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Abstract

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

PAUL MATTHEW ST. PIERRE

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 Quauhnhuac, 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. Firmings 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, Iphigeneia 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, Iphigeneia, 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

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 Ixtaccihuatl 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 descendance — *descendence* 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

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