...Ancient & Modern
Journeys of Discovery...

iafor

Table of Contents

Notes on Contributors

Myles Chilton (B.A. Toronto, M.A. and Ph.D. Chicago) is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Letters at Chiba University. His academic interests are in exploring relationships between contemporary world literature, globalized cultures, and pedagogy. He has published articles on modern Canadian, British and Japanese literary representations of global cities, and on intersections between Anglophone literary interpretation and education in non-Anglophone sites. He is presently at work on two book manuscripts, one on the uses of Toronto in Canadian literature, the other on issues surrounding literature and language pedagogy.

Enrique Galván-Álvarez holds a Ph.D. in Tibetan-English poetry from the University of Alcalá and an MA in South Asian Studies from the University of Manchester. He has published on the interweaving of religious and political narratives in nation- building projects, both in South Asia and the Tibetan diaspora. His interests comprise post-Buddhist literature, film and nationalism in post-colonial contexts, and Buddhist-Anarchist dialogue.

Joanne Nystrom Janssen is an Assistant Professor of English at the Asian University of Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh, where she teaches literature courses and writing-intensive seminars to students from a dozen Asian and Middle Eastern countries. She completed her Ph.D. in 2010 at the University of Iowa, where she examined literary portrayals of rote learning in nineteenth-century British literature, connecting them to historical notions of female identity. As her dissertation suggests, Janssen is interested in the way that pedagogy is both public and private, influencing a community's practices and an individual's way of seeing the world and the self. Other research interests include reading practices, periodicals, religion, and colonialism.

Patricia Louise Haseltine has a Ph.D. in Folklore from Indiana University. She is currently a professor at Providence University in Taiwan, where she teaches American Literature, Mythopoesis, and Modernist fiction and poetry. Her publications include *An Aesthetic Negotiation: The Testimonial Poetry of Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Simon Ortiz, and Luci Tapahonso* (2006), and she has contributed to a study of Native American poets for *Native North American Literatures: Reflections on Multiculturalism,* edited by Hsin-ya Huang and Hsiu-li Ruan (2009). She is currently researching the transrelational semiotics and reception of indigenous films from the Pacific region.

Melissa Kennedy is Assistant Professor of English at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business. She holds a dual Ph.D. from the University of Bourgogne and University of Canterbury. Her research specialises on indigenous cultures and literatures, and she has published several articles and book chapters on Maori, New Zealand and Francophone postcolonial literature and cultural studies, including a monograph, *Striding Both Worlds: Witi Ihimaera and New Zealand's Literary Traditions* (2011). She has recently written on the indigenous Ainu and "postcolonial" Japan, and is currently working on the application of postcolonial studies in East and South-East Asia.

Chee Cheang Sim is a senior lecturer and the Deputy Dean at the School of Arts in University Malaysia Sabah, East Malaysia. She holds a M.A. in English Literature (University of Malaya) and a Ph.D. in Malay Literature (University Kebangsaan, Malaysia). She has widely presented and published in the field of *Peranakan* Chinese literature and Malaysian Literature in English, and is the author of *Negotiating the Chinese American Identity* (2000), Dr. Sim teaches critical theory and the analytical approach to literature in the Creative Writing programme. She is currently involved in a government-funded project on ethnic riddles and Malaysian writers writing in English.

Michael Stetson is an assistant professor at Miyazaki International College in Japan. He has extensive experience as an instructor of several arts and cultural studies, including drama, photography and film studies. His current research interests include a documentation of the Silk Roads, its material culture and the remnants of cultural/ethnic diversity that it once engendered.

Loretta Visomirskis holds a B.A. and M. A. in English from Vilnius State University, Lithuania, and a Ph.D. in West European, American, and Australian Literatures from Moscow Lomonosov University, Russia. Her dissertation and research focus is on Edward Bond's work and post-war British drama. After having served as Visiting International Professor and as Assistant Professor of English at Morehead State University, Kentucky, Dr. Visomirskis took up the position of Assistant Professor at the City Colleges of Chicago. Currently she teaches English Composition II, World Drama, and Women's and Latin American Literatures at Harold Washington College, Chicago.

Literary Journeys and Journeys in Literature

Melissa Kennedy

The International Academic Forum's inaugural online e-journal, the Librasia Journal of Literature and Librarianship, has been a journey in more ways than one. IAFOR aims to promote dialogue in interdisciplinary conferences on, for and in Asia, with open dissemination of its findings in free-access e-journals. The 2011 Librasia conference theme *Journeys*, and this ensuing first journal issue, *Literary Journeys and Journeys in Literature*, tap into this objective on multiple levels. Most literally, of course, the conference brought together scholars from around the world with a common interest in literary and cultural studies in Asia. In another aspect of literary journeying, the Librasia papers tended to move in one of two directions: Western representations of Asia, or Asian interpretations of the West. Within this dynamic, various papers analysed literature about travel, including journal writing, pilgrimages and tourism, while others discussed literature that had travelled from its time and place of writing to new readerships and genres.

Spanning the great distances and differences covered by the umbrella term "Asia," the English language and the theoretical methodologies of academic practice provide mediating modes through which to bridge and connect the Indian subcontinent, Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, South-East Asia, and the Asia-Pacific. Literary and cultural studies are particularly well-suited to the journeying theme, as their focus on the imagination illuminates the multiple and subjective pathways of key issues in the humanities, such as national identity, cultural expression and social critique. Despite great differences between and specificities of each country, the study of literary

journeying reveals many commonalities, thereby revealing the travelling nature of literature itself. Creative forms and functions also travel, reinvented and reworked to fit new contexts. Similarly, despite the diversity of their backgrounds and experiences, both writers and academics who travel are often concerned with the same issues, including those of displacement, self and home, similarity and difference. The essays collected here explore both creative and analytical modes and techniques, often with an eye to illuminating counter-histories, counter-narratives, and counter-interpretations that challenge stereotypes and dominant ideologies about Asian cultures and East-West relations. Also dominant is consideration of the role of education in propagating or challenging pedagogy, academic discourse, and received cultural expectations.

A common thread at the Librasia conference was questioning the problematic—and related— issues of the European conventions of studies in the humanities and their place in Asian university systems. The debate over the authority and hegemony of literary, cultural and sociological critical and theoretical models is already an issue within European and American academia. This debate is exacerbated by exporting these perspectives to Asian countries. The extent to which Western teaching practices and critical perspectives can be applied to non-Western students, texts and responses is a thorny issue confronted by Asian and Western students and academics in the Asian universities in which they study, teach and conduct research. This uneasy cohabitation is further complicated by the increasing demands for a vaguely-defined "global education" expounded by tertiary institutions in their recruitment of students, staff, and in the courses they offer. Many of the participants at IAFOR conferences are caught up in this challenge, including the contributors to the present collection.

Certainly, English-language conference networks such as IAFOR might be seen to encourage a bias toward Western-centred interpretations. It is true that many Westerners have limited ability

in the languages and literatures of the Asian countries in which they live. The place of the Western academic in Asia is often guided by the function of the English departments in which they work, which are predominantly oriented towards teaching the English language. This reduces cultural and literary studies to a tool of language learning at the expense of engaging with the issues surrounding critical perspective. Further bolstering the bias towards Western critical practice is the attraction for many Asian scholars to Western cultural and literary theory, which they apply to their local and regional knowledges, often at the expense of analysis of Asian thinkers. Indeed, the debate over the use and importance of Western theory in Asian studies is long-running and well-rehearsed in the field's dedicated journals, such as *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, and *positions: east asia cultures critique*.[1] The argument that Western theory enacts a kind of Eurocentrism is also one that concerns the essays in this volume, and several contributors engage with the theoretical frameworks of postmodernism and postcolonialism, which claim to subvert such hegemony. However, these essays do not accept any Western theory as-is. Each essay tests theoretical paradigms against local texts or local interpretation, which reveals weaknesses and fallacies in accepting Western theoretical frameworks as context-free critical perspectives.

In the context of teaching Western literary texts in the Asian university, two articles consider Asian students' reader responses in order to question Western interpretative norms. Patricia Haseltine analyses the ways in which Taiwanese readers appropriate and modify James's

---

[1] In a critique of contemporary research practices, Margaret Hillenbrand reviews the frequency of citations in positions: east asia cultures critique to reveal the following most-cited theorists since its inception: Foucault (110), Benjamin (82), Spivak (61), Freud (60), Jameson (55), Said (53), Bhabha and Derrida (51), Anderson (43); the top-scoring Asia-based, or Asian-focused researchers score significantly lower: Rey Chow (34), Naoki Sakai (28), Karatani Kojin (25), Dai Jinhua (18). Hillenbrand 2010, "Communitarism, or how to build East Asian theory," in Postcolonial studies vol. 13(4), pp. 317-334.

characters to fit their uniquely Taiwanese affective structures. Centring a Taiwanese response to this Western canonical author adds a whole new aspect to the production of meaning at the peripheries to that proposed by Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal study of an altogether different era of travelling, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). From her similar study of reader responses to Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) from students at the Asian University for Women, Bangladesh, Joanne Nystrom Janssen turns her critique on the field of postcolonial studies. Like many Western-trained academics who move to teach in Asian universities—myself included—the experience reveals lacunae in the critical traditions of our Western training which were imperceptible from "home." Questioning her own pedagogical and theoretical assumptions, Janssen uncovers biases built into postcolonial literary studies that categorize people and places into essentialist groups of expected critical positions. Janssen's sensitive consideration of how to teach world literature in ways that open up the text and foster multiple responses is another aspect of travelling literature pertinent to our times, and again demonstrates the fruitfulness of using Asian contexts to test pedagogical and critical claims.

In another essay that challenges received postcolonial paradigms, Myles Chilton's study of the city of London in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) further upsets standard reading practices. By contrast with Haseltine's and Janssen's essays, which advocate newness through different interpretations, Chilton concludes that the postcolonial ambition to destabilize colonial and global centres of power finally fails. Chilton's argument of strong resistance to change would seem to be supported by Rushdie's recently cancelled participation in the Jaipur Literary Festival in January 2012, following renewed death threats. *The Satanic Verses* remains a banned book in India, and the *fatwa* on Rushdie is still called for by some Muslim organizations: like unchangeable London, Muslim reaction to Rushdie remains unchanged too. Another essay that investigates challenge to institutional norms and established thought is Chee Cheang Sim's study of three Malaysian

counter-histories. Somewhat more optimistically than Chilton, Sim argues that fiction can play a significant role in generating social change, here by challenging the version of Malaysian history conventionally taught in schools. The emphasis on fictiveness and the non-seriousness of comic and children's fairytale genres mean that these works are not perceived as a threat to the truth of history, which is considered non-fiction.

The final two papers and one photo essay describe literal journeys. The title of Michael Stetson's photo reportage, "The Narrow Road," reformulates and updates Japanese Buddhist haiku poet Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1694), which is in turn taken up by British playwright Edward Bond. Loretta Visomirskis's essay details Bond's political journey that filters Basho through Brechtian theatre techniques to make a strong socio-political commentary on British working class still pertinent today. By contrast with Bond's often controversial agitation for social change, both Basho's never-ending search for spiritual enlightenment and Stetson's travels along the Silk Road describe the object of the journey as the journey itself. However, they do have somewhere to call home, which is not the case for Tibetans born in exile, exemplified in Enrique Galván-Álvarez's analysis of Tenzin Tsundue's poetry. In describing the impossibility of homecoming, Tsundue's poems circle the void that is Tibet. To conclude this essay collection with this paper stresses the importance of the imaginary in constructing the body of Asia.

All these essays describe situations of exclusion—of writers, fictional characters, readers or the academic writers of these contributions. Without solid ground or easy contingencies on which to rest, concepts of identity, cultural mores and pedagogical approaches call into question both the space that is "Asia" and the relationship between East and West. James Clifford's concept of "traveling-in-dwelling" and "dwelling-in-traveling" in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late-Twentieth Century* (1997), cited in Galván-Álvarez's essay, captures the essence of all the

negotiations of space, identity, and interpretative rights exhibited in these essays. The movement engendered by literary journeys and journeys in literature advocate for a relationship between ourselves and others based on open dialogue rather than on the (European) centre and (Far East) periphery of earlier Western thought.

Melissa Kennedy

Editor

Writing Back, Emptying Out and Satanic Narration:
Why London Wins Out in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* [1]

Myles Chilton

Abstract

The Satanic Verses occupies a prominent place in the postcolonial canon because it challenges the social, historical and political place of London by 'writing back' or 'emptying out' the city's imperial residues. The novel's narrative acts of 'emptying out' echo postcolonial literature's broader engagement with the place, legitimacy and ethics of marginalized migrant or diasporic points of view within metropolitan centers. But while *The Satanic Verses* is imbricated in this postcolonial dynamic, techniques of 'emptying' are counterbalanced by the presence of Satan as the novel's narrator. Both as a symbolic figure and through the story he tells, Satan is identified with a rather more sinister aspect of London: as the narrative challenges, resists and reconfigures London, London mounts a stronger counter-resistance, absorbing blows, tolerating violence to its structures of power, but in the end remaining as it is. The novel's Satanic London represents how London 'plays' with social and cultural identities – allowing marginalized subjects to reimagine themselves and the city – only to foreclose any possibilities for agency, social revolution, and economic equality. In this sense, the real London and the novel's London both remain fixed entities: changes that appear protean and revolutionary are smothered by the pressure that London continues to exert.

Keywords: London, *Satanic Verses*, satan as narrator, post-imperial

---

At one point in Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, Gibreel Farishta sets out on a mission to transform London. He wants to turn what the narrator calls the "slippery, most devilish of cities" away from its moral relativism, its hybridity, its secular humanism, to a "tropicalized" (Rushdie 1988, pp. 364-65) metropolis. The narrator, taking Farishta's side, enumerates a list of benefits: "increased moral definition" being the first, followed by

> "institution of a national siesta, development of vivid and expansive patterns of behaviour among the populace, higher-quality popular music, new birds in the trees (macaws, peacocks, cockatoos), new trees under the birds (coco-palms, tamarind, banyans with hanging beards). Improved street life, outrageously coloured flowers […] spider-monkeys in the oaks. A new mass market for domestic air-conditioning units, ceiling fans, anti-mosquito coils and sprays […] better cricketers; higher emphasis on ball-control among professional footballers, the traditional and soulless English commitment to 'high workrate' having been rendered obsolete by the heat. Religious fervour, political ferment, renewal of interest in the intelligentsia […]" (1988, p. 365)

The list continues. London, however, won't conform: as the narrator tells us, "the city in its corruption refused to submit to the dominion of the cartographers, changing shape at will and without warning, making it impossible for Gibreel to approach his quest in the systematic manner he would have preferred" (1988, pp. 337-38). Gibreel Farishta begins to realize his lack of power: again, as the narrator informs, "In this pandemonium of mirages, he often heard laughter: the city was mocking his impotence, awaiting his surrender, his recognition that what existed here was beyond his powers to comprehend, let alone to change" (1988, p. 338). London 'wins' this

encounter: Gibreel Farishta eventually admits defeat by committing suicide, and the city remains untropicalized. It has allowed Gibreel to push, but pushes back even harder.

The Satanic Verses occupies a prominent place in the postcolonial canon because it challenges the social, historical and political place of London by 'writing back' or re-appropriating London's symbolic currency through acts of 'emptying out' – evacuating from London symbols and social structures that carry imperial residues. Gibreel's tropicalization of London is but one example. The novel's narrative acts of "emptying out" echo postcolonial literature's broader engagement with the place of marginalized migrant or diasporic points of view within metropolitan centers (London being one of the most prevalent in postcolonial Anglophone literature). They question the politics of location – the legitimacy of metropolitan material and economic power centers (again, like London) – and the ethics of representation within metropolitan centers. The latter involves stories of/from marginalized subjects – immigrants from the former colonies, racial and ethnic others, women – and their relationships to structures of power, be they imperial, postimperial, or metropolitan – terms which can often be very similar. But while *The Satanic Verses* is imbricated in this postcolonial dynamic, its narrative acts of 'emptying out' are counterbalanced by the presence of Satan as the novel's narrator.[2] Both as a symbolic presence and through the story he tells, Satan is identified with a rather more sinister aspect of London: as the narrative challenges, resists and reconfigures London, London mounts a stronger counter-resistance, absorbing blows, tolerating violence to its structures of power, but in the end remaining as it is – rather like Satan himself, and his identifications with the persistence of imperial, global, and metropolitan hegemonies which win out over the postcolonial one. The novel's Satanic London represents how London 'plays' with

---

[2] Satan as narrator of the novel has received scant attention: "Only two critics, Alex Krönagel and James Harrison, directly confront the question of satanic narration" in The Satanic Verses (Clark 2001, p. 140).

social and cultural identities – allowing marginalized subjects to reimagine themselves and the city – only to foreclose any possibilities for agency, social revolution, and economic equality. In this sense, the real London and the novel's London both remain fixed entities: changes that appear protean and revolutionary are smothered by the pressure that London exerts as a global economic center – which itself is a development of London's existence as an imperial center.

By interposing a fundamentally unstable and untrustworthy voice between himself and the reader, Rushdie turns London into a battleground for the souls of Gibreel and Saladin, with the city space the ground upon which identities are lost, reinvented, and lost again. He uses London both as a stage for the narrator's malign intent and as metaphor for it. Satan's toying with the city is figured in the novel's literary pyrotechnics, the extravagance of the language, the wildness of the magic in this hallmark work of magic realism. As the omniscient presence in the novel, Satan not only 'records' the story, he plays favourites and punishes enemies in both the voice of the realist and of the postmodern meta-narrator calling attention to his or her own narratological, and moral, instability. He presents his characters with the proposition of eternal doubt and/or a choice of deities, "both of which seem to exist in a universe in which no irruption of the sacred can truly orient the self" (Clark 2001, p. 131); with the consequence that old truths, of the religious[3] as much as of the imperial kind, resurface to wield enormous power. In that sense, the satanic narrator is undermining London, using it as a prop and a background for exoticizing and othering. The satanic narrator figures as a guide and a symbol of the nature of London, rendering it a site of transitoriness, instability, and self-fashioning, but also residual colonial identity. He is a shape-shifter

---

[3] The main conflict in The Satanic Verses occurs when the satanic narrator tries to tempt Mahound by pretending to be the archangel Gabriel and persuading Muhammad to accept three goddesses as intercessors between the human and the Divine. Fuller discussion of this aspect of the novel is beyond the scope of this essay.

and a shaper of shifts, staging conflicts between the angelic and diabolic which play into the novel's representations of postcolonial London.

The satanic narrator takes his cues from the palimpsest that is contemporary London. London is built on historically sedimented layers of shifting realities and representations, each exerting an influence on the novel's need for a fixed, immutable London. This immovable London has roots in its historical role as the center of the British Empire, when it regulated and controlled the material and cultural conditions of places far beyond its borders. As Raymond Williams describes:

> [w]hat was happening in the 'city', the 'metropolitan' economy, determined and was determined by what was made to happen in the 'country'; first the local hinterland and then the vast regions beyond it, in other people's lands. What happened in England has since been happening ever more widely, in new dependent relationships between all the industrialized nations and all the other 'underdeveloped' but economically important lands. Thus one of the last models of 'city and country' is the system we now know as imperialism. (1973, p. 279)

Historical changes have rendered London more elusive, but they have not 'emptied out' its centrality. Between 1890 to 1920, the period of waning Victorianism and a rising English literary modernism, Malcolm Bradbury writes that London "had now become the outright point of concentration for English national culture, overtaking and pre-empting the role of the provincial large cities" (1991, p. 179). This centralizing meant that London "had acquired utter dominance in communications, commerce, banking and, of course, most forms of cultural activity; through it and from it came the newspapers, the books, and the ideas of the country at large" (1991, p. 179). The hegemonies produced and controlled by London solidified a sense of the centrality of London in the

global imagination. Ian Jack captures this sense in his introduction to a special London edition of *Granta* (the edition itself, of course, perpetuating a London legacy): "Some cities in the world have no legend outside their immediate hinterland. A few, of which London is certainly one, have many. People who come to London also bring it with them in their minds. They have a feeling of how the city should be before they meet it" (1999, p. 6). The legend of London, the sense of London as a touchstone of metropolitan identity is similarly expressed by Stuart Hall, this time combined with the colonial subject's desire to return to the centre:

> You have to live in London. If you come from the sticks, the colonial sticks, where you really want to live is right on Eros Statue in Piccadilly Circus. You don't want to go live in someone's else's metropolitan sticks. You want to go right to the center of the hub of the world. You might as well. You have been hearing about that ever since you were one month old. (2000, p. 24)

Hall is talking about the attraction of London of the 1960s to a young Jamaican. Update that to 1988, the time of *The Satanic Verses*, and you get the sense that the metropolitan nature of London has only grown stronger.

The narrative strategy behind Gibreel's tropicalization is to demonstrate the futility of attempting to reverse this centripetal postimperial dynamic. This strategy is a microcosm of the narrative pattern of the whole novel, which in virtually every episode highlights futility masquerading as creative reinvention. This may seem paradoxical, if not wrong-headed, particularly when one considers that *The Satanic Verses* has been praised for being all about destroying certainties, binary oppositions, old categories of good and evil, black and white, us and them, self and other; and for breaking down oppositions between city and nation, cosmopolitan and local. These progressive demolitions form a

thematic core of the novel, motivated by questions posed early in the text. "How does newness come into the world?" asks the narrator. "How is it born?" he continues, "[o]f what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made" (1988, p. 8)? However, these questions only construct one side of the inquiry, the affirmative side that sees newness in terms of London-based and -inspired fusions, translations, and conjoinings of ideological, ethnic, and postnational hybridity. This is the side that has preoccupied critics. John Clement Ball's take on the novel is typical: "Through a combination of magic and magic realism Rushdie portrays a city lurching through a painful process of renewal and transformation that will inaugurate a future in which the spatial and racial geopolitics of the past can become obsolete" (2004, p. 202). Such interpretations overlook the implication of the questions Rushdie asks in the novel: "How does it [newness] survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine" (1988, pp. 8-9)? In other words, the satanic narrator challenges us to recognize our fears of change, and then throughout the novel exploits them by telling a story of London that illustrates the dangers of newness and the strength of the old to fight to retain its place. *The Satanic Verses* does not, therefore, depict what London can become, *but argues for what London is*. It is a power center that forces us to reconceptualize the boundaries of our images of the city, and to understand that for every change, there is a backlash, an equal and opposite need for a fixed symbol or image of the city.

The flexibility of the novel's London allows it to pose as a renewable space that nevertheless withstands tropicalization and other transformations, reflecting the real city's transition from imperial center to postcolonial meeting place, and even prefiguring the transition to neo-imperial global city. Such profound transitions have been marked by successive permutations of London's demography, including the opening up of the metropolis to immigrants in the post-imperial period, when London became a draw for its former colonial subjects. John Clement Ball points out that for

many this relocation exemplified an act of resistance: "[a]s ex-colonials come to dwell in London and walk its streets, they appropriate it and reterritorialize it" (2004, p. 9), much like Gibreel and his tropicalization. Postcolonial writers, Ball argues, enact a similar kind of resistance by reinscribing the "metropolis against their backgrounds and identities as formerly colonized subjects. The London that once imposed its power and self-contradictions *on* them can now be reinvented *by* them" (2004, p. 9). But as Gibreel's failure shows, reinventing London in the face of changes and accretions of wealth and power means reinvention is confined. Reinvention, moreover, is doubly circumscribed because invention, as Julian Wolfreys notes (drawing heavily on Jacques Derrida), is itself not a creative act. Invention "produces nothing as such, out of nothing. Instead, *invention* is a response, a reaction or finding out that which was already there, a discovery that is *dis-covering*" (2007, p. 2). Gibreel's tropicalization exemplifies this dis-covering all too well: Ian Baucom sees Gibreel's 'tropicalization' of London as the way to return England to what he calls "the blinked-away landspaces of its elsewhere and its past" (1999, p. 209). It is an attempt to re-place in London "fragments of the cultures that the English Empire collected [. . .] metonyms of the Not-England that England occupied, reluctantly abandoned, and now wishes to forget" (Baucom 1999, p. 211). But Gibreel will not be conjuring what is absent, he will (in Baucom's words) "rain this catalog of difference" upon London not to make it a "foreign city but to deny the foreignness of these differences to the city, to announce that London is a conurbation of such differences" (1999, pp. 211-12). Newness will enter London as those fusions, translations and conjoinings of things that already exist in the history and the present, collapsing the over-there of Empire with the here of the metropolis.

One problem with this reading, which Baucom obliquely registers but does not follow up on, is that Gibreel projects London-bred stereotypes of and attitudes to its former colonial places onto an equally stereotypical English vision of London as fixed and immutable. Gibreel's reinvention of

London is thus another instance in London's long history of literary inventions, each of which "produc[es] one from a potentially endless series of Londons, each the crystallization or actualization of the city's countless singularities [. . .] in finding what was already there it recalls, it brings back what is forgotten, overlooked, occluded, obscured, taken for granted, or ignored" (Wolfreys 2007, p. 3). In this case, the narrator does not simply show the imperial residues that have escaped memory, he punishes Gibreel and Saladin for thinking they can appropriate the city for themselves.

The punishment is incurred from the start, as Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha journey to London from Bombay. Their Air India 747 is blown up by terrorists, sending the two characters on a long fall to the ground. This fall symbolizes rebirth and mutation, as well as serving as a parody of both 'writing back' and colonial longing: in the moments immediately after their fall to British soil Saladin's body comes to take on the characteristics of a traditional devil, with vast horns, hoofed-feet, a hairy pelt, and an enormous very public erection. Gibreel, for his part, will appear as a well-dressed Englishman. Moreover, this is Saladin's second instance of colonial longing. At the age of thirteen, he sees London as the moral and aesthetic antidote to his father's religious zealotry, and to the dirt and vulgarity of Bombay, and accordingly takes on the role of "a goodandproper Englishman" (1988, p. 43), dreaming of life as "a neat man in a buttoned suit" living "an ordered, contented life" (1988, p. 75) in London, married to the English girl of his dreams. In a flashback the narrator shows how the schoolboy Saladin so alters his appearance to conform to his colonial stereotyping of 'London-ness' that he no longer remembers what he used to look like. After the fall from the 747, Saladin's devil-body is clearly Satan's punishment for his colonial idealization of "Proper London" (1988, p. 43). The narrator undermines his cosy assumptions by having London represent "the place where the (post)colonial subject becomes aware that her identity is enmeshed in and constructed by imperial power relations" (Ball 2004, p. 49).

The Satanic narrator serves up and makes great sport of Saladin's anglophilocentrism to emphasize the gap between his delusions and the race-riot, police-brutality reality of London. This is the city in which Saladin encounters Sufyan, Mishal and Hanif, Indian immigrants who refuse to assimilate like Saladin – "Look where all your law abiding got you," says Mishal to Saladin (1988 264). His Anglo-pose has blinded him to the violent truths of immigrant life, and of the social turmoil that erupted in the real London as it transitioned throughout the 1980s from the center of its own imperial system to being a center of the newly globalizing neoliberal economy. The London of the 'Big Bang' economic reforms of 1986, a time when Saskia Sassen argues that London became a paradigmatic global city,[4] was a city of deregulated twenty-four hour trading with other centres of global finance. These reforms shook the sociological organization of the City of London, creating "a rapid phase of change [. . .] entail[ing] new investment players, new financial institutions and conglomerates, new practices, and a changing and expanding labour force" (Jacobs 1996, p. 54). These transformations also entailed changes in the social makeup of the City labour force: while management followed traditional class lines, younger workers comprised a mix of class, race and gender (Jacobs 1996, p. 54). Yet, as with the novel's London, this attitude towards social mobility would not be without limits. As the Corporation of London wrote in the 1986 City of London plan:

> The City of London [. . .] is noted for its business expertise, its wealth of history and its special architectural heritage. The combination of these three aspects gives the City a

---

[4] Saskia Sassen's definition of the global city, as well as being the most precise and detailed, points to how global city functions evacuate history in order to more smoothly function in global networks. Global cities must share similar functions in organizing the global economy in order to control and create markets. These functions make global cities "nodal points for the coordination of processes" and the production of highly specialized services and financial goods. Thus, global capital, financial information, and labour migration flow in and out of global cities, and global cities control these flows. Thus, "key structures of the world economy are necessarily situated in cities" (Sassen 1992, pp. 4-5).

> world-wide reputation which the Corporation is determined to foster and maintain [. . .]
>
> The City's ambience is much valued and distinguishes it from other international business
>
> centres. (qtd. in Jacobs 1996, p. 55)

London's embryonic global city status would rest on heritage correctly preserved and enhanced, making it distinct from other global centres. This heritage-based view of London would call on reconfigurations of the Englishness of London, involving deliberate constructions and ideologies of national identity.

One such construction is figured in the novel through the character of Hal Valance, a representative of the values of Big Bang London. Valance is inflicted on Saladin as a punishment for clinging to dated self-preserving Anglo-delusions, which his wife tells him are made up of "'museum-values [. . .] Sanctified, hanging in golden frames on honorific walls'" (1988, pp. 412-13). These values persist, despite Valance having harangued Saladin with a new vision of what it means to be English: "'I love this fucking country,'" Valance roars (1988, p. 277). "'That's why I'm going to sell it to the whole goddamn world, Japan, America, fucking Argentina. I'm going to sell the arse off it. That's what I've been selling all my fucking life: the fucking nation. The *flag*'" (1988, p. 277). His profane love is a triumphalist embrace of Margaret Thatcher's promise of a new kind of England: "'What she wants,'" he explains, "'is literally to invent a whole goddamn new middle class in this country. Get rid of the old woolly incompetent buggers from fucking Surrey and Hampshire, and bring in the new. People without background, without history'" (1988, p. 278). These neoliberal ravings represent the invasion of market-pleasing forces that leave Saladin, as the narrator explains, "Abandoned by one alien England, marooned within another" (1988, p. 279). Saladin responds, in accordance with his satanic appearance, with feelings of anger, hate, and revenge.

In a similar vein the satanic narrator deploys Gibreel's various guises to illustrate how London plays with social and cultural identities. Gibreel's transformation into a well-dressed Englishman is not only a mockery of Saladin's anglophilocentrism, it is also a parody of the newness that Gibreel sets out to inflict on London – the colonial outsider in the clothes of the colonial outsider's stereotype. Yet for a moment in the narrative Gibreel's outsider status allows him to take advantage of his status as a marginalized subject and use London streetspace to reinvent himself. The narrator, however, has more up his sleeve. As a walking, talking parody of colonial longing, Gibreel proves most amenable to the destructive energies that London makes available to the migrant. The most destructive of these is his guise as the archangel who sets out with the *London A-Z* map book in his pocket to redeem London, "to bring this metropolis of the ungodly [. . .] back to the knowledge of God" (1988, p. 330). In streets that coiled around him, writhing like serpents, London had grown unstable once again, revealing its true, capricious, tormented nature, its anguish of a city that had lost its sense of itself and wallowed, accordingly, in the impotence of its selfish, angry present of masks and parodies, stifled and twisted by the insupportable, unrejected burden of its past, staring into the bleakness of its impoverished future. (1988, pp. 330-31)

London's changing nature reveals its true 'self,' a city that suffers but also inflicts its imperial past on Gibreel. The latter's sense of London is represented in the way he senses the mocking presence of Satan everywhere he goes. Later, in yet another guise – that of resurrected Indian film icon – Gibreel takes to the skies above London in another attempt to show them – yes! – his *power*. – These powerless English! – Did they not think their history would return to haunt them? – 'The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor' (Fanon) . . . . He would make this land anew. He was the Archangel, Gibreel. *And I'm back*! (1988, p. 363)

The narrator has so infuriated Gibreel's relationship with London that the latter lapses into a militant need for moral clarity, and finds it. "This Shaitan was no fallen angel," explains the narrator, mocking Gibreel's demand to an end to "England-induced ambiguities," and "Biblical-Satanic confusions" (1988, p. 364)! Gibreel's mission to transform the "slippery, most devilish of cities" (1988, pp. 364-65) away from its moral relativism, its hybridity, its secular humanism, to – as we have seen – a "tropicalized" metropolis ends with the latter reasserting itself as a postimperial metropolis.

By limiting these gestures to 'empty out' London and reconfigure it, the narrator in effect satirizes the postcolonial transformations and reinventions of identity that Homi Bhabha sees as characterized by the colonial process of othering. For Bhabha "[t]he power of the postcolonial translation of modernity rests in its *performative*, *deformative* structure (1994, p. 241); tactics of mimicry and displacement that lead to agency-granting adoptions of a positive subjectivity. But like the narrator displacing or 'emptying out' London, the performances of Gibreel and Saladin actually deform not structural residues of colonialism, but their own identities. This suggests that London permits the kind of performance and deformation which allows subjects to change both themselves and the images of the city that they need to fulfil their sense of belonging to it. They have not so much gained agency as learned to perform to new scripts, a less than positive postcolonial transformation similar to that which Geeta Kapur sees in the cosmopolitan world of the "twice-born," a first world site – and London would be a prime example – where "identity is ambivalent, restless, interrogative" (1998, p. 199). In Kapur's view, this discursive emphasis on identity produces "a simulacrum of cultural identity," "a *play* of choice, not a test of praxis" (1998, p. 200). As if to echo Kapur's critique of this play implied in Bhabha's and Rushdie's rhetoric of exile and hybridity, *The Satanic Verses* grants to London the "holding power of the historical paradigm where differences are recognized to have real and material consequences" (Kapur 1998, p. 200). Thus,

difference and newness have to be contained. Timothy Brennan sounds a similar critical note when he praises *The Satanic Verses* for introducing some "fresh thinking about national form, about a new homelessness that is also a worldliness" (1989, p. 165). However, he goes on to say, the novel also sees through this homeless worldliness and recognizes "how strangely detached and insensitive the logic of cosmopolitan 'universality' can be" (Brennan 1989, p. 165). In other words, the novel registers the cultural history that has produced it, and thwarts all resistance, making the argument that words have a home. When a migrant can re-shape and re-settle London to fit the dream images of a perpetual outsider, it is an act that reinscribes the colonial longing behind dreaming of London in the first place.

The narrator underscores the "real and material consequences" of London-generated colonial historical paradigms through the creation of Jahilia, the shifting sand city which serves as a metaphor for the novel's London. Jahilia is dreamed into being by the fevered, psychotic imagination of Gibreel (who, at this point, is narrating the novel; viz. Jahilia is also the product of the devil). He crafts Jahilia from "the fine dune-sand of those forsaken parts – the very stuff of inconsistency – the quintessence of unsettlement, shifting, treachery, lack-of-form" (1988, p. 96), representing the surface pliability of London. Conversely, Jahilia, in its "newly invented permanence" is also "a sight to wonder at: walled, four-gated, the whole of it a miracle worked by its citizens" (1988, p. 96). The dualism of Jahilia matches that of London in the way impermanence masks the fixed "walled, four-gated" fact of permanence, underscoring the satire implied in the narrator's rhetorical question "How does newness come into the world?" The newness that London symbolizes as a mongrel, shape-shifting city being recolonized by diasporic subjects is the newness of unmoored identities, neither English nor Indian nor anything else. Gibreel cannot recognize this delusion, perhaps because of the shifting permanence of Jahilia/London itself: he can celebrate the life and ingenuity of Jahilia, while in the next breath fantasize about its destruction. "I, in my wickedness," he intones,

"sometimes imagine the coming of a great wave, a high wall of foaming water roaring across the desert, a liquid catastrophe full of snapping boats and drowning arms, a tidal wave that would reduce these vain sandcastles to the nothingness, to the grains from which they came" (1988, p. 96). This fancy of destruction becomes reality toward the end of the novel when Gibreel, under the influence of his rival Saladin, instigates race-riots that engulf south London in flames.

The novel's race riots have a historical counterpart in the riots that engulfed south London in 1981. The social unrest behind the novel's riots is as complex as the reality of London's (persisting) racial tensions, but the riot scene in the novel can also be read as a moment in which the satanic narrator delivers his verdict on optimistic gestures towards hybridizing social and cultural transformation. The riots mock the promise of such gestures on the worldly level, exposing hybridity as a sham because "on the other-worldly level it contains what Aravamudan calls 'the slyly ironical last laugh of the devil, who has conquered by fading away into innocuous moral virtue'" (Clark 2001, p. 130). Coupled with the novel's general narrative elusiveness, this gives the sense that Satan, in control of the representations of the world, is telling us that the only possible future is to abandon social transformation and progressive politics, not because they offer no solution, but as a way of dodging the responsibility for imagining the world and staking claims on our images and ideas. The corollary is that if our representations of cities like London shift and change in the winds of demographic and diasporic change, then the question "How does newness come into the world?" will be answered by a demonic shrug of the shoulders, and London's retreat into nostalgia, sensual comfort, nationalism, and moral relativism.

The devil's shrug plays with our ability to read the novel, and by extension our ability to judge the moral nature of London. The end of the novel marks the end of the main characters' engagement with that city. Saladin's return to his native Bombay and his love-interest there can be read as a

triumph of his flexibility and transnational reconciliation, and Gibreel's murder of Alleluia Cone and subsequent suicide can be interpreted as an allegorical rendering of how ideological fixations lead to destruction. In Afzal-Khan's view,

> [i]n choosing to let the 'angelic' Farishta die and the 'satanic' Chamcha live, Rushdie is surely challenging the conventional definitions of good and evil [. . .] [the novel] ends on a note that suggests that only those who are flexible survive [. . .] and also that all old, inflexible ideologies and definitions of the world and of its peoples must die or be destroyed if there is to be any hope of renewal, of survival. (1993, p. 172)

But the flexible Saladin has given up on London: he will be flexible and survive by moving back to Bombay, which "represents Rushdie's 'third principle,' a space that attempts to include both sides of the east/west, secular/religious, real/fantasy, colonizer/colonized binary in ever new combinations that foreground hybridity over clarity and open-endedness over closure" (Clark 2001, p. 88). The London of postcolonial migrants and their diasporic communities threw Saladin's images of London into flux and offered no solution. Like it or not, the satanic narrator seems to say, you humans cannot maintain psychic balance unless you give up on newness altogether – that is, they must throw out the baby with the bath water, and give up on whatever social, political and economic progression might result from a commitment to newness and return to the social and cultural fixities that London represents.

Those fixities come from seeing London through the value-laden lens of Rushdie's "third principle." In staking a claim for this space's commitment to newness and "inclusive space[s] of hybridity" Rushdie "privileges an urban, upper-middle class, college-educated, 'worldly' intellect" (Clark 2001,

p. 88). Subaltern voices, and those without the economic means to relocate, are left out of the narrative. The sins of imperialism are washed away in a drive to neuter cultural memory via cultural commodification. As poet and novelist Iain Sinclair saw it, "The Thatcher/Major (bingo millennialist) era was . . . the art of the proposal [in which an] industry grew up for describing things that hadn't quite happened, epiphanies for empty rooms" (1997, p. 217). This is the emptied out but moneyed-up London of Hal Valance, which carries on into the present historical moment as a city that functions within a globalized network of trade, information, and financial and cultural capital. The way the novel suspends its interrogation of London's social inequalities eerily predicts how culture would be mobilized to sustain London's immutability. Projects like the Millennium Dome showed that even a Labour government was not immune to thinking of London as the home "of core values with which not only Londoners but also the British people as a whole are expected to identify" (Schlaeger 2003, p. 55). *The Satanic Verses* did not start this trend, but it can be read as another instance in a cultural history of perpetuating the notion of London as it once was and should forever be.

References

Afzal-Khan, F 1993, *Cultural imperialism and the Indo-English novel: genre and ideology*

    in R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Salman Rushdie. The Pennsylvania State

University Press, University Park PA.

Ball, JC 2004, *Imagining London: postcolonial fiction and the transnational metropolis*,

    University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Baucom, I 1999, *Out of place: englishness, empire, and the locations of identity*, Princeton

    University Press, Princeton.

Bhabha, HK 1994, *The location of culture*, Routledge, London and New York.

Bradbury, M 1991, 'London 1890-1920' in M Bradbury and J McFarlane (eds), *Modernism:*

    a guide to european literature 1890-1930, Penguin, Harmondsworth, pp. 172-190.

Brennan, T 1989, *Salman Rushdie and the third world: myths of the nation*, St. Martin,

    New York.

Clark, R Y 2001, *Stranger gods: Salman Rushdie's other worlds*. McGill-Queen's

    University Press, Montreal and Kingston.

Hall, S 2000, 'The local and the global: globalization and ethnicity', in AD King (ed.)

    Culture, globalization and the world system: contemporary conditions for the

    representations of identity, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 19-40.

Jack, I 1999, 'Introduction', *Granta: the magazine of new writing*, special issue: 'London:

    the lives of the city', Spring, pp. 6-8.

Jacobs, JM 1996, *Edge of empire: postcolonialism and the city*, Routledge, London.

Kapur, G 1998, 'Globalization and culture: navigating the void' in F Jameson and M

    Miyoshi (eds.), *The cultures of globalization*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, pp. 191-217.

Rushdie, S 1988, *The satanic verses*, Picador-Holt, New York.

Sassen, S 1992, *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2nd edn., Princeton University

Press, Princeton and Oxford.

Schlaeger, J 2003, 'London: tomorrow's yesterday, future images of the past', in J Ramon

Resina and D Ingehschay (eds) *After-images of the city*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, pp.

49-60.

Sinclair, I 1997, *Lights out for the territory: 9 excursions in the secret history of London*,

Granta, London.

Wolfreys, J 2007, *Writing London: inventions of the city*, Palgrave, Houndmills.

"An Unexpected Sound": Recognizing Diverse Voices in Postcolonial Literary Interpretation[1]

Joanne Nystrom Janssen

Abstract

This article explores expectations about the ways in which readers from each side of the colonial/colonized divide might approach texts. Pedagogical articles about world and postcolonial literature frequently classify readers in one of two categories—Western or non-Western. Since I teach women from a dozen Asian countries at the Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh, I had imagined that my world literature students would embody expectations about readers from the developing world: that they would relate to the characters and themes in the course's contemporary texts. When I began teaching Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis (2003) last spring, however, I learned that my students' responses to the text varied considerably from what I had expected. As a result, I began questioning my assumptions: why exactly did I expect certain responses from my students, and what is the significance of the alternate responses with which I was confronted? I argue that the assumed interpretive binary does not always exist. In addition to failing to recognize the diverse points of view that readers may bring to texts, the assumption frequently presupposes that postcolonial authors have imagined only Western readers as their audiences—a view that runs the risk of reinforcing oppositional lines of thinking rather than eradicating them. Using *Persepolis* as a case study, I propose avoiding the Western/non-Western binary when considering readers of literature, which requires paying greater attention to "minority" voices—an ironic assertion, considering the field's alleged attention to diversity, heterogeneity, and cultural and historical specificity.

Keywords: postcolonial, reader response, *Persepolis*, World Literature

---

In Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983), the eponymous protagonist offers what has become a quintessential scene of postcolonial interpretation in literature. While paging through her textbook at school one day, the adolescent Annie discovers a full-page picture in which Columbus sits in the bottom of a ship with his hands and feet bound in chains, looking "quite dejected and miserable" (p. 77). Earlier Annie had identified her Antiguan ancestors as having "done nothing wrong, except just sit somewhere, defenseless," in contrast with the ancestors of Ruth, her English classmate, who did "terrible things" (p. 76). Therefore, when she sees the image, she thinks, "What just deserts [. . .] for I did not like Columbus. How I loved this picture—to see the usually triumphant Columbus, brought so low" (pp. 77-78). In Old English lettering, which is "a script [she] had recently mastered," Annie John scribbles a disdainful jab under the picture (p. 78), which contrasts vividly with her Canadian teacher's response: red-faced and wild-eyed, she tells Annie that she has "gone too far this time, defaming one of the great men in history" (p. 82). This scene demonstrates the complexity of responding to imperial narratives: Annie, as a postcolonial subject, can only offer a countering view by "mastering" the characters and language that are aligned with the former "masters." In addition, offering a critique also requires confronting Western readers, like her teacher, who honor the expansionist characters.

Postcolonial literary moments like this one have the power to become not only descriptive but prescriptive, with characters like Annie and her teacher shaping expectations about the ways that readers from each side of the colonial venture might approach texts. In fact, since I teach women from a dozen Asian and Middle Eastern countries at the Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh, I had imagined that my students would respond much like Annie John to the texts we would read together in a world literature course. When I began teaching Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) last spring, however, I discovered that my students' responses to the text varied considerably from what I had expected. As a result, I

began questioning my assumptions: why exactly did I expect certain responses from my students, and what is the significance of the alternate responses with which I was confronted? Because pedagogical articles about world and postcolonial literature frequently classify readers in one of two categories—Western or non-Western—I argue that these fields frequently assume an interpretive binary that does not always exist. In addition to failing to recognize the diverse points of view that readers may bring to texts, the assumption frequently presupposes that postcolonial authors have imagined only Western readers as their audiences—a view that runs the risk of reinforcing oppositional lines of thinking rather than eradicating them. Using *Persepolis* as a case study, I propose avoiding the Western/non-Western binary when considering readers of literature, which requires paying greater attention to "minority" voices—an ironic assertion, considering the field's alleged attention to diversity, heterogeneity, and cultural and historical specificity.

The two interpretive categories represented by Annie and her teacher recur in pedagogical articles about commonly taught postcolonial texts, and these categories seem to be determined by the reader's ethnicity or country of origin. Several professors describe their American or Canadian students as resisting the political implications of postcolonial or multicultural texts. Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter (1997), for example, notes that her "mainstream" American students begin reading postcolonial and multicultural literature by seeming to embrace notions of diversity, but once they encounter the "harsh and quite scathing indictments" of inequalities, the students become irritated, impatient, and frustrated (pp. 142-43). Similarly, Arun P. Mukherjee (1986) notes that her "privileged" Canadian students outright ignore the political implications of the postcolonial texts they read, preferring to focus on what they see as the texts' universal themes (p. 28). When she taught Margaret Laurence's "The Perfume Sea," for example, Mukherjee focused on the nature of colonialism and its aftermath. When she received her students' papers, however, she says, "I

was astounded by my students' ability to close themselves off to the disturbing implications of my interpretation and devote their attention to [. . .] such generalizations as change, people, values, reality etc." (p. 25). When not outright resisting or disregarding the political and historical implications represented in postcolonial texts, Western students are portrayed as lacking accurate information or cultural sensitivity, which therefore influences their interpretations of the texts. Lisa Botshon and Melinda Plastas (2010) describe their students— who vary in age, class, gender, and phase of life—as uniformly approaching texts like *Persepolis* with feelings of "national insecurity," which is influenced by stereotypes and misconceptions of the Middle East. The authors intentionally teach the text, in part, to offer a "space in which students can question Western notions about the Middle East" (p. 2). Like Annie John's Canadian teacher, Western students throughout the articles are described as encountering postcolonial voices with irritation, negligence, and misunderstanding.

In contrast, articles about readers from postcolonial countries or from minority backgrounds are portrayed as approaching texts with an opposing interpretive perspective. Pedagogical articles rarely address students from the developing world, particularly in addressing literary interpretation, presumably because most of the scholars writing on this subject are teaching in a North American context. They still suggest that non-Western readers approach texts differently, however, by explicitly identifying when the professor differs from the students in background and interpretation. Mukherjee, for example, sets out a strong cause-and-effect relationship between her own identity and her interpretive concerns. In the first sentence of her article, she describes herself as "a teacher of literature whose sex, race and birth in a newly independent Asian country" gives her an alternative perspective on pedagogy and ideology (p. 22). When she describes her attention to colonialism in the aforementioned Laurence story, she states, "This, then, was the aspect of the story in which I was most interested, no doubt because I am myself from a former colony of the Raj" (p. 25). She

suggests that because she comes from a postcolonial country, certain reading concerns become foregrounded for her. A similar relationship between identity and interpretation appears in articles about minority students in North American classrooms. Christian W. Chun (2009), for example, advocates teaching graphic novels to English-language learners (ELL), because such texts "foreground racism and immigrant otherness," which "resonate with ELL students" (p. 144). He makes a specific case for teaching Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as an "ideal" text for such students, because it "directly addresses the issue of racism and its pernicious, deadly consequences"; students with an ELL background "often face the daily discourses and practices of racism that permeate the society in which they find themselves" (pp. 147-48). Kurt Lucas, in "Navajo Students and 'Postcolonial' Literature" (1990), likewise describes his teaching of literature from Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific to Native American students, finding that they relate to the texts' themes of cultural change, human injustice, and education. Together, these perspectives suggest that interpretation is not only linked to identity, but grows out of it in a natural and almost spontaneous way. More specifically (and perhaps more problematically), these authors also assume that one's identity can be rather easily determined. Much in the same way that Mukherjee defines her students as coming "from the privileged section of an overall affluent society," and herself as "a non-white woman from the Third World" (p. 28), these articles suggest that classifying readers is a rather obvious process: they are First World or Third World, privileged or poor, mainstream or minority.

In spite of my students' citizenship in a dozen countries—most of them postcolonial ones—their responses to *Persepolis* did not fit into this interpretive binary, which caught me by surprise. Beyond their countries of origin shaping their affinity with the text, I expected my students to identify with the precocious female protagonist due to my perception of their intelligence and bravery, demonstrated by the depth of thinking in their work and their willingness to study at a start-up university far from home. My students, however, expressed

difficulty in relating to Marji, describing her as far more bold, curious, and revolutionary than they were as children. As evidence of the kind of thinking and actions that were foreign to them, they cited scenes in which the child Marji believes herself to be "the last prophet" (Satrapi 2003, p. 6) or desires to join protests against the government (p. 17).[2] At the same time, they did not transverse categories of identification in order to share the "Western" perspective. Rather than being hostile to or oblivious of issues of power and identity, they were eager to discuss the ways in which Marji was restrained, as well as the ways in which growing up in wartime affected her psychology. And, because they live in a Muslim country where women (including some of them) frequently wear veils, my students were unburdened by the stereotypes and confusions about the signification of the veil that other critics describe as shaping their students' responses to *Persepolis.* For example, upon beginning the text my students immediately understood that the veil failed to subsume female individuality or agency, noting in the text's second frame that the veiled young women still have distinctive hairstyles and facial expressions, and, a few frames later, that the young women use their discarded veils to play schoolyard games (p. 3).

While on the one hand my students' responses expose flaws in assumptions about readers in the developing world, on the other, their experience with *Persepolis* reveals an even more significant chasm in the way that critics often think about authors, texts, and readers within postcolonial studies. Beyond demarcating forms of interpretation, critics sometimes create an even more permanent divide between the two categories of colonizer and colonized: they seem to take for granted that within the sphere of postcolonial literature, the postcolonial subjects constitute the authors of the texts, and Westerners are their intended readers. Certainly some postcolonial texts prompt such a reading. Rhonda D. Frederick (2003), for

---

[2] Interestingly, Botshon and Plastas (2010) describe an opposite view among their American students, who identify with Marji: "The fact that Satrapi's narrator is a young girl, illustrated very simply in stark black and white, allows for an easy identification between reader and text" (p. 5).

example, in describing her pedagogical approach to teaching Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, emphasizes how she helps students make sense of the narrator's use of the second person to confront North American and white English people about the way they become tourists and exploit Antiguans (p. 7). Frederick notes, "The author uses the second person singular strategically to position readers in her world. This technique indicates that she does not speak to tourists who might share her opinion" (p. 9). Although the accusatory "you" distinguishes between author and reader in this text, sometimes the assumption seems to extend beyond specific texts to postcolonial literature in general. For example, in "Teaching at the End of Empire," Stephen Slemon (1992-1993) argues for the necessity, in postcolonial pedagogy, of combining two critical approaches that seem contradictory: first, to use critical theory to question the voices of authority, and second, to incorporate anthropology to acknowledge local voices and knowledge.[3] Although he makes a persuasive case, he concludes that postcolonial pedagogy should direct its attention to two primary locations: "the subject by or *for* whom the postcolonial text claims to speak—that is, the colonized—and the subject *to* whom the text is addressed within the circuit of postcolonial pedagogy: that is, the *student* subject within the discipline of organized literary studies" (original emphasis, p. 160). Although Slemon does not explicitly preclude the latter subject from sharing a "colonized" identity with the former, he does divide the subjects into two groups, using distinctly geographical language. Postcolonial pedagogy should focus on two "primary *locations*," with the student reader's "contradictory *emplacement* at the ambivalent 'end' of Empire" creating "a necessary *place* for this subaltern textual opposition" (my emphasis, p. 160). In placing colonized people and students in such different positions, rooted in distinct times and places, he implies that the two groups—colonial voices and student readers—can only share space within the classroom,

---

[3] Slemon further explains that such projects are fundamentally contradictory within postcolonial studies because the first is "skeptical and deconstructive", and the second is "positivist and anthropological." While anthropology honors "culturally specific and local knowledge" (p. 157), critical theory by authors such as Gayatri Spivak argues that colonial subjects cannot express their ideas within forms of discourse that those in power will acknowledge and understand (p. 158).

where one group encounters the other. Obviously my students offer a reminder that that's not always the case. But more is at stake: if postcolonial studies truly desires to overcome the lingering effects of colonialism, then it must not perpetuate binaries built on power and identity where they simply do not always exist.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak anticipated this current problem, if we allow her work on approaches to categories of literature to serve as an analogy for categories of readers as well. In "The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies" (1990), she argues for expanding the canon to include more of what she calls the "others": literature by women, homosexuals, people of color, immigrants, and non-Western authors, among others. When she discusses literature of colonial and postcolonial sites in particular, she appreciates the increased attention it has drawn, but she also believes that this area of study should be a truly "transnational study of culture," yoked with other disciplines and accompanied by a rigorous language requirement.[4] Otherwise, she fears that colonial and postcolonial discourse studies might create a canon of "Third World Literature (in translation)" that will lead to what she calls a "new orientalism." That is, as educational institutions validate and create space for this category of literature, they bring it forward for investigation and therefore control. She warns, "It can fix Eurocentric paradigms," and "it can begin to define 'the rest of the world' simply by checking out if it is feeling sufficiently 'marginal' with regard to the West or not" (p. 791). As Spivak notes, rushing to honor marginal voices can too easily bypass the knowledge and thinking necessary to understand nuances of countries and cultures; "marginal" can become conflated with "not Western." Although Spivak specifically addresses the study of non-Western literature, her insights translate to discussions of non-Western readers as well. All too often, our categories are

---

[4] Spivak persuasively argues that such a study cannot be contained in the discipline of English (p. 791).

well-meaning, yet too simple. They do not acknowledge the available or existing range of positions or perspectives. In consequence, we run the risk of hearing or honoring postcolonial voices only insofar as they fit a preexisting pattern—or, even worse, of molding readers' responses into the form we have come to expect.

Such a mistake does not only disrespect readers and obstruct certain interpretations, but it also undermines some of the key values of the fields of world literature and postcolonial literature. When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe first coined the term "world literature" in 1827, he shared an inclusive vision where "works would be received around the globe" (Thomsen 2008, p. 11). Practically speaking, however, William Atkinson (2006) notes that the concept of world literature, as reflected in anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces,* focused almost entirely on European and North American texts as recently as 1995 (p. 45). He adds that the shift from world literature meaning Western literature to world literature signifying "the literatures of most of the world" happened suddenly, growing out of an academic shift towards "the valorization of difference and specificity" (p. 46). While postcolonial studies originated more recently, its "most significant thinker," Edward W. Said, has been "a strong proponent of world literature" who shares the values that Atkinson articulates (Thomsen 2008, p. 25). In *Orientalism*, Said ([1978] 2003) demonstrates the reductionist nature of most studies of the East. In the Preface to his book honoring its twenty-fifth year of publication, he explains his book's goal of presenting thoughtful analysis as an antidote to polemical arguments "that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity" (p. xxii). Twenty-five years later, he reasserts his resistance to "terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics [. . .] and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse" (p. xxviii). If both world literature and postcolonial studies were envisioned as fields that would recognize difference, identify particulars, and acknowledge unheard voices, then

categorizing readers into two broad groups based on their countries of origin undercuts those fields at their very foundations. The principles that guide our literary interpretations must also apply to our understanding of literary interpret*ers*.

Expanding our thinking to value the diversity in literature's readers becomes even more imperative in an educational context, particularly when the professor, like myself, hails from the United States, and when most of the students are from postcolonial countries. Multiple theorists have addressed education's function in society beyond conveying information (see, e.g., Althusser 1971; Foucault [1977] 1995). In the postcolonial context, English education becomes even more troubling; as Gauri Viswananthan (1989) has shown, English Studies actually began in India as part of the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects (pp. 2-3). For me to have an agenda of shaping my students' views of themselves and others—no matter how well-intended—presents ethical issues that are monumental in scope, placing me and my pedagogy within the legacy of colonialism.

As a result, when I learned that my students' responses to *Persepolis* varied from my expectations, I attempted to guide them through the text's complexities without suggesting a particular interpretation or point of identification. Instead I encouraged students to note relationships and connections—between texts, themes, people, and places, as well as between themselves and the people and events they read about—without eliding differences. Specifically, I facilitated an activity that serves as an example of how granting interpretive freedom may be applied to the classroom, as well as of the diverse student responses that it can generate. Because *Persepolis* is written in frames, at the end of our reading I gave each student some additional empty frames. I asked them to respond to the prompt, "What do you have to say to Marji? And what does she have to say to you?" While this prompt admittedly grows out of a reader-response approach to literature in asking the students to put

themselves in conversation with Marji and/or anything that we had learned about the text and its context, it does not presume that my students will have personal responses to the text that are "non-Western" in any distinct way.[5]

Interestingly, the most common way that students connected with the text was through concepts of war. Two students' responses fit expectations, as they aligned themselves and their own experiences of conflict with Marji's experiences of war. A Sri Lankan student, for example, drew herself standing back-to-back with Marji, saying, "It could be Iran to her, but Sri Lanka to me. Whatever the cause is, war destroyed our safe, happy world." In referring to the Sri Lankan Civil War, which has been waging for almost the entirety of her life, my student portrays herself as a sufferer like Marji. In focusing on issues of oppression and power structures, my student's comments align her with postcolonial issues, particularly since many scholars trace the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict to injustices that began under British rule. Similarly, a student from Myanmar, but who prefers to call her country Burma out of resistance to the current military regime, also discovered personal connections to the text. Like Sri Lanka, her country also has been engaged in an internal conflict; its civil war traces its start to the country's independence from Britain in 1948. This student drew a picture of Marji pumping her fist and saying, "Down with the Shah!" She joins Marji in the scene, noting, "This is the experience I never had in my country. I like the courage she has as a child, for I want to have that kind of ability in my life. I also want to rebel [against] the dictatorship in my country with the kind of courage she has." In attempting to locate a position for herself from which to resist the hegemonic power structure—and in seeing that potential for herself even if not yet

---

[5] In "The Reception of Reader-Response Theory," Patricia Harkin (2005) notes that "reader-response conceptions appear now […] as assumptions in cultural studies, as well as in performance, postcolonial, and queer theories" (p. 412). Although a reader-response approach may be worth questioning along with other assumptions in postcolonial theory, that concern is beyond the scope of this essay. It also is important for me to note that this activity could be applied to any group of students, regardless of country of origin.

the reality—my student's comments evoke discussions central to postcolonial studies about what forms of resistance might be available to postcolonial subjects, as well as how effective those forms of resistance might be.

While maintaining their emphasis on war, many more students—particularly Bangladeshi ones—could only relate to the text's portrayal of the revolution by drawing upon family or national narratives, and these responses fit less clearly into expectations about non-Western readers. In Bangladesh, the most significant national independence narrative does not center on the country's release from British rule, which occurred in 1947 under the Partition of India (when Bangladesh was called East Pakistan), but instead on its independence from West Pakistan in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. According to Sarmila Bose (2011), a controversial author who questions the existing historical narratives, the prevailing view uncritically portrays Pakistan's military as the "bad guys" under which Bangladesh experienced "brutal repression." *Persepolis*—in telling its story through a child narrator's perspective and black-and-white frames (with their connotations of depicting a dichotomized issue)—also positions the government as the brutal torturers and the people as its victims (see, e.g., p. 51), which may explain the students' linking of the Bangladesh Liberation War with Iran's Islamic Revolution. In one Bangladeshi student's frame, for example, Marji asks her if *Persepolis* is "related to [her] life somehow." The student responds, "Yes, it helps me realize how lucky I am that I did not have to face the war in 1971 in Bangladesh." While this example focuses on historical moments of conflict and oppression which are central to postcolonial studies, in this case the student distances herself from the war: she "did not have to face" it. Another student similarly both identifies with and detaches from the conflict. When Marji mentions her experience of war, the student responds,

"My country was in war many years ago in 1971. Though I didn't experience the war, I can feel how [you feel]. I have heard about our war sufferings from my father."

This student does not share Marji's experiences; her point of connection is a generation removed, part of her consciousness only as a matter of history or family stories. Bangladesh's national history may contribute in another way to these students' failure to fully connect—and therefore to their inability to embody expectations. Because Bangladesh defeated Pakistan in the war, its origins as a country directly grew out of the military conquest. These origins vary considerably from most other decolonized nations. Simon During (1995), for example, notes that war often "has little place" in the national identities of decolonized countries. He states, "Most post-colonial nations and tribes have a history of defeat by imperialist powers. Freedom is often the enemy's gift" (p. 127). Because Bangladesh is a postcolonial country that uniquely established itself as a result of a military victory, its history has the potential to complicate my students' positions as postcolonial readers.

In contrast, another set of students linked themselves to the text's conflicts, but only as a point of dissimilarity. A Nepalese student, for example, drew herself seated with a mug of coffee, with thought bubbles depicting her internal conflict between the importance of love and peace versus the necessity of revolution to bring about change. The coffee cup speaks to the leisure and relative comfort of this student's life, while the thought bubbles reveal that these topics are abstract and academic ones for her. Notably, Marji and her story are not depicted in the frame; the graphic narrative merely serves as the backdrop for this student's intellectual questioning. Nepal's history as a country that was never colonized may contribute to this student's response; perhaps many of the issues central to postcolonial theory—such as identity, domination, discrimination, and agency—are irrelevant in a context such as hers. However, Nepal's history as an autonomous country is complex; after India's 1857 War of

Independence, in which Nepalese troops supported the British, Nepal and Britain formed an agreement in which Nepal "became essentially a British protectorate" guided by the British in external affairs and allowing Gurkha soldiers to be recruited for the British military (Schmitt 1995, p. 142). Therefore, only the most literal understanding of Nepal's history would result in declaring postcolonial theory irrelevant to its context. This student's response also cannot be dismissed because other students from explicitly postcolonial countries mirrored her response, such as a Bangladeshi student who drew Marji on one side of the page, surrounded by symbols of weapons and the word, "War," while drawing herself with symbols of love and happiness, accompanied by the word "Peace." In rejecting points of identification with oppressed characters and in not portraying themselves as wrestling with lingering effects of colonialism, these students contest the category "postcolonial." If we consider all of my students' responses related to war on a spectrum, then, they illustrate a range of interpretations, from ones that fit expectations to ones a viewer would not necessarily be able to identify as being drawn by "postcolonial" readers, as well as many in between.

Another theme that prompted student comments is education—a topic that simultaneously highlights my students' privilege and rootedness in an Asian context. In responding to the final scenes of the book, some students found points of contact between themselves and the character or narrative that they initially could not identify. At this point in the text, Marji leaves her country in order to study in Vienna, a decision made by her parents to protect her from the consequences of her increasing outspokenness (pp. 152-53). Because many of my students have left home for their education, they were drawn to these scenes. A Chinese student drew herself holding hands with Marji, commenting upon the difficulty of living abroad and remembering her own tears as she crossed the Chinese border. Likewise, a Cambodian student re-drew the scene in which Marji says good-bye to her parents (p. 152), which the student calls "the saddest scene in Marji's life." She adds, "It's not much different from many

students [. . .], including myself, [who] has to leave family and country because of education." Initially, these students' focus on education appears to fit the mold. Education plays a central role in postcolonial studies; this article's opening scene from *Annie John* revolves around education, and *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader,* edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1995), includes an entire section devoted to the topic (pp. 425-60). Pedagogical articles emphasize this aspect of students' literary interpretation as well; Kurt Lucas (1990) describes his Navajo students as relating well to a particular postcolonial text because "they too are searching for a balance between their Navajo traditions and the promises of Anglo [his students' term] education" (p. 56). My students' responses, in contrast, do not highlight education as a dominating force that has worked to eliminate traditional forms of knowledge and meaning-making. They connect to Marji on a personal level, seeing her painful good-byes as reflective of the ones they have had to say in their own lives. While the students' responses challenge notions of the "minority" developing world reader, they also demonstrate flaws in conflating them with the "privileged" Western reader. Clearly my students have educational experiences far beyond those of many other young women in their countries, yet these opportunities come with sacrifices, too. Many students are studying at the university on full scholarship, and due to cost or other hurdles, they cannot return home for a year or two at a time. Even in their privileged position, then, their experiences are distinct from those usually undergone by Western students who study abroad. These students connect to *Persepolis* from that middle position. While they are drawn to issues of education—which postcolonial studies also foregrounds—they have wrestled with it in ways that extend beyond the predictable meanings or implications.

Although my students demonstrate the flaws in the "marginalized" side of the existing interpretive binary, I would argue that the available categories restrict "Western" readers as well. I recognize that both culture and classroom dynamics can shape student responses to

the texts, so that even when North American instructors anticipate (or even hope for) diversity among their students, those responses can appear "remarkably similar," as Botshon and Plastas found to be the case (p. 1), and as other critics such as Mukherjee, Frederick, and Aegerter describe. At the same time, I suspect that more variety exists than is sometimes acknowledged. Frederick confirms this possibility: at the place where she describes her students as "angry, defensive, or otherwise closed" to the text, she includes a footnote leading to a detail that none of the other authors acknowledge (p. 2). She says:

> I would be disingenuous if I did not mention that a few students read through their discomfort and recognized Kincaid's style as a strategy designed to inform and affect readers. While this essay is primarily concerned with students who were not able to do this, I want to take a moment to discuss the former group. These students tried to make sense of their initial discomfort with the text by interpreting it through the course's themes and readings. I valued their efforts [. . .]. (p. 17)

In Frederick's situation, at least, there are "privileged" students who do not necessarily share all features of the "(presumably) Western worldviews" that she otherwise hopes to reorient (p. 2). Although she states that she desires to "shift emphasis from points of identification between privileged students and postcolonial/multi-cultural writers and ideologies," believing that such a focus "can reduce, or worse, continue to efface differences that motivate postcolonial and multicultural writings," the variety of her own students' responses suggest that her approach overlooks these "minority," foot-noted voices (p. 3). If we can agree that there is no such thing as a homogeneous "developing world" interpretive perspective, likewise we should be wary of believing there is a "Western" one either.

Although texts like *Annie John* might have set readers up to expect two antagonistic approaches to interpretation, in the end they also anticipate the more complex and varied approach that I propose. In *Annie John,* for example, the final chapter of the book echoes the earlier image of Columbus chained on a boat—but this time it is the 15-year-old Annie who becomes a passenger on a ship to England. Although not physically bound, she wrestles with the attachments she has both formed and released as she undertakes her voyage. She recognizes that she is leaving her parents and her home permanently, and as a result, she experiences contradictory feelings, including some of being restrained, stating, "I felt I was being held down against my will" (p. 144). At the point of departure, she returns to her cabin below deck, where she finds herself in a surprising position—both sharing space with and diverging from the path of Columbus before her. In that moment, when she is between countries and identities, she notes that she can hear the waves lapping around the ship. Matter-of-factly, she states, "They made an unexpected sound" (p. 148). Because she was attuned to the sea, Annie could hear and describe its motions, which happened to correspond with her own complicated experience of leaving her home and family. In contrast with the interpretive binary that the earlier classroom scene seems to establish, here Annie demonstrates a more helpful model of postcolonial literary interpretation: of simply listening for and accepting diverse viewpoints, even when they are unexpected.

References

Aegerter, L.P., 1997. A pedagogy of postcolonial literature. *College Literature* 24 (2), pp. 142-
50.

Althusser, L., 1971. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In Ben Brewster (trans.), *Lenin
and philosophy and other essays* (pp. 127-88). London: New Left Press.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H., eds., 1995. *The post-colonial studies reader.* London:
Routledge.

Atkinson, W., 2006. The perils of world literature. *World Literature Today* Sept.-Oct., pp. 43-
47.

Bose, S., 2011. Myth-busting the Bangladesh war of 1971, *Al Jazeera,* [online]. Available at:
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/05/20115983958114219.html> [7
December 2011].

Botshon, L. and Plastas, M., 2010. Homeland in/security: A discussion and workshop in
teaching Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis. Feminist Teacher* 20 (1), pp. 1-14.

Chun, C. W., 2009. Critical literacies and graphic novels for English-language learners:
Teaching *Maus. Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 53 (2), pp. 144-53.

During, S., 1995. Postmodernism or post-colonialism today. In Bill Ashcroft et. al. (eds.), *The
post-colonial studies reader* (pp. 125-29). London: Routledge.

Foucault, M., [1977] 1995. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison.* 2nd ed. New York:
Vintage.

Frederick, R. D., 2003. What if you're an "incredibly unattractive, fat, pastrylike-fleshed man"?:
Teaching Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place. College Literature* 30 (3), pp. 1-18.

Harkin, P., 2005. The reception of reader-response theory. *College Composition and
Communication* 56 (3), pp. 410-25.

Kincaid, J., 1983. *Annie John.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Lucas, K., 1990. Navajo students and "postcolonial" literature. *The English Journal* 79 (8), pp. 54-58.

Mukherjee, A. P., 1986. Ideology in the classroom: A case study in the teaching of English literature in Canadian universities. *Dalhousie Review* 66 (1&2), pp. 22-30.

Said, E. W., [1978], 2003. *Orientalism*. 25th anniversary ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Satrapi, M., 2003. *Persepolis: The story of a childhood.* New York: Pantheon.

Schmitt, K. J., 1995. *An atlas and survey of South Asian history.* Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc.

Slemon, S., 1992-1993. Teaching at the end of empire. *College Literature* 19/20 (3/1), pp. 152-61.

Spivak, G. C., 1990. The making of Americans, the teaching of English, and the future of culture studies. *New Literary History* 21 (4), pp. 781-98.

Thomsen, M. R., 2008. *Mapping world literature: International canonization and transnational literatures.* London: Continuum International Publishing.

Viswananthan, G., 1989. *Masks of conquest: Literary study and British rule in India.* New York: Columbia University Press.

"Too Long in Foreign Parts"?: An Asian Reception to Cosmopolitanism in Henry James's The American and The Portrait of a Lady[1]

Patricia Haseltine

Abstract

The works of Henry James with their attention to cosmopolitanism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide valuable insight into contemporary expectations of cultural hybridity and globalism. This paper assesses the ways students studying English as a foreign language in Taiwan read the cultural exchanges between Americans and Europeans in James's The American (1877) and The Portrait of a Lady (1881). It places the main attention upon how students evaluate James's characters based upon their own attitudes toward cosmopolitanism, work and leisure, and women's independence. Informed by the travel theory of Mary Louise Pratt (2008) and Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, it studies the negotiation and subversion of meaning in postcolonial and reverse-colonial contexts. The analysis of student responses reveals that in this culturally hybrid reading site, the limited consciousness technique of James generates judgments of characters' potentialities based upon the students' own values. Reconciling the cultural oppositions in the self to become a citizen of the world remains an ideal they do not see fully realized in James's highly conflicted characters, and, as their own partial views attest, not realizable in their own lives.

Keywords: Henry James, cosmopolitanism, Taiwan, reception studies, travel theory

Introduction

---

[1] This paper is a revision of a paper presented at the Inaugural Asian Conference on Literature and Librarianship, May 27-30, 2011 under the title "'Too Long in Foreign Parts'?: Reading Henry James in the Asian University.'

The transatlantic theme developed by Henry James in novels set in the late 19th century has long provided readers a vicarious travel experience. The developing cosmopolitanism of the late-19th century in such works as Daisy Miller: A Study (1879) and the early novels The American (1877) and The Portrait of a Lady (1881)[2] mirrors the more geographically widespread globalism of the 21st century when travelers from Taiwan,[3] as well as other Asian countries, are making their own journeys to Europe for business and pleasure. Economically secure, these new travelers now follow in the footsteps of the American travelers in James's novels to find intriguing personalities caught in negotiations involving differing cultural values in an effort to become citizens of the world.

The meaning of the word "cosmopolitan" during the late 19th century could be either negative or positive. In the pejorative sense, as Jessica Berman points out, it indicated the lack of roots and even vagrancy. In the positive sense, it was a kind of post-Enlightenment idealism in the search for universal humanism and a harmonious world community. It supported national interests, both economic and cultural, abroad. As interest in cosmopolitanism increased in the United States, the family magazine Cosmopolitan, containing an article by James, started publication in 1886. The aim of the magazine was to promote the development of women's public self and their interest in the world outside of their home and country. The meaning of the title emphasized "the paired virtues of community and worldliness as evidenced in the body, attitude, and especially the voices of its women" (Berman 2001, p. 31).

While focusing on James's realistic "studies" of various social conditions and the consequences of the 19th-century transatlantic travel phenomenon, readers become aware that James is an astute literary

---

[2] Hereafter, the shortened form of Portrait will be used to indicate The Portrait of a Lady.
[3] According to the Executive Information system of the Tourism Bureau of the Republic of China, the numbers of travellers from Taiwan to France in 2010 and 2011 rose by 21.6% in the months from January through August. In 2011, 20, 837 persons from Taiwan travelled to France with an increase of 26.96% (http://admin.taiwan.net.tw/statistics/month.aspx?no=135).

ethnographer and social critic. Influenced by the realism of Gustav Flaubert and the naturalism of Emile Zola, French writers who meticulously scrutinized the social milieu of their times (see Fussell 1991), James uses an "autoethnographic" type of writing as he documents the lives of Americans in Europe. This orientation makes James's works reflect a "reverse colonization" as Europe during the late-19th and early-20th century was being reinvented by colonial others, a concept put forward by Mary-Louise Pratt (2008).[4] The history of Americans going to the "mainland" or "the continent" is analogous to the return of Taiwanese businessmen who engage actively in business ventures in China, the mainland from which their ancestors migrated. The reverse colonization trend parallels the American business ventures in Europe in the late 19th century that James wrote about.

This article studies the first encounter of a group of graduate student readers in Taiwan with James's The American and The Portrait of a Lady. It examines the interpretive responses of these readers to the judgments on travel, work and leisure, and independence hidden just under the surface of the rich intercultural conversations in the novels. In the social and cultural encoding[5] of these Jamesian conversations, students encounter a wide array of models for global interaction in the burgeoning globalism cultivated in East Asian countries where many have been reaping the rewards of capitalistic growth. For these readers keenly interested in cosmopolitanism and "cultural exchange,"[6] what the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha has defined as a "third space" is created. In the Location of Culture (1994), Bhabha has posited an interstitial space between a colonizing culture and the colonized. In this space between cultures in a post-colonial context, the language signs of the former may be mimicked

---

[4] To her postcolonial scrutiny of the European conquest and anti-conquest literature written by travellers to South America and Africa, Pratt adds an analysis of the later reverse discovery travel of later generations of colonists and mestizos back to Europe (Pratt 2008, p. 237-38).

[5] The pragmatics of conversational speech acts in James's highly-charged interchanges between characters with different backgrounds show conflicting viewpoints in varying linguistic registers.

[6] Jana Gohrisch in 'Cultural Exchange and the Representation of History in Postcolonial Literature' adapts the concepts of Peter Burke on cultural exchange to the postcolonial novel and views the author as a mediator: "The novels themselves are part of cultural exchange processes in which their writers act as cultural mediators" (Gohrisch 2006, p 234).

or subverted. The meanings of words and the values of institutionalized social forms are negotiated and re-negotiated. Adopting the stance of a formerly colonized American, James, through his sometimes rather stereotypical fictional American characters, not only mimics but also subverts European customs and mores in a complex negotiation of values. This culturally hybrid "third space" of interpretation in James's novels becomes an even more complex hybrid meeting place when read in an Asian context; that is, not only American and European ideologies and values are negotiated, but the readers' own Asian concepts come into play. In their acquisition of language and culture, students from Taiwan adopt and adapt the signs of American and European cultures they are learning to deal with. When reading James, the Taiwanese readers whose views are recounted here entered Bhabha's space of negotiation, comparing their own values with those already being negotiated in the novels. That is, in reading, an individual's own multi-perspectival "partiality" is brought into an affective relationship with the partiality in others.

The Asian readers in this study mainly[7] included graduate students in two of my classes at Providence University, a private Roman Catholic university in Taiwan. One course was a graduate special topic seminar on the works of Henry James while the other course focused on modernism in poetry and considered the influence of Baudelaire and the flâneur lifestyle on American modernist poets. Most of the students were Taiwanese; however, one of the students was Korean. One of the women works as a teaching assistant in a grade school and has two children of her own; the Korean student has grown children living abroad. Having lived in Taiwan for a number of years, she was able to provide insights on the experience of both travel and living in a foreign country. The other students, four male students and five female students were between 23 and 25 years old. I asked the students to respond in writing to excerpts from James's two novels based upon their own understanding of the texts. They also each wrote a final term paper for the course on James's novels. In the course on modernist poetry, I asked

---

[7] Besides analyzing the graduate students comments, I also refer briefly to ideas on "Daisy Miller: A Study" from undergraduate students in a class in American Literature at National Taipei University.

the students, most of whom had also taken the course on James, to specifically comment on the flâneur lifestyle in James and on a selected group of poets from the early 20th century. For the following reception study, I have selected comments from the students' writings and class discussions which illustrate the kinds of negotiations they are making with James's texts.[8]

The readers' evaluative judgments of character upon which this reception study is based are divided into three areas of cultural exchange value. They show how the students evaluate James's characters based on their own attitudes toward (a) cosmopolitanism, (b) work and leisure, and (c) women's independence. As readers encounter the multiplicity of views and prejudices that emerge in the plots of the novels, one also discovers that behind the characters' desire to achieve experience and personal fulfillment is James's insistence on the concept of freedom, an idea that remains appealing to students whose acquisition of English promises to empower them with a means to explore the world beyond their own culture.

The Man-of-the-World

In Daisy Miller: A Study, (1879), the character Winterbourne makes the pithy comment that he has "lived too long in foreign parts" (James 1984, p 50) to fully appreciate the fresh naïveté of the American girl Daisy. Some undergraduate students attempted to interpret this phrase in an extraordinary way that offered a secondary meaning to the word parts used in this passage. Literally, the word parts means foreign countries or places away from America, both Winterbourne and James's homeland; however, under a deconstructive reading 'parts' may also indicate that the speaker is a person who has a divided identity, he has been living a life composed of native and foreign parts. Taking their lead, I further deconstruct the phrase to perceive Winterbourne's versatility in adapting to the manners of several cultures. As the common idiom describes such persons, he could be considered "a man of many

---

[8] I am grateful to the editor for suggestions concerning the discussion of the students' reception to James's works and the development of other concepts in the paper.

parts." That is, having lived abroad, Winterbourne is a self-made cosmopolitan. The underlying negative tone of Winterbourne's comment could reflect the emotional reaction to the cultural hybridity and inner conflict experienced both by Winterbourne and James himself: both collect, study, and learn from national "specimens"[9] of European society and Continental traditions while at the same time they strive to break free of cultural constraints and conventions. This contradiction is especially poignant in Portrait where Isabel's "determination to see, to try and to know, attracts her towards European civilization, yet her moral integrity guarantees her immunity" (Lee 1978, p. 36). Such a culturally divisive condition and vacillation may be a result of partial assimilation to a foreign culture, the adoption of values and codes of behavior that alienate oneself from another self.

The vacillation between perspectives in James's characters is found first in The American and then is developed to its fullest extent in Portrait. In the latter half of the 1890's James "explored a kind of radical perspectivalism, the question of what can one see and—since that is never the whole picture— how one fills in the gaps, in ways that may be tested against others' equally partial perceptions but never against an objective standard" (Peter Brooks 2007, pp. 99-100). The depictions of character in the works of James that provide limited and shifting points of view[10] are thus an in-between site or third space of cultural mixing where the language and values of more than one culture coexist and undercut one another even within one person, who may be seen as divided, like Winterbourne, into native and foreign parts.

For readers, the affective responses to such partially defined and changing characters are also divided

---

[9] The word "specimen" is often used to indicate a person from another culture in Portrait. The narrator says that Isabel is prone to use it often. It occurs in Chapter VII as Lord Warburton is described by Ralph as "A specimen of an English gentleman" (Portrait 1991, p. 92). Also, Osmond in Chapter XXIV is thought to be a "specimen apart" (Portrait, p. 291).
[10] Brooks likens the limited consciousness in James to "perspectivalism" in impressionist painting and claims that the late novels of James are "highly perspectival" in that "they depend on the play of seeing and the unseen, of knowledge and ignorance" (Brooks 2007, p. 2).

and subject to a similarly partial recognition. Gilles Deleuze, in his Cinema I, examines the power on the audience, or the affect, of the close-up in film, relating it to how the portrait in painting is partial in the viewer's perception. The close-up focus or a sequence of close-ups upon parts of the self allows an author to provide a virtual dimension or conjunction to a character, and the reader must fill in the gaps. The face of the represented figure or character is both "turning toward" the viewer and "turning away" (Deleuze 1986, p. 104) at the same time. The turning away allows for all sorts of sensations:

The expressed - that is, the affect – is complex because it is made up of all sorts of singularities that it sometimes connects and into which it sometimes divides. This is why it constantly varies and changes qualitatively according to the connections that it carries out or the divisions that it undergoes. This is the Dividual, that which neither increases nor decreases without changing qualitatively. What produces the unity of the affect at each instant is the virtual conjunction assured by the expression, face or proposition.

(Deleuze 1986, p 104-105)

In Winterbourne's gaze on Daisy and in the reflexive gaze, we have the possibilities or virtualities of the multicultural individual in a cosmopolitan or globalized situation. The partiality of each of the characters draws the reader into the potential "becoming" of that character. Moreover, in James's ethnographic sketches, many of the characters' singularities are culturally embedded, the uncertainties allowing for the play of affect between characters and the readers. The partially conceived cultural singularities add mystery to the affective power of the image. As the students' mis/interpretation verifies, Winterbourne has for too long been divided into parts and partialities because of his partial assimilation to foreign cultures and the ever-turning away figure of the American Daisy evades his gaze. When reading such interactions between characters who only have partial views of one another, the readers, who are also limited by their own individual and cultural singularities, boost the becoming of the character to produce varying interpretations.

While Winterbourne's "man-of-the-world" image suggested a multifaceted perspective of events in the novella to undergraduates, intercultural seminar discussion in the graduate class allowed for a deeper level of analysis. Here, students came up with varying views on the cosmopolitanism of characters in The American and Portrait, questioning how these characters were internationalized. In The American, James introduces a striking national contrast through the friendship of the discovery-making American, the innocent Newman, or "new" man, and Valentin de Bellegarde, a Frenchman, who is to serve as a "specimen" of James's cosmopolitan "man-of-the-world." The younger Bellegarde's family heritage is mixed: his mother is of English nobility while his father's family is French aristocracy going back to the ninth century. The novel attempts to join the American entrepreneur with the French family when Newman wants to marry Mme de Cintré, the sister of his friend Valentin, but Newman's romance is doomed to failure. As James W. Tuttleton puts it:

How such a family, as James conceived them, could have permitted themselves even for a moment to suffer the lounging, slangy, socially illiterate American manufacturer of wash-tubs and leather goods is a nice question—one that James does not really wish us to ask. (Tuttleton 1980, p. 111)

Tuttleton sees here a lapse in realism, noting that not only were American readers uncomfortable with Newman's sloppiness but that the corruption and decadence of the French aristocratic family was also too much to bear. In their own negotiation of meaning, however, the Taiwanese graduate students appreciated Newman's naïveté, by contrast with the sophistication of the French family whom they saw as a vivid example of aristocratic decadence. Even though he "has no taste in art," one student observed, Newman can afford a journey in Europe, where he can buy art objects to take back to America and perhaps "find a suitable bride to decorate his life."[11] The older Taiwanese woman in class

---

[11] The students in the class gave their written consent to be quoted anonymously.

reflected that "The European culture is focused on form and ceremony while the American is focused on utility; the European culture is focused on art while the American is focused on nature." She further claimed that Newman wanted to "show his frankness to Valentin. He is busy looking for a wife [. . .] James was trying to judge Newman in a different way, straight but impolite." Giving a higher value to frankness than to politeness, the student judged Newman's behavior as acceptable to her. Other students agreed that he should not be blamed for "lounging" about Europe in his bungling attempt to become a "man-of-the world." His searching for a wife is, for them, an understandable purpose for his journey.

A male student was particularly interested in James's corruption theme in regard to Newman, in which the character is said to be innocent until he encounters the corruptive influence of the continent of Europe. The student created the alliterated phrase "corruptive continent" for his term paper in which he wrote: "James gives the Europe he portrays a power to affect the human mind, and victims are endangered by Europeans or Europeanized foreigners." The student further commented upon how Newman gradually becomes more "aggressive." The "dark effect the Continent has posed on Newman simply turns him toward evil," but all he suffers is a cancelled engagement with Claire de Centré. In the end, he keeps "his freedom from the Continent's gloominess."

The Frenchman Valentin was even more attractive to the students than the innocent Newman. The students read him as a modern man in rebellion against his own corrupt family. In fact, James's description of him as a "man-of-the-world" means that he should be able to transcend class and tradition to find his own freedom of expression. First, two readers noticed that Valentin speaks English fluently; so here, they surmised that being a "man-of-the-world" first of all should involve knowing another language. Their attitude expressed here echoes the common refrain in Taiwan and in the university that English is a lingua franca they need in the globalized world Second, another student remarked on the maturity in Valentin's conversation: "Newman knows he [Valentin] isn't just a

traditional Frenchman. His speech is full of passion and reason." A very sympathetic response from a female student even went so far as to note that Valentin is "lonely in spirit." Having had no close friends before meeting Newman, he has to endure criticism for striking up the friendship with Newman from his own family of strict French aristocrats molded by unbreakable traditional rules. The student sees Valentin as an enterprising individual, who, in spite of his overbearing family code, has acquired his own personality and freedom, which is "dangerous to aristocratic social virtues."

Thinking that Valentin has developed a "modern mind," for some students similar to their own aspirations or in rebellion against time-honored Asian traditions held by the family, the readers in the class were generally shocked by the way James set up Valentin's death scene in a duel. The reversion to a past code of honor was out of keeping with the sympathetic changing portrait they had been constructing of Valentin from their various subjective viewpoints. The duel, the result of his affair with Newman's artist friend, showed that the "man-of-the-world" was obviously conflicted between his outdated aristocratic values and his friendships with the enterprising modern American and a lower class French woman, who was an artist. For the Taiwanese students, Valentin's death involved an adjustment of values that they were reluctant to accept.

When the aristocratic Valentin, who has fallen in love with the bohemian artist, finds out at the opera (Mozart's Don Giovanni) that she has another paramour, he arranges a duel to settle the matter. The events of the novel then take a turn for the worse, which left many students baffled. First of all, the romance of Valentin with the artist, which reflects the bohemian life of the "Belle Epoche," does not coincide very well with the students' earlier concept of Valentin as being in a just rebellion against his traditions. Although there is a similar Chinese tradition in literature of the "Flowery Gentleman," such a figure is usually condemned for his profligate behavior. Second, students would agree with Newman that a duel to settle a matter of romance is not the best option. When Newman challenges Valentin with "You are too good to go and get your throat cut for a prostitute," Valentin responds "one's

honour hasn't two different measures. It only knows that it is hurt; it doesn't ask when, or how, or where" (James 1965, p. 238). In order to explain Valentin's behavior, one class member insightfully related Valentin's problem to the Asian concept of "face." To keep face is to keep one's reputation free of blame from others: "The French are very complex and veil their mind behind their smile because of social honors and face. Valentin can't change his aristocratic background," she wrote. As long as the aristocratic Valentin can keep his pride and honor, even the association with the bohemian artist is acceptable. The duel over the lady's attentions will allow him to keep his honor or face.

However, the duel itself has two dimensions, perhaps not very well understood in the students' reading. In fact, the duel was not taken so seriously by Valentin. It is a part of his dandy or flâneur[12] spirit. He explains to Newman, "Quite apart from the goodness of the cause in which a duel may be fought, it has a kind of picturesque charm which in this age of vile prose seems to be greatly to recommend it. It's a remnant of a high-tempered time; one ought to cling to it." It is only an out-dated, "picturesque" fashion that brings about Valentin's death because Valentin's opponent, the rich son of a German businessman, does not share the same lightminded, or in Newman's words "theatrical," viewpoint about duels. Whereas Valentin's pistol shot only intentionally grazes his opponent, in a second shot, the more serious German aims for and hits close to the heart of the Frenchman.

The opinions among this group of students on the comparative cultural differences between the characters of Newman and Valentin were rather consistent with one another. They realized that being a "man-of-the-world" in James's realistic work does not lead to an idealistic state of harmony between

---

[12] Valentin is the character who most resembles Baudelaire's flâneur, certainly more than any of the American colonists or discoverers in the novel who are only just learning to be leisurely and artistically inclined and doing this far too self-consciously. Benjamin (1999) in fact does mark the behavior of the flâneur as being "modern" (p79). As Baudelaire defined the flâneur, he must be a person of means, one who does not need to work for his daily sustenance and who can be free to paint or write.

the various national characteristics. Valentin's aristocratic upbringing and economic dependence upon his family are at odds with his freedom-loving nature. In conflict with his flâneur spirit, it would be potentially impossible for Valentin to accept Newman's offer to find him a job in American as a banker. Likewise, it is equally difficult for Newman to become the true cosmopolitan he would like to be even though Valentin calls Newman a "man of the world with a vengeance" (James 1981, p. 97). Just as Newman and Valentin understand each other only partially and from their own points of view, the students tended to see the text as making sense to them from the perspective of the values of their own time and place. They made their value judgments relevant to their own experiences and were put at a distance by some of the period aspects in James's novel.

Negotiating between Work and Leisure

The success in industry and hard work by Newman-like entrepreneurs and their employees in the United States after the Civil War produced a new leisure class under capitalism[13] to join the upper crust of American society from New England. The journey to Europe allowed these travelers a view of alternate ways to spend their money. Some travelers chose to remain in Europe, and their lives are part of a history of reverse colonization. The children of this generation could well become dandies, with characteristics in common with the French flâneur lifestyle with the leisure to travel and engage in pleasurable modern pursuits.

Having become rich, Christopher Newman in The American is a would-be flâneur who wants to travel around Europe and view the sights and stroll the streets of Paris. He is described as a loafer by a missionary from America whose congregation has supported their minister's trip to Europe to see the grand architectural and artistic achievements (James 1981, p. 71). In Portrait, the old man Touchett, a

---

[13] The conspicuous consumption of the American colonizers of Europe in this period is to be explained in the theory of the leisure class by Thorstein Veblen in The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (1899), which was contemporary with James's early novels.

retired international banker who has worked hard all of his life, complains, "all you young men are too idle. You think too much of your pleasure. You're too fastidious, and too indolent, and too rich" (James 1991, p. 37). And yet his son Ralph is unable to enjoy the active life of the flâneur because he is seriously ill. The newly arrived Isabel also criticizes the other Americans she meets in Europe rather openly: "'You all live here this way, but what does it lead to?' she was pleased to ask. 'It doesn't seem to lead to anything, and I should think you'd get very tired of it'" (James 1991, p. 240). One of the women that Isabel first sees as a model of leisure for her to follow is Mme Merle, who travels around to the homes of her friends, cultivating the arts of piano playing and drawing. But, given the chance to travel around the world with this lady, Isabel doesn't particularly enjoy the journey or learn as much as she had hoped to.

In Walter Benjamin's insight, "basic to flânerie, among other things, is that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labor" (Benjamin 1999, p. 453). He then explains that poets and writers find inspiration for their works from such a lifestyle. In order to determine how students felt about the flâneur lifestyle, I asked the students in the modern poetry class, most of whom were also in the Henry James course, to give their opinions on Benjamin's illustration of the role and its relation to cultural production. Interestingly, they gave somewhat gender-distinctive opinions. A very precise response from a male student was that

Sadly, this kind of life style cannot be tolerated in Taiwan as a business island. Life needs to be tight and we are required to make contributions every day to different aspects. The city could be a very good place to proceed with a flâneur lifestyle if we avoid our obligations which traditional society asks us to do. Life can never be so easy.

Another male student stated that "Artistic works provide pleasures, but that is the problem. Pleasures can't be seen. We're always being asked to provide something for profits in this era; we have to have

money, houses, and so on." He says that he actually would like to become a hermit; stay away from people and live in the mountains with his dog "till death if reality would allow me to do that—ha."

A woman student had a more positive opinion of leisure that was rather philosophical: "The leisure might be good to create art. [But even] without money and time, if you have an open mind, you can live a leisurely life. Without an open mind, you cannot enjoy life or see anything leisurely." Another woman was quite clear with her negative opinion: "I don't like this kind of lifestyle. I would like my life to have a purpose, have a goal, which will encourage me to continue my life. The goals are my energy." Another conscientiously said, "It would be great to have the money and time, but I still want to do something so I wouldn't lose myself." Another commented on the relative freedom enjoyed by men: "The leisurely life for women is mostly in the house, a chamber. Men can take the outside as a place of leisure." Referring to the characters in Portrait, another woman student made a comparison between Mme Merle, who is a Jamesian flâneuse, and Isabel: "Mme Merle is a woman who travels around to escape her emptiness in her heart. She is not the legal wife, so she cannot stay with her daughter. Travelling is her way to run away, not to enjoy life. [On the other hand] Isabel is using her wealth to support her husband and be a housewife. So Isabel is doing something far more meaningful than Mme. Merle". The modernist aspect of flânerie led to another insight from the students. "The flaneur lifestyle might focus more on the individual matters. The artistic idea needs to exist not to make a difference in the social situation, but make a statement about identity." This attitude toward life is a "force against the mainstream. An alternative lifestyle, like the stay-at-home geeks today." Today "young people are just trying to escape, they don't know the reality or are afraid to face it."

The 21st-century Taiwanese readers' sentiments about leisure parallel rather closely those of James's characters on their first encounter with the leisure class in 19th-century Europe. James seems to view leisure as an affliction, even at times a disease, and the cosmopolitan man or woman of many parts must negotiate between the extremes of being responsible in a puritanical way or of living the role of the

European flâneur, be it a fetishistic art collector, or an idle expatriate reverse colonist.

Evaluating the Independence of Women

Sara Blair reasons that James learned to reject a masculine, aggressive approach to foreign cultures while developing his ethnographic style of writing with the result that he changed his protagonists from male to female travelers (Blair 1996, pp. 15-39). In Portrait several women characters demonstrate a range of attitudes toward travel and independence for women. In this section, I will focus upon the students' reactions to the characters of Mrs. Touchett, Isabel Archer, and Henrietta Stackpole. James allows each of these women to have a different view of the roles of women; however, as one student perceived, they "still have neither social powers or voices." Although "they had liberal thinking, they did not expand their social world to the other [European] world."

One of the most interesting characters for the student readers in the class was the character of Mrs. Touchett, the aunt who brings the orphaned Isabel to Europe. Their opinions were highly divergent, however, and revealed family problems that James himself does not emphasize in Portrait. In fact, she became for the older women students an object of criticism with interpretations that reveal a concern for her role as wife and mother. On the contrary, the younger students, and especially one male student, appreciated her independent style. Mrs Touchett is a prime example of a modern woman. In her freedom of movement she represents a cosmopolitan woman of the period. She has chosen to live separately from her banker husband in her villa in Florence and spends time in travel between her relatives in America, her husband and son in England, and her house in Florence. Her use of the telegram in Chapter 1 brings up concepts of women's independence of speech and action. The topic of conversation of the male characters—her son Ralph, his father Mr. Touchett, and Ralph's neighbor and friend Lord Warburton—is about Mrs. Touchett and her use of telegrams to communicate with her family about what has happened to her on her recent visit to America. The interlocutors are concerned

about the interpretation of the cryptic language in the telegram and the fact that they cannot assume anything about her plans from such a telegram, which reads: "Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent" (James 1991, p. 40). The three men interpret her telegram thus:

[Ralph] "She chiefly communicates with us by means of telegrams, and her telegrams are rather inscrutable. They say women don't know how to write them, but my mother has thoroughly mastered the art of condensation"

…..

"You'll see for yourself," said Lord Warburton. "When does Mrs. Touchett arrive?"

[Ralph] "We're quite in the dark; as soon as she can find a decent cabin. She may be waiting for it yet; on the other hand she may already have disembarked in England."

….

[Lord Warburton] "In that case she would probably have telegraphed to you."

….

[Mr. Touchett] "She never telegraphs when you would expect it—only when you don't," said the old man. "She likes to drop on me suddenly; she thinks she'll find me doing something wrong. She has never done so yet, but she's not discouraged."

….

[Ralph] "It's her share in the family trait, the independence she speaks of."

….

[Mr. Touchett] "Whatever the high spirit of those young ladies may be, her own is a match for it. She likes to do everything for herself and has no belief in any one's power to help her. She thinks me of no more use than a postage-stamp without gum, and she would never forgive me if I should presume to go to Liverpool to meet her." (James 1991, pp. 39-40)

Whereas throughout the novel James uncharacteristically suspends a possible negative judgment of Mrs. Touchett, the readers in Taiwan saw her exercise of freedom quite clearly and had distinctive judgments about it. Two female students described her as "manly" because she prefers to do things by herself. They believed that she had an independence that from their own experience of life could be enjoyed only by men. She is, as one older woman student said, "delightfully free: free to express herself in her own way, free to live independently from her husband, and free to release a mother's tight rein on her son." Other comments attributed her independent power to her age. These students saw her as a "typical old woman" who has the right to make her own choices because of her age. The following comment from a married woman also sympathetically took into consideration the husband's attitude toward his wife's independence:

Mr. Touchett is such a kind old good man to his long absent wife. He does not argue that his wife should keep company with him and lets her be free and independent in such a great range that I want to say [I feel] sorry for him. He is indeed a nice person. Though woman's free attitude at that time is not so high as [what] Mrs. Touchett has, her husband does a great deed for her compared to Mr. Osmond who does not give such freedom to Isabel to go to see her cousin when Ralph is sick at the edge of his life.

Rather than directly criticizing Mrs. Touchett, the student chose to praise the attitude of the husband who would allow his wife to travel widely. That is, he allows her to enjoy her freedom; in the student's eyes, this freedom is not something she naturally has a right to.

Both Taiwanese and Korean older female readers with families saw Mrs. Touchett as inconsiderate of her husband and son. It would be more polite for her to "write a letter" as one of them put it. Their traditional and rather conservative view is that the family will suffer from such a travelling woman's behavior. They are also concerned that she does not take good care of her ailing son. A younger male student, however, lauded Mrs. Touchett's independence and appreciated her freedom to travel as she

wishes. He noticed that "her very strength and independence are represented in her laconic style in the telegram." Although her son Ralph is facetiously saying that his mother is an expert at condensing her messages in the telegram when he claims that his "mother has mastered the art of condensation," the reader holds that she is indeed quite successful in communicating "just what she wants to say." He furthermore condemned the elder Mr. Touchett's comments as "sexist." He interpreted the situation to some depth as follows: "The telegram's message concerns women's feeling, and this is what men like Mr. Touchett usually overlook; otherwise they would understand Mrs. Touchett better." The students thus expressed a wide range of sentiments about this figure of the older generation of women in James's novel, ranging from their concepts of the traditional family under mother's care to feminist theory.

With respect to the younger character of Isabel Archer, the "lady" in James novel's title Portrait of a Lady, the concept of independence is even more problematic. The novel's plot allows the orphaned Isabel to travel with Mrs. Touchett and subsequently to learn her own brand of independence. Isabel's case shows that James's female characters' expression of freedom is often found in women's rejection of the relationships others thrust upon her. In this international game of romance with the cards of gender, race and economics played out most adroitly in Portrait, freedom of choice is found when the more refined and largely self-educated American Isabel conquers an English Lord in Lord Warburton, only to reject him and the institutional role of "lady" for marriage with Gilbert Osmond, an effete American art collector who has no money. Although James allows the younger woman to choose her own husband, she later discovers that she was wrong in her estimation of Osmond. The horrible irony behind these seemingly free choices is that unbeknownst to her she has been reaping the benefits of her cousin, the terminally-ill Ralph, who asked that his father leave a large part of his own inheritance to Isabel. Ralph watches over her intensely to find out what happens to her as a result of this gift, and of course he is disillusioned when he sees that she has made a great mistake in her marriage choice. Here, in a kind way Isabel has been manipulated by her cousin Ralph.

The students sympathize with Isabel's predicament. One student says that she is a "butterfly that lost its freedom." Another noticed that Isabel has been an inveterate reader from childhood. This has made her overly "fond of her imaginary world and [she] intentionally avoids seeing the real world. Her romantic characteristic influences her whole life." The same student also writes that "Her confidence in life conflicts with reality. She thinks that she has the authority to make decisions and choices for her own life, including even about her husband, Osmond. But she is deceived […] because of her lack of experience and the fortune given her by her cousin." Finally, when "she is shocked back from her imaginary life into reality, in this process she transforms from a girl into an adult woman." When I asked the students what the term "lady" meant in the novel, some thought that "lady" just indicated that she was an upper class woman; others thought that she was "becoming a lady" because she was in the process of developing into a grown woman.

As to whether or not Isabel is a cosmopolitan woman, as James envisions her, a student thought that "Isabel can be called a cosmopolitan woman because her unconventional desire for independence and freedom is quite distinguished compared to the traditional way of women's life." This comment uncovers the idea that when a woman remains tied to national traditions and convention, she has little independence. Even though cosmopolitanism of the day allowed women to develop themselves, there were still many restrictions upon their behavior, and some of those restrictions were strictly maintained by American males living in Europe. One example is that Osmond, after he has married Isabel and accessed her fortune, will not allow her to travel to England to attend to her dying cousin Ralph. Students agreed that Osmond is being very cruel. Isabel has a right to visit a dying relative. This is the proper behavior for family members in such a situation. Moreover, as a mature student reflects, Ralph is a loving person.

The other important woman character in Portrait is Isabel's friend Henrietta Stackpole, who serves as

a foil to Isabel and her development. She seems to be a radical feminist and a nationalist. She wants Isabel to marry the American entrepreneur Goodwood[14] rather than let her assimilate to the European society. Both male and female students agreed with Stackpole that Isabel's practical-minded American suitor Goodwood would have been the best man for Isabel to marry. The student who interprets Isabel as an imaginative dreamer sees Henrietta as a realist, with a "clear point of view of reality." As a newspaper and magazine reporter, Henrietta, like James, travels with a definite purpose to investigate and report upon the European scene, finding her "specimens" in this foreign culture and in turn judging their behavior against her own standards. Orphaned like Isabel, Stackpole works hard at her job to earn money for her own life; she is what could be called today a career woman. She is praised by the Korean student for paying the school fees for the children of her widowed sister. She is just like a "man supporting his family."

Whereas the students hold a rather positive view of Stackpole's energetic life which they see as very meaningful, James has gone to great lengths to make her into a caricature of the inquisitive reporter and to criticize her narrow views of European culture. He introduces an irony in the fact that she becomes closely attached to an Englishman who keeps promising to introduce her to English nobility so that she can write about their life. Mrs Touchett pejoratively claims that such women belong to a "boarding-house civilization" that she highly detests (James 1991, p. 122). The students required explanations for such institutional terminology and generally did not pick up the humor in the inquisitive reporter stereotype and working-class connotation of the surname Stackpole.

The freedom of women is a dominant strain in Portrait. Most of the women in the novel are thinking

---

[14] Goodwood, like Newman in The American, is a man who has made his fortune in American industry. In the students' experience, he is comparable to such Taiwanese entrepreneurs as Wang, Yung- ching, who made a fortune in plastics and whose company is now global, and the more recent tycoon Guo, Tai-Ming who through investment in electronics in Mainland China and elsewhere is now a billionaire. His company is the largest one of its kind in the world. Wang's daughter Cher, who founded HTC, is also a billionaire and the richest woman in Taiwan.

independently and want to experience life in travel, but they are still dependent upon the support of their husbands. Indeed, James was reluctant to give an entirely positive portrait of an independent woman, as evidenced Miss Chancellor in The Bostonians (1886), James's examination of turn of the 19th-century American feminist movement. One need only compare the comments of the early critics of Portrait, such as Morse (1881), Noble (1882) and Edgar Fawcett (1884), which focus only on Isabel's beauty and grace[15] to realize that the contemporary Taiwanese readers have perceived Isabel's struggle for freedom more clearly than these early critics. Women's rights were only won in the mid-20th century in China and Taiwan. Many women today travel at their own expense, unlike Isabel, who travels on an inheritance, or Osmond's sister, who is unhappily dependent upon a wealthy husband.

Conclusion

The truly global identity, like the cosmopolitan one, as this study shows, is likely to remain an ideal. In James's reinvention of Europe, national traits prevail in his American travelers and reverse colonists, even as they become deeply involved in various aspects of European life. The protagonists communicate in a language of a third space where meanings and values are constantly shifting, and where both American and European values are often subverted. The reverse colonists, both those who assimilate more or less completely to European life, like Gilbert Osmond, and those who live abroad but keep their American values, like the Tristrams, are judged rather negatively in the negotiations for meaning in James's novels. In another age of globalization from that of James's era, as this study has demonstrated, contemporary reading of James's novels outside of the Western world also opens up further spaces for textual negotiation and production of meaning. For the readers in Taiwan involved in this study, many of their interpretations transpired in a third space in negotiations among and between their own values, especially on travel, work, leisure and gender roles, and those of European and American characters, the writer, and of their American teacher, who participated in the discussions.

---

[15] Such platitudes about women are that Isabel "does what nearly every woman of her personal graces would do under the same conditions" (Fawcett 1884 in Gargano 1987, p. 51)

The travelling man and woman are important figures in James's works, with far-reaching resonance across time and space, as attested by these Taiwanese students' responses. In particular, newly empowered women in Asia have their own personal views on the strengths and weaknesses—even the morality—of James's colonists, explorers and "exploratresses."[16] To travel widely on the one hand carries a measure of respect; however, on the other hand, under these readers' gaze the loafing behavior of James's quite distinctively nouveau-riche American renditions of the would-be flâneur figure invited criticism. On the issue of work versus leisure, national opinions favoring a work ethic dominated in the negotiation, in spite of the attraction to enjoy the fruits of idleness. On the issue of women's independence, traditional family values remained strong for some students while others held a modern concept of women's freedom. By contrast, there was consensus on James's condemnation of unfair manipulation.

Brooks notes that James liked the French writer Balzac precisely for the freedom that he gave to his characters to develop in a natural way without too much manipulation: the "liberty of the subject" in Balzac's romanticism is praised by James, and, contrarily, he criticizes "the manipulators of others" [who] tend to be morally stigmatized, and to impose fatal rigidities on life" (Brooks 2007, p. 60-61). James's critique of imperialist discourse and of ancient cultural traditions and hegemonies in Europe is associated with his support of the freedom of the individual to make choices and develop in one's own chosen way. This freedom also extends to readers of James's works. The ambiguities and partialities in the minds and hearts of the cosmopolitan men and women of James's world have been transformed into the experiences of people who find themselves involved in similar cultural exchanges in the globalism of the present.

---

[16] Pratt borrows and translates the term from Marie-Claire Hoock-Demarle, ("Le Langage litteraire des femmes enquetrices,' in S Michaud 1985, ed. Un fabuleux destin: Flora Tristan, Editions Universitaires, Dijon), (Pratt 2008, p 158).

References

Bhabha, H 1994, The location of culture. Routledge, London.

Benjamin, W 2002, The Arcades Project. R Tiedemann, ed., H Eiland and K

Mclaughlin, trans. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Berman, JS 2001, Modernist fiction, cosmopolitanism and the politics of community,

      Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Blair, S 1996, 'First impressions: "questions of ethnography" and the art of travel' in Henry James and

      the writing of race and nation. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 15-59.

Brooks, P 2007, Henry James goes to Paris. Princeton University Press, Princeton,

      N.J.

Deleuze, G 1986, Cinema 1: The movement-image, Trans. H Tomlinson and

      B Habberjam, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Fawcett, E 1984, 'The Portrait of a Lady: James's masterpiece' in Gargano. Pp.

      51-52.

Fussell, ES 1990, The French side of Henry James. Columbia University Press, New

      York.

Gargano, JW 1987, Critical essays on Henry James: The early novels. G.K. Hall,

      Boston, Mass.

Gohrische, J 2006, 'Cultural exchange and the representation of history in

      postcolonial literature', European Journal of English Studies, vol. 10, no 3,

      pp. 231-247.

James, H 1981, The American. (1877) Penguin, New York.

James, H 2009, The Bostonians. (1886) Oxford University Press, New York.

James, H 1984, 'Daisy Miller: A study' (1878) in Tales of Henry James. Ed.

Christof Wegelin. Norton, New York. Pp. 3-50.

James, H 1991, The portrait of a lady, (1881) Everyman, London.

Lee, B 1978, The novels of Henry James: A study of culture and consciousness.
Edward Arnold, London.

Morse, JH 1882, 'Henry James, Jr., and the modern novel' in Gargano. Pp. 52-54.

Noble, JA 1881, 'The Portrait of a Lady: A masterly painting of moral and intellectual
Atmosphere' in Gargano. Pp 48-50.

'Outbound Departures of Nationals of the Republic of China by Destination,'
Executive Information System, Tourism Bureau, Republic of China, nd.
(http://admin.taiwan.net.tw/statistics/month.aspx?no=135). Accessed Oct. 15.
2011.

Pound, E 1918, 'Henry James' in Literary essays of Ezra Pound, New Directions,
New York. Pp. 295-338.

Pratt, M-L 2008, Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation. 2nd ed.
Routledge, New York.

Tuttleton, JW 1980, 'Rereading The American: A century since' in Gargano. Pp.
96-115.

Veblen, T & M Banta 2007, The rise of the leisure class. Oxford University Press,
New York.

Fictionalized History: Signifying Changes to the Malaysian Nation and Identity

Sim Chee Cheang

Abstract

As one of the cornerstones of fiction, writers often use and confront history in their claim to "reality" and "identity" in their writing. Linda Hutcheon's claim for "a postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s); truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture" (1988, p. 108) is relevant to the use of history in recent Malaysian literature. The multiple and varied claims of truth(s) as reflected through the fictionalizing of Malaysian history is the focus of the analysis in this article, which aims to expose the social, economic, and political implications of the Malaysian identity. The analysis of three current works of fictionalized Malaysian history from the different fictional genres of comic series, children's history, and occidental history, represents a cross section of genres that challenge the supremacy of history's ontological claim over identity. The deliberate contestation of received Malaysian history in fictional modes acknowledges the peripheral identity structures of race, religion, and economics that are sensitive in a multiracial country such as Malaysia.

Key words: Fiction, History, Malaysia, national identity

Fictionalizing Malaysian History

"Fictionalized history" refers to creative projections of history that are wont to project unsanctioned or at times unverified facts not acknowledged by those in authority. Undeniably, fictional work that challenges history generates interest especially in the interrelations between

genres and the socio-political significance they generate. The presentation of Malaysian history in fiction implies an anti-establishment agenda intending to provide an "other" perspective of Malaysian history writing against the versions in Malaysian school text books. The "fictionality" of these works provides immunity to the authors of these histories, leaving a platform open for suggestions, accusations, and implications, which remain unverified. Such reinterpretations further suggest unsanctioned versions of a history that has yet to be uncovered, providing the "real" truth behind the varnished facts found in official versions of school history text books. Furthermore, these works are representative of a postmodern endeavour to interrogate the past by interrogating it through rewriting and re-presenting (Hutcheon 1988, p. 127), In postmodern discourse, such counter-discursive works are recognized as "historiographic metafiction."

In describing the contents of "historiographic metafiction," Hutchen observes the following:

> They [fiction and history] have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (1988, p. 105)

According to Hutcheon, fiction and history are similar in relation to multiple "truths" and conventions with similar strategies of interrogating the past. It is this perspective that is levelled upon a few chosen representations of historiographic metafiction by Malaysian authors who have appeared in circulation, evoking various speculations on its significance on contemporary Malaysian identity. Asserting history as fiction and vice versa renders the factual aspect of history suspect while highlighting the potential for history to be imaginative and creative. Current Malaysian authors who have fictionalized history, such as Tunku Halim and his version of Malaysian history as

children's literature entitled *A Children's History of Malaysia* (2003), Musimgrafik's projection of Malaysian history through a collection of visual comic form entitled *Where Monsoons Meet* (2007), and Farish Noor's *The Other Malaysia* (2005), have more than sociological reasons for fictionalizing history. While established historical accounts of Malaysia begin with Parameswara (1400) (Masariah 2006; Ahmad 2009, p. 47), in the visual comic representation of *Where Monsoons Meet*, the authors choose to go back to a genesis of Malaya in prehistoric times (2,500-300 BC). The deliberate assertion of the "orang asli's" earliest presence at the beginning of Malayan History suggests the intention to "fill in the gaps" of what is accepted "truth" about Malaysian history. This manner of introducing information, albeit unverified, is part of a method of interrogating the very fundamentals of nation and identity. Similarly, Tunku Halim inserts the legend of the *Three Magical Princes* (13) into his historical fiction entitled *A Children's History of Malaysia* (2003), which is a well known folktale that provides hearsay background of Parameswara, a prince from Palembang. In *The Other Malaysia,* Farish Noor (2005) does not even pretend to follow the epochal style of traditional historical writing but prefers to project Malaysia through a number of royal and unsung heroes, offering an "other" version of nation building. These three versions of Malaysian history are by no means the only types of "fictionalized history" available in the Malaysian market but are representative of a new postmodern approach to interpreting history that is significant to contemporary Malaysian identity. Combining different narrative genres together to represent individual perceptions and projections, these works are "distinguished by their frames [formally identified as] 'historiographic metafiction' that first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contract of fiction and of history" (Smith 1978, p. 109).

Visual Comic Parodies, Where Monsoons Meet

Comic strips, caricatures, and editorial comics have often played a role in expressing the values, perceptions or beliefs of a particular culture. In the context of French and British post-war editorials, Pierre Purseigle studies the impact of different types of comic visual representation on a society that has experienced the violence and ugliness of war (Purseigle 2001). In the USA, James Eric Black analyses the role of comic visual media as an expression of social and political dissent in America in the 1950s (Black 2009). In particular, the latter study speaks to the comic representation of Malaysian history. The comic series entitled *Where Monsoons Meet* (2007), written by a group of students who call themselves Musimgrafik, describes its attempt to comprehend historical events from an economic and political viewpoint as a "postmodern venture of questioning established history" (2007, Preface). Thus delineated, the comic representations are hailed as "facts and figures, episodes and anecdotes that illustrate how each of the three major ethnic groups—the Malays, Chinese, and the Indians—has contributed to the building of the Malaysian nation" (ibid). Packaging the "story" of Malaysia in the *penglipurlara*, the traditional Malay story-teller, lends a mythical element to national history. Through myth, the text provides ambivalence of interpretation of Malaysian history, which in turn provides both cover and a creative platform for the authors to
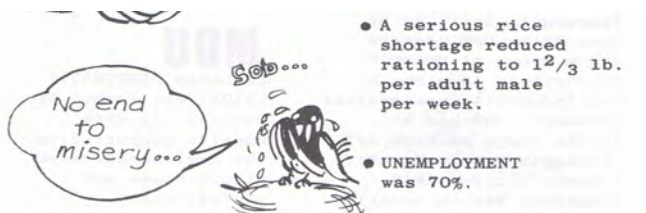
voice their opinions. Another nod to cultural tradition is the cartoon figure of a black bird who often acts as a commentator (See figure above). Similarly, a storyteller who appears to be

narrating to a group of children, provides the voice of the authors (See figure below). The storyteller

character in his Malay traditional clothes typically roots the youngsters gathered around him in Malaysian culture and identity. He is not only a narrator but also a tool who binds together the genre of comic cartoon and folklore to Malaysian history and identity that is ironically presented in a fictitious genre which feels both real and authentic.

As a literary genre, comics are an economical shortcut to generating meaning in that they present multiple concepts through sparse use of key words and highly metonymical images. Readers from different cultures, races, countries, and often languages are free to interpret differently. As an example of multiple readings, the initial 86 pages of *Where Monsoons Meet* can be read as examples of European colonial supremacy in the art of war and cunning diplomacy. It can also be a testimony to the weakness of the Malay sultanate or disunity amongst the Malay rulers, which is not reported in great detail in official versions of Malaysian history. In portraying interactions between local Malays, the pages also give an ethnographic overview of the issues faced by locals throughout this

period. The elements of creativity and freedom involved in generating prevalent points in history or introducing new perspectives is successfully embodied through a comic depiction of Malaysian history. Musimgrafik's alternative history includes revering enemies of the establishment. For example, members of the left-wing Communist Parti Malaysia (CPM), who founded the first organized resistance against both Japanese during World War II and British colonialists after the war, are presented as unsung heroes. Similarly, the brave attempt by the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) is celebrated as the first to organize and lead the people to fight the invaders (See figure below).
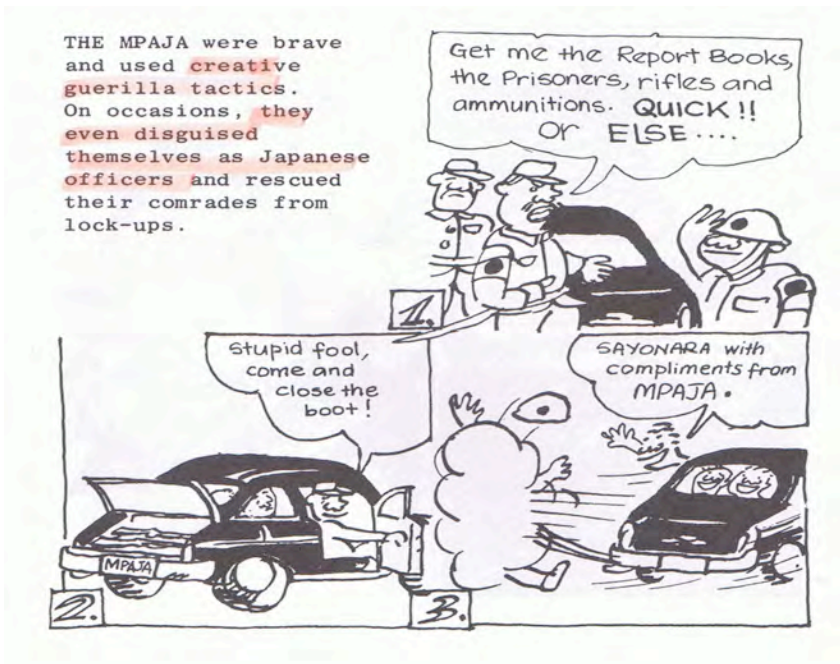
Largely ignored in established Malaysian history, the role of trade unions in organizing strikes across the country to peacefully demonstrate against British re-occupation of Malaya after the war is also

visually acknowledged in this version. Individuals such as Ibrahim Yacob, the left-wing leader of Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) is hailed as the first to aspire to an independent Malaya while it is stated that some who are perceived to have negotiated with the British for independence had neo-colonial intentions with the objective to benefit only an elite group of people (Musimgrafik 2007, p. 92).

Among the structural differences between a formal depiction of Malaysian history as established in school text books and comics are the time-periods, events, and historical personae selected for emphasis or focus. The Form one history text book (Ahmad Fawzi 2009) portrays the rise and fall of the Malay Sultanates in each state arranged chronologically, beginning with Parameswara and ending with the tragic heroism of the Johor sultanate. Similarly, the colonial upheaval and subsequent uprisings against European colonization and Japanese occupation is also highlighted chronologically in the Form two text (Masariah binti Mispari 2006). The Form three history text book (Ramlah Adam 2004) however, carries politically selective episodes that project a united and free Malaysia due to the efforts of the people and at the behest of UMNO (United Malays National Organization). By contrast *Where Monsoons Meet* divides the centuries into a time line associated with economic oppression. Deliberately beginning on a similar trajectory as that found in the school text books, (feudalistic Malacca in the 1500s is followed closely by the oppression of British colonials leading to the Japanese occupation), the comic series overlays this with the satirical depiction of greedy national bureaucrats. The visual depiction of a local character declaring his enslavement began not with the colonials but by their bondage to the Sultans; a poor farmer discussing with his fellow crop grower the famine that they experienced when the British colonized *Tanah Melayu* is further joined by the caricature of six men, each representing a state, carrying an English gentleman on a bamboo chair. The irony of the situation, brought across by the poor, bullied,

fearful, and harassed locals in all these scenes, is further compounded by the culpability of those who perpetrated it, officials who have sworn to protect the locals (See figures below).

The criticism levelled at all the heads of constituencies and heads of state is clearly depicted in an image of early bureaucrats of UMNO, Sultans and British colonials sharing a bathtub together. Greedy officials are also pictured increasing their profits by driving the normal prices up and literally "knocking" the normal man from the market (See figures below).
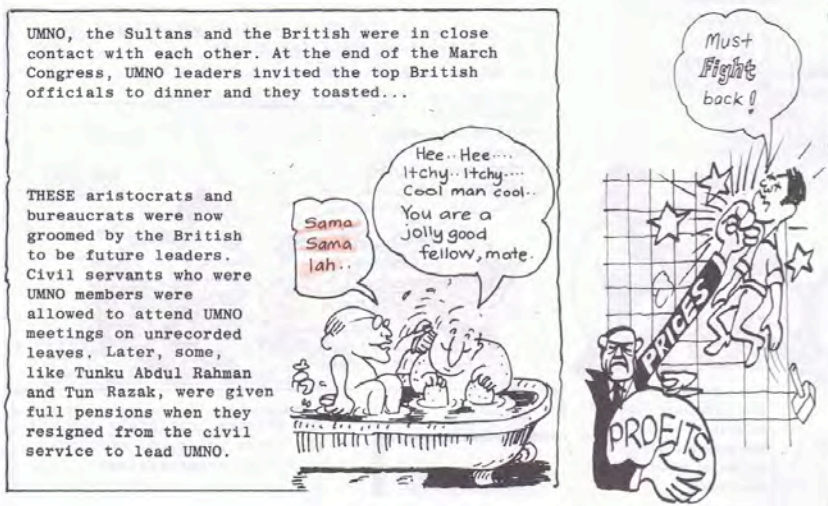
Taking an anti-establishment stand, *Where Monsoons Meet* suggests conspiracy between the colonials, the heads of states and the present government to impoverish the people. Lending authenticity to their project, the Musimgrafik team asserts the non-fictive reality of persecution and suffering by using old photographs in sepia instead of satirized caricatures. This suggests a depiction of the "truth" that is not at all humorous but painful and haunting. An example is the poignant picture of a

mass execution by Japanese troops, the MPAJA[1] troops, which acted as the interim governors prior to the return of the British after the Japanese left, and the photographs depicting the suffering of the people such as from bombings, massacres and torture during the Japanese occupation (See figures below).

----

1 Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army which comprised local farmers and rubber tappers or labourers helped to rebuild a Malaya that was left in ruins after the Japanese retreated but was later disbanded because it was closely linked to the Malayan Communist Party.

The fact that Musimgrafik only succeeded in publishing[2] *Where Monsoons Meet* in 2007, shelved in the national library and widely distributed by local book sellers, reflects a very recent relaxation of policies toward the dissemination of sensitive information that was deemed a threat to national security. The presence of *Where Monsoons Meet* and the rest of the works mentioned in this paper imply a nation that is poised for change and a government that is willing to listen to the grumblings of its people in vocalizing their dissent from and mistrust of establishment versions of their historical experiences. In choosing to anchor Malaysian history in an economic time line of oppression, Musimgrafik provides another perspective on history from the point of view of the layman, as seen in the text's subtitle *A People's History of Malaya*. Thus, locals feature in the comic images, such as an enslaved Malay farmer, who looks confounded by the happenings around him and decries his bond-slavery to the Sultan (See figure below).

---
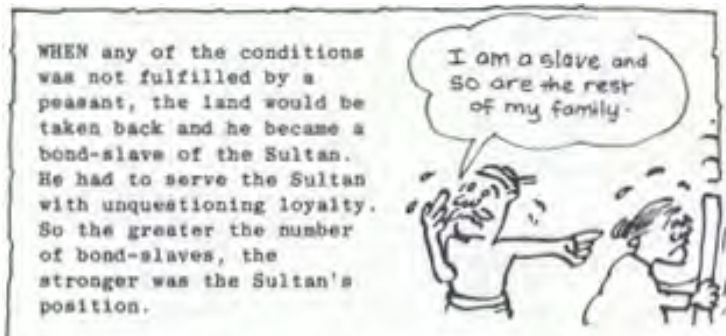
2 Where Monsoons Meet was first published in London in 1979 with an abridged version published in 1989 by INSAN. Only in 2007 did this original edition make it back to Malaysia through the efforts of the Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.

In the foreword of *Where Monsoons Meet*, Amir Muhammad[3] acknowledges the presence of additional unverified information such as the fact that selling opium to immigrant Chinese labourers amounted to 50% of the total revenue of the Straits Settlement. Musimgrafik also challenges the nationally-accepted stance on the civil strife and power struggle for the throne of the Malay Sultanate, which contributed to the surrendering of the states to the British. For example, official versions claim Raja Abdullah was not appointed the Sultan of Perak because of his absence from the funeral of Sultan Ali (Masariah 2006, p. 235), whereas Musimgrafik claims that it was because of his drug addiction and unpopularity among the local chiefs. Another interesting change in received history is Musimgrafik's implication that the emergency[4] period might have lasted more than the 12 years claimed in most official versions and was actually "part of a world-wide campaign supported by U.S.A. to suppress the struggle for genuine independence" (2007, p. 143). Musimgrafik openly states that the reason for the emergency was to provide the returning English with absolute power to do as they wished (2007, p. 147) sanctioned by a world campaign perpetrated by the Americans to "suppress the struggle for genuine independence" (2007, p. 143). Musimgrafik's willingness to critique all who were involved in the post-war power-grab provides a counter-history that would be attractive to many readers, although in many ways uncomfortably challenges widely-held beliefs. The question of Malay sovereignty and the Chinese immigrant's part in enriching the national coffers,

---

[3] Amir Muhammad is a journalist, writer and film-maker interested in the Malaysian identity. His last two films, Apa Khabar Orang Kampung (How Are You Village People?) and The Last Communist have been banned in Malaysia. Despite the government's objection to his creative works, he has received many accolades abroad for his writing and films.

4 The emergency period began from June 18th 1948 and refers to the period after World War 2 when the Allies declared victory and the Japanese retreated while the British colonials returned to secure their holdings in Malaya demonstrating their inclination for brutality.

plus the unveiling of British or American colonials' insidious plans leave readers at an uncomfortable level of belief or disbelief. A renegotiation of loyalties and priorities of Malaysian readers is conditionally ignited by the suggestions but hampered by its fictitious genre. In the light of these "truth(s)," patriotic Malaysians who persist in viewing the government as altruistic may cease to do so while cynics continue to view with suspicion and conviction of their worst beliefs about the Malaysian race and identity beginning with selective histori[sizing].

When analyzing British and French editorial cartoons, Purseigle observes that "cartoons also targeted the state and especially the way national bureaucracies impinged on daily life in an absurd manner throughout the war" (2001, p. 291). Similarly, through the comic genre, Musimgrafik provides Malaysian history with a platform to critique rulers, governors, and the common man without fear of reprisals.[5] Purseigle's observations ring true in issues pertaining to policies motivated by money, such as the complicity between the government and aristocrats in the setting up of Malayan Union plus the Federal Malaya Plan (2007, p. 134). With the comic genre, the sting of criticism is buffered by humour because the cartoons distort and also shrink the reality of the situation, asserting a distance between the "truth" in the past and the present (Purseigle 2001, p. 291). This ability to voice dissent is also due to the fact that cartoons in comics are meant to be funny, which levels out the serious nature of dissent. Nevertheless, the freedom afforded by the genre is superseded by the actual freedom to voice individual dissension against the government in current law. However, recent relaxing of such laws has in turn encouraged the kind of freedom of

---

[5] Malaysia has an Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) which is a preventive detention law that gives the right to the government to detain any persons found to have threatened the security of the country with their actions or words. Since 1974 until 2011, 37 dissidents have been detained including journalists, trade unionists, student leaders, political activists, religious groups, academicians, NGO activists.

speech demonstrated by the publication of *Where Monsoons Meet.* This implies a new order of things to come in the present.[6]

In its comic depiction of Malaysian history, Musimgrafik clearly wants to prove that Malaysian history was mobilized by greed for economic gain and power and was not driven by State altruism, especially where the European colonials were concerned. These criticisms are couched in visual textual strategies such as caricature, parodies, and satire, allowing wit, sarcasm, and irony founded upon humour to carry across the social criticism. Parodies in connection with popular cartoon characters such as Popeye, who represents the current neo-colonial American influence, are placed alongside grotesque depictions of colonial powers that are faceless and formless monsters designed to scorn the subject through the disgust elicited in place of laughter (See figures opposite). This complies with Purseigle's claim that "visual dimensions provoke laughter based on the distortion and exaggeration of the subject's features" (2001, p.292). Thus, caricatures of all sorts abound in *Where Monsoons Meet*, as tools of humour that demean the subject, often ridiculing him or her by playing

---

[6] Section 73(1) of the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) claims that "Any police officer may without warrant arrest and detain pending enquiries any person in respect of whom he has reason to believe that there are grounds which would justify his detention under section 8; and that he has acted or is about to act or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia or any part thereof or to maintenance of essential services therein or to the economic life thereof." The legislation was inherited by Malaysia after it gained independence from Britain in 1957 and was originally used to deter communist activity in Malaysia. However, one website claims it has been "consistently used against people who criticize the government and defend human rights. Known as the 'white terror,' it has been the most feared and despised, yet convenient tool for the state to suppress opposition and open debate. The Act is seen by some as an instrument maintained by the ruling government to control public life and civil society" http: /forum.moonlightchest.com/internal_security_act_malaysia.asp.

The current prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has announced a decision to repeal ISA along with three Emergency Ordinances enacted to prevent racial riots in 1969 which allow persons to be detained without charge with the permission of a minister.
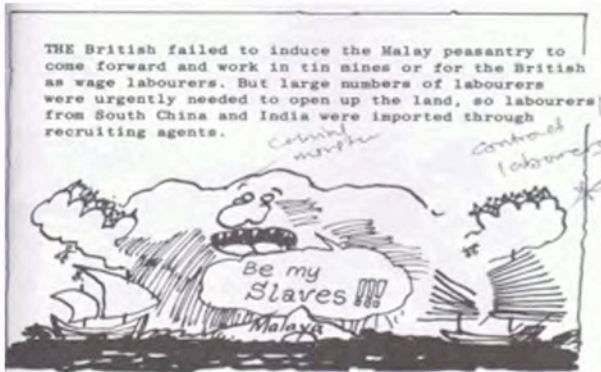
upon the visual stereotypes of the subject. This is especially true of the depiction of European colonials. The earliest Portuguese invaders are depicted as sloe-eyed individuals wearing the Portuguese war-helmet. Their picture disintegrates as other European powers appear in Malacca. The metonymy of the Dutch is a fat short merchant who is keen only on profit when he sells his wares. The most condemning caricature is probably the repeated personification of the English as the wolf in a parody of Little Red Riding Hood (See figures below and opposite). Other traditional caricatures of Malayan historical heroes, Chinese chieftains (2007, p. 44), and popular British residents such as Stamford Raffles (2007, p. 28), Frank Swettenham (2007, p. 63), and J.W.W. Birch (2007, p. 50) are designed to ridicule the subject by calling upon wit and sarcasm to underline the true British agenda in Malaya as economic gain and power. The freedom in which the comic genre allows for derisive condescension is perhaps indicative of the nature of the new order that allows for a certain freedom without fear of reprisals.
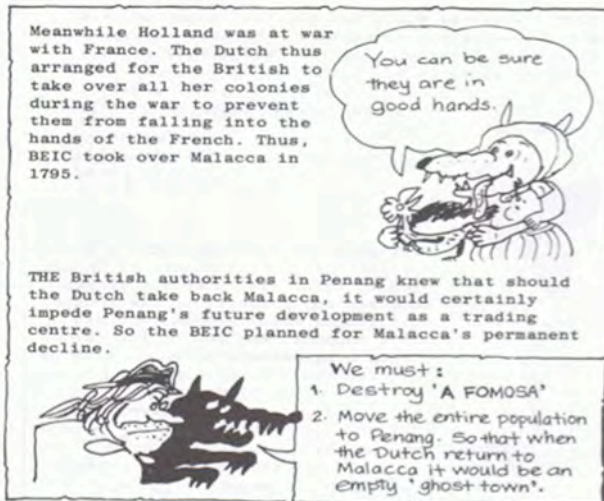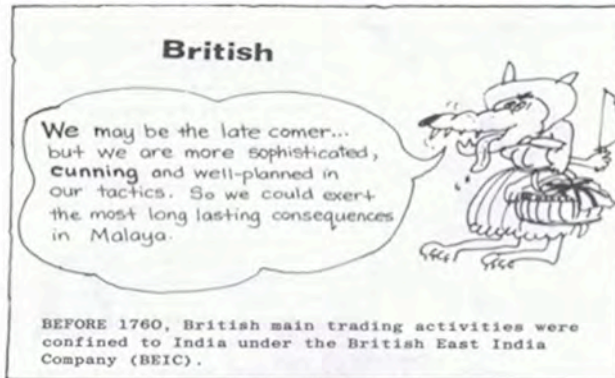
A Children's History of Malaysia

Just as comic sketch is one medium of presenting alternative history, fairytale is another. The illusion of simplicity and greater attention to imagination over fact draws its audience back to childhood, thereby engendering feelings of romantic nostalgia. A history presented in this manner

merges the worlds of realism and fantasy in which facts become less important than the tale. Tunku Halim's *A Children's History of Malaysia* (2008) is a Malaysian history book for children. The author admits that he was inspired by C.S. Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles* to write a version of Malaysian history that was both memorable and enjoyable (2008, p. 271). Beginning with the magical words "a long time ago," and segregating Malaysian history into different "kingdoms," Halim's text uses the fairytale quality of children's literature to fictionalize Malaysian history.

The children's literary genre not only simplifies history but obscures certain events to emphasize a positive perspective that is aptly supplied in the form of a "happy ending" of the fairytale genre. For instance, the Japanese invasion and subsequent occupation is related in six short pages in a tale-like manner. Japanese characters such as Private Sumi and Kenjo are bewildered by the need to cycle through jungles[7] to invade Malaya while Corporal Malik and Private Anum represent the heroic Malay regiment who sacrificed their lives to fight the Japanese army. Despite the short references to beheading (2008, p. 219) and bombing (2008, p. 220), the tale-like style of negotiating Malaysian history dampens the gruesome and often violent war that would usually be deemed unsuitable for children. Nonetheless, the interplay of gravity and flippancy creates a certain tension throughout the book. While the factual priorities of conventional history provide the realism that is often banal, the insertion of a fairytale-like representation of history lightens the impact and also opens the non-negotiable boundaries of history to questions of subjectivity. In analysing adolescent fiction, Robyn McCallum observed that during adolescence, "conceptions of subjectivity are intrinsic to narratives of personal growth or maturation, to stories about relationships between individuals and the world,

---

7 The Japanese managed to take the British unawares in Malaya in 1941 because they took the land route from the north, purportedly launching their assault on bicycles.

society or the past—that is, subjectivity is intrinsic to the major concerns of adolescent fiction" (1999, p. 3). In projecting Malaysian history through the fairytale, Halim reveals untold aspects deemed unimportant, such as Alfonso Albuquerque's pillage of a Sultan's grave, removing six bronze lions that sank along with the Flor de La Mar (2008, p. 50). Other information that contributes to a better understanding of the ascension of the Malacca throne linked to a *sepak takraw*, a rattan ball game that is now a Malay traditional sport, is interesting and provides a humanistic, romantic slant to the official version that sidelines such information in favor of facts.

Halim provides subjectivities in the areas of truth, identity and reality through a treasure trove of little-known facts. Examples include his assertion that "Malays have been Hindus for hundreds of years" (2008, p. 30), which he substantiates with the tale of Parameswara and Cheng Ho, and that the mother of Raja Kassim was the daughter of a Tamil merchant (2008, p. 34). Such details are stealthily inserted into the well-known tales of war between kingdoms with the villain rotating between the Siamese during the Malacca Sultanate and the British during their colonization of Malaya. Small details such as the taking of the six bronze lions suggest a folkloric perspective that prevail in oral tradition yet are uncommon in written literature. Despite a certain amount of implausibility, and the impossibility of verifying sources, oral folklore is popularly admitted as the first source of history that comes from the mouth of a people who relay information about cultural practices along the lines of folk art and antiques. Thus Halim's efforts at adopting fairytale and folklore traditions to represent Malaysian history suggests that his intention is not only to mirror the Malay traditions of story-telling but also to write a legacy of "truth" for his children; to ensure that they remember the subjective roots of their Malaysian identity.

While Musimgrafik provides a people's perspective, Halim's perspective leans toward the elite, with special emphasis on the kingship of each state. The narrative is interspersed with a list of rulers'

names (2008, p. 76; 99; Royal Family Trees Appendix II) that do not even figure in established versions of Malaysian history. In his role as the storyteller, Halim is also keen on tracing the activities of kings directly linked to the Malaccan Empire. As such, his efforts have contributed to a "royal" perspective of Malaysian history. He unashamedly chronicles Malaysian history according to "Kingdoms" rather than by chronological events. Hence, Halim sets Dutch and British colonization against the Malay Kingdom, as having divided the "Malay World" (2008, p. 159-160). He also portrays the Malay Kingdom as including the Indonesian islands before the Dutch and English, and even before that to the founding of Malacca through the legend of the three Princes of Bukit Seguntang (2008, p. 13). By chronicling Malaysian history according to myths, legends, and tales incorporated into fairytale modes, Halim's fictionalized history asserts the idea of subjective individual truth. This accords with what McCallum identifies as "growth and maturation" (McCallum 1993, p. 3), except in Halim's case it is the Malaysian national identity itself that is the adolescent subject, entering a state of angst similar to that experienced by teenagers about to mature to adulthood questioning their existence, their rights, boundaries and freedom.

The Other Malaysia

Farish Noor's *The Other Malaysia* (2005) provides a subaltern perspective of Malaysian history boldly claimed through the subtitle *A Subaltern History of Malaysia*. In Edward Said's foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, the word "subaltern" is defined as "in opposition of dominant or elite terms of political and intellectual power." The ways in which power discourses are linked to representations is the focus of Noor's compilation of essays. As the editors assert in the introduction to the collection on subaltern studies, the field's objective is to "fill in the gaps and lapses" in any intellectual enterprise that enables readers to see the whole of the experience in fairer terms than

the formal mainstream and sanctioned version (1988, p. vii). *The Other Malaysia* falls in with this objective in relation to Malaysian history as an "alternative" Malaysian history. Noor's compilation of his regular column *The Other Malaysia,* which appeared in an online independent news as "alternative writing" (Noor 2005, p. 21)[8] is an anti-establishment deconstruction of the political history of Malaysia that he claims has "awkward silences and blind spots" (2005, p. 21). His book is of interest not as much for the merging of the styles of journalistic writing and historiography of the period between 1999 and 2002 as it is for its content. Noor's approach includes a short synopsis of the events before the content of his column is expanded. As they target different audiences and present different information, both the journalistic and history writing are provocative challenges that evoke change in an otherwise stagnated oligarchy.

Noor's combined style of writing is a kind of metafiction. As such, it destroys the boundaries between fiction and history, "ask[ing] us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time" (Seamon 1983, p. 212). This approach allows a deconstruction of the present perception of history by reinscribing it to "re-present the past in fiction and in history [mainly to avoid] conclusivity and incontestability" (Hutcheon 1988, p. 109). For instance, Noor portrays Sultan Abu Bakar as a hero in comparison to the Sultans of Selangor and Perak for becoming the "black peril of the West" (2005, p. 52). The prowess of this westernized King is detailed over three chapters to launch a consideration of an "other" Malaysian history (2005, p. 53). Abu Bakar's westernized ways of making his presence visually conspicuous in Europe, especially in Britain through his regular visits

---

8 His articles appeared regularly in an online news portal called Malaysiakini.

and socializing with British gentry, is described as ingenious. His presence created a perception of the king as a formidable enemy to the British colonials who were not used to "sovereign native men" (2005, p. 52). Consequently, Johor remained out of the clutches of the British for as long as Abu Bakar could convince them that Johor did not need them, unlike the other states. In another sign of his Westernization, Abu Bakar acquired vast knowledge and was not afraid to implement reforms, especially in technological advancements. Noor thus celebrates Sultan Abu Bakar not only because of his ability to thwart the English and their well-disguised altruism but because of his ability to defy the perceptions of subalternism in a colonial-native paradigm. The Sultan defied the colonial understanding and expectations of a sovereign native, and at the same time stumped his critical observers at home, who assumed his alliance with the colonialist based on his westernized ways.

Noor demonstrates that conventional historical truth claims do not necessarily denote validity. Furthermore, instead of validating his own claims of truth, Noor's extensive use of endnotes that follow every chapter in *The Other Malaysia* appear to be "paratextual conventions" of historiography that seek to undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations (Hutcheon 1988, p. 123). One of the most important aspects of Noor's contributions is the subaltern agency his writing represents that has tremendous socio-political implications for Malaysia in terms of journalistic freedom of expression and the right to criticize and challenge social and political truisms.

Conclusion

As seen through the study of these three very different texts, different fictional genres create alternative histories which challenge conceptions of nation and identity by providing alternatives

which in turn create dialogues between historical perspectives. The portrayal of history through the comic genre, fairytale, folklore, and journalistic writing has caused the boundaries between the fields to melt away, bridging the distance between history's infamous aura of non-fiction and modes of fiction. As revealed in the discussions above, the many specific conventions attached to the fictional genres when merged with historical conventions allow for a freer method of expression in which different versions of "truths" merge with information that was not included in the official versions to generate the ambivalence and subjectivities that evoke changes previously disallowed. The implications include the rise of a new order that involves the pursuit of subjective truth validated or invalidated by facts that will inform a nation poised for changes. Ultimately, the different perspectives of Malaysian history will influence a discourse around Malaysian identity itself.

Aside from the structural contributions of presenting history in different narrative modes, these texts show an awareness of the power to dictate or reject socio-political identity markers through the agency of writing. By contrast with the static dictations of democratic or undemocratic rule, in this case, the Malaysian government, such works embrace the subjectivity and fragmentation of postmodernity. Even if teleological thresholds exist, it must be observed that where "representation" is concerned nothing is permanent. In the analysis of the different ways the above mentioned books question the truth of Malaysian history, they assert other versions of truths that generate discussion of territorial space and hegemony. Since there are multiple "truths," it is logical to assume multiple histories as well. With multiple versions of Malaysian history, there will be multiple kinds of identities based on multiple conceptions of nationhood. Such is the impact of fictionalizing Malaysian history.

Thus, history, perceived as singular, is not dead or weighed down by the burden of a singular validity but is injected with new life through historiographic metafictions which negotiate the intricacies of

validity in relation to nation and identity. As a result, a single authoritative validity ceases to be more important than the tale, the humour that is elicited, and the other perspectives that have been hitherto left out. The identity of a nation and an individual no longer only rests on the ontology of country, kingdom, race, or government but on a host of other social political perspectives that begins with recognizing multiple overlapping identities. As Foucault says of representation in a postmodern world, "There is a freedom in representation ... to conceive of power without a king thus the movement of history in terms of discontinuity and rupture, [is] not linear succession" (qted in Currie 1998, p. 73). History is non-linear because it is constantly being created, making it change constantly in a discourse of national identity.

References

Ahmad Fawzi bin Mohd Basri et.al. 2009, *Sejarah tingakatan 1*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Pustaka.

Anderson, B. 1983, *Imagined communities*. Norfolk: Thetford Press.

Black, J.E. 2009, "'Amoozin' but Confoozin': Comic Strips as a Voice of Dissent in the 1950s," *Et Cetera* 66, no. 4, pp. 460-469.

Currie, M. 1998, *Postmodern narrative theory*. York: St. Martin's Press.

Guha, R., and Spivak, G. 1988, *Selected subaltern studies*. Oxford UK: Oxford University Press.

Halim, T. 2008, *A children's history of Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk.

Hutcheon, L. 1988, *Poetics of postmodernism: history, theory and fiction*. New York: Routledge.

McCallum, R. 1999, *Ideologies of identity in adolescent fiction: the dialogic construction of subjectivity*. New York: Garland.

Masariah binti Mispari et. al. 2006, *Sejarah tingkatan 2*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Pustaka.

Internal Security Act (Malaysia) - Moonlightchest Forum

http://forum.moonlightchest.com/internal_security_act_malaysia.asp 26/12/2011

Musimgrafik 2007, *Where monsoons meet: a people's history of Malaya*. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information & Research Development Centre.

Noor, F.A. 2005, *The other Malaysia: writings on Malaysia's subaltern history*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks.

"PM announces repeal of ISA, three Emergency proclamations" *The Star* online http: //thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/9/15/nation/20110915205714&sec=nation. 15/09/2011.

Purseigle, P. 2001, "Mirroring societies at war: pictorial humour in the British and French popular press during the First World War." *Journal of European Studies* 2001: 289-301.

Ramlah binti Adam, Abdul Hakim bin Samuri and Muslimin bin Fadzil 2004, *Sejarah tingkatan tiga*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Pustaka.

Seamon, R. G. 1983, "Narrative practice and the theoretical distinction between history

and fiction." *Genre* 16, no. 3 (1983): 197-218.

Smith, A. D. 1999, "History and modernity: reflections on the theory of nationalism." In *Representing the nations: a reader* David Boswell and Jessica Evans, eds., London & New York: Routledge.

Spivak, G. 1988, "Can the Subaltern Speak." In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Parables of the East in Edward Bond's Political Drama

Loretta Visomirskis

Abstract

The themes of ancient and modern, of East and West, and of "journeys of discovery" form the ideological fabric of the work of Edward Bond (b. 1935), one of Britain's most established contemporary playwrights. In his plays *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968) and *The Bundle* (1978), set in Japan in vaguely historicized seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, Bond uses history as a prism of looking at the present and of deconstructing the political myths of the past. He introduces the character of the great seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho. In both plays, Basho becomes the Brechtian narrator, the "alienating factor," as well as the medium for Bond's philosophical dilemma of human choice and its political implications in society. In questioning the artist's role and the individual's responsibility in society, Bond creates political parables that oppose the "ivory tower" intellectualism and abstract meditation to active resistance to evil. Both plays signify Bond's own evolution from the pacifism of the Tolstoyan philosophy of "non-resistance to violence by force" (*Narrow Road to the Deep North*) to the revolutionary theory of Brecht's Epic Theatre and its social and political activism (*The Bundle*).

The themes of the ancient and modern, of the East and West, and of "journeys of discovery" form the conceptual fabric of the work of Edward Bond (b. 1934), one of Britain's most established

playwrights since the Second Wave of British drama in the 1960s. His first decade on the stage started with the exploration of English rural and urban life in *The Pope's Wedding* (1962) and *Saved* (1965) and continued with a surrealist historical fantasy *Early Morning* (1968) and an Oriental parable *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968). Both *Early Morning* and *Narrow Road to the Deep North* signified Bond's move away from the "kitchen-sink" naturalism of his earlier plays and his search for new forms of dramatic expression.

To Bond, the search for new dramatic forms has centered on modes of storytelling. In his "Rough Notes on Theatre," Bond coins the terms "storyness"' and "storyability" to give emphasis to storytelling as the core element in creating a dramatic experience. He says:

> The ability to analyse and calculate is characteristic of isolated reason: when it is combined
> with emotion, to produce imagination, it becomes 'storyness' (storyability etc.). Imagination
> is essentially storyability. Imagination needs to relate experience as story or as potentially
> storyable. (Bond 1996, qtd. in Doona 2005, p. 103)

The parable is a predominant mode of storytelling in Bond's theatre. He creates meaning in his parables through images that represent the multi-layered reality of the dramatic situation, which he calls a "theatre event." Bond's images capture the essence of the event by way of implication, allusion, and metaphoric association. Bond's parables contain implicit and explicit moral lessons about "truths that society obscures or denies" (Bond 1996, qtd. in Doona 2005, p. 103). "What attracted Bond to the parable form may well be what attracted Brecht: its history of instructional use, its connection with religious literature, and its tendency towards self-explication [. . .] As an art form, the parable does not impart knowledge directly, but through narrative, privileging the story as a method of learning" (Spencer 1992, p. 110).

In *Narrow Road to the Deep North* and later, in *The Bundle*, Bond sets his stories in the Far East and draws their imagery from Japan's historical past, its literature, religion, and philosophy. He molds Japan's historical realities into post-modern political parables and establishes the form of parable permanently in his repertoire. *Narrow Road* and *The Bundle* show significant new stages in Bond's evolution as a playwright and demonstrate the influence of Oriental art forms on his aesthetics. Both plays are also highly indicative of the major tendencies in the development of British drama of the time, in particular the growing influence of Bertolt Brecht's work and his theory of the Epic Theatre, and the subsequent formation of contemporary post-modern historical drama in the 1960s.

When Bond came onto the stage in the early '60s, the socially engaged dramatists of the First Wave of the previous decade were shifting towards the exploration of the human condition in universal historical-political contexts. Under the influence of the civil rights and political youth movements in the United States, Europe, Japan, and Latin America, the new plays focused on the individual's role in society and its existential implications through the acts of choice and self-determination. This philosophical paradigm shaped by European existentialism and French intellectual drama (Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Giraudoux, and Jean Anouilh) underlies the works of the major British playwrights of the period: Robert Bolt (*Man for All Seasons*, 1960), Christopher Frye (*Curtmantle*, 1961), John Osborne (*Luther*, 1961), John Whiting (*The Devils*, 1961), John Arden (*Left-Handed Liberty* and *Armstrong's Last Goodnight*, 1965), and Edward Bond (*Early Morning*, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, and *The Bundle*).

In their inquiry into the existential dilemmas of the individual and society, the playwrights often turn to historical subject matter as a new medium for their artistic explorations and philosophical generalizations. In this respect, the historical drama of the '60s shows the direct influence of Brecht

whose ideas and aesthetic principles gained substantial ground with the British playwrights after the tour of the Berliner Ensemble Company in London in the late 1950s. Brecht's influence swept across the ranks of British playwrights regardless of their political or aesthetic orientation, with his core techniques assimilated into British drama. These include: the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*); the infusion of the epic element into the dramatic structure of the plays; the objectification of the dramatic situation; the appeal to the spectator's reason over emotion; and irony arising from the clash of the opposites (*Widerspruchsgeist*). In her study of Bond, Jenny S. Spencer elaborates on Brecht's role in the process:

> Though playwrights have used history as a source of inspiration long before Aristotle examined the activity, Brecht's example of ransacking history in pursuit of raw material for epic representation has specifically influenced the shape and uses of history for a recent generation of British playwrights. ...In some cases, the turn to historical subjects has involved the recovery and validation of marginalized figures or incidents from the past; in others, well-known events and famous people get presented unheroically, from the critical perspective of their victims. Often the return is to particular moments of history where class antagonisms are close to the surface, economic injustices apparent, and working-class consciousness sharply defined. (Spencer 1992, p. 42)

In their exploration of historical themes, *Narrow Road* and *The Bundle* reflect the general tendencies of British drama of the period and link Bond's work to Brecht. Despite the apparent similarities and the universal recognition of Brecht's influence on Bond, Bond's attitude toward Brecht is ambivalent. In his interview with Michael Billington for *The Guardian*, Bond declares himself "the opposite of Brecht": he accuses Brecht of conformity and collaboration with the communist regime in East Germany where he lived, calling his work in the Berliner Ensemble "an absolute betrayal of

the duty of the writer" (Billington 2008). In spite of his harsh criticism of Brecht's political choices, Bond acknowledges Brecht's influence on his own work: "I saw the Berliner Ensemble when they came to London in 1956, and learned from Brecht how theatre could take on big subjects and banish decorative staging. There was no chintz in a Brecht set" (Billington 2008). A closer look at *Narrow Road* and *The Bundle* reveals Bond's deep affinity to Brecht's theatre. Like Brecht, Bond employs historical settings as a stage convention, a mythical element in the dramatic situation which adds the dimensions of the parable to his story. Neither playwright is interested in the accuracy of historical detail: their use of history is symbolic, based on association rather than on fact. Hence the non-specific evocation of Japan's history "about the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries" in Bond's two plays (Bond 1968, p. 5), in which Japan's history becomes a prism of looking at the present and a means of deconstructing the political myths of the past.

Bond's interest in Japan is another similarity with Brecht. In his analysis of the last period of Brecht's work, Robert Brustein writes:

> Brecht's contemplative interests are underlined by his increasing interest in Oriental forms, characters, and subject matter - a large proportion of his poems and plays are now inspired by the East. It is true that Brecht is attracted to the Noh play, the Chinese drama, and the Kabuki theatre because of their alienation techniques; and like Yeats, he uses such conventions as masks, mime, dance, and gesture in order to restore the naivete and simplicity that the oversophisticated Western theatre has lost. (Brustein 1964, p. 277)

The adoption of Brechtian techniques in *Narrow Road* marks a new stage in Bond's theatre and with it, his growing involvement with political issues in society. He focuses on the political implications of the individual's choice in society in both, *Narrow Road* and later, in *The Bundle.* In both plays, Bond

creates political parables that oppose "ivory tower" intellectualism and abstract meditation in favor of active resistance to evil. Bond's medium for exploring the idea of the individual's moral responsibility is the character of the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho (1644-94). By criticizing Basho's real-life isolation from society, Bond engages in an ideological polemic against Basho's philosophy on life and art.

Bond names his plays after Basho's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North And Other Travel Sketches* and incorporates Basho's biographical facts into them. Basho's poetic work, his mastery of the *haiku* verse, his travels in search of enlightenment, and pursuit of Zen truths serve as counterpoints in the dramatic structure of Bond's plays. Bond's choice of Matsuo Basho is not accidental: by Bond's own admission, Chinese and Japanese literature and art have been major influences on his work. The language of Bond's plays and his poetry bear the mark of highly structured *haiku* metrics. Bond's storytelling also parallels the *haibun* technique, perfected by Basho, which allows for an organic fusion of the epic (Basho's descriptive sketches) and the poetic (the *haiku*) in his plays. In structuring his dialog, Bond adopts the cornerstone principles of Basho's aesthetics: "non-attachment" and "lightness" which account for the objectivity, detachment from emotion, and the highly stylized terseness of Bond's literary style. As John Russell Taylor has written of Bond's *Narrow Road*, "The dialogue is pared to the bone, and placed with a poetic wit and economy which shows the hand of a master stage craftsman" (Taylor 1978, p. 91).

As Bond writes in his Foreword to *Narrow Road*, "The introduction [of the play] is based on an incident in Matsuo Basho's *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*" (1968, p. 5). In Bond's plays, Basho's encounter with an abandoned child on the banks of the River Fuji described in his travel sketch grows into a dismal setting of feudal Japan plagued by poverty and destitution. The plays open with desperate peasants leaving their children to die by the river because they cannot feed

them. Against this background, Basho comes on stage as a poet who lives in an ivory tower as he is removed from the hardships of people's daily lives. Faced with the dilemma of saving a child or proceeding with his journey to the deep north, he chooses spiritual inquiry into Buddhist truths and enlightenment through meditation, and so leaves the child by the river.

In both plays, Basho is a major character. He becomes the Brechtian narrator, the "alienating factor" as he comments on the happenings in the plays and adds an epic dimension to the dramatic action. In *Narrow Road*, Basho returns after thirty years and provides an account of the growth of the city which was "only a village" when he left. He also says that "the people in the north still live in tribes" which foreshadows further events in the play (1968, p. 9). There is violence on and off the stage with the new ruler, Shogo, in the city, and Basho adds insight into the consequences of his regime, "My old hut was by the place where they throw people in the river. Their friends and relatives used to come and stand quietly on the bank, with Shogo expressions on their faces. But when it was over they ran round looking for somewhere quiet to cry, and they always ended up behind my hut" (1968, p. 13).

In *Narrow Road*, Basho becomes Bond's mouthpiece when he admits to the young monk Kiro the futility of his meditation in isolation from society. "For twenty-nine and a half years I sat facing a wall and staring into space. Then one morning I suddenly saw what I was looking for - and I got enlightenment. I saw there was nothing to learn in the deep north - and I'd already known everything before I went there. You get enlightenment where you are" (1968, p. 10). Bond's character parallels the poet Basho's real-life experiences with the latter's travels and search of solitude—Basho's enlightenment, according to Zen Buddhism, was the discovery of his True Self. In his study of Basho, Leonard Biallas concludes:

Basho found the Real Self, the everlasting self, not in meditation, but in writing his poetry. This self attains a freedom, detachment, and wisdom that encompass all of nature […] The Real Self identifies with the "greater life" of the universe [. . .] The Real Self is the poet, the one who recognizes ever-changing reality and is not attached to any particular aspect of it. (Biallas 2002, p. 82)

Basho's epiphany in the play is highly indicative of Bond's own belief in the active role of the poet/artist and art in society. He rejects the esoteric and metaphysical forms of art detached from the social and political realities of life. Like Brecht, Bond asserts the educational role of art, not in a mystical or religious sense (hence the intellectual and spiritual fiascos of Basho's meditation), but in its ability to promote the rational understanding of the world. In his Introduction to *The Fool* (1976), Bond elaborates on the relationship of art and society stating:

Art isn't just the articulation of utopia, or even a foretaste of it. It helps to monitor the consequence of change [. . .] Art is the imagination of the real, not the invention of fantasy [. . .] Art places the individual in the world, and interprets the world in accordance with possibilities and human needs. ...The artist's job is to make the process public, to create public images, literal or figurative [. . .] in which our species recognizes itself and confirms its identity. (Bond 1976, pp. xiv-xv)

When Basho's journeys of discovery bring him back to his native places, he emerges from social isolation and becomes active in the politics of the city. In fear of political repression from Shogo because of his enlightenment, Basho stages a coup against the dictator and later rises to the position of Prime Minister. The highest point in the process of Basho's discovery comes with the realization that the bloodthirsty Shogo is the child whom he refused to help many years ago. Basho's passivity

and indifference towards the world have come full circle: he becomes aware of his moral responsibility for the tragic consequences of Shogo's rule. "I, Basho, saw that child [. . .] lying in its own filth. I looked at it and went on. O god forgive me! If I had looked in its eyes I would have seen the devil, and I would have put it in the water and held it under with these poet's hands" (1968, p. 56). Basho's contemplation of resisting evil by force is suggestive of Bond's philosophical inquiry into the ways of humanity's moral and social progress. He has called *Narrow Road* "a question play," and he is seeking an answer to his most difficult question, "Can violence be justified in fighting evil in society?" (Coult 2005, p. 15).

The evil of Shogo's regime represents a consistent theme in Bond's work in his explorations of oppression and violence in society. Shogo, homonymous with "Shogun," a Japanese military ruler, usurps the power of the old Emperor and establishes a reign of terror, similar to the dictatorship of Stalin, Hitler or Pinochet, where the destruction of human life reached grotesque proportions. In his treatment of Shogo's violence Bond employs the Brechtian "clash of the opposites," which heightens the ironical effect of the events and reduces the notions behind them to the absurd. Driven by a paranoid fear of assassination, Shogo forbids his subjects to look at him—they can only crouch with their faces on the ground. People are killed or thrown into prison at Shogo's whim. Prisoners are executed in sacks with the words "Shogo is my friend" painted in red. On their way to the river where they are drowned, prisoners chant laudatory slogans to the dictator, which are ironically juxtaposed with Basho's haiku verse.

With the violence and torture inflicted on his people, Shogo is not a stereotype of an Oriental despot but a universal character codifying the grotesque behavior of dictators in repressive regimes throughout the world and throughout history. In Bond's terms, Shogo's aggression is the result of his deprived life. Bond views aggression as the individual's response to society's threats. Freudian in

its essence, Bond's idea that "violence breeds violence" becomes paradigmatic of his treatment of political issues in his plays. In his Preface to *Lear* (1972), Bond writes:

> [Society] creates aggression in these ways: first, it is basically unjust, and second, it makes people live unnatural lives-both things which create a natural, biological aggressive response in the members of society. Society's formal answer to this is socialized morality; but this is only another form of violence, and so it must provoke more aggression. There is no way out for our sort of society, an unjust society must be violent. (Bond 1972, pp. x-xi)

Violent as he is, Shogo finds his counterpart in the gentle and selfless Buddhist monk Kiro whom he saves from suffocating under a holy pot stuck on his head. In his innocence, Kiro represents Shogo's *alter ego*, his missing humanity, and complements his "split" personality which affirms Bond's idea that "there are good things and bad things in almost everybody in the play" (Taylor 1978, p. 91).

The thematic complexity of *Narrow Road* also includes the historical facts of Japan's Westernization in the 1850s brought about by the American fleet led by the Commodore Matthew Perry. In Bond's interpretation, the theme of East meets West is staged as colonial invasion of the city by the barbarians from the West. They are represented by the Commodore, in Basho's words, "a bragging, mindless savage," who uses the language of the nursery "to protect his confidence," and his evangelist sister/mistress Georgina (Bond 1968, p. 40). As the Commodore and Georgina are brought in from the tribal north to take over the city, the rule they establish is more ruthless than Shogo's. Georgina, who is determined to "preserve a little corner of England in the Pacific," says that "Shogo ruled by atrocity" but instead she uses morality (1968, p. 39):

> I persuade people—in their hearts—that they are sin, that they have evil thoughts [. . .]
> that their bodies must be hidden, and that sex is nasty and corrupting and must be
> secret [. . .] That's how I run the city: the missions and churches [. . .] and papers will
> tell people they are sin and must be kept in order. If sin didn't exist it would be
> necessary to invent it. (1968, p. 42)

The perpetuation of repression and violence in the play illustrates Bond's idea of secular or religious morality as "moralized aggression": "any organization which denies the basic need for biological justice must become aggressive, even though it claims to be moral" (Bond 1972, p. xi).

As the cycle of violence continues, Georgina loses her sanity when Shogo kills the five children left in her care in his attempt to find the old emperor's son. Shogo is crucified by the Commodore. In the final scene, a grotesque effigy of the dictator's crucifix is erected on the stage: with his body parts loosely reassembled upside down, his body is askew and the limbs are not meeting the trunk. His head "hangs down with the mouth wide open. The genitals are intact" (Bond 1968, p. 56). Faced with Shogo's death, Kiro commits harakiri. Ironically, the Commodore and Georgina's Western rule brings about as much destruction and violence as Shogo's dictatorship. In their juxtaposition, Bond exposes the violent character of human society that is not culture-specific but unfortunately universal. However, Bond does not propose an alternative to the obsession with violence. Being "a pessimist by experience, but an optimist by nature" (Billington 2008), he offers a symbolic possibility of hope and renewal: while Kiro is dying, there is a cry for help from the river. A naked man in a loin-cloth, cleansed and untouched by the tragic events on land, emerges on the stage (Bond 1968, p. 7).

After a decade of growth and maturity as a playwright, Bond revisits *Narrow Road*. By then, he had produced many more short and full-length plays, and had experienced major theatrical successes at home and abroad, particularly with *Lear*, *Bingo,* and *The Fool. The Bundle,* subtitled *New Narrow Road to the Deep North*, establishes an association with *Narrow Road* which is more symbolic and philosophical than factual. There are similarities in both plays: the poverty of the common people, children abandoned by the river, and the character of the poet Basho. But *The Bundle* stands on its own as a truly epic saga of civil unrest which grows into a social revolution and brings about positive political change. The play enacts Bond's own ideological battle with the cardinal points of his own philosophy: his concern with the genesis of violence in society, the possibility of positive change, and the individual's role in a social revolution.

The play's protagonist and carrier of revolutionary ideals is Wang, who was rescued from drowning by the Ferryman and his wife. He is the character in *Narrow Road* that Shogo would have become, had he been saved before he grew up to become an evil dictator. Wang evolves into a revolutionary gradually and in several stages: nine years of work for Basho give him enlightenment; he leaves the comfort of Basho's home to join the poor peasants in their struggle for a better life; he saves a woman accused of stealing some cabbage from a stone cangue. Wang becomes the ideologue of the peasant movement when he says, "The landowner needs to do one thing. Only one. Keep us in ignorance. The river does that for him. So take the river and make it ours! That's why rifles are food and clothes and knowledge" (Bond, 1978: 46)!

Wang's call to revolutionary action in attainment of social progress is symbolic of Bond's move away from his pacifist position of non-resistance to violence by force. In his earlier plays, *Early Morning* and *Lear*, Bond rejects violence as a means of political change in society. *The Bundle* becomes Bond's manifesto in its affirmation of radical political action which leads to the

establishment of a peaceful peasant commune toiling joyfully to harness the river. Whereas in *Narrow Road* the antidote to society's corruption is the detached Jesus-like figure of the man emerging from the river, *The Bundle* offers a constructive alternative to violence. Under the leadership of Wang, the young peasants are "changing the river," building stone walls on the banks, locks, and a channel for the spring tides (Bond 1978, p. 75). Their shovels are "stacked like rifles" (1978, p. 73). The juxtaposition of shovels and rifles evokes the final scene in *Lear:* having realized the need for empathy for his fellow human beings as an antidote to social injustice, Lear sets out with a shovel to destroy the wall, the image of alienation and repression that he himself has built.

The recurrent image of the rifle is indicative of Bond's coming to terms with the concept of justified violence in society in the process of change. Quoting the example of the French Revolution, he has made statements in support of "the violence of the powerless, innocent violence caused by the revolution of individuals against the state" when there is "no alternative" (Bond 1996, p. xii). In Scene Four of *The Bundle*, Wang comes across an abandoned baby by the river and after Basho and his mother refuse to save him, he is faced with the dilemma of saving the child and providing for him in the comfort of Basho's home, or of leaving the child to die so that he can be free to take on the leadership of the peasant uprising. Wang's choice mirrors Basho's choices in *Narrow Road*: like Basho, Wang refuses to sacrifice his freedom for the survival and welfare of the child and hurls him into the river. The death of the child—the bundle of the play's title—is symbolic of human sacrifice for the cause of the revolution. Wang's violent act becomes, in Bond's later terms quoted above, "innocent violence," "the violence of the powerless" committed in the name of social justice. By contrast, Basho appears in *The Bundle* as a villain. After he returns from his journey to the deep north, he becomes the judge and serves the landowner and his regime. In Bond's terms, Basho represents the injustice of the establishment: he fights ruthlessly to crush the peasant uprising and

becomes responsible for the Ferryman's death. At the end of the play, he is old and delirious, a grotesque image of Shakespeare's Lear, still trying to find the road to the deep north.

As a dramatic analysis of social revolution, *The Bundle* expresses Bond's belief in the possibility of positive change in a society driven by violence and oppression. The pathos of Wang's victory affirms the need for radical action in the struggle against social evil and becomes symbolic of the shift in Bond's philosophy towards embracing political activism in the name of revolutionary change. As Spencer writes, "The emblematic thrust of *The Bundle* is positive, suggesting that social change is difficult, but possible, that moral choices can and must be made, that "right" and "wrong" are relative but not unknowable" (1992, p. 141). Bond's search for answers to the most poignant questions of human existence leads him to the play's paradigm of radical political change but he is concerned about the moral complexity of the choices made in the process and voices it in Wang's final words (Bond 1978, p.78):

> We live in a time of great change. It is easy to find monsters--and as easy to find heroes. To judge rightly what is good--to choose between good and evil--that is all that it is to be human.

Written a decade apart, *Narrow Road* and *The Bundle* mark the trajectory of Bond's growth as a dramatic thinker from "a question play" in *Narrow Road* to "the answer play" in the *Bundle,* where he juxtaposes active resistance by force to social evil and formulates his approach to playwriting as "dramatisation of the analysis instead of the story" (Bond 1978). Bond has defined this approach as "a way of reinstating meaning in literature" which he sees as the theatre's main function in edifying the audiences. In a recent editorial of *The Guardian,* Bond has been called "the theatre's most anguished moralist" ("In praise of ...Edward Bond), which is a well-deserved reputation, as in his Oriental parables, Bond agonizes with his characters over the loss of humanity in the world and

undertakes the most difficult mission--to change society by creating a theatre where "the audience are asked to be not passive victims or witnesses, but interpreters of experience, agents of the future, restoring meaning to action by recreating self-consciousness. At these moments the audience are superior to the actors: they are on the real stage" (Bond 1978).

References

Basho, M 1966, *The narrow road to the deep north and other travel sketches*, London: Penguin
    Books.

Biallas, L 2002, "Merton and Basho: the narrow road home" in *The Merton Annual* 15, pp. 77-
    102.

Billington, M 2008, 'If you're going to despair, stop writing' interview with Bond in *The
    Guardian*, 3 January 2008.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/jan/03/theatre?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487

Bond, E 1966, *Saved,* London: Methuen.

---.   1968, *Narrow road to the deep north*, London: Methuen.

---.   1972, *Lear*, London: Methuen.

---.   1976, *The fool and we come to the river*, London: Methuen.

---.   1978, *The bundle or new narrow road to the deep north*, London: Methuen.

Brustein, R 1964, *The theatre of revolt*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Coult, T 2005, "Building the common future: Edward Bond and the rhythms of learning" in
    Edward Bond and the dramatic child, pp. 9-24.

Davis, D (ed.), *Edward Bond and the dramatic child: Edward Bond's plays for young people*,
    London: Trentham Books.

Doona, J 2005, "The sheet of glass" in *Edward Bond and the dramatic child*, pp. 93-110.

"In praise of ...Edward Bond" in *The Guardian*, 3 October 2011.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/03/in-praise-of-edward-bond

Phillips, T 2002, "Fifty years of British theatre" in *Contemporary Review* 281.1639, p. 100.

Saunders, G "'A theatre of ruins:' Edward Bond and Samuel Beckett: theatrical antagonists" in
    Studies in Theatre & Performance 25.1, pp. 67-77.

Spencer, J 1992, *Dramatic strategies in the plays of Edward Bond*, Cambridge and New York:

Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, J (1978) *The second wave*, London: Methuen.

Silk Roads: an Ecosystem of Ideas & Imagination

Michael Stetson

Abstract

One of the many modern definitions of "globalization" is as a step in world history that develops trade networks that span continents, supersedes cultural allegiance and embraces the exotic in both commodities and ideas. However, there is much about our modern initiative that is merely an attempt to replicate what has been transpiring for thousands of years. Nowhere is this more apparent than the Silk Roads, ancient arteries of movement and exchange of not only tradable goods but also cultures. In today's era of trendy cross-cultural interaction, there is much we can learn by observing the peoples of the Silk Roads, with an eye to finding our human similarities among the specific cultural and ethnic differences that this photo essay documents.

Key words: cultural diversity, ethnic diversity, ethnic identity, photojournalism, Silk Road, visual media

Trade diasporas have been an integral part of human experience at least since the arrival of urbanization from around the 4th century B.C. These trade networks and the routes that connected them were the stage where diverse ideas and experiences collided, refracting cultural paradigms then reassembling them into something that echoed the original but was special and unique. As a result of commercial, social and cultural interactions that took place on that stage, human experience has evolved into a rich and vast array of knowledges and cultural imaginaries.

Our insatiable appetite for leaving the known in order to explore the unknown is a common thread present in storytelling and other forms of cultural expression that links humankind across diverse and far-apart cultures. Leaving one's motherland to become a foreigner in a host country entails learning that culture's customs, language and often their belief systems to facilitate trade or business. In regard to the Silk Roads, China was a prominent player in providing the impetus for cross-cultural trade along them, trade that traversed a wide variety of ecological regions and cultures between East Asia and the Greek and Roman empires. Evolving from a dual need to protect its borders and to enrich its empire, competition for land with the Xiongnu pastoral nomads led to the building of the Great Wall of China from 220 B.C. and also to the sending of envoys to the west of China (present-day Afghanistan) in order to establish an east-west alliance. Knowledge of the exotic goods that could be acquired from the West eventually led to the Han government's decision to open a commercial trade route, thereby extending the Great Wall westward to Dunhuang and making alliances with the oasis states along the Taklamakan Desert.

The fabled Silk Road, whose vast network of routes stretched like a web from China in the east to the Mediterranean in the west, remains today one of the best-known examples of cross-cultural trade and the institutions associated with it. Trade flourished along these routes from the second century B.C. until the fourteenth century. After that time, the overland routes became too dangerous because of anarchy and factional warfare, making the sea routes more preferable for long-distance trade. The oases towns of Western China and the Eurasian steppes provided way stations, or *caravanserai*, where convoys could stop, rest, refresh supplies, buy new beasts of burden and exchange imported goods for the local ones. The *caravanserai* was not only a vibrant, exotic community for conducting business, but it also provided an opportunity for strangers from different cultural backgrounds to interact, socialize and observe traditions foreign to their own.

Although different environments engender different methods for sustaining life and ensuring survival, cross-cultural exchange as well as the products of trade that facilitate living together re-shape cultures, restructure societies and stretch the boundaries of established belief systems. It is in the spirit of acknowledging and respecting both cultural specificity and the universality of human endeavor that these photographs along the Silk Roads are intended. The interplay between familiarity and strangeness that occurs when we look into the worlds of these photos underscores the infinite variety of experiential options, other means of interpreting the world, other ways of being human.

Michael Stetson

"The Narrow Road"

A Photo Essay

Forbidden City
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Tiananmen Square (above)
The Great Wall (opposite)
Both images copyright Michael Stetson

Vietnam Port
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Vietnam Wedding (above)
Images copyright Michael Stetson

Death Ceremony (opposite)
Boat Widow (above)
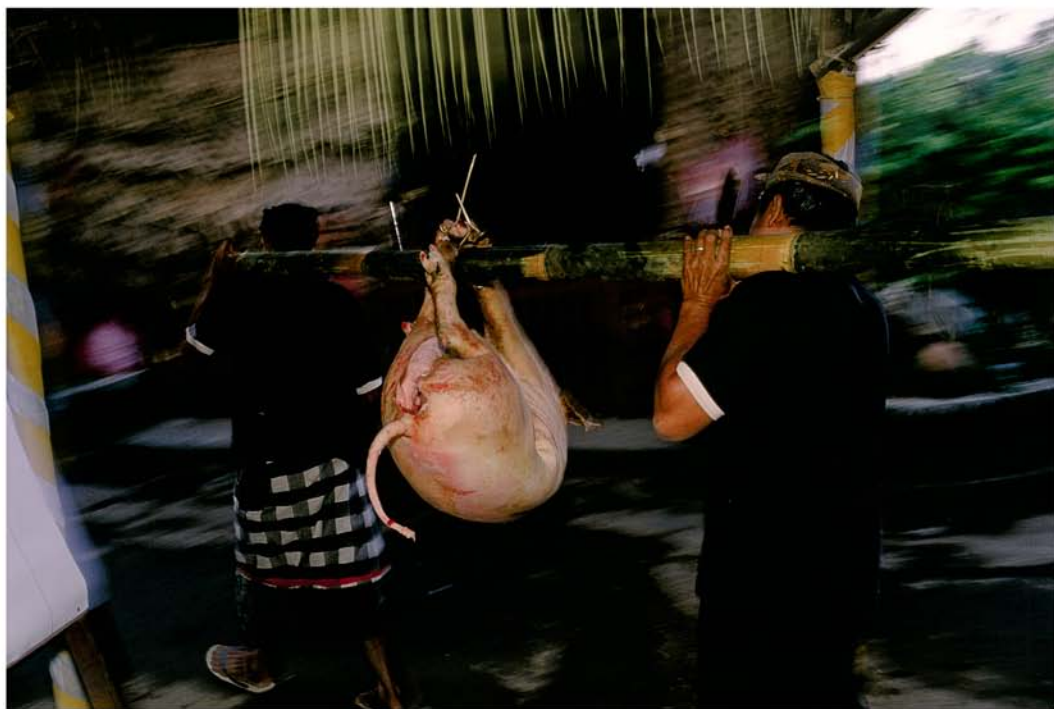Images copyright Michael Stetson

Terraced Rice Fields
Image copyright Michael Stetson

School Exercise
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Pig Roast (above)
Cock Fight (opposite)
Images copyright Michael Stetson

Collecting Sea Salt
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Bagan Temples
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Monk's Firewood (above)
Monk's Erudition (opposite)
Images copyright Michael Stetson

Pao Village Girl (previous page - left)
Ywama Floating Market (previous page - right)
Images copyright Michael Stetson

Stilt Houses
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Intha Fisherman
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Ganges Cremation
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Young Laborer
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Wedding Gifts (opposite)
The Haircut (above)
Images copyright Michael Stetson

Grumpy Old Men (above)
Men's Bath (opposite)
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Bundi Village
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Camel Fair
Image copyright Michael Stetson

The Sand Mountains
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Livestock Market
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Milliner
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Shaman's Home
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Carpenter (opposite)
Motherhood (above)
Image copyright Michael Stetson

The Butcher
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Restaurant
Image copyright Michael Stetson

The Young Rascals
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Tashkurgan Laundary
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Pamir Plateau
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Meteora Monastery
Image copyright Michael Stetson

The Nile River
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Aswan Cistern
Image copyright Michael Stetson

The Alhambra
Image copyright Michael Stetson

Circular Horizons, Impossible Journeys:

Imagining the Tibetan Fatherland in Tenzin Tsundue's Poetry

Enrique Galván-Álvarez

Abstract

Although better known as activist, Tenzin Tsundue is also a prominent Tibetan English poet. As part of a generation of Tibetans born in the exile chosen by their parents, Tsundue considers Tibetan his mother tongue but feels most comfortable writing in English. Hybrid in many ways, his poetry returns constantly to a, sometimes literal sometimes literary, journey of return to the ancestral homeland. For the second generation of Tibetans born in exile the journey "back" to the imaginary homeland is certainly one of discovery, but it is also one that never finds what it expects. Thus, the aim of this essay is to explore how the hope of return to Tibet is expressed in Tsundue's poetry through unconventional and circular journeys of discovery.

Keywords: Tibetan-English, Tsundue, Poetry, Journeys, Kora

Although better known as activist, Tenzin Tsundue (b. 1970) is also a prominent Tibetan English poet. As part of a generation of Tibetans born in the exile chosen by their parents, Tsundue considers Tibetan his mother tongue but feels most comfortable writing in English (Oha 2008). Hybrid in many ways, his poetry returns constantly to a journey of return to the ancestral homeland, a journey that is sometimes literal and sometimes literary. For the second generation of Tibetans born in exile the journey "back" to the homeland of their parents is certainly one of discovery, but it is also one that never finds what they expect. For them Tibet is a place not visited

but imagined through the inherited memories of their parents. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore how the hope of return to Tibet is expressed in Tsundue's poetry through unconventional journeys of discovery. Such a quest is by no means specific to Tibetan exiles in a world where exile, diaspora, migration and displacement have become important shapers of the way in which identities are constructed and studied. Thus, as James Clifford has suggested, similar instances occur in various

> cultures of displacement and transplantation [which] are inseparable from specific, often violent, histories of economic, political and cultural interaction – histories that generate what might be called discrepant cosmopolitanisms. (1997, p. 36)

These "discrepant cosmopolitanisms" present the challenge of coming up with an "approach to specific histories, tactics, everyday practices of dwelling and traveling: traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling in traveling" (ibid). Whereas it seems evident that Tibetan exile can be included in the growing number of communities that are "traveling-in-dwelling" and "dwelling-in-traveling," it is also true that a specific approach to Tibetan exile, and the literature it produces, is required.

For the purpose of understanding the various permutations of Tsundue's sense of dwelling and traveling, I shall first identify the various metaphors he employs to speak of the ancestral land. This land lies at the very end of the journey of discovery and, therefore, it determines the way in which the journey is presented. Despite how this journey of return is often constructed as the natural reversal of the first journey into exile, both journeys could not be more different. As traumatic as the journey of escape is, it reaches a somewhat stable location when it reaches exile (i.e. India). On the contrary, the journey of return never reaches any stable point of destination, being frequently lost in ever-deferred discoveries. In this way, the full circle or double journey associated with

fulfilment in the exilic imagination is always frustrated. It is worth noting here that when the term homeland is used in this paper it refers to the various notions and images engaged in Tsundue's poems and not, necessarily, to a geographical or territorial reality. Analogously, when dealing with the impossibility of reaching such homelands of the mind, the emphasis is on the various personas that appear in Tsundue's poems and not on the poet himself. In fact, Tsundue, the author, has been to Tibet, the place, where he was imprisoned and later deported; his personas, however, never seem to get "there."

In order to analyse this complex process of frustrated and yet dynamic patterns, various Buddhist narratives are useful, particularly the ritual circumambulation of holy sites (kora), which can be seen as a never ending circular journey (Schwartz 1994). Also important is the Buddhist narrative of the ground (gzhi), path (lam) and fruit (bras), which offers many hermeneutical possibilities for regarding gradual processes of realisation as journeys of discovery (Levinson 1996). This triple structure is a way of articulating the Buddhist path as a progression from a starting point or ground, which is the traveller's unrecognised primordial nature, through a path of increasing awareness and discovery leading towards a goal or fruit which is the eventual and total recognition of such nature. Thus, the ground-path-fruit can be regarded as a circular journey, since its beginning and its ending are fundamentally the same, with the traveller's perception being transformed by and through the journey.

In Tsundue's poems the fruit at the end of the journey is very often the ancestral fatherland (e.g. the slippery ground of "A Personal Reconnaisance" or the almost forgotten ancestral homeland of "Exile House"), a destination or goal that is not easy to access, considering the precarious connotations of this notion in an exilic context. This imaginary homeland is thus the object of discovery, but what is not infrequently discovered (like in Buddhist deconstructive and analytical

journeys) is not the object itself but its absence as the ending of "A Personal Reconnaissance" (2008, p. 11) shows: "I didn't see the border, / I swear there wasn't anything / different, there." From this combined standpoint, Tsundue's poetical journeys can be regarded as insights into the nature of exile, the ancestral homeland and the routes that link them, all being, like Buddhist descriptions of phenomena, evanescent, fluid and ultimately ungraspable. In this way, the local Buddhist logic of ground-path-fruit is linked to the wider themes of diasporic cultures currently developing all over the world. The construction of imaginary far away homes by diasporic communities, which are then revealed to be fleeting, thus resembles the Buddhist inquiry into reality as a circular journey that reveals the illusory nature of phenomena.

It is worth mentioning that some of these journeys are not just metaphorically circular but also literally so, built into Buddhist cities such as Lhasa or its new exilic inheritor, Dharamsala. Furthermore, not unlike Lhasa's (or Dharamsala's) concentric circles, used by many for the act of kora, Tenzin Tsundue's book *Kora* also contains a short story called "Kora. Full Circle" (pp. 35-40). In Tsundue's "Kora" an old ex-guerrilla fighter from Kham inspires a young Tibetan exile to keep up the struggle for Tibet. In this sense kora is a full circle, since it dramatises the continuation of a Tibetan consciousness of resistance through generations. The act of kora is used as an analogy of transmission and continuation, which seems also a good way of looking at how the book Kora sees itself, since it begins by paying homage to and seeking inspiration from "the freedom fighters of Tibet" (p. 5).[1]

---

[1] In this respect, Schwartz interprets kora, as re-valorised from 1987 onwards, in the following manner: "Khorra retains its ritual significance as a means of accumulating merit; however, merit-making is transposed into the arena of political action and the everyday private practice of religion is transformed into public protest." (1994, pp. 27-28) This very post-Buddhist appropriation resembles Tsundue's definition of Buddhism as "service in action for society" (2007, p. 68) Furthermore, Schwartz points out how in this context "it is only necessary to substitute the Tibetan nation in the canonical Buddhist formula of acquiring merit by working for the welfare of all sentient beings to appreciate what the Deprung monks have accomplished by inventing a new form of protest" (1994, p. 30).

Another interesting example of how the act of kora can be rhetorically appropriated is a short article by two young Indian men who, after watching The Motorcycle Diaries, decided to visit Dharamsala, where they met Tsundue and became interested in the Tibetan question. Their article for a free community paper in Dharmasala is precisely entitled "Our Kora Has Just Begun" (Ghosh 2006). Following on the footsteps of young Tibetan exiles, the two Indian men redefine the act of kora in the following manner:

> On the final day, we undertook a Kora. A Kora is a spiritual place around a sacred place. As we walked around the Dalai Lama's temple, we realised that we too were on Kora –it was our journey to understand the Tibetan struggle for self-determination…for a dignified life in their land…and the fight to keep their culture and history alive. Our journey to find out how we could make some difference –how we could be part of it […] hopefully, Che [Guevara] and Alberto [Granado] would be proud. [Punctuation shown as in the original]

Such reading of kora resembles the one we find in Kora's back cover, which construes "Kora. Full Circle" as "an allegory on Tibet's half-century-long struggle to break free from Chinese control." In these discourses kora has been re-appropriated as a metaphorical journey of empowerment and resistance through knowledge. All these narratives seem to have drawn inspiration from the very literal use of kora from 1987 onwards as an act of protest. Furthermore, these readings of kora seem to focus on the journey and interpret circularity as a symbol of continuation or completion.[2]

---

[2] In an interestingly intertextual sentence Sonam describes such full circle kora in the following manner: "Our final kora will be complete when we return to a 'free' homeland after years of roaming in foreign jungles" (2008). Such statement closes a review of Tsundue's Kora but also employs a metaphor from

However, these metaphorical circumambulations obliterate what is central to the literal act of kora, the site that is being surrounded, that is, the centre in relation to which the circumambulator is a periphery. In "Kora. Full Circle," the Dalai Lama's exilic residence is peripherally mentioned, but it seems to simply provide a setting for the encounter between the old Khampa and the young Tibetan in exile.[3]

In fact, both the old warrior and the young exile completely forget about the literal act of kora as they become absorbed in the metaphorical act of kora, that is, the re-telling of heroic stories from the Tibetan resistance. Thus the lingkhor (i.e. outer ring or circuit) and its holy centre seem to have been relegated to a peripheral position, merely providing a setting that frames and somehow legitimises the inter-generational encounter. This exchange between centre and periphery or, in other words, this emphasis on the journey rather than on the site, can be seen as a Tibetan version of the roots vs. routes model. By deconstructing the centrality of place, movement and travelling become all important as the new focus of these narratives.

In order to discuss Tenzin Tsundue's images of home in his poems I want to bring the focus back to the original centre, the (literal or metaphorical) sites encircled by kora. This is not to privilege roots over routes, but to acknowledge the empty place that stands at the centre of many Tibetan exilic wanders. The focus on the periphery journey rather than on the centre place betrays the increasing decentring and displacement of Tibetan culture outside Tibet. Thus, by facing the empty centre I want to explore how unstable senses of home or ground are constructed in Tsundue's poems. In the same way that Dibyesh Anand plays "with the root word dharamshala in order to tease out

---

Chögyam Trungpa, who in "A Letter to Marpa" (1983, p. 29) speaks of himself as "Tiger-like Chögyam roaming in foreign jungles."

[3] However, many of ritual details of the protesting acts of kora that took place in Lhasa in 1987 are reproduced in Tsundue's story, such as the invocation to Palden Lhamo, the burning of incense, the recitation of prayers or the offering of prostrations. (Tsunde 2008, p. 38; Schwartz 1994, p. 28)

various possible alternative narratives of Tibetan-ness" (2002, p. 13) I play with the Tibetan root khor in order to explore the issue of homelessness through the lenses of the kora (khor ra) narrative.

The root khor can be found in a number of Tibetan words such as khor mo which expresses the sense that something is continuous, uninterrupted, like a circular wall that surrounds a city or the word khor mo yug which refers to a circle or circuit, a space designed for the practice of kora, but which could also mean horizon.[4] Rethinking Tsundue's exilic homes through the narratives implicit in the khor words locates home as a recurrent or all-pervasive theme; a khor mo, continuous and uninterrupted. Moving towards the more spatial meanings of the word, the exilic journey could be seen as khor mo yug, a circuit that goes round and round an imagined homeland but can never reach it. The very raîson d'etre of the circuit is the centre it environs, however such centre is always beyond reach, at least from the circuit's position.

The similarities with other exilic constructions of home are striking: ideas of home are all pervasive and lie at the centre of many discursive wanders, yet they constitute the very thing that cannot be grasped or reached[5]. It is of course true that the act of kora can also be construed as a return to the origins, as a full circle; nevertheless the very nature of exile prevents this kora from taking place, forcing the exile to wander round and round in a circular horizon or khor mo yug. Interestingly, the first poem in Kora is "Horizon" (p. 9) and expresses this sense of circularity that makes return impossible. Even though "Horizon" mentions the ground (i.e. "home") in its first line, this is an

---

[4] These definitions are from the Nitartha Tibetan English Dictionary.

[5] A clear instance is Said's notion of being "out of place," a useful metaphor for interpreting the exilic condition as an ever displaced space, where the idea of home is not even conceived. This excerpt from his memoirs, suitably entitled Out of Place, resonates with the circular and frustrated journeys of Tenzin Tsundue's poetry: "Now it does not seem important or even desirable to be 'right' and in place (right at home for instance). Better to wander out of place, not to own a house, and not ever to feel too much at home anywhere" (269).

already a forsaken location, with the persona wandering a circular path: "From home you have reached / the Horizon here. / From here to another / here you go" (p. 9). It is worth nothing the implicit identity of the two "heres," the two circular horizons, and their radical difference from "home." The second stanza further emphasizes this sense of endless journey through circular horizons: "From there to the next / next to the next / horizon to horizon / every step is a horizon" (p. 9). In this case the ground has been lost and the persona is trapped in a circular path that knows no end.

Even though the fruit of returning to the original ground seems impossible, the remaining two stanzas offer some sort of advice for enabling return. If the homeland is not to be forgotten, one must "Count the steps / and keep the number" and also "Pick the white pebbles / and the funny strange leaves. / Mark the curves / and cliffs around / for you may need / to come home again" (p. 9). The homecoming journey is thus mentioned at the end; however it is acknowledged as a somewhat unlikely possibility. Remembering the path seems the only way of enabling return to the home ground, the exile's fruit or desired destination. Against this Sisyphean endeavour the poetic voice, not unlike Camus in his reading of the Greek story, offers some sort of resistance by outlining an unlikely though determined path of escape from the circular and trapping horizon. The "white pebbles," "funny strange leaves" and the counting of steps all seem to be symbols of resistance against the exile's absurd destiny: to be caught in a vast succession of horizons that can never be reached or crossed. In this respect the Tibetan persona seems to engage in a "rebellion [. . .] which rejects despair in a self-conscious revolt against cosmic purposelessness" (Bellioti 31). In fact, writing about his situation is another form of rebellion, since the absurdity of his context is exposed and a way to revolt against it is offered.

An interesting and parallel example of these dynamics is the film Dreaming Lhasa (2005) in which Lhasa or Tibet is never shown, even though the lives of the characters gravitate around this compelling idea of home. Tibet is the all-pervasive yet invisible and mostly unreachable thread that links the characters. Furthermore, Karma's and Dondhup's stories can be seen as a full circle kora, since they return to where they came from and accomplish what they intended to do. However, the homeland issue remains open and unsolved. As Karma writes in her screen when emailing her partner in New York: "sometimes, I don't know where I am…it's like I'm living, breathing, dreaming Lhasa" [punctuation as shown in the film]. Nevertheless, even when such a ground (i.e. Tibet) is technically reached it seems to slip through the persona's fingers. Such is the theme of Tsundue's poem "A Personal Reconnaissance" (2008, p. 11), which, ironically, is hardly a reconnaissance. The territory that is going to be inspected is the homeland, which "From Ladakh [. . .] is just a gaze away." Thus, this grandson of the land attempts to rejoin the place his parents left in the form of a military inspection. This does not only confirm Tibet as the ground where he comes from and the fruit he wishes to reach, but also as disputed ground, a place to be approached with a careful and somewhat sceptical attitude. Furthermore, the fact that this reconnaissance is a "personal" one might suggest that the inspection quality of the journey has not so much to do with Tibet being disputed ground qua occupied land, but with Tibet as a disputed space of the imagination. Therefore, the purpose of this "reconnaissance" is to confirm whether such imagined space exists at all. Care and suspicion seem natural (e.g. the persona goes "In a hurried hidden trip" to confirm what "they say," p. 11). In this respect, Meredith Hess comments on the imaginary nature of the home that animates this journey: "Tibet has become for these children and adults [educated in exile] an idea that surrounds them and grounds them even while they live in exile." (2009, pp. 56-57) It should be noted that while Hess is making a general point about Tibetan exiles, she uses "A Personal Reconnaissance" to illustrate her argument.

Thus, "from that black knoll / at Dumse" the reconnaisser sees Tibet "for the first time," even though he calls it "my country."[6] However, this much-expected encounter seems rather an anti-climax. First, the exile tries, quite literally, to grasp the land and soak in its atmosphere: "I sniffed the soil, / scratched the ground, / listened to the dry wind / and the wild old cranes" (p. 11). Nevertheless, the realisation that the craved homeland is somehow intangible or non-existent comes quickly: "I didn't see the border, / I swear there wasn't anything / different, there" (p. 11). Even though what is realised to be non-existent is the border, the homeland vanishes as soon as the border does, since the latter is the gate towards the former, in other words, what makes the homeland a "there." Moreover, the comma in the last line allows us to read "different" and "there" not necessarily as part of the same proposition, but as alternative though not necessarily contradictory propositions. It is not only that at the other side there wasn't anything different but also that there wasn't anything there. Such nuance shows us the slippery nature of the ground, which seems rather unreachable and could hardly be called a fruit, because it is never reached. The hesitations concerning this place develop further: "I didn't know / if I was there or here. / I didn't know / if I was here or there." (p. 11).

The disappointment of not finding the homeland where he imagined, brings the reconnaisser to question his very position; he cannot be certain any more about whether he is "here" or "there" or even what "here" and "there" mean. Is "here" the ancestral home, the primeval ground of the exile or is it his surrogate home? If so, the ancestral homeland would be "there," being an-other to him. Either way, the reconnaisser, once his initial desire to see the homeland has confused his reference points, is implicitly identified with another inhabitant of in-betweenness and uncertainty: the kyang, a wild ass that roams in the area. Not unlike these animals, who "come here every winter" and "go

---

[6] This first encounter with something that is somehow already known or familiar also relates to the Latin root of the word "Reconnaissance," which is re-cognoscere, to know again. Thus, the exile can be said to go to the border to re-cognise that which is familiar to his imagination in a non-imaginary setting.

there every summer" the reconnaisser dwells, metaphorically, in the imaginary and impossible space of the border, a no man's land in which the radical difference of all binaries (e.g. here / there, ancestral homeland / surrogate home) have collapsed.[7] This can be seen as an instance of "dwelling-in-traveling," since the only space the traveller can ever inhabit is the shifty and mobile "home" of the borderland.

The strong desire that enables the certain ground of dichotomies is progressively transformed by an unconventional "reconnaissance" that confounds all certainties and leaves the exile in no man's land. In a sense, although his ideas about the homeland are not confirmed, his experience of in-betweenness is. The exile tries to reach the homeland but ends up being somehow stuck at the borderland; once the border, and therefore the homeland, is seen to be intangible everything transforms into a vast borderland. This vast and uncertain space is somewhat synonymous to the circular horizons of poems like "Horizon" (e.g. "From there to the next / next to the next / horizon to horizon / every step is a horizon," p. 9), in which the border-horizon is always deferred and never reached. This constant state of unfulfillment, or being "out of place," to use Edward Said's phrase, forces the wanderer to inhabit the border-horizon, to make of every step a horizon and dwell in its in-betweenness. Consequently, this kora is not one that could be regarded as a full circle, but rather as one that never reaches the place it encircles. Nonetheless, the unreachability of such homeland seems also to entail some positive political possibilities, as Anand argues:

---

[7] In this context, Figueira's remark that "The theoretical nomad functions as do other discourses […] that purport to engage the Other. It presents a means of observing the Self and reaffirming one's own position. The nomad appears in theory as the armature on which the theorizing Self is sculpted"(88). Although Tsundue's existence is far more nomadic than that of many other who identify with the nomad as a symbol, it is true that his use of the nomadic animals that cross the Tibetan boundaries functions as a metaphor of the exile's condition. This is the mirror that returns a certain image of the poetic persona. Thus, the nomadic ass operates as a symbol that confounds and transcends boundaries, though not in a liberating way. It is the negative reflection of the self; what the self both is and cannot afford to be.

[T]hough for the Tibetans the memory, the ideal and the image of the land from which they have been exiled have been a potent force in the struggle for national recognition, the notion of return to the homeland is problematic. This problematisation should not be seen in terms of a pessimistic scenario where original Tibet has been destroyed and can never be retrieved. Instead, it guards against any naïve imagination of a particularised space-time projection of Tibet as a timeless construct. (2002, p. 31)

The many imaginative and political possibilities opened by the homeland being ever deferred to an unreachable "there" do not alleviate the disappointment of never finding it. In other words, the multiple possibilities of re-imagining identity do not eclipse the sad realization that the goal of regaining Tibet through independence remains unfulfilled. Thus, there is a shift from the realm of realpolitik to representational politics; the struggle is in this way deferred to a more reflective and speculative space.

This deferral of spaces is clearly instantiated in a shorter poem, "Illusion" (1999, p. 10). "Illusion" seems to engage the Buddhist trope that identifies the nature of appearances with a magical display or illusion that is gradually (in three stages) seen to be non-existent (e.g. "I saw it there," "There was nothing there," "I thought I saw something" (1999, p.10). In this way the viewer's delusion is exposed, from the belief in something real to a conviction that his first perception was mistaken. However, in this case the fading of what was thought to be "there" does not seem to have soteriological connotations. Rather, it seems to speak of another imaginary homeland, one that can be seen or conjured but never reached, forcing its pursuer to reconsider his assumptions. Again, the realpolitik aspect of the Tibetan struggle becomes diffused, privileging representational politics and the need to re-think identity and its cartographies. "Illusion" begins with three very direct one-line and one-sentence stanzas: "I saw it there. // I tried to cross over. // I crossed over." We are

never told what was at the other side of the bridge, presumably, luring the persona. The last two stanzas, in two lines of one sentence, simply state that "There wasn't anything / on the other side of the bridge. // I thought I saw something / on the other side of the bridge." Even though we are in the dark as to the object of the illusion—or, rather, disillusion—there are striking similarities with "A Personal Reconnaissance," which appears on the opposite page of Crossing the Border, under the title "A Personal Recconoitre–sic–." In fact, "Illusion" can be seen as a prelude that introduces the theme later developed in "A Personal Reconnaissance" in more detail. In this case the yearned for ancestral ground is identified with something insubstantial and ever-fading, something that is never here but always there. This move re-plays the paradox of acknowledging that the fatherland is both a forbidden land beyond reach and an open ground that, in its absence, can be imagined in manifold ways.

In Tsundue's poems, recognising the fatherland's illusory nature does not seem to bring a soteriological kind of liberation as in Buddhist thought. Instead, it produces either a reflexive sense of disappointment (e.g. "A Personal Reconnaissance") or a mere reconsideration, such as in "I thought I saw something." It needs to be noted that in Buddhist contexts, not perceiving the illusory nature of the self, and the world it seems to inhabit, is regarded as the root of all sufferings. Consequently, realising the illusory (i.e. ever-changing and ultimately uncontrollable) nature of both self and world is highly valued as a liberative insight. This realisation leads to a deep sense of uncertainty or not-knowing (i.e. the goal or fruit of the path), which follows from giving up any attempt to conceptualise, pin down or figure out a reality that is always in flux. Unlike an exiled Tibetan poet from the previous generation, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Tsundue does not link the in-between and uncertain space that is exile with any existentially analogous reality (e.g. the

undecidable nature of reality as perceived at the end of the path); he simply acknowledges such social reality with occasional bitterness, such as in his poem "I'm tired…" (2008, p. 18).[8]

Buddhist tropes like those of kora or fading illusion are still engaged for mediating the exilic condition, but the function of such tropes has been shifted in this new re-birth. It seems obvious that realising that what one thought to be there is merely an illusion involves deception and disappointment; however such discovery is valorised in a positive fashion in Buddhist contexts.[9] As unsettling as this disappointment might be, it could still be said to be liberative disappointment.[10] In this vein, it is interesting to note and compare how an analogous, though antithetical, rhetorical appropriation identifies pre-1959 Tibet as an illusion from a Buddhist perspective. When Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche speaks of impermanence he urges his audience to

---

[8] Chögyam Trungpa, an author born in Tibet and exiled at the time of the Chinese takeover (1950s) often uses Buddhist tropes for interpreting the painful realities of displacement. In his early collection of poems, Mudra (Trungpa 2001) he constantly uses Buddhist narratives for making sense of suffering and transforming it into an inspiration for treading the Buddhist path. In this way exile is revalorized as a great opportunity to develop as a Buddhist practitioner since it tests the poet's equanimity, acceptance of impermanence or compassion for others. This approach differs radically from Tsundue's, who, even when using the same narratives, does not regard displacement as an opportunity but as a social malaise to be overcome.

[9] Since the central aim of Buddhist systems is to bring about an epistemic shift by realizing the illusory nature of all phenomena (including nations, states, historical events or one's imaginary homeland) and not to achieve a defined political goal, any event or narrative tends to be interpreted as an instance of how things are ultimately impermanent, uncertain and undecidable. Although this attitude can be regarded as a political statement in itself, it is not oriented towards the achievement of realpolitik goals. This does not mean that Buddhist institutions and individuals have not struggled for such goals, but that there is a tendency to regard historical events as instances of timeless existential principles (i.e. impermanence) and not read them in terms of their more immediate historical- political significance. Thus, when Tsundue constructs Tibet as an illusion in order to express his political frustration he subverts the original purpose of the Buddhist metaphor, which was not only meant to console its user but also to offer a valuable insight into the nature of things.

[10] In fact Chögyam Trungpa speaks positively of disappointment as the "dissatisfaction which accompanies ego's struggle [as what] inspires us to examine what we are doing." (2002, p. 5) In other words, liberation and understanding are enabled by an underlying sense of disappointment.

Take another example from the more recent past. Before the arrival of the Chinese Communists, how many monasteries were there in what used to be called Tibet, the Land of Snow? […] Now not even a statue remains. All that is left of Samye is something the size of this tent, hardly bigger than a stupa. Everything was either looted, broken or scattered, and all the great images were destroyed. These things have happened and this demonstrates impermanence." (2006, p. 22).

This is the opposite of what Tsundue is doing, since Tsundue uses a Buddhist trope in order to look at Tibet whereas Khyentse uses Tibet as an example for illustrating a Buddhist principle.

When Tsundue uses old Buddhist metaphors for speaking about new realities they have been stripped of any positive qualities; they are bare images of disappointment. In this sense, metaphors like that of illusion are not the disappointing ground to be transformed into some liberating fruit; they are the disappointing fruit of a path of unfulfilled wishes, rooted in a fundamental separation from what is perceived as the ground: the ancestral homeland. Such dynamics are very well instantiated in a poem that mirrors the way "Illusion" develops, also by using a well-known Buddhist metaphor, that of peeling an onion. The trope of peeling an onion has been engaged in an almost endless myriad of Buddhist contexts for speaking about processes of progressive unmasking or realisation, the fruit being the discovery that the onion and its covering layers were either disposable or illusions that naturally fade away when sought out.[11] "Looking for my Onion" (1999, p. 32), however, relates to the process in a different way; its very title conveys some sense of uneasiness about the lost onion. For a start, the intent of the peeler is not to deconstruct the onion

---

[11] The earliest Buddhist example of an onion-like metaphor being used is probably the Phena Sutta, from the Samyutta Nikaya in the Pali Canon. In it the same principle of onion-peeling is applied to a banana tree, which ceases to exist once its various layers are removed. For a translation of the Phena Sutta see Thanissaro.

but in fact to find it, thus: "I peel and peel and peel / looking for my onion." (p. 32) However, this path seems to have obliterated the ground that is aiming to reach and so, "when my eyes are full, / hands stained, / scattered peelings stare at me, / I realise I actually had one." (p. 32) Thus, the ground is only discovered once it is lost and, therefore, is only recognised as an absence. The final deconstruction of the onion is not celebrated; rather its concomitant disappearance is mourned by evoking a moment that precedes the poem (i.e. the full onion). The full onion is never mentioned, since the first line is already involved in the process of peeling; in fact the full onion is only acknowledged once its absence is also total.

If we are to regard the onion as a metaphor for the homeland, the process of peeling can be seen as a quest or search, which unavoidably deconstructs any comfortable and preconceived ideas about this onion-fatherland. The result is very similar to that of previous poems; the desired object is never "there" and its presence is always deferred somewhere else or to some other time. In this case, the onion-before-peeling state is evoked as an invisible moment beyond the poem, which is only acknowledged once the onion has ceased to exist. From this perspective, the lost onion is also similar to the lost homeland, since it was lost at a time when the poet was not yet born. Analogously, the poem starts already with the searching process, the process of losing the onion, a step away from the unpeeled full onion ("I peel and peel / looking for my onion." 2009, p. 32). In this respect it is interesting to compare the contrast of temporal sequences in Tsundue's poetry and in Buddhist thought. Although they both coincide in pointing at a preceding state of wholeness (e.g. rejoining the fatherland in Tsundue's nationalist narrative and primordial lack of confusion in the Buddhist one) they have strongly divergent ways to approach it. In both systems the subject is born already divorced from this preceding and primordial wholeness, but Buddhism offers a way to rejoin it and Tsundue's poetry constantly stumbles upon the impossibility of such re-union.

Thus, a symbol like peeling the onion, which in Buddhism is regarded positively, as a metaphor of seeing through all forms of delusions, becomes a source of frustration in "Looking for my Onion," since it has come to signify the ultimate inexistence of the homeland. In Buddhism, original wholeness is identified with the non-existent onion, already peeled and exposed as empty space, and, therefore, deconstructing the onion is getting closer to that wholeness; the absent or non-onion is the original state to be rejoined. However, in Tsundue's poetry the fatherland is the fully fleshed onion, existent, positive and material and, consequently, its deconstruction only brings frustration. So, Buddhist temporality works like a full circle, like a khor ra that returns to its beginnings and fulfills its purpose and Tsundue's as an unfulfilled one, spiral rather than circular, never finding what it seeks and leading into further levels of despair.

However, the analogy of onion peeling as a metaphorical search for a homeland only works partially since the homeland was not lost as the result of any search. "Looking for my Onion" is clearly about the exilic quest for the imaginary homeland; however, the fact that the point of origin slips out of the poem and is only remembered as a full absence can be seen as a veiled allusion to the poet's generation, which was born in exile and for whom Tibet is an inherited memory that precedes any personal memory: The "onion" of Tibet had already been peeled and its parts scattered by the time of their birth.

Although Salman Rushdie's famous "Imaginary Homelands" begins by mentioning a picture of a house "into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born" (428), it is worth keeping in mind that Tibet precedes the Tibetan exiles' memory in a different way. Whereas the imaginary homelands of Rushdie are reconstructions based on memories, which are unavoidably and ultimately fictional, those of the second generation Tibetans born in exile are altogether fictional. The memories that configure the imaginary homeland of second-generation Tibetan exiles are those

of their parents; they describe a place they have never seen and they cannot access. Thus, the poignant image of Rushdie going back to his old family house in Bombay (Rushdie 428) is impossible for many Tibetans, who are limited to look at their country from the other side of the border and contemplate the irony of nomadic animals being allowed to cross the very boundaries they cannot cross.

It is important to remember Said's remark in his "Traveling Theory" when thinking of the imaginary homelands of the Tibetans: "It [any transference of ideas] necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin" (157). For those Tibetans born in India, like Tsundue, Tibet is a narrative that hardly ever gets debunked by the reality it is meant to represent. They cannot go back to their parents' houses as easily as Rushdie or other South Asians can and they do not have memories they can call their own. The fact that they are only dealing with inherited memories or, in other words, they were born at a time when all that was left from the old country were quickly changing memories, makes their imaginary homelands far more elegiac and meditative. After all, the homeland is little more than a chimera, an almost philosophical idea of origin.

In opposition to the inherited and chimeric memories of Tibet stands India, which for many is a surrogate or host but also native land. Tsundue's "When It Rains in Dharamsala" (2008, pp. 22-23) and "Exile House" (2008, p. 25) deal with this other space in rather different ways. While "When It Rains in Dharamsala" emphasizes the contingency and precariousness of exile as an unstable and uninhabitable location, "Exile House" dwells on its opposite: the rooted and almost homely quality of the native, though not ancestral, land. These other homes do not seem to be portrayed as the evasive centre of kora—or the empty centre of a peeled onion—but as mere contingent steps in

the circular journey that is kora. In a sense they might be regarded as the journey itself, the space travelled and inhabited by the exile but never construed as a fruit or a goal.

The notion of home in Tsundue's poems seems to be always deferred to another shore, to a "there" that is never reached, even when it seems close at hand. This is the mirage that fades away in "Illusion" or the absence discovered at the border between Ladakh and Tibet in "A Personal Reconnaissance." This home is a point of origin that precedes the many circular journeys of "Horizon," the full onion, never seen and only imagined when fully lost in "Looking for my Onion." Although home is a ground, the primordial point of origin, it is also an unreachable fruit, one to which there is no path. The unreachability of the fruit and the absence of a path brings us back to another ground, that of exile. This ground stands for surrogate home that is sometimes precarious like the "rented room" of "When It Rains in Dharamsala" (2008, pp.22-23) or unsustainable like the ring the third side of the coin in "The Third Side of the Coin" (1999, p. 40), and sometimes prosperous but also confining like the rooted and overgrown vegetation of "Exile House" (2008, p. 25) Thus, the ancestral home is the ground of the first journey, the one that has exile as a destination, but from exile such ground is regarded as a fruit to be reached, as a move away from the oppressive ground of displacement. Nevertheless, that second journey is never accomplished; this is a kora that never ends up in full circle but is trapped in a seemingly endless circuit of circular horizons (khor mo yug). These two parallel, though antithetical, journeys constitute the double journey of exile, which crosses over a number of actual and imaginary boundaries. Even though home might be an ever-fading fantasy its search is not given up and a number of journeys are attempted in order to reach it.

References

Anand, D. 2002, "A guide to little lhasa in India: the role of symbolic geography of

Dharamsala in constituting Tibetan diasporic identity," PC Klieger (ed.), Tibet, Self, and the Tibetan

Diaspora: Voices of Difference, pp. 11-36, Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden.

Bellioti, R. 1994, What is the meaning of human Life?, Rodopi, Amsterdam.

Clifford, J. 1997, Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century, Harvard

University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Figueira, D. 2008, Otherwise occupied: pedagogies of alterity and the brahminization

theory, State University of New York, Albany, New York.

Ghosh, S., and Nitin V.G., December-January 2005-2006, "Our Kora Has Just Begun,"

Contact Magazine, 4-5, http://www.contactmag.org/decjan0506.pdf, Accessed March 29 2011.

Hess, J.M. 2009, Immigrant ambassadors. citizenship and belonging in the Tibetan

diaspora, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.

Khyentse, D. Rinpoche 2006, Enlightened courage, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca,

New York.

Levinson, J. 1996, "Metaphors of Liberation: Tibetan Treatises on Grounds and Paths,"

J.I. Cabezón and R. Jackson (eds.), Tibetan Literary Studies in Genre, pp. 261-274, Snow Lion

Publications, Ithaca, New York.

Nitartha Tibetan Software. Online Tibetan English Dictionary,

http://www.nitartha.org/dictionary_search04.html, Accessed, March 29 2011.

Rushdie, S. 1995, "Imaginary homelands," B. Ashcroft et al (eds.) The Postcolonial

Reader, pp. 428-434, Routledge, Oxford.

Said, E. 1999, Out of place, Vintage, New York.

---.   1983, The world, the text and the critic, Harvard University Press, Cambridge,

Massachusetts.

Sarin R., and Sonam T., (Dirs,) 2005, Dreaming Lhasa, White Crane Films, DVD.

Schwartz, R.D. 1994, Circle of protest: political ritual in the Tibetan uprising,

Columbia University Press, New York.

Sonam, B. December 20th 2007, Bread and Freedom, Tibet Writes,

http://www.tibetwrites.org/?Bread-and-Freedom, Accessed, March 29 2011.

Thanissaro, B. (tr.), Phena Sutta: Foam (SN 22.95), Access to Insight,

 http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.095.than.html, Accessed, March 29 2011.

Trungpa, C. Rinpoche 1983, First thought best thought; 108 Poems, D. Rome (ed.),

Shambhala Publications, Boulder & London.

---.   2001, Mudra; early poems and songs, Shambhala Publications, Boston and

London.

---.   2002, Cutting through spiritual materialism, Shambhala, Boston.

Tsundue, T. 2007, Semshook: essays on the Tibetan freedom struggle, Tibet Writes,

Dharamsala.

---. 1999, Crossing the Border, Mumbai: Tenzin Tsundue.

---. 2008 (2002), Kora: stories and poems, Dharamsala: Tibet Writes.