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Unsuspecting Storyteller and Suspect Listener: 
A Postcolonial Reading of 
Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre 
Carine M. Mardorossian

After being widely celebrated as the cult text in the decades following the second wave of feminism, Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre has now become one of the paradigmatic texts of postcolonial studies. The novel is the most widely discussed Victorian narrative by scholars of British colonial discourse, so much so that it seems to have become the text every postcolonial critic has to cut her teeth on today. Contemporary feminist and postcolonial critics typically cite Jane Eyre as the epitome of the metaphorization of racial and cultural differences.1 They argue that Brontë’s use of the metaphors of mastery and enslavement to articulate domestic oppression subordinates colonial to sexual oppression and empties slavery of its racial implications. Further, critics agree that, while the novel is somewhat self-conscious about class and gender restrictions, it effectively erases racial differences by depriving its West Indian character of any textual significance other than as Jane’s foil or alter ego.2 Bertha’s sole function is thus to define—through contrast—the consistent and coherent female subject-under-construction and ultimately to undergo erasure so that the sovereignty of the central narrating subject can be established. As an incarnation of sexuality in its most bestial and violent form, the West Indian character is thus seen as the projection of Victorians’ general, and Brontë’s more specific fear about the colonizers’ own possible racial degeneration.

According to this influential and well-developed strand of criticism, the dramatization of an individualist quest for self-definition in women’s fiction replicates rather than revises the dominant terms of colonial self-representation because any assertion of identity is necessarily based on a “sacrificial logic,” that is, a logic whereby the consolidation of the self entails the assimilation/exclusion of the object/Other by the subject.3
Specifically, *Jane Eyre*’s postcolonial critics foreground the ways in which it is paradoxically the trope of sympathy that provides the grounds for the complicity between the novel’s feminist and imperial processes. They recognize a revolutionary potential in Jane’s identificatory gestures toward her racial others, but they see this possibility as ultimately failing to live up to the expectations it raises (Azim 176; Kaplan 171–72; Sharpe 40; 52). One of these moments of potentiality is Jane’s famous reverie on top of the roof when she draws a parallel between her own situation and the oppression suffered by womankind and the “millions” that constitute other oppressed groups (96). Another episode, similarly identified as an embryonically empowering but ultimately aborted moment, is the ten-year-old Jane’s identification with black slaves at Gateshead when, overcome by a sense of injustice at John Reed’s treatment of her, she uses the figure of a “revolted slave” to establish a parallel between class and race oppression (8–11). According to Firdous Azim and Jenny Sharpe such expressions of sympathy fall flat because their main function is not to establish a common identity between various oppressed sections of humanity so much as to enhance the contrast between the female individualist and her “uncivilized” others.4

Sympathy is thus read as a humanist value that ultimately functions either to corroborate or to disguise the workings of imperialist power. Indeed, if a subject’s identity is ineluctably determined by what the subject opposes, and if the two terms of the opposition (subject/other) are always defined asymmetrically as well as reciprocally, then sympathy can only serve to confirm the subject’s superiority or to obscure the existing hierarchy. In keeping with this logic, postcolonial and feminist interpretations of *Jane Eyre* read the heroine’s professions of sympathy for “native” women as contributing to the establishment of Jane’s central narrative voice and individuated self at her Other’s expense.5 Jane’s story is read as a typical *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist fulfills the Victorian fantasy of upward mobility and, in a more or less linear process, gains a coherent and masterful sense of self which characterizes middle-class subjectivity (Armstrong 187; Azim 173–74; Spivak 270).6 Her development repeats Rochester’s trajectory of advancement from a penniless younger son to the owner of Thornfield (and of Bertha’s
30,000 pounds), and her articulation of imperialism is seen as serving—if not replicating—his.

By presenting the text and its heroine as collaborators in the discursive enterprise of empire, however, these readings ignore the ways in which the author’s and the narrator’s contradictory position as lower middle class women within a metropolitan society necessarily inflects Jane’s representations of female and racial otherness. They present not only women’s writing but also women’s resistance to male structures of power as deeply complicitous with the discourse of colonialism. Azim, for instance, claims that “whether the narrative subject is male or female, the movement is always towards the obliteration of the Other, represented in terms of class, race or sex” (108 emphasis mine). Similarly, Deirdre David is struck by the “commanding manner in which [Jane] has conducted her life and told her story” and argues that Jane puts the Victorian governess’ “physical toughness, moral high-mindedness, and innate bossiness” in the service of British imperial expansion (77–78). For Sharpe, Jane resolves the tension between her subjective desire for self-determination and the principle of self-sacrifice, which is linked with women’s role in the domestic sphere by differentiating herself from her Eastern sisters, who are passive and without agency (52).

These readings construct Jane either as denying her position as Other in order to identify with Rochester, or as simply conforming to stereotypical patriarchal female roles. The premise that Jane’s subject-constitution occurs at the expense of her female Other overlooks the role Brontë assigns to Rochester’s mediation in the process. Jane’s negotiations and appropriations of images of racial and Oriental female otherness differ from Rochester’s and mark her partial difference from the colonialist self. She appropriates the racial categories Rochester debases and illuminates their status as manipulable and conflicting representational discourses. The racial/racist ideologies deployed in the novel are thus complicated—if not disrupted—by their articulation within gender differences. The narrator Jane, I argue, does not unproblematically adopt the male colonial discourse represented by Rochester, but rather challenges such discourse to replace it with an alternative form of female power. The particular kind of feminine authority embodied by Jane pro-
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motes the “powers of distance” and helps her to adopt a critical distance
towards the self as well as towards the mores and manners of her times.11
Such denaturalizing attitude towards social norms and conventions is, as
Amanda Anderson argues, a legacy of Enlightenment ideals of rational-
ity and detachment but does not, as is too often assumed, automatically
result in forms of domination and control.

It is now a critical commonplace that “to understand how gender and
[race]—to take two categories only—are articulated together transforms
our analysis of each of them” (Kaplan 148). Although postcolonial in-
terpretations claim to subscribe to this tenet, their condemnation of Jane
Eyre’s representation of race remains singularly unaffected by the novel’s
sexual politics: whether the narrative is seen as critical of, or complicit
with, the dominant gender ideologies does not seem to have any bearing
on what has become a predictable reading of Jane Eyre. If two divergent
readings of the novel’s gender politics can reach the same conclusion
about its colonial meanings, then chances are that the ways in which
gender transforms our understanding of race have been largely ignored.

Jane Eyre’s progress, I argue, does not blindly reproduce colonial dis-
courses; rather, more troublingly, it depends on the same kind of impe-
rialist rhetoric that the male colonial discourse propounds. The novel’s
critique of gender relations is not only far from feeble or hesitant, but
it also undermines many of the stereotypical and racialized assumptions
Rochester constantly draws upon for self-vindication. Jane Eyre’s post-
colonial critics argue that Jane’s autonomy becomes established through
the negation of her Other and that in making the identities generated
by this logic of exclusion appear “natural” obscures the system of power/
language which constitutes her. By contrast, I argue that the discursive
strategy that articulates Jane’s subjectivity through tropes of otherness
is not rendered transparent in the novel. While Brontë’s references to
slavery, harems, and subaltern women cannot be analyzed apart from
the West’s self-sustaining and naturalized topos about its others, deploy-
ing the references in the narrative nonetheless disrupts the expectations
raised by these same Victorian cultural codes. Instead of interpreting
Jane Eyre as the triumphant ascent of a female individualist, I read it
as a narrative that illustrates the ways in which representations medi-
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are the heroine’s relation to herself as well as to others. Jane’s growth is not a story with a beginning, middle, and an end so much as it is a mediated process of continual deferment and development. Moreover, by pointing out the discordant effects and significations that can derive from the same discursive event, the novel ultimately offers a dissenting commentary on the “naturalized” representations that the imperial and dominant signifying system promotes.

I am not trying to absolve Charlotte Brontë of complicity with the ideological processes of imperial domination and consolidation. The metaphorization of race emblematized by the numerous parallels the narrative draws between Jane and her other, Bertha, arguably falls within the framework of colonialist discourse insofar as it takes away from the literal reality of racial oppression by subordinating it to gender. Nevertheless, I argue that the contradictory impulses of gender in the text ultimately complicate these appropriations of images of racial otherness. While it is true that the recourse to the West Indian Other turns Bertha into Jane’s foil, it nonetheless (albeit indirectly) makes us identify with the exploited. Moreover, the fact that Jane’s “self-making” is, as I will show, patterned after an Oriental woman’s assertion of identity also challenges the text’s sacrificial logic. Like her favorite heroine, Sheherazade in The Thousand and One Nights, Jane relies (albeit with a twist) on storytelling as a means of delaying an evil, thus turning her Oriental other into an exemplar and undoing the “us” and “them” opposition.

I. “But it was always in her”: Metaphors of Slavery in Jane Eyre

In the opening scenes of the novel, Jane’s nine-year-long quiescence under the Reeds’ treatment finally gives way to open rebellion. Troubled by her inability to communicate her thoughts, the girl resorts to an outrageous comparison between her own situation and the harshness and humiliation of slavery she has just read about in Goldsmith’s History of Rome. In the child’s distressed mind, the violence of slavery is what comes closest to the physical and mental torture she has had to endure: “‘You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!’ I had read Goldsmith’s ‘History of Rome,’ and . . . had drawn parallels in silence which I never thought thus to have de-
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claired aloud” (8). Jane first strikes back at her young tormentor, John Reed, and later verbally assaults Aunt Reed herself: “Like any other rebel slave, [she] felt resolved in her desperation, to go all lengths” (9). Even the starkest punishment—a night spent locked up in the haunted Red Room—does not quell the “mood of revolted slave” (11), which resurfaces several times until her departure to Lowood: “Speak I must; I had been trodden on severely and must turn: but how?” (30). Although the use of slavery as a metaphor for other forms of oppression does indeed detract from the “true meaning—the literality—of slavery” (Plasa 69), the fact that an overwrought child with an “undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings” (6) generates from her readings such a strained analogy highlights, I argue, the incongruity of the comparison. At the same time, however, what begins as the young Jane’s endeavor to convey her deep sense of injustice gives way to a microcosm of colonialist discursive practices whose workings get indirectly exposed and scrutinized.

Metaphors of slavery permeate the text even more pervasively than the few explicit references to enslavement suggest. The trope of the idle and degenerate slave is constantly drawn on to justify the kind of treatment to which Jane is subjected. She is considered as less than human and inferior to the working class which the Victorians already put at the farthest reaches of civilized society: “You are less than a servant for you do nothing for your keep. There, sit down, and think over your wickedness” (9). On her deathbed, Mrs. Reed recalls the shock she experienced when Jane “[broke] out all fire and violence, as if an animal had looked up at [her] with human eyes and cursed [her] in a man’s voice” (210). Her revolts are seen as impulsive and irrational tantrums which lack consideration, and, after she rises against her “benefactress,” her past behaviour is immediately re-evaluated in the light of her ungovernable rage and barbarity: “But it was always in her” (10). Nine years of patience and acquiescence, including her attempts to win her aunt’s favour, are retrospectively interpreted as signs of her duplicitous and inherently depraved nature. Jane’s passionate reactions are constantly thrown back at her and linked with her “bad propensities” rather than with the injustices she has had to face. Even her fearfulness is not taken at face value and is recast as the cause rather than the result of the treat-
ment she has to endure: “Don’t start when I chance to speak rather sharply: it’s so provoking. . . . If you dread [people], they’ll dislike you” (33–34). Thus, feelings, which are usually seen as emergent reactions to external stimuli, are again and again interpreted as causing the very conditions from which they derive.

This recurrent reversal of the cause/effect relationship is particularly meaningful when examined in the context of slavery. The slave rebellions that increasingly shook the Caribbean in the early 1800s constitute a key discursive context for a text whose narrator is relating in 1819 the events of 1799–1809. Movements ranging from abolitionism to Chartism seriously hampered the practice of providing a “positive” justification for black slavery as well as for what came to be known as “white slavery” in British factories. 1834 saw the Emancipation Bill become law in England, and, in 1840, London staged the World Anti-Slavery Convention. What had been accepted without question until the second half of the eighteenth century now required an explanation for its continuation. With the tremendous influence of evangelicalism, a movement that had been instrumental in popularizing the ideals of the French Revolution in England, skin color or class origin could no longer be summarily invoked as a justification for a person’s lack of freedom and equality. The leaders of the evangelical movement (Wesley, Whitfield) denounced slavery on the grounds that all men were the children of God and reframed the debate as a moral rather than an economic issue. Although the supporters of slavery originally argued that unremunerated labour was necessary to consolidate national wealth and power, when the moral objections were magnified to the point of overriding the economic dimension, they resorted instead to a mode of representation that would absolve them of the charges of immorality, sin, or inhumanity. They now justified their authority on other grounds than merely economic ones and refined for this purpose the whole range of conceptual categories and rhetorical strategies solidified by the debasement of blacks under slavery had solidified. Their representations of otherness were thus continually readjusted so as to stabilize and maintain colonial authority in the midst of an otherwise unstable situation of colonial relations.
Jane Eyre, and more particularly its representation of Jane and Bertha, draws on arguments from both sides of the slavery debate. On the one hand, Jane echoes the abolitionists’ claim that slave rebellions are a rightful response to the violence of slavery:17 “If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way; they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse” (50). On the other hand, Mrs. Reed’s reversal of the cause and effect relationship parallels the anti-emancipationists’ rhetorical strategies. By representing vengefulness and deceitfulness as inherent to the black slave rather than to his/her strategies of resistance, the planters effectively separated the slave’s deeper reality from material and historical circumstances. This displacement allowed them to argue that since the blacks’ so-called “perverse nature” was the source of the problem, and not bondage, the removal of slavery would not turn these “savages” into equal and civilized human beings. Even after Emancipation, the image of miasmic, savage, and irrational blacks in revolt continued to be summoned as proof of the justice of British rule, since as Kamel explains, “[u]pper middle class types like Aunt Reed whose relatives profited in Madeira especially feared the newly freed slaves who . . . ‘reject[ed] the new economic order of society based on capital accumulation by residual ex-plantocrats and their patriarchal allies’” (7). The Jamaicans who were involved in the 1865 Morant Bay uprising, for instance, were characterized by the defenders of Governor Eyre’s bloodthirsty retaliation as thoroughly undisciplined, with a tendency to revert to bestial behavior, consequently requiring to be kept in order by force, and by occasional and severe flashes of violence; vicious and sly, incapable of telling the truth, naturally lazy and unwilling to work unless under compulsion. (qtd in Biddiss 26)18

One could easily imagine Mrs. Reed giving an identical description of Jane, or Rochester discussing his first wife in these same terms. Indeed, both Mrs. Reed and Rochester have to contend with a “rebel slave” of whom they are in charge, and both are adamant about being the “real” victims of this power relationship. Although the metaphorics of enslave-
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ment in the novel clearly positions them as oppressors, they themselves feel abused in the hands of “a nature wholly alien” (269) and “an interloper not of [their] race” (13), both of who are seen as subhuman. Eight years after Jane’s single-handed mutiny at Gateshead, Mrs. Reed still vividly remembers Jane’s “unchildlike look and voice” (210): “No child ever spoke or looked as she did... I felt fear, as if an animal that I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me in a man’s voice” (203, 210). By thus representing Jane as animalistic and unchild-like, Mrs. Reed obscures the power imbalance that characterized her relationship to Jane. Similarly, Rochester cannot simply summon his wife’s madness as a reason for burying her alive in a “room without a window” (257), since in the 1840s, madness was a major cause for liberal concern. Only by resorting to the notion of “moral madness” can he exonerate himself; when Jane points out that the “unfortunate lady... cannot help being mad” (265), he immediately retorts that Bertha’s “hereditary” condition was preceded and actually caused by her sexual intemperance and “giant propensities” (269).

Such repeated attempts at self-vindication, however, ultimately allow Jane and, to a greater extent, the reader to note the contradictions and unreliability of the various narratives that are marshaled to justify existing power relations and that the young Jane has half internalized herself. According to Mrs. Reed, Jane is impulsive and impassioned and yet simultaneously capable of the most manipulative and calculating schemes, a “creature” who hardly has any brains but who nonetheless thinks too much. Jane’s angry outbreaks are cast both as a sign of passion (“Did ever anybody see such a picture of passion?” 9) and of an inherent underhandedness and “dangerous duplicity”:

“She never did so before,” at last said Bessie, turning to the Abigail.

“But it was always in her,” was the reply. “I’ve told Missis... and Missis agrees with me. She’s an underhand little thing: I never saw a girl of her age with so much cover.” (10)

Indeed, “Missis” describes Jane “as a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity” (14), “a tiresome, ill-conditioned
child, who always looked as if she were watching everybody and scheming plots underhand” (21). When Jane goes to her aunt's deathbed, the first memory that emerges in the old woman's delirious mind is of the child's “incomprehensible disposition, and her sudden starts of temper, and her continual, unnatural watching of one's movements!” (203).

Mrs. Reed's description of Jane as "something mad, or like a fiend" (203) is only one of many correspondences between the protagonist and her alter ego Bertha, not the least of which is their symbolic positioning as black slaves. Although as a white Creole heiress, and a member of the slaveholders' class, Bertha cannot either be equated with the exploited, the narrative does, as Susan L. Meyer convincingly shows, "associate her with blacks, particularly with the black Jamaican antislavery rebels, the Maroons. In the form in which she becomes visible in the novel, Bertha has become black (252), . . . [and] symbolically enact[s] precisely the sort of revolt feared by the British colonists in Jamaica" (255). She is invariably figured as "fearful and ghastly" with "thick and dark hair," a "savage face," "blackened" and inflated features, the "lips . . . swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes" (249). Like Jane, Bertha is made to represent the threat of irrational colonial rebellion and is consequently locked away. She also eventually materializes the child's evocation of the phenomenon of slave suicide: "Resolve . . . instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression—as running away, or, if that could not be affected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die" (12). That Bertha's jailer Grace Pool should bother making "sago" (136), a West Indian bread or cereal made with starch extracted from palm tree trunks, suggests that her prisoner refuses to eat any other food. And in the light of the homicidal and unbroken rampage that Bertha undertakes against her husband and brother "now in fire and now in blood, at the deadest hours of night" (180), her suicide actually takes on the character of yet another act of resistance rather than, as Spivak argues, of a ritual self-sacrifice. Brontë must have had in mind the numerous and extremely popular slave narratives that were in circulation during her lifetime as well as the manifold British novels such as Oroonoko which foregrounded the prevalence of slave suicides as a strategy of resistance against slavery.
These initial connections between Jane and Bertha highlight the inextricability of the ideological narratives of gender and race in the novel. Nevertheless, Jane’s development from childhood to maturity, does increasingly dissociate her from her alter ego. According to Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the distance is created because the relationship between the two women becomes a “monitory” one: “while acting out Jane’s secret fantasies, Bertha does (to say the least) provide the governess with an example of how not to act” (Gilbert and Gubar 361). Sharpe, however, argues that “Jane’s development . . . is represented by her movement from the instinctive rebellion of black slaves toward assuming the moral responsibility of a cognizing individual” (42). In other words, Jane has to distinguish herself from slaves, because in keeping with the racialized thinking of her time, Brontë did not believe blacks to have any sense of morality on which to base their actions.

Although it is true that Jane gradually and self-consciously moves from revolutionary outbursts to more subdued and “rational” reactions, this evolution does not make her reject Bertha to internalize “the proper forms of feminine conduct” elicited by domestic ideology (London 209) so much as discard the particular form Bertha’s resistance takes in the novel. In fact, while other characters are outraged by the young Jane’s rebellious outbreaks, the narrator describes them as “uncontrolled” but “logical” reactions which aimed at “avert[ing] farther irrational violence”: “‘Unjust!—unjust!’ said my reason, forced by the agonizing stimulus into precocious though transitory power” (12). It is not that her revolt is not ethically justified, but that it is eminently recuperable by a discursive formation expert at perpetuating itself. Jane soon discovers that open rebellion often reproduces rather than exposes the oppressiveness of the power structure and its naturalized categories. Calling John Reed a slave-driver makes him behave even more like one.25

It is the realization that social customs cannot be so easily evaded, rather than a belief in the English moral and national superiority, that drives Jane to remain within the bounds of conventionality. When Rochester seeks to vindicate his previous life of “dissipation” (“never debauchery”) and to rally Jane to his views by contrasting her with his
Creole wife and his three “foreign” mistresses, Jane is far from approving of his depiction of her as the “antipode” of “these poor girls” (274). The marriage of equal minds is, she realizes, impossible when the very language Rochester uses is saturated with the binary logic which governs the Victorian representations of women’s nature: “It was a grovelling fashion of existence: I should never like to return to it. Hiring a mistress is the next worst thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading” (274). These words are ultimately responsible for Jane’s determination to leave (“I knew what I must do” 277) even before her “indomitable” claim “I care for myself” sends her on her way (279). Rochester claims Jane as his equal but annihilates the very possibility of equality, since his adherence to Victorian definitions of women renders the very notion unthinkable. For Rochester, a pure and unsullied woman like Jane would never even consider his unconventional proposal were it not for the extenuating circumstances in which he finds himself. Her knowledge of the truth thus necessarily sets her apart from his previous “degenerate” mistresses who had no legitimate excuse to get involved in a sexual liaison outside the bounds of marriage. In other words, Rochester’s disregard for conventions is circumstantial and actually reproduces the oppressive codes of Victorian gender ideology.

Jane refuses to be the exception that confirms the rule and identifies with the mistresses whom she has been so near succeeding. When she asks Rochester whether he did not see anything wrong with living “first with one mistress and then another,” he immediately assumes that what she finds reprehensible is the corruption he incurred through mixing with people who are, if not “by nature,” then “by position, inferior” (274). Jane, herself an inferior by position, challenges his essentialist characterization by relocating the source of the degradation in him, namely in the “feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory” (274 emphasis mine). It is precisely because she sees the equivalence between herself and his ex-lovers and not because she considers herself morally superior that she chooses to leave. She cannot accept an offer that is ultimately based on the traditional image of the self-sacrificing and self-regulating domestic woman rather than on a notion of equal-
ity between the sexes. What she had thought of as a spontaneous and spiritual communion that bound her to Rochester in the garden scene is exposed as another layer of conventionality and reveals the inextricability of identity from social constraints.26

The demonstration of the inescapability of the socio-symbolic order, I argue, does not lead Brontë to advocate conformity or capitulation to it. Rather, Brontë dramatizes the self-destructiveness entailed in attacks against oppressive social forms, and, while demonstrating that there is no space outside dominant narratives, she nonetheless suggests the possibility of wrestling from these narratives the means of empowerment. Jane’s lack of expressed opposition in the second half of the novel does not signify her acceptance of pathological conditions of domination but her reliance on a type of “oppositional power” that, although it derives from existing power structures and as such does not challenge them overtly, “has the extremely tricky ability to erode insidiously and almost invisibly, the very power from which it derives” (Chambers 2). According to Ross Chambers, the effectiveness of “oppositionality” depends on its use of circumstances established by the dominating system but for ends of which the system itself is unaware. It thus remains effectively “‘oppositional’ unless and until it is perceived by the power structure itself, in which case it is classified as illicit or even criminal resistance (and so represents a failed form of ‘opposition’)” (9).

In this respect, Jane’s deployment of “oppositionality” is resonant with the black Creoles’ “tactical” resistance in Wide Sargasso Sea. Like Rhys’s rewriting, Jane Eyre foregrounds the ways in which “coming to voice” in the face of authority results in the speaker losing rather than gaining power. The moment Christophine, the most resilient black character in Wide Sargasso Sea stands up to Rochester, she has to leave the narrative field altogether. Only when her resistance is articulated with rather than directly opposed to the categories of imperial and patriarchal discourse does it have the potential to unsettle the modes of operation of authority.27 Similarly, in Jane Eyre, the potential for effective resistance is located “between the possibility of disturbance in the system and the system’s power to recuperate that disturbance” (xi). Although, as Chambers points out, this “room for maneuver” does not effect radi-
cal or immediate transformation let alone revolutionary reversal, it does have the power “to change what people desire [which] is, in the long run, the way to change without violence the ways things are” (xii). This, I want to argue, is what Charlotte Brontë is doing: taking imposed codes and languages and transforming them from within.28 It is also what the narrated Jane undertakes: she stages her “silent revolt” within rather than against the institutions that constrain her and uses the very social and linguistic systems that seem to lock her in conformity for “other” purposes. For instance, whereas her use of the formula of deference “Master” to address Rochester seems to epitomize her subjection, it also enables her during their “engagement” to assert her independence and identity both of which “her employer” is threatening. Jane’s interiorized form of discipline or “reserve” is thus far more complicated than just an “enforced self-suppression” (London 203) “in keeping with domestic ideology’s structures of self-government” (202).29

II. Unsuspecting Storyteller and Suspect Listener

As Rosemarie Bodenheimer and Janet Freeman point out, Jane’s evolution is also, if not primarily, a verbal one: she grows into a fully developed narrative voice that solicits the reader’s whole-hearted assent (Bodenheimer 160; Freeman 698). The interlude at Ferndean epitomizes this verbal mastery: she has literally become Rochester’s “narrator,” his “vision” and his “right hand,” and has acquired the authority to interpret his life: “He saw nature—he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam” (397). Jane has now achieved the status of an effective storyteller. She not only has the ability to anticipate her audience’s reaction but also to manipulate “the narrative of [her] experience” accordingly: “to have told him all would have been to inflict unnecessary pain” (387). She gives “partial replies” and even withholds her account of their telepathic communication because her “tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of [her] hearer” (394). Applying a lesson she learnt at Lowood, she thus uses “subdued” language and restraint in order to sound more credible (Bodenheimer 160): “I infused into the narrative far less of gall and
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wormwood than ordinary. Thus restrained and simplified, it sounded more credible” (62). Jane’s discursive authority is consequently shown to be about telling as much as about not telling, about keeping quiet as much as about taking the floor. Although her hermeneutic monopoly at Ferndean contrasts with her earlier characterization as reserved and undemonstrative, it does not, however, signify a radical shift in her sense of self or in her relationship with others but a refinement of “well-practised skills” (Tromly 48). Neither can this authority be reduced to the socially ordained “power of influence” Victorian ideology imparted to the domestic woman. Rather, Brontë creates a model whereby Jane’s positioning as both object and audience of the conversation neither symbolizes her powerlessness nor her complicity with middle class conventionality. As Laurence points out,

If reality is perceived according to established patriarchal values, then women’s silence, viewed from the outside, is a mark of absence and powerlessness, given women’s modest expression in the public sphere until the twentieth century. If, however, the same silence is viewed from the inside, and women’s experience and disposition of mind inform the standard of what is real, then women’s silence can be viewed as a presence, and as a text. (157)

At the end of the novel, Jane foregrounds her expertise as a narrator by indirectly comparing herself to Sheherazade, the paragon of tale tellers: “You shall not get it out of me to-night, sir; you must wait till to-morrow; to leave my tale half-told will, you know, be a sort of security that I shall appear at your breakfast table to finish it” (386). While Jane is modeled after the narrator of the Eastern collection, Rochester is linked to the despotic Sultan Shahriyar both through the imagery that describes him and through Jane’s direct remarks. These references are all the more significant because The Arabian Nights formatively influenced Brontë’s style. Sheherazade’s stories were indeed one of the Brontës’ favorite childhood books, “so early acquired, assimilated, conned as to be almost coeval with . . . memory” (Gérin 7). Charlotte and Branwell’s juvenilia is saturated with motifs, references, and images from the Nights.
Both Charlotte and Emily borrowed Sheherazade’s narrative strategies, embedding tale within tale in their own fiction. In *Jane Eyre*, for instance, Jane’s dreams, the pantomime, the gypsy scene, and Rochester’s lengthy reminiscences constitute embedded narratives that “are used structurally to reflect the central action” (Workman 182). Nevertheless, although Jane’s own desire to “open [her] inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale [her] imagination created, and narrated continuously” (Brontë 95–96) does indeed associate her with Sheherazade, I would suggest that Brontë introduces in this novel an unprecedented spin on her borrowings from *The Arabian Nights*, and in so doing destabilizes the (passive) victim/(cruel) sultan binary that Victorians associated with the figures of the Oriental woman and man.

The manifold translations of these “oriental tales” provided the Victorians with an inexhaustible source of unexamined and stereotypical Eastern images to fulfill their fantasy needs. English and French writers plundered the *Nights* for oriental props and erotic references. Drawing heavily on the tales’ descriptions of Oriental women and especially of “harem-inmates,” they reproduced Victorian expectations about Eastern womanhood as either “erotic victims [or] scheming witches” (Kabbani 26). Even the narrator of the tales Sheherazade, with whose predicament most if not all of Brontë’s contemporaries sympathized, ultimately helped perpetuate the topos of the erotic female other as victim of a fanatical, violent, and lusty Eastern master. As a result, the abundance of similes and metaphors inspired by *The Nights* in *Jane Eyre* is accordingly often summoned as evidence of Brontë’s (feminist) Orientalism.

Nevertheless, whereas the few studies of the relation between *Jane Eyre* and the *Nights* highlight the ways in which Jane’s situation and maneuvers parallel Sheherazade’s, what strikes me is the ways in which they differ. Indeed, in contrast to Sheherazade who relies on storytelling as a survival strategy, Jane adopts the role of a quiet listener when she is most vulnerable. At important dramatic moments, she grows silent, and her storytelling skills are overshadowed by her withdrawn and undemonstrative countenance. Throughout the novel, she is repeatedly positioned as the object rather than the subject of conversation: at Gateshead, Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst discuss the future “fitting
a child like Jane Eyre” (29), and the servants confer about her propensi-
ties and even about her possible death in her presence. At Lowood, Mr.
Brocklehurst places her on a stool and publicly proclaims her “vices” to
humiliate her (57). And at Thornfield, whether Rochester bombards
Jane with questions about her past, relatives, and experiences, and even
goes so far as to assume the guise of a gypsy in order to find her out.
Controlling the discourse, he not only determines what he would like to
know, but eventually makes up his own answers (Azim 194).

As the relationship progresses, Rochester increasingly assumes the part
of storyteller and Jane the role of listener. In his words, “it is not [her]
forte to tell of [her]self, but to listen while others talk of themselves”
(119); she was made “to be the recipient of secrets” (127). Rochester not
only gives her several more or less elaborated versions of his past rela-
tionships and mistakes, but he also starts relating to her parts of her own
narrative. He assesses her personality so precisely that she “wonder[s]
what unseen spirit had been sitting for weeks by [her] heart watching its
workings and taking record of every pulse” (175). The few times when
Jane does attempt to tell and interpret her story, Rochester imposes his
own reading on the events she is recounting. When she tells him about
the incident of the torn veil, a rendition that a critic has qualifi ed as
“forceful, honest, and self-consciously formalized—complete with ‘pref-
ace’ and ‘tale,’” her storytelling abilities ultimately fail her since Rochester
unscrupulously imposes his own interpretation in lieu of hers (Peters
228). He dismisses her dreams as nonsensical and explains away Bertha’s
frightening appearance as “half dream, half reality” (251). Sometimes he
even talks about Jane in the third person as if she were not present. For
instance, he turns the story of their meeting into a fairy-story for Adèle
and tells it again later to Jane herself in the third person. Finally, from
telling her who she is, Rochester predictably reaches the point of telling
her what she ought to do, namely become his unofficial “Angel in the
House” whose mission would consist of rehabilitating him.

During the Moor House episode, Brontë even more explicitly dis-
tinguishes her heroine from Sheherazade. Despite the manifold allu-
sions that associate the two women, Jane is again positioned as both
interpretable text and attentive audience rather than as a storyteller.
The day after St. John Rivers recognizes her real name on the drawings she had mechanically and abstractedly signed, he returns to her cottage “experienc[ing] the excitement of a person to whom a tale has been half-told, and who is impatient to hear the sequel” (332). The irony is that Jane had left no narrative “half-told” in the first place and has no clue about what he means. Like Rochester, St. John then proceeds by “assuming the narrator’s part, and converting [Jane] into a listener” (334). He appropriates the interpretive authority and turns Jane into the object of analysis and the disempowered audience of her own past experiences.

Thus, by contrast with her Eastern literary model, who spins out tale after tale (and tale within tale) to save her own life and the lives of the young women of her country, Jane’s quietness and modest expression seem at first to reinforce her powerlessness in a male-dominated context. According to Carol Bock, “[d]espite the pleasure that Jane takes in hearing Rochester, one still senses that being reduced to a mere audience places her once again in a position of vulnerability. . . . Jane is debarred from exercising the interpretive and expressive talents that we have seen are essential to her sense of self” (86). Brontë, however, disengages Jane’s undemonstrative behaviour from what could be perceived as passivity and submission. Like Rhys, she propounds a form of resistance “marked by women’s indirectness of speech and silence” (Laurence 158). In the presence of men whose conceptual framework—let it be Rochester’s patriarchal “despotism,” Brocklehurst’s hypocritical brand of evangelicalism or St. John’s Calvinistic “creed”—strictly controls what it is possible to say on any given topic, Jane learns to adopt an “oppositional” form of resistance which draws on the dominant modes of thought but for her own purposes. Thus, the image of the “caged bird” which conventionally signifies imprisonment and powerlessness paradoxically but judiciously comes to symbolize Jane’s freedom and agency: “Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage, beautiful creature!” (280).

Jane is at her most vulnerable when she tells her ex-fiancé of her decision to leave Thornfield. Rochester reacts violently and is dangerously close to sexually assaulting her: “Jane! will you hear reason? (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear), because if you won’t, I’ll try vio-
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He warns her that “I am not a gentle-tempered man—you forget that: I am not long-enduring; I am not cool and dispassionate. Out of pity to me and yourself, put your finger on my pulse, feel how it throbs, and—beware!” (267). Jane’s response is quite unexpected considering the “perilous crisis” she is facing: “Sit down; I’ll talk to you as long as you like, and hear all you have to say, whether reasonable or unreasonable” (266). She encourages Rochester to start the tale of his first marriage and promises to listen to him “for hours if [he] will” (268). When his first narrative is over, she elicits another one, namely the story of his search for a woman “who’d understand his case and accept him in spite of the curse with which he was burdened” (273). She thus takes over the role of questioner and confessor. Rochester resumes his storytelling but not without first remarking: “When you are inquisitive you always make me smile. . . But before I go on, tell me what you mean by your ‘Well Sir?’ It is a small phrase very frequent with you; and which many a time has drawn me on and on though interminable talk; I don’t very well know why.” Jane’s answer evades the question and again urges him to go on: “I mean—what next? How did you proceed? What came of such an event? Did you find anyone to marry you?” (273).

What is revealed as Jane’s pattern of questioning throws a new light on their relationship: Rochester is not as much in control of the discourse as we thought. While he is busy trying to gain mastery over Jane, she makes him narrate a succession of tales to avoid a potentially violent situation. Incidentally, this is also true of the month preceding their wedding when she makes him sing or talk in the evenings in order to avoid the physical intimacy he insists on establishing. The framing of a person talking to delay an evil is of course a crucial device of The Arabian Nights. While Rochester is plundering the Nights for stereotypes of Oriental women and Grand Turks to playfully represent their relationship, Jane uses the same book on a meta-level in which Sheherazade functions to make him go on talking. Unlike her Eastern counterpart, however, she does not locate her power in speaking but in listening. Indeed, whereas speaking up consistently gets her into trouble and gives her away, her surreptitious attentiveness allows her to gain invaluable
insight into people’s motives and compromising situations. Thus, she occupies the position of both Sheherazade and the Sultan.

Jane discovers at a young age that what is true or false is actually pre-determined by particular discourses (or, in Foucault’s term, “regimes of truth”) rather than by the “truthfulness” of the actual occurrence. When Mr. Brocklehurst asks her whether she is a good girl, she finds it “[i]mpossible to reply to this in the affirmative” since “her little world held a contrary opinion” (27). Similarly, at Thornfield, Victorian gender norms are portrayed as so authoritative that, instead of justifying his offer of “free love” by appealing to Jane’s and his desires, Rochester remains steeped in extremely conventional terms of female domestic and sacrificial devotion. Jane foregrounds the deep-rootedness of self-perpetuating social codes, when, for instance, she resorts to visual representation as a means of curbing her feelings of infatuation for Rochester. “[A superior] cannot possibly intend to marry [a governess],” so Jane reinforces the unbreachable social gap by painting two portraits, one of herself she draws in less than two hours and entitles “Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor and plain,” and a miniature of Blanche she takes two weeks to complete and which delineates “the loveliest face” with “the raven ringlets, the Oriental eye” (141). Jane uses the scripts she has at her disposal to remind herself of the way the dominant systems of meaning perceive her and to make sense out of her situation. However, while she is emphasizing the impossibility of speaking from a space outside of social conventions (“[Blanche] answered point for point” to her portrait 151), she also displaces the conventional symbolic representations that define Victorian class and gender ideology, since their reification takes place at the cost of these representations’ “naturalness.” Indeed, that her faithful representation of Blanche precedes the appearance of the individual Blanche and yet resembles her almost exactly, points to the ways in which social realities are shaped by the representations that they supposedly antecede. While Brontë’s novel has been read as responsible for the perpetuation of a dominant domestic ideology to which Jane ultimately submits, I read Jane Eyre as seeking to expose the constraints and contradictions such ideology entails for women. The marriage of equal minds can only occur through
supernatural intervention and when Rochester, deprived of his abilities to either read or write, is dependent on Jane to provide him with (her) representations of the world.

Jane’s increasing awareness and manipulation of the complex and unstable processes through which she identifies herself and is identified by others is particularly salient in her “oppositional” recuperation of *The Arabian Nights* paradigm. The novel’s feminism intersects with a well-established English habit of Eastern allusion but does not exactly reproduce it. Because it draws attention to representation’s work as representation, it questions the status of *The Arabian Nights* and its female stereotypes as reality. Not only is Jane’s role model an Oriental woman, but her borrowing of Sheherazade’s narrative strategies to resist Rochester also challenges the vocabulary and imagery of silent Oriental womanhood as passive. The novel’s reworking of the *Nights’* paradigm questions the prevalent stereotype of the Eastern woman without agency, whose “soul [is] made of yielding materials, [and is] just animated enough to give life to the body” (Wollstonecraft 311). It also challenges the victim/master binary that characterizes Victorian representations of the East. Brontë’s continuous brooding on the “Woman Question” as well as its novelistic articulation in *Jane Eyre* creates a subversive text that reveals the connections between the workings of dominant gender and race ideologies. As Sara Mills explains in her important book *Discourses of Difference*, while Western women could not be said “to speak from outside colonial discourse. . . their relation to [it was] problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of ‘femininity,’ which were operating on them in an equal, and sometimes stronger measure. Because of these discursive pressures, their work exhibits contradictory elements which [acted] as a critique of some of the components of other colonial writings” (62). Similarly, the invocation of racial otherness to describe Jane Eyre’s gender subordination suggests her solidarity with nonwhite women in a way which does not simply replicate dominant stereotypical views of non-European others.

In claiming that *Jane Eyre* does not pass along the unquestioned ideology of imperialism, I do not mean to suggest, however, that Jane’s discourse makes no claim to power. As her characteristic inversion of the
Sheherazade role demonstrates, Jane does acquire authority if only by forcing confessions through strategic listening. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse have argued that, in fact, the more subtle kind of power Jane harbours, in other words, one that, unlike the masculine modalities of power, “speaks with a mother’s voice and works through the printed word upon mind and soul rather than body and soul” (4) itself exemplifies a kind of violence, “the violence of representation.” In line with a Foucaultian hermeneutics, they see Jane’s specifically female authority as more insidious than the violence of earlier political orders whose forms of control were at least overt. It is a form of power, they claim, that derives its authority from an alleged position of helplessness: Jane is excluded from available forms of social power (money, beauty, status) and becomes as a result the triumphant underdog with whom we cannot help but identify. She is given depth by virtue of her subject position and becomes the “progenitrix of a new gender, class, and race of selves” whose judgment of others we trust and “in relation to whom all others are deficient” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 8). The psychological depth of character she creates through the sheer power of the word “allows her to exemplify and evaluate not only the thoughts and feelings of women but those of men and children as well. . . . And by virtue of this power alone, she builds around herself a community that excludes those who do not think and feel and read and write as she does, all of whom die by novel’s end” (4).

Rather than see Jane Eyre’s denaturalizing attitude towards norms and people as a masked form of power through which the heroine arrogates moral superiority on behalf of the rising middle class, I have sought to offer a more tempered account of the ideal of critical distance the novel propounds through the character. The text, I argue, encourages us to take a dissenting view of the imperial discourse embodied by Rochester and St. John and promotes instead a conscious cultivation of critical distance embodied by Jane’s practices of shielded observation. As Amanda Anderson argues, the practices of critical detachment Brontë’s heroines represent and with which the Victorians were obsessed were far from homogenous in their effects. While contemporary theory tends to emphasize the forms of violence and exclusion attendant on the valorization of
Enlightenment ideals of distance and depth, *Jane Eyre* reveals a dialectic between “detachment and engagement, a cultivated distance and a newly informed partiality” that does not necessarily lead to control, management and surveillance. Instead, Jane cultivates distance not only from others, but also, and predominantly, from her own self. She evaluates herself often more severely than she does others, but the illusion of depth achieved though such self-scrutiny does not, as Rochester would have it, merely serve to separate her from her inferior others. Instead, it exposes the arbitrariness of the boundaries that allegedly set her apart from, for instance, his former mistresses. Rather than engage his claims about the nature of “slaves and mistresses,” she realizes that who they are is inseparable from how he sees them, that is, through the lens of constraining Victorian conventions. Furthermore, far from assuming a stable position of superiority from which she can make final judgments about others, her self-reflexive cultivation of distance is an ongoing practice that does not claim absolute objectivity. It is not, in other words, that Jane Eyre makes no claim to power, but that the alternative form of power she represents reveals the positive potential of cultivated detachment, a potential that cannot be recognized when her practices of withdrawn observation are folded into English conventions of feminine conduct or when all forms of power in the text are read as a ruse.

**Notes**

1. See Azim, Boumelha, Chow, and Sharpe; Plasa also makes this point, but he identifies in the novel an underlying critique of its rhetorical strategies.
2. This criticism can also be leveled against some of *Jane Eyre*’s feminist critics: Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, do not interpret the character of Bertha, the white Creole “madwoman” from the West Indies, in the context of Rochester and his father’s colonialist practices but as Jane’s “dark double,” the displaced representation of the heroine’s repressed rage at women’s social destiny (Gilbert & Gubar 339; Showalter 112–24). In her analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Baer goes further to suggest that even Rhys’s Antoinette is Jane’s double: “One can make a convincing case for a shared identity: Jane and Antoinette are doubles” (135).
3. See Weir for a critique of the poststructuralist assumption that individual and collective identity is always necessarily founded on a same/other dialectic and produced by a logic of exclusion or sacrifice.
4 Azim sees the text’s recognition of the sexual oppression of all women as “hesitant and diffident” (182), while Sharpe argues that Jane identifies herself as a slave but not with slaves. For Sharpe, the older narrator actually uses the metaphor of slavery to illustrate an improper form of resistance and the slaves’ lack of moral responsibility (40–42). Similarly, Jane’s sympathy for her imaginatively summoned “harem-inmates” is identified as a colonial trope that serves to establish her racial and moral superiority by constructing Oriental women as victims to be rescued and molded according to her self-image (Azim 181–82; Sharpe 30). As Sharpe points out, the notion of the submissive, self-effacing, and erotic “native woman” at the mercy of cruel indigenous practices is indeed one of the tenets that legitimated the West’s “mission civilisatrice,” represented by the missionary enterprise of St. John in the novel (30).

5 See Boumelha, David, Meyer, Perera, Spivak and Zonana for other instances of the kinds of readings I have described here.

6 Fraiman challenges this notion and argues that the process of Bildung for female protagonists is necessarily fraught with difficulties that destabilize the linear narrative of progress. Her chapter on Jane Eyre emphasizes the many threads in the novel, which, by pointing to a common identity between Jane and working class women, disrupt the vertical story of Mrs. Rochester’s formation.

7 David acknowledges Jane Eyre’s status as an “object,” but she sees this condition as constituted by the ideas of racial superiority and class difference and as the means through which the heroine establishes her agency. In other words, Jane embraces the ideal of Victorian womanhood and puts it in the service of empire, because doing so fulfills her desire for authoritative subjectivity (85).

8 Azim is aware that the text constantly thwarts the consistency of Jane’s progress towards selfhood and autonomy (when, for instance, the homeless and destitute Jane, “crawling on [her] hands and knees,” temporarily resembles and even “becomes” the savage and animal Bertha), but she reads these destabilizing moments as “rites of passage” that ultimately secure rather than disrupt the sovereignty of the central narrating subject (178–79).

9 David’s reading of Jane as the “symbolic governess of empire” sees her as unproblematically reproducing middle class ideology and values. She thus ignores Poovey’s important contention that while the middle classes were indeed counting on the governess to affirm and maintain their class values, her status as a “border case” not only produced anxiety but also contested the evenness of Victorian gender ideology.

10 Like Azim, Sharpe complicates Spivak’s contention that the discourse of feminist individualism excludes the “native female” by arguing that the subjectivities of the subaltern women actually constitute the very condition of possibility for the establishment of the English subject.

11 See Anderson, who examines the progressive potential of forms of cultivated and critical distance in Victorian culture. Anderson challenges in so doing
Foucauldian readings such as Armstrong’s, which only recognize the violent and alienating effects of practices of detachment.

Although slave revolts had been part of the Caribbean political landscape since the end of the seventeenth century, they augmented in frequency and violence on all the British islands after 1800 and were finally responsible for bringing slavery to an end: the march on the government house in Tobago (1807), the second Maroon War in Dominica (1809–1814), Bussa’s rebellion in Barbados (1816), the 1st West Indian Regiment Mutinies in Trinidad (1837), the 2nd West Indian Regiment Mutiny (1808) and the famous Baptist War (last days of 1831) in Jamaica involved thousands of slaves who sought to destroy the slave plantations and kill their masters. See Rogozinski 157–61.

As Sharpe points out, “[a]lthough Jane identifies the master/slave relation as Roman, the idea of a revolted slave had to come from a more recent past” (39), namely from the memory of the slave insurrections in the West Indies.

In fact, after the Jamaican “Baptist War,” the biggest best organized rebellion of Creole slaves in the history of the Anglophone Caribbean, infuriated whites destroyed the chapels of Methodist and Baptist ministers because they held them directly responsible for the insurrection (Parry et al. 158–60).

Williams argues that modern slavery (in European colonies) was originally a function of economic profitability and not of racism. Stereotypes such as the belief in the inherent inferiority of blacks “were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labour because it was cheapest and the best. This was not a theory, it was a practical conclusion deduced from the personal experience of the planter” (20). Morgan corroborates Williams’s thesis but adds that the planters actually fostered race prejudice among the white lower classes in order to prevent any potentially dangerous alliance between the two groups (330–31). For historians who question the idea that race prejudice was the result rather than the cause of slavery, see Degler and Hoetnick. My own position is closer to Green’s for whom the fact that black slavery emerged for economic reasons far from precludes the prior existence of racism.

Historians disagree about the basis of the antislavery movement’s success. According to Williams, abolition only took place because the economic significance of the West Indian colonies had declined to the point of making the West Indian slave system dispensable to the British metropole (also see Parry et al. 56). This argument challenged most Anglo-American historical studies of abolitionism, which typically emphasized British altruism and humanitarianism as the source of emancipation. For proponents of this view, see Klingberg and Gay. More recently, some historians have occupied a middle-ground between these two views: they argue that emancipation not only failed to undo the basic structure of relations of production but that it also contributed to the transformation of British rule from physical coercion to a “moral imperium” which allowed the British to “celebrate
concessions made to humanity as evidence of moral superiority, and therefore as proof of the justice of their rule” (Richardson 184; see also Smith 93).

17 See, for instance, the 1824 tract *The Rights of Man (Not Paines) But the Rights of Man in the West Indies*:

Nothing can be more evident than, that, if the slave-master will rule his slave by the law of power,—(which must ever be the case where slavery exists, for no man is a slave willingly,) the Slave has a right to make use of the law of power in return. . . . Unprotected, then, as the Slave is by law;—upon the principles of natural right and justice, the allegiance he owes to the law, is nothing. . . . as long as his present state continues, the Slave has a right to rebel;—no moral guilt whatever, that I see, can possibly attach to him, for attempting to assert what is the universal birthright of mankind. (qtd in Sharpe 41)

18 One white and 50 slaves were killed during the 1816 revolt in Barbados, and 214 slaves were executed after the uprising was defeated. The Baptist War in Jamaica led to 14 white and 540 slave deaths (Rogozinski 183–84). The West Indian planters actually saw these slave uprisings as “an opportunity of embarrassing the mother country and the humanitarians,” who favored abolition (207).

19 In 1845, the Lunatics Act was passed and established the principle that the community had a duty to provide care for the insane.

20 Indeed, Jane’s moments of fierce indignation alternate with times when her “habitual mood of humiliation, self-doubt, forlorn depression” (13) takes over: “All said I was wicked, and perhaps I might be so” (13); “Bessie . . . proved beyond a doubt that I was the most wicked and abandoned child ever reared under a roof. I half believed her” (23). Jane’s last altercation with Mrs. Reed gives her an incredible sense of exultation and freedom but is immediately followed by “the pang of remorse and the chill of reaction” (32). One hour later, however, Bessie notices her “new way of talking” and unusually “venturesome and hardy” demeanor, and Jane deems it better not to divulge the source of this welcome change, namely her earlier confrontation of and victory over Mrs. Reed (34). This oscillation between rebellion and convention, coupled with Jane’s self-avowed recognition of her inability to effectively convey her emotions, works to make us sympathize with a “heterogeneous thing” whose perspective vacillates and who has no clear notion of herself.

21 See Gilbert and Gubar’s important essay for an elaboration of the parallels between the two women.

22 According to Kamel, even Rochester’s repugnance to Bertha’s foul language, cursing, and “wolfish cries” can be associated to the colonist’s fear of rebellion, since black women in Barbados for instance resorted to cursing to incite revolts before Emancipation (16).

23 Donaldson similarly argues, “[Bertha’s] insistence upon the physical destruction of both Thornfield and herself constitutes an act of resistance not only to her sta-
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tus as a woman in a patriarchal culture but also as a colonized object” (76). For Perera, like for Spivak, Bertha’s death constitutes a denial of her subjectivity.

24 Equiano’s memoirs, for instance, document that the slave traders watched their African prisoners very closely “lest [they] should leap into the water” and whipped them hourly for not eating (34). Captain Phillips, a slave trader, reported that “[Whydaw slaves] often leap’d out of the canoes, boat and ship, and kept under water till they were drowned to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats” (qtd in Ferguson 243–44). According to Gilroy, slave suicide constituted a major challenge to one of the central categories of modern Western thought, namely the Hegelian master/slave dialectic of intersubjective dependency and recognition. While in Hegel’s scheme, this rational logic dictates that the slave will choose the master’s version of reality over death, slave narratives repeatedly depict death as preferable to bondage.

25 Slavery was extremely unpopular in England in the 1840s. Brontë herself was a strong supporter of abolition which, in 1848, she called “a glorious deed” (Wise and Symington 198). Thus, despite the playfulness of her exchange with Rochester, Jane’s suggestion that he “lay out in expensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash [he] seem[s] at a loss to spend” can only be meant to castigate him. Tellingly, Rochester is not in the least piqued by the implication that he too is a “slave-driver.” To him, the problem with “buying slaves” is not the act of buying fellow human beings but the fact that one has then to mix with “inferiors.” Considering the time in which the novel is set, Rochester was probably a slave-owner during his stay in Jamaica.

26 It is significant that the moment she proclaims her equality to Rochester also marks the turning point at which she starts to increasingly subordinate her feelings to moral and social conventions, keeping a proper distance from her “Master.”

27 See my book, Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism, for an elaboration of this point.

28 See for instance Heilman who foregrounds Brontë’s skill at both using and modifying the conventions of fictional art such as the traditional Gothic. Bodenheimer also argues that the narrative of *Jane Eyre* continually summons conventional and melodramatic plotlines in order to undercut them and highlight its own originality (162–65). According to Baer, Brontë radically revises the Cinderella story through her introduction of Bertha Rochester’s character (132). See Tromly for a discussion of the ways in which Brontë reworked the autobiographical genre in her “thrice-told tales” (14).

29 See Kucich who similarly foregrounds the instability of binary oppositions such as desire and reserve in Charlotte Brontë’s work. He argues that for her, “desire is engendered by means of reserve rather than despite it” and “articulates itself by collapsing the distinction between expressed passion and reserve, making these gestures parallel, sometimes interchangeable modes of self-extension” (68).

27
30 Sarah Ellis, Brontë's contemporary, popularized the concept of “feminine influence” in her book *Women’s Mission* (1839), where women's submission to men is recast as a form of power, namely the power of morally reforming men. According to David, for instance, Jane Eyre ultimately abides by this doctrine: “[Jane's] vocation is to rescue Rochester from his career of materialism and debauchery in a manner that grants her agency in the service of patriarchal rehabilitation” (89). Zonana also argues that Jane “define[s] herself as a Western missionary seeking to redeem not the ‘enslaved’ woman outside the fold of Christianity and Western ideology but the despotic man who has been led astray within it” (593). This reading simply ignores that Rochester's rehabilitation takes place independently of Jane's return: “[he] began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to [his] Maker” (393), at a time when he thinks that she is dead.

31 For elaborations of the ways in which Victorian writers used *The Arabian Nights* to forge stereotypical representations of the Orient, see Kabbani (23–37) and Melman (63–73).

32 Zonana calls “feminist orientalism” a “long tradition of Western feminist writing” that displaces the root of patriarchal oppression onto an Oriental society so that its British readers can investigate women's issues and demands without questioning the Occident’s moral and cultural superiority (593–94).

33 The associations between Brontë's heroine and Sheherazade have constituted the subject of several studies that reveal how extensively *Jane Eyre* is permeated by elements of *The Arabian Nights*: see Jassim Ali’s Sheherazade in England; Stedman’s “The Genesis of the Genii”; and Workman’s “Sheherazade at Thornfield.”

34 This way of representing Jane as if she was not present parallels his relationship with Bertha whose story he also tells several times and whom he only directly addresses (“Bertha!”) right before she jumps to her death.

35 In a related argument, Kreilkamp argues that at a time when fiction writing was increasingly associated with the author's speech and presence, Charlotte Brontë rejected “a model of authorship based on voice and embodied personality in favor of one based on the material [and disembodied] possibilities of print” (332).

36 Lane, one of the most famous translators of the *Nights*, claimed that the interest of the collection was not in the stories themselves but in the “fullness and fidelity with which they describe the characters, manners and customs of the Arabs” (qtd in Melman 66). As Melman points out, however, after Lady Montagu's self-documented peregrinations in the East, the writers of harem literature started to be critical of the use of *The Arabian Nights* as ethnographic source. In 1837, Julia Sophia Pardoe was already criticizing the Western representations of oriental customs for being fantasies rather than the truth:

> There is no intimate knowledge of domestic life, and hence the cause of the tissue of fables which, like those of Scheherazade have created ge-
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nni and enchanters ab ovo usque ad male in every account of the East. The European mind has become so imbued with the ideal of Oriental mysteriousness, mysticism, and magnificence, and it has been so long accustomed to pillow its faith on the marvels and metaphors . . . that it is doubted whether it will willingly cast off its associations, and suffer itself to be undeceived. (qtd in Melman 67)

37 In her book, Anderson discusses this ideal of detachment in relation to Brontë’s Villette.

38 This is particularly salient when the older narrating Jane distances herself from her younger self’s actions and unspoken assumptions.

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Triumphalist versions of globalization often celebrate the possibilities presented by increased mobility and travel in an interconnected world, foregrounding cosmopolitanism, the rise of global cities, and the pathways taken by elite classes of marketable professionals and business entrepreneurs. In the general euphoria of these romanticized visions of present and future reality, the world has become, through an intensification of the time-space compression that is the hallmark of the ‘new globalized world’, a multiply-linked place of mutual benefit, deterritorialized identities, porous borders, hybrid cultures, and mobile capital. The cosmopolitan transnational implied by this paradigm of globalization negotiates deftly between different cultural contexts, languages and selves, and possesses the means to “flexibly” accumulate not only economic capital, but in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, cultural and social capital as well.1 The effects of globalization are far from uniform, of course. The methods of capital accumulation and the related processes of consumption in a globalized world vary significantly for different individuals and groups of people, many of whom are excluded or restricted from participating in certain circuits of exchange depending on the different permutations of gender, class, race, sexuality and nationality which determine access to power and privilege.

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan deploy the term “transnational” to “address the asymmetries of the globalization process” (“Global Identities” 664), and they implicitly underscore the need for self-reflexivity in the use of the term when they examine how transnationalism has been appropriated to mean different things in different contexts.2 Thus they note, for example, how the emphasis on transnational flows in certain subject disciplines tends to neglect critical consideration of “aspects
of modernity that seem fixed or immobile” (664). Indeed, the very language of “flow” itself—an inextricable part of the hegemonic conceptualization of globalization that often promotes ideas of cultural hybridity and economic interconnectedness at the expense of issues about domination and exploitation—requires critical scrutiny. Anna Tsing, for example, has underscored the need for a scholarly yet critical detachment that resists embracing such language and instead interrogates the way such apparent descriptions of the global economic and social landscape are not truthful reality, but rather localized cultural claims and characterizations of the world by particular parties with specific vested interests in notions of globality, the local, and the regional. Questions of travel and mobility are the focus of James Clifford’s influential book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, which looks at precisely the interplay between movement and fixity or the “routes” and “roots” of peoples and cultures. His argument for re-framing culture and cultural identity in terms of a notion of “dwelling-in-travel” is by now relatively familiar. Clifford turns the question of rootedness on its head, seeing it as a function of routes and travel rather than fixity. At the same time, he is careful to make the point about different forms of travel including forced migration and violent displacement by referring to the production of what he calls “discrepant cosmopolitanisms” (36). Clifford is engaged in an attempt to dismantle monolithic meanings of travel and cosmopolitanism by widening the experience and politics of travel and including more subjectivities for serious consideration. But as Pheng Cheah points out, Clifford’s move remains predicated on the assumption that “physical mobility is the basis of emancipatory practice because it generates stasis-disrupting forms of cultural displacement” (297). There are several implications here, not least for the relationship between travel and female subjects as cultural agents, who have long been and still continue to be in many instances defined by a lack of mobility. This is a problem that Anita Desai confronts in her novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, through the figure of her stay-at-home female protagonist, Uma, and the dearth of opportunity the Uma faces in terms of formal education, travel, and economic independence. The novel underscores the fact that questions about access to mobility and consump-
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tion (of food, culture, knowledge and so forth), and how such access varies for gendered subjects in a globalized world, are of critical importance if there is to be any hope at all of addressing the problems of transnational inequality.

In this article, I use the idea of the transnational precisely to evoke notions of disjuncture and disparity in globalization while considering its relationship to, and implications for, literary representation. What are some of the problems and possibilities involved in representing or narrativizing a transnational world, which is experienced differently by gendered subjects? If, for example, it is easy to see how the traveling subject who leaves home and develops through movement and encounters with other cultures is full of narrative potential, how then might stasis, restricted consumption, arrested development, and the subjectivity of the one who has no access to mobility be represented? What are some of the limits to, and not just the possibilities of, cultural knowledge and identity faced by the global traveling subject? I filter these questions through a specific lens—Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*—and consider how she presents the configuration of gendered subjectivities in and through different forms of travel and consumption (both literal and metaphorical) to convey in the process the inequalities, contradictions, ruptures, synchronicities, connections, and epiphanies of a multi-textured transnational world.

In the novel, Desai juxtaposes the life of the plain and ageing Uma in provincial India with the experiences of her younger brother Arun, an undergraduate in the United States, who spends his summer vacation with the American Patton family. At first blush, the sense of a dichotomous society between those who are allowed to accumulate cultural and social capital and those who are not is overwhelmingly obvious. Uma is made to abandon her convent education so that she can help take care of Arun, the long awaited son, as he is carefully groomed for a bright future. In the United States, Arun sees how the Patton family lives in a consumerist land of plenty that is so remote from the concerns of his family in India. The difference between living in India and living in the United States is, on an obvious level, the fasting and feasting alluded to in the novel’s title. But more than a static depiction and compari-
Angelia Poon

son of oppression and opportunity, Third World and First, I argue that Desai’s novel explores instead the narrative possibilities for representing the rhythms of a transnational world—the circuits of exchange, patterns of consumption, and life trajectories that bespeak the dynamic concatenation of ideological forces determining the material conditions of transnational inequality. Desai’s novel underscores the dialectical relationship between fasting and feasting or the entangled politics of gender and cultural inequality, and shows at times how parasitically or symbiotically subjects are placed in relation to each other. In the process, she raises questions about the possible locations for individual agency. At the same time, she shows us how gendered subjects are caught up in the momentum of larger social processes beyond their control. She also discloses how their bodies register resistance in unconscious yet symbolically telling ways. Thus Uma, assured of a lifetime of confinement in her parental home, nevertheless manages to experience a liberation from her body when she is overtaken by periodic fits and fainting spells which non-verbally express her protest against the oppressiveness of her family and her victimization by patriarchal Indian society. This means of escaping the self may indeed be seen as her own particular and distinctive form of travel. In contrast to Uma, Arun, as the only son in the family, is given the twin privileges of a formal education and the best physical nourishment. Ironically, such preferential treatment results only in his weariness and alienation. Having being pampered and raised on a strict diet from a young age, Arun’s rebelliousness is encoded in his vegetarianism, which stands in the novel as a form of passive self-assertion against the meat-eating version of hypermasculinity extolled by his father and the male members of the Patton family in the United States.

Through its textual politics Desai’s novel ultimately refuses to endorse a vision of cultural hybridity, or the kind of seamless, eclectic, and joyous blending of cultures and identities that often glosses over power relations and inequities. Instead, the text remains acutely aware of the divisions and distance that are as a result of the uneven processes of travel, capital accumulation, and consumption. The structural logic of the text, which straddles two societies, tends towards transposition and translation instead of amalgamation. Even when parallels and
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similarities between characters and situations are offered, these tend to underscore separation rather than convergence. Thus, rather than interspersing Uma’s story with Arun’s narrative or splicing both stories, Desai realizes her insistence on an unequal world by literally dividing her novel into two parts. This bifurcated and bifocal narrative structure, part of the novel’s transnational politics, shows us two fairly circumscribed worlds where there is little room for border-crossing, seepage, and hybrid identities. The novel eschews a totally linear style of narration: in the first part, the narrative shuttles back and forth in time between events in family history and Uma’s life in the present while the second part of the novel focuses on Arun’s time in the United States as he experiences it concurrently with his sister’s life in India. The attempt to capture simultaneity and coevality, in order to suggest disjunction as well as possible connections between gendered subjects and different cultures, forms part of Desai’s novelistic vision or what we may call her “imagined world.” The latter term has been used by Arjun Appadurai to refer to “the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe,” and which have the potential to subvert or counter state-sponsored or dominant versions of globalization (51).

In the imagined world that Desai constructs, Uma is denied the familiar trajectory of the protagonist who leaves home for the West and whose physical journey is used to signal initiation into a more complex emotional and cultural modernity or self.5 We see this pattern clearly enough in such recent texts as Monica Ali’s celebrated novel, Brick Lane, where the female protagonist Nazneen is married off to a husband in London and leaves Bangladesh for the underprivileged ethnic enclave of Brick Lane. As a migrant, she begins the sometimes painful and sometimes exhilarating process of settling into her new environment, discovering and empowering herself so that eventual return to the home country is out of the question.6 Here, the female subject’s relationship to movement and travel is scripted in terms of an incremental creation of new knowledge, often sexual and political, as well as liberation from the strictures of home and traditional Bangladeshi society. In contrast, Uma’s story is not the story of intellectual or sexual awakening that travel or a different
positionality excites. Hers, instead, is the story of quotidian stasis and the related question it raises of the possibilities of movement in stasis. In this way, the form of the title, “Fasting, Feasting,” may be seen to reflect the narrative’s disruption of strict linearity and evoke instead other organizational models (of juxtaposition, parallel non-connection, and vicious-cycle causality) with which to view and understand the lives of subjects in a transnational world.

I. Reading *Fasting, Feasting*

By turning her attention to the subjectivity of the one left behind in the first part of *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai returns to a preoccupation that has been a feature of her writing elsewhere. In her earlier novel, *Clear Light of Day*, and even in her well-known short story “Games at Twilight,” Desai explores the plight and pathos of those who have been forgotten. “Games at Twilight” revolves around an ordinary game of hide-and-seek where one of the “hiders” is forgotten by the rest of the children who tire of the game and merrily move on to other forms of diversion. It is a simple story that nevertheless resonates on a more symbolic level to signify the painful loss of innocence and youth. Here, the boy Ravi, faced with the “ignominy of being forgotten,” is crushed by “a terrible sense of his insignificance” (10). In *Clear Light of Day*, the main character Bimla lives on in the family home and looks after her alcoholic aunt and simple-minded brother, while her other brother and sister leave and start families of their own. Bim’s intelligence and independence translate in her old age to an intransigence borne out of a keenly-felt and assiduously-nursed disappointment in her favorite brother, Raja, who has settled in Pakistan. By staying on in the family home, Bim occupies the past as though it is another country. It is only at the end of the novel, when she finally lets go of old grievances, that we see in the clear light of day how her adult life is at once a travesty of her childhood ambition to be a “heroine” and its noble fulfillment.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, heroic self-sacrifice in the form of a refusal to leave is not a choice available to the rather naïve and unschooled Uma. The eldest child in the family, Uma’s subordinate status is unambiguously underlined when she is forced early in the novel to give up her
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convent school education in order to look after the only son in the family. This is necessary to ensure, as Mama puts it, that Arun receives “proper attention” (30). In this way, Uma’s unpaid labour translates directly into cultural capital for Arun, the son who Papa is determined should achieve greatness through earning academic qualifications from a prestigious American university. Forced into a sacrificial role as caregiver, Uma is the one on whom Arun is made to “feast” in a macabre act of consumption that is echoed on different levels in various incidents throughout the novel. Perhaps the most telling evocation of this act of cannibalistic gender discrimination occurs when baby Arun bites Uma’s finger and draws blood as she tries to feed him. When she reminds him of this incident years later, the young Arun, intuitively but not fully grasping the nature of power relations within the family, threatens to tell their parents that she has been illicitly feeding him slices of guava. Uma’s powerlessness and lack of status is signaled in relation to food in other scenes in the novel where we see her—in the manner typical of daughters raised in traditional Indian families—having always to serve food to her father. She passes the food along, but must not partake of it.

As a female, who does not possess the shrewdness and attractiveness of her younger sister Aruna or the feminine perfection of her cousin Anamika, Uma is unable even to move out of the family home through the normal and often sole route available to daughters—marriage. After two failed attempts at arranged marriage, with no husband to show for the effort and only a loss of dowry, Uma’s unmarriageable status is confirmed. She is a burden to her parents without any exchange value, a debt rather than a credit. In stark contrast to Uma, her sister Aruna capitalizes on her looks to make herself an excellent match. Younger, but sharper, Aruna “ripple[s] with an inner momentum” (72) that is absent in Uma. Marriage to the richest and the handsomest of her many suitors takes her out of provincial India and catapults her into the ranks of the urban elite in Bombay, making her seem to Uma “distant and airy” (103). If Aruna’s married life is a whirl of social activity and networking in the rarefied circles of Bombay society, Uma’s life moves to a less frenetic and more mundane beat signaled at the start of the novel by the to-and-fro motion, the “slow, rhythmic swinging” (5) of her parents on
the “creaking sofa-swing” (3) overlooking the garden, moving but not getting anywhere. Aruna’s access to mobility only accentuates Uma’s entrapment within the home as an ageing spinster because she is not even allowed to accept the offer of employment by the local doctor, even after Arun has left home for the United States. Uma’s predicament is also captured symbolically in the novel by her increasing eye problems. Prevented by Papa and Aruna from traveling to Bombay to have her eyes checked by a specialist, Uma’s fast dimming vision mimics the idea of diminished horizons on both a physical and a literal level. Within this context of domestic confinement, Uma’s hobby of collecting Christmas cards and going through them in the privacy of her own room appears particularly poignant. Metonymically, the cards, with their images of snow and reindeer, suggest distant lands and other cultures. They provide Uma with moments of private fantasy and pleasure that are the closest she ever gets to consumption in the novel.

While the respective positions occupied by Uma and Aruna may be seen in terms of a fasting-feasting binary, the novel also presents other mobile characters from whose traveling experiences Uma derives vicarious pleasure, even if their presence only serves to underline by contrast Uma’s entrapment. The visits from her relative Mira-Masi, who travels around the country on nomadic pilgrimages, are especially welcomed because they constitute a break from the monotonous routine of Uma’s life. Freed from a husband, the widowed Mira-Masi is irrepressible and indefatigable in her spiritual journeys, taking advantage of an access to mobility seldom available to single and married women. She had, as the narrator puts it, “an unsettling habit of traveling all over the country, quite alone, safe in her widow’s garments, visiting one place of pilgrimage after another like an obsessed tourist of the spirit” (38). Drawn to Mira-Masi’s stories about Hindu mythology and her restless yet determined wanderings, Uma sees Mira-Masi offering a window to a spiritual world and inner realm, “tantalizing in its colour and romance,” and hungers after it (40). To the rest of her family, Uma and Mira-Masi are nothing more than “partners in mischief” (44). In addition to Mira-Masi, Uma also has an affinity for another wanderer in the family—her cousin Ramu, brother to Anamika. The black sheep of the family with
always a whiff of scandal about him, Ramu is as ugly and disreputable as Anamika is beautiful and good. Physically deformed with a club foot, his difference and unconventional status, and therefore part of his charm for Uma, is further sealed by his restless peregrinations around the country.

Association with Mira-Masi and Ramu allows Uma to irritate if not totally defy her parents. More significantly, the idea of resistance by Uma is figured in the uncontrolled and unconscious reactions of her physical body to key incidents in the text. Thus, instead of throwing a tantrum in protest at merged parental authority signified by the term “MamaPapa” or railing against the injustice that has been done her, she literally goes into fits during which time appears to stand still and consciousness is lost. This happens, for example, when she approaches Mother Agnes in the convent for help in convincing her parents to continue with her education, but is rebuffed instead. The fit that overtakes Uma then also overtakes her at Aruna’s glamorous, pre-wedding cocktail party. Uma’s spectacular collapse at such a “chic” (101) event provokes an angry denunciation from Aruna, now newly afraid of how her sister’s unruly body might disrupt her carefully-planned wedding. In yet another incident where Aruna and her in-laws are present, Uma nearly drowns in the river where they had gone to cleanse themselves as part of a religious ritual. The fleeting near-death experience is liberating, suggestive of all manner of unrestrained possibility: “It was not fear she felt, or danger. Or, rather, these were only what edged something much darker, wilder, more thrilling, a kind of exultation—it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realized” (111). Momentary as they are, these fits and fainting spells are the only means by which Uma gets to transcend her body and situation; they transport her and allow her to travel to another place metaphorically while signaling her resistance against her life and expressing her inchoate and unarticulated, though no less deep, desires.

Powerless as Uma may be to alter anything about her life, she is nevertheless capable, as her unintentional fits show, of providing the odd ironic moment of insight into the inequality of things, often because she herself is not aware of the full import of what she says and thinks. The death of her cousin Anamika is a case in point. As the embodiment
of beauty, intelligence, and goodness, Anamika is the centre of her relatives’ admiration, the ideal feminine standard against which everyone else is measured. Even if she is passive and totally voiceless in the novel, all draw around her in an admiring circle: “She never allowed herself to be pulled into one camp or another; she achieved this equilibrium by simply remaining at the centre, so that everyone had to come to her, attracted to her as bees to a lotus” (68). Anamika’s greatest achievement occurs when she wins a scholarship to Oxford, “[t]o Oxford, where only the most favoured and privileged sons could ever hope to go!” (68). Of course, there is no question of her going. Instead, the letter of acceptance is taken away and used only as part of a marketing strategy to advertise her eligibility as a wife as well as attract suitably educated husbands-to-be. In the end, Anamika enters a terrible arranged marriage and suffers routine abuse at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law before she is finally burnt alive. Her death elicits horror and shock from everyone in the family, including Uma. But more than anything else, Uma is concerned about Anamika’s letter of acceptance into Oxford. As the family grieves over the loss of Anamika, to the mortified consternation of her parents, Uma asks, “The letter—the letter from Oxford—where is it? Did you—did you burn it?” (152). Uma’s outburst, by any account a grave *faux pas*, is nevertheless apt, unintentionally pointing out the object which gave Anamika value in the marriage circuit. Obliquely, the acceptance letter serves as a critique of the way Anamika had been objectified and commodified, only to be literally “devoured” and consumed by twenty-five subsequent years of marriage (134). Yet, Uma’s inappropriate question also foregrounds the fact that the acceptance letter actually offered the possibility of a radically different life. In terms of narrative structure, not withstanding the horrific nature of Anamika’s death, the text makes a link between that tragedy and Uma’s continued survival. As part of performing the last rites for Anamika, “Uma dips her jar in the river, and lifts it high over her head. When she tilts it and pours it out, the murky water catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire” (156). It is a moment that recalls Anamika’s death while at the same time marking a significant departure from it. Just as her cousin was destroyed and consumed by flames, Uma appears awash with fiery water
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in a parallel gesture connotative this time—if only momentarily—of re-
juvenation, renewal, and redemption, rather than death.

The different wasted opportunities that both Anamika and Uma’s lives
represent are cast into relief by the second section of the novel which
deals with Arun as he spends his first summer in the United States.
An undergraduate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Arun
is well on his way to acquiring the educational and social capital that is
his birthright as the only son in the family and for which he had been
primed ever since he was born. But Arun’s experience in America is
more painful than pleasurable. Craving the “total freedom of anonym-
ity” (172) in the new culture into which he has been transplanted and
shunning even his own fellow countrymen, he stands as an observer of,
rather than a participant in an American society running on its own
tribal rhythms and energy. Thus Uma notes with disappointment his
nondescript and bland letters from America, how “thin, [and] without
substance” they are, so much so that he might as well have written and
sent them from the local college hostel than from halfway across the
world (123). In the United States, Arun’s gaze is not the curious, de-
lighted, or all-consuming gaze of the consummate cosmopolitan trave-
ler; the urbane polish of a global citizen of the world, who glides in and
out of different societies is not for him. K. Anthony Appiah implies this
ease of movement and being is implied in his definition of the “cos-
mopolitan spirit” as “the spirit that celebrates and respects difference”
(207). For Appiah, cosmopolitanism is a “dialogic universalism” and
“the image of the cosmopolitan” is one “secure in her difference, but also
open to the difference of others” (215). Instead of experiencing a sense
of openness, however, Arun looks upon the new society before him with
the appalled gaze of increased self-consciousness and a heightened sense
of difference. The sheer excess of American consumerist society and its
material culture is bewildering and disorientating. Obliged to live with
the Patton family when his college dormitory closes for the summer,
he finds himself in a strange yet uncannily familiar environment. He is
cought in the “sugar-sticky web of family conflict” (195) amidst the in-
effectual mothering of Mrs. Patton, the self-destructiveness of a bulim-
ic daughter, Melanie, and the hypermasculinity of Mr. Patton and his
son, Rod. Indeed, Arun is placed in a position not unlike his sister’s in India as he experiences the physical vulnerability of being different which allows him finally to see the pathologized conditions of Uma’s life and those of the Patton women.

In the narrative about Arun, food and the body are repeatedly the symbolic means by which Desai maps the young man’s sense of his own gender and cultural identity. In India, the strict regimen of study imposed on him by his father is a form of forced feeding that has visible physical consequences. Rebelling against the burden of expectation and the coercive methods used on him in the only way possible, Arun grows up thin and weak, with no inclination to play any kind of sport and only “the gait of a broken old man” (119). Above all, though, it is his vegetarianism that constitutes the one visceral disposition and natural habit that no amount of applied force or pressure can alter. His distaste for meat baffles his father. To Papa, “[a] meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brother’s, by their education” (32). Meat, together with cricket and the English language, were “inextricably linked” and signaled, above all else, progress (32). Arun’s refusal of meat amounts to a devaluation of masculine identity, it is an inexplicable atavistic desire “to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life” (33). In the United States, in the land of plenty, Arun’s vegetarianism again surprises and causes anxiety. His diet cuts him off from the red-meat-eating and sports-mad world of Mr. Patton and his son, Rod. There is no question of Arun bonding with Rod, the young man whose phallic name underscores his youthful masculinity and obsession with getting on the football team.

In the Patton household, Arun has no ally except for the kind but clueless Mrs. Patton who enthusiastically turns vegetarian for his sake. As a suburban housewife feeding and caring for her family, Mrs. Patton is the quintessential American consumer. Nervous in the home and around her children and husband, it is only the supermarket, with its “chilled air and controlled atmosphere” and aisle upon aisle of products, that puts Mrs. Patton at ease (183). The act of buying and stocking groceries defines her subject position as wife and mother even though no
one eats what she cooks: “Her joy lay in carrying home this hoard she had won from the maze of the supermarket, storing it away in her kitchen cupboards, her refrigerator and freezer” (184). Arun is forced into unwanted consumption yet again as he becomes Mrs. Patton’s shopping partner and has to eat the food which she thinks all vegetarians eat: “How was he to tell Mrs. Patton that these were not the foods that figured in his culture? That his digestive system did not know how to turn them into nourishment?” (185). Mrs. Patton, with her “bright plastic copy of a mother-smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time,” and her shallow if well-meaning attempt at cultural understanding, cannot feed Arun any more than she can feed her own children (194). The idea of a hollowness at the heart of plenty merely compounds Arun’s feeling of American society as synthetic, unable to offer him anything by way of culture or food which can sustain him: “He had traveled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing—which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised—but the unreal thing—clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment” (185).

This idea of emptiness in feasting finds ultimate embodiment in the damaged figure of the Patton’s bulimic daughter, Melanie. Here, bulimia, with its rhythm of fasting and feasting, can be read as setting up its own momentum which traps the female subject who can only await some external force to break her out of the vicious cycle. Thus Melanie is caught in the violent and lurching rhythm of her own gorging and purging, the pain of which only Arun realizes and recognizes. When he sees her in the agonizing throes of vomiting, he realizes that “[t]his is no plastic mock-up, no cartoon representation such as he has been seeing all summer; this is a real pain and a real hunger” (224). In Melanie, Arun sees an image of his sister, Uma:

Then Arun does see a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being.
and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty. (214)

Uma’s spiritual, intellectual, and emotional starvation finds its physical counterpart in the inexpressible hunger underlying Melanie’s eating disorder. This is Arun’s epiphany and the one tangible link between two different worlds and two different subjects.

The novel ends on a suspended note, with an image of generosity and gratitude before departure and separation. As a parting gesture and by way of thanks, Arun gives Mrs. Patton the tea and shawl his family had sent him, the very same items we are told Uma was packing at the start of the novel. Arun places the shawl around Mrs. Patton’s shoulders and the narrator observes, “An aroma rises from it, of another land: muddy, grassy, smoky, ashen. It swamps him, like a river, or like a fire” (227). This moment recalls somewhat poignantly the ending of Uma’s narrative and her symbolic renewal in the river. In terms of narrative structure, we have come full circle since these objects bookend the text. But instead of totalizing closure, we get a sense that this is a temporary pause, a transitory moment of equilibrium in a transnational world marked by rupture, shifting alliances and connections amid gender and cultural asymmetries, before lives move on again, sometimes coasting on their own momentum, sometimes lurching forward, and sometimes, moving but not getting anywhere. Through her use of symbolism, metaphor and narrative structure, Desai’s Fasting, Feasting sets forth into circulation and competition with other imaginative worlds in a larger public discourse its own set of images and ideas about the extent of connectedness possible and impossible in a transnational world.

Notes
1 The idea of flexibility, like that of flow, implies a certain fluidity and is used to characterize the ways in which certain groups of people take advantage of increased travel opportunities and informational networks to transcend or maneuver between the territorial demands of nation-states in a globalized world. Ong, for example, uses the term “flexible citizenship” to describe the status and practices of Chinese transnationals who bank on international and often historical
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networks of diasporic capital and business links to forge a modernity moving between, above, and through the disciplinary structures of specific nation-states. See Ong and Nonini.

2 Grewal and Kaplan write, “Transnational is a term that signals attention to uneven and dissimilar circuits of culture and capital” ("Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices" 2). See also Grewal, Gupta and Ong.

3 See, for example, Bartolovich.

4 Tsing elaborates, “In the imagery with which I began, flow is valorized but not the carving of the channel; national and regional units are mapped as the baseline of change without attention to their shifting and contested ability to define the landscape. We lose sight of the coalitions of claimants as well as their partial and shifting claims. We lose touch with the material and institutional components through which powerful and central sites are constructed, from which convincing claims about units and scales can be made. We describe the landscape imagined within these claims rather than the culture and politics of scale making” (108).

5 See Grewal and Kaplan, Scattered Hegemonies, for a critique of binary oppositions like centre and periphery and global and local which characterize world-system theory and discourse about globalization respectively (9–17).

6 Ali’s novel was published in 2003 and generated considerable controversy because of its portrayal of the Bangladeshi community in London. For a sense of its reception and a reading of the novel that emphasizes its self-reflexiveness as a literary text, see Hiddleston.

Works Cited


Angelia Poon

Let me draw you a little map.

So begins Thea Astley’s short story sequence *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, and so begins this exploration of Astley’s text, in which I will endeavor to draw a “little map” of the “politics and ideology” (Soja 6) encoded within such an apparently straightforward proposition, and to follow its implications through the interrelated stories. In appropriating Astley’s—and her narrator’s—opening sentence, I intend to foreground my own position as a mapmaker as well as a mapreader, and to locate a productive point of entry from which to begin charting this literary-cartographic terrain.

An initial reading of the sentence “Let me draw you a little map” might suggest that an imminent moment of cartographic representation is to follow, one that draws an implicit parallel between the act of mapmaking and that of storytelling (and here, by extension, to the act of literary criticism). Indeed, the map does evidently serve as a metaphor for the tale that is told in the first story of this sequence, “North: Some Compass Readings: Eden,” as well as in the stories that follow. When discussing Astley’s text in *Territorial Disputes: Maps and Mapping Strategies in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction*, Graham Huggan focuses on this very association between mapmaking and storytelling. He argues that “Astley ridicules the map as a simulacrum of truth. In a collection which, as its narrator suggests, presents life as ‘an unending accretion of alternatives,’ maps are not arbiters of truth at all but rather metaphors of fabrication, of the multiple variations of the storyteller” (64). He goes on to claim that, “mapmaking, the means by which one person persuades another to believe in the reality of what she/he is seeing, thus becomes the ironic metaphor for the illusionism of the
storyteller’s art” (65). While both convincing and plausible, Huggan’s argument rests upon a tacit assumption (made explicit elsewhere in his text) that maps function simply as systems of representation and as tools of persuasion or control that profess to offer a mimetic transcription of “reality,” and that as such, they may be used as “paradigms for an investigation of the procedures—and of the ontological and epistemological problems—of mimesis” (31). Such an assumption about the nature of maps restricts a reading of Astley’s sentence, “Let me draw you a little map,” both within the story where it appears and within the entire story sequence to the drawing of a parallel between two systems of representation: cartographic and literary. However, I will argue that Astley’s complex deployment of the map topos in Hunting the Wild Pineapple in fact goes far beyond the limits of what such a premise would allow. By focusing exclusively on the map as an (ironic) metaphor—of fabrication, illusionism, and disorientation—within Astley’s text, Huggan completely bypasses the question of what Astley and her narrator, Keith Leverson, are actually mapping, and thus overlooks how the map functions as a particular structural paradigm that is reiterated upon multiple levels of meaning in Hunting the Wild Pineapple.

What, then, is being mapped in these stories? If, as I suggest, Astley’s maps serve as more than mere metaphors of the telling of the tales, then what exactly is the function of the map topos within this short story sequence? And why does it matter to our reading of this text, and to our reading of the world that exists beyond the borders of these stories?

Let me draw you a little map.

I. Laying the Groundwork: Astley and Literary Cartography

By way of entering into a consideration of what Astley and her narrator are attempting to map in Hunting the Wild Pineapple, I would like to address the more general question of how a map can be defined, and how it actually functions as a structural paradigm as well as a system of representation. One definition of the word “map” in the Oxford English Dictionary not strictly limited to the delineation of physical geography, describes the map as a “diagram representing the spatial distribution of anything or the relative positions of its components.” The map then, not
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only concerns the mimetic transcription of “reality,” nor merely the arts of persuasion and control (although these are unquestionably essential aspects of cartography), but also the organization of objects in space and of their relative positions within that space. This stress on spatiality is, I would argue, very significant for a reading of Astley’s text. As Richard Phillips succinctly notes, “Maps may be spatial, visual, graphic representations, but the information they represent must be spatial” (14).

In his exploration of adventure stories and their connection to colonialism, cartography and empire, Phillips argues that like “other modern maps, realistic adventure stories naturalise the geographies they represent, and normalize the constructions of race, gender, class and empire those geographies inscribe” (15). The notion of normalization is a crucial one in Astley’s deployment of the map topos within *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, in that both she and her narrator attempt to map not only the relative positions of objects within space (whether physical, social, linguistic, or textual space), but also how these relative positions are normalized and normatively coded in terms of relations of power. Indeed, one answer to the question of what is being mapped in this sequence of stories may be found in the seemingly straightforward sentence that begins *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (and which I have appropriated): “Let me draw you a little map.”

Far more than indicating a parallel between mapmaking and storytelling, this sentence reflects, at the semantic and grammatical level, that which is being plotted upon multiple registers in this text. As well, it serves to reveal Astley’s conscious and careful attention to her choice of words, and her awareness of how they act as signifiers of intent and meaning. For instance, the adjective “little” that modifies the noun “map” in the sentence is a relative term that describes an object in relation to what is larger or “greater” than itself. The word can also be a spatial term in that it denotes the dimensions that an object takes within space. Yet “little” is spatial in the sense that through its normative coding, or ideological connotations of triviality, insignificance, inferiority and subordination (connotations that Astley and her narrator successfully subvert in their drawing of maps), what is “little” is often hierarchically and vertically positioned below objects deemed to be larger or greater.
Hence spatial positioning and normative coding are conjoined through the choice and ideological freight of words.

The verb “draw” and the proposition “let me draw you” in the opening sentence of this story sequence are also crucial to a close reading of this sentence in that they map a particular relation of power, or normative and spatial positioning—that which exists between the mapmaker and the mapreader. In a more general examination of the principles of literary cartography Huggan perceptively observes that, “maps constitute an often complex set of transactions between mapmaker and mapreader” (*Territorial* 3–4). The map “is both product and process: it represents both an encoded document of a specific environment and a network of perpetually recoded messages passing between the various mapmakers and mapreaders who participate in the event of cartographic communication” (4). In referring to the drawing of a “little map,” rather than to the map as a complete and closed document, Astley focuses attention on the process of mapmaking, and thus foregrounds not only the subjective nature of the map that is drawn—what Leverson refers to as the visibility rather than the seeming invisibility of the mapmaker within the representational space of the map—but also draws attention to the map as “a discourse of traveling” (Carter 71). That is, as Leverson draws his “little maps,” Astley emphasizes what Paul Carter, in *The Road to Botany Bay*, refers to as the traces of the encounter; traces that must inevitably involve the mapreader as well as the mapmaker (23). This mutually constitutive aspect of the process of mapmaking is further underscored by the proposition “Let me draw you a little map,” in that the word “let” implies that the reader holds the power to either allow or disallow the cartographic process, while it is the narrator, in “draw you a little map” who seems to be relationally placed in a position of power and who appears to possess the ultimate power of bringing this map into being.

Within this opening sentence of *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, and elsewhere in the text, Astley maps the inherently unresolved and dynamic processes involved in the relative positioning of objects within space, and illuminates how these positions are normatively coded and normalized in terms of “inherent categorical privilege” (Soja 11). In this sense, charting the “event of cartographic communication” involves mapping
the ways in which the complex set of transactions that occur between
the mapmaker and mapreader positions one hierarchically according
to relative power and normatively in terms of inclusion and exclusion.
More than a metaphor of the act of storytelling, the map thus functions
as a spatial paradigm in this short story sequence. The map functions
as a structure of organization that draws attention to the relativity of
objects in space, and to the way in which the spatial positioning of ob-
jects within various demarcations of space is imbricated in the politics
of power.

II. Some Compass Readings: “North: Some Compass Readings: Eden”
In his study of the metaphors of form in Katherine Mansfield’s short fic-
tion, W.H. New argues that, “the choice of verbal form—the language
of literary structure—is inevitably a strategy of communication,” and
the “word strategy, moreover, implies a deliberate intent to shape reac-
tions and responses” (66). While critics of Astley’s fiction have often
been exasperated by her “poetic style” (Milnes 255), reviewers havenev-
ertheless acknowledged her conscious deliberation over the choice and
placement of words, or what Robert L. Ross, in “Thea Astley’s Long
Struggle with the Language of Fiction,” refers to as her “finely tuned
prose” (505). Astley’s deliberate strategy when choosing words, cast by
Ross as an epic struggle with language, can be seen in New’s terms as
a “strategy of communication” that is linked to what is being mapped
by Astley more generally in this sequence of short stories. In order to
illustrate my argument, and to provide a point from which to further
maneuver through this literary-cartographic terrain, I will consider the
opening paragraphs of the first story of Hunting the Wild Pineapple, en-
titled “North: Some Compass Readings: Eden”:

Let me draw you a little map.
Take a patch of coastline and its hinterland, put it north of
twenty and one hundred and forty-six east, make it hot and
wet and sprinkle it with people who feel they’ve been forgotten
by the rest of the country—and don’t really care. Where there
aren’t hills and unswimmable water, plant cane. There’s this lar-
gish place called Reeftown on the coast and in the purple hills behind there are smaller towns that grow tobacco and maize and stories that ripen and wither and repeat themselves as cautions against being human. Human! Ah! There’s the rub! It’s not the dreaming that matters, as the poet man insisted. He couldn’t have been more wrong. It’s the reality that rubs. And rubs. And rubs.

Everything is very green here. Very blue and very green, and the depth of its coloration whacks out this response, not only from me but from the rest of us, who, having chosen, ripen and wither and repeat ourselves in stories. Which are re-lived by others. Over. Over. Maybe it’s only a second-rate Eden with its rain-forest and waterfalls, its mountain-climbing burrower of a railway and sea-bitten rind of coast—a kind of limbo for those who’ve lost direction and have pitched a last-stand tent.

Take me.

Let me draw you a little map. (3)

One is immediately struck by the rhetorical reiteration of imperatives: the reader is told to “Take a patch of coastline and its hinterland,” to “put it north of twenty and one hundred and forty-six east,” to “make it hot and wet,” and to “sprinkle it with people.” This series of imperatives exists in tension with the framing propositions “Let me draw you a little map,” which seems to accord the reader a certain amount of power in the cartographic process. Indeed, one element that is being mapped in these sentences, and in the text beyond this passage, is the tension between imperatives, through which one claims ultimate authority, and propositions, which, in contrast, serve to destabilize that authority. In its rhetorical interplay, this passage foregrounds the relations of power between the mapmaker and the mapreader, and the mutually constitutive “event of cartographic communication.” The story begins, as I have stated, with a proposition that itself encodes a dynamics of power between the mapreader (“let me”) and the mapmaker (“draw you”). Similarly, while formulating his series of imperative demands, the narrator appears to be in control of the mapmaking process. He exerts power
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and hierarchically positions himself above the reader who is then placed outside, or excluded from, this process. The nature of these commands is critical in that the reader is actually being told to position various objects within imaginative space. That is, the mapreader is being invited to participate in the cartographic process, and is thus given the power to either comply with, or deny, the mapmaker’s imperatives. The map to be drawn is far from closed, but is itself structured according to a set of unresolved relations coded in terms of normative positions of power.

At a broader level, this dynamic between imperatives and propositions, with its concern over questions of authority, extends beyond the particular relations between the mapmaker and mapreader to the relative positions of objects within space. Within the linguistic and rhetorical space of the sentence and paragraph, the tension between opposing conceptions of the structure of authority, whether in terms of a vertical hierarchy or a horizontal plane, can be seen in the tension between coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. While coordinating conjunctions connect words, phrases, and clauses of equal value, subordinating conjunctions indicate a relationship of unequal elements, or a grammatical relation of dependence. In the opening passage cited above, individual sentences may contain both coordination and subordination within their structure, as for instance, in the sentence: “Very blue and very green, and the depth of its coloration whacks out this response, not only from me, but from the rest of us, who, having chosen, ripen and wither and repeat ourselves in stories” (3). Moreover, this dynamic pattern may be expressed in the juxtaposition of various sentences—thus the sentence, “There’s this largish place called Reeftown on the coast and in the purple hills behind there are smaller towns that grow tobacco and maize and stories that ripen and wither and repeat themselves as cautions against being human,” is offset by the later line “It’s not the dreaming that matters, as the poet man insisted” (3). From the very outset of these stories then, Astley is drawing our attention to how the spatial organization of words, clauses and sentences is far from neutral or arbitrary. Rather, it encodes varying claims of authority, and betrays a politics of power that is constructed normatively in terms of equality or inequality, or subordination and domination. The rhetorical pattern that
I have outlined as a tension between coordinate and subordinate conjunctions, and more generally as a contention between imperatives and propositions, is, as I will now attempt to demonstrate, further mapped by Astley and her narrator within the terrains of social, linguistic, and textual space in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*.

**III. Mapmaking and the Normative Coding of Spatial Relations**

My argument is progressing outwards from narrower to broader levels of signification within various demarcations of space: from an exploration of the organization of objects within the space of the sentence to that of the paragraph, and now to a consideration of various stories within this story sequence. However, at the same time that I spatially extend my line of inquiry, I would also like to simultaneously reverse this development, focusing first on the more general mapping of the normative coding of spatial relations within Astley’s text, and then concluding with a consideration of the more particular instance of spatial patterning that is mapped in the relations between the mapmaker and mapreader.

Insofar as maps are diagrams that represent the organization of objects within space, they are also tools for orientation, and serve to provide a sense of where objects are located in order to allow for a successful maneuvering within that space. While *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* begins with a depiction of physical geography, describing an area of northern Australia, the end of the short story does not leave the reader with a very clear picture of where various towns are physically situated in relation to each other. However, we are left with a definite sense of where and how various characters are positioned spatially in relation to others, specifically in terms of power.

One story that particularly foregrounds the relative positions of characters within social space is “Ladies Need Only Apply.” Here, the tale that is told is framed by LeVerson’s voice: his friend Tripp tells him of Leo, who is “holed up about fifty miles from here” (111). Tripp draws LeVerson a map, and LeVerson in turn draws it for us. Introduced to the characters Leo and Sadie, or Miss Klein, we are told that, “there were the two of them, no denying it, hanging perilously together on an escarpment in the range of his dinge of a shack whose walls he had
pansied with arrogant arrangements of dried fan-palm frond” (114). While the story begins with these two characters seemingly located on the same horizontal plane, both hanging together on this escarpment in an isolated area of northern Queensland, the story centers on a series of intentional spatial maneuverings, a succession of attempts to gain the “upper hand” or position of social dominance, whether through language or physical positioning. For instance, when Leo leaves Sadie to open her side of the car door, he walks away from her indifferently and stands by his shack waiting, “(‘Tapping his bloody foot!’ she would tell them later), a meaty bulk of a man, cross-hatched by stratagems of light and shadow that made the him of the fellow even more elusive” (122). When Leo later offers a mocking response to her question of what he does to protect his material possessions, we are told that “The more he out-maneuvered her, the more the dislike settled in, became familiar” (123). Their dialogue is also set up as a kind of chess game, where he opens with “king’s pawn,” discussing “his private theories, his dogmatisms, unapologetic and absorbed” (124). The battle waged between these two characters continues throughout the story, and it is interesting that Sadie’s understanding of her own wish for sexual dominance is described in cartographic terminology. Readers are told that, “The tropic blaze, of course, did not diminish, and the week or so of trial she had secretly allowed herself for laughs extended as she discovered he was tolerable simply as a present chunk of male whose remoter coastline she found herself wanting to chart” (127). As the story progresses, however, it becomes more and more apparent that Sadie is on the losing side of their battle, and is ultimately out-maneuvered by Leo’s “geographic cunning” (132). Leo stations Sadie in positions where she will be made aware of his relationship with Flute, his music student; in fact, she is positioned to work in the garden below the window of a larger shack from which she hears them “working at pleasure of another kind” (132).

Shirley Ardener argues that societies have generated their own rules, culturally determined, for making boundaries on the ground, and have divided the social into spheres, levels and territories with invisible fences and plat-
forms to be scaled by abstract ladders and crossed by intangible bridges with as much trepidation or exultation as on a plank over a raging torrent. (Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps 11–12)

In “Ladies Need Only Apply,” Sadie literally does cross a raging torrent, in the very last and incredibly physical and spatially choreographed scene:

One step and she was in to her waist, and then the current grabbed her and flung her towards the bridge. In a minute she had crashed against it and felt the skin above her ribs rip as she hung there just keeping her head gruntingly above water. Inch after inch, using the logs as lever she shoved her way through a force that delighted her perversely until pummeled, gulping, under the slamming drench of rain, she was snatching at slimy weeds on the far slope, grasping, slipping, losing, dragging, and at last hauling herself through mud and banana ooze onto higher ground. (143)

Sadie, however, is not advancing past a restrictive social boundary in order to contest that line of demarcation, but rather crawls up the steps of Leo’s house until she is at his feet on all fours, completely accepting a subordinate and dominated position within this vertical relation of power. In this story, as elsewhere in the text, Astley draws our attention to how human interactions are normatively coded according to relations of power—that is, how the spatial terms “above” and “below” are not neutral signs, but become markers of dominance and subordination within social space, with the person above. In this case that person is Leo, who holds the power of either performing or refusing to perform the act of inclusion or exclusion. It is Leo who is able to open the door and permit Sadie, positioned below him on all fours, “in” through the door, by uttering the phrase “Come on in” (115). As well as the spatial relations between people, this story also underscores the importance of the spatial organization of words in a sentence, within textual or linguistic space. While I have examined the manner in
which Astley’s choice of words in the sentence “Let me draw you a little map” serves as a system of communication, Astley herself emphasizes how the organization of words is of enormous importance in signifying intent and meaning. The difference between “Genuine ladies need only apply,” which suggests inclusion, and “Only genuine ladies need apply,” which is restrictive and establishes rules of exclusion, is not a superficial one, as Sadie first believes. Upon encountering this supposedly “misplaced adverb,” Sadie nuzzles “her face into her arm in a self-mocking attempt to stifle her mirth” (116). However, the choice of the adverb betrays a structure of power within linguistic space that carries implications within social space as well. This story is ultimately concerned with the question of subordination, and with the failure of coordination, as well as with how the manipulation of the sequence and order of words in a sentence is, like the organization of people in space, not neutral, but laden with significance.

Another aspect of Astley’s (and her narrator’s) mapping of social space in this short story sequence is the mapping of what Leverson refers to as “human geography” in the title story “Hunting the Wild Pineapple.” Leverson notes that “Mrs. Crystal Bellamy, a calmly widowed South Georgian,” who has set up a base at his bed-and-breakfast, is “impossibly researching the human geography of the north for a nonsense thesis” (64). A distinct and prominent area of study within the discipline of geography, human geography investigates location, environment, and the arrangement of human activities within space, or the significance of human settlement and activities. This field encompasses subjects such as demographics, migration, diaspora, the distribution of resources, ethnicity, land settlement and agriculture, political geography, and regionalism. Hence, when Leverson drives Mrs. Bellamy about in “a kind of tour-captain fever,” they visit “lakes, craters, dams, limestone caves, ghost towns, abandoned mining camps, mission settlements, crocodile farms, hippie communes, sugar mills, prawn fleets, rich American marlin fishers, tin fossickers” (65). Leverson claims, “We ranged north, south, west, and as far as weather would allow us, east” (65). While Leverson describes the mapping of the human geography of the north as an impossibility, he himself is engaged to some extent in the same
Jacqueline Shin

process as he draws his “little maps,” charts patterns of migration to the coast, of “the mercurial, spontaneous and apparently directionless surges to north and east; a lively fusion, a parting,” and describes the hippie communes and the land settlement patterns of the “middle-class struggling back towards the slums and serfdoms out of which they struggled over the last two hundred years” (64):

The old nostalgie de la boue. In cities they're buying up depressed terrace areas faster than you can blink. A true craving to get back to their economic womb. They’re the new urban trendies, so sadly conformist that they are turning their new elysiums into a bedraggled transcription of the suburbia they have been trying to escape. And these ones. They’re crawling back to the good earth in their hunt for feudal share-cropping, buying up their starveling five-, ten-, twenty-acre blocks, living with a roof, a tamped earth floor and hessian sides. (19)

The concepts referred to in this passage—those of the suburban and urban, of the region as opposed to the city—are also significant to a consideration of social space in that such designations are often normatively coded in terms of power and serve to delineate who or what is to be included or excluded, considered central or marginal. While this group of stories is set in a geographically peripheral location in relation to the “rest of the country” (3), Leverson’s insistence that this “is the place where anything screwball is normal and often where what is normal is horrible” (161) performs a process of reversing the terms of normative spatial coding, insisting upon a new center that is situated in this geographical margin.

Another intriguing spatial relation mapped in these stories is the one that exists between human beings and the environment. While colonial history is often constructed in terms of settlers and communities taming the land and civilizing it, within Astley’s stories the landscape seems to become a separate and tyrannical character who certainly dominates the others in the text through torrential rain and extreme heat, swallowing all traces of human settlement so that “Nothing’s changed,” and that the land Captain Cook—the “flying Dutchman of an Endeavour
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caracol[ing] across the scrolls of reef water”—saw is no different from the land seen by Levenson (14–15). However, because of limitations of space, I will merely point out these elements of “human geography” and turn now to an examination of Astley’s mapping of ‘languages’ and stories within Hunting the Wild Pineapple.

Mikhail Bakhtin explores the concept of voice and authority within artistic prose and argues that a “unitary language is not something given [dan] but is always in essence posited [zadan]—and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia” (270). Far from being isolated and closed, Bakhtin’s conception of language is a dynamic one that involves a requisite connection to an ever-shifting sociopolitical reality. As such, every utterance serves as a “point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear” (272). Heteroglossia, or the “diversity of social speech types” (262) and its stratification into “social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour” (263), are organized by an author within a prose work, and specifically, for Bakhtin, within the novel.

In other words, the “social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its forms, which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his epoch” (300). In Hunting the Wild Pineapple Astley spatially organizes these various Bakhtinian ‘languages’ (of which Levenson’s ironic and colloquial voice is merely one among many) into a system that foregrounds the unresolved tension between unity and disunity, and between the coordination and subordination of languages that purport to possess an equal claim to truth or falsity within the “relativizing of linguistic consciousness in the perception of language borders” (323). Such languages, in their relativity and organization, are given a sense of “materiality . . . that defines such a relativized consciousness” (323–24). Hence, in “North: Some Compass
Readings: Eden," Astley juxtaposes slang, the voice of the narrator, the language of the religious fanatic, that of hippies and Christian American tycoons, the language of musical history, doggerel, cartoons, and so on. Leverson refers to the “newness of the language” of these hippies, who “groove” and say “‘don’t heavy-scene me, man’ and they despise bread. Not give us this daily variety. They’re all for that” (18). In reference to Lilian’s clichéd language of the religious fanatic, Leverson notes, “There genuinely was a lingua franca” (11). And in the story “Hunting the Wild Pineapple,” Leverson refers to the “new inflexion!”

Ah, mamma mia! A new meaning. This body, this face, these fingers, talk diff’rent! But they don’t of course: and reason asserts itself and the same dull old drone of the expected vision intrudes in those boardroom, bar-room, bedroom clichés I’ve heard, oh, I’ve heard, before. (64)

By juxtaposing this variety of languages within the linguistic and textual space of these stories, Astley maps what is being charted upon multiple levels in her text—that is, she maps the ways in which relative spatial positioning normatively codes relations of power. Leverson’s attempts to exert narrative control, and to appropriate the maps and stories of others, creates a situation in which the proliferating heteroglot languages in this text are made to occupy a subordinate position. Astley’s spatial organization of these languages, however, as well as Leverson’s own admission that his stories could be told differently, and by different people, destabilizes the unifying and centripetal forces of narrative within Hunting the Wild Pineapple. As with her mapping of characters within social space, and of words and phrases within rhetorical space, Astley here reveals a perpetual maneuvering for dominance that is opposed to the centrifugal and disunifying forces that seek to create a condition of equivalence in which objects are joined through coordination. Languages, and the specific and subjective worldviews that they represent, are not arbitrarily transcribed, but are rather deliberately placed within the space of these stories in order to underscore the various relations of power held by the characters in this text, by the narrator, as well as by Astley herself as the author of this sequence of stories.
Astley’s decision to write *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* as a short story sequence rather than as a novel further reveals the extent to which the positioning of objects within space is normatively coded. Her organization of these eight stories within the textual space of the sequence parallels that of the various socio-ideological languages within the text, in that both the arrangement of stories and languages serve to destabilize a vertical, hierarchical structuring of narrative authority. In refusing to write a traditional novel with a privileged order of beginning, middle and ending, that is, in a vertical structure, Astley organizes these stories in a horizontal succession, as variations on a theme, or the reiterations of the same story with different reference points. As Levenson insists in “A Man Who Is Tired of Swiper’s Creek Is Tired of Life,”

Birth, marriage, death, re-birth. They’re the only neat endings, traditional culminations for living—for books even—and what bogus back-watering punctuation they are! Living is serial, an unending accretion of alternatives. (175)

While Levenson conceives of these stories as serial and thus as equal nodal points that are joined through coordinate rather than subordinate conjunction, Astley undermines this straightforward resolution, which would posit this group of stories as possessing equal claims to importance and significance. And, while these stories are organized horizontally rather than according to a vertical hierarchy, Astley subverts a normative coding of horizontal positions within space as indicating the conjunction of equal components. Indeed, her insistence on the unresolved tensions between the normative coding of spatial relations in the realms of social and linguistic space provides a means of interpreting the organization of these stories within textual space. Rather than structured as an “accretion of alternatives” that functions as a rhizomatic assemblage, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceive of the term, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* is constructed as a sequence of stories, and relies upon being read as such—if not in the precise order in which they are set out in the (numbered) table of contents—then at least with the first story read first, and the last story read last. The text acts as a sequence in which, as in the organization of a sentence in English, the
order and placement of its component parts are meaningful and normatively coded in terms of power.

In his study of the short story sequence, *The United Stories of America*, Rolf Lundén discusses what he calls the “compulsion to create coherence” on the part of critics of this genre (31). Rather than “marginalize the discontinuity and . . . ignore the multiplicity that are so central to the structure of this mode of narrative” (31), Lundén advocates an acknowledgement of the “tension between separateness and unity” (24). While Astley is very much aware of this tension in her construction of *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, and while she emphasizes the gaps between individual stories in refusing to construct the text according to a linear temporal progression, it is the relatedness rather than the separateness of the stories that she underscores, as is attested to by her choice of title: *Hunting the Wild Pineapple and other related stories*. The gaps and silences that separate the individual stories are certainly significant, but they serve as spatial conjunctions rather than modes of disruption, foregrounding the relations of power within the organization of textual space. The silences are significant elements in the organization of these stories, and whether they are seen as sites of coordinate or subordinate conjunction, the silences emphasize the relative positioning of these stories as markers of normative relations of power. Astley extends the tension between coordination and subordination, and more generally, between imperatives and propositions, that are mapped elsewhere in these stories, to the very structuring of the text as a whole, and ultimately leaves these tensions open and unresolved.

IV. “The Flying Dutchman of an Endeavor”: Open Maps and Relative Space

As I have noted earlier, Carter argues in *The Road to Botany Bay* that the essence of Captain James Cook’s maps lie in the fact that “they did not mirror the appearance of natural objects, but preserved the trace of encountering them.” In *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, Leverson’s and Astley’s maps likewise fail to serve as mirrors of reality, as Huggan convincingly demonstrates. Rather, they preserve the trace of the encounter between the mapmaker and the mapreader. It is in the encounter be-
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tween the person who draws and the person who reads the map, and in the rhetorical as well as spatial tension between imperatives and propositions, coordination and subordination, that the maps of *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* come into textual being. As the opening passage of this story sequence underscores, the cartographic process is one that, while asserting the complete authority and control of the mapmaker, actually depends upon the mapreader’s complicity in accepting the conditions of that map.

Through charting the normative coding of spatial relations, Astley reveals how maps, in organizing objects within space, are subjective projections that encode relations of authority and dominance, and perform acts of inclusion and exclusion. While she does “ridicule the map as a simulacrum of truth” (Huggan *Territorial* 64), Astley perhaps more importantly reveals the relations of power that are involved in cartographic communication, and the role of the mapreader in passively accepting, or actively questioning, these maps. As “discourses of traveling” (Carter 71) that cannot be divorced from the conditions in which they are drawn or read, rather than fixed and closed documents, the designations of authority that maps denote are rendered subjective rather than absolute. While the reference points remain the same, they can be cast as dominant or subordinate, marginal or central, according to the subjective perspective of the mapmaker as well as that of the mapreader. Astley’s maps thus posit space as relative rather than absolute, and it is the readers of the map who participate in its very construction and who may accept or reject these designations of power. Similarly, it is the readers who can refuse the maps presented to them, or write their own, which will then in turn become sites of contestation.

As this paper began with the first sentence of the first story of this sequence, I will conclude with a consideration of the last sentence of the last story, which is in fact an unanswered question. Leverson, dissatisfied with his journey to Swiper’s Creek, is invited on a journey with his friend Tripp, and concludes the text musing, “As the afternoon sun gutters, I promise I’ll join him. But will I?” (175). Leverson and Astley leave their map open and incomplete, with the question of who holds the authority to answer this final query left unresolved between the mapmakers and
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the mapreaders, who in speculating on the answer, become mapmakers themselves. Huggan argues that this indeterminacy is a marker of the “provisionality of cartographic representation,” which renders maps, “and the areas or territories they claim to represent, incomplete, indeterminate, and insecure” (xvi). However, rather than seeing these characteristics as a debilitating aspect of literary cartography, Huggan suggests it is in the very insecurity of these open maps that “the post-colonial societies/cultures of Canada and Australia may both reconceptualize their past and map out their different visions of the future” (xvi). Maps serve as sites of contestation within *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*—as a structural paradigm that both foregrounds the spatiality of power relations, and the ways in which the relative positioning of objects within space are coded as normative relations. By leaving her map open and indeterminate, Astley refuses to provide a comfortable solution to the reader of her text, who, in choosing to interpret these stories, must inevitably be made aware of her or his own subjectivity and assertion of authority, of his or her own acts of exclusion and inclusion. We are not offered a space in which relative positions are able to escape the impositions of categorical privilege, as horizontal positioning implies spatial privileging through order and sequence, just as a vertical hierarchy encodes positions of dominance and subordination. Rather, we are left to repeat the cartographic process, more aware of the ideological implications of words, and the sociopolitical imbrications of verbal discourse.

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Singapore’s New Thrillers: Boldly Going Beyond the Ethnographic Map
Tamara S. Wagner

Douglas Chua’s *The Missing Page*, published by Angsana Books in Singapore in 1999, opens with the construction of a massive development project to link Singapore with Malaysia through a tunnel “modelled after the 51 km Eurotunnel” (14). But the workers stumble upon a disturbing, possibly threatening finding: a mysterious territorial document that disputes Singapore’s sovereignty. The super-agent who saves the day after various action-packed confrontations is the James Bond-like Alex Han, who “thinks he is Mel Gibson chasing after thugs” (45) and repeatedly has to remind himself that he is “no Rambo” (317). He is the native answer to the superheroes of imported popular culture. Testifying to a new interest in regionally produced fiction that has definitely invigorated Singapore’s book-market, Chua’s science fiction thrillers with a local twist form a respite from narratives that Shirley Lim has diagnosed as “almost ethnographic in their fidelity to ethnic surface and social interactions” (138). Even more pointedly, those narratives emulate the popular historical “exotic” of diasporic and postcolonial writing—a globally immensely marketable genre, which the Singaporean novelist Tan Hwee Hwee has dismissed as “Chinese Chick Lit” (66). Instead, they indicate a new direction in localized literature that generally bodes well for the regional book-market’s coming of age, even when it generates some clichéd narratives along the way. This article aims to trace these new developments to go beyond studies that emphasise the globally marketed fictions of the island-state Singapore and Southeast Asia generally. A re-examination of the thriller’s growing local popularity promises to shed a new light on the Singaporean novel, its potential, versatility, and interest for a local readership rather than for consumers of what Graham Huggan has recently termed the “postcolonial exotic.” This analysis reassesses the growing export of these new fictions and
the ways they set out to rework insular analyses of the region’s “exotic” representations.

The greatest appeal of Chua’s thrillers is clearly their specific imaginary. Han is a cross between James Bond and Jackie Chan, and his adventures show how regional preoccupations can be translated into different genres. The dispute over the island-state’s sovereignty in *The Missing Page*, Malaysia’s threatened invasion of Singapore in *Crisis in the Straits: Malaysia Invades Singapore* (2001), the take on current water-disputes in *Ransom* (2002), and the disappearance of Singapore during a diplomatic crisis between China and the USA in *The Missing Island* (2002) set familiar action-stories in the region. The horrors associated with imported fictions break into a familiar world, and there is a certain degree of originality in the transposition of science fiction or horror clichés into the quietude of Singaporean daily life. In *Crisis in the Straits*, for example, Han’s wife runs *amok* in the Takashimaya, an upmarket department store (131), and a baby is attacked by birds that are manipulated by mysterious technology while living in an expatriate enclave (19). Sensitive issues are taken up; anxieties are spelled out and projected onto dystopian near-cataclysms; and local issues become the concern of impressive super-agents. Focusing on terrorist attempts to poison Singapore’s water supply, *Ransom* engages with rising concerns about terrorist networks in the region and a water-dispute between Singapore and Malaysia. Simultaneously, the interweaving of local jokes that stab at international politics pokes fun at the science fiction genre itself. The plausible meets the blatantly ridiculous almost seamlessly. *Ransom* opens with the Singaporean football team set to enter the world cup; *The Missing Page* announces that Harrison Ford has become the president of the United States and that the Americans have landed two men on Mars; *Crisis in the Straits* lists a conglomeration of futuristic events:

A 40-year-old man in Sweden became the first male to give birth to a child. The United States finally developed the long-awaited magnetic highway. . . . In Asia, a war between China, Japan and South Korea almost erupted following the discovery of a potentially oil-rich island off the South China sea. (25)
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Chua’s novels reflect millennial anxieties and hopes; yet, they remain infused with a recognizable local flavour for a communal readership. While new economic developments shape the plots, the sensational potential of the millennium, with all its (narrative) promises, horrors, and special bugs, clearly sold books. A pre-millennium novel, *The Missing Page* is particularly replete with evangelical speculations that express millennium para-noia. The economic transformation of Batam, an Indonesian island near Singapore, is premised on the millennium’s first tragedy on the resort-island Bali: “The millennium’s first seismic wave disaster was so tremendous and expansive that not a single building was left standing on the island” (19). *Crisis in the Straits* even more pointedly spells out dystopian realities beneath economic success: “The new millennium had ironically brought about a divided economic world, which few world leaders had anticipated. Size seemed the only logical way to compete and survive in an increasingly smaller world” (25). Replicating dystopian fictions of virtual realities that have swamped the global movie-market, *Ransom* capitalizes on the dangers of the dot.com boom: “In the merciless corporate world of the new millennium, dot.com companies began sprouting all over Singapore like mushrooms in a damp open field” (30). Terrorists are ridiculously codenamed Dotcom, Website, and Virus. A similar interest in millennium anxieties informs Ooi Yang-May’s novels; yet, these texts go further in exposing the para-noia of the times and the dangers of evangelical millennialism in new forms. Published by a British press and marketed as thrillers both in the region and abroad, they evince new opportunities for fiction set in the region’s booming urban centres such as the city-state Singapore or, to a more limited extent, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital, to go beyond the ethnographic mapping of the “postcolonial exotic.”

Although the market for thrillers in and about Singapore has expanded rapidly over the last few years, it is surpassed by the more steadily growing popularity of ghost story collections since the publication of Russell Lee’s hugely successful *The Almost Complete Collection of True Singapore Ghost-Stories* in 1989. The “runaway bestseller of the Singapore book fair ’89,” as the blurb proudly proclaims, it has spawned an entire series. That Catherine Lim, one of Singapore’s most estab-
lished and internationally known writers, has published a collection of
to its marketability. Other Singaporean collections include *Death Rites:
Tales from a Wake* (1990) by K.K. Seet; *Evil Eyes* (1992) by Pugalenthi,
Noel Chia, and Rashid Saini; and F.J. George’s *Teenagers’ Ghost-Stories*
(1991). Russell Lee’s more recent collections revealingly caution against
“pirated” versions using occidental ghosts: “And do remember that I
only write for Angsana’s *True Singapore Ghost-Stories* . . . then you have
the genuine stuff in your hands. If not, don’t buy the book!” (*Collection
Book 10* n.p.) Most ghost-stories are in English, although Othman
Wok’s *Macabre Tales of Singapore and Malaysia in the 50s* (1991) and
*Tales of Horror and Mystery: More Macabre Tales from Singapore, Malaya
and Indonesia* (2002) have been translated from Malay and compiled
by the author’s daughter. Ignored and almost forgotten for nearly half a
century, these tales have been rediscovered for a readership hungry for
more local horror.

In Book 10 of his collection, Russell Lee capitalizes on the genre’s suc-
cess as he ridicules the aversion to ghost stories expressed by academics
who deplore the lack of more “serious” literary productions. Ironically,
the derision Lee evinces is steeped in class-alignments that at once rep-
llicate and invert these critiques of popular culture. The consumption of
local ghost-stories, Lee further suggests, feeds on and into a preference
for local, multicultural food over the proverbial cup of tea: “It shouldn’t
surprise us that there are some Singaporeans who, as Dr Kirpal writes,
‘cringe’ at what most of us like to read….I do enjoy the sarabat and roti
prata, char kway teow and kopi-o, or nasi lemak, even though it may
not be Mr Rich Snob Singaporean’s cup of tea” (Lee *Collection Book 10*
n.p.). In this, Lee responds to Kirpal Singh’s repeated comments on the
ghost story collection’s doubtful claims to fame as Singapore’s most pro-
lific genre. As Singh puts it in *Singapore Book World* in the early nineties,
when he attempts to qualify his earlier enthusiasm about the increasing
output of “popular” fiction, “[i]n reading some of the recent fiction
published I am not assured that the direction we are taking is altogether
wholesome or qualitatively better” (21). In the introduction to the more
recent volume of *Interlogue: Studies in Singaporean Literature* dedicated
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to fiction, Singh complains even more pointedly that Singapore is being “flooded with ‘popular’ texts” and refers directly to Lee’s series:

take the many ghost stories books, especially those by the “phantom” writer Russell Lee. Whoever this person is, he/she hit on the right formula and thousands flock to the bookshops every time a new volume in the famous/infamous Ghost Stories Volume appears. . . . Add . . . the many other titles which are commonly seen staring at us even in mama stalls around HDB estates and we get some idea of what many out there are really paying money for to read. (xiv)

Lee’s sarcastic reference to the consumption of food pinpoints the main objection to the popular genre as an unrefined consumer product and answers Singh’s dismissive references to the Indian corner-shops (or mama stalls) near the subsidized Housing Development Board (HDB) blocks. Moreover, Lee critiques the imported colonial criteria that underlie this distinction in the first place. A local mix of dishes, inexpensively available at street stalls, nicely encapsulates Singapore’s multiethnic population, composed of Chinese, Malays, Indians, and those groups subsumed as “others” in the official ethnographic categories. The cuisine and the people are contrasted pointedly with the cup (or dish) of tea that continues to be associated with the upmarket High Tea practised in overpriced restaurants and hotels as part of a marketed colonial nostalgia. The local ghost stories feed on an imported genre; yet, so do the criteria that seek to categorize their literary worth.

Although a number of these stories take place in Singapore or neighbouring countries and some contain references to ancient Chinese or Malay tales, the majority are influenced by “Western” clichés. Russell Lee’s series has moreover become increasingly moralizing, harking particularly on a conservative Christian attitude to abortion, contrasting with other popular collections of ghost- and horror-stories that attempt to engage with local issues as more than a backdrop. In Book 10 Lee, for example, sets out to investigate human sacrifice through the ages, providing a gruesome list of sensationalized atrocities that range from ancient burial grounds to the Holocaust. He refers to “The new gods:
Money, Lust and Self,” and says, “Human sacrifice in the guise of abortion is still rife today. We sacrifice these lives because of three demons which we call ‘Money,’ ‘Lust’ and ‘Self’” (56). Abortion, Lee stresses repeatedly, in case the message has not come across, “is a medical holocaust” (54).

Catherine Lim’s The Howling Silence includes a story featuring an aborted foetus haunting its mother. Yet, the briefly invoked “pro-life” agenda is interwoven with ancient Chinese beliefs in the ghosts of the unborn and a social critique of both “Western” and “Eastern” cultures in Singapore. In “Temple of the Little Ghosts,” Rosalind keeps up the tradition of having abortions, a tradition “carried on by the entire female line, from her mother backwards through her grandmother, great-grandmother and forbears lost in the mists of the remote past, way back to the ancestral village in southern China” (32). However, it is in accordance with the cultural alignment of “the West” with corruption or sexual depravity as promoted by “Asian values” that she becomes pregnant while in the United States “for a working stint”; “There she fell in love and lived with a man who turned out to be totally unsuitable” (34). His unsuitability remains unspecified, and, the reader is left to imagine his ineligible qualities. The abortion is as much the result of unsuitable Western affairs as of an Asian family tradition.² Caught between Roman Catholicism and a submerged belief in vengeful ghosts of the dead and the unborn, Rosalind finally exorcises the baby-ghost by making a pilgrimage to the Temple of the Little Ghosts, erected by “[a]nother similarly guilt-stricken woman” in China (34) and by joining Western pro-life organizations. The story ends with the first person narrator marvelling at the conflation of Rosalind’s beliefs, epitomized by the books on her shelves: “I see copies of her beloved Shakespeare on a shelf side by side with The Tibetan Book of the Dead and an impressive-looking tome called The Psychology of Guilt” (38). The ghost story has thus become a vehicle of cross-cultural comparisons.

As they capitalize on the region’s specific horrors, the marketing and analysis of such transpositions of cultural conflicts have begun to encompass recent publications by Malaysian presses as well, and this is vital to the ongoing ethnographic remapping in Singapore’s new thrill-
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ers. Published in English, the thrillers cater predominantly to the regional market. Tunku Halim Abdullah’s horror-stories, published by a Malaysian press, for example, cast an important light on this growing interest in ghost- or horror-stories that have more than just a local (or regional) backdrop. Born and raised in Malaysia and educated in Britain, Tunku Halim lives in Australia, where he works as a corporate solicitor; yet, his fiction is emphatically crafted for the Malaysian and Singaporean Anglophone book-market. His collection contains titles like *The Rape of Martha Teoh & Other Chilling Stories* (1997), *Bloodbaze: 15 Chilling Tales* (1999), or *The Woman who Grew Horns & Other Works* (2001). In his novel, *Dark Demon Rising* (1997), Halim not only evokes the historical background of Malaysia’s early post-Independence era in the mid-sixties, but also makes use of Malay legends of vampires. Storytellers revive the horrors of the past after an elderly foreign scholar conducting research on “Folklore: Demons and Vampires in Malay Culture” stirs up the past. The colonial vestiges that hold on to the old man mark him out as a part of the past as well:

“So you’ve come to hear of demons?” The elderly gentleman stared out of an inquiring milky face, brightly lit by the strong sun, a shock of white hair sprang back, skywards towards the spidery coconut trees. A white-brimmed hat sat on his knobly fingers, a matching safari suit, reminiscent of colonial times, hung to his thin body... “And about vampires?” (9)

While his inquiries of eyewitnesses establish an emphatic claim to authenticity, there is an air of deliberate research about the story, and this links it to the ghost and mystery stories by colonialists and early post-Independence expatriates. Somerset Maugham’s stories of fateful curses and inexplicable occurrences form a literary legacy that has informed subsequent neo-orientalist anecdotes of colonial Malaya and later the postcolonial nation-states Singapore and Malaysia. Further, via more recent adaptations of the genre, locally produced ghost stories have been influenced as well. It is these linguistic and literary aspects of colonial influence that facilitate the ready absorption of Malaysian Anglophone writers in the marketing of “local” thrillers in Singapore—most specifi-
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cally in Singaporean bookstores. Paul Theroux’s *Sinning with Annie and Other Stories* (1969) and *The Consul’s File* (1977), for example, written in and about early post-Independence Malaysia and Singapore, are already self-reflexively ironic about writing regional anecdotes of the last colonials in Maugham’s wake. “A Deed without a Name,” in Theroux’s earlier collection, describes expatriates in Singapore who “fancied themselves amateur detectives, better than the fictional ones” (153). Their “infatuation . . . with murder stories of quite a different stripe” is evoked twice to indicate that their orientalism is steeped in their desire for the exotic: “They had such things as tiger skins and opium pipes, fascinating Oriental pots, and bric-a-brac imprinted with abracadabra” (155–57). *The Consul’s File* contains episodes in which only local superstitions can account for mysterious occurrences. A clear example of this is the “hopeless liaison” (52) between a Malaysian prince who wants to be American and an expatriate woman who aims at being Malay ends when the woman is repeatedly raped by a Malay incubus or demon and the prince wrongly sent to prison.

The somewhat belated three-fold impact of ghost stories on locally produced fiction comes only after realist beginnings and a vehement rejection of the supernatural. At the most basic level, C.M. Woon’s *The Advocate’s Devil* (2002) replicates Maugham’s short-stories, combining a detective-plot, a touch of the supernatural, and local atmosphere: “I had been precipitated in the midst of a murder-mystery, zipping around Singapore town with the legendary Clarence d’Almeida, who even now was hot on the trail of the killer. Who needs fiction?” (32). Second, as we have seen, the popular genre of the ghost story has built on this colonial legacy; and finally, romance—and even realistic social-issues—novels have recently integrated aspects of the ghost story. Catherine Lim has included ghosts and gods as a supernatural undercurrent of her globally marketed, and locally immensely popular, romances of subaltern women. They are in pointed contrast to her earlier social-issues novel, *The Serpent’s Tooth* (1982), in which a self-consciously “modern” woman struggles against her mother-in-law’s Chinese superstitions, waging a losing war on herbal brews and the old woman’s conversations with her late husband.
Lim’s most recent novels feature a wealth of dreams, mysterious tokens, and communions with goddesses. The bondmaid’s story in the eponymous novel ends with her transformation into urban legend: “Stories began to spread of a goddess residing in the pond, who worked miracles” (“Epilogue” n.p.). In an attempt to protect “a little dilapidated shrine in the way of a three-hundred-million dollar industrial development project” (“Prologue” n.p.), the bondmaid’s former master, reduced to the crazed caretaker of her shrine, is killed by fire, thereby fulfilling the prediction that they would be united in death. *Following the Wrong God Home* presents an old servant’s ineffectual struggle to protect a piece of land, chosen by her god-with-no-home, against “the construction of the giant petrochemicals plant” (263). Like the caretaker in *The Bondmaid*, she dies of injuries sustained in a fire that razes the shrine. In contrast to Lim’s earlier accounts of the struggles between modernization and tradition in colonial Malaya and Singapore, in these works ghosts and gods are poised against globalization and building-projects that sterilize the city’s rich past. Yet, a recent local social-problems novel, *Heartland* (1999) by the younger writer Daren V.L. Shiau, reverts to the dismissal of the supernatural that has become a standard feature of ethnographic fiction. “[T]hat the blocks near Ghim Moh were built over a hilly Hakka [a Chinese dialect group] burial site” is nothing more than an urban legend that can safely be ignored as an “unusual story”: “But soon, the unusual story that the bricks of the estate were set on vacated tombs would only be legend” (33). By contrast, in the epilogue to Lim’s *The Song of Silver Frond*, the heroine’s descendant takes the exhumation of graves—“part of an ongoing exercise of the government to reclaim land for residential and industrial use” (328)—as an opportunity to mix her ancestor’s ashes with that of her husband to fulfil her unrealized wish to be buried closer to him than his first wife: “I went away in the joy of having enabled a wonderful ancestor, more than thirty years later, to finish singing her song,” she claims (328). Exhumation opens up new possibilities for the dead; yet, it is nonetheless a sign of modernization that is starkly opposed to the impressive mansions and quaint shanty-villages of the main plot.

Although not all ghosts in recent local novels feature in struggles against modernization, nor are they necessarily part of local legends,
Goh Sin Tub includes the tellingly titled story “Ghost from a Collapsed Hotel” in his second collection of ghost-stories. Some texts have little to do with the locale in which they appear. The companionable ghosts in Gopal Baratham’s *Moonrise, Sunset* (1995) or Marie Gerrina Louis’s *The Eleventh Finger* (2000), visualized as the half-faded replica of their human bodies, are very much the kindly spectres of Hollywood comedy. In both novels, the ghost of a loved one (a suicidal mother, a murdered lover) keeps the first-person narrator company, sitting in the back of a car or on the edge of a desk. Visible only to the narrator (and the reader), the ghosts listen to the conversations of the living, nodding vigorously or shaking their heads to assist in murder-cases. At one point in Louis’s novel, the narrator dismisses the spectre of the past: “Go away, Mum, I told her apparition wearily and she obligingly disappeared” (236). Even more comically, the narrator of Baratham’s novel is in a state of permanent sexual arousal as his dead lover “haunts” him. This ghost does not disappear until her murder has been solved, reinstating elements of the murder-mystery into a self-ironic critique of Singaporean society that Ban Kah Choon has called Baratham’s “great comic vision” (39).

The murder-mystery with a local backdrop or involved in local issues has become increasingly popular. Writers of these texts aim to fuse internationally popular clichés and a local imaginary. Although the neurosurgeon Gopal Baratham, a member of Singapore’s Indian minority, and Ooi Yang-May, a Malaysian-Chinese lawyer living in London, have published both local and global financial thrillers with foreign presses, the local ghost story as well as the globally marketed thriller are published primarily by Singaporean presses. *The Eleventh Finger* by the Malaysian-Indian Marie Gerrina Louis was published by a Singaporean press. A social-issues novel, it qualifies as a detective story and is engaged with two suicides, a murder, and a false accusation of murder. As in Baratham’s, Woon’s, and Ooi’s novels, Louis’s main protagonists include lawyers who have to act as amateur-detectives in cases that involve them on a personal, even intimate, level. Nor Farida Abdul Manaf and M.A. Quayum have argued that Louis’s short story “Extenuating Circumstances” “breaks away from the Anglophone women’s writing tradition through its use of the detective genre” (387). With *The...
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Eleventh Finger, she furthers this interest in the genre and combines it with aspects of the social-issues novel. Its focus on domestic violence and class issues ties in with the murder-mysteries to serve as extenuating circumstances for the heroine’s criminal acts.

This new centrality of elements of the thriller has, in fact, not simply displaced, but in many ways integrated, the postcolonial agenda of earlier “writing back” projects. This is not to say that early fiction did not include thrillers. The China Affair by Kirpal Singh, who later emigrated to Canada, was published in 1972. Kirpal Singh, an academic of the same name as the aforementioned writer, has compared it with another Singaporean novel that came out in the same year: If We Dream Too Long by Goh Poh Seng. While the latter is a conscious attempt to portray daily life in early post-Independence Singapore “in a contemplative, philosophical manner,” The China Affair “is good entertainment,” as if one precluded the other: “as the blurb tells us, [it is] ‘an exciting tale of international intrigue’ [with] absolutely no pretension to literary sophistication” (Singh 68). It sold very well both locally, and abroad and was even considered for a film. Admitting its “popular” appeal, Singh seems to suggest that this popularity indicates its failure as a literary achievement: “Goh’s novel becomes topical and dated as the Singaporean scene changes . . . whereas [Kirpal]Singh’s novel remains a good read” (68).

Goh’s novel, however, has spawned the local genre of the social problem novel, and has thus exerted a different, yet significant, influence on Singapore’s specifically urban thrillers. The Singaporean social-issues novel can, in fact, be traced from Philip Jeyaretnam’s First Loves, a surprising success in 1987, and Colin Cheong’s The Stolen Child (1989) to Shiau’s Heartland, which takes up plots and even names from these earlier novels. Thus, Cheong’s main character Wings becomes Shiau’s Wing, for example. In many ways, locally published fiction has continued to follow in the tradition of urban social-issues novels, while internationally printed and marketed novels, including works by diasporic writers, are still primarily limited to postcolonial or “exotic” historical fiction. These works are inflected by the global publishing strategies that Huggan has perceptively analyzed in his study of the “postcolonial exotic”: an “altery industry” entrenched in “mechanics of exoti-
cist representation/consumption” (x). While the fiction that is most popular among local readerships has long been confined to the denigrated ghost story and has only secondarily included historical novels or romances, more recently, novels have incorporated elements of the thriller into the fictions of the region and local or regional issues into fully-fledged thrillers. I have taken Chua’s novels as an entry point to this significant development and Lim’s as a very different engagement with shifting attitudes to ghostly urban legends. Louis’s *The Eleventh Finger* and Baratham’s *Moonrise, Sunset* use local ghosts divorced from local contexts, but they are also important examples of this trend, and I shall come back to the latter’s critique of what is represented as a specifically Singaporean economic awareness. In the remainder of this essay, I shall take up examples of such local thrillers that have tackled this new interest in the genre in different ways, including Rex Shelley’s spy novels, Ooi’s financial thrillers, and Cheong’s *The Man in the Cupboard*, winner of the 1998 Singapore Literature Prize Award. The latter neatly exemplifies a new focus on the criminal’s mind, as anarchic energies are harnessed and marketed as a subversive fiction, while often being comically presented.

Even while Singapore appears to retreat to the margins of the narrative, Cheong’s *The Man in the Cupboard* ridicules prevailing cultural alignments, including the much-used cliché of the corrupted or corrupting (English) literature teacher in Singaporean fictions. Pointedly, the first-person narrator links his desire to murder his wife to an individualism learned from literature: “The only things that I could really be said to be crazy about were books—English Literature to be specific” (6).3 The connection between literature, individuality, and murderous madness is evoked repeatedly and in a delightfully self-ironic way: “Well, at least as a literature teacher, I’m supposed to have pretensions to individuality. But to be an individualist—one has to have a certain amount of assertiveness, which you probably gather by now, I did not have. And still don’t—unless murder is an act of assertion” (13). The novel ridicules alignments that lump these imported goods together as valueless and dangerous, just as it circumvents the cheap psychologizing that ruins so many social-issues novels. In diagnosing himself as a
submissive, as one who has failed to assert his individuality, the narrator conjures up contrasting “extenuations”:

My mother used to be like really proud of that fact though— that I was a nice, helpful, obliging boy who was quiet and un-demanding . . . I was so good (read submissive) that I was made class monitor with three other submissives (yes, I know that word’s from S&M, but the connection to bondage is appropri-ate). (15)

“But if I were a therapist” (52), he reiterates, in order to poke fun at popular psychology. Motives for murder stretch across the psychology of the submissive and the problematics of a cross-class relationship, as the wife’s nastiness is traced to “her upper middle-class upbringing, her accomplishments and her rank” (58). Finally, even the predicaments of “modern man” can be blamed: “A Ken doll made out of Plasticine. Mr. Ken Gumby. Which was a crock. Because all my life, I’d wanted to be Action Man,” (44). He is the feminized man dominated by his masuli-nized wife, and the novel indeed capitalizes on this clash of clichés—clichés epitomized by “Western” commercial products. Sexism is at once muted and accentuated by the narrator’s self-inflicted ironic whining, and the result is comic as well as pathetic: “All I want is to be me” (48). His proclivity for literature helps him juggle with the mental, emotion-al, and class-driven clichés that parody psychological and sociological plots. Predictably, he leaves the closet only to collapse into submissive-ness once more. Instead of smothering his wife with the smelly pillow she keeps complaining about, he bends over her and says “[t]hen I pull the comforter over her, right up to her chin” (105).

The novel has significant affinities with Baratham’s in the implicitly, even gleeful, self-effacing critique of Singaporean society with its discourse of “Asian values,” and the ridicule of cheap psychologizing. The first-person narrator in Moonrise, Sunset also plays out unconvincing sce-narios in his mind to account for his putative murder of his girlfriend, of which he is, in fact, totally innocent: “I began to invent reasons for the murder. I used to think that psychoanalysis was bullshit. . . . The picture wasn’t convincing. I decided to try one even more bizarre” (25).
Plagued by his unconventional name, which invites a plethora of puns, his effeminate physiognomy—counterpoised by an oversized penis that is similarly the object of much comment—and his self-diagnosed “peculiar” mental processes (12), How Kum Menon is unique in his ethnic make-up (Hokkien mother, unknown Malayalee father), his background (raised by his mother’s employer/lover Oscar Wellington Wu), love-interest in the Indian girl Vanita, and the ways he sees the world. He is an individual among groups of communities that are as bizarre to him as they are exclusive: “I see things different from other people. The sky talks to me, sends messages in rainstorms and lightning. . . . This is how the world has always been to me; this is how, I hope, it will always be. I keep my thoughts to myself, however. If I didn’t, people would think me mad” (1). Despite this gesture towards psychological typecasting in the opening chapter, such attempts are evoked only to be ridiculed, as are the esoteric would-be analysts from America. Science and mumbo-jumbo mutate nicely into each other: “I realised that Mohan was telling me in Hindu jargon what Quincey said in sociological mumbo-jumbo. By Mohan’s book it was karma that made us bad. By Quincey’s, it was perverse genes” (207).

Baratham’s murder-mystery ultimately boils down to money issues. The cross-cultural relationship is a red herring that confuses detectives, analysts, and mediums: “It’s never sex or race, you know. It’s always cash, big dong. Cash is what makes people kill” (272). Most importantly, this critique is aimed specifically at Singaporean society: “Revenge, disapproval and that kind of thing are only motives for murder in TV soaps. In the real world people kill for money. Especially in Singapore where they do everything for money” (75). As critics regularly point out, Baratham is one of Singapore’s most controversial writers. Peter Wicks has called Baratham’s first novel, *A Candle or the Sun* (1991), a “political fable of conspiracy and intrigue [that] attracted considerable public comment” (“Singapore” 75–76). Leong Liew Geok has used it as an example of “dissenting voices” in Singaporean novels to show how politics have “forcibly redirected” the direction novels take (285). Thus, Baratham’s earlier novel pointedly satirizes a simplistic understanding of “Asian values” as the manager of a furniture-store decides to “install
traditional Asian values” by selling fake Chinese antiques instead of “Western” products: “We must flung [sic] out false Western values leading to moral decay, unemployment and social welfare. No more imitating falsity” (45). Throughout his fiction, Baratham keeps returning to his central critique of the role of the individual in Singapore and its fictions; yet, that critique is always mediated through a comic, self-reflexive, and ironic vision.

The exposure of simplistic polarizations of “Asian values” debates also drives Ooi’s thrillers. These novels, published in Britain, take Southeast Asia’s emerging cityscapes as points of entry into critiques of a globalizing capitalism. At the same time, however, they also seek to dismantle the typecasting involved in anti-globalization campaigns. In The Flame Tree (1998), a development project in the Malaysian jungle literally collapses. Out of the rubble emerges a much maligned Western “greenie” as the heroine’s true love. An independent consultant, he is neither one of those “Western environmentalists who are like Victorian missionaries, [and who] come in with their own agenda to take up a local cause and twist it to fit what they think is best for you” (118), nor is he a lover of the Orient who seeks a “child of the East, uncorrupted by our English hypocrisy” (263), unlike his double, the heroine’s upper-class husband. Despite the centrality of the development project, this is no clear-cut story of tradition versus modernization, nor one of “Western” environmentalists versus “Asian” pursuit of technology. The titular tree does not symbolize untouched tropical nature, but rather conceals a gruesome murder. Nothing really is what it appears to be, and Ooi foils ethnographic readings.

Mindgame (2000) takes this dismantling of clichés further. The heroine, a Chinese-Malaysian lawyer, needs to decide between two (white) female lovers, who are caught up in a witch-hunt instigated by the fictitious Asian Values Association (AVA) and the Pentagon’s secret machinations. Singapore is very pointedly featured as the showcase of rapid urban development, of a postcolonial city that, AVA rhetoric announces, “transformed itself from a little-known mosquito-infested backwater into [a] financial hub,” serving as a useful contrast to the picture the AVA paints of the rest of Asia as “a single mind . . . divided . . . by the conflict
between old and new” (33–34). Most significantly, culture-clashes and cultural stereotyping, used by the AVA and its opponents, as well as by the developers and environmentalists in Ooi’s earlier novel, are reworked repeatedly. The reader’s expectations are successively shattered. The exposure of an American double agent delivers the final shock. They had trusted him “[b]ecause he had been white. An American. Swamped in all the AVA’s anti-Western polemic, they had instinctively turned to the man who had been other” (432–33). Alterity alone is no guarantee of alternative discourses; shared ethnicity not a sign of affinity. Conversely, the AVA’s founder feeds as much on discourses of “Asian values” as on the evangelicalism learnt as “a fervent ‘born-again’ Christian in Sydney” (34-35). A newly sanitized pan-Asia is to “take the helm through the new millennium” (34), but as a secret agent doubling as local thug puts it, this is merely millennial rhetoric: “He didn’t care about politics or any of the moral niceties the Suits droned on about. Western values, Asian traditions, liberal sentiments, right-wing dogma—they were all a smokescreen for the same fucking thing: Power” (64). Most importantly, this exploration of cultural and ethnic typecasting on a specifically regional and a global scale is integral to the thriller. It is much more than a backdrop: it is central to the plot.

In an essay on Rex Shelley’s use of ethnicity in his historical novels, Patricia Wong distinguishes between its accidental and incidental functions. In *The Shrimp People* (1991), Shelley creates a panoramic account of the Eurasian community in the former Straits Settlements, roughly what is now Singapore and parts of Malaysia. Yet, suddenly towards the middle of the sizable book, this emphatically ethnographic introduction to a hitherto neglected community, with its litany of Portuguese-Eurasian, Dutch-Eurasian, Anglo-Eurasian names, turns into a story of espionage and terrorism. Analyzing the ways the novel effects “its mutation into spy thriller” (51), Wong argues that ethnicity is the reason the text mutates (46). Simply being Eurasian singles out the central character, Bertha Rodrigues, as an ideal spy and, as it turns out, a double-agent, “committed to do all she could to prevent the formation of Malaysia [and] the merger of Singapore and Malaysia” (370). Symbolically, another Eurasian, “Wee Andy”, has to die to prevent her double-play from
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being exposed. Eurasians embody the meeting of East and West in the
novel and its sequels; yet, there is a certain irony, an ambiguity, harbour-
ing disruptions of this neat categorization. The celebration of the re-
gion’s history and the Eurasian community engenders much more than
a “tale . . . woven around a small minority in Southeast Asia: mixtures of
the East and West known as Eurasians” (5).

People of the Pear Tree (1993) and Island in the Centre (1995), Shelley’s
subsequent novels, work to simplify representations by filtering them
through the perceptions of a Japanese protagonist. In the first, a Japanese
officer falls in love with a woman who is “a mixture of the east and the
west” (50), helps to save her family during the Japanese occupation in
World War II, and ultimately marries her. The epilogue emphatically de-
nounces post-war prejudices against the Japanese. In the latter, the diary
of a Japanese engineer learning English portrays Shelley’s commitment to
linguistic authenticity beyond representations of the changing local patois
and introduces the reader to the Eurasian community through the eyes of
an outsider. Most importantly, Shelley’s novels highlight the multiplicit-
y of the region’s communities. Unlikely individuals become involved in
espionage networks. Like Bertha, they are marked by their background.
To transcend simplistic categorisations, Shelley juxtaposes different mi-
norities. In A River of Roses (1998), so far the last of the “Shrimp People”
novels, a Eurasian woman falls in love with a Baba Chinese, a member
of the region’s Peranakan (locally-born) culture, which had evolved from
intermarriages of Chinese and Malays over the centuries. His ethnicity
becomes symbolic in the discussion of the nation’s future:

Keh’s a Chinese. And a Baba. But neither of these complete-
ly. You know, he’s genuinely concerned that we should build
a Malaya out of the shrewdness of the Chinese, the warmth
and people-sensitivities of the Malays, with bits of Kling and
Seranis, or even the Singapore Jews thrown in. (A River 262)

Eurasians and Peranakans are drawn together as outcasts, and yet there
are ways of typecasting at work that need to be further exposed. Thus,
in Island in the Centre, a Baba sees his specificity reflected in that of a
Un-Malay. Un-anything. . . Un-classifiable. Outside of the realms of all their ethnic pigeonholes. And therefore, to them, outcast” (102). However, he considers her to be outside his cliché of the Eurasians as well: “She can’t be Serani [Eurasian]. They’re not like that.” (101) Conversely, he serves to dismantle stereotypes of the Babas: “Hey, this guy is no limpid Baba, she said to herself.” (101) Wicks has suggested that the Eurasians’ distinctive historical experience “richly frames” Shelley’s fiction (“Eurasian” 377). It does more than that. First, a self-reflexively ironic undercurrent ruptures cultural categorizations. Whenever characters engage in ethnic typecasting, they imbue it with irony, thereby exposing any symbolic reading as flawed: “Marrying the Chinese astrology with the western. Surely nobody could do that better than a Eurasian? Ha, ha, she chuckled to herself, you’re getting senile sweetheart” (A River 80). Second, as Wong has suggested, the spy-story is premised on the protagonists’ ethnic distinctiveness. To read it as a mere backdrop or to see the introduction of the thriller as a generic disruption is a failure to recognise what Shelley’s novels achieve as they represent generic and other forms of hybridity.

The new interest in popular genres such as the thriller, the detective-story, or science fiction in Singapore’s fictions of the region clearly includes the integration of local concerns. As we have seen, even some of the prolific ghost story collections produce new engagements with cross- and multicultural issues. When Ooi’s thrillers situate the problematics of globalization in the divide between urban Singapore and emulative jungle projects in Malaysia, the novels rework the postcolonial exotic and confront local reactions to complex issues. Like Baratham’s fiction, they shatter expectations raised by neo-orientalist and occidentalist stereotypes through the medium of the detective or mystery story. False leads are premised on ethnic typecasting. In fact, the meeting of orientalism with occidentalist “Asian values” discourses provides material for a thriller, and, at the same time, the genre exposes stereotyping strategies. Shelley’s novels do the same for neglected minorities in the region, moving beyond East-West clashes to foreground ethnic multiplicity. Although some recent genre novels, fall short of complex self-reflexive engagement with literary representation, most thrillers feed into
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(as well as upon) these developments and are thus central to the widening of Singapore’s fictions.

Notes
1 Shirley Lim criticizes Maniam’s The Return (1981) and Catherine Lim’s The Serpent’s Tooth (1982) for slotting characters neatly into the two partitions of Indian/Chinese (old) culture and “Westernized” (new) society (142–43). More recently, in a review of Min’s Wild Ginger (2002), Tan refers specifically to Asian-American novels that feed on this trend: a feisty, exotically gorgeous woman faces political/patriarchal adversity in China in a sensationally marketable plot. For a recent discussion of the impact of such diasporic novels on Singaporean novels see Wagner.

2 On Singapore’s ongoing “Asian values” debates, “anti-Western” tags, and theories that postulate that the values labelled “Asian” were originally Victorian and absorbed at the height of imperialism see Mauzy and Milne (57, 213).

3 On Singapore’s official bilingualism see Pakir: while English “is deemed necessary for access to cutting-edge technology and world markets,” its use for cultural purposes has been controversial (263). Compare Talib on its instrumental versus cultural uses: “Another reason for the controversy was the association of the English language with Western values, which some people felt might threaten traditional Asian values” (1).

Works Cited
In Memoriam

Readers of ARIEL will be saddened to learn of the death of Milan Dimić in March 2007. Professor Dimić was a longtime faculty member at the University of Alberta, where he taught in the Comparative Literature program. The Milan Dimić Institute (formerly the Comparative Literature Research Institute) at the University of Alberta is named in his honour. Indeed, he will be remembered as one of the leading figures in the development of the discipline of Comparative Literature in Canada. He served for many years as editor of the Canadian Comparative Literature Review and developed the journal into a leading venue in its field. He is the author of several books including Diaspora Serbs, edited with Earle H. Waugh (2004), Comparative Literature Now: Theory and Practice (1994), and Acculturation, edited with Eva Kushner (1985).

Following his retirement Professor Dimić taught for some years at Shih Hsin University in Taipei, Taiwan. This experience aroused his interest in diasporic Chinese literatures, and ARIEL is pleased to publish his article, “Language in Chinese Canadian Writing: The Impact on Interpretation and Reception.”
Language in Chinese Canadian Writing:
Impact on Interpretation and Reception
Milan V. Dimić

When one group finds it difficult to stand up and say its name; when to say one’s identity is already to mark one as lesser than, that is where the boundaries of exile begin. (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Afterword 168)

The very choice of the language in which to compose is itself a political statement on the part of the writer. (Barbara Harlow xviii)

During the last three to four decades, there has been—in the United States and Canada—a flowering of diasporic Asian authors of Chinese and Japanese origin, who have both acquired considerable commercial success and enlarged the canon. To name only a few, I am thinking in the United States of the reception of such works as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1988), Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001), and Gish Jen’s novels and stories about the immigrant Chang family.1 In Canada, there are Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) and *Itsuka* (1992), Evelyn Lau’s *Runaway Diary of a Street Kid* (1989), SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990) and *Bellydancer: Stories* (1994), Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* (1994), Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995), Larissa Lai’s *When Fox Is a Thousand* (1995) and *salt fish girl* (2202), Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* (1996), and Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* (2002), among others. The success of Asian Canadian creativity has been supported by a variety of anthologies, such as *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese Canadian Anthology* (1979), SKY Lee and her co-editors’ *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures* (1990), Bennet Lee and Jim Wong-Chu’s *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary
This Asian American and Canadian literary production is, at least in Canada, well matched and even preceded by writers belonging to a very broad range of other ethnic groups, with different linguistic, cultural, religious, and geographic backgrounds. The immigration experiences depicted in literature—initially predominantly of peoples coming from Europe and, to a much more modest extent, from East Asia, now from most parts of the world—reflect the fact that over time there have been significant shifts in the educational and other assets of the newcomers and therefore altered opportunities for integration into society. A startling, but not unique, example is the difference between the economic and human plight of early Chinese and Japanese labourers, who were not only exploited but also discriminated against by force of law, and the relatively smooth social success of today’s immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. Often well educated and sometimes well heeled, they are now frequently accepted—in the first and not only second or third generation—as a natural part of the country’s elite. In certain parts of Canada, such as the areas of greater Vancouver and Toronto, they moreover represent a rapidly increasing demographic fact.

In literary terms, there was in Canada a prolonged period of attempts to document the immigrant experience, including painful identity crises, of settlers belonging to the various majority and minority groups, such as the English, Scottish, Irish, French, Ukrainian, Jewish, German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and others. Writing in their mother tongue, or in English or French, authors belonging to that earlier period usually emulated in their writing older, realist, and naturalist paradigms, with a gradually increased use of modernist techniques and attitudes. Today, immigrant writers from the whole spectrum of the Canadian ethnic mosaic—from Blacks and Creoles from the Caribbean to the Chinese and others who came from South-East Asia—examine not only the traditional tribulations of being in an unaccustomed and different environment, climate, geography, and culture, but they tackle in addition...
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the new internal and external psychological and social problems and advantages of a largely post-modern, post-industrial, globalized, and resolutely heteroglossic society. Their prominent themes express the preoccupations of a society with a rapidly changing demography, a society that has become, to a great extent, truly multi-cultural, albeit within a still vertical mosaic privileging the traditional Anglo-Canadian, and in Quebec Francophone, mainstream.

For a long time, most scholars perceived the specificity of ethnic minority writing—a term meriting a special critical inquiry—as being thematic, a matter of subject, theme, and perspective. Nevertheless, more recent inquiries tend to show that “ethnic writing may be distinguished from what is not ethnic writing by its particular preoccupation with language” (Blodgett, “Towards” 623; see also Blodgett, “Ethnic […] Paratext”). Quoting poets and critics such as Amprimoz, Caccia, and Viselli, E.D. Blodgett concludes, “ethnic poetry, especially Italian-Canadian, is where cultural values are confronted as a problem in language” (“Towards” 624). Analyzing Joy Kogawa’s Obasan in the perspective of Lacanian psychology, Blodgett finds that the language and its varied uses in the novel are essential for the understanding of the protagonist and, indeed, the author (“Ethnic”).

Before concentrating on my corpus, which covers Chinese Canadian writing in English, I should like to point out with emphasis that various strategies of “breaking up” standard English are not an exclusive practice of Canadian minority writers. This world wide phenomenon is described, from a linguistic point of view, in such books as David Crystal’s English as a Global Language (1997) and Tom McArthur’s The English Languages (1998). The study of this development is the focal point of the scholarly periodical World Englishes, published in Oxford and New York since 1985, first by the Pergamon Press and now by Blackwell. While it specializes in questions of linguistics and teaching strategies, the journal offers, from time to time, articles that may interest literary historians. A literary and ideological exploration of this field can be found, for example, in Dennis Walder’s Post-Colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory (1998), which focuses on Indian fiction in English, Caribbean and Black British poetry, and contemporary South African
literature; Walder also discusses the Canadian author Michael Ondaatje. Recent short overviews such as Christopher O’Reilly’s *Post-Colonial Literature* (2001), on Anglophone literature, and the late Jacqueline Bardolph’s *Études postcoloniales et littérature* (2002), on Anglophone and Francophone literature, offer equally some insights into the question of language appropriation. The most active debates about these practices and their meaning, as well as their influence on reader-response and reception have taken place, it seems, in Sub-Saharan Africa and the West Indies (Dasenbrock 11–12). It is worth mentioning that similar developments, albeit probably less radical, have taken place in the international, multicultural Francophone, Hispanic, and Lusophone literary and language spaces (Dimić, esp. 11-12., 15, 18-19.).

But let us return to writers of Chinese origin in North America. In an often reproduced and quoted article, “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan, the contemporary American writer of best sellers of Chinese origin, expresses one aspect of this problem of and in language; while it may be the most basic, it is not the only one. Mentioning that “lately, [I have] been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks,” she continues:

I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts. (135)

Amy Tan identifies in this statement four types of her mother’s speech and three problems in reproducing it. Of the four types, at least two involve non-standard language: the category of “broken” English, and that
which has “neither an English nor a Chinese structure” but rather some in-between organization. The three problems are: how to express the subtle varieties of her mother’s speech, how to avoid pejorative labels for it, and how to ensure that the book she writes is “easy to read.” Although already complex, this diagnosis does not mention the additional difficulty of rendering Chinese dialects and idiolects, an obstacle encountered by some of the writers studied by me, and the inevitable cultural connotations embedded in any use of words, something that is present in all Chinese, and for that matter, in all writing, be it ethnic, minority, or majority. It is important to keep in mind that certain postmodern authors, for artistic or political reasons, do not wish to facilitate the reading experience and prefer “making strange” or “defamiliarization” (Viktor Shklovsky’s ostranenie) or even the purposeful creation of misunderstanding and unintelligibility (Dasenbrock).

Distortions of English, insertions of Chinese words and speech patterns are frequent in the reproduction of dialogue in narrative fictions by writers of East Asian origin. In this presentation, I will rely especially on the exemplary use of languages in one prominent Chinese Canadian novel, Wayson Choy’s The Jade Peony. His “Author’s Note” refers to matters of language as follows: “I am also responsible for any rendering of Chinese phrases and complex kinship terms into English equivalents, and for the adoption of the different sets of rules for the spelling of Chinese words” (8; see also Christopher Lee). Vancouver’s Chinatown in the late 1930s and the early 1940s is the setting of the reminiscences of three young children, Jook-Liang, Only Sister, Jung-Sum, Second Brother, and Sek-Lung, Third Brother. The novel covers 238 printed pages and at least one hundred of them (I tried to count) contain Chinese words. These are usually translated in the same sentence or fairly soon after, in a kind of “appositive” inter-lingual stylistics, similar to simultaneous translation in oral situations. Already the motto, taken from Wing Tek Lum’s “Translations” (1987), reads as follows: “Ťông Yâhn Gâai was what we once called where we lived: ‘China-People-Street.’ Later, we mimicked Demon talk and wrote down only Wâh Fauh—‘China-Town.’ The difference is obvious: the people disappeared” (9). On the second page of the first chapter we find “the lao wah-kiu, the Chinatown old-timers”
on the third page “Ahyaii, ho git-sum! How heart-crimp!” (15), and there are in the novel well over one hundred similar juxtapositions of Chinese words and English equivalents.

Quite frequent are instances of “broken” English, and somewhat less the particular mix of Chinese and English termed “Chinglish” by Jook-Liang, Only Sister, who practices it with her close friend, the Old Monkey, for their own secret talks (63). Already in the first chapter, Third Uncle Lew is fond of saying about old-timers: “We all pea-pod China men!” (18). Grandmother Poh-Poh, when furious, says to her grand-daughter, who is only a useless girl-child, mo yung (32): “No more teach!” (35) In her mouth, Shirley Temple becomes “Shirlee Tem-polah” (34). A Chinese assistant of a camp’s cook, staring at the Monkey Man, exclaims, “You lookee good!” (54), and so on, certain expressions inadvertently sounding like Anglo-American caricatures of Asian speech habits. Pointedly, Jook-Liang, Only Sister, uses true colloquial English, which she learned at Kingdom Church Kindergarten, only when she wants to insult her brothers: “‘Fart Face,’ I said” (20).

In addition, from the very opening page of the novel, the author frequently alludes to various Chinese regional and even village dialects, naming many, and signals idiolects, even family preferences. Usually he does not attempt to illustrate them with direct quotations or English semantic and semiotic equivalents, but only mentions their social and psychological importance for that family and the whole Chinese Canadian community.

A large role in the novel is played by English words that are not used in their standard Anglo-American meaning. Beginning with the quoted motto, the words “demon” and “ghost” designate any non-Chinese, especially “white” person, but also Chinese mythological demons and ghosts, without any explanation of the former usage. Chinese kinship terms are sometimes elucidated, as in the case of the family’s decision to call the concubine, once she had children, Stepmother—because this is Canada after all (14). Most other terms, like Third Uncle, are left as reminders of “otherness,” little pebbles, and sometimes stones, on the reader’s path. The narrative voice in the novel assumes that Gold Mountain, as a name for Canada, is self-evident, but the young girl’s
musings about Old Monkey, an important figure in her childhood, are unlikely to enlighten a reader unfamiliar with the legends about this popular hero. On only one page in the novel (72), Giltrow finds seven cultural references that probably would not be understood by the average reader who is not a member of the Chinese immigrant community, and one of these references—to Chinese children attending both English and Chinese school—would be incomprehensible to Asian Canadian readers whose families arrived in the 1990s. It is otherwise a sign of the author's broad humanity that his protagonists are aware of the plight of other immigrants: “Some nights I would hear in my dreams our neighbours’ whispering rising towards the ceiling, Jewish voices, Polish and Italian voices, all jostling for survival, each as desperate as Chinese voices” (51). Towards the end of the novel, Sek-Lung, Third Brother, who fancies young athletic men, learns that even the despised Japanese are human and subject to tragedy.

SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* inserts a number of syntactic alterations of current English, as well as some phonetic and morphemic translations of Chinese words and metaphors, certain of which with cultural connotations that escape a non-Chinese reader. The author avoids concessions to a readership comprised of cultural outsiders and introduces many hidden cultural subtexts.

The most recent novel mentioned in my introduction, *This Place Called Absence*, is the work of Lydia Kwa, a Singaporean Chinese, who came to Canada in 1980 and studied clinical psychology. The novel intertwines two narrative streams, one set in present Vancouver and Singapore and the other in the Singapore of the 1900s, interweaving the mistreatment of Chinese prostitutes in early Singapore history with the story of a Peranakan Chinese living in Vancouver and her difficult attempts to make her family accept her homosexuality. The book is written in a mixture of, as Kwa informs the reader, “Malay and ‘Singlish’—a corruption of the Queen’s English—a colloquial form spoken in Singapore” (213). The narrator, Wu Lan, includes the Cantonese and Hokien dialects in her text.

Although outside of my present purview, the novels by Ying Chen, well-received and winning prizes in Quebec and France, follow much
more closely the traditional standards of the French literary language. The author, raised in Shanghai, came to Montreal in 1989, studied French language and literature, and decided to write in that language, always keeping an eye on Marcel Proust. Nevertheless, she uses reformulated Chinese proverbs, refers to the meaning of Chinese names, and includes cultural pointers, which may escape some readers.

Shorter narratives by Chinese Canadian writers, with the exception of those by Evelyn Lau, contain similar linguistic and cultural specificities. SKY Lee, in “The Soong Sisters,” an anthologized short story from her collection *Bellydancer*, has at least two such passages. One of the three female protagonists, who are not sisters by blood nor do they belong to the Soong dynasty, Sue Mei, has a mother. Before dying, she exclaims: “‘Yew Sue Mei mama,’ were her last words, fired off perhaps randomly, perhaps not” (541). These words are not translated. More importantly, the little ditty about the Soong Sisters of China is quoted early in the narrative, without further information: “One loved money, / the other loved power, / and the third loved China” (538). The editors of the anthology felt obliged to provide a long footnote (538). Such explanations are not given for other cultural references, for example “It’s all a part of her inalienable rice,” an expression referring both to the Chinese biological inheritance and the title of the pioneering anthology of Chinese Canadian writing.

Nevertheless, and regardless of the theme of the narrative, in some short stories there is only a limited actual display of either altered English or of Chinese terms. For instance, Larissa Lai, who was born in La Jolla, California and grew up and lived in various places in Canada, from St. John’s, Newfoundland, to Vancouver and Calgary, in her recent brief fiction “Two Houses and an Airplane” (2003) presents a complicated double vision of two houses, two countries, two cultures, two identities, two generations, two protagonists, two languages and two dialects; still, verbal examples of otherness are very rare (see 4), and there are two references to the inability of one of the narrative voices to speak (15) or comprehend Chinese, according to the second-last sentence of the text: “Of course, I cannot understand a word” (18).

More subtle, but not less important are such interferences in poetry.
They range, as in writings originating in other Canadian minority groups, from the mimetic reproduction of particular speech habits to postmodern explorations of language and identity (Chao, “Dialogue”). An example of the mimetic is to be found, for example, in Jim Wong-Chu’s poem “old Chinese cemetery: kamloops July 1977”; the poet narrates an old man’s memory of a road construction accident caused by a white engineer’s mistake:

the gwai low engineer
       gave wrong instruction
               with the dynamite

“I lucky”
the break in his leg
       did not pop the skin (28)

In the few sentences the old man can pronounce in English, he asks: “Where is my china?”

Sean Gunn in his poem “And Then Something Went” sarcastically points out the deadly racial stereotypes and clichés, introducing some of them into his own text:

here
       suck fortune cookie
                click click

…………
       every day sammy tong houseboy
               one day he find no peter
       sammy tong shoot self in head
                click click
               beep beep (Inalienable Rice)

Canadian writers of other ethnic origin often use stylised, “broken” English when they depict Chinese characters. Andrew Suknaski, a poet of Ukrainian extraction, for example, adopts a phonetic spelling: “commeh bek in coopleh veek time” (19), and introduces his Chinese cook in a stereotypical way that is representative of Western Canadian fiction:
Lien Chao, who was born in China and came to Canada in 1984, has published a collection of bilingual narrative poems, evenly covering Chinese and Canadian spaces, and expressing the author's youth, marriage, and divorce in China and her new life as a Chinese Canadian academic (*Maples and the Stream* 1999). In some of the poems, she expresses her desire to belong to the majority community (“Canada Geese”), which still sees her as part of the Chinatown (105, 117); at the same time, her Mandarin speaking background separates her from the Chinese Canadian community dominated, at least in the past, by the Cantonese culture and dialects: “The truth is, I don’t understand a word in Cantonese” (114). The author uses unsimplified characters in the Chinese versions of the poems, but apparently with many errors, some of them due to the ignorance of Cantonese pronunciation (Jay).

Language as a problem is directly addressed in Laiwan’s poem “The Imperialism of Syntax,” published in *Many Mouthed Birds* in an English and a Chinese version, which often alters the original (Chao *Beyond Silence* 45-46 128ff.). Addressing Chinese immigrants the poet, who herself cannot read Chinese, states:

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you had travelled long and far to be subject to another’s
language,
another’s syntax.
Right away, those rules of grammar were the forgetting of
yourself.
Those letters never pronounced before
Became the subject of your ridicule.
The bitterness on your tongue became hidden in need of
survival
a proof of assimilation
the invisibility of yourself…
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Now you are here
do you remember your syntax, your language
that which would be the remembering of yourself? (57-58)

Laiwan’s most ambiguous feelings about English are explained in her short essay “Ubiquitous China,” in the anthology Yellow Peril (40).

A particular case is the creativity of Fred Wah, of mixed origin, who in his numerous well-received poems, prose poems, narratives, and essays explores in a sophisticated way both postmodern experiments with language and the more traditional search of personal and family roots. In the prose poems of Waiting for Saskatchewan (1985) and the narrative Diamond Grill (1994), and other works, Wah probes into the conflicting feelings of a cosmopolite education and temperament and the nagging need to find a defined place of belonging for one-self, in one’s own mind but as well in society, and explores, with some provocation, the question of being on “the margin” or on “the edge.”\(^9\) When speaking of his family, Wah evokes their special idiolect, which combines English and Chinese phrases with the so-called Chinook jargon and elements of indigenous languages (Hilf 145); he presents his father’s Chinese gambling games and the family’s home-cooked Chinese dishes, usually providing the Chinese names (9, 67, 91, 167; see Hilf 148–49).

Winston Christopher Kam’s play Bachelor Man (1985/87) reconstructs the language spoken by Chinese bachelors in the 1930s, with whole paragraphs of broken sentences (Chao 1997 66–87, esp. 72ff.). A fairly extreme case of imitation of people’s way of speaking is Betty Quan’s play Mother Tongue, written in 1996 and performed a few years ago in Toronto that depicts cultural contacts and conflicts going beyond words, using various English sociolects, Cantonese, and American sign-language.

Local, Canadian born and raised, authors of Chinese descent are sometimes criticized by other Chinese for their imperfect knowledge of the “mother tongue” and greater ease in English (see Ng “Chop Suey” and “Representing”). My colleague Jennifer W. Jay, of the History Department at the University of Alberta, who knows Chinese dialects and classical Mandarin, makes the following observations (“Gold Mountain”):
because their first language is a spoken Cantonese dialect, hybridities of language are created in the texts of the local-born Chinese, as indicated by the scattered appearance of dialect terms. SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* contains a child’s literally translated Taishanese, as in “go die, stinky bitch,” “dead girl bag,” and “how many times ten years” (24, 70). In Denise Chong’s family history, we see confusion in the translation, as when “jook gee Hing” is translated as “fast enough to catch a pig,” when the intended meaning is “Hing, who is gullible and stupid like a pig” (110). Fred Wah’s native Kaiping dialect, sprinkled with Chinook jargon, refreshingly yields two original terms: “high muckamucka” for putting on airs, and “You mucka high” for a crude Cantonese swear phrase. (*Diamond* 68)

It is this hybrid or deficient grasp of the Chinese language that has drawn ridicule to the local-born Chinese as *zhuxin*, hollow bamboo or hollow in Chinese culture. SKY Lee remarks that Hong Kong Chinese similarly look down at the local-born because their Chineseness derived from peasant families, reflecting low-brow culture and low class practices (Go 64). But to the local born writers, not just in Canada but elsewhere, the ability to speak Chinese is not a defining criterion of Chineseness. In fact, Chinese identity is more complex and changes in configuration, as put by Ien Ang: “In short, if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics” (36).

These literary practices display many different features. Their scope and motivation can be very varied. In some cases, the interferences are limited to dialogue or isolated words and expressions; in other cases, the whole text is contaminated with regional Englishes or with the syntax and rhythms of a foreign tongue. The reasons for such deviations from standard language usage may be quite divergent.

In principle, most post-colonial theorists and linguists contend that “all language is localized, heterogeneous and ‘variant’, and that the concept of a Standard English is a construction of imperial rhetoric that
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constantly separates ‘centre’ from ‘margin’” (Ashcroft et al. 148–49). In subverting “standard English,” post-colonial issues are often combined with feminist concerns, but they also involve matters of multicultural-ism, on the level of the state, and pluri-culturalism and cosmopolitan-ism, on the level of the individual.

While the introduction of variant Englishes into fiction and poetry may be considered to have convergent elements in cases of political post-colonial and feminist concerns and aesthetic post-modern practic-es by Anglophone authors from the Commonwealth, the motivation of some minority ethnic writers in Canada, and often in the United States, as we have seen, seems even today to be often different. As expressed by Amy Tan and others, they primarily want to preserve and to do justice to the speaking, thinking and feeling of their family and community, to express with verisimilitude the complex dualities and pluralities of their cultural and social existence, their personal and collective past and present. A poem like Ha Jin’s “The Past” (1996) is a telling example of the intimate struggle between these heterogeneous, often agonistic ele-ments of the immigrant, minority psyche, attempting to find a proper self-image and empowering identity.

Studying the impact of this broad range of linguistic practices and cultural markers on both the implied or “ideal” reader and on empirical, specific communities of readers, one can sharpen the conceptualization of the inquiry by the introduction of methods and ideas developed by polysystem theory (see Dimić et al., Even-Zohar, and Toury), particu-larly in its application to the study of literary translations. Empirical analyses of translations in many languages, past and present, show conclusively that translators make choices and in doing so inevitably adjust the source text according to the linguistic usages and literary norms (repertoires) of the target system. The extent of these transformations and adaptations can be projected on a continuous axis that reaches, on one end, the complete acceptability within the target system, and on the other extreme, the complete adequacy to the original. Well-received translations tend historically to be more “accessible” and “acceptable,” while more “faithful” or “adequate” translations resist or even hinder the standard reading experience.
Seen in this perspective, literary works by most writers who are not of Anglo-American extraction and do not fully identify with the dominant, “mainstream” language and culture, including, therefore, most ethnic and minority authors and almost all Chinese Canadian authors consulted by me, can be similarly placed on such an axis. Their works would occupy points on this axis from “very readable” or “accessible” and “acceptable” texts to those more reflective of the complexity of immigrant psychology and life and, for this reason, requiring various degrees of multilingual and multicultural competence. To readers lacking this competence, which in North America and beyond probably include most Anglo-Americans, plus the peoples belonging to other nationalities and races, these texts would, firstly, represent different degrees of obstacles, of obscurities, and ambiguities; secondly, while this resistance may attract certain readers, it excludes and irritates others.

It would seem, at first sight, that such texts could find their implied or ideal readers in members of the same ethnic, here Chinese, community, especially if they were similarly raised and educated as the author in question. Others would be apparently left on the outside, at least from time to time and to some extent (Giltrow). Plausible as this conclusion may appear at first, it has only a limited validity. Increasingly, Chinese Canadian authors are not only speaking for their collectivity but for their individual selves. They are in a more obvious way attracting attention to the diversity and complexity of such an omnibus term as “Chinese.” In their plots and characters, but as well in the language and in the cultural references, they point out the regional differences of the various parts of China and of the disparate areas of Chinese Diaspora; they foreground differences of class, authority, politics, and education; they insist on generational, age, and especially gender tensions and conflicts. These attitudes, in addition to the further de-homogenization of the implied audience, may provoke diverse reactions even within the supposed “family,” among readers belonging to the same or the supposedly same community. Typical examples can be found in the writings of SKY Lee, Larissa Lai, Lydia Kwa, and Fred Wah, authors who are otherwise of quite divergent educational and general backgrounds. But even Wayson Choy, often considered as mildly conservative and idealizing
in his pictures from Chinatown, when read carefully, does not hide the plurality of Chinese immigrant experiences and the struggles and tensions within a traditional Chinese family.

The more postmodern authors, mentioned before, who use postmodern narrative devices and sometimes those of magic realism, who embrace forms of radical feminism, express not only the well-known racial and economic conflicts between the immigrants and the dominant Canadian society, but also the internal vertical (class and gender) and horizontal (geographic) cleavages among the Chinese. They strongly challenge many traditional Chinese (patriarchal and Confucian) attitudes about gender, heterosexuality, and other social and family power relations, often preferring the more liberal standards of modern Canadian (and Western) society (Hilf 55–59 and Jay, “Writing”). They freely reinterpret or transform traditional Chinese culture: a distinct example is, for instance, Larissa Lai’s handling of the legendary fox figure and of Daoist transformation processes in general. They present texts full of hybridities in culture, identity, and language. Being provocatively personal and individual, these and other writers subvert not only the habits and prejudices (and the lack of adequate knowledge) of many readers “from the outside,” but equally the horizon of expectation of readers belonging to the so called “in group.”

In this paper, and a larger project conducted in collaboration with my colleague at Shih Hsin University, Professor Peng-hsiang Chen, the heuristic hypothesis is that, in addition to “imitations of life” and strictly artistic experimentation, this marked, foregrounded use of languages is part of the Chinese Canadian writers’ attempts to find and create a Self using a constant element of transgression of Anglophone “mainstream” values. These writers transgress linguistic norms and often those of Anglo-American literature: there is an underlying tension between their attempt to depict their own, or their group’s “real” life experience, negating in their mimetic efforts the silence and stereotypes of Anglophone representations, and, in some of them at least, their postmodern being, with its multicultural and intra-cultural position. They always transgress cultural norms; they sometimes transgress the law of the land. They in addition transgress the expectations of the
(imaginary) “mainstream” reader (often white, Christian, European, if not WASP).

Quite importantly, this predominant transgression in the nature of ethnic writing and its use of language can be demonstrated in the artistic activity of other such groups in Canada and elsewhere. This phenomenon helps explain both the great attention this literature is receiving and the malaise many feel in reading it: it is a literature of challenge, often of fragmentation, even exclusion, and while, on the one hand, it makes the different racial, national, cultural, and religious communities better known to each other, it does not, on the other hand, necessarily foster a new, harmonious unity. It is a literature characterized by its openly or covertly agonistic character, challenging the host society but also ancestral traditions, a literature asking for change, itself constantly changing.

Notes
1 See Kim, Ling, Lim and Ling, Wong, and Cheung and Yogi.
2 See Chao, “Anthologizing” and Beyond Silence, Hilf, Miki, and Miska.
3 According to reports by Statistics Canada, during 1951–1970 Chinese immigrants did not belong to the top eight ethnic/national groups joining this country; for 1971–1980 immigrants from the People’s Republic of China occupy the seventh rank and those from Hong Kong the eighth. In 1981–1990 immigrants from Hong Kong occupy the first place and those from the People’s Republic of China the fifth. In the most recent report, for 1991–2001, the first place is occupied by immigrants from the People’s Republic of China, the fourth by those from Hong Kong, and the seventh by those from Taiwan. Right now the break-down by ethnicity includes over one third of all Canadians who avoid that question by declaring themselves to be “Canadian”; other groups follow in this order: English, French, Scottish, Irish, German, Italian, and Chinese—in the seventh place among declared ethnic origins, ahead of such important Canadian groups as the Ukrainian, Aboriginal, Dutch, Polish, and East Indians. These summaries were presented in Taipei by Professor Eleanor Ty. More can be found on the website of Statistics Canada: <www.statscan.ca>. Demographers predict that the Chinese immigrants will soon reach a population of two million and that in the greater Vancouver area more children entering primary school will have Mandarin and Cantonese as their mother tongue than English.
4 See O’Reilly (63–64); Bardolph, (25, 30–31, 44ff., 49–58); and Dimić.
5 See Dasenbrock 13–14.
6 See Chao, Beyond Silence 102–3.
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7 See Hilf and Chao (96–97; see also 119).
8 Ng places Kwa’s novel in the context both of Chinese Canadian writing and of works by ethnic Chinese writers from South East Asia.
9 See Chao, “Dialogue” (12–29), and Hilf (137–55); also Derksen and McCaffery, “Anti-Phonics” and “Death.”

Works Cited
Milan V. Dimić


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—. “Two Houses and an Airplane.” Chao and Wong-Chu. 1–18.
“A knife through time”:
Robert Sullivan’s Star Waka and the
Politics and Poetics of Cultural Difference
Chris Prentice

Media coverage of cultural and economic matters in Aotearoa-New Zealand strongly indicates that Maori—and more broadly Pacific—cultures are ‘hot properties’ in national and international music, literature, fashion, art, décor, and cuisine, not to mention sport and tourism. Yet Maori political discourses identify continued disadvantage and discrimination facing Maori people, while non-Maori political discourses remain divided between those committed to rectifying the legacies of colonial dispossession, and those who would draw a line under the putative past to move into an implicitly assimilative future. The space that opens between these various political positions and the celebration of Maori and Pacific cultures nationally and internationally is a critical space of contemporary cultural politics in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and one that Robert Sullivan’s 1999 poetry collection Star Waka actively occupies and engages.

Published on the eve of the new millennium, Star Waka enacts a poetics of liminality that urges a rethinking of the relationship between the cultural politics of representation, cultural decolonization, and indigeneity at the interface of the postcolonial and the global. The collection explores the question of what can serve as cultural reference points for Maori, individually and collectively, in a bicultural postcolonial nation-state as the third millennium witnesses an intensification of the processes and perspectives of globalization, with their ambivalent implications for Maori agency in decolonization. More implicitly, it poses questions about the very notion of culture as a reference point at this juncture. While the identification of cultural reference points is pursued by way of a structuring star-waka-ocean motif (discussed below) that governs the collection, the question of culture as a reference point may be inferred
from the metonymic references to the kinds of work the term ‘culture’ has been required to perform across the historical and political spectrum of discourses since colonization.

I argue that by reading together the desire for, and the problematization of, the stabilizing force of culture at the intersection of the postcolonial and the global, Star Waka can be seen to offer an intervention into a global cultural market that figures diversity as a positive resource at the same time as it needs to extinguish the threats of alterity. Importantly, however, Sullivan’s intervention—indeed the wider postcolonial project of cultural decolonization—is necessarily implicated in this problematized desire, this ambivalence.

As a collection of poems, Star Waka invokes the “ungatherable” aspects of culture, a turning away from systematization, totalization, and appropriation as/in consumable, assimilable images. Paradoxically, this refusal takes place within a literary genre that comprises images and imagery. Even when its ‘content’ appears metonymic with regard to the social and political reality it engages, however, the poetic image proposes a metaphoric relation to reality, culture, and identity. This metaphorical relation plays across the terms of similarity and difference. It interrupts and displaces, rather than continues, the practices and legacies of capture and containment of the Pacific by visual and verbal image-makers—explorers, missionaries, painters, ethnographers, writers, photographers, and tourists—whose images have been accorded metonymic status in colonizing and postcolonial discourses alike.

Star Waka undoubtedly manifests the degree of formal and thematic diversity that invites its assessment as a representation of the heterogeneity of Maori cultural identity, itself a plurality of identities, as discussed in Dieter Riemenschneider’s primarily spatial reading of the collection’s treatment of the interaction of the local and the global. Poems invoke the mythic, legendary, and historical pasts of Polynesia and Europe, including voyages of discovery, settlement, and colonization; the oral, literary and other artistic histories and heritages of regional cultures; local, regional and international political and social formations; the Maori renaissance, international indigenous alliances, and the economic reforms of the late twentieth century that offer new forms of agency for some
Maori, while impacting harshly on the rural and urban proletariat, the
poor and unemployed. There are poems that explore the cyberworlds of
e-mail and the Internet (eg. 39 A wave), and that articulate space travel
fantasies (iv 2140AD; 46). Some poems are primarily visual, concrete
works (Waka 29 waka taua; 53), some offer quiet and intimate family
moments (47; 48 (Bright 1)), and some articulate mythic and historical
voices (Waka 87; Waka 88; Waka 89 and others).

This pluralist, additive evocation of range, however, misses the dis-
junctive, interruptive temporality of the images that comprise the
works. It is not simply a variety among/across mythic time, historical
time, colonial time, or past, present and future, or indeed across local,
regional, global, galactic and cyber-spaces. Instead, each spatio-tempo-
rality is constitutively haunted by others. The complex fi guration of
space and time renders many of the images and references uncanny—
strangely (un)familiar—for readers attuned to the mythologies, histories,
and socio-political present of Aotearoa-New Zealand. On one level,
it complicates the binary terms of the conventional bicultural relation
of Maori and Pakeha [settler] by drawing out the threads of difference
within each—their multiple heritages and histories, their past, present
and future networks of fi liation and affi liation, and indeed the complex
dimensions of subjective and collective experience buried under those
identifi cations. Yet the liminality of Star Waka’s spatial and temporal
location and its affective and eff ective ambivalence further evoke the cut-
ting edge of cultural difference—“a knife through time” (i)—beyond
diversity or heterogeneity. It is, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s words, “not
a celebration of fragmentation, bricolage, pastiche or the ‘simulacrum,’”
But rather “a vision of social contradiction and cultural difference—as
the disjunctive space of modernity” (238). I read Star Waka as exempli-
fi cing Bhabha’s insistence that

Cultural difference does not simply represent the contention
between oppositional contents or antagonistic traditions of
cultural value. Cultural difference introduces into the process
of cultural judgement and interpretation that sudden shock
of the successive non-synchronous time of signifi cation...
Designations of cultural difference interpellate forms of identity which, because of their continual implication in other symbolic systems, are always “incomplete” or open to cultural translation. (162–63)

The cutting edge of cultural difference can be related to Bhabha’s contentious concept of hybridity, not simply as the ontological (syncretic) outcome of the literal and figurative encounters and exchanges depicted in the poems, but also in the sense of the complex interruptive space-time that neither fixes nor multiplies, but de/constitutes or de/constructs the image, the poem, the collection. The political effect of such ambivalence attains specific significance in relation to the challenges facing decolonization of (a) culture posed by the contemporary proliferation of images in the name of (self-) representation, taken as the sign of agency within globalization. Bhabha posits the hybridization of English authority and English presence in the encounter with colonial space and its native inhabitants, renders it ambivalent, a “split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (107), with repetition pointing to temporal, and difference to spatial, movements or displacements. However, his argument concerning the presence of the symbol of cultural authority—the colonial “English book” as the “surface that stabilizes the agonistic colonial space”—calls for extension in the postcolonial context where the postcolonial (counter)claims of originality articulated by the indigenous (post)colonized manifestly split and double all expressions of cultural presence or identity (110). Not only do two ‘surfaces’ vie for the stabilization of postcolonial space, each ostensibly in contestation with the other, but the postcolonial dynamics of hybridity destabilize even those identity claims, invocations of presence, and articulations of original authority made from the cultural space of indigeneity.

Further, the political significance of postcolonial indigenous “effects of presence” is transforming in ways that demand a contemporary (re)assessment of the full import of hybridity. Expressions of Maori cultural identity have served to sustain both individual and collective agency. As the means of producing and disseminating such expressions
have, however, expanded so dramatically with the developments of visual media and the intensification of market logics under globalization, the political stakes may lie more in an interruption of, rather than the feeding of the circulation of images. Accession to the “logic of the signifier” threatens to divert contemporary objects of cultural value, turning them into objects of (global) cultural demand (Bhabha 119), problematizing any claim to cultural cohesion other than through market access and attachment. Indeed, global cultural commodification seeks to resolve the disjunctive time of modernity whose hybridity at least offers space for otherness to articulate itself, even if it does not unify into a ‘self.’ In this context, then, there is renewed importance in Bhabha’s insistence that “the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply *there* to be seen or appropriated,” and that the cultural symbol “retains its presence, but it is no longer a representation of an essence; it is now a partial presence, a (strategic) device in a specific [post]colonial engagement, an appurtenance of authority” (114–15). Such claims, developed with regard to a colonial context, now come to suggest a postcolonial logic of resistance to cultural appropriation, commodification within a global market, to point to a politics of elusiveness, a veritable *trompe l’œil*.

*Star Waka* intervenes and disrupts the (self-)presence and availability of identity-images on two levels: the spatio-temporal liminality that informs the collection on a structural level is extended in the hybridity of specific poetic images. In this way it dramatizes the problems and the politics of cultural identity, whose celebration and interrogation call up and indelibly mark each other. Liminality, with its implications of transition and process, is figured formally in the collection’s construction by way of the waka-ocean-star motif—each poem containing one or more of these figures, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively—which I argue is also an image of metaphor itself, and like translation, involves ‘carrying with’ or ‘carrying across’. The tripartite structure consisting of a vehicle or vessel (the waka), a medium across which it travels (the ocean), and the reference point for navigation or guidance (the star), echoes the structure of metaphor that consists of tenor, vehicle and
ground, where the tenor (subject) is carried by the vehicle (analogous image or object) by way of the ground (the mediating term, the basis for comparison, that draws the tenor and vehicle together). While the terms of the tripartite structure do not map exactly on to one another, my point concerns the structure itself, and the insistence on three terms, offering mediation and movement, rather than an unmediated two-term likeness between one element and another that collapses them into one, subsuming the difference that separates them. Both metaphor and translation represent the ambivalence of presence—splitting and doubling the linguistic or cultural sign, destabilizing the terms that comprise it. The openness of movement points to a resistance to the order of self-same identity, challenging the binary oppositions of essentialized presence and absence, subject and object, identity and difference. These oppositions continue to privilege the former and, while holding them out as the prizes of all political struggles for freedom, depend upon the continued construction of the latter within violent relations of power.

The collection comprises 101 poems (the first, a karakia—prayer or incantation—unnamed), and 2001 lines, invoking the millennial moment it spans in both time (date of publication on the threshold of a new century and a new millennium) and space (the Pacific as the site for the first dawning of the year 2000). The poems articulate this spatio-temporal threshold with a constant theme of voyaging. Along with the voyages of migration and settlement of Maori from the mythic Polynesian homeland of Hawaiki—as figured in the opening *He karakia timatanga* and in poem *i*, and back to which the whakapapa or genealogies carry their descendants in Aotearoa—many other voyagers, past, present and future, traverse the work: from Odysseus (*Waka 88*), Kupe, the legendary discoverer of Aotearoa (*Waka 69 Kupe; Waka 86*), and European colonizers and settlers (*Waka 87*), to urban drifters (*x Goldie (1)*) and space travellers (*46; iv 2140AD*). While attending to the geographical, historical and social specificity of Aotearoa-New Zealand, the collection responds in its very structure to the opening of all bounded forms to the effects of international, global and even galactic flows.

While there are three numbering systems employed for the poems, some with additional titles and some without, the systems leak into each
other, preventing the bounded definition of each and thus present the secure mapping of the collection into discrete sections. This fluidity unsettles the very structure it invokes, demonstrating the dialectic of location and movement, the transformative encounters between ocean and beach that define and dissolve the coastline, just as image, poem, collection and cultural context enter into dynamic relations of exchange and mutual transformation. Fluidity, in turn, invokes the oceanic medium across which Polynesian and European voyagers made their journeys, as well as the transactions and exchanges of the contact zones. However, the connotations of fluidity as even, smooth, and able to find a natural balance—connotations that ideologically invest many discourses on globalization, or ‘global flows’—are complicated by imagery of chaotic ocean weathers. The latter serve as reminders that transactions and exchanges were, and are, rarely across equal terms and understandings, and the flows of peoples, goods, wealth, and ideas are similarly shaped by the forces of political economy. Similarly, the poems register the different ‘weathers’ of personal, social and political life, not by naturalizing them but by politicizing ‘climate’ itself, depicting forces that are increasingly difficult to see (other than in their effects), to locate, to control or indeed to evade, as globalization effects forms of dispersal without dismantling inequities and injustices. In *Waka 57 El Nino Waka* we read of

> a compass based on currents, such was the reliability of the sea. Today the sea is unreliable.

...  
> El Nino has burst into the sea as rapidly as it has burst into our popular culture and our livelihoods: droughts and floods and storms around the rim of the Pacific (64)  

The poetic images through the collection acknowledge and critique—whether seriously or satirically, in a subdued or vociferous tone—the kinds of systems of power/knowledge and representation that have underpinned imperialism and colonialism, the assimilative or discrimina-
tory nation-state, and neo-imperial military and economic interests, all dependent on the construction of spaces and peoples as knowable, mappable, penetrable, conquerable, consumable. This mapping and penetration, and its implication in power politics, is invoked in the gridlines—cartographic and political—implied in poem 43:

The South Pacific Forum met recently in Rarotonga
CHOGM meets soon—they’ve readmitted Fiji
The powerful and the powerless
Across (internationally) and vertically (internally).
Power is on show in Polynesia regularly. (47)

Here the term “power” brings together space and politics, ambivalent evocations of modernity’s enlightenment project, and its pairing of “powerful” and “powerless” (found also, for example, in poem xxv power/powerlessness, and poem 46), is connotatively echoed in the image of power “on show” in Polynesia “regularly”: the former phrase encompassing senses of both openness (or accountability) and control (through the spectacle of power) in display. The implicit grid-mapping image of power (“across” and “vertically,” “internationally” and “internally”) is interrupted by the semantic ambivalence that haunts the affirmative images. Further, the prosaic language of the first two lines, culminating in the political acronym CHOGM—a figure of language fully reduced to instrumental efficiency—is challenged by the play of meanings that confuse or even ‘short’ the semantic circuitry in the rest of the poem, where no term is amenable to a single and transparent interpretation. Thus the poem ultimately eludes containment within its own invocation of grids, maps and power.

While these structures are thematized and visually evoked in 43, other poems deal with relations between power and knowledge systems as they construct or inscribe place and identity within power relations (see xii Independence Day), and the engagement with the authority of European visual representations of Maori in xxxiv Goldie (2):

The ancestors in the portraits
look grim, with few exceptions.
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The ones in *Arrival*
look destitute. I cannot speak

as a direct descendant
of a Goldie subject,
as my ancestors were depicted
by Lindauer.9 (38)

These final two stanzas of the poem suggest the virtually ubiquitous reach of European powers of representation a domination that inevitably occludes the space to articulate other knowledges (see also x Goldie (1) and xxxv). Despite its concern to assert Maori specificity, however, the collection most effectively contests colonizing ways of knowing not by replacing them, but by interrupting, disrupting the temporal unity and fixity of representational knowledge-claims.

*Star Waka* invokes grids and structures, only to reveal their instability by means of a palimpsest of temporalities. Each term of the structuring metaphor that governs the collection—star-waka-ocean—is hybridized in specific poetic images. In the rest of this analysis, I take each metaphor in turn to show how it is a term of translation as well as in various ways in translation, its multiple iterations not simply calling up multiple referents but opening up any one of them to the play of time. In using mostly the English-language word ‘star’ rather than Maori ‘whetu,’ the linguistic sign calls up celestial, navigational, and cosmological associations, and in more recent idiomatic English it serves as a term of affirmation and refers to the product of the postmodern entertainment industry, circulating as media image. Stars have also become “tagged for domination” (*Waka 16 Kua wheturangitia koe*) in the era of space travel and futuristic dreams of conquest and colonization. What links these various meanings is their common invocation in systems of guidance or direction, but within irresolvably different cultural ontologies and epistemologies: the early voyagers navigated by the stars, and as stars are said to be the ancestors who have returned to Hawaiki after death, they offer ancestral guidance to the living: “yet stars are/ancestors/they are stars/our ancestors/and we will be stars” (*Waka 16 Kua wheturangi-*)
tia koe). The cosmological merges linguistically with the idiomatic and postmodern (image) senses of ‘star,’ but this combination is an unstable conflation of radically incompatible terms. This poem meditates on the challenges facing Maori as these sources of guidance are literally blanked out “where the power/of the land powers/a mechanical culture,” where “we are vacuumed into this/culture of menace to the land,” a disen-chanted “culture of dead capitals . . . a culture that knows/no bounda-
ries/has only prophecies called strategies”:

And stars look down on this and eyes
Of divinities
Look down on stars
And eyes
Of the powerless look up

But only at night
When machines
Lighten blackness
When many stars
Are lost in the lightning

Except in papakainga
From tops of pa
From middle of ocean (20)

Only the specific Maori spaces of village and fortress, the historical medium of ocean, are sufficiently far from the over-powered, over-lightened world to allow the people to see their ancestral guides any more—an observation with metaphysical implications.

In poem viii No, the lines “yet waka searches for star/among all people/who have become stars” allude to both looking to the ancestors for guidance and navigation, and at the same time to the problems of leadership and direction in the face of a postmodern culture of the image. The latter can be extended, with reference to other works in the collection, to the larger question of participation in the bureaucratic structures that shape and represent ‘Maori culture’ in the post-1980s
era. However, the ambivalence of these lines relates both to the semantic palimpsest, where each reading is haunted by an other—neither is fully present or fully absent—and also to the temporal effect of hybridity where the ‘present’ is disjunctive, split by other temporalities. There can be no choice between them, nor can they be added together as each also interrupts the other. This is the ambivalent time of cultural difference that characterizes the postcolonial moment. The postmodern moment of Maori stardom is evoked in the poem *xxv power/powerlessness*, the title itself questioning the images that follow:

```
waka cuts it Maori in magazines
remarkable sensational
sports stars
Maori models wear groovy fashion
single studded ears indigenous beauty
at the second Maori expo
dark green lipstick
sips from silver
coffee cups (29)
```

The striking image in the final three lines turns the references to fashion and commerce throughout the poem into a late twentieth-century picture of glamour, marketable indigenous beauty. But the choice of colours also evokes the native forest of dark green trees and ferns, and silver running streams against an implied brown earth, or perhaps drops of moisture onomatopoeically suggested in the repeated ‘(i)ps’ sound of “lipstick,” “sips,” and “cups.” In this way, the Maori woman as image of fashionable beauty also suggests the woman as Papatuanuku,
or Earth Mother, and if this metaphor holds, it is undecidable which serves as the referent for the other in the poem. Whether tradition guides and grounds Maori participation in postmodernity, or whether the postmodern appropriates tradition: this uncertainty pervades the poems in the collection. Poem 54 waka rorohiko is similarly concerned about the impact of individualizing technologies such as computers for Maori culture, traditionally sustained by the primacy of collective face-to-face encounter: “without this unity our collective knowledge/dissipates into cults of personality.” This poem also points to the multivalence of ‘waka,’ the second term in the metaphorical triad that informs the collection.

Through its various invocations, ‘waka’ articulates a range of temporalities in interruptive and ambivalent relation to each other. Although often translated as ‘canoe’ (contested with reference to the size of the vessels in xvii Some definitions and a note on orthography), it refers also to the crews who made the originary voyages, settling different regions of Aotearoa, and whose descendants trace their ancestry back to a particular waka—also, therefore, to the people of the specific waka-descent. In other words, waka refers to ancestors and descendants as each is contained in the other, both ‘vehicles’ for the reproduction and transmission of cultural identity. In poem i, we are told

In ancient days navigators sent waka between.
Now, our speakers send us on waka. Their memories,
memory of people in us, invite, spirit,
compel us aboard, to home government, to centre (3)

These lines evoke the journeys between the islands of Polynesia described by Epeli Hau’ofa, the movement, arrival and settlement of Maori in Aotearoa, now remembered in marae oratory as whakapapa, recalls links to the migratory waka, and the memory of this cultural history harnesses collective political agency. The line “Star waka is a knife through time” could be seen as expressing the complexity of time and space that characterizes the collection, as knives generally bear traces of all they have passed through. Similarly, the choice of diction at certain points causes the image to oscillate between historical moments and referents:
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Hear sounds of waka knifing time—auē, again, what belongs to water belongs to blood. Crews leap aboard leap out, with songs of relations and care to send them. Whole families have journeyed here, they continue the line. The bottom line is to know where to go—Star points. (3)

This passage could refer to ancestral journeys to Aotearoa, to the history of whaling in the Pacific, to the arrival of colonizers and settlers from Britain, as the connotations of “blood” include family, life and death, myth and history—once again invoking the pervasive theme of direction, guidance and leadership condensed in the image of ‘star’. The reference to continuing the line, supplemented by “the bottom line,” carries the genealogical reference across to one of accounting, conflating print, narrative and of course economics. Poem vii Reconnaissance is similarly a temporal palimpsest signalled by key choices of diction, as the legendary preparations for the waka migrations and the industrial work of forestry (in which many Maori have been employed), fleets of waka and logs transported in fleets of trucks, are both possible readings of the same images, despite their radical temporal and cultural disjuncture.

A waka is also a box or container in which precious items are kept, such as huia feathers in a waka huia, while Waka Huia is also the name of a television program that screens weekly in Maori language on Television One, the New Zealand channel that seeks to culturally define the nation (‘us’) through its charter (see Waka 56 A Double-Hulled Waka ii). One poem refers to a Honda waka; aeroplanes are waka, and spacecraft are fantasized as space waka. Poem 54 waka rorohiko refers to a computer (a box containing precious material, and loosely translatable as ‘electric brain box’) on which the speaker has found a database containing whakapapa, traditionally produced and transmitted collectively and orally. While ‘waka’ functions as a base for the conceptual as well as linguistic translation of ‘computer’ into Maori, it would be too simple to see this as an assimilation of technology into Maori language, or reconciliation between modern machinery and traditional Maori concepts.
Sullivan’s poetic persona is caught in the midst of the complex time of cultural difference, and so cannot distance fully from it, resulting in a poignant ambivalence and contradiction: the librarian Sullivan, whose culture of “access for all, no matter who, how/why” is paid his “respects”; the Sullivan of Maori ancestry, who is concerned about (implicitly paradoxical) “tapu/information” on the internet: tapu connotes the sacred or restricted, while information exists by virtue of access and circulation. He asks what the “big Western principle stressing/egalitarianism” means for “Maori knowledge,” whose collective passing down ensures unity. This tension is not resolved.

The collection—understood as the poem, Star Waka—is in itself a waka, a poetic waka or waka of poetry, and of the poet’s waka or genealogy. The many primarily personal poems about family, friends, memories (v Honda waka; xv Sullivan Whanau; xxx; 40; 47; 48 (Bright 1); 52; Waka 73 Gone Fishing) testify that the collection is a vehicle and container of treasured things that link the poet to ancestry, whanau, culture and words. Further, Star Waka is self-consciously structured, aware of itself as a poetry sequence, of its craft or artistry as a contrapuntal intervention into European recorded history, so that in Waka 56 A Double-Hulled Waka, we read “and so this waka has passed its/thousandth line,” and in Waka 94, “I am Tane Mahuta—and not offended/to be introduced at this late stage.” Even more strikingly with its reference to the print medium, the final poem Waka 100 begins, “Stroke past line 1642/into European time. Stroke past 1769/and the introduction of the West//Stroke on the approach to 1835/and formal Northern Maori sovereignty.” Yet the print medium and references to the introduction of European historical time (Abel Tasman’s ‘discovery,’ Captain Cook’s arrival, the Maori Declaration of Independence) contain echoes of the rhythm of the stroke-call to propel the waka, another temporality obeying rhythmic rather than linear, progressive, historical-clock time. However, this strategy also prevents direct recourse back to tradition, identity and authenticity—what Bhabha would call the pedagogical time of culture—other than as cut across by the performative act of enunciation or articulation. Even assertions of Maori cultural identity are haunted by the interruption implied in the need to make them. Not
The least of *Star Waka’s* gestures of self-referentiality as a poetic waka is the numerous poetic intertexts it invokes. However, these point to the notion of ocean, the third term of the triad, suggesting a medium in, through or over which the collection journeys.

When it is not figured literally, ocean as medium is suggested figuratively in images of other waterways or fluids/fluidity, such as blood (blood ties, blood spilt), as well as in the concerns with language as medium, and the histories and politics of English and *te reo* Maori, with orature and print. It is also implicit in spatial concerns with land, outer space and cyberspace as mediums through which Maori representations and images are projected and circulated. Indeed, as well as the problems of waka rorohiko discussed earlier, Sullivan refers to such technologies as integral to the construction of international indigenous alliances, forged through “the NativeNet email discussion list” (see 39 A wave). Even the notion of ‘context’ could be an inflection of the oceanic metaphor, as it invokes the medium through which things (or meanings) travel.

In poems contemplating the politics of language, Sullivan problematizes attempts at fixity of meaning in the context of cultural difference. At the same time, he shows context itself to be a hybrid and unstable term. In xvii *Some definitions and a note on orthography*, he notes that “it is still very/difficult to procure word processors”

that have a set of macronised vowels
and subeditors who do not pluralise
Maori loan words although most have
ceased italicising them
to give a sense of inclusion
in one context

in the other context
it is for purposes
of pacification (21)

The senses of integration and assimilation, participation and absorption that constitute the term “inclusion” cannot be resolved by reference to the putatively stabilizing concept of “context.” “Pacification” bears both
the literal meaning of suppressing resistance as well as the interruptive echo of the assertion of a Pacific identity. Context itself, like ‘the local,’ remains ambivalently caught between times and spaces that inhabit the postcolonial moment of cultural difference.

This theme is continued in the next poem, xviii Similitude, whose title invokes the senses of similarity, the poetic trope of simile, and the threat of assimilation. Likening the fact that “Mangere’s/ancient stone fields/ have a sewerage pipe/cut through them” to “sticking a pipe through Stonehenge,” he insists

  don’t you think it is wrong?
  who thinks it is right?
  is this extraordinary?

  we are told ordinariness
  is the standard in justice—
  yet the word Maori
  means ordinary (21)

This poem calls up the question of norms, standards and justice, all terms to which Western modernity’s project of universal enlightenment has appealed, but values nevertheless undercut by its own colonial processes of imposing them on others, and possibly further challenged by contemporary appeals to market forms of value. Bhabha asks, “what is modernity in those colonial conditions where its imposition is itself the denial of historical freedom, civic autonomy and the ‘ethical’ choice of refashioning?” (241). Poem 50, whose epigraph is Shakespeare’s “It is the star to every wand’ring bark,/whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken” is similarly concerned with questions of value(s), asking “What is gallantry these days/but by Mistsubishi?” It proceeds to interrogate the notion of ‘justice’—natural, legal, political—with biting irony:

  we watch and wait for justice. Justice
  for inclusion in the proletariat. Justice
  for compliance by salary. Justice
  for revoking our guardianship of all
  the eye can see in the imposition
of adversarial law. Justice for our apathy.
Justice the person who sits at the bench.

We wait for the Justice bus
.
.
.
.
.
.
Why turn and face the sun, knowing
That justice is going to run you down? (55)

Textuality, and indeed poetry more specifically, serves as another ocean of reference. Waka 76 begins, “Tangaroa slams his pint on the bar, ’Gissa nother,’ he hisses,” where both the demotic setting and diction, and the specific abbreviation “gissa” is reminiscent of the major Maori poet Hone Tuwhare’s poem, “Sun o (2),” which begins, “Gissa smile Sun,” along with his general invocation of male camaraderie. However, not all poetic intertexts are from New Zealand: in Waka 98, images of paper cut-out waka are followed by the question, “what dread hand shaped your fearful symmetry?” and in the following lines waka is addressed as “tiger of the sea carrying deities/to an empty land filled with fur seals,” both calling up Blake’s “The Tyger.”

Many poems in the collection undoubtedly articulate and affirm Maori cultural identity and traditions. Thus, in Waka 56 A Double-Hulled Waka (ii):

Make moko in the wrinkles
warriors for ourselves, for our people,
leaping from pits into bright daylight
defying the culture of the death
of our culture. (63)

My argument neither denies these claims, nor takes such affirmations at face value—though perhaps in another sense it takes them precisely and solely at face value, without anchoring them to essential and timeless truths. Commenting on the Algerian writer Frantz Fanon, Bhabha points out that

Fanon recognizes the crucial importance, for subordinated peoples, of asserting their indigenous cultural traditions and
retrieving their repressed histories. But he is far too aware of the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures to recommend that “roots” be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing the history of the present. (9)

Instead, the poetic expressions of Maori cultural identity are unavoidably produced from, and articulate the split time of, postcolonial cultural difference. They are iterative, “signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction—that takes you ‘beyond’ yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present” (Bhabha 3). In this way, the hybridity of the images or poems is not an index of the failure of political agency, but the condition for a truly transformative intervention into a totalizing present that presumes to cast both past and future in its own image. Two poems in the collection present speculative accounts of globalized futures, one dystopian and the other utopian, and in each case it is the movement of return to, and reinscription of, the cultural present of Aotearoa-New Zealand that constitutes the political intervention.

The first, *iv 2140AD*, is set 300 years after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, but the technological futurism—“Waka reaches for stars—mission control clears us for launch/and we are off to check the guidance system/personally”—is undercut by its reflection of recent and contemporary social and political concerns. In fact, even the pursuit of sovereignty is presented against a knowledge of self as Maori—looking to the stars, ancestors, gods, for guidance—already inflected through nineteenth-century western anthropological discourses: “Some gods are Greek to us Polynesians,/who have lost touch with the Aryan mythology,” and further, through a twentieth-century relativization and Disneyfication of culture more generally: “but we recognise ours and others—Ranginui and his cloak,/and those of us who have seen Fantasia know Diana.” The ‘mission,’ “to consult with the top boss,/to ask for sovereignty and how to get this/from policy into action back home,” is expressed through the diction of 1990s New Zealand bureaucratic cor-
poratization that reshaped even Maori forms of social and political collectivity.¹¹ The problems of persistent inequality that shadow this rise of managerialism, and that serve as a warning against uncritical Maori participation in it, are depicted in the rest of the poem:

Just then the rocket runs out of fuel—
we didn’t have enough cash for a full tank—
so we drift into an orbit we cannot escape from
until a police escort vessel tows us back

and fines us the equivalent of the fiscal envelope
signed a hundred and fifty years ago.

They confiscate the rocket ship, the only thing
all the iwi agreed to purchase with the last down payment. (7)

These lines are rich with political and historical resonance, and play across connotations of both corporate Maori collectivity and the banal realities of everyday life for those who cannot pay for a full tank; cash payment for rocket fuel jars with the rise of credit and electronic financial transactions that characterise a global econosphere. Similarly, the police escort and fine suggests the disproportionate degree of involvement with police experienced among Maori. The penalty fine cancels out the “fiscal envelope,” which refers to a once-and-for-all monetary payment to iwi—tribes—proposed by a National Party government (and rejected by Maori) as the resolution of all grievances and claims brought under the Treaty of Waitangi. The ‘confiscation’ of the rocket ship echoes colonial government confiscations of Maori land as retribution for resistance to colonization, and offers an ironic comment on the pointless and implicitly divisive effect of accepting monetary compensation for the injustices of colonial history, and doing so within the formal context of social and cultural reconstruction effected by corporatization.

In relation to the space-time of postcolonial globalization, however, the poem’s most significant trope is that of “drift[ing] into an orbit we cannot escape from.” It captures the sense of entrapment by, and endless circling round, the colonial moment which, no matter how far out from
that centre the rocket reaches, it is held in the same orbit around the same centre. In this way, 2140AD is just a 300-years-later recycling of the same historical processes and relations. The orbital image points to a political failure to articulate cultural difference; in Bhabha’s terms, “The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation” (7). However, the poem itself reveals what Bhabha expresses when he writes that “the present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence; our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities” (4). In this way, iv 2140AD’s representation of the continual recycling of past and future as an immutable, essential present is itself an intervention that estranges the present from itself. It is with this point that I return to the argument that Star Waka’s hybridity is an interruption to the production and circulation of identity-images feeding a global cultural market in diversity. The collection’s metaphoric structure, the metaphoric relation to the material, social present, illustrates Bhabha’s contention that “the move . . . from the material to the metaphoric, is not a smooth passage of transition and transcendence. The ‘middle passage’ of contemporary culture . . . is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience” (5).

Poem 46 also takes a speculative global perspective, though it presents an ironic utopia, in contrast to iv 2140AD’s ironic dystopia. It begins:

it is feasible that we will enter

space
colonise planets call our spacecraft waka

perhaps name them after the first fleet
erect marae transport carvers renew stories
with celestial import (50)

Dieter Riemenschneider has described 46’s “vision of a paradise in outer space [that] might be read as fractured in a double ironical revision
of the European ‘canoes’ utopian search for paradise in the expanse of
the Pacific”, where—presumably by the logic of analogy that undercuts
the vision of a different colonization—“the waka’s travelling into space
may end by exporting and being tied down to our global imperfections”
(145). The imagined difference of this envisaged colonization turns on
the primacy of aesthetics over politics in a future space-world, where
“we” might

establish new forms of verse
free ourselves of the need for politics
and concentrate on beauty

like the release from gravity
orbit an image until it is absorbed
through the layers of skin

spin it
sniff and stroke the object
become poetic (50)

These lines both articulate the basis for the poem’s utopic vision (freedom, beauty, release), and at the same time contain the echo of an image that in iv 2140AD depicted entrapment (orbit). They oscillate seemingly ambivalently between images of distance and touch, contact and non-contact, transcendence and assimilation, although the idea that we might “become poetic” shimmers with suggestive possibilities of reconceptualizing identity itself.

Before returning to how notions of identity are refigured, I suggest
that the poem proceeds to its conclusion by way of images of cultural ‘freedom’ that have to be seen as disturbingly close to the processes of cultural globalization, where a local voluntarist relation, “picking up the tools/our culture has given us//and to let them go again/knowing they won’t hit anyone,” opens the way to an aestheticization of culture that depends on, and produces, total cultural relativism: “no longer subject to peculiarities/of climate the political economies/of powers and powerless.” The arguably utopic quality of this vision—a world of total equal-
ity—is troubled by the implicit loss of any necessary relation to an/the other, and of any meaningful articulation of value and identity. Perhaps this speculated transcendence of culture and identity is the ideal solution to contemporary problems of violence and inequality enacted in their name or cause, but its similarity to exactly the conditions dreamed by the global culture market—which has contributed little if anything to the economic and political freedom of colonized and oppressed peoples—suggests that the leap from worldly power politics to otherworldly aesthetics will leave the conditions of suffering untransformed. I prefer to read the poem, its intuition, in the light of Bhabha’s comments on the aesthetic image:

what Emmanuel Levinas has magically described as the twilight existence of the aesthetic image—art’s image as ‘the very event of obscuring, a descent into the night, an invasion of the shadow’. The ‘completion’ of the aesthetic, the distancing of the world in the image, is precisely not a transcendental activity. The image—or the metaphoric, ‘fictional’ activity of discourse—makes visible ‘an interruption of time by a movement going on the hither side of time, in its interstices.’ (15)

In other words, its gesture is to offer a poetic intervention into our political present, to light the fuse that winds through its cracks and fissures, to open new faces in its rock-solid façade (‘the real world’). From this perspective, the suggestion that we might ‘become poetic’ can be seen, not as a denial or transcendence of power and identity, and their mutual implication with discourses of culture, but as a radical rethinking of those very terms with an ethical charge whose very import could be global.

In conclusion, the poems in Sullivan’s collection are not simply diverse accounts of the challenges facing Maori as postcolonial politics intersect with the dynamics of globalization. The poems embody evocations of the split and doubled or hybrid time of cultural difference. In its spirit, a politics of decolonization might consider that “Every positive form can accommodate itself to its negative form [opposition], but understands the challenge of the reversible form [ambivalence] as mortal. Every struc-
ture can adapt to its subversion or inversion, but not to the reversion of its terms” (Baudrillard 21). Thus poetry can draw to a crisis the economic logic of the cultural market, and the politics of representation predicating signification on the subject-object opposition, so that “the dividing line that defines the victory of the one and the defeat of the other, is illegible” (Baudrillard 22). This is not an argument for poetry rather than politics, but for re-energizing the duel between the ‘realities’ to which they belong, and for critically reassessing the belief in, and demand for, representation. At the same time, the ambivalent, uncontainable language-forms of poetry such as Sullivan’s palimpsestic images, offer a new way of thinking about the stakes of decolonization in the wake of globalization, and of any oppressive system whose power rests on knowing its other.

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Notes
1 This term is used by Phillipson in his argument for art’s potential to refuse the terms of culture, for art’s transforming potential, “to enable us to ‘see’ our relations to others, nature-culture, and ourselves, differently—to draw us into their own elsewhere” (202–03).
2 See Keown, especially 2–15.
3 I am rendering the titles of poems as they appear in the collection, in italics rather than in quotation marks. The titles are also more strictly a numbering system, as I will discuss below, and only some have additional titles.
4 In using the term ‘haunted’ I am invoking Bhabha’s account of the “ghostly time of repetition” that characterises the national ‘present’ (143). See also Gunew for a discussion of the notion of haunting with respect to ‘settler-indigenous’ relations and multiculturalism in Australia, Canada, and to a lesser extent New Zealand. Gelder and Jacobs further discuss the haunting disturbances of ‘settler’ space in Uncanny Australia.
5 See Gelder and Jacobs for an extended consideration of the specifically postcolonial forms of the uncanny that unsettle ‘settler’ identity and the national sense of being ‘at home’. They argue, in relation to the Australian context, that, “the various promiscuities arising from this movement [between ‘one nation’ and a ‘divided nation’], where sacredness and modernity solicit each other, produce a condition for the nation which we will designate as ‘uncanny’” (22).
6 Bhabha contends that, "metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the 'middle passage' . . . across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people" (139–40). He refers to a "metaphoric movement [that] requires a kind of 'doubleness' in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centred causal logic" (141).

7 This term is taken from Pratt. She explains that, "By the term 'contact,' I aim to foreground the interactive, improvizational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" (7).

8 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

9 Both C.F. Goldie and Gottfried Lindauer painted early twentieth-century portraits of Maori in a detailed realist, if not always completely accurate, style. Their work has been controversial for its focus on elderly Maori depicted within the terms of the period's discourse of Maori as a noble but dying race. However, these paintings were very popular at the time, and have remained among the most popular portraits of Maori, including among Maori for whom they have "been valued as memorials to ancestors and kin." See Bell and Blackley.

10 Hau'ofa writes, "The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. . . . Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers" (8).

11 Barcham has argued that "Government reports released during [the 1980s] thus outlined the government's new policy position as being that rangatiratanga (indigenous rights) was to be exercised through iwi (tribes) (Minister of Maori Affairs 1989), and that increased focus was to be placed upon iwi as the major player in Maori economic development (Minister of Maori Affairs 1990) as they were seen by the Government as constituting part of an unbroken line of cultural continuance as the legitimate receptacle of current Maori voices. . . . [Thus] New Zealand government policy has played a pivotal role in the iwi-ization of Maori society as the conflation of Maori society with the institution of iwi was given legislative force through the codification in law of a number of specific acts throughout the 1980s" (141).

Works Cited


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*A special issue on Anglo-Caribbean slavery*

Guest editors: Sara Salih, University of Toronto  
Candace Ward, Florida State University

March 25, 2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, passed by Britain’s parliament by a vote of 114 to 15. Although the act did not completely eradicate slave-trading activities, it represents a monumental first step in abolishing an institution responsible for what French historian Jean Michel-Deveau describes as the “greatest tragedy in the history of humanity in terms of scale and duration.” In commemoration of this bicentennial, this special issue of *ARIEL* will examine a variety of texts produced during the long eighteenth century that deal with the Caribbean slave trade and that reflect the ideological underpinnings of the trade and the resistance to slavery by enslaved peoples in the Caribbean and abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Writing the Caribbean: A Special Cluster

Producing the Colonial Subject: Romantic Pedagogy and Mimicry in Jamaica Kincaid’s Writing

Jocelyn Stitt

Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge: it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science. Emphatically may it be said of the Poet, as Shakespeare has said of man, ‘that he looks before and after.’ He is the rock of defence [sic] of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of landscape and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. (Wordsworth “Preface” 259)

It is out of season to question at this time of day, the original policy of a conferring on every colony of the British Empire a mimic representation of the British Constitution. But if the creature so endowed has sometimes forgotten its real significance and under the fancied importance of speakers and maces, and all the paraphernalia and ceremonies of the imperial legislature, has dared to defy the mother country, she has to thank herself for the folly of conferring such privileges on a condition of society that has no earthly claim to so exalted a position. A fundamental principle appears to have been forgotten or overlooked in our system of colonial policy—that of colonial dependence. To give a colony the forms of independence is a mockery; she would not be a colony for a single hour if she could maintain an independent station. (Cust qtd. in Bhabha 85)
Jocelyn Stitt

Still holding me close to her, she said, in a voice that raked across my skin, “It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go, I’ll always be your mother and this will always be your home.” (Kincaid Annie John 147)

The intersection of two vectors, the effects of colonial education on Antiguan society and the effects of a mother’s love on her daughter, lies at the heart of Jamaica Kincaid’s body of writing. Kincaid scholars, however, encounter the persistent problem of how to theorize the relationship of these two forces: the public colonial education that connotes largeness and the political, and the small, private and individualized mother-daughter relationship. This article draws a connection between Kincaid’s critiques of colonial pedagogy and her abiding concern over mother-daughter relationships by arguing that these two themes mirror each other through their common origin in the imposition of a mimetic subjectivity.

I chose the epigraphs above to suggest the “binding” nature of Romantic poetry, colonial discourse, and Kincaid’s representations of colonial mothering all share claims to authority that are based on an assertion of knowledge about the subjectivity of the other. These three central modes of Kincaid’s discourse claim the primacy of the dependence of the “vast Empire of human society” (259), the colonized state, and the colonial child on the mother(land) by defining the relationship in terms of permanence and inevitability because it is warranted by the other’s condition. In Kincaid’s first novel, Annie John, the mother can no more imagine her children as independent subjects than Sir Edward Cust can imagine the colonies able to govern their own affairs as independent nations. Kincaid’s novels, Anne John and Lucy, depict a profound ambivalence in the mother-daughter relationship that stems from the mother’s desire to impose her own subjectivity onto the child. Kincaid twins this theme with the view that the canonical Romantic poetry taught in colonial classrooms is fundamentally connected to the ideologies of colonial control. Reading the linkages of these themes reveals that the destructive power of both stems from an imposition of a way of seeing the world on the child’s subjectivity.
It should be emphasized at the outset that this investigation involves a particular subset of Romantic poetry which celebrates the canonical male Romantic poet’s subjectivity because this is the body of works against which Kincaid’s characters react and rebel. While my thinking about Romanticism have certainly been influenced by the work of feminist and postcolonial scholars, which has broadened the aesthetic definition of Romanticism, these new interpretations are not part of the canon Kincaid uses intertextually in her writing. The ongoing re-invention of Romantic studies encompasses both seemingly apolitical poems, as well as Romanticism’s complementary interest in alienation, marginalization, revolution, and social outcasts. Those Romantic works that celebrate the poetic imagination and the consolidation of the self through nature, usually taught as part of the literary canon, comprise the subject of this article.

In the first section I perform an analysis of the ideologies I have termed “Romantic pedagogy,” and stress their importance in the formation of colonial subjectivity. Let me now define exactly what I mean by “Romantic pedagogy” or “Romantic subjectivity.” In describing the texts studied in the colonial schoolroom as well as the discourses surrounding the education of the subaltern subject as “Romantic,” I mean to invoke the inscription in the writings of a new form of subjectivity which came into being in the early nineteenth century. This new discursive self foregrounded its abilities as a subject who views and experiences. Marlon Ross states that the “Romantics . . . help prepare England for its imperial destiny. They help teach the English to universalize the experience of ‘I’ . . . to organize the universe by celebrating the universal validity of parochial English values” (31). The reason behind the appeal of Romantic poetry to colonial educators lies, I believe, in what Jerome McGann calls an essential aspect of canonical Romanticism: it works hard to hide its ideology behind a facade of seemingly apolitical topics. McGann notes, “the poetry of Romanticism is everywhere marked by extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization whereby the actual human issues with the poetry is concerned are resituated in a variety of idealized localities” (1). Until recently, canonical Romantic poems as they were read and taught were distinguished by their ability
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, wrote of his wish to “reduce all knowledge into harmony,” exemplifying some of the universalizing tendencies in canonical Romanticism to which I have referred (138). While individual systems of knowledge may have value, for Coleridge they are merely “isolated fragments of truth” which need to be united by an overarching history of human achievement (138). Coleridge, like Wordsworth, privileges the poet as a universalized viewing subject who collects and disseminates knowledge. Children need to mimic such a subject in order to develop their own intellects:

Impulse and power should be given to the intellect, and the ends of a moral being be exhibited. For this object thus much is effected by works of imagination—that they carry the mind out of self, and show the possible of the good and great in the human character. The height, whatever it may be, of the imaginative standard will do no harm; we are commanded to imitate one who is inimitable. (“Education” 401)

This passage by Coleridge sounds remarkably like writings by those in charge of British colonial education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both Coleridge’s theories, and British colonial educational writings advocate the amalgamation of knowledge produced around the world, while at the same time ensuring a hierarchical relationship between knowledge produced abroad and at home. They call for the child or colonial subject to imitate “the height . . . of imaginative standard” which is, of course, a subjectivity created by the English. If Coleridge propounded the theory, it was Wordsworth who created an innovative method of representing the self. His work played a role in the development of imperialism and modernity and should be seen as more than merely a poetic innovation. According to Saree Makdisi:

What is driving Wordsworth’s nature poetry is not an interest in what Blake would call raw or “vegetable” nature as such, but rather his obsession with a new mode of vision and above all
a new mode of subjectivity to which that vision is tied. What Wordsworth is elaborating here is a way of viewing and controlling the world: a new way of imagining and representing and even producing the whole world from the standpoint of a solitary observing subject. This form of visuality is the mode of production of the bourgeois subject, who is in turn the key framing element—the primary ideological and cultural focal point, a cultural episteme of power—of the whole project of modern imperialism. Without such a focal point, modern imperialism simply would not have worked, or it would have taken what would be to us, its inheritors, an utterly unrecognizable form. (67–68)

Makdisi argues that without this revolution in literary subjectivity, the colonial enterprise would not have succeeded, or would have been at the least very different, because Wordsworth’s revolution in seeing made possible the ethnocentrism necessary for imperial ideology. Wordsworth’s poetry normalized a mode of writing that now seems unremarkable: that of the individual consciousness imposing its view on the reader. It is, of course, paradoxical that an individual poet’s subjectivity was powerful enough to be thought of as a “universal” expression of national identity, but that is how Wordsworth came to be seen in the later nineteenth century.

In contrast to Makdisi’s investigation of the role Wordsworthian viewpoint played in the development of imperial ideology in the metropole, I am more interested in how the adoption of this viewpoint in the colonies constructs postcolonial subjectivity as it is represented in the works of Jamaica Kincaid. Texts that use this new model of authorial subjectivity were handpicked for use in colonial education. These literary texts allow for the dissemination of not merely Eurocentric values, but of a new way of observing the world from the viewpoint of a detached observer sorting through impressions “recollected in tranquility” to produce a vision of the world that replicates the viewpoint of the colonizer. They teach English aesthetics, values, and language. The role Romantic poems play in colonial education, especially the lyric poem “Daffodils,”
as I will discuss in the first section, and Coleridge’s poem “This Lime-
Tree Bower” as I will discuss in the second section, is merely a smaller
representation of this larger concept of poetry as a primer for Romantic
subjectivity in Kincaid’s work. In the reading that follows, I will fore-
ground the effects of the popularization of “Romantic” subjectivity as a
model to make sense of the world.

This new way of thinking about canonical Romantic poetry as enabling
the colonial enterprise provides insight into the connection between
Kincaid’s colonial education in Romantic poetry and her characters’ in-
tersubjectivity with their mothers. I build on this analysis in the second
section to illustrate the parallels Kincaid draws between daughters’ and
colonized peoples’ attempts to separate from their mother(lands). The
ruptures produced by colonial education have their corollary in the rup-
ture between mother and daughter in Kincaid’s novels. Rather than
seeing the struggles between Kincaid’s female characters and their moth-
ers as “universal,” I argue that their colonial subjectivity always co-exists
with their status as daughters. This analysis produces a new understand-
ing of the ways in which the Romantic subjectivity propagated in the
colonial classroom continues to construct the colonial subject even after
political independence from Britain.

I. Romantic Poetry as Colonial Discourse

Kincaid’s Lucy, like other Caribbean writings, identifies Romantic
poetry, specifically Wordsworth’s poem “Daffodils,” as a manifestation
of cultural imperialism. The protagonist, Lucy, remembers her reci-
tation of “Daffodils” when she was a pupil of Queen Victoria’s Girls’
School in the Caribbean. Lucy comments that this act of memorization
and declamation marked “the height of my two-facedness: that is, out-
side I seemed one way, inside I was another; outside false, inside true”
(18). This poetic performance intensifies Lucy’s split subjectivity, caus-
ing in her a kind of Du Boisian double consciousness.

For Lucy, speaking Wordsworth’s words within the context of the co-
lonial school makes manifest the splitting of reality that is inherent in
colonial discourse, as Homi Bhabha tells us in a familiar passage: “two
attitudes towards external reality persist; one takes reality into considera-
tion while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, rearticulates ‘reality’ as mimicry” (91). Lucy’s double consciousness highlights her interpellation as the colonized school child who is praised for how she “nicely . . . pronounced every word . . . placed just the right amount of special emphasis in places where it was needed, and how proud the poet, now long dead, would have been to hear his words ringing out of [her] mouth” (18). While receiving praise for her mastery of Wordsworth’s poem, Lucy remembers that “inside I was making a vow to erase from my mind, line by line, every word of that poem” (18).

What is so wrong with this poem? How could a seemingly simple poem about a man’s ennui tempered by the memory of flowers come to stand in for the indignities of imperial education? Why should this poem, of all the English poems taught in the imperial curriculum, become an actor in a horror story that is repeated throughout the empire? How does this poem about a flower become, as Kincaid writes in Lucy, a narrative where daffodils are “cast in a scene . . . of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes” (30)? By understanding the Romantic ideology contained within this poem and the reason it was used in colonial classrooms, we can go beyond a simplistic critique of the foreignness of the flower as the main reason for its negative associations in the memories of the formerly colonized.

To think of “Daffodils” as colonialist discourse may seem like a huge leap, since the poem is neither thematically about colonialism, nor did Wordsworth intend it to be used as such. “Daffodils” is colonial discourse by virtue of the way it was used. The lessons of colonial education include the ambivalence integral to colonial discourse, where the colonized subject is offered the possibility of becoming like, but not the same, as the colonizer. As Bhabha suggests, colonialist discourse’s “predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for a ‘subject peoples’ through the production of knowledges” that “construe[s] the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis or racial origin, in order to justify conquest and establish systems of administration and instruction” (70). I want to emphasize that the rhetoric of colonial education, like other colonial discourses, contains this same ambivalence, this same splitting of the subject, since this is a major legacy of the use
of Romantic pedagogy. Secondly, it is crucial to note that critics of colonial education and cultural imperialism have traditionally understood them as an imposition of culturally unfamiliar or inappropriate subject matter, rather than as a conditioning of subjectivity.

I will start with this second contention. Many critics point to the inappropriateness of “Daffodils” and other texts of colonial education as stemming from its subject’s unfamiliarity to the children. Alison Donnell writes “The poetic subject (daffodils) signifies the forced adoption of the motherland and the attendant suppression of difference” (50). However, studies of colonial education show that the aim was not necessarily to erase difference, but to create and maintain difference. Students in colonial schools were never expected to become English, just to mimic the norms of the colonizer on the way to becoming better colonial subjects. This colonial desire, manifested as educational policy, worked to produce colonized subjects trained in English culture but not actually English.

Colonial educators, even in later periods, harnessed Romantic literature’s power to introduce a new subjectivity in order to create colonized subjects who are loyal to the British motherland. During the Victorian period, interest in education at home turned toward the responsibilities of the British nation to its colonies. The Bishop of Antigua, William Walrond Jackson, seemed well versed in Wordsworth’s discourses on the particularly impressionable nature of children as he addressed the London-based “Ladies Society for Education in the West Indies” in 1860:

Childhood is of all seasons the best in which to make impression,—in which they are most readily produced and take the firmest hold upon the mind. And usually, in his tastes and habits, in his modes of thinking and acting, in his moral sentiments and feelings in mature life, the man is very much what the influences exerted upon him in youth, in childhood, even in the nursery and the cradle, were adapted to make him. (12)

Jackson echoes Wordsworth’s “The child is the father of the man” in order to justify an almost arrogant measure of control over the creation of the colonized child’s subjectivity. Not content to teach subjects,
colonial education provides a new subjectivity, a moral framework for the child's outlook on life, creating sympathy within the child for the English way of life. This nineteenth-century creation of the canonical Wordsworth, and the role poetry itself should play in the lives of readers, had a profound impact on the lives of West Indian readers. As Trinidadian historian and Marxist critic C.L.R. James writes of his childhood in the 1930s: "In my youth we lived according to the tenets of Matthew Arnold; we spread sweetness and light, and we studied the best that there was in literature in order to transmit it to the people—as we thought, the poor backward West Indian people" (73). It is not merely the anthologies and the selection of the poems that transmit Englishness through poetic subjectivity, it is a theory on how literature fits into society itself that James recognizes here.

The ideologies of English Romantic poetry functioned pedagogically in West Indian schools of the later twentieth century as well. In a 1963 publication *School Methods with Younger Children: A Handbook for Teachers in the Caribbean* Elsa Walters emphasizes the development of children's aesthetic senses through the memorization and imitation of the Romantic views of poetry, as well as their connection to England through their use of Received Pronunciation. Teachers in the West Indies were told that, “poetry is one of the means by which children may be lead to experience beauty of thought and feeling expressed in words” (Walters 173). However, not all words or languages are acceptable forms of expression:

Children have learned whatever language they know by hearing it; they cannot learn English if they do not hear English spoken. For most children, the teacher’s voice is the one he will most often hear speaking English, and the one he will imitate. It is most important, therefore, that every teacher should do all in his power to make his own speech as clear, correct and pleasant as possible. (169)

The teacher must, along with the English poetry, help to divest the children of their patois in order to join the larger English-speaking world. This text uses literature to teach a new subjectivity by “experiencing
beauty of thought and feeling expressed in words” (Walters 173), as well as norms of Englishness. In doing so, School Methods joins a host of texts reaching back through the nineteenth century. It is probably not accidental that School Methods was adapted from a West African edition put out by the same publisher.

To return to the issue of Romantic pedagogy, it should be noted in passing that the Romantic era has long been associated with an increased interest in the child and in pedagogical theories. One might even say that childhood as it is currently understood in the West is a Romantic invention. Wordsworth’s poetry largely concerns itself with childhood subjectivity and its relationship to the creation of adult identity, which manifested itself in the widespread use of his poetry in texts compiled for children within Britain. Romantic poetry, as well as Romantic pedagogy, exerted a powerful influence in the English-speaking colonies.

While the introduction of a foreign flower in the colonial curriculum does indeed signify a kind of cultural imperialism, the traditional critical account does not perform the hermeneutic of this essay in reading “Daffodils” as colonialist discourse. Rather than attributing the splitting of the school-child’s consciousness to the foreign nature of the flower or the linguistic hegemony of the standard English Wordsworth uses, Kincaid suggests in Lucy a different way to read the importance of this poem to colonial education: the poem helps train the colonized child to perform a subjectivity in which the experiences and values of the poet become more important than those of the child. This model of romantic pedagogy appeared in many different parts of the British Empire, as Shirley Lim writes remembering her fascination with “Daffodils” as a child in colonial schools in Malaysia: “even at that early age, I knew the image was not central to the poem” (128). Instead Lim remembers that this poem contained within a colonial “schooltext anthology” taught her the “sovereignty” (128) and “supremacy of the subject” (129). The invitation inherent in Romantic poems such as “Daffodils,” asks the reader to see the world through the poet’s eyes, and develops a different kind of subjectivity on the part of the colonized school child.

To understand how the promise of colonial mimicry fails, as well as the gendered and raced implications of this failure, we have to turn
to Kincaid’s *Lucy*. The contrast between poetics and lived experiences occurs repeatedly in the novel. When Lucy leaves her home in the West Indies to become a nanny in New York, she encounters her privileged employer, Mariah, a woman whose world is as unblemished and unpolticized as her relationship to spring and daffodils. Lucy describes photographs of this family as “six yellow-haired heads of various sizes tied together by an unseen string. In the pictures, they smiled out at the world, giving the impression that they found everything in it unbearably wonderful” (12). Mariah’s enthusiasm for yellow extends to daffodils, which she wishes to share with Lucy.

The terms in which Mariah describes spring and daffodils are distinctly Romantic, and I would suggest that it is her own training in Romantic subjectivity that makes it possible for her to have an intimacy with nature through its invocation of her childhood.13 Mariah’s goal, throughout the novel, mirrors those of canonical Romantic poetry insofar as she wants Lucy and her children to occupy the same subject position, “to see things the way she did. She wanted us to enjoy [her country house], all its nooks and crannies, all its sweet smells, all its charms just the way she had done as a child” (36 emphasis added):

One morning in early March, Mariah said to me, ‘You have never seen spring, have you?’ And she did not have to await an answer, for she already knew. She said the word ‘spring’ as if spring were a close friend, a friend who had dared to go away for a long time and soon would reappear for their passionate reunion. She said, ‘Have you ever seen daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground? And when they’re in bloom and all massed together, a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy to the lawn stretching in front of them. Have you ever seen that? When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive.’ And I thought, So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze. How does a person get to be that way?

(17)

I have cited this passage at length since it is the phrasing of the invitation as much as the content that is important.14 Kincaid explicitly con-
nects a Romantic view of nature—an interconnectedness of the self and the natural world—with a suspect ignorance of political realities.

Although Lucy tells Mariah how she was forced to memorize “an old poem” about daffodils and made to declaim it in front of all the pupils at Queen Victoria’s Girls’ School, Mariah cannot grasp the significance of this memory of colonial education. Mariah’s relationship to daffodils, spring, and the natural world has been conditioned by her own schooling in Romantic ideology. Mariah cannot comprehend Lucy’s rejection of a Romantic relationship with nature. This rejection, the novel implies, comes from the character’s consciousness of the natural world as a space of hard physical labor, not as a source of pleasure.

For Wordsworth, daffodils give the poet a moment of happiness when he first encounters them: “I gazed, and gazed, but little thought / What wealth the show to me had brought” (11–12). However, the real payoff for him poetically comes later:

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. (15–18)

“Daffodils” expresses that most Romantic of hopes—the delights of the natural world can provide solace when recollected later. It is these exact sentiments that lead the speaker in “Tintern Abbey” to turn to his sister after describing his childhood delight in the outdoors and say:

If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! (144–47)

The “healing thoughts” of the natural world perceived through the eyes of childhood are not accessible to Lucy, not only because of the legacies of slavery, but also because the presentation of this poetic ideology is, for her, inextricably linked to colonial education. She cannot experience the flowers divorced from their context of colonial education anymore than Mariah can comprehend that connection:
I said, 'Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?

As soon as I said this I felt sorry that I had cast her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes. This woman who hardly knew me loved me, and she wanted me to love this thing—a grove brimming over with daffodils in bloom—that she loved also. Her eyes shrunk back in her head as if they were protecting themselves, as if they were taking a rest after some unexpected hard work. It wasn't her fault, it wasn't my fault. But nothing could change the fact that where she saw beautiful flowers I saw sorrow and bitterness. The same thing could cause us to shed tears, but those tears would not taste the same. We walked home in silence. I was glad to have at last seen what a wretched daffodil looked like. (30)

Clearly it is not the daffodils themselves which infuriate Lucy, but the fact that she was forced “to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen” (30). The metropolitan reader takes Mariah's place as “a scene she had never considered,” plays out with all of its implications of British conquests. Kincaid uses this passage to name the role the colonized child must play in learning the poem, that of “conquered” and “brute” receiving education and civilization. Lucy glosses the tension between the actual poem, and the colonial agenda it has come to represent. Lucy's reaction to seeing actual daffodils is one of rage. She states that she wants “to kill them. I wished that I had an enormous scythe; I would just walk down the path, dragging it alongside me, and I would cut these flowers down at the place where they emerged from the ground” (29). Lucy cannot explain these urges to Mariah: “how could I explain to her the feeling I had about daffodils—that it wasn't exactly daffodils, but that they would do as well as anything else” (29).

This mimicry is the promise held out by Wordsworth's poem—it promises to teach the reader how to experience life as Wordsworth does.
The poem’s rearticulation of reality trains the reader to see as Wordsworth sees, and it is this training in mimicry that allow the poem to fit so well into the colonial curriculum. As one of the key poems in Wordsworth’s canon, “Daffodils” is didactic, training the reader in how to experience consciousness, to relish the “flash upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude” (15–16). The poem demonstrates that an aesthetic experience might not be immediately appreciated: “I gazed, and gazed, but little thought / What wealth the show to me had brought” (11–12). Later it comes to have meaning through the repetition of thought. One can see how such an ideology of displacement and mimicry by insisting that the reader experience the world through the poet’s subjectivity does the work outlined by the colonial educators. When Mariah and Lucy pass the freshly plowed fields that Mariah looks forward to as a sign of spring, Lucy says, “‘Well, thank God I didn’t have to do that.’ I don’t know if she understood what I meant, for in that one statement I meant many different things” (33). As in much of Kincaid’s writing, this provocative statement is not elucidated. It is meant to evoke a complex history of slavery, forced agricultural labour and resistance to that labour after emancipation, but its referentiality is left up to the reader.

In a series of provocative essays published in the *New Yorker*, Kincaid elaborates on the distinctions between gaining pleasure from the natural world, botany, and its practical application, agriculture. She explicitly attempts to educate the privileged readership of the *New Yorker* about the connections between gardening, agriculture, and imperialism. As Kincaid notes, the reasons why West Indians might not draw pleasure from plants is a legacy of slavery:

And yet the people of Antigua have a relationship to agriculture that does not please them at all. Their very arrival on this island had to do with the forces of agriculture. When they (we) were brought to this island from Africa a few hundred years ago, it was not for their pottery-making skills or for their way with a loom; it was for the free labor they could provide in the fields. . . . Perhaps it makes sense that a group of people with such a wretched historical relationship to growing things
would need to describe their current relationship to it as dignified and masterly (agriculture), and would not find it poetic (botany) or pleasurable (gardening). (“Alien” 50)

Kincaid’s essay, when understood in the context of colonialism, reads as an indictment of poetic pleasure in the natural world that masks the realities of capitalist agriculture. Ironically, perhaps, she does not hesitate to make a blanket pronouncement about the feelings of Antiguan people towards the natural world. Assuming the power to name the subjectivity of people other than herself is itself the prerogative of the Romantic artist.

_Lucy_ makes clear that the purpose of West Indian school children reciting “Daffodils” is to teach them to appreciate and to emulate a specifically Romantic subjectivity—one predicated on a distance from lived experience and an appreciation for beauty that must be learned. It is not the immediate experience of seeing the daffodils that is important, but Wordsworth’s ability to turn this vision into a lesson for moral fortitude: “They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude.” After reading _Lucy_ we know that such a position is dangerous because it suggests that reality and beauty come from experiencing the colonizer’s thoughts, by being led into knowledge discursively rather than through one’s actual experiences. This is not only Romantic ideology but also colonial pedagogy. Canonical Romantic poetry, _Lucy_ demonstrates, makes the perfect vehicle for colonial ideology.

II. “Hypocrisy and Breasts”: Mimicking the Colonial Mother

If, for Wordsworth, it is the figure of the poet who looks “before and after” (“Preface” 738), then for Kincaid, it is the woman searching for the meaning of her relationship with her mother who must “look backward and forward” (_Autobiography_ 3). For the colonized child, already subject to the divided consciousness that is the product of Romantic pedagogy, the presence of a mother who insists on a similar mimicry is truly terrifying. Lucy associates Romantic pedagogy with her mother’s attempts to make her into an “echo,” a mimic woman. We might read the presence of examples of Romantic pedagogy in Kincaid’s work along
with her numerous examples of mimetic mothering as an allegory of the difficulties of subject formation for the colonized subject during the crisis of independence from the mother(land).

Mothers in Kincaid’s texts enact an allegory of colonialism by forcing the child’s subjectivity to become a mimicry of her own, just as colonial educators did. Kincaid draws a parallel between Mariah’s wish, rooted in a pedagogy of Romanticism, that Lucy “see the world as she does,” and Lucy’s mother’s wish to make her “into an echo” (36). Lucy notes that her rebellion against her mother

would have come as a complete surprise . . . for in her life she had found that her ways were the best ways to have, and she would have been mystified as to how someone who came from inside her would want to be anyone different from her. I did not have an answer to this myself. But there it was. (36)

Unlike Fredric Jameson, however, I resist the notion that all texts from the formerly colonized world should be “read as . . . national allegories” (“Third-World” 69). Such a limited understanding of Kincaid’s project would not permit me to perform the reading in the last section in which I understand Kincaid to be concerned with questions of Romantic authority and aesthetics in the construction of the colonial subject. This section makes use of the conceit of the allegory in order to show that discourses of the colonial and the familial construct each other in Kincaid’s work. I take Jameson’s point that some texts of decolonization, “even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension” (“Third-World” 69). My feminist corrective to Jameson’s formulation, as should be evident in the section on the deployment of Romantic ideology, is that many types of discourse originating from the perspective of the male colonizer should also be read as invested with their own libidinal dynamic of desire for control and reproduction of the colonized subject.

The critical confusion about the meaning of Kincaid’s “harshness” in her treatment of her mother characters, as Moira Ferguson puts it, stems from the repetition of the mother country/imperial possession dyad in Kincaid’s texts (1). If we agree with Giovanna Covi that the
central rubric of all of Kincaid’s work is “the articulation of the effects of colonialism on subjectivity, specifically on female subjectivity” (37), then we need to look at the roots of the formulation of the self in the discourses that influence her writings. The last section completed some of this work, pointing to the effects the training in the poetry of the Romantic period has on Lucy’s sense of self. In this section I want to look at the rhetorics of mother-daughter relationships in Kincaid’s writing as a metaphor for the ways colonial discourses construct the colonized subject and to argue for the continuing effect of these discourses on contemporary Caribbean subjectivity.

Kincaid’s work should be understood in the context of Antigua’s comparatively late independence from Britain in 1981. One of the central shocks of decolonization for Antiguans stemmed from their having been educated to exist in an Empire that no longer existed. Kincaid glosses this transition as suddenly moving the nation from the nineteenth to the twentieth century: “You see, the educational system in Antigua, well, Antigua has this incredible history. It went from colonialism to the modern world—that is, from about 1890 to 1980—in five years . . . So my education, which was very “Empire,” only involved civilization up to the British Empire—which would include writing—so I never read anything past Kipling” (Cujoe 217–18). While this is clearly Kincaid’s own presentation of her colonized self and seems to be anti-colonial hyperbole in that it serves to reinforce that England’s self-conception as the mother-country to its colonies, it is in this way that it has parallels with Kincaid’s representations of the relationship between mothers and daughters. The right of the British government to lay claim to their imperial possessions was repeatedly articulated in terms of a parent’s imperative to guide and control the child. Indeed, seeing the relationship of the nation and the citizen in terms of parent and child was popularized by the literature of the Romantic era. Colonial education emphasized creating a colonized subject who is recognized as similar to the colonizer, but different enough to justify continued rule.

Kincaid articulates the hierarchy inherent in the British urge for cultural reproduction in A Small Place: “And so everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English.
But no place could every really be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would ever be English, so you can imagine the destruction of people and land that came from that” (24). Kincaid frames the dislocation of colonial mimicry in familial terms: “what I see is the millions of people, of whom I am just one, made orphans: no motherland, no fatherland” (31). *A Small Place* reconfigures the colonial family from one with England as the mother country to her child-like dominions into a family in which the violence of imperialism makes orphans of its colonized subjects.

In a short story titled “My Mother,” Kincaid constructs a mother-daughter relationship along the fault lines of ambivalence. Written using modernist stream of consciousness and surrealism, “My Mother,” begins with the narrator “wishing my mother dead” (53). The daughter’s wish for her mother’s death causes her own: “Standing before my mother, I begged her forgiveness, and I begged so earnestly that she took pity on me, kissing my face and placing my head on her bosom to rest. Placing her arms around me, she drew my head closer and closer to her bosom, until finally I suff ocated” (53). The closeness of the mother and daughter, continues: “I fit perfectly in the crook of my mother’s arm, on the curve of her back, in the hollow of her stomach. . . . we merge and separate, merge and separate; soon we shall enter the final stage of our evolution” (61). This final stage consists of the narrator “sitting on my mother’s enormous lap” in a utopian space of a lime tree bower “whose petals are imperishable” (61).

Kincaid’s fictionalized depiction of the mother-daughter merge evokes Coleridge’s poem, “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.” This poem famously creates a sense of the poet’s vision of what his readers should see as he produces an idealized version of a walk his friend must take without him. Coleridge’s poem is another example of the tendencies of canonical Romantic poetry to produce a poetic narrator who educates the reader about the proper way to experience the world.

In “This Lime-Tree Bower,” Coleridge addresses his friend Charles Lamb, a city dweller who the poet imagines to be in particular need of nature: “For thou hadst pined / And hungered after nature many a year / In the great city pent” (28–30):
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So my friend,
Struck with deep joy, may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily, a living thing
Which acts upon the mind (37–42)

Nature, seen through the poet’s eyes as an educational tool that can change subjectivity by “act[ing] on the mind,” works in this poem as an antidote to Lamb’s entrapment in an urban landscape. The pedagogy of this poem functions similarly to how “Daffodils” was used to inculcate a subjectivity that was attuned to Romantic aesthetics.

Kincaid’s story “My Mother” invites us to connect the power of Coleridge’s vision for his young friend with the mother’s power to create her child’s subjectivity. Kincaid imagines the narrator and her mother merging during a walk, in much the same way as Coleridge imagines a union with Lamb: “as we walked along, our steps became one, and as we talked, our voices became one voice, and we were in complete union in every other way. What peace came over me then, for I could not see where she left off and I began, or where I left off and she began” (60). This peace, however, never lasts in Kincaid’s work. Pre-Oedipal bliss always ends for the child; the Lime-Tree Bower always becomes a prison.

Kincaid’s work does not tell the story one might expect, however. If Kincaid’s daughters might stand in for Antigua and her mothers for England, then our knowledge of independence struggles in the Caribbean would lead us to believe that separation from the mother would be desirable. In Kincaid’s 1996 novel, The Autobiography of My Mother, the narrator Xuela defines herself through the loss of her mother during her birth. Her motherlessness represents a failure of lineage, an inability to trace a national or racial bloodline because of the trauma of colonization and slavery. Xuela’s own mother was given away at birth, an act that compounds Xuela’s status as a motherless child:

That attachment, physical and spiritual, that confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh, which was absent between my mother and her own mother was also absent between my mother and
myself, for she died at the moment I was born, and though I can sensibly say to myself such a thing cannot be helped—for who can help dying—again how can any child understand such a thing, so profound an abandonment? I refused to bear any children. (199)

The “confusion of who is who,” then, seems to be a necessary element for a child’s psyche. Belonging is a necessary precondition for separation. Xuela’s motherlessness marks her as a permanent outsider to identity:

Who was I? My Mother died at the moment I was born. You are not yet anything at the moment you are born. This fact of my mother dying at the moment I was born became a central motif of my life . . . For years and years, each month my body would swell up slightly, mimicking the state of maternity, longing to conceive, mourning my heart’s and mind’s decision never to bring forth a child. I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still do want, to observe the people who do so. (225-26)

The severed bloodlines, both literally in the case of Xuela and her foremothers and allegorically of Xuela’s loss, stand in for the losses of family and psychological continuity under colonial rule. This vision of motherlessness in a colonial society tells us much about mothering and national identity. Xuela’s fantasy of being mothered relies on an image of a mother who is whole—whose identity, whose flesh, is not marked with the scars of history. The wholeness of the mother makes possible the identity of the child. This ideal of a mother outside of history and colonial identity is not possible for Xuela herself and so she does not bear children. Xuela notes that “The crime of these identities, which I now know more than ever, I do not have the courage to bear” (226). So Kincaid’s characters desire separation, from the mother and the colonial motherland, but without an identity to move towards, either racial, national, or personal, their quest becomes blocked.

The daughters in Kincaid’s novels Lucy and Annie John long for separation from their mothers while they are simultaneously bitter about ending the “peace” the narrator of “My Mother” feels in their union.
“Why I wonder” says Annie John, “didn’t I see the hypocrite in my mother when, over the years, she said that she loved me and could hardly live without me, while at the same time proposing and arranging separation after separation” (133). At the same time that this separation causes Annie pain, she makes clear that her departure for England, “which unbeknownst to her, I have arranged to be permanent” is a result of her growing similarity to her mother, “So now I, too, have hypocrisy, and breasts” (133). The “hypocrisy” that Lucy, like Annie John, feels is her inheritance from her mother shows up again in what Kincaid argues is Antigua’s inheritance from Britain.

Like colonial justifications for rule, which are based on the so-called benefit to the colonized (justifications that were thrown into question during decolonization struggles) Lucy is shocked to learn that although she feels “identical” to her mother, her mother privileges her sons. Lucy, like a colonial subject attempting to “return” to Britain, is treated as a second-class citizen. In this analogy, the sons are the “real” children of the mother(land); Lucy is a secondary colony. After Lucy’s three younger brothers were born:

my mother and father announced to each other with great seriousness that the new child could go to university in England and study to become a doctor or lawyer or someone who would occupy an important and influential position in society. I did not mind my father saying these things about his sons, his own kind, and leaving me out. My father did not know me at all; I did not expect him to imagine a life for me filled with excitement and triumph. But my mother knew me well, as well as she knew herself: I, at the time, even thought of us as identical; and whenever I saw her eyes fill up with tears at the thought of how proud she would be at some deed her sons had accomplished, I felt a sword go through my heart, for there was no accompanying scenario in which she saw me, her only identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation. To myself I began to call her Mrs. Judas, and I began to plan a separation from her that even then I suspected would never be complete. (130–31)
Our knowledge of the use of Romanticism as a pedagogical tool for teaching subjectivity alerts us to the politics of Kincaid’s ambivalent portrayal of mothers in her works. Romantic subjectivity when deployed as a colonial discourse teaches the child to emulate the ‘norms’ of Englishness. The mothers in Kincaid’s work demand a similar kind of mimicry from their daughters, which explains their negative effect on their daughters’ developing subjectivity. Mimicry of all kinds becomes political in postcolonial discourse, as Kincaid’s work shows, both within the family and without.

Kincaid’s works have something to teach us, I think, about the results of colonial education even after independence. Kincaid’s daughters can never simply leave their mothers—the lessons of mimicry have been too strong. Lucy describes with defeat her attempts to separate from her mother:

My past was my mother; I could hear her voice, and she spoke to me not in English or the French patois that she sometimes spoke, or in any language that needed help from the tongue; she spoke to me in language anyone female could understand. And I was undeniably that—female. Oh, it was a laugh, for I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother—I was my mother. And I could see now why, to the few feeble attempts I made to draw a line between us, her reply always was ‘You can run away, but you cannot escape the fact that I am your mother, my blood runs in you, I carried you for nine months inside me.’ How else was I to take such a statement but as a sentence for life in a prison whose bars were stronger than any iron imaginable? (90–91)

Lucy’s prison-house of simulated identity leaves her without access to an individuated subjectivity. Lucy becomes a colonial subject not only through her indoctrination into the norms of Romantic poetry, but through her creation and then partial erasure at the hands of her mother. As I suggested earlier, a fragmented mother figure, as Lucy’s mother is when she consents to erase herself (she privileges masculin-
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itim over femininity) makes a whole female identity for the daughter impossible. Lucy’s mother, then, becomes a phallic mother, incapable of engendering a female child able to create and maintain a separate identity.

Colonial education and the prison of Lucy’s mother-defined female identity ensure a subjectivity for Lucy that is divided and incomplete, hallmarks of colonial indoctrination. In arguing this I differ from critics such as H. Adlai Murdoch who see the drama of the daughter’s departure in Kincaid’s work as “the outcome of her recognition of an existence which she has outgrown and a step toward the establishment of a newer, more valid one” (326). Instead, as this article demonstrates, both the daughter and the Antiguan nation in Kincaid’s writing find themselves bound to the mother(land) by the ties of mimic subjectivity even after moves have been made to establish their independence.

The mimic relationship between mother and daughter exists on a continuum with the mimic relationship between Mother Britain and her colonies. Kincaid notes that “the character of the Antiguan people is influenced by and inherited through conquest, from the English people,” resulting in a culture that “imitates their rulers” in both small and large ways (“Alien” 47–48). In A Small Place, Kincaid writes that even after independence from Britain in 1981, Antiguans mimic British culture to the extent that they rehearse British rituals in the celebration of their Independence Day. Antiguans, Kincaid tells us, “are so proud of [Independence] that each year, to mark the day, they go to church and thank God, a British God, for this” (9). Even after “years and years of agitation . . . deeply moving and eloquent speeches [made] against the wrongness of your domination over us” the trauma of the colonized subject is such, according to Kincaid, that their lives can only be described as a “ruin” and a “debacle” (Small 35-36).

The trauma of colonization is due, in large part, Kincaid suggests, to colonial pedagogical practices: “you loved knowledge, and wherever you went you made sure to build a school, a library (yes, and in both of these places you distorted or erased my history and glorified you own)” (Small 36). In an interview Kincaid states:
One of the things that inspired me to write was English poets, even though I had never seen England. It’s as if I were a blind person too . . . I memorized Wordsworth when I was a child, Keats, all sorts of things. It was an attempt to make me into a certain kind of person, the kind of person they had no use for, anyway. An educated black person. I got stuck with a lot of things, so I ended up using them. (Bonetti)

“Stuck with” Romanticism, as all westernized subjects are to some extent, Kincaid works with and through its aesthetic and political lessons to focus on her society:

I would not have ever, ever been able to say, ‘you know, I really need to write this, I really need to get rid of these images,’ but that’s what I was doing. A sort of desire for a perfect place, a perfect situation, comes from English Romantic poetry. It described a perfection which one longed for, and of course the perfection that one longed for was England. I longed for England myself. These things were a big influence, and it was important for me to get rid of them. Then I could actually look at the place I’m from. (Bonetti)

Surprisingly, in moving her gaze from the Romantic “perfect place” that she writes about in early stories such as “My Mother,” to more trenchant political observations of her mother(land) in later works, Kincaid re-encounters Romantic pedagogy in the form of institutionalized mimicry.

The hope that the departure of daughters in Kincaid’s fictional writings might enable a subjectivity not bound by mimicry of the mother is not held out for post-Independence Antigua either. If the colonial school’s lessons to Kincaid and her characters have been those exercises in colonial mimicry, then her writings instruct her readers in the far reaching effects of Romantic pedagogy on the West Indian family and society. Although a reading of the mother-daughter relationships in Annie John and Lucy as allegories for the difficulties of postcolonial separation from the motherland allows us to see the connection between
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the familial and the colonial, Kincaid’s non-fiction work discusses the imperial legacies on the family in a different way. “In a society like the one I am from,” Kincaid writes, “being a child is one of the definitions of vulnerability and powerlessness” (*Brother* 32). Kincaid shows that the lessons of domination and control learned in the colonial classroom, the method of managing the colonized child, created a culture in modern Antigua where weakness is exploited and ridiculed.

The question remains: where does Kincaid’s deconstruction of the legacies of Romantic pedagogy leave the postcolonial subject? Poet Derek Walcott scolds the contemporary West Indian writer who “wants to effect an eugenic leap from imperialism to independence by longing for the ancestral dignity of the wanderer-warrior. . . . they are children of the nineteenth-century ideal, the romance of redcoat and savage warrior, the simplification of choosing to play Indian instead of cowboy” (125). Such a stance, according to Walcott “is the hallucination of imperial romance” (125). Kincaid’s work, when considered within the context of the civilizing mission of the colonial classroom, shows the postcolonial subject’s interpelation in the binaries of the Romantic “nineteenth-century ideal” that Walcott describes. Such an escape from the structuring narrative of the colonial enterprise, Kincaid’s writing reveals, will not be easy to achieve.

The ending of *A Small Place* explicates Kincaid’s theorization of the condition of postcoloniality when it repeats a refrain from earlier in the text that “all masters of every stripe are rubbish, and all slaves of every stripe are noble and exalted; there can be no question about this” (80). Kincaid then qualifies her hyperbole:

Of course, the whole thing is, once you cease to be a master, once you throw off your master’s yoke, you are no longer human rubbish, you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. So too, with the slaves. Once they are no longer slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings” (81).

Although Kincaid describes the condition of postcoloniality as a “ruin” and a “debacle” she refuses to valorize a subjectivity created in the
wake of decolonization (Small 36). Indeed, she breaks with the writings of other West Indians in their immediate moment of independence by rejecting even the comforts of an imaginary return to (and thus an imitation of) pre-colonial African culture: “As for what we were like before we met you, I no longer care,” she writes in A Small Place. “No periods of time over which my ancestors held sway, no documentation of complex civilizations, is any comfort to me. Even if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees, it was better to be that than what happened to me, what I became after I met you” (Small 37).

Kincaid neither escapes nor embraces mimicry as a solution to the problem of subjectivity for the postcolonial subject. Returning to Antigua after decolonization Kincaid notes, “All the things I had thought made it a bad place were gone—but it was worse, and it’s not that things would be better should they go back in time” (Cudjoe 225). Her work takes a more complicated route, presenting us instead with the dilemma of the Caribbean subject, trained to mimic the subjectivity of their colonizer only to their detriment. Reading Kincaid’s writing is valuable, and indeed urgently needed, since it tells a different story of the drama of decolonization, showing that it is not notions of English superiority, but an English way of seeing that continues to grip Caribbean families and culture after political independence.

Notes

1 Born Elaine Potter Richardson in Antigua in 1949, the writer and social critic Jamaica Kincaid immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s. Kincaid’s contributions to The New Yorker first brought her work to the attention of literary critics. Since then she has published four novels, three works of non-fiction, numerous short stories and brief articles.

2 In a recent essay, de Abarna comments that, “Kincaid’s primal theme, repeated well past the point of obsession, has been her abiding resentment of her mother, connected with, but not overriding, her resentment of cultural imperialism” (181). While noting the centrality of these themes, critics have not produced a satisfactory interpretation of the meanings of these themes when read together. For example, Timothy finds “the most puzzling moments” in Kincaid’s work to be “the emotional break between the mother and daughter” and the “violence of the daughter’s response” (233). De Abarna’s essay, “Jamaica Kincaid’s Writing and the Maternal-Colonial Matrix,” addresses the erasure of the colonial context.
in favor of the “universal” of the mother-daughter theme in much Kincaid criticism, as does Ferguson’s in her discussion of Kincaid’s “harshly rendered” portrayals of family, “a fact that has constantly unsettled reviewers” (1).

3 See Makdisi, Fay, and Richardson and Hofkosh. Also influential on my work is the movement to correct, in the words of Mellor, the problem of founding “our constructions of British Romanticism almost exclusively upon the writings and thoughts of six male poets” through the recovery of female writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (1). This critical impetus has accompanied an expansion of works considered to be “Romantic,” such the Romantic novel generally.

4 Coleridge differs from Wordsworth, however, in his rejection of Wordsworth’s early embrace of a more rustic “man speaking to men” style of poetic diction. Coleridge embraced a Germanic notion of a high literary language, a lingua communis. See Dowling for an extended discussion of nation, literature, and the differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge. Dowling notes, “The influence of Coleridge and, through him, of Romantic philology on Victorian civilization is most obvious . . . when language is taken to express the inner essence of a nation” (36). This influence continues from the Victorian period on to twentieth-century colonial education.

5 That individuals such as Wordsworth might create a revolution in thought is, of course, a point of contention. Works such as Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious suggest that the attribution of such power to an individual rather than to a societal zeitgeist is in itself a Romantic fallacy. Regardless of whether or not Wordsworth individually created a new form of subjectivity, as Makdisi suggests, his legacy through the colonial curriculum attests to the power of Wordsworth’s own representations of himself as an innovator.

6 Rieble comments that canonical Romantic writings contain the urge to direct the reader’s subjectivity producing “new forms of authoritative discourse” (4) which became institutionalized over time, even as they “evidently reflect profound doubts about their ability to control their own meaning . . . and perhaps also doubts about their right even to try to direct or form the consciousness of others” (3).

7 Henderson usefully points out the “production of a diversity of models for understanding subjectivity,” many of them very different from the Wordsworthian models popularized in his canonical poetry (3). The fact that other ways of conceiving the self were in circulation during the Romantic era should bring home to us that our received notions of proper poetic subjectivity were not inevitable.

8 Caribbean writers such as Edwidge Danticat, Lorna Goodison, Jean Rhys, Michelle Cliff, and Derek Walcott reference Wordsworth’s poem “Daffodils” in connection with colonial education. Brathwaite calls the attempt by Caribbean children to integrate their lived experience with their colonial education, the “snow on the canefields” effect (“English” 19). In the context of the Anglophone
Caribbean, children taught about winter and snow as normative weather, without any context for this, begin to write essays entitled “Snow fell on the canefields.” This gap between experiential reality and textual representation has come to be called “the daffodil gap,” pointing to the centrality of Wordsworth’s poem to postcolonial critiques of British colonial education practices (Tiffin n.7 920).

For one of the most comprehensive studies of colonial education and literature see Viswanathan.

This use of Wordsworthian ideals of childhood has important parallels to the figuring of the poet in Victorian England as a source of moral instruction second only to the Bible. See Gill for a full discussion of Wordsworth’s meaning to Victorian religious life.

See Richardson who notes that the majority of educational theories prevalent today (such as separating children by ages into grade levels) were promoted by various Romantic writers (including Wordsworth and Coleridge) and “were still considered rarefied and avant-garde if not patently absurd toward the end of the eighteenth century, and yet had become respectable, widespread, and destined to prevail by the middle of the nineteenth” (xii).

Richardson contextualizes the use of poetry anthologies used within Britain and in its colonies: “I have also tried to suggest how pervasively literary genres not usually thought of as didactic were enlisted in the schooling of traditionally and newly literate groups alike . . . the development of poetry anthologies aimed explicitly at subaltern populations in the colonies and, concurrently at young people in England” (Literature xv).

In another passage, reminiscent of Wordsworth’s poetic treatment of older rustic folk, such as in “The Leach Gatherer” and “Michael,” Lucy criticizes Mariah’s treatment of her country home’s caretaker. Lucy rejects a Romantic notion of time, where the childhood past and adult present collide. “His name was Gus, and the way Mariah spoke his name it was as if he belonged to her deeply, like a memory. And of course, he was a part of her past, her childhood . . . Still, he was a real person, and I thought Mariah should have long separated the person Gus standing in front of her in the present from all the things he had meant to her in the past” (33).

Discursively equating children and the colonized is a well-known imperialist trope with roots in discourses from the Romantic era. Richardson observes: “Those tendencies within later eighteenth-century and Romantic thought that led to the idealization of childhood, of rural laborers, and of “primitive” peoples also supported the view that all three groups were uncivilized and needed to be properly trained or educated—disciplined—if they were to fit into the industrialized and regulated world then in the process of emerging” (Literature 155).

See Ahmad’s excellent response to Jameson’s conception of Third-World literature as national allegory.
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16 See Dyde for a comprehensive account of Antigua’s colonial history and political independence.

17 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that there must be a necessary separation between the textual “truth” of Kincaid’s self-constructions, and the more complex realities of the contemporary Caribbean. My project in this second section of the essay is to look at the textual constructions of colonialism, mother-daughter relationships and subjectivity in Kincaid’s work. While Kincaid’s writing demonstrates an important aspect of post-independence identity, it would be a mistake to conclude that Kincaid’s works are a template for Caribbean subjectivity as a whole.

18 Nineteenth-century discourses on the education of European children linked their mission to the education of colonized adults within the Empire, using the guise of education as a mandate for colonial rule. See Stoler for an analysis of this phenomenon.

19 All of Kincaid’s work clearly reflects her idiosyncratic views on history, colonization, and the Caribbean family. Her writing usually focuses more on oppression than struggle and does not often provide solutions. I view Kincaid’s identification of the difficulties presented by legacies of nationalism and Eurocentric economic policies for liberation from colonization as a form of resistance, agreeing with Cooper’s assessment of Kincaid’s work as struggling against “assimilationist, diasporic internationalism” (186). A Small Place might be seen within the context of other women’s activism during the late 1980s against neo-colonialism, the policies of the IMF, and the establishment of Free Trade Zones within the Caribbean, such as Women Working for Social Progress and Women against Free Trade Zones: Work with Dignity (see Reddock). Although Kincaid’s texts often focus on the effects of colonialism rather than active resistance, that has not prevented their use by others; sections from A Small Place, for instance, are used as narration in Life and Debt (2001), a documentary critical of IMF policies and their effect on the economies of Caribbean nations.

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Call for Papers

*ARIEL* invites submissions for a Special Issue on Life Writing (39.1) to be published in 2008, co-edited by Marlene Kadar, Linda Warley and Jeanne Perreault. We are particularly, but not exclusively, interested in indigenous, transcultural, and postcolonial explorations of memory, identity and place in auto/biographical texts.

Articles might consider the following:
* Experimental use of form and genre in life writing (graphic texts; prose poems; illustrated texts)
* Changes of place and culture on gender and sexuality, on embodiment itself
* Self and cities
* Political/personal hybridities
* Film or photography as modes of life writing
* History and identity
* Transitions and transformations
* Life-writing fragments as sites of identity
* Violence, war and necessary selves
* Translated selves

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As the titles of many of her writings (Brown Girl, Brownstones, Praisesong for the Widow, Daughters) might suggest, Paule Marshall’s career has been preoccupied with the concerns and difficulties that women, particularly non-white women, face in American society. Her books have been published by The Feminist Press, lauded in feminist and postcolonial journals, and she has rightly taken her place among the important voices in the fiction of African-American and Caribbean-American women. By her own admission, her work is “interested in discovering and unearthing what was [and is] positive and inspiring about [the] experience” of marginalized peoples, and in pursuing “the unique opportunity to create, to reinvent” (“Interview” 5) cultural and individual understandings of those peoples. As such, her first and most famous work, Brown Girl, Brownstones, has been praised for constructing black female characters who are “unquestionably strong, capable, independent, assertive” (Denniston 16) and who embody a “determination to resist” (Christol 150) homogenized cultural formations.

In a basic sense, such assessments of Brown Girl are valid. The novel frequently focuses on a kind of gendered struggle that demands a certain amount of wilfulness and drive. The protagonist’s mother, Silla Boyce, is undeniably strong and capable, yet the suggestion that the novel depicts a “determination to resist” stereotypical ideas of racial and gender identity is tough to swallow. Most of the novel’s characters (with Silla as their leading example) relentlessly pursue property and money in a way that mimics rather than analyzes Western capitalist and masculinist ideas of value. The novel itself, I think, critiques such acquisitiveness, yet most criticism of the novel fails to contend with the conflicted relationship between “resistance” and “struggle” that Marshall presents. Mary Helen
Washington’s idea that Silla acts as “the avatar of the community’s deepest values and needs” (315), for example, fails to recognize the degree to which Silla is in fact an agent of the community’s desire for cultural self-destruction. Further, what is important is the degree to which her desires and ideals work to undercut notions of identity that depart from white masculinist norms.

Here, I would like to consider how Marshall, a writer usually considered exclusively in terms of feminist thought, handles the concept of masculinity. I will also illustrate some significant, and frequently disturbing, connections between certain types of feminist discourse and some of the more destructive aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Bluntly, I would like to examine feminist treatments of Brown Girl, Brownstones in light of emerging discourses on masculinities and to suggest that many versions of the “unquestionably strong, capable, independent, assertive” (Denniston 16) woman might in fact be subtle re-articulations of conventional masculine norms. The struggle Marshall depicts in Brown Girl might not be a struggle to resist, but rather a struggle to dissolve racial and sexual difference into something very like the universalized male experience feminist discourse generally seeks to deconstruct. The result is a dubious kind of feminist victory whereby Marshall’s women are considered strong, powerful and good only insofar as they conform to the dictates of a visibly performed hegemonic masculinity.

In most contemporary studies of masculinities, hegemonic masculinity is conceived in terms of an emphasis on external factors and a suppression of interior signals. In Manhood in the Making, David Gilmore imagines a “quasi-global” notion of hegemonic masculinity in terms of an identity focused on “visible, concrete accomplishments” (36), an identity formation aimed at attaining “approval and admiration in the judgmental eyes of others” (37). As such, the discourse of “the Real Man” marginalizes feelings and thoughts, and feminizes what Roger Horrocks calls “inner space” (40). It renders invisible signals masculine and reinforces Jeff Hearn’s claim that “men are constructed through public visibility” (3). This being the case, a universalized and homogenized gender identity develops, one that “debilitates individualism” as each man “aims to stay uncontaminated by the alleged inferiority of
(his own intrinsic) alterity” (Schoene-Harwood xii). Ultimately, this amounts to what Peter Middleton calls a “cultivated occlusion of self-reflection,” a systematic effort to suppress sensitivity and ambiguity and to perform a masculinity defined exclusively in terms of the demands of “the judgmental eyes of others” (190).

In light of the above constructions, investigations into hegemonic masculinity might seem to be at odds with Marshall’s self-conscious position as a writer of emancipatory minority discourse. If her novels are imagined in terms of an effort to come “out from under the seduction of another’s values” (“Interview” 4) and express a “particular spirited self” (“Meditations” 285), then a simultaneously reductive and universalized masculinity would seem to function strictly as a straightforward and unambiguous agent of oppression, one that does not require detailed investigation so much as sustained contestation. Yet Marshall’s handling of gender turns out to be neither straightforward nor unambiguous. I would like to argue that particularity and the spirited self are under siege in Brown Girl, Brownstones, not from an uncompromising male presence, but rather from a female character, Silla Boyce, who is often figured as “an avatar” for the survival of minority cultural practice. I also want to suggest that the novel’s primary male figure, Deighton Boyce, is attacked by his own community for failing to suppress the inferiority of his own intrinsic alterity, for failing to be a “real-real Bajan man” (Brown Girl 173). More specifically, I want to argue that Deighton’s emasculation is figured through a systematic deconstruction of his role as father. Together, I think Silla and Deighton confirm the validity of Lieve Spaas’s description of “the profound difference between the biological reality of paternity and the cultural construct of father, the procreating genitor and the authority-wielding pater” (1). In Brown Girl, father may be genitor, but mother is pater, and the complexity of Marshall’s gender disruption has thus far been overlooked. The effort to establish and express a particularly spirited self is very much at issue in Brown Girl, but not in a way that observes conventional notions of male and female identities and roles.

Critical treatments of Deighton Boyce tend to overlook the complexity of Marshall’s depiction of gender. They have either tacitly or explic-
ily endorsed Debra Schneider’s comment that “Silla’s situation is made more difficult by her husband’s ideas about all things due to him as a man” (70), a suggestion that positions the female as a marginal figure contending with an imposing male authority. Such arguments are entirely correct when they conclude that Deighton’s ambitions cannot be reconciled with the austerity of his life in New York. However, these arguments trade on reductive ideas of gender roles and lack a clear understanding of the novel’s complex gender dynamic. Deighton tells his daughter, “I got big plans or nothing a-tall. That’s the way a man does do things,” and he is viewed as “a dark god . . . who [has] fallen from his heaven and [lies] stunned on earth” (Brown Girl 83, 52). His “big plans” are directly associated with his ideas of manhood and make him disinclined to “scuffle” the way Silla does, and the collapse of his mythic status as a dark god haunts him throughout the novel. While others buckle down to thankless tasks, Deighton idly dreams of seeing his “name in lights,” of seeing his identity manifested in public space as somebody who “does get people respect” (Brown Girl 85, 84). In this sense, Deighton might well be viewed as a vainglorious male figure with an overdeveloped sense of entitlement.

But Deighton’s characterization is much more complex than the above paragraph suggests, and the link between Deighton’s behaviour and hegemonic masculinity is much more conflicted than Schneider acknowledges. Deighton is anything but a straightforward agent of patriarchal power, and Silla’s problem seems to have almost nothing to do with her husband’s excessive maleness. He is quite specifically delineated as the victim of experiences that “utterly unmanned him before he was yet a man,” and, as such, his behaviour seems motivated not by a sense of privilege, but by a sense of loss (Brown Girl 182). He is not puffed-up with an exaggerated sense of what his manhood deserves so much as he is profoundly anxious about the manhood he feels he is missing. His preoccupations, both with his land in Barbados and with his youth (despite advancing age and mounting pressures he looks “very young and irresponsible”), reflect a longing for a stage before he had become “umanned,” a stage when a legitimate adult masculinity still seemed possible (Brown Girl 22). In Men’s Silences, Jonathan Rutherford
describes this phenomenon in terms of “a specifically masculine form of nostalgia” that is linked to a “transitional loss of cultural authority” (125). As masculine identity becomes less and less tenable in the world of everyday experience, “nostalgia replaces the imperfect present with a perfect past” (Rutherford 127). Because Deighton was the last child, and, more significantly, “the only boy” in his family, his youth was conditioned by a mother who believed “the sun rise and set ’pon” (32) his every desire, and this period of psychological and emotional security (a space where even the sun does his bidding) provides him with what Thomas Pavel calls a “sacred space” (77) in the narrative of his life. His youth in Barbados acts as a grand narrative in which he operates as a heroic figure, while in New York he becomes a kind of “profane reality” (Pavel 77), factually real, but, as an agent of his loss of cultural authority, completely outside any workable notion of his masculine identity.

The land in Barbados, then, is not just the stuff of idle and vain-glorious dreaming; it is the centre of his emotional life, the source of his self-identification and the site where his masculine identity might be redeemed. The land represents the still-possible dream that people might someday say, “Deighton Boyce is one man that makes money and lives good,” and perhaps more poignantly, it represents his refusal to accept his emasculated position in a city where he “doesn’t exist fuh true” (Brown Girl 85, 66). In this context, Silla’s decision to secretly sell Deighton’s property amounts to the collapse of his remaining chance at a stable masculine identity, a collapse that disqualifies him from any claims at being the family’s patriarch, which further feminizes an already unstable masculine performance and leads directly to his death.

The sale of the land, of course, is only the final phase of a long process of emasculation. From the very beginning of the novel, Deighton’s relationship with dominant masculine norms is strained and, as a result, his identity as a man is constantly called into question. In Manhood in the Making, Gilmore figures hegemonic masculinity in terms of an imperotive triad composed of man the impregnator, man the protector, and man the provider (223). Deighton, the father of two girls and a deceased son, is clearly successful as an impregnator, yet his failures as both protector and provider ultimately compromise his claims at a legitimate
masculine identity. While walking down a New York street, Deighton is pointedly positioned “at a distance” from the robust masculinities of the men wrestling and swearing outside the bar. “Jarred by . . . violence,” Deighton lacks the aggression necessary for the role of protector and as a result he is “envious and respectful” of the others because “there [is] no question that they [are] truly men” (*Brown Girl* 37). A sensitive man who likes the feel of silk against his skin, Deighton is a man for whom the visible “proofs of manhood [are] alien” and he feels himself subordinated to men who are able to affirm masculine legitimacy “by flashing a knife or smashing out with their fists or tumbling one of the whores in the bar onto a bed” (*Brown Girl* 37–38). Unable to uphold any kind of violent masculine performance and no longer able to sexually satisfy his wife (his hands no longer “arouse . . . the full and awesome passion they once had”), Deighton falls outside conventional masculine norms and feels anxiety as a result (*Brown Girl* 23).

Much more significantly, however, Deighton’s failures as man-the-provider lead to conflicts with Silla, conflicts that reverse the roles of father and mother, leaving Deighton in a feminized position. However much Deighton is compromised by his sensitivity and his sexual inadequacies, his failure to “get ahead” financially amounts to the crux of the novel and the source of its many conflicts. Clearly, the conflict between Deighton and Silla is one of Marshall’s most emphatic examples of “the acquisitive nature of [American] society [and] its devastating impact on human relationships” (“Shaping” 108), yet it is also one directly figured around reductive notions of masculine legitimacy. In the eyes of his wife and the wider Barbadian community, Deighton is not a real man because he does not make enough money. His assessment of Barbados as “poor poor but sweet enough” (*Brown Girl* 11) reveals an emphasis on the internal that hegemonic masculinity cannot accommodate, and a less-than-masculine acceptance of a world outside visible accomplishments.

In his study of the sociology of fatherhood, Leonard Benson claims that “the breadwinner task is unquestionably the father’s key responsibility [and] lies at the core of our ideology of fatherhood” (271), yet Deighton conceives of his relationships with his children in emotional, not finan-
cial, terms. Despite Ina’s fears that he has forgotten her in his heart, Deighton specifically locates her most prized memory when he recalls how they “used to walk ’bout downtown looking in the people window when [she] was small,” and, far from being a distant money-maker, he has an intimate knowledge of her tastes that allows him to select a dress that makes her “smile luminously” (Brown Girl 126, 127). His similarly subtle and reflective relationship with Selina leads him to buy gift-certificates for books because he remembers a single moment in the past when she said she wanted “[b]ooks that would be [hers], that [she] wun have to take back to these people library” (127). These purchases are hardly stern or practical and they provoke harsh judgments from the wider community, yet he risks this censure and buys the gifts anyway because he knows it will make the girls feel good. The precision of his memory and the thoughtfulness of his choices represent an emphasis on inner space rather than concrete visible accomplishments, and this compromises his paternal performance making him more mother than father. His actions are those not of an aloof, ego-driven pater, but of a doting, other-driven maternal figure, one who really knows the children, even if he does not provide the financial resources to give them everything they want.

This being the case, there is something really peculiar about Schneider’s suggestion that Silla’s main problem is Deighton’s gendered sense of entitlement as a man. It is true that Deighton frustrates Silla’s efforts to purchase property in New York, but his disinclination for Silla’s project is hardly a matter of his adherence to conventionally masculine modes of behaviour. The problem seems just the opposite, that he is not manly enough. Silla’s problem is that Deighton is not hard-headed and hard-hearted enough to fulfill her dreams (and they are solely hers) of keeping up with the Joneses. Instead, he wants to buy something pretty for the kids, his wife and himself. As such, he is too “girly” for his wife’s tastes. Frustrated that he is passive where he “ought” to be aggressive and poor when he ought to be rich, she asks “what kind of a man he is, nuh?” because she cannot situate him in terms of the masculine norms established by the rest of the community (Brown Girl 24).

Silla’s question presupposes its own answer, of course. Deighton is not a very good man according to most conventional standards, particularly
in the context of an immigrant experience based on the pursuit of material prosperity. In Nancy Foner’s *New Immigrants in New York*, “the lure of the United States” is imagined in almost exclusively material terms, in terms of “the availability of jobs; the higher wages; and the promise of amenities, including, most importantly, higher levels of living and more consumer goods” (198). When Deighton refuses to pursue these goals and instead aligns himself with a return to Barbados (a space that is paradoxically “poor” and “sweet”), he disrupts the wider community’s efforts to “get ahead” in New York City. While the Barbadian Association is preoccupied with the material practicalities of New York, that is, with demonstrating that it has “a business mind,” Deighton retreats into a variety of invisible, imaginary frameworks outside the framework of both American capitalism and visible accomplishments (*Brown Girl* 221). To Deighton, New York is a place in which he “doesn’t exist fuh true” (66), and instead of following his wife’s program of social advancement he constructs his “real” life in the metaphorical terms of memory and emotion, in terms of inner rather than “outer” space.

In so doing, he makes a decisive move away from the world of visible concrete accomplishments, the most obvious of which would be ownership of his house. He tells Selina, “as far as the record goes I ain even in this country since I did enter illegally . . . I don’t even exist as far as these people here go” (66), and this makes New York the site of his ontological dissolution rather than the focus of his existence. Refusing the ontological insecurity of living in a place where he is not really real, he disassociates himself from New York, its ideology, and most importantly, from the compromised existence the city imposes on people who do not exist “for true.”

Paradoxically, then, he ceases to be a “real Bajan man” by refusing to become a committed New Yorker. While “every West Indian out here taking a lesson from the Jew landlord,” Deighton retains a desire to go “home and breathe good Bimshire air” (*Brown Girl* 173, 85). As a Barbadian man in New York, his alterity is registered by Barbados itself, and his masculine identity is compromised by his desire to operate outside the norms of American capitalism. His nostalgic and emotional desire to go home confirms his inability to achieve the “hardiness and
self-discipline required by the male role” (Gilmore 220–21). It signifies his inability to grasp the seemingly hardwired relationship between what Andrea Greenbaum calls “brass balls” masculinity and “the discourse of capitalism” (33). In the end, Deighton embodies “‘feminine’ values—compassion, nurturance, empathy—[that] are threatening to the men’s business ethos” (Greenbaum 36) and his demise can be directly traced to this feminized alterity.7 His “unnatural acceptance” of his disappointments and his belief that such defeats are “simply his due” cannot be reconciled with aggressive acquisitiveness, and lead first to his abandonment of any kind of masculine identity, later to his death (Brown Girl 115). Not surprisingly, the dissolution of his identity in the Father Peace movement involves the renunciation of material possessions (and hence the role of provider) and is figured through a movement from a paternal to a filial role. He insists that his children “mustn’t call [him] ‘Daddy’” because his new cosmology maintains that “we’s all [God’s] children and brothers and sisters to one another” (Brown Girl 171, 172). Joining Father Peace, then, is abandoning paternal function, a move that amounts to the complete collapse of Gilmore’s masculine triad. Not protector, not provider, not father, Deighton ultimately exclaims, “I am nothing” shortly before he commits suicide (169).8

And, as Deighton gradually renounces all claims at hegemonic masculine authority, Silla greedily assumes the position of patriarch. Early in the novel, she appears as the quintessential pater familias, “cool, alert [and] holding the newspaper,” and, as the novel progresses her masculine performance only intensifies (52). Aggressive where her husband is sensitive, and acquisitive where he is apathetic, she acts as emotionless protector and provider. Both her preoccupation with her daughters’ chastity (she will throw them out onto the street before she raises any “wild dog puppies”) and her clear preference for her deceased “boy child” reflect a paternalistic interest in preserving a “pure” reproductive line and retaining the respect of her peers (42, 30). More importantly, perhaps, she is characterized in terms of a relentless war on all interior processes, a consistent contempt for anything that cannot be figured in terms of visible concrete accomplishments: when Ina becomes religious, Silla tries to undermine her spirituality, and when Selina begins
to dance, her mother is more likely to “take apart this building bare-handed” than to encourage her talents (Brown Girl 277). Silla applauds Clive’s mother for destroying his paintings, and thinks of him as a kind of effeminate contagion, something less than a man. Combining a critique of emotion with an endorsement of profitable enterprise, she tells Selina that Clive “ain nobody to be associating with. A man that’s hiding from work with tears in his eyes” (259). To Silla, emotion is not just pointless, it is an insidious impediment to material advancement. When Selina suggests that Gatha Steed’s efforts to buy her daughter a nice wedding gown cannot erase the emotional distance between bride and groom, Silla’s contempt is evident. “Love!” she says, “give me a dollar in my hand any day” (104).

Silla’s contempt for inner space, then, is predicated upon an exaggerated interest in visible concrete accomplishments. The easily observed presence of the dollar in the hand makes the inherent interiority of love both unintelligible and useless. Under such conditions, the most visible demonstration of a dollar in the hand is property ownership, and Silla’s desire to own a house can be read in terms of a quintessentially masculine desire for “approbation in the judgemental eyes of others.” Not surprisingly, attaining her goal demands that she “steel her heart” against any kind of emotion, which she considers a sign of weakness (Brown Girl 131). If this is the case, readings of the novel that imagine Silla’s project in terms of her love for her children need to be re-examined in light of love’s unintelligibility in Silla’s masculine performance. If emotion is what needs to be eliminated, how can love be the motivating force?

To me, it seems quite clear that Silla’s aspirations are not a matter of any nurturing desire to better the conditions of her children. She destroys her relationships with her entire family to pursue a dream that is solely hers, and, because she has no time for invisible, interior processes, she is willing to see her “soul fall howling into hell” as long as she can save face in the wider community (Brown Girl 75). Despite many critics’ hopeful suggestions to the contrary, Silla is neither a loving mother nor a trail-blazing feminist: she is an old-school patriarch intent on making money and winning respect at all costs. She feels that “children ain nothing but a keepback” in her quest for financial prosperity,
but critics justify her pathology in terms of a “love” for her children that manifests itself only in soul-destroying outbursts (30). She freely admits that she wants to “make out like the rest” (Brown Girl 174) and hopes to follow her friends into Crown Heights, yet Washington somehow concludes Silla is “forging a path through unfamiliar territory, cutting brush for those behind her” (312). Quite the opposite, she is following the pattern laid out by her friends, friends who “ain white yet,” but who take their models of behaviour from the very male world of “big-shot white executives” (Brown Girl 221).

It is also important to remember that the central struggle in the novel is not to move a struggling family out of squalor and into decency, but rather to purchase the house they are already living in. As such, Silla craves a change in social status, not a material shift. The much talked about children end up in the same house whether Silla gets her way or not, and any argument suggesting Silla’s primary motivation is to help her children must account for the fact that the distinction she seeks involves her position in the hierarchy of the community, not her children’s position in geographical space.

So far, there is little critical recognition that this is the case. Even if it is true that Silla’s desire to buy the brownstone is disrupted by Deighton, the validity of Silla’s desire still needs attention, attention that is absent in almost every treatment of the novel. Critical representations of Silla as “a perfect representative of the community of black women [who] embodies positive values” (Christol 149), as someone involved in a “fight for basic survival” (de Abruna 250), and as someone who “is not obsessed with status in the least” (Schneider 70) seem to me to be almost entirely unsupported by the text. More damagingly, they demonstrate how Marshall’s critics are unable to conceive of a notion of “success” outside Silla’s reductive materialism, reflecting the extent to which the masculinist ethos of capitalist logic has transcended the need for justification to such a degree that even self-consciously feminist treatments consider “a dollar in the hand” as an a priori good and interior signals as unintelligible and pointless.

In the terms I am using here, Silla is not so much an emblem of cultural resistance as an embodiment of a cut-throat masculinist ethos main-
taining that, in order “to make your way in this Christ world you got to be hard and sometimes misuse others, even your own” (Brown Girl 224). As such, she demonstrates both that “success in [the American] capitalist framework comes at a steep price—the obliteration of compassion, loyalty and trustworthiness,” and, perhaps more emphatically, that “women stand in direct opposition to the fulfillment of the American Dream—the ability to make something out of nothing” (Greenbaum 37, 39). Disassociating herself from all feminine attributes, Silla re-makes herself as a masculine figure in order to pursue her very American dream, and, acting as patriarch, she demonstrates the validity of both Gilmore’s claim that “big-balled men . . . tower over and dominate their less well-endowed and more phlegmatic fellows” (41) and Greenbaum’s parallel suggestion that “to not be masculine (sans “balls”) is to be feminine” (36). Deighton’s suffering as a feminized man is an emphatic demonstration of the validity of these observations. Just as Silla predicts, he ends up “dead-dead at [her] feet,” while Silla’s brass-balled masculinity assumes control (Brown Girl 131).12 And, while Deighton is imagined as a deposed god “stunned” at his compromised position on earth, Silla begins to appear as a kind of malevolent omniscient being (“you’s God, you must know”), an association that links her directly to the brutal masculinity of Percy Challenor “presiding like a threatening god at the head of his table on Sundays” (Brown Girl 24, 169).13 Admiring Challenor’s ability to eliminate all interior signals and become “nothing but a work horse,” Silla accepts (rather than critiques) the idea that “those on top got a right to scuffle to stay there” (Brown Girl 54, 225) because she lives entirely in terms of an aggressive and competitive world in which the strong control the weak. Gilmore maintains that “manliness means results” and Silla sees no need to muddy this exteriority with ethical or moral questions (41). While Clive’s compromised masculinity tries not “to hurt people when they’re so damn fragile inside,” Silla (perplexed at the mysteries of her daughter’s emotional life) hovers over an unprofitable invalid tenant shouting, “why you wun dead, nuh?” wondering what the old woman has to live for if she isn’t worth a dime (Brown Girl 254, 202).14

The dominance of this cultural logic and the unintelligibility of all other modes of masculine performance are also essential to the forma-
tion of the perhaps misleadingly named Barbadian Association. In her study of West Indian immigrants in New York, Linda Basch maintains that “voluntary societies” play an important role in immigrant life by “providing an arena in which the group can reaffirm its traditional heritage and ethnicity in an alien context,” yet it is often difficult to figure out how, exactly, the association depicted in the novel affirms traditional heritage (162). The speeches delivered at the association’s first meeting originally seem to suggest that the association is working to preserve Barbadian identity, yet this pretense is gradually revealed as not only false, but counter to the association’s true project which is to “adopt the same single-minded selfish values of their detractors” (Denniston 23). Cecil Osbourne’s opening speech claims the Barbadian Association acts as “a sign that people have banded together in a spirit of self-help,” asserting the presence of “a little fish in a big white sea,” a construction that implies that cooperation and minority identity are central to the group’s purpose (Brown Girl 221). Yet, conflict erupts immediately when Claremont Sealy insists that, “our doors got to be open to every colored person that qualify” (Brown Girl 222). Sealy’s suggestion that the community become more cooperative and more inclusive leads directly to the charge that he is “nothing but a commonist” because the community’s notion of “banding together” is subsumed by its larger interest in the privatized, competitive, white, masculinist logic of capitalist discourse (223). When Osbourne says “we ain’ white yet . . . but we got our eye on the big time”(221) the group feels “as if they [are] no longer individuals . . . but a puissant force, sure of its goal and driving hard toward it” (222); when Sealy proposes a kind of Garveyist Pan-Africanism, everybody gets upset because they are unwilling or unable to think outside a template that equates private property with personal legitimacy. Rather than creating a nurturing, inclusive, cooperative environment, the association ultimately upholds the view that nurturing is effeminate and unnecessary. Silla feels no racial connection with poor black roomers because “I had to get mine too hard,” and, because everybody else feels (more or less) the same way, the spirit of banding together gives way to the logic of the free market; “people got to make their own way” (Brown Girl 224).
Ultimately, then, Marshall’s Barbadian community has no time for “soft” signifiers and devotes itself to performing the aggressive masculinity encoded by the capitalist ethos. After the community discovers that Deighton has spent the family’s money on pretty presents rather than investing in property, they figure his departure from their (adopted) cultural norms in terms of a kind of infection they do not wish to catch. When Deighton is deliberately and uniformly rejected by the dancers at the wedding, the community uses its cultural heritage as an expression of hostility against a man who has failed to perform the masculine function, and they refigure the dance in terms of the masculine world of concrete accomplishments (rather than in terms of relaxation, enjoyment, and so on). When the dancers at the party use their backs to “form a wall against him,” they use a cultural expression of life, beauty, joy, and sex to censure Deighton for his interest in the very factors that gave (and should give) rise to the dance in the first place (Brown Girl 150). Lloyd W. Brown perceptively views the novel in terms of “the life force,” which is embodied by Deighton, and “the machine force,” embodied by Silla. Under such a framework, Brown believes that

The machine-like force of the immigrants’ inflexible purpose has really mechanized the calypso. The calypso is, intrinsically, a rhythm symbol of the life-force. But the ritual expulsion at the wedding party (in effect an exclusion from the sexual rites of the life-force) transforms the calypso into an instrument of the immigrants’ determination to secure . . . material rewards. (161)

In the terms I am using, the life force might well be aligned with nurturing, feminized values and the machine force with competitive “male” ones. In either construction, the dancers reject Deighton because he is too interested in things like dancing and not interested enough in making money. This is a judgment made by a marginalized community of Barbadians, but, more importantly, it is a judgment for the hegemonic masculinity of capitalist economics. Because Barbados is “poor poor,” the island ultimately registers not as a revered homeland but as a feminized space for the weak and the lazy, a space that is no longer ap-
appropriately for ambitious brass-balled New Yorkers with their eyes on the big time (Brown Girl 11). When Deighton tries to include himself in the dance, the worst thing they can think to do to him is to call him a small time, small islander. As he approaches, the voices of the community “rush full tilt at him, scouring him and finally driving him from their presence with their song, ‘Small Island, go back where you really come from’” (150). Not long afterwards, they get their wish and Deighton leaves New York, not for the small-island of his youth but to be dissolved into the archetypal maternity of the sea. An absolute failure as a man, he finally abandons the quest to see his name and lights and renders himself invisible and anonymous, unmarked even by a tombstone.

Near the end of the novel, Selina reflects upon her past judgments and on the wisdom she has gained, saying, “my trouble maybe was that I wanted everything to be simple—the good clearly separated from the bad—the way a child sees things” (Brown Girl 303). As a bildungsroman, the novel tracks her journey from childlike certainty to adult ambiguity and toward the end of the book she begins to perceive a world that is complex and contradictory rather than reductive and smooth. In this article, I have tried to demonstrate how many critical reactions to the novel ignore the lesson Selina clearly learns, how critical readings demonstrate a desire for things to be simple and smooth. I have tried to show that Marshall’s critics want the good and the bad to be separated according to conventions that figure gender in reductive and uncomplicated ways, and I have attempted to show how unworkable those ideas are, how complicated Marshall’s construction of gender really is. In Brown Girl, Brownstone, patriarchal authority is not ultimately a matter of sexual identity or reproductive function, but of hegemonic masculine performance. Men who fail to measure up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity are “unmanned,” while women who visibly perform a ruthless, “big-balled” masculinity act as patriarchs. Inside a capitalist discourse that aligns manhood with money and femininity with emotion, biological identities based on sexual difference are ultimately less significant than visible demonstrations of virility and aggression. In the end, efforts to situate Silla Boyce inside feminist discourse are efforts to duplicate rather than critique hegemonic masculine norms, and any de-
fence of Silla’s behaviour amounts to an unwitting endorsement of a discourse that suppresses all forms of interiority in favour of a world where “results” are the only things that matter.

Notes
1 While Marshall has never achieved the kind of critical and popular success that Toni Morrison or Alice Walker have, she has been a major presence in the world of American women’s writing for several decades, and was among the first black American women to achieve any kind of recognition from the literary world. And, while Marshall’s complicated and convincing treatments of political, social and interpersonal relationships have not, perhaps, been seen as “socially relevant” in the manner of Morrison and Walker, she has received several literary awards and honours, including the American Book Award, the Langston Hughes Medallion Award and the John Dos Passos Award. In 1990, she was honoured with the PEN Faulkner Award.

2 Critical writings on Marshall consist of at least two full-length studies, *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender* by Dorothy Hamer Denniston, and *Towards Wholeness in Paule Marshall’s Fiction* by Joyce Pettis. There is also a fairly substantial collection of essays and reviews in journals like *ARIEL, World Literature Written in English* and SAGE, and in larger studies like *The African American Novel Since 1960, Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*, or *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women’s Fiction*. As the above might suggest, the critical preoccupation has been with matters having to do with race, gender and geography. There has been almost no effort to consider the works of fiction as distinct story worlds, just a repeated effort to delineate useful, real world allegories from the texts. And, while such a strategy might be appropriate when approaching a more programmatic writer like Walker, Marshall’s work is not self-consciously *instructive* in the same way. As a result, critical efforts to find straightforward instructions are often strained and unconvincing.

3 Given the global legacy of European imperialism, this “global” vision is implicitly linked with a project that figured “whiteness” as a universalized form.

4 Specifically, Deighton is “unmanned” in his effort “to be like” the dominant white males he encountered in colonial Barbados (*Brown Girl* 182). This being the case, his emasculation simultaneously amounts to a kind of re-racination, an abandonment of the pointless project of becoming white, and his lack of interest in the Barbadian Association, with its rallying cry “we ain white yet, but we got our eye on the big time,” might well be read as a rejection of a project he already knows to hopeless (*Brown Girl* 221).

5 This is not to suggest that Deighton is indifferent to his children’s wellbeing, just that he refuses (or fails) to perform the paternal role in a conventional way.
“You Ain No Real-Real Bajan Man”

His insistence that “a man got a right to take his ease in this life and not always be scuffling” marks a clear departure from the quintessentially masculine approach of Percy Challenor, who is represented as “a pagan deity of wrath [with] his children cowering before the fire flaring from his nostrils” (Brown Girl 85, 54). Without Challenor’s aggressive nature or his money, Deighton’s version of parenting tends toward a feminized, nurturing role rather than a role defined in terms of protecting and providing.

6 Byerman recognizes Deighton’s distaste for the visible, practical world, observing that Deighton’s various career decisions reveal an interest in the “abstract rather than concrete” (138).

7 As bizarre as the comparison seems to be, Greenbaum’s study of David Mamet and masculinity contains assessments that are more applicable to Brown Girl’s business ethos than many strained efforts to situate it in terms of feminist or minority discourse.

8 It is also significant that Silla receives the news of Deighton’s death at sea just as the radio announces the war’s successful resolution (Brown Girl 185), juxtaposing the demise of a failed masculinity with the triumph of the quintessentially masculine figure of the soldier hero.

9 She dismisses Ina’s boyfriend’s masculine identity on similar grounds, saying, “he does give me a bad feel. He’s so softy-soft” (191).

10 Obviously, ownership suggests greater security, and, in some situations, mortgage rates can be lower than monthly rents, but none of this ever seems to make any impact in the novel. Selina’s college tuition is free, and there are no suggestions that life becomes any easier after Silla buys the house. Indeed, insofar as there are any indications of increased prosperity since the purchase of the brownstone, they suggest that all the money has been re-routed toward Silla’s new, and still very personal, goal of a bigger house in a better neighbourhood.

11 Byerman does recognize that Silla’s joyless enterprise is damaging and debilitates individuality, noting that, for Silla, “conformity . . . is the measure of success” (140).

12 Byerman claims Silla’s purpose is “not the destruction of Deighton’s manhood, but the transformation of his values,” but his claim only makes sense in the context of an intelligible masculinity (Brown Girl 144). In my view, Deighton’s manhood is always compromised and it is his distance from masculine norms that enrages his wife. Silla, as an agent of hegemonic masculinity, seeks to destroy Deighton as a feminized, not a masculine, figure.

13 The link between Silla’s behaviour and Percy Challenor’s manhood is made even more explicit when Selina speaks to Challenor’s daughter, Beryl. Cowed by the authority of the patriarchal presence in each girl’s life, Selina rejects conventional gender parallelisms when she says, “I can’t imagine your father ever being small, or my mother either,” thus figuring her mother (rather than her father) as Challenor’s closest peer (Brown Girl 59).
I do not mean to overlook the racial dimension of Silla’s hatred here (her rage that the old woman’s daughter “never once count me to speak because my skin black”), just to highlight the old woman’s helplessness and, by extension, Silla’s acceptance of a worldview where the weak are systematically destroyed by the strong (*Brown Girl* 203).

It is also worth remembering that ideological debates about socialist values are deeply invested in discourses of masculinity. Socialist values register as soft in the discourse of capitalism because they admit that the individual agent is vulnerable and requires cooperation and protection, while robust and “free” competition reveals the true measure of a man. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s 2004 comments about the divide between “brave” and “strong” Republican values and those of the “economic girly man” make this quite explicit.

In this sense, the Barbadian community duplicates the earlier behaviour of the white clerks who ridicule Deighton’s effort to identify with the dominant cultural position. In many ways, the community has turned the calypso into the exact reverse of the carnival tradition Bakhtin describes. Rather than using the festive occasion to “express their distrust of official truth” (269) and suspend existing hierarchies—what Victor Turner calls a “lampooning liberty” (104)—they use it to affirm white middle-class masculine notions of value, and to further isolate a marginal figure.

**Works Cited**


“You Ain No Real-Real Bajan Man”


CONFERENCE: “THE PRAGUE SCHOOL AND THEORIES OF STRUCTURE”
Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague 18–21 October 2007

The theme of the conference goes back to the structural concept of the language system developed by the Prague School. The conference will address the following:

1. a reassessment of the theoretical work of Prague structuralists (especially Bohumil Trnka and René Wellek) and their relevance for contemporary research;
2. a discussion of transformations of structuralist approaches in recent and contemporary theories of structures and systems, characterized by the movement away from the models of homogeneous, hierarchized and centralized structures to concepts of structurality based on dehierarchized assemblages, transversal relations and dynamic semantic situations (Einstein, Dewey, Bateson, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Deleuze, etc.).

The conference will have two sections and will conclude with the first annual Prague colloquium on “Frontiers of Theory: Technicity, Art and the New Media” (Saturday 20 October 2007):

For information contact:
Prof. Dr. Martin Procházka (Section 1):
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or
Doc. Dr. Jan Cermák (Section 2):
<jjan.cermak @ ff.cuni.cz>

Questions concerning the colloquium on “Frontiers of Theory: Technicity, Art and the New Media” should be addressed to Dr. Louis Armand: <info@litterariapragensia.com>.
Jamaican Ladies and Tropical Charms
Erin Mackie

In her novel *Voyage in the Dark*, Jean Rhys’ West Indian protagonist Anna Morgan reflects on the hallucinogenic distance between her Dominican home and the England to which she has been transplanted: “Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together” (8; my emphasis). This lack of coherence registers the colonial relation between England and the Caribbean as an en-jammed structure of competing realities. The disorienting shifts between the reality and unreality of England and the West Indies, between the thing itself and the dream fantasy of something else, is figured as a condition of colonial consciousness that also affects the characters in Rhys’ later novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. There these competing realities repeat in debate between Antoinette and her husband: “is it true,” Antoinette asks, ‘that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so’; he answers, ‘that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream’” (80). The difference between England and the West Indies, between the English and the Creole, frequently figures as an epistemological and metaphysical rupture across which each side is unrecognizable by, and unreal to, the other. In the colonial consciousness this perplexing difference may be redoubled, as is the case with Anna Morgan and Antoinette Cosway. Here, the subject regards herself alternately in the frames of England and the West Indies. Thus the Creole experiences a self-alienation that leaves her always only partially, potentially real. For the white Creole, as we see so emphatically in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the frame that might identify the “West Indian” is itself fractured along black/coloured/white, slave/servant/master, and African-Creole/Anglo-Creole lines.

Looking at representations of the sea in three texts—the anonymously authored 1720 *The Jamaica Lady, or, The Life of Bavia*, Herbert de Lisser’s
1929 *The White Witch of Rosehall*, and Jean Rhys’ 1965 *Wide Sargasso Sea*—I examine in this article this perilous distance, this “wide Sargasso Sea” that lies between England and her West Indian colonies, and that appears in the gap between the words “Jamaican” and “lady,” making an oxymoron out of the term “Jamaican lady” as well as a bitter irony of the epithet “White Witch” in de Lisser’s title. From the early eighteenth century and well into the twentieth century this gap has frequently acted as a space for the contemplation of how the colonial condition speaks to the way that fears about colonial degeneracy and the production of fraudulent value typically merge with misogynist fears of feminine capriciousness and sexual/reproductive illegitimacy.\(^1\) Specifically, my interest here is how this gap between “Jamaican” and “lady” is perceived and constructed, as well as how this rupture across which England and the West Indies confront and contest one another comes to be filled with occult content: witchcraft, obeah, voodoo. This evocation of the occult, I will argue, attempts to control, traverse, and exorcise the highly charged differences that create it. In Rhys’ mid-twentieth-century re-writing of Charlotte Brontë’s Bertha Mason as Antoinette Cosway, in de Lisser’s early twentieth-century sensationalist depiction of the infamous Annie Palmer, the (ethnically) white witch of Rosehall killed in the 1831 pre-emancipation uprisings, and in the early eighteenth-century burlesque anti-colonial narrative *The Jamaica Lady, or, The Life of Bavia*, the white West Indian woman’s distance from the socially legitimating status of “lady” is filled and confirmed by her proximity to the occult.\(^2\) Charges of witchcraft, whether of the European or African-Caribbean variety, are brought against these women in efforts to explain and counteract their charms.

While all three women, Antoinette, Annie Palmer, and Bavia, are subjected to specifically colonial and male policing in order to expose and to nullify their allegedly magical powers, the relationship of each character to her so-called powers varies in ways that reveal historical differences in the interactions between England and the West Indies, the African-Caribbean and the Anglo-Caribbean. I would suggest that the divisive relationship between England and the West Indies is triangulated through Africa, and that this is seen most readily in *Wide
Sargasso Sea. What makes the (white) Jamaican alien to the English almost always is represented in some relation to African-Caribbean ethnicity and culture. So the British Bavia is described with African features; Annie Palmer, the white witch of Rosehall, practices voodoo and obeah; and Antoinette Cosway also uses obeah, which was made available to her by the black Christophine. Historically, as African culture is more and more heavily creolized in the West Indies, the nature of this relation of conflation becomes increasingly explicit and direct. Indeed, Antoinette’s inability to situate herself involves her estrangement from both English and African-Caribbean culture. As Christophine says to Rochester, “She [Antoinette] is not beke like you, but she is beke, and not like us either” (155). Yet in all three narratives the violent ruptures of colonialism—between England and the West Indies, between master and slave, between the African-Creole and the “beke”—are so darkly fraught with oppression and mystification that they conjure up charms of “black” magic, figured as specifically tropical and feminine charms, which both compete with, and provide alibis for, white colonial domination. In relation to the history of belief in witchcraft, these texts show how just as such belief was being relegated to the realms of folklore and children’s tales in Britain, both belief and legal persecution were renewed in the West Indies where they focused on African-Caribbean practices. Despite their historical and ideological differences, all three texts vividly lay out the failures of England’s West Indian colonial enterprise, and all three texts articulate these failures, in part, through female black magic, which in West Indian colonial discourse becomes inseparable from black female magic.

Figuring difference through occult practice, these texts show how, as Abdul R. JanMohamed observes, colonial discourse transforms “racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference” (80). Such transformations work both ways. Racial difference such as obeah and voodoo becomes metaphysical and moral; equally, the metaphysically and morally “black” practices of voodoo and obeah are in turn fixed as racial difference. This conflation is demonstrated in Wide Sargasso Sea when Christophine warns Antoinette that obeah does not work for beke, for white people, for it is immutably a black practice (112). A similar
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inversion can also be found in *The White Witch of Rosehall* where Annie Palmer’s bookkeepers speculate about her origins and the provenance of her occult practices, both of which they trace to Haiti: “‘I hear’ says Burbridge, ‘there is a lot of mixture of blood in Haiti; and she may have some. That might account for her witcheries’” (127).

Cultural ethnographers and historians have recognized the ways in which African-Creole practices such as voodoo and obeah often—though not always—respond in preservative and redemptive ways, to the pressures of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. In contrast, the texts under discussion here show how these practices are instead enlisted on behalf of English, white, and, in de Lisser’s case, anti-nationalist interests. It must be noted, however, that *Wide Sargasso Sea* differs from the two earlier texts in its critical, postcolonial, representation of how these interests operate and oppress. *The Jamaica Lady*, fuelled by anti-colonialist panic, xenophobia, and misogyny, embodies its fears in Bavia, the monstrous female conjurress, and in Holmesia, the quadroon Creole, both of whom are safely ejected from England by the end of the narrative. De Lisser’s Annie Palmer, her whiteness complicated by her mastery of voodoo, also functions as a scapegoat, in this case for all the excesses, crimes, and sins of pre-emancipation white domination. While Annie Palmer’s involvement in voodoo seems to make her more “black” and savage, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette uses (ethnically) “black” magic in a misguided attempt to become more white, more English. Giving a postcolonial twist to colonialist discourse of obeah/voodoo, Rhys’ narrative draws a parallel between African-Caribbean obeah and forms of occult transformation and possession practiced by Rochester, the white English husband. This juxtaposition both criticizes colonial domination, and affirms the operation of both (ethnically) “black” and (ethnically) “white” magic. Thus Antoinette rebukes her husband when he tries to rename her, “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too” (147).

Historically, the discourse of witchcraft, especially here of the African-Caribbean practices of obeah and voodoo, has enabled ways both of understanding and resisting white colonialism, and ways for white co-
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lonialism to invalidate this understanding and persecute this resistance. As scholars Alan Richardson and James Perkinson discuss, talk about obeah works very like obeah itself to exorcise oppositional powers and so “the very charge of ‘witchcraft practice’ can itself be understood as a form of witchcraft” (Richardson 173). Through its use of witchcraft as narrative event and as colonial discourse, to critique colonial relations, Rhys’ novel witnesses, as Perkinson puts it, how “witchcraft . . . can be ‘good to think with’ as a mode of communicative action, signifying with a kind of ‘boomerang effect’ in the intercultural space of rupture between the West and the rest” (606). Following Charles Long, a scholar of African-American religions, Perkinson sees colonialism as a “cosmic” upheaval for the colonized, a spiritual event: “unlike for the West, for the rest, the experience was irreducibly ‘religious’. . . . It required dealing with contingency and terror on a cosmic scale. The result was the Native American “Ghost Dance,” African millenarian prophetism, Caribbean vodun, Jamaican Rastafariansim, the black church in the United States, and the cargo cult in the South Pacific” (604). Perkinson reads the figures of African-based metaphysical systems against the colonialist, racist discourse that would dismiss them as mere primitive “superstition.” Hence, the “witchcraft” tropes of African belief systems understand slavery and colonialism in ways that accord well with Marxian critiques of consumption and exploitation. Figuring European domination as cannibalism, these tropes register the ways in which “European power, in effect, ‘ate’ African substance in the slave trade” (Perkinson 604). These tropes, then, are available in both European and African discourses as ways to talk about the world historical devastation effected by colonialism and the slave trade: “Whatever the discourse [African occult or Marxian European], the fact of the effect is clear. A ‘witchery’ of heretofore unimaginable potency ravaged African and aboriginal cultures” (612).

The rupture that troubles the relationship between African and Africa, master and slave, black Creole from white Creole, West Indian and Englishman, produces a metaphysical gap that, from its inception, then, is figured in terms of witchcraft and the occult, as these in turn are asserted and countered. Describing circuits of exploitation and resist-
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ance, a discourse of witchcraft is useful insofar as postcolonial analysis accounts for both the practice of the occult and the colonialisit indictment against such practice. This discourse, I would argue, is crucial to the postcolonial study of West Indian history and texts for through it the super-charged cosmic rupture of the Middle Passage and its aftermath are persistently and powerfully registered. So, in the three texts examined here, the African and the European, colonized and colonizer, slave and master, the West Indian and the English, confront each other across this metaphysical rupture of colonialism and seek to understand and control this confrontation through an occult discourse.

I. Only in Jamaica

Insofar as the early modern Protestant imagination was “as apt to see witchcraft in misfortune, as Providence in good tidings,” *Jamaica Lady* can be read as an antithesis to *Robinson Crusoe* (Bostridge 110). In Defoe’s novel Providence authorizes a vision of colonial success as peculiar as the spectacle of colonial failure told through the adventures of the diabolical and monstrous Bavia. *Robinson Crusoe* uses the Caribbean as a site for its romantic dreams of a reconciliation of capitalism, Christianity, and colonization; *The Jamaica Lady* brings the Caribbean home as a nightmare vision of the effective evacuation of all categories of value, secular and spiritual. Defoe’s text performs, or seeks to perform, the all-but-impossible suture of economic and moral value, of God’s plots and man’s experience, of autonomous individual and social subject, of subjection and free will, within the final term of a miraculous Providence that authorizes the profits accruing to Crusoe from the colonies. In contrast, *The Jamaica Lady* refuses, both sceptically and satirically, such mediation and insists, ultimately through the charge of Bavia’s witchcraft, that the production of value in the West Indies is at once diabolical and fraudulent, an empty, accursed promise.

It is in this reactionary and sceptical refusal of the value of British imperialist enterprise that this text is “anti-colonial.” Uniform in its censure of colonialist and colonized alike, such a stance is not critical of colonial imperialism’s effects on those it exploits, but rather is xenophobically protective of Old World interests and values and against New
World contamination. The early eighteenth-century anti-colonial position is politically “conservative,” yet often populist, in contrast to the more “progressive” expansionist position that led mercantile imperialism and colonialism. Whereas later in the century anti-colonialist sentiment is transformed by the anti-slavery cause, such noble motives are not in play here. The still inchoate European notion of ethnic difference—African, but also Scottish, Irish, French, and so forth—plays a part in this early brand of anti-colonialism, but only as a figure for the dangers of contamination and degradation that colonialism courts. At this early period, the labouring underclasses in the West Indies were comprised of a constellation of despised types—English, Irish, Scottish and French indentured servants, transported felons, and masterless men and women, as well as African slaves. Not surprisingly, the first concern of this anti-colonialism is for the British underclasses in the West Indies, and this concern aims not to ameliorate their condition but to insure their suppression and containment.

In the eighteenth century, as in the twentieth century, England has been all too ready to throw her social “garbage” into West Indian backwaters, via transportation and indenture. However, England was less sure of what to do when her colonial chickens came home to roost, as they are doing in The Jamaica Lady. In his anti-colonial tract, A Trip to Jamaica (1700), Edward Ward describes Jamaican women: they “are such who have been Scandalous in England to the utmost degree, either Transported by the State, or led by their Vicious Inclinations; where they may be Wicked without Shame, and Whore on without Punishment” (16). Exacting their satiric “punishment” with virulent attacks on these Jamaican women, both A Trip to Jamaica and The Jamaica Lady are narrations of a trans-Atlantic passage, and so echo the pattern of the Middle Passage trope that is so prevalent in African diasporic postcolonial representations of relations between the old and new worlds.

The African diasporic Middle Passage, both as a historical event and a trope, is appropriated to spiritual and cultural uses in the writing of a redemptive return to “Africa” as a resolution of the upheaval and restitution of the loss incurred by the cataclysmic trauma of the abduction from Africa. This redemptive rescripting, then, mimes the event of the
Middle Passage and places the two episodes in dialogic relation. There are now two crossings, the traumatic passage from Africa to the New World and the restorative spiritual journey back. In contrast, the trans-Atlantic crossing and recrossing in these early English anti-colonial texts describes a trajectory only of deterioration and contamination. They articulate the passage in a desperate attempt to maintain distance and police boundaries between the old and new worlds, not, as in the African diasporic trope in order to bring these worlds together in a revised trajectory where, within the transformative model of spiritual redemption, each might become the dialogic fulfilment of the other. Ward’s *A Trip to Jamaica* recounts a descent into a feverish hell colonized by rogues and whores; the trip out of Jamaica in *The Jamaican Lady* follows the progress of this demonic populace from the hell of Jamaica back to the sanctity of England. *The Jamaican Lady*, then, is an early specimen of anti-immigration propaganda. Probably written by William Pittis, a friend of Ward’s (McBurney 85n2), and certainly revealing a reactionary anti-colonialist perspective close to Ward’s own, *The Jamaican Lady*, like *A Trip to Jamaica*, stands as a satiric counter-discourse to visions of the West Indies as Edenic sites of limitless resources and profit, of pure potential for the realization of commercial imperialism’s highest hopes.

Centering its repudiation of the West Indian project on the adventures of the conjurress and con artist Bavia, *The Jamaican Lady* follows the gendered commonplaces of eighteenth-century discourses of value, especially those concerned with the reproduction of value, which frequently take form in fantastic female figures with uncanny, capricious, and sometimes-demonic powers. So Defoe’s and Addison’s marvelously mercurial Lady Credit and so Swift’s lady investors swept along in the deluge of the South Sea project: “Undone at Play, the Female Troops/Come here their Losses to retrieve/Ride o’er the Waves in spacious Hoops/Like Lapland Witches in a Sieve” (ll. 89–92). In a figure that combines the stereotypical desperate West Indian adventurer with the witch, Swift creates an emblem of falsely inflated value, such as the hoops as bubbles on the South Seas that indicts these investors as both victims and perpetrators of fraud. Again and again, from the late seventeenth century well into the twentieth century, the figure of the
bewitching and beguiling female stands at the centre of critiques that speculate about the very potential of the West Indies to produce any reliable value, financial or sociocultural. Such female figures become emblems and scapegoats of England’s failure to retrieve her losses in the West Indies and therefore of the futility and peril of the efforts to forge circuits of exchange between England and the Caribbean.

The perils of traversing this distance between England and Jamaica is thematically rendered in *The Jamaica Lady*, which chronicles the sexual and social disruptions that take place on a ship travelling from Jamaica back to England with the recall of the navy immediately following the negotiation of the Peace of Utrecht in 1713. The narrative takes place, then, at a time when English commitment to and complicity with slave trade and plantation economies was intensifying; it was published somewhat later, however, in 1720, at the height of speculation about the South Sea scheme. So, as Melissa Downes points out, this novel registers its apprehensions about the circuits of exchange between England and her colonies specifically in the context of the South Sea Company boom (32). As an anti-colonial text, *The Jamaica Lady*, catalogues fears centring on fraud and colonial corruption that are activated both by the post-1714 intensification of British activity in the South Seas and, in 1720, by the spectacular rise of investment in the South Sea company. Both sets of anxieties involve problems of return, returns from investment in the South Seas Company and the return of a populace from the South Seas who have been contaminated by residence there. This contamination is typically figured as sexual and female. As Pharmaceuticus, the ship’s surgeon, remarks of his wife’s compromised virtue: “It’s true, he had caught her tripping at Jamaica, but . . . [that place] so changes the constitution of its inhabitants that if a woman land there chaste as a vestal, she becomes in forty-eight hours a perfect Messalina” (110).

Presenting the Jamaican lady as monstrous misfit, both *The Jamaica Lady* and Ward’s *A Trip to Jamaica* work to foreclose any attempt to “fit together” England and the West Indies. The colonial woman is pilloried on the charges of meretriciousness, demonic depravity, and monstrosity that England needs to purge from an accounting of its colonial enterprise. With all the conventionality of colonial discourse, *The Jamaica
Lady reads as a kind of transcript of the bad dream of England’s guilty and paranoid colonial conscience. These fears take shape in the deep divide that separates what is Jamaican from what is a “lady,” a discrepancy which here, as in the other texts, is figured in terms of witchcraft and conjuration, and which marks not only Bavia, but also her shipmate, the Creole quadroon concubine, Holmesia. The articulation of these fears provides a defence against them since the charge of witchcraft offers a legitimate provocation for persecution either against witchcraft per se, or against malicious fraud. For at this time in England witchcraft, as historian Ian Bostridge puts it, was an “amphibian denizen of the secular and sacred jurisdiction” (101). After the repeal in 1736 of all statutes against it, witchcraft in England was still actionable as a species of fraud (Bostridge 3; Sanders 190). Reflecting the ambiguity of belief that this repeal legally resolves sixteen years after the publication of The Jamaica Lady, Bavia’s conjuring is variously condemned as a confidence game and as actual witchcraft. But, as I discuss below, the narrative offers something of its own resolution by locating Bavia as con-artist in England and Bavia as conjurer in Jamaica and so expelling from English shores both the more potent danger of witchcraft and the backwardness of superstition.

In ways that define both terms in fixed opposition, the text splits “Jamaican” from “lady” in the two deeply conflicting accounts given of Bavia’s background: one narrative styles her as the English lady, the virtuous heroine of a tragic romance, the other as the fallen Scots-English woman gone Jamaican, a vicious con-artist and conjurer. Before Bavia actually appears on board the ship, the man she sends to secure her passage relates the first, favourable, and fantastic, account of her life and character. This tale is pure romance, and she a charming young noblewoman, beautiful, wealthy, and perfidiously betrayed by a false husband. Sold into white slavery to a Turkish harem, she is rescued from this fate by a bribe, her virtue, and the kindness of strangers. Told at length with much flourish of heroic and pathetic detail, the tale is only met with skepticism by the captain who, suspecting fraud, “really imagined she had been no better than a domestic servant . . . and was inquisitive to know how he should be paid for her passage” (101). Still, for all
his skepticism, Captain Fustian is ill prepared for the appearance Bavia makes immediately after her story has been told. The romantic sketch of the damsel in distress that precedes Bavia jars dramatically with the picture of the crippled “piece of deformity” that limps onto the deck, “one of her legs . . . much shorter than the other.” She astounds the captain with her “dead wainscot complexion,” “large pobble walleyes, bottle-nose, very wide mouth with great blubber-lips,” and her broad yellow teeth (102). The gap between the idealized lady of romance and the female “piece of deformity” from Jamaica could hardly be established more dramatically. Translating Bavia’s frightful appearance into a frightening talisman, Captain Fustian thinks Bavia “the picture of ill luck” and, although not a religious man, he confirms her malevolent power by “blessing himself” against its force. Although actually an English woman born to a Scottish father and an English mother, Bavia’s vicious nature is written on her body with signs that render her ethnically suspect in distinctly West Indian terms: her “dead wainscot” complexion recalls the stereotypes of febrile and meager white Creoles, while her “great blubber-lips” suggest, within the racist discourse emerging from this West Indian context, an African type. And like the Africans enslaved in Jamaica, Bavia is characterized as a sub-human primate; her name, Low German “bavian,” means baboon or ape. The features that announce Bavia’s diabolic nature are composed into a “picture of ill luck” drawn specifically from West Indian types and redolent, in their juxtaposition, of its monstrous hybridity.

After a series of intrigues that articulate Bavia’s malevolence and deformity in social and moral terms, the second “true” biography is given, one that establishes the opposition between “Jamaica” and “lady” around the charge that Bavia is a witch, a conjureess. Giving the lie to the earlier romantic biography of Bavia as the unfortunate Jamaica lady, this narrative styles her as a sexually insatiable con artist, procuress, and sorceress (122–35). Told by a second mate, it follows on the heels of the determination by the ship’s surgeon that Bavia is a witch. It is given as evidence to confirm the captain, and the reader, in the surgeon’s opinion.

Going down to his cabin after his habitual dram of rum, Captain Fustian “cast a malicious look towards Bavia” who “sat fronting the
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gangway” (121, 120). Thus distracted he misses his footing and tumbles down the ladder (121). The ship’s surgeon is summoned and he tells the captain that “it was looking on that ill-favoured carrion was the cause” of his accident and that “he [the surgeon] really believed she was a witch,” so suggesting that Bavia had caused the captain’s fall by hexing him (121). Yet it is Captain Fustian who gives Bavia the evil eye—“it was his looking on [her] that was the cause [of his injury]” (121). The surgeon’s reading, then, projects the captain’s malice onto Bavia and, charging it with supernatural forces, redirects it from her as maleficium. In support of his charge, the surgeon summons the second mate who delivers up the rogue’s tale that is the (second) story of Bavia’s life. After hearing this, Captain Fustian “really believed . . . that she was a sorceress” (135).

From here on, the antagonism between the captain and Bavia is organized as a witch-hunt. Understanding Bavia’s sorcery in the age-old terms of maritime folklore where witches are feared as conjurers of storms, the captain has her confined because “he had heard that when witches were imprisoned, they lost their diabolical power” (137). But when a storm blows up immediately afterward, the captain becomes convinced that Bavia, balking at her confinement, summoned the storm, and so he releases her. The storm blows over and the ship arrives safely. In England Bavia gets up to her old tricks again and is transported to Ireland, and so Bavia as England’s worst nightmare completes her phantasmagoric colonial course.

Bavia is not, strictly speaking, Jamaican, but once she has been in Jamaica that character is fixed in oxymoronic negation of her status as an English lady. Yet as an embodiment of the stereotypical unruly, depraved female adventurer who goes to Jamaica where she might dodge creditors and the law and pursue her nefarious career with little impediment, Bavia is quite amply qualified for the ironic title “Jamaica Lady.” Further, as we have seen in the physician’s apology for his own wife caught “tripping,” the moral miasma of Jamaican anti-society takes no more than forty-eight hours to infect and transform its inhabitants. Certainly Bavia, arriving in Jamaica utterly disgraced, is soon acclimatized.
Most importantly, her criminal depravity flourishes most vividly in Jamaica where it is represented as witchcraft and conjuration, unlike in England where it is simply fraud. It is not only that Baviá is by innate ill nature and criminal history “Jamaican” and so not a “lady,” but also that in Jamaica this failure of feminine virtue is infused with the tropical charms of black magic. The discourse of witchcraft in this text is liminal, positioned at a juncture between witchcraft understood in European terms and, as it is coming to be understood in West Indian colonial discourse, in African-Caribbean terms as obeah and voodoo. Baviá’s career in Jamaica hints at an overlap between these two, somewhat entangled, discourses of witchcraft: what she does in Jamaica can be understood, as it is expressed in the text, as the work of a European conjurress; yet it resonates with and at points mirrors the activities of the African-Caribbean obeah woman. That is, the more typically European focus on the witch’s performance of the devil’s Sabbath is completely absent in accounts of Baviá’s career; rather, her supernatural powers, like those African-Caribbean practitioners of obeah such as Christophine in Wide Sargasso Sea, are used to predict and influence personal, often romantic, matters. While in England Baviá makes a career out of defrauding couples through sham matchmaking deals, in Jamaica she works through “geomancy” and, in typical West Indian fashion builds up a profitable business for her “charms and incantations” (129, 132–33). Although geomancy is a thoroughly Western European practice of divination through scattering pebbles or stones, it has an analogue in the Yoruba divination scheme called Ifá, which uses palm nuts or cowrie shells. Likewise, there are both European and African forms of “charms and incantations.” Finally, however, what is most West Indian about Baviá’s conjuring is that it occurs only in Jamaica.

Baviá shares the title “Jamaican Lady” with another character, Holmesia, a quadroon born and raised in Jamaica who might seem to have an even stronger claim on it. Not only is she actually a Creole, but also, as a prostitute and adventuress, Holmesia is just as un-lady-like as Baviá. In a pattern that chiastically mirrors that of Baviá’s career, charges against Holmesia as a conjurress do not emerge until she leaves Jamaica and lands on English soil. Along with her slave Quomina, Holmesia
tries to find her way from Deal to London, and so asks a peddler for the road. She addresses him in patois: “‘You Baccaraman, which is dey way to grandee town?’” (142). Not understanding her nor even recognizing her appearance or speech as West Indian, the peddler assumes she is a gypsy fortune teller. Significantly, the English peddler not only fails to recognize Holmesia’s ethnicity, but also at the same time fails to recognize his own as a “Baccaraman” or white man. For indeed, in England “whiteness” is an exotic ethnic category imported from the West Indies; appropriately, it is announced in a foreign “Negroish” tongue. Here the distance between Jamaica and England is registered at once in ethnic and linguistic terms, and the epistemological gap of this distance is filled by the peddler with suspicions of necromancy and fraud.

This scene bears witness to the often class-based variations in witchcraft belief available in the early eighteenth century. While the peddler at first ignores the quadroon Holmesia, thinking her a mere gypsy, he becomes genuinely frightened with the appearance of the very black African Quomina (142). Her attendance by Quomina confirms the peddler’s estimation of Holmesia’s black arts: “he thought certainly the gypsy [Holmesia] had sent the Devil [Quomina] for him” (142). He cries out for help and is answered by “two countrymen” passing by. These men do not seem to be under any apprehension about actual witchcraft, but take Holmesia and Quomina off to be tried for vagrancy and fraud: “We know you are a pack of counterfeits and stroll about only to cheat the country under pretence of telling fortunes” (143). The quadroon Creole and her maid are rescued by Holmesia’s lover Galenicus who happens by at an opportune moment and clears up the whole misunderstanding with a rational explanation and a full payment of her ransom (143). In this brief incident, Holmesia is understood, like Bavia in the larger narrative, alternately as a fraud or a witch, depending on the beliefs held by the accuser, and, apparently, depending on the site of the activity. The situation patently registers the misapprehension of the peddler in a kind of reverse encounter scenario. So, in a way that, again, reverses the pattern of association between Bavia, Jamaica, and witchcraft; what is most un-English about Holmesia’s witchcraft is that it cannot be sustained in England. Her sorcery is foreign to an over-determined
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degree: it is attached to West Indian, to African, and to gypsy bodies. Further, while belief in witchcraft is briefly entertained by the underclass peddler, it is immediately dismissed twice over, first by the two men who charge Holmesia with fraud and then by Galenicus who explains the Creole’s actual circumstance.

II. White Witch of the West Indies

During the eighteenth century belief in witchcraft may be fading in England, yet the secular aspect of its jurisdiction (which is never completely secular) is still abundantly available for mobilization against stigmatized groups—gypsies, other foreign or disruptive women, and so on. We have just seen how through conventional discourses against gypsies, West Indian and African women may be pulled into this list of the stigmatized. Moreover, such a belief is revitalized in the West Indies as African-Caribbean occult practices come to the awareness of colonialists who rightly fear themselves to be targets. In the next two examples of infamously unladylike Jamaicans, the failure of conventional English femininity that is at once a consistent feature of colonial (anti)socialization, and a constant object of colonial castigation, is charged with the forces of magic which is black both culturally and morally.

Herbert de Lisser’s 1929 sensationalist historical novel, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, relates the story of Annie Palmer, who was a legendary plantation owner, a sadist, and a witch, from an anti-nationalist perspective. According to the legend, which is solidified by de Lisser’s novel, Annie Palmer was born of Irish parents and raised in Haiti as the protégé of a highly ranked voodoo priestess. A Jamaican lady of Irish extraction brought up in post-revolutionary Haiti, Annie Palmer embodies connections between a type of bad (colonial) whiteness first formulated as “Irish” and then exported to England’s West Indian colonies, where it combines with stereotypically African-Caribbean traits to produce the Creole type (Allen 22; Mackie 264). Palmer’s connection to an occult genealogy from a specifically Haitian source reinforces the dual association to which the novel is devoted: illegitimate female power and African-Caribbean culture. In voodoo, as one of the Rosehall bookkeepers comments, “the priestesses of Haiti are quite as powerful, in
every way as influential, as their male colleagues. Given a woman of that description thrown into contact with Annie Palmer... and anything might happen” (129). What does happen confirms the blackness of Palmer’s diabolical career. She acquires the Rosehall and Palmyra plantations through one husband, and then marries two others, all of whom die under more than dubious circumstances. Armed with the power of her erotic allure and her witchcraft, Palmer pursues a career of illicit gain, voodoo, seduction, and murder that is checked only when she is herself murdered in the 1831 uprising.

Just as Bavia’s narrative occupies two moments, that of the 1714 Peace of Utrecht and of the 1720 South Sea Scheme, and works to dispel a set of fears connected to each, so de Lisser’s narrative of Annie Palmer has a doubled timeframe. De Lisser’s narrative occupies 1831 Jamaica, poised for emancipation and social upheaval, as well as and that of early twentieth-century Jamaica, which was divided along pro- and anti-nationalist lines when de Lisser writes and publishes his novel. The book, then, simultaneously addresses the historical problem of plantation society and the more immediate issue of Jamaican independence, and it does so in ways that locate the corruption and failure of the plantation, not in English imperialism, but in an illegitimate exercise of power by the Irish-Haitian-Jamaican, and most importantly, female, Palmer. Thus, the text exculpates British colonialism from historical guilt in a way that supports de Lisser’s own anti-nationalist Anglophilic position.

Quite simply, then, the novel is premised on a vision of colonial corruption that identifies and disowns corruption as foreign (Irish, Haitian, female) to the very English colonial powers culpable for it. “The White Witch of Rosehall,” comments Paravisini-Gebert, “is a tale of colonial decline whose moral arguments centre on the contrast between Jamaica as a place which by its very nature incites corruption and sin, and England as the repository of strong and lasting moral values” (“White Witch” 28).17 Standing in a long line of white Creole females renowned for their imperious sadism, Annie Palmer’s sexual indulgences, and practice of voodoo colours the evils of the plantation system and depicts them as both feminine and black.18
So, in de Lisser’s text, as in conventional colonial discourse, Jamaica’s “nature” is feminine and England’s masculine. So the sole gentleman in the text is the young, virtuous Englishman George Rutherford who goes to Rosehall as a bookkeeper to gain firsthand experience of the workings of a sugar plantation in order better to manage his inherited Barbados estate. The narrative opens with Rutherford’s arrival at Rosehall and proceeds with its gothic tale of his seduction by Palmer, her conjuration of demons, her vicious voodoo curse on the free coloured girl Millicent, who is also in love with Rutherford, and, finally, closes with Palmer’s death at the hands of a group of outraged blacks led by Millicent’s grandfather, Takoo. Importantly, he is an African obeah man, and “chief and leader of the people of St. James” (243). The erotic enchantment of Rutherford, a red-blooded English man, well-educated and wealthy, with Annie Palmer is soon soured by his repulsion at her cruelty and its effects, which he spends the rest of the novel attempting in vain to counteract. After Millicent’s tragic death and the purging execution of the white witch Annie Palmer, Rutherford, exhausted by the horror he has witnessed, sails for England, vowing never again to return to the West Indies. So evolves another absentee landlord. Fortunately for his protagonist and tellingly for his readers, de Lisser does not allow Rutherford to make the same near-fatal mistake of carrying the taint of the tropics back with him with a West Indian wife, as Brontë’s Rochester did. Colonial corruption and failure is figured as purely West Indian and emphatically feminine and black; the (white male) English colonialist can neither tolerate it, nor be held responsible for it. De Lisser’s novel, then, like The Jamaican Lady, is anxious to contain the threat of colonial contamination and keep it out of the colonial motherland, Britain.

The characters in de Lisser’s novel respond in a variety of ways to Palmer’s voodoo: some rationalize it as a kind of vicious psychological manipulation; others understand it more literally as magic pure and simple. De Lisser’s overall representation of voodoo/obeah operates much as it does in the English Romantic texts that Richardson discusses, where the representation of obeah is invoked in order to exorcise anxieties about power, and so “functions rather like the practice of
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Obeah itself” (173). These anxieties become political and national for they emerge from an awareness of the central role that creolized African practices such as voodoo and obeah took in slave uprisings, especially in the Haitian revolution. However, as “primitive superstition,” obeah and voodoo are invoked to discount and dismiss the rational political content of black agents and activism: “It is not Toussaint [the leader of the late eighteenth-century Haitian revolution] but the Obeah-man who is made to embody British colonial anxiety in the critical decade of 1797–1807” (Richardson 178). Yet in de Lisser’s case, it is not Takoo the obeah man who is made to embody Creole colonial anxiety about the horrific legacy of the plantation system, but rather Annie Palmer the voodoo woman. For, writing in early twentieth-century Jamaica, de Lisser’s immediate concerns are not as primarily centred on slave rebellion and emancipation as they were for writers in the Romantic period (though these concerns do figure in the content of his narrative). Rather, de Lisser focuses on the historical legacy and validity of British colonialism in the West Indies.

Representing Palmer as a corrupt and lascivious female who amasses wealth through murderous and occult means, de Lisser’s narrative strips her of her social and economic powers and ultimately destroys her. Likewise, when pitted against Takoo’s obeah, Palmer’s occult powers are discredited and overcome. This Jamaican lady must be subdued by masculine force and so removed both from the white realm of imperial power and from the black realm of occult power. De Lisser’s novel suggests that in the past Palmer, with her African voodoo, and Takoo, with his African obeah, have been allies. As events unfold, however, Palmer and Takoo are represented as competitors, and her female black magic pitted against his male black magic. One of Palmer’s slaves ruminates, “he was afraid of this woman, who was hand in glove with Takoo, with Takoo who was dreaded by every man and woman on Palmyra and Rosehall. As dreaded as Mrs. Palmer, and even more in a peculiar sort of way . . . though she was dangerous she was less so, to them, than the gaunt negro [Takoo] of whom even some white men stood in awe” (140). While Takoo’s superior power is affirmed, his practice of obeah is simultaneously distinguished morally from Palmer’s. Palmer
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uses her occult powers to intimidate and finally kill her sexual rival—and Takoo’s granddaughter—Millicent, whereas Takoo uses his to try to save his beloved Millie. Although he fails to save his granddaughter, Takoo resists Palmer’s charms and strangles her in her bed. Yet, even as he commits murder, the novel affirms his sense of moral justice. Having killed Palmer while his co-conspirators hold back Rutherford and the other white bookkeeper, Takoo turns to them, “We could kill both of you Squire, if we want. . . . But both of you are kind. We may have to fight you tomorrow, but for Millie’s sake you can go tonight” (246). And so the rebellion of 1831 commences with the murder of the white witch and the African’s pardon of the white Englishmen. This pardon has two effects. By identifying Palmer as author of the horrors of the plantation, Takoo excuses the Englishmen, and, targets feminine black arts above all else, and in so doing de Lisser apologizes for the violence of the male African rebel and sorcerer.

This gesture of distancing the evils of colonialism from all things English, a move that characterizes colonial discourse from the seventeenth century on, continues, then, in de Lisser’s novel in ways that are deeply and bitterly ironic. The irony of Palmer’s epithet, “white witch,” depends on this distance between England and the West Indies, between the lady and the Jamaican, between what is white and good, and what is black and diabolical. It invokes our understanding that rather, than a white witch (as in Glinda the good witch of the South), Palmer, despite her whiteness, has become culturally and morally “black” by practising “all the old African sorcery” available in the West Indies (128). De Lisser’s white witch of Rosehall embodies the cruelty, exploitation, and corruption against which African-Caribbean culture fought for its life in ways that trace the source of these evils right back to that culture itself. Annie Palmer’s savage propensity for cruelty and her uncanny mastery of the psychological and corporeal techniques for inflicting it are identified as voodoo, and so assigned not to the English plantation system but to the newly independent African-Caribbean nation, Haiti. In a perversely twisted fashion, the novel reflects, in ways that ascribe blame rather than affirm liberation, the role that black magic—voodoo—played in the downfall of white colonial rule in Haiti by making Annie Palmer,
white witch, Irish mambo, the scapegoat for the cruelty and corruption that brought the downfall of white colonial rule in Jamaica.

III. Coda: Reversing the Charges

Wide Sargasso Sea, like The Jamaica Lady, figures the divide between England and the West Indies as two competing biographical narratives. However, here Rhys turns the tale against the Jamaican lady in order to reverse the charges, tallied across the centuries. Richardson notes how Rhys juxtaposes “the standard Eurocentric approaches to Obeah . . . against the narrator’s refusal to depict it at all” and so “effectively subverts the colonialist construction of Obeah” (189). The role of obeah, in Wide Sargasso Sea, and more generally of African-Caribbean culture per se, has been an object of considerable critical attention. Two critics in particular, Sandra Drake and Elaine Savory, structure their analyses of the novel around Rhys’ use of obeah and African-Caribbean spirituality. Savory argues that for Rhys writing-as-conjuration works in personally protective and transformative ways that are analogous to obeah. Drake’s work with the occult in Rhys’ novel is more elaborate and goes further to define her reading of it. Rather than understanding the narrative treatment of occult practices as a critical refusal of depiction and so a refusal of participation in colonialist talk about obeah, as Richardson does, Drake finds this depiction definitive to the novel. She argues that the African-Caribbean logic of zombification determines the novel’s overall structure and final significance. Further, Drake inscribes her reading of the novel into the doubled, redemptive logic of the Middle Passage. In this reading Antoinette, zombified by the white obeah of a demonic English husband, is spiritually awakened as she falls from the burning house into the welcoming arms of her childhood companion, the black Jamaican Tia. In death Antoinette returns home, and her alienation from what is black and Jamaican (Tia) is amended. Drake’s reading, then, exploits most fully the African diasporic spiritual context of Wide Sargasso Sea and offers the most utopian, optimistic analysis. Yet it threatens to take the edge off the novel’s postcolonial critique.

While my abbreviated and selective analysis here follows readings that affirm the positive presence of African-Caribbean practices in Wide
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Sargasso Sea, and while I am deeply impressed by and sympathetic to interpretations, such as Drake’s, that argue for the liberatory potential of this culture in the text, I think that Rhys is concerned with emphasizing the limits of obeah’s powers to salvage the wreck of West Indian colonialism. Finally, my engagement with this amply studied text operates mostly as coda to the foregoing analyses of colonialist witchcraft discourse in those earlier depictions of Jamaica ladies. With Richardson, I believe that the obeah work Rhys does here is properly postcolonial and therefore aimed at the colonialist talk about obeah which, ironically, functions quite like obeah in order to render colonialism invulnerable to opposition.

From early on in Wide Sargasso Sea the presence of obeah marks the hostility aimed at Antoinette’s family by both black and the white communities in Jamaica. Impoverished and left “marooned” in post-emancipation Jamaica, the Cosways struggle against colonial policy and black reaction to maintain their social position as landowners, as the Creole elite. Their horse—the one token of their status as proprietors—is poisoned. Antoinette’s mother Annette blames the black servant Godfrey for not preventing his fellow blacks from killing her horse, and claims, “He knew what they were going to do” (18). White society launches its attack against the Cosways not in the form of obeah/poisoning, but as talk about obeah. When Annette makes her advantageous marriage gossiping neighbours surmise that it is only through the black arts of Christophine’s obeah that she, an impoverished Creole, has attracted her respectable and wealthy English husband, Mr. Mason (30). This charge of obeah is levied to produce a distinction between these soi disant “Jamaican ladies” and the Martiniquan Annette. Jealous of her beauty—“because she pretty like pretty self”—and of her post-emancipation financial security, they never accept her (17, 30). The status and cultural gap between Mr. Mason and Annette Cosway, the Englishman and the West Indian, as their charges assert, can only be traversed by black magic, by charms the illegitimacy of which, then, are advanced to annul the match and to discount any claim Mrs. Mason might make to the title “lady.” Such charges participate at once in both secular and supernatural epistemologies; they speak of fraud and deceit as much
as they speak of enchantment. Likewise, Antoinette’s husband sees his marriage as a fraud imposed on him through deceitful negotiations that obscured the family history of madness and disgrace.

Antoinette understands the antagonism between the West Indian and the English as a competition between two contending forms of occult transformation, the West Indian as obeah and the English as talk about obeah that seeks to counter its charms with more-than-rhetorical forces of its own. Just as the neighbours attribute her mother’s marriage and rise in fortunes to obeah, so Antoinette attributes the changed spirit of Coulibri to “their talk about Christophine and obeah” (31). Here, Antoinette shows her awareness that talk about obeah can act just like obeah itself. For Antoinette, a Creole raised by the black obeah woman Christophine, obeah is a primary term in a discourse of the world that is partially shaped within an African-Caribbean cultural matrix. Antoinette, then, sometimes uses the term in ways that operate outside of the limits of European reality and that comment critically on the colonial discourse, through which this reality has been extended around the West Indies. When her husband tries to rename her “Bertha,” Antoinette protests: “‘Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too’” (147).

With its highly charged claim on her identity, this curse of becoming “Bertha” would rhetorically transform a Jamaican Creole, a “white cockroach,” into an English lady just as Holmesia’s “Baccararaman” recasts the English peddler as a white man. And, just as the term for “white man” is foreign in England, so the spell that would change Antoinette into a lady can only be enunciated in terms of an alien identity.

Yet, Antoinette charges her husband with this sort of sorcery only after she has herself used obeah to try to win back his affections. In doing this, she seems to take a hint from the suspicions the neighbours had murmured against her own mother and uses Christophine’s potion in her attempt to close the gap between her self and her husband. By charming him into full erotic connection, she attempts to traverse the distance between her Jamaican identity and the role of his wife, his English lady. She, then, uses Christophine’s black magic to make herself more white, more English, and more of a lady; by doing so, she aban-
dons herself to the spells of patriarchy and colonialism (Drake 105). Ironically, and in ways that confirm the novel’s critique of colonialism, both Antoinette and her husband use obeah toward the same end, to make her “into someone else.” The failure of any successful negotiation between West Indian and English, between Anglo-Creole and African-Creole, realities is affirmed in the gestures across cultural-ethnic lines that lead up to and then proceed from the “obeah night” Antoinette spends with her husband. The critique of colonialism becomes apparent as each gesture stumbles across the fault lines that structure the terrain of colonial social relations. Antoinette insists on obtaining the potion against Christophine’s admonition that obeah is not for white people, and therefore commits a cultural trespass. This error immediately redoubles as Antoinette then uses the potion in her attempt to situate herself wholly within an English identity. By so forsaking her West Indian self she renders that self more vulnerable to English colonial misapprehension as “Bertha” Mason the mad, monstrous West Indian. Disgusted and vengeful, her husband sleeps with a black servant, an act that at once asserts his immunity to Antoinette’s fraudulent, toxic charms and confirms his captivation within the easy web of adulterated and venal sexual mores that are stereotypical characteristics of the tropics.

Antoinette’s obeah, then, evokes her husband’s hatred, and she herself stumbles into an abysmal dissociation represented simultaneously as madness, and as Drake suggests, zombification (Drake 106–12). This dissociation figures within Antoinette’s psyche as the colonial ruptures that prevent Jamaican and lady, West Indian and English from ever “fitting together.” The categorical juxtaposition here of “zombification” versus “madness” itself emerges from the presence of two divergent discourses, one West Indian, the other English. Rochester violently rejects her tropical charms, and challenges her obeah with his own brand: “No more damned magic,” he declares, and proceeds, vampire like, to drain her life away: “I did it too. I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost . . . Blank lovely eyes. Mad eyes. A mad girl” (170). Just as the animosity of Captain Fustian’s gaze renders Bavia into a witch and brings about a completely different narrative of her life, so here the husband’s hatred
makes Antoinette into the mad girl and generates the different story of her life we read in Jane Eyre. Rochester’s confinement of Antoinette as Bertha locates its justification in her “madness” which, within the obeah centred epistemology that the narrative shares with Antoinette, is itself the product of the voodoo work of white colonialism. As Antoinette observed earlier, “that’s obeah too.”

Pulling Antoinette fully under the sway of his legal and medical definition of pathology, her husband in a sense conquers and owns her, but the powers of this seemingly rational discourse are compromised by his recognition that the limits of that discourse mark the very source of both his attraction and his hatred. This recognition registers his vulnerability to Antoinette’s tropical charms and so engenders his reaction against them. His associations with the islands and their people lock together the qualities of magic and fraud in a single term of disillusionment, the enchantment that attracts him and deception that repulses him: “I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, conceit and deceit. And I hated the place. . . . I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. . . . Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness” (172). His antagonism is generated by a frustration with a world he cannot know whose magic “secret” produces an exotic loveliness that is mystified in a way which enhances both its beauty and suspicions of its illusive and deceptive nature. Antoinette’s tropical charm, here, is figured as an intimacy of hatred and beauty, and is finally dissolved in Rochester’s verdict on her that exorcizes the magic, the hate, and the beauty: “a drunken lying lunatic—gone her mother’s way” (164). But in its place all he is left with is “madness,” here the name for how the Englishman controls what he does not understand, once he has emptied it of all promise that might tempt him.

Although witchcraft operates in Wide Sargasso Sea, as it does in The Jamaica Lady and The White Witch of Rosehall, to configure a set of ontological and epistemological gaps that obstruct the reconciliation between the West Indies and England, between being a Jamaican and being a lady, Drake suggests that such occult powers in Rhys’ novel finally register a conjunction rather than a rupture. This coming together
is articulated not on the personal level between Antoinette and her husband, nor on a national level, between England and Jamaica, but on cultural level between Anglo- and African-Creole, and on a textual level between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*. For Rhys returns Antoinette as Bertha, the madwoman in the attic, to Brontë’s text, and to the narrative that culminates in the mutual destruction of madwoman and her prison, Thornfield Hall. While within the terms of Brontë’s novel and Antoinette’s husband, this self-immolation is the act of a madwoman that retrospectively confirms the justice of her confinement even as it rids the narrative of the obstacle of her presence, within the voodoo epistemology that Drake claims for Rhys’ text this act stands as affirmation of Antoinette’s release from zombihood into the realm of autonomous being: “The zombi, awakened, takes revenge in flame. But in burning Antoinette-zombi, she also frees Antoinette for her real life—her reverse trip back across the wide Sargasso Sea—’the slow road to Guinea, Death will take you there’” (108–09). Figuring the death and disposal of Bertha as the awakening and return of Antoinette, Drake emphasizes the victory over death this reading awards Antoinette and the metaphysical triumph it grants African-Caribbean belief systems.

Yet while I, like Drake, note the zombi figure in the text, I think that it should be read as part of the texture of Antoinette’s, and the novel’s, West Indian consciousness. “Zombi” names a West Indian way of understanding the alienation of identity; it stands against the English understanding named by the term “madwoman.” Zombification and madness, then, signal, as is characteristic of this text, the presence of two incongruent realities and so the epistemological and ontological gap between them. Rather than maintaining this tension, Drake’s reading tends to close it. By following the notion of Antoinette’s zombification through to a redemptive conclusion, Drake contravenes the irresolution of the novel’s conclusion.

It seems clear from Rhys’ confident handling of African diasporic beliefs and practices such as zombification and obeah, that, if she had meant to send Antoinette along “the slow road to Guinea,” she would have done so. Instead, she sends her protagonist down a dark passage intent on doing some unnamed thing she was “brought here to do,”
that she “had to do” (190). Rhys’ text then stops, leaving the narrative to pick up from her intertext, *Jane Eyre*. The compulsion, the horrible necessity, here expressed by Rhys’ Antoinette can be read as a metatextual confrontation with the ending ineluctably scripted in the nineteenth-century novel. The “dark passage” named in the last two words of Rhys’ novel, accordingly, would refer to the space between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. More broadly, it might be read as that gap between English and West Indian realities that Rhys’ Antoinette never can traverse, not with marriage, not with Christophine’s obeah, not, I suggest, even with Drake’s triumph of zombification. Rhys’ Antoinette never does traverse this space; the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea* simply positions her at its edge, where, I believe, she has been throughout. Rhys uses the discourse of witchcraft to write about colonial power relations and, I think, what she finally conjures with this discourse is the rupture of colonialism, not its redemption. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, then, witchcraft becomes part of a postcolonial discourse that goes far to account for the violence and waste brought in the wake of colonialism’s truly “cosmic upheaval.” And it is in this manner that I have endeavoured to use a postcolonial discourse of witchcraft here.

**Notes**

1 See Downes, who examines this nexus of femininity, value, and bad magic in relation to *The Jamaica Lady*.

2 In the context of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, conservative, even reactionary critics who opposed the Whig-led expansionist program of mercantile imperialism usually took this “anti-colonialist” position. See below pages 7–8.

3 See Mackie: “In earlier seventeenth-century descriptions, stereotypes of the white West Indian drew not so much on analogies with the black population, as on existent types of ‘bad whiteness’ formulated by the English to vilify the Irish, the French, and members of their own criminal and underclasses. Later, as the labor force shifted away from the white, mostly Scottish and Irish, population of bonded servants and transported felons to slaves, and as the white Creole population advanced their own interests and legitimacy, the threats that the tropics presented to British cultural identity were more explicitly traced to the influence of the African-Caribbean inhabitants” (255).

4 For the history of English witchcraft belief in this period, see Bostridge and Porter. While there is a whole industry built around the witch trials in Salem,
much less attention has been given by historians to other, more African-inflected forms of witch belief in the colonies. Noting the presence of African-derived forms of occult practice in the colonies and the paucity of discussion about these, Behringer observes that this “chapter of colonial witchcraft has not yet been written” (146).

5 See, for example, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions* and *Sacred Possessions*. For a classic study of African religious culture in the New World, see Bastide.

6 This trope occurs frequently in contemporary African diasporic writing; it structures a wide variety of cultural forms, such as dance, and shapes the cosmography and spirituality of African diasporic religions. For an overview of the historical and cultural origins of this trope and a variety of discussions of its operations, see Diedrich, Gates, Jr. and Pedersen. As the editors of that collection write in their Introduction: “The Middle Passage . . . emerges not as a clean break between past and present but as a spatial continuum between African and the Americas” (8). When I speak of the redemptive uses of this trope I have in mind most generally the African diasporic notion of a “return to Africa,” especially as it is understood in spiritual and, as Gilroy has explained, in culturally symbolic terms. More specifically, I think, for example, of the movement from abjection to salvation, from captivity to liberation in African diasporic music described by Gilroy as “the slave sublime” (187–224). This musical movement, its accompanying kinetic forms, and the basis of both in the Middle Passage, are the material for Brathwaite’s “Caliban.” The logic and narrative of redemptive return, a sort of retracing of the Middle Passage, informs any number of well-known contemporary literary works such as Robert Hayden’s poem, “Middle Passage,” Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage: A Novel*, and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*.

7 Whereas our habitual secularism might tempt us to see the first voyage out of Africa as the “actual” event and the second, supplementary, passage back as a “merely spiritual” or “merely figurative” imaginative construction, as Perkinson reminds, us the first passage, no less than the voyage back, would necessarily have been experienced by those who suffered it as an “irreducibly ‘religious’ event” (604).

8 The terms of the Peace of Utrecht that ended the War of the Spanish Succession granted England the Asiento, the monopoly on the slave trade to the Spanish American colonies. More generally, England’s success consolidated her Atlantic/Caribbean domination. The South Sea scheme was a huge speculative venture, which crashed in 1722.

9 “Tripping” is a metaphor for sexual misconduct; it denotes the shaky morality of a woman perhaps not utterly “fallen,” but certainly compromised. Note that the more completely corrupt Bavia is crippled from her early “fall” (into sin).

10 For the features and genealogy of white Creole stereotype, see Mackie.

11 See Booth: “One of the most universally accepted notions concerned the power of witches to raise storms and control the natural elements at sea” (54).
12 See Barash: “Bavia is thus the archetypal English colonial subject. . . . The story of Bavia’s Irish origins [sic] and her return to Ireland at the novel’s end reinforce the extent to which her story figuratively reconstitutes the historical origins of English slave culture, and her punishment the desire to root out the sexual and linguistic ambiguities of colonization by forcibly returning her to her place of cultural origin and marking her as indisputably female” (418). Although Barash’s reference to Bavia’s “Irish” origins is based on a misreading (Bavia is half Scottish not half Irish), her point about the colonial circuit of Bavia’s career is illuminating.

13 Properly speaking, the typically more personal, more exclusively “magical” practices of obeah differ from voodoo that names an elaborate religious system of beliefs and practices. However, like voodoo, obeah could be and was used in aid of political and social cohesion and liberation. Identified with an autonomous African-derived belief system and set of practices frequently employed to inoculate the individual against harm and, conversely, to harm one’s enemies, obeah is part of the culture of slave resistance. Obeah, then, has both a personal and a public face. Savory makes this distinction: “The person working Obeah is in the world of magic when using the powers privately. If an Obeah practitioner works in public—for example, in a cult such as Jamaican Cumina—then Obeah usually becomes part of a religious ritual” (218). But Obeah, per se, is not in itself a religious cult as is Cumina and as are vodou, santeria, and candomble.

14 For contemporary eighteenth-century notions of and names for ethnic difference, see Wheeler. For the concept of “whiteness” see Allen and Mackie.

15 The peddler’s response to Quomina echoes that of Captain Fustian who reprimands a sentinel on board whom he believes had sex with Quomina: “Don’t make a cuckold of the Devil, you dog” (111). Downes observes, “An African slave, the object of trade that lies at the heart of the South Sea Bubble and a domestic economy based on empire, is also at the heart of images of absolute fetish and absolute transgressive sexuality” (39).

16 Although Annie Palmer is elsewhere associated with the practice of black magic, usually obeah, this Haitian connection is de Lisser’s own invention. For other accounts of Palmer, see Black and Shore. For an analytic unraveling of the various accounts of Palmer’s life, see Lomas.

17 As Paravisini-Gebert notes, Palmer “became, by virtue of her being female and thus not naturally entitled to a commanding position, emblematic of the debasing domination of the plantation system” (“White Witch,” 26).

18 The cruelty of Creole women to their slaves is stereotypical by the time of The Jamaica Lady, where Quomina is routinely beaten by Holmesia and Captain Fustian comments: “a Negro had better live in Hell than with a Jamaica termagant” (112). See Bush.

19 See, for example, James, Dayan, Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, Creole Religions; for an analysis of how voodoo works in twentieth-century contemporary Haitian socio-cultural discourses, see Browning.
Jamaican Ladies and Tropical Charms

20 See Spivak, Perry, Savory and Drake.
21 African-Caribbean practices such as obeah and voodoo preserved and developed esoteric herbal and medicinal knowledge that could be used in poisoning, as they are here with Annette’s horse and as they were widely employed against the master class in plantation society.
22 This is not to say that Antoinette uniformly speaks from some kind of stable and “pure” African-Caribbean cultural position. Her inability to find a place in the worlds that have shaped her is a major theme of the text. So she certainly does, as Richardson claims, sometimes respond to obeah and to other elements of African-Caribbean culture in colonialist, racist ways (189). Her appropriation of obeah against Christophine’s warnings is an instance of Antoinette’s misapprehension of that culture.

Works Cited

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To mark the re-launch of the journal World Literature Written in English as the Journal of Postcolonial Studies, The Centre for Contemporary Fiction and Narrative, University of Northampton, and the Journal of Postcolonial Writing, in association with Taylor and Francis publishers and the UK Network for Modern Fiction Studies, hosts:

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Blue Belonging: A Discussion of Olive Senior’s Latest Collection of Poetry, *over the roofs of the world*  
Anne Collett

In the twelfth annual Philip Sherlock Lecture, delivered in February 2005 at the University of the West Indies (Mona, Jamaica), Olive Senior spoke about the journey she had undertaken to becoming ‘a woman-of-words,’ and established the connection between ‘tradition and the individual talent’ with the claim that the voice of individual talent in the Caribbean is one that necessarily draws upon oral and scribal cultures. It is at once representative of the personal and the collective. In the Philip Sherlock lecture, “The Poem as Gardening, the Story as Su-Su: Finding a Literary Voice,” Senior remarked, “I have learned that to answer to the calling of writer in Jamaica is a humbling experience. In a place where the oral culture is dominant, ‘telling story’ will always be more valued than authorship . . . what is valued is not authorship but the power of the story” (36, 43).

Although Olive Senior’s repertoire as a poet now includes three collections of poetry, *Talking of Trees* (1985), *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) and most recently, *over the roofs of the world* (2005), much scholarly work to date has focused upon her skill as a short story writer, possibly because ‘telling story’ is so valued in the Caribbean, but also perhaps because Senior came to international attention with the award of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1987 for her first book of short stories, *Summer Lightning*. This volume was followed by *Arrival of the Snake-Woman* in 1989 and *The Discerner of Hearts* in 1995. It should, however, come as no surprise that ‘telling story’ is equally the art of Olive Senior’s poetry as it is of her prose, and that her most recent collection of poetry places her as firmly in the literary world of the ‘blue foot’ poet-traveler as it does in the oral craft of ‘born-ya’ song and story. In a well-knit and
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cunningly crafted poem entitled, ‘Embroidery,’ Senior tells the story of her ‘blue foot’ relationship to ‘Aunt Millie’:

The women of the family took tea all together except for Aunt Millie, Uncle Vincent’s wife. She read books, she wore makeup and jewellery even on weekdays. On Sunday afternoons behind locked door, she had me put colouring (Madam Walker’s, IMPORTED FROM AMERICA) in her hair. She was a blue foot, a stranger, not a born-ya. She had crossed water. (roofs 78)

If the dominant colour of Gardening in the Tropics, was yellow—yellow of gold, sun, sand, bananas, fever grass (and piss)—the colour of over the roofs of the world is blue—blue of the sea, blue of the sky, blue of the traveler leaving and returning. In the poem ‘Blue’ Senior writes:

Never knew that blue was a song to be sung, no, never knew. Thought blue was something swallowed: a choke, an anguish, an ache, a separation from everyone, a curtain, an emptiness, a disappearance. Thought I was the only person who knew the meaning of blue.

... Blue was that in-betweenness, that moment of change, of solstice, where you feared to fall between worlds (roofs 58)

Although a ‘born-ya’ to Jamaica, the Caribbean island of her birth, Senior is a ‘blue foot’ to the Canadian city of her adoption, Toronto. She might be said to be one for whom be-longing is a longing both for the lost home of birth and the unattainable land of adoption, and thus the association of blue with the blues. Olive Senior would appear to suggest that belonging is only realized through longing, or that belonging is never realized and only always a state of longing. The puzzle
of paradox lies at the heart of this volume in which Senior plays with the meaning of “flight as the only way home” (‘Bird-Man/Bird-Woman’ 91). The poem “Bird-Man/Bird-Woman” explores the relationship between contemporary female poet and ancient male shaman. It begins with a quotation from Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff’s work, *Goldwork and Shamanism*: “Over time, representations of the bird-shaman in pre-Columbian gold work evolved into heart-shaped icons,” to which Senior responds: “It takes heart to become one, the courage to be, to accept the separation from whatever life you embark from” (91). You must leave the world in order to discover or recover the world. You must leave the self, create distance from the self, in order to ‘see’ the self, but it is also possible that both world and self are elusive of discovery. In the poem “*Blue Foot Traveller*” she observes:

That world no longer exists.
Yet from the architecture of longing
you continue to construct a bountiful edifice.

This is not exile.
You can return any day to the place that you came from
though the place you left has shifted a heartbeat.

Like that artful dove Hopping Dick
you hopscotch. (*roofs* 72)

At one level, the poem is an acknowledgement (perhaps the first) of the degree to which so much of Olive Senior’s poetry to date has been a bountiful edifice constructed from the architecture of longing: a poetry that looks back over sea, across space and time, to a Caribbean past that is personal, historical and mythological. She is the migrant who denies exile, always believing in and always sustained by the idea of return. But even here there is acknowledgement of return that can never be return for the past is a different country and the place left has “shifted a heart beat.” The poem, however, is much more than an astute comment on the diasporic or migrant state, for it is also reminiscent of Wordsworth’s ode on “Intimations of Immortality” with its vision of children playing on the shore, and the increasing sense of loss as, with age, we move fur-
ther from ‘home,’ further from the sound of that immortal sea out of which we were born:

Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of that eternal Silence . . .

Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Then sing, ye birds, sing, sing a joyous song! (Intimations 190)

Like Wordsworth’s ode, “Blue Foot Traveller” is a poem that combines the sublime and the homely, but unlike Wordsworth, its gravity is undercut by reference to Hopping Dick, the Jamaican name for the “white-chinned thrush” or in scientific jargon, *turdus aurantius*. Whatever you call him, he seems to carry a tinge of the salacious or not quite respectable, a dove perhaps but with none of the nostalgia attached (he’s not white but black and artful as his hopping gait would indicate).

The story of Hopping Dick and White Belly is reminiscent of Ananse stories in which greed and cunning are necessary features of survival. According to James Anderson Hilton of Maroon Town, the tale goes like this:

Hopping Dick go up on sharp ‘tump an’ White Belly go up on one tall tree an’ bet one bet who can stay de longest widout eat. Hopping Dick say, ‘Chem chem. Cheery o!’ White Belly say, ‘Coo coo coo, me hearie you!/Coo coo coo, me hearie you!’ [White Belly drops a worm] Hopping Dick go down to do groun’ pick up worm. White Belly stay up on tree all de time. White Belly fall down an’ die. (Hare)

Hopping Dick is a survivor. Perhaps like Ananse spider-man, the black bird succeeds where others fail because he is cunning and skillful,
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hopscotching adeptly from square to square in order to make it back ‘home’ safely. To win at hopscotch requires a well-chosen stone, a good eye, agility and a keen sense of competition. The players travel away from home in order to return home. Hopping Dick is a born-ya, his inborn Caribbean qualities plain to see, and yet, because he is a ‘black bird’ he is also a Blue Foot (one who has crossed water).

Blue foot could be the name of a bird, in fact the poem is the last of a series of bird poems entitled “Ping Ya!” “Blue Quit,” “White Belly” and “Wild Nester.” “Wild Nester” is the overarching title of the series and the poem that deliberately evokes the gospel blues of loss and longing for ‘home,’ be it Africa or God’s Heaven:

Wild nester, wild nester so far from home
Wish I had the wings of a dove (65)

The link is thus affirmed between “Blue Foot Traveller” and Wordsworth’s Ode, but the poem is also cunningly linked into Jamaican folksong and ring-tune, gospel and blues, as indeed the collection as a whole creates linkage between the gossip of Jamaican yards, and what has perhaps been mistaken as the high seriousness of poets like William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman (from whom the title of the collection, over the roofs of the world, is taken’), Wallace Stevens and Pablo Neruda—all of whom took the common life, the common man and the common object, as their center and their politics. In this collection Olive Senior places herself among them, (one of a company), but something of a strange bird, not least because she is a woman. Her storytelling, as we have come to expect, is grounded in the domesticity of folktale and gossip, the familiar and the habitual worlds of guinea hen, yard fowl, magpie and hopping dick; and lifted ‘above the roofs of the world’ in the poetic flight of the mythic and spiritual. Talking of Trees and Gardening in the Tropics took the habitat of birds as center point/talking point; over the roofs of the world is guided by the pull of those birds.

“The Pull of Birds” is the title of the first poem in the collection, and one that creates a curious and unexpected alliance between the poet and Colón. Cristobal Colón (better known to the English-speaking world as Christopher Columbus) has been variously described as “one of the
greatest mariners in history, a visionary genius, a mystic, a national hero, a failed administrator, a naive entrepreneur, and a ruthless and greedy imperialist” (“1492 Exhibit”). How you see him depends upon your angle of vision, but rarely has he been described as “son and grand-son of weavers”: These are the words with which Olive Senior begins “The Pull of Birds” and the collection:

Colón, son and grand-son of weavers
rejected that calling but did not
neglect craft (keeping two sets of books).
On his first voyage, landfall receding
(where was Japan?) he sailed on (9)

The craft of which Olive speaks and that which binds poet to sailor is multiple: craft is the vessel in which each travels (ship and book). Craft is art (mariner’s and writer’s), and craft is most definitely cunning: las Casas writes that Columbus “always represented to the people [the sailors] that he was making little headway in order that the voyage should not seem long to them, so that he kept a record by two routes, the shorter being the fictitious one, and the longer the true one,” and the cunning word-play of the poet is evident in this particular example, but also throughout the collection. Poet and seafarer-adventurer then are blue foot travelers who ply their craft in unknown seas and lands, voyaging from the familiar to the distant and exotic; both have homely beginnings that shape and guide the means by which they understand the world and themselves. Verified by any number of sources on the web (some pedantic, some humorous, some just plain silly), it would appear that Colón was indeed the son of a weaver, and himself a weaver of tales (for which the double set of logs is telling evidence). Spinning a yarn is Olive Senior’s stock in trade, whether in poetry or prose. Thus alliance is created where one might least expect it (literally and politically), but it is, of course, imagination that guides and misguides both adventurers, by whatever craft they travel.

The relationship between text and textile is ancient, and one upon which Senior draws extensively in this collection. Lost at sea, the ‘un-marked immensity’ of Atlantic ocean is imagined by sailor and poet as a
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stretch of blue fabric whose expanse is miraculously crossed—“as warp is to woof”—by the path of migratory birds flying south:

And suddenly from the north a density
of birds flying south, their autumn migration
intersecting his westward passage. (“Pull of Birds” 9)

Columbus’ journal of 8 October 1492 records that the air was “as soft as that of Seville in April, and so fragrant that it was delicious to breathe. The weeds appeared very fresh. Many land birds, one of which they took, flying towards the southwest; also grajaos, ducks, and a pelican were seen”; and on the following day he writes that they “heard birds passing all night” (“1492 Exhibit”). Thus Colón is centered, saved by the familiar, and the new world discovered and charted in terms of the old. Senior writes:

At such an auspicious conjunction, his charts
he threw out, the flocks drew him south
across the blue fabric of the Atlantic.
weary mariners buoyed by the miracle
of land soon, of birds flying across the moon.
(“Pull of Birds” 9)

Are “birds flying across the moon” a miracle of life or a portent of death? For whom is this conjunction auspicious? Meaning is dependent on the angle of vision from which the sign is read. It is at this point in the poem that an oppositional shift occurs, for in the final stanza we fly not with Colón and his buoyed mariners, but with the miracle of birds become prey to the floundering lost ship now turned predator. Birds seeking to outdistance three raptors skimming

the surface of the sea and sending skyward
their doomsday utterance of hawks’ bells
tinkling endlessly. Birds speeding
to make landfall at Guanahani. (“The Pull of Birds” 9)

Three raptors—the Pinta, the Niña and the Santa Maria—speed toward the horizon of their vision. The story is a familiar one: “At 2 a.m.
on 12 October the land was seen plainly by one of the Pinta’s crew, and in the forenoon Columbus landed on what is now called Watling’s Island in the Bahama group, West Indies. The discoverers named the island San Salvador . . . Immediately after landing Columbus took possession of the island for the Spanish sovereigns” (“1492 Exhibit”). But some of the names are perhaps not so familiar, as Colón was unfamiliar to anyone used to Columbus. We take possession of ourselves and our worlds by naming (a concept that is thoroughly explored in Senior’s first two collections of poetry). The politics of which I was uncertain at the poem’s beginning is now made plain in the reference both to “Guanahani” and to “hawks’ bells.” “Guanahani” is the indigenous name for the discovered island of San Salvador, a name whose use in this poem might refuse discovery, or at least assert recovery.

Hawks’ bells are not only symbolic of the leisure pursuit of the noble and wealthy, they are also the trinkets that have become iconic of unequal ‘exchange’ between rapacious traders and native peoples throughout the coastal nations of Africa and the Americas. On Thursday 11 October Columbus records:

As I saw that they were very friendly to us, and perceived that they could be much more easily converted to our holy faith by gentle means than by force, I presented them with some red caps, and strings of beads to wear upon the neck, and many other trifles of small value, wherewith they were much delighted, and became wonderfully attached to us. Afterwards they came swimming to the boats, bringing parrots, balls of cotton thread, javelins, and many other things which they exchanged for articles we gave them, such as glass beads, and hawks’ bells; which trade was carried on with the utmost good will. (“1492 Exhibit”)

It is some little time after that Colón notes the evidence of gold, at which point perhaps “utmost good will” undergoes something of a shift, and on the 15 of October he writes:

About sunset we anchored near the cape which terminates the island towards the west to enquire for gold, for the natives we
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had taken from San Salvador told me that the people here wore golden bracelets upon their arms and legs. I believed pretty confidently that they had invented this story in order to find means to escape from us, still I determined to pass none of these islands without taking possession, because being once taken, it would answer for all times. ("1492 Exhibit")

“Once taken, it would answer for all times” . . . the phrase has the dark sonorous tone of a funeral bell. Olive Senior’s view of that astounding act of self-assertion is declared in no uncertain terms but with characteristic humour in *Gardening in the Tropics*. In “Meditation on Yellow” the poet reflects upon the history of conquest in the Americas and muses:

I like to feel alive
to the possibilities
of yellow

lightning striking

perhaps as you sip tea
at three in the afternoon
a bit incontinent
despite your vast holdings
(though I was gratified to note
that despite the difference in our skins
our piss was exactly the same shade of yellow)

I wished for you a sudden enlightenment that

. . .

you cannot tear my song
from my throat

you cannot erase the memory
of my story

you cannot catch
my rhythm
(for you have to born
with that)

you cannot comprehend
the magic

of anacondas changing into rivers
like the Amazon
boas dancing in my garden (11–18)

Poet and Admiral are binary; there is no crossing the historical/political divide. Senior’s angle of vision is clear: she is the ‘born-ya’ and he the ‘blue foot.’ Remarking on her younger self, Senior observes in the poem “Blue”: “Blue was not me and you, but me / or you” (58). Yet “The Pull of Birds” suggests a more complex understanding of relationship and the possibility of something shared—the the blue of be-longing. Columbus’ journal would indeed suggest that he was not incapable of comprehending the magic of anacondas or the beauty of the garden. On Friday 19 October he writes:

The wind being favorable, I came to the Cape, which I named Hermoso, where I anchored today. This is so beautiful a place, as well as the neighboring regions, that I know not in which course to proceed first; my eyes are never tired with viewing such delightful verdure, and of a species so new and dissimilar to that of our country, and I have no doubt there are trees and herbs here which would be of great value in Spain, as dyeing materials, medicine, spicery, etc., but I am mortified that I have no acquaintance with them. Upon our arrival here we experienced the most sweet and delightful odor from the flowers or trees of the island. Tomorrow morning before we depart, I intend to land and see what can be found in the neighborhood. Here is no village, but farther within the island is one, where our Indians inform us we shall find the king, and that he has much gold. (“1492 Exhibit”)

Clearly Columbus veers between astonishment and appreciation of a difference he finds beautiful such that he is virtually immobilized,
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even mortified by his own ignorance, and that of his responsibility to the desires and demands of the “Most Christian, High, Excellent, and Powerful Princes” (“1492 Exhibit”) who funded his voyage for the usual, less than altruistic, reasons of politics, power and the accumulation of wealth, as Senior remarks in *Gardening*:

> ... gold  
on your mind  
gold the light  
in your eyes  
gold the crown  
of the Queen of Spain (“Meditation on Yellow” 13)

So when Colón throws away his charts to be guided by “the pull of birds” in *over the roofs of the world*, perhaps Senior here accedes to the possibility of a man pulled ‘both ways.’ Colón is associated with raptor and hawk (a bird of prey who brings doomsday to the ‘new’ world), but he also gives himself up, allows himself to be pulled, by birds who follow ancient paths, invisible and unknowable to men. He proves himself to be canny in the use of the familiar to guide him through the unfamiliar, and yet “the pull of birds” also suggests that Colón is not as much in command of ‘his’ world and his self as he and we might imagine or have claimed and blamed. Remember too that Colón is the son and grandson of weavers: hawks’ bells are not his birthright. So perhaps Colón and Senior, mariner and poet, are birds of a feather for whom “flight [is] the only way home.”

Olive Senior’s inheritance is also that of weaving, and it is a craft that, like Colón, she rejects only to embrace in other form. Weaving is aligned in *over the roofs of the world* with a female inheritance, but it is also associated with storying and more specifically, with Ananse, the spider-woman/story-weaver from indigenous traditions:

> This thread of poetry: Where does it come from?  
> Are you born with it? Is it handed to you like a sweet  
> or a rattle to a child, who takes it without thinking?

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Here’s how I see it: This thread is one that crosses your path like the spider’s web. You walk through unaware. The Great Spider still clings to it. So now Spider clings to you, my friend. This is not an accident. You have been chosen Spider’s apprentice. To master language. As Trickster, to spin and weave tales. To prophesy and heal. The go-between serving earth and sky.

(“Ode to Pablo Neruda” 94)

Olive Senior is go-between: a poet who mediates, who makes connection, between the sacred and the profane, the mythic and the historic, woman’s ‘craft’ and man’s ‘art,’ oral and scribal word, small Caribbean island and the world, the past and the present, all the various homes of our belonging. At this point I would return readers ‘home,’ to the beginning of article, and to ‘embroidery’ and Aunt Millie:

. . . She was a blue foot, a stranger, not a born-ya. She had crossed water. They did not know precisely where Uncle V had found her. He was the eldest, family head. A sly dog and purse-string controller, so no one said anything. Aunt Millie smiled often but her mouth was sewn up. Her reticence offering them few strands, the women of the family enhanced them with embroidery (washing lightly in vinegar to keep the colours fast).

. . .

. . . They thought she kept her distance because she was all of the above and snobbish. My dears, such airs! She and I were What a pair! Myself, orphaned with frayed edges unraveling into their care. Everyone knowing my pathetic history, I could wind myself up in Aunt Millie’s mysterious air, undulate in the sweet waves (artificially induced) of her hair. She nurtured me on books and
A Discussion of Olive Senior’s *over the roofs of the world*

...reticence. The women of the family fed me cold banana porridge (or so everything then seemed) told me tales of girls who did and men who didn’t marry them. Tried to enmesh me in their schemes to undo Aunt Millie’s disguise. In the end they embroidered her an elaborate cover when (I could have said) a plain winding sheet would have suited her. For to me she gave her story, unadorned. The women of the family willed me their uniform tension. Aunt Millie left me her pearls. I sold them, became a blue foot traveller. Kept no diary. Sewed up my mouth. Shunned embroidery. *(roofs 78–79)*

Blue foot traveller maybe. But don’t believe everything you read. Embroidery would seem to be the craft of poets, those ventriloquists who speak through closed lips. This is the magic of text/ile. In the last poem of the collection, “Ode to Pablo Neruda,” Senior accepts the dual pull of her calling, the pull of earth and sky, body and spirit, joy and obligation, politics and poetics:

I wanted more than woman’s knotted portion so I refused to learn the way of thread: sewing, embroidery, darning, weaving, tapestry, knitting or crochet do not appear on my CV.

But look at this:

In the sky
a kite
still aloft
and the one
holding
the thread
is me.

Maybe I’ll accept after all my commission as apprentice Spider who spins from her gut the threads for flying,
for tying up words that spilled, hanging out tales long unspoken, reeling in songs, casting off dances.
And perhaps for binding up wounds?

... 

And so, my trickster powers evolving, I’m learning like you, Pablo Neruda veteran tightrope walker, to swing more easily between joy and obligation

... 

“God is dead,” wrote Nietzsche.
“Heaven is empty,” wrote Kadinsky, “God is dead”.

You, Pablo Neruda, saw instead

The heavens 
unfastened 
and open. (roofs 101–04)

These heavens “unfastened and open” might be said to constitute the “blue be-longing” of which Senior writes. The phrase speaks of nostalgia for a lost heavenly home (the past and all that binds us historically and mythically together as community, and it proclaims belief in the possibility of heaven on earth) a heaven of our own word/world making that maintains connection between our past lives, our living present and our possible futures: “threading/threading/the moon/moonlight stories” (Brathwaite 166). The story-telling spider-wo/man poet spins the thread that will bind us together. It is not only the shared joys and obligations of the explorer-poet/weaver that connect Senior, Neruda and Cristobal Colón, but their shared humanity. Olive Senior suggests that we are all blue foots seeking return ‘home,’ assuring ourselves in our artful games of hopscotch that
A Discussion of Olive Senior’s *over the roofs of the world*

This is not exile.
You can return any day to the place that you came from
though the place you left has shifted a heartbeat.

For home is where the heart is where the w/Word is.

**Note**
1 See Whitman: “The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me . . . he complains of my gab and my loitering./I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable,/I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (85).

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2000 CELJ PHOENIX AWARD FOR SIGNIFICANT EDITORIAL ACHIEVEMENT
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Amrita Bhalla’s *Shashi Deshpande* is one of only a handful of monographs on this prolific Indian writer, as well as the first book of any kind on Deshpande published outside of the Indian sub-continent. As such, it inaugurates a new era in Deshpande criticism and should be welcomed by any scholar engaged in a study of contemporary Indian fiction written in English. Indeed, such a book is long overdue—Deshpande began publishing in the late 1970s, and she has won major Indian awards for her work. While her work is highly regarded in India, only three of Deshpande’s nine novels have been published in North America. Bhalla’s monograph provides a foundation for and is sure to inspire a wider critical interest in this important writer.

A publication of the Writers and Their Work Series, *Shashi Deshpande* clearly meets the series’ mandate “to bring neglected or marginalized writers to a wider readership, to represent fully the rich diversity of post-colonial writing and to show the breadth and density of women’s writing through the centuries” (Writers and Their Work home page). The series aims for both rigor and brevity, and Bhalla’s work, while rigorous, is hampered only by its brevity. Of Deshpande’s nine published novels (for adults) and numerous collections of short stories, Bhalla is able to treat only five novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), and *Small Remedies* (2000). Deshpande’s latest novel, *Moving On* (2004) was published after the editorial deadline for the monograph. The novels chosen are arguably Deshpande’s most accomplished works, and it is difficult to argue with Bhalla’s choice to restrict her discussion to five novels, given the imposed length restrictions. Deshpande’s two crime novels are not in wide circulation, and *Roots and Shadows* (1983) covers thematic territory similar to that of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. As it is, treatments of the five novels chosen, within the allotted space of 111 pages, are necessarily limited to quite specific critical concerns.

Driven by both the series’ mandate and its length restrictions, Bhalla must skillfully define her focus in the long introduction to the monograph. Here, Bhalla firmly places Deshpande within an Indian and Indian feminist context, arguing that “It is essential to locate and place Indian literary works in the context of . . . Indian ‘society’ . . ., to deal with a specific location ever changing, vibrant, and mediated by its internal dynamics, the politics of its multi-polar binaries in terms of caste, class, gender, rural-urban divides and the myriad ways in which it functions” (3). Bhalla limits her own discussion,
however, to the idea that Deshpande’s “central trope . . . is the construction of Gender and Patriarchy” (3). To this end, Bhalla outlines the trajectory of the women’s movement in India, from its roots in Hindu tradition and religious law, through colonialism and the struggle to free India, to the post-Independence period, when most of Deshpande’s work is set.

In arguing that it is essential to place Deshpande’s work in an Indian, rather than Western, feminist context, Bhalla extends a critical project whose groundwork has been laid by critics such as Chandra Mohanty, Susie Tharu, Meenakshi Mukherjee, K. Lalita, Lakshmi Homstrom, and Malashri Lal, among others. Bhalla makes particularly good use of the methodological approach to Indian women’s writing in Lal’s *The Law of the Threshold*: “The threshold suggests the barrier between the inside—the arena of home and tradition—and the outside, associated with the world of men, business trade and politics” (20). Acknowledging that there is considerable variation in the experience of contemporary women in India (as a middle-class woman from a Brahmin family, Deshpande herself occupies, arguably, a privileged position vis-à-vis other women in India), Bhalla contends that Lal’s theory may be adopted as “an Indocentric methodology that may be used as an analytical tool for women’s writing in India” (21). Whether or not Lal’s theory can be generalized to this extent, Bhalla makes a convincing argument for its applicability to Deshpande’s texts, most of which begin, either literally or metaphorically, on a threshold.

Guided by her focus on gender and patriarchy, Bhalla discusses five of Deshpande’s novels in separate chapters of ten to twelve pages each. The brevity of these chapters is compensated for by Bhalla’s incisive, focused, and theoretically grounded analysis. Bhalla perceptively highlights and explicates the major characteristics of all of Deshpande’s fiction: a woman’s mental turmoil and introspection as she faces a major dilemma or loss in her life; the house as “character” (26); the motif of silence; the re-imagining, from a feminist perspective, of Hindu mythology and religion; the vexed relationships between mothers and daughters; the importance placed on male heirs; and the inconclusiveness of the novels’ endings. Drawing connections from Deshpande’s life to those of her female characters, many of whom are creative artists, Bhalla argues convincingly about the dilemma of the Indian woman writer, for whom “writing as self-discovery and knowledge [is] in conflict with the attempt of a woman writer not to reveal herself” (36). Less convincing is Bhalla’s claim that most of Deshpande’s male characters “are created simply to highlight some aspect of her women protagonists” (60). While men may be mostly “in the wings” (Deshpande, cited in Bhalla 60) in some
of Deshpande’s novels, they play a significant role in later works such as *A Matter of Time, Small Remedies, and Moving On.*

It would be churlish to fault Bhalla’s book for what it does not do, given both the limitations of the Series and the relatively nascent state of Deshpande criticism, for which Bhalla must, to a large extent, compensate. Taking these conditions into account, Bhalla’s *Shashi Deshpande* is extremely successful at introducing readers to the Indian contexts for and the main thematic and narrative concerns of Deshpande’s novels, and in drawing attention to the resources currently available to Deshpande scholars (including Deshpande’s not inconsiderable literary criticism). Indeed, Bhalla surpasses, in sophistication and precision, most of the scholarship to date on the writer. One might point, however, to some as yet uncharted territory in the field. For example, while Bhalla takes her direction from Malashri Lal’s notion of the “threshold,” she neglects an intriguing aspect of Lal’s theory. In *The Law of the Threshold,* Lal argues that what disrupts the educated woman writer’s relationship with her immediate social milieu is her exposure to non-Indian influences, particularly that of 19th-century British women writers, such as Austen and Bronte: “the [Indian woman] writer expressed her particular threshold of strenuous poise—between the outer world of patriarchy and colonial influences and an inner world of energy let loose by selected visions of the [European] ‘Other’” (Lal 5). Given Deshpande’s obvious passion for and frequent allusions to 19th-century European writers, from Dickens to Brontë, an examination of her work that is both sensitive to its Indian context and acknowledges the disruptive force of its intertextuality would also add to our understanding of this complex writer. Bhalla’s well-researched and groundbreaking monograph, however, will be essential reading for any future critic who wishes to chart new directions in Deshpande criticism.

*Nancy E. Batty

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A confession: I have a weakness for lively writing and celerity of thought. Those who think that the contracting sales of books on literary criticism and theory is a sign of decline in the discipline, rather than a sign of the times, are not paying close attention. Critical theory in English—whether in Philip Sidney’s apologies for poetry in relation to philosophy and history, or Percy Shelley’s meditations on poets as unacknowledged legislators of the world, whether Matthew Arnold’s thoughts on poetry as a secular religion or Virginia Woolf’s consideration of women as needing a room of their own, whether Oscar Wilde’s serious and comic play on the decay of lying or Toni Morrison’s comments on the challenges of race, whether John Dryden’s ideas on classical decorum or Homi Bhabha’s exploration of the location of culture—has expressed and continues to express itself with great variety and accomplishment. This range of styles, ideas and assumptions across centuries is a matter for celebration. The lively commotion of English criticism is something to enjoy and celebrate.

Terry Eagleton is a theorist I have admired for some time: his writing is full of life and engagement, and it always involves the reader in the debate on the relation between literature and society. He is a theorist who has a wide cultural range and brings the vitality and variety of other literatures and cultures into the English-speaking world. Eagleton has a distinct voice that reaches readers and engages them in what matters about the pursuit of fictions and truths, pleasure and happiness.

*After Theory* is a teaching book that reaches out primarily to students and general readers; it also has much to offer more specialist readers. Eagleton has hope for the future, but is also nostalgic and elegiac. Although his nostalgia is not for the absolute truths that some earlier theories sought, it can be glimpsed in the opening sentence: “The golden age of cultural theory is long past” (1). Even though the age of theory (the early 1960s to the late 1980s) is now over, he notes that those who think that we can return with relief to “an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment” (1). Eagleton considers the pursuit of theory and scholarship to be pleasurable, but aptly warns: “Like all scientific inquiry, it requires patience, self-discipline and the inexhaustible capacity to be bored” (5). He uses irony and satiric wit to unmask theories that trivialize culture and politics in the face of starving, underfed and marginal peoples. Although the art of interpretation can be seen as early as Plato’s writings, Eagleton equates the most intense period of cultural theory with the period between 1965 and 1980 in which the political left became prominent.
Cultural and national liberation, as critiques of a dominant capitalism and the conspicuous consumption of wealthy western cultures, became keys to this brief countering of prevailing trends. The awareness of other worlds and movement between them was part of the spirit of the age.

In the 1980s counterculture turned to postmodernism in a global world where Marxism seemed less and less relevant. Eagleton’s satirical insights into the denial of historical events and natural occurrences are cautionary. Theory that is blind to the world is not advisable. Jonathan Swift had wicked fun with that in Book III of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Repression and amnesia, unraveled by theory to uncover the anti-theoretical nature of humans, might be a survival instinct. Eagleton maintains that cultural theory must be ambitious in trying to make sense of the grand narratives in which it participates. Cultural theory is by necessity abstract, but it needs to engage with the concrete specificity of the art and literature it discusses. Both plain language and conceptual terminology are needed; both close reading and theory share abstraction. Cultural theory, according to Eagleton, “has disabused us of the idea that there is a single correct way to interpret a work of art” (95), but it has also fallen short on many intense human experiences from love through evil to truth. As Eagleton notes, it is important to distinguish truth from dogmatism and he suggests gnomically: “Other persons are objectivity in action” (138).

Cultural theory might explore the interconnections of politics and ethics more than it has in the recent past. Humans are social animals (or, as Aristotle said, political animals), and therefore encounter ethical choices and decisions in their everyday lives. The movement of history is one in which human life improves in some ways but deteriorates in others. Progress then is neither absolute nor categorical; it has an uneven and partial development. The letter and spirit of texts is an important divide in the world in which revolution, foundations and fundamentalism have had such an impact in both the past and present. Fundamentalists try to plug up with dogma “the unnerving vacancy,” the open-endedness of human life (208). What Eagleton advocates is a political order based on “non-being as an awareness of human frailty and unfoundedness” and not of “human deprivation” (221). Cultural theory needs to enter contemporary debates and to engage global history with new resources and topics. He ends the “Afterword,” which addresses the world after September 11th, 2001, with a satire on American foreign policy and a praise of an “authentic America,” that speaks up for justice, humane values and human liberty (228). Eagleton goads readers into thought and away from received ideas—theoretical and otherwise. This process of defamiliarization can only be a good thing even if we cannot always agree.

Jonathan Locke Hart

The field of postcolonial scholarship extends from anthropology and history to fiction and essay, but it hardly ever examines poetry. Jahan Ramazani makes a superb case for mending this serious lacuna in postcolonial studies. As one reads his discussion of the poetry of postcolonial poets from W.B. Yeats to A.K. Ramanujan, Derek Walcott, Louise Bennett, and Okot p’Bitek, one comes away not only with the richness of postcolonial scholarship but also with the wealth of poetry that produces a nuanced rendering of history and the hybrid self. Why is there a lack of critical discussion of postcolonial poetry? Ramazani answers his own question in his introduction to *The Hybrid Muse*: the realm of poetry is probably seen as too subtle, nuanced, and oblique as compared to the transparency of fiction or the essay. But in looking at poetry, which highlights the intricacies of culture, postcolonial scholarship can only gain in volume and texture.

Firmly grounded in modern American and contemporary poetics, as evidenced in his *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, volumes 1 and 2, as well as in postcolonial and deconstruction theories, Ramazani moves between poetry and theory and between cultures with the ease of a trapeze artist. We wonder with him why he regards Yeats as a postcolonial poet, if he isn’t giving into having a “white male” figure from the first world open the discussion. But we quickly realize that Yeats writes out of an Ireland besieged for more than 700 years by British imperialism, and this gives way to several ambiguities between colonizer and colonized, between local power and victimization, and between indigenizing and anglicizing of language in poetry. Ramazani throws open a window into Yeats’ poetry, the remarkable variety and depth of Yeats’ thoughts about history, language, and his “ironic nationalism” that balances his critique of imperialism. By reciting Irish place names, remaking English forms, and using global mythologies to create his mythic syncretism, Yeats answers the Empire back.

Poetry has the uncanny ability to present the complexity of a culture that has been colonized. At the level of language, all the poets discussed in *The Hybrid Muse* use metaphor, borrow western classical heroes and give them lines from creole or Indian English, and use irony to expose western and local hypocrisies. Reading about Walcott’s Omeros, we realize how much Western poetry became both the subject and the catalyst for novel techniques in postcolonial poetry. Walcott achieves in poetry a theoretical transference of ideas between colonial power and the colonized by the indigenization of canoni-
Book Reviews

cal Western characters and the use of metaphor as a device that encompasses movement and transference that mirrors the dislocation inherent in postcoloniality. For example, Walcott’s use of the wound motif in his development of Philoctete’s character is a case in point. As Ramazani points out, “The wound motif exemplifies the slipperiness and polyvalence of poetic discourse that circulates between races, crossing lines of class and community, bridging differences between West Indian fisherman and Greek warrior. With its resonance and punning, imagistic doubling and metaphoric webbing, Walcott’s poetry demonstrates the kinds of imaginative connections and transgressions that have ironically made poetry a minor field in postcolonial literary studies.” This last statement is provocative and challenges mainstream American poetry in its ignorance of postcolonial poetry and poetics as well as postcolonial literary studies that have failed to tap into the richness of poetry to expand its scope.

Ramazani’s leading question about the origin of Philoctete’s wound forms the basis for his analysis of the succeeding chapters. While the West Indian’s wound is a combination of the Afro-Caribbean negritude and the European vegetation figure which was originally borrowed from the East, Louise Bennett’s experience of colonial exploitation drives her to uses the local trope of Anancy to suggest “the playful and polymorphous, all-ironizing folk wit” of Jamaican creole. And herein lies the cure! Through the use of irony and metaphor in a language that pushes to invent ever-newer hybrid elements born of its cultural hybridity, the postcolonial poet represents the process of decolonization. “Philoctete’s wound like his cure tends to be transcultural,” cultural borrowings that only enrich local literary production, explains Ramazani.

Irony and metaphor share with postcoloniality the notion of sameness and difference, “of double vision, meaning and perception.” Through the stereoscopic vision of metaphor A.K. Ramanujan brings us close to a precolonial past and at the same time mocks the notion of “revivalist nostalgia.” For example, Ramazani quotes from Ramanujan’s Second Sight: when the speaker examines “copies with displaced originals” and copies without originals, which is ironic—the result is “the experience of linguistic and cultural displacement, disinheritance, and expatriation.” Ramanujan’s own realization that the anglicized Indian is and is not Indian or Anglo-American links all postcolonial poets; the human family is a “weave of alterities.”

Both Okot p’Bitek and Louise Bennett show how the local language can help the poet to deepen irony and metaphor, the mainstays of postcoloniality. Ramazani’s wonderful discussion of their poems brings us face to face with a poetics that is innovative, spurred by its postcolonial context and its juxtapo-
sition with Standard English. For example, in the following lines by Bennett, Rainazani sees the problem of reverse colonization:

Two pounds a week fi seek a job—Dat suit her dignity—Me seh
Jane will never fine work
At de rate how she dah look
For all day she stay pon Aunt Fan couch
An read love-story book.

Ramazani draws our attention to Bennett’s brilliant tongue-in-cheek critique of both imperial power and the dole dependents.

Irony is a trope that shares with postcoloniality the notion of doubleness or “two-fold vision,” Ramazani explains, quoting Linda Hutcheon. As a “tool of subversion,” and in its ability to excite laughter, irony, if used effectively, heightens the perception of both poet and reader, as we see in Ramazani’s analysis of Bennett’s poems. Through her use of dialect together with the sly mocking irony of the folk figure Anancy, Bennett is able to create performance poetry at its best that pokes fun at society and herself.

Ramazani discusses Okot’s popular Song of Lawino to draw attention to Okot’s talent in going beyond anthropology. In fact all of the poets Ramazani discusses in The Hybrid Muse give us something unique and rare, beyond the “evidence” of anthropology: they reveal worlds that cannot be categorized. Okot’s Lawino draws our attention to the dialectic between the western and the indigenous but finally leaves us with the irony of postcolonials who realize they can never go back to a pure, original culture. Ramazani reiterates in his discussions of Okot, Bennett, Ramanujan, Yeats, and Walcott that culture is hybrid, that language is hybrid and the nature of postcolonial experience gives richness to the poetry that ultimately colors local American or English poetry, or the poetry of any imperial power. Thus, Ramazani asks provocatively, “What happens if we hybridize our canons of modern and contemporary poetry in English, giving due space in our courses, personal libraries, and anthologies to Third World poets? If we place them cheek by jowl alongside confessional poets and poets of the Movement, neoformalists and experimentalists?” In shaking up the canon of anglophone poetry by drawing our attention to the prolific outpouring of the hybrid muse that has “traversed an astonishing geographic range,” Ramazani has made an invaluable contribution.

Pramila Venkateswaran
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