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Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both 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.
# Contents

**Editorial, Anne Collett**  
vi

**MEMORIAL ESSAY**  
Anne Collett, ‘In Memoriam: Valentine Vallis (1916–2009)’  
8

**ARTICLES**  

*Elizabeth Leane*, ‘Eggs, Emperors and Empire: Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s “Worst Journey” as Imperial Quest Romance’  
15  

*Beth Cardier and H.T. Goranson*, ‘Storymaking across Contexts: How a Fiction Writer and a Team of Computer Scientists Came to Terms’  
37

*Pramod K. Nayar*, ‘The Informational Economy and Its Body in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*’  
52

*Lucy Wilson*, ‘Illness and Insight: Virginia Woolf and Caribbean Women Writers vs. Western Medicine’  
71

*Kim Clothier and Debra Dudek*, ‘Opening the Body: Reading *Ten Canoes* with Critical Intimacy’  
82

*Petra Tournay-Theodotou*, ‘Performative Bondage or the Limits of Performing Race in Caryl Phillips’s *Dancing in the Dark*’  
94

*Angi Buettner*, ‘Mocking and Farting: Trickster Imagination and the Origins of Laughter’  
119

*Susmita Roye*, ‘“Sultana’s Dream” vs. Rokeya’s Reality: A Study of one of the “Pioneering” Feminist Science Fictions’  
135

*Bárbara Arizti*, ‘Never Give Up Hope: A Levinasian Reading of Janette Turner Hospital’s ‘Dear Amnesty”’  
147

*Suzanne Foley*, ‘“I Am a Lie”: Connections between Identity and Narrative in *Tracks* and *Season of Migration to the North*’  
161

*Paul Magee*, ‘Poetry as a Physics of Power’  
173

**POETRY**  

32, 34, 35

*Mervyn Morris*, ‘The Roaches’, ‘Valley Prince’, ‘At a Poetry Reading’  
116, 117, 118

*Mark Tredinnick*, ‘Improvisations on a Window’  
192
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEWS</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Doumerc, ‘An Interview with Mervyn Morris’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACTS</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES ON EDITORIAL ADVISORS</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EDITORIAL

When I reflect on the competing narratives of science and the arts in my own life (as discussed briefly in my memorial essay for Valentine Vallis) I am struck by the artificial nature of the difference between them, as defined by academic disciplines and organisational structures of education institutions, and by social attitudes towards them (the hard/difficult/practical/valuable sciences, the soft/easy/ephemeral/less valuable arts). These structures and attitudes serve to reinforce their separateness where we would do better to think about the relationship between them.

The purpose of this special issue is to gather essays interested in thinking about the role of science in imperial/colonising projects and the impact of science upon the arts produced in the colonial/postcolonial world. ‘Focus on Science’ is an attempt to explore the connections between sciences and arts. I did not receive as many contributions that spoke directly to the theme as hoped, although some of the essays do so. Beth Cardier and H.T. Goranson tell the story of a collaborative effort to use insights gleaned from the arts in computer system design. Elizabeth Leane examines the imperial, scientific, personal and literary narratives that coalesce around three emperor penguin eggs that sit at the centre of Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922). Pramod Nayar examines the role of informational economies in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), while Susmita Roye explores the pioneering feminist science fiction of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Lucy Wilson reveals the perhaps-surprising common ground of wellness narratives that reclaim the traditional role of women as healers of cultural dis-ease in the work of Virginia Woolf and selected Caribbean women writers. Other essays speak only tangentially if at all to the theme, and yet connections between the disciplines might be made when these essays are read within the covers of this special issue. A number of essays for example examine the body — the different kinds of knowledge it produces and the various values attached to those knowledges in postcolonial cultures. Some essays reflect on the uses made by magic and mythology to contest the assumed supremacy of ‘Western’ science while others suggest alternative ways of appreciating and critiquing the arts.

Along with an interview and a selection of poetry by Mervyn Morris, this issue includes poetry by South African Stephen Gray and Australian Mark Tredinnick. All three speak on a theme of animal/human relationship. Morris’s poem ‘The Roaches’ could be read as a comment on white attitudes towards black immigrants in the UK — ‘The roaches came. / We sprayed, but they kept breeding all the same’, but it also speaks to the survival capacity of the cockroach, against which human reign over the planet is belittled. So too, Gray’s tortoise complains of global warming with the words, ‘through this demolition I’ll tiptoe again — which is more than you will, being no pachyderm’ and Tredinnick ruminates on frog, blue wren, spider and lizard: ‘this is their world / And I need to take it slow’.

Anne Collett
These beautiful words from John Shaw Neilson’s poem ‘At the Dancer’s Grave’ speak for how I feel, but also stand as symbol of my association with Val Vallis, the university lecturer who introduced me to Australian poet, John Shaw Neilson, to the English Romantic poets, and with whom I shared a love of Judith Wright’s poetry.

I began my undergraduate degree at the University of Queensland in 1976 under the shadow of disappointment that I didn’t make it into Medicine and had thus enrolled in Science with the aim of applying for entry to Medicine at the end of my first year. I enrolled in Biology, Physics and Chemistry and, somewhat whimsically, English. After two weeks of complete incomprehension in the Organic Chemistry class (I couldn’t understand a thing written on the board at lectures and managed to come up with a chemical formula not even listed as an option in the prac), I realised that although I loved Biology, I was not meant for the so called ‘hard sciences’ and the subject with which I felt most at ease and in which I found most enjoyment was that other ‘soft’ option, English literature (I prefer to think of the adjective ‘soft’ as applying to the heart rather than the head). So I made the drastic change to an Arts degree with an English major (and no prospect of employment, money or status) and in 2nd year, transferred to the honours stream and a double major in English (that possibly doubled my lack of prospect).

This was the point at which I came under the influence of Val: Romantics with Val in 2nd year and Yeats with Val in 4th year. Val was the most inspiring of teachers because his love of his subject was infectious, and because he gave so generously of his knowledge, energy, enthusiasm and time. I remember animated discussions of Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, of Wordsworth’s original and revised *Prelude*, and of Coleridge’s distinction between Fancy and Imagination. It was Imagination, an idea central to Romantic philosophy, that inspired Val’s teaching
In Memoriam: Valentine Vallis [1916–2009]

and research and that became central to my own work, and still forms the focus of my teaching on Romanticism. If it were not for Val, I might not have ended up where I am today — not only teaching Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake and Byron to second year students at the University of Wollongong, but also pursuing the study of Australian poetry. Val supervised my Honours dissertation on aesthetics and the role of the image in poetry, in particular the poetry of John Shaw Neilson and Judith Wright; he also wrote the many references required for scholarships and entry to the Masters (at Queensland) and PhD (in London) and then for my first academic position at the University of Aarhus in Denmark.

The essay that follows grew out of my desire to do more ‘in memory’ of the man who had such a big impact on my decision to become an academic and who was for me a role model of what a teacher could and should be. The essay (part of a longer paper delivered in July 2009 at the Association for the Study of Australian Literature’s Conference on ‘Common Readers and Cultural Critics’, the Australian National University, Canberra) is a tribute to Val’s stalwart support of Australian poetry through times when those brought up on a diet of canonical English literature would ask ‘what Australian poetry?’

**AN UNCOMMON MAN WITH THE COMMON TOUCH**

I’m not really sure who the ‘Common Reader’ is or what it is that constitutes ‘commonness’, but given that those of us who are literate are all readers and writers, I would like to offer this paper as tribute to Val Vallis (who died in January 2009) and the uncommon contribution he made not only to the minds and hearts of the many students (common or otherwise) who came under the magic of his influence, but also to a collaborative project that resulted in the publication of *Witnesses of Spring*, a collection of John Shaw Neilson’s unpublished poems. One of the collaborators, Ruth Harrison, writes in a prefatory note to the volume, ‘I have been indebted to Dr Val Vallis of the University of Queensland. Without his recognition of the value of the manuscript material and his drive and enthusiasm in overcoming scepticism in some quarters, these poems may not have come to light at this time’ (xix). Val was a poet himself, publishing *Songs of the East Coast* in 1947, *Dark Wind Blowing* in 1961 and a new collection of poetry also titled *Songs of the East Coast* in 1997; and his work with Judith Wright on the Neilson volume is a declaration of the value he placed upon her poetic credentials as a reader and writer of uncommon sensitivity and skill. Val’s relationship with Judith however was ‘uneven’, perhaps more a matter of class than of gender.

Pat Buckridge alludes to the aloof patrician in Wright when he records in his recent work on Queensland literary cultures how she was ‘persuaded by Val Vallis and Ken Hamilton, head of the English Department at the university [of Queensland], to descend from the Mount (Tamborine) to offer her famous weekly series of poetry classes at the university in the mid-1960s’ (67); and in an interview conducted with Wright for *The Bulletin* (but unpublished with Douglas Stewart’s retirement from its editorship) Val asked Judith why she chose to live
in Tamborine rather than Brisbane — why country rather than city — to which she replied with ‘a smile’. Val reads that smile with the observation that, ‘Anyone who has fallen for the spell of that volcanic outcrop with its rainforests and redbrown fertile soil its Olympian air, needs no answer’. Interestingly, however, he moves on to deny the claim that ‘the Southern critic’ might be tempted to make for ‘the Tamborine farmhouse as a kind of Petit Trianon’ (a reference to the Chateau in the grounds of the Palace of Versailles to which Marie Antoinette famously retreated to escape the formality of court life and the burden of royal responsibility). Val tells the story of ‘making do with what is at hand and by hand’ required of Judith’s life in Queensland country, and remarks that it is ‘this “peasant” quality of a timeless identity with the earth that marks her work off from contemporary Australian writing’, equating Wright with Hardy and Synge — poets whose greatness grew from the soil. Val also records ‘a day in the life of Judith Wright’ that although designed to refute her positioning as aloof, seems less ‘peasant’ than domestic. That day:

ranges from the gentle turmoil of getting daughter Meredith off to school, the hour in the vegetable patch, looking after the calf or Meredith’s pony, the hens, a trip to the main shopping centre of Mt. Tamborine, with its bakehouse all oven and pastry bench, sewing and cooking, and the many extra tasks required by the street stalls for the local Junior Red Cross and the Parents’ and Citizens’ Committee for the local school … It is often ‘latish’, as Barry Humphries would say, that Judith Wright is able to find time for the literary work that must bring in some part of the family income … setting down the poetic ideas that may occur during the digging, or the washing-up. (F904 4)

Ultimately, I find Val’s equation of Wright’s poetry with peasantry unconvincing, perhaps because the alliance speaks more for her partner, Jack McKinney’s background and influence, than it does for Wright’s; or maybe it does come down to the difference gender makes. For all her gardening and washing-up, sewing and cooking, Wright is neither common labourer nor common woman. The joint McKinney libraries that ‘bulge from their appointed walls into the living room’ (3) suggest the uncommon reader — the reader of educated taste and discrimination — the poets Vaughan and Traherne are on her current reading list; and her record collection consists in the main of chamber music — ‘Mozart and Brandenburg concertos’ (although Val also mentions a lack of vocal music, the exception being the Irish ballad singer Delia Murphy and Barry Humphries … something of the common touch here perhaps) (3). There is however no evidence of ‘the navvy’ here — a term used by John Shaw Neilson to refer to the hard labour of working on the roads. ‘In the autumn we were breaking stones on a Road job,’ recalls John Shaw Neilson. ‘Then I think Dad & I did a small contract for the shire, some draining and a culvert. In the winter we got a job of woodcutting which lasted close up till Xmas’ (1978 35).

In the first ‘letter’ of his autobiography, Shaw Neilson records a life of desperate poverty and hardship: ‘I think it is pretty common knowledge amongst the working class, during the last thirty years, that the Contract System is always
in favour of the Employer’: ‘That year,’ recalls Neilson, ‘we followed the trasher again, but only for five weeks. This year, I had a better job, I was on the wheat stack. The year before, I had been chaffy, and that accounted for the sore eyes’ (35). ‘The red dust was very bad that year and I got sore eyes, which stopped me from doing any reading or writing till the middle of Winter … I think the sore eyes was about the beginning of my very discontented period which lasted for several years… When my eyes got better, I tried to write verse and Stories. I got eight lines of rhyme into the Leader’ (1978 33).

Although one of Val’s many talks on Neilson is titled ‘The poet who never went to school’, reading (and writing) is here not a matter so much of education or its lack, but material, and cannot help but remind me of the point made so well by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, that:

> Imaginative work... is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners… But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in. (53–54)

To be a ‘common reader’ (or an ‘uncommon reader’ depending on how you look at it) is perhaps to be a reader who finds him or herself in poverty of circumstance that proves disabling not only in terms of the lack of opportunity for leisure or guidance, but the lack of material object (books, paper, ink) and physical ability (poor eyesight attributable to or exacerbated by living conditions). In her foreword to the collection of ‘unpublished poems by John Shaw Neilson’, Wright (perhaps tellingly) makes no mention of the ‘day job’ that kept Neilson from his ‘real work’, but rather concentrates on a discussion of his poetic craft, and the difficulties encountered in editing from manuscripts sometimes indecipherable, often hastily written and unfinished due to ‘his own lack of leisure [that] would have prevented him from going over past Notebooks, and his poor eyesight’ (xiv). But in her introduction to Shaw Neilson’s *Autobiography*, Nancy Keesing is more explicit and more confrontational, remarking that, ‘John Shaw Neilson was a peasant poet in the direct line of Burns (whose poetry he learned as a boy), Clare, Crabbe and Rob Donn’, and that:

> Like Rob Donn, but unlike the other three, Neilson worked arduously, and essentially as a peasant, for the great part of his life. The fact that Australia does not officially admit to a peasantry is beside the point. Little is altered by our preference for euphemisms like ‘cocky farmer’, replacing earlier terms like ‘stringybark settler’. Neilson uncompromisingly called himself a navvy, when a more pretentious man might have said ‘fruitpicker’, ‘scoop operator’ or ‘quarry hand’. Neilson and his father and brothers, straining their muscles, racking their joints and breaking their hearts at pioneering a series of doomed small farms, were unequivocally peasants. (12)

I think the esteem in which Val held Wright’s poetry (and person) was quite different to his feeling for Shaw Neilson. Val was drawn to the study of Neilson’s poetry, as much I would suggest for a fascination and a sympathetic alliance with
the man, as for an admiration and perhaps some envy of the poetry. Neilson, like Val, was an uncommon, common man: a man of more than usual complexity and contradiction. Pat Buckridge captures something of this in his brief portrait and placement of Val in the ‘literary history of Queensland’. He writes:

Vallis was born and grew up in [the small Queensland coastal country town of] Gladstone, the son of a local ‘wharfie’ and fisherman, [i.e. he was a commoner] and his first book of poems, Songs of the East Coast (1947), expressed a passionate attachment to the place and people … his best, and best-known, poems … are heartfelt tributes to his father, and to the magic of a vanishing way of life… Vallis’s later poetry has a more wistful and inward cast, somewhat shaped by the melancholy lyricism of Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold and Charlotte Mew, and by Shaw Neilson, whose poems he co-edited with Judith Wright in 1963. It insists, as they do, on the intrinsic beauty and human meaning of natural things. (1988 61)

But if Val’s poetic output was slim, Buckridge goes on to argue, ‘his importance for Brisbane’s postwar poetic culture was disproportionately great’:

This was because he both embodied and disseminated, through thirty years of teaching aesthetics and poetry at the University of Queensland, a powerful and distinctive conception of poetry that combined an intense Romantic sensibility with a gruff realism; a devotion to international high culture (especially opera) with an equal devotion to the local and the ordinary; a respect for the great literature, art and music of the past with a love of what was unique and unprecedented in the present. (61–62)

Shaw Neilson’s poetry combined the qualities of something ‘unique and unprecedented in the present’ — the literary present of Australia’s early twentieth century — and something tied to what might now be understood as the high culture of European/British Romanticism (although it began as a radical movement advocating the democratic inclusion of ‘the common reader’ into the aesthetic and practice of literary culture). In this, and in other ways, Shaw Neilson was a man of complexity whose poetry appeared to sit in an unlikely relationship to his life — a poetry of Romantic sensibility that sat in contradistinction to the life of ‘gruff realism’. In that talk on ‘the poet who never went to school’, Val asks his audience to ‘Listen for a moment to a stanza from one of his [Neilson’s] best-known poems’ (F1684):

Let your song be delicate.
The flowers can hear:
Too well they know the tremble,
Of the hollow year.

Val comments that:

If this is the kind of poetry the man wrote, you may well expect that his life was a careful, sheltered one, offering plenty of time to stand and stare at the beauties of Nature around him. Nothing could be further from the truth. Like Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson he humped his bluey along western roads in search of work. It is easy to understand their poetry. It tells of the characters they met, the funny and tragic incidents they witnessed. It is as though from the gnarled, tough exterior of life Paterson and Lawson tore off recognisable strips of bark. From the same tough tree Neilson plucked the rare, fragile orchids of his poetry. (F1684 2)
Where did those fragile orchids come from? What gave them existence? What conditions were necessary for their surprising creation, given not only the harshness of the life, but the lack of formal education? Val writes of a man ‘who received only four years’ schooling, intermittently, between his eighth and sixteenth years’ but about whom he ‘can’t help wondering’, ‘whether a more scholarly life would have helped or hindered him in his poetry’:

Book learning may have directed him to a wider variety of poems on which to model his ‘rhyme’ as he called them, but the simple lyric, the type of poetry in which he is supreme, is not to be achieved by imitation. It must just simply blossom naturally out of the soil of the poet’s own life. (F1684 1)

Poetry, wrote Keats, must come naturally, as leaves to a tree. Like the Romantics, and, perhaps unexpectedly, like Woolf, Val was dubious about the merit of education — not so much a matter of whether it was better to be locked in or locked out of a system that might act to constrict rather than free the mind, but whether the poet was perhaps better off listening to his ‘heart’ rather than his ‘head’. In an ABC broadcast made late in his life (1997), Val remembered how Douglas Stewart had warned him that (his late entrance to) university would ‘spoil him as a poet’ and reflects that ‘it did in a way’ because ‘there you think with your mind, not your heart (though I know you can feel with your mind too)’.1

‘Of course,’ Val concedes, ‘to write poetry requires some meagre supply of education, a knowledge of grammar and a certain vocabulary. But it requires a far more important thing, a gift of vision to see the miracle that lies in the ordinary things of the world’ (F1684 1). In this way, Neilson is clearly aligned with Blake: a man of vision, a man who in his own words, ‘lives by miracle’; and a poet like John Clare, who is a common reader, that is, a man of little formal education, with an uncommon ability to read and translate Nature into poetry. ‘It was in this place, Minimay in Victoria,’ Val explains, ‘that young Shaw Neilson grew to love the wild life that lived on the swamps — the ibis, the crane, the heron, the black swans, all to people his poetry many years later… This was the school-room in which Shaw Neilson learned the important things of his life’ (F1684 3).

Val said to me at one point that he struggled to write poetry now (in the late 1970s); that the inspiration or the vision had left — the muse didn’t visit him any more — and for this he was sad, because I think he felt that the poet’s calling was the highest of all callings. Perhaps too much book-learning, too much academia, had driven the muse away; but for many people who knew him, Val’s calling and his greatest gift was his capacity to teach. He gave all he knew to others with generosity and he inspired them with the love of his subject, whether that subject was philosophy, music or poetry.

Val’s slim volume of poems (Dark Wind Blowing) sits on my bookshelf next to a much-thumbed volume of Judith Wright’s collected poems and the volume of unpublished poems by John Shaw Neilson that he edited with Judith. It seems appropriate then to end this memorial essay with lines from Shaw Neilson’s poem, ‘Speech to a Rhymer’:
Good fellow of the Song
Be not too dismal it is you and I
And a few others lift the world along.

...  
Let us deceive each other Love is all

NOTES

1 Notes by Paul Sherman from Val’s broadcast on ABC Sunday Oct 18, 1997; recorded in the ‘Val Vallis Scrapbook’; Val Vallis Archive, Fryer Library, University of Queensland. Accession No: 090320 (no F number yet). This commented is reiterated in slightly different form in the Courier Mail of Friday, October 17, 1997 in which, in answer to the reason why ‘recent works are fewer’, Val comments that his poetic muse has largely departed and that ‘Doug Stewart got it right when he said [about Val’s admission to University], ‘I’m pleased for you Val, but it will bugger you as a poet — you’ll start to see with your brain rather than your heart’ (cutting in Scrapbook).

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Eggs, Emperors and Empire: Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s ‘Worst Journey’ as Imperial Quest Romance

Antarctic exploration in the ‘Heroic Era’ (the early twentieth century) is often represented as the last gasp of British imperialism — an attempt to occupy empty, uninhabited and more-or-less useless territory at a time when the rest of the empire was beginning to crumble. Of British Heroic-Era exploits, three stories in particular preoccupy the present popular imagination: Robert F. Scott’s ill-fated journey to the Pole with his four companions, as famously related in his posthumously published journal; a slightly earlier journey to Cape Crozier by three of Scott’s expedition members in search of Emperor penguins’ eggs, as told by Apsley Cherry-Garrard in a chapter of his 1922 travel memoir The Worst Journey in the World; and the story of Ernest Shackleton’s Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, in which his ship, The Endurance, was imprisoned and later crushed by ice, leaving the men to survive on ice-floes and a subantarctic island. Each of these stories has its own reception history throughout the twentieth century. Scott’s reached its peak of prominence at the time of its first appearance in 1913, in the wake of the explorers’ deaths, and has provoked controversies, revisions and backlashes ever since. Shackleton’s, which emerged in the midst of World War I, was no rival to Scott’s until recent decades, when the tale of the Endurance experienced a renaissance of popularity, with the Anglo-Irish explorer held up in ‘how to’ management guides as a brilliant leader. Only Cherry-Garrard’s story of ‘the weirdest bird’s-nesting expedition that has ever been’ (240), which forms the structural centre of The Worst Journey in the World, has kept a strong, steady reputation. The Worst Journey has appeared in numerous editions throughout the century, and is frequently acknowledged as a classic both of Antarctic exploration and the wider genre of travel writing. Yet, while Scott’s polar journey has been an increasingly popular subject within literary and cultural studies of recent times, with a number of analyses intent on interrogating his legend in the light of new political viewpoints, particularly those influenced by gender and postcolonial theories (see for example, Moss 2006; Bloom 1993; Wylie 2002a, 2002b; Spufford 1996; Pegg 1993), and Shackleton has also begun attracting attention in this context (for example, Farley 2005), The Worst Journey in the World has been largely ignored by literary critics. This essay offers the beginnings of a cultural analysis of this text, focussing on the closely intertwined
narratives — imperial, scientific, and literary — that coalesce around three penguins’ eggs in Cherry-Garrard’s account of the world’s worst journey.

The sledging expedition that has become known as the ‘Winter Journey’ or simply the ‘Worst Journey’ took place during the first winter of Scott’s Terra Nova expedition, and consisted of a round-trip of over two hundred kilometres from the base hut at Cape Evans on Ross Island to the Emperor penguin colony at Cape Crozier. The expedition team consisted of the young, short-sighted Cherry-Garrard, who had been appointed assistant zoologist; Edward Wilson, the expedition doctor, chief scientist and artist; and the indomitable Henry ‘Birdie’ Bowers, a naval lieutenant.

The explicit aim of the five-week journey was scientific — to collect embryos from Emperor penguins’ eggs — but it also had a practical side-benefit in the lead-up to Scott’s assault on the Pole, which commenced shortly afterwards. The three men existed on separate diets to discover empirically which combination of fat, carbohydrate and protein was best suited to polar exploration. The journey was, then, at least from Scott’s perspective, itself a form of scientific experiment. Two of the men — Wilson and Bowers — went on to be members of the polar party, and thus to die on the return journey. Cherry-Garrard survived the expedition to chronicle both journeys — the attempt on the Pole and the attempt to retrieve the eggs — in his famous book.
A useful way of approaching the narrative of the Cape Crozier expedition is to compare it to the far longer polar journey. An ostensible point of difference between the two endeavours is the purpose of each. Scott’s polar journey was one of territorial exploration undertaken — publicly, at least — for the glory of nation and empire. While it is true that the expedition as a whole had serious scientific aims — even on the way back from the Pole the desperate, dying men dragged around sixteen kilograms of geological specimens with them — Scott had stated in his first public announcements that his primary aim was reaching the Pole (Crane 397). His disappointment at being forestalled by Roald Amundsen’s Norwegian team makes it clear that national and personal priority was a highly important factor. The Winter Journey, by contrast, was explicitly scientific in aim. No new territory would be covered: Wilson had collected eggs from Cape Crozier before, but only an embryo in the right stage of development — that is, one retrieved in the darkness of winter — was suitable for his purposes. Following nineteenth-century biologist Ernst Haeckel’s influential theory that ontology recapitulated phylogeny, and believing the Emperor penguin to be the most primitive bird on Earth, Wilson thought that its embryo could reveal the evolutionary link between reptiles and birds. And for Wilson, personally, intense scientific curiosity was very likely sufficient motivation for the undertaking. But, as numerous critics have observed, science and empire are not so easily disentangled. Imperial control is closely linked with the scientific objectification of the colonised, whether this be a people or a landscape and its fauna. The collection and display of exoticised objects, including those relating to natural history, is a way of deploying and displaying power, and was a strategy that Britain made ample use of at its imperial height:

The acquisition of objects from areas of the world in which Britain had colonial or proto-colonial political and military interests, and the ordering and displaying of them by a museum which was a part of the British state, formed … a three-dimensional imperial archive. The procession of objects from peripheries to centre symbolically enacted the idea of London as the heart of empire. (Barringer 11)

Cherry-Garrard’s story ultimately tells of such a procession (although one with an ambiguous ending befitting its historical position at a point when the British Empire was past its apogee and about to suffer an irrecoverable blow). Thus, while the polar journey (retrospectively at least) seems to foreground imperialism, and the Winter Journey science, in both endeavours these two contexts are inextricably linked.

A more striking difference between the two journeys lies in the physical nature of the goal that each expedition hoped to achieve. Both had an obvious geographical aim: to reach the Pole and return, in Scott’s case, and to retrieve the eggs from Cape Crozier in Cherry-Garrard’s. But the Pole, as many have pointed out, was in some senses a non-goal. It was marked by nothing (or so Scott’s men hoped), and was only identifiable by careful measurements and calculations; it
was the lack of such that made Robert Peary’s claimed conquest of the North Pole in 1909 a subject of dispute. The South Pole is, as science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson observes, ‘a kind of no-place, a blank on the map. No reason to be here except for the abstract fact of the spin axis of the planet, which was a pretty strange reason once one thought about it. Ridiculous in fact’ (231). Scott’s men faced terrible disappointment at being beaten to this nothingness, and ended up dying as a result of their efforts. Cherry-Garrard and his companions at least had a material object — several, in fact — as the goal of their journey. They ended up gathering five penguin eggs and although two broke on the return trip, they were able to bring the others back to base, and later to London, as a concrete sign of their success. This points to another difference in the two stories: their outcomes. Scott and his companions perished horribly, whereas the Winter Journey — despite being identified as ‘The Worst Journey in the World’ by Cherry-Garrard, Scott and hosts of later readers — ended happily, with the safe return of the three men, complete with eggs.

These points of comparison and contrast mean that the events of the two journeys fit neatly into the narrative patterns of two pre-existing literary genres: the tragedy and the imperial quest romance. At the outset, admittedly, both journeys presented as polar variations on the second of these genres. Robert Fraser, in his outline of the imperial quest narrative, points to its early origin in transcultural myths of ‘male protagonists who … set out with a team of picked companions’ to recover a prized object, such as ‘a golden fleece, or the skin of some fabulous animal’ (5), and the influence of ‘certain key features of traditional legends’ including ‘an onerous journey across uncharted regions, the reaching of the goal, the conquest, a withdrawal’ (6). Drawing on the work of Andrew Lang, he identifies the important elements of the genre in its late Victorian manifestation — ‘the band of companions devoted to one another; the common code of chivalry; the quest for a fabled source of wisdom; forbearance; virility; fighting’ (7) — and adds his own criteria: the team of adventurers are ‘usually amateurs’, although ‘the nature of their enquiries has to do with the harnessing of technical and exclusive disciplines’ (16). Furthermore, the wisdom they seek is linked to the ‘sources of humanity itself’ (76). With certain elements interpreted metaphorically — there are few specific external foes to be fought on these Antarctic voyages, except the environment itself — both journeys display clear resonances with this genre.

The imperial quest romance was highly popular in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, and no doubt informed and reinforced both the public’s and the men’s own conception of their actual endeavours (Cherry-Garrard’s favourite authors were Kipling and Conrad [Seaver lxix]). As Graham Dawson observes, while the adventure quest is a form of fiction, it can nonetheless ‘be seen to furnish imaginative resources and a mode of subjective composure that may be drawn upon in a living engagement with real circumstances of risk and challenge’. But real circumstances mean that there is ‘no guarantee of closure…
Where in practice such an “adventure” ends in disaster and defeat, it will not be narratable as an adventure quest but will give way to the narrative pattern of irony or tragedy’ (56). This is exactly what happened in the case of the polar journey. As Carl Murray has observed, ‘a quest narrative transform[ed] ineluctably into tragedy’ (180) when the well-known events of the journey transpired: the various problems with weather, surfaces and supplies that plagued the expedition, the men’s realisation that they were not the first to the Pole, the terrible trials of the return journey and the eventual death of all of the team members. Murray notes that later chroniclers of the story, including Cherry-Garrard, constantly reinforced its reading as a tragedy both explicitly and implicitly through references to ‘fate’ and ‘hubris’, but shows that the basic events in themselves conformed remarkably closely to the established elements of the Greek tragedy (195–208). And many elements which the polar journey initially appeared to share with the imperial quest romance have been eaten away by the controversies and revisions which have dogged the polar journey in the hundred years since it was undertaken: various commentators have, for example, challenged the assumption that Scott’s companions were devoted to each other, suggested their apparent displays of forbearance (such as Lawrence Oates’s famous sacrificial suicide) were coerced, and questioned the overall worth of their undertaking.

The Winter Journey, by contrast, is striking in the way its events adhered to conventions of the imperial quest romance throughout the entire undertaking. The journey was certainly romantic in purpose — a perilous search over extremely hostile territory for the eggs of an exotic, remote creature — a piece of ‘some fabulous animal’. Although the team were largely composed of amateurs (neither Bowers nor Cherry-Garrard had any formal scientific qualifications, and neither had experience of polar sledging expeditions prior to joining Scott), the knowledge they sought — the evolutionary link between reptiles and birds — related both to a specialised disciplinary debate and to the broader question of origins. The trek was undertaken under the most testing possible circumstances — in the dead of winter, in complete darkness, with temperatures reaching down to around -60°C. The three questors suffered many trials, such as the loss of their tent during a particularly windy spell, and were also at times rewarded with miraculously good luck, including the re-discovery of the tent. The journey had none of the realistic messiness and retrospective controversy of Scott’s polar journey, with its rivalry for places in the polar party and later accusations of incompetency; according to Cherry-Garrard, he and his two companions were unfailingly civil and cheerful throughout their trials (251, 279, 302), and later commentators have revealed no evidence to the contrary. Lastly, as I have said, the journey was successful, as opposed to Scott’s narrative of noble failure.

This success was, admittedly, later qualified by a different kind of failure: the failure of the eggs to yield any information of scientific interest. But before addressing this aspect of the ‘Winter Journey’, I would like to deal with a prior
question: just what was it about the Emperor penguin that made the retrieval of its eggs in the dead of winter vital enough to risk three human lives in the first place? In literary terms, what exactly is the sought-after knowledge that motivates this imperial quest romance? Cherry-Garrard gives an initial explanation in his lead-up to the story:

it is because the Emperor is probably the most primitive bird in existence that the working out of his embryology is so important. The embryo shows remains of the development of an animal in former ages and former states: it recapitulates former lives. The embryo of an Emperor may prove the missing link between birds and the reptiles from which birds have sprung. (240)

But this begs the question of why the Emperor was considered ‘the most primitive bird in existence’. Recent events have conspired to make the modern researcher sceptical about the tendency to project diverse qualities onto this particular animal: in the wake of the film, *March of the Penguins*, conservative Christian groups in the USA claimed the Emperor as the model of proper parenting and proof of Intelligent Design. The blockbuster animation, *Happy Feet*, seemingly reacting against its predecessor, held it up as a paradoxical symbol of the power of individualism within conformity, and a poster-child for environmental protection. What assumptions did a culture steeped in imperial quest romances project onto this unsuspecting bird?

A couple of critics have had a stab at this in passing. Patrick Morrow, in a coda to his *Post-Colonial Essays on South Pacific Literature*, observes that ‘the explorers guessed very wrong on the Emperor Penguin eggs as being “truly primitive”, (a common mistake for a Colonizer when faced with “the other”, be this human or beast)’ (151). Tom Griffiths, in *Slicing the Silence*, also suggests that the assumption may have been grounded in culture as much as science: ‘The primitive lurked in the wastes of Antarctica for Edwardian explorers…. Like indigenous peoples encountered by voyagers around the world, the Emperors were seen to be a doomed “race”, noble savages of a kind, destined to die out because they were a relic of past ages’ (222, 235). This comment rests on a logic familiar to postcolonialists, a process identified variously as ‘allochronism’ (Johannes Fabian’s term) or ‘anachronistic space’ (Anne McClintock’s) in which an analogy is drawn between spatial and temporal difference: ‘colonized people … do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographical space of the modern empire…. Atavistic, irrational … the living embodiment of the archaic “primitive”’ (McClintock 30). The process can apply to animals as well as people. The thylacine is a case in point: Robert Paddle, in *The Last Tasmanian Tiger*, notes the way in which this animal was classed by early twentieth-century commentators as a one of the world’s most primitive creatures, cut off from the evolutionary progress of the rest of the world (205). And in Antarctica, a continent lacking human inhabitants, animals structurally take the place that indigenous peoples occupy in other imperial contexts. Just as
the latter tend to be naturalised by colonial invaders, to be categorised not under culture but together with the natural environment as something to objectify and conquer, the former may be projected further down the supposed evolutionary ‘ladder’ than is strictly warranted.

But why, of all Antarctic creatures, and of all birds, should the Emperor be the particular bearer of the ‘most primitive’ label? Certainly there was early confusion about whether penguins were birds or fish, but this was true of all species of penguin. The Emperor’s name suggests if anything regality, and the cliché of the penguin as a tuxedoed man — the epitome of upper-class civility — was familiar and often used by Heroic-Era explorers, who sometimes quite literally confused distant groups of Emperors (the tallest of the penguin family) with their fellow expeditioners. Cherry-Garrard himself terms Emperors the ‘most aristocratic inhabitants of the Antarctic’ (xxix). There are other Antarctic animals whose outward appearance from a human perspective better suits them for the ‘most primitive’ award, as anyone who has seen — or heard or smelled — an elephant seal up close will testify.

The history of human encounter with Emperors sheds little light on this point. Penguins were first seen by Europeans around the turn of the sixteenth century (Sparks and Soper 152), but Emperors, an almost exclusively Antarctic species, were not spotted until about three hundred years later. The latter part of their scientific name, *Aptenodytes forsteri*, stems from a German naturalist, Johann Reinold Forster, who travelled on James Cook’s Antarctic journey of the early 1770s together with his son Georg (Simpson 34–35). The Forsters described and drew what was later thought to be an Emperor, although it was more likely a King (Müller-Schwarze 119–21; Sparks and Soper 179). The first Emperor specimen was caught in 1820 by the Russian explorer Thaddeus von Bellingshausen (Masson 14), and several were brought home (some pickled in barrows) by James Ross during the British expedition of 1839–43 (Ross 159). George Robert Gray, a zoologist on Ross’s voyage, identified the new species in 1844 using the retrieved specimens, mistakenly identifying them (probably mistakenly) with Forster’s drawings — hence the scientific name. While subantarctic penguins became more familiar to the British in the later nineteenth century, with the first birds (Kings) arriving at the Zoological Gardens in Regent’s Park, London, in 1865 (Martin 78, 86; Palmer), knowledge of the birds continued to be very limited over the next decades (Rivolier 89). Their common name seems to have been well-established established by the 1880s (Weinecke 2010, 271), but no one knew anything about where or when their eggs were laid, or how their chicks developed. An important artefact was in fact available: an Emperor’s egg, found sitting on an ice floe, was retrieved by a French expedition in 1838, and sold as part of a larger collection to an Englishman in 1845 (Walter 5; Wilson 28).? There was no way of confirming its provenance, however, and it sat in a collection in Norwich for the next fifty years. In 1905, it was finally identified by Wilson, who by this time had been to
the Antarctic on Scott’s first expedition, sledged to the first identified Emperor penguin rookery at Cape Crozier and brought back a number of Imperial eggs of his own. But Wilson had visited the rookery only in the comparatively tolerable conditions of the Antarctic spring; the eggs he found were deserted and he was not able to obtain embryos early enough in development to tell him anything startling in evolutionary terms. When the chance came to go south again, he was eager to clear up the mystery: ‘The possibility that we have in the Emperor penguin the nearest approach to a primitive form not only of a penguin, but of a bird’, he wrote in 1907, ‘makes the future working out of its embryology a matter of the greatest possible importance’ (31).

Wilson’s remark about the Emperor’s primitive nature comes at the end of a thirty-page report on the bird that gives no explanation for this assumption. It is surprisingly difficult to trace the source of his scientific reasoning on the matter. In an 1836 essay, influential palaeontologist Richard Owen had observed in penguins ‘an interesting affinity to the Reptilia’ (270; online); this, along with corroborating evidence from two other authors, is remarked on in the zoology report from the 1873–76 Antarctic Challenger expedition, which in turn considers penguins to be of ‘considerable antiquity’ (Watson 231) and notes that ‘the opisthocœlous character of the dorsal vertebrae’ is ‘more truly reptilian than avian’ (Watson 233). In 1887 M.A. Menzbier proposed that penguins had ‘gradually evolved from reptiles independently of other birds’ (Sparks & Soper 137). R.W. Shufeldt, writing in 1901, is convinced of the ‘low morphological rank’ of penguins, which he terms an ‘extremely old’ suborder, but he does not single out the Emperor in this context (390). In fact, it is difficult here or in any other of the contemporary ornithological literature to find any reference to the primitiveness of the Emperor in particular — unsurprisingly, given that so little evidence of the species was available prior to Scott’s Discovery expedition. William Plane Pycraft’s report on evidence brought home by this expedition (published in the same volume as Wilson’s report cited above) points to some aspects of penguin anatomy that indicate primitiveness (25), but also states that ‘penguins are [in a certain respect] less primitive than has been supposed’ (2), and debunks the myth that penguin feathers are scale-like (and hence support a connection between birds and reptiles), which he considers a product of ‘slovenly observation’ (3–4).8 A newspaper report on a lecture Wilson delivered to the Royal Institution in early 1905 also makes no mention of the bird-reptile link. According to Scott, Wilson was more forthcoming in a presentation delivered at the expedition’s base hut before the journey, mentioning feather arrangement, wing muscles, feet structure and fossil evidence (194). Having investigated the literature, Douglas Russell (2009), a curator of birds at the Natural History Museum in Tring where Cherry-Garrard’s eggs now reside, notes that Wilson’s views about the antiquity of the family Spheniscidae (penguins) echoed Haeckel’s, and that his selection of the Emperor in particular as the most primitive was based on head plumage colour characters.
This complex background, however, is in no way evident to the reader of Cherry-Garrard’s narrative or any of its numerous retellings. The basic explanation that Cherry-Garrard provides for the Emperors’ primitiveness is that they live in the far south. He notes it is still an ‘open question’ whether or not penguins are ‘more primitive than other non-flying birds’ such as the ostrich and the rhea, some of which are ‘hanging on to the promontories of the southern continents, where there is less rivalry than in the highly populated land areas of the north’. If penguins are indeed primitive, he continues, ‘it is rational to infer that the most primitive penguin is farthest south’, indicating the Emperor and the Adélie (579) — the two penguin species that breed only on the Antarctic continent (Shirihai 44). Of these, it makes sense, he suggests, to look towards the less numerous and successful — the Emperor — for primitiveness (579). Given the arduousness of the enterprise it is designed to justify, this reasoning seems weak: ostriches are hardly ‘hanging onto southern promontories’; and, even in Cherry-Garrard’s day, it was well-recognised that successful adaptation did not necessarily imply increasing sophistication or complexity, an observation that fuelled contemporary anxiety about ‘degeneration’. Why then should Cherry-Garrard assume that a successful species must automatically be less primitive than a less successful one? Whatever Wilson’s rationale for believing in the Emperor’s primitiveness, Cherry-Garrard can only give a confused, unconvincing version of the issue he asserted ‘might be of the utmost importance to science’ (274). He was himself trained in classics rather than science, and one has to assume that he risked his life, and experienced what he characterises as the most trying journey in the world’s history, simply on faith — or that, indeed, he very much needed there to be some special prize at the end of the quest he undertook, not a blank space on the map.

Cherry-Garrard’s emphasis on southerly locations suggests that, whatever scientific reasons existed at the time for the incorrect assumption of the Emperor’s primitiveness, they were reinforced not only by the logic of anachronistic space, but also by the sense that the far southern regions and their inhabitants are especially vulnerable to the state of being ‘frozen in time’. This is due to a combination of factors: the temporal anomalies that occur at high southern (and northern) latitudes, the sense that the southern regions of the Earth are temporally ‘behind’ the northern, and the association of ice with preservation in time. This logic certainly manifests itself in the numerous ‘lost race’ romances set in the southernmost continent. Fictional Antarctica, particularly in the early twentieth century, is occupied by Neanderthals, Cro-Magnon Men and dinosaurs (Leane 2009). Its far southern position, distant from populated northern centres, its isolation within rough southern oceans, and its icy, preserving climate all made it perfect for these fantasies in which extinct species were preserved alive. The Emperor penguin (along with the Adélie) lives and breeds further south than any other bird. The Antarctic was in this sense the ideal place to set an imperial quest romance, a genre in which, Fraser (along with Patrick Brantlinger [1988])
notes, the atavistic nature of the discovered object is key. The apparent scientific motivation for the Winter Journey cannot then be easily separated from the imperial culture which enabled it.

This reading is strengthened rather than weakened by the coda to the ‘Winter Journey’ in which Cherry-Garrard relates the bathetic conclusion to his sublime endeavour. ‘And now’, he writes at the end of his long chapter, ‘the reader will ask what became of the three penguins’ eggs for which three human lives had been risked three hundred times a day, and three human frames strained to the utmost extremity of human endurance’ (304). The action flashes forward to the Natural History Museum in South Kensington in 1913, with Cherry-Garrard dramatising his encounter with museum staff, reporting the conversation accurately ‘in spirit’ if not verbatim. He initially encounters the ‘First Custodian’:

‘Who are you? What do you want? This ain’t an egg-shop. What call have you to come meddling with our eggs? Do you want me to put the police on to you? Is it the crocodile’s egg you’re after? I don’t know nothing about no eggs. You’d best speak to Mr Brown: it’s him that varnishes the eggs’. (305)

This lower-class diatribe is then replaced by a cool and officious response from the Chief Custodian, who dismisses Cherry-Garrard perfunctorily, ignoring his request for a receipt.

Although Cherry-Garrard eventually receives his receipt, on a later visit to the museum with Scott’s sister he is initially told that no eggs are in the museum’s possession. This is corrected, and he eventually learns that they are being examined by a Professor at Edinburgh University, with whose underwhelming report the chapter concludes. Cherry-Garrard also chose to conclude the wider narrative of The Worst Journey with reference to the eggs:

Exploration is the physical expression of the Intellectual Passion.

And I tell you, if you have the desire for knowledge and the power to give it physical expression, go out and explore. … Some will tell you that you are mad, and nearly all will say, ‘What is the use? For we are a nation of shopkeepers, and no shopkeeper will look at research which does not promise him a financial return within a year. And so you will sledge nearly alone, but those with whom you sledge will not be shopkeepers: that is worth a good deal. If you march your Winter Journeys you will have your reward, so long as all you want is a penguin’s egg. (597–98)

No scientific results from the study of the Emperor embryos appeared until 1934, when C.W. Parsons reported that they were of no great significance — certainly not the missing link that Cherry-Garrard’s narrative anticipates.

As an imperial scientific expedition, the Winter Journey was rendered a failure by the museum’s refusal to appreciate or acknowledge — let alone exhibit — the eggs. The culmination of the imperial urge to control through collection was typically display. As McClintock writes, ‘the middle class Victorian fixation with origins, with genesis narratives, with archaeology, skulls, skeletons and fossils — the imperial bric-a-brac of the archaic — was replete with the fetishistic
compulsion to collect and display’. The museum became ‘the modern fetish-house of the archaic’ (40). With the Natural History Museum’s failure to live up to its end of the imperial bargain, Cherry-Garrard’s story ends in defeat as much as Scott’s — a defeat not from the elements, nor even the march of scientific progress, but from a ‘nation of shopkeepers’ which no longer recognised the kinds of heroic acts that both Scott and Cherry-Garrard undertook. The passage provides a fitting end to *The Worst Journey in the World* as a whole, as the memoir is frequently read as a lament for a society and a way of life that its author believed had irrevocably disappeared in the wake of the First World War.

However, as an imperial quest romance rather than a report on a scientific expedition, the Winter Journey remains a success. The difference here is that the most important thing that the quester brings home from his adventure is not a material object — although this may support his case — but the story itself. Imperial quests are, like Cherry-Garrard’s, frequently framed by a mundane narrative of the departure and/or return of the adventurer/s from the centre of civilization (usually London): an outer narrative that contextualises and lends credibility to the inner adventure narrative, and often explains how the latter came to be written and published. This inner narrative can itself take the form of an artefact, such as a manuscript published on the insistence of a friend or relative, or recovered after the adventurer’s death. The testimony of the adventurer then itself becomes the quest’s most important result.

Although Cherry-Garrard’s ironically identifies the ‘reward’ of his imperial quest narrative as an essentially useless object (‘a penguin’s egg’), like fictional narrators he implicitly acknowledges the worth of his quixotic endeavour by the space and energy he spends relating it. Those who first received the story of the Winter Journey immediately recognised the value of this narrative *qua* narrative. Only weeks after the expeditioners returned, Scott commented that, while Wilson was ‘disappointed at seeing so little of the penguins … to me and to everyone who has remained here the result of this effort is the appeal it makes to our imagination as one of the most gallant stories in polar History. … It makes a tale for our generation which I hope may not be lost in the telling’ (259). The story, for Scott, was more important than its outcome; and Cherry-Garrard chose Scott’s comment for an epigraph to the Winter Journey chapter. More recent commentators agree with Scott: Frances Richard writes that ‘though the trekkers keep up the premise of a scientific rationale for their journey, it quickly becomes a kind of existential fiction, a Godot or a MacGuffin to give shape to their travail and keep them going on when they can’t go on’ (online). Although this is easily said from the vantage-point of the early twenty-first century, when biological knowledge has progressed, it is nonetheless applicable to the internal logic of Cherry-Garrard’s original story: the Worst Journey was scientifically under-motivated, and in this sense its much-quoted anti-climatic ending — the journey back to the centre of civilisation, the Museum — seems retrospectively fitting. Yet as an imperial quest
narrative, it is not anti-climatic at all, because the tale itself has garnered the appreciation ostensibly due to the eggs.

The eggs which Cherry-Garrard, Wilson and Bowers retrieved from Cape Crozier are still held by the Natural History Museum. Its website notes that ‘[t]he embryos for which so much had been risked contributed little of scientific importance’, but ‘[t]he three eggs and the remains of the embryos nevertheless have immense historic importance as the goal of the incredible journey and the struggle for survival in the appalling conditions of the Antarctic winter’ (online). Where the three eggs once justified the Worst Journey, the Worst Journey now justifies the continued preservation of the eggs. Scott presciently realised that the worth of the journey lay in its narrative: the eggs are important not as specimens, but for their structural function in a now-famous tale. While science and imperialism are inescapable and intertwined discourses lying behind Cherry-Garrard’s Worst Journey, its primary value is, in the end, literary.
NOTES

1 The situation was, unsurprisingly, much more complex than this generalisation suggests: Britain along with other established imperial Western powers such as France and Belgium certainly mounted expeditions, but the desire to explore the far south stretched to nations with very different histories and contexts. Japan launched an expedition under Nobu Shirase; Norway, then a newly independent nation with no colonies of its own, attained the goal of first to the South Pole; and the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) saw itself both as representing the British Empire and establishing a special relationship between the newly federated Australia and its southern neighbour. See Innes for an analysis of the Shirase expedition that critiques the tendency to overstate national context in the analysis of ‘Heroic-Era’ exploration; and Leane (2005) for a discussion of the AAE’s ambivalent national position.

2 Although different nations have developed their own favoured Heroic Era epics (Mawson’s solo trek to the AAE base hut in 1913 is Australia’s most famous), accounts of these British exploits in particular are popular amongst polar enthusiasts beyond Britain itself. For example, the only two primary texts that US bestselling science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson points his readers towards in the acknowledgements to his novel Antarctica are Frank Worsley’s Shackleton’s Boat Journey (an account of the latter part of the Endurance expedition) and ‘above all else’ The Worst Journey in the World (562).

3 The journey to Cape Crozier occupies the longest chapter — 76 of 598 pages in the Picador Travel Classics edition — of The Worst Journey, which is itself an account of Scott’s expedition published more than ten years after the events it describes. The Cape Crozier expedition, rather than the assault on the Pole, is the ‘Worst Journey’ referred to in the book’s title (304).

4 The Worst Journey is the founding volume of the Picador Travel Classics series, which in itself can be read as part of an attempt to establish a ‘travel writing canon’ (Hollard & Huggan 238, 205). The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing singles out The Worst Journey in the World as the example of polar exploration writing which is often seen as ‘consolidating the qualities’ of the genre (Hulme & Youngs 7). National Geographic Adventure magazine selected it as the greatest adventure book of all time in a list published in 2001 (‘Top 10’ F02).

5 Jones (2003) includes detailed analysis of the complex ways in which discourses of imperialist and scientific endeavour were woven around Scott’s expedition.

6 See Leane and Pfennigwerth (forthcoming 2011) for a discussion of the representation of the Emperor in these films.

7 Kept in Drayton Hall, Norwich, before being donated to Norwich Castle Museum (Walter 5) and eventually acquired by the Scott Polar Research Institute, this object is now known as the ‘Drayton egg’.

8 It is, of course, difficult for a non-specialist such as myself to assess and interpret ornithological literature of the kind cited here. However, T.W. Glenister, summarising Pycraft’s report in 1954, states that Pycraft concluded that ‘the skull of Pygoscelis [this genus includes the Adélie, Gentoo and Chinstrap penguins] was more primitive than that of Aptenodytes [the Emperor and King penguins]’ (1). Glenister states that early data on the embryology and development of all species of penguin is scarce, and cites Pycraft report as the first to detail Emperor penguin embryology (1, 3).

9 The problem may have hinged partly on the word ‘primitive’. In biology (now and in Wilson’s time), ‘primitive’ life-forms are those that relate to or represent ‘an early
evolutionary stage’ \textit{(OED)}; in more general discourse, the word also has (and had) connotations of ‘simple, basic, rudimentary; unsophisticated, crude’ \textit{(OED)} which the scientific usage does not necessarily imply (Wienecke 2011). Wilson would have been cognizant of this distinction; Cherry-Garrard and his readers may not have.

10 Tarak Barkawi writes that ‘One of the most pervasive ways of seeing the world is in terms of a distinction between an “advanced”, modern world — the global “North” — and a “backward”, underdeveloped world, the global “South”… The distinction is … temporal, in that the South is considered historically “behind” the North’ (101–102). Roxanne Doty likewise identifies ‘abstract binary oppositions’ that ‘frame our thinking’ about the North-South relationship, including ‘developed/underdeveloped’, ‘core/periphery’, and ‘modern/traditional’ (2).

11 See Leane (2009) for further discussion of ‘Antarctic temporality’.

12 As the Adélie breeds in the summer, however, knowledge of its embryology was far more readily obtained, and thus did not present the allure of the unknown that the Emperor signified.

13 H. Rider Haggard’s seminal imperial quest romance, \textit{She} (1887), provides a good example. The frame narrative is written not by one of the adventurers but by the book’s editor, whom the reader is encouraged to identify with Haggard. A letter addressed to him explains that the adventurers, having departed on another long and potentially dangerous journey, did not want to deny their account to the world. The manuscript is the most significant of several corroborating objects (ancient documents and artefacts) supporting the tale.

14 These words bear some similarity to one of Scott’s most famous phrases, written nine months later in his dying ‘Message to the Public’: ‘Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell …’ (422).

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Stephen Gray

THE COLONIAL EXHIBITION

The Royal Museum of Central Africa at Tervuren
founded by Leopold III
beneath the cupola of colonnaded entrance hall
displays in the north wing
first the agricultural products: the cocoa plant
and forms of wood carved
according to the anatomy into materials of use,
shovels, beams and clubs;
the ethnographic chamber further works, such as
carvings (fetishes, masks,
with nails implanted or without, teeth, chips
of mirror or beadwork,
incredibly naked and polished and later clothed);
their mats and pots and pokers
scattered from a village fireside, still utilitarian;
through the light-filled rotunda,
the ecological section, comparative, with what they call
the Kaapsche ezelen or zèbre
measured against the wired skeleton of an okapi.
Promenading south where the light draws again the sombre
cabinets of insects spiked
and small invertebrates (the richest collection held)
and fish, reptiles and amphibians;
then all the mammals that may be classified and stuffed
on stumps or dead branches:
the monkeys and gorillas composed in families; not to neglect
the birds on wires
caught in midflight, raptors pouncing down to
canaries and squabs and chickens;
annexed is mineralogy (crystals mostly, seams of
gold, copper, tin);
geology (the Congo River with its 200 cataracts);
and palaeontology (the implements,
like wedges and axes, wielded by people now extinct).
Opposite their prehistory
is anthropology (evidence of smoking, ritual dances
and stringed instrument activity).
Across the courtyard with its clouds in circulating water
is the Salle du Mémorial
where inscribed are all the names and rank of those Belgian
expansionists who perished,
rendering their king the largest private fiefdom ever
(1885–1908) he left unvisited;
this museum built to prove his boundless philanthropy.
Here no chains, chopped hands,
no shrunken heads on poles, nor the bullets that killed
the brutes, nor is one ever named.
Plunder is too weak a judgment, lust too strong,
greed must now suffice,
while as we, his inheritors, drive off in rain to
Europe’s capital city
and the fat black rubber tyres bite and squelch
on the broken stones, I hear
the moan of those ten million souls we in comfort
take our ease and
sit upon, the progress of this great atrocity.
TORTOISE COMPLAINS OF GLOBAL WARMING

It’s going to close down again — the whole planet,
the way your carbon emissions cloud the kraals
and you drain the reedy wetlands and boil up
the whole ocean: ah me, feet burning

on barrenness again. What may I nibble at
beyond drystone walls and your dead tarmac,
when ninety-five per cent of mine are extinct?
We had real trees here, with tongues and horsetails

that is, before the dinosaurs took off and flew. Your timeline:
I’ve had Cretaceous, Triassic and from 300 million
years ago I descend: call me a Permian relic,
I’m a therapsid come through rainshadow, even before Gondwana split.

How did I come down through this so-called Karoo basin,
living on leaf mould under those glossopterides?
As Marvell knew: low-roofed tortoises do dwell
in cases fit of tortoise shell … my impervious shelter.

While the basalt lava sills burst their dolerite dykes
and the hornfels sank into segments to make your flinty arrows:
safe as a house. But I’m depressed at all my losses,
now it’s all ganna. All the flat-headed gorgons have gone.

Gone the slimey-glanded, boneless fish and the rampant ferns.
It’s all numnum and scraggly gwarrie and doef-doef.
Through two nostrils I can smell my mate no more:
there’s sheep fart only and heaves of acid rain.

But through this demolition I’ll tiptoe again —
which is more than you will, being no pachyderm,
withdraw again from the droughty upheaval and endless dust,
wait till the lake returns, and the shower of rapsids at last.

I’ve shrunken geometry, horny plates and a two-tooth,
I’m called chelonian and the military testudos once were famed
in my honour: built to waste not, then never want,
wear your own scaly carapace. Learn survival, keep low
through the next extinction.
WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO OUR CLEOPATRA?

Once Plutarch had her, the long-nosed strumpet embarged on the Nile with drum and trumpet —

the haemorrhage of a continent in fertile flood, a basket of bread from a sump of mud —

the queen in whom empirical Caesar first ploughed his troth, left a rare son behind, but broke his oath;

next faithless Brando to outdo his chief, her ally whom on the right she gave relief,

mooned and maundered unmanned, became besotted, as she manoeuvred for her people polyglotted,

with her left hand meanwhile ruling all Egypt, its independent destiny by them, alas, unshipped at Actium, after which was best to disappear, beating the colonials by myth (says Shakespeare) —

that sultry regent and solemn husband-batterer, this forthright, fierce old Cleopatra! —

as played with plump pomp by dear Liz Taylor, who went for a Burton when he tried to nail her.

The last of the lavish Ptolomies in 30 B.C., now guest-appears on Dallas or Dynasty.

However prejudiced the kitsch, she knows the price is anything conceded to avoid a Suez crisis.

That such a lady was diplomatic did not astound either T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound.

But in the States where their poets retain more spark both Williams and Simpson have rogered Mark.

Our Bosman tried with adolescent fluster to suck her tits, like an asp, and bust her.

I for my sins have lumped her with litchi and mango, drifting, ma-like, in a canoe along the Okavango.

But all poets, henceforth hands off! Instead of being seduced by this formidable pharaoh, she’s merely being traduced.
So praise her now for, better than any man,  
consummating policy like a real African.  

Our male way’s misogynist, cuts her down to size:  
so praise her then, the more plangently she multiplies.
Storymaking across Contexts: How a Fiction Writer and a Team of Computer Scientists Came to Terms

In July 2001, a young Australian writer of fiction was asked to help envision the next generation of intelligent reasoning systems. She was an unlikely candidate. At the age of 27, she was preoccupied with storytelling, testing her acting abilities in semi-professional theatre and toying with plots for a science fiction novel. In search of ideas for future inventions, she attended a conference on ‘Symmetry: Art and Science’, planning to audit the event for a day. She didn’t realise that a well-funded systems architect was scouting the forum, looking for novel approaches to a longstanding problem in computer science.

As the writer listened to the presentations, she saw the problematic relationship between art and science for the first time (Snow 1993). She experienced a ‘postcolonial moment’ in which ‘disparate knowledge traditions abut and abrade … stuck fast, in power relations characteristic of colonizing’ (Verran 730). The scientists displayed artworks and explained how they were measuring them — Kandinsky, Picasso and Escher were reduced to lines over grids. Used to trusting their truths, these researchers had not questioned whether their formalisms could report meaningfully on a different field. When it was time for the artistic delegates to speak, they did not engage with such metrics. Instead they spoke in poetic manifestos, many of which just affirmed the ‘non-narrativisable’ nature of their practice (Spivak 1990 144).

The young fiction writer’s understanding of stories was different from either of these. Without a paper submission, she asked the organisers whether she could present. Before the delegates returned to their home countries, she explained how her story-making tools depended on a structure beneath the semantics (Cardier 2004).

As a result, the writer was invited to participate in a collaborative science project. She was chosen because her ideas were different from conventional approaches, but this also increased the challenge of saying anything comprehensible to her team. Colonial dynamics can exist between fields of research, and it is common for both the creative arts and science to treat each other as exotic spaces of fieldwork (Law 98), with one of the many consequences being displaced or repressed knowledges (Law 148). Given the divergent notions of text, proof and truth within the new interdisciplinary group, on whose terms should they speak? If the computer scientists adopted the writer’s terms, their work could not be implemented in a machine. If the writer tried to express her ideas in relation to
existing theories of information science, the work would not capture the extra insights needed. Before the group could collaborate, their disciplinary cultures had to negotiate shared territory (Devlin 5). Valuable ideas were hovering between the specialists in a space they could not see.

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The aim of the project, named *Sheherazade*, was to design foundations for a new sort of knowledge base. A knowledge base is similar to a database except it stores concepts so they can be assembled and enriched by reasoning systems. For the non-expert, imagine that instead of a computer providing a user with canned responses, it gathers clouds of media fragments into tailored answers. A database just returns what was put in; a knowledge system extends what has been stored.

The usefulness of a system’s output is limited by its knowledge terms. Think of the terms as the knowledge-about-the-knowledge inside the computer. Knowledge-about-knowledge is similar to John Law’s notions about creating models of reality, in which ‘it becomes important to think through modes of crafting that let us apprehend’ (Law 152). In a knowledge base, this manifests as a higher level of operation within the–system, a knowledge base in itself. The abilities of current systems suggest that if strong computerised reasoning is desired, this higher-level system has to be large and complex, perhaps as large as the knowledge base itself. The *Sheherazade* project addressed this fundamental level, wanting to figure out a better way to model the apprehensions on which the system’s terms would rest.

The cost of neglecting this knowledge-about-knowledge can be illustrated by describing what is still not possible for knowledge bases. Cancer research is an interdisciplinary affair, performed by teams. Each participant is an expert in a unique area, so specialised that the others generally do not understand the details in depth. These collaborative researchers will puzzle, query, and explain to each other, and perhaps not make much progress. Mathematics helps, but only a bit. A key problem is context: each specialist uses the context of a particular discipline to situate the meaning of her or his statements, but colleagues do not have access to the same reference points. A new sort of knowledge base could solve a significant portion of the communication problem, so that every piece of information under discussion could be transferred into multiple terms. New connections and insights could emerge. State of the art knowledge representation schemes, like those used by the US intelligence community and the semantic web, currently cannot automatically and accurately transfer information between numerous contexts in this way.

Humans intuitively understand context (Ikris 6). Without consciously thinking about it, people understand that when the context changes, the meaning of statements within it also alters. Here is a simple example — a story told by a two-year-old child:

The baby cried. The mommy picked it up. (Devlin 81)
This tale can be understood to represent comforted distress. Consider how the perceived context changes if I add another sentence:

The baby cried. The mommy picked it up. The mommy hit the baby again.

Now the situation could be one of child abuse. In the world as it is experienced there is always another piece of information coming, and ‘there is never closure’ (Law 132). Humans are able to re-evaluate their assumptions about a situation if new, conflicting information is received. The Sheherazade project wanted to discover what sorts of representations would enable a knowledge system to automatically re-contextualize knowledge, in such a way that new causal connections between elements might emerge.

We started with the idea that computer systems could manage contexts in the same manner as stories. Even though a story refers to known imagery and ideas, it can synthesise these from many different contexts, and in the process alter them to produce new, unexpected arrangements. The Sheherazade team’s resident writer began research into a particular aspect of stories: how humans can maintain an evolving understanding of information, even when its contexts are changing or disjunctive.

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Actually that is not true. At first the writer did not even understand the problem. Why not just program the computer to add new information to the old? she asked. The scientists explained that computers could not cope with information that was ‘unexpected’. This is because there is a map inside all systems, known as an ontology.

In computer science, an ontology is a fixed constellation of concepts that defines the terms used by the system, like a dictionary. The term ontology originally came from philosophy — there it refers to the nameable aspects of reality (Hofweber online). In this respect, the computer science notion of ontology is similar to that of Law, who sees an ontology as a way in which ‘particular realities are brought into being’ (132). The computer science definition differs, however, in the specific terms of that representation:

I define ontology as a set of knowledge terms, including the vocabulary, the semantic interconnections, and some simple rules of inference and logic for some particular topic. (Hendler 30)

Figure 1 is an example of part of a representation for a low-level ontology developed for a website that helps travellers find preferred airline seats. The method of ontological representation informs the reality modelled, both capturing and producing a situation of conceptual objects and relational links.

Ontological terms are necessarily finite in computer science, so concepts do get left out. This causes problems for systems and the users who depend on them. If an unexpected question is asked of an airline database, such as ‘send Munich to Frankfurt’ (where ‘Munich’ is the soccer team), and the system does
not understand, strange transits could result. The problem gets worse when two different ontologies try to interact. A simple example: consider the way an airfare database depends on a relationship between departures, destinations, and prices (Kanellopoulos 199). If it tries to interact with a system that deals in plane crashes, the concepts surrounding ‘plane seat’ will likely be different. If one system understands but the other does not — or worse, thinks it does but does not, they will likely malfunction. Because each represents a different abstraction of reality, the relations between concepts differ, even if some of the actual terms are the same.

Current ontologies cannot change much once they are implemented in a computer, unlike a human who can learn new ways of thinking. As a consequence, a knowledge system can only process information if it slides easily into the available abstractions. Anything else is ‘unexpected’ and so cannot be handled. Ontological conflict, if managed poorly, diminishes the concepts available for enactment:

… if the lines of making sense of something are laid down in a certain way, then you are able to do only those things with that something which are possible within and by the arrangement of those lines. (Spivak 1993 34)

Inadequate context modelling has two implications for the knowledge base that tries to analyse cancer. First, it cannot synthesise data from many different sources. Second, even if it could, neither it, nor any application, could propose new, unexpected therapies. We wanted to make a system that could redraw the lines over and over. How could we endow our knowledge-about-knowledge with an understanding of contextual re-interpretation?

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**Non-Ideal Solutions**

Researchers have been trying to formalise contextual re-interpretation since computers were invented, and have still only partly succeeded. One approach is to institute a common ontological standard and establish it as universal, applying both
to context and facts. Apart from whether this is do-able, this assumes one context. In this homogenisation, every system uses the same, agreed-upon terminology and logic. For example, the Semantic Web has a common ontology, based on OWL, the Web Ontology Language. Supporters suppose it could eventually embrace all the expertise covered on the web, making more accurate searching possible. The problem is that specialised information is so peculiar to a domain that the required ontology explodes in size. As a consequence of the expected failure of this approach, senior researchers in the field have started work on ever higher and higher meta-ontologies, with the case against the OWL approach even being made by one of its originators (Ikris 6), (Cheikes 3).

Another solution has been to develop a bridging mechanism, such as an intermediary lexicon, that each context’s ontology can use to map and share concepts (Park and Ram 598). This assumes that beneath the differing abstractions is a standard reality — a single abstraction against which any ontology could be matched and ‘translated’. The first problem is that this designates one particular abstraction as the common standard; another is the assumption that this abstraction can be a suitable bridge between any two contexts. Consider what sort of middle space lies between the notions physical trauma and psychological trauma, compared with the connection between physical trauma and news photography. For an accurate transference of ideas, the middle ground depends on the specifics of each case.

Other research, notably the 25-year Cyc project (Kanellopoulos 196), assumes that a ‘federated’ approach is required — ‘federation’ being a combination of multiple integrated ontologies. These ontological citizens are united using a single, coherent framework, a meta-ontology. Unfortunately, both the Cyc and Semantic Web approaches seem to be running into unbreachable barriers (Copeland 1). The problem is simply that the rules behind the ontology that were designed to simplify things, become too complex to code.

The assumption underlying all approaches is that one framework can produce ontologies that can adequately capture anything in the universe, as well as being usable by every feasible application. Yet, experience with working computer systems indicates the opposite — that ontologies are the most supportive when they are purpose built for a single domain. The limit is not the knowledge per se, but the idea that there is a single knowledge-about-knowledge.

The Sheherazade group started by assuming that a context was more than a subsection of a single ontology. Instead it is an enactment — a particular view, a moment and mode of representation. Shifting between contexts not only means a shift in what constitutes fact, but the way in which such assemblages cohere — the terms of their terms. The domain of storytelling could offer this structure, if only our research group knew how to characterise it. A story can contain numerous perspectives, and even tales that share similar plot elements can convey different meanings. An old story can be constantly remade, ‘clotting’ in new ways (Law
138). To this behaviour, we added another consideration. We assumed that part of our understanding of context depends on the fact that we know it can change (Goranson and Cardier 2007). Important, previously unrepresented mechanisms existed in the transition from one view to another. We needed to understand the behind-the-scenes construction of stories, the activity of the storyteller.

It soon became clear that our group was dealing with two instances of the same dynamic. The first would become the basis of a new approach to ontological representation. The second was the interaction between members of our team. As Law says, reflexivity about the contexts from which ideas are built is critical, because ‘methods enact divisions’ (Law 153). As our collaboration progressed, we drew increasingly from the ways in which we were coping with our own disjunctive contexts. We could not rely on a generic middle ground, because given the range of disciplines, there was none. We could not invent a general standard reality and ask all members to conform to it, because everyone’s context-specific knowledge would be lost. The strengths of the system would depend on our ability to reason about how we were trying to reason, and transform our knowledge into a new conceptual space.

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It started with the systems architect patiently teaching the writer about computer systems. He made it clear that the writer had been brought into the project because current scientific approaches could not do what he needed, thus it would be a disaster if, in the process of learning computer science, her writerly intuitions were trampled. To avoid this, the writer was taught scientific modelling techniques as an extension of the research for her science fiction novel. Years passed before it seemed as though she was discussing anything remotely connected to computers.

The second risk concerned analogy. Any writerly principle could be arbitrarily correlated to any aspect of systems architecture, because there was no ideal, objectively correct relationship between creative writing and knowledge bases. But it was still tempting to use the connections made by previous theorists, in relation to unrelated projects. It emerged that the only reliable parameter that could inform the linking of our contexts was the focus of application — in this case, a context-sensitive reasoning system. Our specific, intended product would gradually define the relations between our members’ expertise.

After a year, the writer realised that the area of computer science closest to her concerns was knowledge representation. As she moved into this domain, her soft intuitions were besieged from a new direction. When she mingled with computer scientists, she encountered veterans, who were curious and asked her to get back to them when she could demonstrate ideas in math, and she met rising stars, who pointed out that her ideas did not belong. Principles that she had assumed to be natural prickled with tension in their new surroundings. Sometimes she wondered wonder whether they existed at all.
By 2007, the writer understood enough about her relationship to computer science to work with the rest of the team. She was flown to Boston, to spend a month with graduates from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who were hired to build the system. Even though she had been auditing programming and logic classes for a year, she was afraid she had not yet learned enough to communicate with this savvy crew. She did not know that her deficiencies of language would not negatively affect the workshop. The whole team was about to learn the importance of drawing on multiple contexts, in order to build a shared mode of storytelling.

**Cohering Fragments**

A storyteller begins by drawing together elements from a range of contexts. These fragments exist at both the syntactic level of words and phrases, as well as the conceptual level of images, themes and other already-established stories. As the tale unfolds, a reader gradually learns how the incongruent pieces are likely to be associated, how their relations are changing, and the terms on which change can occur. Curiously, such formation is possible even when those associations are unexpected, or their inferred contextual meanings conflict. Far from crashing into incoherence, as would occur in a knowledge base that encountered the same sort of discontinuity, the parts of the story that do not yet cohere can actually drive a reader to consume more text, in the hope of discovering how the rogue pieces fit. Once made, the story can be re-imagined, re-told or dismembered, so its parts can be digested by new stories.

We needed to develop a context in which our research could occur. Here, core principles from each of our fields would have meaning, although perhaps not their usual meanings. The writer taught the group how stories were driven by ambiguity and missing information; the computer scientists explained that mathematics and logic work because they do not. We wondered how we would ever get along. The writer needed to reach into another context, in order to flesh the shape of her ideas. She needed an example.

She chose the fairytale *Red Riding Hood*. Theorist Sandra Beckett believes this is ‘the most commented on fairy tale of all time’ (xv) and narratologists have tracked the elements that most frequently re-occur (Orenstein 231). As a result of the commonalities of plot and character in multiple versions of this tale, narrative analysts sometimes share the attitude of Catherine Orenstein, who asserts that ‘like a change of wardrobe, motifs come and go without altering the body of tales’ (231). This is certainly one way to look at it. But in terms of our problem, this narratological stance was similar to the assumption of the fixed ontology used in computer science. It posited that it was possible for features to retain standard meanings, no matter what context they appeared within.

The writer presented two versions of *Red Riding Hood* to the group. She wanted to show how the process of storytelling could alter the meaning of particular
features in different versions of the story — girl, wolf, grandmother, being eaten — even though the characters and plot remained the same. She believed each story enacted a unique ontology, simply by being told.

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**Cause of Death**

In order to establish a fixed point of reference, the writer focused on the same concept in each *Red Riding Hood* example — death. This made it easier to show that an identical concept in two stories could be used to convey different meanings. She was particularly keen to show how the writers had constructed specific conceptual spaces in order to produce those meanings. In each story, the reasons for a character’s death were identified through the way its ontological reality had been revealed.

The first story was Walter De la Mare’s *Little Red Riding Hood*, which was written in 1927, towards the end of the economic boom known as the Roaring Twenties (Osgerby 80). The defining characteristic of his child heroine is her vanity. Vanity is established as significant from the outset, being responsible for the most familiar aspect of the protagonist’s identity, her hood:

> In the old days when countrywomen wore riding-hoods to keep themselves warm and dry as they rode to market, there was a child living in a little village near the Low Forest who was very vain. She was so vain she couldn’t even pass a puddle without peeping down into it at her apple cheeks and yellow hair… Nothing pleased her better than fine clothes, and when she was seven, having seen a strange woman riding by on horseback, she suddenly had a violent longing for such a riding-hood as hers, and that was of scarlet cloth with strings. (de la Mare 208)

This is the first information encountered by the reader. As such, vanity becomes a term of meaning, informing the reader’s first view of the heroine’s activities, attitudes and even the object associated with her name.

As the story progresses, the reader learns that vanity is not the girl’s only vice. As she wanders through the forest, her mother’s sober warnings compete with ‘greedy thoughts of what she would have to eat at the end of her journey’ (de la Mare 209). Vanity is a foundational concept, but with this inclusion of gluttony, the terms are expanded to include both — vice. Forgetting her mother’s warning ‘not to lag or loiter in the Low Forest’ (de la Mare 209), Red Riding Hood falls lazily asleep, thus adding sloth to her list of vices. Having confirmed that vice is a concept with agency, the story then progresses through consequences on these terms. When Red Riding Hood succumbs to sloth, her sleep creates a state of vulnerability:

> In her sleep she dreamed a voice was calling to her from very far away. It was a queer husky voice, and seemed to be coming from some dark dismal place where the speaker was hiding. At the sound of his voice calling and calling her ever more faintly, she suddenly awoke, and there, no more than a few yards away, stood a Wolf, and he was steadily looking at her. (de la Mare 211)
At this stage of the story, the wolf begins to represent a form of punishment, a consequence of virtue’s lapse. In other versions of this fairytale, the wolf signifies other concepts — for example, in a medieval account of the myth, the wolf is believed to represent ‘the violence of the infernal wolf, the Devil’ (Ziolkowski 117). In another version by the Brothers Grimm, he is a ‘seducer’ (Bettelheim 172). In de la Mare’s story, the wolf demonstrates that dealing in vice leaves one open to the vice of others.

Just as the girl is subject to these terms, however, so is the wolf. The terms of meaning are reinforced when the pattern repeats. The wolf indulges in gluttony, eating both grandma and the girl. As with Red Riding Hood, the wolf’s own vice leaves him vulnerable to death:

Nevertheless, that cunning greedy crafty old Wolf had not been cunning enough. He had bolted down such a meal that the old glutton at once went off to sleep on the bed … And he had forgotten to shut the door. (de la Mare 214)

Indulgence of vice again leads to a vulnerable sleep, and the hunter enters to slay the wolf. The role of the wolf now shifts from punisher to punished:

‘Oho! You old ruffian,’ [the woodman] cried softly, ‘is it you?’

At this far-away strange sound in his dreams, the Wolf opened — though by scarcely more than a hair’s breadth — his dull, drowsy eyes. But at a glimpse of the woodman, his wits came instantly back to him, and he knew his danger. Too late!

(de la Mare 214)

By the end of the story, its terms are settled. The ontological parameters are that vice leads to excess, which can cause an unknowing sleep, which in turn results in death. It is interesting to note that even though grandma is not portrayed as having vice, and is eaten, the terms of the story remain consistent. As the reader learns of her demise, they are simultaneously assured that grannie’s ‘death’ is only temporary, with the parenthetical ‘for a while’: ‘[t]he door came open and in he went; and that (for a while) was the end of grannie’ (de la Mare 191).

Sure enough, Grannie is later rescued, along with Red Riding Hood, who has now learned not to indulge in vice (de la Mare 193). Meaning is built by the ways concepts are associated with each other. These meanings are primed by the causal consequences established by the tales’ unfolding, and the terms on which these events occur.

Compare the above ontological parameters to those of Red Riding Hood as a Dictator Would Tell It, by H.I. Philips. This version was written in 1940, in the United States, before the country entered the Second World War. In the title alone, two commonly known contexts are juxtaposed — generic images of Red Riding Hood and general notions of dictators. Such a deliberate initial assembly alerts the reader that juxtaposition might be a term of meaning. The first few sentences of the story build imagery to support this, with the wolf’s sensitive qualities being so emphasised as to seem laboured:
Once upon a time there was a poor, weak wolf. It was gentle and kindly and had a heart of gold. It loved everybody and felt very sad when it looked around and saw so much deceit, selfishness, strife, treachery and cunning on the loose. All it wanted was to be let alone. (Phillips 230)

Given the title’s suggestion that this tale is an interpretation, the characterisation of the wolf as kind can be read from two different perspectives. If the narrator is telling the truth, the meaning of this story will be an inversion of the traditional Red Riding Hood, in which the wolf is usually devious. If the narrator is not telling the truth, the nature of the situation can only be deduced if the meanings of his words are re-interpreted. This extends the term of meaning, ‘juxtaposed contexts’, to the possibility that deception about one context is being enacted by another.

As the tale progresses, the notion of juxtaposed contexts is reinforced. Another description follows in which other role reversals are apparent, this time in relation to Red Riding Hood and Grandma:

Now in a cottage on the edge of the forest there lived a little girl who went by the name of Red Riding Hood… The kid was not to be trusted an inch. She was a rattlesnake, a viper and an imperialist… Grandma was a louse too! (Phillips 230)

Tension is created by continuing discrepancies between stated and inferred versions of the tale. Other clues, such as inconsistencies of narrative voice and the fact that the narrator’s scope is limited, reinforce these terms of meaning.

The first death — that of grandma — is used to define the conflicting relationship between inferred and explicit contexts. The reader learns that she dies, and through this recounting, it becomes clear that narrator is concealing information:

When the wolf walked he liked to think things over… This took a lot of concentrating and when he was concentrating the wolf sometimes got lost in thought and didn’t know what he was doing. Suddenly, and before he knew what was what, he found himself not only in Grandma’s cottage but in her bedroom! He had kicked down the door. Grandma was pretty startled and demanded, ‘What is the meaning of this?’ ‘I am repulsing an invasion,’ the wolf explained, scorning all subterfuge. Grandma was an aggressor, that was clear. So the Wolf ate her up. (Phillips 231)

With the last six lines, it is revealed that the causal association in the narrator’s explicit account is flawed. If the grandmother is ‘an aggressor’ it seems inconsistent that she also be represented as ‘startled’. This instils doubt in the narrator’s trustworthiness, and reinforces the possibility that he is lying. Even though the narrator explicitly associates himself with gentle qualities, the combined inferences indicate aggressive behaviour. As the story progresses to its resolution, it confirms that all explicit statements must be transformed onto these terms of dictator manipulation, in order to determine their meaning. Its series of deaths establishes the ontological parameters to be: viewing the world in multiple
ways leads to comparing versions which provides an informed perspective and makes justice possible.

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Through this analysis, the writer first articulated the way a story builds a specific ontological scope. The interaction between informational elements, as they progressively appear, build terms on which naming and assembly are conveyed. The next day, two of the computer scientists arrived with a way to represent this. It was the first moment one of the writer’s ideas had found footing in their world.

The computer scientists had drawn concepts as nodes and links. The writer could do this too. She reinterpreted more of the 1927 version of the story using this method, and soon discovered it would be fairly easy to depict what she knew this way. The group’s focus then shifted to the 1940 version, because it was harder.

Most of the information critical to the meaning of Red Riding Hood as a Dictator Would Tell It is not explicit. Instead the meanings depend on external contextual relations — a knowledge of dictators, of conventional tellings of Red Riding Hood, and even the fact that the story was written at a particular time. It also leverages multiple, changing meanings. When the writer tried to map this version, the next problem arose.

Too much was changing. She could not keep track of all the concepts. In order to record every semantic negotiation, she needed to leave enough drawing space on the page to include it. But there was so much renegotiation in this story that a new slice of paper was required for every sentence. With each step forward through the text, there was another fragment of information that did not fit, and she had to start drawing again. It was as though she had to know every structure that might surface in the story before commencing the representation. The urge to create a fixed ontology was creeping back into our modelling, along with the attendant problems.

The writer tried multiple sheets of paper, then experimented with sticking clear plastic film over existing diagrams. She considered constructing a three-dimensional installation artwork to capture this Red Riding Hood’s ontology. Eventually the writer realised that her problem was, in fact, part of the model. It
was not sufficient to make a system that anticipated every kind of structure that would appear — this was already understood. Our knowledge base would need ways to solve the problem the writer was drowning in. The ontology had to be able to move. There was another ontology behind it, related to assembly.

In fact, the writer didn’t realise this until it coincided with a practical consideration. She was tired of redrawing the same picture on dozens of sheets of paper. She switched to the presentation program *Keynote* to save time. As *Keynote* provides progressive slides, it has a capacity for animation. Moving pictures offered an extra dimension of organisation — time. Because time-based unfolding was one of the issues at stake, this solved the initial problem the writer had been fighting.

Figures 3 and 4 show two consecutive slides from our approach to ontological representation. The ‘bands’ along the top are the inferred, reference contexts.
The band at the bottom is the space in which this particular story’s ontology is assembled as the tale progresses. When text streams in, coloured boxes group concepts that are associated. Every time another part of the text appears, ‘funnels’ show how aspects of previous concepts are transferred. Finally, shapes that are coloured purple show when a conflict between concepts requires ontological rearrangement, in order to restore enough coherence to continue. All the links change over time, which can be represented as the slides progress.

We were ready to start collaborating on a system. The writer’s keynote drawings provided a shared way to discuss it, one accessible to all of us. After four years of informal discussion and three years of funded collaboration, we were now at the point at which most system design begins, in which the programming team could design code to support it. But we were also far ahead of the beginning, having had an embodied experience of the process we wanted to model. The effort of making
a ‘two-way conversation’ (Kapoor 642) had become such a significant part of our work that it provided the foundation for the product’s eventual shape.

* * * * *

What methodology can be used, in order to make a collaborative story, when different cultures are participating? Spivak suggests that an exchange of knowledges should start with an assumption of re-learning, and the attitude:

I need to learn from you what you practice, I need it even if you didn’t want to share a bit of my pie; but there is something I want to give you, which will make our shared practice flourish. (Spivak 2000 16)

Instead of relying on established theories about the relationship between our domains, we depended on a strong engagement with each other, as well as a connection to a specific target context — the intended product. We wanted to design a knowledge base ontology that could cope with contextual transference and change. The principles that survived from each field were those that resonated in multiple spaces, including the reflective space, in which we understood the construction of our method in relation to the desired outcome. Ideas developed currency in relation to the confused looks on each other’s faces, and also in conjunction with the target product, only surviving if they were able to find new footing in both areas. We changed our words as we spoke, so that our languages grew towards each other, learning fresh affordances from the interaction. Through these incremental adjustments, new representations and contexts emerged from the desire to connect, and eventually cohered in unexpected ways. We discovered that building terms, and the stories that rest on them, is a dynamic process.

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The Informational Economy and Its Body in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) is a novel about the informational economy. The novel proposes a new kind of subjectivity that is, in Katherine Hayles’s terms, a cross between the ‘materiality of informatics and the immateriality of information’ (193). It could also be read as a cyberpunk novel with its themes of information, networks, codes, bodies and posthuman identities.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* opens in early twenty-first century New York. Antar, a reclusive Egyptian, works for the International Water Council (which seeks to privatise the world’s water resources), and is assigned to a supercomputer Ava, whose task is to inventory lost objects while seeking potentially useful information. Antar discovers the story of Murugan when his ID Card turns up on Ava. Murugan, a former colleague of Antar’s (they were together at an organisation called LifeWatch, which was absorbed into the International Water Council), had disappeared in Calcutta in 1995. Antar begins to put together information about Murugan and discovers that he had quit his LifeWatch job in pursuit of his obsession: to trace the history of the quest for the malarial parasite in British India. Gosh merges the narrative timelines of nineteenth century India and Ronald Ross’s quest for the malarial pathogen, with Murugan’s 1990s Calcutta and Antar in the twenty-first century.¹

Antar is the sole survivor of a very mysterious malarial outbreak in his remote village in Egypt. Murugan had been certain that British investigations into malaria in colonial India had been closely monitored and indeed interfered with by an Indian cabal. Ross’s predecessors like Farley, the American malaria scientist-turned-missionary doctor who comes to India in the 1890s, and the British army doctor and malaria investigator D.D. Cunningham, had been manipulated. Murugan hypothesises that Ross too was led to his discovery of the malarial parasite – the anopheles mosquito – by this cabal which is headed by a mysterious woman, Mangala, a cleaning woman in Cunningham’s clinic. Mangala, who is syphilitic, chances upon a medical discovery: the malarial parasite might be used to regenerate the brain tissue decaying in the last stages of syphilis. In the course of this discovery, Mangala and her group stumble across a strange ‘chromosome’, the ‘Calcutta chromosome’. This is the biological equivalent of the human soul, and is a chromosome ‘only by analogy’ (Ghosh 247). It resides in brain tissue and...
survives by mutation. Mangala’s group discovers that the malarial parasite can splice DNA, and therefore, they speculate, could be used to transmit the Calcutta chromosome so that the decaying brain may be regenerated in a syphilitic patient. The cabal believes that immortality could be ensured when the Calcutta chromosome is transmitted into another person. Thus, while Ross searches for the nosology, etiology and vectors of malaria, the ‘natives’ have an entirely different project: the transmigration of personalities and souls into new bodies through the transmission of the malarial parasite. This group also believes that in some forms of knowledge, the minute one ‘knows’ anything, it changes its form. The group therefore believes that once Ross discovers the malarial parasite, it will change. In order to monitor Ross’s experiments, the group constantly supplies him with assistants and aides. Antar discovers that members of this group — mainly Mangala and Lakhan — have appeared in Calcutta’s twentieth century history in many forms: Urmila (a journalist to whom Murugan reveals the story of Mangala and the cabal), Sonali Das (a journalist and movie star), the self-made man, Romen Halder, and the cook that Tara (also, perhaps, an incarnation of Mangala) hires.

The Calcutta Chromosome juxtaposes the so-called rationality and scientific rigour of the colonial Ronald Ross with the quasi-religious experiments of Mangala and her cabal. It suggests that Ross’s experiments were actually Mangala’s, and Ross had been roped in only because the cabal needed to take a next step in the process of uncovering how genes work. The novel also suggests that the colonial quest for the malarial pathogen was a minor moment in the larger ‘native’ project: reincarnation and immortality.

Criticism of The Calcutta Chromosome has been dominated by an interpretation of the text as a postcolonial science fiction tale that positions folklore and ‘native’ knowledge in antagonistic relationship with colonial science where the discoveries of Western scientists are rewarded and ‘native’ efforts dismissed as unscientific. In such interpretations, The Calcutta Chromosome is seen as deromanticising the efforts of the colonial doctor-hero Ross. By showing how Ross ‘never realizes he is being manipulated’, Tuomas Huttenen argues, Amitav Ghosh ‘assigns agency and power to the subaltern groups’ (36). Colonial laboratories such as those in India peopled by Ross, Farley and Cunningham, are places where the logics of colonial science are overturned by ‘native’ cultures of healing like Mangala’s. The novel thus asks: who takes the responsibility for the discoveries in the laboratories? In Nelson’s reading, Ghosh problematises the very idea of a white man’s discovery — a discovery that was made possible by a network of ‘native’ actors (254). Others treat it as a novel exploring the possibilities of posthuman futures where increasing human-computer interfaces and forms of embodiment will redefine the very ontology of human beings (Shinn). Calcutta is the colonial city, Ghosh suggests, where more than individual transmigrations of souls and personalities occur: it is the site where massive crowds gather, and a collective transmigration occurs (Thompson), or the very idea of dwelling is inverted (see Romanik).
On the contrary I want to argue that Ghosh’s novel is about information. Starting with the random piece of information — Murugan’s identity card on Antar’s screen — through the messages, DNA (itself an informational code), puzzles and stories to misrepresentations and decodings, Ghosh traces the multiple, complicated and messy traversals of information. In this essay then, I attempt to unravel the informational economy and its structures of information-gathering, codification and dissemination and the ‘body of information’ produced as a consequence in Ghosh’s novel. It argues in the first section that the materiality of information — bodies, laboratories, chromosomes — intersects with the ‘immateriality’ of information. The informational economy in the novel is the embeddedness of forms and modes of colonial information-gathering in ‘native’, anti-colonial and counter-science contexts, which therefore render the information gathered authentic, suspect or altered because the context determines the validity of the information. In the second section I examine the ‘body’ of information, where the signs, inscriptions and codes of the informational economy are incorporated and merged with(in) a body, showing how the information economy of colonial medical research and anti-colonial science both take recourse to embodiment to instantiate information. In the last section I trace the emergence of cyborgs, where informational economies collide and result in new species-blurring bodies that are posthuman.

**THE INFORMATIONAL ECONOMY**

In our contemporary world the materiality of informatics is the actual infrastructure that enables the creation, packaging and dissemination of information. It refers to the hardware, the concrete buildings and other physical topographies wherein information is located, generated and codified into suitable bytes to be retrieved by computers. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* a lot more than hardware and concrete make up the materiality of informatics. What I am identifying as the ‘informational economy’ is the set of structures — material, hardware, human bodies — that enable the collection, codification and transmission of data. This informational economy is colonial and anti-colonial, ancient, with its own forms of codifying and transmitting information, and very contemporary. It consists of the Valentinian cult of silence (named after the 2nd century AD Alexandrian gnostic philosopher Valentinus and founded, according to the novel, on two key aspects, the Abyss and the Silence, where one is male and the other female, one is mind and the other truth) in an age of colonial science, the situated knowledges of ‘native’ cultures, and the high-speed information transmission of the globalised cybercultural era. In this section I examine the informational economy — the material structures, hardware and ‘bodies’ in *The Calcutta Chromosome* where information and bodies conflate and rewire each other.

The opening lines of *The Calcutta Chromosome* refer to the material dimension of information:
If the system hadn’t stalled Antar would never have guessed that the scrap of paper on his screen was the remnant of an ID card. It looked as though it had been rescued from a fire: its plastic laminate had warped and melted along the edges. The lettering was mostly illegible and the photograph had vanished under a smudge of soot. But a four-inch metal chain had somehow stayed attached… It was the chain that tripped the system, not the card. (3)

Ghosh is discussing information here — an individual’s identity card. But the narrative forces the reader to focus on the material manifestations of this information: a card, its physical features, a screen on which it appears, a system that carries the image, a photograph. Finally, it is not the information that stalls the system but the metal chain. It is the very material basis of information that generates a request for more information and stalls the information process.

The materiality of informatics in The Calcutta Chromosome includes the computers and their hardware, the malarial mosquito, the parasite’s body, Murugan’s and other malarial patients’ bodies, Antar, Laakhan and Ross. (At one point it even involves other bodies: such as the pigeon, whose blood is delivered as a specimen for Farley to investigate the pathogen/vector, 151). The devious plot of the novel complicates this too. Information is collected by Ross about the medium of transmission of the parasite, which consequently results in changes in the parasite. Mangala discovers the secret of malarial information-transmission, only to realise that she needs another body (Ross) to decode it.

The third paragraph of the novel informs us of the material objects in the inventorying process that often stall the computer: a glass paperweight and a bottle of correcting fluid (3–4). The point is one of irony: that older forms of technology, such as type-writing and identity cards stall a sophisticated computer like Ava. Ava, which can render any phrase in ‘the world’s languages in declining of order of population’ (7), is bogged down by details, by an excess of information being processed about material objects. Ghosh writes: ‘Anything she [Ava] didn’t recognize she’d take apart on screen, producing microscopic structural analyses … producing ever greater refinements of detail’ (4). I believe Ghosh sets in motion here the two key components of his tale: the material contexts and conditions of information and the ‘immaterial’ (because it is electronic) nature (and quality) of information itself. A material object generates interminable data flows about perhaps trivial particulars. The information gathered by Ava is akin to what the young Antar had said about the European archaeologists in his village in Egypt: they count dust particles, they are ‘dust counters’ (6) — a term he also uses to describe Ava (7). Ghosh shifts focus from the materiality of information flows to the unending flow of irrelevant, and therefore ‘immaterial’, information.

Later Ghosh juxtaposes two materialities of information. The narrative shifts to 1995 and relates the story of Murugan, the intrepid explorer on the track of Ronald Ross and his bumbling experiments with the malarial parasite. Murugan is in Calcutta when he comes across the Ross memorial inscribed with a few lines of verse (40–41). He laughs at the pompous inscription because he believes
that Ross was deliberately led by Mangala’s cult to the discovery of the malarial parasite, and he is astonished and amused by his self-confidence and sense of achievement. The memorial (consisting of a medallion and Ross’s ‘bearded head in profile’) is part of the materiality of information. Both medallion and memorial are material **commemorations** which celebrate the scientist and his discovery, and impose upon the world the myth of his genius. This monumentalisation of a ‘discovery’ which may not even have been Ross’s discovery is, according to *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the irony and contradiction at the heart of Western science. While the achievements of Western scientists working in Indian laboratories is commemorated, the exploits of ‘native’ folk medicine and science, are rendered silent: there is no **information** about Mangala and her cabal in the novel’s documented history of discovery. Mangala, as Suchitra Mathur notes first appears in the novel as a figurine that Murugan picks up. She is situated at the periphery of the colonial laboratories, (133–34.) Inspired by the pomposity of this memorialisation of Ross, Murugan takes it on himself to reveal the real story behind the quest for the malarial parasite. Immediately after his discovery of the memorial, he also discovers the figurine that will eventually be revealed to the reader to be ‘Mangala-bibi’ (42–43). Two oppositional and material — because they are in the form of statues/memorials/figurines — narratives appear here: the first Ross memorial (to which flawed information is attached) and its counterpart, the Mangala-bibi figurine that memorialises ‘counter-science’ and the ‘native scientists’ represented by Mangala.

It is important to note that even before the details of the Ross plot are revealed in the narrative Ghosh provides material clues to historical events surrounding Ross’s work. The monuments, memorials, photographs and documents described above are material carriers of information, and it is the nature of this material that becomes the key point of *The Calcutta Chromosome* because the material-medium changes the information as it passes it through.

At this point it will be useful to situate the theme of the materiality of informatics within contemporary biomedical technoscience and newer concepts like ‘biomedia’. *The Calcutta Chromosome* has as its central theme, bio-informatics: the interface of biology, information (where even biology is essentially converted into information that computers process, but also the DNA which is the information code for biological traits) and modes of transmission. Ghosh is writing in the immediate aftermath of massive bio-informatics projects like the Human Genome Project and the Visible Human Project. The first seeks to discover the genetic basis of all human characteristics, and to decode the genetic databases of all known human groups, ethnic and tribal identities (www.ornl.gov/sci/technology/human_Genome/). The second prepares a digital anatomy, where the human body is rendered into datasets that one could explore and navigate through a computer interface (www.nlm.nih.edu).³ The body is transcoded⁴ into the language of genetics and computers, and the result is digital humans,
bio-informatics, computational biology and, not the least, genomic art. Eugene Thacker defines biomaedia as the ‘technical recontextualization of biological components and processes’ (13). The body is a medium where the media (computers, genetic codes, databases) themselves are indistinguishable from the biological body. The transcoded body here needs to be understood in two ways — as a biological, molecular, species body and as a body that is compiled through modes of visualisation, modelling and datasets.

As the novel proceeds information is shown to be not only mediated by the body: information is the body. Murugan exists in the form of fragmented information — primarily as a set of data in the form of his identity card and scattered references in cyberspace arriving via Ava on Antar’s screen but also as Antar’s vague memories of meeting him many years ago. The mysterious ‘Calcutta chromosome’ that Mangala and her cabal are trying to unravel is a special one: it keeps altering its coat-proteins. Murugan points out to Antar that the key point is not so much the chromosome as its methods of ‘transmission’. The chromosome is particular to every individual, it is not inherited from the immediate gene pool nor is it transmitted into it. It is not transmitted by sexual reproduction, yet it requires a body, preferably a human one, for onward transmission (246–49). Bio-information clearly requires a body for transmission, the only problem being that the information is modified in every body, even as the body is itself rewired — this is the ‘secret’ of the Calcutta chromosome. The malarial parasite carries its genetic code into the host, alters itself, and cures syphilis but rewires the brain — the epicentre of information-processing — of the host. This rewiring is what enables the transmission of a personality into another body (a form of interpersonal migration of souls), and is the focus of Mangala’s efforts. The parasite is the vehicle upon which personalities can cross over into other brains/minds in the form of information codes.

This is the principal variation on the bioinformatics theme: in bioinformatics data must be capable of being transmitted between molecules and bits, but the genetic data must remain self-identical in a variety of research-based contexts (Thacker 45). The Calcutta Chromosome’s postcolonial politics is about the research contexts in which the data alters with the context. Its key theme is the creation, packaging, transmission and reception/interpretation of data. The ‘creation’ of data is of course linked to the contexts (including bodies) in which it is produced. The source of information, its mechanisms of transmission and the contexts of its interpretations are also infused with the same postcolonial politics and may be summarised as a series of questions the novel raises: who produces the information? How is it packaged? For what purposes is the information sought? Who is authorised to interpret the information as adequate or inadequate? Murugan’s theory about Ross’s discovery is that the Western scientists may have sought specific information about the malarial pathogen and vector, but it was the ‘native’ cabal working invisibly alongside Cunningham, Farley and
Ross, that directed the colonial scientist’s gaze to the correct data. Though it is the colonial scientist who makes the pronouncements regarding the disease, his information is gleaned from carefully placed clues. The patient-bodies from which the information about the disease is gleaned are also ‘native’, and even turn up fortuitously in Ross’s laboratory as Abdul Kadir (70–72) or Lutchman (73–74). The entire link between bodies, the data about the bodies, the observational techniques and the conclusions is manipulated by the ‘natives’ — and this is the postcolonial politics of information itself. Over and beyond this, Ghosh also offers a theory of knowledge through this politics of information.

Explaining the conspiracy he has unravelled about Ross’s discovery, Murugan proposes a whole new theory of knowledge-making. Murugan informs Antar that to know something is to change it and what you know of something is only its history (104). In short, any ‘knowledge’ is the history of what was investigated and decoded, but which has changed since the investigation and decoding. It follows that the information being studied becomes something else the minute it is understood. Only the contexts can be known, the archives, in which information was acquired or studied. Murugan suggests that Mangala and her team wanted the knowledge of the parasite to develop along specific trajectories and contexts. If they believed, Murugan suggests, that to know something is to change it, then it should be possible to effect a desired change by knowing something about the object of study. If they want the malarial parasite to change into a means of interpersonal migration — which is their project, according to Murugan — then some changes need to be effected in the parasite. These changes (‘mutations’, as Murugan calls them, 104) are what they have Ross effect by directing his information-gathering inquiries along certain routes. This is where Murugan maps the informational economy of the parasite and of the scientific inquiries into the pathogen.

Murugan admits that the ‘natives’, headed by Mangala, needed the Western scientist:

They’ve run smack into a dead end: they’re stuck, they can’t go further — because of the glitches in their own methods, because they just haven’t got the right equipment … The question now is: how do they speed up the process? The answer is: they’ve got to find a conventional scientist who’ll give it a push. (104)

Ross is no brilliant pioneer, he is the ‘conventional scientist’ the ‘native’ cabal is looking for: he is an instrument of knowledge-making in its hands. The mutation in the parasite, then, is the very process of Western science’s inquiries into it. Mangala, therefore, needs Ross to ‘figure the whole thing out and publish it … once the life cycle had been figured out it would spontaneously mutate in directions that would take her work to the next step’ (249, [emphasis added]). Ross’s understanding of the information and the parasite would cause it to change and enable Mangala to further her studies. This is the well-organised informational economy — where Western science’s access to and control over information is manipulated by ‘native’ cabals — in which Ross has to work.
It is this informational economy that is the context of information-gathering, transmission and reception, where information can never be pure. Ross’s information about the pathogen and its vectors is contaminated because of its location within the informational economy built by Mangala and the cabal, even though Western laboratories and sciences have contributed to it. The presumed success of Ross in acquiring reliable information is undermined by the emphasis on the role of ‘native’ manipulation: Ross is just a body who is manipulated into seeking information in patient-bodies, which are themselves supplied unobtrusively by ‘natives’ interested in particular directions in his research. His own research results in no real (material) consequences: his raw material (bodies) and important (material) information can emerge only within a ‘nativised’ informational economy.

There are other, material and networked ‘bodies’ central to the transmission of information (about the parasite, people or anything else): Farley, Cunningham, Phulboni and even the railway station. Railway stations are of course critical nodes (‘actors’) in communication-transportation networks. As Nelson points out, the colonial laboratories in The Calcutta Chromosome ‘link actants — humans and non-human — into networks’ (253). In the novel, railways, organic bodies, institutions, computers are all nodes and conduits for the transmission of information. The Renupur railway station is the key transaction-translation point involving the mysterious Laakhan. Farley is last seen alighting there (153). Grigson, the linguist, has a near-death experience at a railway station (93). Antar walks to Penn Station on a regular basis (13). Antar hails from a small hamlet in Egypt, whose population was wiped out through a malarial epidemic: young Antar, the sole survivor, was seen at a railway station near his village (203). Phulboni loves trains (254), and has a near-death experience at Renupur station (271, 276). That it was Cunningham — the man behind Ross — who had some self-altering experience in Madras is known only through one piece of evidence: he had been in Madras during a particular week. The information about his critical dis-location comes from a railway reservation chart (104, 176). Laakhan first lives at the Renupur railway station and then at Sealdah (278). Cunningham finds all his assistants at the Sealdah railway station (145). The railway station — a very material context, if any — is a junction where trains are switched (in fact, these are deliberately switched, to murderous effects). But they are also points at which information is exchanged, routed and transmitted. Colonial scientists — bodies — are rerouted along paths the ‘natives’ want them to travel. Trains and packets of information are switched at railway stations which therefore become major actors in the informational economy.

The ‘old’ informational economy is the organisational structure of colonial medical research, but it is also the informal ‘laboratory’ that Mangala runs (ironically, right next to Cunningham’s). Mangala is a cleaning woman in the laboratory and Laakhan/Lakhan another assistant in it. Yet they both exhibit remarkable prescience: Farley discovers that Mangala and her assistant choose
the specimen slides for Cunningham. He ponders: ‘how was it that she, evidently untrained and unaware of any of the principles on which such knowledge rested, had come to exercise such authority over the assistant?’ (143). The entire structure of the colonial laboratory, Ghosh suggests, is manipulated and turned to their own purposes by the ‘natives’. The politics of medical research — of ‘trained’ knowledge, for example — are subverted by the ‘natives’. When Farley asks Cunningham how he could hire untrained assistants, he pompously declares that he had trained her himself (145). Ghosh however makes it clear that the colonial laboratory trained no ‘natives’. The colonial laboratory is only one node in the science network which also consists of alternative ‘laboratories’ such as Mangala’s.

The ‘new’ informational economy consists of LifeWatch, Murugan and Antar’s former employer, and the International Water Council, Antar’s present one — all global organisations relying heavily on electronic mail communications (11–12). As the novel moves to its close, Ghosh demonstrates how the new informational economy reworks older ‘bits’ of information and produces new versions of older stories, myths and humans (I shall return to this toward the end of the essay). And, like the colonial one where ‘natives’, Englishmen, railway stations and multiple ways of knowing were linked, the new one is also made up of what Claire Chambers identifies as ‘nodes and networks’ where ‘places and events which seem to bear no relation to each other are in fact linked’ (2009 45–46).

The Body of Information

Katherine Hayles identifies two polarities of the body in the informational economy: the body and embodiment. The first is an ideal and a norm relative to a set of criteria. The second, embodiment, is always contextual, ‘enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture’ (196). Embodiment has many variations, particularities, and abnormalities. In order to understand embodiment in the informational economy of The Calcutta Chromosome, I take recourse to the two principal modalities of the body outlined by Hayles: inscription and incorporation (198).

Inscription is normalised and abstract: it is a system of signs and their significance derives from the concepts they express and not from the medium in which they appear. Incorporation can be explained using an example. A practice such as the Indian form of greeting, ‘namaste’ (where one greets with palms together held chest high), cannot be separated from its embodied medium. It exists only when it is instantiated in a particular pair of hands making a particular kind of gesture. Incorporated knowledge is achieved through repeated use of the body in particular practices, where an action is converted into bodily memory until it becomes habitual. It is obvious that the embodied gesture of the namaste is in constant interplay with inscriptions that abstract the practices into signs. It is the interplay between inscription (signs, concepts, abstractions) and incorporation (embodied practices) that constructs the ‘body of information’ in The Calcutta Chromosome.
Incorporated knowledge retains improvisational elements that make it contextual. Incorporated knowledge is sedimented into the body: it is resistant to change and it is habitual. When changes in incorporated practices take place they are usually connected to new technologies that affect how people use their bodies and experience space and time (Hayles 205). I will now look at the new technologies that *The Calcutta Chromosome* describes, and the triangulation between inscription, incorporation and technological materiality.

*The Calcutta Chromosome*, as noted above, was written around the time the body was becoming a set of data-bases in genetic, molecular and digital forms. In the novel the body is itself a recorder of data. For example, Murugan’s describes the symptoms of syphilis writ on the body (lesions, scabs, sores, loosening of teeth, etc) as signs of his past (284). On the one hand, in the new informational economy of genetic testing, gene databases such as the Human Genome Project, convert the body into mathematised data for computers to code (bioinformatics). Here the technology incorporates the corporeal body into itself. On the other hand, the history of the individual is not only in his/her computerised database but writ as signs on his/her body. The ‘native’ cabal’s project is aimed at discovering whether technology can facilitate the merger of bodies by transposing data from one body into another (data which Murugan calls the Calcutta chromosome), so that personalities can be exchanged. Technologies could be invented that make use of incorporated practices (bodily behaviour, practices, features) that are then transmitted into new bodies. This complicated intertwining between inscription and incorporation is explained by Murugan when he expounds his theory of the Calcutta chromosome to Antar.

To demonstrate this Murugan screams first at the waiter, and later at Antar, eliciting different responses from the two men. Turning to an astonished and angry Antar Murugan says:

Same stimulus, different response: he says tamatar and you say tamatim. Now think, what if the ‘im’ and the ‘ar’ could be switched between you and him? … You’d have him speaking in your voice, or the other way round. You wouldn’t know whose voice it was. (107)

Murugan takes the *signs* of fright and anger — inscription — in the waiter and Antar, that point to the incorporated knowledge (bodily knowledge on which the biologically stimulated psychological response is based) of a frightened or startled body, and speculates on the possibility of transmitting this knowledge from the waiter to Antar or vice versa. Can the incorporated knowledge of responses to stimuli — such as the waiter’s or Antar’s — be transmitted? Can the contexts of responses — the bodies — be altered? Can one body’s response, which would bestow it meaning for the listener/viewer, be shifted into another’s so that the meaning might change (since meaning is context-specific and not reliant only on the words)? Is there a technology through which ‘information [by which he means bodily practices, behaviour, attitudes] could be transmitted
chromosomally, from body to body’? (107). This, he says, is what the Mangala group was seeking to find. Is there a transmissible code in our bodies? Is there, in other words, a transmissible Calcutta chromosome, a code for transmitting incorporated information into another body?

The code is a sign. It works as a concept, an abstraction. The code is encrypted and carries information. It is, in effect, a normative concept signifying secrecy, information and transmission. The chromosome is an instance of such a ‘sign’, more significant for what it represents than anything else. Murugan’s use of the term ‘chromosome’ treats it as a sign of something else (in this case, the entity that ‘embodies’ the human personality). To shift time frames, the ‘body’ that Ronald Ross seeks is one that would be coded as a malarial patient. This is a normative body, an abstract or typical body — a particular kind of body that exhibits certain symptoms. The normative body here is one inscribed as, given the sign of, ‘the malarial body’ or ‘vector’. Further, the ‘body’ of the malarial mosquito is also normative because Ross has no idea about the different species of mosquito. He only seeks a mosquito body. In each of these three cases we have inscription employed as a normative and abstract concept. There is a normative idea among the English researchers of what constitutes the pathology of malaria, or a patient-body. It is this typical patient-body (human) and vector (mosquito) that Ross seeks. This means that a model of the patient-body and vector is already coded into the research project (what we can think of as the normative body). It is inscribed with the sign, ‘malarial body’. However, Mangala and her team subvert the English researchers’ practices by directing their efforts away from what they (the English) believe to be typical malarial bodies towards other bodies — humans and mosquitoes — where the pathogen and the vectors can be found. In other words, Mangala and her team reject the colonial inscription of the malarial body by offering another in its place.

It is the assistant Lutchman, says Murugan, who ‘succeeds in planting a crucial idea in his [Ross’s] head: that the malaria vector might be one particular species of mosquito’ (76). This bit of information is the ‘little seed’ (76) that begins to take root in Ross’s mind. It is the planting of information — a body of information about the specific mosquito — into Ross that marks the ‘native’ intervention into Western science. Ross’s ideas about the pathogen or the malarial body are reversed — or redirected — and he begins to look elsewhere for the ‘right’ bodies with more accurate information.

_The Calcutta Chromosome_ shows how inscriptions are in tension with incorporation. Inscription in the informational economy requires and ‘produces’ a body, what I am calling a ‘body of information’. One of the premises of _The Calcutta Chromosome_ is that information requires manifestation, or embodiment. What is significant about this inscription-to-embodiment is that embodiment is always context-bound and situational. That is, the information or inscription is appropriated and manifests in particular contexts, whether colonial medicine or the contemporary cybercultural era.
The Calcutta ‘chromosome’ carries information, which can be transmitted from person to person. It is a chromosome ‘only by analogy’ (247) because it is not the usual chromosome and cannot be found through existing research procedures, but is definitely a packet of information found in certain kinds of tissue. Information in any chromosome would be manifest in the form of a new body, and it is the case with the Calcutta chromosome as well. It could be a mode of ‘crossover of randomly assorted personality traits, from the malaria donor to the recipient’ (246). This crossover, which is now random, is what Mangala and her acolytes seek to control, according to Murugan. It is important to control the information and its transmission so that its embodiment (those into whom the information is transmitted) can be manipulated. Tara (who is Urmila in a new incarnation), Mrs Aratounian, Romen Haldar (the self-made man who is perhaps the newest version of Lakhan), the Tara’s cook-boy, Urmila, Sonali Das and Antar are also embodiments of the code in new contexts. They embody the information coded into and as the Calcutta chromosome.

The body incorporates information — of new contexts and technologies (in this case, the use of the keyboard and Ava by Antar) — and works accordingly. The responses, Murugan argues, could be deliberately coded into the body so that the body would hereafter work/respond in certain ways. The ‘new’ body would be what he calls a ‘fresh start’ (107). The new body could be made to work in certain ways, just as malaria was injected into people so that their bodies reacted in certain ways. The Calcutta Chromosome’s complexity is such that embodiment is achieved at several levels.

Ross embodies the mis-information deliberately transmitted to him. Murugan’s language when he describes Ross indicates the results of this embodiment: he has become naïve, blundering, school-boyish (69, 75). Abdul Kadir, who walks into Ross’s laboratory embodies the malarial disease deliberately given to him (70–72). Murugan embodies a syphilitic body that has a scrambled brain. Phulboni, Cunningham and Grigson are recipients of selective bits of information and whose personalities are therefore controlled by Mangala and her group. When Grigson elicits information from Lutchman, he does so surreptitiously, by analysing the latter’s language and declares: ‘Can’t fool me … I’ve got you natives figured’ (92). For this information, Grigson comes close to losing his life (93–94). The ‘natives’ do not allow the English free access to any information: this is the informational economy in which all colonials are trapped. Any information they do not approve of also disappears: Farley’s crucial letter regarding developments in malaria research goes missing (119).

Both ‘sides’ (Ross, Cunningham, Farley and Grigson on one, Mangala and her company on the other) have embodied information. Finally, there is Antar, Tara, Urmila, Sonali and Romen Haldar who are all embodiments of the experiment that has been in progress for a hundred years. The chromosome has been transmitted through a series of embodiments that affects personalities. The ‘body
of information’ is located in the interplay between the sign (the chromosome) and the embodied state, owing much to both, but not restricted to either. The body takes on meaning in the moment of instantiation — the gesture, the behaviour, the obsessions. In Murugan’s case for example, it is hinted that he himself has been engineered to undertake the quest for an alternative history. His obsession (itself, perhaps, the result of the Calcutta chromosome inside him) leads him to uncover the mysterious parallel medical research of Ross’s era — research that may have happened entirely in Murugan’s mind. But when he himself catches a malaria-like fever, and then discovers the clearly planted test-tube (158), perhaps carrying the pathogen, in his room, his fevered body instantiates his belief about the covert research project running since the 1890s. It is in the course of his delirium that he sees himself as ‘one of them … lying on a hard hospital charpoy [cot] … watching the English doctor uncork a test tube full of mosquitoes into his net’ (155). His body, like Lakhan’s or Abdul Karim’s in Ross’s era, is inscribed as a ‘patient body’ in the present. The transmission of the disease is accompanied here by the transmission of the Calcutta chromosome that remakes Murugan as a version of Lakhan or Karim. (Ghosh however leaves it uncertain as to whether Murugan really catches malaria or dreams he catches it.)

The two informational economies — of colonial medicine and contemporary global information society (embodied in the supercomputer Ava and the electronic linkages that Antar traverses) utilise the very structure of their economies to instantiate specific information. Colonial medicine’s informational economy is altered, driven in certain directions, by the embodied information that is Abdul Kadir, Lakhan, Ross, Cunningham and Mangala. Contemporary society’s informational economy is appropriated by Mangala when she reappears as Urmila, and perhaps as Sonali and Tara, to further Murugan’s work in unravelling the alternative history of malarial research. Towards the end of the novel, Antar discovers that ‘somebody had begun loading the SimVis system at about the time that Ava stumbled upon Murugan’s ID card’ (306). Both informational economies are altered by information — inscription — that is instantiated in bodies.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* asks the reader to look at new forms of subjectivity that emerge in the technologies of inscription — the genetic code — and the contexts of embodiment — colonial Calcutta, 1990s Calcutta and twenty-first century New York. Inscriptions are instantiated through embodied actions in particular contexts. The ‘body’ may have been normative once. It is not so any more, being an embodiment of various techniques and practices of information gathering and dissemination. Ghosh’s novel calls attention to the practices not only of information-gathering but the contexts of its interpretation. It proposes that information itself is ‘immaterial’ until the contexts and communities assign values to it. In this case, *The Calcutta Chromosome* demonstrates how anti-colonial resistance achieves subversive effects through the manipulation of embodied information. Mangala’s team literally ‘directs’ Ross’s research by
manipulating the ‘bodies’ (mosquitoes, pigeons, the parasite itself, and patients) for him to ‘discover’ the pathogen and the vector. By manipulating bodies within the colonial laboratory they also manipulate the information they want him to find.

**Cyborg Bodies**

So far I have proposed that *The Calcutta Chromosome* represents an informational economy where the materiality of informatics crosses with the immateriality of information to construct a ‘body of information’. What kind of body is this ‘body of information’? Does it have a specific form? Does it encode a particular kind of subjectivity and identity?

It has been suggested that *The Calcutta Chromosome* could be read as a cyberpunk novel because of its concerns with technology, the body, the Gothic settings, the obsession with information transmission and mythography. Fifth, cyberpunk’s chief feature is of course the cyborg body. *The Calcutta Chromosome* presents some of the more iconic features of cyborg bodies. Donna Haraway describes the cyborg as the ‘site of the potent fusions of the technical, textual, organic, mythic, and political’ (24–25). It transgresses the boundaries between the human and animal, the physical and the non-physical and finally, between the organic and the machine. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* many bodies are ‘cyborged’ in the terms that Haraway describes. Antar’s life is a wired one, forever under surveillance by Ava, and constantly connected to the non-space of cyberspace and simulated reality through SimVis (Ghosh’s term for simulations of reality). Murugan eventually comes to exist only in cyberspace, turning up on Antar’s screen as a ‘body’ experiencing what the novel calls an ‘alternative state’. In both these cases the body is cyborged — networked, wired and altered through insertion into the machinic universe.

The textual is central to the narrative’s construction of cyborged bodies. Antar, is drawn into the world of archives, documentation and textuality. First, he discovers textual evidence of Murugan — if one treats the ID card as text. He retrieves, at second hand, the archives that Murugan had uncovered regarding Ross, Farley, Grigson and Cunningham — all of whom leave behind textual evidence in the form of letters and other writings. Urmila and Sonali begin by listening to Phulboni, whose speech eventually returns to the story he wrote years ago about Laakhan. Urmila’s information network comes in the form of a strange connection with Romen Haldar and a soiled newspaper with an item from the distant past. Such textual connections, as Claire Chambers has proposed, are indicative of other networks, boundary-crossings and confusions as well (2009).

For instance, the borders of animals and humans seem to blur in the novel. *The Calcutta Chromosome* breaks down the animal-human barrier by showing a miscegenated body, as DNA crosses over from pigeons to humans, mosquitoes to humans and finally, humans to humans. The gene pool is as messy as a duck pond, with traces of many races, genetic material and somatic features. When Ross is tracking the malarial parasite, with the invisible aid of Mangala and her cohorts,
it seems to move across humans, birds and insects. It seems to have a curious connection with the syphilis pathogen. Though Ross has little interest in these border crossings between diseases, the entire colonial research is in fact steadily underwriting Mangala’s teams research into syphilis as well. Textual, genetic and behavioural characteristics are all presented as border-crossing and species-blurring in what is a posthuman condition (where posthumanism, as defined by commentators like Cary Wolfe, is about mutually dependent species, species-crossings and humans co-existing with other species, where the line between animals and humans or humans and machines, is impossible to sustain because of the constitutive nature of these ‘species’ and forms of life).

The political body is surely that which is constructed by anti-colonial science. The syphilitic bodies that are cured by Mangala become the basis for a new race of humans. Mangala’s project is political because she hopes to engineer this new race by controlling their traits — not unlike genetic engineering projects of late twentieth-century technoscience. These genetically modified bodies are political bodies because their evolution is masterminded in a human laboratory, and because their categorisation as ‘human’ is open given that their genetic code is a messy mix of various species.

Ross seeks to revolutionise tropical medicine (which was primarily about preventing the colonial masters from falling victims to local diseases) through the discovery of the parasite. The bodies he is given are political in the sense that Abdul Kadir and Laakhan are experimental bodies deliberately planted in his laboratory. The political body here is fused with the experimental and informational body — but it is one that symbolises (anti-colonial) agency. It is a body that alters the course of medical history, and subverts the colonial powers of domination. It is a body that does not get colonised within Western medicine alone.

In fact, elaborating what he means by the Calcutta chromosome, Murugan offers a critique of ways of knowledge-making (or, the contexts in which information is gathered and organised). Murugan says:

If there really is such a thing as the Calcutta chromosome only a person like Mangala, someone who’s completely out of the loop, scientifically speaking, would be able to find it … It’s exactly the kind of entity that would be hardest for a conventional scientist to accept. Biologists are under so much pressure to bring their findings into line with politics: right-wing politicians sit on them to find genes for everything … (247–48)

What Murugan is saying here is that despite, or because of, the very structures of knowledge from within which Ross and his compatriots operated, they could not even envisage an entity like the Calcutta chromosome. It is the ‘untrained’ Mangala who ‘stumbl[es] across the process of transmission’ (248) because she ‘didn’t know what a chromosome was’ (248). The malarial pathogen-body in the ‘native’ mosquito and the human carrier might be something the colonial scientist can imagine, but cannot find. It is the ‘natives’ who colonise the Western medical research by directing them toward the ‘right’ malarial problem (by implanting
bodies, blood specimens) but also, under this guise, seek to find the Calcutta chromosome.

Then there is the mythic body. Ross is on a quest for a malaria infected body. Cunningham has an out-of-this world experience in a séance. The mythic body is one whose human contours get blurred, fusing with myths, images, stories and histories. Part of such a body is ‘drawn’ or derived from textual evidence of the body: does Laakhan really exist or is he a mythic construction? Further, the bodies of Maria-Tara, Urmila-Sonali merge into each other, and all of them into Mangala. The SimVis and the cyberspace inside Ava become a space where distinctive human identities dissolve and new ones emerge — identities that existed only in myths (Mangala, Laakhan) or history. By the end of the novel there is a confused mass of bodies.

What I am identifying as cyborg bodies are those that exist in the interstices of the mythic, the technological, the textual and the political. There is no body that is unique in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Everybody is something else too, at least in terms of its genetic code. These are bodies that do not fit a classificatory regime or scheme. Like cyborgs that occupy that space intersecting the human, the machine and the animal, *The Calcutta Chromosome*’s ‘body of information’ is precisely that — a body with few identifying characteristics, a mass of information from various versions, texts, sources and memories. Every body in *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a collective body, carrying the traces of political battles, scientific cross-overs and myths. They are all cyborgs, bodies that do not fit the taxon.

When the novel ends Antar has merged the information codes from Murugan into his body. The transportation of ‘souls’, facilitated by the transmission of computer code, or the malarial pathogen — Murugan and Urmila have acquired the pathogen through sexual contact — is complete and a cyborg is born. It is now a body: (i) that does not fit the taxon for it is neither Antar nor Murugan alone; (ii) which is a congeries of code (computer, biological parasite, DNA); and (iii) that might be ‘versions’ of older forms of bodies (maybe Antar is now Antar 2.0). Ghosh reworks the question of identity itself here by proposing that information being transmitted could result in identities being transmitted and changed in the process of transmission. Antar becomes Murugan and perhaps even the mysterious Lakhan. Urmila, Tara, Sonali all begin to collapse into each other’s identities. When Antar enters Ava’s consciousness at the end, he joins and is joined by a host of other people:

‘We’re here.’ There were voices whispering everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people was in the room with him. They were saying: ‘We’re with you; you are not alone; we’ll help you across’. (306)

The singularity of the individual human — that epitome of Western Enlightenment — is no longer valid in this cyborgisation. Ghosh reinstates the Indian/Hindu theme of reincarnation and merges it with Western advanced science and bioinformatics. Anticipating the potential and challenges of the age
of information and the increased cyborgisation of bodies and individual identities, Ghosh appropriates myth, legend and scientific discourses (and discoveries) to offer us a congeries of the human, or what could more accurately be a posthuman. If this be a ‘postcolonial new human’, as Nelson calls it, it is one based entirely on information exchange and embodiment. Ghosh’s is a posthumanist view because he shows Antar and the others evolving into something else altogether with the aid of various ‘structures’ and ‘species’. Antar embodies connections, networks and linkages across life forms (animals and humans), ecological systems, environments (laboratories, the cities) by demonstrating how life forms evolve together, embedded within relational structures, all made possible through networked information. Pigeons, mosquitoes, the malarial pathogen, human bodies, the syphilis pathogen, electronic data constitute the Antar at the end of the novel. The transmission of the Calcutta chromosome across species borders blurs the autonomy of the human (Antar) — a characteristic of the posthuman.

NOTES
1 Ross, 1857–1932, a British doctor, discovered that malaria was transmitted through the bite of the anopheles mosquito, a discovery for which he won the Nobel in 1902.
2 See Khair, Chambers, Halpin, Thrall, Banerjee.
4 Transcoding is the process of translating something into another format. For instance, cultural categories and concepts are ‘substituted … by new ones which derive from the computer’s ontology, epistemology, pragmatics’ (Manovich 64).
5 On cyberpunk as a literary genre see, among others, McHale (1991), McCaffery (1991) and Cavallaro (2000).
6 Christopher Shinn proposes that Ghosh’s novel offers an ‘evolutionary organicism’ instead of a ‘cyborg ontology’ (146). My own argument regarding Ghosh’s cyborg theme is based on an entirely different trajectory of investigation: that of the informational economy.

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Illness and Insight: Virginia Woolf and Caribbean Women Writers vs. Western Medicine

In novels by Caribbean women writers, illness is often a rite of passage, a turning point in the protagonist’s life, and the central structuring device of the novel. Illness as metaphor can be used to interrogate power structures and unmask injustice. According to Michel Foucault, the highest duty of the intellectual ‘is to criticize the working of institutions’ in order to unmask the political violence that operates obscurely through them ‘so that one can fight them’ (qtd in Rabinow, 6). Illness facilitates this process by forcing characters to tap their inner reservoirs of strength and creative expression through the recovery of their personal past and their cultural history. In Healing Narratives, Gay Wilentz argues that ‘cultures themselves can be ill’, and she examines five women writers from ‘diverse ethnic backgrounds’ (Afro-Caribbean, African American, Native American, and Jewish) who write ‘wellness narratives that explore the role of woman as healer to cure cultural dis-ease’ (1, 3). Healing discourse and other ‘alternative’ practices are not the exclusive domain of women, but women are reclaiming their traditional role against contemporary culture’s ‘masculinist’ privileging of technology and science, by using the novel ‘to transform binary modes of thinking in both form and content, and create stories to begin this healing discourse — one in which critics and readers alike can participate’ (4, 5).

Wilentz’s remarks are part of a growing challenge to Western medicine. David Morris reflects, in ‘Un-forgetting Asclepius: An Erotics of Illness’, on the millennia-long repression of the erotic element in Western medicine: ‘Asclepius and Hippocrates reflect the continuing split within medicine between eros and logos; it is a split some patients and doctors today are openly beginning to question’ (419). Morris uses the term ‘erotics’ to signify what some would call ‘alternative medicine’ or ‘spiritual healing’. He does not propose that Asclepius replace Hippocrates: ‘What matters is that an erotics of illness offers a vital supplement to the nanotech, genetic, laser-driven postmodern reconfigurations of Hippocratic practice… and in this role it inherently resists solipsistic biomedical tendencies toward domination that would confine Asclepius to the ranks of erased or forgotten gods’ (428–29). The return of Asclepius to Western medicine would provide additional therapies for patients, but doctors too would benefit from the opportunity to enrich their professionalism with human feelings. The return of Asclepius or Eros to
medicine is evident in the recent declaration by medical authorities ‘that it is legitimate and valuable for doctors to express empathy’ (Morris 9).

Wilentz includes in her study only one woman writer from the Anglophone Caribbean — Erna Brodber. However, many factors have contributed, in the last three decades, to the outpouring of literary works by West Indian women writers. These works hold a mirror up not only to the Caribbean nations themselves but also to the United States and England whose values have undermined Creole (Afro-Caribbean) culture from colonial times until the present.

Wilentz chooses Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* from among many Caribbean novels because culture plays a pivotal role in the protagonist’s recovery from an emotional breakdown. With the help and healing powers of her Rastafarian friend, Baba, the protagonist, Nellie Richmond, finds the strength to break out of the protective cocoon or ‘kumbla’ that her family had woven around her consisting of middle-class pretensions, Eurocentric values, and pride in their white ancestry. According to Wilentz, ‘[t]he kumbla is a disguise that works as a metaphor for the way that Caribbean women protect their children… Specifically, for young girls, the kumbla is also used as a way to protect them against the onslaught of male aggression (or even their own sexual yearnings)’ (38). This protection comes at a great price, however, by ‘linking sexual repression with a rejection of cultural identity, a changing of color’ (Wilentz 38). With Baba’s help, Nellie begins a spiritual journey that will enable her to accept her sexuality by reaffirming her African ancestry and re-establishing contact with Afro-Jamaican (Creole) language and culture.

Illness also signifies rejection of externally imposed values and expectations in novels by Jamaica Kincaid and Zee Edgell, though in Kincaid’s *Annie John* the protagonist’s transformation is more about personal freedom than reaffirmation of ancestral ties. (It should be noted, however, that for the author, the decision to leave her home and family in Antigua and relocate to the United States was essential to her development as a writer whose novels themselves reaffirm her profound emotional ties to her family and Antiguan culture.) In the novel, Annie is suffering from a debilitating physical and emotional breakdown. When Western medicine fails to help the adolescent protagonist, her mother calls in two ‘obeah’ women, first Ma Jolie and then Annie’s grandmother, Ma Chess. Bridget Brereton explains that, ‘[t]he obeahman/woman — the magical specialist who could control spirits to harm someone, or, if he or she chose, to cure and heal and ward off ill-intentioned spirits — was a powerful figure in the rural communities of the Caribbean well into the postwar period’ (104–105). The effectiveness of the obeahman or obeahwoman, according to Brereton, depended upon his or her ability to ‘offer advice and comfort for emotional problems as well as cures [traditional herbal remedies] for physical ills’ (105). In the Caribbean, it would appear the rift between Asclepius and Hippocrates, eros and logos, has been healed, or perhaps never existed — at least among obeah practitioners and
Illness and Insight

their patients. Annie John’s mother places Ma Jolie’s little vials on a shelf next to Dr. Stephens’s prescribed vitamins and purgatives. However, Annie’s father ‘didn’t like what he saw’, so her mother ‘arranged the shelf in a new way, with Dr. Stephens’s prescriptions in the front and Ma Jolie’s prescriptions in the back’ (117–18). Mr. John has internalised the values of the dominant power structure, the British colonial system, and has adopted their scepticism toward Creole traditions and remedies, which he views as mere superstition. It is primarily the women who keep these practices alive.

When neither Dr. Stephens nor Ma Jolie can cure Annie, her grandmother Ma Chess suddenly appears though the steamship from Dominica was not due in Antigua that day. ‘Whatever Ma Jolie knew, my grandmother knew at least ten times more. How she regretted that my mother didn’t show more of an interest in obeah things’ (123). Ma Chess lives in Annie’s room and avoids Mr. John ‘because they didn’t see the world in the same way’ (126). Months later the monsoonal rains suddenly stop, Annie recovers, and Ma Chess disappears as mysteriously as she appeared. Annie senses that her condition was somehow tied to the weather. ‘I knew quite well that I did not have the power to make the atmosphere feel as sick as I felt, but I still couldn’t help putting the two together’ (126). Rather than build upon the bond she feels or has felt between herself and the island of Antigua or between herself and her once adored mother, upon her recovery Annie realises that, more than anything else, she wants to leave her island, her mother, and the limitations imposed upon her by ‘this young lady business’: the endless cycle of domestic drudgery that shuts women off from opportunities for achievement in the public domain. The novel ends with seventeen-year-old Annie on board a ship bound for England where she will study nursing. ‘I did not want to go to England, I did not want to be a nurse, but I would have chosen going off to live in a cavern and keeping house for seven unruly men rather than go on with my life as it stood’ (130). If this novel is read as a fictional autobiography — and Kincaid has said that all her novels are autobiographical (Ferguson 176) — the concluding image is highly suggestive: ‘I went back to my cabin and lay down on my berth. Everything trembled as if it had a spring at its very center. I could hear small waves lap-lapping around the ship. They made an unexpected sound, as if a vessel filled with liquid had been placed on its side and now was slowly emptying out’ (148). Paradoxically, Annie’s decision to leave Antigua will bind her even more securely to her past, something her mother realises even if Annie does not: ‘It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go, I’ll always be your mother and this will always be your home’ (147). The vessel filled with liquid slowly emptying out is a birth image, suggesting that as Annie lies on her ‘berth’ her water breaks. The ‘child’ that is about to be born is this novel: Kincaid’s portrait of the artist as a very young woman.

Even more than Brodber’s Jamaica and Kincaid’s Antigua, in Beka Lamb Zee Edgell portrays Belizian culture as dis-eased and in need of healing discourse.
Beka, the protagonist, feels that she and her country have ‘bruk down’. Beka’s breakdown stems from the tragic death of her best friend, Toycie, who overcame abject poverty and illegitimacy to achieve high honours in school, but lost hope when the Catholic school she attended expelled her (though not the boy) when she became pregnant out of wedlock. If, as Wilentz claims, ‘cultures themselves can be ill’, then Belize in the 1950s is in very bad shape due to poverty, lack of sanitation, a poorly educated populace, and dependence upon wealthy nations to fulfil their most basic needs. Toycie and Beka represent different ways of responding to crisis and disappointment. Toycie collapses under pressure, whereas Beka — despite nearly flunking out of school and incurring the wrath of her father — discovers that she is stronger, more intelligent, and more creative than she had given herself credit for.

Beka has advantages that Toycie does not. The Lamb household and extended family is loving and supportive, Beka’s parents are married, and her father is a moderately successful businessman. Toycie lived in squalor with the woman who raised her from infancy, the well-meaning but mentally incompetent Miss Eila. Most importantly, Beka has grown up in a household where strong women speak their mind. Beka’s mother, though initially infatuated with all things English, comes to appreciate the value of her Belizian heritage — at least she is beginning to do so by the end of the novel when she abandons her effort to grow roses and selects indigenous flowers instead. Beka’s maternal grandmother, Miss Ivy, is heavily involved in politics on the side of the common folk against the money and power brokers. She also admits to Beka at the end of the novel that like Toycie, ‘I turned to rocking the cradle’. ‘But at least you didn’t break down and die’, Beka responds, and her grandmother concurs (170). By this point Beka has come to terms with her friend’s death, and she realises that although the misogynistic Father Nunez and the rigid Sister Virgil have much to answer for, Toycie herself lacked the inner resources to face trouble when it came. Still, the novel provides a scathing indictment of the Catholic clergy whose unfair treatment of women and girls is the catalyst for Toycie’s suffering and eventual death. Father Nunez warns the girls in his charge that their bodies have the power ‘to unleash chaos upon the world’ (90), and Sister Virgil justifies expelling Toycie, but not the father of her unborn child, because ‘we believe it is entirely up to the modesty of the girl to prevent these happenings’ (119).

Not all the priests and nuns are as hypocritical and uncaring as these two. At Beka’s lowest point she turns to her friend and mentor, Sister Gabriela, who tells her, [y]ou must go as far as the limitations of your life will allow. Find a way to do what you can, even though things seem to be crashing all around you. Try to recognize the pattern even if it is one you don’t like, then maybe you can do something about it’ (116). Sister Gabriela’s advice reflects the metaphorical role that illness often plays in novels written by Caribbean women in the second half of the twentieth century. Physical and often mental collapse coincides with the
breakdown of ties to home and family, as well as the transition from child to woman. This transitional time tests the protagonist’s courage and strength, and more often than not she emerges phoenix-like from the ashes of her childhood to take her place in the life of her community, her country, or even beyond.

In novels by Afro-Caribbean writers, even elderly black women are strong. Kincaid’s Xuela Richardson, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, is as proud and uncompromising at seventy as she was in her prime. And the protagonists of Beryl Gilroy’s *Frangipani House* and Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* have turned the infirmities and physical limitations of old age into opportunities for advancement. In Marshall’s novel, an affluent African American widow, Avey Johnson, impulsively abandons her friends and the cruise ship *Bianca Pride* in Grenada, where she joins a charismatic old man, Lebert Joseph, and his fellow pilgrims on an expedition to the tiny island of Carriacou. The events that follow — her debilitating sea-sickness, the ritual bath, and ‘the Carriacou Tramp, the shuffle designed to stay the course of history’ (250) — reconnect Avey with her roots in the South Carolina Tidewater where as a child she listened to great-aunt Cuney’s tales of the Ibo people who walked on water, despite their chains, all the way back home to Africa. Her spirit healed by the pilgrimage, Avey finds that she is no longer trapped in the cycle of ‘getting and spending’ to keep up with her affluent white neighbours back in North White Plains, New York. She resolves to sell her big house and return to the Tidewater region where she will pass down Aunt Cuney’s stories about the Ibos to her grandchildren and their friends.

In contrast to these depictions of strong black women, Jamaica Kincaid has commented to Moira Ferguson on the weakness and nihilistic posturing of female characters in novels by white women. Kincaid observes ‘that the Americans, the women from the centre of the world, lack that sense of self-invention or renewal, self-discovery. They don’t have that, unless of course they are a repressed group like black women in America. But the white women in America and European women, you know, they don’t have that at all’ (177). Kincaid attributes this to the white woman’s investment in the status quo: ‘[e]ven as they are oppressed within their group, they are still of the privileged. I think that change for them would be very threatening because when we rebel we want the whole thing washed away, turned upside down. But they can’t do that because they would lose something too’ (177).

Oddly, Kincaid refers to Marguerite Duras and Jean Rhys as examples of ‘decaying’ white writers ‘from the center of the world’, yet neither woman was born in Europe or America. Duras, whose family lived a financially precarious existence in French Indochina, falls outside the Anglophone perimeter of this study. Elsewhere, however, I have argued that the white Creole Jean Rhys, who spent the first sixteen years of her life on the tiny island of Dominica, created characters who were not weak or decaying. Anna Morgan, the narrator of *Voyage in the Dark*, and Antoinette Cosway, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, are willing victims,
not hapless scapegoats. ‘Viewing Rhys’s novels against the background of Caribbean colonial history helps to explain many attributes of the so-called “Rhys woman”: her self-destructive behavior, apparent passivity, sexual debasement, and fatalism… [Rhys’s] novels constitute a somewhat twisted tale of remorse and repentance for the white Creole’s complicity in slavery and colonial domination’ (Wilson 74). Rhys uses madness, obeah, and suicide to expose the Western world’s original sin: slavery. Her characters must pay, in Antoinette’s case with her life, for the sins of their slave-owning forefathers. For both characters, illness and near or actual death become means to an end. Anna’s abortion and Antoinette’s suicide symbolise the end of their bloodlines and the collapse of a world that was destined to fall because it was rotten at the core.

Virginia Woolf is a writer whose privileged background and place of honour in the modern British canon make her a better choice than either Rhys or Duras for inclusion in this study of illness and insight in novels by Creole women from the former British colonies and white women ‘from the center of the world’. In Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, one might question whether Clarissa Dalloway’s privileged social and economic circumstances as a member of ‘the ruling class’ (her husband is a Member of Parliament) would limit her opportunities for spiritual renewal in mental and physical illness, and in the infirmities and physical limitations of old age. Do the Dalloways’ ties to England’s vast colonial power structure compromise her spiritual development? Is Clarissa, as Jamaica Kincaid suggests of white women in general, too heavily invested in the status quo to risk bringing down the entire house of cards by her words and actions?

According to Woolf, illness calls into question the most basic assumptions of human beings regarding class and power relationships. In *On Being Ill*, Woolf describes illness as radicalising and the afflicted (including herself) as deserters and outlaws: ‘[b]ut in health the genial pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed — to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases … we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters’ (12). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith are separated by class and circumstance (they never actually meet), yet these unlikely soul mates are united by illness and a shared vision or epiphany. The bond between them transcends binary constructions by virtue of their failing health. Clarissa’s recent illness has exiled her from the marriage bed. ‘Like a nun withdrawing’, she climbs the stairs to the small attic room and the narrow single bed where she sleeps alone (31). When Septimus returns to England after experiencing the horrors of World War I from the trenches, he too withdraws — not to a room like a nun’s cell but deep into the recesses of his own mind. Both, according to Caroline Webb, reject ‘society’s solemn progress’ (289). Both are ‘deserters’ from the ‘army of the upright’. As such, both must be isolated, for their own good and for the good of society. Richard Dalloway insists that after
her illness, Clarissa must sleep undisturbed. More ominously, the ‘obscurely evil’ medical doctor, Sir William Bradshaw, has convinced Septimus’s wife, Rezia, that the people we are closest to ‘are not good for us when we are ill’, so she and Septimus ‘must be separated’ for as long as her husband remains institutionalised (147).

Septimus feels threatened by both of his doctors, Holmes and Bradshaw. Although he sees dead people and hears birds singing in Greek, prior to his suicide he acquires absolute clarity regarding his predicament: ‘[w]hat right has Bradshaw to say “must” to me? he demanded… So he was in their power! Holmes and Bradshaw were on him. The brute with the red nostrils was snuffing into every secret place! “Must” it could say! Where were his papers? The things he had written?’ (147). Septimus has intuited the threat to privacy, autonomy, and integrity when medical doctors are granted the power previously reserved for priests and the police. Illness becomes a sin and a crime, punishable by involuntary confinement of indefinite duration.

Foucault traces the transition from a pre-Renaissance view of madness as ‘linked to the presence of imaginary transcendences’ to the classical age when, ‘for the first time, madness was perceived through a condemnation of idleness and in a social immanence guaranteed by the community of labor. The community acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into another world, all forms of social uselessness’ (1982 30). Sir William Bradshaw, and to a lesser extent Dr. Holmes, represent the community of labour which has granted doctors the ethical power of segregation to protect the bourgeois order. ‘Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion’ (Woolf 1981 99). Dr. Holmes too speaks for the ‘community of labor’ when, immediately following Septimus’s suicide, Holmes exclaims ‘The coward!’ Society has spoken, for suicide is the ultimate form of social uselessness.

Sir William arrives late at Clarissa’s party because of Septimus’s death, and Clarissa, trying to pinpoint the source of her dislike for the man, observes that ‘one wouldn’t like Sir William to see one unhappy. No; not that man’ (182). For Bradshaw worships not only the goddess Proportion but also her sister Conversion, the ‘fastidious Goddess’ who ‘feasts most subtly on the human will’ (100). Submit to Sir William’s regimen, obey his commands, merge your will with his or risk the consequences, which for Septimus would have been indefinite incarceration, separation from his loving wife, and denial of access to his books and writing materials. ‘Life is made intolerable’, Clarissa reflects, by men like Bradshaw, and she intuits Septimus’s final moments as moral victory: ‘[d]eath was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate… There was an embrace in death’ (184–85). Fortified by Septimus’s defiance, Clarissa opts for life, returning to the party after withdrawing to reflect on the significance of Septimus’s suicide.
and the nightly solitary ritual of her elderly neighbour whose progress toward bed/death Clarissa watches from her window.

*Mrs. Dalloway* is a critique of a medical profession that has lost sight of its patients’ humanity, a call for reform of an institution that worships Logos at the expense of Eros in all its manifestations — spiritual as well as physical — and thus fails to treat the whole person. Clarissa’s experience of oneness with a dead man she never met is a sign of the novel’s emphasis on spirituality or ‘the universal human desire for transcendence and connectedness’ which, according to Judy Kaye and Senthil Kumar Raghavan, is stronger in those with serious illness (233). Numerous studies have shown that transcendence, ‘a transformation of the perception of the human condition’, can help alleviate feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among the disabled and those with serious illnesses (233). Clarissa’s spiritual awakening leads to a renewed appreciation for life, and life’s brevity is no longer a cause for despair but rather a reason to seize the moment and celebrate: ‘An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow [the party] was her gift’ (122).

Given the importance of mental attitude in the treatment of illness and injury, why has Western medicine been slow to acknowledge that spiritual practice can facilitate treatment by providing peace of mind and serenity in troubled, uncertain times? Woolf asked that question eighty-five years ago, and *Mrs. Dalloway* is her attempt to answer it. It is a question with profound implications for her writing in general, as seen in the following passage from her essay ‘Modern Fiction’: ‘[l]ife is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end’ (287–88). Woolf suggests that illness and suffering contributed to her rejection of realism in favour of stream of consciousness, for pain transports us beyond ‘this monster, the body’ by making ‘us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism’ (2002 6). ‘In illness’, Woolf continues, ‘words seem to possess a mystic quality… Incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow’ (2002 21). For Woolf, the ‘literature of pathology’ (Lee xxiii) is integral to her vision. Illness is much more than a plot device: it is a doorway to higher consciousness.

Asclepian ‘narrative medicine’ and spiritual healing provide Clarissa Dalloway and other ‘outlaws’ with the strength to embrace life with renewed fervour. Clarissa does not ‘lack that sense of self-invention or renewal, self-discovery’ that characterises the protagonists of novels by Afro-Caribbean women writers (Ferguson 177). Jamaica Kincaid’s distinction between white women writers ‘from the center of the world’ and marginalised black writers is an example of binary thinking which healing discourse seeks to mend. Kincaid is well aware that nothing is simply black or white, good or evil. Although she grew up poor and black in a colonial setting, she is now — compared to most people — rich and
famous. She has told Moira Ferguson that she turned the tables on the colonisers by means of the excellent education that they provided (175). Living and paying taxes in the United States presents an ethical dilemma: ‘I contribute to some pretty horrendous thing… I live in a nice house in a country that does pretty horrendous things’ (183). Kincaid’s frank assessment of the complexity of her own position echoes Foucault on the cyclical nature of power relationships:

The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules [of law], to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them; controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules. (1984 85–86)

Ultimately, however, even the rise and fall of ethnic groups and entire civilisations will be reduced to ‘a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing’ (Macbeth V, v, 27–29). Death is the great leveller: it does not distinguish between races or genders or classes. The powerful and those on the margins of society will come to the same end. And illness is practice for the inevitable. ‘What the bedridden invalid gains in resigning worldly power is access to truth… Health conceals not only the solitude of the individual, which illness chillingly exposes, but also the compensating link between illness and eros’ (Morris 428). The refrain from Cymbeline that haunts several of the characters in Mrs. Dalloway — ‘Fear no more the heat o’ the sun’ — is not an invitation to sit in judgment on the protagonists’ courage or lack thereof. Although they follow different courses of action, both Clarissa and Septimus are motivated by insight they obtained as a result of their illnesses, insight into the nature of power and the dearth of empathy in modern medicine. The enemy is not death but fear of death. When one has overcome that fear, the question is no longer ‘to be or not to be’ but how to make the most of these precious gifts, life and consciousness. Septimus’s suicide is not an act of despair but an act of defiance, a refusal to live on any terms but his own. Death does not frighten the war hero, but life on Bradshaw’s terms terrifies him. Like the Ibos in Praisesong for the Widow who walked into/across the sea rather than live as slaves, Septimus chooses physical death over death of the spirit. His death renews Clarissa’s commitment to life: ‘[s]he felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking, leaden circles in the air. He made her feel the beauty: made her feel the fun’ (186). Clarissa ‘assembles’ herself and returns to the party where her fading beauty and immense charm are still capable of working their magic. Clarissa’s awareness that Septimus has suffered ‘some indescribable outrage’ at the hands of Sir William Bradshaw has, in a sense, transferred the young soldier’s life force to her soul — ‘She felt somehow very much like him’ — and her triumphant re-entrance is his as well.

By seeking common ground between Virginia Woolf and contemporary Caribbean women writers, I am attempting to overcome binary thinking in postcolonial criticism. Criticism as ‘healing discourse’ does not ignore history or
justify a race-neutral, ahistorical perspective that Kamau Brathwaite sees as a way of masking or denying or reassigning white guilt (Brathwaite 73). The atrocities committed by the colonial powers in the name of some ‘civilising’ mission must never be forgotten. Colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and genocide constitute the original sin upon which the contemporary world is built and the root cause of so many of our social problems. But it is as dangerous to look only backwards as it is to ignore the past. The abolitionists’ logo of 1787, and its updated version focusing on gender oppression, works both ways: ‘Am I not a man and a brother? Am I not a woman and a sister?’ (Kristof online). Black and white, African and European, female and male: are we not sisters and brothers? Healing discourse acknowledges the horrors of the past and the injustice of the present but also looks ahead, with cockeyed optimism, to a future when everyone, not just the sick and dying, can challenge those social institutions that question or deny our shared humanity.

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Opening the Body: Reading *Ten Canoes* with Critical Intimacy

The 2006 Australian film *Ten Canoes*, directed by Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr, opens with a slow aerial shot over the Arafura swamp’s watery landscape, underscored by native bird calls, then the sound of rain, followed again by birds. After one full minute, the unnamed narrator’s voice joins the bird sounds when he says, ‘*Once upon a time, in a land far, far away... [Laughs] // No, not like that, I’m only joking*’. These opening words allude to a Western tradition of orality, the fairytale, as well as to the popular culture phenomenon *Star Wars*, which begins with the words, ‘*A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away*’. The inherent ambiguity of this laugh may lead viewers to wonder whether the narrator is laughing with or at us, or perhaps both. Critics’ analyses of this opening have identified the narrator’s laugh as preparation ‘*for a very different kind of story*’ (Henderson 54) and as ironic and transformative (Crosbie 144), a laugh that shifts the narrative away from a familiar story to a personal one.

This shift is made evident when the narrator continues, ‘*But I am going to tell you a story. // It’s not your story... // It’s my story... //... a story like you’ve never seen before. // But you want a proper story, eh? // Then I must tell you some things // of my people, and my land. // Then you can see this story, and know it*’. In this article, we analyse the relationship between the ‘*I*’ of the storyteller/narrator and the ‘*you*’ of the audience with particular attention to how the narrator encourages an affective response from the viewer by inviting the reader to ‘*see*’ the story and therefore ‘*know*’ it. This combination of corporeal and mental engagement with the text brings our reading strategy close to what Gayatri Spivak calls ‘critical intimacy’, a strategy that we argue is an appropriate — and indeed ethical — way for non-Indigenous (and perhaps non-Yolgnu) viewers to respond to this film, which is the first Indigenous language film to be produced in Australia.

**Plot**

When the narrator simultaneously assumes and asks whether the viewer wants a ‘*proper story*’, he insists that he must tell the viewer about his people and his land, which indicates the importance of an entire body of knowledge that informs the narrative. The narrator then summarises the cosmological backdrop of the story, while the viewer travels via aerial shots presumably across the land about which the narrator speaks:

*This land began in the beginning.*

*yurlunggur, the Great water Goanna, // he travelled here.*
Yurlunggur made all this land then. 
He made this water...
... and he made this swamp / that stretches long and gives us life. 
I come from a waterhole / in this land Yurlunggur made. 
I looked like a little fish / in my waterhole. 
Then, my father came near my waterhole. 
I asked him for my mother. 
I wanted to be born. 
My father pointed out one of his wives. 
That is your mother, he told me. 
I waited until the right time... 
... and went just like that, into her vagina. 
Then my father had a dream. 
That dream let him know she had / a little one inside her. 
That little one was me. 
When I die, I will go back to my waterhole. 
I’ll be waiting there, like a little fish... 
... waiting to be born again. 
You didn’t know all that, did you? 
But it’s a true thing. 
It’s always like that for my people.

Important spiritual and cultural information is being shared in this passage of the script. It imparts creation knowledge, expressed through Yurlunggur, as an identified creation Being who shaped the landscape. It discloses cultural information that may be foreign to the Western audience regarding the polygamous marital arrangements that are normal within Yolgnu society. Ideas of spirituality are revealed when the narrator says, ‘When I die, I will go back to my waterhole. I’ll be waiting there, like a little fish... waiting to be born again’, which indicates the belief of reincarnation within the specific cultural context of this group of people.

This scene also foregrounds the body as an important site of power and knowledge. After Ridjimiraril’s death, his body is painted with the marks of the waterhole, and the audience follows Ridjimiraril’s return to his waterhole. In ‘Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and the Corporeal’, Elizabeth Grosz examines corporeal inscriptions and argues that ‘[m]essages coded onto the body can be “read” only within a social system of organisation and meaning. They mark the subject by, and as, a series of signs within the collectivity of other signs, signs which bear the marks of a particular social law and organisation’ (65). Ridjimiraril’s body is literally and metaphorically mapped, so his body, the land, the narrator’s voice, and the accompanying subtitles may be understood as a series of signs that viewers can access in multiple ways. The viewers’ access to the film’s ontological and epistemological significance depends upon their own subjectivity and their willingness to open their bodies to the narrator’s bodily imperative.

The story itself is a cautionary tale involving the narrator’s ancestors, Minygululu and Dayindi, who are out hunting Magpie Geese eggs in the Arafura swamp. Minygululu knows that his younger brother, Dayindi, is infatuated with
his youngest wife and as he shows him how to make the canoe he begins to tell
him a story of their ancestors, Ridjimiraril and Yeeralparil. These more distant and
timeless ancestors’ lives are thrown out of equilibrium when a strange man turns
up near their camp. They give him food, but his presence disturbs the community.
Some time after the stranger’s appearance, Ridjimiraril’s second wife, Nowalingu,
disappears. Ridjimiraril is certain that she has been kidnapped by the stranger,
who may be a sorcerer.

One day Birrinbirrin, the Honey Ant man, tells Ridjimiraril that he has seen
the stranger not far from the camp at a waterhole, so the two men set off to find
him. They think they see the stranger squatting in the bushes. Ridjimiraril throws
his spear at him, killing the stranger. When they come up to the body lying in the
bush they discover that Ridjimiraril has killed the wrong man. They hide the body
after hearing voices coming through the bush and quickly return home.

Ridjimiraril and Birrinbirrin are soon confronted by an angry group of warriors.
They have in their hand the spear head that killed their man and they recognise the
spear as being made by Birrinbirrin. Ridjimiraril confesses to them that it was not
Birrinbirrin who killed the man, but him. He knows the law and agrees to meet up
with the warriors for the payback ceremony. As part of the law Ridjimiraril can
bring one other man with him to participate in the spear throwing ceremony, and
as soon as blood is drawn from either man, the payback is complete and justice
has been served. Yeeralparil convinces his brother that he should come as his
offsider for the ceremony, because he is young and quick on his feet.
Ridjimiraril and Yeeralparil dance and dodge the flying spears; for some time it looks like they might avoid serious injury until suddenly Ridjimiraril is struck. The wronged warriors leave, feeling that due justice has been enacted. When Ridjimiraril and Yeeralparil return to camp Ridjimiraril’s wound becomes steadily worse. Their own sorcerer cannot help him and his health declines. Late in the night Ridjimiraril wobbles up to his feet and begins his dance of death. He dances until his body can move no more and death comes to him.

When all the appropriate ceremonies have been completed and the mourning period is over, the excited Yeeralparil moves to take his place in Ridjimiraril’s camp. He thinks that now he can finally be with the youngest wife, Munandjarra. But he finds that he is responsible for all three wives, as Nowalingu has returned. His life is much more complicated than he expected.

**Narration of the Film**

The narrator leads the audience as the film moves between the different time frames of the distant past and the more mythical past. The narration is used throughout the film to frame and contextualise the cosmology of the Yolgnu people. In this way the narrator is a guide, taking the audience on a journey, not only through time and space, but also negotiating the cultural context for the non-Yolgnu audience. The narrator is the keystone that connects both pasts of the story, bringing it back to his present by reminding the audience that it is his story. Although the narrator is not a visible character in the film, his aural presence moves across the time periods and connects his individuality, and his story, to the community. The narrator’s voice, which directs the audience how to read the embodied story, may be understood through Elizabeth Weiss’s notion of a ‘bodily imperative’ (131). The narrator’s bodily/discursive imperative is an oral tool, a discursive apparatus that guides the viewer in the appropriate ways to ‘see’ Ridjimiraril’s death dance, which will be the main scene analysed in this essay.

In her article ‘Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation’, Marcia Langton discusses the deep and pervasive ties Australian Indigenous cultures have to oral traditions, both as a means of cultural continuance and as an artistic expression of the individual within the community context. Enormous social value is placed on oral traditions as the artistic and spiritual articulation of a community (Langton 109). These values are evident in the structure of the narrative in *Ten Canoes*. The story clearly illustrates the pedagogical uses of narrative in informing younger members of the Yolgnu community of their laws and moral codes of conduct, such as when Minygululu regales Dayindi with this story of their ancestors as they work together making the canoes. In this realm of purposeful activity, he teaches Dayindi both the practical skills required for hunting and the moral skills needed for cohesive living.

There is circularity to the narrative as it shifts between three time frames. The present is articulated as the narrator speaks directly to the audience as an embodied voice, which can be heard in both the other time-frames. The past is
filmed in black and white, representing the narrator’s more immediate ancestors. The mythical past is framed by the re-emergence of colour, and as the scene where the dramatic tension of the story dwells. It is between these three temporal landscapes that the audience comes to understand the story as a coherent whole. This narrative structure alerts the audience to the intricate and complex structures that underlie oral traditions. By moving backwards and forwards through different time frames, viewers bear witness to the community’s cultural continuance and to the connection between individuals and the community both past and present.

**Theoretical Framework: Reading Intimacy and Intensity**

This connection between the individual and the community, between the local and the political, is an issue that Diana Brydon analyses by studying a Canadian poet’s connection to a global community. In her reading of Dionne Brand’s long poem *Inventory*, Diana Brydon analyses the poet’s persona as a witness whose body registers an ethical and political ‘hereness’ that connects local stories to ‘the political projects of citizenship and community in contemporary times’ (990–91). For Brydon, citizenship extends beyond the nation-state to a global citizenry, which is a concept we find useful for a text such as *Ten Canoes*, given its attention to how a local and personal story collapses time and space in its juxtaposition of several pasts with the present and in a space that exists prior to and within an Australian nation-state. Brydon’s essay informs our analysis of *Ten Canoes* in two ways: one, its focus on the poet as narrator and witness parallels the role of the film’s narrator/storyteller as witness; and two, its analysis of the role of critical theorists provides a useful model for our own approach to how non-racialised critics might read and analyse racialised narratives in ethical ways that are attentive to both local and global intimacies.

Brydon argues that Brand’s poet’s persona as reader provides a model for how to read the poetry itself, and we employ this strategy in our analysis. The narrator in *Ten Canoes* tells and reads his story simultaneously, which is apparent when he directs the viewer to ‘see’ an event. This seeing brings the body to the process of analysis, which Brydon articulates when she expands upon Spivak’s notion of critical intimacy: ‘Critical intimacy suggests the need to employ both passion and reason while seeking understanding. One must enter the poem with all one’s faculties while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance from it’ (995). While Brydon discusses this reading strategy in relation to Brand’s poem, we employ this process in reading and viewing *Ten Canoes*. The simultaneity of reading subtitles while reading the visual text of the film brings the viewing experience close to that of engaging with a long poem, especially if we accept the storyteller as parallel to Brand’s poet’s persona. To accentuate this point, we indicate the line breaks (/) and frame breaks (//) in our quotations from the film, in order to draw attention to the poetic and performative aspects of how the film is subtitled. We are especially attentive to the placement of ellipses, the use of repetition, the employment of sight metaphors, and the proliferation of question
Film is a performative text in which the audience both hears or reads the narration and watches the actors embody the story, which in turn allows gestures to express non-verbal communication. Unlike an oral performance, however, the scripted text remains the same each time it is viewed. When watching Ten Canoes, an audience that cannot understand the many languages of the Yolgnu people must read the subtitles in order to access the verbal text. As Fanon states in Black Skin, White Masks, embedded in the language of the colonisers are all the ideas that perpetuate hegemony. For Yolgnu audiences, the use of their own languages in Ten Canoes highlights the vibrancy of a continuing linguistic heritage. It creates a reflection that affirms their community’s culture and offers possibilities of cultural and linguistic resurgence for other Indigenous communities. For non-Indigenous viewers, it not only challenges any notions regarding the vigour of contemporary Indigenous languages, but also challenges the hegemony of language, requiring the story to be mediated by translation via subtitles for non-Yolgnu people.

Bruno Starrs analyses the use of subtitles in his article ‘The Authentic Aboriginal Voice in Rolf de Heer’s Ten Canoes’. As a local story with global distribution, the film’s narrative represents a source of political and cultural debate in its use of subtitles. For instance, the distribution of the film in Italy became problematic because the distributors wanted the dialogue to be dubbed. The people of Ramingining, however, were very clear about retaining the authenticity and integrity of their language within the context of the film and would not allow the actors’ voices to be dubbed. Rolf de Heer mediated with the distributors, resulting in three forms of release: the Yolgnu language version, with no subtitles; the Yolgnu language version with English subtitles; and the cinematic-release version, with the narration in English and the dialogue in local languages subtitled in English (Starrs). Collectively the Yolgnu community of Ramingining and de Heer negotiated these challenges involved in the process of filming and the distribution of Ten Canoes. (Ten Canoes Press Kit 20). DVD viewers of the film may choose any of these three versions; our reading of the film is based on the all-Yolgnu version with English subtitles, which we believe brings us the closest to the version preferred by the people of Ramingining, given their reluctance to have the film dubbed.

By analysing the film through this version, we are signalling what non-Indigenous critic Anne Brewster calls ‘the particularity of the [White reader’s] own racialised intercorporeality (and intersubjectivity)’ (56). As White readers of a Black narrative, we find that by drawing upon Brewster’s essay ‘Engaging the Public Intimacy of Whiteness: The Indigenous Protest Poetry of Romaine Moreton’ as well as Brydon’s article about critical intimacy, we are able to construct a strategy of reading that acknowledges how non-Indigenous critics might be guided by Indigenous texts to read and analyse them in ethical, intimate,
and politically-conscious ways, which includes defamiliarising whiteness as a way of understanding how viewers’ bodies are placed in relation to the bodies in the film and of how critics’ voices are guided by the words of the film’s narrator.

One of the most important aspects of this strategy is the attention given to how non-Indigenous readers are addressed by a persona within the text. In her analysis of Indigenous poet Romaine Moreton’s work, Brewster examines, ‘how the rhetorics of both social and political critique and personal address… solicit affective and political responses in a non-Indigenous reading’, and she discusses how the ‘forms of address… interpellate non-Indigenous readers’ (56). One of the forms of address that Brewster identifies is particularly relevant here: the ‘first-person speaking position and… direct address to a second-person “you”’ (65). This use of the second-person address applies to Ten Canoes when the narrator interpellates the audience as ‘you’ who wants a ‘proper story’, which indicates that the story he is about to tell may not be regarded by non-Indigenous viewers as ‘proper’.

As with the ‘you’ in Ten Canoes, the addressee in Moreton’s poems is not overtly identified as white and middle-class, but Brewster argues, ‘the fact that their racial identity is unmarked, places them, at the very least, in a position homologous to that of a white person’ (65), a placement that we, too, can assume, based especially upon the opening allusion to fairytales and Star Wars and upon the use of English subtitles. We may then also consider Brewster’s argument that this white addressee is positioned in such a way as to ‘defamiliarise white privilege and ontology’ and to engage ‘whiteness affectively’ (65). The opening lines of Ten Canoes do precisely this work. When the narrator addresses non-Indigenous viewers with the words, ‘Once upon a time’, he sets up the audience to expect a familiar story. By then laughing and telling viewers that he is joking, the viewers’ sense of being is destabilised, and she or he must learn to listen and to see differently, actively, and affectively.

In a turn of phrase that connects Brewster to Brydon and Spivak’s arguments, Brewster claims that the ‘direct address to the second person “you” is immediate and intimate, dramatising the cross-racial encounter’ (69). This intimate encounter contains a similar impulse to Spivak’s critical intimacy and to Brydon’s version of this argument in relation to Brand’s poetry, in which she claims that the ‘intimate recognitions’ between the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ are entangled in such a way that ‘no one can any longer claim innocence with any kind of good faith’ (992). What we are foregrounding here is the intimacy of the relationship between the narrator and the viewer via the direct address from the ‘I’ to the ‘you’. In watching Ten Canoes the viewer is affected by the intimacy and immediacy of an event through the technique employed by the narrator in clearly enunciating the difference between the ‘I’ and ‘you’.

This ability to be affected and to affect draws upon Brian Massumi’s definition of affect, which he develops through a reading of Spinoza’s ethics (‘Notes’ xvi). In
Parables of the Virtual, Massumi argues that Spinoza’s ethics is the ‘philosophy of the becoming-active, in parallel, of mind and body, from an origin in passion’ (32). This beginning with passion, which Massumi relates to intensity, moves our reading away from the opening scene of the narrator’s laughter to the pivotal scene in which Ridjimiraril performs his death dance. The death dance scene is the one in which the viewer is most intensively interpellated by the narrator, who repeatedly asks the viewer to see details of Ridjimiraril’s dance. In the narrator’s repeated address to the viewer, he directs them to enter the scene with all their faculties. This moment is a moment of critical intimacy because although the viewer may try to enter the scene with passion and reason, she/he must still acknowledge a critical distance from it, for it is a ritual that she/he sees but sees differently from the audience watching within the film.

Sara Ahmed begins her book, The Cultural Politics of Emotion, with an analysis of pain ‘in order to show how even feelings that are immediate, and which may involve “damage” on the skin surface, are not simply feelings that one has, but feelings that open bodies to others’ (15). In Ridjimiraril’s death dance, he dances in order to show his people that he is dying, so that his fathers and his ancestors will come for him. Susan Leigh Foster in ‘Choreographing History’ argues that ‘[d]ance, perhaps more than any other body-centred endeavour, cultivates a body that initiates as well as responds’ (15). In his dance, Ridjimiraril opens his body to his people, but in the narration of this death dance, Ridjimiraril’s body also opens to the viewer, who cannot but be affected by his passion. Ridjimiraril responds to the needs of his people and initiates a response in the viewers. These bodies then open to each other, in a movement that may be read as an embodied ethics of becoming-active, for the narrator will not let the viewer be passive.

Ridjimiraril’s Death Dance

The narrator’s opening words in the film, which are quoted in the opening paragraphs of this article, establish his authority and subvert the white viewer’s expectations through the use of the coordinating conjunction ‘but’. He says, ‘But I am going to tell you a story’ and ‘But you want a proper story, eh?’ The third time in the film that the narrator uses this conjunction is to introduce Ridjimiraril’s death dance, which alerts non-Indigenous viewers to the fact that viewers have something to learn here, that it will defy expectations, and that viewers’ bodies should be open to it. After the canoes are completed and after Ridjimiraril and Yeeralparil go through the payback ceremony, the narrator says, ‘But there is still some of / this story left for me to tell you’.

The sorcerer continues this scene, this story, by whispering to Ridjimiraril that he is going to die and that the spirits are waiting. The narration slows down; it has a quality of breath, of inhalations and exhalations, with pauses between each thought, giving time for the audience to absorb each new piece of information and to wait for the next idea to emerge. Just as many Western fairytales use repeated themes and words in their narrative structures, so storytelling techniques in the
film employ repetition. These repetitions occur both aurally through the narrator and also visually through Ridjimiraril’s actions. The narrator guides the audience through the events: what Ridjimiraril is about to do and how the rituals of his death will unfold. In the darkness of the night, surrounded by the haze of the evening fires, he slowly stands alone and begins to dance his death:

_And the people know... //... see? They know._ // They come out of the bush, from everywhere. // And see how Ridjimiraril makes one very big effort... //... maybe his last effort. // Slowly he gets up._ // Look at him get up while he still has the strength. // Slowly he walks to the middle of the space in the camp. // And there, near the fires / so that everyone can see... // Ridjimiraril begins to dance... // his own death dance. // Soon the clapsticks will join in, // and the didgeridu, // and then singing. // Hear the clapsticks start. // And now the didgeridu //... as Ridjimiraril dances /... his own death dance. // He is becoming weaker. // But see? // See how he keeps dancing // until all his strength is gone. // Now he is getting tired. // Now his strength is finished, // and he lies down on the ground. // And now the warriors / finish the death dance for Ridjimiraril.

The narration begins with ‘_And the people know’; this ‘and’ excludes the ‘you’ from the body of knowledge concerning the process of death, as it is implied that it is ‘the people’ who possess knowledge, not the non-Yolgnu viewer. The people know that Ridjimiraril is dying, and the ellipsis signals a pause, a breath, a suspension of time. This pause allows viewers, both inside and outside the film, time to register the affect that this knowledge creates, that is created by the presence of the non-verbal body. The ellipses perform the function of waiting, reflective of the film’s opening narration. When the narrator commands and questions ‘_See?’’, the White viewer — who is not the people — is not certain what to see. There is bush, and, slowly, there are people emerging from the bush, but there is no certainty that this emergence signifies knowledge of Ridjimiraril’s death until the narrator confirms in the next frame that the people emerge from the bush from everywhere.

Repetition of the words ‘and’, ‘slowly’, ‘see’, ’dance’, ‘hear’, ‘soon’ moves the viewer through the scene of Ridjimiraril’s intensely slow suffering. The poetic performance of his shuffling feet, urged on by his arms opening and closing from the elbows is narrated in such a way as to support him with an imperative that the viewer ‘see’ and bear witness to his effort. Then the tone shifts, and the word ‘now’ is repeated, a word that connotes immediacy and further intimacy as Ridjimiraril can no longer move. As he lies down, his body opens to others, and the warriors’ bodies move onto the screen, finishing his dance. The absence of storytelling during the warriors’ dance signals a closure of the relationship between Ridjimiraril and the viewer, and demonstrates the limits of language and the material body. Now his body belongs to his people and not to the viewer.

To signal this shift, the pronouns move away from ‘I’ and ‘you’ and focus on ‘he’, ‘him’, ‘them’, and ‘they’:

_Ridjimiraril is waiting for them / to start singing again. // He wants them to sing his death song for him, // so that all his fathers / will know that he is dying, // and come to_
Opening the Body

him. // Hear now. // They are starting to sing. // You think he might be dead, // but he’s only waiting for this singing.

This is the time for the viewer to acknowledge that space is needed between the body of the viewer and the body of Ridjimiraril. If critical intimacy relies on both passion and reason, of engaging faculties and maintaining distance, then now is the time for distance. When the narrator says, ‘[h]ear now’, it is a bodily imperative to listen but also to be in the present, to be here, now, even from a distance. The audience hears the clap sticks, the didgeridoo, and the singing that begin one after the other. All the words that are being sung at this point in the film are not translated for the non-Yolgnu audience. These songs belong only to the community within the film and to select audiences who have been initiated into their sacred significance. For non-Yolgnu audiences, these songs exist in the realm of sound, with the meaning of the songs felt by intuition rather than understood by the intellect. Before Ridjimiraril’s heart stops beating, the men surround him and continue his dance. Their feet kick up dust, as if it is his last breath emerging from his lips.

After his death, the women weep in mourning and the men prepare his body. The narrator tells the audience that they are painting the design of his waterhole on him, which restates the theme established in the opening of the film, of the narrator’s spirit, of his ancestors’ spirits always returning to their waterhole. Ridjimiraril’s dark body is painted with red and then white ochre: two white lines down his sides, a meandering line down the middle, and a large white dot on his side. As the camera rises up into an aerial shot, as if following Ridjimiraril’s spirit, the audience is returned to the vision of the waterhole. Something disturbs the surface and circular ripples gently flow out, then the surface of the waterhole becomes still. Over the whiteness of the light on the water, a mirrored reflection of Ridjimiraril’s body painting can be seen: two black lines from the shadows of the trees frame the waterhole on either side, a meandering line of shadow through the middle, and the waterlilies, like large dots, float on the surface. This reflection shows the interconnection between the Yolgnu body and the land, and like the repeating words of the story being told, it reinscribes the ideas being communicated visually rather than orally. This visual recapitulation — the

Ridjimiraril’s death dance. (Photo: Jackson)
only one in the film — acts like the physical gestures of a storyteller; it enhances the story through non-verbal communication.

*Ten Canoes* represents an intimate embodied racialised encounter when it presents some of the intricacies of Yolgnu identity to a non-Yolgnu audience. Post-1788 Aboriginal identity has historically been defined by non-Indigenous people who have placed themselves in a position of dominance through colonisation and the policies and legislation that arise from this process. In contemporary Australia, cultural production is often a facilitator in challenging this stereotyping, enabling many different Indigenous individuals to voice their stories. *Ten Canoes* represents Yolgnu identity and culture expressed through Yolgnu voices and bodies. The film — through the narrator — invites non-Indigenous people to enter the narrative, and to do so with body and intellect, with passion and reason. To approach this film, this story, with critical intimacy is to open non-Indigenous bodies to Indigenous stories, to attend to the narrator’s bodily imperative to see and to know, and to emerge from the process uncertain about the extent of that knowledge but certain that viewers have seen, heard, and felt a good story.

**NOTES**

1 See Ian Henderson’s article ‘Stranger Danger: Approaching Home and *Ten Canoes*’ for a further analysis of the intersections between these two films.

2 See Crosbie and Henderson for further analysis of the structure of the film.

**WORKS CITED**


*Ten Canoes* 2006, dir. Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr, Madman and Palace Films.

Performative Bondage or the Limits of Performing Race in Caryl Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark*

In his novel, *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), Caryl Phillips fictionalises the life story of the Caribbean-born black American minstrelsy entertainer Bert Williams who became America’s most famous and best-paid performer at the beginning of the twentieth century. Other stories interwoven into Phillips’s imaginative retelling are those of Williams’s wife Lottie; his black stage partner George Walker; and Walker’s wife Ada. This polyphony of adopted voices — along with the inclusion of (fictional?) authentic material such as newspaper clippings, excerpts from interviews and original lyrics from some of Williams’s and Walker’s musical shows — allows Phillips to provide the reader with a sense of Bert Williams the person as well as with a sense of the times in which the novel is set.

In my article I trace the numerous implications and consequences of the ‘anomaly of a black person performing in blackface’ (Garber 281) on a personal as well as on a larger societal and cultural level. While painfully attempting to preserve his personal integrity and dignity in view of his adopted role, Phillips portrays Bert as the embodiment of Ralph Ellison’s ’sacrificial figure’ engaged in a self-humiliating and self-effacing act. More specifically, I attempt to read Bert Williams’s performance of race through the lens of Judith Butler’s concept of repeated and re-enacted identity. I begin my analysis with the question of whether her conceptualisation of the performativity of gender can be appropriated and redeployed in the context of race. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously argues that ‘[t]here is no gender [read race] identity behind the expressions of gender [read race]; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results … gender [read race] proves to be performativie … gender [read race] is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed’ (1999 33). That is, I wish to argue that just like gender, race is performative and cannot be traced back to some kind of original core. This anti-essentialising view suggests that it is the subject’s acts that produce the effect of an internal core or substance and that, in fact, this essence or identity is the fabrication of a public fantasy, a phantasmatic illusion that reduces — in this context — the black person to a ‘negative sign’ (Ellison 1572) of the ‘shuffling dumb fool’, the ‘coon’, the ‘happy-go-lucky nigger’.

According to Butler, the subject that is caught up in this web of interpellating calls may not only experience this condition as an act of violation producing
estrangement and division, but the interpellation could also lead to what Gayatri Spivak calls an ‘enabling violation’ (qtd in Butler 1993 122). That is, the subject responds to these interpellations by articulating its opposition. In this way, the subject achieves a certain agency which is paradoxically derived from ‘the impossibility of choice’ (Butler 1993 124 [italics in original]). Hence, one could argue that in imitating race, or more precisely, an inferior racialised subject, Bert Williams’s performance implicitly reveals the imitative structure of race itself. His performance dramatises the cultural mechanism of the fabricated fantasy and exposes the ‘phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction’ and thus reveals the ‘temporal and contingent groundlessness’ (Butler 1999 179) of a substantial ground of identity. However, tragically where this illusion of a fabricated fantasy may work for drag\(^1\), it does not work for Bert, the black minstrelsy performer, a subject that is fixed within a limiting identity of clearly circumscribed historical and cultural confines. As Judith Butler has furthermore outlined on the subject of parody: ‘Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony … indeed, parodic laughter depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered’ (1999 176–77).

While Bert Williams’s and George Walker’s deliberate decision to play the ‘coon’ seems to testify to a subjectivity that deviates from Judith Butler’s Foucauldian perspective of blindly following predefined scripts, this choice is everything but blind. On the contrary, Williams’s role is an enforced response to the powerful discourses which determine who one is rather than one determining it for oneself. The fact that the two young men entitle their performance ‘The Two Real Coons’, (Phillips 2005 11)\(^2\) which ironically suggests a superior degree of authenticity to minstrel shows performed by white players, is only further proof of Butler’s historicised and culturally demarcated definition of parody, because the intended irony is most likely lost on their racist audience. Bert follows and performs a script on stage that is put on public display for white laughter and debases not only himself but a whole group. While being hopelessly out of date, his performance resonates with the terrible legacy of slavery and the ongoing struggle for racial recognition and equality. However, his (predominantly) white audience never fails to recognise ‘[t]his buffoon. This nigger’ (84).

In the first of several scenes in the novel in which Bert looks at himself in the mirror, the following thoughts rush through his mind:

The first time he looked in the mirror he was ashamed… No longer Egbert Austin Williams. He kept telling himself, I am no longer Egbert Austin Williams. As I apply the burnt cork … I am leaving behind Egbert Austin Williams. However, I can, at any time, reclaim this man … he knew that he had disappeared … every night he would have to rediscover himself before he left the theatre … just who was this new man and what was his name?… Sambo? Coon? Nigger? However, the audience never failed to
recognize this creature. That’s him! That’s the nigger! He looks like that… I know him! I know him! But this was not Egbert Austin Williams… This was not any negro known to any man. This was not a Negro… This was somebody else’s fantasy’. (57–58)

The revelatory effect of the fabricated groundless fantasy is only visible and painfully palpable to the black people in the audience. If the novel’s protagonists keep insisting that this person, this ‘darker entertainer’ never existed, Bert’s tragedy is that the white public sees him as identical to his role. In fact, his white audience is only too happy to continue to embrace this de-formity, this act of stylised repetition that approximates the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, however illusory. In a racist environment, the performer’s assumed identity is therefore seen as his ‘true’ identity. White America demands these eternal repetitions of its fantasy for its confirmation of the stereotype and for its security. In the performer’s words they ‘must understand how to make them feel safe… They feel safe watching a supposedly powerless man playing an even more powerless thing. Williams and Walker have to respect this’ (121).

In ‘Significant Corporeality: Bodies and Identities in Jackie Kay’s Fiction’, Patrick Williams argues that Joss Moody, the transsexual black female trumpeter in Jackie Kay’s novel, Trumpet, ‘performs gender in order to perform music’ (45); similarly it may be said that Bert Williams performs race in order to perform theatre. To him, his art is everything. If, however Joss ‘performs his identity in order to enter a different performative space, where that identity no longer has substance or importance, where the corporeal is in fact no longer significant’ (45), the opposite is sadly and tragically true for Bert. His performance constitutes and affirms a corporeality that comes to be seen by his racist audience as his ‘true’ identity. If, for Joss Moody, the musical performance functions as ‘locus of truth’ and ‘[i]n its dissolution of individual ego and identity, the music grants access to a wider identity — transhistorical, transcultural, potentially universal’ (45) it is again the opposite effect that is created in the case of Williams’s performance: it fixes the individual ego — and by extension the entire group he represents — within a limiting identity of a historically and culturally predefined script. Deplorably, this ‘I’ cannot free itself from the aggregation of interpellations and their historicity. Contrary to being empowering or liberating, Bert’s performance is experienced in the resonant term of ‘performative bondage’ (6).

In her reading of Simone de Beauvoir, Butler suggests that gendered bodies (read racialised bodies) are ‘so many “styles of flesh”’, and goes on to say that ‘[t]hese styles are never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities’ (1999 177). She adds that gender (race) has cultural survival as its end and that those who will not agree to believe in these culturally constructed fictions will receive punishment: ‘The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress’ (1999 178). Bert is only too acutely aware of the possibility of
these punitive consequences when he says: ‘Mr. Bert Williams and Mr. George Walker are entertainers, and they have to respect the conventions of the time or face the consequences… Too much fighting talk is not going to help anybody’ (120) because ‘he knows not to strain the color line for he respects their violence … he will proceed with caution and neither irritate nor provoke,’ always vigilant not to break the ‘unwritten contract that exists between the Negro performer and his white audience’ (10).

Throughout Dancing in the Dark Phillips makes it abundantly clear that the pressures to conform to pre-existing expectations and scripts experienced by Williams are not limited to the physical confines of the theatre but extend beyond its boundaries into the performer’s larger social reality. This predicament is described in especially poignant terms when, during a race riot raging in the streets outside, the performer conceives of the events in exclusively histrionic terms: ‘But tonight his fellow white citizens are angry … Bert hides in his dressing room … ready to leave whenever America is ready to receive him … he will wait until … his audience is ready for him’ (68). In other words, Bert experiences his entire life as a performance. While evoking the topos of the theatrum mundi this passage is a clear illustration of Judith Butler’s conceptualisation of performativity as a human condition. In this case of racialised expectations, the black person is never free to ‘be’ himself but finds himself in the permanent condition of playing a role. This leads an exasperated Williams to ask the question: ‘Can the colored American ever be free to entertain beyond the evidence of his dark skin? Can the colored man be himself in twentieth-century America?’ (100). Sadly, however, towards the end of the novel, Bert’s final conclusion is that ‘[w]e are being held hostage as performers’ (208), condemned to please and serve the white man. Bert Williams can be described as a black man held in custody or, as it were, captured on the stage.

Phillips portrays Williams as entangled in the terrible net of catering to a racially demeaning and debasing stereotype while at the same time he is desperately trying to make a living and assert himself as an artist. In Tabish Khair’s words the performer is caught ‘in the double bind of using the actor’s art to confirm prejudices, which then blind their audiences to that art’ (online). However, at the time in which the novel is set, minstrelsy was the only way for a black performer to have access to mainstream entertainment. Opportunities and roles were limited for black artists. If, as the highest paid black entertainer of his times, Bert Williams can be viewed as the embodiment of the American Dream, the rules that allowed him access to this dream were dictated by whites. The money he made was white money. Unsurprisingly, his performance of racial ‘crossover’ — a term which describes the popularity of black performers with a white audience — enraged and frustrated his contemporaries. Aida Walker, his partner’s wife, alternately calls him a ‘smoked white man’ (186) and ‘[t]his damn fool know-it-all West Indian with his white heart … this white man’s fool’ (188).
It is important to keep in mind that minstrelsy is not a form of entertainment that originated in black culture; on the contrary it derives from white American folklore. As Ralph Ellison has famously pointed out in his essay ‘Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke’, ‘this “darky” entertainer is white’ (1571), his role has grown out of the ‘white American’s Manichean fascination with the symbolism of blackness and whiteness’ (1571) and in this white branch of American folklore ‘the Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable’ (1572). When the popular music performer Prince was popular, the black saxophonist and activist Morris Wilson accused him of being ‘the top white act out there right now!’ (qtd in Garber 274), an allegation that applies with equal force to Bert Williams’s situation.

As such, Bert’s career can be read as a model of Booker T. Washington’s philosophy as advocated in his famous Atlanta Exposition Address which assures whites of the black community’s devotion and humility. The impossibility of separating art and these social pressures has been discussed by several critics and addressed by Caryl Phillips himself in terms of the black artist’s responsibility to his community as he is always seen as synecdoche, as representing the ethnic whole.

The novel convincingly depicts how, with the changing times and an increase of African-American self-assertion and race pride, the pressure becomes quite intolerable for Bert Williams and he suffers from a deep sense of shame, embarrassment and guilt. Therefore, his only defence is to discuss his performance in terms of his art, the smoke-screen hiding him. In his effort to assert himself as an artist, Phillips has Williams insist that all he is doing is performing a role, playing a part all the while treading very carefully lest he should upset his white public:

The audience may think they are watching a powerless man but they are, in fact, watching art. We must understand how to make them feel safe, George. We must see the line. We cross that line, George, then who is going to pay to see us? … Right now nobody will pay to see the colored man be himself, so we must tread carefully. (121)

In one crucial scene Bert receives a visit from prominent members of the black community who, in an appeal to his sense of responsibility to the community, urge him to re-write his script and change his performance because his portrayal of a Negro character is ‘wounding the race’ (180). However, he withdraws into his protective shell and abdicates any responsibility for his representation of a black man: ‘Am I responsible for how the Negro is viewed in America? I am an entertainer, what would you have me do?’ (179) ‘He was merely playing a character. His darky was clearly not representative of them or their worlds. His coon was a very particular American coon as seen by a man from the outside’ (180).

Phillips’s novel reveals how this continuous effort of trying to escape the reality that black art is always seen in relation to the entire black people and not only as an individual act of artistic expression, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, gradually wreaks havoc on Bert Williams’s dignity, professional pride
and identity. Williams turns to alcohol and withdraws into himself physically and psychologically. This retreat is captured by Phillips in the fact that Bert finds most comfort in various ‘place(s) of refuge’ (93) as there are available to him — most prominently, his dressing room, but also the cabin on board the ship that takes him to the UK and Metheney’s bar. These restricted/restricting spaces constitute very apt spatial symbols of Bert’s physical, social, cultural and mental incarceration.

In this context it is interesting to note that *Dancing in the Dark* is also a novel that takes its place in the tradition of texts focusing on the troubled relationship between African-American fathers and sons. In Phillips’s novel Bert’s father functions as the performer’s conscience or, to speak in psychoanalytical terms, as his super-ego. As such, the father figure not only represents the biological father but the symbolic order which in turn stands for society at large, that is in this case, the black community. Williams significantly regards his adoption of the blackface minstrel mask as a betrayal of his father (‘It was in Detroit that he first betrayed his father’, [58]). Moreover, his father, his conscience, accuses him of being ‘deaf to everything but the roar of the white audience’ (144), of having ‘mortgaged his soul’ (159), accusations that echo Phillips’s comments below about Williams and contemporary hip-hop performers. In Lacan’s terms, Bert has failed before the paternal law so that his father — and by extension his community — subsequently disown him: ‘But this is not his son… This grotesque simpleton… This buffoon. This nigger’ (83–84). In his search for white approval, his Faustian pact with the devil, Bert Williams is yet another of the many Othello figures that have populated Phillips’s fiction from the very beginning of his writing career as seen most prominently in the re-writing of Othello’s story in *The Nature of Blood*.

Even though Butler herself is reluctant to address race as a category in her conceptualisation of performativity, various critics have argued that the performativity of race is nowhere more evident than in minstrelsy. As, for example, J. Martin Favor observes: ‘Minstrelsy suggests at its root that “race” is performable, if not always already performed. That is, with the proper make-up, a white person could be “black”, and by removing pigmentation, a black person could become “white”. “Race” is theatrical — it is an outward spectacle — rather than being anything internal or essential’ (123).

In this context Sara Ahmed’s discussion surrounding the notion of what she calls ‘the perpetual confirmation of the knowability of strangers’ (130) sheds further light on the issue of the performativity of race. Basing her analysis on John Griffin’s autobiography *Black Like Me* (1970), in which a white man changes his pigmentation from white to black through medical interference in order to find out the ‘truth’ of being black, Ahmed explores the way in which ‘skin … is seen to hold the “truth” of the subject’s identity’ and how this essentialising vision of the black skin is ‘over-determined by the “knowledges” available of blackness’ which are ‘already structured by the knowledges that keep a stranger in a certain place’ (131). Keeping in mind that in its conception minstrelsy is a white
form of entertainment, it is a manifestation of what Ahmed calls ‘an apparatus of knowledge that masters the stranger by taking its place’ (131). In other words, by assuming the blackface mask, the white minstrel performer regulates and hence confirms his, and even more importantly his audience’s, ‘knowledge’ about the black subject he represents. As a black man performing in blackface, Bert finds himself in the distressing position of seeing himself both ‘as a stranger and as imprisoned by the stranger’ (Ahmed 131 [italics in original]) and like Griffin, Bert finds himself ‘inhabiting the figure and the body of the stranger’ (131). For Ahmed ‘being estranged from one-self by passing for a stranger is hence narratable only as a story of “being imprisoned” by flesh. Passing for the stranger turns the stranger’s flesh into a prison’ (132). In white minstrelsy, the fantasy works because the difference between the performer and the subject performed is understood as both the player and the audience ‘know’ that the performer has taken the role of the other. In adopting the place of the stranger, the difference between performer and character is perpetually confirmed. In Bert’s case, precisely the opposite effect is achieved: it is not the difference but the disavowal of difference that is constantly reaffirmed. The difference is only painfully known to him and his black audience, but for his white audience his performance is not an affirmation of the difference, but of the identity with his theatrical role that is perpetually reaffirmed.

In the novel Williams insists that he is merely an artist performing a role, that ‘his character, this Shylock Homestead … bears no relationship to the real Egbert Austin Williams’s (12). Yet, applying Sara Ahmed’s words to this context, ‘the fantasy of an ability (or a technique) to become without becoming’ (132 [italics in original]) is sadly completely unavailable to Bert. Even though he has developed his technique to perfection it does not become visible as a technique. On the contrary, it is precisely because the minstrels are such skilled performers that, as Robert Nowatzki so aptly puts it, ‘their performances become unintentional acts of passing’ (125–26), passing for ‘coon’ characters, the only identity their audience allows them. Bert is not judged on the basis of his technique — apart from some of his fellow performers, like Ziegfeld who appreciates him as an artist (175–76) — but he is evaluated on the basis of the reproduction of the stereotypical demeaning image of the black man. Here the knowledge of strangers receives a double affirmation. The clear-cut difference between the performer and his role — as in the case of a white man impersonating a black man — is blurred in the case of the black man in blackface. The black man assuming the black minstrel mask becomes identical with the theatrical role he has adopted. It is precisely because he and his Negro audience know the difference that this performance is regarded as a form of theatrical self-humiliation. George Walker, the W.E.B. du Bois counterpart to Bert’s Booker T. Washington⁹, describes this sentiment as follows: ‘The one fatal result of this [white minstrelsy] to the colored performers was that they imitated the white performers in their make-up
as “darkies”. Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself” (119–20). On the other hand, for the white performer the assumption of the black minstrel mask is a set of practices through which knowledge of strangers functions to affirm a white, masculine identity. Again following Ahmed: ‘Through adopting or taking on signifiers of the subordinated other, passing becomes a mechanism for reconstituting or reproducing the other as the “not-I” within rather than beyond the structure of the “I”’ (132 [italics in original]). If Griffin, the white man, can say when looking at himself in the mirror ‘[h]e in no way resembled me’ (qtd in Ahmed 132), then Bert, as portrayed by Phillips, feels exactly the same way —‘this was not a man that he recognized’ (58). That is, Ahmed’s conclusion about Griffin that ‘the split between the “he” and the “I” is seeable within the mirror image of the face’ (132) is equally applicable to Bert’s situation. This relation between identity and looking is most clearly captured when the protagonist looks at himself in the mirror. The mirror is clearly one of the dominant images employed in Dancing in the Dark. In many passages throughout the novel there are descriptions of Williams staring at himself into his dressing room mirror, which for him ‘is the most important part of the room’ (89).

The pivotal scene (already partly quoted earlier) in which Williams scrupulously examines himself in the mirror when he blackens his face for the first time is saturated with affirmations that ‘this was not Egbert Austin Williams’s’ (58), that is, with Bert’s attempts at disassociating himself from the person that he sees himself becoming as he gradually applies the offensive make-up. It is also interesting to note how in an almost chant-like manner, Bert keeps repeating his full name in an effort to preserve his dignity and identity. As a result of the final transformation ‘He erased himself. Wiped himself clean off the face of the earth so that he found himself staring back at a stranger’ (58). However, if for the white subject passing for black is the possibility to ‘become without becoming’ (Ahmed 132 [italics in original]), Phillips portrays Bert, who is desperately trying to claim the same difference for himself, as knowing that his audience has already fixed him in their racist ‘hate stare’ to be the stranger that he has become, anticipating their cries of recognition ‘I know him! I know him!’ (58). Unlike Bert, the white minstrel performer and his body can put difference on and off as he likes using it like an extra layer of skin that can be easily wiped off. But Phillips reveals Bert as only too well aware that with his performance, he throws precisely this difference into doubt and seems to confirm and condone the domestication of the other. The theme of painstaking self-examination reaches its climax when at the end of his (fictionalised) life Bert spends the whole day staring into a hand-held mirror — significantly provided for him by his wife who refers to these sessions as her ‘husband’s daily performances’ (207) — in a final attempt to make sense of his identity and life.

Apart from the mirror the second most prominent emblem used in the novel is that of the mask. As an ambivalent symbol the mask is simultaneously a form
of deception or illusion, sometimes it can be both. On one hand In terms of race relations, the mask hides the true emotions (of slaves, blacks) and allows its wearer to have an identity without the ‘other’s’ (white master’s) detection. On the other hand, it gives the illusion that the slave/black person is exactly how the white person believes him to be: ignorant, primitive, lazy, and stupid. While it conceals an identity that may be understood as true and authentic, Bert Williams’s masquerade is in fact the means by which the conceptions about black people and their ‘authenticity’ is produced. It operates as an insidious reinforcement of the sanctioned norms of the dominant order. The mask exacts the spectator’s recognition and acceptance of the same racial identity (targeted for subversion) intended for entertainment purposes only. Bert’s performance perpetuates and confirms racial prejudice and stereotypes while it simultaneously increases entertainment value and reassures the white audience of (illusory) racial differences and boundaries. The ‘enabling violation’ — discussed earlier in this essay — of masking as a means of challenging and transgressing borders or of calling a ‘regulatory fiction’ (Butler 1999 175) into question is not at Bert’s disposal. The image he projects is dismaying, not powerful and effective.

In this use of the image of the mask, the novel resonates with echoes of some of the key texts from African-American literature, first and foremost Laurence Dunbar’s poem ‘We Wear the Mask’, but also passages from Richard Wright’s Black Boy and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man in which the protagonists express the need for performance, simulation, artificiality and masquerade.

In the novel, one of the most tragic consequences of Williams’s self-humiliating performance is that together with his personal dignity — as a male player — Bert is stripped of his masculinity and male pride. His representation of the stupid, ignorant fool caters to one of the extreme stereotypes associated with black male sexuality. According to Myra Jehlen: ‘One stereotype of the black man threatens violence and uncontrollable sex. The other has him contemptibly effeminate. Black men are seen simultaneously as excessively male and insufficiently masculine’ (46–47). Following Marjorie Garber ‘in some contexts black men “became” “women” in and for white Western culture (physically, through the violence of lynching and castration; socially, through their relegation to domestic service, subservience, and comic inconsequence)’ (281). While Bert’s performance predominantly reproduces the stereotype of comic inconsequence, it also reproduces the relegations of service and subservience. All of these assignations, taken together, result in his emasculation and metaphorical castration. To put it bluntly: the ‘dumb fool’ is simply not attractive sexually. As Louise Yelin has pertinently put it, in Dancing in the Dark ‘Phillips underscores the engendering of psychosexual pathologies by the traumas of racism’ (97). This trauma is most clearly reflected in Bert’s oppressed sexuality. Phillips’s representation of Williams as a disempowered, feminised or even sexually neutered character results in a sexless marriage completely devoid of physical contact. The fact that
in addition he calls his wife Mother (in Phillips’s spelling with a capital M) shows the depth of the character’s trauma.¹¹

In her discussion of Nella Larsen’s work, Judith Butler quotes Hazel Carby who says that ‘the repression of the sensual in Afro-American fiction in response to the long history of exploitation of black sexuality led to the repression of passion and the repression or denial of [female] sexuality and desire’ (Butler 1993 175).¹² This observation clearly applies to Bert’s situation as represented in Phillips’s novel in that he represses any kind of sensuality, on stage, through his re-enactment of the trauma of the de-sexualized black individual in the figure of the darky entertainer. Following Norma Alarcon, who has insisted that women of colour — and I would like to include men of colour — are ‘multiply interpellated’, Butler concludes that ‘this implies that the symbolic domain, the domain of the socially instituted norms, is composed of racializing norms, and that they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another’ (1993 182 [italics in original]). Historically, minstrelsy’s buffoon was specially constructed to be as sexually undesirable as possible.¹³ In adopting an aesthetic defined by race and playing the clumsy, clownish buffoon, Bert obviously gratifies the emasculated image imposed by a frightened white audience in need of domesticating and thus containing threatening black male sexuality.

Reading Phillips’s essay on Marvin Gaye in *A New World Order* alongside *Dancing in the Dark* further illuminates the issue of the ambivalent representation of black male sexuality in American culture. For Phillips, ‘White American society placed so much emphasis upon black male sexuality that it created for itself an imaginary nightmare’ (2001 45). Whereas early images of African-Americans tended to emasculate and neuter the black male, nowadays the fear is engendered by the image of the ‘superspade’ (2001 46). If Marvin Gaye had no idea how to escape the burdensome role of ‘Sex God’ imposed on him, Bert Williams would appear to have had no idea how to escape the image of the de-sexualized shuffling ‘coon’. Both men could be said to have ‘finally submitted to the power of the stereotype’ (2001 55) and as a result feared sexual intimacy.¹⁴ In analogy to what Phillips says at the end of his article on Marvin Gaye, Bert is also portrayed as understanding ‘that he must play the part that has been assigned to him, the part that he thought he could pick up and put down at will. A Mephistophelean pact’ (2001 59).

On several occasions during his writing career — and especially following the publication of *Dancing in the Dark* — Phillips has deplored the fact that up to this day the black male artist is still today determined by the racist assumptions about black male sexuality. While at times showing sympathy for the predicament in which the black male performer is caught up, as in his essay on Marvin Gaye, Phillips has become increasingly impatient with black performers who show themselves in compliance with images ordained by the essentialising politics of race. In the introduction to his essay collection, *A New World Order* (significantly subtitled ‘The Burden of Race’), Phillips offers a scathing critique of ‘racial
posturing’ (2001 13) as presented and articulated by black gangsta rappers. To Phillips ‘gangsta rappers bear no more relationship to African-American life than the Mafia does to Italian-American life’ (2001 14) and strongly condemns the fact that these ‘stand-off’ performances are ‘encouraged and rewarded by capitalists, both black and white’ (2001 14).

Phillips clearly wants to make Dancing in the Dark resonate for the present when he states that ‘one of the reasons why I wrote this novel now is because of hip hop’ (Phillips 2007 105). The author is highly critical of the — in his words — “minstrelsy” of some hip-hop artists (Foot 1). To his mind, today’s hip-hop artists, like Williams, degrade themselves in their race for riches. ‘For many making it in the rap world is something to aspire to — but I think of it as performative bondage, being tied down to a part that degrades and debases while it appears to esteem and enrich. I’m fed up with it. If you listen to rap most of it is about making money. It’s the same with the Williams’s story — make money at all costs’ (Foot 1).

Yet, the only time in the novel that Bert Williams chose not to use the offensive make-up (when he was asked to participate in a film) the audience’s reaction was one of violent rejection and the screening resulted in a ‘riot’ (191). Phillips shows Williams’s efforts to rationalise the violent response as indicative of a subservience that marked both his career and life: ‘They are angry because he has chosen not to cork his face … Between his needs and his audience’s expectations he walks a tightrope … but they too must understand that there is, on his part, no desire to cause offense’ (191). One could argue, as Phillips appears to do, that he is not only enslaved but, what’s more, he enslaves himself through the adoption of the blackface minstrel mask. He is portrayed by Phillips as seeming to accept white supremacy and the inferior status assigned him as a black person in America and behaves like an Uncle Tom — humble, dignified, patient in the face of the unregenerate racism of a white produced stereotype. Yet, a supposedly authentic review from the time included in the novel says tellingly: ‘Gone was the familiar “darky humour” heavily laden with pathos, and in its place he gave to us an uncorked colored person of cunning and resourcefulness that left a sour taste in the mouth of all who had paid money to attend this presentation’ (192). This quotation provides a concise summary of the burdensome requirements and limitations faced by the black entertainer (which basically says that ‘we pay you so you must dance our dance’). In other words, Williams, as portrayed by Phillips, finds himself trapped in a web of expectations and vicious stereotypes derived from the legacy of slavery and financially motivated capitalist dictates.

By way of conclusion, Dancing in the Dark engages with the representation of minstrelsy in order to point to the pressing issue of race and the ways in which racial categories have been and continue to be socially constituted. On the one hand, the novel addresses the postmodern concern of constructed identities and invites a reading which extends these conceptualisations to include race as a
category. On the other hand, despite being a historical novel set at the beginning of the twentieth century, with its foregrounding of the burdensome expectations of black entertainers, the text encourages its readers to acknowledge the topicality of the perpetuation of demeaning racial stereotypes as they still affect black artists well into the twenty-first century. With this novel, Phillips has again offered a text that demonstrates his ongoing concern, but also his growing impatience, with the ‘burden of race’ (2001 9).

NOTES

1 See Judith Butler, ‘The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed… In imitating gender [race], drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender [race] itself’ (1999 175 [italics in original]).

2 All further page references to the novel are given in the text.

3 Every evening Bert is involved in the struggle to ‘impress them [his audience] with the overwhelming evidence of his artistry’ (12).

4 Bert’s off-stage persona couldn’t contrast more starkly with his on-stage character. In a sentence that is repeated twice, Phillips describes him as possessing ‘old-fashioned dignity … civic pride’ and a ‘stout heart’ (3, 4). His ‘dignified presence’ (94) challenges white people’s perception of him and — in an echo of Booker T. Washington’s famous phrase ‘[c]ast down your bucket where you are’ — ‘they would rather he knew his place’ (94).

5 See Booker T. Washington: ‘you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen’ (596).

6 At what point do you tell an individual, ‘you are letting the side down’? ‘You should not do that because your responsibility is not to your art, your responsibility is to your imagined community’? (Phillips 2007 105).

7 See for example James Baldwin’s description of his problematic relationship with his father in Notes of a Native Son; or Alice Walker’s depiction of the relationship between Harpo and Mr in The Color Purple; or Toni Morrison’s rendering of the troubled relationship between Milkman and his father Macon Dead II in her novel Song of Solomon.

8 For more detail see: Petra Tournay, ‘Challenging Shakespeare: Strategies of Writing Back in Zadie Smith’s White Teeth and Caryl Phillips’s The Nature of Blood’; and Fernando Galván, ‘Between Othello and Equiano: Caryl Phillips’s Subversive Rewritings’. See also Zadie Smith’s similar wording in her description of the immigrant’s ‘devil’s pact’ (White Teeth 336) upon entering Britain.

9 Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) was a black rights activist who advocated a conciliatory approach to race relations whereas W.E.B. du Bois (1868–1963) was an uncompromising, radical civil rights champion.

10 See for example Richard Wright: ‘I smiled each day … to keep my position seemingly sunny [...] I laughed in the way he expected me to laugh’ (1475). In combination with the notion of servitude — right at the beginning of the novel Bert characterises his work as ‘sweating servitude’ (6) — the emblem of the mask also strongly evokes Langston Hughes’s poem ‘Negro Servant’ in which the speaker after a long working day: ‘[a]ll day subdued, polite./ Kind, thoughtful to the faces that are white’ returns to ‘Dark Harlem’ in the evening where he experiences ‘sweet relief from the faces that are white’ (1301).
In psychoanalytical terms, Bert is still caught up in the mirror stage and has not been able to transfer his feelings of narcissism onto a socially acceptable other.

In this context see Aida Walker’s bitter comment which clearly describes precisely this predicament of the African-American performer: ‘[p]rejudice means that, of course, we can never fall in love or have a romance at the center of our Williams and Walker productions. It is all too easy for a colored show to offend a white audience so instead we pretend that we have no such emotions, and we are all guilty of this pretense, all of us. We accept that the remotest suspicion of a love story will condemn us to ridicule’ (117).

Significantly, Bert’s partner George Walker represents the other extreme on stage as well as in life. He flaunts black male sexuality and engages in the punishable transgression of having an affair with a white woman.

In addition to being a racial and cultural ‘other’, Phillips constructs Williams as a sexual outsider who is involved in a sexless marriage and calls his wife ‘mother’.

WORKS CITED


Mervyn Morris was born in 1937 in Jamaica and taught at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica from 1970 until 2002 when he retired. He is well-known as a poet, critic and editor of anthologies of Caribbean writing. Morris was educated in Jamaica and at St Edmund Hall, Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship. After returning from England, he taught at Munroe College and was Warden of Taylor Hall between 1966 and 1970. He joined the English Department at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies in 1970. Morris was a visiting academic at the University of Kent in Canterbury between 1972 and 1973, and in Hull in 1983. In 1992 he was writer in residence at the South Bank Centre in London. He is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing and West Indian Literature at the University of the West Indies.

Morris’s books of poetry include: *The Pond* (London: New Beacon, 1973; revised edition 1997); *On Holy Week* (Kingston: Sangster’s, 1976; Sydney: Dangaroo, 1993); *Shadowboxing* (London: New Beacon, 1979); *Examination Centre* (London: New Beacon, 1992); and *I been there, sort of: New and Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006). Some of his poems, such as ‘Valley Prince’ and ‘To an Expatriate Friend’, have been anthologised many times and are considered as Caribbean classics.

As an anthologist, Morris’s contribution to the dissemination of West Indian literature is immense. He has compiled (or helped to create) significant anthologies, such as *Seven Jamaican Poets* (Kingston: Bolivar, 1971), *Jamaica Woman*, with Pamela Mordecai (Kingston: Heinemann Educational, 1980; London: Heinemann, 1985), *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry*, with Stewart Brown and Gordon Rohlehr (London: Longman, 1989), and *The Faber Book of Caribbean Short Stories* (London, 1990; Boston, 1991). Morris has also worked as a critic of West Indian literature and has examined various kinds of
Caribbean writing. Some of his essays and interviews have been collected in ‘Is English We Speaking’ and Other Essays (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999) and Making West Indian Literature (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2005).

Last but not least, in the 1970s and 1980s, Morris edited the work of several oral, performance or dub poets and prepared their work for publication. He nurtured the development of dub and performance poetry in Jamaica, and was one of the first academics to write about this art form. Morris knew Oku Onuora and Michael Smith personally and his friendship with these poets led to his interest in the art form. Thus he came to edit the late Michael Smith’s poems (It A Come. [London: Race Today, 1986; San Francisco: City Lights, 1989]). Mervyn Morris has also been a long-time admirer of Louise Bennett’s work and in 1982 he edited a new collection of her poetry entitled Selected Poems (Kingston: Sangster/s, 1982). More recently Mervyn Morris edited a collection of Dennis Scott’s poems entitled After-image (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2008).

He has acted as friend, adviser and mentor to many budding poets, critics and teachers, and his warmth and humour are legendary. In 2009 the Jamaican Government awarded him the Order of Merit for his contribution to West Indian Literature. The following interview was conducted in Jamaica in August 2010.

* * * * *

ERIC DOUMERC: I’ll begin by asking you a very simple question. You’ve worked for many years as an academic on performance poetry and orality. One of your first essays that got you noticed internationally is entitled ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’. I know that this essay was published in the 1960s, which was the time of independence, when West Indians were discovering or re-discovering their heritage, but did you have any personal reasons to write this article, apart from the obvious ideological ones?

MERVYN MORRIS: Yes, very much so. Growing up, in our household, we read, as in many households, Louise Bennett poems when they appeared in the newspapers and in some of her early books. We enjoyed many of the poems. Then later, when I was teaching in a secondary school, at Munro College, to which I returned in 1962, I included some Louise Bennett poems in the selection I used in teaching literature, because I liked them and I thought the students would find them attractive. Looking closely at some of her poems, it occurred to me that I might write an essay on them — I thought she was a lot better than some of the people who were getting anthologised. I wrote the essay largely out of my pleasure in reading her poems, which is how most of the stuff I write comes to me.

ED: So you’re telling me basically that in your household, as you were growing up, people knew about Louise Bennett’s poetry.
MM: Throughout the country people knew about her poetry. But I have at least one friend who used to tell me that my household was unusual. We also read P.G. Wodehouse, which is oral too. We liked Louise Bennett’s work — we were not uncomfortable with Creole. Some of the stuff being published in the newspapers in standard English was awful. My dad would read a few lines and then ask us to supply the next one, and we often got it right. The craft was so poor. We knew that Louise Bennett was a lot better.

ED: In your collection of essays entitled Is English We Speaking, there are pieces on Mutabaruka, Paul Keens-Douglas, Miss Lou and an essay entitled ‘Printing the Performance’. About Paul Keens-Douglas, would you see him as Trinidad’s answer to Louise Bennett, or is his poetry significantly different from Miss Lou’s?

MM: Paul has always acknowledged the influence of Miss Lou. He studied in Jamaica for a while. He thinks the world of Miss Lou and he invited her to share some of his performances, in North America mainly. They’re similar in many ways. Paul is a terrific performer, a terrific manipulator of audiences. In a sense, so is Miss Lou. But there’s something about Paul’s style — it works, it’s very efficient, but to me it seems more studied than Miss Lou’s.

ED: Would you say he’s more of a storyteller than a poet?

MM: Yes, absolutely. But Louise Bennett is a storyteller too.

ED: Then, in the same collection, there’s an essay on Mutabaruka, which is an account of one of his performances. In that essay, you seem to see Muta more as a cultural activist, more as an orator than as a poet. This is something that I noticed at the conference on the Rastafarian movement. There were several presentations on Muta, but apart from Carolyn Cooper’s talk, the other presentations were mainly about Muta as a cultural activist, or a black ‘icon’. My feeling is that Muta is a real poet, and that sometimes his poetic talent is overlooked.

MM: But he has led us in that direction really. I think he knows he’s a poet, he’s got accustomed to being called a poet now. He has many times disclaimed any interest in the shaping but it’s not true. I mean, the fact is he’s got better. I think in that article I gave one example where there’s an earlier version and a later version.

ED: Yes, the poem about the Statue of Liberty.

MM: Yes, and it’s quite clear he had improved on it. I don’t know how often he rewrites, but then you know, quite often the oral people, without thinking they’re rewriting, say something differently. But he defines himself
primarily as a cultural activist. He’s developed that more and more and more. He’s got his radio programme. He also has his own sound system that plays black music from all over the world. And he’s been on a television series quite recently, *Simply Muta*. You see, Muta’s great skill is that he is a communicator. He’s a kind of natural orator. He will come up with various things that he takes very seriously, but they’re said in a way that makes you laugh as well as think. He’s a cultural activist and that’s the way he wants to be seen. Another point I was making in that article is that I like some of the poems, but when you go to a Muta performance, the poems are often only a small part of the overall impact.

**ED:** Since we’re talking about Muta, maybe we should move on to dub poetry. You were one of the first critics who wrote about Mikey Smith, Jean Breeze and Oku Onuora. So what’s the state of dub poetry today in Jamaica? Is it a flourishing or a decaying art form?

**MM:** It’s a very reasonable question to ask, but I don’t have a good answer because I haven’t really kept up. Much of what I’ve written about dub poetry in general is derived from conversations with Oku. Before Oku started promoting the term ‘dub poetry’, Linton [Kwesi Johnson] had written of deejays overdubbing rhythmic phrases on to the rhythm of music, and had called some of them poets, but that was something I learnt much later.

**ED:** Ironically, if you look at all these early pioneers of dub poetry, Oku, Muta, LKJ, Jean Breeze, Oku is the one who’s probably the least recognised today, internationally. Muta has a huge profile, Linton tours regularly, but Oku seems to keep a low profile.

**MM:** I doubt that he wants to keep a low profile, but I don’t think he’s been writing as much as the others. He is more concerned, I think, with trying to get films of dub and the whole recording scene.

**ED:** You’ve edited the work of several oral poets like Miss Lou, Mikey Smith and Jean Breeze. Your poetry is quite different from these poets’ work and your background is different from their background. So do you or did you see yourself as some kind of cultural translator, as a bridge between the world of oral poetry and academia?

**MM:** I would understand if you saw me in that role, but I never saw myself as that. I’ve told you how I came to write about Louise Bennett. About me and dub poetry — what happened essentially was that in 1975 to 1976, when John Hearne was away, I was director of the Creative Arts Centre on the Mona campus. And when I was there, late in 1975, Leonie Forbes, the terrific Jamaican actress, phoned me and said she had some poems by someone who was in prison, and she wondered whether I would have a
look at them. They were by Oku Onuora, who was Orlando Wong at that time. I liked some of them. Leonie said: ‘You should go and tell him that!’ So I went and I became one of his regular visitors. I talked with him a lot and lent him some of the books he wanted. He talked to me about what he was doing in his poems, suggesting some of the rhythms of Jamaican popular music. And as it happened, I had met Linton when I was at the University of Kent in 1972–73. So I was able to tell Oku that what he was doing was similar to what Linton had been doing, and I lent him some work by Linton.

ED: So you did act as some kind of ‘bridge’.

MM: Yes, but what I’m resisting is the idea that I did it self-consciously. It fits the pattern that you’re talking about, certainly. But my basic line is that the bridge is not necessary, and I know a number of people for whom it is not necessary. People like Eddie Baugh, like Dennis Scott, have always recognised excellence in some of the popular music, and in Louise Bennett. You can say there’s a kind of bridge yes, but it’s simply that you like the stuff and you talk about it, and some of what you say makes sense. About translation, there’s one instance where that is certainly what I was doing, that’s when I was helping Mikey Smith towards his *It A Come*. Because in a sense that was the assignment! I did what Mikey asked me to do. He was already making a huge impact as a performer and then he wanted to get published. He asked if I would help him put things on the page; so we started working on that. Somewhat earlier, I had helped Oku with *Echo*. But what I’ve done in relation to Oku and Mikey, I’ve also done in relation to some standard English poets who give me stuff and ask me what I think of it.

ED: What about Jean Breeze? I understand you edited her work too.

MM: Although *Race Today* credited me with having edited *Riddim Ravings*, I didn’t really see it as something that I had edited, though I helped at an early stage. Jean was one of the poets who asked me to look at stuff and she was very responsive to some of the things I said.

ED: At one stage, Jean Breeze distanced herself from the dub poetry scene and said that she did not want to write poems to a one-drop reggae rhythm.

MM: To some of its most talented practitioners, dub poetry is a limiting category. They see themselves simply as poets.

ED: What about Louise Bennett? How did you work with her on the 1982 collection? What was it like?

MM: Oh, it was a wonderful experience! She had ultimate control, and she agreed with most of what I proposed. I made the selection which she approved. When I was drafting the notes and questions, she would tell me,
very gently, what a particular detail meant and where it came from, and so on. She was immensely knowledgeable, a great scholar of Jamaican folk culture. A key thing I did which is subject to serious question, but was done completely with the agreement of Louise, was try to get a common-sense orthography.

**ED:** Yes, you wrote about it in ‘Printing the Performance’.

**MM:** Yes, what I said is that in many, many instances, there were words and phrases which gave difficulty in the forms in which they had been written in previous editions. We said, ‘Let us assume that the reader of this thing has already been taught to read standard English. We want to give signals that this is not standard English, but where traces of the standard English spelling might be helpful, let them stay’. It makes a lot of sense to transcribe ‘friend’ as ‘FRENN’, but in *Selected Poems* it’s spelt ‘FRIEN’, so that someone who’s been reading standard English constantly will pick up right away that this is ‘friend’ without a ‘d’. But when I asked Louise whether she would approve of ‘ha fi’ for ‘haffi’, she wouldn’t. She chose ‘haffi’.

**ED:** You also edited *Voiceprint*, an anthology of oral and related poetry, with Stewart Brown and Gordon Rohlehr. So how did you work with these two researchers?

**MM:** In the initial project, it was suggested that Gordon would do the Eastern Caribbean, Stewart would do Britain (Black British) and I would do the rest of the Caribbean, Jamaica and other places. We did some of the early selections on that basis. I think it’s a good anthology, but it was made much better by what Gordon did at the end, which was rearrange it on different principles from the way it had first been conceived. And he wrote that superb introduction.

**ED:** Moving on to your poetry now. Many of your poems seem to be about the relationship between the poet and the reader, or between the poets and literary critics. Poems like ‘At a Poetry Reading’, ‘Data’, ‘Question Time’ tackle the issue of the relationship between poets and the outside world, or poets and academia. Would you agree with that very blunt characterisation?

**MM:** I try to stay away from is regarding the sense of any one poem as expressing my view of a whole lot of situations. The poems are very often trying to say something that may have some kind of currency in one specific situation. [Mervyn Morris reads from ‘At a Poetry Reading’]. Yes, trying to avoid ‘the false pretence’, that’s the heart of it, really. And ‘manage’ is important too, you know, ‘manage’ as in ‘If I can just manage to do so and so’ but it’s also ‘manage’ as in control or organise or arrange the occasion or epiphany.
ED: In a lot of your poems, you use paradox, which reminds me of the Metaphysical poets.

MM: Oh, it’s a very big influence, mainly because when I came to the University College of the West Indies in 1954, Professor Croston taught a number of the Metaphysical poets. We did Donne, Herbert, Marvell, bits of Vaughan. Plenty of ambiguity and paradox. And we were reading critics such as Empson and Cleanth Brooks and learning to recognise that a word or a phrase might be doing several different things at the same time.

ED: In the poem entitled ‘Post-colonial Identity’, you seem to attack the post-colonial school which you see as formulaic. The last line of the poem is in Creole (‘white people language white as sin’). Could you comment on that aspect of the poem?

MM: Well, it’s working against the line before. That’s a very helpful question… My answer’s coming from very far back, I think. When we were taught English at school, it was still a common notion that if you thought clearly you would write in good English. And there was also the notion that Creole was limited in its ability to deal with complex ideas. But during my university time at Mona I realised that Creole could perfectly well do what you chose to make it do. And a bit later, in the late 1960s, it became quite fashionable for some of the academics to sometimes teach or lecture in Creole. George Beckford, the economist, did some public lectures in Creole. There was also Abeng magazine but it didn’t last long — it was a magazine with revolutionary ambitions, and most of the writing was in Creole. More and more we were realising that Creole can do the work we choose to make it do.

ED: Some of your poems like ‘A Poet of the People’, ‘Afro-Saxon’ and ‘Advisory’ seem to deal with the pressures intellectuals had to bear in the revolutionary 1970s when art for art’s sake was challenged by a more social approach. You seem to take the view that social art is a sell-out.

MM: That’s probably a view I have grown away from. But a poem that makes your point is ‘Advisory’. The key thing is the last couple of lines with ‘Don’t let anybody lock you in’ — and that’s a very Jamaican line by the way, because that ‘in’ rhymes with ‘between’. ‘Don’t let anybody lock you een’.

ED: In some of your poems you use Creole very sparingly and to telling effect, and there are other pieces like ‘Valley Prince’ or ‘For Consciousness’ which are written entirely in Creole. What were you trying to achieve with the poems written entirely in Creole? Did you make a conscious decision to write in Creole or did they come naturally in Creole?
Interview with Mervyn Morris

**MM:** Neither, perhaps. Or perhaps both? You sort of feel you way into the voice. Take ‘Valley Prince’: I started drafting it in standard English and that was not the voice that I felt it wanted.

**ED:** *In some of your Creole poems, I seem to hear Dennis Scott’s influence.*

**MM:** He was a very good friend. But I don’t know if I see the influence where you see it. I’m not sure. In the period in which many of the poems were written, the late 1960s, Dennis was a good friend. So was Tony McNeill … and Wayne Brown, the Trinidadian poet.

**ED:** *Some of your poems are about human relationships, love, life, and domesticity (‘Proposition One’, ‘Togetherness’). One of them, ‘The Roaches’, is quite enigmatic.*

**MM:** It was originally an element in a longer poem about moving house. People talk about me writing short poems. Sometimes from the beginning they were short, but quite often they are what’s left of a much longer draft. ‘The Roaches’ is a poem I still have a lot of time for. Where I place it in a reading helps to colour the way it’s received. Sometimes it’s placed next to a political section, sometimes it’s somewhere else. But it’s really all about the fact that whatever the problems are, they are likely to recur!

**ED:** *Well, thanks for answering my questions.*

**MM:** Thank you for talking to me!
We had a home. The roaches came
to stay. They spread until they had control
of kitchen, pantry, study, then the whole
damned house. We fought them, but the game
was set. We sprayed, and they kept breeding all the same.

We found a house with plenty space,
clean and dry and full of light.
We checked beneath the sink — no roach in sight.
We checked the cupboards — not a trace
of roaches. No roach anyplace.

And so we moved.

The roaches came.

We sprayed, but they kept breeding all the same.
VALLEY PRINCE

_for Don Drummond, 1943–1969_

Me one, way out in the crowd,
I blow the sounds, the pain,
but not a soul
would come inside my world
or tell mi how it true.
I love a melancholy baby,
sweet, with fire in her belly;
and like a spite
the woman turn a whore.
Cool and smooth around the beat
she wake the note inside mi
and I blow mi mind.

Inside here, me one
in the crowd again,
and plenty people
want mi blow it straight.
But straight is not the way; my world
don’ go so; that is lie.
Oonoo gi mi back mi trombone, man:
is time to blow mi mind.
AT A POETRY READING

Negotiating strangers
and inscrutable desires,
the old pretenders hope to be
accepted as constructive liars.

If, playing parts, they can avoid the spurious
(the false pretence, the histrionic fraud)
and manage the occasional epiphany,
some of the other actors will applaud.
Mocking and Farting: Trickster Imagination and the Origins of Laughter

INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the use of trickster imagination and the appropriations of trickster mythology by writers from formerly colonised countries as a rich and relevant arsenal of material for their project of cultural transformation and critique. It shows the trickster figure as an ambivalent image and discusses the functions of laughter in trickster imagination. One of the most famously recorded trickster figures is Coyote, the trickster of American Indian mythology (Radin 1972). Coyote is a somewhat unfortunate being. He suffers accidents like getting his head stuck in the empty skull of an elk, which forces him to stumble about until he falls into a river, or he is shot full of holes after having been trapped by Rabbit. Coyote has also been known to burn his own anus, or to have most of his penis eaten in an accident with a chipmunk. The trickster is a multiform, as well as a multicultural, figure. The shapeshifter of usually animal form who can change through all kinds of disguise is prominent in myth cycles of almost every culture, and is kept alive particularly strongly in Indigenous cultures.1 In many of the tales, fellow animals make a fool of the trickster and have just as much fun at the trickster’s expense as the reader when reading these stories.

Trickster stories, however, are not just stories of embarrassing failure, but often also stories of success. A North American Indian story from the Winnebago myth cycle recounts the creation of the world. Wakdjunkaga, the Winnebago’s trickster figure, scatters all living creatures across the face of the earth with one enormous fart, which leaves them laughing, yelling and barking. Lawrence Sullivan, who retells this myth of origin in his short overview of tricksters, informs us that this is ‘an ungracious parallel to the Winnebago’s solemn account wherein Earthmaker creates a quiet and static world order in which each species remains in a separate lodge’ (Sullivan 1987a 45).

This short account suggests what epitomises trickster tales right from their beginnings — laughter. Trickster tales appear wherever there is a hearty laugh, whenever things become so solemn that they provoke laughter. In many cultures and their mythical cycles, sacred accounts of the creation of the world are often accompanied by analogous myths that challenge their ritualised seriousness. These alternative myths tell the story of how tricksters create the ‘unofficial’, dirty and physical worlds we live in, of how the creation of the gods is counterbalanced by a different creative agency — the chaotic and comic acts of the trickster. It is
striking how these myths of origin almost always relate to the origin of laughter. Laughter and creation are closely linked. Laughter either precedes the bringing into being of something new (the world or such cultural goods as language), accompanies creation, or or immediately succeeds it.

This essay is about how trickster tales do not just induce laughter but are about the creation of laughter itself. Looking at some examples of myths from primarily South American backgrounds that have this point as their central theme, I aim to show how in the telling of myths laughter has been seen and used as a tool for specific ends. From there I ask what Trickster’s comic vision is — what is represented in the stories, but also what is used as a rhetorical strategy for continued mythmaking — and what relevance such a trickster imagination might have for the postcolonial condition. If Trickster tells us about the creation of laughter, what kind of laughter is brought into the world with him or her?

Laughter, Trickster Imagination, and Postcolonialism — Political Dimensions of Artifice

In the first volume of his famous *Mythologies*, Lévi-Strauss records a whole series of myths from South American regions, mainly central Brazil, that are based on the theme of laughter. The main characters in Tucuna mythology for example, Dyai and Epi, embody the pairing of the solemn aspects of creation with the nature-and-culture bridging aspects of trickster creation, which is usually motivated by hunger and sexual desire. Dyai and Epi are twins. Dyai created humanity, the arts, laws, and customs, but Epi was a trickster, a muddler, and an impudent fellow; if he wanted to take animal form, he often changed into an opossum. It was he … who discovered his brother’s secret wife in the bone flute where Dyai had hidden her …; this wife, Tul, was born of the fruit of *Poraqueiba sericea*. He forced her into betraying her presence by making her laugh … at the fish leaping to escape from the heat of the fire, while he himself undid his belt and danced, so that his penis quivered like the fish. He raped his sister-in-law with such violence that the sperm spouted from her mouth and nostrils. She immediately became pregnant and was too big to go back into her hiding place. (171)

This is an etiological tale about the opossum, whose forked penis, according to Lévi-Strauss, caused the belief that it copulates through the nostrils and that the female sneezes its young into its marsupial pouch (171). Trickster laughter here makes someone laugh so that she reveals her presence. It serves as a means for the fulfilment of the trickster’s sexual drive. This theme of inducing laughter that destroys victims’ camouflage — their place of hiding or disguise — which provides protection from tricksters’ desire, or often from the wrath of the gods, can be found frequently in trickster myths. Trickster laughter, however, is also used for ends other than the fulfilment of desire:

After bringing men forth from the bowels of the earth, the demiurge Orekajuvaakai wished to make them speak. He ordered them to stand in single file one behind the other, and sent for the little wolf to make them laugh. The wolf performed all sorts of
Mocking and Farting

... he bit his tail, but all in vain. Whereupon Orekajuvakai sent for the little red toad, whose comic gait amused everybody. After the toad had passed in front of the row for the third time, all the men began to speak and laugh heartily.

(Lévi-Strauss 123)

This little episode illustrates that trickster laughter is not just about the often-dirty tricks trickster plays but also, and importantly, about what laughter creates. Here it is the ultimate gift of culture, language. Notably, the two alternative creators, a god and the trickster, are placed within one story. The demiurge needs help to finish his creation, and speaking and laughing are joined in a causative connection. It is also interesting that for this act, not just anyone will do. The wolf performs all sorts of tricks, but he doesn’t have the power of the trickster; it is the little red toad who can make ‘men’ laugh that performs the trickster’s work.

Lévi-Strauss employs a series of myths revolving around laughter to illustrate his argument about the raw and the cooked which he sees as the disjunction between nature and culture. He argues that this contrast underlies all myths relating to laughter (132). Within this framework, he adds to the myths that recount the origin of laughter by showing how certain myths establish a connection between laughter and fire, which is primarily desired for cooking. In these myths, the monkey and the prea (a guinea-pig like animal with a short muzzle) are the main agents involved in tricking their way to the fire, which is usually stored in the mouth of a primordial being (128–32). But it is Lawrence Sullivan who recounts a myth that is most clearly connected to laughter. Hasimo, a mythic bird-man of the Venezuela-Brazil border region, steals fire from a primordial alligator which stores the first fire in its mouth. Hasimo shoots excrement into its face, which forces the alligator to laugh and Hasimo snatches the fire from its open mouth (1987b 52). Lévi-Strauss’s and Sullivan’s myths are just two examples of how laughter and cultural invention are related. Trickster brings cultural goods and cultural practices into being: fire, food, hunting, painting, business transactions and many more, which he usually steals from the gods and brings to human beings. It is this function that forms the basis and logic of the trickster imagination. It is important to note, however, that the techniques deployed to fulfil this function are part and parcel of Trickster’s comic vision. With their ingenuity, lying and stealing, mocking and teasing, or sometimes just by chance, tricksters invent and create the natural as well as the cultural world (Hynes & Doty 15, 213; Hyde 8), and it is these strategies that make them the embodiment of vitality, imagination and creativity in so many myths of origin.

Cheating, cunning, deception, and trickery belong to the most effective, most widely used and oldest strategies of survival in nature. According to evolutionary biologists, the first attempts to trick others appeared about 540 million years ago, when the sense of sight started to evolve. Defenceless organisms found themselves suddenly exposed to the hostile glare of stronger adversaries. With the pre-Cambrian animal diversification and animals that moved volitionally the
dynamic play of prey and predator was unleashed. Life before shows no evidence of predation; it was tethered or floated randomly (Raff). For reasons easy to grasp, zoologists argue, those newly spied on were in a rush to recede into invisibility again. Under this pressure, evolutionary creativity was called for and many species discovered a growing arsenal of optical tricks and ploys to deceive their pursuers. They began to invent camouflages, to experiment with colours, shapes, textures and designs, and finally, to perfect the deception by slipping into other identities or mimicking them. This plight activated an immense creativity and led to an enormous diversification. So one can find, for example, poison arrow frogs whose bright colours warn predators of their lethal chemicals; chameleons, the masters of camouflage whose astonishing ability to change colour allows them to merge into their habitats; or insects and lizards mimicking plants or bark, or their own predators.

Concepts of biology have been drawn upon by postcolonial writers and critics in order to demonstrate the genesis, or evolution, of the imagination in the context of violated civilisations (see for example the work of Wilson Harris). The question of how and in what form imagination in formerly colonised cultures goes on to develop after the often near extinction of its old form by the imposed imagination of dominating cultures is a vital one. Its mutations tell a lot about how newness and change — brought about by the all-too-often catastrophic events concomitant with imperialism and colonisation — are dealt with in the arena of cultural production and politics. Mimicry as a means of adapting to, as well as coping with, one’s environment — in this case the new environment as formed by the cruelties of a colonial past — is a concept that has been used and discussed at least since V.S. Naipaul’s novel, *The Mimic Men*, appeared in 1967. But whereas for Naipaul mimicry is uncreative, Walcott, argues in ‘The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?’ that:

Mimicry is an act of imagination, and, in some animals and insects, endemic cunning. Lizards, chameleons, most butterflies, and certain insects adapt the immediate subtleties of color and even of texture both as defense and as lure. Camouflage, whether it is in the grass-blade stripes of the tiger or the eyed hide of the leopard, is mimicry, or more than that, it is design. What if the man in the New World needs mimicry as design, both as defense and as lure? We take as long as other fellow creatures in the natural world to adapt and then blend into our habitats, whether we possess these environments by forced migration or by instinct. That is genetics. (55)

In the context of the politics of adaptation to new environments, Walcott brings together the concepts of mimicry, imagination and genetics.

The question that poses itself is what kind of evolutionary creativity is invoked by the plight of the postcolonial condition, the need to adapt and to evolve as a reaction to imposed changes.2 Walcott’s statement about mimicry hints at the type of creativity and imagination that is at play — one of artifice and trickery in order to defend. Artifice is connected with the question of instrumentality. Mimicry as the art of mischievous imitation is one strategy of survival. It is a concept
of special interest in the context of postcolonialism. Mimicry, for both Naipaul and Walcott (as in evolutionary biology) is dependent on a mirror in order to be successful; it needs to feed on models. As in biology, where the development of prey and predator is inextricably linked, there is a dynamic play between ‘colonisers’ and ‘colonised’. In their coexistence, both feed on each other, and the borderline between contestation and complicity is at best thinly drawn. Once seen, not only does the prey have to conceive of ploys to defend itself, but the predator too, has to be inventive in order to react to changes in its prey. A play of mutual impetus for evolution and creativity is initiated and predators profit as much from the deceptions and camouflages developed by the prey as does the prey itself.\(^3\) In postcolonial contexts, then, it is interesting to look at whether a similar co-evolution exists between colonisers and colonised, with a promotion of adaptation and diversity by evolved interaction among ‘organisms’ toward a mutually beneficial arrangement, or whether the two groups change independently.

The Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, for one, sees conqueror and conquered as being involved in a shared process, although this, for him, is primarily a process of mutual erosion because of the workings of creation and destruction implicit in the division of the world into dominant and subdued cultures. Harris’s concern is the shaping process worked by this experience on exploiter and exploited alike ((Harris 1999a 189; Griffiths 191).\(^4\)

The biological context of mimicry lies at the very core of postcolonialism and the postcolonial condition. Homi Bhabha, in his essay, ‘Of Mimicry and Man’, identifies mimicry as a core mode of colonial discourse (86), and as one of ‘the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge’ (85):

In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat … comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself’. And that form of resemblance is the most terrifying thing to behold. (90)

Bhabha quotes Lacan in the epigraph to his essay: ‘The effect of mimicry is camouflage’. Bhabha does not mention it, but the figure embodying mimicry in many postcolonial texts is Trickster. The most crucial aspect of Bhabha’s notion of mimicry is the ‘ambivalence’ of mimicry’, which he defines as ‘almost the same, but not quite’ (86): ‘… the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference’ (86) [emphasis in original]. Trickster imagination is the strategic performance of mimicry, of becoming mottled against a mottled background (as Lacan describes mimicry in Bhabha’s opening quote). Trickster lives in the ‘ambivalent world of the not quite’ (91), but through his cunning and misfortunes relentlessly reveals the tight web spun by mimicry:
imitated and imitator are woven into a web of interdependent existence and becoming, where difference threatens to disappear but never does, and where the result or direction of the becoming is never predictable or controllable. Mimicry thus becomes mockery — of both imitated and imitator — with all its effects of the comic and threat.

Artifice and deception, ingenuity and mischievous imitation are Trickster’s arts. Importantly, Wilson Harris, a highly influential ‘postcolonial’ thinker, places tricksters at the centre of his work, both fictional and critical, which at its core is about the unfinished genesis of the imagination. The fact that tricksters are often associated with originary myth, as for example in etiological tales, makes them interesting for postcolonial writers concerned with the ‘genetics’ of the imagination. It is the work and potential social or political function of the imagination that is at issue here.

As described earlier, mythological trickster figures embody imagination and creativity; trickster myths tell of the creation of cultural goods and cultural practices. As eternal boundary breakers and crossers of frontiers, trickster figures symbolise what Wilson Harris has described as the ‘unfinished genesis of the imagination’. For Harris, the ‘element of tricksterdom’ is at the heart of the rise of the ‘imaginative arts’ in formerly colonised cultures, and the artist must, in fact, become a trickster in order to negotiate the demands of the new and old world order:

> It is this element of tricksterdom that creates an individual and personal risk absolutely foreign to the conventional sanction of an Old Tribal World: a risk which identifies him (the artist) with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples but requires of him, in the same token, alchemical resources to conceal, as well as elaborate, a far-reaching order of the imagination which, being suspect, could draw down upon him a crushing burden of censorship in economic or political terms. (199b 166)

The imaginative and creative resources in culture are vital to negotiate the spaces of past, present, and future in postcolonial societies. Bhabha describes a project similar in function to Harris’s ‘unfinished genesis of the imagination’:

> Postcoloniality, for its part, is a salutary reminder of the persistent ‘neo-colonial’ relations within the ‘new’ world order and the multi-national division of labour. Such a perspective enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance. (1994b 6)

The interplay between colonised past and exploitative present still creates the material realities for many societies. Like Harris, Bhabha asks how ‘strategies of representation or empowerment’ come into being (1994b 2). Bhabha finds them formulated in the ‘in-between spaces’, the ‘interstices’. The in-between spaces are where culture is located and where ‘newness enters the world’ (1994c 227). Trickster — shapeshifter and boundary-cropper — inhabits the in-between, and trickster imagination becomes a space for the evolution of strategies and agencies of empowerment, or for what Frantz Fanon has famously described as ‘negating activity’ (qtd. in Bhabha 1994b 9). The imaginative elements surviving — and
Mocking and Farting

re-created — in trickster stories, Wilson Harris shows, form a ‘trickster gateway’ (1999b 166) into an art that can take on this function for society — new original creative art that can imagine the future in the face of contemporary crisis and ‘see through or break through a hang-over of the past’ (1999c).

The import of the work of the imagination as a cultural and political fact has also been outlined by the Indo-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in his Modernity at Large (especially 5–11). In showing how the construction of imagined worlds and imagined selves become objective social realities, Appadurai emphasises the role of the imagination in the struggle for cultural identity. The imagination’s political aspects clearly speak of its ambivalent character. Imagination is used or abused for ideological purposes, and also produces ideologies. At the same time, however, it can just as well provide new resources for identity and mobilise energies for creating alternatives to assumptions of monoculturalism, essentialism, or the unified nation, which have been shown to be dangerous or invalid. Trickster imagination comes in handy for writers addressing the many problems of a postcolonial world. Robert Pelton, who is primarily working in the West African context, defines Trickster as the image of the human mind and imagination; an image of the human power to create images (131–32). Lewis Hyde expresses a similar idea: ‘several places in the trickster mythology itself seem to me to suggest a creation story for the imagination’ (58). The momentousness of laughter becomes evident in that it is either the cause, driving force, or result of creation. It is not only the art of something, like cooking or hunting, but also art itself that is brought into existence by tricksters.

What, then, characterises the art trickster laughter brings into being? The performances of tricksters have been vividly and aptly described by Hyde (252–80), who examines the acts of disturbance tricksters perform. Trickster goes for the vulnerable points, attacks the Achilles’ heel. In a tale among the Ossetes in southern Russia reported by Hyde, the handsome hero Soslan is invulnerable except for a secret weak spot in his knees, a weakness which the trickster Syrdon, who is disguised as a woman, manages to discover. The other Ossetic heroes are much amused by Soslan’s invulnerability and roll a saw-toothed wheel down a hill just for the fun of seeing it bounce away from Soslan’s body. But Syrdon inspires them to aim the wheel at Soslan’s knees, and so the hero is cut down. From this story Hyde concludes that even the eternals are vulnerable at their joints. The word that provides Hyde with the unifying image to describe the cultural work that tricksters do is the Latin articulus. Hyde elaborates on its etymology and associations. Articulus can mean both a joint in the body and a turning point in the solar year, and for Hyde both represent moments of crisis. The solstice marks the crisis or turning point in the life of the sun when it seems to stop growing and begins to die. The scope of the word becomes clear when looking at its root and many related terms: all terms coming from the old Indo-European root ar, meaning ‘to join’, ‘to fit’, and to ‘make’, have to do with some sense of joining.
The two Latin nouns *ars* and *artus* echo this. *Ars* refers to skill, artifice, to craft and crafty action, while *artus* means a joint in the body. From this etymology in combination with the trickster stories, Hyde suggests thinking of trickster artists as artus-workers, or joint-workers. Tricksters are fond of the flexible or movable joint; they are joint-disturbers. Another disturbance they are fond of is re-articulation. Much of trickster’s play is the reshaping of the world around him by disjoining and rejoining its elements: ‘trickster’s art involves playing with what I’m calling the second-order articulation; trickster shifts patterns in relation to one another, and by that redefines the patterns themselves’ (Hyde 257).

This idea of trickster performance as a work of *artus* is a concept of obvious relevance for the question of the interrelationship between trickster discourse and issues of postcolonialism. It has been argued that Trickster, after all, merely reaffirms the belief system he is initially working against, that he is mocking but not actually changing the order of things. In this sense, he would serve merely as a kind of safety valve in a kind of carnival that allows for the expression of opposition without serious consequences, with trickster myths operating as ritual vents for social frustrations (see for example Hynes and Doty 206–208; Hyde 187). Although this is certainly part of trickster discourse, it does not stop there. Tricksters play with second-order articulation, as Hyde calls it, and the discourse that emerges with recourse to trickster imagination plays in turn with signification, which accounts for its deconstructive power. ‘To kill a god or an ideal, go for the joints’, Hyde reasons (253) and it is this work at the joints that offers an extremely valuable tool for the problem creative artists find themselves confronted with. At times or points of crisis, Trickster and his laughter can help to discover the weak spots that need to be attacked so as to get rid of old or superimposed concepts that must be changed in order to enable re-articulation (on how laughter and its expression in literary form discovers the ‘Achilles’ heel’ see also Bakhtin 87). As Hyde notes, attacking the joints in order to actually destroy something, or attacking the joints to change the shape of things, are two senses in which ‘tricksters are *artus*-workers and their creations works of *artus*’ (258). This idea opens up many areas of application for postcolonial studies. The implications of trickster’s pleasure in disjoining and rejoining in relation to the problem of cultural difference is one example; the entanglement of trickster play and the work of the imagination is another.

Imagination lets us conceive of new significations. Trickster imagination incorporates cheating and lying, both of which have to do with signification and language; duplicity is the precondition of signification (Hyde 75). Umberto Eco, in *A Theory of Semiotics*, has this to say about what makes something a sign:

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else … thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything *which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used ‘to tell’ at all. (qtd in Hyde 60)
Mocking and Farting

This is the level of signification on which trickster imagination operates. As a form of creative lying, it can be used simultaneously to tell a truth, opening up new space for significations by giving the old ones the lie. The play of signs in trickster stories, Anne Doueihi argues, opens up for us the way ‘our minds function to construct an apparently solid but ultimately illusory reality’ (198). This playfulness of language reveals a different order of reality, a reality in which several meanings on several levels are possible because a space opens up between the different signifiers (199) as well as between signer and signified; it dissolves the order of things and opens up other realities. In this way, laughter, which is at the heart of trickster imagination, can become a hermeneutic activity, an activity that makes us aware of the way we perceive things and construct realities. This activity includes an emphasis on the source and character of creativity, discovering how creativity can produce the possibility of social change. Trickster imagination and its laughter open up the doors of perception and bring to light the social consequences of this activity. Consequently, trickster imagination draws us into the hermeneutic activity of interpreting, and of subsequently critiquing our own interpretations and significations.

‘If We Laugh at Him, He Grins at Us’ — Postcolonial Laughing

The quote in the section title is from Paul Radin’s study of the trickster in North American Indian mythology (169). Ever since Radin and others introduced this figure into Western anthropology, and eventually into Western consciousness, as more exotic than, say, the Hermes figure from Greek mythology, the trickster has become an object of fascination. Anthropology, psychology, or art are just a few examples of fields that draw on trickster imagination as a source of creative and scientific inspiration. Another group of people that has found trickster imagination a rich and relevant arsenal of material for its own project of cultural transformation and critique is writers from formerly colonised countries.

One such author writing from the background of former colonies is Pauline Melville. Her Guyana-based novel, The Ventriloquist’s Tale, explores the incest and eclipse myth of Amerindian culture in order to address the problem of societal restructuring in the wake of European colonisation. Melville plays with many pre-texts, such as Wilson Harris’s The Infinite Rehearsal and Mario Andrade’s Macunaima. Most notably, however, she draws upon and writes back to Lévi-Strauss’s accounts of Amerindian myths in his Mythologies. Melville thoroughly deconstructs Lévi-Strauss’s underlying presupposition of knowing an ‘other’ people or culture. The narrative device of choice is a traditional trickster figure as narrator. The Ventriloquist’s Tale is framed by Macunaima, the popular mythical being who has experienced many rewritings, and unfolds its own version of this figure’s laughter and imaginative play. In Melville’s story Macunaima returns from the skies, where the Brazilian novelist Andrade, he complains, had tried to consign him. Macunaima’s laughter and the laughter in the novel are characterised primarily by mimicry and mocking. Melville mimics Lévi-Strauss, but also
subverts and mocks his *Mythologies*; and Macunaima, who prides himself on the
art of disguise (Melville 7), imitates and mocks everything and everyone. That
dayly life was ‘just an illusion behind which could be divined another reality’
(37) and ‘an illusion behind which lay the unchanging reality of dream and myth’
(99) is the central vision of the novel.

At the centre of *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*’s comic vision is another story that
links the creation of laughter with the creation of the world. Macunaima, who can
imitate everything from ‘the flickering hiss of the labaria snake’ to the ‘Lilliburlero
signature tune of the BBC’s World Service’, reproduces a BBC radio programme
on the Big Bang and on Einstein and Hawking for his grandmother:

‘Which came first,’ I wondered out loud, ‘the equation or the story?’
‘The story, of course,’ she snapped, as she listened carefully to my perfect mimicking
of those faint hissing sounds of the universe from the beginning of time, recorded by
radio telescopes.
‘What people are hearing,’ she said, ‘is the final wheeze of an enormous laugh.’ (8)

The laughter in Melville’s novel remains in the spirit of this creation myth. It is
the enormous laugh of creation that indulges in the vitality and sheer fun of the
mythical stories. In a little vignette about her incestuous pair, Danny and Beatrice,
Melville rewrites almost word for word one of the myths reported in Lévi-Strauss
and quoted here about the trickster Epi:

Beatrice laughed at the way his penis wiggle-wogged as he ran. Catching her mood,
he began to strut and show off in front of his sister, thrusting his little pelvis forward.
Beatrice laughed with all the more excitement because she realised that his penis
danced like one of the fish cavorting in the pan. (92)

Or, to give just one more example of the positive associations of laughter, Melville
also reinvokes the little red toad, which doesn’t function here as a civilizing hero
bringing the gift of language, but rather makes Beatrice, who has been placed in
a convent school, feel ‘that it had come to cheer her up’ (143).

But the laughter in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* is not only associated with positive
aspects and creative energy. Laughter is also attributed with destruction.7 The
primary connection made throughout the novel is between laughter and blindness
(see particularly 88). Laughter and questions of perception are closely linked.
Beatrice’s sister Wifreda, who has witnessed the incest, goes blind, with the
laughter of Beatrice ringing in her ears. The main issues at stake in the context
of disaster in Melville’s novel are perception and communication, or rather the
failure of communication. Lévi-Strauss has described mocking and teasing, those
staples of trickster activity, as ‘abusive forms of communication’, and Trickster,
as a traditional messenger figure, plays an important role in this. In an ironic and
tragic accident Bla-Bla (note the name), the son of one of the main characters in
*The Ventriloquist’s Tale* dies in an explosion, running towards the danger spot
Americans wanted to warn him about by shouting ‘Chofoye. Chofoye’, thinking
it was an Amerindian word for explosion (343). But Chofoye is actually the name
of Bla-Blas father. The Americans, not realising that Bla-Blas can speak English, also fail to realise that their informant has been mocking them.

Trickster not only embodies the playful but also the disruptive side of the human imagination. The negative sides of trickster, though, are not usually given enough attention in the critical literature. Mean laughter and nasty disruptiveness are just as important a part of the trickster imagination. In many myths, Trickster is associated with bringing into being people or things that establish ultimate boundaries; this acknowledges the negative aspects of trickster imagination. One such boundary created by trickster is, for example, death. Trickster imagination can thus account for and respond to the negative aspects of life, aspects that help make this figure fruitful for formerly colonised peoples, for whom the material conditions and consequences of colonialism and imperialism are still a harsh reality.

Trickster imagination — characterised by both its negative and positive aspects, and by the incessant changing of roles and identities — has the potential to dissolve often unchallenged ideologies and ideas about the world. The duality of Trickster’s destructive and creative sides can be accounted for through the many functions of his laughter. Laughter has many manifestations and effects, and theories of laughter abound. No theory, however, can account for the richness and ambivalence of what is laughter; laughter can only be tackled in its specific instances. As discussed earlier, trickster discourse — and the laughter effects produced by it — has been questioned as to whether it has a critical and subversive function and a potential for political and social transformation. In the context of postcolonial fiction, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein have asked whether laughter gestures ‘towards a new world order’ or, rather, merely upholds ‘the order of the day’ (10). Many laughter or humour theorists have focused on the function of laughter as a social corrective or a mere social vent (and hence reconfirming the order of the day), particularly Henri Bergson in his famous *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*.

Mikhail Bakhtin, however, in his similarly influential book on Rabelais and the Renaissance philosophy of laughter, has elaborately demonstrated how later theories and philosophies of laughter — including Bergson’s — have focused on laughter’s negative functions rather than on its creative power. Bakhtin shows how laughter ‘degenerated’ by shifts in culture that increasingly ignored conceptions of the creative power of laughter as it is expressed in ancient myths and antique laughter theories (such as Hippocrates, Aristotle, or Lucian). In these conceptions laughter is ‘a universal philosophical principle that heals and regenerates’ and ‘is essentially linked to the ultimate philosophical questions concerning the ‘regulation of life’” (70). Laughter in this tradition becomes a philosophy. This ‘supreme form of laughter’, as Bakhtin calls it, found its highest expression in Rabelais. During the Renaissance the ‘culture of laughter begins to break through the narrow walls of festivities and to enter into all spheres of ideological life’ and ‘became the form of a new free and critical historical consciousness’ (97).
Trickster laughter and imagination also draws on older conceptions of laughter and mythical sources that resonate with the creative power of laughter. Trickster discourse rediscovers the critical, productive, and regenerative power of laughter that has been lost in Western discourse since the Renaissance. Readings of Bakhtin’s *Rabelais* have emphasised the critical and subversive function of laughter and its positive aspects, not least because of the ‘historical orientation of this laughter’ (98) and hence its political and utopian potential. Unsurprisingly, this opening for subversion of official ideologies has been attractive to postcolonial discourse. What has been less discussed in these readings focusing on the political and historical function of laughter, however, is just how much this laughter is about the image of the ‘historic world of becoming and renewal’ (Bakhtin 435), and just how much this image is an ambivalent image. Images in the cultural forms that are imbued with and brought about by laughter are all ambivalent images, or, to use Bakhtin’s famous formula, grotesque images. They deal with the ‘grotesque world of becoming’, a world full of transgressions and transformations, where destruction and death are an integral part of becoming (308). The grotesque image is an ambivalent image, one that can combine ‘in one image both the positive and negative poles’ (308) — birth and death, the upper and lower level of the body, or play and seriousness.

Trickster is such an ambivalent, grotesque image in the Bakhtinian sense. In its ambivalence lies the power of this figure. Trickster’s laughter, like Rabelais’s or Bakhtin’s laughter, is ambivalent: gay and triumphant, mocking and deriding. Both aspects have an utopian nature. Ambivalent laughter is related to the world, to freedom, and to ‘the people’s unofficial truth’ (Bakhtin 90). The ‘laughing aspect of the world’, writes Bakhtin, has an ‘unfinished and open character’ (83) and laughter opens people’s ‘eyes on that which is new, on the future’ (94). Laughter and the grotesque, ambivalent images of a world in the constant process of becoming and transgression of the ‘old’ is inextricably interwoven with ‘the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture’ (Bakhtin 325). Trickster’s laughter in postcolonial writing, similarly, is interwoven with the unfinished genesis of the imagination that tells of an unfinished world and its times of crisis and renewal.

To summarise, trickster imagination as it has developed through the re-enactment, re-creation, and re-appropriation of trickster mythology in postcolonial fiction is characterised by both the negative and positive aspects of its laughter. The laughing trickster is an ambivalent image. The interplay between creation and destruction creates its richness and function. Through this play trickster discourse opens spaces to destroy — or at least challenge — ‘the closed circle of interpretation’ of the West’s epistemologic creation of the Other (Bhabha 1993 31). As Bhabha has shown, in this closed circle, ‘[t]he other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse’. Trickster’s work of artifice — of disjoining and
rejoining — produces spaces for ‘the active agent of articulation’ — the status the West denies its Other through its ‘narrative and cultural politics of difference’ (Bhabha 1993 31).

Unsurprisingly, then, postcolonial discourse — historically concerned with dichotomies between us and them, with notions of identity, self and the other, and with many more concepts and ideas that have been used as tools for domination and colonisation — makes full and productive use of trickster imagination. Pauline Melville’s trickster-narrator dismantles the fixity of such notions. Disguise is the only ‘true’ tool, paying homage to the fact that everything is disguise, construct, illusion. ‘Ah, secrecy, camouflage and treachery. What blessings to us all,’ he exclaims. ‘Where I come from, disguise is the only truth and desire the only true measure of time’ (7). Such sentiments confront us with an art of narration and imagination completely different from our Western one. Sexual desire, lying, fantasy, playfulness and laughter prevail over the linearity of time, realism, seriousness and science. In this spirit, Macunaima in the novel is rather destructive, digging a grave for most of our precious — and sacred — grands récits. Time, truth, history, psychology, the primacy of literacy or Darwinism: all of these, for him, are not much more than amusing antics.10 Mocking Darwin and his science — measuring and collecting for instance — Macunaima’s laughter draws attention to questions of perception. He laughs at Darwin’s ‘blindness’, making up his own cheeky myth about Darwin sitting down on the ancestral stones of Macunaima’s myth cycle and writing down the first line of The origin of Species, which, as is well known, declares that we are descended from monkeys. ‘If his eyes had been in his arse he would have known better’, Macunaima mischievously observes (Melville 3). The creation of the world and its narration, in Macunaima’s vision, are accompanied not by awe and respect, but by laughter. Where the gods create, or the trickster laughs and farts.

NOTES

1. The Native North American art scene, for instance, even saw the rise of The Magazine to Re-Establish the Trickster (see for example in Ryan 1999). The trickster figure has also gained a cultural role more generally in various cultural fields. On this, and especially on the trickster’s literary role and in literary criticism see, for example, Morra and Reder, or Pulitano. On the trickster in film see Bassil-Morozow. On the role of the trickster in blues, and popular music more generally, see Smith.

2. Note Ania Loomba’s observation that such terms as ‘the postcolonial condition’ or the ‘postcolonial subject’ can at best be no more than a handy shorthand, ‘because they do not allow for differences between distinct kinds of colonial situations, or the workings of class, gender, location, race, caste or ideology among people whose lives have been restructured by colonial rule’ (Loomba 15).

3. Compare Lewis Hyde, who also draws on the concept in evolutionary theory that the tension between predator and prey is one of the great engines that has driven the creation of intelligence itself, each side successively and ceaselessly responding to the other (1998).
For a discussion of the evolutionary hypothesis of co-evolution as cause of diversity, see for example Stephen Gould’s *Dinosaur in a Haystack*.

On the connection between laughter and opening within mythology, see for example Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (120–32).

Hynes and Doty offer a useful bibliography tracing such influences. They supplement their extensive entries with [TC] for collections of trickster tales, or [TM] for works that have significance in engaging the methodology of ‘trickster studies’ (233–58).

For an interesting evaluation of this contradiction, see Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (132).

For one such story, see Hyde. He relates one origin myth of death, showing how Coyote’s foolish behaviour is the reason for the present situation of mortality (84–86).

For a brief but very good introduction to humour theory and the meaning of humour see Critchley; for a useful overview of literature on humour theory in a postcolonial context see Reichl and Stein.

For an excellent essay on Melville’s take on Darwinian evolution as a colonial mistranslation see DeLaughrey.

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‘Sultana’s Dream’ vs. Rokeya’s Reality: A Study of one of the ‘Pioneering’ Feminist Science Fictions

Locating Rokeya’s Fiction in Literary History
Any term like ‘pioneering science fiction’ might be highly suspect since the very origins of this genre are fiercely disputed. Most of the readers and critics of science fiction would emphasise its recent conception and development, pointing out that such a mode of thought and fiction could only come into vogue in the post-Enlightenment era when scientific discourses have visibly as well as distinctly started shaping human knowledge. Others would argue that, in essence, its roots could be traced back to the beginnings of human creativity and literature. While some go back to unearth the science-fictional ‘fantastic’ quality in the Syrian Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2000 BC), others see the ‘utopian’ promise in Thomas More’s Utopia (1526); yet others appreciate the strange ‘otherness’ portrayed in Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726). Most see H.G. Wells (1866–1946) and/or Jules Verne (1828–1905) as the Father(s) of Science Fiction. Adam Roberts, however, considers John Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667) as first having science-fictional qualities, albeit in a theological garb. On the other hand, as Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin point out, ‘most literary historians agree that the first work of fiction that has all of the characteristics of the science fiction genre was written by a woman’ (6) and that was none other than Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (1797–1851). The work of fiction referred to is, of course, her Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus (1818). It is widely agreed that her development of the prevalent Gothic imagination gradually engendered a new species of fiction that no longer depended upon the supernatural but started heavily drawing from science to simultaneously stimulate one’s wildest imagination and arouse in one a chilling terror. This new species of fiction eventually came to be known as science fiction, its dependence upon science generically distinguishing it from earlier Gothic fiction. Taking Mary Shelley’s pioneer status for granted, Scholes and Rabkin wittily name the nineteenth century as the ‘First Century A.F. (After Frankenstein)’ where they name Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), Edward Bellamy (1850–1898) and Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875–1950) as the main figures that gave a shape to this fledgling genre. It can be seen, then, that different critics have given the crown of the pioneer of this genre to different persons and the argument presumably is an endless one.
But if, as the majority of critics agree, science fiction is indeed a young genre, then feminist science fiction is even younger. Although Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is often viewed as the first proper science-fiction novel, and her powerfully evocative fiction delineates the admirable-but-accursed inventing power of a (male) scientist, it does not necessarily challenge prescribed gender roles, or imagine a feminist utopia. Of course, many critics from Ellen Moers and Fred Randel to Bette London and Nancy Yousef detect feminism in Shelley’s work, but it may safely be said that it certainly does not present a feminist sci-fi utopia. In the wake of the success of her enormously influential novel, it was mainly men who followed the path she charted and it was more than a century later that women start trying their hand at it. In fact, Adam Roberts and Sarah Lefanu roughly mark the 1960s as the starting point of writing science fiction. Roberts associates Marion Zimmer Bradley (1930–1999), Andre Norton (1912–2005) and Ursula Le Guin (1929–) with popularising this new offshoot of the genre (93). Lefanu, however, sees Joanna Russ (1937–) and Susan Wood (1918–) as the ‘pioneering’ figures (14). In mentioning other women writers who explored these areas even before the 1960s, Lefanu refers to Pamela Sargent’s collection of science fiction stories by women, *Women of Wonder: SF Stories by Women about Women* (published in 1974). The earliest work in this anthology is Judith Merril’s ‘That Only a Mother’ which was written in 1948, although it is not strictly or self-declaredly a work of science fiction. So, taking into account the information provided by critics, it would appear that feminist science fiction becomes a dominant and recognisable trend only from the 1960s onwards, and even if some previous ‘science’ stories by women may have feminist overtones, those appear to emerge no earlier than the 1940s. However, this essay focuses on a story which is both feminist and science-fictional and which is written long before this kind of writing becomes acceptable or fashionable. This is Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s ‘Sultana’s Dream’, written and published in 1905. Keeping in mind the literary history of this genre as traced so far, it can be justifiably claimed that Rokeya’s work is one of the ‘pioneering’ feminist science fictions.

In any case, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s (1880–1932) reputation is well established as the first female writer of science fiction on the Indian subcontinent. This is her only story in the colonial master’s language but although it was originally written and published in English, Rokeya later translated it into Bengali to facilitate an easier accessibility by the vernacular-reading women of Bengal who formed her target readership. Nevertheless, by writing this single story in English, she becomes one of the earliest Indian woman writers to express herself in this alien tongue. Indian women’s writing in English gradually started flowering as late as the 1870s with Toru Dutt’s (1856–1877) literary works. Then followed writers like Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862–1894), Shevantibai Nikambe (n.d.) and Cornelia Sorabji (1866–1954), all of whom drew attention to Indian woman’s woes. Works like Satthianadhan’s *Kamala* (1895) or *Saguna* (1894), Nikambe’s
Ratanbai (1895) and Sorabji’s *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901) strive to show the many social evils and constrictions including: child marriage, disapproval of widow-remarriage, and prejudice against female education, that circumscribe a woman’s life. These works offer snapshots from the lives of different communities of Hindus, Parsees and native Christians. However, up to this point, the Muslim woman is certainly not abundantly represented in English by any Muslim woman writer. Rokeya is one of the first Muslim women to attempt this task. She is distinct not merely in taking the reader into the world of a purdahnashin Muslim woman,¹ but also in her manner of dealing with it. Whereas the other writers of her time endorse the realist style of writing to describe their society, Rokeya chooses the science-fictional fantastic mode to envisage what her society could become; while the others limit themselves to the remembered past and the lived present in the portrayal of their characters’ nightmarish existence, Rokeya boldly forays into the unknown future through her protagonist’s dream; while the others angrily demolish the unjust structures of the world they live in, Rokeya constructs a utopia of justice and virtue. A groundbreaking work of such novelty, power and promise surely deserves a thorough in-depth analysis, which this essay hopes to accomplish.

**A Feminist Utopia**

‘s Sultana’s Dream’ was first published in the *Indian Ladies’ Magazine*, at Madras. It narrates the dream of a purdahnashin woman, Sultana. The eponymous protagonist happens to doze off one evening but seems to be woken up by a visitor, whom she initially mistakes for her dear friend, Sister Sara. The visitor asks Sultana to accompany her on a walk outdoors, and deeming a brief walk in the garden with a lady not so inappropriate in the darkness of the night, which will easily shroud her from men’s eyes, Sultana ventures forth. However, to her utter astonishment, it is broad daylight outside and she becomes painfully shy. Soon her anxieties are put to rest when she realises that not a single man is to be seen anywhere, and instead, women are walking, talking, working all around her. Then she is informed by her companion that this place is called Ladyland, where Virtue herself rules. Yet, the land has not always enjoyed such bliss. In the olden days, when the male Prime Minister mainly ruled on behalf of their ‘minor’ Queen, strict purdah for women was observed. Women of this dreamland then, as in Sultana’s real world, were kept confined in zenanas while their men dominated and ruled. Later, when the ‘adult’ Queen issued orders for female education, schools and universities for women were set up which radically widened the horizons for these women. Once a neighbouring king declared war on their land for not bowing to his command to hand over a few of his citizens who had sought political asylum in Ladyland, and taking this as an opportunity to demonstrate their muscle-power, the men of Ladyland marched to the battlefield to combat the king’s army, only to return wounded and nearly defeated. At this crucial point, the Queen appealed to her lady scholars to use their brain-power to defeat the enemy, upon which the Lady Principal of a women’s university came up with her ingenious scientific idea of
using trapped concentrated solar heat to burn the foe’s armaments and force them to flee. Meanwhile, the surviving male members of their society were ordered by the Queen to enter the zenanas so that the purdahnashin women could come out of their homes to tackle the alien forces. Wounded, tired and convinced that their land could no longer be saved, these men accepted the offer of temporary respite in the zenanas while their women implemented their plans. After the enemy was driven out, the men were never allowed to leave the zenanas despite their endless appeals to their monarch. This is how the women came to rule the land. Since, as is claimed in this story, there is no vice or corruption left under their efficient administration, and Sultana, at a loss for words to sufficiently praise this novel society, simply remarks, ‘I see Purity itself reigns over your land’ (171). Clearly, a strong feminism colours both the activities of women leaders of this fictional land as well as the grand vision of the writer herself.

This feminist vision creates a utopia. Ladyland is ruled by ‘Virtue’ and ‘Purity’, embodied by the far-sighted wise Queen. There is no want or sin or suffering here. Since men, who are, according to the story, corrupt and evil by nature, are safely confined, there arises no need for a Police Officer or Magistrate or Military force in this land. If someone does err s/he is punished by being banished from the land forever because the authorities do not believe in taking away a life that God has gifted. At the same time, mercy is shown to sincere penitents. Thus, justice seems to be delivered in the best possible manner. Similarly, agriculture and commerce are well employed by these women who plan to replace the innumerable ugly brick buildings with a large beautiful horticultural garden. Their religion is based on Truth and Love, which prevents all kinds of communal fanaticism. There are no epidemics and premature deaths. There is no time for petty jealousies and quarrels among these women because they are always busy with more fruitful occupations. In the absence of railroads or paved paths, there arises no possibility of unfortunate life-taking accidents. The time taken for travel is considerably reduced by the aerial conveyances that take them from one place to another in surprisingly short time. When Sister Sara takes Sultana to the Queen, she mentions that even before she could realize that their strange ‘air-car’ has started moving, they had reached the palace. That there is no false pomp or pride about the Queen and that Sultana from an ordinary household is received ‘cordially without any ceremony’ (171) by Her Majesty point to the admirable egalitarianism of the land. The author, in fact, sketches her utopia in the minutest detail: not only is there no crime or want or crushing class system here but also the fortunate denizens are free from mud, dirt and even mosquitoes. In every way, Ladyland is the perfect h(e)aven for women.

The existence of this utopia relies not so much on women’s physical prowess as on their ingenious scientific and technological innovations. Ladyland has become what it is because its women are great scientists. When women face the challenge of defeating a powerful enemy, they simply resort to science instead of
trying to fight the aggressor with their ‘arms’ (connoting both bodily strength and armament). So, in the battlefield, the Lady Principal with her two thousand female students, strikes terror into the foes’ hearts by showering on them a scorching heat that is generated by directing all the concentrated sunlight towards them. During the subsequent era of peace, they till their lands with electricity and take care of their crops with the help of their advanced botanical science. Presumably, their thorough acquaintance with medical science prevents diseases and premature deaths. Women scientists have even sent up a special ‘water-balloon’ to the space above the clouds to directly collect water from the atmosphere and that water is regulated and distributed through huge pipes attached to it. This arrangement not only enables them to draw as much rainwater as they want in a convenient way but also prevents thunderstorms and rainfall that might result in floods. Additionally, water for taking a shower is available by opening the removable roof of the bathroom and turning on the tap of the pipe. The kitchens do not have dirty chimneys because there is no coal fire to emit smoke. Instead the people use solar heat to do their cooking in a neat and healthy manner. Moreover, they use electricity for their aerial conveyances. Using science, these women have revolutionised their style of living. In this dream-world science becomes the tool of the so-called weaker sex to wield authority.

SULTANA’S DREAM VS. ROKEYA’S REALITY

This feminist utopia is, after all, only a dream and, drawing from its Greek roots, as Barnita Bagchi reminds us, ‘[Utopia] is, most of all, about embodying a dream, a dream of an ideal place (“eu-topia”) which is, at the same time, no place (“ou-topia”), for it does not exist until imagined into existence by those strongly inspired by the dream of an ideal life’ (xviii). More importantly, Sultana’s dream concerns a purdahnashin, which is a measure of the radicalism of this story as it throws into sharp relief Rokeya’s reality. In the world Sultana dreams of, women are happily liberated and know no hindrance; not a single woman wears a veil. This is clearly light-years away from what Rokeya (and Sultana) lives through. Rokeya ranks among the early Muslim feminists in South Asia. Even as late as the turn of the twentieth century, she found her ideas and ideologies of balancing gender inequalities and demanding the female’s right to basic needs for a healthy living pitted against the almost impregnable durability of a patriarchal system that had solidified over centuries in the name of tradition. Women — especially Muslim women — in British India were still behind the purdah, deprived of a proper education and slaves to men’s whims. Rokeya scathingly wrote and relentlessly campaigned against the custom of purdah. Yet, the irony is that she herself had to strictly abide by most of the social customs she was fighting against. Despite condemning purdah in her polemics, she had to wear a burqa when she went out into public. Bagchi explains this contradiction:

[h]er reputation for departing from the norm made it all the more difficult for Rokeya to be accepted as a competent educator by parents who had to garner sufficient faith in
Even if she did not like it, she had to continue observing purdah to retain people’s faith in her integrity and allegiance to her own culture because without the support of her few sympathisers, her radical reformist activities stood little chance of succeeding.

Sultana dreams that the men of Ladyland are confined at home to do all household work. In this land, it is the men who do the cooking, washing, cleaning and take care of children. Although, they are such inept creatures that they are not entrusted with delicate tasks like embroidery and knitting. Women instead do that because they are able to handle both the work in the offices/laboratories as well as skilled domestic duties. In Rokeya’s world, women did sewing and knitting as part of their confined lives, and that in no way reflected on their versatile efficiency. Whereas men in Ladyland are thrust into enclosed spaces wittily called ‘murdanas’ (masculine version for the word zenana), women in Rokeya’s reality were confined in ‘zenanas’. She witnessed the suppression of women’s individuality and spirits through a suffocating internment. The idea of purdah (veil) arises from a conception of feminine modesty but this is stretched too far by the jealousy of domineering males when it is gradually given the shape of total incarceration. Sonia Nishat Amin points out how many Muslim bhadrhamahilas (‘gentle-women’) of modern Bengal around this time had begun distinguishing between purdah and abarodh. Purdah is seen as ‘modesty in dress and behaviour’ whereas abarodh is a ‘patriarchal distortion of purdah which makes women invisible behind the andarmahal [inner quarters for women]’ (Amin 139). Rokeya herself denounced the injustices heaped on a confined woman in Abarodhbasini (woman living in abarodh) — a series of essays that was written in Bengali and published in 1931. In ‘Sultana’s Dream’, her subversion of the idea of protecting women’s modesty by instead putting men into confinement is a powerfully acerbic critique of the system of abarodh.

The reason given for keeping men in abarodh in Ladyland is that ‘Men … are rather of lower morals’ (172). Sister Sara explains to Sultana that just as lunatics and wild beasts should not be let loose, men with their beastly nature should also not be allowed total freedom. She is horrified to see that ‘Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenana [in Sultana’s world]!’ (165). She considers it unfair and unnatural. When Sultana reminds her that men are, after all, physically stronger than women, Sister Sara dismisses such explanation because, as she highlights, lions are stronger than human beings and yet can be captured by them; similarly, elephants have larger brains than human beings but are still no match for them. Sister Sarah claims that, although admittedly physically weaker than men, women are superior to them in intellect and morals. However, Rokeya lived in a social reality where women were both physically weaker and intellectually less developed than men. They were denied education and were thereby deliberately
kept intellectually stunted. As for morals, that too often was nearly unachievable since, born and bred in the filth of male lasciviousness and unjust domination in the (physically and morally) unhealthy zenanas, women, more often than not, were unable to develop into exemplary creatures in any respect. Worse is that even when some women were genuinely virtuous, such virtue went virtually unnoticed and inadequately appreciated because virtue was considered to be a ‘duty’ of a woman, which if she failed to perform, was severely reprimanded and/or punished. On the other hand, men were unencumbered by such moral restrictions, exposing the misbalanced gender-morality prevalent in the society.

Sultana’s dream-world is one where women run universities and are great scientists. They are one and all highly educated and are also in control of the educational system of their community. Sister Sara mentions that she works in the laboratory and describes to Sultana the various scientific wonders achieved by their women. That is indeed only possible in a dream for both Sultana and Rokeya. Rokeya lived in a world where she was allowed only a narrow traditional religious education at home, suited to limit the mental horizons of aspiring girls and to equip them solely for a confined life as a wife and mother. In fact, it served to entrench in them a complacency with their confinement and so they never recognised the lamentable lowliness of their condition. However, Rokeya was secretly taught Bengali and English by her eldest brother, who was in favour of female education. Her first biographer, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, describes how they had to wait for the dead of the night to be able to conduct their clandestine studies since the family objected to such untraditional learning for girls. Later, her husband actively fostered her education and encouraged her to write. Consequently, in spite of never having been to a school to learn, Rokeya grew into an exceptionally knowledgeable woman. Her struggle to achieve this feat indicates the strength of prejudice against female education in her culture. When Royeka later decided to open a school for girls with the money left to her by her dead husband, she faced immense opposition from her own in-laws. In fact, they defeated her plan to establish a school in Bhagalpur — the town where her in-laws lived — and drove her away to Calcutta, where the strong-willed young reformer opened her school. She had to overcome innumerable obstacles to educate the few girls who came to her school, which struggled for survival against the pressure of strong social disapproval. Under such dishearteningly difficult conditions for female students, women scientists are creatures of a dreamland indeed. It is true that by the beginning of the twentieth century, science had in general started dominating educational curriculums since, as Geraldine Forbes points out, it was a world where “science” was equivalent to “modern” (71). However, women’s education was not expected to be ‘modern’ and thus, science was not seen as important for them as it was not deemed to be needed to prepare them for their domestic lives. In most girls’ schools, the students were taught basic arithmetic, home ‘science’, language and knitting and weaving skills. Other radical women
who violated the limitations prescribed for traditional female learning and aspired to study medical sciences still confronted considerable opposition. Despite the task of healing being traditionally seen as suited to women, it was seen to be objectionable if it involved any scientific training.

Perhaps the most fascinating discrepancy between Sultana’s dreamland and Rokeya’s real world are the scientific innovations that are spoken of. Atomic bombs that generate tremendous heat are yet to be invented (in 1945) but the women of Ladyland already use a different method to direct concentrated heat on their enemies. The first artificial satellite to be sent into space (in 1957) is still decades away and yet, women scientists of this dreamland have sent a ‘water-balloon’ into the atmosphere to trap rainwater for them. Not very long ago (in 1903), the Wright brothers had succeeded in remaining air-borne for a considerable length of time to prove that the dream of human flight could materialise with further scientific and technological efforts; in Ladyland, however, the technique has already been perfected in the form of ‘air-cars’ so much so that the inhabitants no longer need road and railways. Mr. McPherson, a friend of Rokeya’s husband, makes the following comment after reading the story: ‘I wonder if she has foretold here the manner in which we may be able to move about in the air at some future time’ (qtd in Jahan 2). Indeed imagination can reach certain heights before scientific inventions can match it but this creative fantasy of science fiction writers to anticipate some of the greatest inventions of mankind is astounding. Jules Verne and H.G. Wells had already sent humans to the moon in their novels. The time machine had been invented in fiction by Wells a decade earlier and Verne has also sent man to the core of the earth. Land, water, air, space — all have been invaded by human (scientific) imagination by 1905. Science fiction has already started establishing itself as a separate genre by the turn of the twentieth century and at such a crucial juncture of its development comes Rokeya’s story. It is hard to believe that despite her restricted education at home and the limited knowledge she gathered from her brother and husband, Rokeya was well acquainted with all the new developments in science and literature (especially the science fiction) of her times. At the same time, it is equally difficult to imagine how, without any hint or notion drawn from others’ works, her fantasy soared so high with regard to scientific achievements described in her fiction to render its originality and distinct flavour.

With contemporaneous science still struggling to achieve many of its wonders like trapping renewable sources of energy or fulfilling humanity’s desire to soar among clouds, Rokeya’s imagination is remarkable. Of course, one could argue that the flight of imagination cannot be limited, but the interesting point to note is that the author strives to provide convincing scientific explanations for the working of her innovations. Quite in a Vernian style, she attempts to base her fictional inventions on the scientific coordinates known then, thereby fitting them within the prevalent scientific discourses of her time. Solar heat, for example, is
shown to be distributed through pipes attached to kitchens, although how that heat is trapped is silently glossed over. The mechanism of the ‘air-car’ is also explained: a square plank with seats screwed to it can rise in air due to the wings and hydrogen balls attached to it. The hydrogen balls are said to help this solid object overcome the force of gravity, thereby preparing it for a take-off, while the wings, which whirl when electricity is applied to them, lift the car into air. Crude and insufficient as this scientific explanation may seem, it should be remembered that this comes from a woman who has never had a formal ‘scientific’ education and has never been to a school as a student. In light of her background, her triumph in the form of this science-fictional story becomes significant and praiseworthy.

Significance of Rokeya’s Story
As mentioned, Rokeya did not have a formal education but she later goes on to become the pioneer of female education in Bengal. Forbes notes that that Rokeya was not the first Muslim woman to set up a school for Muslim girls but ‘her systematic and undaunted devotion to this project has earned her the title of pioneer’ (55). So, coming from a legendary educator, this story, which shows what women can achieve with learning and liberation, is telling. It is both a form of propaganda and a protest. Moreover, one must not forget that Rokeya is a triply marginalised author: she is a woman, a Muslim woman and a colonised Muslim woman. As a woman, she belongs to the ‘second sex’ with only secondary rights and privileges. When she additionally happens to be a *sharif* (high-caste) Muslim woman, she is further restrained and stripped of her agency in order to safeguard the status of the family and the honour of their culture and religion. Of course, being a colonised woman loudly declares the subject’s (near-)inaudibility. Fighting all these barriers, she has shown extraordinary courage in voicing her opinion and proclaiming her vision.

Although not yet widely acknowledged, Rokeya’s story can be seen as the first feminist science fiction, if the history of this genre is taken into consideration. In her world, where she could become educated only with the help of a few progressive male relatives (her brother and husband), to even imagine a male-guidance/male-domination-free women’s realm is radical to the extreme. It seems surprising that one of the earliest feminist science fiction should come from the pen of an Indian woman from a colonised corner of the earth, where voices like hers are easily crushed by centuries of native patriarchal traditions and additionally by the male predominance of the imperialist machine. Yet, it is perhaps understandably predictable (though such a view might seem far-fetched at first). Direst needs make one take the most radical steps. The suffocating existence of a colonised Muslim woman coerces her to invent an equally explosive way to be delivered from the constraints of purdah, *abarodh*, lack of education, absence of agency. In comparison, one might say, the white women who later go on to establish the feminist branch of science fiction, still have space to breathe and can afford gradually to find a means to explore and explode ideas of gendered
roles in patriarchy. Whereas Rokeya is victimised by two layers of patriarchy — indigenous and imperialist — the white woman comes under the domination of one, and that too the one which professes to be superior to indigenous patriarchies in its benevolent treatment of its women, so much so that it claims the right to civilise the ‘others’. No wonder then that an abarodhbasini like Rokeya should be one of the pioneers to imagine a feminist utopia.

A science-fictional utopia is fantastic and ‘the mark of the fantastic’, Scholes and Rabkin explain, ‘is the thrill of seeing the believed unreal become real’ (169–70). To imagine a land of learned and liberated women is a good way of defying the despair of deprived and incarcerated women. Looking forward to such a ‘fantastic’ future in imagination is a strong incentive in the present to pave the path to it. What Rokeya is portraying is both fantastic and futuristic: this dream of a world will motivate the quest for the world of dreams. This realm will witness the sanction of female liberty. Yet, Rokeya’s feminist utopia is largely informed by the social discourses of her time. It is neither perfect nor totally radical after all. This is a land where women rule, enjoy freedom, benefit from education and are not forced into child-marriage. Nevertheless, this vision is not wholly liberated from certain cultural prejudices of its society. Seclusion is still strictly practised. Men must remain confined in murdanas so that women can function outdoors. In fact, they go into seclusion in the first place to allow women to step out of home (without the fear of being ogled by strange men) to defend their country. Before that, Sister Sara proudly asserts, women’s universities carefully maintained seclusion. Even now, when women are permitted to roam about the streets, they can only meet men of ‘sacred relations’ (171), but in utopian broadmindedness, even distant relatives are considered as sacred as a brother. Nonetheless, the fact remains that a line is drawn between the sexes. Furthermore, although Roushan Jahan points out that ‘to portray a society where women are in a position of power, Rokeya did not find it necessary to eliminate men or to propose anything so drastic as Charlotte Perkins Gilman did a few years later in Herland, in which parthenogenesis was the means for continuing a unisex society’ (4). Rokeya’s utopia is, after all, highly sexist and depends upon the deprivation and exploitation of a section of society. Now, men are confined and are thereby denied privileges of equality and freedom. Like the women of the zenanas in Rokeya’s world, the men of the murdanas in Ladyland have stopped grumbling over their lot, realizing the futility of doing so. They are also the butt of unkind jokes from women. Sultana mocks at their condition by saying that she should not stay too long in Sister Sara’s kitchen because the men of her household must be cursing her for not being able to come to the kitchen in the presence of an unknown woman, and they both heartily laugh at this joke. Initially, when Sultana feels shy to have come out in the open, the women of Ladyland laugh at her, saying she was ‘mannish’ in her coyness and unwillingness to come outdoors. Not surprisingly, Rokeya’s husband, on reading the story, remarks that it is a ‘terrible revenge!’ (Jahan 2). However, Bharati Ray
comments, ‘It was not revenge; it was rebellion … against the evils of a system that kept women subjugated, humiliated, and subservient, and ‘Sultana’s Dream’ was symbolic of that protest’ (2).5

This ‘terrible revenge’ is taken by a (Muslim) woman upon the patriarchy that oppresses her; this daring ‘rebellion’ is against sexist tyranny. Additionally, in my reading, a colonised woman’s dissenting voice can also be faintly traced. Ladyland is ruled over by a wise Queen, who takes drastic measures to improve the conditions of her fellow-women. Is there any hint of censure of the prevailing poor conditions of women in India despite having been ruled by Queen Victoria for years? Is it an oblique comment on the half-hearted measures taken by the British government to ameliorate their deprivation and improve their situation? Didn’t the foreign rulers base their rule in India on the grand claim of bringing light to the ‘heart of darkness’? How far is that pretentious claim validated if a considerable section of the indigenous population is still categorically denied its share of that light? Above all, can the invasion of Ladyland by the neighbouring king on the slightest of pretexts be read as a covert critique of conquests of distant lands under the banner of imperialism, including that of India by the British? It is, of course, very difficult to prove. All the same, Sultana’s ‘fall’ from the air-car of her dream back to the reality of her dark bedroom is simultaneously a signifier of women’s deprivation, a measure of injustices committed by the native patriarchy and an exposé of the failure of imperial rulers to fully honour their promises. Undeniably, in spite of (or perhaps, because of) the author’s triple marginalisation as a colonised Muslim woman, a robust feminism marks her work, proving that, as Maitrayee Chaudhuri reminds us, there were a few women even at the turn of the twentieth century who struggled to voice their opinions amid the larger trend of placing women in social reform discourses merely as a silent symbol of the ‘moral health of ““tradition” itself’ (80), which accounts for the gradual growth of Indian feminism more in novel concepts than in radical actions. ‘Sultana’s Dream’, dreamed at the crucial juncture of social (and literary) history where it stands, is an epic achievement of feminist protest and science-fictional utopianism.

NOTES

1 A ‘purdahnashin’ is a woman who observes ‘purdah’, which literally means the ‘veil’ or the ‘curtain’; in other words, her veil symbolises the segregation of sexes.

2 Zenana is the part of the household that is reserved for the women of the family.

3 Several decades before Rokeya establishes the Sakhawat Memorial School in Calcutta in 1911, Faizunnessa Chaudhurani opens a free Madrassah and later an English-medium school for girls in Comilla in 1873 (Amin 115).

4 Although Rokeya becomes an educator, social reformer and writer later in her life, she was an abarodhbasini during her childhood and adolescence. She was put behind purdah at the tender age of five and only with the help of her progressive husband could she fight her way out of the zenana to materialise her radical dreams of women’s equality and education.
Perhaps it is worth making the point here, that Rokeya’s utopia only succeeds in inverting the gender oppression. In other words, Rokeya’s dream does not imagine a way out of binary gender roles; she does not imagine gender equality and a consequent end to the oppression.

WORKS CITED
Never Give Up Hope: A Levinasian Reading of Janette Turner Hospital’s ‘Dear Amnesty’

This article deals with the short story ‘Dear Amnesty’ by the Australian-born writer Janette Turner Hospital. As its title suggests, ‘Dear Amnesty’ takes the popular human rights organisation (founded by Peter Benenson in 1961) as its focus. Amnesty International offers individuals various ways of collaborating with the organisation. These include the classic letter writing to the authorities, joining a local group, leaving a gift in your will, and throwing a fundraising party, among others. The title of Turner Hospital’s story is, in fact, evocative of the basic technique employed by the organisation: ‘intervention by letter writing’, as Jonathan Power puts it in *Like Water on Stone: The Story of Amnesty International* (134). Sarah, the main character in ‘Dear Amnesty’, is a member of the organisation’s Urgent Action Network. When someone is in imminent danger of suffering a violation of their human rights, an urgent action is issued and activists worldwide write letters to the relevant authorities. The degree of commitment shown by Sarah in one particular case acquires hyperbolic tinges. She not only writes several letters in support of Rosita — a factory worker from an unspecified country, arrested and tortured for requesting better working conditions — but she also manages to save her by draining her pain into her own body. ‘Dear Amnesty’ is included in Turner Hospital’s 1991 collection of short stories, *Isobars*. Like letters, isobars serve to connect, joining areas of equal air pressure. ‘Dear Amnesty’ is all about connecting. Sarah’s relationship with Rosita shows that there is no clear separation between I and not-I. ‘Dear Amnesty’, states David Callahan in his monograph on Turner Hospital, ‘focuses in puzzling fashion on the complications brought about by empathy as Sarah becomes so absorbed in her letter-writing … that she begins to bear the physical marks suffered by Rosita … on her own body’ (161). This story of the relationship between two women from different parts of the world verges on the irrational but eventually, succeeds in saving a life.

Like Amnesty International, the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas envisages a messianic time free from political violence. ‘Man’, he says, ‘… can master the hostile forces of history by helping to bring about a messianic reign, a reign of justice foretold by the prophets’ (2003a 252). This article engages with Turner Hospital’s short story as an extreme example of the main tenet of Levinas’s
ethics of alterity, that being our infinite responsibility and accountability for our neighbours. My analysis of Sarah’s radical openness to the other will also draw on the theories of Julia Kristeva and Andrew Gibson. I will resort to Kristeva’s concept of the abject, a by-product of the separation from the mother that precedes entrance into the symbolic order, so as to complement Levinas’s gender-neutral philosophy. In my opinion, the prominence of the female body in ‘Dear Amnesty’ makes it necessary. Much of Turner Hospital’s fiction hinges on the female body as ‘an important site of woman’s resistance to patriarchal authority’ (Callahan 2001 34). ‘[C]haracterised by the male order as excess, as hysteria, as immoderation’ (Callahan 2001 34), the feminine body is explored in her fiction as ‘a site of value’ (Cowley 175). Its value lies not in its solidity and immutability but rather on the fact that it is open and vulnerable. Like Kristeva’s concept of the abject, Turner Hospital’s bodies — fluid, shapeshifting (Coe 22), disrupted — question the classic Western notion of the stable, essential self. Andrew Gibson’s ethics of affect is directly inspired by Levinas and his ‘other-centred’ philosophy. Gibson elaborates an ethics that privileges sensibility, vulnerability, generosity and self-expenditure over and above self-interest and restraint. Besides firmly rooting Levinas’s philosophy on the body, Gibson’s ethics will help throw further light on Sarah’s intense involvement with Rosita, emphasising again qualities traditionally associated with the feminine rather than the masculine.

Levinas is perhaps the main influence behind the turn to ethics that has characterised the humanities since the late 1980s. Welcomed by many scholars, who think that literary studies should never have left the ethical path, but lamented by others who see in it an abandonment of political engagement on the part of literary criticism, this (re)turn to ethics comprises attempts to restore the values of liberal humanism represented by F.R. Leavis and his followers, together with practices informed by deconstruction. The latter brand of ethical criticism draws upon the work of Levinas to demonstrate that it is possible to build an ethics outside universals and moral foundations, both challenged during the theoretical era of the sixties, seventies and eighties, dominated by the tenets of (post)structuralism.

The ethics of Levinas, known as the philosopher of suffering (Wolcher 93), is an ethics for hard times. Born in Lithuania of Jewish parents, the Holocaust looms large in his writings. His philosophy of alterity blends well with the mission of Amnesty International, which is involved with prisoners of conscience, political prisoners, ‘disappearances’, torture and executions, both on a small and a large scale. For Levinas, everybody is his brother’s keeper. Even if we choose not to, we are always already immersed in an ethical situation the crucial moment of which is the encounter with the Face of the other (Campbell and Shapiro x). The encounter with the other precedes normativity (Shapiro 77). It is not the result of following a series of pre-established moral principles but a summons to act before which I am not free (Levinas 1996a 121). It is ‘an unconditional
Yes’ (Levinas 1996b 93), a ‘here I am’ (Levinas 1996c 104) that ‘overflows comprehension’ (Levinas 1996d 6), ‘puts me into question, empties me of myself … showing me ever new resources’ (Levinas 1996e 52). This ethical moment par excellence is not symmetrical as it involves people of different status who give without expecting anything in return (Levinas 2003b 48). Levinas’s ethics of care and responsibility does not necessarily imply physical presence and is often unmediated by language. For Levinas, states Critchley, ‘ethical subjectivity is the experience of being affected by an other in a way that precedes consciousness and which places in question our spontaneity and sovereignty. Our autonomous majesty is deposed and decapitated, our autonomous self-binding is unbound and we are undone’ (121).

The fiction of Janette Turner Hospital is similarly pervaded by an ethics of care and responsibility. She shares with Levinas the imperative of engagement. In the words of David Callahan, ‘Turner Hospital … comes down clearly on the side of the necessity of engagement, not just stressing the need actively to intervene but also enforcing the realisation that any position, any putative avoidance of action, is also to intervene, so that there is no not intervening’ (1996 75). Callahan (2001 31) speaks of Turner Hospital’s ‘ethics of interference’ — which Sarah clearly practises — metaphorically expressed in the author’s interest in the rainforest. As a place ‘where plants grow on other plants, around other plants, through other plants and in every variation of touching and interference that can be imagined’ (Callahan 2001 33), the rainforest defies boundaries and encourages organic connections. The entanglements of the tropical landscape, Callahan suggests, reflect not only Turner Hospital’s concern with interconnectedness, solidarity and empathy, but also her narrative strategies, which revel in the profusion and confusion of meaning. Turner Hospital’s fiction is packed full of ‘networks of connection, entanglements of involvement, … webs and nettings of association which make responsibility for everybody and everything always part of the human condition’ (Callahan 2001 31).

‘Dear Amnesty’ opens with a fragment from a letter:

All the letters — they would have made a snowstorm — began with Your Excellency… Sarah always wrote them by hand, with a fountain pen, taking particular care with the flourishes: the sensuous f’s, the loopy I’s, the trailing lace flounces on the y’s. Your Excellency: It has come to my attention that contrary to Article XXIII, Clause 6, subsection iv of your own Constitution… (255)

The concern of Sarah, a middle-aged woman from an unspecified Western country, in this particular Amnesty International case is Rosita Romero. She is ‘almost a decade younger than Sarah’ (257) and has ten children, while Sarah has two, a boy and a girl. Rosita is a typical case of the Urgent Action Network. She is in prison after demanding better conditions at the factory where she works, and is being tortured by the guards who interrogate her. Several concerns of Amnesty International coincide in Rosita. Besides being a prisoner of conscience, she is the
object of two far-reaching campaigns: the campaign for the Abolition of Torture and of other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and of the Human Rights are Women’s Rights campaign, launched in preparation of the UN summit on women held in Beijing in 1995. The kind of torture inflicted on Rosita intimately impinges on her female condition: ‘Romero was subjected to the “water torture” in which a hose is inserted into the vagina, and water is admitted under high pressure while an assistant of the interrogator stands on the woman’s stomach’ (261).

Sarah and Rosita enact the Levinasian encounter with the other. Despite the fact that her letter writing in support of Rosita has become an obsession and interferes with her family life, Sarah feels compelled to continue: ‘“I’ll stop”, Sarah promised. She wanted to stop. But she couldn’t’ (256). In the words of David Callahan: ‘There is no escaping implication’ in Turner Hospital’s fiction (2001 33). Sarah is depicted as a caring person, and she cares not in an abstract way but in a very physical manner. Notice for example the attention she puts into her writing, and the way she used to brush out her daughter’s hair when she was a little girl ‘Sarah would brush out her black ringlets … would brush them one by one, wrapping each around her index finger like a tendril, stroking it with the bristles’ (256). Sarah responds to the summons of alterity. In the opinion of Christopher Falzon, the attitude of openness towards the other means:

an abandonment of the security, the comfort, that comes with an all-embracing view of the world where the other is completely mastered and predictable. It means promoting risk, instability, uncertainty, and the possible transformation of prevailing principles and forms of life. It is a dangerous exercise, and so it also requires a degree of courage.

(61)

Sarah feels called to support the burden of the other even if this means sacrificing herself. In a literal/literary rendition of Levinas’s ethical demand, she renounces her autonomy and is undone by Rosita.

Rosita perfectly fits Levinas’s conception of the other. Her relationship with Sarah is an example of ‘a fraternity existing in extreme separation’, (Levinas 2003c 84). Rosita is a foreigner, a stranger, someone Sarah does not know personally. At the same time, Rosita is a neighbour and a face — two prominent concepts in Levinas’s theory of alterity (Levinas 1996d 8, and passim) — a face described by Sarah in the following terms: ‘Rosita has long dark hair and a tiny mole low on the left cheek’ (259). But Rosita’s face and body have been disfigured by torture. When she is in a wretched condition facing death, ‘Rosita’s hair is clotted with blood, her face is swollen, she is naked, her body is grotesquely blackened … but Sarah recognises her. … Rosita cannot smile. Her lips are swollen shut, they are purple as eggplants, they are embroidered with scabs of blood’ (261). Her condition evokes Levinas’s words:

Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself. (2003c 83 [my emphasis])
Sarah is being held hostage by Rosita, a condition inherent to Levinas’s conception of the self (1996a 121, and passim). ‘I’m the other’s hostage, taken by them and prepared to substitute myself for any suffering and humiliation that they may undergo’ (Critchley 61). Extrapolating from Levinas (1996f 167), Sarah feels ‘the impossibility of letting the other alone faced with the mystery of death’ (1996f 167). She experiences the desire for the non-desirable — represented by Rosita’s wretched body — which in the opinion of Levinas characterises the relationship with the other.

As mentioned before, Sarah’s degree of commitment interferes with her family life and concerns her children: “Mother”, Katy murmured, cajoling. “Some people can handle this and some can’t. I think you should just give money and leave the letters to someone else” (256). They believe her letter writing has become an obsession, which they interpret as a displacement of Sarah’s own personal trauma, since she has been abandoned by her husband for a younger woman. Sarah’s response to the collective trauma of torture as one of the evils that affect contemporary society is seen as a displacement of a private trauma that she still has not worked through. Her son, a medical student, tells her:

‘I’ve been reading up about this, about… well, you know, traumatic change, the stress scale, stuff like that. It’s called displacement, what you are doing. Well, to some extent we’re all… I mean here we all are, back home, practically huddling together… It’s not unusual, its even healthy for a while, depending on what you pick up as your substitute for…’ (258)

But despite her children’s warnings, Sarah cannot help it. She goes on with her letter writing while her son and daughter decide to leave the family home and go back to their routines. Sarah is more and more affected by Rosita’s case. First, she experiences shivering as she writes (255); next, she develops bruises; and then her period begins to coincide with Rosita’s: ‘[e]ach month when Rosita begins to bleed, Sarah wakes with the sensation of a leaden ball low in her belly; she reaches down with her finger, slides it into warm fluids, tastes her own salty menses’ (259). One night, Sarah staggers to her next-door neighbour with terrible cramps in her stomach. Mrs Donovan is convinced she is having a miscarriage: ‘[d]on’t waste your time expecting doctors to understand. I know women’s problems when I see them’ (261). She is, in a sense, right. It is women’s problems but of a very different nature: Rosita is being subjected to the water torture and Sarah can feel her pain. The doctor diagnoses Sarah’s condition as ‘[s]ympathetic magic … a form of hysteria. You believe that if you suffer with her, it will help. You believe you are, as it were, draining off some of her pain into your body’ (261). He also attributes Sarah’s trouble to the fact that her husband has abandoned her: ‘[i]t’s not Rosita Romero’s problem you have to work on … You have to stop avoiding your own. You have to cure your own pain’ (261). Meanwhile, Mrs Donovan insists: ‘[w]omen’s problems. What do doctors know?’ (261). Extrapolating from Shapiro, both scientific discourse and feminine common-sense seem to reproduce
representations that remain ‘unreflectively within the already said’ (86). The doctor and the neighbour are stuck in their traditional mental patterns that do not allow for Sarah’s extreme involvement with Rosita. The mention of hysteria by the doctor is significant indeed. Judith Lewis Herman situates hysteria within the spectrum of traumatic disorders and summarises its history in the following terms:

For two decades in the late nineteenth century, the disorder called hysteria became a major focus of serious inquiry. The term *hysteria* was so commonly understood at the time that no one had actually taken the trouble to define it systematically. In the words of one historian, ‘for twenty-five centuries, hysteria had been considered a strange disease with incoherent and incomprehensible symptoms. Most physicians believed it to be a disease proper to women and originating in the uterus’. Hence the name, hysteria. As another historian explained, hysteria was ‘a dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in the opposite sex’. (10)

As is well known, it was Freud who further associated hysteria with female sexuality. His investigations ‘led … into the unrecognised reality of women’s lives’ (Lewis Herman, 2001 18). Faced with the mystery of Sarah’s pain, the doctor explains it away by having recourse to a ‘medical metaphor’ that pre-empts this radical case of female communion.

Again, in the middle of the night, ‘Sarah wakes in agony’ (261). She senses that Rosita, savagely tortured, is on the verge of death: ‘[d]oubling over her own pain, pleating it between her knees and breasts, containing it, she cradles Rosita’ (261). When the guards appear and take Rosita by the ankles, Sarah ‘digs in her heels and will not let go’ (261). The darkness of the night blurs distinctions, encourages continuity, and signifies the interconnectedness of everything, as the following words by Levinas highlight:

> When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence … There is no longer *this* or *that*; there is not ‘something’. But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence. (2003d 30)

There is no longer Rosita or Sarah but a continuum of bodies joined in suffering and resistance. The night has traditionally been associated with the feminine. Notice the motherly way in which Sarah relates to Rosita’s tortured body: ‘She sings to her, she rocks Rosita in her arms, she strokes her hair’ (261). I will next turn to the abject, in order to counterbalance Levinas’s ungendered theory of alterity. Sarah’s mothering of Rosita across space adds a feminine dimension to her alignment with Levinas’s radical openness to the other. The abject appears as a by-product of entrance into the symbolic order, which culminates in the process of individuation and demands a clear-cut opposition between I and not-I. According to Kristeva, abjection ‘disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (232). The feminine in general and the maternal in particular, are often associated with the abject, since the first thing we reject in order to become subjects is the
body of the mother and all things maternal. Entrance into the symbolic implies renouncing the gross materiality of the mother. Bodily fluids such as blood, urine, faeces, mucus, and so on, are also a common source of the abject in that they often transgress the separation inside/outside and remind the individual of the precarious nature of bodily integrity. Rosita’s tortured body is an evident site of the abject — dirty, broken and bleeding — an object of disgust as much as sympathy. In embracing it, Sarah challenges the principles of separation and rejection on which both individual and social identity are founded. The act of torture that has rendered Rosita’s body abject, disrupts the moral code on which social order rests. As an instance of the abject, Rosita’s body poses a further threat to Sarah’s integrity too, since it compromises not only her mental and physical health but her familial order as well.

The body and not the intellect is also the centre of Gibson’s ethics of sensibility or affect. He defines it simply as ‘the power of being affected rather than affecting’ (161), and builds it on the eighteenth-century concept of sensibility and on Levinas’s philosophy of alterity. I will draw on Gibson to further anchor my analysis of Sarah’s attitude towards the feminine and to cast further light on her answerability for Rosita. For Gibson, sensibility implies ‘quickness and acuteness in emotional apprehension, a particularly keen susceptibility to emotional influence, indicating a specific kind or quality of emotional capacity, ‘the soft sense of the mind’ that Mackenzie regarded as feminine or feminising’ (162). Sensibility is also an ethical faculty characterised by ‘active receptivity’ (Critchley 14), openness and attentiveness. Levinas associates it with ““uncovering” […], exposure to wounds, vulnerability […], not as a passive reception of stimuli, but as a positive “aptitude”” (165). In this sense, sensibility cannot be distinguished from the power of suffering: it is ‘the nakedness of a skin presented to contact, to the caress, which always […] is suffering for the suffering of the other’ (165). Drawing upon Bataille’s concept of ‘expenditure without reserve’, Gibson equates sensibility to exuberance and excess (166). Sarah, like the Rhys heroines Gibson analyses, is characterised by her ‘power of constant involvement, of gratuitous disinterest, [her] disposition to self-expenditure’ (168). Her involvement with Rosita is clearly excessive, since she literally aches with her problems and manages to save her only by draining her pain into her own body.

Gibson’s ethics of sensibility is articulated around two complementary aspects: it shows a particular way of being in the world, and, at the same time, it considers the body of the text, or the text as body, emphasising those formal devices that open up traditional realism to alternative modes. By privileging fragmentation, intertextuality and undecidability, and by encouraging the suspension of disbelief in the reader,5 ‘Dear Amnesty’ shows awareness of this textual side of the ethics of affect. The ambiguity of the ending is a proof of the story’s insistence in the profusion of meaning. The last section of ‘Dear Amnesty’ portrays Sarah once more stroking her daughter’s hair with the brush under the horsechestnut candles,

Rosita Romero — Update: Released yesterday, after worldwide barrage of letters, and after a number of official and semi-official protests from political figures in the US, Canada, Australia, and Europe. (The politicians themselves were a target of our letter writing campaign.) Released in critical condition, due to several bouts of interrogation with torture. Currently under Red Cross care. Present condition: stable. (262)

‘You never hear much’, (263) Sarah says, answering her daughter’s question on the effectiveness of her letter writing. ‘She let Katy’s curls fall loose over her shoulders, and ran the brush through them again. “Don’t stop”, Katy murmured. / “I had no intention of stopping”’ (263). What does Sarah mean with this last sentence? Is she referring to the brushing of her daughter’s hair or to the letters she writes for Amnesty International? This is something the reader has to decide for him or herself. I am inclined to think that she has no intention of stopping either her brushing or her work for Amnesty, since at this stage she seems to have found a balance between her family life and her commitment to the defence of human rights.

The reading of ‘Dear Amnesty’ in the light of Levinas is productive, as I hope to have demonstrated, in that it helps disclose extra layers of meaning with important implications for the understanding of Turner Hospital’s fiction at large. However, this approach is, by no means, unproblematic. In what remains of this essay I would like to draw attention to three specific problems the analysis of the text poses.

The first difficulty I would like to comment on concerns Sarah’s attitude towards Rosita. What happens when the other doesn’t want to be saved? Twice in the text Rosita pleads with Sarah to let her go, but she will not:

‘Let me go’, Rosita pleads. Her lips are like rubber pontoons; the words ooze out, slow and viscous. ‘I can’t hold on any more. Let me go’, she pleads. […] ‘Rosita!’ she gasps. She is losing her hold, Rosita has almost gone. ‘Rosita!’ She clasps Rosita’s hands and hangs on.

All night Sarah braces her legs against the wall. She will not let go. […] When morning comes, Sarah wakes exhausted. Her sheets are sodden.

I did not let go, she thinks. (262)

Is Sarah imposing her own will on Rosita? Is Sarah’s approach to Rosita’s suffering totalising or does it respect the radical otherness of the other? For Levinas, the other is always already radically different and resists ‘being dominated by or reduced to whatever interests or assumptions condition my understanding’ (Sim 263). In approaching the other, Levinas insists, we should avoid subsuming the other into the same. And, besides, what future awaits Rosita when she is no longer under the protection of the Red Cross? Is Sarah’s insistence on saving her a way of prolonging her suffering?
The second problem exposes the limits of Levinas’s notion of the other. Several critics have drawn attention to the difficulties of Levinas’s encounter with the other when there is a third party involved. Levinas himself is aware of the problem: ‘how does responsibility obligate if a third party troubles this exteriority of two […]? What am I to do? Who passes before the other in my responsibility?’ (1996f 168). ‘Dear Amnesty’ is a good illustration of the conflict that arises when more than one other demands the attention of the self. Notice Katy’s words: ‘these people you write letters for … I don’t see where they get the right to swallow up our lives. […] I could do with a few letters of support myself’ (259). The story seems to solve the problem by opting for that other whose needs are more urgent or of a most basic nature. In the end, Sarah’s choice appears to have been right since she manages to save Rosita from death and to establish a more rewarding relationship with her daughter, which demonstrates that the story’s ending does not support an ‘either or’ dynamics but a ‘both and’ one: Sarah won’t stop brushing her daughter’s hair and she won’t stop letter writing for Amnesty either.

The third dilemma, of a more general and theoretical nature, lies in the suitability of approaching a story about human rights from the perspective of a deconstructive, post-foundational ethics. How does the universal character of human rights, forcefully defended by Amnesty International, fit a deconstructive ethics that is suspicious of universals? Despite this apparent contradiction, there are, I believe, strong affinities between a deconstructive ethics inspired by Levinas and the purpose of putting an end to the most extreme forms of suffering that underlie the Declaration of Human Rights. In order to stress this, I will first consider the idea of the universality of human rights together with the particular nature of the work of Amnesty International. Next, I will draw on Simon Critchley, one of the proponents of a deconstructive ethics, and his theory of a situated universality, inspired by the philosophy of Alain Badiou.

Should human rights be universal? Is this set of rules agreed upon on 10th December 1948 generalisable to all peoples and all cultures at all times? Jonathan Power considers the reaffirmation of the universality of human rights in the final version of the Declaration4 ‘an amazing, if under-reported, step forward for mankind’ (302). This claim to universality justifies itself in the inherent dignity of all human beings.7 Human rights, however, have been criticised and opposed by some as a local Western construction, an imperialistic imposition of the West on the rest of the world, as an attempt of a particular culture to generalise its liberal individualistic morality, excessively concerned with the self, in the detriment of the larger community and one’s duties to others (Mahoney 69–71). There is no doubt that human rights as they are understood today are a product of history. There is no doubt either that these ‘transcultural ethical values need some adjusting, ‘some ethical maneuvering [sic] or casuistry in the light of local conditions and circumstances’ (Mahoney 114). Nevertheless, I agree with Jack Mahoney in that ‘there is common ethical ground to be found in the most diverse
of countries and cultures’ (114). Like him, I regard the universal character of human rights as empowering rather than limiting which also appears to be Turner Hospital’s position. The key, Mahoney states, is to approach human rights ‘not as an imposition on some cultures by others but as a challenge to every culture’, (Mahoney 111) the Western world promoted.

The emphasis in the work of Amnesty International is not so much on the defence of an abstract set of principles as on our responsibility for the particular victim of human rights abuses, a victim who has not only a concrete face but also a name and a surname, a victim who would feel neglected and insulted if one decided not to act on the grounds that human rights are a Western imperialistic imposition (Mahoney 106). The words of Warren Christopher, US ex-Secretary of State, are appropriate here: ‘[w]e respect the religious, social, and cultural characteristics that make each country unique. But we cannot let cultural relativism become the last refuge of repression’ (qtd in Mahoney 170). Unlike other NGOs, more concerned with community projects, Amnesty International works on behalf of specific individuals. As happens with Sarah in ‘Dear Amnesty’, those who have signed up for the Urgent Action Network are provided with the victim’s particularities, thus blending the universal with the specific in their concerns. In focusing on the work of Sarah in the interest of Rosita, ‘Dear Amnesty’ overcomes a further objection. How can one accuse Sarah of individualism and self-centredness when her involvement with Rosita undoes her own self? Rather than supporting their own rights for their own sake, as Thomas Paine would put it, Amnesty International’s volunteers support ‘those rights in other people’ (qtd in Mahoney 101).

In line with Alain Badiou, Simon Critchley (42) affirms that ethics should not be tied to abstract generalities but to concrete situations, at the same time that it must not renounce its claim to universality. A possible remedy to the trappings of both relativism and foundationalism, Simon Critchley suggests, is what he calls a situated universality:

The subject commits itself ethically in terms of a demand that is received from that situation, for example a situation of political injustice: a strike, an act of police brutality, a miscarriage of justice or whatever. But this demand is not reducible to the situation. It is, rather, a situated demand that is addressed, in principle, to everyone and hence universal. (42)

Both Amnesty International and Turner Hospital’s short story, articulate, in Critchley’s words: ‘an ethical demand whose scope is universal and whose evidence is faced in a concrete situation’ (132).

‘Dear Amnesty’ demonstrates the interdependence between the private and the public, the ethical and the political and fosters an ethics of alterity that avoids the pitfalls of foundationalism without renouncing responsibility for our neighbours. In this short story, Turner Hospital successfully resolves Levinas’s unfulfillable ethical demand: an openness to the other that exceeds the limits of myself. Its
outcome would suggest that Turner Hospital is in accord with the Levinasian idea that ‘at the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible’ (in Morrison, 2001 passim). But also, extrapolating from Buell (7), ‘Dear Amnesty’ ‘rescues’ Levinas from himself’, as it corrects one of his most evident blind spots: his ‘neglect of the feminine aspect of alterity’ (Shapiro 69). Turner Hospital promotes ‘the possibilities of agency for women in a world where those possibilities have been circumscribed by men in such a way that acting comes to be constructed as transgressing’ (Callahan 1996 6). Sarah is one of Turner Hospital’s most potent ‘representations of women acting, succeeding, creating their own spaces and understandings of events, possessing power’ (Callhan 1996 6). Her short story ‘Dear Amnesty’ is, finally, an original metaphor for the effectiveness of the work of Amnesty International. As the Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman said on the Pinochet’s case: ‘“One person crying out in the ethical wilderness, one person, and then one more, then another” — that is all that is needed to keep the spark of justice alive’ (qtd in Power 111). Sarah’s saving of Rosita against all odds testifies to it.

NOTES

1 This article is a revised and extended version of a paper presented at the 14th ACLALS Conference held in Vancouver in August 2007. The research carried out for the writing is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (code HUM2007-61035). The author is also thankful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H05).

2 As Isabel Fraile argues, the notion of confluence, developed by Fritz Perls, the creator of Gestalt therapy, can cast light on Turner Hospital’s interest in making connections. In a situation of confluence the subject loses ‘any notion of his/her own limits’ (203). Confluence can be a neurotic mechanism: the person takes refuge in the collective ‘we’ in order to elude responsibility. But, there is also a healthy kind of confluence, like that experienced by newborn babies or adult people ‘during rituals or periods of extreme concentration’, which ‘allows the individual to feel a deeper connection with him/herself due, precisely, to this identification with the other members of the group’ (203).

3 The use of the masculine is deliberate, as Levinas has been charged with offering an undifferentiated at best, if not clearly male-oriented, conception of the other (Hand 38). See also Shapiro (69) and Buell (1999 16; 2000 7).

4 I am partly indebted to a doctorate seminar on Turner Hospital taught by David Callahan at the Department of English and German Philology (University of Zaragoza, February 2006).

5 See Anne Whitehead, Trauma Fiction on the key stylistic features that recur in narratives of trauma (81–89). Trauma studies, a spin-off of deconstructive ethical criticism, testifies to the affinity of the literary with trauma and to the fruitful interconnections between literary criticism and the scientific study of trauma (4).

6 ‘The universal nature of these rights is beyond question. All human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated’ (Universal Declaration of Human Rights qtd in Power 302).

7 For a comprehensive study of the arguments about the existence of human rights see Mahoney, 2007, chapter 4 ‘Establishing Human Rights’.)
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‘I Am a Lie’: Connections between Identity and Narrative in *Tracks* and *Season of Migration to the North*

Tayeb Salih’s novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), depicts the life of Mustafa Sa’eed through the medium of an anonymous narrator who is intrigued by Mustafa’s enigmatic nature. The narrator and Mustafa initially encounter one another in the narrator’s native village in the Sudan. He has just returned from school in England, and Mustafa had arrived in the village during his absence. What begins as an antagonistic relationship between Mustafa and the narrator evolves into a profound understanding of one another. Both men were raised in Africa and educated in England, and both men were forced to construct fictional identities that were contingent upon the beliefs and expectations of the people around them. Mustafa incites the narrator’s interest in him when he begins reciting British poetry during a party in the Sudan, but the narrator does not immediately acknowledge their connection. He is quietly suspicious of Mustafa for some time, and when he finally develops a relationship with the man, it is a posthumous one. Mustafa dies early in the novel, and the narrator pieces together the details of his life through Egyptian, British, and Sudanese sources who knew him (or, more accurately, who knew the mythology of self that Mustafa constructed for them).

It becomes apparent that Mustafa played a fictional role for his acquaintances in each setting, and those personas fulfilled the stereotypical expectations that people held about him. In order to seduce women in England, Mustafa played on their assumptions about the exoticism of the ‘Orient’; and in order to ingratiate himself with Sudanese villagers, he adopted the persona of a humble farmer.

Neither of these identities was a fabrication, rather, they were both isolated components of his overarching hybrid identity. In order to function in a monolithic space, he needed to suppress the contradictory elements of his cultural identity and create the illusion of singularity. In the Sudan, he was African. In England, he was British enough to understand how African people wanted him to be without crossing into the treacherous territory of ‘otherness’. Mustafa figured out who everyone else was before he determined which character to become. He did reveal his inherent multiplicity to the narrator, though.

When Mustafa is perceived outside of a stifling cultural context, his complexity becomes apparent. The narrator finds himself identifying with Mustafa’s complexity, and he realises that he can see through Mustafa’s illusions because they parallel his own. The narrator also navigates the ambiguous spaces between...
the Sudan and England, and he also consciously suppresses elements of himself when he is surrounded by people who would fear those elements as alien to their closed ideological universe. The narrator provides the necessary bicultural lens through which the reader may view the multi-faceted nature of Mustafa; and by scrutinizing Mustafa’s nuances, the narrator confronts the multi-faceted nature of himself.

Salih presents the complications of being multicultural in one solid culture, and he suggests that a new hybrid culture is mobilised in the gaps between its stationary shaping agents. The difficulty surfaces when that new culture asks its makers to acknowledge it on its own terms. If the existing culture is confined within its own system of knowledge and perception, then how can it understand that which permeates those walls? How does one culture make sense of something that adopts a familiar form and beckons in a familiar language, yet resides in the obscurity of otherness?

That question yields dismal results for Pauline in Louise Erdrich’s 1988 novel, *Tracks*, which details the conflict between a Chippewa tribe and the encroaching white American society in the early twentieth century. The solidarity of the tribe is unravelling due to external and internal factors, and one of those factors is Pauline (or Sister Leopolda). Pauline, a woman of mixed Indian and European descent, co-narrates this story with Nanapush, who is one of the elders of the Chippewa tribe. She despises her ambiguous heritage and tries to force herself into a singular Christian mould. Pauline acts as a divisive figure in the tribe, and most of her narration is tainted by gloom and her increasing insanity. She struggles to claim a distinct identity in the murky space of cultural convergence, and in doing so, she sabotages members of the Chippewa tribe and clings to a perversion of Christian ideology in order to give herself a clear label. Pauline needs to make sense in assimilated white society, so she fears (and actively destroys) the Chippewa components of her identity. Erdrich’s thematic focus reflects that of Salih: how does one find internal harmony between colonising culture and colonised culture when those cultures battle for dominance in one’s external surroundings?

In the space of cultural collision, hybridity is the interstice between fixed cultures. To be hybrid is more complicated than just to be composed of a cultural binary or cultural multiplicity; ideally, hybridity should enable mediation between the cultures that shape one’s identity, and it should become a space that elicits cultural exchange. Hybridity is a condition that can literally be described as split, but to function in this space one must become multiple, adaptive, and fluid in order to negotiate between all parts. Robert Young writes:

> it involves processes of interaction that create new social spaces to which new meanings are given. These relations enable the articulation of experiences of change in societies splintered by modernity, and they facilitate consequent demands for social transformation. (79)
The space of hybridity is perceived as a gap between recognisable cultures. Distinct definitions are broken down and boundaries are blurred here, so it becomes incomprehensible to those who function within a singular cultural definition — it is often misconstrued as an absence or a realm of confusion that must be overlooked or revised. Constructing an identity that embraces one’s immersion in the space of hybridity is problematic due to the ambiguous nature of this space, and translating that identity to either side of the gulf — or gulfs — it straddles is also a concern.

In *Season of Migration to the North* and *Tracks*, two characters use storytelling to fabricate new identities which seem to fit neatly into one side of the binary that each struggles with. But in the process of narrating an artificial self into a singular cultural context, Mustafa and Pauline exclude the remaining components of their inherent cultural duplicity. Pauline refuses to identify with her Chippewa community and forcibly internalises a Christian ideology, while Mustafa composes two separate identities (one for Western company, one for Sudanese), both of which are constructed to appease his audience. In England, he embodies the over-exoticised Western paradigm of Orientalism, whereas in the Sudan, he transforms into a prototypical member of the village in which he resides. In this revision of self through narrative, the actual hybrid self is lost and all that remains is the story that the self has become.

Because both Pauline and Mustafa’s identities are constructed in narrative, they have wholly transformed themselves into fictions. What may appear to be a revision (or translation) of hybrid self has realistically become a story about hybridity — revealing the ambiguous, untranslatable, alien and inescapable nature of hybrid space and identity.

Mustafa and Pauline dually function as stories and storytellers — Pauline confirms the destructive aspect of hybrid space, but Mustafa suggests a potentially positive alternative in both the contents and format of his narrative. According to Jennifer Sergi,

> [w]ithout stories there would be no articulation of experience: people would be unable to understand and celebrate the experiences of self, community, and world. And so cultures value the tellers of stories. The storyteller takes what he or she tells from experience — his or her own or that reported by others — and in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to the tale. (279–83)

So if the ideal outcome of a story is to connect with the listener, then it seems that Mustafa is more likely to be socially valued and carried into posterity than Pauline. His confinement to and death within ambiguity is an undesirable fate for an individual, but his narrative opens up the realm of hybridity as a recognisable presence. He narrates himself into lies in England and the Sudan, but as the narrator of *Season of Migration to the North* collects the fragments of Mustafa’s life to compile a meta-narrative, he illuminates the space of hybridity as one that can be occupied. Mustafa’s narrative connects with the anonymous narrator and
will carry on as a vessel that articulates the experience of those who are learning to see with more than just ‘one eye’ or speak with more than ‘one tongue’ (150).

On the other hand, Pauline has narrated herself away from all possible connections; she has convinced herself that her revised identity is a genuine transformation of self. Since she is not conscious of her containment in narrative form, she becomes a story that functions only to validate itself rather than articulate an experience to unite a community. Pauline falls short of the necessary connection between narrative and listener, and in fact, she has no human audience — her intended listener is God.

While Mustafa is the initial constructor of his fictions, and therefore the original storyteller, he is not the only medium by which the narrator comes to understand the tale of hybridity that Mustafa constructs. The narrator connects fragments of Mustafa’s lies as they are relayed by the other Sudanese villagers: Hosna Bint Mahmoud, the Mamur on the train (‘we nicknamed him “The Black Englishman”’ [53]), the college lecturer, and Mrs Robinson. Because the narrative is not limited to one teller, Mustafa as a story is multiple and somewhat fractured, so his tale enacts hybridity in its structure and its mode of mediation between speaker and listener; it must be perceived with more than ‘one eye’, it is spoken with more than ‘one tongue’, and its truth lies in the spaces that are neither ‘black or white’ nor ‘Eastern or Western’ (151).

In the narrative condition that Mustafa embodies, the construction of fiction is a potential healing agent of a fragmented or dispossessed community. In this case, the community exists in the overlooked space of hybridity, a space in which the anonymous narrator is an isolated occupant. He struggles with his identity, unsure of how to balance his internal conflict of Sudanese and Western cultures. In seeking out the story of Mustafa, the narrator is looking for a description of himself, and when he understands that Mustafa’s narrative originates from that same ambiguous space between cultures, the narrator is forced to deal with his own hybridity. Salih does not offer a solid conclusion to the narrator’s realisation, but one certainty is that the story of Mustafa has forged a connection with its listener, and that connection could be the premise of a new community of hybridity once the narrator chooses to continue the story-telling chain that has begun.

The story that the narrator comes to pursue is not the tale that is explicitly narrated by Mustafa or by the random acquaintances of Mustafa who he meets throughout the novel, but instead, the narrator constructs the actual tale through the absences in those narrative accounts. This mode of story-telling is a revision of the traditional oral style — instead of gathering fragments from what is spoken and passing them along, he gathers the unspoken truth from the spoken lies and strings the absences together to form a noticeable presence. The unspoken truth is hybridity — it is the reality of Mustafa’s oscillation between two cultures that both resisted his efforts at leaving ‘a mark’ (54). The unspoken truth encapsulates what Homi Bhabha is referring to when he writes:
The anxiety of the irresolvable borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny disjunctive temporality that is at once the time of cultural displacement and the space of the untranslatable. (Bhabha qtd in Young 25)

Mustafa’s narrative speaks from the space of the untranslatable, paradoxically illuminating it through the gaps in his translated lies. The narrator is in a unique position of understanding the untranslatable on its own terms, and he constructs his own narrative that will similarly resist translation. By continuing the narrative chain in this irresolvable space, the narrator and Mustafa assert hybridity as a new presence — one that requires a revision of the reader’s mode of perception rather than a revision of the hybrid identity to fit his/her fixed perceptions.

At a drinking session in the Sudan, the narrator first notices that discrepancy in the space between Mustafa’s fiction and the actual story: ‘…his eyes gave me the impression of wandering in far-away horizons’ (14). There is something that cannot be said, that cannot be translated from hybridity into this most recently devised identity, and the narrator begins to sense this inexplicable connection. Then the connection between story and listener is solidified with Mustafa’s next action: ‘I heard him reciting English poetry in a clear voice with an impeccable English accent. It was a poem which I later found in an anthology of poetry about the First World War’ (14). The narrator is alerted to the gaps in the narrative of self that Mustafa has constructed, and his curious response is due to his identification with the narrative manifesting itself in those gaps. When he confronts Mustafa and asks him to admit what he is, Mustafa does not blatantly tells him who he is, but he simply allows the narrator to listen to the lies and piece together the story of Mustafa by hearing everything that Mustafa is not.

In this revised mode of story-telling (where the actual narrative is embedded in the easily overlooked interstices between fabrications of cultural identities), hybridity also transforms into a presence that must be acknowledged. If the story connects with the experience of its listeners, then the listeners are located in those same interstices. Lack of translatability ceases to function solely as an agent of alienation, and it becomes a potential agent by which a new kind of cultural community is galvanised.

Towards the end of the novel, the narrator does not need to listen to any more of Mustafa’s tale that forces itself into either side of the East/West binary because he has fully located the story of Mustafa and himself in the liminal sphere between them — the space of mediation between the two cultures. He leaves Mustafa’s hidden room and says of the British aspect of his narrative: ‘I left him talking and went out. I did not let him complete the story’ (166). The surface story of translated identities had come together to signify the real narrative that it was not — hybridity — and the narrator of Season of Migration to the North is left in a position to deal with this fully acknowledged hybrid space as a presence, albeit an incomplete one.
Patricia Geesey discusses Mustafa as a model of hybridity, and in doing so, she points out another instance where he begins to draw the narrator into a chasm between dominant cultures and narratives. She writes:

The next day, the narrator encounters Mustafa digging up the ground around a tree. After greeting the narrator, Sa’eed indicates the tree at hand: ‘Some branches of this tree produce lemons, others oranges’ (Salih 15). Attempting to provoke him, the narrator responds, ‘What an extraordinary thing!’ (15) in English, but the remarkable tree is really of no interest to him. The narrator, for all his longing to resemble the solid and ageless palm tree of his family’s home, would do well to examine the very real ‘extraordinariness’ of that lemon-orange tree. (132)

Mustafa is implicitly centralising the hybrid space of perception by presenting the grafted lemon-orange tree. Geesey reads this tree as a symbol of the positive possibilities of hybridity because it embodies the potential for equilibrium between two differing forces in one grafted body. As the product of grafting a lemon tree and orange tree, this new species has successfully become something original, multiple, and fruitful. This tree can be understood as a botanical analogy for functioning hybridity; it goes beyond simply containing a duality, it has allowed for the interaction between lemon and orange to create something new.

The novel ends with the point of origin of the narrator’s tale — the words ‘Help! Help!’ (169). These words are the reader’s portal to his revised thread of oral tradition. Trapped in a geographical recreation of hybrid space in the middle of the Nile, the narrator is ‘half-way between north and south … unable to continue, unable to return … conscious of the river’s destructive forces pulling (him) downwards and of the current pushing (him) to the southern shore’ (168).

His position is that of a drowning man, and he must continue the story-telling chain in order to make sense of this dangerous, chaotic region by making it habitable for the reader’s perception. Mustafa’s narrative has thrust the narrator into a realisation of his own cultural location as a hybrid subject but alone he is unable to continue to survive in this space. He opens up his story with a plea for acknowledgment, forcing his listeners to scrutinise the gaps mediating between definable presences (literally the waters swirling between current systems and shorelines). Saree Makdisi concludes her analysis of the novel by saying: ‘While Mustafa Sa’eed’s story is dedicated to a reader who could not possibly exist, *Season of Migration to the North* is dedicated to readers who do not yet exist: those who can simultaneously see with two eyes, talk with two tongues, and see things both as black and as white’ (820). Mustafa’s narrative passively outlines the role of that ideal reader and opens a space for the potential to eventually manifest itself in the actual. The anonymous narrator takes his story one step further: he is desperately calling the reader into action and enticing him to dive into that space to carry on the narrative chain for which Mustafa laid the groundwork.

In her discussion of the social implications of story-telling, Sheila Hughes argues:
The authority of any speaker—in any discourse across power lines of race, class, culture, or gender lies not so much in his or her essentialised identity, but in the relational ties such speech draws upon, sustains, and seeks to create: the kind of community such rhetoric relies upon and (re) produces. (88)

Mustafa is both the speaker and subject of this community-forging rhetoric that Hughes outlines here. He alerts the narrator to his position in a previously unknown community, and as the narrative chain extends outward from the narrator to his listeners and so on, this community will potentially continue to strengthen.

Pauline, the narrator of *Tracks*, is also a construction of fiction, but she does not provide the same degree of value to her listeners. She narrates herself away from community and into an isolated sphere of delusion and Westernisation. She even directs her narrative away from human readership. Hughes writes: ‘[t]here is no identifiable audience for her story, auditory or otherwise, and wherever dialogical voices enter her text, she struggles to control and judge them’ (6). There is no dialogue provided in Pauline’s narrative (between speaker and listener or between story and community), she is a force that needs to contain all that it encounters (including the self) within the confines of her fiction. Pauline excludes possibilities of multiplicity, and the reality that her story is ridden with hybridity—exposing gaps is purely accidental on her part.

Mustafa’s presentation of hybridity is intentional—he is fully conscious of his obligation as the creator of a fiction, and he deliberately speaks with more than one tongue, juxtaposing his lies against one another to call attention to the overshadowed truth. He never deludes himself into believing that he has revised an independently functioning self—he exists for his listeners. Pauline does not operate with this same awareness. She perceives no distinction between artifice and authenticity, so she fully believes that her lies have woven a new reality, one in which fiction transformed her old self into a new one, rather than simply transforming it into a narrative. Nanapush, Pauline’s co-narrator is a wholly different kind of story-teller because he remains in the role of story-teller and trickster, the one who manipulates the stories while avoiding containment within them. He says of Pauline:

Pauline was the only trace of those who died and scattered. She was different from the Puyats I remembered, who were always an uncertain people, shy, never leaders in our dances and cures. She was, to my mind, an unknown mixture of ingredients, like pale bannock that sagged or hardened. We never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around. So we tried to ignore her, and that worked as long as she was quiet. But she was different once her mouth opened and she started to wag her tongue. She was worse than a Nanapush, in fact. For while I was careful with my known facts, she was given to improving truth. Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage… That is all to say that the only people who believed Pauline’s stories were the ones who loved the dirt. (39)
This description of Pauline reveals a few details about her character before it becomes a Christianised fiction. She begins in the space of hybridity, confusing Indians and transparent to the white people in Argus (she admits to her invisibility in the minds of whites by saying ‘I never rinsed through the white girls’ thoughts [15] and later she discusses her status as an absence, a shadow, or as an unseen seer). Pauline considers it impossible to establish an identity when she does not belong to any single culture or compartmentalised space that provides neat labels for its occupants, so she attempts to escape hybridity by fully immersing herself in a single culture and abandoning the other. But her account of breaking free from this space paradoxically reveals just how embedded she is in it. Failing to actually revise the self, she undergoes a transformation into fiction and narrates a self that is definable, recognisable, and void of any overt multiplicity. From the beginning, her narrative function is almost antithetical to Mustafa’s: his lies provide for subtle revelation to his listener while hers are an instrument of concealment.

While Pauline claims to consist of one myopic vision — Christianity — she has gaps in her narrative that depict hybridity, as well. The gaps manifest themselves in the discrepancy between the ideology she wants to embrace and the lens of Chippewa belief and mythology through which she perceives this Western ideology. When she follows Fleur — the pillar of strength in the Chippewa community — to the Chippewa afterlife, she describes the motives of the card players: ‘They play for drunkenness, or sorrow, or loss of mind. They play for ease, they play for penitence, and sometimes, for living souls’ (160). The concept of this afterlife as something that does not fit into the Christian dichotomy of heaven / hell is in direct contrast to the beliefs that she is forcefully internalising. It reveals a continued, almost unquestioned, belief in Chippewa culture and mythology despite her attempted abandonment of it. She uses the word ‘penitence’ as something that is being gambled for here; penitence usually connotes divine forgiveness in Catholicism, so Pauline is witnessing a space removed from Christian mythology, yet familiar in design to her, and she uses newly acquired Christian terminology to describe its contents. There is an overlapping of cultures in this moment resulting in a momentary exposure of the location of Pauline’s narrative in a hybrid interstice. Despite her attempt to detach herself from both Chippewa culture and the ambiguity of her hybrid cultural makeup, she, like Mustafa, is telling a story of hybridity.

But her version of hybridity is distorted into something destructive, a space where cultures and mythologies merge to form something monstrous and unnatural. If Mustafa’s narrative asks the reader to make sense of the new space he/she is encountering, Pauline’s narrative asserts that the reader must beware of it. For her, hybridity becomes a battleground that promises to dissipate once a single voice emerges as the victor. While Mustafa’s depiction of hybridity demands its viewers step outside their preconceived notions of power structures and hierarchical categorisation, Pauline fears a breakdown into a polyphonic
equality. The loss of a power hierarchy implies the loss of a system of external identification, and since she seeks to define herself exclusively by her inclusion in white, Christian society, she is terrified by a space that would render that identity equal to any other.

Towards the end of the novel, Pauline is trying to finalise her induction into the Christian world, and her narrative fuses Christian iconography with Chippewa, skewing the meanings with which figures and symbols such as Satan, Jesus, the desert, or Misshepeshu were initially invested. She says:

The mystery of what I saw was some diversion. He crept in one night dressed in a peddler’s ripped garments with a pack on his back full of forks, scissors, and paper packets of sharp needles. He tried them all out upon my flesh. ‘Are you the Christ?’ I screamed at least. ‘I am the light of the world’, he laughed. I thought of Lucifer … I heard air rushing beneath his wide-stretched wings. ‘We’ll meet in the desert’, he shouted … I had to wonder. Which master had given me these words to decipher? I must hate one, the other adore. (193)

Hybridity becomes a space of confusion, where concrete meaning dissolves into chaos. Since what Pauline seeks is a master who will validate her identity by association, this space is something that must be overcome. Satan, the Christian divine (Jesus or God), and Misshepeshu intertwine in the form of her visitor, and neither she nor the reader of Tracks is entirely sure how to decipher this moment. The vision she is having exemplifies the idea of poly-vocality and multiplicity that Mustafa ultimately endorses, but to Pauline, it takes on a nightmarish quality:

The desert was all around me and I knew which god was which. Christ had turned His face from me for other reasons than my insignificance. Christ had hidden out of frailty, overcome by the glitter of copper scales, appalled at the creature’s unwinding length and luxury. New devils require new gods. (195)

Pauline places this moment into the context of a Christian mythological binary: one is either aligned with God or the devil. If there is no definitive saviour, master, or enemy in the situation, then she must assign those roles to the ambiguous figures she has to work with. Jesus is absent, so she must fill that role (a ‘new god’), and this indeterminable figure must by default be a ‘new devil’. While she takes pride in her ability to enter this space where the singular figures of Christianity cannot function, her ultimate goal is to erase the lines of fragmentation that she is composed of and become singular, as well. She connotes singularity with wholeness.

It was I with the cunning of serpents, I with the skill to win forgiveness. I was cleft down the middle by my sin of those days in Argus, scored like a lightning-struck tree. Deep inside, that crooked black vein, charcoal sweet, was ready to dissolve. If I did not forsake Jesus in his extremity, then he would have no other choice but to make me whole. (195)

This concept of becoming whole involves being re-mythologised into Christianity, and this affects her narrative status, as well. To enter Christianity
Suzanne Foley

170 

completely, she must turn her fiction away from the Chippewa and hybrid communities and contain it within Western tradition. Hughes finds a parallel between Pauline’s narrative and ‘the Indian autobiographical genre’. Both subordinate ‘the Indian voice’ and allow its experiences to be reshaped and re-spoken by a white editorial presence in order to fit the expectations of the white reader. ‘The Indian element’ is essentially extracted from Indian autobiography. She writes:

Arnold Krupat explains that such texts were not technically authored but were instigated by, inscribed in collaboration with, and published under the editorial supervision of ‘some white’ (Indian Autobiography 262). In this case, the mixed-blood and bicultural Pauline is herself that ‘white’ and ‘Indian who is [the text’s] subject’… She is simultaneously writing a white life for herself. (7)

In ‘writing a white life for herself’ Pauline has allowed Christianity to literally colonise the Chippewa within her. She may never escape the space of hybridity, but she can silence the components of her identity that are cumbersome to her goal of absolute Westernisation. Pauline is incapable of the cultural exchange necessary for managing a hybrid identity, so the fictitious self that she narrates eliminates the possibilities of negotiation between cultures and allows her intrinsic multiplicity to be swallowed up by the delusion of singularity. She has abandoned hybridity and all of its possibilities of fluidity and cultural interaction.

The oral story-telling tradition has been shattered here. Pauline actually severs the narrative chain, whereas Mustafa, by contrast, reinvented it. Her tale is not being spoken in the context of the oral story-telling community; instead, it seems to take on the form of a confession, if not directed at God, then at another member of white, Christian society. She says:

I am now sanctified, recovered, and about to be married here at the church in our diocese and by our bishop. I will be the bride and Christ will take me as wife, without death. For I was caused by my sisters’ most tender ministrations to regain my sense, to wash in the name of my Divine Husband, to eat His provender and drink His Blood, so brutally spilled. (224)

When her narrative concludes, she is about to take her vows. She has just been renamed and she seems to be confessing before she is officially transformed into Sister Leopolda. Whether or not this is God receiving her formal confession, it is someone associated with the church, a person to whom she must justify the history behind her arrival in this place. Instead of passing this story of Chippewa history on to the inheritors of the culture, or of hybrid culture, she discards it to the forces that helped destroy those cultures.

Whether or not her narrative can be termed a formal confession, it still takes on the characteristics of the confessional format. Confessions do not share narratives’ concern with posterity and community; they are isolated accounts that are told under the premise of being sinful or wrong. The act of confessing implies participation in an ideology that unequivocally determines what is right and
wrong, and it can be assumed that the listener also functions within that ideology. Pauline’s confession is another vessel through which she forces her duality into the Christian right/wrong binary. In describing the path she took to joining the convent and taking her vows (presumably the actions that would be ‘right’) she must also detail her Chippewa identity (‘sinful’).

Framing cultural multiplicity in this irrelevant binary serves to detach the two worlds from each other. If hybridity is the fluid space between cultures, then it would be suffocated by the imposition of inflexible binaries. As E Shelley Reid writes: ‘[i]t is not, then, the multiplicity of perspectives or the cultural fragmentation itself that is destructive, but an inability to mediate the differences’ (82). Mustafa does mediate the differences in his own way, but Pauline fears her disappearance into untranslatability in the liminal spaces, so she confines herself in a single lie. In doing so, she confirms the theory that the irresolvable of hybridity is ultimately destructive. While she has re-mythologised herself into Christian culture, she has distorted the basic tenets of that culture. She is isolated in her own insane universe that is a kaleidoscopic fusion of Christianity, Chippewa culture, and individual delusion. Her confinement within her own alienated space of distortion is due primarily to her frustration at the reality of her untranslatability.

Narratives build up communities by establishing a shared point of origin and connecting chains of dialogue as part of a continued cultural construction. Stories are a community’s mythology, and narrative dialogue allows mythology to encompass the new stories that stem from the old. But when a mythology becomes myopic and operates on a principle of exclusion, then the evolved, hybrid person (who cannot recognise the pre-existing narrative as one that he or she can fully identify with) loses his or her position within a single community. This fractured identity resists a connection with the solidified wholeness of a singular mythology. This condition produces Bhabha’s accurate description of hybridity as ‘irresolvable’. One must either find a way to eschew pre-existing conceptions of solvability and embrace a hybrid identity, or one can spend a lifetime clinging to the delusion of having discovered a method of translatability.

Mustafa and Pauline were both faced with this problem, but Mustafa authored a new mythology — one composed of fragments. This mythology will facilitate the ideal dialogic connections between members of its poly-vocal community, because fragments will not form a closed structure. This space of hybridity that Mustafa calls forth with his mythological groundwork will still be irresolvable, but also inclusive, fluid, and adaptive.

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1. Power

Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach were written in Brussels in 1845. They occupy just three pages of the fifty volume Collected Works, and comprise Marx’s call for an exit from philosophy and an embrace of revolutionary agitation. A series of terse formulations, the Theses begin in the highly abstracted language of idealist philosophy, and become increasingly shorter, and closer to the directness of political rhetoric. Thesis XI, the final and most famous, states:

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it. (1976 8)

In what follows I am going to argue that the comparatively uncelebrated second thesis on Feuerbach, can be read as a cogent theory of poetry. I also aim to show that the theory of Thesis II resonates with the practice of Robert Hass — one of the most celebrated contemporary English-language poetry critics. In addition, I will try to extend the range of Thesis II through some critical work of my own. Throughout I will be seeking to raise the possibility that power, far from necessarily inimical, or even just supererogatory, to poetic practice, might be one of the key things that make poetry poetic.

But before I can make that argument, I need to clarify the relationship between Thesis II and XI. Marx did not publish the Theses on Feuerbach. They remained unpublished until 1888, when Engels, five years after Marx’s death, made them an appendix to his Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy. I suggest that Marx did not publish Thesis XI in particular because the only authentic way to hold this thesis — ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it’ — is not to publish it. To publish it is immediately to render the statement hypocritical. For what are you doing thereby if not philosophising, in spite of your urging to the contrary?

There is little, as Etienne Balibar has recently argued, to distinguish Thesis XI from the concerns of traditional philosophy ‘at the heart of its most speculative turn’ (19). It is the strict division the thesis imposes between interpretation, on the one hand, and change — that realm of revolutionary action, somewhere out there, beyond the articulation of theses like this one — on the other, that makes it susceptible to such a fate. It does not perform its own truth. Hegel’s attack on philosophical stances that trumpet what ‘must be’ without simultaneously showing how that obligatory reality already has ‘being’ right here right now on the page, takes us immediately closer to the practice and criticism of poetry.
Let us look now at Thesis II:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question. (1976 6)

A statement needs to prove its own truth. Thesis XI only makes sense when read in the light of Thesis II, which has the additional advantage of explaining what Marx in fact went on to do. He did not abandon thinking so as to militate exclusively for change. Rather, he put his thinking — for we are really talking about science here as much as art or politics — to the test. That involved asking the world a question: do these ideas have power? Or rather, which is the same thing, are they real?

Not only did Marx not publish the Theses, soon after writing them he stopped writing philosophy altogether. As Louis Althusser remarked, a set of theses which seemed ‘to announce a revolution in philosophy’ was in fact followed by ‘a thirty year-long philosophical silence’ (178). But this picture of Marx’s philosophical silence is not entirely true. Althusser paraphrases a comment of Lenin’s, to the effect that ‘one should look in Marx’s Capital for his dialectic — by which he [Lenin] meant Marxist philosophy itself’ (1990 183). The fact is that Marx did not stop writing philosophy at all. Capital, published some twenty years after the Theses, in 1867, contains Marx’s response to Hegel’s universalism. That critique takes the form of a demonstration that Hegel’s ‘absolute knowledge’ is pre-empted in the very being of the capitalist commodity, which is itself a sort of universalising philosopher (it ‘thinks’ everything in its path in terms of — the only thing it can see — so many quantifiable and precisely exchangeable units of universal human labour), and brings forth societies that conceive the world in similarly abstract and universalising forms, up to and including Hegelian philosophy itself (see further Postone). Yet that critique comes by way of a this-worldly discussion of political economy. Hegel’s crowning idea is thus revealed as a fantasy masking a contingent social form, a social form which itself serves to mask the most powerful of the modern forms of slavery. In sum, Marx demonstrated that his philosophy was more cogent than Hegel’s by setting up a verbal experiment (that is, Capital, the book itself, including the economic data it amasses and analyses) that would show the ‘reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking’ (1976 6).

There is however no need to restrict the explanatory power of Thesis II to the ‘thought-experiments’ of book-based theory. To the contrary, the thesis inspires us to realise that the ‘reality and power’ of Marx’s demonstration could just as well be the revolutions and governments his theoretical work lead to. In this light, one might want to claim that the history of the twentieth century has conclusively disproved Marx’s philosophical work.4 Thinkers like Meghnad Desai, André Gorz, David Harvey and Moishe Postone, on the other hand, suggest — at the very least — that the question is still in the balance. According to those authors, Marx’s statement is still being made.
That is why I like Thesis II so much more than Thesis XI. Instead of gesturing to a world that is purportedly better than that in which its speaker finds him or herself, Thesis II offers a mode of speech whose measure is its repercussions upon the very place we inhabit. Less dismissive of philosophy than Thesis XI, it is, by the same token, so much more in this world. It leaves open the possibility that our language itself might be the spark to fire change. But that is already putting it too teleologically. For Thesis II — and again, this marks a point of contrast with Thesis XI — cannot be read as supplying blind support for change. It is much more like a focussing device, to help us isolate the moment of power.

2. Criticism with Power

I have just outlined a critique of one of Marx’s theses, and expressed the superiority of a different one. I have done so by relying on the theoretical statements of thinkers who themselves identify as Marxists, plus Hegel, who in many ways speaks through them; and of course I have relied on the critical power of Thesis II itself.

The curious thing is that I could have arrived at the same result by way of poetry criticism. I will sketch how this is so by analysing an essay by celebrated American critic Robert Hass. The essay is entitled ‘James Wright’ and concerns the American poet of that name, (1927–1980), who is perhaps best known for introducing a vivid, imagistic sensuality into North American verse. Hass (1941– ), on the other hand, is based in California, taught at UCLA with Czesław Miłosz, won the U.S.A.’s National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism in 1984 for Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry, and is also a poet in his own right. ‘I want,’ Hass offers, ‘to say some things against James Wright’s poems, which I love’ (28). As we will see in analysing the nature of those complaints, poetry for Hass, far from being ‘fantastic’, is itself a form of ‘reality and power’ (Marx 1976 6); it proves its own truth, in its own words, at every step.

A parallel between Karl Marx and a contemporary critic of poetry might appear to be a counter-intuitive project. Who in the philosophical canon would support such a blatant equation of poetry and power? Did not Spinoza, that astute observer of language and habit — ‘Marx without a beard’, as Georgi Plekhanov once called him (Anderson 64) — oppose power to poetry in the Tractatus Politicus? There Spinoza attacks philosophers who refuse to think through realpolitik, on the grounds that such thinkers have merely ‘produced fantasies, ideas that could only be realised in Utopia, or the Golden Age of the poets, when of course they were least required’ (n.p. [my translation]). Poetry, for Spinoza, is a place of fantasy and weak philosophy, the very opposite of practical thought. The parallel I am drawing is, indeed, a counter-intuitive one, though I hasten to add from the outset that Hass is not the only critic I might have drawn on to make it: Ted Hughes comes to mind (19; 43), also Robert Pinsky (6–9), Randall Jarrell (230), Stephen Spender (161) and contemporary Australian critic Elizabeth Campbell (46–55).
All have held positions on poetic value similar to Hass’s, which is to say, positions redolent of Marx’s second thesis as to how thinking needs to evidence its own ‘reality and power’; and this is the case even when — or rather most particularly when — such poetry posits Utopia, or any other such ‘Golden Age’. But my point here is not to cover the field and it is certainly not to claim that all criticism works in this fashion. Rather it is to demonstrate, through one particular case, that Marx’s thesis on how to evaluate revolutionary thinking can be just as cogently applied to poetry. Indeed, such a demonstration might get us closer to the core of what poetry (or at least a certain celebrated practice of it — I will cite Emily Dickinson later) in fact is.

It is the gestural nature of aspects of Wright’s work that Hass complains of: the fact that the poet repeatedly points to those better places, beyond the degraded Puritan world of 1950s and ’60s North America, without ever actually demonstrating their existence. So Hass criticises Wright’s over-reliance on ‘plain words from romantic poetry, lovely, beautiful, terrible, that do not describe anything but tell you that someone is feeling something’ (36). Such words are doubtless easy targets. But the criticism effects Wright’s more elaborated phrasings as well. Hass cites the following lines, from Wright’s famous 1963 volume *The Branch will not Break*:

… Only two boys
  Trailed by the shadow of the rooted police,
  Turn aimlessly in the lashing elderberries.
  One cries for his father’s death,
  And the other, the silent one,
  Listens into the hallway
  Of a dark leaf (qtd in Hass 36)

‘There is no ground in these lines,’ Hass comments critically, ‘between the violent outer world and the kid listening poetically down the hallway of a dark leaf’ (36). Though the phrasing is much more complex and indeed sensuous than in the case of the poet using a simple word like ‘lovely’, the problem for Hass is the same: the world which that silent boy apparently accesses is not actually described as any plausible sort of place. I mean, that it is not even metaphorically plausible. Compare, given we are on the theme of plants, Auden’s ‘The crowds upon the pavement / Were fields of harvest wheat’ which captures a sense of crowding, anonymity and perhaps even comfort common to the experience of either phenomenon (129). What distinguishes Wright’s lines from these is the fundamentally random nature of the association he offers us, that between a ‘hallway’ and a ‘dark leaf’, neither of which can really be said to say anything about the other. What we actually have here is not a description of anything, so much as a sign for all that is inaccessible. The case of the philosopher calling, in a philosophical text, for an end to all that is philosophical is not dissimilar. What Hass rejects is Wright’s repudiation of language.
Elsewhere in *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, Hass praises a poem, ‘Baltics’, by the Swede, Tomas Tranströmer (1931–), for the lines:

I stand with my hand on the door handle, take the pulse
of the house
The walls so full of life
(the children won’t dare sleep alone up in the attic — what
makes me feel safe makes them uneasy) (88)

Hass imputes to these lines ‘an awakening which has no form but itself; it is not the fantasy of a paradisal form that exists elsewhere’ (76); whereas he criticises lines from Wright’s ‘The Branch will not Break’ like

The secret shelters of sparrow feathers fallen into the snow (37)

and

…it if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom (37)

as exemplars of Wright’s penchant for ‘repeating his talismanic nouns and adjectives of the discovery of the inner world’ (36). Words like ‘secret’ are ‘talismanic’ for Hass because they symbolise a magic that is not forthcoming. The reader is given no hint as to what would make sparrow feathers on the snow function counter-intuitively as ‘shelters’; the adjective ‘secret’ may be intended to qualify the nature of those shelters, but it could just as easily be read as the poet’s admission that he is not letting the reader in on the reality he is describing, perhaps because it is not one. The second quotation, on the other hand, does go some way toward performing its subject matter and so putting the ‘reality and power, that is, the this-worldliness’ (Marx 1976 6), of the concepts to the test. It is the enjambment on ‘break’ which causes a little jump as the reader flicks back to the left-hand margin, and suddenly ‘Into blossom’. It is still a weak step, I would suggest, mainly because the association of flower and transformed self is, again, so ultimately unrelated to any actual transformative phenomenon. What we have rather is an instantly recognisable symbol: flower-life stands for ‘that which is beyond us’, and calls out our yearning. I’m reminded of the ‘angels’ contemporary Australian poets so often (and unfortunately) often invoke, to similarly mawkish effect.

I suspect Hass would find Spinoza’s reference to ‘fantasies, ideas that could only be realised in Utopia, or the Golden Age of the poets, when of course they were least required’ pertinent, were it applied to Wright’s lines above. The distinction with Spinoza’s picture (other than the fact that Spinoza is attacking weak philosophy first and foremost and just sideswiping poetry in the process) is that when Hass makes comments of a similar order it is not to disparage poetry in general, but rather to critique those poems, or lines, that fall short of actually amounting to poetry.

Hass puts the matter in Nietzschean terms: ‘Aestheticism, is what I am talking about, decadence’ (Hass 40). Hass’s subsequent gloss only underlines the
association he makes between poetry and the expression of power: aestheticism,

a cultural disease and it flourishes when the life of the spirit, especially the clear power of
the imagination and intelligence, retreats or is driven from public life, where it
ought, naturally, to manifest itself. The artists of decadence turn away from a degraded
social world and what they cling to, in their privacy, is beauty or pleasure. (40)

This is a version of Nietzsche but it could also be Marx — ‘Man must prove the
truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice’ — not to mention Spinoza himself, the Spinoza of that same, ferocious Tractatus
Politicus, which repudiates all notion of abstract human rights, to insist that the
only rights are those which are actual (14–18).

Yet this is not to suggest that the ‘inner world’ is excluded from the ambit of critics who hold positions like Hass’s. Hass’s critique of Wright’s tendency — amid some otherwise gripping and at times even devastating poetry — to fall to gesture is certainly not a rejection of introspection. The point is rather that the emotional and intellectual dimensions of that introspection have to be enacted, to the point that they impress their actuality upon us. Far from a rejection of the ‘inner world’, Hass’s criticism takes the form of an insistence that Wright be less reticent about it, for he should be bringing it to the fore, allowing it to overwhelm.

We can see something like this principle at work in Emily Dickinson’s poem, ‘26’, which I bring to the table to exemplify the sort of thing I think Hass is implicitly valorising through these critiques:

556
The Brain, within its Groove
Runs evenly — and true —
But let a Splinter swerve —
’Twere easier for You —
To put a Current back —
When Floods have slit the Hills —
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves —
And trodden out the mills — (online)

Dickinson’s poem plants a splinter in the reader’s mind and then submits it to a flood of imagery, which gathers in rhythmic pace as it goes from the finicky syllables, each demanding precise articulation, of ‘easier’, to the quickening pace of the following two lines, the sudden sense of expansion in ‘And scooped a turnpike for themselves’ which adds another beat to the trimeter timing of what has preceded it, and so a fitful rush into the final line, only to conclude on the liquid consonants of ‘mills’. After the rushed first reading — for that is what the prosody compels you to do, to rush — the reader has now to displace all that flooding imagery, like so many rivers in the mind, to draw them back and find some sort of contemplative space in this midst, in which the beguiling, and perhaps even
anxious question might play out its inner tensions: how can a splinter swerve? Is the mind reading this poem just such a splinter? This is Marxian poetry, in the terms of Thesis II. There is not an other-worldly gesture in it, though it is startling and indeed estranging. It proves its reality through its power. In fact, they are the same thing.

The Hassian/Marxian stance insists that a poet of the ‘inner world’ should be bringing it to the fore, persuading readers that there is indeed such a place. That such a stance is equally a critical measure of stagy writing becomes apparent if we train it on ‘The Inversion of Simonides’ Line about the Sun’, a recent poem by Australian poet John Kinsella (1963—). The poem concerns a rural Australian child’s painful experiences when learning to read, and begins:

Head down on the desk,
he hides tears that force
their way out, warping ink
of words he can’t read.

Isoglosses: smudges of dialect,
script across areas of page,
title deeds to land his grandfather
collated: blocks of mallee, (20)

Kinsella does not actually give us the line of Simonides that he references in his title, the line which this poem will apparently go on to invert. This might be understood as placing those readers who do not have the Greek Anthology to heart in the position of the illiterate child the poem describes. If so, it seems an easy effect. But it is the enjambment on ‘force’ in the second line, however, that really underscores the weakness of the poem’s rhetoric. The reader who is pausing to reach the start of the new line, is caused to mime the slight pause one experiences as tears well up. Yet this is only the second line — no sense of drama has been built up, other than, perhaps, a sense of exclusion in relation to Simonides — and there is something just a bit too pushy about it. Is the reader really crying over this?

This sense of forcing is compounded as the poem continues through a reverie that opens out from those ‘blocks of mallee’ through an inventory in short, variously enjambed and otherwise tensile phrases, of the property where the child was raised with its ‘vast cleared spaces, / fencelines and patches of scrub,’ and its processes of mapping, ‘paddock-making’ and tending,

each year upturning
more relic-like granite,
more history. His reality.
The teacher approaches
and he chokes on his sobbing. (20)

‘His reality.’: I take issue with that emphatically short, verbless, sentence. It is as if the forthrightness of the grammar and the finality of its end-stopped positioning
were, in themselves, enough to persuade the reader that he or she has had the powerful experience of being taken to that place. But were the lines preceding this phrase expressing their own reality and power in the manner Hass requires, we simply would not need to be told: neither that it is his, nor, even more emphatically, that it is real to him. We would already be there.

There is a political aspect to Kinsella’s poem as well. ‘The family have sent him out’, we read towards its end,

… a boarder, home
only on holidays, socialising
with kids his own age,
to confront a language
he neither reads nor writes.
*It's your language, they say ...*
it explains who you are,
*where you come from.*
Why wheat grows
in the light of day … (20)

So Kinsella reworks the tropes of postcolonial theory, to convey the oppressive power of a hegemonic language on the white regional subject, whose reality will not survive the translation. There is protest here, and a lament for things that are local. Hass’s criticism of the weak power of James Wright’s protests against Puritan civilisation is pertinent here. The weakness in those protests for Hass is that they fail to convey that Puritan strictures are delivered by people too, who also feel and desire, in however deformed a fashion. Yet their world is all abstract and colourless in Wright’s hands. Hass proceeds to remind us that, where the initial version of Blake’s ‘London’ ran

    I wander’d thro’ each dirty street,
    Down where the dirty Thames does flow, (qtd in Hass 42

the final version became

    I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
    Near where the charter’d Thames does flow,

He comments on the improvement:

_DIRTY_ is a protest; _charter’d_ is a seeing: it confronts not squalor but an order that men have made. It meets power with power, the power of poetry to illuminate and clarify, to speak out of its whole being. (42)

What is Hass doing here if not bleeding the whole category of the ‘protest’ poem out of existence? All that remains is the poem of power. Kinsella’s poem is weak on these same grounds.

But let us return to the theme of ‘the inner world’, and from Kinsella and Blake back to Wright. As I have been arguing, Hass does not reject the right of the ‘inner world’ to speak. Rather, he attacks those lines of Wright’s that serve to obscure the
expressions of its power. It seems to me that what is driving Hass to this attack is something like the following: in obscuring that ‘inner world’, making it occasion for the ‘familiar celebration of whatever is not mind […] everything unformed, unconscious and suffused therefore with yearning’ (28), Wright hides from us the very thing that is so revolutionary and uncompromising about modern poetry. I indicated above that something strikingly akin to the second thesis on Feuerbach (‘Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice’) can be found on the lips of many a good poetry critic, and I have started to suggest that something like this is driving a poet like Dickinson as well. The fact that Hass will indiscriminately apply this same criterion both to the introspective verse of James Wright and to the much more public verse of William Blake, gets to the heart of the issue. For it points to the radical absence, in modern poetry, of any clear distinction between inner and outer experience.

In Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, Mikahil Bakhtin provides, so as to critique it, one example of such a distinction: that between the person one is in public, with all the complications and evasions which social, and with it linguistic, interaction requires, and the actual individual whose true desires, feelings — bodily experiences even — course beneath such masks. Bakhtin asserts, to the contrary, that ‘experience exists even for the person undergoing it only in the material of signs’ (28 [my emphasis]). Signs are by definition social and shared and so, for Bakhtin, is the material of our innermost thoughts and experiences. Now to demand, as Hass does, a poetry that will ‘illuminate and clarify … speak out of its whole being’ (42), regardless of whether it deals with public or private life, is to demand of poets that they treat that inner life, and all its experiences, in similarly Bakhtinian fashion: as something that takes place and has its reality and power ‘in the material of signs’, which are both public and intimate at the same time. What is more, it is to suggest that William Blake (‘Energy is eternal delight’ (358)) — the inspiration for Hass’s pronouncement — was alive to just this coherence of public and intimate speech, and that so too was Emily Dickinson. Both are ‘this-worldly’ poets to the letter, as is Tomas Tranströmer.

To consider the observation Bakhtin makes a few pages later in Marxism and the Philosophy of Language brings one even closer, I would suggest, to the experience of the sort of poetry we have seen valorised above. Bakhtin proceeds to focus on what happens when one marshals those signs in the form of conscious thought, which he terms ‘inner speech’:

Close analysis would show that the units of which inner speech is constituted are certain whole entities somewhat resembling a passage of monologic speech or whole utterances. But most of all, they resemble the alternating lines of a dialogue. (38)

There is no single person for Bakhtin, behind any set of thoughts, but rather a cluster of voices within the ‘I’ that variously propose and re-join, and are quite literally in conversation. This is the nature of reflection as understood by Bakhtin. The concept is a striking one, particularly for academics, accustomed as we are, to
founding our identities on the capacity both to posit a proposition and subsequently to defend it — as if we remained the same monologic person in the passage between these two acts (Lacan 62–65). Again, this idea that we think as a multiple personality is Bakhtin’s theoretical position, in illumination of a reality we tend not to interrogate; but is it not also the case that one experiences something like a conscious sense of this subjective splitting into dialogic partners with oneself, when reading, that is, *thinking through*, poems like that by Dickinson above? I will turn to address this sort of subjective splitting in greater detail below. But I will add in passing that none of this is to suggest that we necessarily survive such experiences intact. I am referring, after all, to Marx’s theory of revolution.

3. **Thesis II (reprise)**

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question. (1976 6)

I have raised the possibility that we contemplate modern poetry, and the allied art of its criticism, as strategies for the expression of power, and I have drawn heavily on Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach to do so. Yet this thesis can be understood in a number of ways: I have just discussed a way which would be something like the self-proving statement, the line that enacts the very thing it describes. Kierkegaard would claim that ‘veritas index sui’, *truth provides its own criterion* (73) and this focus on the self-fulfilling nature of truth gives a reasonable insight into Hass’s position. He refers, as we have seen, to ‘an awakening which has no form but itself’ (76).

But of course no statement can really be said, strictly speaking, to be self-proving. When we find poems whose signifiers embody for us the ‘reality and power’ of their subject matter, it is clearly just as much because of the way they compel or seduce our imaginations into collaborating on the production of that picture, as for any properties of adequation in the actual text. Even Ted Hughes, whose theories of poetry (as embodied in the much anthologised poem ‘The Thought-Fox’ (2003 51), and in the prose text *Poetry in the Making* — ‘read back through what you have written and you will get a shock. You will have captured a creature’ (19) — which admittedly was written for children) seem most open to the charge of a naïve belief in presence in language, makes it clear that the reality and indeed the power in question is actually an inter-subjective one: ‘the whole art of writing is to make your reader’s imagination go into action’ (43). Insofar as I have a criticism of Hass, it is that when he refers to ‘an awakening which has no form but itself’ (76), he is eliding the fact that that awakening takes its form not simply on the page but also in the reader’s imagination, just as it first did in the case of that primary reader who was the poet, him or herself.
Is it not much more pertinently the case that thinking proves its truth ‘i.e. its reality ... and power’ in the inter-subjective space between the text and those others who encounter it, with all the slippage this implies? Which brings forth another, and I would suggest ultimately more apt, way of reading Marx’s second thesis: it is that thinkers need to write or speak in such a way that the world itself will demonstrate the cogency of their words by the way it takes them up. Such an interpretation points to the link between someone reading a given poem and starting to act in a particular way, not to mention between Lenin reading Marx’s *Capital* and the Russian revolution. I am referring to the way a writer’s words act to move bodies, whether the immediate body of the reader, or the bodies that reader will then influence and sway (including his or her own future body), in turn.

I do not think poetry criticism really has a language to deal with the idea that the proof of a statement, or a line of poetry, lies in the reader’s uptake of it. But I have difficulty appraising a poem like ‘Cochlear Implants’, by Australian Jennifer Harrison (1955—), without such a notion. The poem begins:

*What will I recognise?*
*How will birds present*
*their shattered monasteries? (25)*

After the first line there is no need for the poet to indicate, in a subsequent gloss in case we missed it, that for one facing the prospect of sudden hearing gain, this is ‘her reality’. The second and third lines are rather more beguiling, and I have to say that in my own case it took many goes before a metaphorical reading dawned on me: any given environment, when shrouded in absolute silence, could take on something of the air of a monastery, and its inhabitants, whatever they might be doing (‘men in mime digging / with their jackhammers at noon’ appear later in the poem), might take on a monkish air of ritual about them as well; it is *this* which the journey to hearing shatters. Such would be one way to make sense, plausibly, of these two lines. But the reader’s effort to arrive at some such reading of them is, I believe, subject to the continual interference of the vivid literal image which they immediately offer: birds flying about a shattered ruin. One wavers between the attempt to treat as metaphor what seems to demand a metaphoric reading, and yet is only on the verge of the comprehensible, and the immediate pull of the scene is engraved in its very signifiers. This might amount to just the sort of struggle to comprehend a world made new that a dawning sensory perception involves. Again, Harrison does not tell us that this is ‘her reality’. But something has been implanted all the same.

What is more, and this is my key point, I do not see how you can appraise these opening three lines without suggesting that they give rise to a similar process of struggling to comprehend in the reader. If it is not these lines which do so, it will be others, for Harrison’s signifiers repeatedly usurp their would-be signifieds in this fashion:
Will I feel intruded upon?
Deafened? tell me
how do I poach from rubbed sound
the language of my hands? (25)

The ‘rubbed sound’ harkens back to those initial ‘shattered monasteries’ but it has something even more of the impossible about it: what can it mean? I found myself having a sudden recollection of something I read about the Kabbalah once, something about the concept of the Shekinah — the sudden shattering of a vessel which brings the universe into being (Scholem 65). I cannot say that that association contains the gap I feel when confronted with the idea of a sound ‘rubbed’ by the ruin of silence. The phrasing beguiles, and another voice within me arises, in Bakhtinian fashion, to offer a totally different association, or even a leap to interpretation. Then another. I keep peering at the phrase.

At such times, whether in this instance or over another such run of words, you could say that this poetry does not take us to any reality at all, so much as a gap on the verge of it. But there is a contrast to be made here with those poems critiqued above: Wright’s ‘listens into the hallway / Of a dark leaf’ is not, as Hass points out, on the verge of anything (36), while Kinsella’s Ancient Greek reference to ‘words he can’t read:/ Isoglosses, smudges of dialect’, bespeaks readerly exclusion but nothing like the minor anxiety and entrancing confusion that gives the reader the sense that there is actually something he or she might learn here, about something that concerns that reader intimately. The ‘reality and power’ of Harrison’s work is, in short, that of a question, which engages the reader because it is drawn his or her world into its query. It is the ‘this-worldliness’ of the gaps she opens up in her readers that marks all the difference between such moments in Harrison’s poem and the sorts of aestheticism Hass criticises. That is also, however, why his reference to ‘an awakening which has no form but itself’ (76) will not suffice to explain it: these gaps have their form in the reader.

But the thing that lodges itself most fully in my mind is ‘the bee’. Harrison’s poem concludes:

Before I take the bee inside
give me time
to memorise the poem I’ve seen:
the red hibiscus in bloom
my street without shadow —
outside the window, men in mime digging
with their jackhammers at noon. (25)

The most obvious reading of the first of these lines, at least to me, is the metaphorical one: ‘the bee’ stands for her hearing device. But this interpretation is also faced with a sort of interference, and it has to do with the oddness of that metaphor (bee = cochlear implant), which inclines the reader to think past it, particularly given the vivid, literal meaning that also immediately suggests itself,
once more from the surface of the signifiers themselves: it is the possibility that an actual bee will literally enter her ear. Could that, however, be a description of hearing? Marx has a revealing comment to make in this regard, from chapter one of *Capital*: ‘in vision, light actually passes from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. We are dealing with a physical relation between physical actualities’; yet, he continues, in perceiving we ignore this relation of ‘subjective stimulation’ so as to create the sense that what we perceive is actually ‘a concrete object existing outside the eye’ (1930 45). The same applies to hearing and sound waves. From this point of view, what I perceive is actually and always right inside me as well as out there in the world. It was just such a reading, via a dim memory of Marx’s passage that in due course arose within me while I was brewing over this passage. But if so — to focus just on that one, personal experience of the lines — how strange: that the metaphorical meaning of Harrison’s phrase was the immediately obvious one, while the literal meaning was the initially obscure, and then gradually enlightening, one. Then again, Harrison is talking about — and in some wise proving in her reader — the experience of gaining an extra sense, which would seem from these lines to involve just such a dawning sense of how all these new properties can speak through the very surfaces of things.

But that is not all that is implanted, at least in my case. Whenever I read ‘Cochlear Implants’ as a whole, sounding it out in my head, dwelling within the spaces I find there, it is like I myself ‘take the bee inside’, and this time once more as a metaphor. What I mean by this is that I feel some strange awakening that lasts for at least the rest of the day, as if the instruction to hear and also not to hear my environment has been at once sealed and activated within me. I keep recalling that instruction, like a whispered suggestion, at odd moments of the day, such as during meetings, or in the middle of intimate conversations. And I think through it. In fact, this is how I experience Harrison’s poetry more generally. Her poems turn me into their agent — and their scientist.

I have said that I do not think criticism has a language with which to evaluate poetry in terms of such impacts, which are at once pragmatic, based on the public medium of language, and yet starkly personal to each interpreter. How, indeed, can one present the documentation of such a reading (that is, of one’s lived embodiment of the gaps in the poems), and yet still maintain the illusion of that ‘concrete object existing outside the eye’ (Marx 1930 45), which others can be shown and persuaded to value accordingly, and objectively? Do you simply not talk about such reading experiences, even though the fact of their traction is — the logic of my argument would lead me to assert — the key proof of the power, and with it, the reality of the poem in question? Is it better simply to pretend none of this took place?

4. **The science of the future**

Thesis II offers a blunt response: ‘The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question’ (1976
You might say that the lack of such a critical meta-language is no more an issue to the poet than to the revolutionary. Why should they care whether it is possible to objectify the phenomenon of a text’s hold on you, or not?

But that is not quite true, in either case. There are a number of twentieth-century texts one could turn to here, from Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done* through Che’s *Guerilla Warfare* to Subcommandante Marcos’ interviews and communiqués. As with the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the focus of such writing is the thoroughly poetic topic of how language can be used in such a way that it will move future bodies in time and space, and what such writing assays in various ways is the continual problem of how one can, in any given case, ever know with the necessary degree of objectivity what that uptake will be. It is not a ‘purely scholastic question’, which is why *What Is To Be Done* hammers it out, again and again. What is more, the critical need to predict, with some degree of objectivity, what language will move others is inherent to poetic practice as well. When I paraphrased Auden some pages above to state that a poem’s first reader is the poet him or herself, I also had in mind Auden’s corollary: the poet is also the poem’s first critic — the one who first thinks the decidedly public question of whether anonymous others will be intimately effected by this particular deployment of signifiers, or not (1975 33). The critic’s struggle to assume an objective relation to poetry’s power is actually the poet’s struggle as well.

The subjectively universalising, critical ideal that anyone who encounters this work will find it similarly compelling must in some wise have accompanied and indeed tormented Marx himself as he laboured on *Capital* in a silence lasting decades, with only glimmers of response towards the end.\(^6\) I have looked at how a Marxian political theory might help us grasp something about certain powerful forms of poetry. Now I want, in conclusion, to suggest that a writing on aesthetics can help make sense of the textual strategy which Marx eventually adopted to ensure that ‘the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking’, as embodied in *Capital*, would be enacted and ideally proved by others after him, ‘in practice’. I intend this concluding analysis to dovetail into my comments on the uptakes, at once performative and epistemological, public and personal, to which Harrison’s work gives rise. Ideally, it will move us towards a critical meta-language for talking about them, or rather — and more pertinent to Marx’s own position, back there in London in the late 1850s, trying to work out how to write *Capital* — a critical meta-language for engaging in the practical task of assessing the potential powers that an interventionary writing might have upon the future.

Louis Althusser’s essay ‘The Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht, Notes on a Materialist Theatre’, one of that philosopher’s few writings on aesthetics, is useful here. Just as Lenin is interested in the rhetoric that will bring a critical mass of the populace to action, Althusser is interested in the capacity of art to create subjects who will feel the limits of this bourgeois world of appearances, and so
seek change. This article of Althusser’s is the same one that Warren Montag has in recent years tried to revive for literary theory, with the aim of jolting scholars out of commonly held prejudices against the ‘scientism’ and/or ‘structuralism’ of Althusser’s work. What interests Althusser is the power of particular artworks to foment in subjects a search for their own structures (1979 142). I will focus on Althusser’s comments on Brecht’s epic theatre. For Althusser, Brecht’s plays are ‘marked by an internal dissociation, an unresolved alterity’ (1979 37). To understand Althusser’s argument it is crucial to realise that this ‘unresolved alterity’ is not — as the received wisdom on ‘the alienation effect’ would have it — an alterity between the play and its technically distanced audience. For it is not that Brecht simply pushes us away from the possibility of dramatic illusion and identification, and so forces us to think critically, as if his strategy were to abandon theatre itself, in the belief that playwrights have only entertained the world in various ways; the point however is to change it. To the contrary, Brecht’s is a much more ‘this-worldly’ practice. A substantial number of Brecht’s characters, including Katrina, the dumb daughter in Mother Courage, are calculated to arouse empathy and to retain it through to play’s end. One might well say the same of Courage herself. Althusser’s point is rather that none of the characters in a Brechtian play, not even Mother Courage, are entirely centre stage. That place is taken by what Althusser describes as a ‘non-relation’. Now Mother Courage is certainly centre stage in her own world, living out the drama of the conflict between maintaining her business and so her family, on the one hand, and risking their death through trading in war, on the other (1979 144). Here, in the play Mother Courage sees herself as living through (for ‘all the world’s a stage’), all of the drama is visible, familiar and thoroughly bourgeois: its denouement concerns the way the decisions she hoped would protect her family lead tragically to its annihilation. One can, and does, readily identify with such a character. Indeed, Brecht might well have left the play at that. But, Althusser insists, there is actually another play being performed on the stage. The play alongside Mother Courage’s is enacted through placards, historical commentary and song. It concerns the social and economic mechanics of the war being fought all around the family, and this second play makes clear that whatever such a character did, her children would be devoured by the war. This second play places in radical suspension all the drama of the first by rendering its dramatic conflict over profit or protection quite simply meaningless — though that drama nonetheless continues to be felt. The fact that the drama is still felt, for all the equally cogent fact that on another plane it simply does not exist, creates an effect of ‘radical alterity’. But it is not an alterity between the stage and its audience, as rather between the stage and itself.

Yet it gnaws at the spectator’s mind all the same, and this is for one crucial reason. According to Althusser, these two plays, in all their ‘non-relation’, have become that spectator’s mind:
the play itself is the spectator’s consciousness — for the simple reason that the spectator has no other consciousness than the content which unites him to the play in advance, and the development of this content in the play itself. (1979 150–51)

That spectatorial consciousness now finds itself split between two dramas: both make sense in their own worlds, which is to say, again following Althusser, both make sense in this world, yet they fail to cohere, and this amounts to the fact that this world itself fails to cohere. For Althusser such dissonance creates in the spectator a desire to restore the world (which, again, is nothing other than one’s own consciousness) to integrity, whether in thought, or deed. The non-relation centre stage, and now internal to the spectator’s mind, generates a desire for structure. So Althusser proclaims that Brecht’s theatre involves the ‘production of a new consciousness — incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompletion itself’ (1979 150). This new consciousness, moved by incompletion, is as much scientist, the one who will be driven to find out what is so wrong with this world for it to produce such contradictions, as agent, the one who will act to change the mode of production, to make the world whole again. An audience member (a reader, a viewer) thus becomes that ‘actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life’ (1979 150).

A powerful creative act, understood in these interventionary terms, will be one that can hit upon just the right non-relation — ‘take the pulse of the house’; ‘But let a splinter swerve’; ‘their shattered monasteries’ — to wedge its way most deeply into its audience’s minds, and thereby their futures. I have very much shifted focus over the last two sections of this essay to concentrate on the power such instances of ‘non-relation’ can hold, but I hasten to add that such a thing will only have traction if its component parts feel as vividly realised (call them ‘illusions of presence’ if you like — though I would suggest that usage involves a weak theory of illusion) and this-worldly as a Hass would demand. It has to feel like this really is how a house is felt. This swerve must prove itself in the reader too. What we have here, in sum, and again fully consonant with Thesis II, is a requirement of plausibility — only it is a plausibility that concerns the insistence of an impossibility.

As for the plausible impossibility in Capital: there are a number of these, all related, but probably the most compelling Marx has implanted there, for our reading at this conjuncture concerns the paradoxical fact — and again, that it be felt as a fact is essential — that unemployment is actually a problem for capitalist societies. Under what other social formation is the absence of jobs that have to be done a problem? Capitalism is constitutively incapable of enjoying the free time potentiated by the technological advances it is structurally compelled to produce. We actually and increasingly do not need to work (see further Magee; Gorz). We work through blind necessity, and this in spite of the alternate possibilities our
social order ceaselessly brings about. The moment one recognises one’s world in that picture of unresolved alterity, Marx’s intervention has taken hold.

NOTES


2 Balibar is referring to those programmatic moments in which philosophy ‘strives to think its own limits, whether to abolish them or to establish itself on the basis of a recognition of those limits’. He reminds us of a stream of similar such slogans: ‘from Parmenides’ “Thinking and being are one”, to Wittgenstein’s “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”, via Spinoza (“God is nature”), Kant (“I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith”) and Hegel (“The rational is the real and the real is the rational”) (19). Thus what would seem a critique of philosophy becomes little more in practice than a slogan, a weapon in a battle that is all to do with succeeding in philosophy.

3 ‘What must be is also in fact, and what only must be, without being, has no truth’ (qtd in Balibar 23).

4 For a summary, but sophisticated, statement of Capital’s failures to predict the future, see Erik Olin Wright’s essay ‘Compass Points’.

5 To avoid any misunderstanding, it needs to be pointed out that Hass’s critique, as précised and explicated in this paragraph, of the ‘familiar celebration of whatever is not mind’ in Wright’s work, cannot be applied to ‘The Inversion of Simonides’ Line about the Sun’. Indeed, one of the things Kinsella’s unfortunate ‘His reality’ phrase is probably trying to underline is that the child brings his own symbolic language (‘blocks of mallee, caprock, breakaways, map the farm’) to the table, where it is ignored. That poem cannot be criticised for suffusing some fantasy of a pre-semiotic reality with ‘yearning’; rather, it suffuses a prior semiotic reality with yearning. But the real reason it fails to have the effect I proceed to chart in the paragraphs to follow is not so much its relation to semiosis, as its simple innocuousness.

6 Debray comments that the Manifesto caused ‘hardly a ripple’ when first published in German in London, was regarded as ‘a bibliographical curiosity’ as late as 1871 and only really came to prominence in the mid-1880s; indeed, Marx’s obscurity during his life-time — he died in 1883 — was such that ‘[a]n article on his work in an English journal was still a rare enough event that in the winter of 1881 Marx would show it to his wife on her deathbed’ (Debray 21).

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Last night a small frog landed on the window of my library. From inside I could count four toes on each of his four feet; I could see through his round translucent stomach to the dark entrails coiled there portentous with dinner; and from a foot away and underneath, I looked him in his black and bulbous, handsome eyes and watched him slide unhurriedly down the pane.

This morning a blue wren came to the window of the room next door. There are webs in each corner of the frame, clotted with flies and moths, and no doubt the bird had some business to attend to there. But twice he hovered at the glass and tapped an encrypted message that might have been meant for me and turned and flew back to the morning.

Frog on my window at midnight; Blue wren at the window at dawn. But what do they want me to say?

Frog on my window at night; Blue wren tapping there at dawn. What do they want me to say? What am I meant to do?

Frog on my window at midnight, blue wren tapping there at dawn. What’s up?

Near midnight, the full moon floats in a shoal of cloud: a fisherman’s lamp dropped in the tideline. The world is a mystery occluded by reality. Small red frogs, Now one, now another, spring insouciantly across the Old South Road; their heads turn my way; their eyes return my headlamps’ blaze. A light rain falls. This is their world
And I need to take it slow. In the morning,
the plump and tiger-striped lizard
        rises with the sun from the stump that holds my shed up
in the east, and returns herself to herself on the concrete cattle ramp.

I open a window above her at ten, and she opens her blue mouth wide in return. Nature is an idiot savant:
        Profoundly gifted
        at the mathematics of being,
damned if she can make a single reliable word come out of her mouth.
The poplar saplings are the morning’s sibilant Greek chorus,
and high above me
        by the recycled church window
        a spider splays like flung
scaffolding. Is her life over? asks my child, remembering what I’d said
About the perfect black body of the cicada I had set upon my desk. I found her on the grass,
        survivor of everything but time,
        her perfect wings
like leadlight, her body an abandoned chapel.

Later I take a spade and try to convince myself to kill
the young copperhead
        coiled in the sun beside the laundry steps.
But I’m too slow for her, and beguiled.
        The world is a woman
Standing naked before me, who took off her self with her clothes. She’s mine to take,
        but never to know.
        The wind rises and, back in my shed,
I open both doors to shepherd it through, and the spider starts
        and quickens me half to death.
ABSTRACTS

BÁRBARA ARIZTI

‘Never Give Up Hope: A Levinasian Reading of Janette Turner Hospital’s “Dear Amnesty”’

A double click on the ‘Take Action’ button opens up several ways of collaborating with Amnesty International that include the classic letter writing to the authorities, joining a local group, leaving a gift in your will and throwing a fundraising party, amongst others. The degree of commitment shown by Sarah, a member of the Urgent Action Network in Janette Turner Hospital’s short story, ‘Dear Amnesty’, acquires hyperbolic tinges when she manages to save Rosita — arrested and tortured for requesting better working conditions — by draining off her pain into her own body. This article engages with Turner Hospital’s short story as an extreme example of the main tenet of Levinas’s ethics of alterity: our infinite responsibility for our neighbours. Like Amnesty International, Levinas’s ethical philosophy envisages a messianic time free from political violence. Sarah’s radical openness to the other can also be analysed in the light of Gibson’s ethics of affect. Inspired by Levinas and his other-centred philosophy, Gibson elaborates an ethics that privileges sensibility, vulnerability, generosity and self-expenditure over and above self-interest and restraint.

ANGI BUETTNER

‘Mocking and Farting: Trickster Imagination and the Origins of Laughter’

This article examines the use of trickster imagination and the appropriations of trickster mythology by writers from formerly colonised countries as a rich and relevant arsenal of material for their project of cultural transformation and critique. It shows the trickster figure as an ambivalent image and discusses the functions of laughter in trickster imagination. In addition, the essay explores how trickster mythology can be read as postcolonial.

BETH CARDIER & H.T. GORANSON

‘Storymaking Across Contexts: How a Fiction Writer and a Team of Computer Scientists Came to Terms’

Colonial dynamics can exist between fields of research, and in the most problematic cases, a discipline will appropriate the knowledges of another solely on its own terms, distorting meanings in the process. Interestingly, a similar problem exists in the domain of information management, in which computers struggle to automatically transfer ‘objective’ facts between contexts that actually represent subjective abstractions of reality. In 2004, the authors of this article — a fiction writer and a systems architect — began collaborating with a team of computer scientists to design a knowledge representation system that could track changes in contextual meaning. Our task was to use insights from the arts in system design, without losing the strengths of each field’s forms. As the project grew, we discovered how much work and reward is involved in Gayatri Spivak’s suggestion regarding collaborative story-building: there is something I want to give you, which will make our shared practice flourish.

KIM CLOTHIER & DEBRA DUDEK

‘Opening the Body: Reading Ten Canoes with Critical Intimacy’

This article analyses the Australian film Ten Canoes (2006), which was co-directed by non-Indigenous director Rolf de Heer and Indigenous director Peter Djigirr. The essay foregrounds the relationship between the ‘I’ of the Indigenous narrator and the
‘you’ of a mainstream non-Indigenous audience that must read the English subtitles while viewing the visual text, which brings the viewing experience close to that of engaging with a long poem. The narrator encourages an affective response from the viewer by inviting the viewer/reader to ‘see’ the story and therefore to ‘know’ it. This combination of corporeal and mental engagement with the text brings the reading strategy close to what Gayatri Spivak calls ‘critical intimacy’, a strategy that we argue is an appropriate — and indeed ethical — way for non-Indigenous (and perhaps non-Yolgnu) viewers to respond to this film, which is the first Indigenous language film to be produced in Australia.

SUZANNE FOLEY

“‘I Am a Lie”: Connections between Identity and Narrative in Tracks and Season of Migration to the North”

This article discusses both the transformative power of narrative and the complications of cultural hybridity that are exemplified in Louise Erdrich’s Tracks and Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to The North. Two characters, Mustafa Sa’eed of Season of Migration to the North and Pauline/Sister Leopolda of Tracks, narrate themselves into fictions in order to escape a shared fate of untranslatability. One narrative is designed to illuminate the nuanced space of cultural hybridity, and the other is designed to destroy the space of cultural hybridity and name a singular culture as dominant.

ELIZABETH LEANE

‘Eggs, Emperors and Empire in Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s “Worst Journey in the World”’

In the Natural History Museum in London, amongst a plethora of other curious objects retrieved from the far reaches of Empire, sit three emperor penguins’ eggs, now nearly one hundred years old. The collection of these eggs forms the narrative centre of Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s The Worst Journey in the World (1922), which chronicles the events of Robert Scott’s second Antarctic expedition. Cherry-Garrard’s title refers not to Scott’s ill-fated polar voyage but to an earlier journey to collect a scientific rather than a geographical prize: the emperor penguin’s egg, which was thought to be the key to an evolutionary puzzle. According to the New York Review of Books, The Worst Journey ‘is to travel writing what War and Peace is to the novel … a masterpiece’. It is also considered a classic Antarctic exploration tale, rivalling even Scott’s famous last diary. Surprisingly, given recent interest in travel narratives, Cherry-Garrard’s book has received relatively little attention from literary critics. This article looks at the various narratives — imperial, scientific, personal and literary — that coalesce around three penguins’ eggs in Cherry-Garrard’s account of the world’s worst journey.

PAUL MAGEE

‘Poetry as a Physics of Power’

In this essay I argue that Thesis II (that ‘Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice’), from Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach, might be read as a cogent theory of poetry, and that the ‘proof’ of a line of poetry lies in the reader’s uptake of it. In support of this claim, I give examples from the critical practice of Robert Hass as having particular resonance with the thesis; and move on to give examples of the reality and power of poetry (or its lack) through my own critical readings of poems by Emily Dickinson and Australian poets, John Kinsella and Jennifer Harrison.
PRAMOD K. NAYAR
‘The Informational Economy and Its Body in Amitav Ghosh’s The Calcutta Chromosome’
This article discusses the role of information in Ghosh’s The Calcutta Chromosome. It argues that the informational economy occurs in two specific modes in the novel. First, information acquires a material dimension: it is embodied and generates what I call the ‘informational body’. I suggest that Ghosh’s novel is about biomediated information where both the medium (the body) and the information are modified in the process of transmission. Second, the body itself becomes converted and reduced to data in a process of informatisation. This occurs through incorporation and inscription — the two modes of embodiment suggested by Katharine Hayles when speaking of the computer-linked bodies of today. With these two moves Ghosh crosses the materiality of the body with the ‘immateriality’ of information. Finally, this results in the generation of cyborg bodies which exist in the interstices of the mythic, the technological, the textual and the political where none of the bodies is unique or self-contained but has incorporated something more.

SUSMITA ROYE
“‘Sultana’s Dream’ vs. Rokeya’s Reality: A Study of one of the “Pioneering” Feminist Science Fictions”
Long before feminist science fiction came into vogue, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s ‘Sultana’s Dream’ (1905) powerfully constructs a feminist utopia with women administering state affairs while men remain confined at home to manage household matters. The existence of this utopia, however, relies not so much on women’s physical prowess as on their ingenious scientific and technological innovations. In this dream(-like) world, science becomes the tool of the so-called weaker sex to wield authority. In fact, although women like Mary Shelley have previously used contemporaneous scientific discourses to shape their creative imagination, Hossain’s story is the first of its kind to employ science to communicate her feminist ideology. It becomes further charged when such a radical piece of work comes from the pen of a triply marginalised author: a woman; a Muslim woman; and a colonised Muslim woman at that. This article explores the enormous significance of Hossain’s story, when placed in its historical context and judged against the scientific discourses of her times.

PETRA TOURNAY-THEODOTOU
‘Performative Bondage or the Limits of Performing Race in Caryl Phillips’s Dancing in the Dark’
Taking Judith Butler’s lead that ‘identity is performatively constituted’ (Gender Trouble, 1999) in this article I examine how race — similar to other subject positions — is performatively constructed in Caryl Phillips’s novel Dancing in the Dark (2005). I trace the development of the novel’s protagonist, Bert Williams, the famous American black minstrelsy entertainer and the numerous implications and consequences of the ‘anomaly of a black person performing in blackface’ (Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests, 1990) on a personal as well as on a larger societal and cultural level. All the while painfully attempting to preserve his personal integrity and dignity in view of his adopted role, Bert becomes the embodiment of Ralph Ellison’s “‘sacrificial’ figure” engaged in a self-humiliating and self-effacing act. For, if in the case of the white man impersonating a black man there is a clear-cut difference between the performer and his role, this distinction is — to say the least — blurred in the case of the coloured
man in blackface. The analysis hence revolves around the multiple implications of the performative re-enactment of race and addresses issues such as the appropriation of a white form of entertainment, perpetuation of white stereotypes, knowability of the other, black male sexuality, masquerade, and group debasement among others.

LUCY WILSON

‘Illness and Insight: Virginia Woolf and Caribbean Women Writers vs. Western Medicine’

This article seeks common ground between Woolf and Caribbean women writers in an effort to overcome binary thinking through criticism as ‘healing discourse’. In novels by Caribbean women writers, illness is often a rite of passage and a metaphor that can be used to interrogate power structures and unmask injustice. By employing what Gay Wilentz calls ‘wellness narratives’ to reclaim the traditional role of women as healers of ‘cultural dis-ease’, these writers are part of a growing challenge to Western medicine. They are calling for alternative therapies that can facilitate clinical treatment by providing peace of mind and serenity in troubled, uncertain times. Eighty-five years ago, in her novel Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf recognised illness as a doorway to higher consciousness and thus set the stage for today’s effort to reform an institution that fails to treat the whole person.
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BÁRBARA ARIZTI is Senior lecturer in English Literature at the Department of English and German Philology (University of Zaragoza, Spain). Her current field of research is Postcolonial literature and criticism, with special emphasis on the relationship between literature and the intimate sphere. She is the author of the book ‘Textuality as Striptease: The Discourses of Intimacy in David Lodge’s Changing Places and Small World, published by Peter Lang in 2002. She has also written several articles and book chapters on Lodge and other contemporary authors like Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys and Tim Winton; and co-edited the volume On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Writing in English (with Silvia Martínez-Falquina, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).

ANGI BUETTNER is a Lecturer in Media Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, NZ. She researches in the areas of new media, cultural studies, and environmental studies, with a focus on media and the public sphere. She has recently published a book with Thierry Jutel, Tony Schirato, and Geoff Stahl — Understanding Media Studies (Oxford University Press, 2010).

After winning the Eisner prize for Literature at UC Berkeley, BETH CARDIER began writing a sci-fi novel that required so much research that she now delivers papers in her protagonist’s field. She has published articles in conference proceedings for the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence, Symmetry: Art and Science, and The Mathematical Intelligensi, as well as short fiction in HQ magazine, scarp and anthologies by Womangong Press. Beth is currently researching a PhD in the overlap between story structure and knowledge representation, examining the way causality is captured in narrative form.

KIM CLOTHIER returned to university after 10 years of teaching. She completed her BA (Hons) in Community, Culture and Environment, with her Honours thesis on the role of orality in literature. Kim is currently working on her PhD examining the figure of young adults in Contemporary Indigenous Literatures at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

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PAUL MAGEE is the author of From Here to Tierra del Fuego (University of Illinois Press: 2000) and Cube Root of Book (John Leonard Press: 2006). He is working on a monograph entitled Poetry and Knowledge. Paul is an Associate Professor of Poetry at the University of Canberra, where he teaches philosophy, composition and criticism.

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