of meaning in the novel. That is to say, critics tend to address either one or the other of these topics, but they are not viewed as interconnected problems. For significant exceptions to this critical trend, see chapter two of Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism*, discussed in note 8. Also see Messenger and Marcus, who both argue that problems of meaning in the novel center on Wait's body.
- 3 Messenger's comment regarding Conrad's racism is, I think, incisive in exposing the overall futility of this debate: Conrad is exceptional for his "ability both to replicate imperialist racist prejudices and to contest them"—simultaneously, I would add (65). See also Achebe. The responses to his essay have been legion and have effectively dominated inquiries into the meaning of race in Conrad's work in the thirty years since its appearance. A comparatively limited number of works have been produced during this period that address the issue of race in Conrad's fiction outside of the reductive parameters dictated by this debate. In addition to the previously mentioned works of North, Messenger,

and Marcus, see Andrade, London, and Said for important exceptions to this trend. Esonwanne notes that the impact of Lacanian thought within Conrad criticism has, so far, been "negligible" (202). I believe that my approach of reading the textual production of race in terms of the Lacanian "real," and using this reading to emphasize how race functions as a fundamental structural and formal aspect of Conrad's work, is unique.

- 4 Firchow's *Envisioning Africa* opens with a behaviourist definition of racism and clearly demonstrates the limitations of such a definition for a substantive inquiry into the meaning of race. We might note, for instance, based on Firchow's questionable definition of "racism," that Conrad was more racist in his attitude toward Belgians than Africans (9–10).
- 5 Marcus asserts that Wait, in this scene, becomes "the catalyst around which the text and the crew uneasily and unwillingly converge and contradict themselves" (41).
- 6 North explains the importance of Wait's cough as a disruptive force in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* He argues that the frequently identified modernist impulse in this work can be understood as an extreme tension between the wish for a language capable of conveying important sensual truths, expressed by Conrad in the preface, and a fear of the impossibility of attaining this goal, which is the motivating force of the novel itself. This tension is expressed through a focus on "the asignifying aspects of language" that hold forth the possibility of "phatic communion" (North 51, 54). The promise of an experience of solidarity that bypasses the mediation of the construction of meaning and in doing so achieves an immediacy of experience that can be expressed only in terms of its sensual impact is repeatedly disrupted, however, by the existence of linguistic and cultural barriers, for "nothing is more particular, less easily translatable," than the asignifying aspects of language (47). According to North, this disruption is consistently figured as racial difference within *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* expressed as both the auditory disturbances of the rhythms of the ship provided by Wait's cough and, later, his death groans, and in the visual register as the inscrutable black mask that is Wait's face: "[A] nigger does not show" (*Narcissus* 32). In this reading, both the black voice and the black body become symbols that absorb the central contradictions of a modernist theory of language.

From the standpoint of my argument, the asignifying hum that is somehow experienced as the word "Nigger" in this scene would underscore the fact that Conrad's ideal of "phatic communion" is, from its inception, founded on the condition of its own rupture, for such ideal communion is depicted in this scene as somehow expressive of the very thing (the "Nigger") that seems to prevent it from being fully realized.

- 7 Stockdale argues that Conrad's dominant figure for the problem of meaning in *Narcissus* is that of "a surface which must be penetrated."

- 8 Bonney notes that the narrator is “incapable of comprehending the visual signals” conveyed by Wait, rendering “the Nigger ... essentially inaccessible” despite the narrator’s continual scrutiny (570).
- 9 Levenson argues that because *Narcissus* presents “a plea for order and community ... in the face of the ‘modernizing habits’ of individualism and class antagonism ... the near-mutiny aboard the *Narcissus* ... is the dramatic center of a cautionary tale” (101).
- 10 Messenger suggests that Conrad’s choice of tuberculosis as Wait’s illness is very deliberate. He quotes Susan Sontag, noting that it is “a disease ‘rich in visible symptoms’ ... with sudden remissions and relapses,” and that for these reasons Conrad’s contemporaries thought of tuberculosis as a “deceptive illness” (72). Marcus develops this point, arguing that not only was tuberculosis thought to be deceptive, but (also quoting Sontag) “morally, if not literally, contagious” (43).
- 11 As Batchelor points out the world that the *Narcissus* represents in microcosm is shown to be England. Conrad, for instance, refers to England as a “ship mother of fleets and nations, a great flagship of the race” (120–21). In this context, Batchelor finds it significant that the fictional crew of the *Narcissus* is much more English than that of the *Narcissus* on which Conrad actually sailed (36).

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Candace Ward on representations of resistance in early Anglo-Caribbean fiction

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## ‘Re-formed’ Women and Narratives of the Self

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Krupabai Sathianadhan’s novel, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*,<sup>1</sup> was first published posthumously in 1895.<sup>2</sup> More than a century later Oxford University Press reissued the novel under the altered title *Saguna: The First Autobiographical Novel by an Indian Woman*.<sup>3</sup> The new title, along with the altered paratextual context, substantially reconstitutes the reader’s reception of the text. Paratexts act as significant regulatory devices, shaping the transactions between texts and readers, indicating the historical location of the text, the location of its dissemination and circulation, and the historically specific set of intentions that situate a text for a distinct reading public with particular intended effects.<sup>4</sup> The paratextual reissue of Sathianadhan’s novel invites a return to historically available discourses, a revision of the repertoire of narrative self constructions, and the legitimated practices of femininity that made possible the writing and shaping of the female autobiographical *I* in late nineteenth-century India. The twenty-first century reader’s simultaneous access to both editions of *Saguna* works to historicize the novel and makes possible a textual self-reflexivity, which, I would argue, undermines its representational transparency as an autobiographical novel.

Throughout the nineteenth century, upper caste/class women were appropriated re-formed and re-cast in the service of Hindu social and religious reform, missionary proselytizing, British colonialism and, later in the century, Indian Nationalism. The formation and reform of the nation was, very significantly, developed alongside the “re-forming” of the upper caste/class woman’s modes of access to what was constituted “education”: the structures of her familial and sexual relationships, the spaces she could and could not occupy and the ways in which she could occupy them. The “woman question,” which was central to the male-operated reform movements of the century, centered on what could be

done to ameliorate the condition of the “new Indian woman.” The social evils of child marriage, sati, and the re-marriage of widows, which were the focus of missionary, colonial and reformist interventions applied to the lives of upper-caste/class women in some regions. But within the reform debates these issues were expanded to encompass all women who inhabited the abstract space of the nation. The “new woman” who emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century was a marker of the “re-formed” nation. Education had modernized her and enabled her to remake the private sphere. She was a companion to her husband who was, most often, a Christian evangelist and/or an official in the colonial bureaucracy or educational system. She also had access, albeit under careful male supervision, to some areas of the public sphere.<sup>5</sup> Her so-called emancipation was structured as a movement from the dark, oppressive confines of the *zenana* into the open enlightened spaces of the school, the church, the drawing room, and the women’s organization. Here, under the tutelage of her husband, father, or brother and with their approval she came into a “realization” of her true potential as enlightened mother, wife/companion and saviour of women who had not yet had access to the privileges that she now enjoyed. This was the standard plot trajectory of the reformist narratives available to women of the upper caste/class, and, if they chose to change or challenge them, they had to face the censure and withdrawal of male support.

A number of these formulaic autobiographies were written by women in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The historical conjuncture that made space for and necessitated the sculpting of this autobiographical female self also made available to these women the skills and techniques needed for such self-fashioning and self-display and decreed the contours that this self could take. But as women entered material and discursive spaces hitherto closed to them they changed these spaces, whether consciously or unconsciously.<sup>7</sup> As reform-era women were appropriated by male reform agendas and made a part of male political maneuverings, they were confronted with the liminal spaces they occupied and the contradictions that frayed the seams of their lives.<sup>8</sup> I argue that this doubled-subjectivity fissured given notions of self and agency, which in turn pushed women to critique accepted practices of “being

women.” Autobiographical writing, I suggest, also allowed women to explore an incipient agency that was both apart from, and simultaneously within the male reformist agendas and patriarchal coercions that they were participating in and colluding with. Very often, the narration of this female self was not coterminous with the dominant narrations of the “national woman.” For Sathianadhan this disjuncture between nation and self is further aggravated by her adopted Christian religion. The narrative *I*, as author and subject of the autobiography, occupies an extra-textual material location while it is simultaneously positioned as a subject of/in discourse. In the case of Sathianadhan’s text, as well as her life, both locations are tenuous, beleaguered, and liminal. They come into existence through a complex process of negotiation with, appropriation of, and rejection of available modes of being and thinking of oneself as an “Indian woman.”

The 1895 edition of Sathianadhan’s autobiographical novel is embedded in a dense paratextual context. Dedicated to Mrs. H.B.Grigg,<sup>9</sup> it is prefaced by an obituary of Sathianadhan by Mrs. R.S.Benson. The novel is followed by an appendix, which contains a summary of the speeches made and decisions taken at

[A] largely attended Drawing-room meeting [was] held at Government House at 5:30 PM, on Wednesday the 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1895 under the presidency of Her Excellency Lady Wenlock, to consider what steps should be taken to perpetuate the memory of the late Mrs. Samuel Sathianadhan, the gifted authoress of “Saguna” and “Kamala.” (Appendix 233)

This contextualizing is followed by a collection of reviews by individuals, newspapers and journals of *Saguna* and Sathianadhan’s other novel, *Kamala*. These texts, which surround the novel, function both as a prism and as a document; they refract as well as reinforce the context of the autobiographically-shaped uniqueness and autonomy of the subject of the novel *Saguna*. Memoir, testimonial, obituary, and first-person account intersect to constitute an ideal of the Christian/Reformed Hindu—Sathianadhan’s educated “new woman” self, which is both validated and undermined by the fictional autobiography.<sup>10</sup> Sathianadhan’s self-

fashioning through her protagonist Saguna is to a great extent complicit with the orientalist/evangelical/reformist lens of these paratexts that envelop the novel. As discourses that enabled and decreed the construction of the “Indian Woman,” they share strategic alliances and are informed by certain common interests that cut across their differences.<sup>11</sup> But Sathinadhan’s novel is a complex combination and contradiction of truth effects. The novel simultaneously colludes with and interrogates its paratexts. It opens with this claim:

In the following pages, I shall in my own way try to present a faithful picture of the experiences and thoughts of a simple Indian girl, whose life has been highly influenced by a new order of things—an order of things which at the present time is spreading its influence to a greater or lesser extent over the whole of her native land. (*Saguna* 1998 19)

The narrative *I* rejects autobiographical uniqueness of subjectivity and ascribes to itself the generic anonymity of a “simple Indian girl.” The narrator represents her autobiography as the story of a nation’s agonistic relationship with a new order of things as inscribed on the life of An ordinary young woman. The transgressive act of assuming the authority of authorship and authoring the female self is redeemed by this tactic of fictionalizing and deindividuating the self. The framing paratext employs a similar strategy, effacing the radically subversive possibilities of Sathianadhan’s English education, her intellectual and literary capacities. Sathianadhan’s obituary is primarily located within the home and is circumscribed by normative and feminine attributes and roles that belong within the home. Moreover, “her talents” are yoked to these feminine qualities. As an agent of “enlightenment to her countrymen” she becomes the agent of a middle-class, Victorian ideal of femininity. In Mrs. R. S. Benson’s hagiographic reconstruction Sathianadhan is described as follows:

Her intellect she cultivated with zeal, and with so much success that she passed her medical examinations with honors. In her home and married life, she was all that is ideal as wife and

mother, companion and friend. The talents, that with health might have been used to alleviate the sufferings of others, found a vent, when her health failed, in writings which revealed to her countrymen, better perhaps than practical work would have done, the beauty and culture of her mind, and its noble aspirations for their enlightenment. With all the praise and publicity which her writings brought her she remained throughout most modest, retiring, sensitive and gentle. (*Saguna* 1895 viii)

The novel is the autobiographical narrative of the life of its fictional protagonist Saguna who *is* and *is not* Saththianadhan, the author of *Saguna*. As the title of the Oxford edition of the novel states, it is an *autobiographical* novel. There are very few names and dates in the novel, which, within a realist epistemology, are crucial for authenticating the life stories of embodied subjects. But the few names that appear in the novel and the temporal sequencing of events through which the life of Saguna is constructed closely approximate, even replicate the biographical construction of Saththianadhan’s life, which is made available in the form of paratext in both issues of the novel. The generic distinction between biography and novel has been established, predominantly, on the basis of the extra-textual historical facticity of the biographical subject and the fictionality of the character in the novel. Yet, the realist novel, the biography and the autobiography produce similar reality effects through the use of similar literary devices. Though they can be differentiated on the basis of a divergent identification among author, protagonist and narrator; as subjects achieved in language the author, protagonist and narrator are distinct to the extent that they perform individual narrative functions. Further, I would suggest that the generic indefiniteness of Saththianadhan’s autobiographical novel aligns it in a simultaneously refractory and coterminous relationship with its paratexts in the complex construction of the subjectivity of Saththianadhan/Saguna. The subject of the autobiographical novel, Saguna, is dispersed across several locations. She is situated within the text as the subject of the narrative as well as the narrating subject. Her narrative structure closely replicates the biographical structuring of Saththianadhan the author, who is also an em-

bodied being occupying a materially specific geographical and historical location. The paratext of the modern edition biographically constructs Sathianadhan and intimately connects her with Saguna by generically designating the novel as an autobiography. According to Benson, “In the pages of *Saguna* the authoress tells the story of her own early life” (*Saguna* 1895 vii). The shifting multiplicity of Sathianadhan/Saguna’s states of being, alongside their instability, allows for a reading that critiques the ascribed national/colonial identities of Saguna/Sathianadhan, dismantles these identities, and displays the strategic uses to which they are put. If, as autobiography, the text gestures towards an extra-textual life which it is authentically represents, as autobiographical fiction it takes the liberty of reshaping the contours of that represented life so as to encompass or open out to emancipatory possibilities of being without cracking the illusion of representational transparency. I locate the historical Sathianadhan’s agency in this possibility of authorial reshaping. One such instance of authorial reshaping in the novel is the h(er)istory of her father’s conversion. The event of Harichandra’s conversion and the spiritual conflicts resulting from his decision to convert, forms a significant part of the early history of his life. Saguna introduces the history of her parents’ early lives in the following manner:

Before proceeding further with my story, I think it necessary to give a short sketch of the early history of my parents, with special reference to the spiritual struggles through which they had to pass, before giving up the religion of their ancestors. This will throw some light on the influences that were at work in our simple home, and will show how our lives and characters were moulded. The pictures that I am about to present are more or less reproductions of those depicted to me in their simple, unaffected manner by my mother and by my eldest sister, who entered into my father’s thoughts and feelings, and who, though a daughter, was a companion and a friend to him. (*Saguna* 1998 27)

The history that follows is almost completely narrated by the third-person omniscient narrator. This perspective, however, is invaded by,

and encompassed within the conventions of the autobiographical *I*. In an act of ventriloquism, the autobiographical *I* projects the narrative perspective on the characters of the wife and the daughter of the convert who are positioned in differing relationships to the convert and his conversion. Through the complex intermingling of narrative voices and perspectives Saguna/Sathianadhan rewrites the “conversion story” that had hitherto been narrated, almost exclusively, by men.

The story of the conversion of Sathianadhan’s father, Hari Ramachandra Khisty, had been narrated in Khisty’s Marathi biography, *Life of the Late Rev. Hari Ramachandra Khisty*, written by his son-in-law the Reverend Appaji Bapuji Yarde. An excerpt from this book, translated into English, was included in an anthology of conversion narratives, titled *Sketches of Indian Christians Collected from Different Sources*, published by the Christian Literature Society of India, with an introduction by Samuel Sathianadhan, Krupabai’s husband. With the exception of one narrative, that of Pandita Ramabai, the thirty-eight conversion stories anthologized in this book are all by and about men. In each of these narratives, conversion is invariably constructed as result of an epiphanic vision of the rational monotheism of Christianity with a concomitant revelation of the superstitious idolatry of Hinduism. This revelation inevitably follows upon the soon-to-be-convert’s entry into the institutions of colonial or missionary education and is a consequence of the non-coercive or the providentially coercive persuasions of the Christian missionary or teacher. In every instance, conversion results from a decision taken voluntarily by the convert. The ensuing life of sacrifice and struggle of the new convert is modeled on the sufferings of a Christian martyr.<sup>12</sup>

Sathianadhan/Saguna’s narration of her father’s conversion closely follows Yarde’s in its narrative trajectory and many of the narrative details are similar. Nevertheless, there are significant points of departure. Yarde’s narrativization of Radhabai’s response to, and her acceptance of, her husband’s conversion is much less detailed and complex than Sathianadhan/Saguna’s narrativization of Radha’s conversion. In Yarde’s story, the most painful event that Radhabai faces prior to her conversion is the baptism of her daughter: “After a time a little daughter was born

to them. Much grieved was she on learning that her husband wished the child to be baptized, and she spent the day of the baptism in mourning over her baby's fate" (*Sketches* 191). Embedded within the narrative of the conversion of Ramachandra Khisty, and narrated throughout by the omniscient narrator as a document of personal history, Radhabai's conversion in Yarde's narrative is subsumed and controlled by the conversion of her husband. In contrast, Saththianadhan/Saguna's construction of Radha's transitional subjectivity as convert-to-be is much more complex. It takes place at the intersection of multiple narrative voices, interrogating, rebutting, colluding, and conniving with each other. The story of Radha's conversion as narrated by Saththianadhan/Saguna never achieves narrative closure as it does in Yarde's biography of Radhabai's husband. Yarde's narrative glosses over the intensely traumatic experience of deracination suffered by the convert's wife as a result of the radically liminal locations she is forced to occupy in the wake of her husband's conversion.<sup>13</sup>

Yarde plots Radhabai's narrative mobility as always already oriented towards becoming "a true helpmate to her husband, and [she was] all that a true Christian wife should be" (*Sketches* 191). The resolution of her transitional state of being as convert-to-be is narratively constituted, as a spatially linear movement from her natal Hindu home in Satara to her husband's Christian home in Ahmednagar ("Haripunt was very anxious to have Radhabai his wife brought from Satara before the tidings of his change of religion should get abroad" 191). Yet at another level her transition is constituted as a temporally linear development in knowledge and faith towards the acceptance of Christ and Christianity: "By patient teaching and earnest prayers on her behalf, Radhabai was at last led to accept Jesus as her saviour. When 19 years of age she was baptized in 1841" (191). What marks the Radhabai of Yarde's narrative is her passivity and lack of agency.

Conversely, in *Saguna* Radha's reluctant acceptance of Christianity is detailed at greater length and involves a complex orchestration of narrative voices. The story of Radha's conversion in *Saguna* sketches the complicated negotiations that take place, focusing on the changes that occur in and through the convert, as well as between her former religion

and her adopted one, and between the community from which she was ostracized and the community into which she was "reborn." The critically alienating perspective enabled by Sattiandhan's tenuous location informs this narrative; it becomes a subversive method of critiquing the patriarchal authorities that try to form and re-form her.

The conversation between Harichandra and his brother Vaman Rao about the ways and means to be used in bringing Radha to her converted husband is illustrative of this narrative complexity (*Saguna* 1998 56–7). Here the impersonality of the third-person narrative is infected/inflected by a split contradictory perspective that fissures the conversion story and consequently the hero of the conversion story, the convert.<sup>14</sup> The ventriloquist autobiographical narrator projects the fissured halves of her narrative perspective on Harichandra and his brother Vamanrao, thus redeeming both conversion and the convert from the sin of patriarchal coercion and deceit. Harichandra's complicity in the violent act of compelling his unwilling wife to accept his conversion is effaced by its representation as a reluctant assent to the machinations of his brother Vamanrao, given in the face of the far more grievous suffering that Radha would have to bear if left at the mercy of Hindu patriarchy. Confronted by Harichandra's reluctance to use coercion and deceit on his wife his brother Vaman Rao retorts:

Then give her up forever ... Make her life a life of misery. Her head will be shaved, and she will become an object of scorn. Wherever she is seen, people will exclaim: "Ah! This is the polluted one's wife; this is the unfortunate woman whom the gods have disgraced." Life will become a living death for her, and you will be cursed forever in her heart. You will like that, I suppose? What has she done to suffer such wrongs from you? If you take her with you, she may in time come to fall in with your way of thinking, and she will be happy. (*Saguna* 1998 56–7)

Yarde's explanation of Radhabai's willingness to live with her Christian husband is blunt: "For sometime she held herself aloof from Christians and their religion, but believing her husband was in the place of God to her, she determined to live with him whatever differences they might

have as to religion” (*Sketches* 191). It becomes an oblique critique of the repressive hierarchies mandated by Hindu patriarchy when re-narrated by Saththianadhan as follows:

He [Vaman Rao] requested his brother to be ready at a certain place with the missionary’s covered carriage, which would carry Radha straight off to the bungalow before suspicion was roused, adding: “All that you have to do is to be very stern and order the girl in. Thanks to our customs, she will be very frightened to see you alone with her, and won’t get over the shock till she sees the bungalow, and even if she attempts to talk and ask questions on the way, a word from you will silence her.” (*Saguna* 1998 56)

Unlike Yarde’s story, Saththianadhan/Saguna’s story of Radha’s forced, reluctant meeting with and acceptance of her convert husband is narrated in great detail:

She was silent, and kept furtively looking at him and out of the window. But when the carriage stopped at the bungalow of the missionary, she was aghast. Her husband’s voice fell on her dazed ear, “Radha, get down.” She instinctively obeyed, and looked round, wondering if it was all a dreadful dream, but before she could realize her situation, she found herself following her husband into a room, and the door closed on her. Everything seemed clear now. This was the *padre sahib’s* house, and she had entered it, she a Brahmin. What pollution! What degradation! A time of intense anguish followed. In her first impulse she tried to push open the door, and shook the bars of the window; but when she found herself powerless, she sat down on the floor quivering with anger, and with the sense of some great wrong done to her. Her tears had fled, and she tried to think what her position was, but she could not analyse her thoughts. A sense of shame overwhelmed her at the thought that her husband, in her eyes the very perfection of humanity, should have brought her to this disgraceful place. What

was he about? And yet in the midst of all these overwhelming thoughts the undercurrent of trust and confidence in him was not shaken. She thought of the past two years during which she had watched him closely. Whatever his elder brother was, her husband was upright and just; his word was never broken, and he was never known to do anything mean. But what did *this* act signify? To impute any low motive to him was to break everything that she held dear; she felt humbled to the dust. This humiliation was, however, followed by an overexcited state of mind. Her soul rebelled against what seemed mean, wicked, and debasing, and the gentle Radha was for the time changed into an avenging angel, who shot her glances and words with withering scorn at her husband. (*Saguna* 1998 59)

Abiding by the rules of the formulaic narrative of conversion, Saththianadhan reconfigures and enlarges it so as to reshape the contours of the conversion story. In the novel, the story of the conversion is narrated by Saguna who disowns authorial conception of it, for, as she claims, she is reproducing exactly what has been recounted to her by her mother and sister. In contrast to the posthumously reconstructed Saththianadhan, in the paratext the wife and daughters reconstruct the father posthumously. By constructing and relating his story they usurp his patriarchal prerogative to authorial agency. This illegitimate act of authoring the husband and the father is followed by other acts of female transgression. One example can be found in the rewording of silences in male conversion narratives. In Saththianadhan/Saguna’s narrative, Radhabai’s acceptance of Christianity is a long and difficult process. It is achieved through coercion and never completed as she retains the “Hindu notion of things” in spite of a “strong faith in her new religion” (np). The convert takes recourse to what is seen as a Hindu patriarchal subjection of women to unquestioned obedience to and dependence on their husband to force her into accepting his life. The later companionate marriage of Radha and Harichandra, which is shown as a result of their mutual acceptance of Christianity, cannot efface the dark history of patriarchal coercion. The difficult, violently imposed, never complet-

ed, conversion of Radha fills in what is left unsaid in Yarde's narrative of Radhabai's conversion.

As she rewords the silences in the male versions of the conversion narrative, Saththianadhan /Saguna also appropriates it to articulate a personally emancipatory and enabling subjectivity for herself. Harichandra's conversion becomes the site on which Saththianadhan contests the regulatory powers and legitimacy of her secular feminine identities and re-articulates for herself a Christian identity that restructures her possibilities of being in the secular world in liberating ways. Professedly "reproducing," but insidiously re-producing the spiritual conflicts of Harichandra, Saththianadhan/Saguna usurps the narratively-constructed space of her father's consciousness to structure her relationship with God-the-Father:

In other words, it dawned upon him gradually that the idea of a personal God, one whom we can look upon in the relation of a father was entirely absent in the systems of philosophy which he studied. "Oh what a consoling thought it would be," said he to himself, "if such a relationship between the infinite and the finite, the all-wise, the all-perfect, the infinitely good creator and the imperfect, sin-stained and fallible mortal were possible. How easy it would then be for man with the help of this higher power to satisfy his nobler longings and aspirations! But ah! why is it that this view of the relation of God to man which seems to me to be the most true view, inasmuch as it helps me to satisfy that impulse which I find so strong within me-why is this view entirely absent in the Hindu religion?"  
(*Saguna* 1998 50)

Protestant subjectivity, constructed in the process of the believer's individual spiritual conflicts and colloquies with God, is liberating for Saththianadhan/Saguna. The "idea of a personal God" to whom the devotee has unmediated, unrestricted, private access, whose human manifestation understands and whose divinity sanctions the devotee's worldly "longings and aspirations," is a utopian re-formation of the patriarchal father. I would suggest that here Saththianadhan/Saguna undertakes au-

thoring the father whose being is legitimated by an unquestioned overt acceptance of a prerogative to authorship. The undermining of his divine status by a rationalist critique is one of the major crisis in Saguna/Sathianadhan’s life (*Saguna* 1998 162).

The material benefits that the Christian convert accrues can be seen in the radically transformed mobility of Saguna. At the time Sathianadhan was writing, Christianity in conjunction with colonialism was opening specific areas of the public sphere to women.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Saguna’s entrance into spheres, spaces, and professions hitherto unoccupied or sparsely occupied by women maps the pioneering mobility of the historical Sathianadhan and an elite class of women. Sathianadhan/Saguna locates conversion, to use Gauri Vishwanathan’s words, “at the nexus of spiritual and material interests.”<sup>16</sup>

In her own time, Sathianadhan’s autobiographical novel was appropriated in different ways to serve different interests, as seen from the paratext that surrounds the nineteenth-century publication of the novel. In the twenty-first century I read this novel as retrieved for me by its modern editor, Chandani Lokuge, and its modern publishers (Oxford) from my own professional location within the academy. Sathianadhan’s narrative encourages and enables me to read conversion narratives of the present, against the grain.

### Notes

- 1 I will henceforth refer to this novel as *Saguna* 1895.
- 2 Lokuge, the editor of the *Oxford* edition of the novel, gives the year of publication of the novel as 1895. But, Joshi gives the year of publication of the novel as 1892. I have retained Lokuge’s date in my paper.
- 3 I will henceforth refer to this edition of the novel as *Saguna* 1998.
- 4 Referring to the ways in which the paratext of the 1895 edition of *Saguna* orients our reading of it, Joshi writes: “Indeed, given the physical layout of Sathianadhan’s books (which was supervised by her husband, Samuel), to read her work was first to learn *how* to read it (from Mrs. Grigg) and then *what* to make of it from its reviewers” (174).
- 5 Forbes quotes an incident that appears in Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal’s book, *An Indian Freedom Fighter Recalls Her Life*. When Sahgal was jailed in Lahore in 1930, a fellow demonstrator was arrested along with her while her husband was at work. When her husband came to know about the arrest he sent word

asking her not to return home after her release. When asked for the reason behind this order he said that “it was a great honour to have his wife arrested, but she had not asked his permission to leave the house” (121).

- 6 Some of the memoirs and autobiographies written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were *Amar Jiban* (My Life) by Rashundari Dei (1876), *Amchya Ayushyatil Kabi Athawani* (Memoirs of our Life Together) by Ramabai Ranade (1910), *Autobiography of an Indian Princess* by Maharani Sunity Devi (1921), *Hindu Widow: An Autobiography* by Parvathi Athavale (1928), *India Calling* by Cornelia Sorabji (1934), *Smriti Chitre* (Memory Sketches) by Lakshmibai Tilak (1934–37).
- 7 Teaching and medicine, the two professions legitimated for the nineteenth-century “new woman,” built upon and perpetuated the feminine stereotype of the nurturing mother whose femininity is oriented towards the socialization of her children and nurture of her family. However, as professions they necessitated an education and mobility hitherto unthinkable for women. Saththianadhan’s entry into medical college is described in her novel as being such a momentous event that the entire class stood up and cheered for her.
- 8 A chapter from Ranade’s autobiography very finely illustrates this point.
- 9 Mrs. Grigg wrote a memoir of Saththianadhan, which prefaced Saththianadhan’s novel *Kamala*. This memoir has been the most cited text on Saththianadhan’s life.
- 10 Mrs. Grigg’s memoir is quoted in the appendix to the 1895 edition of the novel, as testimony to the reforming influence of Christianity and Western culture on Saththianadhan: “In her autobiography she has shown, sometimes it would almost seem unconsciously, what a higher culture and a purer faith can achieve in her country. She brings into strong contrast the ignorance and superstition of Kamala’s house and the equally simple but happy and enlightened atmosphere of her own home and surroundings” (Appendix 235). The Honourable Dr. Duncan’s opinion on the influence of education on Saththianadhan is summarized thus: “What Indian women really required were favourable circumstances in order to develop their latent powers. These circumstances were favourable with the late Mrs. Saththianadhan, and if they had been equally enjoyed by others, he [Dr. Duncan] was quite sure that many Indian women would be able to emulate the late Mrs. Saththianadhan in the great gifts she undoubtedly possessed” (Appendix 241).

Rai Bahadur P. Krishnamachari testifies to the ‘exemplary character of Mrs Krupabai Saththianadhan’ from his association with her as a fellow member of the Madras Branch of the National Indian Association thus: “She always seemed the very picture of modesty and she kept her capacity for literary work quite a secret” (Appendix 244).

Mr. N. Subramaniam, an acquaintance of Krupabai when she came to live in Madras, has this to say of her: “The higher education she had received,

which perhaps would have turned many an unbalanced head, had made her a homely, simple and unassuming lady without any conceit or pride. Her husband had often described her to him (Mr. Subramaniam) as his guiding star and had acknowledged that she had exercised considerable influence on him" (*Saguna* 1895, Appendix 243).

- 11 See Mani for a nuanced historical account of this nexus.
- 12 The decision to accept Christianity by Rev. W. T. Sathianadhan, the father of Krupabai's husband, who was strongly influenced by his evangelist teacher Mr. W. Cruickshanks, is narrated thus: "Under the instruction of this admirable teacher, the youth referred to remained for about three years, when light began gradually to dawn upon his mind and the Spirit of God convinced him not only of the folly of Heathenism, and the truth of Christianity, but also of his lost condition as sinner, and the necessity of closing in with the offers of salvation through Christ" (*Sketches* 32).

An excerpt from the autobiographical sketch of another convert, Guru Charan Bose, narrates the changes that take place in the to-be-Christian as follows: "The English education which I received in Hari's school opened the eyes of my understanding, and I perceived the folly of image worship. My faith in Hinduism was shaken; it failed to satisfy my spiritual cravings" (100).

Yarde's biographical sketch narrates Khisty's spiritual conflicts in his own words: "I began to be convinced that there could be only one God, and none other beside Him. Although my faith in idolatry was shaken, I still worshipped idols for fear of my friends. Through study and talks with the missionaries, by the great mercy of God I became convinced that the Christian Shastra was the true one. I prayed that God would give me strength to come through all the trials that must be faced. After a time I was enabled to give up idol worship" (190).
- 13 In her autobiography Tilak describes in harrowing detail her intense sufferings after the conversion of her husband Narayan Waman Tilak.
- 14 See Morris (116–118) on the construction of subjective consciousness in the Realist Novel.
- 15 See Forbes 161–67.
- 16 Referring to modernity's marginalization of religious belief to the realm of the private, Vishwanathan writes that this is "constitutively linked to the lack of an adequate vocabulary to deal with its worldliness." According to her, the destabilizing act of conversion restitutes the worldly function of belief. The act of conversion is not just an assent to a religious ideology but is also linked to struggles against worldly oppressions like sexism, racism and colonialism, hence, aligning it with cultural criticism. As significantly connected with the "politics of identity," Vishwanathan locates conversion at the "nexus of spiritual and material interests" (xxvi–xxviii).

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**“There is No World Outside the Text”:  
Transatlantic Slippage in Eva Hoffman’s  
*Lost in Translation***

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

No, I’m no patriot, nor was I ever allowed to be. And yet, the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our marginality, and its primitive, unpretty emotions. Is it blind and self-deceptive of me to hold on to its memory? I think it would be blind and self-deceptive not to. All it has given me is the world, but that is enough. It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind .... no geometry of landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservation. (Hoffman *Lost in Translation* 74)

In Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*, Poland is the landscape of desire, the starting point to which Hoffman can neither return, nor abandon. Indeed, the very blurring of locations, as Hoffman moves almost seamlessly from past to present, indicates the way in which spaces are influenced, if not infected, by other spaces. Hoffman follows in a long line of critics and writers who see places as though they were on a continuum of being. Ernest Hemingway, in his memoir of life in Paris, observes, “Paris was never to be the same again although it was always Paris and you changed as it changed” (182). Hoffman, too, discovers this odd double image, as the Poland of her youth—Paradise—is re-membered by others and herself, as a continually evolving depiction of place. In the acknowledgements of his collected essays, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, Canadian critic Robert Kroetsch claims that he “wear[s] geography next to [his] skin” and that he “speak[s] out of the play of surfaces against and with each other” (ix). These poetic phrases, buried in his list of thanks,

could as easily be applied to Polish-Canadian/American writer Hoffman. *Lost in Translation*, her first memoir,<sup>1</sup> examines the necessity of wearing geography next to one's skin, of the way in which the surfaces and depths of her beloved lost country and her grudgingly gained new one(s) slip against each other to form a palimpsestic narrative where America is a concept that obtrudes upon both Canada and Poland. Hoffman limns the landscapes of Poland, Canada and the United States in a style evocative of Virginia Woolf: she traces the space of childhood and young adulthood, alternating between a geographic and a linguistic structuring of her memories. This article explores the discourses of "here" and "there" invoked by Hoffman's multi-layered images, and maps the transatlantic, linguistic signs of Poland, Canada and the slippery concept of "America." I also argue that Hoffman's text, which critics often position in one or another of the defining geographical spaces in an attempt to circumscribe the memoir (sometimes for publishing purposes), actually offers a more nuanced, transnational reading of space. Hoffman herself has defined transnational literature as a site where "multiple cultural references collide and collude" ("New" 56), and her reader undoubtedly encounters a variety of cultural collisions in negotiating the memoir's meaning. These collisions problematize Hoffman's other assertion, that "there is no world outside the text" (182). This position, developed during her formal study of New Criticism, is ultimately undermined, precisely by reading Hoffman's memoir, in which the multifaceted world outside the text is skillfully created and re-created in a series of competing discourses about how memory itself is constructed and place is negotiated.

In the very first paragraph of the book, posing as her thirteen-year-old self, Hoffman observes that leaving Poland "is a notion of such crushing, definitive finality that to me it might as well mean the end of the world" (3). However, Hoffman's text reveals that the process of emigration—or, indeed, exile—can never be complete. It is always the subject of regrets, memories, and transitions. Indeed, Hoffman's text is not a chronological account of coming to the "New World," but instead is a tapestry of ideas, that flows like a transatlantic stream of consciousness narrative back and forth between Poland and Canada or the United States. As the

ship taking her from Poland pulls away, Hoffman notes that her “being is engaged in a stubborn refusal to move” (4)—yet move she does. What the book celebrates and analyzes is that very movement, even by way of its elliptical structure, which fluidly melds past and present. Such images reinforce the physical reality of the transatlantic tides which move in different directions, and which carry Hoffman both back and forth across this (imagined) oceanic space.

The book is, as the subtitle “Life in a New Language” suggests, principally a memoir of dislocation. In it, Hoffman examines both individual words and whole languages in a bid to understand her own sense of exile; she uses literary criticism and theory to structure her responses to the “new” world, invoking structuralism, postmodernism, and theatre. This “New World” is an amalgam of Canada and the United States; indeed, Canada is at first vaguely interpreted and mistakenly associated with an “America” that erases its cultural specificity. Canada itself only invokes an undefined sense of a cultural desert: “There are vague outlines of half a continent, a sense of vast spaces and little habitation” (*Lost* 4). In contrast, Poland is written large, and lovingly, though Hoffman problematizes her own construction of Poland as “paradise” through an acknowledgment that Poland itself is an ever-shifting entity. A particularly poignant example of this is Hoffman’s reference to the city of Lvov.<sup>2</sup> Once Polish, Lvov becomes Russian and necessitates a move for her parents who were “trying as quickly as possible to cross the new borders so they could remain within their old nationality even at the cost of leaving home” (8). Poland is a country revisited in the text, both sentimentalized and exposed as unforgiving. Poland’s meaning is not simply wrapped up in paradise, but constantly alters until it becomes such a diffuse image that Hoffman cannot contain it. Hoffman uses the term “geography of emotions” to explain and explore her own feelings, acknowledging as she does so that for her Canadian contemporaries, Poland is a “gray patch of language inhabited by ghosts” (132). She finds her own poltergeist in Mary Antin, author of an immigrant narrative that she feels maps onto her own, despite the fact that Antin’s transatlantic tale is a Russian-American one; again, cultural and country borders are here problematized, and the

metaphorical maps she uses as guides do not necessarily relate to political geography.

It is formally appropriate that questions of “here” dominate Hoffman’s memoir, given that her first emigration is to Canada, a country that critics have argued is preoccupied with margins and dislocations, a place which, rather than loudly proclaiming a sense of its own location and identity (as perhaps its southern neighbor does), instead expends its critical energies on the tensions between “here” and “there.” Indeed, it has long been a commonplace that Canada’s primary question is “Where is here?”<sup>3</sup> If contemporary critics unpack the assumptions behind Northrop Frye’s momentous statement, they nevertheless acknowledge the potency of the image, whether it is mythic or more pragmatically “real.”

Geography, again, becomes metaphorical, and Kroestch’s construction of it as skin links with Hoffman’s construction of it as emotion. Geography here extends beyond definable, if changing borders, and is not necessarily aligned to political nation-states; after all, Hoffman’s text frequently conflates Canada with the United States, and the short author biography in later texts suggests that Hoffman moved to “America” at the age of thirteen, a shorthand assertion that offers no national differentiation, and indeed encourages a misrecognition of place.<sup>4</sup> From Hoffman’s perspective, one of the difficulties of being an immigrant is dealing with “the strangeness of glimpsing internal landscapes that are arranged in different formations as well” (265). It is therefore not surprising that external landscapes and divisions are not rigidly maintained. What further complicates Hoffman’s half-wished-for, half-resisted assimilation into the “New World” is her adolescence at the time of emigration. She is a child lost in the nuances and attitudes of a new culture, where dating, make-up, and the ways to conduct oneself in public all require performing a role to which she is unaccustomed. Hoffman’s own sense of national and personal identities become fragmented when she moves from being a Polish child, to a Canadian adolescent, and then to an American adult, and these various, indeed sometimes imaginary, identities bleed into each other to form the tapestry of her memoir.

**I. If not Where, then Who?**

R. Barbara Gitenstein argues that “critics who write of Hoffman try to confine or limit her identity,” but it is significant that in Gitenstein’s list of possible constructions of Hoffman (“Polish, Jewish, female and developing American”), the identity tag “Canadian” is not even mentioned (261). Indeed, Gitenstein refers to Canada only twice, in two short passages. In one, Gitenstein notes that

[a]fter her teenage passage in Canada, where she begins to learn the niceties of being a female in the New World and a modern visionary with a memory and nostalgia for the Old World, Hoffman comes to see herself as a special interpreter of America to her friends, her family and herself. (266)

A second reference is even briefer, simply noting that it was in Canada that Hoffman “begins to lose her sense of self—her ability to speak and be” (271). For Gitenstein, then, the contrast is between the sharply divided Old and New Worlds, rather than between the nations that constitute this “New World”; Canada is merely the transitional space that gets superseded by the United States. Given that Gitenstein’s article appears in a collection subtitled “American Women Writers of Polish Descent,” the elision of Canada is perhaps not surprising. It is also the case, as Danuta Zadworna Fjellestad notes that Hoffman herself is slippery in relation to the term “America,” which sometimes seems to encompass Canada and sometimes does not. Hoffman acknowledges the slippage early on: “America—Canada in our minds is automatically subsumed under that category—has for us the old fabulous associations: streets paved with gold, the goose that laid the golden egg” (84). Furthermore, as Jerzy Durczak points out, “Though the reader has occasional glimpses of the Canadian school, the Canadian society or the autobiographer’s family life, the bulk of the author’s observations has to do with ‘living in a new language’” (27). Thus, it may be Hoffman’s own construction of Canada as space of transit, or as part and parcel of continental “America,” that encourages critics to focus elsewhere.

Nevertheless, it remains surprising how few writers even acknowledge Hoffman’s transitional Canadianness. One article in *MELUS*, the

journal attached to the *Society of Multiethnic Literature* (which therefore might be expected to engage with the multi-national nature of Hoffman's identity), does not focus on Hoffman's "other" other nationality as a Canadian, at all, while another article from the same journal makes only passing reference to her Canadianness—and this occurs solely in the footnotes. Other articles focus on Hoffman's Jewish identity, on the genre of immigrant novels in general, or on the connections between Hoffman's narrative and Mary Antin's. Mary Besemeres is thus unusual in explicitly isolating Hoffman's Polish-Canadian identity. Besemeres justifies her usage of the term "Polish-Canadian" by noting that her article considers Hoffman Polish-Canadian "because her original emigration from Poland was to Canada" (327). Besemeres then notes that she will refer to Hoffman's "'Polish' and 'Anglo' senses of self," and that the latter term covers both the American and the Canadian portions of this identity, thus then conflating her Canadianness with her Americanness, and stirring up other critical debates about the contested term "Anglo" (327). Furthermore, while Besemeres offers a comprehensive account of Hoffman's national identity, this discussion also occurs in a footnote. Moreover, Besemeres is likely to need to justify such a claim, given that the article is published in *Canadian Slavonic Papers*.

Perhaps the most extensive treatment of Hoffman's Canadianness comes from *Canadian Ethnic Studies*—again, the site of publication perhaps ensures such discussion. Eva Karpinski's critically acute, if at times scathing, discussion of Hoffman's memoir acknowledges Canada's "transitional" space for Hoffman, and engages more extensively with the country. Karpinski argues that, "Canada to her becomes a place of exile primarily because it is associated with linguistic uprooting" (128). It is, moreover, "a place inhabited by her *immigrant* self and her 'ethnic' parents" (132 italics mine). Karpinski clearly sees a self that moves beyond an immigrant status, yet paradoxically, she lambasts Hoffman for not attending sufficiently to the importance of her outsider status. It is worth exploring Karpinski's objections in more detail. Hoffman's passage runs thus:

I want to figure out, more urgently than before, where I belong in this America that's made up of so many sub-Americas. I

want, somehow, to give up the condition of being a foreigner.... *I no longer want to have the prickly, unrelenting consciousness that I'm living in the medium of a specific culture. It's time to roll down the scrim and see the world directly, as the world.* I want to reenter, through whatever Looking Glass will take me there, a state of ordinary reality. (*Lost* 202, italics mine)

Karpinski argues that, in this passage, Hoffman “confuses ‘ordinary reality’ with the ethnocentric ‘norms’ of American culture, thus implying that the immigrant reality is peripheral and somehow less real” (132). A different reading, however, may simply locate the desire to belong, the desire to exist not as a type, but as an individual—a desire endlessly deferred for a visible or aurally-identifiable immigrant. I would argue that Hoffman here wishes to locate the unthinking sense of place that individuals who have not been uprooted seem to maintain as if without effort. If such a place is more mythic than real, it is still a powerful symbol of one’s ability (or inability) to fix location. It is perhaps significant that Karpinski cuts the section in italics in her citation.<sup>5</sup> The tensions between “here” and “there” are, in this passage, between two states of being: an idealized, unselfconscious sense of rootedness, and an overwhelming awareness of displacement. Such binaries structure much of Hoffman’s memoir. Nowhere is this clearer than in her positioning of her Polish childhood as “paradise” and her Canadian adolescence as “exile.”

In his discussion of the difficulties of distinguishing between fact and fiction in autobiography, Ihab Hassan trenchantly asks, “Isn’t memory sister to imagination, kin to nostalgia, desire, and deceit? Isn’t memory sometimes even an agent to mendacity, meant consciously to mislead or manipulate history?” (30). Thus Hoffman’s memories of her homeland must always be seen through the screen of doubt, their constructed nature foregrounded. She herself admits that

[t]o some extent, one has to rewrite the past in order to understand it. I have to see Cracow in the dimensions it has to my adult eye in order to perceive that my story has been only a story, that none of its events has been so big or so scary. It is the price of emigration, as of any radical discontinuity, that it

makes such reviews and re-readings difficult; being cut off from one part of one's own story is apt to veil it in the haze of nostalgia, which is an ineffectual relationship to the past, and the haze of alienation, which is an ineffectual relationship to the present. (242)

It is to her credit that Hoffman acknowledges her own process of reinscription as both a willed and a willful one. She is not, as some critics have mistakenly believed, unaware of her own manipulations. Indeed, her careful linguistic and structural plotting of a sense of exile and emigration attests to the fact that, if anything, she is hyperaware of the creation and construction of her memories. As Hassan notes, "paradise" is made in the mind, precisely to be lost and perpetually regained" (68). Such awareness is crucial to Hoffman's own construction of her Edenic Poland, a Poland which is irrevocably lost to her, especially after a visit "home" in which her childhood friend suggests that she is at least half-American now.

The near "double-consciousness" that Hoffman experiences as a returning stranger—that iconic position so closely allied with Canadian postcolonialism—is implicitly contrasted to her Poland of childhood, which appears (in places) as whole and unreflective. Marianne Hirsch, herself a multiply-displaced immigrant, criticizes Hoffman's stance in this respect, arguing that she wants Hoffman to acknowledge that "in Poland, as a child, she was already divided" (76–77). Hirsch's difficulty comes with her mistaken assumption that Poland is "unequivocally" located as paradise in Hoffman's text. Indeed, Hirsch asks a series of piercing questions:

What does it take for Hoffman to consider this place paradise? Why would she want to recapture a childhood that rests on such [an anti-Semitic] legacy? Hoffman's denial is painful to read, yet it is basic to her construction of her narrative and her world, of her self.... With her evocation of childhood plenitude, Hoffman has displaced the reality of the war, of the anti-Semitism she admittedly still experiences, but which she simply dismisses by calling it *primitive*. (77 italics in original)

Hirsch's passionate discomfiture with Hoffman's text is compelling, but, as Besemeres rightfully notes, her criticism of Hoffman is flawed: "Hoffman's declaration about childhood's non-dividedness should be read not as an absolute or descriptive statement but as an experiential one, relative to her own life 'in' the Polish language" (330). Moreover, Besemeres also observes Hirsch's own conflation of places within the Polish landscape, an elision that makes a powerful argument, but not an entirely accurate one. Yet perhaps Hirsch needs a more complete answer to her questions of how Cracow can be constructed as paradise. The text offers one: it is a paradise constructed of "shimmering light and shadow, with the shadow only adding more brilliance to the patches of wind and sun" (Hoffman 38). Despite superficial appearances, this is no pollyannaish stance, but a carefully considered one, which evokes the play of light and dark in order to hollow out a more deeply felt understanding of a sense of homeland and place.

Karpinski offers another critique of Hoffman's "personal mythology," as she calls it. She argues that, in the memoir, childhood is "coded" as "the place of the familiar" whereas adulthood "connotes fragmentation and divisiveness, splintering and insecurity" (128). The most important words here, I believe, are "mythology" and "coded," in that they specifically indicate the constructed nature of Hoffman's version of her childhood. If Hirsch faults such binaries, Karpinski recognizes their self-conscious use. Furthermore, as Marianne Friedrich notes, "the paradise motif provides an ideal supportive structure due to its inherent potential to *build oppositions*" (164 italics in original). This "supportive structure" is deliberately invoked, as Hoffman's text moves from a structuralist position through many different levels of literary and cultural criticism to arrive at a post-structuralist, postmodern stance towards identity. Fjellestad identifies the movement thus: "The book speaks of the results of the loss of what poststructuralist wisdom would call a romantic illusion of unity and center and of the costs and rewards, the joys and terrors, of being thrown into the postmodern world of constantly shifting boundaries and borderless possibilities" (136).

Hoffman's text engages with the myth of wholeness in order, I believe, to acknowledge that childhood is full of illusions; her text allows them

a space, even as or when there is another, ironic voice behind such idyllic memories. A clear example of such dual-coding occurs in her recollection of a summer holiday in Bialy Dunajec, a small village near the Tatra Mountains. The village is considered “primitive” by the city folk who elect to spend their leisure time there (17), yet overlaying any sense of having to *put up* with “roughing it” is the “good, strong smell of raw wood and hay and clear mountain air” (18). Here we have a clear sense of the primitive as close to nature, and therefore “good.” The journey to Dunajec is expressed in similarly idealized terms. Hoffman is “hypnotized” by the train and sees “golden haystacks baked by the sun, and the peasants unbending from their work to wave at the passing-by train” (18). This Edenic version of the Polish countryside is a highly stylized one, with peasants acting out picturesque and folksy scenes, rather than toiling hard with little reward. Indeed, even the work they perform seems a rich part of a child’s happy life. To consider this carefully-crafted idealism as less than consciously constructed is to fall into Hoffman’s critical trap. As she bluntly acknowledges at the beginning of the book, “the wonder is what you can make a paradise out of” (5). Here then, as elsewhere, Hoffman is overtly conscious of the *desire* for plenitude, as well as the myth behind such wish for wholeness.

Hoffman’s use of binaries—admittedly and perhaps strategically disrupted through her conflation of the United States and Canada—follows not only from an immigrant-tale template in which Old and New Worlds are explicitly compared and contrasted, but also from her own education in structuralist and then post-structuralist thought. Indeed, it is perhaps this overt awareness that motivates Hoffman to undermine any sort of binary opposition, even as she herself sets them up. If the immigrant template calls for a text which sees the Old World as “bad” and the New World as “good,” she calls her Old World “Paradise” and her New World “Exile.” If the immigrant template of a resident of a former Communist country calls for a denunciation of the Old World political view, Hoffman “complicates the popular picture by focusing on the charms and blessings of the System and the terrors and curses of the Promised Land” (Fjellestad 136), going so far as to use the image of the smiling peasant—a Communist propaganda tool, if there ever was

one—for her own ends. Hoffman's memoir is thus more than a personal narrative; indeed, her inclusion of cultural and literary analysis makes it possible to isolate lines which come as if from literary criticism, rather than biography, and it is to her linguistic and theoretical structuring of “exile” that I now turn.

## II. Words and the World: the Literary Interpretation of Exile

As a child, Eva reads *Anne of Green Gables*, the archetypal coming-of-age story of a girl in Canada: “As long as I am reading, I assume I am this girl growing up on Prince Edward Island; the novel's words enter my head as if they were emanating from it. Since I experience what they describe so vividly, they must be mine” (28). In this passage Hoffman constructs herself as a naïve reader who wishes to sink into a “realist” text and be transported. She goes on to comment, “I love words insofar as they correspond to the world, insofar as they give it to me in a heightened form” (28). As yet unaware of the contingency of meaning, or of Saussure's theory of linguistic signs, Hoffman allows words to stand in for real things. She even goes so far as to evoke her own, nonsensical language in order to tell “A Story, Every Story, everything all at once” (11).

Once she is in exile, however, she understands the inability to articulate everything, and her critical literary language takes over. She becomes a “living avatar of structuralist wisdom” fully aware that “words are just themselves” (107). In fact, she sees as one of her biggest problems the experience that “the signifier has become severed from the signified” (106). Moreover, she understands that immigrant stories are just that, stories, “models for immigrant fates” which most likely feel unnatural to those that live them (95). She goes as far as to incorporate an example of an immigrant story within her larger narrative of immigration—the story of Irena, a young woman who plays out her love on board the ship carrying them from Europe to North America, only to be “sold” into marriage upon reaching the “promised land.” Here, Hoffman again reveals how things only “mean” contingently. After all, what is political freedom in such an environment? Moreover, Hoffman makes this “story” part of her own story; she notes that Irena “completes the novel I'm temporarily living in perfectly” (89) and she later imagines

contradictory fates for her heroine, who fittingly disappears into Canada without a backwards glance.

Hoffman suggests that life becomes a series of translations, not necessarily between two different languages, but “from the word back to its source” (107). For the young woman who revels in language—her own childhood language—there is the sudden disconnection that comes from experiencing words only in their “literary value,” words “that exist only as signs on the page” (106). Further, in her exile from language, Hoffman learns through *text* rather than experience. Given a diary, she makes a conscious decision to write in English: “I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self. Refracted through the double distance of English and writing, this self—my English self—becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives” (121). Indeed, this distinction becomes crucial for the rest of the text, as Hoffman moves from Canada, to Rice University in Texas, to Harvard University for graduate school and on to New York. What she does not leave behind in these perambulations is her sense of being an immigrant. Indeed, as she notes, “being ‘an immigrant,’ I begin to learn, is considered a sort of location in itself—and sometimes a highly advantageous one at that” (133). In this context, though, Canada itself is never transformed into a homeland, a place of comfortable return, because it was there that she “fell out of the net of meaning into the weightlessness of chaos” (151).

If in Poland she read the narrative of a young girl’s life in Canada as realism, Hoffman cannot, in America, read an immigrant’s tale with such abandon. Mary Antin, her alter ego, “amusing poltergeist” and “ancestress,” is unraveled by her newly-aware structuralist and poststructuralist objective, perceiving self (162). Taking the stance of a resisting reader, she unpicks the triumphalist tone of *The Promised Land* in order to interrogate the “trace of another story behind the story” (162). With great irony, she notes the similarities between their tales, yet observes that Antin focuses on triumph and assimilation, whereas Hoffman—a spectacularly successful woman by any definition—appears to revel in her own maladaptions, her own sense of dislocation.

Perhaps appropriately, Hoffman uses the language of pop psychology and contemporary theatrical performance to explore her dislocation. In

inventing and reinventing herself, she finds her own desires as are uncontrollable as “an infant’s id” (160). Moreover, she invokes the idea of a “Canadian superego,” secretly observing Polish immigrants that conform, or at least behave as though they do (141). Her text is interrupted and infused with interpolated dialogues between the versions of herself, and existential passages that speak of fragmentation and loss. In one example, the young Eva imagines what she would have been like had she never left Poland, how she would have looked, how she would have acted:

But you would have been different, very different.

No question.

And you prefer her, the Cracow Ewa.

Yes, I prefer her. But I can’t be her. I’m losing track of her.

In a few years, I’ll have no idea what her hairdo would have been like.

But she’s more real, anyway.

Yes, she’s the real one. (120)

Yet even this “real” Eva is constructed, as an adult version of Hoffman acknowledges over a hundred pages later. In her internal struggle, various Evas coexist, and none are awarded an identifiable tag that clearly differentiates the Polish “Ewa” from the “American” Eva, though the reader is able to disentangle who is who:

Leave me alone. It’s you who’s playing the charade now. Your kind of knowledge doesn’t apply to my condition

I’ll never leave you quite alone...

But I don’t have to listen to you any longer. I’m as real as you are now. I’m the real one. (231 ellipses in original)

This linguistic and existential construction of the “real” across the transatlantic space indicates slippage as well as demarcations of identity. In her travel book-cum-memoir *Exit into History*, Hoffman suggests that every immigrant has “a second, spectral autobiography, and in my revision of my own history I would have stayed in Poland long enough to become involved in the oppositional politics of my generation” (36).

Instead, she revisits Poland—here as elsewhere—in an attempt to make sense not only of the country she has left behind, but the person that she might have become as well. Also set out as theatrical dialogue are conversations between one version of herself and M.A.F., “My American Friend,” a nameless Everywoman; these dialogues point to a postmodern sense of identity as process, not product, and, perhaps more to the point, performance, not being. Hoffman’s text moves among genres as quickly as she moves between continents, setting down only momentarily in one style before hurling herself in another direction.

At Rice University, she is taught New Criticism, a form of literary criticism that feels inherent to her own understanding of the function of a text, “Luckily for me, there is no world outside the text; luckily, for I know so little of the world to which the literature I read refers” (182). In exploring American literature, she prefers once again to focus on the word, the “world” being too remote, too unknowable, to capture successfully. New Criticism, she argues, “is an alienated way of reading meant for people who are aliens in the country of literature” (183). Here, form and content, literature and life intermingle, and offer mirror images that reinforce Hoffman’s sense of exile. It is only when she becomes a teacher of literature herself that she jumps back into a space almost akin to her childhood where words become “beautiful things—except this is better, because they’re now crosshatched with a complexity of meaning, with the sonorities of felt, sensuous thought” (186). It is fitting, then that Hoffman experience this moment of epiphany when she is reading and interpreting T. S. Eliot, himself an American national transplanted to England.

New Criticism and other analytic methodologies are never enough, though, for a complete understanding of her own “here” and “there” tensions, though she plunders the discourse of Foucault, Bakhtin, and others in her search for a literary description of exile. She refers to Theodor Adorno, Vladimir Nabokov, and Milan Kundera with ease, locating in their dislocations a sense of camaraderie. As Fjellestad notes, “She is conscious of her *experience* of a linguistic construction of her self” (139 italics in original). She is, moreover, conscious of others’ constructions as well.

Karpinski maintains that Hoffman's narrative never gets beyond "a nostalgia trip, a piece of cultural anthropology that flaunts cultural generalities" (133). Furthermore, she argues that "[d]espite her appropriation of poststructuralist rhetoric, she is still committed to the concept of essential selfhood whose experience can be of universal value" (133). I would argue, however, that Hoffman rejects the universal time and time again, and this rejection is one of the key facets of her memoir. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her refusal to concede to her friends' decisions to draw universal connections from specific texts. While she and M.A.F. both find a particular Hungarian movie powerful, M.A.F. extrapolates its plot to encompass the notion of everyone's co-option in the system. Hoffman reacts angrily: "But it wasn't about all of us. It was about the Communist party in Hungary circa 1948" (205). She fiercely notes, "I'm loyal to some notion of accuracy, which is more than I can say for you! The world isn't just a projection screen for your ideas, highly correct though they may be" (206). If such language bespeaks the righteous indignation of youth, it also sets up a running argument about the importance of specificity; the myth of universality must indeed be abandoned. Clearly, there *is* a world outside the text, despite earlier protestations otherwise, and clearly, Hoffman's literary sensibilities reject a casual transference of meaning across space and time.

At the same time, the fabulated nature of Hoffman's early construction of North America ("streets paved with gold") is revisited near the end of the book, where Hoffman's Polish compatriots gather in New York, and ironically reconstruct a Polish-inspired vision of the United States: "Someday you'll get there, and then you'll see what it's like. Tall men in cowboy hats, producers throwing deals at your feet, a swimming pool in every penthouse, and a TV with remote control in every room... I tell you, it's quite a country, America" (259 ellipses in original). This description is followed by the statement, "Oh well, maybe I'll apply for a visa to go there, I hear they're easier to get these days," Jurek says and raises his glass" (259). Already inhabiting *an* America, Hoffman's Polish friends step back ironically to reinhabit the fantasy version of it, to acknowledge the gap between the actual country and their transatlantic versions of it. Hoffman even compares and contrasts the differing

interpretations of space that immigrants from various countries hold. She compares a Polish friend to her cleaner, Maria; for her unnamed friend, “the world is too small to sustain the fabulous America of people’s dreams; there is no America any longer, no place the mind can turn to for fantastic hope. But for Maria, who nurtures no fantastic hopes, it’s still America you emigrate to—this all-too-real America” (261).<sup>6</sup>

*Lost in Translation* is, as Karpinski rightfully notes, composed of a privileged narrative voice; its discourse *is* that of Western autobiography. What Hoffman does with the immigrant narrative, however, is extend it beyond her own “essential selfhood” through the very discourses of power and criticism that she invokes. Poland, Canada, and the United States become both particularized places, and metaphorical ones in her capable hands. Paradise, Exile, and the New World correspond to these countries respectively, and yet even these designations slip and tumble into each other. Poland is both the “gray patch of land” imagined by her Canadian classmates, and the whole globe imagined by her adolescent self. Hoffman is eventually, however, able to see it as her classmates do, as “a distant spot, somewhere on the peripheries of the imagination, crowded together with countless other hard to remember places of equal insignificance” (132). This realization, in turn, recalls her first view of Canada as “an enormous, cold blankness” (4). Two views, at the same time similar in perspective yet diametrically opposed, mark her moment of realization that reference points necessarily shift.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Hoffman notes, “The reference points inside my head are beginning to do a flickering dance. I suppose this is the most palatable meaning of displacement. I have been dislocated from my own center of the world, and that world has been shifted away from my center” (132). The world is larger than she is; its center is not her and never will be. Indeed, “there is no geographic center pulling the world together and glowing with the allure of the real thing; there are, instead, scattered nodules competing for our attention” (275).

Hoffman is searching, through words, for her “blank white center” (275), but paradoxically, it is only through black marks transgressing this white space that any story can be written at all. As this article has shown, what Hoffman does in her memoir is inscribe Poland onto a

transatlantically produced Canadian and American literary landscape. She asserts connections and disruptions between all three countries, relocating specific geography within a linguistic and emotional geography, juxtaposing for instructive comparison the worlds inside—and outside—the text.

### Notes

- 1 Hoffman followed publication of *Lost in Translation* with her travel memoir *Exit into History: A Journey through New Eastern Europe*, an account of her return to Poland after the fall of Communism. The book begins by noting that “Poland has taken a leap away from me, not in distance, but in time” (1), indicating Hoffman’s continuing engagement with emotional rather than literal geographies of place. She has also published *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World* and *After Such Knowledge: Where Memory of the Holocaust Ends and History Begins*, as well as one novel, *The Secret*, and various essays, including “The New Nomads” in Aciman’s *Letters of Transit*.
- 2 After the Soviet invasion, German soldiers occupied Lvov in the Second World War. It was the site of several pogroms, and by 1942 more than 65,000 Jewish occupants had been deported from the Lvov ghetto and murdered. Political changes two years after the publication of Hoffman’s text now situates Lvov within the independent Ukraine.
- 3 The question comes originally from Northrop Frye: “It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some riddle such as ‘Where is here?’” (220).
- 4 See, for example, the Vintage editions of *After Such Knowledge*, *Shtetl*, and *Exit into History*.
- 5 Just as I have cut some of the words Karpinski quotes. The missing words are as follows: “I no longer want to tell people quaint stories from the Old Country, I don’t want to be told that ‘exotic is erotic,’ or that I have Eastern European intensity, or brooding Galician eyes. I no longer want to be propelled by immigrant chutzpah or desperado energy or usurper’s ambition” (Hoffman 202).
- 6 This discussion can be compared with Josef Skvorecky’s exploration of nations, in his novel *The Engineer of Human Souls*, where he writes, “I also know about their real country, the one they carry in their hearts” (299), referring to immigrants’ views of their native Czechoslovakia, or to Hoffman’s own *Exit into History*, where, visiting an impoverished part of Warsaw, she is told she is visiting Poland’s Harlem.
- 7 Hoffman notes in *Exit into History* that for the “new” Eastern Europe, engagement with the “West,” for example, includes both Japan and Hong Kong (25),

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revealing again the contingency of meaning that is not necessarily connected to geographical “reality.”

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## Dirty Snow

Michael Aird

It wasn't what you said so much as how  
You got across what you had wanted  
to  
Since day one. The loudspeaker broke  
up,  
So I felt sorry for you in that sense.  
Somehow you knew everyone  
understood  
What you meant nonetheless—which  
made  
Repetition seem out of place. Words  
were  
Falling all around their intended use;  
If you raised your voice it was only  
because  
That was as white as any truth.

I kept an inventory of these things  
That happen to us, as though putting  
names  
To a past tense smoothes over a certain  
Anxiety. My photography album  
Says: "happiness" or "the long wait."  
Here's my dog's spot—which is also  
Luckily what he is called. There is  
A favorite bush he likes to mix it up  
with  
And keeps coming back to. If only  
Everything else worked out so well.

On second thought it is the blank spaces  
I like the best, the ones that don't  
Ask too much. It's been some times  
since  
You threw a question out, to catch us  
Off-guard I guess—except it's no longer

A matter of fact/response anyway,  
When I tried so hard to be that  
complex  
Manual on climactic forms of doubt.  
Other layers added to the depth.  
If it couldn't be the same old stuff,  
You wanted whatever you meant by  
*fresh*.

My dog is tired of the arrangement  
and  
Saunters off. He is looking for new  
ways  
To get a leg up—but all he got was  
lost.  
Luckily for me I still have  
His photograph to show friends from  
time to time.  
That's what I made out through the  
crackle and the hiss,  
Besides the fact the kids packed it in  
And went home for a hot drink. These  
were all  
Signs that something better might  
come along

Perhaps. I couldn't deny you that  
much.  
It seems we have the same ideas, just  
A different approach. No one was  
there though  
By the time we arrived, but I thought  
We planned it like that. Despite  
abundance,  
We made our own angels out of what  
was left.

## Of Houses and Canons: Reading the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

Arnab Chakladar

As South Asian fiction has come to be globally available, lauded, read and studied an informal canon of sorts has come into being. The names of certain writers recur so often in course descriptions and in the titles of journal articles, conference papers and book chapters that lay readers might be forgiven for thinking that other writers, if they are available, must not be worth reading. Of the contemporary writers in English who are in a sense excluded from this unofficial canon the most peculiar case may be that of Shashi Deshpande, who is in fact a globally celebrated and available writer. Her novels have been translated into multiple European languages, have won India's highest literary prizes, and have been reprinted in the United States by the Feminist Press;<sup>1</sup> Deshpande, a famously reserved person, has herself in recent years become more visible in the Indian literary scene, serving on the juries of major awards, and publicly taking issue with such global luminaries as V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie.<sup>2</sup> However, the critical attention paid in the western academy to her large body of work (her short stories began appearing in the early 1970s and she has published nine novels since 1980) is remarkably slim.<sup>3</sup> In this article I will attempt to both account for this inattention in the western academy and highlight some of the reasons why Deshpande should be studied and taught more extensively than she is today. In particular, I will examine her engagement with issues of women's inheritance and property rights, particularly in her seventh novel, *A Matter of Time* (1996). Such an engagement itself requires from critics a parallel engagement of their own with issues more locally situated than those that structure the emerging canon of Indian literature in general, and in particular the construction of an idea of Indian women's literature.

The history of women's writing in India goes back many centuries, and occurs in a number of languages.<sup>4</sup> The western academy's interac-

tion with this body of work to date has, however, centered almost entirely on post-Independence fiction in English.<sup>5</sup> More precisely, it seems to be given over to the study of novels by a handful of women writers, who include, chronologically, Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa,<sup>6</sup> and more recently Arundhati Roy.<sup>7</sup> These are, of course, very different writers of variable talent and their careers and receptions, too, have been quite diverse. I would argue, however, that there are certain thematic similarities and trajectories in their work that may help account for at least the arc of academic interest in their writings. These similarities, I would further argue, are emblematic of the ways in which Indian Women's Literature as an academic category has come to be defined. Anita Desai's critical and academic history perhaps is the best entryway into this issue. Desai is one of the best-known Indian writers and her work has received much greater critical<sup>8</sup> and popular success, as evidenced by three Booker prize finalists to date—*Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting/Feasting* (1999)—as well as an Ivory-Merchant film adaptation (*In Custody*). Her career's trajectory is very telling. While her international fame rests on her output in the 1980s she had in fact published five novels before *Clear Light of Day*. Her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* was published in 1963 and she remained relatively prolific throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>9</sup> If she was relatively unknown outside India before the success of *Clear Light of Day*, she was already considered a prominent writer within India, with *Fire on the Mountain* receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award<sup>10</sup> for English in 1977. With a few exceptions here and there, however, the interest by the western academy in Desai's work post *Clear Light of Day* has not extended back to her earlier output.

At the risk of a certain amount of over-generalization it seems safe to say that *Clear Light of Day* marks, if not a complete, at least a significant thematic break in Desai's writing. Where the earlier novels are focused almost entirely on the interior landscape of their female protagonists, *Clear Light of Day* marks, in the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, "a widening out of human concerns and a willingness to integrate concrete historical and specific cultural dimensions in the creation of interior landscape" (qtd. in Pathak 39). Her subsequent novels extend this jour-

ney out, so to speak, with *In Custody* expanding her horizon of interest to a larger swath of Indian culture and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting/Feasting* taking on an even larger international geography. I do not mean to imply by this that it is only the changing physical landscape of her novels that has in some way mediated her academic reception; though it may, to a large extent, explain her relatively increased popular international success.<sup>11</sup> The explanation of the status of *Clear Light of Day* in metropolitan postcolonial criticism and syllabi, however, lies I think in the fact that it, more than any other of her novels, is available to be read as a national allegory. I do not wish at this point to go in too much detail into the controversy over Fredric Jameson's contention<sup>12</sup> that in third world texts, "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture or society" (69). I agree with Christine Prentice, and other critics, that as a frame for analyzing any postcolonial literature Jameson's thesis is severely flawed.<sup>13</sup> However, I invoke this argument here because it seems to me that when it comes to studying Indian literature, precisely those texts, which continue to be privileged, are those that are more available to such allegorizing. This situation is particularly exacerbated in the case of fiction by and about Indian women. I would argue that this susceptibility to allegorizing is one of the threads that links Desai and Sidhwa and explains why some of their novels have occupied prominent places in the postcolonial canon and others have not. Similarly, the attention to Kamala Markandeya's and Nayantara Sahgal's novels in earlier moments of Commonwealth/post-colonial criticism cannot be separated from the fact that almost all their novels focus on either the colonial encounter or the crisis of the post-independence Indian nation state. In all these novels, be it *Clear Light of Day*, Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955), *Cracking India* or Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985), it is impossible to separate the psychological narrative from a narrative of the Indian nation state.<sup>14</sup>

This is not to suggest that in a sense Jameson is in fact correct in describing third world texts as always operating in some register as national allegories, but to point to a process of self-selection. I want to stress here that what keeps this logic alive is text-choice. Routinely

writers, and texts by writers, that do not locate their narratives in relation to national allegories or “East/West” encounters or a transnational subjectivity,<sup>15</sup> are marginalized or ignored.<sup>16</sup> There is, of course, nothing wrong with studying these issues. In the case of Indian literature, however, operating only in these frameworks means that literary criticism endlessly, surreptitiously reproduces the Indian nation state. As a result the Indian woman, it appears, is doomed to be handcuffed, like Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai, to History with a capital H: if the gendered analysis of nationalism seeks to disrupt the metaphors of nation, woman nonetheless is studied only in the context of a particular subset of those metaphors. It should be clear that I am not postulating that it is possible to make a break with discourses of the Indian nation or colonialism while reading any Indian literature. However, I do feel that attempts to destabilize the foundational claims of this nation can only be successful by expanding the field of responses to it to include not just texts that are emblematic of the nation (*Clear Light of Day*, *Cracking India*) but also texts that deny it representational primacy. Since in everyday life the nation state does not function merely at a spectacular level, as critics it should be of interest to us to read texts that engage with gender and nation not just in political but also in cultural terms. It is in this spirit that I present my discussion of Shashi Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time*, and in particular her treatment in that novel of issues of women’s inheritance and property rights. I offer this reading not in an attempt to present/recover Deshpande as a more appropriately representative Indian woman writer,<sup>17</sup> but to demonstrate the ways in which she negotiates, often contradictorily, the capillary relationships between the modern nation, traditional culture and middle-class women. Deshpande rarely references the nation or its History; her novels operate at not the macro but the micro-political level to interrogate the dialogic relationship of the past and the, largely oppressive, physical present of Indian women. She addresses head-on the contradictions in the articulation of middle-class Indian womanhood caught between the demands of tradition and modernity, yet locates at least part of her critique outside of the terrain of the postcolonial nation-state. By eschewing allegory Deshpande enables us to read women not

as mirrors or containers *of* the nation (or its limits) but *in* the nation, in search of agency.

*A Matter of Time* has a number of thematic continuities with Deshpande's earlier novels, in particular her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and her Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *That Long Silence* (1988). In all these novels the more immediate crisis of Deshpande's heroine, that of her marriage and conjugal family, is in a sense the more apparent symptom of a larger cultural malaise that affects the extended natal family. Deshpande's protagonists cannot be understood outside the context of their families, and likewise their path to true selfhood passes through the project of rebuilding their relationships with their families. Thus in all these novels Deshpande often drops us into a bewildering multi-generational network of family members and relatives. For some critics this constitutes narrative confusion. Shakuntala Bharwani, for instance, ascribes the difficulty of reading *That Long Silence* to the fact that "several characters appear and disappear and serve no ostensible purpose," and notes of her earlier novel *Roots and Shadows* (1983) that even the presence of a family tree does little to clarify matters (150). These difficulties seem to me to be part of the point. Apart from demanding the reader's careful attention, what Deshpande accomplishes with this complicated structure is to make her reader literally confront the dense network of family ties that bind traditional Hindu society in general and her protagonists in particular. And it is not just family members and kinship ties but also family homes that need to be kept in mind. Indeed, much of the action in her novels takes place in either her protagonists' natal homes or in substitutes for them. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* we see glimpses of Sarita's married life in flashbacks but the bulk of the narrative, and the novel's present, is set in her parental home. Similarly, Jaya's married life in *That Long Silence* is alluded to but the action is set not in the Bombay flat rented by her husband, but in a flat in the suburbs that has come to her from her natal family. And, in *A Matter of Time* as well, the action begins in Sumi and Gopal's home but moves immediately to her parents' home to which Sumi returns with her daughters when Gopal walks out on them. One of the effects of these moves, as Ritu Menon has noted, is to place the protagonist's story liter-

ally in the context of her family's past.<sup>18</sup> I would argue further that the family homes do not function merely as points of connection for the stories of different generations; rather, they are the literal sites of Deshpande's protagonists' negotiations of their places in their families. They come home not just to take their place in the larger family drama but also to literally inherit their places in their homes and by extension in the family. Thus in the case of Sarita, her parents' home serves not just as a refuge from her abusive husband and loveless marriage but as the place that she must reclaim as her own. Her coming into her own at the end of the novel, expressed in terms of her new found sense of self-worth as a doctor, which frees her from the fear of confronting her husband, is likewise twinned with her finally reclaiming her family home and her place in the family. Her move forward into self-reliance is not presented as a step out of her family; rather, the novel presents the process through which Sarita finally becomes the daughter of the house. At the start of the novel she begins her stay by cleaning out her dead mother's room and in the course of the narrative makes peace both with her mother and her father, and also, in the surrogate form of her father's lodger Madhav, with her dead brother Dhruva. The novel ends with Sarita still in her parents' house—it is there that she will finally confront her husband. Sarita's self-discovery, while it will likely take her back outside the walls of her parents' home, is nonetheless predicated on her finally inheriting her place in it. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was Deshpande's first novel and is arguably the most interior of all her narratives. While this interiority has the effect of giving it perhaps the most visceral impact of all her novels, it also has the limitation locating Sarita's problems and their resolutions almost entirely on a psychological plane. Thus the physical violence that her husband visits upon her almost becomes a metaphor, with marital rape signifying the downfall of an unequal marriage in which the wife is more successful than the husband and the primary earner; if Deshpande indicts a social structure which is implicitly grounded on male dominance, the possibility of legal intervention is nonetheless not entertained. Deshpande's later novels, however, move increasingly outward in their social affiliations. For Jaya in *That Long Silence* the issue of the daughter's place in the family is also fraught, if not to the same

degree as it is for Sarita. Despite being her father's favorite as a child, Jaya is all too aware that women have a lower place in traditional Hindu families. On a visit to her ancestral home after her marriage she is shown a two hundred year old family tree that her uncle has created. When she points out that she is not included in it, he retorts that she is now a part of her husband Mohan's family; a view that is endorsed later by Mohan. In what represents a widening out of Deshpande's protagonists' affiliations, Jaya wonders why then it is that her aunts, her mother and her grandmother, all of who married into her father's family, are not represented in it either. Furthermore for Jaya, unlike Sarita, this question of having a place in one's natal family is not just psychological but also a question of physical inheritance. If Sarita has to literally come home to her parents, Jaya, as the exchange about family trees insinuates, is no longer a part of her extended family and cannot lay claim to her ancestral home. As a result, in *That Long Silence* the role of the natal home as scene of the protagonist's self-discovery is transferred onto a family flat in Bombay, whose ownership, as it turns out, is itself a site of family conflict. Jaya's mother gives her dead brother's Bombay flat to her oldest son Dinkar, who lives in the United States, instead of to Jaya, who lives in Bombay and may actually have use for it.<sup>19</sup> Jaya's resentment initially causes her to resist living in the flat when she and Mohan first come to Bombay. Eventually, though, it does revert to Jaya, since her brother recognizes the injustice and cedes his claim to it to her. And when a scandal at work requires that Mohan lie low, they retreat to this flat where the bulk of the novel's narrative is set. Deshpande at this point transfers the location of conflict over ownership, so that the flat becomes not a metaphor of Jaya's conflicted relationship with her natal family but instead becomes the literal site of Jaya's conflict within her own marriage. We see nothing of Jaya and Mohan's affluent Churchgate flat that is linked to Mohan's job. The novel begins with Jaya and Mohan ascending the stairs to her family's Dadar flat, and the bulk of the narrative is set there. It is clear from the beginning that the flat is not a shared marital space, it is very much Jaya's dominion: she controls the keys, and unlike Mohan, who is put off by the dirt of the building and the neighborhood and the cramped quarters inside, Jaya is completely at home in it. More impor-

tantly, in her family's flat Jaya is presented only as a woman and a writer, not as a mother or housewife: her children are absent, on vacation with another family, and if Mohan's work woes have stripped him of his authority as head of the family, this is stressed as well by his diminished status in Jaya's flat; halfway through the novel Mohan literally leaves the flat and the novel's narrative. If Jaya's claims on her family home and its surrogate are conflicted, it is nonetheless only there that she can shed her social role as mother and wife and come into her own as a woman.

As I noted above, there is something of a slippage in Deshpande's narrative of the question of women's inheritance in this novel. The questions that Jaya asks—Why aren't daughters part of their family trees after marriage? Why do sons and their families inherit everything?—are social in scope, but Deshpande deals with them largely as part of family politics and in any case shunts the whole issue into the matter of giving Jaya, not just a room but a home of her own, where she can be free of all the burdens of family and domesticity and resolve her identity crisis. The fact that this location itself is a contested zone for her natal family adds a layer to the story but is not really foregrounded as part of Jaya's crisis, which is played out largely in terms of her marriage. The facile resolution of the conflict over the Dadar flat's ownership represents Deshpande's sudden shying away from a social resolution of issues that are once again consigned to the realm of the personal.<sup>20</sup> Jaya's coming into her own is presented as a synthesis of both parts of her identity: she no longer has to keep silent the part of her that yearned for individual self-expression in order to be a good wife. She becomes finally both the writer and the wife she wants to be. However, her dissatisfactions with her place in her natal family are left unattended. Deshpande's seventh novel *A Matter of Time* (1996) is, however, a different story.<sup>21</sup> In this novel the larger social contexts of the questions of family, property, men's rights and women's claims are very much in the forefront.<sup>22</sup>

The novel is divided into three parts, and the first part is titled "The House." Indeed, the novel begins with a lengthy description of the house in question, "The Big House," the ancestral home of the protagonist Sumi:

The house is called Vishwas, named not as one would imagine for the abstract quality of trust, but after an ancestor, the man who came down South with the Peshwa's invading army and established the family there. The name, etched into a stone tablet set in the wall, seems to be fading into itself, the process of erosion having made it almost indecipherable. And yet the house proclaims the meaning of its name by its very presence, its solidity. It is obvious that it was built by a man not just for himself, but for his sons and his son's sons. (3)

The house's foundational story and its stated purpose—as one built for sons—are immediately inverted by Deshpande: when the first character is introduced we learn it is the daughter, “Kalyani, whose father built the house” (5), who is the owner. As we quickly come to see, the “Big House” is inhabited almost entirely by women. Deshpande subtly contrasts the family's written history with the lived presence in its embodiment, the house. Thus in the family history “[O]f the women, there is nothing. They are only an absence, still waiting to be discovered” (95). The house's story, however, is completely that of its women—a story that spans four generations. The one man who resides in the house is Kalyani's husband, who lives alone in a room attached to the top of the house and who has not spoken to his wife in many decades. Presiding over the house is the picture of Kalyani's mother Manorama, whose husband built the house. Kalyani herself still lives in the house, in which she was raised with her cousin Goda who is still a frequent visitor. The latest inhabitants are Kalyani's daughter Sumi, and Sumi's daughters Aru, Charu and Seema—all of whom return to their ancestral home when Sumi's husband Gopal suddenly abandons them.

When Gopal's renunciation of his family makes staying in their own rented house unviable for Sumi, a housewife, she initially conceives of her move to her parents' house as a temporary one. Her subsequent, frustrating search for an affordable home for her daughters and herself mirrors an earlier anxiety, that of her grandmother, Manorama. The one character in the novel whose story is told entirely in the past tense, Manorama was the eldest daughter of a poor village priest who was

transformed through an unusual schooling into a young woman who caught the eye of a rich man from Bangalore as a potential wife for his son. Manorama's transition through marriage to a life of wealth, however, resulted in a great fear of the possibility of returning to poverty and she "ruthlessly cut herself off from her family after her marriage" (120); the only family member she supported directly was her much younger brother, who had been born after her marriage and rendered motherless soon after. This younger brother of Manorama is Shripati, Kalyani's uncle who her mother prevailed upon, as repayment of all he owed her, to marry her daughter. This tale, that is recounted elliptically by Kalyani and Goda to Aru and Charu, leaves out the reason for the marriage: Manorama's fear that her new found property will move out of her family. The root of this fear lays in the fact that Manorama and Vithalrao did not have a son. Manorama's "failure," after a series of miscarriages that ruled out further births, to provide a son led to family pressure on Vithalrao to marry again or adopt a son. While Vithalrao, like his father, not ruled by tradition, refused, choosing instead to leave his property to his daughter, this was scant consolation for Manorama:

Manorama, who had been terrified her husband would marry again, never got over this fear. It was as if that deprived childhood, which she so resolutely ignored, was always close to her, so close that a nudge was enough to push her back into it. To add to her insecurity, that main crutch, the one most women depended on, a son, was denied to her. All that she had was a daughter, Kalyani, who would get married and become a part of another family. (128)

Kalyani was always a disappointment to her mother, first and foremost for not being a son, and when she developed a crush as a schoolgirl on a young man, her mother in rage and panic put an end to her schooling and married her off to her uncle, Shripati. As the narrator puts it, "[P]erhaps, after this, Manorama felt secure. The property would remain in the family now. Her family" (129).

This story is overlaid in the novel with an account of Gopal's nephew Ramesh offering Sumi money from Gopal's share of the sale of a family

flat in Bombay—money that would be enough to finance a new home for Sumi and her daughters. Sumi, however, refuses; not out of pride, but because she wants to find a job, and support her daughters herself, without charity. Deshpande's twinning of Sumi and Manorama's stories not only highlights the different choice that Sumi is able to make for her daughters than Manorama could for Kalyani, it also signifies a refusal to resolve the social dilemma through a personal *deus ex machina*. Manorama's stratagem keeps Vithalrao and her property in her daughter's family but unwittingly condemns Kalyani to an empty, unhappy marriage. Sumi, on the other hand, keeps her daughters un beholden to anyone and able to make their own choices. A further echoing of earlier family stories is represented by the lack of sons in every generation. While Manorama and Sumi do not have sons, Kalyani and Shripati did have a baby boy, who was born retarded, and in tragic circumstances, was lost by Kalyani in a crowded train station. This event, the cause of Shripati's choice to abandon his wife and his refusal to speak to her after his return years later, is mirrored at the end of the novel when Kalyani loses another child. Sumi's death at this point in the story, at the point at which she has finally found a job, achieved independence from the demands of both her conjugal and natal families, is difficult to interpret. Menon ponders whether it may be an acknowledgement of the idea that, for women, consciousness and articulation of their situations might be rewarded with death. I would argue, however, that this represents a break in both the family's and Deshpande's stories. For the traffic accident that kills Sumi also kills Shripati, and after the deaths Goda and Kalyani, lying awake in the house, hear "a strange sound, as if the house has exhaled its breath and shaken itself before settling down into a different rhythm of breathing" (236). This "different rhythm of breathing" finds its expression in Sumi's eldest daughter Aru. When Sumi dies it is Aru who consoles Kalyani, saying: "I'm your daughter, Amma, I'm your son" (244). I read this declaration and the glimpses the narrator gives us of Aru's future success as a feminist lawyer as a conscious stepping out from cultural narratives that revolve around (absent) men. Aru's story will also take place in the "Big House" but it will be one no longer weighed down by the narratives of the past. The mooring of all these

narratives in the “Big House” and in the context of women’s relationships to property is key to Deshpande’s success in this novel. Aru’s affinity for the law, which initially develops out of a desire to find some way to make her father accountable, her apprenticeship under a women’s rights lawyer, and the fact that Shripati himself was a lawyer, also draw our attention to Deshpande’s location of Sumi and her family’s stories in a larger social context. And if the plot of *A Matter of Time* perhaps seems a little baroque, it becomes evident from a consideration of the history of Indian family law and women’s inheritance rights that this is not really so. Hindu widows gained an equal right to their husbands’ properties in 1937, but only for the course of their own lives (the property would return to their husbands’ male heirs upon their deaths).<sup>23</sup> While the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 made sweeping changes, allowing widows absolute ownership of their husbands’ property and allowing daughters equal rights as sons in the property of both parents, many inequalities remain. The most glaring of these is the fact that there are separate lists of heirs for inheriting from men and women. Thus a mother can inherit an equal share of her son’s property as a Class 1 heir but her daughter can inherit only after the heirs of her husband. A provision allowing property inherited by a woman from her father to devolve to her father’s heirs in the absence of her own heirs is counterbalanced by a provision that property inherited from a husband or father-in-law shall devolve in the absence of her own heirs to the heirs of the husband. A daughter can inherit a share of her father’s joint family property but this remains a smaller share than that of a son who inherits both as an heir and as a direct member of the joint family. Another provision of the Act that maintains the definition of family and family property through the male line allows sons but not daughters the privilege of demanding a partition of property owned by either of the parents. While some states have taken steps to rectify this situation, other forms of this bias towards keeping property within the male line continue. For example, there is no distinction made between daughters, married or unmarried, as Class I heirs of family natal property, but when it comes to residence rights married daughters, unlike single, widowed or divorced daughters, have none. Thus women who may be in abusive marriages or who may have

been abandoned or fled their married homes have no rights of residence in their natal family home. This continues to be the legal situation today.

While Deshpande does not actively foreground this legal history I would argue that it is against it that we have to read *A Matter of Time*. And when we do the family melodrama of its plot extends to a larger social canvas, and the interiority of Deshpande's narrative is thrown into sharp relief. I am not suggesting that Deshpande's novels are most profitably read when revealed to be "national allegories." In any case, what Deshpande is interested in is not nation but culture and tradition, and the ways in which they contradictorily locate/limit the middle-class woman. And her novels make clear that these narratives of culture and tradition are not collapsible into those of the postcolonial Indian nation but in fact predate and extend beyond them. While on the one hand this often leads in her fiction to the kind of disregard for collective social action that gives a critic such as Sundar Rajan pause, on the other her novels open up, often in contradictory and fragmentary ways,<sup>24</sup> fault-lines in Indian society that the texts of other, more celebrated, possibly more appropriately feminist, writers do not.<sup>25</sup> If Deshpande's novels rarely resolve all the narrative and social tensions they uncover this should be read not simply as evidence of aesthetic limitation or faulty politics, but as suggestive of the constitutive contradictions of those tensions. Furthermore, by de-emphasizing the nation and its structures, Deshpande opens up a very particular space for her characters, one in which they are not simply metaphors for or symptoms of a national failure. It is this particularity of Deshpande's narratives that sets them apart from those of many of her contemporaries who have been included in the unofficial canon of South Asian writers I referred to at the beginning of this article. However, one might wonder if it is also part of the reason for her exclusion from it. While the factors governing text-selection are doubtless varied, the hallmarks of Deshpande's novels are quite different from those of most of the South Asian women writers who have been and are read, taught and written about more frequently in the western academy: her novels are set in and have to be read in very particular cultural locations, and her narratives rarely include any pan-national, let alone international encounters. I would reiterate that

I am not arguing that Deshpande's narrative concerns make her a more appropriate or representative Indian writer or that Deshpande or any other Indian writer only receives her true due when she is "discovered" or "recovered" by the postcolonial critical apparatus. However, the very local concerns of a writer such as Deshpande, her very lack of a global address in her style or themes, unsettle the configurations of "India" and "Indian Literature" that are willy-nilly created by the seemingly unconscious act of text-selection. And the introduction of such writers and their themes and formal concerns in discussions of Indian literature and culture seems all the more important for this reason. Her writings not only expand our understanding of Indian women's literature, or of representations of women's agency, but also expand our understanding of the complex relationships that mediate community and tradition, culture and nation, and of Indian literature as a whole.

### Notes

- 1 Deshpande's fifth novel, *That Long Silence*, won the Sahitya Akademi Award. The Feminist Press reissued her next two novels, *The Binding Vine* and *A Matter of Time*. European languages her novels have been translated into include Finnish, Russian, German, Italian, Danish and Dutch. Within India her novels have been translated into Urdu, Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada.
- 2 Deshpande famously challenged V.S Naipaul's comments about Indian writers' alleged obsession with colonialism at the the celebrated International Festival of Indian Literature outside New Delhi in 2002; (for a description of the incident see: <[http://www1.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/cms.dll/articleshow?art\\_id=1899551](http://www1.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/cms.dll/articleshow?art_id=1899551)>). In 2000 Salman Rushdie took issue with her role on the panel for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, citing her presence as "the spectre at the feast" as the reason for the award going to J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace* rather than his own *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (for a description of the incident see: <<http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20010420&fname=shashi&sid=1&pn=10#1>>).
- 3 The MLA bibliography, for instance, returns a paltry 16 hits for Deshpande and most of these are in Indian collections. Compare this with 721 hits for Salman Rushdie, 167 hits for Anita Desai, and even 54 hits for Arundhati Roy and her one novel. Compare also to the very different estimation of Deshpande in India where articles on her book comprise two and a half volumes of the five volumes in Set 1 of the *Indian Women Novelists* series and where a number

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of her books have won awards. Josna Rege's *Colonial Karma* is one of the few recent monographs on Indian fiction that devotes a chapter to Deshpande.

- 4 See the first volume of *Women Writing in India*.
- 5 Gayatri Spivak's sustained work on and with Mahashweta Devi is a notable exception.
- 6 Sidhwa is, of course, Pakistani in origin, but her novel *Ice-Candy Man* (published in the US as *Cracking India*) set during Partition is invoked often in analyses of gender and Indian nationalism. A later novel set in the United States does not seem to have attracted as much attention.
- 7 Once again, a rough measure of this claim can be obtained by querying the MLA bibliography, or indeed by looking at the tables of contents of monographs on Indian literature in the last few decades.
- 8 This is true both in India and abroad. For instance, in addition to the 167 hits in the MLA database mentioned above, two and a half volumes of the five volumes in Set 1 of the *Indian Women Novelists* series are given over to discussions of Desai's novels whereas Markandeya and Sahgal do not even get one article devoted solely to their fiction.
- 9 Her other novels in this period include *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1974) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977).
- 10 The Sahitya Akademi Award is India's highest literary award, given each year to work in each of 22 Indian languages.
- 11 Desai herself thinks the increased interest she's received in the USA is due largely to her novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* and has occurred "not because of its Indian material but because of its Jewish material" (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 168–69).
- 12 See Jameson.
- 13 See Prentice's critique of Jameson.
- 14 Interestingly, *Cracking India* was published in India and Pakistan under the title *Ice-Candy Man*. Presumably subcontinental audiences did not need an "Indian" marker in the title. Similarly the film adaptation by the Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta was titled *Earth*.
- 15 These are the other thematic similarities (in varying degrees) between texts by Markandeya, Sahgal, Desai and Sidhwa that have made it onto the Commonwealth/postcolonial curriculum.
- 16 Thus it is not just literature in languages other than English that remain marginalized but even literature in English that is not definitive of Indian-ness in institutional terms.
- 17 The argument made in this essay could just as easily be made on behalf of a writer such as Githa Hariharan or even the late Shama Futehally.
- 18 See her afterword to the Feminist Press edition of *A Matter of Time*.

- 19 This is a repetition of an earlier betrayal: Jaya's maternal grandmother had left most of her jewelry not to her daughter (Jaya's mother) or to Jaya, her only grand-daughter, but to her only son's wife; the one piece that she had left to Jaya's mother—"the least valuable of her jewels," as her mother refers to them (112)—was in turn promised to Jaya's daughter but given finally to Jaya's sister-in-law.
- 20 It is this kind of a maneuver that leads Rajeswari Sundar Rajan to find *That Long Silence* to be overly individualized and family-oriented in its evocation and resolution of the problems of Indian women and, therefore, inadequate as a feminist critique. Also see Varma for a sympathetic reading of Deshpande's novel in terms of the negotiation of gender identity and urban space in Bombay, and a critique of Rajan's reading.
- 21 I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Deshpande is the only contemporary Indian writer whose novels thematize issues to do with women's inheritance. For a discussion of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in the context of her mother's pioneering legal battle against the Syrian Christian Church for property rights, see Natarajan.
- 22 Josna Rege goes over all three of these novels as well in her chapter on Deshpade and Githa Hariharan. Rege's analysis, however, centers on the de/re-coding of traditional narratives of womanhood in these novels.
- 23 For a more detailed account of the history of this Act and relevant colonial legal policy see Sarkar.
- 24 As should be apparent from my readings of the novels under discussion here, while the question of property rights clearly erupts in many of her novels she rarely articulates a clear position on the larger issue, and nor does she explicitly thematize it.
- 25 Varma notes of Rajan's critique of *That Long Silence* that it "forecloses an engagement with the gaps and contradictions in the narratives of middle-class Indian women that are revealed in the novel" (43).

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## **Call for Papers**

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Christian Moraru. *Memorious Discourse: Reprise and Representation in Postmodernism*. Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2005. Pp. 282. \$52.50 cloth.

Forty years later, it's easy to forget that the earliest accounts of postmodern fiction as "apocalyptic," "absurdist," "black-humorous," or "pop-cultural" understated, if not overlooked, its preoccupation with problems of representation. This shortcoming was largely corrected in the late 70s/early 80s with the ascendancy of what we may call the metafictionist paradigm. Larry McCaffery, Robert Scholes, Christine Brooke-Rose, Patricia Waugh and others, building on the insights of structuralism and narratology, explained how postmodern fiction self-reflexively registered the essential disjunction between literary representation and the world it purported to describe. Subsequently, the paradigm underwent innumerable adjustments to accommodate an ever-expanding range of multiculturalist, political, and poststructuralist concerns. All the same, to this day, the core premise of metafictionist criticism remains indispensable to most commentary on postmodern fiction: "All writing, all composition is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poesis. No recording. Only constructing" (Scholes 7). And although this (classical) view of mimesis has since been questioned, the metafictionist idea that reality is necessarily grasped in textual form, that life and history make sense only insofar as discourse narrates them into shapely (even novelistic) patterns, still holds. But such overworked formulae elide an important distinction. Typically, we settle for the "slack" version of the representation/reality relation: reality is so much raw material creatively processed or constituted by our discourses. Less often, the "taut" version of this relation obtains: representation engages with a reality that is itself pre-codified; as Derrida puts it, "The so-called 'thing-itself' is always-already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence" (49). Moraru's achievement is that *Memorious Discourse* probes the literary, philosophical, and ideological implications of this latter relation at a range and depth well beyond the usual accounts of intertextuality, simulation, and decentered meaning in postmodern fiction. Here, I should add, one often reads such poststructuralist approaches to postmodern fiction feeling that the concepts of the former are somewhat tentatively grafted onto the latter. However, given Moraru's firm purchase on theory (as evidenced by his fine-grained discussions of Derrida, De Man, Levinas, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Lacoue-Labarthe), one could not ask for a tighter fit between poststructuralism and the fiction it seeks to illuminate.

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Inspired by Borges' short story, "Funes the Memorious," Moraru reconceptualizes postmodernism as "memorious discourse": "Funes's sprawling memory provides me with a trope of postmodern discourse as *representation that operates digressively, and conspicuously so, through other representations*" (22). This metaphor encapsulates the "interrelational nature of postmodern representation, its quintessential intertextuality" (22). The inherently memorious nature of discourse becomes "dominant and distinctive in postmodernism" (24). Indeed, throughout this study, Moraru maintains his sharp focus on the ineluctable fact of intertextuality: "all representations cannot but incorporate previous efforts to interpret, imagine ... the world" (17); "the context is always-already textualized, comes somehow pre-represented..." (164). All textual production turns out to be re-textualization; the "reality" we see has already been fashioned by our culture's representations of it.

This model of an exitless textuality may well suggest entrapment in the proverbial prison-house of language and lend support to the recurrent charge that postmodernism is essentially ahistorical and oblivious to socio-political matters. Moraru, however, invoking his critical metaphor, refutes the charge: "[T]he memorious constitution of the world, the world's intertextual 'packaging'" (164), ensures that postmodern representation "collapses the distance" between text and world, providing for the latter's representability. Postmodern fiction is eminently suited to represent a world which is itself "pregnant with fiction" (193). Thus, to indict postmodernism for its alleged irrelevance to history and the political is to adhere to an outdated, Aristotelian model of mimesis; after all, in a world replete with texts and stories, mimesis in its "imitative-specular sense" (19) must be abandoned in favor of a sense of mimesis which, in the postmodern era, obtains through intertextuality. Moreover, Moraru forestalls possible accusations of excessive textualism by continually appealing (in the spirit of Bakhtin, Foucault, the New Historicists) to the socio-historical nature of discourse: historicity as embedded in texts; language as ideologically animated-issues especially foregrounded in Chapter 2, where he discusses the politics of naming. Whence, representation is necessarily a matter of cultural dialogue; memorious intertextuality opens a space for alternative "re-presentations," for critical reprise, of the (textualized) referent. Unavoidably, memorious discourse situates us in the domain of a culture's politics.

The critical operations of memorious discourse are examined in a variety of contexts: postmodern autobiography (Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak Memory*, Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, David Antin's *talking at the boundaries*); postmodern onomastics (Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star*, Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream*, Toni Morrison's *Song*

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of *Solomon*); posthumanist ethics (Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Mark Leyner's *Et Tu, Babe*, DeLillo's *White Noise*, Philip Roth's *The Breast*, Joseph McElroy's *Imp Plus*); the "enframing games" of postmodern ontology (Nabokov's "The Assistant Producer"); the postmodern sublime (DeLillo's *Mao II*, *White Noise*, *Libra*); transnational fiction in the age of globalization (Lee Siegel's *Love in a Dead Language*). It is testimony to the cogency of his thesis that Moraru can encompass such a diversity of issues and writers. Each chapter yields fresh insights and awakens us to the postmodern character of texts which, hitherto, we may not have thought of as postmodern (e.g. *Song of Solomon* or *The Breast*).

Moraru is a younger member of a distinguished group of Romanian expatriate scholars at work in the fields of postmodernism and critical theory. This cohort includes such notables as Matei Calinescu, Mihai Spariosu, Marcel Cornis-Pope, Virgil Nemoianu, and Toma Pavel. Many lived under Ceausescu's totalitarian administration when, given strict censorship laws, literary criticism served in a coded way as a forum for debating political and ideological issues. As Cornis-Pope has observed, "After 1963, criticism played a crucial role in the process of cultural de-Stalinization" (144). A growing dialogue with Western critical theory facilitated critiques of the ideological repression of the regime. The critique of socialist realism is particularly relevant here. The regime's vigorous defense of this monopolistic doctrine necessarily rested on faith in (if not cynical use of) the "mimesis paradigm"; that is to say, faith in the viability of "natural" and "transparent" representation. Accordingly, mimesis became a target of the radical, emancipatory criticism of a new (postmodern) generation of Romanian theorists. They readily embraced the anti-representational and intertextual dynamics of poststructuralism, and the anti-mimetic and self-reflexive aesthetics of postmodernism, as resources for challenging the ideology of mimesis.

*Memorious Discourse* may be read as another advance of Moraru's continuing ambitious project of exploring questions of representation/re-representation from the polemical perspectives of postmodernism and critical theory. His first book, *Poetica reflectarii (Poetics of Reflection; 1990)* is subtitled *Essay in the Archaeology of Mimesis*. In *Rewriting* (2001), he reads postmodern writers as undertaking the task of a critical rewriting of 19th-century American fiction, insofar as the myths and mystifications of the latter still constitute a potent ideological force in US culture. *Memorious Discourse* brings to light yet more philosophical and political issues in ways that disrupt our settled views of literary representation. It firmly establishes Moraru as a major voice in the field of literary-postmodernism scholarship, one to be ranked alongside those of Marcel Cornis-Pope, Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, Alan Wilde, Larry

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McCaffery, Joseph Tabbi, and Patrick O'Donnell. Rigorously argued and elegantly written, *Memorious Discourse* is sure to become, in Moraru's felicitous terminology, a key intertext in the cultural archive, one to which subsequent commentary on postmodern fiction will be memoriously indebted.

Paul Maltby

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Jennifer Blair, Daniel Coleman, Kate Higginson, Lorraine York, eds.  
*ReCalling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Literary and Cultural Production*. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2005. Pp. 412. \$34.95 pb.

Over the past few decades, scholars working on early Canadian texts may well have had reason to feel that their area of research has been unduly neglected within the field of Canadian literary studies. A lingering Modernist bias in Canadian literary culture against things Victorian, and the influence of post-1960s Canadian literary nationalism are two factors that have contributed to a general privileging, in many Canadian English departments, of contemporary writing over historically-based inquiries into older forms of cultural and literary production. As the editors of *ReCalling Early Canada* point out in their introduction, there are in Canada "no scholarly journals or professional associations dedicated to ... historical areas of research," or at least none that direct themselves specifically toward an audience grounded in the disciplines of English or Cultural Studies. It is this relative inattention to the study of early Canadian texts that this volume seeks to redress and it does so admirably.

The book is the product of a 2003 conference hosted by the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Not surprisingly,

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the essays testify to the impact of Cultural Studies upon English scholarship in recent years. Most contributors hold positions in English departments, yet their essays are not confined to strictly “literary” topics. Included, in addition to papers on poetry and fiction, are papers that consider the historical and cultural importance of paintings, carvings, letters, captivity narratives, family photos, journalism, census returns, and animals. While some readers may be unsympathetic to this kind of approach, for me, the scope of the collection made it exhilarating to read. Its well-written essays consider canonical figures such as Charles G.D. Roberts, Emily Carr, and Isabella Valancy Crawford alongside lesser known ones like Frederick Alexcee and Letitia Mactavish Hargrave in order to expose the kinds of suppressions and erasures upon which Canadian cultural nationalism is founded.

The de-naturalization of nationalist narratives of unity is itself the central unifying concern of the essays collected here, many of which approach Canadian texts produced during the so-called “nation-building era” of the late nineteenth century as sites that offer a privileged glimpse into the “gains and losses of the imposition of the nation—with its demands of cohesion and homogeneity—upon the many and various preoccupations of artists, writers, and cultural commentators” (xxvii). Scrutinizing its own complex involvement in the politics of recollection, the book positions itself amidst the recent controversy surrounding the teaching and researching of Canadian history, exposing, for example, historian Jack Granatstein’s lament for the “death” of Canadian history as instead a lament for the passing of a particular version of that history, namely, the version that celebrates British North America’s progress from colony to nation. The essays in *ReCalling Early Canada*, by contrast, collectively question this triumphalist narrative by utilizing a strategy, which the editors term an “embracing” of nation. That is, “they both turn to the nation as a privileged unit of analysis ... and critique ... the nation’s *braces*: those structures and mechanisms which gird, support, invigorate, and animate the nation” (xxvii).

Initiating discussion of the problematic relationship between historical work and nation-building work is Paul Hjartarson’s essay “Wedding ‘Native’ Culture to the ‘Modern’ State.” The paper focuses on the 1927 Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art as a foundational moment in Canadian art history, one that mobilized colonialist binaries of art vs. artefact, modern vs. primitive, in such a way as to establish Emily Carr as a central figure in a nationalist canon that excluded the work of so-called “old Tsimshyan half-breed” Frederick Alexcee (27). The distortions and appropriations of aboriginality that accompany the construction of Canadian national identity are examined in other essays including Cecily Devereux’s elegant analysis of how

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Crawford's celebrated long poem *Malcolm's Katie* affirms a colonialist ideology, using aboriginal myths not to represent aboriginal experience but instead to indigenize the white male settler by connecting him to his own "primitive" self (298). In her essay on *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear: The Life and Adventures of Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delaney*, Kate Higginson examines the way in which this dual captivity narrative mobilizes the rhetoric of the "colonial rape scare," feeding fears of First Nations men as threats to white settler women, justifying "the Dominion's territorial expansion and repression of the rights of First Nations peoples" in the years immediately following the North West Rebellion of 1885 (41). Kathleen Venema's paper reads the letters of Letitia Mactavish Hargrave, wife of Hudson's Bay Company officer James Hargrave, as a record of the domestic politics of fur-trade society, and addresses the consequences for aboriginal women of officers' post-1830 practice of enhancing their social status by bringing "genteel British wives" into Rupert's Land (147). Julia Emberley contributes a meditation on the photographic archive of the Royal British Columbia Museum as a site of representational violence that includes photographs of aboriginal families in such a way as to affirm the hegemony of the normative colonial bourgeois family.

The rest of the essays concern themselves with English-Canadian, French-Canadian, and (with Jennifer Blair's and Nick Mount's contributions) more broadly North American texts and cultural formations. To some extent, the selection contradicts the book's stated view of itself as a contribution toward a "new nationalism" grounded in heterogeneity (xxx). Readers looking for accounts of African-Canadian or Asian-Canadian experiences in "early Canada," for example, will be disappointed. This said, these chapters do not simply reinforce a tired mythology of "two founding nations." Andrea Cabajsky's paper on Napoleon Bourassa's *Jacques et Marie* emphasizes the importance of comparative studies of early Canadian historical fiction, the lack of which has, she argues, perpetuated a "'two solitudes' view of Canadian literary production that overlooks the genre's complicated internal dynamic of intercultural dialogue" (76). Historical fiction is also the focus of Robert David Stacey's excellent essay that questions the traditional estimation of romance as the dominant mode of early Canadian literature and reframes *The Golden Dog* and *Les Anciens Canadiens* as *pastoral* romances that "speak to a tradition of Canadian political compromise" (97). The remaining chapters are, for me, all highlights. Janice Fiamengo's paper on a selection of Sara Jeanette Duncan's newspaper writings brings much-needed attention to this underappreciated aspect of her work, and reveals Duncan's ambivalent engagement with the rhetoric of 1880s feminism. Anne Milne's chapter reads Federal Bill S-22, which declares *le petit cheval du fer* the national horse of Canada, as an

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ethically questionable imposition of a nationalist narrative that not only suppresses important bio-regional differences, but also compromises the horse's "biological essence" by appropriating it for symbolic use (212). Official attempts to read the horse's tough but gentle nature as somehow representative of an essentialized Canadian national character speak to a desire that is also addressed in Adam Carter's essay, a fascinating critique of how Charles G.D. Roberts' "Canada" and "An Ode for the Canadian Confederacy" trope the nation as a human (white, male) subject in a way that "falsely covers over ... structural inequalities and differences of race, gender, and class" (127).

This is a highly readable and important book that should prove invaluable to scholars and enjoyable to anyone with an interest in early Canadian literary, historical, or cultural studies.

Sara Jamieson

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Lee M. Jenkins, *The Language of Caribbean Poetry: Boundaries of Expression*. Gainesville: Florida UP, 2004. Pp. 232. \$55 cloth.

Lee Jenkins is a faculty member at Cork University in Ireland and, while holding this position, she has contributed to the renown of what is now known as the Cork School of Poetry: a critical grouping also comprising such members as Graham Allen, Patricia Coughlan, Alex Davis, and formerly Anne Fogarty and John Goodby. The group is primarily recognized for its groundbreaking studies of Anglo-Irish poets ranging from Davis's watershed account of such Irish modernists as Denis Devlin, to Coughlan's pioneering feminist approaches to the poetry of Seamus Heaney and John Montague. Jenkins's latest book would seem to depart from a focus on Irish literary matters by dealing with another area of the postcolonial nexus, but this is only partly the case as one of the most remarkable aspects of her criticism is that it draws attention to numerous points of contact between the apparently unconnected islands of Ireland and the Caribbean. In fact, Jenkins's work centres on intertextual kinship between Caribbean and European writers as well as the now sizeable tradition of local Antillean literatures, which examines uniquely Caribbean genres and subgenres such as the Letter Home poem, the Antipraise poem, the Apostrophe to the Nation poem, and Caribbean poems about America. The study offers lengthy accounts of Claude McKay, David Dabydeen and Kamau Brathwaite and closes on a highly invigorating discussion of three female poets, Una Marson, Loma Goodison and Marlene Nourbese Philip, thus giving this panoptic study a gender balance too.

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McKay, who has been called a “literary prostitute,” is given extensive treatment as the problematic founding father of Caribbean verse. The book examines indigenous resistances to McKay’s aesthetic as well as his watershed explorations of Jamaican vernacular and his bi-cultural exilic response to America, viewed in part through his contributions to the subgenre of the “Harlem Pastoral” poem. Jenkins argues, “far from disclosing that McKay is in thrall to English colonialism, both “My Native Land, My Home” and “Old England” carry nascent suggestions of the anticolonialism and black nationalism that inform his later work.” She also convincingly counters Charles Bernstein’s contention that McKay’s Jamaican poetry is weighed down by the iambic chains of British tradition. Most strikingly, Jenkins draws parallels between McKay’s use of the mask of the Midnight Woman and Yeats’s Crazy Jane persona, a link that is carried through later on in connection with Goodison’s Wild Woman antitype and Nourbese’s “jamette (loose woman) poet,” whose genealogy is also traced to Nanny of the Maroons and Nzinga of Angola. McKay’s antipastoralism and his hostility towards Modernism are identified as two of the driving tenets of his poetic. In a very natural way, McKay is also placed in relation to Scottish literary “devolutionists” like Burns and MacDiarmid, who are read as “diagnosticians of decline” preoccupied by the notion of revival. Significantly, Jenkins documents McKay’s response to the Irish subaltern and Irish men of letters such as Shaw, through a biographical account of McKay’s travels to Britain and Ireland, which complements Walcott’s later statements regarding the links between Ireland and the Caribbean. In the concluding parts of this chapter, Jenkins highlights McKay’s bitter-sweet relationship to what he humorously called the “United Snakes” of America, as well as his subversive use of the sonnet tradition.

Another figure of exile examined in this context is David Dabydeen, the Indo-Guyanese poet. Dabydeen’s relationship to Modernism is persuasively discussed along with his double-edged relationship to contemporaries such as the so-called Barbarian poets. In “Coolie Odyssey,” he delves into his solitary sense of displacement with regard to both Metropolitan poets and decentred writers.

In the third chapter, Brathwaite’s epic poetry is profitably related to Eliot’s theories of the dissociation of sensibility. Jenkins’s discussion of Brathwaite’s relationship to Modernism benefits from her explorations of Modernist *topoi* in a book on the literary geography of Modernism she has jointly edited with Alex Davis. Both Brathwaite and Dabydeen are justly submitted to the Feminist gaze for their dabbling in gendered stereotyping of the nation and their sometimes misogynistic representations of women, but Jenkins is never scathing, arguing for instance that Brathwaite has responded creatively to the

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reception history of his poems by revising his reductive Jungian sexual typology in the 2001 edition of *Mother Poem* in *Ancestors*.

The fourth chapter evaluates the unequal merits of Una Marson's poetry, arguing that the unavailability of her books suggests that her final significance "is contextual rather than textual." Although Jenkins's treatment of Marson is not unsympathetic, she clearly favours the more accomplished poetics of Loma Goodison whose inventiveness and stylistic features are seen to surpass her matrilineal predecessor's. Jenkins's impressive intertextual knowledge reaches its culminating point in her fascinating discussion of Caribbean re-workings of Homeric and Ovidian ur-texts by both female and male poets. The book closes on a thought-provoking account of Nourbese Philip's experimentalism and her points of contact with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Her daring explorations of mother/daughter relationships are treated in conjunction with psycholinguistic gendering of Father and Mother tongues in her poetry.

While it does engage in postcolonial, feminist and intertextual theory, the overall emphasis of Jenkins's work is never overly theoretical. She relies on her vast knowledge of contemporary poetry (she is also a Wallace Stevens specialist) to carry the reader's interest through an often breathtaking, panoramic view of twentieth-century European and Caribbean poetry. The tone of her writing is always sober and the content is far-reaching yet always accessible, even for readers new to postcolonial or Caribbean literature. Jenkins is also to be commended for painstakingly defining her critical criteria, never taking the arcana of jargon for granted. Her study benefits from impeccable documentation, which is frequently enriched by references to letters written by the poets to the author, an invaluable resource that enhances her arguments. Epistolary correspondence is a form of dialogue that is too infrequently considered by critics.

If one assents to Dash's assertion that "the only useful approach to Caribbean literature is an intertextual one," then Jenkins's book is indeed an indispensable work. Her volume is valuable in exploring the formal aspects of Caribbean poetry, ranging from the traditional to the experimental. This being said, one can at times be mildly disappointed that Jenkins does not explore in greater detail the linguicidal attempts to "mug de Queen's English" to use John Agard's words. Examples of hybridized English such as Louise Bennett's "turning History upside *dung*" go a long way towards liberating Received Pronunciation and ideological hegemony into derisive, scatological *jouissance*. However, Jenkins's book is so accomplished and informative that it makes this objection seem like a quibble, as does the niggling desire for a more eye-catching title. *The Language of Caribbean Poetry: Boundaries*

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*of Expression* does not quite succeed in conveying how exciting this work is. Jenkins relays the flavour of the Caribbean literary scene with great panache. Her work is also peppered with savoury anecdotes for the reader in search of literary curios. Ultimately, however, its greatest attribute is the Penelope-like warp and weft of connections it makes both within Caribbean literature and between the old world and the new.

Erik Martiny

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Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster, eds. *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Pp. xv, 312. \$70.20 cloth.

The time has come, editors Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster say, “to listen to the authentic literary voice of the child” (1). And so the contributors to this volume set out to consider the “non-canonical” writings by children who later became, for the most part, canonical writers. Sixteen chapters—the first an introduction and the last an annotated bibliography of nineteenth-century juvenilia—survey the territory and scrutinize a few famous cases. The famous cases, who provide the focus, are Jane Austen, the Brontës, Byron, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, John Ruskin, Louisa May Alcott, Mary Augustus Ward, and Amy Levy. Other juveniles considered in the opening survey chapters include Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Virginia Woolf, Opal Whiteley, and Iris Vaughan. In every case, with the exception of Daisy Ashford, the juvenile develops into a professional writer, and for the most part, into a famous professional writer. Obviously, the editors had to place restrictions on what they included in their study, and their choice was to remain close to the hundred years between 1800 and 1900, to include writing completed before a person’s twenty-first year, and to centre on the work of writers who are recognized for their adult achievements. This is fine, but as Peterson and Robertson wonder in their opening remarks to the annotated bibliography (Chapter 16): “how many lively and original young voices faltered into silence or convention-driven cliché in later years, whose early work remains to be recovered or recuperated” (269)? Implicit in what Peterson and Robertson say is the very narrow focus a study like this almost inevitably takes. The young voices are still with us because they are, for the most part, young voices of privilege and young voices that matured into public voices that our culture has valued. In other words, the emerging study of juvenilia perpetuates a liberal humanist bias towards the cultural elite.

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Not that this is so bad. We have to begin somewhere, and the Brontës, Carroll, Austen, and other luminaries have left us accessible material from their childhood and adolescence. To study this material is to give us some insight into the making of major authors, into family life at a certain time and in a certain place, and into the benefits of privilege. The Introduction to the book offers a general review of the contents of this volume, and Alexander and McMaster present a case for our considering juvenilia “a category of literature,” a genre (1, 2). Consequently, their concern is not only to study juvenile work as preparation for adult writing, but also to study juvenilia in relation to other juvenile work. In other words, the contributors to this volume respect the minds and abilities of children. Like philosopher Gareth Matthews, the contributors to this volume accept the premise that a certain age is not a prerequisite for authorship or for serious thinking. Some children, like some adults, can write. They can also take an interest in subjects as varied as family relationships, politics, and sexuality, and they can think about such subjects seriously. And what’s more, their interest in such subjects is more often than not unfettered by the constrictions of etiquette or convention.

Part One consists of four chapters. In the first of these chapters, Alexander surveys nineteenth-century juvenilia, and she suggests that such juvenilia “are a middle—and upper—class phenomenon.” Since we have no records of stories by working class children, Alexander concludes: “their imaginative life belonged chiefly to an oral tradition” (11). Such a conclusion strikes me as hasty despite Alexander’s assertion that the “means and leisure to read and write were the preserve of the middle- and upper- class child” (12). In any case, the young writers surveyed in this volume are the products of means and leisure. The writing they produce takes the form of letters home, private journals, and imitations of adult genres such as historical novels, romances, journalism, poetry, and drama. Although some of this writing is the product of individual meditation (journal writing, for example), much of it emanates from what Alexander calls “collaborative play” (15). For many Victorian middle-class children, play included acts of writing in imitation of adult writing. Indeed, imitation is the way of juvenilia: Austen imitated the epistolary novel, the Dodgson children imitated adult magazine writing, so too did the Stevens children, Mary Ann Evans imitated Scott and G. P. R. James, and so on. Imitation serves as practice, apprentice work, even while it initiates the young writer into the intricacies of intertextual play. Imitation also serves as a form of appropriation (17). Alexander’s survey of intertextual play among the young writers she mentions also serves to demonstrate the sophistication of the Victorian young reader. For example, Mary Arnold took for her models the work of “Bulwer Lytton, Charlotte Yonge, Elizabeth Gaskell, and

George Eliot”(18). Even younger children read major authors, indicating just how advanced Victorian upper-and middle-class children were in their ability to read.

Finally, Alexander points out that juvenile writing serves the young writer as a means of self-exploration. Not only does the young writer measure herself or himself against adults and both imitate and mock adult behaviour, but she also expresses herself without the sentimentalizing so often apparent in adult depictions of the young. Child writing is the product of close observation both of adult behaviour and of adult writing. If Alexander is correct about the oral-based literacy of working-class children, then she is so in the sense that children’s writing generally gives evidence of the textuality of both oral and written communication. Children show little interest in differentiating between oral and written text, and their written work easily makes use of both oral and written forms. What Alexander (and others in this volume) refers to as imitation often, very often, slides into parody. When the Dodgson children or the Stevens children create their family magazines, they do so gleefully making fun of adult conventions and pretensions. In her second essay in this volume, “Play and apprenticeship: the culture of family magazines,” Alexander argues that children’s writing is a form of play, and that in playing the child “is free to be creative and to use the whole personality without fear of censure” (30). In passing, she suggests that such creative play is a form of socializing in which adult forms and conventions “colonize” the child, while at the same time the child “is colonizing the adult world itself by remaking it in the image of self” (31). The question whether literature for the young colonizes young children or somehow liberates them from the colonizing intentions of the older generation here takes a turn precisely because we are now talking about children producing their own literature. However, the process of production by the young is not necessarily different from the process of production for the young. In imitating the literature they read or have read to them, children learn to participate in the institution of literature; they are interpellated. When imitation turns into parody, they are not necessarily any more subversive than when they merely imitate adult conventions. After all, the Dodgson family or the Stevens family, adults and children, participated in the juvenile literary activity, either directly or through supervision.

On the other hand, children do desire privacy, and the younger they are the less fully interpellated they are. The several treatments in this volume of the Brontë children’s creation of miniature worlds such as Glass Town and Angria note the tiny script the children used. The size of the little books and the minuteness of the writing were ways for the children, as Alexander notes, to exclude grown-ups (162). In a chapter on Charlotte Brontë, Alexander

argues that the marginal status of juvenile writing allows the child writer “to experience the adult world while at the same time challenging the ideologies it professes” (162). This dual aspect of child writing is perhaps nowhere more intensely presented than in Margaret Anne Doody’s chapter on Jane Austen’s juvenilia. The young Jane Austen in the 1790s is free from social constraint, or prior to such restraint taking hold. Doody remarks that this Austen manifests nothing “soft, auntly, or fusby” (101). Indeed, the early works by this young author show a decided Rabelaisian strain. They “point in directions in which their author was later not permitted to go” (103). They deal with matters children are not supposed to know about—most pointedly, sex. The progression of Jane Austen as author is from lively and audacious young parodist into careful and proper mature ironist. From the point of view of the creation of what Foucault calls the author function, a comparison of Austen and Amy Levy is instructive. Doody’s chapter on Austen illustrates the necessary taming of an author when contextual circumstances demand such taming. In the case of Levy, as apparent in the chapter on her by Naomi Hetherington, we have a young person raised in the milieu of first-wave feminism, and so Levy demonstrates at an early age a rebellion against the strictures of patriarchy, a rebellion sanctioned by the society into which she matures. As Hetherington puts it: “I map the inter-connection of the assimilated Jewish and feminist-oriented worlds of Levy’s girlhood as I hear her championing of ‘women’s rights,’ not *sotto voce*, but as a dominant strain in a chorus of other voices” (259). We might argue that Levy is interpellated into a particular social group just as Austen is interpellated into a different social group, only one happens to be politically progressive and the other politically conservative.

In other words, even young writers desire acceptance by the readers they most certainly envisage. Rachel M. Brownstein, in a chapter on Austen and Byron, discusses the young writer’s position between his or her models, the writers whom she or he imitates, and his or her readers. Brownstein suggests that in negotiating the way between models and readers, the young writer seeks to “create a sense of complicity” (123). Complicity strikes me as an appropriate word for us to describe the motive for writing. The writer seeks accomplices. Juliet McMaster, in a chapter on the epistemology of the child writer, notices the insistent occurrence of witnessing on the part of the child. Citing Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*, McMaster suggests that “*seeing* is the one activity in which [Maisie] can gain a degree of agency” (52). Seeing is learning, and writing results from seeing. As long as writing remains secret, resistance to adult ideology is possible, but as soon as writing becomes an open secret, complicity enters. What this book might chronicle is the inevitable slide into complicity of the young writer.

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In chapters on Elizabeth Barrett Browning by Beverly Taylor, Branwell Brontë by Victor A. Neufeldt, George Eliot by Juliet McMaster, Louisa May Alcott by Daniel Shealy, John Ruskin by David C. Hanson, Mary Augusta Ward by Gillian E. Boughton, and Amy Levy by Naomi Hetherington we have descriptions of young writers seeking the complicity of a reading public as they move from the secret sharing of juveniles to the desire for a public voice of the adult. Perhaps the most bracing narrative among these various narratives is that of John Ruskin who learned very young how to defy “his mother’s demands for method and closure” (204). Hanson’s chapter on Ruskin chronicles the young writer’s navigation of the evangelical strictures on precocity, and offers some hope that the young writer can successfully manage, in his writing, to overcome the overseeing eye of the parent. The downside to this is evident in the repercussions in Ruskin’s personal life; Hanson speculates that, “it is likely that the construction of Ruskin’s emergent sexuality was influenced by the conventional paradigm of precocity” (214). That such “ambiguous consequences of moderating the precocious child” are not inevitable is evident from the case of Robert Browning who emerged from a childhood similar to Ruskin’s less damaged than Ruskin (214).

Of the sixteen chapters in this book, Christine Alexander has written four and co-authored a fifth. Her voice rings clearest. And her chapter, “Defining and representing literary juvenilia,” is the book’s centerpiece. In this chapter, Alexander examines attitudes to juvenilia shaped by “different groups with control over juvenilia—the authors, their family and friends, professional critics and biographers” (70). The second part of the chapter considers how attitudes towards nineteenth-century juvenilia have influenced the way juvenilia “have been handled in the past” (70). Accordingly, the chapter begins with a review of the pejorative implications of the term “juvenilia.” It suggests or has suggested inferiority, immaturity, and simplicity. The term, Alexander points out, is “extra-textual,” and any definition must be “ageist” (72). But ageism here is descriptive, not evaluative. Alexander goes on to argue, calling on Virginia Woolf as authoritative source, “that juvenilia are not inferior literature” (73). They are experiments in identity-formation. Another way of putting this is for me to return to what I noted earlier and quote Alexander: “juvenilia reveal not just the maturation of the writer but her socialisation” (75). Turning to the editing of juvenilia, Alexander reviews previous editorial practices related to juvenilia, and then details the practices instituted by The Juvenile Press, a press begun in 1994 by Juliet McMaster, and now “based at the University of New South Wales in Sydney” (86). In passing, I might note that at times this chapter and the book as a whole reads like a detailed promotion for The Juvenile Press.

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But undeniably Juliet McMaster and Christine Alexander are pioneers in the study of juvenilia, and The Juvenile Press serves the academic community as no other press does. Comparing Alexander's and McMaster's contributions to this volume with, say, the chapters by Shealy and Neufeldt, we can see how they take the early work of writers seriously as writing and not simply as apprentice work in which the aspiring writer learns her craft through imitation. They see imitation as a truly creative act, or at least as potentially creative. It need not be simple repetition. What this volume does is to highlight the importance of what children create. What we now need is a study of the relationship between literature by children and literature for children. Is the literature that adults create for children in any way similar to the literature children create for themselves? Or does the literature children ostensibly create for themselves actually target a different readership than does the literature written by adults for children? Can we define genres more precisely by comparing literature by children with literature for children? Or do categories break down when we make such comparisons?

Last words: this book is a valuable contribution to literary study, especially as it relates to literature for and by the young. It is provocative—well written and thoroughly researched. The annotated bibliography by Lesley Peterson and Leslie Robertson is invaluable. It lists scholarship about juvenilia and the major editions of nineteenth-century juvenilia. To refurbish a cliché, I will hail this book as seminal. I hope the seeds it scatters result in extended studies of juvenilia. We have, for example, the likes of Gordon Korman and S. E. Hinton, writers who began their careers while still in their teens. How do their early works compare with what we might hastily conclude is their “more mature” work? What other juvenilia lie waiting for discovery? And should we examine all those works by children who do not grow up to become writers? What of school anthologies or the kinds of books that collect children's stories such as those by Brian Sutton-Smith and others? *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* is an important beginning to what promises to be a rich literary field—the study of juvenilia.

Rod McGillis

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Marlene Kadar, Linda Warley, Jeanne Perreault and Susanna Egan.  
*Tracing the Autobiographical*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005.  
Pp. 276. \$32.95 paper.

This collection of essays by established and emerging scholars of autobiography studies stresses the diversity currently in the field in its approach to “the autobiographical” as a discourse. Although there were times that I wished for a little more focus, the strength of this approach is that there is something for everyone. There is much to admire in the variety of approaches found here.

*Tracing the Autobiographical* begins with an introduction by Marlene Kadar and Jeanne Perreault subtitled “Unlikely Documents, Unexpected Places.” For Kadar and Perreault, “the autobiographical” is a discursive construct that surfaces in all kinds of texts that are usually not assumed to be part of autobiography. They want to “stress the scope of the autobiographical” and not the limits of autobiography as a genre (1). They also see the scope of the autobiographical as the site of and means for producing new ways to know about historical documents and new media. Reading for the “traces” of autobiography can mean looking through what they call “unlikely documents” such as online home pages, letters and memos in an archive, or it can mean examining autobiographies produced by women in contexts that are removed from North America. As Kadar has written elsewhere, “tracing” is like the approach to life writing: an act of politically-engaged reading that is alive to text and context in a wide variety of modes (152–53).

Kadar and Perreault’s introduction places this collection well within a current in auto/biography<sup>1</sup> studies that stresses the discursive nature of autobiography and memoir.<sup>2</sup> What these approaches have in common is the assumption that a consideration of autobiography as a consistent genre does not address the variety of self-representational practices in existence, and that the concept of genre itself acts to constrain our understanding of how people represent themselves. *Tracing the Autobiographical* widens this approach to a consideration of historical documents and to other forms, like stage drama, poetry and best-selling memoirs.

Perhaps because the collection is based on a 2001 conference called “Auto/biography: Contemporary Issues,” held at the University of Calgary, all of the essays in it are about issues that concern many of us today: issues like the problems of memory and trauma related to the Holocaust and to Israel/Palestine, the ethics of online and televised narration, or the legacy of the Aboriginal Stolen Generations in Australia. One way to bring the disparate concerns of these scholars together would be to discuss their common concerns with the

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ethics of representation and of research, which cohere remarkably with other concerns about national questions, with interests in alternative genres like poetry or theatrical performance, or with meditations about new technology and its dynamic relationship to selfhood at the current time.

Essays by Helen Buss, Linda Warley and Gabriele Helms are about identity and online or televised ways to represent it: Buss' essay about Katherine Tarbox argues that Tarbox's memoir restores the agency that she lost when she was molested by a man she met in an internet chat room. On the other hand, Warley says that the creation of online home pages represents a need for online authenticity, while Helms carefully delineates how reality television works and why critics of autobiography should take it seriously. The next three essays examine the autobiographical in three "unusual" genres: Sherill Grace looks at drama, Kathy Mezei discusses domestic space in a variety of interiors from a memoir by Mary Gordon to essays by Dionne Brand, and Susanna Egan reads Daphne Marlatt's long poem "Steveston" as a type of autobiography.

The collection shifts to a consideration of documents and ephemera as autobiography, especially in Cheryl Suzack's reading of legal proceedings by Aboriginal women as a context for Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, and in Jeanne Perreault's reading of the activist Muriel Rukeyser's "ego documents" of World War II. Bina Friewald's examination of autobiographies by three Israeli women, and Christina Crawford's analysis of narratives that have been published in the wake of the Stolen Generations report in Australia ask us to consider how autobiographies by women are used in nation-building and searches for strategies of resistance. The last two essays deal with ethical issues in research and interpretation involving the Holocaust. Adrienne Kertzer examines her own efforts to grapple with the legacy of the Holocaust in the lives of her parents while she looks at an art exhibition. In the most theoretical piece in the collection, which takes on the ethics of "trace" as a practice, Marlene Kadar examines the almost obscured traces of gypsies who were part of the Holocaust.

The essays in *Traces of the Autobiographical* demonstrate the importance of looking at autobiography as traces or fragments that tell a quite different story than what we see when we look at canonized texts or autobiographical classics. As Kadar and Perreault say in the introduction, "the forces at the heart of this collection are the inexhaustible variety of human identity and experience, and the irrepressible impulse to explore, express and understand it" (2). This collection is itself a tribute to the varieties of human existence, and the decision to take them seriously.

Julie Rak

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### Notes

1. I use the term auto/biography as a way to include both terms and to signal their close relationship to each other in various texts (Smith and Watson 184–85).
2. See Smith and Watson on reading “the autobiographical” as a performative act (184–85). Autobiography also has been characterized as a discourse about identity (Gilmore 1–5), an “outlaw genre” (Kaplan 155–56), or as an everyday practice (Stanley 132).

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