Kunapipi 23(2) 2001 Full version

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Abstract
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*Kunapipi* is a bi-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Microsoft Word) and should be accompanied by a hard copy. Please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.


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Tribute to Anna

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ACLALS

Front Cover: Contemporary Musqueam weaving by Debra and Robyn Sparrow, 1999 (1.8m x 3m), entrance hall, UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver.
(Photograph: Stan Gielewski)

Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.
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- **NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS**
EDITORIAL

Reflecting on the events of September 11th and their aftermath it would seem that the need to maintain a journal of Kunapipi's stated aims and founding ethos is greater than ever. It provides a space, indeed, a relatively protected (and indeed privileged) public place, within which to explore, expose and discuss our differing perspectives on and positions within histories that determine not merely probable futures but possible futures. Despite the obvious differences of subject matter and approach, material and methodology, all the contributions in this general issue would seem to share a political vision. This is not the vision of a single party or theoretical stance, but one that recognises the need to right imbalances of power whilst acknowledging the complexity of personal and social histories from which states of inequality and injustice arise. There are no simple solutions; but the symposium that Kunapipi keeps alive allows for ongoing reflection, adjustment and re-adjustment of our ideas and opinions in the light of new knowledges and new perspectives.

For me, an example of the way in which a different perspective can move you to 'think again' or to adjust and re-align an entrenched view, is offered by Debra Sparrow's response to the term 'half-breed' — a term for which I would assume negative connotation, given the history of its pejorative use. Yet when asked what she thought of the term, Debra replied: 'I think it's pretty positive because you get to look at things in different ways. I don't look 100% Native, but I don't look White either, so nobody knows what I am. I am left open for people to call down the Native people, or call down another culture, and I can sit in the middle of it'. This is (to me at least) a surprising response from a First Nations' woman who can also speak of hurtful experiences (felt on personal, familial and generational levels) that were 'responsible for my growth'. Hers is quite a remarkable story of strength and survival that is based upon imaginative energy and openness to possible futures. This is effectively demonstrated when, towards the end of the interview, Debra (whose work is featured on the cover) talks about the weaving that now hangs in the Vancouver International Airport as an emblem of living tradition: '... the weaving just shows you where the Musqueam community has gone, from tradition to technology, and that's why I did the work.... We were doing it for the whole coastline, and representing an open door to the world and to our land....' I read her words and feel a deep admiration and respect for a woman whose capacity to create and believe in better futures is born out of a history of cultural genocide. I too am left open.

On a more mundane note, I would like to point out to subscribers that although Kunapipi has gone from 3 to 2 issues annually, the actual value of 'words for dollars' remains the same. The issues will continue to be of this size. I would also like to apologise to Jennifer Strauss, whose poem 'Stains', published in an earlier issue, lost its last stanza. It is reprinted in full in this issue. Finally, thank you to Anna: her work and spirit lives on.

Anne Collett
‘Tableaux of Queerness’: The Ethnographic Novels of John White

Describing European writing about the orient, the critic Edward Said once noted that literary accounts of its peoples tended to be organised round ‘tableaux of queerness’ (Said 103). The phrase, though dated now and open to misunderstanding, is a striking one, encapsulating as it does the tendency of these accounts to dwell on episodes characterised by the bizarre and (frequently) the cruel. Said, who had in mind writers such as Flaubert, was writing about European representations of the near/middle Eastern cultures, but his phrase can be usefully applied to European representations of peoples far from Algiers or Baghdad. In this article I’ll be looking at one particular ‘tableau of queerness’, or rather at a sequence of them: the little-known ethnographic novels of the nineteenth-century New Zealand ethnographer John White. Their existence reminds us that the project of representing Indigenous peoples in order to construct an opposing ‘European’ or ‘Western’ identity was by no means confined to the familiar territories of Africa and Asia. It was going on, in one form or another, all around the globe. White’s ethnographic novels are fascinating, in particular, because they show an early attempt at fictionalising an Indigenous people — Maori — who have since been the subject of much colonial and post-colonial writing.

Amateur ‘Anecdotes’ — White’s Early Years

John White (1826–91) is largely forgotten today. An early anthropologist and historian of Maori, he is accorded a couple of pages in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography (Reilly 587–89) and the Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature (Wattie 586–87) as well as a handful of references in the Oxford History of New Zealand Literature. In his time, however, White was greatly respected. In the main he was admired for his ethnographic work, but he was also admired for his novel, Te Rou, which was published in 1874 (no lesser a figure than George Grey, a keen supporter of White’s, praised the book in Parliament, describing it as ‘intensely native’ [Grey 567]). Te Rou was not the only novel White wrote. A second, unpublished one, The Tale of Hari, the Maori Revenge, remains in manuscript in the Wellington Public Library, while in 1940, as part of New Zealand’s Centennial celebrations, A.W. Reed brought out Revenge, White’s third and final ethnographic novel. White in fact was fascinated by fiction (as a young man he had wanted to be a poet) and wrote a great deal of it. This writing, while not necessarily ‘intensely native’, is intensely revealing, and offers an intriguing
glimpse into the mentality of one nineteenth-century New Zealander as he attempted to translate an Indigenous people into fiction.

White was born in England, but he was brought up in the Hokianga in northern New Zealand, at a time when the European presence there was minimal and the local Nga Puhi culture was only semi-Christianised. Although staunchly Methodist and convinced, in very Victorian fashion, of the superiority of British civilisation, White was fascinated by Nga Puhi culture and studied it from an early age. He collected and translated waiata (songs), karakia (incantations), tupe (charms) and tara (tales); in particular, he amassed hundreds of ‘anecdotes’ (as he called them), that is, short stories illustrative of Nga Puhi life and thought. These ‘anecdotes’ cover a very wide range of subject matter, from canoe building to kumara (sweet potato) planting, from warfare to flax weaving – they are unified, however, by the theme of murder and revenge. Whether this theme reflected a real aspect of Nga Puhi culture, or whether it merely reflected White’s own particular interests and prejudices, is debatable. What is certain is that these anecdotes, with their strong element of the bizarre and the cruel, provided much of the material for White’s later fictional writings.

Perhaps inevitably White’s ethnographic interests intersected with his literary inclinations. Initially he wrote verse imitative of Byron and Scott, with European locales and subject matter (one long piece, entitled ‘Dover Castle’, was apparently sent to an Auckland newspaper for publication but was refused). Gradually, however, he ceased writing about European themes and concentrated on ‘Maori’ subject matter, producing melodramatic poems such as ‘the Chief’s Last Act’ in which a Maori chief, having lost his lover, kills himself (MS Papers 0075 092). Longer verse narratives incorporating Maori themes were also planned, and their plot outlines sketched – a typical one, dating from 1846 and entitled ‘the Tale of Kora, the Twilight Star’, tells a story of romantic love in which a young man, though ‘puhi’d’ (betrothed) to another, falls in love with a slave girl, Kora, and marries her despite the objections of his intended’s father (MS Papers 0075 085). The story is thoroughly European in essence, but it shows how White was beginning to use Maori elements such as the puhi betrothal to propel his narrative. Later, White would make far more extensive and sophisticated use of such elements when he came to write his ethnographic novels.
**Learned Lectures — White as Ethnographer**

Dissatisfied with the narrowness and isolation of life in the Hokianga, White moved to Auckland in the 1850s. While there he continued to write on Maori themes (it was during this period that he began the story that would ultimately be published as *Te Rou*). Perhaps the most interesting pieces of writing he produced at this time, however, were the three lectures on Maori beliefs (or ‘superstitions’ as White termed them), the first of which he gave at the Auckland Mechanics’ Institute in 1856. In it, White discussed Maori mythology and migration traditions, tohi (baptism) rituals, makutu (witchcraft) and moko (tattooing). While White followed George Grey’s account in *Polynesian Mythology* (1855) fairly closely, there is a notable focus on cannibalism, which is ascribed a divine origin (White 1856, 7). In addition there is a marked tendency in White’s lecture to connect Maori mythology to the Bible. The inundation of the world by the offspring of Tawhirimatea and Rangi (‘hail, rain and sleet’), for example, is compared to the Flood of Genesis, while Tiki’s creation of man out of blood and clay is seen as analogous to God’s creation of Adam (10–11). This tendency to see Biblical parallels in Maori mythology was by no means peculiar to White, it should be said. Many missionaries (and some early ethnographers) believed that Maori were either Jewish in origin, or at least had dwelt near the Jews in prehistory, before migrating east across Asia into the Pacific. Maori, it was thought, though once highly civilised, had degenerated through loss of contact with Old World cultures, forsaking the worship of the True God and falling into deplorable practices such as cannibalism. It is this degenerationist subtext that runs through all White’s depictions of Maori.

White’s first lecture was well received, and prompted by its success he gave two more in 1860 and 1861. He took up where he had left off, dilating upon Maori ‘superstitions’ and their pernicious effects (as he saw it), before moving on to deal with warfare rituals, land tenure, canoe landing points, iwi (tribal) origins and chiefly mana (authority). While the subject of man-eating was carefully skirted (‘the cannibal rites of the Maori battlefield I will pass unnoticed,’ he said, ‘as any description of them would disgust you’ [1861: 36]), the practice of makutu (witchcraft) was roundly condemned, and lurid accounts of it — and of the utu (revenge) taken on its practitioners — were offered to White’s audience. Maori, in other words, were being depicted by White as degenerate, bizarre and cruel. Only by abandoning their beliefs and converting to Christianity, White suggests, could they be saved.

**Carnage and Cannibalism — White’s Ethnographic Novels**

This highly negative view of Maori culture, and the tendency to depict it in lurid episodes that focused on the bizarre and the cruel, was carried over by White into his fictional writings. In this treatment of an Indigenous or alien culture, White had good precedent, for European writers had been producing similar
Title Page of Te Rou

‘tableaux of queerness’ for several decades. In particular, the English cleric and novelist Charles Kingsley had in 1853 produced Hypatia, a vast, detailed recreation of fifth-century Alexandria that told (or purported to tell) the story of the beautiful Greek mathematician and her terrible death at the hands of an enraged mob. White
admired Kingsley’s writing and had read *Hypatia*; he even proposed sending excerpts of his own novel, *Te Ron*, to the English writer for comment (Letter of June 8\(^{th}\), 1872 MS Papers 0075 077A). Certainly the society depicted by Kingsley (described as ‘filled with sensuality, hatred, treachery, cruelty, uncertainty, terror’ [2: 29]) is strikingly like that depicted by White in his own novel. If there is a difference, it is that the Alexandrians of Kingsley’s book are decadent and exhausted, whereas the Maori of White’s novel are trapped in a cage of superstition and fear. Both peoples, however, are united in their need for salvation — in the case of the Alexandrians, through an infusion of Germanic virtues brought by Goth invaders, and in the case of Maori, through the saving truths of Christianity and nineteenth-century European civilisation brought by British colonists.

Distracted by his work as a journalist and government official, and by the demands of a growing family, White worked slowly on his novel. By 1872, however, he was ready to give extracts of *The Maori* (as he then called it) to the newspapers for review, and in 1874 *Te Ron* was published in London by Sampson Low, a small firm that had a niche market in antipodean subjects. Handsomely produced, with a gold rangatira (chief) figure on the front cover and a map inside, *Te Ron* told (or purported to tell) the story of the Kopura, a pre-European Maori hapu (sub-tribe) living in the Hokianga.

The book is divided into twenty-four chapters, most of which have graphic, highly visual titles, such as ‘The Attack and Capture of Otu Pa’ and ‘Cooking a Dead Slave’. The narrative, in other words, is presented in a series of dramatic scenes, or tableaux, rather than in a continuous, even narrative flow (one New Zealand critic described White’s book as ‘a perfect mine of episodical adventures’). The text is supplemented with many waiata (songs), whakatauki (proverbs) and karakia (spells), which, in general, are well translated. In addition, occasional notes provided by White underpin the narrative, translating Maori phrases, explaining Maori customs, and providing the scientific names for native New Zealand plants and animals.

White introduces his text with a Preface in which he strongly stresses the factual, historical nature of his book:

The tale contained in the present volume is not fiction. Though woven together in the form of a tale, as the most convenient for lifelike representation, the places mentioned are all real, as may be seen on the accompanying map; the incidents are all true, and have occurred; the personages are all real, though the names have been slightly altered to avoid unnecessary offense to the living; the native mode of expression has been carefully followed; and the songs, proverbs and incantations are trustworthy (though, perhaps, in some respects imperfect) reproductions of the ancient originals.

(White 1874, v)

White’s claim of factuality and historicity — which he probably made to distinguish his novel from superficially ‘Maori’ productions such as George Wilson’s *Ena* (1874) — while significant, is not really tenable. What is offered to
the European reader in *Te Ron* is a carefully constructed *version* of pre-Christian Maori life, acceptable to nineteenth-century Europeans, albeit one that does indeed make very extensive use of real-life incidents and personages and bona fide ethnographic data such as waiata and karakia.

How, exactly, does White construct his massaged version of pre-Christian Maori life? One important strategy is selectivity, by which I mean that White tends in *Te Ron* to concentrate on the bloodier, more gruesome aspects of pre-Christian Maori existence. *Te Ron*’s subtitle (‘the Maori at Home’) might lead one to think that the book is going to deal with the arts of peace, but this is not so. *Te Ron*, in fact, is a long and exceptionally bloody chronicle of murder, warfare, suicide and cannibalism.

The carnage starts immediately, with old Tare’s graphic description of how in former days he slew a neighbouring chief, Papa, who had trespassed on his lands. This is soon followed by the murder of some young tribesmen at the neighbouring Otu pa, whose cooking and dismemberment are later described in horrific detail. This act provokes a gruesome account of killings in past years carried out by the Kopura:

*I took the spear I had gained when first I fell, and, looking round, I saw six of those who had been so brave but a short time before laid low as the worm. I smote them on the head with a branch of a tree which I broke for the purpose, and then besmeared the calves of my legs with their brains. Going farther on...I saw Kawe sitting against a stone. His arm was broken; I bound it up, and while doing so the other two came back with the head of Haupa’s uncle, which they had cut off with a piece of flint.... (19)*

After this, the blood-letting increases: the Kopura gather their allies and attack their enemies at Otu pa. The attack is successful, and many of the Otu people are killed, in circumstances of great savagery; even the odd, wounded survivor is brutally dispatched. Revenge obtained, the Kopura return to their settlement, but their peacetime lives are scarcely less violent – a mother, taken prisoner, drowns herself and her child; an old slave, Koko, is clubbed to death and eaten; a wife is insulted by her husband and hangs herself; and the husband is then ambushed and garroted by the wife’s devoted retainer. Finally, the hapu’s ariki (high chief), Takaho, who was the insulted woman’s father, dies of grief, and two old women are strangled to accompany him in the afterlife.

Particularly horrific are the scenes of cannibalism that punctuate *Te Ron*. Previous writers about Maori had alluded elliptically to this practice; White himself mentioned it in his lectures, but had refused to dwell on it. In *Te Ron* any such hesitation is cast aside, and the reader is offered several scenes in which man-eating is depicted in lurid detail. Here, for example, is a passage describing the consumption of one of the young Kopura men murdered by the Otu pa people:

*A young chief took a rib, and, while picking it, stood over the old women directing the division of the flesh. A young damsel also took some flesh from a leg, and returned to*
a group of her young companions, who asked for a taste. The flesh having been divided, the baskets were set before those who were to feast, and soon all were eating, laughing as they picked the bones. Those who had a thigh or an arm-bone would bruise one end of it, warm it again at the fire, and suck the marrow out of the bruised end: and to make sure of getting it all out they would heat a fern-stalk, which they passed through the bone, then draw it across their lips, sucking the marrow off with their curled, protruded tongues... (51)

Noticeable here is how White increases the horror of the scene by his careful use of terms such as 'damsel', which carry connotations of innocence and harmlessness grotesquely at variance with the activity being described. The presence of these 'damsels' here is noteworthy, too, because according to writers on the subject such as Edward Shortland, Maori women rarely in fact took part in the eating of human flesh (Shortland 67–74). White presumably knew this, but chose to include women in his cannibal scenes in order to underline what he saw as the savagery and brutality of pre-European Maori life. It is a significant distortion, for through it, the highly regulated tapu activity of consuming human flesh is presented as a casual commonplace, the very image of bestial social disorder.

White's selectivity — his relentless concentration on the bloodier, more gruesome aspects of pre-Christian Maori existence — distorts his readers' view of Maori, since it gives the impression that ancient Maori life was a constant round of killing. Why White concentrated, in his novels, on this darker side of Maori life is not hard to fathom: he had a particular, degenerationist view of Maori, underpinned by a strong streak of Methodist disapproval of and dislike for pagan Maori culture. This view of Maori and Maori culture emerged in his fiction just as it did in his more straightforward ethnographic writings.

White's concentration on the darker side of pre-Christian Maori culture, and his tendency to depict this in highly coloured, extremely dramatic scenes, or tableaux, undoubtedly makes Te Rou resemble those 'tableaux of queerness' which contemporary European writers produced as they described other cultures. Te Rou, indeed, should be seen as part of a larger literary tradition produced by nineteenth-century European writers in which the exotic, bizarre, and unusual elements of an alien culture are focussed on obsessively — one thinks in this connection, not merely of Kingsley's Hypatia, but of a book like Flaubert’s Salammbô (1862), which, like Te Rou, meticulously reconstructed a strange, cruel, ancient world, in this case that of the ancient Carthaginians.

**Romantic and Sentimental — White's Angelic Maori**

If a selective concentration on the darker side of Maori existence is one means White uses to mould his version of pre-Christian Maori life, another is the injection of Christian or European notions into the thoughts and actions of some of his Maori characters. Most of the Maori in Te Rou are fiendish; there are some, however, who are decidedly angelic, or at least sentimental and romantic. An
example is the captive mother who drowns herself and her child: drastic as her act is, she herself is portrayed in the most pathetic manner: 'Her tears fell on the nurseling's face and partially awoke him, and she said, "Oh my child! Do not stop me in my song for thy father; it is all I have to give him..."' (201). This kind of sentimentalising is apparent in other parts of the novel. One male character, Poko, for instance, boasts how as a young man he became a slave to love in a very troubadour fashion ('I did not care for father, mother, priest or tapu. I loved, and that was all I wished to know; and love was my only master...'), while another, Heta, fights a rival for the hand of a young woman, Aramita, in a barely disguised knightly combat (162–63).

The influence of medieval romance (or nineteenth-century versions of medieval romance, such as Keats’ 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' or Scott's Lady of the Lake) is palpable here: White is giving his European readers characters and sentiments they can relate to, in what otherwise might seem a wearying chronicle of incomprehensible mayhem. The fact that the characters in Te Ron generally address each other in archaic, 'medieval' English, full of thee's and thou's and woe is me's, only underlines the debt that White owes to this British literary tradition.

White, in fact, is playing a kind of double game. On the one hand he relentlessly portrays Maori as alien and devilish (thus fulfilling the nineteenth-century European reader's craving for the bizarre and the exotic); on the other hand he carefully offers some Maori characters who are sentimental and 'Christian' in feeling and behaviour (thus fulfilling the nineteenth-century European reader's need for something familiar to identify with). In this way, the reader of Te Ron is both repelled by, and drawn into, the lives of White's Maori characters.

Equally interesting, in this respect, is what White chooses to leave out of his narrative. White had difficulty with the sexually explicit nature of much pre-Christian Maori culture, and this unwillingness to deal with the issue of physical sex (typical of White's period) is carried over into Te Ron, which, for all its claimed ethnographic accuracy, signally fails to deal with this important aspect of Maori life. Sex, in fact, is completely absent from the book: White's Maori kill, and kill brutally, but never make love. It is another example of how White's depiction of Maori is carefully tailored to suit the tastes of his nineteenth-century European readers.

Te Rou, as mentioned previously, was not the only novel White wrote. Even before it was published he had begun a second ethnographic fiction, the unpublished Hari. Like Te Rou, Hari describes (or purports to describe) the life of a pre-Christian Maori sub-tribe (the Tihao) living in the Hokianga. Like Te Rou, it presents the life of the Tihao in a series of 'tableaux of queerness' in which there is a marked focus on the bizarre and the cruel. Like Te Rou, too, Hari possesses a number of characters who display, in contrast to the prevailing ethos of murder and revenge, romantic, sentimental attitudes of a very Victorian cast. The morality of these characters is necessarily at odds with the savage, pagan
culture (as White depicts it) that these characters live in, anticipating as it does an apparently Christian and European mentality. These characters, indeed, seem in an odd way to be trying to become European.

**Taming the Savage Native—The Indigenous Becomes Docile**

*Hari* is notable, in particular, for one very striking scene in which Te Rou (the chief who gave his name to White's first ethnographic novel) has his tapu (sacredness) ritually destroyed by having cooked food placed on his head (White, *Hari* 631). This scene, which was apparently based on a true event, and which White had described in one of his lectures, takes place towards the end of the novel; it marks a change in the way Maori are depicted by White, for after this climactic episode the Tihao become pacific, even docile, the literary equivalents, in a manner, of the passive, dreaming Maori painted by late nineteenth-century New Zealand artists such as Charles Goldie. While this destruction of chiefly mana (authority) is explained in terms of a complicated plot involving a wife's revenge, the real significance of the episode is clear. Te Rou, the central character of the pagan Maori world depicted in *Te Rou* and *Hari*, indeed its very touchstone and heart, is symbolically degraded, and with him the whole structure of pre-Christian Maori belief. Maori have to be tamed, it seems, even (or perhaps especially) in fiction.

The new way of depicting Maori was continued by White in his third and final ethnographic novel, *Revenge*, which he wrote toward the end of his life, and which A.W. Reed edited and published in 1940, nearly half a century after White's death. Despite its title, *Revenge* is largely a peaceful story. Warfare threatens the Mount Eden tribe, the pre-European tribe living on the Auckland isthmus who are the subject of White's novel, but it does not materialise, and the only cannibal character, the albino man-eater Pupuha, is executed for his misdeeds. If cruelty and violence are generally absent, the bizarre, however, is not: *Revenge* has a number of striking scenes designed to fascinate the European reader. One occurs early in the novel when tribespeople wave their arms in front of their ailing ariki (high chief), in an attempt to 'scrape away' the evil spirit that is thought to be possessing him (White 1940, 40). Later, in another striking scene, Popo, who is still unwell, is 'steamed' in an oven, the intention being, apparently, to 'sweat' the malady out of him (189). Of particular note, too, is the extended, highly detailed description of the gull-egg gathering expedition in the Waitemata harbour undertaken by the Mount Eden tribe (180–86), and the depictions of the pakuha (mass betrothal meetings) that occur several times in the novel.

*Revenge* ends happily, with the hero Popo and the heroine Ata-Rehia marrying and living happily ever after - White states on his last page, in fact, rather prosaically, that they had a 'large family at Mount Eden'. In this the two Maori lovers resemble White himself, who had several children and who lived in the Auckland suburb of that name. White, in a sense, is writing about his *ancestors*
— his geographical forebears, if not his biological ones. This claiming of local ancestry has been identified by the literary critic, Terry Goldie, as one of the cardinal characteristics of European writing about Indigenous peoples (Goldie 149–68). It is fascinating to see it displayed so clearly, so unselfconsciously, here.

NOTES
1 White’s straightforward ethnographic work, in particular his massive Ancient History of the Maori, has been discussed by Michael Reilly in two articles for the New Zealand Journal of History. See ‘John White: the Making of a Nineteenth-Century Writer and Collector of Maori Traditions’, and ‘John White: Seeking the Elusive Mohio — White and his Informants’.
2 White’s ‘anecdotes’ are scattered through his Private Journal, notebooks and other papers. Many of the most striking are to be found in two notebooks entitled ‘Anecdotes for Book on New Zealand’, MS Papers 0075 139 and 143.
3 The missionary the Rev. Richard Taylor, for instance, whose voluminous study of New Zealand and its Indigenous people Te Ika a Maui appeared in 1855, believed that Maori were one of the ‘long-lost tribes of Israel’ who had wandered east across Asia and taken ship to Hawaii, Tahiti and, finally, New Zealand. Arthur Thomson, on the other hand, a military surgeon and amateur ethnographer whose massive Story of New Zealand was published in 1859, proposed that Maori were of Malay origin and had migrated in ‘proas’ from Indonesia via Timor, Fiji and Samoa.
4 See the review ‘Te Rou’ in the New Zealand Herald, 27th March 1875. Reviewers of Te Rou, both in New Zealand and England, were respectful rather than enthusiastic. One commented that a little of White’s style ‘goes a long way’ and wished that White had constructed the plot of his book ‘with a little more skill’ (see review ‘Te Rou’ in the New Zealand Times, 19th May 1875).
5 White had to bowdlerise, for example, many of the Nga Puhi tara (tales) he collected as a young man while living in the Hokianga. ‘Nearly all my best tales are tainted with indecency’ he recorded disapprovingly in his Private Journal (see Private Journal entry for 22nd August 1849).
6 Charles Goldie, who was active in Auckland around the turn of the century, painted both Maori and European subjects, especially portraits. He is best known today for his painstaking, detailed pictures of elderly Maori, who are often shown as passive, dreaming figures, lost in reverie and remembrance of times past. See for example, Memories (1903) and Meditation (1904).

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HELEN TIFFIN

Among Head-Hunters and Cannibals: Spenser St. John in Borneo and Haiti

In his preface to *The Hero as Murderer*, Australian critic Geoffrey Dutton noted that his interest in writing about Edward John Eyre, colonial governor and Austro-colonial hero-explorer, was awakened by an interchange with the Jamaican anthropologist Fernando Henriques. To Henriques, Eyre was that 'monster' (Dutton 9) who, in 1865, in the aftermath of the Morant Bay Uprising had, in what Bernard Semmel describes as 'a month-long reign of terror', burnt over one thousand homes, executed over five hundred negroes and flogged and tortured as many (15). The 'rebel' leader, Rev. Paul Bogle, had used Christian theology as justification for the uprising and had relied on the sympathy of the English Crown in a situation where many of the local peasantry were starving (Semmel). To Dutton, however, Eyre was the 'brave explorer' of the interior of an 'unknown' continent, and Dutton, only vaguely aware of some scandal in relation to Eyre's governorship of Jamaica (9), was intrigued by the discrepancy between his and Henriques' views and by the very different places Eyre now occupied in two post-colonial national histories.

Throughout the history of the British Empire, but particularly during the nineteenth-century, British administrators and adventurers (like Eyre) played significant roles in more than one colony or territory.¹ Such men were often representatives of the Crown, but sometimes they worked for themselves or for interests independent of the administration in one colony, while serving as diplomats or officials in another; and like Eyre they worked not only for the British government, but with those of power and influence in the colony or territory itself. In Eyre's Jamaica of 1865 a nervous white plantocracy of ex-slavers feared the growing 'mulatto' influence and the degeneration of the colony into what they believed to be the current conditions in the Republic of Haiti. Although Eyre was tried in England for his actions in Jamaica, he had had much local white support and encouragement for his harsh measures and this goes some way towards explaining that 'paradox' of Eyre's character which Dutton sought to unlock.

From a twentieth-century point of view, the life and works of Sir Spenser Buckingham St. John offer a not dissimilar instance of apparent contradiction. Spenser St. John is remembered in the Caribbean as a particularly influential nineteenth-century racist, a writer whose *Hayti or the Black Republic* (1884) both supported those Haitian stereotypes already in circulation, (for instance, at the time of the Morant Bay Uprising), and vastly extended their influence. St. John's
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work on Haiti remains notorious for its uncompromising dismissal (one which echoes that of J.A. Froude) of the very possibility of blacks being able to govern themselves, and for its sensationalist treatment of cannibalism (particularly child-eating) in nineteenth-century Haiti. By contrast, St. John’s two-volume *Life in the Forests of the Far East* of 1862 is noteworthy for its racial toleration, its open admiration of different cultural attitudes and practices, its sponsorship of Bornean Dyak welfare, and its approval of race mixing and ‘miscegenation’. Where Caribbean critics, historians and anthropologists have quite rightly called into question St. John’s lurid accounts of Haitian horrors, present-day local and international anthropologists and historians still draw on *Life in the Forests of the Far East* as a reliable and authoritative ethnographic source book. Both of St. John’s major works, then, had, and continue to have, significant influence in two post-colonised areas and beyond.

In his foreword to *Voodoo in Haiti* (1959) anthropologist Alfred Métraux credits (or discredits) St. John with prime responsibility for the ‘evocative power’ of the term ‘voodoo’ itself. ‘Voodoo’, argues Métraux, is ‘nothing more than a conglomeration of beliefs and rites of African origin ... closely mixed with Catholic practice’. But

... the few allusions to Voodoo which may be found in documents and books little known to the general public could not have raised this rural paganism into the legendary terror it became, had not a British Consul, Spenser St. John written a book (*Hayti or the Black Republic*) in which he described the most blood-curdling crimes committed by the Voodoo sect. (Métraux 16)

This work, attests Métraux, ‘was widely read and for long has been regarded as the main authority’ Métraux lists prominent historians, anthropologists, critics and writers who either cite or draw on St. John’s work, and his estimation of its influence is impressive. Writing in 1981 on ‘global’ stereotypes of Haiti, Michael Dash noted that one of the most influential ‘and grotesque’ accounts of ‘black magic’ is that of St. John. Such ‘sensational and gory episodes’, Dash argues, particularly appealed ‘to the repressed fantasies of the Victorian imagination’ (15). But the recounting of these tales, was not. Dash concludes, gratuitous sensationalism on St. John’s part. Rather, the passages were calculated to demonstrate to a white reading public that ‘according popular government to these colonies’ was out of the question. ‘I know what the black man is,’ St. John famously stated, ‘and have no hesitation in declaring that he is incapable of the art of government’ (xi).

Spenser St. John was born in 1825, and went to Borneo at the age of twenty-three as Private Secretary to Sir James Brooke, the ‘White Rajah’ of Sarawak, owner and ruler of that ‘eastern state’. St. John served as Brooke’s secretary between 1848 and 1850, and acted as temporary commissioner for Brooke between 1851 and 1855. In 1856, still in Borneo, he was appointed British Consul General in Brunei, becoming Chargè d’Affaires in Haiti in 1863. He remained in the
Caribbean for twelve years, later as Chargè d’Affaires in the Dominican Republic and Resident Minister in Haiti. The apparent discrepancy between St. John’s attitudes to other races as they appear in *Life in the Forests of the Far East* and his attitude to late nineteenth-century Haitians — a difference exaggerated in the minds of modern readers who tend to expect that what we regard as ‘racism’ in one area will be evident in a writer’s approach to all non-white or non-European groups — could be partially explained by age and role differences. The St. John of Borneo is a young adventurer working for a radical and racially tolerant regime. During his years with the Brookes (and in Brunei) St. John became the first white man to explore the larger rivers in the western interior. Harriette McDougall, the first white woman in Sarawak, was also attached to the Brooke regime through her missionary husband and although she and Spenser St. John were strong supporters of the Brookes, and admired both Dyak and Malay cultures, McDougall particularly disliked St. John. He was, she charged, agnostic and irreverent; he had a Dyak mistress with whom he lived openly, even (and this seems to be his greatest sin) calling on the McDougalls with her; and he led talented young men astray, luring them from McDougall’s mission into the Brooke administration.

These seem very much the attitudes and actions of a young, even idealistic colonial adventurer, a far cry from the sober Haitian Chargè d’Affaires of fifty, and it would certainly be possible to argue that with age and the changing nature of his official posts, St. John may simply have become more conservative. But neither age, office, nor even racial and geographical loci seem in either Eyre’s or St. John’s cases to offer sufficient explanation for their apparent attitudinal changes. I want, therefore, in the remainder of this essay, to consider the kinds of broader discursive contexts out of which *Life in the Forests of the Far East* and *Hayti or the Black Republic* were written, and those into which they were received and thus interpreted. While I have already raised one important contextual difference — the issue of slavery and post-slavery black poverty in the Caribbean together with white fear of black rule — I want to concentrate, in terms of St. John’s work, on a different but related discursive context: the Victorian progressivist narrative and its darker side, degeneration. These two counter narratives jostle each other in his writing, and it is the uncomfortable relation between these strains which may partially account for the discrepancy.

As Daniel Pick notes, it is possible to argue that degeneration must primarily be understood as ‘one intellectual current within a far wider language of nineteenth-century racist imperialism’, the ‘hegemonic task’ as Pick expresses it, ‘lying in the ideological construction of inferiority of savagery, atavism and moral pathology in the far flung countries which came increasingly under Western political control’ (37). Pick’s interest is primarily in European discourse, but he recognises that currents in European thought, particularly during the period of his study (the mid to late nineteenth-century) are inextricably interwoven with the overseas empires. While fears of degeneration were rife in late nineteenth-century Europe, they
existed within a counter-context of European optimism. As many historians have argued, the years from 1870 to 1900 were dominated by the idea of mankind’s unstoppable progress. Evolutionary anthropology had reinforced progressivist ideologies, and the white man’s burden was still envisaged as one of catalysing or fostering ‘civilisation’ amongst the ‘backward’ races. But not all commentators were equally optimistic. Bagehot warned in 1872 that ‘only a few nations, and these of European origin, advance; and yet these think — seem irresistibly compelled to think — such advances to be inevitable, natural and eternal’ (qtd in Pick 13). The theory of ‘dégénérescence’, so Pick argues, is the ideological product of the ‘complex process of conceptualising a felt crisis of history’ since ‘after 1848 there was a deep sense of confusion about the patterns of historical change and repetition’ (37).

The relationships between these two counter-narratives of progress and degeneration were further complicated by differential European racisms. While the ‘savage’ or ‘barbarous’ could be broadly defined against a concept of ‘civilisation’ (inevitably European), the Rousseau-esque current in European thinking had increasingly divided ‘native’ cultures from the (diasporic) ‘coolie’ castes — that is, former African slaves and Indian and Chinese overseas communities from the indigenous, ‘uncontaminated’ cultures, whose ways of life seemed, by the end of the nineteenth-century, threatened with extinction due to the spread of Western ‘civilisation’. Darwinian evolutionary theory had also apparently given credence to a racial hierarchy wherein Africans and Australian Aboriginal peoples were ranked lowest. The role of European commerce in this complex was also an ambivalent one. ‘Slaves’ and ‘coolies’ had frequently been the agents of acquisition of the ‘civilised’ wealth of Europe; a necessary ‘evil’ in the progress of the West as a whole, while the sophistication of a relatively wealthy industrialised Europe had come to seem to some both cause and symptom of Western attenuation and potential degeneration. (Decline into barbarism could still be Europe’s fate, a fear expressed through the recurrent fin de siècle tropologies of the ‘sick heart’ and the ‘heart of darkness’.) Some commentators thus felt that South Pacific island cultures (and even some European-descent settler colonies) had preserved an energy and a simple integrity increasingly absent from the (over)sophistications of European ‘civilisation’. All these currents, then, are important in St. John’s conceptualisation of the peoples and societies among whom he lived and worked, and necessarily play a part in determining the reception of his writings, both locally and in Europe and the United States.

In his introduction to Life in the Forests of the Far East, St. John writes that he has ‘treated of the tribes in groups’ and ‘endeavoured to give an individual interest to each’. Part of that interest for the reader lies not only in the ‘exotic’ subject matter, but in the immediacy of encounter St. John wishes to convey: ‘To preserve the freshness of my first impressions, I have copied my journal written at the time, only correcting such errors as are inseparable from first observations’
(1862 1:1). Although St. John's tone is not Rousseau-esque, it is progressivist and nativist, a not uncommon perspective whereby the potential contradiction between a desire to retain Dyak difference, yet 'improve' on the good qualities already possessed had to be negotiated. St. John effects this by, on the one hand, drawing attention to the similarities between Dyak and English 'civilisations', while on the other noting that 'steady government' or 'the benefits of civilisation' can improve on their 'natural' (English) attributes. The 'energy displayed by the Sea Dyaks ... gives much hope of their advancement in civilisation at a future time'. A 'few years of quiet and steady government' (1862 1:2) was all that was required. Moreover, the Dyaks already demonstrate their potential in terms of another essential marker of 'civilisation': they value surplus. The Seribas Dyaks, for instance, 'recover immediately from the effects of the destruction of their villages and property and set to work to create more wealth'. Comparison between English and Dyak customs are frequent, and the men in particular are 'clean built and upright in their gait, and of a very independent bearing ... Gentle in their manners', yet nevertheless 'warlike', they are 'partial to bright red cloth jackets when in the field', making them look 'so like a party of English soldiers' (1862 2:29). Indeed their sense of duty and even upbringing have English public School analogies:

Their strength and activity are remarkable. I have seen a Dyak carry a heavy Englishman down the steepest hills; and when one of their companions is severely wounded they bear him home, no matter what the distance. They exercise a great deal from boyhood in wrestling, swimming, running and sham fighting ... When a little more civilised they would make good soldiers, being brave by nature. (1862 2:29–30).

While the classic colonialist sketch of the 'heavy Englishman' being carried is a reminder of the inescapable hierarchies of the relation, the Dyaks share the 'boy’s own' adventuring ideals of love of sport, bravery in war and loyalty to comrades, prizing strength, activity and good manners. And given these attributes, even the familiar colonialist trope, the Englishman carried by native bearers, assumes — at least for those fearing European degeneration — something of a warning.

Even though St. John was the first Englishman to explore the Western interior of Borneo, the Dyaks (particularly the Iban) had already been stereotyped in European discourse (through Dutch and other sources) as the world’s fiercest head-hunters, famous for head-hunting practices and rituals. (The Norwegian explorer Carl Bock, who published his popular The Head-Hunters of Borneo in 1881 deliberately drew on [and played to] this reputation, searching for instances of cannibalism to, as it were, provide the icing on the head-hunting cake). By contrast, St. John, throughout his two-volume work, plays down the alleged 'evils' of head-hunting, carefully distinguishing the practice from cannibalism and drawing attention to measures by the Brookes to curb it.
In *Life in the Forests of the Far East* St. John writes less as an administrator than as an explorer and ethnographer, providing an exciting tale of his expedition along the rivers, an adventure shared with his Dyak and Malay companions. Head-hunting is not described as a marker of (savage) difference, even if from time to time the whole party fears pursuit by other groups with a ‘reputation’. But St. John never sensationalises the possibility (or the practice) and though he does comment, when recounting one Chief’s tale of a raid that ‘its cool atrocity always makes my heart sick’ (1862 2:61) some of his references to head-hunting seem almost casual, and talk about it is frequently the basis of cross-cultural male camaraderie. Sent inland to inquire into ‘the alleged bad conduct of an English trader and a Sarawak Malay’ (1862 2:104), St. John spent two hours on the investigation and, when this was concluded, discussed head-hunting with the local Dyak men over drinks of native arrack and his own French brandy:

> A little spirit getting into them, they became more cheerful and amusing, and we talked about their head-hunting propensities. The wholesome advice I felt compelled to give them on this subject made them feel thirsty, and Tamawan seizing a bottle, filled the tumblers two-thirds full of raw spirit and handed it to me and asked me to drink with him to the friendship of the two nations. Could I refuse? No. I raised the tumbler to my lips, and amid very excited chorus allowed the liquor to flow down. (1862 2:104)

While Rajah James Brooke and after him Charles (and the British Government) officially outlawed head-hunting in Sarawak, both James, and particularly Charles, encouraged group raids to maintain and extend their territory. Charles not only accompanied Dyak war parties but was widely rumoured to have taken heads himself; an assumption generally supported by the esteem in which he was held by Dyak Chiefs. St. John was close to both James and Charles and he had certainly accompanied war parties. But even more remarkably, long after he had left Borneo and Haiti and retired to England, he re-imagined himself back into the days of *Life in the Forests of the Far East* in a strange narrative allegedly penned by one Capt. Charles Hunter, R.N., entitled *The Adventures of a Naval Officer* (1905). St. John drew extensively on his 1862 accounts for this fiction, and his first person narrator, Ali, is fully disguised as a Malay, having permanently dyed his skin to undertake pirate raids (internecine and on Dutch shipping) with his mixed Dyak-Malay comrades.

Cannibalism is only briefly mentioned in *Life in the Forests of the Far East*, but its practice is dismissed perfunctorily as unlikely. St John notes that there have been one or two reports of it (possibly Carl Bock’s) but says that he has never either seen any evidence himself, nor credited reports he has heard. What is a more troublesome conundrum for St. John is that which had worried Alfred Russell Wallace before him and William Hornaday after: the potential disbenefits for native races of the goals of ‘civilisation’ itself. Too often, as Wallace opined, ‘civilisation’ led inevitably to extermination (99); and for Hornaday, Dyak
‘civilisation’ was both happier and morally superior to that of his native United States. Spenser St. John had fewer qualms about the benefits of Western civilisation, but just as the McDougalls regarded him as a pernicious influence on young Englishmen in Sarawak, so St. John did not approve of missionising Borneans whose general condition he regarded as already felicitous.

Twenty years after Life in the Forests of the Far East, Spenser St. John published his (in)famous Hayti or the Black Republic. His account was widely circulated and much discussed, not only in the Caribbean, but in Britain, Europe and the United States. The subject of Haiti had always been of great interest in the metropoles ever since Toussaint L’Ouverture’s slave revolt of 1791 (the only successful large-scale one in New World history). With the establishment of the black state of Haiti, all eyes, particularly in France, Britain and the United States, had been focussed on her. Not only did Haiti represent, before the abolition of slavery in Britain and her colonies — and later in the Southern United States — a major threat to white plantocracy, it also stood, in the post-slavery era, as an actual (or potential) example of the progress or decline of self-governing colonies and/or black states in the New World. St. John’s apparently authoritative report on the status of Haiti after Toussaint was thus read with great interest and generally regarded as fact. Its form is much less personal than that of Life in the Forests of the Far East, and though the author recounts first-hand experiences, many of the book’s observations depend on, (as well as present) statistics; accounts of trials; three chapters on history for which St. John draws on English and European written sources; an account of the origins and present state of the population; the structure and operations of the Government; the Army and the Police; Religion, Education and Justice; Language and Literature, and Agriculture, Commerce and Finance. Fluent in French and Spanish as well as in English, St. John included impressions received from fellow diplomats and continental travellers. But the book’s most notorious chapter was (and is) ‘Vaudoux Worship and Cannibalism’.

Where Life in the Forests of the Far East was progressive and optimistic, Hayti, or the Black Republic is an account of degeneration in almost every aspect of Haitian life, and it was certainly received as incontrovertible evidence of the impossibility of the negro’s ever being able to manage his own affairs. In his Introduction St. John defends himself against charges of racism by appealing to his experience across a number of cultures and by emphasising his unqualified approval of Toussaint and his early successors:

In treating of the Black and the Mulatto as they appeared to me during my residence among them, I fear that I shall be considered by some to judge too harshly. Such, however, is not my intention. Brought up under Sir James Brooke, whose enlarged sympathies could endure no prejudice of race or colour, I do not remember ever to have felt any repugnance to my fellow creatures on account of a difference of complexion.
I have dwelt above thirty-five years among coloured people of various races, and am sensible of no prejudice against them. (viii)

More specifically, ‘for twelve years I lived in familiar and kindly intercourse with Haytians of all ranks and shades of colour’ and ‘all who knew me in Hayti knew that I had no prejudice of colour’ (viii).

Where, from the beginning, *Life in the Forests of the Far East* promises a journey, a forward movement into an exciting and (to Europeans) unknown interior, *Hayti or the Black Republic* looks backwards from its very inception, moving forwards only to look backwards, confirming a decline up to the present, and assuring readers that the decline will continue: ‘Whilst in Port-au-Prince a Spanish colleague once remarked to me, “Mon ami, if we could return to Hayti fifty years hence, we should find the negresses cooking their bananas on the site of these warehouses”’ (v).

This ‘prophecy’ St. John says, will certainly be fulfilled ‘unless [they are] in the meantime influenced by some higher civilisation’. In fact, ‘the negresses are ... already cooking their bananas amid the ruins of the best houses of the capital’ (v). His own impression, ‘after personally knowing the country above twenty years, is, that it is in a state of rapid decadence’, and since 1843, ‘the country has ... been steadily falling to the rear in the race of civilisation’ (v). Architecture, society, agriculture, all are ‘deteriorating’ or have already deteriorated beyond redemption, and ‘in spite of all the civilising elements around them, there is a distinct tendency to sink into the state of an African tribe’ (vii). The trajectory of *Hayti or the Black Republic* then, is backwards to a ‘tribal’ past, well beyond the point of ‘origin’ for the black nation, in the ‘new’ world, that is, their freedom from slavery. Strangely, in the trajectory of decline catalogued by St. John, slavery appears to play no part, since it is necessarily past by the time of origin of the Haitian state. It is, of course, discussed in the chapters concerned with history; but both the formal design of St. John’s account, and his trajectory of ‘decline and fall’ give slavery — the very basis of black Haitian history — only a ‘bit’ part.

Significantly, *Hayti or the Black Republic*, does not begin with the kidnap and transport of Africans to Santo Domingo, but from Toussaint’s revolution and his leadership. His constitution, St. John notes, ‘was a model of liberality’ (63), and Toussaint ‘governed admirably’ (64) so that by 1800 ‘all was now progressing on the island; the government was regularly administered, the finances were getting into order and agriculture was beginning to raise its head’ (65). The *initial* cause of decline for Toussaint’s Hayti is external, not racially or culturally inherent: ‘Bonaparte, having secured peace in Europe, determined to recover the Queen of the Antilles and restore slavery’ (65). Nevertheless, this narrative of Haitian ‘decline’ elides slavery, while at the same time marking the decline with moments
inextricably interwoven with it. Toussaint’s revolution initiates a potential upward moral trend with the liberation of the slaves but an inevitable economic decline. It is Bonaparte’s determination to re-institute slavery (and the debilitating wars which follow) which, precipitating the decline, is then assisted by incompetence and corrupt leadership till the bottom limit is reached: ‘the state of an African tribe’. Since he was against slavery, St. John can hardly situate it at the beginning of New World potential; yet his apparent sharing of the commonly-held view that Africans were to be placed on the next to lowest rung of the evolutionary ladder returns a ‘decayed’ Haitian society to its African rather than Afro-European origin in the iniquitous slave trade. The comparisons by which present-day Haitian society is measured are drawn from the era of Toussaint. Haitian officers had been brave and energetic under this leader, but are now so lazy the Guard sit on chairs. Most governments since Toussaint (and those of his immediate successors) have been corrupt; production of goods and trade have declined. (Where his statistics don’t accord with this, St. John argues that ‘nature’ rather than effort is responsible). But the ultimate sign and symbol of Haiti’s overall decline is cannibalism as a ritual voodoo practice.

Where, in relation to the Dyaks, St. John dismissed both written and oral reports of cannibalism, appealing to his own observations (he had never seen any evidence of it), in Haiti he is prepared to credit and to draw on written accounts (particularly that of Moreau de St Méry) and hearsay (French and Spanish diplomats and travellers; white and mulatto Haitians) even quoting a sailor’s report from Vanity Fair. He also reports at ‘first hand’ on a trial he attended which took place during President Geffrard’s rule. This was a notorious case (the Bizoton or Congo Pelle trial [1864]) and one which had been widely reported in the American, French and English language presses. The case involved the alleged murder and eating of a child as part of a Voodoo ritual, and a conspiracy ‘to do away with’ another. It was openly acknowledged in Court (and in the reports) that the ‘confessions’ had been beaten out of the accused, and it was even suggested that, believing there was no escape from the charges, the prisoners had gone on to sensationalise their stories. St. John reports that the confessions were obtained under duress, but has no hesitation in ascribing guilt, concurring with the Court’s verdict. In contrast to his dismissal of cannibal charges against Borneans as unsubstantiated rumour, St. John readily believes the evidence, and the even more nebulous hearsay about the widespread nature of the practice and the high level of ‘corruption’ protecting the ‘Vaudoux’ sects. But the accused in the Congo Pelle case were tried and punished, suggesting that in one of the few instances for which St. John has some ‘evidence’ of it, cannibalism as a Voodoo practice was not sanctioned by the State. Nevertheless, cannibalism is both structurally (and figuratively) at the centre of his narrative of Haitian decadence and decline.

In keeping with his demonisation of the syncretic Voodoo, the St. John of Hayti or the Black Republic (agnostic and actively anti-clerical in Sarawak) praises
Toussaint for having been ‘a fervent Roman Catholic ... greatly attached to the priesthood’, and for repressing Voodoo and forbidding all fetish rites (71–72). ‘Vaudoux’ for St. John is the overt cause and symptom of Haitian decline, of degeneration ‘to the level of an African tribe’, a measure identical with that of Conrad’s 1901 *Heart of Darkness*. African tribalism is indicated by both cannibal practice and disdain for the symbols of European culture in mercantile capitalism and European architecture. (Negresses are *already* cooking bananas ‘amid the ruins of the best houses of the capital’; they will soon be ‘cooking their bananas on the site of these warehouses’ [v]). What is striking about both of St. John’s images of Haitian decline are the obdurately separate ‘poles’ from which they proceed: ‘Europe’ (Christianity, Architecture) is the sign of civilisation; ‘Africa’ is savagery. But Voodoo is a Christian-West African syncretism (not an African religion) while the State of Haiti (and the stately buildings of its capital) are a product of the relationship between Europe and Africa through the slave trade.

Evolutionary anthropology, as Daniel Pick and others have noted, functioned not only to differentiate the colonised from the imperial race, but to scrutinise populations ‘at home’. The other was both outside, at the peripheries of Empire, and also ‘inside’, as evidenced by Europe’s criminal ‘classes’, the decadence and filth of its slums and tenements, and by its physical and mental ‘degenerates’. Joseph Conrad had read St. John’s *Life in the Forests of the Far East* and had probably read *Hayti or the Black Republic*. In *Heart of Darkness* he brought head-taking, fetish rites and cannibalism together in what would become the classic *fin de siecle* Modernist image of European degeneration, exposing the potential for savagery at the very heart of civilisation; the white man abandoning his ‘burden’ of civilising ‘others’ to become the abandoned fetish priest; the genius of Europe gone tragically native, ‘sunk to the level of an African tribe’.

It is possible to read Conrad’s complex work as a telling allegory of European degeneration occurring precisely because of its imperial ambitions and greed masked by noble, civilising motives. Kurtz’s atavistic reversion is linked to both his greed for ivory and his civilising mission, just as the dying worker-slaves in the ‘grove of death’ are both product of Europe’s rapacious capitalist expansionism and refractions of a European ‘whited sepulchre’, a sick heart and a heart of darkness at the very centre of European imperialism.

St. John’s writing is much less complex than Conrad’s and it does not have Conrad’s figurative density or ironic vision, but like his near contemporary, St. John was necessarily influenced by many of the same discursive strains in Victorian thinking. Where Conrad set the ‘boy’s own’ Empire adventure narrative against the realities of ruthless imperialist exploitation to indict the very (colonialist) decadence constitutive of Europe’s optimistic, progressivist mood, St. John dealt with this fundamental contradiction by compartmentalisation. In Borneo and thus in *Life in the Forests of the Far East* and *The Adventures of a Naval Officer* empire adventuring, the bringing into contact of Europe and the exotic ‘other’
could be construed as mutually energising and generally benign. The European traveller could delight in observing different practices (while discovering ‘universal’ moral and social similarities) without there being any disturbing prior imbrication with the European past. But Haiti was a different matter.

Paraphrasing Werner Arens, Maggie Kilgour argues that

the anthropophage provides an image for the forces hostile to the civilising process, a wild, untamed nature that threatens advances made by culture. That force can be projected also onto the culture’s own past, as a state of savagery out of which it has just emerged and back into which it fears it may fall. (242)

But the cannibal image had been further complicated by European recognition of its own ‘cannibal’ practices in relation to other peoples. At least as far back as Montaigne, writers had condemned the hypocrisy which projected savagery onto the other as justification for the (cannibalistic) savageries of genocide and slavery; the consuming of entire cultures in a drive for wealth and power.

St. John was the first white man to explore Borneo’s western river systems, and his encounter with Borneo and her peoples was a pristine one. But Haitian society was a product of Afro-European history; and thus always already contaminated by some of the worst examples of European cannibalism — the slaughter of Amerindian peoples and the obscenities of the slave trade and the plantation. Genocide and enslavement (cannibalisms) were the very foundations of the Spanish and French creation of Santo Domingo and thus the ‘origins’ of nineteenth-century Haiti. St. John always retained his faith in the benefits of European civilisation. ‘One thing I wish distinctly to state’, he wrote in a footnote to the chapter on Voodoo, is ‘that I never heard of any Mulatto, except Generals Salnave and Therlonge, who was mixed up with the cannibalism of the Vaudoux, nor of any black educated in Europe’ (182).

Yet St. John’s differing attitudes to the evidence (or lack thereof) of cannibalism in two different, apparently ‘savage’ populations is significant. Already demonstrating traits of ‘civilisation’ within their own cultures, Dyak peoples would go on to greater things. By contrast, Africans had already been brought into contact with ‘civilisation’ (through their enslavement by Europeans) and had now, after Toussaint, failed the test of ‘progress’. Their trajectory as a people was thus downwards — degenerative. But degeneration and cannibalism, represented, respectively, a potential future and a repressed history: they could uncomfortably mirror Europe’s destiny or her past ‘savage’ dealings with ‘others’. And because Haitian society was so uncomfortably imbricated with that past and could even prefigure a devastating future to Europeans, it had to be firmly and unequivocally differentiated from it. Consequently, where St. John was eager to expel the possibility of cannibalism from the progressivist narrative of Borneo, he was equally determined to invoke it in Haiti as a barrier between ‘civilisation’ and
"savagery"; to re-erect the classic 'poles' in assessing a society where Europe and an 'African tribe' had been perforce brought together.

Some of St. John's expressed sentiments about Haitians are what we would now regard as unequivocally 'racist', while his reassessment of Dyaks is positive, but patronising and condescending. Such categorisations are however, too facile. In the context of fears of European degeneration and against the guilty repression of the past, the 'decadent' Haitians, as racially and religiously 'syncretic' products of that past, had to be 'returned' to Africa.

It is perhaps not surprising that St. John returned to the simplicities of Empire adventuring in his later work, casting his protagonist as an Englishman dyed 'native', enjoying serious play along the tropical coastline and up the rivers of St. John's memory, with companion Dyaks whose exciting differences yet pleasing similarities both offered and promised such civil possibilities. In that almost Adamic encounter, the 'other' neither offered a (cannibalistic) reflection of Europe's genocidal activities, nor prefigured its exposure or decline 'to the level of an African tribe'.

NOTES
1 Governor Grey, and the Roth brothers offer other instances of this 'cross colony' phenomenon.
2 I have followed Métraux in using the modern spellings 'Haiti' and 'Voodoo' except where they appear in quotes in their nineteenth-century forms as 'Hayti' and 'Vaudoux'.
3 For example Gustave Aymard's Les Vaudoux where 'the sect is described as a lot of fanatics thirsting for blood and power' (Métraux 16).
4 Spenser St. John, Hayti or the Black Republic, Frank Cass, 1971. Introduction p. xi. This later introduction to Hayti or the Black Republic was written after Froude's The English in the West Indies or the Bow of Ulysses, 1877. All further quotations in this paper are from the original edition of 1884, published by Smith, Elder and Co., London.
5 Both James and Charles Brooke had excellent relations with both Dyaks and Malays; and Sarawak's legal system operated through three codes: English, Muslim and Dyak.
6 See Harriette McDougall, Sketches of Our Life at Sarawak.
7 Susan Morgan wonderfully characterises the Sarawak of the Brookes as a 'real-life "boys' own" adventure' (215).
8 See William T. Hornaday, The Experiences of a Hunter and Naturalist in the Malay Peninsula and Borneo.
9 For an account of Toussaint L'Ouverture see C.L.R. James, The Black Jacobins.

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A Female Conquistador: The Contradictions of Colonial Discourse in the Countess of Merlin’s *Viaje a La Habana*

Follow me, dear viscountess, you whose originality has not lost any of its freshness and grace among Parisian elegance and the demands of the civilised life. Come to an unknown and remarkable place to behold the spectacle of customs that have never been described, nor hardly observed. Our hopes have not been sufficiently extinguished that they are not awakened anew by the sight of beings which still maintain all the charm of primitive society. (Merlin 1844b, 59)

With these words, the Countess of Merlin invites her European audience to come, metaphorically through her writing, to the ‘unknown’ and ‘primitive’ world that was Cuba in 1844. This primitive world was in fact the countess’s place of birth, which she travelled back to after a long absence and about which she wrote her travelogue *Viaje a La Habana* (1844b). Although born in Cuba, Merlin resided in Europe for most of her life, which possibly accounts for her exclusion from the Cuban literary canon. Moreover, since her exile also prevented her from having a voice as a Latin American author, Merlin ultimately shares the lack of visibility that is characteristic of other Latin American women writers of the nineteenth century.

In the area of travel writing this invisibility is accentuated by the lack of studies on Latin American women travel writers. Current research on women’s travel writing mostly focuses on the large number of travel writers from Europe and the United States. The travel writing analysed in Latin America focuses either on writing by foreigners who travelled to this geographical area or on writing by men who travelled to Europe and the United States. Since Latin American women travel writers remain largely unknown, this study on the Countess of Merlin and her text, *Viaje a La Habana*, is part of a larger project, which looks at travel writing by Latin American women in the nineteenth century.
Contrary to what may be expected, there were many Latin American women who travelled and who wrote travel accounts during the nineteenth century. These were educated, upper-class women who travelled to other Latin American countries, to Europe and to the United States. Sometimes they travelled to accompany a husband, or a father on a diplomatic or work mission, as did the Mexican sisters, Enriqueta and Ernestina Larrainzar, who travelled with their father all over Europe and produced a monumental five-volume account of their voyage (1880). At other times women travelled for leisure or for their own work as did Aurelia Castillo de González, for example, a Cuban journalist who travelled in 1889 to report on the Universal Exhibition in Paris (1891). On her way to Chicago in 1893 to document that exhibition, she travelled first to Mexico and wrote about this experience as well (1895). Another writer was the Colombian, Soledad Acosta de Samper, the most important female intellectual in her country at that time, whose countless writings include a travel book, *Viaje a España en 1892* (1894). The Argentinian, Juana Manuela Gorriti, spent her life writing and travelling between Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Chile. Though she did not write a book-length travel account, her extensive work includes some *impresiones de viajes* or travel impressions (1878).

These are just a few of the Latin American women writers who have written travel accounts and who, like the Countess of Merlin, the subject of this article, deserve critical attention. Latin American women travel writers have remained voiceless in the area of research on nineteenth-century travel writing, but the study of these writers and their works enables us to better understand the role of women in nineteenth-century Latin America. This research, like the research on European nineteenth-century travel writing, reveals strategies of colonialism, as they affect Latin American women, as well as the historical processes by which they participated, actively or passively, in the colonial enterprise of that century.

**THE COUNTESS: STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND**

In the second letter of *Viaje a La Habana*, the Countess of Merlin wrote, ‘My heart is oppressed ... to think I come here as a stranger’ (10). She was fifty-one years old when she wrote her travelogue and was indeed a stranger in her native land. Merlin visited Cuba at that age after being absent from the island for close to forty years. She had left Cuba when she was a child and had lived in Europe all her adult life. Her two-month stay in the island could have hardly relieved her feeling of alienation. As much as she wanted to identify with Cuba, which she calls her *patria*, or fatherland, throughout the text, the truth is that she felt like a foreigner and that her compatriots regarded her as one also.

At the time of her voyage to Cuba, Merlin enjoyed some acceptance from the Del Monte group, a literary society made up of the island’s prominent intellectuals who sought reforms for the island. Some members of this group however, were suspicious of the social class she represented, the powerful saccharocracy, since
the class was the focal point of their resistance (Araújo 113). A member of the literary group, Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel, wrote a series of articles attacking Merlin for 'seeing the island of Cuba with Parisian eyes' (Méndez 1990, 711). This critical reception of Merlin was further complicated by the fact that she used several costumbrista, or local colour sketches, written by Cuban authors without giving them credit in Viaje a La Habana. Tanco y Bosmeniel was the first critic to denounce Merlin for her plagiarism as well as for her foreignness.

Adriana Méndez Rodenas, who has researched Merlin extensively, argues that the countess has been excluded from Cuban literary history because she was a woman (1990 710), but her 'foreignness', her absence from the island and the fact that she wrote in French, also contributed to this lack of recognition. Even
some critics in the twentieth century were still reluctant to include Merlin as a Cuban author. For example, José Antonio Portuondo fails to mention Merlin in his work on Cuban literature (1960). Those critics who do mention her in their critical works continue to highlight her dubious adaptation of the costumbrista and her Frenchness. Two examples of this are Max Henríquez Ureña in his *Panorama histórico de la literatura cubana* (1963) and Salvador Bueno in his essay ‘Una escritora habanera de expresión francesa’ (1977).

Recently the Countess of Merlin and her work have awakened new interest among academics and researchers who are focusing on a number of different areas of study, from the biographical to the literary. In Méndez’s approach, the countess is read as a feminist writer who subverts feminine codes of behaviour and who transgresses the male-dominated boundaries of literary production by writing historical essays (1986 76; 1990 725). Other analyses deal with Merlin’s autobiographical texts, with the genres of her texts, and with her political essays on slavery (Molloy 1991; Díaz 1994; Martin 1995). Whatever the approach, this new attention rescues Merlin from oblivion inasmuch as it acknowledges her voice and her participation in history.

To contribute to these studies, then, the purpose of this article is to produce an analysis of colonial discourse in *Viaje a La Habana*. Sara Mills argues that ‘[F]emales play an important part in the colonial enterprise as signifiers, but not as producers of signification’ (1991 59). Considering that Latin American women have been ignored in the analysis of colonial discourse, my intention is to show Merlin’s agency in the colonial discourse of her era. However, since the countess was a hybrid product of both Cuban and European culture, her colonial discourse is conflictive. In fact, this disjunction is very much evident throughout *Viaje a La Habana* since she is both the product and the producer of colonial signification.

**IN SEARCH OF LA COMTESSE MERLIN**

The Countess of Merlin was born Maria de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo in Havana in 1789 to one of the founding families of the Cuban sugar aristocracy (Méndez 1998, 20). Merlin’s parents migrated to Spain soon after her birth, leaving her in the care of her maternal grandmother. At the age of 12 she joined her family in Spain. She later married Antoine Christophe Merlin, a French general in José Bonaparte’s army, and became *La Comtesse* Merlin. After Bonaparte’s fall, she was forced to migrate once again, leaving Spain for France, with her husband and firstborn daughter. In Paris, during the 1830s and 1840s, the countess became famous for housing a literary salon (Araújo 114). She lived in Paris until her death in 1852.

In 1840, a year after her husband’s death, the Countess of Merlin travelled back to Cuba to resolve a dispute with her brother over the sale of the family’s sugar mill at Nazareno. (It was resolved against the Countess’s interests [Méndez 1990, 727]). Upon Merlin’s return to Paris, she wrote *La Havane* (1844a), a
three-volume text in epistolary form, which is part travelogue, part political treatise and includes some historical writing. The political and historical material of this text was omitted in the Spanish edition, leaving Viaje a La Habana with only ten letters of the original thirty-six (Méndez 1990, 710). From the analysis of these ten letters, it is evident that Merlin uses the colonial discourse that European imperialism employed to classify the non-European world, to portray Cuba and its people.

Both Sara Mills and Mary Louise Pratt have argued that colonial discourse is articulated in the imperial situation as a justification for intervention in the ‘unknown’ and ‘non-civilised’ world (Mills 1997; Pratt 1992). During the nineteenth century, the discourse of imperialism circulated among writers, artists, scientists, travellers and scholars, in fiction and non-fiction as well as in art. No clear distinction was made between ‘observed or imagined reality’, in other words, travellers ‘drew not just on their actual observations, but on concepts, images, and quotations taken from fellow French or British writers, to describe and explain their experiences’ (De Groot 101). De Groot notes that, ‘[a] Frenchman like Lamartine could characterise the people he saw on his visit to the provinces of the Ottoman Empire as “nations without territory, patrie, rights, laws or security ... waiting anxiously for the shelter” of European occupation’ (98). Two of the writers mentioned in De Groot’s study, Lamartine and Hugo, authors of Voyage en Orient (1835) and Les Orientals (1829) respectively (De Groot 125), frequented the Countess of Merlin’s literary salon (Araújo 114). Consequently, Merlin was aware of the colonial discourse that was circulating during her lifetime and, although it portrays her place of birth unfavourably, she uses it extensively in her travelogue. According to Mills, colonial discourse should not be attributed to the individual author’s beliefs alone but to the larger belief system of imperialism (1997 106). Since the nineteenth century was the era of Europe’s high imperialism, Merlin participates in colonial discourse because it is the dominant discourse of both the salon and her social class.

Sara Mills argues that through the use of words such as ‘primitive’, ‘medieval’, and ‘backward’, colonial discourse places the colonised country in the distant past of Western progress (Mills 1997, 111). This situates the West as an ideal, a step further in a teleological conception of history. In this view, the act of describing people as ‘savages’, as sub-human, or as infants, is also part of a temporal differentiation which includes the use of negative terms, such as weak, idle, or dirty, to describe the native inhabitants of the non-Western world (Mills 1997, 114). Mills also notes that ‘value-laden statements about the inhabitants of colonised countries were presented as “facts” against which there was little possibility of argument’ and that the generalisations made about particular cultures ‘made them less communities of individuals than an indistinguishable mass, about whom one could amass “knowledge” or which could be stereotyped’ (1997 109).
In my analysis of *Viaje a La Habana*. I have found that the language of colonial discourse as described by Mills is a constant in Merlin’s descriptions of Cuba and its inhabitants. The strategies of colonial discourse which I have identified in Merlin’s text, distinctly place Cuba in a European past by ‘primitivising’ Cuba, ‘infantilising’ its inhabitants and ‘naturalising’ their alleged laziness. Merlin constantly compares Cuba to Europe, equating the former with primitiveness, inertia, neglect and laziness among other negative terms, and the latter with civilisation, energy, willpower, industriousness.

**Havana: City of the Middle Ages**

When Merlin arrives in Havana in 1840, she is surprised by ‘the strange appearance of this city of the Middle Ages, that has remained intact under the Tropics’ (13). The domestic life in this city ‘seems to renew the charm of the Golden Age’ (18). Cuba is, according to Merlin, trapped in a European past, both the Middle Ages and Spain’s Golden Age being European temporal terms. What follows then, in the logic of colonial discourse, is the need for Cuba to progress towards European civilisation. Throughout *Viaje a La Habana*, the reader is confronted with images of a primitive Cuba that needs Europe’s civilising mission.

Indeed, Merlin believes that it is Europe’s duty to civilise Cuba. In order for Europe to achieve this it must have knowledge about Cuba, knowledge which the countess wishes to provide in her travelogue. According to the Countess of Merlin, ‘...this country [is] hardly known in Europe, and that deserves more than just a token interest from statesmen and observers. We have here more natural wealth than wealth acquired by work and perseverance. Our fellow citizens lack stimuli and our monuments lack history’ (31). Since her fellow citizens lack the stimuli necessary to exploit such natural wealth, Merlin invites Europeans to come, observe and produce knowledge about the island in order to exploit those under-used resources. Mills notes that the process of describing a country, its landscape and its inhabitants, is not an innocent act of producing knowledge for its own sake but is inflected by the relations of power in the colonial context (1997 115). This knowledge which has been produced about America by the *conquistadores*, the chroniclers, the scientists and the travellers since the conquest, is also the type of knowledge that Merlin’s text generates for the purpose of ‘civilising’ Cuba.

Occasionally, Merlin assumes a masculine authoritative voice to portray the Cuban landscape and thus reproduces the voice of the conquistadors. For instance, she describes the island as ‘virginal’ and claims that it is covered in ‘virginal forests’ (3). She greatly admires the men who “discovered” Cuba and dedicates a two-page homage to Christopher Columbus in which she likens him to a god (58–59). Upon her arrival she exclaims, ‘... I think I see the shadows of those great warriors, of those men of willpower and energy, Columbus’ and Velazquez’ companions. I think I see them proud of their most beautiful discovery bending from gratitude to the ocean, and thanking it for such a magnificent gift’ (3). Those
European men are the opposite of the natives of Cuba; while they have willpower and energy to conquer, the natives lack the stimulus to work the land. With this comment, moreover, Merlin reduces the conquest to a mere gift from nature to Europe, a gift, she seems to say, that these ‘great warriors’ rightfully deserved as a reward for their willpower and energy.

Merlin also wishes to ‘discover’ this virginal land, to observe it, to describe it, and to make it known to Europeans. By constantly referring to the natural resources that are under-utilised and emphasising the island’s potential for colonial exploitation, she is extending this invitation like ‘a travel brochure to lure Europeans to invest and work in the island’ (Martin 43). Merlin’s invitation to capitalist exploitation of the island is justified through colonial discourse, which is signified principally by the laziness of the native inhabitants.

**Evil Under the Sun: The Tropics and Laziness**

In Merlin’s discourse all the inhabitants of Cuba are not equal and there are obvious distinctions between one class and another. The countess belongs to the top of the Cuban social hierarchy, which in the 1840s is the landowning aristocracy whose wealth is based on the sugar plantation and slavery. This social class is very proud of its lineage since it comes directly from Spain or from Spanish descent. This is the only section of the Cuban population to which Merlin grants the status of ‘civilised’ as indicated in her use of positive adjectives. She claims, for example, that the youth in her own family have ‘fine features, expressive gaze and noble manners’ and adds, ‘you could notice an air of refinement and delicacy in all of them’ (12).

In contrast, the rest of Cuban society is described in negative terms. This includes the middle class which is composed of the less wealthy Creoles and the merchants, followed by the lower classes which consist of mestizos, mulattos, freed slaves and slaves. The stereotypical descriptions of the inhabitants of Cuba that Merlin’s text reproduces replicate the schema of European colonial discourse. For the countess, Cuban people evoke the quintessential image of the ‘noble savage’. They are mostly good, warm, passionate, and innocent, but idle and neglectful. She is surprised, for example, at how naively they give her gold, as if it were a fruit (18). This lack of recognition of the value of gold further indicates to Merlin, the ‘primitiveness’ of their pre-capitalist society. This opposition, between the civilised Europeans and the primitive Cubans, is mentioned again in Letter VI, entitled *Los Guagiros*, which is devoted to the Cuban country folk. She writes:

> The people of the country, here named *guajiros* or *monteros*, have an eccentric nature that distinguishes them from those of other countries. They are fond of singing, pleasure and adventures, they divide their life between love and knightly prowess, and they could have figured in the court of Francis I as well as in these primitive cabins, if their indomitable passion for independence had not destined them first to the savage life
rather than to the yoke of civilisation. Their material life, simple and rustic, agrees with their poetic life, and this combination is exactly what gives their action a romantic and original mark. (34)

This letter reads more like a work of chivalric literature whose central character is a knight-errant searching for adventure, similar to the stories of Lancelot, Tristram or Amadis of Gaul, than an observation of country life. For example, Merlin’s claim that the guajiro loves his horse and his machete almost as much as his beloved (39) reminds the reader of a mounted knight with sword in hand courting a damsel. In fact, Merlin’s description is an adaptation of the work, El Guajiro, by the Cuban writer Cirilo Villaverde (Méndez 1990, 712) and it is clear that she did not observe the guajiro lifestyle herself. Moreover, her use of the words ‘primitive’, ‘rustic’ and ‘simple’, as well as the reference to Francis I, king of France during the early sixteenth century, again situate the country folk in a distant European past. The country folk of Cuba are for Merlin the other, that being a primitive and outgrown version of her European self. The same is true of the black slaves who appear infantile and, according to Merlin, are dependent on their masters, and hence on the very institution of slavery, for survival.

Although in Viaje a La Habana, Merlin does not write on the subject of slavery directly, she does describe the slaves on several occasions and, as with the guajiro, they are also stereotyped. Merlin constantly uses possessives and diminutives such as ‘mi negrito’ [my little black man] (55), and ‘mi negrilla’ [my little black woman] (27) to name the slaves. Her paternalistic attitude towards the slaves presents them as always happy; happy to serve and to be slaves. This is evident on her arrival when she is greeted by ‘semi-nude Negroes, that drive countless small boats, and scream, smoke, and show us their teeth as a sign of happiness to welcome us’ and later when the black men and the mulattos ‘sweat with the heat and yet they are all ready and serviceable’ (11). This is an ironic claim in view of the fact that the slaves run away and that they are hunted down by dogs especially bred for this job (24).

The portrayal of the slaves as ready and serviceable is incongruous with other depictions of them. For example, Merlin describes an aunt as a ‘sainted woman’ who never scolds her slaves, ‘instead she allows them to be lazy and neglectful; so that, except at mealtimes, you can find her Negro women lying on the floor all day singing, talking and combing each other’ (17). The slaves are infantilised in this description; just like children, they lie all day on the floor singing, talking and combing each other. Since they work very little, only at mealtimes, they are also represented as lazy and negligent. Merlin’s text is fractured by these discursive contradictions: the slaves are content to be slaves, but they run away; they are serviceable but are also lazy; the masters are benevolent but they hunt their run-away slaves as animals.

Even in the instances when the countess attempts a humane and compassionate representation of the slaves, she inadvertently achieves the contrary effect. When
Merlin plays the piano all the black women in the house become her audience, an audience she appreciates: '[y]ou will say that it is the most stupid audience in the world; but nevertheless I am honoured, and their gestures and pure demonstrations are like no other. The Negroes love music with a passion, and they have songs which they sing with an interesting simplicity' (28). She tries to describe them in a favourable way; they, like the countess, love music but since they are stupid they can only love it by instinct not through a real understanding of music. The guajiros' music culture is similarly described: their dance is 'simple' yet 'passionate', as are their lives, and their music 'lacks major and minor chords' (39). Although the countess can appreciate the primitive efforts at making music of both the slaves and the guajiro, to her their music lacks the sophistication of European music.

In addition to the guajiro and the slaves, the merchant middle class, which consisted of Spaniards that migrated to Cuba, is also portrayed negatively. Merlin notes that although the merchants 'arrive without patrimony to the island, they end up making great fortunes; they begin to prosper by their industriousness and saving, and end up taking possession of the most beautiful inherited patrimonies, because of the high interest they charge to lend their money' (30). Since this class appropriates the wealth of the aristocracy and is thus a threat to it, Merlin declares it immoral: 'I cannot believe that good can come of immorality' (31). The disjunctiveness of Merlin's discourse is evident here for, having described the industriousness of the merchant class, she then goes on to claim they are immoral and lazy. On business transactions in Havana, for example, she states, '[t]o avoid an extra step, an extra word, an extra signature, there is always an excuse, there is always a pretext, there is always a tomorrow. The sun, an implacable sun, is perpetually getting between you and your agents, between your agents and your business' (19). The inhabitants' laziness is ascribed to the effects of the 'implacable sun'. They are lazy and immoral and yet they are unable to control their own actions since it is nature that renders them immobile and incapable.

Nature plays an important role in Merlin's discourse, not the nature she observed, but the idea of America's primal nature. Although it was circulating during the countess's lifetime through the writings of travellers, writers and scientists such as Humboldt (Pratt 120–29), this idea originated earlier, during the second half of the eighteenth century. In what is called the 'dispute of the New World', European scientists such as Buffon, De Pauw and Robertson argued that the new world was a humid, degenerating environment not only geologically but botanically and humanly (Pagden 76–81). These scientists claimed that 'the Americas were, by their very nature, incapable of producing anything of lasting cultural value, that any New World culture whether autochthonous or transplanted must be inferior to the cultures of the Old World' (Pagden 76). Through this scientific discourse Europe confirmed that the inhabitants of America were degenerate by nature. Using the same apparatus, Merlin naturalises the laziness
of the Cuban inhabitants, though with the notable exception of her own class. She presents a picture of idleness and inertia when she describes the *habanero*, or inhabitant, of Havana whose ‘passionate soul’ only thinks of the present, and never of the future.

[Laziness and negligence weaken his will. Just as the blood concentrated by the heat of the atmosphere flees from the surface of his skin, and takes refuge in the depth of his veins giving him that innate and characteristic paleness of the inhabitants of the Tropics, so his will, weakened by neglect and his indifference, does not awaken again in him except by the force of great passions or great needs. (34)

The negative language is persistent: laziness, negligence, weak will power, and indifference. This is a language which describes the *innate* characteristics of the *habanero*. The heat of the atmosphere, the surface of his skin, the depth of his veins: his primitivism and his laziness reside in his body and are derived from nature and that is why, according to Merlin, he needs Europe to further his progress toward civilisation.

Merlin describes Cuba as a ‘marvellous land’ where anything can happen (33) and the Cuban landscape as ‘an enchanted world’ (21) where one raindrop can almost fill a glass (47), and where trees are so full of fruit they bend with their weight (69). Although Merlin frequently praises Cuba’s exuberant nature, the island remains at a disadvantage: it is an exotic paradise incapable of producing art, history or anything that represents civilisation:

Cuba lacks the poetry of memories; its echoes only repeat the poetry of hope. Its buildings have no history. The inhabitant of Havana lives in the present and in future time: his imagination and his soul only move before the wonderful nature that surrounds him: his palaces are the gigantic clouds that kiss the sun at dusk; his *arc de triomphe* is the sky: instead of obelisks he has palm trees; instead of feudal escutcheons he has the shining feather of the macaw, and instead of paintings by Murillo and Rafael he has the dark eyes of his women.... (56)

Merlin juxtaposes the wonders of European civilisation — the palaces, the *Arc de Triomphe*, the obelisks, the artists — to Cuban nature. These monuments are the symbols of civilisation, which Cuba lacks. For Merlin, ‘Cuba has no history’ (31), nor does it have any art as she demonstrates in her description of the cathedral of Havana: ‘its semi-Spanish and semi-classical architecture has no style and no antiquity. It is a mixed type composed of the Arab, the Gothic and even the primitive Mexican, that like all the works of art in infant peoples is an imitation of nature’ (55). Because Cuba is only a child, it cannot produce any sophisticated art, or music for that matter; it can only imitate the mature art of Europe, the parent. It’s imitation is so artless that it ‘vividly wounds the imagination’ (56) of a European woman such as Merlin, who is so accustomed to the refinement of civilisation.

In sum, the Countess of Merlin views Cuba, its inhabitants and its culture as primitive. To her, this characteristic is innate and it is explained by primal nature.
Apart from idleness and negligence, nature also produces passion and sensuality (70), morbidness and voluptuousness in the Cubans (107). Merlin's use of words such as morbid, negligent, simple, sensual, lazy, immoral, ardent, primitive, rustic and weak contrasts with her depiction of energetic and civilised Europe. This opposition between the geographical/cultural space of Europe and Cuba is comparable to the opposition between mind and matter:

Human beings (especially men) appropriated nature in this period [the nineteenth century], and the appropriation was a consequence of the hypothesis of a dualism of mind and matter. In this dualism, however, rationality became a supreme value and a value associated exclusively with men. Women by contrast were consigned to the matter part of the dichotomy, along with beasts of nature, and members of the working classes and other races. (Mendus and Rendall 8)

Europe is rationality: Europe is civilisation; it has history and art, and it is male. Cuba, on the other hand, is sensual, passionate, and idle; it has primal nature and no history or art. Cuba is the female receptor of the civilisation that masculine Europe wants to bring to it. Cuba, like the rest of America, is also the gift that nature has given Europe.

**CONCLUSION**

Merlin inhabits a paradoxical position between her colonial discourse and her desire to recover, in the two short months of her visit to Cuba and through her text, the lost patria that she recognises as her own. The opposition between Europe and Cuba that she so carefully presents — civilisation and savagery, mind and matter, male and female — situates her patria, as well as her gender, in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the masculine imperial power of her era. Although I agree with some scholars that the Countess of Merlin challenged masculine codes of behaviour in as much as the acts of writing and travelling were a subversion of the limited roles allowed women, it is also evident that Merlin followed the conventions of the colonial discourse of her time. She was in an anomalous position — that of a female conquistador, a civilised savage or a colonising colonial subject. These oxymorons reveal the conjunctions and disjunctions of the hybrid space, which she inhabited.

At this point, I would return to the quotation that opens this essay: 'Follow me, dear viscountess...behold the spectacle...of primitive society' (59). Merlin's audience is a viscountess, a Parisian woman, elegant, graceful and, of course, civilised. Merlin also has a noble title, thus, being a countess herself she identifies with this woman. She also shares the characteristics of elegance and gracefulness. The Countess of Merlin wants the viscountess, to whom she addresses her letter, and the rest of her European audience, to identify her as also civilised. Yet Merlin also acknowledges and asks for recognition of her 'primitive' place of birth by the very act of writing about it. She is herself from this 'unknown' and 'remarkable' place whose customs have never been described or observed — that is, observed
by Europeans. If the Countess of Merlin is European because of her title and her place of residence, she is also Cuban by birth and, it would seem, by inclination. The spectacle that Merlin exhibits through her text is not just the ‘primitive society’ to which she belongs, for the spectacle that Merlin displays is her own ambiguous place in literary history. She is both spectator and spectacle. Though she may have had some success during her lifetime because of her class and her literary salon, neither Cuba nor France would claim her as their literary daughter. Consequently Merlin has been consigned to oblivion — a literary exile — from which this essay attempts to retrieve her.

NOTES
1 All references are from Viaje a La Habana and translations from the Spanish original are my own.
2 See Adriana Méndez Rodenas 1986, 96.
3 See Adriana Méndez Rodenas 1986, 96.
4 See Adriana Méndez Rodenas 1998, pp. 292–99, for a detailed bibliography of Merlin’s works and of past and current studies on her life and works.
5 Merlin’s writings include: Mes Premières Douze Années (1831), Histoire de la soeur Inés (1832), Souvenirs et Mémoires de Madame la Comtesse de Merlin: Souvenirs d’une Créole (1836), Les Loisirs d’une Femme du Monde (1838), Mémoires de Madame Malibran (1840), La Havane and the Spanish edition Viaje a La Habana (1844), Lola et María (1845), Les Lionnes de Paris (1845), and the posthumous Le Duc d’Athènes (1852).
6 Sylvia Molloy notes that the countess was a reader and admirer of Rousseau, p. 87.
7 The Countess of Merlin studied music when she arrived in Europe as a youth. She wrote musical compositions as well as sung in operas. See Méndez 1998, p. 23.

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Chris MacMahon

TEA AT HLAMBEZA POOL

The pool is as you’d imagine it to be: brown and narrow, mirroring cycads and ferns, the crags of a deep ravine. Spined succulents thicket the banks, the pleated rocks and surface shales.

We are much as you would picture us, sprawled on rugs with thermos flasks, discussing new software and hardware, exchanging stories of burn-out, stress, armed robbery and patients with AIDS.

‘A green cathedral,’ chirps someone, smacking at horseflies and miggies. The children pick through the rushes and clambering onto adult shoulders leap out with shrieks into the pool.

‘What’s this?’ Bobbing along an edge, roofed in by naves of ferns and reeds, three fist-sized crumplings of paper, pumpkin seeds in the boat of the one, white beads and tobacco in the others.

‘Offerings,’ says a friend, ‘you know, like Greeks and Romans used to make. Not to gods, to the people of the river, the ancestors which Xhosa locals claim are intercessors, their links with God.’

‘Perhaps we shouldn’t have swum here.’ The words reverberate across a silence. I feel the cycad fronding of the unknown breaking out around and inside us again, then glimpse deep in a pool of memory the faces of the living-dead, the shades.
THE MIGRANT SHUTTLE

Year end. a Durban evening without rain.
Beneath a gloom of orange street-lights
a taxi-rank with people waiting in groups,
the aroma of spilt beer and car-exhausts,
cigarettes, urine and meat roasting on fires,
the *doemp-doemp-doemp* of rap from a car.

You board an old bus, its migrant shuttle.
*Trust Nobody* says the sign in the back.
You leave behind in the bins and gutters
a Christmas decor of peeled egg-shells,
chicken-bones, mango and orange skins
and crushed-in cartons of pineapple beer.

MaZama, a cleaner at Shoprite Checkers,
dozing off, breastfeeds her child to sleep.
She has her wages cached in her bodice
and warm nuggets of vetkoek in her bag.
Bheki Khumalo, who married her cousin,
lifts a brown paper packet to his mouth.

The bus passes factories, billboards, tolls,
grinding on beneath the stars of the hunter
through cane-fields towards an umbilicus,
a cluster of earth-walled shacks on a hill.
You check the sweets and radio in a bag
and yearn to touch the body of your wife.

The road’s a circuit, a two-way pilgrimage.
At one end’s a family hungry in the fields,
the scent of a herb burnt for the ancestors,
the molten sugar-cane smell from the mill.
The other’s a dream of groceries, a car,
money in the bank and a home with taps.
WORDING THE GAP

A landscape of aloes and thorns,
the post office's hot iron stoep.

Two fellow teachers from the school,
having sat beside you on the bench.

are reading a gloss-faced postcard
sent by a friend studying abroad.

First they in an English collage
then you in minimalist Xhosa

struggle to express a response
to water lilies, a bridge, a stream.

A pause, a silence like a kloof
suddenly chasms apart our talk.

I sense the borders of wordscapes,
a still unpainted, unsayable land.

Words — how they undo and make us,
as much the frontier as the pioneer.
UNVEILING A SHADE

The scene registers: a hilltop plot of grass, cleared and fenced, choirboys in cassocks, a priest with glasses, then Thisha Ngcobo standing at a tombstone veiled with a sheet.

That much the painting before me evokes. A stippling of ink's the flint in the grave. Pale floatings of colour, textures of light turn into fawn grass, a blue KwaZulu sky.

It looks so real. Thorn-trees and rondavels, the tense, sombre look on the teacher's face cross over a then to now, a there to a here, with traces of clouds and barbs on the wires.

The art is in the omissions. The goats I saw straying into a neighbour's maize are gone. So have the friends that crowded the fence, a bus with balloons, thumping to a wedding.

Under the level flint, the coffined residue of Ngcobo's father lies. The grieving over, the money saved up to purchase the tomb, he's being returned, back home as a shade.

Dogs barking nearby, the ads from radios, the prayers and hymns have leached away. He like the painting has now turned into a clustering of hints, a presence of clues.
Until the controversy surrounding his identity became widespread in 1996, the most durable dimension of Mudrooroo’s public self was that of the Aboriginal author, academic and critic whose work represented a site of revelation of colonial duplicity. Acknowledged for over two decades as the arbitrator in matters of authentic Aboriginal writing, his was the voice of Indigenous Australia, both at home and abroad. Increasingly, however, there has been a shift in that perception. In recent times, the thrust of Mudrooroo’s project has become less clear. A more sinister version of his story has emerged, one which portrays him as having knowingly constructed a false Indigenous heritage. It has become possible to regard Mudrooroo’s work as the creation of a clever literary trickster who has written himself into a narrative of Aboriginal belonging that is as much a fabrication as the characters who inhabit the pages of his books. For it is now apparent that Mudrooroo does not belong to the Kickett family of Western Australia who are descended from the ancient Bibbulmun tribe, as he claimed. Rather, he is a non-Aboriginal man of mixed heritage whose ancestors are the Barrons, one of the first white families to arrive on the shores of Western Australia, in 1829.

Debates over the issues of authenticity and belonging are connected to a long history of discriminatory practices in Australia that persist in our time. Writing in a different but related context, Sneja Gunew suggests that the discourses circulating associated with predicaments such as Mudrooroo’s represent examples of ‘how a cluster of questions concerning authority linked with authenticity resonate within today’s cultural politics: who has the right to speak, on behalf of whom’ (Gunew 1993, 7). Mudrooroo’s dilemma is inextricably linked to his claim to authentic Indigenous ancestry, a subject position that has authorised him to speak for and on behalf of Australia’s Aboriginal community. It is undeniable that Mudrooroo belongs to a discriminated-against minority in this country. His background as an institutionalised black man has clearly informed his works of fiction. However,
prior to the questioning of his Indigenous belonging, Mudrooroo was particularly
dogmatic and exclusive in his views on who should or should not inhabit Aboriginal
cultural space. This has meant that critics, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal,
are especially unforgiving for what they regard as a form of cross-cultural betrayal,
one that fosters disunity and has ominous echoes of not only the native informant/
collaborator but also of colonialism's restrictive, controlling practices.

The controversy surrounding Mudrooroo's alleged duplicity has emerged
within the larger, unsettling experience of a growing number of Australian writers
and artists whose claims to Aboriginal authenticity have been either questioned
or found fraudulent. Among them is author Banumbir Wongar, known overseas
as an Arnhem Land Aboriginal writer but who proved to be Streten Bozic, a Serbian
immigrant to Australia. There is also the instance of the young, female Indigenous
novelist Wanda Koolmatrie who was unveiled as Leon Carmen, a middle-aged
white male. Yet another is male Aboriginal artist, Eddie Burrup who was the
imaginary creation, the brain-child if you will, of white female artist, the late
Elizabeth Durack. However, Mudrooroo's case should not be confused by this
widely published series of non-Aboriginal impostures. Nor does it fit neatly within
the context of the latest charges brought, in particular, by activist Robert Eggington
on behalf of the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation.

The 1973 Federal Government regulation governing the definition of
Aboriginality requires that the following conditions be met: one must: be of
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; one must identify as being of
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; and one must be identified by the
community as being a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.
Dumbartung's most recent challenges have been directed towards, among others,
academic and writer, Dr. Roberta Sykes, as well as novelists Sally Morgan and
Archie Weller, on the grounds that they do not meet the prerequisites of Australian
Aboriginality, in all its diversity, either by genetic descent or way of life. These
challenges are yet to be resolved.

Unlike these challenges, speculation regarding Mudrooroo's heritage is not a
recent phenomenon. As early as 1955, when as a youth he left the institution
known as Clontarf Boys' Town, his dark appearance set him apart from white
Australian culture. The authorities of the day considered whether he might be of
Indian, Negro or part-Aboriginal descent, but were unable to resolve this issue.
Since then he has undergone a number of transformations, identifying variously
as Colin Johnson, bohemian beatnik, and as the Reverend S.A. Jivaka, Buddhist
monk. He has also adopted several Aboriginal names which, arguably, have given
an aura of authenticity to his work. From Colin Johnson he moved to Mudrooroo
Narogin, then to Mudrooroo Nyoongah to arrive finally at Mudrooroo. And now,
on their own initiatives, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike are engaging in
an unprecedented level of debate over who 'this' Mudrooroo really is.
The Western Australian journalist, Victoria Laurie, brought the controversy surrounding Mudrooroo's identity out of the shadows in 1996 in her now infamous article, 'Identity Crisis'. Contrary to the widely held view that the public airing of Mudrooroo's dilemma was a direct result of non-Aboriginal intervention, it was a member of the Aboriginal community who first aroused Laurie's curiosity about the research being undertaken into the Johnson family's ancestry. It was only following this initial approach that the journalist moved to contact the researcher herself, Mudrooroo's older sister, Betty Polglaze. In 1992, the fruits of Polglaze's research up until that time culminated in her reunion with a 'lost' younger brother she had neither heard of nor seen for over forty years. And it was then, having been presented by his sister with a copy of a biological family tree going back five generations to the year 1829, Mudrooroo stated publicly that 'crucial aspects of his identity [were] hazy' and that he was 'not clear concerning his tribal connections' (Moran 9).

In the course of her investigations, Polglaze discovered that their white mother, Elizabeth Johnson (née Barron) was directly descended from early Irish settlers who arrived on the shores of Western Australia aboard the vessel, *Sulphur*, in 1829. Elizabeth died in Fremantle Hospital on September 15, 1989. She was 91 years of age. Their father, Thomas Creighton Patrick Johnson, on the other hand, was born in Sydney in 1874 to an Irish immigrant mother and an immigrant father of Black American descent. Thomas died in Narrogin on June 7, 1938, just two months and fourteen days before his son Colin was born.

It was apparent that Mudrooroo's claim to Aboriginal genealogy and a connection with the Kickett family was without substance. This fact was disclosed in a series of newspaper articles (including that of Victoria Laurie to which I refer earlier) published during 1996 and 1998. Although apparently unable to invalidate his sister's findings, Mudrooroo refused to accept that his mother was white and not, as he had claimed, an Aboriginal woman.

In view of this, following Aboriginal protocol, the Kickett family invited Mudrooroo to come forward to substantiate his claim to belonging to the Nyoongah people through a matrilineal link. This gracious and well meant invitation was neither acknowledged nor accepted. Therefore, following the dictates of Aboriginal tribal law, representative elders made the following public statement on July 27, 1996:

> the Kickett family rejects Colin Johnson's claim to his Aboriginality and any kinship ties to the families throughout the Narrogin and Cuballing region.

(Martin and Anthony 15)

In light of this, it is significant that Mudrooroo's friend and colleague, Gerhard Fischer subsequently observed that:
given the fact that Mudrooroo has not challenged his sister’s findings in order to ‘set the record straight’, as he has been asked to do, it seems safe to assume that the basic facts of the family history of Mudrooroo as documented by his sister are correct. (96)

As noted, Mudrooroo’s father died shortly before his son was born, in August 1938. As had been the case for his brothers and sisters before him, Mudrooroo’s mother, who had once more fallen on hard times, delivered him at the age of nine into the care of welfare authorities. It was equally clear that, whilst Mudrooroo’s background was one of institutionalisation, he was not a child of the ‘stolen generation’ as he had always maintained. Nevertheless, Fischer cites the author as saying in a 1990 interview with Liz Thompson:

I’ve always been aware of my black heritage. This awareness came from my mother: the Bibbulmun people are matrilineal so the female line is very very important to us. It was from my mother that I got most of my culture and also most of my complexes — one of the latter was not being white.... If you’re an Aboriginal then you’re discriminated against since the time you were born. This discrimination becomes part of the psyche ... Because of the policies at the time, you lived in terror of being taken away from your parents. This is exactly what happened to my brothers and sisters and eventually what happened to me. It’s what we call the ‘stolen generation’.

(Fischer 96)

As Fischer notes, despite the lack of a genealogical link, this statement clearly shows that there was no ambiguity in Mudrooroo’s claim concerning Aboriginal ancestry through descent on his mother’s side.

Mudrooroo’s misplaced identification with an Aboriginal mother and a stolen generation is difficult for anyone to understand, particularly so for those who have lived through such a traumatic experience. The politically loaded words ‘stolen generation’ are used to describe part of a long term, systematic government plan to assimilate Australia’s Indigenous people into the dominant white community. Part of that plan involved the forced removal of Indigenous infants and children from their homes and families and their subsequent incarceration in various welfare institutions in an attempt to ‘rid’ them of their Aboriginality — their language and culture. The words ‘stolen generation’ themselves are terrible and false when one stops to consider how many generations have had to survive the broad reach of their meaning. However, as Fischer speculates, it may have appeared a more psychologically tolerable option for Mudrooroo to claim he had been ‘stolen’ by government authorities than to outwardly acknowledge that, as a child, his white mother had given him away. Fischer sees Mudrooroo’s fabrication of a stolen generation past as a ‘defensive psychological strategy [which would] exonerate the memory of the mother and offer some kind of protection against the trauma of a childhood experience that would otherwise be very hard to bear’ (Fischer 102). Sensitive though Fischer may be to his friend’s plight, this is largely a matter of conjecture and Mudrooroo’s childhood relationship with his mother remains unexplained and unresolved. That being said, it is difficult not to agree
with Fischer that an ongoing resentment towards his mother for abandoning him to the care of the Christian Brothers of Clontarf Boys’ Town may account for Mudrooroo’s negative attitude towards females in his fiction, literary criticism and cultural projects.

Unlike Mudrooroo’s fiction, *Us Mob* (1995) is a socially and culturally specific project in which the author claims to voice the demands and views of Indigenous Australians. Referring to Vivienne Rae-Ellis’s book, *Black Robinson*, Mudrooroo observes that ‘there is a danger in using the [official] records of the past in that they may be complete fabrications, something which does not come to light without an extensive investigation and documentary analysis’ (1995a 186). *Black Robinson* was first published in 1988 and is a controversial exposé of the crimes of George Augustus Robinson who held the post of Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people between the years 1829 to 1839.12 Rae-Ellis unmasks Robinson as a cunning and deceitful betrayer of the people whom he was charged to protect. Drawing on the authority of Rae-Ellis’s work, Mudrooroo states his opinion that the Indigenous people of Tasmania owe their survival to the nineteenth-century white seal hunters of Bass Strait. The author describes the sealers as ‘the outcasts of colonial society, who enabled the Indigenous people to survive’ and sees them as being wrongly criticised by some historians today (Mudrooroo 1995a, 187). Depicting the sealers’ status as heroic, Mudrooroo excludes from his account the horrific plight of the Aboriginal women whom they not only raped and prostituted but also used for slave labour. Rae-Ellis observes that, during Robinson’s Protectorate in 1835 the going price among the sealers for the acquisition of an Aboriginal woman was seven pounds fifteen shillings a head. As she writes:

> each of the twenty-six sealers lived with two or three or more Aboriginal women, mostly from Van Diemen’s Land and some had children by them. a number of whom were killed by their mothers. (Rae-Ellis 71)

It is only following this alarming disclosure that Rae-Ellis goes on to say that the descendants of the surviving children of these unions became known as straightsmen or islanders and are now recognised officially as Tasmanian Aborigines.

Tendencies towards, at best, overlooking and, at worst, being dismissive of Aboriginal women’s past suffering and their struggle to come to terms with what this means in the present are also evident in Mudrooroo’s criticism of Sally Morgan. Morgan, who discovered her Aboriginality as an adult, has seen both her work and identity bear the brunt of Mudrooroo’s harsh scrutiny and judgement. Writing in 1990, Mudrooroo described Morgan’s first novel, *My Place*, in denigrating terms as ‘a milepost in Aboriginal Literature in that it marks a stage when it is considered OK to be Aboriginal as long as you are young, gifted and not very black’ (1990 149). Ironically, this patronising representation echoes the late Dame Mary Durack’s racially biased description of Mudrooroo in the foreword to his own first novel. In that foreword, Durack describes the budding author as a youth
who 'was a natural intellectual', who had 'an above average I.Q.', and who 'showed little obvious trace of native blood' (Mudrooroo 1995b, xvi, xvii).  

Whilst Mudrooroo later modified his criticism of Morgan, he continued to be dismissive of her work's relevance in the struggle to establish a place for Indigenous literature in Australia. In Mudrooroo's view, Morgan was less concerned with issues of political import to the Aboriginal community, than with her personal search for identity. He categorised her novel as a form of 'woman's work' interested more in her own life story than 'with the future aims and aspirations of the Indigenous people' as a whole (Mudrooroo 1997b, 16). For Mudrooroo, Morgan's work was a non-activist, apolitical form of literature bound up with a more general will to separate Australian culture from its British colonial heritage and dependency, rather than a site of Indigenous contestation. In his stated opinion, _My Place_ was a settler, or

> Australian text, romance, autobiography, or what you will. What Indigenality is in the text has come from a white readership who at last found an Indigenous text which did not shout at them and in fact mirrored their concerns as to their place in Australia.  
> (Mudrooroo 1997b, 195)

Although he was not the only critic to find fault with Morgan, Mudrooroo's attack was particularly severe, denouncing her as an 'outsider' and an 'inauthentic' Indigenous writer in a way that denied the diversity and ever-changing nature of Aboriginal belonging. Some time later, Mudrooroo condescendingly stated that he considered Morgan's book to be a 'well-written and edited' life-story (Mudrooroo 1997b, 194). Nevertheless, he simultaneously reaffirmed his view that she was 'not an Indigenous person writing about her community from a position of knowledge, but an outsider discovering that culture and an identity' (Mudrooroo 1997a, 195).  

This form of criticism fractured and diluted the identity of an Aboriginal literary movement whose legitimation, development and best interests Mudrooroo claimed to support. In attacking Morgan in this way, Mudrooroo engaged in a politics of contestation and difference that contradicted the lessons of his own literary project in its refusal to accept the colonising view of 'authentic' Aboriginal culture as something static, traditional and incapable of positive response to social change. Coupled with the large measure of authority he then held in relation to Indigenous literature, Mudrooroo's criticism of Morgan spoke of cultural determinism and the coloniser's wont to treat Aboriginal people as outsiders who did not belong in their own country. Conversely, when he referred to the merits of his own writing, Mudrooroo asserted that, unlike Morgan, most of his work was produced from the inside looking out, rather than from the outside looking in. This being so, he suggested that he therefore had no need to establish his Aboriginality through genealogy or any other means (O'Connor 24). Put another way, without stating precisely what he meant by 'Aboriginal writing', Mudrooroo claimed that his
work alone was sufficiently Aboriginal to prove the authenticity of his Indigenous belonging. This self-centred image of the meaning of Aboriginality drew specifically on Mudrooroo’s professional standing and sought to preserve his own privileged position as the voice of Aboriginal Australian literature. It was an assertion that both denied the validity of diverse textual representations of Aboriginal life and culture, and took no account of whether Mudrooroo himself held validated authorisation to speak on behalf of the people he claimed to represent. Arrogant and lacking in substance, it is not unreasonable to suggest that his attack on Morgan compounded, if not led to, the challenge to Mudrooroo’s claim to Aboriginal heritage.

As mentioned earlier, Mudrooroo’s sister traced the Johnson family back to the year 1829 through five generations on her mother’s side to show that the Johnson children are directly descended from the first white child born on the shores of the Swan River colony of Western Australia. In Polglaze’s view, Mudrooroo’s refusal to accept the legitimacy of her findings is a rejection not only of the memory of his mother, but also of the truth of his family history and background. Ironically, Mudrooroo’s rejection of his biological family has uncovered an area where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike share substantive agreement on fundamental human values. By distancing himself from the newfound relationship with his ‘natural’ brothers and sisters, Mudrooroo has also distanced himself from the Aboriginal community for, as Fischer observes:

[i]The tracing of their family histories is of particular importance today to the many Aborigines who were taken away as children and who are searching to re-establish lost family and community links. The writer’s reluctance to recognise his own ‘natural family’ is thus met with little sympathy and understanding by many Aborigines. (97)

Mudrooroo has since admitted that some self-examination was necessary for him ‘when in 1996, it was declared that he was of Negro ancestry, thus negating thirty years of being an Aborigine’ (1997a 263). What transpired was the proposition that, according to his way of seeing, identity was self-made and performative rather than bound to a sense of belonging. As he writes:

all in all, the crossblood exists at the edges of identity and his identity is always open to doubt. He is the existentialist par excellence, resting his authenticity on doing rather than being.

[...] Australia was multicultural and the world was postmodern. A fixed identity really did not exist for writers such as myself who, every day, were creating identities in language. (1997a 263)

The author goes on to say that he felt he had done his part and was no longer deeply implicated in the Aboriginal cause. Now that ‘native title [had] been established in law, there was really nothing left to fight for, especially when he [did] not intend to pursue an Aboriginal identity merely for the sake of claiming a piece of land’ (Mudrooroo 1997a, 264). This statement speaks self-consciously
of the collapse of the will to further develop a relationship with a community in which the author no longer had a legitimate voice. It also suggests a fickle disregard for the land which, previously, he had defined as fundamental to Aboriginal life, its ‘patterns of survival and, above all, its identity’ (Mudrooroo 1995a, 209). The author’s evaluation of his position became a work of retrieval, one that led to the decision to take up a new form of cultural identity. Mudrooroo now regarded himself as ‘having become a new person, belonging to a new group which came into genetic being with the arrival of the first Europeans and the coming to birth of their offspring’ (1997a 264).

Mudrooroo’s notion that the self can be reborn with the practised ease of a magician’s sleight of hand is illusionary and full of tension. This is a quasi-existentialist view of life that belongs in the performative realm of ambiguity and uncertain identification, the imaginary domain of the trickster. Identities do change, but they do so grounded in the memory and understanding of the perception of the self that has gone before. As Mudrooroo himself asserts, ‘the past is there to be used — built upon’ (1997b 23). The author’s resort to a discourse of mutability, or to a notion of postmodern instability, potentially negates everything that supposedly gave meaning to his life as it had been prior to the questioning of his Aboriginality. It also implies that a person’s identity is a form of self-ownership that can be changed at will; that it can travel unrecognised from one social identity to another without reference either to personal history or to the communal nature of the self.

Eminent Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has suggested that human life is fundamentally dialogical in character. Any attempt at self-examination must also be dialogic and involve discursive interchange with others. In Taylor’s view, modes of identity formation that opt for self-fulfilment without regard to the demands of one’s ties with others is antithetical to any strong commitment to community. Moreover, he observes that once those ‘that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of being, they are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our [life] projects’ (Taylor 5). This begs the question of whether or not Mudrooroo’s choice to identify as an Aboriginal ever meant more to him than a way of gaining access to a site from which to excavate valuable textual material for his works of fiction. Or whether this most recent re-packaging of his identity is an inevitable and convenient way for him to ‘save face’ in the context of a radical re-positioning which, conceivably, is unwanted from his perspective.

Mudrooroo has pointed to the late Dame Mary Durack’s 1965 foreword to his first novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, as the racist source of what he calls his textualisation as a crossblood Aboriginal. Given his most recent comments in this respect, it is conceivable that the construction of the narrative of the author’s Aboriginal belonging may have had its beginnings as early as the 1960s. He writes:
Having been textualised by a white person, having been officially designated the native, in other words, I had to go along with that, though in a different climate I might have claimed my Irish ancestry and, by doing so, Irish culture [...] But racism intruded in denying me this identity. It was denied to me by members of the dominant culture, such as Mary Durack. (Mudrooroo 1997a, 263)

By his own admission, however, Mudrooroo engaged ‘in a politics of the body’ (1997a 259) when negotiating his Aboriginal identity in dialogue with Durack. This may be explained as the inevitable outcome of dominant and dominated positions within a crude, dichotomous racist structure in which, ultimately, those who are neither black nor white must choose between two sides. The paradox of such a ‘choice’ is that those who are recognised as neither the one nor the other have no alternative but to elect which side of the racial divide they will stand. Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. To borrow Adorno’s words, ‘in [such] a state of unfreedom, no-one, of course, has a liberated consciousness’ (1973 95). And, of course, Mudrooroo’s particular ‘state of unfreedom’ required his entry into a discourse that recognised him only in terms of its own notion of what it meant to be an Aboriginal Australian, one based on the colour of his skin.

Is it plausible, however, that some inverse racist judgement on his own account was necessary to enable Mudrooroo to set about building the framework for the achievement of his goal to become an Aboriginal author of fiction, rather than an Irish author of fiction? If we are to believe him, Mudrooroo’s adoption of the dominant rules of recognition excluded any personal evaluation or judgement of Durack’s assessment of who or what he was. But if this were so, it must follow that the author was prepared to accept Durack’s pre-judged image of him as an Aboriginal and, at least to some extent, to reproduce the colonial values and ideology in which both were ensnared. There could have been little gain to be had from being identified as an Aboriginal in 1965, a time when Indigenous Australians were not even recognised as citizens under the law. But, unlike today, it was also a time when calling yourself an Aboriginal meant you would be accepted as one. The displaced nature of Mudrooroo’s hybrid self meant that he belonged ‘nowhere’, his values and priorities informed by a sense of total exclusion. An assumed Aboriginal ‘authenticity’ would not only provide him with a platform from which to express a particular literary mode of protestation, potentially it would also release him from the homelessness of the in-between social space he then occupied. It is not unreasonable to suggest that, during this complex dialogic process, willingly or not, Mudrooroo determined to become not just another mixed heritage writer, but the first Australian Aboriginal novelist.

Mudrooroo was never alone in the formulation of his Aboriginal identity, and, given the cultural politics of the day, Mary Durack had no reason to inquire about the truth of his claim to Aboriginal belonging. The background details for the foreword to his first novel defined the budding author in a way that determined his forebears as members of the Bibbulmun tribe ‘which, in 1829, had welcomed...
the first white settlers as the spirits of their dead returned’ (Mudrooroo 1995b, xiii). The foreword is saturated with the unquestioned racial prejudices of Durack’s time. Nevertheless, it has been retained, in full, in succeeding reprints of Wild Cat Falling. This has meant that the ‘original’ version of Mudrooroo’s story has survived. Mudrooroo himself holds the copyright to his novel and with every reprint of the novel — and there have been fifteen of these over the years — the author has, in effect, consistently reasserted and reiterated his claim to ancestral tribal connections. And, whilst the 1992, 1993, 1994 (twice) and 1995 reprints are prefaced with an introduction by Stephen Muecke, Durack’s foreword has also remained.

There is a further connection that might shed some light on the complexities of Mudrooroo’s racialised Aboriginal identity, one which may be found in his preoccupation with the historical figure of George Augustus Robinson. Whilst not obvious at first glance, Mudrooroo’s fascination with Robinson and his treacherous practices has been career-long. The author’s particular interest in the life of ‘the first’ white man to be appointed to the position of Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people began with Wild Cat Falling. As I have written elsewhere,15 the name Robinson appears originally in the author’s first novel as that of a character who is portrayed as the unnamed protagonist’s probation officer. Finding himself in court on a charge of car stealing, the unnamed hero says, ‘that fat old square Robinson’s turned up again. Thought he’d be content with the statement, but no, here he is in court. Dear old guardian angel probation officer’ (Wild Cat Falling 99).


In Doctor Wooreddy, for example, Mudrooroo makes a complete parody of the ‘real’ George Augustus Robinson’s widely accepted ‘official’ accounts of the ‘civilising’ mission of the Indigenous people of Tasmania. The spectre of history’s Robinson then ‘reappears’ in each of the four volumes of the Master of the Ghost Dreaming series. In the first of these, Robinson is re-born as Fada, a Christian Missionary who has started his life as a bricklayer, but was ‘well on the way to achieving his ambition to become a member of the [Royal Anthropological Society]’ (Mudrooroo 1991, 18). In the second, characters are named after him. As one comments:
Well, my name is George. I was named after a mad king and my elder brother, Augustus, was named after an insane emperor and also after the ghost Fada who ruled over us on that island, ever imprisoning us in the words he drew on paper.

(Mudrooroo 1998, 4)

The third book of the series, *Underground*, sees Robinson return once more as the treacherous ‘Fada’. Spoken of in past tense, one character describes him in duplicitous terms as:

the bloke who one day arrived on our southern island with a mission to save us from devils such as himself. He saved us all right. He got us together in a God-forsaken bit of rock where we quickly began to pine away. We blamed it on evil spirits who had been waiting for this opportunity to get us and so did Fada. (Mudrooroo 1999, 8)

The *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series culminates in Mudrooroo’s last published novel, *The Promised Land*, where we encounter Robinson yet again as the character Sir George Augustus, portrayed as, ‘one of those self-made knights who, in the Reform Act of 1832, had risen from the enfranchised lower classes, though he had yet to create a suitably noble genealogy to go with his advancement’ (Mudrooroo 2000, 10-11).

It is quite uncanny that all of the above characteristics apply just as equally to Robinson the ‘real’ man of historical narration as they do to Robinson the fictional character. Moreover, both in life and in fiction, Robinson adds an intriguing dimension to the shape of Mudrooroo’s narrative to the extent that the author could arguably be said to have moulded his persona around that of the man who has provided so much material for his writing. To tease out some of the more sinister parallels, it may be useful to consider Robinson’s story in brief.

Robinson arrived in Hobart on January 20, 1824 aboard the vessel, *Triton*. It was not until March 1829 however, that he was first appointed to the government post of Conciliator and Protector of Aborigines. Like Mudrooroo, Robinson was an avid reader, a man too who wrote ‘creatively’ and who had great faith in the power of the written word. In her book, *Black Robinson*, Vivienne Rae-Ellis suggests that conciliation was a field which George Augustus Robinson found richly rewarding, owing mainly to the gradual elimination of his competitors by various means. Being in a position of authority allowed Robinson not only to discredit his peers, but also to assume the right to speak for and on behalf of the Aboriginal people. It is no secret that Mudrooroo has also held a position of authority both in his academic and writing careers, speaking as and for Indigenous writers as well as the Aboriginal people generally.

One of Robinson’s most consistent claims was that he had an insider’s knowledge of Aboriginal life which far exceeded that of white outsiders who, in his view, failed to recognise the vast difference between the two cultures. (Once more, this is a claim that echoes Mudrooroo’s interest in preserving his own status as the custodial voice of Indigenous Australian literature.) Robinson had an aptitude
for languages and his ever-growing mastery of Aboriginal vocabulary gave him an immense advantage over his rivals. Acceptance of Robinson’s communication skills and Aboriginal cultural knowledge by colonial officialdom, and in particular by Lieutenant Governor Sir George Arthur, gave the pretender his authority to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal people. Ironically, it also provided the means of betraying them. Echoing a particularly difficult time in Mudrooroo’s own life, Rae-Ellis writes of Robinson:

the only pleasure he extracted from his dismal situation on Flinders Island was the infinite time he had to read and write. He read as widely as his small library would allow, making notes on the meanings of unfamiliar words, continuing the process of self-education he carried on throughout his life. (Rae-Ellis 123)

The parallels that can be drawn between the worlds of these two men of words are remarkably self-evident. The question we need to ask here, is whether or not, like Robinson, Mudrooroo is similarly guilty of an act of imposture, however well meant it may have been.

Three significant ‘relationships’ have strongly influenced the Mudrooroo narrative. The first is George Augustus Robinson. The second is the late Dame Mary Durack, and the third is his sister, Betty Polglaze. And there is a (perhaps coincidental) thread that connects them all.

In the process of her research into her family history, Betty Polglaze made an odd and ironic discovery. She found that she, Colin and the other Johnson children whose mother was Elizabeth Johnson (née Barron) are direct descendants of the first white woman to give birth to a child on the shores of the Swan River Colony, in 1829. Even more uncanny, is that in Mary Durack’s foreword to Wild Cat Falling, 1829 is the year in which Mudrooroo’s claimed that his alleged forebears, the great Bibbulmun tribe of Australia’s west coast, ‘welcomed the first white settlers as the spirits of their dead returned’ (Mudrooroo 1995b, xiv). Stranger still is that, whilst George Augustus Robinson lived in the new colony between 1824 and 1849, it was not until 1829 that he was appointed as the first Conciliator and Protector of the Aboriginal people. Just fragments of information regarding Robinson’s first five years in the colony remain (Rae-Ellis 19). At thirty-eight years of age, 1829 was a turning point in his life. It was the year in which the story of his exploits involving the Tasmanian Aborigines and the making of his personal fortune began. Arguably, the fact that the details of Robinson’s shameful (his)story live on is due in no small way to Mudrooroo’s fixation with the character, in his fiction.

However we may view its extraordinary recurrence, 1829 is a year that plays a significant role in the making and unmasking of Mudrooroo’s Aboriginal identity. It is the year that connects the author’s biological family history to his claim to belonging to the Bibbulmun tribe — to Mary Durack’s foreword in Wild Cat Falling — and to the intense interest he has shown throughout his writing career.
in the life of the betrayer of the Aboriginal people, George Augustus Robinson. And, as shown above, it is also a year of great significance in the life of Robinson himself.

NOTES
1 Margaret Atwood, commenting on her novel. The Blind Assassin, is so quoted in an interview published in the March 3-4, 2001 edition of The Weekend Australian Review.

2 Gunew’s comments refer to a similar controversy surrounding the revelation in the early 1980s that Aboriginal writer. B. Wongar, is also Streten Bozic, a Serbian immigrant. Born of a Yugoslavian father. Bozic is uncertain of exactly where he was born or who his mother was. He immigrated to Australia in 1960 and spent ten years living with Aboriginal tribes in the Northern Territory.

3 It is interesting to note that the cover of the 1995 edition of Wild Cat Falling is illustrated by the late Elizabeth Durack. Elizabeth’s sister is the late Dame Mary Durack who was the author of the infamous introduction to that novel.

4 It was Robert Eggington who debunked the claims of US author Marlow Morgan’s ‘non-fiction’ book. Mutant Message Downunder, in which she wrote of having undergone a spiritual transformation whilst crossing the Australian desert with a tribe of traditional Aborigines. And, ironically, the site now occupied by the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation was previously the Catholic institution known as Clontarf Boys’ Town where, from 1947 to 1955. Mudrooroo spent eight years of his life in the care of the Christian Brothers.

5 Eleanor Bourke, Director, Aboriginal Research Institute, Faculty of Aboriginal and Islander Studies, University of South Australia. ‘The First Australians: Kinship, Family and Identity’.

6 I have compiled this summary from articles appearing in The Sydney Morning Herald between Friday March 14, 1997 to Saturday December 20, 1997 with particular reference to Richard Guilliatt’s ‘Black. White & Grey All Over’.

7 The confusion about Mudrooroo’s origins prompted a diligent clerk in 1955 to instigate a search of Department of Native Affairs files. The search revealed that Mudrooroo was not known to the DNA and they were unable to confirm that he was an Aboriginal.

8 This statement follows both verbal and written communication with Mudrooroo’s elder sister, Betty Polglaze, to whom I am greatly indebted. The assistance she has given to me in the course of my ongoing research has been invaluable. Mrs Polglaze has provided me with copies of documentation relating to the Johnson family heritage including a copy of the family tree. All such documents have been certified as ‘authentic’ by the Western Australian Genealogical Society Inc. On July 19, 1996. the Society formally recognised Rebecca Elizabeth Polglaze and the members of her biological family as direct descendants of Edward and Jane Barron who arrived in Australia on the ship ‘HMAS Sulphur’ on June 8th, 1829.

9 The Johnson children’s paternal grandfather. Thomas Creighton Johnson was an African-American who emigrated to Australia from North Carolina in 1860. Thomas, died in 1880 at the age of forty-eight having spent seventeen years in ‘the Colony of Victoria’. His death certificate states his place of birth as North Carolina, U.S.A. His son, Thomas Creighton Patrick Johnson, was twice married. Born in Sydney in 1874, he died in Narrogin in 1938 and, among others, is Betty’s (and Mudrooroo’s) father.

11 A meeting was held at the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation in Western Australia on June 26, 1996 to discuss the questions surrounding Colin Johnson’s Aboriginality. The meeting was attended by representatives of both families as well as members of the literary and academic communities. Following Aboriginal protocol, the meeting resolved to invite Colin Johnson to attend a subsequent meeting to provide his side of the argument.

12 Mudrooroo’s novel, Dr Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World (1983), is a parody of the life and times (crimes) of the same George Augustus Robinson.

13 Rae-Ellis accounts for this as being due partly to the intense shame suffered by the women in giving birth to offspring of white men, and to a wish that their children not live to suffer a fate similar to their own.

14 Mudrooroo, Wild Cat Falling, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1995b (first published 1965). Future references to the novel are from this edition.


16 In Mudrooroo’s discourse the word ‘ghost’ represents European people of white skin.

WORKS CITED
LYCIA DANIELLE TROUTON

From her Grandmother's House: The Role of Craft and the Significance of Community Public Art in the Work of Haida artist Bernie Williams (formerly Bernie Poitras)

The first European expeditions to North America in the late 1700s found the Haida artists of northern British Columbia to be remarkable painters and sculptors. The coastal peoples of the Queen Charlotte Islands, or Haida Gwaii, northern British Columbia, worked in a variety of materials: woven cedar bark, wood, argillite (a black slate found in local deposits), silver and gold (Drew and Wilson 94). Initial contact and trade in sea otter pelts stimulated the local economy and cultural patronage of artists to fulfill the demand for increasingly 'taller and more complex totem poles' for families of nobility (Stewart 20). The Haida have an extended vocabulary of mythological figures, family crests, and beings of legends in flat form-line style, with typically ovoid design shapes. But by the mid 1860s, the Haida had lost an incredible 85–90% of their population due to the smallpox epidemic, spread by European colonisers. During the mid-1880s, devastating displacement of cultural and spiritual practices occurred through the outlawing of shamanic practices and destruction of carvings, as well as a ban on potlatch celebrations that lasted until 1951. The legacy of the residential school system, 1874 to mid-1970s, further oppressed the culture. However, since the 1950s, Haida art has enjoyed a cultural reconstruction and renaissance, due, in part, to collaboration among art historians, anthropologists and artists.

Bernie Williams, or Skundaal, her Haida name, meaning Little One, has been a traditional carver, textile artist and printmaker for over thirty years. Williams is part of the Haida cultural revival, and contributes to it as an 'expression of who I am and where I came from'. This article seeks to explore how Williams has built upon her craft through her chosen relationship to community.

Williams gained increased recognition by working for six years with the late renowned Haida artist Bill Reid (1920–1998), in the late 1980s, as his first female apprentice. Williams' legacy as that of a sculptor of large-scale work is due, in part, to her training with Reid during his monumental phase. Williams completed an eleven metre tall Timeship Tumanos totem in 1996, and a twelve metre canoe,
Bernie Williams

*The Copper Eagle* [see page 75], to mark the Millennium — distinctly rare achievements for a woman.

Williams' cultural gains have also been accomplished through the inspiration of the art of other female artists, considered part of a tradition of 'the grand women' for which the Haida culture is also known. Two such carvers were Charles
Edenshaw’s granddaughter, Lavina Lightbown, a carver of argillite in the 1960s and ‘70s (Drew and Wilson 104–05), and Ellen Neel (1916–1966), sometimes called the ‘first woman of wood’. Neel, trained by her grandfather Charlie James (b. 1867), carved and repaired full-size totem poles in the 1950s and ‘60s. She also created miniature totems during the period of cultural prohibition, (1920s to ‘40s), when Haida artists adapted their work to the dictates of the commercial market demand for seemingly less offensive, ‘non-pagan’ imagery (Stewart 21–22). Williams’ ‘biggest idol’ is Frieda Deising (b. 1926). Deising works in a variety of B.C. Pacific Northwest Coast cultural styles in which she carves totems, and often integrates three-dimensional carving with flat-design textile work in her masks and headdresses (Wyatt 32, 66).

‘Drawing all over her Grandmother’s house’, was how Williams explained to me that she first began to follow an artistic path at a young age. Williams’ early life was spent in Masset, at the northern tip of Haida Gwaii. She spoke her native tongue fluently and was brought up, until the age of ten, by her grandmother, a high-ranking elder and wife of Robert Williams, an Eagle Chief, and one of the last canoe builders at Old Masset Village. As a young girl, she walked every day from the old village to New Masset Indian Day School. She was punished for speaking her native language and she says, ‘I learned to speak English from reading the Archie comics’. Williams’ direct connection to her people, their language and their traditions, was severed at the age of eleven, when, after her ‘grandmother died, she was flown off of The Island [of Haida Gwaii]’ and placed into government foster care in Vancouver, in 1970. Williams describes this period as one of difficult adjustment and culture shock. Yet, to this day, she still maintains a hold on images drawn from just one year before, when her favourite past-time was swinging on the cedar log which Robert Davidson was carving into the first totem to be raised ceremonially in the village fifty years later.

Williams’ artwork is influenced by the fact that, in her early years, her cultural heritage remained intact. She picked cedar roots with her grandmother — a basket and hat weaver — and Williams recalls, ‘I knew that if we picked the roots from the tree, to make an offering to it — that we got life from it.’ She danced and sang regularly ‘for the women’s auxiliary or her grandmother’s hen parties’. ‘My grandmother was adamant about native spirituality,’ and Williams recalls joyfully, ‘the times when the elders would tell the old legends and laugh with their weird sense of humour’. The old women would ‘rap her ankles with sticks’ if she made a mistake while dancing for them! To this day, in an interesting reversal which symbolises the carrying of her grandmother’s spirit, Williams consistently uses the bear mother, the crest of her grandmother, in the stomach of a Raven as her own crest. ‘We came from a large family — a matrilineal society (Drew and Wilson 30) — in my home,’ she explains, ‘but things have really changed. There are not many of the grand women elders anymore and I want to carry on the teachings.’ When Williams made a mask representing her grandmother’s face.
she described it in the following terms, ‘she is looking out over the land, sea and sky and the damage that has been done’. Today, Williams is a compelling storyteller of her culture, both orally, and in the legends she depicts on her artwork. Yet, Williams rejects the manipulation of her interest in ‘native spirituality’ into a simplistic contemporary New Age settler primitivism; nor does she want to achieve ‘a broader audience [that] retains an appetite for a pure ‘primitive’ culture that can be romanticised’ (Thomas 16).

Williams refuses to be easily defined, commercially marketed or ‘colonised’ as she strives to carve out an authentic path for herself and her artwork. She makes her artwork with the original purpose of Haida crafts in mind, as a living art form, designed to be presented, or used, for particularly significant occasions. This purpose is probably most obvious in her textile work and masks, made for presentation in potlatches or for wearing in ceremonial dances. Williams has been a maker of the robes unique to the indigenous cultures of Canada’s Northwest, called Button Blankets. This unique form of narrative textile art, which demonstrates a powerful cultural heritage, has seen a revitalisation since the 1970s. This also speaks to ‘the social and functional effects of technological changes, the significance of the materials used, the ways in which the objects represent an ideology, their place in trade and marketplace and so on’ (Cochrane 57).

The blanket is considered a flat pictograph of totemic imagery — depicting clan crest, family lineage or, today, personal designs. The blankets are made of red and black wool — a traded blanket material which superseded the use of woven, decorated cedar bark cloaks during and after the maritime fur-trade era. Dentalium shells, considered valuable, were replaced by shiny pearl buttons found to be suited to outlining the symbolic images (Jensen and Sargent 63–65).

In an essay about ‘Craft, Modernity and Postmodernity’, Terry Smith suggests that,

Fourth World peoples, marginalised and victimised in the West, also lead with their craftwork. The women’s art movement had been alerting us to this for decades. Another example is craft and multiculturalism. After modernism, the avant-garde, and the superficial modernism of the 1980s (which included a jazzing up of art/craft, and of modernism...), this emergence of the others is indubitably the main direction of innovation in current art practice internationally. Lucy Lippard’s recent book, Mixed Blessings, a compendium of such work, is filled with examples of critical and resistant art, virtually all of which uses craft materials, aesthetics, forms and contexts as its medium. (Smith 26–27)

Place, locality and context are part of the conversation about indigenous art in relation to colonialism today. In the 1960s the resurgence of Haida art was re-contextualised, as a living, innovative and highly skilled art form; this was guaranteed by its placement in public places of visibility and prestige. Reid’s historic achievement in his latter years, was that of ‘lifting a regional craft’ of the major B.C. Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations to an internationally recognised
sculptural form, developed, in part, through its large scale, and placement in international ‘corridors of power’, which included new museums, corporate headquarters and federal buildings. Yet, since the mid-1990s, Williams’ large-scale projects may be seen as bearing the hallmarks of new genre contemporary public art. This art is place and context-specific, and meaningful to the community who are often involved in its creation; community-based public art is ‘accessible art of any species that cares about, challenges, involves, and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and the environment’ (Lippard 24). Today, there is another underlying objective at play which is of critical importance to Williams, that being ‘to make locally meaningful art in a place [rather] than on a “site”’. However, as Lucy Lippard discusses in her 1997 book, The Lure of the Local, ‘Art in a more neutrally “public space” (park, corporate, and development contexts) is already displaced. When an artist tries to bring back the original place that lies under the site, s/he runs the danger of creating a nostalgic façade … for “tourists” from other parts of the city’ (264).

Williams takes risks in her choice of site and subject matter for her artwork. Her ‘indigenous cultural pride always carries a political edge that gives this dialogue an unpredictable character’ (Thomas 16). For example, Williams has chosen to donate her work to auctions which fundraise for persons living with HIV, and her next large-scale project is to be a totem pole, entitled Missing Women — a memorial to those who have been murdered in Vancouver’s infamous downtown east-side, many of whom were aboriginal sex trade workers. As Lippard notes, ‘Place-conscious public artists are beginning to create “memorials” to vanished [people] sites, buildings, cultural centers, even topographies…. In doing so, they help to save other places [and persons] from the same fate’ (287).

Williams has also prioritised teaching over the requirements of managing an art career in today’s competitive marketplace. Her artistic engagement is with a ‘profoundly local public art [that] has not caught on in the mainstream because in order to attract sufficient buyers in the current system of distribution, art must be relatively generalised, detachable from politics and pain’ (Lippard 278). Williams’ emphasis is on creating opportunities for young people, ‘the Torchbearers of the next generation’, because over the years, she has observed the people of her urban, multi-nation community struggle with drug addiction and ‘suiciding themselves’. The types of apprenticeship programmes Williams puts into effect are different to the apprenticeship model under which Williams served Reid. Since Reid’s death, his lack of service to apprentices has been criticised because he retained a rigid hierarchical structure which led to the erasure of the contributions of his ‘workers’ and a distinct lack of fostering of their own careers or achievements (O’Hara 20–29). Lippard speaks about apprenticeship models as being another arena of Public Art, one which has served particularly well in the renewal of art practices or skills, like weaving, basket-making and carving, among indigenous groups (Lippard 273–75). The training of apprentices includes the passing on of technical
skills and renewed pride and self-confidence in First Nations culture, often changing the future for a young person. Lippard asserts the importance of working with children, which,

like art education in general, has typically been distained in the art world, although the younger generation may be changing this. The new surge of interest in genealogy as a way of illuminating place has inspired programs nationwide which focus on elders ('national treasures') and their stories or schoolchildren doing oral histories of their own and others' families. Patricia Phillips suggests that as a form of radical education, public art might be used to fulfil a community service or learning component of a high school curricula. (289)

Williams has also chosen to create works which mark occasions of particular significance to indigenous peoples, such as the private Haida presentation of a Button Blanket to Rigoberta Menchu on her receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.13 Williams recalls this commission as a highlight in her career, over and above her work with Reid, because of Menchu's legacy as a woman who has struggled for her people. In this way, Williams' work runs parallel to both developments in the community art arena of the last ten years, as well as in the gains made through the cultural renaissance of Haida art in the Pacific Northwest, from the 1950s to 1990s.

Williams' visionary work is evidence of how communicating through craft, ceremony and community artwork, one can make important connections between peoples and places. For her, artwork must act as a vehicle for cultural reparation and empowerment, as well as for furthering skilled and innovative craftsmanship. In either sculpture or textiles, Williams' objectives are four-fold: healing, artistic, educational, and political. The struggle between worlds and the economic limitations of her chosen field requires her to take time away from the creation of art and the city, to rejuvenate herself under the guidance of another kind of mentor — a Medicine Woman.

NOTES
1 In 1998 A Statement of Reconciliation was made and The Aboriginal Healing Foundation and Gathering Strength, Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan was put in place to 'recognise past mistakes' and 'manage the healing strategy, including providing financial support to eligible community-based healing initiatives'. Canadian government website, Backgrounder: The residential school system http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/gs/schl_e.html.
2 Interview with the artist, April 2001
3 Reid gained an international reputation for his jewellery, as well as for his monumental masterpieces in wood and bronze, including The Raven and the First Men (1983), The Chief of the Undersea World (1984). His most famous work is The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, (1991). Reid, whose mother was Haida, is credited with reviving an artistic tradition that was in danger of dying out (Daniel Francis pp. 594–95).
Williams learned her canoe carving techniques while working on Reid’s ocean-going canoe, Lootas, for Expo ’86.

Interview with the artist, April 2001.

Later in life, Williams recalled in interview, she had fond memories of Reid reading to her (he had an early career in broadcasting), his ‘articulate intelligence’ and ‘passion in being Native, period’. During her apprenticeship, Reid tasked Williams to be ‘well-writ’, as she said in interview. Williams told me her reply was one of surprise and indignation, ‘What the hell was that?! I asked him [Reid]. He wanted to mould me … but I’m not one to wear long slit dresses and get my hair done for $150’. Williams tried out this role, as part of her apprenticeship, for a time. She recalled an incident when Reid handed her $300 to get herself dressed up to accompany him to the ‘Freedom of the City’ event, July 12, 1988, where he was to be presented with an honour award for ‘outstanding contribution to improving the quality of life in the City of Vancouver’. However, the pressure of the conflicting roles under Reid’s mentorship eventually became too demanding, and she left ‘the limelight and living the high life’ for ‘more down-to-earth’ existence where she would be happy ‘passing on what I’ve been blessed with — the talent of who I am’.

“This event, with its accompanying feast and ceremonies, aroused a new pride in Haida nation” (Stewart 22).

Also, interview with the artist, April 2001.

Originated with the Nuu-chah-nulth word pa-chitle, meaning ‘to give’ (Stewart 17).

For an evaluation of the criteria and models of new genre public art, see Lucy Lippard p. 286.

Donations for, or questions about, this project can be discussed with Margot MacDonald, administrator of Williams’ large-scale work at wolfmac@portal.ca.

Interview with the artist, July 2000.

‘Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan Indian and human rights advocate accepted the Nobel Peace Prize today, calling it a tribute to exploited people in her country and around the world. “Today we must fight for a better world, without poverty, without racism, with peace,” said Miss Menchu. “I consider this prize not as an award to me personally, but rather as one of the greatest conquests in the struggle for peace, for human rights and for the rights of the indigenous people who, along all the five hundred years, have been victims of genocides, repression and discrimination”’ (New York Times International, Friday, December 11, 1992).

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Bernie Williams after the successful launch of the Copper Eagle canoe. November, 2000. (Photo: Lycia Trouton)
Bernie Williams and the apprentice carving crew. The Copper Eagle canoe was carved from a single 800-years-old Western Red Cedar and took eight months to complete. (Photo: Lycia Trouton)
Carving team apprentices of *The Copper Eagle Canoe*. Bernie Williams in lead. Launch, November 2000, Britannia Heritage Shipyards. (Photo: Lycia Trouton Trouton)
Copper Eagle canoe (end section). Steveston Harbour, British Columbia, Canada.
Timeship Timanos. Totem, 7.3m tall, carved by approximately thirty-five students of the First Nations Awareness program at Vancouver Technical School. 1995.
Debra Sparrow, Wall Hanging, red, grey, white sheep's wool, 51cm x 76cm
(Photo: Stan Gielewski)
Debra Sparrow, red and ochre leggings, part of dance regalia 33cm x 30.5cm
(Photo: Stan Gielewski)
‘Know Who You Are and Where You Come From’

Interview with Debra Sparrow
Vancouver, September 13th, 2001

This interview highlights the work of contemporary artist Debra Sparrow, Coast Salish–Musqueam. Sparrow carries the three-fold responsibility of single-handedly raising children, putting in place a holistic educational programme, and producing excellence in design and art. Debra and her sister, Robyn Sparrow, often work on creative commissions together and have produced a line of modestly-priced machine-woven blankets and vests for the retail market, in partnership with Kanata Company. The backdrop against which they work is one marked by a resilience of spirit against repeated cultural losses incurred through the European colonisation of their homeland, since the late 1700s.

I began the interview by talking to Debra about the background of Kunapipi as a postcolonial journal that symbolised regeneration, whose founding editor had been based in Scandinavia.

DS My mum is Scottish-Norwegian, and my Dad is Native, but we have been born and raised here. I have always said that one day I would research Norwegian textiles and look at their techniques, for my mum. But I haven’t done it and I should, because my mum’s already seventy-three.

LT So, your mum is still alive?

DS Oh yeah! And she will be for a lot longer. She has always raised us to only identify in Musqueam. She married into this community and respected the community by going by my father’s ways. So when we were growing up we never identified with our other side — where she came from. She never talked about it.

My grandmother speaks fluent Norwegian. Of course she didn’t teach the children, but they understood some of it. Mum married early, when she was only nineteen, and we were raised up here. So, we never identified with the outside world very much, and with her culture at all, until just in recent
years. when we started asking questions. We knew we were half-breeds, but we didn’t identify with it; we looked at ourselves as whole.

**LT** What do you think of that term, ‘half breeds’? In what way do you use that term?

**DS** I think it’s pretty positive because you get to look at things in different ways. I don’t look 100% Native, but I don’t look White either, so nobody knows what I am. I am left open for people to call down the Native people, or call down another culture, and I can sit in the middle of it.

**LT** So you’ve looked at it that way in the last few years, but before that you really identified as Musqueam?

**DS** Yeah, I did. I never thought, in my twenties, that I would be doing what I am doing today, because we didn’t identify with any textiles here. And I’m also a jewellery maker, and we didn’t identify with that here, either.

**LT** And when you say ‘we’?

**DS** The whole community! The *whole* process of weaving was dormant ... so we [Musqueam] didn’t grow up with visuals in our community like we [First Nations Peoples] did North of here, like the Haida people, the Kwakiutl, the West Coast — you can look around the community and see the *strong* reflection of the people through their work. I lived in Alert Bay for seven years which is strong Kwakiutl country, and I really was respectful of their identity through their artwork, but I couldn’t understand why these people who had so much, were so weak ... in spirit ... with alcohol. So, I guess the influence of Western society was really dominating our cultures all through the coast anyway. So our strength of culture, our strength of identity through our creative process, was weak, I think. But in the last fifteen years there has been a real emerging identity, and I am a part of that. It was about sixteen years ago that I came to a place where I wanted to know more about who I was, wondering ‘Where did aboriginal people and Musqueam fit in, or did they?’ And so my journey is not just about the end results, but it’s about getting there. I think people categorise artists, and think that all aboriginal people on the coast are artists. So they study *art* to know more about the Haida or the Kwakiutl or the Salish; but I don’t agree with that [...] we lived in that infamous/famous circle where everything is messy. We don’t draw lines and isolate people away from one thing or another.

I remember in grade three that I never felt like I belonged in the public school system. They throw you into their assimilation process — not only
Debra Sparrow at her spinning wheel, September 2001.
(Photograph: Stan Gielewski)
aboriginal people, at that time, but Japanese, Chinese, whatever you were, and I didn’t like it.

Everyone goes through these experiences that bring you to where you are, and a lot of the experiences that were hurtful were responsible for [my] growth. ‘What do I have to pull from the depths of darkness to understand why I’m in this condition? And how do I get out of it? Where’s the light at the end of the tunnel?’ It’s very distant in the beginning and it’s very dim, but as you move towards it, and you replace fear with faith, then you are able to take those steps. So I must have, and I know I did, pray very much, which I had never done in my life, because to me prayer was always religion. And religion was Catholicism but everybody told me that Catholicism was not for us.

I don’t know if I have to have an answer, other than to say I have been guided to do what I have to do. I pay attention to it, and I feel very blessed by it. I have to respect that blessing and I take it very seriously.

When I started to evaluate my own life for the [last] twenty-five years, I felt a lot of emptiness. Even though my mother didn’t talk about her culture, we lived in a culture that wasn’t sure of its identity either. So, that was confusing — that we had cultures within cultures on our own reserve. Well, I just decided that I wasn’t going to worry about everyone else, but I would follow my own path and that’s what I do.

**LT** Did that coincide with the re-emergence of the weaving, or learning those techniques?

**DS** Not really. What coincided with that was my interest in learning how to do jewellery. And I did that six or seven years before I did the weaving, and that is where I started questioning, and where I was led to the Museum of Anthropology, at the University of British Columbia: not into the museum, but to a professor, Michael Kew who’s wife, Dela, was from here, and with my older sister Wendy John, questioning the subject [of weaving], and [in] our questioning about our community life here, I spoke to Michael asking for everything that he had on the Musqueam people. He sent me the [historical] slides, and I took a small three-month course on the technicalities of silver-smithing. I did that in order to ‘become’ [self-actualised]: I had to learn what it was I wanted to create. I could make jewellery, out of silver, but I needed to have something to reflect from it what ‘it’ is — not just silver jewellery. So, when I got the slides and I started to look at the slides of the Musqueam content in history, it was then I was moved. I was terribly moved to look at this history that I knew nothing about, never identified with. I was in awe, because Musqueam, as I said earlier, had no visual
reflection in our community. So, we really did have to believe in what we didn’t see.

There is that saying, and I always like to use it in my talks, ‘Blessed are those who believe, but have not seen’. That is so evident amongst our people. We are great believers in the spirit, even though we haven’t seen it. In our society today, we must see everything to believe it. You must show that paper to believe that you are qualified. And I refuse to write a paper like that. We come from an oral tradition. We believe, strongly, in what I have to say is what has been handed to me from my ancestors and, through that, I have confidence that I will say what I need to say, or what they want to say. So, that is the gift that has been given to me.

When I started to look up the history of people here, I felt very moved because I, too, didn’t believe in those [messages]. We were taught — not openly taught — that we were ‘unworthy’ … that we were unworthy of anything. By taking us away, and by taking away our whole culture, we couldn’t think that’s [the message of unworthiness] not it. So, the messages were there subliminally. Nobody had to say them, we just knew it; we felt it. We felt we were not worthy of anything.

I mean certainly my father, in the struggle that he had in his life, coming from a residential school — he wanted to be the best he could be ‘for them’. I think it was instilled into him and passed onto us, indirectly, that we were not equal people in our own land … and you still feel that way today. And so, when you feel [in] second or third [place] to your land, in your land, then it hinders your success … and so that’s passed on.

LT After your father’s generation — some people have called it the ‘dark ages’ or the ‘cultural prohibition’ of the thirties, forties and fifties — how were you able to gather your strength back together as a person and bring out what you have done in your artwork?

DS Well, I think, from what I understand in my own journey, that each one of us in this world has a responsibility. I always like to say that out of your weaknesses come your strengths. If we can somehow recognise in our hurts that there is something greater than ourselves — open the doorway when someone knocks on our soul — and then in comes the knowledge of the universe, and with that comes guidance, and with that, comes the steps that you need to take in order to understand the larger picture.

My grandfather has been gone for three years, this year. He was my best friend and my greatest teacher in the second part of my life. He always told me something that I feel the need to pass on, ‘that you have to know who you are and you have to know where you come from. If you don’t know these things then you are nothing’. And by that he confirmed, ‘plant your
feet in the roots of where you come from and you won’t have to waiver and that is your strength’. When you believe in that so strongly, then you do find conviction in it, and it’s something that I felt moved to write about. I feel like not only did my grandfather encourage me, but the ancestors did, because I honestly don’t know how I put this piece of writing together. I just sat down and I got pen and paper, and took one of my son’s school notebooks and this is what I wrote. (she begins to read aloud)

My grandfather was ninety-nine and a half years old, born in 1898, in the village at the mouth of the Fraser River — that’s here in Musqueam. We spent many hours driving along the shoreline of what is now called the city of Vancouver — my grandfather beside me and one or more of my three children in the back of me — listening closely to him tell us the history of our great land. The same history that his grandparents who raised him, told him — driving along in horse and buggy — and their grandparents told them, walking along these same shores. Here there is almost three hundred years and the stories are still passed on, because of these oral traditions. My grandfather can rest in peace, knowing that I have, as he had, retained in my own brain, ‘what we shared as people of this land’. Because I was blessed to have this time with him, I will take with me into the future the success and integrity of our people through these reflections. My roots are planted firmly in the very soil where my ancestors are buried and I am connected, my children are connected, and my grandchildren will be connected. We will be here another millennium, as we have been here for nine millennia past. When it is asked of the First Nations people, ‘Who said this land belongs to you? There are no signs on the mountain tops; I don’t see it written anywhere?’ my reply is, ‘That it is written — written in the earth — anywhere you open the earth, there is evidence of our people’.

And that’s what I wrote — it just came to me — that was for him and about him. (pause) My grandfather was more important than I think he knew he was. In 1998, that story was sandblasted into a ‘story-stone’, a boulder that is now sitting by the Fraser River, near one of our old village sites. It was for him, but also for my ancestors, that people know that we live here. We still have to identify that. We still have to defend ourselves and, to me, that’s […] not equality. It doesn’t matter how long we’ve lived here, we’re still, still, after all these thousands of years, having to prove our existence.

LT When you think of that story on the stone by the river and about how aboriginal artwork is displayed in museums…?
DS  I think, besides being a person who believes in my history, I also believe in the present. I believe that we have to move with the times but that we’re [Musqueam], at least, honoured enough to make those choices with who is making them. So, that, if we have a blanket in the museum, as long as it’s there with our co-operation and with our understanding then, I think it’s OK!

We have to study the old blankets to learn how to do this — there’s no documentation, there’s nothing ... just that, ‘it was collected at the mouth of the Fraser in 1786’, — not who made it, not what we thought it was, why they did it, what the dye meant. There’s absolutely no history of what any of the design meant. We can only dream about it. (pause) Because we don’t know. So when we work with them and our fingers are actually touching the warp and the work in-between, we have a sense of what they may have meant. If we can connect that — but we don’t know. We don’t know and that’s why when I became interested in jewellery making and I had to teach myself how to draw — I stumbled ... and I really feel strongly that I have to stumble in my own journey. So, I taught myself how to draw the beautiful reflections of the people from the past. And I connected them, and I asked for assistance because I was not an artist and I needed to, I wanted to, make the beautiful things that I saw, so that people in this present day could see them and appreciate them, and connect themselves to it as well.

So, I would think about the person who made it, who was this person? He or she was someone who was my ancestor. So I had the right, and I had the ability to work with it, and I wanted to do that, so I taught myself how to draw. Then the challenge was how am I going to make this beautiful piece of silver which is cold and lifeless ... come alive? I worked with it, and then, at the same time [I was] talking to my sister — she’s the one who started that weaving program. It was the first step I took towards that understanding.

LT  And yet, you are both given credit for starting the Musqueam Weaving School.

DS  Well, yes, because it evolved out of our conversations. There was only one opening, so she [Wendy John] took the opening, and I stayed with my jewellery. And then, when she finished that a year later, she came back here to the reserve and she started the program in a little space not bigger than the upstairs of my house. And they had nothing! They applied for grants and they applied for the wool. And all the women who came into this class knew absolutely nothing about weaving. They thought they were going to make baskets. They didn’t know that it was going to be Salish weaving and they were shocked! You know, it was a stepping stone for my sister, too, because it wasn’t her passion. I think she liked it, but she doesn’t love it. So,
it gave her a step towards what she was doing too, and she stepped out of that after a year, and went on to politics. But I think that’s her foundation. I don’t think — I know it is.

**LT** The weaving is her foundation?

**DS** Yeah! Once we were to get involved and research these women — that’s what I was getting at earlier — the ability that these women have to create?! I found a saying a couple years ago — it says, ‘Creativity is a gift from God, and to create you can give back to Him’. So that if you are given this gift, and you use it, then that is your gift back to him and that is your friendship between him and you. That’s your blessing. That’s who you are after you feel that. So, in the beginning, we each felt that.

I was still doing my jewellery, but I’d go and visit them. I’d go in and visit and say, ‘You guys are nuts. I am sure glad I am not involved with this!’ You see, Salish Alt was not known then, in 1985. For example, Susan Point had just started....

I am not a graphic artist; I am not a creator — a Van Gogh, or anything like that. I have an ability to look at my own people’s history and bring it forward, but I don’t think of myself as an artist.

**LT** Do you have a problem with the term ‘Artist’?

**DS** It’s an English term. I don’t think of myself as one. I am a Mother, I am a Sister, I’m an anything — I am not just an Artist.

**LT** Can you say anymore about how you made the transition from jewellery to the weaving?

**DS** Well, what happened was, I would go over and watch the women working. I admired them, I thought they were doing wonderful, beautiful stuff, but I didn’t want to be involved with it. But I did go with them to New York on a trip. We went to the Smithsonian Institute, and to the American Museum of Natural History and to the Museum of the American Indian. All these places housed Salish blankets. Lots of the women had never been off the reserve, let alone getting on a plane and going to New York! Culture shock or what?! I even had culture shock because, and I thought I was pretty worldly — I had been to Toronto — but to get to New York, it was like, ‘Oh my God, what are we doing here!? ’ (laughs)

**LT** What year was that?
DS It must have been '85. So, off we went and I went with them. You know, just hung out with them, and we came back and the program had ended. So, my sister thought she'd give it one more round and they applied for more funding. They didn't get as much as they did the first time, so they thought they'd go on with just eight women, instead of ten. At first we didn't have funding, so what I did was offer my basement, which was empty at the time. We made it a 'make-work' project, which meant for single mothers who were working. My kids were really small — oh, I only had one; I had just split up with her father and I was on social assistance trying to figure out what I'd do. It was a project that would enhance your social assistance. So, we started working in my basement — well, they did. And she [Wendy John] said, 'Do you want to join?' and I said, 'No'. And she said, 'The money's good! You've got your daughter to look after...'. So she enticed me... with being a single mother. So I went — very reluctantly and pouty — and my other sister, she's the one I work with today [Robyn Sparrow] [...] went reluctantly to the first group, too, and we were working for about two or three months, learning how to spin — I think I worked up a couple pieces and learned how to dye the wool.

I found, fundamentally, I just enjoyed being there with a group of women from the community that I had never really got to know before. It was really interesting the dynamics in there because you have different categories of Musqueam families that might not have really known each other anymore — whereas our grandparents were all very close. They knew each other's history, they all knew one another, but we had all moved away from that. And the grandparents were afraid to tell us anything or teach us anything, because they all thought we wanted to be 'out there', that we wanted to be 'something else'. That's what they were taught, and that's what they thought their kids were teaching us — to get out there and be successful, and it has nothing to do with your identity. It has nothing to do with being Musqueam; there's a big world out there and 'get in it' and do whatever you need to do to 'be successful.' So, we still try to encourage our kids to do that — but it doesn't work very well (laughs) because they don't go very far — away from us — shouldn't say they don't go very far — they don't go far away.

So, I was in the weaving group for a couple months and one evening — its one of my favourite stories — I went to my grandpa's [Ed Sparrow] house for tea. It was the only place I ever drank tea! So, I got my tea and I was coming over to sit with him and while I was drinking the tea he said, 'So, how's that weaving coming along that you are doing?' And I looked at him, and I sat down, and said, 'Well, Grandpa, believe it or not, I have to tell you, I think I am actually starting to enjoy it!?' And he goes, 'Oh, that's good, umhm...'. And I said, 'Yeah, it's sort of getting a hold of me'. And he said, 'Oh, yeah... yeah... oh that's good'. And I said, 'Do you know
anything about weaving, Grandpa?’ And he said, ‘Well, yeah, yep. I know a little bit’. And I said, (in a shocked tone) ‘You know a little bit?!’ And he goes, ‘Yeah’. And I said, ‘Well, why have you never told me?’ And he said, ‘Well, you didn’t ask me’. And I said, ‘Well, I know I didn’t ask you — but did you ever see it?’ And he goes, ‘Uhmhm’, and I said, ‘Oh, what did you see then and what do you know?’ And he goes, ‘Well, what do you want to know?’ I said, ‘I want to know everything that you know about?!’ Well, he goes, ‘Well, you know, I was pretty young when I last saw it. You know, they haven’t done it here ever since I was a little kid’. And I said, ‘Yeah, I know that. I didn’t even know that we had it’. He goes, ‘Well, you know, I was a little boy’. He said, ‘I don’t know how old I was, I was just coming to my senses’. I thought, ‘Oh, I love that saying ... you are just waking up to the world’. He said, ‘I used to watch the old people’. And I said, ‘You watched them?!’ And he goes, ‘Yep! Selisya, Thellaiwhaltun’s wife; my grandmother Spahqia’. And I said, ‘Oh, my God, I can’t even believe it. You are so lucky to have seen it, Grandpa. Grandpa, we have been sitting up there — those ladies for a year, and me for a half year — not really feeling connected because, we didn’t know these people. We only saw them in a book and now you are sitting here telling me that you actually watched it?! So that just all verifies everything, and it connects us! It connects us to a couple hundred years ... right back’. I said, ‘This is amazing! I didn’t know that you had seen it?! Wow! What did you see there or what were you doing?!’ And he said, ‘Well, I used to go watch them — they’d be working together — the old ladies. You know how kids are ... they crawl underneath there and they’re playing in the balls of wool’. And he said, ‘Every once in a while my grandmother kicked me outside.... Oh, they were working and working, and I didn’t know what they were up to, and then one day I found out’. He said that everyone got called to the longhouse; they were finished on their work and everybody got called and, in those days, when someone got a name in a ceremony they invited people from everywhere, and everybody brought food. They call it a potlatch, but we don’t call it that here. It was a gathering, and he said that people came from all over, and ‘I didn’t know, but it was going to be the evening that I was going to get my name — that’s what they were working for’. So I said, ‘Wow, so it was all for you? And he said, ‘Yes, and I think that was the last time I’d ever seen anyone do that kind of work until you girls...’. I said, ‘What did you just say? You saw your Grandmother Spahqa, and Selisya, and Thellaiwhaltun’s wife working on those pieces and you never saw anything more until your granddaughter started it again?! Eighty-five years there was this darkness in the community and, then, an awakening happened and it’s through you. You are eighty-five years old and you are a blessing!’ He said, ‘Oh, I don’t know about that...’. And I said, ‘It makes my work even more important ...
that I am connected now! ’ And he goes, ‘ Oh, yeah ... yeah ’ . He was a man of few words — sometimes very humble ( she laughs ) . So, he never wanted to take the credit for anything, but he didn ’ t realise how much of a professor he was . He had a wonderful sense of humour and loved life ... loved his history .

LT  Do you think of yourself as a Storyteller ?

DS  No, I think of myself as a person who reflects their history through their creative process and I would be doing exactly the same thing had I lived a thousand years ago, or five hundred, or two hundred. I am someone who works very passionately with their identity. ( stops herself ) I don ’ t tell a story, though my work does . If you look at a piece of jewellery with beautiful designs on it, you ’ re the one who wants to know and understand where it comes from .

I think I found that with the blankets, once I got involved with it . When you look at a piece, I always say the educational process starts for the person who ’ s observing it . When you look at a beautiful piece of weaving, that ’ s what happens: you go, ‘ Wow, I wonder who made that? I wonder where it comes from. Oh, how did they do that? ’

That ’ s what we thought when we looked at the old pieces in the museum and in the books ... you were in awe of these women! These women existed many years ago . No one taught them. I shouldn ’ t say no one taught them — children learned from their aunts and their grandmothers . We didn ’ t have that opportunity . But I shouldn ’ t say we didn ’ t — we do — because it was from them we still learned, through our ancestral connections . When you look at these pieces and you think about these women — and then about the men who were with them — it really connects you, and the gap that you felt in your life starts to shorten . You start to feel that . ‘ This is what I needed to know . This is what I needed to educate myself with, so that I know my history, and I know where I come from ’ .

I only know ... that after I started working with it [ the weaving ] that some of the questions I had asked myself were being answered . That whole educational process started, and I started to realise that these people were very educated people . They knew when the salmon was going to run; they knew what the weather was going to be like this year; they knew when they should take and when they shouldn ’ t. They knew things that we can ’ t even comprehend anymore — we have to get a scientist to tell us — but they had scientists . They had people who knew the geology; they had people who knew the area; they knew what they should stay away from . Why do we not believe in them? Why are we so leery of our own people? I couldn ’ t understand it .
So, you have to get yourself into focus, and turn yourself around a little bit, and try and look into the past, and pray for understanding. Pray for a knowledge that isn’t there anymore, because I can’t go read it in the book and most of our Elders are going on. And my grandfather — fortunately I had the last fifteen years with him, one-on-one — he verified things that sometimes I didn’t think that we knew about. I think my Elders hoped that some of us would retain that knowledge. But we know that we live in the year 2001, and that we have to have a balance. I am a traditionalist, but I am also very much a contemporary person who understands what’s going on around me and must defend the integrity of my people through my work.... Recently, I think more than anything, that I have moved past the last one hundred years, into the depth of the thousand years ... and it’s there where I really search for an understanding of where we are today.

Today, I have a school program called The Musqueam Museum School and it gives children an opportunity to have a little insight into what our people were, and who they, partly, are. And I say ‘partly’ because it’s only a part of us today. That gives us success. Those children ought to have a little peek into that....

It’s a five-week program we have and we go into the school on five consecutive terms or they come and see us. We do both. We start at the Museum: we go to the schools and we come here, so that the children have somewhat of an insight into our life, as well. But not to think that we’re all wonderful romantic weavers. Because there’s only a few of us who do this work, and only a few of us who look after the environment, and there’s only a few of us who do politics. We share [with the children] the kind of life [choices]. We may take different little parts of the life that people have here and we interpret it in our way.

We work for a balance with the Museum of Anthropology, at the University of British Columbia, and the education system, so that the children understand that and the teachers, as well. The teachers are very grateful because they knew more about Haidas than they did about Salish people in Vancouver, when we’re all Salish people. It has been our own fault for not taking that responsibility before. But now we do, and we have been doing it for three or four years, and last year was one of our most successful years — we were booked to capacity. One of my goals, with creating this program, was that we would be able to work with our own women, who have been involved with me [in the Weaving School] and teach them to be cultural teachers. We wouldn’t want to pass this on to the teachers so that they could change it, or add to it, or create it the way they wanted it to be. It had to be the way that we felt comfortable, as well as the lady that works with me at the Museum of Anthropology, Jill Baird. We find a way of inter-understanding between both cultures; and lots of times, I’ve had to pull her
back and go over why we started this program. So, we have been able to have a few misunderstandings, but resolve them very quickly because that was our foundation.

LT  *Is it a programme geared for aboriginal kids?*

DS Absolutely not — it’s for everyone. But another one of our goals is that we could use it as an after-school program, here, on the reserve. I am, finally, after four years, going to present it to our educational committee on the reserve so that they will support it to be a program that should be taught to all Musqueam kids. I have been on that educational committee for four years and it’s always been pushed aside, because the focus is academic education — fundamental education.

LT  ...reading, writing, and arithmetic?

DS Yeah, but our kids are still failing; they’re still disinterested, they are on the bottom of the list. My vision is that if we can slip the foundation under them, then we may succeed with it. I mean, if I can come from grades one to seven and feel inadequate, and then become successful in what I am doing because of what I have learnt through my historical knowledge and from my community and put that into perspective, then we have success! And we share that — it’s not for just me! That’s, I am sure, what we need in our community to be successful — that we have to give back the tools that we took away. Those are the tools that we need, again, and they are there — we just needed to pull them out.

LT  *You have used the word ‘romantic’ in relation to your weaving. Can you say more about that?*

DS I am a romantic about many things in my life — I love romantic comedies, I love romantic movies, and — you know, we are all actors. We came from a ‘dysfunctional era’ — where everyone was, you know, crazy.... And how do we get out of that? So, it becomes very philosophical. And you either get out or you don’t. You either want to survive or you don’t want to survive. And I wanted to survive and I figured out that if I needed to survive, then I needed to let go of the things that were a part of the reason why I wouldn’t. I needed to be responsible for my own happiness, nobody else was. If I wanted to be happy then I had to get out of it, and I just started taking layers off — layer by layer, by layer — and walking out of myself and catching up to who I was. And that’s what the weaving has done for me — it has caught me up to who I am — and it walks with me forward. It guides me in my life.
It gives me strength, identity! That’s what a successful person is, a person who has that balance in their life, an understanding of why they exist.

LT Do you feel it is something to do with the daily practice of sitting at the loom?

DS No, I don’t think so. I think, also, weaving is the end result of it. It all starts within you and it is a tool. It’s a visual tool, is what it is. It reflects back to the person observing it. I bring it from a place where it was lying dormant and bring it forward again. I think for people to understand that when you look at the work, [you] don’t just look at me, I am not responsible for it. (laughs) But you want to give the credit to me, and it’s not to my credit. It’s to the credit of the people who existed [before us]. I didn’t dream one day I was going to be a weaver — but I do have a vision. I am very much a visionary, and sometimes I do see that in the future, I know where this work will go and I know where it needs to go, and if I didn’t know that then I wouldn’t take it there. I am very careful about where my work goes and that’s why I don’t sell to the galleries.

LT So, where does your work go?

DS Everything that I do has a home. It has an understanding. We did the big weaving for the Vancouver International Airport in 1996. But that’s my home. That’s tradition and technology together. But that’s my homeland. That’s where my people lived. The very ground there is their foundation and the weaving just shows you where the Musqueam community has gone, from tradition to technology, and that’s why I did that work.

What I mean by technology is the scale, but also the environment that the weaving lives in — the airport; high tech. I think the difference about the piece that is hanging there and the pieces that we had done prior to that — because that was our step from tradition into this century — [was] the size of it and because of the colours that we used. What we decided was that we would use this really beautiful bright red, which we hadn’t found in any of our dyes in the environment. So, we used a commercial dye. We used the really nice earth, gold/mustard colour which would be representative of the Salish people. The red, black and white is representative of the Northwest Coast — to honour them, and think of them as we were doing our work here — that it wasn’t just for us. We were doing it for the whole coastline, and representing an open door to the world and to our land, here, on the northwest coast [of British Columbia].

We always only used natural colours before that. We only used natural dyes from the environment and we were steadfast to stay there in tradition
until we felt comfortable enough to move out — which took ten years! We wouldn’t share too much with anybody. We worked in our homes; we had commissions to do and we did them for the right moment and the right people, and a few galleries asked us but we said, ‘No. That’s not where we want to go’. I am not in this for the business. (laughs)

LT And the piece you created for the Museum of Anthropology. [see front cover] you dedicated it to your mum....

DS When we did the airport one, we realised that we had come a distance and we were ready for a more contemporary view on what we were doing. We also realised that in all the work that we had done, we only spoke, ever, of our father, our grandfather, or our community, but that we didn’t always give as much credit to our mother, who was really responsible for our well-being, after my Dad died, when we were very young. So I wanted to dedicate it to her for her heritage, and for her contribution to our village, even though other people are not aware of it. She thought of this community as her home and, over the years, felt it was some place that she’d always be, and wanted to be. We’ve lived here, and it’s been a real challenge to understand the changes that go on, and the hardships that we come up against.

NOTES

Susan A. Point (b. 1952) has been instrumental in reviving Coast Salish art since she began with a jewellery course in 1981. Now well-known, she produces serigraphs and prints, and public art in wood and glass. Point often starts with a ‘spindle whorl’ motif as the foundation of her imagery.
FATHOMS:
the cartography of ghosts

Maps unfold beneath
my cartographic palms

I touch Vancouver like an afterthought
leaving death behind, fleeing continents

now there is no one else
there is no forwarding address

* * *

The map, after all, has not changed
the streets still sparkle
languidly

as though space had not shifted
as though my grief had not imploded
sucking all coordinates towards me

planes turn my way now
explorers seek me out
following their compass needles

yesterday Captain Cook
pencilled me in between his islands —
‘I will delete this entry here,’
he said, ‘make room for you,’
rubbing until the resin in the map was gone
until his ink scarred — until the vellum tore
and there beneath the skin my pale face
ruptured forth, pleading

***

the piper marched behind my mother's grave
— a military tattoo.

She was laid to rest beside her parents
where the piper had played so often —
where 'Scotland the Brave' met 'Ave Maria'
till I wept

***

The ground was so thickly frozen
the year before
that my father was left behind
to be buried in the spring

I never visited his grave
when I tried he eluded me
the stones stared back blankly with unwritten histories

'The unmarked graves,' my uncle later said.
'are hangings — deserters, criminals —
an absence now'.

I couldn't find his place...
did I make the same of him?

***

my mother led me to the cemetery
where we wound our way, reading all the names but his
She held her side, her eyes just lipped with white:

'One more minute. How far's the car?'

I should remember...

Not so fast'.
I sighed in silent fury as we waited in the grass.
    Impatient with departures. Angry at her loss.
She was dying on this consecrated ground,
    and I didn’t even know.

Would it please my God, in retrospect,
to let me claw the harshness from my words?

* * *

Columbus clears his blind eyes
and asks me what has happened
My father’s passing has brought explorers to my door
The tall resplendent masts weave in my front yard
The music groans, out of place

He spreads the scroll —
smoothes the skin and points:
    ‘Here, we were here.
    And then ... nothing’.

He is speaking Spanish or Portuguese — but I understand every word.
    ‘Nada. Aca nada.’ Canada. ‘There is nothing there.’

I know how he feels. This emptiness.
This desert that was once so green.

He has lost his way.
I hurry him along — there are others waiting
some torn, encrusted with the sea,
their faces drawn and barnacled.

Others are burnt and fractured
    with the desert rain
The sand is plastered to their overcoats
I resist the temptation to brush their sleeves
dust their bent shoulders
    I want to protect them
against their age, their weariness
    I want to hold them close against me
tell them ‘You’ve done well’.
Sometimes I think I’ve spoken.
More often I forget.
It’s hard to be eloquent here
where words are so plentiful. They bring
me labels: ‘This is what the island’s called
— this is what the landscape means —
but it escapes me…’.

I am weary of these journeymen
asking me the time — as if it mattered.

We are speaking of the age. We are making nations
through elisions. We are swallowed by the absences
that we label and secure
with gestures in a darkened room

The landscape is hardly real.
after all. It is all invented

space

Columbus bristles guiltily.
There are others waiting. But he will not be moved.
He tells me: ‘There was nothing here before
the compass pricked the page —
until we sought to conquer it with words.
We spoke it into being
— and our fables fell like rain.
   Building layer by layer,
they formed a reef, an atoll, an island.
   Then we crashed into it with our ships,
our own imaginings ripped our hulls to shreds:
it is a terrible thing to dream beyond ourselves’.

His body turns away,
even though he scarcely moves. He knows my thoughts.
He answers before I have a chance to speak.

‘Most dreams are built on other people’s land.
Most dreams are constantly undone.
   They already scratch my works,
uncovering what I find,
rewriting what I name.
When everything's discovered you wipe away the chalk.
begin again — this palimpsest amnesia —
    but it is always there'.

He pauses.
Sees the ghostlike stirrings from the shadows.
They are getting restless in the wings.
What can I possibly tell them that is worth more than an island?
These sailors who spent years at sea, praying for a slice of land
Why are they pressing in on me
as though I were a harbour
— a dock for ships whose timber is so swelled
with rain they could be sponges?
    I push my finger through a hull
that comes too close ...
I feel it suck me in.
    I dodge the figurehead and pull away.
My seaming palm emerges glistening and wet.

The desert travellers eye
me thirstily.

I have no time for them. They've had their day.

    * * *

Were my father here he'd shrug his shoulders and repair the hole.
He'd lift his restless hammer and position the first nail.
    'This,' he'd say, 'is Cedar'. He'd name it,
but would tame the substance
through the act.
I'd hold my hand like his, poised to do the same.
We'd move in unison.

    * * *

My mother would hover like a chimera
unwritten in our explorations
holding out a hand, including herself through
unacknowledged gestures
How could I turn from her so thoroughly?
Why did I not accept her sere geographies
the heritage she proudly offered up?

Why did I speak to her in tongues
pretending not to be of her?

* * *

And what of the legacy of wives and guides
who bore explorers
through uncharted worlds?
How can I know their stories when my mother’s
stays unread — unrecognised.

Is there a door nearby that stands ajar?
A room whose musty lace and fine embroideries
aren’t even tinted yellow from the sun
because the curtains have stayed closed so long?
Have I walked past it daily in my search for him?

If I crane my neck and tear myself away from influence
will Florence Baker meet my glance?
  Will Sacajawea stare me down,
her newborn child reproachful in her arms?
Will Mrs Parks or Lady Franklin fight my cause?

Why do I leave that space untouched?

* * *

The darkened room, the day I packed my bags,
echoed with the hollow clock
muffled in the box that held it.

Outside the snow was scratching patterns in the glass.
We sat on dusty steps rehearsing our goodbyes.

All I could do was shout
although I never said a word.
She shook her head despairingly
reading every thought.

* * *
Here is the silver touch of evening,
Where memory is the pressure of a hand

the leather creaks like tin
when I lift the suitcase from the icy porch

‘Goodbye,’ I breathe.
   In winter, weather mocks uncertainty
freezing syllables in the air
   I leave all my unspoken rage in that one dark breath
between us
and find it again, ten years later.
hovering, still, over her deathbed

At night, when the lights go down, and morphine
runs its fiery course through the lakes and rivers
of her veins,

   and when she has stopped suffocating
   and pressing drunkenly at the bars that hold her in
   and when she has stopped trying to mouth the words
   she has always generously said
   and when I have won my battle with the intern
   who will not kill her pain —
   and when the ward is silent with relief
   and even footsteps have long since stilled

And when at last I have my chance to rub away the resin
of that long dark breath
and show her what I really meant to say

the darkness presses down on me
and I run from the room,
   out into the gothic shadows of the Sacred Heart
   fleeing, as always, fleeing

Most explorations are escape not search

When I return, at last, prepared to conquer shadows,
prepared at last to wrestle ghosts,
her face has pierced the darkness that I feared.
I never said farewell.

* * *

And so they both have sailed
while I wandered inland and apart.

I make my way blindly through the bodies
that are pressed against me in the church
whispering their fondness for the dear departed
pressing paper prayers at me as though
I’ll one day trade them in for cash

* * *

I hold this compass firmly in my hand.
It points to every corner of the globe.
    This perfect compass rose that fails to bloom.

How could I know that the magnetic north pole
    was not at the true north pole at all?
Where was I heading when I wandered off?

How could I know the needle could be swayed
by filings on the ship,
    by iron or steel,
by rivets and the like?

That alcohol was used to float the compass card,
that fathoms were another way to tell the time.

* * *

There are stories that Franklin visited my home
though he refused to queue.
    He saw the sodden carpet,
the fractured hulls,
he studied the animology of ships:
    the fox, the rabetts. An ark of shiply pieces.
He rejected its domestic space:
   its bonnet, apron, shoe and cap.

He held the prayer-book open at regret —
   the holystone for scrubbing decks —
   inspected all the sails
   — the worming, the parceling of cloth —

sprinkled sand across the planks for me to wash them down.

‘A fiddlehead turns inward*, he might have said.
his fingers lingering on battened ribs.
   planked skin too battered to resist.

When I probe the room I notice he has gone.
   How can such absences be made so easily?

* * *

They carried him away.
My mother, in her own time.
watched the ambulance disappearing like a ship.
believing my father would return. I shared her hope.

But the Northwest passage was never found.
   It never can be found.
Don’t believe them if they tell you otherwise.

Maps are just fictions that articulate our grief

and grief a map of where we’ve failed to anchor
   a record of the journeys undertaken
   the shoals we’ve foundered on
   the nights we’ve crossed
   ever silent, ever painful,
   ever dark.
And Unafraid of the Gorgon on the Breastplate, the Stones Speak: The Anguished Drama of Return in M. Nourbese Philip’s ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’

M. (Marlene) Nourbese Philip is one of the most powerful, internationally reputed Afro-Caribbean poets in Canada today. Much of her appeal lies in the dexterous manner in which she intermingles the oral tradition with EuroAmerican traditions of writing. In this essay I will focus on both these traditions with specific reference to the poem ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language‘ in She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks. The first part of the essay deals with the narrative strategies by Philip to express the loss experienced by the Afro-Canadians, while the second part deals with my readerly response to the poem as a South Asian woman of colour belonging to a minority group, the Parsis. Despite our many differences, Philip’s voice finds an echo in my heart for my people too have known the pain of exile and subsequent loss of identity.

I

this tongue that roots
in
deepp

yank
pull
tear

root
out

that I would

chop
in

pieces

a snake
each to grow

a head

(Gorgon —
to turn my tongue to stone)
a tail
and haunt the absence
that mourns
/haunted into shape and form….

M. Nourbese Philip

Petrified by the Gorgon on the breastplate of their white colonisers, the Africans who journeyed across the Atlantic to the ‘New World’ were ruthlessly silenced and dehumanised. In order to prevent them from uniting to foment rebellion and revolution, laws were created to prohibit them from speaking in African languages. With their mother tongues wrenched from their mouths, the equation between experience and expression was destroyed. Explaining this self-alienating process, M. Nourbese Philip writes:

The African could still think and i-mage, she could still conceive of what was happening to her. But in the stripping her of her language, in denying the voice power to make and, simultaneously, to express the i-mage — in denying the voice expression, in fact — the ability and power to use the voice was effectively stymied. Furthermore, alien and negative European languages would replace those African languages recently removed and, irony of all ironies, when the word/i-mage equation was attempted again, this process would take place through a language that was not only experientially foreign, but also etymologically hostile and expressive of the non-being of the African. (1989a 14–15)

To speak an alien language is to enter an alien consciousness and consequently be estranged from one’s own people. Talking similarly about the loss of identity which accompanies the loss of language, the First Nations writer Basil Johnston observes that the colonised ‘lose not only the ability to express the simplest of daily sentiments and needs but they can no longer understand the ideas, concepts, insights, attitudes, rituals, ceremonies, institutions brought into being by their ancestors; and having lost the power to understand, cannot sustain, enrich or pass on their heritage’ (10). The silenced, ‘culturally disadvantaged’ groups are consequently spoken for/about, labelled indifferently (see Philip’s powerful poem, ‘What’s in a name’) and exiled ‘into the pale and beyond, into the nether nether land of race’ (Philip 1992, 10). They then exist in the margins as ‘eternal immigrants forever poised on the verge of not belonging’ (Harris 115); ‘the thin/ mixture of just come and don’t exist’ (Brand 29). Prompted by the various consciousness-raising movements post sixties, the Afro-Caribbeans in Canada, like oppressed groups in several parts of the world, position themselves as subjects and strive to empower their people by breaking the generations of silence imposed on them. Vehemently refusing to be intimidated anymore by the Gorgon, they, like the narrator in the poem quoted above, aim to confront her, destroy the source of her evil power and tame her with the valour of their tongues.

In 1989 Gayatri Spivak revised her observation that the subaltern woman cannot speak, to suggest that ‘if the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not the subaltern any more’ (283). By returning the gaze, the
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disempowered reveal that the coloniser’s value system, which was paraded as ‘universal’, is nothing but a ‘construct’. Their incredulity towards all the master’s narratives disturbs the power equation and shifts, what bell hooks calls, ‘looking relations’ (340) between the coloniser and the colonised once and for all. Since the quest for authentication must necessarily begin with language, M. Nourbese Philip ‘problematise[s] the monoglossia of English-Canadian literature’ (Godard 154) in a powerful and haunting manner in her poem, ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’. She does this by foregrounding the politics of the hyphen that complicates the situating of the subject as both ‘here’ and ‘there’. Vijay Mishra perceptively observes that under the guise of empowering people who came from different ethnic backgrounds and encouraging them to preserve their culture, the hyphen also ‘disempowers them, it makes them, to use a hyphenated term, empoweringly-disempowered’ (10). True to the self-versus-Other consciousness bred by Western dichotomous thinking, those different from oneself cannot be granted power. In ‘Managing the Unmanageable’, Philip detects a deep-rooted fear of the alien Other in the Western psyche:

European thought has traditionally designated certain groups not only as inferior but also, paradoxically, as threats to their order, systems, and traditions of knowledge. Women, Africans, Asians, and aboriginals can be said to comprise these groups and together they constitute the threat of the Other — that embodiment of everything the white male perceived himself not to be. Where the latter was male, the Other was female; where he was rational, the Other was irrational; where he was controlled, the Other was uncontrolled.... If left unchecked, western European thought suggests, these qualities — of the Other — could undermine the social order; for this reason these groups are considered potentially, if not actually, unmanageable. At all times they must be managed. (295)

They are expected to know their place and not disturb the status quo. In She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, Philip rebels against this by consciously setting out ‘to be unmanageable’ (1990 296). ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’ is one such unmanageable, collage-like, unreadable poem, ‘sculpted out of the colonial experience’ (Philip 1990, 297). The centerpiece of the poem ‘is an unbroken refrain on the ambivalence of English being both a mother and father tongue’ (Philip interviewed by Williamson 228). In the Caribbean islands the upper and educated middle class speak standard English, while a variant of it, which Philip calls the Caribbean demotic, is spoken by the people in the street. For European-educated writers like herself, Claire Harris and Dionne Brand, the choice between standard English and the demotic involves much anguish. Since the demotic is dismissed by the speakers of standard English as this chattel language
babu english
slave idiom
nigger vernacular
Coolie pidgin
wog pronunciation
(‘Lessons For The Voice (1) (contd)’)

She hesitates to regard it as her mother tongue. Moreover,

A mother tongue is not
not a foreign lan lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
-a foreign anguish. (‘Discourse’ 56)

Keeping her privileged upper middle class background in mind, she then decides to regard it as her father tongue for

A father tongue is
a foreign language.
therefore English is
a foreign language
not a mother tongue. (‘Discourse’ 56)

The suppression of the mother tongue by the colonising master tongue causes her to be

...tongue
dumb
dumb-tongued
dub-tongued
danm dumb
tongue. (‘Discourse’ 56)

To the right of this central, chant-sounding text are two historical edicts in italics about African slaves being prohibited from speaking their mother tongues and having their tongues removed for breach of this edict. Writers like T.S. Eliot (in his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’) believed that a poem must be depersonalised and removed from its morass of history so that anyone, anywhere can understand and identify with it. Philip however, sneers at the cultural imperialism underlying the concepts of ‘universality’ and ‘objectivity’ which such modes of thought hold dear. She insists on the importance of history, for ‘to forget is to collude in one’s erasure’ (1992 20). ‘Memory is essential to human survival’ (1989c) for it has ‘a potentially kinetic quality’ (1992 19) prompting the colonised to create alternate his/her stories. The edicts in the poem clearly indicate her insistence on combating ‘the amnesia of colonialism through the memory of post-colonialism’ (Hutcheon 89) to write the Africans in the New World into being.

The left-hand margin of the page describes a mother blowing words into the mouth of her newborn daughter. This text which is entirely in capital letters is interestingly turned away from the rest of the page. Philip says that she does this to indicate the manner in which Black women in particular, and all women in
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WHEN I WAS BORN, THE MOTHER HELD HER NEWBORN CHIUM) CLOSE. SHE BEGAN THEN TO LICK IT ALL OVER. THE CHILD WHIMPERED A LITTLE, BUT AS THE VIOLENT'S TONGUE MOVED FASTER AND STRONGER OVER ITS BODY, IT GREW SILENT—THE MOTHER TURNING IT THIS WAY AND THAT UNDER HER TONGUE, UNTIL SHE HAD TONGUED IT CLEAN OF THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE COVERING ITS BODY.

Discourse on the Logic of Language

English
is my mother tongue.
A mother tongue is not
to a foreign language.

English is
my father tongue.
A father tongue is
a foreign language, therefore English is
not a mother tongue.

What is my mother
my mammy tongue
my mummy tongue
my mother tongue
my ma tongue?

I have no mother
tongue
no mother to tongue
no tongue to mother
tongue
me

I must therefore be tongue
dumb
dumb-tongued
dumb-tongued
dumb dumb
tongue

These parts of the brain chiefly responsible for speech are named after two learned nineteenth century doctors, the eponymous Doctor Wernicke and Broca respectively.

Dr. Broca believed the size of the brain determined intelligence; he devoted much of his time to 'proving' that white males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than, and were therefore superior to, women, Blacks and other peoples of colour.

Understanding and recognition of the spoken word takes place in Wernicke's area—the left temporal lobe, situated next to the auditory cortex; from there relevant information passes to Broca's area—situated in the left frontal cortex—which then forms the response and passes it on to the motor cortex. The motor cortex controls the muscles of speech.
general, have been positioned in society (Carey 20). ‘[T]here is a gap between the main text and the woman’s story, and to read the woman’s story you have to make an effort — a physical effort’ (Carey 20). Patriarchy portrays women in terms of their relationships with men and regards all forms of female bonding with suspicion. Signe Hammer perceptively notes that ‘[m]ost of what passes between mother and daughter falls outside the acknowledged social context.... This has a paradoxical effect of making the mother-daughter relationship an “underground” one, whose emotional power and importance may be increased precisely because it is underground’ (qtd in Buss 32.). While the historical edicts in the right-hand margin record ‘the parameters of silence for the African in the New World’ (Philip 1990, 297), the mother-daughter text records a silencing based on gender. The anguish of the Black woman of the central text is thus seen to be caused by both her race and her gender.

The pages facing the poem describe the physiology of speech and a series of multiple-choice questions on the tongue as an organ. These texts reveal that the English language is inflected by institutionalised racism. The ‘language of logic’ used to describe the production of speech in human beings conceals the racist objectives of De Broca who set out to prove that ‘white males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than, and were therefore superior to, women, Blacks and other peoples of colour’ (Philip 1989b, 57). Through this, ‘Philip develops a critique of the entire system of signification, showing that the overseer’s whip is the unacknowledged metonym for the production of linguistic meaning in Euro-American civilisation. Such concepts of inferior intelligence and lesser value of the speech of Blacks were theories of white supremacy justifying the practices of Black slavery’ (Godard 163). Though Philip does not comment on the absurdity of these seemingly objective, ‘scientific’ texts, we are made to perceive them as both racist and sexist.

The four multiple-choice questions with which the ‘poem’ ends, likewise foreground what Barthes calls the ‘stickiness’ of ‘encratic’ (40) language (which is language produced and spread under the protection of power). Under this system of discursive violence, the oppressed find themselves in ‘the double bind situation.... For the choices offered are in fact no choice’ (Godard 163). The first question emphasises the fact that, like the penis, the tongue too is an organ used for wielding power. The second indicates the destructive-redemptive power of the tongue which is both the principal organ of taste and articulate speech and the principal organ of exploitation and oppression. The third offers no choice as the options merely give physiological descriptions of the tongue. The latter part of the final option however, sounds a non-scientific note with ‘contains ten thousand taste buds, none of which is sensitive to the taste of foreign words’ (Philip 1989b, 9). The final question about the metamorphosis of sound to intelligible word focuses on the undeniable fact that ‘systems of discourse are often synonymous with systems of power’ (Garrett-Petts 83). Philip says that though this realisation
The Anguished Drama of Return

was crucial to her growth, it caused her to become ‘an epistemological orphan’ (Philip 1990, 299).

Philip says that for her, ‘working in English, is like coming to terms with an abusive parent’ for it involves ‘coming to terms with this mother/father tongue that I love, but that has meant so much pain for me and my people’ (1990 299). In the central text of ‘Discourse’, she dramatises this anguished drama of return by making the word ‘language’ itself physiologically difficult to articulate

... lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
- a foreign anguish. (56)

Adam, who was moulded in his ‘white’ Maker’s image, joyously exclaims in Milton’s Paradise Lost ‘To speak I tri’d, and forthwith spake / My tongue obey’d and readily could name/ Whate’er I saw’ (Bk 8, ll. 271–73) but when the silenced return to voice, they are both terribly confused and hesitant. In ‘Making the House Our Own’, Philip asks if an attempt should be made to transform the ‘father tongue’ into the mother tongue (43). Afrosporic people do not in fact have much choice for ‘[I]n the absence of any other language by which the past may be repossessed, reclaimed and its most painful aspects transcended, English in its broadest spectrum must be made to do the job’ (Philip 1989, 18). The ‘enemy’s language’ (which is what the Amerindian writer Joy Harjo regards English as) must be ‘detoxified’ before it can be made to articulate their reality. Such a language, emerging phoenix-like out of the ashes of loss and silence, could restore the equation between experience and expression and heal the wound. The Black woman in ‘Discourse’ therefore cries out:

| tongue mother |
| tongue me     |
| mothertongue me |
| mother me    |
| touch me     |
| with the tongue of your |
| lan lan lang |
| language. (‘Discourse’ 58) |

The father tongue may begin to ‘mother’ in the manner of the woman in the mother-daughter text but the quest for it will be constantly interrupted. The poem itself is so full of interruptions that, true to the African musical tradition, it reminds one of jazz music ‘where you might have the main riff going and the musician interrupts and goes off on another musical path’ (Williamson 230). Philip interrupts the text also to reflect a historical reality: ‘the African in the New World represented a major interruption of both the European text of the Old World and the African text of a more ancient world that had continued uninterrupted for millennia, as
well as the text of the aboriginal world of the Americas and the Caribbean’ (1990 298). The interruptions make the poem seem so hybridised that it can be labelled ‘postmodern’ but it is a lot more rewarding to read it as ‘[t]he restless product of a long history of miscegenation, assimilation, and syncretisation, as well as of conflict, contradiction, and cultural violence’ (Sangari 158).

Philip often talks about the violent ‘eruption of the body into the text’ (1990 298) of *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. This is because ‘when the African came to the New World she brought with her nothing but her body and all the memory and history which body could contain’ (1990 298). Furthermore, she was ‘managed’ not only by the ‘ overseer’s whip but also by the penis; the ultimate symbol of control in male-female relations. Philip observes that the long poem form of the poems in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, helped her satisfy a very strong desire during her second pregnancy to occupy more space. In the Western culture the only time women are allowed to take up space physically and be physically big is during pregnancy. During an interview in 1996 she said: ‘Intellectually, I really had a sense of wanting to take up space with my ideas — physical space, somehow spatially to expand, and this is where I believe the idea of the long poem begins for me’ (Vevaina 21). By writing the ‘real’ (not symbolic) Black female body, Philip wants to make her readers stop regarding Black women as either highly sexed and castrating or matriarchal and asexual. This is not a form of biological essentialism for, as the postcolonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, it is ‘a way of making theory in gender, of making a theory a politics of everyday life, thereby rewriting the ethnic female subject as a site of differences’ (44).

Philip believes that she is working within ‘the tradition of alchemy, which derives from the Arab word al-kamiya, meaning the art of the Black and of Egypt. It is a tradition of transformation and metamorphosis — transforming the conventional and standard into something new, like lead into gold’ (Carey 21). True to this statement made by Philip, Brenda Carr recognises a trickster element at play in her impersonation of styles and forms not her own; she deploys an ‘aesthetics of ruse’ or ‘transformation and transmutation’ that historically allowed the subjugated to survive. ‘This,’ she feels, ‘may be closely related to the traditional female trickster figure from Western African Dahomean mythology who used wit, disguise, and concealment to overwhelm a larger and more powerful foe’ (83). Philip regards current street talk, hip talk or black talk as ‘one of the most overt, explicit and successful acts of subverting the English’ (1985 43) designed to trigger the alchemical process. The transformation could make the language of enslavement, the language of liberation. It is important to note that though Philip sees this process as desirable, she does not mindlessly glorify the culture of her homeland as she is not interested in creating an Afrocological, millenarian discourse which is ‘every bit as imperialistic as the coloniser’s own project’ (Mishra 5). By naming the oppressors, the process of oppression and the effects of
oppression, she hopes to enable her people to create their own images and see themselves as distinct and valuable people.

Philip’s reactive and recuperative agenda is designed to lead her people along the political and spiritual path to healing and change. As a Black woman writer, she feels the need to go beyond confrontational writing for, by writing from a reactive position, one is responding to ‘someone else’s agenda’ (Philip 1992, 67). In ‘Why the United States’, Julia Kristeva perceptively remarks: ‘[As] everyone knows every negation is a definition. An “opposing” position is therefore determined by what is being opposed. And in this way we arrive at two antithetical systems, which internalise and reflect one another’s qualities’ (qtd in Philip 1992, 63). Philip thus urges writers to transform negation into affirmation and reaction into initial statement by seeing themselves ‘[a]s centre, not Other’ (1992 69) and reconstruct their identities piece by piece in their own images (1992 65). She therefore urges Blacks not to collude in their victimisation by thinking of themselves as marginal or marginalised. Self-empowerment demands that the ‘margin’ must be thought of as ‘frontier’ but she realises that it is not as simple as it sounds for ‘that authentic leap from margin to frontier demands nothing less than a profound revolution in thinking and metamorphosis in consciousness’ (1990 300). Such a transformation will liberate the coloniser too for those who oppress others cannot themselves be truly free.

II

Every time we raise our voices, we hear echoes.
Jo-Anne Elder

Philip’s voice strangely finds an echo across thousands of miles of land and sea in my own heart. Why does this text about the loss of language and culture of Afro-Caribbeans in Canada move me as deeply as it does? Are we not products of very different histories and socio-religious backgrounds? Yet, despite the many differences, my position in India as a woman belonging to a minority group, the Parsis (also called Zoroastrians — the followers of Prophet Zoroaster), is in fact very similar.

My culture received its first big blow when, three hundred years after Zarathushtra founded his religion, Darius the Great lost Persia (now Iran) to the Greek conqueror, Alexander. As a result of this defeat which took place around 300 B.C. (Dhalla 24), Zoroastrian religion and culture lost their royal patronage. Additionally, Alexander and a Persian courtesan named Rukshana (Roxanne in Greek), torched the royal library at Persepolis in a drunken orgy. At a time when only two sets of our religious and historical texts existed, one of them was lost forever when the archives were burnt down. About ten centuries after this event, my people fled from our ‘motherland’ Persia, to escape persecution and forcible conversion to Islam by the Arab conquerors. According to legend, Jadav Rana,
the ruler of Sanjan (the small village on the west coast in the province of Gujarat where we landed) seemed reluctant to grant us asylum at first. To indicate this, he sent us a cup of milk, filled to the brim, to show that there was no room in his village for us. Our head priest cleverly returned the cup with a spoonful of sugar stirred in, to signify that we would mingle with the villagers and sweeten their lives. Pleased with the gesture, Jadav Rana granted us refuge but on certain conditions. We were allowed to practise our monotheistic religion but had to give up our language, customs and mode of dressing and adopt those of the Hindus. We were also made to give up arms, celebrate religious feasts and marriage ceremonies only after sunset and not inter-marry with the local population. What we did not realise at that time was that Jadav Rana our protector, was also the destroyer of our culture.

By the time the European traders arrived in India, we Parsis had established ourselves as successful agriculturists, artisans and traders. We traded with the Portuguese, then the Dutch, the French and finally the British who became the rulers of India in 1770. The Raj changed things dramatically for us. We soon developed a ‘fairer-therefore-better-than-most-Indians’ complex, gleefully embraced British culture and excelled as Western-educated lawyers, doctors, teachers and creative writers. Though some intellectuals resisted the British and even joined the independence movement, most of us felt pleased with the preferential treatment meted out to us by our colonisers. The post-independence years however, left us feeling confused and bereft. How could our ‘Mai-baaps’ (parents) have forsaken us? While many who could not endure their ‘reduced circumstances’ emigrated to ‘better’ lands, those who remained in India once again needed to fit in by developing survival strategies. A few intellectuals insisted that despite our socio-historical reality, we Parsis had forged a distinct identity and had contributed to Indian culture and progress in important ways. In their opinion, we should strive to see ourselves as postcolonial ‘Indians’ for by now, our position in this country could not be truly termed ‘diasporic’. Most Parsis, however, lost their moorings. Some tried to assimilate with the Hindu mainstream by tapping their feet and clicking their fingers to Hindi film music while others deluded themselves into believing that we Parsis are definitely superior to other Indians on account of our ‘British’ life style, our ‘British’ accents and our passion for Beethoven, Mozart, Liszt and Chopin.

Uncle Sam’s forays into Indian culture via Michael Jackson and the Star TV with programmes like Santa Barbara, The Bold and The Beautiful and Dallas have made it possible for the Westernised group to once again breathe more freely. With the young and the not-so-young Indians wanting to look and live like those bold and beautiful white people ‘out there’, the general unexpressed feeling among this group now is, ‘At last Indians (some, even today, refer to themselves as “Persians” or just “foreigners”) have learnt the only decent way to live’. Blissfully unconscious of their ‘colonial cringe’, they ignore even our step-mother tongue,
Gujarati, and encourage their children to learn only English in the hope of seeing them emigrate to the Whitelands while they are still wet behind their ears. Unfortunately for the community, even the superficially Indianised Parsis seem to be faring no better. The rhetoric of ‘Hinduvata’ voiced by muscle-flexing politicians in the nineties has created a kind of fearful psychosis among them. To add to the damage, those who claim to be the ‘protectors’ of our religion and culture are themselves lost in self-aggrandisement and stuck in the mire of orthodoxy. Unable to interpret Zoroastrianism connotatively, they cling to the letter rather than the spirit of our religion and propagate purist notions of our culture and religion, totally unmindful of our hybridised identity. Estranged from our language and ethnicity, our numerically dwindling community cannot survive in this (American) global village for more than a few decades. Where are our creative writers? Why aren’t writers like Rohinton Mistry, Saros Cowasjee, Boman Desai, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy and Bapsi Sidhwa able to lead us into the future by taking us back into our past? Which past? What past? Are they too as lost as we are? ‘What shall we do tomorrow? What shall we ever do?’ (Eliot ‘The Wasteland’, II.133–34).

Teetering on the brink of despair, I applaud the efforts of those communities which refuse to collude in their erasure. I am neither arrogant nor so naive as to claim that I truly ‘understand’ writers like Philip. I do not walk in their shoes and cannot occupy their headspace but I thank them for allowing me a few glimpses into their way of ‘becoming’. They have touched me, I have grown.1

NOTES
1 This section is a modified version of the final section of my paper ‘Black Woman “Righter” and the Anguish of English’. The present text reflects the changes in my thinking about my culture and my position as a reader of Afro-Caribbean Canadian literature.

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ON A LOCAL TRAIN IN MUMBAI
(for Coomi Vevaina)

After taking in Elephanta:
and the trinuriti
    out on an island
on a sweltering hot day —
    I enter the train
in Mumbai with you, Parsi
scholar, and watch people
huddling,
    all trying to get in,
along with the many tourists.

The crowd not defeated,
but with an accustomed ease
or frenzy due to their state
of poverty, or what seems like it;
    and two young girls:
eight or nine, with eyes large
    as a cow’s.
shabby clothes worn past their knees,
    unique in style …

And you say in India it’s so special
    because of what
has to be learned,
    or endured
as a movie-star handsome youth,
    determined at the back —
plays mournfully on his harmonium,
    the train moving along,
and he sings a bhajan,
    to establish the right mood.
The two girls take their
turn to ask for alms,
coming to us next —
as I long to stand up
and listen to the centuries unfolding,
the girls’ eyes wider —
as an entire continent
opens before me

Across the Arabian Sea,
Elephanta’s images still form,
the train chug-chugs along
as I record sensations
with affection or simple love
I can never truly return.

(November 1, 1997)
ANGLO-SAXON ETHNIC

1
He begins with the parable of a remembered place:
where he is comfortable with style and form,
rhythms of another country once more,
always with a will to understand his own.

Absolute, definite, or uncompromising:
all shapes I come to grips with, taking
heed that things must change or forever remain as they have been for centuries.

With new instincts or desire at the brink
near the Amazon, not the Thames. I consider places yet undiscovered, learning about familiar truths we must learn to live by.

2
This rage or desire in foreign places,
civilisation at one’s fingertips, or the effort to be what the indigenous peoples often consider their own, always with a new sensibility.

Now constrained to being in one place, colonies are yet like secrets forming, as I reflect on the tribe’s own memory and being able to understand myself less over the years.

The drama now played out in territories — like a burning desire, or being discreet about my origins; and it would always be oneness, or forever be resigned to a place called heaven

Because of burdens we carry, as we recognise who we truly are, or will become in time — moving with determined stride or conviction because of what was never our own.
THE TABLA PLAYER

(All life is rhythm,
  Ustad Alla Rakha)

I played the drum
alone, on the kitchen table —
imagining a far place, my knuckles
cracking hard on stiff board,
fingers and wrist movements.

A far continent, truly,
tracing the Ganges River,
or moving by train
from Madras in the south,
then all the way up
north to Shimla
in the Himalayas.

The tabla player I was meant to be,
instilled in my genes —
and little did I know
being born in South America,
with the Orinoco and other rivers
close by, or regions merely nurturing
a greenhouse effect —
as I kept on playing,

    Crossing a new terrain:
a new hemisphere, too,
      if you must know. Recalling that time
I’d heard Hemant Kumar, the playback singer —
  who, having come to our village
with his troupe of musicians —
    the tabla drummers and sitar men,
all active in my imagination.

Memory indeed being
    all now in cold Canada,
in this winter, and recalling
  the desire to be my best on stage
in Bombay or Calcutta —
still pretending to be a tabla player —
my knuckles grown harder,
bones brittle.

Because of where I grew up —
and my mother
wonders what I'd left behind —
the sounds she yet hears,
her hands clapping —
before a silent stage.
Over the last decade even as Salman Rushdie has been receiving accolades from the literary world, there has been a simultaneous stream of criticism about his representations of South Asian women. Charu Verma complains about ‘Midnight’s Children’s’ sexist bias against Padma [the protagonist Saleem Sinai’s companion] ... who is projected as a pathetic victim’ (60), while Sukeshi Kamra writes that ‘Rasheed [Haroun and the Sea of Stories] is the victim of three female forces [the moon, his wife, and an allegorical Mother India], all of whom he desires and all of whom castrate him’ (243). Inderpal Grewal observes that the women presented in Shame are ‘passive, ineffectual or mediators of male power’ (30) and Aijaz Ahmad adds that in Shame ‘We find ... a gallery of women who are frigid and desexualised ... demented and moronic ... dulled into nullity ... driven to despair ... or suicide ... or [who] embody sheer surreal incoherence and loss of individual identity’ (1992b 144). All four of these critics clearly demonstrate that within Rushdie’s allegorical scheme of the postcolonial nation, women are only allowed to be victims of the excesses of the nation or victimisers who, like Sufiya Zenobia in Shame, have suffered so much at the hands of the patriarchal nation-state that they become corrupted oppressors themselves.

Some of the factors influencing Rushdie’s problematic treatment of women can be traced to the allegorical mode he uses. Rushdie’s consistent conflation of individual with national destiny reinforces Jameson’s warning to the ‘first-world’ reader that ‘third-world literature’ should not be read as stories about individuals but as allegories about nation-states. However, unlike the works by Lu Xun and Ousmane Sembane that Jameson examines, Rushdie’s literary texts are implicated in a postmodern consciousness that allows him to play with the allegorical form itself and emphasise its limitations. For instance, he has his narrator in Shame point to ‘an allegorical overlay that suppresses other [gendered] histories — a palimpsest that obscures what lies beneath’ (91). Yet, even as Rushdie’s narrator overtly sympathises with the women characters in Shame, he co-opts their histories into a national allegory, which says more about the atrocities perpetrated by postcolonial nation-states than about female subjectivity and desire.

Rushdie’s self-conscious use of the allegorical form can be theorised in the context of arguments made by postcolonial critics against Jameson’s problematic contention that ‘all third-world literature must necessarily be read as national allegory’ (69). Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, points out that Jameson’s generalisations
about the 'third world' elide differences between and within third-world nations, ignore the presence of third-world pockets within the 'First world', and completely silence large bodies of third-world texts that do not fit the category of national allegory (1992a 104–110, 122). Ahmad also mentions that while Jameson describes 'First' and 'Second' worlds according to their modes of production, he 'defines the so-called Third world in terms of its 'experience of colonialism and imperialism', [and therefore] the political category that necessarily follows from this is that of "the nation"' (98). Feminist critic Lydia Liu reiterates that Jameson's theory of third-world literature favours a 'nation-oriented and male-centered practice of literary criticism' (46).

Despite their moments of self-consciousness and their parodic reflections on the limitations of the allegorical form, Rushdie’s narratives, for the most part, tend to fit the Jamesonian paradigm of national allegory. Consequently, like Jameson, Rushdie can be criticised for presenting first-world readers with narratives that privilege the metaphors of colonialism and nationalism to the detriment of other voices. Josna Rege points out:

Recent feminist research on the colonial construction of Indian nationalism has demonstrated the extent to which 'traditional' conceptions of Indian womanhood have been bound up with the nationalist project. Women’s experiences in the postcolonial period have shown, again and again, that their interests are incompatible with the interest of the nation-state ... In general, minorities and women writers, who have found that the exclusive discourse of nation cannot be made to tell their story, have been less likely to employ the narrative of the nation. (367)

In this essay I will examine Rushdie’s allegorical treatment of the postcolonial nation alongside his representations of South Asian womanhood in East, West Stories (1994). It is my contention that while the women in East, West fall prey to the constraints of the allegorical form that encloses their narratives, they mark a departure from their earlier counterparts in Midnight’s Children, Shame, and Haroun and the Sea of Stories. On a characterological level, the women are brave, independent, and intelligent and do not easily fit into the victim/victimiser binary found in the earlier texts. On an allegorical level, even as these women remain the ‘the object ... of Rushdie’s narrator’s [and, by extension, the postcolonial nation-state’s] literary and sexual desires’ (Kamra 245), instead of consistently reinscribing those desires, the textual representations of women in East, West sometimes interrogate and point towards the limitations of the patriarchal gaze that encloses them. Like Jameson, I think it is important to alert the first-world reader to the allegorical dimension of these postcolonial texts and like Ahmad and Liu, I think it is necessary to be aware of the limitations of the nation-centered narrative that Rushdie writes. I believe, like Sukeshi Kamra, that in Rushdie’s narratives women do ‘not exist except by negation and resistance to patriarchal naming’ (247), but I also feel that these patterns of negation and resistance are worth exploring. While pointing out the various ways in which Rushdie’s use of
allegory informs and limits his narratives, my discussion also seeks to privilege those moments in these stories that strain against the allegorical form that he employs. Consequently, my discussion shows how the stories in *East, West* both continue and depart from Rushdie’s narrative excesses in his earlier works.

The absence of much critical scholarship on *East, West* suggests that readers have been taken in by the surface simplicity of these stories and have been content with either reading them characterologically and applauding Rushdie’s vision of South Asian womanhood, or dismissing their allegorical treatment of the nation as necessarily limiting in its representations of gender. In this essay I would like to conflate both the above approaches by examining the different ways in which Rushdie’s representation of South Asian womanhood is complicit with patriarchal allegories of the nation-state even as it questions and critiques the latter. Although the entire collection *East, West* can be read, as its title suggests, as an allegory for the colonial/postcolonial encounter between India and England, for the purpose of this paper which delineates the subjecthood of South Asian women, I will restrict my reading to the sections entitled ‘East’ and ‘East, West’.

Situated as they are against the backdrop of postcolonial India, Pakistan, and/or England, each of the stories in these sections introduces a trope of modernity that threatens to contain gendered desire and identity. For instance, in ‘Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies’ Miss Rehana’s visit to the British Consulate becomes symbolic of the vast numbers of South Asians who went to Great Britain to work as cheap labor in the post-World War II years. In ‘The Courter’ Certainly-Mary’s identity is threatened by the middle-class narrator’s immigrant desires and by the racist rhetoric spouted by politicians like Enoch Powell. ‘The Harmony of the Spheres’ emphasises the role played by the native woman’s body in Eliot Crane’s modernist impulse to fuse East and West, while *Star Trek* consumes the desires of the male and female characters in ‘Chekov and Zulu’. In ‘The Prophet’s Hair’ the sacred relic belonging to the Prophet Muhammad is implicated in discourses of religious fanaticism that threaten to destroy women’s rights as well as the secular nature of the postcolonial nation, and in ‘The Free Radio’ Ramani, the rickshaw-puller, is seduced by the ‘thief’s widow’ who symbolises the glamour of Bollywood and the promise of technology.

My essay, however, reveals that woman’s desire sometimes resists containment by modernity. In ‘Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies’ and the ‘Harmony of the Spheres’, postcolonial gendered desire is found to lie outside colonial and national allegories. In ‘The Courter’ Certainly-Mary’s desires threaten to disrupt the narrator’s sense of place and identity and Certainly-Mary, like Zulu’s wife in ‘Chekov and Zulu’, actively rewrites the virtual reality of electronic media. However, when women begin to acquire voice and agency they threaten narrative structures, and are consequently, returned ‘home’ to stories with a tighter allegorical framework that silence their dissident voices. In two out of the six stories under discussion — ‘The Prophet’s Hair’ and ‘The Free Radio’ — female desire is
completely swallowed up by the religious implications associated with the theft of the hair and by the Emergency\textsuperscript{4} rhetoric of Ramani’s letter home. When read together as a whole the six stories illustrate both the ways in which female desire is contained by allegorical structures as well as the manner in which textual desires confront and challenge allegorical representation.

Since Rushdie’s reading of women’s bodies operates within a theoretical framework which privileges colonialism and nationalism as the definitive tropes of postcolonial experience, an interpretation of these stories is best served by a look at the ways in which symbolic readings of native women’s bodies originated in colonial India. It is my belief that the roots of Rushdie’s allegorical reading of women’s bodies as sites of contention between East and West can be traced to the conflict between colonial and national discourses about Indian womanhood in the nineteenth-century. The first part of my essay will therefore trace the origin and development of these debates in order to provide a context for the critical interpretation of the stories that occurs in the second part of the essay. I will show how Rushdie’s postcolonial perspective draws from and complicates colonial and national allegories of Indian womanhood in a complicated rewriting of the old tropes of woman, nation, and desire.

Like Saleem Sinai, the egotistical narrator of Midnight’s Children, the various narrators of Rushdie’s East, West Stones serve as symbolic representations of the postcolonial nation-state. The six stories under discussion represent a diverse collection of narrators ranging from the idiosyncratic Teacher Sahib of ‘The Free Radio’ to the more ‘objective’ third-person narrators of ‘Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies’, ‘Chekov and Zulu’ and ‘The Prophet’s Hair’. Although some narrators are easier to dismiss than others, all six narratives are complicit in their desire to narrate the story of the nation and its women in an allegorical format. Thus, in all these stories narrative desire for closure is paralleled by a national impulse towards wholeness. This implicit fear of fragmentation can be traced to British colonial policies that helped fuel Hindu/Muslim enmity and finally resulted in the partition of the country. The colonial rhetoric of British India can best be understood within the context of Edward Said’s description of Orientalism. Said points out that the study of the ‘Orient’ was premised on ‘a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “Us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “Them”)’ (43). His comment about the ‘Orient’ can, with appropriate modifications, be extended to symbolic representations of all non-Western countries described in colonial discourse. Ania Loomba points out that, ‘this opposition is crucial to European self-conception: if colonised people are irrational, Europeans are rational, if the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy, Europe is civilisation itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic of hard work’ (47). This kind of binary thinking results in what Abdul JanMohammad calls a ‘Manichean allegory’ which defines
'the putative superiority of the European' against 'the supposed inferiority of the native' (82).

As Ania Loomba points out, the projection of colonial desire on to the native body resulted in very different representations of the gendered body. The 'Oriental' male 'was effeminised and portrayed as homosexual or else depicted as a lusty villain from whom the virile but courteous European could rescue the native (or the European) woman' (152). Loomba continues, '[a]nother favorite figure in colonial insertion was that of the burning widow or sati.... Eastern royal or upper class/caste women being watched by, consorting with, and being saved by, European men is a feature of colonial narratives from the seventeenth century to the present' (153). Brown bodies thus serve as a fantasy site enabling the projection of very different colonial desires as the wholeness of the colonial master comes to be experienced at the cost of fragmented native bodies. Consequently, the colonial project can be summed up in Gayatri Spivak's comment that in colonial discourse 'brown women [are] saved by white men from brown men' (296). Because this allegorical trope gained so much importance in colonial India, nationalist leaders and freedom fighters felt compelled to address the problem of the colonised nation through the 'problem' of its women.

In nineteenth-century India there were two dominant streams of colonial thought concerning Indian women. The Orientalists or Indologists such as Max Mueller believed that Indian culture had declined after the Indo-Aryans, while Anglicists such as Macaulay and John Stuart Mill claimed that it had always been primitive and rude. Influenced as they were by colonial ideals, Indian nationalists found themselves forced to choose between two problematic representations of their national culture and finally opted for the less-negative representation by reviving the image of the high-caste Aryan woman of ancient India. Uma Chakravorti writes that the nineteenth-century Indian intelligentsia 'could regard itself as a product of an “exhausted” culture but, through the work of the Orientalists, could simultaneously feel optimistic that despite the present circumstances they were representatives of a culture which had been “organically disrupted by historical circumstance but was capable of revitalisation”’ (32). The efforts of this intellectual elite gave rise to the idea of a Victorian middle-class Hindu gentlewoman who was made to represent the moral core of the Indian nation. Any woman who deviated from this ideal was promptly written out of nationalist discourse about the country. Because the Indian nationalists saw English women as corrupt and immoral, they were determined to protect the spirituality and purity of Hindu women from their licentious counterparts. And because the middle-class Hindu woman had come to represent all that was best about Indian culture, the sanctity of the latter had to be protected by the demarcation of social space into 'ghar' (home) and 'bahir' (world). According to the nationalist point of view:
The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world — and woman [is] its representation. (Chatterjee 120)

Thus, in nationalist discourse woman came to be equated with home and home came to mean the true India that needed to be rescued from its tainted Western trappings.

This conflation of a certain kind of woman's body with the Indian nation is made most evident in the allegorical representation of 'Bharat Mata' or Mother India, which was born in nineteenth-century Hindu texts like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anand Math* (1882). As Nalini Natarajan points out, "'Mother India' is an enormously powerful cultural signifier, gaining strength not only from atavistic memories from the Hindu epics, Sita, Sati, Savitri, Draupadi, but also its use in moments of national (typically conflated with Hindu) cultural resurgence" (84). In her essay, 'Woman, Nation, and Narration in *Midnight's Children*', Natarajan describes the moment of Saleem Sinai/India’s birth as a time when 'the midnight of Indian independence is represented through refraction of the colors of the Indian flag on to nation celebrations ... and the bodies of women giving birth' (76). Later, in the same essay, Natarajan shows how the assumption of the predominantly Hindu image of Mother India was appropriated by a Muslim woman, Saleem's mother, in order to safeguard the idea of a secular India and to prevent a communal riot.6 Natarajan's reading of the women characters in *Midnight's Children* foreshadows the allegorical representation of women in Rushdie's *East, West* stories.

Although, with the exception of the thief's widow and Mrs. Zulu, none of the women in the stories are mothers, two of them — Miss Rehana and Certainly-Mary — are ayahs7 and function as surrogate mothers to the nation’s male children. Despite the fact that the women in these stories belong to different religions — Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Catholic — they are linked by the idealised image of Mother India that each of them represents. By taking the predominantly Hindu image of Mother India and secularising it, Rushdie's vision implies the national ideal of a secular India even as it is complicit with the way in which this ideal foregrounds motherhood to the exclusion of other kinds of gendered experience. For the purpose of this essay I will begin by examining the two stories that most challenge and complicate paradigms of national desire, 'Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies' and 'The Courter'; then examine the brief interjections made by 'The Harmony of the Spheres' and 'Chekov and Zulu'; and finally, look at the two texts which most closely follow the victim/victimiser paradigm found in *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* — 'The Free Radio' and 'The Prophet's Hair'. 
‘Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies’ which is set in contemporary Pakistan, narrates the friendship between an old con artist called Muhammad Ali and a young woman, Miss Rehana. Muhammad Ali preys upon women who come to the British Consulate to obtain visas that will allow them to be united with their husbands in England. Miss Rehana’s husband lives in Bradford, England, and she comes to the British Consulate to acquire a visa that will allow her to join him there. Her marriage had been arranged by her parents and Miss Rehana has not seen her husband, Mustafa Dar, since the wedding, which took place when she was still a child. Muhammad Ali initially wants to dupe Miss Rehana into paying for a fake British passport but he is charmed by her beauty and tries to help her instead. The Consulate officials deny Miss Rehana her visa because they think she is lying about her marriage to Mustafa Dar. Disappointment leads Miss Rehana to confide in Muhammad Ali. She tells him of her marriage to Mustafa Dar and her rejection at the hands of the Consulate before returning home to Lahore.

‘Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies’ critiques colonial and national representations of women by showing their inability to speak for the gendered native subject. Although the story is narrated by a third-person narrator, his narrative tells the story from the perspective of Muhammad Ali and does not provide any insight into the character of Miss Rehana. At the very beginning of the story Muhammad Ali makes it clear that Miss Rehana is different to and better than all other women. For instance, he observes that while Miss Rehana comes to the Consulate on her own, his ‘clients’ arrive clinging to fathers and brothers. While Miss Rehana is beautiful and independent and, indeed, the symbol of all that is best about Muslim womanhood, the ‘Tuesday women’ appear as an undifferentiated mass who are worthy only of Muhammad Ali’s deception. Muhammad Ali’s narrative also foregrounds the fact that it is Miss Rehana’s beauty that turns her into a symbol of ideal womanhood; however, Miss Rehana demystifies this masculinist idealisation of beauty by calling the public bus on which she travels to the Consulate, a beautiful one. Miss Rehana’s observation reinforces Rudolf Beck’s analysis of the way in which Rushdie plays with readerly expectations. Beck points out that Rushdie uses a pattern of demystification to ‘subvert conventional essentialist notions of East and West’ (365). He observes that:

The title ['Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies'] in itself will surely raise expectations of a certain kind: readers might conceivably anticipate a parable or moral fable — perhaps, because of the rubies, in an oriental or exotic setting. However, the first paragraph reads more like the beginning of a ‘slice-of-life’ story: ‘On the last Tuesday of the month, the dawn bus, its headlamps still shining, brought Miss Rehana to the gates of the British Consulate. It arrived pushing a cloud of dust, veiling her beauty from the eyes of strangers until she descended’. (365)

Beck’s comment alerts the reader that there may be more to Miss Rehana than the ‘beauty’ that Muhammad Ali sees.
Once unveiled, Miss Rehana’s beauty seduces Muhammad Ali. He wants to give her a fake passport that will allow her entry into Great Britain and prevent her from facing indignity at the hands of the Consulate men. It is important to realise at this juncture that Muhammad Ali’s offer is based on a national desire to preserve the gendered citizen’s body from the indignities of invasive immigration procedures that destroy the sanctity of the female ideal. Avtar Brah writes that in the ‘70s and ‘80s:

Reports of harassment at the hands of the immigration service were widespread. There were cases of Asian women arriving in Britain being subjected to ‘virginity tests’ and of Asian children undergoing x-ray examinations in order to establish their age. Asian marriages involving a fiancé from the sub-continent were likely to be subjected to acutely embarrassing forms of surveillance for the first year. (39)

British Consulates around the world naturally modelled their pattern of investigation on the immigration service in England, and Muhammad Ali and Miss Rehana’s description of the British Consulate in Pakistan suggests that it was no exception to the rule. Muhammad Ali’s awareness of immigration procedure makes him plead with Miss Rehana not to go into the Consulate building and ‘lose her pride’. However, as I have already pointed out, he is more concerned with protecting the national sense of honour that her body symbolises than with her feelings as an individual. Miss Rehana, being a good colonised subject brought up on ideals of integrity and fair play, turns down his offer and the British Consulate both desecrates and rejects Muhammad Ali’s nationalist offering of womanhood. While Miss Rehana’s beauty can charm Pakistani men — the bus driver, Muhammad Ali, and the Consulate guards — the officials working for the Consulate are immune to her charms and reject her visa application. As far as the British immigration officials are concerned Miss Rehana is no different than the Tuesday women. To them, she is just another deceitful native trying to trick her way into a better life in England.

Thus, the postcolonial woman’s body becomes meaningful not in terms of her desire but in terms of patriarchal national and colonial desires. Miss Rehana is caught between her parents’ desire to have her marry an older man who will protect her in times of need, Muhammad Ali’s idealisation of her body as a national symbol, and the Consulate’s rejection of that body based on its inability to provide them with marital details. In her interview with the Consulate officials Miss Rehana rewrites not only the geography of her husband’s body and home, but also the national geography of England itself. Her inability to recognise the distinguishing marks on her husband’s body is the result of her having no real knowledge of the man she married when she was nine years old, but the consul officials, conditioned as they are by ‘love marriages’ in the West, read her mistakes as a sign of dissembling and think her a liar. Miss Rehana’s accidental redrawing of the map of England indirectly refers to the large numbers of third-world immigrants who take over sections of the country, remaking England in the image of the colony it
once occupied. Both factors combine to influence the Consulate officials and lead them to deny Miss Rehana's visa application. Thus, Miss Rehana remains trapped between various competing discourses, which makes it difficult to read agency into her actions. Critics like Rudolf Beck and Rocio Davis infer that Miss Rehana deliberately misled the Consulate officials because she had no desire to join her husband in the West. However, this reading is problematic because it marks Miss Rehana as an idealised 'modern' South Asian woman with no desire to be trapped by arranged marriages or by colonial seductions and completely ignores specific narrative references to 'the anxiety in her voice' and 'the bitterness that had infected her smile' (8–15). When Muhammad Ali begins to warn Miss Rehana about the indignities that she will be forced to suffer once she enters the Consulate gates, her hands begin to 'flutter', she loses her composure and has to 'discipline' her voice. Later, the bitter smile she wears when she tells Muhammad Ali that her visa application was refused, suggests that she was not happy with the outcome or in control of the procedures that led to it. Davis' and Beck's reading grants Miss Rehana agency and completely ignores the fact that the ultimate decision to go or stay is not hers to make. Their reading, consequently, provides an uncritical endorsement of Muhammad Ali's conviction that Miss Rehana is happy to return to Lahore to 'work in a great house, as ayah to three good boys' who 'would have been sad to see [her] leave' (15).

At the end of his narrative Muhammad Ali returns Miss Rehana to his nationalist objectification as 'the smile on her face remains the happiest thing he had ever seen in his hard, unloving life' (16). Even though the third-person narrator describes Muhammad Ali as an aging con man infatuated by a young girl, the story's conclusion does not contradict or undermine Ali's sentimental objectification of Miss Rehana. Nevertheless, there is enough textual evidence to indicate that Muhammad Ali's interpretation is clearly as limited as that of the consular officials. The Consulate deems Miss Rehana unfit to be a British citizen and sends her back to Ali's adoring gaze. His narrative returns her to her nurturing role as surrogate mother to home and nation, but the reader never knows what she wants. There is no reason to rejoice in the fact that Miss Rehana has exchanged one form of servitude (to a husband she does not know) for another (as ayah to three young sons of a wealthy family). Miss Rehana's independent journey to the Consulate, her refusal to be tricked by Muhammad Ali or to ask for his assistance, and her obvious discomfort at the hands of the immigration officials suggest a subjectivity that rejects the easy containment provided by the end of the story. Muhammad Ali's narrative renders Miss Rehana a transparent object of nationalist desire but her desires remain outside the discourses of nation and empire that compete for her.

While 'Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies' emphasises the failure of colonial and national discourses to read the gendered subject, in 'The Courier' these discourses are actively threatened by Certainly-Mary's desires. 'The Courier',
which appears to be the most autobiographical of all the stories in *East, West*, presents the reader with two competing narratives: the adolescent narrator’s coming of age read against the love story between his 60-year-old ayah, Certainly-Mary, and her East European porter/courter, Mecir. The narrator resents having to share his ayah with another man, particularly since their courtship reinforces his sense of alienation in postcolonial England. As with all Rushdie narratives, in ‘The Courter’ female desire is subsumed by narrative desire. When Certainly-Mary begins to develop a voice of her own, she threatens the narrator to such an extent that she has to be physically returned to India.

At the beginning of the story the narrator emphasises his closeness to Certainly-Mary by stressing that she ‘did as much as [his] mother to raise [him]’ (177). In fact, she is more effective than the narrator’s own mother when it comes to dealing with his alcoholic father. Because of her age, Certainly-Mary can assume the national symbol of Bharat Mata, or Mother India, to instill fear and respect into the patriarch of the family. Her performance of maternal identity becomes doubly subversive as it involves a Catholic woman taking over a predominantly Hindu image in a move that reinforces a secular Indian identity.

However, Mary’s identification with the national symbol of Mother India is threatened by her love affair with Mecir. Even though the narrator emphasises the absence of any kind of sexuality in the Certainly-Mary/Courter relationship, their love opens up a third space for Mary, which is removed from both racist and national pedagogy. While the outside world is made up of racist thugs and dangerous elevators, and the narrator’s parents make Certainly-Mary sleep on the floor in the children’s room, in Mecir’s little apartment she can drink tea, watch television, and play chess. Their relationship also challenges the allegorical role of Mary as mother figure to the adolescent Rushdie and his family and becomes doubly threatening in the face of the narrator’s inability to find love and acceptance at home or in England.

Consequently, the narrative voice and the narrator complement each other as they try to find ways to undermine the love story between Certainly-Mary and Mecir. Name-calling becomes the narrator’s way of asserting his superiority to ‘Jumble Aya’ and ‘Mixed-Up’. The narrator’s ability to call Mecir and Certainly-Mary names is an indication of both his class privilege and, by extension, his fluency in English. However, while the narrator can use his prowess with the English language to lord it over his ayah and her courter, both he and his father are faulted for ‘incorrect language usage’ by the British themselves. The narrator complains, ‘[m]y schoolfellows tittered when in my Bombay way I said “brought up” for upbringing (as in “where was your brought-up?”) and “thrice” for three times and “quarter-plate” for side plate and “macaroni” for pasta in general’ (185). The narrator’s father, despite his role of tyrant at home, is slapped by an English sales girl for confusing ‘nipples’ with ‘teats’. While England emasculates the narrator and his father, Certainly-Mary and Mecir shake off the name calling and
teasing with a good natured shrug and a ‘[t]hese English ... aren’t they the limit?’ (184).

In fact, far from being to her disadvantage, it was Mary’s lack of fluency in English, that allowed her and her porter, whom she re-names ‘coulter’ — because ‘English was hard for Certainly-Mary.... The letter p was a particular problem, often turning into an f or c’ (176) — that draws Mecir to her. And later, when the former Grandmaster teaches her chess it becomes, ‘their private language ... When they played, he handicapped himself, he told her her best moves and demonstrated their consequences, drawing her step by step, into the infinite possibilities of the game’ (194–95).

The narrator is particularly jealous of their relationship because of his failure in love. Dismissed by Rozalia, a Polish girl he fancied, for not being a ‘real man’, he seeks refuge in love songs heard over the radio. On a parallel level, Certainly-Mary chooses virtual reality over the real world and infantilises her employers by identifying them with cartoon characters like the Flintstones. She also dismisses politicians like Enoch Powell with a turn of the television knob. However, the racism of the outside world keeps returning to haunt the narrator and Certainly-Mary.

The narrator’s identification with the universality of love is problematised by the racist subtext to some rock music which reinforces his insider/outsider position. For instance, the thugs who harass the narrator’s mother and Certainly-Mary sport Rolling Stones and Beatles haircuts; a style that suggests the anti-immigrant excesses of certain British youth sub cultures. Even as the narrator’s desire to turn white manifests itself in an adolescent identification with rock music, his postcolonial subject position points to the ambivalent nature of his desire.

When Certainly-Mary and the narrator’s mother are attacked by racist thugs, it is Mecir who comes to their rescue. The Indian gentry and the narrator’s father choose to use their class privilege to absent themselves from any unpleasantness and when Certainly-Mary and Mecir come to the narrator for help, despite his class privilege he says he can do nothing to help them. Because the ayah and her courter stand on the lowest rung of the immigrant ladder, they are particularly vulnerable to racist attacks and while they can withstand discrimination at the hands of the narrator’s family, they become vulnerable to Skinhead violence.

The transformative nature of their relationship is curtailed both by racism in England and by the narrative desire that it threatens. Certainly-Mary’s decision to return home to India suggests a rejection of both the courter and the narrator. However, it soon becomes clear that by removing Certainly-Mary from her relationship with her courter, the narrator is once again able to possess her as a symbol of home and nation. She becomes the India that he longs for and is in exile from. While both she and the narrator are put in a position where they are forced to choose one identity over another, Certainly-Mary and Mecir come up with a relationship that can be defined as both/and rather than either/or. Their
relationship provides a third space: one that doesn’t have to be defined by England or India. However, the fragility of their relationship is revealed when Mecir is unable to recover fully from his injuries and when Certainly-Mary decides to return to India. After choosing India over England, she is never again worried by ‘heart-trouble’ and at the time of the story is still going strong at ninety-one. Mecir also conveniently disappears from the narrative. Thus, while the love story between Certainly-Mary and Mecir tells the reader more about female desire and subjectivity than any of the other *East, West* narratives, their relationship is threatening to the narrator precisely because it falls outside the parameters of narrative/national desire. After a brief exploration of their relationship, the narrator conflates Certainly-Mary’s feelings with his own when he writes:

So it was England that was breaking her heart, breaking it by not being India. London was killing her, by not being Bombay. And Mixed-Up? I wondered. Was the courter killing her, too, because he was no longer himself? Or was it that her heart, roped by two different loves, was being pulled both East and West, whinnying and rearing, like those movie horses being yanked this way by Clark Gable and that way by Montgomery Clift, and she knew that to live she would have to choose? (209)

However, as my argument has shown, Certainly-Mary’s desires are very different to the narrator’s and hence they need to be neutralised. By using the outside forces of racism to destroy the Certainly-Mary/Mecir love affair, the narrative enables Mecir to disappear and Certainly-Mary to return home where she can once more become the symbolic representation of national/narrative desire. In this way Certainly-Mary’s rejection of England as manifested in her desire to go home becomes compensation for England’s rejection of the narrator. Certainly-Mary’s story can also be read as a continuum of Miss Rehana’s in ‘Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies’ as both women are returned ‘home’ to the nation-state, when they endeavor to move, both literally and symbolically, away from it.

In ‘The Harmony of the Spheres’ which, like ‘The Courter’, is also set in postcolonial England, Mala, the narrator Khan’s wife, becomes yet another symbol for home when Khan tells the reader ‘the warm dark tides of the Indian Ocean rose nightly in her [Mala’s] veins’ (140). Rejected and humiliated by his English girlfriend, Laura, Khan turns to ‘serious, serene Mala, non-smoking, non-drinking, vegetarian, drug-free, lonely Mala from Mauritius’ (129) for comfort, but finally finds wholeness in the arms of, Lucy, the wife of his best friend, Eliot Crane. Khan keeps his feelings for Lucy a secret from Eliot and Mala but, in an ironic twist, at the end of the story after Eliot’s hallucinations lead him to commit suicide, Khan stumbles upon Eliot Crane’s diary and discovers that Eliot and Mala had been lovers.

Khan fell in love with Lucy for the first time when they were children playing on Juhu beach. Lucy’s Anglo-Indian background and colonial heritage transform her into his object of desire, for, in embracing her, he is able to embrace all England and forget the indignities suffered because of his colonised past. Khan’s feelings
for Lucy represent a very Fanonian sense of the desire of the native man for the white woman. In voicing the desire of the colonised man Fanon writes, ‘I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white ... who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man’ (63). The colonial project determines postcolonial desire by inflecting it with a need to turn white and whole. In the case of ‘The Harmony of the Spheres’ the native home or nation — that is, Mala — is betrayed for the English woman Lucy who holds out the promise of wholeness for Rushdie’s narrator. Lucy’s Anglo-Indian past also enhances her attractiveness for it implicates her in the narrator’s postcolonial history, enabling him to embrace both East and West in her. While both he and Mala are ‘aliens’ in England, his derisory attempts at parodying Mala’s English and his affair with Lucy suggest the implicit superiority the postcolonial man feels in front of the postcolonial woman. Moreover, Khan’s contemptuous dismissal of Lucy’s American husband, whom she marries after Eliot dies, suggests a narrative inability to come to terms with his own rejection at her hands. The story ends on an ironic note when the reader and the narrator discover that the latter has been cuckolded by his wife, Mala, and Lucy’s first husband, Eliot Crane. However, even as Mala’s affair with Eliot provides an ironic rewriting of the narrator’s love affair with Lucy, the only representation of the Mala-Eliot affair is seen in Eliot’s diary. Mala confirms the affair but is both betrayed and silenced in the story. The reader has no idea why she and Eliot had the affair or why Eliot stayed married to Lucy instead of marrying Mala. Thus, the native woman once again appears as commodity in a patriarchal text which tells us more about cross-cultural male bonding and betrayal than about postcolonial female desire. Lucy becomes the privileged object of desire for both Khan and Eliot Crane and once again the brown woman is seen to occupy the lowest rung in the hierarchy of colonial/postcolonial masculine desire. However, Mala does have the literal and metaphoric last word in the story when with her simple statement, ‘[t]hose weren’t fantasies’ (146), she claims Eliot’s diary for herself. Her words clearly point to the limitations of narrative/national desire in its ability to narrate and contain the postcolonial female subject. The postcolonial gendered body may be (mis)read and (mis)appropriated but always remains outside the limits of national/narrative desire and discourse.

Like the adolescent narrator of ‘The Courter’, Khan also seeks acceptance in Anglo-Saxon England through a ‘white’ partner. Unfortunately, Rozalia rejects the teenage protagonist of the former story for a ‘real man’, while Lucy’s hasty second marriage forces Khan’s feelings to remain unconsummated. However, while the protagonist in ‘The Courter’ can seek refuge in an unsullied image of Certainly-Mary who rejects Mecir and England for an idealised image of India, Khan finds that his idealised image of home (Mala) has betrayed him for the coloniser (Eliot). Thus, the national ideal of home found in ‘Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies’ and ‘The Courter’ changes in ‘The Harmony of the Spheres’ as Khan
finds himself betrayed not just by his best friend and his first love, but also by the idealised image of home and nation that he had grounded himself on.

‘The Harmony of the Spheres’ suggests the illusory nature of home and its ability to deceive. The actions of Certainly-Mary and Mala indicate that the postcolonial woman can stray away from the national ideal and therefore she needs to be locked into an allegorical representation of home that denies her any space for individual desire and agency. This monolithic representation of an idealised female figure is best seen in Zulu’s wife who gives her husband five sons and ensures that he has ‘a full heart ... a full house, a full belly, a full bed’ (160).

The story ‘Chekov and Zulu’ is told by a third-person narrator and takes place in England in 1984 in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. Zulu, a Sikh, who works as an undercover agent for the Indian government mingles with Sikh terrorists in England to try to find those implicated in planning the Prime Minister’s assassination. Like the idealised national citizen he represents, Zulu puts the nation’s welfare before his own ethnicity and gives up fellow Sikhs who have betrayed the Indian nation. However, after accomplishing his mission, he resigns in disapproval of the way in which the Indian government turns a blind eye to the atrocities perpetrated against Sikhs in India by the late prime minister’s followers.

Like ‘The Harmony of the Spheres’, ‘Chekov and Zulu’ is a story about male bonding and betrayal. When Zulu goes undercover, his best friend Chekov begins to have doubts about his integrity and muses:

The Sikh community has always been thought loyal to the nation.... Backbone of the Army, to say nothing of the Delhi taxi service. Super-citizens, one might say, seemingly wedded to the national idea. But such ideas are being questioned now you must admit; there are those who would point to the comb, bangle, dagger et cetera as signs of the enemy within.... It is possible ... that Zulu has boldly gone where no Indian diplonaut has gone before.... Zulu is a better name for what some might allege to be a wild man.... For a suspected savage.... For a putative traitor. (152–53)

Chekov’s speech is filled with innuendo in its representation of the Sikh as the native savage or the civilised man gone wild. However, when Mrs. Zulu speaks she contradicts Chekov’s representation of her husband by pointing out that his Doon school pet name is Sulu and not Zulu. Rushdie writes:

The wife wept. ‘Even the stupid name you could never get right. It was with S. “Sulu”. So-so many episodes I have been made to see. you think I don’t know? Kirk Spock McCoy Scott Uhura Chekov Sulu’. (153)

Chekov and Zulu’s uncritical assumption of the persona of two Star Trek characters with a complete disregard for the television show’s colonial implications emphasises their elite Doon school upbringing. Mrs. Zulu’s preference for virtual reality, in the form of an American television show, to objectification in a racist,
nationalist pedagogy, is particularly ironic given that the colonial implications of *Star Trek* are translated into India’s national impulse to eliminate its dissidents. Thus, Mrs. Zulu’s subject position is ambivalent. On the one hand, she partakes of the colonial legacies promoted by her husband and Chekov, while on the other, like her husband, she is critical of the anti-Sikh national discourse promoted by the Indian government. Her own gendered desires, however, always remain sublimated to those of her country and her ethnicity. Even as she voices her discontent at the government’s attitude towards her community, she remains subject to the national ideal of the perfect wife and mother. At the end of the story, the reader is told that Zulu ‘had three more children, all of them boys, and remains happily married to this day’ (169). Like Mala, in ‘the Harmony of the Spheres’, Mrs. Zulu remains in the margins of a story about male friendship and bonding.

Gendered voice and desire are further eliminated by the tight allegorical framework of the next two stories under discussion, ‘The Free Radio’ and ‘The Prophet’s Hair’. As with ‘Chekov and Zulu’, Rushdie emphasises the allegorical nature of these stories by situating them within the framework of specific historical events. While ‘The Free Radio’ criticises the ways in which ‘national interest’ marks the lives of individual citizens, in ‘The Prophet’s Hair’ the larger good of the secular nation seems to take precedence over the lives of individual citizens.

‘The Free Radio’ narrates the events that lead to the seduction of a young rickshaw puller, Ramani, at the hands of a thief’s widow as witnessed by the narrator, a retired village school teacher. Ramani gets sterilised in order to ensure that the thief’s widow who already has five children, will never get pregnant again. His ‘love’ for the thief’s widow also causes him to leave his village and go to Bombay to earn a fortune which will keep the thief’s widow and her children in style. The story ends with a skeptical Teacher Sahib reading a letter that purports to be sent from Ramani in Bombay. In the letter Ramani stresses that he and the thief’s widow are well and happy but Teacher Sahib remains unconvinced.

‘The Free Radio’ is clearly an allegory about the political excesses that took place in India during the Emergency years of 1975–77. Although the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, had followed the liberal political style of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, her government came to be known for corruption, upper-caste atrocities against lower-castes, communalism, and her son Sanjay Gandhi’s unchecked power (Sunder Rajan 123). In June 1975 Indira Gandhi took the unprecedented step of declaring a state of Emergency under which civil liberties were suspended, press restrictions imposed, and members of the opposition imprisoned. The Emergency soon gained notoriety for mass arrests, sterilisation programmes, and the destruction of urban slums. Distressed at its implications, Indira Gandhi removed restrictions and called for fresh elections in 1977. However, the Emergency cost her the confidence of the people and the opposition party, the Janata Dal, won the 1977 elections, but when elections were held again in 1980, she swept back to power.
After visiting India in the post-Emergency years, Salman Rushdie wrote *Midnight’s Children* using conversations that he had had with friends and acquaintances to criticise India’s Emergency years. In 1984 Indira Gandhi won a law suit against Rushdie for the accusations he made against her in the novel but she was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards soon after. In *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie refers to Indira Gandhi as the ‘witch’ and the ‘widow’ — two epithets that he uses for the thief’s widow in ‘The Free Radio’. The first name refers to the wicked witch of the west who appears in Rushdie’s favourite book *The Wizard of Oz* and symbolically represents the power of the castrating woman, while the second refers to the demise (in 1960) of the late Prime Minister’s estranged husband, Feroze Gandhi, and the cultural misogyny with which Hindu widows are regarded in India. This misogyny can be seen in the unsympathetic attitude of the narrator towards the thief’s widow in the parable, ‘The Free Radio’. Not only does he deny her an identity by refusing to call her by her proper name, he also tells her to ‘thank[ing] God that widow-burning is now illegal’ (23). The correlation between the thief’s widow and Indira Gandhi is further strengthened by the association of both women with the sterilisation camps that are set up in the retired teacher sahib’s village. Ramani decides to be sterilised because the thief’s widow does not want to have any more children, and because his vasectomy is in the ‘national interest’. ‘National interest’ was the term used to justify the imposition of forced sterilisation programs and other controversial initiatives that were said to be in the interests of the vast majority of the Indian people who lived in small towns and villages.

In ‘The Free Radio’, Ramani falls prey to national rhetoric and becomes the perfect citizen who is willing to sacrifice his body for the good of the nation. In addition to serving the cause of ‘national interest’ and the desires of the thief’s widow, Ramani decides to have a vasectomy because of the lure of the free radio that the government promises to those who undergo sterilisation. However, in the story, the promise of the free radio is never fulfilled and when Ramani goes into a sterilisation camp to ask for his ‘free gift’, he is roughed up and thrown out. This reinforces Teacher Sahib’s belief that Indira Gandhi’s promises, like those made by the thief’s widow, are not to be trusted and leaves him skeptical about Ramani’s happiness at the end of the story. The thief’s widow’s refusal to have more children connects her with Indira Gandhi who wanted to control her country’s population through sterilisation programs. The connection between Indira Gandhi and the thief’s widow is further tightened when the latter watches Ramani being beaten up by a group of thugs who closely resemble Sanjay Gandhi’s ‘goondas’, but refuses to go to his assistance. Her gaze is reminiscent of that of the late Prime Minister whose giant hoardings loomed large over the people of her nation and in whose name vasectomies were performed on reluctant subjects.

The widow’s body thus becomes the site for competing discourses about nationalism and modernity. On the most obvious level, we have the retired teacher’s
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A ‘traditional’ stance towards women exemplified in his reactionary attitude towards the thief’s widow. The teacher’s perspective shows how the national idealisation of motherhood elides the possibility of sexual desire on the part of the woman. The narrator finds the thief’s widow’s sexuality threatening and tells her to go and live, as befits her position in society, in a widows’ ashram in Benaras. The thief’s widow’s characterisation as ‘bad mother’ is further reinforced by the fact that her ‘rutputty shack’ is frequented by men late at night. Her transgressions carry the betrayals of the earlier protagonists to an extreme, showing that if woman’s actions are not tightly monitored her sexual desires will corrupt the national ideal of womanhood.

This denial of female sexuality can also be found in the case of the late Prime Minister whose national popularity was contingent upon her appropriation of the symbolic role of Mother of the Nation; a role which emphasised her maternal identity but simultaneously elided her sexuality. Sunder Rajan points out that, ‘[i]t was during the 1967 elections — when she was as yet only fifty — that Indira was first hailed as “Mother India”. In a speech she said to her village audience, “Your burdens are relatively light because your families are limited and viable. But my burden is manifold because crores of my family are poverty-stricken and I have to look after them”’ (110). Yet, in the midst of her popularity Indira Gandhi is said to have bemoaned her inability to have a private life (Sunder Rajan 107). The conflation of tradition and modernity can be seen in the Prime Minister’s assumption of a traditional symbol of motherhood to win over the sympathies of the people along with a national discourse which emphasised technology (the free radio) and science (vasectomies) as key instruments to the modernisation of India. In Rushdie’s short story, the thief’s widow is reconstituted as the ‘modern Indian woman’ who asserts her choice to re-marry a younger man and take control over her sexuality by persuading Ramani to be sterilised and keeping her ability to bear children. Tradition also gets replaced by modernity as the radio begins to displace teacher sahib in the dissemination of news. Ramani, as the nation’s model citizen, is slowly sucked into the virtual world created by radios and the Bombay film industry and refuses to listen to the gossip that circulates around the village about the thief’s widow. Finally, both he and the thief’s widow are reduced to texts in the national rhetoric of modernisation and urbanisation, and at the end of the story the traditional narrator is left reading a letter which says that ‘the thief’s widow was well and happy and getting fat, and life was filled with light and success and no-questions-asked alcohol’ (32). Once again the widow’s body is reduced to a symbolic signifier which, like the symbolic Prime Minister, prospers at the cost of Ramani and the nation’s other male children.

Despite the obvious bias of the first-person narrator that allows the reader to take him even less seriously than the egotistical Saleem Sinai of Midnight’s Children, ‘The Free Radio’ suggests only two options for the Indian woman. Either she goes to a widow’s ashram or, as a symbol of modernity, she, like the
late Prime Minister, turns into a castrating woman or bad mother who deprives men of their manhood in the interests of modernity and progress. It is easy to dismiss Teacher Sahib’s story as a totalitarian narrative that is as black and white as its representation of the thief’s widow. In fact, there are moments when the narrative voice even questions its own bias as, for instance, when Teacher Sahib says, ‘[y]es, I know. I’m an old man, my ideas are wrinkled with age, and these days they tell me sterilisation and God knows what is necessary, and maybe I’m wrong to blame the widow as well — why not? Maybe all the views of the old can be discounted now, and if that’s so, let it be’ (30). These moments of doubt disrupt the teacher’s narrative suggesting that there may be another way of reading the story. However, this other way proves as problematic as the first. Rushdie’s critique of Emergency politics creates an allegory which equates women’s rights and female desire with forcible castration and the loss of manhood. His negative image of the thief’s widow subverts the nationalist allegory of a Mother India who must be worshipped and protected by her male subjects. In the post-independence India of Indira Gandhi’s politics, woman turns into a castrating mother who deprives Indian men of their manhood. National wholeness is won at the cost of individual fragmentation. The thief’s widow becomes well and fat while Ramani works so hard that he dissolves until he is nothing but a spokesperson for the national rhetoric spewed out by Indira Gandhi’s government and endorsed by the thief’s widow. At the end of the story the thief’s widow and Teacher Sahib are silenced and we are left with Ramani’s ‘voice’ as it is mediated through a professional letter writer who tells us that all is well with the rickshaw puller and the thief’s widow, and by extension, with the state of the nation.

In ‘The Prophet’s Hair’ the female protagonist Huma falls prey to discourses of tradition and modernity in much the same way that the thief’s widow does. However, while the latter appears as a castrating woman whose power must be denied in the interests of mankind, Huma is the modern, secular gendered subject who must be saved from fundamentalist Islamic discourses. The story is told by a third-person narrator and takes place in Kashmir, a region that has been disputed territory between India and Pakistan since 1947. In 1699 a Kashmiri merchant bought a hair of the Prophet Muhammad and enshrined it in the Hazrat Bal mosque as a sacred relic. The mosque became a pilgrim site and many people came from all over the world to worship there. On December 26th, 1963 the hair was stolen. This led to Hindu-Muslim riots in the valley until the relic was suddenly miraculously found in the gardens of the mosque on January 4th, 1964. Muslims claimed that Hindus had stolen the relic while India accused Pakistan of attempting to destabilise conditions in Kashmir.

In Rushdie’s story Hashim, a Muslim moneylender, finds the relic and instead of returning it to the mosque keeps it as part of his collection. The relic wreaks vengeance on Hashim and his family by turning the moneylender into a religious fanatic. His daughter Huma hires a thief to steal the relic from Hashim so that
things may return to normal. Unfortunately, their plan backfires resulting in the death of the thief and the destruction of Hashim’s family.

At an initial glance Hashim reminds the reader of Aadam Aziz (in Midnight’s Children) who tries to modernise his wife and change her from a good Muslim girl to a modern Indian woman. While the experiment fails in the case of Aziz’s wife, Hashim’s family seems the perfect mix of old world values and new world modernity. Hospitality and courteousness blend with liberal views to create the parable of the perfect home or nation. However, we are soon informed that behind Hashim’s harmonious façade lurks a feudal landlord who indulges in very un-Islamic conduct by extorting high interest rates from his debtors. He also goes against the strictures of the Koran when he engages in the theft of the prophet’s hair and uses the fact that the prophet did not believe in relics to turn it into a collector’s item. This act emphasises the choice of individual desire over secular citizenship. Hashim’s duty as a good citizen was to return the prophet’s hair to the mosque, but instead he chooses to be like the American millionaire and privilege his collector’s greed over the nation’s welfare. In a move reminiscent of Wilkie Collins’ Orientalist novel, The Moonstone (1928), the curse of the prophet’s hair results in the damnation of Hashim and his family. Hashim becomes a religious zealot insisting that his daughter always be veiled in public, leading his family in prayer five times a day, and ordering that the Koran be the only book read in his household. His religious fanaticism is supplemented by a disdain for and a rage against the modern secular family he has nurtured for so long. He reveals the presence of a mistress and tells his wife that upon his death in accordance with Islamic law she will receive only an eighth of his fortune. He calls his son an oaf and his daughter immoral, and when a debtor reminds him of the Koran’s strictures against usury he tries to cut the man’s arm off.

Hashim comes to represent two alternate extremes of tradition and modernity. On the one hand, his individual self-aggrandisement suggests a modernist involvement with the self and on the other, his religious fanaticism and his position of feudal landlord are reminiscent of more ‘traditional’ attitudes. In contrast to Hashim, there is Huma’s uncle, the Muslim Deputy Commissioner of Police who embodies the good secular citizen: a Muslim sacrificing his life in the interests of a secular India. It is under his symbolic protection that Huma can enter the den of thieves to hire a thief to steal the relic from her father. In this way the secular nation state takes on the guise of the Muslim police man to protect its Muslim women from Islamic fundamentalism.

When Huma enters the thieves’ den she is reminded of the childhood stories her nurse told her about the bogeyman, Sheikh Sin, who would steal her away if she were naughty. The sheikh’s name reiterates the ‘sinful’ nature of Huma’s transgression and Huma experiences a ‘moment of involuntary nostalgia’ when she remembers her secular childhood. This feeling gives her strength to challenge her father’s decree that the Koran is the only ‘true’ book, and encourages her to
explore a realm of experience denied by fundamentalism but permitted by a secular nation. Her entry into the dark world of the thieves becomes symbolic of her entry into the world of her subconscious while her final meeting with Sheikh Sin suggests a rite of passage that allows her to confront her childhood demons and see the sheikh as the frail, old man that he is.

The conflict between tradition and modernity is further explored as Huma’s body becomes a site for both sets of discourses. At the start of the book Huma represents the modern Muslim woman as well as the secular Indian woman who goes unveiled with her father’s permission. Later her father insists that she become a good Muslim girl and veil herself, but she resists his instructions and suffers a beating. Her bruised, beautiful body then becomes symbolic of the way in which the modern Indian woman is marked by excessive religious zeal. It is also the spectacle of this bruised body combined with the institutional authority of the name of her uncle, the police inspector, that allows her to be untouched in the thieves’ den. Rushdie describes Huma’s entry into the thieve’s den in this way:

The young woman [Huma] added: ‘I should say that I am carrying no money, nor am I wearing any jewelry items. My father has disowned me and will pay no ransom if I am kidnapped; and a letter has been lodged with the Deputy Commissioner of Police, my uncle, to be opened in the event of my not being safe at home by morning. In that letter he will find full details of my journey here, and he will move Heaven and Earth to punish my assailants’…. Her exceptional beauty, which was visible even through the enormous welts and bruises disfiguring her arms and forehead, coupled with the oddity of her inquiries, had attracted a sizable group of curious onlookers, and because her little speech seemed to them to cover just about everything, no one attempted to injure her in any way. (37)

As her trip to the thieves’ den and her willingness to reward Sheikh Sin with the family jewels reveal, Huma is clearly willing to give up the name and tradition that her father represents for the good of a secular home and nation. Later in the story when Sheikh Sin steals the prophet’s hair and Hashim kills Huma in a case of mistaken identity, Huma’s letter to her uncle reveals the religious fanaticism that is responsible for the ruin of her family. All those implicated in the desecration of the sacred relic are destroyed, the sheikh’s wife regains her eyesight and her faith, and the sheikh’s sons who had been mutilated in the interest of profit are made whole once again. Thus, in this parable wholeness and faith are clearly privileged over economic gain. The prophet’s hair is restored to its rightful place in the mosque and Hindu-Muslim fighting comes to an end. Huma’s uncle is left with the duty of punishing the offenders, restoring the relic, mourning the dead, and taking care of the sick. In Rushdie’s allegory of the nation-state the excesses of the fundamentalist home are punished and the secular modern nation-state has the last word through its idealised representative, Huma’s uncle. The dead Huma remains the romanticised representative of the modern, gendered subject slain by the excesses of Islamic fundamentalism.
Like her uncle, Huma represents an idealised image of the secular citizen. She is intelligent, beautiful, and independent, and consequently, like her counterpart Miss Rehana in ‘Good Advice’, a romanticised representation. She is, however, also desexualised and her desires always seem to be in complete accordance with those of the postcolonial nation-state. Even though her foray into the thieves’ den is, in many ways, reminiscent of a quest narrative with Huma playing a traditionally male role, her thievery is licensed by her desire to protect the integrity of the secular nation-state. Huma’s attempted theft connects her with the thief’s widow in ‘The Free Radio’ and emphasises the need for female manipulation in a patriarchal world. The idea of subterfuge also links her with Sheikh Sin’s widow in ‘The Prophet’s Hair’ whose ‘blind eyes never opened’ until her husband had fled (56). This line hints at the potential for masquerade for, while it is true that the sheikh’s wife was blind, it is also possible that in the course of events she may have regained her sight and was deliberately keeping that fact from her husband. Thus, even as Huma’s representation is consistently romanticised, her penchant for subterfuge suggests that, like Mala in ‘The Harmony of the Spheres’, she too has the potential to deceive.

In conclusion, it appears that when rebellious women who threaten the narrative framework and nationalist desires of their stories are returned ‘home’, their dissident desires can continue to deceive and betray. Even as the male narrators and characters consistently try to inscribe meaning on to the textual representations of the women, the latter’s desires interrupt and challenge patriarchal naming practices. Miss Rehana’s desires remain outside the British Consulate and Muhammad Ali’s representations of her; Certainly-Mary’s love for Mecir suggests that she wants more than a maternal identity for herself; Mala’s affair with Eliot highlights her husband’s inability to know her; and even Mrs. Zulu has Chekov wondering whether she is collaborating with her husband to betray the Indian government. At the cost of sounding cynical, in Rushdie’s schema it appears that the only good gendered subject is a dead one. The dead Huma remains a tragic victim of religious excesses and a romanticised abstraction of the gendered citizen. Her opposite is the thief’s widow, whose allegorical identity is reinforced by the absence of a proper name. The thief’s widow is the perfect embodiment of the castrating woman and ‘The Free Radio’ an excellent illustration of the chaos that ensues when a woman’s desires are not kept in check.

While ‘The Prophet’s Hair’ and ‘The Free Radio’ fit the victim/victimiser paradigm set up in Rushdie’s earlier works, the other stories suggest an in-between space made up of subversion and resistance. This space is worth studying because it highlights the inability of allegorical style and national desire to speak for women and alerts the reader to a need for other ways of learning about gendered desire and identity. While Huma and the thief’s widow, like their counterparts in Midnight’s Children, Shame, and Haroun and the Sea of Stories, are domesticated by the nationalist excesses of their narratives, Certainly-Mary, Miss Rehana, Mala,
and Mrs. Zulu refuse such domestication and emphasise that gendered desire lives outside of, and even in opposition to, nationalist objectification. Their desires are no less important or meaningful than national ones, but are more difficult to locate because they are so often obscured by patriarchal frameworks of meaning. My reading has sought to show how the traces of desire and subjectivity found in these stories subvert their narrative’s allegorical structure and reveal more about the nature of gendered experience than their narrators are willing to acknowledge and emphasise the need for alternate re-presentations of women’s experience in South Asia.

NOTES

1 Like Aijaz Ahmad, I believe that we live in one world, not three (1992a 103) and that labels like ‘first’ and ‘third’ force arbitrary homogeneity on very diverse parts of the world. Consequently, even though these terms are necessary and valid in the context of my argument, I use them under erasure. I use the idea of the first-world reader to describe a kind of reader who is well versed in the postmodern aesthetic Rushdie uses but who is less aware of the historical nuances of his texts. While Rushdie has always been met with overwhelming success in the Western academy, his reception in India and Pakistan has been more ambivalent. Rushdie’s recent comment in The New Yorker (1997) that the best Indian writing is happening in English is a case in point. First-world readers unaware of the richness of contemporary regional writing in India took the comment at face value but postcolonial intellectuals around the world took issue with Rushdie’s claim and the way in which it contributed to the hegemonic role played by English in the world today.


3 To date there have been two scholarly essays on Salman Rushdie’s East, West: Rocio G. Davis’ ‘Salman Rushdie’s East West: Palimpsests of Fiction and Reality’, and Rudolf Beck’s ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind’. Davis explores the ways in which ‘the creation of cultural and generic constructs ... constantly cancel each other out to reveal new versions of the same’ (90), while Beck examines the stylistic techniques that Rushdie uses to deconstruct conventional notions of East and West. Neither essay touches on the issue of gender in East, West Stories.

4 In June 1975 the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, declared the nation to be under a state of Emergency. Civil liberties were suspended and restrictions were imposed on the press. The Emergency was called off in 1977. The Emergency is further described in the section of this essay that deals with ‘The Free Radio’.

5 Critics who interrogate Orientalism include Lata Mani and Malek Alloula. See Lata Mani’s discussion of sati in ‘Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning’. Also, see The Colonial Harem by Malek Alloula. Alloula contends that the postcards of Algerian women that French soldiers sent home to France do not ‘represent Algeria and the Algerian woman but rather the Frenchman’s phantasm of the Oriental female and her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden harem’ (Harlow xiv).

6 The conflation of woman with nation that Natarajan discusses is exemplified in the popular film Mother India (1957). Natarajan writes, ‘In this archetypal film of nationalism, the Muslim identity of the actress who played the recognisably Hindu character symbolising the nation is at once appropriated and emptied of significance.
The main actress who played Mother India was the Muslim actress Nargis, and she has always been associated in the minds of the public with Mother India. Her marriage to Hindu Sunil Dutt, who played her son in the film, cemented her image as Mother India. The cultural message of the film has always been seen as Hindu, with its echoes of Radha, Parvati, Sita, with all of the traditional self-sacrificing virtues ascribed to these women’ (85).

7 Ayahs are maidservants who look after young English and middle-class Indian children.

8 Muhammad Ali calls the women who come to the British Consulate on the last Tuesday of every month to apply for visas ‘Tuesday women’.

9 Beck writes, ‘when she [Miss Rehana] returns smilingly from the Consulate, we find that she has profited from Mohammed’s advice in an unexpected way. She has used his expert knowledge to ensure the failure of her application’ (367). Davis also points out that ‘Miss Rehana chooses to fail the test’ (86).

10 See Dick Hebdige’s discussion of British youth subculture in Subculture: the Meaning of Style.

11 Mala is originally from India. Her ancestors were taken over to Mauritius to work as indentured laborers.


13 Rushdie’s fascination with The Wizard of Oz can be seen in his book on the film that was authorised by BFI publishing. His short story ‘At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers’, can also be found in this book.

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Years of Silence Came to an End

Interview with Shashi Deshpande
Bangalore January 6th, 2000

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 in Karnataka. She and her husband now live in Bangalore, a thriving industrial centre in the South of India. The Southern location contributes significantly to Shashi’s reception and career as well as to her writing. Although Indian English writers come from a variety of locations, Delhi is the major site of publishing, followed by Mumbai and Kolkata. This unevenly shared prestige once again reveals the north-south divide which is strong in many other aspects in Indian politics and culture.

We met at Shashi’s home in January 2000, after the global Millennium celebrations. There was a more or less constant consciousness of the surroundings as a group of workers were mending the house, thus awareness of the environment in which Shashi lives — its gender and class inequalities — had more impact on our conversation than it might otherwise have done.

Although, as she herself comments in the interview, the development of Shashi’s career has not been glamorous and celebrated, her publications are numerous. The Writers’ Workshop (WW) published her first book, a collection of short stories, The Legacy & Other Stories, in 1971. Since then, apart from articles and uncollected stories, she has published eight novels, six collections of short stories, four books for children and a film script. She has also written many articles for newspapers.

The discussion that follows falls into four main themes: the biographical, Shashi’s views on literature in general, her views on translation, and finally the basic changes in society regarding the status of English language, women and women’s writing.

Beginning briefly with some biographical aspects, could you tell me how you started writing?

Well, I started writing really late. I was thirty or nearly thirty. I don’t know how I started or why I started. There was never any conscious desire to be a writer nor was I writing in my adolescence, you know, poetry.... All that I did was to write a diary — pages and pages — which my brother would read aloud and embarrass me (laughs). So I stopped writing even that. But I
read a lot. I think that was the preparation for writing. I read an enormous amount. I was always told that you are wasting your time. You'll amount to nothing. You're a good-for-nothing. My father used to think that if you don't do your schoolwork, just see, you'll just become a clerk (laughs). So I was constantly abused for reading. My father was a writer. His objection to my reading was only because I didn't do my schoolwork. It was important for him because my father was a scholar. We come from a family of scholars and it was important for him that I do well at school. My sister, my elder sister, was good with her work. She did very well in exams. She came first and second and I didn't do any of those things. So he was very angry with me for my reading. But I think that was the preparation for my writing.

I never imagined that I would write but there was always the fascination with words — not only with literature, not only with reading — but also with words. I can remember sitting with a dictionary for hours, you know, tracing the history of words. It was always fascinating for me.

I started writing, I think, when we had gone to England for a year. My husband is a doctor and he had a Commonwealth Fellowship. We had two children by then, the younger one was just about a year and the older one was three and a half. I lived a very isolated life, obviously. England is not a friendly country and we were kind of isolated — being Indians — as there were not so many Indians then. I never met anybody. I never had neighbours, friends ... very isolated. Maybe that was the second stage, you know. I could distance myself from my country, from my own experiences, everything.

So when we came back my husband — I was a good letter writer — he said, why don't you just write all that we did so that we'll remember? So I wrote and I showed it to my father because he was a writer. My father and I, we were not very close, so he just took it and didn't say anything, he just took it. A month later he sent me a cutting from a newspaper — he had sent it to a newspaper. The Deccan Herald, and they had published it.

At that time my younger son was not more than two and I was very eager to do something. I was tired of being just a housewife, doing nothing, being with children — it did not satisfy me. Then I joined 'Journalism' in the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. That was in the evenings, so in the mornings I was at home and in the evenings my husband came back and I went out. I liked it. And I found myself.

I was much older. They were all young people and I was very much older. I was thirty. I found that I was good. I could feel myself being good. You know how you feel. I could write. I could use words and I did it in my own way. I did not follow what they told me, so I knew I was creative. I did not know it consciously but it came in my writing. After that I had to join a magazine to do the practical training for my diploma. They did not give me
much work because I was not on the staff and they did not pay me. But one day they wanted a short story and asked why don’t you write something for us. Though I don’t know why they thought I could, I went home and I wrote a short story. They published it and it was good for a first short story. It was quite good. And so after that it really kind of began. It just came. I wrote, I wrote, I wrote, I wrote, you know. Like thirty years of silence came to an end so I wrote many short stories and a lot of articles. I got them published in magazines and newspapers. I was really kind of doing what I wanted to do. So that is how it began.

JK  It’s like finding oneself again.

SD  Absolutely, absolutely. Because until then I’d never done anything which I really liked...Just drifted through life. In school I liked no subject except literature. I did law, I didn’t like that. There was really nothing I was fond of. I got married and that was fine. I am happy with my husband and love my children but I did not find that it could give me everything that I wanted from life. One part of me was satisfied, one part of me was happy but there was still much more of me that wanted something. And that came out in writing.

So it was a slow process and I never, never called myself a writer for years. You know, today you write one short story and you call yourself a writer (laughs). But it took me years to even call myself a writer, because I was very shy of the word. I was very shy of what I was doing. I had no confidence. I had confidence when I was writing. When I was writing I was very sure of myself. I had control over what I was doing. I was constantly critical of myself, trying to improve myself. But to the outside world I never presented confidence and never had this brashness.

JK  Such restraint used to be common with writers but nowadays you have to come out and kind of sell yourself.

SD  Yes. It was not so much there when I started writing — nobody did that and nobody talked much. But what was good for me was that I wrote those short
stories which all got published. There was this women's magazine that was called *Femina*. It's still there. Today it's a fashion magazine. At that time it was not like that. It was new and a lot of women were just coming out — talking about themselves — you know — a part of that evolving consciousness of women — the magazine was a part of that.

When I used to write my short stories I never thought anybody was reading but so many years later people would come and say: 'Oh, I read your stories' and 'I liked your short stories in *Femina*'. So I got readers. That means, I was saying something which people wanted to hear. Women wanted to hear what I was saying. That I know only now. At that time I did not know it.

**JK**  
*It must be pleasing to hear about it, even later.*

**SD** Yes, extremely pleasing. And so many years later. They would remember the story and they would say: 'I read this one' and 'I read that one'. But at the time I didn't know if anybody was reading. I didn't know if I reached anywhere. But nothing stopped me from writing.

I always feel that...remember there were a lot of women writing at that time — short stories — then when I was writing. There were magazines like *Femina*. There was *Eve's Weekly*. There was something called *Women's Era*. *Eve's Weekly* had a special issue once of good short stories by women. Many women were writing short stories. I remember their names. None of them are writing today. Most of them just stopped, I don't know why.

In fact a German magazine asked me to write a piece about women's writing and this was one of the questions I was posing: Why did all those women stop writing? They all wrote a novel or so but then it ended there. So two things may be there: there was no more, only that much, for them in it, and that came to an end. The second thing is that you need to have this desire to say that this is my profession. It's not just a hobby; it's not something I just dreamed; that this is my life. For me it was like that. It was my life, my profession. There was nothing which could make me stop.

But I was nobody, nobody knew me. I didn't make much money. I had no ways of knowing whether I was becoming a known writer. When people wrote about writers in English nobody ever mentioned my name. I was quite ignored but nothing stopped me. I was writing because I had to write.

**JK**  
*What comes out of your article in The Hindu is that you write for yourself. Do you still feel like that?*

**SD** That's right. Ultimately, yes. In fact, as I said in an interview the other day, maybe this is true about my new novel that is just coming out. Next Monday
I think it is released. It may be my last novel. So many people are writing and telling me: ‘Oh, you should never say that, you should write more’, but right now if there is nothing, I’m not going to write. If it comes, I’ll write. But at that time, you know, it came. There was a pressure inside me and it just came.

JK  You also did an MA in English.

SD  Much later, very much later. I did it when I was in my forties when my older son was doing his graduation and my younger son was doing his 12th, getting ready to enter medicine. It was a very difficult time. I was writing That Long Silence and everyone told me not to (do my MA, that is): why do you want to do your MA and what are you going to do with it? I didn’t want to do anything with it. I just thought I’d made a mistake because I did my BA in economics and I hated economics. I don’t like figures, I don’t like numbers, I don’t like mathematics. I don’t know why I did economics. But I wanted to do literature. Since I couldn’t do my BA I did my MA. Also I thought I would read, because I have not been a very good reader — I only read fiction — I thought I would read poetry, read drama and literary criticism. I read all that, of course, but it was very hard. I was writing a novel, my father was very sick, and my son was working for a very important exam. My husband had given up his job. We had changed houses several times and were finding it very difficult. So one year I worked with him as a typist because we couldn’t afford one and all this when I was doing my MA. It was terrible. But anyway I’m glad I did it.

JK  Do you think the reading for the MA affected your writing afterwards?

SD  Not really. But what did affect my writing was something else. When I was in Bombay we badly needed money. I was not working, we had two growing children, my husband although he is a doctor was in a full-time teaching job in a medical college. So the money was not enough. Femina asked me to write two stories a month. You know, that kind of story where you take up a theme like ‘my husband was a wife beater’. That kind of stuff. I wrote that for the money. That really affected my writing. After that I could not write for quite some time. It took me about six months. At that time I wrote children’s books so I could get out of all that.

JK  I don’t see even in your later novels the kind of theoretical touch you might imagine in a scholar’s work.
SD  No, thankfully no. No, I think the writer in me was unaffected, even today. At first I was very shy of speaking to university audiences because my language is not their language. The language is entirely different. But it doesn’t affect me now.

JK  Perhaps we could go on now to your views on literature. As I said, I read this Hindu article. In that and other articles you talk about how as a writer you are speaking to the reader and then about the book as a reading experience. Can you explain this? Could you imagine, when you are writing or after having written, yourself desiring particular effects in your audience?

SD  Now, that is strange because all these things that I have written, particularly The Hindu article. I have written as a reader. But as a writer I don’t think of the reader. Not when I am writing, nor after I have written. Only sometimes the editors, when I give the manuscript to them, tell me that the reader won’t understand this or that. At that time I have to become conscious of the reader. Or when my husband, who always reads my manuscripts, says something. Then I have to think of the reader. But on my own in the process of writing, no. In the process of editing, yes, sometimes you take account of the reader. But it is the reader; it is not a specific reader in India or abroad. It is just a vague reader, somebody who’s going to read the book. I don’t think of the reader as belonging somewhere or having a certain kind of understanding.

When I have to think, force myself to think who the reader is when I write, then it is like writing about Aswatthama. When I say ‘I am like Aswatthama’, I’m trying to say, ‘I’m a terrible outcast’. I think Christian mythology also has the figure of the wanderer who never belongs to any human society and who is destined to be always outside human society. I think that is one of the most terrible punishments for any human being. So when I say Aswatthama, any Indian who has read the Indian mythology will know immediately that it is the terrible state of being an outcast. I’m not interested in explaining that: ‘Aswatthama, the outcast etc’. because that is not how it comes to me. So then it obviously means that I’m writing for people who know this mythology. It does not mean that anyone who does not understand this will not be able to read the book but it always means to me that anyone who reads me has to make an effort. It is not easy reading. So as a writer I don’t really think of the reader at all.

But when you read it again you become a reader yourself. For me as a reader there may be some problems where I have not done this or that right, so that is the critical reader — there are so many stages in which one looks at one’s own novel. At first you are the creator and as a creator you are totally in power. It is your creation and you are damned if anyone’s going to
do anything to that. You don’t let anybody touch it or say a word about it. But then you finish it and the creative power has gone away, it is over now. Then you become a very humble writer and you know that it hasn’t come out as you wanted it to. Then when you read it you become a critical reader and you give it to someone else to read and you have to think that there are other readers as well. For the first time you have to step outside and see it from the outside. So there are all these different stages.

JK Just recently I read in an article in a newspaper that some criminals were punished by ordering them to read Alex Haley’s Roots and to watch the film Gandhi.

SD Where was this, in the United States?

JK Yes.

SD Oh, this was the punishment?

JK Yes, it was the judge’s decision that they read and watch these and write about them. They were young men convicted for racist crimes who obviously needed to be educated. Could you imagine your books used as a kind of educational material for that kind of educational purpose?

SD Certainly for a lot of men it opens out different new areas which men close their minds to. You know, like when I had just started writing, my husband and his brother were talking about their mother, my mother-in-law who was a widow. A Brahmin widow lives a very bad life. She was shaven, she could only take one meal a day, she could dress only in one kind of sari, she could not wear colour, etc. I was just talking to my brother-in-law about how terrible her life was and he said: ‘But she does not say it is terrible, she must be happy. I think she would tell us if it were terrible’. I thought then that men cannot hear, because unless she shouts they will not hear her. I can hear her without her saying things, you know, because we are on the same wavelength.

There is a kind of deafness in the gender barrier — between classes, between genders, between wherever there is a difference. There is this kind of a barrier which prevents us from hearing. To that extent men who read my books, many of them are made very uncomfortable. Maybe it would be a punishment for men to be made to read them (laughs). But I think more than anything else that it is enlightening. It opens up their minds.... Especially as my books go into the female mind and the psychology of the human
female which a text book may tell you about, but a living human being you create in a book can tell you much better, because that person is real.

Like Jaya in That Long Silence. She is a woman, she’s not a text book character like one of Freud’s — what are they — cases. It means much more to you than it would in a psychology textbook. When you see that, you do get an understanding of the female psyche. To that extent I suppose it would be true for women also because there’s a sense of identification. Like many things we keep to ourselves: you are ashamed of your feelings because you don’t want to admit them but when you see that somebody else has the same feelings you feel good: ‘Look, she feels the same way, too’.

I write about motherhood and I don’t write about it in a sentimental way because motherhood is very difficult. There are all shades. There could be very good bonding, there could be hostility. There are different variations.

JK  Your books are not sentimental. They are very much down-to-earth but they are still very touching. How do you manage that?

SD  They are very analytical more than anything else. The women are all very analytical and critical of their own selves: not only of their relationships but of their own selves.

JK  And not only the women. Consider for example Gopal in A Matter of Time. It is very astonishing how you brought about Gopal’s first person narrative.

SD  It surprised me also because it had to come in the first person. I thought Sumi would be in the first person but when I began writing, it had to be Gopal in the first person. One doesn’t know how it happens. I would hate to think anyone was being punished by reading my books (laughs). But I think it does one good to read about.... Like I like to read about men — because men are strange to me and if I read about certain aspects of men I feel good because I feel I know you better. This opens my eyes to the men in my own circle. So I suppose in that way it is a pity that many men think it is a woman’s book and it is about women so they don’t want to read it.

JK  Well, there are some books which seem as if they are written for women though that is not very often. But sometimes, or at least some parts feel like that.

SD  OK. It is a problem that a lot of men do not even want to read. I’ve said this so many times but sometimes when people come to me with my book and say ‘Sign this please’ and then they say, ‘this is for my wife’, as if they are ashamed of the idea that they may want to read it — or as if they think —
 Years of Silence Came to an End

this is not for me, it's women's stuff, I'm not going to read this'. I always feel like saying, 'maybe only your wife can read and you can't read at all' (laughs). But there is this, especially in India, this very sharp division between women's world and men's world. Even today, you'll notice, to insult a man, you say, 'Go and wear bangles'. Bangles mean identification totally, absolutely, with a woman. So in the same way, reading a women's book would make you a woman — which is an insult for a man (laughs). I think that is a problem but less with younger people. I find young men read women's books more comfortably than older men.

JK There are changes.

SD Yes, very much.

JK In Finland your book That Long Silence was published by a feminist publisher, Kääntöpiiri. Was it a problem for you that it was a feminist publisher?

SD Well, I knew that only a feminist publisher would publish me. When I wrote to Virago in London it was the same thing. I knew nobody else would publish me. That was not the time when Rushdie, Vikram Seth or Arundhati Roy had made Indian writing famous. And then my novels are also not the sort of novels which the publishers could sell all over the world. Very quiet. They are not Indian like Rushdie's. He is a bit dazzling. I knew that and I thought a lot before I wrote to Virago about the book and I was right. They accepted it. It is the same even today. In America a feminist press has published it. In Finland they also wanted to publish The Dark Holds No Terrors but they said that money was a problem. But the publisher was no problem for me because I knew there was no other...though in one way it was a problem because it stamps you, which I did not like. After that I've tried to get away from that label of feminist writer because I don't like that.

JK Yes, it's what I read in your comments — that you don't see yourself as a feminist writer.

SD No. Like I said, I want to be read just as a novelist. It's just a novel. Either it's a good novel or it's a bad novel. I don't like any other labels.

JK Still your novels do have strong women's points of view.

SD They would because of my being who I am — being the kind of person that I am living in the time that I am. I woke up to what it was being a woman
living in India. It was the beginning of my writing. My writing began from that when I realised what it was to be a woman in this country. I have moved away a little bit from that since because one becomes more conscious of one’s humanness as one grows older. Definitely this happens when you grow old because it’s only, say, when you are between ten and fifty that you are very conscious of your gender for many reasons, one of which is your reproductivity. So I am now more conscious of myself as a human being — and of the whole world — I don’t see it so strongly as I did before.

At that time I was very conscious, it came out of these very strong emotions, of what being a woman is. And I really was a privileged woman in many ways, because I had education. I grew up in a family where I was not barred from doing anything because I was a female. I married into a very conservative family but my husband was not like that. For him I was another human being and we had, always have had, an equal partnership which very few Indian marriages are. It used to be so and even today they are not. So in that way I was very privileged. But still I was conscious of this non-acceptance of me as a thinking human being. Acceptance of me only as a woman, and as a woman married with two children, as a mother, as a wife. I was seen more as that. I think that troubled me a lot.

JK It is exactly these themes that you write about.

SD Yes, correct. Especially That Long Silence. I think that was really the culmination of all the anger and all the repression; everything came out in that book. More than in all the others.

JK The title carries this word silence which I think is very important. In your novels there is always this silence which needs to be breached and a way out has to be found.

SD Yes. I think in all the novels this happens. In A Matter of Time, in The Binding Vine, in That Long Silence. Even in The Dark Holds No Terrors, because Kamala never speaks to her husband so there is the silence between them.

JK And there is also the silence between the father and the daughter.

SD Yes, you’re quite right. Someone had a very interesting theory that That Long Silence is about words. It’s less about silence and more about words which are used, such as husband, wife. Jaya sort of takes them apart. This is how a wife is supposed to be, this is how a husband, this is what a marriage is like. She tears them apart and reconstructs them with her own you know...I thought that that was a very interesting theory and it is true. It is as much
about words as about silence. But of course, words are the other face of silence. So if you’re talking about silence you’re talking about words as well.

JK  Exactly — when you are trying to find a way out of the silence, you need words. I have this feeling when reading Indian women writers that they are trying to— as Rushdie puts it: ‘reshape English’ — so that women are now trying to reshape English for women so that women can talk about what’s never been said.

SD  Yes, but that’s true all over the world, why only Indian women? I think that all over the world women are trying to use language in their own way because language has not been ours. It has been given to us. For our experiences we need a different language. Literary language has been mainly for men and used by them to describe their own experiences. Since my language is English I have to reshape it but I think it would be true for any other language. Take Marathi or Hindi for example. They would be using the language differently. So it is happening. Like Gauri Deshpande, this writer writing in Marathi and English, has said. Writing in Marathi she faces this problem because there are almost no Marathi words for sexual experiences, for parts of the body. They are very vulgar — used in a very bad sense. She says it’s only in English you can get these words, where you can write about these things. I thought that was very interesting. I think women have been forced to kind of forge a new language more in the [regional] languages than in English because English has all the words.

So I think for the languages it is even more difficult. In Indian languages there is so much difference between men’s language and women’s language. Certain things are never said by women. And women’s use of language on their own [in private or amongst themselves] is very different from what it is when they are talking in public. I think in the indigenous languages it would be more interesting to see how this is happening than in English.

JK  So, I have come to think of English as a ‘daughter language’. You say somewhere in your books that ‘daughters don’t belong’, that sons belong. So the indigenous languages are sons, they belong, they are Indian. And English does not belong.

SD  That’s a very original theory.

JK  Therefore, one can imagine that women writers can liberate, can let English as a daughter language speak in woman’s voice.
SD It is more liberating. A lot of women, older women especially, say that there are certain things about which you cannot write in your own languages. Two things. One thing is that in the languages there isn’t that kind of eligibility for a certain use. And secondly your readership is very close to you. When I write, when I write about anything, my readership is very far. I mean I never meet my readers. It’s as if the guardians are standing close by when you’re writing in your own language. In English it’s not so. So maybe if you write in your own language you would write differently than when you write in English. I don’t know.

JK *I think it is unnecessary to say that English is in opposition — this thing you get in these debates all the time.*

SD Yes. I’ve said enough about it and I don’t want to talk about it any more (laughs). I have become quite tired of that and as you said I think it’s not necessary to have this stance of opposition. It is the language that some of us use because we don’t know any other language. We are using it as best we can. It is like they say, if you lose a little you gain a little and English has much more variety, a big vocabulary, more flexibility in certain aspects than the languages. It’s something which should be taken into account now.

JK *Perhaps now a few words about translation. Your books have been translated into many languages. How do you feel about that?*

SD But very few into Indian languages, very few. That’s very bad. More into European languages than into Indian languages. I don’t know why. This process of translation is very peculiar because the languages get translated into English but English very rarely gets translated into the Indian languages. I don’t quite understand it because my book really is a language book. It is just that it happens to be in English. A friend of mine said that ‘when I read your book only after I finished it I realised it was in English. I read it like I would a Marathi book because it has the same — I don’t know what to call it — the same sensibility, as would a language book’. It would be very easy to translate. But it is not very much translated, I don’t know why.

JK *Maybe it’s because people who would read it can read it in English too.*

SD That’s true and also maybe publishers are hard to get. Maybe that is the reason. You’re quite right, maybe as you say the same people would be reading it in English anyway. But many more translations are from the languages into English now.
And as I said in the *Hindu* article, I feel we are running into the same problem of writing for the West. So there is this politics when you are choosing a book to be translated. Obviously you want to appeal to a very big readership. I feel again that same thing is happening. One thing is that translated books are not doing very well. I don’t know of any translated book that has done very well. Excepting, perhaps, Mahasweta Devi who was translated by Gayatri Spivak. Or Ramanujan’s translation of [U.R. Ananthamurthy’s novel of 1976,] *Samiskara*. I don’t see any other translations that have done very well...

Nevertheless, it’s a very good thing, translation, and it’s happening. I am very happy that there is so much translation. Never mind if there are a lot of bad books. So many Indians are writing in English now, so many people are writing very bad first novels. But it doesn’t matter. I think out of all this something good will come. It is a good thing. It shows that there is a lot of life. I’m sure you have seen this in India, that literature is alive.

**JK** How do you feel about the so-called non-resident Indians’ writing? Do you feel it is very different?

**SD** Very strange (laughs), it’s completely different. Our writing in India belongs to the category called Indian literature, if you must have labels. But that cannot be the case with writing from outside. Even if they write about India it’s different because the whole vision is different, because the perspective is different. These are what I would call international books, they are meant for a bigger audience. It’s very clearly made for an audience or a readership that would find what is mainly interesting in the book is the exotic element. I find a lot of these books have that exotic element in them.

**JK** There are also a lot of books that seem to be written to similar people as the writers.

**SD** That’s right, autobiographical. Another thing also is that a lot of importance is given to those books. This is the only point about which I am a little annoyed. In India, there is this writer called K.R. Usha, she has written a book [*Sojourn*, 1998]. It scarcely got much notice but let somebody from abroad write a book and *India Today* will give it a big review. This is the same kind of colonial mindset in which anything coming from the West is more important. This is what I feel a little annoyed about.

Obviously if you’re an Indian living there you would write differently and it is interesting because everybody has a different world and as an author I can only give my world. So these are different worlds, there is nothing superior or inferior. But somehow this coming-from-the-West hype, we are
not able to shake it off. This annoys me. They get much more importance
than writers who are living and working here.

Most of these books are not for us ... grandmothers, magic, spices ...
that is what a reviewer has said — these people write about spices as
something exotic. For us it is not exotic, we use it every day in our kitchen.
We are grinding it and putting it in our vegetables. It is an everyday matter.
They make it exotic because in the West, Indian spices are exotic. Now we
cannot have tigers and elephants so we have spices and grandmothers
(laughs). But that's a different category all together. Totally different and I
would put them in a different group altogether.

I'm not showing you anything strange. I'm just writing about this life
here.

**JK** Yes, and through reading critical stuff and other books I have been able to
approach it. Now, how has your work been received?

**SD** As I told you, for a long time I thought I was writing in a void. I had no
feed-back. I did not know I had readers. Critical work on me did not exist.
There was scarcely any criticism. Critics took no notice of me. I think in
1989 there was a Sahitya Akademi book on Indian writing in English and
my name was not even mentioned there. I was invisible for a long time and
I did not know how my work was received at all.

things changed. People became aware of my writing and I became aware of
my readers. I think that there has been a good readership but as I told you,
there is a problem. One thing is, I am regarded as a woman writer and writing
about women. They just don't allow me to come out of that slot. My books
are not read as novels, pure and simple. That is a big problem for me.

The second problem regarding my work is that people are reading it
only from the feminist angle. Everything is read from the feminist angle,
particularly by the critics. The ordinary readers — and I think I have, 
obviously, more women readers than men readers — they will read it as a
novel about women or a novel by a woman, etc. And critics will be reading
it as feminist writing. It's something I'm not happy about. I think I want to
be read as a novelist.

A certain writer recently said: 'Where are the writers? They talk of
English writing, but where are the writers. There are no writers, everybody
has written either one novel or two novels'. And I wanted to say: I've got
seven novels, do I not exist at all? Obviously, for them I don't. When they
think of novelists they think of Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor,
Allan Sealy, Upamanyu Chatterjee at the most. That's all. They wouldn't
think of anyone else, not even of Githa Hariharan if she hadn't won the
Commonwealth Prize. This consistent ignoring of my contribution and of the significance of what I have written — I'm not happy about that.

I've been writing for thirty years now. I have about ninety short stories. I have eight novels. I have four books for children. I have about fifty articles on all aspects of Indian writing in English but you continue to ignore me. I don't understand it. It is very hard. There was a feature in India Today about women writers and they had everybody from Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt down to the latest one who had written half a novel and I was not in there. I don't understand. This is what surprises me. They tell me it's because you don't live in Delhi.

JK It's a good reason....

SD Is it? (laughs)

JK I mean, obviously, for them, because it is the great place where things happen.

SD But even so, things happen because we write our books here. And I think what is important is writing the books — not readings, not events, not coming on TV. It's the books. I don't want you to look at me; I want you to look at my work. At least in the academic world there is a lot of interest. I have about one hundred, more than one hundred people working on me from all the universities and I have critical books coming out. So at least the academic world is interested. But there it is the same thing: the feminist angle — the women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, tradition versus modernity — I'm so tired of all that. I suppose they have to write something....

But recently there's been a book by a teacher who taught for a long time in Germany and is now in Bangalore in a local college, Mrinalini Sebastian. She has written a book putting my writing in the context of postcolonialism.7 Padmini Mongia and some other critics have been talking about how postcolonialism has marginalised a lot of writing like mine. Mrinalini too has kind of redefined postcolonialism in the context of my writing rather than the other way round.

JK The title or rather, the idea of my research is 'tense past, tense present'. It means envisaging language, the English language, as carrying a tension between the colonial and now the nationalist burdens. I see that this, as the idea of daughter language suggests, reflects the status of women: that there used to be the old traditions and now there is the burden of modernism. How do you see the changes in the status of women and where are the changes going?
Well, the last thirty years have seen a lot of changes. Feminism entered this country. When I say feminism, I don’t mean it in the sense of theory. I mean it in the sense of activism. which is really what feminism in India has been. It’s not Simone de Beauvoir; it’s not Germaine Greer, or anything. Some people will read these, but what changes things is activism. It’s become understood that women activists are working for other women, on things like dowry, rape, you know.

And there have been a lot of changes in the laws. But what has really changed is the awareness that these things have to be taken into account. There was a sudden realisation that women have suffered wrongly, greatly. Even that wasn’t understood before. As I said, I think there was a kind of closed-eyedness among men. I think that has gone now.

Everybody knows that these are the problems. Even if we have not been able to solve them, we have faced the fact that the problems are there. I think a lot of it is just gestures. You know, you make a law, but the society is not changing fast enough. So...In fact the society is changing fast in one way, in that we are becoming more nuclear family oriented. more women going out for jobs. So it has added to women’s burdens. it’s not taken them away. One thing is that when you’re living in a nuclear family you are free of one burden. the one of your in-laws. otherwise the woman had to live under the guard of her in-laws. That’s gone.

But then there are new burdens: of being the housekeeper, of going out earning money, and looking after all of this. There are a lot of middle class women in jobs. The problem is greater in India because life is not really convenient for women. And men are still not co-operative...men are not moving. This is to me the problem. Women are moving, there’s much more awareness among women. Even if you go to a small town you will see that women are more alert, more bright. But I think men are not moving fast enough.

Secondly, I think the very young generation is not moving in the right direction. See, our generation thought about feminism. we saw the past, we saw how our mothers lived. We wanted to live better. We found that we could, with struggle, live a life of more freedom. But the younger generation today has got it all without fighting for it. The women are now becoming like the men. I find that a lot of the young women now are so career-minded that emotional ties are given second place. I think there’s going to be this problem of women not being able to cope, because sometime or other you might get married, then you get children and then there’s going to be a problem. I’m a little worried about what’s going to happen to families with all this. Men are still unwilling to take the burden. No man would say: ‘Look. I will stay at home. I will take care of the baby’. I see this as the
problem. For most of the women, especially the women in the villages, life has not changed at all.

Like the woman who is here now: the men are doing the work and the whole day she’s carrying that sand on her head. I don’t want to look at her. I feel so bad because I am sitting here in such a privileged position and there she is, the whole day she is carrying that burden. She will never be able to have anything else other than that. She’ll be paid less than these men, she will continue to be paid less than the men are. She will be working equally hard but hers will not be skilled work. The men are skilled; they are the masons so they will get double what she is getting. She’ll go back home and she will have to contend with her drunken husband and she will have babies to feed.

So, life is not changing ... unless there is, I think, a better standard of living, unless all of us come under it, unless there is population control. And population control will not come unless women are more educated. And women will not be more educated until there are fewer people in a family. If there are too many children the girls will not be educated; the boys will be educated. It is a vicious circle. I think, to a certain extent things have changed. There is more awareness. You have these panchayats now where women are given a thirty three percent representation. The panchayats are the governing councils for the village.

JK  Do you mean Women’s Reservation Bill is now passed?8

SD No, for the parliament, no. For the villages it has already happened. It’s interesting that there it is not happening but here it has happened. And if you find in the village panchayats women who cannot read or write, they are there because this 33 % quota has to be given to them. It is generally the husband, who will put his wife there. He will tell her what to do. But — and I have a friend who is working on this — after being there for some time they start thinking: ‘It’s me, I’m going to do things’. So they learn. So I see hope there. I see hope at the bottom, in the village women. They are becoming aware. They will learn that they can also have money, they can be independent. So I see some hope in these things.

JK  There are many initiatives in petty industries and....

SD Yes. There is a lot of work which activists, NGOs, are doing which are helping women. So I think there is some hope. But unless we have population control, I don’t think things will change.

JK  It will make it more difficult — the population growth.
Yes. Look at what is happening in the parliament now. They all talk about wanting to do things for women but when it comes to giving seats, they are not going to do it. I mean, they are willing to fight against it.

I think it will never happen because men will never give women anything. It will happen because of women themselves. They'll learn. They are learning. You will see. Among the younger girls today, I think, there is much more awareness, more understanding. They want to go out, they want to have a good life.

I think consumerism is good in one way. You see a TV and you see all those things and you say I want to have that. And how do you get that if you don’t work and your husband alone is earning?

You know, my servant who has been working with me for many years, whatever she wants she buys with her own money. She does not wait for her husband to buy it. So, consumerism is going to be good in one way. Because if people want the goods, they’ll need their own money. To earn the money they want to take up a job. Once you take up a job you become an independent person.

Some marriages will break up because of that, but I think that is going to happen anyway.

There are going to be changes.

Yes. You can’t get anything without some kind of sacrifice. I am afraid for family life, you know…I would feel very bad if children lost out in this. But as I said, we always criticise consumerism, but in one sense I think it is good. Also I think improving this condition of women, one way to do it is to give daughters an education.

Yes, education is the key.

Understanding, realising, that’s the key.

Like Yamunabai in A Matter of Time.

Yes. In fact she is a real-life person. My husband comes from a village and there was this woman in that village — she had a different name. At that time, years ago, she had classes for girls. And not only did she teach them, she had Yoga — you know, 70, 80 years ago! — she taught them Yoga, she made them do physical exercises, drama…It’s amazing, in a small village. There’ll always be Yamunabais. And today’s Yamunabais will find girls who are responding. In those days it would have been hard. Girls would not
come out, as their parents would not allow them to come out. Now it's easier. So I have hope. And I think as women change, the society will change.

JK Yes. And I think that it is in India, as well as elsewhere, the most important thing: the change in the status of....

SD Status of women, absolutely. It is the hope I wait for. In fact I was just saying that once women in India become a force — once the political parties realise that there are so many votes, once we come together as a political force — you will find that they will give so much more importance to women. Like they give to Muslims now, because the Muslims together form a vote bank. You know, the Scheduled Castes form a vote bank. If the women from all the communities form one force, we will be the biggest vote bank in the country (laughs). It will be an amazing thing how the politicians would take a note of us. Until now they have ignored women, that is, until the last two elections. In the last two elections things changed. Suddenly they realised that there is this whole class of women which is more aware, enlightened, not going to take things lying down. Now we see in parliament that all the MPs from all the parties have got together on this Women's Reservation Bill. They are all together, all fighting it together. That happens, but the Bill will never happen — human beings being what they are, they are always going to fight it.

JK Well, things are going to change.

SD They are going to change. They already have, there is a lot of change. But there is still so much cruelty. Cruelty is there for both men and women. But because women are vulnerable, the mode of cruelty which women endure.... I myself know of two cases, close to us, educated girls who have put up with enormous cruelty from their husbands. One of the girls was in the United States; she married a man from here. They got married and went there. He was so enormously cruel to her that finally she divorced him. She says, 'I can't understand why I put up with it'. So there is a lot of cruelty. And this was among the educated; among the uneducated it is much more. There is a consistent, persistent cruelty towards women, which is very hard to...you know.

JK Like in The Binding Vine, it's shocking.

SD It is. But I think things are much worse than any fiction can ever show. Fiction can only touch a little bit.
JK  It can raise awareness.

SD  Yes that's right. It is the only thing it can do.

JK  Do you think English literature can have that kind of role in raising awareness?

SD  Yes, today it can because there are more readers of English than there ever were before. Formerly English reading was for the very, you know, elite. Now it is no longer so. Now you find a variety of readers. You really have a great number of readers. I also feel it is important for it to be translated.

JK  Sure. It's still a small readership.

SD  It's small. I'm very happy if...and I always say I don't want to take money if you translate me into any Indian language. I would like the translator to have all the money because for me it is important my work is translated. That Long Silence was translated into Marathi and it did very well. In fact there was a magazine which serialised it and at the end of it, they had a whole issue of readers responses, about twenty, forty pages of readers’ letters, on all the distinct issues the book had raised.

I think the languages are much more responsive to literature than English. They are closer: people read and respond very strongly. In English it is a little — a little distant, I think.

JK  More reserved, more educated, that kind of thing?

SD  That's right. Maybe because a lot of English readers would not be in those positions. Well, I don't know really. It's true that in the languages there is much greater response to writing than there is in English.

JK  It is also due to a tradition of such discourse. There is already that kind of a mechanism that you can use.

SD  Which is there in all the Indian languages. Very true. Somebody says something and immediately there is a response to that. It's always been there. You're quite right. Whereas we don't have a forum in English. In Kannada, for example, they have a lot of meetings, seminars, poets' meets, you know: Independence Day you celebrate with the poets coming together reading their poems. And then you have an annual summit, a gathering where you have three, four days of discussions and interviews of one and other, make new friends. In English we don't have that. I don't meet any other
English writers. Everybody asks me if I know Anita Desai and I ask how will I know her? She lives in the States, I think, now. I live in Bangalore, where would I meet her? I don’t go to seminars in England and the United States. There is no forum, whereas, as you say, the tradition is there in the languages. There is a presidential speech in the summit where a lot of literary issues will be taken up and that will be debated in the newspapers for months and months and it goes on. I think it is very lively.

JK  That is one thing I regret — not being able to enjoy, not knowing the languages.

SD  You’re not the only one. I’m ignorant as well. I can get it second-hand, through friends who write in Kannada, who read Kannada. My husband reads Kannada, so whenever he reads something, he tells me about it. And then he has some literary friends, so through them he comes to know. I am interested in that. I don’t feel that because I write in English I don’t belong here. I feel very much a part of it. But it would be interesting, quite right. It is also interesting how they kind of fight, quarrel and all that. It is very lively.

JK  We are now at end of this discussion. Thank you very much.

SD  Thank you. I hope you get something out of all this and of India as well.

NOTES

1 From 1st Jan., 2001, Calcutta officially changed its name to Kolkata. Bombay was renamed as Mumbai in 1996. Delhi’s status is due to its being the capital, whereas Mumbai and Kolkata were among the first three Indian cities where the British established universities, the third being Chennai (Madras) in the South.

2 The Bharatya Vidya Bhavan is, among other things, an educational cultural institution founded in 1938 by Dr. K.M. Munshi. The Bhavan functions in several places in India and abroad. For more information, see http://www.cyberasia.co.uk/lifestyle/bhavan/information/institute.html.


6 For Aswatthama in the Mahabharata see e.g. http://www.hindubooks.org/books_by_rajaji/mahabharata/aswatthama/page1.htm.


8 At the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000, the Women’s Reservation Bill was very much discussed in the media, but plans to secure women a quota of 33% in the
legislative assembly were met with great resistance. The issue still remains unresolved in 2002, see e.g. http://indiatogether.org/women/authority/womensrep.htm.

DESPANDE’S PUBLICATIONS

NOVELS


SHORT STORIES

The Legacy & Other Stories (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1978); The Miracle & Other Stories (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1986); It Was the Nightingale (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1986); It Was Dark (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1986); The Intrusion & Other Stories (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993). [Incl. It Was Dark (1986), It was the Nightingale (1986), The Miracle (1986)], and The Stone Women (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2000).

FOR CHILDREN

A Summer Adventure (India Book House 1978); The Hidden Treasure (Bombay: India Book House, 1980); The Only Witness (Bombay: India Book House, 1980); The Narayanpur Incident (Bombay: India Book House 1982).

FILM SCRIPT

The Anglo-Indianness of Geoffrey Firmin: Deracination in *Under the Volcano*

Whereas Indian culture predated British colonialism in India (1600–1947) by six millennia, Anglo-Indian and Eurasian cultures were concurrent with colonialism and have survived it. The first British colonisers, men in the British East India Company which ‘expected that its servants would lead a celibate life’ (Hawes 2), often ignored this stricture and entered into marriages and similar sexual relationships with Indian women. Their children were the progenitors of the Anglo-Indian community (the first Anglo-Indians were born in 1601), for which the racialised subject formation of hybridity is the marker. Anglo-Indians have always been a minority or marginal community in India, largely outside the caste system, as the word *half-caste*, which originally signified women who married outside their castes, suggests (Moore 170). In the post-independence period especially, this minority or marginal position has become attenuated because of the Anglo-Indian Diaspora. Within India, the ‘life span of the Anglo-Indian community will depend in large measure on two strong bulwarks of the community that have sustained it through the most difficult periods of its history, namely its educational institutions and its organised structure under a strong leadership’ (Abel 186). In the 1930s one Anglo-Indian, E. T. McCluskie, even conceived of founding an Anglo-Indian homeland, or *mooluk*, in Bangalore, and around this time several other people also attempted to establish *mooluks* in various parts of India, but these projects all failed (Lahiri-Dutt 41–42). Another means of survival has been marriage within the Anglo-Indian community, because between World War I and independence ‘the Anglo-Indian community had become virtually endogamous as they were shunned by British and Indian society’ (Younger 130). In the post-independence period ‘sexual relations were restricted within the community and between Indians. Previously, the Britisher was the prize in the sexual stakes for Anglo-Indian women, but with independence the emphasis shifted from him to the Indian’ (Younger 138). Thus, the practices of intermarriage and global migration have contributed to the weakening of the community.

In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, there was a steady exodus of the community to Britain, Australia and Canada. Today their children and grandchildren have blended seamlessly into the fabric of their adopted countries and are indifferent — some deliberately so — to the warp and weft of their mixed ancestry. Soon, this people and culture, born out of Britain’s three hundred years in India, will no longer exist — not even as a footnote to the annals of British-India history. (Penn-Anthony)
Now dispersed around the world, many Anglo-Indians simply cannot rely on educational, political, utopian and endogamous constructs, as in India, to help ensure their survival. Often they depend instead on life-tellings and other forms of orature and literature in their effort to save if not the community itself, then at least an archive of their Anglo-Indianness.

In his story of Geoffrey Firmin, the protagonist of his novel, *Under the Volcano* (1947), Malcolm Lowry has created an archival record of an Anglo-Indian's tragic struggle to assert his ethnicity amidst the vicissitudes of the Diaspora and against the opposing force of colonialism. Set on the Day of the Dead, 1 November 1939, the novel takes the form of an analeptic lament, as Jacques Laruelle recalls the events of exactly one year earlier, in particular: his childhood friend Geoffrey's fleeting reunion with his estranged wife, Yvonne, with whom Laruelle has had an affair; her death when she is trampled by a runaway horse; and his murder by fascist gangsters.

When Firmin is murdered at the climax of the novel, his body thrown down a barranca, his body of meaning — deracinated and uprooted, is scattered among the critics Cripps (1982), Harrison (1982), Ackerley (1983, 1985–86), Asals (1989), St. Pierre (2002), and any future Lowry scholars intent on exhuming and pathologising *Under the Volcano*'s themes of Indianness. Firmin's life cause and cause of death can be traced in the genetic and semantic code of his Anglo-Indianness. Indeed, Firmin's alienation from his Anglo-Indianness is his personal and existential infirmity, the fulfilment of his nominal identity and his hamartia. His fall from greatness is not his bodily descent into the barranca, nor his mythopoeic descent into Faustian and Dantesque underworlds, nor even his alcoholic drop into a bottle of mescal, so much as it is his deracination — his detachment from his ethnicity and his race. Forced into the role of British Consul in the Mexican town of Quauhnahuac, Firmin is left longing for Kashmir like an atavistic cloud, or perhaps a 'geografictione' (van Herk) of home, the site of nonmimetic Borgesian ficciones, with no referent in the known world. The infirmity of being Firmin outside the walls of the Himalayas is much more his disease than alcoholism, much more his Kafkaesque crime than treason, much more his Camusian estrangement than his separation and disconnection from a range of friends, relatives and acquaintances. The Consul's infirmity is his personal deracination — its traces found in the bone and hair of his bodily remains and the critical remains of the body of the text.

If bell hooks can declare herself 'bone black' (1996), then I would like to speak for Geoffrey Firmin, ex-skeletally, and declare him Anglo-Indian down to his powdery bones. What is the construct 'Anglo-Indian'? Who is Geoffrey Firmin among Anglo-Indians? Today, Anglo-Indian culture may be dying out, but in 1947, the year in which *Under the Volcano* was published, and the year when India recovered its independence from the British colonial power, Anglo-Indian culture was prominent and cohesive. Clearly, within the postcolonial dialogic, Geoffrey
Firmin is an ambivalent figure. He is a British national who in 1938, when the novel is set, is associated with the coloniser; he is an Anglo-Indian, who perceives himself as Indian, yet serves as British Consul in Quauhnahuac, even though, according to Jacques Laruelle, who here speaks as his executor,

the poor Consul’s job was merely a retreat, that while he had intended originally to enter the Indian Civil Service, he had in fact entered the Diplomatic Service only for one reason and another to be kicked downstairs into ever remoter consulships, and finally into the sinecure of Quauhnahuac as a position where he was least likely to prove a nuisance to the Empire.... (31)

How is Firmin Anglo-Indian? How is he ‘a nuisance to the Empire’? How is denying his Anglo-Indianness a form of systemic deracination?

In the opening paragraph of Under the Volcano, the narrator situates Quauhnahuac on the 19th parallel of latitude, in line with Juggernaut (Puri), on the Bay of Bengal. This reference is a ‘geografictione’, which situates Firmin’s fiction, including the fiction of his Anglo-Indianness, on the edge of the Indian subcontinent, just as Janet Frame sites her character Thora Pattern on ‘the edge of the alphabet’ in her novel of the same name (1962), that is, outside the rule of essentialisation. As Pattern wonders ‘[h]ow can one identify oneself, living so close to the edge of the alphabet?’ (134), Firmin might ask ‘how can one identify oneself, living off the edge of a subcontinent?’ The narrator first identifies and ‘racialises’ Firmin as Anglo-Indian in his account of Jacques Laruelle’s meeting with him, in 1911, at Courseulles, in Normandy. Young Geoffrey Firmin is depicted as ‘the strange little Anglo-Indian orphan, a broody creature of fifteen, so shy and yet so curiously self-contained, who wrote poetry that old Taskerson (who’d stayed at home) apparently encouraged him with, and who sometimes burst out crying if you mentioned in his presence the word “father” or “mother”’ (16). The narrator then completes his Victorian portrait:

His mother had died when he was a child, in Kashmir, and, within the last year or so, his father, who’d married again, had simply, yet scandalously, disappeared. Nobody in Kashmir or elsewhere knew quite what had happened to him. One day he had walked up into the Himalayas and vanished, leaving Geoffrey, at Srinigar, with his half-brother, Hugh, then a boy in arms, and his stepmother. Then, as if that were not enough, the stepmother died too, leaving the two children alone in India. (19)

To be left ‘alone in India’ is apparently the senior Firmin’s wish. This is a solitude that takes the form of ‘vanishment’. The deaths of the two Mrs. Firmins are also vanishings. Young Geoffrey might well have echoed the narrator of Midnight’s Children, Saleem Sinai, in saying, ‘[t]he curse of vanishment, dear children, has evidently leaked into you’ (Rushdie 435), because the scandal of disappearance leaks into Firmin’s consciousness.

Firmin begins his process of ‘vanishment’ in response to the news that ‘England is breaking off diplomatic relations with Mexico and all her consuls — those, that
is, who are English — are being called home. These are kindly and good men, for the most part, whose name I suppose I demean. I shall not go home with them. I shall perhaps go home but not to England, not to that home’ (36). Firmin makes this declaration of identity (apart from the English consular corps and apart from an English homeland) in his reconciliatory letter to his estranged wife, Yvonne, which Laruelle finds misplaced, or at least unmailed, in his friend’s book of Elizabethan plays. Firmin’s remark might be interpreted to mean that he is an Indian national, not an English national, and that to him home is not his adoptive household of England but his Indian birthplace. It is his ‘pre-gutteral’ utterance of postcolonial identity. But when Laruelle, who fancies his friend ‘a kind of more lachrymose pseudo “Lord Jim” living in a self-imposed exile, brooding ... over his lost honour, his secret’ (33), burns Firmin’s letter in the cantina, he destroys not only Geoffrey’s chance for reconciliation with his wife but also his declaration of racial identity. Geoffrey’s ‘secret’ is less his wartime indiscretion than his discretion of race. The ‘writhing mass in an ashtray’ (42) is his Anglo-Indian body itself.

The loss of racial identity, and the denial of difference in the burning of this critical mass of self are of tragic import. Geoffrey Firmin is a heterodoxically tragic figure, in that his hamartia, or moral flaw, and his hubris both lie outside him, in a racialising and deracinating society. His hamartia, therefore, is not his failure to assert his racial identity but society’s failure to recognise it; and his hubris is neither his alcoholism, his infidelity, his fatal errors in judgment, nor even his Anglophilia, but rather society’s insolence towards him: its disrespect for him as a racial subject. In Geoffrey Firmin, Malcolm Lowry reinscribes the Aristotelian prescript of the tragic hero, casting him as martyr-witness to society’s ills to the point of death. Firmin does not represent social ills: he scapegoats them. His tragic position as innocent, or at least as somebody whose moral flaws cannot be held responsible for his downfall, is similar to that which Northrop Frye attributes to Cordelia, Socrates, Iphegenia, and Christ, whom he ultimately prefers to place outside the mythos of tragedy, specifically, ‘in a kind of insane cautionary tale’ (Frye 211). But the Frigian position that ‘[t]ragedy, in short, seems to elude the antithesis of moral responsibility and arbitrary fate, just as it eludes the antithesis of good and evil’ (Frye 211), is perhaps most remarkable because it hinges on seems, much as the Consul hinges on the seems of his agencies, professional and racial. Frye ‘seems’ to leave open the possibility of a tragic hero whose fate is arbitrary. Had he addressed Under the Volcano in Anatomy of Criticism, might Frye have classified Geoffrey Firmin, and with him Cordelia, Socrates, Iphegenia, and Christ, as tragic heroes? Probably not: if he would not make an exception for Christ, why would he be willing to find Firmin exceptional? But I wish to take exception with Frye, and give exception to Firmin, who is a compelling tragic hero not because he is an ‘innocent sufferer’ (Frye 211) but because his downfall is arbitrary, despite the fact that he happens to be morally
flawed. Even so, Firmin might be assigned what Frye calls ‘moral responsibility’ in that he does accept responsibility for his ‘damned’ state. Lowry calls his life a ‘tragedy, proclaimed’ (65). In this sense, all Firmin’s utterances proclaim his responsibility.

In his Poetics Aristotle calls tragedy ‘the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought’ (62). Geoffrey Firmin is a tragic hero in part because society ignores his personal agency, preferring to Anglicise him, essentialising the ‘Anglo’ of his Anglo-Indianness. When, at the end of the novel, he is mistaken for and executed as a secret agent, the mistake is that his secret and his agency have to do with race, not treason: he is a secret agent — an unacknowledged racial subject. His execution as a spy amounts to a hate crime: the racially-motivated murder of a man because he appears to be British. The racial motivation has to do with the fact that his disguise as a British Consul undoes his guise as an Anglo-Indian subject: his consular role hates the reconciliation of English and Indian within him, as Laruelle hates the written possibility that Firmin and Yvonne might reunite. In arguing that the ‘emphasis on the disjunctive present of utterance ... allows the articulation of subaltern agency to emerge as relocation and reinscription’ (193), Homi Bhabha distinguishes hybridity from colonial racial binaries, and identifies ‘subaltern consciousness’ as, in Frye’s phrase, eluding ‘the antithesis of good and evil.’ Within Bhabha’s hybridity construct, Firmin’s letter to Yvonne might be seen as his ‘articulation of subaltern agency’, an agency that empowers him to ‘relocate’ (or ‘vanish’) home — perhaps in the Himalayas with his father — and to ‘re-inscribe’ his letter from the ashes. One might argue that, even given his arbitrary life circumstances and manner of death, Firmin does manage to draw on his hybrid agency as Anglo-Indian to ‘relocate’ himself from the barranca to readers’ acts of reading and reader responses. His racial identity is ‘re-inscribed’ in Under the Volcano, and in its sequel, Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid (1968), assembled by Douglas Day and Margerie Lowry. Still, the question remains for the reader, even if Geoffrey Firmin as subaltern can speak (Spivak 1995), albeit re-inscriptively, does he truly speak as subaltern, as Anglo-Indian, or only in the thin disguise of a British Consul?

Postcolonial critics of Under the Volcano have either not allowed Firmin to speak his race, or not acknowledged that he is speaking his race, as in his letter to Yvonne. In ‘Under the Volcano: The Politics of the Imperial Self’ (1982), Michael Cripps observes simply, ‘the Consul is a representative of British imperial power’ (94). In ‘Lowry’s Use of Indian Sources in Under the Volcano’ (1989), Fredrick Asals notes how, while composing Under the Volcano, ‘Lowry begins sprinkling his language with Anglo-Indianisms’ (115) to support what Asals sees as Firmin’s incidental racial background, his local colour, as it were. Similarly, Keith Harrison, in ‘Indian Tradition and Under the Volcano’ (1982), cites Lowry’s Hindu allusions (to the Rig Veda, the Upanishads, and the Mahabharata, for example), mainly as
analogic structural devices, yet seems to reserve comment on the dialogic issue of race, and denies the fact that Firmin has a dialogic imagination (Bakhtin 1981). To deny this hybrid imagination in him is to deny his race, and to deny his race is to deny his self and identity — his being — and in effect to shove his body down the *barranca*. So my critical response is to descend into the ravine, which can be associated with the Indus Valley (78), to retrieve Geoffrey’s broken body, and to reinscribe it.

The idea of British Columbia as a place of refuge for Yvonne and Geoffrey, which she discusses at length with Hugh (Geoffrey’s half-brother) (116–24), becomes in Geoffrey’s consciousness (as signaled by italics) an ambivalent vision of Kashmir, that ends in a questioned ‘*Certainty of brightness, promise of lightness, of light, light, light, and again, of light, light, light, light, light?*’ (125–26). This vision of Kashmir is also Geoffrey’s background, in the sense that Fawzia Afzal-Khan, in *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* (1993), identifies herself as ‘a person of South Asian background’ (26), or in the manner in which V. S. Naipaul uses foregrounding and backgrounding techniques to situate his narrator as an Anglicised Trinidadian-Indian subject in his novel, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987). Thus, the Consul is foregrounded in ‘British imperial power’, whereas, as Geoffrey Firmin, he is backgrounded in a vision of Kashmir. His tragic quest is to shed his consular disguise and get back to this sacred ground. But his task, stuck as he is in the colonial construct, is formidable. Hugh Firmin, is also struggling with his hybridity as Anglo-Indian; he sees himself as ‘[a] piece of driftwood on the Indian Ocean’ and wonders, *[i]s India my home? [Should I] disguise myself as an untouchable, which should not be so difficult, and go to prison on the Andaman Islands for seventy-seven years, until England gives India her freedom?’ (153). Clearly, their personalities are in opposition: Hugh being as unsettled geographically and politically as Geoffrey is well placed, yet they are working together according to the same anti-colonial agenda and focusing on getting home. In the ‘disjunctive present’ of his thought, Hugh might indirectly unmask Geoffrey as an untouchable, or *dalit*, imprisoned on an island of Empire — his consular posting. Hugh’s dream comes true, in a sense, with Geoffrey’s 1947 re-inscription, when *Under the Volcano* is published and ‘England gives India her freedom’ disguised as a consular ‘*dalit*’. Having lost his passport while riding the máquina infernal at the fair near the British Consulate (222), and with only Hugh’s papers for identity — the identity of the anti-fascist revolutionary for whom the authorities are actually looking, Geoffrey takes his brother’s place at the end of the novel when he is mistaken for Hugh and taken as a spy. Ironically, for Hugh, ‘*that in Karachi homeward bound he might have passed within figurative hailing distance of his birthplace never occurred to him*’ (163). For Geoffrey, this call to his birthplace is an occurrence that takes him into the Indus Valley. When he loses his passport on the Ferris Wheel, he is not taking on Hugh’s kind of multiple alienation or sense of placelessness, but surrendering his false nationalism
The Anglo-Indianness of Geoffrey Firmin

and, paradoxically, leaving himself paperless for re-inscription. His uncertain subject position (or subject position of questionable certainty) is apparent again later, at the Salón Ofélia, when readers hear him deliver a long monologue (306–308) to Hugh about Kashmir, only to discover 'there was a slight mistake. The Consul was not talking. Apparently not. The Consul had not uttered a single word' (308). This is Homi Bhabha's state of re-inscription which comes about without paper, writing, or speech, but only in silence and imagination.

Geoffrey's desire to rescue his Anglo-Indianness from the process of colonial deracination finds expression in a range of geografictional events, from a scheme to climb Popocatepetl (Popocatepetl and Ixtacihuatl are signifiers of the Himalayas that loom throughout the novel, and provide its title [339]) to being caught without lavatory paper — being caught, that is, literally, paperless — and having to 'clean himself on a stone' (294), as Cervantes, the Salón Ofélia proprietor, directs him, in an act of abject self-reinscription. When the police later arrest Geoffrey on the evidence of Hugh's Federación Anarquista Ibérica card in his pocket, and demand 'Where your passaporte? What need for you to make disguise?' (370), the narrator is hinting that he has renounced imperialism (he is paperless — without British identity papers or colonial documentation) and that he has cast off the consular mask of his diplomatic immunity that concealed his Anglo-Indianness. By identifying himself as William Blackstone — one recalls his declaration to Yvonne at the beginning of the novel: 'I'm thinking of becoming a Mexican subject, of going to live among the Indians, like William Blackstone' (82) — Geoffrey reveals that he has become black, stone, and Indian. Given that the novel abounds in Mexican-Kashmiri correspondences, an Indian (Indigenous American) — Indian (South Asian) sign correspondence (an exchange of letters: the letters I-n-d-i-a-n with the letters I-n-d-i-a-n) is entirely possible here. Even in an earlier scene where Firmin witnesses two Indians coming out of the tavern Todos Contentos y Yo También, one Indian could be Indigenous American and the other Indian could be South Asian, at least if the scene were to be contextualised in a spirit of Derridean play:

Bent double, groaning with the weight, an old lame Indian was carrying on his back, by means of a strap looped over his forehead, another poor Indian, yet older and more decrepit than himself. He carried the old man and his crutches, trembling in every limb under this weight of the past, he carried both their burdens. (280)

It could be suggested that Firmin might find this compassion play between two peasants so deeply moving in part because he sees himself as one of the Indians. Later, when he identifies himself as 'Blackstone' (and with William Blackstone), he no doubt recalls this scene at the tavern, and the narrator invokes it for readers. These two scenes are examples partly of Joycean word play and partly of Derridean play with meaning, indicating that, however indirectly, Geoffrey Firmin is indeed becoming 'Indian' again. When the police say 'I'm afraid you must come to prison'
(370) and ‘You say your name is Black. No es Black’ (371), readers know, to the contrary, that he has escaped Jameson’s prison house of language (1972) and he has become a black stone subject.

His descendence — descendance is the process of defeating an opposing force such as colonialism not by rising above it (transcending it) but by falling beneath it, as into a barranca or under a volcano — of deracination (displacement, or uprooting, and the erasure of race) is fully apparent in the novel’s concluding three paragraphs. As he is falling into the barranca, a movement signified when the old fiddler who calls him ‘Compañero’ as he lies dying at the top of the ravine ‘had vanished’ (374), he imagines ‘[h]e was in Kashmir, he knew, lying in the meadows near running water among violets and trefoil, the Himalayas beyond, which made it all the more remarkable he should suddenly be setting out with Hugh and Yvonne to climb Popocatepetl’ (374). The return — to Anglo-Indianness and to Kashmir — would seem to be complete. Yet in the midst of his execution, even as he hurtles down the barranca, he reaches the summit of Popo, and he realises that his racial identity is becoming insubstantial again:

But there was nothing there: no peaks, no life, no climb. Nor was this a summit exactly: it had no substance, no firm base. It was crumbling too, whatever it was, collapsing, while he was falling falling into the volcano, he must have climbed it after all, though now there was this noise of foisting lava in his ears, horribly, it was in eruption, yet no, it wasn’t the volcano… (375)

Here, every thing, every body is variously itself and its negation. Every sign signifies at once the fullness and the absence of meaning. At the tragic moment of death — every death is a tragedy, even the death of a dog (‘[s]omebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine’ [375]) — Geoffrey Firmin seems to realise his own ambivalent significations as racial subject: Indian-not Indian; British-not British; spy-not spy; dead-not dead. Can a body be variously or at once dead-not dead? How can Firmin be signed ‘not dead’?

First theory: the Consul is dead. He died: from three gunshot wounds to the head, from a Colt ’17 revolver discharged at close range (373); from severe traumatic blows to the head, torso, and internal organs, some blows sustained in his fall down the rocky hillside of the barranca, but other blows sustained when he was punched, slapped, and kicked before his fall; and from massive blood loss, when his battered body came to rest at the bottom of the barranca. Although he is sustained by the ellipsis at the end of the novel’s penultimate paragraph (375), which is the last of his focalised paragraphs, that also marks his end of consciousness, he survives at the bottom of the barranca for several minutes, before he dies.

Second theory: Geoffrey Firmin is not dead. He has slipped through the ellipsis of the penultimate paragraph, re-inscribed himself as an inviolable Anglo-Indian subject, and vanished somewhere in the vicinity of the Himalayas and the Indus
Valley in the ex-claustral home of Kashmir, which is at once India and Pakistan, yet neither nation:

Suddenly he screamed, and it was as though this scream were being tossed from one tree to another, as its echoes returned, then, as though the trees themselves were crowding nearer, huddled together, closing over him, pitying... (375)

He might have been able to make an ontological slip through an ellipsis (compare slipping through a worm hole in quantum physics) because the sentence ending in ellipsis has no end stop. A sentence without an end stop is a sentence without end and when it coincides with the last representation of focalised consciousness, it marks the latter’s continuity, even after the cessation of life. Firmin had already practised some elliptical manoeuvres earlier in the day, for example, when ‘suddenly the Calle Nicaragua rose up to meet him’ (77) and when he ‘fell asleep with a crash’ (93), in that, from the Greek elleipein (‘to fall short’), ellipsis points to every descent, from a drunken collapse in the street to a tragic fall from greatness. After his encounters with his Anglo-Indianness on the last day of his life, the Day of the Dead, Geoffrey Firmin moves into a new ‘location of culture’ (Bhabha), beyond the last posts of postmodernism and postcolonialism to the hantu (Jahn 1961) or placetime of re-inscripted ‘vanishment’ and Anglo-Indianness as his own inviolable racial identity. He manages to defer the full stop in his narratorial existence precisely by resisting the forces of deracination that threatened his survival as a colonised subject. His final moments of consciousness, focusing on Kashmir, suggest he does indeed recover his Anglo-Indian identity, despite Laruelle’s destruction of his letter to Yvonne, and many other circumstances that, within the tragic mode, seem to conspire against him and demand his downfall, notably his brutal treatment at the hands of the Mexican police. In consciousness, he transforms the barranca into the Indus Valley and he finds a way for even the ‘dead’ subaltern to speak, and to speak out about issues of race and hybridity.

As in the novel’s refrain ‘A corpse will be transported by express ...’ (284), the ‘dead-not dead’ body of Firmin is transported through an unstopped ellipsis to Kashmir, and the Anglo-Indian condition of hybridity. In his poem ‘For Under the Volcano’ (1937–1938), Lowry had experimented with the refrain and the idea of elliptical movement (his phrase ‘mysteriously waking up suddenly’ anticipating Geoffrey’s falls in the street and his crashing to sleep in the novel):

‘A corpse should be transported by express’, said
the Consul

[mysteriously waking up suddenly.
(Scherf 103)

Under the Volcano, the novel, reinscribes this utterance, changing ‘should’ to ‘will’, attributing it to the Consul, and making it a condition of consciousness. Malcolm Lowry also reinscribes Geoffrey, by transporting the corpse of a colonial civil servant into the consciousness of a dead-not dead Anglo-Indian secret-not secret agent, a nuisance to the British Empire. To Geoffrey Firmin, the agency is all....
WORKS CITED
Jennifer Strauss

STAINS

Red rain out of the north.
While I sit in a Land Rights meeting
It marks my shiny car
With the broken dreams
Of the Mallee’s soldier settlers —

Or does it blow, this dust,
From somewhere further back —
From out of that red centre
The broken hearts
Of our first dispossessed?

My car’s an urban upstart,
A little water clears it of this deed.
Some stains are not so easily dispersed.
...Hannah was never part of the outback. Hannah was an island in it. A trucked-in civilisation of crisp salad and fresh seafood and city papers, all air-conned down to the twenty-four degrees of Celsius that surveys found was optimum comfort-level for mining families.

(Silences Long Gone 10)

Australia’s imagining and imaging of nationhood and identity, the construction and modification of its sense of itself, home and away, has been a crucial focus of its literature. From nationalist redefinitions of Europhile exilic trauma to post-colonial realignments of geographic, political and cultural vectors, this activity has kept writers employed since invasion. In contemporary times, symbolic and ‘imaginary homelands’ have competed with a regional focus on migrancy and relocation to re-define transnational and local cultural imperatives. Focussing on topical and terminal disorders, Anson Cameron’s two novels, *Silences Long Gone* and *Tin Toys*, scrutinise Australian social, political and aesthetic conditions. His targets are sometimes off-shore, like multi-national companies, but their local influence is regrettably familiar. Embracing satire, farce, tragedy and pathos, these funny, bleak fictions relentlessly tackle crucial issues and force us to ask how far ‘past the post’ is post-colonial in this country?

*Silences Long Gone* replies to Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* but the cast — Indigenes, an aged woman, a beach and mining community and an odd assortment of misfits — were not encountered by Tom Collins, that myopic, misguided itinerant-worker and diarist.¹ While *Such is Life*’s chaotic events exposed the limitations of Anglophile accounts of early Australian life, Cameron’s novels subvert more recent national inscriptions.² However, as in *Such is Life*, the scriptors compete for ownership of the tale (this narrator is pursued by a professional writer intent on capturing the whole sad story in his powerbook to present it ‘realistically’) but this contemporary picaresque shadows even darker tales of exploitation and loss.

The novel is about several deaths: of a mining town doomed by dodgy political and corporate dealings over an Indigenous site; of a resolute, aged white woman, Belle (and several members of her family) resisting eviction from her home in the Pilbara; and of Belle’s unlikely saviour, the inscrutable surfer, Thaw. This
narrator, Jack Furphy, Australian prodigal son, is not ‘unemployed’ but is a real estate agent, currently under different company orders to persuade his mother to leave her particular sacred site: ‘They are flying me across the country to fight a hag’ he blithely remarks, as he sees his dismantled childhood iron-mining town being trucked out in an enforced exodus:

The whole town, all its timber parts and all its tin parts and all its fibro parts, which is nearly all its parts, is driving south towards permanent green, to become outskirts of sandstone and brick towns with reasons to live. (5)

This radical case of home and away scrutinises, and problematises personal and public sites and emotional and economic investments. While this trope is a familiar one in assessments of national identity, in Cameron’s schema people are held to ransom rather than account in the spectrum of Australian social and political rights being interrogated.

WAITING: NOT WAVING

The entire town of Hannah, which as the above quote indicates was never ‘real’, now exists in absentia:

Either side of the red earth roads are hundreds of red rectangular silhouettes of gone houses surrounded by small lawns now given license to run, but with the night-chirping sprinklers silenced they’re not running, they’re yellowing and whitening into dead admission that here is a species of flora that has no business in the Pilbara.

[Mrs Furphy’s] garden stands out provocatively green with borrowed water. Greener than anything else here. Nothing else is this green for whole latitudes. (13)

This residual garden contains five blood-red rose bushes, fertilised by Belle’s dead daughter’s and husband’s ashes: these personal memorials are the reason why this woman remains in situ under siege by company lawyers. Isolated but at home, sustained only by tenacity, native cunning, a threatening ‘heart condition’, an unwavering faith in God, and an unlikely guardian angel (a visiting newspaperman with integrity), Belle Furphy confronts relentless opposition forces. The company who leased land from Indigenous communities for ‘mining and extraction’ is contracted to return it to them in its natural state at the lease’s end. And the end is nigh. But cemeteries (especially ashes under rose bushes) which might anchor people are forbidden and Mrs Furphy’s shrine therefore represents a dangerous ‘legal precedent’. Her cynical son, with a slowly-maturing caring-nature, takes a long time to admit involvement with his mother’s plight. When not appalled by her evangelism he is horrified at not being able to compete with the dead, as indicated by his mother’s habitual count of residual blessings:

When they bloom every year it’s your father’s message to me. And it’s Molly’s message to me. It’s him and it’s her. With a beautiful sign held aloft telling me they’re waiting. (28)
silences long gone
Anson Cameron

Cover illustration of *Silences Long Gone*, courtesy of Pan Macmillan. Original cover photograph by Nora T. Murphy, Horizon Photo Library. Cover design by Ruth Grüner.
When all else fails and the company (the BBK) threatens to have the recalcitrant woman certified, Thaw, Jack's surfing friend observes:

'Christ, my father was five times as insane as her and no one suggested he was mad.'

'He probably owned the land he lived on' [Replies Jack]. (227)

Ideas of respect for home spaces, decent and caring human governance and legal protection for those with just causes, are remote in this territory. And here the fiction reflects on the world. The inversions of black/white circumstance are cleverly juggled to problematise the entire arena of action. Just to the east of Mrs Furphy's garden is the remainder of the town of Tinburra where other rule-breakers linger. They are the residual mining staff whose lives have been disastrously affected by the Theozinc board which sat on the news of mesothelioma and asbestosis among its mine workers for years, and then decided, when sprung, to enlist government assistance and cover up their crime, by hastily:

closing it fast and [calling] it gone. Get a crew of dozer drivers space-suited up and push the whole town into the poisonous hole it came out of. Sign the whole area over to the tribe that made the land claim on it. (51–52)

This Maralinga-style political expediency is stymied by the refusal of terminally ill mine-workers to leave and it is Jack's brother, Adrian, the town cop, who presides over the last rites of that dying community, counting the empty bar stools until counselling fails one day and he dies on the job. Given government machinations and the political cover-up of negligent site management of British ex-test sites at Maralinga and proposals for nuclear waste dumps in South Australia I would be pleased if this was fiction.

Other national narratives are dismantled as Cameron unleashes a chain-saw brigade of 'post-Whitlam trained arboREALISTS' who, in returning land to pristine Dreamtime perfection, cheerfully eliminate anything 'not-native' with absolute zeal.

Men in hardhats on giant machines are committing reverse archaeology here. Tearing down and covering up any sign of town. An environmental reclamation unit is moving east through the whole map reference. Replanting spinifex, ghost gum, red gum, and desert oak. Landscaping Dreamtime curves into the country with D10 caterpillars. Hannah is becoming a deliberate lost city. A planned Atlantis.

There is much more about inscription and reinscription in this text, from serious investigations of concepts of home and nation to more parodic impressions: like the short-lived pattern of the radial direction-finder impressed on Jack's buttocks at Lorne's summit look-out which proved an 'unparalleled panorama for fornication' (352). This inscription records the couple's escape from the unwanted attentions of the would-be writer of Jack's family story. This synthesis of serious and farcical elements of life and exploitation of intra-textual and inter-textual resonances echoes techniques employed in Furphy's Such is Life. In a
contemplative mood when struggling to define his own allegiances, Jack considers
the more lasting effects of time and distance:

If Hannah is lingering in me in some susceptible place what unit of measure would
appear after it to tell of its distance? Which wouldn't be kilometres or miles and
wouldn't even be months or years, but would be something else altogether. (357)

**REAL ESTATES: WINDLESS GULLIES VS COASTAL VIEWS**

The narrative shifts between the Pilbara and the tree-studded beach-side
location of Lorne, revealing contemporary social tensions in the land-rights debate
and unscrupulous manipulation by city-based corporate powers. Jack Furphy
shares his place amid the 'amphitheatre of trees' with Jean and their boarder,
Thaw who does a steady trade in hot four-wheel drives — a kind of redistributive
effort pioneered in the greener forests of Nottingham.7

The latter’s life-story is both a counter-narrative and the key to the novel. The
most horrific interface between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians
is revealed through a long-suppressed story of an earlier time. In a hotel owned
by Thaw’s father, ironically called ‘The Court House’, abhorrent acts caused by
drunkenness, ignorance, racism and neglect, claim the life of the Aboriginal girl,
Kelly Atkinson. Thaw was nineteen and as his father, the publican, was drunk at
the time, he was nominally ‘in charge’ of the pub on a night of escalating violence
which spiralled out of control. Rape, murder and an ensuing conflagration ended
his father’s troubles, but the aftermath was a travesty of justice as the white
perpetrators re-jigged their testimonies to become more ‘credible’ and protect
each other (181). Thaw’s refusal to co-operate in this white rehabilitation sees
him labelled as chief suspect and marked for life. Much later he confesses
culpability — to a degree:

‘I had a hand in it’, he tells Jack. ‘I made it possible. Organised the event, I suppose.
Was the impresario. Got her alone with us white men by chasing off with red heelers
anyone who was black and who loved her.’ (91)

In Lorne, before this story breaks, Jack is marketing either windless gullies or
coastal views where ‘bluegums grow right down out of the Otways to the water’
and ‘real estate is made exclusive by geography’ (73). His partner Jean, who runs
a gallery, is engaging: generous, talented, tolerant and loving and ‘brown from
being young enough to sunbake wildly never believing that death is a personal
option’ (193).8 When, like the girl from Ipanema, this ‘free spirit’ ‘goes walking
by’, down to the sea in her togs, ‘male retirees come out to pull weeds from their
perfect gardens or tinker with their smooth running mowers’ until she passes. In
retaliation or payment for their gaze, she steals their fruit and knowingly causes
aging voyeurs near-asphyxia as they crouch gasping in their dahlia beds.9

But Senior Sergeant Malcolm Lunn is far more dangerous: peddling poisonous
rumour called ‘pre-emptive law enforcement’ (84), this cop with a persecution
complex has tried for years to ‘finger’ Thaw for the death of Kelly. When the law finally enforces a DNA test on Thaw to determine the case, the accused severs his own finger to prove (or test) his innocence. Although he is blameless, like others, regrettably often Indigenous people held in custody, he dies of guilt by association as he takes his own life without waiting for an official finding. Again, I would be pleased if this were merely fiction but in several Australian states (NT and WA) mandatory sentencing has removed the right of magistrates to mediate sentences in relation to the severity of crimes. The outcome of these draconian measures has seen more people locked up for minor offences, increasing the risks of self-harm.

**HOME AND AWAY**

Out in the desert, a hostage to her own convictions, Mrs Furphy stoically withstands seduction, intimidation, bullying, isolation and broadcast postcards from re-located residents in Surfer’s Paradise condominiums or euphemistically named rest homes which feature opportunist promises to retirees of happy deaths on ergonomic beds (10). But when a visit from the ‘Kunimara’ people is arranged, the negotiations shift register. In permanent trauma from her teenage daughter’s death, Mrs Furphy is also a vulnerable product of her culture and her lament is somewhat Hanson-esque:

“How is it’, she asks, ‘they’ve made their Rainbow Serpent so much realer than my Frank’? Than my Molly, who died on the road outside?’ She’s picking little rayon balls off her slacks as she speaks, flicking them onto the floor. A rayon lint-ball fired with each question. ‘Did their Rainbow Serpent tell the same old jokes for years and laugh like a fool at them every time? Did arthritis trouble their Rainbow Serpent at night, from tightening three-inch nuts across iron-dusted thread each day? Was their Rainbow Serpent a chronic thumb-sucker for so long we had to fly her to Perth to have braces fitted on her teeth when she stopped and the orthodontist cost us our holidays for three years? These things happened.’ She looks at the woman. ‘How is it you’ve made your Rainbow Serpent so real when I can’t get anyone to believe in my Frank and Molly? I’d like to know how it’s done.’ (120)

This arranged visit by Indigenous representatives to persuade Belle of the company’s right to evict her in the name of returning the land to its rightful owners, is cleverly portrayed. The incumbent listens unwillingly and is wholly unsettled as the Indigenous women explain their rights to the land. Understanding that home is sacred Mrs Furphy looks at their land maps ‘hoping to see a lie’ but cannot (120). Their unsentimental meeting is fraught with the issues of contested legitimacy and the history of dispossession and of black/white relations in towns all over Australia. Cameron has Pearl, the Indigenous woman, quietly reiterate her people’s land rights — ‘but she’s apologetic about it’ (120). Much later in the narrative, after the most militant of the delegation, Barry Campbell, has berated Mrs Furphy for implying their ‘cultural imperialism’ and ‘bullying’ — he wryly
observes that ‘after two hundred years of calling our Dreamtime primitive shit’ this company is suddenly promoting it’s legitimacy as leverage (120). After Belle’s death it is Barry who eventually recognises Belle’s claim in these entirely different terms:

‘She become blackfella, looked to me. That’s why she was scared shitless of us other blackfellas ’cause she’d found out what it was to be one.’ (323)

This reconciliatory gesture is made at Mrs Furphy’s funeral when all the small-time participants gather in an exorcism of guilt while collectively disclaiming responsibility by insisting that ‘they are not the heavy machinery’ (325). The law is the heavy machinery capable of levelling fields — witness Mabo or the recent Hindmarsh Island decision which has brought overdue recognition of Indigenous credibility in respect of land rights and sites after ten years of acrimony. Despite apparent flippancy, the novel is about individual, moral, ethical and universal rights, and centrally, land rights and euthanasia. Thaw eventually puts Belle, the prime sufferer out of action by smothering her after administering champagne and pills, before killing himself. But we are left with the ethical dilemma of this as either an act of violence or one of absolute compassion.

Silences Long Gone is about history-making and story-telling and the powerful effects of the personal and public fictions by which we live our lives. These texts interrogate the nature of emotional, symbolic, environmental and political investments in Australian life and foreground issues commonly erased from national inscription. It has been claimed that ‘Furphy’s socialist utopianism and his egalitarian Christian ideologies coexisted uneasily with social Darwinist assumptions about race which he accepted uncritically’ (Devlin-Glass 355). But about other things Furphy was very astute. For example, in The Buln Buln and the Brolga he noted the way that stories of home are inscribed and legitimised:

...there is one thing that lasts longer than the tree...that is, the spoken word, the appellation. The Aboriginal name of this town will probably outlive any tree in Australia. Strange, isn’t it — to think that a word, impalpable to touch and invisible to sight should be more enduring and reliable than any material monument? The history of nations — their migrations, settlements conquests — can be traced by the philologist far back into ages which afford little or no clue to the antiquarian. Yet in spite of the paramount significance of local destinations — or, perhaps because of it — the map of this young land is already defaced by ugly and incongruous names, transplanted from the other side of the world. (52)

Cameron’s Tin Toys also has a thing or two to say about such appellations as the map, the land, the inhabitants (‘serious patriarchy’) as hallowed inscriptions like the flag are re-read. The hero, Hunter Carlyon, is a stolen child of an Indigenous mother, perceived as Aboriginal or white depending on the town he is in and the politics of the viewer. He claims: ‘they let me be a white boy in Jefferson but when I began to turn into a man they made me black. Everywhere else I’m just a
man' (73). He sees himself as a product of a ‘failed attempt at harmony between
races’ and explains that one year after his birth his mother suffered ‘death by
misadventure which was then called suicide. But my mother’s death was never
called policy at all’ (226). Given what we now know of the policies that gave rise
to The Stolen Generation, and the demise of mothers whose children were removed,
this is not fiction.

Employed as a sign-painter depicting patriotic ‘Aussie’ flags on French
restaurant walls, to avoid their owners being targetted by anti-nuclear protesters,
Hunter stumbles onto a potentially prize-winning design ‘the southern cross with
red, yellow and black shadows thrown right and with Uluru underneath’ which
can ‘embrace every citizen from Saxon through Slav ever sent here by war or
revolution’ as well as ‘that citizen who was already here’ (69). Hunter is in love
with Kimi, a Japanese Australian whose business acumen and fine sense of post­
colonial enterprise sees her sending tourists far away on high risk holidays: ‘trips
into danger – travel for the already out there’ (54). The satire of this reversal is
bleak:

Control Risks Global rates countries for travel and investment risk. From countries
with virtually no crime and stable governments to countries where law and order has
broken down and government has no control or the country has no government and
the risk of travel is extreme. Kimi purchases these bulletins off the net and uses them
to keep abreast of global troubles. And uses them for assessing the costs of travel
insurance, which she sells to her clients along with their journeys into the Third and
barbaric world. (334)

Hunter was taken from his Indigenous mother by his white father (with help
from ‘cops and nuns’). Since then the father has been constantly incarcerated, the
last time, for taking pot-shots at jet-skiers ruining the peace of his river fishing
retreat (having de-activated his police-monitored ankle-alarm by dowsing it in a
bucket of water). He claims that his initial crime was being at home when his
Indigenous partner’s ex-lover came to kill him. His assailant died and, given this
paternity, Hunter is marked for life. But before being condemned for his association
with an Indigenous woman, Hunter’s father was a respected councillor and
businessman who ran a once-successful company called ‘Truckited Nations’. This
provides Cameron with a further opportunity to censure economic rationalism,
so-called free trade, and to comment on the rapaciousness of global economic
forces. The business is described in the following terms:

[T]ruck buyers came from a long way to see the world’s trucks ranged side-by-side.
And my genius father got ten percent of every sale this outright and unprecedented
bonhomie generated. Which prompted him to tell me many a time when I was a kid,
that all you had to do was to move men to Mars to get a lasting peace.

It only lasted a handful of years. Until Stockholm got wind of it, and Detroit got wind
of it, and Tokyo got wind of it, and London got wind of it, and Berlin got wind of it
too. And then the great socio/economic experiment in harmonious international
relations and profit maximisation that was Truckited Nations was no more. The cartel formed by my father far from the watching eyes of the Chairman of Directors to incidentally maximise bonhomie between the races but primarily corner the truck market fell all to pieces. They broke it up, those faraway Chairmen of Directors, into five separate and competing dealerships that held each other in mutual contempt for their globulous evaporators and their stuttering turbochargers and their wide-hipped women and their pulsing disc brakes and their blinkered design engineers. But by then my father was rich from the years of dangerous cooperation. Was a sort of profiteer on peace. (84–85)

Father and son have little in common except their love of an absent mother, but when the destitute father breaks bail to get to the Australia day ceremony where Hunter may or may not win the prize for his inclusive flag design, the plot congeals rather than thickens. This reconciliation of diverse parties, like the nation's, is put on hold because the past intrudes. Hunter, the flag-designer, is also the ex-schoolboy who, after being up-ended in a fish tank by a racist schoolmaster, once wrote a threatening letter to the then-Prime Minister and became a listed security risk. In the final scene of the novel he finds himself onstage with this Prime Minister (who wears a smile described as 'a scary thing of pre-planned rictus') as his escapee father materialises, along with a virtual voice-message from Kimi (presumed lost in Bouganville) with the security men about to move in. This is clearly not romance. This Australia Day may produce chaos or a resolution/reconciliation but Hunter's story remains a parable of the nation's potential (387).

Cultural Frontiers

In Silences Long Gone there is an equivalent uncertainty about codes of ethical practice and the relative 'power' of the individual in an information era. On the one hand, if there is publicity, a lone old woman can exert temporary influence:

BBK isn't sure what to do next. An unpaid water bill is a fine tool for coercion, as a rule. A fine truth to wave in a tenant's face. But it leads, in the end, to that same old point where you've waved your unpaid bill and stamped your feet and told your tenant 'This simply isn't good enough' so many times you can't wave and stamp and tell any more without looking hollow and powerless and just a waver and just a stamper and just a chronicler of things that simply aren't good enough. The point where you have to act.

And shutting off an old woman's water in the middle of a hot, dry land sounds even worse than eviction. Sounds like torture. Sounds like inhumanity. Sounds like an act that might scuff up a company's exquisitely manicured corporate image, if it were to get into print. (189)

Like good investigative journalism, this fiction engages with the global and regional issues of deadly seriousness, and silence is broken by speaking-out, as a first act of redress. Similarly, the title Tin Toys links back to the narrative's sagas of cars and trucks but provides a sharper focus. The production of hand-crafted
toys from re-cycled tin souvenired from around the world by Kimi, but also by world tourists' because they are 'made with the mysterious antediluvian science of a million focused hammer-taps', is put in a global perspective as the narrator claims that this is an indication of 'proving how far we, in our world, have come' (139). And now, imported tin toys are still being re-distributed and Mitsubishi cars exported, while 'antediluvian' Indigenous art represents Australia globally.

Frederick Jameson has spoken about the consumer society's propensity to live in the eternal present (125) but these audacious novels consider the formative effects that have shaped the nature of commercial and social values. Cameron is aware of the ease with which neo-colonial re-appropriations of image markets are made. Like Jameson, he studies the effects of market capitalism with its exploitative links to Imperialism and notes its postmodern phase in multinational capitalism and international corporations. However Cameron uses his fiction as a way of remembering. His satires measure tensions between city/rural, indigenous/non-indigenous, regional/global and private/corporate interests. While these fictions adopt a post-colonial review of colonised territories they also portray a nation re-negotiating shared spaces, which is potentially an emancipatory process. I suggested at the outset that this writing raised the question of how far 'past the post' (of post-colonial) we had managed to become in this country, and in the spirit of Cameron's texts I will end my reading with a paradox akin to the staged crisis of identification epitomised by imminent the clash of values 'staged' in Tin Toys. The major image of reconciliation in this country has been a series of walks over bridges as thousands of Australians have demonstrated their solidarity with the goals of reconciliation by taking to the streets in capital cities around Australia. But in Tin Toys a confrontation over right-of-way incurs race-based violence while in Ngarrindjeri home-lands in South Australia a bridge (built from the mainland to Hindmarsh Island) has caused so much offence that people will no longer access the island by road. This iconography, like that of an inclusive flag, suggest that there is a way to go if differences are to be genuinely accepted and reconciled and home spaces shared with mutual respect.

NOTES

1 Cameron's novel also makes reference to its family legacy in the sense that 'Furphy' has come to mean, colloquially, a rumour or false story. (In the trenches of World War I the water carts [made by one John Furphy of Victoria] were sites of gossip and sometimes misinformation). Cameron's Jack investigates the ways that rumour serves the community in Lorne (Vic) and the ways in which story-telling has consequences that are wholly unexpected. At the end of the book, in discussion about novels and film with the 'famous' novelist (who is mostly known from his appearance on 'Burke's Backyard'), Jack makes a deliberate 'Furphy' when he mistakenly speaks of One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (Murphy) another political novel about Indigenous oppression and presumed madness.
The role of the narrator in *Silences Long Gone* is similarly problematic as Jack’s inaction leads to others’ involvement.

In Furphy’s novel Molly is kicked by a horse and loses her nose and being disfigured is then jilted. Cameron’s Molly is felled by a company truck while being chased in a harmless bit of bra-snapping sexual by-play on her sixteenth birthday. Belle’s husband dies of cancer (and a drink-induced stupor condoned by his son which causes an estrangement between Belle and Jack). Throughout, matters of life and death are ‘dealt with’ matter-of-factly. Jack’s father’s gamble with cancer is recounted like a card game (149) as the oncologist and thoracic surgeon alternately play their hands. After his death and the vodka and red cordial send-off he is brought home to rest and added to Molly’s garden.

Cameron, like Furphy, employs cartoon-like exaggeration to expose injustice. For example, several kinds of power are satirised in the ‘hostage situation’ as ‘Didgeridoo music’ is broadcast day and night to terrify Mrs Furphy who seeks relief in radio programs where God is pumped in via the Philippines or talk-back shows where hosts work as ‘dream interpreters’ to recommend applications for Arts Council Grants.

Jack at his most scathing utters this anti-religious diatribe about his brother’s death: ‘It’s all I can do to resist asking why she thinks it is Our Father would make a situation like Tinburra for Adrian to be a steady rock in in the first place. Maybe Our Father set up the whole cancerous tragedy, the whole carcinogenic trap, for Adrian to prove his worth in. Maybe Our Father said to Jesus, “Now look here Jesus, I know asbestosis is a tough call and I know mesothelioma is a debilitating bitch but look at that young man there. I believe he’s made of the right stuff and just needs surrounding with innocent death to be able to prove himself. A young man like that needs opportunity. And if you don’t give me any grief on this I’ll let the Americans find those thousands of P.O.W.s we’ve been holding in Nam all these decades. Is it a deal. Son?” Something like that’ (24).

The logger-come-environmentalist puts it bluntly enough: ‘Jesus peppercorns are bastards to cut and can blunt a chain fast as dirt. They’re fucking weeds, these things. The others are just struggling along. But these things are fucking weeds. From Peru they are. Bastards. He lifts his visor up onto his helmet and puts his boot up the trunk of the tree and tries to pull out his saw. He works it back and forward and swears against everything Peruvian till its out’ (99). Later the logger mellows to observe, whilst cutting out *Tipuana tipu*, ‘Nice tree in its place’ (100) and granting longevity to *Acacia baileyana* he works ‘to his own Hippocratic oath’ (101).

Echoing Furphy’s ‘multicultural jamboree’ local Greek/Australian crayfishermen are obsessed by defending their patch from ‘Asian’ freeloaders evincing all the recognisable prejudices of an Australian seaside town (this is not ‘Sea-Change’). Thaw may have lost the plot of his planned lesbian novel and endured surfing misadventures but he understands that Jack (‘Mr Couldn’t-Give-a-shit’) is not unmoved by his mother’s deteriorating condition (281).

The question of the borders between art and life are also interrogated in Jean’s later exhibition of Mrs Furphy’s obsessive purple paintings of ‘Sad Dad and Sad Molly’ — the latter’s death ‘by bra’ providing the model for Jean’s curious tribute. Later in the tale, grief as art form becomes a marketable commodity — and it is the mining company which has a vested interest. But just who is ‘buying’ whom becomes extremely difficult to determine. The scene of the gallery-showing is high farce as the pretensions of the community are tested in a confrontation between a champagne saturated narrator, a lobster wielding fisherman and the soul-fishing grey sister intent on psychoanalysing Belle’s paintings. This ends with frenetic love-making as antidote to Jack’s grief and
his spirited defence of his mother's obsession of only for its argument with 'landscapes and 'still life'. There is a great deal of sex in the face of death in this novel.

9 At the other end of the vulnerability spectrum, Mrs Furphy, held in situ by permanent trauma from her teenage daughter's death, retreats into her wardrobe nightly to inhale the last scents of her lost child. This is also bleak echo of Kelly's death as she was found in a wardrobe by her mother.

10 Pauline Hanson is the founder and former leader of One Nation, a far-right conservative political party in Australia.

11 When we have heard the whole sorry tale the teller claims that whatever has been said of the family — 'that wasn't them'.

WORKS CITED

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A Message from the Secretary of EACLALS

The latest meeting of the EACLALS executive took place in Tübingen shortly before Xmas. The main item on the agenda was the forthcoming election of officers for the period 2002-2005. As the chair is not standing for re-election, the secretary has now served two terms, and the current treasurer is serving only in an acting capacity, all three positions on the Executive Committee will be up for election. The election will take place at the Copenhagen Triennial conference in March. As we shall be running this election in accordance with our recently enacted constitution, members will be sent a Notice of Elections together with a Call for Nominations immediately after the meeting.

By now members should have received the Second Circular pertaining to the Triennial Conference to be held at the University of Copenhagen from March 21-27, 2002. The members of the Committee went to Denmark in June to consult with the conference organisers and can assure members that this promises to be an unusually stimulating conference with a number of special events and sessions taking place at some exciting venues.

The first of the two volumes of proceedings from the 1999 Triennial Tübingen conference should be published by the time this issue goes to print. Entitled Colonies, Missions, Cultures in the English-Speaking World: General and Comparative Studies, it has been edited by Gerhard Stilz and is obtainable from the Stauffenburg Verlag, PO Box 2525, 72015 Tübingen, Germany. E-mail: narr@stauffenburg.de

The Association's list of e-mail addresses for members is far from complete. We should be most grateful if members could let the Secretary have their e-mail addresses as soon as possible.

Geoffrey V. Davis (Aachen)
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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

MAUREEN CLARK is a doctoral candidate and teacher of contemporary Australian literature and film studies at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her area of research focuses on the novels of Colin Johnson (a.k.a.) Mudrooroo and expatriate Australian, Janette Turner Hospital with a particular interest in how the work of these authors deals with issues of identity formation and ways of belonging in Australia. Her other interests include postcolonial writing in English and the work of Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, in particular. Further elaboration of her current work on Mudrooroo will be published in *Mongrel Signatures* (Rodopi).

CYRIL DABYDEEN has published over fifteen books, including *Coastland: New and Selected Poems* and *Discussing Columbus* (poems). His recent fiction titles are *My Brahmin Days and Other Stories* and *North of the Equator and Other Stories*. He served on the jury of the Year 2000 Neustadt International Prize for Literature (University of Oklahoma) and was Poet Laureate of Ottawa from 1984–87. Born in Guyana, he lives in Canada, and now teaches English at the University of Ottawa.

LUZ MERCEDES HINCAPIE was born in Colombia and migrated to the U.S. where she graduated with honours in Intercultural Studies with a thesis describing the migration(s) of her family. Her nomadic spirit has taken her to Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Europe and obliged her to backpack extensively through the U.S., Mexico, Australia and most of South America. Luz is currently engaged in postgraduate research on Latin American women travel writers.

LYN JACOBS is Associate Professor in Australian Literature and Australian Studies at the Flinders University. Recent publications include: *Against the Grain: Beverley Farmer's Writing* (Queensland UP, 2001), *A Bibliography of Australian Literary Responses to 'Asia' 1788-2000* with A. Chittleborough and G. Worby (Australian Literature Electronic Gateway, 2001; initially co-authored with R. Hosking, 1995), *Soundings: Poetry and Poetics* (co-edited with J. Kroll, 1998) and *Reading Tim Winton* (with R. Rossiter, 1993). Lyn’s reviews and articles on contemporary Australian fiction, Australian poetry and Australian women’s writing have been published locally and internationally.

JOEL KUORTTI is an Acting Professor in the Department of English at the University of Tampere, Finland. Recently he has been working on a bibliography of Indian English Women’s Writing which is due to be published in 2002. His earlier work includes three books on Salman Rushdie: *The Salman Rushdie Bibliography* (1997), *Place of the Sacred* (1997), and *Fictions to Live In* (1998).

CHRIS MACMAHON offered his poems for publication in *Kunapipi* by email attachment and the editor, by some inopportune slight of hand, managed to delete
the contents of her inbox, thereby also deleting any possibility of further contact with Chris! Who and where are you Chris? Readers with any information please contact me at acollett@uow.edu.au.

JOHN O'LEARY was born in India and brought up in a variety of Commonwealth countries. He recently completed his doctoral thesis, ‘The Colonising Pen — Mid-Nineteenth-Century European Writing about Maori’, at Victoria University of Wellington, N.Z., and is currently researching nineteenth-century European writing on indigenous peoples in the Pacific and Australia.

ASHA SEN is an Assistant Professor in the department of English at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She holds a double MA from Purdue University and Bangalore University, India, and received her PhD from Purdue University in 1996. Asha teaches courses in postcolonial and world literature and in composition. She has been published in refereed journals such as Passages: Journal of Transnational and Transcultural Studies and the Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies.

PAUL ST PIERRE completed his PhD in Australian literature at the University of Sydney. He is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, specialising in world literature and postcolonial theory. Paul is the author of ‘The Architectonics of Deconstructivism: Vancouver Skylines and Storylines’, in Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City (1994) (an essay in which he makes jocular reference to Malcolm Lowry’s ‘remains’), and is currently working on A Portrait of the Artist as Australian: L’Oeuvre bizarre de Barry Humphries.

JENNIFER STRAUSS is an Honorary Research Fellow at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. She is currently editing the collected poems of Mary Gilmore. Recent publications include Tierra del Fuego: New and Selected Poems, the editorship of Family Ties: Australian Poems of the Family and co-editorship of The Oxford Literary History of Australia.

HELEN TIFFIN is Professor of English at the University of Queensland, Australia. She is co-author (with Bill Ashcroft and Gareth Griffiths) of The Empire Writes Back (1989) and Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies (1998); and Decolonising Fictions (with Diana Brydon. 1993). She has co-edited The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (with Ashcroft and Griffiths, 1994); After Europe: Critical Theory & Post-Colonial Writing (with Stephen Slemon. 1989); Past The Last Post: Post-Colonialisms and Post-Modernism (with Ian Adams, 1990); and Re-Siting Queen’s English (with Gillian Whitlock. 1992). Helen is currently researching gardens and gardening in the Caribbean and the relationship between race and the species boundary.
LYCIA DANIELLE TROUTON is an artist who has worked on numerous municipal public projects in Canada, the United States and the UK. Her artwork covers a wide spectrum, from site-specific, outdoor projects to installation work with textiles. Lycia grew up in Vancouver, BC where she witnessed the cultural revival of First Nations artwork and was influenced by the natural environment. Born in Belfast, she is currently engaged in the creation of ‘The Irish Linen Memorial’ which seeks to commemorate the Lost Lives of Ireland’s Troubles, 1966 -present, based on a recently published book by David McKittrick et al. Lycia obtained her MFA from Cranbrook Academy in Michigan and her BFA from Carnegie Mellon University, Pennsylvania.

GERRY TURCOTTE is an Associate Professor in the English Studies Program at the University of Wollongong. His new novel, Flying in Silence (Cormorant Books, Canada & Brandl & Schlesinger, Australia) was short-listed for The Age Book of the Year (2001). He has also published a collection of poetry entitled Neighbourhood of Memory (Dangaroo 1990) and is the author of many articles and edited collections of essays in the field of post-colonial literature, including a monograph on Australian playwright, Jack Davis. Having acted in executive roles for the Association for Canadian Studies in Australia & New Zealand (ACSANZ) and the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS), Gerry is currently Founding Director of the Centre for Canadian/Australian Studies, University of Wollongong.

COOMI VEVAINA is a Reader in English at the University of Bombay. She has published four books to date — Intersections: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Women’s Writing (co-edited with Barbara Godard) Re/membering Selves: Alienation and Survival in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence, Negotiating Differences: Aspects of Contemporary Canadian Literature and Margaret Atwood, the Shape-Shifter (co-edited with Coral Ann Howells). She has published many papers in Indian and international journals, among which is the reprint of an essay considered one of the best ten articles on Canadian literature in the world, by the International Journal of Canadian Studies. Coomi is currently engaged in research toward a book on the Afro-Caribbean writers M. Nourbese Philip, Claire Harris and Dionne Brand.
POETRY
Chris MacMahon, Gerry Turcotte, Cyril Dabydeen, Jennifer Strauss

ARTICLES

INTERVIEWS
Joel Kuortti, ‘Years of Silence Came to an End: Interview with Shashi Deshpande’; Lycia Danielle Trouton, ‘Know Who You Are and Where You Come From: Interview with Debra Sparrow’

COVER
Contemporary Musqueam weaving by Debra and Robyn Sparrow, 1999 (1.8m x 3m), Entrance Hall, UBC Museum of Anthropology

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